



Introduction to the Bible

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We believe it is true that many of us Lutherans are a little embarrassed because we are somewhat less familiar with the Bible than we wish we were. With that in mind, we make this brief introduction to the Bible available to you, and trust it will be helpful.

This “Introduction to the Bible” has been cheerfully “stolen” (with permission) from the congregations of Grace Lutheran in Des Moines, Iowa, and Trinity Lutheran in Moorhead, Minnesota, as well as Pastor Gary Jepsen. It is our fondest wish that others will perpetuate this tradition in the future by reproducing or modifying it for their particular needs (with or without permission).

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October 2016*

WHAT IS THE BIBLE?

I. A Very Divine and Very Human Book (This is a faith statement, not a demonstrable fact.)

- A. A human book, or rather a collection of human writings, subject to the authors' limitations and personal characteristics, reflective of the authors' times and culture, just as open to literary analysis as any other human writing is.
- B. A divine book: By means of these human writings, God has spoken and continues to speak to his people. They are inspired ("inbreathed") by God's Spirit. They not only contain God's word to us; they are God's word to us.
- C. A living word: God not only inspires the writers of the Bible, but also the readers and hearers. That is, the Holy Spirit is with us as we read or hear this word, so that it comes alive for us and finds a home in us.

Because the Bible is a collection of very human writings, and in order to understand it in its own time and place, we investigate and explore it with every available tool. Because the Bible is God's word to us, we sit humbly before it ready to hear what God has to say to us.

II. What does the Bible say about God's word and about itself?

<i>Psalm 33:6-9</i>	<i>God's word created everything.</i>
<i>Isaiah 55:10-11</i>	<i>God's word is powerful and incisive,</i>
<i>Jeremiah 23:29</i>	<i>like rain, fire, a hammer, a sword.</i>
<i>Hebrews 4:12-13</i>	<i>It does what it says.</i>
<i>II Peter 1:20-21</i>	<i>The Holy Spirit guided the writers.</i>
<i>II Timothy 3:14-17</i>	<i>God inspired the scriptures, for specific purposes.</i>

III. What is the Word of God?

The word of God includes:

- A. The power which created and maintains the universe.

- B. The priestly and prophetic word to Israel.
- C. The Word-become-flesh, Jesus Christ, who makes God known.
- D. The witness to Christ in preaching and sacraments and on the lips of Christians.
- E. The scriptures, which bear witness to Christ and inform our witness, our faith, and our life.

IV. How did the Bible come into being?

A. Who wrote it? When? Why?

These questions involve a good deal of speculation, and there is wide divergence of opinion among scholars. Tradition assigns authorship of the books of the Bible to central characters of the Bible's story, e.g., the first five books to Moses, and the Letters of John to John the Apostle. Modern scholarship tends to suggest a more complex origin for many books of the Bible. But, as long as Christians acknowledge that the Bible is God's Book and God's Word to us, there is plenty of room in the family of faith for differences of opinion on these matters.

The Bible's story spans many centuries of time, from Abraham, perhaps as early as 2000 B.C., to A.D. 100 or so. The actual writing spanned just about as much time and involved many of God's people for many purposes. The questions Who? When? and Why? need to be asked about each book separately, to try to discover what God was saying to one generation of his people, and so to hear more clearly what God says to our generation.

B. Some peeks at the process: The Bible does give us a few glimpses into the process of its writing.

1. *Exodus 24:7* – Moses writes the “Book of the Covenant” (Ex.21-23?)
2. *Deuteronomy 31:24-26* – Moses writes the law in a book to be stored in the Ark of the Covenant.
3. *Isaiah 8:16* – Isaiah stores up his prophecies with his disciples so that future generations can read them.

4. *Jeremiah 36* – Jeremiah dictates his prophecies to Baruch ... twice.
5. *II Kings 22:8-10* – A book of the law (probably some form of Deuteronomy judging by the particular reforms King Josiah enacts) is discovered in the temple.
6. *Nehemiah 8:1-8* – The scribe Ezra brings back from Babylonian exile “the book of the law of Moses” (the Pentateuch, first five books of the Bible) and reads it to the people.
7. *Luke 1:1-4 and John 20:30-31* – Two gospel writers tell why they are writing.
8. *II Peter 3:15-16* – By this time, Paul’s letters have come to be regarded as “scripture.”

C. Compilation of the Canon: Little by little, collections of scripture were put together, collections of works used often by God’s people and regarded as faithful expositions of God’s word. The formation of such a “canon” (“yardstick”) helps to ground Biblical faith and to keep our teachings from wandering too far from our roots. The canonization of scripture took place in stages:

1. The Law (Genesis through Deuteronomy) is canonized, probably under Ezra (#6 above), and the Jews become the “people of the book.”
2. Later on (by 200 B.C.) a second group of writings are accepted by the Jews as holy scripture: the Prophets.
3. The rabbinic council of Jamnia in A.D. 90 canonized a third group, the Writings. There had been controversy over a few books, but finally Ecclesiastes, Esther, and Song of Solomon were accepted and others were rejected. The Old Testament is now complete.
4. The list of accepted books in the New Testament was hammered out during the second, third, and fourth centuries A.D. The collected letters of Paul were accepted (and read as scripture in church) early on, then the four gospels and Acts. Of the catholic or general epistles, I Peter and I John won early acceptance, but the rest – Hebrews, James, II Peter, II and III John, and Jude – were in dispute for quite some time. The Revelation, too, was disputed. Finally, it was usage among the churches that decided the issue. Two local councils in North Africa, in 393 and 397, officially adopted the 27 New Testament books that we know now as canonical.

Many factors along the way, such as conflict with heresies and persecution, helped to make the choices, but it was finally the usage of the Christian community (under the Spirit's guidance, we believe) that formed the canon.

V. A Library of Books

This collection of 66 books is not all of one kind. It's a rich and varied library. Within this collection one finds such types of literature as:

- Narrative, *Genesis 22*
- Law codes, *Exodus 21-23*
- Genealogies, *I Chronicles 1-9*
- Ancient songs, *Judges 5*
- Fable, *Judges 9:7-15*
- Chronicled history, *II Kings 15*
- Hymns, *Psalms 103*
- Liturgies, *Psalms 24*
- Laments and dirges, *Lamentations*
- Love songs, *Song of Solomon*
- Sayings of the wise, *Proverbs*
- Prophetic oracles, *Isaiah 1*
- Visions, *Isaiah 6*
- Apocalyptic visions, *Daniel 7*
- Biography, *Luke*
- Parables, *Matthew 13*
- Teachings of Jesus, *Matthew 5*
- Letters, *Philippians, Philemon*
- Summaries of the faith, *Romans, Ephesians*

What holds together this diverse library? The focus of the Bible is the endless love of our gracious God, centered in the cross of Jesus Christ.

