

–IX–

GOD SURPRISES EVERYONE

Christians have an uneasy relationship with the Old Testament. On one hand, we have to admit that the Living God revealed in Jesus was the God of Israel, the God of the Old Testament. On the other hand, we don't relish being reminded that God had a chosen people. Nor do the aspects of God revealed by the Old Testament sit well with all. So, we pillage it for things that serve our needs, leaving the rest behind. It is scary how little the Old Testament is actively read. We rationalize this by saying the "Christian part" gives a clearer picture of God.

The whole affair resembles how most see American history. We don't think much about precolonial America. Few care about the rich history of Native American tribes, and we have successfully shrugged off as a nation any real guilt over our country being established via genocide of the American Indian.

We use bits and pieces of Native American culture as they suit our needs, much like how Christians take parts of the Old Testament. And we cannot help but think that the land is rightfully ours now.

That's how we perceive the changeover from Judaism to Christianity as well. We see Christianity as rightfully belonging to the Gentiles because the Jews refused Christ. It's a convenient perspective for us, just as it was expedient for 19th-century Americans to feel God had given them the land from coast to coast.

Thing is, that's not how it went down.

Jesus preaches almost exclusively (and rather emphatically) to Jews (*Matthew 15:23–27*). He instructs His disciples to do the same in *Matthew 10:5*. When He speaks to anyone else, it is generally to chastise the Jews (*Luke 7:9*). After Jesus' resurrection, His apostles initially only evangelize other Jews. ***For its first several years, the Christian Church is completely Jewish!*** (Of course, this provokes the question "what happened to all the Jewish Christians?" That is itself an interesting topic, but sadly not one for this book.)

And it is not as though these Christians are just ethnically Jewish. They still keep the Mosaic law. In *Acts 11:7–10*, Peter has a vision where he initially believes that God is commanding him to eat pork, and he refuses! Surely this cannot be explained by saying the disciples (so full of the Spirit they can cast it at will on others) simply totally misunderstood Christ's purpose.

Things become more understandable if you see Jesus through the eyes of His disciples. Jesus comes to redeem Israel; He preaches a gospel to Jews telling them that God has not forgotten them. The gospel He preaches, and the gospel His disciples preach, is totally compatible with their policy of engaging only Jews.

Jesus proves God is keeping the promises made to Abraham; so it makes perfect sense that only his heirs receive the Spirit, the gift given to the prophesied remnant of Judah to build the kingdom of the new Covenant.

But then everything changes.

The change is hard for us to see. We ignore that the original Christians were Jews evangelizing only other Jews. We cannot grasp their shock upon finding in *Acts 11:17–18* that the Gentiles can receive the promised Spirit.

Now, imagine the challenge to a gospel writer. The gospel would, of course, be woefully incomplete if it did not illuminate that God's nation now has open borders. Yet, Christ only proclaimed to Jews the coming kingdom (prophesied by Jews) and never indicated directly that the Gentiles were going to be allowed in! After all, if Jesus had Himself explicitly proclaimed that the Gentiles would join God's people, the apostles would not have waited a decade before taking the message to them, would not have required so much prodding by God, and would not have been so amazed by Peter's testimony. The earliest Christians certainly did not have the view of the Law modern conservatives place on Paul.

To accurately interpret the New Testament, we must understand the relevancy of this message to its original readers. We see it in the Synoptic Gospels and Paul's epistles, but the first place we will study is John's gospel, a book written to the Greeks trying to explain how Jesus opened God's kingdom to them.

Word of God

Gentiles are invited to join God's house, but how does that happen?

Jewish culture is built on the Torah, the first five books of the Bible. Israel is blessed with God's Word and cherishes it in a way we can not comprehend. If modern Christians loved God's Word as deeply as the 1st-century Jews do, every 10-year-old in church would have the entire New Testament memorized.

But what is God's Word to the Jews? The Torah is also called the Law, and the Jews focus on the 613 requirements it contains. Obeying the Torah separates the Jews from everyone who has not been blessed with it, the nations that were not God's people.

Christians marginalize these laws because we, quite frankly, don't like being told what to do and feel we deserve more from God than a list of rules. Furthermore, there is an unfounded idea that the revelation of God in the Old Testament is somehow no longer applicable.

