

He Gave Us Scripture: Foundations of Interpretation

LESSON
NINE

MODERN APPLICATION &
THE NEW COVENANT



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Lesson Nine

Modern Application & the New Covenant

INTRODUCTION

We all have experiences that we quickly forget, but some experiences impact us so much that they stick with us our whole lives. Perhaps, for you, it's when you first came to faith in Christ, your wedding day or the loss of a loved one. Whatever the case, when we go through these kinds of experiences, they change how we look at everything, forever. And the same is true for followers of Christ as we apply the Scriptures to our modern world. Although the Bible tells us about many things that God has done, the arrival of the new covenant in Christ is a pivotal event that changes the way we understand everything, including the application of Scripture to our lives today.

This is the ninth lesson in our series *He Gave Us Scripture: Foundations of Interpretation*, and we've entitled it "Modern Application and the New Covenant." In this lesson, we'll explore how the new covenant in Christ should guide the ways we apply all of Scripture to our own day.

In our previous lesson, we learned how we must acknowledge epochal developments in the Old Testament as we apply the Bible to our lives. And we observed that one storyline underlies all of biblical history. The Bible teaches us that God rules from his heavenly throne in brilliant glory, and his goal from the beginning has been to extend his visible glory from heaven throughout the earth despite all who oppose him. As creatures made in his image, God ordained human beings to fill the earth and to rule over it in preparation for the ultimate display of his glory. And when God's brilliance shines everywhere, every creature will worship and praise him endlessly.

We also noted that the drama of this underlying biblical storyline developed in six major chapters, or epochs, that built on each other cumulatively: the covenant epochs of Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, David and the new covenant in Christ. The cumulative nature of these epochal developments reminds us that while God's people must never return to serving God in the ways of the past, they must also never forget to apply the lessons of the past appropriately to their own day.

In this lesson, we'll explore modern application and the new covenant in two steps. First, we'll look at the fulfillment of the new covenant in Christ. And second, we'll see how the new covenant should guide our application of Scripture today. Let's begin with the fulfillment of the new covenant in Christ.

FULFILLMENT

We often imagine what particular experiences will be like before they actually happen — like, winning a competition or entering a new phase in life. But many times, we discover the experiences themselves are different from what we expected. Well, the same kind of thing was true for God’s people in biblical times. Prior to Christ’s coming, God revealed to his people many insights into what he would accomplish through Christ. But when the new covenant in Christ finally arrived, it wasn’t exactly what his people had imagined.

To see how this happened, we’ll look at three facets of new covenant fulfillment in Scripture. First, we’ll touch on outlooks that appear in the Old Testament. Second, we’ll describe perspectives that developed during the intertestamental period. And third, we’ll describe how the New Testament addresses the fulfillment of the new covenant. Let’s begin with the Old Testament outlooks on the new covenant.

OLD TESTAMENT

Old Testament hopes for a new covenant rose out of words God spoke through the prophet Jeremiah as he ministered near the time of Jerusalem’s destruction in 586 B.C.

Despite the severe judgments that were coming against Judah through the Babylonian exile, in Jeremiah 31:31-34, God announced a grand hope for the future. Listen to what it says there:

“The days are coming,” declares the Lord, “when I will make a new covenant with the people of Israel and with the people of Judah... 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” (Jeremiah 31:31-34).

This passage raised many wondrous hopes for God’s people. As we read in Jeremiah 31:31, God will make a new covenant with both the northern kingdom of Israel, and the southern kingdom of Judah. The new covenant will not fail because, as verse 33 explains, God will fulfill the ideal of putting his law “in their minds” and “on their hearts.” And as verse 34 also indicates, these blessings will never end because God will permanently “forgive” and “remember their sins no more.” When we consider these hopes for the new covenant age, it is hard to imagine anything greater.

At this point in our lesson, we want to see how the Old Testament dealt with the fulfillment of these new covenant hopes. To begin with, it’s evident that God initially offered to grant these blessings when he returned Israel from exile.

As we’ve just read, Jeremiah 31:31 simply begins with the vague expression “the days are coming,” but in the immediate context this temporal reference was rather precise. Jeremiah 31:31-34 is part of a larger segment of the book of Jeremiah often called the Book of Restoration that extends from Jeremiah 30:1–31:40. This section bears

this name because it rehearses several descriptions of the exile and the blessings that would follow after the exile. Listen to what it says in Jeremiah 30:3, near the beginning of the Book of Restoration:

“The days are coming,” declares the Lord, “when I will bring my people Israel and Judah back from captivity and restore them to the land” (Jeremiah 30:3).