OUTLINE OF BIBLE HISTORY

Where in Bible
Genesis 1-11

I. **Pre-History:** creation, fall, flood, the nations

II. **Foundations of God's People**

Genesis 12-50

A. The Patriarchs (ancestors of the faith): Abraham and Sarah, **1800 B.C.?**

(promise: Genesis 12:1-3)

Isaac, Jacob, Joseph

B. Sojourn in Egypt as slaves

Exodus 1

C. The Exodus (escape) from Egypt under Moses, **1200s B.C.**

Exodus 2-15

Covenant at Mt. Sinai (see Exodus 19:4-6)

Exodus 19-34

Wilderness Wanderings

Numbers

D. Conquest/Settlement of the Promised Land under Joshua, by about **1200 B.C.**

Joshua

E. Tribal Confederacy, led by heroes called "Judges"

Judges

III. **Monarchy, c. 1020-586 B.C.**

Told twice:

A. Decision: Yes or No? (Samuel's warning)

I, II Samuel

B. United Kingdom:

and I, II Kings,

▪ Saul

then again in I,

▪ David (covenant with David in II Sam. 7:8-16 leads to the hope for a Messiah); "Messiah" means "anointed," the king.

II Chronicles

▪ Solomon

C. Divided Kingdom, split in **922 B.C.**

1. North, "Israel"

▪ Series of dynasties

▪ Baalism, injustice, oppression

▪ Prophets: arose with kings as a check-and-balance

▪ North destroyed by Assyria, **722 B.C.**; vanished; remnant are **Samaritans**

2. South, "Judah":

▪ Davidic dynasty

▪ Also abandoned the Lord

- Jerusalem destroyed by Babylon, **586 B.C.**;
some to Egypt, some to Babylonian exile;
Jews are those who return from exile,
returning home to “Judea”

IV. Exilic and Post-Exilic Israel

A. Exile in Babylon, 586-538 B.C.

- New promises:

B. Post-Exilic times

- Return and reconstruction under Ezra, Nehemiah
- Under the Persians until **333 B.C.**
- Under Alexander the Great and the Greeks, **333-167 B.C.**
- Maccabean Revolt, **167 B.C.**
- Independent under priest-kings until **63 B.C.**
- Conquered by Rome in **63 B.C.**

*Isaiah 40:1-11;
60:1-3; 61:1-3
Ezra,
Nehemiah*

V. The Life of Jesus

- Born in **7 or 4 B.C.?**
- Lived as carpenter in Nazareth
- Ministry for one to three years
- Crucified in Jerusalem, **27 or 30 A.D.?**
- Raised from the dead

*Matthew,
Mark, Luke,
John (told from
four
perspectives)*

VI. The Early Church, New Testament Community

- A. The Holy Spirit, and the Jerusalem Church, Led by Peter, James, and John
- B. Early Spread of the church
- C. The Missions of Paul, **c. 45-63**

Acts 1:5

Acts 6-12

Acts 13-28

VII. All the Centuries in Between, including “our” time!

VIII. Christ’s Second Coming, and a new world, date?

*Revelation 21-
22*

CONTENTS OF BIBLE BOOKS

Connection to
History
Outline

I. The Old Testament: (the Hebrew Bible)

A. The Law (Torah)

1. **Genesis** (“Beginning”)

1-11 Creation, fall, pre-history

I

12-25 the Abraham story

II-A

25-36 the Jacob story

II-A

37-50 the Joseph story

II-A

2. **Exodus** (“Departure”)

1-18 deliverance from Egypt and travel to Sinai

II-C

19-34 covenant at Mt. Sinai

II-C

35-40 building the worship-tent

3. **Leviticus** (matters relating to priests and Levites): the worship leaders’ manual for sacrifices, purifications, etc., plus another law book (the Holiness Code, ch. 17-26)

4. **Numbers** (named for the census in ch. 1-2): travels and events in the wilderness, en route to the Promised Land.

II-C

5. **Deuteronomy** (Greek: second law): a book of exhortations and laws as Israel is about to enter the Land. This is one of the books Jesus quoted most.

B. The Prophets

1. The Former Prophets (so named in the Hebrew Bible), called by scholars the “Deuteronomic History” because it tells the history of Israel in the land from the point of view of Deuteronomy. Termed a prophetic book by the Jews because it is a prophetic interpretation of the history. Includes **Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings**.

Joshua 1-12 conquest of the land

II-D

Joshua 13-22 settlement

II-D

Joshua 23-24 renewal of covenant

Judges 1-16	adventures of the heroes	<i>II-E</i>
Judges 17-21	appendices showing the need for leadership	<i>II-E</i>
I Samuel 1-8	Samuel, a hinge-figure	<i>III-A</i>
I Samuel 9-15	King Saul	<i>III-B</i>
I Samuel 16-31	The rise of David	<i>III-B</i>
II Samuel	King David	<i>III-B</i>
I Kings 1-11	King Solomon	<i>III-B</i>
I Kings 12		
-II Kings 17	the two kingdoms	<i>III-C</i>
I Kings 17		
-II Kings 9	contain the stories of the prophets Elijah and Elisha	
II Kings 18-25	remaining years of the southern kingdom	<i>III-C</i>

2. The Latter Prophets (so named in the Hebrew Bible) are the writings of the prophets who addressed the kingdoms and the post-exilic community. They are:
- Isaiah:** the great prophet of 8th century Jerusalem (chapters 40-55 represent the time of the exile, and chapters 56-66 probably come later) *III-C*
IV-A
 - Jeremiah:** the suffering prophet of the fall of Jerusalem *III-C*
 - Ezekiel:** mystical prophet of the exile *III-C & IV-A*
 - Hosea:** prophet of wounded love *III-C*
 - Joel:** predictions of the end-times *IV-B??*
 - Amos:** defender of the poor in the northern kingdom *III-C*
 - Obadiah:** judgment on neighboring Edom *IV-A*
 - Jonah:** God's unwilling servant *IV-B?*
 - Micah:** Isaiah's contemporary *III-C*
 - Nahum:** vengeance on Assyria, which destroyed the North *III-C*
 - Habakkuk:** questioning God's justice *IV-A*

