

Breathed By **God**



The Bible and You

Student Text



Breathed By **God**
The Bible *and You*



By order of
Bishop Daniel Findikyan, Primate

Copyright © 2004, revised 2016, 2021
Department of Christian Education
Diocese of the Armenian Church (Eastern)
630 Second Avenue
New York, New York 10016
212 686-0710
www.vemkar.us

Editors, sidebars, quizzes
Elise Antreassian
Nancy Basmajian

Design
Armen Edgarian



Breathed By **God** **The Bible** *and You*

A high school course on the Bible
Student text

Valerie Goekjian Zahirsky



Table of Contents

1. Introducing...The Bible!	9
2. How Our Bible Came To Be.	17
3. Christians and the Old Testament.	23
4. The Covenant Through the Generations	31
5. The Books of the Law.	37
6. The Rest of the Pentateuch (Books of the Law)	43
7. History and Some Famous Names (The Historical Books)	49
8. More History and Famous Names (The Rest of the Historical Books).	55
9. Wisdom is a Gift From God.	61
10. The Prophets: God's Human Messengers	67
11. The Prophets: God's Human Messengers (Part 2)	75
12. Introducing...The New Testament	81
13. More on the Gospels.	87
14. The Book of Acts	95
15. The Letters of St. Paul and the Early Church	103
16. The Catholic Epistles (James, Peter, John and Jude) The Book of Revelation	109



Session One

INTRODUCING... THE BIBLE!

*How sweet are your words to my taste,
Sweeter than honey to my mouth!
Through your precepts I get understanding;
Therefore I hate every false way.
Your word is a lamp to my feet
And a light to my path.
I have sworn an oath and confirmed it,
To observe your righteous ordinances.*

Psalm 119:103-106





The Armenian Angle

After the Armenian alphabet was created in 404 A.D. by St. Mesrob Mashdotz, the first book translated into Armenian was the Bible. Thanks to one of his students – the monk Koriun – we have the story of how this was accomplished. Koriun wrote a small book called “The Life of Mashdotz” in which he lovingly and admiringly details this fascinating story.

Introducing... The Bible!

Most people are more familiar with the Bible than they think they are. They’ve heard that “the love of money is the root of all evil,” which is something Saint Paul said. They know that Mary is a shining example of obedience and love. They can tell you what David did to Goliath, and they know that calling someone a “Judas” is the same as calling him a traitor.

A Special Way of Seeing

Both Christians and non-Christians are familiar with these Bible bits, and probably many more. But for Christians, the Bible is not just a collection of sayings and stories, a good book to dip into now and then. For Christians, the Bible is the book of sacred writings of God’s people, both the people of the Old Testament and the people of the New Testament. And since those people are our ancestors as well as our spiritual sisters and brothers today, the Bible is absolutely essential to understanding who we are and who God is.

Though we refer to the Bible as a book, it is not really one book but a collection of many, arranged and ordered over a period of hundreds of years. There are two main parts to this collection of books: the Old Testament and the New Testament. The Old Testament has a very specific purpose, according to Christian teaching. It reveals how God carefully and thoroughly prepared the world for the coming of His Son to save humankind and all creation. The New Testament books contain several kinds of writings which all testify to the fact that Jesus Christ did come, as His Father promised, and that He has saved the world.

This specific way of seeing the Old and New Testaments is unique to Christians. No casual reader of the Bible who is not part of a church, and no member of any faith group other than Christianity, looks at the Bible in just this same way. It really is a special way of seeing.

Translations

Since the original languages of Scripture are primarily Hebrew and Greek, when you read the Bible in English (or Armenian) you are reading a translation. You might have noticed that these vary slightly in vocabulary and style.

Some translations will render each word of the ancient text into as precise a word as possible of the new language. Translators call these “formal;” they will always sound different from modern English because they follow the patterns of the ancient language. They can be (though not always) a clearer word-for-word mirror of the original text and culture.

Other translations are more interested in putting whole thoughts into modern expressions. These translations are functional and are generally smoother to read and easier to understand. Many of the newer translations try to honor both approaches. These will sound contemporary yet still reflect ancient Bible times. Here are a few examples from the famous 23rd Psalm:

King James Version (1611) “formal”

The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.
He maketh me to lie down in green pastures.

Today’s English Version (1976) “functional”

The Lord is my shepherd; I have everything I need.
He lets me rest in fields of green grass.

New International Version (1984) “formal-functional”

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not be in want.
He makes me lie down in green pastures.

Any standard translation is okay if it gets you reading the Bible regularly!

Main Sections of the Bible

The New Testament, for all Christians, contains 27 books. They can be looked at as four groups: 1) the four Gospels 2) the Acts of the Apostles 3) Epistles or Letters 4) The Revelation to John. We’ll learn more about these in later sessions.

The Old Testament used in the Armenian Church, as well as in other Orthodox Churches and the Roman Catholic Church, contains more books than those listed as Old Testament books in Protestant Bibles. How did this come about?

The original Old Testament Scripture was written largely in the Hebrew language. But the Jewish people were frequently dispersed, and sometimes those who had settled in an area far from their homeland forgot or lost their Hebrew language. Translations of the Bible into the languages of these dispersed people became essential if the faith was to be preserved.

The most important of these translations from Hebrew (into Greek) is the Septuagint. This name is from a Latin word meaning “seventy.” Jewish tradition tells us that over seventy Hebrew scholars worked separately on the translation, yet came up with the same wording.

The Septuagint was accepted by the Jewish religious authorities of the time (about 300 B.C.). It was also the Scriptures known to Jesus Christ and His disciples.



Word Watch

Septuagint (lit. seventy): The Greek translation of the Old Testament completed in the second century B.C. and the version used in the Orthodox and Catholic Churches.

Deuterocanonical (lit. second canon): Books and chapters recognized as Scripture on a secondary level by the Orthodox and Catholic Churches.



Looking In

“And these words which I command you this day shall be upon your heart; and you shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise.”

Read this passage from Deuteronomy 6. Underline the words you think are key and reflect on these questions:

Who is “I” and who is “you” in this passage? What does it mean to have words “upon your heart”? How would a person live if he or she were living according to this passage?

However, in the first centuries of our era, when Christianity became a distinct and separate religion, the Jews rejected this version.

A few of the books in the Septuagint were not part of the original Hebrew Scriptures. Yet the Christian Church of the first few centuries recognized them as part of the canon—this word means the group of books accepted by scholars and clergy as being part of the Bible. But many centuries later, the Protestant “reformers” decided to accept as part of the canon only those books which had been part of the original Hebrew Scriptures. So their Bibles do not contain these few books, and they refer to them as apocrypha, a name derived from a word that means “hidden.” A more properly descriptive name is deuterocanonical, which means “second canon.”

The Old Testament in the Bible of the Armenian Church contains 48 books, and we can look at them in four groups: 1) The Pentateuch, the first 5 books of the Bible, sometimes called the Books of the Law of Moses 2) Historical Books 3) Wisdom Books 4) Books of the Prophets and Prophecies.

Many Kinds of Writing

As a way of sampling the many kinds of writing found in the Old Testament, look at the books of Deuteronomy, Isaiah, First Samuel, Proverbs and Psalms. Find a short passage (about 10 to 20 words) of each of the following kinds of writing and copy it here:

1. Law
2. Prophecy
3. Historical description
4. Wise sayings
5. Poetry

Finding Your Way Around in the Bible

We know that some people can quote the Bible “chapter and verse.” Originally, the Bible wasn’t divided into chapters and verses. That work was done by later scholars, and makes it easier for us to find a passage. So if we see a reference to a Bible passage listed as, for example, *Isaiah 12:6*, we will do three things:

1. Look in the Bible's table of contents to find the page on which the Book of the Prophecy of Isaiah begins.
2. Turn to Isaiah, and find within it the large, boldface number for Chapter 12.
3. Within the chapter, follow the small verse numbers to verse 8.

We might see a reference like this: *1 John 1:5b*. This would mean that we are to look at the first Letter of Saint John (he wrote three) and that we should look into Chapter One to find the second half of verse 5 (indicated by the "b") and read that rather than the whole verse. If we saw "5a" we would look at the first half of verse 5. (In referring to half of the verse, we mean an obvious division in the verse, not necessarily exactly half the words in it. So, in *1 John 1:5b* we would read the words "God is light and in Him is no darkness at all.")

For a bit of practice, find and copy these passages:

2 Peter 3:7a

Proverbs 14:1a

Lamentations 3:3a

John 14:1a

Ezekiel 40:38b

Wisdom of Solomon 15:3b

Deuteronomy 22:1b

2 Chronicles 36:2b

Helpful Bible Reference Books

Most of us would have no trouble using a Bible dictionary or a Bible atlas because we are used to using dictionaries and atlases in other fields of study. But another helpful Biblical reference book may be less familiar to us:


the Bible concordance

This is a book of words and names listed in alphabetical order, showing all the places where each one appears in the Bible. (Some concordances are very big books and quite complete, while abridged ones show only the more significant words and names.)



Did You Know?

Tradition actually reports that 72 scholars translated the Jewish Scriptures into Greek. So why is their translation called the Septuagint (which means "seventy")? Simple. The Roman numeral for seventy-two, LXXII, slowly became abbreviated to LXX. Never underestimate the power of laziness!



Suppose you have a Bible verse in mind, and are not sure where it appears in the Bible. To find out, you would take a key word from the verse and look it up in the concordance. The concordance will list a short part of each verse in which the word appears, and from that list you can find the reference you are looking for.

An example: “By you all the families of the earth will bless themselves” are God’s words to Abraham. If you wanted to find where they appear in the Old Testament, you would look up a key word in the concordance. The words “you” and “bless” are so common in the Bible that the list of references for each one might take a long time to go through. But the word “families” might have a somewhat shorter list, and going through it you would find that this passage is from *Genesis 12:3*. (NRSV)

Another way to use the concordance is to see what the whole Bible has to say about a certain person or subject. So to find out what the Bible says about families, you could use the concordance to get a whole list of references to that word in the various books of the Bible.

For a bit of practice, choose a word (a subject) or a Biblical name that interests you. Use the concordance to find some references, and be prepared to share with the class.

Quick Quiz #1

① **The Old Testament of the Armenian Church (as well as other Orthodox Churches and the Roman Catholic Church) contains more books than those listed in Protestant Bibles.**

T F

② **The New Testament is divided into 5 basic sections called the Pentateuch.**

T F

③ **The Septuagint is**

- the Armenian translation of the Old Testament
- the Hebrew translation of the Old Testament
- the Greek translation of the Old Testament
- the original language of the Old Testament

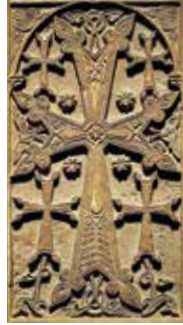
④ **Which term best describes the additional Old Testament books in the Armenian Bible?**

Church Bible apocrypha deuterocanonical

④ to ⑤ **Old Testament or New Testament?**

- _____ epistles
- _____ gospels
- _____ Pentateuch
- _____ prophets
- _____ wisdom
- _____ revelation





Session Two

HOW OUR BIBLE CAME TO BE

*The seas of my behavior constantly rock me.
I am tossed by the enemy who creates storms.
Good Captain, be my shelter.*

Mesrob Mashdotz (c.400 A.D.)





Did You Know?

Canonization is the process by which the scrolls and stories circulating in Bible times became recognized by the community as sacred and authoritative.

How It All Began

Christians believe that the writers of the Biblical books were inspired by God to write what they did, and that the Bible therefore is a holy book containing God's message for His people, God's will for His people, and God's promise of a Savior to His people.

The Bible is more than 3000 years old, and it began as oral tradition: stories, songs, poems and rules for good living passed down by word of mouth from one generation of the Hebrew or Jewish people to the next generation. As time went on, these oral traditions began to be written down so they would not be forgotten. Probably one of the earliest pieces to be written down is the Song of Deborah, found in *Judges 5:1-31*. Take a moment to read this song in your Bible now.

God's Chosen People

God could have selected any of the peoples of the ancient world to be His chosen people. The intelligent Greeks, the gifted and powerful Phoenicians, the highly-advanced Egyptians—why not one of them, instead of the nomadic and relatively poor Hebrews? This question is not one we can answer. We only know what God did, and that was to name the Hebrews as His chosen people.

So as more and more oral traditions were being written down, the religious leaders of the Hebrews knew they had an important task because of their special role in God's plan. They began to collect the writings that were being produced. From about 1150 B.C. to 90 A.D. these writings—with corrections, additions, and deletions along the way—were gathered, and they form the Old Testament that we know today.

Who Were the Bible's Writers?

The question of authorship is another that we often cannot answer. We simply don't know who the writers of many Biblical books actually were. Some books certainly were written by the people whose names are on them as authors. But in the ancient world, standards of authorship were not the same as they are in our day and time.

For instance, today someone might study the writings of Saint Gregory of Nareg. Then that person might write a book called "The Message of Saint Gregory for Today's World." Nothing wrong with that—good idea, in fact. But in the ancient world, a writer who studied Saint Gregory's work might honor the saint by writing a similar book and simply calling it "The Writings of Saint Gregory of Nareg." For the ancient peoples, nothing was wrong with that, either.

And sometimes a person's name was put on a book as its author because that person was a major source for the material or mode of thought presented in the book. Again, this was fairly standard practice in the time the Bible was being written.

The Bible is True

Christians believe that there are no internal contradictions in the Bible and no formal errors. The Bible truly and authentically represents the relationship between God and humankind. But this does not mean that every single word of the Bible is to be taken literally. The writers of Scripture were constrained by their own human knowledge and the limited understanding of their times. For example, in the Book of Jonah (3:3) we read that "Nineveh was an exceedingly great city, three days' journey in breadth." This is the writer's deliberate exaggeration to show the prominence of Nineveh. What actual city is or has ever been so big that it would take three days to get across it?

Another kind of example appears in the Book of Daniel, where Belshazzar is described as a king, and the son of Nebuchadnezzar. In fact, he was the son of Nabonidus and never did become king.

So, in proclaiming the divine inspiration of Holy Scripture, the Church does not deny that a reader will find some insignificant errors of fact. There are also some intentionally exaggerated pieces of writing such as the Jonah passage. This doesn't change the essential and life-giving Truth of the Bible and its eternal message, presented in various ways in the books of the Bible but always authentically the word of God.

"Breathed By God": Asdvadzashoonch

The word "breathing" makes us think of the essence of life—it's the process which enables us to live. So the Armenian name for the Bible, *Asdvadzashoonch*, which is a translation of the expression used in 2 *Timothy* 3:16, reminds us that God's word is life for us. It also tells us how close this word is to God. It is His very breathing, and He gives it to us.

The name is especially apt because the phrase "Word of God" means not only the written word. It also refers to Jesus Christ. Our loving Creator gives us not only the word of His own breathing but also His only Son.

The people of Armenia in the fifth century knew the wonderful gifts God had given them. They had priests and other leaders who exemplified God's love; they worshipped in beautiful churches. But there was one important thing they



Word Watch

Canon (Hebrew: *kaneh* – reed; Greek: *kanon* – reed which were units of measure): the authoritative list of books in the Old and New Testaments.

Asdvadzashoonch (lit: Arm: "breathed by God"): The Armenian expression for the Bible which comes directly from Scripture. (2 *Timothy* 3:16)



The Armenian Angle

The translation of the Bible into Armenian has been called the “queen of all translations” (by the French scholar La Crosse) for its power and beauty. The frenzy of translating activity in the 5th century marked those years as the “Golden Age” or “Vosgetar” in Armenian (lit: “golden century”) and many very valuable ancient documents have been preserved only in the classical Armenian!

did not have. They could not read the words of Scripture in their own language; in church they heard the Bible read in Syriac or Greek and then roughly translated. There was no Armenian alphabet, and thus no possibility of a Bible written in Armenian.

Saints Sahag and Mesrob

Many people, especially clergy, knew how important it was to find a way of translating the Bible and other holy books so that people could hear and read the words in their own language. But it was a former keeper of royal documents named Mashtotz who took the task on himself. At the rather late age of forty, he was ordained a priest with the blessing of his good friend Catholicos Sahag, and took the priestly name of Mesrob.

Over the next several years, through arduous labor and many promising starts that ended in disappointment, Mesrob developed an excellent alphabet. But the letters were not quite sufficient to write all the words and sounds that existed in Armenian. Mesrob tried everything he knew, even traveling to other countries to consult with scholars.

Then one day, in the year 406, God rewarded Mesrob’s efforts and patience with a vision of the missing letters. Now he had 36 all together (the last two were added centuries later for a total of 38), and they sufficed to write any word in his beloved Armenian language. He couldn’t wait to try them out. So he opened the Bible to the first verse of the Book of Proverbs—verses which expressed so well the reason for all his hard work. Mesrob wrote out in Armenian letters, “To know wisdom and instruction, to perceive the words of understanding.” Yes! All the letters and sounds were there. The alphabet “worked”!

The next twenty-five years were filled with more labor, as Mesrob and Catholicos Sahag worked with teams of scholars to translate first the Bible and then the writings of many saints. They also sent out teams to teach people how to read, so that every Armenian could benefit from God’s word in this new, personal way of reading it themselves. Mesrob traveled to many parts of the country to help with the teaching and to correct any errors in people’s understanding.

The saint was now advanced in years. We might think that Mesrob retired to a monastery in later life, satisfied that his work for God and country were done. But Mesrob took very seriously the command that Jesus gives to His disciples at the end of Matthew’s Gospel: “Go and make disciples of all nations.” Mesrob wanted all people, in whatever countries they inhabited, to have the blessing of hearing and reading God’s word in their own languages. So when Church leaders in Albania and Georgia asked him to come and help develop their alphabets, he willingly did so.

A Bible Passage to Learn

“Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age.”

(Matthew 28:19-20).

- a. These are words of Jesus Christ to His disciples after He rose from the dead and before He ascended to heaven. What do you think He meant by telling them to teach others “all that I have commanded you”? What did He mean by “to the close of the age”?
- b. How did Saint Mesrob fulfill the commands of Jesus Christ?
- c. What does it mean to “make disciples of all nations”? Does it refer only to people in other countries? How might the command apply to us and our lives here and now?



Looking In

The very first words written in Armenian were from the Bible. Biblical metaphors, phraseology, and stories influenced Armenian literature until the late 19th century! Imagine for a minute that you learned to read using only the Bible as a text. Do you think this would influence how you think? Form sentences? Write stories?



Quick Quiz #2

① We know the author of each book of the Bible because it is included in the book.

T F

② Every word of the Bible is meant to be taken as literal truth.

T F

③ Asdvadzashoonch means

④ to ⑤ What are the two meanings of the term "Word of God?"

⑥ When stories are passed down by word of mouth from one generation to the next, it is called

⑦ After he invented the Armenian alphabet, St. Mesrob helped 2 countries develop an alphabet. Name one

⑧ to ⑨ Matching

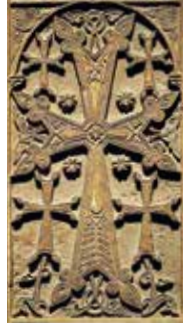
A St. Sahag

B St. Mesrob

_____ His name was Mashdotz

_____ He was ordained at the age of 40.

_____ He was a Catholicos.



Session Three

CHRISTIANS AND THE OLD TESTAMENT

*Eternal God and Creator of all things,
Who in the beginning created the heavens and the earth
By your almighty power,
on this day you brought forth light by your command
and separated the light from darkness
Let the light of your mercy shine upon me and keep me away
From the darkness of evil thoughts.*

Hovhannes of Garni (13th c)





Did You Know?

