

# A Gift From Heaven

*The Books of the New Testament*

*The Work of the Holy Spirit*

*God Calls His People Back*

## Lesson 18

REFORMED  
EVANGELISM  
TASKFORCE

# The Books of the New Testament

What God had announced in the Old Testament by means of the prophets was fulfilled in the New Testament by Christ. The New Testament is a book of fulfillment. The last prophet who announced the coming of Jesus is John the Baptist. He is the one who saw and presented Jesus as the transition between the Old and the New Testament. "Behold, the Lamb of God" (*John 1:29*).

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## The First Witness

As heralds went before the king to announce his coming, likewise John the Baptist prepared the path for the coming of Jesus Christ. He took his position at the beginning of Jesus' public appearance. That is the reason both Mark and John begin their Gospel story with the preaching of John the Baptist (*Mark 1:1-8; John 1:6-34*). Although Matthew and Luke begin their Gospel story with the birth of Jesus Christ in Bethlehem, they immediately record the appearance of John the Baptist after that. In all four gospels John the Baptist plays an important role because he is the first witness of Jesus as the promised Messiah. It is for that reason that Jesus replies to the elders' question about his credentials with another question: "What do you say about John the Baptist?" (*Matt. 21:23-27*)

## Good News

Gospel means good or favourable news. This good news forms the nucleus of the New Testament. The glad news of the redemption of man's sinful life and the conquest of Satan by Jesus is central.

## Matthew, Mark, Luke, John

The writers of the four gospels describe, each in his own way, the person and work of Jesus. Lessons 11 to 14 have already elaborately dealt with the four gospels. Do not think that the gospels give a complete description of Christ's life on this earth. That is not the purpose of the gospels. What the writers want to show is the way God fulfills His promise. They show that God has sent His own Son, the Saviour, to earth in order to save and give new life to all believers (*John 20:30,31*).

## The Acts of the Apostles

This second book of Luke is a direct sequel to his gospel in which he wrote about all that Jesus began to do and teach up to the day when He went to heaven (*Acts 1:1*). In Acts Luke is going to tell how Jesus continues His work from heaven. Despite the name *Acts of the Apostles* Luke's book does not deal with what the apostles have done after Jesus' ascension. The names of most of them are no longer mentioned in this book. The message of this book is how Jesus directs of the preaching of the good news of salvation after His ascension (*Acts 2:33, 3:16, 9:1-6*).

Christ gives the following charge to His apostles: "you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth." (*Acts 1:8*).

The apostles carried out this instruction accordingly. They were His witnesses, first in Jerusalem (chapters 2-7), then in Judea, Samaria, and Syria (chapters 8-12) and finally in the world, all the way to Rome (chapters 13-28). Beginning with chapter 13 this book deals especially with Paul's work in Asia Minor and Europe. Paul, formerly called Saul, was the son of a Pharisee and had been taught by the famous scribe Gamaliel (*Acts 13:9*). Filled with wrath against the Gospel of Christ he hunted down the Christians until Jesus Himself intervened (*Acts 9:3-19*). Jesus converts the wrathful Saul into the Gospel preacher Paul. He leads Paul on his life's

journey and shows that He alone determines where and how the Gospel will be preached (*Acts 13:2, 16:6-10, 23:11*). The Gospel reached the center of the Roman empire and was preached there unhindered for two years. The task of the apostles was completed. It is striking that Paul came into Rome as a prisoner, apparently powerless. You can see that as far as the preaching of the Gospel is concerned, nobody may put his trust in man or praise man (*2 Cor. 12:9,10*).

## **Paul's Letters**

### **Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, 1 and 2 Timothy, Titus, and Philemon**

Paul instituted churches in many places. By means of Paul's preaching Jesus even gathered believers into churches in Europe. However, Paul could never stay in one place for very long, so when he left he appointed elders or had his aides appoint them (*Titus 1:5*). These young churches still needed more instruction. That is why Paul wrote letters to the various congregations. In addition, he warmed and to warn them against those who would pervert the Gospel (*Gal. 1:6-10*). His letters were also intended to encourage the congregations when they were persecuted and to further explain the glory of the gospel.