- l. **Zephaniah:** wrath and restoration for God's humble people *III-C*
 - m. **Haggai:** rebuild my temple! *IV-B*
 - n. **Zechariah:** courage for returned exiles; end-time visions *IV-B*
 - o. **Malachi:** a catechism for waiting Jews *IV-B*
- C. The Writings
- 1. **Psalms:** Israel's hymn-book, compiled over centuries
 - 2. **Job:** The framework (ch. 1-2 and 42) tells the story of a righteous man who suffers. The poetry (3-41) explores the problem of suffering.
 - 3. **Proverbs:** nuggets of Israel's wisdom
 - 4. The Five Scrolls (these are read at five Jewish festivals today):
 - a. **Ruth:** the story of David's foreign ancestress *II-E*
 - b. **Song of Solomon:** love poems
 - c. **Ecclesiastes:** musings of a disillusioned man
 - d. **Lamentations:** songs of mourning over fallen Jerusalem *IV-A*
 - e. **Esther:** a story of the Jews in a foreign land *IV-B*
 - 5. **Daniel:** This book, recounting the story of a faithful Jew in Babylonian exile, gives encouragement for God's persecuted people of any era and looks forward to God's final victory. *IV-AB*
 - 6. The Chronicler's History: Four final Old Testament books retell the story of the monarchy and add the return from exile and the reconstruction. It presents an idealized picture of King David as founder of Israel's worship life. The Chronicler's special themes are faith, prayer, and worship.

Includes **I and II Chronicles, Ezra, and Nehemiah.**

I Chron. 1-9	genealogies	
I Chron. 10-29	King David	<i>III-B</i>
II Chron. 1-9	King Solomon	<i>III-B</i>
II Chron. 10-36	Judah (the southern kingdom only)	<i>III-C</i>
Ezra, Nehemiah	return and reconstruction	<i>IV-B</i>

II. The Apocrypha (meaning “secret/hidden”): Disputed books, mostly written between the testaments, accepted as scripture by Eastern Orthodox, Anglican, and Catholics, but not by Protestants or Jews:

- Tobit and Judith are religious stories
- Wisdom of Solomon and Sirach are books of wisdom (like Proverbs)
- Baruch is an interpretation of the history of the exile
- I and II Maccabees are histories of the revolt in 167 B.C.
- I and II Esdras are apocalyptic writings (like Daniel)
- The Prayer of Manasseh is a liturgical psalm
- Plus additions to the books of Daniel and Esther

III. The New Testament (specifically Christian scripture)

A. The Gospels: The “good news” of Jesus Christ, told four times:

1. **Matthew:** Perhaps the most Jewish of the gospel writers in his outlook. Records much of Jesus’ teaching. Shows how Jesus fulfills prophecy. *V*
2. **Mark:** The briefest gospel, it drives toward two questions: Who is this Jesus? What does his cross mean for the disciple? *V*
3. **Luke:** Part of a two-volume work (see Acts), this gospel shows special interest in Jesus’ attitude toward the poor, the outcast, women and children. Highlights prayer and the Holy Spirit. *V*

Matthew, Mark, and Luke are so similar in structure and verbal content that they are often called the “synoptic” gospels, i.e., “seeing together.”

4. **John:** This is a more explicitly theological rendering of Jesus’ story, driving every scene to the matter of Jesus’ identity and mission. V

- B. **The Acts of the Apostles:** This second part of Luke’s work shows the spread of the gospel from Jerusalem to Rome. VI

- C. **The Epistles** (Letters): Letters of early Christians provide much of the teaching and encouragement of Christian faith:
 1. The Letter of Paul: VI
 - a. **Romans:** Paul’s master-work on justification and its consequences
 - b. **I Corinthians:** correcting abuses
 - c. **II Corinthians:** a follow-up, with extended treatment of ministry
 - d. **Galatians:** declaration of Christian freedom
 - e. **Ephesians:** God’s master-plan
 - f. **Philippians:** written from prison but full of joy; shows us Christ who humbled himself
 - g. **Colossians:** a high vision of who Jesus Christ is
 - h. **I Thessalonians:** a warm, encouraging letter; tells of Christ’s second coming
 - i. **II Thessalonians:** a follow-up, dealing more with the expectation of Jesus’ coming
 - j. **I and II Timothy and Titus:** Advice to young pastors
 - k. **Philemon:** what to do with a run-away Christian slave?

2. The Catholic, or General Epistles (written to the church at large)
 - a. **Hebrews:** shows how Christ supersedes the Old Covenant; calls Christians to hang on to their faith
 - b. **James:** like Christian proverbs, full of down-to-earth practical guidance
 - c. **I Peter:** a warm letter on Christian servanthood in the footsteps of the Savior
 - d. **I, II, and III John:** about sin and false teaching, but above all about love
 - e. **II Peter and Jude:** about the second coming; against false teachings

- D. **The Revelation:** Encouragement, in vision form, to embattled Christians, and promises of the glorious conclusion to the story.

WHAT TO READ FIRST

It's usually not the best idea to begin trying to read the Bible cover to cover. Genesis and early Exodus make for rapid reading (since they're full of good stories), but most readers will bog down by the time they reach Leviticus. Instead, it's probably best to begin with the clearest statements of the gospel of Jesus Christ. The following course of study will get one into the heart of the matter quickly:

1. **The Gospel of John:** This is full of such gems as John 3:16, which relate the believer to Christ so clearly. It's good, also, to start reading **Psalms**, not troubling oneself too much over the more difficult ones, and enjoying the richness of faith in these prayers.
2. Add another gospel, **Mark** perhaps. Then turn to some of the briefer (yet meaty) epistles, such as **Galatians, Philippians, I Peter, and I John.**
3. Read **Luke.** This is your third trip through the story of Jesus now, and you're noticing the different emphases of these early witnesses, and the richness of having four gospels. Read Luke's second volume, too: **Acts.** Then take up two of Paul's great summaries of the faith: **Ephesians** and **Romans.**
4. It's time to go back to the beginning of the whole story. Read **Genesis** and the first part of **Exodus** (say, through chapter 24) to get the foundation.
5. From here there's still a lot more to explore. The two **Corinthian** letters are rich. Try some of the Old Testament prophets (**Hosea** or **Micah** or **Amos**, or even that giant among prophets, **Isaiah**). You might go on to more history (**Samuel? Kings?**) or to wisdom writings (**Proverbs**) or apocalyptic (**Revelation**) – you might check with a friend or a pastor for a good commentary on this one. And there's plenty more...

