

GOD IS FAITHFUL

5

THE WORLD OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

Background from the Author

The references in this part are diverse, and you must be careful not to be led away from the main directions of the theme. Here our principal concern is the interaction of the world environment with the faith and early growth of the new Christian communities as background for viewing God's faithfulness to people under a new covenant.

World was used in more than one sense in Part 2. The range is even greater in the New Testament, so you should allow for some vocabulary study in your session plan. The most common word for *world* in the Greek New Testament is *kosmos*, the root meaning of which is associated with "order" and usually refers to the *created* world. Another word refers to the *inhabited* world. A third word indicates the *experiential* world and may be translated "age." Each of these words may occur with either a neutral or a negative connotation, to be discovered from the context.

Two other modifications appear. Sometimes the *world* is an entity in distinction from God without particular emphasis upon its moral or religious values. When the evil aspect of these values is stressed, the *world* may be treated as a demonic force, sometimes so intense that it seems to be a threat to God's rule. Footnote 8 of the *Resource Book* broaches the concept of dualism. It is important to stress that the Bible does not countenance a dualistic view of God's world.

Keep in mind that our theme is not far removed as we deal with the Gospel records about Jesus. His frequent references to nature always imply that it is responsive to and under the particular control of God. The so-called “nature miracles” are not introduced in the *Resource Book*, but they may be interpreted in this light. The stilling of the storm demonstrates that nature responds to the command of one who speaks with the authority of the Creator, and more importantly it teaches human dependence upon that authority.¹

The Gentile world was not Jesus’ primary field of mission, but this must not be interpreted as narrow provincialism on Jesus’ part. It was rather that he was establishing a base for the church. The outward movement was inevitable and Jesus, who was an astute student of the Old Testament prophets, knew this. It was necessary, therefore, that Jesus carry out his ministry within the Jewish tradition as a precondition and basis for the faithful program of God in the rest of the world.

Is it God’s intention to save the whole world? The *Resource Book* introduces John 3:16,17 and puts it in the Memory Bank. Verse 18 gives the other side of the story: God does not violate the prerogative of decision that is a part of being human. It is evident, however, that God’s desire includes all the world. This is the direction we move in parts 6 and 7.

The problem of evil surfaces again and again. It must be emphasized repeatedly that precisely in Jesus’ ministry and mission the ultimate power of evil has been defeated. This is what is implied by Jesus’ response to the charge that he was in league with Beelzebul, *the ruler of the demons*.² The saying about binding *the strong man* and plundering *his house* surely means that in his ministry Jesus is overcoming the power of the evil adversary.

Do not be misled by the vivid, oriental imagery. The point should be well established that Jesus was true to his Near Eastern heritage, and his proclamation was couched mostly in picture language rather than in rational argument. He followed the prophets and wisdom teachers rather than philosophers.

1 The converse responsibility of humanity for the preservation of nature is, of course, not in view in such incidents. In Matthew 6:30 and 10:29, Jesus calls attention to God’s care for nature.

2 The *Resource Book* gives the reference in Luke; the parallels are Mark 3:22-27 and Matthew 12:24-29.

Two further observations may be helpful regarding evil. Most obvious—and most difficult—is the final fact that God is transcendent and sovereign. If it is claimed that this is a cop-out, recall that this is precisely where Job wound up when he wrestled with the problem. Such a conclusion is ultimately a decision of faith. The second observation is in a sense the flip-side of the first: If God immediately eliminated to our satisfaction everything we consider evil, what would become of our identity as sensitive, responsive, willing persons? Probably this, too, cannot be understood without faith.

Paul's situation differed from that of Jesus in a number of respects. The critical events of the crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension had taken place. Paul grew up in Diaspora Judaism and was a Roman citizen. Paul was at home in Greek language and literature. Paul understood that forces are at work in the world in opposition to the good news about Christ. He did not entertain any possibility that Christ's victory is ultimately in danger from the power of evil, but he recognized that there is superhuman opposition to his mission and to the church. He wrote bluntly that Satan was working against him (2 Corinthians 12:7; 1 Thessalonians 2:18), but he was never in doubt about the future outcome (2 Corinthians 4:7-12). The idea that the power of evil exercises a time of rule in the world is difficult to handle, and it is only a step away from a dualistic view of Satan's place in the scheme of things. Phrases like *the god of this world* (2 Corinthians 4:4) lend support to such thinking.

