



Our Daily Bread
Ministries®

UNDERSTANDING THE BIBLE

NEW TESTAMENT

AN OVERVIEW OF KEY
PEOPLE, PLACES & THEMES

Excerpted from *Understanding The Bible: New Testament*

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Printed in U.S.A.

First Printing 2019

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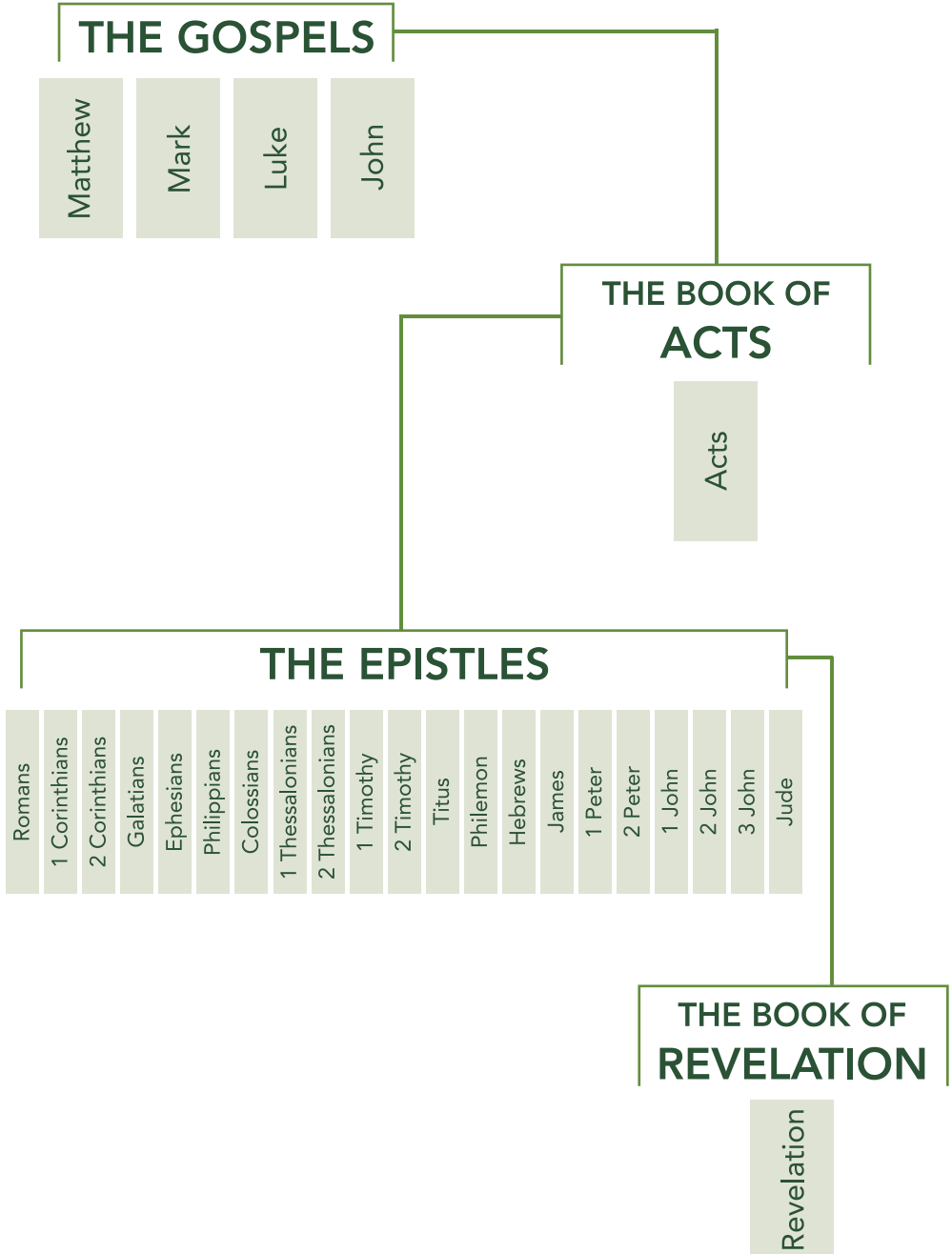
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INTRODUCTION

The words *New Testament* don't tell us a lot about the content of the New Testament. Actually a better title might be "The Greatest Story Ever Told" or "How to Get Out of the World Alive" or "The Story of Jesus and His Salvation." But we call it the New Testament because of its relationship to the Old Testament.

The Old Testament begins the story; the New Testament completes it. The Old Testament without the New Testament is a story that stops in the middle, and the New Testament without the Old Testament is a story that starts in the middle. So we call them Old Testament and New Testament because they are intended to be read together.

THE NEW TESTAMENT'S FOUR SECTIONS

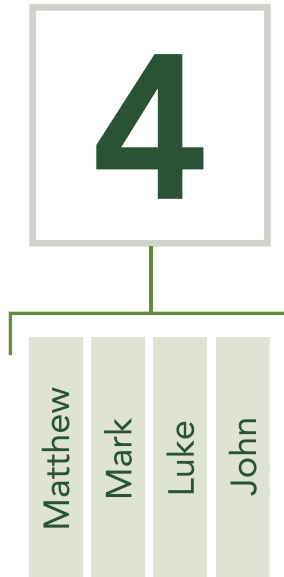


You will notice that we refer to “books” as we look at the New Testament. That’s because, like the Old Testament, the New Testament is made up of a series of books within a larger book called the Bible. When you hear a reference to the Bible as a book, and you hear a reference to various portions of the Bible as books, don’t be confused by that. We just use the term book in both of those ways when we refer to the Bible.

So what is this New Testament? Well, it’s a collection of twenty-seven books that make up the story of Jesus coming to earth, launching His message into a worldwide movement, instructing those who become His followers about how they should live as Christians, and then culminating the story with His return to earth in the book of Revelation.

The twenty-seven books that make up the New Testament can be divided into four main sections: the Gospels, the book of Acts, the Epistles, and the book of Revelation.

THE GOSPELS



There are four gospels that tell us the story of Jesus. They tell us about how God became human and dwelt among us. It's the most magnificent story you could ever imagine. As you read the Gospels, Jesus intended us to understand that He was fully God and fully human. He was none other than the God-man, the Son of God who came to save the world from sin.

In fact, the New Testament book of Hebrews, written to Jewish Christians, tells us in its opening verses that God spoke to our fathers through the prophets “in many portions and in many ways.” That’s a reference to the Old Testament. This writer had to convince them that they should not abandon their commitment to Jesus. But although he didn’t want them to return to Judaism, he had to affirm its teaching because it too had come from God. So in his opening statement he validated the Hebrew Scriptures, what we call the Old Testament, by making it clear that God had spoken it to the Hebrew fathers through the prophets.

But then the writer said God has spoken again in these last days in His Son. The biblical story wasn’t finished with the prophet Malachi, the last Old Testament book. There was a four hundred-year period of silence before God spoke again, but He did speak again. And this time He spoke to us through His Son, Jesus Christ. The biblical record of how God made Himself known by speaking to us in Jesus is recorded in the four gospels.

That’s what the four gospels are about. They’re about the life, the death, the resurrection, and the ascension of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

But one of the gospel writers, Luke, wrote another book called Acts. There he makes it very clear that when Jesus ascended back into heaven, His work continued. Luke tells us that Jesus sent His Holy Spirit back to earth and continued His mission to save the world from sin through His followers. The story of the New Testament isn’t only the story of Jesus at work while He was physically here on earth, it also tells of Jesus’s ongoing work through His people.

THE BOOK OF ACTS

1

Acts

Luke recorded the explosive growth of the Jesus movement in the book of Acts. The story begins with about 120 believers in the Jerusalem church; and by the end of the book of Acts about thirty years later, this church, this work of Jesus through His people, had spread all across the Mediterranean world. That explosive growth of Jesus's movement was confusing to people. Luke's purpose in writing Acts was to explain how this little obscure sect that was opposed by both the Jews and the Romans captivated the hearts of the Roman Empire! Luke tells us that it worked because it was the work of God. It succeeded because it was more than the work of devoted, ambitious men and women. It was the continued work of Jesus through His people.

What's magnificent, what's wonderful is that Jesus is still at work today. He's still at work in His people and He's still at work *through* His people. If we don't understand Luke's message in the book of Acts that Jesus is continuing to work through His people to change our world, we totally misunderstand what Christ and Christianity and the church is all about. So the book of Acts plays a crucial role in telling us that the same Jesus who came to earth and began His work is still at work in you and me today.

THE EPISTLES

21

Romans

1 Corinthians

2 Corinthians

Galatians

Ephesians

Philippians

Colossians

1 Thessalonians

2 Thessalonians

1 Timothy

2 Timothy

Titus

Philemon

Hebrews

James

1 Peter

2 Peter

1 John

2 John

3 John

Jude

Paul said in 2 Corinthians 5:17, “If anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!” (NIV). That is the core of Jesus’s work—changing the world one person at a time. But what does that mean? What does it mean for you and me if we have accepted Christ as our Lord and Savior? What does it mean that we are a new creation, that old things have passed away, that all things are becoming new?

Well, the next section of the New Testament is a series of twenty-one letters, or epistles, and their purpose was to instruct Jesus’s followers in how to live this new life they found in Christ.

The Epistles tell us that we have new ways of thinking about God and new ways of thinking about ourselves and our life’s mission. We have new ways of thinking about our neighbors, our enemies, and our culture. We have new ways of thinking about the church and our role and responsibility in it.

As Jesus’s followers, we don’t think the way we would think if Christ weren’t in our life. And because we think differently, we also live differently. So the Epistles are letters of instruction about how God’s people should live. We refer to these books as “epistles” because they were written as letters. Although there are some technical differences between an epistle and a letter, the words can be used interchangeably. You will sometimes hear these New Testament books referred to as letters and sometimes as epistles.

