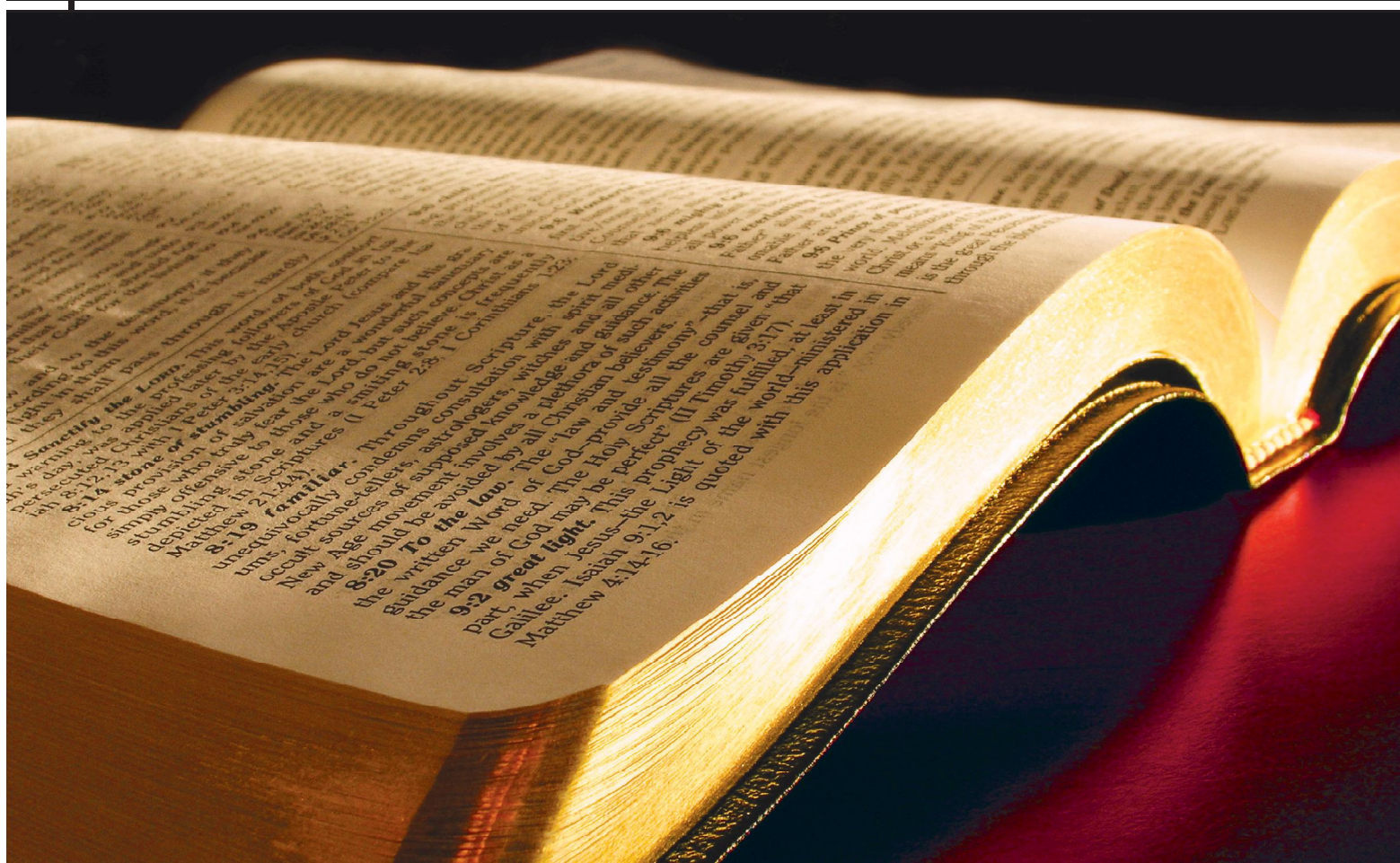


BIBLE OVERVIEW



BIBLE OVERVIEW

Bible Overview
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INTRODUCTION

Reading the Bible is an exciting spiritual, emotional, and intellectual adventure. It is an invitation to walk alongside God's people in Scripture and meet an awe-inspiring God. God invites us to have an intimate relationship with him. Through the Holy Spirit and the Scriptures, we get to know a loving, compassionate, graceful, stern, holy, and just God. Knowing God is a life-long journey. It is not an easy journey—as Israel's journey through the wilderness, for example, shows, or Paul's ministry in the book of Acts. However, God has promised to be with us through the journey: "My Presence will go with you, and I will give you rest" (Ex. 33:14), and "Surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age" (Matt. 28:20).

Whether you travel on your own or with other fellow travelers, *Bible Overview* is a tool to help you in your journey through the Bible. If you are teaching the Bible, *Bible Overview* is a fully **reproducible** book that you can share with those traveling alongside you.

Traveling through the Bible is similar to visiting a foreign, exotic country. Many things are familiar, while many others seem too strange for us to understand them. However, the experience leaves us transformed. Reading the Bible is a transformative experience. Gradually, the Holy Spirit renews our inner beings so we mature and grow in grace before God and other people. Sometimes on this journey we will face opposition and setbacks. Don't be discouraged; remember and be "confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus" (Phil. 1:6).

How Bible Overview Will Help You

- *Bible Overview* provides you with the **background** of each biblical book, so you can become acquainted with the lands and the cultures in the Bible. It's the who, what, where, and when of each book.
- We also explore the **purpose** of the biblical book. This section is similar to a compass that helps you navigate a trek through the mountains. It does not show the final destination, but it helps you get there.
- The **outline** of each book gives you a way to travel through the book, so you can enjoy the richness and beauty of the Scriptures.
- Knowing the major **themes** in each biblical book will also help you grasp the main message of each book. Keeping in mind the main message of the book will help you stay on the path as you travel.
- Recognizing the **key people** in the books of the Bible—particularly in the narrative books—helps us follow the story line. When we can follow the plot of the story, we begin to discern the way God interacts with people and nations. As you read the Bible, focus on the main characters. Humbly learn from their shortcomings, and gratefully recognize the wonderful things that God did in and through them.
- **Key verses** are nuggets of truth in each book that sum up the message of the book, contain important prophecies and words of Jesus, and help us focus our attention squarely on who God is and what he has promised.
- The section **Being God's People** is a reminder that one of the main functions of the Bible is to provide an identity to God's people. It helps us know who we are in Christ: a new creation, God's holy nation, and a royal priesthood (2 Cor. 5:17; 1 Peter 2:9). It helps us know about God's intense love for his creation, his compassion, and his merciful plan of salvation.
- Finally, recognizing that **Jesus is the center** and star of God's revelation, Bible Overview shows the way Jesus is present in each book of the Bible. Like the northern star that has guided sailors for hundreds of years, the light of Jesus guides us so we can understand God's plan of salvation.

How We Got the Bible

To begin this journey, knowing a few important facts about the Bible will give us the proper starting point.

1. God inspired the whole Bible (2 Tim. 3:16–17; 2 Peter 1:20–21).
2. The Bible is made up of 66 different books that were written over 1,000 years, by more than 40 individuals. The Old Testament has 39 books, and the New Testament has 27 books. The Hebrew Bible has the same text as the English Bible's Old Testament. However, the Hebrew Bible has different divisions and arrangements of the books.
3. The Old Testament was written mainly in Hebrew, with some Aramaic. The New Testament was written in a dialect of ancient Greek that merchants and travelers used.
4. The books of the Bible were collected and arranged and recognized as inspired sacred authority by councils of rabbis and councils of church leaders based on careful guidelines.
5. Before the printing press was invented, the Bible was copied by hand. The Bible was copied very accurately, in many cases by special scribes who developed intricate methods of counting words and letters to ensure that no errors had been made.
6. The Bible was the first book ever printed on the printing press with moveable type (Gutenberg Press, 1455, Latin Bible).
7. There is much evidence that the Bible we have today is remarkably true to the original writings. Of the thousands of copies made by hand before the year 1500, more than 5,900 Greek manuscripts from the New Testament alone still exist today. The text of the Bible is better preserved than the writings of Plato or Aristotle.
8. The discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls confirmed the astonishing reliability of some of the copies of the Old Testament made over the years. Although some spelling variations exist, no variation affects basic Bible doctrines.
9. As the Bible was carried to other countries, it was translated into the common language of the people by scholars who wanted others to know God's Word. By AD 200, the Bible was translated into seven languages; by 500, 13 languages; by 900, 17 languages; by 1400, 28 languages; by 1800, 57 languages; by 1900, 537 languages; by 1980, 1,100 languages; by 2006, 2,426 languages have some portions of the Scripture. Today there are still 2,000 people groups with no Bible in their own language. (Source: *The World Christian Encyclopedia*; Wycliffe, International.)

Reasons to Study the Bible

To know God. God created the heaven and the earth and everyone in it (Gen. 1–3). To know God is to have eternal life (John 17:3).

To enjoy and love God. Meditate on God’s character, principles, and promises. Rejoice in his love, care, and forgiveness (Ps. 119:12–18, 160–162; 1 Tim. 6:17).

To know God’s Word. The Scriptures were inspired by God. They teach us the truth and show us what is wrong in our lives. They straighten us out (2 Tim. 3:16).

To understand the Word. Jesus is called the Word because he is the ultimate communication from God. He existed from the beginning with God, he is God, and he created everything. He said that those who have seen him have seen the Father (John 1:1–3; 10:30; 12:44, 45; 14:7–9).

To learn direction in life. The Bible shows us what to do (Ps. 119:11).

To find comfort and hope. The Scriptures give us encouragement (Rom. 15:4).

To let God expose our innermost thoughts and desires. God’s Word helps us see ourselves as we really are and convicts us of sin so that we repent and change (Heb. 4:12–16).

To become pure and holy. Jesus prayed this for all believers that they would be set apart for God and his holy purposes (John 17:17–23).

To obey the Great Commandment. The more we know God, the more we can love him. The Great Commandment is to love God with all of our being and our neighbor as ourselves (Mark 12:29–31). And Jesus gave us a new commandment to love one another (John 13:34–35).

How to Study the Bible

Plan a study time. Decide on a quiet time and place to study God's Word and make it a daily habit, like eating. Some people get up early to spend time with God. Others study during the day or evening.

Pray. Ask God to help you understand his Word. Pray using your own words or something like this: "Lord, thank you for the Bible so that we will know who you are and what you want for our lives. Please help me understand it and do what you want me to do."

Read and re-read it. The Bible is the most important letter you can ever receive—a message from the God of the universe who made you, loves you, and wants to communicate with you. Open your "love letter" every day. Re-read each chapter and verse several times.

Know the author. Read Genesis to learn about God who created the world. All Scripture is inspired by God. God actually visited earth in the form of man—the man Christ Jesus. Jesus said, "I and my Father are one." Read the Gospel of John to learn about God's plan for you.

Take notes. Write notes about what you read. Use a specific notebook or "spiritual journal" especially for Bible study. You might want to underline key verses or write notes in the margin of your Bible.

Make the Bible your authority. Accept and believe that what the Bible says is true. You may not understand everything in the Bible, but obey and apply what you do understand.

Find a group. "As iron sharpens iron, so one person sharpens another" (Prov. 27:17). God gave his Word to his people. When you share what you are learning with other fellow believers, God will do amazing things. It will also help you to be accountable to someone.

Basic Principles of Bible Study

Look for God's over-all plan. The Old Testament reveals God's loving plan of salvation, from creation to prophecies of the future Messiah (the Savior). The New Testament reveals God's salvation of sinful humanity by the suffering, death, and resurrection of the Messiah, Jesus Christ, and reveals the everlasting kingdom of God.

Find the background of the books. Find out who wrote the books, the reason for writing, and the themes of the books. Ask "Who, What, Where, When, Why, and How?" Usually this information is in the first chapter or in the introduction of the book.

Read verses in context. Read the surrounding chapters and the verses before and after the verse you are studying. Get the whole picture. Don't study verses out of context. Look at the outline of the book.

Get the whole message of God's Word. Take the whole Bible as God's Word. Don't just concentrate on one verse or one idea. See if the teaching is explained more fully in other parts of the Bible. If you are using a study Bible, look at the small cross references in your Bible to help you find other verses on the same subject.

Discover the intended meaning. As you read the Bible, look for the author's intended meaning. What did the author want to say? What did it mean in that culture? What does it mean now? What are the main ideas? If you have questions, write them down, pray for insight, and discuss your ideas with others.

Learn the history and geography. Use a time line to learn about the history of the Bible. Use maps to learn about the geography of where the events took place.

Pay attention to figurative language. Figures of speech are word pictures that help us understand a truth. "Your word is a lamp for my feet, a light on my path" (Ps. 119:105) is a metaphor that helps us picture the Bible enlightening our minds and actions and giving us direction. "As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, my God" (Ps. 42:1) is a simile that compares ideas with the words "like" or "as." Similes occur over 175 times in the Psalms. Jesus used personification when he said if the people did not declare the mighty works they had seen God do, the stones would cry out in praise (Luke 19:40). Hyperbole (exaggeration) is found in Matthew 5:29–30 when Jesus speaks of eyes and hands causing one to stumble.

