Ad Fontes, Week Eleven: The Verse-Numbering Ghosts

Chapter 10: The Verse-Numbering Ghosts

Adult Sunday School · **Grace Free Lutheran Church** · Valley City, North Dakota

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Week Eleven

Open a modern Bible to Mark 9 and the verse numbers skip: 43, 45, 47. This week we look at five such “missing” verses and at why the numbers were left behind. The short answer: the verse numbers are older than our best manuscripts. A printer numbered the verses in 1551, from the Greek text he had. When later evidence showed some of those verses were added by copyists, editors kept the old numbers so every concordance and memory verse would still work. The gaps are not holes in God’s Word. They are an honest map.

How we will spend the next hour

Minutes	What we are doing
0 to 5	Opening and prayer
5 to 12	Report back: the gaps you found
12 to 20	Why the numbers skip: Stephanus, 1551
20 to 28	Mark 9:44 and 46
28 to 35	Luke 17:36
35 to 52	Acts 8:37 and the Ethiopian’s Baptism
52 to 58	Romans 16:24
58 to 65	Marks of recovery, not loss
65 to 70	Assignment and closing

1. Report back: the gaps you found

Last week you looked for skipped verse numbers in a modern Bible and read the same verses in a King James.

Missing verse	What the King James has there	Where the BSB notes it
Mark 9:44 and 9:46	“Where their worm dieth not, and the fire is not quenched” (the same words as 9:48)	Notes at 9:43 and 9:45: “BYZ and TR include” the verse
Luke 17:36	“Two men shall be in the field; the one shall be taken, and the other left”	Note at 17:35: “TR includes 36”
Acts 8:37	Philip: “If thou believest with all thine heart, thou mayest.” The eunuch: “I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God.”	Note at 8:36: “TR includes 37”
Romans 16:24	“The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all. Amen.”	Note at 16:23: “SBL, BYZ, and TR include 24”

- Was it unsettling to see numbers missing? Why?
- Did every footnote tell you what the missing verse said?
- Which of the five do you think matters most?
- Look at the BSB notes again. At Luke 17:36 and Acts 8:37 they say only “TR,” not “BYZ.” Hold on to that; we will see why.

2. Why the numbers skip: Stephanus, 1551

The apostles did not write in chapters and verses.

When	What happened
Early 1200s	Stephen Langton, later Archbishop of Canterbury, divides the Bible into the chapters we still use
1551	The printer Robert Estienne (Stephanus) adds numbered verses to his Greek New Testament. His son later said he did it on a journey between Paris and Lyon
1560 and 1611	The Geneva Bible and the King James adopt his numbers, and every concordance and commentary follows
1700s to 1900s	Older manuscripts show that some verses Stephanus numbered were added by later copyists

Stephanus numbered the Greek text he had, which included these five verses. By the time the older evidence came to light, his numbers were woven into every cross-reference, concordance,

commentary, and memory verse in the Christian world. Renumbering would have broken all of them to avoid a few skipped numbers.

So editors did the sensible thing. They took the verse out of the text, kept its number, and put a footnote at the bottom of the page. The gap says: this verse is not in the oldest manuscripts. The footnote says: here is what it said and where it came from. Nothing is hidden.

3. Mark 9:44 and 46: the warning said three times

Jesus gives three parallel warnings: if your hand, your foot, or your eye causes you to sin, cut it off. The last one ends with Isaiah 66:24: “where ‘their worm never dies, and the fire is never quenched’” (Mark 9:48). In the King James, that line appears three times, after each warning (9:44, 46, and 48).

Once, at 9:48 only	Three times
Sinaiticus, Vaticanus, Ephraemi, Washingtonianus, Regius, Family 1, the Old Latin k, the Sinaitic Syriac, the Sahidic and Bohairic Coptic	Alexandrinus, Bezae, Koridethi, Family 13, the Byzantine majority, most Old Latin, the Vulgate, the Peshitta

What happened. Three parallel sentences, but only the last had the closing line. A copyist tidying the pattern repeated it after the first two. That is harmonization, the most common copyist’s habit of all. No one would cut a striking line from two places and leave it in the third. The UBS editors rate the omission an A.

What we keep. The warning about hell is untouched. It stands at 9:48, where Mark put it, as the climax of the three.