THE BOOK OF REVELATION

1

Revelation

The book of Revelation closes the New Testament with a crescendo. Jesus, speaking through the apostle John, gave this revelation to the church during a time of severe persecution. His purpose was to convince them that no matter how discouraging life gets, no matter how much it appears that God has no control over our lives or even of our evil world, they should not despair. The book of Revelation proclaims loud and clear that God is always in control, and in the end He is victorious over Satan and his evil intentions. The book of Revelation assures us that Christ is coming back to earth; that He will restore order. It tells us that Christ, even though He is not now physically living on the earth, has not forgotten about His world. And He is coming back to change it.

With the above understanding of how the New Testament is structured, the book you hold in your hand will provide you an overview of each of the twenty-seven books that make up the New Testament. Following, you will find an introduction to each book of the New Testament, its key verse(s) and theme(s), the major people and places encountered in the book, and a general application of the book's message for today. The resource you hold in your hands will serve as a handbook to the New Testament, allowing you to quickly gain important information about a book and obtain a high-level understanding of its meaning and purpose.

MATTHEW

Overview

1. Presentation of the King (1–7)
2. Advancement of the Kingdom (8–10)
3. Opposition to the King (11–13)
4. Compassion and Glory of the King (14–18)
5. Program of the King (19–25)
6. Crucifixion and Resurrection of the King (26–28)

What Does It Say?

Matthew presents the life, ministry, and death of Jesus in order to demonstrate that Jesus is the long-awaited messianic king. He repeatedly reaches back into the Old Testament, validating Jesus's claims that He is the Christ. From Matthew's pen we also gain a picture of Jesus as the King with a radical kingdom. The kingdom dominates this book, as Jesus unfolds its characteristics, values, strategies, and future.

Matthew's gospel opens with the presentation of Jesus—His ancestry, miraculous birth, prophetic fulfillment, identification, opposition by Satan, and His message of the kingdom. As the book progresses, our understanding of Jesus's identity and mission grows, but so does opposition to Him. The religious and political leaders object to Jesus, plotting ways they might kill Him. At the same time, Jesus moves purposely toward Jerusalem, predicting His own suffering and death. As do the other gospel writers, Matthew concludes his account with the horrendous crucifixion, glorious resurrection, and wonderful challenge to make disciples of this Jesus.

Matthew contains a cast of colorful characters and places. Central, of course, is the Lord Jesus Christ. His words, actions, and even mere presence at times greatly impact the people around him. The reader's intrigue of this man called Jesus grows as He teaches, touches, and even is rejected and nailed to a cruel cross.

In Matthew's gospel a wide variety of people surround Jesus. Two groups of men are the most prominent. The disciples—the sometimes brilliant, sometimes dull followers of Jesus—and the religious and political leaders of the day—Pharisees, Sadducees, scribes, chief priests—who rejected Jesus. Most notable among the disciples are Peter, James, John, and the traitor Judas.

Other people woven into this story include Mary and Joseph, Herod, Magi, the rustic prophet John the Baptist, Satan, Moses and Elijah, little children, a rich but sad young man, an extravagant woman with perfume, the high priest Caiaphas, Pilate, Joseph of Arimathea, soldiers, and a handful of stunned women.

Matthew also records the identity of people who are the objects of Jesus's miracles: a centurion with great faith, Peter's mother-in-law, the demon-possessed, a paralytic with some faithful friends, a bleeding woman who dared to touch Jesus, a dying daughter, 5,000 hungry men and their families, a foreign but believing woman, 4,000 hungry men and their families, a demon-possessed boy, and two shouting blind men.

Also intriguing is the cast of people in Jesus's parables: a sower, a shepherd, an unmerciful servant, vineyard workers, two sons, abusive tenants, a king with a wedding banquet, ten virgins, three entrusted servants, sheep and goats.

In Matthew's gospel we journey to a number of significant places. Among them are: Bethlehem—Jesus's birthplace, Jerusalem, Egypt, Galilee, Nazareth, Judea, the Jordan River, the desert, Capernaum, the Sea of Galilee, Tyre, Sidon, Caesarea Philippi, Jericho, Bethany, Gethsemane, and Golgotha.

THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN

Matthew 4:23: The theme of Jesus's kingdom permeates Matthew's gospel account. "Jesus went throughout Galilee . . . proclaiming the good news of the kingdom."

REPENTANCE

Matthew 4:17: The message of both Jesus and John the Baptist is one of repentance. "From that time on Jesus began to preach, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.'"

FAITH

Matthew 17:20: Jesus frequently commends or rebukes people according to their faith. "Truly I tell you, if you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you."

Why It Matters

Matthew presents Jesus as the Son of God who delivers people from their sins. Many rejected Him, some believed Him. Like the various characters in the book, I must either embrace Him or reject Him. Do I believe in this radical man named Jesus?

We also see Jesus as the true Messiah who is establishing His kingdom. Throughout the book of Matthew, Jesus teaches concerning His kingdom. Am I exhibiting the character qualities of kingdom people? Is my hope in Jesus's return as He promised?

Matthew's gospel closes with Jesus's exhortation to make disciples. Am I active in building up followers of Jesus Christ?

MARK

Overview

1. Jesus Appears as a Servant to the Multitudes (1:1–8:26)
2. Jesus Is Pictured as a Servant to the Disciples (8:27–10:52)
3. Jesus Is Shown as a Sacrifice to the World (11:1–16:20)

What Does It Say?

Mark presents Jesus as the Servant who came to sacrifice His own life in order to provide salvation. This is captured in 10:45, “For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

In addition to Jesus’s miracles and teaching, Mark underscores several statements to emphasize Jesus’s identity. With others making wrong guesses, Peter declares: “You are the Messiah” (8:29). The centurion witnesses how Jesus dies and says, “Surely this man was the Son of God” (15:39). Even the demons testify, “You are the Son of God” (3:11; cf. 1:24; 5:7).

Mark is the shortest of all the gospel accounts, and the book portrays Jesus as a purposeful Servant. In story after story Jesus is seen constantly ministering to others through healing the sick, teaching, casting out demons, and ultimately, sacrificing His own life. Although the opposition mounts and His followers forsake Him, Jesus stays the course and is crucified. The book closes with the climax of Jesus’s glorious resurrection.

As in all four gospels, the primary focus is squarely on Jesus Christ. He actively and purposefully moves through these pages. The book moves at a quick pace with Jesus healing the sick, casting out demons, teaching the crowds, feeding the hungry, instructing His disciples, and taking time to withdraw from the crowds and pray.

Throughout Mark's gospel Jesus is surrounded by fascinating characters. Some rejected Jesus, not believing Him to be the Christ, the Son of God. Among these were the Pharisees, the teachers of the law, the Sadducees, King Herod and his vengeful wife Herodias, a sad wealthy man, the high priest, Pilate, and the soldiers.

Others believed (to some degree) that Jesus was the Messiah. This odd assortment includes John the Baptist, the disciples (with special attention given to Peter), a leper, a paralytic with four faithful friends, numerous crowds, a synagogue ruler named Jairus, a social outcast because of her continual bleeding, thousands of hungry men, a woman of Syrian Phoenicia, a deaf and mute man, a blind man who recovered in stages, Moses and Elijah, little children, blind Bartimaeus, Joseph of Arimathea, and a few women. Even the demons repeatedly recognized Jesus to be the Son of God.

Among the intriguing places visited in Mark's gospel are: Judea, Jerusalem, Nazareth, Galilee, the Sea of Galilee, the region of the Gerasenes, Bethsaida, the vicinity of Tyre, the region of the Decapolis, the region of Dalmanutha, Caesarea Philippi, Jericho, the Mount of Olives, Bethany, the temple courts, Gethsemane, the courtyard of the high priest, and Golgotha.

SERVANTHOOD

Mark 10:43–45: “Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

DISCIPLESHIP

Mark 8:34–35: “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it.”

JESUS’S DEATH & RESURRECTION

Mark 8:31: “He then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again.”

Why It Matters

In his gospel account, Mark highlights the various responses to Jesus. Many were amazed at Him, a number were terrified because of Him, some believed in Him, and others hated Him, ultimately putting Him to death. We, the readers, must respond to this Jesus as well. The primary response mentioned in Mark is belief. Do I believe in Jesus? Am I characterized by faith, such as the bleeding woman and blind Bartimaeus exhibited? Or am I like the disciples, whom Jesus often rebuked for lacking faith?

Another key area of application is that of servanthood. Jesus modeled and taught the necessity of having a servant's attitude toward others. Am I willing to serve my Lord as well as the family and friends God has given to me? Do I seek to save my soul, or do I lose my soul for Christ's sake? (Mark 8:34–35).

LUKE

Overview

1. Presentation (1:1–4:13)
2. Ministry in Galilee (4:14–9:50)
3. Ministry en Route to Jerusalem (9:51–19:27)
4. Ministry in Jerusalem (19:28–21:38)
5. Crucifixion and Resurrection (22:1–24:53)

What Does It Say?

Luke constructs an orderly account of the life and ministry of Jesus Christ, showing Him as the Son of God who became the Son of Man in order to seek and to save sinful people. Jesus is a man whose birth and early life are covered with the fingerprints of God. His qualifications—physically and spiritually—are superb. In His ministry Jesus identifies with the lowly, exhibits compassion and mercy, yet possesses divine authority. Jesus seeks out the people through healing, teaching, casting out demons, asking questions, and telling captivating stories—all with awe-inspiring grace and wisdom. Jesus’s death and resurrection reverberate with His power to save. It is because Jesus suffered, died, and rose again that “repentance for the forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations” (24:47).

