

GOD SAVES A PEOPLE

THEME
1

God's Saving Act in Jesus Christ

PART
3

NOTES FROM THE AUTHOR

The Gospels and Our Kerygma Study

As we focus on the Gospels for the first time, let us remember that we aim to use the Bible as the sourcebook for Christian faith. Its contents, therefore, must become well-known, and so we constantly emphasize both details and interrelationships of the biblical books.

By studying the biblical material through themes drawn from the Bible itself, we gain maximum opportunity to learn the Bible on its own terms. A great value of this structure is that it enables us to learn responsibly what the Bible as a whole is about.

To relate biblical details to the themes requires another move. We have to give careful attention to the setting of the particular passages as we move along. Thus, when we are studying about Jesus, it will not do to pick indiscriminately among the materials in the four Gospels. Our group members need a growing awareness of the relationships among the Synoptic Gospels—the so-called “Synoptic problem”—and we cannot avoid the question of the relationship of the synoptics to the Gospel of John. We shall not explore problems in unnecessary detail, but when open study and inquiry are invited, serious questions will arise. They should be dealt with constructively, but we must avoid overkill.

About Technical Matters

Some of the material in this part requires basic familiarity with research in Gospel studies. If you the leader do not feel adequate in this area, a few ideas here should see you through. If you do have confidence in these matters, be careful not to parade your learning. Our goal is to understand the texts, not to see how technical we can become.

Perhaps the most important observation on the Gospels in relation to this theme is that a Gospel is not intended to be a biography of Jesus. John 20:31 expresses well the purpose

of a Gospel: *These [signs] are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.* What we learn about the life of Jesus is to be viewed in light of the primary goal of the Gospels. Although we have information from only a few of the years of his life, we do have data upon which to form a fair view of his career. An important example is the sequence of events centering in Peter's confession at Caesarea Philippi. In all four Gospels this seems to constitute a turning point. (The confession in Matthew 16:13-20, Mark 8:27-30, Luke 9:18-21; John 6:67-71 is somewhat parallel.) From then on, Jesus turns inexorably toward Jerusalem and the dramatic conclusion of his ministry.

Another conclusion of Gospel research is that each of the Gospel writers was a theologian in his own right. This is one of the factors that accounts for the existence of four different Gospels. The star news reporters of each TV network file stories on the same events, but each report bears the distinctive character of the individual. So it is with the Gospel writers.

A challenging example is Matthew's story of the flight to Egypt (2:13-15). No other Gospel writer even hints at such an episode, and it is not, of course, an essential detail for studying Jesus' ministry. Matthew, however, makes a theological reflection that brings the story into direct bearing on this theme. *This was to fulfill what had been spoken by the LORD through the prophet, "Out of Egypt I have called my son."* This quotation from Hosea 11:1 refers to Exodus 4:22. Thus, a very brief detail in one Gospel becomes a part of the pervasive exodus theme. It also associates Jesus again with the figure of Moses. Among many other Moses examples, see John 3:14, 15.

About Fulfillment

Now just a few words about the idea of "fulfillment." When the occasion offers itself, help your group to understand that we deal with several kinds of fulfillment in Bible study. The most common is the sort we have just mentioned. The New Testament writer observes that something that has occurred reflects appropriately something recorded in the Old Testament. (Matthew particularly points out such connections.) The New Testament writers were probably convinced that there was a providential relationship between the Old Testament citation and what they were recording, but this is primarily the inspired insight of the writer. If we treat fulfillment as a mechanical ordering of history, it undermines the meaning of human existence.

Another meaning of fulfillment is related to this. Sometimes the relation between Old and New Testament events or texts shows a bringing to completion of what started in the past. Matthew's citation of Isaiah 7:14 is sometimes misused because of the inclusion of the

Greek word for “virgin,”¹ but here think about *Emmanuel . . . God is with us*. The presence of God in Isaiah’s thought now finds its ultimate meaning in Jesus. This is also one meaning in Jesus’ words about the presence of the Kingship of God. In Theme 6 we trace how the perception of God as ruler comes to a new and complete understanding in Jesus’ mission and message.