The expression “the days are coming” appears in this verse as it does at the beginning of the prophecy of a new covenant in Jeremiah 31:31. And in this verse, “the days are coming” is explicitly associated with the time when God will bring his people “back from captivity and restore them to the land.”

In this light, it’s clear that Jeremiah 31:31 initially associated a new covenant with Israel’s restoration to the Promised Land. From the Old Testament perspective, Israel’s restoration would take place at the culmination of history in “the latter days,” or in “the last days.” It would entail the establishment of a new covenant along with Israel’s return from exile, the rebuilding of Jerusalem and its temple, the worldwide reign of the anointed Son of David, and the renewal of creation.

In Jeremiah 29:10-14, God also revealed to Jeremiah when to expect this age of a new covenant to take place. Listen to what the prophet said:

This is what the Lord says: “When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will come to you and fulfill my good promise to bring you back to this place... Then you will call on me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you... I will gather you from all the nations and places where I have banished you” (Jeremiah 29:10-14).

Here God offered the hope that if Israel “will call on him and come and pray,” then God will “bring them back” to the Promised Land in seventy years. The same timetable is revealed in Jeremiah 25:12.

As a matter of fact, in 538 B.C. God led the Persian emperor Cyrus to command Israel to return to the Promised Land. So, it’s not surprising that in 2 Chronicles 36:20-22, the author of Chronicles closed his book by noting that Jeremiah’s seventy years of exile were fulfilled at this time.

But what of the many other blessings that were to come in the last days, the days of the new covenant? Sadly, those who returned to the Promised Land failed to serve God time and again. And as a result, the magnificent blessings of a new covenant foretold in Jeremiah 31 were postponed.

This is precisely what Daniel learned in Daniel 9:24 when God sent word to him about the fulfillment of Jeremiah’s prophecy of 70 years:

Seventy “sevens” are decreed for your people and your holy city to finish transgression, to put an end to sin, to atone for wickedness, to bring in everlasting righteousness, to seal up vision and prophecy and to anoint the Most Holy Place (Daniel 9:24).

As this passage indicates, God decreed a postponement of the greater blessings of the last days, the days of the new covenant, for “seventy ‘sevens,’” seven times longer than Jeremiah’s original seventy years. At that time, the hopes of the new covenant would be fulfilled. Transgression would be finished, sin would end, atonement would be accomplished, righteousness would come, vision and prophecy would be sealed up, and the Most Holy Place would be anointed.

When Daniel is praying about Jeremiah’s prophecy about the seventy years of exile, he’s praying, “The time is about up. Lord, what’s going on?” And the answer that’s given to him is that it’s not just seventy years but it’s also seventy sevens of years, the land making up for its Sabbaths, for all the neglect that had taken place. Something that that suggests to us in terms of interpreting Scripture is that sometimes there is the dimension where God is doing literally what was promised, but there’s also the dimension where there are some other implications of it that are sometimes brought out prophetically later on. So, for example, in the book of Revelation, you often have Old Testament imagery that’s used in ways differently than it was in the Old Testament. Obviously the Revelation isn’t talking about the same plagues that happened on Egypt, but we have the imagery of the plagues being used again in Revelation to make a comparison for how God is bringing judgment. So, we need to be open to that when we read Scripture, when we read how later writers are dealing with earlier writers. I mean, there was a sense in which there was a seventy years of exile, but there was also another sense that God had in mind that Daniel would never have known if it hadn’t been shown to him by the angel.

— Dr. Craig S. Keener

We’ve seen that in the Old Testament, the full extent of the new covenant was postponed due to the people’s disobedience. Now let’s turn to the intertestamental period — the time between the Old and New Testaments — and the perspectives many in Israel developed regarding the fulfillment of Jeremiah’s prophecy, especially in the days just before Jesus’ earthly ministry.

INTERTESTAMENTAL PERIOD

It was obvious to everyone in the first century that Jeremiah’s prediction of a new covenant had not yet been completely fulfilled. New Testament records and archeological discoveries indicate that different religious factions among the people of Israel had different perspectives, but there was widespread agreement on a number of basic issues.

Toward the end of the intertestamental period, the vast majority of rabbis spoke of the hope of the last days, or the new covenant epoch, in terms of two great ages of history.

In the first place, they referred to prior history and their current circumstances as “this age.” The obvious victory of evil over God’s people in the exile led the rabbis to characterize this age as a time of failure, sorrow and death.