The relationship of Paul and the early church to civil authorities is important. Romans 13:1-7 is a key passage. Jesus' relationship to Herod and Pilate is part of the picture. So is Revelation, but at this point its contribution is confined to assurance that evil government will finally fail. As long as civil government does not interfere with his Christian mission, Paul seems willing to accept the authorities as compatible with God's rule.

The subject of the future of the world can hardly be avoided in this theme, yet substantive discussion must be postponed. The focus on how the earliest Christians related to the world about them will provide undergirding for seeing how God's faithfulness is a guarantee for the future.

Paul does not hold to the nationalist hopes that are so prominent in the Hebrew Scriptures. The future for him does not embrace land and progeny but the emergence of a new people of God in Christ. Though his view of the future occasionally looks beyond this life, he never loses interest in or concern for this world. Compare Philippians 3:20 with 4:11,12; 1 Corinthians 16:1-3; and 2 Corinthians 5:1-10.

SESSION PLANS

Learning Objectives

This session is intended to enable participants to:

1. Identify 3 historical developments that defined the New Testament world.
2. Discuss 2 tensions that resulted from the interaction between early Christianity and the world.
3. Describe some analogous tensions in today's world.
4. Express the assurances of Christians.

Resources You May Need

Chalkboard or newsprint and markers

Bibles

Copies of Worksheet A, "Role Plays: Tension between Jew and Greek"

Copies of Worksheet B, "Faith and the Future"

Hymnals

Leadership Strategy

SETTING THE STAGE

1. **Today's World.** Invite participants to name significant historical developments for the past 100 years that have shaped the world of today (e.g. aftermath of the cold war, sexual revolution, development of computers). Write them on chalkboard or newsprint as they are named. (5 minutes)

and

The New Testament World. Invite participants to look at the Time Line in the Appendix. Note that 400 years elapsed between the close of the Old Testament and the beginning of the New Testament. Ask the group to identify significant

historical developments during that period that shaped the New Testament world. Be sure that the following are included and briefly discussed:

- Greek rule and continuing cultural influence (Hellenism)
- Maccabean Revolt and 100 years of Jewish independence
- Roman occupation of Palestine (5 - 8 minutes)

- 2. Attitudes toward the World.** Note that the word “world” has several connotations in the New Testament. Title three columns on chalkboard or newsprint “Good,” “Bad,” and “Neutral.”

Ask volunteers to read aloud in random order the verses below, which you have previously written on 3 x 5 cards. After each passage is read, ask the group to decide whether the author has good, bad or neutral feelings about the world.

Matthew 25:34 **John 3:16** John 15:18, 19 John 17:14 Acts 17:6

Romans 1:20 Galatians 6:14 Hebrews 1:6 James 1:27 1 John 5:19

Conclude by noting that the word “world” is used with different meanings in the texts for this session and that its meaning in a particular passage must be discovered by looking carefully at the context. (5-8 minutes)

- 3. Introducing the Theme.** Read **Matthew 28:16-20**. Then state: “Today’s session addresses the interaction between Christian faith and the New Testament world as this commandment of Jesus was carried out.” (2 minutes)

EXPLORING THE SCRIPTURE

- 1. Role Play: Tension between Jew and Gentile.** Distribute Worksheet A, “Role Play: Tension between Jew and Gentile.” Ask the participants to imagine they are members of a Council in Jerusalem called by the Apostles and Elders of the early church to address the question: Must a non-Jew be circumcised in order to become a Christian? Divide into groups of 4 to 7, and assign each group one of the role play situations on the worksheet. After 20-25 minutes, bring the whole group together and convene the “Jerusalem Council” with the whole group acting as members. Invite the “Conservative Jewish Leader,” “Peter”, and “Paul” to

make statements. After all the statements have been made, ask the “Council Members” to decide whether or not a non-Jew must be circumcised in order to become a Christian. (35-40 minutes)

