

Therefore, brothers and sisters, in view of the mercies of God, I urge you to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God; this is our true worship. Do not be conformed to this age, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may discern what is the good, pleasing, and perfect will of God.

Romans 12:1-2

God Who Transforms Us

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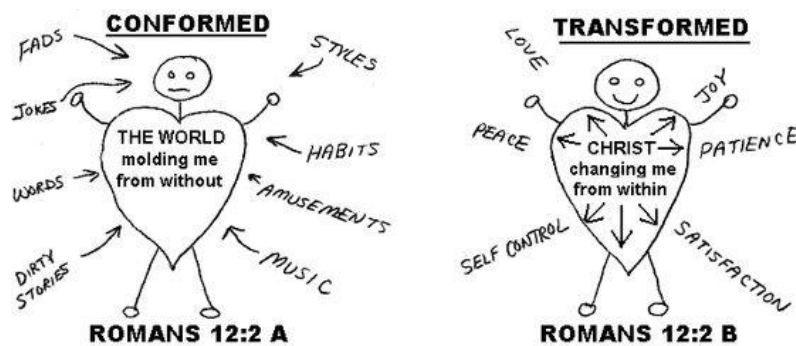
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About this unit:

We have reached the last portion of the Bible in our reading plan. This section contains Acts, the letters written to various churches throughout the Roman Empire and the prophetic book of Revelation. Because of the direction of this unit, we will not be covering the book of Acts that chronicles the birth of the Church and Paul's life, but I have included information about those topics in the maps and charts since some of Paul's letters were written specifically to churches he established on his missionary journeys.

The other important backdrop for this unit is the Roman Empire. The New Testament takes place during the Pax Romana that was established by Emperor Augustus Caesar. This period is marked by roads and ships that made travel possible and relatively safe and a huge military presence keeping the citizens of the vast empire under control. Included is a timeline of the rulers of Rome, who are mentioned in the New Testament, and who are responsible for the state sponsored persecution and execution of believers. This may have been a time of peace, but it was certainly not a time of freedom.

This unit is based off Romans 12:1-2. Our focus last unit was the Gospel that Paul so eloquently tells us is "the power of God for salvation." (Romans 1:16) But when we truly trust God with our lives, a transformation also happens. Paul says in Romans 12:2 not to be conformed to this age but to be transformed by the renewing of your mind. I love the language that is used in this verse. The word conformed means being pressed by outside forces (like what we would do with playdough). The world wants to conform us and presses against us in every way possible to make that happen. But Paul tells us not to conform, rather to be transformed. The Greek word here is where we get our word metamorphosis. God's Word and God's Spirit transform us from the inside out from one who was dead in our sin and an enemy of God into one who is a child of God and salt and light in the world. For some this transformation happens so quickly that it is noticeable to everyone, for others it is a slower process. For all of us, it is a lifelong journey. In Philippians 1:6, Paul says to the church, "I am sure of this, that he who started a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus." God's good work started in the early church and will continue until Christ returns. God's work in you started at the moment of salvation and He will see that work through to completion. The focus of these lessons is some of the different evidences of this transformation the writers of the New Testament letters share. Praise God that He transforms our character and our nature into His image so that we can walk in obedience because we are not capable of doing that on our own!



Maps and charts



1

Roman Rulers during the time of the New Testament

Roman Emperor	Years	Historical Notes	Reference
Augustus Caesar	27 B.C. to 14 A.D.	Granted unlimited power by Senate	Luke 2:1
Tiberius	14 to 37 A.D.	Likely assassinated	Luke 3:1
Caligula	37 to 41 A.D.		
Claudius	41 to 54 A.D.	Likely poisoned in 54 A.D.	Acts 18:2
Nero	54 to 68 A.D.	First to carry out persecution of Christians. Paul and Peter martyred during this time.	Philippians 4:22
Galba	68 to 69 A.D.	Murdered	
Otho	69 A.D.	Committed suicide	
Vitellius	69 A.D.	Murdered	
Vespasian	69-79 A.D.	Senate declared ruler	
General Titus	79-81 A.D.	Destroyed the Temple in Jerusalem Died of the plague	
Domitian	81-96 A.D.	Started Rome's 2nd persecution of believers. Exiled John to the Island of Patmos	
Nerva	96-98 A.D.		
Trajan	98-117 A.D.	Conducted Rome's third persecution of believers.	

2

Paul's Missionary Journeys:

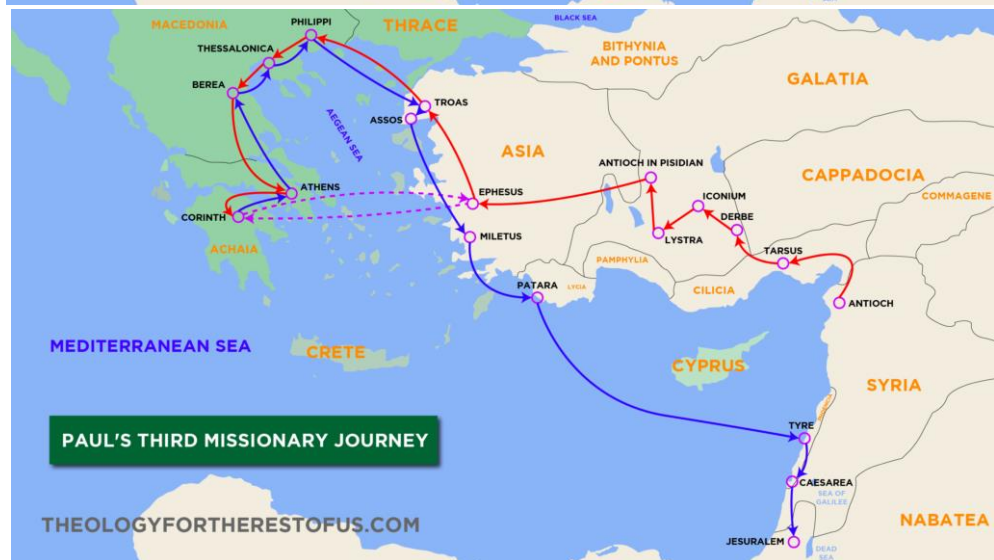
Timeline of Paul's Missionary Journeys

- **A.D. 37:** Converted on the road to Damascus
- **A.D. 37-40:** Spends three years in Arabia
- **A.D. 40:** Brief visit to Jerusalem to meet with the apostle Peter
- **A.D. 40-44:** Preaches and ministers in Tarsus and surrounding regions
- **A.D. 44 or 45:** Relocates to Antioch in Syria
- **A.D. 45 or 46:** Travels with Barnabas to visit Jerusalem, brings a famine relief offering
- **A.D. 46 or 47:** First missionary journey with Barnabas, likely lasts 1-2 years
- **A.D. 50:** Attends the Jerusalem Council
- **A.D. 51:** Second missionary journey, trip lasts 2.5 to 3 years, including 18 months in Corinth
- **A.D. 54:** Third missionary journey, trip lasts more than 4 years, including 3 years in Ephesus
- **A.D. 58:** Arrested in Jerusalem, put on trial before the Roman governor Felix
- **A.D. 58-60:** Held in Caesarea for two years
- **A.D. 60:** Put back on trial by Festus the new Roman governor; eventually transported to Rome
- **A.D. 61:** Arrives in Rome
- **A.D. 61-63:** Placed under house arrest for two years
- **A.D. 63:** Released from house arrest, likely launches his fourth missionary journey
- **A.D. 66 or 67:** Imprisoned in Rome again
- **A.D. 67 or 68:** Martyred under Nero's persecution

**Dates are approximate.³*

Maps:





Who is the Holy Spirit?

The Baptist faith and message, which is a document outlining what we believe as Baptists, says this about God:

“There is one and only one living and true God. He is an intelligent, spiritual, and personal Being, the Creator, Redeemer, Preserver, and Ruler of the universe. God is infinite in holiness and all other perfections. God is all powerful and all knowing; and His perfect knowledge extends to all things, past, present, and future, including the future decisions of His free creatures. To Him we owe the highest love, reverence, and obedience. The eternal triune God reveals Himself to us as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, with distinct personal attributes, but without division of nature, essence, or being.”¹

Notice the last sentence, “God reveals Himself to us as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.” We have one God that we also know in three persons that we call the Trinity. If you have been in church for many years, you know the Trinity is one of those ideas we are not fully going to comprehend until we are in heaven experiencing the complete fullness of God. Perhaps one of the simplest ways to think of the Trinity is one God with three different expressions or essences that all have different unique purposes. The Holy Spirit is that third part of the Trinity and is probably the least understood, so let’s take some time to look at what God’s Word says about the Holy Spirit.

The Old Testament surprisingly teaches us many things about the Holy Spirit. The word used for Spirit is “ruah” and means wind, breath, or spirit.² We meet the Holy Spirit in Genesis 1:2 where He is hovering over the surface of the waters during the creation of the universe. Throughout the Old Testament we see the Spirit of God come on people or be placed in people:

- In Exodus 31, the Lord appoints Bezalel and fills him with God’s Spirit, so he has wisdom, understanding, and ability in every craft to design the artistic work for the Tabernacle.
- In Numbers 11, the Lord tells Moses to bring 70 elders to help him bear the burden of the people, and He will put the Spirit on them.
- In Numbers 24, the Spirit of God came to Balaam and spoke through him even though Balaam was a prophet for hire and not a follower of God.
- In Numbers 27 and Deuteronomy 34 Joshua was filled with the Spirit.
- In Judges, the Spirit of the Lord came upon the different judges to enable them to battle Israel’s enemies.
- In 1 Samuel 10 and 11, the Spirit of the Lord came upon Saul.
- In 1 Samuel 16 the Spirit of the Lord came powerfully upon David when he was anointed to be the next king and that same Spirit left Saul.
- Ezekiel 2,3, & 11 says that the Spirit entered him, set him on his feet, lifted him up and said go.

So, the Spirit tends to come and go from people in the Old Testament, showing up when God needs a judge, a king, or a prophet. He enables them, empowers them, and equips them to do what God has called them to do.

Then God speaks about the Spirit through the prophets. Isaiah speaks of a shoot who will grow up from Jesse and the Spirit of God will rest on him, a Spirit of wisdom, knowledge, counsel, strength, and fear of the Lord (Isaiah 11:1-2) He also describes a servant that God has put His Spirit on that will bring justice

to the nations (Isaiah 42:1). And in Isaiah 61, he describes one who has the Spirit of the Lord that has been anointed to bring good news to the poor, was sent to heal the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, freedom to the prisoners, and the year of the Lord's favor. These prophecies all speak of Jesus Christ, the Messiah. So, the Spirit of God was and still is with Him. The prophets also speak of God pouring out His Spirit. In Isaiah 44:3, Isaiah says "I will pour out my Spirit on your descendants, and my blessing on your offspring." Ezekiel echoes this idea in chapter 36 saying, "I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will remove your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. I will place my Spirit within you and cause you to follow my statutes and carefully observe my ordinances." Ezekiel continues in chapter 39 saying the Spirit will be poured out on the house of Israel. Joel 2 says that God will pour out His Spirit on all humanity. Haggai 2 says we do not need to be afraid because God's Spirit is present among us. As Nehemiah recounts the history of Israel in Nehemiah 9, he says that God sent His good Spirit to instruct them, and then He sent His Spirit through the prophets to warn them, but they did not listen. Zechariah echoes Nehemiah's words in chapter 7, reminding them they did not obey the law, or the words sent by His Spirit and that angered God. Then in chapter 4 he reminds Zerubbabel that he will succeed not by strength or by might, but by the Spirit. So, the prophets speak of the Spirit's presence on them and in people and events in the Old Testament, but they also point us to one who is coming with the Spirit of God on Him (Jesus) and that one day there will be an outpouring of the Spirit on the world.

As we move into the New Testament, we see these prophecies fulfilled. After God was silent for 400 years, Zechariah was filled with the Spirit and prophesied (Luke 1) and John the Baptist was filled with the Spirit while still in his mother's womb (Luke 1). In the story of the birth of Jesus we know that Mary was pregnant from the Holy Spirit (another one of those divine mysteries we will never fully comprehend). We know the Spirit was present as Jesus was baptized (Matthew 3) and it was the Spirit that led Jesus to 40 days of fasting in the wilderness (Matthew 4). Luke tells us that Jesus had the power of the Spirit and Jesus fulfills Isaiah 61. Matthew 12 quotes Isaiah 42 saying Jesus fulfilled this prophecy about a servant of God chosen and beloved in whom He delights, and His Spirit was on him. Finally in Matthew 28, Jesus instructs His disciples to baptize in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. These Gospel writers confirm that Jesus fulfilled prophecies of the coming Messiah and that He was filled with the Spirit. John, in His Gospel, speaks of the importance of being born of the Spirit (chapter 3) because the Spirit gives life (John 6). In John 7 he speaks of the events in Acts, "those who believe in Jesus are going to receive the Spirit." He tells us of the ministry of the Spirit in John 14-16: He is a counselor, He will teach you all things, He will remind you of what I have taught, He is a Spirit of truth, He will guide you into all truth.