In the second place, the rabbis also spoke of a second great age of history, the time of future glory, as “the age to come.” The age to come was also known as “the last days,” “the kingdom of God,” and as the age of a new covenant. The rabbis expected that when the age to come arrived, God’s purposes for history would be fulfilled. He would return his repentant, exiled people in large numbers, restore the throne of David, spread his reign throughout the earth, bring judgment against those who refused to submit to God and to the son of David, and spread the blessings of Abraham to the ends of the earth.

In addition to this, the vast majority of rabbis in Israel also taught that the transition from this age to the age to come would take place decisively with the appearance of the Messiah, the great son of David. The Messiah would bring about a grand turning point in world history, the transition from defeat to victory, from evil to righteousness, from death to eternal life, and from darkness to a world filled with the brilliant glory of God.

With this background of Old Testament and intertestamental outlooks in mind, let’s look at how the New Testament explained the fulfillment of Jeremiah’s hope of a new covenant.

NEW TESTAMENT

We all know that in his Last Supper with his disciples, Jesus held up the cup and said, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood.” Also, Paul called himself and his companions “ministers of a new covenant.” And the book of Hebrews refers to Jeremiah 31 and affirms that Christians live in the new covenant age. But when we compare what’s happening in our day with the description of the new covenant in Jeremiah 31, we realize that we’re yet to see the new covenant promises in their fullness. The law of God isn’t perfectly written on our minds and in our hearts. People in church still need to be told to know the Lord. We’re still commanded to ask for the forgiveness of our sins. So, how can we be in the new covenant age when so many of Jeremiah’s expectations are yet to be fulfilled? The answer lies in the mystery God revealed in Christ, how he was going to unfold the fulfillment of the new covenant.

Different New Testament figures addressed these matters in different ways. For instance, Jesus, in a number of his parables, announced that the kingdom of God had begun with his earthly ministry, would gradually grow over time, and finally reach its culmination when he returned in glory.

The apostle Paul addressed these matters in places like Ephesians 3:3-5, by referring to the fact that the mystery regarding the last days had been kept hidden from people in the past, but was now being revealed in Christ.

Paul mentioned this mystery in a number of other places as well like Romans 11:25 and 16:25-26 and Colossians 1:26-27. In these and other passages, Paul referred to different aspects of the Christian outlook on the last days in Christ as mysteries because they had been kept hidden from previous generations.

In several places in Paul’s letters he speaks about the gospel or various aspects of the gospel as being a mystery, a *mysterion* in Greek. And by mystery he doesn’t mean some mysterious, cloudy thing that suddenly appeared on the scene or a puzzle that no one can solve. As one New Testament scholar described it, a mystery for Paul was something that God hid in plain view, something hidden in plain view in the Old Testament. And it’s something now that, through clarifying revelation in the appearance of Christ, people can look back and say, “Oh look! Look at what is there.” So it’s not that Paul is presenting something that’s not there, but he’s saying, “Look at what we’ve missed, look at what is there” ... And in many ways, the truth about the coming Messiah and about the unity of Jew and Gentile together is right there in the Old Testament in the Psalms and in Isaiah, but the coming together of it ... the “look at what’s here; look at how all these pieces fit together” awaited God’s giving of his Spirit and the promises of the new covenant that Paul speaks about.

— Dr. Robert L. Plummer

When Paul was talking about the mystery being made known to him in Ephesians 3, he’s talking about the gospel. The gospel is a mystery. That means it’s hidden unless God takes explicit action to disclose it to us so that, of course, with respect to the gospel, it’s a public mystery. It’s a public secret, if you will. But it can only be unfolded to us through the proclamation of the gospel by the power of the Holy Spirit. Now, when Paul speaks of the mystery, as in the case in Ephesians 3, sometimes he’s talking about the mystery of the body of Christ that is brought into reality through the proclamation of the gospel. And there in Ephesians 3 he’s saying, the mystery is that Jew and Gentile love each other and are brought into organic unity together in a kingdom. It’s amazing. So, he says the unsearchable riches of Christ are being proclaimed to these wild Gentiles. Of course, being a Gentile, I’m glad it came to Gentiles. But that’s a mystery... He is the one that unites Jew and Gentile together by the blood of the cross and by the power of his Spirit.