A third kind of fulfillment concerns things Jesus said and did that are related to his Old Testament heritage. The relationship is intentional even when not explicit. Two items are very important: (1) The influence of the servant-figure from Isaiah 40-55 upon Jesus’ evolving mission. Another way of putting this is to say that Jesus accepted the role of suffering servant-savior of God’s people rather than that of political messiah. (2) Jesus’ deliberate choice of Passover time for the climax of his ministry. Thus he died as the sacrificial paschal lamb for the new people of God (as Paul observes in 1 Corinthians 5:7).

One more kind of fulfillment is that which the modern reader professes to see between texts. It is valid when it relates God’s law or saving power to a sequence of experiences. It is highly questionable when it associates events with passages perceived as predictions of the far future. This latter practice is subject to the interpretative whim of each person who comes to the texts. It applies particularly to claims of fulfillment in modern world events. In this course we make regular and intensive use of thematic relationships among texts from the two Testaments, but we scrupulously avoid identifying this as fulfillment unless the Bible itself introduces the association. Perilous mischief can be done through the indiscriminate connection of texts by the subjective ingenuity of someone who will not seriously study the Bible whole.

About Beginning at the End of the Gospels

It is important to the development of this theme to understand why we begin at the end of the Gospels. When the evangelists compiled their Gospels, they were living after the climax of God’s saving act in Jesus Christ. The Gospels were written in the light of the church’s knowledge that Jesus had risen and that he was relating to his followers in a new way. This is a presupposition of the New Testament understanding of God, and it explains why a new view of the people of God developed. There is a parallel to the exodus story, which gave new meaning to the events that had happened to God’s people before that time.

The Emmaus road passage, Luke 24:13-35, provides a narrative view of the transformation that was taking place among Jesus’ followers. Cleopas and his friend were in a dilemma: They were not ready to accept the reports about Jesus’ resurrection, yet they could not give up their hope that he might bring a new day to God’s oppressed people. Their discussion

¹ We consider this in another context. Do not allow it to intrude here.

with the unrecognized traveler turns on continuity between the old revelation and the new time. They recognize Jesus during a meal, which directly connects them with experiences from his earlier ministry. This breakthrough disclosure of the resurrection immediately leads the two to join the community that is sharing support and witness. This kind of response and action becomes distinctive of the life and work of God's people in the New Testament.

Peter's quotation of Joel 2:28-32, recorded in Acts 2:17-21, begins with the addition of the words *In the last days*. The events following Jesus' resurrection were viewed as a decisive fulfillment of Old Testament expectations. The fact that the *portents in the heaven above and signs on the earth below* had not literally taken place is ignored in Peter's affirmation. Luke anticipated a fulfillment by his use of the word *exodus* when Moses the law-giver and Elijah the prophet were talking with Jesus at the transfiguration (Luke 9:31). Now, Peter says, what Joel wrote is taking place: *God declares. . . I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh*. Because of what has happened in Jesus a new time in the life of God's people has begun.

The New Deliverance

This theme concentrates upon the importance of the resurrection as the initiation of a new deliverance for God's people. Part 4 looks at how this immediately affected the church, and other themes will consider other facets of what Jesus did. No one line of description exhausts the significance of Jesus' accomplishment. Through the centuries, theologians have held what are called "theories of the atonement"—that is, explanations of what Jesus did for the relationship between God and people. Each focuses on one or more aspects of the truth, but the whole truth is greater than the sum of these expressions. The New Testament includes many ways of describing the new condition and how it took place: "entering the Kingdom of God," "receiving life," "being justified by faith," "being reconciled," "being redeemed," and so on. This theme emphasizes one descriptive view, which has the immediate value of using terms that we have just studied in Old Testament traditions.

