
THE GOS

PELS

The angel Gabriel visits Mary and tells her that her **child** is the **Son of God**.



LUKE
1:26–38

The **magi** visit the infant Jesus with **gifts** of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.



MATTHEW
2:1–12

Satan **tempts** Jesus in the desert after **40 days** of fasting.



MATTHEW
4:1–11

Jesus delivers the **Sermon on the Mount**, and with it, the Lord's Prayer.



MATTHEW
5:1–7:29

LUKE
2:1–7



Jesus is born in a stable in **Bethlehem**.

MATTHEW
3:13–17



Jesus is **baptized** by John the Baptist, beginning His ministry.

MARK
1:16–20



Jesus calls the first of His **disciples** to follow Him and teach with Him.

JOHN
11:38–43



Jesus raises **Lazarus** from the dead.

Christians first used the Greek word *euangelion* (“gospel” or “good news”) to refer to the message of salvation from sin and judgment through faith in Jesus Christ. By the middle of the 2nd century CE, however, it was also used to refer to the four canonical books of the New Testament written in the second half of the 1st century CE. While none of the four Gospels names its author directly, two are traditionally attributed to the Apostles Matthew and John, and two are associated with the Apostles Peter (Mark) and Paul (Luke).

The central figure in the Gospels is Jesus, an itinerant preacher born in Bethlehem and raised in Nazareth, a small town in Galilee. His life and ministry are set against the background of the Roman

occupation of Israel and prophecies of a divinely anointed leader, a Messiah. Although the details of this expectation varied widely, popular belief looked for a military-political leader such as Moses or David, who would liberate Israel from Roman control and reestablish the Davidic monarchy. Jesus’s claim to be the Messiah combined many of these ideas, but rejected the establishment of an earthly kingdom as His immediate goal. Instead, it seems Jesus saw sin and alienation from God as the primary enemy to be defeated.

All four Gospels relate the miracles that Jesus performed—feeding the hungry, healing the sick, casting out demons, calming storms, and even raising the dead. They also report His teaching, public preaching, and His private

conversations with His disciples. Through sermons and parables, Jesus repeatedly called for His followers to repent and submit to the coming Kingdom of God.

Disputes between Jesus and Jerusalem’s religious leaders punctuate the Gospels. In private and public settings, these leaders show a growing concern over His fellowship with “sinners” (Jews who did not obey God’s commandments) and His seeming blasphemy by claiming a status equal to God and the authority to forgive sins. Jesus, in turn, rebuked the religious leaders by cleansing the Temple, warning against their teaching and the example they set, and declaring God’s judgment on them. This conflict, along with alarm at His popularity, led the religious leaders

In the midst of a great storm, Jesus **walks on water**.



MATTHEW
14:22–33

Peter, James, and John witness the **transfiguration** of Jesus.



MATTHEW
17:1–13

Judas betrays Jesus with a kiss in the Garden of **Gethsemane**.



MATTHEW
26:47–49

Jesus **rises from the dead** after three days.



MARK
16:1–10

LUKE
9:10–17



Jesus **feeds** a crowd of **5,000** with five loaves of bread and two fish.

LUKE
22:7–38



Jesus gathers His **12 disciples** together for the **Last Supper**.

MARK
15:21–47



Jesus is crucified, **dies** alongside two criminals, and is buried.

MATTHEW
28:16–20



Jesus sends His disciples to spread the **Christian message** to all nations.

to try Jesus for blasphemy, and then pressure the Roman governor Pilate to crucify Him.

The Gospels all indicate that Jesus expected His betrayal and crucifixion. This confused His disciples, who could not grasp how Jesus's execution could be the culmination of God's plan for the one they regarded as the Messiah.

The climax of the Gospels is Jesus's resurrection. Luke and John report the incredulity of the disciples, and how Jesus overcame their doubts and prepared them for their own mission to preach the "good news" to all nations.

Similarities and differences

The first three Gospels—Matthew, Mark, and Luke—are called the Synoptic Gospels (literally, "looking together") because they relate

many of the same events in much the same order, often using similar or even identical language. Such similarities have led many scholars to the view that one Gospel, and possibly other documents, was the primary source for the others. Debate about which Gospel was written first, the exact nature of their relationship to one another, and related issues, are known as the "Synoptic problem."

Differences between the Gospels have also been intensely analyzed. Ancient scholars tended to see these as harmonious rather than contradictory, collectively painting a richer picture of Jesus's life and teaching than any single account. Some modern scholars see the differences as conflicting and evidence of myth-making. Others see them as an attempt to address

different audiences or theological themes present in Jesus's life and teaching. While Matthew stresses Jesus's fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy, Mark depicts Him as the "Suffering Servant." Luke's account primarily appeals to Gentile audiences, while John, whose account is markedly different from the Synoptic Gospels, often elaborates on Christ's divinity.

Scholars have also debated the literary genre of the four books. The traditional view of the Gospels as biographies lost favor among 20th-century scholars, who pointed out that as a genre, biographies tend to explore the personality, psychology, and forming influences of their subject. In the Bible, these aspects are secondary to the depiction of Jesus as divine and the espousal of His teachings. ■



AND BEHOLD, YOU WILL CONCEIVE IN YOUR WOMB AND BEAR A SON

LUKE 1:31, THE ANNUNCIATION

IN BRIEF

PASSAGE

Luke 1:31

THEME

The Annunciation

SETTING

c.7 BCE Nazareth, a town of Galilee.

KEY FIGURES

Mary A young Galilean Jewish woman. Luke's Gospel traces her lineage from King David.

Joseph Betrothed to Mary and, according to Matthew's Gospel, a descendant of King David.

The angel Gabriel God's heavenly messenger and the bearer of the Annunciation.

The Gospel of Luke is the only place in the Bible in which the announcement to Mary of Jesus's birth is recorded. In an event now known as the Annunciation, the angel Gabriel visits a young woman named Mary in Nazareth and declares that she will soon bear a son. She is surprised to hear that she is going to give birth, as she is a virgin, not yet married to her betrothed, Joseph. In reassurance, the angel Gabriel tells her: "The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God" (Luke 1:35).



Elsewhere in the Gospels—in Matthew 1:20—Joseph is informed by another angel that his wife-to-be is expecting a child of the Lord. The angel tells Joseph, who has been considering breaking his engagement to Mary because she has become pregnant, that the pregnancy has been divinely orchestrated and that he should marry her without delay and name their child Jesus, which means "the Lord saves." The significance of this name is confirmed by the angel, who states that "he will save his people from their sins."

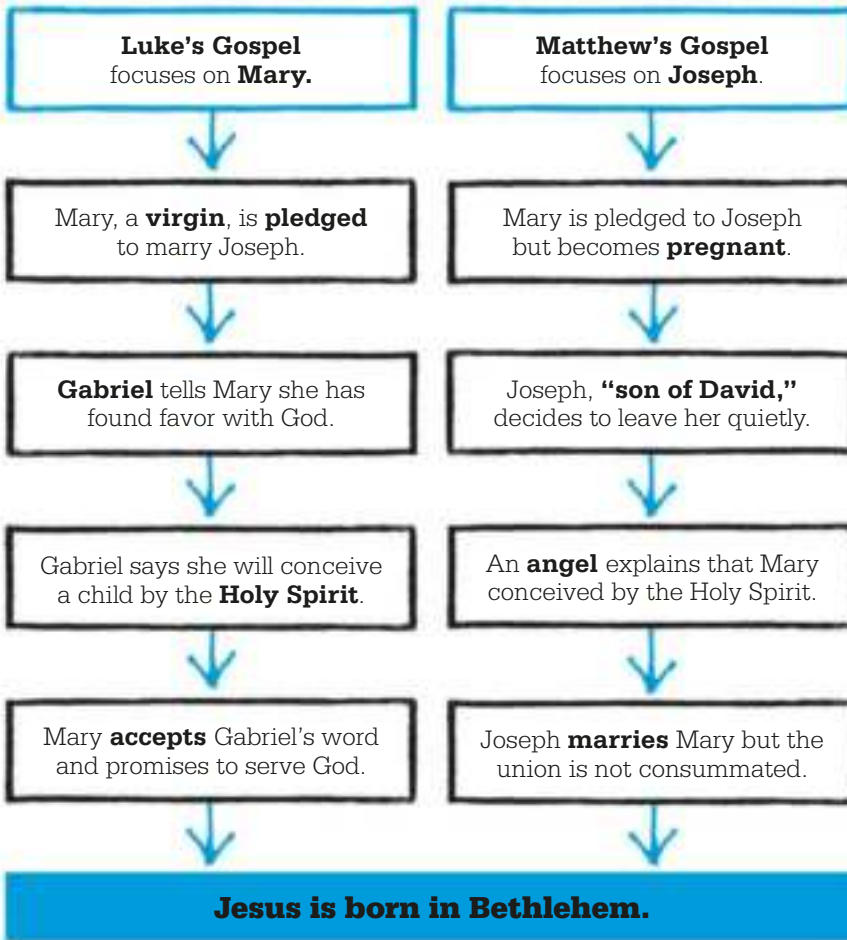
Davidic inheritance

One of the most important aspects of Jesus's birth is His ancestry—the lineage of both His parents. Although Joseph and Mary are of humble means, they are of noble birth, as descendants of the Israelite King David. This connection is of great significance in Judaic culture and religion, because many Jews at the time expected not only a Messiah but

Gabriel appears to Mary in the central panel of this oil on oak triptych. This depiction of the Annunciation was painted by Carlo Crivelli c.1440.

See also: The Birth of Jesus 180–85 ■ The Magi 186 ■ Herod's Infanticide 187 ■ The Divinity of Jesus 190–93

Angels announce Mary's conception



a Davidic Messiah, or king, who would deliver them from their enemies—at that time, the Romans. As Isaiah had prophesied: "He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness" (Isaiah 9:7).

A common name given to Jesus refers back to this idea of Him as the prophesied savior. *Messiah* means "anointed one" in Hebrew—that is, Jesus has been blessed by God to lead His

chosen people—and translates as *Christos* in Greek, hence the English name "Jesus Christ."

Son of Man

While the Bible is full of miraculous signs, it is noteworthy that the means of Jesus coming to earth is genuinely human: through Mary's pregnancy and childbirth. Although Jesus proves Himself to be the Son of God, His conception in Mary by the Holy Spirit makes Him both human and divine. ■


Mary

An obscure young woman living in Nazareth and betrothed to Joseph, Mary rises to everlasting adoration by the Annunciation of the angel Gabriel. Mary humbly accepts her extraordinary situation without challenge and immediately prepares herself to deliver the son of the Lord. She gives birth to Jesus in a stable in Bethlehem.

Mary encourages Jesus to perform His first miracle at Cana. After Jesus leaves home to begin His ministry, Mary rarely appears in the Bible, but she is present at the foot of the cross during the crucifixion and continues to meet with the disciples after this and the resurrection. Mary's devotion to God is attested to by her psalm of thanksgiving (canticle) in Luke 1:46–55. This "Song of Mary" is also called the Magnificat, and is incorporated into the liturgical services of the Catholic Church. It is one of the most ancient of all Christian hymns.



The Virgin of Guadalupe, in a clay wall hanging in Metepec, Mexico. The name dates back to 1851, when a peasant saw a vision of Mary near Villa de Guadalupe.



**A SAVIOR
HAS BEEN BORN
TO YOU; HE IS THE
MESSIAH**

THE BIRTH OF JESUS, LUKE 2:11





IN BRIEF

PASSAGE

Luke 2:1–40

THEME

Christ's humble origins

SETTING

c.6–4 BCE A cave or barn on the outskirts of Bethlehem.

KEY FIGURES

Mary A young woman from Nazareth, Galilee.**Joseph** Husband of Mary, a carpenter, possibly descended from the royal House of David.**Jesus** Mary's newborn baby, who is the Messiah and Son of God.**Three shepherds** Herdsmen watching their sheep through the night near Bethlehem.**Simeon** An old and devout man in Jerusalem.**Anna** An 84-year-old widow in Jerusalem.

The story of the birth of Jesus, widely known as the Nativity, is presented as a simple tale in the Gospel of Luke. Probably writing in the early 80s CE, the author draws on earlier written accounts of Jesus's life alongside oral traditions handed down in various 1st-century Christian communities. It is believed that the author was also highlighting parallels with birth



narratives in the Hebrew Bible—notably, the story of the birth and infancy of the prophet Samuel. Matthew's account stresses the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies and begins with a genealogy tracing Jesus's ancestry to Abraham through King David.

The birth of Jesus

When the Roman emperor orders a census requiring the heads of all households to register in their ancestral communities, Joseph needs to return to the town of Bethlehem. He travels there with his heavily pregnant wife Mary, finally arriving at an inn.

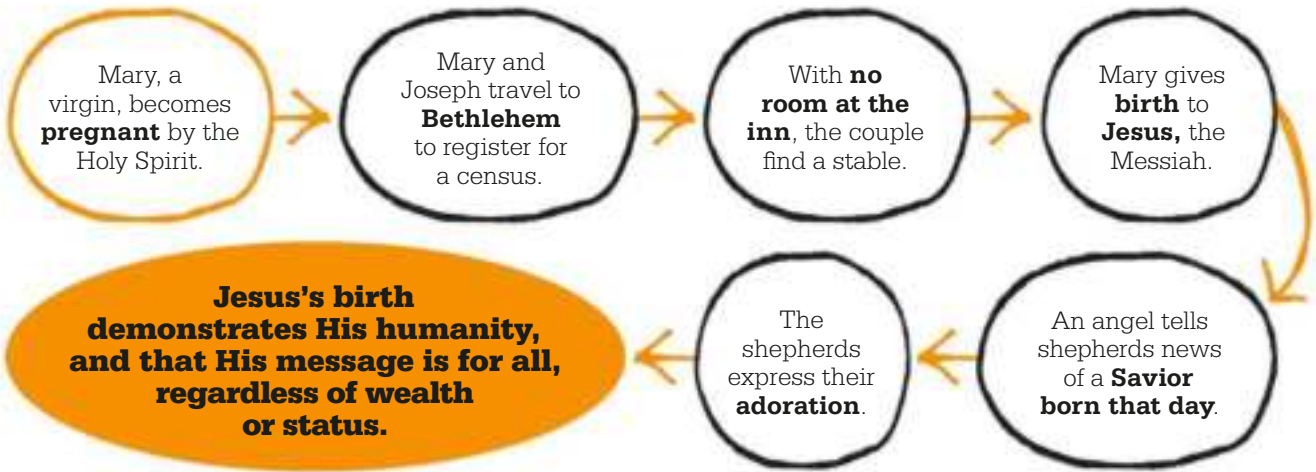
Mary and Joseph arrive too late in the evening to find suitable accommodations—the Greek phrase in Luke 2:7 translates as “there was no room at the inn”—and they must find makeshift shelter elsewhere: a stable, or possibly a cave, on the

The Nativity scene in Joan Mates's *Altarpiece of St. James* (c.1400) from Vallespinosa, Spain, depicts a troubled Joseph struggling to come to terms with the divine birth.

town's outskirts. In these unlikely surroundings, Mary gives birth to a son. Like all mothers of the time, she wraps her newborn baby with swaddling cloths. She then places her child in the only crib available: a feeding trough for animals. The modest birth story of God's son serves to indicate how Jesus was born as an ordinary member of mankind—a status that would enable Him to establish His close relationship with the people of God.

Like the author of Matthew's Gospel, the writer of Luke also places the birth in Bethlehem, about 6 miles (10km) south of Jerusalem. This has symbolic significance, as it links Jesus with

See also: The Prophet Samuel 110–15 ■ The Suffering Servant 154–55 ■ The Prophet Micah 168–71 ■ The Annunciation 178–79 ■ The Magi 186 ■ Herod’s Infanticide 187 ■ The Coming of Salvation 189 ■ The Divinity of Jesus 190–93



King David, who was also born in Bethlehem, and with the prophet Micah’s foretelling that a savior, or Messiah, of David’s line would be born there. Ascribing Jesus’s birthplace to Bethlehem is not purely symbolic, however, as traditions in the early Church also say that Jesus was born there.

Luke’s dating of the birth is more uncertain. He identifies the census that obliges Mary and Joseph to travel to Bethlehem

as the one that was ordered by Quirinius, the Roman governor of Syria, in 6–7 CE. This census provoked a revolt among the Jews. However, this does not fit with later references in the Gospels. Both Luke and Matthew make clear that Jesus was born during the reign of King Herod the Great of Judea, who died in 4 BCE. Luke may have confused the census that took place under Quirinius with an earlier one carried out by Herod within his

own realms. Although still contested, scholars generally place the birth of Jesus between 6–4 BCE.

The news spreads

Rejoicing at the birth of Jesus extends beyond Mary and Joseph. Just as the birth is preceded in Luke’s account by the annunciation of the angel Gabriel, who appears to Mary in her home village of Nazareth, so it is followed by another annunciation. An angel »

Joseph, husband of Mary



Joseph is mentioned only in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, where he is said to be descended from King David. This is not impossible: although a humble carpenter, he might come from a minor, impoverished branch of the former royal house.

Matthew’s Gospel—in which an annunciation happens to Joseph rather than Mary—shows a very human figure caught in a struggle between his sense of justice and his compassion for Mary. According to Law, Mary, if guilty of adultery, should be stoned to death. Unlike Mary,

Joseph does not feature in the ministry of Jesus, perhaps because he had died by then. He must have died by the time of the crucifixion, as John 19:26 states that Mary went to live with the “disciple whom He loved.” From the 2nd century CE, tradition portrayed Joseph as a widower when he married Mary, with children from a previous marriage. This preserved the doctrine of Mary’s perpetual virginity while also helping to explain the brothers and sisters of Jesus mentioned in Mark 6:3 and Matthew 13:55–56.

appears to shepherds in the fields nearby, as they watch over their sheep during the night. The angel announces the birth of a “Savior,” a word with double significance. In Jewish minds, it would recall Moses, who saved the Israelites by leading them out of slavery in Egypt. On another level, it would also evoke the Roman Emperor Augustus, a self-proclaimed “savior” who had brought much-needed peace to the empire. This child, the angel is saying, born in such lowly circumstances and announced to such humble people, will come to be a savior to all of humankind.

In the eyes of many at the time, shepherds would be regarded as unworthy of receiving a divine revelation. Although King David started life as a shepherd, and kings in the ancient Near East generally liked to describe themselves as shepherds of their people, in everyday life shepherds were despised and shunned. Spending so much time in the fields with animals, they were dirty and foul-smelling, and they also

had to deal regularly with animal carcasses, making them ritually unclean in Jewish eyes.

Like other marginalized figures in Luke, the shepherds, although initially afraid, are open and trusting, and their response to the angel is immediate. They hurry off to find the baby, and then share all that they have heard and experienced with Mary and Joseph. Mary is described as “treasuring up” the things they tell her and “pondering” them in her heart (Luke 2:19).

A humble sacrifice

On the eighth day after the birth, the baby is circumcised, as is customary, and named Jesus, meaning “the Lord saves.” Later, He is taken to the Temple in Jerusalem, in an episode which recalls the earlier story in the Hebrew Bible of the young Samuel’s presentation by his mother Hannah at the “house of the Lord” in Shiloh (1 Samuel 1:24). Here, Luke seems to have conflated two different rituals. The first concerns the redemption of the firstborn,

“
A Savior has been
born to you; He is the
Messiah, the Lord. This
will be a sign to you:
You will find a baby
wrapped in cloths and
lying in a manger.
Luke 2:11–12

whereby all firstborn males were redeemed—effectively, bought back from God—through the payment of money to the religious authorities. This did not necessarily involve going to Jerusalem. The second required a mother to go to the Temple for her ritual purification just over a month after childbirth. There, the mother would make a sacrificial offering. For those unable to afford anything more elaborate, this consisted of “a pair of doves or two young pigeons” (Luke 2:24). This is the approach Mary takes, again emphasizing the family’s humble background.

Blessing the child

While they are in the Temple, Mary and Joseph encounter two people, a man named Simeon and a woman called Anna. Luke often pairs men and women in this way, perhaps to indicate that they are equal and complementary before God. Both

Giovanni Girolamo Savoldo’s

Adoration of the Shepherds (c.1530s) depicts the shepherds and the Virgin Mary bathed in the luminous and symbolic light of the Christ child.



Celebrating Christmas

The Bible gives no indication as to the year of Jesus's birth, and many leaders of the early Church disapproved of marking the event, preferring to honor martyrs on the anniversary of their martyrdom. In spite of this, efforts were made to assign a date to the Nativity, using the seasons as a guide.

The spring equinox in March was associated with creation, the emergence of new life. This seemed right for the date of Jesus's conception. Nine months later came the winter solstice—December 25, in the Julian calendar of the time. In Rome this was also the feast of the invincible sun, *Sol Invictus*, the turning point at which light starts to drive back darkness. Jesus had long been identified as the “Sun of righteousness”; the symbolism was compelling and the date gradually gained acceptance. There is evidence that, by 336 CE, the feast of the Nativity—Christmas—was already being celebrated liturgically in Rome on December 25. Within a century, the holy festival had become widespread.

adult Jesus embarks upon His public ministry, to let go of her son for the greater good.

Anna, an 84-year-old widow, joins the group, also recognizing that the child is the one promised by God. She gives loud thanks for what she is seeing. Having fulfilled all that is required of them and their baby by “the Law of the Lord”, and marveling at what they have seen and heard, Mary and Joseph set off home to Nazareth. The child Jesus grows and becomes strong, “filled with wisdom, and the grace of God was upon Him” (Luke 2:40). ■



are old, righteous, and devout, belonging to a recognizable group known in the Bible as the “faithful remnant,” described by Zephaniah, Malachi, and other prophets. They care passionately about the redemption of Jerusalem and Israel.

Simeon arrives first, divine inspiration leading him to the couple from provincial Galilee. He takes the child Jesus in his arms and utters the song, or canticle, known by its first two words in

“

This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed.

Luke 2:34–35

”

The traditional place of Christ's birth, Bethlehem's Church of the Nativity, is an important pilgrimage site for Christians. A silver star marks the supposed birthplace.

the Latin Bible, *Nunc Dimittis*. Years earlier, God had revealed to Simeon that he would not die until he had seen the promised Messiah. Now the old man declares that promise has been fulfilled. He can die peacefully, for in the child he holds in his arms he sees God's salvation. This, he proclaims, is for the whole world, not just Israel, saying the child will be “a light for revelation to the Gentiles” (Luke 2:32). This universalism is another characteristic of the Gospel of Luke, which was written chiefly for a Christian audience from a Gentile, rather than a Jewish, background.

Simeon then adds two warnings: people's responses to Jesus will be mixed. Not all shall welcome Him; many will reject Him. In an aside to Mary, he tells her that a sword will one day pierce her soul. This may be a foretelling of Mary's later sufferings at the crucifixion, or it may refer to her need, when the



THEY ... PRESENTED HIM WITH GIFTS OF GOLD, FRANKINCENSE, AND MYRRH

MATTHEW 2:11, THE MAGI

IN BRIEF

PASSAGE

Matthew 2:1–12

THEME

Glorification of the Messiah

SETTING

6–4 BCE During the reign of King Herod. The Judean cities of Bethlehem and Jerusalem.

KEY FIGURES

Herod King of Judea, notorious for the ruthless elimination of his enemies.

Magi Astrologers from the east who come to worship the newborn Jesus in Bethlehem.

Mary The mother of Jesus and wife of Joseph.

Joseph The adoptive father of Jesus and husband of Mary.

Jesus The son of Mary and the adopted son of Joseph, who is the Messiah and Son of God.

Although divination was forbidden in the Jewish scriptures, it was common in other Greco-Roman and ancient Near Eastern societies. Magi were respected professionals, who studied the constellations and then interpreted the movements of the stars as divine portents.

A new king

The journey of the magi is recorded only in Matthew's Gospel. In his account, the magi travel from the east to Judea searching for the newly born "king of the Jews." On hearing of the magis' quest, King Herod is alarmed by the potential threat to his rule. When his chief priests tell him that the Christ is to be born in Bethlehem, he tells the magi to go to that city and return with the exact location of the baby, on the pretense that he wishes to pay his respects.

The magi follow a unique star to Bethlehem and find Jesus with His mother, Mary. Overjoyed, the magi kneel down before the child and offer gifts of gold, frankincense,



The Adoration of the Magi by Quentin Matsys shows the magi with a huge retinue. None of the Gospels suggest this was the case.

and myrrh. Finally, on account of a dream warning them against returning to Jerusalem, they journey back home to the east.

The story of the magi shows that Jesus is not only fulfilling Jewish prophecies but also Gentile predictions. As such, Jesus is depicted as a divinely chosen ruler whom all peoples and nations should glorify. ■

See also: The Birth of Jesus 180–85 ■ Herod's Infanticide 187 ■ The Council of Jerusalem 292–93



HE GAVE ORDERS TO KILL ALL THE BOYS IN BETHLEHEM

MATTHEW 2:16, HEROD'S INFANTICIDE

IN BRIEF

PASSAGE

Matthew 2:13–18

THEME

Persecution

SETTING

6–4 BCE During the reign of King Herod. Judea and Egypt.

KEY FIGURES

Herod King of Judea, appointed by the Romans, who also called him “King of the Jews.”

Joseph The adoptive father of Jesus and husband of Mary.

The angel A divine messenger who warns Joseph of King Herod's plot to kill the infant Jesus.

The first two chapters in the Gospel of Matthew recount the early years of Jesus's life. In each scene, the author calls on the words of the prophets, including Jeremiah and Hosea, to demonstrate how Jesus is the anticipated Messiah.

Exodus reinterpreted

Worried about a prediction that his royal replacement, the Christ, has been born in Bethlehem, Herod orders the killing of all babies under the age of 2 in the city. In a moment of divine intervention, an angel appears to Joseph and urges him to flee with Mary and Jesus. Following the angelic command, Joseph resettles his family in Egypt. They do not return to Judea until after the death of King Herod several years later.

The king's actions mirror those of Pharaoh in the Exodus story, who also ordered mass infanticide. Like Moses, Jesus flees from the land of His birth after a king threatens His life, but later returns to become an influential religious teacher.

The author builds on these connections between Jesus and the Exodus story by proclaiming that Jesus's stay in Egypt fulfills a text in Hosea in which God calls His son out of Egypt: “When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son” (Hosea 11:1). The original passage referred to God rescuing the people of Israel from slavery in Egypt. The author of Matthew's Gospel reinterprets the divine claim, making Jesus the Son of God. ■

“

Escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him.

Matthew 2:13

”

See also: Moses and the Burning Bush 66–69 ■ The Ten Plagues 70–71 ■ The Exodus 74–77 ■ The Prophet Micah 168–71 ■ The Birth of Jesus 180–85



DIDN'T YOU KNOW I HAD TO BE IN MY FATHER'S HOUSE?

LUKE 2:49, A CHILD IN THE TEMPLE

IN BRIEF

PASSAGE

Luke 2:41–51

THEME

Jesus reveals His divine lineage

SETTING

c.6–7 CE Jerusalem.

KEY FIGURES

Jesus The 12-year-old son of Mary and adopted son of Joseph, who is also the Messiah and Son of God.

Mary and Joseph Devout Jews from Nazareth, identified as the earthly mother and adoptive father of Jesus.

The rabbis The teachers of the scriptures, who gathered in the Jerusalem Temple to debate points of Mosaic Law.

Every year, Jesus and His parents travel to Jerusalem for the feast of Passover.

One year, when Jesus is 12 years old, He stays in Jerusalem after His parents have set out for home. Thinking their son is among their fellow travelers, Mary and Joseph do not realize He is missing until a whole day has passed, at which point they return to Jerusalem to look for Him. After three days of searching, they find Him debating with the rabbis in the Temple.

Everyone who listens to Jesus is amazed by Him, but Mary rebukes her son. In an instant, Jesus turns from His debate with the rabbis to address His mother: “Why were you searching for me? Didn’t you know I had to be in my Father’s house?” (Luke 2:49). Jesus’s reply confuses His parents, who do not understand that He is revealing His knowledge of His divine lineage.

The author’s use of dramatic irony was probably intended to amuse early Christian readers of Luke. Other literary devices include foreshadowing and allusion: Jesus’s

three-day absence from His family anticipates His three days in the grave after His death, and the combination of the Passover setting and Jesus’s claim to be the Son of God allude to the Exodus, in which Israel is also called God’s son (Exodus 4:22). Such devices, and the fact that this is the only depiction of Jesus’s adolescence in the Gospels, lead some scholars to view the episode as theological fiction rather than historical fact, the main purpose of which is to highlight Jesus’s divinity. ■



In William Holman Hunt’s highly symbolic *The Finding of the Savior in the Temple* (1860), a blind rabbi (bottom left) clutches the Torah as though he and his religion are under threat.

See also: The Exodus 74–77 ■ The Annunciation 178–79 ■ The Birth of Jesus 180–85 ■ The Magi 186 ■ The Coming of Salvation 189



PREPARE THE WAY FOR THE LORD

LUKE 3:4, THE COMING OF SALVATION

IN BRIEF

PASSAGE

Luke 3:1–18

THEME

The prophecy fulfilled

SETTING

c.26 CE The country around the River Jordan.

KEY FIGURES

John the Baptist Son of Elizabeth and Zechariah. A prophet who baptizes Jesus and is later beheaded by King Herod.

Isaiah An ancient Israelite prophet, to whom the Book of Isaiah is ascribed.

Jesus The Messiah and Son of God in the period before He begins His ministry.

John the Baptist was a Jewish prophet who heralded Jesus in the Gospel of Luke. In Luke 3, John goes out into the country and calls the people to repent and be forgiven. He baptizes those who accept his message in the River Jordan.

The author of Luke presents John's actions as the fulfillment of a prophecy in the Book of Isaiah. John quotes Isaiah 40:3, in which a voice in the wilderness exhorts listeners to prepare the way for the Lord. They are to make the path straight, level, and smooth, and then all will see the coming of God's salvation. Although Isaiah's prophecy spoke first about God's rescue of the Israelites from exile in Babylon, the Gospel of Luke reports that John the Baptist interpreted it to have a further fulfillment in his own ministry.

Baptism by fire

In the next scene, the followers of John begin to wonder if he is the Christ. John affirms his role as messianic precursor, declaring that

“

The ax is ... at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down.

Luke 3:9

”

he is not worthy to untie the sandal of the one who is to come. He says that while he baptizes with water, the one more powerful than him will baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire. John concludes his message with an image of Christ as a winnow, separating the wheat from chaff and burning the chaff with unquenchable fire (3:17), symbolizing the Final Judgment. John hopes that all will hear the news of the coming Christ, repent, and be saved. ■

See also: The Suffering Servant 190–93 ■ The Divinity of Jesus 190–93 ■ The Baptism of Jesus 194–97 ■ The Empty Tomb 268–71

THE WORD BECAME FLESH AND MADE HIS DWELLING AMONG US

JOHN 1:14, THE DIVINITY OF JESUS



IN BRIEF

PASSAGE

John 1:1–18

THEME

The Incarnation

SETTING

c.24–27 CE Roman Palestine

KEY FIGURES

John Author of the fourth Gospel in the New Testament.

The Word John's title for Jesus, emphasizing His divine nature.

For Christians, Jesus of Nazareth is the central figure in the Bible. Although prophets, priests, and kings have come before Him, none taught as He did, nor provoked such loyalty and hostility. Jesus's life, teaching, death, and resurrection are the substance of Christian teaching.

Word of God

The Gospel of John is the last of the four Gospels to be written. One of the main concerns in the Apostle John's New Testament writings, which include the epistles of 1–3 John, is to encourage those who believe in Jesus that He is the Son of God. It begins like Genesis 1 with the creation of the world. Just as Genesis 1 assumes the existence of God, "In the beginning God ..." and goes on to assert that this God is the creator, "and God said, 'Let there be light,'" John opens with, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God ...

See also: The Exodus 74–77 ■ The Suffering Servant 154–55 ■ The Crucifixion 258–65 ■ The Empty Tomb 268–71 ■ The Coming of Salvation 301

Awaiting the Messiah

The prophet Isaiah had predicted that the Messiah would be born to a virgin and be called “Immanuel” (Isaiah 7:14), meaning “God with us.” In the New Testament, the author of the Gospel of John reports how John the Baptist, proclaiming Jesus’s higher rank, says, “He was before me” (John 1:15). The implication is that Jesus, who was younger than John the Baptist, existed eternally.

The other Gospels report that even during Jesus’s lifetime, people see and hear things about Him that are extraordinary. When Herod hears that magi from the east are visiting the infant Jesus, he sees the child as a threat and asks his chief priests “where the Messiah was to be born” (Matthew 2:4).



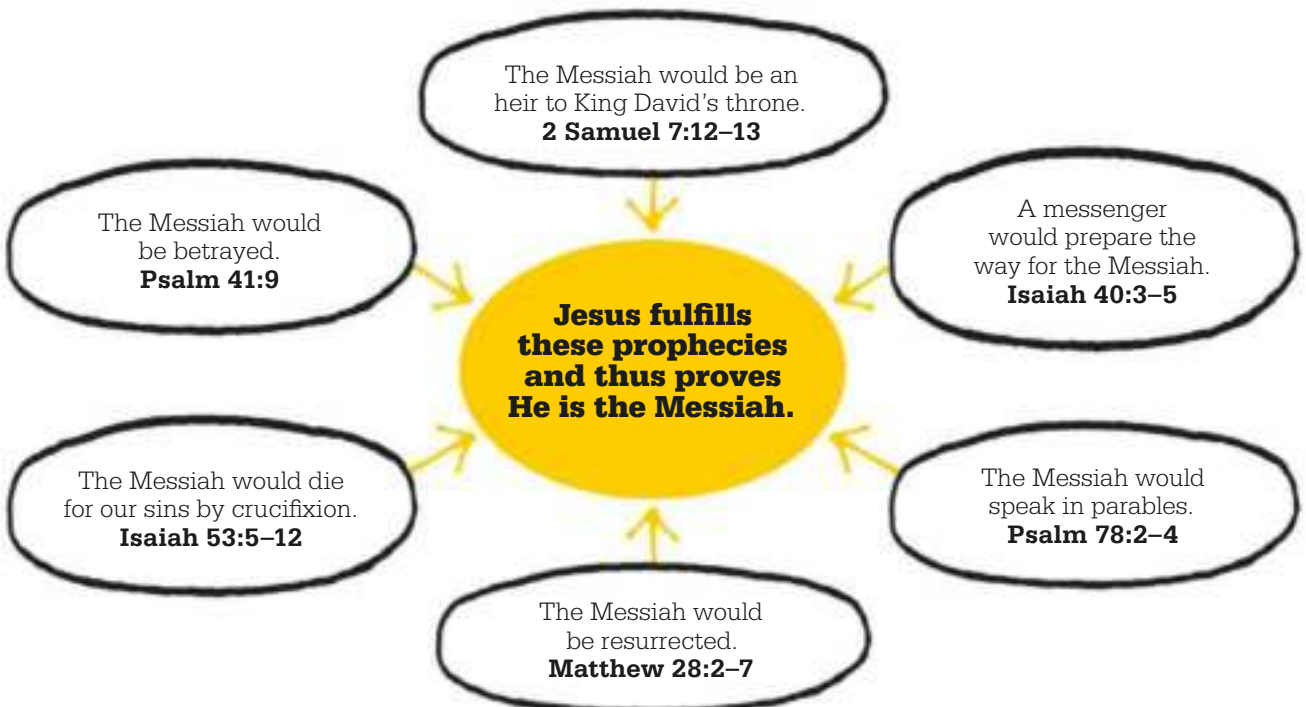
Fra Angelico's fresco *Christ the Judge Amongst the Angels*, from the Chapel of San Brizio, Orvieto, Italy, shows Christ presiding in judgment on a heavenly throne.

All things came into being through Him.” The foundation of all things, according to John, was the Word, who was in some sense God, and yet somehow distinct from God.

In John 1:14–18, the Apostle returns to the connection he made between the divine Word and creation. John declares that “the

Word became flesh, and dwelt among us ...” and God exhibited His glory as His “one and only” Son.

John the Apostle’s claim that Jesus was also the creator did not arise with his Gospel nor was the realization that Jesus was, and claimed to be, something more than a Galilean carpenter or a preacher a late invention. Jesus’s behavior itself implies divinity. The first three Gospels portray Him acting in ways that parallel God’s interventions in the Old Testament, such as feeding the 5,000 with loaves and fish (God feeds the Israelites in the wilderness) and »





St. Simeon

Eight days after His birth, Mary and Joseph present Jesus for circumcision at the Temple in Jerusalem. Luke’s Gospel tells how an elderly priest, Simeon, who was longing for the coming of Israel’s Messiah, is in the Temple courts that day (Luke 2:25–35). God had promised Simeon that he would not die until he had seen the Messiah. Led by the Holy Spirit, Simeon takes the infant Jesus in his arms and blesses Him. In Simeon’s Song, he praises God for keeping His promise, both to him and to Israel. He identifies Jesus as the salvation for both Israel and for the world.

Simeon’s expectation echoed the universal scope expressed by Isaiah, who talks of the Israelites being a “light for the Gentiles” (Isaiah 49:6). Salvation would come first to the Jews, but would not be for them alone. God’s plan was to save people from all nations. The praise in Simeon’s Song anticipates an important theme in Luke’s Gospel and in Acts—the salvation of the wider world.

stilling storms (as God does in Jonah when the prophet runs away to sea).

Matthew, Mark, and Luke’s Gospels also report incidents in which several religious leaders understand Jesus to be claiming divine status. Most famously, the night before His crucifixion, Jesus faces a trial before a large group of religious leaders. They demand to know if He is the Christ, the Son of God. Jesus affirms that He is, saying they will see Him “sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One, and coming on the clouds of heaven” (Matthew 26:64).

The Apostle Paul, preaching across the Roman Empire after Jesus’s death, writes that Jesus is divine. He refers to Jesus as God twice in his letters and calls Jesus “Lord,” a Hebrew term for God. Paul anticipates John’s teaching that all things are created through Jesus (1 Corinthians 8:6) and insists that Jesus possesses every attribute of divinity (Colossians 1:19, 2:9), such as omnipotence, eternity, and omnipresence.

John’s evidence

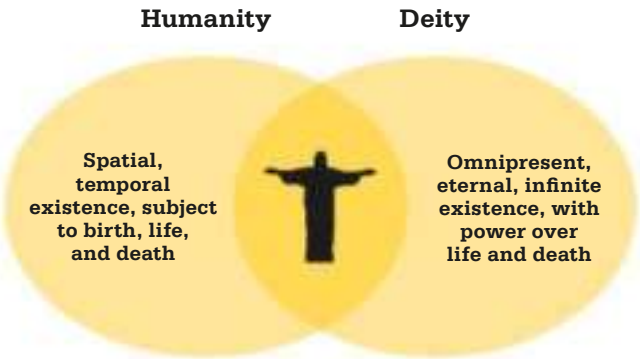
The Gospel of John provides the most explicit case for Jesus’s divinity. After healing a man on the Sabbath day, Jesus answers the

“
Christ was not . . . a being half human and half not, like a centaur, but both things at once and both things thoroughly, very man and very God.
”
G.K. Chesterton

rabbis’ criticism by equating God’s work with His own, calling God His Father, and making Himself equal with God. In another dispute, Jesus states that “before Abraham was, I AM,” thus making a claim to preexist Abraham (John 8:58). The rabbis understand these words, but deny their truth, and pick up stones to kill Jesus for blasphemy. Later, when pressed to declare if He is the Messiah, Jesus says, “I and the Father are One” (John 10:30), echoing Deuteronomy 6:4—“Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One”—but replacing the second “Lord” with “I and the Father.”

Fully man, fully God

The Chalcedonian Creed asserts that Jesus Christ has two natures—human and divine. Each is complete and distinct, yet “not parted or divided” into two persons.





The supreme act in support of Jesus's claim to be divine is His resurrection. After His execution by the Romans for being a rebel, Jesus's resurrection would have stood as God's vindication of Jesus's words and deeds. When Thomas finally sees the resurrected Jesus, he addresses Him as "My Lord and my God" (John 20:28).

The incarnation

Jesus of Nazareth is a man who eats and sleeps, yet He also claims to be God. Affirming these two ideas together is the doctrine of the incarnation: the Word becoming flesh. Some early teachers tried to resolve this paradox by saying Christ was fundamentally human, but had been "adopted" as God's Son. Others, affirming the genuine deity of Jesus, taught that He only "seemed" to be human. Yet others

insisted that Jesus could really be God because He was the Father in disguise. Later teachers affirmed the humanity and deity of Jesus, but struggled to find a consistent explanation for how He could be both. In the 5th century some teachers affirmed that Jesus had a human body and soul, but that the divine Word took the place of His human spirit. Others taught that the human and divine had merged in Jesus, and that He was neither purely divine nor human.

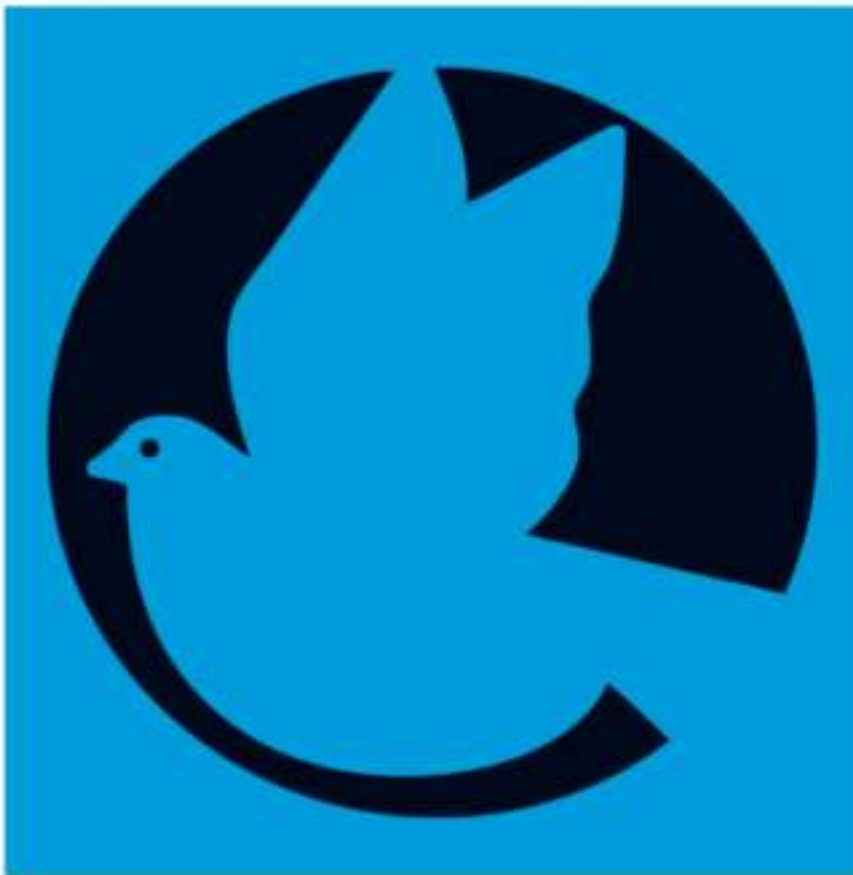
In 451 CE, Church leaders at the Council of Chalcedon in Turkey affirmed that Jesus possessed two natures, one divine and the other human, in His one person. Each of these natures was complete, not lacking any attribute proper to being either divine or human. The Chalcedonian Creed became the affirmation of the incarnation.

The Christ the Redeemer statue on the Corcovado mountain in Rio de Janeiro was built in the 1920s, reputedly in response to a rising tide of godlessness in the city.

The doctrine of the incarnation arose as a recognition of the validity of Jesus's claim to be God; an assertion vindicated by His resurrection. Yet it also protected Christianity from the possibility of a fatal internal contradiction. Jesus accepted worship as God from His followers and commanded them to trust in Him for their salvation. If Jesus were not God, then His followers were guilty of idolatry, an offense for which there was no atoning sacrifice under the Law of Moses. But worship of and trust in Jesus would not be idolatry if Jesus were God, and salvation in His name would not be blasphemy. ■

THIS IS MY SON, WHOM I LOVE; WITH HIM I AM WELL PLEASSED

MATTHEW 3:17, THE BAPTISM OF JESUS



IN BRIEF

PASSAGE

Matthew 3:13–17

THEME

The beginning of Christ's ministry

SETTING

c.26–27 CE Judean countryside, alongside the River Jordan.

KEY FIGURES

Jesus The Messiah and Son of God, who travels from Galilee to the River Jordan to be baptized by John and commence His ministry.

John the Baptist A dedicated holy man and preacher who baptizes Jesus, then steps aside to make way for His ministry.

Near the beginning of the Gospel according to Matthew, at the start of the New Testament, Jesus undergoes a baptism (ritual washing by immersion in water) at the hands of a man named John the Baptist. Such is the significance of this event—because it marks the beginning of Jesus's ministry—that it is mentioned in all four Gospels of the New Testament. In addition to Matthew 3, referenced here, Mark 1 and Luke 3 both give full details of the baptism, while in John 1, it is discussed in passing.

See also: The Temptations of Christ 198–99 ■ The Transfiguration 234–35 ■ The Crucifixion 258–65 ■ The Empty Tomb 268–71 ■ The Great Commission 274–77

Baptisms in the New Testament	
Baptism by John	(Matthew 3:6)
Baptism of Jesus	(Matthew 3:13–17)
Baptism by the Holy Spirit	(1 Corinthians 12:12–13; Galatians 3:27)
Baptism with fire	(Luke 3:16)
Baptizing believers	(Acts 2:41; 8:36)
Baptism of the Israelites	(1 Corinthians 10:1–2)
Baptism for the dead	(1 Corinthians 15:29)



This detail from *The Baptism of Christ*, by A.H. Philippe Sauvan-Magnet, c.1500, shows John pouring water over Jesus's head. Matthew's account suggests He was submerged.

According to Luke (3:23), Jesus is about 30 years old at the time of the baptism. He travels to the River Jordan from Galilee to meet with John. The latter has gained a reputation for the act—exhorting local people to confess and repent of their sins, and then washing them clean in the water of the river.

When the two men first meet, John is surprised by Jesus's request to be baptized, because he

knows that Jesus is the Messiah. John exclaims: "I need to be baptized by You, and do You come to me?" (Matthew 3:14). Reassured by Jesus that there is no mistake, John then lowers Jesus into the waters and baptizes Him.

Purpose of the act

Biblical scholars have long debated the precise significance of this event, since the stated purpose

of John's baptism is a "baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins" (Mark 1:4). However, as the New Testament confirms, Jesus was completely without sin—Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 5:21 that "God made Him who had no sin to be sin for us." Jesus therefore has nothing to repent for, yet still asks for baptism. The general consensus is that, in this case, the act of cleansing is merely symbolic. »

John the Baptist



Like Jesus, John the Baptist is born in miraculous circumstances. In Luke (1:5–23), an angel of the Lord visits Zechariah, an aged priest, and his barren wife Elizabeth. He announces that they will have a son and that he will become a great man of God. Such is Zechariah's disbelief at this revelation—owing to their age—that God strikes him dumb.

Zechariah recovers his speech when Elizabeth gives birth to their son, John. Luke confirms that the birth occurs just months prior to that of Jesus (1:36). John becomes a preacher, living an

austere and hermitic life in the desert. He preaches a message advocating both confession and repentance, and offers baptism in the River Jordan to all who heed him. John speaks, above all, of a "greater one" who will come after him—the Messiah prophesied in the scriptures.

John's preaching ultimately leads to his downfall, when he warns King Herod against marrying his brother's wife. The king marries her anyway, but she never forgives John, and John is eventually beheaded on the whim of her daughter, Salome.

Some scholars debate whether or not John knew before he baptized Him that Jesus was the Messiah. According to Luke's account, as Jesus comes up out of the river, the heavens above Him open and "the Holy Spirit descended on Him in bodily form like a dove" (Luke 3:22). A voice from heaven simultaneously booms out: "This is my Son, whom I love; with Him I am well pleased" (Matthew 3:17). John's Gospel suggests John did not know who was in front of him until he saw the dove: "And I myself did not know Him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water told me, 'The man on whom you see the Spirit come down and remain is the one who will baptize with the Holy Spirit'" (John 1:33). John claims to have decided to baptize Jesus simply because then the man "might be revealed to Israel" (1:31).

The affirmations of God and John the Baptist, made in front of the witnessing crowd, both confirm that Jesus is the Son of God and the Messiah. He is symbolically cleansed in order to commence His ministry and is now ready to encounter the forces of darkness. Immediately after the baptism, Jesus goes into the desert, where He fasts for 40 days. Here, He is tempted by Satan (Matthew 4),

“

He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.

Matthew 3:11

”



in a series of tests that resonate with universal human desires and concerns. Jesus maintains His resolve—His baptism has been successful—and He returns to society to begin preaching to the people and working miracles.

Historical ramifications

The baptism of Jesus is one of five key events in the Gospel narrative of the life of the Messiah. The other four are: the Transfiguration; the Crucifixion; the Resurrection; and Jesus's Ascension into heaven. Nearly all denominations of Christianity celebrate the event, and the baptism of Jesus shaped the Christian rite of baptism that is practiced worldwide to this day.