Know the forms of literature. The Bible contains various forms of literature: history, narrative, poetry and wisdom, prophecy, parables and letters. Recognizing each form will help you interpret the meaning. For example, parables explain a spiritual truth by means of a story or analogy. The parable of the Prodigal Son in Luke 15 does not refer to a specific historical person, but teaches that God is a loving father who joyfully welcomes back prodigal or rebellious children who later repent and return to him.

THE NEW TESTAMENT

Between the Old and the New Testaments

An approximate 400-year gap divides the events in the Old Testament and the birth of Jesus in the New Testament. The Old Testament ends around 400 BC when many Jews returned to Jerusalem from their exile in Babylon. They returned to rebuild the city and the temple.

This 400-year gap is known as the Intertestamental Period (meaning “between the testaments”) or the Second Temple Period (referring to the time after the temple was rebuilt). We learn about this era through a few important sources: the Apocryphal and the Pseudepigrapha books, the Dead Sea Scrolls, and the writings of Josephus.

- **The Apocrypha** – The Apocrypha, which in Greek means “the hidden books,” are not considered inspired by God, and were written during the Intertestamental Period, often in Greek, though some might have been written in Hebrew. These books—like Tobit, 1–2 Maccabees, and 1–2 Esdras—reveal a great deal about this period even if they are not part of the divine revelation.
- **The Pseudepigrapha** – The word means “false name,” and it is used for books written in the Intertestamental Period whose authors falsely attribute the books to famous names, like Moses, Enoch, and Isaiah.
- **The Dead Sea Scrolls** – Discovered in the mid-twentieth century near the Dead Sea, these writings contain the oldest copies of portions of the Old Testament, and also include other writings that give us insight into the religious and cultural life of the Intertestamental Period and the time of Jesus.
- **Josephus** – He was a first-century Jewish historian who wrote extensively on the history of the Jewish people and the struggles between the Romans and the Jews. His writings provide us with a portrait of first-century Judaism during the time of Jesus.

Historical Background to the New Testament

When dealing with the background to the New Testament, it is impossible to avoid important changes in the culture, politics, religion, and language in what had once been the kingdom of Israel. In the 500s BC when the Jews left Babylon to return to Jerusalem, the Persian Empire ruled from the borders of India to the eastern Greek islands. However, the Persian dominance did not last very long.

Alexander the Great, from Macedonia, a small kingdom to the North of Greece, began a campaign of expansion that overtook Greece and moved to the east to the very borders of India. In a few years, Alexander established an enormous kingdom.

However, he died at the peak of his power and abilities in 323 BC. The kingdom was divided among four of his generals. However, the cultural Greek influence was long-lasting. That was the beginning of the Hellenistic Period (331–146 BC).

Greek became the language of education and trade. As Greek expanded its influence, Greek culture also influenced and changed many other cultures; this became known as Hellenism. Alexander founded many cities, such as Alexandria in Egypt and Bactria in Central Asia—modern day Afghanistan—that became centers of Hellenic culture and influence.

Jerusalem and its surroundings were also under the influence of Hellenism. Both Ptolemies from Egypt and Seleucid from Syria dynasties (323–166 BC)—descendants of Alexander’s generals—ruled the area. The Second Temple Period, especially the history that the Maccabean books narrate, occurred under the Seleucid kings, most notably Antiochus IV Epiphanes. The title Epiphanes means “god manifest,” which shows his increasing megalomania during his rule (175–164 BC).

The Jews revolted and sought independence, which they achieved under the Maccabees and the Hasmonean dynasty, which ruled from 164–63 BC. As it was in the time of Ezra and Nehemiah, the Jews and their faith were once again under siege from the powerful and pervasive Hellenic influence. Under these difficult cultural conditions, the people of the land developed a tough and often legalistic understanding of religion. It became a fight for their cultural and religious survival.

Pharisees, Sadducees, and Essenes

From this time, three distinct groups emerged (there might have been more groups, but these three have survived the passing of time):

- **Pharisees:** The name probably means “set apart, be separated.” The group appears to have emerged during the religious and social reforms under the Maccabees. Without a king, the temple was even more important for the religious practices of the Jews. However, besides the temple, Judaism was practiced and studied in smaller houses of worship, the synagogues. Whereas the priests controlled life at the temple, the synagogues became the province of scribes and teachers of the Law, the Pharisees.
- **Sadducees:** The name means “the righteous ones,” and probably was a way to connect the group with Zadok the priest (2 Sam. 8:17). This group was in charge of the temple. The temple became the most important political symbol, and the group in charge of the temple dominated the political life of the region.

- Essenes: The name might be connected to a self-description in the Dead Sea Scrolls as “observers of the law.” Not much is known about this group. It appears that they followed a communal life, with a severe self-discipline and abstinence, daily cleansing rituals, and dedication to study the Law.

The Roman Empire

This period, the Hasmonean period, ended when the Romans conquered the region and imposed a regional government (63 BC–AD 324). The Romans governed the region first through King Herod and his successors, then through prefects (such as Pontius Pilate in Jerusalem). In time, the Jews revolted against the Roman yoke in AD 66, but this resulted in the Roman destruction of Jerusalem and the temple in AD 70.

Looking for a Messiah

The events in the New Testament take place in a time of political difficulties. The Roman Empire had tightened its fist around regions like Judea, with people unwilling to bow down to the Roman emperors. Many Jews hoped and prayed for a liberating Messiah to come and drive the Romans away from Jerusalem and rebuild the kingdom of David. God did send the Messiah, but he was not the Messiah they were expecting. He is much more than a political leader: he is the Savior who conquered death, defeated evil and sin, allows us a direct relationship with God, and offers eternal life. The New Testament tells us the story of this Messiah, Jesus Christ, his life, teachings, death, and resurrection.

In the Old Testament, we find God’s revelation through his works of creation and redemption of Israel, as well as through the law and the prophets. In the New Testament, God “has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom also he made the universe” (Heb. 1:2).

In Jesus, God reveals the fullness of his plans for humanity. God also establishes a new way of relating to people. This new relationship does not occur through the Sinai covenant but through the new covenant in Jesus’ blood. This new covenant, as God promised through the prophets, is now written in our hearts and sealed by God himself, the Holy Spirit. Through the ministry of Jesus and the Holy Spirit, God has created for himself a people, the body of Christ, the church.

The Beginning of the Church

The New Testament also tells the story of this new people, the church. It gives guidance, instruction, exhortations, and encouragement for the long journey home, for the mission that Jesus gave to his disciples, and for the times of persecution and trials.

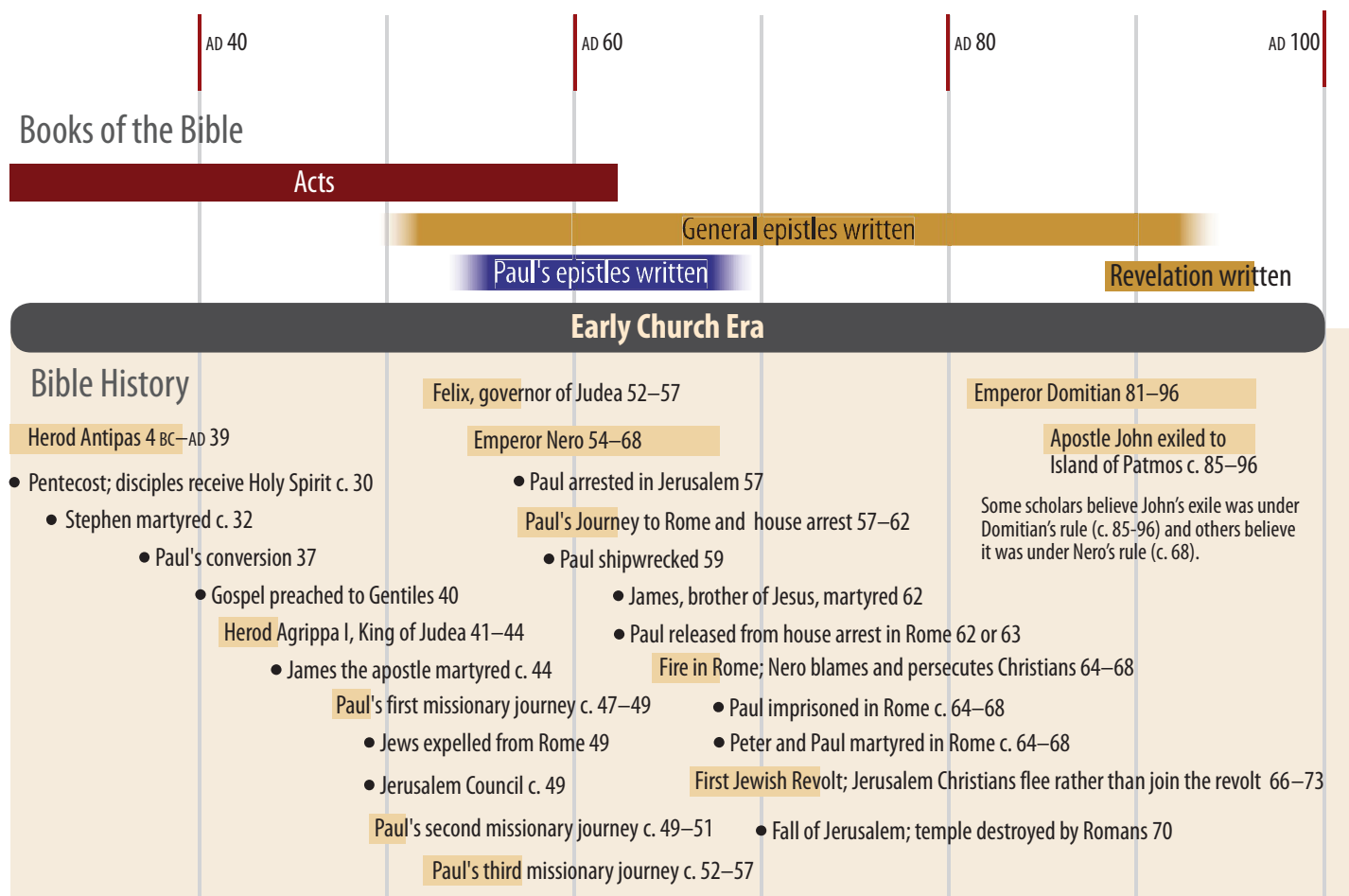
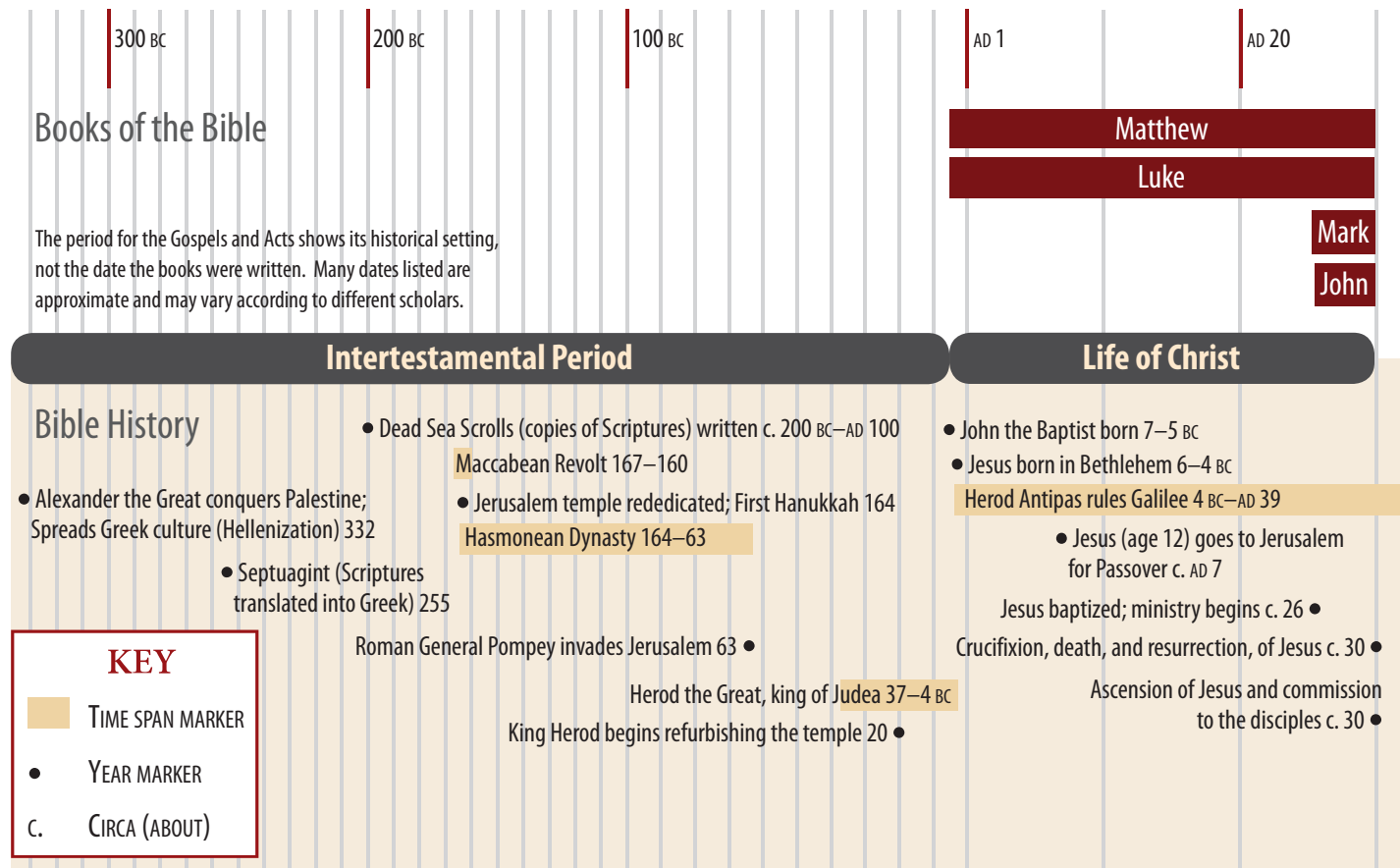
In the New Testament, we find what it means to be God’s people—the body of Christ, the purpose of our existence as Christ’s body, and the ultimate goal of each believer and the whole creation. In the New Testament we learn about God’s final solution to rescue humanity from sin and death.

