



## Editor's Note

Welcome to a new year and the real possibility that this year may close out the "Day of Grace" by the return of "the Lord Himself"! Let's commit to living in that hope throughout the year.

For our prayer warriors: To help you pray intelligently for ESN, our goal is not to entertain but to edify and equip. Whom? All who love the Lord and the Scriptures in general, but more specifically, busy elders, students, and teachers—especially those who are studying

church truth, young people forming views of the church, those involved in planting new churches, and servants helping churches disillusioned with denominational systems move toward the NT pattern, just to name a few examples. The adversary hates both the Bridegroom and the Bride, and will oppose these truths at every turn. That's where prayer comes in. Thank you for your labors before the throne of grace!



## Biblical Foundations

### New Testament Overview, Part 1: The Gospels by Warren Henderson

God introduced a new and vivid literary form in the New Testament called the "gospel" to express the grandeur of His Son's life and sacrifice. Only the "gospel" which means "good news" could declare the "mystery of godliness"—God manifest in the flesh to offer peace to the world (Luke 2:14). The four Gospels present the Lord Jesus Christ in the manner by which His Father chose to reveal Him. The unique Gospel themes preclude a full harmony of facts but serve as an invitation to appreciate the distinct glories of Christ's holy character, divine essence, and selfless ministry as God's Servant and Lamb, and Israel's future King.

#### Gospel Variations

As one examines the four Gospels (*Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John*), it is quickly observed that deliberate variations, exclusions, and inclusions of content exist within each account. There are different styles of language and arrangement of subjects. The Spirit of God obviously never intended a multiplication of narratives, but rather a necessity for variation. Likewise, the Holy Spirit made no attempt to convey a complete biography of the Lord's life, for lengthy gaps of personal history are apparent. Of the eighty-nine chapters in the four accounts, eighty-five pertain to the Lord's last three years on earth, and twenty-eight of these focus solely on His final week of ministry, His crucifixion, and His resurrection. Therefore, roughly one third of the four Gospels is devoted to the specific details surrounding the events of Calvary. The Gospel focus is a Person, not a biography of a person.

#### Gospel Number

The symbolic meaning of the number four in Scripture is earthly order and the Son of God came from heaven to be subject to the laws of this cursed planet. This is why there

are four Gospels, no more or less. In Scripture, God rarely *divides* four as 2 and 2 to reveal divine mysteries; He normally combines the numbers *one* and *three* to create four, and we have the three synoptic Gospels with similar records as compared with the unique content of John's Gospel. By devising a *one-and-three* Gospel format, God has upheld the symbolic scriptural meanings of the numbers *one* and *three* to represent His Son to the world. Number *one* represents divine unity and speaks of the Creator, while the number *three* signifies divine fullness and perfection. God used two *holy numbers* (numbers pertaining to Himself) to manifest the divine glory of His Son in the Gospels.

#### Gospels' Construction

Generally speaking, Matthew and Luke do not strive to record events in exact sequence, but in accordance with their associated themes of royalty and humanity, respectively. For this cause miracles, discourses, events, and related facts are grouped together to ensure the fullest development of the deliberate theme of the Holy Spirit. Mark provides the most concise and most chronologically accurate Gospel account; He is upholding the "doings" of the Lord. John would be the next most chronological account of the Lord's ministry but is characterized by vast gaps in the life of Christ. Matthew and John were personally discipled by Christ, while Mark and Luke were not. God employed quite a variety of writers and styles to portray His Son to the world.

#### Matthew's Gospel

Matthew's Gospel comprises five discourses and six narratives; the former highlight aspects of the coming Messianic Kingdom, while the latter focuses the reader's attention on the King Himself. The phrase "from that

(Continued on page 3)

## Practical Application

### The Goodness of God Leading to Repentance *by Jack Spender*

**C**an a church repent or is repentance only for individuals? Do Christians repent or is it only for lost people? These are honest questions, and one wonders how many believers well-grounded in the Word can answer them?

