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Pastor, College Church, Wheaton, Illinois

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—J. Ligon Duncan III
Senior Minister, First Presbyterian Church, Jackson, Mississippi
President, Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals
Adjunct Professor, Reformed Theological Seminary
Chairman, Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood

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—C. J. Mahaney
Sovereign Grace Ministries
Author, *The Cross Centered Life*

“This outstanding series of bird’s-eye studies of the New Testament books will enable all Christians to feed deeper from God’s Word and equip teachers to feed others. They expand the mind, warm the heart, and challenge the will.”

—Vaughan Roberts
Rector, St. Ebbe’s Church, Oxford, England
Author, *God’s Big Picture*

“Unusually prophetic utterances from the heart of the nation’s capital, these overview introductions to the most salient truths of each book of the New Testament are vintage Mark Dever. Dever’s scholarship abounds as all of his knowledge is here poured into truths that will transform a person, a church, or a nation.”

—Paige Patterson
President, Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary,
Fort Worth, Texas

“Is biblical exposition a lost art? Not if this book is any indication. Dr. Mark E. Dever is a masterful expositor who combines stellar scholarship with a tremendous ability to communicate God’s revealed truth. These sermons and essays represent more than brief introductions to the books of the New Testament. Mark Dever helps draw the reader into the text and texture of each book, while providing a constant frame of reference that sees the New Testament not only as a collection of books but as a book in itself—telling the Christian story and grounding the church in God’s truth. This book is a gem—and it belongs on every Christian’s bookshelf.”

—R. Albert Mohler, Jr.
President, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary,
Louisville, Kentucky

“Many Bible readers know individual verses and sometimes even chapters but often do not see the message of books as a whole. They are familiar with individual trees while failing to see the forest. They are in great danger of misinterpreting the parts of the Bible they read because they do not see the entire structure of a Gospel like John or an epistle like Ephesians. Mark Dever fills a gaping need with his sermons on each of the individual books. Readers will be given a vision of the landscape of each of the New Testament books. Pastors will see the importance of preaching sermons that cover an entire book. All will be strengthened by the biblical truth, the insightful introductions, and the relevant application found in this work.”

—Thomas R. Schreiner
Teaching Minister, Clifton Baptist Church
Professor of New Testament, Associate Dean for
Scripture and Interpretation, The Southern Baptist
Theological Seminary, Louisville, Kentucky

“The heart of biblical preaching is exposition: explaining what the text of Scripture is saying and applying it. But sometimes this approach is allowed to degenerate into laborious verse-by-verse expositions in which the larger view of the forest easily becomes lost to the minute details of the trees. This book provides an encouragement for another way which complements the systematic exposition of whole units of the biblical literature. Mark Dever’s approach is thematic without ignoring the literary and theological structure of the books and is thus a stimulus to doctrinal preaching. This is not only a book for preachers but a challenging read for all who listen to sermons.”

—Graeme Goldsworthy
Moore Theological College, Sydney

THE MESSAGE OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

P R O M I S E S K E P T

MARK DEVER

**FOREWORD BY
JOHN MACARTHUR**

CROSSWAY BOOKS

**A PUBLISHING MINISTRY OF
GOOD NEWS PUBLISHERS
WHEATON, ILLINOIS**

The Message of the New Testament: Promises Kept

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Published by Crossway Books
a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers
1300 Crescent Street
Wheaton, Illinois 60187

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Cover design: Josh Dennis

Cover photo: Getty Images

First printing 2005

Printed in the United States of America

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All emphases in Scripture citations have been added by the author.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Dever, Mark.

The message of the New Testament : promises kept / Mark Dever.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 1-58134-716-2 (HC : alk. paper)

1. Bible. N.T.—Criticism, interpretation, etc. 2. Bible. N.T.—Sermons.

3. Baptists—Sermons. 4. Sermons, American—21st century. I. Title.

BS2361.3.D48 2005

225.6—dc22

2005013979

SB	14	13	12	11	10	09	08	07	06	05				
15	14	13	12	11	10	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1

FOREWORD

THERE IS, OF COURSE, more than one valid approach to biblical exposition. When the preacher surveys a long section of biblical text, he is able to expound on large ideas and present the grand flow of biblical logic in a panoramic way. When he deals with smaller sections in more careful detail, he can home in on specific issues and explain them in greater depth. There are advantages and disadvantages to both styles. Both methods have a legitimate place in biblical preaching.

From time to time, I have done surveys of large passages of Scripture. I once preached through the entire New Testament in six day-long sessions in one week for a group of Russian pastors. On other occasions, I have surveyed whole chapters, groups of chapters, or entire books of Scripture in a single sermon. (One of the most popular sermons I have preached was a single message covering the whole book of Revelation, titled “A Jet Tour Through Revelation.”)

Yet these types of overviews have been the rare exceptions to my normal approach. For most of my ministry, as I have preached through the New Testament, I have given careful attention to words, phrases, and verses, usually devoting whole sermons to a select phrase from a single verse. That is how I have worked my way systematically through book after book of Scripture: phrase by phrase, verse by verse, line upon line, precept upon precept. By that method, it has taken me thirty-five years to cover most of the New Testament, and I am not yet finished.

In stark contrast, Mark Dever used twenty-eight sermons in the early years of his ministry at Capitol Hill Baptist Church in Washington, D.C. to preach through the entire New Testament—one sermon for each of the twenty-seven books of the New Testament and one extra sermon that surveys the whole New Testament. He is uniquely and supremely gifted to teach in this manner.