— Dr. Sanders L. Willson

The mysteries that God revealed to the apostles and prophets led to an outlook on the new covenant age that New Testament scholars often describe as “inaugurated

eschatology” or “the now, but not yet.” Whatever terminology we may choose, we can see that Jesus and the writers of the New Testament taught that in God’s plan for the last days, the fulfillment of the age of the new covenant was to take place in three main stages.

First, the inauguration of the new covenant age was initiated in Jesus’ first coming and in the ministries of his apostles and prophets. This is why the New Testament speaks of the days of Jesus and his apostles as “the last days.” In Hebrews 1:1-2 we read these words:

In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe (Hebrews 1:1-2).

Here, the author of Hebrews referred to the time of Jesus’ earthly ministry and of his readers as “these last days.” As this passage indicates, with Jesus’ inauguration of the kingdom, the promised last days of the Old Testament, had come upon the world.

The New Testament emphasizes that this inaugural phase of the new covenant age included all that Jesus accomplished in his incarnation, death, resurrection, ascension into heaven, and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. This special time also included the ministries of the apostles and prophets in their foundational work for the church. In Ephesians 2:19-20, Paul put it this way:

God’s household [is] built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone (Ephesians 2:19-20).

Second, the continuation of the new covenant epoch extends throughout the entire period of church history. During this time, Christ spreads the church throughout the nations through the proclamation and transformative influence of the gospel.

This is why the New Testament writers, in places like 2 Timothy 3:1-5, designated the entire period of church history as the last days. Listen to what it says there:

But mark this: There will be terrible times in the last days. People will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, proud, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, without love, unforgiving, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not lovers of the good, treacherous, rash, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God — having a form of godliness but denying its power (2 Timothy 3:1-5).

The sins listed here for “the last days” were sins that were occurring in Paul’s day, and that have continued to occur throughout history and into the present day.

Paul referred to the character of this same period as a mystery revealed in Christ in Ephesians 3:9-10:

This mystery, which for ages past was kept hidden in God ... [is] that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known (Ephesians 3:9-10).

In this light we are right to treat the entire period of church history as the new covenant age.

Third, the last days of the new covenant age will reach their consummation when Christ returns and fulfills God's ultimate purposes for all of history. This is why New Testament authors described the consummation of the kingdom at Christ's return as "the last days." In John 6:39, Jesus told his disciples:

This is the will of him who sent me, that I shall lose none of all that he has given me, but raise them up at the last day (John 6:39).

Here Jesus taught his disciples about his relationship to the Father. His reference to the "last day" points forward to that ultimate final day when he will return in glory, the dead will rise, and God will judge the world.

In Ephesians 1:9-10, Paul also described this time as a mystery that God revealed in Christ. In these verses, Paul described the consummation as:

The mystery of [God's] will ... which he purposed in Christ, to be put into effect when the times will have reached their fulfillment — to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ (Ephesians 1:9-10).

As the New Testament indicates, Jesus inaugurated the new covenant in his first coming, he continues to reveal the new covenant through the worldwide church today, and the full judgments and blessings of the new covenant age will come when Christ returns in glory as king over all.

Having explored the fulfillment of the new covenant in Christ, we're now in a position to turn to the second main topic of our lesson: our modern application of Scripture based on the unfolding character of the new covenant epoch.

APPLICATION

As we'll see in later lessons, there are many things to be said about the application of Scripture to people living in the new covenant age. Among these are countless cultural and personal considerations. But at this point, we want to see how the New Testament teaching about the three stages of the new covenant guides us in applying the Bible to our lives today. These aspects of application are rather general, but they provide us with indispensable perspectives on how we are to use the Scriptures in our lives today.

Everyone who's watched a play in a theater knows that where you sit affects your perspective on the performance. The same character and actions can look very different

from different angles. And the best way to take in the whole presentation is to see it more than once from different seats. In many ways, this is how Jesus and the New Testament authors taught the Christian church to apply the Scriptures in the new covenant age. By examining Scripture from different vantage points, we're more equipped to apply the Bible to our lives.

Imagine a faithful follower of Christ reading the Scriptures on a stage whose backdrop divides into three large panels. From one side of the audience, we see that the Christian reads the Bible against the backdrop of Christ's inauguration of the new covenant. From the middle of the audience we see that the Christian reads the Bible against the backdrop of Christ's continuation of the new covenant. And from the opposite side of the audience, we see him reading the Bible against the backdrop of Christ's consummation of the new covenant. In one way or another, followers of Christ are to apply the Scriptures to the modern world by studying the Bible with all three of these perspectives in mind.