Luke paints Jesus as a brilliant, gracious, and powerful man who extends salvation to sinners. The hurting people, the common folk, the foreigners, the outcasts, are captivated by Him and His message, while the proud and arrogant reject Him.

The personalities that surrounded our Lord are colorfully described by Luke. These include Zechariah, Elizabeth, the angel Gabriel, Joseph, Mary, the Holy Spirit, John the Baptist, awestruck shepherds, angels, Simeon, Anna, Herod, the devil, the demon-possessed, Simon's mother-in-law, the twelve disciples (with special attention given to Peter), a leper, Pharisees, teachers of the law, a centurion with great faith, a widow and her son, a Pharisee named Simon, a woman with a sinful past and a loving heart, a synagogue ruler named Jairus and his daughter, a bleeding woman, 5,000 hungry men, Moses and Elijah, seventy-two thrilled disciples, Martha, Mary, large crowds, a man with dropsy, a prominent Pharisee, tax collectors, "sinners," ten lepers, little children, a rich ruler, a blind beggar, Zacchaeus the tax collector, chief priests, Sadducees, a poor but generous widow, Pontius Pilate, two crucified criminals—one abusive, the other repentant—Joseph of Arimathea, a group of women, two "men" with gleaming clothes, and two men (one named Cleopas) on their way to Emmaus.

Luke also includes more of Jesus's parables than the other gospel writers. In these we meet a sower, a compassionate Samaritan, a shepherd with one lost sheep, a woman with one lost coin, a father with one outwardly rebellious son and one inwardly rebellious, a shrewd manager, a rich man and a poor man, a persistent widow, a Pharisee and a tax collector, ten servants entrusted with money, the owner of a vineyard, and his tenants.

The places we visit along with Jesus include the temple, Nazareth, Judea, Bethlehem, shepherds' fields, the Jordan river, the desert, Capernaum, the Sea of Galilee, Nain, the region of the Gerasenes, Bethsaida, a Samaritan village, Jericho, Jerusalem, the Mount of Olives, an upper room, the high priest's house, the place called "the Skull," the road to Emmaus, and the vicinity of Bethany.

FORGIVENESS

Luke 7:47: “Therefore, I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven—as her great love has shown. But whoever has been forgiven little loves little.”

SAVING THE LOST

Luke 19:10: “For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.”

PRAYER

Luke 5:16: “Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed.”

Why It Matters

Luke presents the unique life of Jesus the Son of Man to awaken and deepen the faith of his readers. Jesus is able to identify with, love, and save us. The most significant point of application is: Do I respond in faith to this Savior? Have I, like the Prodigal Son, returned to my Father's loving embrace?

In Luke's gospel Jesus calls people to radical discipleship, a life that incorporates humility, love, abandonment, forgiveness, faith, obedience, repentance, and prayer. Am I willing to forsake all in order to walk with Jesus? Am I so captivated with this Man that I lose my life for His sake?

JOHN

Overview

1. Prologue (1:1–18)
2. Public Ministry to the People (1:19–12:50)
3. Private Ministry to His Disciples (13:1–17:26)
4. Crucifixion and Resurrection (18:1–20:31)
5. Epilogue (21:1–25)

What Does It Say?

John has the clearest purpose statement in the Bible: “But these [miraculous signs] are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name” (20:31). John’s gospel is designed to encourage a life of faith so that we will experience life.

John draws upon teachings, events, and interactions to demonstrate that Jesus is God in the flesh, and thus perfectly suited to sacrifice His life and offer eternal life. John highlights seven miraculous signs (2:1–10; 4:43–53; 5:1–9; 6:1–13, 16–21; 9:1–34; 11:1–44) to demonstrate Jesus’s deity. Also included are seven “I am” statements, pointing the reader to recognize Jesus’s identity (6:35; 8:12; 10:7; 10:11; 11:25; 14:6; 15:1). The ultimate “sign” is Jesus’s death and resurrection, offering solid proof to His claims.

John places the spotlight on Jesus, the Son of God. He is God incarnate, the sacrificial lamb, the bread of life, the light of the world, the gate for the sheep, the good shepherd, God's Son, the resurrection and the life, the way, the truth, and the life, and the true vine.

In John's gospel many intriguing personalities surround the Lord. These include John the Baptist, the Holy Spirit, the disciples (with attention given to Andrew, Simon Peter, Philip, Nathanael, Judas Iscariot, and "the disciple Jesus loved"—probably John), Jesus's mother, temple merchants, Nicodemus, the Pharisees, a Samaritan woman, a royal official, a disabled man, 5,000 hungry men, a boy with bread and fish, antagonistic Jews, an adulterous woman, a man blind from birth and his parents, Lazarus, Mary, Martha, chief priests, the high priest Caiaphas, a detachment of soldiers, Annas, Pilate, a group of women, and Joseph of Arimathea.

Some of the places we visit in John's gospel are Bethany, Cana, Capernaum, Jerusalem, the Judean countryside, Galilee, Sychar, the Sea of Galilee, the Mount of Olives, the temple courts, the Kidron Valley, an olive grove, Pilate's palace, Golgotha, and a new tomb in a garden.

BELIEF

John 20:30–31: “Jesus performed many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.”

ETERNAL LIFE

John 3:16: “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.”

JESUS’S SUBMISSION TO THE FATHER

John 12:49–50: “For I did not speak on my own, but the Father who sent me commanded me to say all that I have spoken. I know that his command leads to eternal life. So whatever I say is just what the Father has told me to say.”

Why It Matters

The predominant theme of John's gospel is the response of faith to the person of Jesus Christ. The primary point of application is obvious: Do I believe in Jesus, the Son of God? Am I born again and, as a result, experience the eternal life Jesus talked about?

When we come to believe in Christ it should affect the way we live. Jesus stresses serving and loving one another. What characterizes my relationships with fellow Christians? Have I washed any feet lately? Do people know that I am a follower of Jesus because of my love for others?

Jesus also emphasizes the crucial role of the Holy Spirit in the believer's life. Am I open to His work of conviction, instruction, and guidance?

ACTS

Overview

1. Witnesses in Jerusalem (1–7)
2. Witnesses in Judea and Samaria (8–12)
3. Witnesses to the Ends of the Earth (13–28)

What Does It Say?

The book of Acts resumes where the gospel accounts leave off. Luke begins this historical record of the early church with Jesus's charge to wait for the Holy Spirit. On the day of Pentecost the Spirit descends on each of the disciples, filling and empowering them for ministry. From that point, they enthusiastically proclaim Jesus, His death, and His resurrection. Even persecution and hardship fail to silence their voices for the resurrected Jesus. The apostles begin their proclamation of the gospel in Jerusalem, but due to persecution fan out to Judea, Samaria, and to the Gentile nations. Pivotal to this expansion are the missionary journeys by Paul, Barnabas, and others. By the end of Acts, the gospel has spread throughout the Roman Empire.

The central character in the book of Acts is the Holy Spirit. Among His various activities He fills, baptizes, empowers, enables, testifies, transports, encourages, communicates, instructs, directs, restrains, warns, compels, and appoints.

Also pivotal are the apostles, especially Peter and Paul. Peter is the main apostle in the first twelve chapters, while Paul assumes the prominent role in the last sixteen chapters.

Other characters include Jesus just prior to His ascension, Matthias, John, a man crippled from birth, Annas the high priest, Barnabas, Ananias and Sapphira, angels, the Sanhedrin, Gamaliel, Stephen, Philip, a sorcerer named Simon, an Ethiopian eunuch, a disciple named Ananias, Aeneas, Dorcas, a centurion named Cornelius, a servant girl by the name of Rhoda, Herod, John Mark, a disabled man from Lystra, James, Silas, Timothy, Lydia, a jailer in Philippi, angry Jews, the noble people of Berea, the husband and wife team of Aquila and Priscilla, Apollos, Demetrius, Eutychus, Paul's nephew, Felix, Festus, King Agrippa, and a centurion named Julius.

In the book of Acts we visit many new locations. Key places include the Mount of Olives, Jerusalem, the temple, Judea, Samaria, a road from Jerusalem to Gaza, Damascus, Caesarea, Tarsus, Lydda, Joppa, Antioch, Cyprus, Perga, Iconium, Lystra, Derbe, Attalia, Troas, Philippi, Thessalonica, Berea, Athens, Corinth, Ephesus, Crete, Malta, and Rome.

THE RESURRECTED SAVIOR

Acts 3:15: The focus of the apostles' preaching was Jesus who died and was raised to new life. "You killed the author of life, but God raised him from the dead. We are witnesses of this."

THE HOLY SPIRIT

Acts 1:8: "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

THE CHURCH

Acts 9:31: "Then the church throughout Judea, Galilee and Samaria enjoyed a time of peace and was strengthened. Living in the fear of the Lord and encouraged by the Holy Spirit, it increased in numbers."

Acts 11:21: "The Lord's hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord."

Why It Matters

The book of Acts demonstrates the power of the gospel in people's lives and in society. A few transformed individuals spread the good news of Jesus Christ throughout the Roman Empire. Has the gospel gripped me to the point that I am eager to spread it throughout my world? Do I know the power of the Spirit so that I speak boldly about Christ?

Many of the men and women in Acts who were enthusiastic about the gospel suffered for the cause of Christ. Peter was imprisoned, Stephen was stoned to death, and Paul experienced beatings, imprisonment, and false accusations. Does Christ mean enough to me so that I'm willing to suffer for Him?

