



Storming Fortresses

For the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh,
but divinely powerful for the destruction of fortresses.

2 CORINTHIANS 10:4

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So, what's new in the New Testament? We can answer that in two words: Nothing and Everything.

The New Testament does not reveal a new way to please God.

Parables and explicit teachings abound in Luke, wherein our Lord makes it clear that God's covenant will never die, but covenant-breakers will.

In the Old Testament one received the Law externally, but in the New Testament one receives the power to obey it." Oy vey! Nope.

All I Really Need to Know I Learned in the New Testament (Part 1)

By
Steve M. Schlissel

I know, I know. "Didn't you just get through telling us that you learned all you really need to know in the *Old Testament*? So how can you now say the same thing about the New?"

I apologize if I did not make my position clear. Perhaps this will: The New Testament *is* the Old Testament—come into its own.

Though I learn all the components of the covenant curriculum in the Old Testament, it's in the New Testament that they reach

critical mass, historical realization. The Scriptures of the New Testament are most necessary.

After all, would you be content to take a highly touted mystery book and, before reading it, rip out the last chapter? Could you happily read along knowing the last chapter had been excised? "Wow, this is very interesting," you say to yourself as you read. "So many characters I am getting to know! I am getting to know Detective Moishe Epstein. I am getting to know Schlemiel the butler and Ethel the nosey

neighbor, and Dr. I. Yan-kum the dentist; I am getting to know where they live and what they are like. I know about the players and the plot and the progress—everything I need to know." Except how it ends! You don't know how it ends. Are you satisfied with that? Hardly. Yet that is what it's like—after Messiah has come—to read the Old without the New.

The New Testament *is not to be read as a separate book, but as the final chapter of the book you've been reading.* I can now

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say to you, “All I really need to know I learned in the New Testament” without contradicting our last letter *because* the New Testament is the last chapter of the Old Testament.

Yes it is. And that’s why its very first sentence is a crochet loop, hooking what is to follow with what is past. “This is the genealogy of Jesus Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham.” A seamless connection. You need Exodus to understand Leviticus and Genesis to understand Exodus. Each builds on the other. It’s that way through all the Law, all the Prophets, all the Writings. Last of all comes the New Testament to tell us how everything works out, everything concerning “Old Testament David” (the father of the kings of the Jews) and “Old Testament Abraham” (the father of all the Jews), and all the rest. The New Tes-

tament is going to tell us how it all resolves, how it devolves, how it all comes together in a particular person and work in history. Luke goes back to Adam. John goes back even further. It’s all wrapped up in Jesus Christ. The New Testament brings it all together.

The New Testament never presents itself as a contrary testament. It doesn’t compete with the Old, but *completes* the Old. It supplements rather than supplants. It makes the Old obvious, not obviated. That is the way the New Testament itself insists it is to be read. “The (Old Testament) Scriptures,” says our Lord, “are they which testify of me” (John 5:39).

So, what’s new in the New Testament? We can answer that in two words: Nothing and Everything. Why is nothing new? God—he doesn’t change. Why is everything new? Gentiles—they’re about to.

Nothing New

The New Testament does not reveal a new God, though many modern Christians, alas, seem less than convinced of that. Their errant reading of the New Testament as something other than the last chapter of the Old appears to have led them to regard the Old Testament God as mean, hung up on law, vengeful. The New Testament God, in contrast, is (in their minds) nice¹ and hung up on grace. But the one Bible reveals just one true God (Dt. 6:4;

Mk. 12:29; James 2:19) in whom alone justice and mercy meet. He’s the one in whom they’ve always met.

The New Testament does not reveal a new way to God. Since the Fall, the way to God has been, could only be, through the blood of Christ, the God-appointed substitute. The pious mind recoils at even the suggestion of another way, for that would make the death of Christ unnecessary. Such a thought is not only full of blasphemy; it is full of theological chaos.

The New Testament does not reveal a new way to please God. God’s law, found throughout the Scriptures—“Old” and “New”—is the perfect disclosure of what pleases him. Even our Lord’s “new command” (John 13:34) is acknowledged by all reasonable commentators to be, in the words of Matthew Poole, “strictly no new commandment.” Indeed, no commentator is needed to know this, for John himself (1 John 2:7, 8) tells us that the “new commandment” is “no new commandment, but an old commandment.”