Continuing into the book of Acts, in Acts 2, the believers were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in different tongues as the Spirit enabled them. Peter mentions that this fulfilled the prophecy in Joel 2 during his sermon. The description of the rushing wind and the tongues of fire are the same symbols associated with God in the Old Testament. In Acts 4, Peter was filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke through the Holy Spirit. In Acts 5, Ananias and Sapphira are accused of lying to the Holy Spirit and testing the Holy Spirit because they lied about the amount of money they received when they sold a piece of land. In Acts 6, seven men filled with the Spirit are selected to be the first deacons. In Acts 8, the Samaritans who believed received the Holy Spirit and in Acts 10, the Holy Spirit is poured out on Gentiles who believed. In Acts 13, Paul and Barnabas were sent by the Holy Spirit as the first missionaries. In Acts 16, the Holy Spirit provided directions for Paul about where to go and where to

avoid on a mission trip. In the book of Acts, we see the Spirit playing an active role in the development and growth of the early church and in the lives of believers.

The writers of the Epistles paint a beautiful picture of the ministry and influence the Holy Spirit has in the lives of believers.

The Holy Spirit is one of God's good gifts to us. Titus 3:6 says that God poured out the Holy Spirit on us through Jesus our Savior. So, the Holy Spirit is given because of our faith, not because of any work that we have done (Galatians 3). Unlike the Old Testament where the Holy Spirit came and went as needed, our bodies are a temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 3:16 and 6:19). John says that God gave the Holy Spirit to us, and He remains in us (1 John 3:24). We are made alive by the Spirit (1 Peter 3:18) and blessed because of the Spirit (1 Peter 4:4).

The writers of the Epistles also do a great job explaining the nature of the Holy Spirit and what kind of ministry He has in our lives as believers. God pours out His love for us and gives us newness of life through the Holy Spirit (Romans 5:5 & 7:2). The Spirit is described as a seal and a down payment (see 2 Corinthians 1:22, 5:5 and Ephesians 1:13-14). A seal was used in New Testament times to identify belonging and ownership, so the Holy Spirit marks us as belonging to God for now and all eternity.³ The Holy Spirit testifies that we are God's children (Romans 8:16). The Spirit also intercedes for us when we do not know how to pray (Romans 8:26). The Holy Spirit testifies about the new covenant (Hebrews 10:14-16), teaches us, and reveals things to us because He searches everything and knows the very thoughts of God (1 Corinthians 2, 12). So, the Holy Spirit is our teacher and our adviser for all things in life! The Holy Spirit also sanctifies us (2 Thessalonians 2:13). This is the process of salvation where we are made like Christ. In Titus 3, Paul writes that "we are saved according to His mercy through regeneration and renewal by the Holy Spirit that God has poured out on us." This process of sanctification also includes the Holy Spirit producing fruit in us (Galatians 5), distributing Spiritual gifts to us (1 Corinthians 12 and Hebrews 2:4), and enabling us to preach the Gospel (1 Peter 1:12). The Holy Spirit can do all these things because of His nature. He is a giver of life (1 Corinthians 14:45 & 2 Corinthians 3:6) and freedom (2 Corinthians 3:17). He is a Spirit of wisdom, revelation (Ephesians 1:17), and truth (1 John 4:6 & 5:6). This allows the Holy Spirit to provide strength to our inner being (Ephesians 3:16). The Holy Spirit is very much God with us, dwelling in us in a unique relationship. What a great gift God has given to us!

The New Testament also provides us with instructions regarding the Holy Spirit.

- Be fervent in the Spirit (Romans 12:11)
- Walk by the Spirit (Galatians 5)
- Be led by the Spirit (Galatians 5)
- Live by the Spirit (Galatians 5)
- Keep in step with the Spirit (Galatians 5)
- Keep the unity of the Spirit (Ephesians 4:3)
- Do not grieve the Holy Spirit (Ephesians 4:30)
- Be filled with the Holy Spirit (Ephesians 5:13)
- Hold on to the pattern of sound teaching and guard the good deposit through the Spirit who lives in you. (2 Timothy 1:13-14)

When we live according to the Spirit as these instructions suggest we will have our minds set on the things of the Spirit which are righteousness, peace, joy, (Romans 14:17) and love (Romans 15:30). When we take our focus off of the Spirit and start walking by our own path and living by our own rules as the world does we cannot experience all the peace, joy and hope that God has for us, nor can we live out the plans and purposes that God has for us, nor can we reach our full potential in the Spiritual gifts that He has given us. The ministry of the Holy Spirit and how we respond to Him is a huge part of being a Christian. Not only is the Holy Spirit a good gift from God, but He is also necessary for us to grow Spiritually and thrive as believers.

“Now may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you believe so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.” (Romans 15:13)

Metanarrative of the Bible

The definition of metanarrative is simply the over-arching story. In a nutshell the metanarrative of the Bible is God's plan for man's redemption. The Bible is about the nature and character of God that demanded a blood sacrifice for sin and then eventually provided that sacrifice through His Son, Jesus. During this over-arching narrative, there are also many basic instructions for human thriving. To help us grasp this idea, I am going to include some themes or keywords to help us remember the big ideas of each book that we have read so far.

Genesis: Beginnings

The beginning of the world, the beginning of sin, and the beginning of Israel.

Exodus: The Exit from Egypt

Israel flourished in Egypt until Pharaoh enslaved them. God sent Moses to rescue them and lead them into the land He promised Abraham (Canaan). God gives them the Law and directions for a Tabernacle which they build.

Numbers: The Wanderings

A lack of faith keeps Israel from entering the Promised Land, and God leads them "wandering" for 40 years so that generation can die off and the next generation can enter the land.

Leviticus: The Levitical Law

Moses details sacrifices, offerings, feasts, and the Law for the tribe of Levi, aka the Priests.

Deuteronomy: The Second Law

Moses' farewell sermon to the next generation of Israelites, reviewing their history and the law and commissioning Joshua before they enter the Promised Land.

Joshua: The Conquest of Canaan

The Israelites cross the Jordan River, prepare, and then begin the process of taking Canaan relying on the Lord to fight those battles. Joshua ends with land allotments and covenant renewal.

Judges: No King in Israel

After Joshua's death, there was no king in Israel and everyone did what was right in their own eyes. So, God sent nations to terrorize Israel, Israel cried out to God, God rescued them, they followed Him for a while and then the cycle began again.

Ruth: The Kinsman-Redeemer

During the period of Judges, this story of Ruth, Naomi and Boaz shows how the Israelite law worked to take care of widows, from gleaning the leftovers of harvest to a close relative marrying and providing heirs for the deceased.

1 & 2 Samuel: The first kings of Israel

Samuel was the last judge of Israel and a priest and prophet that transitioned Israel to a nation with a king. First in Saul, the king the people wanted, then in David, the king after God's own heart.

1 & 2 Kings: A Historical account of King Solomon to the Exile

1 Kings opens with the death of David and moves through Solomon, the building of the temple, then the divided kingdom and the fall of both the northern kingdom and the southern kingdom.

1 & 2 Chronicles: A Spiritual account of the kings from King David to the exile

This book may have been written by Ezra as those in exile returned to remind the Jews how the corrupt kings of Judah (the Southern Kingdom) led them to idolatry and ultimately to exile.

Job: Suffering

Job reminds us that one reason that suffering happens is that God allows Satan to cause suffering to test us. We also see how Job responds to that suffering by choosing to worship and to stay faithful to God.

Psalms: Songs

This book is a collection of songs, many probably sung in ancient Israel. They have a range of subjects and a range of authors.

Proverbs: Wisdom sayings

Written mainly by Solomon with Agur and Lemuel also contributing. In it we meet Wisdom and Folly personified and see numerous contrasts that paint a picture of obedience that leads to human thriving or disobedience that leads to human suffering.

Ecclesiastes: The Futility of the things of this world

Most likely written by Solomon. The rhythm of the book is a waltz between life without God and life with God. Life apart from God is meaningless, but life with God has purpose and joy.

Song of Solomon: Love Story of a Lifetime

Most likely written by Solomon. Courtship, love, marriage, romance, and even growing old together as a married couple are all contained in this beautiful love story.

Prophets to the Northern Kingdom

Amos: God's Justice and Righteousness

Amos, a sheep herder from the Southern Kingdom, spoke to the Northern Kingdom about their empty worship that had led to trusting in their military for protection, using their personal wealth to satisfy their desires and using their influence to trample the poor and needy. He says they are no better than the nations around them and that God will judge them.

Hosea: God's Faithful Love

Hosea is the story of a prophet who marries a woman named Gomer and they have 3 children together. Even though Hosea loves Gomer faithfully, she is unfaithful to him, and he must buy her back. God had Hosea walk through these trials as a picture of His relationship to Israel. God chose Israel and blessed Israel, but they committed spiritual adultery by worshipping other gods. Like a husband is jealous for the faithful love of his wife, God is jealous for the faithful love of His people.

Jonah: God's Compassion

Jonah was called as a prophet to Nineveh, the capital city of Assyria and sworn enemy of Israel. In this story we see Jonah's reluctance and prejudice and we see God's compassion for this Gentile people group and for Jonah. God always meant for Israel to be a light to the nations, but Israel was content to be God's chosen people and keep God for themselves.

Prophets to the Southern Kingdom

Isaiah: God's Messiah is Coming

Isaiah prophesied to the Southern Kingdom around the time of the fall of the Northern Kingdom. Although Isaiah speaks of judgment, he is known as the evangelical prophet because he speaks more about the coming Messiah than any other prophet.¹ Isaiah speaks about the "Holy One of Israel" who "must punish His rebellious people, but afterward will redeem them."²

Micah: God's Covenant Love

Micah was a contemporary of Isaiah and a prophet to the Southern Kingdom. He says they have broken God's covenant and so God will judge them. But that judgment will not be forever. One

day there will be a new Jerusalem, a new king will sit on the throne, and he will be a blessing to all the nations.³

Nahum: Nineveh will Fall⁴

Nahum prophesies about the coming judgment of Nineveh for her oppression, cruelty, and wickedness. He reminds us that God is sovereign over all nations, writing their history and controlling their destiny.

Habakkuk: God is still Good (amidst evil in the world)

This book contains a dialogue between the prophet and God. Habakkuk trusts God but questions what God is doing because it makes no sense to him. God defends His goodness and power in view of the evil that is in the world. A key verse we also see quoted in the New Testament is 2:4b “the righteous one will live by his faith.”⁵ This dialogue leads Habakkuk to pen a psalm of praise in chapter 3.

Zephaniah: God’s Tough Love

Zephaniah was a descendant of King Hezekiah, and thus related to the royal line, so his prophecies are spoken with a familiarity of current political issues.⁶ The phrase “Day of the LORD” occurs seven times in this book⁷ as a great day of judgment. But in chapter 3, he also speaks of a future restoration and God who saves and loves (Zephaniah 3:17). This is the tough love of God, a love that disciplines and punishes to restore His people to a right relationship with Him.

Jeremiah: God’s Word will Stand True

Jeremiah was one of the last prophets to the Southern Kingdom before the Babylonian exile. His fiery message of accountability and the consequences of sin fell on deaf ears.⁸ Two key repeated words in this book are “backsliding” (unfaithful, CSB) and “Babylon.”⁹ As Judah refused to listen to his message, he was watching them backslide right into destruction and captivity in Babylon, and it was breaking his heart. No wonder Jeremiah is called the weeping prophet.¹⁰ As he watched God’s words of judgment come true right before his eyes, he did not leave Judah without hope. He offered comfort in God’s promise not to abandon His people and God’s promise of a new covenant through the Messiah.¹¹

Lamentations: Lamenting the destruction of Jerusalem

The focus of this book is on the destruction and devastation of Jerusalem, sometimes using graphic language. However, in chapter 3 there is a section of hope in the goodness of God and in chapter 5 there is a prayer of repentance for the people. Jewish tradition considers Jeremiah the author.

In the Exile and Return

Joel: The Day of the LORD

No one knows exactly when Joel was written, but the theme is “the day of the LORD” in three different pictures: a plague of locusts, and invasion of Judah by Assyria (an army like locusts), and final judgment of the world in an ultimate day of the LORD.¹²

Daniel: God's Sovereignty

Daniel was taken to Babylon as a teenager and lived to see his fellow captives return home. This book has two distinct parts. The first 6 chapters explore God's sovereignty in Daniel's personal life, showing us how to walk with God in a pagan culture. The final 7 chapters are prophecies of future kingdoms and events reminding us that history is really God's story.

Ezekiel: God's Glory is Eternal

Ezekiel was a contemporary of Jeremiah who was taken to Babylon. He ministered to his fellow captives in Babylon while Jeremiah prophesied in Judah.¹³ Ezekiel's message and visions focus on the sovereignty and glory of God and the sinfulness and judgment of His people Judah.