ROMANS

Overview

1. Introduction (1:1–17)
2. Description of Man’s Sinfulness (1:18–3:20)
3. Revelation of God’s Righteousness (3:21–8:39)
4. Question of Israel’s Unbelief (9:1–11:36)
5. Application to the Believer’s Relationships (12:1–15:13)
6. Conclusion (15:14–16:27)

What Does It Say?

Romans presents the good news of Jesus Christ. In His mercy, God offers the gift of His righteousness to all who come to Jesus by faith. This salvation releases us from the power of sin so that we may live gloriously as God’s children and move powerfully in the lives of others.

In the book of Romans, Paul systematically traces God’s plan of salvation. He begins by describing our sinfulness and God’s legitimate condemnation. God, in His great mercy, however, has not left us without hope. Through faith in Jesus Christ our sins are forgiven and we are credited with a righteousness from God. This provision of grace and the indwelling Spirit of God enable us to live free from sin and alive to God. In chapters 9 through 11, Paul addresses the issue of Israel’s unbelief. While the Jews largely reject God’s righteousness, God is faithful to His promises and keeps the door wide open for their salvation. In the last major section of the book, Paul explores the practical applications God’s mercy ought to have in our lives.

The book of Romans revolves around the members of the Trinity: God the Father, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit. Speaking in broad categories, God, in His mercy, unveils His righteousness; Jesus Christ's death grants justification to those who believe; and the Spirit releases believers to godly and glorious living. The object of the Triune God's mercy and compassion is all of sinful mankind, comprised of both Jews and Gentiles.

Along the way we are reintroduced to a few Old Testament characters, including Abraham, Sarah, Adam, Jacob, Esau, and Pharaoh. At the end of the book, Paul identifies a number of fellow workers and friends, including Phoebe, Priscilla and Aquila, and Epenetus—the first convert in Asia.

Only a few places are listed in the book of Romans. Paul mentions Rome, the destination of this book. He also expresses his desire to visit Spain and refers to Jerusalem as his next location.

RIGHTEOUSNESS

Romans 1:17: “For in the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed—a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: ‘The righteous will live by faith.’”

Romans 3:21–22: “But now apart from the law the righteousness of God has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. This righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe.”

FAITH

Romans 5:1–2: “Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand.”

Why It Matters

The book of Romans is an intensely theological and highly practical book. The gospel of Jesus Christ is meant to penetrate our lives, radically transforming our orientation toward God, sin, and people. Do I possess the righteousness from God that Paul discusses? To what extent am I aware of my sinful tendencies? Am I experiencing freedom from the law of sin and death?

According to Paul, the gospel has profound implications for the way I relate to people. Where and how do I live out the gospel with my family and friends? Can I say that the gospel impacts the way I relate to my enemies? Government officials? Weaker brothers and sisters who do not see things as I do?

1 CORINTHIANS

Overview

1. The Corinthians' Problem of Divisiveness (1–4)
2. The Corinthians' Ethical Problems (5–10)
3. The Corinthians' Worship and Doctrinal Problems (11–15)
4. Paul's Personal Remarks (16)

What Does It Say?

This letter addresses specific problems in the Corinthian church. Paul speaks directly to the problems of divisiveness, sexual immorality, lawsuits, selfishness, abuses of the Lord's Supper and spiritual gifts, and doctrinal misunderstandings. The focus of Paul's exhortations is on progressive sanctification, that is, the ongoing development of holiness in our lives. In response to the various problems, Paul encourages the Corinthian believers toward qualities such as unity, humility, discipline, love, sexual purity, service, and edification. He also speaks to their confusion surrounding issues such as marriage, spiritual gifts, and the resurrection.

The major players of this book are Paul and the members of the church at Corinth. Paul wrote the letter to address the request by the Corinthians for advice. He also wanted to deal with some negative reports that he had heard about them. The only ones mentioned by name are Crispus, Gaius, and Stephanas (whom Paul baptized).

Central to the book, however, is Jesus Christ. His crucifixion and resurrection have profound ramifications for the Corinthian believers. Paul also points to Jesus using other images, including: wisdom, the foundation of the church, the Passover Lamb, the spiritual rock, and the last Adam.

Other individuals mentioned in this book include Sosthenes (Paul's companion), Chloe, Apollos, Cephas (Peter), Timothy, Barnabas, Fortunatus, and Achaicus.

The central place in 1 Corinthians is the city of Corinth. Corinth was the capital of the Roman province of Achaia. Other places mentioned include Jerusalem, Macedonia, and Ephesus.

CHRIST CRUCIFIED

1 Corinthians 1:23–24: “We preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.”

LOVE

1 Corinthians 10:24: “No one should seek their own good, but the good of others.”

1 Corinthians 13:4–7: “Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.”

JESUS’S RESURRECTION

1 Corinthians 15:14: “If Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith.”

Why It Matters

First Corinthians is addressed to specific problems of a specific church. Yet most of their questions and struggles are no different than ones we face in our churches. In this letter Paul deals with problems such as immaturity, marital difficulties, sexual immorality, lawsuits among believers, divisiveness, and the misuse of spiritual gifts. This book can guide us as we seek God's perspective on thorny issues within the church body.

This letter also points us toward Christlike characteristics for individuals and local congregations. We are encouraged toward unity, servanthood, and love among others. One of the best-known chapters in the Bible is 1 Corinthians 13, known for its beautiful description of love. Am I progressing in the characteristics of this book? Am I serving in my local church in a way that edifies my fellow believers?

2 CORINTHIANS

Overview

1. Paul's Ministry (1–7)
2. Paul's Collection (8–9)
3. Paul's Authority (10–13)

What Does It Say?

The Corinthian church had been infiltrated by certain “false teachers” who stirred the people against Paul. Second Corinthians is Paul’s response, in which he defends his ministry, credentials, and apostolic authority so that the believers would accept his message as the true message from God and live accordingly. This is Paul’s most personal letter, as he reveals his motives, attitudes, and struggles. He also risks appearing foolish to them, “boasting” about his authentic ministry and weaknesses on behalf of the Corinthian believers. Throughout 2 Corinthians, Paul offers encouragement as well as challenges to the people, with a special invitation to generously give to the needy brethren in Jerusalem.

Second Corinthians is full of autobiographical material about Paul and reveals much about his heart. We gain glimpses into aspects of his life, including details of his persecution and hardship not found anywhere else. Only a few other individuals are mentioned by name, such as Timothy and Titus.

As with 1 Corinthians, the central location in this letter is the destination, the city of Corinth. Corinth was the capital of the Roman province of Achaia, and in many ways the chief commercial city of Greece. Paul also mentions the province of Asia, Troas, Macedonia, Judea, Achaia, and the city of Damascus.

GOD'S STRENGTH IN MY WEAKNESS

2 Corinthians 12:9: “He said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.’ Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me.”

GENEROUS GIVING

2 Corinthians 9:7: “Each of you should give what you have decided in your heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.”

Why It Matters

Being a highly personal letter, 2 Corinthians invites us to personalize the gospel message. Through Paul's example and exhortation we are challenged to holy living that includes: spreading the fragrance of Christ, being transformed in Christ's likeness, living by faith not by sight, living for our crucified and risen Lord, purifying ourselves, cheerfully giving, and suffering for the sake of the gospel.

In this letter we see the heart of a true friend. Paul cares deeply for the believers in Corinth, even to the point of speaking foolishly to draw their hearts back to the true gospel. Do I care so deeply for the people at my church? Am I willing to appear foolish and weak, so that God's power might impact the people around me?

GALATIANS

Overview

1. The Gospel Defended (1–2)
2. The Gospel Explained (3–4)
3. The Gospel Applied (5–6)

What Does It Say?

The letter to the Galatians has been called the Magna Carta of Christian Liberty. In it Paul contends that his gospel message has been given to him by God, not by people. He vigorously asserts that justification is by faith, not by keeping the law. The law imprisons, but faith grants freedom. This freedom in Christ enables us to love those around us and to produce the fruits of righteousness through a Spirit-led life.

Concerned that the Galatian believers have adopted a different gospel, in the first two chapters Paul defends the true gospel of justification by faith. Paul traces his life as a Christian, demonstrating that he received his message not from men but directly from God. In chapters 3 and 4 Paul explains the gospel, highlighting the contrast between human effort and God's grace. It is faith in Jesus Christ, not self-imposed religiosity, that brings us to God and frees us to become like Christ. In the last two chapters Paul applies the gospel to the believer's life. The freedom we experience from trusting Christ enables us to love those around us and exhibit Spirit-produced characteristics.

In recounting his conversion and early ministry Paul mentions several of the other apostles, including Peter, James, Barnabas, and John. Titus is also mentioned, as a companion of Paul on a trip to Jerusalem. Also referred to are some Old Testament figures, such as Abraham, Hagar, and Isaac (Sarah is implied).

The central location is Galatia, the destination of Paul's letter. Galatia was a Roman province in central Asia Minor. Throughout the letter Paul also refers to Arabia, Damascus, Jerusalem, Syria, Cilicia, Judea, Antioch, and Mount Sinai.

JUSTIFICATION BY FAITH

Galatians 2:16: “A person is not justified by the works of the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ.”

FREEDOM

Galatians 5:1: “It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery.”

FRUIT OF THE SPIRIT

Galatians 5:22–23: “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.”

Why It Matters

This powerful letter asks that we explore our belief as to what makes us right with God. Am I relying on my behavior? Am I working hard at being good (observing the law)? Or am I trusting in Jesus Christ and Him alone?

Paul's letter to the Galatians also requires that we examine the message we believers communicate to others about Christianity. Do I model a grim legalism, or the authentic freedom Paul talks about? Does change for me come ultimately through human effort, or by God's Spirit? If the freedom Paul writes about is more the exception than the rule, what prevents me from tasting it more often?

EPHESIANS

Overview

1. The Believer's Wealth (1–3)
2. The Believer's Walk (4–6)

What Does It Say?

