

The True Story of the New Testament

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Responding to Christ and His Commission

This inductive Bible study is designed for individual, small group, or classroom use. A leader's guide with full lesson plans and the answers to the Bible study questions is available from Regular Baptist Press. Order RBP0106T online at www.regularbaptistpress.org, e-mail orders@rbpstore.org, call toll-free 1-800-727-4440, or contact your distributor.

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The Doctrinal Basis of Our Curriculum

A more detailed statement with references is available upon request.

- The verbal, plenary inspiration of the Scriptures
- Only one true God
- The Trinity of the Godhead
- The Holy Spirit and His ministry
- The personality of Satan
- The Genesis account of creation
- Original sin and the fall of man
- The virgin birth of Christ
- Salvation through faith in the shed blood of Christ
- The bodily resurrection and priesthood of Christ
- Grace and the new birth
- Justification by faith
- Sanctification of the believer
- The security of the believer
- The church
- The ordinances of the local church: baptism by immersion and the Lord's Supper
- Biblical separation—ecclesiastical and personal
- Obedience to civil government
- The place of Israel
- The pretribulation rapture of the church
- The premillennial return of Christ
- The millennial reign of Christ
- Eternal glory in Heaven for the righteous
- Eternal torment in Hell for the wicked

Alex Bauman, Editor

THE TRUE STORY OF THE NEW TESTAMENT:
RESPONDING TO CHRIST AND HIS COMMISSION

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Preface

When we pick up an especially exciting novel, we may become so engrossed in reading it that we read the whole book in one sitting. We say, “I just couldn’t put it down.” The benefit of such an action is that we see the continuity of the book. We get the whole picture. The opening is still fresh in our minds when we come to the conclusion.

Often when we read the Bible through, we do so over a long period of time. Reading it may even take several years. If we are more dedicated, we may set a goal to read through the whole Bible in one year. While that ambition is noble, it still may leave us wondering how the Bible all fits together.

This is a basic study of the twenty-seven books of the New Testament. It develops the chronological and historical story of the Bible from Matthew to Revelation. Focus is given to the major themes of the incarnation and ministry of Jesus Christ, the birth and development of the church, and the need for godly Christian living. The study emphasizes the central place of Jesus Christ in God’s redemptive plan.

While this goal is a challenge, it is a valuable endeavor. It will help you see the unity of the New Testament and better understand the life of Christ and the history of His church.

Lesson 1

The Background of the New Testament Story

God sovereignly oversaw the history of the intertestamental period and prepared the world for the coming of Christ.

Various passages

“But when the fulness of the time was come, God sent forth his Son, made of a woman, made under the law” (Galatians 4:4).

Historical figures can seem disconnected from the Bible, especially those not mentioned in Scripture. But famous historical figures have played key roles in God’s plan. For example, you won’t find the name Alexander the Great in the Bible, but the Scriptures contain specific prophecies about him.

Getting Started

1. What do you know about Alexander the Great?

2. Why might someone be concerned about Alexander the Great in a study about the New Testament?

Alexander the Great is an important figure from the period between the testaments. Daniel gave specific prophecies about the Greek leader. All the prophecies eventually came to pass. Alexander, along with other people and nations, are excellent examples of God's sovereignty as He prepared the world for the coming of Christ.

The background of the New Testament is the topic for this lesson. Understanding the history leading up to the New Testament helps us understand the New Testament better.

Searching the Scriptures

The Old Testament period closed about 400 BC. Persia was the undisputed ruler of the Near East. Half a century before the Old Testament period closed, Nehemiah had led in rebuilding Jerusalem's walls, which Nebuchadnezzar had torn down when Babylon destroyed Jerusalem in 586 BC. Ezra aided Nehemiah by teaching God's Word. A revival broke out among God's ancient people. However, not all the evils were corrected.

About 400 BC, Malachi wrote his book to warn the nation of God's judgment on evildoers (Mal. 1:6) and of God's remembrance of those who feared the Lord (3:16). The Old Testament closed with Malachi's prophecy of the coming of someone like Elijah the prophet (4:5, 6).

3. Read Malachi 1:6–13. Describe the attitude the Jews and in particular the priests had toward God.

4. What was the result of the Jews' sinful attitudes?

Greek Period

The Greek period began about 333 BC, when Alexander the Great came sweeping out of Greece and conquered the Persian Empire. Alexan-

der was one of history's greatest generals. He never lost a battle, though the Persians usually greatly outnumbered him. He conquered all the land from Greece to Egypt to the border of India. Jerusalem and the Jews submitted without a battle and even showed Alexander the place in their Scriptures that prophesied of him (Dan. 8:1-7; 11:3). This prophecy stated that the big horn (Alexander) of the goat (Greece) would smite the ram (Persia) and would be victorious. Alexander was very pleased and favored the Jews from that time on. However, after conquering Persia, Alexander died at the young age of thirty-three. His kingdom was divided among four of his generals, thus fulfilling the prophesy of Daniel 8:8.

