

# Opening the Scriptures

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The Gospel of Luke relates how Jesus, after his resurrection, appeared to two of his disciples as they were on their way from Jerusalem to the village of Emmaus. At first they didn't recognize Jesus, as he discussed with them the events they had witnessed. We'll pick up the story in the middle, at Luke 24:25.

## Luke 24:25-45 NIV

He said to them, "How foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?" And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself.

As they approached the village to which they were going, Jesus acted as if he were going farther. But they urged him strongly, "Stay with us, for it is nearly evening; the day is almost over." So he went in to stay with them. When he was at the table with them, he took bread, gave thanks, broke it and began to give it to them. Then their eyes were opened and they recognized him, and he disappeared from their sight.

They asked each other, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?" They got up and returned at once to Jerusalem. There they found the Eleven and those with them, assembled together and saying, "It is true! The Lord has risen and has appeared to Simon." Then the two told what had happened on the way, and how Jesus was recognized by them when he broke the bread.

While they were still talking about this, Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, "Peace be with you." They were startled and frightened, thinking they saw a ghost.

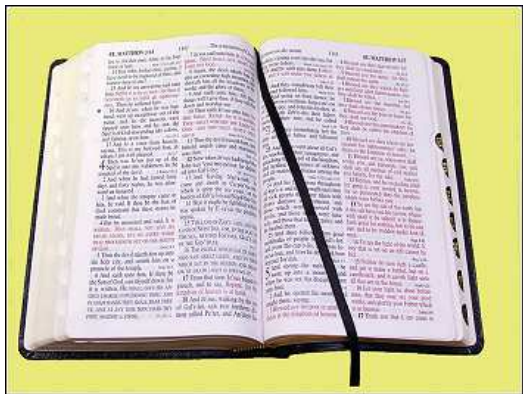
He said to them, "Why are you troubled, and why do doubts rise in your minds? Look at my hands and my feet. It is I myself! Touch me and see; a ghost does not have flesh and bones, as you see I have." When he had said this, he showed them his hands and feet.

And while they still did not believe it because of joy and amazement, he asked them, "Do you have anything here to eat?" They gave him a piece of broiled fish, and he took it and ate it in their presence.

He said to them, "This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms." Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures.



As Protestants, and perhaps especially as worshipers in a congregation that calls itself a "Christian Church," we consider ourselves people of the Bible. The first Article of this church's Statement of Faith says, "We believe that the Bible is the inspired word of God . . . It is the complete revelation of His will for the salvation of mankind, and the final authority for all Christian faith and life." We like to think of the Word of God as the authority for how we conduct our personal lives, and how we conduct ourselves as a church. Unlike some Christian groups, we don't have a powerful denominational structure, or leaders like bishops who are set over groups of churches. Instead, we understand that Jesus is the head of each local congregation, just as he told his disciples: "You have one Teacher, the Christ" (Matthew 23:10). And Jesus exercises his headship through the Word of God.



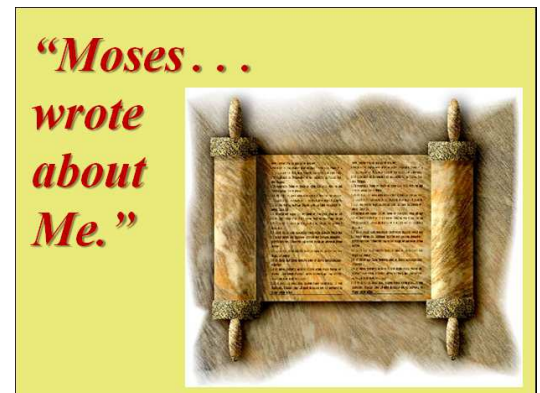
So because we want to do things in the Bible way, we follow certain practices we see in the Bible's picture of the early church. We don't baptize infants or small children, who haven't made a

mature decision of their own to serve the Lord. And we baptize by immersion under the water, because we believe that's the practice we see in the Bible. Most significant, perhaps, we observe Holy Communion whenever we gather for worship, because that was what the earliest Christians did when they met together. Those are some things we do because we want to be faithful to the way the Bible describes the life of the first Christians.

