

Exploring the Bible



Prepared by Allen Browne

Version 2026-03-19



Prepared by Allen Browne for Riverview Church, 2026.

Unless noted otherwise, Bible quotations are from the New International Translation,
© Zondervan, 2011.

For information on Riverview Church, visit:

<https://www.riverviewchurch.com.au/>

Contents

1	Approaching the Bible	5
1.1	What is the Bible?	5
	Where did the Bible come from?	6
	What is the Bible's message?	6
	How did the Bible come together?	7
	Your questions.....	8
1.2	Hearing what God says	9
	Why are there different versions?	9
	Where do I begin?	11
	How do we hear what the Bible is saying to us?.....	12
1.3	Conclusion.....	13
2	The Old Testament	15
2.1	The story of the Old Testament.....	16
	Torah (Genesis – Deuteronomy)	16
	History (Joshua – Esther)	18
2.2	The Wisdom, the Psalms, and the Prophets	21
	Wisdom	21
	Prophets.....	23
2.3	Conclusion.....	25
3	The New Testament	27
3.1	The Gospels and Acts	28
	Matthew.....	29
	Mark	29
	Luke.....	30
	John	31
	Acts.....	32
3.2	The letters.....	34
	Pauline epistles.....	34
	General epistles	37
3.3	Conclusion.....	38

4	Recognizing the genres	39
4.1	Law.....	39
	Jesus' teaching on the Law	41
	The Law and grace in the New Testament.....	43
4.2	Narrative, poetry, and prophecy.....	45
	Narrative.....	45
	Poetry	46
	Prophecy.....	47
4.3	Conclusion.....	48
5	Living with uncertainty	49
5.1	Difficulties with Scripture.....	50
	Jesus' grandfather	51
	The LORD or Satan?.....	51
	When the text is uncertain.....	52
5.2	Relational faith	54
	What is faith?	54
	When you face a crisis of faith.....	56
5.3	Conclusion.....	58
6	The living word	59
6.1	How can the world see God?	59
6.2	We share in Christ's life together.....	62
	It's not about me	63
	The gospel	64
6.3	Conclusion.....	67

1 Approaching the Bible

Welcome to this series as we explore why this ancient book is as popular as ever, and how to handle it well.

The Bible raises lots of questions for us. You may be asking, “Where do I start?” Or if you’ve been reading it for years, you’ll have questions like “What do I do when I don’t understand something, when people disagree about what it means?”

Over the next seven weeks, we’ll take you on a journey that will give you a framework to make sense of what you’re reading in the Bible. Each evening, we start at 7 pm sharp, take a coffee break around 8 pm, and be finished by 9 pm. Feel free to ask questions. If you prefer not to ask in front of everyone, come and chat in the coffee break, or send an email to: allen.browne@riverview.church.

There’ll be notes to download each week. Bring them on your device, or print them if you prefer. (We’ll provide a few copies for those who can’t.) We also record the audio, and make a podcast available after the event. You can access the notes and podcasts through the *Church Centre* app, or this link:

<https://allenbrowne.blog/exploring-the-bible>

How are you feeling? If you’re comfortable, let’s begin with what the Bible is.

1.1 What is the Bible?

The Bible is the best-selling book of all time. With an estimated 6 billion in print now, and another 100 million printed each year, no other book comes close.

The word *bible* means “books.” It’s printed as one volume, but consists of 66 books. Open to the *Table of Contents* and you’ll see the names of the books.



Photo: Allen Browne, 2025.

It’s divided into two sections: the Old Testament and the New. The 39 books of the Old Testament describe how people encountered God before Jesus was born. The 27 books of the New Testament introduce Jesus and his followers. Together, the Old and New Testaments make up *The Holy Bible*—a phrase that means “the sacred books.”

The Bible provides a record of people who encountered God. That’s what makes it special. **The Bible is a revelation of God.** The “sacred books” describe God revealing himself to people across the centuries of human history. In its pages, we discover **who God is**, and **who we are** in relation to God.

The 2023 movie *Barbie* concludes with Billie Eilish asking a poignant question: “*What was I made for?*”

The Bible addresses that question: you are a child in the family of the sovereign of the universe. Our heavenly Father gives us our identity and our purpose.

So, who is this God? What is God doing? How do we discover the meaning of existence? That’s the story of the Bible. It’s in relation to the majestic God of the universe that we discover a significance greater than the self. We find our value as children of the one Jesus called *our Father in the heavens*.



“What was I made for?” from *Barbie* (Vevo, 2023)

Where did the Bible come from?

The Bible did not just drop out of the sky one day. It was not dictated by God. More than 40 authors recorded encounters with God in the Middle East, western Asia, and eastern Europe. Their books were copied by hand and widely read.

Eventually, 66 of these books were recognized as a trustworthy revelation of God. Christians treat these books as inspired by the Holy Spirit, guided and preserved by the Spirit of God in partnership with the human authors.

That makes these books definitive for the Christian faith, the reliable revelation of who God is and what God is doing in partnership with us humans in his world. We derive our identity and purpose from God, so hearing what God says in the Bible forms us into the mature human community God always intended us to be.

The character at the heart of this revelation is Jesus. God had been working in partnership with us for thousands of years (the Old Testament). Then we suddenly see a clear picture of God in the person of Jesus. The New Testament describes it like this:

Hebrews 1:1-3 (NIV)

In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom also he made the universe. The Son is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word.

In Jesus we discover what it looks like for God and humans to live in unity together. God’s Holy Spirit is remaking us into the image of God revealed in Christ. That’s what the Scriptures are all about. That’s why the Bible is so life-transforming.

What is the Bible’s message?

Humans have a long history of being tribal: our group versus yours. We divide into nations that fight each other for resources, wealth and power. Our rulers sometimes use religion to support their claims to power and encourage people to fight for them.

In ancient times, many believed that each nation had a god (or gods) looking after them. If they did right, the gods give them prosperity. If not, the gods would be angry, and their nation would suffer disasters like drought, disease, or defeat.

Around 2000 BC, in the region we know as Iraq, there lived a man named Abram (or Abraham). His people worshipped many gods, but Abraham received a revelation that there was one God for all the peoples of the earth.

It's hard to overstate how radical and countercultural that idea was. It threatened the identity of the Sumerian kingdom where Abraham lived. But instead of pressuring people into following his beliefs, Abraham heard God calling him to leave his city and his nation, to lay the foundation for a different kind of nation so the nations could discover what they were missing—the leadership of this God:

Genesis 12:1-3 (NIV)

¹ The LORD had said to Abram, “Go from your country, your people and your father’s household to the land I will show you.

² “I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing.

³ I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and **all peoples on earth** will be blessed through you.”

Abraham and Sarah left the culture and religion they knew, setting out to establish a family that would be the revelation of God to all the peoples of the earth. In time, their descendants grew into a nation led directly by God. But as the Old Testament tells us, this nation—called Israel—had difficulty living as God intended, and they struggled to survive among the warring nations of the region.

God sent prophets to correct his people, calling them back to following his ways. But Israel couldn't even get along as a nation. They split in two, and both those nations eventually fell to other powers. So, by the end of the Old Testament, there was no longer any nation to demonstrate God's leadership to the nations.

In this vacuum, Jesus was born to save his people and restore the nations to our heavenly Father. This is the story of the New Testament. The rescue of the planet is back on in Christ (God's anointed leader), so what God planned in the beginning is fulfilled in the end. That's the overarching message of the Bible, the story we live in.

That's the unfolding story within the Bible. But before we dive into that story, let's clarify how the Bible came to be the collection of books it is today.

How did the Bible come together?

How did Christians decide which books to include in the New Testament?

Only books from the first century were included, and only books that were recognized right across the churches. The list was formalized into a *canon* (the standard by which things are measured) in the fourth century. To be included, a book needed to be:

- connected to the apostles Jesus appointed (*apostolic*)
- from the first century (*antiquity*)
- consistent with the faith (*orthodox*), and
- recognized and used widely across the churches (*usage*).

This was a no-brainer for most books: the Gospels, Acts, and the letters from Paul and the other apostles. It was less clear for Hebrews, Revelation, and Jude. Some popular books did not make the cut: The Shepherd of Hermes and The Epistle of Barnabas.

For the Old Testament books, Protestant Christians simply accept the ones Jewish Rabbis regard as Scripture. The Hebrew Scriptures (called the *Tanakh*) contain the same books as our Old Testament, though the order is different.

Some churches (e.g. Roman Catholic and Greek Orthodox) have additional books in their Old Testament. Here’s how that came to be.

A couple of hundred years before Christ, Alexander the Great captured the whole world from Greece to Persia, including Palestine, so the Jewish people translated the Hebrew texts into Greek. We call this translation the **Septuagint** meaning 70 in Latin. It’s sometimes abbreviated to LXX (70 in Roman numerals) because it was said to have been translated by 70 scholars in 70 days.¹

The New Testament was written in Greek, and most early Christians spoke Greek, so they used the Septuagint as their Bible. But the Septuagint included some books that were not eventually regarded as Scripture by the Jewish Rabbis. That’s why some of the oldest Christian groups still use the Septuagint as Deuterocanonical (a second level of canon), while others regard them as apocryphal (not part of Scripture).

While I do not regard these books as a revelation of God (Scripture), they do provide useful insights on how people were practicing their faith in the time before Jesus came.

Your questions

What questions do you have about the Bible? We’ll cover much more over coming weeks, but are there things you need to know now to make sense of where we’re going or why the Bible books matters?

.....

.....

.....

.....

¹ The ancient *Letter to Aristeas* explains. See <https://www.pseudepigrapha.com/pseudepigrapha/aristeas.htm>.

1.2 Hearing what God says

Why are there different versions?

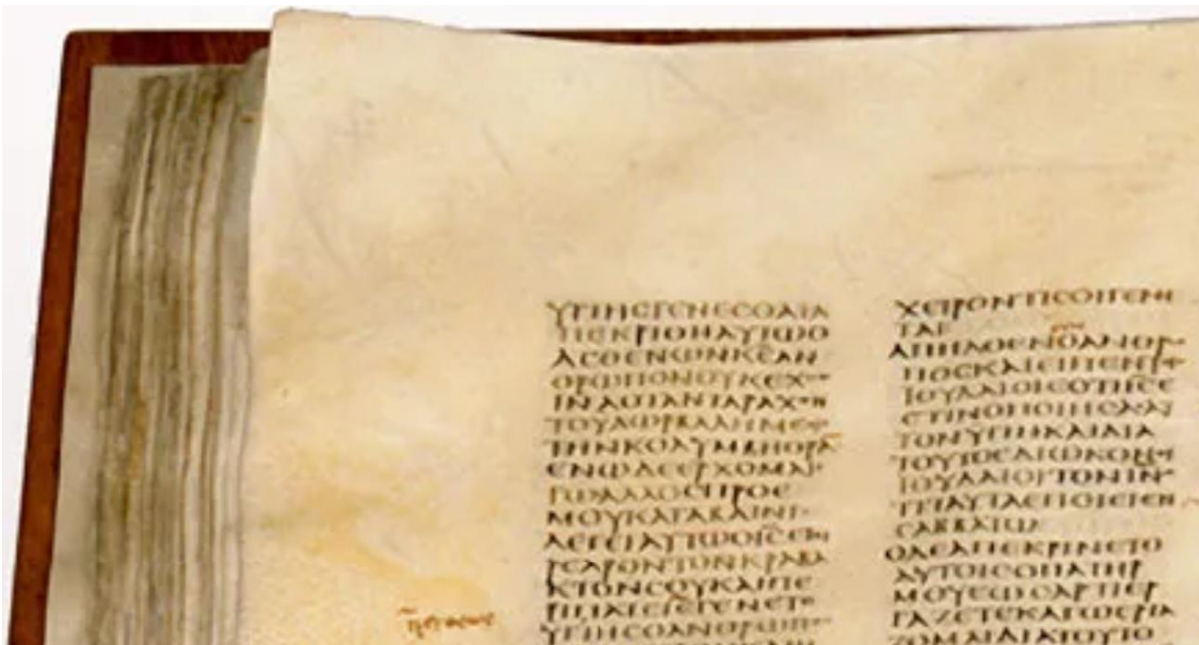
The Old Testament was written in Hebrew, a language read from right to left:



This copy of Isaiah was hand-written around 125 BC. It's one of the Dead Sea Scrolls found at Qumran in 1947.

Source: <http://dss.collections.imj.org.il/isaiah>

The New Testament was written in Greek, usually in all capitals like this:



Codex Sinaiticus is the oldest known copy of the complete Bible, copied out by hand in the AD 300s.

Source: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Codex-Sinaiticus>

You don't need to know Hebrew and Greek to read the Bible. It's been translated into more languages than any other book, and there are many translations in English.

If you speak more than one language, you'll be aware of the problems translators face. Some words are ambiguous: is *lead* about leadership or metallurgy? If someone offers you a *shot*, are they pouring you a drink or lending you a gun?

There's no exact match between words from different languages. The Inuit (Eskimos) have seven words for snow, where we have one. Greek has several words that translate to *love* in English. A Greek writer may choose one of those words for a reason, but not necessarily: they're synonyms (words with overlapping semantic domains).

Combining words introduces further ambiguities. What does *the love of God* mean? Is it God's love for us, or our love for God?

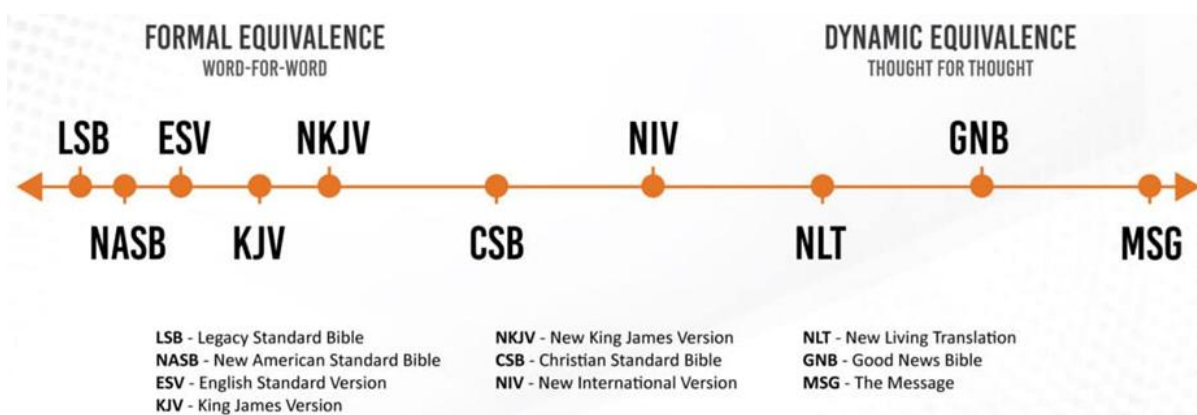
The grammar and word order are also different in different languages. In Hebrew, the verb (action) normally comes first, followed by the subject (actor), with a word that indicates the object in the sentence. So the Hebrew words in Genesis 1:1 are:

Hebrew words	English translation
b-eresit	In the beginning
bara	created
elohim	God
et	[next word is the object of the sentence]
ha-samayim	the heavens
wet	and [with next word as object of the sentence]
ha-erets	the earth

As you can see, translators don't just substitute English words for Hebrew ones. They must build a sentence that makes sense in language. So, which is better?

