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## **Summary**

Almost all of Jesus' ministry was carried out in the land of the Hebrew Scriptures, but his outlook embraced all humanity. He was also intensely aware of the world of nature. His followers moved out of the confines of the Jewish world, at first hesitantly, then boldly. Paul, a Roman citizen, took the gospel to the West, confident that the whole world is God's. Some New Testament texts use "world" in a negative sense, but God's sovereignty is affirmed throughout. Christ's victory guarantees final renewal for the world.

## **Basic Bible References**

Matthew 6:26-30; 28:16-20

Luke 12:54-56

John 3:16, 17

Acts 11:1-18; 13:44-48

Romans 8:18-23, 38, 39;

13:1-7

2 Corinthians 5:17-20

1 Peter 2:13-17

Revelation 21:1-5

## **Word List**

Beelzebul

Deacons

Gentiles

Hellenistic

Syrophoenician

World

# GOD IS FAITHFUL

# 5

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## THE WORLD OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

### **Jesus and the World He Lived In**

Jesus was born in the land where the Hebrew Scriptures had developed. The religious, social, and political impact of this fact can hardly be overemphasized. From babyhood through youth, Jesus was initiated into Jewish religious life (see Luke 2:22-24, 39-47); according to Luke 2:52 he adjusted very well. His mature ministry was in a land rich in associations from the lives of his ancestors. Thus the continuity of God's faithfulness was in one respect a given for his ministry.

Jesus' public career was affected by two political facts of the past. (1) Two hundred years before his time the Jews had gained independence, and the fervor of that Maccabean revolution was not forgotten. (2) One hundred years before Jesus' time the Romans had conquered Judea, and the Roman presence was deeply felt and resented by most of Jesus' hearers. After his resurrection, his followers asked, *Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?* (Acts 1:6).

Jesus' public ministry was directed first to the land of his ancestors, but there are clear signals that he meant his message for all the world. In his initial sermon at Nazareth he used illustrations in which Elijah and Elisha cared for non-Jews. This proved to be very unpopular, but it reflects the breadth of Jesus' outlook (Luke 4:25, 26). He visited

Samaria and “the region of Tyre” (Mark 7:24). He praised the faith of a Roman centurion (Luke 7:2-9). His “great commission” commands Jesus’ disciples to *make disciples of all nations*. Read **Matthew 28:16-20**.<sup>1</sup>

In the New Testament *the world* is used with various shades of meaning. Sometimes it means heaven and earth; sometimes it indicates the inhabitants of creation.<sup>2</sup> It may refer to the environment in which people live.<sup>3</sup> It may express a negative contrast to God’s way.<sup>4</sup> We must be careful, then, when we encounter the word “world” in the New Testament. It may be good, bad, or indifferent; the context must tell us which. Read **John 3:16, 17**, probably the best-known passage in the Gospels. What does it say about *God* and *the world*?

At Pentecost, after Jesus’ resurrection, many people from other lands were in Jerusalem because of their relationship to Judaism, and they were immediately drawn to the Christian faith (Acts 2:5-11). Peter connects this with Jesus’ plan and promise (Acts 2:38, 39).

## Jesus and Nature

Jesus spoke much about nature. His sayings and stories are full of references to the natural world around him. One of the best-known passages is **Matthew 6:26-30**, from the Sermon on the Mount. Much of his ministry is conducted out-of-doors. Recall how many incidents take place on or around the Sea of Galilee. In **Luke 12:54-56** he makes weather observations.

In Luke 13:4, 5 Jesus refers to an otherwise unknown accident in which *people were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them*. These were not *worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem*, he says. Natural events are not punishment from God, but they should cause people to *repent*, that is, to redirect their lives according to God’s will.

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1 The Greek word translated *nations* may also be rendered *Gentiles*; TEV has *all peoples everywhere*. The point is strengthened whichever translation is used.