In other words, when studying the Bible, believers need to relate every Scripture to what Christ has already accomplished in the inauguration of the new covenant and consider everything Christ accomplished for us in his earthly ministry. But we also have to view the teachings of Scripture in light of the continuation of the new covenant age and search for the significance of Scripture in our lives today. Additionally, it's important that we view the Scriptures through the lens of what Christ will accomplish in the consummation of our age and live in readiness for Christ's wondrous return in glory.

There are many ways we could explore these three perspectives on new covenant applications, but we'll touch on just two important points. First, we'll summarize some general guidelines for application in the new covenant age. And second, we'll offer an example of application that illustrates these strategies. Let's begin with some general guidelines.

GUIDELINES

In an earlier lesson we defined the process of application as:

Appropriately connecting the original meaning of a biblical document to contemporary audiences in ways that impact their concepts, behaviors and emotions.

As this definition points out, every application of Scripture involves appropriately connecting original meaning to contemporary audiences.

First, we need to determine the original meaning of a biblical passage by identifying the ways biblical authors sought to impact the concepts, behaviors, and emotions of their original audiences. Then, we can apply this original meaning to contemporary audiences by determining how a biblical passage should impact the concepts, behaviors and emotions of people today. As we've seen in other lessons, it's important to keep epochal developments in mind when we apply the Scriptures because originally every passage of Scripture was written for people living in a different stage of

biblical faith than our own. So, at this point in our lesson, let's focus on the ways epochal developments connect the original audiences of Scripture with contemporary audiences living in the new covenant age.

To see what we have in mind, we'll look briefly in two directions. First, we'll make some general comments about new covenant applications of Old Testament passages. Then second, we'll do the same with New Testament passages. Let's begin with the Old Testament.

Old Testament

As we have seen in a preceding lesson, the Old Testament refers to six major covenants in biblical history, but the writing of Old Testament books took place in only two of these covenant ages: the covenant epochs of Moses and David. Every Old Testament passage was designed to address the needs of God's people living either in the covenant epoch of Moses or during the covenant epoch of David. As such, Old Testament passages originally conveyed to God's people sets of concepts, behaviors and emotions that were appropriate for the theological developments of these two covenant epochs.

For this reason, it's necessary to build bridges of meaning from Old Testament passages to the new covenant epoch. As followers of Christ, we know that the only infallible guide in this process is the New Testament. So, it's essential to look for ways New Testament authors applied the Old Testament to all three stages of the new covenant. For instance, the New Testament gives us many examples of the ways Christ fulfilled Old Testament teachings in his first coming. It also draws attention to the ways Christ continues to fulfill Old Testament teachings during the continuation period. In addition, the New Testament points to the ways Christ will fulfill Old Testament teachings in the consummation of the new covenant.

One of the most important biblical themes is the theme of the kingdom of God, and yet that particular phrase only occurs in the New Testament. Well, we see it everywhere in the Old Testament, especially in the Psalms regarding this acclamation, "the Lord reigns." New Testament authors are taking up Old Testament themes in the light of Christ's coming, and so as the gospel evangelists summarize Jesus' teaching, they talk about the kingdom of God and Jesus himself as his words are recorded are talking about how the kingdom of heaven is at hand, the kingdom of God is at hand. And so, something that talks about Yahweh's reign over his people and over the nations is now embodied in terms of Christ the Messiah, the son of David, who has arrived on the stage in Israel... We see it in terms of both how Christ is ascended and he reigns on the throne in Acts 1, as he has ascended and the resurrection is preached and people have drawn to the risen and ascended Christ, but also there is still a future sense of the day of the Lord that Christ will come again. As Acts 1 tells us, he will return in the same way that he left, and there will still

be that final vindication as the people of God are tested in the final deception and rebellion when Satan is released, but also when Christ comes and is victorious over all of Satan's schemes at the end.

— Dr. Greg Perry

One of the most fascinating things to see is the way the gospel has portrayed Jesus in light of Old Testament themes. We see this in a number of different places. One of the main places we see it is we see Jesus portrayed really in the place of Moses. He in some ways is a second Moses coming to lead a new second and greater exodus. A number of examples of that come to mind when we think about Jesus as the second Moses. One, of course, is the idea of him going right into the wilderness after his water experience. So, when he's baptized in the Jordan River, in one sense, this going through the water is just like the Israelites going through the Red Sea and from there immediately going into the desert. In the desert he experiences temptations just like the Israelites, but he is the faithful Son, whereas Israel was the disobedient son. In that desert experience, Jesus emerges as the triumphant leader of a new exodus whereby he comes and then delivers a new law on the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5 when Jesus is portrayed there as the new lawgiver... So time and time again you see this harmony and this unity between the Gospels and the Old Testament and that Jesus is finishing a story that was begun years ago.