5. How would you expect the Jews to respond to God's accurate fulfillment of prophecy during the "silent" years between the testaments?

6. What "loud and clear" message about Himself did God send the Jews by fulfilling prophecy?

One of Alexander's generals, named Ptolemy, ruled over Egypt. Another general, named Seleucid, ruled over Syria and points east. These generals soon became kings. At first Palestine was a part of Ptolemy's kingdom. But after a series of wars, it fell to Syria and the Seleucids.

In about 171 BC, a Greek king of Syria named Antiochus IV began to persecute the Jews. He wanted them to stop worshipping Jehovah and to worship Greek gods, such as Zeus, instead. When the Jews refused, he sacked Jerusalem, profaned the temple, and offered a pig on the altar of burnt offering in honor of Zeus (Dan. 8:9-14.)

7. Read Daniel 8:9-14. What is your response to such accurate fulfillment of prophecy during the years between the testaments?

Hasmonean Period

An old priest named Mattathias led a revolt against Antiochus and his Syrian Greek army. With the help of Mattathias's five sons, including Judas Maccabee, the Jews gradually won their independence. Judas Maccabee cleansed the temple. Jews celebrate this act of temple cleansing to this day with the feast of Hanukkah. Descendants of the Maccabees governed in Judea for about a hundred years.

Roman Period

In 66 BC civil war broke out between two Maccabean brothers. By then Rome, the fourth beast of Daniel's prophecy (Dan. 7:1–7), had conquered Syria. In 63 BC one of the Maccabean brothers requested help from Pompey, the Roman general in Syria. Rome responded instead by conquering all of Judea.

Rome appointed Herod, a descendant of Esau, as king of Judea (Luke 1:5) under the Roman emperor Caesar Augustus, the ruler of the Near East (2:1) when Christ was born. Throughout the events of the rest of the New Testament period, Rome ruled the land from England to Palestine in the mightiest empire that region had ever known.

8. Given their political situation, how might the Jews have reacted to the news of the birth of a Jewish king?

Pharisees

The Gospels contain names of Jewish sects and political groups not part of Old Testament Israel. Yet the groups were very much a part of the society in Jesus' day. To better understand Judaism at the time of Christ, we need to know more about these groups.

Some think the Pharisees were successors of the pious Jews who stood true to the law under the persecution by Antiochus IV. Though the Pharisees did have a good beginning, many had capitulated to dead orthodoxy by Jesus' day. They held not only to the Scriptures, but also

to the organized and codified oral traditions handed down from the fathers in the Mishnah. Because the Pharisees put so much emphasis on tradition, Jesus rebuked them and told them they were “making the word of God of none effect” through their traditions (Mark 7:13).

The Pharisees were rigid legalists, and they added to the Scriptures. For example, the Law of Moses forbids work on the Sabbath. So the Pharisees said that if a wife sewed a garment for her husband and left the needle in it, the husband would be a lawbreaker if he wore that garment on the Sabbath with the needle attached.

As another example, the Pharisees had strict hand washing rules (Mark 7:3). A person had to wash before the meal, after each course of the meal, and after the meal. If he did not immerse his hands in the water, then none of the washing was valid. The water itself and the pots that held the water had to be taken through a cleansing ceremony before the washings. And so it went with ever-increasing detail.

9. What was missing in the Pharisees’ “worship” of God?

10. How would you expect Jesus to respond to the Pharisees’ religious leadership of the Jews?

Jesus did not regard the traditions of the elders to be binding. For this reason, most Pharisees did not approve of Him.

Sadducees

The Sadducees were another influential religious group in Jesus’ day. Their beginnings have been traced to Zadok, whom Solomon made high priest (1 Kings 2:35). All Sadducees were priests, but not all the priests were Sadducees.

The Sadducees were worldly minded, materialistic aristocrats involved in both politics and religion. They were the liberals. They denied

all things supernatural. Thus they did not believe in angels, spirits, miracles, or the resurrection of the dead (Matt. 22:23; Acts 23:8).

The Sadducees and Pharisees did not get along with each other except when they were uniting against a common enemy, such as Christ and His followers (Acts 23).

Scribes

Since there were no printing presses in that day, all copies of Scripture had to be made by scribes by hand. They were very meticulous. After they had completed a manuscript, they counted every letter to make sure all were right. Since Hebrew letters were also used for numbers, they could add up the letter numbers and make certain the total was correct.

Since scribes spent so much time copying Scripture so meticulously, they came to know the Law of Moses better than almost everyone else. Therefore, they were also called lawyers (Matt. 22:35). Many of the Pharisees were also scribes.