Books of the New Testament

The New Testament consists of twenty-seven books. The four Gospels narrate the life of Jesus Christ and Acts tells the story of the first Christians. The twenty-one epistles are letters from early church leaders to churches and believers. Letters from the apostle Paul make up most of the epistles in the New Testament. The book of Revelation is unique in the New Testament because it is the only book that is written in an apocalyptic style; in other words, the book relates its message through signs, symbols, dreams, and visions.

Gospels & Acts	The Epistles & Revelation	
<i>Gospels:</i> Matthew Mark Luke John Acts	<i>Paul’s Epistles:</i> Romans 1 Corinthians 2 Corinthians Galatians Ephesians Philippians Colossians 1 Thessalonians 2 Thessalonians 1 Timothy 2 Timothy Titus Philemon	<i>General Epistles:</i> Hebrews James 1 Peter 2 Peter 1 John 2 John 3 John Jude Revelation

New Testament Time Line



NEW TESTAMENT HOLY LAND



GOSPELS & ACTS

THE LIFE THAT BRINGS NEW LIFE

What Are the Gospels?

The term *gospel* was used in the Roman world as an imperial proclamation, the good news of the deeds of the Caesar. However, in the New Testament, the good news these books present is about “Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God” (Mark 1:1). The Gospels tell a story about the actions and teachings of Jesus. In his life and words, Jesus proclaimed the coming of God’s kingdom. God’s promises to his people in the Old Testament are now fulfilled in Jesus.

However, we do not find just one story about Jesus. Rather we find four similar yet distinctive stories. Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John tell us about Jesus’ life and work from four related perspectives. Why are there four Gospels instead of just one? One answer is that it takes four points of view to get the whole story about Jesus. Some might argue that one authoritative story should be enough. However, God chose to reveal himself using four Gospels. The Gospel of John begins with these words: “In the beginning was the Word (1:1) ... and the Word became flesh (1:14). God chooses as his preferred method of communication to speak to humans by means of the human. This is true of the Bible and it is supremely true of Christ whom we are told is God in the flesh (John 1:14–18). So then, the Gospels are, like Jesus, both a Divine work as well as a human work. They have real human authors and one divine Author. They give details that might be difficult to understand, but they are never truly contradictory. They have four different points of view on the history of Jesus, but only one Divine conclusion as to his identity as the Son of God.

Gospels & Acts

Matthew
Mark
Luke
John
Acts

Gospel	Viewpoint	Audience	Jesus the Son of God
Matthew	Palestinian Jewish	A Jewish cultural world	Is he the Messiah the King of Israel?
Mark	Hellenistic Jewish	A Greek cultural world	Is he the power of God active in the World?
Luke	Greek-Roman	A Gentile world	Is he the ideal man of God?
John	Heavenly	The whole world	Is he the Word of God?

The Synoptic Gospels and John

The word *synoptic* means “seen together.” It refers to the first three Gospels: Matthew, Mark and Luke. When seen together, these Gospels often reveal related accounts in very similar language. Scholars agree there is some relationship between these three books. The exact nature of this relationship has been the subject of much debate. It seems that these three authors either read one another or some common source, which explains why so much of their content and language are so similar.

The Gospel of John, however, is different than the first three Gospels. John includes material that the other writers do not have. For example, in the feeding of the 5,000, the Synoptic Gospels show that Jesus talks to the disciples as a group, whereas the Gospel of John names specific individuals who talk with Jesus. Also the wording of some of the stories is different. John often adds details that the others do not include. For example, the name of the woman who washed Jesus’ feet with her hair (John 12:3), and that John beat Peter in a foot race to the empty tomb on Easter Sunday (John 20:4). Many of these details have a personal tone. On a more theological level, whereas the Synoptic Gospels emphasize the theme of the kingdom of God, the Gospel of John focuses on the concept of eternal life. In the Synoptic Gospels, Jesus’ miracles are illustrations of how the kingdom of God has already arrived through Jesus’ ministry. In the Gospel of John, miracles (there are no exorcisms in this Gospel) show that Jesus’ ministry is superior to Jewish institutions.

The Book of Acts

The book of Acts is a natural continuation of the Gospels. The good news of Jesus continues in the work of Jesus’ disciples in Jerusalem and throughout the world. In the book of Acts we find God’s plan for humanity being played out in the life of the early Christians, who embodied Jesus’ ministry and announced the good news of salvation to all peoples. Similar to the Historical Books in the Old Testament, the book of Acts gives identity to God’s people today by showing us how God’s mission spread to all people and nations of the world.

Although the apostles Peter and Paul play a significant role in the book, the main characters of the book are God and the church. The apostles Paul and Peter lay the foundations for the spread of the gospel and illustrate the ministry of the Holy Spirit through the apostles. Acts tells about the spread of the gospel. For that reason, some knowledge of the places Christians visited and of the cultures in those places helps us to better understand the importance of the book.

In a very real sense, the book of Acts is about us because we are members of Christ’s body. Understanding the book of Acts helps us understand our missions as followers of Christ.

MATTHEW

JESUS IS THE CLIMAX OF PROPHECY



Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5–7) by Henrik Olrik

The Kingdom of Heaven

Unlike the other Gospels that use the expression “the kingdom of God,” the Gospel of Matthew uses “the kingdom of heaven.” Since Matthew was probably writing to Christian Jews, he avoids using the name of God out of respect, as Jews continue to do to this day. However, both expressions refer to the same reality: the kingdom that Jesus set in motion through his birth, life, teaching, death, and resurrection.

Purpose

The Gospel of Matthew presents the life and ministry of Jesus as a fulfillment of the long awaited Messiah, David’s son, and heir to the kingdom. More than the other Gospels, Matthew focuses on the many ways that Jesus fulfilled the Old Testament promises and God’s grand plan of salvation for Israel and the world. In Greek, the first two words of the Gospel, often translated as “a record of genealogy,” can also be translated as “the book of genesis.” These words introduce Jesus’ royal line back to David and Abraham. Matthew presents Jesus as the true Israel in whom God’s promises are being fulfilled.

The Gospel focuses on both the life and the message of Jesus Christ. The overall structure of the book gives us a narrative of Jesus’ life as he traveled from Galilee to Jerusalem. Within this narrative of his life, Matthew includes Jesus’ five sermons about the kingdom of heaven. These “discourses” reveal the centrality of the kingdom in Jesus’ teaching and ministry.

Outline

1. Preparing the Way (1:1–4:11)
 - a. Birth (1:1–24)
 - b. Infancy (2:1–23)
 - c. John the Baptist (3:1–12)
 - d. Baptism (3:13–17)
 - e. Temptation (4:1–11)
2. A Great Light Shown in Galilee (4:12–18:35)
 - a. Beginning of ministry and calling of disciples (4:12–25)
 - b. First Discourse: The Morality of the Kingdom—The Sermon on the Mount (5:1–7:29)
 - c. Miracles and teaching (8:1–9:38)
 - d. Second Discourse: The Proclamation of the Kingdom—The Commission of the Twelve (10:1–42)
 - e. Opposition to the Messiah (11:1–12:50)
 - f. Third Discourse: The Mysteries of the Kingdom—Parables of the Kingdom (13:1–52)
 - g. Rejection in Nazareth and death of John the Baptist (14:1–12)
 - h. Miracles and teaching (14:13–15:39)
 - i. Opposition of Pharisees and Sadducees (16:1–12)
 - j. Peter's confession and Jesus predicts his own death (16:13–20)
 - k. The transfiguration: Jesus reveals his glory (17:1–13)
 - l. Miracles and teaching (17:14–27)
3. Jesus in Judea and Jerusalem (19:1–27:66)
 - a. Fourth Discourse: Life in the Kingdom (18:1–35)
 - b. Jesus' ministry in Judea and Perea (19:1–20:34)
 - c. Triumphal entry, the temple (21:1–17)
 - d. Controversies with Pharisees (21:18–23:39)
 - e. Fifth Discourse: The Final Coming of the Kingdom—The Olivet Discourse (24:1–25:46)
 - f. Prediction and the plot to kill Jesus (26:1–16)
 - g. Lord's Supper, Peter's denial predicted and Gethsemane (26:17–46)
 - h. Arrest, trial, and Peter's denial (26:47–75)
 - i. Judas' suicide (27:1–10)
 - j. Jesus before Pilate (27:11–31)
 - k. Crucifixion, death, burial, and the guard (27:32–66)
4. Triumph and Mission to All the World (28:1–20)
 - a. Resurrection (28:1–10)
 - b. Report of the guard (28:11–15)
 - c. Great Commission (28:16–20)



St. Matthew and the Angel by Rembrandt

Background

Author: The apostle Matthew, also known as Levi (Mark 2:14), was a tax collector, a Jewish citizen working for the Romans. When he identified himself as a tax collector, he lumped himself in with “sinners,” and he showed that it was not a very popular occupation (Matt. 9:9–13; 10:3).

Date: Determining when the book was written is difficult. Scholars suggest dates that range from the late AD 50s to the late 70s. There is no conclusive evidence to determine the date. Many people prefer an early date, some time around AD 60.

Audience: The emphasis on fulfilled prophecy, the use of the expression “the kingdom of heaven,” and a lack of explanation of Jewish customs suggest that Matthew might have had a Jewish Christian audience.

Themes

- Jesus announces the arrival of kingdom of heaven (4:17; 7:21; 11:11–12; 18:1–4,23; 25:1, 14).
- Jesus’ authority and preeminence over the law (5:21–22, 27–28), the temple (12:6), the Sabbath (12:8), the prophets (12:41), wisdom (12:42), and heaven and earth (28:18).
- Jesus’ reference to God as Father (5:45; 6:4–9; 7:11; 11:25–27; 12:50; 16:17; 18:10–19; 28:19).

Key Verses

“But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.”—Matt. 6:33

“All things have been committed to me by my Father. No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son, and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him. Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.”—Matt. 11:27–28

“All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I will be with you always, to the very end of the age.”—Matt. 28:18–20



Messiah

Derived from a Hebrew word, the word Messiah, as the Greek word Christ, means “anointed.” In the Old Testament, some people chosen for special tasks, such as kings, priests, and prophets, were anointed with oil. In time, as the prophets warned the Israelites about God’s judgment and promised God’s eventual restoration, the term Messiah referred to one who would come to rule Israel, restore the kingdom of David, and bring peace and prosperity to God’s people. Most Jews at the time of Jesus expected a military hero who would liberate them from Rome. However, Jesus was an unexpected Messiah. He did liberate people but not from Rome; rather from sin and death.

Prophecy — God's Promises Fulfilled

The Gospel of Matthew more than the other Gospels focuses on God's Old Testament prophecies being fulfilled in Jesus. Jesus fulfilled more than 100 Old Testament prophecies.