Obadiah: Edom will Fall¹⁴

Scholars disagree on exactly when this prophet lived but mention of the destruction of Jerusalem and celebration of that destruction in Edom suggest that he spoke around the time of the destruction of Jerusalem. This book focuses on God's judgment of the Edomites (descendants of Esau) for their arrogance and violence against Judah.¹⁵

Ezra: The Exiles Return Home

Ezra was a descendant of the priest Hilkiah. He organized the synagogue and founded the order of scribes. He led two groups to return to their homeland, the first 50,000 and the second 2000.¹⁶ He was a great revivalist and reformer. His mission was to restore the spiritual heart of the nation,¹⁷ rebuild the temple and the city, and restore the Jewish community in their land.¹⁸

Nehemiah: The Exiles Need Strong Leadership

Nehemiah served as a cupbearer to the King of Persia. He saw what was happening in his homeland and requested a leave of absence. So, as a layman he returned to Jerusalem to help with the rebuilding efforts. "Watch and pray" and "work and pray" are the words that characterize him. This book includes rebuilding the walls, revival, and reform.¹⁹

Esther: God Providential Power

We see the providence of God on every page of this book. As God stands in the shadows, perhaps hidden from his people, he is still watching over them and protecting them through the life of Esther.²⁰

Haggai: Prioritize God

Haggai prophesied to the exiles who had returned to their homeland about 520 BC. The rebuilding of the Temple had ceased, and the nation needed to get back to work. The book contains four speeches: glorify God, stay committed to God's plans, live in a way that pleases God, and serve God faithfully.²¹

Zechariah: God's personal concern for His people²²

Zechariah prophesied to the remnant of the Jews during the time of Ezra and Haggai. He spoke through a series of visions exhorting them to repent and encouraging them with prophecies of glorious future events including the coming Messiah.²³

Malachi: Honor God in How you Live

Malachi prophesied while Nehemiah was leading the remnant of Israel in their homeland. He addressed many of the same issues as Nehemiah. The people were dishonoring God by offering blemished sacrifices, disobeying God with a failure to keep their marriage vows, robbing God by not bringing the full tithe to his house, and complaining that they did not feel God's love and God's promised blessings. He called them to return to Godly living.

The Gospels

Matthew, Mark, and Luke are called the Synoptic Gospels because their content and order is similar.

Matthew: Christ the King

This Gospel was written by Jesus' disciple Matthew who was a Jew for a Jewish audience. We know this was his intended audience because of the use of Jewish language and customs and the opening genealogy that speaks of Jesus as a descendent of Abraham. The focus is on Jesus as King and His Kingdom.²⁴

Mark: Christ the Suffering Servant

This Gospel was most likely written by John Mark, Barnabas' cousin. Scholars believe that he was in Rome around the time that Peter was martyred and wrote during that time for the people in Rome. This is the shortest and most succinct of the Gospels, focusing on the actions of Jesus as God's servant and how following him will lead to persecution and suffering.²⁵

Luke: Christ the Son of Man

This Gospel was written by the physician Luke who traveled with Paul on several of his missionary journeys. Luke was a Gentile and wrote this book for Theophilus (Luke 1:1-4) a Greek name meaning "one who loved God." In his book we see order and compassion for humanity. From his genealogy tracing Jesus as a descendant of Adam to his focus on Jesus' concern for women, the poor and sinners he focuses on the humanity of Jesus and His compassion for all humanity, Jews and Gentiles.²⁶

John: Christ the Son of God

This Gospel was written by the disciple John. It does not follow the structure of the other 3, rather he clearly sets out to focus on the deity of Christ. He writes about 7 Messianic signs, 7 "I AM" statements, and how Jesus fulfilled the Old Testament festivals and institutions.²⁷ John tells us his purpose in John 20:30-31.

Acts: You will be My Witnesses

Luke wrote the book of Acts as a continuation of his Gospel. The purpose of this book is to explain how the Gospel spread throughout the world and how churches were established. The thesis of the book is Acts 1:8, which speaks of the order of the spread of the Gospel. In Acts we also meet Paul who had a dramatic salvation story and then became the first missionary.²⁸

The Epistles (Letters)

James – Faith produces Good Works

James the half-brother of Jesus is most likely the author of this letter which was written to Jewish Christians.²⁹ The teachings in this book echo ideas and language from the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5-7 and the book of Proverbs. This letter explains how our faith is displayed and lived out in daily life and conduct.³⁰

Galatians – Faith in Christ Alone

Paul wrote this letter to the church in Galatia to confront some false doctrine being spread by Judaizers. These false teachers were telling the church they still needed to follow the Old Testament Law to be saved. They were telling them they needed Jesus and works to be saved! Paul reminds them they are justified by faith alone. And sanctified by God alone, not by our works, but by our submission to the Holy Spirit who dwells in us.

1 & 2 Thessalonians – Christ is Coming Again

Paul wrote both letters in a relatively short time span covering similar information. His purpose was to encourage the church at Thessalonica to stand against persecution and pressure from their community and instruct them in Godly living. The other main topic in both letters is Paul answering their questions about the second coming of Christ.³¹

1 Corinthians – Walk in Godly Wisdom

Most scholars believe this is the second letter Paul wrote to the church at Corinth. The purpose of this letter was to address problems within this young church. The church was using the grace of God to excuse worldly living, and they were divided with 4 different groups competing for leadership. These behaviors were obvious to the surrounding community and hurting their ability to spread the Gospel. Paul writes to contrast Godly wisdom and Godly living with worldly wisdom and worldly living to get this church back on the right course.³²

2 Corinthians – Walk in Godly Courage

After 1 Corinthians, Paul made a trip back to Corinth to address some of the issues in person. With no improvement, he then wrote another “severe letter” that Titus delivered to them, mentioned in 2 Corinthians 2:4-9. It is after this letter and a good report from Titus that Paul wrote 2 Corinthians. The key words in this letter are comfort and encouragement. There are two big actions Paul encouraged them to do: restore a member who had caused trouble and share in an offering for the needy in Judea.³³ This letter contains the most biographical information about Paul and the longest teaching on giving in the New Testament.³⁴

Romans - The Gospel is the power of God for Salvation

In this letter to the church in Rome, Paul eloquently puts forward a thorough explanation of the Gospel. In chapters 1-3 his focus is our sin and need for salvation. In chapters 4-5 the focus is salvation by faith. In chapters 6-8 he focuses on the process of sanctification. In chapters 9-11, Paul turns to God’s Sovereignty specifically as it applies to the Jews. In the remainder of the letter, he turns to some practical instructions about how to serve God. This letter will deepen your understanding of the Gospel and help you defend and share your faith.

Paul’s Prison Epistles

Colossians – Supremacy of Christ

This letter is part of a group of letters Paul wrote while he was in prison in Rome. The church at Colossae was struggling with heresy that combined Greek philosophy, Eastern mysticism, Jewish legalism, and Christianity. Paul reminds them first of who Christ is and His supremacy over all things, and then that we live out our faith and our calling through obedience, not philosophy, legalism, and mystical teaching.

Philemon – Forgiving like Christ

Paul sent this letter with Colossians to a man named Philemon about a specific situation. A slave named Onesimus had run away from Philemon’s household and Paul shared the Gospel with him and was now sending him back to his master. The law allowed runaway slaves to be executed if they were found. However, Paul recommends that Philemon forgive him and treat him as a brother in Christ. Slavery was a part of the economy in ancient Rome, but masters certainly had the freedom to choose how to treat their slaves and that is the point of this letter.

Ephesians – Riches in Christ

Paul also wrote this letter to the church in Ephesus while imprisoned in Rome. Ephesus was a very wealthy city, but some believers had given up careers to follow Christ. Paul reminds them they are blessed with immeasurable riches as members of God's Kingdom. In the second half of the book, he switches his focus to our responsibilities as believers to walk in a manner worthy of the calling we received.

Philippians – Suffering with Christ

As Paul writes this letter to the church at Philippi, they are facing intense persecution, and he is sitting in prison in Rome. Yet the repeated words in this book are Christ, mind/attitude, and joy/rejoice. Basically, when we keep our minds focused on Christ, we always have joy even during difficult circumstances.

Paul's Pastoral Epistles

1 Timothy – How to Conduct Yourself in God's House

Paul wrote this letter to Timothy, who was a young pastor, so that "you will know how people ought to conduct themselves in God's household." (3:15) Topics include preaching sound doctrine, the different roles and ministry of men and women in the church, and the qualifications for pastors and deacons. Paul also encourages Timothy not to let anyone look down on him because of his age, but to set an example in his speech and conduct.³⁵

Titus – How to have a Healthy Church³⁶

Paul wrote this letter from Corinth to Titus who was serving as a pastor in Crete.³⁷ Chapter 1 focuses on preaching God's Word, ordaining qualified leaders, and silencing false teachers.³⁸ The remaining two chapters focus on Christian behavior and responsibilities both in the church and out in the world.³⁹

2 Timothy – How to Minister Courageously for Christ

This is most likely the last letter Paul wrote and it was written while imprisoned in Rome waiting for execution. Paul sent Tychicus to relieve Timothy. This allowed Timothy to join Paul in Rome, so as Paul's life ended Timothy could continue Paul's ministry. Paul tells Timothy to hold on to the pattern of sound teaching, to guard the Gospel, to present himself to God as a worker who is not ashamed of the Gospel, to be strong in the grace of Christ, and to suffer as a good soldier of Christ. These are all instructions to live in the last days where people will not tolerate sound teaching.⁴⁰

Hebrews – Superiority of Christ and Christianity

The writer of this letter was an expert in the Old Testament and writes this letter to show us how Christ is the fulfillment and completion of the Old Testament. He speaks of how Christ is superior to the prophets, the angels, Moses, and the priests and that He is the supreme object of faith and is superior in power as well.⁴¹ If you want to make connections between the Old Testament and the New Testament this book is one you need to study!

Peter's Epistles

1 Peter – Living Hope from Christ

This letter was written by Peter sometime before he was martyred in AD 64. He was probably in Rome and wrote this letter to believers in Asia Minor. Peter wrote this letter to encourage them and testify to the true grace of God (1:13). He tells them they can live victoriously in persecution

by not losing hope, not becoming bitter, trusting God, and looking for the second coming.⁴² The overarching idea of each of these topics is living hope.⁴³

2 Peter – Spiritual Knowledge from Christ

In this second letter, Peter uses the words “know” and “knowledge” thirteen times. The Greek meaning of this word is more than just an intellectual understanding, it is a knowledge that comes through participation in that truth. The letter describes the marks of a Christian life, followed by how to recognize false teachers and instructions for living as a Christian.⁴⁴ This is Peter’s last written word before his death, it is also a farewell letter and a summary of his teachings.

Jude – Contend for the Faith

Jude started out to write a letter about the salvation we share, but instead felt led to write urging them to contend earnestly for the faith and out of concern for false teachers among them. So, as you read this short letter both threads are in there by way of Old Testament examples, vivid imagery, and instructions. The Old Testament references mean this letter was most likely written to Jewish Christians.

John’s Epistles (Letters)

1 John – Know that you have Eternal Life

John wrote this letter to show us what it means to be born of God. Those who are born of God know God, love God, abide with God, have fellowship with God, walk in light and do not live in sin. These are the marks of a believer, and John says he has written these things so that you may know that you have eternal life (1 John 5:13).

2 John – Walk in the Truth in Love⁴⁵

John wrote this letter to the elect lady and her children. This may be an actual family or symbolic of a church and its members or both.⁴⁶ He reminds her of the command to love one another and to remain in Christ’s teaching with a warning not to allow other teachings into their home. This letter showcases the simple instructions for building a Christian home.

3 John – Walk as a Faithful Witness

John wrote this letter to Gaius who is mentioned throughout the New Testament as one who traveled with Paul and hosted people and the church in his home. This letter commends the hospitality of Gaius and the witness of Demetrius, while also condemning Diotrephes for slander and not receiving John’s authority. This letter is a study in different types of Christians and whether how they are living is helping or hindering the church’s witness.⁴⁷

Revelation – Jesus, the Lamb who is worthy

John, the beloved disciple of Jesus, wrote this book during the reign of Domitian, dating it somewhere between 81 and 96 AD, while he was in exile on the island of Patmos. The theme of the book is Christ: His risen glory, His direction of the churches, His judgments during the 7-year tribulation, His return, His millennial reign, and His new heavens and new earth. John provides an outline for the book: “write what you have seen, what is, and what will take place after this.” (Revelation 1:19)⁴⁸ This is the only prophetic book in the New Testament, filled with visions and symbols, so it must be read and studied as we study Old Testament prophecy.

November 24 – God Transforms our Works

Text: James 2:14-26

Big Idea: Living, saving faith is evidenced by works

Focus: *Use this section to open in a large group or small group setting.*

Option 1: What did you learn about God this week in your reading?

Option 2: Have you encountered someone (or even yourself at one point) who thought they were saved because they believed in Christ but their actions did not support this? What did that look like?

Study: *Use this section for your small group Bible study time.*

About this book:

Authorship

James, the half-brother of Jesus, is most often accredited as the author of this book. James was the leader of the Jerusalem church (Acts 15:12-21; Galatians 1:19) however he did not appear to be a believer during Jesus' life; as can be observed in John 7:5. But as we see in Acts and other New Testament books, James eventually committed his life to Christ's ministry (Acts 12:17, 1 Corinthians 15:7, Galatians 1:19 & 2:9). His conversion ultimately cost him his life according to ancient documents – he was asked to publicly denounce Christ and refused, losing his life around AD 62.¹

Date and Audience

The book was likely written in the mid-40's AD and the audience is strongly considered Jewish Christians outside Jerusalem based on the reference to "the twelve tribes dispersed abroad" in chapter 1.

Content & Theme

The book of James is a series of short wisdom speeches full of metaphors and one-liners, influenced by Jesus' teachings in Matthew and the wisdom writings of the Old Testament. Each teaching stands alone, with key words and themes tying them together. Overall, the book of James focuses on practical application of living a life of faith- of the 108 verses in the book of James, 50 are direct commands² – be doers of the Word!

Introductory Material:

James 2 begins with calling out the favoritism that was occurring, reminding us that God chose the poor to have faith and be heirs in the kingdom (2:5). He then reinforces the "royal law" of "Love your neighbor as yourself" (2:8) however, if they are showing favoritism then they are still law breakers. James goes on to highlight that one can uphold the entire law, but if you commit just one sin you are guilty of breaking the entire law (2:10). He closes this section with a call to "speak and act as those who are to be judged by the law of freedom," (2:12) which brings us to our focus today.

