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**Core Seminar**

**How To Study the Bible**

**Class 7: Gospels, Epistles, Prophetic & Apocalyptic Literature**

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*“When Christ who is your life appears, then also you will appear with him in glory.”* (Col. 3.4)

Good morning! If you look at the title for today’s class, you’ll note that perhaps we’ve bitten off a lot this morning!

My goal this morning is to introduce you to the basics of studying four different genres that we find in the Bible:

The Gospels and Acts

The Epistles

The Prophetic Writings

Apocalyptic Literature

We’ll go quickly through the gospels, acts, and the epistles and we’ll spend most of our time on Prophesy and Apocalyptic.

1. **The Gospels (and Acts)**

Even though reading all 4 Gospels and Acts together provides a comprehensive/fuller understanding of Jesus,

His life,

And the early church,

Each of these books were originally written to stand on its own as

Independent and

Sufficient accounts

Of Jesus and his followers.

So before we get into each of these books, let me make a few overall comments about all of them.

A. Genre. The Gospels and Acts are slightly different genres.

*Bios*—The Gospels mirror a genre from the ancient world called *bios,* an ancient biography. Unlike modern biographies that trace physical, psychological, and personal development, *ancient biographies* focused on *key events* in a person’s life and his teaching.

*Legitimization—*Acts, however, is an example of the *legitimization* genre, a document intended to defend and bring legitimacy to the early church and its development.

*B. Chronology?—*While the Gospels are historical accounts, they are not always arranged chronologically. Some are organized topically. For example, Mark tells of five controversies in a row (2:1-3:6) that are spread out between chapters 8-12 in Matthew. This is the way bios were often written at that time. If we assume the gospels are written like 21st century histories, we will likely be confused.

*C. Harmony—*While each of the Gospels offer varying points of view, they all make the same point, that Jesus is the promised Messiah who died for our sins.

The Gospels are typically divided into two groups. Does anyone know what these groups?

* *Synoptics* (overlap at many places)—Matthew, Mark, and Luke. These three tell the story of Jesus “from the ground up,” gradually revealing the evidence that Jesus is the Messiah.
* *John*—John, however, tells the story “from heaven down.”
  + How does John begin his Gospel? *In the beginning was the Word—*He directly and explicitly presents the pre-incarnate Word becoming flesh!
  + John differs from the Synoptics because it approaches the question of who Jesus is from a different point of view.

*Acts*—The book of Acts literally picks up where the Gospels leave off and records how this rag-tag group of disciples becomes the Christian Church.

*D. Distinctives—*So that’s some general statements about all five of these books. Let’s turn now to see how they’re different. I will give a few quick bullets on themes to have in mind for each gospel.

* + 1. **Matthew**

*Structure—*Matthew consists of 6 discourses, which are long sections of Jesus’ teaching (Ch. 5-7; 10; 13; 18;24-25 [eschatological discourse followed by a section of parables]).

*Central Concern—*Matthew’s central concern is to explain

How Jesus fulfills the Messianic prophecies given to Israel

And Israel’s rejection of Jesus as that Messiah.

* + 1. **Mark**

As for Mark, it’s understood to be the first Gospel that was written.

About a quarter of Mark is devoted to the last week of Jesus’ life—hence, Mark emphasizes Christ’s death and resurrection.

Also, Mark is about *action,* rather than the teachings of Jesus. Mark contains 20 separate miracle stories!

Mark also emphasizes Jesus’ *authority—*

authority over sin,

over people,

over nature,

and over Jewish tradition.

* + 1. **Luke**

Luke is the longest Gospel. May have been written more to Gentile audience. Most Chronological of the Gospels.

He mixes discourses, parables, and miracles that largely follow chronological order.

Luke emphasizes:

the sovereignty of God (God’s will),

joy at the arrival of the Messiah,

Christ’s role as prophet,

And the miracles that validate Jesus’ claims.

Ultimately, Luke explains how Jesus forms a new community [being rejected by Israel!], which lays the foundation for the book of Acts,

**4. John**

We’ve already touched on some of the differences between John and the other Gospels. John makes it VERY clear that Jesus was sent from God. Largely concerned with showing Christ’s divinity. Purpose of letter stated at the very end:  
  
Jn 20: 30 Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; 31 but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

John boldly asserts Christ’s

status,

power,

and authority

in contrast to the gradual development (progressive revelation) of these themes in the other Gospels.