— Dr. Michael J. Kruger

With this basic pattern for applying Old Testament passages in mind, let's turn to the application of New Testament passages to the new covenant age.

New Testament

At first glance, it may appear that there's no need to consider epochal developments when Christians apply the New Testament because the New Testament was written in the epoch of the new covenant. But it's important to keep in mind that the entire New Testament was composed during the inaugural stage of the new covenant. Today, we no longer live in that stage. Rather, we live in the continuation of the new covenant age. So, we need to keep this epochal distinction in mind when we apply the New Testament to our lives.

New Testament books came from the hands of the foundational leaders of the church and were initially written for people living during the inauguration of the new covenant epoch. What these authors wrote has many implications for us as we live in the

continuation of the new covenant age. So, even though we live thousands of years after these works were written, they have unquestionable authority for us.

Consider just a few of the differences between our lives today and the times in which the New Testament was written. For instance, unlike today, appeals for guidance could be made directly to individual apostles and prophets who were living at that time. We see this in the book of Philemon. Moreover, widespread issues could be decided by the interactions of the church's foundational leaders, as in the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15. But in our day, we don't have these foundational authorities living among us. So, we have to rely on the New Testament's summations of their teachings to help guide us.

In addition to this, the New Testament contains many examples of miraculous and supernatural events. Jesus and his apostles and prophets were especially gifted to perform such feats to establish their authority. While this was true then, authority today is established only by the standard of the New Testament itself. If we forget this distinction, we'll often have false expectations for our day. To be sure, God continues to work miracles in the church during the continuation of the new covenant, but we should not be disappointed to discover that in this age such events do not occur with as much frequency as they did when Christ and the apostles lived on the earth.

Moreover, New Testament authors devoted themselves primarily to doctrinal and practical issues that were particularly important for the inauguration of the new covenant. For instance, hardly any issue received more attention in the New Testament than the expansion of God's kingdom from its Jewish roots to the Gentile world. Controversy after controversy addressed in the New Testament dealt with how followers of Christ were to observe or not observe Old Testament practices and additional Jewish traditions. While it's true that these teachings have implications for the church today, the Christian church has gone beyond many of these foundational controversies. As the gospel continues to spread throughout the world, we face different sorts of issues.

I sometimes wish that I could go back to the apostolic age and witness the preaching ministry of the apostles and the miracles that they performed and everything that they introduced into the life of the church. And of course, so many of the experiences of the early church are very similar to the experiences we have in the world today. I mean, in many places in the world the church is persecuted community, and we're holding onto the same gospel that the first believers held onto. But there's also a sense in which that ministry of the apostles was unique in a unique period in church history, and we build on their foundation by reading the Scriptures that those apostles produced. But the office of the apostle is not a continuing office in the life of the church. That's a unique foundational ministry that they were given and now we build on their foundation in the church today.

— Dr. Philip Ryken

For this reason, when we apply the New Testament to the modern world, it's crucial to understand that the original meaning is based firmly in the inauguration stage

of the new covenant era. With that original meaning in hand, we can then apply it to our own time by taking into account further developments within the new covenant age.

Having seen the general guidelines for application of the new covenant in both the Old and New Testaments, let's look at an example in Scripture that illustrates these principles. We'll use the Bible's emphasis on warfare as our example.

EXAMPLE

Everyone familiar with the Bible knows that it gives a lot of attention to the theme of warfare against evil spirits and against the nations that follow them. Nearly every book in the Old Testament touches on this theme in one way or another. And the New Testament repeatedly indicates that the war against evil found in the Old Testament continues in the new covenant epoch.

In the Old Testament, we often see God being portrayed as a warrior, as a warrior king, as kind of a military hero. I mean, our context may not seem to make a lot of sense, we don't fully understand it. But the reality of life in ancient Israel was warfare was common... Pharaoh was not going to let God's people go, so what God did was ... There were the plagues first of all, but then God basically ended up fighting for them by kind of drowning the Egyptian army in the Red Sea. So yet another example. Then Moses and Miriam sing this song praising God: The chariot and rider ... the horse and rider he has thrown into the sea. So God is being sung about as a warrior. And certainly we see that, as the nation of Israel moves into the land of the Canaanites, God is fighting on their behalf.