Fortunately for us, Pastor Dever’s sermons on the whole New Testament have been collected in this book, and I think it will give you a new and deep appreciation for how valuable the overview approach can be. This is a won-

derful survey of the entire New Testament, unfolding its big picture—and the central themes of each book—with amazing clarity and accuracy. I found the book hard to put down.

Having done relatively little of this type of survey-style exposition, I know how difficult it is to do well. Mark Dever does it superbly. He covers a broad range of topics, always succinctly, accurately, and with remarkable care and clarity. He is very good at seeing the big picture, which is not always an easy thing to do. But he makes it look easy, and the result is a valuable tool that I know will help thousands to understand the New Testament more accurately.

I am grateful for Mark Dever's obvious love for God's Word, his commitment to handling Scripture carefully, his willingness to take the truth of the Bible seriously, and his ability to teach it so clearly. All of that comes through powerfully in this book. My prayer is that the Lord will bless these pages to the hearts of thousands of readers.

—John MacArthur
Pastor, Grace Community Church,
Sun Valley, California
President, The Master's College and Seminary

INTRODUCTION: GETTING A WINDOW SEAT

SOME THINGS CAN BE seen only from a great height. Go to the highest point in a city and what do you see? Sweeping vistas that both delight and inform. “Wow, look how far the city stretches out.” “Oh, that’s how the street system works.”

If you are anything like me, you love these views. When out-of-town friends visit, I like to take them to the roof of our church building. Looking out, we can see the Capitol Hill neighborhood as well as numerous landmarks of both Capitol Hill and the city of Washington. The view reminds me of the unusual community God has placed us in. And by this view we are thrilled and challenged and inspired.

Back in college, I enjoyed reading my Bible and praying out on a dormitory fire-escape that had a good view of the campus.

The window seat on an airplane is also a must for me. “That’s Chicago!” “Look at the Grand Canyon!” “Did you have any idea this area had so many lakes?”

I remember the first time I flew back to America with my family after living in England for a few years. Once the airplane was over the American landscape, I peered out the window and was reminded of how vast and unpeopled the American continent is, especially compared to the quilt-work cultivation you see when you glance out the window over Great Britain. Seeing the two landscapes from a great height put them into a different perspective and gave me a far richer understanding of them.

That is what I hoped these “overview sermons” would do for my congregation, and what I hope they will do for you.

When you compare these sermons to most sermons you have heard, I think you will find them unusual. Sermons typically come in a couple of varieties. Some people preach *topical* sermons, which focus on a particular topic such

as money, parenting, heaven, or repentance. The sermons in this book are not topical in that sense.

Other people preach *expositional* sermons. An expositional sermon takes a portion of Scripture, explains it, and then applies it to the life of the congregation. The sermon text might be something like “Honor your father and mother” or “Jesus wept” or Ephesians 2:1-10 or Psalm 23.

The sermons in this book are more expositional than topical, but they are expositional with a difference. Rather than looking at particular Scripture passages through a microscope, we are looking down from an airplane.

Some expositional preachers may feel that their seriousness in preaching God’s Word shows itself in how many years they spend in one particular book. Maybe you have heard someone say, “Our church just spent eighteen weeks in Jude!” or a pastor testifying, “When I arrived at the church two-and-a-half years ago, I began in Matthew chapter 1, and we are just now getting to the Sermon on the Mount.” Then, of course, there are the Puritan ministers like Joseph Caryl or William Gouge, who spent several decades in Job and Hebrews, respectively! Can you imagine being in Job on Sunday morning for decades?

Do not misunderstand me. God’s Word is inspired and worth a lifetime of study. We can legitimately preach for decades on any book of the Bible. God’s Word contains beauties to be seen through careful consideration that the more impatient among us will never see. I do worry that such preaching runs the danger of becoming topical preaching under the guise of expositional preaching. It can also deprive people of learning about all the different parts of God’s Word.

There is another kind of expositional preaching that is, I think, more rare, but that also serves the church well. This is what I call an “overview sermon,” like the ones contained in this volume. An overview sermon attempts to give the burden of one particular Bible book in a single message. If a typical expositional sermon makes the point of the biblical text the point of the sermon, an overview sermon simply makes the point of a whole book the point of the sermon. I have preached these sermons based on the conviction that aspects of God and his plans can be seen most clearly not only when studying the microscopic structure of one phrase in one verse but when examining a book as a whole.

Now, preparing these sermons is more difficult than preparing a sermon on smaller portions of Scripture. But like an invigorating hike up a mountain, they provide views that are rarely seen, views breathtaking in their beauty and stunning in their usefulness.

I cannot remember when I first thought of preaching sermons like this. It

may have been when I was discipling a recent Muslim convert and asked him to teach me the book of Hebrews in three meetings (I thought he would learn it better by teaching me). At each meeting, I would read a sentence or two from Hebrews and ask him where the verse fit into the book's argument. I did not so much care if he could tell me chapter and verse references; I was more concerned about whether he understood the overall flow of the book, and how any one idea from the book fit into that flow.

As we worked through Hebrews this way, I found that an overview was beneficial not just for my friend but also for me as a pastor. When I preach a passage like Ephesians 2, do I approach the chapter in context? That is, am I using chapter 2 in the same way Paul uses chapter 2 within his larger argument as it unfolds in Ephesians?