Truth be told, the New Testament does not even reveal a New Covenant. That is, it does not reveal anything concerning the gracious

¹ For a sermon on modern “Nice-ianity,” send a donation to Messiah’s Ministries and request the sermon, “Your Father’s Ears.” [This tape is available in Australia from Reformation Ministries]

relationship between God and his people on earth that was not already enjoyed in the Old Testament.

What, after all, is *covenantally* new in the New Testament? Salvation by grace through faith? Hardly! When Paul argues that justification is had through faith and not through human merit, whom does he enlist as a witness? Peter? Lydia? Archippus? No. Abraham. See Genesis 16:6 and Romans 4:3. Paul quotes no words of Jesus in support of this doctrine; he doesn't need to. It was *always* true. What too many regard as the summary teaching of the New Testament exclusively, is introduced there as an "as it is written" teaching (Rom. 1:17). Yes, "The just shall live by faith" was only *quoted* by Paul; it was penned by Habakkuk (2:4). Nothing new here.

What about forgiveness of sins? Is that new to the New Testament? Don't tell that to David—at least not before you read Psalm 32. Indeed, when Paul sought testimony concerning this, the supreme covenant blessing—the forgiveness of sins—he went directly to David (Rom. 4:7,8; see also David's testimony in Ps. 51).

Well, perhaps it was reserved to the New for sinners to have the right to be called friends of God? Oops! Don't tell that to Abraham (2 Chr. 20:7; James 2:23)!

But surely in the New Testament men can know God better; they can be more intimate with him

than in the Old? Don't let Moses hear you say that (Ex. 33:11; Num. 12:6-8)!

But can't New Testament-era men have a better relationship with God than was possible in the Old? Oh? Who in your circle is closer to God than Enoch? Or Asaph? Does not the most ardent "New Testament devotion" but repeat what was before? Listen to the passion of a saint captivated by Christ: "*I am continually with Thee: Thou hast holden me by my right hand. Thou shalt guide me with Thy counsel, and afterward receive me to glory. Whom have I in heaven but Thee? And there is none on earth I desire beside Thee. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.*"

"Well," you say, "though none of these be new with the New, yet surely this is: In the Old Testament one received the Law externally, but in the New Testament one receives the *power* to obey it." *Oy vey!* Nope. That won't work, either. Who of us obeys the Law better than Abraham (Gen. 26:5), or better than the Psalmist (see Ps. 119), or better than Zechariah and Elizabeth (Lk. 1:6)? No, this suggestion is as untenable as it is today common. For not only do we find myriad examples of Old Testament saints rendering powerful obedience to the Lord in faith (see Hebrews 11!), we also find New Testament-era saints falling just as far from perfection as their Old Testament counterparts. If it's "newness" you're looking for, it will not be found along this path.

The newness will not be found in the God of the covenant, nor in the intrinsic benefits of the covenant, nor in the ethics of the covenant, nor even in the experiential "spirituality" of the covenant. *The newness is in the administration of the covenant.* The Westminster Confession is right on target when it says, "There are not two covenants of grace, differing in substance, but one and the same, under various dispensations" (VII, vi).²

The New Covenant in Christ's blood is the *same* covenant enjoyed by the saints in the Old Testament. Now it is *administered* in a different manner, a manner which recognizes, honors and glories in the accomplishments of our Lord Jesus Christ in history, and which accords with God's purposes through Him.

What are those purposes which called for a new administration? In a word: Gentiles.

The Gospel Goes Global

The gospel, since the Fall, was always present in the world, but for many centuries it was, in effect, confined to the Jews. In the New Testament era, however, the gospel goes global. *That's* what's new in God's covenantal dealings. All other changes are viewed properly only when viewed in relation to—one might even say, as subordinate to—this grand change. Changes in administration, changes in worship, changes in the Spirit's work, are to be referred back to this: in the New Testament, the gospel goes global.

² The Westminster Confession of Faith uses "dispensations" in the sense of economies or administrations. The Confession has zero tolerance for "Dispensationalism."

This is a dominant theme of the four Gospel accounts; it is the very outline of the Book of Acts. The apostolic letters are self-evidently a handbook instructing Gentiles how to be *true* Jews. (The Book of Hebrews forcefully reminds Jewish believers what a real *Jewish* Jew is.) Then the Book of Revelation reveals the epochal shift in world centers, from the Jewish Jerusalem on earth to the universally accessible New Jerusalem in heaven, a fitting place in part because it is *equidistant* to all the families of the earth. Behind and under all changes in covenant economy is this single idea: the covenant is moving out under Christ to encompass the world.