Most of the time Paul dictated his letters, but in order to distinguish his letters from the forged ones which were circulating, Paul signed his letters personally (*Rom. 16:22, 2 Thess. 3:17*). Unfortunately, not all of Paul's letters have been preserved. The letter to the Laodiceans which Paul refers to in his apostle to the Colossians has never been found (*Col.4:16*). Also, Paul's letters have not been put in the Bible in chronological order. The letters to the Thessalonians (the inhabitants of present Salonika) are the oldest ones, probably written around A.D. 51. Paul wrote his second letter to Timothy just before his death. All in all it probably took Paul 17 to 18 years to write his letters.

According to the order in which Paul's letters occur in the Bible, the long letters to the individual churches lead the way. Then follow the shorter letters to churches and finally four letters to three persons, Timothy, Titus, and Philemon. The letters to the churches are directed to Rome, Corinth, the region of Galatia, Ephesus, Philippi, Colossae, and Thessalonica. All these letters contain the same basic theme, which can be summarized in Paul's own words: "For I am not ashamed of the gospel: it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written, 'He who through faith is righteous shall live.'" (*Rom. 1:16,17*)

## **The Letter to the Hebrews**

It is not certain who the writer of this letter is. From the name we can conclude that it is directed to Jewish-Christians. In this letter the author warns against back sliding and exhorts his readers to be steadfast and true. In addition, he explains in depth the Old Testament sense of worship and often compares the worship service of the Old Testament with that of the New Testament after Jesus' ascension. It is remarkable how much attention the author pays to Jesus as High Priest and how clearly he shows the superiority of Christ over angels, Moses, and the Old Testament priests.

## **The General Letters**

### **James, 1 and 2 Peter; 1, 2 and 3 John, Jude**

Except for the second and third letter of John, the general letters are not directed to readers in one particular place but to believers spread all over the Roman empire. The writers Peter and John are Jesus' disciples. James and Jude are probably Jesus' two brothers (*Matt. 13:55*).

## **The Revelation to John**

This last book of the Bible gives, mostly by means of visions, a revelation about what will take place throughout the ages till the end of world history. Revelation describes how Jesus continues His work in heaven. The book encouraged the suffering and struggling church on earth, while calling for watchfulness and endurance.

Unfortunately, the book of Revelation is often misused. Revelation announces that the world will experience many catastrophes and disasters. These are the judgments of Jesus Christ, and they will always be there because humanity refuses to repent (*Rev. 16:9,11*). Moreover, the Bible does not give this view on the future to let the believers analyze in minute detail what will happen before Jesus

returns to earth. John is not even allowed to write down everything that God showed him (*Rev. 10:4*). The purpose of the book of Revelation is to warn the church against people who, with great signs and wonders, will try to draw the believers away from the faith. Moreover, the book encourages those believers, for when God's children see the catastrophes and disasters happening, they must not be astonished or afraid. Jesus also prophesied this future when He was still on earth and said, "Lo, I have told you beforehand." (*Matt. 24:25*) The last book in the Bible strengthens the church during persecution. The end of the Bible gives strength to whoever doubts, assurance and certainty for the present, and hope for the future. Jesus will return! Yes, He will come soon! (*Rev. 22:20*)

# The Work of the Holy Spirit

## Article 8

In the King James Version of the Bible you can read that Jesus calls the Holy Spirit the Comforter. This translation gives us a good idea of what the Holy Spirit does. The Holy Spirit gives the believers relief from pain and distress. He is the One who defends them.

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### Where the Spirit Lives

After Jesus ascended into heaven He sent the Holy Spirit to the believers. The Holy Spirit descended on the believers as tongues of fire (*Acts 2*). Jesus sent the Holy Spirit to His disciples. That is why the Holy Spirit is also called the "Spirit of Christ" in the Bible (*Rom. 8:9*). Jesus died on the cross and shed His blood, to erase every believer's debt but the Holy Spirit was involved there, too. Through the Holy Spirit, Jesus' sacrifice is made effective in your life. The Spirit opens your heart for the Gospel of the forgiveness of sins. Consequently, the Spirit makes you believe, or gives you faith. The Spirit sets your life free from debt through the blood of Jesus.