The majority of theologians assign a high degree of certainty to the actuality of Jesus's baptism, using it as a starting point from which to assert Jesus's historicity. It is also highly likely, based on

The dove of the Holy Spirit in this 14th-century fresco by Giusto de' Menabuoi, in the Baptistery in Padua, is a symbol of renewal, like the dove sent out by Noah after the Flood.

historical records, that John the Baptist lived at the same time as Jesus. The 1st-century historian Flavius Josephus attested to the existence of John the Baptist at the same time as Jesus in his work *Antiquities of the Jews*. He stated that John's ministry began around 28–29 CE, shortly before that of the Messiah, and most modern theologians accept this view.

Once he has baptized Jesus, John the Baptist's popularity as a preacher begins to wane. This is largely due to people beginning to follow Jesus instead of him. John's response to this change in his circumstances is typical of his renowned humility, as well as affirming his role as a precursor

Methods of baptism

Denomination	Sprinkling	Pouring	Immersion	Do Not Baptize
Adventist			✓	
Anglican	✓	✓	✓	
Baptist		✓	✓	
Roman Catholic		✓	✓	
Eastern Orthodox			✓	
Episcopalian	✓	✓	✓	
Methodist	✓	✓	✓	
Presbyterian	✓	✓	✓	
Quaker				✓
United Church of Christ	✓	✓	✓	

to Christ. In John 3:30, John states: “He [Jesus] must become greater; I must become less.”

Holy waters

Most scholars agree that the baptism took place near the Jordan River, in the countryside of Roman Judea. Some accounts suggest that the immersion was conducted in one of the many desert springs or waterholes in the area, rather than in the river itself. Specific references in the book of John point to the town of Bethany on the eastern bank of the Jordan River, near Jericho (1:28), or to the settlement of Aenon near Salim “because there was plenty of water, and people were coming and being baptized.” (3:23).

Given the meaning of the word baptize—“to dip”—many Christian denominations insist upon baptism by total immersion, often three

times, to symbolize Jesus’s death and resurrection; others favour sprinkling or pouring to represent the Holy Spirit descending from above. Some Christians believe that baptism is a sacrament that is necessary for salvation; other groups, such as Lutheran Protestants, associate baptism with spiritual regeneration. ■

“

Heaven was opened and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove.

Matthew 3:16

”



Baptism

The Christian rite of baptism—which consists of sprinkling or pouring water on a person’s forehead or immersing them in water—symbolizes spiritual and physical purification. The rite of baptism confers an individual’s admission to the Christian Church. Before His Ascension, Jesus bids his disciples to “make disciples of all nations, baptizing them” (Matthew 28:19).

In many denominations, baptism is performed on very young children, accompanied by name giving. The doctrine of original sin, propounded by St. Paul and developed by the early Church, made the baptism of infants, who might die suddenly or unexpectedly, of vital importance. The early church frowned upon the practice of “baptism of the dead,” in which a living person was baptized on behalf of the deceased.

Today, some Christian denominations, including Baptists, do not baptize children, on the grounds that the basis for baptism is a credible profession of faith. Other groups, including Quakers, view baptism as an unnecessary ritual.



JESUS SAID TO HIM, “AWAY FROM ME, SATAN!”

MATTHEW 4:10, THE TEMPTATIONS OF CHRIST

IN BRIEF

PASSAGE

Matthew 4:1–11; Mark 1:12–13; Luke 4:1–13

THEME

Resisting temptation

SETTING

c.26–27 CE The Judean Desert, near the Dead Sea.

KEY FIGURES

Jesus The Messiah and Son of God at the start of His ministry, recently baptized by John the Baptist.

Satan The accuser and tempter, whom early Christians later identify as the serpent in the Garden of Eden and the great dragon of Revelation.

The temptations of Jesus in the wilderness are a theological battle between Jesus and Satan. Both figures quote the Old Testament—Satan to taunt Jesus into proving that He is the promised Messiah, beginning each

of his challenges with the words “If you are the son of God” (Psalm 91:11, 12), and Jesus to assert His divinity: “Do not put the Lord your God to the test” (Deuteronomy 6:16). The encounter is described in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, although Mark mentions it in only two verses (Mark 1:12–13). Applying the scholarly assumption that Mark is the oldest Gospel, it is likely that Matthew and Luke expanded on the stories using a source known as Q—named for the German *Quelle*, meaning source.

Satan speaks

In all three Gospels, Jesus is sent or led to the desert by the “Spirit.” There, after 40 days and 40 nights of fasting, Jesus is suddenly confronted by Satan, who poses three questions to Him.

He first asks Jesus to sate His hunger by turning stone to bread. In reply, Jesus tells him that man shall not live on bread alone. Then Satan asks Jesus to demonstrate the extent of His power by throwing Himself from a mountain so that angels can save Him. Jesus refuses, telling him not to put the Lord your God to the test. Finally, Satan tells Jesus he will give Him the world if

He worships him. Again, Jesus refuses, saying that only God should be worshipped. In Matthew, Jesus then cries: “Away from me, Satan!”

Even though Jesus never tells Satan that He is the Son of God, it is implied that He is not only God’s Son, but also the embodiment of God on earth. The Gospels suggest that while humans would succumb to the temptation of



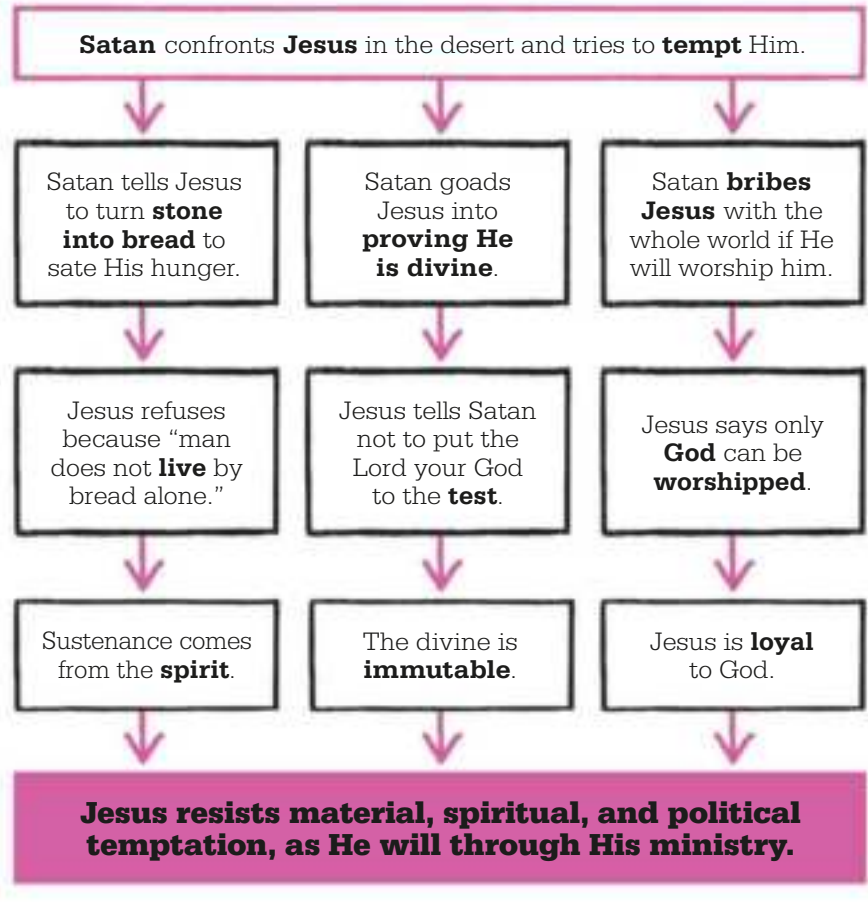
Christ in the Wilderness (1872), by Russian artist Ivan Kramskoi, emphasizes the human in the divine, depicting a figure pondering the heavy responsibilities that await Him.

See also: The Fall 30–35 ■ The Flood 40–41 ■ The Exodus 74–77 ■ The Suffering of Job 146–47 ■ The Lord’s Prayer 212–13 ■ Demons and the Herd of Pigs 224–25

Satan, Jesus passes each test. His divinity is confirmed in Mark and Matthew’s description of angels attending Jesus when Satan leaves.

Fulfilling the prophecy

In all three Gospels, the temptation of Christ occurs after He has been baptized by John, creating a sequence of birth, baptism, and then temptation that culminates in His ministry. As in many passages from the New Testament, the Gospel authors also allude to the fulfillment of Isaiah’s Messianic prophecy through Jesus. Other echoes of the Old Testament include the Fall, when Adam and Eve are tempted to eat from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil by the serpent (whom Christians later identify as Satan), and the significance of the number 40. Like Noah’s flood, which destroys the world’s sins, Jesus’s fast lasts 40 days and 40 nights, and there are echoes of the Israelites’ 40-year wandering in the wilderness, when God sates their hunger with manna from heaven. ■



Satan in the New Testament

Throughout the Bible, from the writing of Job to the Gospels, the figure of the *satan* (Hebrew for “adversary”) is portrayed as an antagonistic being who, despite an existence predicated on God’s will, is intent on destroying His followers and discrediting Him.

The “devil” appears most often in the New Testament. In Luke 22:3, Satan enters Judas Iscariot, and in Luke 13:10–15, Jesus cures a crippled woman whom Satan “has kept bound”

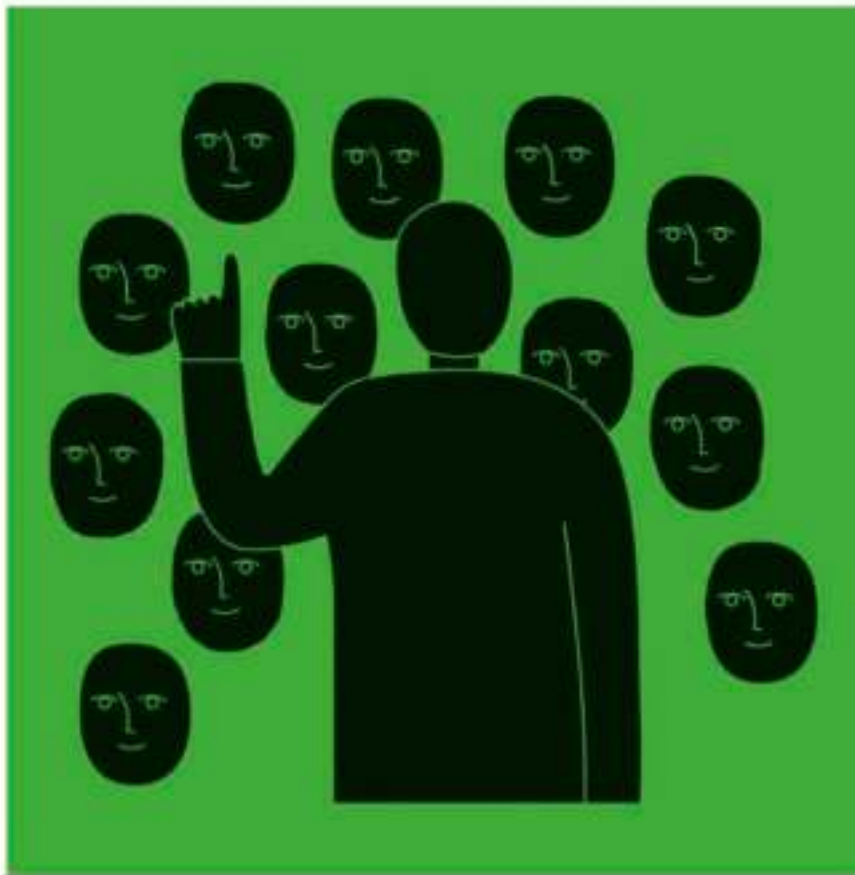
for 18 years. In Revelation 20:2, Satan, “who leads the whole world astray,” is hurled to the earth and bound for 1,000 years.

The belief in Satan as an independent, evil figure who contrasts with God’s goodness is known as “dualism.” The concept became popular among medieval Christian sects such as the Paulicians and the Cathars. Its origins may lie in the spread of Greek culture after Alexander the Great’s conquest of the Phoenician Empire in 331 BCE.



“FOLLOW ME,” JESUS SAID, “... I WILL SEND YOU OUT TO FISH FOR PEOPLE”

MARK 1:17, THE CALLING OF THE DISCIPLES



IN BRIEF

PASSAGE

Mark 1:17

THEME

Jesus calls His disciples for ministry

SETTING

c.26–27 CE, Roman Judean countryside, beside the Sea of Galilee.

KEY FIGURES

Jesus The Messiah and Son of God at the start of His ministry in Galilee.

The 11 “good” disciples

These include (Simon) Peter, Andrew, James, John, Matthew (Levi), and Simon the Zealot.

Judas Iscariot The disciple who will betray Jesus.

Early in His ministry, Jesus selects 12 disciples. This is a step to securing His legacy and has huge significance: the 12 men He chooses will go on to spread the word of Jesus and build a new Israel: a new Church.

In the Ancient Near East, the gathering of students, or “disciples,” around a master teacher was an established practice. At the time, knowledge was largely imparted via the spoken word, and the more disciples that were amassed, the farther that word would spread. Jesus was aware of this, and the selection of as many as a dozen disciples gives an indication of the intended scale of His ministry. In Mark 1, Jesus is walking beside the Sea of Galilee one day, when He sees Simon (whom Jesus calls

See also: Jesus Embraces a Tax Collector 242–43 ▪ Peter’s Denial 256–57 ▪ The Great Commission 274–77



The Miraculous Draught of Fishes, by Jean Jouvenet (1644–1717), depicts Jesus recruiting Peter and Andrew, and filling their previously empty nets with fish.

Peter) and his brother Andrew hauling in an empty net. Jesus walks up to the men and exhorts them to cast their net again. When they draw the net in, it is brimming with fish. “Follow me . . . to fish for people,” Jesus tells them (1:17). Without hesitating, the men leave their nets to go with Him to recruit more disciples. Jesus then meets two more fishermen—James and John—in a boat with their father Zebedee and some hired men. Like Peter and Andrew, James and John join Jesus as soon as He asks them. The four fishermen become the first of Jesus’s 12 disciples.

Lowly profession

Just as it is symbolic that Jesus chooses 12 disciples—to represent the totality of the nation of Israel—it is also telling that He selects four fishermen and, ultimately, possibly as many as six. Such an elevation of this relatively lowly profession indicates that knowledge of God should not be confined to the learned or priestly classes. As stated in 1 Corinthians 1:27: “God chose the foolish things of the

world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong.” There may also be some significance in the fact that fishermen have to be patient in their work; Jesus knew that to change the world as He intended would take great patience.

Courting controversy

Jesus’s choice of His remaining eight disciples is also significant. First, He chooses a tax collector,

Levi, who also goes by the name of Matthew, and is the reputed author of the Gospel of that name. Initially, this seems like an odd choice. As the Bible repeatedly demonstrates, tax collectors were particularly unpopular at the time; Jesus’s selection of Levi therefore earns Him disdain from the Pharisee teachers of the Law: “Why does He eat with tax collectors and sinners?” (Mark 2:16). Jesus responds: “It is not the healthy who need a doctor but those who are sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners” (2:17).

Jesus next chooses the Zealot, Simon. Again, the appointment is symbolic. After their experiences in Egypt and in the wake of the ceaseless invasions of their nation, the Jewish people had developed an intense dislike of foreign rule. No group is still more active in »

Disciples as learners

A “disciple” is someone who adheres to the teachings of a master or instructor. In the New Testament, it is made clear on numerous occasions that Jesus is the ultimate master on earth. It is upon Jesus that all authority in heaven and on earth has been bestowed (Matthew 28:18); it is to Jesus that every knee will bow (Philippians 2:10); it is in account of Jesus that all the tribes of the earth will mourn (Revelation 1:7); and from Jesus that the absolute

fury of God’s wrath will be executed (Revelation 19:15). It is incumbent upon the 12 disciples that they learn to live like Jesus, and to teach others to behave in the same way. Essentially, they should learn to become “little Christs,” or “Christians” (Acts 26:28; 2 Corinthians 1:21). The four Gospels demonstrate what it means to be a disciple of Jesus. In particular, John classifies the role in three ways: worshipper (or learner/follower), servant, and witness.



encouraging resistance to foreign control and religion. As their name implies, they are “zealous” in asserting the ancestral traditions of the nation of Israel and repelling the depredations of invaders and false gods. For many Zealots, the end objective was the overthrow of Rome itself. By appointing Peter, as with Levi (Matthew), Jesus appears to be courting controversy. He condemns violence, yet also paradoxically chooses a disciple who supports it. The selection of Simon the Zealot shows that ideological orientation is no barrier to admission to God’s kingdom.

The professions of the other six disciples are not specified by the Gospel writers, but it seems likely that at least two more of

them were fishermen. The names of the six are: Philip; Bartholomew, also referred to as “Nathanael” in John and probably Philip’s brother; Thomas, who went on to doubt the resurrection of Jesus, giving rise to the term “Doubting Thomas”; another James (not the brother of John); Thaddaeus, also known as Judas; and Judas Iscariot, who eventually betrays Jesus.

These 12 disciples are also known as “Apostles” in the Bible and the two terms are employed interchangeably in the Gospels. Indeed, such was their importance to the spread of Christianity that the period in which they lived is known as the “Apostolic Age.”

Martyrdom

Christian tradition maintains that all but one of the 12 disciples were martyred, with John alone surviving into old age and dying peacefully. However, only the death of James—fisherman and son of Zebedee—is described in the New Testament. There may be a reason for this: according to the 18th-century English historian Edward Gibbon, early Christians believed that among the original 12 disciples only James and Peter died for their faith in Jesus.

There are various reports of the death of Judas Iscariot. Matthew 27:5 records that he throws down

Each of the Apostles in this gilded and painted alabaster representation (c.1450) from England holds his emblem and a colored scroll inscribed with a sentence of the creed in Latin.

the silver he receives for the betrayal of Jesus in the Temple and then hangs himself. Acts 1:18 states that he purchases a field with his blood money, and then plunges headlong into a pit in the field and bursts open. In any event, Judas Iscariot is dead by the time of Christ’s resurrection. The disciples replace Judas, by election, with Matthias.

New disciples

The Christian teachings inspired by the short life of Jesus were not just taught by 11 of the 12 original disciples and Matthias. Instead, Eastern Christian tradition maintains that there were as many as 70 Apostles during the time of Jesus’s ministry. A number of other prominent figures, such as St. Paul (who was also martyred), were also known as Apostles, even though they did not follow Jesus during His earthly ministry.

The Apostles would become the foundations of the early Church. During the 1st century CE, they established churches throughout the Mediterranean, as well as across the Middle East, Africa, and India, in spite of persecution,



The things you have heard me say . . . entrust to reliable people who will also be qualified to teach others.

2 Timothy 2:2



which continued into the 4th century. The reputation of these men, and the esteem in which they were held, grew as the Church spread through the world.

Holy lineage

To this day, churches that are believed to have been founded by one of the Apostles are referred to as “apostolic sees,” among which the Holy See of Rome is pre-eminent. Bishops throughout the Christian world have traditionally claimed their authority via

“apostolic succession”—claiming to trace their roots back to the original 12 disciples. In practice, this means that bishops today are consecrated by older bishops, who in turn were consecrated by bishops before them, with a chain stretching directly back to the 12 Apostles.

Today, personal apostolic succession is still a requirement for a bishop’s ordination in many Christian denominations—notably the Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, and Anglican churches. ■

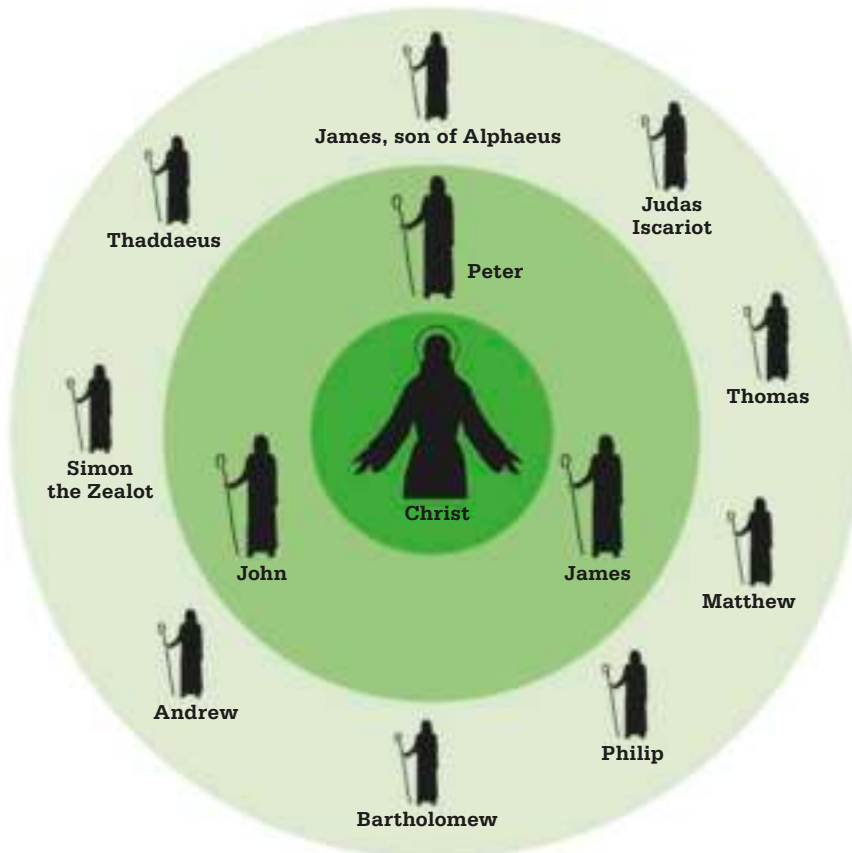


Fishing and the Ichthys


Just as fishermen bear great symbolism in the New Testament as “fishers of men,” so do fish themselves. The most famous reference to fish in the Gospels is the feeding of the 5,000 using just five loaves of bread and two fish, which is reported in all four (Matthew 14:13–21; Mark 6:30–44; Luke 9:10–17; John 6:1–15). In Matthew 13:47–52, in the Parable of the Net, Jesus compares God’s Final Judgment on who goes to heaven and who to hell to fishermen sorting out their catch, keeping the good fish and throwing the bad away. After His resurrection, Jesus is offered grilled fish to eat in Luke 24:41–43.

The many mentions of fish in the New Testament may explain why the ichthys (Greek for “fish”), the elliptical shape ending in a fish tail, became a symbol of early Christianity. Deployed as a secret code by Christians during times of persecution, the ichthys is sometimes seen etched into walls or in floor mosaics in early Christian basilicas. To this day, Christians incorporate the fish symbol in jewelry and clothing.

The Apostles of Jesus



The disciples closest to Jesus were Peter, James, and John. They spent the most time with Him and witnessed more of His miracles. In any list of the Apostles, Peter is always first.



**LOVE YOUR
ENEMIES, AND
PRAY FOR THOSE
WHO PERSECUTE YOU**

MATTHEW 5:44, SERMON ON THE MOUNT





IN BRIEF

PASSAGE

Matthew 5:1–7:29

THEME

The wisdom of God's Kingdom

SETTING

c.27–29 CE A mountainside in Galilee.

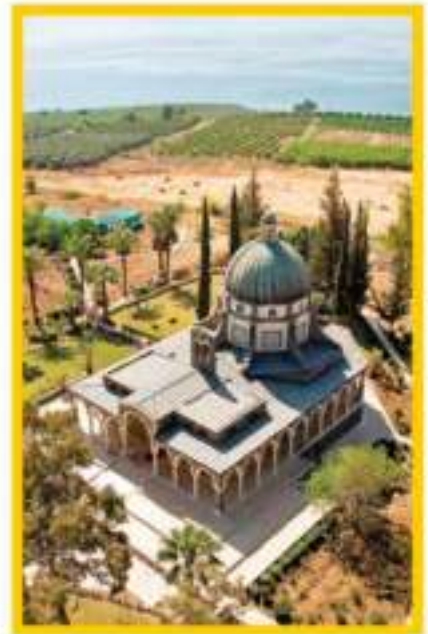
KEY FIGURES

Jesus The Messiah and Son of God at the start of His ministry in Galilee.**Disciples** Jesus's close group of 12 followers.**Crowds** People from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, and “beyond the Jordan” who have begun to follow Jesus out of curiosity and amazement.

News of Jesus and His preaching and healing ministry was beginning to spread far and wide. In addition to His band of 12 close disciples, large crowds started to follow Jesus, eager to hear Him teach about the Kingdom of God and to watch Him perform miracles.

Seeing an opportunity to address the crowds one day, Jesus climbs up a mountainside and sits down, adopting the typical position of an authoritative teacher, or rabbi. The disciples and crowds gather around and Jesus begins to teach. Often known as the “Sermon on the Mount,” His speech to the people reads as His manifesto, announcing how life will be in God's kingdom.

Jesus begins by turning usual expectations upside down in a short passage known as “the beatitudes.” He announces a blessing on those who are aware of the powerlessness of their own lives; it is they, rather than the strong and self-sufficient, who shall receive a place in God's kingdom. Conventional ideals of wealth and



The Roman Catholic Church of the Beatitudes stands on a hill overlooking the Sea of Galilee in Israel. It was built on the traditional site of Jesus's Sermon on the Mount.

success are rejected as Jesus declares that those who appear to have been overlooked in their present life shall receive God's reward in heaven.

In Jesus's inverted vision of the world, those who follow Him are to be “salt” and “light,” bringing out God's flavor in the world and shining God's light into the darkness. The purpose of the positive attitudes and actions of such people is that others “may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven” (Matthew 5:16). From just a little salt and a little light, Jesus knows that God's kingdom can reach the world.

A parallel with Moses

Those listening to Jesus are predominantly Jewish, brought up to honor and obey the Law of Moses given centuries earlier.

The Beatitudes

The concept of bestowing a blessing on those who faithfully follow God's commandments is familiar from the Old Testament. However, at the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus delivers His idea of “blessing” in a different way, through eight statements that are collectively known as the “beatitudes,” a word deriving from the Latin for “blessed” (*beatus*).

Instead of saying “you will be blessed if you do this,” Jesus's beatitudes announce that certain people will be blessed without condition—specifically, the poor in spirit,

those who mourn, the meek, the merciful, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, and the persecuted. Also, God's benchmark for blessing is at odds with that of the earthly world: people will not be measured in terms of their visible successes, but rather by an awareness of their own brokenness and dependence on God for all things.

Some versions of the Bible translate “blessed are” as “happy are,” but Jesus's teaching remains the same: it is those who are least expecting it who will find themselves recipients of God's favor.

See also: The Ten Commandments 78–83 ■ The Golden Rule 210–11 ■ Parables of Jesus 214–15

There are several parallels in Jesus’s Sermon on the Mount that would not have been lost on His audience, for it strongly echoes the giving of the Ten Commandments to Moses on Mount Sinai (Exodus 20): just as Moses went up the mountain and received God’s word, so Jesus here ascends a mountainside and teaches with God’s authority.

Moses’s Law showed the Israelites how to live as God’s new community following their deliverance from slavery in Egypt. Jesus is less concerned about establishing a moral code for a defined earthly kingdom; instead, He presents a picture of life in God’s spiritual kingdom of heaven that is accessible to all people at all times. To some in His audience, it may have seemed that Jesus was contradicting Moses. However, in a large section of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus addresses this question directly: “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them” (Matthew 5:17). Jesus is God’s new Moses, instructing the crowds as they follow Him.

“

Be perfect, therefore,
as your heavenly
Father is perfect.
Matthew 5:48

”



Other religious leaders at the time—in particular, the Pharisees—encouraged people to follow the law down to its last letter. However, Jesus says that such rigid adherence to Moses’s Law is not sufficient to guarantee people a place in God’s kingdom: “I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the Law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven” (5:20).

Instead, in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus intensifies the meaning of the Law by declaring that it is not enough simply to obey God’s commands outwardly; rather, His Law must transform the desires and motivations of the heart of those who seek to obey Him.

In a series of teachings that take the form, “You have heard that it was said . . . but I say to you,” Jesus takes some of the most familiar commandments from Moses’s Law and broadens their application. His disciples must not simply refrain from murder, but must avoid anger or ridiculing others, and prioritize forgiveness

In the Vatican’s Sistine Chapel, this fresco of the *Sermon on the Mount* (c.1461) by Cosimo Rosselli is opposite the artist’s fresco of Moses receiving the Ten Commandments.

and reconciliation. Lustful looks are to be considered as perilous as adultery, and marriage relationships should not be broken except in clear cases of unfaithfulness. Disciples should not merely keep the oaths they have made to God, but rather be faithful to every word that they speak.

Exercising humility

Moses’s law had sought to restrict overly harsh punishments by commending the principle of “eye for eye, tooth for tooth” (Leviticus 24:20); but Jesus rejects the notion of giving “as good as you get.” Instead, He tells His disciples to exercise restraint, never fighting back, but always praying for those who would seek to bring harm to them. By loving their enemies, they would be showing that they belonged with Jesus as children »

of God, since they would be imitating Jesus's love for His enemies, as He would demonstrate on the cross.

Having asked His disciples to "exceed" the righteousness of the Pharisees, Jesus then warns them not to become "self-righteous," or smug: "Be careful not to practice your acts of righteousness in front of others to be seen by them" (Matthew 6:1). They should not "trumpet" their good works to the world, but rather be discreet, confident that God sees what they do. The same humility should be evident, He says, when people pray.

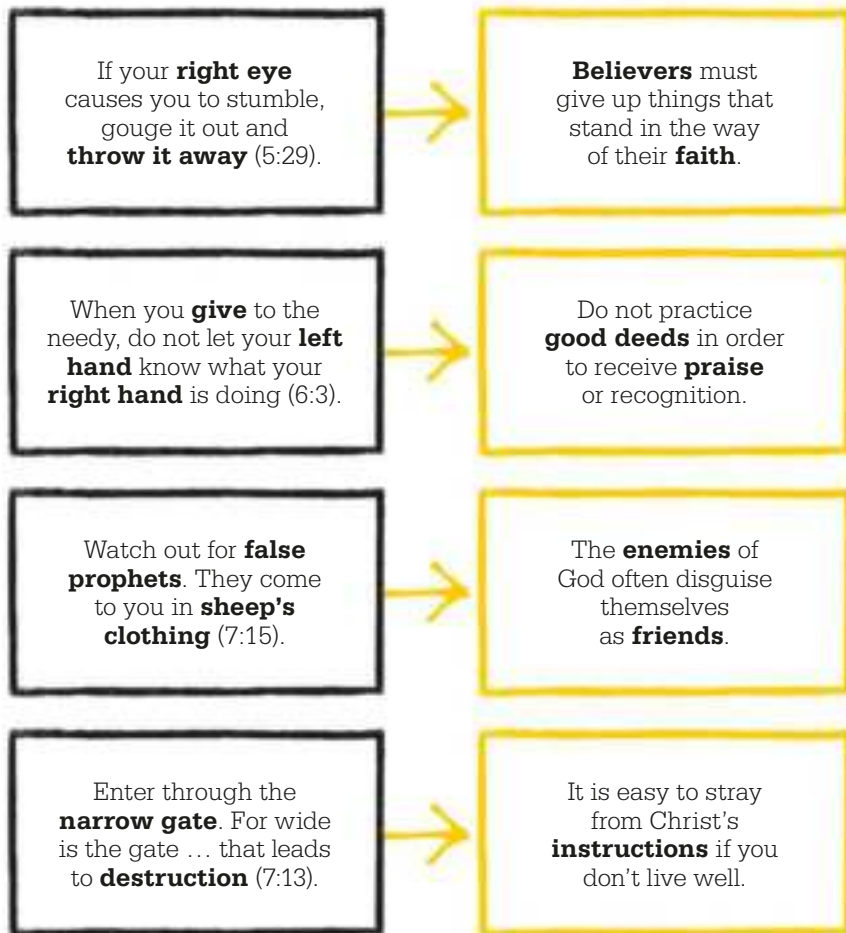
Jesus teaches that God does not listen to prayers because they are loud and long, but because they are offered in humble dependence on God. "Go into your room, close the door, and pray to your Father ... who sees what is done in secret" (6:6). In short, Jesus encourages His followers to look for God's favor more than the applause of the people around them. "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on Earth ... but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven" (6:19-20).

One of the key themes in Jesus's Sermon on the Mount is the faith that His disciples should have in



“
Can any one of you
by worrying add a single
hour to your life?
Matthew 6:27”

Teachings from Jesus's sermon



God. They must be confident that God's goodwill is all they need for their lives to flourish. Instead of being anxious about finding food and clothing, they should focus on the life of God's kingdom. In much the same way, His disciples should not spend their lives looking for faults in other people, but rather leave all judgment to God. At its heart, this part of Jesus's teaching is emphasizing that God is good and is to be trusted.

At the end of His sermon, Jesus reminds His listeners to practice what He preaches: "Everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock ... and not the foolish man who built his house on sand" (7:24-26).

Revolutionary message

Jesus's listeners are amazed by His teaching, because they recognize that He teaches with God's supreme authority, and not simply with human skill. When Jesus finishes teaching and comes down the mountainside, He is followed by large crowds (8:1).

The Sermon on the Mount describes a world that has been turned upside down by God's



Jesus warns against judging others in *The Parable of the Mote and the Beam* (c.1619) by Domenico Fetti. The painting was one in a series of 13 works illustrating the parables.

kingdom. It is a world in which the weak and powerless are considered to be God's treasured children, a place where generosity and forgiveness are valued more highly than strength. Here, trust in God matters more than any other virtue. The idea of such a world must have seemed an impossible utopia for those listening to Jesus, yet they recognized God's authority in Jesus's words. He was not simply

presenting a picture of an ideal life; He was saying that they could be part of this kingdom, if only they would build their lives on the "rock" that He was.

Jesus knew that not everyone would accept this way of life. It was a "narrow gate" for people to enter, compared to the broad road of living as you please, but the narrow path would lead to God's blessing (7:13–14).

Jesus's story continued to unfold. His death and resurrection became powerful reminders to Jesus's disciples and followers to teach and live by the lessons of the Sermon on the Mount. ■

The sermon as a far-reaching influence

From the earliest days of Christianity, Jesus's Sermon on the Mount has been considered central to His teaching, giving His followers a clear pattern for their lives. Church leaders and prominent thinkers point to the sermon when giving ethical guidance to Christians in such diverse areas as conflict resolution, personal relationships, wealth, and justice. Some groups, such as the Amish, are renowned for seeking to live simply in accordance with the Sermon on the Mount.

The influence of the sermon reaches beyond the Christian Church. Some phrases have become idioms in wider usage, not least owing to influential literary figures such as Dante, Chaucer, and Shakespeare. "Don't hide your light under a bushel," "salt of the earth," and "don't throw your pearls before pigs" all come from Jesus's teaching.

“

Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you ... For everyone who asks receives.

Matthew 7:7–8

”



DO TO OTHERS AS YOU WOULD HAVE THEM DO TO YOU

LUKE 6:31, THE GOLDEN RULE

IN BRIEF

PASSAGE

Matthew 7:9–12;
Luke 6:27–36

THEME

Fulfilling the Jewish law

SETTING

c.27–29 CE The Sermon on the Mount (in Matthew), a mountainside in Galilee; the Sermon on the Plain (in Luke), a plain near Capernaum.

KEY FIGURES

Jesus The Messiah and Son of God at the start of His ministry in Galilee.

Jesus's disciples A group of Jewish men and women who travel with Jesus during His ministry. The 12 closest to Him are tasked with spreading the word about Him and His teachings after His death.



The saying, “Do to others what you would have them do to you,” has become known as the Golden Rule, and finds expression in the ethical code of most of the world’s religions. In the Bible, it is taught by Jesus as part of the Sermon on the Plain in Luke 6:31 and the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 7:12, where Jesus says that it “sums up the Law and Prophets.”

The Golden Rule emphasizes the necessity of positive ethical behavior. It is not simply enough

Jesus preaches to His followers in this stained-glass detail of one of the four scenes gifted to St. Leonard’s Church in Charlecote, England, in the late 19th century.

to refrain from doing what is wrong; rather, those who would live by the Golden Rule must actively seek to do good to and for others, just as they would hope to be treated themselves. When Jesus claims that this sums up all the Law and Prophets, it is a reminder that God’s commandments are not primarily

See also: Sermon on the Mount 204–09 ■ The Lord's Prayer 212–13 ■ The Good Samaritan 216–17

a list of dos and don'ts, but rather a blueprint for healthy relationships between people. Ethical behavior requires us to treat every person as equally valuable.

Emulating God

Jesus's teaching contains a distinctive perspective on the Golden Rule. In Luke's version, Jesus points out that if His disciples apply this rule only to those who are already good to them, then they have missed the point. Following the Golden Rule will mean that they will seek to do good even to their enemies, even though they might never treat them with respect in return. By blessing others, even when they do not respond in a like manner, Jesus's disciples show that they have truly become children of God through their imitation of God's character.

In Matthew's account, Jesus gives the Golden Rule immediately after describing the willingness of God to listen to prayer: "Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door

will be opened to you." Jesus makes the point that good parents give good gifts to their children, and would never think to serve up a stone rather than bread to eat, or give a child a snake instead of a fish.

If human parents are like this, Jesus says, then "how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask Him!" (Matthew 7:11). Since God responds so readily to the needs of Jesus's followers, blessing them with love despite their many failings, they in turn should willingly act for the good of others, regardless of what the response might be.

Basis of morality

It is important to remember that the Golden Rule is positive in form. Too often the negative form—do not do things to other people that you would not want done to you—is used, which ensures that there is a minimum level of ethical behavior. However, Jesus's Golden Rule seeks to guide His disciples in a life of kindness, generosity, and justice that goes beyond strict moralism.

“

Love the Lord your God
with all your heart
and with all your soul and
with all your strength
and with all your mind.

Luke 10:26–27

”

The Golden Rule is sometimes called the "ethic of reciprocity" when discussed outside of a Christian context. This name has sparked some debate: while, in a philosophical context, the concept is seen as a moral contract between two parties (one treats the other well, in expectation of this kindness being reciprocated) in the Golden Rule, the *actual* or presupposed behavior of others has no bearing on how one should treat them. ■



The Qur'an tells Muslims to do good to everyone, including wayfarers, "neighbors who are strangers," and slaves (Q:4:36).

The Golden Rule in other religions

As a fundamental ethical idea, the Golden Rule is found in many of the world's religions and moral codes. However, different religions each approach the rule with a slightly different emphasis, and many Eastern religions take the negative form. Buddhism says: "Hurt not others in ways that you yourself would find hurtful (Udana-Varga 5:18), while Hinduism says: "Do not do to others what would cause pain if done to you" (Mahabharata 5:1517). The Confucian Doctrine of the

Mean says: "Do not impose on others what you yourself do not desire" (13.3).

The Abrahamic religions are united by the use of the positive form to express the Golden Rule. Islam preaches that "None of you believes until he wishes for his brother what he wishes for himself" (Hadith-Nawawi 13), while Judaism's expression of the Golden Rule can be found in Leviticus 19:18, with the simple commandment to "Love your neighbor as yourself."



THIS, THEN, IS HOW YOU SHOULD PRAY

MATTHEW 6:9, THE LORD'S PRAYER

IN BRIEF

PASSAGE

Matthew 6:9–13
Luke 11:2–4

THEME

Teaching on prayer

SETTING

c.27–29 CE The Sermon on the Mount (in Matthew), a mountainside in Galilee. Luke says only that Jesus teaches the prayer “in a certain place.”

KEY FIGURES

Jesus The Messiah and Son of God during His ministry in Galilee and Judea.

Jesus's disciples A group of Jewish men and women who travel with Jesus during His ministry, and spread the word about Him and His teachings after His death.

Christianity's most famous prayer, which was taught to the disciples by Jesus Himself, starts on a striking note: “Our Father.” By opening what became known as the Lord's Prayer with those two words, Jesus was encouraging His disciples to enter into an extraordinary intimacy with God—similar to the one that He Himself enjoyed.

The image of God as a loving parent was not unknown in the Hebrew scriptures. As early as Exodus 4, the Lord refers to Israel as His “firstborn son.” Nowhere in

the Old Testament, however, is the idea of God as the Father as central as it is in Jesus's teachings. In telling His followers to say “Our Father,” He encourages them to approach God boldly, just as a child would approach a parent whose care, provision, and protection they otherwise take for granted.

Learning to pray

In Luke's Gospel, Jesus gives the prayer in response to a request from one of the disciples: “Lord, teach us to pray, just as John [the Baptist] taught his disciples.” Luke's version

Translations

The oldest known English versions of the Lord's Prayer date from before 1000 CE. John Wycliffe, leader of the reformist Lollard movement, translated it into English (along with the rest of the Bible) in the 1380s, and William Tyndale followed suit in the 1520s and 1530s. After the English Reformation, Tyndale's version of the Prayer was included with a few changes in the new Church of England's Book of Common Prayer, compiled by Thomas Cranmer,

Archbishop of Canterbury, and first published in 1549. This has survived with only a few modifications as the traditional form of the prayer in English, which is still the most familiar version for many people.

The doxology (a short verse praising God) at the end of the prayer—“For thine is the kingdom ...”—is not found in the Bible, but versions of it have been used for hundreds of years, particularly in the Eastern and Orthodox Church. In its present form, the doxology is mostly used by Protestants.

See also: The Origin of Prayer 38–39 ■ The Divinity of Jesus 190–93 ■ Sermon on the Mount 204–09 ■ Parables of Jesus 214–15 ■ The Nature of Faith 236–41

“

The Lord’s Prayer is the most perfect of prayers. . . . This prayer teaches us not only to ask for things, but also in what order we should desire them.

Thomas Aquinas

”

of the prayer is more pared down than Matthew’s and includes just five petitions. In Matthew’s Gospel, the prayer is the focal point of the Sermon on the Mount and includes the salutation and seven petitions familiar to Christians today. Different religious traditions had their distinctive prayers, and Jesus intended the Lord’s Prayer to be for His followers to say. The early Christians recited it three times a day in the same way that Jews recite the 18 Benedictions.

Seven petitions

The prayer has become central to Christian liturgies, but it is also seen as a “school of prayer.” The opening salutation stresses the person’s membership in a family of fellow children of God: “Our Father.” Three so-called “you-petitions” follow—hallowed be *your* name; *your* kingdom come, *your* will be done on earth as it is in heaven—succeeded by four “we-petitions”: give *us* our daily bread; forgive *us* our trespasses; lead *us* not into temptation; and deliver *us* from evil.



While the you-petitions concern God’s desire for love and justice among people, in the we-petitions the believer grapples with the challenges of living out that vision: the need for material and spiritual sustenance, forgiveness, mercy, and the ability to persevere.

In both Matthew’s and Luke’s Gospels, the prayer is followed shortly afterward by other famous pronouncements of Jesus: “Ask

Reciting the Lord’s Prayer was once a daily ritual in many Christian families, as shown in this illustration from Berlin, dating from around 1900.

and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you . . .” Through the Lord’s Prayer, Jesus repeatedly demonstrates His belief in making petitions to God, thus encouraging people to pray. ■



WHOEVER HAS EARS, LET THEM HEAR

MATTHEW 13:43, PARABLES OF JESUS

IN BRIEF

PASSAGE

Matthew 13:1–53,
Luke 8–20, Mark 4–13

THEME

Teaching through stories

SETTING

c.27–29 CE The Galilee region.

KEY FIGURES

Jesus The Messiah and Son of God during His ministry in Galilee and Judea.

Jesus's disciples A group of Jewish men and women who call Jesus their rabbi or teacher. They travel with Him during His ministry and preach about Him and His teachings after His death.



One of the many reasons the Bible is still so popular today is its use of story. As humans, we are captivated by the power of narrative, so skilled orators use stories to convey concepts. Jesus is no exception. He uses short, meaningful stories called “parables” to engage and teach His listeners.

The word “parable” comes from the Greek *parabole*, meaning “placing beside” or “comparison,” and refers to the fact that parables use extended analogies to explain God’s teachings. Parables allow readers to draw comparisons with

A farmer sows his seeds in Marten van Valckenborch’s 1590 depiction of the parable of the sower. The painting also shows Jesus (in a boat) telling the story to His followers.

the situations in the stories and their own lives as servants of God. They are sometimes called earthly stories with heavenly meanings, as Jesus uses common socio-cultural contexts, such as farming, to explain the kingdom of heaven. In Matthew 13:3–8, for example, Jesus tells the story of a farmer whose seed falls variously on a path, rocky ground, thorns, and good soil.

See also: The Good Samaritan 216–17 ■ The Prodigal Son 218–21 ■ Workers in the Vineyard 223

Unsurprisingly, only the seeds on the good soil yield abundant crops. Jesus explains what the parable signifies: the seed stands for the truth of the kingdom, while the various soils represent the people hearing the truth (18–23). If people are not “good soil”—receptive to the word of God—they will not come to understand it. Only those who comprehend the word and let it transform their lives will bear fruit.

Speaking in parables

Jesus uses everyday images, but some fail to grasp the complex spiritual truths they communicate. For instance, after Jesus tells them several parables, the disciples ask Him to explain the story about the weeds in the field (13:36), which explains the existence of good and evil people in the world.

Once Jesus explains them, the stories make complete sense to the disciples. However, when Jesus does not clarify their meaning, they

“
Jesus spoke all these things to the crowd in parables; he did not say anything to them without using a parable.
Matthew 13:3

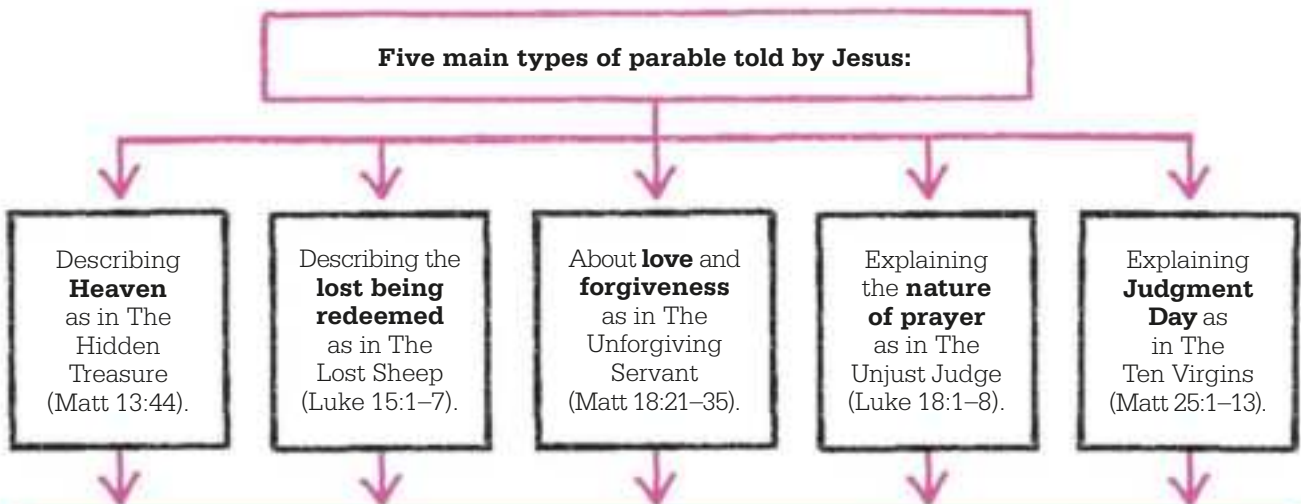
are not always so obvious. This is the very nature of parables—and one of the reasons Jesus uses them. He uses parables not just to convey the truth to those who believe, but to conceal it from those who harden their hearts to Him. They will not know the truth because “they hardly hear with their ears ... they have closed their eyes” (13:15). ■

The oral tradition

Before the Jewish and Christian traditions existed in written form, they were almost always passed down orally. The history, values, and folklore of these communities were verbally transmitted from teacher to student in familial or educational circles. Since the spoken word was the main form of education, students refined their listening skills, while teachers sought to be riveting orators. They used rhetorical devices to help structure their teachings and make them more memorable.

Jesus learned and taught in this method, which is why He often quoted the scriptures from memory and chose to teach with parables: they were short, rich with meaning, and easy to remember. The number of parables recorded in the Gospels—decades after Jesus’s death—demonstrates their memorability and His skill as a rabbi and storyteller.

Five main types of parable told by Jesus:



Jesus uses parables to teach several different religious lessons.



WHEN HE SAW HIM, HE TOOK PITY ON HIM

LUKE 10:33, THE GOOD SAMARITAN

IN BRIEF

PASSAGE

Luke 10:25–37

THEME

Charity to the unfortunate

SETTING

c.27–29 CE The road from Jerusalem to Jericho during the time of Christ's ministry.

KEY FIGURES

Jesus The Messiah and Son of God during His ministry in Galilee.

Expert of the Law Possibly a priest, who has studied the Torah.

The Good Samaritan

A traveler who shows compassion for a stranger.

The stranger A man traveling the road to Jericho.

The Parable of the Good Samaritan is one of several stories told by Jesus, and, like many parables, only appears in the Gospel of Luke. At the heart of it is the Golden Rule—that we must treat others as we would expect to be treated ourselves.