The Hebrews overview also got me to thinking about my congregation. I want the members of my church to become so familiar with the books of the Bible that they know how to turn there as easily as they turn to popular Christian books. So when members of the church struggle with conflict, I will encourage them to read the book on conflict resolution by Ken Sande, but I also want them to have been trained by an overview sermon to immediately ask themselves, "I wonder what James says about this situation?" When members want to learn about the Christian life, let them read C. S. Lewis and J. I. Packer; but let them also think to read 1 Peter and 1 John! When people struggle with discouragement, by all means read Ed Welch on depression; but also read Revelation! When people worry they are slipping into legalism, I hope they know to reach for Martin Luther or C. J. Mahaney on the cross-centered life; but I also hope they know to reach for Galatians. I am even happy for the congregation to read Dever on the church, but I would prefer for them to know Paul's argument in 1 Corinthians.

Obviously, I can preach this kind of sermon in my own church only sixty-six times. This volume presents the twenty-seven sermons I preached on the twenty-seven books of the New Testament (with one more sermon thrown in that I preached on the New Testament as a whole). Hopefully, these sermons are not just dry lectures; nor, hopefully, are they just random thoughts on my favorite verses from each book. Rather, I preached each of these sermons with the conviction that they were genuine expositions of God's Word—except that the passages were a little larger than the passages I normally expound. In each sermon, I attempted to present the weight and balance of the Bible book, with applications that represent the original thrust of the book but that also applied to our congregation at the time I first preached the sermon. In recognition of how time-bound the sermons are, we have included the date on which each sermon was first preached at the beginning of every chapter. Yet in recognition

of the continuing relevance of God's Word, these sermons are offered for your consideration as well.

I hope you are encouraged by how the various Gospels hold up the life of Jesus Christ, or how Paul presents the church in 1 Corinthians, or what Peter says is normal for Christian lives in 1 Peter, or what the elderly prisoner John perceives in his triumphant vision of God's sovereignty over the world in Revelation.

What a benefit I have known in my own life from preparing these studies! How they have familiarized me with the arguments of the various books, so that I understand each of their parts more in context! How I pray they have blessed our own congregation!

Now, we commit them to you, with our prayers and wishes that you, too, will be surprised, delighted, and edified as long-familiar books take on new aspects of coherence and power and conviction.

—Mark Dever
Capitol Hill Baptist Church
Washington, D.C.
May 2005

THE MESSAGE OF THE NEW TESTAMENT: PROMISES KEPT

PROMISES KEPT¹

In 1858, the Illinois legislature elected Stephen A. Douglas to the office of U.S. senator instead of Abraham Lincoln. Afterward, a sympathetic friend asked Lincoln how he felt, to which he responded, “Well, a little bit like the boy who stubbed his toe; I am too big to cry and too badly hurt to laugh.” As a pastor on Capitol Hill, I am struck every election season by how one person’s political victory is someone else’s political loss. No matter who wins an election, a vast number of people—up to half—are disappointed. People become so involved in partisan politics that election seasons can be a time of great hope for some and, just as surely, great disappointment for others.

Sometimes we can bear disappointment well. Some people are so given over to disappointment they actually seem to thrive on it. Like the character Eeyore in the Winnie-the-Pooh tales, they take comfort in looking for the dark cloud around every silver lining. For most of us, however, disappointment can feel like a sharp thrust to the heart. We do what we can just to get by.

Did you ever see the movie *Shadowlands*—the story about C. S. Lewis’s late-in-life marriage to Joy Davidman? In an opening scene of the movie, Lewis is sitting amid several of his students at Oxford and he refers to a piece of poetry that mentions the image of a perfect rosebud. Lewis asks what the image of the bud represents. One of the students responds, “Love?”

“What kind of love?” says Lewis impatiently.

“Untouched,” says a student.

“Unopened, like a bud?” says another student.

“Yes, more?”

Another student says anxiously, “Perfect love.”

“What makes it perfect?” says Lewis, “Come on, wake up.”

“Is it the courtly ideal of love?”

Now, that is a little inside Lewis joke, because Lewis had written a thesis

¹ This sermon was originally preached on September 6, 1996, at Capitol Hill Baptist Church in Washington, D.C.

on the courtly ideal of love. Still, Lewis replies, “Okay, what is that, though? What is the courtly ideal’s one essential quality?”

The students are quiet. They don’t know the answer. So Lewis himself answers: “Unattainability. The most intense joy lies not in the having, but in the desiring. The delight that never fades. Bliss that is eternal is only yours when what you most desire is just out of reach.”

Well, is that true? It sounds fine as an artistic and romantic ideal, but is life like that? Is the only lasting bliss the bliss of desire rather than fulfillment? If so, how can we have hope without the possibility of actually attaining that for which we hope? After all, the pain of disappointment is acute because the object of our desires comes close and then we miss it. Whether it is a lost election, a collapsed business scheme, a disproved theory, a canceled vacation, a piece of defeated legislation, a failed job prospect, or a departed loved one, we understand what the writer of the proverb means when he says, “Hope deferred makes the heart sick!” (Prov. 13:12). In other words, we cannot overlook what our hearts are set upon.