You may say that the Spirit comes to "live" in us. When the Spirit lives in you, then your body is His dwelling place (*Gal. 4:6; 1 Cor. 3:16*). This is what Paul means when he writes in his letter to the Corinthians that the body of the believers is a temple of the Holy Spirit. The symbolism of calling the body a dwelling place, a temple, is used more often in the New Testament. Paul calls the believers in Ephesus, "a temple holy in the Lord" (*Eph. 2:19-22*). He continues with this metaphor when he tells them that they are "built for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit". Believers must let themselves be used by Jesus as living stones with which His church is built. Even if the living stones are sometimes weak the church will never fall apart because Jesus is the foundation (*1 Pet. 2:4-6; 1 Cor. 3:10-17*).

### In Whom the Spirit Lives

As we mentioned in the previous lesson, the Old Testament contains many passages about the Holy Spirit. Already in the second verse of the first chapter of the first book of the Bible the Spirit appears (see also *Ps. 104:30*). Even though the Holy Spirit appears in the Old Testament you will probably be wondering what exactly He does and to whom He does it. The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of life. All gifts and talents in life come from the Holy Spirit. He works in people in such a way that they receive gifts in order to do what God plans for them. He does not give these gifts only to simple people without influence, but also to powerful political leaders and kings, even if they do not know God (*Is. 45:1-8*).

The Holy Spirit gives life and ability to believers and unbelievers alike. From the Old Testament we can gather that the Spirit was given to people with special tasks such as leading the people of Israel (*Num. 11:16,17,24-30*). The Spirit gave the leaders of Israel the wisdom to know God's Word, to proclaim it, and implement it properly.

In the time of the Old Testament, while the Holy Spirit leads all believers to faith, He is mentioned specifically only in relation to certain people and positions (*Ex. 31:1-5; Judg. 6:34*). The Spirit lived in artists; He gave an army general the ability to be a good officer in His service; He gave a poet the wisdom to write Psalms; He gave a prophet insight to prophesy. Since Pentecost this has changed. At that time the Holy Spirit came publicly and dramatically from heaven to earth. Now the Spirit is no longer mentioned in connection with a few "select" people, but is linked to everyone who believes in God-young and old, rich and poor, black and white (*Acts 2:5-21*). This does not mean that everyone who received the Spirit is now an artist, or a strategist, or a political leader. It does mean, however, that everyone who has received the Spirit of Jesus now has an office. People who received the Holy Spirit are now

prophets, so they can magnify God through their words, priests, so that they can serve God in holiness, kings, so that they can fight against sin and the Devil and reign with Christ over all things in the life to come.

## What the Spirit Gives

Before a person is acceptable to God, Jesus must change his life. This life must be "holy". We cannot do this by ourselves, but we need the Holy Spirit to teach us. The Holy Spirit enters a person and does everything for that person. He first works the desire for reform in the individual and then He carries out the actual transformation. The Holy Spirit teaches you how you must use your life and talents in a new way. You no longer use them in hatred against God, but for His service in love. The goals of your life become different. You try to do "good works", as they are called in the Bible. Good works, fruits of the Spirit, do not justify you before God, but they arise from thankfulness because you are saved from your guilt. The Bible defines good works very specifically as love, joy, peace, gentleness, and self-control. In his letters Paul also calls good works "the new walk of life" (*Col. 3:5-17; Gal. 5:22; Eph. 4:22,23*). Yes, life with the Spirit is different. It is as if you are born again - a "rebirth". In other words, the Holy Spirit reshapes your whole life, from the cradle to the grave. He completely renews that life into a new life with a new direction.

## How the Spirit Gives His Gifts

People do not receive the Holy Spirit automatically. In the Bible it is clearly stated in what way people can be confronted with the Spirit (*Rom. 10:14,15*). You meet the Spirit when you read God's Word and especially by listening to what is proclaimed from that Word. The gift of faith comes through listening to the Gospel. The Holy Spirit gives His gifts by means of the power of the preaching of the Word. A sermon is therefore not just a little pep talk, or a crowd pleasing or entertaining speech. In a sermon the Word of God is explained and applied, completely and unabridged with all the promises and threats which the Word contains. A sermon does not leave you cold. It does not just criticize the world around you. A true sermon hits you right in your proud, egotistic, sinful heart. A sermon puts you in your place. A sermon startles you. God does not humble you out of spite but out of love. He is helping you transform your life.