2 See Matthew 25:34; Acts 17:6; Romans 1:20; Hebrews 1:6.

3 As in John 12:25; 17:15; 1 John 3:17; 5:4, 5.

4 As in John 15:18, 19; Galatians 6:14; 2 Timothy 4:10; James 1:27; 4:4; 1 John 3:1.

## The Early Christian Mission

Jesus warned his followers that their mission would not be easy. The presence of Judaism in the Hellenistic world was sometimes a help and sometimes a difficulty for the new movement. Translation of the Hebrew Scriptures into Greek had helped the Jewish faith survive outside Palestine, and that Septuagint version became the Bible of the Christian missionary church.<sup>5</sup> While Judaism was struggling to survive in the first-century world, Christianity moved deliberately into that world as a field for mission.

The universal outreach of the gospel caused friction among some of the first Christians. When the momentum of the faith led Christian leaders to accept Gentiles, difficult tensions developed because of the diverse backgrounds of the members. Conflict in one such situation led to the appointment of the first deacons (see Acts 6:1-6). Note that the names of these men are Greek. Two of them soon attracted attention and caused problems.

One deacon, Stephen, was opposed by Jews of non-Palestinian background because of his powerful preaching (Acts 6:9-11). His defense (which is told at length in Acts 7) infuriated his enemies, and this resulted in his being stoned to death. Philip, another deacon, engaged in a successful mission to Samaria (Acts 8:4-25), and this brought the Jerusalem leaders to investigate the situation. Philip also preached effectively to an Ethiopian official in a chariot (a sort of hitchhiking evangelism; see Acts 8:26-40). A milestone in the church's mission was reached when Peter visited a Roman centurion and was prompted by the Holy Spirit to baptize the soldier and his household. Read **Acts 11:1-18**.

## Paul's Mission

When Paul grasped the worldwide intention of the gospel, he moved boldly to evangelize both Jews and Gentiles. His letters provide a theological foundation for world Christian mission. In **Acts 13:44-48**, read how Paul took a radical step. During this same journey Paul and Barnabas had a remarkable brush with Greek religion at Lystra in Asia Minor; first they were treated as gods, then they were stoned (see Acts 14:8-18). During Paul's next journey he visited Athens, the very center of Greek religion and secular philosophy. This marked another step of the Christian movement into the non-Jewish Greco-Roman world.

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<sup>5</sup> Scriptural quotations in the New Testament are frequently from the Septuagint.

Paul's letters reflect this advance. In Galatians 2:6-10 he recounts how the Jerusalem church approved his Gentile mission. In his correspondence with the Corinthian church he counters the pagan influence of their city. The moral environment shocks him (see 1 Corinthians 5:1; 6:9-11). Christians are to live in such a society without compromising their faith (see 1 Corinthians 10:23-29; 2 Corinthians 6:14-16). The list of personal greetings in Romans 16 contains Greek and Roman names.

The social structure of pagan society raised serious questions for Christian faith. Slavery was widely practiced and accepted, and Paul makes many references to the subject, sometimes very delicately. The letter to Philemon concerns a slave Onesimus. Paul does not mount protest movements, but he insists that Christian faith must make a difference in social relationships (see Ephesians 6:5-9; Colossians 3:11, 22-24; 4:1).

Paul's journeys expanded the geographical horizons of the first-century church. A map will help you gauge the extent of his travels. When he wrote to the church at Rome, it had already been active for some years. He expresses his hope to visit them, *when I go to Spain* (Romans 15:22-24). Those plans did not work out, but he did reach Rome near the end of his career (Acts 28:11-16). This involved a hazardous sea voyage, from which we may learn much about navigation on the Mediterranean Sea in the first century.

## **Rome and the Pagan World**

Roman imperial power is always in the background of New Testament events, but that power is viewed in various ways. Roman authorities crucified Jesus, yet he prayed for those who carried out the sentence (Luke 23:34), and Paul implies that Rome acted in ignorance (1 Corinthians 2:8). There is evidence that Paul was somewhat proud of his Roman citizenship. At any rate, he took advantage of it (see Acts 22:25-29; 23:26, 27). Prayer for civil authorities is enjoined in 1 Timothy 2:1, 2. The legitimacy of human governments is recognized in **1 Peter 2:13-17**.