Gentiles: Godless and Hopeless

The Old Testament Scriptures, as we noted in our last article, testified that the Gentiles would be coming to God through the Messiah. Simeon showed himself “a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the Word of truth” when he, holding the infant Jesus in his arms, called him the “light to lighten the Gentiles.” Simeon had read about the calling of Abraham and he knew that from the moment our father was called out to be the fountain of a new people, God intended by this to assuage the thirst of the Gentiles. “All families on earth will be blessed through you” (Gen. 12:3), said the Lord. In the very act of covenanting to be the God of the Jews, God had in view his long-term plan of saving the Gentiles.³

In general, however, during the period from the call of Abraham to the death of Christ, relatively few Gentile individuals (and no Gentile nations to speak of) entered into the covenant. God, at the birth of the nation, did make provision for those who so desired: “An alien living among you who wants to celebrate the Lord’s Passover must have all the males in his household circumcised; then he may take part like one born in the land” (Ex. 12:48). The way into full covenantal participation was by circumcision.

While no doubt many availed themselves of this privilege (believing Gentiles appear throughout the pages of the Old Testament), the Gentile nations as a whole remained “without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world” (Eph. 2:12). To *Israel* belonged the adoption as sons, the divine glory, the covenants, the receiving of the law, the temple worship and the promises. The Gentiles, “Godless and hopeless,” were out; the covenanted Jews were in.

Israel: The First Christian Nation

What many seem not to notice in Ephesians 2 is a powerful implication in Paul’s argument. If Paul, in contrasting the Gentiles to the Jews, says that heretofore the Gentiles were *without Christ*, the manifest implication is that the Jews were with Christ, or, better, that *Christ was with the Jews*, even prior to his incarnation. Paul thought of Old Tes-

tament Israel as a Christian nation. If there is any doubt of that it ought to disappear on reading I Corinthians 10:3.4: Our forefathers “all ate the same spiritual food and drank the same spiritual drink; for they drank from the spiritual rock that accompanied them, *and that rock was Christ.*” The Bible, then, clearly teaches that *Christ* was covenantally with Israel (but not with the Gentile nations) in the Old Testament administration.

Prior to his incarnation Jesus was present to Israel in diverse and sundry ways. Throughout their history he was their Savior. He birthed them, freed them, protected them, disciplined them, blessed them, nourished them, refreshed them, taught them, and provided atonement for them. When he—the word who in the beginning was with God and who was God—became flesh and dwelt among us, he came first unto his own. Amazingly (the New Testament records) his own would not receive him! Though he longed to gather Israel’s children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wing, they were not willing.

Let’s Do the Twist

That is the first element of the astonishing Old Testament plot twist found in the New Testament Scriptures. The story itself, the story of the gracious God redeeming, had begun thousands of years before. The New Testament “twist” is not the disclosure of some new way of salvation. It is the story of how the only way of salvation had been rejected by the people who should

³ In bringing the Gentiles into covenant in the new economy, God has precisely the same long-term intention toward the Jews. That is Paul’s crystal-clear argument in Romans 11:11 ff.

have known it best! It is the story of how the people who had been accepted in the Beloved rejected the Beloved and in turn were no longer accepted.

The point cannot be made too strongly that in rejecting Jesus Christ the Jews were not rejecting, as it were, a new covenant, and (again) they certainly were not rejecting a new way of salvation. No, the bitter irony is that they were rejecting the very embodiment of all they should have known and practiced. Their rejection of Jesus was the clearest possible proof that they, in heart and fact, rejected Moses and the Prophets.

Think of it this way: Major premise: In the beginning was the Word of God. Minor premise: The Word of God (the same Word by which the worlds were created and Israel was redeemed; the same Word written in stone at Sinai, and on other media throughout Israel's history) became flesh in the person of Jesus Christ. Conclusion: To believe in Jesus Christ entirely is to believe in the Word of God entirely. Conversely, to reject Jesus Christ is to disbelieve and reject the entire Word of God.

You might well say, then, that the first element of the plot twist found in the New Testament is the story of the Jews' rejection of the Old Testament. The second element, a recurring theme to the end of the Book, is how their rejection

became the occasion for the reconciliation of the whole world!⁴

The Gospel in the Gospels

Matthew's Gospel, considered by many to be the most Jewish,⁵ puts a teaser at the beginning by telling us that the Incarnate Word, born of the Jews and announced by angels as David's Son, was worshiped *first* by Gentiles (Mt. 2:11). This is as a token of what would eventually come to pass.