Faithful Jews do not see God's law as a burden, and neither should we. Rather it is a blessing. Parents give rules to children for their own good, rules that might not make much sense to those who receive them. How much wiser are God's commandments, and how much more beneficial for those who keep them? We may not like being treated as children, but what does Christ say in *Luke 18:17*? This does not mean we have to *stay* children with little clarity as to why the commandments are to our own benefit... it just indicates why it might be hard for us to see those benefits before "growing up."

Christians often suggest the Jews erred by focusing on the Law. But the problem was not that the Jews were too focused on the Law. (It is hard to say what else they could have focused on!) The problem was that their leaders abused scripture to give themselves political power. They warped the Torah to their own devices by selectively picking which scripture to emphasize and which interpretation they liked — the Christian church arising afterward did the same.

We underestimate the Torah. Jesus' command to **love your neighbor as yourself** is not new. It is in the Law (*Leviticus 19:18*). There are also requirements to aid the poor (*Deuteronomy 15:7*) and be compassionate to widows and orphans (*Deuteronomy 24:20*); they just were not faithfully obeyed. The wisdom and mercy of the Lord in forbidding any Israelite to lend money at interest to a countryman, or to lend money at high interest to *anyone*, should speak to millions today. Jesus does not attack the Pharisees for being "legalistic"; He derides them for abusing the Law, as in *Matthew 23:23*.

The Law says to **love your neighbor as yourself**, but doesn't say who the "neighbor" is, so the Jews choose an interpretation that serves their needs. The Law says to **honor your father and mother**, but the Jewish leaders are ignoring that in their dealings with those who have made a vow to the temple (*Mark 7:10*).

God's Word separates those who are God's people from those who are, as described by Jesus Himself, **dogs**. The Law forms the covenant relationship God has with the Jews. Not accepting it places one, *ipso facto*, outside that relationship.

Jesus as the Word

John thus presents Jesus as a superior version of God's Word, made available to *everyone*. To have God's Word is to be a member of God's people. John calls Jesus the Word (*John 1:1*) made flesh (*1:14*) from the very beginning. In *1:4–5*, he says **In Him was life, and the life was the light of mankind**. He echoes this in *1:9*. *Psalms 119:105* uses the same language to refer to God's Word.

To make clear Jesus' role, John needed to show two things. First, that Jesus is superior to Moses. Second, Jesus and Moses must be on the same team, or else the gospel is not about uniting Jew and Gentile as a single flock.

This first goal is addressed in *John 3:13*, where John remarks **No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven — the Son of Man**. Why did John put that there? What's the point?

The Jews believed Moses had ascended to heaven to receive the Torah directly from God. John not only disagrees but shows Jesus is greater than Moses because He *did* descend from heaven (as the Word). John also limits Moses in *John 7:22*, saying he did not create the Law but only brought it to Israel.¹

We also see in John a clear indication that Jesus is not rebelling against Israel. Jesus does not attack Moses but claims a higher glory. *John 3:14–15*; *5:45–46*; and *7:19* illustrate Christ's alignment with Moses. Moses brought God's Word to the Jews, and Jesus is bringing a clearer understanding of God's Word to everyone, and (through the Spirit) the ability to be faithful — truth and grace.

Bread of Life (Optional)

Based on Christ's Word as the new Law, rejected by the Jewish leaders and now available as a blessing to all, an interesting observation can be made.

In *John 6:32* and *6:48* Jesus calls Himself the **bread of life**. What does He mean? I think most Christians see it as a vague picture of Jesus as sufficient. We often do this with things we don't understand — we take them as vague or make them say what we want. We use fuzzy terms (like "salvation," "believe in Christ," and "gospel") to cope with a system that does not smile on conflict.

Christian groups do not like doctrinal tension because it suggests Christianity is not a mapped-out, logical belief system. If people disagree on an important topic, it means something isn't clear. But if we use vague words, then no one is disagreeing with anyone and we can all pretend we are saying the same thing.

¹To see other examples of Jesus as similar to, but surpassing, Moses as revealer of God's Word, compare *John 5:39*; *6:68*; and *12:50*.