James 2:14-26 examines how our works are a byproduct of faith. Verses 14-19 provide an example of what faith without works looks like while verses 20-26 reinforce how faith and works work together as seen in the example of Abraham and Rahab the prostitute.

Clarifying a “Contradiction”

Read James 2:14-26 and discuss the questions below.

¹⁴ *What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but does not have works? Can such faith save him?*

¹⁵ *If a brother or sister is without clothes and lacks daily food¹⁶ and one of you says to them, “Go in peace, stay warm, and be well fed,” but you don’t give them what the body needs, what good is it?¹⁷ In the same way faith, if it does not have works, is dead by itself.*

¹⁸ *But someone will say, “You have faith, and I have works.” Show me your faith without works, and I will show you faith by my works.¹⁹ You believe that God is one. Good! Even the demons believe—and they shudder.*

²⁰ *Senseless person! Are you willing to learn that faith without works is useless?²¹ Wasn’t Abraham our father justified by works in offering Isaac his son on the altar?²² You see that faith was active together with his works, and by works, faith was made complete,²³ and the Scripture was fulfilled that says, Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness, and he was called God’s friend.²⁴ You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone.²⁵ In the same way, wasn’t Rahab the prostitute also justified by works in receiving the messengers and sending them out by a different route?²⁶ For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so also faith without works is dead.*

Commentary & Questions

- Before we dig into the application of this passage it’s important to address what is often viewed as a contradiction between James’ understanding of faith and works vs. Paul’s. Supposed contradictions in the Bible can be roadblocks to non-believers so understanding them so that we are equipped to address them in conversations is crucial to our witness.
- There are two verses in this passage that appear to contradict Paul’s teachings on the same subject:
 - Contradiction 1
 - **James 2:14: *What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but does not have works? Can such faith save them?***
 - **Ephesians 2:8-9: *“For you are saved by grace, through faith, and this is not from yourselves; it is God’s gift- not from works, so that no one can boast.”***
 - **1. Get it:** What is the apparent contradiction in James 2:14 and Ephesians 2:8-9?
 - While on the surface these appear to be contradictions, Paul and James complement each other when we examine the environment and the perspectives of the respective audiences they were addressing.
 - In Paul’s writings, he was dealing with individuals who were depending on their works as their salvation. James, on the other hand, was dealing with individuals who depended only on their belief and didn’t require any works as evidence of their faith. As Jewish Christians, the pendulum may have swung too far the other way.
 - Contradiction 2: Justified by works vs. justified by faith
 - **James 2:21-24 *“Wasn’t Abraham our father justified by works in offering Isaac his son on the altar? You see that faith was active together with his works, and by works, faith was made complete, and the Scripture was fulfilled that says, Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness, and he was called God’s friend. You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone.”***

- **Romans 3:28:** *“For we conclude that a person is justified by faith apart from the works of the law...”*
 - **2. Get it:** What is the apparent contradiction in James 2:21-24 and Romans 3:28? In Roman’s 3:28, Paul is referencing works as the means of obedience to the law of Moses and before people began embracing the faith Jesus preached in the Gospels. James is speaking of works in context of obedience to Jesus’ teachings in the Gospels.
 - Paul speaks of justification before God whereas James speaks of justification before men. Paul magnifies faith by showing the insufficiency of any works of the law as a saving act. Whereas James magnifies the same faith Paul is discussing by showing what genuine results of faith are.
- Both these apparent contradictions are not contradictions at all. Both James and Paul speak of the same faith and the same works. This passage in James shows us WHAT type of faith we should have.

Identifying a Living Faith

Read James 2:14-19 and discuss the questions below.

¹⁴ What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but does not have works? Can such faith save him?

¹⁵ If a brother or sister is without clothes and lacks daily food ¹⁶ and one of you says to them, “Go in peace, stay warm, and be well fed,” but you don’t give them what the body needs, what good is it? ¹⁷ In the same way faith, if it does not have works, is dead by itself.

¹⁸ But someone will say, “You have faith, and I have works.” Show me your faith without works, and I will show you faith by my works. ¹⁹ You believe that God is one. Good! Even the demons believe—and they shudder.

Commentary & Questions:

- James is speaking to Jewish Christians who now knew the freedom from the works-based righteousness under the law of Moses. However, as highlighted in the introduction, many went to the extreme, thinking they only needed to believe in Christ as a means of salvation.
- James challenges this error in thinking by showing his readers what kind of faith they must have to be saved.
 1. **Get it:** How does James describe a faith without works?
 2. **Get it:** Is it possible to have faith in God and not be saved?
 3. **Get it:** What example does James give us of a faith that is dead and where do you see this today? *See verses 15-16*
 4. **Get it:** If faith without works is dead, what type of faith must we have?
- A living faith is one where our actions are an outpouring of the faith we profess. Luke 3:11 and Luke 6:44-45 reinforce this message (along with many other verses throughout the bible):
 - ***“John answered, ‘Anyone who has two shirts should share with the one who has none, and anyone who has food should do the same’,” Luke 3:11 (NIV)***
 - ***“Each tree is recognized by its own fruit. People do not pick figs from thornbushes, or grapes from briars. A good man brings good things out of the good stored up in his heart, and an evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in his heart. For the mouth speaks what the heart is full of,” Luke 6:44-45 (NIV)***

- Faith is evidenced by our works, not because of our works but as a sign of our faith

Living Faith in Action

Read James 2:20-26 and discuss the questions below.

²⁰ Senseless person! Are you willing to learn that faith without works is useless?²¹ Wasn't Abraham our father justified by works in offering Isaac his son on the altar? ²² You see that faith was active together with his works, and by works, faith was made complete, ²³ and the Scripture was fulfilled that says, Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness, and he was called God's friend. ²⁴ You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone. ²⁵ In the same way, wasn't Rahab the prostitute also justified by works in receiving the messengers and sending them out by a different route? ²⁶ For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so also faith without works is dead.

Commentary:

- James's readers are Jewish Christians, and he uses the Old Testament to demonstrate what transformed works looks like (as evidenced by a living faith) to further persuade them that faith without works is dead. Even more interesting is James's use of Abraham, the father of the Jews, and Rehab, a Gentile. It may have been James's way of shifting the Jewish Christians mentality as more Gentiles came into the faith (works will not save, as Jews thought they did under the Jewish law).
- James recounts Abraham (Genesis 22), the father of their faith, who demonstrated his obedience to God by sacrificing his son Isaac to God. The language here is interesting because James is acknowledging that Abraham did in fact offer Isaac on the altar, even though the angel stopped him from killing his son. Yet, he would have completed the act had God not stopped him.⁴ It was his complete faith and obedience to God that he was willing to act on what was probably the hardest thing he'd do in his life.
- He then shifts to Rehab the prostitute (Joshua 2:1-24 & 6:22-27) whose act of faith, when hiding the spies in Jericho, saved her family. She believed what she had heard about the Israelites and then acted on that belief.

QUESTIONS:

1. **Get it:** Considering the passage of James 2:14-26, what kind of works are the result of a living faith?
2. **Apply it:** How should we respond when we see others in need?
3. **Apply it:** Can you share how you have seen your faith transform your works or seen it in others?

Apply: Use this section to conclude your lesson for today.

In the words of David Guzik, "faith alone saves, however a faith that saves is not alone, it has good works with it."⁵ Faith and acts work together, you cannot separate the two. If you have one without the other your faith is dead. True, living faith does something, it prompts you to act. The world will see our faith by our works. And our works should transform the lives of others.

Apply it: What can you take away from today's lesson?

December 1 – God Transforms Our Fruit

Text: Galatians 5:16-26

Big Idea: All the good characteristics we'd like to have in our lives come from an abiding relationship with the Holy Spirit. Paul calls "love, joy, peace, etc." the **fruit of the Spirit**, not the fruit of a good person or a good Christian.

Focus: Use this section to open in a large group or small group setting.

Option 1: What did you learn about God this week in your reading?

Option 2: Explain a time you saw the Spirit produce His fruit in you when your flesh wanted to respond to life's circumstances differently.

Study: Use this section for your small group Bible study time.

About Galatians:

The Apostle Paul wrote this letter to the churches of Galatia around 49 AD (1:1). Paul had visited this region with Barnabas on his first missionary journey (Acts 13-14). His church planting work among the Gentiles had led to significant conflict and questions concerning the acceptance of Gentiles into the faith. This was at the root question of the Jerusalem Council that takes place in Acts 15.

Galatia is a region north of the Mediterranean Sea in what we know in modern times as the southern part of Turkey. Some of the towns that Paul visited in the area include: Perga, Antioch, Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe (see map).



Scholars believe that the letter to the Galatian churches may have been the earliest of the New Testament books and letters. “If one espouses a south Galatian hypothesis and places the letter before the events of Acts 15:1–35, then Galatians is the earliest Pauline letter and may have been written ca. AD 48.”¹

The purpose of the letter (at least in part) is a defense of Paul’s apostleship. “From Gal 1–2 we can infer that the opponents disputed the legitimacy of Paul’s apostleship.”² Thomas Schreiner goes on to add, “The first verse of the letter has a defensive tone unlike the openings in all the other Pauline letters. Further, Paul explicitly defends himself against the charge of pleasing people.”³

In addition to an apostolic defense, Paul argued for a Christian life marked by grace through faith while vehemently opposing the idea that Christianity was to be an accumulation of religious rites and exercises. He specifically opposed the requirement of circumcision as a sign of conversion (Gal. 3-4) as it required a specific act in addition to faith as a requirement for salvation. Besides circumcision Paul argued against the other religious legal requirements such as keeping special days on the calendar (4:9-10).

Paul’s logic argued that just as one must be saved by faith alone then the believer’s present walk with the Lord was dependent on faith. If a believer could only be saved by grace through faith in Christ, how could he be expected to live out a consistent Christ-life without total dependence on the Spirit (Galatians 3:1-6). Therefore, a believer’s hope for living out a godly life is dependent upon his surrender to Christ (Galatians 2:20-21).

This leads into today’s passage. The believer must walk in the Spirit to produce the fruit that God desires.

Walk By the Spirit

Read Galatians 5:16-18 and discuss the questions below.

¹⁶I say, then, walk by the Spirit and you will certainly not carry out the desire of the flesh. ¹⁷For the flesh desires what is against the Spirit, and the Spirit desires what is against the flesh; these are opposed to each other, so that you don’t do what you want. ¹⁸But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law.

Commentary:

- The command to “walk by the Spirit” is the only imperative in this passage. This must be the goal and focus of the believer.
- Translators struggle a bit with the best way to translate the phrase “walk by the Spirit.” The NIV and NRSV use “live by the Spirit” while the NKJV translates it “walk in the Spirit.” The two categories of meaning for the Greek word in question provided by Bauer, Danker, Arndt and Gingrich are: 1) “to go here and there in walking, go about, walk around” and 2) “to conduct one’s life, comport oneself, behave, live.”⁴
- The conditional sentence in verse 18 sheds light on the author’s intention for his metaphor of “walk by the Spirit” when he interjects the idea of being “led by the Spirit.” He tells us that if we obey his command to walk by the Spirit (ie. being led by the Spirit), then we are not under the law.

- Paul’s simple statement made in verse 18 is a key point in his entire argument through Galatians. See Schreiner, “Paul makes a salvation-historical argument here, for those who are led by the Spirit do not belong to the old era of redemptive history when the law reigned. To be ‘under law,’ as was noted previously (see also 3:23; 4:21), is to be ‘under a curse’ (3:10), ‘under sin’ (3:22), ‘under the custodian’ (3:25), ‘under guardians and managers’ (4:2), ‘enslaved under the elements of the world’ (4:3), and in need of redemption (4:4–5). If one is ‘under law,’ then one is not ‘under grace’ (Rom 6:14–15).”⁵
- James Boice suggested that verse 18 provides a summary of Paul’s thought in this section, “This final verse of the section is best taken as a summary in which Paul reminds the Galatians that, though he is now talking of the need to live a godly life, he is not thereby reverting to legalism.”⁶
- The intervening verse 17, tells us that our flesh and spirit are “against” each other. That is, what comes naturally to my fleshly desires is opposed to what the Spirit would have me do and vice versa. If we follow the flesh, we will not do what the Spirit wants. If we follow the Spirit’s lead, we will be going against the desires of our flesh.

QUESTIONS:

1. **Get it:** Explain what it means to “walk in the Spirit?”
2. **Get it:** Why are believers no longer “under the Law?”

Common Sense Reveals the Works of the Flesh

Read Galatians 5:19-21 and discuss the questions below.

¹⁹Now the works of the flesh are obvious: sexual immorality, moral impurity, promiscuity, ²⁰idolatry, sorcery, hatreds, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, selfish ambitions, dissensions, factions, ²¹envy, drunkenness, carousing, and anything similar. I am warning you about these things—as I warned you before—that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.