4. Luke 17:36: borrowed from Matthew

In Luke 17, Jesus gives two pictures of the sudden day of the Son of Man: two in one bed, and two women grinding grain. In each, one is taken and one left. The King James adds a third: two men in the field. That line is word for word from Matthew 24:40.

Two pictures	Three pictures
P75 (about AD 200), Sinaiticus, Alexandrinus, Vaticanus, Washingtonianus, Koridethi, Family 1, the Coptic, and most Byzantine manuscripts	Codex Bezae, Family 13, the Old Latin and the Vulgate, the Syriac versions, a scattered minority of Byzantine manuscripts

A surprise. This verse is not in the majority of Greek manuscripts. It reached the King James mainly by way of the Latin tradition. Even the modern editions of the Majority Text leave it out; Robinson and Pierpont keep only the verse number, to preserve the traditional numbering. “Oldest” and “most” agree here.

What happened. A copyist who knew Matthew’s version supplied the missing picture. That is harmonization between Gospels. Luke’s pair (two in a bed, two women grinding) is the shape he wrote.

What we keep. The teaching is whole in Luke 17:34 to 35, and the men in the field are still in Matthew 24:40, where Matthew put them.

5. Acts 8:37 and the Ethiopian's Baptism

This is the one of the five that carries real weight, because it has often been used in arguments about Baptism.

Philip has preached Jesus to the Ethiopian official from Isaiah 53. They come to water, and the man asks, "Look, here is water! What is there to prevent me from being baptized?" (Acts 8:36). In the King James, verse 37 follows: Philip says he may if he believes with all his heart, and the man answers, "I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God." In the oldest manuscripts there is no verse 37. The next thing that happens is the Baptism.

The evidence

No verse 37	Verse 37
P45 (200s), P74, Sinaiticus, Vaticanus, Alexandrinus, Ephraemi	Codex Laudianus (500s) and a handful of late Greek minuscules
The Byzantine majority	Some Old Latin manuscripts and some of the Vulgate
The Sahidic and Bohairic Coptic, the Peshitta and Harklean Syriac	Quoted in Latin by Cyprian (200s). Irenaeus (about 180) alludes to a confession at Baptism, but does not clearly quote the verse

Like Luke 17:36, the verse is missing from most Greek manuscripts of every age, which is why both Majority Text editions omit it too. Erasmus printed it because it stood in the Latin Bible and he found it in one late Greek manuscript, written in the margin, though he knew most Greek copies lacked it. The UBS editors rate the omission an A.

What happened

By the 100s and 200s, churches asked candidates to confess the faith before Baptism. A copyist who knew that practice felt something was missing between the question and the water, and supplied the exchange his own church used. No copyist would have cut a confession of Christ at a Baptism.

Listen to the silence

Read 8:36 to 38 without verse 37. "What is there to prevent me from being baptized?" Philip gives no speech. They go down into the water. The answer to the question is the Baptism itself: nothing stops you. Not being a foreigner. Not being a eunuch, whom the law kept out of the assembly (Deuteronomy 23:1) but to whom Isaiah promised a name better than sons and daughters (Isaiah 56:3 to 5). The man goes on his way rejoicing (8:39). That is grace given without a barrier.

What this means for Baptism

Many Baptist Christians have pointed to Acts 8:37 as the pattern of confession before Baptism, and so as a reason not to baptize infants. Many careful Baptist scholars now grant that the verse is doubtful, and the Baptist case does not rest on this verse alone. We should not use the textual fact as a club. Our teaching never rested on this verse either way.

The Augsburg Confession, Article IX, teaches that Baptism is necessary for salvation, that through it God's grace is offered, and that children are to be baptized and so received into God's grace. That rests on ground nobody disputes:

- "make disciples of all nations, baptizing them" (Matthew 28:19)
- "This promise belongs to you and your children" (Acts 2:39)
- Whole households baptized (Acts 16:15, 33)
- Baptism as the circumcision made without hands (Colossians 2:11 to 12)
- "Let the little children come to Me" (Mark 10:14)

The Ethiopian's Baptism was real, and so was his faith, given him by the Spirit through the Word Philip preached. The verse's absence takes nothing from him. It gives Luke's story back its own shape.