Rather than being so frightened of internal friction, we should be more wary of what is lost by stifling debate and undervaluing precision. Attempting to resolve a fuzzy topic, like “salvation,” can lead to a greater grasp of many things.

With that in mind, I believe I can put a fine point on what Jesus means when He says **I am the Bread of Life**.

Bread of Life = God’s Word = New Covenant’s Law

Don’t act so surprised.

There are four separate ideas pointing to this claim.

1. John describes Jesus as **the Word made flesh**, and Jesus identifies the bread and wine of communion with His body.
2. Jesus says He is the true bread from heaven, contrasted with the manna sent to the Israelites in *Exodus 16:31–35*. This manna was itself a symbol of God’s word as described in *Deuteronomy 8:3*.
3. When Satan tempts Jesus to turn a rock into bread, Christ’s reply in *Matthew 4:4* confirms the manna as a symbol for God’s word.
4. In *Matthew 16:6*, Jesus tells the disciples to **beware the leaven of the Pharisees**. In *16:12* we find out He is referring to **false teaching** and in *Luke 12:1* it is described as **hypocrisy**, suggesting they have contaminated the Law, leaving it inadequate to keep people in God’s covenant, just as the leavening of bread makes it unfit for use in the Jewish rituals prescribed by the covenant. See *Luke 11:52*.

If bread is a symbol for God’s word, many verses in John’s gospel gain clearer meaning. For example, *John 6:32* conveys the same ideas as *3:13* and *7:22*, emphasizing that Moses did not create the Law but only brought it.

In *John 6:48*, Jesus contrasts Himself with the manna the ancient Israelites received: **Your fathers ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. This is the bread which comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die.** This is a false comparison if you take *die* in the normal sense. We die just as the Israelites did.

However, after receiving the manna and the Law, what happens? A year later they are worshiping the golden calf. Half a year after that they lose faith while on the verge of entering the promised land. The word translated **perish** is the same word (in both Greek and Hebrew) used to convey that someone is **lost** in the sense of wandering away. So Jesus could be describing how the Israelites could not stay faithful.

Another interesting verse is *John 3:14*. Why would John bring up the story from *Numbers 21:5–9*? There are other examples (such as Moses' intercession after the people worshipped the golden calf in *Exodus 32:31–32*) Jesus could have alluded to if the point was to show His intercession for us. Why mention the snakes?

One reason might be that Jesus' death heals our spirits from the poison of Satan. But there is also the point that the snakes were sent when Israel detested the bread they had been given. *Numbers 21:5* says **our souls detest this worthless food**. Perhaps John, commenting to his readers, chose to reference a story where the Israelites detested the bread they had been given just as the Jews had rejected Christ, a point John states explicitly in *John 1:11*.

The depiction of eating Jesus' flesh (*John 6:53*) and the symbolism in communion attain greater meaning when we see Jesus giving us the bread we eat — the Word of God internalized = the Holy Spirit. Compare this to Jesus' statement against the Pharisees in *John 5:38* and *8:37*. I will describe another way to understand Christ's words at the Last Supper in chapter 11.

This linkage also gives extra meaning to Christ's retort when His disciples come to Him in *Matthew 14:16* asking him to send the masses away so they could get food: **They do not need to go away; you give them something to eat**. These disciples would later give the Holy Spirit, and hence God's Word, to those who believe.

Misreading Parables

John captures Jesus' teachings in abstract dialogues. In Matthew, Mark, and Luke, homages to the expansion of God's kingdom are seen in Jesus' parables.

We'll talk later how we 21st-century types pillage the Old Testament prophecies, taking those we like while leaving unrespected the treasure trove lying between Isaiah and Malachi. We perpetrate the same crime with Christ's parables. We read them as though Christ is talking directly to us Western, modern Christians and rip away what we want. This philosophy essentially assumes Jesus did not care about the 1st-century Jews He spoke to. We simply cannot read the words Jesus spoke to the Jews and interpret them within the framework of a Christian philosophy 1900 years in the making. Jesus came to save **the lost sheep of the house of Israel**, and His disciples only ministered to Judah for nearly a decade after His death. Any interpretation of His parables that does not consider His Jewish audience shows an arrogance beyond simple ethnocentrism.