HOW TO READ THE BIBLE

1. **Read prayerfully.** Before you begin reading, ask God to speak to your life.
2. **Read often.** Try to read a portion of Scripture every day. Work through sections of the Bible such as Genesis 12-50, or read a favorite verse. The point is: develop a healthy habit of reading God's word daily.
3. **Read slowly.** Before you ask what the passage means, first ask what it says. Too often people skim or read quickly, and consequently they misunderstand. Read slowly and let the words, spirit, and ideas sink in. Don't skim.
4. **Read devotionally.** Ask, "How does this passage apply to me? What could God be trying to say to my life as I read these words?"
5. **Read intelligently.** Ask questions such as:
What did the passage mean to its original hearers?
What did it mean to the ancient Hebrew or Greek minds?
What was the problem the author was dealing with?
What are other similar themes in the Bible?
6. **Read contextually.** A Bible verse is always part of a larger portion of Scripture. Don't lift a verse out of its context and twist its meaning to meet your own preconceived ideas. Let the paragraphs around a verse help interpret the verse.
7. **Read honestly.** If you don't understand a portion of Scripture, ask a Christian friend or pastor for help.
8. **Read humbly.** Understand and accept that other Christians will interpret the Scriptures differently from you and your friends.
9. **Read wisely.** Read easier sections first. Don't begin with the book of Revelation, or even Romans. Begin with the simpler portions of Scripture. Always move from the clear to the unclear; never the opposite.
10. **Read communally.** Read with other Christians. Take a class on the Bible. Read commentaries written for laity (e.g. Barclay). Buy a Bible concordance.

“A LAYMAN’S GUIDE TO QUANTUM PHYSICS SCRIPTURE...”

- How Luther Meant Lutherans to Read the Bible¹ -

by Gary R. Jepsen (Pastor, Pilgrim Lutheran Church, Puyallup, WA)

“The neglect of Scripture, even by spiritual leaders, is one of the greatest evils in the world. Everything else, arts or literature, is pursued and practiced day and night, and there is no end of labor and effort; but Holy Scripture is neglected as though there were no need of it... But its words are not, as some think, mere literature (Lesewort); they are words of life (Lebewort), intended not for speculation and fancy but for life and action. May Christ our Lord help us by His Spirit to love and honor His holy Word with all our hearts. Amen.”² (M. Luther, 1530)

Go to “Google” and type in the phrase, “A Layman’s Guide to...” on the search bar and you will get all sorts of interesting results. When I did so, the first item that popped up was an article titled, “A Layman’s Guide to Quantum Physics.” That seemed like a rather heady topic so I clicked on it and found an article by James Higgo written in 1999. I quickly perused the article and found that it actually seemed somewhat accessible and understandable to me. So, when I have more time, I plan to return to read it more carefully. Perhaps with a little perseverance I might be able to crack this nut that in the past has seemed so impossibly hard for me.

This little exercise in self-edification raised for me a question, “If quantum physics can be made somewhat more accessible to a science dunce such as I, why can’t Scripture be more accessible to the average lay person?” I also wondered if Luther thought Scripture would be made so difficult to understand for the average layperson when he coined the Lutheran motto, “Sola Scriptura” (“Scripture alone” – as the norm for the faith, life, and proclamation of the church). To be sure, it’s nice to have the slogan; but if the average literate person can’t pick up the Bible and readily understand it, then what’s the point? It’s no more accessible or useful to the

¹ For a more thorough examination of this topic, please see my article “The Role of Scripture in Lutheran Deliberation” at the Word Alone website: <http://wordalone.org/docs/wa-jepsen-essay-scripture-2007.shtml>.

² LW (Luther’s Works. American ed. 55 vols. Philadelphia: Fortress; St. Louis: Concordia, 1955-1986) 14, p. 46.

average person than quantum physics, rocket science, or brain surgery. Scripture itself would be reduced to a topic reserved for only a few specialists to understand and master while the rest of us basically ignore it.

Anyone familiar with the history of the Reformation knows that leaving Scripture solely in the hands of ecclesiastical specialists was the last thing Luther wanted to do. Not only was it one of the main problems Luther faced regarding the controversy over indulgences, but it was the opposite of the legacy he wanted to leave to his followers when he was gone. Yet, ironically and unfortunately, that is exactly what has happened in the church that bears his name. Lutheran churches today too often rely more on experts schooled in philosophies and interpretive schemes foreign and even opposed to the clear meaning of Scripture. Theologians often deconstruct the Scriptures and then re-create them in ways completely unrecognizable vis-à-vis the original text. Pastors, using strange interpretative methods, or forcing the Scriptures to fit some foreign ideology, come up with conclusions which leave the average lay person scratching his head and saying, “How on earth did the pastor come up with that?!!” But they reckon the pastor must know what he is talking about because, after all, he has been to seminary.

That may be a dangerous and unwarranted assumption.

So, what are some basic principles one might look for in good preaching and biblical work?

Luther’s Christocentric Approach

The first thing that comes to mind is what is often referred to as “Luther’s Christocentric approach to Scripture.” Jesus Christ for Luther is always the center of biblical witness. There are several implications of this Christocentricity.

- First, the primary role of Scripture is to point to and proclaim Christ, and to anticipate His return.
- Secondly, what Jesus says, taught, or did with regard to a particular topic is what is authoritative for the church over against anything else in the Bible including Old Testament law. For example, consider the woman in John 8 who was caught in adultery and was brought to Jesus. Jesus’ interaction with her shows that if the OT called for the stoning of an adulteress, Jesus instead showed compassion and did not condemn her. Nonetheless, He did tell her to,

“Go and sin no more,” that is, stop her adulterous behavior. In short, Jesus modeled a new approach to sin and sinners.

- Lastly, not only what Jesus taught and did, but also what the Apostles taught and did under the guidance of the Holy Spirit (“Who proceeds from the Father and the Son; Who with the Father and the Son together is worshipped and glorified...”) has authority over OT law.