Some of the scribes challenged Jesus concerning the Scriptures. Others used the oral traditions, laws and regulations added to the Scripture, to try to find fault with Jesus. The scribes saw their oral tradition as having authority over the Scriptures. They expected Jesus to have the same view.

11. Read Matthew 15:1–9. For what major fault did Jesus condemn the scribes (v. 9)?

Herodians

Turning from the religious groups, we come to the political ones. The New Testament mentions two. The first is the Herodians. As their name indicates, they were a Jewish party who supported King Herod. They were government people whose jobs depended on Herod's maintaining his position. They were the ones who questioned Jesus about paying taxes to Caesar (Matt. 22:16, 17).

12. Read Mark 3:6. Why would the Herodians be especially motivated to kill Jesus?

Publicans

The publicans were native people in conquered lands who collected taxes from their countrymen on behalf of Rome. In Greece they would be native Greeks. In Judea they were Jews.

The Romans had a policy of specifying how taxes should come from each conquered land. The publicans were to raise that amount. During part of the history of the Roman Empire, the publicans were allowed to collect as much as they could; they pocketed anything above the amount required by Rome. At times the publicans would use extortion or other means to raise the money. Thus they earned a reputation for trying to get every coin they could from their fellowmen to send to Rome. Though the publicans often became rich, they were despised as traitors.

Some noted publicans were Matthew, who became an apostle (Matt. 10:3) and writer, and Zacchaeus (Luke 19:2). After coming to Christ, Zacchaeus sought to make right any money he had falsely taken from others.

13. Read Mark 2:13–17. Why would tax collectors be particularly attracted to Jesus?

Sanhedrin

Several Jewish institutions also played a part in the New Testament.

The Sanhedrin was a seventy-member council of Jewish leaders. The group was the Jews' supreme authority. It was made up of Sadducees and Pharisees with the high priest as its leader. Since Rome ruled the land of Israel, the Jews were subject to the Romans and could not apply the death penalty. Thus the Sanhedrin had to go to Pilate concerning the crucifixion of Christ (Matt. 27:1, 2).

Synagogues

The synagogues came into existence in Babylon after Nebuchadnezzar destroyed the temple in Jerusalem and carried away the Jews to Babylon. Once in Babylon, the Jews met in houses, but this gathering gradually developed into formal assemblies with their own places of worship. The synagogue was a place of instruction, public worship, and prayer. It also was a storage place for copies of Scripture.

There had to be a minimum of just ten Jewish men in a city for a synagogue to be built, so almost every major city with any Jewish population had one or more synagogues. The synagogue strongly influenced the early church. With the arrival of Christianity, churches became places of instruction, public worship, and prayer like the synagogues. The apostle Paul did much evangelizing in the synagogues (Acts 13:14; 18:4).

Preparation for the Coming of Christ

The Jewish Scriptures prophesied the coming of the Messiah many times. During the intertestamental period, God was at work preparing for Christ's coming. Three groups of people contributed to the preparation for the rapid diffusion of Christianity.

The Jews contributed their monotheism—their belief in one God. Wherever they went, they proclaimed that there is only one God. In that day they actively sought to win others to Judaism (Matt. 23:15). The Jews, through their synagogues, provided places for many early Christian sermons by Paul and others (Acts 17:1, 2). The Jews also contributed their meticulous copies of the Scriptures. Additionally, the Jews provided their Messianic hope that made the world conscious that a great deliverer was coming.

14. Read John 1:6–8. What did God do specifically through the Jews to prepare the way for Jesus?

The Greeks contributed their language. Greek was widely spoken throughout the Near East. It was the language of culture, education,

and commerce. Greek was the language of the first Bible translation from Hebrew, called the Septuagint. Thus the Old Testament could be read far and wide. Greek also became the language in which the New Testament was written. Greek culture and thought patterns were widely spread after the days of Alexander the Great; therefore, the early Christians did not have to break down a cultural gap.

The Romans contributed the *Pax Romana*, the Roman peace, which allowed Christians to witness in relative safety. Roman roads made travel easier for missionaries, such as Paul, Luke, Timothy, and Barnabas, to reach distant places.

In general, there was degeneration in religion, which left a vacuum. Many people no longer believed in the myths of the gods of Greece and Rome. Thus Paul could write, “When the fulness of time was come, God sent forth his Son” (Gal. 4:4).

Making It Personal

15. How does knowing the background of the New Testament affect your desire to study this course?

16. Why should you personally value a study of the New Testament?

17. How does God’s working in history to fulfill prophecy and prepare for the Messiah affect your trust in Him?

18. How should you respond to God's directing of *your* life?

19. Memorize Galatians 4:4.