The story begins with “an expert in the Law” asking Jesus how to inherit eternal life. When Jesus asks the expert to consider the Law, he begins by quoting Deuteronomy 6:5, which says to love the Lord with all your heart, soul, and strength. The expert then quotes Leviticus 19:18, that you

must also love your neighbor. Jesus tells the expert that he has found his answer, but when the expert is not satisfied, Jesus uses a parable as a novel means of getting him to seek the answer out himself.

The story concerns a man who is going from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he is robbed and left for dead by the side of the road. A priest passes and does nothing. Then a Levite passes and does nothing. Yet when a Samaritan comes past, he stops, takes care of the man's wounds, and gives him food, before paying for the man to stay in an inn. Jesus ends the story by asking the expert who is the better neighbor.

A story of Luke

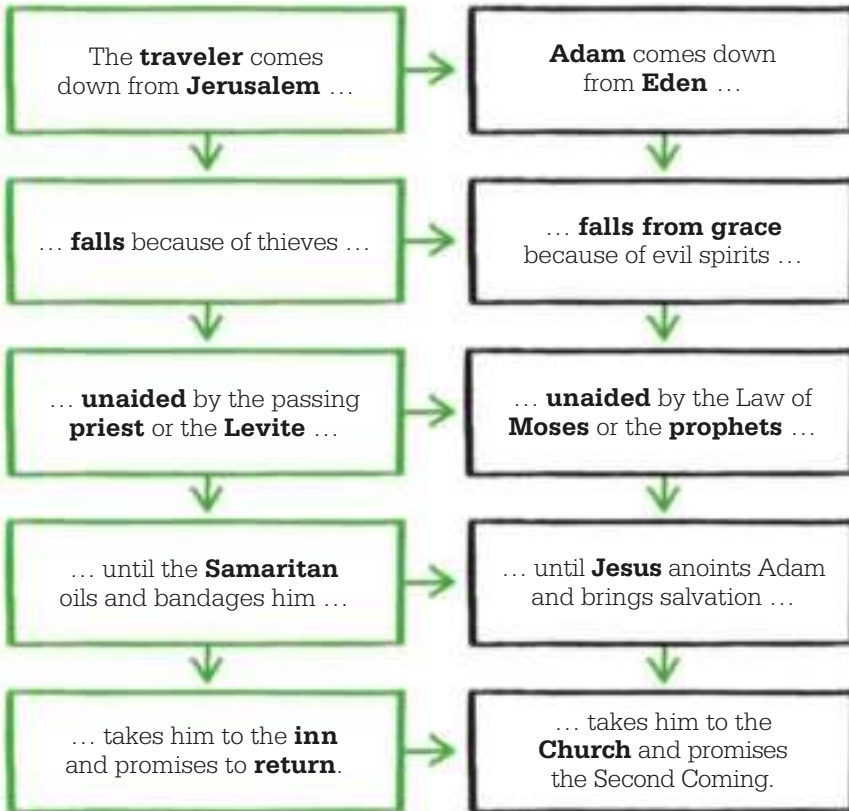
Although Matthew (22:34–40) and Mark (12:28–34) include the Law expert's question, they do not include this parable. Because of this omission, some scholars question the authenticity of the story as a true parable of Christ. Nonetheless, the story gives the



The stranger is helped onto the back of the Samaritan's horse, while other passers-by disappear into the distance, in this 1890 depiction by Vincent Van Gogh (after Eugène Delacroix).

See also: The Golden Rule 210–11 ■ Parables of Jesus 214–15 ■ The Prodigal Son 218–21 ■ Workers in the Vineyard 223

Early Christian allegorical reading of The Good Samaritan



reader an insight into the theology of the author of Luke. Given that he was probably a Greek-speaking Gentile, the parable is a perfect analogy of Jesus extending His favor to non-Jews.

In particular, the positioning of a non-Jew—and Samaritan—as the protagonist of a parable would have shocked contemporary Jewish audiences, due to a longstanding rivalry between the Jews and the Samaritans since the 5th century BCE. In telling this parable, Jesus helps His audience to see the kindness in a figure they would traditionally consider an adversary,

emphasizing the message of the parable: to love your neighbor, and enemy, as you love yourself.

Road from Jerusalem

Roads and pathways are “liminal” spaces—they signify a transition from one place to another. In a literal sense, roads are ungoverned, dangerous spaces. With Jerusalem being a popular destination for trade and pilgrimage, it would come as no surprise to find bandits lying in wait. In the Bible, roads are often metaphorical, suggesting a pathway to wisdom, immorality, goodness, or God. ■



Samaria

Samaria is a region in modern Israel that roughly equates to the biblical Northern Kingdom of Israel. Samaria was also the name given to the city built in the 9th century BCE by King Omri, who declared it capital of the region. In 722 BCE, following the fall of the city of Samaria to the Assyrian empire, many foreign groups (2 Kings 17:24) were moved into the land by the Assyrians, eventually forming what would become known as Samaritans. These groups were largely composed of Gentiles, and for this reason, Judeans were wary of the Samaritans, who were not viewed as ethnically or religiously Jewish. Over time, Samaritans came to be seen as unclean people, who lived sinfully and worshipped at the altars of pagan gods.

In the New Testament, Jesus initially commands His disciples to avoid frequenting any Gentile or Samaritan city. Later, however, Jesus visits Samaritan areas, healing the sick, casting out demons, and showing compassion where others had not. It seems fitting, therefore, that the merciful man in this parable should be a Samaritan.

THIS BROTHER OF YOURS WAS DEAD ... HE WAS LOST AND IS FOUND

LUKE 15:32, THE PRODIGAL SON



IN BRIEF

PASSAGE

Luke 15:32

THEME

God seeks out the lost

SETTING

c.27–29 CE The road to Jerusalem.

KEY FIGURES

Jesus The Messiah and Son of God during His ministry in Galilee.

The father A farmer.

The prodigal son The farmer's younger son.

The older son The farmer's older son.

Of all of the allegorical and moral tales that Jesus told during His ministry, the parable of the prodigal son is one of the most beloved and well-known. Widely regarded as one of the greatest short stories ever told, the tale offers profound insights on the human condition, and its essential message of repentance, forgiveness, and redemption has ensured its timeless popularity.

Presumption and pigs

The parable concerns a farmer with two sons, who will jointly inherit his land. Rather than wait until the death of his father, the younger son asks for his share of the family estate, and the father divides up his property accordingly.

The son swaps the land he has been given for cash and sets off for an unnamed distant country. It does not take long for him to spend all of his money—leading to the moniker

See also: Proverbs 148–51 ▪ The Prophet Micah 168–71 ▪ Call for Repentance 172 ▪ The Good Samaritan 216–17

of “prodigal,” meaning “recklessly extravagant.” At the same time, however, famine strikes the land. The prodigal son, reduced to penury, is forced to hire himself out to a local farmer, who puts him to work looking after his pigs. In his miserable state, he longs to eat the same food that the pigs are eating. The choice of pigs is deliberate. According to Mosaic Law, swine are classed as unclean. Eating and even touching them is forbidden (Leviticus 11:7–8). The fact that the prodigal son is contemplating eating pig slops is therefore a highly significant demonstration of his hunger, desperation, and moral depths to which he has fallen.

Faced with poverty, the prodigal son is finally made to confront his sinful actions. He recognizes how greedy he has been and decides to return to his father and beg for forgiveness. He even rehearses the plea of contrition that he will use in order to win his father’s favor. “Father, I have sinned against heaven and you,” he says. “I am no longer worthy to be called your son;

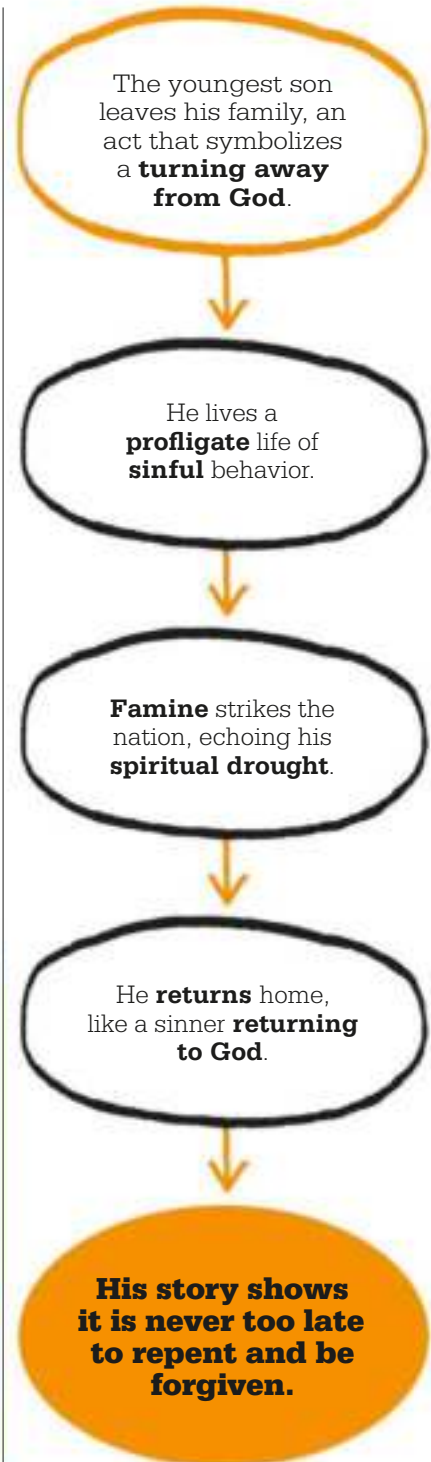
make me like one of your hired servants” (Luke 15:18–19). Having practiced his apology, he journeys home to beg forgiveness from his unwitting father and brother.

Healing the rift

When his father spots the prodigal son in the distance, he does not feel the urge to rebuke him for his misdeeds. Instead, he is filled with compassion for his long-lost child. The father runs hastily to greet his returning son, embraces him, and seals the reconciliation with a kiss.

The prodigal son only gets as far as the end of the second sentence of his prepared speech before his father interrupts him. He tells his servants to bring him the best robe they can find and clothe his son with it. Similarly, they are told to put a ring on one of his fingers and sandals on his feet. Following »

The Prodigal Son depicted as a swineherd in 1608, by the Flemish master David Vinckboons, and printed by Claes Jansz Visscher. The protagonist looks enviously at the pigs’ food.





this, the celebrations begin with the slaughter of a fattened calf—a lavish expense—followed by feasting, singing, and dancing.

Undeserved welcome

Meanwhile, the prodigal son's older brother, who has spent the day laboring in his father's fields, hears the music as he approaches home. A servant tells him why his father has ordered such rejoicing.

When he learns the reason for the celebrations, the older brother becomes infuriated. He refuses to join the party, despite his father's pleadings. He tells his father that while he, the elder brother has worked tirelessly and obediently for his father for many years, he has never been rewarded. In contrast, he says, "when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!" (Luke 15:30) However, his father does not see it this way. "My son," he says, "you are always with me and everything I have is yours. But we have to

celebrate ... [your brother] was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found" (Luke 15:28–31).

When engaging with the parable of the prodigal son for the first time, it is easy or even natural to identify with the helpless rage exhibited by the elder son. His belief that he has suffered an injustice is certainly not unfounded and, having worked hard for his

The Return of the Prodigal Son by Bartolomé Esteban Murillo (1618–1682), painted sometime around 1667–1670. The riches of the father contrast with the son's dirty feet and ragged clothes.

father for years with little to no acknowledgment, his resentment is understandable. This sense of identification with the plight of the elder brother only heightens the power of the parable's conclusion.

While the older brother has been open and honest in his assertions, his self-righteous and self-centered attitude is condemned by Jesus. In the older brother's fury at the lack of recognition that his father has given to his good deeds, or works, he is unable to exhibit the grace of his father and welcome his brother home. What is more, the older brother cannot share in his father's gratitude that the prodigal son has owned up to his mistakes and sought out forgiveness. We never learn whether the older brother repents for his behavior.

Lost but redeemed

In the Bible, important principles are often repeated for emphasis. This is exemplified by Luke 15, which, in

Familial relationships and inheritance

In the ancient world, land was a family's most important asset. For this reason, laws evolved that governed the rights of inheritance. Though the Bible varies in what it says these laws stipulate—probably because the texts setting them out were written at different times—it is clear that a man's principal heirs were sons born to him by his wife or wives. As stated in Deuteronomy 21, the eldest son inherits a double share. So if, for example, there were four sons,

the oldest would get 40 percent of the estate and the others 20 percent each. Daughters did not inherit, but were provided with a dowry that went to their husband's family when they married. They could only inherit their father's estate if there were no sons to do so.

Contrarily, the New Testament focuses on spiritual, rather than physical, inheritance. Indeed, in Luke 12:13–21, Jesus specifically states that life "does not consist of an abundance of possessions."

addition to the prodigal son, contains two other parables linked by a common theme—the lost sheep and the lost coin. In the first of these parables, Jesus is not worried about the sheep that are safe—all 99 of them; he is concerned about the one sheep that is lost. The point is reiterated in the second parable, about a lost coin which, when rediscovered, becomes all the more treasured. Throughout these first two parables, Jesus repeatedly states the possibility of forgiveness and redemption, saying: “there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents” (15:10).

In the parable of the prodigal son, this message is taken further, with the lost being contrasted against the faithful. The prodigal son represents any person who has—one way or another, through greed or negligence—strayed from God. His older brother represents the loyal believers who, basking in their self-righteousness, may be blind to the sin of their own arrogance; his presence in the story reminds those who hear it that the grace of God is above petty human notions of justice and fairness.

“

When he came to his senses, he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired servants have food to spare, and here I am starving to death!’

Luke 15:17

”

“

His father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him, and kissed him.

Luke 15:20

”

The father figure represents God Himself. Despite having been wronged by his son’s actions, he loves him and welcomes him home with open arms—just as God, throughout the Bible, forgives His people for their misdeeds on the basis of His grace. The message of the Prodigal Son is clear. It is the people who are lost that need to be shown God’s mercy and forgiveness the most, so that they may be found again.

Context of Luke

Though Luke was not present with Jesus at the time of His ministry—in all likelihood, he did not convert until after the resurrection—it is notable that his Gospel account is the only one to include the parable of the prodigal son. While the Synoptic Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke are broadly similar in content, the Gospel of Luke in particular addresses a specific challenge often put to Jesus—that in associating with sinners, He Himself is acting sinfully. It is therefore perhaps not surprising that Luke alone would focus on a tale that encourages forgiveness of the wayward sinner, regardless of any transgressions in his past. ■



Lost and found

As well as the three parables in Luke 15, the notion of things that are “lost” and “found” features elsewhere in the Bible, such as Luke 19:10 and Psalm 119. In Psalm 119 in particular, the idea is highly relevant. This acrostic poem is a prayer to God, which tells Him: “I have strayed like a lost sheep. Seek your servant, for I have not forgotten your commands” (Psalm 119:176).

Isaiah 41:10 sums up God’s reaction to all such pleas from the lost who pray for guidance: “So do not fear for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my strong right hand.” Solomon, the son of King David, also preaches about the need to trust in God, and to do so fully, “with all your heart and lean not on your understanding” (Proverbs 3:5). He goes on to say that if you acknowledge God “in all your ways” and “submit to him,” then God will “make your paths straight” (Proverbs 3:6). According to Solomon, by following the word of God and obeying His will, His people will be guided through life and not become “lost” or sinful.



FROM WHOM DO THE KINGS OF THE EARTH COLLECT DUTY AND TAXES?

MATTHEW 17:27, THE TEMPLE TAX

IN BRIEF

PASSAGE

Matthew 17:27

THEME

God's provision

SETTING

c.27–29 CE Capernaum at the Sea of Galilee.

KEY FIGURES

Jesus The Messiah and Son of God during His ministry in Galilee.

Peter A fisherman by trade and one of Jesus's most favored disciples.

Tax collectors State officials generally disliked for their corrupt practices.

In addition to the taxes that were imposed on the people of Judea by Rome, a voluntary Temple tax was levied on Jewish males over the age of 20 to pay for sacrifices and incense in the Temple. In Matthew 17, the Apostle describes Jesus and His disciples arriving in Capernaum, where Peter is confronted by the collectors of the Temple tax. When the officials ask Peter if His master pays the tax, Peter affirms that He does.

A little later, Jesus challenges Peter, asking if taxes are paid by the children of the “kings of the earth” (Matthew 17:25). In response, Peter grants that taxes are not paid by the children of kings. Then, in a miraculous twist, Jesus tells Peter to catch a fish and open its mouth. There he will find a four-drachma coin with which he is to pay both his own tax and Jesus's.

The tax is paid

When Jesus speaks of the children of kings, He casts Himself and His disciples as sons of God who are therefore exempt from the taxation



Peter finds a coin in the mouth of a fish on the shores of Lake Capernaum, in a 17th-century Dutch engraving by Salomon Savery after a painting by Peter Paul Rubens.

that is imposed on the house of God. Yet Jesus instructs Peter to fish for the coin, explaining it must be done “so that we may not offend” the tax collectors (Matthew 17:27).

Jesus's actions suggest that it is sometimes necessary to comply with the views of others in order to keep the peace. However, they do not pay from their own pockets: the miracle of the coin in the fish's mouth shows God's generosity and His capacity to lovingly provide for both His Son and His people. ■

See also: A Child in the Temple 188 ■ Jesus Embraces a Tax Collector 242–43 ■ Cleansing the Temple 244–45



SO THE LAST WILL BE FIRST, AND THE FIRST WILL BE LAST

MATTHEW 20:16, WORKERS IN THE VINEYARD

IN BRIEF

PASSAGE

Matthew 20:16

THEME

God operates through unending grace

SETTING

c.27–29 CE The region of Galilee.

KEY FIGURES

Jesus The Messiah and Son of God during His ministry in Galilee.

The landowner Owner of the vineyard and the purveyor of God's grace.

The workers The employees of the landowner gathered from the marketplace.

The parable of the workers in the vineyard is one that many readers with modern notions of fairness struggle to accept. However, it functions very well as a demonstration of how God deals with people on the basis of grace, rather than works.

In the parable, a landowner goes out early one morning to recruit workers. He agrees to pay each of the laborers a denarius for the day. Later in the day, the vineyard

owner goes out again four times—at 9 am, midday, 3 pm, and 5 pm. Each time he leaves, he encounters more men doing nothing and offers them work in his vineyard too, which Jesus says represents “the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 20:1).

When evening comes, the landowner gathers the workers. He pays all of them the same amount—one denarius each. The men who worked longer hours are outraged. The landowner, however, brushes away their objections, saying that he is generous and has the right to use his money as he sees fit.

Interpreting the tale

The story of the workers in the vineyard shows us that God's grace can supersede human logic. One interpretation of the parable is that those who turn to God late in life are just as worthy of salvation as those who have always believed. Other theologians go further, presenting the first laborers as Jews, and the latecomers as Gentiles—both equally deserving of God's love and salvation. ■

““
These who were hired last ...
you have made ... equal
to us who have borne the
burden of the work and
the heat of the day.

Matthew 20:12

See also: Parables of Jesus 214–15 ■ The Good Samaritan 216–17 ■ The Prodigal Son 218–21



MY NAME IS LEGION, FOR WE ARE MANY

MARK 5:9, DEMONS AND THE HERD OF PIGS

IN BRIEF

PASSAGE

Mark 5:1–20

Luke 8:26–39

Matthew 8:28–34

THEME

Jesus's authority over the spiritual realm

SETTING

c.27–29 CE Gerasene shores of the Sea of Galilee.

KEY FIGURES

Jesus The Messiah and Son of God at the height of His ministry in Galilee.

The demoniac An immensely strong demon-possessed man who lives in tombs near the shores of the Sea of Galilee.

Pig-keepers The unfortunate herdsmen who see their pigs drown and inform the local people of Jesus's miracle.

Often referred to as the Miracle of the Gadarene Swine, the miracle of the demons and the herd of pigs demonstrates the total authority of Jesus over the spiritual realm.

The story is recounted in three of the Gospels—Mark 5:1–20, Luke 8:26–39, and Matthew 8:28–34—but the fullest account is in Mark. Jesus crosses the Sea of Galilee with His followers and arrives in the land of the Gerasenes. As He gets

out of His boat, a man possessed by a demon, a demoniac, comes down from some tombs to meet Him. The man is so strong that he cannot be bound, breaking his chains and cutting himself with stones, while crying out at the top of his voice.

Jesus heals the demoniac in this 6th-century mosaic from the Basilica of Sant'Apollinare Nuovo in Ravenna, Italy. The drowning pigs are depicted next to the possessed man.



See also: The Raising of Lazarus 226–27 ■ Feeding the 5,000 228–31 ■ Healing of the Beggar 284–87 ■ The Final Judgment 316–21

Jesus approaches the man and calls for the demon to come out of Him. The demon replies: “What do you want with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? In God’s name, don’t torture me!” (Mark 5:7) Jesus asks for the name of the demon, who tells Him it is “Legion, for we are many.”

Unclean and unwanted

The demons plead with Jesus not to send them away, but rather to send them into the bodies of a large herd of pigs grazing nearby. When Jesus grants the demons their wish, the pigs hurtle down the steep hillside into the lake and are drowned, demonstrating Jesus’s dominion over spiritual creatures.

The pig-keepers are angry at the loss of their property and when the local people hear about the carnage, they remonstrate with Jesus and ask Him to leave. As He climbs back into His boat, however, Jesus is hailed by the cured demoniac. The man begs Jesus to let him travel with Him, but Jesus refuses, telling the man to go home to his own people and tell them how much the Lord has done for him.



The traditional interpretation of this story is that, in casting out the demons and condemning the pigs, Jesus prioritized the soul of the man. Medieval scholar St. Thomas Aquinas argued that Jesus acted to save the demoniac’s soul rather than his body or the property of the

pig-keepers. Thus, the miracle is a judgment on the townsmen’s concern for their pigs over the possessed man. The tale may also have symbolic meaning. Judaism regards pigs as unclean, and therefore the herd might be a good place to bury impure spirits. ■

Demonic Possession

According to French Benedictine monk Antoine Augustin Calmet, writing in the 18th century, in the Bible there are two forms of demonic attack—“possession” and “obsession.” The former usually involves the internal “ownership” of the individual by an evil spirit. This manifests in the form of physical agitation, a furious temper, speaking in tongues, and uttering blasphemy. “Obsession” occurs when the

demon acts externally against its victim. This can involve unexplained lesions, epileptic seizures, and facial deformation.

In the Old Testament, evil spirits are mentioned in 1 Samuel, 1 Kings, and Job. There is a greater number of demonic attacks in the New Testament. However, Calmet notes that what seemed to be demons may have often represented little more than simple maladies that could not be explained by contemporary physicians.





THE MAN WHO HAD DIED CAME OUT

JOHN 11:44, THE RAISING OF LAZARUS

IN BRIEF

PASSAGE

John 11:1–57

THEME

Resurrection through Christ

SETTING

c.29–33 CE Bethany, south of Jerusalem.

KEY FIGURES

Jesus The Messiah and the Son of God.

Mary and Martha Two of Jesus's followers and friends.

Lazarus The brother of Mary and Martha, and one of Jesus's closest friends.

Disciples The 12 Apostles chosen by Jesus at the beginning of His ministry.

The Book of John is full of signs and wonders that are seen as proof that Jesus was not simply a prophet but the Son of God. When compared to the Synoptic Gospels—the books of Matthew, Mark, and Luke—the Book of John contains few parables, with more emphasis placed on the miracles that Jesus performs.

A plea for help

One of the most well known of these miracles is the story of Lazarus, a name which means “God helped,” and possibly foreshadows the events that occur in the story. Lazarus and his sisters Mary and Martha—close friends of Jesus—live in the town of Bethany. When Lazarus becomes deathly ill, his sisters send word to Jesus, asking for His return so that He may heal their brother. Jesus and His disciples are about one day's travel away, but when word reaches them, the disciples do not want Jesus to go to Bethany due to rising hostility toward Him in nearby Jerusalem.

However, Jesus rebukes them, saying “A man who walks by day will not stumble, for he sees by this world's light” (John 11:9). In this way, Jesus shows His disciples that



Friedrich Overbeck's 1882 painting *Raising of Lazarus* was born out of the Nazarene movement of 19th-century Rome. Art from this movement was dominated by religious subjects.

through faith in God any obstacle can be surpassed, including death itself—a theme emphasized in the story of Lazarus.

Jesus wept

By the time Jesus returns to Bethany, Lazarus has already been dead for four days. On His arrival, Jesus greets Martha, saying “your brother will rise again” (John 11:23). Jesus then calls Mary to meet Him, and when He sees her grief, Jesus weeps alongside her.

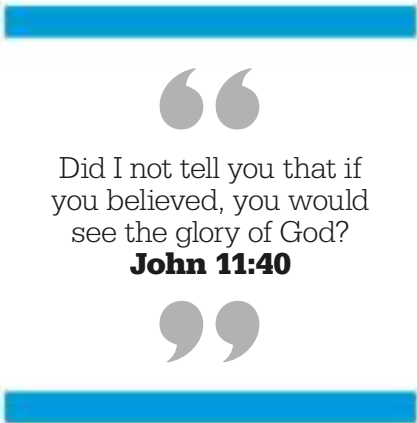
See also: Demons and the Herds of Pigs 224–25 ■ Jesus Anointed at Bethany 246–47 ■ The Empty Tomb 268–71

Jesus asks Mary to take Him to the tomb of Lazarus and she obliges. When He ask the crowd to roll away the stone from the front of the tomb, Martha initially objects, expressing fear that the corpse will smell, but then acquiesces. In a loud voice, Jesus shouts “Lazarus, come out!” (John 11:43). Immediately, Lazarus rises and exits the tomb.

Purpose of the miracle

In one of the many miracles that Jesus performs, He resurrects Lazarus for the purpose of proving that He is the Messiah. Jesus states this when Martha asks Him to return to Bethany: He says that it will be done “so that God’s son may be glorified through it” (John 11:4).

When Jesus approaches the tomb, the doubtful crowd suggests that if He were truly the Son of God, He would have healed Lazarus before his death. Jesus then prays to God, telling Him that He is enacting the resurrection out loud for the benefit of the crowd, so that they may see the glory of God. These details suggest that the primary purpose of raising Lazarus is to inspire the watching audience



to discuss the figure of Jesus and, ultimately, have faith in the power of Christ above and beyond death.

However, the importance of the story of Lazarus extends further. When Martha and Mary send word to Jesus that Lazarus is dying, their message reads “Lord, the one you love is sick” (John 11:3) and Jesus’s compassion is clearly visible from His interactions with Mary. More than simply a display of divinity, the story of Lazarus shows an emotional depth in Jesus, which acts as a powerful reminder that, like God, Jesus feels profound love and compassion for His people. ■

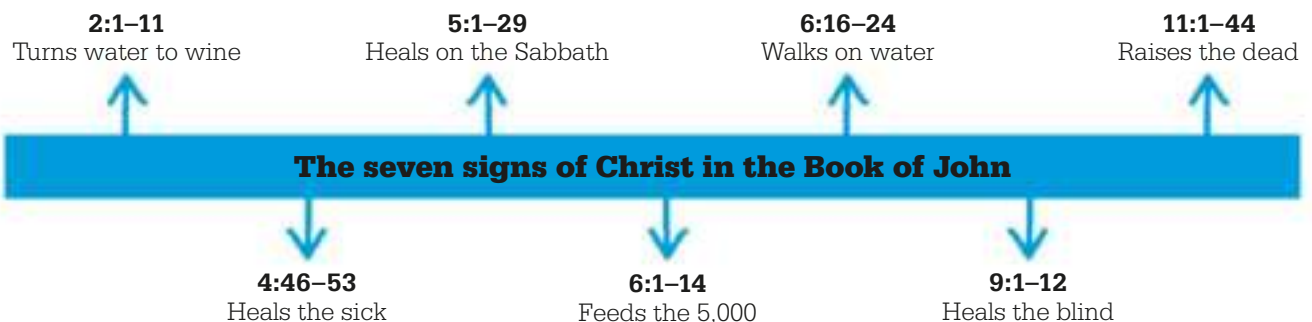
Healing the sick

The curing of illnesses and casting out of demons were often considered one and the same in ancient Near Eastern thought. In fact, many ancient people believed that demons were the root cause of any given illness. For example, in Babylon, the god Marduk was called upon to cure common ailments such as headaches or toothaches through exorcism.

With this in mind, it is no surprise that over the course of His ministry, Jesus would heal those with more serious ailments in order to show His holiness. In the Bible, demonic possession is sometimes described in similar terms to what we regard as mental illness today. One such example comes in Mark 5, when Jesus exorcizes multiple demons from a man in Gerasa.

In ancient times many of those who were sick, such as lepers, were cast out of society out of fear and hatred. Jesus focused on these individuals during His mission and, in doing so, taught His followers that nobody is beyond Christ’s redemption if they have faith.

The “seven signs” proving that Jesus is the Christ form the structural backbone of the Book of John. These miracles become increasingly more impressive as the Gospel goes on.



AND TAKING THE FIVE LOAVES, AND THE TWO FISH, HE LOOKED UP TO HEAVEN

LUKE 9:16, FEEDING THE 5,000



IN BRIEF

PASSAGE

Matthew 14:13–21

Mark 6:31–44

Luke 9:12–17

John 6:1–14

THEME

God satisfies material and spiritual hunger

SETTING

c.27–29 CE Bethsaida.

KEY FIGURES

Jesus The Messiah and Son of God during the height of His ministry in Galilee.

The 12 disciples Jesus's chosen followers, who help Him to heal the sick and feed the multitude.

The crowd Mainly Jewish residents of the settlements near the town of Bethsaida.

The feeding of the 5,000—also known as the Miracle of the Five Loaves and Two Fish—is one of the most celebrated moments in the Bible. In fact, it is the only miracle, other than the resurrection, to appear in all four of the Gospels, which underlines its significance. God's compassion and limitless ability to satisfy both physical and spiritual hunger are shown here at their greatest.

Although this miracle is most often referred to as “the feeding of the 5,000,” the number of people present could have been far greater. Matthew 14:21 estimates the number of men alone at “about five thousand,” and goes on to say that

See also: The Origin of Prayer 38–39 ▪ The Lord’s Prayer 212–13 ▪ The Last Supper 236–41 ▪ The Empty Tomb 268–71



women and children were there, too. Some Bible scholars believe there may have been as many as 20,000 people fed in total.

Jesus seeks solitude

According to Luke’s Gospel, upon hearing that John the Baptist has been killed, Jesus withdraws to a

“

They do not need to go away. You give them something to eat.

Matthew 14:16

”

remote place near the town of Bethsaida, likely located on the River Jordan just north of the Sea of Galilee. However, the crowds find out where He is, and they leave their towns and villages to follow Him there. Despite His desire for solitude, when Jesus sees the large crowd of people gathering around Him, He feels compassion for them. He speaks to them about the kingdom of God and begins to heal those who are sick.

Feeding the multitude

Late in the afternoon, all 12 of the disciples approach Him, and remind Him of their remote location. They suggest that He send the people away to the surrounding settlements so they can find food and lodging for the night. Jesus instead tells His disciples to give the hungry people something to eat where they stand.

The Feeding of the Five Thousand is depicted by Flemish Renaissance artist Joachim Patinir. The painting, from the Monasterio de El Escorial, Spain, has the Sea of Galilee in the background.

The disciples explain that this is impossible, as they only have five loaves of bread and two fish with which to feed the thousands.

Jesus instructs the disciples to make the crowd sit down in groups of about 50 people. He takes the loaves and fish, looks up to heaven, and gives thanks. He then breaks the loaves and fish into pieces and hands them to the disciples, who then feed everyone at the gathering until they are all satisfied. There are even 12 basketfuls of broken bread left over at the end of the meal.

The miracle that Jesus has just performed is symbolic of God’s endless love and compassion for »

Bread as a symbol of life

Bread is mentioned throughout the Bible. While this was one of the most important foods of ancient times, it also has a symbolic status as a manifestation of human life itself. Nowhere is this idea underlined more thematically than in the Miracle of the Five Loaves and Two Fish. Shortly after performing His miracle, Jesus states, “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry” (John 6:35).

The breaking of loaves of bread to feed the multitudes also foreshadows Jesus’s same action during the last meal He shares with His disciples. It is during this event that Jesus establishes that the bread and His flesh are one and the same, at least symbolically.

As well as providing the people with sustenance, bread also represents a connection to Jesus. Its multiplication and distribution in this miracle shows Jesus’s desire to satisfy the people’s hunger, and also to spread the word of God.



Bakers check the quality of the matza bread at a handmade matza factory in Kfar Chabad, Israel.

His people. From an impossibly small amount of food, an enormous crowd is fed. The fact that they are in such a remote setting shows the wide reach of God’s love, suggesting that no matter where one is, God’s love can still be felt.

Giving thanks to heaven

The sustenance that God provides can be thought of as both physical and spiritual. Although the story focuses on the necessary physical nourishment the bread provides, this is also a symbolic gesture of compassion. Many Christians interpret this miracle as proof that if they remain faithful and grateful to God, He will provide them with everything they need, both physically and spiritually. The 12 baskets of leftover bread exemplify the endless nature of God’s love for His people, and serve as an illustration of why He deserves their worship.

It is also noteworthy that in three of the Gospels—Matthew, Mark, and Luke—Jesus does not hand the food out Himself; instead, He gives the bread and fish to the disciples to distribute to the crowd. This not only suggests that anybody can deliver the message of God’s love, but also teaches the importance of faith in God. It is implied that unless the disciples have faith in Jesus and God, the bread and fish will run out. It is not simply enough to ask for something and to be grateful in receiving it: one must have total faith that God wants to and will provide for His people.

Five loaves of bread

Numbers often carry a symbolic significance in the Bible, and this miracle is no exception. Not only are there 12 baskets of leftover food, recalling the 12 tribes of Israel in the Old Testament and the 12

disciples in the New Testament. The five pieces of bread that Jesus is handed could represent the Pentateuch of the Torah: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. Jesus takes these five loaves and multiplies them into something more, in the same way that He takes the Mosaic Law from the Torah and builds upon it.

This is not the only way in which the feeding of the 5,000 refers back to the Old Testament. In John 6, Jesus explains the miracle of the multiplication of the loaves with a sermon that draws direct parallels between God providing for the multitudes at Bethsaida and His provisions for the Israelites during their time in the wilderness. Jesus closes this sermon with a difficult teaching that foreshadows the Last Supper: “I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats this bread will live forever” (6:51).

Feeding the Gentiles

This is not the only miracle recorded in which Jesus and His disciples feed the multitudes. Both Matthew and Mark describe two versions of what is seemingly the same miracle. While Matthew 14 tells the story of the feeding of the 5,000, which occurs after the death of John the

“

The Lord Almighty will prepare a feast of rich food for all peoples.

Isaiah 25:6

”



I [the Lord] will bless [Israel] with abundant provisions; her poor I will satisfy with food.
Psalms 132:13-15



Baptist, Matthew 15 goes on to describe Jesus and the disciples feeding a crowd in a region of the Gerasenes, near the Decapolis, a cluster of ten allied cities east of the Sea of Galilee. The narrative is similar to that in Matthew 14, except for two key details: the numbers and the type of people who were fed.

Some Bible scholars have questioned why the Gospel writers would include two such similar miracles so close together in their accounts of Jesus's life. However,

both the numbers cited and the audiences are important. While the crowd at Bethsaida was predominantly Jewish, scholars suggest that those gathered in the "feeding of the 4,000" were more likely to be Gentiles. This feeding of the multitudes, therefore, was proof that God would provide for all people, Jews and Gentiles.

Doubting disciples

It is notable that when Jesus tells His disciples in the Gerasenes that He plans to feed the multitude, they express doubts. They ask Him "where could we get enough bread in this remote place to feed such a crowd?" (Matthew 15:33). They either do not quite believe He will work in this "remote place" or they have forgotten how Jesus recently performed this very miracle for the 5,000 gathered at Bethsaida. Some scholars have taken this skepticism to show that the disciples are, at this point, still learning: they do not yet possess an unwavering faith in the power of God to do what, to humans, seems impossible. ■



Jesus as the king of the Jews

Since the prophet Isaiah, the Jewish people had waited for a king from the line of David to deliver them from their enemies and preside over an era of economic prosperity and international influence.

Throughout His ministry, Jesus, a descendant of David, proves Himself to be this very savior. He preaches the word of God to the multitudes, heals the sick, and provides them with food. Not concerned with earthly kingdoms, Jesus performs acts that show Him to be divine, leading many who hear Him to accept Him as the promised Messiah. The crowds that gather to listen to Him speak are testament to His growing support among both Jews and Gentiles. Jesus's following, of course, eventually becomes so great that enemies of His decide that He poses too much of a threat. As Jesus undergoes questioning at His trial, it is no wonder that Pilate refers to Him as the "king of the Jews," a title that also appears on the cross on which He is crucified.

	Feeding of the 5,000	Feeding of the 4,000
Featured in Matthew/Mark	Yes	Yes
Featured in Luke/John	Yes	No
Location	Bethsaida	Near the Decapolis, in the Gerasenes
The people being fed	Jews	Gentiles
Number of loaves/fish before miracle	Five loaves and two fish	Seven loaves and several fish
Remaining food after miracle	Twelve baskets' worth	Seven baskets' worth



TAKE COURAGE! IT IS I. DON'T BE AFRAID

MATTHEW 14:27, JESUS WALKS ON WATER

IN BRIEF

PASSAGE

Matthew 14:27

THEME

God's sovereignty over all things

SETTING

c.26–27 CE The Sea of Galilee.

KEY FIGURES

Jesus The Messiah and Son of God during His ministry in Galilee and Judea.

Peter One of Jesus's inner circle of disciples, who later denies knowing Him. Peter was one of several disciples who were originally fishermen.

Disciples Jesus's close group of 12 followers, who often witness His miracles.

Jesus walking on the waters of the Sea of Galilee is one of the most significant miracles recorded in the New Testament.

It follows on from another miracle—feeding 5,000 people with five loaves of bread and two fish—and is succeeded by Jesus's retreat up a mountain to pray. The sight of Jesus walking on water astounds

the disciples and, for the first time in the Bible, they begin to worship Jesus, exclaiming, "Truly you are the Son of God" (Matthew 14:33).

A stormy sea

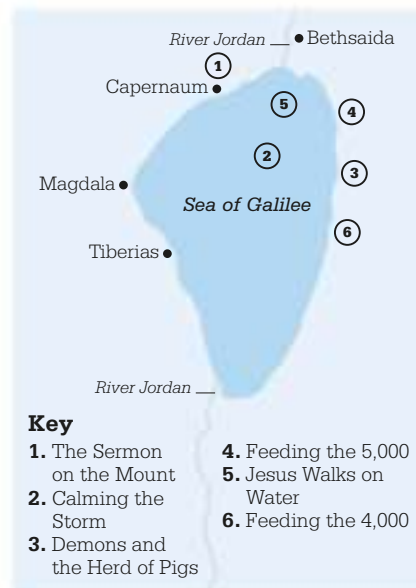
The scene takes place in the Sea of Galilee in the lower part of the Jordan valley. At 13 miles (21km) long and 8 miles (13km) wide, it is Israel's largest freshwater lake. It is also prone to sudden storms, as the disciples discover to their cost.

One evening, the disciples go down to the lake, get into their boat, and set off for Capernaum. They soon find themselves struggling to make headway against a powerful headwind. Even though most are experienced fishermen, they become exhausted after hours of straining on their oars in the face of the gathering storm.

It is at this moment—probably in the early hours of the morning—that Jesus comes to the disciples' rescue. He approaches them in a totally unexpected way, by walking on the turbulent waters as if they are as stable as solid rock.

The disciples are confused. They see something or someone coming toward them, but they do not realize who or what it is. Rather,

Jesus and the Sea of Galilee



See also: Demons and the Herd of Pigs 224–25 ■ Feeding the 5,000 228–31 ■ Peter’s Denial 256–57 ■ The Empty Tomb 268–69



they are terrified, because they believe the figure is an apparition. Jesus calls out to them to calm them down, but Peter asks Jesus to command him to come. When Jesus calls for Peter, Peter climbs out of the boat and starts walking on the water toward Jesus. When Peter’s faith wavers, he begins to sink, but Jesus rescues him.

“

Immediately Jesus reached out his hand and caught him. “You of little faith,” He said, “why did you doubt?”

Matthew 14:31

”

Jesus walks on the water toward the helpless disciples. Despite Peter questioning Jesus’s identity and betraying his faith in the process, Jesus saves His servants.

The Gospel writers vary slightly in the way they tell the story of this particular miracle. According to Matthew 14, Peter walks on the water in response to Jesus’s one-word command, “Come,” before his faith fails him. The focus of the story as told in Mark 6:47–51 and John 6:16–21 differs from that of Matthew: in those Gospels, only Jesus is shown to walk on water.

Messages in the miracle

There are two important points to note in this particular miracle. One is the lesson the disciples learn when Jesus comes to save them from the stormy waters. The message is universal: Jesus will always be there for His followers at the times when He is needed the

Flawed faith

Although Peter steps out onto the water, his faith is not strong enough to overcome his fear. This is not the only time Peter loses faith in Jesus. As Jesus accurately predicts on the Mount of Olives immediately after the Last Supper, “this night, before the rooster crows, you will disown Me three times” (Matthew 26: 69–75). Fear and frailty usurp Peter’s faith—but he learns from these moments to go on to become a pillar of the early Christian Church. His three denials of Christ are counterbalanced by his three declarations of love after Jesus’s resurrection.

There are many examples of flawed faith in the Bible. The prophet Jonah fails to go to the Ninevites and tell them to repent. Instead, he flees through fear and because he does not think they deserve to be forgiven (Jonah 1:1–3). Just as Jesus rescues Peter, Jonah is forgiven by God.

In renewed faith there is redemption—these stories show that it is never too late to return to God.

most. Jesus helps the disciples to go safely to their destination, and they hail Him as the Son of God.

It is also significant that Jesus is shown as having the power to walk on water. In the Old Testament, this ability is described as being unique to God. Genesis 6–7 and 9 and Exodus 14:21 and 15:8 all state clearly that only God has power over the seas. This fact is also confirmed by Job 9:8, which states: “He alone . . . treads on the waves of the sea.” Jesus’s ability to walk on water is therefore proof of His close relationship to God. ■



HIS FACE SHONE LIKE THE SUN, AND HIS CLOTHES BECAME AS WHITE AS LIGHT

MATTHEW 17:2, THE TRANSFIGURATION

IN BRIEF

PASSAGE

Matthew 17:1–13;
Mark 9:2–13; Luke 9:28–36

THEME

Jesus is affirmed by God

SETTING

c.27–29 CE Mount Tabor.

KEY FIGURES

Jesus The Messiah and Son of God during His ministry.

Peter Together with James and John, a member of Jesus's inner circle of three disciples.

James and John Sons of Zebedee. Originally fishermen on the Sea of Galilee.

Moses Israel's liberator and lawgiver, who led the people out of slavery in Egypt.

Elijah A prophet active in the reign of King Ahab of Israel in the 9th century BCE.

Mark, Matthew, and Luke—the so-called Synoptic Gospels—all tell the story of the Transfiguration. This event follows two outbursts by Peter, one of Jesus's favored disciples. In the first, Peter makes a bold statement about Jesus's identity: "You are the Christ, the son of the living God" (Matthew 16:15). After the second, in which Peter objects to Jesus's intimations that He will suffer rejection and be killed, Jesus issues

the stinging reply: "Get behind me, Satan!"—"Satan" here meaning simply an adversary of the Lord—"Your thoughts are not thoughts from God but from men" (Mark 8:33).

Shining glory

Six days after Jesus's rebuke, according to Mark and Matthew, or eight days in Luke, Jesus takes His closest disciples—Peter and the brothers James and John—up a high mountain. A tradition dating from the 4th century CE identifies it as Mount Tabor in Lower Galilee, but mounts Carmel and Horeb are other candidates. There, the astonished disciples witness an extraordinary metamorphosis. Jesus's clothes become dazzling white—"no one on earth could clean them so white" (Mark 9:3)—while His face shines like the sun.

With Him are two other figures, whom the disciples identify as Moses and Elijah. The disciples are terrified and, as ever, it is Peter who speaks. He suggests erecting three

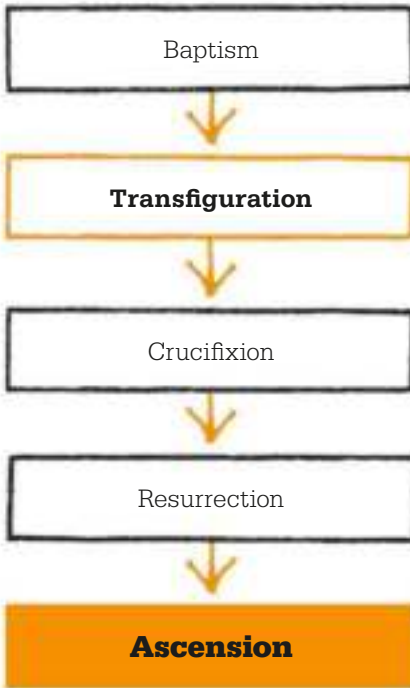


The Transfiguration of Christ

(1516–1520), by Raphael, sets the transfiguration against a story of the Apostles, who, unlike Christ, are only human, failing to rid a boy of demons.

See also: The Baptism of Jesus 194–97 ■ The Crucifixion 258–65 ■ The Empty Tomb 268–71 ■ The Great Commission 274–77

The Five Milestones of Jesus's Ministry



shelters to worship in: one each for Jesus, Moses, and Elijah. However, as he speaks, a cloud envelops them and the voice of God comes forth: “This is my much loved Son. Listen to Him!” (Mark 9:7). After this, everything returns to normal. When the disciples look around, there is no one there but Jesus.

Divine revelation

The Transfiguration has been seen by some theologians as a blueprint for how to respond to the glory of God. While the disciples’ first response is to fear it, they learn to listen and believe, reassured by the touch of their friend, Jesus, who says, “Do not be afraid.” For a moment, it seems, some kind of partition is drawn back between

the heavenly and earthly realms, allowing the disciples to glimpse Jesus in His glory as the Christ, the son of the living God.

In the Hebrew Bible, Yahweh reveals himself in a cloud on a mountaintop to both Moses and Elijah. The cloud that descends upon this mountain conveys the same divine presence, known in rabbinic literature as the *Shekinah*. The words uttered by God from the cloud are similar to those spoken at Jesus’s baptism: “This is my Son, whom I love” (Matthew 3:17).

God now adds a command: “Listen to Him!” Luke’s Gospel tells us more about what this refers to. In Luke’s version of events, Jesus, Moses, and Elijah speak with Jesus concerning His “departure, which He is about to bring to fulfillment at Jerusalem.” In other words, they are discussing the suffering and death Jesus had recently warned His disciples about. The use of the word “departure”—*exodus* in Greek—draws a deliberate parallel to the Old Testament. Just as Moses had freed the Israelites from Egypt, the suffering of Jesus would deliver the people from their sins. ■




We did not follow cleverly devised stories ... we were eyewitnesses of His majesty.
2 Peter 1:16–18



The new Elijah

According to the Hebrew Bible, the prophet Elijah did not die in the usual sense. Instead, he was taken up into heaven in a blazing chariot of fire. This gave rise to a belief that he would come back one day to prepare the way for the Messiah. Indeed, the very last verses of the Old Testament make this prediction. “See, I will send you the prophet Elijah before that great and dreadful day of the Lord comes,” the prophet Malachi proclaims in Yahweh’s name.

Descending the mountain after the Transfiguration, the three disciples ask Jesus about this prophecy. His reply is that it has already been fulfilled in the person of John the Baptist: “But I tell you, Elijah has already come, and they did not recognize him ... In the same way, the Son of Man is going to suffer at their hands” (Matthew 17:12). John the Baptist suffered and died at the hands of Herod Antipas, and Jesus says again that He will suffer the same fate. In fulfilling God’s plans for redemption and restoration, the way of glory and the way of suffering are inseparable.



**FOR GOD SO LOVED
THE WORLD,
THAT HE GAVE HIS ONE
AND ONLY SON**

JOHN 3:16, THE NATURE OF FAITH





IN BRIEF

PASSAGE

John 3:3–21

THEME

The nature of faith

SETTING

c.27–29 CE Roman Palestine.

KEY FIGURES

Jesus The Messiah and Son of God, who requires that people believe in Him in order to be saved.

Nicodemus A Jewish leader and teacher who came to question Jesus. After Jesus's death, he brings myrrh and aloes to embalm His body with strips of linen.

Different religious leaders come to test Jesus as He grows in popularity as a teacher. Some listen to His public preaching; others examine Him in more private settings. One leader, a Pharisee named Nicodemus, comes to Jesus with questions. A member of the Sanhedrin, the ruling religious council, Nicodemus is an important teacher in his own right.

Nicodemus does not understand what Jesus means when He says that people must be born again to see the kingdom of God, and Jesus tells him he should not be surprised by the statement, if he is truly a teacher of Israel. Jesus says, "I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things?" (John 3:12). Jesus then



refers to an event that happened during the wilderness wanderings of the Israelites; He describes how God judged the Israelites' bitter attitude toward Him by sending venomous snakes into their camp. When Moses cried out to God, he was instructed to make a bronze serpent and lift it up where the people could see it. The snakebites of those who gazed upon the snake were healed. Jesus compares Himself to the snake, saying that He must also be lifted up (a reference to the crucifixion), so that whoever believes would have eternal life in Him (3:14–15).

