

32 Foundations 103 - What's Old Is New Again: Judaizers and Gnosticism

August 25, 2026

Last time, I promised we'd look at the "lost gospels" – books like Thomas and Judas, and why the early church didn't accept them.

I want to go further than just history because the ideas behind those rejected books didn't disappear.

They just changed clothes.

If you've ever felt drawn to the idea that you have a "hidden inner light," or that enlightenment comes from special knowledge only some people find – you've already brushed up against this. It shows up in bookstores, in wellness culture, even in some corners of the modern church.

I want to identify it clearly, so you can recognize it when it shows up because if you live in a western nation, it will likely show up.

Two Different Problems, Two Different Letters

Before we go further, I need to separate two things that are easy to mix up.

The early church faced two major false teachings.

They are not the same thing.

Problem One: the Judaizers.

These were people who said Gentile believers had to follow Jewish law – circumcision, dietary rules – on top of faith in Christ, in order to really be saved.

Paul addressed this head-on in his letter to the Galatians.

"O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you?" (Galatians 3:1, LSB)

"Did you receive the Spirit by works of the Law, or by hearing with faith?" (Galatians 3:2, LSB)

The Judaizers' error was adding works to grace.

There is a great temptation for some to fall into this trap.

One of my favorite movies is called *The Mission* – about Jesuit missionaries who traveled to South America to bring the truth of Christianity to the indigenous tribes there. Two central characters carry the story: Jeremy Irons plays a Jesuit priest, Father Gabriel. Robert De Niro plays a mercenary and slave trader named Mendoza, a man who had done great evil to the very people he later comes to serve, until a moment of conversion changes everything.

According to his order's practice, Mendoza believes he must atone for his sins – pay a penance – before he can truly be forgiven. He sets out with Father Gabriel on a missionary journey into the jungle, and his penance is to drag behind him a heavy, awkward net full of his old soldier's armor.

They come to a massive waterfall and must climb the rock face beside it. Mendoza won't let the armor go. He believes he hasn't yet paid enough for what he's done. So he agonizes up that cliff, hauling the weight of his old life behind him, inch by inch.

When they finally reach the top, exhausted and covered in mud, they're met by the very tribe Mendoza once enslaved.

One of the tribesmen puts a knife to his throat.

And then – instead of ending him – the man cuts the rope.

The armor falls. All of it. Down into the river, gone.

Mendoza sobs.

The grace didn't come from the priest who assigned the penance.

It came from the people he had wronged the most – the ones with every right to make him keep carrying it, or worse.

This is a good picture of what modern Judaizer influence still does to us. It convinces us our sin is too great for what Christ already accomplished on the cross, so we keep carrying the weight ourselves – climbing, straining, refusing to let go – as if we have to finish paying a debt Jesus already paid in full.

But that is not the gospel.

The Gospel of John records Jesus's actual final word from the cross – one word in Greek, *tetelestai*, translated **"It is finished."** (John 19:30)

I'll be honest with you. I almost wrote something different here – that *tetelestai* was a term stamped on ancient receipts meaning "paid in full," a detail you've probably heard preached before. I had heard it too, and it sounded compelling enough that I nearly used it.

But when I actually checked it, the claim doesn't hold up. It came from a 19th-century mix-up between two different Greek words on old tax documents, and scholars corrected the error decades ago. It just never stopped getting repeated from pulpit to pulpit.

That's exactly the point of this whole series.

Even well-meaning claims, repeated often enough, start to feel like fact. Even I nearly passed one along without checking.

Be a Berean. Even with me. Especially with me.

The good news is the real meaning doesn't need the borrowed illustration to carry its weight.

Tetelestai. Finished. Complete.

Not “I have finished my part, now you finish yours.”

Finished. Nothing left to add.

It is actually an insult to what Christ already accomplished. He did it. There is nothing left for us to earn.

Jesus is ready, willing, and able to carry our burdens. We don’t have to bear them ourselves. And every time we try to carry them anyway, we are quietly telling His sacrifice it wasn’t enough.

