

New Testament 101

An Introduction to the New Testament

Before we dive into the New Testament, let's answer a few basic questions.

What Is the New Testament?

While the Bible is one big volume, it includes 66 books in two sections — the Old Testament (39 books) and the New Testament (27 books). The Old Testament primarily focuses on the history of God's chosen people, the nation of Israel. The New Testament focuses on the impact of one person, Jesus Christ, the Promised Savior.

Why Is It Called the New Testament? How Is It Different Than the Old Testament?

Another word for testament is *covenant*. A covenant is an agreement, a promise, or a contract between two parties. In the Old Testament, God instituted laws and a sacrificial system for Israel. The laws revealed God's standards for righteousness, but no one could keep them completely. God's people fell short of His laws and, thus, they were condemned by them. That's why God instituted a sacrificial system, to provide a way for the forgiveness of their sins (*Hebrews 9:22*).

The priests, tabernacle, animals, sacrifices, and rituals in that bloody system foreshadowed what Jesus would do when He came to earth. With His sinless life, He fulfilled the law for us, then sacrificed Himself on our behalf, so that we might have forgiveness in Him. Therefore, Jesus instituted a new covenant in His blood (*Luke 22:20*). We are saved by faith in His sacrifice.

Thus, in the Old Testament, there are many pictures of Christ (called types) foreshadowing what He will accomplish in the New Testament. There are also hundreds of prophecies or predictions in the Old Testament that Jesus would fulfill in the New Testament. Therefore, the Old Testament is foundational to the New Testament. It has been said that the New is in the Old concealed, while the Old is in the New revealed. Both testaments tell one big story.

How Is the New Testament Organized?

The New Testament has 27 books organized in five themes. The first four books — *Matthew*, *Mark*, *Luke*, and *John* — are called the Gospels ("good news") and detail the life, ministry, teaching, death, and resurrection of Jesus. The book of *Acts* records the early history of the Church (followers of Christ) shortly after Jesus' ascension into heaven. The third and fourth themes include letters from the Apostle Paul and others explaining how we should live as followers of Christ and how the Church should operate. Finally, the New Testament ends with the book of *Revelation*, which describes the end times, the destruction of God's enemies, and the reunion of God's people in heaven.

Why Are There Four Gospels?

The word *gospel* means the good news about the salvation we have in Jesus. The Bible includes four books about this good news — *Matthew*, *Mark*, *Luke*, and *John*. But why did God give us four books about the same story? Isn't that a bit redundant?

The life of Jesus is the greatest story ever told. It would be difficult for one person to catch and include all the details of the events, but with four books, we have a more comprehensive view. Each witness notices things that the others miss; and each witness has different perspectives, experiences, personalities, and interests. Thus, with four gospels, God has given us a colorful picture of the life of His Son.

Matthew wrote his book with the Jewish people in mind, while Mark and Luke wrote with Gentiles (non-Jews) in mind. These three books are so similar that they are often called "the Synoptic Gospels" (meaning alike in content, order, and style). However, John's Gospel is unique in that he focused more on Christ's deity and included layers of rich theology that the other Gospels did not (i.e., *John 1:1-18*). For more details, read the article entitled, "Four Voices, One Song" (Bible Basics).

Were Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John Disciples of Jesus?

To answer this question, we must first ask what is meant by a disciple. A disciple is simply a follower or student. Were these men followers of Jesus? Yes, of course. He was the great Teacher (Rabbi), and they were His students. However, not all of them were among the Twelve Disciples (disciple with a capital D).

Matthew and John were among the twelve disciples, but Mark and Luke were not. How, then, did they know the stories of Jesus so well as to write their accounts?

Keep in mind that Jesus had many disciples (He sent out 72) and thousands of followers. Mark and Luke could have been named among them. Furthermore, those who were eyewitnesses to the events in Jesus' life were sharing stories with everyone. Luke credits these witnesses for helping him write his account (1:1-4).

However, it is important to note some other key information. Both men were privileged to accompany and assist key figures in the early Church. It is believed that Mark is the same John Mark mentioned in the book of *Acts* (12:12, 25; 15:37, 39). Mark later became a close associate to the Apostle Paul and an assistant to Peter (*Philemon* 24; *2 Timothy* 4:11; *1 Peter* 5:13). Early Church leaders unanimously affirmed that Mark wrote the second gospel, some even claiming that the account Peter's and that Mark was his scribe.

Luke was also a close companion of the Apostle Paul (*Acts* 16:10-17; 20:5-15; 21:1-18; 27:1-28:16) and the only associate, among those whom Paul lists in his letters who fits the profile of the author of the gospel (*Colossians* 4:14; *2 Timothy* 4:11; *Philemon* 24). The point is that both men were more than qualified to write their gospel accounts. We must also remember the sovereign Spirit of God who gave oversight to the formation of the Bible (*2 Peter* 1:20, 21).



How Do We Reconcile the Discrepancies in the Four Gospel Accounts?

With four different writers recounting the same stories, there are bound to be some differences in their descriptions and details. Most of the differences are stylistic or thematic. One writer focuses on a specific aspect of the story, while another writer focuses on a different aspect. But what if those differences are discrepancies, meaning two accounts appear to disagree?

We must first avoid the tendency to conclude that discrepancies are always contradictions. For example, when we watch a detective show or read a book surrounding a murder mystery, we are presented with facts or pieces of the story. We struggle to put the pieces together, to make sense of it all. Clues don't seem to add up. The witnesses' stories seem to disagree. We may even throw up our hands in disgust because the riddle can't be solved. But at the end, when the details are explained and the timeline put together, we feel relieved. The plot seems obvious to us, even though we couldn't see the big picture amid the investigation.

The same process applies to our understanding of Scripture and piecing together the four accounts. While it is easy for us to dismiss the Bible because of the seeming disagreements, it is better for us to be a careful investigator until the mystery is solved.

When we are confronted with "disagreements" in biblical stories, we must maintain a high view of Scripture. A high view of Scripture is the belief that the Bible is God's Word to us, complete, sufficient, authoritative, and true. Every word is in the Bible for a reason, and it can be trusted, even if we spot discrepancies. We approach "problematic passages" with the attitude that our understanding is limited. The problem is with us, not with God or Scripture. Though we may not be able to reconcile the discrepancies, that does not discredit the accounts.

When faced with discrepancies in Scripture, let us be patient and pray for discernment. It is a mystery to be solved. We must only be diligent and careful to investigate.