An example of how this principle works came to me recently when I was browsing a website of the Southwestern Washington Synod of the ELCA. It is a site where pastors and laypersons share in an e-mail discussion of a variety of issues (I’m not sure if it qualifies as a “chat-room” but, here it is: SWWA-Synod-Gracetalk@googlegroups.com). The topic at hand was how Lutherans read the Bible. A concern was expressed regarding certain expressions of biblical fundamentalism that take everything in the Bible too literally without regard for context, biblically or culturally. The discussion turned to Deuteronomy 23:1, which says, “No one whose testicles are crushed or whose penis is cut off shall be admitted to the assembly of the LORD” (NRSV). It was seen as an example of extreme OT law which, when taken out of context and strictly enforced, is terribly lacking in compassion.

However, if we apply the principle identified above, we are reminded to do several things. First of all, we are to consider how Jesus dealt with persons who had physical afflictions and deformities. Jesus welcomed the sick, the lame, and the lepers. Secondly, we are reminded that we ought not take this passage from Deuteronomy out of context (remember, it was not uncommon in Baal cults of the time for practitioners, while in some hallucinogenic frenzy, to mutilate themselves) or in isolation, but we are instead to look to see if there are other passages which might offer a legitimate and mitigating perspective. For example, we might look at how Philip dealt with the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8:27-39, as that eunuch certainly fit the criteria outlined in Deut.23:1.

Thus, with the example of how Jesus dealt with people, and when we see how the Church under the power of the Holy Spirit dealt with persons formerly rejected and condemned under the law, we find that many OT laws are at least put in a new perspective or perhaps even done away with. The Ethiopian Eunuch was welcome and baptized, not excluded from the assembly!

Scripture as Inspired by The Holy Spirit

A famous German theologian by the name of Juergen Moltmann wrote a book titled “The Church in the Power of the Holy Spirit.” We might here paraphrase that title to say that, for Luther, the Bible was and is under the power of the Holy Spirit. Listen to what Luther writes when commenting on 2 Sam. 23:2 where King David says, “The spirit of the LORD speaks through me, His word is upon my tongue”:

In the first place, he [David] mentions the Holy Spirit. He [David] ascribes all that is foretold by the prophets to Him [the Holy Spirit]. And to this and to similar verses St. Peter refers in 2 Peter 1:21, where he says: “No prophecy ever came by the impulse of man; but moved by the Holy Spirit, holy men of God spoke.” Therefore we sing in the article of the (Nicene) Creed concerning the Holy Spirit: “Who spake by the prophets.” Thus we attribute to the Holy Spirit all of Holy Scripture and the external Word and the sacraments, which touch and move our external ears and other senses. Our Lord Jesus Christ also ascribes His Word to the Holy Spirit, as He quotes Is. 61:1 in Luke 4:18: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me, etc.,” and as He quotes Is. 42:1 in Matt. 12:18: “Behold, My Servant whom I have chosen.... I will put My Spirit upon Him.” And in Luke 1:35 we read that the Holy Spirit will overshadow Mary, that He will touch her, take her blood and impregnate her, so that the Lord is described as “conceived by the Holy Ghost.”³ (emphasis mine)

In short, Luther is affirming that the witness of Bible is attributed to the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Again, notice what he writes above, “we attribute to the Holy Spirit⁴ all of Holy Scripture and the external Word and the sacraments.” In other words, just as 2 Timothy 3:16 puts it, “All scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness.”

³ LW 15, p.275.

⁴ Pastor Ron Marshall quite rightly notes this difference between Luther and modern scholarship when he comments in a footnote, “So, Willi Marxsen is wrong when he argues that ‘the New Testament was the work of the church which decided for itself what should be authoritative.’” “Making A New World: How Lutherans Read the Bible,” (Seattle, WA: Certus Sermo, 2003), p. 2; footnote #5. This is an excellent introduction to how Lutherans ought to approach the Bible. If you would like to order a copy, Pr. Marshall can be reached by email at deogloria@foxinternet.com or at First Lutheran Church of West Seattle – 4105 California Ave. SW, Seattle, WA 98116-4101 or at 206-935-6530.

This is extremely important and quite contrary to the emphasis of much modern scholarship, which seems to want to give more credit to the individual authors of the individual books than to the Holy Spirit. How often do we hear, “The Prophet Isaiah says...” rather than “God speaking through the Prophet Isaiah says...”? Or, “Luke says...” rather than “Luke, inspired by the Holy Spirit, says...”? Tragically, what has been lost in this change of expression is the conviction that the Holy Spirit inspired and guided the writing of the Bible. Then, as a result, we have a book, which is no different from any other book – the product of creative imaginations. “Why then,” a skeptical world asks, “should we pay any more attention to this book than to others?” However, if Scripture is under the inspiration and guidance of the Holy Spirit, it then demands that we take it seriously as it is.

The Clear and Consistent Witness of Scripture

Another principle that Luther used is one that I describe as “the clear and consistent witness of Scripture.”

Luther was a genius. One website estimates his IQ to have been higher than that of Bill Gates or Einstein.⁵ Whether true or not, the point is that Luther was no dummy; neither was he so naïve as to believe that there were no difficult or seemingly contradictory passages in the Bible. So, by clear and consistent, it is meant that, for Luther, the meaning of Scripture was clear and did not need elaborate interpretive schemes to unwrap that clear meaning. For example, he had little patience with Thomistic scholars and their dependence upon Aristotle (more on that later).

Neither did Luther have much to do with the allegorical, anagogical, or other metaphorical methods of the medieval period. For Luther, these methods gave way too much license to the “cleverness” of the individual interpreter and thereby robbed the text of its meaning. Instead, Luther went to the clear meaning of the text. However, by way of caution, Luther was in no way advocating what we call “proof-texting,” that is lifting a verse or phrase out of context in order to substantiate an already arrived at agenda. No. By “clear” he meant the clear meaning of the text because it was, he believed, inspired by the Holy Spirit. Therefore, Luther believed that with perseverance, the reader would eventually find clarity in Scripture.