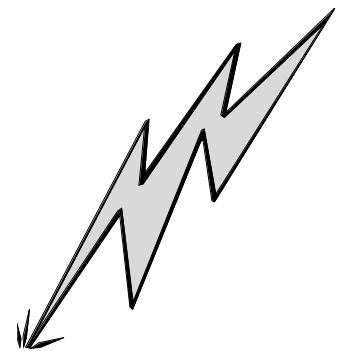
In chapter 10, Matthew recounts Jesus' instruction to his apostles that they "not go among the Gentiles," but "rather to the lost sheep of Israel." Yet, by the time we get to chapter 21, we find Jesus telling the Jewish nation, "The kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people who will produce its fruit." Their rejection of him is a rejection of Abraham and Moses and David—it is a rejection of God himself. But God will not be left without a people! Christ's work will be victorious and glorious.

After his resurrection, Jesus invokes his universal authority in commanding the apostles to "go and make disciples of all nations." The nations are to be incorporated into the covenant *not by circumcision*, but by baptism in the Triune Name. This will become *the issue* in all that follows

in the New Testament (as we shall presently see). Henceforth, Gentiles will fully participate in the covenant without becoming Jews. After the Jewish rejection of Jesus, Gentiles won't need to move to Israel because Israel will "move" to include them, wherever they are! *Wherever* Christ is received, *wherever* he is owned as Lord, *wherever* everything he has commanded is taught and obeyed, *there* is the Kingdom of God.

Mark's Gospel ends with a similar universal vision, Jesus commanding, "Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation. Whoever believes [Jew or Gentile] and is baptized [not circumcised] will be saved."

Luke reiterates the story of the tenants who killed the heir of the vineyard. In response, "the owner of the vineyard will come and kill those tenants *and give the vineyard to others.*" Parables and explicit teachings abound in Luke, wherein our Lord makes it clear that God's covenant will never die, but covenant-breakers will.



⁴ We must note that included in the New Testament story is clear revelation concerning the restoration and re-ingrafting of that ancient people of God. Joseph's brothers *shall* be reconciled to their Chosen Brother; though he now rules over "Egypt" (the Gentiles), Israel, too, shall behold him in truth (Zech. 12:10).

⁵ I vote it #2 in Jewishness. It seems to me that John's Gospel enjoys the unique distinction of being simultaneously both the most universal *and* the most Jewish.

Jesus predicts the destruction of Jerusalem and associates this with the beginning of the “times of the Gentiles.”⁶

Of course, at Luke’s end we find some of the most explicit teaching confirming the unity of Scripture and its message. On the road to Emmaus, Jesus rebuked the dizzy disciples: “How foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken!” For the prophets spoke of Christ. “And beginning

with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scripture concerning himself.” Then, as with the other disciples, “He opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures.” Not so they could disregard the “Old” in light of the “New,” but so that they could understand that what we call the New was *in the Old all along!* Jesus explained the Old Testament Scriptures: “This is what they teach: The Messiah will suffer and

rise from the dead.⁷ But that’s not all. Repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem.”

That’s the teaching of the Old Testament. Now it’s going to happen universally. The gospel that was enjoyed virtually exclusively by Israel will now go forth, *in suitable form*, from Israel to the world.

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⁶ It should be noted that Luke 21:24 overthrows hyper-preterism. Hyper-preterism asserts that *all* prophecies in the New Testament were fulfilled by or in A.D 70. Yet Jesus here says that unbelieving Israelites “will be taken as prisoners to all nations. Jerusalem will [then] be trampled on by the Gentiles until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled.” Since the times of the Gentiles officially (as it were) *began* in 70 with the destruction of the city, the times of the Gentiles could not also have then been fulfilled. Hyper-preterists are forced to say that the times of the Gentiles *ended* in 70, whereas our Lord says that’s when they began. And Paul, presumably referring to this same “times of the Gentiles,” links its conclusion with the future softening of Israel and their re-ingrafting (Rom. 11:25-32).

⁷ I regret that it is needful to stress this, but stress it I must: What Jesus says here, Paul calls “the gospel” itself in 1 Corinthians 15. The gospel, it needs to be emphasized over and over, is found in the Old Testament. The writer of Hebrews says it was preached in the Old. It is *not* new to the New Testament.