If you feel the subject is unworthy of busy elders' time and dismiss the matter as elementary, consider the following. In writing letters to seven local churches of His day, the Lord Jesus counseled 4 of the 7 to repent. That's more than half, and none of those churches had been in existence for 50 years! How many times in your life have you ever heard a church repent? Yes, the risen Christ had some strong words to say on this subject to congregations that we call "early churches."

As to individual believers, think back to messages you've heard on 1 John 1:9 and the confessing of sins. Did the speaker mention repentance? Was there any explanation of the relationship between confession and repentance? Was it clear that the goal of the Christian life is not "sin, confess," "sin, confess," but "stop sinning"? The biblical word describing that change of mind and heart, and turning away from evil is *repentance*. Sadly, for many Christians, the idea of repentance is now a thing of the past and has no further use for the believer except in his witness to lost people.

#### The Goodness of God

There is an encouraging statement on the subject in Romans 2:4 which states that "the goodness of God leadeth thee to repentance." Note that this was written (as is the entire epistle) to "the saints" (1:7). There we note that when a person turns from away sin, the goodness of God has been involved! The wording "leadeth thee" describes a progressive work or process rather than a snap decision. As truth revealed, we can know it and thank the Lord for it. It is one of the gracious inner workings of the Holy Spirit.

This should have an effect on our hearts. The ideal, of course, is to quickly confess our sins once the Spirit's conviction is received. That is all that is needed. But at times there can be spiritual dullness or hardness of heart. Think of David,

who carried on the business of government for many months after his sin with Bathsheba. In such cases, we can know that the goodness of God sets in motion things that will lead us toward a repentant heart, as it did with David. Certainly this

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is often a personal matter between the Lord and the individual. However, our inquiry now involves the local church fellowship and its leadership. Is it wise or necessary to leave this subject entirely to the individual believer and the Lord? Does the church have any responsibility? I think it does.

#### Thoughts for the Churches and the Saints

Some churches have subconsciously divided hearers into "them"—people who need to repent—and "us"—people who repented long ago and are now beyond it. This is a mistake. Rather, the church is a fellowship of forgiven people who experience and rejoice in receiving forgiveness all along life's pathway (1 John 1) as sin is confessed.

Part of real church fellowship should include helping other saints enjoy this practical forgiveness as brothers and sisters are restored to fellowship with the Lord, which then serves as the basis for fellowship with one another. But the basis on which fellowship is genuinely restored is not merely that confession is made, but that there is a decision to turn away from—to forsake—what is wrong and walk in the light!

To confess our sin but not turn from it invites chastisement (see Heb. 12). The actual mechanics of explaining and helping one another with this will vary from

assembly to assembly, but holding it as a value and maintaining an environment where it is encouraged is essential, and an important work of those who lead.

Further, consider the words of Christ to Thyatira in Rev. 2:21 "I gave her space to repent...and she repented not." Sin undealt with affects the church, and the Lord holds the church responsible.

#### Discussion Points for Elders

The following list is offered for those who may feel the need to improve in this area. If you're already on top of the matter, praise the Lord and scan the list as a review. If the subject is pointing out a need, you may want to discuss each of the following with fellow elders and pray for guidance as to what action might be taken. In any case, these are just some areas to increase awareness in our shepherding skills.

- Be sure the saints are getting solid Bible teaching on these and related important words: conviction, forgiveness, confession, repentance, restoration. This includes a clear definition and exposition of what is intended, one or more Bible references, and possibly an example or two from Scripture or personal experience. Good Bible ministry is not entertainment! As explained in 2 Tim. 3:16, it is expounding the path of faith (doctrine), allowing the Spirit of God to bring conviction where needed (reproof), encouraging the repent-believe response (correction) and then instructing as to how one may go along more faithfully next time (instruction in righteousness).
  - Be attentive to questions from the believers regarding problem passages, e.g., the "repentance" of Judas Iscariot (Matt. 27:3) or Esau (Heb. 12: 17), or unbiblical doctrines taught by some churches (e.g., "penance" as a replacement word for repentance; sins "forgiven" by clergymen etc.).
  - Be sure to touch on this subject with
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## Repentance (continued from page 2)

new folks coming into fellowship, such as the need to preserve harmony in relationships by following the Lord's instruction in Matt. 5: 23f. and Matt. 18:15f.