- A **literal** translation, sticking as closely as possible to the words, phrases, and sentence structure of the Hebrew? Or
- A **dynamic equivalent** translation, giving the clearest sense in English?

That's a sliding scale, and different translations make different choices:



Source: <https://reasonabletheology.org/why-we-have-different-bible-translations/>

The diagram illustrates how ten popular English translations handle this issue:

- The *English Standard Version* (ESV) tries to maintain a formal equivalence.
- *The Message* (MSG) provides a dynamic equivalent, using English idioms.
- The *New International Version* (NIV) tries for a balance between the two.

Which one is best? Use them all! By combining different approaches, we can hear the nuances of what's being said in a language we don't know.

You still need one as your default, for everyday use. That's a personal choice, but my preference is the NIV. It was translated by a team of scholars from different nations and denominations, so it's not biased by one person's ideas, one denomination's theology, or one country's values.²

When I want something more literal, I turn to the *ESV*. When I want a good turn of phrase in English, I reach for *The Message*.

What are your thoughts? What translations do you use?

.....

Where do I begin?

To read on your phone or tablet, download an app like [YouVersion](#).

To buy a printed Bible, visit a store like [Koorong](#) or an online retailer like [Amazon](#). It comes in different translations, with hard or soft covers, and various print sizes. It may have maps, indexes, and study notes.

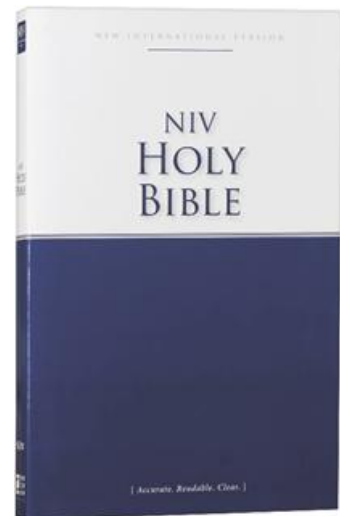
If you're not a reader, listen to the Bible as an audio book. While reading gives you time to pause and meditate on the text, listening helps you piece the story together.

Where do you start? Start with the New Testament. The first four books are accounts of Jesus' life, by Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. They'll introduce you to Jesus, the ideal place to start.

Each book has been divided into **chapters**, and each chapter has verse numbers for when we want to refer to specific bits of the book. For example, if someone refers you to *John 3:16*, open the Gospel of John (fourth book of the New Testament), turn to chapter 3, and within that chapter you'll find verse 16.

There are many resources to help make sense of what you're reading. Examples:

- [The Bible Project](#) has free videos, including an overview of each Bible book.
- **Commentaries** discuss how others have understood the Bible, book by book.
- **Bible Dictionaries** provide an A-Z listing of things you might want to look up: background information on people, events, kingdoms, and places.



² For details, see the Preface at the beginning of the New International Version (Zondervan, 2011).

- A **Concordance** is a printed index to all the words in a translation of the Bible. Today it has largely been replaced by Bible software.
- **Bible software** lets you search for words and phrases in the Bible and other books such as commentaries and dictionaries, and maps.

Your brothers and sisters in Christ are also an important resource. The Bible was never a private book. We encounter God in the community of faith, in the people who live with allegiance to Jesus Christ and follow his leadership.

What questions or suggestions do you have?

.....

How do we hear what the Bible is saying to us?

Context is crucial for understanding the Bible, as it is with any communication.

Words don't have meanings; meanings have words.

We know this in everyday life. Take a statement like, "*It'll never work.*" A dictionary can help if you don't know a word, but it cannot tell you the meaning of the sentence. The Concise Oxford English Dictionary gives 16 possible meanings for *work*, many that aren't relevant to this sentence (like the *works* of a clock, *working* the land).

Imagine you're in a meeting and the boss says: "We're betting the whole company on this invention we're developing. If you're not with me, speak up now." And you say, "It'll never work." What does that mean? It means you don't have a job anymore. It means uncertainty about how you'll pay your mortgage.

Imagine you're out for a drink with friends. One of them says, "Do you think we could ever time travel?" and you say, "It'll never work." What does that mean? It might mean you missed the cues about how they're feeling, how much they're missing their Mum who died suddenly about this time last year. It doesn't mean you've lost your job. The meaning is not just in the words; it's in the relationship.

Read the Bible **relationally**:

- In the *Old Testament*, the context is God's relationship with Israel, based on the Sinai Covenant. Understand what God was saying to them, and you'll be better equipped to understand what God is saying to us.
- In the *New Testament*, the context is God's relationship with everyone (Israel and the nations) in the person of Jesus the Messiah. In him, we're called into restored relationship between heaven and earth. We're living in his story.

If I don't hear the Bible as our relationship with God, I make it all about me. I end up hunting for verses that give me personal affirmation instead of participating in what God is doing to restore all things.

Some examples:

- “*I can do all things,*” says Philippians 4:13. But it’s not saying I have super-powers. What Paul means by “all things” is clear if you read the context.
- “*You will be prosperous and successful,*” says Joshua 1:8. But it’s not about me and my business venture. It was about the project God entrusted to Joshua.
- “*I know the plans I have for you,*” declares the LORD, “*plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future,*” says Jeremiah 29:11. But the “you” is not me in the twenty-first century. It’s plural—the nation that had just fallen apart and gone into exile.

A text without a context is a pretext ... for whatever you want to say. When you recognize the relationship between God and who he was speaking to, you won’t put your individual self as the centre of the universe. Remember:

A text cannot mean what it never meant.

— Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart,
How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth
(MI: Zondervan, 1993), 30.

In the coming weeks, we’ll focus on understanding the Bible in relationship with God.

1.3 Conclusion

What questions remain for you?

.....

.....

.....

.....

We’ve talked about what the Bible is, how its books were assembled, and the message at its core. We’ve discussed the translations available in English, where to start, and reading the Bible in relationship with the God who speaks.

Have we whet your appetite *to taste and see that the LORD is good* (Psalm 34:8)?

Have we sparked your desire for the wisdom of God’s word—*a lamp for my feet, a light for my path* (Psalm 119:105)?

It's the word of God because it reveals God. But it's not just a guidebook that God sent down from heaven:

The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth. — John 1:14

It's in relationship with God that we understand what the pages of Scripture are all about: the living relationship with God we have through Christ Jesus.

That's the reason no new Scriptures are being added to the Bible today. As the Holy Spirit births us into the leadership and life of the resurrected Messiah, we're living in God's story. The Word is coming to life in the peoples of the world.

Your questions?

.....

.....

.....

.....

2 The Old Testament

Welcome back. If you missed last time, the podcasts and notes are here:

<https://allenbrowne.blog/exploring-the-bible>. We covered questions such as:

What is the Bible? Where did it come from? What is its message? Why are there different versions? Where do I start reading? How do I hear what it's saying?

Are there questions we need to address before we continue?

.....

Tonight we explore the Old Testament, the revelation God gave Israel before the time of Christ. The 39 books are the ones Judaism recognizes as Scripture, arranged in categories:

- **Torah:** Genesis – Deuteronomy (5 books). These foundational books explain how God established Israel as his nation with a mission to the other nations.
- **History:** Joshua – Esther (12 books). These books tell the story of Israel, how they struggled as a nation in relation to God and the other nations.
- **Wisdom:** Job – Song of Songs (5 books). These books highlight the wisdom God provided for his people in the Torah, and the songs Israel sang in response.
- **Prophets:** Isaiah – Malachi (5 major prophets and 12 minor prophets). These books contain messages from God for his people as the kingdom disintegrated.



These Jewish Scriptures are set in the framework of the Sinai covenant that established Israel as a nation led by the LORD. As we'll see next week, we live in a new covenant relationship with God, established in Christ for Israel and all the peoples of the earth. The Old Testament is a revelation of God, but we don't live under the laws of the old covenant. That's crucial to making sense of the Old Testament.

2.1 The story of the Old Testament

The first five books lay the foundation for the whole story. They're called the *Torah* (the Hebrew word for Law or Instruction), or sometimes the *Pentateuch* (Five Books).

Torah (Genesis – Deuteronomy)

The earth and all its people belong to the God of heaven. But people turned from God and used violence to gain power over each other, trying to take over God's world. So, God called Abraham and Sarah, promising to create a nation to restore the blessing of his reign to the whole world through them.³ Jacob (their grandson) had twelve sons who grew into the twelve tribes of Israel. That's **Genesis**.

Jacob's family had moved to Egypt. A later Pharaoh enslaved them. God sent Moses to challenge Pharaoh's claim over them: "*Let my people go!*"⁴ With ten mighty acts, God demonstrated his authority to reign, showing Pharaoh to be a mere human. As God led his people to freedom, Pharaoh's army tried to stop them, so God opened up a way for his people through the Red Sea. Moses led them to Mount Sinai where the LORD gave them his laws for their nation, including the Ten Commandments.⁵ They agreed to the covenant that established the LORD as their ruler. They built a tabernacle (tent) for God to live among them and lead them. That's **Exodus**.

As the first nation to recognize the LORD's leadership, Israel was called to reflect God's character: "*You shall be holy, for I the LORD am holy.*"⁶ His laws defined the foods they could eat, ritual cleansing, sexual relations, and being a society that cared for each other: "*Love your neighbour as yourself.*"⁷ And just as other nations gave gifts to honour their gods, Israel offered sacrificial gifts to their God through priests who came from the tribe of Levi. That's **Leviticus**.

Since the Sinai covenant established them as the LORD's people, Moses now enrolls them (recording the numbers of each tribe and clan) before leading them towards the land God promised Abraham. But when they realize there are people living in the land who are prepared to defend themselves, they refuse to go in.⁸ So what does God do? How does God lead if people won't follow? God waits. For forty years. Every day he provides for these people while he waits for them to die. At the end of the book, the next generation is enrolled. That's the book of **Numbers**.

The final book of the Torah is Deuteronomy (meaning second-law). Since each generation must make its own commitment to the covenant, Deuteronomy repeats the story of the LORD redeeming Israel from Egypt, calling them to follow his leadership:

³ Genesis 12:1-3

⁴ Exodus 5:1; 7:16; 8:1, 20-21; 9:1, 13; 10:3-4.

⁵ Exodus 20:1-17.

⁶ Leviticus 11:44-55; 19:2; 20:26.

⁷ Leviticus 19:18.

⁸ Numbers 14.

“Hear O Israel: the LORD our God, the LORD is one. Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.”⁹ We hear the terms of the covenant again, with sanctions for disobedience. That’s **Deuteronomy**.



Moses led Jacob’s descendants out of Egypt to Sinai where Israel was founded as a nation led by the LORD. Modern place names are imposed in red on this map of the exodus. Source: Paul Wright, *Rose Then and Now Bible Map Atlas with Biblical Background and Culture* (Torrance, CA: Rose Publishing, 2012), 29.

⁹ This command from Deuteronomy 6:4-5 is one of the Jewish foundational prayers, called the Shema.

The remaining Old Testament books keep calling Israel back to covenant faithfulness. They struggled to represent God to the nations, eventually falling to the big kingdoms that dominated the Middle East. Yet, the Jewish people did not die out. The Rabbis of Judaism guided their people in how to fulfil the requirements of the Torah: preparing kosher food, activities to avoid on Shabat (the Sabbath), and so on.

So, what is the relevance of the Torah for us today? We are not called to comply with its laws regarding purity and cleansing rituals, kosher food, Sabbaths and feast days, sacrifices and worship—commands given to Israel, not to the nations. But we still see God revealed in the Torah: his sovereign authority over heaven and earth, his patience and persistence in partnering with humans to restore heaven’s reign to the earth, the foundational story of the nation that ultimately gives birth to the Saviour of the world.

Before we continue with Israel’s story, what questions do you have about the Torah?

.....

History (Joshua – Esther)

The next twelve books of the Old Testament continue the story of Israel from the time they entered Canaan until the land was lost to foreign empires.

Their first task after Moses led them to the Promised Land was to capture it from the Canaanites. Joshua led those campaigns. Then Joshua divided up the land between the twelve tribes of Israel. This is the book of **Joshua**.

Israel was now a nation ruled directly by God. But with no human leader, they didn’t follow the LORD’S instruction, and they were regularly attacked and plundered by their neighbours (Moabites, Philistines, etc). So in each generation, God raised up someone to rescue them: Deborah, Gideon, Samson, etc. These leaders were called judges: restoring what was right (just) for God’s people. This is the book of **Judges**.

Facing constant struggles against their enemies, Israel rejected their uniqueness as a nation ruled directly by God: *“We want a king over us. Then we will be like all the other nations, with a king to lead us and to go out before us and fight our battles.”*¹⁰ So, Samuel the prophet anointed Saul as king, but the power corrupted Saul, so God fired him and anointed David instead. That’s **1 Samuel**.

God promised the kingship would remain in David’s family forever.¹¹ David established Jerusalem as capital. He fought battles to defend his people. But David also struggled to handle power. In the end, he could barely manage his own family: adultery, incest, murder, and a son who tried to dethrone him. That’s **2 Samuel**.

¹⁰ 1 Samuel 8:19-20.

¹¹ 2 Samuel 7:1-17.

David's son Solomon built a temple in Jerusalem to recognize the LORD as Israel's ultimate king. It meant seven years of high taxes and forced labour. Then Solomon extended the burden, forcing them to build him a palace too. It was too much. When Solomon died, his son was king of Judah, but the rest of Israel broke away to form their own nation based in Samaria, worshipping golden calves in Bethel and Dan.¹²

God sent prophets (Elijah and Elisha) to call this northern nation back to himself, but in 722 BC Israel fell to Assyria, leaving only Judah. In 586 BC, Judah fell to Babylon. The story of life in the kingdoms of Israel and Judah is told in **1–2 Kings**.



The Assyrian kingdom in the eighth century BC.

Source: Carl G. Rasmussen, *Zondervan Atlas of the Bible*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010), 160.

When Babylon captured Jerusalem, they took anyone of significant to live in exile. When Persia captured Babylon, these exiles were encouraged to return and rebuild. Ezra led some back and taught them the Torah. Nehemiah led others back and rebuilt Jerusalem's defensive walls. But many did not return, like Esther who'd married a Persian king. These are the stories in **Ezra**, **Nehemiah**, and **Esther**.

To maintain the flow of the story, we skipped over Ruth and Chronicles. In the book of **Ruth**, love wins, so a foreigner is included in the regal line of King David.

1 and 2 Chronicles retells Israel's story from a later perspective. After listing those who returned from exile, Chronicles focuses on the reign of David and Solomon. They can't have a son of David as king since they're ruled by Persia. Then they're ruled by Greece when Alexander the Great captures Persia. As the centuries go by, retelling the story of David and his son keeps alive the hope that God would still regather his people and fulfill his promise that a son of David would reign over them forever.

¹² 2 Kings 12.

What questions do you have about these books and the story they tell?

.....

.....

One of the difficulties we face in these books is the constant stream of violence. Did God authorize war in the book of Joshua? In Judges, the violence spirals downwards until Israel almost wipes out one of their own tribes. David is lauded as a great warrior who killed tens of thousands. Israel's kings do despicable things. Why is all this in the Bible? What does it say about God?