He also believed that Scripture was consistent in the sense of “Scripture interprets Scripture.” As we have seen with regard to the text about the emasculated male, one might take for example that passage in isolation and end up with nothing but a hard

⁵ http://www.aceviper.net/estimated_iq_of_famous_people.php

passage completely lacking in compassion. Then we could say, “This is ridiculous,” and use this example as a precedent to deconstruct all meaning out of Scripture and rob it of its authority. However, Scripture inspired (not dictated) by the Holy Spirit emerges as very clear in saying that the rejection of the emasculated male would be contrary to the teachings of Christ who welcomed the wounded, the broken, and the unclean, such as lepers. What’s more, the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8 was not only welcomed but also baptized! Scripture thereby interprets Scripture and, via the authority of Christ, emerges clear and consistent in compassion rather than confused.

Let me add a caveat at this point – one that is in no way aimed at my colleagues at the synod website/chat-room. Their discussion was legitimate and sincere. However, there are those who seem to delight in finding obscure and antiquated biblical passages which they use to poke holes in the principles of “The clarity of Scripture” and “Scripture as the norm for the faith, life, and proclamation of the church.”

I am reminded of a somewhat famous story about the late comedian, W. C. Fields. Fields was known to be a skeptic and hardly a man of faith. However, towards the end of his life when he was quite ill, his nephew one day came into his room and found him reading the Bible. Shocked at the discovery, the nephew said, “Uncle, what are you doing?”

Fields responded, “Looking for loopholes!” Perhaps he was thinking he could sneak into eternity through the back door.

I admire those who are quick witted and who can come up with clever responses on the spur of the moment like that. However, more to the point, might it be the case, and a much less humorous one, that there are those who love to poke holes in Scripture – whether the Deut. 23:1 passage, the question of the rabbit chewing the cud (Lev.11:6), meats that were declared unclean, or other minor discrepancies – as a sort of smokescreen to cover their deeper desire to find a loophole so he doesn’t have to take Scripture so seriously and is thereby free to do with Scripture as he sees fit? That might work in the secular world of linguistic analysis but for Lutherans, especially those who take Luther seriously, such an approach ought to be nipped in the bud. For Luther, Scripture was always clear and consistent when it came to the essential matters of faith, life, and proclamation. Other matters and minor discrepancies were for him of little concern.

By the way, it was Luther's belief in the clarity of Scripture that helped motivate him not only to translate the Bible into common German, but also to become a strong advocate for public education. He did so because, on the one hand, he wanted an educated clergy, trained in Greek, Hebrew and the humanities (as he understood them), while on the other hand he also wanted an educated laity. However, Luther's commitment to education for laity did not arise out of the same concerns that motivate secular people today, namely, the earthly desire to have a lucrative career where one might make a lot of money. Instead, Luther's commitment to public education arose out of his bad experience with ecclesiastical hierarchy that could so easily go astray chasing unbiblical rabbits, as it were, such as indulgences, and persecuting reformers who merely preached the Word. As a result, Luther believed that an educated laity, well grounded in the Bible, basic interpretive fundamentals, and the basics of the Christian faith (as in the Small Catechism) would stand a better chance of holding pastors and the church hierarchy accountable.⁶

Isn't it interesting that we have so strayed from these basic commitments that we now have church sponsored biblical scholars tearing down the Bible on the basis of having found "loopholes," who then deconstruct the clear witness of Scripture all in the name of some clever innovation they want to propose thereby reshaping the Bible in their own image? And these are the experts who are telling us that the Bible doesn't really mean what it appears to mean? Hmmm. What would Doctor Luther say to that?

With all this in mind, Luther would have resisted with all his might those who allow the Church to be taken captive by principles of interpretation foreign to the witness

⁶ Cochlaeus, a champion of Roman Catholicism, paid Luther's translation of the Bible the greatest compliment when he complained that "Luther's New Testament was so much multiplied and spread by printers that even tailors and shoemakers, yea, even women and ignorant persons who had accepted this new Lutheran gospel, and could read a little German, studied it with the greatest avidity as the fountain of all truth. Some committed it to memory, and carried it about in their bosom. In a few months such people deemed themselves so learned that they were not ashamed to dispute about faith and the gospel not only with Catholic laymen, but even with priests and monks and doctors of divinity." [De Actis et Scriptis M. Lutheri ad Ann. 1522. Gieseler (IV. 65 sq.) quotes the whole passage in Latin. - <http://www.bible-researcher.com/luther02.html>].

Consider also Roland Bainton's recap of Luther's debate in 1519 with Eck at Leipzig at which Luther said, "A simple layman armed with Scripture is to be believed above a pope or a council without it" (Roland Bainton's "Here I Stand," Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1950, p.117)

of Scripture. That was why he rejected the scholastic system of St. Thomas Aquinas because of Thomas' dependence on Aristotle and Aristotelian metaphysics. That does not mean that Luther was anti-Aristotle per se. In fact he found Aristotle's "Logic" and "Rhetoric" quite helpful. However, he found Aristotle's metaphysical system inadequate and unhelpful in terms of dealing with the dynamic witness of Scripture. For example, he wondered how we humans could possibly hope to encapsulate Christ's promise to be present in the sacrament in terms of Aristotle's "substances" and "accidents." For Luther, Thomas Aquinas' system regarding Holy Communion is an interesting bit of speculation, but that's all it is – speculation! And, more importantly, it undermines the clear promise of Christ who is present in the sacrament whether we understand how He is there or not! How do we know He's present? Because He promises to be! Therefore, Luther could not understand why Thomas (and the Church) would seek to build a theology on such a system. Clearly, he concluded, they did not understand what they were doing.

In addition, returning to a theme we explored earlier, it took Scripture out of the hands of the laity and put it into the hands of the specialists and the hierarchy who could thereby twist it to suit their purposes. In the experience of Luther (especially regarding the indulgences controversy), history showed how unreliable the hierarchy and specialists could be.

Scripture and the Role of Reason

The same was true with regard to Luther's controversy with Zwingli. Unlike Thomas Aquinas, Zwingli was not dependent upon a philosophical system like that of Aristotle. However, in Luther's view, Zwingli, like Thomas, imposed a false litmus test on Scripture – namely, his own reason. To simplify, Zwingli couldn't understand how Christ could be present in the sacrament of Holy Communion and be ascended into heaven at the same time. Therefore, in Luther's view, Zwingli denied the clear witness of Scripture where Christ says, "This is my body... blood." For Luther what other witness or testimony do you need than the clear word of Jesus?