or

Paired Debates. In the whole group, ask volunteers to read **Acts 11:1-18** and **Acts 13:44-48** aloud. Elicit from the group a general understanding of the issue the early church is addressing in these passages: Must a non-Jew be circumcised in order to become a Christian? Then invite the group to count off by fours. First ask participants to pair off with persons sitting near them so that “ones” and “twos” are paired together and “threes” and “fours” are paired together. The “one-two” pairs are to construct arguments in favor of restricting baptism and church membership to the circumcised. The “three-four” pairs are to construct arguments in favor of baptizing both circumcised and uncircumcised, including them equally in the church. After about 5 minutes, switch partners so that “ones” and “threes,” “twos” and “fours” are paired together to debate the issue. After about 5 minutes of debate, bring the group back together. (10 minutes)

and

Group Discussion. Conclude the debate about inclusion of uncircumcised gentiles in the early church by reading aloud Acts 15:19-21, which indicates that the more inclusive faction prevailed. Then invite the group to focus on the issue of diversity and the church in today’s world using the following questions:

- What issues have divided the contemporary church in ways similar to the circumcision issue in the first century?
- How do we sometimes exclude people from the church by setting up false barriers and requirements? (for example, race, “appropriate” dress, social status, political attitudes)
- How do such divisions and requirements relate to Jesus’ commandment “to make disciples of all nations?” (10 minutes)

2. Discussion: Civil Authority. Ask volunteers to read aloud **Romans 13:1-7** and **1 Peter 2:13-17**. Remind the group that just as the word “world” is used with different meanings in the New Testament, so also we find different attitudes expressed toward civil authorities, depending upon the situation under which they were written. As indicated in the passages above, Paul’s attitude was largely favorable. Later books such as Revelation, written after widespread persecution had taken place, reflect a more negative attitude toward the Roman government. Lead a discussion concerning the relationship of the church to civil authority based on the following questions:

- Why is government necessary? What benefits does it provide?
- What are dangers or risks in giving our unquestioning support to governing authorities?
- When has faith led people to resist or protest against the government?
- What guidelines does our faith give us for when and how to oppose governing authorities? (10-15 minutes)

or

Group Reports: Christians and Authority. Ask volunteers to read aloud **Romans 13:1-7** and **1 Peter 2:13-17**. Then break into groups of 4 to 7, asking each group to think of situations where these scriptural admonitions to obey all governing authorities have been or should be questioned. The group task is to choose one of these situations and to prepare a case for resisting or opposing the governing authority with regard to this issue. After about 15 minutes, bring the whole group together and invite each group to make its case. Then ask, “What guidelines does our faith give us for when and how to oppose governing authorities?” (25-30 minutes)

3. Faith in a World of Evil and Suffering. Read aloud to the whole group Dr. Walther’s statement from the section “The World and Evil Power” in the *Resource Book*:

Jesus recognized the power of evil in the world. He spoke freely about it, but he used terms and ideas that were current in his day. Thus *the world* may be the arena in which God is combating evil.

Ask, "What personal experiences or world situations might lead you to question God's power to control what happens?" List the answers on chalkboard or newsprint. (5 minutes)

and

Faith and the Future. Ask four volunteers to read aloud one of the following passages:

Matthew 6:26-30

Romans 8:18-23, 38, 39

2 Corinthians 5:17-20

Revelation 21:1-5

Give participants copies of Worksheet B, "Faith and the Future," and ask them to do the worksheet, working quietly and individually. After 5-10 minutes, invite participants to meet in groups of 3 to read any parts of their statements they wish to share and to talk about the experience of writing them. (15-20 minutes)

or

Responses to Scripture. On chalkboard or newsprint, write the four scripture references listed in the option above, "Faith and the Future." Ask the participants first to read each passage slowly and carefully and then to choose one verse or phrase that they find particularly meaningful, lightly underlining the phrase or copying it onto a separate sheet of paper. Then they are to write in their own words what their chosen phrases or verses mean to them or to express the meaning for them using some other art form such as a poem, a picture, a prayer, or a human sculpture (positioning their bodies as a sculptor might create a work of art). Tell them that those who wish to do so may share their responses during the Closing. (10 minutes)

