

# *The Story of* **God and Us**

*The whole Bible in Eight  
Weeks*

## ***Chapter Seven: From Darkness to Light (The Story of Jesus Part 2)***



**Introduction:** In our modern world, we tend to take light for granted. Our lives continue, seemingly unaffected by the light outside, constantly illumined by electricity. But in the ancient world, light was a precious resource. Oil for lamps was often expensive, and so much of the lives of everyday people were spent either working outdoors or in the darkness of their dwellings. On a basic, practical level, the world was a place where light was cherished, and darkness was a constant reality.

For that reason, when Jesus sought to explain the significance of the kingdom of God, he used the analogy of a lamp lighting up a dark room: “you are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hid. Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house” (Matt. 5:15). The message of Jesus, and the life that his followers would live, was similar to that lamp: it would bring *light* to a world that lived in *darkness*. It would bring *hope* to a world that lived in *despair*. It would bring *life* to a world that lived in *death*. And so, when Jesus himself, resurrected from the dead, appeared to Saul of Tarsus (a persecutor of the early Christians) on the road to Damascus, he gave him this commission:

“But rise and stand upon your feet, for I have appeared to you for this purpose, to appoint you as a servant and witness to the things in which you have seen me and to those in which I will appear to you, delivering you from your people and from the Gentiles—to whom I sending you to open their eyes, so that they **turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God**, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.” (Acts 26:16-18).

That’s the story we will read today, in our seventh chapter in our story: the story of how Jesus, by his resurrection and ascension, brought to the world a new age: an **age where God, without a shadow of a doubt, proved that he keeps his promises.**

## Post Tenebras, Lux

*Q: If you were those disciples on the Saturday after the crucifixion, what do you think you'd be like?*

We left our story with a scared group of disciples hiding from the authorities. Jesus had just been crucified, and the Passover had occurred. But these people were not feasting; they were terrified. Yet, a group **of women**, in reverence for their dead Messiah, headed to the tomb where he was buried to anoint him with burial spices.

When they arrived, however, they found something they did not expect. Even though the Romans had placed guards, and even though the tomb had been sealed with a large stone, when the women arrived, they saw the guards in a dazed stupor, and the heavy stone tossed aside as though it were a feather. In shock they entered the tomb, and inside there was no sign of Jesus, but instead two dazzling looking men who said to them:

“Why do you seek the living among the dead? He is not here but has risen.”  
(Luke 24:5-6).

The women left, terrified of the vision, and ran back to the disciples to report what had happened. When the group heard the story, they didn't believe, but Peter and John ran to the tomb and discovered it empty. While this was happening, **Mary Magdalene** (one of the women who went first to the tomb) wept outside the tomb, fearing that Jesus' body had been stolen. While she was weeping, she heard a voice say “Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you seeking?” Overcome with grief she replied, “Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.” Then, the voice said “Mary,” and she turned in disbelief to see **Jesus, risen from the dead, speaking with her** (John 20:11-18).

After this, the disciples were still not convinced that Jesus was alive. They hid in a house, with the door locked, petrified of who might come to arrest them. Then, in a move which doubtlessly shocked them all, **Jesus himself stood among them**, showing them his wounds and saying these words: “**Peace** be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you” (John 20:21). In this way Jesus appeared to many people, at one point to five hundred people (1 Corinthians 15:6), and he sent his disciples to Galilee, continuing his appearances for **forty days**.

Afterward, when they returned to Jerusalem, Jesus **promised the coming of the Holy Spirit**, and gave his followers a mission: to be a witness to who Jesus is and what he has done to all the world, starting in Jerusalem and spreading to the ends of the earth (Acts

1:4-8). The message of Jesus was to go, not just to one ethnic group, but to every part of the world. And with that, Jesus **was lifted up into the sky**, and he disappeared out of their sight (in an event we call **the ascension**). As the disciples looked around, two angels appeared and assured them, “This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven” (Acts 1:11).