If we had only the Old Testament, we might conclude (as some forms of Judaism do) that violence is justified. But if we recognize Jesus as God's anointed leader, he did not fight as David did. Jesus insisted it was wrong to, *'love your neighbour and hate your enemy.'* Loving our enemies is the only way to reflect God's character.¹³

The world was already compromised before Israel's story began. Violence began with Cain murdering his brother and establishing a society based on violence (Genesis 4). Violence corrupts our humanness (Genesis 6:11). Nations use war to build kingdoms (Genesis 10:9-12). They want to take divine power into human hands (Genesis 11:4). But God did not walk away from the violent world. He called Abraham, establishing the people through whom he will restore the blessing of his reign to the nations (Genesis 12:1-3).

The nation of Israel was birthed in a world where nations use violence to gain power. God didn't introduce war; it came with the territory. To have a nation among all the warring nations of the earth, God accommodates himself to the fallen world.

Yes, it seems to compromise God's character. But what would you do if your children did evil? Would you walk away and reject them to protect your own integrity? Or would you stick with them and be regarded as guilty by association? God chooses faithfulness to his people even when they misrepresent them. That theme repeats over and over in the Old Testament (e.g. Genesis 12:11-20; 20:1-7).

There are clues that the violence of his people—even King David—was displeasing to the LORD. David explains why he was not permitted to build a temple for the LORD: *"This word of the LORD came to me: 'You have shed much blood and have fought many wars. You are not to build a house for my Name, because you have shed much blood on the earth in my sight.'"* (1 Chronicles 22:8)

What we read in the Old Testament must be interpreted in the context of their relationship with God. Our relationship with God in the new covenant is not the same as Israel's relationship with God as a nation among warring nations. Yet the story of Israel is a revelation of God's faithfulness to his people in a compromised world.

¹³ Matthew 5:43-46.

How does this sit with you? Thoughts?

.....

.....

2.2 The Wisdom, the Psalms, and the Prophets

The Torah and History books fit together as an unfolding story (Genesis – 2 Chronicles). The remaining books do not follow chronologically. They're grouped by genre:

- **Wisdom:** 5 books of wisdom and song (Job – Song of Songs)
- **Prophets:** 5 major (Isaiah – Daniel), and 12 minor prophets (Hosea – Malachi).

Let's check out the books in these categories.

Wisdom

The book of **Job** is a drama about why bad things happen to good people. Job lived well, but all at once he lost his businesses, his children, and his health. He asks why God turned against him. Is God unjust, or is life meaningless?

Job's friends assure him God is not unjust. They call Job to admit he's the one at fault and repent. Their blame leaves Job feeling even more rejected and misunderstood.

Job wants to plead his case before God. Eventually he gets that opportunity. God explains that humans are incapable of understanding how God runs the world. Job agrees he doesn't understand, but the fact that God gave him an audience satisfies Job.

In the prologue, we were told something those living in the drama did not know: Job's sufferings were connected to something going on in a higher court. In the epilogue, God declares Job to be in the right, and those who condemned are in the wrong. Suffering does not prove sinfulness, but it can reveal faithfulness.

150 songs make up the **Psalms**, the largest book in in the Bible. There are songs of praise, hymns about God's character, declarations of his sovereignty, calls so align with his wisdom, expressions of thanksgiving and trust. But the biggest category is lament: people calling on God to help them in their sufferings and struggles.

The Psalter was assembled after the return from exile and grouped into five "books" (e.g. Psalms 1–41 = "Book 1"). The collators added titles to many psalms to help us make sense of them. For example, if the heading says, "Of David," it helps to know we're listening to the king's voice. When the king says, "The LORD is my shepherd," he's submitting to God's authority.

Together, the five "books" within Psalms tell Israel's story.

In Books 1 and 2, David struggles with his enemies. In Book 3, the kingdoms of Israel

The Five Books of the Psalter

Book 1: Psalms 1-41

Book 2: Psalms 42-72

Book 3: Psalms 73-89

Book 4: Psalms 90-106

Book 5: Psalms 107-150

and Judah fall to their enemies (Psalms 80 & 89). In Book 4, they've gone into exile, but they still proclaim, "The LORD reigns." In Book 5, while still under foreign rule, David's voice rises again as God's promise of the anointed ruler to come (Messiah).¹⁴

The book of **Proverbs** calls God's people to align with the wisdom of the Torah. "*The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge*" (1:7). They tell the next generation, "*The commandment is a lamp, the Torah a light, and the reproofs of discipline are the way of life*" (6:23). We do not get ahead by doing wrong: "*There is a way that seems to be right to us, but in the end it leads to death*" (14:12; 16:25).

Ecclesiastes is a wisdom book that calls into question what we do with our lives. Is there meaning in life? What are you living for? Will you be satisfied with the choices you've made when you reach the end of your life? The choices you're making today are your answers to these questions.

Song of Songs is a love poem. The woman and the man want to be together, but they still maintain relationship with friends. In Hebrew, the pronouns (feminine, male, and plural) indicate when the woman, the man, and the friends are speaking. Since that's not obvious in English, translations like the NIV add headings to help us keep track. The language is erotic at times, combined with a warning not to arouse those feelings until the time is right to devote their lives to each other.

What questions or observations do you have about the wisdom books and the Psalms?

.....

.....

Remember how we said the meaning is in the relationships rather than the words? Quoting a verse without reference to the relationships in context can be misleading.

For example, this is a popular Bible quotation:

Job 11:13-17 (NIV)

¹³ If you devote your heart to him [the LORD] and stretch out your hands to him, ¹⁴ if you put away the sin that is in your hand and allow no evil to dwell in your tent, ¹⁵ then, free of fault, you will lift up your face; you will stand firm and without fear. ¹⁶ You will surely forget your trouble, recalling it only as waters gone by. ¹⁷ Life will be brighter than noonday, and darkness will become like morning.

So what's the problem? First, these words reflect the Sinai Covenant values where people expected to receive blessing for obedience and trouble for disobedience. That doesn't apply directly to us who live as Christ's followers in the covenant of grace.

Second, these are Zophar's words (see Job 11:1). He's one of Job's friends, and we've already seen that God said he was wrong: "*I am angry with you and your two friends,*

¹⁴ For more on the structure of the Psalms, see <https://allenbrowne.blog/2024/07/17/formed-in-gods-story-psalms/>

because you have not spoken the truth about me, as my servant Job has” (Job 42:7).

We cannot promise what Zophar said, when God says his words are not true.

The meaning is in the relationships, so what are we to learn from Zophar?

Prophets

Prophets were people who heard what God was saying (*the word of the LORD*) or saw what God was doing (a *dream* or a *vision*), proclaiming this revelation to the people.

They called God’s people back to their covenant responsibilities under the Torah. They warned that straying from God led to disaster. They promised God would rescue them if they turned back to him—the twin themes of judgement and salvation.

There were former prophets who spoke for God in the time of the kingdom: Samuel, Nathan, Elijah, Elisha, and others in 1 Samuel — 2 Kings. Kings were also anointed with God’s Spirit (1 Samuel 10:10-11; 16:10; 2 Samuel 23:1), but when they used their power wrongly God sent prophets to confront them.

The books from at the end of our Old Testament (Isaiah — Malachi) are what we call the Latter Prophets. God sent them as the kingdom was falling apart, and after they went into exile.

The book of **Isaiah** begins with Isaiah speaking to the kings of Judah and declaring God’s sovereignty over all nations. After Jerusalem was captured by Babylon, Isaiah 40–66 addresses the returning exiles, promising God will restore them and the whole earth under his sovereignty.¹⁵

Jeremiah also warned God’s people that Jerusalem would fall to Babylon. Then he promised that God would restore them, establishing a new covenant with them. He called God’s people to leave Babylon and return, declaring that Babylon would fall.

Lamentations consists of five poetic laments. It’s not prophecy, but it’s been placed with Jeremiah because “*Jeremiah composed laments*” (2 Chronicles 35:25).

Ezekiel saw visions while in exile. The temple was so defiled that God was moving out, effectively placing a sword in Babylon’s hand to conquer Jerusalem. Israel and Judah looked like a valley of dry bones, but the LORD would bring them back to life and install his David as king over them. Jerusalem would again be the place where God lived and reigned through his people, the city where the LORD was known.

Daniel and his friends wrestled with how to serve foreign rulers in Babylon. They encouraged the rulers to recognize the LORD’S reign over all the peoples of the earth.

¹⁵ For podcasts and note on Isaiah, see <https://allenbrowne.blog/2025/10/08/isaiah-introducing-the-good-news/>

But in Chapter 7, Daniel sees that the kingdoms will never stop fighting for power. The Ancient of Days will restore his authority through someone who is like what God intended when he gave humans authority in the beginning (*one like a son of man*). After visionary depictions of domineering rulers (Alexander the Great, Antiochus Epiphanies IV etc), Daniel sees that God would restore his people by raising the dead. The twelve **Minor Prophets** all fitted on one scroll. They're called *The Book of the Twelve* in the Hebrew Bible. All we can do here is provide some context:

<i>Book</i>	<i>Addressing</i>	<i>Historic setting</i>	<i>Chaps</i>
Hosea	Israel (North)	Divided kingdom, just before the fall of Israel	14
Joel	Judah	Uncertain	3
Amos	Israel (North)	Divided kingdom, before the fall of Israel	9
Obadiah	Edom	Shortly after Jerusalem fell to Babylon	1
Jonah	Assyria (Nineveh)	Divided kingdom, well before the fall of Israel	4
Micah	Judah	Overlaps with Isaiah	7
Nahum	Assyria (Nineveh)	Divided kingdom, before the fall of Israel	3
Habakkuk	Judah	Shortly before the exile	3
Zephaniah	Judah	King Josiah's time (before the exile)	3
Haggai	Jews	After the return from exile	2
Zechariah	Jews	After the return from exile	14
Malachi	Jews	After the return from exile	4

Do you have questions about the prophets?

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

2.3 Conclusion

The Law and the Prophets is traditional Jewish term for what we call *the Old Testament*:

- God revealed himself first in the **Law** (Torah), the Sinai covenant that established Israel as God’s nation. But even that first generation refused to follow the LORD when they reached the Promised Land.
- When the kingdom broke apart and Israel worshipped golden calves, God sent Elijah to call them back to “*the LORD, the God of Israel*” (1 Kings 17:1, 14). This prophetic ministry continued through other **prophets**.

So, *the Law* (the covenant established through Moses) and *the Prophets* (the ministry established in Elijah) is shorthand for Jewish Scriptures (the Old Testament).¹⁶

How does this story end? On a knife-edge! These are the closing verses:

Malachi 4:4-6 (NIV)

⁴ “Remember the law of my servant Moses, the decrees and laws I gave him at Horeb for all Israel. ⁵ “See, I will send the prophet Elijah to you before that great and dreadful day of the LORD comes. ⁶ He will turn the hearts of the parents to their children, and the hearts of the children to their parents; or else I will come and strike the land with total destruction.”

The *Law* told them to expect blessing when they followed the LORD, and disaster when they did not (Deuteronomy 28). But even when they were unfaithful, God’s faithful love kept pursuing them through the *prophets*.

So, who wins in the end?

- *The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness* (Exodus 34:6)? Or
- *The people who quickly turned from the ways of their ancestors* (Judges 2:17)?

What a cliff-hanger! Come back next week to hear how the faithful God does right by his people, rescuing them—and all the peoples of the earth—in the Messiah. That’s the story of the New Testament.

What questions do you have?

.....

.....

.....

.....

¹⁶ See Matthew 5:17; 7:12; 11:13; 22:40; 23:29; Luke 16:16; 24:44; John 1:45; Acts 13:15; 24:14; 28:23; Romans 3:21.

Resources

For one book that provides background for each book of the Old and New Testaments, see:

Gordon Fee & Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible Book by Book* (Zondervan, 2014).

For an overview of the Old Testament, see:

Paul House & Eric Mitchell. *Old Testament Survey* (B&H, 2007).

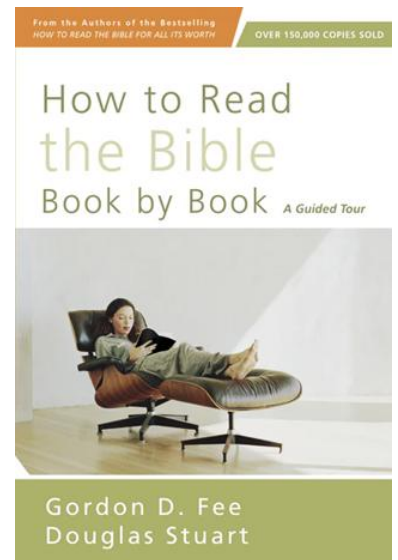
For free videos on the books of the Bible:

<https://bibleproject.com/>

For commentaries on individual books of the Old Testament, see:

The Bible Speaks Today series (Inver-Varsity Press)

For Everyone Bible Guides (Westminster John Knox)



3 The New Testament

In the Old Testament, God established Israel as a kingdom of heaven:

- The **Torah** established the covenant relationship (Genesis – Deuteronomy).
- The **History** recounted how that worked out in practice (Joshua – Esther).
- The **Wisdom** books elevated this way of life (Job – Song of Songs).
- The **Prophets** declared the LORD’S faithfulness to them even when the nation fell apart, calling them back into covenant relationship (Isaiah – Malachi).

In the New Testament, God fulfils that story in the Messiah and those who trust him.

Books of the New Testament

Genre	Book	Author	Addressed to	Chapters
<i>Gospel</i>	Matthew	Matthew		28
	Mark	Mark		16
	Luke	Luke	Theophilus	24
	John	John		21
<i>History</i>	Acts	Luke	Theophilus	28
<i>Letter (epistle)</i>	Romans	Paul	Rome (Italy)	16
	1 Corinthians		Corinth (Greece)	16
	2 Corinthians			13
	Galatians		Galatia (Türkiye)	6
	Ephesians		Ephesus (Türkiye)	6
	Philippians		Philippi (Greece)	4
	Colossians		Colossae (Türkiye)	4
	1 Thessalonians		Thessalonica (Greece)	5
	2 Thessalonians			3
	1 Timothy		Timothy (pastor at Ephesus)	6
	2 Timothy			4
	Titus		Titus (pastor at Crete)	3
	Philemon		Philemon (a slave-owner)	1
	Hebrews			13
	James	James		5
	1 Peter	Peter		5
	2 Peter		3	
	1 John	John		5
	2 John		1	
	3 John		1	
Jude	Jude		1	
<i>Prophecy</i>	Revelation	John	7 churches in western Türkiye	22

The **Gospels** tell the story of Jesus the Messiah, the Spirit-anointed ruler sent from his Father to save his earthly kingdom. Jesus announces the kingdom of God, using his authority to care for God's people. But Jerusalem's rulers hand him over to be executed by the empire that rules them. On the third day, God raises him up to reign with all authority in heaven and on earth. With his death, burial, and resurrection, Jesus has established a new covenant (a *new testament*) with Israel and all the peoples of the earth. He has brought the whole earth back into his Father's reign.