What do you set your hopes upon? If you cannot answer that question, you may not be able to benefit from the rest of this study. It is crucial for you and me both to answer that question: What are our hopes set upon? Many of our problems come from attaching our hopes to things that were not made to bear them. Some things hold out great promise but they prove to be passing fancies as life goes on. Other things are actually dangerous and destructive. In this old world, it is not only in politics that promises made are not necessarily promises kept.

Of course, this is where God comes in. As the one who made us, he knows how we work best. He knows what we should hope for, and he has set those very things in the Bible so that we can fix our hopes upon them. In the companion to this volume, *The Message of the Old Testament: Promises Made*,² we looked at the “big picture” of the Old Testament. Now we will do a similar overview of the New Testament.

In the Old Testament, we saw that God created the earth and then patiently bore with a people who rebelled against him. Beginning with Abraham, he chose a special people of his own. Those people, the nation of Israel, waxed and waned for almost two millennia until their once high hopes almost vanished when their nation was crushed a final time by an alien invader—the mighty Roman Empire. When this final defeat occurred, they felt disappointed to the point of heartsickness and despair. Would their deliverer never come? Would they never be restored to the fellowship with God for which they longed? Would the world never be put right?

²Mark Dever, *The Message of the Old Testament: Promises Made* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2006).

The New Testament tells the story of how all the promises made in the Old Testament were actually kept. And as we understand what God is doing in the grand scheme of history, our own disappointments and hopes will begin to fall into perspective.

In order to view the whole New Testament, we will look first at *Christ*, then at God's *covenant people*, and finally at the renewal of all of *creation*. Think of three concentric circles. First, we focus on Christ; then we expand outward to the new covenant people; and, finally, we take in all creation.

CHRIST

The first question that must be addressed concerning the New Testament is, did the deliverer whom God promised in the Old Testament actually come? The New Testament answers that Old Testament question with a resounding yes! And he is not just an ordinary human deliverer, he is God come in the flesh. The one and only Son, Jesus, perfectly displayed the Father, so that God's people might know him and be delivered from their sins. The New Testament squarely focuses on Christ. He is the heart of it all. He is the center of its message.

God has always had a plan for creation. Before history even began, the New Testament teaches, God planned to send his Son as a human to die for the sins of his people. After God created the universe and humankind, Adam and Eve rebelled against God's rightful rule. God then called a special people to himself in Abraham. Through Abraham's descendent Jacob, or Israel, the family grew to be a great nation. The majority of this nation was then destroyed by invading armies because of its sin, while the survivors were taken captive, exiled, dispersed, and only partly regathered from exile. Yet God's plan remained firmly in place through all of this. In this tattered remnant would be found the coming deliverer, the anointed one—in Hebrew, the "Messiah"; in Greek, the "Christ."

The collection of twenty-seven books that comprise the New Testament begins with four accounts of the life of this Messiah—Jesus of Nazareth. Look at the contents page in your Bible. Under the New Testament heading you will see four books at the top of the list—Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Following these four is a fifth—Acts. All five of these books argue that Jesus of Nazareth is the Messiah. These books are documentaries, as it were, of Jesus' life, and they make the case for his Messiahship. They presented to their readers the tremendous news that the promised deliverer had actually come! The one for whom God's people were waiting had come! Where Adam and Israel had failed and been unfaithful, Jesus proved faithful. He survived the temptations. He lived a life without sin. Furthermore, Jesus fulfilled God's

promise to Moses of a coming prophet (Deut. 18:15, 18-19). Jesus fulfilled God's promise to David of a coming king (2 Sam. 7:12-13). Jesus fulfilled the prophecy of the divine Son of Man witnessed by Daniel (Dan. 7:13-14). All of these promises and more were fulfilled, say these four Gospels, in Jesus of Nazareth. In fact, according to John chapter 1, Jesus was the Word of God made flesh—God himself living in human form.

Turning to these Gospels individually, we note that Matthew was probably written for a Jewish community. He stresses Jesus' fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies, such as the many prophecies about his birth. Matthew includes five major teaching sections, each of which shows Jesus to be the great prophet promised by Moses.

Mark chronicles, perhaps, the apostle Peter's recollections. The book does not say that but various things in the book make us think Mark compiled Peter's recollections about Jesus for the Roman Christians, maybe around the time Peter was killed for being a Christian. Seeing the first apostles killed, the church may have wanted to commit these things to writing. Mark's account is the shortest of all the Gospels and it may be the oldest.

Luke, the third Gospel, is sometimes called the Gospel to the Gentiles. Luke stresses that the Messiah has come not just for the Jewish people but for all the nations of the world, and he puts to good use the Old Testament prophecies that make this promise. Luke also wrote a second volume, the book of Acts. Acts is "part two" of Luke's work. It shows how Jesus actively expanded his church through his Spirit. So even after Jesus' crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension, his work continued as the church grew and as God established this new society. Luke concluded his narrative with Paul imprisoned—but still ministering—in Rome.

The fourth book is the Gospel of John, which may be the most beloved of the Gospels. It is different from the other three Gospels in some ways. It does not teach a different theology but it has an especially clear emphasis on both Jesus' identity as the Messiah and the fact that the Messiah is God himself. John explicitly states this purpose for his Gospel in chapter 20: "these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ [that is, the Messiah], the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name" (20:31).