*Q: What is particularly significant about Jesus’ Resurrection and Ascension? What sticks out to you?*

### **A new people, a new temple, a new heart: The Holy Spirit**

Many days later, on a day called **Pentecost**, the apostles experience something unusual: “suddenly there came from heaven a sound like a mighty rushing wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. And divided tongues as of fire appeared to them and rested on each of them. **And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit** and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance” (Acts 2:2-4). After this point, the Holy Spirit, who is himself God, **dwelled amongst those who believe in Jesus**. The mission that Jesus gave to his disciples would be completed, not by their work alone, but primarily by the **Holy Spirit working in and through Jesus’ followers to spread the message of Jesus to the world** (1 Cor. 12:1-11).

Later on, the apostle Paul would make this point very clearly: through the presence of the Holy Spirit, the believing community (which they called **the Church**, in Greek *ekklesia*, or “called-out ones”) was **a new temple in which God dwelt** (Eph. 2:18-22; 2 Cor. 6:16-18). This new temple was not made with hands but was rather made up of every individual who placed their trust in Jesus (Eph. 1:11-14).

As time went on, this new community grew and spread, at each point spreading the good news of who Jesus is and what he has done (which they called **the gospel**, or “good news”). The basic message which they proclaimed was that Jesus Christ, a real man from the town of Nazareth, was God’s appointed Messiah, the Son of God, the one whom God had promised from the beginning of the world. All of God’s promises, they argued, were fulfilled (or beginning to be fulfilled) by Jesus (2 Cor. 1:19-20). This meant that, because Jesus had come, the world had entered the “end of the ages,” a culminating point in which God was beginning the restorative work he had always planned. In other words, in Jesus Christ, God was beginning the last stage of his plan to bring **shalom** back to the world which he created (Acts 3:20-21). God had signaled this, without a doubt, by **raising Jesus from the dead to new life** (1 Cor. 15).

While the earliest followers of Jesus were tempted to think that this message of restoration was solely for the nation of Israel, the Holy Spirit led first Peter (Acts 10)

and later the converted Saul of Tarsus (who began to go by Paul) to **share the gospel with those outside of the national and ethnic borders of Israel**. Paul later realized that this was always God's plan, that he would **bleed all the nations** through Abraham's offspring (Romans 4). This promise, which came before Moses' law, had always been the true center of God's plan for Israel, and so, because of Jesus' work, **the promises of God were open to everyone, regardless of ethnicity** (Gal. 3:15-29).

Therefore, to the earliest Christians, the response to what God had done in Jesus Christ was the same regardless of whether one was a Jew or a Gentile: **faith** (Gal. 5:6). Paul, as he read the Old Testament, realized that it was through **believing** in Jesus Christ that what Jesus did was *applied* to an individual (Romans 3:21-26). Paul described it this way: "For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Cor. 5:21). When one believed in Jesus, she **participated** in his death, burial, and resurrection, and was therefore "a new creation" (Romans 6:1-4; 2 Cor. 5:17). **The internal heart change**, which the law could never provide, had been provided in Christ, by whom those who believe receive the Holy Spirit (Rom. 8:3-4). Because of what Jesus had done, the Church had **peace with God** (Rom. 5:1).

*Q: We defined shalom as "designed harmony between us and God, creation, and each other." What aspects of Shalom do we see in the story of the early church?*

### **Living a Life Worthy of the Gospel**

As time went on, the Church grew rapidly. In just a small amount of time, it went from a small group in Judea to a diverse, multi-ethnic compilation of communities throughout the eastern Roman empire. The Holy Spirit used Paul and others to spread the message of Jesus throughout the Roman world, and by the time Paul arrives in Rome, he finds a group of believers already there to greet him (Acts 28: 11-16). The gospel had confronted varieties of pagan religious beliefs and practices, as well as the Jewish authorities, and had come out victorious. In Thessalonica, the complaint about Paul and his companions was that "these men who have turned the world upside down have come here also...and they are all acting against the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is another king, Jesus" (Acts 17:6-7). The gospel seemed unstoppable.