7 signs of Jesus’ power, authority, and identity dominate the first 2/3 of this Gospel.

The response to these signs ranges from rejection to openness. They especially highlight, however, Jesus’ superiority to Jewish institutions—with most of the miracles occurring during Jewish celebrations. That underscores that Jesus Himself is the one who provides what the feasts celebrate—He is the great “I Am.” At the end of John, those who believe without such signs are called blessed.

1. **Acts**

Finally, we come to Acts, which explains how the Gospel advances to the nations. Gospels end with Christ’s ascension. Acts picks up with the establishment of the early church. Acts is:

the story of the Gospel penetrating the Roman Empire, despite stiff opposition, through the boldness of witnesses drawing on God’s Spirit.

Key figures are Peter, Stephen and Philip, and Paul.

There are two prominent types of discourses or speeches:

*missionary speeches:* a call to believe the gospel

*defense speeches:* explanation of the Christian faith

The book ends on a triumphant note, with Gospel arriving at Rome, in spite of injustice and persecution.

This has been a *fast and furious* summary of the Gospels and Acts, which will hopefully give you a running start as you study them.

***Any questions before we move on to Epistles?***

**II. Epistles**

Epistles deal with established churches and their issues.

What is an Epistle? Just another word for “letter.” Understanding *how* to study these letters is significant since they constitute 21 out of the 27 NT books!

***Can anyone tell us who the major authors of the Epistles are?***

Paul wrote 13

John wrote 3

Peter wrote 2

James and Jude (Jesus’ brothers) each wrote 1

**A. Structured in three parts**

* **Opening**: the opening typically has 4 parts:
  + **Sender** (e.g., Paul)
  + **Recipients** (e.g., the Ephesians)
  + **Salutation** (e.g., “Grace and peace to you”)
  + **Prayer** (usually of thanksgiving)

Not all of the letters follow this format, however.

For example, Hebrews’ author is not named, nor are the recipients.

* **Body**: When looking at the bodies, there is no particular pattern across all epistles. So what we need to do is carefully trace the flow of thought in each individual letter.

Paul’s letters and Hebrews are marked by careful logical progression,

whereas John repeatedly circles back to the same themes.

James is written in a style reminiscent of Proverbs, a collection of many shorter teachings without much structure.

* **Closing**: The closings in epistles vary widely. Paul tends to include his travel plans, prayer requests, final instructions, and benediction of grace.

**B. Studying Epistles:**

The key thing about the epistles is that they were all written *after* Jesus died, rose, and ascended into heaven. So they are looking back on all of these events as completed—which no other books in the Bible save Revelation can do. As a result, they’ve played a major role in the formation of Christian Theology throughout Church History. They’re also crucial to our understanding of the OT. By studying OT allusions/citations in the Epistles, we come to see how God fulfills his OT promises in Christ!

OK. So how do we interpret them? Well, for the most part interpretation is fairly straightforward since they’re written from the same side of Jesus’ earthly life as we life in. The one challenge you might face is that they were all written in a specific context that we’re not always privy to. For example, 1 Corinthians seems to be written in response to a letter Paul received from the church in Corinth. But we don’t have that letter! Sometimes, reading these letters feels a bit like constructing a full conversation by listening to just one part of it.

Three things to keep in mind, then.

1. Some understanding of context is useful in interpreting these letters. If you’re using a study bible, the opening introduction to each of these letters does a good job setting context for you. Or you can get a copy of “Introduction to the New Testament” from the bookstall or library.
2. At the same time, these letters speak with amazing power right to *our* context without much need for interpretation. It’s as if God caused them to be written knowing we’d be reading them today! (Which of course, he did.)
3. Third thing to keep in mind is that God has given us everything we need for life and godliness in the Scriptures. So there’s no new discovery historians are going to make that’s going to completely change our understanding of Romans, for example. God’s given us exactly what we need.

III. **Prophetic** **and Apocalyptic Literature**:

When people think of “prophecy,”they tend to think of *foretelling* the future. But that’s actually not the bulk of prophesy in the Bible. Instead, prophecy begins with *forthtelling,* being forthright with God’s people.

Calling Israel out on their sins.