The resurrected Messiah then returns to his Father in the heavens, sharing his Father's reign. He gives to his people the anointing that was on him as Messiah, so we implement his reign by caring for all the peoples of the earth. Holy Spirit empowers us to spread this good news from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth. That's the book of **Acts**.

Paul the apostle opposed this message until he met the resurrected Jesus on the road to Damascus. Paul established churches in Türkiye and Greece. He wrote letters to these churches and their pastors. Others wrote letters too, so 21 of the 27 New Testament books are **letters**.

The final book of the New Testament is a prophetic **apocalypse** (Revelation). John wrote it down while exiled to the island of Patmos for proclaiming Jesus' kingship. His visionary revelations are all about the King of Kings who ultimately overturns all that's wrong on earth. In the end John sees a new heavens and a new earth, everything remade is as God intended in the beginning.

That's an overview. Any questions before we take a peek at each book?

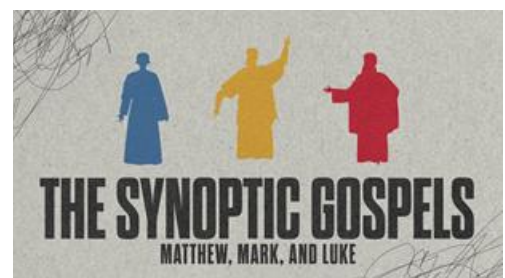
.....

3.1 The Gospels and Acts

Jesus' followers told everyone about him: his life, his four years of ministry, his death, burial, and resurrection. Many who witnessed these events were still alive when the accounts were written down in the second half of the first century. The writers didn't sign their work, but early Christians understood the writers to be Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.

Mark was probably written first. It's the shortest, and ninety percent of the material in Mark is found somewhere in the other Gospels too, especially Matthew and Luke.

Together, Matthew, Mark, and Luke are called **Synoptic Gospels** (*synoptic* = seeing together). They used the oral tradition that Christian communities had developed to tell the stories of Jesus. Sometimes the wording in the Synoptic Gospels is very close (e.g. compare Matthew 19:13-14; Mark 10:13-14, and Luke 18:15-16).



Matthew

The first book of the New Testament is *The Gospel according to Matthew*. He was a tax collector, so his countrymen regarded him as a traitor—financing the Roman oppression of the nation that should have been under God’s reign. Yet Jesus called Matthew, sending him to “*proclaim the kingdom of heaven*” (Matthew 9:9-12; 10:7).

From the start, Matthew announces Jesus as *the Messiah, the son of David* (1:1). He summarizes Jesus’ message and ministry, as: *proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people* (4:23; 9:35).

Did you get that? Jesus’ words and works are intertwined. His teaching explains what he’s doing, and what he’s doing interprets his teaching. In fact, Matthew structured his Gospel to interleave Jesus’ ministry and message:

- Matthew 1–4 How Jesus came as King
- Matthew 5–7 The Sermon on the Mount*
- Matthew 8–9 How the king used his authority
- Matthew 10 The mandate for the mission*
- Matthew 11–12 How human and spiritual powers opposed him
- Matthew 13 The parables of the kingdom*
- Matthew 14–21 How Jesus was revealed as the Messiah
- Matthew 22–25 The king’s teaching in the capital*
- Matthew 26–28 How the rulers crucified Jesus, but God raised him to reign.¹⁷

Mark

Mark is the action Gospel. Skipping the birth narratives, Mark proclaims Jesus as the anointed ruler restoring the kingdom that God promised through the prophets (1:1-15). With no pause for breath, everything in Mark’s Gospel happens *immediately* (1:10, 12, 18, 20, 21, 23, 28, 29 30, 42, 43, etc).

What shocked people was Jesus’ *authority* (1:22, 27; 2:10; 3:15). “*Who is this?*” they asked (4:41). It’s the question Mark (and Jesus) want us to ask:

Mark 8:29

“What about you?” he asked. “Who do you say I am?”
Peter answered, “You are the Messiah.”

This is the hinge of Mark’s Gospel. Previously, it’s been all about the amazing things Jesus did as he brought heaven’s authority to earth. Now that they recognize him as the God-anointed ruler (Messiah), Jesus explains that God does not use his power the way human rulers do. Jesus is therefore vulnerable to those who’ll kill for power:

¹⁷ For podcasts and notes on Matthew’s Gospel see <https://allenbrowne.blog/2023/07/20/figs-matthew/> and <https://allenbrowne.blog/2023/09/27/formed-in-gods-story-matthew-14-28/>

Mark 8: 31 (NIV)

He then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again.

The *Son of Man* (descendant of humanity) inherits the authority God gave humans in the beginning (Genesis 1:27-28). But the world is now ruled by beasts who tear each other apart for power. That was Daniel's vision of the world (Daniel 7:1-7) until he saw that the Ancient Ruler would take power from the beasts and give it to *someone like a son of man* (Daniel 7:13).

Jesus knew the rulers in Jerusalem would tear him apart (Mark 11:28-33; 12:7; 12:13, 38-40; 14:61-64; 15:2, 32). He called us to take the way of the cross too, trusting his Father to raise him out of death and give him the kingdom (Mark 8:34 – 9:1; 9:9, 31; 10:33-34; 12:7-12, 36; 13:26; 14:24-25; 16:6).

Mark's Gospel concludes with the rejection of *the King of the Jews* (Mark 15:2, 9, 12, 18, 26, 32), and the announcement that God has raised him up (Mark 16:5-8).

Luke

Luke was not Jewish. He researched Jesus' life:

Luke 1:1-4 (NIV)

¹ Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, ² just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word.

³ With this in mind, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, I too decided to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, ⁴ so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught.

As a physician,¹⁸ Luke feels what Elizabeth and Mary felt. Mary said her child would overturn the power structures of society: *bringing down rulers from their thrones, but exalting the humble* (1:52). Jesus is the heir of King David (Luke 1:27, 32, 60; 2:4, 11, etc.), but so unlike the rulers of the world (1:51-52; 2:1-3; 3:20; etc).

Luke focuses on Jesus caring for the **poor** (4:18; 6:20; 7:22; 11:41; 12:13; 14:31, 21 etc), the **outcasts** (5:27-32; 6:32-34; 7:29-35, 39-50; etc), all who suffer **affliction** (4:18, 38, 40; 5:15; 6:18-19; etc). He draws attention to those who were often overlooked: the **women** disciples (8:1-3; 10:39; 23:27, 55; 24:1-8, 21-24), and the **gentiles** who recognized his authority (2:31-32; 7:2-9; 8:26-39; 10:29-37; 17:18 24:47).

The kingdom of God turns power on its head. To save the world, the king is rejected. In Luke 9:51 as Jesus *resolutely set out for Jerusalem*. On the way he explains what it

¹⁸ See Colossians 4:14.

costs to follow him: “*Whoever does not carry their cross and follow me cannot be my disciple*” (14:27). He explains how the rulers will treat him: “*The Son of Man ... will be delivered over to the Gentiles. They will mock him and spit on him; they will flog him and kill him. On the third day he will rise again*” (18:31-33).

The crowds received Jesus into the capital as their long-awaited king (19:28-38). But the leaders rejected his authority (19:39–20:19), handing him over to be crucified (22:66 – 23:56). God raised him to life, and Jesus commissioned his followers to proclaim his authority to transform all the nations (24:46-49).

John

John’s Gospel is different. We still hear of Jesus’ baptism, miracles, confrontation with those in power, crucifixion, and resurrection. But John’s Gospel is primarily a mediation on Jesus as *the Son sent from the Father* (John 5:23, 36-37; 6:44, 57; 8:16, 18, 29 etc) to save *the world* (1:29; 3:16; 4:42 etc).

Consider what God proclaimed for the world:

Genesis 1 ¹ In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. ...

³ And God said, “Let there be light,” and there was light. ⁴ God saw that the light was good, and he separated the light from the darkness.

Since then, the world has gone dark, but that has not extinguished God’s decree. What God expressed—his *word*—brought life to a world that was otherwise formless and void. And now, John says, we have seen that living, breathing, enduring Word from God among us, the expression of God restoring light and life to the world:

John 1:1-5 (NIV)

¹ In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ² He was with God in the beginning. ³ Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made.

⁴ In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. ⁵ The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

Creation is being renewed in Christ. The creation account was described in seven days, so John’s account of God restoring creation is recounted in “days” (e.g. 2:1). On the sixth day, God created the human (Genesis 1:27-31), but under the tyranny of thorns and death we barely know what it means to be human anymore. The representative of Rome’s power over Jerusalem presents Jesus as a pitiful example of humanity crowned by thorns and death: “Behold the human!” That was the sixth day of the week (19:31). On the seventh day, God rested—in a tomb! But that’s not the end of the story.

A new week begins—a point John makes twice so we don’t miss it:

John 20:1 Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the entrance.

John 20:19 On the evening of that first day of the week ...

As the Father raises up his Son, death no longer reigns as prince of this world (John 12:31; 14:30; 16:11). The light of life has returned. The new creation has begun as a man and a woman stand in the garden with tears wiped away, the Son restoring us to his Father's family (20:11-17), breathing the breath of God back into us (20:22).

That's John's picture of Jesus: the Son who restores his Father's life to the world.

Do you have questions about the Gospels?

.....

Acts

We've already met the writer of *The Acts of the Apostles* (compare Luke 1:4):

Acts 1:1 (NIV)

In my former book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach ...

What Jesus *began to do and teach* now continues through us. When we say, "Jesus is the Christ (Messiah)," we're saying he is the Spirit-anointed ruler who restores heaven's reign to the world. And unlike other rulers, Jesus shares his power with all who recognize his leadership, so the kingdom represents its king across the world:

Acts 1:8 (NIV)

"But 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."

Judea and Samaria were the divided kingdoms that fell in Old Testament times. God promised to resurrect both these fallen kingdoms into the leadership of the Davidic king (e.g. Ezekiel 37:15-28). Now God does even more: extending heaven's reign beyond Israel—to *the ends of the earth!*

That's how the story unfolds in Acts of the Apostles:

Acts 1–7 Jesus is proclaimed in *Judah and Jerusalem*.

Acts 8 Jesus is proclaimed in *Samaria* and beyond.

Acts 12–28 Jesus is proclaimed *to the ends of the world* as they knew it.

The Jewish leaders tried to stop Jesus' disciples from declaring that Jesus had been raised up to rule the world. A key opponent was Saul from Tarsus who chased them all the way to Damascus (Syria). On the journey, Saul had an unexpected encounter:

Acts 9:5, 15 (NIV)

⁵ "Who are you, Lord?" Saul asked.

"I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting ...

¹⁵ "This man is my chosen instrument to proclaim my name to the Gentiles and their kings and to the people of Israel."

Saul became Paul the apostle. He accepted Jesus’ commission and spent the rest of his life proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the king of all the nations.

Acts 12–28 describes Paul’s three missionary journeys into Türkiye (Galatia, Ephesus) and Greece (Philippi, Thessaloniki, Athens, Corinth). He was constantly in trouble the Jewish leaders, and with the Roman authorities who treated him as an enemy of Caesar: “saying that there is another king, one called Jesus” (Acts 17:7).

That didn’t stop Paul. In the final chapter of Acts, Paul has reached Rome. In the heart of Caesar’s empire, Paul proclaimed Jesus as Lord and king of the world:

Acts 28:31 (NIV)

He proclaimed the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ—with all boldness and without hindrance!



“Paul’s Second Missionary Journey” in Carl Rasmussen, *Zondervan Atlas of the Bible*, (Zondervan, 2010), 228.

What are your thoughts on the Gospels and Acts, what Jesus began, and how we continue his message and ministry?

.....

.....

.....

.....

3.2 The letters

How do you stay in touch with people? Phone? Text? Email? Social media?

There was a time when people wrote letters.

As the Jesus movement spread, the apostles wrote letters to the churches. Their letters still guide our belief and practice—what we believe, and how we live out our faith.

There are twenty-one letters (sometimes called *epistles*):

- 13 from Paul:
 - 9 addressed to churches (*Romans – 2 Thessalonians*),
 - 4 addressed to individuals (*1 Timothy – Philemon*).
- 1 anonymous sermon for Christians with a Jewish background (*Hebrews*).
- 7 letters (called *General Epistles*) that bear the writer's name:
 - 1 from *James*,
 - 2 from *Peter*,
 - 3 from *John*,
 - 1 from *Jude*.

We'll discuss Revelation next week.

Pauline epistles

Romans

In this letter, Paul explains the gospel of Messiah Jesus to those who lived at the heart of Caesar's Empire. He says everything God promised in the Scriptures was fulfilled when God installed his Son to reign, by raising him from the dead. This *good news* calls everyone from Israel and the nations to recognize Jesus as Christ and Lord (1:1-6).

The letter ends with a similar summary. The gospel (the good news of Jesus' kingship) calls all peoples of the earth to the obedience that springs from a faithful commitment to Messiah Jesus (16:25-27).



Valley of the Forums, Rome. Photo: Allen Browne, 2008.

Between these bookends, Paul explains the faith and lifestyle of the gospel community:

- how the gospel unites humanity under Jesus' leadership (Romans 1–11),
- how to embody that good news in his world (Romans 12–16).

Podcasts and notes are available to help you explore Romans:

- <https://allenbrowne.blog/2025/05/05/invitation-to-romans/>
- <https://allenbrowne.blog/2025/07/31/formed-in-gods-story-romans-9-16/>

1 & 2 Corinthians

The Greek port of Corinth was Paul's home for eighteen months (see Acts 18:11). Later he wrote two letters to the church he established there.

People use power the opposite of how Jesus did (**1 Corinthians** 1–4). We're to be careful our lifestyle does not bring the gospel into disrepute (1 Corinthians 5–6). Paul answered their questions (e.g. 1 Corinthians 7:1; 8:1; 12:1; 16:1) on marriage (7), lifestyle choices (8–9), gatherings (10–11), spiritual gifts (12–14), resurrection (15) and generosity (16).

The earliest summary of the gospel is found in 1 Corinthians 15:1-4.

Paul's second letter to the Corinthians reveals grief in his relationship with them. Paul is a servant of the new covenant in the Messiah (**2 Corinthians** 2–6). He asks the Corinthians to demonstrate their solidarity with the Jewish people who served as God's people for centuries past by contributing to them (8–9). He tries to mend the gap that has developed between himself and some of the Corinthians (10–13).

Galatians

Paul's first missionary journey was to the Roman province of Galatia (Antioch, Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe—Acts 13-14). Galatians might be Paul's earliest letter.

At issue is whether gentile believers must comply with the Law God gave Israel in the previous covenant. Must they be circumcised, keep the Sabbath, and eat only kosher food? The church leaders met in Jerusalem to discuss this question (Acts 15).

Paul's answer is that all of us—Jews and gentiles—are now brought into relationship with God through the new covenant in the Messiah. The Torah is fulfilled in Christ. God never gave the Sinai laws to gentiles. We're all one people now, a people who have come to life in Christ and live by the Spirit, not by the Law.

Ephesians

Ephesus was a seaport in western Türkiye where Paul lived for two years (Acts 18–19). His letter to the Ephesians proclaims Jesus as the reigning Saviour of all the peoples of the world, both Jew and gentile (Ephesians 1–3). He explains how to live as the community of our Heavenly Father in a world that's not yet fully submitted to Christ as Lord (Ephesians 4–6).