I'll give four examples of misconstrued parables from the book of Luke. Others can be found in Matthew and Mark. Keep in mind the context — the Jews were God's people. Christ is heralding not only the reunification of Judah and Israel as foretold in the prophets (e.g., *Jeremiah 3:18*; *Ezekiel 37:19*; and *Hosea 1:11*), but the inclusion of all people into God's nation (e.g., *Isaiah 11:10–12*).

Modern Christians understandably have a hard time reading the gospels in this context because the idea of God's Word and special grace being available to only one nation seems foreign. However, it certainly wasn't foreign to the Jews. Their entire culture was based on being God's special people, blessed with the Law that separated them from the Gentiles.

There were two problems with this arrangement. First, God wanted the whole world to have the blessing of the Word. The second is that the Jews had not done much with the gifts they had been given. They had failed to be a light to the nations. Instead of the nations looking upon them and deciding the Living God was worth following, Judah's hypocrisy and backsliding had caused them to become a **curse among the nations**, as described in *Zechariah 13:8*.

The Lost Sheep, Coin, and Son

Luke 15 contains three parables about the lost. In the first a shepherd goes looking for one sheep even though it means leaving 99 others behind. In the second a woman turns her house upside down looking for a lost coin without paying any mind to the nine she has in safe keeping. In the third a son asks for his inheritance early and leaves home. He squanders his wealth and ends up serving foreigners in another land. Coming to his senses, he returns home, whereupon the father throws him a party. The son's older brother is upset with his father because he has worked obediently without reward for years.

Keep in mind that these parables all teach the same thing, as indicated by the concluding lines of each (see verses 7, 10, and 32 of *Luke 15*).

Common Interpretations

Christians take all sorts of things from these parables. Most people take away things they want to hear. The teachings that are read into the stories are not necessarily incorrect; they just have little to do with the parables' intent.

For example, these parables are not about how God pursues us — the younger son was not pursued. Nor are they about how God "will always take you back" — the lost coin and the lost sheep did nothing to be found.

When you put a modern gospel spin on them, it gets worse. Things go hay-wire when you try to make The Prodigal Son a parable meant to teach salvation by grace. I've read commentators make a huge deal about how the son wanted to come back and work for his father, but his father wouldn't let him, as though Jesus' point is that you cannot work for what God wants to give. This interpretation should be dismissed out of hand as it expands one fragment to dominate the rest. In addition, there are four more explicit problems:

- This nuance would be meaningless to the Jews and Luke's readers, and he makes no effort to emphasize the point.
- This teaching does not show up in the other two parables.
- The between the father and the older son does not support this message. The father does not dismiss his son's toil: **everything I have is yours.**
- Such a teaching rather violently opposes other scripture (e.g., *John 6:27*).

Another issue is Jesus' total focus on repentance. That is the moral given at the end of the first two parables . . . **there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous people who have no need to repent.** There is no mention of faith, sacrifice, or Judgment.

It should be obvious that this parable is not a direct call to prodigal sons if we look at the moral again. Jesus says the point of the parable is that God is pleased when people repent. Why would people who hate God care about that? If you are the type of person who is compelled to do something purely because it pleases God, chances are you not a lost sheep!

There's a more direct reason why we know these parables are not about bringing prodigal sons home. Interpretations that focus on how God takes back anyone often fail to explain the emphasis placed on the dialogue between the father and the older son. This is a grievous error because generally the concluding content of a parable is the most important. Any interpretation of the prodigal son parable that focuses on the younger son is doomed from the beginning.

More Accurate Interpretation

If we fully take into consideration Jesus' Jewish audience, it's much easier to identify what these parables are getting at.

Let's take a deeper look at the prodigal son. He is an ungrateful son who essentially desires his father dead. The younger son wants nothing to do with his father except to have his inheritance. The rebellious youth shows no interest in abiding by his father's rules. His dissolute living causes him to lose everything he had been given, things he had not worked for himself, and he ends up serving

foreigners in another land because of it. Jesus specifies he tended **pigs**, indicating that the boy served the Gentiles after losing everything.