However, for Luther there was perhaps no more dangerous threat to the church and the authority of Scripture than that posed by "the prophet of Zwickau," Thomas Muntzer. Muntzer took Paul's statement in 2 Cor. 3:6, "the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life," and radicalized it to mean that because true Christians now have the Holy Spirit, they no longer needed the Bible (letter). He even went so far as to reject the Bible because, in his view, the Bible got in the way of direct experience

of the Holy Spirit. The Bible was for him mere letter, paper, and ink – “Bible, babble, bubble,” he used to say.

Luther was outraged at such irresponsibility. He saw in Muntzer’s approach an open door to absolute chaos. As was mentioned earlier with regard to allegorical, anagogical, and metaphorical interpretation, Muntzer’s lack of solid grounding allowed way too much freedom for the cleverness of creative imaginations to come up with “inspirations,” which in turn gave individuals license to do whatever they may want or feel like doing with the Scriptures. Little wonder Luther said of Muntzer that he had swallowed the Holy Spirit feathers and all. Under Muntzer’s guidance, Luther wondered what “new thing” God might be accused of doing with no other authority than the whim of the individual making the assertion.

Conclusion

Luther was again and again brought back to the Bible guided by the principles we have just laid out:

- the Bible as Christocentric;
- the Bible as inspired by the Holy Spirit;
- the clear and consistent witness of Scripture;
- the “Scripture interprets Scripture” principle to discern clarity;
- and human reason in service of biblical witness as opposed to the Bible being subservient to human reason, or whatever philosophical categories one might want to impose upon it.

Again, all of this relates back to Luther’s primary assumption, namely, that the Bible was inspired and guided (not dictated) by the Holy Spirit. Therefore, the proper approach to interpreting Scripture is not to seek to poke holes in its witness; neither is it to look for loopholes. Instead, while recognizing that there are a variety of literary forms in the Bible, the proper approach to the study of Scripture is to ask in all humility: What is it that God is trying to say to us through the witness of Scripture?

“May Christ our Lord help us by His Spirit to love and honor His holy Word with all our hearts. Amen.”

BIBLE HELPS

Libraries, bookstores, and the web have a number of aids for Bible study.

BIBLE DICTIONARIES give a wealth of background information for names, places, events, cultural matters, and concepts in the Bible. The Bible story takes place in a faraway place and time, and dictionaries or encyclopedias can help bring it near and make it comprehensible.

BIBLE ATLASES: Maps help to locate the story. If you can't find a good atlas, most Study Bibles and Bible dictionaries have sets of maps in the back (e.g., Westminster, Harper's, or the Interpreter's, Vol. 1).

TRANSLATIONS: The Old Testament was first written in Hebrew and the New Testament in Greek, so most of us need translations into English. Since the English language is ever-changing and the nuances of the original Hebrew and Greek are many, English translations of the Bible continue to be written. Some recommended translations: *The New Revised Standard Version* (we use this is our corporate worship), *The Revised Standard Version*, the *New International Version*, *Today's English Version* (Good News), the *Jerusalem Bible*, and the *New King James Version*. Compare various translations of key verses. Also, comparing various translations side-by-side is a great way of "getting at" the nuances of the original Hebrew or Greek text.

NOTE: Paraphrases (e.g., *The Message*) may be enjoyable to read but should not be used for in-depth study since the theological bent of the one doing the paraphrasing can sometimes obscure the meaning of the original text.

CONCORDANCES list the occurrences of certain words throughout the Bible and are a good tool for studying a word or a concept.

COMMENTARIES are scholars' interpretations of the Biblical texts. They are helpful for unraveling difficult passages and for checking one's own understanding of a passage. Commentaries are not always right, though. Use commentaries, but use the head God gave you, too.

BIBLEGATEWAY.COM is an example of an online Bible with multiple translations that have passage, keyword, and topical search capability.

WHERE TO FIND IT

1. AGING

Genesis 18:10-14
Psalm 71:17-18
Psalm 92:12-14
Luke 2:36-38
I Timothy 5:1

2. ALIENATION FROM GOD

Job 23:8-9
Psalm 22:1
Psalm 69:1-3
Psalm 27:7-10
Habakkuk 1:2
Matthew 27:46
Mark 15:34
Ephesians 2:17-19
Hebrews 13:5-6

3. CHRISTIAN LIFE

Psalm 25:4-5
Micah 6:8
Matthew 28:18-20
Mark 8:34-35
Luke 11:9-13
John 13:34-35
Acts 1:8
Romans 12:1-2
I Corinthians 13:4-7
Galatians 3:27-28
Galatians 5:1
Galatians 5:13-14
Galatians 5:22-23
Galatians 6:2
Ephesians 4:32 - 5:2
Philippians 2:1-11
James 3:17-18

4. DEATH

Psalm 23:4
Ecclesiastes 3:1-2
Isaiah 43:2
Hosea 13:14
Matthew 4:16
John 5:24
Romans 5:12
Romans 6:23
I Corinthians 15:22
I Corinthians 15:51-52
I Corinthians 15:55-56
II Corinthians 5:1-5
Revelation 14:13

5. DEPRESSION

Psalm 25:15-18
Psalm 38:6
Psalm 42:11
Psalm 109:22
Psalm 116:6
Psalm 147:3
Proverbs 17:22
Jeremiah 15:10
II Corinthians 4:8-10
Philippians 4:11-13

6. FAITHFULNESS OF GOD

Deuteronomy 7:9
I Kings 8:56
Psalm 119:90
Psalm 145:13-14
I Corinthians 1:9
II Thessalonians 3:3

7. FEAR AND ANXIETY

Job 4:13-14
Psalm 34:4
Psalm 55:4-5
Proverbs 1:33
Isaiah 12:2
Matthew 6:34
Mark 4:35-41
Luke 12:22-31
John 14:27
I Corinthians 2:3-5
Philippians 4:6
I Peter 5:7
I John 4:18

8. FORGIVENESS AND ACCEPTANCE FROM GOD

Psalm 32:5
Psalm 78:38
Psalm 103:8-14
Matthew 9:2
Luke 15:17-24
Colossians 1:13-14
Colossians 2:13-14

9. GRACE AND GROUNDING FROM GOD

Psalm 145:8-9
Mark 10-14
Mark 10:45
John 3:16
John 6:35
John 8:12
John 11:25-26a
John 14:6
Romans 8:1
Galatians 2:20
Ephesians 2:8-9