- Are there informal times of fellowship for the believers where these subjects can be discussed, prayed about and even practiced? A setting where questions about Bible passages or spoken ministry can be answered? This can be a real blessing to the spiritual climate of a local church. Elders can be sure that under normal circumstances such interaction will not take place in the public meetings of the whole church.
- Do the elders value these words and the ideas they represent so that they come up in visitations conducted, especially when visiting people

whose salvation may not be known or where bitterness is suspected?

- Probably most important of all: Is there a loving, accepting, forgiving family spirit in the assembly and among the leaders, where people can expect to be comforted and forgiven and restored when they fail? Young believers and newcomers may be reluctant to participate verbally or get involved serving if they sense a harsh climate where one must "get it right" on the first try.

In summary, repenting of sin is, first and foremost, a matter between the

believer and the Lord, and there is no thought here of substituting a public or mechanical ceremony for the work of

God within the heart. Nevertheless, the Scripture is clear that Christian fellowship is not only vertical, but horizontal. The church does not forgive sin, but it can be the setting where family matters involving sins, weights, and other problems are faced and

cleared up. Sin tolerated will weaken the testimony not only of individuals but also of the whole congregation. Therefore, this subject has profound implications, not only for personal holiness, but also for the life of the local assembly, and elders should be mindful of its importance.



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## Gospels (continued from page 1)

time," found only twice in Matthew's Gospel (4:17 and 16:21), properly divides the book into three main sections:

- 1:1-4:16—Introduction
- 4:17-16:20—Presentation of the Jewish Messiah
- 16:21-28:20—Rejection of the Jewish Messiah.

The first section of *Matthew* informs us of the events leading up to the Lord's public ministry, which was initiated directly after His baptism and testing. The second section presents Messiah to the Jewish nation. The final portion of *Matthew* vividly describes the Messiah's rejection. This section commences after Peter's confession of Jesus as "the Christ the Son of the Living God" (Matt. 16:16) and just prior to the Lord's transfiguration.

The bulk of *Matthew* (the latter two sections) records the three-year-plus ministry of the Lord Jesus. Generally speaking, He labored in Galilee for approximately two years, then in Decapolis for six months and in Judea for three months, then withdrew to Perea for the final four months, prior to returning to Jerusalem for the Passover and His crucifixion. The transfiguration of our Lord occurred in

the latter days of the Decapolis ministry. Thus, Matthew 4:17-16:20 covers nearly two and one-half years of history, while the last section in *Matthew* (16:21-28:20) spans the final seven or eight months of the Lord's sojourn on earth.

Matthew labors in his Gospel account to validate Jesus Christ as the Jewish Messiah: He was born *of* the Jews and *for* the Jews. He does so by frequently referring to Old Testament quotations and messianic prophecies, and then showing that Jesus Christ is the literal fulfillment of each one. Consequently, his Gospel has a strongly Jewish flavor. Because Matthew directly relates Jesus Christ to Old Testament declarations, the word "fulfilled" appears sixteen times in his Gospel. The probability of Jesus fulfilling these prophecies by chance would be astronomically impossible, thus, He must be God's Son to do so. The *authority* theme of *Matthew* is quite evident in Christ's preaching of the Kingdom Message (e.g., 3:3, 4:17) and His parable telling (e.g., 22:2). The Kingdom Message itself was the culmination of a Jewish dispensational economy that began on Mt. Sinai with the giving of the Law and would conclude at Mt. Moriah with the crucifixion of Christ. Matthew, more

prominently than the other Gospel writers, shows the offering of Messiah, the Jewish rejection, and the consequential setting aside of Israel that the Gentiles might receive grace (Rom 11:11, 25).