Faith in Christ

Having acknowledged the promise of eternal life, Jesus begins to broach the topic of faith, which is the major precondition for salvation. In what is perhaps the most famous statement in the Bible (John 3:16), Jesus tells Nicodemus that God loved the world so much, "He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but

The Brazen Serpent, a sculpture by Giovanni Fantoni, in Madaba, Jordan, commemorates the bronze snake erected by Moses, which Jesus draws on to illustrate His teaching on faith.

have eternal life." John's Gospel goes on to say that God's love is for everyone, but can only be experienced through faith in Jesus. Although Jesus had come to save the world, not condemn it, escaping God's Final Judgment depends upon having faith in Jesus first. According to John, those who do not believe in Jesus stand condemned already (3:17–18).

The result of believing in Jesus is to enjoy eternal life instead of divine judgment. Such faith involves trust in Jesus and belief that His death and resurrection is sufficient for salvation. Paul teaches that when a person has such faith, affirmation through words and deeds should be the result. Writing in Romans 10:9–10, Paul states, "If you declare with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart

See also: Ruth and Naomi 108–09 ■ The Empty Tomb 268–71 ■ Fruits of the Spirit 300 ■ Salvation Through Faith 301 ■ Faith and Works 312

that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you profess your faith and are saved.”

Walking by faith

Christianity is defined by the tenet that those who believe in Jesus’s crucifixion and resurrection receive life, and those who do not face condemnation. Though this idea may serve to alienate non-Christians, its purpose is to convey the gravity of the call to faith and the urgency of believing in Jesus.

This faith in Christ initiates the Christian life, but also drives it forward. In his second letter to the Corinthians, Paul writes that Christians should live by faith, not by sight (2 Corinthians 5:7). This did not mean that Paul understood faith as being irrational or contrary to evidence, or that the contrast between faith and sight should mean that faith is blind. Some versions of the Bible translate the phrase as “walk by faith, not by sight,” which may illuminate Paul’s

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Faith is a living, daring confidence in God’s grace, so sure and certain that a man could stake his life on it a thousand times.

Martin Luther

”

“
Ask God ... and it will be given to you ... but when you ask, you must believe and not doubt, because the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind.

James 1:6

”

meaning: a Christian’s life should be guided by trusting God’s judgment, not by one’s own.

The source of faith

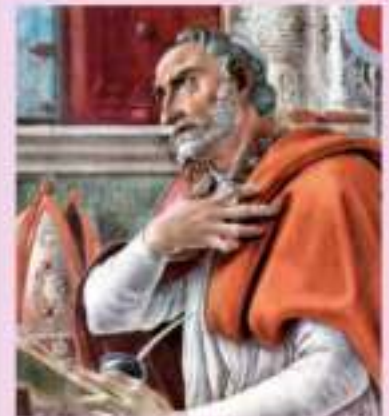
The Bible most often uses the word “faith” to describe people believing some assertion or trusting in God or Jesus. People are commanded to believe statements and to believe that Jesus has done or said things. For this reason, it would be easy to conclude that faith is a purely human response to propositions or persons. Yet the Bible speaks of God as the One who produces faith in people. It is not an instrument of human will, adapted to accomplish human purposes. Instead, it is a gift of God that accomplishes God’s purposes in those who receive it. Paul held that belief in Christ was something that God granted to people (Philippians 1:29).

The idea of faith as God’s gift also appears in Ephesians 2:8–9, where people are saved through faith that is “not from yourselves, it is the gift of God.” The gift of »

St. Augustine

Augustine (396–430 CE), the Bishop of Hippo, an ancient port on the coast of Roman North Africa, advised that in studying the Bible, one ought not seek to understand in order to believe, but rather believe in order to understand. Augustine’s counsel was intended to produce humility. It is too easy, he seemed to say, to dismiss the parts of the Bible that are difficult to understand as incoherent or to say that the logic is fatally flawed. Belief, on the other hand, perseveres in study and often finds flashes of insight.

Augustine, who had previously studied the Bible as a pagan teacher of rhetoric and a student of Platonic philosophy, argued that there was a connection between faith and reason. He came to believe that even the best thinkers in the world made mistakes, due to their human nature. Faith, he argued, was illuminating, and allowed a philosopher to see the truth of scripture more clearly.



Augustine was an important scholar in the early Church and a contemporary of St. Jerome. This painting (c.1480) by Sandro Botticelli shows him in his study.



Fra Angelico's *Entombment*

(c.1438–1443) shows Nicodemus (behind), the Virgin Mary, and John attending the dead Christ. Belief in His death and resurrection are cornerstones of faith.

faith is understood to come by hearing the Word of God, which summons forth faith in a person's heart, just as God's first words in the Bible, "Let there be light," summoned light into existence at the beginning of creation.

Understanding God as the creator of faith in human beings means that there is not an insurmountable barrier to the production of faith in flawed people. Indeed, some of the least likely

people in the Bible became some of its most powerful examples of faith—for example, in the Old Testament story of Ruth, who demonstrates faithfulness to both God and Naomi; or in the conversion of Paul, a Pharisee who had previously and zealously persecuted Christians, in the New Testament.

Characteristics of faith

Hebrews 11 defines faith as "confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see"; this definition summarizes the cumulative examples of faith in the Old Testament. However, faith is more complicated than this. According to the Bible, faith has many characteristics.

One of the most obvious is that it gives assent to the truth of a statement. The New Testament speaks of having "faith that ..." and exhorts people to "believe that ..." more than 20 times, with most examples relating to statements about Jesus. Yet the Bible

describes faith as being more than merely an affirmation that something is true. Faith is also about entrusting oneself to God or Jesus. Here there is a personal aspect to faith: one has "faith in" or "believes in" Jesus.

Trust or entrusting one's self to God is perhaps the most essential characteristic of faith in the Bible. One acknowledges the truth of what God has said because one trusts the God who said it. The biblical words for faith, such as *aman* (Hebrew for "believe, trust, be faithful"), *emunah* (Hebrew for "certainty, faithfulness, trust"), and *pistis* (Greek for "believe, trust, be faithful"), also convey the idea of fidelity, which points to persistent adherence to God or God's will over time. Christians, therefore, must not only trust in God, but continue to trust in Him even when their faith is tested. The wavering of a person or people's faith in God can have dire consequences, as the

“

Never be afraid to trust an unknown future to a known God.

Corrie ten Boom

Holocaust rescuer (1892–1993)

”

“

I believe in Christianity as I believe that the sun has risen: not only because I see it, but because by it I see everything else.

C. S. Lewis

Author, Oxford professor (1898–1963)

”

Israelites find in the example given by Jesus: God sends snakes into the camp of the Israelites because they do not have faith that God and Moses are guiding them on the best path through the desert.

Active faith

The Bible therefore stresses the importance of an enduring and obedient faith. Having faith that God knows best—because He is all-knowing and all-loving—is key to ensuring obedience to His laws, and throughout the Bible a lack of adherence to God’s will usually correlates with a loss of faith.

While assenting to true statements, and even trusting in God are salient features of faith in the Bible, the active nature of faith (faithfulness) is significant. The epistle of James, in particular, deals with the question of whether or not the faith in God that saves is mere assent or is naturally active, producing good works. James writes “Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith

by my deeds. You believe that there is one God . . . Even the demons believe that—and shudder” (James 2:18–19). James writes that it is not enough for Christians to believe in God, but they should also show this belief through their actions—just as, in the Old Testament, Abraham showed his faith through his willingness to sacrifice his son, Isaac.

Paul takes the idea of active faith even further in his letter to the Romans, when he tells them that “whoever has doubts is condemned if they eat, because their eating is not from faith; and everything that does not come from faith is sin” (Romans 14:23).

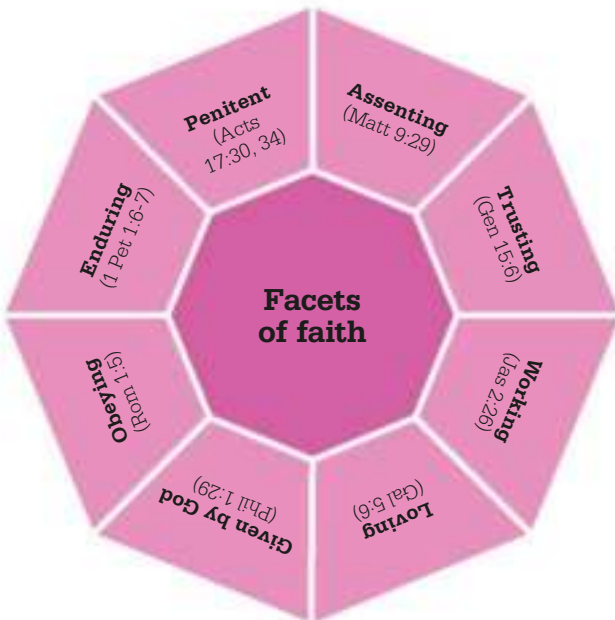
While reason and experience can challenge a Christian’s faith, they can also vindicate it. Faith produces the good, loving deeds that comprise a life lived in Christ, standing with hope and charity as one of the three theological virtues identified by Paul in his letter to the Thessalonians (1 Thessalonians 1:3). ■



Darkness and light

In John 3, Nicodemus comes to Jesus in the night. This otherwise minor detail is part of a larger theme in John’s Gospel and one that originates at the very start of the Bible: “Let there be light” (Genesis 1:3). John describes Jesus as the Light, and those who do not believe in Him as being in darkness. Although the light of faith was available to all who encountered Jesus or His teaching, people still rejected the light. They loved the darkness that hid and enabled their wicked deeds, while hating the light that exposed them.

Jesus identified Himself as the “light of the world” and commanded His followers not to walk in darkness. The imagery of light and dark is also present in the miracle of healing the man who had been blind from birth, and the betrayal, arrest, and crucifixion of Jesus, when foreboding shadow prevails. Yet the triumph of the light was also evident on the morning of the resurrection, and in each person who came to have faith in Jesus.



Facets of faith

Protestants identify eight characteristics of faith that come up again and again in the Old and New Testaments, from the stories of the patriarchs to the teachings of the Apostles.



FOR THE SON OF MAN CAME TO SEEK AND TO SAVE THE LOST

LUKE 19:10, JESUS EMBRACES A TAX COLLECTOR

IN BRIEF

PASSAGE

Luke 19:1–10

THEME

God's kingdom is for all

SETTING

c.27–29 CE Jericho.

KEY FIGURES

Jesus The Messiah and Son of God at the height of His ministry.

Zacchaeus A rich tax collector, whose salvation is proclaimed by Jesus after he gives up half of his riches to the poor and defrauded.

Throughout the Gospels, Jesus is the obvious protagonist. However, in the Gospel of Luke, there are several other figures who become unexpected heroes: notably those who were previously considered “unclean,” sinners, or otherwise socially unacceptable.

Luke 19 describes one such outcast by the name of Zacchaeus. He is a chief tax collector in Jericho, viewed by many in the Judean community as a traitorous enemy, seizing money from his own people to fill the Roman coffers. Zacchaeus is also a *rich* tax collector, which

suggests to the people of Jericho that he extorts additional funds for personal gain. They therefore deem him a sinner.

A second chance

Zacchaeus makes up for in riches what he lacks in stature—he is so short that he cannot see Jesus above the crowds when He comes into town. Consequently, Zacchaeus climbs a sycamore-fig tree to get a better view. Of all the people assembled, Jesus notices Zacchaeus. He calls to him by name, beckons him down from the tree, and proclaims “I must stay at your house today” (Luke 19:5).

While the people of Jericho complain that Jesus has chosen to be the guest of a sinner, Zacchaeus eagerly welcomes Jesus into his home. Zacchaeus then says he will give half of his possessions to the poor, and that, if he has ever cheated anyone, he will pay them back fourfold. His newfound generosity toward the poor is



Jesus spies Zacchaeus (in red) watching from a sycamore tree as He enters the city of Jericho in this 1908 illustration by English artist William Brassey Hole.

See also: The Temple Tax 222 ■ Workers in the Vineyard 223 ■ Cleansing the Temple 244–45 ■ Faith and Works 312–13 ■ Holiness 314–15

evidence of his salvation—as Jesus says, “the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost” (19:10).

Unlikely redemption

Zacchaeus’s story is particularly noteworthy because of another tale that precedes it. In Luke 18, a rich ruler queries Jesus about what he must do to gain eternal life. Despite the man’s adherence to Jewish teachings, he does not meet the final criteria that Jesus requires—that he give the proceeds from the sale of his belongings to the poor and follow Him. Jesus tells him that it is extremely difficult for the wealthy to enter the kingdom of God: it is harder for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom.

However, Zacchaeus’s example shows it is not impossible: he gives up more than half of his total wealth because he has been made righteous by Jesus. This turn of events exemplifies the power of Jesus’s ministry: He transforms the sinner, loves the rejected, and saves the lost—showing that no one is ever fully “lost.” ■

The Pharisee and the tax collector



Roman taxation

The Roman Empire, like all empires, levied taxes so it could grow and thrive—its subsumed nations bore the financial weight of Rome’s imperialism. Judeans who lived in Palestine had a particular distaste for new Roman taxes, because they already paid local and religious taxes. While Roman taxes brought roads, aqueducts, and other societal needs to the area, political and religious tensions still rose. Some Jewish factions

resisted Roman occupation and taxation, which led to revolts and subsequent military interventions. Eventually, in 70 CE, the Romans invaded Jerusalem and destroyed the Temple, resulting in the displacement of many Jews into other parts of the empire. These events would resonate with readers of New Testament stories of Jesus’s interactions with tax collectors (Luke 19) and others who question Him about His opinions on the empire and its compulsory tributes (Luke 20).



This 2nd century CE relief from a Roman mausoleum depicts a tax collector making an entry in a ledger.



HE SCATTERED THE COINS OF THE MONEY CHANGERS AND OVERTURNED THEIR TABLES

JOHN 2:15, CLEANSING THE TEMPLE

IN BRIEF

PASSAGE

Matthew 21:12–17; Mark 11:15–19; Luke 19:45–48; John 2:13–16

THEME

Challenging corruption in the old religion

SETTING

c.27–29 CE The Temple courtyard in Jerusalem, before Jesus is crucified.

KEY FIGURES

Jesus The Messiah and Son of God, who is filled with anger at the corruption He finds in His Father's Temple.

Temple merchants Priests who sold offerings to Jewish pilgrims visiting the Temple, capitalizing on the fact that they could not enter the Temple's innermost altars.

Jesus chasing money changers and merchant priests from the Temple in Jerusalem is described in all four Gospels. Often referred to as the cleansing of the Temple because Jesus expelled corrupt, “impure” priests, the event shows Jesus fulfilling prophecies of Isaiah (56:7) and Zechariah (14:21).

When Jesus arrives in Jerusalem, it is the height of the Passover pilgrimage season, a time when Jews would travel en masse to the city to visit the Temple. Priests would often sell offerings to the pilgrims to be sacrificed in their name, as only priests could approach the Temple's innermost altars. Such transactions typically took place outside the Temple walls. However, when Jesus goes inside, He sees money changers, as well as priests selling sheep, cattle, and doves.

Anger of Jesus

Jesus sees this as corruption. The priests are profiting from the faithful and not allowing them clear access to God. He proceeds to overturn the priests' tables and call them a den of robbers. He tells them: “Stop turning my Father's

house into a market!” (John 2:16). Many people remember only the compassionate, “turn the other cheek” descriptions of Jesus; however, Jesus is angry here. John's narrative states that Jesus “made a whip out of cords and drove all from the Temple courts, both sheep and cattle” (2:15).

This and other accounts describe Jesus “driving out” the priests and money lenders—in the Greek, the same word is used for Jesus cleansing the Temple as



Jesus drives out the corrupt in this 19th-century oil painting by Danish artist Carl Heinrich Bloch. Jesus is shown holding the whip above His head, ready to strike.

See also: A Child in the Temple 188 ■ The Temple Tax 222 ■ Betrayal in the Garden 254–55 ■ The Crucifixion 258–65

is used elsewhere in the Gospel when He expels demons. The power of Jesus's command alone is enough to force the corrupt to leave His Father's Temple.

Jesus's motives

In the 1st century CE, there were a number of sectarian groups unhappy with the administration of the Temple. One such group was the Essenes, some of whom had exiled themselves to the Dead Sea. Jesus's anger in the Temple has led some to suggest that He may have been a member of the Essenes, but there is little evidence of this. Some historians believe Jesus was

crucified by the Romans for trying to incite a riot and that His actions in the Temple would have been viewed as those of a rebellious Jewish leader.

Some Christians see Jesus's actions as evidence of Him looking toward a reformation and split from traditional Judaism. Others see His actions as working to fulfill Mosaic Law and institute a new covenant. According to this interpretation, Jesus is not a rebel: He is exercising responsibility and authority as an heir to King David to order the service of the priests and ensure the purity of their obedience to the Mosaic Law. ■

Solomon builds the Temple (10th century BCE) as a house of prayer **for all nations** (1 Kings 6–7) ...

... **Babylon destroys** the Temple (587 BCE), which had become a focus of **Israelite pride** ...

... **Ezra rebuilds** the Temple (c.520–15 BCE), evoking **humble worship** from the people ...

... After **Herod's renovation** (19 BCE–63 CE), the Temple again becomes a focus of **nationalistic pride** ...

Jesus cleanses the Temple for all nations.



Palm Sunday

Jesus enters Jerusalem on a day now known as Palm Sunday, and does so by humble means, on the back of a donkey. This fulfills the prophecy of Zechariah, that the king would come in riding a donkey. As Jesus enters the city, people gather to greet Him. The crowds spread their cloaks and branches from palm trees to cover the ground, and proclaim *Hosanna*—the imperative form of the Hebrew word meaning “save”—as a form of praise. The crowd also quotes Psalm 118, proclaiming that Jesus is the Son of David coming in the name of the Lord.

Although it takes place at a different time of year, Palm Sunday is reminiscent of the Jewish holiday of Sukkot. During this festival, Jews weave together pieces of palms and wave them in each of the four cardinal directions. The palm frond is also a symbol of life and resurrection, and a symbol for the Assyrian Tree of Life. Some scholars believe that the palm fronds of Palm Sunday could therefore signify that Jesus will die in Jerusalem, but soon also be resurrected.



SHE HAS DONE A BEAUTIFUL THING TO ME

MARK 14:6, JESUS ANOINTED AT BETHANY

IN BRIEF

PASSAGE

Matthew 26:6–13; Mark 14:3–9; John 12:1–8

THEME

Foretelling Jesus's death

SETTING

c. 29 CE The village of Bethany, near Jerusalem.

KEY FIGURES

Jesus The Son of God, in the last days of His earthly life.

The woman Possibly Mary of Bethany, who anoints Jesus.

Judas The disciple who later betrays Jesus.

In the last week of His life, Jesus has a moving encounter in Bethany. Two days before Passover, He is reclining at the table in the home of Simon the Leper in Bethany, near Jerusalem, where He is staying. Unexpectedly, a woman enters Simon's home. Uninvited, and unprompted, she comes to Jesus and pours perfume



onto His head from an alabaster jar. The perfume is nard—an expensive oil imported from India. Following its use in this symbolic act of anointing, Jesus foretells His coming death to His disciples and to the other guests that are assembled in the house.

Afterward, the woman is rebuked by some of those present—disciples and others—who accuse her of wasting perfume that could have been sold “for more than a year’s wages” (Mark 14:5), raising money to be given to the poor. However, Jesus immediately

A woman anoints Jesus with nard as He dines with friends in Bethany, in this illumination from the *Codex de Predis* by 15th-century Italian miniaturist Cristoforo de Predis.

defends the woman and tells her accusers to leave her alone. He argues that the poor will always be there, and the disciples can help them at any time.

Jesus then adds that He will not be with His disciples for much longer and explains this to the assembled company: “She poured perfume on My body beforehand

See also: The Raising of Lazarus 226–27 ■ The Last Supper 248–53 ■ Betrayal in the Garden 254–55 ■ The Crucifixion 258–65 ■ The Empty Tomb 268–71

to prepare for My burial” (Mark 14:8). None of the Gospel authors tell us how the disciples responded to Jesus’s claim.

Mary of Bethany

In the version of this scene in John’s Gospel, the anointing takes place at a dinner held in Jesus’s honor in Bethany. Here, Mary, the sister of Lazarus, whom Jesus had previously resurrected from the dead (John 11:1), anoints Jesus. According to John, she pours oil over His feet and then wipes them with her hair (John 12:3), filling the house with perfume. This action would have been doubly shocking, given that it was against custom for Jewish women to let down their hair when in public.

John’s description echoes another Gospel event (Luke 7:36–50), in which a “sinful woman” weeps at Jesus’s feet, before drying His feet with her hair and anointing them. While Mary of Bethany is sometimes incorrectly confused with this sinful woman, in all the biblical accounts that

reference Mary she is generally portrayed as a good and devoted servant of Jesus.

Jesus portrays Mary’s actions as a sign that she knows what is coming: she, unlike the disciples, accepts His imminent death. The Gospels give no other clues to her motives, although some scholars propose it was to show gratitude to Jesus for raising her brother from the dead. Whatever Mary’s reasons, Jesus asks the disciples to remember her act: “wherever this gospel is preached . . . what she has done will also be told, in memory of her” (Matthew 26:13).

Preface to betrayal

When Mary anoints Jesus, the disciples are taken aback, not by the scale of her devotion, but rather her extravagance. As John notes, the nard cost 300 denarii, or a year’s wages (a laborer at the time would earn one denarius per day). John’s Gospel attributes the objection about wasting money to just one disciple—Judas Iscariot, the group’s treasurer, who, it is

“
The poor you
will always have with
you, and you can help
them any time you
want. But you will not
always have me. She
did what she could.

Mark 14:7

implied, wanted the money for himself (John 12:6). The story closes with Judas going to the chief priests, who offer him money in exchange for handing Jesus to them. Scholars have long debated the correlation between the events at Bethany and Judas’s subsequent betrayal. It is not clear if Jesus’s foretelling of His own demise is a trigger for Judas’s actions. ■

Anointing for burial

In the ancient world, anointing corpses for burial was a common practice. This symbolic act consisted of pouring aromatic oil over a person’s head, feet, or entire body. The effect of the ritual was to designate its object as belonging to God. It did not matter whether the consecration took place when the person—or creature—was alive, or after their death. Sometimes, even inanimate objects were anointed in the Bible—Jacob, for example,

anointed a rock in Genesis 28:18, to designate a place, Bethel, as the house of God.

These oils were also used as a form of medicine for centuries by many different cultures. They were thought to have special properties that could drive out demons that were believed to cause disease. To this day, European kings and queens are sanctified with oil in ceremonies involving a divine blessing. When Jesus is anointed in Bethany, this simple act represents a symbolic preparation for His death and an affirmation of His holiness.



A pharaoh is anointed by gods Horus and Thoth in this bas relief from the Temple of Horus and Sobek in Kom Ombo, Upper Egypt.



**THIS IS MY
BODY,**

WHICH IS GIVEN FOR YOU

LUKE 22:19, THE LAST SUPPER





IN BRIEF

PASSAGE

Luke 22:7–38

THEME

**New symbolism
of Passover**

SETTING

c.29 CE An upper room of a house in Jerusalem on the night of the Passover feast.

KEY FIGURES

Jesus The Messiah and Son of God in the period leading up to His crucifixion.**Peter and John** Two of Jesus's disciples, who are sent by Jesus to prepare the Passover meal in Jerusalem.**Judas Iscariot** The disciple who goes on to betray Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane.

As opposition mounts to Jesus's ministry, Jesus decides to spend time privately with His closest disciples, sharing with them the most important occasion of the Jewish year, the Passover supper. During this meal, they remember God's rescue of their ancestors from slavery in Egypt. Like many other Jews, they have traveled to Jerusalem so that they can share the Passover meal within the walls of their holy city, in proximity to the Temple, the focus of their worship of God.

Since they are staying at Bethany, just outside the city, they need to find a room in which to share the meal. Jesus sends Peter and John, two of His disciples, to make the arrangements for the feast. "Where do you want us to prepare for it?" they ask (Luke 22:9). Jesus tells them that as they enter the city, they will find a man carrying a jar of water, quite an unusual sight in an age when this was considered to be a woman's task. They are to follow him back to the house and say to the owner: "The Teacher asks: 'Where is the

A Flemish miniature by Simon Bening (c.1525–30) shows Jesus preparing to wash the feet of His disciple Peter, an act normally performed by a servant.

guest room, where I may eat the Passover with my disciples?" (Luke 22:11). Jesus tells the two disciples that they will then be shown to a large upper room, where they can prepare for the meal.

Peter and John go to the city, and find everything just as Jesus has said. They buy all the elements that make the meal a reminder of

See also: Covenants 44–47 ■ The Passover 72–73 ■ The Baptism of Jesus 194–97 ■ The Crucifixion 258–65 ■ The Day of Pentecost 282–83

their ancestors' escape from Egypt: unleavened bread, roasted lamb, bitter herbs, and wine.

The table is set

Later that day, Jesus and the rest of the disciples arrive at the room to share the meal. A low table is set, and Jesus and the disciples recline around it, in the customary way. Stone jars filled with water stand by the door, so that guests can wash their dusty feet before sitting down. Usually, this task is done for them by a servant, but to their surprise, the disciples watch as Jesus strips off His robe, ties a towel around His waist, and begins to wash their feet.

Peter is horrified: "Lord, are you going to wash my feet?" he asks (John 13:6). In answer, Jesus tells the disciple that unless he allows his feet to be washed by Him, Peter will not be able to share the meal with Jesus, or all it symbolizes. Jesus is setting His disciples an example here, turning the usual expectations of greatness on their head. Jesus, their honored leader, is humbly serving them by washing their feet, an act that symbolizes

“

Very truly I tell you, no servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him.

John 13:16

”

“

For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until He comes.

1 Corinthians 11:26

”

a spiritual cleansing. All that Jesus is about to face in the next 24 hours can be understood as Him serving them in the ultimate way—His sacrifice will cleanse the stain of sin from their lives.

Preparing the disciples

As they eat bitter herbs and roasted lamb and remember God's deliverance of the Israelites from Egypt, Jesus alludes to the significance of the occasion. "I have eagerly desired to eat the Passover with you before I suffer," He says (Luke 22:15), knowing that this will be the last meal with His disciples before His opponents lay hands on Him. As they share one of the traditional cups of wine around the table, Jesus notes with foreboding that He will not eat this meal with them again "until the kingdom of God comes" (Luke 22:18). Just as the Israelites have shared a last meal in Egypt before their divinely ordained rescue and journey to freedom, so this is Jesus's last meal before the events that will bring about a new freedom for the world in the kingdom of God. »

Herod's Jerusalem

Seeking to establish his reputation as Israel's ruler despite his association with the Roman overlords, Herod the Great, King of Judea (37–4 BCE), decided to refurbish the Second Temple. He aimed to nearly double its overall footprint with a vast paved court, and this work was still ongoing during the time of Jesus. According to historian Flavius Josephus (c.37–100 CE), the Temple was "like a snow-clad mountain for all that was not gold was gleaming white." Situated alongside the Temple walls was the Antonia Fortress, which Herod built to house the occupying armies. Other major sites included his palace, the Praetorium, and the home of the Roman governor.

Jerusalem's population around this time is estimated at 40,000, though at festival times, pilgrims coming into the city to worship could increase that number to about 250,000. However, many of these visitors would not find accommodation in the city; instead, they would look for rooms in nearby villages—such as Bethany, where Jesus and His disciples stayed.



A model of Herod's Temple shows what it might have looked like. The Temple was 164 feet (50m) high and stood on the highest hill in Jerusalem.

In a **Catholic** mass, the priest acts *in persona Christi*—in the **person of Christ**.

During the **sacrament**, he says: “**Take this**, all of you, and **eat of it**: for this is my body which will be given up for you.”

Catholic dogma teaches that when this phrase is spoken by the **priest**, transubstantiation occurs.

This means that although the **bread remains unchanged** in appearance ...

... Catholics believe that the essence of the bread has become the body of Christ.

This is my body; this is my blood

The words that Jesus instructs His disciples to use when they re-enact this meal together have provoked controversy through the centuries. Known as the words of institution, the phrases “this is my body” and “this is my blood” announce the special significance of the elements of this special meal, now celebrated in the Eucharist.

Churches have differing views about the force of the word “is.” For some Christians, it means that Jesus becomes physically present in the elements, an understanding known as “transubstantiation.”

In the 13th century, the great theologian St. Thomas Aquinas explained this concept: while the physical characteristics of the bread and wine stay the same, the “substance” of them is transformed into the very being of God. Other Christians understand the words to be purely symbolic, inviting them simply to remember Jesus’s suffering and sacrifice. In between these two views, a third understanding suggests that Jesus is spiritually present “along with” the bread and the wine when Christians today celebrate the Eucharist.

Taking the unleavened bread, Jesus lifts it up and thanks God for it, tears it apart, and then passes it to each of His disciples. “This is my body,” He says, “given for you; do this in remembrance of me” (Luke 22:19). Then, pouring out another cup of wine, He raises it in blessing, and gives it to them to share around: “This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you” (Luke 22:20).

Foretelling His death

With the words, “This is my body” and “This is my blood,” Jesus brings a deeper significance to the Passover meal. He foretells that He will soon give Himself up for others, and during this last meal with His disciples, He warns them about the events that are about to unfold: Jesus’s arrest and trial, His crucifixion, and, after three days, His resurrection. The Gospels make it clear that these are not events that will befall Jesus unexpectedly; rather, they are part of God’s plan. They are integral to His new

covenant with humanity, which will be sealed by the sacrifice of His only son.

Jesus has used the familiar Passover meal to teach His disciples about His impending death. Since Moses’s day, the lamb at the Passover meal had been a reminder of the blood of the lamb that the Israelites painted on the doorposts of their houses so that God’s angel would “pass over” their homes and only bring destruction to the Egyptian overlords. Now Jesus is offering Himself up as a new Passover lamb, a perfect lamb in accordance with God’s instructions to Moses. The goblet of wine symbolizing the blood of His sacrifice introduces the New Covenant—the promise of eternal life through Christ—foretold by Jeremiah (31:31–34).

Judas leaves

During the Passover meal, Jesus also explains to His disciples that one of them will betray Him to the authorities and trigger the events that will lead to His crucifixion.

According to John, this too has been foretold: “This is to fulfill this passage of Scripture: ‘He who shared my bread has turned against me’” (John 13:18).

As the evening goes on, one disciple fulfills this prophecy. Judas Iscariot makes his excuses and leaves, because he has made arrangements to betray Jesus later that night. The remaining disciples continue with their evening of food, drink, prayer, and storytelling, until, after a final hymn, they make their way to the Garden of Gethsemane on the Mount of Olives.

Everlasting sacrament

Importantly, Jesus does not envisage His last supper as being a one-off occasion for His disciples. Just like the Passover meal, it will serve as a reminder to Jesus’s followers of the significance of His life and death. As the first Christians gather in the days following Jesus’s resurrection and ascension to heaven, they share this meal together, joyfully remembering that Jesus’s death has brought them life. Unlike

“
I am the living bread
that came down from
heaven. Whoever eats
this bread will live forever.
This bread is my flesh,
which I will give for
the life of the world.

John 6:51

Passover, which is celebrated once a year, the Last Supper will be shared more frequently, even weekly in some church traditions.

Today, the Last Supper remains a vital part of the life of the Church and is one of its “sacraments”—special activities that convey God’s profound truth through physical actions. There are many ways of celebrating the Last Supper; some are highly formal, while others are

intimate and informal. In some traditions, the ritual is called “communion,” because it is a sharing with Jesus; in Catholicism, it is called “mass,” from the Latin words *Ite, missa est*, the dismissal, the concluding rite of the Eucharist during the medieval period.

What all forms of the Eucharist share is their connection to the meal that Jesus shared with His disciples that final night before His betrayal, arrest, and crucifixion. The Last Supper reveals the deeper significance of Jesus’s crucifixion and shows that He was well aware of His impending confrontation with the forces of evil and death. As Jesus says in John 10:18, He gives His life freely: “No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again. This command I received from my Father.” ■

Judas Iscariot (fifth from left) leans back in shadow, his face turned away, in Leonardo da Vinci’s *The Last Supper*. This 19th-century copy of the painting is by Michael Kock.





THE HOUR HAS COME, AND THE SON OF MAN IS DELIVERED INTO THE HANDS OF SINNERS

MATTHEW 26:45, BETRAYAL IN THE GARDEN

IN BRIEF

PASSAGE

Matthew 26:46–56; Mark 14:42–52; Luke 22:47–53; John 18:1–11

THEME

Betrayal of Jesus

SETTING

c.29 CE The Garden of Gethsemane, Jerusalem, in the last week of the life of Jesus.

KEY FIGURES

Jesus The Messiah and Son of God at the end of His time on earth, as He prepares to be crucified in Jerusalem.

Judas Iscariot One of Jesus's 12 disciples, who betrays Him by leading the authorities to the Garden of Gethsemane.

After the Last Supper, Jesus retires to the Garden of Gethsemane to pray, in an event which is often called the “Agony of Jesus.” There He is “deeply distressed and troubled,” and tells His disciples: “My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death” (Mark 14:34). Jesus knows that the end is near, and indeed, the Garden of Gethsemane is the place where Jesus is betrayed by one of His own followers.

This story is within the Gospel narratives called the Passion: the cycle of Jesus’s arrest, crucifixion, and resurrection. For the most part, all four Gospels agree in their depiction of the betrayal, albeit with different emphases. Judas, one of the 12 disciples, leads the Temple guards to Jesus in the garden. The

three Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) write that Judas betrays Jesus with a kiss, which identifies Him to the guards. A kiss was a significant gesture at the time, often given by a student to a teacher as a sign of honor and respect. It is notable that Judas calls Jesus “rabbi” and performs this gesture of respect in the very moment he hands Him to those who would kill Him.

Necessary betrayal

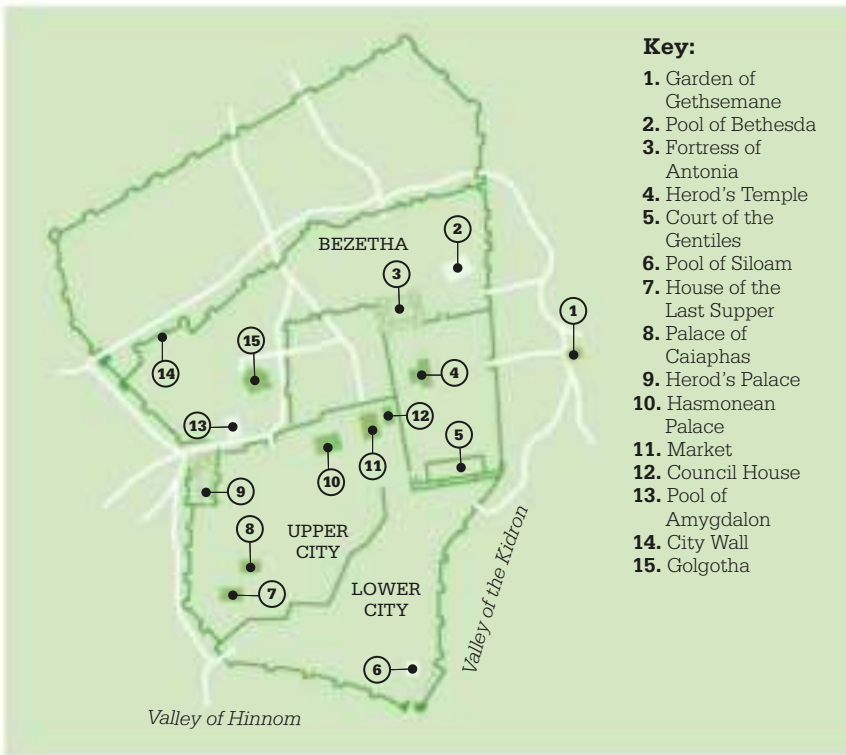
John is the only Gospel not to mention the kiss. Instead, he focuses on a fight that breaks out between the disciples and the guards, and one of the 12 (John says it is Peter) cuts the ear off a soldier. Jesus stops the violence and goes willingly—according to Luke, He even heals the soldier’s ear. He tells Peter “Put your sword away! Shall I not drink the cup the Father has given me?” (John 18:11). His “cup” here is a metaphor for His destiny. According to John 13, Jesus



Judas kisses Jesus in this scene from the Santa Croce Altarpiece (1328) by Italian painter Ugolino di Nerio. The panel sat at the altar’s predella (base) beside an image of the Last Supper.

See also: The Last Supper 248–53 ■ Peter’s Denial 256–57 ■
The Crucifixion 258–65 ■ The Empty Tomb 268–71

Jerusalem at the time of Jesus



Judas Iscariot

The Greek version of the Hebrew name Hudahudas, Judas means “the one who praises.” No one knows what “Iscariot” truly means: some believe that it is the now-unknown place Judas came from, while others have suggested that the name might relate to a group of Zealots called the Sicarii.

Scholars have long debated Judas’s motives in betraying Jesus. A popular theory was that Judas wanted to bring about a war between Romans and Jews, and when Jesus did not make this happen, Judas turned Him in to the officials. In the so-called “Gospel of Judas”—a 2nd-century CE text composed by a Gnostic writer, comprised of conversations between Judas and Jesus—Jesus Himself tells Judas to betray Him.

The betrayal ends with not one death, but two. Matthew 27 states that after Jesus is condemned, Judas returns the money and hangs himself in remorse. Acts 1:18 has a gory alternative: Judas buys a field with his blood money and, falling down in it, dies, his body bursting open and his intestines spilling out.

already knew that He would be betrayed, and He knew that He was going to die. In fact, Jesus’s death and resurrection is a fundamental pillar of Christian theology, which makes Judas’s betrayal a crucial act: Matthew 26:56 states that the betrayal is necessary so that the writings of the prophets are fulfilled.

Judas, however, had his own motives. Despite numerous theories, no one knows why he decided to betray Jesus. According to Matthew 26:14–16, Judas betrays Jesus for money and he receives 30 pieces of silver for leading the guards to the garden. Luke agrees that Judas received money, but declines to inform the reader of the amount; according to Luke, Judas

only goes to the chief priests in the first place because he is possessed by Satan (Luke 22:3).

Garden motif

Whether it is the Hanging Gardens of Babylon or the Garden of Eden, the garden is seen as a special place in the ancient Near East. Gardens—especially those in the desert—were understood as places where the divine can interact with the earthly. While the Garden of Gethsemane is not the Garden of Eden, the story of Jesus’s betrayal is related to that in Genesis. Adam and Eve’s betrayal of God leads to death entering the world, while Judas’s betrayal of Jesus leads to Him conquering death. ■



I DON'T KNOW THIS MAN YOU'RE TALKING ABOUT

MARK 14:71, PETER'S DENIAL

IN BRIEF

PASSAGE

Matthew 26:31–35, 69–75;
Mark 14:27–31, 66–72;
Luke 22:31–34, 54–65;
John 13:38, 18:25–27

THEME

Peter denies Christ

SETTING

c.29 CE Jerusalem, the courtyard of the High Priest right before the crucifixion of Jesus.

KEY FIGURES

Jesus The Messiah and Son of God, in His final days before His crucifixion.

Peter Also called Simon Peter, one of Jesus's inner circle and seemingly the leader of the disciples. Despite this, he still fears the officials.

Predicted by the prophets of the Old Testament, the disciples' abandonment of Jesus in the period leading up to the crucifixion has long been a conflicting issue for many readers of the New Testament. During the Last Supper, Jesus quotes Zechariah 13:7, which foretold how: "This very night you will all fall away on account of me, for it is written: 'I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered'" (Matthew 26:31).

Hearing this prophecy, the disciples protest. Jesus tells them that once He—the figurative shepherd—is captured, His disciples, the sheep, will flee. Peter

is especially upset by this claim and argues that this will never happen: "even if all fall away on account of you, I never will" (26:33). At this, Jesus sets him right; He tells Peter that before the rooster crows, he will deny Him three times. Peter, however, remains adamant—he says he would rather die alongside Jesus than disown Him.

The denials

Jesus's words come to fruition immediately after Judas betrays Him in the Garden of Gethsemane. Guards take Jesus to the high priest's house to stand trial. Peter follows, waits in the courtyard, and is approached by three people (John mentions two) who ask if he knows Jesus. Just as Jesus has predicted, when questioned, Peter denies knowing Jesus, even after he is identified as a Galilean by his speech—and is recognized as a disciple by a relative of the high priest's servant (Luke 22:59).



Peter denies Christ in a miniature by 15th-century Italian artist Cristoforo de Predis. All four Gospels agree that Peter's first denial is to a servant girl who accuses him of being with Jesus.

See also: The Last Supper 248–53 ■ Betrayal in the Garden 254–55 ■ The Crucifixion 258–65 ■ The Empty Tomb 268–71

Peter's three denials, according to Mark's Gospel

Accuser

"You also were with that Nazarene, **Jesus**."

"This fellow is **one of them**."

"Surely you are one of them, for you are a **Galilean**."

Peter

"**I don't know** or **understand** what you're talking about."

"Again he **denied** it."

"**I don't know** this man you're talking about."

The third time Peter denies knowing Jesus, the rooster crows. Luke's Gospel also says that at that Jesus turns to look at Peter through an open window, as if acknowledging His words coming to pass; all accounts, however, describe how Peter weeps once he realizes what he has done.

Symbolic dawn

The crowing of the dawn rooster signifies not only the breaking of dawn, but also that Jesus's fate has been decided upon. Dawn signifies the new life that Jesus will bring about through His death, as does the rooster itself, a symbol of fertility. However, the coming of dawn is significant for another reason: at the time, trials

were required to take place after daybreak if the Sanhedrin were to sentence the defendant to death.

Disciples forgiven

The Gospels give no reasons for the betrayal. Peter and the disciples are human, and may be afraid that they, too, will be arrested. The Gospels frequently describe the disciples as vulnerable and even dimwitted: they constantly question Jesus and have difficulty understanding His parables. Some appear to be in denial that Jesus will die. Their fallibility, however, shows that one does not have to be perfect to be a servant of Christ. Peter denies Jesus, yet he is the one who will eventually hold the keys to heaven. ■

The Sanhedrin


Described in all four Gospels, the Sanhedrin was a body of elders and priests that met to discuss religious and political matters. According to Acts, it convened several times a year.

The term Sanhedrin comes from a Greek word meaning "assembly." There were lesser Sanhedrins that could form in any town or province, but the Great Sanhedrin was a large body of more than 70 elders that met in Jerusalem. It gathered to discuss the Law and acted as a judiciary body.

When Jesus met with the high priest elders, it is generally assumed that He is meeting with the Great Sanhedrin, whose members will determine whether He has committed blasphemy. However, they are portrayed in the Gospels as corrupt: Matthew writes that "the whole Sanhedrin were looking for false evidence against Jesus so that they could put Him to death" (26:59), an accusation that is repeated in Mark's Gospel (14:55).



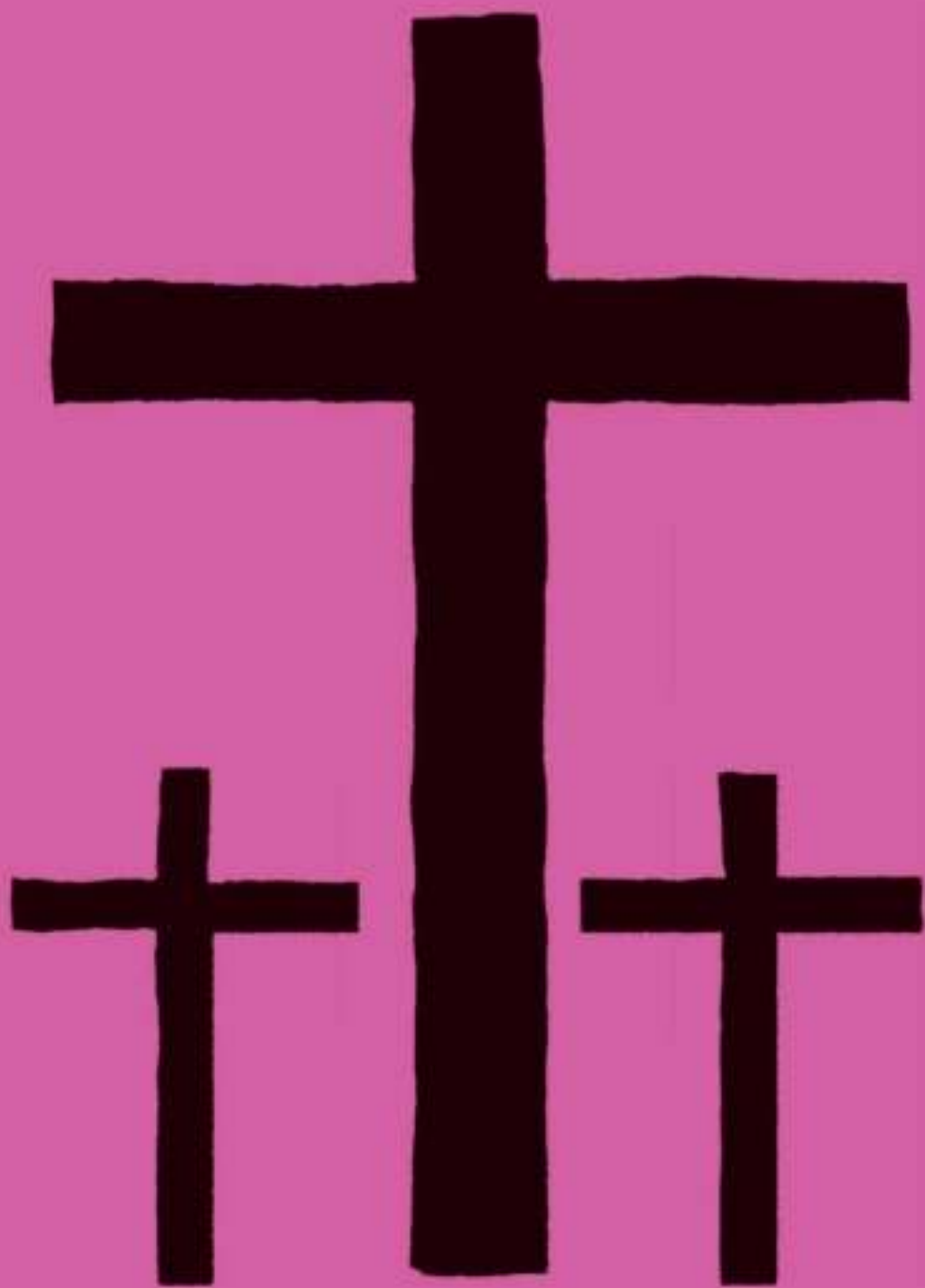
Christ Before the High Priest (c.1617), a painting by Gerrit van Honthorst, illuminates a book containing the Mosaic Law, which Jesus is accused of breaking.



**SURELY THIS MAN WAS
THE SON OF
GOD**

MARK 15:39, THE CRUCIFIXION





IN BRIEF

PASSAGE

Matthew 27; Mark 15; Luke 23; John 18:28–19:42

THEME

Jesus dies for the sins of many

SETTING

c. 29 CE The Antonia Fortress, Herod's Palace, and Golgotha, in Jerusalem.

KEY FIGURES

Jesus The Messiah and Son of God, accused of blasphemy and treason.

Pontius Pilate Roman governor who tries Jesus.

Herod Antipas Son of Herod the Great, who rules the regions of Galilee and Perea as client king for the Romans.

Joseph of Arimathea

A member of the Jewish ruling council, the Sanhedrin, who is sympathetic to Jesus.



Considering the short length of each of the four Gospels, it is remarkable how much space the authors give to the build-up to Jesus's crucifixion, known as the "passion narrative"—passion meaning suffering. While the Gospels (which differ in the level of detail but largely correspond) are the accounts of the event drawn on by Christians, various historical sources also mention Christ's trial and crucifixion, including *Annals* by the Roman historian Tacitus (56–120 CE) and Flavius Josephus's *Antiquities of the Jews* of c.94 CE.

In the eyes of the Sanhedrin, the Jewish court that first tries Jesus, He is guilty of blasphemy, for which the penalty is death. However, they cannot enforce this: under the rules of the Roman occupation, they do not have the authority to execute anyone, so, early in the morning, after Jesus's arrest and trial, they take Him to the palace of Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor, which is situated beside the Temple in the Antonia Fortress. As it is the Passover festival, the Jewish leaders are careful not to set foot inside Pontius Pilate's residence

In Hieronymus Bosch's *Mocking of Christ* (c.1500), the gauntlet of the man crowning Him with thorns and the spiked collar worn by the figure on the right symbolize the mockers' brutality.

themselves, since doing so would render them unclean and unable to participate in the religious ceremonies later that day. Staying outside the palace, they send Jesus in with their charges against Him: "We have found this man subverting our nation. He opposes payment of taxes to Caesar and claims to be Messiah, a king" (Luke 23:2).