These are the four Gospels and the book of Acts. They begin the New Testament by showing us that the promises made about the Messiah in the Old Testament have been fulfilled in Christ.³ They proclaim the good news that God has kept his promises to deliver not just his Old Testament people

³ Among many other designations, Jesus is also described as the New Adam (2 Cor. 15:45-47); the Righteous One (2 Pet. 2:15; Acts 3:14; 1 John 2:1); greater than Moses (John 1:17; 5:45-46; Heb. 3:1-6); and greater than David (Matt. 22:41-45; Acts 2:29-36). Abraham also rejoiced to see his day (John. 8:56-58).

but you and me as well, if we repent of our sins and follow his Son. If the collection of the Gospels and Acts strikes you as just a few more musty old history books, you have not read them very well. Read them again. I think you will find there is more than you suspect, even as I did when I began reading them carefully as an agnostic. The Gospels show that Jesus the Messiah is not just the Lord of people who lived two thousand years ago but is the Lord that you need in your life.

COVENANT PEOPLE

This brings us to our second concentric circle for understanding the overall message of the New Testament. Christ is at the heart of the New Testament's message, and then we move outward to his special covenant people. Glimpses of Christ's work among his people can be seen in the Gospels, especially among the disciples. Yet it really picks up momentum in the book of Acts and then in the New Testament Epistles. God himself took on human form in order to display his image in Jesus Christ, as we will consider in the Gospels. Yet the Old Testament teaches that God made human beings—all of us—in his image to display his image to creation. So as we read along in the New Testament, the transforming, image-clarity work of Christ among his special covenant people emerges as a second dominant theme.

Now, I know the word “covenant” is not used very often these days. If anything, it sounds like a legal term. In our study of the Old Testament, we thought about the “covenant” language used in ancient Israel and we found that it is not cold, legal language; it is the language of relationship. Then in the Gospels, Jesus used the language of covenant when he shared the Last Supper with his disciples: “This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you” (Luke 22:20). Covenants are used to form new relationships, which is why Jesus came: to make a new relationship for his people with God, because that relationship had been destroyed by sin.

Jesus said very strangely, toward the beginning of John, “Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days” (John 2:19). At the time, he was standing in the temple in Jerusalem; but then he told his disciples he was talking about his body (2:21-22). He himself was the temple that would be destroyed and rebuilt. He would be the new meeting place for God and his people, just as the temple in Jerusalem had been in former days. He would be the mediator between God and man. As we have already considered, Jesus Christ fulfilled the Old Testament promise that the Messiah would come as a prophet and a king. But in order to deliver his people from their sin and establish his new covenant, Jesus also fulfilled the promise that the Messiah would come as

a priest. Like the Levitical priests of the Old Testament, he would intercede between God and man with a blood sacrifice. The rescue needed by God's people, ultimately, was a rescue from their sins.

The Old Testament temple, priests, and sacrifices could not effectually accomplish (and were never intended to accomplish) that work of intercession and reconciliation, which brings us to the riddle of the Old Testament. In Exodus 34 God revealed himself as the Lord who "forgives wickedness" (see 34:7). Then in the same sentence, he said he "will not leave the guilty unpunished." The riddle is this: how can God "forgive wickedness" and yet "not leave the guilty unpunished"? The Levitical priests could not solve the riddle by sacrificing bulls and goats (Heb. 10:4). The answer is found, of course, in Jesus. Jesus came as priest, sacrifice, temple, and substitute, in order to intercede between God and man by taking upon his body God's punishment for sin. God could then forgive the wickedness of his people and yet ensure that their wickedness is punished. The New Testament provides the answer to the riddle posed in the Old. Jesus' death on the cross allowed God to both forgive and punish. Christ forms the new covenant—he reestablishes a relationship between God and his people—with his blood.

Not that the Old Testament did not foresee this. Through the prophet Isaiah, the LORD promised,

Surely he took up our infirmities
 and carried our sorrows,
 yet we considered him stricken by God,
 smitten by him, and afflicted.
 But he was pierced for our transgressions,
 he was crushed for our iniquities;
 the punishment that brought us peace was upon him,
 and by his wounds we are healed.
 We all, like sheep, have gone astray,
 each of us has turned to his own way;
 and the LORD has laid on him
 the iniquity of us all (Isa. 53:4-6).

Isaiah said these things centuries before the birth of Christ. Yet that is exactly what God did for us in Christ! It is clear from the Gospels that Jesus had meditated on the Isaiah passage and knew he would fulfill those very prophecies. So he taught his disciples, "the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45). After his resurrection, "beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself." He also told them,

“This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem” (Luke 24:27, 46-47).

Christ did not come for himself. He came for his people. As you read through the whole New Testament, you will not only find that Jesus is the Messiah, you will find what this means for you. As Paul wrote, “God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law, to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights of sons” (Gal. 4:4-5). Christ came to make a people for himself.

One of the New Testament’s most amazing passages is Revelation 5. The apostle John is given a vision of the great throne room of God in heaven. As John looks, God’s decrees for the rest of history are brought into the room on a scroll. John desperately wants to know what history contains. What has God decreed? But the scroll is sealed, so he begins to weep. An elder approaches John and says, “Do not weep! See, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has triumphed. He is able to open the scroll and its seven seals” (Rev. 5:5). John looks up to see this lion of the tribe of Judah, this mighty king of the beasts, but what does he see? “Then I saw a Lamb, looking as if it had been slain, standing in the center of the throne” (5:6). The ferocious lion that God sends to devour his enemies is a Lamb that he sends to be slain. It is not the way you or I would have rescued a people. If we had been made director and producer of the Messianic coming, we would have sent somebody who would clean up in the polls, who would win all his battles, and who would bring everything our flesh desired. But that is not the way God did it. The enemy to be devoured is sin. So he sent a sacrifice to die on our behalf. The lion of the tribe of Judah is the Lamb that was slain.