The Nicene Creed was formulated in two Ecumenical Councils: Nicea (325 AD) and Constantinople (381 AD). It was a difficult document to finalize since it had to outline the Christian faith as agreed upon by everyone! During the late 5th century, Catholicos Hovhannes Mantakuni instituted the recitation of the Creed in every badarak.

The Old Testament in Our Church

People sometimes ask, “Why do we bother with the Old Testament? Now that Jesus Christ has come, hasn’t the New Testament replaced the Old?”

To answer, we have to know something about the way God works with His people. He does not want to “spring” things on us when we are not prepared for them. Human beings need to prepare for things. Think of a diver just before the dive, mentally and physically getting ready. Think of a groom and bride, planning and arranging for months before the big event of the wedding. Consider an actress rehearsing lines by the hour before opening night, or the new store owner arranging displays before opening day.

The Old Testament is the long and beautiful story of God preparing His people for the coming of the promised Messiah (another word for Savior). All the events of the Old Testament were times when God was with His people, teaching them and bringing them to a point of maturity where they would be ready and able to receive and recognize His Son as the Christ (which also means Savior or Messiah). This preparation was very necessary, since human beings are creatures who need to be prepared for things, so the Old Testament is very important to Christians.

God Keeps Working for Us

The Nicene Creed which we recite at each Divine Liturgy summarizes God’s preparatory work: “We believe also in the Holy Spirit, the uncreate[d] and the perfect; who spoke through the Law and through the Prophets and through the Gospels; who came down upon the Jordan, preached through the apostles and dwelled in the saints.”

These words tell us that God’s Holy Spirit was speaking His word to us through the Old Testament law, in the words of the prophets, in the Gospels, in the manifestations of Jesus’ divinity such as His baptism in the Jordan, in the apostles’ preaching and letters to churches, and in the holy examples of the saints. In all these ways, God worked through the millennia to prepare us to accept everlasting life through His Son.

Interpreting the Bible

When Jesus Christ did come, He established a community: the Christian Church. Because the whole Bible leads toward Jesus Christ, it is the community He established, the Church, that can rightly interpret the Bible. The Holy Spirit dwells in the Church, and inspires the Church’s members to understand the Bible in the truest and deepest way. Saint Peter wrote about it this way:

“First of all you must understand this, that no prophecy of Scripture is a matter of one’s own interpretation, because no prophecy ever came by human will, but men and women moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God.” *2 Peter 1:20*

Do these words mean that we have nothing to learn from those who study Scripture and write about their interpretations of it? No, there’s a lot we can learn from good Bible scholarship. And these words certainly are not telling us we should not read Scripture on our own—in fact, Bible reading is one of our main privileges as Christians. But we believe that the Bible “lives in the Church” and it is there, as part of the community of believers, that we will find its meaning most surely and clearly.

Match-Up

Let’s look at some passages from the Old Testament that are basic to our worship today. This will help us see how the Old Testament is God’s way of preparing us, His people, to be part of the Church that was founded by His Son, Jesus Christ.

Here are some things that we believe, or that we do as part of our worship, today. Match them up with their sources in the Old Testament by writing the correct letter in front of the statement.

1. ____ The Savior’s birth will be a virgin birth.
2. ____ As the priest prepares to celebrate the Divine Liturgy, he puts on vestments modeled partly on those of Old Testament priests.
3. ____ The Savior is one who will suffer and die for us.
4. ____ In the Divine Liturgy we sing a song of the angels.
5. ____ In the Requiem Service we call out to God in our grief.
6. ____ At the end of the Divine Liturgy we declare our intention to continue praising God as we go out into the world.
7. ____ The Savior will be like a shepherd who gives his life for his sheep.
8. ____ The Savior will come from a small, insignificant place.
9. ____ The Savior will be silent before His accusers.
10. ____ A special child will be born.



Word Watch

Heen Gdagaran: Armenian for Old Testament.

Havadank: Armenian for The Creed; lit: “we believe.”

Genesis: from the Greek for “origin” or “beginning,” the name given to the first book of the Old Testament. In the original Hebrew, however, the Book of Genesis is called “Bereshith” which means “in the beginning” and is the first word of the book. In fact, most books of the Old Testament are named simply for their first words.

Here are ten Old Testament passages:

- a. *Psalm 132:9*
- b. *Isaiah 53:4-5*
- c. *Ezekiel 34:11-12*
- d. *Isaiah 9:6*
- e. *Psalm 34:1*
- f. *Micah 5:2*
- g. *Isaiah 6:3*
- h. *Psalm 130:1*
- i. *Isaiah 7:14*
- j. *Isaiah 53:7*

The Book of Genesis

Would you say this statement is true or false: “The early chapters of the Book of Genesis are the Church’s literal account of how God created the world.”

Well, the answer is false. Genesis is a *sacred* history, not a scientific or literal account, of God’s creation of the world. It is also an account of how God loved His creatures and they failed to return that love. The consequences of this failure were terrible for humankind, but God never abandoned His creatures; His love never failed.

The first two chapters of Genesis declare that God is the creator and ruler of the world and of humankind, and this is the main message. Not every detail is literally true, and doesn’t have to be. (For example, the statement that God created the world in six days does not have to mean, and probably does not mean, six 24-hour periods.)

The God of Israel

These first two chapters do give a picture of a God who is very different from the gods worshipped by Israel’s pagan neighbors. First, of course, God is one rather than many. Israel was the first monotheistic people. Second, God is seen as the Lord of the whole universe, not just of Israel. (Many other countries at that time had “national” gods worshipped only by the people of that nation.)

The God of Israel is morally good and just. He transcends the needs and wants of humankind—and yet He is full of love and compassion for the people He has made.

Finally, and most mysterious, the God of Israel is described as having created the earth out of nothing. Pagan gods are pictured as taking existing elements (earth, air, fire, water) and forming them into the world as we know it. Only the God of Israel can make something out of nothing at all. He makes it, we might say, out of His own love.

Creation, Adam, and Eve

Many Bible scholars agree that there are actually two accounts of creation presented in these first two chapters of Genesis. The “six days of creation” story ends with 2:1-3, and is followed in 2:4-25 by an account of the creation of the human race and the Garden of Eden. This may be because Genesis contains material from three or four sources, or documents, that were put together by Jewish priests and scribes during the fifth century B.C.

Genesis gives us a picture of God’s creation as essentially good, with man and woman as keepers and beneficiaries of it. According to the Church’s teaching, man and woman were also created entirely equal and good, but not yet perfect. It was God’s intention that they should grow to be more and more like Him, and to have perfect communion with Him.

But God, in His love, would not force this growth on them. They had to have a choice if they were to be free. They made their choice to follow the way of the world rather than the way of God. (This is the meaning of the “knowledge of the tree of good and evil”—it means to take part in the good and the evil of the world.)

It’s been said that Chapters 1 and 2 of Genesis describe human life as God meant it to be, while Chapter 3 describes life as it is now, fallen because of human sin and our turning our backs on God. Believing the lie of the serpent, that turning away from God can give us power, we have all put ourselves out of the Garden, out of the immediate presence of God. Our task in life now is to grow spiritually as He meant us to in the first place, and to find our way back to Him. He has provided the One who shows us the way: His Son, Jesus Christ.

Read Chapter 3 of Genesis, and list three things that changed as a result of human disobedience.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.



The Armenian Angle

Noah's Ark is said to have landed on Mt. Ararat (Genesis 8:4). The Ark rested on the mountaintop for almost eight months until it was safe enough for Noah and his family to step out safely. Talk about being afraid of getting your feet wet!

The Fallen World

The next chapters of Genesis show us human life falling more and more into dissolution and sin. Finally it reaches rock bottom in 6:5. Read from this verse up to 9:19. Some skeptical Bible critics point out that the Hebrew story of a great flood is a later version of a similar Babylonian tale. They seem to suggest that the story of the flood, Noah, and the ark is an unimportant story because it is not “original.”

But there is an important difference between the Babylonian story and the Hebrew one, and once again it has to do with God’s loving care. The Babylonian story gives no reason for the flood—it’s more or less an adventure story. But the Hebrew story of the flood does two things: it shows us that God will not tolerate continuous evil, and that He will always save those who make the effort to do His will even when evil and temptation surround them. Saint Peter, writing in the New Testament, compares Noah being saved by water to us Christians, who are saved by the waters of baptism. It’s the same loving God saving Noah and us.



Looking In

How can knowing that all things came into being through God make a difference in how you see the members of your family? Your friends? The water you drink? The food you eat? Write down two ways it can change how you act towards the people and things just mentioned.

1.

2.

Quick Quiz #3

- ① to ④ **List four ways the Holy Spirit speaks to us.
(Clue: It's in the Creed.)**

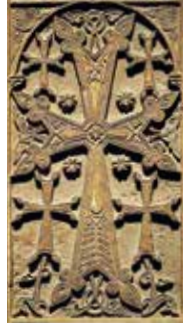
- ⑤ to ⑧ **Name four beliefs about our Savior that are predicted in the Old Testament.**

True or False?

- ⑨ **Israel was the first monotheistic nation.**
 T F

- ⑩ **There are two accounts of creation presented in Genesis.**
 T F





Session Four

THE COVENANT THROUGH THE GENERATIONS

*I have seen you in the sanctuary
And beheld your power and your glory.
Because your love is better than life,
My lips will glorify you.*

Psalm 63:2-3





Word Watch

Covenant: a mutual agreement between two equals or between a superior (a king) and a person lower in position. Both of these types of covenant existed in Old Testament times and appear in Scripture. God makes four covenants with the Hebrews. The New Covenant is established through the coming of Jesus Christ and the founding of the Church.

Patriarch: father of a family, tribe or race, and the name given to Abraham and his line as the first “fathers” of God’s people.

God Keeps His Covenant

The covenant that God made with Noah after the great flood was that He would never destroy His creation again. God kept His promise, as always. But we know, from the strife and conflict described in the Bible and from what happens in daily life, that human beings have a hard time living in harmony with God and each other.

The Covenant with Abraham

The period of 2000-1700 B.C. is often called the age of the patriarchs (a word related to the word “father”). God also made a covenant with the first of these great fathers or patriarchs, Abraham. Read about this covenant in *Genesis 17:1-11*. The Church teaches that those who follow Jesus Christ are truly “descendants of Abraham” who will inherit the Promised Land—God’s Kingdom. In fact, the very first verse of Matthew’s Gospel identifies Jesus Christ as descended from King David and from Abraham.

But like Abraham, we have a long way to go to reach that Promised Land. His travels began when God called him to take a far journey from his home in Haran to an unknown land. It was an act of faith for Abram and his wife Sarai (as their names were then) to pack up their whole lives and go where God told them to, but they did it. Their act of faith is an example for everyone who struggles to trust God with their whole lives—and that’s all of us.

God changed Abram’s name to Abraham, and Sarai’s to Sarah. Though the elderly, childless husband and wife had given up hope of children, God promised them a son. This was so hard for them to believe that they laughed; in fact the Bible says that Abraham “fell on his face and laughed.” But their baby boy was born in the spring, and was named Isaac (which means “laughter”—a reminder that God’s power is great no matter how unlikely His promises may seem).

A Great Test of Faith

This little boy, coming so late in the life of eager parents, was deeply precious to them. But Isaac was to be at the center of a critical moment, a truly life-and-death moment, in his parents’ lives. Read *Genesis 22:1-19*. What was the test of faith Abraham underwent?

This is one of many Old Testament episodes that prefigure (or in other words, is an earlier example of) what God Himself would later do, in giving His Son to save the world He created and loved.

By continuing to be faithful to God, Abraham carried on God’s plan. He continued to be a concerned father to Isaac, too, even sending a servant to find his

son a good wife. Read *Genesis 28: 10-22* to see how the maiden Rebekah impressed the servant with her hospitality.

Jacob, the Son of Isaac

Isaac and Rebekah were married and lived together in prosperity for a long time after Abraham and Sarah died. Genesis does not tell us much more about Isaac's adult life until the time he was very old and nearly blind. Then his younger son Jacob, always a trickster and very ambitious, deceived Isaac into giving him his older brother Esau's birthright, or inheritance. (It was the tradition in those days for the older son to get the whole inheritance.) Jacob pretended to be Esau, and fooled their old, blind father. He stole not only the inheritance, but a special blessing which Isaac could give only once. Read this blessing in *Genesis 27:28-9*.

Esau and Isaac discovered Jacob's deceit, and to escape his brother's anger, Jacob fled to his family's old home in Haran. Read *Genesis 28:10-22*. What was the promise that God made to Jacob and Jacob's promise in return?

Jacob Wrestles with God and Gets a New Name

Jacob stayed in Haran for twenty years, during which time he married the love of his life, Rachel, and also her older sister Leah. (This was customary in those days when older sisters had to be married before younger ones could wed.) Finally he made his way back to Canaan, and on the way he had a miraculous encounter, just as he had when he fled to Haran twenty years before. Read *Genesis 32:22-32* to see what happened.

Jacob's name was now Israel, which means "one who struggles with God." Jacob had been dealing with his own sins, especially his inclination to cheat others, all his life. Now he was reconciled with God, and with himself. He was ready to be God's servant. Jacob is the third and last of the great patriarchs after Abraham and Isaac.

To reach Canaan, Jacob had to cross land owned by his brother Esau. He was fearful, remembering how he had stolen from his brother and wondering what Esau might do to him. But it was another blessing on Jacob's new life that the brothers met lovingly. Read the account in *Genesis 33:1-11*.

Joseph and His Brothers

Jacob's twelve sons were Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah, Dan, Naphtali, Gad, Asher, Issachar, Zebulun, Joseph, and the youngest, Benjamin. These sons would also become the fathers of the twelve tribes of the Hebrews which made up the ancient nation of Israel. So that name, Israel, can refer either to the nation or to the man who had been called Jacob.

The Armenian Angle

Abraham was the first patriarch of the Old Testament. Did you know there are living patriarchs in the Armenian Church? We have two "patriarchates" where they reside – the Patriarch of Jerusalem, father to the people and places of the Holy Land, and the Patriarch of Constantinople, shepherd to the flock in modern Turkey. Both positions were formed at specific times in history when a strong presence in these places was needed. The Catholicos himself is called the "Supreme Patriarch" as he is father to the entire Armenian flock.





Did You Know?

Joseph and his 11 brothers also had a sister, Dinah. She is rarely mentioned in the typical study of the “Twelve Tribes” of Israel. Dinah was assaulted by a local prince who then fell in love with her and wanted to marry her. Jacob’s brothers responded by killing all the men of that city and plundering it – the family’s honor was no laughing matter. But Jacob was sorry about their harsh response. The name Dinah means “judgment.”

Joseph was his father’s favorite among the sons and he was a dreamer. Often his dreams included visions of superiority over his brothers, and since Joseph didn’t hesitate to tell his brothers how he ruled over them in his dreams, he annoyed them deeply and fueled their jealousy. Probably the “coat of many colors” was the last straw—a beautiful garment Jacob gave to his favorite son.

The brothers sold Joseph as a slave to a passing Egyptian caravan, then smeared goat’s blood on the many-colored coat and told the grief-stricken Jacob that Joseph had been killed by a wild animal. The mourning father hugged the coat close and wept over it, tricked by his sons as he had once tricked his own father to gain an inheritance.

Joseph the Dreamer Prospers in Egypt

Joseph’s tendency to dream would bring him good things in Egypt, for he became known as a man who could interpret the dreams of others—and dream interpretation was taken very seriously by the Egyptians. It wasn’t long before Joseph’s talent became known to the mighty Pharaoh himself. Read *Genesis 41:17-41* for the story.

When a terrible famine struck the land, as predicted in the dream, it spread as far as Canaan. Joseph was put in charge of distributing food, which Egypt still had, to those who came from places that no longer had food and wanted to beg some from the Egyptians. Among those who came were Joseph’s brothers, all but Benjamin the youngest.

Joseph knew at once who they were, and now the tables were turned: they were at his mercy. The hungry travelers didn’t recognize the lordly official who frowned sternly at them. They got the food they needed, but never knew the true identity of the one who gave it to them. In fact, it was not until the second time they came that Joseph told them who he was. Read what happened then, in *Genesis 45:4-28*.

Jacob, the last of the three great patriarchs, died in Egypt, but not before using his fatherly authority to tell Joseph to forgive his brothers from his heart. So the Book of Genesis ends on a note of forgiveness, and with the promise of God that He would be with His children always. He would be with them down through the generations of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, through Joseph and the other brothers, and through their children down to our own time today.

“You, O Lord, blessed the marriage of Abraham and Sarah, of Isaac and Rebekah, of Jacob and Rachel, of Joachim and Anna [the parents of Mary the mother of God], of Zachariah and Elizabeth [the parents of John the Baptist]. Bless, O Lord, we pray you, the crowning of these your servants [the couple now getting married] into marriage, as you did bless the crowns of your righteous ones. For you have brought these your servants to receive your sweet blessing and have placed upon their heads a crown of precious gems.”

—from the marriage service of the Armenian Church



Quick Quiz #4

① to ⑥ Matching

- | | |
|---------------------------|-----------|
| _____ Sarah | A Jacob |
| _____ Rebekah | B Isaac |
| _____ 12 tribes of Israel | C Abraham |
| _____ a twin | |
| _____ coat of many colors | |
| _____ first patriarch | |

⑦ Prefigure means

- _____ an event that foreshadows (or comes before) another event
- _____ the writings of the patriarchs
- _____ something that happens over and over again

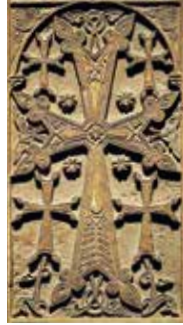
⑧ to ⑩ Which three words do not belong?

- | | | | | |
|---------|-------|--------|---------|-------------|
| Joseph | dream | baby | Egypt | forgiveness |
| wedding | angel | famine | Pharaoh | |

Looking In

Jacob and Esau were desperate to receive their father's blessing and birthright. What is one thing you feel you have inherited from your father?





Session Five

THE BOOKS OF THE LAW

Leader to life, Path to truth, our Lord Jesus Christ; you led Joseph to Egypt, and the people of Israel through the Red Sea; and Moses to Mt. Sinai, and his people to the land of promise...Now I pray you, Lord, lead me and my companions to travel in peace on the journey before us...For you are our way and our truth and our life...Amen.

Hovhannes Garnetzi (13th c)



The Armenian Angle

When asked what He should be called, God said to Moses “I am who I am.” This entire phrase is caught in a single Armenian letter “ւ”. The seventh letter of the alphabet, it literally means “he, she, it is.” You can see this letter etched on church walls; it is also often worn on a chain like a cross.



Word Watch

Pentateuch: (Greek: 5 scrolls): The first five books of the Old Testament

Torah: the common Hebrew word for “law,” the first five books of the Old Testament



The Torah

Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy

This group of the first five books of the Old Testament has several names. We noted in an earlier session the name *Pentateuch*, which means “five scrolls.” These books are also called by some the “Books of Moses” but that isn’t because he wrote every word of them, though he did write some things. The books carry his name because his leadership of the Hebrew people and his close association with God are central to what the books tell us. In fact, the life and work of Moses constitute most of what appears in the four books following Genesis.

You may have heard the word *Torah*, which is another name given to these books by the Jewish people. This word has come to mean “law” but it more broadly means “instruction.” In the four books after Genesis, this law is laid out in detail. It is a huge compilation, which was written and edited over time from the tenth century B.C. to the fifth, by Hebrew priests and scribes. These books, besides containing the law, also give us the story of Israel’s exodus from Egypt and eventual return to the land of Canaan (also called Palestine). The story begins during some hard times for the Hebrew people in Egypt.