But the early Church was not without its problems. After a while Paul started hearing from different churches about various issues they were having, and while these issues were varied, they can be thought of in four broad categories:

<b>Problem</b>	<b>Examples</b>	<b>Letters</b>
<b>Issues relating to the Old Testament Law</b>	Do Gentiles need to keep the law? Does the gospel and faith negate the law? Can you simply please God by observing the law? Is the law good or bad? Should Christians still follow it? How should Christians follow it? Can Jews and Gentiles really get along?	Romans 1 <sup>st</sup> and 2 <sup>nd</sup> Corinthians Galatians Ephesians Hebrews James
<b>Issues relating to Cultural/societal Issues</b>	Can a Christian eat meat sacrificed to idols? How should a Christian interact with those who do not believe? How should Christian households work? What does the gospel say about marriage? About slavery? About wealth? About opposition to the gospel? About gender roles?	Romans 1 <sup>st</sup> and 2 <sup>nd</sup> Corinthians 1 <sup>st</sup> and 2 <sup>nd</sup> Timothy Philemon Ephesians Colossians James 1 <sup>st</sup> Peter
<b>Issues relating to Jesus' return</b>	Will Jesus return? When will Jesus return? How will Jesus return (as a spirit, in the flesh, etc.)? What should we do while we wait? What's taking so long?	1 <sup>st</sup> Corinthians 1 <sup>st</sup> and 2 <sup>nd</sup> Thessalonians 2 <sup>nd</sup> Peter
<b>Issues relating to false teaching</b>	Was Jesus just a spirit? Can we communicate with God through pagan ritual? Is there some secret knowledge that Christians need? How should we respond to those who spread false teaching?	1 <sup>st</sup> , 2 <sup>nd</sup> , and 3 <sup>rd</sup> John Colossians 2 <sup>nd</sup> Peter Jude

It became clear that the early Christians needed to know how to *live* the gospel life as they awaited Jesus' return (Phil 1:27). The root of the problem, especially in Paul's mind, was that people hadn't grasped all the implications of what it meant to be "in

Christ” (Gal. 2:20). In general, we can understand their responses by focusing on three major aspects of the Christian life: **hope, faith, and love** (1<sup>st</sup> Cor. 13:13).

**1. Gospel hope:** “hope” to the writers of the New Testament meant a firm assurance of the future of things. To the apostles, the future of things was secured by **Jesus’ resurrection and ascension** (Phil. 2:9-11): God had exalted Jesus Christ to God’s right hand, as the King of kings and Lord of lords. This was the signal and irrevocable guarantee that, no matter what comes the Christian’s way, Jesus will **return and finish the work that he started** (Rom. 5:1-11; 8:12-39; 2<sup>nd</sup> Cor. 4:17-18). **The Christian hope is therefore a hope that waits with patience: it understands that Jesus has inaugurated the fulfillment of God’s promises, but doesn’t assume that they are fully realized yet.**

**2. Gospel faith:** “faith” does not just mean mental assent in the New Testament. The Greek *pisteo* had wrapped in it connotations of faithfulness (cf. 2<sup>nd</sup> Timothy 2:13), endurance, and a veracious *trust* in God’s promises. To “believe” in Jesus is to cling to his promises, to receive his gift of forgiveness and to walk in light of his work (living a life of **repentance**, or turning from sin, 2<sup>nd</sup> Timothy 2:19). Therefore, the idea of faith is very closely tied to the word *hypomeno*, “to endure” (Hebrews 12:1-3). **The Christian’s faith is really an orientation of our entire lives around Jesus Christ his story (Romans 10:9-10; 1 Cor. 2:2; Gal. 2:20; Phil. 1:21), a veracious clinging to Jesus despite all obstacles.**

**3: Gospel love:** When the New Testament authors want to describe the basis of Christian action, they use the word “love.” They followed Jesus’ direction in their insistence that Christians do not *forsake* the Old Testament law, but rather they strive to follow the greatest commandments: “you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength;” “you shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Mark 12:28-31; Romans 13:8-10). **Christians therefore “fulfill” the law by following its essence: love for God and neighbor** (Romans 7:6; 8:4; Gal. 5:14; 6:2; James 2:8-13). **Christian love recognizes that there is a way that God has designed human beings to live in loving community, and therefore strive for that design in every relationship.**

*Q: How do hope, faith, and love (as defined by the New Testament) help to resolve some of the above problems?*

Next Week: Shalom Regained (Revelation)