Paul's letter to the Ephesians describes the incredible wealth that believers possess because of their position in Christ. These spiritual blessings include adoption, redemption, forgiveness, a grand purpose, the seal of the Holy Spirit, a glorious inheritance, a position in the heavenlies, life, intimacy with God, and grace. Out of their incredible spiritual wealth, Paul urges the Ephesian believers to live an incredible life. God calls believers to exercise spiritual gifts and love so that the body of Christ is edified. The Christian is also called on to submit to God's larger picture in every relationship (husband-wife, parent-child, slave-master). Paul closes out this letter by encouraging his readers to engage in spiritual battle equipped with God's armor.

The apostle Paul addresses this letter to the saints in Ephesus. Paul had laid the foundation for the church in Ephesus on his second missionary journey. Later, on his third missionary tour, he spent approximately three years there, teaching and discipling the people. The only individual mentioned in this letter is Tychicus, the man who delivered the letters to the Ephesians and Colossians.

Much of this letter revolves around God the Father, the Lord Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit. Paul repeatedly instructs the readers as to what the Triune God has accomplished, is doing, and will complete.

The only location mentioned is the city of Ephesus, an important city in western Asia Minor (now Turkey). Ephesus was at an intersection of major trade routes, and thus a commercial center. This city was famous for its pagan temple dedicated to the Roman goddess Diana (called “Artemis” in Greek).

SPIRITUAL BLESSINGS

Ephesians 1:3: “Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ.”

Why It Matters

You can benefit tremendously from Paul's letter to the Ephesians. Paul invited his immediate audience to examine their spiritual wealth and walk, and it would be wise for us to do so as well. As I live my life, am I aware of my spiritual blessings or do I doubt God's goodness? Am I increasing in my knowledge of God, His hope, and His power? (1:17–19). Do I grasp the unfathomable love of Christ? (3:18).

We also ought to examine our lives from the practical half of the book (Ephesians 4–6). Am I serving my local church in a way that edifies others? How can I better submit to what God wants to accomplish in my wife or husband? In my children or parents? In those I work with? How well-equipped am I to do spiritual warfare?

PHILIPPIANS

Overview

1. Rejoicing in Partnership with God (1)
2. Rejoicing in the Path of Humility (2)
3. Rejoicing in the Pursuit of Christ (3)
4. Rejoicing in the Provision of God (4)

What Does It Say?

Writing to express his appreciation for the Philippians' gift to him, Paul uses the occasion to encourage them to progress in the faith. He tells them that they can endure suffering with a humble attitude and actively pursue Christ and all the while experience great joy.

Paul encourages the Philippians for their partnership in the gospel. Their gifts and prayers have served to help advance the good news of Jesus Christ. Such union with Christ makes it possible to have unity with other believers. This unity comes about through the attitude of humility, as Christ exhibited so perfectly in His incarnation and on the cross. Paul also warns against legalism and lawlessness, while advocating a passionate pursuit of Christ and contentment in the peace and provisions of God.

Paul reveals his love for the Philippian believers in this personal and informal letter. Throughout the letter, we also see his delight in God. Timothy also plays a large role, as Paul's companion and as a model of a faithful servant. Another man who Paul holds up as an example is Epaphroditus, the bearer of the Philippians' gift. Others mentioned in this letter are Euodia and Syntyche, two women apparently at odds with each other, and Clement, a "fellow worker" of Paul's.

The central location is the city of Philippi, a prosperous Roman colony. It was the first major center in Europe where Paul preached.

JOY

Philippians 4:4: “Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!”

HUMILITY

Philippians 2:3–4: “Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.”

Why It Matters

Philippians is a letter written by Paul while in prison. In the midst of such circumstances, he exudes joy and invites his readers to share in that joy. One author described joy as “the soul delighting itself in God himself.” Do I consistently delight in God, even when circumstances are less than the best?

Paul also emphasizes qualities such as humility, suffering, contentment, peace, and a strong ambition for knowing Christ more deeply. Which of these qualities is most lacking in my life? As I read Philippians, am I drawn toward these qualities? In which of these qualities has God shaped me to be more Christlike?

COLOSSIANS

Overview

1. The Supremacy of Christ and the Gospel (1–2)
2. The Sufficiency of Christ for Living (3–4)

What Does It Say?

Colossians is a book about the Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus is described as the Creator, Sustainer, Lord, Head of the Body (His church), Reconciler, and Savior who is worthy of our adoration and allegiance. Paul stresses the supremacy of Jesus's person and the completeness of the salvation He provides. With such a preeminent Lord and powerful gospel, believers are equipped to grow toward maturity in Christ. Union with Christ also sufficiently enables believers to lovingly enter into relationships, honoring God in their lives.

Without a doubt, the central figure in Colossians is the Lord Jesus Christ. Paul seeks to honor and magnify Jesus as both supreme and sufficient.

Other individuals mentioned include Paul, the author; Timothy, Paul's companion; Tychicus, the carrier of this letter to the Colossian believers; Onesimus, a returning slave from Colosse; and Archipus, an active worker in the Colossian church. Greetings are passed on to the Colossians from Aristarchus, Mark, Jesus (called Justus), Epaphras, Luke, and Demas.

The central location is the letter's destination of Colosse. Colosse was an ancient city of Phrygia. The Colossian church was established by Epaphras during Paul's three years in Ephesus. Other places mentioned include Laodicea, a city about eleven miles from Colosse, and Hierapolis, roughly thirteen miles away.

THE SUPREMACY OF CHRIST

Colossians 2:9–10: “For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form, and in Christ you have been brought to fullness. He is the head over every power and authority.”

Why It Matters

Paul's letter to the Colossians points us squarely to the Lord Jesus Christ. He is the Creator, Head of the Body, Sustainer of life, and Savior. He is the Supreme Lord. Paul challenges us to focus not on the shadows (events, activities, etc.) but on the reality, the person of Jesus (Colossians 2:17). What is most real to me today? Is it my ministry, my job, my friends, my struggles, or is it my Lord?

Jesus is also sufficient for us to live godly lives. Paul describes the Christian life in terms of being indwelt, permeated, and clothed by Jesus. It is as such that I am equipped to move into relationships for His glory.

1 THESSALONIANS

Overview

1. Paul's Commendations and Concern (1–3)
2. Paul's Exhortations and Teaching (4–5)

What Does It Say?

With great fondness Paul writes about the impact of the gospel in the lives of the Thessalonian believers. He reminds them of the way the gospel was presented and the way it was received. The Thessalonians' faith, love, and hope continue to excite Paul. He lavishly commends them while inviting them to more of the same. Paul offers instructions toward their growth, especially in the area of their hope for Jesus's return. With the assurance of Christ's coming, the believers are challenged to encourage and edify each other.

Although not named, the Christians at Thessalonica come to life in this book. They are men and women of strong faith, inspiring hope, and warm love. Their love for Paul and Paul's affection for them permeates the entire letter.

Individuals mentioned include Paul, the primary author of the letter; Silas, Paul's companion; and Timothy, who strengthened and encouraged the Thessalonians.

The destination of this letter was the city of Thessalonica, a prominent city of Macedonia. Paul visited Thessalonica during his second missionary journey. Many quickly believed in Jesus while others reacted angrily, rounding up a mob and forcing Paul to leave.

In reminding the believers of his stay with them, Paul mentions other locations including: Macedonia, Achaia, the city of Philippi, Judea, and Athens.

THE RETURN OF THE LORD

1 Thessalonians 4:16–17: “For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever.”

SANCTIFICATION

1 Thessalonians 3:12–13: “May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else, just as ours does for you. May he strengthen your hearts so that you will be blameless and holy in the presence of our God and Father when our Lord Jesus comes with all his holy ones.”

Why It Matters

Perhaps more than any other book, 1 Thessalonians points us to the Christian triad of faith, hope, and love. Paul is absolutely thrilled about these qualities in the Thessalonian believers' lives, yet at the same time he invites them to increase in each. How does my Christian community compare in these categories? What impact does the gospel have in our lives? How can I encourage and edify the others in my church in order to increase faith? Hope? Love?

2 THESSALONIANS

Overview

1. Assurance of God's Justice (1)
2. Clarification on the Day of the Lord (2)
3. Encouragement toward Gainful Employment (3)

What Does It Say?

Since Paul's first letter, incorrect information had infiltrated the Thessalonians. Thinking that the day of the Lord had already begun, some had ceased working. Second Thessalonians is largely written to correct their misunderstanding of the day of the Lord. Paul assures the Thessalonians that the day of the Lord is still in the future and challenges them to keep busy. Throughout this letter, Paul also offers encouragement through commendations and prayers.

Those named in 2 Thessalonians include: Paul, the writer; Silas and Timothy, Paul's partners.

Chapter two focuses on "the man of lawlessness" who is doomed to destruction. Paul foretells that this man will violently oppose anything connected with God, actually proclaiming to be God Himself. He will produce all kinds of Satan-inspired miracles. In the end, however, he will be overthrown and destroyed by Jesus.

The only location mentioned in this letter is the destination, Thessalonica. Thessalonica was a large port city (perhaps of 200,000) in Macedonia.

THE DAY OF THE LORD

2 Thessalonians 2:2–3: “. . . not to become easily unsettled or alarmed by the teaching allegedly from us—whether by a prophecy or by word of mouth or by letter—asserting that the day of the Lord has already come. Don’t let anyone deceive you in any way, for that day will not come until the rebellion occurs and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the man doomed to destruction.”

DILIGENCE

2 Thessalonians 3:11–12: “We hear that some among you are idle and disruptive. They are not busy; they are busybodies. Such people we command and urge in the Lord Jesus Christ to settle down and earn the food they eat.”