The Book of Exodus

When Joseph’s brothers and their father Jacob (Israel) joined him in Egypt and settled there, a long period of prosperity for the Hebrew people began. The descendants of Jacob “multiplied and grew exceedingly strong,” as Exodus puts it. But the Hebrews were still different from the Egyptians among whom they lived, and many years later “there arose a new king over Egypt, who did not know Joseph.” (*Exodus 1:8*) He was fearful of this fast-growing group of strangers in the midst of his people, and decided that the best way to keep them under control was to enslave them and order their male babies killed.

Two Courageous Women

This was the terrible situation into which Moses was born. He was able to survive and grow up thanks to the courage of two women and one little girl. Read about the two women, Puah and Shiphrah, in *Exodus 1:15-22* and about the little girl (who was Moses’ sister Miriam) in *2:1-10*.

So Moses grew up in the luxury and power of the court ruled over by the Egyptian king (whose title was Pharaoh) while his fellow Hebrews labored as slaves. Somehow Moses discovered or felt his true identity, because when he saw an Egyptian beating a helpless Hebrew slave, his outrage was so great that he killed the man. This deed was made known to Pharaoh, and Moses had to flee across the desert to Midian (now Saudi Arabia). There he married Zipporah, the daughter of a Midianite priest and settled down to work as a shepherd.

God Calls Moses to Lead the Exodus from Egypt

Moses' peaceful life was not to last very long. One day as he was tending the flock in the wilderness near Mount Horeb, God appeared to him in a bush that "was burning, yet it was not consumed." (3:2) God told Moses that he was to return to Egypt, confront the omnipotent Pharaoh, and deliver his people from their bondage. How would you react to such a call? Moses made many excuses, and you can read about one (and about God's response) in *Exodus 4:10-16*.

Despite all excuses, Moses did return to Egypt, and many of us know some details of his encounters with Pharaoh: the king's repeated refusals to release the Hebrews, the plagues God sent on the Egyptians, and the result of the tenth plague—the death of the first-born of Egypt, after which Pharaoh allowed the people to leave.

So the great exodus began, and Israel moved eastward from Egypt toward the Sinai peninsula. Pharaoh regretted his decision and the loss of his slaves, and pursued the people to the Red Sea or Sea of Reeds. The east wind blew all night and parted the waters, allowing the Israelites to cross. But their Egyptian pursuers were drowned. Read the song of triumph sung by Moses' sister Miriam in *Exodus 15:21*.

The Desert Journey

The mood of the people did not always remain triumphant. The journey across the desert of Sinai was a taxing and difficult one, and often the people complained against Moses, even wishing they were back in Egypt, where at least they could have counted on getting a drink of water when they needed one! Yet just when things seemed worst, God would provide what the people needed—water, meat, bread, or help against the marauding Amalekites, a tough desert tribe that tried to attack and steal from the Hebrews.

The Ten Commandments and the Tabernacle

Finally they reached the wilderness of Sinai, where they set up camp in the shadow of Mount Sinai. On the third day, the mountain was enveloped in smoke, and the Lord called Moses to the summit, where he received the law of God—the Ten Commandments. God also gave Moses other laws to help the people live in harmony and peace. Then God called Aaron and some of the other priests to the top of the mountain. He instructed them to make a tabernacle—a tent that would travel with them and be a place of worship for them wherever they were. The tabernacle would house the Ark of the Covenant, a wooden chest in which would be kept the stone tablets with the Ten Commandments written on them.




Did You Know?

Passover is the great Jewish feast that marks when the angel of death "passed over" Jewish homes – known by the smear of lamb's blood over their doorways – in taking the lives of first-born Egyptian males. That very night a commemorative meal was initiated and eventually featured such food items (all with a symbolic value) as: a lamb shankbone (sacrifice), haroset, a relish of crushed apples, nuts, cinnamon, red wine and ginger (the bricks the Hebrews made for building), bitter herbs or vegetables such as endive and radishes (the bitterness of slavery), salt water (the sweat and tears of the slaves), and three matzoh sheets, the unleavened bread made hastily as the Jews fled Egypt (the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac and Jacob).

Looking In

If you had to get out of your house in 30 seconds, what one thing would you make sure you got out (other than family members and pets)? Explain.



The people became impatient waiting for Moses to come down from the mountain. They said, “As for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him.” They persuaded Aaron to build an idol they could worship—a golden calf, made from the melted-down golden jewelry they had been wearing.

What a terrible disappointment these people were to God, and also to Moses, who had worked so hard to bring them this far. Yet Moses begged God not to be angry with the people, though his own anger when he saw them worshipping the idol was so strong that he smashed the tablets with the Commandments on them.

God renewed His covenant with His disobedient people, though He warned them that, because they were such a “stiff-necked people” (meaning proud and arrogant) they would have a good deal of trouble. He gave Moses two new tablets with the Commandments written on them, and sent him back to continue leading the people.

The rest of the Book of Exodus describes how the artisans among the people constructed the Ark, the tabernacle, the altars and tables and chairs and lampstands, the clothing for the priests when they led worship, and all the other things that God had told them in detail how to build. And despite their disobedience, the Lord didn’t abandon them. The very last words of Exodus are these: “Throughout all their journeys the cloud of the Lord was upon the tabernacle by day, and fire was in it by night, in the sight of the whole house of Israel.”

Quick Quiz #5

① to ⑥ Matching

- | | |
|---------------------------|-----------|
| _____ Sarah | A Jacob |
| _____ Rebekah | B Isaac |
| _____ 12 tribes of Israel | C Abraham |
| _____ a twin | |
| _____ coat of many colors | |
| _____ first patriarch | |

⑦ Prefigure means

- _____ an event that foreshadows (or comes before) another event
- _____ the writings of the patriarchs
- _____ something that happens over and over again

⑧ to ⑩ Which three words do not belong?

- | | | | | |
|---------|-------|--------|---------|-------------|
| Joseph | dream | baby | Egypt | forgiveness |
| wedding | angel | famine | Pharaoh | |





Session Six

THE REST OF THE PENTATEUCH
(Books of The Law)

*O Lord our God,
Awaken our minds in righteousness for you.
By day and by night
And at all times
Make us, your servants,
Reflect always on the love of your commandments.*

St. Hovhannes Mantakuni (5th c)





Word Watch

Tabernacle: a portable sanctuary that served as a place of worship for the Israelites from the time of their wanderings until Solomon built the first Temple.

Did You Know?

Aaron is considered the first priest and many of the vestments and temple paraphernalia mentioned in Exodus (28-40) are the inspiration for vestments and church vessels in today's Armenian Church.

In Leviticus 16: 21, Aaron is told to symbolically place all the sins of Israel onto the head of a goat and then drive the goat into the wilderness as part of the ritual on the Day of Atonement. This is where we get the expression "scapegoat" – something we designate to bear the blame.

The Torah Continued

The book of Genesis covers a very long period of time, stretching from the creation of the world to the exodus from Egypt. By contrast, the four following books of the Pentateuch (Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy) cover only forty years—the period when the Hebrew people wandered in the desert, having made the exodus from Egypt, and were journeying to Canaan, the Promised Land.

We looked at the Book of Exodus in the previous session. Now we can say something about the three remaining Books of the Law: Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy.

The Book of Leviticus

You remember that Jacob the Patriarch had twelve sons, and that the twelve tribes of Israel had the same names as his sons. One of these tribes was Levi, or the Levites, and it's from that tribal name that the Book of Leviticus gets its name. God gave each tribe a special responsibility, and He called the Levites to be priests, to lead the sacred worship of the tabernacle, and to guide the people in moral living.

The Book of Leviticus tells us about the religious organization of Israel under the leadership of Moses and his brother, the high priest Aaron.

Leviticus contrasts the absolute holiness of God with the deep sinfulness of human beings and describes the ways that people can be reconciled with God. The book describes many rituals of service, sacrifice, and worship that can bring sinners back to the Lord.

Read *Leviticus 16:20-22* and *29*, which describes a yearly "Day of Atonement." (*Atonement* means repenting and making things right when you have sinned.) In the Hebrew language this Day of Atonement is called *Yom Kippur*. You may have Jewish friends who observe this special day every year.

The 17th to 27th chapters of Leviticus are sometimes called the *Holiness Code*. They have much to say about the relationship between the rituals of tabernacle worship and living a good, moral life. Marriage, family, respect for parents, compassion toward the poor, being a good neighbor, as well as the proper way to observe the Sabbath, Passover, and tithing are all discussed in these chapters. (Examples: *Leviticus 19: 17, 18, 32*)

Codes of Living

Every community develops rules by which it lives, from traffic laws to the American Constitution. The first experience we have of living by rules is in our own family. Think of the "rules and regulations" that exist in your home. Now

complete the following:

My favorite rule: _____

My least favorite rule: _____

The Book of Numbers

This book begins with a census, or numbering, of the able-bodied men in the tribes of Israel—those who would be able to fight in case of war. Only the Levites were not counted; God had commanded that they were not to take part in any fighting. As we saw when we looked at the Book of Leviticus, their job was to lead worship, observe religious traditions faithfully, and keep the tabernacle safe and in good order.

The Book of Numbers gives details about the political and social organization of Israel under Moses' guidance, and also tells us of the preparations the Israelites (another name for the Hebrew or Jewish people of the time) made for occupying the land of Canaan.

Unfortunately, the journey to Canaan was not as straightforward as it might have been. We might expect that the Israelites would enter the Promised Land soon after the renewal of the covenant at Mount Sinai (when Moses received a second set of tablets with the Ten Commandments). But because the people continued to doubt God's authority and ability to govern them, He punished them by extending their wandering in the wilderness to a period of forty years. They suffered during this time, and their faith faltered often. But God continued to be patient with His "very stiff-necked people." Read about an example of this in *Numbers 21:5-9*.

The Book of Deuteronomy

The name of this book is based on the word "second" (*deutero*). Moses is approaching the end of his life; the people are approaching the time when they will enter the Promised Land. So in three great speeches to the people, Moses gives them God's law a second time, so that they will remember it and be guided by it in the future.

Read *Deuteronomy 34:1-12*. This is a beautiful account of Moses' death and of the great respect and love the people had for him. But notice that even after all his service to God, Moses was not allowed to enter the Promised Land. By some standards, this doesn't seem "fair." Yet we know that God loved Moses and chose



The Armenian Angle

The Armenian name for Deuteronomy is "Yergort Orinatz" which, like the Greek, literally means "second law."



Looking In

Read *Leviticus 22:17-22*. What do you make of all this detail about what makes an offering acceptable in ancient times? How about your offering to God in the twenty-first century? List 5 ways you can offer your best to God.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.

him for greatness. God does not do things by our standards, but the greatest of believers have been those who trusted Him and were willing to follow His way under any circumstances. The question for us is, Are we willing to do the same? How would you answer that question for yourself?

A Bible Passage to Learn: And now, Israel, what does the Lord your God require of you, but to fear the Lord your God, to walk in all His ways, to love Him, to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and soul, and to keep the statutes and commandments of the Lord, which I command you this day for your good? (the words of Moses, in *Deuteronomy 10:12-13*)

Quick Quiz #6

① **The tribe of Levi was chosen by God to serve as:**

- a. prophets
- b. priests
- c. scribes
- d. soldiers

② **Yom Kippur is:**

- a. Hebrew term for the Ten Commandments
- b. the day the Israelites reached the Promised Land
- c. a Jewish day of celebration
- d. a special day of repentance for the Jews

③ **To which of the 10 tribes of Israel did Aaron belong?**

④ **What happened to Moses when the Israelites reached the Promised Land?**

⑤ **What are the first five books of the Old Testament called?**

⑥ to ⑩ **Put the correct letter next to each phrase**

- Holiness Code___
 - a census of the tribes of Israel___
 - Moses dies___
 - Some of the vestments of an Armenian priest are first described here___
 - Joseph is sold into slavery___
- a. Genesis
 - b. Exodus
 - c. Leviticus
 - d. Numbers
 - e. Deuteronomy



Աւարցա-լէւսիս քահանայ ինչ

Էւրոպէի իւր ճամուր քն



Session Seven

HISTORY AND SOME FAMOUS NAMES (The Historical Books)

Dear Lord,

*You parted the Red Sea and the Jordan River as your people
Journeyed to the Promised Land.*

*Lift away those things that keep us from you today
As we continue that journey. We ask this in your name, and with the
Father and the Spirit, Amen.*

Adapted from Hovhannes Garnetzi





Word Watch

Yahweh: YHWH is called the tetragrammaton for the four consonants that meant God, a word too sacred to be uttered (there were no written vowels in ancient Hebrew).

Warriors, Judges and Kings

In this session we will look at part of a group of Old Testament books called the *Historical Books*. These books take us from the time when the Hebrew people, under the leadership of Joshua, conquered and settled in the land of Canaan, up to the time of the great king David. Along the way we will meet some interesting people, men and women whose names are still well-known because they shine out as people who changed their world because of their love for God. We will also see how some of these people prefigured (do you remember that word?) the saving work of Jesus Christ. And one of the first people we will hear about has the same name as Jesus, but in a different language. God made it easy for His people to get prepared—all they had to do was to be willing.

The Book of Joshua

There are three major sections to this book. **First** is the invasion and conquest of Canaan (the Promised Land) by the Israelites. **Next** we read how the land was partitioned among the tribes of Israel. **Finally** comes the farewell address of the now-aged Joshua to his people. He reminds them how necessary it is for them to be faithful and obedient to God, and some dire warnings of what can happen if they fail to be so. In Joshua's words we see again that people are free to choose to follow God.

Read what he says in *Joshua 24:14-15*. Write the famous last phrase of these verses here.

The name Joshua is a Hebrew word which means “Yahweh is salvation.” (Yahweh is the title with which the Hebrews addressed God, not daring to call Him by any name.) In Greek, the name Joshua translates as Jesus. So for Christians, Joshua leading the people of Israel to victory in Canaan prefigures the victory of Jesus Christ, leading the new Israel (the Church) to the true Promised Land, which is the Kingdom of Heaven.

The Book of Judges

For almost 200 years (about 1200 to 1025 B.C.) the twelve tribes of Israel, to which Joshua had given parcels of land when they reached Canaan, lived as a loosely organized group, pledging support and protection to each other. Some Bible scholars call this the “tribal confederacy.”

All was not well among them. Years went by, and still they failed to complete the occupation of Canaan, begun in the days of Joshua. They had forgotten their promise to God that they would “make no covenant with the inhabitants of this land” and began venerating the pagan deities of their Canaanite

neighbors, especially Baal and the goddess Astarte (the equivalent in pagan Armenia of the goddess Anahit). Anarchy, confusion, and a lack of faith in their God made a mess of the Hebrews' lives.

But once again, God did not abandon His people, despite their infidelity. The title "Judges" refers to an extraordinary group of leaders—spiritual, military, and political—whom God sent to lead and help His people. They were not so much "judges" in the sense of presiding in a court of law as they were counselors and leaders. Part of their function was, however, to settle disputes or questions.

Three of the judges stand out: Deborah, Gideon, and Samson.

In your group study of one of these Judges, produce a brief biographical sketch and answer these questions:

- What character traits stand out in this person? (Good or bad)
- What do you think is the most important thing this person did?
- If you could meet this person and ask one question, what would it be?

The Book of Ruth

The Book of Ruth is set in the time of the Judges, though it was actually written several centuries later. It tells the story of a family of Israelites who, to escape famine in their Bethlehem home, move to the country of Moab. The Moabites' worship of pagan gods sets them very much apart from the worship of the Hebrews. In fact, the Hebrews consider them to be alien and untrustworthy.

The father of the Israelite family dies in Moab, and the two sons marry Moabite women named Ruth and Orpah. The sons die also, and their widowed mother, Naomi, decides to move back to Bethlehem.

To see how Naomi's daughters-in-law react to her decision, read *Ruth 1:6-18*. Ruth's words in verse 16 are some of the most famous in all of literature. Write them here:

Ruth and Naomi go to Bethlehem, where they live together in harmony but without much money. However, a wealthy and generous relative named Boaz takes compassion on Ruth when she goes to glean (pick up what the reapers have left behind) in his field. Read what they say to each other in *Ruth 2:8-12*.

Finally, Ruth and Boaz marry. In *Matthew 1:1-6* Ruth is named in the genealogy of Jesus Christ. This woman who is a stranger, a foreigner, an immigrant from a

The Armenian Angle

Ancient Armenia had a pantheon of gods and goddesses similar in nature to others in the Mediterranean and Near East. These included Aramazt (Zeus), Asdghig (Aphrodite), Anahid (Artemis), Mihr (Hephaestus), Vahakn (Hercules), Dir (Hermes), and Nané (Athena). Pagan roots still make their appearance in our Christian faith. For example, the Feast of the Transfiguration is called Vartavar, recalling how Armenians used to adorn the altar of Aphrodite with roses (vart means rose). Also, underneath the altar of Holy Etchmiadzin in Armenia is a remnant of a pagan altar from earlier times.



country whose people were looked down on by many of the Hebrews, is chosen and named in the Gospels as a human ancestor of the Son of God.

The First Book of Samuel; The Second Book of Samuel

Though the Book of Judges tells us about many impressive leaders, conditions in Israel remained unsettled and disorderly. The very last sentence in *Judges (21:25)* describes the situation: “In those days there was no king in Israel; every man did what was right in his own eyes.” The last of the judges was Samuel, and finally the people appealed to him with a radical idea. Read about it in *1 Samuel 8:1-22*.

Then choose the best answer to each of these questions:

Why do the people want a king?

- a. They have a lot of extra money and want to spend it building a castle.
- b. They want to be like everybody else.
- c. Samuel really thinks they should have one, and they want to respect his wishes.

What does God tell Samuel when Samuel prays about this idea of having a king?

- a. God tells Samuel to forbid the people to have a king.
- b. God tells Samuel that if there is to be a king, it must be Samuel himself.
- c. God tells Samuel that the people have rejected Him as their divine king so that they can be like everybody else and have a human king. Samuel should allow this.

What does Samuel tell the people about having a king?

- a. He tells them it will be great—lower taxes, higher prestige, plenty of banquets.
- b. He tells them it will be terrible; the king will use and abuse them.
- c. He tells them he doesn't have a clue what it will be like.

Samuel anoints Saul to be king, according to God's command. Saul was able to consolidate the Hebrew monarchy, and was a well-regarded warrior. But in the end he was defeated by the Philistines (despite David's famous victory over Goliath) and the strife between the Hebrew tribes continued. Saul became emotionally unstable, wildly jealous of the successful young warrior David, and subject to irrational fears and suspicions. He would later commit suicide after losing the Philistine war, and the country would be left vulnerable to foreign conquest.

So in wanting to “be like everybody else” and have a human king, the Israelites had turned their backs on God again. They had ignored His will for them, which was that they would have Him as their divine King, putting their trust and faith in Him. Not only that, they had put their country in a situation that was no less dangerous and difficult than the time of the Judges had been.

David Becomes King

God still did not abandon His beloved people. Read *1 Samuel 16:1-13*. Answer these questions:

- Why was Samuel not sure about whom he was supposed to anoint?
- How did God answer his uncertainty?

We know a great deal about David, who began as a young shepherd and became the greatest king in Israel's history. He was a poet who both wrote and sang psalms. He inspired great loyalty, and had many deep friendships. Under his excellent military and political leadership, the Philistines and other enemies of Israel were driven back, and the quarrelsome tribes came together to be a unified nation, prosperous and strong.

Still, David was far from perfect. We know of his great sin, for example, in having his own soldier Uriah killed so that he could marry Uriah's beautiful wife, Bathsheba. His own son, Absalom, rose against him and was killed by his soldiers. (Read the few words that convey David's deep grief in *2 Samuel 19:4*.)