This is all a neon sign pointing to one conclusion: *The younger son is Israel!*

David united all 12 original tribes of Israel. When Solomon (his son) sinned, God ripped the 10 northern tribes from him. These 10 tribes became known as Israel while the land of the lower 2 tribes was known as Judah.

Israel fell away when their rulers forced idolatry upon them. God had given them all the land they had, and they began worshipping golden statues. Soon they were overtaken and enslaved by Assyria. They intermingled with Assyrians and other races. Their descendants were the Samaritans the Jews despised. They were worse than mere Gentiles. They were viewed as traitors (*as were the tax collectors in the preamble to these parables: Luke 15:1–2!*).

Thus, Israel matches up strikingly with the younger son. They had been given everything by God, refused to follow the Law, lost everything due to their ungodly behavior, and eventually were enslaved by Gentiles. Repeatedly Israel's unfaithfulness is referred to as **harlotry**,² and how does the older son refer to the younger? He says he has **devoured your assets with prostitutes**. Samaritans were hated by Jews who saw themselves as the righteous people in God's house and had no interest in reaching out to their fellow sons of Jacob.³

This parable is a slap in the face to the Pharisees who felt entitled to hate their sinful brothers. Jesus is describing how a son who truly desired the joy of his father would heartily welcome the son back. The Jews should not begrudge their foolish brother reentry into God's household, which this parable foreshadows. (Israel later came to symbolize all Gentile nations.)

Jesus is extending the point He made in the Parable of the Good Samaritan, where He said the Jews had to consider even the Samaritans as their neighbors.

The Rich Man and Lazarus

The parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus (*Luke 16:19–31*) tells the story of a rich man and Lazarus, a beggar, who both die. The rich man is taken to Hades and Lazarus is taken to **Abraham's bosom**. The rich man looks up from Hades, sees Abraham, and asks him to send Lazarus to **dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, because I am in great pain in this fire**.

²*Jeremiah 3:8–9* is but one example of this.

³Speaking of sons of Jacob, there is yet another parallel between the sons in the parable and the kingdoms of Israel and Judah when we consider Jacob's literal sons, but it takes a bit to explain.

Abraham tells him this is impossible because a **great chasm has been fixed between us** and mentions how earlier in his life the rich man had the **good things** while Lazarus had the **bad things**. The rich man then asks Abraham to send Lazarus to his **father's house** to warn them **so they do not come into this place of torment**. Abraham tells him it will do no good because his five brothers would not believe him.

Common Interpretations

Modern Christians immediately turn this into a discussion of faith in Christ, as it foreshadows Christ's own rising from the dead and the Jews' response. While there is certainly something to this, the "faith in Christ" indicated by this parable would not be the kind of faith or belief we normally think of.

Christians also use this parable to emphasize the torments of hell and how they can happen immediately after death. Conversely, they claim people can go immediately to paradise with God after death.⁴

The problem is that none of the above makes any sense when you understand Christ's point here. If you take this parable as a discussion of heaven and hell, you might as well also say that people go to heaven if they are poor and all rich people go to hell. As L. Ray Smith⁵ has pointed out, the parable does not say one good thing about Lazarus at all. It certainly does not claim he had any faith.

Indeed, nothing in the parable refers to belief in Christ. When the rich man speaks of sending Lazarus to his brothers, he does not want them to "believe." He asks Lazarus to tell them to **repent**. The discussion of belief in *Luke 16:31* refers to convincing the brothers of the danger to those who do not do God's will.

Hades and Hell

The final reason we cannot take this parable as having anything to do with heaven and hell is that it *isn't about hell*. The word used is Hades. It is just the place of the dead. Linguistically the word means "unseen."

It is the Greek equivalent of sheol, the Hebrew word for where *all* people were assumed to go when they die. For example, the prophet Samuel is raised *up* from the pit in *1st Samuel 28:3–15*. Samuel was a righteous prophet of God,

⁴Even Jesus did not ascend immediately to the Father, as shown in *John 20:17*. Whether *Luke 23:43* argues differently depends on what word order and punctuation you use.