Acrocorinth. Photo: [Wikipedia](#).



Ephesus today. Photo: Allen Browne, 2014.

Philippians

Philippi was a Roman colony in Macedonia, named after the father of Alexander the Great. When Paul announced the good news of Jesus here, he upset the authorities and ended up in jail overnight (Acts 16).

Paul was in prison again as he wrote this letter. The Philippians had sent money to help Paul survive, since prisoners were expected to provide for themselves. As well as thanking them, the letter encourages them to live the way our Saviour did as he gave his life for us.



Philippi, Thessalonica, Corinth, Crete, Ephesus, and Colossae.
 “Map 23” *Standard Bible Atlas* (Standard Publishing, 2006), 36.

Colossians

Colossae was a town in the southwest of Asia Minor (Türkiye).

The letter to the Colossians is similar to Ephesians. The first half sets out what we believe, i.e. the kingship of Jesus the Messiah (Colossians 1–2). The second half sets out how we live as the people of the Messiah (Colossians 3–4).

1 & 2 Thessalonians

Like Philippi, Thessalonica was in Macedonia. After just a few weeks there, Paul was run out of town for *saying that there is another king, one called Jesus* (Acts 17:7).

Paul supported these new believers with two letters. They’d misunderstood what Paul meant when he said Jesus would soon be king of the whole world, so they quit working and sat around waiting for it to happen. Paul wrote to correct them (1 Thessalonians 4:11; 2 Thessalonians 3:8-12), explaining how the day of the Lord will arrive.

1 & 2 Timothy and Titus

Timothy was a pastor in the church at Ephesus, and Titus was a pastor on the island of Crete. We refer to the two letters to Timothy and one to Titus as the *Pastoral Epistles*.

These letters contain practical guidance for the church, calling pastors, elders, and deacons to set the example of what it looks like when people serve the Lord Jesus.

Philemon

A runaway slave had come to faith, as had his owner. Should Paul send Onesimus back to Philemon as required by Roman law? Or does Christ set the slave free?

Paul asked Philemon to treat Onesimus as *no longer a slave, but better than a slave as a dear brother* (verse 16). God has not called us to attack evil institutions like slavery; rather it’s as we embody life under Christ’s leadership that the world is transformed.

General epistles

Hebrews

This book doesn't say who it's from or who it's to. It's more of a sermon than a letter. It's full of Old Testament references, and the speaker is concerned about his audience being pressured to turn from Christ, back to the old covenant (e.g. Hebrews 11:32-39).

Jesus is the better way. He is superior to angels (Hebrews 1–2) and to the founders of the old covenant (Moses and Joshua, 3–4). Jesus is the great high priest (5–6), the king/priest who establishes our relationship with God through a new covenant (7–10). Jesus fulfils everything the Old Testament saints believed for (11). So let's trust his leadership and live as children in our Father's care (12–13).

James

This letter is probably from Jesus' brother James (Matthew 13:55), since James the apostle had been killed by Herod (Acts 12:2).

It calls us to trust God in hard times. Faith is expressed by fulfilling the *royal law of love* (2:8). Though the wealthy are often treated as more valuable, everyone is valued under God's authority.

1 & 2 Peter

Peter's first letter was written to encourage God's people who were scattered through Asia Minor because of persecution, like the exiles of Old Testament times. Instead of fighting back, we're called to embody the lifestyle that credibly represents the salvation of the world.

Peter's second letter warns against false teachers. We can recognize them because they're preoccupied with their own authority instead of Christ's.

1, 2, & 3 John

To be clear, *1 John*, *2 John* and *3 John* are letters, while *John* is a Gospel.

John's first letter marvels at God living among us physically in the person of Jesus (1 John 1:1; 2:22; 4:2). Since that's what God did, we're called to physically care for each other too, for *God is love* (4:16). Father's love is seen in his children (5:1).

2 John addresses a church John calls *the lady chosen by God* (verse 1). It's a warning against false teachers.

3 John is addressed to a friend named Gaius, encouraging him to live faithfully.

Jude

Jude was another of Jesus' brothers (Matthew 13:55). As in 2 Peter, Jude warns against false teachers putting themselves in charge since they don't respect God's authority.

4 Recognizing the genres

What are you listening to if it starts like this?

- Once upon a time
- There will be scattered showers tomorrow
- A long time ago in a galaxy far, far away
- Amazing grace, how sweet the sound
- An Englishman, an Irishman, and an Aussie walk into a pub
- 4 March, 2026. Dear John,

Our language has cues that tell us what we're listening to. We recognize when we're reading history or fiction, a song or a joke, a weather forecast or a letter. If English is a secondary language for you, you may not be familiar with the cultural cues.

That's a problem we face as we read the Bible. Their language, culture, and worldview are foreign to us. We're from a different time, and we don't have their local knowledge. What was obvious to them might not be obvious to us.

So, what are we hearing as we read the Bible? Is it prose? Poetry? Fiction? History? Biography? Philosophy? Songs? Prophetic oracles? Apocalyptic visions? Someone's mail? What kind of writing is it?

There are many genres among the 66 books. And recognizing the genres is crucial to interpreting Scripture well. Let's look at some of them.

4.1 Law

The first five books of the Bible are what we call the Law (*Torah* in Hebrew). It's not all legal matter in the modern sense, but it was the legal foundation for Israel as a nation: called by God (Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob), established by the Sinai covenant, living under the LORD'S sovereign authority as his kingdom.

Within the Law, there were specific laws for their society. That begins with the Ten Commandments. The Commandments begin by defining the relationship between the God who reigns over them and the people he rescued from enslavement to human rule:

Exodus 20:1-17 (NIV)

- ¹ And God spoke all these words: ² "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.
- ³ "You shall have no other gods before me.
- ⁴ "You shall not make for yourself an image ...
- ⁷ "You shall not misuse the name of the LORD your God ...
- ⁸ "Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. ...
- ¹² "Honor your father and your mother ...



The Ten Commandments

¹³ “You shall not murder.

¹⁴ “You shall not commit adultery.

¹⁵ “You shall not steal.

¹⁶ “You shall not give false testimony against your neighbour.

¹⁷ “You shall not covet ...”

God’s laws continue for the next three chapters, called *the Book of the Covenant*:

Exodus 24:7 (NIV)

Then he took the Book of the Covenant and read it to the people. They responded, “We will do everything the LORD has said; we will obey.”

The laws defined justice for their society. For example:

Exodus 21:22-26 (NIV)

²² If people are fighting and hit a pregnant woman and she gives birth prematurely but there is no serious injury, the offender must be fined whatever the woman’s husband demands and the court allows.

²³ But if there is serious injury, you are to take **life for life**,

²⁴ eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot,

²⁵ burn for burn, wound for wound, bruise for bruise.

²⁶ An owner who hits a male or female **slave** in the eye and destroys it must let the slave go free to compensate for the eye.

What do you make of these laws? Is this God’s ideal society?

Is God okay with slavery, with one person owning another?

Does God want capital punishment, putting murderers to death?

Traditional Judaism treats these commands as absolute. Even before Jesus’ time, rabbis were discussing how to keep these laws. The Rabbinic discussions were published around AD 600 as the *Talmud*. Retribution (*an eye for an eye* etc) is repeated three times (also in Leviticus 24:18 and Deuteronomy 19:21), so the Rabbis viewed it as foundational to the Law. An entire tractate in the Talmud explains how to apply this principle to false witnesses, so whatever punishment a false witness intended their victim to receive should be done to them, even capital punishment.

Is this how our courts should operate in Australia today?

Does the Torah represent God’s ideals for our society?

The problem is that this is not how God himself operated in the beginning. When Cain killed Abel, the family wanted Cain to pay for his crime. They wanted retribution—a life for a life—but God would not give it to them. The LORD placed Cain under royal protection, *so that no one who found him would kill him* (Genesis 4:15).

Capital punishment is not God’s ideal. It’s not how God operated in the beginning, but it is how humans conceive of justice. And because of our preoccupation with violence, God eventually gave us authority to kill the killer (Genesis 9:6). And since the nations (Genesis 10) had that authority, God gave that authority to Israel at Sinai too.

So, the laws of the Sinai Covenant are not God's ideal for human society. The Sinai laws were a stepping stone towards where God wants us to go, but God doesn't take us there in a single leap. With astounding patience and a refusal to give up, God takes us just one step of the way, **accommodating** our needs, our failures, our propensity for violence, and our expectations of justice. Why? Because God is living in the story with us, refusing to walk away.

Jesus' teaching on the Law

If that's the right way to understand the Sinai law, we can expect God to give further revelation as the story of Scripture unfolds. Does God ever tell us that some of what he permitted in the Sinai covenant was less than his ideal?

There's this moment when Jesus was pulled into an argument the rabbis were having about the grounds for divorce. Some rabbis believed Deuteronomy 24 allowed divorce for any reason. Others believed the Law permitted divorce only if something indecent had happened. Jesus said divorce was never God's ideal in the beginning, that God was accommodating human failure: "*Haven't you read that in the beginning the Creator made them male and female, and said 'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united with his wife one flesh'?*" (Matthew 19:4-5, quoting Genesis 2:24). The law was an accommodation rather than God's creational ideal.

Does that mean we just disregard the Old Testament? Not at all: it's still a revelation of God, particularly of God's faithfulness to a world that wasn't faithful to him.

It's interesting that Jesus needed to defend himself against the accusation that he was treating the Law as irrelevant:

Matthew 5:17-39 (NIV)

¹⁷ "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. ...

²¹ "**You have heard** that it was said to the people long ago, 'You shall not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.'

²² **But I tell you** that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister will be subject to judgment. ...

²⁷ "**You have heard** that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.'

²⁸ **But I tell you** that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart. ...

³³ "Again, **you have heard** that it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not break your oath, but fulfill to the Lord the vows you have made.'

³⁴ **But I tell you**, do not swear an oath at all ...

³⁸ "**You have heard** that it was said, 'Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.'

³⁹ **But I tell you**, do not resist an evil person ...

Jesus was not *abolishing* the Law God had given Israel. As their king, he was *fulfilling* what God asked of his people. But for Jesus, this was not a matter of ticking boxes for all of the 613 commands the rabbis had identified. He taught them to look beyond the law to God's intention in giving it to them.

As the God-anointed king, Jesus gives examples of how their heavenly sovereign wanted them to live.

To paraphrase the verses above:

- *“When you heard, ‘Do not murder,’ God was not saying it’s okay to beat someone within an inch of their life. I tell you, he was calling you to value each other.*
- *“When you heard, ‘Do not commit adultery,’ God was not saying it’s okay to have sex with another in your imagination. I tell you, he was calling you to faithfulness in your relationships.*
- *“When you heard, ‘Do not break your word,’ God was not saying it’s okay to deceive as long as you didn’t swear it. I tell you, he was calling you to authenticity in your relationships.*
- *“When you heard, ‘Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth,’ God was not authorizing you to respond to someone who does evil by doing evil in return. I tell you, do not perpetuate their violence by responding as they did to you.”*

The last one was a bombshell. If retribution was the basis for justice in the Sinai Law, Jesus just deconstructed the entire basis of justice. Can he do that?

Jesus was calling 1000 years of tradition into question. King David spent most of his kingship fighting off their enemies. Can this son of David overturn that precedent?

Did we hear him right? Jesus continues:

Matthew 5:43-45 (NIV)

⁴³ “You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbour and hate your enemy.’ ⁴⁴ But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, ⁴⁵ that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.”

Jesus goes above David's head. The father of the kingship and the nation is *your Father in the heavens*. That's who we (the kingdom) represent. So, if your Father in the heavens sends sunshine and rain to the nations of the earth, this is how his kingdom must respond to the nations—even the nations that oppressed them (Rome).

King Jesus called his people beyond retribution, to live out the restoration of the world under God's leadership, whatever the cost. That's radical love—so radical that the church fathers of the first three centuries quoted these verses from Matthew 5 more than any passage in the Bible. This is the heart of divine restoration for the earth.

“You have heard that it was said to those of old...”

but I say to you...”

The Law and grace in the New Testament

The early church found Jesus' approach challenging. When gentiles became part of the community led by the Jewish Messiah, did they have to keep the Law God gave to Israel? That question divided the church. The leaders met in Jerusalem to prayerfully discern what God wanted. Here's their conclusion:

Acts 15:23-29 (NIV)

²³ They sent the following letter:

The apostles and elders, your brothers, To the Gentile believers in Antioch, Syria and Cilicia: Greetings. ...

²⁸ It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us not to burden you with anything beyond the following requirements: ²⁹ You are to abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals and from sexual immorality. You will do well to avoid these things.

No Sabbath keeping. No circumcision. No kosher food laws.

Eating food sacrificed to idols would send the city the wrong message (1 Corinthians 8). Draining blood from our food was something God asked all people to do, since taking a life was never God's ideal (Genesis 9:4). Sexual immorality is the opposite of God's faithfulness. The way we live under Christ represents our relationship to God and creation, but we're not called to obey the Law God gave to Israel in the previous covenant.

How does their discernment of God's intention for new covenant people sit with you?

.....

The apostle Paul devoted his life to calling gentiles to trust the leadership of the Jewish Messiah. He addressed this issue in his letters, especially Galatians.

Paul was Jewish. He knew his people labelled gentiles as "sinners" (unacceptable to God) since they were not part of the Sinai covenant community. But relationship with God is no longer defined by that covenant:

Galatians 2:15-16 (NIV)

¹⁵ "We who are Jews by birth and not sinful Gentiles ¹⁶ know that a person is not justified by the works of the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ. So we, too, have put our faith in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the law, because by the works of the law no one will be justified.

In the new covenant, people (Jew or gentile) are *justified* (set right with God) on the basis of loyalty to the Messiah (*faith*), not on the basis of what the Sinai Law required.

That does not mean the previous covenant was a bad thing. It was appropriate for the time when humanity was not yet mature enough to be what God intended.

For little children, you set firm rules, like “Never cross the road without holding my hand!” But childhood rules do not continue into adulthood. You want your children to grow up and take responsibility for themselves:

Galatians 3:23–25 (NIV)

²³ Before the coming of this faith, we were held in custody under the law, locked up until the faith that was to come would be revealed. ²⁴ So the law was our guardian until Christ came that we might be justified by faith. ²⁵ Now that this faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian.

We now live under a different covenant:

“*You are not under the law, but under grace*” (Romans 6:14).

Grace is the generous way God expresses his reign. God was full of grace in the previous covenant too (e.g. Exodus 34:6). But in the setting of the new covenant, *grace* refers to how God treats us in the Messiah.

Grace is God giving his Son to a murdering world.
Grace is the Son taking into his own being the evil, oppression, and death his people have suffered.
Grace is the heavenly throne overturning the assassination of the Son, raising us up to life in him.
Grace is the covenant that re-establishes earth as a kingdom of heaven in the leadership of the Messiah.¹⁹



Therefore, the identity markers of the old covenant no longer define our relationship with God. We’re not blessed on condition of performing what the Law requires. We’re blessed because we’re in the Messiah. The new covenant makes us a unified, restored humanity in Christ:

Galatians 3:26–28 (NIV)

²⁶ So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, ²⁷ for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.

²⁸ There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

Do you have questions about how we approach the Law in contrast to the new covenant in Christ?