Prophets function to

shine a light on Israel’s disobedience,

and highlight how their sins are against God’s law,

and *in some cases* tell how their sins were predicted by previous prophecies.

The prophets are the *prosecutors* of God’s covenant.

But then, the prophets DO turn to *foretelling* the future, looking forward and promising one of 2 things:

Either Salvation or Judgment

(Keep in mind, even the promises of judgment are typically implicit calls to repentance—which, if the people do repent, would in fact turn away God’s wrath.)

Admittedly, prophecy can be a difficult genre to read, given its numerous literary forms:

Allegories (Isa. 5:1-7)

Proverbs (Ez. 18:2)

Lamentations (Amos 5:1-2)

Prayers (Habakuk 3)

Narratives (Isa. 36-39)

Their writing style is also diverse:

Jeremiah’s lamentations (8:18-9:1)

Ezekiel’s shocking statements (20:21-26)

Habakuk’s questioning (1:12-17)

Amos’ sarcasm and irony (3:12)

Also, their predictions can be difficult because they have multiple levels of fulfillment (e.g., Isaiah 7’s virgin giving birth seemed to be fulfilled short term in Isaiah’s fiancé eventually having a child, but we also know that it is fulfilled in the virgin Mary bearing Jesus.) short term vs. long term fulfillment

Remember: prophecies are like a mountain range—what looks like one range, will actually have several mountains behind it!

Let me give you 8 tips for interpreting OT prophecy—you’ll see them in your handout.

* 1. **Interpreting** **the Prophets**:

1. Discern the immediate context – the structure and flow of the book.
2. Discern the kind of oracle employed (judgment, salvation, or something else).
3. Study the balance between the forth-telling (truth-telling) and the predictive (foretelling).
4. Determine what kind of language is being used (Poetic? Disputation? Narrative?) Literary forms are often crucial in determining the author’s meaning and intent.
5. Place these texts in their overall place in redemptive-history. In doing this, be careful not to make wrong associations between Israel and your nation or church.
6. Try not to impose your theological system on the text (whether dispensational, covenantal, etc.).
7. Be alert for certain reoccurring and sweeping themes, especially those that bear on the relationships between the testaments (e.g. eschatology, temple, marriage and spiritual adultery, new birth).
8. Consider how the New Testament authors employ your passage, or at least your book.

***Are there any questions about this before we move on to apocalyptic literature?***

* 1. **Interpreting** **Apocalyptic Literature**

While portions of Daniel are apocalyptic, John’s Revelation is by far the best example of this genre. Understanding Revelation’s interpretive rules will also apply to Daniel—so we’ll primarily focus on Revelation.

Revelation is probably subject to more commentary, speculation, and interpretation than any other book of the Bible. In this book you’ll find:

Angels

Demons

Dragons

New Heaven

New Earth

Lake of Fire!

What are we supposed to make of these things??

Some fearfully read Revelation as the book where God finally unleashes his wrath on mankind, while others simply avoid it because it’s too confusing or just not important enough to be deliberately studied—but Revelation is God’s word, which is “useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness.”

Here are 4 tips to help you understand Revelation:

1. **Understand** **background**

By the time John writes Revelation, the gospel has been preached throughout the whole Asian province, as well as much of the Roman Empire!

Many have believed and are now Christians.

They all recall what Jesus promised right before he ascended—that he would return and establish his kingdom! The church has been

LOOKING and LONGING

ever since for the consummation of God’s plan of salvation.

BUT, in the view of many, “nothing was happening.” As a result, wickedness began to grow in the church and persecution was on the rise. Some conformed to the ways of the world. And some began questioning God’s ability to make good on his promises. The church was asking questions like:

Does God really care about us?

Why is evil triumphing over good?

Can he do anything about our suffering?

Will he do anything about our suffering?

This is the context into which John writes Revelation!

1. **Understand genre (those present and not present**)

This book spans at least 3 genres:

Apocalyptic

Prophetic

Epistle/Letter

*Apocalypse* is Greek for “to unveil.” Revelation was not written to confuse, but to serve as a clear unveiling of God’s plan

To bring judgment on the wicked

And to bring the faithful in Christ into His eternal kingdom.

Daniel did this in the OT, too. What appears to modern readers as strange visions and coded language was to the 1st century Jewish-Christian a familiar set of literary devices.

Also, apocalyptic literature functions as **prophetic,** speaking of what will happen in the future.