God would be completely justified to leave us all eternally separated from him in hell under the penalty of our sin, yet in his great love, God has not done that. He sent his Son, who came and lived a perfect life and who therefore deserved no wrath or punishment for sin. Christ died on the cross specifically to take the place of everyone who turns and trusts in him. In exchange for our sinfulness, we are given his holiness. In Christ, then, we are declared holy before God and are brought into a reconciled, everlasting relationship with him!

The very thing the letter of Hebrews says never happened in the Old Testament has now come to pass in the New. In the Old Testament, God’s people were only ceremonially clean. The covenant in the Old Testament was real, but partial. The prophets knew this and promised that a new covenant would come. Speaking through the prophet Jeremiah, God said,

“The time is coming,” declares the LORD,
 “when I will make a new covenant
 with the house of Israel
 and with the house of Judah.
 It will not be like the covenant
 I made with their forefathers
 when I took them by the hand
 to lead them out of Egypt,
 because they broke my covenant,
 though I was a husband to them,” declares the LORD.
 “This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel
 after that time,” declares the LORD.
 “I will put my law in their minds
 and write it on their hearts.
 I will be their God,
 and they will be my people. . . .
 For I will forgive their wickedness
 and will remember their sins no more” (Jer. 31:31-33, 34b).

Now, in the New Testament, God finally has a people who are not just ceremonially clean; the guilt of their sins has actually been removed because of Christ’s death on the cross.

As Christians, we are counted as completely righteous in Christ, and we are being made holy in our lives *today*, as attested to by our manner of living and interactions with one another. We are not perfect by any means. If you have any doubt about that, get a mirror. Nevertheless, we are growing and improving with the help of God, dealing with life in a way that brings him glory and honor, not pretending we have no disappointments, but knowing where to turn in those disappointments and where to set our hopes. God is making us his own, and we wait for the completion of his work. For on that day, we will be fully, finally, and personally holy in the way that we are now holy in Christ.

In all this, a Christian’s salvation is past, present, and future. So Paul can tell the Ephesian Christians they have been saved (Eph. 2:8-9), the Corinthian Christians they are being saved (1 Cor. 1:18), and the Roman Christians they shall be saved (Rom. 5:9). This accomplished, ongoing, and promised salvation distinguishes the covenanted people of God from the rest of humanity.

What all this means occupies almost the rest of the New Testament. If you look back at the table of contents for the New Testament, you will see the first four Gospels. Following these is the book of Acts, which is really the transition from these Gospels to the books about living as God’s people. In Acts, the

gospel expands outward from Jerusalem, to Judea, to Samaria, and, with Paul's three missionary journeys, to the ends of the world. After Acts, the rest of the New Testament books are letters written to early Christians about what it means to live as the special covenant people of God, who are distinct from the rest of the world.

The first thirteen letters were written by the apostle Paul, a former rabbi and Pharisee who was remarkably converted by God while traveling to persecute some Christians "to their death," as he puts it (Acts 22:4). His letters are ordered in the New Testament from longest to shortest—first letters to churches and then letters to individuals. In his first letter, Romans, Paul explains that God has been faithful to his covenant through Christ. Through Christ, God has provided a righteousness for his people, which is accounted to us by faith, as was the case with Abraham.

Then 1 and 2 Corinthians were written to a church with a lot of troubles. The church lived within a very secular society, so Paul tried to help them sort out how to live holy, special, distinct lives in an unholy culture. You will find a lot of very interesting parts in these two letters, such as a famous chapter on love (1 Corinthians 13). In the second letter to the Corinthians, Paul passionately defends his own ministry.

If you want just the sharp edge of Paul's teaching, Galatians is a good summary. He is clear about what he is saying, and he is clear about what he is not saying.

Then in Ephesians Paul writes about the church God is creating. God had always planned to create the church, and it is a new society calling together both Jews and Gentiles in Christ.

Philippians—often called the happiest book in the New Testament because Paul does not seem to have a cross word to say—encourages its readers to rejoice in the Lord. It includes that beautiful hymn in chapter 2 describing how Christ, though being equal with God, made himself nothing and gave himself to die on the cross (Phil. 2:6-11).

Colossians is about Christ's supremacy over all, and some implications this has for our lives.

First and Second Thessalonians are two of Paul's earliest letters. Apparently, a number of people in Thessalonica had heard about Christ's second coming and, misunderstanding it, had quit their jobs. They were just hanging around like fanatics, waiting for God to do something. So Paul writes and tells them to get a job.

Next are Paul's personal letters, written to his individual friends. Paul wrote 1 and 2 Timothy to Timothy, a young minister he disciplined and trained.

The letters were intended to encourage this young associate in his work as an elder. Second Timothy is probably the last letter Paul ever wrote.

The letter to Titus was written to a ministerial friend Paul left on the island of Crete to establish elders in the new churches and to complete other unfinished business.

Finally, Paul wrote a very short letter to Philemon, which you could easily read in the next five minutes. Philemon was the owner of an escaped slave who had found Paul and become a believer. It is interesting to see how Paul deals with a slave owner.