.....
.....
.....

¹⁹ See John M. G. Barclay, *Paul and the Power of Grace* (Eerdmans, 2020), or this review of his *Paul and the Gift* (Eerdmans, 2015): <https://allenbrowne.blog/2020/05/08/john-barclay-paul-and-the-gift-book-review/>

4.2 Narrative, poetry, and prophecy

Many of the difficulties we have with how God treats people in the Old Testament (and the New) disappear when we realize what God is doing. God would not give up on the world that refused to follow him. But God did not force his authority on us. God kept engaging with us in our failures. God **accommodated** us, even when our lives became very messy because we wouldn't follow his leadership.

God journeys with us in our pain, our suffering, the violence we do to each other, until we become all he intended humanity to be, *until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ* (Ephesians 4:13).

That journey is the story of the Bible.

Narrative

Most of the Bible is narrative. It's not a self-help guidebook or an instruction manual for life. It's not an argument in theology or philosophy.

It's a story: the story of the heavenly sovereign's relationship with his earthly realm. The story unfolds as God engages with people: Abraham and Jacob, Moses and Israel, Joshua and the judges, David and the kings, Elijah and Elisha, Ezra and Nehemiah, Esther and Job, the prophets of the fallen kingdom, and then Jesus and his followers.

So where do you find God in the Bible? God is revealed in people. We were designed to *image* God in creation (Genesis 1:27), so it's in the people who partner with God that we see God.

But people don't always reflect God well. Noah introduced slavery (Genesis 9:25-27). Jacob cheated his brother (Genesis 27). Moses murdered an Egyptian (Exodus 2:12). Israel's tribes fought each other (Judges 20). David couldn't be trusted with your wife or your life (2 Samuel 11).

The problem is that the story doesn't always tell us if what they did was right or wrong. There's a case in Genesis 34 where Simeon and Levi (sons of Jacob) slaughtered a village as a revenge killing. Jacob questions what they've done, but they see themselves as heroes defending family honour—a view that made sense in their culture. So, did they do right or wrong? The text doesn't say. Fourteen chapters later we finally hear Jacob condemning their actions (Genesis 49:5-7), but that doesn't always happen.²⁰

About three-quarters of the way through the Bible, Jesus arrives. That's when we see the full picture of God, for *the Son is the image of the invisible God* (Colossians 1:15).

²⁰ See <https://allenbrowne.blog/2016/11/11/were-simeon-and-levi-justified/>

Poetry

The Psalms voice a whole range of feelings: from angst and struggle to joy and wonder, from disappointment and failure to trust and gratitude. Poetry and song have an emotional and spiritual brilliance that leaves narrative and prose in the shade.

Poetry weaves us together in shared life with God. Poetry is a blanket when life leaves us cold, calling us into the warmth of God's presence.

But poetry is less obvious than prose. What do the metaphors mean?

Psalm 22:12-13 (NIV)

¹² Many bulls surround me; strong bulls of Bashan encircle me.

¹³ Roaring lions that tear their prey open their mouths wide against me.

What's going on? To help us out, many Psalms have a heading with the background we need to understand the Psalm. Whose voice are we listening to in Psalm 22? The heading says it's *A Psalm of David*. So, if this is the king of Israel, the metaphor refers to his enemies. Rulers of the surrounding nations attacked like animals, trying to kill him and take his people into their herd.

The kings of Israel and Judah all knew this feeling. That includes Jesus—the son of David, born to restore the fallen kingdom (Matthew 1). So, Jesus quoted this Psalm to describe how he felt: the King of the Jews surrounded by enemies intent on killing him (Matthew 27:46). David felt pinned down by his enemies. His poetic description fits Jesus even better: *They pierce my hands and my feet* (verse 18).

As you read the poetry of the Old Testament, hear it within the story of God's people. Ask **what it meant to them** before you ask what it means to us. At the heart of their struggles, you'll often find Jesus bearing in his own body the pain of God's people.

Here's a clue to help you understand what the Hebrew songs are saying. If you don't get it the first time, the next line gives it to you in a **parallel** way:

- In Psalm 22:12, *Many bulls surround me*.
Another way to say that is: *strong bulls of Bashan encircle me*.
- In verse 13, David was facing *Roaring lions that tear their prey*.
Another way to say that is: *they open their mouths wide against me*.
- Verse 13 is also parallel to verse 12. If you took *bulls* literally in verse 12, when the image changes into *lions* in verse 13, you realize, "Ah, this isn't about animals threatening his life; these are people behaving like animals."

The parallelism builds up a composite picture, like the brush strokes of an impressionist painting. Parallelism helps us understand and treasure the poetry of the Old Testament.

And this isn't just the Psalms. The Prophets and much of the wisdom literature are poetry. Any recent translation shows that by setting out the parallel lines for us to see.

Prophecy

The prophets delivered the heavenly king's instructions for his nation. They recorded *the word of the LORD* in poetic form. This slows us down. We hear what God says repeated in a parallel way.

The word of the LORD calls his people back to covenant relationship with him. Each prophet's message is specific to a nation (Israel or Judah) at a particular time (usually when things aren't going well). The prophets have two primary messages:

- They warn about disaster ahead if the people keep walking away from God.
- They declare God's faithfulness to his people. God will restore them to life under his leadership if they return to him.

These themes are the promises and sanctions of the covenant: blessing for obedience, trouble for disobedience (Deuteronomy 28).

The prophets were not predicting a fixed future. They say God is living in the story with his people, so how we respond affects the outcome:

Jeremiah 18:5-10 (NIV)

⁵ Then the word of the LORD came to me. ...

⁷ "If at any time I announce that a nation or kingdom is to be uprooted, torn down and destroyed, ⁸ and if that nation I warned repents of its evil, then I will relent and not inflict on it the disaster I had planned.

⁹ "And if at another time I announce that a nation or kingdom is to be built up and planted, ¹⁰ and if it does evil in my sight and does not obey me, then I will reconsider the good I had intended to do for it."

The kingdom lives in covenant partnership with its heavenly king, and the king does not use his sovereignty to overrule our responsiveness. We can spoil what God is making. When we do, God starts over like a potter when the clay doesn't turn out as intended. That's God's faithfulness. The whole project takes longer, but the potter faithfully continues until the project is complete. This was the word of the LORD at the time when the kingdom of God was about to fall to Babylon.

The New Testament has one book of prophecy. **Revelation** is a series of prophetic visions God gave John when he'd been exiled for his testimony that Jesus is the King of Kings, the God-appointed ruler of all the peoples of the earth.

Some have imagined Revelation as a map of the future, events they expect to see in their lifetime or the near future. But relegating it to a time that's still future for us misses the point of the prophetic message that Jesus is king for all people in all eras.

Revelation is addressed to the seven churches John had been caring for (Revelation 1:11). As the *son of man*, Jesus received the authority of the fallen kingdom and holds the communities of the earth in his hands. The *Living One* was raised up to reign, as death lost its power (1:12-18). Jesus is Lord, so the prophet John delivered the word of

the Lord to the churches who represented his kingship in seven cities of Türkiye (Revelation 2–3).

John saw the throne of God in the heavens (Revelation 4). The resurrected Lamb shares the throne with God and releases God’s script for life on earth by breaking the evils that have sealed up what God intended (Revelation 5–6). The gospel announces the restoration of heaven’s reign to the earth in Christ: “*The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and his Messiah, and he will reign for ever and ever.*” (Revelation 11:15).

Babylon—representing every power that tried to take the world from God—falls (Revelation 18). The fallen city of Jerusalem returns as a gift from heaven that fills the known world (Revelation 21).²¹ At the end of the story, earth has all the characteristics of the garden God planted in the beginning (Revelation 22).

The most important verse in Revelation could be 21:5, since this is the first time we hear from *the one who is seated on the throne*. The heavenly sovereign says, “***Behold I am making all things new.***” That’s the word of the Lord. That’s what the prophecy of Revelation is all about.²²

The word of the Lord makes the story we’re living in meaningful.

4.3 Conclusion

Scripture is richly textured: Law, narrative, poetry, prophecy, and letters. At its heart, the revelation of God arrives in Christ who expands the kingdom of God to all the peoples of the earth in a new covenant established with his death and resurrection.

Bible Interpretation cannot be reduced to a set of rules, but listen well. Hear what it meant to the audience who first received it as a revelation of God. Then hear how Christ’s leadership calls us to respond today.

I hope you’ve enjoyed this tasting plate of the different genres in Scripture. For more to chew on, try: Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth* (Zondervan, 2014).

Your thoughts?

.....
.....
.....

²¹ The city is described as 12,000 stadia (2200 kilometres) in all three dimensions (Revelation 21:16).

²² For podcasts and notes on Revelation, see <https://allenbrowne.blog/2024/10/02/formed-in-gods-story-book-of-revelation/>

5 Living with uncertainty

God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble (James 4:6; 1 Peter 5:5 ESV).

Ever been misunderstood? An old yarn tells of troops radioing, “Send reinforcements; we’re going to advance,” but the message headquarters heard was, “Send three and fourpence; we’re going to a dance.”

We misunderstand for so many reasons. We make assumptions about what someone is talking about. Is the context what just happened, or what happened earlier? Noise and distractions interrupt. So do silences and unspoken issues. People use the same word to mean different things. Language itself is ambiguous. Sometimes the way we encode our messages can be cryptic, like the phrase in this puzzle:²³

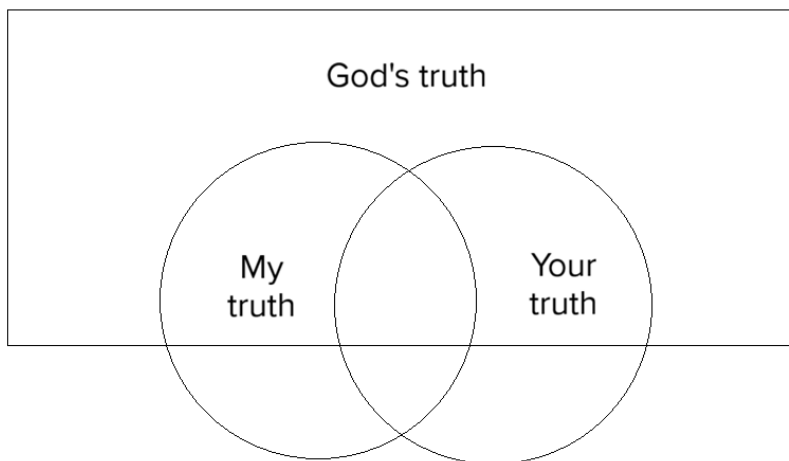


To live with humility is to live with uncertainty. A humble person asks, “Did I hear you right?” while a proud person is sure they’re right.

And there’s no shortage of proud Bible teachers. They’re so sure they’re right, arguing with anyone who doesn’t hold their view, as if they think they’re God.

God’s word is true. We approach it humbly, so it changes us.

There is objective truth: it’s what God knows. But I’m not God; my truth is partial. My truth has some of God’s truth, mixed with things I’m wrong about. What I don’t know far outweighs what I know. So, my truth is a blend of truth, falsehood, and ignorance. I don’t know what I don’t know.



²³ Solution at the end of tonight’s notes.

We learn from each other with each other, pursuing God's truth together:

Philippians 3:15 (NIV)

All of us, then, who are mature should take such a view of things. And if on some point you think differently, that too God will make clear to you.

While Paul was inspired by the Holy Spirit to write Scripture, he trusted the God who was at work in those who didn't see things his way. That's faith.

Maturity (in verse 15) is not knowing everything; it's knowing someone. Five verses earlier Paul told them his goal: *I want to know Christ* (verse 10). The reason we study the Bible is not informational; it's relational.

Faith is not convincing myself of my certainty (self-belief). Faith is trusting the one who is certain. God is trustworthy, abounding in love and faithfulness (Exodus 34:6). Our faith is constantly growing and being refined, adapting to what we know of God. Knowing God is the reason we study the Bible, the revelation of God.

We're okay to live with our uncertainty because we're living with God.

5.1 Difficulties with Scripture

Are there errors in the Bible? That was a topic of debate between "liberal" scholars²⁴ and Evangelicals last century. Evangelicals claim the Bible is *inerrant* (without error), but it has proved deceptively difficult to pin down in precisely what sense that's true.

The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy was produced in 1978, signed by 300 scholars. It consisted of nineteen propositions, expressed positively and negatively like this:

WE AFFIRM that a confession of the full authority, infallibility, and inerrancy of Scripture is vital to a sound understanding of the whole of the Christian faith.

WE DENY that such confession is necessary for salvation. However, we further deny that inerrancy can be rejected without grave consequences, both to the individual and to the Church.²⁵

Of course, their statements needed exposition too, and the exposition was longer than the propositions were. They met again in 1982 to produce a further interpretation of how to interpret the Scriptures (*the Chicago Statement on Biblical Hermeneutics*), and again in 1986 to explain how to apply the Scriptures.

The problem is that to deny errors in the Scripture, you must define what constitutes an error. Is the Bible wrong to speak about *the four corners of the earth* (Revelation 7:1) since we now know the earth is round? Most readers understand this was just an archaic way of speaking about spreading out in all directions (north, south, east, west).

Other difficulties are harder to explain.

²⁴ Roger Olson, *Against Liberal Theology: Putting the Brakes on Progressive Christianity* (Zondervan, 2022).

²⁵ G. K. Beale, *The Erosion of Inerrancy in Evangelicalism* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008), 273-74.

Jesus' grandfather

Who was Jesus' grandfather?

- **Jacob** was the father of Joseph, the husband of Mary, the mother of Jesus (Matthew 1:16).
- Jesus the son, so it was thought, of Joseph, the son of **Heli** (Luke 3:23).

Jacob and Heli are not merely two names for the same person; the disparity continues back for several generations.

Some suggest that Matthew and Luke could have traced different sides of Jesus' family: Mary's ancestry versus Joseph's. That's possible, since kingship was received through the father, while Jewish heritage even today comes through the mother.

The truth is we **don't know** how to account for the difference. That's why I'm not keen on arguing about inerrancy: there's too much we don't know.

The LORD or Satan?

What do you make of this?

2 Samuel 24:1 (NIV)

The anger of the LORD burned against Israel, and he incited David against them, saying, "Go and take a census of Israel and Judah."

1 Chronicles 21:1 (NIV)

Satan rose up against Israel and incited David to take a census of Israel.

These texts describe the same event. David conducted a census of Israel to determine his military strength. God was displeased because David's faith was misplaced: relying on the power of his army rather than the power of the LORD.

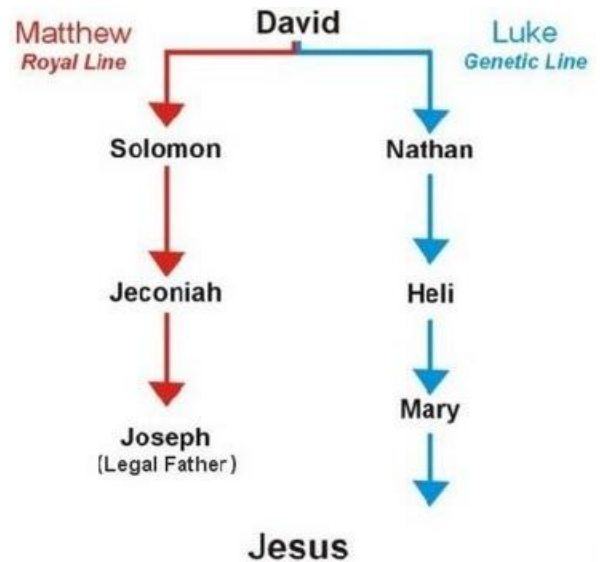
But what was the source of David's misplaced faith? Was the LORD setting a trap for David? Or was Satan tripping him up? Which one is right? Which one is wrong?