Is it not remarkable that God wants to give you the Spirit by means of human preaching? God's Word is perfect, but human mistakes and shortcomings are part of any preaching of that Word. Still by listening to, and by taking to heart the preaching of men, God wants to come to us. "For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God" (*1 Cor. 1:18*). "For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe" (*1 Cor. 1:21*).

That is the way the Bible puts it. It is simple language for whoever wants to read it. Simple language especially for whoever wants to listen.

Still, it is not always easy. Your natural inclination is to be critical of an ordinary man on the pulpit. Yet God thought it proper to save people through the preaching of the gospel. Whoever is willing to listen, without muttering objections will experience that God gives the power of His Spirit through the weakness of people. Then something will happen in your life. God will enter your life. "For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men" (*1 Cor. 1:25*).

# God Calls His People Back

## *Ezra 1, 3-4*

God promised that the Saviour would be born out of the people of Israel. Therefore God guided and protected His people every step of the way. In themselves, the people did not deserve such close guidance and protection. Only because God is gracious, merciful and faithful, does He continue to save and shelter His people time and again. It seems as if the people of Israel have come to an end when both kingdoms of Israel are deported to foreign countries. The complete sinful story of the people is summarized in *2 Kings 17:7-23*. After such a long history of sin, will this people merge into the nations of the east? No, God punishes His people as a father punishes his disobedient child. Conquered by hostile nations, Israel will repent during captivity. God is going to call His people back.

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## Captivity

God never forgets His promises. Even in the land of captivity He called prophets into His service to warn the people, calling them to repentance, and praying for them. One of the captives in Babylon, Ezekiel, received an awesome vision in which God commanded him to call the people to serve the Lord again (*Ezek. 1:4-3:11*). A few years prior to his call, Ezekiel, together with King Jehoiachin and the core of Israel, had been led into captivity under King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon. They left their beloved Jerusalem in control of Zedekiah and a few remaining Israelites (*2 Kings 24:8-17*).

After a couple of years the new king of the remaining people rebelled against the Babylonian king. The city of Jerusalem was besieged, but the captives in Babylon refused to believe that the city could ever be conquered. Was Jerusalem not the city of God? He would not give His temple over into the hands of the Babylonian king, would He? In the first part of his prophetic book, however, Ezekiel predicted that the city would indeed be taken and destroyed (*Ezek. 4,7,9,15*). And the prophecy came true. Jerusalem was defeated, and the remaining inhabitants were now taken away (*Ezek. 33:21*). In the midst of all the mourning, Ezekiel announced that there would be an end to the captivity. For the captives, that occasion was comparable to a resurrection, and they would only believe it when it actually happened (*Ezek. 37*).

The prophet Daniel also brought this message to the people of Israel. The first few chapters of his book give us an interesting glimpse of Daniel's life inside the Babylonian courts. Daniel trusted in God's promises, and in a moving prayer he asked for the end of captivity (*Dan. 9*). Even though Israel was acting like a bride who was cheating on her husband, God did not reject His people. He never forgets His promises. This measure of divine grace is beyond all our comprehension. God coaxed the runaway bride to come back to Him as had been prophesied before the captivity by the prophets. (See *Micah 4:1, Isaiah 40:1,2* and *Jeremiah 33:6-9*.)

## The Return

Fortunately, the captivity did not mean the end for the people of Israel. After spending seventy years in Babylon, freedom came. God used no one less than Cyrus, the king of Persia to allow His people to return to their homeland. Nothing is too marvelous for God. When Cyrus let the people return to Jerusalem, he even gave back many things that had been plundered from the temple at the fall of Jerusalem. A new era started for Israel. Had the people learned something from God's punishment? Apparently not enough. After the captivity God had to continue to send His prophets to point out to the people their sins. All too soon they only thought about

themselves. First, they quickly rebuilt their own houses, but they left the temple in ruins. Haggai reproved the people and called them to repentance. Only then was the temple rebuilt, despite the opposition of enemies. The temple was the symbol of the forgiveness of sins, the proof that the Saviour would come. There was a future for the people if they would trust God's promises. The people could again look forward to a future while they obeyed God's Word.