Commentary:

- In the previous paragraph, Paul compared the desires of the flesh to the desires of the Spirit. In verse 19, he begins to delineate the results or evidence of the life that pursues the fleshly desires. Here they are referred to as the “works of the flesh.”
- When a person is simply giving into or following the desires of the flesh, his life will be marked by these kinds of actions.
- Schreiner categorizes these as: sexual sins, refusal to worship God, social sins, and sins of revelry.
- These activities are so widely accepted as sin in Paul’s society that he refers to them as “obvious” or “evident.” Schreiner notes, “Identifying the works of the flesh does not demand extraordinary spiritual discernment. It is not a secret disclosed to a gnostic elite. Instead, those things that issue from the flesh are obvious and clear to anyone with an ounce of discernment.”⁷
- “Although Paul is emphatic that we cannot by ‘doing’ the works of the law enter our promised inheritance (3:12, 18), but that entry is by faith alone (3:11), yet he strongly asserts here that by ‘doing’ these very different things we can bar ourselves from the kingdom. That is not the paradox that it seems to us at first sight. Paul’s whole point is that *those who do such things* thereby show themselves to be without the transforming gift of faith which leads to the gift of the promised Spirit, which, in turn, leads to the fruits of the Spirit, the seal of our inheritance.”⁸

QUESTIONS:

1. **Get it:** Why does Paul call these works “obvious?”
2. **Get it:** Why does Paul indicate that those who do the “works of the flesh” are barred from entering the kingdom? Is he teaching a works-based salvation here? If not, explain. *(Paul is suggesting that those who have chosen to walk in the flesh and not in the Spirit will have a life characterized by the works of the flesh. This is especially important to understand the next section.)*

The Fruit of the Spirit

Read Galatians 5:22-26 and discuss the questions below.

²²But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, ²³gentleness, and self-control. The law is not against such things. ²⁴Now those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. ²⁵If we live by the Spirit, let us also keep in step with the Spirit. ²⁶Let us not become conceited, provoking one another, envying one another.

Commentary:

- The most important observation a believer can make concerning this list is to note that these virtues are the “fruit of the Spirit” – NOT characteristics of a hard-working religious person. These traits are virtues that the Spirit will naturally produce in those who submit to His will, His leadership, and His transforming power.
- When we try hard and work hard at producing virtue, we are (by definition) exercising religious practices to please God, thereby placing ourselves under the law of works.
- Paul’s teaching throughout this text is that we must walk by the Spirit, submitting to His leadership. The natural outcome of this kind of focus will free up the Spirit to produce in us all His glorious traits. It will become “obvious” or “evident” that we are walking in the Spirit because this kind of fruit will become increasingly common in our lives.
- Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control are NOT virtues evident in someone who is controlled by fleshly desires. Nor are they virtues of great “religious” people. These virtues come from deep within those people who have been transformed by and are being led by the Spirit of the living God.
- Paul notes in verse 24 that this is possible because those who belong to Christ Jesus have “crucified the flesh with its passions and lusts.” That is, they consider dead their old way of life and have surrendered to the way of faith. (See Galatians 2:20)
- In verse 25, Paul indicates that this is an ongoing process. If we are to be led by the Spirit, we must keep in step. This is reminiscent of Jesus’ instructions to his disciples in Luke 9:23 to “take up your cross daily.” Though one may certainly choose to surrender to Christ for the first time at some point and begin this “walk” in the Spirit, it will take a daily decision to “keep in step” so one does not fall back into striving according to the flesh.
- It is uncertain whether verse 26 is more connected to this passage or the beginning of chapter six. One must remember that this is a letter written by Paul without chapter and verse divisions.
- The message of verse 26 certainly has some connection to our pericope today. Paul exhorts us to remain humble allowing us to rightly relate to other believers. When “keep(ing) in step with the Spirit” certainly pride, provocation, and envy are excluded because under the control of the Spirit the believer is filled with love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, etc.

QUESTIONS:

1. **Get it:** Whose responsibility is it to produce the fruit provided in this list?
2. **Get it:** Describe the difference between “fruit of the spirit” and “good works”?
3. **Get it:** How must a believer operate to continue being led by the Spirit?
4. **Get it:** Should our capacity to produce the fruit mentioned be impacted by life’s circumstances? (difficult times, bad news, health or economic struggles)
5. **Apply it:** Describe how one might display good works according to religion and not display the fruit of the Spirit.

Apply: *Use this section to conclude your lesson for today.*

Throughout history, it is a common desire for all who believe in God (any god) to try to live up to that god’s expectations with the hope of pleasing the god (or gods). That struggle leads to a never-ending pursuit of good works, religious deeds, and ritual observances. It seems that man can never do enough to overcome his propensity for sin and evil. His flesh always gets in the way.

The Good News of Christ is those days are over, those efforts are unnecessary. Those who are willing to place their faith in Jesus and surrender our lives to Christ by faith can get a fresh start. That fresh beginning doesn’t just clean the slate, by submitting to the Spirit who lives in us and leads us, we find that He begins to produce His fruit in us. The “goodness” that had eluded us with every fleshly effort, becomes a natural outgrowth of the Spirit’s work in a surrendered believer.

December 8 – God Transforms us into Overcomers

Text: 2 Corinthians 4:7-18

Big Idea: The excellency of power is of God and not of us

Focus: Use this section to open in a large group or small group setting.

Option 1: What did you learn about God this week in your reading?

Option 2: Share a time in your life when you knew that it was God's power working through you.

Study: Use this section for your small group Bible study time.

About this book:

Authorship, purpose and recipients: External and internal evidence (1:1) amply support the Pauline authorship of this letter (see Bible.org "An introduction to Second Corinthians for more information). Part of the background of Second Corinthians can be found in the time of First Corinthians. Paul was in Ephesus when he wrote First Corinthians and expected Timothy to visit Corinth and return to him (1 Cor. 16:10-11). Upon receiving a discouraging report from Timothy, Paul made a painful visit to Corinth to correct the leader of the opposition to Paul. Returning to Ephesus, Paul writes his sorrowful letter to the Corinthians and sends it with Titus. Eager to hear Titus' report, Paul journeys to Troas and then to Macedonia to meet Titus on his return. It was there in Macedonia that Paul writes this second letter. Second Corinthians is written to express his thanksgiving for the repentant majority and to appeal to the rebellious minority to accept his authority. The phrase in verse 1 "with all the saints in Achaia" indicates that this letter was to be shared. This took place late in A.D. 56 early 57, possibly from Philippi.¹

Key Verses: *2 Corinthians 4:1, 5-6 Therefore, since we have this ministry because we were shown mercy, we do not give up. . . For we are not proclaiming ourselves but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus's sake. For God who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of God's glory in the face of Jesus Christ.*

Major Theme: The major theme of Second Corinthians is Paul's defense of his apostolic credentials and authority. The Corinthian church had been swayed by false teachers who had stirred the people against Paul. Throughout this letter Paul defends his apostolic conduct, character and call.²

Literary style: Second Corinthians is a pastoral letter containing three of the standard parts of a first-century epistle: salutation (1:1-2), main body (1:3-13:10), and farewell (13:11-14).³

Introductory Material:

Corinth as Paul found it was a cosmopolitan city composed of people from varying cultural backgrounds. It was a Roman colony ruled by Emperor Claudius who had expelled the Jews from Rome shortly before Paul arrived in Corinth. The church was planted on Paul's second missionary journey in AD 50-51 after his visit in Athens. While in Corinth Paul stayed with Roman Jews named Aquila and Priscilla for eighteen months teaching the word of God and working as tent makers. The account of Claudius' decree, Priscilla and Aquila's departure from Rome and Paul's founding of the church in Corinth is recorded in Acts 18.⁴

The writing of Second Corinthians would have occurred during Paul's third missionary journey which was during the rule of emperor Nero who was approximately 15 years old at the time.⁵

Clay Jars

Read 2 Corinthians 4:7 and discuss the questions below

⁷Now we have this treasure in clay jars, that that this extraordinary power may be from God and not from us.

Commentary:

- The treasure is the greatness of the Gospel of Jesus Christ and the glory of God made evident through that Gospel.⁶
- There are numerous scriptures that remind us that we are vessels formed by God for His use. From creation when man was formed from the dust of the ground (Gen. 2:7) to the reminders that we are clay in the potter's hands (Jer. 18:5; Isa. 45:9) to the kind of vessel that is useful to God (2 Timothy 2:21; Acts 9:15).
- There are many types of beautiful, valuable vessels that God could have used to describe us, but as He formed us from the dust not to display our glory, but His, He likens us to the humility of a clay jar for the same reason.
- The believer is simply a "jar of clay"; it is the treasure *within the vessel* that gives the vessel its value.⁷ Paul simply compares the "value" of God's light and glory and the "value" of what He chose to put His light and glory into.
- "We are vessels so that God might use us. We are *earthen* vessels so that we might depend on God's power and not our own."⁸
- The important thing about a vessel is that it be clean, empty, and available for service.⁹

QUESTIONS:

1. **Get it:** What is it that gives a vessel its value?
2. **Get it:** What is the treasure?
3. **Get it:** What are three things that are important for a vessel to be useable?
4. **Apply it:** Does it amaze you that God should chose us to carry His light and glory?
5. **Apply it:** Who is *worthy* to be a "container" for God's light and glory?

Overcomers

Read 2 Corinthians 4:8-9 and discuss the questions below.

⁸We are afflicted in every way but not crushed; we are perplexed but not in despair; ⁹we are persecuted but not abandoned; we are struck down but not destroyed.

Commentary:

- Paul experienced every type of hardship imaginable, but in every situation, he knew God's power. He was:
 - Afflicted (trouble, pressure, hardship), but not crushed.
 - Perplexed (in a position not able to see a way out), but not despaired.
 - Persecuted (oppressed, harassed), but not abandoned.
 - Struck down, but not destroyed.
- In Philippians 3:7-11 Paul is clear that he is willing to lose everything for the surpassing value of knowing Christ, desiring to being conformed to Christ's death.

- *But everything that was a gain to me, I have considered to be a loss because of Christ. More than that, I also consider everything to be a loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. Because of him I have suffered the loss of all things and consider them as dung, so that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own from the law, but one that is through faith in Christ – the righteousness from God based on faith. My goal is to know him and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of his sufferings, being conformed to his death, assuming that I will somehow reach the resurrection from among the dead.*

QUESTIONS:

1. **Get it:** What was Paul willing to lose everything for?
2. **Apply it:** How much are you willing to lose to be conformed to Christ's death?

Death that brings Life

Read 2 Corinthians 4:10-12 and discuss the questions below.

¹⁰We always carry the death of Jesus in our body, so that the life of Jesus may also be displayed in our body. ¹¹For we who live are always being given over to death for Jesus's sake, so that Jesus's life may also be displayed in our mortal flesh. ¹²So then, death is at work in us, but life in you.

Commentary:

- By writing “we always carry the death of Jesus in our body,” Paul meant that he felt as if the death of Jesus was being spiritually worked inside of him. Jesus' death was not only a historical fact, it also was a spiritual reality in his life.¹⁰
- We must focus on the treasure that is carried in the vessel and not on the vessel. Paul was not afraid of suffering or trial, because he knew that both the suffering and the glory were connected.
- Not only must we focus on the treasure and not on the vessel, but we must also focus on the Master and not on the servant. If we suffer, it is for Jesus' sake. If we die to self, it is so that the life of Christ might be revealed in us. If we go through trials, it is so that Christ might be glorified.
- And all of this is for the sake of others. As we serve Christ, his death works in us – but his life works in those to whom we minister.¹¹

QUESTIONS:

1. **Get it:** What did Paul mean when he said he was always carrying about the dying of the Lord Jesus?
2. **Get it:** Who benefits from our trials?
3. **Apply it:** What percentage of your time is focused on the treasure you carry about in your body?

The Voice of Faith

Read 2 Corinthians 4:13-15 and discuss the questions below.

¹³And since we have the same spirit of faith in keeping with what is written, I believed, therefore I spoke, we also believe, and therefore speak. ¹⁴For we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus will also raise us with Jesus and present us with you. ¹⁵Indeed, everything is for your benefit so that, as grace extends through more and more people, it may cause thanksgiving to increase to the glory of God.

Commentary:

- Paul identified with the believer who wrote Psalm 116:10: “I believed and therefore have I spoken.” In the midst of trial and persecution, faith creates the testimony.
- The ability to speak with confidence is knowing that the One who raised Christ will also raise those who believe. He is confident that the more that God’s grace is seen working in lives through trials and tribulations, the greater it extends through more and more people, causing thanksgiving to increase to the Glory of God.
- He sees trials as not only benefitting him but extending out to the salvation of others.
- In 2 Corinthians 4:6 Paul states ‘For God who said, “Let light shine out of darkness” has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of God’s glory in the face of Jesus Christ.’ Paul knew that the light of Christ wasn’t given to him to hide, but to give light of the knowledge of God’s glory.

QUESTIONS:

1. **Get it:** In the midst of trial and persecution, what creates a visible testimony?
2. **Apply it:** Remember the song This Little Light of Mine? Do you feel that you are faithful to 2 Corinthians 4:6?

The Weight of Glory

Read 2 Corinthians 4 :16-18 and discuss the questions below.

¹⁶Therefore we do not give up. Even though our outer person is being destroyed, our inner person is being renewed day by day. ¹⁷For our momentary light affliction is producing for us an absolutely incomparable eternal weight of glory. ¹⁸So we do not focus on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.