Matthew began his gospel by focusing the Jews upon the Lord Jesus as the Son of David, the rightful heir to the throne of David. He will close his Gospel in a figurative manner that beautifully climaxes this realization. Matthew does not record the ascension of Christ, but rather closes his account by observing Christ positioned on a mountain in Galilee imparting directions to His disciples. Matthew often mentions mountains in his Gospel, which in the figurative sense symbolize kingdoms in the Bible. From a Jewish perspective, this scene is the climax of *Matthew* and completes the theme that he began in the very first verse. Just before the curtain closes, we get a futuristic representation of Christ's kingdom established on earth. The subjects of the King are worshipping Him on a mountain (Matt. 28:17). God will keep His promises to Abraham, to David, to the Jewish people, and to all those who heed the gospel message and enter by faith into the kingdom of heaven.





## Wives' Corner

**"Plug In"** by Rachel Kichar

One morning I woke up extra early and decided to enjoy the luxury of lying in bed listening to some hymns on my MP3 player. It certainly was lovely—the perfect way to begin a Sunday morning. The music swirled through my earbuds, lifting my soul to think of God and to rejoice in Him and His works. I let myself be lost in the music and the delicious sensation of absolute rest. Suddenly, it all stopped. My earbuds had come unplugged from the mp3 player. I was lying in a silent, pitch-black room. The magic was gone. I fumbled for the cord, and plugged it back in, and the music swirled on, picking up a few measures from where I had lost it. It hadn't stopped, of course. I had just unplugged.


I sit by my window at night, looking out on the little valley that is our town, watching a few cars drive by. We live in a rural area, so there aren't many lights to defy the darkness of the night. Yet the darkness is far deeper than night. Broken homes, broken dreams, broken promises, broken bodies, broken social systems, broken resolutions, so very many broken hearts, and all of this multiplied in every little valley in every country across this broken earth. And I know that my grief is only a drop in the vast river of tears that have been wept down through the centuries.

But is it possible that, existing in parallel with this broken weeping world, there is another world of rejoicing and hope? Is there music being sung somewhere, if only we could "plug in"?

I open my Bible and find the answer. The music swirls around me. Not an absence of sorrow, for here are tones of the greatest sorrow of all, the sorrow of Love rejected and hung on a cross. Yet that very cry of agony ends in the triumphant cry of new life. And the music swirls on, jubilant and victorious. It sings of a Child born, and a King triumphant, of a bride won and a Bridegroom satisfied, of a battle fought and the last enemy conquered. It sings of a plan accomplished and a work finished, of a son come home and a lost sheep found, of a home filled and a table laid, of promises completed and hopes fulfilled. The song goes on, and the singer is God Himself, to tell of love at last rewarded, and faith at last made sight, and hope fulfilled beyond our dreams. The rich strains span all of time and eternity, one harmonious whole in which every note makes sense. The voices of the morning stars that sang together before the beginning of the world, are mingled with angelic jubilation over sinners repented, and answered by the countless voices of those saved ones themselves, worshiping the Lamb who is worthy. The trumpets at the walls

of Jericho and the harp of David, mingle with the voice of the last trumpet and the harps of the elders in heaven.

Sorrow is woven all through the song, and yet it is sorrow that has fulfilled its purpose. It is not a song of well-laid plans gone awry, but of a perfect plan fulfilled just as intended. The pace is measured, not too fast and not too slow. Not a note is hurried, nor does a single note lag. The conductor is perfectly in control of his orchestra, though the instruments range from the devil himself to the created world of nature, to mankind, to angelic hosts, to the very Son of God.

Is it possible that this song is being sung even now, as I look out at the dark valley and feel the weight of a collapsing society and a disintegrating world pressing in on me? Surely the sacred pages answer, "Yes," and remind me that the other world is, after all, more real than this. That song of the triumph of God was being sung before this little world hung in space, and it will continue long after the stage has been dismantled and the blood-bought singers gathered home. I can take my place even now in that choir, and add my voice to the chorus, "To Him who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb, be blessing and honor and glory and dominion forever and ever." (Rev. 5:13) All I have to do is plug in. 

### THE SMALL PRINT

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Note: All words referring to God have the initial letter capitalized. While the original languages of the Bible do not use capitalization, this is the convention in some translations but not in others. So at times there may be inconsistencies in usage in ESN articles.