This is how the earliest Christian community understood what Jesus did. We should also ask, "How did *Jesus* understand his mission and accomplishment?" The *Resource Book* touches this question. What did Jesus think he was doing? How do we discover this? Do the Gospels tell us enough that we can recover Jesus' own intention? Of course we cannot explore the ranges of Christology, nor can we pursue technical details of how the Gospels were formed. The objective is to set the records we have within a framework that will facilitate understanding this theme.

Mark's three predictions of the passion are significant. This must surely reflect an emphasis in Jesus' teaching. Note the setting of the first warning (Mark 8:31). The collection of

incidents (whatever their sequence in each Gospel) marks a turning toward the climax of Jesus' ministry, so we may take it that Jesus foresaw how it would end.

Jesus' perception of the sociopolitical situation differed radically from that of most of his contemporaries. We have stressed the background of the Maccabean successes followed by the Roman occupation. Jewish nationalists in Jesus' time seem not to have understood two things. (1) The unsettled conditions under Antiochus' rule were different from the hard reality of Roman imperial power. (2) The Maccabean revolt was as much a spiritual achievement as it was a military victory. Thus Jesus' contemporaries who had high political ambitions did not recognize that the relationship between God and a people is primarily moral and spiritual, not physical and political.

Old Testament prophets tried to say this, and it was an essential emphasis in Jesus' teaching. It finally reached theological formulation in the letters of Paul. He declared that in the cross and resurrection God had delivered a people from the ultimate slavery, which Paul identifies as *sin and death* (Romans 8:2). The rest of the New Testament, especially the Gospel of John, supports this interpretation.

The Scope of Deliverance

If there is one New Testament theme that embraces the others it is this one about God's saving acts. The material in the *Resource Book* provides a framework for this theme. You have the responsibility of seeing that any diversion is turned back to the focal point.

The theme indicates that there is a new people of God, but we must not lose sight of the continuity with God's people before the New Testament. "New" implies an old. Once slavery to sin is seen as the universal problem of people, God's deliverance must be announced beyond national boundaries. Do not miss the importance of Jesus' Nazareth sermon in this respect. Note particularly his use of Isaiah 61:1, 2 as a program for his ministry. His choice of illustrations shows the broad scope of his vision. Think how this would speak to the second-generation church. This is expanded in Theme 4.

Supplementary Reading

A review of articles in a Bible dictionary on the items in the Word List will be helpful. You might also do some background reading on "Messiah," "Resurrection," and "Kingdom of God."

SESSION PLANS

Learning Objectives

This session is intended to enable the participants to:

1. Describe the impact the crucifixion had upon the disciples.
2. Retell the story of Jesus' resurrection in their own words.
3. Explain three ways Jesus is seen as the fulfillment of the Old Testament.
4. Compare the similarities and differences between the deliverance in the exodus and the new deliverance accomplished by Jesus.
5. Describe the nature and purpose of the new community.

Resources You May Need

Chalkboard and chalk

Newsprint, markers, masking tape

A recording of "Were You There When They Crucified My LORD?"

A recording of *Jesus Christ Superstar*

Record player or cassette player

Large sheets of construction paper

Hymnbooks or copies of a hymn about the resurrection

Leadership Strategy

SETTING THE STAGE

1. Add dates for Jesus' and Paul's ministries to your timeline.
2. Ask the group members if they wish to add to the Loose Ends list any questions from previous sessions or from the present reading.
3. The story of Jesus' crucifixion is so familiar to us that it is easy to overlook the impact it had on his followers. In order to experience the joy of the resurrection, we need to reflect upon the death of Jesus.

Tell the participants to close their eyes and pretend they are the followers of Jesus. Set the scene by saying, “It is Saturday morning. Yesterday you saw Jesus placed on the cross and crucified. His dead body was removed and placed in a tomb. All night you have met in small groups, talking over the events that have just taken place. There is no way to know what today will bring. Your grief and pain overshadow everything else.”

or

Dim the lights and play a recording or have someone sing the spiritual, “Were You There When They Crucified My LORD?”. After the final verse is sung, have the whole group hum the melody.