David was a highly emotional person, and sometimes became angry and spiteful. He had established the capital of the nation in Jerusalem, and had brought the Ark of the Covenant to his new capital with much pomp and celebration. (Read about this in *2 Samuel 6:3-5*.) His ambition was to build a beautiful temple for the Lord around the Ark. But God told him that it would be David's son, not David himself, who would have the honor of completing the temple.

Yet David was beloved of God, because he recognized his sin, repented, and struggled to do better. He also was willing to take counsel from other people. Read the story of David and Abigail, one of his wives, in *1 Samuel 25:2-35*.

The rest of the two Books of Samuel deal with David's life and the life of Israel while he reigned over it. At the beginning of the next book, the First Book of Kings, we find out what happened after David died.

Looking In

If you looked at others as God does, how would that change some of your relationships right now?

Did You Know?

Our word "philistine" means someone who is smug and ignorant, often antagonistic to artistic and cultural values. This comes directly from the Old Testament notion that the Philistines were a barbarous enemy.





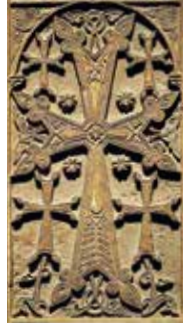
Quick Quiz #7

① to ⑤ **Put the following in chronological order, 1-5:**

- ___ David becomes king of Israel.
- ___ Samuel anoints Saul.
- ___ Land is divided among the twelve tribes of Israel.
- ___ Joshua enters the Promised Land.
- ___ The period of the judges.

⑥ to ⑩ **Identify the following people (put the correct letter in the blank):**

- ___ Ruth
 - ___ Deborah
 - ___ Mihr
 - ___ Saul
 - ___ Samson
- a. a judge
 - b. an ancestor of Jesus
 - c. a pagan god
 - d. a king



Session Eight

MORE HISTORY AND FAMOUS NAMES (The Rest of the Historical Books)

*Oh Spirit of God,
You proclaimed yourself through Moses
As the one moving over the waters,
Boundless power that you are.
And with your overwhelming care
Brooding over and protecting the newly-born
Under your wings, with compassion.
Through you shall all of us be renewed at the resurrection.
Glory to our Lord through you, and praise to you
With the Father Almighty, Amen.*

St. Gregory of Narek (Divine Liturgy of the Armenian Church)





Word Watch

Ark of the Covenant: the chest containing the tablets of the law which were to rest in the tabernacle and then the temple. With the destruction of the first temple by the Babylonians in 587, the ark disappeared (see the movie “Indiana Jones and the Lost Ark” for an imaginative treatment of its whereabouts). Synagogues today have scrolls of the law stored behind a curtain in a side wall.

Victory and Loss

The dying King David chose his son Solomon to be the next ruler of Israel.

1. Read *1 Kings 3:3-14*.

What did Solomon ask for?

2. Solomon was known for his wisdom. Read the story of what is probably the most famous example of his wise decisions in *1 Kings 3:16-28*.

How do you think what he asked for (*1 Kings 3:3-14*) helped in this decision?

Dilemma

Find a story in a newspaper or magazine involving two opposing claims and apply the “wisdom of Solomon” in deciding which claim will prevail. Work in small groups and report to the class as follows:

- a. Describe the problem.
- b. Relate how you arrived at a solution.
- c. Discuss how you think the decision reflects Christian love and concern and actually ends the problem so no further disputes are possible.

Solomon was an active king, building a strong navy and army as well as many cities in various parts of the kingdom, which was truly becoming an empire. He greatly extended Israel’s territory, and forged alliances and trade agreements with many foreign powers. People continued to come from far and wide to hear his wisdom, including the Queen of Sheba.

The Temple is Built

Solomon’s most famous achievement was to oversee the construction of the Temple in Jerusalem. Thousands of workers labored on it, using only the finest materials and making it a truly beautiful place. When it was finished, the Ark of the Covenant was brought into its sanctuary to stay. No longer were the Hebrew people wanderers, carrying their tent of worship and the Ark with them. The Temple was situated in one place and the Ark had come to rest in it. The celebration, when everything was ready, lasted for fourteen days.

Solomon Forgets God; The Kingdom is Divided

God had promised to reward Solomon for his faithfulness. But Solomon, for all his talents and strengths, didn’t or couldn’t resist the influence of some of his wives and courtiers, who pulled him away from God into idol worship in his old age. Then enemies of Israel created trouble which led to civil strife—a dangerous, difficult situation which Rehoboam, Solomon’s son and heir, inherited when his father died.

Civil strife led to civil war, partly because Rehoboam could not handle the problems he was faced with, and by 930 B.C. the country had divided into two kingdoms: Israel in the north with ten tribes, and Judah in the south, retaining loyalty to David and Solomon but consisting only of the tribes of Benjamin and Judah. (There were members of the priestly tribe of Levi in both kingdoms.) Rehoboam was king of Judah, while Jeroboam, a military man, ruled over Israel. The two kingdoms co-existed from 930 to 722 B.C. But these were years of fighting between the two, as well as corruption and discontentment among the people.

The End of the Northern Kingdom

Finally, the northern kingdom of Israel was attacked by the Assyrian empire and within a year (723 B.C.) it was utterly defeated. The ten tribes were enslaved and transported eastward to the outer reaches of the Assyrian empire, which stretched as far as present-day Iran. Assyrians moved into the land the Israelites had left behind, and it became known, from then on, as Samaria. The Assyrian settlers did adopt the Hebrew God as their own, but their form of worship was not like that of the true Hebrews, and in later centuries they were looked down on by the Hebrews. The ten tribes of Israel were lost, assimilated and scattered among the Assyrians when they were transported to the Assyrian empire. Only the tribes of Judah and Benjamin (along with some Levites) remained in existence in Judah, to the south. Thus the religion and culture of the Hebrew people became known as “Judaism” and the people themselves as “Jews.”

The Southern Kingdom is Conquered

The southern kingdom of Judah continued as an autonomous state until 586 B.C. The Assyrians had tried and failed to conquer it, and finally they themselves were overthrown by the Babylonians (sometimes called the Chaldeans). The formidable leader of the Babylonians was Nebuchadnezzar, who entered Jerusalem in 586 B.C. and destroyed both the beautiful Temple built by Solomon and the Ark of the Covenant. The Hebrews were carried off to slavery in Babylonia. The empire of David and Solomon, the great empire of the Hebrews, had come to an end. The long history of the Hebrews’ lack of faith in God had destroyed it. But God still did not abandon His people.

A New Beginning

History often seems to be a series of conquests of one great empire by another. In 539 B.C. the Persian empire conquered the Babylonians. The Persian leader, Cyrus the Great, presided over the largest empire the world had ever seen up to that time.

Did You Know

The “Babylonian captivity” or “exile” lasted nearly fifty years. Read Psalm 137, verses 1-6 to get an idea of the Hebrews’ sadness and longing after this terrible event. Many Armenians read this Psalm and remember their own despairing songs of massacre and exile in 1915.



Looking In

As you read about the lives, accomplishments, and challenges of the men and women of the Bible, you can't help but notice the very different strengths these people brought to their lives. What's one of your outstanding qualities? Bravery? Kindness? Vision? Humor? Identify it and thank God!

Cyrus made an important decision: He allowed the Jews enslaved in Babylonia to return to their homeland. The First Book of Chronicles gives us a history of the Hebrews from the time of Adam, through the life of David, up to the Babylonian captivity. The Second Book of Chronicles continues the story up to the time of this Persian king, Cyrus.

The Book of *Ezra* and the Book of *Nehemiah* tell us about the Jews who returned to Canaan (now called Palestine) and how they rebuilt the Temple in Jerusalem as well as the wall around the city.

The Book of *Esther* is a story about the Jews who stayed in Persia, and how God protected them there. The books of Tobit and Judith are set in the time of the Assyrian conquest and give us history of that time (though they were written later.) Judith, one of the deuterocanonical books, is a wonderful companion to Esther, both of which offer powerful images of determined and courageous women.

The Maccabees: The End of Old Testament History

Alexander the Great defeated the Persians in 330 B.C. The Jews of Palestine, along with the whole Middle East, came under Greek control, first under the Ptolemies of Egypt (who were of Greek background) and then the Seleucids, led by Antiochus the Great. When Antiochus tried to force Hellenistic (another word for Greek) culture and values on the Jews, they revolted under their leader Mattathias the Levite and his sons. Mattathias' name in Greek is "Maccabeus", and the Books of the Maccabees tell of the success of this revolt. An independent Jewish state was established in Palestine, governed by the Maccabees.

This independent state did not last long. The Roman Empire began expanding into the Middle East, and the struggling remnant of God's people found themselves under the control of yet another foreign power. After 40 B.C., with the Romans in control, the history of Israel in the Old Testament comes to a close. The new covenant, or "New Testament" of Jesus Christ, would transcend the Old, bringing God's promise of the Kingdom into completion.

Order, please!

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____
6. _____
7. _____

Quick Quiz #8

① to ⑤ **Either/Or. Circle the correct answer.**

Solomon's greatest achievement was building the:
Ark of the Covenant Temple in Jerusalem

This leader let the Jews return to their homeland:
Nebuchadnezzar Cyrus

This book tells the story of a Jewish revolt:
Maccabees Nehemiah

These two tribes made up the Southern Kingdom:
Judah and Benjamin Judah and Israel

Solomon was best known for his:
wisdom evil

⑥ to ⑩ **True or False?**

The Queen of Sheba admired Solomon
 T F

Solomon's father was King Saul
 T F

The historian Yeghishe wrote about Nehemiah
 T F

The Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed by the Babylonians
 T F

Solomon was a powerful and energetic leader
 T F

The Armenian Angle

The Book of Maccabees has had a big influence on the language and imagination of Armenian historians. The priest Yeghishe, who wrote his famous book "Vartan and the Armenian War" in the 5th century, often alluded to the Maccabean revolt. In his mind, the stories of the Maccabees revolting against Rome and the Armenians fighting the Persians shared images of purpose and valor.







Session Nine

WISDOM IS A GIFT FROM GOD

Dear Lord,

*We read in your inspired proverbs that
“the beginning of all knowledge is the fear of the Lord
but fools despise wisdom and discipline.”*

*Grant us the wisdom to bow our heads before you, O Lord
And the desire to lift up our hearts to Your will and Your Way.*

Amen.





Did You Know?

There are many famous “wisdom” stories out of the Ancient Near East. One of them was so popular that it was transmitted in a dozen different languages (the most ancient manuscript is in Aramaic – the language of Jesus – and dates from the 5th c.B.C.) and was recounted widely. It tells the story of a certain Ahiqar, a court official in Assyria, who is betrayed and then restored to his post, and contains many proverbs about life, order, and the meaning of things.

What Are the Wisdom Books?

We have seen, in the history that we have been studying, how neighboring cultures and ways of thinking influenced the Jewish people. Long before Israel became a great nation under King David, these cultures—the Babylonians and the Egyptians especially—were known for their “wisdom writings.” These writings, sometimes in the form of poems and stories, ask the big questions that we human beings have always asked and still do ask:

Why are we born and why do we die?

What’s the purpose of life?

What is the best way to live?

Many of the ideas in these “wisdom writings” from other cultures became part of the writings of the Hebrews.

But there is a basic difference between the Hebrew writings and those of other cultures. For other cultures, wisdom itself is a source of power and knowledge. For the Hebrews, only God is wise. He gives wisdom as a gift to human beings (like Solomon, for instance). This God-given wisdom can be applied to life in very practical ways, and so the Wisdom Books of the Old Testament are filled with sayings and stories to help us live in ways that are pleasing to God and beneficial to us. They remind us over and over that the way to have a good life is to know God and follow His teachings.

The Book of Job

This story of a righteous (meaning morally good) man who suffers shows a new way of thinking among some of the Jewish people. The book was written sometime around the exile and captivity in Babylonia. You remember that the Babylonian army destroyed the Temple, the Ark of the Covenant, and the city wall of Jerusalem, as well as other parts of the city. The Hebrew people were taken away from Judah in chains, to slavery in a foreign land whose people didn’t know or revere God.

How could anyone explain this? Though the Jewish people knew they had not always followed God’s law, they also knew that His Kingdom was eternal and that no human being could overcome it. So how was it that everything most holy could have been destroyed by men? How was it that God’s chosen people could have everything taken from them?

The Book of Job shows that even good people can suffer in this life, and not because of any obvious sin. It's not a simple matter of punishment for the evil and reward for the good. In this life not only will the good suffer, but sometimes it seems as if the evil prosper in a way that is very frustrating to everybody else! So Job is the prime Old Testament example of the "righteous sufferer."

The story of Job begins by telling us that Job is a man who loves God and has prosperity of all kinds. The devil tempts him by taking away all the good things he has. The devil is sure that if Job loses enough of what he had, he will turn against God. But Job refuses to do so. When his friends tell him that he must have done something wrong because God must be punishing him for something, he insistently claims that he is innocent, but still refuses to blame God.

Finally Job looks over his past behavior, and sees nothing seriously wrong in it. He asks God why the innocent should have to suffer.

God's answer is a powerful one, given in the 38th chapter of Job.

After hearing these words, Job realizes that God cannot be "explained" or fully "understood" by mere human beings. His majesty, power, and love for His creatures are beyond our ability to fathom. At the end of the Book of Job, the many good things Job had are restored to him. This tells us that for those who keep their faith in God, no matter what the circumstances, good things will come. Of course, because this was a story with a moral, it's not so much about material goods as it is about God's ultimate blessing – the true joy of the Spirit.

We read this part of the Book of Job at the Holy Saturday service in the Armenian Church. Why was this reading chosen for Holy Saturday? Because in Jesus Christ, the idea of the "righteous sufferer" is complete. The innocent Christ, who is also the Son of God, suffers for us and faces the evil of the world for us when He is crucified. We will still face suffering in this world, but now we know that it is not simply meaningless. God's own Son has faced it, and has overcome it. It need not destroy us, and it cannot destroy the reality of God's Kingdom, as the Babylonians once destroyed Jerusalem.



Word Watch

Job: pronounced to rhyme with "robe," the meaning of the word is uncertain but James coined the phrase "the patience of Job" and refers to the perseverance of the book's main character in the face of his suffering (James 5:10-11). Patience may be a bit misleading, however, since eventually Job loses his cool and sputters the question exasperatedly to God: "why?"



The Armenian Angle

Psalms are the foundation of much of our Divine Liturgy. The priest and deacon chant psalms “antiphonally” in the Armenian tradition, which means verses are alternated in a sing-song style. One of the oldest psalms used in our badarak is Psalm 24, attributed to David. As the deacon ceremoniously hands over the veiled chalice of wine (covered by the “paten” or small plate on which rests the wafer of bread or nushkhar) they chant the beautiful ancient couplets “Who is the King of Glory, the Lord of Hosts?” “This is the King of Glory!” “Ov eh sa takavor paratz, Der Zorootyantz?” “Sa inkn eh takavor paratz!”

Bible Study: God Speaks to Job (Job 38)

1. What in the natural world is a very awesome experience for you? Something scary like a storm? Something grand like a tall tree or a mountain? Little things like a tiny flower or a hummingbird? Something vast like space or the ocean?
2. In this chapter of Job, does God reveal Himself as something distant or as a personal God?
3. Does God answer Job’s question: *why am I suffering if I’ve done nothing wrong?* What is He saying instead?
4. Do you ask God questions about your life when you’re hurting or confused? What might God be choosing to reveal to us instead of the answers we might expect?

The Book of Psalms


This book is sometimes called the “prayer book of the Church” because psalms are part of every worship service we have. There are 150 psalms, many of them written by King David and some by his choir director Asaph. Others are by unknown writers. They were written over many years, and were used in the Temple worship. Today, in the longer worship services that are conducted in monasteries, you might hear the whole Book of Psalms (called the Psalter) chanted or sung in just a few days of worship. Try chanting or singing the psalms the same way they are chanted or sung in church.

As most of us know, some of the psalms are songs of praise. Others ask God for help or tell Him of human troubles and ask Him to intervene. Others thank Him for His gifts. Some psalms are a combination of all these.

One group of psalms is very special. They are called the “royal psalms” or “messianic psalms” because they point us toward the coming of the messiah, the king, Jesus Christ. In fact, Jesus Himself referred to the Psalms. Read His words in *Luke 24:44* and copy them here:

The Book of Proverbs

Want to know how to be a good parent? Seeking some guidelines for a happy family life? Care for some advice that will help you when you are feeling envious or sorry for yourself? The Book of Proverbs, put together in the third century B.C., is the place to go. These “wise sayings” and useful thoughts were probably written by many people. One of the writers was the wise Solomon, but others came from the minds and pens of unknown writers. We do know that rabbis in



those early centuries used these sayings in the moral and religious training of Jewish youth.

The Book of Ecclesiastes

Written in the fifth century B.C., the Book of Ecclesiastes tells us that nothing in this world—fame, money, learning, success—has any meaning in and of itself. Only in God can we find meaning, purpose, and hope in life.

The Song of Songs

This is a Canaanite wedding song which the Jewish people adapted. It's a very romantic description of love between a man and a woman. It is seen as a poetic way of describing how much Jesus Christ loves His bride, the Church (which means all of us).

The Wisdom of Solomon, Sirach

These books of thoughts about the world and the people in it are not from Solomon's time. Rather, they come from the years just before the time of the New Testament. Remember that writers in ancient times sometimes attributed their books to a person whose thought they admired and had tried to emulate in their own writing. That is probably the basis for these books being attributed to Solomon.

Looking In

Proverbs reflect the conventional wisdom of a particular society but they usually have something to say for all people in all times. What's your "wisdom" on friendship? Think of an important tip you have about friendship and write it here in proverb form.

Quick Quiz #9

① **The Wisdom writings of the Old Testament consist of**

- a. ___ poetry
- b. ___ advice
- c. ___ stories
- d. ___ all of the above

② **Job was a**

- a. ___ bad husband and father
- b. ___ righteous sufferer
- c. ___ poor man
- d. ___ slave

③ **Job 38 is read in the Armenian church during**

- a. ___ a funeral
- b. ___ the Badarak
- c. ___ Holy Saturday
- d. ___ Good Friday

④ **King David wrote many of the chapters in**

- a. ___ Psalms
- b. ___ Proverbs
- c. ___ Ecclesiastes
- d. ___ all of the above

⑤ **Solomon was one of the writers of this book**

- a. ___ Psalms
- b. ___ Proverbs
- c. ___ Wisdom of Solomon
- d. ___ all of the above

⑥ **Which word best describes the Song of Songs?**

- a. ___ advice
- b. ___ pessimistic
- c. ___ violent
- d. ___ romantic

⑦ **Which book is described as the “prayerbook of the Church?”**

- a. ___ Sirach
- b. ___ Proverbs
- c. ___ Psalms
- d. ___ Job

⑧ to ⑩ **Circle the three words that do not belong.**

Psalter Gospel Asaph epistle
poetry praise suffering Torah



Session Ten

THE PROPHETS

God's Human Messengers

*Dear Lord,
Your prophet Hosea described you to us.
He said you would be like a dew to your people
and that we would blossom like the lily.
Help us spread out our shoots and be fragrant,
Help us live again in your shadow where we will flourish like a garden,
Where we will thrive like a vine and our souls be as sweet-smelling as
The sweetest flower, the headiest wine.
Amen.*

Based on Hosea 14:5-7





Word Watch

Prophet: a person who speaks by divine inspiration, who expresses the will of God; a person of profound moral insight.

Remnant: An important concept in the story of God's people, the "faithful" remnant meant the spiritual kernel of the nation that would survive God's judgment and become the germ of the new people of God.