The rest of the New Testament is comprised of a second set of letters, none of which were written by Paul. There are nine of them, and again they are basically in order of length. The author of the first letter in this second set, Hebrews, is unknown. Hebrews helps us understand the relationship between the Old and New Testaments as well as what it means for us to be the new covenant people of God. Evidently some Christians were considering going back to some version of the older covenant God had made with Moses. After all, these plain Christian assemblies meeting in people's homes, devoid of any great ceremony, felt unimpressive. Back in the temple in Jerusalem, there was incense, sacrifices, fancy garments, great horns, and so forth. All that felt special, maybe even religiously satisfying. So people were beginning to turn back. The author of Hebrews responded by saying, "Look very carefully. Under the old covenant, you have priests who died because of their own sin. And their endless sacrifices of bulls and goats only made people ceremonially clean. But look at what you have in Christ! The eternal, sinless Son of God gave himself once forever to make his people truly clean and holy. The blood of the former sacrifices merely points to him."

James is a very practical letter. He describes how to live the Christian life with a practical concern for others.

First and Second Peter are relevant for the church today because they were written to Christians who were beginning to undergo difficulties for being Christians. This confused them. I think they were assuming, "If I am living rightly, won't life go well?" Peter responded, "Actually, if you look at the life of Jesus, you will see this is not a good assumption. In fact, living rightly can mean life does not go well, at least not in this world." Both of these letters encourage Christians to persevere in the faith, with Christ as their example. The second letter also warns about the danger of false teachers.

First, Second, and Third John are three brief letters written to encourage Christians in their lives of love and faithful obedience to the Lord.

Jude is a brief letter, similar to 2 Peter, warning against false and immoral teachers.

These are the New Testament's instructions for us about what it means to be the covenant people of God. In the New Testament, the promises made to the holy people in the Old Testament are kept in God's new covenant people. If we are Christians, they are kept in us today.

CREATION

In many church services, you will hear the prayer, "Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." Have you ever wondered what that means? It falls off our tongues so easily. Many of us have said it since childhood.

"Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven."

Consider for a moment the kind of people who carefully tend their hearts because they want to avoid hurt or disappointment. The only hopes they allow themselves are the hopes they are able to make happen. The only promises they hear or make to themselves are the promises they have the power to keep. Yet limiting your hopes in this fashion is the complete opposite of Christianity. If you tend your heart in this way, I encourage you to look at the gospel. As Christians, Peter says, "we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness" (2 Pet. 3:13), and this is entirely beyond our power to effect. No elected party, no economic scheme, no job promotion, and no successful relationship can bring about the great thing we as Christians wait for. We wait for the fulfillment of our first and final hope: the whole world being put right, as God's plan in the New Testament extends from Christ to his covenant people to the outermost circle—his whole creation. In other words, we wait for his kingdom to come and his will to be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

This is what we find at the end of the New Testament in the book of Revelation. It is a letter too, but it is an unusual letter in which the apostle John describes a number of visions God gave him. In certain respects, John's apocalyptic letter picks up on the Old Testament prophetic tradition by focusing on great events that lie in store for the earth's inhabitants. More specifically, Revelation describes the consummation of God's people, in God's place, in right relationship to him. The church militant becomes the church triumphant—the victorious church in heaven. And the whole heavens and earth are re-created forever (see Rev. 21:1-4; 21:22-22:5).

The Bible does not present Christians as Platonists or Gnostics—people who think this world and material things do not matter, that only the spiritual afterlife matters. Throughout the book of Revelation and the whole New Testament, the biblical authors stress the bodily nature of the resurrection. Jesus was bodily resurrected, and his resurrection is called "the firstfruits." It

begins what we will experience in the final resurrection from the dead. We will be taken up to be with God forever, but that is no world-denying proposition. God's plan for the world does not exist on some ethereal plain, far away from concrete reality. There is an interesting verse in Revelation that reads, "The nations will walk by [Christ's] light, and the kings of the earth will bring their splendor into" the city of heaven (Rev. 21:24). In the final consummation of creation, the kings of the earth will present their splendors and all the cultural grandeur of the world before the gathered heavenly assembly; and all these things will display God's glory as we discover what he meant for creation. Not only what Mark the preacher or Mary the Sunday school teacher brings will be counted worthwhile. Rather, the things you and I do in our daily lives in business, education, government, health care, or our families—if we have done them unto the Lord—will be presented and appear on the last day as adding to the luster of God's glory. These things are part of God's plan for the world. And here at the end, the holiness of God's people will finally be complete, as they are at home with him. John wrote in his first letter, "Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is" (1 John 3:2). The end will be like the beginning, only better. The Garden of Eden, in some sense, will be restored. God will dwell with his people. The whole heavenly city is presented in Revelation as a perfect cube, which recalls the Most Holy Place in the Old Testament temple. The Most Holy Place, which represented the presence of God on earth, was also in the shape of a cube. Only now, this heavenly cube is not restricted to the high priests once a year, as in ancient Israel; all the children of God will enter his presence, and we will live there with him forever! That is how the book called the New Testament ends.

It is a good way for the New Testament to end, I think. It gives us as Christians great news to offer the world. We presently live in a time of waiting, but we wait with God and we wait for God. After all, Revelation was written by a man in his nineties who had been exiled on an island by the mightiest power on earth, the Roman Empire. At the time, Christians were being killed for their faith. He was utterly desperate and dependent upon God. Yet he was full of hope because his hope did not rest on external circumstances. It rested on the sovereign God who ruled above the Roman emperors. That's when the curtain of the New Testament drops.