See also: The Suffering Servant 154–55 ■ The Nature of Faith 236–41 ■ The Last Supper 248–53 ■ Betrayal in the Garden 254–55 ■ The Empty Tomb 268–71

Foreseeing that Pilate would not consider the charge of blasphemy to be sufficiently serious to merit execution, they tell him that Jesus is a threat to security and guilty of treason against Caesar. They know this will force Pilate to take action.

All four Gospels record Pilate asking Jesus: “Are you the king of the Jews?” Jesus asserts that He is, but points out that He is not the kind of king who will cause a military threat to Rome. He says, “My kingdom is not of this world” (John 18:36). Impressed by the authenticity of Jesus’s words, Pilate realizes that Jesus does not pose a direct threat to Caesar. He then goes back to the Jewish authorities and tells them that Jesus is innocent of the charges they have brought against Him.

Brought before Herod

Pilate’s verdict is not the one the Sanhedrin want. They insist again that Jesus has been inciting rebellion, beginning in the region of Galilee and spreading to Jerusalem itself. In Luke’s Gospel (23:6), on hearing of Jesus’s link with Galilee, Pilate sends Him

“

You disowned the Holy and Righteous One and asked that a murderer be released to you.

Acts 3:14

”

“Don’t you hear the testimony they are bringing against you?”
But Jesus made no reply.

Matthew 27:13

under guard to Herod Antipas, the Jewish king appointed by Rome, who has jurisdiction in the region.

Herod is delighted to see Jesus, because he has heard the stories about Him and hopes to see some of the miracles for which He is famous. When Jesus simply stands in silence before Herod, saying and doing nothing, Herod is frustrated. He orders his soldiers to dress Jesus in a royal robe to mock the claim that He is a king. After they have had their fun, Jesus is escorted back to Pilate.

By this time, a crowd has gathered at the palace. Pilate, who must now decide Jesus’s fate, considers a way to let Him go free. It is his custom during Passover to release a prisoner (invariably one of the Jews’ popular leaders) to please the crowds who arrive in Jerusalem for the festival. Pilate says to the crowd, “There is no basis for your charges against Jesus. Therefore, I will punish Him and then release him.” To his surprise, the crowd cries out, “Away with this man! Release Barabbas to us” (Luke 23:18). Pilate is unable to believe his »



Pontius Pilate

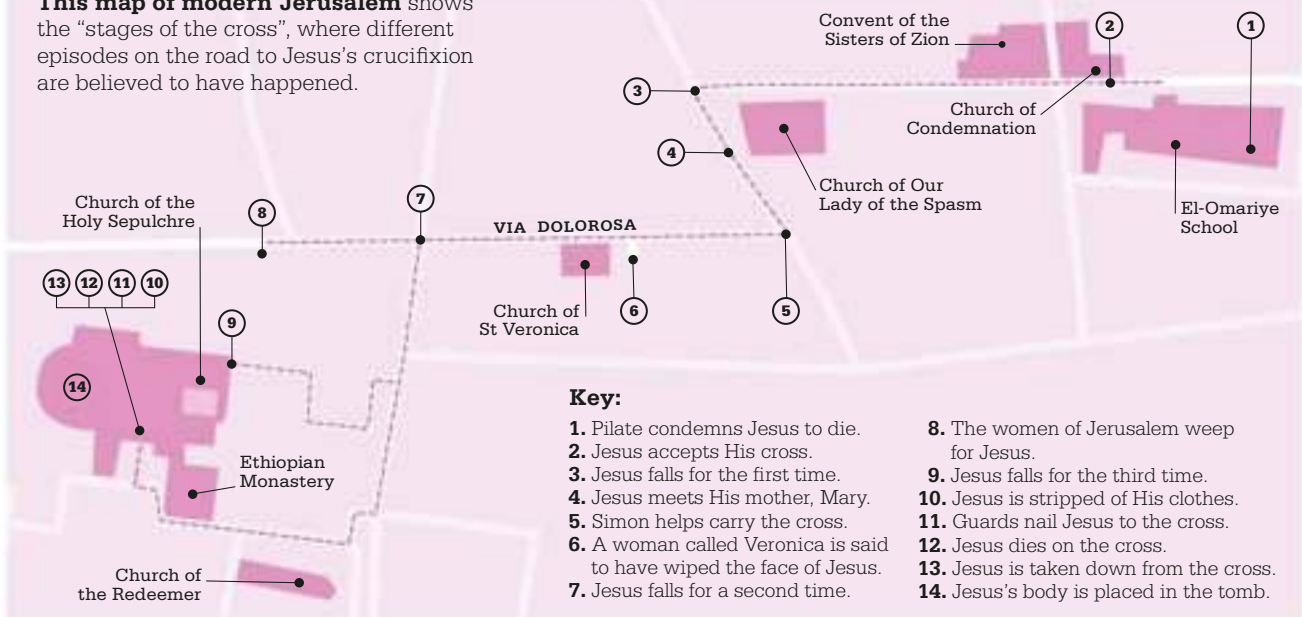
Appointed by the Emperor Tiberius, Pontius Pilate was the prefect (or governor) of Judea and the neighboring regions of Samaria and Idumea from 26 to 36 CE. He had a residence in the provincial capital of Caesarea and the use of the Antonia Fortress in Jerusalem.

Pilate’s responsibilities included taxation, public spending, and law and order. His relationship with the Jewish people was fragile, particularly because he repeatedly disregarded their religious and social customs. He minted coins bearing pagan religious symbols and hung worship images of the emperor in Jerusalem.

In 36 CE, Pilate was forced back to Rome after the Samaritans (an offshoot of Judaism) lodged an official complaint about him with the legate (in charge of provincial governors) in Syria. Pilate died shortly after his term of office in Palestine. According to the Christian bishop and historian Eusebius of Caesarea, in *Ecclesiastical History*, Pilate killed himself on the orders of the Emperor Caligula in 39 CE.

The route of the crucifixion taken by pilgrims

This map of modern Jerusalem shows the “stages of the cross”, where different episodes on the road to Jesus’s crucifixion are believed to have happened.



Day of Preparation

Friday, the day before the Sabbath, was known as the Day of Preparation, when Jews would prepare themselves to keep the Sabbath “holy,” as instructed by the fourth of the Ten Commandments. Food would be prepared and cooked, and errands completed so that the Sabbath would be free for the worship of God. As Jesus was crucified on the Day of Preparation, the Jewish authorities requested that His body be taken down from the cross and buried. This was a break from Roman custom, which was to leave the body on view as a deterrent. With the Sabbath starting at sunset (around 6 pm), Jesus’s body was taken down after He died (around 3 pm).

ears—Barabbas is a hardened criminal, imprisoned for murder—but the Jewish authorities had been weaving through the crowd, inciting them to ask for Barabbas (Mark 15:11).

Sentenced by the mob

According to Matthew’s Gospel, Pilate’s wife, who had a disturbed night’s sleep, then sends her husband a message. “Don’t have anything to do with that innocent man,” she says, worried by a dream she has had (27:19). Once again, Pilate asks the crowd: “Jesus or Barabbas,” and together they reply, “Barabbas.” Asking what he should do with Jesus, the people shout “Crucify him! Crucify him!” Pilate realizes there would be a riot if he didn’t give the crowd what they wanted, so, taking a bowl of water, he washes his hands in full view, saying, “I am innocent of this man’s blood” (Matthew 27:24).

Jesus is handed to the Roman guards to be crucified. They know the process, and are practiced at inflicting suffering on their prisoners. First, Jesus is flogged, then they dress Him in another royal robe, twisting thorny branches together to make a crown. “Hail, King of the Jews!” they cry in mockery. Some spit, and others prod Him with sticks, and still others hit Him across the head (Matthew 27:30). Humiliated and beaten, Jesus then begins His painful journey to the place where He will be crucified, a publicly visible hill called Golgotha (“place of the skull”), also known by the Latin translation Calvary, just outside the city wall. Crucifixions serve as prominent reminders to the Jews that the Romans are in charge.

A heavy wooden beam, which will become the cross on which He is crucified, is then thrust upon Jesus. Weakened from the flogging,



The Way to Calvary, by Marco Palmezzano (c.1460–1539) shows Jesus carrying His cross. Victims of crucifixion were required to carry their own cross to the place of execution.

He stumbles under the weight, prompting the soldiers who are escorting Him to haul out of the crowd an unsuspecting pilgrim called Simon to help Jesus carry the cross. While many look on, jeering and shouting, others follow, including women, who weep and wail. The mournful procession makes its way out to the hill.

Three crosses

Along with Jesus, two criminals are brought to be crucified. When they arrive, the soldiers set to work, nailing Jesus to the wooden crossbeams by His wrists and to the wooden upright through His ankles, fulfilling a prophecy in Zechariah 12:10: “They will look on me, the one they have pierced.” The three crosses are then hoisted into position, with Jesus in the center. The charge against Jesus is nailed to the cross: “This is the King of the Jews” (Matthew 27:37 and Luke 23:38). The chief priests protest against the sign, saying it implied that Pilate thought Jesus was a king. It should say, they said, “this man claimed to be the King of the Jews” (John 19:21). By retaining his description of Jesus, Pilate implies that those who demanded His death are the ones truly guilty of treason.

Twelve hours after His arrest, Jesus looks down upon the crowd, who are mocking Him and baying for His blood. “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing,” He says (Luke 23:34). Taking no notice, the soldiers gamble for the clothes of the crucified men, again fulfilling a prophecy in Psalm 22: “They divide my clothes among them and cast lots for my garment.” A crowd gathers to watch, and the Jewish authorities begin to hurl insults at Jesus: “He saved others; let Him save Himself if He God’s Messiah, the Chosen One” (Luke 23:35).

Darkest hours

At midday, the sky grows dark, the sun blotted out of sight. In the darkness, Jesus calls to the few followers who have remained with Him to the end: a small huddle of women and His disciple John.

“

“Come down from the cross, if you are the Son of God!”
Matthew 27:40

”

Speaking to His mother Mary, Jesus says “Dear woman, here is your son,” indicating John. And in turn, He says to John, “Here is your mother.” Even in His own pain, Jesus makes arrangements for John to care for His grief-stricken mother.

The darkness lasts for three hours, until the ninth hour of the Jewish day, around 3 pm. As the »

Michele da Verona's Crucifixion (c.1501) combines several scenes from the event, including the centurion’s conversion and the proffering of a sponge soaked in vinegar.



“

And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross!

Philippians 2:8

”

life drains from His body, Jesus grows weaker, but then He calls out in a loud voice: “*Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani,*” Aramaic for “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Matthew 27:46). Again, the words draw directly on Psalm 22, the ancient Hebrew poem written by David. Having memorized the psalm as a young boy, Jesus now recognizes that it describes His present experience: “All who see me mock me. . . . all my bones are out of joint” (Psalm 22:7–14). Some of those around the cross mishear Jesus, thinking He is calling for the prophet Elijah to come and save Him.

In the heat of the afternoon sun, with pain taking its toll on His body, Jesus cries out “I thirst.” Some of those nearby find a jar of sour wine—a vinegarlike liquid considered to be a thirst-quenching drink for the poor—and offer it to Jesus on a sponge at the end of a stick. The Israelites had often been

Deposition from the Cross, by Antonio Allegri, c.1525, shows Mary swooning over the dead Christ, a detail that became a popular embellishment of the story in the Middle Ages.

likened to a vineyard, charged with producing fine wine of holy lives for God. Here, Jesus tastes the best they can offer, and it is sour.

Last breath

Just as Jesus had told His disciples during His last supper with them the night before, He had now given His life for them. Speaking with a loud voice, Jesus cries out, “It is finished” (John 19:30). With a final prayer of trust in God, quoting from Psalm 31, Jesus takes His last breath and dies: “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit” (Luke 23:46). Matthew’s Gospel goes on to record how the ground then shakes, tombs split open, and the curtain of the Temple in Jerusalem is rent in two. Matthew, Mark, and Luke record one of the Roman guards, who has witnessed many frantic last moments of the crucified, being astonished at Jesus’s dignified death, trusting in God as His Father

right to the end. The centurion unwittingly blurts out the truth: “Surely this man was the Son of God” (Mark 15:39).

As Jesus hangs dead on the cross, the Jewish authorities ask the soldiers to finish off the crucifixions and take down the bodies before nightfall, since the next day would be the Sabbath. One of the soldiers pierces Jesus’s side with a spear, proving beyond doubt that Jesus is dead.

Two Jewish noblemen and scholars, Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus, then get Pilate’s permission to take Jesus’s body for burial in Joseph’s garden tomb. Anointed in sweet spices and wrapped in linen, Jesus’s body is sealed in the tomb by a stone.

Why Jesus died

The fact that Jesus died was central to early Christian belief. Crucially, Jesus is innocent of



The symbol of the cross

For Christians today, the cross is a symbol of God's love and forgiveness. Yet, when Jesus died, it was clearly a symbol of Roman power and oppression and of violence and torture. Many early Christians were also crucified for their belief in Him.

As early Christian believers shared the message that God had set up His kingdom on Earth through Jesus, God's true Son and king, they explained that Jesus's death on the cross was not an embarrassing end to

Jesus's life's work, but rather the means through which He fulfilled His greatest task of triumphing over sin and offering forgiveness. This turned the symbolism of the cross on its head. As the Apostle Paul put it, "the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God" (1 Corinthians 1:18). The cross became the universal sign of Christian faith after the Christian conversion of the Roman Emperor Constantine in the early 4th century.



Crosses still represent death and sacrifice, as at the Auckland War Memorial Museum, New Zealand, remembering soldiers killed in war.

the charges that are brought against Him. Although He is convicted and condemned to death in an alarmingly short space of time, both Pilate and Herod are unable to find any grounds for capital punishment. Jesus does not die because He presents a military threat against the Roman Empire. His ministry has been filled with miracles of healing and teaching to "love your enemies" (Matthew 5:44), not with criminal behavior or political revolution. Even the Sanhedrin's charge that Jesus had blasphemed against God by claiming to be God's special representative, the Messiah, is false, since Jesus is, in fact, who He claims to be.

This lays the foundations for the Church's teaching about Jesus's death: He did not die because of His own wrongdoings, but because of those of humankind. By trying to protect their own positions of authority by getting rid of Jesus as a troublemaker, and condemning an innocent man to death, the opponents of Jesus represent the pride and self-centeredness that characterize the whole of humanity.

Even though Jesus is innocent, the crucifixion narrative does not present Him as a passive victim. All through His suffering, Jesus is in control and not at the mercy of His circumstances. As Jesus had taught earlier, "No one takes my life from me, but I lay it down of my own accord" (John 10:18). The sinless Jesus took humanity's sin onto Himself, willingly drinking the world's cup of suffering (Matthew 26:39) in order to save others from doing so. On the cross, Jesus was not a victim, but a savior.

Dying to save sinners

Jesus's cross is seen as the culmination of His life's work, rather than an unfortunate ending. When Jesus declares, "It is finished," Christians believe He means that the mission He had been sent to achieve is now complete: the kingdom of God has been set up as Jesus's cross was raised into the air. This kingdom, in which Jesus is the king, is not a military state that uses violence to coerce people into obedience, but rather a kingdom of love, in which King Jesus lays down His life so people can be free from the sin that would

otherwise drag them into eternal death. By dying, the sinless for the sinful, Jesus clears the way for a new relationship with God to which all people are invited.

Yet, as Jesus's body is sealed in the tomb for the Sabbath day, no one has yet understood how Jesus's death is, in fact, good news. That life-transforming awareness would only be possible after the Sabbath had passed, as the story continues on the morning of Easter Day. ■

“

Fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before Him He endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

Hebrews 12:2

”



REMEMBER ME WHEN YOU COME INTO YOUR KINGDOM

LUKE 23:42, THE REPENTANT THIEF

IN BRIEF

PASSAGE

Luke 23:39–43

THEME

**It is never too late
for salvation**

SETTING

c.29 CE Golgotha, a hill outside the walls of Jerusalem, during Jesus's crucifixion.

KEY FIGURES

Jesus The Messiah and Son of God, who is crucified by the Roman authorities in place of the criminal, Barabbas.

The repentant thief The criminal to Jesus's right: although unnamed in the Gospels, later Christian tradition calls him "Dismas" or "Demas."

The unrepentant thief

A fellow revolutionary who taunts Jesus; later tradition named him "Gestas."

Jesus is crucified between two criminals on the hill of Golgotha, overlooking one of the roads into Jerusalem. The two men on either side of Him are "robbers" (Matthew 27:38) who may well have been comrades of Barabbas, a resistance fighter against Roman occupation of Judea. Jesus, who is Himself being crucified on the charge of rebellion, has taken Barabbas's place in execution, and occupies the central of the three crosses.



As Jesus hangs on the cross, the crowds taunt Him and tell Him to come down if He really is God's chosen king. The criminal on Jesus's left joins in: "Aren't you the Messiah?" he asks. "Save yourself and us!" (Luke 23:39). As far as the thief is concerned, Jesus cannot be the savior if He is unable to put an end to their suffering.

The thief calls out

However, the second condemned man realizes Jesus really is the savior. He sees now that the violent attempts of Barabbas and his comrades to resist Roman occupation had been misguided, and that God desires something far deeper than political nationalism: a kingdom of people who follow Him through humility and service.

Calling over to the first man, the repentant thief tells him to stop mocking Jesus: while the two of them are hanging on their crosses for real offenses, Jesus—despite dying in the place of a criminal—

The penitent thief's soul is carried into paradise by angels in James Tissot's 1897 illustration. Tissot aimed to portray the people and setting of the Gospels as faithfully as possible.

See also: The Divinity of Jesus 190–93 ■ The Crucifixion 258–65 ■ Salvation Through Faith 301 ■ The Power of the Resurrection 304

“has done nothing wrong” (23:41). The thief then asks Jesus to “remember me when You come into Your kingdom” (23:42). The Jewish faith had long spoken about a kingdom beyond death, in which God’s faithful people would enjoy everlasting life. This, he realizes, is the kingdom of which Jesus is king. Jesus replies with assurance: “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise” (23:43).

Deathbed salvation

The repentant thief illustrates a vital aspect of the Christian faith. Acceptance into God’s kingdom is not dependent upon good works or a blameless life, since the thief clearly had no time to amend his ways. Instead, Jesus freely gives places in His kingdom to those who recognize that He is their only hope. Jesus’s promise to the thief, just moments before his death, is also part of the rationale for the later practice of deathbed confession and absolution, or last rites. In this, a dying person is given assurance in their final moments that their sins have been forgiven by God; it is never too late to repent. ■

Jesus forgives many types of sins



The sinful woman

“Her many sins have been forgiven ... whoever has been forgiven little loves little.”

Luke 7:47

The tax collector

“Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham.”

Luke 19:9

The repentant thief

“Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise.”

Luke 23:43

Romans and Jews at His crucifixion

“Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.”

Luke 23:34

Crime and punishment in the time of Jesus

Like any society, Jesus’s world had a complex system of law and punishments. In Jewish law, the practice of reparation—giving back what was taken with interest—was typical. Stoning to death was the form of capital punishment favored by the Jews for serious offenses.

However, the Romans—the occupying overlords—routinely used crucifixion to execute criminals who were not Roman

citizens, especially those who resisted their authority or slaves found guilty of wrongdoing. Crucifixion was a humiliating death, in which the victim was stripped, flogged, and then nailed to a horizontal beam of wood through the wrists, and an upright beam through the ankles. Jews detested it because of one of their laws, which said “anyone ... hung on a pole is under God’s curse” (Deuteronomy 21:23).



Dressed as a Roman soldier, a man carries a replica of a Roman whip in a Good Friday procession in San Miguel de Allende, Mexico.

BLESSED ARE THOSE WHO HAVE NOT SEEN AND YET HAVE BELIEVED

JOHN 20:29, THE EMPTY TOMB



IN BRIEF

PASSAGES

Matthew 28:1–10;
Mark 16:1–8; Luke 24:1–12;
John 20:1–18

THEME

The resurrection of Jesus

SETTING

Spring c.29 CE, during Passover The garden tomb of Joseph of Arimathea in Jerusalem.

KEY FIGURES

Mary Magdalene A prominent disciple of Jesus.

Mary, the mother of the Apostle James A follower of Jesus in her own right.

Salome Another follower, and probably the wife of Zebedee and the mother of the Apostles James and John.

Jesus This story tells of the first encounters with Jesus after His resurrection.

The events of the first Easter morning are foundational for the whole of Christianity. One of the primary messages of Christian faith is that Jesus could not be held by the power of death.

The Gospels give varying accounts of the dramatic events of that Sunday morning. Matthew, Luke, and Mark generally agree that Jesus was buried in haste late on Good Friday afternoon, with only the minimum of preparation, so that His body would be in the

See also: The Divinity of Jesus 190–93 ■ The Crucifixion 258–65 ■ The Road to Emmaus 272–73 ■ The Word Spreads 288–89

Turin Shroud

In Jesus's day, it was customary for families to embalm a dead body in sweet-smelling spices, wrap it in linen cloth, and leave it until only the bones remained. From there, the skeletal remains would be gathered up into an ossuary—a bone box, or chest—which would then be placed in the family vault.

After His crucifixion, Jesus had been hastily wrapped in linen cloth and placed in the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea. When the tomb was discovered

empty on the Sunday morning, the linen cloths were found neatly folded where Jesus's body had been (John 20:6–7).

The Turin Shroud is a large linen cloth kept in the cathedral in Turin, Italy. The cloth bears the faint image of a body, and a bearded man's face. It is claimed to be Jesus's burial cloth, His image having been impressed on it when it was wound tightly around Him after death. This claim has been contested since the Middle Ages, and carbon dating tests strongly suggest the cloth is not old enough.



grave by sunset, the start of the Jewish Sabbath day. The morning after Jesus's grief-stricken friends observe the Saturday Sabbath, Mary Magdalene, Mary, the mother of the Apostle James, and another woman called Salome visit the tomb to embalm Jesus's body, according to Jewish custom. The

women stumble to the tomb in the half light of dawn, clutching bags of spices, which they will use to anoint Jesus's body and counteract the anticipated odor of decay.

The empty tomb

As the women approach the tomb, however, the ground shakes violently. Out of their sight, an angel of God appears at the tomb's entrance and rolls back the stone sealing it. The guards that the Roman authorities had posted to prevent the disciples from stealing Jesus's body had fainted with fear on seeing the angel and run off.

When the women arrive at the tomb, they are astonished to see that it is already open. Wondering who has arrived before them, they look inside—but there is no one there. The rocky ledge, where Jesus had been carefully laid down before

sunset on Friday, no longer holds His body. Instead, the women see a few strips of linen cloth, carefully folded on the spot where His body had previously been.

In the Gospels of Matthew and Mark, the women then meet God's angel at the tomb (Luke reports the presence of a second angel). The message the women receive is one of reassurance: "Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified" (Matthew 28:5); "Why »



In three Gospel accounts, an angel (or angels), shown here in Gustave Doré's illustrated Bible of 1865, appears to Mary, the mother of James, and Mary Magdalene at the tomb's entrance.

“
Some of our women ...
went to the tomb early
this morning but didn't
find His body.
Luke 24:22–23

”

do you look for the living among the dead?" (Luke 24:5); and an explanation for the empty tomb: "He has risen! He is not here!" (Mark 16:6).

The women struggle to comprehend what the angel has told them. Jesus's body has not been stolen—He is a living, breathing human being again. The women then hear the angel give them a task. "Go quickly and tell His disciples: 'He has risen from the dead and is going ahead of

you into Galilee. There you will see Him'" (Matthew 28:7). Galilee was a significant place for the disciples, since it was where much of Jesus's ministry had taken place.

The resurrected Jesus

The women, "afraid yet filled with joy" (Matthew 28:8), turn from the tomb and head away to relate these incredible events to the other disciples. On the path, the women suddenly come across a man. It is Jesus, who utters one

simple word: "Greetings" (Matthew 28:9). Falling to the ground, the women cling to His feet, realizing what the angel had said was true—Jesus is really alive—and they begin to worship Him. Stooping, Jesus encourages them to their feet and tells them to go and pass on their joyful news.

Women were not normally asked to give testimony in Jesus's day, since they were considered to be incapable of presenting the truth. Here was a clear signal that God's kingdom is turning expectations upside down, as women become the first to meet and then share news of the risen Jesus.

The Gospel of John

John's Gospel focuses on Mary Magdalene's experience that morning. Upon seeing the empty chamber, she immediately rushes back to tell the other disciples that "they have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don't know where they have put Him!" (John 20:2). Peter and John race to the tomb and look inside, seeing for themselves that Jesus's body is gone. Peter and John leave, but Mary, overcome with emotion, stays by the tomb. She sees a man near her and, presuming it to be the gardener, says, "Sir, if you have carried Him away, tell me where you have put Him, and I will get Him" (20:15). It isn't the gardener, however; it is Jesus. Through her tears, Mary does not recognize Jesus until He speaks her name. When Mary realizes who it is, she turns and clings to Him, crying "Rabboni!," the Aramaic word

Raphael's *The Resurrection of Christ*

(c.1501–1502) imagines the reaction of the Roman guards. Mathew's Gospel says they "shook and became like dead men" (28:4).





for “teacher” (20:16). Jesus gently tells her to return to the other disciples to share the news of His resurrection. Back at the house where they were gathered, Mary bursts in on the others, shouting, “I have seen the Lord!” (20:18).

Mary’s mistake, thinking Jesus was the gardener, is a profound discovery: just as God planted the Garden of Eden at the beginning of the Bible, now, through Jesus, God is restoring that garden.

As Peter put it in his sermon a few weeks later, human authorities may have killed Jesus, but God raised Him to life (Acts 2:23–24).

“

God has raised this Jesus to life, and we are all witnesses of it.

Acts 2:32

”

Thomas the Apostle doubts the man before him is the risen Jesus until he touches His wounds. Jesus says, “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed” (John 20:29).

Jesus’s disciples begin to understand the logic of what had happened: if Jesus is alive, that means death is not all-powerful and that sin—understood to be the inevitable human tendency to turn away from God, leading to death—does not have to mar human life forever, but can be forgiven.

Faith and reason

All that Christianity believes about God—forgiveness, salvation, and transformation—depends on Jesus’s resurrection. As Paul puts it in 1 Corinthians 15:14, “if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith.”

Still, the accounts of Jesus’s resurrection raise many questions and demands for events to be explained in terms of natural causes. In place of the Gospel’s explanation, some have suggested that the disciples experienced mass-hallucination or that local leaders hid Jesus’s body to prevent His disciples from removing it themselves and then proclaiming His resurrection. These theories do not explain why the disciples would later allow themselves to be martyred for preaching a message they knew to be false.

If the Gospels are to be taken literally, the women discovered an empty tomb; Jesus’s body was never found, there or anywhere else; and the women and other disciples met Jesus, not just as a memory but as a living person. Discovering what the resurrection of Jesus means is the concern of the rest of the New Testament, and the ongoing task of the Church today. ■



Mary Magdalene

One of Jesus’s closest followers, Mary Magdalene is remembered particularly for being one of the early witnesses to Jesus’s resurrection. Mary’s name indicates she was from the town of Magdala Nunaya on the shore of the Sea of Galilee. Luke 8:2 records that she received healing from Jesus when He cast seven demons out of her. Grateful for the wholeness that Jesus had given her, she became a prominent disciple, accompanying Jesus on His final trip to Jerusalem and bearing witness to both His crucifixion and burial (Matthew: 27:56–61). Later tradition associated Mary Magdalene with Mary of Bethany, the prostitute who anointed Jesus’s feet with expensive perfume while He was in the house of Simon the Pharisee (Luke 7:36–50), although most modern biblical scholars believe that this association is apocryphal.

It is noteworthy that several of Jesus’s most faithful followers were women (Acts 1:14) and that they continued to play key roles in the life of the early Church.



WERE NOT OUR HEARTS BURNING WITHIN US WHILE HE TALKED WITH US ON THE ROAD?

LUKE 24:32, ROAD TO EMMAUS

IN BRIEF

PASSAGE

Luke 24:13–35

THEME

Witnessing Jesus's resurrection

SETTING

c.29 CE Jerusalem, at the end of Jesus's ministry.

KEY FIGURES

Jesus The Son of God, crucified by the Romans but resurrected days later.

Jesus's disciples A group of men and women who followed Jesus. They traveled with Him during His ministry and preached about Him and His teachings after His death.

Peter Also called Simon Peter; one of Jesus's closest disciples, to whom Jesus appeared after the resurrection.

The good news of Jesus's resurrection is first told to female disciples by angels, who appear to them at Jesus's empty tomb. The angels remind the women that Jesus had already foretold His death and resurrection, and the women subsequently report the miracle to the other disciples. However, the disciples do not believe them.

Later that same day, two of Jesus's disciples make their way to a village called Emmaus, about

7 miles (11km) from the city of Jerusalem. The two disciples, one of whom is named Cleopas, are reflecting on recent events when Jesus starts traveling alongside them. The disciples, however, do not recognize Him. He probes them about their conversation and they

Jesus takes supper at Emmaus with the disciples. Like other Renaissance depictions of the event, Caravaggio's 1601 version includes an innkeeper not mentioned in Luke's account.



See also: The Last Supper 248–53 ■ The Crucifixion 258–65 ■ The Empty Tomb 268–71 ■ The Great Commission 274–77

explain the cause of their grief to the “stranger”: the prophet and miracle worker, Jesus, had died on the cross three days before.

They tell Him the story of the women at the tomb and, finally, acknowledge their sorrow because they had formerly believed Jesus was the Messiah. As they recount recent events and admit to feeling disillusioned, they reveal their denial of the truth of Jesus’s resurrection—while, unbeknown to them, He stands right before their eyes. Jesus then declares them ignorant of the scriptures and proceeds to explain how Jesus is, indeed, the Messiah. Still, the disciples do not comprehend who the man is or what He is saying.

Jesus is recognized

The disciples finally become aware of their companion’s identity when they stop for the evening and share a meal. Jesus takes the bread, and after blessing and breaking it, He gives it to the disciples—an action reminiscent of the Last Supper in Luke 22. With that action, they recognize Him as Jesus.

Luke highlights this moment with an inversion of a metaphor from the beginning of the story: at first, the disciples did not recognize Jesus (24:16), but now, “their eyes were opened and they recognized Him” (24:31). Before the disciples can even blink, however, Jesus disappears. Dumbfounded and embarrassed, they remark that they had felt their hearts burn while Jesus spoke to them on the road.

Soon after their conversation, the disciples return to Jerusalem, find the other disciples, and share the good news—also known as the Gospel—that Jesus has risen from



Why are you troubled, and why do doubts rise in your minds? Look at My hands and My feet. It is I Myself! Touch me and see; a ghost does not have flesh and bones, as you see I have.

Luke 24:38



the dead. Unlike when the women first reported the news, the others believe their story, and tell them that “it is true! The Lord has risen and has appeared to Simon” (24:34). Shortly before He joined Cleopas and the other disciple on the road, Jesus had appeared to Simon Peter in John 21.

Witnesses of Christ

Jesus appears on several other occasions in the New Testament. In 1 Corinthians 15:5–8, Paul provides a list of those who have witnessed Him, including: Peter; the 12 disciples; 500 men and women “at the same time”; James; the apostles; and Paul, the letter-writer himself. Other famous Gospel accounts include Jesus appearing to Mary Magdalene (Mark 16; John 20) and Thomas (John 20). These stories function as proof for Christians that Jesus died and rose again; they also point to a deeper theological belief that Jesus conquered death and offers everlasting life to others. ■



GO AND MAKE DISCIPLES OF ALL NATIONS

MATTHEW 28:19, THE GREAT COMMISSION



IN BRIEF

PASSAGE

Matthew 28:16–20

THEME

Spreading the good news

SETTING

c.29 CE Around Galilee and Judea, during the 40 days following Jesus's resurrection.

KEY FIGURES

Jesus The risen Jesus, who is both familiar and unfamiliar to His disciples. He is often recognized by His actions or His words, or when He performs miracles.

Peter A member of Jesus's inner circle of disciples and often a spokesman for the other disciples.

The other disciples The remaining 10 disciples.

For the 40 days following His resurrection, Jesus spends time with His disciples, teaching them about the significance of His death and resurrection, and preparing them for the future. On the evening of His resurrection, He had told them, "As the Father has sent me, I am sending you" (John 20:21). Although they have spent three years traveling with Jesus, only now do they begin to appreciate what He is asking them to do. In the past, He had sent them out to neighboring villages and towns to tell people about the kingdom of God that would soon be arriving through Jesus (Luke 9:1–6). Now,

See also: The Calling of the Disciples 200–03 ■ Peter's Denial 256–57 ■ The Road to Emmaus 272–73 ■ The Word Spreads 288–89



however, He is sending them out on a permanent mission that would last the rest of their lives. Jesus understands that it will take some persuasion to transform the fearful disciples into bold ambassadors for His message and tells them that the Holy Spirit will support them.

Inspiration at Galilee

At the end of the Passover festival, the disciples return to Galilee, where they had first met Jesus, and had been called to follow Him. Peter decides to go fishing and several disciples accompany him. They catch nothing all night, but as morning breaks, they turn toward the shore and see a man on the beach. He calls out to them, “Friends, haven’t you any fish?” “No,” they reply. He tells them to throw the net out to the right of the boat. Miraculously, when they do

The risen Christ appearing to His disciples in the 40 days before His ascension is depicted on a colorful, carved wooden frieze in the Cathedral of Notre Dame, Paris, France.

so, the net fills with so many fish that it nearly breaks. One of the disciples exclaims, “It is the Lord!” Peter immediately jumps out of the boat and wades to the shore, and the other disciples follow in the vessel, towing the net full of fish. On the shore, Jesus has already prepared a “fire of burning coals” with fish and bread on it. He asks them to bring a few more fish and they all sit down to eat breakfast together.

After breakfast, Jesus turns to Peter and asks him, “Do you truly love me?” Peter says that he does. Then Jesus says, “Feed my lambs.” Twice more, Jesus repeats the »

The Ascension

Forty days after Jesus’s resurrection, He summons His disciples to a hillside near Bethany, just outside Jerusalem. As He blesses and commissions them, He is “taken up before their very eyes” and hidden from sight by a cloud (Acts 1:9). His ascension is the end of His earthly ministry; Christians understand that He now ministers in God’s presence, praying for His disciples to receive His Spirit and go out and gather more followers. Aspects of the ascension are familiar. The hill is a reminder of the mountain where Moses received God’s Law, the cloud is a visible image of God’s presence during the Exodus journey from Egypt, and Heaven was long perceived as a physical realm above the Earth. Theologically, the significance of such imagery is to emphasize Jesus’s divinity.



The Ascension of Christ (1884) painted by the Polish artist Jan Matejko shows Christ in a cloud known as an “aureola,” often used by artists to depict God or Christ.

The number 12

Throughout the Bible, the number 12 recurs often, and signifies the complete people of God. Early on, Abraham's grandson Jacob has 12 sons. They become the fathers of the 12 tribes of Israel, God's special people and a sign of His presence in the world. For this reason, Jesus chooses 12 disciples to be the foundation of a renewed family of God, marked out by faith. After his betrayal of Jesus, the disciples have to find a replacement for Judas in order to restore their number to 12. The criteria for apostleship was personal knowledge of Jesus's ministry, so that the apostle could provide witness to the fact and significance of Jesus's life, death, resurrection, and ascension. The disciples chose Matthias. The number 12 also appears frequently in the Book of Revelation, referring to the final completeness of God's worldwide family.



The Tree of Life bore 12 crops of fruit in John of Patmos's vision of Eden restored (Revelation 22:2), one for every month.

question, and both times Peter replies that he does. Both times, Jesus also instructs Peter to take care of His sheep—a reference to the family of believers. Peter, who had denied that he knew Jesus three times in the high priest's courtyard during Jesus's trial, is now restored as a faithful disciple of Christ and instructed to take care of the community of believers that would soon grow.

Telling the world

During this period, Jesus often meets the disciples as they eat together. On one occasion, He tells them to “wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about” (Acts 1:4). The gift is God's Holy Spirit, whom He has told them is “power from on high” (Luke 24:49) that will strengthen them in their mission. God's power will be essential, because Jesus is sending them to take His message not just to Judea and Galilee, but also to Samaria (a region often avoided because of longstanding political tension) and “to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8).

At the end of the 40 days, in His last moments with the disciples, Jesus sums up all He has taught them in words that have become



Declare His glory
among the nations,
His marvelous deeds
among all peoples.

Psalm 96:3



A 5th-century Roman mosaic from an eastern Mediterranean church has the cross as a central image, testimony to the spread of Christianity at the time. It is now in the Louvre, Paris.

known as “the Great Commission.” First, He reminds the disciples of the significance of His resurrection from the dead: “All authority in heaven and on Earth has been given to me” (Matthew 28:18). By defeating death, Jesus proves that God has validated His life and teaching, and has granted Him divine authority over all things. He then commissions the disciples to bring others into His kingdom: “Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you” (Matthew 28:19–20). Jesus will be with the disciples, but is now entrusting His divine mission to human hands and feet.

From disciples to apostles

Jesus's Great Commission signals a change in the identity of His closest followers. Throughout His ministry, the 12 have been called “disciples,” which comes from a Greek word meaning “learners” or “followers.” Now, the 11 disciples remaining—

after Judas's betrayal and suicide—have become “Apostles,” from the Greek word meaning “sent.” For three years, Jesus has drawn them closer to Him, demonstrating the reality of God's kingdom through stories, teaching, and miracles. Now, His “inner circle” can no longer stay by His side, but must go and announce the good news of Jesus and His resurrection to all the world.

A blessing for all

The Great Commission must have been both daunting and exciting for a group of ordinary men from Galilee and Judea. For a long time, the Jewish people had thought that the appeal of their God would bring people of all nations streaming to the Temple of Jerusalem. Converts, or proselytes, would then have to commit to Jewish customs of life

and faith. The Great Commission subverts this idea. Rather than people converging on Jerusalem, the apostles must go from the city to the four corners of the world, even to those Gentiles who have no regard for Jewish faith at all. Baptism in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit becomes the initiation ritual for new believers. Those who are baptized must center their lives, not on the Temple in Jerusalem, but on Jesus and His presence in their lives through the Holy Spirit. The Great Commission thus fulfills an older promise given to Abraham that through his descendants “all people on earth will be blessed”.

After two millennia, the Great Commission remains a regular impetus of the Christian faith. The teachings of Jesus reached the



Therefore I want you to know that God's salvation has been sent to the Gentiles, and they will listen!

Acts 28:28



ends of the known earth within the first two centuries CE. Today, the mission is as focused on sharing the message of the resurrection as it is about journeying to the other side of the world. ■

Spread of early Christianity



**ACTS,
EPISTLE
REVELA**

**S, AND
TION**

The Apostles receive the **Holy Spirit** on the feast of **Pentecost** in Jerusalem.



ACTS
2:1–47

Philip converts an official of the Queen of Ethiopia on the road to Gaza.



ACTS
8:26–38

Paul is **arrested** in Jerusalem and is **imprisoned** for two years, after which he is taken to Rome.



ACTS
21:17–26:32

ACTS
3:1–10



Peter performs the Apostles' first miracle when he **heals a beggar** outside the Temple in Jerusalem.

ACTS
9:1–30



Saul, a persecutor of Christians, is **miraculously converted** on the **road to Damascus**.

1 CORINTHIANS
12:27



Paul tells the Corinthians they are the **body of Christ** and each one of them is a part of it.

The Acts of the Apostles is the first Christian work to trace the dissemination of the Gospel message. Written by the author of the Gospel of Luke, the book presents key events and speeches in support of the mission that Jesus gave His followers: “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the Earth” (Acts 1:8). It describes the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, the witness of the disciples in Jerusalem and Judea, and the persecution that drives the Apostles through the Roman Empire. A pivotal point is the conversion of the zealous persecutor Saul into the missionary Paul, the most influential leader in the early Church.

Acts demonstrates the struggles of the early Christians to deal with persecution, hypocrisy, old jealousies, and the cultural divide between Jews and Gentiles. It also narrates the spread of the Gospel through the eastern Roman Empire by means of the preaching and church-founding efforts of Paul. Descriptions of Paul’s ministry in Corinth, and the churches of Galatia, Ephesus, Philippi, and Thessalonica, provide valuable contextual material for the New Testament Epistles.

The Epistles

Part of a larger tradition of letter-writing in the Greco-Roman world, the Epistles comprises 20 of the 27 books of the New Testament. Letters were taken to be a way for the author to be “present” and

“speak” with the reader when face-to-face conversation was impossible. They often followed the same basic structure: an introduction of the author and the recipients, a short prayer before the main text of the letter, concluding greetings to mutual acquaintances, and a brief blessing.

Thirteen of the New Testament letters name Paul as their author. Most of them address churches or groups of churches with which Paul had contact. Others (1–2 Timothy, Titus, and Philemon) address specific individuals, but with the apparent intention of being read in the recipient’s churches. The remaining letters (James, 1–2 Peter, 1–3 John, and Jude) are known collectively as the “general” or “catholic” (meaning “universal”) epistles. This designation indicates

Paul **asserts the Trinity** in a blessing at the end of a letter he writes to the Corinthians.



2 CORINTHIANS

Paul warns against “false teachers” in his letter to the Philippians and urges **belief in the resurrection**.



PHILIPPIANS 3

John of Patmos receives a series of dramatic and terrifying visions of the **apocalypse**.



REVELATION 1–20

EPHESIANS 2:1–10



Paul tells the Ephesians that **personal salvation** can only happen through **faith**, not good deeds.

JAMES 2:14–26



James rejects passive faith and praises **active faith** that honors God through good deeds.

REVELATION 21–22



After the Final Judgment, John’s vision shows heaven and Earth renewed in the **New Jerusalem**.

that they were written to churches scattered over a wide geographical range, or to all Christians wherever they might be found. The Book of Revelation, while not a letter in its entirety, begins with seven brief letters to churches in Asia Minor. Its apocalyptic message describing Christ as the Final Judge of the wicked and vindicator of believers was partly an encouragement to those experiencing persecution.

Academic debates

Given their nature as letters, the Epistles give readers access to one side of a conversation. Readers can “overhear” the authors speak to congregations and individuals. The situation being addressed, however, must be inferred from the letters themselves. This has led modern scholars to speculate about the

nature of the societies in which the recipients lived. One important area of discussion focuses on opponents called “false teachers,” which are mentioned and/or rebutted several times in the Epistles. The false teachers included practices and philosophies, such as Jewish legalism and mysticism, popular Greek philosophical and religious ideas, speculation about angels and spiritual powers, and ascetic and ritual practices.

Fierce debate also rages about the authorship of several Epistles. Since the 2nd century CE, scholars have speculated about the authorship of Hebrews. An early tradition attributed Hebrews to Paul, but others credited Peter’s companion Silvanus, the early preacher Apollos, or one of Paul’s companions—Barnabas, Priscilla,

or Luke. Some modern scholars have also challenged authorship of certain Pauline epistles (especially Ephesians) and 1–2 Peter.

A new beginning

Taken together, the Book of Acts and the New Testament Epistles demonstrate that the resurrection of the crucified Jesus was not the end of God’s work in the world, but a new beginning through the Holy Spirit. The Epistles, while written by men, are included in the canon because they are seen as divinely inspired. They unpack the significance of the Gospel message of faith in Christ, in the service of “teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be equipped for every good work” (2 Timothy 3:16–17). ■



EVERYONE WAS FILLED WITH AWE AT THE MANY WONDERS AND SIGNS

ACTS 2:43, THE DAY OF PENTECOST

IN BRIEF

PASSAGE

Acts 2:1–47

THEME

The day of Pentecost

SETTING

c.29 CE Jerusalem. The city is full of Jewish pilgrims, who converge there annually for the feast of Pentecost (Shavu'ot), seven weeks after Passover.

KEY FIGURE

Peter Despite his denial of Jesus following Christ's arrest, Peter is again leader among the core disciples.

Other disciples According to Acts, the male disciples number about 120. Alongside them are Jesus's mother Mary and the other female disciples.

Just as thunder, lightning, and dense cloud accompany the giving of the Torah in Exodus, so dramatic phenomena accompany the giving of God's Spirit at the beginning of Acts. This happens during the feast of Pentecost, or Shavu'ot—one of three great pilgrimage festivals that each year brought throngs of Jews from across the known world to Jerusalem. Also in Jerusalem, according to Acts, is the core group of Jesus's disciples, who have met to

pray, as they have done regularly since His ascension, ten days previously. Suddenly, a noise like that of a strong wind fills the house where the disciples are meeting and tongues of fire come to rest on their heads. Impelled by a strange inner power, the disciples find themselves speaking in languages they do not know.

A great confusion

The disciples make so much noise that a crowd gathers, including many of the pilgrims who have come to Jerusalem from other parts of the world. These foreigners are astonished because the disciples, who by now appear to have spilled out onto the street, are miraculously speaking to them in their native languages, telling them about the "wonders of God."

In response to these strange happenings, some of the onlookers are skeptical and dismissive, accusing the disciples of being



Celebrating the ascension (top) and Pentecost, this miniature is from *La Somme le Roi*, an illuminated manuscript produced in France between 1290 and 1300 and now held in the British Museum.

See also: The Calling of the Disciples 200–03 ■ The Crucifixion 258–65 ■ The Empty Tomb 268–71 ■ The Great Commission 274–77

drunk. At this point, Peter, the leader of the disciples, stands up and addresses the crowd. The strange phenomena they are witnessing, he announces, are not the result of drunkenness, but they are the work of God—as foretold by the Prophet Joel in the Hebrew scriptures. He reminds his listeners of Jesus, who was God’s prophet and Messiah and whom the people of Jerusalem have recently killed. This same Jesus, God has now raised from the dead.

Peter’s speech has an electrifying effect on the crowd, many of whom are “cut to the heart” and beg to know what they can do in an attempt to make things right. Peter exhorts them to repent and become baptized. According to the Book of Acts, some 3,000 pilgrims follow his command, creating a massive increase in the number of believers.

The Pentecost event

Acts presents Peter’s speech as a work of the Holy Spirit. At His ascension, Jesus promises that the Spirit would empower His disciples

“
All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them.

Acts 2:4

to be witnesses to His resurrection, beginning in Jerusalem (Acts 1:8). At Pentecost, God gives His Spirit—dramatically and emphatically—to the disciples. Just as the Spirit enabled the disciples to speak in other languages, so He inspires Peter’s speech to the people of Jerusalem. Some scholars, however, think that Luke—the author of Acts—employed a literary device, common among ancient Greek historians, in which speeches are

put into the mouths of leading figures in order to comment upon the events they describe.

Peter’s speech begins with the words of the Prophet Joel, who said the Spirit would be poured out on God’s people at a critical point in history: “Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy. ... And everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved” (Joel 2:18–32). Peter goes on to argue that God had empowered Jesus’s life and ministry, leading to His crucifixion. He quotes David’s words that God would not abandon His holy one to death (Psalm 16:8–11), noting that while David’s body was still in its tomb, God had raised Jesus and poured out His Spirit as promised. Jesus had then risen into heaven in fulfillment of God’s command that the Messiah sit at His right hand until God defeated all the Messiah’s enemies (Psalm 110:1). Luke reports that 3,000 of the assembled people of Jerusalem, convinced by Peter’s words, repent their sins and receive forgiveness and the Holy Spirit. ■

The early Christian community

Luke’s account of the events of Pentecost concludes with a brief description of the community that emerged in Jerusalem as a result of that day’s conversions. This is marked, says Acts, by four elements: teaching by the Apostles; fellowship; the breaking of bread; and prayer. The fellowship is radical: the believers are said to have owned everything in common, selling their possessions and

distributing the money that they raised according to people’s needs—all in a spirit of gladness and generosity.

All four elements were no doubt present in the early Christian community of Jerusalem, but later in Acts, Luke reveals tensions among them as well. Attempting to win unwarranted regard, some lie about their generosity and are judged by the Holy Spirit (Acts 5:3–5). For Christians since, it has remained an inspiration and a challenge.



The Apostles Going Forth to Preach, a 15th-century miniature by the Limbourg brothers, shows the Christian community at work.

IN THE NAME OF JESUS CHRIST OF NAZARETH, WALK

ACTS 3:6, THE HEALING OF THE BEGGAR



IN BRIEF

PASSAGE

Acts 3:1–5:42

THEME

The disciples work
in Jesus's name

SETTING

c.29–31 CE Jerusalem.

KEY FIGURES

Peter A leader among the believers, twice imprisoned by the Sanhedrin but defiantly loyal to God. Peter was in Jesus's inner circle of disciples.

John Brother of James, son of Zebedee. He is with Peter when they heal the beggar.

Sanhedrin A supreme court in Jerusalem presided over by the high priest.

Acts 3 tells the story of one of the first holy works performed by Jesus's disciples in the wake of His death, resurrection, and ascension. Peter and John approach a gate of the Temple in Jerusalem. It is a time of prayer, and they have come to pray, but they stop at the gate when they come across a beggar.

Crippled from birth, this beggar is a familiar figure at the Temple; he is carried there each day by friends or family to beg for money from the worshippers who stream by. On this day, the beggar is being carried to what was referred to as

See also: The Raising of Lazarus 226–27 ■ Peter’s Denial 256–57 ■ The Great Commission 274–77 ■ The Day of Pentecost 282–83 ■ The Word Spreads 288–89



Peter (right) heals the lame man in this detail from Renaissance master Raphael’s depiction of the miracle. It is one of a set of tapestries by the artist depicting the works of Peter and Paul.

beggar’s feet and ankles heal in an instant. He jumps up and walks for the first time in his life. Peter has just performed an astonishing, awe-inspiring miracle—the very kind, in fact, that Jesus used to perform before He was killed.