Old Testament Prophecy	Fulfillment in Matthew
A virgin shall bear a son who is "God with Us." Isa. 7:14	Jesus was born of a virgin. 1:23
He will be the "Branch" from David's line. Ps. 80:15; Isa. 4:2; 11:1; Jer. 23:5; 33:15; Zech. 3:8; 6:12	Jesus came from Nazareth. The name Nazareth comes from the word for branch or shoot. 2:23
The northern territory of Israel will see the revelation or his coming. Isa. 9:1–2	Jesus ministered in Galilee. 4:15–16
His life and death will be healing to people. Isa. 53:4	Jesus saved and healed people. 8:17
He will be kind, gentle, and humble. Isa. 42:1–4	Jesus was incredibly kind, gentle and humble. 12:18–21
He will speak and many will not understand. Isa. 6:9–10	Jesus spoke in parables. 13:35
He will be struck and his followers will be scattered. Isa. 53:4–5; Zech. 13:7	Jesus' was arrested and his disciple fled. 26:31–56

Being God's People

As Christians, we are followers of Jesus and citizens of the kingdom of heaven. To us, God revealed the morality of the kingdom of heaven, commissioned us to spread the good news of the kingdom, revealed the mysteries of the kingdom, instructed us to live in the kingdom, and encouraged and comforted us with the promise that the kingdom of heaven will take over all of life when Jesus returns. As people of the kingdom, we serve the King of kings and Lord of lords, before whom "every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth" (Phil. 2:10).

MARK

JESUS IS THE HUMBLE SERVANT



Christ Healing the Blind Man (Mark 8:22–25) by Gioacchino Assereto

Purpose

The Gospel of Mark presents “the beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God” (1:1). Mark’s Gospel, then, is the starting point of the good news (the gospel) that the awaited Messiah has come. This Messiah is the Son of God. In Mark, a variety of characters identify Jesus as the Son of God:

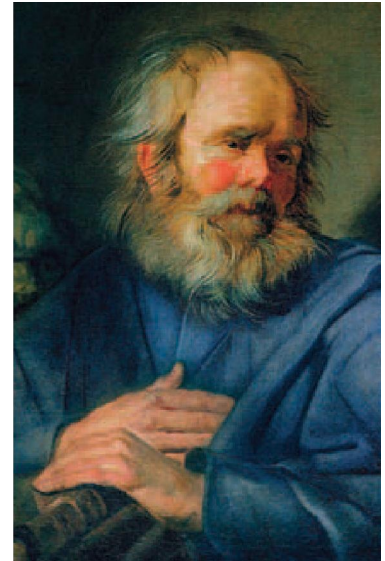
- God the Father (1:11; 9:7)
- The demons (3:11; 5:7)
- Jesus himself (13:32; 14:61)
- The Roman centurion (15:39)

Mark’s main interest is to present the good news. Jesus’ first words in the Gospel introduce the good news: “The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!” (1:15). Mark shows that the good news of God’s rule over all things has come near. This rule is revealed by Jesus’ teachings and miracles. Mark presents Jesus as God’s active agent, his power in the world, and his means of defeating sin, death, and the Devil (1:27–28).

In Mark, Jesus, although the Messiah with divine authority (2:1–12; 9:2–8), appears in humility, weakness, and suffering. These themes suggest that Mark is probably writing to a community in distress and persecution. The Gospel of Mark, then, is an account of the good news, Jesus' life in words and actions, and is meant to encourage, comfort, and give hope to a community under duress.

Outline

1. Beginning of Jesus' Ministry (1:1–13)
 - a. John the Baptist prepares the way (1:1–8)
 - b. Jesus' baptism and temptation (1:9–13)
2. Jesus' Public Ministry (1:14–8:26)
 - a. Calling of disciples (1:14–45)
 - b. Controversies with the Jewish authorities (2:1–3:12)
 - c. Teachings and power of the kingdom (3:13–6:6a)
 - d. Jesus' ministry beyond Galilee (6:6b–8:26)
3. Toward Jerusalem, Passion, Death, and Resurrection (8:27–16:8)
 - a. Crisis foretold (8:27–10:52)
 - b. Arrest, death, and resurrection (11:1–16:8)



St. Mark by Frans Hals

A Personal Touch

Both Matthew and Mark give the name of the man who helped Jesus carry his cross, Simon of Cyrene. But only Mark names him as the father of Alexander and Rufus (15:21). Years later in Paul's letter to the Romans we hear of another Rufus and his mother in Rome (Rom. 16:13), who might be the same person Mark names in his Gospel. Mark's reference might be a personal touch naming someone whom the Roman Christians might know.

Background

Author: An early church tradition holds that John Mark, a friend of Paul and cousin to Barnabas (Acts 12:12; Col. 4:10), wrote this work after being a disciple of the apostle Peter (1 Peter 5:13). The church leaders Papias, Irenaeus, and Clement of Alexandria, in the first and second centuries AD, are the source of this tradition. The rapid-fire style of the Gospel may show some influence from Peter's own writing style. We first learn about Mark in connection to his mother. Believers met at her house to worship (Acts 12:12). He accompanied Paul and Barnabas in their first missionary journey (Acts 12:25). After deserting them in Perga (Acts 13:13), he followed Barnabas to Cyprus.

Date: Many scholars believe Mark was the first to write his Gospel. If this is true, Mark might have written the Gospel in the late AD 50s. Other scholars suggest a later date just before the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple in AD 70.

Audience: If Mark wrote his Gospel in Rome, as many scholars think, it is possible his intended audience was Roman. The theme of suffering, power of God, and hope for the future, as well as the explanation of Jewish customs, suggest that Mark's audience could have been a community of Gentile believers under persecution and suffering, such as the church in Rome.

The Son of God and Son of Man

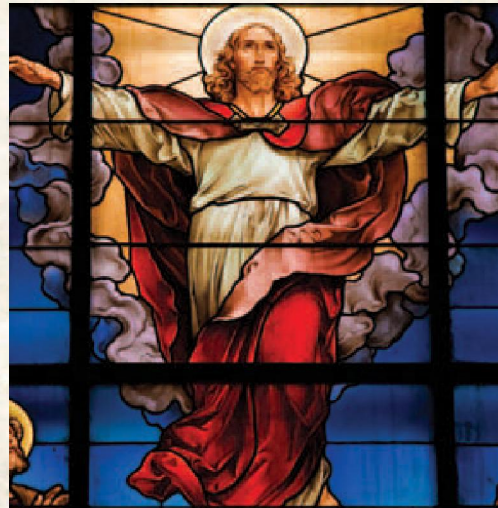
Son of God

As Christians, when we read the words “Son of God,” we immediately and correctly think of the second member of the Trinity, Jesus. However, at the time Jesus lived on earth, that was not the natural meaning of the expression.

The expression is connected to God’s promise to David. God promised that one of David’s descendants would be on the throne of Israel forever: “I will be his father, and he will be my son” (2 Sam. 7:14). The expression is also connected to Israel as a people. God is the “father of Israel” (Isa. 64:8; Jer. 31:9). The expression, then, “Son of God” referred back to the king; it was royal language. Initially, calling Jesus “the Son of God” meant that he was Israel’s king, descendant of David, the Messiah.

Most non-Jewish people within the Roman Empire would recognize the expression “Son of God” as referring to the Caesar. By affirming that Jesus is “the Son of God,” the Gospels indirectly deny that any Caesar can truly hold that title.

However, in time, the disciples and all the people realized that Jesus was more than just David’s son. As the Roman centurion confessed, “surely this man was the Son of God” (Mark 15:39). Jesus is King, but he is not King of Israel alone. He is the King of kings and God himself in the flesh.



Son of Man

Mark also affirms that Jesus is the “Son of Man.” This expression occurs in three different contexts:

1. Jesus’ earthly ministry (Mark 2:10, 28; 8:20; 13:37; 16:13; 18:11)
2. Jesus’ humiliation and suffering (Mark 8:31; 9:31; 10:33; 9:12; 10:45)
3. The future coming in judgment (Mark 8:38; 14:62)

The expression “Son of Man” is likely connected to the prophet Daniel’s vision of one “like a son of man” who receives victory and dominion from God (Dan. 7:14–18). “Son of Man,” then, also expresses the promise of a King, one who would defeat the forces of evil (the four beasts in Daniel) and establish God’s eternal kingdom. Thus, the two expressions, Son of God and Son of Man, are complementary and point to Jesus’ role as King and Messiah.

Themes

- **The Gospel.** The gospel must be preached (8:35; 10:29; 13:10; 14:9).
- **The Nature of God.** God is passionate and compassionate.
- **Jesus' Emotions.** Mark shows us Jesus' emotions: compassion (1:41; 6:34; 8:2); anger (3:5; 10:14); weariness (7:34; 8:12); overwhelming sorrow (14:33–34).
- **Jesus' Passion.** Mark focuses a major portion of his work on Jesus' Passion (his last hours and crucifixion) and the events leading up to it (chapters 10–16).
- **The Goodness of God.** God is unstoppably good. (1:32–34; 3:10–11; 5:18–20; 6:47–56; 7:33–37; 10:27; 11:22–23; 16:6–7).
- **The Messianic Mystery.** In the Gospel of Mark, Jesus warned different people to not reveal to others that he was the Messiah (Mark 1:43–44; 1:34; 3:11–12; 5:43; 7:36; 8:30; 9:9). Because first century Jews expected the Messiah to be a conquering hero, Jesus revealed slowly his true nature as the Messiah.

Curious Details

Some think that the unnamed “young man wearing nothing but a linen garment” in Mark 14:51–52 is a reference to Mark himself. This may be so, but it is certainly an example of detail that often Mark alone provides. Alternatively, the reference might be one of those curious details that an aged witness—perhaps Peter—would recall in his memoirs of those amazing events surrounding the death of Jesus.

Key Verses

“For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it.”—Mark 8:3

Filled with compassion, Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man.—Mark 1:41

“Don’t be alarmed,” he said. “You are looking for Jesus the Nazarene, who was crucified. He has risen! He is not here.”—Mark 16:6

Being God’s People

Marks presents two equally important sides of Jesus. On the one hand, Jesus is “the Son of God,” full of power and authority, which he demonstrates through many miracles and teaching with authority. On the other hand, Jesus is humble, unassuming, obedient, and a servant.

With that presentation, the Gospel challenges our normal concept of leadership: to be a leader does not mean having power and being feared like the Caesars. Rather, it means to be humble, obedient, and have the heart of a servant. Jesus was a servant-leader through whom God’s power shone brightly.

The Gospel of Mark presents the “beginning of the gospel ... ” The gospel continues through the life and ministry of each and every Christian since Christ ascended until he returns in power and glory.

LUKE

THE GOSPEL FOR THE WORLD



Jesus' Entry into Jerusalem (Luke 19:28–43)

Luke, Mark, and Paul

Luke as the author of both the Gospel and Acts is the most prolific writer of the New Testament. Paul wrote more books, but Luke wrote more pages. Luke knew John Mark as well (Col. 4:10, 14; Philem. 24). It is a common view among scholars that Mark's Gospel was one of the source materials used by Luke (1:1–2). Many scholars point to Luke's use of Mark's basic outline of events. To this Luke adds much more material and his own insight in the development of his Gospel.

Purpose

Luke's main purpose is to show that the good news of Jesus is meant for the whole world. First, Luke addresses the book to Theophilus who was probably a Gentile, an indication that Luke saw the gospel message as not only for the Jewish people. Second, the sending of the seventy—or seventy-two—disciples occurs only in Luke (10:1–24). For many rabbis, seventy was the number of languages of the world. Sending seventy disciples meant that the gospel was being preached to the whole world.

In addition, Luke, who is also thought to be the author of the book of Acts, wants to show how Jesus' ministry is extended to the disciples at the end of the Gospel and into Acts.

Theophilus

Both of Luke and Acts are addressed to a certain Theophilus whom the author calls “most excellent” (Luke 1:3; Acts 1:1) The same Greek word is applied to Felix (Acts 24:3) and Festus (Acts 26:25) both Roman governors. Theophilus may have been a Roman official. Another possibility is that he was a Christian convert who became Luke’s patron. Books were expensive, and only a few people and groups were able to afford them. It was common to have a wealthy patron who would keep the books and grant access to others to read. Theophilus might have financed Luke’s writing, paid for copies of the books, and granted churches access to the books.

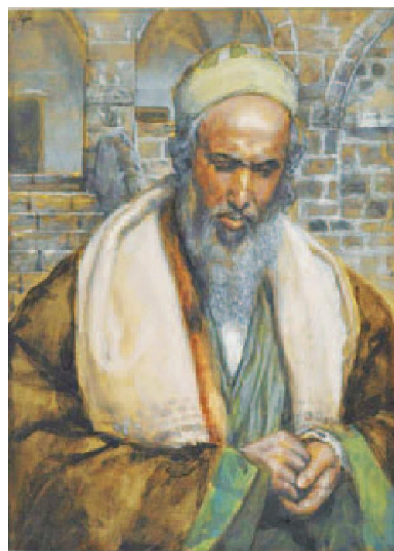
Outline

1. Prologue (1:1–4)
2. Birth of Jesus (1:5–2:52)
3. Preparation for Jesus’ Ministry (3:1–4:13)
4. The Work in Galilee (4:14–9:50)
 - a. Beginning of his ministry in Galilee (4:14–5:16)
 - b. Beginning of conflicts (5:17–6:11)
 - c. Jesus and his disciples (6:12–49)
 - d. Identity of Jesus (7:1–50)
 - e. Teachings of Jesus (8:1–21)
 - f. The power of Jesus (8:22–56)
 - g. Jesus and the twelve disciples (9:1–50)
5. The Ministry on the Way to Jerusalem (9:51–19:27)
 - a. Ministry in Judea (9:51–13:21)
 - b. Ministry in and around Perea (13:22–19:27)
6. The Work in Jerusalem (19:28–24:53)
 - a. Triumphal entry and cleansing of the temple (19:28–48)
 - b. Authority of Jesus questioned (20:1–47)
 - c. The Olivet Discourse (21:1–37)
 - d. Last Supper (22:1–38)
 - e. Gethsemane (22:39–46)
 - f. Jesus arrested (22:47–65)
 - g. Jesus, Pilate, and Herod (22:66–23:25)
 - h. The crucifixion (23:26–56)
 - i. The resurrection and appearances (24:1–49)
 - j. The ascension (24:50–53)

Background

Author: Luke is thought to be the author, based on a second century (100s) tradition that names him as the author of this Gospel as well as Acts. Also, evidence from the two books and Paul’s letters make that conclusion more likely. The introductions to Luke and Acts seem to connect the books; both are addressed to Theophilus (Luke 1:3; Acts 1:1).