But there's one issue we might not have thought too much about. In many Bible-believing churches, the greatest amount of preaching and teaching tends to be from the New Testament, and especially the Epistles — the writings of the apostle Paul, or the apostle Peter, or the Letter to the Hebrews. We might also hear teaching from the four Gospels as well, the narrative of the life and ministry of Jesus and his death and resurrection, and from the Revelation to John.

Those are the Scriptures we pay the most attention to, but there's one problem: these New Testament writings weren't what the early Christians called *the Scriptures*. In the church we read about in the New Testament — the church we try to be like — the Scriptures were the *Hebrew Scriptures*, what we call today the Old Testament. It was in those writings that the early Christians found the plan of God for his people, the plan fulfilled in Messiah Jesus. As the risen Jesus explained to his disciples, in the lesson we read from Luke's Gospel: "Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms" (Luke 24:44).

That should have been no surprise to the disciples, because Jesus had always made it clear that what he was doing is what God has always declared to be his purpose in the history of Israel. They must have heard Jesus' pointed words to the Judeans, in John chapter 5: "You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. . . . If you believed Moses, you would believe me, for he wrote about me" (John 5:39, 46). The connection between what God was doing through Jesus and what he had been doing through two millennia of Israelite history should have been apparent when, at his transfiguration, the disciples saw him speaking with two major figures in that history: Moses and Elijah. They were speaking about Jesus' "departure" he was about to accomplish — in his crucifixion and resurrection — which was to be his *exodus* (that's the Greek word the Gospel uses), in fulfillment of the Exodus from Egypt, that key event in which the Lord had delivered the Israelites from slavery.



The first three-quarters of our Bible consists of what we call the Old Testament. I believe that if we want to be like the *New Testament* church, we need to pay more attention to the *Old Testament* than is typical of many Protestant churches. We need to read from it in worship (which is why I ask you each Sunday to join in a short responsive Psalm). We need to teach from the Old Testament at least once in a while. And we need to understand that part of the Bible not as an antiquated body of writings we can set aside because we now have a New Testament, but rather as the Scriptures through which Jesus and the earliest Christians found the clue to what God intends to do with his creation, and with the people he has chosen to be his own.

This isn't simply a matter of quoting passages from the Old Testament to show how Jesus fulfilled ancient prophecies. That does occur in the New Testament, but we ought not to understand these quotations superficially. The reason for citing these prophecies goes much deeper. For example, when Jesus first begins to preach in Galilee, Matthew quotes from Isaiah 9:1-2: "The land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, toward the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles — the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light, and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death light has dawned" (Matthew 4:15-16). Matthew quotes this passage not just to show that Isaiah predicted that Jesus would preach in Galilee. It was to show that God's purpose in sending Jesus was not restricted to doing something for the Jewish nation, but was for the salvation of all people the world over — that is, the Gentiles. And that's a purpose of God that's clear all the way through the Hebrew Bible as well as the New Testament.

So if we want to bring out how the earliest Christians understood Jesus to be the fulfillment of the promise of God in the Scriptures, we need to look at the big picture. If we just quote a verse of the Old Testament here and there, we'll miss the point. We need to grasp the general sweep of the Old Testament, as the record

of God's dealings with his creation, and especially his dealings with Israel — the people he chose to work through in order to bring about his purpose in a world that had turned aside from the way of God. The earliest Christians were Jews, and what they saw in Jesus was something that was incipient in the faith they already had but which they couldn't quite grasp till Jesus made it clear to them.

As Jesus told the woman at the well of Samaria, "Salvation is from the Jews" (John 4:22). The salvation, or deliverance, of all people is to come from Israel — or, stated more accurately perhaps, the Savior is the Savior of the world because he is, first of all, the long-awaited Messiah of the Jews. If we forget that, we will miss what the Gospels, the letters of Paul and other apostles, and the Revelation to John are trying to tell us about Jesus.