But He won’t just take it from us – we have to offer it to Him, and believe that what He did on the cross two thousand years ago is sufficient.

There is no sin great enough to extend beyond the boundary of God’s grace given to us through His Son, Jesus.

Problem Two: the Gnostics.

The word Gnostic comes from the Greek word *gnosis* – knowledge.

Gnostics believed salvation came through secret, special knowledge. Not everyone could have it. Only the enlightened few.

They also taught something else, just as important to understand:

Matter is bad. Spirit is good.

The physical world – bodies, food, matter itself – was considered a lesser, even evil, prison for the true spiritual self trapped inside it.

This created a strange problem for Gnostics when it came to Jesus.

If matter is evil, how could God become flesh?

Their solution: He didn’t, not really.

Jesus only appeared human. His body was an illusion. He didn’t actually suffer, bleed, or die in real flesh.

This is called **Docetism**, from a Greek word meaning “to seem.”

John’s Direct Response

The apostle John confronted this exact error, directly, by name.

“By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist.” (1 John 4:2-3, LSB)

Real flesh.

Not an illusion.

John is not being poetic here.

He is giving you a test.

Any teaching that tries to make Jesus less physical, less human, less bloody and real – that teaching fails John's test, no matter how spiritual it sounds.

Paul's Warning to the Colossians

Paul faced a similar problem in the church at Colossae.

“See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deception, according to human tradition, according to the elementary principles of the world, and not according to Christ.” (Colossians 2:8, LSB)

He also confronted a specific behavior tied to this false teaching – people claiming special visions and secret spiritual experiences, and using them to look down on other believers.

“Taking his stand on visions he has seen, inflated without cause by his fleshly mind.” (Colossians 2:18, LSB)

Puffed up. Inflated. Because of a secret experience others supposedly didn't have.

Sound familiar?

Guard What Was Entrusted

Paul gave Timothy the same warning, even more directly.

“O Timothy, guard what has been entrusted to you, avoiding worldly and empty chatter and the opposing arguments of what is falsely called ‘knowledge’ – which some have professed and thus gone astray from the faith.” (1 Timothy 6:20-21, LSB)

“Falsely called knowledge.”

Not real knowledge.

A counterfeit, dressed up to look like the real thing.

What's Old Is New Again

Here's why this matters right now, today, not just in a history lesson.

Look at how many of these same ideas have quietly resurfaced, wearing modern language.

“You have a divine spark within you.” That's not far from Gnostic teaching that the true self is a fragment of the divine, trapped in flesh.

“Unlock your higher consciousness.” “Access hidden knowledge others haven’t found.” That’s the same secret-knowledge-equals-salvation structure Paul and John both confronted head-on.

“Your body doesn’t define you. Only your spirit is truly real.” A subtler echo of the same matter-versus-spirit divide.

Here’s a real, recent example, so this doesn’t stay abstract.

In 2008, a book called *A New Earth* by Eckhart Tolle became one of the bestselling spiritual books in America, largely after Oprah Winfrey selected it for her book club and hosted a ten-week online course on it with the author himself. Millions of people read it.

The book teaches that your true self is not your body or your mind – those are illusions produced by something Tolle calls “the ego” – but a deeper, universal consciousness you share with God, the same divine essence running through everyone and everything. Tolle even claims Jesus’s original message was later “distorted” by the church, while approvingly citing the Gnostic gospels as a truer, recovered version of that message.

Run that through what John and Paul already told us to watch for.

Does it take Jesus’s real body and real death seriously? No – Tolle reduces Jesus to an early teacher of consciousness, one voice among many, not a Savior who died a physical death to pay for sin.

Does salvation come through Christ alone? No – it comes through a shift in awareness anyone, of any religion, can access on their own.

Does it welcome everyone equally, or does it quietly divide people into the awakened and the unawakened? By Tolle’s own words, his book “can only awaken those who are ready” – the same esoteric, insider structure Paul confronted in Colossae.

Same errors. New packaging. A bestseller sticker and a famous talk show host.