CLOSING

- 1. Personal Responses to Scripture.** If the participants created Responses to Scripture as described in the option above, invite those who wish to do so to read their selected verses or phrases and share their responses. (5 minutes)

and/or

- 2. Prayer.** Close with a prayer acknowledging the tensions, suffering, and uncertainties that we encounter in the world. You may pause for individuals to name particular concerns aloud or silently. Conclude by giving thanks for God's promises that sustain our faith in difficult and confusing times. (3 minutes)

and/or

- 3. Hymn.** Sing or speak together "God of Grace and God of Glory," "Where Cross the Crowded Ways of Life," "The Church of Christ in Every Age," or another hymn that affirms God's faithfulness throughout the past, present, and future. (3 minutes)

and/or

- 4. The Final Word.** Close the session by reading **Romans 8:38, 39**. (1 minute)

Looking Ahead

The next session (Exploring the Scripture #2) suggests asking a volunteer to do a dramatic monologue or reenactment of the Jewish Ritual of Atonement (Yom Kippur), based on the information in Leviticus 16. If you plan to use this option, recruit a volunteer at this session. He or she may want to ask another person to act as narrator while the "High Priest" conducts the ritual in pantomime.

If you are planning to close the next session with Communion, go over the details with the minister who will celebrate the Communion, being sure to clarify who will be responsible for procuring the Communion elements and setting up.

Worksheet A

Role Plays: Tension between Jew and Gentile

Read Acts 11:1-18 and Acts 13:44-48.

Imagine yourself in the shoes of one of the persons listed below. You have been asked to appear at a Council in Jerusalem which will decide whether or not a person must follow all Jewish rituals, including circumcision, before that person may become a Christian. Discuss as a group how you would think and feel and what you might say. Then designate one person to “role play” this presentation at the Jerusalem Council. You have about 20 minutes to prepare.

A. A Conservative Jewish Leader

You are a conservative Jewish leader in Jerusalem. Countless generations of your family have been circumcised and raised in the Jewish faith, keeping the feast days, obeying food laws, and studying the Torah. You do not eat with or socialize with gentiles, believing that their Greek and pagan practices may compromise the integrity of your faith. For you, Jesus is a Jewish Messiah, the fulfillment of God’s covenant with the Jews. You are appalled to hear that Paul and Peter have been associating with, and even baptizing, Gentiles. You have been asked to make a statement at the Council in Jerusalem about whether a non-Jew must be circumcised in order to become a Christian. This is your chance to defend the faith of your ancestors.

B. Peter

You have always been Jewish. You grew up in a Jewish fishing community, kept the dietary laws, and followed Jewish social customs without giving it much thought. You spent three years in Jesus’ company and it changed your life; but you were still a good Jew. Since the Pentecost experience, you have been increasingly recognized as the leader of the early church in Jerusalem, but you still keep the Jewish law and practice Jewish customs. You have heard that Paul, (and it’s sometimes hard to forget that you knew him as Saul, who oversaw the stoning of Stephen), is preaching about Jesus to Gentiles everywhere, that he is

socializing with Gentiles, staying in their homes, and even baptizing them into the faith community of Jesus (without first having them circumcised)! You've been very uneasy about all this. Then you had a dream that changed your whole outlook. (See Acts 10). Now you too have baptized uncircumcised Gentiles and stayed in their homes. Other leaders in Jerusalem are criticizing you. You have been asked to defend your actions at a Council in Jerusalem which has been called to decide whether a non-Jew must be circumcised in order to become a Christian.

C. Paul

You have been spreading the Gospel about Jesus to the Greek world, forming Christian churches, and baptizing Gentiles into the church even though they are not circumcised and do not keep Jewish dietary laws or observe Jewish festivals. As a Roman citizen and an educated Jewish Pharisee, you grew up in a cosmopolitan environment. You are comfortable with Greek language and literature, and you have traveled widely. At first, you adamantly opposed the Christians, but after having a vision of Jesus on the road to Damascus, you now are certain that the message of salvation through Jesus is meant for everyone. You have been asked to make a statement at a Council in Jerusalem about whether a non-Jew must be circumcised in order to become a Christian.

Worksheet B

Faith and the Future

Reflect about situations in the world today in light of God's promise to "make all things new" (Revelation 21:5) and Paul's statement that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 8:38, 39). Then complete the statements below to create a personal faith statement:

When I think about _____

I fear that _____

Sometimes it seems _____

Then I remember _____

and I _____