Let's look, then, at the "big picture" of the Old Testament, and learn to see Jesus there — just as the risen Lord told his disciples: "Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms." I suggest we can view this "big picture" by looking at three major themes: Creation, Covenant, and Consummation. *Creation*: How did God start things out, and what was their purpose? *Covenant*: How is God working out his purpose now, through the partners he has chosen? *Consummation*: What will it be like when God's purpose is completed? What do the Hebrew Scriptures teach about these major themes, and where do we find Jesus in them? There is so much here that we'll be able only to sketch this in brief.

### Creation

Turning to the theme of Creation, let's begin with the first words of the Bible: "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth" (Genesis 1:1). Genesis proclaims that God created the universe through his Word: "And *God said*, 'Let there be light'; and there was light" (Genesis 1:3). Psalm 33:6 repeats the thought: "By the word of the LORD the heavens were made, and all their host by the breath of his mouth." The impact of Jesus' life, of his healings and signs, and of his resurrection from the dead, was such that his followers immediately connected it with the power of God in creation.

The Gospel of John opens this way: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God; all things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made" (John 1:1-3). The creative word of God became flesh, John states, in the appearance of Jesus the Son. We read a similar expression at the beginning of the Letter to the Hebrews: "In many and various ways God spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets; but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world. He reflects the glory of God and bears the very stamp of his nature, upholding the universe by his word of power" (Hebrews 1:1-3). The apostle Paul puts it like this: "He is the image of the invisible God, the first-born of all creation; for in him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible" (Colossians 1:15-16).



The earliest Christians could make such astounding claims concerning Jesus because they were witness to his resurrection. Only the Creator of all things could bring life out of death. Only the Creator could feed a multitude from five loaves and two fish, bringing *that which is* out of that which was not — as Hebrews 11:3 states: "By faith we understand that the universe was formed at God's command, so that what is seen was not made out of what was visible."

But the Genesis account of Creation reaches its climax in the creation of human beings. "Then God said, 'Let us make man in our image, after our likeness' . . . So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him" (Genesis 1:26-27). People were made in God's image; they were to have dominion over the creation, managing it as God's representative. Psalm 8 echoes the Genesis narrative in asking, "What is man that you are mindful of him, the son of man that you care for him? You made him a little lower than the heavenly beings and crowned him with glory and honor. You made him ruler over the works of your hands; you put everything under his feet" (Psalm 8:4-6). That was humanity's original glory, but as we know from the story of Adam and Eve that glory was defaced when they disobeyed the command of God. People today aren't very glorious creatures! But the Christians of the New Testament saw in Jesus the return



of mankind as God intended him to be. Jesus called himself the "Son of man," a title which in Aramaic or Hebrew means "representative man" or "genuine man." Jesus, through his ministry and his resurrection, is *humanity as it is supposed to be*. Therefore the apostle Paul can call Jesus *a new Adam*: "Thus it is written, 'The first man Adam became a living being'; the last Adam became a life-giving spirit" (1 Corinthians 15:45). As the new Adam, Jesus is the firstborn of a new humanity; all who come into Jesus, and belong to Jesus, are members of that new people in which the glory of Adam is restored.

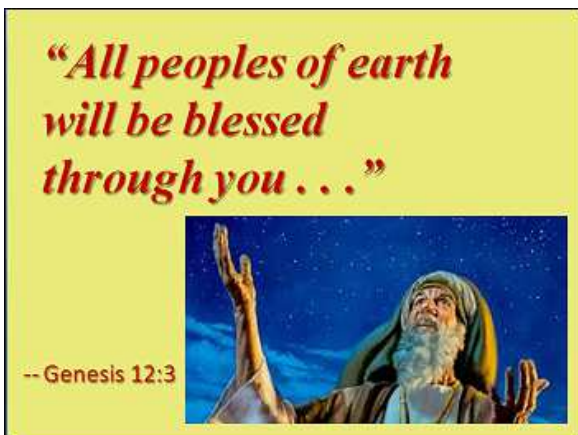
Now one further point regarding the Bible's creation story. What's God really doing when he creates the heavens and the earth? As New Testament scholar N. T. Wright has noted, God is *constructing a temple* where he will dwell with his people. The temple of the Israelites was intended to be a picture of the universe in miniature, the intersection between God's space and our space. Israel's temple was modeled after heathen temples of surrounding nations, with one important difference: a pagan temple contains an image of the god who supposedly dwells there, but the temple in Jerusalem contained no image. The Old Testament forbids the use of images of the invisible God; we have only to recall the second Commandment: "You shall not make for yourself a graven image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth; you shall not bow down to them or serve them" (Exodus 20:4-5). But the Bible's account of creation shows us that God did put an image in his temple: "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness." Israel's temple points to God's real temple, which is the heavens and the earth, and people are God's image in that temple.



