

Today we continue our series about rediscovering the power of scripture, looking to the Bible and seeing what we can learn about what it is and how we might apply its words for us today. Last week, we looked at the Old Testament and today we take a closer look at the New Testament. I want to begin with a comparison of these two sections of the Bible.

If you brought a Bible with you, or you can find one in the pew in front of you or pull up one on your mobile device, you might go to the table of contents or perhaps flip through as I'm speaking about these things today. There are just over 23,000 verses in the Old Testament and almost 8,000 verses in the New Testament. If you divide a physical Bible, and put your thumb in the middle and split it open, you'll see it's about one-quarter of the Bible by volume is the New Testament. About three-quarters is the Old Testament.

You remember that for the earliest Christians, their Bible was the Old Testament, and they looked to those scriptures as pointing to Jesus. Now the New Testament of course is words on a page. It's pixels on a screen. It's part of the Bible. It's a collection of books, but what kind of book or what kinds of books do we find in the New Testament?

The New Testament is a compilation of 27 different documents from the first century, most of which are letters. They're among the earliest documents written by Christians. They represent the earliest thinking about Jesus, the very earliest implications about the gospel and the kingdom of God and the earliest attempts to write down the stories of Jesus that we possessed. Out of these 27 documents, just five of them are narrative, Matthew, Mark, Luke, John and Acts tell a narrative story.

The first four, the gospels, tell the story and seek to summarize the life and teachings of Jesus. They primarily focus on his death and resurrection. If you look at any of these, Matthew, Mark, Luke or John, you'll see that the majority of their time is spent in the very last week of Jesus' life. Then the book of Acts or the Acts of the Apostles tells the story of Jesus and of the early church after Jesus ascended into heaven.

Everything else in the New Testament are letters. Even the book of Revelation was a letter that was written to seven churches in what's now modern day Turkey. They were all written to different people or different groups of people, different congregations. With that in mind, let's take a closer look at each one of these books of the New Testament.

We begin with Matthew. It is thought that Matthew was first written in Hebrew and later was written in Greek. You remember that most of the New Testament was written in Greek, but this particularly book was written to Jewish people, to help convince them that Jesus is the messiah. You'll see that in our Bible today, it's right next to the Old Testament, closest there to the Hebrew Bible and Matthew quotes the Old Testament more than any other gospel, to help the reader see the connection between how Jesus lived and how he fulfilled what the prophets foretold what would come.

The gospel according to Mark was probably written at a time when Christians were facing persecution in the city of Rome. You'll see that as you're reading through, and Mark seems to be addressing some of the issues connected with persecutions and how Christians could handle it. It's also the most action-packed gospel. Jesus is performing miracles. He is moving from place to place. Immediately is a word that you'll find often in the book of Mark.

The gospel of Luke was written to Gentile. All that means is non-Jewish Christians, by someone who was non-Jewish himself, Luke. Luke was a doctor, a physician and likely a traveling companion of Paul. He was particularly concerned for the down and out, the outcasts and the nobodies of his day. In Luke, Jesus is particularly concerned with sinners, tax collectors, prostitutes and women. We see Jesus spending more time with these folks, those that were considered second-class citizens at the time.

Now John is writing at a time when the Jewish Christians, those that had grown up in the faith of Judaism, were being, and come to Jesus, have been, are being persecuted by the Jews who were not Christians. They were being expelled from the synagogue. You can see that in the gospel of John, there's more of a division between the Jews and the Christians. You see this conflict as you're reading John's gospel. Now John was written probably a bit later. It offers a very theologically developed story of Jesus. The author wanted to clarify who Jesus was and Jesus' importance.

For example, when he tells the story of the birth of Jesus, there's no mention of a stable or angels or shepherds. Instead, he talks about in the very beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God. Of course, the Word being Jesus, helping us understand that Jesus was before all time and now and forever.

The first three gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke are similar to one another. They're what theologians will call synoptic, synoptic gospels. It's because it's a word that means being seen together. They contain very similar content. It's likely that Matthew and Luke had some version of Mark before them, when they were writing their gospels. You'll see a number of stories that are the same.

Now John is quite different from these three, and was referred to as the spiritual gospel in the early church. After the four gospels, we come to the book of Acts, or the Acts of the Apostles, as you'll find in some translations. Acts actually has the same author as the gospel according to Luke and is considered a sequel to this gospel. Now Acts was written, if we think about the verses in Luke and Acts, we see that this author actually has written most of the New Testament by verses.

If you look at the number of books. We often think of the Apostle Paul as having written most of the New Testament and that's true with books, but the volume of texts comes greatest in Luke and Acts when they're combined. Now Acts tells the story of the beginning of the church to just after the death of Peter and Paul. This sets the stage for everything else in the New Testament, which are the writings of the apostles to the early church, to early Christian communities as they were forming.

Next we see the writings of Paul gathered together and organized in two groups in this way. First, Paul's letters that are written to churches and next, Paul's letters that are written to individuals. Within these groups, they're organized not very spiritually, by length, from longest to shortest. First the letters that Paul writes to churches, Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, which is actually a little bit shorter than Ephesians, and then Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, these are all books that are authored by the Apostle Paul to a particular community, a congregation perhaps not dissimilar to this one, encouraging them, helping them to understand what it means to follow after Jesus, who Jesus was and addressing controversies that they may have.

Then we see letters that Paul writes to individuals, 1 and 2 Timothy, Titus and Philemon. These are individuals, people in the life of the early church. Finally, well next comes Hebrews. Now early, the early

church debated about whether Paul actually wrote Hebrews or not. They eventually decided that he probably didn't write Hebrews, but the writing was so similar, it sounds so much like Paul that they put it next to Paul, Paul's writings in the New Testament. Then come what are known as the general epistles.