Commentary:

- Paul began the chapter by declaring *since we have this ministry, as we have received mercy, we do not lose heart*. Paul is saying that his death-like trials made for more effective life-giving ministry for the Corinthian Christians. Knowing this made him not lose heart.¹²
- The person who guards the treasure of the light of Christ does not give up. Rather, he finds that although he (the vessel) may be worn, chipped and cracked, the life within the vessel is being renewed day by day. Second Corinthians 3:18 states it this way: *We all, with unveiled faces, are looking as in a mirror at the glory of the Lord and are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory; this is from the Lord who is the Spirit.*
- Paul had a truly realistic perspective. He sees his earthly afflictions as light & momentary in view of the incomparable eternal weight of glory. Some of his “light & momentary” afflictions were stripes, imprisonments, beatings, stonings, shipwrecks, perils of waters, robbers, perils in the city, perils in the wilderness, and quite a few others. The ability to perceive these as light and momentary is by the measure of eternity.
- It also means that we see through the lens of an *absolutely incomparable eternal weight of glory*. We usually think of weight as heavy, but the word used here has a different meaning. Moses wrote that when we give weight, or honor, to our parents, our actions please God (Ex. 20:12). Paul picked up on this “weight” metaphor in his letter about future glory. It conveys the idea of value. C.S. Lewis gives a good description of this in *The Great Divorce*. In it one character says, “All the loneliness, angers, hatreds, envies and itchings that [this world] contains, if rolled into one single experience and put into the scale against the least moment of the joy that is felt

in Heaven, would have no weight that could be registered at all." On one side we have vapor. On the other, we have the weight and value of glory and eternity."¹³

QUESTIONS:

1. **Get it:** Why did Paul not *lose heart*?
2. **Get it:** What does weight mean in the context of the weight of glory?
3. **Apply it:** Do you feel that even with all the trials you face that spiritually you are being renewed?

Apply: *Use this section to conclude your lesson for today.*

Warren Wiersbe stated that all a vessel needs to be to be useful is to be clean, empty and available.¹⁴

Here are some questions to ask ourselves:

1. Have I been cleansed of the sin that makes me unusable?
2. Have I emptied myself of my desires, so that God can fill me with His?
3. Have I made my life available for God to use?

December 15 – God Transforms Our Mindset

Text: Romans 8:1-17

Big Idea: In Christ, everything about us has changed.

Focus: Use this section to open in a large group or small group setting.

Option 1: What did you learn about God this week in your reading?

Option 2: Describe a time you discovered an annoying habit. What did you do to get rid of it?

Study: Use this section for your small group Bible study time.

About Romans:

Who wrote the book of Romans?

- The Apostle Paul of Tarsus is the writer of the Letter to the Romans (Romans 1:1).

Who were the recipients?

- Paul was writing to both Gentile and Jewish believers in Rome (Romans 1:7).
To all who are in Rome, loved by God, called as saints.

So why did he write to the believers in Rome?

- Paul hoped to be able to visit the believers in Rome on his way to Spain as he had finished his work in the East, probably on his third missionary journey¹ (see Romans 15:23-24). However, something kept preventing Paul from doing so (Romans 1:13). Paul states why he wanted to visit them: ***I am eager to preach the gospel to you also who are in Rome. (Romans 1:15)***
- Paul wrote to unify the church in Rome (Romans 1:16). Preceding his letter, Roman Emperor Claudius expelled the Jews (believing & non-believing Jews alike) out of Rome (See Acts 18:1-2). After about five years, they were allowed to return. To quote the Bible Project, “When they [returned], they found a church that had become non-Jewish in its customs and practice.”² This led to division and confusion. Therefore, Paul wrote to them to encourage unity in Christ: ***For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, first to the Jew, and also to the Greek.*** (Romans 1:16)
- Paul wrote to clarify the Gospel (Romans 1:16-17). All throughout Paul’s ministry, there have been opponents to the Gospel. These opponents would teach that you had to be circumcised to be saved (Acts 15:1-2), or that Christ could not have come incarnate (Colossians 1-2), or there were some who simply wished to discredit Paul’s name (2 Corinthians 10:10).³ In his letter to the Romans, Paul wanted to make it abundantly clear what he believed and what he would be preaching once he made it to Rome. Paul says this of the Gospel in Romans 1:17: ***For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith, just as it is written: The righteous will live by faith.***
- And finally, Paul wrote seeking for assistance in his goal to bring the Gospel to the West (Romans 15:24). ***For I hope to see you when I pass through and to be assisted by you for my journey there, once I have first enjoyed your company for a while.***

Before you dive in...

What's the "therefore" there for?

- Paul in chapter 8 is continuing an idea he began at the end of the previous chapter. In chapter 7, Paul wrestles with the idea of sinning after salvation. Because of Christ and His Spirit, we now are given a desire to follow God's Law, but operating in the flesh, we can only commit evil. Our sinful nature wars with our new righteous nature in Christ. So, Paul cries out at the end of chapter 7: ***What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? (Romans 7:24)***
- Paul answers his question with the only hope we have: ***Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, with my mind I myself am serving the law of God, but with my flesh, the law of sin. (Romans 7:25)***
- In other words, we ourselves are powerless to be free from our sinful nature, but Jesus Christ is the atoning sacrifice for us because of our sinful nature. Christ is the one and only one who rescues us from our "bodies of death."

A note to leaders:

- Romans is one of Paul's most theologically dense letters. Romans 8 alone gives us glimpses of Paul's soteriology, Christology, pneumatology, eschatology, and more (all of which scholars, theologians, and historians all have varying views on!). That being said, I could never cover the full scope and depth of Romans 8:1-17 in this medium, so this lesson will be a more general overview the passage. If there are sections you want to dig deeper into, I encourage you to do so!

Freedom in Christ

Read Romans 8:1-11 and discuss the questions below.

¹Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those in Christ Jesus, ²because the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and death. ³For what the law could not do since it was weakened by the flesh, God did. He condemned sin in the flesh by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh as a sin offering, ⁴in order that the law's requirement would be fulfilled in us who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. ⁵For those who live according to the flesh have their minds set on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit have their minds set on the things of the Spirit. ⁶Now the mindset of the flesh is death, but the mindset of the Spirit is life and peace. ⁷The mindset of the flesh is hostile to God because it does not submit to God's law. Indeed, it is unable to do so. ⁸Those who are in the flesh cannot please God. ⁹You, however, are not in the flesh, but in the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God lives in you. If anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to him. ¹⁰Now if Christ is in you, the body is dead because of sin, but the Spirit gives life because of righteousness. ¹¹And if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead lives in you, then he who raised Christ from the dead will also bring your mortal bodies to life through his Spirit who lives in you.

Commentary & Questions:

- (v.1) Note what verse one does *not* say:
 - It does not say "There is now no condemnation for all people because of Jesus."
 - It does not say "There is now only some condemnation for those in Christ Jesus."
 - It does not say "There is no condemnation for those who perfectly obey God's Law."

- For those **in Christ**, or in other words, those who have been “justified by faith” there is no condemnation, for we sinners now “have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ” (Romans 5:1).

1. Get it: Why is there now no condemnation? **John 3:18: *Anyone who believes in him is not condemned, but anyone who does not believe is already condemned, because he has not believed in the name of the one and only Son of God.***

- Once we are freed from sin, we cannot once again be made slave to it. We can fall into sin, even after salvation, but it no longer rules over us.
 - “We lose the battle [to sin] only when we engage the enemy without the resources supplied by the Spirit. God never intended us to go it on our own. Did not Jesus say, “Apart from me you can do nothing” (John 15:5)? The difficulties of the Romans 7 experience are self-imposed. They show the natural outcome of failing to appropriate the Spirit of God. The victory of Romans 8 results from living in vital union with Christ Jesus, sustained and empowered by the Spirit of God.”⁴

2. Get it: How did God set us free from sin?

- **Romans 3:23-26: *For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus. God presented him as the mercy seat by his blood, through faith, to demonstrate his righteousness, because in his restraint God passed over the sins previously committed. God presented him to demonstrate his righteousness at the present time, so that he would be just and justify the one who has faith in Jesus.***
- By the Law alone, we should have been condemned to death. But thanks be to God, He freely offered up His Son. Thus, the Law was fulfilled in Christ as the substitutionary atonement for us.
 - **Romans 6:23: *For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.***

3. Get it: What is the difference between living according to the flesh and living according to the Spirit?

- Paul highlights a clear pattern in his comparison between living according to the flesh and living according to the Spirit. Our mindset is closely linked to our actions. One of my professors often said, “Your theology shapes your philosophy, which shapes your methodology.” This means that how you view God influences your perspective on the world, which in turn affects your behavior. Consider how your worldview and actions would change if God weren’t part of the equation. The transformation we experience in Christ encompasses not just our souls but our entire being.
 - **Romans 6:12-14: *Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body, so that you obey its desires. And do not offer any parts of it to sin as weapons for unrighteousness. But as those who are alive from the dead, offer yourselves to God, and all the parts of yourselves to God as weapons for righteousness. For sin will not rule over you, because you are not under the law but under grace.***
 - **Romans 12:2: *Do not be conformed to this age, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may discern what is the good, pleasing, and perfect will of God.***
 - **Colossians 3:2: *Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things.***

4. Discuss: In what ways do you think our thoughts influence our behavior? What does having your mind set on the things of the Spirit look like?

5. Get it: What is the mark of a true Christ-follower?

- The moment a believer is saved and redeemed by Christ Jesus, they are indwelt with the Holy Spirit. Death could *never* rule over them again, for the very Spirit of Life lives inside of the believer!
 - “The presence of the indwelling Christ is the believer’s guarantee of life. Although believers’ physical bodies are subject to death, their spirits are even now “enjoying life” (Williams). Death comes as a consequence of sin; life is the reward of justification. Death is the absence of God; life is a right standing before him. Whether or not a person is indwelt by the Spirit is truly a life-and-death matter.”⁵
 - You might have asked this question before, been concerned about it, or have come from a theological background that supports this idea. This text is just one of many that addresses the question, "Can I lose my salvation?" Let’s consider some things:
 - For the believer, the same Spirit that raised Jesus from the dead lives in them (v.11). If Jesus can never die again, so too will the believer never face the spiritual death that awaited them before Christ.
 - **Romans 6:10-11:** *Now if we died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him, because we know that Christ, having been raised from the dead, will not die again. Death no longer rules over him. For the death he died, he died to sin once for all time; but the life he lives, he lives to God. So, you too consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.*
 - The Spirit of God is eternal, meaning He has no beginning or end. If the eternal God of universe seals you in Him, that’s not something you can simply undo! You are forever His! Hallelujah!
 - **Ephesians 1:13-14:** *In him you also were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and when you believed. The Holy Spirit is the down payment of our inheritance, until the redemption of the possession, to the praise of his glory.*
6. **Discuss:** Only God can see our hearts, but what are some ways we know that the Spirit of God lives in us?

The Spirit of Adoption

Read Romans 8:12-17 and discuss the questions below.

¹²*So then, brothers and sisters, we are not obligated to the flesh to live according to the flesh,*
¹³*because if you live according to the flesh, you are going to die. But if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live.* ¹⁴*For all those led by God’s Spirit are God’s sons.* ¹⁵*For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear. Instead, you received the Spirit of adoption, by whom we cry out, “Abba, Father!”* ¹⁶*The Spirit himself testifies together with our spirit that we are God’s children,* ¹⁷*and if children, also heirs—heirs of God and coheirs with Christ—if indeed we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him.*

Commentary & Questions:

1. **Get it:** What are we no longer obligated to as believers?

- For a believer, living in sin is contradictory. Sin represents a slavery to selfish and evil desires, while those in Christ have been set free from sin. It's not just that we shouldn't sin anymore because of God's grace; it's that we get to live free from sin by His grace.
 - **Romans 6:15-18:** *What then? Should we sin because we are not under the law but under grace? Absolutely not! Don’t you know that if you offer yourselves to someone as obedient slaves, you are slaves of that one you obey—either of sin leading to death or of obedience*

leading to righteousness? But thank God that, although you used to be slaves of sin, you obeyed from the heart that pattern of teaching to which you were handed over, and having been set free from sin, you became enslaved to righteousness.

2. Apply it: How do we by the Spirit, put to death the deeds of the body (v.13)?

- “Be killing sin or it will be killing you.”⁶ – John Owen

3. Get it: For those in Christ led by His Spirit, what are we?

- Do you know the phrase “We are all God’s children”? Theologically speaking, that’s not entirely correct. We were all created by God, but because of our sin, our father before God was something else entirely.
 - ***Ephesians 2:1-3:*** *And you were dead in your trespasses and sins in which you previously walked according to the ways of this world, according to the ruler of the power of the air, the spirit now working in the disobedient. We too all previously lived among them in our fleshly desires, carrying out the inclinations of our flesh and thoughts, and we were by nature children under wrath as the others were also.*
 - ***1 John 3:8:*** *The one who commits sin is of the devil, for the devil has sinned from the beginning. The Son of God was revealed for this purpose: to destroy the devil’s works.*
 - (Jesus speaking to the Pharisees) ***John 8:44:*** *You are of your father the devil, and you want to carry out your father’s desires. He was a murderer from the beginning and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he tells a lie, he speaks from his own nature, because he is a liar and the father of lies.*
- Yikes! But that’s what makes this passage even more striking. God looked at us fatherless, evil, wicked children, and had compassion on us. He *adopted* us into the family of God. And by His Spirit, He assures us that we are His when we proclaim, “I am a child of God!”
 - ***Ephesians 1:5-6:*** *He predestined us to be adopted as sons through Jesus Christ for himself, according to the good pleasure of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace that he lavished on us in the Beloved One.*
 - ***1 John 3:1:*** *See what great love the Father has given us that we should be called God’s children—and we are! The reason the world does not know us is that it didn’t know him.*

4. Apply it: How does not just being redeemed by God, but also a child and co-heir of God affect how we endure suffering? (v.17)

Apply: *Use this section to conclude your lesson for today.*

What are some things that stood out in the passage today?