For me, this was one of the "I don't know" texts for a long time. Now I understand it's not a contradiction, but an example of **progressive revelation**. More had been revealed by the time Chronicles was written.

Progressive revelation (definition):

More is revealed as the story unfolds. The more complete revelation of God comes to us in Christ.

The Hebrew word *śā-ṭān* means enemy or adversary. In the time of the kingdom, the Philistines or Moabites were Israel's *śā-ṭān* [enemy]. In a time of peace when there was no enemy, Solomon could say, "There is no *śā-ṭān*" (1 Kings 5:4). Later, Hadad the Edomite became a *śā-ṭān* to Solomon, and the Syrian king *Rezon* was Israel's *śā-ṭān* as long as Solomon lived (11:14, 23, 25).



A commonly suggested solution for the disparity in Jesus' genealogy in Matthew and Luke.

It wasn't until after the exile that the Jewish people realized there was a *Śā-tān* in the heavenly realm opposing them. Assyria had wiped out Israel. Babylon captured what was left. Persia captured Babylon, so now they were under Persia—not restored as a kingdom of God. Alexander the Great conquered Persia, so now they're part of the Greek empire. They realize, "These aren't just human *śā-tāns* opposing us. There's a Satan—the Enemy behind the enemies. This Satan is oppressing us to prevent God's saving work being fulfilled through us." They speak of this Enemy opposing them in the heavenly court (as in Job 1–2). The *Śā-tān* accuses them of being so corrupt that God cannot use them (Zechariah 3:1-2).

Chronicles was written after returning from exile. (See the list of returning exiles in 1 Chronicles 1–9). Now they realize a spiritual enemy has been opposing them all along, so Chronicles can speak of the Satan trying to undermine them in David's time.

There's no contradiction. This is a diachronic difference—a time-based difference in perspective and the language available to them. As God revealed more (progressive revelation), they became aware of things they did not know in earlier times.

When the text is uncertain

Open your Bible to Mark 16:9-20. Are these verses in your Bible? Is there a note saying these verses were not in the earliest copies of the Bible? These verses were in the text when the King James Version was translated in 1611, so why do modern translations leave out chunks of the Bible? People who crave certainty sometimes accuse translators of tampering with God's word.

The reality is that there are differences in the ancient copies of the text available to us today. Manuscripts were copied by hand, and copyists made mistakes. They may have written "your" instead of "our." They may have missed a line. They may have seen a note written in the margin and added it to the text on the assumption that the previous copyist had missed it and then realized their mistake. For many reasons, there are differences in the ancient copies since they were not churned out by a printing press.

We have so many copies of the New Testament that most of the time it's easy to reconstruct what the text would have been. For example, older copies are more likely to be right than later copies that are copies of copies. That makes us cautious about Mark 16. As the NIV says, "*The earliest manuscripts and some other ancient witnesses do not have verses 9-20.*"

Did Mark's Gospel originally end at verse 8?
 Would Mark end the story with confusion, silence and fear?
 Was there a final page that's been lost in transmission?
 Did a later copyist add an ending to resolve the tension?
 Honestly, **we don't know**. We can't be certain.

Mark 16:8 (NIV)

Trembling and bewildered, the women went out and fled from the tomb. They said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid.

The other passage we can't be sure of is John 7:53–8:11. For the first five centuries, the story of the woman caught in adultery was not in John's

Gospel. It's such a great story, and so consistent with the heart of Jesus. I wish it was there. Others did too, apparently. Some copyists included it here. Others inserted it into John 21 or Luke 24. It's very unlikely this was originally part of the Gospel of John, so you won't hear me teaching from this passage, even though I like the story.

In any recent translation, you'll see footnotes on the manuscript evidence. Some are very obvious: the additional text in 1 John 5:8 has no support in any manuscript before the fourteenth century. Others are less clear. Should Mark 1:1 include the words *the Son of God*? The evidence is inconclusive. Of course, many other verses describe Jesus as the Son of God, whether this one does or not.

The truth is that we have thousands of manuscripts and fragments of New Testament books, far more than any other books from ancient times. Some fragments are dated to the second century—from 100-200 years of when the text was written.²⁶

Are you okay to live with uncertainty?

.....
.....
.....
.....

²⁶ <https://www.biblicalarchaeology.org/daily/biblical-topics/new-testament/dating-the-oldest-new-testament-christian-manuscripts/>

5.2 Relational faith

Isaiah 55:8-9 (NIV)

⁸ “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,” declares the LORD.

⁹ “As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.”

God is beyond knowing, but not unknowable. The Bible is God revealed to us, the revelation that ultimately comes to us in Christ. We know God relationally.

Some things we know through mathematical deduction or scientific experiment. Historical and relational knowledge are not like that: you can't repeat events in a lab. I've known Robyn's love for many years, but I can't prove it scientifically. God is present in history and relationship, but neither astrophysics nor apologetics can prove God. The Bible doesn't try. God is someone we know, and trust:

*I know **whom** I have believed, and am convinced that he is able to guard what I have entrusted to him until that day (2 Timothy 1:12).*

The Bible begins with relationship between God and humanity:

- It's the story of a creature honoured with authority to image God, and the conflict we introduce when we see ourselves as gods instead of God's.
- It's the story of God's faithful love: leading his people in this conflict zone, entering the warzone to defeat death without using our weapons, and rising to restore heaven's reign to the earth.
- It's the story of the Lamb leading his people in the way of the cross towards the day when earth is once again what God intended it to be: a kingdom of heaven.

That's the story we live in, the macro framework for my little life. I'll be dead long before God completes this goal, but it's the one thing worth spending my life on. The restoration of heaven's reign to the earth in Christ is *the treasure hidden in the earth, the pearl of immeasurable value* (Matthew 13:44-46).

What is faith?

Hebrews 11:1 (NIV)

Now **faith** is **confidence** in **what we hope for** and **assurance** about what we **do not see**.

Does this verse promise that if I'm confident enough, I'll get what I ask for? That interpretation puts *me* at the centre: *my* faith in *my* confidence assuring *me* of getting what *I* hope for. That reduces faith to a means of manipulating God.



Put your faith in God. That makes a world of difference:

- Faith is *confidence* in God’s character, where God is leading us.
- *What we hope for* is our world reborn as a kingdom of heaven.
- What we’re *sure about* is that God is taking us there, even though we *do not see* it fully realized yet.

That interpretation fits the context: *we hold unswervingly to the hope we profess because the one who promised is faithful* (Hebrews 10:23). The faith examples that follow are of people trusting where God would take the world. By faith they invested their lives in what they did not yet see.

Why did Abraham’s faith lead him to leave the Babel-builders region? *He was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God, ... longing for a better country*—one that recognized heaven’s reign (Hebrews 11:10, 16).

All the heroes of faith in Hebrews 11 died without seeing their hope fulfilled. The nation founded by the Torah was a miniature kingdom of God, a piece of the earth as the Promised Land, with God reigning through his anointed (David). But it all fell apart. They lost everything to the kingdoms of the world. *They were all commended for their faith, but none of them received what had been promised* (11:39).

The unresolved hope of earth as a kingdom of heaven then finds fulfilment in Christ. Jesus is the architect/builder Abraham longed for, the one who brings to earth what we’re all longing to see. So we keep running towards that goal, *fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith. For the joy set before him*—the hope of earth reborn as a kingdom of heaven—*he endured the cross, scorning the shame* of being treated as a powerless pretender to the throne. And he has been raised up, *given a seat at the right hand of the throne of God* (Hebrews 12:2).

This is the faith the gospel calls us to. The gospel is the good news of God’s Christ, raised up as Lord to lead the world. This gospel calls for faith in Jesus—trust in God’s anointed leader as the Saviour of the world. Faith in God’s Messiah sets us right with God (justifies), so we do right out of faith[fulness] to God, in response to God’s faithfulness to us.

Our faith is in God, not in ourselves. God is trustworthy, and I have much to learn. Are you okay living with faith in God and uncertainty in our own understanding?

.....

.....

.....

.....

When you face a crisis of faith

In his letter to the Philippians, Paul talks about going through a crisis of faith. When everything he knew went down the drain, Paul lost everything that gave him value:

Philippians 3:4-7 (NIV)

⁴ If someone else thinks they have reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: ⁵ circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; ⁶ as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for righteousness based on the law, faultless. ⁷ But whatever were gains to me I now consider loss ...

Paul's Jewishness was his identity. At 8 days old, he was already obeying the Torah (compare Leviticus 12:3). His DNA was Jewish all the way back to the man who was Israel (Jacob), through his youngest son (Benjamin). Paul was a model of pure Jewishness: a Hebrew of the Hebrews. As a Pharisee, Paul called his people to live as the Sinai covenant demanded. He was so zealous for the faith of his fathers that he tried to stop those who gathered in the name of King Jesus (the church).²⁷ He was so meticulous in fulfilling the Torah that he believed he was right with God, faultless by the standards of the Sinai Law.

All his certainly came tumbling down when Paul met Jesus on the road to Damascus. If Jesus was raised from the dead, those who crucified him were wrong. The God of Israel overruled Jesus' execution, enthroning him as Lord of all people, and calling Paul to carry this good news to the gentiles as well as Israel (Acts 9:15). Belonging to the people of God was no longer a matter of Jewish ancestry and Torah obedience. All who give their loyalty to the Messiah (place their faith in Christ) are counted as the people of God now. Paul's Jewishness was no advantage anymore.

This was such a crisis of faith for Paul that it took him years to work through it (Galatians 1:17-18). His identity and value no longer came from belonging to the Jewish nation but from belonging to the Jewish Messiah who is Lord of all.

The value of the Messiah replaced what Paul had considered valuable:

Philippians 3:7-14 (my translation)

⁷ But whatever were my assets, I've recalculated as a liability on account of the anointed ruler. ⁸ All of it moved to the liability column in light of the surpassing value of knowing Messiah Jesus as my Lord, the reason I forfeited it all. I consider it worthless so I could gain Christ ⁹ and be found in him: not having my own right standing from Torah obedience, but through reliance on the anointed leader, the right standing from God on the basis of allegiance. ¹⁰ To know him—both the power of his being raised up, and the participation in his anguish—is to be shaped with him by his death, ¹¹ so I could come to rise up out of death.

²⁷ On why we use the word *church*, see at <https://allenbrowne.blog/2019/09/06/why-church/>

¹² It’s not like I’ve already moved in, or already arrived. I’m in pursuit, acquiring how I was acquired by our anointed leader. ¹³ Family, it’s not like I think I’ve acquired it. Just one thing: forgetting what was before, stretching forward to what’s ahead, ¹⁴ I pursue the goal—the prize of the higher call of God [to participation] in Messiah Jesus.

See what Paul did? When everything he thought he knew crumbled around him, he reframed everything around the Messiah. Just as you might deconstruct an old house to make way for a new one, deconstructing your faith is not a bad thing if you hold on to the one thing that matters: the Messiah God has given us. Everything can be reconstructed around him.

We’re doing that all the time. I grew up with faith, but in 2012 I realized that my understanding of Jesus was lacking. He saw himself as *the son of man*, but that’s not how I understood Jesus’ identity. What he did and taught was all about *the kingdom of God*, but that’s not how I understood Jesus’ mission. I met with Haydn Nelson and said, “I need to pursue a better understanding of Jesus. I don’t understand how he understood himself and his mission.”

In the years since then, I’ve let go of many things I thought were important, so I could know him—who he is, and what he’s doing. Seeing Jesus as the king at the centre, with us as his kingdom has reframed everything for me. I’m still learning, but seeking King Jesus and his kingdom is reconstructing everything I value.

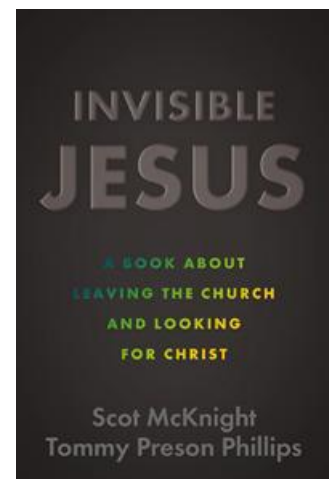
What about you? Is your faith under reconstruction as you see Jesus as our leader who reconstructs humanity in his leadership?

For more on the topic of deconstructing faith, see Scot McKnight’s book:

Invisible Jesus: A Book about Leaving the Church and Looking for Christ (Zondervan, 2024).

Your thoughts?

.....
.....
.....
.....



5.3 Conclusion

Rather than deconstructing our faith, we could say our faith reconstructs us. We lose our own certainty as we trust God to redeem the world through the leadership of the Christ. That's faith.

Scripture is the vision of the God reconstructing us in Christ. Seeing God changes us, as we follow him. That's the goal of Bible study:

James 1:22–25 (NIV)

²² Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. ²³ Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like someone who looks at his face in a mirror ²⁴ and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like.

²⁵ But whoever looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues in it—not forgetting what they have heard, but doing it—they will be blessed in what they do.

More on that next week.

Did you solve the puzzle on page 49? Answer below.²⁸

²⁸ A little misunderstanding between friends (a little *mis*, under stand-in-G, between friend and friend).

6 The living word

We study the Bible not just for information but for transformation. What God has decreed for the world comes to life in us. We become like the God we worship. The world discovers its heavenly sovereign as his word comes to life in us.

6.1 How can the world see God?

Most of what exists is not visible to the naked eye. There are billions of stars in the universe, but only a few thousand are visible to us. So, we build telescopes with huge mirrors to collect and focus light from distant stars.

We put the Hubble telescope in orbit beyond the earth since the atmosphere scatters the light. We launched the James Webb Space Telescope (JWST) 1.5 million kilometres from earth, so earth doesn't block its few. To see far into space, JWST needed a mirror larger than the rocket that carried it. Eighteen hexagonal mirrors—each 1.3 metres across—were unfolded in space and focused to work together as a single reflector. Now we see what it was designed to reveal: the early universe from 13 billion years ago.



James Webb Telescope. Photo: NASA.
<https://science.nasa.gov/mission/webb/webbs-mirrors/>

But no telescope can reveal God. The Creator is not part of creation. So how can people see God?

In many cultures, people constructed idols—a visible image to represent their god. But calling an inanimate object a “god” insults the living God (Exodus 20:4).

Only a *living* being can image the *living* God:

- To be human is to image God. Among all the creatures of earth, we represent heaven's authority (Genesis 1:26-28).
- Since humans went their own way, creating their own gods, Israel was called to image God, to represent *the living God*.²⁹

But like the rest of humanity, Israel struggled to live as the people who reveal God to the world. God set them up as *a light to the nations* (Isaiah 42:6; 49:6), but darkness spread over them too, as they fell to the nations (Isaiah 8:22–9:2). The whole world went dark, yet God promised the world would see him in his people (Isaiah 60:1-4).