It is likely that Luke was a Gentile, well educated, companion and friend of Paul, and possibly the same Luke the physician mentioned in Colossians 4:14. Luke followed Paul from his second missionary journey through the time of Paul’s house arrest in Rome (2 Tim. 4:11).



St. Luke by James J. Tissot

Date: Tradition says that Paul was martyred sometime late in the persecution of Christians by Roman Emperor Nero (AD 64–68). Thus, Luke probably wrote both his books around AD 60–62 before the fires in Rome for which Nero falsely blamed and persecuted Christians.

Audience: The Gospel of Luke was most likely intended for a Gentile audience. It is presented as a biography similar to other works of its day. The book is historical, although not in the same way we think of a historical book. It is historical in the sense of being a character portrait of Jesus the man, his work and, if Acts is included, his continuing work in and through others.

The Gospels as Biography

Modern Biographies	Ancient Biographies
Biographies place a premium on historical sequencing. This means that the events of the subject's life are typically narrated in the order in which they happened. Beginning with the birth of the individual, relevant events and information are viewed in sequential order up to the death of the subject. While chapters may present different phases in the subject's life, these phases are arranged in the order in which they are supposed to have happened.	Ancient biographers had a general commitment to an historical sequence. They did not feel the need to place every detail in their writings in the exact order in which it happened. Much more emphasis is given to developing an accurate picture of the character of the subject. Deeds and happenings are seen as illustrative of that character no matter when they occurred.
<p>Example:</p> <p>Luke 7:36–50 is an example of the non-sequential nature of ancient biographies. This passage is Luke's account of the woman who anointed Jesus' feet. Matthew, Mark and John tell this event as part of Jesus' arrival at Bethany just before the events of Easter week. Despite Luke's care as an accurate historian (Luke 1:1–4), he places this event much earlier in Jesus' ministry.</p> <p>Some have tried to resolve the difficulty by suggesting that there were two such events, two times when various women anointed Jesus' feet. But scholars think that the details of Luke's account too closely resemble the other Gospel accounts to make it a separate incident.</p> <p>It is possible that Luke (and so the Holy Spirit) placed this event out of historical sequence to illustrate the coming of the kingdom of God through the Messiah Jesus. This story, like the stories before it, illustrate the kind of Messiah Jesus is: one who heals—like the story of the centurion and the widow's son show—and one who forgives, as the story of the woman who anoints Jesus' feet shows. For Luke, this story helps demonstrate who the Messiah is, which was more important than placing the story in historical sequence as the other Gospels do.</p>	

Themes

- The presence and ministry of the Holy Spirit (1:15; 1:35; 3:22; 4:1, 14, 18; 10:21; 24:49).
- Luke, like Matthew, lays emphasis on the kingdom and Jesus as king (4:43; 6:20; 7:28; 9:2; 10:9–11; 12:32; 13:18–29; 14:15–24; 17:20–21; 18:15–17; 19:11–27).
- Luke focuses on the spiritual realm with frequent references to angels (more than twenty times) and the hidden reality of God (1:11, 26; 2:9, 13; 9:28–36; 22:43; 24:15–31).
- God’s care for the poor and the disadvantaged in society (5:12–14; 6:17–26; 8:36–50; 13:10–17; 18:9–17; 19:1–10; 21:1–4).
- Jesus as the perfect spiritual man (3:23, 38).

Gospel

The word *gospel* translates the Greek word *euangelion*, which means “good news.” Around the time Jesus was born, the term *euangelion* was used to announce the birth of the emperor’s (Caesar’s) son and future Caesar. The Roman empire promised a *pax romana*, a Roman peace, that would benefit all peoples. Caesar was regarded as the son of the gods, divinely chosen to rule the world. The gospel in the New Testament refers to the birth of the true King, one who came first to be a humble servant and a savior, and then he will rule as the rightful King of all forever. The gospel is the good news about Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection, and the new life that he offers to all who repent and believe in him as their King and Savior.

Key Verses

“The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”—Luke 4:18–19 (Isa. 61:1–2)

“Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.”—Luke 6:20

The centurion, seeing what had happened, praised God and said, “Surely this was a righteous man.”—Luke 23:47

Being God’s People

The Gospel of Luke presents the ongoing importance, relevance, and necessity of the good news for all humans. The presence of the kingdom of God now is seen the work of the Holy Spirit who equips, guides, and empowers believers to continue the work that Jesus began. Besides the wondrous salvation Jesus accomplished on the cross, Jesus was also an example of what it means to live and serve God in his kingdom. Empowered and led by the Holy Spirit, all Christians are entrusted to continue Jesus’ ministry until he returns, as he promised.

JOHN

THE WORD BECAME FLESH



The Descent from the Cross (John 19:31–42) by Peter Paul Rubens

Purpose

The Gospel of John makes its purpose clear: “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” (John 20:31).

The Gospel of John seems to have two main purposes:

1. For teaching, in that it presents Jesus as the Messiah, the Son of God in the flesh and helps believers to continue exercising their faith in Christ.
2. For evangelism, in that it leads people to have faith in Jesus the Messiah.

In addition, the Gospel of John also seems to argue against the view that the material world is evil and worthless. By showing Jesus, the Word, becoming flesh, the Gospel of John shows that the material world, although sinful and dominated by the powers of evil, is worth redeeming and is valuable to God.

Outline

1. Prologue: The Word of God Becomes Flesh (1:1–18)
2. Preparation and Start of Ministry (1:19–2:11)
 - a. John the Baptist and Jesus' baptism (1:19–34)
 - b. Beginning of discipleship (1:35–51)
 - c. First miracle in Galilee (2:1–2:11)
3. First Passover—First Year (2:12–4:54)
 - a. Cleansing the temple (2:12–25)
 - b. Jesus and Nicodemus (3:1–21)
 - c. Jesus and John the Baptist (3:22–36)
 - d. Jesus and the Samaritan woman (4:1–42)
 - e. Healing at Cana (4:43–54)
4. Second Passover—Second Year (5:1–6:2)
 - a. Healing at the pool (5:1–15)
 - b. Opposition from the Jewish leaders (5:16–47)
 - c. Miracles in Galilee (6:1–2)
5. Third Passover—Third Year (6:3–11:57)
 - a. Jesus the bread of life (6:3–71)
 - b. Jesus the living water—Feast of Tabernacles (7:1–8:11)
 - c. Jesus the light of the world (8:12–41)
 - d. Jesus the I AM (8:42–59)
 - e. Jesus heals a blind man (9:1–41)
 - f. Jesus the gate of the sheepfold and good shepherd (10:1–21)
 - g. Jesus and the Father are one—Feast of Dedication (10:22–42)
 - h. Jesus the resurrection and life (11:1–11:57)
6. Last Passover—Easter Week (12:1–19:42)
 - a. Jesus anointed at Bethany (12:1–11)
 - b. Triumphal entry into Jerusalem (12:12–19)
 - c. Jesus predicts his death (12:20–50)
 - d. Jesus in the upper room with his disciples (13:1–17:26)
 - e. Jesus' arrest, trial, and crucifixion (18:1–19:42)
7. The Resurrection and Appearances (20:1–31)
8. Epilogue (21:1–25)



John, "the disciple whom Jesus loved"
Mosaic of the Last Supper of Christ

Background

Author: The authorship of this Gospel has raised much discussion among scholars. According to a well-known tradition of the church, John the apostle wrote this book. This view is based on the witness of Irenaeus and other second-century church leaders. Irenaeus had close contact with at least two disciples of John. He affirmed that John

wrote his Gospel after all the others had written theirs. Other scholars have suggested that there was another John, John the Elder, who may have been responsible for the Gospel. The Gospel itself refers to “the disciple whom Jesus loved” (John 13:23; 19:26; 20:2; 21:7), who probably is John, the author of the book. It is likely that John also wrote the letters of 1, 2, and 3 John and the book of Revelation.

Date: Some scholars have suggested this Gospel was written first because it is so very different and independent of the other three, but most consider the work later than the Synoptic Gospels—Matthew, Mark, and Luke. With that assumption, a likely period for the writing is AD 85–95.

Audience: Tradition holds that John wrote his Gospel while living in Ephesus. Ephesus was a cosmopolitan port city of great importance. It already had a Jewish presence including followers of John the Baptist early on in the days of Paul’s missionary work (Acts 19:1–12). The apostle John’s care in describing Jesus’ ministry and the ministry of John the Baptist (1:19–37; 3:22–36) may reflect the apostle’s concern for his Jewish audience. But John’s Gospel also appealed to Gentiles by using the term “Word” (*Logos*), which for the larger Gentile audience would have carried the idea of “the Divine Mind” behind creation.

Themes

The Persons of the Trinity. John shows the relationship of Jesus to the Father through the Spirit (1:1–18; 3:13–21; 4:21–26; 5:16–47; 6:32–63; 7:28–29; 8:14–58; 10:17–18, 22–39; 12:44–50; 14:1–31; 15:1–16:33). The Gospel focuses on Jesus’ connection to the Father. It is this relationship in the power and love of the Holy Spirit that is at the center and foundation of everything else from creation to salvation.

Contrasting Realities. Unlike the other Gospels that focus on the contrast between the present and the future, the Gospel of John focuses on two realities: the heavenly and the worldly realities (8:23; 16:11; 18:36). John makes this contrast using several important images:

1. Darkness and Light (1:5; 8:12; 9:5; 12:35–36)
2. Flesh and Spirit (1:13; 3:6; 4:24; 6:63)
3. The Old and the New (2:1–25)

The heavenly realm refers to God’s rule, which is characterized by light, life, and the presence of the Spirit.

Logos

The Greek word *logos* was an important word in the Greek understanding of the world at the time. Based on a philosophy called Stoicism, many Greeks believed that the world was in constant change (just like the water of a river going under a bridge). However, the universe had an eternal principle (the *logos*) that gave order, meaning, and allowed morality to be possible. It is likely that John referred to this concept when using the term for Jesus (1:1). Most Gentile believers would have known about the Greek *logos* and understood how John was using the term.

It is also likely that John had in mind an Old Testament usage of the term. *Logos* can also simply mean “word.” The Greek translation of the Old Testament—the Septuagint—uses *logos* to translate the Hebrew for “the word of the LORD.” The expression refers to the active and revealing activity of God. Jesus reveals the Father (John 17:6; Heb. 1:2). In fact, Jesus affirms that “this is eternal life: that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent” (John 17:3).

The worldly realm—the “world” in the Gospel—refers to the usurping rule of Satan, which is characterized by darkness, death, and sin. One of Jesus’ missions was to unmask Satan as the false ruler he is. Jesus is the only rightful ruler of the whole world (*kosmos* in Greek).

The Seven “I Am’s”

1. “I am the bread of life” (6:35)
2. “I am the light of the world” (8:12; 9:5)
3. “I am the door” (10:7, 9)
4. “I am the good shepherd” (10:11)
5. “I am the resurrection and the life” (11:25)
6. “I am the way, the truth, and the life” (14:6)
7. “I am the true vine” (15:1)

Love. Love is a central theme in the writings of John: the Gospel and the letters of John.

Identity of Jesus. Jesus’ teachings about himself reveal that he is God’s Son (6:35; 7:37–38; 8:12, 58; 10:1–21; 13:12–17; 14:6; 18:36–37). He came to the world for two main reasons: to reveal the Father and to die for the world. In the book of John, Jesus teaches the famous seven “I am’s” to illustrate with powerful images who he is. All the images come from the Old Testament. In them, Jesus identifies with God because he is God.

The Holy Spirit. Although the other Gospels also teach about the Holy Spirit, the emphasis

in the Gospel of John is unique. The Holy Spirit is sent as a result of Jesus’ death and resurrection. The Holy Spirit’s ministry anticipates the full coming of the kingdom (chapters 14–16).

Jesus and Miracles. Jesus’ miracles are signs of his identity as the Incarnate Son of God (2:11; 4:46–54; 5:1–15; 6:1–21; 9:1–41; 11:1–45; 20:1–31).