These are letters that for the most part are written to large groups of the Christian church. They have specific names associated with them but they're written to broad audiences, James, 1 and 2 Peter, 1, 2 and 3 John, again in order by length, and Jude. Finally, Revelation comes at the very end because it deals with the end times. Everything that will happen at the end of time, with the Lord's return.

That's all 27 books of the New Testament. Of course, these are not all that was written down in the early church. So who decided what made it into the New Testament and what did not? How was the New Testament formed? Well after Paul's death, the churches who had Paul's letter said, you know what? These are something that are really special. This is the founder of our church, and when we read this letter, we hear God speaking through it. This letter has authority for us in our lives. It helps show us the way to follow after God.

Then they recognized that Paul wrote letters to other communities as well. The Philippians said to the Ephesians, hey didn't Paul write you a letter? If you could copy yours off and send us a copy, we'll copy ours and send you a copy as well, and those individuals that had received letters began to share them as well. All of these letters began to be collected and passed around from church to church. We actually have a clue about this process from the scripture passage today from 2 Peter.

I want to read a couple verses again for you. "Consider the patience of our Lord to be salvation. Just as our dear friend and brother Paul wrote to you according to the wisdom given to him, speaking of all these things in all his letters. Some of his remarks are hard to understand and people who are ignorant and whose faith is weak, twist them to their own destruction, just as they do the other scriptures." So the author of 2 Peter, even before the end of the New Testament era, recognizes that these letters are important, speaking of these things in all his letter, referring to these letters of Paul.

The writer of 2 Peter knows about Paul's letters because they've already been gathered together and have started to circulate, and then he writes, this is great, "Some of them, his remarks, are hard to understand." One of the authors of the scripture text looks at some of the authors and says you know it's a little bit difficult to understand at times. This is fantastic. One of the New Testament authors finds the Bible hard to understand. So if you ever find yourself in a place where it's difficult to understand the scriptures, know that you are in good company. You have permission not to understand everything either.

Then he continues, "People who are ignorant and whose faith is weak, twist them to their own destruction, just as they do the other scriptures." Now what are these other scriptures that this author is referring to? Well the other scriptures here being referenced are most likely the Hebrew Bible which clearly had authority in the life of the early church. So Paul's letters are beginning to be compared with these, the holy texts of the Jewish people. They begin to see something similar in the rest of the writing of the Bible and all the scriptures. This is a process that again theologians would call canonization.

It's a word that's used to describe the formation of the New Testament. A bit of a timeline of that for you. By the end of the first century, Paul's writings are already circulating with a certain weight of

authority and the gospels had been written by this time. By the beginning of the second century, the four gospels have been collected, and they were being passed around together.

Well there were other individual gospels that had been written. None were understood to have the same authority as that of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. By the end of the second century, it seems that the gospels have been connected together along with the letters of Paul and other letters were brought together, including Revelation.

By the end of the third century, there was a general consensus of what most books of the New Testament were, and yet still, a bit of debate in the church about whether books like 2 Peter or even Revelations were to be included. By the end of the fourth century, there was clear agreement around these 27 books that we have in the New Testament today.

We look at this process and these books and see that the Holy Spirit is involved in preparing these texts to tell the story of God in Jesus Christ, to tell the story of the early church and to help us in our Christian life. So that's how the New Testament came to be, but what is the story that's told in these books?

The New Testament is the story of Jesus Christ, the message of God's kingdom and how it's spread across the world. It's the story of God's love for humankind. It's the story of God's response to the brokenness of this world and the evil and tragedy and suffering that we so often see around us. God saw our suffering. God saw humanity struggling with death and sin and God chose not to leave us alone, but instead God chose to walk among us as a human being. He chose to show us the way, the truth and the life to teach us by his words and by his example.

Jesus came to lead a revolution, a revolution of the heart though, not one of military power. In this revolution, he would call people to love God with all their heart, soul, mind and strength and to love their neighbor as themselves. He would tell them that the way of life is not found in violence and revenge. Instead the way of life is found in forgiveness and mercy, found in loving your neighbors and even loving your enemies. The way of life is found in seeing people who are hurting and offering them compassion. The way of life is found in humility and not in pridefulness. It's found in your willingness to lay down your life for others.

This story is one that's modeled for Jesus. One the cross, Jesus took all the pain, the sins, the evil of the world and he died, but on the third day, he rose again, to show clearly and conclusively that evil and suffering and even death is not the last word. This is the overarching message of the New Testament. One of the great theologians of the last century, Karl Barth, when asked to summarize the gospel in a phrase, he said this. A phrase that you probably know well, "Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so."

This story of the New Testament is one that tells us how to live out God's love, that Jesus loves us far being what we can imagine and that we might live life in response to that, and one day there will be a reckoning, where the Lord himself will come back and make all things right. This is a word that we so often need to hear even today. We see brokenness in our world. We see families that are torn apart for senseless reasons. We see violence in war and other countries and even closer to home. In all of that, we remember that the New Testament tells the story that there is brokenness but it's not the end.

The good news is that in the end, evil and brokenness are never the final word. God loves all people and has a purpose and a plan for you. Jesus suffers and dies for our sin and our salvation and Jesus is raised up to give us life. The words of the Bible bring us this story. The words of the Bible bring life.

So my hope for you, my hope for each of us is that you'll read the Bible, that you'll spend time reflecting and meditating on its words and allow the Bible to shape your life. Will you pray with me? Thank you oh God for the words of scripture. Help us to grow in the grace and knowledge of Jesus by opening your word. By your Holy Spirit put in each of us a deep desire to read the Bible and to be shaped by its words. Help us be people of your book, in Jesus' name, amen.