What Is a Prophet?

The word *prophetes* in Greek means someone who speaks for another. The Hebrew word for prophet, *nabi*, means one who pours forth the divine will. Putting these two together, we can say the prophets were people who spoke for God to the people, and told them His will.

We have already met two prophets in the earlier history of the Hebrew people. First there was Samuel, who chose kings for Israel according to God's will. The other was Elijah, who stood up to King Ahab and Queen Jezebel with their worship of the pagan god Baal. Elijah also had a disciple, Elisha, who did miracles and carried on Elijah's work. These men are sometimes called the "early prophets."

But now we come to a group of men called the "classical prophets." They lived and preached from the 8th down to the 2nd centuries B.C. Not writers, but preachers, they emerged in the period when the Hebrew empire was declining. Their work continued through the empire's fall to foreign invaders, the exile to Babylonia, and the return of the faithful "remnant" to Palestine when the conquering Persian king allowed them to go.

In all of these events, the prophets were God's messengers. They had received instruction from Him about what to tell the people, and they gave the message even when it was so unpopular that they literally risked their lives delivering it. Sometimes their messages were warnings that God was displeased with the Hebrews' faithlessness, and wanted them to change their ways. The prophets warned that God would punish them for their disobedience, not out of tyranny but out of love, knowing as He did that only by faithfulness to Him could they be happy and have peace.

In fact, many of the prophets gave messages of God's abiding love and care for His people at the same time they were giving these dire warnings. God would not force His people to do His will, but He wanted them to for their own good. Sadly, very often the people thought they knew better, and did not listen.

There are 18 books of prophecy in the Armenian Bible. Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Daniel are often called the "major prophets" not because their books are more important than others, but simply because they are longer. In addition to those four, we have the books of Lamentations, Baruch, Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habbakuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi. We can now take a closer look at some of them.

Isaiah

Born into a noble family, Isaiah was a married man and father of two sons who lived most of his life in Jerusalem. He was called by God to be a prophet with a special vision. Read about it in *Isaiah 6:1-8*. His preaching (prophecy) stretches over fifty years in Judah, from about 740 to 687 B.C. There are two main parts to the Book of Isaiah, and probably the second part was written in the sixth century by a disciple of the prophet.

You remember that the time of the divided Hebrew kingdom, with Israel in the north and Judah in the south, was a period of corruption and confusion for the people. Isaiah received a vision in which God told him to warn Judah that He would allow it to fall to foreign conquerors if the people didn't change their evil ways. Again, God had no desire to punish, except as a way of bringing His people to their senses. In fact, the Book of Isaiah contains many warnings of destruction for those who fought against God's chosen people. (Look at *Isaiah 14:24-31*.) In spite of the Hebrews' disobedience, they were His beloved people forever.

The fall of Israel to the Assyrians in 722 B.C. should have alerted Judah to listen to Isaiah's words. But Judah had a series of weak, sometimes corrupt, kings. They tried to rely on the military might of neighbors to save them. (See *Isaiah 31:1-3*.) They threatened and sometimes killed those who brought an unwelcome message. (Isaiah probably died at the hands of a truly bad king of Judah named Manasseh.) They did almost anything rather than listen to Isaiah.

Finally, Judah's own destruction came at the hands of the Babylonians. As you recall, the people of Judah were exiled to Babylonia. The second part of Isaiah contains words of hope and encouragement for the people who were so far from home, and looks forward to God's deliverance.

Isaiah always believed that through any kind of punishment, exile, destruction and loss, God would keep His promise that the throne of David "shall be established forever" (*2 Samuel 7:16*). But as he looked around at the mediocre leaders of Israel and Judah, he knew that they and others like them could never fulfill such a promise. Isaiah began to see a new meaning to God's promise. He told of a Messiah, a king who would fulfill it, and described this king in ways that startle us today—because they are descriptions of Jesus Christ, who would come to the world several centuries later!



The Armenian Angle

The beautiful and famous Chapter 6 of Isaiah describes how God called the prophet into His service. In the vision of God that Isaiah sees, angels are in attendance at God's throne, singing "holy, holy, holy!" This is the inspiration for the haunting Armenian sharagan "Soorp, soorp" heard at every Divine Liturgy.

Read these passages, and write here how they “match” with what we know about Jesus Christ:

Isaiah 7:14

Isaiah 11:1

Isaiah 50:6

Isaiah 53:7

Despite all the terrible things he had seen happen to the Hebrew people, Isaiah always believed that a “remnant” would stay faithful and return to the homeland. These would be the people who would rejoice in the coming of the Messiah.

Group Think Tank

1. The Armenian liturgical hymn “Soorp, soorp” (Holy, holy) is a quotation from Isaiah 6:3. Why do you think it’s used in the liturgy?
2. Compare the person described in Isaiah 9:6-7 and Isaiah 53: 3-7. These are understood to refer to Jesus. Which of these images fit into your personal picture of God? Which do not? Why?

Amos

Though born in Judah, a contemporary of Isaiah, Amos was called by God to prophesy to the people of the northern kingdom, Israel. He made himself popular there by saying that Israel’s enemies, such as Moab, would suffer God’s wrath. He got himself thrown out of Israel, though, when he said the same thing would happen to the Hebrews there!

Amos was determined to show people the folly of worshipping nature gods, or the forces of nature, as many of Israel’s neighbors did. He wanted people to see that God is the one creator and of all things. Amos wrote:

“He who made the Pleiades and Orion, and turns deep darkness into morning, and darkens the day into night, who calls for the waters of the sea, and pours them out upon the surface of the earth, the Lord [Yahweh] is His name.” (*Amos 5:8*)

Amos also made it clear that while the proper worship of God is very necessary, it should not replace good works and compassion toward others. Read *Amos 5:21-24*. Is Amos saying we should do away with worship? If not, what is he saying here?

Hosea and Micah

These two contemporaries of Isaiah also denounced Israel's faithlessness to God. Hosea compared Israel to an adulterous wife whose husband (God) is willing to forgive her if she repents sincerely and lastingly. Micah says both the northern and southern kingdoms are doomed, but predicts that there will be ultimate salvation for humanity through a Messiah. Read *Micah 5:2-4*. Once again, keep in mind that these words were written centuries before the coming of Christ. Copy verse 2 here:

Zephaniah and Nahum

These prophets lived in Judah and wrote sometime around 625 B.C. This is before the defeat of Assyria (Israel's conqueror) in 612, yet Zephaniah prophesies the Babylonian exile, and Nahum makes an amazing prophecy concerning Assyria and its capital city, Nineveh. Read it in *Nahum 2:1 to 3:7*. (A special note: Nineveh was one of the great cities of the ancient world, but it is a wasteland today.)

Habbakuk

Like the other prophets, Habbakkuk saw sad and terrible things happen to his people. His message is one of trusting in God no matter what the circumstances. Read his words in *Habbakuk 3:17-19*.

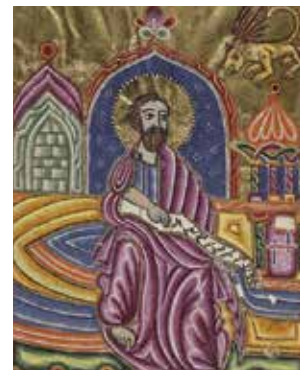
This prophet also reflects the idea of the "righteous sufferer" that we encountered in the Book of Job. Habbakuk describes someone who suffers even though he is innocent, and who trusts that the Lord will make him triumphant in the end. Read these rather mysterious words in *Habbakuk 2:1-4*.

Prophets During the Era of the Babylonian Exile

The prophets we've talked about so far preached before or at the beginning of the exile in Babylonia. That period of exile or captivity lasted from 586 to 538 B.C. Close to and during that time, three important prophets did their work. One was Jeremiah.

Jeremiah

If there was ever a prophet who would rather have done something else than be a prophet, it's Jeremiah. He was the son of a priest, born during the reign of the evil King Manasseh. His ministry lasted from about 627 to 580 B.C. Read about how it began in *Jeremiah 1:4-10*. Discuss these questions as a class:



Looking In

Every prophet lived in a certain time and place and yet they expressed the dream of God for the world that would be true at any time and any place. If you were a full-time modern prophet, what would your message be to your community (any community – your parish, your city, the world) today?

1. What words tell us that God's plan for His people has been in place for a very long time?
2. What does Jeremiah do that Moses also did, when called by God?
(See *Exodus 4:10-16*.)
3. What words suggest that Jeremiah is going to have a tough job?

Jeremiah saw destruction coming to Judah, and warned against it. While this didn't make him popular, he said something else that made a lot of people actually want to kill him. He told the people that the Temple, the physical building, was not enough to save them. Up to this time, the people believed that as long as they honored the Temple, which God Himself had ordered Solomon to build, they would be safe. But Jeremiah told them they should honor and trust only God. Nothing on this earth, not even the Temple, could save them if they failed to trust God.

Did You Know?

In the 6th century B.C., the prophet Jeremiah wore a wooden yoke around his neck as a symbol that Jerusalem and Judah would wear the yoke of Babylon. In the 18th century A.D., the Armenian Patriarch of Jerusalem, Gregory of Shirvan, wore a huge chain around his neck as a symbol of his commitment to stopping the corruption and debt that had engulfed the Armenian Patriarchate. He vowed not to remove the chain until the disgrace had been resolved.

Jeremiah was a very passionate prophet. Read his agonized words in *Jeremiah 4:14-22*. He loved Jerusalem and its people. It was no joy to him to accuse them, and to see them punished by foreign conquest. And he had an even more unpleasant task to accomplish for the Lord. When the Babylonians conquered Jerusalem, they didn't take all the people away at one time. Some were left in Jerusalem, and among these people there came false prophets who predicted the downfall of the Babylonian enemy and the imminent return of the exiles. Of course, these were words that the devastated people in Jerusalem were only too glad to hear and believe. Jeremiah warned the people not to listen. He wrote letters to the exiles, telling them to prepare to be in Babylonia for a long, long time. We can imagine how much frustration and hatred he earned in Jerusalem for these actions!

Of course, Jeremiah was right. The Babylonians returned to Jerusalem and destroyed it, taking all the rest of the people off to slavery. The end of Jeremiah's life was bitter and sad, yet he is honored as a great prophet because nothing would stop him from telling the truth and giving God's message to the people.

Two books of prophecy are entitled Lamentations and Baruch. The first is a series of mourning poems over fallen Jerusalem. It is attributed to Jeremiah, but was written later than his time. Baruch was Jeremiah's secretary, and wrote down much of the prophet's preaching.

A Passage to Learn: O Lord, be gracious to us; we wait for You. Be our arm every morning, our salvation in the time of trouble. (*Isaiah 33:2*)

Quick Quiz #10

① to ⑥ **Matching – put the correct letter in the space provided**

1. ___ compared Israel to an adulterous wife
2. ___ “Soorp, Soorp”
3. ___ the Babylonians destroy Jerusalem
4. ___ chosen by God before he was born
5. ___ spoke of a divine king and a man of suffering
6. ___ he said God hated Israel’s feasts and burnt offerings

- | |
|---|
| <p>a. Isaiah
b. Jeremiah
c. Amos
d. Hosea</p> |
|---|

⑦ to ⑧ **Define the following words:**

7. prophet
8. remnant

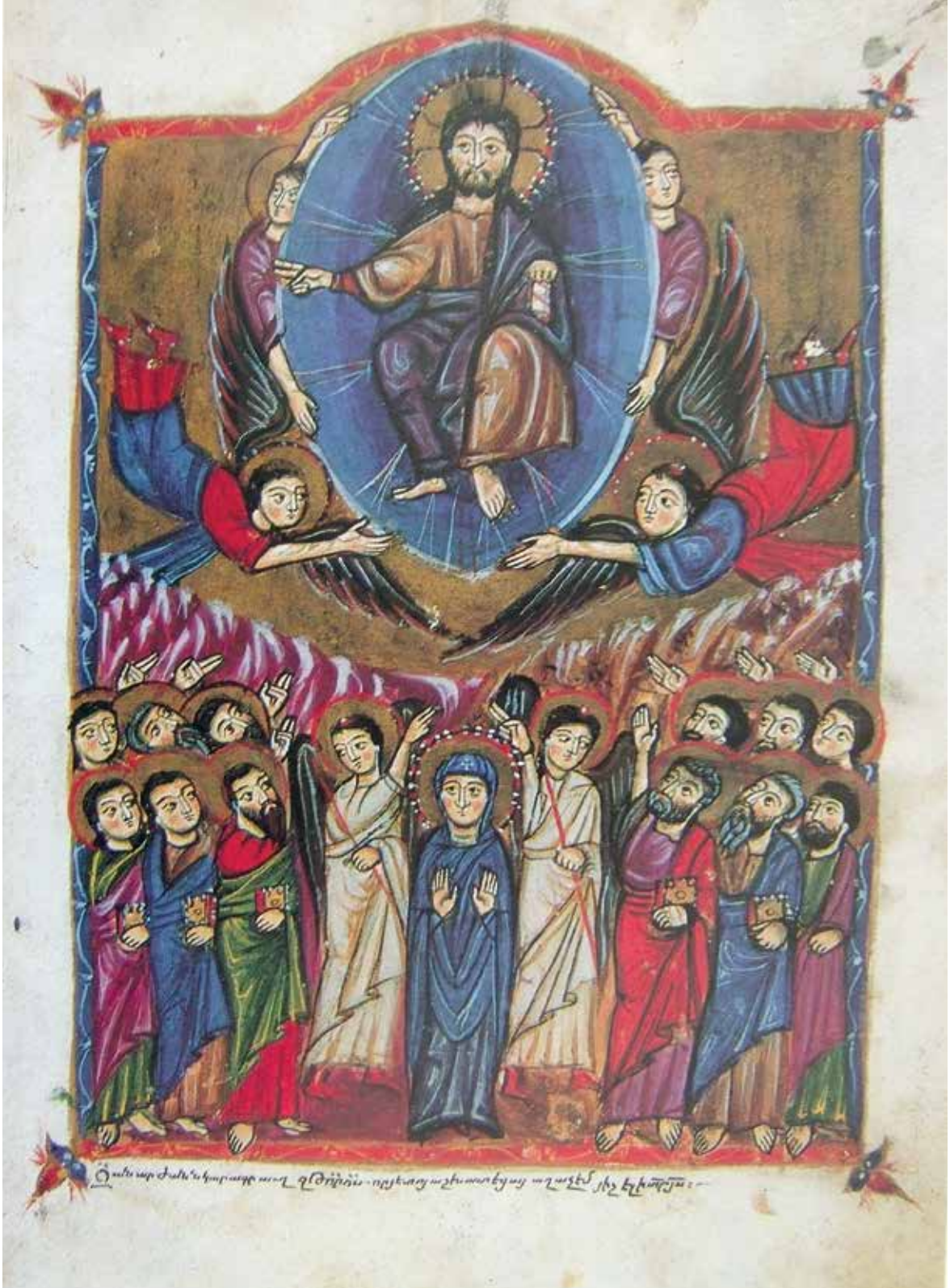
⑨ to ⑩ **True or False?**

The Old Testament books of the prophets prepare us for the coming of Jesus Christ as our Savior.

T F

The Hebrews always obeyed their prophets.

T F



Զստեւոյ Ժողովոյ Կոնստանդնուպոլսոյ արար զԸնթացն ողորմոյ արեւմտեան եկեղեցւոյ արարեալն ինչ էրկայնս Եւսեբիոս Կեսարացի Գրագիրն Եւսեբիոս Կեսարացի



Session Eleven

THE PROPHETS

God's Human Messengers

(Part 2)

*Dear Lord,
Fill us with your Holy Spirit,
the uncreated and the perfect,
who spoke through the Law and through the Prophets and through
the Gospels, who came down upon the Jordan and preached through the
apostles and who lived in the saints.
Amen.*



Did You Know?



Ezekiel was asked by God to do quite a demonstration for the people. In a public square he had to lie down on his left side for 390 days, then on his right side for 40 days to symbolize the number of years Israel and Judah would spend in exile (respectively). Meanwhile, he was to live on very little food – mimicking a people in exile – and was to bake humble barley cakes on human dung. Talk about making a point! See Ezekiel 4 for the details.

In the Time of the Exile

As we noted in the last session, Jeremiah was one of three prophets who preached during the time of the exile in Babylonia. The other two are Ezekiel and Obadiah.

Obadiah

This very brief book (21 verses) indicates that the enemies of God's people will be judged at the last judgment. This is one of few references, in the words of the prophets, to the idea of a last judgment at the end of time. Obadiah specifically talks about the Edomites, who were ferocious enemies of the Hebrew people. Edom and its people have completely disappeared from history. There is a haunting reminder that they must once have been a great civilization—a great city full of temples cut out of huge rocks, which is called Petra and which was once the Edomite capital.

Ezekiel

This book was written between 593 and 573 B.C. Ezekiel was one of the captives taken to Babylonia, and he describes Babylonia's conquest of Judah as God's judgment on the sins of His people.

But Ezekiel was not only a "scold" to the people. He was given some wonderful visions of God's intentions to bring all people, both Jew and Gentile, into His Kingdom. Ezekiel had one vision which seems to be a promise of resurrection for those who have died. Read this in *Ezekiel 37:1-14*.

Ezekiel's visions were a gift from God to the Hebrews in exile. They took comfort and courage from Ezekiel's descriptions of the things God had shown him. But these visions are also a gift to us, and to everyone in the world, because the promises they make are for every human being.

Group Bible Study: Ezekiel 37:1-14

1. Read the passage together and list the characters.
2. Describe Ezekiel's vision: Where is it taking place? What might it look like?
3. Describe the vision, step by step (verses 1-10).
4. What is the interpretation of the vision (verses 11-14)? Speak about the symbolism of *bones*, *breath*, and *graves*.
5. How might we, as Christians, interpret this vision today?

The Prophets of the Period After the Exile

You remember that when the Persian king defeated the Babylonians, he allowed the Hebrews to return to their homeland of Palestine. Not all of them returned, but many did. We can now look at the prophets who preached after the exile, both to those who returned and those who did not.

Haggai and Zechariah

Having been in exile, many Jews realized that they could worship God in places other than the Temple in Jerusalem. You remember, too, that Jeremiah had told the people they must not rely on the Temple or any other building to save them. But the Jews who returned to Jerusalem also knew that in their circumstances, rebuilding the Temple was still very important as a visible sign of God's presence among the people. It was also a visible sign that the people were putting God at the center of their lives.

Haggai and Zechariah urged the people on to rebuild the Temple, when their energy and enthusiasm waned.

Zechariah also has some clear prophecies about the way the Savior would come into the world. Read *Zechariah 9:9*. Write here the words that relate to what happened on Palm Sunday:

Malachi

The mid-fifth century B.C. was a hard time in Palestine. There was drought, famine, and the same grumbling discontentment that the people had felt when wandering in the desert with Moses. Malachi warned the people not to complain, but to love and worship God with enthusiastic hearts.

Jonah

This book was written in the fifth century B.C., but it is set in the 8th century. Unlike the other prophetic books, it contains no predictions or warnings. Instead it shows us by means of a story that God's salvation is for all people, not just the Hebrews.

And the book doesn't feature a prophet like Isaiah or Jeremiah, doing God's will no matter what the consequences. No, Jonah is trying very hard to escape God and His will. God is asking him to go to the city of Nineveh—remember that this was the capital of Babylonia—and Jonah has no desire to help the enemies and conquerors of his people by calling them to repentance as God wants him to. Finally, Jonah does do God's will but learns a lot about himself and God's character.