Why It Matters

Second Thessalonians makes it clear that our beliefs determine our actions. Some who believed that the “day of the Lord” had already arrived were guilty of laziness. What beliefs guide my life? In particular, what do I believe about the future that impacts the way I live today? What do I know about the second coming of Jesus Christ?

1 TIMOTHY

Overview

1. Instruction Regarding True Faith (1)
2. Instruction Regarding Public Worship (2)
3. Instruction Regarding Church Leadership (3)
4. Instruction Regarding Personal Godliness (4)
5. Instruction Regarding Pastoral Oversight (5–6)

What Does It Say?

Near the end of his life, Paul writes this letter to a young pastor and personal friend named Timothy. Paul offers Timothy advice in several areas: false teachers, public worship, qualifications for church leaders, personal godliness, and pastoring various groups within the church body. This letter is essentially a challenge to Timothy—a challenge to a life of faith, godliness, and love as he shepherds the people entrusted to his care.

The central figure in this letter is Timothy, Paul's "true son in the faith" (1:2). He faces the responsibility of pastoral leadership in the church of Ephesus.

Also named in 1 Timothy is Paul, the apostle who wrote this letter. Two others, Hymenaeus and Alexander, are mentioned as examples of men who "suffered shipwreck with regard to faith" (1:19).

The chief place in 1 Timothy is Ephesus, the location where Timothy was pastor. Ephesus was an important city in western Asia Minor (now Turkey).

PURSUIT OF GODLINESS

1 Timothy 6:11–12: “But you, man of God, flee from all this, and pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance and gentleness. Fight the good fight of the faith. Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called when you made your good confession in the presence of many witnesses.”

GODLY FREEDOM

1 Timothy 4:4–5: “For everything God created is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, because it is consecrated by the word of God and prayer.”

Why It Matters

Paul's letter to Timothy is a call to faith and godliness. Paul twice challenges Timothy to "fight the good fight of the faith" (6:12; see also 1:18) and encourages him to "train yourself to be godly" (4:7; see also 6:6, 11). How is my "faith fight" and "godliness training"? Am I calling others to walk in faith and exhibit godliness as Paul did for Timothy?

In addition to personal godliness, Paul has much to say about corporate leadership. He supplies a number of qualifications for godly overseers and deacons in chapter three. If I am in a position of church leadership, or aspiring to leadership, am I progressing in these qualities?

2 TIMOTHY

Overview

1. Proclaim the Powerful Gospel (1)
2. Persevere in Godly Instruction (2)
3. Preserve the Gospel's Integrity (3:1–4:5)
4. Personal Remarks (4:6–22)

What Does It Say?

As he writes this letter, Paul apparently knows that his days on earth are about to end. In the last chapter he writes, “. . . the time for my departure is near” (4:6). With that knowledge, the apostle seeks to challenge his friend Timothy to persevere in his ministry at Ephesus. He calls Timothy to boldly engage in his tasks with endurance, strength, alertness, patience, and godliness. Also woven throughout this letter are exhortations to be a man grounded in and able to proclaim the Word.

Paul the aged apostle and Timothy the young pastor are the two major players in this letter. Paul apparently knows of his imminent death, as he writes about his departure and subsequent crown of righteousness. He writes to Timothy, who is serving the church in Ephesus.

Others mentioned in this letter are Lois and Eunice, Timothy's grandmother and mother respectively; Hymenaeus and Philetus, two who "have departed from the truth" (2:18); Demas, a man who deserted Paul; Crescens; Luke; Mark; Tychicus; Carpus; Alexander the metalworker; Priscilla and Aquila; Erastus; Trophimus; Eubulus; Pudens; Linus; and Claudia.

As in 1 Timothy, the central location is the city of Ephesus where Timothy is serving. In the course of the letter, Paul mentions a number of places including: Rome, Antioch, Iconium, Lystra, Thessalonica, Galatia, Dalmatia, Troas, Corinth, and Miletus.

ENDURANCE

2 Timothy 2:3: “Join with me in suffering, like a good soldier of Christ Jesus.”

THE WORD OF GOD

2 Timothy 2:15: “Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth.”

2 Timothy 3:16–17: “All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.”

Why It Matters

A major theme of 2 Timothy is endurance. Timothy, a young pastor, is challenged to endure hardship “like a good soldier” (2:3). What does endurance or perseverance look like in the life of my pastor? How can I offer encouragement this week in some practical way?

Second Timothy also highlights the Word of God in Timothy’s life. All of Scripture is “God-breathed” and beneficial for our lives. What a privilege and honor to have God breathe out His revelation and instructions to us! No wonder the psalmist expressed sheer delight in God’s truth: “How sweet are your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth!” (Psalm 119:103). Does the Bible play an important part in your life? Do you read it regularly?

TITUS

Overview

1. Appoint Godly Elders (1)
2. Teach Godly Living (2)
3. Emphasize Godly Actions (3)

What Does It Say?

Titus is left on the island of Crete to continue the task of organizing the churches. Paul shares with Titus some practical advice regarding leadership and discipleship. Leaders are to possess godly character and must be able to refute false doctrine. Regarding discipleship, Paul urges Titus to teach the various groups within the church about godly living. He also wants this teaching to have a domino effect, where the older Christians will in turn teach the younger. As the basis for this godly living, Paul emphasizes God's grace and mercy.

The central figure in this letter is Paul's young associate, Titus. Titus, a Gentile, was one of Paul's converts who became a significant help to Paul in his ministry. Paul had left Titus on the island of Crete, entrusting him with the organization of the churches. Other individuals mentioned are Artemas, Tychicus, Zenas, and Apollos.

The primary location is the island of Crete, where Titus is serving. Crete is an island in the Mediterranean Sea, directly south of the Aegean Sea. At the time of this letter, the inhabitants of Crete had established the reputation of being lazy, evil, dishonest, and gluttonous (cf. 1:12). Also mentioned is Nicopolis, a city on the West Coast of Greece where Paul was intending to spend the winter.

TEACHING

Titus 2:1: “You, however, must teach what is appropriate to sound doctrine.”

GODLY LIVING

Titus 2:11–14: “For the grace of God has appeared that offers salvation to all people. It teaches us to say ‘No’ to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, while we wait for the blessed hope—the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good.”

Why It Matters

Paul's letter to Titus emphasizes godly people characterized by godly lives. Everyone in the church is to be marked by godliness that emerges from the grace of God. Which of the categories Paul mentions have I seen the most growth in my life lately? Which area is most lacking?

The New Testament highlights that we are to be about the task of pouring ourselves into the lives of others. Paul instructed Timothy: "The things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable people who will also be qualified to teach others" (2 Timothy 2:2). Here, Paul urges Titus to teach the older women so they, in turn, can teach the younger (2:3-4). Whose faces come to mind as people who have nurtured me in the Christian faith? Who do I know that I can nurture?

PHILEMON

Overview

1. Paul's Prayer for Philemon (vv. 1–7)
2. Paul's Plea to Onesimus (vv. 8–17)
3. Paul's Pledge to Philemon (vv. 18–25)

What Does It Say?

Paul writes this short letter to Philemon, a slave owner, asking him to take back his runaway slave, Onesimus. Paul begins by praising Philemon's faith in Jesus and love for believers. Next Paul describes Onesimus's conversion, "who became my son while I was in chains" (v. 10). Sending Onesimus back with this letter, Paul encourages Philemon to forgive and receive him as a useful brother. Paul also pledges to make good any debt that Onesimus might owe.

Three characters play prominent roles in this brief letter. Onesimus was a runaway slave from the household of Philemon. Somehow he had come into contact with Paul and was led to Christ. Now he faced returning to Philemon. Philemon, a resident of Colosse, owned slaves and had a house large enough to serve as a worship place. In this letter, Paul commends Philemon as a man of faith and love. The third character is Paul himself. Paul reveals his fond affection for both Onesimus and Philemon.

Others included in this letter are Apphia and Archippus (possibly Philemon's wife and son), Timothy, Epaphras, Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke.

No location is mentioned, but from the book of Colossians it appears certain that Philemon was from Colosse or the near vicinity. Colosse was a city of the region of Phrygia.

FORGIVENESS

Philemon 17–18: “So if you consider me a partner, welcome him as you would welcome me. If he has done you any wrong or owes you anything, charge it to me.”

ENCOURAGEMENT

Philemon 7: “Your love has given me great joy and encouragement, because you, brother, have refreshed the hearts of the Lord’s people.”

Philemon 20: “I do wish, brother, that I may have some benefit from you in the Lord; refresh my heart in Christ.”

Why It Matters

Although this letter is short, the picture of forgiveness it portrays is huge. According to the law Onesimus was guilty, yet Paul urged Philemon to graciously forgive his runaway slave and receive him as a dear brother. Paul even offers to pay any debt owed to Philemon by Onesimus. This is a great picture of the kind of forgiveness God wants us to extend to our brothers and sisters in Christ.

While he does not outright condemn the institution of slavery in this letter, Paul does undermine it. He exalts Onesimus to the position of “brother,” vastly different from that culture’s understanding of slaves. All people, regardless of their circumstances, are to be loved and respected. Who in my life needs to be reminded of their dignity?

HEBREWS

Overview

1. The Superior Person of Christ (1:1–4:13)
2. The Superior Priesthood of Christ (4:14–10:18)
3. The Superior Path for Christians (10:19–13:25)

What Does It Say?