Powerful proof

Following Pentecost, Jesus’s disciples continue to preach and perform great works. Luke, the author of Acts, gives many examples of signs and wonders that the disciples perform. As Jesus had promised them, His believers start to do even greater things in His name than He himself did during His three-year ministry.

The healing of the beggar is, as it were, the inaugural miracle of the post-Pentecost order. According to Luke, the beggar goes with Peter and John into the Temple, “walking

and jumping, and praising God” (3:8)—a triumphant sight that draws a large crowd. This gives Peter an opportunity to make a speech similar to the one he made at Pentecost: he reminds his listeners of their guilt in handing Jesus over to be killed, telling them to “repent ... and turn to God” (3:19).

Disciples on trial

Some 5,000 people are converted that day, although some scholars suggest that this figure given by Luke is not meant to be taken literally—it simply suggests a large number. However, while ordinary people react with jubilation and awe to the healing of the beggar, it also attracts negative attention from the authorities, who are greatly disturbed by the events.

That same evening, the Temple guards arrest the two Apostles and throw them into prison overnight, before bringing them before the high priest and Sanhedrin the next morning. Standing before them, a Spirit-emboldened Peter speaks out yet again about Jesus, in whose »

the Beautiful Gate—possibly the bronze-clad Nicanor Gate, between the court of the Gentiles and the court of the women.

The beggar asks the disciples for money, and both of them look him directly in the eyes. “Look at us!” Peter says, and so the beggar looks. “Silver or gold I do not have, but what I do have I give you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk” (Acts 3:4–6). Peter then takes the beggar by the hand and the

Almsgiving

For people with disabilities—such as Bartimaeus, the blind man whom Jesus healed outside Jericho (Mark 10:46–52), and the man at the Beautiful Gate—begging was not demeaning, but simply one of the few ways they could make a living. Giving to the poor was encouraged by Jewish scripture—“I command you to be open-handed toward ... the poor and needy in your land” (Deuteronomy 15:11)—and by Jesus. In the Sermon on the Mount, He names almsgiving

(giving to the poor) as one of the three prime works of piety, along with prayer and fasting (Matthew 6:1–4). From the point of view of beggars hoping to receive alms, location was key. Bartimaeus positioned himself by one of the gates into Jericho, to benefit from the constant flow of people into and out of the city; the man at the Beautiful Gate relied on the visiting pilgrims who were especially aware, as they entered or left the Temple, of their religious duty to give.



It is by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead, that this man stands before you healed.

Acts 4:10



name the beggar has been healed. Baffled at such eloquence in the mouth of these two “unschooled, ordinary men” (4:13)—and by the undeniable fact that a great miracle has taken place—the council commands the Apostles to keep silent from now on.

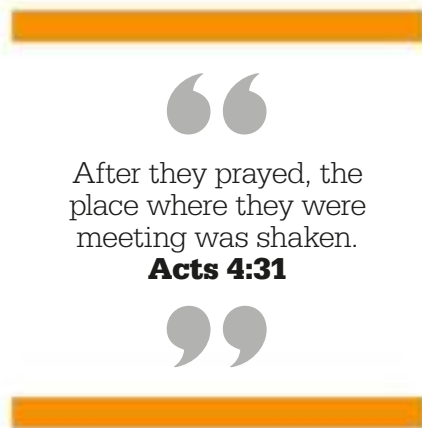
Peter and John’s reply is simple: “Which is right in God’s eyes: to listen to you, or to Him? You be the judges! As for us, we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard” (4:19–20). The council members threaten them further, but with so much excitement at the miracle, the Sanhedrin has no option but to let the men go free.

The second Pentecost

Peter and John return to their community. What follows is sometimes called the “second Pentecost.” Aware of the growing

opposition they face from the authorities, the believers pray to God for renewed boldness in telling the world about Jesus. They ask, “Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness” (4:29). The Greek word that Luke uses for this boldness is *parrhesia*, also meaning “free speech,” “frankness,” even “plain speaking.” As a sign of divine approval, the building where the believers are meeting shakes.

Thereafter, the community of believers in Jerusalem prospers: “all the believers were one in heart and mind” and they shared their possessions among each other (4:32). Most but not all of the believers are willing to take part in this. Acts 5 tells the story of Ananias and Sapphira, a couple who suddenly fall down and die after Peter reveals that they have



“After they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken.

Acts 4:31

lied—wanting to receive praise, they pretend to hand over all their property while keeping some back for themselves.

The community thrives, as many more signs and miracles lead to an impressive growth in numbers. Inevitably, however, such success brings further jealousy and



persecution from the authorities, at which point Luke’s narrative borders on comedy. Once more the Apostles are arrested and thrown into prison, but during the night an angel comes and opens the prison doors, allowing them to go free. The angel tells them to go back to the Temple and preach as they usually do. When morning comes, the Sanhedrin meets and sends for the prisoners. Shocked officers return empty-handed with this report: “We found the jail securely locked, with the guards standing at the doors; but when we opened them, we found no one inside” (5:23).

Outwitting the council

Baffled once more, the Sanhedrin then receive a report from the Temple: the men imprisoned last night are there teaching the people. Yet again the Apostles are arrested. When upbraided for continuing to teach about Jesus, they reply: “We must obey God rather than human beings!” (5:29). Infuriated, many of the Sanhedrin want to put them to death and are only dissuaded by the more cautious counsels of a Pharisee named Gamaliel. In the



People brought the sick into the streets and laid them on beds and mats so that at least Peter’s shadow might fall on some of them as he passed by.

Acts 5:15



end, the Apostles are flogged, once more told not to speak in Jesus’s name, and allowed to go free. Yet again they ignore the Sanhedrin’s orders. They continue, Luke writes, joyfully “teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Messiah” (Acts 5:42).

Inherited leadership

Throughout this narrative, Luke makes important theological points. With their bold Spirit-empowered preaching, confirmed by God in signs and wonders, the Apostles have established that they stand in a clear line of continuity reaching back as far as Abraham, Moses, and the prophets of the Hebrew scriptures. God has been faithful: the great covenants He made with Abraham and the Hebrew patriarchs have found fulfillment in Jesus, the promised Messiah, whom God affirmed with miraculous works—notably, the supreme miracle of His resurrection. Now though, the traditional leaders of the Jews, the Sanhedrin refuse to accept Jesus as the Son of God, and so the leadership of God’s people passes out of their hands and to the Apostles. The believers are portrayed by Luke as the “new Israel,” true heirs of the covenant promises of the Old Testament.

In this context, the fact that Peter and John heal the beggar in the name of Jesus is important. Peter’s speech acknowledges that not only are the disciples following in the tradition of Jesus’s ministry, the power they are exercising is not their own: Jesus now works through them. Peter, John, and their fellow disciples have been empowered by the Holy Spirit to continue Jesus’s work on Earth, and have been given the authority to carry out this task because of their faith in Him. ■



Simon Peter

One of Jesus’s closest disciples Simon Peter became a leading member of the early Church. His real name was Simon, but Jesus called him “Rock”: “Peter” in Greek, “Cephas” in Aramaic. He and his brother Andrew were both fishermen, and worked with another pair of brothers, James and John. John’s Gospel says Peter met Jesus through Andrew, who was a disciple of John the Baptist. However, the Gospels of Mark and Luke report that Peter and Andrew were working as fishermen when Jesus called them to be His disciples.

During the ministry of Jesus, Peter was one of the inner circle of three disciples, along with James and John, but when Jesus was arrested, Peter denied Him three times. This failure marked a turning point in Peter’s life; he was forgiven by Jesus and soon emerged as a dauntless leader in the early Church. He was also the first to share the Christian message and baptism with non-Jews. Peter was famously crucified upside-down during the persecution unleashed by Emperor Nero in 64–68 CE.



HE TOLD HIM THE GOOD NEWS ABOUT JESUS

ACTS 8:35, THE WORD SPREADS

IN BRIEF

PASSAGE

Acts 7:54–8:40

THEME

God's word is for everyone

SETTING

c.32–35 CE The countryside around Jerusalem.

KEY FIGURES

Saul of Tarsus A Hellenistic (Greek-speaking) Jew later known as Paul. At this stage, he is a diehard persecutor of the fledgling Church.

Philip One of the “Seven” appointed to oversee the distribution of food to widows in Jerusalem. He spreads the word of God.

Ethiopian official Chief treasurer to the Queen of Ethiopia; a eunuch who is baptized by Philip.

Life for most of the believers in Jerusalem is relatively peaceful in the period after Pentecost, despite some conflicts between the Sanhedrin and the Apostles. However, this changes when the Sanhedrin, alarmed by the evangelical success of a Hellenistic Christian called Stephen, sentences him to death by stoning. Stephen's execution begins “a great persecution” against the Jerusalem Church, masterminded by a young man called Saul, at whose feet Stephen's killers had laid their outer

garments. Luke's Gospel describes Saul going from house to house, dragging off men and women and throwing them into prison.

From curse to blessing

The Apostles stay in Jerusalem to face the persecution, while the rest of the community scatter across Judea and Samaria to escape the violence. However, what at first seems like a setback leads to the fulfillment of Jesus's prophecy at His ascension: “You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and . . . to the ends of the Earth” (Acts 1:8).

Proselytes and God-fearers

In the period after Jerusalem's Temple was rebuilt in the 6th century BCE, there was a growth in the number of “proselytes”—those who went through the full rites of conversion to Judaism, including circumcision—and “God-fearers,” who followed many Jewish religious practices without full conversion. This growth resulted partly from increased contact between Jews and non-Jews, and partly because of the missionary zeal of the Pharisees. Later, many

proselytes and God-fearers were drawn to the teaching of Jesus and His disciples.

In Matthew's and Luke's Gospels, a Roman centurion whose servant Jesus heals may well be a God-fearer, as may the Ethiopian official in Acts. Two converts in Acts—the centurion Cornelius, and Lydia, a cloth dealer in Philippi—are described as God-fearers. Cornelius and his household are baptized after hearing Peter preach, Lydia and hers after hearing Paul.

See also: Ruth and Naomi 108–09 ■ The Suffering Servant 154–55 ■ The Great Commission 274–77 ■ The Day of Pentecost 282–83 ■ The Road to Damascus 290–91

Wherever the believers go, they “preach the word” to the great joy of those who hear and accept it.

The Ethiopian

In Samaria, Philip, a former associate of the martyred Stephen, makes an impact. He was one of seven men appointed to oversee the distribution of food to widows in Jerusalem. Now in Samaria, he preaches to large crowds and performs dramatic healings.

Luke describes two aspects of the events that follow. On one level is the persecution that scatters the believers, who then set out to preach the word. On the other is the direct intervention of God, whose influence becomes clear when He sets Philip a new task. As Philip returns to Jerusalem from Samaria, an angel tells him to take the road to Gaza. He sets out and sees a chariot ahead. God’s Spirit tells Philip to catch up with it, and there he finds a high official of the Queen of Ethiopia, a eunuch who has been to Jerusalem to worship. The man is reading one



They all paid close attention to what He said. For with shrieks, impure spirits came out of many, and many who were paralyzed or lame were healed.

Acts 8:6–7



of the Suffering Servant Songs from the Book of Isaiah, which speaks of the arrival and suffering of the Messiah. Philip asks the eunuch if he understands what he is reading. The eunuch replies that he does not and invites Philip to sit with him to explain the passage. Philip agrees and tells the man “the good news about Jesus,” as predicted by Isaiah. Later, when they pass a stretch of water, the eunuch asks Philip to baptize him. Philip does so, and then the “Spirit of the Lord” miraculously takes Philip away, depositing him on the coast near Caesarea. The eunuch, meanwhile, continues on his way, rejoicing.

Joy thus marks the spreading of the Gospel—a process that Saul’s persecution has only, in the end, promoted. As Jesus foretold,

The Ethiopian eunuch is baptized by Philip the Evangelist, in a stained-glass window in Brackley, England. This act symbolized the start of the Ethiopian Church.

the “good news” has spread from Jerusalem into Judea and Samaria. Now, with the conversion of the Ethiopian, it pushes farther afield.

God of all

The conversion of the eunuch shows a key difference between Judaism and Christianity. For Jews, castration was unlawful, so, as a eunuch, the Ethiopian would not have been allowed to worship in the Temple. God, however, prompts Philip to baptize the man. The episode is seen as proof that the word of God was meant for the whole world—not just the Jews. ■



I AM JESUS, WHOM YOU ARE PERSECUTING

ACTS 9:5, THE ROAD TO DAMASCUS

IN BRIEF

PASSAGE

Acts 9:1–19

THEME

Miraculous conversions

SETTING

c.33–36 CE The road to Damascus, Syria, where many Jews have become Christians.

KEY FIGURES

Saul Better known by his Latin name Paul, Saul is initially a fanatical persecutor of Christian believers.

Ananias A Christian believer in Damascus who was a former disciple of Jesus. Described as a “devout observer of the Law,” he was sent to heal Paul and bring him the Gospel.

The conversion of Paul on the road to Damascus is one of the most dramatic episodes in the Book of Acts. The most fanatical persecutor of the early Christians has an overwhelming experience with the risen Jesus and becomes a member of the very community he has previously attacked. Within a short space of time, Paul became one of his new community’s most eloquent preachers, earning him many converts but also the enmity of his former allies. Not once but twice he has to flee for his life. The arch-persecutor thus joins the ranks of the persecuted.

Saul’s vision

The story in Acts begins with Paul, who is then known by his Hebrew name, Saul, “breathing out murderous threats against the Lord’s disciples” (Acts 9:1). Armed with warrants from the high priest, he is on his way to Damascus to hunt down believers and bring them back to Jerusalem as prisoners. Just outside the city, however, he has an extraordinary encounter. A “light from heaven” flashes around him, and a voice says, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” (9:3–4).

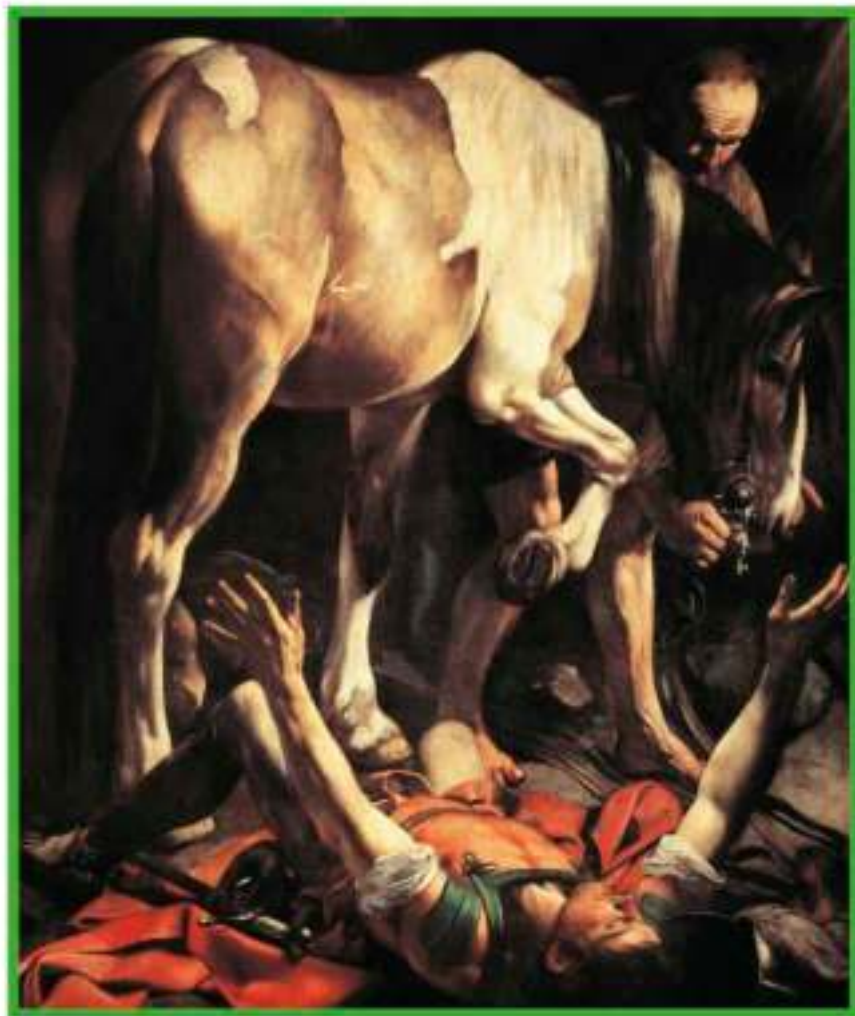
Saul, who has fallen to the ground, asks who is speaking. The voice replies, “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do” (9:5–6).

Finding himself blinded, Saul is taken into Damascus by his traveling companions. After three days, the Lord appears to a local believer named Ananias and tells him to visit Saul. Ananias does as the Lord says and baptizes Saul, who receives the Holy Spirit and the return of his sight.

According to Luke, Saul is soon preaching about Jesus in the Damascus synagogues, arousing the animosity of local Jews, who conspire to murder him.

Lowered in a basket from the city wall by his disciples, Saul escapes the conspirators and goes to Jerusalem, where he makes contact with the initially suspicious Apostles. Once again, his preaching earns him the hostility of certain Jews—probably the very group of diaspora Jews with whom he had previously associated—and he has to flee, this time to his home city of Tarsus. The conversion of Saul is so fundamental to the evolution of the early Church that Luke tells the

See also: The Word Spreads 288–89 ■ The Council of Jerusalem 292–93 ■ Paul’s Arrest 294–95 ■ The Power of the Resurrection 304–05



story three times (Acts 9, 22, and 26). His aim is clear: to establish Paul as an apostolic and prophetic figure, who was called, revealed, and confirmed as such by God.

God's prophet

As in the rest of the Bible, God works through signs and wonders, but also through suffering. The fact that Paul is now persecuted affirms both the power of God and the status of Paul as God's prophet, suffering with Jesus and the

The drama of Paul's experience is captured by Caravaggio's *Conversion on the Way to Damascus* (1601), in which the blinded Saul is thrown into a pool of light.

Hebrew prophets who came before Him. As God reveals to Ananias, He has selected the former enemy of His people to become His "chosen instrument to proclaim My name to the Gentiles. . . . I will show him how much he must suffer for my name" (9:15–16). ■



Paul, Apostle to the Gentiles

Paul was born in the city of Tarsus, in today's Turkey, to a family of Hellenistic (Greek-speaking) Jews. The well-educated young man had a knowledge of Greek thought and studied under the famous Pharisee Rabbi Gamaliel in Jerusalem.

Paul makes reference to his conversion in his letters to the Galatians and Corinthians. Paul adds to Luke's account in Acts, saying he traveled from Damascus to Arabia after his conversion and that it was three years before he went to Jerusalem to meet Peter and the other Apostles.

In the years that followed, Paul traveled around the eastern Mediterranean, preaching the Gospel and establishing communities of Christians in the major cities. The hostility of Jewish opponents led to his eventual arrest in Jerusalem and then transportation to Rome for trial. The New Testament gives no account of his death, but an early tradition asserts that he died by beheading during the persecution unleashed in 64 CE by the Roman Emperor Nero.



HE PURIFIED THEIR HEARTS BY FAITH

ACTS 15:9, THE COUNCIL OF JERUSALEM

IN BRIEF

PASSAGE

ACTS 15:1–35

THEME

Accommodating Gentiles

SETTING

c.49 CE Antioch and Jerusalem.

KEY FIGURES

Paul The Apostle argues in both Antioch and Jerusalem against an insistence on Gentile circumcision.

Barnabas Paul's longtime friend accompanies him on his journey to Jerusalem.

Peter The Apostle speaks decisively at the Council of Jerusalem against the need for circumcision.

James A leader of the Jerusalem church, James sums up the Council's findings.

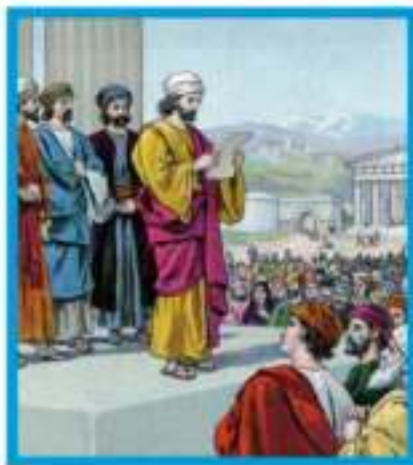
The growing influx of Gentile believers posed problems for the early Church. Questions arose as to whether they should be regarded as full members of the Church, or have to meet further requirements to put them on an equal footing with Jewish followers of Christ.

According to Acts, these burning questions come to a head in Antioch after Paul's return to the city at the end of his first missionary journey. Jewish believers, having recently arrived from Judea, are teaching that all believers must be circumcised, according to the Law of Moses. Paul and his long-standing ally

Barnabas deny this, insisting that circumcision is not necessary for Gentile believers. The debate becomes so heated that the Antioch church sends a delegation, led by Paul and Barnabas, to consult the elders of the founding church in a meeting that became known as the Council of Jerusalem.

The Council meets

In Jerusalem, much like in Antioch, the debate becomes vigorous. Peter speaks first, insisting that faith alone is necessary for salvation. He cites the recent conversion of the Roman centurion Cornelius and his household, who heard the Gospel from Peter and believed. God confirmed their salvation by filling them with the Holy Spirit, just as He did with Jewish believers. God, Peter says, "did not discriminate between us and them, for He purified their hearts by faith" (Acts 15:9). As a result, no extra yoke, such as circumcision, should be placed on their necks. Following further testimony from



A Bible study card (c.1900) illustrates Acts 15:22–33, in which the Gentile believers of Antioch are told which of Moses's Laws they must keep.

See also: The Nature of Faith 236–41 ■ The Word Spreads 288–89 ■ Salvation Through Faith 301 ■ The Power of the Resurrection 304–05

Paul and Barnabas, James, an increasingly influential leader in the Jerusalem church, cites the prophet Amos to show that it was always God’s intention that people from other nations would “seek the Lord” (15:17). Like Peter, he concludes that “we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God” (15:19).

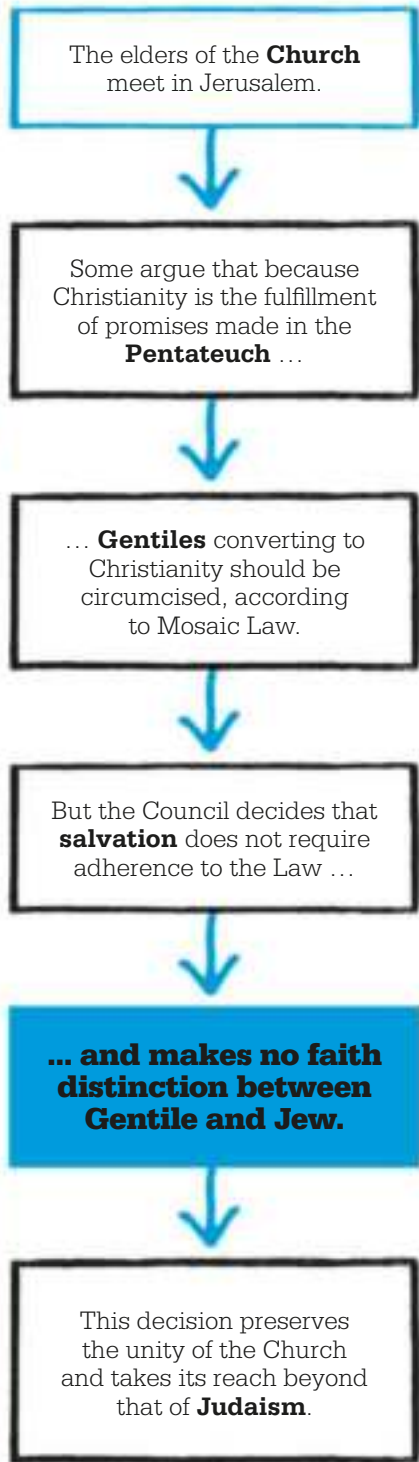
A compromise

James proposes a compromise: there will be no circumcision for Gentile believers, but they will be required to observe certain Jewish dietary and cleanliness laws, chiefly to ensure that Jewish and Gentile believers can eat together. James’s proposal is accepted, and so believers from Jerusalem are chosen to go back to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas, bearing a letter confirming the Council’s resolutions.

The Council of Jerusalem is a watershed. It stresses above all the importance of understanding that God wants to reach out to Gentiles, as He did with Cornelius and his household, and the Gentile converts Paul and Barnabas made in their travels. This creates a consensus

“
The rest of mankind may seek the Lord, even all the Gentiles who bear my name.
Acts 15:17
”

between God and His people, as reflected in a famous clause from the letter the Council sends to the believers in Antioch: “It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us not to burden you” (15:28). In the new “kingdom” that is therefore established, Gentile believers enjoy full and equal citizenship with Jewish ones. Faith alone gives entry. With these truths firmly established, the rest of Acts is dominated at the human level by Paul, God’s “chosen instrument” (9:15), for bringing the message of the Gospel to the Gentiles. ■



Paul and Peter’s fight at Antioch

In his letter to the Galatians, Paul describes a combative encounter in Antioch with the Apostle Peter over Jewish dietary laws. Paul publicly accuses Peter of inconsistency and hypocrisy because Peter sometimes eats with Gentile believers, but at other times refrains from doing so for fear of offending Jewish visitors from Jerusalem (Galatians 2:11–12). Paul argues, “You are a Jew,

yet you live like a Gentile ... How is it, then, that you force Gentiles to follow Jewish customs?” (2:14). These were difficult issues for leaders of the early Church. As shown at the Council of Jerusalem, Peter and other Church leaders eventually agree that outreach to the Gentiles was God’s initiative through Christ and could not be ignored by the Church.



I ADMIT THAT I WORSHIP THE GOD OF OUR ANCESTORS AS A FOLLOWER OF THE WAY

ACTS 24:14, PAUL'S ARREST

IN BRIEF

PASSAGE

Acts 21:17–28:31

THEME

Faith under trial

SETTING

c.57–60 CE Jerusalem and Caesarea Maritima.

KEY FIGURES

Paul An Apostle of Christ.

Claudius Lysias A tribune (high-ranking military officer) in command of the Roman garrison in Jerusalem.

Roman procurators

Governors of Judea, first Marcus Antonius Felix c.52–60 CE, then Porcius Festus c.60–62 CE.

Agrippa II Great-grandson of Herod the Great. A Roman-appointed king whose realms include Galilee.

Despite it leading to his arrest and near lynching at the hands of a mob, the Apostle Paul's decision to return to Jerusalem from Rome is made for a simple and virtuous reason: he wants to hand over money that has been collected among Gentile churches to relieve the poor of the Judean Church. The intent is generous, yet, as Luke makes clear, by traveling to the Jewish capital, Paul is entering dangerous territory. The Apostle is only too aware of

this. "I am going to Jerusalem," he tells friends, "not knowing what will happen to me there. I only know that in every city the Holy Spirit warns me that ... hardships are facing me" (Acts 20:22–23).

Pain and trials

It is not long until Paul must face these hardships. His first act upon arriving in Jerusalem is to meet with James, the leader of the Judean Church, who warns him that many believers in Judea think Paul is subverting the Law of Moses because of a rumor that Paul has been teaching Jews to abandon their obedience to that law. To prove them wrong, he suggests that Paul join four local believers who are about to undergo a Jewish purification rite. Paul agrees and reaches the last day of the rite before he is spotted in the Temple by Jews from Asia. He has also been seen in the company of a Greek from Ephesus, and the Jews assume he has sacrilegiously taken



The arrest of Paul is a popular subject in religious artwork, such as this fresco from the Papal Basilica of St. Paul Outside the Walls, which was built on the site of Paul's burial.

See also: Peter's Denial 256–57 ■ The Crucifixion 258–65 ■ The Word Spreads 288–89 ■ The Road to Damascus 290–91

the Greek into parts of the Temple forbidden to Gentiles. A riot ensues in which, according to Acts, the Asian Jews drag Paul from the Temple and try to kill him. He is saved only by the intervention of a Roman commander who takes him into protective custody and, after discovering a plot within the Jewish Sanhedrin to murder Paul, sends him to the headquarters of the Roman governor, Felix.

Paul remains a prisoner there for two years until Felix is replaced by another Roman governor, Festus, who reviews the case alongside the Herodian King Agrippa. He proposes another meeting with the Sanhedrin, but Paul, revealing that he is a Roman citizen, insists on his case being referred to Rome.

While imprisoned, Paul tells the story of his conversion outside Damascus twice and portrays the risen Jesus he encountered there as the fulfillment of all that God has promised the Jewish people. In the end, Festus and Agrippa can find no just cause to sentence Paul to

“

I am saying nothing beyond what the prophets and Moses said would happen—that the Messiah would . . . bring the message of light to his own people and to the Gentiles.

Acts 26:22–23

”

“

My brothers . . . I stand on trial because of the hope of the resurrection of the dead.

Acts 23:6

”

death, and he is sent on to Rome to live under house arrest for a further two years, before he eventually gains his freedom.

Gospel parallels

Throughout the trials of Paul, there are parallels with the account in Luke's Gospel of the trial of Jesus, who, like Paul, strived to spread the word of God amid often barbaric opposition. Unlike his portrayal of Jesus, who remained largely silent during His torments and judgment, in Acts Luke records three major speeches in which Paul defends himself and his record. Moreover, Paul advocates for his own holiness with a vehemence that Jesus does not display, arguing that he is not merely a Jew, but a Pharisee, and thus, like all Pharisees, fully believes in bodily resurrection, like that experienced by Jesus.

Although the trajectories of Jesus and Paul are not identical—after all, within biblical scripture Paul escapes his mission alive—both men represent devout teachers of the word of God who, despite suffering, choose to persist under the burden of their holy mission. ■



Persecution and martyrdom

For prophets in the Bible, faithfulness to God draws hostility. Jeremiah speaks for many when he begs God to “think of how I suffer reproach for your sake” (Jeremiah 15:15). Likewise, Jesus makes clear in the New Testament that just as He will suffer, so will the disciples that spread His message: “they will seize you and persecute you . . . all on account of my name” (Luke 21:12).

The changing meaning of the Greek word transliterated as “martyr” reflects this close link between preaching and suffering. In the New Testament, the word occurs often, meaning “witness”—someone who bears witness to Christ. By the end of the 1st century CE, as witnessing increasingly began to lead to persecution and death, the word took on its modern meaning of one who suffers and dies for the sake of their religious beliefs. Paul himself was beheaded on the orders of Emperor Nero.



LOVE IS PATIENT, LOVE IS KIND. IT DOES NOT ENVY, IT DOES NOT BOAST, IT IS NOT PROUD.

1 CORINTHIANS 13:4, THE WAY OF LOVE

IN BRIEF

PASSAGE

1 Corinthians 13:1–13

THEME

Love is everlasting

SETTING

54 CE Ephesus, a province in modern-day Turkey.

KEY FIGURES

Paul Apostle who became a Christian after Jesus's death. One of the leading figures in the early Church, he travels extensively, preaching the word of God.

Corinthian believers The community in Corinth, who are prone to factionalism and cliquishness.

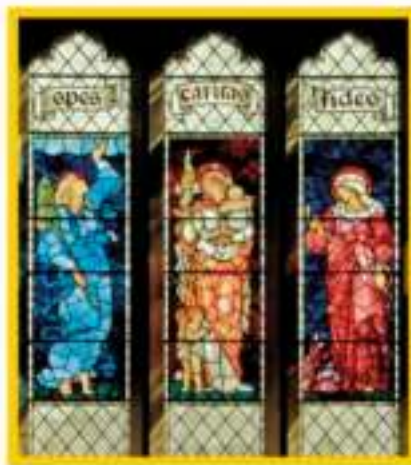
The Apostle Paul's letters to the Corinthians are his response to various questions the Corinthian believers have sent him on topics ranging from marriage and divorce to the use of spiritual gifts, such as speaking in tongues. In his first letter, he describes seven things that love is and does—love is patient; is kind; rejoices with truth; protects; trusts; hopes; and perseveres; and, eight that it is not or does not do—does not envy or boast; is not proud, rude, self-seeking, or easily angered; keeps no record of wrongs; and does not delight in evil. This is the core of

Paul's extended "hymn" to love, which itself forms the heart of a discourse by Paul on how believers should behave and relate when they meet for worship.

For Paul, as for all other New Testament writers, love is the touchstone of the Christian faith; this begins with God's love. In the words of John's Gospel: "God so loved the world" (3:16) that He sent His own son to die for the sins of man. That son, Jesus, shows that same love with acts of mercy, healing, and forgiveness, and tells His followers that love is the greatest commandment of all: love your neighbor, and "love the Lord your God with all your heart ... with all your soul and with all your mind" (Matthew 22:37).

Above all else

Writing to the Romans, Paul says: "you shall not commit adultery," "you shall not murder," "you shall not steal," "you shall not covet," which are summed up in one



The martyrs Spes, Caritas, and Fides, or Hope, Love (a modern translation for Caritas), and Faith, named after the three virtues, depicted in the Church of St. Martin, Cumbria, England.

See also: The Golden Rule 210–11 ■ The Road to Damascus 290–91 ■ Paul’s Arrest 294–95 ■ Fruits of the Spirit 300

Types of love in the Bible



Agape—Divine love

Love found between God and Jesus, Jesus and His disciples, believers and God, and also among believers.



Eros—Romantic love

The “erotic” or romantic love between two lovers (spouses), as depicted in Song of Songs.



Philia—Brotherly love

Love found in close friendships, such as that between Jonathan and David in the Old Testament.



Storge—Familial love

The love between family members, as shown in the Bible between Jacob and Isaac, or Mary, Martha, and Lazarus.

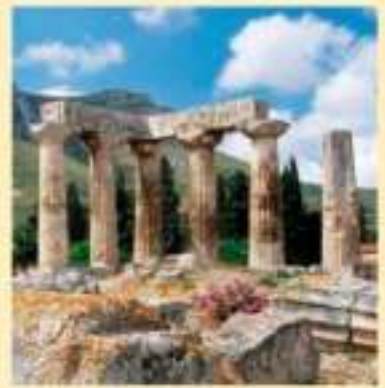
command: “Love your neighbor as yourself” (Romans 13:9). Writing to the Corinthians, Paul applies this “royal law” in a particular context. The Corinthians, he believes, are far too individualistic. They pride themselves on spiritual gifts, such as speaking in tongues or prophecy, in a way that causes division. Love is missing, and Paul highlights the emptiness this causes in the first part of his hymn: “if I speak in the tongues of . . . angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal” (1 Corinthians 13:1).

The last section of Paul’s letter begins with the declaration, “love never fails” (13:8). In a world of constant change, he says, just three

things last: faith, hope, and love. Of these three, Paul writes, the greatest is love. Love is produced by God’s Spirit and should guide the use of the Spirit’s gifts. While tongues and other gifts may fade and cease, love brings humility, unity, and peace.

Apostle of love

Some describe Paul as the “Apostle of love.” As he writes in his letter to the Galatians—where the issue is “Judaizing” believers trying to impose circumcision on Gentile believers—“neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love” (Galatians 5:6). ■



Corinth

The believers in Corinth were citizens of a rich, culturally diverse metropolis. Much of its prosperity was because of its location on the isthmus connecting the Peloponnese with the rest of mainland Greece, commanding not one but two trade routes: from the south to the north between the Peloponnese and the rest of the mainland, and west to east between the Adriatic and Aegean seas. The capital of the Roman province of Achaëa, Corinth had sizable foreign communities, which included Egyptians and Jews, as well as many native Greeks.

According to Acts 18:1–11, Paul arrived in Corinth for the first time around 50 CE during his second missionary journey, and stayed for 18 months with a Jew, Aquila, and his wife, Priscilla. The couple had fled from Rome the year before, after the Jews were expelled from the city.

The fractious church Paul helped to establish in Corinth remained close to his heart, and was the recipient of a number of the Apostle’s letters and appeals. Two of these letters became part of the New Testament as the books of 1 and 2 Corinthians.



THE GRACE OF THE LORD JESUS CHRIST AND THE LOVE OF GOD AND THE FELLOWSHIP OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

2 CORINTHIANS 13:14, THE HOLY TRINITY

IN BRIEF

PASSAGE

2 Corinthians 13:1–14

THEME

The Trinity

SETTING

54–55 CE Corinth, a major city in Greece and the provincial capital of the Roman province of Achaëa. It was occupied by Rome until around 521 CE.

KEY FIGURES

Paul The Apostle who founded the church at Corinth in around 50 CE during his ministry in the Aegean.

The Corinthians Christians in the troubled church of Corinth, who have been led astray by teachers opposed to Paul.

The church in Corinth, which the Apostle Paul had founded and led for several years, faced many difficulties after Paul left to continue his missionary work, mainly arising from the arrival of teachers opposed to Paul. These problems prompted two letters from the Apostle to correct and redeem the wayward church.

Writing from Ephesus in Asia Minor, Paul takes a sharp tone in 2 Corinthians, but ends on a gentle note. In the final paragraph (13:11–14), he exhorts his readers to become spiritually mature and to come together, reminding them that God is hard at work among them to this end. Paul then ends by blessing the entire congregation, concluding, “May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all” (13:14).

In this blessing, Paul combines three ideas about the relationship of God, Christ, and the Holy Spirit to Christians, affirming the equal

dignity of the three persons. It is thus one of the most complete references in the New Testament to the concept of the Trinity.

Three in one

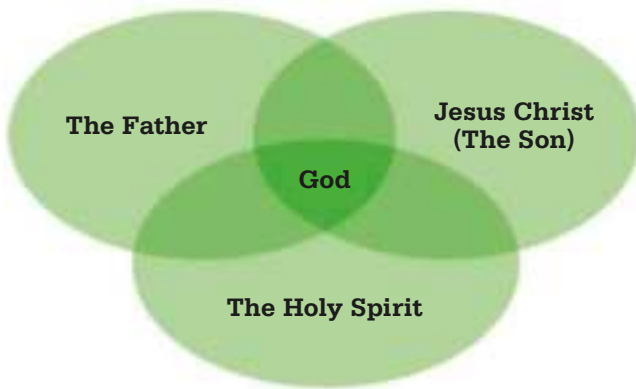
The New Testament affirms that there is only one true God, yet also asserts that the Father is God,



The Holy Trinity (1440) by the Master of the Darmstadt, an anonymous artist from Germany, shows God holding the body of His Son, and the Holy Spirit represented by a dove.

See also: The Divinity of Jesus 190–93 ■ The Nature of Faith 236–41 ■ The Council of Jerusalem 292–93 ■ Salvation Through Faith 301

Holy Trinity



The Trinity refers to the existence of God as three consubstantial persons. These three persons are distinct—The Father, Christ, and Holy Spirit—yet share one nature.

Jesus is God (John 5:22–23), and the Holy Spirit is God (Matthew 12:32). Christians have therefore concluded that the Bible teaches its readers that, while there is only one divine being, there are three divine persons within that being. Reinforcing this idea are texts in which each Person is present but distinct, such as in the baptismal formula in Matthew 28:19; and the “confessions” of faith in Ephesians 4:4–6 and 1 Peter 1:1–2.

The Nicene Creed

In 325 CE, centuries after Paul’s death, Church leaders met at Nicaea (modern Iznik, Turkey) to address the teachings of Arius. His followers defended the uniqueness of God and the personal distinction between the Father and Son by denying the godhood of Jesus, arguing that the Son merely had a nature “similar” to the Father’s. The Council of Nicaea developed the ideas essential to the doctrine of the Trinity: the uniqueness of God, the divinity of the Father and Son, and the personal distinction between them. Christians argued over these concepts extensively,

but most eventually agreed that to deny the deity of Jesus was to render dependence upon Jesus for salvation and that worship of Him was a form of idolatry. While Arians affirmed that Jesus had a nature that was homoiousios (similar) to that of God the Father, defenders of the Nicene Creed insisted that Jesus’s nature was homoousios (same). In English, the latter idea is expressed by the word “consubstantial” or “being of one substance with the Father.” ■



I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father and the Son, who with the Father and the Son is adored and glorified.

The Nicene Creed



Council of Nicaea

Constantine the Great’s Council of Nicaea was the first of seven ecumenical councils held between 325 and 787 CE. The purpose of each of these meetings was to address some of the heresies that were arising within the Church and answer difficult questions raised by Christian skeptics. Constantine realized that by establishing universal doctrines that could be widely shared and promulgated, the Church, and his empire, would strengthen and expand. Prior to the Council of Nicaea, doctrine had been decided at the local level, such as at the Council of Jerusalem in 50 CE.

Constantine himself presided over the council meeting, even though he was a Catechumen (the name given to an adherent of Christianity who had not been baptized). The rest of the council was made up of representatives drawn from across Christendom.



Constantine the Great presides at the Council of Nicaea, in 325 CE, in a 12th-century fresco in the Bachkovo Monastery in Bulgaria. The figure below him is Arius.



BUT THE FRUIT OF THE SPIRIT IS LOVE, JOY, PEACE, FORBEARANCE, AND KINDNESS

GALATIANS 5:22–23, FRUITS OF THE SPIRIT

IN BRIEF

PASSAGE

Galatians 5:13–26

THEME

Living by the Spirit

SETTING

48–55 CE Galatia, a province in modern-day Turkey.

KEY FIGURES

Paul An Apostle of Christ who acted as a missionary in the early Christian Church, later writing letters to the churches he founded. Many of these epistles became books of the New Testament.

Galatians Lapsed followers of Christ from Galatia, a Roman province founded in the 3rd century BCE.

In his letter to the Galatians—new churches in a province in present-day Turkey—Paul delivers an impassioned affirmation of the importance of having faith in Christ, as he implores the people not to return to a sinful life.

In Galatians 5, in particular, Paul uses two lists in order to compare the vices produced by human effort to the virtues that are “the fruit of the Spirit” (5:22). The first list outlines “acts of the flesh,” listing qualities such as “sexual immorality . . . hatred” and “selfish ambition” (5:19–20) among the vices of sinful humanity. For Paul, these sins dominate a society that has become focused purely on its selfish impulses.

The second list establishes the virtuous alternative to sin as the “fruit of the Spirit”—love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, gentleness, and self-control. For Paul, those who have embraced these “have crucified the flesh” (5:24) within themselves and have been freed from their egotism, enabling them to better serve God.

Although Greek and Roman philosophers often made lists of vices and virtues, Paul’s primary intention in Galatians is to draw attention to the inevitable choice between the sins of the self-righteous and living by the Spirit.

Paul focuses on vices that cause dissent among communities, such as jealousy, factions, and envy. The “fruit of the Spirit,” in contrast, emphasizes principles centered on healing communities; such as love, patience, and gentleness. ■

“

So, I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature.

Galatians 5:16

”

See also: Council of Jerusalem 292–93 ■ The Way of Love 296–97 ■ The Power of the Resurrection 304–05



FOR IT IS BY GRACE YOU HAVE BEEN SAVED, THROUGH FAITH ... NOT BY WORKS

EPHESIANS 2:8–9, SALVATION THROUGH FAITH

IN BRIEF

PASSAGE

Ephesians 2:1–10

THEME

Faith and salvation

SETTING

61–62 CE Ephesus, a province in modern-day Turkey.

KEY FIGURES

Paul An Apostle of Christ who acted as a missionary in the early Christian Church. He wrote letters to the churches he founded, such as the church in Ephesus. Many of these epistles became books of the New Testament.

Saints in Ephesus Jewish and Gentile Christians in the church in Ephesus.

After he is arrested, and while he awaits trial in Rome, Paul writes letters of encouragement to churches he has founded around the Aegean Sea. In one such letter, to the people of Ephesus, Paul discusses the importance of having faith in God, compared to the significance of performing “works”—that is, good deeds and actions. Despite stating that “we were created . . . to do good works” (Ephesians 2:10), Paul repeatedly writes that personal salvation—being welcomed into the kingdom of heaven—can only happen through faith in Jesus.

A gift from God

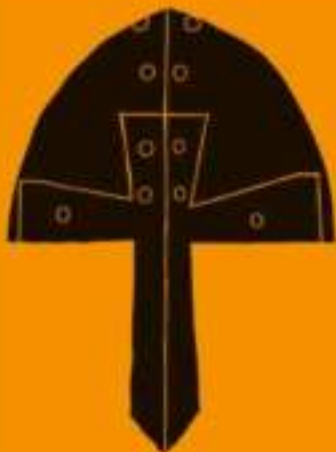
According to Paul, the Ephesians were “dead in [their] transgressions and sins” (2:1), yet because God is loving and merciful, He made them alive with Christ. By this, Paul means that the people’s actions were previously of a sinful nature, not good works in the name of God. However, when the Ephesians were converted, they were saved through God’s favor, His grace (2:8–9).



Protestant reformer Martin Luther was a firm proponent of the doctrine of *sola fide*—salvation through faith alone. This view was fundamental to the Protestant Reformation.

Crucially, Paul tells the Ephesians that even their faith is a gift from God, rather than a virtue they have cultivated themselves. According to Paul, God alone may take credit for the salvation of the Ephesians: the people have been saved not because they have done good deeds, but because God, in His grace, gave them faith. ■

See also: Fruits of the Spirit 300 ■ The Power of the Resurrection 304–05 ■ Faith and Works 312–13



PUT ON THE FULL ARMOR OF GOD

EPHESIANS 6:11, ARMOR OF GOD

IN BRIEF

PASSAGE

Ephesians 6:10–20

THEME

The protection of God

SETTING

c.61–62 CE Ephesus The Ephesian letter was probably written for churches in western Asia Minor, of which the church in Ephesus was the largest and most important.

KEY FIGURES

Author of Ephesians Early Christians believed this to be Paul. Some modern scholars argue that it is more likely to be one of his disciples.

Readers The recipients of the letter were mostly Gentile converts to Christianity.

The author of Ephesians uses fierce military imagery to convey his view that believers face all-out warfare in the fight against evil. It is a struggle populated not with human foes at the earthly level, but with powerful and malevolent supernatural beings—the scheming devil and the hierarchy of “spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms” (Ephesians 6:12).

For believers, however, God’s power is greater. Drawing on the Old Testament prophet Isaiah, who depicts God putting on

“righteousness as His breastplate, and the helmet of salvation on His head” (Isaiah 59:17), Ephesians describes the “full armor of God” (Ephesians 6:11) that believers, too, can and must adorn to take their stand “against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world” (Ephesians 6:12).

The Ephesian audience

As with all New Testament writings, Ephesians is addressing believers in a particular context. The Ephesians live in a region of Asia Minor whose chief city, Ephesus, is famous for magical practices associated with the goddess Artemis. For them, as for the area’s Jewish converts, the world has two dimensions—earthly and heavenly—and the heavenly realm includes fearsome forces of evil as well as of good. Ephesians in no way denies this vision of things—it simply puts this idea into a wider perspective by asserting the supreme power



St. Michael the Archangel dons full armor in his victorious battle against Satan in the book of Revelation. This painting, composed in the early 16th century, is by an unknown artist.

See also: The Nature of Faith 236–41 ■ The Crucifixion 258–65 ■ The Road to Emmaus 272–73 ■ The Power of the Resurrection 304–05 ■ The Final Judgment 316–21

of God and the authority of the risen Christ seated “at His right hand in the heavenly realms, far above all rule and authority, power, and dominion” (Ephesians 1:20–21).

Standing firm

Just as God’s power has raised Christ from the dead, so it has also raised believers from their pagan practices. Even so, Ephesians says, the world and believers are in an interim state. There is a fullness yet to come—a further, definitive stage in history “when the times reach their fulfillment” and unity will be brought to “all things in heaven and on earth under Christ” (Ephesians 1:10).

Until this happens, believers are still vulnerable to the ever-active forces of spiritual evil. For this reason, they need to “be strong in the Lord” (6:10), emphasizing their complete reliance on God when cultivating courage. Believers are instructed to put on the “full armor” of God and stand firm—a command that is repeated in Ephesians three times.

The full armor of God is stated as including truthfulness, righteousness, salvation, peace, and faith. Ultimately, Ephesians is about resisting the assaults of temptation—originating in both the individual’s sinful nature and the spiritual forces of evil—and living one’s daily life in a truly Christian way by being moral, honorable, and loving. ■

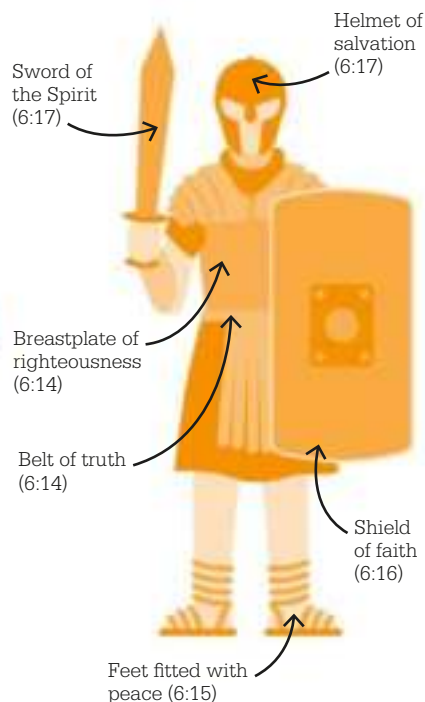


Stand firm then,
with the belt of truth
buckled around your waist,
with the breastplate of
righteousness in place,
and with your feet
fitted with . . . peace.

