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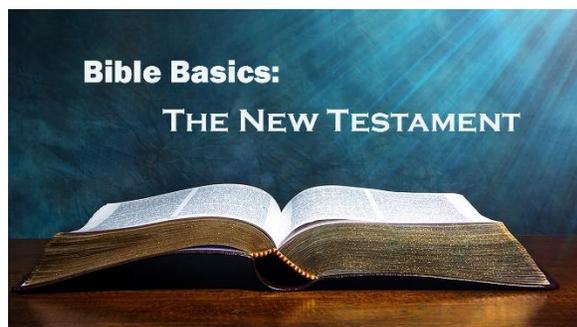
Title: Bible Basics: The New Testament

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Text: [2 Timothy 3:14-17](#)

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Today's sermon is part two of two sermons that are a bit different from usual. For these two weeks, rather than looking at a particular passage with a microscope, we're taking a high-level view of the Bible itself. Last week, we covered the entire Old Testament and the 400 years between the Old and New Testaments. People left last week's

service looking more exhausted than I've ever seen them look. It's called Bible Basics – for many, it is VERY BASIC - for others, it is brand new information.

By way of a short review, we talk about the Bible singularly as a "book" only because of its binding. It's bound together as one book but it's a book of books. The books that make up the Bible were written by various people for over more than 1,000 years and these books span a variety of literary genres. Many, in the Old Testament especially, were originally handed down orally from generation to generation then written on scrolls of parchment and copied by hand.

Over time, the sacred writings being used in faith communities were deemed authentic and were included in what became the definitive collection of scripture. It's sometimes called the "canon." There were hundreds of other competing scriptures that circulated, and they were either discarded or hidden. The debate about what's in and what's out of our Bible was mostly decided by the late 300s however people were still squawking about their preferences as late as the 1500s.

The first complete English translation of the Bible was done of John Wycliffe in 1382, but the Authorized King James Version of 1611 is often considered to be more authoritative because it was sanctioned by the King. It was produced during a particularly fertile period for English literature – think William Shakespeare - but also in a period when religion had become very politicized. William Tyndale had been executed in 1536 for his early

Protestant translation, although his work then became a major source for the King James Version.

Our Bible, but not every Christian's Bible, contains 66 books - 39 in the Old Testament and 27 in the New Testament. Today, we going to take a deeper look at those 27 books. This collection is centered on the figure of Jesus - sometimes directly, sometimes tangentially. Each of these books has its author, context, theme, audience, and purpose. We do well in our study of scripture to understand all of those nuances. Like the Old Testament, there are different literary genres in the New Testament as well. ¹

The first four books of the New Testament - Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John - are called Gospels. Gospel means "Good News." There is one history book - the Book of Acts. After that, there are letters, sometimes called Epistles. Some letters were written to one person, some written to one church, some written to a group of churches and others are general letters with no specific audience. Lastly, there is one book in the apocalyptic genre - the book of Revelation - and it's just one "revelation" - don't let me hear you putting an "s" on the end of Revelation. Books in the apocalyptic genre - like Daniel in the Old Testament - talk about a vision of the end of times, the apocalypse.

The first three Gospels - Matthew, Mark, and Luke are known as the synoptic gospels - synoptic means "at one look." I have a textbook from seminary still on my shelf called Gospel Parallels that lines the three synoptic gospels up in columns, so you can see the similarities between the three. Each of the synoptics tells a similar story, differing only slightly because of the intended audience and the interests of the author. For example, Matthew has deep roots in Judaism and Jesus' mission in Matthew is only to the Jews. It is why Jesus must be credentialed in the first chapter of Matthew with the long genealogy that traces Jesus' ancestry to Abraham. You won't find such credentialing in Luke and Mark because they are writing to a more Gentile audience and such a lineage is not as important.

Mark is universally accepted as the earliest Gospel written sometime between 66 and 74. Mark is also used as a source document for Matthew and Luke along with another missing document called "Q." "Q" is short for "Quelle," the German word for "source." A full 90% of the Gospel of Mark can be found in Matthew. It's also interesting to note that none of the Gospel writers name themselves. Names were assigned in the second century as a way of distinguishing between all of the gospels floating around at the time.

Keep in mind that if the earliest Gospel we have was written in the year 66 and Jesus died in approximately the year 33, there is a 33-year gap between the death and resurrection of Jesus and the first written record. Some of

that may have to do with the fact that people were expecting the immediate return of Jesus. It's only when he didn't return as soon as first thought that the need to write things down for the upcoming generation took hold.

Each of the synoptic Gospels tells the story of Jesus of Nazareth, including his ministry, gathering of disciples, trial, crucifixion, and resurrection. John is also a Gospel, though it is not placed with the synoptic Gospels because his story is so different. Rather than recording many of the facts about Jesus's life, the Gospel according to John focuses on the mystery and identity of Jesus as the Son of God. Just listen to the first two verses of John – "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. (John 1:1-2) – that's a far more heady way to talk about Jesus than him being born to Mary in a manger. If we relied on John for our Christmas story, there would be no pageants, no animals at the manger, no manger, no wise men.