Key Verses

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.... The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.—John 1:1, 14

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. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.—John 3:16–17

“I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.”—John 15:5

Being God’s People

The Gospel of John reveals God’s wonderful promise of a new birth into an abundant life. God challenged his people to take hold of that promise offered in his Son Jesus. As Jesus prepared his disciples to continue his ministry, he promised to send the very same Spirit that empowered him to be their teacher, counselor, and comforter.

ACTS

THE STORY OF THE EARLY CHURCH



Apostle Paul Preaching on the Ruins by Giovanni Paolo Pannini

Purpose

The book of Acts continues where the Gospel of Luke left off, with Jesus' resurrection. In the Gospel of Luke we meet the Word of God—Jesus—acting through the power of the Holy Spirit. Jesus, the Messiah, fulfills God's promises to Israel and brings good news to all people from all walks of life. In the book of Acts, Luke continues the story about God's work in history. Acts tells the story of what the disciples did as a response to Jesus' commissioning (Acts 1:4–5, 8). Through the power of the Holy Spirit, the apostles continued the work that Jesus began.

Luke presents not a history in the academic sense that we use that word today. He presents a selective history, a history that helps him accomplish several important purposes:

1. *A Proclamation Purpose:* The book of Acts proclaims the good news of Jesus. In the narration of events, and in the speeches, we find a basic presentation of the good news that was pivotal for the life of the early church and is still useful today.
2. *An Apologetic Purpose:* Judaism was a legal religion in the Roman empire. This means that the Jews were free to practice their religion as they saw fit. At first, Christianity was seen as a division of Judaism. However, both Jews and Christians

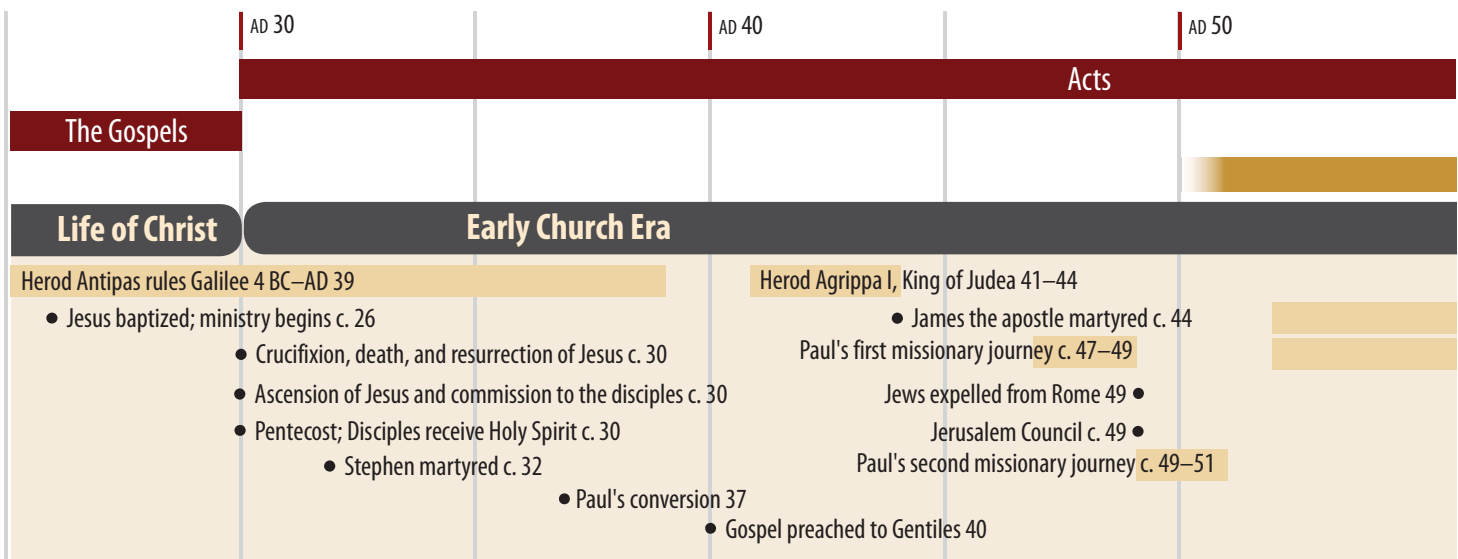
soon separated themselves from each other. Christians had to show the citizens of Rome that Christianity was not dangerous, but rather a source of blessings for all. This apologetic purpose is best seen in the speeches of Peter (2:14–40; 3:12–26; 4:8–12), Stephen (7:1–53), and Paul (13:10–42; 17:22–31; 20:17–25; 21:40–22:21; 23:1–6; 24:10–21; 26:1–29), and the encounters with the Roman government officers (13:4–12; 18:9–17; 22:22–23:11; 24:1–27; 25:1–26:32).

3. *A Unifying Purpose:* As the church was growing out, numerically and geographically, the issue how to include Gentiles came to the forefront. Although both the Gospel of Luke and the book of Acts emphasize the mission to the Gentiles, the work among the Jews was equally important. By focusing both on Peter who ministered primarily in Jerusalem and Paul who ventured to spread the gospel to the Gentile world, the book of Acts shows the importance of preaching the gospel to Jew and Gentile alike.

4. *A Teaching Purpose:* The book of Acts was meant to be a book of instruction for the many new believers throughout the Roman empire. Believers needed to know the origin of their faith (Gospel of Luke) and the way the power of the gospel spread through the empire (book of Acts). As believers could trace God's actions in the Old Testament, they could also trace the actions of the Holy Spirit in their time. The history of the book of Acts is the history of God's people, and it shows how the Holy Spirit is moving throughout the world through believers' words and actions.

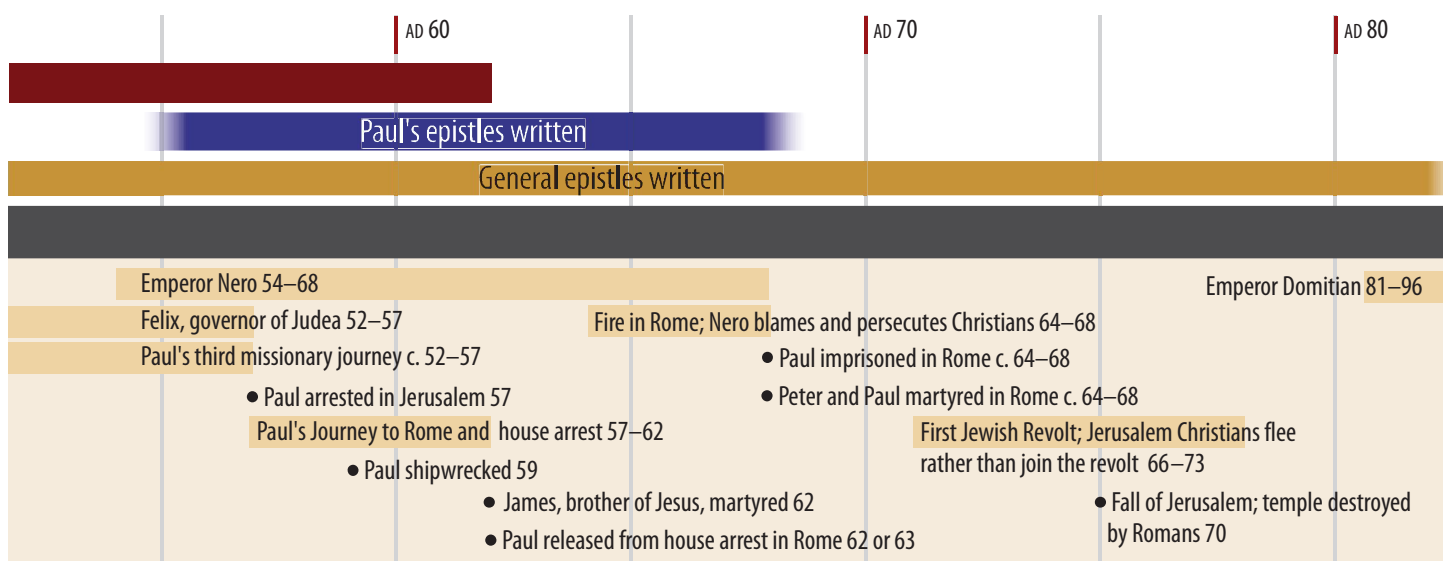


Pentecost (Acts 2) by Titian



Outline

1. The Work Jesus Continues with the Apostles (1:1–11)
2. The Mission in Jerusalem (1:12–8:3)
 - a. The ministry of Peter (1:12–5:42)
 - b. The ministry of Stephen (6:1–8:3)
3. The Mission in Samaria and Judea (8:4–11:18)
 - a. The ministry of Philip (8:4–40)
 - b. The conversion of Saul (Paul) (9:1–31)
 - c. The ministry of Peter continues (9:32–11:18)
4. The Mission to the Ends of the Earth (11:19–28:31)
 - a. The ministry of Barnabas (11:19–30)
 - b. The conclusion of Peter's ministry (12:1–19a)
 - c. The death of Herod Agrippa I (12:19b–25)
 - d. The ministry of Paul and Barnabas: First missionary journey (13:1–14:28)
 - e. The Jerusalem Council (15:1–35)
 - f. The ministry of Paul and Silas: Second missionary journey (15:36–18:22)
 - g. The ministry of Paul: Third missionary journey (18:23–21:14)
 - h. Paul in Jerusalem (21:15–23:10)
 - i. Paul in Caesarea (23:11–26:32)
 - j. Paul taken to Rome (27:1–28:29)
 - k. Conclusion: The gospel preached throughout the world (28:30–31)



Background

Author: An early church tradition names Luke as the author of Acts as well as the Gospel that bears his name.

Determining the authorship of an anonymous text is very difficult. However, there seems to be enough internal evidence between the two books and Paul's letters to make Luke a plausible suggestion. Acts 28:16–31 suggests that the author of the book came to Rome with Paul. From Paul's prison epistles written from Rome a list of those who were with him there can be assembled: Epaphras, Epaphroditus, Timothy, Tychicus, Aristarchus, Mark, Jesus called Justus, Demas, and Luke. The first two did not arrive with Paul when he came to Rome. The next four on the list are ruled out because the author mentions them by name in Acts. Demas deserted Paul later, which makes him an unlikely candidate, leaving only Jesus-Justus and Luke. No tradition exists in favor of authorship by Jesus-Justus. Also, some medical terminology appears in both the Gospel of Luke and the book of Acts, and Paul mentions a Luke in Colossians 4:14 who was a physician.

Date: Because of the historical sequence found in the Gospel and Acts, it is likely that Acts was written after the Gospel. If Luke wrote the Gospel around the years 60–62, it is possible that Acts was written shortly after that period.

Audience: Both Luke and Acts address a certain Theophilus. He is addressed as “most excellent” (Luke 1:3), a common way of addressing socially important people. Some scholars have suggested that Theophilus was an important Roman noble, perhaps a member of the government.

Others suggest that he could have been a Christian convert who became Luke's patron. Books were expensive, and only a few people and groups were able to afford them. It was common to have a wealthy patron to write books for who would keep them and grant access to others to read. If Theophilus was a wealthy patron, then it is possible that he financed Luke's writing, paid for copies of the book, and granted churches access to the book.

Acts was meant for several audiences: first, the book is addressed to an individual—Theophilus; second, it's for other people like him—perhaps Romans who were intrigued by Christianity; and third, it's for all Christian believers—Jews and Gentiles alike.



Philip Baptizes the Ethiopian Eunuch
(Acts 8:26–40) by Rembrandt

Themes

Commission to the Disciples. Jesus' mission continues through the acts of his disciples. Jesus sent his disciples to be his witnesses "in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (1:8).

The Coming of the Holy Spirit. When Jesus sent his disciples to proclaim the gospel, he promised to send them the Holy Spirit: "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you" (1:8).

The Cost of Discipleship. Because of his mission, Jesus suffered greatly. Suffering and rejection continue in the mission of the disciples (1:3; 14:22; 28:17–31).

The Spread of the Gospel. The book of Acts tells about the fulfillment of Jesus' orders to his disciples. They preached the gospel throughout the known world.

The Leadership of the Church. Leadership in the church was vital during the early formative years of the church. Although there are many important leaders—Stephen, James, Barnabas and Silas, and many more—the book of Acts focuses on two main leaders: Peter and Paul. Peter, who appeared as the natural leader of the apostles, enters the scene first and dominates the book early on. A bit surprisingly, the focus then shifts to Paul, and his story goes on much longer. However, the book of Acts makes parallel affirmations about both apostles that place them on equal footing. In addition, these parallels show that Paul, although not an apostle when Jesus was on earth, became an apostle just like Peter.