The Armenian Angle

Ezekiel 37:1-14 is read in the Armenian Church on Holy Saturday, as we prepare for the resurrection of Christ. Like Him, we will die. But also like Him, we will be resurrected. We will come into the "land of Israel"(v.12) and be in "our own land"(v.14)—these are references to the Kingdom of God. One of the beautiful stained-glass windows in St. Vartan Cathedral depicts this scene; above it a phoenix, the mythological bird that rises from the ashes, is pictured. Both images are meant to evoke the Armenian genocide and Christian hope.



Word Watch

Temple: the holy place of sacrifice and pilgrimage in Jerusalem for Jews everywhere. The Temple was destroyed in 586 B.C. by the Babylonians, rebuilt, and then destroyed again by the Romans in 70 A.D. With the Temple's final destruction, the Torah became the most important expression of faith for the Jews.

Looking In

Jonah not only ignored what God was asking him to do, he hopped a boat and tried to get as far as possible in the opposite direction! What is something God might ask you to do that you would have trouble doing? Give your savings to a poor child? Spend your time in a certain way? Think of one specific change of lifestyle or attitude that would be very challenging.



Joel

Written during the late 5th or early 4th century B.C., this book states that our salvation is in our own hands. Faith and obedience will save us; ungodliness will mean destruction.

Daniel

Daniel lived during the time of the exile in Babylonia. Some of this book was probably written by him, though much of it was written later. The book's purpose was to build up the hope and courage of the exiled people. It is the story of four young men—Daniel and his three friends Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah—who are carried off to Babylon and who are chosen to serve in the court of King Nebuchadnezzar. Despite every temptation and threat, they refuse to eat the pagan food or observe the pagan worship practices of their captors. Even when they are given Babylonian names they won't conform to Babylonian ways. (Their story is read on Christmas and Easter Eves in the Armenian Church.)

Daniel is a wise and talented young man who earns the king's trust and favor by being a good administrator and by being able to interpret the king's dreams. He rises to a position of power and asks his friends to help him govern, but jealous rivals denounce him and his friends to the king.

God saves His faithful servants from every dire plan these jealous people can think of to destroy them. What do you think the "message" is to the exiled Hebrews? Is there a message for us?

Baruch

Jeremiah's secretary, Baruch, praises wisdom as a divine principle which can lead people to God. This book is a deuterocanonical book. As we saw in a previous session, that means that it is of the "second canon." Though it is included in the Greek version of the Old Testament, it was not part of the original Hebrew scripture.

Quick Quiz #11

① to ⑤ **Select the right answer from the list of prophets below.**

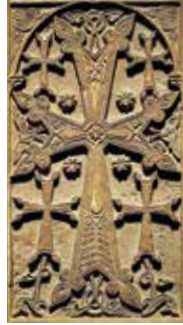
1. His book contains a reference to the concept of a last judgment at the end of time. _____
2. This prophet had a vision about bones. _____
3. His book has a reference to a king "riding on a donkey." _____
4. This prophet tried to run away from God. _____
5. His book contains the story of four young men exiled in Babylon. _____

Ezekiel, Obadiah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi, Jonah, Joel, Daniel

⑥ to ⑩ **Fill in the blanks:**

Sometime later, I felt the Lord's power take control of me, and his Spirit carried me to a valley full of 6. _____. The Lord showed me all around, and everywhere I looked I saw bones that were 7 _____ out. He said, 'Ezekiel, son of man, can these bones come back to 8 _____?' I replied, "Lord God, only you can answer that." He then told me to say: Dry bones, listen to what the Lord is saying to you, "I, the Lord God, will put 9 _____ in you, and once again you will live. I will wrap you with muscles and skin and breathe life into you. Then you will know that I am the 10 _____."





Session Twelve

INTRODUCING...

THE NEW TESTAMENT

O Lord,
*You who fashioned the countless lights of heaven,
You who designed the house that is the world
You who placed the sun, the moon, and the constellations
in the firmament
To mark the seasons and the days and the years,
We pray you, Giver of life, stir our minds and our will
That we might love you with all our heart.
Amen.*

From Hovhannes of Garni





Word Watch

Gospel: from the Anglo-Saxon word “godspell” which meant “good tidings” and later came to mean the “story concerning God” and specifically, the books which describe Christ’s life and teachings. In general use, it refers to something that is unquestionably true.

Epistle: from the Greek for “letter,” the word technically refers to the 21 letters of the New Testament, written by St. Paul and other apostles to the new Christian communities.

Between Old and New

The last of the prophetic books in the Old Testament is the Book of Malachi. Between the time he wrote and the time of the coming of Christ is a period of about 400 years. We know what happened during some of that time: the conquest of Palestine by Alexander the Great, who introduced the Greek language and customs. Alexander’s empire was succeeded by others, one of them led by the brutal Antiochus who tried to “Hellenize,” or force Greek customs on, the Jewish people.


The revolts led by the Maccabees began a brief period of Jewish independence, but soon the expanding Roman Empire conquered Palestine. The Romans had little respect for Judaism, and were deeply resented by the Jews. This was the setting of the birth of Jesus Christ into a Jewish family in the obscure town of Bethlehem.

Some good things had come out of this history of constant conquest. The Greeks, when in power, had established Greek as a common language of the conquered lands. The Romans had built a large and well-maintained network of roads. These things would make it easier for the Gospel (which means “good news”) of Jesus Christ to spread far and wide. The “Old Testament” or old covenant between God and the ancient Hebrews would now be fulfilled in the “New Testament,” a new covenant with Jesus Christ at its center. The first followers of Jesus Christ were nearly all Jews. They were the “faithful remnant” who were looking for the Messiah, and recognized Him as the one they had been looking for. After His death, resurrection, and ascension, they proclaimed His message of salvation to all the peoples of the world. The early Church was composed of people from many nations. Its membership was based on faith, not ethnic background.

How the New Testament Came to Be

The 27 books of the New Testament include the four Gospels of Saints Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, the Book of Acts, 21 letters or “epistles” by Saint Paul and other writers, and the Book of Revelation. The books were written in common or “koine” (koy-nay) Greek (the everyday language of the people).

The epistles were written first, probably all before 65 A.D. (Of course we are now out of the time of B.C.—before Christ—and into the time of A.D. which in Latin means “year of our lord.”) The Gospels were composed between 65 and 90 A.D. Saint John’s letters and the Book of Revelation (usually thought to be written by him) were written between 90 and 95 A.D.



In talking about the Old Testament, we said that the oral tradition known in 1200 B.C. was written down later. Similarly with the New Testament, the apostles of Jesus Christ listened to His teaching, and witnessed the things He did. All of this they passed along orally to the new converts to the faith. Then, as they became older and began to die, the need to put things in writing became obvious. So in the later part of the first century, the Gospels and other documents were written. Not long after, the letters of Saint Paul were collected.

The Canon is Established

A problem soon arose. All sorts of books and writings began to appear, claiming to be true to the teaching of Jesus Christ. Some of these writings were produced by cultic groups or by people who only pretended to know what the apostles had taught and witnessed. Over time, three criteria evolved in the Church to determine what writings would be part of the New Testament scriptures. The criteria were these:

- They had to have been written by an apostle or an immediate follower of an apostle
- They had to be recognized by at least one established Church community
- They had to be consistent with the doctrine taught by the apostles

The writings that met these criteria were part of the “canon of Scripture.” As with the Old Testament, this means a rule or standard by which something is measured. It also means the group of writings that meet a rule or standard. For several years, there were arguments about certain writings—some thought they should be in the canon, some thought they should not—but by the fourth century the Church had agreed on the 27 books we have as the New Testament canon today.

The Four Gospels

Though these four books were written by people with different points of view, they have the same joyous message. (That’s why when we are speaking formally, we say “the Gospel according to St. Mark” or “according to St. Luke.” Same story; different storyteller.)

The Gospels are not biographies of Jesus Christ. They don’t even tell us much about His early years, up to the age of thirty when He began His public ministry. In those years, we can assume, Jesus was preparing for that ministry and was in communion with His Father and the Holy Spirit. The Church doesn’t speculate or guess at what God has not chosen to reveal, so sometimes those years of Jesus’ life are called the “silent years.” A few early events are recorded, and we will look at those later.

The Armenian Angle

It was a very early practice in Armenia to illuminate biblical manuscripts. Illuminate in this sense means to adorn a page with ornamental designs, miniature illustrations, or ornate lettering. At first only sections of the Bible were copied and illustrated. By the 12th century, entire Bibles were being laboriously hand copied and brilliantly illustrated. One of the most famous of these artists was Toros Roslin of the 13th century.



The Gospels of Mark, Matthew and Luke are more similar to each other than they are to the Gospel of John. The three are similar in content and form, and they basically follow the same narrative. For this reason they are called the *synoptic* gospels, which means that they “see together.” We’ll consider these three gospels in this session, and St. John’s gospel in the next.

SYNOPTIC STUDY

Read Matthew 4: 1-11

Mark 1:12-13

Luke 4:1-13

What are these readings about?

How do they differ?

How are they the same?

The Gospel of Mark

This earliest of the four books is also the shortest; it appears second in the Bible. Mark was not one of the twelve apostles, but his writing was probably guided by St. Peter, who was. Since Mark probably wrote his gospel for Romans, who did not know too much about the prophecies of the Old Testament, he tells what Jesus did rather than what had been predicted about Him. Mark’s Gospel is known for its action. You will often see the word “immediately” in Mark’s gospel—the action moves quickly. (Read *Mark 1:16-31* as an example.)

Mark stresses Jesus as the crucified Messiah who brings hope to the world, and who came to be a servant to the world

The Gospel of Matthew

Written for Jewish Christians, Matthew’s gospel quotes the prophecies of the Old Testament frequently. His purpose is to show those who are familiar with the prophecies that Jesus Christ fulfills them, that He is the One they are written about. Matthew establishes Jesus as the king who is descended from King David (because the Jews knew from Scripture that the Savior was to come from David’s line). He also shows Jesus as the descendant of Abraham, the father (or “patriarch”) of the Hebrews to whom God gave His promise. You remember that in a previous session we looked at the genealogy which begins this gospel. Matthew’s gospel contains the longest and most detailed record of Jesus Christ’s teachings that we have—in the Sermon on the Mount (chapters 5 to 7).

Matthew’s gospel appears first in the New Testament. Its writer was one of the twelve apostles, and a man who was not very popular with his fellow Jews because he made his living by collecting taxes for the Romans. But Matthew

did a very good job of portraying Jesus Christ as a king, fulfilling and going beyond the tradition of King David.

The Gospel of Luke

Luke was not one of the twelve apostles, but he was a close follower of Jesus who traveled and worked with St. Paul. Luke was a doctor who wrote his gospel primarily for Gentile converts to Christianity. He emphasizes the universal nature of Jesus' message: salvation is not only for the Jewish people but for all humankind. Luke wrote his gospel and the Book of Acts as a single volume, relating the ministry of Jesus Christ and the history of the early Christian Church under the leadership of the apostles. Read the parable of the lost sheep in *Luke 15:1-7*.

Luke's gospel contains several parables (stories that teach a truth or lesson) warning against the dangers of wealth and self-satisfaction, and showing the great mercy of God. These parables appear only in this gospel, as does the story of the Lord meeting two disciples on the road to Emmaus after His resurrection.

Luke emphasizes the Kingdom of God brought to the world by Jesus Christ and given to those who follow Him in His suffering. He gives us a record of Christ's great concern for the poor, and for those who have sinned and need forgiveness.

Did You Know?

While Matthew is the first gospel of the New Testament, it was not the first written. Mark is the oldest. Matthew is placed first because his gospel refers most often to the prophecies of the Old Testament and their fulfillment in the New. Flip through the four gospels and quickly find out the following. Which gospel has the least chapters? Which has the most? Look up John 11:35 and read the shortest verse in the Bible. Which gospel starts with the words "in the beginning"? Which ends with "I am with you always, to the end of the age"? Which gospel's first chapter has Mary singing her joy about the news of Jesus' impending birth in a famous hymn that is still sung today (The Magnificat or "my soul magnifies the Lord")?

Looking In

Pretend you are about to write your own gospel describing the life and teachings of Jesus. Call it "The Gospel According to (your name)." What would you stress? What, in this time of history, needs to be stressed?



Quick Quiz #12

① to ④ **Which came first? (circle the right answer)**

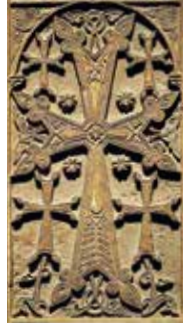
1. the Gospels or the Epistles
2. oral tradition or illuminated manuscripts
3. the silent years or the first gospel
4. the Gospel of John or the synoptic gospels

⑤ to ⑦ **What criteria did the Church use to form the New Testament?**

- 5.
- 6.
- 7.

⑧ to ⑩ **Who were their intended readers?**

- | | |
|------------|-------------------|
| 8. Mark | Gentile converts |
| 9. Matthew | Romans |
| 10. Luke | Jewish Christians |



Session Thirteen

MORE ON THE GOSPELS

*Let us glorify God
The Father of our Lord Jesus Christ
Giving thanks to Him who has kept us in peace during this night
To Him who has led us from darkness to light
From death to life,
From ignorance to the knowledge of His truth.
Amen.*

from the Armenian Matins Service



The Message of the Synoptic Gospels

We noted that all three of the Synoptic Gospels are similar in content and structure. What are some of the elements that all three of these books contain?

Jesus' Birth and Boyhood

Is it possible to think that the birth of Jesus Christ might never have happened, that God might never have entered history as a human being? A major feast in the Armenian Church is the Feast of the Annunciation. This celebrates the event of the angel Gabriel coming to Mary to tell her that she would be the mother of God's Son, not through sexual intercourse but by the power of the Holy Spirit.

We honor Mary on this feast day because she said “yes” to God. She was not mere passive “receptacle” for the baby to be carried and born in. She was a willing participant in the miracle of carrying this divine child in her womb. Like the people of the Old Testament, she made a choice to follow God's will. So the Church honors her not only because God chose her but also because of the choice she made—a choice that has been the salvation of all human beings.

Though we usually associate Christmas with sentimental images of a sweet baby boy in a manger, the truth is that Jesus Christ was a threat to powerful people and His life was in danger from the moment of His birth. Herod “the Great” was a not-very-faithful Jew, whom the Romans allowed to govern Palestine. Jesus was born during his reign. Herod thought of himself as “king of the Jews” and he wanted no competition for the title. The news of this birth worried him—there were people coming to Jerusalem, like the group of wise men from the East, asking questions about where they could find the “king of the Jews” who had just been born.

When Herod couldn't trick the wise men into finding the baby for him so he could kill it, he vented his rage by killing all the male babies in the region of Bethlehem. Joseph and Mary had traveled to Bethlehem for the census ordered by the Romans. Now, warned by the wise men, they fled with their baby to Egypt and stayed there till Herod died. Then they returned to their home in Nazareth (a small city in the northern district of Palestine called Galilee). Jesus' earliest days were filled with upheaval and terrified flight.

The next years, as we have noted, are not known to us. The family's life seems to have been peaceful enough at their carpentry shop in Nazareth. But one incident shows us that Jesus was preparing for His ministry in ways unseen by human beings. Read *Luke 2:41-52* and discuss these questions:

- a. Do you think Mary and Joseph were faithful in attending worship, or did they go now and then?

- b. What in this passage indicates that something unusual has been going on in Jesus' spiritual life?
- c. What indicates that Mary and Joseph couldn't fully understand what was happening with their son?
- d. What do you think Mary's attitude is toward her son's unusual activities?

John the Baptist

The prophet Malachi made a prophecy at the beginning of Chapter 3 of his book. He wrote, "Behold, I send my messenger to prepare the way before me." Four hundred years later, John the Baptist came on the scene.

John lived in the wilderness, eating the things that grew there and wearing a camel's hair garment with a leather belt around his waist. There was another man who had dressed this way long before John. Find his name in *2 Kings 1:8*, and write it here:

The Jews of Jesus' time were expecting the prophet mentioned in *1 Kings* to return to the world before the Messiah came and to announce His coming. This expectation was fulfilled in John the Baptist. Luke's Gospel tells us that John was sent "in the spirit and power of Elijah." (*Luke 1:17*)

John preached a powerful message of the need for repentance. He taught that there would be a fearful day of judgment, followed by the ushering in of the Kingdom of God. But his message was one of love, and people flocked to the bank of the Jordan River where he lived and preached, to be baptized there by him. But John didn't let it go to his head. He didn't pride himself on having a lot of followers. In fact, he very humbly said, "After me comes he who is mightier than I, the thong of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I have baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." (*Mark 1:7-8*)

You probably know that one day, someone very unexpected came to the banks of the Jordan to be baptized by John. This was Jesus Christ, of course, who showed the deepest humility by allowing himself, the sinless and perfect Son of God, to be baptized by a sinful human being. The Father's voice came from heaven, announcing that He was well-pleased with His Son. At the same time, the Spirit descended on Jesus in the form of a dove. Thus began His public ministry.

The Armenian Church celebrates Jesus' birth and baptism as one feast day. Both mark very important beginnings in His earthly life and our salvation. But before He began His work with people, Jesus was tested for forty days and nights in the desert. The devil tempted him there, offering him every enticement to either give up or doubt his divine relationship to God as his Son.



Word Watch

Synoptic: *Matthew, Mark, and Luke are called synoptic gospels because they look at the life and teachings of Jesus in a similar way. From the Greek "synoptikos" meaning "to see the whole together, to take a comprehensive view."*

Messiah: *from the Hebrew, Aramaic and the Greek, meaning "anointed one." The word Christ also means "anointed."*



The Armenian Angle

The exact date of Christ's birth cannot be determined. Historically, His birth and baptism were celebrated on January 6. This is noted in many early documents. In the 4th century, the feast day was divided into two – with the birth celebrated on December 25th to counteract the festivities of the Saturnalia within the Roman Empire and the baptism on the 6th. Thus, “the 12 days of Christmas.” Although the custom spread everywhere, Armenia retained the ancient custom of one celebration.

The devil offered material rewards to Jesus in return for being worshipped by Him in place of God. Then the devil urged Jesus to do silly “miracles” that would only show His power rather than help or teach anyone. And twice he said to Jesus, “If you are the Son of God...” trying to plant doubt in Jesus’ mind.

Was it easy for Jesus to withstand all these temptations? We should remember that He had taken our human weaknesses. He could have been attracted by these temptations just as we might be. But He did withstand them. And now He was ready to go out among people as the Savior promised in the Old Testament, full of His Father’s loving power to save His people.

Preaching, Teaching, Healing: The Ministry Begins in Galilee

As He began healing and proclaiming the Kingdom of God, Jesus attracted a growing following. He called twelve of these followers, or disciples, to be His close associates and fellow workers. We refer to them as the apostles, from a Greek word meaning “one who is sent forth.” They would indeed be the ones who would carry His message far and wide, and who would speak and heal in His name.

At first Jesus did not declare Himself to be the Messiah or the Son of God. But people did begin to see Him as the fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecies. They hoped that He would deliver them from Roman oppression. Many thought that once Israel was free politically, the nations would be converted and the Kingdom of God would be ushered in. What many people were not ready for was a King who would suffer and die in order to redeem His people.

Opposition by the Jewish Leaders

The powerful sects among the Jewish people, especially the Pharisees and Sadducees, feared and distrusted Jesus. For one thing, they enjoyed special privileges with the Romans and did not want Jesus to threaten those. Then too, both groups were religious “elitists” who did not approve of Jesus’ mixing with the common crowd and encouraging them to question their leaders.