Divide into groups of four. Remind the participants that they have just experienced the loss of the person in whom they have invested their hopes and dreams. They have gathered to share their confusion, fear, grief, disappointment, and pain and to give support to one another. Ask them to share their feelings about the death of Jesus with one another.

or

The musical *Jesus Christ Superstar* has become a classic. The selection titled “Crucifixion” (running time 4:04) is very moving. Ask the members of the group to imagine that they are followers of Jesus and are witnesses to the event of the crucifixion. Play the music and then ask what impact the experience of the music had on them.

and

Many events, including the story of the crucifixion, are told with varying details in all four Gospels. Dr. Walther states that, “Our group members need a growing awareness of the relationships among the Synoptic Gospels . . . and we cannot avoid the question of the relationship of the Synoptics to the Gospel of John.” Give a mini-lecture about the purpose and composition of the Gospels using information found in resources such as *Understanding the New Testament*, *Introducing the New Testament*, and the material under “About Technical Matters” in Notes from the Author.

EXPLORING THE SCRIPTURE

1. After the despair of Saturday came the amazement and hope of Sunday. Luke 24 presents three different encounters with the resurrected Messiah. Divide into three groups. Assign these passages of Scripture:

Group 1 - Luke 24:1-12

Group 2 - Luke 24:13-35

Group 3 - Luke 24:36-53

Give these directions to each group:

- a. Select someone to read your passage aloud to the group. The remainder of your group will form a “listening team.”
- b. Listen for and record the “evidence” that caused the followers to believe that Jesus had indeed been raised from the dead.
- c. Together, make a composite list of the information your group has gathered.
- d. Choose someone to present your list to the other groups.

After ten minutes gather the groups so they can compare the evidence that is mentioned in each case.

Divide into clusters of three and invite the participants to respond to this question: “What has convinced *you* that Jesus has been raised from the dead?”

OR

Divide into three groups. Assign each group one of these portions of Scripture: Luke 24:1-12; Luke 24:13-35; Luke 24:36-53. After they read the assigned verses, the groups are to decide how to present the central message of their accounts of the resurrection to those who do not understand its importance. Some suggestions are a dramatic reading, a TV interview using eyewitness accounts, a pantomime, a mural, or a poster. After the presentations reflect on these questions:

- a. What is similar or different in the attitudes and responses of the women, the two disciples, and the others?
 - b. What is it that makes the most difference in these responses?
 - c. Who or what has influenced your response to the resurrection?
2. The idea that Jesus is the “fulfillment” of the Old Testament hope is presented in many New Testament passages. In his notes Dr. Walther says that there are several senses in which fulfillment is used in Bible study. Engage the group in a discussion of these different meanings of fulfillment by asking questions such as:

- a. What do you think Luke means in chapter 24:44, 45 when he says that Jesus “opened their minds to understand the scriptures”?
- b. To what extent do you think Jesus’ followers saw him as the fulfillment of Scripture before the resurrection?
- c. What do we mean when we say that the Gospels were written backwards, beginning with the resurrection?

or

Introduce the person who prepared a report based on Dr. Walther’s comments in his notes under the heading “About Fulfillment” on pages 62-63 of the *Leader’s Guide*.

and/or

The early church understood Jesus consciously to have related his mission and message to the Old Testament. Assign the following passages to small groups and ask them to summarize the texts and share with the whole group how they see Jesus linking himself with the history of Israel in each passage.

Matthew 26:1, 2, 17-29

Luke 9:28-36

Luke 4:16-30

Mark 15:33-39

Conclude by asking the group to name titles for Jesus (the Good Shepherd, Vine, Lamb) and discuss how these also link him to the Old Testament.

3. Up to this point we have been concentrating on the continuity between Jesus and the Old Testament. In Romans 6:1-11 Paul indicates that our bondage and the deliverance secured by Jesus Christ are different from those involved in the exodus.