⁵I don't agree with much of what Smith says, but he must be given credit for relentlessly seeking biblical truth. I am indebted to him for much of the material in this section.

yet he was still in Hades. Peter makes the same remark about David still being there in *Acts 2:29*.

The Jews' theology regarding the afterlife had changed greatly over the years. One popular idea was (and still is) that people are purified through fire for a time after death. After the soul is smelted, it can move on.

When Jesus wants to talk about eternal torment, He doesn't use the word Hades. He uses the word Gehenna, which is properly translated as hell in most Bibles. Hades is a symbol for separation from the land of the living. Christ Himself was in Hades for a time while dead. That is why we read in *Acts 2:27–31* of His soul not being allowed to **remain** in Hades.

Hades and Death are themselves thrown into **the lake of fire** in *Revelation 20:14* after the souls of the dead have been taken from them, symbolizing the defeat of Death (see *1st Corinthians 15:26*).

More Accurate Interpretation

This parable is not about the Judgment at all. The parable foreshadows the transfer of God's grace from the Jews to the Gentiles.

The rich man represents Judah. They have enjoyed God's blessings, the Word, the Bread of Life, but they have not done much to help other nations. He has **five brothers** (Judah had 5 brothers). Abraham calls him **child**, and we are told they **have Moses and the prophets**. Jesus goes out of His way to say he wore fine **purple** clothing, which symbolized royalty. Judah was considered the ruling tribe for all Israel (see *Genesis 49:10*).

Lazarus represents the Gentiles. He is begging with the **dogs**, a common epithet for the Gentiles (*Mark 7:27–28*). The beggar's name must be important; in what other parable is such information given? The Hebrew version of "Lazarus" is Eliezer, the name of Abraham's steward (*Genesis 15:2*) who was to inherit everything Abraham had, but ended up getting nothing after Isaac's birth.

Notice where Lazarus is: at the rich man's **gate**. Gentiles who held the central doctrine of Judaism — God is One — and kept the seven Noahide Laws were called **Geirei toshav**: Proselytes at the gate. They were not Jews and had refused circumcision, but they were considered more righteous than those Gentiles who had not abandoned idolatry. They did not have to keep the entire Law, and *the Jewish leaders were not required to give them financial aid* (unlike full proselytes who were qualified for such support). They could worship in the courts of the Gentiles, but could not cross the *gate* between that court and the temple. Speaking of which, the clothing the rich man wore was fine linen, the same type of material specified for Judah's priests.

The **good things** discussed here do not refer to eternal life or bliss. These men represent whole nations, and the **good things** Abraham speaks of refers to what Jesus' Jewish listeners thought of as good — God's favor and providence. Notably, the text of *Luke 11:13* places **the Holy Spirit** in parallel to **good gifts**.

Jesus speaks of a cosmic switch where Abraham's natural children find themselves on the wrong side of the Jordan, the river separating the promised land from the godless nations. The Greek word in the last part of *Luke 16:26* is the word for crossing water. It's no accident that just before this parable, Jesus says:

The law and the prophets were in force until John, since then the good news of the kingdom of God has been proclaimed, and everyone is urged to enter it (*Luke 16:16*).

This gives us a better idea of what aspect of the gospel Luke wanted to emphasize. Paul's gospel revolved about the removal of the Mosaic law as a barrier to the Gentiles. Luke was a protégé of Paul, so we are not surprised to find Luke emphasizing that feature. Jesus is saying that up until John the Baptist, the Law was a dividing wall between Israel and those who were not part of God's people. But now the removal of this partition is declared, and all people are urged to know God and be known to God.

Of course, I cannot stop myself from pointing out that Jesus immediately (*Luke 16:17*) clarifies that God's commandments are in no way abrogated by the removal of this division — **But it is easier for heaven and earth to pass away than for one tittle of the law to become void.**

The Gospel of Paul

No treatment of the Gentile's advent into the kingdom is complete without a discussion of Paul. The next chapter is devoted to him, but here I want to stress simply how much he saw the entry of the Gentiles *as* the gospel. We 21st-century Gentiles can hardly understand the importance this message had to Paul, a conservative Jew who was **entrusted with the gospel to the uncircumcised just as Peter was to the circumcised** (*Galatians 2:7*).