None of this usually comes labeled “Gnosticism.”

It comes labeled as self-help. As wellness. Sometimes it even comes wearing Christian language, quoting a Bible verse out of context to sound biblical.

That’s exactly why this matters for you specifically.

If you process the world carefully, logically, looking for patterns and hidden structure – these ideas can be genuinely appealing. They often sound deep. They promise insight other people don’t have.

But sounding deep and being true are two different things.

Think about this in terms of the castle.

Every room I’ve written about in my book *Do You Live In A Castle* – the storerooms where we pack away pain, the Dark Halls, the corridors of addiction that connect every other room – those rooms can become exactly what that net of armor was for Mendoza.

Something we insist on dragging with us, long after grace has already offered to cut it loose.

We tell ourselves the weight proves we're serious about our sin. That carrying it shows humility. But it isn't humility at all.

It's a refusal to let the castle be rebuilt by anyone but us.

The Judaizers built new walls out of old law. The Gnostics built new towers out of secret knowledge. Both, in their own way, were dragging armor up a cliff face that Christ had already offered to cut free at the cross.

The castle was never meant to be fortified by what we carry. It was meant to be built by what He finished.

The Test That Still Works

John didn't just describe the problem. He gave us a command:

“Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world.” (1 John 4:1, LSB)

Test the spirits.

Here's how, and it still works two thousand years later. Ask this about any teaching you encounter:

Does it take Jesus's physical body, His real suffering, and His real death seriously – or does it try to make Him more “spiritual” by making Him less real?

Does it say salvation comes through Christ alone – or does it quietly require you to find something extra, some special insight or hidden knowledge, to complete the picture?

Does it divide people into the enlightened and the ordinary – or does it welcome everyone equally at the foot of the cross?

Does grace stay grace – or does it quietly turn into a checklist? Modern legalism rarely says “you must be circumcised” anymore. It sounds more like “real Christians pray a certain way, vote a certain way, homeschool, or avoid certain foods and media – and if you don't, something's wrong with your faith.” Same trap Paul confronted in Galatians. New rules.

Keep in mind – this test isn't meant to shame something God may be calling you specifically to do. If you feel convicted about something in your own life, even something other believers feel free to do without any conviction at all, don't let others pressure you out of that conviction. And likewise, don't pressure them to adopt yours.

Paul addresses exactly this in Romans 14, when he talks about the stronger and the weaker believer – disagreements over things like food and holy days that were matters of personal conviction, not core doctrine.

“One person esteems one day as better than another, while another esteems all days alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind.” (Romans 14:5, LSB)

A personal conviction between you and God is not the same thing as a rule imposed on everyone. The first is the Holy Spirit leading an individual believer. The second is what Paul confronted in Galatians. Knowing the difference matters.

If a teaching fails any of those questions, it doesn’t matter how peaceful it feels, how many candles are lit in the room, or how many rules it hands you to feel secure.

It’s an old error with new packaging.

Guard the Deposit

Paul told Timothy to guard what had been entrusted to him.

Not invent something new.

Guard what was already there.

That’s still your job today... and mine.

Not because we’re afraid of new ideas.

Because some ideas are not actually new at all. They’re just old counterfeits, polished up and handed to a new generation who doesn’t recognize the packaging.

Next time, we’ll look at the specific “lost gospels” themselves – what they say, and why they fail every one of the tests we just walked through.

For now, you have the test.

Use it.

If you’re struggling:

- Christian Faith-Based Resources: <https://mentalhealthhotline.org/christian-faith-resources/> or call 1-866-903-3787 (24/7)
- Crisis Text Line: Text HOME to 741741
- National Suicide Prevention Lifeline: 988 (call or text)

You matter. Whatever doubts you’re wrestling with right now – you don’t have to sort them out alone. Please stay.

William James Meyer is the author of “Do You Live in a Castle? Breaking Free from the Walls That Hold You Hostage.” He writes from a Christian perspective as a fellow traveler and Berean trying to examine the Scriptures daily and share what he finds.

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