— Dr. David T. Lamb

The prominence of this theme raises a crucial question. How are we to apply it to our lives today? Whether we read the Old Testament or the New Testament, if we want to gain a fuller picture of how this theme applies to our lives, we must view it in light of the three stages of the new covenant epoch in Christ.

In the first place, we should give attention to the inauguration of our age. The New Testament makes it clear that some aspects of the theme of war against evil in the world were fulfilled uniquely in Jesus' earthly ministry. Jesus himself referred to what was happening in his ministry with his disciples as victory over evil.

For instance, in Luke 10:18-19, we read Jesus' reply when his disciples returned from having cast out demons.

I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven. I have given you authority to trample on snakes and scorpions and to overcome all the power of the enemy (Luke 10:18-19).

Also, according to Colossians 2:15, Jesus defeated evil spiritual forces in his death on the cross:

[Jesus] disarmed the powers and authorities, [and] made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross (Colossians 2:15).

In a similar way, in Ephesians 4:8, Paul referred to Christ's resurrection and ascension as his victory in war.

When he ascended on high, he led captives in his train and gave gifts to men (Ephesians 4:8).

In light of these and similar passages, whenever we come upon the theme of warfare against God's enemies in the Old or New Testaments, we should always keep in mind how Christ fulfilled his role in this war during the inauguration of the new covenant age. Apart from what Christ has already accomplished, there is no hope of final victory over the powers of sin and death.

In his first coming Christ demonstrated the warfare, or fulfilled the warfare, or could be depicted as warfare, with Satan. And it started with Genesis 3:15 where God promised Adam and Eve at the very beginning in the Fall that there would be a Deliverer. And we see that then happening at the cross. Satan's head is crushed, Jesus' heel is bitten, smitten — whatever term you want to use — and then he is raised from the dead and has complete victory over Satan.

— Dr. Howard Eyrich

Many Christians think that Christ will not destroy evil until he comes back again at the end of times. But the fact is that Jesus Christ eliminated evil in his first coming. We can say that he eliminated evil in principle, meaning he defeated the Devil on the cross and laid the foundation for the final second coming. There is still evil in the world, and we still live in it, but it's an evil on the road to extinction. In the battle our Lord Jesus Christ fought, he "disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them," and he obtained a massive victory over the Devil's work through his death and resurrection.

— Dr. Ghassan Khalaf, translation

In addition to the inauguration of our age, whenever we encounter the theme of warfare in Scripture, we must be ready to apply it to the continuation of the new covenant epoch.

Although Christ himself initiated the final defeat of evil in his first coming, the New Testament teaches that this war is still very much a part of the experience of every believer throughout the history of the church.

For example, in 2 Corinthians 10:4, Paul affirmed that the spread of the gospel was warfare against evil spirits. There he said:

The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds (2 Corinthians 10:4).

Paul referred to the warfare of the church in similar ways in Ephesians 6:12:

For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms (Ephesians 6:12).

Notice that in both of these passages the war we wage as Christians is spiritual in nature. Just like Jesus did in the inauguration of our age, we don't make war with "flesh and blood." We make war against the "rulers" and "authorities," that is, "the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms." During the continuation of the kingdom of Christ, we are at war with Satan and other evil spirits at work in the world, rather than at war with people. In 2 Corinthians 5:19-20, Paul wrote these words:

[God] has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God (2 Corinthians 5:19-20).

As God's people living during the continuation of the new covenant, we are not warriors toward our fellow human beings. Instead, we are "Christ's ambassadors" who seek to rescue human beings from the dominion of sin through the spread of the gospel of Christ. We further the defeat of Satan's kingdom by urging people to, "Be reconciled to God."

So, it's not surprising that in 2 Corinthians 2:14 Paul also described the gospel ministry as Christ's victory parade:

Thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumphal procession in Christ (2 Corinthians 2:14).

Whether we are drawing examples of warfare from the Old Testament or from the New Testament, followers of Christ should always be ready to apply this theme in their daily ministry during the continuation of the new covenant.