The Book of Acts is the history book of the New Testament and recounts how the early Christians structured themselves. We are a church that is a part of the "Restoration Movement." The Restoration Movement was trying to restore the practices of Christians in the Book of Acts. It also tells of the journeys of Paul as he traveled around the world – at least the world of that day – starting new Christian communities and sharing the message of Jesus. Acts was written by Luke and is really "volume 2" of Luke. When the Bible was put together, it was more important to keep the Gospels together than to keep these two volumes together. If I were doing it, I would start the New Testament with Mark (because it was the first written) then Matthew, John, and Luke, then Acts so they could be together so from now on it is Mark, Matthew, John, Luke, Acts. Nah, I guess it just doesn't sound right.

The bulk of the New Testament – 21 of the 27 books – are letters. They are written from church leaders to churches and people in various parts of the world. The first fourteen of these letters are called the "Epistles of Paul" and are letters that tradition has credited to Paul. Historians are fairly certain that Paul himself, a very successful missionary, composed seven of the letters - Romans, 1/2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, 1 Thessalonians, and Philemon. There is less certainty about six of the remaining seven for various reasons – language, vocabulary, historical placement, and so on. The last of the seven – Hebrews – has near certainty that it was NOT written by Paul. Paul's importance in New Testament authorship led composers of the King James Bible to attribute Hebrews to him without much justification.

Paul was from the town of Tarsus in what is now Turkey. He experienced a dramatic transformation on the road to Damascus. While persecuting the fledgling Christian movement, Paul had a vision in which Jesus called him to

become his apostle to the Gentiles. As part of his missionary journeys across the northern Mediterranean region, Paul was a prolific letter writer, offering direction, support, encouragement, and correction to his network of congregations.

A very human Paul comes across in his letters. He sometimes turns angry and sarcastic, as in Galatians, when attacked by opponents. At other times, as in Philippians, he is very personable and appreciative. In Philemon, he comes across as manipulative, and in 2 Corinthians he seems almost depressed. From a theological standpoint, many say Romans is his best work. It was a letter written near the end of his missionary travels in the year 58 as an introduction to a congregation he wishes to visit in Rome. Paul will eventually get to Rome but only for imprisonment and ultimately, his execution.

Finally, "The Revelation to John," or "Revelation" for short is easily the most misunderstood book in the New Testament. Someday, we'll do a series on Revelation. It was probably placed last because it speaks about the second coming of Jesus, the ending of this world, and its replacement by a new heaven and a new earth. Revelation scares people because it uses imagery that is so different from anywhere else in the New Testament. There are scrolls and seals to be opened and there are plagues and dragons and bowls that all take some work to interpret. It was written on the island of Patmos.

There are two very different ways that Revelation has been used in the church especially in the last 80 – 100 years. The first way is a warning that the second coming is near, and we should be ready. Church folks have worked very hard to interpret all the signs of Revelation and point to things happening and say – "see, it's happening right now." It was the basis for fire and brimstone preaching that some, including me, grew up with and was used to scare people into believing. It was also the basis for the popular *Left Behind* series of novels from a few years ago. ² My great-uncle even wrote a small book trying to interpret the signs of Revelation that proved the end of the world would happen in 1956.

The other way to interpret Revelation – and, in the interest of full disclosure, this is the camp that I'm in – is to understand what John was saying to Christians in his time. I believe that he was saying that there was a struggle between the lordship of Christ and the lordship of Caesar and the lordship of Christ will prevail. If we look at every other book in the New Testament by asking what the author was saying to that time and how does it apply to us, why wouldn't we do the same with Revelation? Rather than trying to get Revelation to say something it doesn't, we will be better off listening to what it says. Revelation has more hope than most other books. There is a

paradise restored. No more death, pain, crying. No more darkness for God is light but it takes some work to get to that vision in the last chapter of the last book of the Bible.

That's the New Testament in a nutshell. Last week, I borrowed an analogy from Glenn McDonald where he compared the Old Testament to the basement of a house. It's the footers and the foundation, it's the plumbing and heating and electrical. Everything rests on it but it's not where we spend most of our time. We spend our time in the living areas on the main level of the house. For Christians, that's the New Testament. As Christians, the New Testament is what informs and gives meaning to our faith. ³ It is our responsibility to share the gospel – which means "good news" – with others.

Like the Old Testament, especially the laws of Leviticus that we looked at last week that we do not or cannot even attempt to follow, the New Testament also contains similar difficult passages. No one no matter how much they tell you they follow everything in the New Testament is not leveling with you. So, what then are we to do with the New Testament. Here's my counsel. Learn as much as you can. Don't look at passages in a vacuum but put them in the context of an entire picture. The popular bracelets of a few years ago would not be a bad place to start – WWJD – what would Jesus do?

In my Bible, I have underlined many passages and I have stars by a few passages. There is only one passage in my Bible that warrants both underlining AND a star. I commend it to you as the summary statement of all of the New Testament – "For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." (Romans 8:38-39).

¹ Much of the background on the overview material in this sermon is gleaned from audio transcript of an interview with Dr. D.A. Carson, Professor Emeritus at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, Deerfield, IL titled "An Overview of the Whole Bible," posted February 12, 2016 at www.desiringgod.org.

² Information on Revelation from *Evolution of the Word* by Marcus J. Borg. Harper Collins Publishers, 2012. p. 363.

³ Glenn McDonald daily meditation titled "OT vs. NT." July 9, 2021. Glenn's daily meditations can be found at <https://glennsreflections.com/>.