Ephesians 6:14–15



The Armor of God



According to Ephesians, the conflict with Satan is a spiritual one. Thus, one requires a full complement of spiritual weapons to use against him and other evils.

Ephesus



Standing on the Aegean coast of Asia Minor (roughly modern Turkey), Ephesus was an intellectual and cultural hub of up to 250,000 people and capital of the Roman province of Asia. The city was also an important religious center renowned for magical practices, mystery cults, and, above all, the worship of Artemis, Greek goddess of woods and hunting and the most venerated deity of Asia Minor. Her temple at Ephesus was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world and the largest Greek temple ever built.

According to the Book of Acts, Paul visited Ephesus twice. He most likely founded the community of Christian believers there on a brief visit during his second missionary journey. Later, during his third mission, Paul spent more than two years in the city before he and his companions were forced to leave—their ministry success triggered a riot among silversmiths, who saw them as a threat to their livelihood, which depended on making devotional offerings to the goddess Artemis.



I WANT TO KNOW CHRIST

PHILIPPIANS 3:10, THE POWER OF THE RESURRECTION

IN BRIEF

PASSAGE

Philippians 3:1–14

THEME

The power of Christ's resurrection

SETTING

c.50 CE Philippi, a Roman colony in Macedonia.

KEY FIGURES

Paul The Apostle, who founded the church in Philippi. According to the letter, he is a prisoner at the time of writing—most likely in Rome.

The Philippians Christians in Philippi, most of whom are Gentile converts.



St. Paul holding the sword of the Spirit. This painting is attributed to the Italian Renaissance artist Macrino d'Alba, 1490–1527.

Paul wrote his letter to the Christians in Philippi while imprisoned, preparing his defense in rebuttal of charges of treason against the Emperor Nero. The charge arose because early Christians affirmed that “Jesus is Lord,” refusing Roman oaths of loyalty, because they considered them blasphemous. To their enemies, however, their refusal suggested subversive intent.

A critical part of Paul’s defense would have been that loyalty to Jesus did not foster rebellion, but instead produced virtuous citizens. Philippi, a military colony, was mainly populated by retired Roman soldiers or their descendants—an outpost of loyalists with a duty to secure the province of Macedonia. Demonstrating that Christians were exemplary citizens in a city unquestionably loyal to the Empire would persuade the Romans to tolerate the new religion.

Paul seemed to have this in mind when he urged the people to “conduct yourselves”—literally, live out your citizenship—“in a manner worthy of . . . Christ” (Philippians 1:27). The key to Paul’s defense was the moral behavior of the Christians in Philippi. Yet he

See also: The Empty Tomb 268–71 ■ The Road to Damascus 290–91 ■ Paul’s Arrest 294–95 ■ Armor of God 302–03

notes that their good character had been threatened by “false teachers,” who claimed that righteousness depended on keeping the Mosaic Law of circumcision. Paul was writing to the Christians in Philippi to testify against this belief, and argue that Christians received their righteousness from God.

Alive in Christ

Christians believe they become righteous when faith leads them to experience “the power of [Christ’s] resurrection” (3:10). This means the power of God that raised Jesus from the dead similarly transforms the spiritually “dead” (sinners) into “living” saints. Indeed, Paul saw any person’s conversion to faith in Jesus as a manifestation of the power of the resurrection.

In a letter to the Colossians, Paul writes that although believers once lived in sin, their sins have been buried, and they have been reborn through Jesus. By coming to know God, they now share in his resurrecting power. In Colossians 3:3–4, for example, Paul writes

“for you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with Him in glory.”

Paul teaches that the power of the resurrection drives the entire Christian way of living: Jesus’s resurrection enables His people thereafter to live new, transformed lives, characterized by obeying God’s laws in all that they do. Peter’s teaching echoes this idea: “His divine power has given us everything we need for a godly life” (2 Peter 1:3). Even in difficult times, such as those faced by the early Christians, belief in Christ’s resurrection would transform the character of the converts to make them exemplary citizens in Philippi—justifying the claim that “Jesus is Lord” (Philippians 2:11).

The final resurrection

Paul concludes that ultimate experience of “the power of His resurrection” will come in the future, at the Second Coming of Christ from heaven—which

“

At the name of Jesus every knee [shall] bow . . . and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Philippians 2:10–11

”

is the true place of Christian citizenship. At that time, the dead will rise, and the living will be brought up to meet Christ in the air, in physical bodies like that of the resurrected Lord. In that moment, Paul writes, the appearance of the resurrected savior will complete the process of eliminating sin and perfecting righteousness in Christians. ■



An illustration of the preaching of the first missionary Apostles, after a 15th-century Arras tapestry in Tournai Cathedral, Belgium.

Paul’s influence on Christianity

Paul molded Christianity more than any other Apostle, paving the way for it to become a major world religion. Although Peter and Philip converted the first Gentiles, it was Paul’s tireless missionary journeys that brought the Gospel to thousands across the eastern Roman Empire and finally in Rome itself. Crucial in this quest was Paul’s insistence, against considerable opposition, that all believers—Gentile and Jewish—had equal status and that

Gentile converts should not be made to submit to the rite of circumcision and Jewish dietary laws. This helped Christianity to spread throughout the Greek and Roman worlds, rather than merely remaining the faith of a small Jewish sect.

Paul’s other legacy was his letters. Thirteen of the 27 books of the New Testament are attributed to him. These letters elaborate much of the New Testament’s theology and, for Christians, act as a guide for the application of its teaching in a practical context.



AND HE IS THE HEAD OF THE BODY, THE CHURCH

COLOSSIANS 1:18, THE BODY OF CHRIST

IN BRIEF

PASSAGES

Colossians 1:15–23,
1 Corinthians 12:12–31,
Ephesians 4:1–16

THEME

The body of Christ as a metaphor for the Christian Church

SETTING

c. 54 CE Letters written to the churches of Asia Minor by Paul and his disciples.

KEY FIGURES

Paul An Apostle of Christ, writing to the churches in Corinth and Asia Minor.

Author of Colossians Early Christians believed this to be Paul. Some modern scholars argue that it is more likely to have been one of his disciples.

The image of the community of believers as a discrete entity unfolds and develops in the Pauline writings of the New Testament. It was by no means a new idea. The concept of the “body politic”—an understanding of a nation of peoples as one body—was commonplace among Greek and Roman philosophers. Plato had used it, as had Aristotle, Cicero, Seneca, and many others.

For his part, Paul takes hold of the idea and begins to develop it in earnest in his first letter to the Corinthians. Writing to the

fractious people and chastising them, Paul employs the image to press home a message about unity despite diversity. “Just as a body, though one, has many parts . . . all its many parts form one body,” he tells his readers. Then, he continues: “So it is with Christ” (1 Corinthians 12:12).

A united body

Despite coming from diverse backgrounds, the Corinthian believers must remember the basic unity they have through God’s Spirit. “For we were all baptized by one Spirit so as to form one body—whether Jews or Gentiles, slave or free—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink” (12:13).

Continuing with the image of the body, Paul reminds the different cliques among the Corinthians of their inescapable need for one another: “The eye cannot say to the hand, ‘I don’t need you!’ And the head cannot say to the feet, ‘I don’t need you!’” (12:21).



St. Ignatius, painted in oils by Giuseppe Franchi (1565–1628), was an early Christian writer and Bishop of Antioch. He was the first to employ the term “Catholic Church” in writing.

See also: The Word Spreads 288–89 ■ The Way of Love 296–97 ■ The Holy Trinity 298–99 ■ The Power of the Resurrection 304–05

Pope Francis, the 266th head of the Roman Catholic Church, rides through the crowds of the faithful in September 2015, as he attends mass at the Vatican.



Nor is there any room for one group of members to regard itself as better than the others: “God has put the body together, giving greater honor to the parts that lacked it, so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other” (12:24–25).

In several letters, Paul refers to certain “gifts,” such as wisdom or faith, that Christians receive by believing in Jesus. The analogy of the body as a united entity is a way of ensuring that none of these gifts is viewed as superior to others. If more visible “gifts” are held in too great esteem, they will promote pride, with one exception—love—as there is no greater gift that one can possess or give in return. Paul ends his exhortation with a simple metaphor: “Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it” (12:27).

“

Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of Him who is the head, that is, Christ.

Ephesians 4:15

”

This is the first mention of “the body of Christ” in the Bible and, in 1 Corinthians, the concept has a relatively narrow focus. It is about living out the Christian message of love and service in the context of a local place of worship.

Developing the image

Two later writings of the New Testament—the letters to the Colossians and the Ephesians—are regarded by some scholars as the work of two of Paul’s disciples, and add to the image of the united body. Jesus Christ “is before all things, and in Him all things hold together” (Colossians 1:17).

The author of Ephesians expounds on this idea: “We will grow to become in every respect the mature body of Him who is the head, that is, Christ. From Him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work” (Ephesians 4:15–16). This vivid depiction presents the body of Christ as a living, breathing organism. Built on love, the body of Christ depends and thrives on the faith of its members. ■

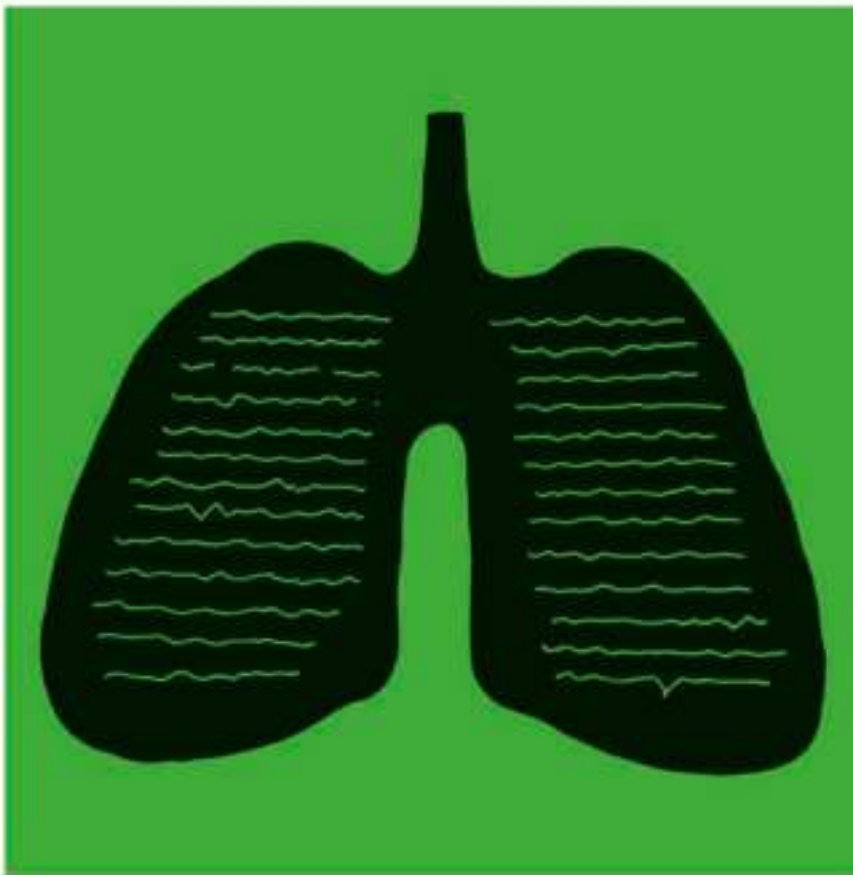
The concept of the Church

In Greek, the word *ekklesia*, usually translated in the New Testament as “church,” simply refers to an assembly called together for, say, a political purpose. The Greek version of the Hebrew Bible, the Septuagint, uses the term in this sense to describe various assemblies of the people of Israel. It is later—in Acts and the Pauline writings, above all—that the word starts to acquire the meaning of “church” as we know it today.

Generally, in the Pauline writings, the term refers to an assembly of believers in a particular city or region—as when Paul refers to the Galatians, for example, as the “churches in Galatia.” In the later New Testament books of Colossians and Ephesians, the use of the term “church” (*ekklesia*) further develops the more transcendent meaning of the body of all believers, united as the body of Christ and the Holy Spirit.

SCRIPTURE IS GOD- BREATHED

2 TIMOTHY 3:16,
THE BIBLE AS GOD'S WORD



IN BRIEF

PASSAGE

2 Timothy 3:14–17

THEME

Authorship of scripture

SETTING

c.64–67 CE Letter written by Paul in Rome.

KEY FIGURES

Paul The Apostle, who is imprisoned in Rome awaiting trial. He writes letters to various churches and disciples, including Timothy.

Timothy A disciple and former representative of the Apostle Paul. Timothy serves as the pastor of the church Paul founded in Ephesus.

Jesus The Messiah and Son of God, whose proclamations are divine. Jesus's teaching highlighted the divine authority of scripture.

Near the end of his life, Paul was imprisoned in Rome, awaiting trial before the emperor for charges related to his faith. During this time, the Apostle wrote several letters to colleagues and friends, including to his young disciple, Timothy. He had become a trusted aide to Paul as the two men traveled to Greek cities on both sides of the Aegean Sea.

In his second letter to Timothy, Paul encouraged him to deal with false teachers and remain committed to what he had been taught. As a child, Timothy's mother and grandmother had taught him the Hebrew scriptures,

See also: The Divinity of Jesus 190–93 ■ The Word Spreads 288–89 ■ Paul’s Arrest 294–95 ■ The Power of the Resurrection 304–05



[Scripture] is useful for teaching . . . and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped.

2 Timothy 3:16



which had prepared him to hear and understand Paul’s message that Jesus was the fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecies of a messiah who would redeem God’s chosen people.

These scriptures, Paul wrote, were “God-breathed” (2 Timothy 3:16). This phrase indicates that Paul himself understood the Hebrew scriptures to be God’s Word. It is little surprise that Paul,



who had been trained among the Pharisees as a rabbi, would see the Old Testament as coming directly from the Lord. Since Moses, the prophets had introduced their pronouncements with the phrase, “This is what the Lord says . . .” more than 400 times, while “the word of the Lord came” appears 245 times in the Bible.

Prophecies of old

At roughly the same time as Paul, the Apostle Peter writes that the prophets of the Old Testament never came by their prophecies based on their own interpretations: “For prophecy never had its origin in the human will, but prophets, though human, spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit” (2 Peter 1:21). These writings were not considered to be the prophets’ personal opinions about what was happening or what they wanted to see happen in the future. The prophets were mere agents; they spoke from God, and they had as much control over the content of their writings as sailors on a small boat in a storm. God’s Spirit was the wind that carried them along and determined their course.

Jesus speaks in ways similar to the Old Testament prophets, but with a unique development. Like the prophets, Jesus says that He speaks from God (John 12:49). Unlike the prophets, however, Jesus does not preface His sermons with “This is what God says.” Instead, »

Illustrated manuscripts of the Bible, such as this page from the Book of Kells, an Irish manuscript of the Gospels from c.800, both glorified God’s word and aided understanding.



Timothy

Timothy was a colleague of the Apostle Paul during several of Paul’s missionary journeys and his imprisonment in Rome. The son of a Jewish-Christian mother and a Greek father, Timothy had been taught the Hebrew scriptures (the Old Testament) from an early age. Paul used Timothy as either a coauthor or the recording secretary for his letters to the Philippians, Colossians, and to Philemon. During Paul’s life, Timothy served as his representative to churches in Thessalonica, Corinth, and Philippi, before he eventually took up the role of pastor in Ephesus. Paul wrote two letters directly to Timothy in Ephesus; these became the books of 1 and 2 Timothy. The latter, written from prison in the last days of his life, is considered to have been Paul’s spiritual last will and testament.

One Christian author in the eighth century claimed Timothy was present with Mary, the mother of Jesus, at the end of her life. According to *Foxe’s Book of Martyrs*, Timothy was beaten to death by a mob in Ephesus in 97 CE.



The Bible in its entirety has been translated into 363 languages, and the New Testament into 1,442. These pilgrims in Lalibela, Ethiopia, hear the word of God in their native Amharic.

proverbs. The prophetic books of the Old Testament (from Isaiah to Malachi) identify human authors, as do each of the New Testament epistles, except for the mysterious Epistle to the Hebrews.

The human authors of the Bible each display vast differences in background, language, and style, as well as geographical, cultural, and historical location. They wrote in ancient Hebrew, Aramaic, and the common Greek spoken in the first century CE. Some authors were highly educated (for example, Moses, Isaiah, and Paul), while others were farmers and fishermen (Amos and Peter), producing a wide variety of literary genres ranging from narratives and histories to genealogical records. Other biblical writings take the form of poetry, proverb, and apocalyptic vision.

The concept of dual authorship addresses the question of how to reconcile the interaction between divine and human in the scriptures. The Bible depicts authors as recording messages that they had

Apocrypha

The apocryphal books are an additional set of writings associated with the Old Testament. Mostly written in Greek, all were completed between 300–100 BCE, and came into use by Christians due to their inclusion in some Greek translations of the Old Testament (the Septuagint).

While many early Christian bishops did not accept the apocryphal books, recognition of them grew among Roman Catholic bishops in the late Middle Ages. They were formally adopted as scripture by the Council of Trent in 1546. Of the 18 apocryphal texts, Roman Catholics accept seven as scripture, plus the expanded versions of the books of Daniel and Esther. They can be found in the Old Testament of the Roman Catholic Bible.

He prefaces His pronouncements with “I tell you,” and uses this phrase nearly 140 times throughout the Bible. Paul indicates that he sees Jesus’s teachings as the Word of God when he introduces a combined quote of Deuteronomy and Jesus with the words, “Scripture says ...” Interestingly, this expanded understanding of the divinity of scripture also encompasses the writings of Paul himself. Peter says that Paul writes with God-given wisdom and warns that false teachers will attempt to distort Paul’s writings, “as they do the other Scriptures” (2 Peter 3:16).

Dual authorship

The Bible’s words on its divine origin stand alongside clear acknowledgment of its human authorship. Jesus attributes the Pentateuch of the Old Testament to Moses. The Psalms are attributed to King David, while David’s son, Solomon, is identified as the author of many of the

“

Prophets, though human, spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.

2 Peter 1:21

”

God's role in producing the scriptures is interpreted in three major ways.

The theory of **Limited Inspiration** argues God **guided** the authors of the Bible but did not preserve them from making **errors**.

The theory of **Verbal Plenary Inspiration** maintains that every word of the Bible has been directly **"God-breathed"** and preserved by God (2 Timothy 3:16).

Neo-orthodoxy teaches that the Bible was written by fallible humans and only **becomes** the word of God when He reveals Himself through it.

been given by God; describing visions; explaining and applying already-written scripture; and even conducting investigations before making a written account of the findings (Luke 1:3). For the most part, the Bible describes no fixed process by which the authors were "moved by God," but Peter teaches that the writing process was superintended by God, so what they wrote was God's word.

Divine authority

The belief that the scriptures were God's own words carried several significant implications in the minds of biblical figures. One was the total trust of, and belief in, scripture. The truthfulness of God's word therefore became a proverb: "Every word of God is flawless" (Proverbs 30:5).

Divine authorship implies divine authority. To disregard the message of the prophets was to disbelieve or disobey God. Even the writings of the Apostles were to be treated as God's commandments. When tempted by Satan, Jesus quoted scripture to rebut him. Jesus also appealed to scripture to answer

the challenges of the religious leaders of His day. This pattern of appeal to, and explanation of, Old Testament scripture was followed by the authors of the New Testament. Old Testament quotations or allusions are present in 26 of the 27 books of the New Testament—absent only in the Book of Philemon—making up about a third of its content.

For Paul, the divine authorship of the Bible is closely linked to its transformative power. The Apostle reminds Timothy that the "God-breathed" nature of the Bible makes it a fit instrument for addressing issues of faith and behavior, writing that the scriptures "make you wise for salvation through faith" (2 Timothy 3:15). Paul teaches that the faith that unites people to Christ comes by hearing the word of God. Delivering "what the Lord says," the prophet Isaiah wrote, "My word that goes out from my mouth, will not return to me empty, but will . . . achieve the purpose for which I sent it" (Isaiah 55:11).

The concept of the divinity of scripture has also influenced which writings are included in the

Bible by different Christian groups. Jews believed that divine prophecy, the basis for the scriptures, had ceased by 400 BCE, and Jesus Himself only acknowledged "the Law and the Prophets" of the Hebrew Old Testament as Israel's scripture. In spite of this, some Christians, such as those in the Eastern Orthodox Church, accept the so-called "apocryphal books," written centuries later—including Ecclesiasticus (also known as Sirach), 1 and 2 Maccabees, and Judith—as scripture. ■



England has two books; the Bible and Shakespeare. England made Shakespeare, but the Bible made England.

Victor Hugo





KNOW THAT THE TESTING OF YOUR FAITH PRODUCES PERSEVERANCE

JAMES 1:3, FAITH AND WORKS

IN BRIEF

PASSAGE

James 1:2–2:26

THEME

Demonstrating faith

SETTING

c.50 CE Jewish-Christian communities throughout the Roman Empire.

KEY FIGURES

James the Just Possibly the brother of Jesus and the leader of the Church in Jerusalem.

Paul Early Church leader, who was on the Council of Jerusalem with James.

Diaspora Jewish Christians who were scattered throughout the Roman Empire.

The Epistle of James is addressed to Jewish Christians scattered across the Roman Empire. This one letter, written in Greek, takes the form of a series of miniature sermons.

James begins with a reflection on how God tests faith in order to refine it (1:2–12), and later returns to the subject of faith in relation to good works (2:14–26). Good deeds, especially obedience to the Law of Moses, were part of the first Christians' Jewish heritage. The

Gospel message of salvation through faith in Jesus, however, made the relationship between faith and the good deeds that demonstrate faith a pressing question for Jewish believers.

Even demons believe

James rejects faith that is passive, asking, “Can such faith save them?” (James 2:14). He goes on to describe his opponents who claim that faith in Jesus relieves believers of the duty to live in a righteous way. These false teachers attempt to prove their faith simply by affirming the Shema, “the Lord is One,” the statement of monotheism central to Old Testament teaching. Dismissing this less than adequate show of faith, James says, “Even the demons believe that—and shudder!” He goes on to cite Abraham as the paradigm of living, active faith. When God promises Abraham a son, he says, Abraham “believed the Lord, and He credited it to him as righteousness” (Genesis 15:6).



Adherence to the Torah, the Law of Moses, was seen by James as an important aspect of faith. Other church fathers, such as Paul, believed that faith alone was the key to salvation.

See also: Entering the Promised Land 96–97 ■ The Nature of Faith 236–41 ■ Salvation Through Faith 301

Later, when God commanded Abraham to sacrifice his son, Isaac (Genesis 22), Abraham placed him on an altar, believing that God could bring his son back to life (Hebrews 11:19). For James, that obedience fulfills the claim that God had reckoned Abraham righteous. James then cites Rahab, a Jericho prostitute, who showed the same kind of faith when she sheltered two Israelite spies (Joshua 2). Both Abraham and Rahab demonstrated and grew their faith through honoring God with their actions under difficult circumstances.

The faith that saves

The conclusion that people are justified—worthy of salvation—by their works, or actions, seems to contradict Paul's views. When false teachers in Galatia taught Christians that obedience to the Law of Moses is an essential addition to faith in Jesus, Paul insisted that such works cannot

justify (Galatians 2:16). The apparent conflict arises because the two authors use the word “justify” differently. While James sees works as the visible evidence of faith, Paul speaks of justification as righteousness before God. Paul and James agree that the faith that saves is active, not passive. In Romans, Paul writes of “the obedience of faith” and he reminds the Galatians that what matters is “faith working through love.”

The relationship between faith and works is a key point of debate between Roman Catholics and Protestants. Catholics see works as a necessary addition to faith. Protestants see them as the result of genuine faith, and therefore affirm that salvation is *sola fide* (by faith alone). ■

Rahab demonstrates faith through action by helping two Israelite spies escape the clutches of her fellow Canaanites, in an image from a 12th-century French manuscript.



James the Just

There were several figures in the New Testament who bore the name “James.” Two were disciples of Jesus, but the third was one of Jesus's four brothers, later known as James the Just. This James did not believe in Jesus as the Messiah during His lifetime, but came to have faith in Jesus after the resurrection, possibly because the risen Christ appeared to him in person (1 Corinthians 15:7).

There is debate about which James wrote the New Testament Epistle of James, although the most likely author is James the Just. Tradition holds that James was martyred in Jerusalem for his faith in Jesus.

James came to be called “the Just” (meaning “the righteous”) because of his fidelity to the Law of Moses. Although he voiced the consensus of the Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15), which recognized that Gentiles did not need to observe the Law of Moses—specifically circumcision—to become Christians, he did believe that they should adhere to other Jewish practices.



JUST AS HE WHO CALLED YOU IS HOLY, SO BE HOLY IN ALL YOU DO

1 PETER 1:15, HOLINESS

IN BRIEF

PASSAGE

1 Peter 1:3–2:25

THEME

Holiness

SETTING

c.60–65 CE 1 Peter is addressed to believers scattered throughout Roman provinces in northwestern Asia Minor.

KEY FIGURES

Peter Although the letter is written in the name of the Apostle Peter, scholars are divided about whether or not he was the actual author.

The readers The recipients of the letter are mostly Gentile Christians experiencing persecution because of their faith.

In his letter to Christians scattered throughout Asia Minor (modern Turkey), Peter praises God for the salvation secured by Christ's resurrection. Although his audience is facing various troubles, Peter is confident of God's purpose in allowing their suffering, and of their future joy.

For the New Testament, salvation through faith in Jesus is not merely a release from the eternal consequences of sin. Salvation also liberates believers from sin's tyranny in their daily lives. One of God's primary tools for accomplishing this, Peter says, is suffering. In Peter 1:7, he uses imagery suggesting that God is

like a goldsmith, working on the precious metal of the believer's faith. The divine smith heats it so that impurities rise and can be skimmed off, until the smith can see His reflection without blemish in the purified gold. Enduring troubles righteously serves to refine the believer's faith and bring their character into conformity with God's holiness.

Divine holiness

Holiness is the most frequently mentioned attribute of God in the Bible. At its core, "holy" indicates separation. For God, holiness refers to His transcendence over all created things and to His alienation from unrighteousness and sin. These qualities are reflected in the description of things, places, and even people as "holy" in the Old Testament. Such things could be called "holy" insofar as they were separated from common use for the service of God, and as they were preserved from contamination by sin or ritual impurity. Israel was to be "a holy nation" (Exodus 19:6), and the construction of a "Holy of Holies" in the Tabernacle and Temple set that area apart as a place for God's presence.

“

I am the Lord your God;
consecrate yourselves and
be holy because I am holy.

Leviticus 11:44

”

See also: The Ten Commandments 78–83 ■ The Prophet Ezekiel 162–63 ■ The Prophet Micah 168–71 ■ Jesus Embraces a Tax Collector 242–43 ■ Fruits of the Spirit 300



Just as you used to offer yourselves as slaves to impurity and to . . . wickedness, so now offer yourselves as slaves to righteousness leading to holiness.

Romans 6:19



The holiness of God, and its representation in ritual aspects of the Mosaic Laws of piety, highlights a central tension in the biblical narrative: how sinful humanity can come into the presence of God when God’s holiness separates Him from sin. The Bible tells how only the High Priest could enter the Holy of Holies, and then only once a year

after ritual cleansing. Those who entered unworthily would be struck down by the holiness of God. Laws concerning ritual uncleanliness illustrated the separation of unclean people from God and others; they could not worship in the Temple, nor could they enjoy human contact without spreading uncleanliness.

Cleansing sinners

Although Jesus claimed to be the Final Judge, who would condemn unrepentant sinners to hell, He demonstrated that holiness did not make God unloving or unmerciful. Through His miraculous healings of, and fellowship with, sinners—those who did not comply with Mosaic Law—He welcomed sinners into God’s kingdom. Rather than approving their sins, He cleansed them. Those He healed became fit to worship God under Mosaic Law.

The Apostles taught that after His death, Jesus sent the Holy Spirit to remove sin and “sanctify” sinners (make them holy). Believers, they said, were already holy in the sense of being set apart by God



In Revelation 12, a star-crowned woman represents the Church born through Christ. Edward Robert Hughes draws on this symbolism in his painting *Star of Heaven*.

and called “saints” (holy ones). Yet, Peter says, believers should also demonstrate holiness through their character and deeds. That way, their persecutors could level no legitimate charge against them. ■



The ritual washing of feet on Maundy Thursday replicates Jesus washing the disciples’ feet at the Last Supper. It is an act of humility.

Key rituals of the Church

Worship in the early Church focused on two key rituals. The first was baptism, which initiated new believers and brought them together spiritually, bound by the symbolic purification and holiness of following Jesus. The other was a meal, the Lord’s Supper, celebrated during weekly gatherings of believers, which involved the ritual sharing of bread and wine. A forerunner of the Eucharist, this ceremonial meal recalled Jesus’s “last supper” with His disciples before

His crucifixion and symbolized the believers’ holy unity with Jesus and each other in the “body of Christ.” It also was the setting for Church discipline, preserving the holiness of the Church by removing those who persisted in sin. Restoration and readmittance to the fellowship of the table was accomplished through repentance. For early Christians, the Lord’s Supper anticipated the banquet that awaited them in heaven at the end of time.



**THE DEAD WERE
JUDGED
ACCORDING TO WHAT
THEY HAD DONE**

REVELATION 20:12, THE FINAL JUDGMENT





IN BRIEF

PASSAGE

Revelation 1:1–20:15

THEME

Justice for all

SETTING

God's heavenly throne room. An unspecified future time.

KEY FIGURES

Jesus The key figure in the Final Judgment, described alternately as “the Son of Man,” “the lamb on the throne,” and “the First and the Last.”**All humanity** All people, who ever lived, from all nations and all times.**John the Seer** The author of Revelation, who sees the events described in a vision.

The Greek word used in the book of Revelation for judgment originally meant “to sift,” and from there it came to mean choosing right from wrong. It essentially means that each human life will be examined according to God’s standards and sorted into what is acceptable and what is not. However, unlike today’s conception of judgment, which calls for justice here and now, in the first century CE people believed in an impending judgment. For many in the Greek and Roman worlds, this was at the end of their earthly life, at the point of death. Christians, however, building on Jewish beliefs, looked toward a future, Final Judgment in which all people of all places and times would need to give an account of their lives before God.

In the Old Testament, this future judgment is called “the Day of the Lord.” In one of the prophet Daniel’s visions, he sees a picture of God’s throne room, where God sits ready to judge the world. Many beasts try to establish their rule over the world, but then, at the

“

Therefore keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come.

Matthew 24:42

”

climax of the vision, Daniel sees “one like a Son of Man”—a clear reference to the name Jesus takes throughout His ministry—approach God’s throne. God then gives Jesus the authority and power to bring the Final Judgment to the world.

Royal return

At Jesus’s ascension, the Apostles were told that “this same Jesus . . . will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven” (Acts 1:11), which is thought to mean that Jesus will return bodily on earth one day. The image of a king arriving to bring judgment was familiar in the Roman world, where an emperor occasionally visited key cities to hold court—he would punish his enemies and reward his friends. The Greek word for this is *parousia*, which means “coming,” and early Christians understood Jesus’s return as the coming of God’s appointed king.

Jesus says that the criteria for the Final Judgment will henceforth be whether people trust Him as



The Whore of Babylon is introduced in Revelation 17 riding a beast with seven heads. An angel tells John that the heads represent the sinners Christ will defeat in the battle at Armageddon.

See also: The Prophet Ezekiel 162–63 ■ Daniel in Babylon 164–65 ■ Call for Repentance 172 ■ The New Jerusalem 322–29

Beliefs matching John's visions in Revelation

	Judaism	Christianity	Islam
A day of judgment	✗	✓	✓
Resurrection of the dead	✓	✓	✓
Separation of the righteous and the wicked	✓	✓	✓
Book of Life	✓	✓	✗
Book of Deeds	✗	✓	✓
New Jerusalem	✓	✓	✗

a savior: “If anyone is ashamed of me and my words ... the Son of Man will be ashamed of him when He comes in His Father’s glory with the holy angels” (Mark 8:38).

Many of Jesus’s parables speak about a coming Final Judgment. He explains in one parable that the weeds will be burned by fire, while the good crop will be harvested into God’s barn. Whereas the crops and the weeds grow side by side in the present, one day each will

become distinct when Jesus makes His judgment (Matthew 13:24–30). In another parable, Jesus speaks of His role in the coming Final Judgment as being like that of a shepherd separating sheep from goats (Matthew 25:31–46).

Signs and symbols

John’s visions, recounted in the book of Revelation, paint a dramatic picture of the Final Judgment. They begin in the throne room of heaven, where all the heavenly creatures are preparing for the scroll containing God’s final order for the world to be opened. At first, the creatures cannot find anyone who is worthy to open the seven seals that keep the scroll rolled. Then, however, John sees a lamb that looks like it has been sacrificed, standing alive on the throne: a clear reference to Jesus. As this lamb takes the scroll, all of heaven sings with joy, “You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals” (Revelation 5:9).

Out of the first four seals ride the “horsemen of the apocalypse,” one of Revelation’s most enduring »



John the Seer

The author of Revelation identifies himself as Jesus’s “servant John” (Revelation 1:1). Since the second century, it has been suggested that this John is the same as Jesus’s disciple John, brother of James and author of the Gospel and three epistles that bear his name. However, even from the third century CE, Bible scholars have argued that there is such a difference in style between Revelation and the other writings that it is unlikely they could have come from the same author.

Whoever he was, this “servant John” wrote down his visions toward the end of the first century CE while on the island of Patmos, off the coast of present-day Turkey. John writes that he is on the island “because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus”; scholars therefore believe that he was living in exile, and see this as further proof that authorities were already starting to persecute Christians as troublemakers.



He will judge the world ... by the man He has appointed. He has given proof ... by raising [Jesus] from the dead.

Acts 17:31



images. The riders are atop a white horse, a red horse, a black horse, and a pale horse, representing conquest, war, famine, and death (6:1–8). The four horsemen are traditionally viewed as harbingers of the imminent Final Judgment.

Evil destroyed

The events described after this are complex—John’s intention does not seem to be to describe his visions in a logical order, but rather to remind Christians of the finality of the approaching judgment.

Revelation 6–18 cover a series of vignettes in which John witnesses different symbolic judgments. One of the most well-known scenes in John’s account is the Battle of Armageddon, “the Day of the Lord.” The word “Armageddon” is used

“
You know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night.
1 Thessalonians 5:2
”

only once in the Bible, and it is thought to come from the word *har*, meaning mountain, and *Megiddo*. Mount Megiddo was the site of Old Testament battles, such as Deborah and Barak’s victory against the Canaanites. Whether this location

is intended to be literal or symbolic, it ties the final battle of humanity to early wars fought by the Israelites.

In the final battle, all the “kings of the whole world” (Revelation 16:14) gather at Armageddon. They are influenced by Satan, and bring their armies to fight with God for control of the earth. God, on the other hand, calls on Jesus to return. There, the Son of God strikes back at those willing to go to war with Him. John describes how “Coming out of His mouth is a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations” (Revelation 19:15); Jesus thus destroys the evil enemies of God, leaving only good behind. With evil vanquished, God appoints Jesus to replace existing systems of governance and rule over the newly established Kingdom of God.

The number seven denotes completion or perfection: fitting for the Bible’s final book, which describes a Final Judgment. In the Book of Revelation there are more than 50 references to the number seven.



Seven **letters** are written for seven **churches** in Asia (Rev 1:4)



Seven **spirits** stand before **God’s throne** (Rev 1:4)



Seven **angels** pour out seven **bowls** (Rev 16)



Seven **golden lampstands** accompany the son of Man’s entrance (Rev 1:12)



A **Lamb** appears with seven **horns** and seven **eyes** (Rev 5:6)



Seven **seals** are broken (Rev 5:5)



Seven **stars** are held in Christ’s **right hand** (Rev 1:16)



The Angel of Revelation, painted by William Blake between 1803–05, shows St. John on the island of Patmos gazing up at a mighty angel “robed in a cloud,” as described in Revelation 10:1.

This sets the scene for the Final Judgment itself. As the climax of John’s vision draws near, in Revelation 19–20, he sees a great white throne, in front of which is a vast crowd of all of the people who have ever lived. Jesus then opens the “book of life,” and every person is judged “according to what they [have] done” (20:12). Those whose names are in the book of life are welcomed into God’s new creation; those whose names are absent are thrown into a lake of fire, the final hell, where “death and Hades” (the underground world of the dead) are also thrown (20:14–15).

Humanity on trial

The Final Judgment is a crucial motivation for the holiness and mission of Christians. Although Christians are assured that they will be considered acceptable by God on the “Day of the Lord” simply because of their trust in Jesus—this is called “justification,” meaning that they are judged to be righteous because Jesus has

died for their sins and has cleaned their record before God—they will still be exposed to God’s judgment of their deeds. Paul writes that on “the day” fire will test each person’s “foundation,” which will reveal its quality, whether it was made from “gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay, or straw.” When this fire comes, if “what he has built survives,” Paul writes, “he will receive his reward” (1 Corinthians 3:12–14). Paul thus teaches that some will pass through judgment with nothing, while others will be rewarded for their faithful lives.

This impending judgment also promotes urgency in the missionary task. Jesus tells His disciples to be ready: His *parousia* may occur at any moment (Mark 13:33). As Peter says, “the Day of the Lord will come like a thief” (2 Peter 3:10). Because of this, Jesus’s great commission to His disciples is all the more urgent. God does not want anyone to go to hell, but wants all to have the chance of eternal salvation. ■



God is just: He will pay back trouble to those who trouble you and give relief to you who are troubled.

2 Thessalonians 1:6-7



Revelation as a letter to early Christians

The book of Revelation was written to a number of early Christian congregations who were facing the threat of persecution. Although seven churches are mentioned in the early chapters—those in Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea—the book of Revelation became important in encouraging all Christians.

The language of the book relies heavily on symbolism, and the recurring mentions of “Babylon,” Israel’s ancient enemy, are a veiled reference to the Roman Empire, which was putting increasing pressure on early Christians, because of their refusal to worship the emperor. Through its colorful language and dramatic visions, the Book of Revelation is a pastoral letter that seeks to encourage Christians to keep faith in the face of persecution, for regardless of the horrors of history, the risen Jesus remains the world’s ultimate King, and faith in Him as savior and Lord is the sole criteria for salvation from eternal condemnation at the Final Judgment.



The seven churches are guarded by God’s angels. At the start of Revelation, Jesus appears to John and instructs him to write to them recounting the coming vision.



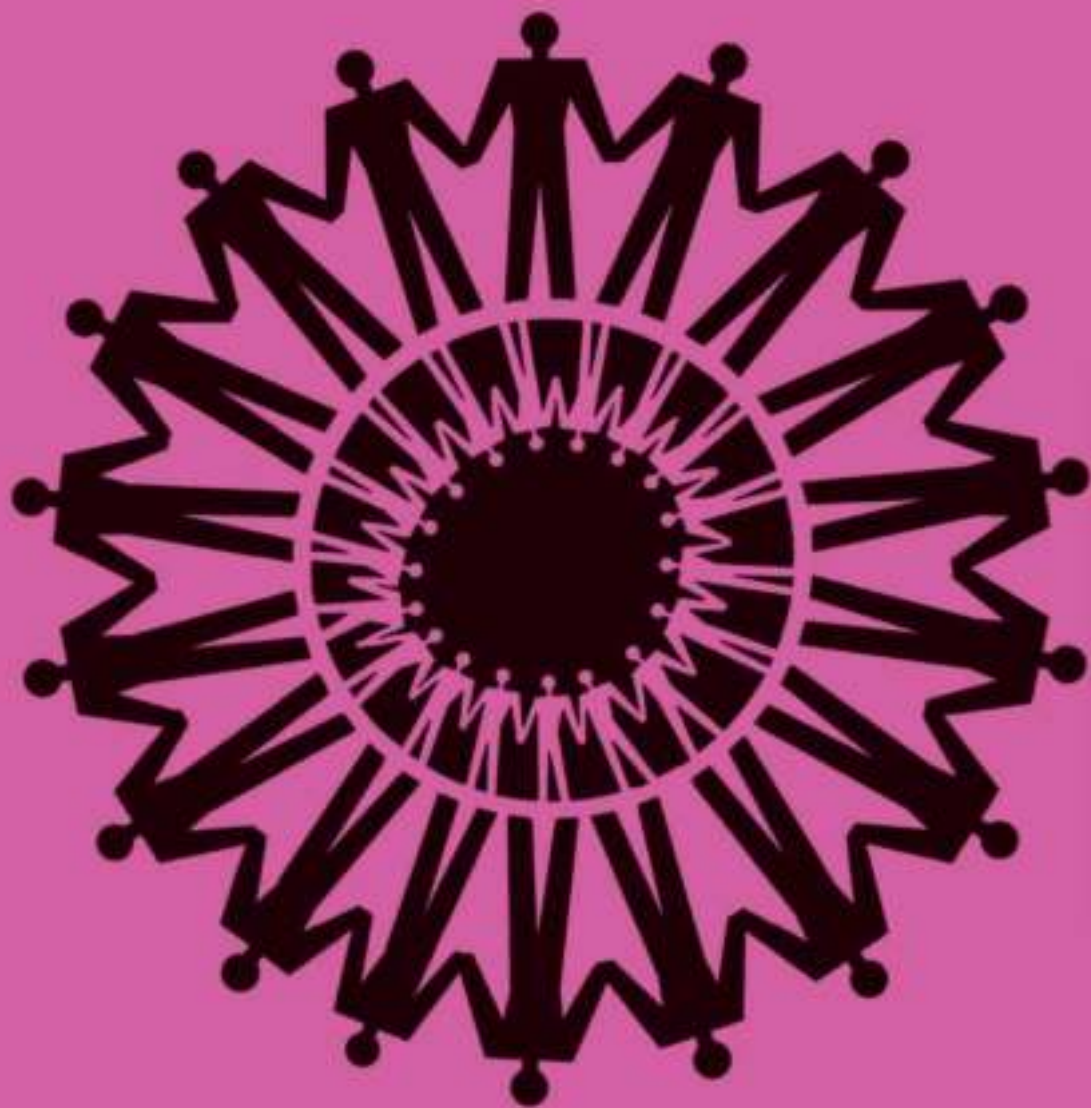
THERE WILL BE NO MORE

DEATH

OR MOURNING

REVELATION 21:4, THE NEW JERUSALEM





IN BRIEF

PASSAGE

Revelation 21–22

THEME

Eschatology (the end of all things)

SETTING

Future time Heaven and Earth.

KEY FIGURES

Jesus At the center of the vision, God's chosen King rules with peace from the New Jerusalem.

The saints God's people who are welcomed to the marriage feast of heaven and Earth.

John of Patmos The narrator of Revelation (sometimes identified as Jesus's disciple John), who received the vision described while in exile on the island of Patmos.



In the final pages of the Bible, the story of God and the world, which began with the first words of Genesis, concludes with an extraordinary vision of a glorious city where God reigns supreme. Despite recording many human failings and frequent rebellions against God, in its last chapters the Bible returns to the universal subject matter with which it began: the creation of perfection. Heaven

New Jerusalem is depicted in a fresco from the Rila Monastery in Bulgaria. It was painted in the 1840s after reconstruction of the ancient building following a devastating fire.

and Earth are renewed and the stage is set for God to manifest His loving relationship with the people He has made and saved.

John receives his vision of “a new heaven and a new Earth” after the judgment of the dead and the banishment to the lake of fire of those whose evil deeds and unbelief made them unworthy of inclusion in the Book of Life (Revelation 20:12–15). We are told that “the first Heaven and the first Earth had passed away” (21:1). The heavens and elements having been destroyed by fire, the way is cleared for God’s new creative work.

John adds a specific detail to this passing: “and there was no longer any sea.” For the Israelites, the sea was always a symbol of chaos and danger. During the Exodus, for example, the sea stood between them and safety

Apocalyptic language

The Book of Revelation is one of a number of biblical passages that can be categorized as “apocalyptic.” The term comes from the Greek *apokaluptó* (“to uncover”). Apocalyptic literature foretells cataclysmic events that will occur when the world ends; sometimes, as in the book of Daniel, apocalyptic symbols such as supernatural beasts represent contemporary persecutors. Such literature also typically presents a fantastical picture of God’s throne room

and those who serve in heaven. Trying to evoke what cannot be put into words, apocalyptic language uses vivid imagery and driving narrative to tell the story of God’s ultimate triumph. Although such language may be difficult to understand, clues link certain passages to their historical context. For instance, “Babylon” here is understood to refer to the Roman Empire. Christians through the ages have reinterpreted this language to proclaim the victory of God’s Kingdom and the expectation of God’s City of Peace.

See also: Creation 20–25 ■ The Garden of Eden 26–29 ■ The Fall 30–35 ■ The Prophet Ezekiel 162–63 ■ Call for Repentance 172 ■ The Day of Judgment 173 ■ Salvation Through Faith 301 ■ The Final Judgment 316–21

Characteristics of New Jerusalem



It **shines** with the brilliance of a very precious **jewel**, “clear as crystal,” which reflects the glory of God.



It has **12 gates** inscribed with “the names of the 12 tribes of Israel,” indicating the restored Israel.



The city is a **perfect cube**, “12,000 stadia in length, and as wide and high,” with room for all of God’s people.



Its **walls** are 144 cubits **thick** and “made of jasper,” sturdy enough to exclude the wicked.



There is **no temple**, because **God and the Lamb** (Jesus) live among His people. Heaven has come to earth.



There is **no sun or moon**, “for the glory of God gives it **light**, and the Lamb is its **lamp**.”

from Pharaoh, and in the New Testament, Jesus calms “a furious storm” that terrifies His disciples as they sail on the Sea of Galilee (Matthew 8:23–27). In John’s vision, all that threatens the life of God’s people has been banished from the new creation.

The new City of Peace

John then sees “the Holy City, the New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God” (Revelation 21:2). Jerusalem, which means “City of Peace,” had been a focus of life for the Israelites since it became King David’s capital city. Despite its name, it had also been a place of conflict from David’s time onward. Human efforts to bring about lasting peace had always dissolved into strife. Following the violent warfare of the previous

chapters of Revelation, John now sees a City of Peace, prepared by God Himself, being established on Earth. This signals the fulfillment of repeated promises throughout the Bible that one day God will end all world conflicts by asserting His peaceful rule. God’s chosen King, now known to be His Son Jesus, is the “Prince of Peace” and “Of the greatness of His government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David’s throne and over His kingdom . . . from that time on and forever” (Isaiah 9:6–7).

God with His people

The arrival of God’s home on Earth also satisfies the pledge that He had made to His people long ago, when He said, “I will take you as my own people, and I will be your God” (Exodus 6:7). There have been

moments throughout the Bible when this promise has seemed in doubt, when God’s people have strayed from His path, and when God has seemed distant and even hidden while His people suffer. But now, God is at home among His people, sharing the same space, »



See, I will create
new Heavens and
a new Earth.
Isaiah 65:17





The prophet Abraham (center) sits with other biblical figures in the New Jerusalem sculpted above the western entrance to the Abbey Church of Saint Foy in Conques, France.

and all the suffering of the past is wiped away. “There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away” (Revelation 21:4). John hears a loud voice from God’s throne announcing, “I am making everything new!” (21:5).

The shining city

John now gets a further glimpse of the New Jerusalem, as one of God’s angels takes him around the city, which shines with the glory of God. Jerusalem’s outer wall is made of jasper, a precious stone that is usually opaque, but here it is transparent; light passes through the wall, revealing what is within the city. Everything is exquisite: the enormous city gates are each made of a single pearl, and the city’s great street is pure gold.

In the Bible, the number 12, often symbolizing perfection, signifies the completeness of the nation of Israel. The walls around the New Jerusalem have 12 gates—three on each of its four sides—and an angel standing by every gate. The gates bear the names of the 12 tribes of Israel,

reassuring John that none of God’s faithful people will be excluded.

The wall has 12 foundations, inscribed with the names of the 12 apostles, and decorated with 12 kinds of precious stone. When the angel measures the city, its length, breadth, and height are each 12,000 stadia (1,400 miles/2,200km) and the walls are 144 cubits (about 200 ft/65 meters) thick.

Most striking of all, John notices that the Temple is missing from the New Jerusalem. The Temple had

“

For the Lord Himself will come down from Heaven, with a loud command . . . and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first.

1 Thessalonians 4:16

”

been the greatest building in the Old Jerusalem, being the focus of Jewish worship and the meeting point between heaven and Earth. Now, no such meeting point is needed, because God Himself lives in the city—heaven has come to Earth. The light of God’s presence shines from the city into the whole world, and all the people from every nation whose names are in the Book of Life stream through the gates, guided by God’s light, to bring their worship and devotion into God’s presence.