Colossians 1:13-14
I Peter 1:3-4
I John 3:1-2
I John 5:13

10. GRIEF AND BEREAVEMENT

Genesis 37:35
Genesis 50:10
II Samuel 18:33
Job 17:7
Psalm 23:4
Ecclesiastes 3:1-2
Isaiah 43:2
Hosea 13:14
Matthew 4:16
Matthew 26:3
Luke 6:21
John 5:24
John 16:20
Romans 5:12
Romans 6:23
I Corinthians 15:22
I Corinthians 15:51-57
II Corinthians 5:1-5
I Peter 1:3-8
Revelation 14:13
Revelation 21:4

11. GUARDIANSHIP OF GOD

Job 23:10
Psalm 43:3
Psalm 48:14
Psalm 121:7-8
Isaiah 58:11

12. GUILT

Psalm 38:3-4
Psalm 40:12
Luke 18:13
Romans 3:23-25
James 2:10
I John 1:8-9

13. HELP FROM GOD

Psalm 50:15
Psalm 55:22
Psalm 86:7
Matthew 11:28
John 6:37
I Peter 5:7

14. HELPLESSNESS

Psalm 88:14-15
Matthew 9:36
John 5:2-9

15. HOPE

Psalm 42:11
Jeremiah 29:11
Lamentations 3:22-24
Romans 5:2-6
Romans 15:13

16. JOY AND THANKS

Psalm 118:24
Proverbs 17:22
I Thessalonians 5:16-18

17. KEY PSALMS

Psalm 23
Psalm 46
Psalm 51
Psalm 103
Psalm 121

Psalm 130

Psalm 150

18. LONELINESS

Joshua 1:9
I Kings 19:10
Psalm 25:15-18
Psalm 38:6
Psalm 38:11
Psalm 42:11
Psalm 88:18
Psalm 109:22
Psalm 116:6
Psalm 139
Psalm 147:3
John 6:67
John 14:18-19
John 16:32
II Corinthians 4:8-10
Philippians 4:11

19. LOVE OF GOD

Deuteronomy 7:7-8
Psalm 100:5
Psalm 145:8-9
Song of Solomon 2:4
Jeremiah 31:3
Hosea 4:11
John 3:16
John 13:1
Romans 5:8
Romans 8:35, 37-39
I John 4:10

20. LOW SELF-ESTEEM

Psalm 8:4-8
Psalm 40:17
Psalm 139:1-6
Matthew 10:39-41
Romans 7:19-20
Romans 7:24-25
II Corinthians 12:9

21. PEACE AND COMFORT

Psalm 4:8
Matthew 11:28-30
John 14:1
John 14:18
John 14:27
Romans 5:1
Ephesians 2: 17-19
Philippians 4:6-7

22. PHYSICAL SICKNESS/WEAKNESS

Psalm 41:3
Psalm 103:2-3
Matthew 4:24
Matthew 8:17
John 11:4
II Corinthians 12:7-10

23. RESURRECTION! ETERNAL LIFE

Job 19:23-27a
Psalm 73:25
Isaiah 25:6-9
Daniel 12:2-3
Matthew 22:32
Luke 23:43
John 5:28-29
John 11:21-27
John 14:1-6

John 17:24
Romans 6:3-9
Romans 8:3 1, 37-39
I Corinthians 2:9
I Corinthians 15:12-26
I Corinthians 15:42-44
I Corinthians 15:51-57
II Corinthians 4:16 - 5:8
Philippians 1:21-23
Philippians 3:20-21
I Thessalonians 4:14-17
Hebrews 9:24, 28
Revelation 7:9
Revelation 7:15
Revelation 14:13
Revelation 21:1-7
Revelation 22:3-5

24. STRENGTH AND COURAGE

Exodus 15:2
Deuteronomy 31:6
Joshua 1:9
Psalm 27:1
Psalm 46:1-2
Psalm 121:1-2
Psalm 146:5-9
Isaiah 40:3 1
Isaiah 41:10
Isaiah 42:3a
Isaiah 43:2-3
Luke 12:32
Luke 18:27
Romans 8:31
I Corinthians 10:13
Philippians 4:13
Colossians 1:11-14

25. TRIALS AND SUFFERING

Psalm 94:19
Isaiah 53:3
Nahum 1:7
John 16:33
Romans 5:3-5
Romans 8:18
I Corinthians 4:11-13
I Corinthians 10:13
II Corinthians 4:17
II Corinthians 11:24-27
Hebrews 12:1-2
I Peter 3:14
I Peter 4:19
I Peter 5:10

26. TRUST

Psalm 55:22a
Psalm 121:1-2
Psalm 139:9-10
Psalm 145:18
Isaiah 12:2
Lamentations 3:22-24
Matthew 6:26
John 10:27-28
Romans 8:28
Romans 8:38-39
II Corinthians 12:9a
Colossians 1:19-20
I Peter 5:7

27. WHERE TO LOOK FOR ...

Ascension of Christ: *Acts 1*
Baptism: *Romans 6*
Beatitudes: *Matthew 5:3-12*
Christmas Story: *Luke 2; Matthew 1-2*

Church of Christ: *I Corinthians 12; Ephesians 4*
Commandments, The Ten: *Exodus 20; Deuteronomy 5*
Communion: *I Corinthians 11:23-26*
Confession: *Psalm 51; Psalm 130; Luke 18:9-14; I John 1:8-9*
Creation: *Genesis 1-2*
Crossing the Red Sea: *Exodus 14*
Crucifixion of Jesus: *Matthew 27; Mark 15; Luke 23; John 19*
Faith: *Romans 5; Hebrews 11*
Good Samaritan Story: *Luke 10:25-37*
Great Commission: *Matthew 28:18-20*
Greatness: *Matthew 18*
Jesus' Second Coming: *Mark 13; I Thessalonians 4:13-18*
Last Supper of Jesus: *Matthew 26:17-30; Mark 14:12-26; Luke 22:7-39; John 13-17*
Lord's Prayer: *Matthew 6:7-13*
New Heavens and New Earth: *Revelation 21-22*
Pentecost: *Acts 2*
Prodigal Son Story: *Luke 15:11-32*
Resurrection of Christ: *Matthew 28; Mark 16; Luke 24; John 20; I Corinthians 15*
Sermon on the Mount: *Matthew 5-7*
Suffering servant: *Isaiah 53*
Temptation: *Luke 4; Ephesians 6:13; I Corinthians 10:13*