Christ fulfills warfare against evil through the church today in a variety of means, but the principal category for considering this is

that Christ's kingdom is of a different order than we normally think of kingdoms. This was true in Jesus' day when those who misunderstood him to be establishing a political order, as much as it is today when, out of our national or ethnic or socioeconomic interests, we want to see Christ's war as not a war of the cross but a war of crown or sword. Paul gives us guidelines for this kind of spiritual warfare in Ephesians 6. We are to pray. We are to share the good news. We are to have faith. We are to practice righteousness and the principal means of the Word of God... Martin Luther, in fact, in his "A Mighty Fortress" spoke of that Word above all earthly powers. So, it's the Word of God which will prevail through God's servant son, Jesus Christ, as the fulfillment of Christ's spiritual warfare. So, what that means for us is we have to follow the pattern of Christ, a cross-shaped life. We imitate Christ as Philippians 2 says by having the same attitude in ourselves, so that the gospel is distinguished, and Christianity is distinguished from other religions, which see religion as primarily coercive. This is one of the principal contrasts between, say, Christianity and Islam. Islam cannot conceive of a non-coercive belief in God, and Christianity is fundamentally a religion of the cross, of self-divestiture, of giving our lives for the sake of others because Christ gave his life for us, so it's a call for sacrifice and for modeling the example of Christ so that others will willingly come to make him Lord.

— Rev. Mike Glodo

Not only does the New Testament associate the theme of war with the inauguration and continuation of our age, but with the consummation of the new covenant epoch.

Just as Christ himself performed warfare in his first coming, he will complete the war against evil when he returns in glory. At the second coming, the distinction he made between spiritual forces as the objects of his wrath and human beings as the objects of his mercy will fade. In Revelation 19:11-15, John described the battle to come this way:

I saw heaven standing open and there before me was a white horse, whose rider is called Faithful and True. With justice he judges and makes war... The armies of heaven were following him, riding on white horses and dressed in fine linen, white and clean. Out of his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations. "He will rule them with an iron scepter" (Revelation 19:11-15).

In many ways, this scene of Christ waging the final battle against evil is our hope for victory and eternal life in the new heavens and new earth. When the final defeat of sin and death have taken place, Christ will reign and invite all of his followers to reign with him in victory.

The topic of warfare in the Bible, perhaps especially in the Old Testament, and God's judgment and his wrath and how that's going to unfold and what it's going to look like in the end times is a big topic ... But in the New Testament we have two different ways in which this theme is developed. The first is with Jesus. He comes as a divine warrior to wage war on sin, but this time not on the sinner but on sin itself. He is, in some sense, the victim here. He becomes the one who receives the full wrath of God rather than the one who brings wrath. Now, sinners escape the wrath of God at the end by hiding themselves or being united to Christ as those who have experienced that judgment in Christ. So when Christ comes, he's going to come with his people, and he's going to come and wage war on those that have not repented or not united to him in faith. And so we get these pictures of warfare, in some sense, at the flood, with Israel and the Promised Land, even with Assyria and Babylon waging war on Israel, as pictures of this eschatological judgment. But they're all pictures of, really, what Christ has undergone for us as well. So there are two pictures: One, God's grace — that he has undergone that warfare and wrath and experienced its curse for us, but also there's God's justice. He's coming back and any of those who aren't united to him will experience that same judgment.

— Dr. Miles Van Pelt

We should always remember to interpret the theme of warfare found throughout Scripture in light of the great consummation of Christ's return as the conquering warrior.

The way in which the New Testament handles the theme of war is instructive for us as we apply the Scriptures to our own day. To be sure, we have to study every theme individually because the New Testament develops them in different ways. Yet, to apply any biblical theme more fully, we must see how it is viewed in the light of the inauguration, continuation and consummation of the new covenant age in Christ. No matter how we begin to explore any topic, whether we begin in the Old or in the New Testament, as followers of Christ we can apply these topics to our lives by discovering how they are fulfilled in all three stages of the new covenant epoch.

CONCLUSION

In this lesson on modern application and the new covenant, we've looked at the ways in which the new covenant in Christ should affect our application of the Bible to the modern world. We've noticed how the fulfillment of Old Testament hopes for a new covenant can be seen in the inauguration, continuation and consummation of our epoch in Christ. And we've illustrated how the application of every theme of the Old and New

Testaments to modern life should accord with these same three stages of the new covenant.

The new covenant in Christ is no small matter. Rather, it's the culmination of God's purposes for all of history. And as such, the new covenant in Christ affects how we are to apply every portion of the Bible in our modern world. As followers of Christ, we must read the Scriptures in the light of the way God accomplishes his purposes in Christ. We look back to what Christ has already done, we look at what he's doing now, and we look forward to what he will accomplish when he returns. Only then will we rightly apply the Scriptures to our modern world as people of the new covenant.