## Restoration

Ezra and Nehemiah were two prominent leaders during the rebuilding of the city and the temple. In the Bible books named after them, you can read the history of the building of Jerusalem and the temple, but at the same time you can read of the devil's opposition to the restoration. Just as in all the past centuries there is the conflict between the woman and the serpent (*Gen. 3:15*).

In many different ways people tried to hinder the building of the walls (*Neh. 2:11-20*). They tried mockery, temptation, weapons, and slander. One of the mockers exclaimed, "Yes, what they are building - if a fox goes up on it he will break down their stone wall! " (*Neh. 4:3b*). But the piercing sword of mockery was blocked by Nehemiah's unwavering trust. "The God of heaven will make us prosper, and we his servants will arise and build; but you have no portion or right or memorial in Jerusalem" (*Neh. 2:20*).

## Looking Forward to Christ

Despite the mockery and the obstruction, Jerusalem and the temple were rebuilt. Granted, the new temple was not as beautiful as Solomon's first temple, but God did live among His people again. God always reaches His goal. And from this entire story it is evident that this is not by virtue of the people. It was God who saved His people. The fact that they still existed after so many centuries was His work alone. He also sees to it that today the church of Jesus Christ still exists. The devil resists this with all his power. He incites people to try to destroy God's work with a mighty show of power, but "He who sits in the heavens laughs; the LORD has them in derision" (*Ps 2:4*). When the rebuilding of the temple was finished, the whole nation congregated on the square in front of the Water Gate. Moses' Book of the Law was brought out and Ezra, the scribe, read aloud from it. The returned captives were told that the only way to guarantee a prosperous future was to obey that law. It pointed out the way of salvation and whoever would abide by this traveler's guide would be safe. Now the Israelites could truly look forward to the coming Christ (*Hag. 2:2-9; Mal 3:1, 4:5,6*).

We also have knowledge about His coming and today we wait for Jesus' second coming to judge the living and the dead. You do not have to be afraid of that future event. If you read His Word and believe, if you expect life from Jesus, you have no reason to be scared. Christ said Himself, "He who believes in the Son has eternal life..." (*John 3:36*). Believing is a matter of life and death, and in the end it are the believers who receive life.

# Questions 18

## The Books of the New Testament

1. To whom did Jesus appear after His resurrection? (To answer this question read the last chapter of the four gospels)
2. In his letter to Timothy Paul discloses his approaching departure from this life. Then he also expresses his expectation for the future. What is the content of this expectation for all believers? (2 *Tim.* 4:6-8)
3. In his first letter John writes why he wrote the letter. What is the purpose of his writing and what assurance does it give? (1 *John* 1:4)

## The Work of the Holy Spirit

1. In his letter to the Romans Paul contrasts "minds on the things of the flesh" with "minds on the things of the Spirit". What does Paul mean by this? (*Rom.* 8:1-17; *Gal.* 5:13-26, esp. *Gal.* 5:17)
2. *John* 3 relates the conversation which Jesus had with Nicodemus. What did Nicodemus think Jesus meant by "rebirth"? In reality what does Jesus want to get across to Nicodemus? (read esp. *John* 3:14-18)
3. What strikes you when you compare *Numbers* 11:24-29 and *Acts* 2:1-4, 17-18?

## God Calls His People Back

1. Why could we call *Micah* 5:2 a Messianic text? Can you name another Messianic text from one of the prophetic books?
2. Why did Daniel and his three friends refuse to eat of the royal food? (*Dan.* 1; *Lev.* 11; *Deut.* 14; *Acts* 10:14)
3. What conclusion can you draw from the fact that, of all the Judean noblemen, only these four asked for different food? (*Dan.* 1:3,4; *Jer* 5:1-9; *Jer.* 5:23-31)