The light of God's reign had gone out for 600 years. Ruled by the kingdoms of this world instead of by God, they were living in darkness, like the nations.

²⁹ Deuteronomy 5:26; Joshua 3:10; 1 Samuel 17:26, 36; 2 Kings 19:4, 16; Psalm 42:2; 84:2; Isaiah 37:4, 17; Jeremiah 10:10, 23:36; Daniel 6:20, 26. Compare Isaiah 44:9-20.

They needed a glimpse of God to keep them going:

John 14:8-10 (NIV)

⁸ Philip said, “Lord, show us the Father and that will be enough for us.”

⁹ Jesus answered: “Don’t you know me, Philip, even after I have been among you such a long time? Anyone who has **seen me** has **seen the Father**. How can you say, ‘Show us the Father’?”

¹⁰ Don’t you believe that I am in the Father, and that the Father is in me? The words I say to you I do not speak on my own authority. Rather, it is the Father, living in me, who is doing his work.”

Want to see God? Look at Jesus!

In the beginning, God spoke *light* and *life* to a dark and lifeless world.

As people turned from God, *darkness* returned, and *death* reigned.

Into the dark and dying world, came **the living word** (John 1:1).

In the beginning, God decreed, “Let there be light!” That decree came to life in Jesus: *In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind* (John 1:4).

In him, *the true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world* (1:9).

The *light* and *life* that God decreed for us in the beginning was visible on earth again:

John 8:12 (NIV)

He said, “**I am the light of the world**. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the **light of life**.”

We come back to *life* again in him. *The light of the world* doesn’t leave us floundering in the dark to find our own way. He is *the way* to the Father; *the truth* God decreed for creation; *and the life* God breathed into humanity resurrected (John 14:6).

In summary, Jesus is the living word of God, the word come to life. That’s where Bible study takes us. Would you like to discuss what John did here?

.....
But it isn’t only in Jesus that God’s word comes to life. As he lives in us, God’s word comes to life in us. The community where he lives becomes the light of the world:

Matthew 5:14-16 (NIV)

¹⁴ “**You** are the **light of the world**. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. ¹⁵ Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. ¹⁶ In the same way, let **your light** shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.”

Wow! We are *the light of the world* because *the Light of the world* lives in us. We come to life in him, so the world sees the living God living in us. If the resurrected Christ is living in us, can we say, “If you’ve seen us, you’ve seen the Father. ... The Father, living in us, is doing his work in and through us”?

Crucially, the *you* is plural here. I am not the light of the world, but together we are. As humanity coming back to life in the resurrected Christ, we are the light that God has set up for the world; the way, the truth, and the life of the Father.

Do you have any stories of the word of God coming to life in us?

.....

In reality, not everyone sees God in his people.

No farmer gets 100% strike rate from the seeds they plant:

- Some of the seed lands in places where it never comes to life.
- Some germinates in shallow places where it cannot take root.
- Some comes to life, but doesn't survive among the thorns and thistles.
- Yet, some of the seed grows and produces the harvest the farmer intended.

The parable of the sower is Jesus explaining how the word of God comes to life in the earth. "*The seed is the word of God*" (Luke 8:11), for God decreed fruitfulness for the earth (Genesis 1:11-12). But the rebellion against God has frustrated the harvest. The earth grows thorns and thistles, death where God intended life (Genesis 3:18-19).

The frustrated farmer in this story is Jesus: "*This is why I speak to them in parables: 'Though seeing they do not see; though hearing, they do not hear or understand.'*" (Matthew 13:13).

But even though he feels the anguish of a world that resists what God has said, Jesus keeps planting *the message of the kingdom* (Matthew 13:18). Though many seeds are unproductive, the earth will produce the harvest God decreed:

Isaiah 55:10–13 (NIV)

¹⁰ As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater,

¹¹ so is my word that goes out from my mouth:

It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.

¹² You will go out in joy and be led forth in peace; the mountains and hills will burst into song before you, and all the trees of the field will clap their hands. ¹³ Instead of the thornbush will grow the juniper, and instead of briars the myrtle will grow. This will be for the LORD's renown, for an everlasting sign, that will endure forever."

God's word will not echo back from an empty void, producing nothing. The sower keeps planting in tears, for the harvest that will fill heaven and earth with joy.

The word of God comes to life in the people how recognize Jesus as our heaven-appointed ruler and live as his kingdom. That's what these parables of the kingdom are saying.

Discuss? Are you comfortable with being the living word of God, the word that comes to life in us? Do you feel the frustration Jesus felt? Do you share the sower's hope of a harvest?

.....

Okay, let's clarify our role in the world. Some Christians fear Western society is losing its moral fibre. They call us to be *salt and light*, by which they mean standing up against the evil doers and evil legislators who undermine godly values and moral purity.

That was not Jesus' agenda. He did not say, "You are the moral police for my kingdom, to shine a light on the criminals and highlight their dark deeds." That's not what Jesus did, though it is what the Pharisees did.

Being the light of the world is not a call to fight against the darkness. God set us up as the light of heaven's presence on earth, to "*give light to everyone in the house ... so that they see your good deeds and glorify your Father in the heavens.*"

Similarly, the *salt* metaphor is not a call to try to preserve a world that's already gone rotten. It's not about the rotten meat; it's about the salt's flavour. If God's people lost their distinctiveness, they were *no longer good for anything except to be thrown out [exiled] and trampled underfoot* by the nations (Matthew 5:13). While salt (sodium chloride) cannot lose its distinctive flavour, God's people had lost their God-flavour.

Eugene Peterson got the metaphors right:

You're here to be the salt-seasoning that brings out the God-flavours of this earth. ... You're the light, bringing out the God-colours in the world. (Matthew 5:13, 14, Msg).

The goal of bible study is **to be the living word**. Knowing God changes us, so the world sees God dwelling in us. The community that trusts and follows Christ reveals God's sovereign authority on earth.

6.2 We share in Christ's life together

Some of Jesus' audience missed the point of Bible study:

John 5:39-40 (NIV)

³⁹ "You study the Scriptures diligently because you think that in them you have eternal life. These are the very Scriptures that testify about me,
⁴⁰ yet you refuse to come to me to have life."

The Bible is not the source of life. Jesus is. Even the Old Testament leads us to him. Bible study is relational: knowing Christ, rather than knowing stuff.

So, what does it look like for us to be the people who have found life in Christ? Crucially this is something we must do together.

It's not about me

In my younger days, I thought the Bible was about me. Bible reading was a spiritual discipline, a quiet time to develop my piety. I was the person in the story: Joshua taking the land, or Daniel being rescued from lions. I called Jesus *my personal Saviour*.

The Bible never asks me to get alone with Jesus, and it never refers to him as my personal Saviour. It calls *us* into communal relationship with Jesus as our God-appointed leader, and it calls him *the Saviour of the world* (John 4:42; 1 John 4:14).

Now, please don't misunderstand. Each of us needs time with God, as Jesus did when he *went off to a solitary place where he prayed* (Mark 1:35). Each of us bows to Jesus, as Thomas did when he said, "*My Lord and my God*" (John 20:28). But don't make self the centre of the story. It's a communal story about a king and his kingdom, the anointed ruler (*Christ*) and the community that lives in his leadership (*in Christ*).

The problem comes from our culture where the individual is king. *The kingdom of God is within you*, says Luke 17:21 (KJV). That has led to many books and podcasts on having the kingdom of God within *me*. Do you realize how nonsensical that is? A kingdom is a community of people under a royal leader. If I had a kingdom living inside me, I'd be tormented like the guy in Mark 5:9.

In 1611, when the King James Version was translated, Luke 17:21 was unambiguous. Back then, English used *thee* or *thou* for you (singular), and *you* was plural. We misunderstand today because we've lost the English words to distinguish *you (singular)* from *you plural*). Language changes to reflect culture.

But even when the Bible was clearly speaking communally, I was taught to change it!

- John 3:16 says, "*For God so loved **the world*** (John 3:16), but I was taught to substitute *me*: "For God so loved me (insert my name)." In something closer to solipsism than the gospel, I was told, "If I was the only person in the world, Jesus would have died just for me."
- I heard the gospel as, "*Jesus loves **me**; this I know for the Bible tells **me** so.*"

But the Bible does not say that. Whether it's speaking of the Father, the Son, or the Holy Spirit, it always says God loves **us**:

- *See what great love the Father has lavished on **us**, that **we** should be called children of God! And that is what **we** are!* (1 John 3:1)
- *Walk in the way of love, just as Christ loved **us** and gave himself up for **us**.* (Ephesians 5:2)
- *God's love has been poured out into **our** hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to **us**.* (Romans 5:5)

The gospel turns us inside out. Rather than fighting to preserve his own life, Jesus gave his life to rescue a world that resisted his authority. To follow Jesus is to crucify the self:

Mark 8:34 (my translation)

Having gathered the crowd with his disciples, he said to them,
 “Anyone who wants to follow me is to pay no attention to the self,
 to lift up his/her cross and follow me.”

The world will never be set right while each of us focuses our energy and resources on the self, my own appetites and power. That’s not our priority:

Matthew 6:33 (my translation)

“Live first for God’s kingdom, for his reign that sets everything right.
 Everything will be provided to you.”

Jesus called himself *the son of man*. He is the human descendant who received the dominion God gave humanity in the beginning, the vocation to fill the earth with heaven’s reign (Genesis 1:26-28). The earth and its creatures have been terrorized by hunters who subjugate the world to their own power. Nebuchadnezzar conquered Jerusalem. Alexander the Great conquered everyone from Greece to Persia. Julius Caesar changed the world as they knew it from a republic (ruled by a senate) into an empire where he (as emperor) held unchecked power. This is the violent world our heavenly sovereign so loved that he sent his Son so that those who trust his leadership will not perish but participate in his enduring life (John 3:16). This is the kingdom Jesus called us to seek, with the promise that everything else people pursue comes through seeking his Father’s reign restored to the earth in the Christ.

I’m not saying, “Don’t read the Bible on your own.” I do that every day.
 But the goal is shared relationship in his leadership, life together in him.

The gospel

Salvation is not just a personal thing. God is working on a global rescue:

Colossians 1:13 (NIV)

He has **rescued** us from **the dominion of darkness**
 and brought us into **the kingdom of the Son** he loves.

What God has done in Christ is what God has been doing from the start. God *rescued* Jacob’s family from *the dominion of darkness* (their oppression under Pharaoh). God formed them into *the kingdom of light* through the Sinai covenant for the sake of the nations. The *holy people* (Deuteronomy 28:9) received the land as their *inheritance* (Joshua 11:23).

That story now continues in Christ, for all the peoples of the earth. Rescue. Kingdom. Commission as God’s holy people. Inheritance for all in Christ’s kingship:

Colossians 1:12 (NIV)

The Father ... has qualified you [i.e. Colossian gentiles] to share
 in **the inheritance of his holy people in the kingdom of light**.

God did not abandon Israel in favour the nations. God includes us gentiles in *the inheritance of his holy people*, as citizens of the *kingdom of light*, participating in Messiah's life (compare Ephesians 2:19-20).

The Messiah has received the earth as his inheritance (as in Psalm 2:8). So God is visible to the earth in the Son who heads up God's family (*firstborn over creation*):

Colossians 1:15–20 (NIV)

¹⁵ The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. ¹⁶ For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him. ¹⁷ He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. ¹⁸ And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy.

¹⁹ For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, ²⁰ and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.

The *church* (verse 18) is the community that gathers around King Jesus, making his kingship known on earth. As his community, we are the place where people see the gospel reconciling people to God and to each other.

Jesus did not make peace by shedding the blood of his enemies (war). Jesus offered his life to make peace with those who wanted his blood (the cross). We trust him that this is how God will reconcile the whole creation to himself.

What a vision! It's more than individuals regenerated with the life of Christ. It's a cosmic salvation: all the broken and dislodged pieces finding their place in his leadership like a magnificent mosaic reflecting the majesty of its heavenly king (verse 20).

So, in reading the New Testament letters, don't just take it personally. The question is: **how can we treat each other in response to the way our king treats his kingdom?**

Colossians 3:12-14 (NIV)

¹² Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. ¹³ Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. ¹⁴ And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.

How would we treat God's chosen people if we saw them as God does: *holy* and *dearly loved*? We live in a culture where people take advantage of each other sexually,



Artwork from broken pieces.

<https://www.madebybarb.com/2023/04/22/how-to-make-your-own-tesserae-for-mosaics/>

where capitalism presents greed as the root of all good when it's actually a false god, a world where we use anger and deception to manipulate people (3:5-9).

But now we've seen in Christ what it means to be human, we put off those attitudes as unsuitable clothing, *clothing ourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience* (verse 12).

Since God released us for our rebellion against him, we release each other from the grievances we hold against each other. Only then can we be a unified community, bound together in perfect unity by the love God has given us in Christ (verses 13-14).

The gospel that makes peace between people and God also makes peace between people who were previously at war with each other:

Colossians 3:15-17 (NIV)

¹⁵ Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful. ¹⁶ Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom through psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts. ¹⁷ And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

God's gospel—the good news of his Christ as our Lord—releases *his rule in our hearts* (our attitudes towards each other). Together we are Jesus in the world (his *body corporate*), *members* of the kingdom that is *at peace* in him, thank God! (verse 15).

The gospel forms us into a temple where God lives on earth. *The king living in his kingdom* imparts a *richness* to us, helping us embody the *wisdom* of our heavenly sovereign by focusing our hearts on living for his honour, a life affirmed in the harmonies and melodies of our *psalms, hymns, and the songs of the Spirit*) (verse 16).

So, whether you're at home, at work, in a church meeting, with family, playing sport, or helping a neighbour, our words and deeds all express the same reality: the authority of King Jesus, our gratitude to belong in the family of the Father in the Son (verse 17).

That's the message everywhere in the letters of the New Testament: the living, breathing reality of life under Jesus Christ our Lord.

Your thoughts?

.....
.....
.....

6.3 Conclusion

Next week's session is dedicated to your questions. Email questions to:

allen.browne@riverview.church

with the subject:

“Question for Exploring the Bible.”

There will be no notes or podcasts, so this invitation is for those who attend in person.

We've seen how the Bible is one congruent story from creation to new creation. Our heavenly sovereign never gave up on his earthly realm, responding to the rebellion by making himself known through humans: through Israel, through Christ, and through the people who live under his Christ today.

As we remove our masks and look into the face of God in Christ, our humanity is being restored. His Holy Spirit is reconstructing us as God's mirror for the world:

2 Corinthians 3:18 (NIV)

And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.

The word *hermeneutics* means the interpretation of the text:

Hermeneutics is not simply about getting the text right. It is about being rightly formed by the text so that God's people can live faithfully within his unfolding story. The goal is not to master Scripture but to be mastered by it.³⁰

For examples of Jesus interpreting Scripture relationally, see:

<https://allenbrowne.blog/2021/01/22/the-god-who-raises-the-dead/>

<https://allenbrowne.blog/2021/01/28/davids-lord/>

³⁰ Kevin Vanhoozer, What Is Hermeneutics? <https://www.logos.com/grow/live-hermeneutics-vanhoozer/> 2026.