The book of Hebrews is an appeal to Christians to press on toward maturity in Christ. Jewish believers apparently are being tempted to revert to Judaism, and this letter points to the superiority of Christ over the Judaic system. Jesus is superior to the angels, Moses, the Aaronic priesthood, and the Law. His once-for-all sacrifice on the cross is superior to the repeated sacrifices of Judaism. To shrink back from following Christ by faith is to return to an inferior system and to invite God's judgment. The author challenges the readers to hold tightly to their hope in Christ and live by faith. Such faith may lead one into severe hardship, but also leads to God-pleasing lives of love and worship.

This book revolves around the person and work of Jesus Christ. Jesus and His death on the cross are compared with the system of Judaism, and Jesus is shown to be superior in every case.

Other characters that come into play are angels—God’s ministering spirits who were active in the giving of the Law; Moses, the servant of “God’s house” and mediator of the old covenant; Aaron the high priest; Melchizedek, the king/priest who blessed Abraham; those included in chapter 11 as models of faith (Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses’s parents, Moses, the Israelites at the Red Sea, the Israelites at Jericho, Rahab, Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel, the prophets); and Timothy.

Locations mentioned in Hebrews include the desert, heaven, Egypt, Salem (Melchizedek’s town), the Red Sea, Jericho, and Italy (possibly where this book originated).

FAITH

Hebrews 11:6: “Without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.”

JESUS’S SACRIFICE

Hebrews 9:12–14: “He did not enter by means of the blood of goats and calves; but he entered the Most Holy Place once for all by his own blood, thus obtaining eternal redemption. The blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer sprinkled on those who are ceremonially unclean sanctify them so that they are outwardly clean. How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that led to death, so that we may serve the living God!”

Why It Matters

Hebrews points to the Lord Jesus Christ as superior to any religious system. The readers are warned against shrinking back from Christ and the cross. God's people must look only to Him, whose atoning death and resurrection have made it possible to draw near to God. This book also speaks of encouragement. How can I encourage my fellow believers to fix their eyes on Jesus? (12:2). Who can I encourage today to persevere in hardship? (12:7).

The book of Hebrews also pinpoints faith as essential for Christian living. "Without faith it is impossible to please God" (11:6). In the author's "Faith Hall of Fame" of chapter 11, with whom do I most identify? What might it look like for me to move out in faith this week?

JAMES

Overview

1. Perseverance in Trials and Obedience (1)
2. Love in Honor and Action (2)
3. Power in Speech and Wisdom (3)
4. Humility in Relationships and Plans (4)
5. Patience in Suffering and Prayer (5)

What Does It Say?

This letter, written by James, speaks to the issue of Christian maturity. “Faith without deeds is useless,” writes James (2:20), pointing to the truth that Christianity is all about faith that inspires godly activity. In this letter, James discusses the impact faith has in the life of the believer. Faith enables one to persevere in the midst of trials, love all people regardless of their condition, move powerfully in speech and wisdom, humbly submit to God and others, and wait prayerfully during times of suffering. James is a highly practical letter, one that challenges the reader to evaluate his or her life.

The author of this letter is James, most likely James the brother of Jesus. He was considered a “pillar” in the church at Jerusalem (Galatians 2:9) and was a leader at the council of Acts 15.

The only other human characters mentioned are examples from the Old Testament: Abraham, Rahab, Job, and Elijah.

This letter is written to “the twelve tribes scattered among the nations” (1:1). This refers to Hebrew Christians who were scattered due to persecution.

FAITH THAT WORKS

James 2:14–17: “What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save them? Suppose a brother or a sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to them, ‘Go in peace; keep warm and well fed,’ but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.”

POWER OF THE TONGUE

Hebrews 3:9–10: “With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse human beings, who have been made in God’s likeness. Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this should not be.”

Why It Matters

James is a highly practical book about maturity in the Christian life. A mature believer is characterized in several ways: a mature Christian embraces trials as opportunities for growth, actively loves even the less fortunate, speaks powerfully and wisely into peoples' lives, humbly serves others and submits to God's agenda, and waits patiently and prayerfully for the return of Christ.

At the core of this book is the issue of faith. Faith in Jesus Christ, James says, inspires loving actions. Which recent actions of mine can I gratefully point to as springing from faith? Where has my faith been dead, or void of any activity?

1 PETER

Overview

1. The Believer's Salvation (1:1–12)
2. The Believer's Spiritual Growth (1:13–2:12)
3. The Believer's Submission (2:13–3:12)
4. The Believer's Suffering (3:13–5:14)

What Does It Say?

Peter writes this letter to “exiles” in a hostile world, encouraging them to mature in their salvation. The letter moves in a clear progression from salvation to sanctification to submission to suffering. Peter reminds his readers of their glorious salvation that astounded the Old Testament prophets and marvels the angels. Salvation leads to the process of spiritual growth, and Peter stresses holy living that exalts God. One important fruit of maturing spiritually is submission—submission to authority, husbands, wives, and each other. The supreme model of this submission is, of course, the Lord Jesus. Peter's final topic is suffering. He invites his readers to persevere and even rejoice in the midst of trials.

The only individuals mentioned are Peter, the apostle and author of this letter; Silas, Peter's companion; and Mark.

Peter directs this letter to “God’s elect, exiles scattered throughout the provinces of Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia,” various regions of Asia Minor. At the end of the letter, Peter refers to “Babylon” as the place of writing. Some are convinced this is the literal city of Babylon, but it is more likely a symbolic reference to Rome.

SPIRITUAL GROWTH

1 Peter 2:2–3: “Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation, now that you have tasted that the Lord is good.”

SUBMISSION

1 Peter 2:23–24: “When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly. ‘He himself bore our sins’ in his body on the cross, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; ‘by his wounds you have been healed.’”

SUFFERING

1 Peter 4:12–13: “Dear friends, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that has come on you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice inasmuch as you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed.”

Why It Matters

First Peter is rightly called “the epistle of the living hope.” It is obvious that Peter’s understanding of salvation is not something that is merely intellectual, static, or boring. Peter knows Christianity to be alive, dynamic, and glorious beyond words. For that reason he invites his readers to “grow up in your salvation,” having tasted God’s goodness. To what degree can I relate to Peter’s enthusiasm? Is my faith alive as Peter describes?

Peter indicates that spiritual maturity occurs as we feed on God’s truth. Do I “crave” God’s nourishment as Peter exhorts? (2:2). Are there other “foods” that whet my appetite more than God’s truth? If so, why?

2 PETER

Overview

1. Cultivation of Godly Qualities (1)
2. Caution against False Teachers (2)
3. Certainty of Christ's Return (3)

What Does It Say?

In this second letter, Simon Peter deals with what is false versus what is true. His readers are facing a serious problem with false teachers in their midst. These men are arrogantly and sinfully exploiting the people with their stories. Peter exposes the motives and methods of these false teachers and strongly denounces their evil ways. The truth that Peter proclaims in this letter includes God's provisions for godliness, His calling and election, the Scriptures, God's kindness, and Christ's return. These are all things the readers of 2 Peter can count on that will stimulate them to spiritual maturity.

As stated in the first verse, this letter was written by Simon Peter. As with the first letter, Peter likely wrote this from Rome. The only other human characters mentioned are Old Testament examples including Noah, Lot, and Balaam. The only locations referred to are the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, Old Testament objects of God's judgment.

GROWTH IN CHRISTIAN CHARACTER

2 Peter 1:5–8: “Make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; and to godliness, mutual affection; and to mutual affection, love. For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

GOD’S PATIENCE

2 Peter 3:8–9: “But do not forget this one thing, dear friends: With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day. The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.”

Why It Matters

In this letter, Peter makes frequent use of the word *knowledge* in various forms. What we know—intellectually, experientially, and relationally—can make a big difference in the way we live our lives. In fact, Peter states that his purpose in writing this letter (and his previous one) is to “stimulate you to wholesome thinking” (3:1). Throughout 2 Peter he focuses on knowing such things as the inspiration of Scripture, the certainty of Christ’s return, and God’s kindness manifested in His patience. Are these things I know? What difference do these things make in my daily life?

1 JOHN

Overview

1. Fellowship in God's Light (1–2)
2. Fellowship in God's Love (3–4)
3. Fellowship in God's Life (5)

What Does It Say?

John writes this letter to his “dear children,” encouraging them in their walk with God. The central theme is fellowship within the family of God. John addresses the criteria and characteristics of this fellowship. Central to the book are three assertions about God: 1) God is light, 2) God is love, and 3) God is life. Fellowship occurs as we grasp these truths and walk in them. Throughout the letter, John also refutes false teachings that deny the deity of Jesus. This is a simply written yet profound exhortation to continue to abide in Christ, assured of eternal life.

Except for Jesus Christ, there is no mention of any individual in this book. John, the author, does not even include his own name, likely due to his familiarity among the readers. This John is the beloved disciple who also wrote the gospel of John and the book of Revelation. According to tradition John spent his latter years in Ephesus, suggesting that city as the place of this letter's writing.

FELLOWSHIP

1 John 1:3: “We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ.”

CONFESSION

1 John 1:9: “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.”

LOVE

1 John 3:16: “This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters.”

Why It Matters

John walked (literally) with Jesus, he witnessed His power, heard His words, and experienced persecution on Christ's behalf. In reading 1 John, we are sitting at the feet of an older, godly, wise man. In simple yet profound words, John shares his insights into the Christian walk. He puts his finger on a few key thoughts that he wants to leave with his readers.

Over and over, John points to fellowship with God and with each other. How significant is God's love for me? John can hardly contain himself when he writes of God's love, which is "lavished on us" (1 John 3:1). Later in the letter, he encourages his readers to "know and rely on the love God has for us" (1 John 4:16). Am I bathing in God's love today? If not, what is blocking my rich enjoyment?

Because God loves us, we are to love one another (1 John 4:11). This love is to be sacrificial. "Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters" (1 John 3:16).