Jesus Prepares for the End

John the Baptist was beheaded by Herod Antipas (son of Herod the Great) and the conflict between Jesus and the Jewish leaders was growing. At this time Jesus took three of the apostles—Peter, James, and John—to the top of Mount Tabor. Read what happened in *Mark 9:2-13*. This event is celebrated as the Feast of the Transfiguration in the Armenian Church (one of the five major feast days), because it was the first time the disciples saw Jesus’ glory so powerfully revealed.

Soon after this, Jesus traveled through Judea, the territory of Palestine where most of the Jews lived, preaching and teaching. Finally He entered Jerusalem on what we call Palm Sunday, to face the final days of His life on earth.

Events went quickly after this. The crowds that had shouted “Hosanna!” when Jesus entered Jerusalem turned on Him when they were incited by the Jewish leaders and when they realized he was not the political leader who would free them from the Romans.

But Jesus was more concerned with His intimate friends, the apostles, than with the opinion of the crowd. He shared with them a Passover supper and offered them bread and wine, proclaiming, “This is my body” and “This is my blood.” Now the New Covenant was sealed, and those who took part in that supper truly became one with Christ. We, when we take Holy Communion, become one with Him in the same way.

Betrayal by Judas, arrest, and trial came with the darkening evening of that Passover supper. When asked at the trial if He was the Son of God, Jesus answered that He was. This was the ultimate blasphemy to the Jewish leaders trying Him. They had been taught to expect a Messiah who was below God, not one who was God’s own Son and Equal.

By the next morning, Jesus’ fate was sealed and He was crucified—the most ugly, painful and humiliating death known in the Roman Empire. After He died, He was put in a sealed and guarded tomb so no one could steal the body and claim that He had risen. This was the end, or so it seemed to many people.

But as we know, it was not the end. Jesus would rise, and fulfill the promise of everlasting life for those who believe in Him. Since the days of Abraham, God had been true to His promise, true to His word.

How are They the Same? How are They Different?

Matthew 28:1-10

Mark 16:1-8

Luke 24:1-11

Three Things in Common

Three Things Different



Did You Know?

He is the bread of life, the light of the world, the good shepherd who cares for His sheep, the door to salvation, the true vine on which all His followers are branches, the way, the truth, and the life. These are called the great “I am’s” of John’s Gospel. Some of these names refer back to Old Testament promises about the Messiah. All of them point to the special roles He was ready to fulfill for people.

The Gospel of John

This gospel was written by John, one of the twelve apostles, or possibly by a close and trusted follower. John was very close to Jesus, and because of this he was urged to write this book witnessing to what he had seen and experienced. John is traditionally credited with four other documents that are part of the New Testament (three letters and the Book of Revelation).

What are some of the differences between this gospel and the three synoptics? John does not describe Jesus’ birth or childhood. He does not write about the baptism, temptation, transfiguration or ascension into heaven. But there are certain events that appear in John’s gospel and no other:

- Christ’s very first miracle at the wedding at Cana in Galilee
- a dialogue between Christ and a man named Nicodemus in which Christ speaks of the need for people to be “born again”
- the raising of Lazarus from the dead

In addition to these, John’s Gospel contains speeches in which Christ explains who He is and what He is doing for the salvation of all people. Here Christ uses images that are easy for His hearers to understand.

Why is John’s Gospel Different from the Others?

John’s Gospel was written at least 10, and maybe 25, years later than the other three. John assumes that his readers are familiar with the writings of Matthew, Mark, and Luke and that he does not need to cover the same ground. His purpose is to supplement the other three books. He wants to give more theological depth to our understanding of who Jesus Christ is. John wants to make it very clear that this man Jesus was also the divine Son of God. He writes about seven miracles performed by Jesus and characterizes them as signs of Jesus’ authentic divinity. Jesus has come to take part in the physical world, and to show that it is linked to the Kingdom of God.

For this reason—because of this link between our world and God’s Kingdom—John shows us a Messiah who uses many physical things. He changes water into wine at a wedding. He brings a man (Lazarus) out of his tomb and burial wrappings into renewed life. He talks to a Samaritan woman at a well about “living water” and then tells her that He is the One who can give people that living water. He washes His disciples’ feet as an example to them of love and humility.

This fourth Gospel writer is sometimes given the title “St. John the Theologian.” He offers us a deeper look into the meaning of Jesus Christ’s life and work.

A. *John 3:1-8*

- 1) Why do you think Nicodemus came to Jesus “by night”?
- 2) What is Jesus speaking about when He says we must be “born anew”?
- 3) Why do you think Jesus compares this “being born anew” with the wind?

B. *John 2:1-11*

- 1) How does Jesus show respect for His mother in this event?
- 2) How does He show concern and love for the people hosting the wedding?
- 3) This passage is read as part of the marriage service in the Armenian Church. Why do you think the Church chose this passage to be read when people are married?

C. *John 11:1-44*

- 1) Why does Jesus say in verse 15 that He is glad He was not there when Lazarus died, “so that you may believe”?
- 2) Can you find the shortest verse in the Bible in this passage? (Hint: It’s after verse 28.)
- 3) In verses 41-42, Jesus speaks to His Father. How do His words tell us that this miracle was not done just to show Jesus’ power?

A Passage to Learn: “Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.” (*Matthew 6:19-21*)

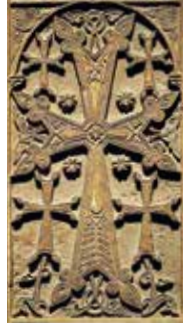
Looking In

What’s one of your earthly treasures? What’s a good example of a ‘heavenly’ treasure? How can you take care of such a treasure?

Quick Quiz #13

① to ⑩ **How are they connected? (Be as specific as you can.)**

1. Gabriel and Mary
2. Herod the Great and Herod Antipas
3. John the Baptist and the prophet Malachi
4. The synoptic gospels and the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke
5. The River Jordan and the Holy Spirit
6. Jesus' birth and baptism
7. Pharisees and Sadducees
8. Mt. Tabor and Peter, James, and John
9. The Last Supper and Holy Communion
10. The Wedding at Cana and the raising of Lazarus



Session Fourteen

THE BOOK OF ACTS

*Awaken our minds in righteousness for you,
Lord our God,
So that our eyes may see your salvation.
May your divinity come and abide in us.
By day and by night and at all times make us, your servants,
Reflect always on the love of your commandments.
Amen.*

From A Prayer for Early Morning by St. John Mantakuni



The Church Begins

When we spoke about the Gospel of Saint Luke, we said that he originally wrote it as one piece of writing, and that later the piece was divided. The second “portion” of Luke’s writing is the Book of Acts, or more properly the Book of the Acts of the Apostles, in which Luke recounts the history of the early Church.

During the forty days after His resurrection, Jesus appeared several times to His followers. They knew now that He had truly risen, and that He had kept His promise never to abandon them.

Did You Know?

Numbers are one of the many sacred symbols in the Bible. The number 40, which is approximately a generation, appears frequently in the Bible. For example, it rained for forty days and nights (Genesis 7:4); Moses wandered in the desert with the Israelites for forty years (Exodus 16:35); David ruled for forty years (2 Samuel 5:4); Jesus stayed in the wilderness for forty days (Luke 4:2) and appeared to the apostles for forty days after His resurrection (Acts 1:3). The forty-day periods of Jesus’ ministry intentionally recall the Old Testament.

Read about one of these appearances in *John 21:1-14*. Look at another in *Luke 24:13-35*. What do these two appearances have in common?

Finally on the fortieth day, Jesus kept another promise: that He would ascend to His Father. The Ascension is a great feast in the Armenian Church and always falls 40 days after Zadic, or Easter—the feast of the Resurrection.

Count the number of apostles in verse 1:13. There are eleven. Now the apostles had a problem. Because the number of apostles chosen by Jesus had been twelve, the dead Judas’s place had to be filled. Read how the apostles accomplished this in 1:21-26.

Read *Acts 1:1-14*. Answer these questions:

1. Where did Jesus command the disciples to stay?

2. What were they to wait for?

3. What did they do with their time?

Pentecost

On the fiftieth day after the Resurrection, Jews from places throughout the known world had gathered in Jerusalem for the Old Testament Jewish feast of Pentecost.

Something incredible happened that day, and things would never be the same again. Read about this in *Acts 2:1-4*.

Even at this glorious event, some people mockingly said the apostles were merely drunk. The apostle Peter, who had denied Christ just a few weeks earlier, stood up to the crowd and proclaimed the truth. First, he pointed out that nobody was drunk; it was only nine in the morning. Then he showed how Jesus Christ had fulfilled all the prophecies of the Old Testament. He told them that King David had prophesied about a Savior, and that Jesus was the One he had spoken of. So powerful and convincing were Peter's words that about 3000 people were baptized that very day.

These people were the "faithful remnant" we read about in the Old Testament. They were Jews who knew their Scripture, and they recognized that Jesus Christ was the Messiah. They would be the first members of the Church.

This wonderful day of Pentecost is an important feast in the Armenian Church and all churches. The Old Testament feast of Pentecost was filled with new meaning on this day. God's promise that His Holy Spirit would be in His Church forever was fulfilled.

Preaching and Healing

Now the work of the Church began. Peter preached to large crowds, converting thousands more to the new faith. One day, as he and John were going to the Temple to pray, a lame man asked them for money. Write here what Peter gave to the man (see *Acts 3:6*):_____.

The Sadducees, one of the "elite" groups of Temple leaders, did not believe in the resurrection from the dead, so they told Peter and John to stop teaching false doctrines. But despite their orders, the apostles continued to preach as before. Finally the two were taken before the high council and were put in jail.

Read how they got their freedom in *Acts 5:19-21*.

Peter and John were not the only ones to suffer for spreading the Gospel. The deacon Stephen was stoned to death, with the eager participation of a learned Pharisee named Saul, who was a fierce enemy of everyone and everything Christian. With the relentless persecutions in Jerusalem, some of the Christians began going out to Judea and Samaria to preach and teach there.



Word Watch

Pentecost: derives from the Greek for "50th day." It was the Jewish Feast of Weeks (also called Feast of Harvest and Day of First Fruits) which fell on the 50th day after Passover. We read in *Acts 2* how those gathered in Jerusalem for that festival witnessed the power of the Holy Spirit (who descended upon the apostles in the form of tongues of flame) as the apostles were suddenly able to speak foreign languages and thus be able to spread the Good News everywhere.

Saul's Conversion

On his way to Damascus, the Pharisee Saul was made temporarily blind. He heard the voice of Jesus Christ, asking him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" This incredible experience made Saul realize who Jesus Christ was. It also made him realize that God must have a special mission for him.

Saul was converted to the Christian faith, taking the name of Paul. He immediately began preaching in the synagogues (where Jews met to worship and read the Old Testament).

When Paul returned to Jerusalem and wanted to join the group of apostles, they were afraid to take him in at first, because of his terrible persecutions of Christians up to that time. But finally they did accept him, and soon after that he began making missionary journeys to faraway cities, preaching about Jesus with great power.

Paul's first journey began in Antioch. It was in this city that Christ's followers were first given the name "Christians." It wasn't meant as a compliment, but as a derogatory slur. Yet like many things, what was intended as an insult became a respected title.

Paul was certainly determined to make the name of Jesus Christ honorable. With another Christian named Barnabas, he traveled from Antioch to Cyprus and several cities in Cilicia and Galatia.

At Lystra, Paul and Barnabas had a scary experience. Read about it in *Acts 14:8-20*.

When Paul and Barnabas returned to Antioch, they told the believers how many people were accepting the new faith. There were essentially three groups:

- Former pagans (often called "Gentiles" in the New Testament)
- Hebrew Jewish Christians, from Palestine, who spoke Aramaic and read the Old Testament Scriptures in Hebrew
- Hellenist Jewish Christians, born outside Palestine, who conversed and read the Old Testament Scriptures in Greek

A Crisis Develops

Now a question arose: would the non-Jews be asked to follow the Old Testament laws given to Moses? (These laws, sometimes referred to as the "Mosaic law," concerned dietary rules, refraining from eating with pagans, Sabbath observances and the circumcision of male babies.) Some of those of Jewish background felt that everyone should follow these rules, since the Old Testament was basic to Christianity. But the non-Jews who were unfamiliar with

these laws were not comfortable with keeping them.

Peter had a vision from God, and the vision made him realize that the Church is open to all, no matter what their background or tradition. The Church leaders met together in council in Jerusalem. They asked for the guidance of the Holy Spirit, and decided that converts who were not of Jewish background should not be required to follow the Mosaic laws. The principle of meeting in council under the guidance of the Holy Spirit has been the Church's way of making decisions ever since that first Council of Jerusalem.

Read the letter that the Council of Jerusalem sent out to Gentile believers in *Acts 15:22-29*. What words in the letter tell you that this was not just a decision of the apostles on their own? Write the words here:

Paul's Second Missionary Journey

After the Council, Paul decided to revisit some of the places he had gone to before, to see how they were doing. On this second journey, he traveled with Silas. When they stopped at Lystra, Paul asked a young Christian named Timothy to join them. They went on to other cities where they told people about the Council's decision in Jerusalem. The number of believers kept growing.

At the harbor city of Troas, Paul had a vision of a man asking him, "Come over to Macedonia and help us." They went to Philippi, a leading Macedonian city. There they met a believer named Lydia, who was a sharp businesswoman and a seller of purple cloth. She listened eagerly to their preaching, and then she and her whole household were baptized. She also offered them the hospitality of her home.


Paul and Silas also exorcised (removed) an evil spirit from a young slave girl who made money for her owners by telling fortunes. The owners were furious with Paul and Silas because their chance to make money was lost, so they went to the city officials and accused the two of making trouble in the city. They stirred up the crowd against them by saying that they were Jews and were advocating customs that were foreign to Roman citizens.

Paul and Silas were beaten and jailed. Near midnight, as they prayed and sang hymns in their cells, an earthquake rocked the prison's foundations. Doors were



The Armenian Angle

St. Paul's journeys show how the faith was taken into the world beyond Jerusalem. St. Gregory the Enlightener (Soorp Kri-kor Loo-sa-vo-rich) similarly journeyed throughout Armenia to bring Christ to its citizens. Like St. Paul, St. Gregory had to wean hearts and minds from pagan traditions and demonstrate how the Lord and Savior was the true way to true life. Read about those journeys in "The Conversion of Armenia" a pleasant condensation of the original 5th century account of St. Gregory's efforts written by Agathangelos.



thrown open, and chains came undone. When the jailer saw this—and when he saw that Paul and Silas had not made a problem for him by running away—he and his household were baptized.

Another stop on the journey was Athens. The Athenians always enjoyed hearing and discussing philosophy and various religious beliefs. They listened to Paul eagerly, though some scoffed at his words while others took them seriously.

Read about the encounter in *Acts 17:16-34*. How do you think you would have responded if you were an Athenian listening to Paul that day?

Paul went on to Corinth, where he met a couple named Priscilla and Aquila. Like Paul, they were tentmakers by trade. Also like Paul, they were eloquent preachers of the faith, helping Paul in his work and becoming two of his closest and most trusted friends. They went with him from Corinth to Ephesus, a port in western Asia Minor and a major city of the Roman Empire. There they instructed a powerful young preacher named Apollos more deeply in the faith, so that his preaching became even more effective.

Paul returned to Jerusalem and Antioch. He continued traveling to the young churches in Galatia and Phrygia, strengthening their faith and understanding.

Paul's Third Missionary Journey and the Trip to Rome

The third journey took Paul to many of the cities he had visited before. While many loved him and were converted by his words, Paul was always in great danger from those who wanted to kill him because his words were a threat to their own beliefs, especially some of the Jews who did not accept Jesus Christ as the Messiah. And they weren't the only ones. Certain silversmiths were angry, too. Probably you can guess the reason why.

Read about it in *Acts 19:23-41*.


Paul was aware of the danger of what he was doing, yet he continued his work. And though warned not to go back to Jerusalem because of the plots against him there, he did go back and preach to the Church in Jerusalem, telling the people how many Gentiles in distant lands now shared their faith.

But Paul's preaching so incensed some of the hostile Jews that they tried to beat him to death. Roman soldiers had to rescue him from the mob. Paul was taken to Caesarea to be interrogated by the Roman governor, Felix. He stayed in prison there for two years, but he was often summoned by Felix for religious

Looking In

Acts 2:42-47 gives us the very first description of a church-like community. Read these verses. List the verbs (action words).

How does this description resemble your parish today? How is it different? Discuss as a class.



discussions. Paul's enemies continued to bring charges against him.

Being a Roman citizen, Paul demanded that his case be heard in Rome. This request was granted but the journey by ship was a terrifying one.

Everyone survived this adventure, and arrived safely in Rome. Though a prisoner of the Roman government, Paul had some freedom and he continued to preach there and in surrounding areas. But in the year 67 or 68, Paul was arrested and martyred by beheading during a brutal persecution of Christians carried out by the Emperor Nero. Paul's work of thirty years had carried the Christian message to thousands of people in many lands throughout the world. He was truly an apostle, "one who is sent out."

Quick Quiz #14

Fill in the blanks.

- ① to ② _____ and _____ are the feast days that are marked on the 40th and the 50th days, respectively, after Easter.

Choose from the list below to fill in the blanks

- ③ I wrote the Book of Acts in addition to my gospel. _____
- ④ On the way to arrest Christians in Damascus, I was temporarily blinded by Jesus until I understood the true "sight" of faith.

- ⑤ I was chosen to replace the dead Judas. _____
- ⑥ This fellow Christian and missionary traveled with Paul to cities like Antioch, Lystra, Cyprus and Cilicia. _____
- ⑦ After denying Christ three times when He was arrested, I became one of His greatest champions. _____
- ⑧ A sharp businesswoman in the dyed goods trade, I was baptized by Paul and opened my home to the use of Christian gatherings.
- ⑨ My wife and I were tentmakers like Paul. _____
- ⑩ I served the early church as one of its first deacons and was stoned to death with the eager participation of the Pharisee Saul. _____

Matthias

Lydia

Luke

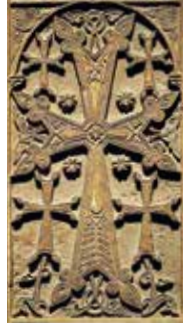
Stephen

Paul

Aquila

Peter

Barnabas



Session Fifteen

THE LETTERS OF ST. PAUL AND THE EARLY CHURCH

*Dear Lord,
If we speak in the language
of people or even of angels
but have no love in our hearts,
We might as well be
a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.
If we understood all kinds of mysteries
And had every kind of knowledge
And had the faith that could move mountains but had no love
We would be..... nothing.
Make us something Lord. Fill our hearts with the love
That you alone can provide. Amen.*

From 1 Cor 13





Word Watch

Epistle: from the Greek for letter and refers to any written correspondence, personal or official. It has come to have, however, a highly technical meaning, referring specifically to the 21 New Testament letters or epistles written by St. Paul and others.

Gnostic: from the Greek for “knowledge” (*gnosis*). Gnostics of the second and third centuries brought together elements of traditional Christianity, Greek philosophy, Eastern religions and astrology to create a strangely dualistic world of good and evil (evil created by a lesser god) in which people acquire the truest knowledge of Jesus Christ, who is himself pure spirit, by mystical means.

Themes of the New Testament Letters

We sometimes think that the life of the early Christians was serene and uncomplicated. We may believe that they lived in a “simpler time” than we do. Unlike us, therefore, they didn’t have much trouble reconciling their faith with the problems and temptations of the world around them.

But these ideas of ours don’t give a very true picture of what went on in those years. From the first days of the organized Church, Christians faced the hostility, ridicule, or ignorance of various groups around them. Even among themselves, they argued and sometimes created divisions. It’s said that the devil works hardest among those who are really trying to follow God. There were enough problems and misunderstandings in the early Church to prove the truth of that saying. Only through the saving work of the Holy Spirit, coming to the Church on Pentecost, did Christianity survive and then thrive and grow, so that we have a Church today.