On the chalkboard or two sheets of newsprint create a chart that will help the group compare the first exodus with Jesus’ death and resurrection. Head one column “Exodus 1” and the other “Exodus 2.” Ask the members of the group to respond to these questions:

- a. Who is in bondage?
- b. What is the nature of the bondage? to what? to whom?
- c. What is the means of deliverance?

- d. What is the nature of that deliverance? by what? by whom?
- e. What is the result of the deliverance?

OR

Dr. Walther says, “The Gospels were written in the light of the church’s knowledge that Jesus had risen and that he was relating to his followers in a new way. This is a presupposition of the New Testament understanding of God, and it explains why a new view of the people of God developed.” While the church understood its relationship to what had come before, it also recognized that God’s saving act in Jesus Christ ushered in a new type of deliverance from bondage.

Ask the group to skim the material in the *Resource Book* under “Discontinuity with the Old Testament,” “Jesus’ New Message,” and “Paul and God’s New Salvation” to locate ways in which the deliverance brought about by Jesus’ death and resurrection differed from the exodus experience of the Hebrews. Write their suggestions on a chalkboard or newsprint. Conclude by discussing these questions:

- a. In what ways can Jesus’ death and resurrection be seen as the second exodus?
 - b. How are the first exodus and the second exodus similar? dissimilar?
 - c. The Israelites were God’s special people of the first exodus. What people were/are a part of the second exodus?
4. The deliverance brought about by Jesus resulted in the formation of a new community. The resurrection was the trigger that set this new community in motion and mission. Review with the group the following texts, asking what each one discloses about the nature and purpose of this community.

Matthew 28:18-20

Acts 1:8

Luke 10:30-37

Acts 2:14-42

Discuss these questions in the group:

- a. According to these passages, what was the nature and purpose of this community?
- b. In what ways do the life and work of your church reflect the meanings of these texts?

or

The church's ministry and mission reflect the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The unity and diversity of each community of faith depends upon its understanding of what Scripture discloses about the nature and purpose of the church. Divide into small groups. Provide large sheets of construction paper and markers. Assign each group one of the following passages:

Luke 10:30-37;
Matthew 28:18-20;
Acts 1:8; 2:14-42

Tell the groups to imagine they are founding members of a new church community. They want to spread the news about their church's ministry through the local newspaper. Using the assigned passages for inspiration, each group has ten minutes to create an advertisement that discloses the nature and purpose of this new community and encourages others to become a part of the church.

Gather and share the advertisements.

and/or

Ask the participants to describe the path by which they came to be members of their present congregations. Were they members of the same denomination previously? What branches of the church and what nationalities do they represent? Discuss as a group how their diversity reflects the nature of the community described in the passages listed above.

CLOSING

1. Go over the Loose Ends list and respond to those questions that can be answered at this point.
2. The following verses to "Come, You Faithful, Raise the Strain" tie in the exodus theme with both the Old and the New Testaments. Sing or recite the words in unison. The hymn tunes St. Kevin or Ave Virgo Virginum can be used.

Come, you faithful, raise the strain of triumphant gladness;
God has brought forth Israel into joy from sadness;
Loosed from Pharaoh's bitter yoke Jacob's sons and daughters;
Led them with unmoistened foot through the Red Sea waters.

'Tis the spring of soul's today; Christ has burst his prison,
And from three days' sleep in death as a sun has risen;
All the winter of our sins, long and dark, is flying,
From his light, to whom we give laud and praise undying.

OR

Select another resurrection hymn to sing.

3. Stand, join hands, and invite the members of the group to share their joys and concerns. Include these in your closing prayer.

Looking Ahead

Item #2 under "Exploring the Scripture" in the next session suggests that two individuals or two small teams prepare brief presentations reflecting opposing views of the church's relationship to civil authority. Scripture references and discussion questions are listed with that activity.

Item #3 suggests that a member of the group present a summary of the characteristics of apocalyptic literature. Sources of information for the presentation are included with the activity.