Read **Romans 13:1-7**, where Paul discusses his view of government at that stage in his career. He is on good terms with rulers, but human governments are not permanent fixtures in God's world. Paul's relationship with Roman authority finally turns bad. He exercised his right to appeal to Caesar, but tradition tells us that Paul was eventually put to death by the emperor's authority.

Colossians 1:23 states that *the gospel . . . has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven*, but this is surely a rhetorical exaggeration. There were very many pagans that did not have an opportunity to hear the good news about Christ. What is their fate? Paul says that all people should be able to perceive God in the created world and therefore they should acknowledge God's power (Romans 1:18-25). He writes that there is law *written on their hearts*, which renders all people liable to God's judgment (2:14-16). Nowhere is God *without a witness*, Paul declares at Lystra (Acts 14:16, 17).

## The World and Evil Power

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. In the Fourth Gospel Jesus refers three times to *the ruler of this world*, and it is clear he is thinking of an evil power (John 12:31; 14:30; 16:11). In each instance, however, he is bringing the power of that ruler to defeat.

In his farewell discourses Jesus speaks of *the world* much as we should refer to pagan society or secular circles. He contrasts this to the company of his chosen followers (see John 15:19; 17:14-16). He has no doubt about how his mission will turn out: *I have conquered the world!* (John 16:33.) His ministry challenges and will defeat the power of evil in the world. When he is accused of being in partnership with *Beelzebul, the ruler of the demons*,<sup>6</sup> Jesus insists that he is breaking the power of evil (see Luke 11:15-22).

Occasionally there is a hint that the power of evil temporarily rules in the world. In Jesus' temptation the tempter<sup>7</sup> offers Jesus *authority over all the kingdoms of the world* (Matthew 4:8-10; Luke 4:5-8). Without discussing whether such an offer was at all possible, Jesus rejects it with a declaration of the absolute supremacy of God. Ephesians 6:12 speaks of *the cosmic powers of this present darkness . . . the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places*, but the same epistle declares that Christ is *far above all rule and authority and power and dominion* (1:21). While the power of evil

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6 You may find this name in your Bible dictionary under *Beelzebul* or more probably *Baal-zebul*, which gives a clue as to the pagan origin of the name.

7 Do not get stuck on the character of *the devil* at this point. That subject requires separate treatment.

is potent, it is ultimately subject to God's supreme rule. Indeed, it has already been doomed by the victory of Christ, and thus there is no dualism.<sup>8</sup> Paul states this beautifully in **Romans 8:38, 39**.

## The Future of the World

The future of the world is directly related to what Christ has already done. Paul ties this to creation when he writes in **Romans 8:18-23** that *the whole creation* yearns for the fulfillment anticipated through Christ and *the children of God*. God proposes to form a *new creation* out of persons who will be *ambassadors for Christ*. Read **2 Corinthians 5:17-20**.

The future of the world requires a detailed study, which is beyond this course. God will finally suppress all opposition and *be everything to everyone* (1 Corinthians 15:28). Isaiah's expectation of a renewed world will be accomplished. This is part of John's vision in **Revelation 21:1-5**.

## For Further Study and Reflection

### Memory Bank

1. Matthew 28:18-20
2. John 3:16, 17
3. Romans 8:38, 39

### Research

1. On a map of the New Testament world locate these cities:

Athens	Corinth	Lystra
Bethlehem	Ephesus	Nazareth
Caesarea (2)	Jerusalem	

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<sup>8</sup> This is a philosophical term referring to belief that two great powers are opposed in the world with the outcome of the struggle pending.

2. Make a list of references to nature in the sayings of Jesus.
3. Who was Zeus? Hermes? (see Acts 14:12); Artemis? (see Acts 19:24-28, 35-37).

### ***Reflection***

1. The text implies a question whether God can be understood from nature. What difference may the answer make with reference to Christian mission?
2. In what ways does Christian faith lead to concern for the needs of the world?