Parallels between Peter and Paul in Acts

Action	Peter	Paul
Healed a lame man	3:2–8	14:8–10
Performed a miracle at a distance	5:15	19:12
Exorcised evil spirits	5:16	16:18
Defeated sorcerers	8:18–24	13:6–11
Raised the dead	9:36–43	20:9–12
Defended themselves against Jewish authorities	4:8–12; 5:27–32	22:3–21; 23:1–6; 28:25–28
Received heavenly visions	10:9–16	16:9
Involved in giving the Holy Spirit upon new believers	8:14–17	19:1–7
Miraculously released from prison	5:19; 12:7–11	16:25–27
Proclaimed the same message	2:27	13:35

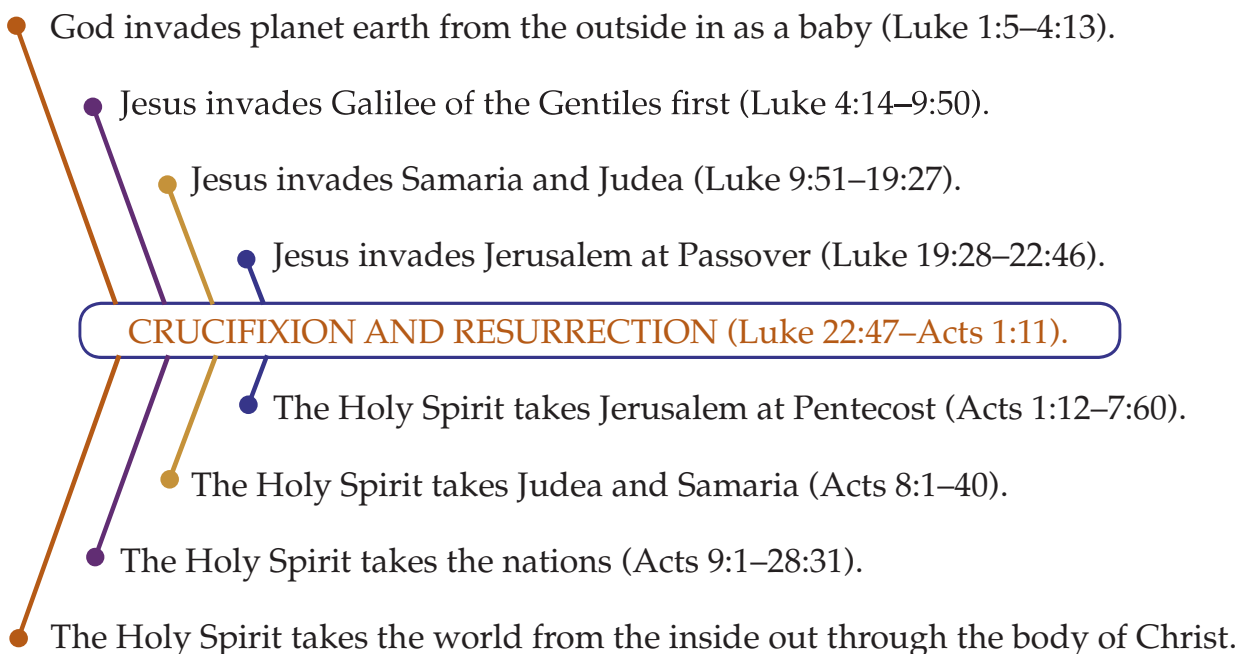
The Gospel in the Book of Acts

In the book of Acts, we find a basic presentation of the gospel. It is not the only presentation of the gospel, but it is a message that appealed to Jews and Gentiles. The basic outline was helpful for Christians then and is helpful for Christians today.

1. God's promises to Israel are now fulfilled with the coming of Jesus, the Messiah (2:30; 3:19, 24; 10:43; 26:6–7, 22).
2. God anointed Jesus as his Messiah during his baptism (10:38).
3. Jesus began his ministry in Galilee after his baptism (10:37). His ministry showed God's power with words and actions.
4. Jesus, the Messiah, suffered and died on the cross according to God's own plan (2:23; 3:13–15, 18; 4:11; 10:39; 26:23).
5. God raised Jesus from the dead. Jesus appeared to his disciples (2:24, 31–32; 3:15, 26; 10:40–41; 17:31; 26:23).
6. God exalted Jesus and gave him the name of "Lord" (2:25–29, 33–36; 3:13; 10:36).
7. God sent the Holy Spirit to create a new community, the church (1:8; 2:14–18, 38–39; 10:44–47).
8. Jesus will come back one day to judge all people and to make all things new (3:20–21; 10:42; 17:31).
9. The good news of Jesus is for all people. The gospel urges all people to hear the message, repent, and be baptized (2:21, 38; 3:19; 10:43, 47–48; 17:30; 26:20).

The Movement of God in Luke-Acts

Tracking God's movement through the books of Luke and Acts is an interesting exercise. God moves from the outside in and then from the inside out, much like the Spirit's movement in individual lives.



Key Verses

In my former book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach until the day he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles he had chosen. After his suffering, he showed himself to these men and gave many convincing proofs that he was alive. He appeared to them over a period of forty days and spoke about the kingdom of God.—Acts 1:1–3

[Christ’s promise to his disciples:] “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.”—Acts 1: 8

[Paul’s address to King Agrippa II:] “Short time or long—I pray God that not only you but all who are listening to me today may become what I am [a Christ-follower], except for these chains.”—Acts 26:29

Being God’s People

Jesus promised that the presence and power of his Spirit would be with his disciples so that all of them would be able to carry on Jesus’ mission to spread the good news throughout the world. Although proclaiming the gospel can be dangerous, the Holy Spirit is present to comfort and guide us. The history of Acts shows Jesus’ faithfulness to the promises he made to his disciples.

The book of Acts challenges believers to remain faithful to Jesus’ commands. It teaches us what it means to be Jesus’ disciples and how to carry on with Jesus’ mission.

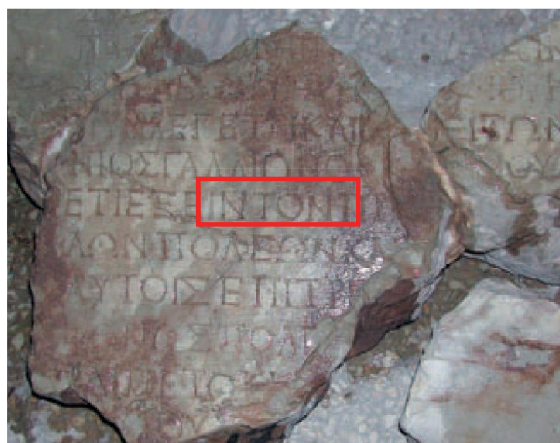


View of the Areopagus (Mars Hill) from the Acropolis onto the city of Athens, Greece. The apostle Paul preached the gospel to a group of Greeks at the Areopagus (Acts 17:19–34).

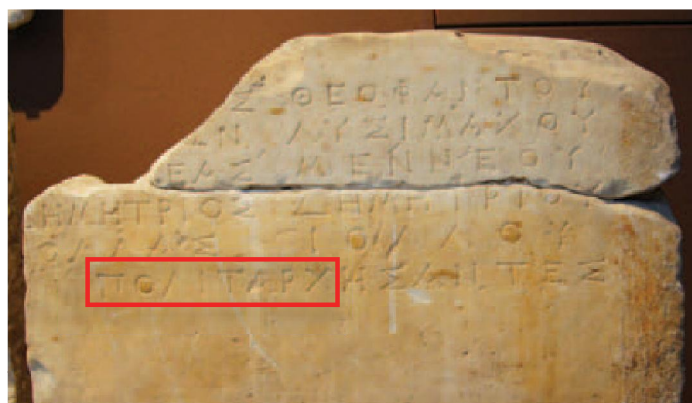
Luke as a Historian

One of the interesting details of Luke as a careful historian comes out in his proper use of titles for the many and varied Roman officials. This could not have been done easily by someone writing much later since provincial boundaries and terms often changed. The use of these titles reveals an eyewitness account, someone with first hand knowledge.

Book of Acts	Title	Comment
13:7; 18:12	Proconsul: Used of Sergius Paulus of Cyprus and Gallio of Achaia.	Title for the ruler of a senatorial province.
16:20, 22, 35–38	Magistrates: Used of the authorities in Philippi, a Roman colony.	Though the technical Roman term for those in charge of a colony was <i>duumviri</i> , Luke used a popular term here showing his familiarity with the area.
17:6, 8	City Officials: Used of the leaders of the city of Thessalonica.	The strange term <i>politarch</i> Luke used here was thought to be an error, until an inscription on the city gate was unearthed using the same word.
19:35	Clerk: Used of an official in Ephesus.	This is the same word that is used in other places for “scribe.” In Ephesus it meant the town recorder.
23:24, 26, 33–34; 24:1, 10; 26:30	Governor or Procurator: Used of Felix and Festus in Palestine.	Title for the ruler of an imperial province or a ruler with certain authority from the emperor.
28:7	Chief Official: Used of Publius, governor of Malta.	This term seemed like a very general term, but inscriptions found on the island of Malta show it was the title used.



The Gallio Inscription. A stone found in Delphi, Greece, mentions a Roman governor (proconsul) named Gallio of the province of Achaia. Dating to around AD 52, the name quite possibly refers to the governor in Acts 18:12.



The Politarch Inscriptions. Thirty-two inscriptions have been found with the term *politarch* (“city officials”). At least three of them date from Paul’s time. Until their discovery, there were no other documents with the same term for city officials. These inscriptions confirm Luke’s use of the term in Acts 17:6, 8.

Paul's Missionary Journeys

Paul's First Missionary Journey • AD 47–49 • Acts 13:1–14:28



TRAVELERS: Paul, Barnabas, John Mark

MAIN ROUTE: Cyprus and Turkey (1,400 miles; 2,253 km)

CITIES/PLACES:

- Antioch in Syria:** The Holy Spirit sets apart Paul and Barnabas to be missionaries. John Mark goes along as their helper.
- Sailed from Seleucia to Salamis and Paphos (on Cyprus):** Paul confronts a sorcerer named Elymas and blinds him. (From this point the Bible calls him Paul, rather than Saul.)
- Perga in Pamphylia:** John Mark deserts the group and returns to Jerusalem.
- Antioch of Pisidia:** Paul preaches his longest recorded sermon, and many respond. Jewish leaders drive them out of the city. The Lord calls Paul to focus his ministry on Gentiles. The Gentiles are glad and many become believers.
- Iconium:** More plots force them to flee.
- Lystra:** When Paul heals a lame man, the townspeople think he and Barnabas are Greek gods. Jews from Antioch stir up the crowd, and Paul is stoned and left for dead. But Paul survives and goes back into the city.
- Derbe:** Paul preaches and many disciples are added to the church.
- Lystra, Iconium, Antioch of Pisidia, Pamphylia, Perga, Attalia:** On the return trip, Paul and Barnabas appoint elders in the churches they had planted.
- Antioch (Syria):** Paul remains there for a while, reporting what God had done. (Possibly writes Galatians from here.)
- Jerusalem, via Phoenicia and Samaria:** In AD 49, Paul and Barnabas report to the leaders of the Jerusalem church. This meeting is known as the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15:1–35).

Paul's Second Missionary Journey • AD 49–51 • Acts 15:36–18:22



TRAVELERS: Paul, Silas, Timothy, Priscilla and Aquilla, Luke

MAIN ROUTE: Syria, Turkey, Greece, Jerusalem (2,800 miles; 4,506 km)

CITIES/PLACES:

- 1. Antioch in Syria:** Paul and Barnabas decide to visit the churches again, but disagree about who should go with them. Barnabas takes John Mark with him to Cyprus. Paul takes Silas.
- 2. Syria and Cilicia:** Paul and Silas take a letter from the Jerusalem church for the churches in this region.
- 3. Derbe, Lystra, Iconium:** While visiting these churches, Timothy joins them.
- 4. Troas:** While in this seaport, Paul has a vision of a man from Macedonia calling him to come help them.
- 5. Samothrace, Neapolis, Philippi:** Lydia, a wealthy businesswoman, is converted in the Macedonian city of Philippi, and the group stays in her house. When a fortune-telling slave girl is converted, her owners start a riot, and Paul and Silas are thrown in jail. After an earthquake, Paul and Silas stay in their cells. The jailer is converted.
- 6. Amphipolis, Apollonia, Thessalonica:** Jews in Thessalonica try to have Paul and Silas arrested after they gain some converts.
- 7. Berea:** The people in the synagogue receive the message eagerly. Silas and Timothy stay here while Paul goes on.
- 8. Athens (Mars Hill/Areopagus):** Paul sees an altar to an unknown god, and preaches to the thinkers of Athens. A number of them believe.
- 9. Corinth:** Paul meets Aquila and Priscilla, who join him. People try to get Paul arrested, but the authorities refuse. He writes 1 and 2 Thessalonians here.
- 10. Cenchrea:** Paul gets his hair cut because he had taken a vow (Acts 18:18). No more details are given.
- 11. Ephesus:** Paul leaves Priscilla and Aquila here.
- 12. Caesarea in Syria, Jerusalem, Antioch in Syria:** After visiting these churches, Paul returns to his home base of Antioch.