Imagine you have a place of command in Judaism, a religion whose adherents hold themselves as God's chosen people and use the term "unrighteous" to refer to anyone outside the covenant. You're attacking the disciples of a heretical Rabbi causing trouble within the religion, and all of a sudden you receive a vision that turns your world upside down. The heretic whose followers you are persecuting not only turns out to be righteous, but is in fact the Messiah. That

Messiah, the rightful King of Israel, desires to call unrighteous Gentiles to Him, and *you* are going to be His method of doing so!

Paul's evangelism centers upon the unification of all creation under Christ, and in particular the inclusion of Gentiles as equal heirs to Christ's kingdom. **Christ redeemed us from the curse of the Law**, Paul says in *Galatians 3:13–14* . . . **in order that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham would come to the Gentiles**. In addition to showing Gentile inclusion as Paul's focus, a careful reading of *Galatians 3:16–18* allows us to deduce two important points:

- The Spirit is proof that God is fulfilling the Promise to Abraham.⁶
- This promise is the inheritance Paul declares comes from faith in Christ rather than from keeping the old covenant.

The emphasis Paul gives to this message of unification in Christ through the Spirit is staggering. Paul's gospel is not one of grace overcoming God's wrath on an individual, eschatological basis so we can go to heaven. Paul's gospel describes how God, through grace, has **opened a door of faith** for the Gentiles, allowing them to join the Jews in obedience to the Living God. The Gentile nations had done nothing for God, and Israel had utterly failed to keep its covenant with the Almighty. However, grace upon grace, God *still* sends Jesus to unite all people through the Spirit. That is Paul's gospel:

Romans 15:18 **For I will not dare to speak of anything except what Christ had accomplished through me in order to bring about the obedience of the Gentiles, by word and deed. . .**

Galatians 3:8 **And the scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, proclaimed the gospel to Abraham ahead of time. . .**

Ephesians 3:6 . . . **through the gospel the Gentiles are fellow heirs, fellow members of the body, and fellow partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus.**

Ephesians 2:14–16 is particularly striking. Why did Jesus nullify the law? . . . **to create in His flesh one new man out of two. . .** What was the hostility Jesus' sacrifice was neutralizing? . . . **the middle wall of partition.**

This passage also illustrates Paul's point in *Colossians 2:13–15*, which uses similar language and yet is used to support a different theology. The New International Version, for example, translates *Colossians 2:14* as . . . **having canceled the written code, with its regulations, that was against us and that stood opposed to us; he took it away, nailing it to the cross.** This is a perfectly

⁶Peter's discussion of the promise to Abraham (*Acts 3:25–26*) being fulfilled by the Holy Spirit's work supports this understanding as well.

fine translation. What is insane is when people suggest Paul refers to Christ's sacrifice canceling the debt we owe to God by transgressing this **written code**.

The Gentiles whom Paul addressed didn't have a written code (the Mosaic law)! How can Paul be suggesting that the Gentiles owe God due to sinning against a Law they were never given?

Paul's point in *Colossians 2:13–15*, as in the Ephesians passage, is that the **written code** with its **ordinances** (like circumcision, observations of special days, and dietary laws — *exactly the things referred to two verses later in 2:16*) was opposed to Gentiles because it separated them from God's people — a division that had become more severe as Gentiles oppressed the Jews and the Jews saw all Gentiles as sinners (for they did not have or follow God's Law).

Paul describes how God has dealt with this hostility from both sides. No longer does the Mosaic law keep Gentiles out of God's kingdom, and at the same time God has forgiven the Gentile's past sins, allowing peace between the two nations. Notably, **peace** occurs three times in *Ephesians 2:14–17* and is the purpose given for Christ's death: **He did this to create in himself one new man out of two, thus making peace, and to reconcile them both in one body to God through the cross, by which the hostility has been killed.** Recall the "hostility" here is not between God and humanity but between those who have the Law and those who do not, see *Ephesians 2:14*. All four times the underlying Greek word (**phragmos**) for partition is used in the New Testament, it refers to a division between God's people and everyone else.