6. Romans 16:24: the blessing given twice

Paul blesses the Romans at 16:20: "The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you." After more greetings, the letter closes with the great doxology of 16:25 to 27. The King James repeats the blessing at 16:24.

Blessing once (16:20)	Blessing twice (16:20 and 16:24)
P46 (about AD 200), P61, Sinaiticus, Alexandrinus, Vaticanus, Ephraemi, minuscules 81 and 1739, the Vulgate, the Coptic	Codex Claromontanus, Augiensis, Boernerianus, Ψ, the Byzantine majority, some Old Latin

What happened. Paul usually closes with the grace blessing. A copyist who expected it at the very end supplied it again before the doxology.

What we keep. The blessing is at 16:20, where Paul gave it. Nothing is lost.

(A side note for the curious: the closing doxology itself, 16:25 to 27, sits in different places in different manuscripts. We take up that puzzle next week.)

7. Marks of recovery, not loss

Missing verse	How it got in	Where its truth still stands
Mark 9:44, 46	A line repeated to match a pattern	Mark 9:48

Missing verse	How it got in	Where its truth still stands
Luke 17:36	Borrowed from another Gospel	Luke 17:34 to 35; Matthew 24:40
Acts 8:37	A church's Baptism practice written in	Acts 8:36 to 39; Matthew 28:19
Romans 16:24	A familiar blessing repeated	Romans 16:20

Five missing verses do not make the New Testament smaller. They show the work of recovery. The copyists were faithful almost all the time, and when they added something, the older witnesses let us see it.

This is the distinction we have used since Week One. Inspiration belongs to what the apostles wrote. Preservation runs through the whole stream of copies. The gap in the numbering is where you can watch the two being told apart. That is why these "ghosts" should make us trust our Bibles more, not less. The editors are showing their work.

For discussion

1. Before today, what did you think a skipped verse number meant? What do you think now?
2. Luke 17:36 and Acts 8:37 are missing from most Greek manuscripts, not just the oldest. What does that tell you about the difference between the Textus Receptus and the "majority" of manuscripts?
3. What does Philip's silence in Acts 8:36 to 38 say to you about how God gives his gifts?
4. How would you talk kindly with a Baptist friend about Acts 8:37?

Working vocabulary, new this week

Add these to your vocabulary page.

Stephen Langton. English churchman of the early 1200s who gave the Bible its chapter divisions.

Stephanus (Robert Estienne). The printer whose 1551 Greek New Testament first numbered its verses.

Verse-numbering ghost. A verse number kept in modern Bibles though the verse itself is set in a footnote.

Textus Receptus and Majority Text. Not the same thing. The Textus Receptus is the printed text from Erasmus to the Elzevirs. The Majority Text is what most Greek manuscripts actually read. They usually agree, but not always: Luke 17:36, Acts 8:37, and 1 John 5:7 are in the first and not in the second.

Codex Laudianus (E). A Greek and Latin manuscript of Acts from the 500s, the oldest Greek witness to Acts 8:37.

Before next Sunday

Read. Chapter 11, “The Other Acts of the Apostles,” on the longer “Western” text of Acts.

Do this one thing. Look up the footnote at Acts 19:9 and read what some manuscripts add about Paul’s daily teaching in the lecture hall of Tyrannus. The BSB has no note there, so borrow an ESV, a NASB, or use the free NET Bible at netbible.org. Then look for other footnotes in Acts 12 and 15 that say “some manuscripts add.”

Bring. Your Bible, your notes, and your vocabulary pages.

Think about. When were you baptized, and who brought you? What did God give you there that you did not have to earn or explain?

A closing word

Thanks be to God for a Word that endures forever, carried through twenty centuries of human copying and still whole in our hands. Thanks be to God for honest editors who show their work, and for gaps in our verse numbers that let us see what the apostles wrote. And thanks be to God for the water that stood by the road to Gaza, and for the font in our own church, where nothing stood in the way.

“Look, here is water! What is there to prevent me from being baptized?” Acts 8:36 (BSB)

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Scripture quotations are from the Berean Standard Bible (BSB), with the KJV and other translations quoted where the lesson compares them. Confessional citations follow the Kolb-Wengert edition of the Book of Concord.