What did you learn about God and who He is?

What did you learn about your status in Him?

Romans 13:11-14

Besides this, since you know the time, it is already the hour for you to wake up from sleep, because now our salvation is nearer than when we first believed. The night is nearly over, and the day is near; so let us discard the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light. Let us walk with decency, as in the daytime: not in carousing and drunkenness; not in sexual impurity and promiscuity; not in quarreling and jealousy. But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh to gratify its desires.

As you go, go with God, go in peace.

December 22 – God Transforms Our Conduct

Text: 1 Peter 1:13-2:10

Big Idea: God transforms His people into a unified and holy church made up of believers who live by His word.

Focus: Use this section to open in a large group or small group setting.

Option 1: What did you learn about God this week in your reading?

Option 2: Have you ever tried to build something before? (Legos, crafts, organizations) How did it go?

Study: Use this section for your small group Bible study time.

About this book:

This book is a letter from the apostle Peter written while he was in Rome to the believers in Asia Minor (common day Turkey). They are identified in verse 1 as “temporary residents dispersed in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia.” They are likely persecuted Gentile Christians suffering under the reign of Emperor Nero, a Roman Emperor famous for beginning a widescale persecution of Christian believers. Peter’s goal in writing to these believers is to encourage them to remain faithful while under oppression. He specified that God’s holy people should lead distinctive lifestyles as temporary residents in a foreign land, keeping in mind their eternal home in heaven.¹

Introductory Material:

This letter is likely written a few decades after the beginning of the early Church detailed in the book of Acts. Peter’s goal is to strengthen believers amid suffering and persecution. He calls believers to remember their heavenly hope and eternal inheritance, to live in holiness and love, and to imitate Christ in their lives daily.² He opens the letter with a greeting and then begins to remind his audience about their salvation and the eternal inheritance of that salvation. Right after he makes clear that our focus as Christians should be on eternity, he then begins to detail some practical ways that affects our lives here and now. This is where our passage picks up today.

Living in Holiness

Read 1 Peter 1:13-21 and discuss the questions below.

¹³ Therefore, with your minds ready for action, be sober-minded and set your hope completely on the grace to be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ. ¹⁴ As obedient children, do not be conformed to the desires of your former ignorance. ¹⁵ But as the one who called you is holy, you also are to be holy in all your conduct; ¹⁶ for it is written, Be holy, because I am holy. ¹⁷ If you appeal to the Father who judges impartially according to each one’s work, you are to conduct yourselves in reverence during your time living as strangers. ¹⁸ For you know that you were redeemed from your empty way of life inherited from your ancestors, not with perishable things like silver or gold, ¹⁹ but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of an unblemished and spotless lamb. ²⁰ He was foreknown before the foundation of the world but was revealed in these last times for you. ²¹ Through him you believe in God, who raised him from the dead and gave him glory, so that your faith and hope are in God.

Commentary:

- There are three imperatives (commands) in the passage: “set your hope,” “be holy,” “conduct yourselves in reverence.”
 - **Set your hope**—this hope is to be revolving around the grace brought to us at the revelation of Jesus Christ. Take special note that this grace is brought to us instead of us moving towards it.³ We are to set our hope *completely*. Many times in life we may try to give Christ a part of our lives and many times we will find ourselves trusting Him plus our own talents, possessions, or even other people. But Christ doesn’t want part of our hope, He wants all of it. To live the Christian life is going to require we keep our hope fully set on Christ.
 - **Be Holy**—this command is given in contrast to the previous sentence, the direction to not be conformed to the desires of former ignorance. In other words, God is now the standard or pattern of living, not our own selfish desires or lusts.⁴ Note this is also a reference to the main theme of Leviticus (11:44; 19:2; 20:7)
 - They are to be holy in all their conduct. “Conduct” translates a Greek word which Peter uses extensively in this letter, literally meaning “turn upside down.” This points to the revolutionary nature of the new life associated with holy living.⁵
 - To be holy is to be separate, not conformed to the world. To live the Christian life we must focus on behaving like Christ in every way, even though that is radically different from the rest of the world.
 - **Conduct yourselves in reverence**—The word for “reverence” is also “fear.” To fear God is to have a deep respect for Him that does not take Him for granted and understands the dire consequences of turning away from Him.⁶ Sometimes we focus so much on God as a loving Father we forget He is also an Almighty God. To live the Christian life will require not just a love for God, but a submission to Him.
- Verse 18— “for you know:” After the commands, Peter gives further explanation for them, citing their redemption based not on money but the even more valuable blood of Christ. When he compares it to a spotless “lamb,” he uses a word which should call back to Exodus 12:5. Just as the Israelites were freed from captivity in Egypt on the night of the first Passover with the shed blood of a lamb, so too are Christians freed from sin by the blood of Christ. The whole Exodus story is in the background of Peter’s argument in this passage.⁷
- What God requires in us is a total change of purpose. We are not live like we did when we were unbelievers because a genuine belief in God results in a genuine transformation of our attitude and purpose. Therefore, we cannot be conformed to this world, but we must strive to be holy. Believers who cultivate Christian hope must also cultivate personal holiness, which includes a specific moral sense of separation from evil and a dedication to a life of right living. Holiness produces in our lives a loving conformity to God’s commands which ultimately produces the character of God in us.⁸

QUESTIONS:

1. **Get it:** What are the three commands in this part of the passage?
2. **Apply it:** What are some things we tend to put our hope in?
3. **Apply it:** What are some strategies for living in holiness?

Living by the Word

Read 1 Peter 1:22-2:3 and discuss the questions below.

²² Since you have purified yourselves by your obedience to the truth, so that you show sincere brotherly love for each other, from a pure heart love one another constantly; ²³ because you have been born again—not of perishable seed but of imperishable—through the living and enduring word of God.

*²⁴ For all flesh is like grass,
and all its glory like a flower of the grass.*

The grass withers, and the flower falls,

²⁵ but the word of the Lord endures forever.

And this word is the gospel that was proclaimed to you.

² Therefore, rid yourselves of all malice, all deceit, hypocrisy, envy, and all slander. ² Like newborn infants, desire the pure milk of the word; so that by it you may grow up into your salvation, ³ if you have tasted that the Lord is good.

Commentary:

- Peter’s emphasis on loving each other stems from the Christian believer’s status of being born again thanks to the word of God. This word of God is meant to affect and change every part of the believer’s life and is integral to a believer’s growth and character. The word reveals God’s mind, so we should *learn* it; God’s heart, so we should *love* it; God’s will, so we should *live* it. Our whole being should be controlled by the word of God.⁹
- Verses 24-25—in these verses contain a reference to Isaiah 40:6-8. Peter uses it to remind his audience about the imperishable quality of the word of God. It does not go away or become void.
 - What is this word that does not perish? The good news which was proclaimed to us. The word is the same word where we get both “gospel” and “evangelizing.” Another way of saying this is “the word which was evangelized to you.” The gospel is *truth of old*, and it *shall not kneel, shall not faint*.¹⁰ The same gospel which saved the early Christians is the same one which saves us today. It has an imperishable quality.
- In verse 2, there is another imperative (command) found in the word “desire.” Peter commands Christians to desire the milk of the word like newborn infants. Of course, milk to a newborn infant is necessary for survival. They have no teeth yet and so cannot eat anything else. Moreover, the word for “desire” can mean “long for,” or “intensely crave.” Peter is encouraging believers to make God’s word necessary for survival. It is to be intensely craved by a believer who wants to grow into maturity in their faith.
- Verse 3—this section concludes with a reference to Psalm 34:8. Peter uses it to suggest his readers have indeed tasted that the Lord is good. Peter purposely uses this passage to refer to Jesus so that “Lord” is now taken to mean “Lord Jesus Christ.” Peter is identifying the divine Yahweh with Jesus. There is also a likely wordplay with the word for good. This word “chrestos” (good) is only one letter from “Christos” (Christ). It is as if the early Christians were saying

“Christos is chrestos” (Christ is good).¹¹ Certainly those who have come to this understanding of Christ personally have done so only through the word of God and ought to desire to keep growing into maturity in their faith. The Gospel causes us to grow in our faith.

QUESTIONS:

1. **Get it:** What should Christians do with the word of God?
2. **Apply it:** How do we cultivate a craving for God’s word in our life?
3. **Apply it:** What are the challenges to living according to God’s word?

Living as a Holy People

Read 1 Peter 2:4-10 and discuss the questions below.

⁴ As you come to him, a living stone—rejected by people but chosen and honored by God—⁵ you yourselves, as living stones, a spiritual house, are being built to be a holy priesthood to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. ⁶ For it stands in Scripture:

*See, I lay a stone in Zion,
a chosen and honored cornerstone,
and the one who believes in him
will never be put to shame.’*

*⁷ So honor will come to you who believe; but for the unbelieving,
The stone that the builders rejected— this one has become the cornerstone,’*

*⁸ and a stone to stumble over,
and a rock to trip over.’*

They stumble because they disobey the word; they were destined for this.

⁹ But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his possession, so that you may proclaim the praises of the one who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.

¹⁰ Once you were not a people, but now you are God’s people; you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

Commentary:

- Peter compares the people of God to living stones making up a spiritual house. Then he brings up several Old Testament passages to remind the believers that Jesus is the cornerstone to that house (Isaiah 28:16; Psalm 118:22; Isaiah 8:14). Jesus Christ, though chosen by God, was rejected by men. Because He was not the kind of Messiah they were expecting, they stumbled over Him. The real cause of this stumbling is refusal to submit to the Word (verse 8). Believers are living stones in His building and although we may see differences across denominations, we should be mature enough to disagree without becoming disagreeable.¹²
- The description of the church in verses 9-10 parallels God’s depiction of Israel in Exodus 19:5-6 and Deuteronomy 7:6. The church today is to God and the world what Israel was meant to be. We are a chosen generation, chosen out of love and grace. We are a holy nation, belonging exclusively to God with our citizenship in heaven. We are God’s special possession, purchased with the blood of Christ.¹³ These privileges carry with them a responsibility. We are meant to be a visible church, a light in the dark, and a house on the hill.

- In this last section Peter wants his readers to understand that as believers we exist each as one part of the building of God, with Jesus as the most important “cornerstone.” We ought to seek to live at peace with one another and to demonstrate to the world what it means to be the people of God.

QUESTIONS:

1. **Get it:** What is the most important part of the spiritual house?
2. **Apply it:** How can a local church body seek to fulfill its purpose?
3. **Discuss it:** How does it make you feel to know that we are living stones meant to resemble the cornerstone who Himself was rejected by the world?

Apply: *Use this section to conclude your lesson for today.*

When someone accepts the gospel and puts their faith in Christ, they are re-born. This means they forsake the desires of their former self and pursue Christ, focusing on eternal salvation despite suffering and rejection by the world. Practically, it means living as part of a church body, living in holiness, and living by the word of God.

What sticks out to you from this lesson?

How can you take what you learned today and better live as part of God’s house this week?

December 29 – God Transforms us to Endure

Text: Hebrews 12:1-3

Big Idea: Exhortation to Endure

Focus: Use this section to open in a large group or small group setting.

Option 1: What did you learn about God this week in your reading?

Option 2: When you have a big, long-term project what is your greatest hindrance to completing it?

Study: Use this section for your small group Bible study time.

About this book:

1. **Purpose of the Book** – The main point of Hebrews is that because of the superiority of the person and work of Christ, the high priest of the new covenant, true believers must – and will– endure to the end. This is a message that is always relevant because believers in every age struggle in their faith and in perseverance. The book of Hebrews was given to us so that we will continue to run the race with perseverance.¹
2. There are two primary purposes for the book:
 1. To show the pre-eminence of Christ. Jesus is prominent on every page.
 2. To encourage Christians to endure and warn against abandoning their faith in Christ.
3. **Theme** -
 - The basic theme of Hebrews is found in the word **better**, describing the superiority of Christ in His person and work. In His person He is better than the angels, Moses and Joshua; and in His performance He provides a better priesthood, covenant, sanctuary, and sacrifice. The writer develops this theme to prevent the readers from giving up the substance for the shadow by abandoning Christianity and retreating into the old Judaic system.²
 - In short, there is more to be gained In Christ than to be lost in Judaism. Pressing on in Christ produces tested faith, self-discipline, and a visible love seen in good works.³
 - **Key words** – Key words and phrases help us discover the author’s logic and flow of ideas.⁴ Some of the most significant key words do not occur as often as other words, yet each of these words are vital to the understanding of the text and cannot be removed without leaving the passage devoid of meaning. The fact that they are key to understanding the author’s intended message or purpose is what sets them apart as a key word.⁵
 - Better, Faith/Faithful, Heaven/Heavenly, Perfect, Once/One, Eternal, Greater, Draw near/Come to, No more, Therefore let us, sat down and Blood are some of the words and phrases that should be considered key to the context in which they are placed.
 - **Key verses** -
 - **Hebrews 4:14-16:** *“Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens – Jesus the Son of God – let us hold fast to our confession. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who has been tempted in every way as we are, yet without sin. Therefore, let us*

approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in time of need.