Paul is certainly not suggesting Christ's death frees us from the very real danger of sin, or else *Colossians 3:5–6* would look pretty stupid. In case that wasn't clear enough, Paul reiterates the point in *3:25*. Paul's exhortation is that we follow Christ's commands rather than those of the world.

Christ's destruction of this wall between Jew and Gentile had tremendous practical importance, for Paul was the chief apostle to Gentiles. However, the removal of this wall was part of a grander unification of all things in Christ. There is an undeniable horizontal component to Paul's gospel, and he uses the word **peace** over forty times. Six times he calls the Almighty the **God of peace**, and his desire for peace within the church is a principal reason he warns Timothy and Titus of controversy caused by doctrine. Paul demands we be mindful of the spiritual welfare of fellow believers and desires us to all have peace within ourselves as well, urging us to be content with what we have and find fulfillment in Christ.⁷

⁷*Romans 15:33; 16:20; 1st Corinthians 14:33; 2nd Corinthians 13:11; Philippians 4:9–13; 1st Thessalonians 5:23; 1st Timothy 6:4–8; and Titus 1:11*

Summary and Final Notes

God's nation was opened to the Gentiles by God's Word being sent to them, first by Christ and later by the Holy Spirit. Jesus is a new Torah written on the hearts of believers. Just as it says in *Jeremiah 31:33*:

But this is the covenant I will make. . . I will put my law in them and on their heart I will write it. I will be their God, and they shall be My people.

This chapter described how Gentiles were added to God's people by receiving the Word, and in chapter eleven I'll discuss the other half of the ingress — being received into God's *house*, the temple.

The opening of God's house and the transfer of God's favor from Judah to all who follow Christ represent key ideas in Christ's preaching. I've described how a few of His parables predict these events. The parables of the tenants (*Mark 12:1–11*; *Luke 20:9–19*; and *Matthew 21:33–41*) and the fig tree (*Matthew 21:19*; *Mark 11:12–21*; and *Luke 21:29–33*) are of this type.

These clear parables are not hard to interpret because they predict only the passing of the kingdom due to Judah's failure to do God's work. The problem occurs when the return of Christ in Judgment is mixed in. Recall that *everyone* thought Jesus was coming back very soon. The generation that heard Christ saw themselves as the **firstfruits of the feast to come**,⁸ a type of transition phase before Christ returned to usher in the New Jerusalem.⁹ Many of His parables appear to blend these two ideas, seeing the Judgment not as an ending but as a new beginning where God's people could do God's work. Jesus clearly laments that the Jews will be cut off from His light, but it is not always clear if that happens at the Judgment or earlier. Passages like *Matthew 23:37–39* suggest it occurred when the Jews rejected Him. Other passages describing the transfer of the kingdom mix the idea of the transfer or enlargement of the kingdom with Christ's return (e.g., the parables of the talents [*Matthew 25:14–30*], the minas [*Luke 19:11–27*], the harvest [*Matthew 20:1–16*], the great supper [*Luke 14:15–24*], and the wedding feast [*Matthew 22:1–14*]). This last one is particularly hard for "free gift"ers to put a modern spin on given that the concluding remark is . . . **for many are called but few are chosen**.

These parables were particularly important to record in the gospels due to the importance of making peace between Gentiles and Christian Jews in the

⁸*James 1:18*

⁹*Revelation 14:4; 21:2*

early church. In particular, they served to discourage Christian Jews from requiring Gentiles to follow the Jewish cultural laws. If we try to read these teachings without considering the context and political situation of their audience, we cannot hope to understand Jesus' message.

It is this destruction of the dividing walls between Gentile and Jew that Paul describes as God's will all along, kept secret through ages past. As apostle to the Gentiles (*Galatians 2:7*), Paul's letters focused on interactions between Gentiles and Jews in the early church. He portrays as a principal part of the gospel the unification of all under Christ.

He calls the justification of the Gentiles **the gospel** in *Galatians 3:8*, says the reason Jesus came was to remove the hostility between Jew and Gentile in *Ephesians 2:14–16*, declares the Gentiles **fellow heirs** through **the gospel** in *Ephesians 3:6*, and says the receipt of the Holy Spirit was the reason Christ **became a curse for us** in *Galatians 3:13–14*.