**A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF THE BIBLE (Part 2)**

Like the Old Testament, the New Testament also divides itself into three subdivisions. First, there is a “historical” section, consisting of the first five books (Matthew – Acts). These books describe the personal history of the long-awaited Messiah: Jesus Christ, the Son of God (Matthew, Mark, and Luke), and the history of the early church (Acts). Second, there is a “prophetical” section, which is the last book (Revelation). While this book certainly concludes with the final judgment (Rv.20:11ff), it is primarily concerned with “things which must shortly take place” – that is, within the lifetimes of those to whom it was written (1:1). It is a verification of the ultimate fulfillment of all OT prophecies concerning Christ and the Jewish people (10:7). Sandwiched between these two sections is the “devotional” section, consisting of 21 books (Romans – Jude) which deal with doctrinal issues, and practical day by day living for the people of God.

While the Old Testament is the word of God (2Pt.1:20-21), and a very valuable document (Rm.15:4), the New Testament is the complete and final revelation of the will of God (Jude 3). As such, it is our authoritative guide today (Col.3:17; 2Jn.9). Therefore, one should be very familiar with its contents and major themes. There are at least five major themes in the New Testament:

**First, there is the Christ (or Messiah).** Christ was the hope of every Jewish person from the time of Abraham (Gn.12:1-3; 22:18; Jn.1:41, 45; 4:25-26; Ac.2:38-39; 3:18-26). We see His story told to a Jewish audience (Matthew), a Greek audience (Mark), a Gentile audience (Luke), and then from a decidedly spiritual focus (John).

**Second, there is salvation in Christ.** The blessing intended for all nations, which was foretold to Abraham, was salvation from sin (cf. Ac.3:26). The book of Acts shows the unfolding of that purpose, as the gospel is preached “in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth” (Ac.1:8).

**Third, there is the church, which is the result of God’s redemptive work in Christ.** God had always intended there to be a people on this earth, who had chosen of their own free will to serve and glorify Him (Ep.3:8-11, 20-21). In the Scriptures, the church of Christ is manifested in both a “universal” (family of God) and a “local” (organized) sense. We see how the universal church comes into being through the preaching of the gospel (Ac.2:36-47). We also see how local churches come into being through mutual agreement (Ac.9:26-28), and how they are to be organized (Ph.1:1; 4:15; cf. 1Tm.3:1-13). And we learn something of their work and worship (Ac.11:27-30; 13:1-5; 20:7).

**Fourth, there is service to God.** We learn our personal obligations, spiritually (Jn.4:24), morally (Ga.5:19-21), civilly (Rm.13:1-7), domestically (Ep.5:22-6:4), economically (Ep.4:28), and socially (Jm.1:27).

**A fifth theme of the New Testament, which is often overlooked, is the all-important distinction between the Old and New Testaments.** I am constantly amazed at how little people seem to be aware of this, especially since it is such a MAJOR New Testament theme! It is taught in Acts 15; Romans 7; 2 Corinthians 3; Ephesians 2; Colossians 2; *and the entire books of Galatians and Hebrews!* Despite such widespread teaching, many religious people continue to appeal to Old Testament for their practices. This is grievous error (cf. Ga.5:1-4)!

Finally, here are some things to remember when studying the Bible. I forget where I first heard this, but it is such good advice: *“Remember that when you study the Bible, you are actually ‘reading someone else’s mail.’”* Especially in studying the New Testament, we are reading “epistles” (letters) which were actually written to others! This means that we must take into account certain things such as context and background.

For instance, when Paul said, “If you become circumcised, Christ will profit you nothing” (Ga.5:2), understand that he is not condemning circumcision per se. Rather, this was said in a context where circumcision was being forced upon people as a prerequisite to salvation. Another example is the ancient custom of foot washing, which was nothing more than an act of hospitality (cf. 1Tm.5:9-10). It is NOT a religious ritual for us to observe today! Still another example is noticing certain idioms of speech. When Peter said that women must NOT adorn themselves by “putting on apparel” (1Pt.3:3-4), he was not forbidding clothing! He was showing a contrast between those who emphasize outward appearance over the “hidden person of the heart” (note: “not…but”).

In conclusion, let us recognize that the Bible is the greatest book ever written! It gives us the answers to age-old questions like: *“Who am I?”* (God’s image, Gn.1:26-27); and *“Why am I here?”* (God’s servant, Eccl.12:13-14); and *“Where am I going?”* (God’s home, Jn.14:1-3). Let us become diligent students of this sacred volume, so we can have all the blessings prepared for us from the foundation of the world (Mt.25:34).

--Lanny Smith