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Many, if not all, believers in Christ are aware that as we *progress* through the Bible, so God reveals more of His plan and purpose for mankind. We may turn to Genesis for teaching on creation, but we are not likely to offer God burnt offerings like Abel, Noah and others did.

We may admire the faith of Abraham who believed that even in his old age God would grant him a child, but we know that we have to believe something different if the same righteousness is to be imputed to us. We may read of the ritual of circumcision, but we are unlikely to have our boy babies circumcised as a religious rite, even if we may do so for medical reasons.

From Exodus we may see the sense of having a day of rest once a week and on that day worshipping God, but we probably don't do so on the seventh day and we are not likely to stone to death anyone picking up sticks on a Saturday afternoon.

## Progressive revelation

In Genesis 3 we read of the Seed of the woman Who is to bruise the Serpent's head. Later we learn that that Seed is to come from the descendants of Abraham. Later, He is to come from the line of David. Even later that He is to be born in Bethlehem, and even later still, that He is to be called Jesus.

Thus one of the important principles in understanding the Bible is to appreciate that revelation is *progressive*. That means that we should not expect to find in earlier Scripture something that is revealed later. We do not find Noah circumcising his sons, as God did not reveal circumcision until afterwards, in the time of Abraham. And we do not find Abraham keeping the Sabbath day, as God did not reveal the Sabbath (to Moses) until after the exodus from Egypt.

We will never understand Genesis properly if we insist on reading into it the Law of Moses, a Law which was not revealed by God until 400 years or more after the end of Genesis. This may be obvious, yet many of us are tempted to do such things when we come to the New Testament. We read the revelation that the risen, ascended, glorified Saviour gave to His apostles, in the epistles, *back* into the Gospels. In this way we can distort and misunderstand the teachings and actions of our Lord Jesus Christ when He was on earth.

Similarly we can read the revelation Christ gave to the Apostle Paul contained in his later letters, back into his earlier ones. Or, even worse, perhaps, we can read that revelation back into the letters of Peter, James and John - or back even further into the Gospels. In doing this we can only cloud our understanding of just what the Lord Jesus Christ was doing when on earth, and just what Peter, James and John were teaching during the time covered by the Acts of the Apostles.

Over the page are some examples of some of the teachings which change as we *progress* through the New Testament. However, before turning to them, we need to consider one other important feature of God's revelation to mankind.

## Another variable

It has been said that the most important variable in God's dealing with mankind is *time*; that is, revelation is *progressive*,

and as such, it seems eminently sensible that we give greater emphasis and weight to the later parts of Scripture, rather than the earlier. Many Christians do this in part, giving greater emphasis to the New Testament than to the Old Testament. However, do we take this to its logical conclusion?

We believe very much that "All Scripture is God-breathed" and we believe that all Scripture "is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work" (2 Timothy 3:16-17). However, we also believe that we should give greater emphasis to the Epistles, more than we give to the Gospels. The Gospels tell us about Christ when He was on earth. The letters tell us about Him when He is in heaven. The Gospels contain the words of Christ when He was on earth. The letters contain His revelation to mankind *after* He had been crucified, raised and ascended into heaven. And do we give greater weight to Paul's later letters, over and against his earlier ones? That is a most interesting question and one which few consider.

The sense in doing this is seen when we consider another important variable in God's dealing with mankind, namely the people themselves. In the opening chapters of Genesis there seems to be no difference in God's dealings with different people. However, the words of Genesis 12:1-3 herald a change; the descendants of Abraham are to be treated differently. They may have greater blessing, but they are also to have greater responsibilities.

Those who descended from Abraham, Isaac and Jacob became the people of Israel, eventually known as *Jews*. Those from other nations are called *Gentiles*. Thus when reading the Bible we need to distinguish what God says of *Jews* from what He says of *Gentiles*. Sometimes it may be the same; sometimes it is different.

When we read through the Old Testament, the people of Israel, the Jews, dominate the scene. There is a plan and a purpose which God has for Gentiles, but it is secondary to the one He was working out with the Jews. However, this is still the case when we come to the Gospels, much to the surprise of many Christians.

And to the surprise of even many more, this is still the case when we come to the Acts of the Apostles and the letters written during that time. The people of Israel, the Jews, still occupied first place in God's dealings with mankind - and we shall see this over the page.

It isn't until we come to the later letters of Paul that we see a return to the situation that existed in the opening chapters of Genesis, namely that all people of all nations are treated the same by God. There is no longer one plan for the Jews, and another for the Gentiles. There is no longer one Law for the Jews, and another for Gentiles. Everything has come full circle. The special plan and purpose that He had for Israel ceased at the end of Acts. Now individual Jews and individual Gentiles are alike.

All have sinned and come short of the glory of God; both Jews and Gentiles. None are righteous; neither Jews nor Gentiles. All need to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ as their Saviour to have forgiveness, gain righteousness, and have the gift of eternal life.