Three Problems in the Early Church

One problem that faced the early Church is something we have noted in an earlier session. The “Judaizers” in the Christian community insisted that Christianity had roots in Judaism, and therefore all Gentile (non-Jewish) converts must follow every stipulation of the Mosaic law. (Remember that these included dietary restrictions, circumcision of male babies, Sabbath observances, and other things.)

The Judaizers did not recognize that Jesus Christ fulfilled the law and went beyond it—His teachings and example were a new kind of law for every person, including those who had never heard of the Jewish law. In John’s Gospel Jesus says that He is “the way, the truth, and the life” by which every person has the wonderful opportunity to inherit eternal life in God’s Kingdom. This happens not by rigid adherence to the Jewish law of the Old Testament, but by following His way of living.

Yet, as we have seen, Jesus respected the law as a moral guide. He also respected the worship of the Old Testament and regularly attended services in the Temple. His teaching was that these things in and of themselves would not save a person. He also insisted that the Kingdom is for those who don’t know the Old Testament law, as well as those who know it and follow it.

A second problem for the Church came from a group within the community called the Gnostics. These people denied the goodness of the material world. In fact, they taught that the material world was evil. They made a division between the “good” spiritual world and the “bad” material world.

This led to many non-Christian ideas. For example, the Gnostics denied that Jesus Christ was truly the Son of God who became man and rose from the dead. For them this idea was an improper mixing of the material with the spiritual.

Yet Christianity teaches that the material world is basically good because it is God's creation. It's a world that has fallen from its created beauty because of human sin, but it is still God's creation which He loves and does not disdain.

A third problem in the Church was a group of people who thought salvation depended only on what a person believed, not anything that person did. "Good works" didn't matter, so long as your faith was correct and real. Moral law and the Mosaic law had no importance in the thinking of these people. Any law applies only to our actions and what we do—and for these people, those things didn't matter.

Of course, true Christianity teaches that if we really have faith in God, our actions will show it. We will live in a loving way with others, and will abide by moral law because it benefits and protects others. Jesus Christ taught that our actions do matter, because faith without good works only benefits ourselves. Actions, or good works, are for the well-being of the other person, whom we are called to love as Our Lord loves us.

The Letters of Saint Paul

Saint Paul's travels took him to many places more than once. As he established churches, taught people the faith, baptized and preached, he knew that "follow-up" was needed (even if that wasn't the word he used!). So he often returned to places where he had already been, to see how things were going. In addition, he wrote letters to the Christians in these places, encouraging them in times of trouble and reminding them of what they should be doing. They didn't always do such a good job of remembering what he had taught them, as we shall see when we look at some of the letters.

Paul wasn't only concerned with church communities, either. He also wrote to people with whom he had special concerns. Here is how the fourteen letters of Saint Paul may be broken into groups:

- 9 letters to church communities: Romans, Corinthians (2 letters), Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, Thessalonians (2 letters)
- 4 letters to people: Timothy (2 letters), Titus, Philemon
- 1 letter probably written by a close disciple of Paul rather than Paul himself: Hebrews

Did You Know?

Besides Deacon Phoebe (*Romans 16:1-2*), there were many other women actively involved in spreading the new faith. Dorcas (*Acts 9:36-42*), or in Aramaic, Tabitha, was so renowned in Jaffa as a tireless server of the poor, that Peter was prevailed upon to resurrect her when she fell ill and died! Lydia (*Acts 16:11-15*) was a successful businesswoman in Thyatira, Asia Minor, a seller of dyed goods – especially the luxurious purple fabric which only a very prosperous trader could afford. After her conversion, she opened her home in Philippi to gatherings of Christians for worship and fellowship. Prisca, or Priscilla and her husband Aquila (*Acts 18:1-3, 18-19, 24-28; I Cor 16:19; Romans 16:3-5; 2 Timothy 4:19*) were tentmakers by trade and considered co-workers with Paul. They instructed many others in the faith and established home churches in a number of cities.



The Letter to the Romans

Paul wrote to the Christians in Rome somewhere between 53 and 57 A.D. He was living in Corinth and planning to go to Rome so he could speak to Church members about certain conflicts in their community, caused by the fact that some were Gentiles and some were of Jewish background. Part of the letter is addressed specifically to Gentiles; part of it specifically to former Jews.

Paul wanted to send his letter ahead of time so that people in Rome would know something about him and would be open to his message. He sent the letter with a deaconess named Phoebe, who was going there at the time.

This letter shows us that Paul did not disdain the Jewish law. He says that the law is both valid and holy. But he also says that salvation is not through that law, but through the One who fulfilled it—Jesus Christ. He also says that the law is so rigorous that no mere human being could ever fulfill it. That could only be done by the Son of God, and now He has done it.

Paul shows great love and anguished concern for those Jews who have not yet believed in Christ. He is sure of God's intention to save them, and he is greatly concerned that they see the truth of Jesus Christ's Lordship and turn to Him. Read Paul's words in *Romans 10:1-4* and *11:25-27*.

1 Corinthians (The First Letter to the Corinthians)

Written between 54-57 A.D. It would have been hard to find something that wasn't wrong in the Corinthian church. There were factions and disagreements, incest and sexual immorality, and people embarrassing the community by taking each other to courts presided over by pagan judges.

Corinth was an important commercial seaport city, noted for its luxury and the people's love of pleasure. Christians there had a lot of bad habits to overcome, and a lot of temptations to face in their city every day.

Paul does a certain amount of scolding in this letter, but he also writes with love about how people should treat each other. One of the disagreements that had come up in the Corinth community was whether people ought to eat food that had been used as a sacrifice to pagan idols. Some thought it was all right to do so; others thought it was a terrible thing to do because it would be like honoring the pagan deity to which the food had been offered. The Corinthian Christians had written to Paul and asked him to settle this question. Read his answer in *1 Corinthians 8:1-13*. What would you say is Paul's main concern here?

Paul felt very strongly that worship should be dignified and orderly. He knew that some people considered themselves to be “prophets” and that they were inclined to speak out during worship services. Paul cautions them to do things “decently and in order.” He knows that certain women in the Corinthian church were especially likely to converse or ask questions during the service, and he asks them to wait until they get home to do so. Though some consider his words to be “against women,” he is really only talking about a local problem and suggesting a solution for it. To see Paul’s high regard for a woman, read the greetings at the end of the letter (*1 Corinthians 16:19*). Is there a woman’s name that is familiar to you?

In this letter Paul also talks about the resurrection from the dead, saying that it is an absolute truth. Read his words in 15:12-19. Whom do you think Paul might be addressing when he mentions “some of you”?

Letter to the Philippians

The Christians at Philippi really had Paul’s personal admiration and love. He thanks them for doing something that none of the other churches did. Read *Philippians 4:12-20*. Write here what the Philippians did.

In *Philippians 2:5-11* Paul gives a very clear explanation of Jesus Christ being both God and man. Read the passage, and write here the words Paul uses to express Jesus’ lordship over everything in creation:

“Rejoice” is the word most characteristic of this letter. It has such a tone of joy and thankfulness that it surprises us to realize that Paul wrote it from a Roman prison, probably between 60 and 62 A.D. Paul knew very well that he was probably facing death, yet his spirit could never be vanquished by fear—it was strengthened by faith.

1 Timothy and 2 Timothy (The First Letter to Timothy; The Second Letter to Timothy) and the Letter to Titus

Paul’s two letters to Timothy and his letter to Titus are called the “Pastoral Epistles.” All three were probably written while Paul was imprisoned in Rome. In them he explains what a good pastor or church leader should be and do. He specifically describes the duties and qualifications of bishops, presbyters (priests) and deacons. This shows that there was a hierarchy in the early Church, just as there is today in the Armenian Church and all her sister Orthodox churches.

The Armenian Angle

You’re familiar with the traditional grave markers called “headstones,” right? Well, Armenians believe so deeply in the resurrection of the dead that in earlier eras, the dead were buried with their feet, not their heads, at the cross that marked their graves. This meant that the dead were facing the cross and it would be the first thing they would see at the Second Coming when they would rise up to join the Lord for eternity.



Looking In

1 Corinthians contains a famous and beautiful statement about love. Find 1 Corinthians 13:1-12. Read it over slowly, at least twice. Each time the word "I" appears, substitute your own name, making these verses a personal message to you. Then take a few minutes to think about what you can do to make the love in your own life stronger and more in keeping with Paul's description of it here. Do this as your own private prayer and promise to God, asking for His help with the things you may need to change or strengthen. Perhaps there are people with whom you will need to resolve disagreements, or situations you need to settle in a loving way. Bring all those to mind as you read.

You remember from our study of the Book of Acts that Paul recruited Timothy as a young man to be part of his traveling teachers. Read *1 Timothy 4:12*.

Answer these questions:

- What does Paul say about Timothy being a young person? How does he want Timothy to see himself?
- What does Paul encourage Timothy to do?
- How might Paul's words apply to your life as a young Christian? As a member of your local parish? As a young member of the Armenian Church?

The Letter to the Hebrews

Most scholars agree that the Letter to the Hebrews was written not by Paul but by a close associate who understood his thinking very well. It was written sometime near the end of the first century A.D. It was addressed to new Christians from a Jewish background, and specifically talks about some things that had been very familiar to them in Judaism. The writer (maybe Barnabas or the preacher Apollos) shows how Jesus Christ is greater than Moses, Joshua, the angels, or any of the prophets. The purpose of the letter is to strengthen these new Christians in their faith.

Jewish worship included a high priest who made offerings and sacrifices for the sins of the people. These sacrifices were made every year. The writer of Hebrews points out that Christ's sacrifice on the cross is forever and need never be repeated. He is the true and only high priest.



Session Sixteen

**THE CATHOLIC EPISTLES
(JAMES, PETER, JOHN AND JUDE)
THE BOOK OF REVELATION**

*Let us feel in our hearts, Lord
The promise you gave.
That someday You will dwell with us and we with You
and that we will be Your people
as we have never been before.
And You will wipe every tear from our eyes
for there will be no more death, no more loss, no more pain
when the old order passes away.
“Behold!” You will command from Your throne.
“I am making everything new!”
Amen.*

From Revelation 21:3-5





Word Watch

Catholic: from Latin & Greek meaning “universal.” The Catholic Epistles probably came to be termed thus because they were not addressed to individual churches or persons but were meant for the church at large. The word also appears in the Nicene Creed, describing the church; it is not a reference to the Roman Catholic church but rather to the universal church.

Apocalypse: from the Greek meaning “unveiling” or “revelation.” Besides the famous New Testament Book of Revelation, “apocalypse” refers to any of a number of Jewish and Christian texts dating from the 2nd century B.C. to the 2nd century A.D. which contain prophecies about the end of the world and the salvation of the righteous.

The Catholic Epistles

These letters or epistles by James, Peter, John and Jude are called *catholic* because they are written about universal topics. You remember that catholic means “universal.” Sometimes these letters are also called the *general* epistles. We can look at them a little more specifically.

The Letter of James

In studying the letters of Saint Paul, we discovered that three big problems faced the early Church. One of these problems was that some Church members were saying that only a person’s faith mattered, not the person’s actions or “good works.” If we no longer follow the Mosaic law word for word, they said, then what we do no longer matters, since the Old Testament law was all about what a person should do or not do.

James, who was a relative of Jesus Christ and the first bishop of the Church in Jerusalem, wrote his letter partly to correct such ideas. James said that any person of faith will express that faith in good works. Read *James 2:14-17*. Rewrite it in your own words. You might want to do it as a story, a dialogue, or just a re-working of James’s own words. Share what you have created with the rest of the class.

James had another concern in this letter. He knew how powerful our spoken words can be. What we say can help us and others. But what we say can also injure and harm others. Read what he says in *James 3:7-12*. Next, read *Psalms 141:3-4*. Answer these questions:

- What do these two readings have in common?
- Think of a time when you or someone else used the power of words in a positive way.
- Think of a time when you or someone else used the power of words in a negative way.

What are some ways that all of us can use the power of words most positively?

The First Letter of Peter

This letter was written from Rome, and probably dictated by the apostle Peter to a close associate between 60 and 68 A.D. It’s addressed to new converts from

paganism, living in Asia Minor. Peter explains in depth to these “newborn babes” what their baptism means. He reminds them to live in a new way, not looking back at what they were before. Read his description of what it means to be baptized in *1 Peter 1:3-9* and in *1:23-25*. Next, read what Peter tells these newly-baptized people to do in *2:1-5* and in *4:8-11*.

The Second Letter of Peter

The new Christians were excited about their faith. Some were so excited, in fact, that they thought the Second Coming would take place very soon. As time went on and life remained the same, some of them became impatient—why didn’t God fulfill His promise now?

In his second letter, written to the same people as the first letter was, Peter addresses this problem. Read his words in *2 Peter 3:1-9*. What does Peter give as the main reason for God’s delay in keeping His promise?

Peter also warns these new Christians against the Gnostics, who rejected the material world as evil and not having to do with God. You remember that the Gnostics denied the reality that Christ took flesh and rose from the dead. They refused to believe that God, who is Spirit, would involve Himself so closely with a physical body.

Read Peter’s words in *2 Peter 2:18-22*. “They” refers to the Gnostics.

The First, Second, and Third Letters of John

The apostle and Gospel writer John wrote three letters, all of them from Ephesus around 90 A.D. The first letter is the longest, and contains the most important material. It was probably passed from church to church to be read and thought about. All three letters deal with the problems created by the Gnostics, whom John considered to be a bunch of religious snobs.

Why did John feel this way? Because the Gnostics thought they were special, a kind of “elite” among Christians. They were “too spiritual” to believe in the *Incarnation* (a word that refers to Jesus Christ taking flesh, or becoming man). They were also “too spiritual” to believe that He rose from the dead. In their view, Jesus of Nazareth was an ordinary man until He was baptized by John the Baptist in the Jordan River. At that time, He received supernatural powers. Once He had completed His mission of making God known to all humanity, the supernatural powers left Him. So the man who died on the cross was just a man and his death meant nothing special. There was no resurrection of the divine Son of God for the Gnostics.

How did the Gnostics claim to know all this? They asserted that they had been specially enlightened. They felt that they were far above others in their exclusive knowledge of God. (The word *gnosis* in Greek means “knowledge” and it refers to this special knowledge they claimed. The name “Gnostic” comes from this word.)

The Gnostics looked down on their fellow Christians as “unenlightened” and were rather contemptuous of them. Even more serious, the Gnostics claimed to be above the laws that govern our physical lives. Some of them believed they were entitled to do anything for pleasure in eating, entertainment, or sexual activity. They were above those physical laws—let the unenlightened ones abide by them. The apostle John was quite right in considering them to be religious snobs, and he wrote plainly about it.

John first establishes himself as an eyewitness of Jesus Christ (as Peter also does in his letters). Then he writes about how we should feel toward one another. Read his words in *1 John 2:3-11*. How does John say we can “know” God? What does he say about looking down on others? What is he referring to?

John was of course concerned about divisions that the “exclusive” attitudes of the Gnostics could cause in the Christian community. He reminded his readers that we are all one family, bound together by the love God has shown to all of us, and also bound by the knowledge of God that we all have. But this is not just sentimental “love talk.” John also wants his readers to be wise, and not naïve. Read *1 John 4:1-6*. How does John want his readers to respond to things they hear?

The Letter of Jude

This brief letter, by an unknown writer, addresses some crises of leadership in the Church. This letter contains a phrase that is often used to describe the Christian faith: “the faith that was once for all delivered [entrusted] to the saints [apostles]” (1:3). This phrase reminds us that there is one faith, and that God gave it to His people to hold and live by.

The Book of Revelation

Late in his life, the apostle and Gospel writer John was living in exile. He was given a vision, and was commanded by Christ to write it down. This book, written about 95 A.D., is the result.

John had been bishop of the Church in Asia Minor during the time when the Emperor Domitian began a persecution of Christians that spread across the whole Roman Empire. The Christians were his special targets because of their

Looking In

Look up *1 John 4:7-12*. How many times does the word “love” appear? What does verse 12 mean to you?

refusal to take part in the cult of emperor worship. Domitian called himself "savior," "lord," and even "god," and had statues of himself erected everywhere. Refusal to go along with this idolatry cost the Christians jobs, possessions, freedom, and in many cases their lives. It was at this time that John was sent into exile on Patmos, off the west coast of Asia Minor.

John's Vision

The Book of Revelation is nothing less than a vision of Christ in His heavenly glory, and of the ultimate destiny of the world. It is filled with symbols, mysterious numbers, figures of speech, and descriptions of otherworldly events and creatures. The Church has never tried to "figure these out" because that is not the purpose of the book. Its author wanted to give comfort to Christians enduring terrible hardships and suffering in the world. He wanted to show them that it all had meaning and purpose and that things were still in God's hands, not the hands of their fierce human enemies.

In the book, John is commanded by Christ to send messages to each of the seven churches in Asia. Some of these warn of tribulation and suffering, some are critical of members' lukewarm faith. Other messages accuse the members of being too lazy about converting unbelievers, and two commend communities for their steadfastness in the face of suffering.

From these messages, Christians ever since have been taking inspiration and comfort. And the same is true for John's descriptions of terrible beasts that threaten the followers of Christ. John's beasts and terrifying creatures were Rome and the Roman emperor, but we can take his descriptions to apply to all the things that threaten and harm the Church in this world. John has the promise of God that if we hold on through the terrible things we face here, we will be with Him in His glorious Kingdom forever.

John also describes the breathtaking beauty of the Kingdom and the worship that goes on there. It is partly on this description that the Armenian Church and other Orthodox churches base their worship.

The Book of Revelation also tells us about God's final judgment on the world. For this reason it is also called The Apocalypse—remember that this means an unveiling or revelation. It applies to the "last days" of life, when Christ will come again, and life as we know it now will be at an end. We are told that God's judgment will be terrible and decisive. But, as we have said, the strongest message of the Book of Revelation is that we will survive all the terrors of this world, and will be with Christ in glory, if we only persevere in love and faith.



Did You Know?

There have been many attempts to link the number of the "beast," 666 (Revelation 13:18), with contemporary figures since the verse clearly states that the number stands for a "certain man." However, 666 was a shared code with writer and audience that meant "Nero Caesar." The Hebrew letters for that title have a numerical value that add up to 666. (Did you know that Armenian letters have numerical values as well?)



The New Testament Letters in Our Worship

When we studied the Book of Psalms, we said that there are psalms in every worship service of the Armenian Church and her sister Orthodox churches. They are really a book of prayers and they have been used that way in churches since they were written.

Many other passages from the Bible, both Old and New Testaments, are also used in our worship. This includes the letters we have just been studying.

Divine Liturgy

Place the correct number below on each line.

- a. The priest prays as he puts on his vestments. ____
- b. As a sign that we are at peace with everyone and thus ready to receive the Body and Blood of Christ, we give a kiss of peace to fellow worshippers. ____
- c. At the end of the service, we acknowledge that all good things are from God and we thank Him. ____
- d. Before receiving Holy Communion, we participate in confession and review the ways we have strayed from God's teachings and hope for us.
- e. After singing Soorp Asdvadz, we ask God to remember those who govern us. ____

Letters:

1. I Timothy 2:1-2
2. I Corinthians 11:27-28
3. Ephesians 6:13-17
4. I Peter 5:14
5. James 1:17



The Armenian Angle

The Book of Revelation was placed in the Armenian canon relatively late, c. 1200 A.D. and is never read during public worship.



Department of Christian Education
Diocese of the Armenian Church of America (Eastern)
630 Second Avenue • New York, NY 10016
www.vemkar.us