But the New Testament understands that Jesus, as the Word of God, sums up all creation in himself. As Paul states, "He is before all things, and in him all things hold together . . . for in him all the fulness of God was pleased to dwell" (Colossians 1:17,19). Therefore *Jesus is the temple*, because the reality of God dwells in him. He is the intersection of heaven and earth, where God's space meets our space. And beyond that, the people who belong to Jesus are also a temple because Jesus dwells in them by his Holy Spirit. As Paul reminds the Corinthians, "Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you? (1 Corinthians 6:19). The creative Word, true humanity, the temple where God dwells — the Old Testament's theme of Creation is basic to how the earliest Christians understood who Jesus is.

### Covenant

The second Old Testament theme through which the New Testament sees Jesus is the theme of *covenant*. A covenant is an agreement between two parties, and we first meet that theme in the story of Abraham. The Lord called Abraham to become the father of a new family — a people he could work with to set right what human culture had turned into in its disregard for God. God made the agreement with Abraham in Genesis 12: "I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you" (Genesis 12:3).



Because God made mankind in his image, people have the free will to disobey him, and Genesis tells us they made the decision to go their own way instead of God's way. What the Lord did about that was this: he called a special people to work with him, to undo the damage done by Adam and Eve. He made an agreement with them the Bible calls the covenant, and when he brought the people of Israel out of slavery in Egypt he gave them more specifics about that covenant, in the Ten Commandments and other laws of Mount Sinai. But the covenant is more than rules to follow; it really means a family relationship of love and commitment between God and his people. There are consequences if his people remain faithful, and consequences if they turn away from God; the Bible calls

these consequences “blessing” and “curse.” In the final chapters of the Book of Deuteronomy, the end of the Law or Torah, we get a full statement of the blessings and the curses that concludes with these words:

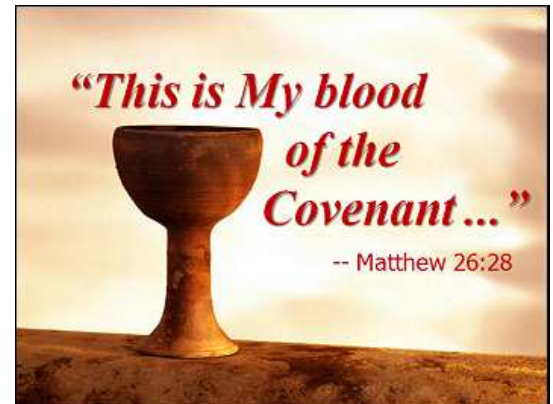
“Now what I am commanding you today is not too difficult for you or beyond your reach. It is not up in heaven, so that you have to ask, ‘Who will ascend into heaven to get it and proclaim it to us so we may obey it?’ Nor is it beyond the sea, so that you have to ask, ‘Who will cross the sea to get it and proclaim it to us so we may obey it?’ No, the word is very near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart so you may obey it. See, I set before you today life and prosperity, death and destruction. For I command you today to love the LORD your God, to walk in his ways, and to keep his commands, decrees and laws; then you will live and increase, and the LORD your God will bless you in the land you are entering to possess. But if your heart turns away and you are not obedient, and if you are drawn away to bow down to other gods and worship them, I declare to you this day that you will certainly be destroyed. You will not live long in the land you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess. This day I call heaven and earth as witnesses against you that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life, so that you and your children may live . . .” (Deuteronomy 30:11-19).