A vision to be shared

The angel brings John into the city, where he sees a mighty river flowing from God’s throne down the golden street. The Tree of Life, last seen in the Garden of Eden, is growing on the banks of the river. It is so large that it straddles both sides of the river, and so fruitful that it bears a significant 12 crops every year. Its leaves bring healing to the nations and finally do away with the pain and suffering that have marred humanity’s existence since Creation (22:1–3). God’s people joyfully serve Him here, and their new life goes on forever.

After receiving the dazzling vision of God’s promised future, John is so overwhelmed that he falls down at the feet of the angel who has been guiding him. But the angel lifts him up and reminds him that he is just a messenger. John should not be overawed by the image of the New Jerusalem, but rather by the goodness and glory of God the Father, His Son, and the Holy Spirit, who alone can bring it

“

Let us rejoice and be glad and give Him glory!
For the wedding of the Lamb has come, and His bride has made herself ready.
Revelation 19:7

”

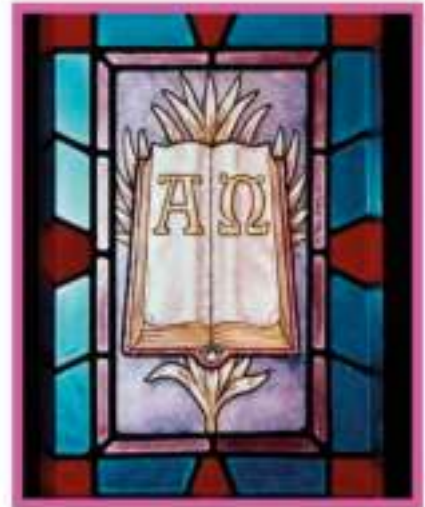
to pass. John is told to share his vision to motivate God’s people to do good. In the words of God, the angel says, “Let the one who does wrong continue to do wrong; let the vile person continue to be vile; let the one who does right continue to do right; and let the holy person continue to be holy” but warns, “I will give to each person according to what they have done” (22:11–12).

In the final verses of Revelation, John returns to an image that emphasizes the relationship of love that God longs to have with all

people. When John first saw the New Jerusalem, he described it as “a bride beautifully dressed for her husband” (21:2). Now, at the end of the vision, this “bride”—God’s people, collectively cleansed from sin and dressed in the robes of righteousness—awaits the groom, Jesus, God’s Son, the true king of all. The marriage and celebrations will signal the beginning of the new life of eternity, where heaven and Earth are wedded together, God’s home is among His creation, and all of God’s people, that is “everyone who does right,” will be released from sin and death to live in holy freedom forever. The vision ends with a longing cry for this future, “Come, Lord Jesus” (22:20).

Interpreting the vision

John’s vision in Revelation is the basis for Christian eschatology, a word that means “the study of last things” and is an attempt to describe the indescribable. His words depict the end of evil and the beginning of God’s reign of peace in awe-inspiring detail. Over the centuries, some people have tried to fit the visions of Revelation into a chronology, using them to predict



A stained-glass window depicts the alpha and omega, the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet, symbolizing God as “the Beginning and the End” (Revelation 22:13).

when the world will end. Given Jesus’s warning that “You do not know when that time will come” (Mark 13:33), it seems better to focus on what God’s future looks like rather than when it will occur.

One key theme of eschatology is recapitulation, which means that the end is a summary of all that has gone before, and a return to »

The Kingdom of Heaven



The terms “kingdom of Heaven” and “kingdom of God” are used extensively by Jesus in His teaching to refer to God’s righteous reign on Earth. The arrival of Heaven’s kingdom on Earth is the purpose of Jesus’s ministry. He says, for instance, “Repent, for the kingdom of Heaven is near” (Matthew 4:17), and uses it as the motivation for prayer, “Your kingdom come, Your will be done, on Earth as it is in heaven” (Matthew 6:10). In popular imagination, heaven is often thought of as a spiritual, non-physical realm. The early

Christians, however, building on the convictions of Jewish faith, understood heaven as the reality of living under God’s order, as directed by Him.

While some might perceive heaven as existing elsewhere, the Christian hope is for heaven to come to Earth, so that God’s rule is established in the physical world. Such a hope reassures Christians that the injustices of this life will be made right in God’s future, and that death is not the end, but rather—for those with faith—a gateway into God’s kingdom.



its original purpose. The Bible begins in Genesis with a picture of God in harmony with His good creation, and ends in Revelation with evil destroyed forever and that harmony restored. The reality of the long, hard history of sin and suffering that lies between is not simply denied, however. In Genesis, creation is good simply by virtue of its origin in God, but in Revelation, the future is good, both because of its origin in God and because it has been set free from sin by the death and resurrection of Jesus. From the earliest days of Christianity, believers looked forward to when

God would gather up those with faith in Him from the four corners of the world to celebrate God's glory. This picture, which appears in many of Jesus's parables, is stated by Paul the Apostle. God's purpose—"to be put into effect when the times reach their fulfillment"—is "to bring unity to all things in Heaven and on Earth under Christ" (Ephesians 1:10).

The promise of new life

Central to this "recapitulation" is the expectation that all God's people who have ever lived will be physically present. Throughout

A popular French print dating from around 1900 shows Christ waiting above the entrance to New Jerusalem to welcome those who have been redeemed.

the Bible, there is a growing understanding that death is not the end for those who have a place in God's family. Since justice is often not received in the present life, Old Testament prophets look forward to a future time when the wrongdoers will be punished and God's faithful dead will be raised (Isaiah 26:19). Jesus affirms this expectation and extends it when

He himself is raised from the grave to a new life. Christian logic sees a correlation between Jesus's resurrection and ours. Jesus is resurrected because He has defeated sin and death, and the grave could not hold Him. Jesus has ascended to heaven and is waiting for the moment when the present creation has "passed away" and God's new creation is revealed.

Jesus is described by Paul the Apostle as the "first fruits of those who have fallen asleep" (1 Corinthians 15:20). The words "first fruits" and "fallen asleep" are believed to indicate that what happened to Jesus will happen to those who die in faith, "that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in Him" (1 Thessalonians 4:14). At the new creation, Christians believe that they, too, will share a new life as all things return to their original purpose of worshipping and service to God in a relationship of love.

Heaven on Earth

For centuries, an image of the afterlife as a vague, heavenly realm where people float around playing angelic harps has captured popular imagination. The eschatology of the Bible has little to do with this

“

The perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality.
1 Corinthians 15:53

”

“
Creation itself will be liberated ... and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God.

Romans 8:21

”

idea. Christians look forward to the coming of heaven on Earth. This means that every part of the world we know will be transformed by the rule of Jesus, the King of the City of Peace, the New Jerusalem. Evil will have been destroyed, the old will disappear to be replaced by the new, providing a fresh start for all who believe. At death, Christians who have "fallen asleep," secure in God's presence, await resurrection in the new creation. Christian eschatology reaches a grand finale: at some unspecified moment, a sumptuous wedding feast will celebrate the marriage between heaven and Earth, God's home and ours.

However, eschatology, "the last things," is not only found in the future in the Bible. Another strong theme in the New Testament is that Jesus brings some of God's future into the present. His core message is, "The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!" (Mark 1:15). By placing all their trust in Jesus, Christians bring that kingdom into their lives. The "last things" begin now—through their prayers and deeds, empowered by God's Holy Spirit—and continue forever. ■

Hell and purgatory

"Nothing impure" will ever enter New Jerusalem, nor "anyone who does what is shameful or deceitful" (Revelation 21:27), which raises questions about the fates of the people who are excluded. Images of tortuous destruction by fire are often associated with hell. In Revelation 21:8, God warns that evildoers will be put in "the fiery lake of burning sulphur" and will suffer "the second death." The description of hell is another example of apocalyptic language and serves as a warning about being separated from God for eternity. Roman Catholics also affirm belief in purgatory, a place where God's people are purged of remaining sin through refining fire (1 Corinthians 3:11–15). By the Middle Ages, purgatory was believed to be a physical place where people were held after death to be made pure before entering Heaven.



Freed from purgatory, souls are welcomed by the Virgin Mary, God the Father, His Son, and the Holy Ghost (as a dove) in a 19th-century print by François Georgan.

DIRECTO



RY



DIRECTORY



Central to both Judaism and Christianity, the Bible has shaped the development of the world and human thought more than any other single work. Its influence is so great that, from ancient times to the modern day, many Bible stories have become inextricably intertwined with art, culture, philosophy, and society. The Bible is often deemed a single, cohesive work, but a more accurate view of it would be as an anthology of the writings of many authors that has developed through several iterations. In addition to foundational narratives, such as creation, the Ten Commandments, and the crucifixion and resurrection detailed in the main part of this book, many less well-known stories have also been woven into this tapestry of Jewish and Christian thought.

THE CURSE OF CANAAN

Genesis 9:20–11:26

Noah is the first person to plant crops after the Flood. Drinking wine from his vineyard, he falls asleep naked. His youngest son Ham sees him and tells his brothers, Shem and Jephthah. Shocked, they walk backward into the tent, so they cannot see their naked father as they cover him with a coat. When Noah wakes and hears that Ham has seen him naked, he puts a curse on Ham's son, Canaan, and his offspring, saying they will be "servants of servants" while Shem and Jephthah's offspring will be blessed. This story acted as justification for the Israelites' subjugation of the Canaanites. **See also:** The Flood 40–41 ▪ Covenants 44–47

A BRIDE FOR ISAAC

Genesis 24

Growing old in Canaan, Abraham sends a servant with 10 camels to his native lands to find a suitable

wife for his son Isaac. The servant prophesies that if any woman he meets at a local well not only responds to his request for water, but also offers pitchers of water for his camels, she will be the chosen bride. The young woman who does these things is Abraham's great niece, Rebekah. Her marriage to Isaac ensures the continuation of Abraham's lineage and fulfills his covenant with God.

See also: Covenants 44–47 ▪ The Testing of Abraham 50–53 ▪ Esau and Jacob 54–55

ISAAC FOUNDS BEERSHEBA

Genesis 26:12–33

Blessed by God, Isaac becomes a rich farmer, making the Philistines so jealous that they block up his wells, and King Abimelech asks him to leave the country. Isaac goes into the Negev desert where his servants dig fresh wells, and he prospers once more. Seeing this, Abimelech seeks out Isaac to apologize, saying that he now realizes that God is with Isaac. They make an oath of peace.

After a feast, Isaac's servants discover another well, so the place is called Beersheba, meaning "Well of the Oath."

See also: The Testing of Abraham 50–53 ▪ Esau and Jacob 54–55 ▪ David and Bathsheba 118–19

MOSES'S FLIGHT FROM EGYPT

Exodus 2:11–22; 4:24–26

When Moses's murder of an Egyptian for beating a Hebrew slave becomes known to Pharaoh, Moses flees Egypt. Arriving in the desert of Midian, where he will spend the next 40 years, Moses defends seven women from some shepherds who want to drive them from a well. Their father, the priest Jethro, invites Moses to stay, and he marries Zipporah, one of Jethro's seven daughters, who bears him two sons. This begins Moses's transformation into one of the most important prophets.

See also: Moses and the Burning Bush 66–69 ▪ The Exodus 74–77 ▪ The Ten Commandments 78–83

THE LAST DAYS OF MOSES

Numbers 27:12–23;
Deuteronomy 34

On Mount Abarim, Moses looks over the land God has given to the children of Israel. God tells him to make Joshua his successor, presenting him to the priests and the people. At the age of 120, Moses takes his leave of the people, giving instructions on how they should live. God then gives him a last look at the lands promised to Abraham and his descendants, so as to reaffirm the importance of Moses's mission and celebrate his faithfulness. When Moses dies, the Israelites weep for 30 days.

See also: Covenants 44–47 ▪ The Ten Commandments 78–83 ▪ Entering the Promised Land 96–97

ACHAN'S SIN

Joshua 7

After the fall of Jericho, an Israelite named Achan secretly pillages gold, silver, and a Babylonian garment from the city. In the subsequent Israelite attack on the city of Ai ordered by Joshua, 36 Israelites are killed and the rest are chased from the city gate, fleeing in terror. Later, tearing his clothes before the Ark of the Lord, Joshua appeals to God to save His people. God tells Joshua that one of the Israelites has broken His covenant, and will be punished. The next day, God identifies Achan as the culprit. After Joshua's encouragement, Achan admits to his crimes. As punishment, Achan, his family, and livestock are stoned to death.

See also: The Ark and the Tabernacle 86–87 ▪ The Fall of Jericho 98–99

THE BATTLE OF AI

Joshua 8

Following the death of Achan, God commands Joshua and the entire Israelite army to attack Ai once again—this time, with an ambush from behind the city. Approaching from the north with 5,000 men, Joshua lures the army out of Ai, allowing his forces to enter the city from the west. Unopposed, they burn it to the ground. The Israelites then go on to defeat Ai's army and kill all of its citizens.

See also: Entering the Promised Land 96–97 ▪ The Fall of Jericho 98–99

JEPHTHAH'S VOW

Judges 10:6–11:40

Jephthah, a great warrior, leads the people into battle against the Ammonites, vowing to God that he will sacrifice to Him the first thing he sees coming out of his house if he returns victorious. Fatefully, it is his daughter who runs out to greet him. He is struck with grief, but she accepts her fate. This brutal tale of human sacrifice has puzzled commentators. Some note that God does not explicitly endorse Jephthah's fulfillment of his vow and that the sacrifice itself is not confirmed.

See also: The Testing of Abraham 50–53 ▪ Herod's Infanticide 187

ARK OF GOD RETURNED TO ISRAEL

1 Samuel 5:1–6:21

After defeating the Israelites in battle and taking the Ark of the Covenant, the Philistines are

afflicted with a plague of tumors in every city the Ark enters. After suffering seven months of plagues, the Philistines finally agree to return the Ark in a cart laden with golden treasure in order to appease the God of the Israelites.

See also: The Ten Plagues 70–71 ▪ The Ark and the Tabernacle 86–87

THE MEETING OF SAUL AND SAMUEL

1 Samuel 9–10

Kish, a man from the small tribe of Benjamin, sends his son Saul to look for his stray donkey. Frustrated by the search, Saul's servant suggests they ask the seer of a nearby town for help. This seer is the Prophet Samuel, who anoints Saul and tells him God has chosen him to rule over the Israelites.

The blessing sanctifies Saul's new role, preparing the way for him to become the first king of Israel.

See also: Jacob Wrestles with God 56–57 ▪ Moses and the Burning Bush 66–69 ▪ The Prophet Samuel 110–15

SAUL, KING OF ISRAEL

1 Samuel 11

When Saul hears that the Ammonites have threatened the people of Jabesh, he rushes to their defense, rallying the people of Israel by cutting up two oxen and telling them that the oxen of anyone who did not join him in battle would be similarly butchered. The Israelites are victorious and Saul is declared king, having earned the respect of his people with his leadership.

See also: The Ark and the Tabernacle 86–87 ▪ The Prophet Samuel 110–15

SAUL'S FALL FROM FAVOR

1 Samuel 18

After slaying Goliath, David becomes a close friend of Saul's son, Jonathan. Jealous of the popularity and success of David, Saul realizes that God favors David above him. He therefore hopes to eliminate David by setting him the impossible task of killing 100 Philistines as a precondition of marrying his daughter Michal. When David accomplishes this feat, Saul grows more fearful of the young man's power. Saul's malice toward David is cruel and unwarranted, showing a turning away from God.

See also: David and Goliath 116–17 ■ David and Bathsheba 118–19

THE JEALOUS KING

1 Samuel 20

David suspects that the jealous Saul will kill him at a New Moon feast. He therefore asks Jonathan to tell his father that he has given David permission to absent himself from the feast. Saul's fury at this news confirms his murderous intentions. He tells Jonathan to fetch David, who must pay for this insult with his life, but Jonathan engineers David's escape. Here, loyalty to family proves secondary to aiding David, God's chosen king of Israel.

See also: David and Goliath 116–17 ■ David and Bathsheba 118–19

SAUL'S ROBE

1 Samuel 24

In pursuit of David, Saul and his 3,000-strong army go into the wilderness where they stop

by a cave, unaware that David and his army are sheltering inside. David quietly approaches Saul and cuts a corner off his robe. When David presents the corner of the robe to Saul—to show that he could have killed Saul but chose not to—Saul realizes that David is the chosen king of Israel, and the two make their peace. Although Saul has wronged David in the past, his show of mercy disarms Saul and demonstrates his virtuous nature.

See also: Esau and Jacob 54–55 ■ David and Goliath 116–17

THE WITCH OF ENDOR

1 Samuel 28

Saul has banished soothsayers from his kingdom, but when an army of Philistines threatens and God fails to answer his call, he turns to the Witch of Endor to summon the spirit of Samuel. From beyond the grave, Samuel refuses to help, telling Saul that God has chosen David to become king and that Saul and his sons will soon be dead. In the ensuing battle, Saul kills himself to avoid capture. This episode demonstrates that God's judgment is absolute and unavoidable.

See also: The Prophet Samuel 110–15 ■ David and Goliath 116–17

THE ARK IN JERUSALEM

2 Samuel 6

Under King David's leadership, the Ark is removed from Abinadab's house in Kiriath-jearim and transported to Jerusalem. When a driving ox stumbles on the journey, Abinadab's son Uzzah steadies the Ark with his hand and is promptly struck dead by God. David, in fear,

sets the Ark aside in the house of Obed-edom before finally taking it to Jerusalem three months later. By killing Uzzah, God emphasizes a tenet established in the Book of Numbers—that only the Kohathites should be permitted to carry the Ark, and, more broadly, that anyone who touches it will die.

See also: The Ark and Tabernacle 86–87 ■ Entering the Promised Land 96–97 ■ Rebuilding Jerusalem 133

ABSALOM'S REBELLION

2 Samuel 15

Under the pretense of going to Hebron to give sacrifices to God, Absalom, David's third son, rallies support for a revolt against his father. David, who is now elderly, flees Jerusalem, but his forces later confront Absalom at the Battle of Ephraim's Wood, where Absalom is killed in revenge by his cousin Joab. Absalom's unnatural rebellion, motivated by greed, is thus punished by a just God.

See also: Cain and Abel 36–37 ■ David and Bathsheba 118–19

NABOTH'S VINEYARD

1 Kings 21

When a Jezreelite called Naboth refuses to sell his family vineyard to King Ahab of Samaria, Queen Jezebel successfully conspires to have Naboth stoned to death for insulting God. After the king takes possession of the vineyard, Elijah visits him to tell him that his sin was so great that he will suffer Naboth's fate, that Jezebel will be eaten by dogs, and that his descendants will be outcasts. Seeing Ahab is truly repentant,

God relents and says he would not bring down these curses on Ahab and his family until after his death. In this way, while the deception and greed of Ahab and Jezebel bring dire consequences for his descendants, they allow for God to display His justness and mercy.

See also: A Prophet Hiding 124 ▪ Elijah and the Prophets of Baal 125

SOLOMON BECOMES KING

1 Kings 1:28–53

In poor health in his old age, King David needs to name a successor. Adonijah, his oldest son, proclaims himself king. Solomon, his younger son, is supported by his mother Bathsheba, the priest Zadok, Nathan the prophet, and the army chief Benaiah. David has Solomon crowned, and after David's death Solomon consolidates power by executing Adonijah.

See also: David and Bathsheba 118–19 ▪ The Wisdom of Solomon 120–23 ▪ Proverbs 148–51

JEROBOAM AND REHOBOAM

1 Kings 12–2 Kings 25

As predicted by the prophet Ahijah, Solomon turns away from God. Consequently, when he dies, God gives the lands in the north to Jeroboam, one of Solomon's officials, and 10 tribes of Israel, while Judah and Benjamin in the south fall to Solomon's son Rehoboam. Rehoboam imposes harsh working conditions on his people, and many flee north to join Jeroboam. Rehoboam's attempts to reunite the country fail.

See also: The Wisdom of Solomon 120–23 ▪ The Prophet Jeremiah 156–59

ELISHA'S MIRACLES

2 Kings 4:1–7, 38–44; 6:1–7

The Prophet Elisha exemplifies the divine principles of compassion and charity in four simple yet miraculous acts of kindness. First, a widow who owes money to her dead husband's associate asks Elisha for help. He tells her to pour her valuable oil into as many containers as she has. As she pours the oil, she realizes that its quantity has increased vastly, and she sells it to pay off the debt. Second, a servant unwittingly poisons a large stew with deadly berries. Using flour, Elisha removes the poison. In another miracle, there are only 20 loaves of bread to feed 100 men but when Elisha hands it out, there is plenty to go around, with some to spare. Last, cutting a beam, a man drops his axe head in the river. Elisha throws a stick, which brings the axe head to the surface, so that the building work can continue.

See also: The Raising of Lazarus 226–27 ▪ Feeding the 5,000 228–31

ELISHA AND THE CHILDLESS COUPLE

2 Kings 4:8–37

In repayment for bread and lodging offered freely by an elderly, childless couple in Shunem, Elisha promises they will have a baby within the year. This comes true and they have a son. However, when the child is a few years old, he dies. The woman lays him on the bed that the prophet used, before going to tell him of the reason for her grief. Consoling her, Elisha agrees to help the child. He goes to the woman's house and shuts himself

in the room with the child, who is miraculously restored to life. By giving Elisha power to bring the dead back to life, God shows that through Him, all things are possible.

See also: The Prophet Samuel 110–15 ▪ The Raising of Lazarus 226–27 ▪ The Empty Tomb 268–71

ELISHA'S SKIN CURE

2 Kings 5:1–14

Naaman, commander of the Syrian army, is advised by an Israelite girl captive to seek a cure for his leprosy from Elisha. The prophet tells him to wash seven times in the River Jordan. Believing the Jordan to be an unworthy river, Naaman at first refuses, but then relents and washes himself. His body becomes as unblemished as a child's, showing that even if temporarily obstructed by pride, faith results in great transformation.

See also: Baptism of Jesus 194–97 ▪ The Raising of Lazarus 226–27 ▪ The Healing of the Beggar 284–87

ELISHA'S TEARS FOR A KING

2 Kings 8:7–15

In Damascus, Ben-Hadad II, King of Syria, is sick, so he sends his servant Hazael to ask Elijah if he will ever recover. In tears, the prophet tells Hazael that not only will the king die, but Hazael will replace him and commit terrible crimes against the children of Israel. The following day Hazael suffocates the king and seizes the throne. Later, following the death of Hazael, he is succeeded by his son, Ben-Hadad III.

See also: The Prophet Jeremiah 156–59 ▪ Herod's Infanticide 187

JOASH, KING OF JUDAH

2 Kings 12:1–21;
2 Chronicles 24:1–27

At the age of 7, with the help of the high priest Jehoiada, Joash begins his 40-year rule of Judah. On the death of Jehoiada, the king and his people stop worshipping in the Temple. When his son Zechariah complains, Joash orders him to be stoned to death. In retribution, God allows a small Syrian army to conquer the army of Judah and raid Jerusalem.

See also: The Wisdom of Solomon 120–23 ■ The Prophet Jeremiah 156–59

DEATH OF ELISHA

2 Kings 13:14–20

On his deathbed, Elisha instructs King Joash to fire an arrow out of the window. This, he said, was “the Lord’s arrow of victory.” He tells Joash to fire the remaining arrows, but when Joash does so only three times, Elisha asks why he has not shot five or six arrows, as this would have completely defeated the Syrians. Now they will be defeated only three times. After issuing this warning, Elisha dies.

See also: A Prophet in Hiding 124 ■ Elijah and the Prophets of Baal 125 ■ The Chariot of Fire 126–27

HEZEKIAH’S REFORMS

2 Kings 18

At the age of 25, Hezekiah becomes King of Judah. His religious reforms demand the destruction of images, including Nehushtan, the bronze serpent said to have been made by

Moses. He purges the priesthood and centralizes the worship of God at the Temple in Jerusalem. This act represents an emphatic denunciation of impure gods and false idols.

See also: The Golden Calf 84–85 ■ Daniel in Babylon 164–65

DANIEL IMPRESSES NEBUCHADNEZZAR

Daniel 1:1–21

Four noble Israelites are selected to serve Nebuchadnezzar’s royal palace in Babylon. They are to be trained for three years and given the best food and wine. Daniel does not want to eat or drink anything against God’s Law, and he asks the chief official if they may eat only vegetables and drink water. After ten days, Daniel and his compatriots look much healthier than the king’s men, showing Daniel’s wisdom and virtue, and they become the most respected wise men in the kingdom.

See also: Joseph the Dreamer 58–61 ■ Daniel in Babylon 164–65

DEFYING THE KING’S FIERY FURNACE

Daniel 3

When Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego fail to take part in the worship of a huge new golden image which Nebuchadnezzar has created, he orders them to be burned to death. The furnace is built and the fire is so intense that the soldiers in charge of the victims are burned, but the three Israelites remain completely unharmed by the flames. Seeing this miracle, Nebuchadnezzar is converted, and says anybody offending God would

be cut to pieces. This story reflects the moral imperative to avoid worshipping false idols, while the conversion of the tyrannical Nebuchadnezzar reflects the might and reach of God’s influence.

See also: Daniel in Babylon 164–65 ■ The Road to Damascus 290–91

BECOMING A WILD ANIMAL

Daniel 4

Nebuchadnezzar dreams of a giant tree reaching to the sky being cut down, dispersing the animals sheltering beneath it, though the stump of the tree remains. Daniel interprets the dream as the king being driven into the wilderness to live like the animals, although the remaining stump implies that he will return to power when he acknowledges the Kingdom of Heaven. Daniel’s interpretation of Nebuchadnezzar’s dream introduces his ability to explain the significance of visions.

See also: Joseph the Dreamer 58–61 ■ Daniel in Babylon 164–65

BELSHAZZAR’S FEAST

Daniel 5

King Belshazzar of Babylon hosts a banquet for 1,000 nobles, who drink wine from golden goblets taken from the Temple of Jerusalem. When a finger appears and writes a message across a wall, the king promises riches for anyone who can interpret the sign. Daniel is summoned and offered riches and status in exchange for deciphering the message. Refusing the offer, he explains to King Belshazzar that God is displeased with his lack of

faith and his days are numbered. The king rewards him with high office, recognizing Daniel as God's loyal servant.

See also: Joseph the Dreamer 58–61 ▪ Daniel in Babylon 164–65

WATER INTO WINE

John 2:1–11

Jesus, Mary, and His disciples attend a wedding at Cana in Galilee. When the entire supply of wine has been consumed by the wedding guests, Mary comes to Jesus and tells Him what has happened. Jesus instructs the servants to pour water into jars and take it to the master of the banquet, who, upon tasting it, discovers it has been transformed into wine. Despite performing the miracle, Jesus initially showed reluctance when Mary approached Him, saying, "Why do you involve me? My time has not yet come." Jesus makes multiple references to His "time" or "hour" throughout the Gospels, alluding to His crucifixion and resurrection, when His blood, often symbolized by wine, will cleanse humanity of all sin.

See also: The Raising of Lazarus 226–27 ▪ Feeding the 5,000 228–31 ▪ The Healing of the Beggar 284–87

WOMAN AT THE WELL

John 4:1–42

Jesus meets a woman drawing water from Jacob's well. Although Samaritans are not meant to speak with Jews, Jesus talks to her, revealing Himself as the Messiah, saying, "Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water I give

them will never thirst." Many in the town come to believe in Him and they urge Him to stay. Jesus's interactions with the Samaritan woman and surrounding crowd are imbued with clear metaphorical connotations, as He demonstrates to those present that the water of life will provide sustenance to any who will follow Him, regardless of their nationality or origin.

See also: The Calling of the Disciples 200–03 ▪ The Good Samaritan 216–17 ▪ Road to Emmaus 272–73

THE WISE AND FOOLISH BUILDERS

Matthew 7:24–27

During the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus tells a parable in order to demonstrate the importance of following His teachings in daily life. He describes a man who faithfully practices the word of God as one "who built his house on the rock." Jesus explains that after the house is built, and when the rains come, the streams rise, and the winds beat against the house, it stays standing because of its solid foundation.

By contrast, those who do not practice the word of God are compared to "a foolish man who built his house on sand." For him, when the rains come, the streams rise, and the winds beat against the house, it crashes to the ground. Through this parable, Jesus signifies that through times of affliction, practicing faith in God will give believers the strength they need to persevere.

See also: The Raising of Lazarus 226–27 ▪ Feeding the 5,000 228–31 ▪ The Healing of the Beggar 284–87

BEHEADING OF JOHN THE BAPTIST

Mark 6:16–29

Following the death of her husband, Philip, Princess Herodias marries Philip's brother, King Herod. When John the Baptist insists that this union is unlawful and immoral, Herodias nurses a grudge against him. At a banquet, Herod asks the daughter of Herodias, Salome, to dance, before promising her any gift she chooses. At Herodias's suggestion, the girl asks for the head of John the Baptist. Although Herod has no quarrel with John, he carries out his promise. John the Baptist is executed, and his head is brought to Herodias on a platter.

This story demonstrates the vicious and brutal nature of Herod's rule.

See also: Baptism of Jesus 194–97 ▪ The Crucifixion 258–65 ▪ Paul's Arrest 294–95

A GIRL POSSESSED

Matthew 15:2–28; Mark 7:24–30

A Gentile in the region of Tyre and Sidon begs Jesus to cure her daughter, who is possessed by a demon. At first, He refuses, saying He has been sent to help the children of Israel, and that it was not right to take their bread and toss it to the dogs (meaning Gentiles). She replies that even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table. For her faith in Him, He tells her to go home where she will find her daughter cured. In doing so, Jesus rewards all those who show their faith in Him.

See also: Demons and the Herd of Pigs 224–25 ▪ The Raising of Lazarus 226–27 ▪ The Nature of Faith 236–41

FEEDING 4,000

Matthew 15:29–32; Mark 8:1–13

After feeding the 5,000, a crowd of 4,000 follow Jesus into the mountains. Many are lame, blind, or dumb and hope to be cured. After three days, in which He cures many people, Jesus does not want to send them away hungry. The disciples bring seven loaves and a few fishes, and with this amount of food, Jesus feeds the multitude.

See also: Feeding the 5,000 228–31 ■ The Healing of the Beggar 284–87

WOMAN CAUGHT IN ADULTERY

John 8:1–12

An adulterous woman is brought before Jesus by the scribes and Pharisees, who ask Him why the Law of Moses, which calls for death for adulterers by stoning, should not be carried out. Jesus says to the people, “Let he who is without sin throw the first stone.” The crowd disperses and Jesus tells the woman to go and sin no more. With this act, Jesus successfully evades the trap of those wishing to force Him to choose between holiness and mercy.

See also: The Golden Rule 210–11 ■ Jesus Anointed at Bethany 246–47

THE MAN WITH THE SHRIVELED HAND

Matthew 12:10–13; Mark 3:1–5; Luke 6:6–10

Angry that Jesus has been defying their rules about the Sabbath, and looking for reasons to bring charges against Him, some Pharisees in a

synagogue ask Jesus if it is lawful to heal on a Sabbath. Seeing a man with a shriveled hand in the synagogue, Jesus heals him. He then asks the Pharisees, “If any of you has a sheep and it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will you not take hold of it and lift it out? How much more valuable is a person than a sheep! Therefore it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath.” After this, the Pharisees plot how they might kill Jesus.

See also: Jesus Embraces a Tax Collector 242–43 ■ The Healing of the Beggar 284–87

A MAN BORN BLIND

John 9:1–38

Meeting a man who is born blind, the disciples ask Jesus if his blindness is due to his parents’ sins or his own sins. Jesus says that he is blind so that the work of God can be shown in him. “I am the light of the world,” Jesus says, and He restores the man to sight by pressing clay into his eyes and sending him to wash it off in the Pool of Siloam. The man, now healed, reflects God’s ability to work through people in order to show His love and power.

See also: Jesus Embraces a Tax Collector 242–43 ■ The Healing of the Beggar 284–87

LAZARUS AND A RICH MAN

Luke 16:19–31

Jesus tells the parable of a rich man who lives in luxury, and Lazarus, who is full of sores and lives in poverty at his gate. When they die, Lazarus is taken up to heaven by Abraham; the rich man is sent to hell. Abraham denies the

rich man any comfort, and refuses his request to send Lazarus to his five living brothers to warn them of their likely similar fate. Abraham says they have already been warned by the prophets. The message is clear—judgment will be fair, as we have all heard God’s message.

See also: The Testing of Abraham 50–53 ■ The Ten Commandments 78–83 ■ The Raising of Lazarus 226–27

THE EXTENT OF FORGIVENESS

Matthew 18:21–35

Asked by His disciple Peter how many times he should forgive somebody who has wronged him, Jesus says seventy times seven, and He tells the parable of the servant who owes a king money. When the servant pleads with him, the king relents and cancels the debt. The servant then finds a fellow servant who owes him money and has him thrown into prison when he cannot pay. When the king hears this, he berates the servant for not treating his debtor as he has been treated himself and orders for him to be imprisoned and tortured. The parable affirms the Golden Rule, and suggests that forgiveness is not a finite resource.

See also: The Golden Rule 210–11 ■ Parables of Jesus 214–15 ■ The Prodigal Son 218–21 ■ The Temple Tax 222

TEN CURED, ONLY ONE GRATEFUL

Luke 17:11–17

On His way to Jerusalem, Jesus is passing through a village when ten men with leprosy walk toward Him,

calling out for mercy. Jesus tells them to go to see the priests, and as they do so, they are healed. One of them, a Samaritan, returns to give thanks, and Jesus expresses His disappointment that only one man has done so, showing the importance of expressing gratitude.

See also: The Good Samaritan 216–17 ▪ The Healing of the Beggar 284–87

A BANQUET FOR THE POOR

Luke 14:1–24

On the Sabbath, Jesus heals a man in the house of a Pharisee. Afterward He tells a parable about a large banquet, where all invited guests make excuses and do not attend. In anger, the host tells his servants to go into the streets and invite the poor, the crippled, and the blind to come and eat with him, until the house is so crowded that there will be no room for any other guests. This parable emphasizes that, having been rejected by the religious people, God would ensure the salvation of all kinds of social outcasts.

See also: The Golden Rule 210–11 ▪ Parables of Jesus 214–15 ▪ Feeding the 5,000 228–31

THE TWO SONS

Matthew 21:28–32

In this parable, Jesus describes a man with two sons. The man asks both of them to work in his vineyard for the day. The first son refuses, but later changes his mind and begins working. The second son agrees to work in the field, but, ultimately, does not fulfill his promise. Jesus asks the crowd, “Which of the two did what his

father wanted?” They reply the first son. Jesus confirms this, and tells them that the prostitutes and tax collectors who repented to John the Baptist will enter heaven before them. Jesus explains that these sinners, despite their past actions, believed in God and repented. The crowd, however, with their hollow professions of faith, will not enter God’s kingdom.

See also: The Raising of Lazarus 226–27 ▪ Feeding the 5,000 228–31 ▪ The Healing of the Beggar 284–87

STEPHEN, THE FIRST CHRISTIAN MARTYR

Acts 6:8–7:60

Stephen, a deacon of the early church, is Christianity’s first martyr. He is a Greek speaker and a powerful debater, and the speech he delivers at his trial before the Sanhedrin in Jerusalem is recorded in the Acts of the Apostles. His last words before he is stoned to death for blasphemy are a plea to God not to hold the sin of his executioners against them. The cloaks of those who step forward to stone him are guarded by a Roman citizen named Saul, who is yet to convert to Christianity and change his name to Paul. Saul’s sins in his early life are thus framed against the piety of early Christian martyrs.

See also: Road to Damascus 290–91 ▪ Paul’s Arrest 294–95 ▪ The Power of the Resurrection 304–05

THE HEALING OF TABITHA

Acts 9:32–43

Tabitha (known as Dorcas in Greek), a well-loved Christian woman in Joppa, dies and her

body is placed in an upstairs room. The Apostle Peter, who has recently cured a paralyzed man in the town of Lydda, is sent for. Peter is taken into the upstairs room where Tabitha’s body has been washed and placed. Grieving women show him clothes that Tabitha had made for them. After sending the women out of the room, Peter kneels and prays. He then commands Tabitha to get up, and she rises from the bed, returned to life. Through the miracle of resurrection, the status of Peter as one of God’s primary miracle workers is reaffirmed, and Tabitha is rewarded for living a good and virtuous life.

See also: The Raising of Lazarus 226–27 ▪ The Empty Tomb 268–71

PETER IN THE HOUSE OF A GENTILE

Acts 10:1–11:18

An angel appears to the Roman centurion Cornelius in Caesarea and tells him to send men to find the Apostle Peter and bring him to him. Meanwhile, Peter has a vision from God telling him that he may eat “unclean” food as it is not unclean when God says it is not. A servant takes Peter to Cornelius’s house even though religious laws prevent Peter from entering the house of a Gentile. Peter realizes that God is telling him that He has no favorites and will accept all those who believe in Him and he baptizes everyone there. God’s treatment of Cornelius allows for a transnational approach to salvation, as Peter demonstrates that the Kingdom of God is open to all who have faith.

See also: The Word Spreads 288–89 ▪ The Council of Jerusalem 292–93

GLOSSARY

Amen An affirmation meaning “trustworthy” or “surely” that is often used to end prayers or religious statements.

Annunciation The announcement by the angel Gabriel to the Virgin Mary that she would conceive the Son of God by the Holy Spirit.

Anoint To apply oil or ointment to a person or object to mark their dedication to God.

Apocrypha (or apocryphal)

Books of the Bible added to the Hebrew Old Testament by Catholic and Orthodox churches. Jews and Protestants do not accept the Apocrypha as part of the canon.

Apostles Special messengers commissioned by Jesus to preach with authority in His name. These included 11 of the 12 original disciples and Paul.

Ark of the Covenant A wooden box overlaid with gold that God instructed the Israelites to build to contain the Ten Commandments.

Armageddon The place of God’s ultimate victory over evil. It is mentioned only once in the Bible, in the Book of Revelation.

Ascension Jesus’s ascent to heaven on the 40th day after His resurrection.

Baal The storm god of the Canaanites and the most important (though not chief) god in the Canaanite pantheon.

Baptism A Christian ceremony in which the “washing away” of sins with water symbolizes rebirth and admission to the Church.

Beatitudes, The A series of blessings that Jesus bestows on those with special qualities in His Sermon on the Mount. These blessings echo His teachings.

Birthright The right of a firstborn son to inherit a larger share of his father’s property than his siblings.

Blasphemy The offense of misusing or desecrating God’s name in action, speech, or writing.

Burnt offering A type of sacrifice common in the Old Testament—in which an entire animal is consumed by fire. Such offerings were either thanksgivings for God’s goodness or atonements for sin.

Canaan The land between the River Jordan, the Dead Sea, and the Mediterranean Sea. It is sometimes referred to as the Promised Land.

Canon, The From Greek for “rule.” It refers to the list of books accepted as part of the Bible.

Cherub (plural cherubim) An angelic being with a human face and wings that serves God.

Chief Priests The men in charge of Temple worship in Jerusalem.

Christ From *Christos*, Greek for “messiah,” the anointed one. In the New Testament, this is Jesus.

Circumcision The removal of the foreskin done when a Jewish boy is 8 days old as a sign of membership in God’s Covenant.

Codex A handwritten manuscript with writing on both sides of the page that can be made into a book.

Council of Jerusalem Possibly the first assembly of the Christian Church, in 49 CE. It affirmed that Gentiles did not need to adopt the custom of circumcision for entry into the community of believers.

Covenant A binding agreement, based on faithful loyalty, between God and His people.

Cubit An ancient measure, both of length and distance, of about 18 inches (0.5m)—the distance from the fingertips to the elbow.

Cult A system of religious worship. In the Hebrew Bible, the Temple cult was a system of sacrifices and rituals.

Cuneiform A writing system developed by the Sumerians that used wedge-shaped characters.

Denarius A Roman coin and the standard pay for a day’s work during the time of Jesus.

Diaspora, The The dispersal or scattering of large groups of people throughout the world.

Disciple A follower who serves Jesus Christ. In the Gospels, the term refers to Christ’s inner circle.

Elder A local community leader. In the New Testament, elders are senior members of the Church.

Epistle A letter. Twenty-one of the New Testament's books are epistles.

Evangelist One who preaches the Gospel of Jesus Christ to those who are not believers, aiming to bring people to recognize Jesus as Lord and Messiah.

Exiles, The The name given to expelled inhabitants of Israel after the Assyrian conquest of the northern kingdom in 722 BCE and also to those forced from the southern kingdom of Judah after the Babylonian conquest a century later.

Exodus, The The Israelites' release from slavery in Egypt and their journey to Canaan, the Promised Land, under the leadership of Moses.

Fall, The The disobedience of Adam and Eve that led to judgment of mankind. In Christian doctrine, this is when sin enters the world and pervades all humanity.

Gentile A non-Jewish person.

Gnosticism A general term for 2nd-century heretical sects that sought to live a purely spiritual life by way of a secret knowledge (*gnosis*).

Gospel The teaching that God offers redemption to humanity through the salvation Jesus Christ brought by His life, death, and resurrection. When written with an initial capital, it refers to the first four books of the New Testament.

Grace Abundant love freely given to humanity by God through Christ.

Hanukkah A Jewish religious festival lasting eight days that commemorates the victory of the Maccabees in 160 BCE and the rededication of the Temple.

Hebrew Bible The name used by some non-Jews to refer to the Jewish Scriptures. The Hebrew term is Tanakh.

Hellenism The characteristics and spirit of Alexander the Great's empire and its successors. Additionally, the attempt by those empires to impose Greek language, culture, and religion on the peoples they had conquered.

Herodian Of, or concerning, Herod the Great, king of Judea (37–4 BCE), or members of his family.

High place A raised place used for religious worship, hence a sanctuary. Often used in relation to shrines for Canaanite gods.

High priest The senior Jewish leader responsible for the nation's spiritual well-being.

Idol An image, often carved and made of wood, metal, or stone, which is worshipped as a god.

Israel and Judah The northern and southern Jewish kingdoms, respectively, created after the United Monarchy was divided in c.930 BCE.

Jehovah A name for God related to the Hebrew term *Yahweh*.

Jews The tribespeople of Israel and their descendants.

Judgment Day The day when Jesus returns to Earth. Some believe it is also the end of the world, when God will assess every human being by identifying and condemning sin and absolving and rewarding believers.

Judges Leaders who governed the tribes of Israel from the death of Joshua to the time of Samuel; and the name of the Old Testament book concerning that same period.

Kingdom of God The teaching that the entire world will come to accept sovereign rule of God; the Kingdom of God comes wherever God's authority is recognized.

Law, The Mosaic Law given to the Israelites by God, aimed at creating a society based on their obligations to each other, to the land, and to God under the Covenant.

Leprosy An infectious skin disease. In the Bible, leprosy denotes a wider range of ailments than just the modern definition.

Living God Term denoting God as a living, active, and powerful deity in contrast to the idols of nations opposed to Israel.

Lots, casting of A traditional Israelite method of discerning the will of God in conflicts or disputes.

Manna Food provided by God for the Israelites on their journey from Egypt to the Promised Land, with the appearance of coriander seed and the taste of honey.

Martyr Initially used to refer to one who spread the word of Jesus, it is later used to refer specifically to those who die for their faith.

Menorah A sacred candelabrum with seven branches used in the Temple in Jerusalem. It became an emblem of Israel and Judaism.

Mesopotamia Land between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers that included such cities as Babylon, Ur, and Nineveh.

Messiah Hebrew term meaning “the anointed one.”

Midrash A Jewish commentary on the Hebrew Bible.

Ministry The Old Testament associates the term with the work of the Temple priests. The New Testament cites Jesus as the model for Christian ministry.

Miracle An event defying natural laws that is usually attributed to divine powers.

Mishnah Jewish teachings, compiled in the late 2nd century CE, which forms the earlier portion of the Talmud.

Most Holy Place (also known as Holy of Holies) The most sacred part of the Temple in Jerusalem. It originally contained the Ark of the Covenant.

Ordination A ceremony in which someone is officially appointed into a religious leadership role.

Pagan From Latin *paganus*, meaning rural or of the countryside, the word came to refer to one who did not follow the one true God.

Parable A short story that uses everyday language and events to convey moral and spiritual truths.

Paradise A blessed place in which the righteous live. Paradise can refer to heaven or to the Garden of Eden prior to the Fall.

Passover The annual Jewish holiday commemorating the Israelites’ escape from slavery in Egypt.

Pentateuch A Greek word used by Christians to describe the first five books of the Bible that comprise the original Torah.

Pentecost A feast, celebrated 50 days after Passover, when harvest fruits were offered at the Temple. In the New Testament, the Holy Spirit descended on believers at Pentecost.

Pharaoh The title of the ancient Egyptian rulers.

Pharisees One of the main Jewish religious groups of the New Testament, known for their strict adherence to the Law.

Philistines Descendants of a people who possibly came from Crete, the Philistines infiltrated the eastern Mediterranean. Arriving in Canaan around the same time as the Israelites, they are their most notorious enemies.

Polytheistic Of, or concerning, the belief that there are many gods.

Praetorium Originally used to refer to a general’s tent in a camp or a military headquarters; also, the governor’s official residence in Jerusalem.

Prefect A title given to a local military or civil official of the Roman Empire.

Promised Land Canaan, the homeland God promised to the Israelites upon their escape from Egypt in Exodus.

Prophecy A message concerning the past, present, or future that is inspired and/or revealed by God and delivered by a prophet.

Prophets People who spoke words of prophecy. In the Old Testament, they are often called by God to explain the responsibilities and privileges of God’s Covenant.

Proverb A short popular saying that conveys a lesson about how to live wisely, often based on observations of everyday life.

Psalm A song, often used in worship to demonstrate praise and thanksgiving.

Rabbi From Hebrew for “teacher,” a title of honor given to a qualified Jewish religious teacher.

Repentance A complete change of heart leading to a change of action, involving confession of, deep regret for, and sincere turning away from sin to God.

Resurrection The giving of new life to a dead person, especially in relation to the raising of Jesus Christ by God after His death on the cross.

Revelation The disclosure of God’s will, nature, and purpose through the scriptures.

Righteous, The Especially in the Old Testament, the designation of people who lead lives that have spiritual and moral integrity according to God’s commands.

Sabbath The seventh day of the week, set aside as a day of rest and for the worship of God. It originally began on Friday evening for both Jews and Christians, but as Christ's resurrection took place on Sunday, this displaced the Sabbath for Christians.

Sacrifice In the Hebrew Bible, an offering made to God, often involving slaughtering an animal. For Christians, the death of Jesus Christ is the one sacrifice that secures forgiveness by God.

Sadducees A Hellenized aristocracy of Jewish priests in the New Testament who dominated both temple worship and also the Sanhedrin. They opposed the Pharisees and Jesus.

Sanhedrin A Jewish council, either local or, in Jerusalem, the supreme council that was directed by the high priest. Members included teachers of the Law, elders, and chief priests.

Scripture The biblical writings received as the word of God; for example, the Hebrew Bible and/or the New Testament.

Septuagint The name of the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible. The Bible of the early Church, the books of the New Testament were added as they became accepted.

Seraph (plural seraphim) Celestial being with two or three sets of wings that is a guardian of God's throne.

Sheol Used in the Hebrew Bible to refer to a grave, pit, or tomb, cut off from God.

Showbread "Bread of the presence," made from the finest ingredients, which was placed on a table in the Tabernacle and, later, in the Temple of Jerusalem.

Speaking in tongues

A phenomenon in which people speak in languages unknown to them to praise God or to deliver a message from God.

Spirit The innermost nonmaterial part of a human being—one's soul. The Old Testament sometimes describes the "Spirit of God." In the New Testament, the Holy Spirit is the third person of the Trinity.

Synoptic From Greek for "seeing things together." The Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke are known as the Synoptic Gospels, because they share much material and have similar frameworks.

Tabernacle The large portable tent that formed the sanctuary in which the Israelites carried the Ark of the Covenant during their journey from Egypt to Canaan.

Talent A unit of weight equivalent to about 75 pounds (34kg) in Old Testament times. In the New Testament, it was a unit of value worth the wages of a laborer for 20 years.

Talmud A Jewish work containing interpretation of, and commentary on, the Torah, and the primary source of Jewish religious law.

Tanakh An acronym comprising the initial letters of the three sections of the Hebrew Bible: the Torah (the Teaching/Law), Nev'im (the Prophets), and Kethuvim (the Writings), combined in one work.

Temple, The In Jerusalem, the place where sacrifices could be made. The First Temple was built by King Solomon. The Second was built after the exile and was the one known to Jesus.

Teraphim Household gods or images venerated by ancient Semitic peoples.

Torah A term that used to refer solely to the Pentateuch, but in Jewish tradition came to mean the whole Hebrew Bible.

Transfiguration The revelation of Christ's glory, witnessed by His closest disciples.

Transubstantiation The Catholic belief in the conversion of the wine and bread given at communion into the blood and body of Christ.

Typology The interpretation of figures or events in the Old Testament as foreshadowing those in the New Testament, particularly in relation to Christ.

Yahweh The name for God given by God to Moses. Yahweh stems from the letters "YHWH."

Zealots Jewish rebels who fought against the Roman occupation of Judea at the time of Jesus Christ.

Ziggurat An Assyrian or Babylonian tower in which each successive story is smaller than the one beneath it.

Zion Synonym for Jerusalem. The Temple was also known as Mount Zion. Zion is also used to refer to Israel, the Church, and heaven and is often represented as a peak extending into the heavens.

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