- ***Hebrews 12:1-2: Therefore, since we also have such a large cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us lay aside every hindrance and the sin that so easily ensnares us. Let us run with endurance the race that lies before us, keeping our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith. For the joy that lay before him, he endured the cross, despising the shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.***
- **Author** – The authorship of Hebrews is unknown with many suggestions as to the writer’s identity having been offered over the past 2000 years. Some of the most suggested names are Paul, Barnabas, Luke, Apollos, Clement of Rome and even Priscilla.
 - What we do know about the author:
 - It was a man – The participle used in 11:32 is masculine.
 - 2:3-4 tells us that he is a second- generation Christian – one who heard the Gospel from someone other than Jesus.
 - He knew Timothy (13:23).
 - He lived among the people “from Italy” (13:24)
 - He is very well educated. His grammar, vocabulary, style and use of rhetoric is exemplary.
 - He has an excellent command of the Greek language using the Septuagint (Greek translation of the OT) rather than the Hebrew text.
 - He is an exceptional Old Testament scholar with an intense interest in the religious symbols and the sacrificial system of Judaism and how these all point to Christ.⁶
 - He knew his readers and was eager to see them again. (13:19)
 - Some loose assumptions we can make about the author:
 - Since Priscilla is a woman and Hebrews 11:32 is in the masculine, she was probably not the author.
 - Given what is said about Apollos in Acts 18:24-28 and I Corinthians 16:12, he is a viable candidate as the author.
 - Most scholars of Hebrews deny a Pauline authorship for several reasons.
 - The Greek vocabulary and syntax of Hebrews are not Pauline. Paul’s Epistles and Hebrews describe similar concepts with quite different language and logic.
 - In Hebrews 2:3-4 the author states that he did not see the Lord but heard the gospel from others who heard the gospel. Paul distinctly states in Galatians 1:11-12 that he did not receive the gospel from a human source but it came by a revelation of Jesus Christ.⁷
 - The author’s perspective: For the author of Hebrews, the written Scripture is actually the very words of God spoken personally to the readers. Hebrews 10:30 quotes Deuteronomy 32:35 with the introduction of “For we know him who said” meaning God. Again in Hebrews 10:5, the author placed the words of Psalm 40:6-8 on the lips of Jesus. Hebrews 10:15 cites the Holy Spirit as testifying to us concerning Jeremiah 31:33.⁸ We may never know the name of the human author, but He knew that Scripture was the very words of God to the hearer making God the true author of the book.

- If time permits look up and read 2 Peter 1:20-21 and 2 Timothy 3:16.
- **Type of literature** – Although considered a general letter or epistle, Hebrews lacks two components of a first-century epistle, a salutation and a thanksgiving; although it does have a benediction. It begins like an essay, continues as a sermon and ends like a letter. The book begins with a rhetorical statement of its thesis (1:1-3) and then develops step-by-step arguments and impassioned exhortations. Hebrews is a deeply theological book that is essentially a sermon in written form. This is most apparent when it is read out loud, especially in the original language. The Greek of Hebrews is excellent with the author revealing a large vocabulary and excellent style.⁹
- **When written** – It is unknown when Hebrews was written, but as with the authorship, we can make some educated assumptions based on what is and or is not mentioned in the text. What we cannot do is make a dogmatic commitment to when it was written, just as we cannot make a dogmatic commitment as to who wrote it and to whom it was written.
 - According to The New American Commentary there are three major views to the dating of Hebrews: pre- AD 64, AD 67-69, or toward the end of the reign of Domitian who died in AD 96.¹⁰
 - If one wants to assign authorship to Paul, then a pre-AD 64 date must be used since he died sometime between AD 64 & AD 67.
 - The single most important argument for the AD 67-69 date for Hebrews is the deafening silence in reference to the fall of Jerusalem and destruction of the temple in AD 70. The use of the present tense in Hebrews suggests to us that the Levitical priesthood and sacrificial system were still in operation when the epistle was composed (5:1-4; 7:21,23,27,28; 8:3-5:13; 9:6-9, 13, 25; 10:1,3,4,11; and 13:10,11)¹¹ which indicates a pre-AD 70 writing.
 - The suggestions in Chapters 10, 12 & 13 of persecution ramping up could date the writing of Hebrews during any of the Roman Emperors from Nero to Domitian. Domitian ruled after the destruction of the Temple, so given the fact that the Temple worship seems to still be occurring during the time of writing the dating of the book of Hebrews is most likely not towards the end of Domitian’s reign.
- **Intended audience** – We do not know exactly who the intended audience was. Some scholars hold the view that because of the elegant Greek style found in Hebrews, that the book was written to a gentile readership, however, the bulk of the evidence favors the traditional view that the original recipients of this letter were Jewish Christians.¹² In addition to the ancient title “To the Hebrews”, the intricate use and play on words from the Old Testament that the author used in his argument coupled with the sustained appeal to the Old Testament Scriptures and sacrificial system of the Old Testament make it highly unlikely that the recipients were non-Jews.¹³

Introductory Material:

There is so much that is unknown about the background of the Book of Hebrews. The book doesn’t tell us the author, the date, the recipients or their location. What we know from the context of the book is that the recipients were discouraged and suffering from some type of persecution that was causing

them to think that they had lost everything by accepting Christianity. They were in danger of leaving what was spiritual reality and returning to the “shadow” of what they had before.

- **Hebrews 10:1: *Since the law has only a shadow of the good things to come, and not the reality itself of those things, it can never perfect the worshipers by the same sacrifices they continually offer year after year.***

Witnesses of Endurance

Read Hebrews 12:1a and discuss the questions below.

^{1a} Therefore, since we also have such a large cloud of witnesses surrounding us,

Commentary:

- In its most basic sense, the word “therefore” simply means “for that reason.” “Therefore” is our signal that something important is being clarified, so we should immediately stop and ask, “Do I know what is being clarified?”¹⁴ To answer that question in the context of Hebrews 12 we need to look back at Chapter 11.
- Chapter 11 is known as the “Hall of Faith” or the “Faith Hall of Fame” and gives the accounts of people who lived their lives through faith confident in the promises and blessings of God without ever obtaining what they hoped for. They were able to walk by faith and see beyond their own lifetime. By starting Chapter 12 with “Therefore” the author is asking us to look back at the heroes of faith in Chapter 11 and apply to our lives the enduring faith that was witnessed in the lives of those listed in Chapter 11.
- Large cloud of witnesses - These are not witnesses in the sense of being spectators witnessing what we do (in other words watching us), but rather we have all these examples of people who throughout the ages are witnesses to us of great faith and endurance. Both the Greeks and the Latins frequently use the term *cloud* as a metaphor to express a *great number* of persons or things.¹⁵ We should be encouraged that there are so many who have preceded us and endured to the end.

QUESTIONS:

1. **Get it:** What is the main purpose in using “Therefore” at the beginning of a sentence?
2. **Get it:** What did both the Greeks and the Latins use the term cloud to describe?
3. **Apply it:** Are you encouraged knowing that multitudes have gone before us with a faith that endured to the end?
4. **Apply it:** Do you feel that your faith is strong enough to take you through anything?

Running with Endurance

Read Hebrews 12:1b-2a and discuss the questions below.

^{1b} let us lay aside every hindrance and the sin that so easily ensnares us. Let us run with endurance the race that lies before us, ^{2a} keeping our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith.

Commentary:

- The main verb in Hebrews 12:1-3 is “let us run” and we are provided with the reason and means/manner in which Christians are to run.¹⁶
 1. Lay aside every hindrance could be rephrased to say, “by means of having thrown off”, let us run. Hinderances (weight) are not necessarily sins, but rather things that keep us from running effectively. During the first century AD runners ran virtually naked. They would enter the stadium with their robes and “throw off” the robe that would hinder them from

running effectively. We are encouraged to get rid of those things (good or bad) that hinder us from being effective for God.

2. Lay aside the sin that so easily ensnares (entangles). The sense here is something that would wind around the body and hinder movement. Although the “sin” is left undefined, one could contextually argue that it could indicate the sin of faithlessness.¹⁷ By faith or through faith is used 21 times in Hebrews 11 indicating that it is faith in Christ that enables us to endure.¹⁸
 3. Let us run with endurance literally reads “through endurance let us run”. This is how we run – with endurance. The Greek word translated “perseverance” connotes an active endurance involving effort and struggle.
 4. The noun race points to a lengthy race where endurance is essential to passing the finish line. The Christian life is one of lifelong endurance.
- In Acts 20:24, Paul tells his beloved Ephesians that he considered his life of no value to himself, that his purpose is to finish his course [with joy] and the ministry he received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of God’s grace. Later in 2 Timothy 4:7 Paul says, “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith”. Here, as in Hebrews, we see the connection between faith and finishing the race. Paul knew the course of his race, endured the race and kept the faith. We each have a course marked out for us and are called to finish it in faith with joy.
 - Keeping our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith. Chapter 11 gives the reader a multitude of names and examples of people who persevered with great faith. While they are an encouraging testimony to us, we are not told to keep our focus on them as we run this race. We are to keep our eyes on the one who is the source of our faith and the finisher of our faith (Philippians 1:6). Proverbs 4:25-27 gives some great advice on following the path that has been laid before us: ²⁵**“Let your eyes look forward; fix your gaze straight ahead. ²⁶Carefully consider the path for your feet, and all your ways will be established. ²⁷Don’t turn to the right or to the left; keep your feet from evil.”**

QUESTIONS:

1. **Get it:** Are hinderances always sin?
2. **Get it:** What does endurance involve?
3. **Get it:** Where are we to keep our focus?
4. **Apply it:** What kinds of things are hinderances to your race? (*example: overcommitted*)

Joyful Endurance

Read Hebrews 12:2b and discuss the questions below.

^{2b} ***For the joy that lay before him, he endured the cross, despising the shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God***

Commentary:

- Jesus was not looking forward with joy to the cross (Matthew 26:39) but was able to look beyond the cross with joy to what his death would accomplish.
- Jesus endured far more than any of the heroes of faith mentioned in Hebrews 11; thereby becoming a perfect example for us to follow. He endured the shame of the cross. This involved humiliation, suffering and the temporary rejection of the Father. On the cross he suffered for all the sins of all the world, yet He endured and finished the work the Father gave Him (John 17:4)¹⁹
- Jesus did not welcome the shame of the cross; he despised it but he endured it to give us eternal life. We read in Galatians 3:13 that **“Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by**

becoming a curse for us, because it is written, Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree (Deuteronomy 21:23). By submitting to the cross he did not pursue his own pleasure. He did not let its shame or suffering deter him from his goal of being our “once for all” atoning sacrifice.

- Jesus knew that he would be exalted to heaven in glory. So “the joy that was set before him” would include Jesus completing the Father’s will, His resurrection and exaltation, and His joy in presenting believers to the Father in glory (Jude 24).²⁰
 - *Psalm 110:1 – This is the declaration of the LORD to my Lord: “Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies your footstool*
 - *Psalm 16:11 “You reveal the path of life to me; in your presence is abundant joy; at your right hand are eternal pleasures.”*

QUESTIONS:

1. **Get it:** What was the shame that Jesus endured on the cross?
2. **Get it:** What passage in Deuteronomy is quoted in Galatians and what did Christ become for us? *Deuteronomy 21:23.*
3. **Apply it:** Jesus found joy even in the worse of situations. Are you able to see beyond your circumstances and find joy in the hard times?

Perfected Endurance

Read Hebrews 12:3 and discuss the questions below.

³ *For consider him who endured such hostility from sinners against himself, so that you won’t grow weary and give up.*

Commentary:

- The repetition of “endurance” in each of the first three verses marks the theme of the section. The author sets the stage with his statement in Hebrews 10:36 that the readers need endurance. The main point of 12:1-3 is the command to “run with perseverance” considering the suffering of Jesus himself who endured the cross and completed the work of atonement.²¹
- The phrase “consider him who endured” carries the sense of “by all means consider”. The imperative “consider” suggests a process of serious thinking where a matter is weighed with the utmost care through comparison, reflection, and conclusion. The object of their consideration serves to highlight the permanent perfect nature of Jesus’ sufferings for the readers.²²
- In any activity, relationship or just life itself when we take our eyes off of Jesus, we are prone to grow weary and give up. Since Christ is the “author and finisher of our faith” trusting him gives us the assurance that we can endure because He endured (see Hebrews 4:14-16)

QUESTIONS:

1. **Get it:** How can we have assurance that we’ll be able to endure?
2. **Apply it:** When you get weary and want to give up do you focus on yourself and the problem or do you focus on Jesus and consider what he endured on your behalf?

Apply:

This lesson wraps up a yearlong chronological study of the Bible and there is no other book in the Bible that pulls together the relationship of the shadows of Christ in the Old Testament with the substance of Christ in the New Testament than Hebrews. Hebrews stresses this connection between the Levitical priesthood and that of Christ’s. We read, “The law was but a shadow of the good things to come instead of the true form of these realities (Hebrews 10:1). The shadow of the Old must give way to the substance of the perfect and permanent reality in Christ. Since the shadow of the old covenant was only

temporal, the substance of the new, in order to abolish the old, must be final. All of this permanence is because after offering one sacrifice for sins forever, Christ sat down at the right hand of God. (Hebrews 10:8-14).²³

“The New is in the Old concealed, and the Old is in the New revealed.” - Augustine

End Notes:

Cover Page Art

Harmon, Mark. "How God Uses the Bible to Change Us." Crosswalk, 7/7/2017.

<https://www.crosswalk.com/faith/bible-study/how-god-uses-the-bible-to-change-us.html>

About this Unit:

Pintrest, <https://au.pinterest.com/pin/822751425651958496/> "Romans 12, Bible Lessons for kids" visited 11/1/2024.

Maps and charts:

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Who is the Holy Spirit?

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