While OT prophecies tend to foretell using realistic and literal language, apocalyptic literature tends to use *highly* symbolic language to foretell future events. So we need to be careful to read this book according to its genre, not interpreting symbolic language too literally. This is *not* history. Many read it as if it were tomorrow’s newspaper printed in advance. But when you do that, you risk taking conclusions out of it that God never intended.

Finally, Revelation is also an Epistle, written to specific congregations (see Rev. 1:10-11).

1. **Understand** **purpose**

John’s letter was meant to be distributed to 7 specific churches, addressing the particular problems of those churches. It’s not an abstract treatment of the end times, but a practical book for local churches facing persecution.

Its message is that we should understand our present trials, not in light of this earth, but in light of heaven.

1. **Understand structure**

There’s two aspects of how John structured Revelation that will be really helpful as you read it.

1. Seven visions

First, just like the Old Testament prophets of Ezekiel and Zecharaiah, the books contains a sequence of visions. In fact, there are seven different visions as we move from chapter 1 to chapter 22. Seven lampstands, then seven seals, then seven trumpets, and so on. With each of the seven visions, John surveys the entire history of the church, but each time from a different perspective and with different emphases. There is a progressive nature, but it is not fundamentally chronological, but rather a progression in intensity and finality.

Again, it’s a mistake to read this book as if it is a modern history, written in advance. We need to see it not as a chronology but as a repeated retelling of world history, always with the same endpoint: God wins. And God reigns. Believers redeemed, evil punished.

1. Hearing leads to seeing

The second thing that’s useful to keep in mind is how John uses our senses of hearing and sight. Remember the Bible’s emphasis on hearing. God creates the world with Words. He rules his people through his Word. He sends the Word made flesh in Jesus Christ. We live, as Mark Dever has put it, **in the age of the ear**. We live by faith and not by sight.

But Revelation is the transition point where God’s people start to live by sight, isn’t it? So Revelation often does word plays on what we hear versus what we see. I’ll give you an example. Look at chapter 5, with me. John is weeping because no one is found worthy to open the scroll in God’s hand.

**5**And one of the elders said to me, “**Weep** no more; behold, **the Lion** of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered, so that he can open the scroll and its seven seals.”

**6**And between the throne and the four living creatures and among the elders **I saw** a **Lamb** standing, as though it had been slain, with seven horns and with seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth.

***So what has John heard about in the scriptures in terms of Jesus coming? How is Jesus described in verse 5?* [wait for answer: a lion (Hosea 5:14)]. *But what does he see in verse 6?* [a lamb].** OK. So is the elder confused? Are we talking about a lion or a lamb? Are there two different animals or just one? No: the lion *is* a lamb. We have *heard* that the Lion of Judah is coming in Hosea 5:14:

For I will be like a lion to Ephraim,

and **like a young lion to the house of Judah**.

I, even I, will tear and go away;

I will carry off, and no one shall rescue.

But when we can actually see with our eyes, we discover the Lion is the Lamb, the suffering servant of Isaiah 53. Sight gives us the fullness of what we hear.

So when you see these two played off against each other, don’t get confused. Josh is not describing two different things. He is describing one thing.

Another example, in chapter 7 when John “hears” of 144,000 from every tribe of Israel. And then he “looks” and sees a great multitude that no one can number from every nation. It’s not that that one group is big and the other’s really big? No: they’re the same.

We have heard God’s promises to Israel. But in the end we will get to see what he’s done, and we will discover something so much greater.

So in the case of Revelation 7, the Old Testament prophesies to expand the people of God are being fulfilled and we now see that God’s plan is to save people from every tribe and tongue and people and nation.

1. **There is some** **debate**

In conclusion, I should say that not everyone agrees with this interpretation of Revelation. If you come from a Dispensational background, or pre-millennial, then you’ve been taught that much of what is recorded in Revelation (after the initial letters to the churches) **is yet to happen and is to be taken literally, not figuratively**.

You may have also been taught the events in this book are tied up with a special future promise to the ethnic nation of Israel. If you would like more information on this topic, we have a whole class on Revelation in both the NT overview class and in the Systematic Theology class on the end times.

That concludes our time together today. Next week we will look at specific interpretive tools. First up: *Purpose & Context*. If you have any questions, I’ll be up at the front. Let’s pray.