2 JOHN

Overview

1. Practice the Truth (vv. 1–6)
2. Protect the Truth (vv. 7–13)

What Does It Say?

This brief letter is written to “the lady chosen by God and to her children,” who are being infiltrated by false teachers. John draws their attention to “the truth,” both praising and warning them. He encourages them to continue walking in the truth by obeying God’s commands and loving each other. At the same time, however, their love is not to be without discernment. He urges the readers to protect the truth by not receiving into their homes those who reject the teaching of Christ. Hospitality towards false teachers only aids them in their deception.

This letter is identified as “the elder” (2 John 1:1). The early church fathers clearly pointed to John the apostle as the author.

Second John is addressed to “the lady chosen by God and to her children.” Some suggest this is a specific woman and her children. Others believe this is a figurative description of a local church. In either case, John knew these readers well. John sends greetings from “the children of your sister, who is chosen by God” (v. 13), possibly a sister church.

No location is mentioned, although tradition suggests Ephesus as the place of John’s writing.

TRUTH

2 John 4: “It has given me great joy to find some of your children walking in the truth, just as the Father commanded us.”

LOVE

2 John 5–6: “I ask that we love one another. And this is love: that we walk in obedience to his commands. As you have heard from the beginning, his command is that you walk in love.”

AVOIDING FALSE TEACHERS

2 John 9–10: “Anyone who runs ahead and does not continue in the teaching of Christ does not have God; whoever continues in the teaching has both the Father and the Son. If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not take them into your house or welcome them.”

Why It Matters

In this “postcard” John emphasizes both truth and love. And the two are tightly woven together. Truth is not merely intellectual understanding. Rather, it is something that also permeates our hearts, impacting the way we relate to those around us. Walking in God’s truth means walking in love with each other. Am I in love with God’s truth? Do I deeply delight in the truth as it is revealed in God’s Book? And, am I in love with God’s people? Do I continually move toward people for their good?

3 JOHN

Overview

1. Commendation of Gaius (vv. 1–8)
2. Condemnation of Diotrephes (vv. 9–11)
3. Recommendation of Demetrius (vv. 12–14)

What Does It Say?

The shortest book in the Bible, 3 John is a letter to a personal friend named Gaius. John delights in Gaius's walk, commending his faithfulness and love. Most admirable is the hospitality he extends to the traveling messengers of Christ. John also condemns a man named Diotrephes, an arrogant and dictatorial leader in the church. By way of contrast John applauds Demetrius, a man with an outstanding reputation.

The author of 3 John is identified only as “the elder,” most likely a reference to John the apostle. The recipient is a man named Gaius, a man whom John repeatedly refers to as “dear friend.”

Two other men are mentioned in this brief letter: Diotrephes, a dictatorial leader in the church who refused to extend hospitality to Christian messengers, and Demetrius, a man with a good reputation whom John commended.

No location is mentioned in this letter. As with 1 and 2 John, tradition suggests Ephesus as the place of writing.

WALKING IN THE TRUTH

3 John 4: “I have no greater joy than to hear that my children are walking in the truth.”

HOSPITALITY

3 John 5–8: “Dear friend, you are faithful in what you are doing for the brothers and sisters, even though they are strangers to you. They have told the church about your love. Please send them on their way in a manner that honors God. It was for the sake of the Name that they went out, receiving no help from the pagans. We ought therefore to show hospitality to such people so that we may work together for the truth.”

Why It Matters

First John stresses fellowship with God. Second John forbids fellowship with those spreading false doctrine. Third John emphasizes fellowship with Christian brothers and sisters. John spells this out clearly: “We ought therefore to show hospitality to such people so that we may work together for the truth” (v. 8).

Other passages in the New Testament strongly promote hospitality among Christians. It is encouraged among widows (1 Timothy 5:10), church leaders (1 Timothy 3:2; Titus 1:8), and all believers in general (Romans 12:13; 1 Peter 4:9). To whom can I extend hospitality this week? This month?

JUDE

Overview

1. Salutation (vv. 1–2)
2. Reason for the Letter (vv. 3–4)
3. Warning against False Teachers (vv. 5–16)
4. Exhortations to the Believers (vv. 17–23)
5. Doxology (vv. 24–25)

What Does It Say?

This letter paints a vivid picture of the threats of false teaching in the church. Jude wanted to write a letter concerning salvation, but instead urges his readers to “contend for the faith” (v. 3). Jude reminds them of the convincing judgment carried out by God in the past, including unbelieving Jews, rebellious angels, and the corrupt cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. He also points out the false teachers’ disrespectful and worthless character as well as their prophesied condemnation. Jude exhorts his readers to be aware of these men, to nurture their own spiritual growth, and to compassionately help others. This brief letter closes with an explosive doxology, in which God is exalted as magnificent Savior and Protector of His people.

The author identifies himself as “Jude, a servant of Jesus Christ and a brother of James.” This is likely Jude one of Jesus’s brothers, also called Judas in the Gospels.

Jude mentions a number of Old Testament characters as examples, including Cain, Balaam, Korah, Enoch, and the disbelieving Israelites who came out of Egypt. Also included are Michael the archangel and rebellious angels.

Locations referred to include Egypt and the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah.

CONTEND FOR THE FAITH

Jude 3: “Dear friends, although I was very eager to write to you about the salvation we share, I felt compelled to write and urge you to contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to God’s holy people.”

GOD OUR SAVIOR

Jude 24–25: “To him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy—to the only God our Savior be glory, majesty, power and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all ages, now and forevermore! Amen.”

Why It Matters

Jude's short but powerful letter urges his readers to "contend for the faith." They were in danger of mixing error with God's truth. Our danger is no less as we live in an age of relativism and syncretism. Like the people of the early church, we need to hold to the truths taught in Scripture. Without becoming dogmatic in all sorts of minor theological issues, we should become grounded in the fundamentals of the faith.

Jude encourages his readers to be aware of false teachers, and, at the same time, to nurture their own spiritual growth. "But you, dear friends, by building yourselves up in your most holy faith and praying in the Holy Spirit, keep yourselves in God's love as you wait for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ to bring you to eternal life" (Jude 20–21). What does it mean for me to keep myself in God's love? What practical steps can I take to further edify myself in my faith?

REVELATION

Overview

1. What You Have Seen (1)
2. What Is Now (2–3)
3. What Will Take Place Later (4–22)

What Does It Say?

The book of Revelation is a fitting capstone to the Bible. As Genesis describes the beginnings of human history, Revelation depicts the consummation. While on the island of Patmos John writes to seven churches, disclosing his visions of coming judgment and restoration. Central to this book is the Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus is portrayed as the worthy Redeemer who possesses authority to judge wickedness and rule with perfect righteousness. With vivid imagery, Revelation paints the cosmic battle between God and His faithful people and the forces of evil who are bent on destroying God's plan.

The individual that stands out above all the others is the Lord Jesus Christ. Among the many descriptions, Jesus is the First and the Last, the Living One, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, the Lamb who looked as if it was slain, the rider called Faithful and True, the Word of God, King of Kings and Lord of Lords, the Alpha and the Omega, and the bright Morning Star.

Revelation contains many colorful characters including: the author John, the apostle and writer of the gospel of John; twenty-four elders; living creatures; numerous angels; colorful riders and their horses; Christian martyrs; 144,000 from the tribes of Israel; a woman clothed with the sun; an enormous red dragon, called Satan; a monstrous beast with seven heads and ten horns; another beast with two horns; three frog-like evil spirits; and a great prostitute who sits on a scarlet beast.

John wrote this book from Patmos, a tiny island off the coast of Asia Minor. It was one of the places to which the Romans banished their exiles. Tradition says that John was sent there by the Emperor Domitian in AD 95.

The recipients of this book are seven churches located in the cities of Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea. These cities were in Asia Minor, located about fifty miles apart.

JESUS CHRIST

Revelation 19:11–16: “I saw heaven standing open and there before me was a white horse, whose rider is called Faithful and True. With justice he judges and wages war. His eyes are like blazing fire, and on his head are many crowns. He has a name written on him that no one knows but he himself. He is dressed in a robe dipped in blood, and his name is the Word of God. The armies of heaven were following him, riding on white horses and dressed in fine linen, white and clean. Coming out of his mouth is a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations. ‘He will rule them with an iron scepter.’ He treads the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God Almighty. On his robe and on his thigh he has this name written: KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS.”

WORSHIP

Revelation 4:9–11: “Whenever the living creatures give glory, honor and thanks to him who sits on the throne and who lives for ever and ever, the twenty-four elders fall down before him who sits on the throne and worship him who lives for ever and ever. They lay their crowns before the throne and say: ‘You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they were created and have their being.’”

NEW HEAVEN & NEW EARTH

Revelation 21:1–4: “Then I saw ‘a new heaven and a new earth,’ for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, ‘Look! God’s dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. “He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death” or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.’”

Why It Matters

The book of Revelation is a magnificent picture book. Painted on these pages are colorful and wild portraits of the Lord Jesus Christ, thunderous choirs of redeemed saints, angels unleashing deadly plagues, bizarre beasts, martyred believers pleading for judgment to be carried out, the mother of prostitutes, and a glorious new heaven and earth. This is a book that evokes a sense of wonder and invites us to use our imagination. Above all, Revelation is a book that invites us to worship. We serve a God who is orchestrating history towards the ultimate glorification of His Son, Jesus. We follow a Lamb who is, indeed, worthy of our adoration and praise.

Revelation closes with a powerful invitation: “The Spirit and the bride say, ‘Come!’ And let the one who hears say, ‘Come!’ Let the one who is thirsty come; and let the one who wishes take the free gift of the water of life” (22:17). Have I taken a drink from that free gift? Do I continually satisfy my thirst from the true Giver of life?