Where did the earliest Christians see Christ here? Listen to the words of the apostle Paul in Romans 10:

But the righteousness that is by faith says: “Do not say in your heart, ‘Who will ascend into heaven?’” (that is, to bring Christ down) “or ‘Who will descend into the deep?’” (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead). But what does it say? “The word is near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart,” that is, the word of faith we are proclaiming: That if you confess with your mouth, “Jesus is Lord,” and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved” (Romans 10:6-10).

Notice that Paul is quoting that very passage from Deuteronomy 30 and relating it to faith in Jesus Christ. In his death on the cross and his resurrection from the dead, Jesus canceled out that curse of disobedience, and thus he renewed that covenant God made with Israel — the purpose of which was that all people the world over might be brought back to God and blessed with the life he intended for humanity in creation. To see this we only have to read what Paul says in Galatians 3: “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: ‘Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree.’ He redeemed us in order that the blessing given to Abraham might come to the Gentiles through Christ Jesus, so that by faith we might receive the promise of the Spirit” (Galatians 3:13-14).

Therefore, we understand why the Letter to the Hebrews calls Jesus the “mediator of a new covenant” (Hebrews 12:24). And we see why Jesus told his disciples at the Last Supper, “This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins” (Matthew 26:28). We can understand this because we have the background of the Old Testament to explain why the theme of the covenant, or God’s family bond, was so important to the Christians of the New Testament, and why it’s important for us. As we gather at the Lord’s Table today, let’s remember what Holy Communion really is: it’s our affirmation and celebration of *the covenant between God and his people*, and how through the work of Jesus we’ve been brought into the family of God. This is the fulfillment of the vision of the Law and the Prophets, as stated by Jeremiah: “‘The time is coming,’ declares the LORD, ‘when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah’” (Jeremiah 31:31).



### Consummation

There’s one more Old Testament theme we need to mention, and that’s the theme of *consummation*. The Bible teaches us that history is going somewhere. Creation took a wrong turn when Adam and Eve disobeyed the Lord. So the Lord chose a people to begin undoing that damage; he made a covenant with Abraham that has been fulfilled and renewed in Jesus, and all who belong to him. But the story isn’t over; it’s to be completed in the renewal of God’s creation.

So the Hebrew Scriptures look ahead to the day when God’s purpose for this world will be fulfilled. Isaiah puts it this way: “And the glory of the LORD will be revealed, and all mankind together will see it. For the mouth of the LORD has spoken” (Isaiah 40:5). The prophet Habakkuk declares, “For the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD, as the waters cover the sea” (Habakkuk 2:14). The Old Testament has

a vision for that time when God will dwell once again with his people, as he intended to do when he created the world as his temple. It was always God's purpose the dwell with a holy people, which is why he brought Israel out of Egyptian bondage and Moses could utter the Lord's word to them: "Then I will dwell among the Israelites and be their God. They will know that I am the LORD their God, who brought them out of Egypt so that I might dwell among them. I am the LORD their God" (Exodus 29:45-46).



*"For the earth will be filled  
with the knowledge of the  
glory of the LORD,*

*as the waters  
cover the sea."*

*-- Habakkuk 2:14*

The New Testament views the coming of Jesus as the beginning of the fulfillment of this purpose. As the Gospel of John puts it, "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth" (John 1:14). The appearance of Messiah Jesus, and his rising from the dead, are the promise that one day the glory of God's creation will be restored and he will dwell once again with his covenant people.

To see this, we have only to turn to the final pages of our New Testament, to Revelation's vision of the city of God coming down out of heaven to earth: "I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God'" (Revelation 21:2-3). And John adds, "I did not see a temple in the city, because the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple. The city does not need the sun or the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and the Lamb is its lamp" Revelation 21:22-23).

What I hope I have been able to bring out today is why the risen Jesus could tell his disciples, "Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms." The Old Testament was the Scripture of the early church, and it's our Scripture as well. This message has been a little longer than usual, and you've been patient to see me through it. I realize that my sermons tend to be lectures in biblical theology, but I've been a graduate school professor and that's about all I know how to do! Thanks for bearing with me. As Luke says, Jesus "opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures." I pray Jesus has done that today for you, and for me.



*"I saw the Holy City, the new  
Jerusalem, coming down out  
of heaven from God . . ."*

*-- Revelation 21:2*

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