God promises in Scripture that the earth will be filled with the knowledge of his glory, and the promise is certain to be kept in his new creation.

Promises made; promises kept.

CONCLUSION

Of course, some disappointments have their uses. The ruins of our own cherished plans often become the steps we take toward the true good that God has waiting for us. Some of the very things you hope for right now are what God in his great love wants to pry from your fingers, so that you can receive what is better from him. Paul learned that when he prayed three times for God to remove the thorn from his flesh. God told Paul that his strength would be made perfect in Paul's weakness. So Paul rejoiced to become weak for the glory of God. And this is what we find in our own lives. When we cling to the world with all our might, we soon realize we cannot hold on. As Jesus said, "What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul?" (Mark 8:36). God has something even better than the whole world for his children.

In the last paragraph of the last book of C. S. Lewis's series *The Chronicles of Narnia*, Lewis captures something of the nature of Christian hope. He writes, "And as Aslan spoke, he no longer looked to them like a lion; but the things that began to happen after that were so great and beautiful that I cannot write them. And for us this is the end of all the stories, and we can most truly say that they all lived happily ever after. But for them it was only the beginning of the real story. All their life in this world and all their adventures in Narnia had only been the cover and the title page: now at last they were beginning Chapter One of the Great Story which no one on earth has read: which goes on forever: in which every chapter is better than the one before."⁴

After considering the mysteries of God, his mercies to us in Christ, and the hope we have as his covenant children, Paul dissolves into doxology and says, "Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out!" (Rom. 11:33).

So I hope I have been clear: the *point* of the New Testament, indeed, the *point* of the whole Bible, is that God has made promises to us, he has kept those promises to us, and we are called to trust him because he is the keeper of promises! God has revealed himself to humanity through his promises. And that is why faith is so important. At the end of the day, the Bible does not lie on the shelf like a passive object for us to investigate. At the end of the day, it turns and looks at us and says, will you believe and trust? Or as Lady Wisdom cries out in the book of Proverbs, "Who will trust? Who will follow? Who will believe what I say?"

God gives his Word and his promises to us. He calls us to trust his Word and to believe his promises. Adam and Eve did not believe in the Garden of

⁴C. S. Lewis, *The Last Battle* (New York: Collier, 1956), 183.

Eden. Jesus believed throughout his life, and particularly in the Garden of Gethsemane. And as you and I hear and believe God's Word, we are restored to the relationship with him for which we were made. This is the hope in which we can trust, because this hope will not disappoint. This is what the Bible—Old Testament and New—is all about.

Let us pray:

Lord, we praise you that you have not left us alone, even though we asked you to get out of our lives. We praise you that you sent Jesus as the Messiah, and that he came not just to display your holiness and exclude us, but to incorporate us into your holiness and to make us your people. With love, mercy, and forgiveness he has come and told us of your love by giving himself completely, so that we might be made acceptable to you. Lord God, we praise you for the love you show us in Christ and for the people you are making for yourself. We pray that you will put in our hearts a hope that compels us to live as the new people you have made us to be, trusting you and your Word. Lord, you have given yourself fully for us. We pray that you would come and take our whole lives, and use them to your glory, for Jesus' sake. Amen.

Questions for Reflection

1. Have you ever been given or achieved something you had sought for a long time, only to find yourself disappointed? When? Why were you disappointed? Is there anything in this world worth desiring that is *not* that way?
2. What is the main argument of the four Gospels?
3. What does "Christ" mean? What does "Messiah" mean?
4. Explain the riddle of the Old Testament. Explain how Christ alone solves that riddle.
5. As we have seen, Jesus, the lion of the tribe of Judah, came to devour the enemy, sin. How was this lion able to devour this enemy?
6. What do the New Testament Epistles, generally speaking, attempt to accomplish?
7. What does it mean to refer to Christ as our "priest"? How does he act as our priest?

8. As we have seen, Christians are counted as perfectly righteous today, even though we are by no means perfect. Is this a contradiction? How does this work?

9. Earlier, we considered the kind of people who try to protect their hearts by hoping only for things that they have the power to control or make happen. Then we saw that Christianity calls for the exact opposite. How? Why?

10. Why is it significant that the heavenly city is shaped like a cube?

11. As we have considered, some of the very things you hope for right now are what God in his great love wants to pry from your fingers, so that you can receive what is better from him. What might he want to pry from your fingers? What dream, hope, ambition, demand, expectation, possession, person are you tightly clutching that he might ask you to surrender?

12. Surrendering the things we long for requires a kind of death—the death of a desire. And willfully choosing that death is hard to do. It requires us to believe—really believe!—that what God promises is even better. Can you remember a time in your life when God proved himself faithful to his promise of something better? Do you think he would do otherwise next time?

13. The end of Lewis's *The Last Battle* is marvelous, isn't it? A stanza in John Newton's hymn *Amazing Grace* evokes a similar sentiment when it begins, "When we've been there ten thousand years, bright shining as the sun . . ." Take a few moments to consider, what will all the things that have seemed so important to you over this last week look like in ten thousand years? Ten thousand years from now, what do you think you will want to have done this coming week?

14. In sixty seconds or less, what's the good news of Christianity?