Paul's Third Missionary Journey • AD 52–57 • Acts 18:23–21:16



TRAVELERS: Paul, Timothy, Luke, others

MAIN ROUTE: Turkey, Greece, Lebanon, Israel (2700 miles; 4,345 km)

CITIES/PLACES:

- Region of Galatia and Phrygia:** Paul decides to visit the churches again.
- Ephesus:** Paul stays here two years. He writes 1 Corinthians. So many people convert that the silversmiths who manufacture idols start a riot.
- Macedonia and Greece (Achaia):** Paul writes 2 Corinthians and Romans.
- Philippi (Macedonia) and Troas:** While Paul is preaching, a young man falls asleep, falls from a third-story window, and dies. Paul revives him.
- Assos, Mitylene (near Chios), Samos, Miletus:** Elders from Ephesus meet the ship at Miletus; Paul tells them he expects to be imprisoned in Jerusalem.
- Cos, Rhodes, Patara, Tyre:** Disciples warn Paul not to go to Jerusalem.
- Ptolemais and Caesarea:** A prophet predicts that Paul will be imprisoned and handed over to the Gentiles.
- Jerusalem:** The missionaries report to the church leaders, who urge Paul to participate in a purification ritual at the temple to counteract rumors that Christianity is anti-Jewish.

THE EPISTLES & REVELATION

GUIDANCE FOR THE JOURNEY

The Epistles

The epistles (or letters) make up twenty-one of the twenty-seven books in the New Testament. They contain vital information for Christians and their journey through life. Whereas the Gospels present the good news of Jesus—his life and ministry—the epistles explain the effects of Jesus’ ministry, the coming of the Holy Spirit, and the spread of the gospel through Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and the Gentile world.

The epistles are traditionally grouped into two sections: Paul’s Epistles which are the thirteen letters written by the apostle Paul, and the eight General Epistles which are letters written by other apostles or early church leaders.

There are different kinds of epistles in New Testament:

1. Personal letters, such as Philemon which is written to a specific individual.
2. Circular letters, such as Ephesians which was a letter meant to be circulated among several churches in a region.
3. Letters to a specific congregation, such as 1 and 2 Corinthians which were written to the church congregation in the city of Corinth.
4. Other letters do not name the author or the recipients, such as Hebrews which does not name its author and 1 John which does not indicate to whom it is written. Others look only in a very general way like a letter at all (James).

However, all the letters share some important features. The first, and most important, is that they are divine communications for God’s people in the early church and throughout history. Another important consideration about these New Testament letters is that they are *occasional documents*. This means that each letter was written to address a specific set of issues, at a specific time, and in a specific place. This point is important to keep in mind because it highlights the value in knowing as much about the context of the letter as possible. It also reminds us that none of the letters, or even all of them put together, represents the full theology of Paul, Peter, or John. Rather, they were addressing specific issues. Those issues determined the content of each letter. However, understanding the issues that each letter addresses is not easy. Often, reading the letters can feel like listening in on a person’s phone conversation; we know only half of it.

Paul’s Epistles

Romans
1 Corinthians
2 Corinthians
Galatians
Ephesians
Philippians
Colossians
1 Thessalonians
2 Thessalonians
1 Timothy
2 Timothy
Titus
Philemon

General Epistles & Revelation

Hebrews
James
1 Peter
2 Peter
1 John
2 John
3 John
Jude
Revelation

Epistle	Author	Date	Audience	Major Themes
James	James	49	Christian Jews in and around Jerusalem	A faith in action
Galatians	Paul	48–49 or 54–55	Churches in the Roman province of Galatia	Justification by faith through Christ alone
1 Thessalonians	Paul	50–52	Church in the city of Thessalonica	Encouragement during persecution
2 Thessalonians	Paul	50–52	Church in the city of Thessalonica	The second coming of Christ and the end times
1 Corinthians	Paul	55–56	Church in the port city of Corinth	Unity of the body of Christ, freedom and mature behavior of a godly lifestyle, the nature of love, and the centrality of Christ's resurrection
2 Corinthians	Paul	56	Church in the port city of Corinth	Humility and power, tough love, and the new creation
Romans	Paul	57	Church in Rome	God's power, justification, sin, and holy living
Philippians	Paul	60–62	Church in the important Roman colonial city of Philippi	Servant leadership, unity of believers, joy in the Lord
Colossians	Paul	60–62	Church in Colossae (in modern day Turkey)	The supremacy of Christ, community life in Christ
Philemon	Paul	60–62	Philemon, a leader at the church in Colossae	Forgiveness and Christian love
Ephesians	Paul	60–62	Church in the Hellenistic cultural center of Ephesus	God's gracious salvation in Christ, unity and diversity of the church, and the Christian life
1 Timothy	Paul	62–66	Timothy, one of Paul's disciples, who was ministering in Ephesus	Encouragement in the face of false teaching, instruction on worship, organization, and care within the church
Titus	Paul	64–66	Titus, one of Paul's disciples, who was ministering on the island of Crete	Encouragement for Titus, warning against false teachings, doing good
1 Peter	Peter	64–65	Churches in Roman provinces of Asia Minor (modern day Turkey)	Suffering and Christian witness
2 Peter	Peter	64–65	Churches in Roman provinces of Asia Minor (modern day Turkey)	God's revelation and warning against false teachings
2 Timothy	Paul	66–67	Timothy, one of Paul's disciples, who was ministering in Ephesus	Personal appeals to Timothy, encouragement to proclaim the gospel at all times, and encouragements for the church
Jude	Jude	60s–80s	Unknown. Perhaps addressed to Jewish Christians.	Christ's faithfulness and God's judgment
Hebrews	Unknown	60–69	Jewish Christians	The superiority of Christ
1 John	John	85–95	Churches in Asia Minor	The love of God
2 John	John	85–95	Probably to a house church in Asia Minor	Warning against false teachings
3 John	John	85–95	Gaius, a Christian in a church in Asia Minor	The Christian life

THE WORLD OF THE FIRST CHRISTIANS



Who Was Paul?

Paul was an enemy of Christianity, who became the greatest Christian missionary of all time. He authored more books of the Bible than anyone else. He is better known as the “apostle to the Gentiles.”

Paul came from a well-respected family in Asia Minor (Turkey today) where his father was an official. He excelled in his studies and became a devout Pharisee. As a young man Paul—whose Jewish name was Saul—was sent to Jerusalem to study under the great teacher Gamaliel. He hated Christians and participated in the first execution of a Christian leader, a man named Stephen. Paul was determined to murder all those who followed Jesus, not just in Jerusalem, but elsewhere (Acts 7:54–8:3).

Paul asked the chief priest in Jerusalem to give him authorization to arrest any follower of Jesus in Damascus (about 100 miles away). On his way from Judea to Damascus, a light from heaven blinded him. He fell to the ground and a voice said, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” He answered, “Who are you?” The voice said, “I am Jesus, the one you are persecuting. Get up! Go into the city, and you will be told what to do.” Paul was told to go to a house and wait for a Christian man named Ananias to come restore his sight (Acts 9:1–12).

The Lord spoke to Ananias and said that Paul was chosen to take the Lord's name to Gentiles, their kings, and to the Jews. Ananias placed his hands on Paul and his sight was restored. Paul was filled with the Holy Spirit and was baptized. He started speaking in synagogues and convincing people that Jesus was the Messiah.

During the early years of Christianity, most of the converts were Jewish. Jesus' disciples preached only to Jews. Yet as Jewish people scattered throughout the Roman empire, they told their neighbors about Jesus. Many of these Gentiles (non-Jews) became followers of Jesus too (Acts 11:19–21). Traveling all over the Roman empire, the apostle Paul preached and ministered to Gentile Christians. Paul became one of God's powerful tools to spread the good news of Jesus. Eventually it would cost him his life. According to tradition, Paul was martyred during Emperor Nero's fierce persecution of Christians in Rome. Yet Paul's God-inspired writings have provided guidance, comfort, exhortation, and assurance to millions of Christians throughout history.

The Book of Revelation

The book of Revelation is not an epistle. Rather it belongs to a special category or *genre* of writing, known as apocalyptic literature. *Apocalyptic* is a type of literature that reveals God's plans that had been hidden to humanity. The message is conveyed through signs, symbols, dreams, and visions.

Interpreting the book has always been a great challenge for Christians. However, its message is much too important to simply ignore it. We must approach the book with a sense of respect and wonder, but also with the confidence that God's message in the book is still relevant to all believers today.

Despite the many disagreements about the meaning of the book, there are important agreements among Christians:

- The message of the book is relevant for Christians today, as it was for Christians in the times of the apostles.
- The main purpose of the book is to provide *hope* and *encouragement* for believers at all times, especially in times of persecution or suffering.
- The message of the book is clear on at least three points: (1) Christ is coming back and will judge humanity; (2) the powers of evil are doomed before Christ; and (3) God promises a wonderful future for all who believe in Christ.

ROMANS

THE POWER OF THE GOSPEL



Purpose

The epistle to the Romans is Paul's most theological and complex letter. The letter has at least three important purposes:

- **Missionary.** Paul's ministry was at its core missionary—spreading the gospel throughout the world. His travels present us with an apostle profoundly involved with Jesus' commission to spread the gospel. The epistle to the Romans reveals Paul's heart for missions. The apostle had not visited the church in Rome, yet he wanted to make it his church base for launching a missionary effort that would reach the end of the known world: Spain. Paul might have wanted to explain to the Roman believers what the content of his missionary preaching was—in other words, the message of the gospel.
- **Teaching.** Paul explained in detail many crucial topics of the Christian faith. The letter to the Romans is not a complete handbook of Christian beliefs. Rather, the book reveals an interest in themes like the human need for salvation, the relationship between Jewish and Gentile Christians, the death and resurrection of Jesus as the way of salvation, justification by faith alone, and the role of faith in people's lives.
- **Pastoral.** This is not just a doctrinal letter; it is a personal letter. The apostle Paul sends personal greetings to many people and shows that he is aware of the different house churches in Rome. He is also aware of potential divisions and troubles. As a pastor, he writes to encourage and exhort Roman believers to unity and wisdom.

Outline

1. Introduction, Greeting, and Preface (1:1–17)
2. The Righteous Anger of God (1:18–3:20)
 - a. Against the Gentile world
 - b. Against the Jewish world
 - c. Against the whole world
3. Justification by Faith in Christ (3:21–5:21)
4. Sanctification through Union with Christ (6:1–8:17)
5. Glorification in Conquering with Christ (8:18–39)
6. Election (9:1–11:36)
7. A Living Sacrifice (12:1–15:13)
8. Conclusion, Personal Greetings, and Doxology (15:14–16:27)

Election

Election (Rom. 9–11) is best thought of as a compelling love story in which God's love seeks a specific beloved (the church in Christ) and we are individually and as a group drawn compulsively into that love revealed in Christ.

Paul's Roman Citizenship

The apostle Paul was a Roman citizen by birth (Acts 22:25–29). Access to Roman citizenship was limited and difficult to obtain. Although many people achieved, earned, or were granted Roman citizenship, their citizenship had less rights and privileges than those who were citizens by birth. In the Roman Empire, when slaves were freed, they became citizens. When people performed special duties for Rome, the emperor granted them full Roman citizenship. Many scholars believe this is how Paul's ancestors might have acquired their Roman citizenship.

Background

Author: The apostle Paul is the author of this important letter (1:1).

Date: This letter was probably written in AD 57 a little after the Corinthian letters at the time Paul was visiting the Corinthian church and just before he was headed to Jerusalem with the relief fund gathered for the believers there (Rom. 15:25–27).

Audience: Paul wrote this letter to the church in Rome. Rome was at the center of nearly all that happened in the Mediterranean world. Though there is no mention of who first brought the gospel to Rome, Christianity had spread quickly to the capital city of the Empire, probably through the natural concourse of business, political, and religious activity. By the time of the great persecution under Emperor Nero (AD 64), the historian Tacitus could say a “great multitude” of Christians lived in Rome. (Those were Nero's early days as emperor, and he had not yet turned into the cruel ruler he would become after the fires in Rome.)

The church at Rome was a mix of both Jewish and Gentile believers. There was a large Jewish presence in Rome as we learn from the expulsion order given under Emperor Claudius (Acts 18:2–3). Many believers were

already there before Paul made his first journey to Rome around AD 57 (Acts 21:17–28:31).

Paul greatly desired to visit the Christians in Rome. Little did he know when he wrote this letter that he would later come in chains to the city and testify before the emperor. Nor could he know of his eventual death by beheading in Rome. What Paul did know was the power of the gospel. In Romans, we have an unmatched presentation of it.

Examples of Faith in Romans

Believers	Example	Reference in Romans
Abraham	Father of all the faithful and example of justification by faith	4:1–25
David	Knew God's justification by faith	4:6–8
Adam	Through his faithless disobedience, the punishment of death came to all humanity.	5:12–21
Sarah and her son Isaac	Examples of God's choice in Christ	9:6–9
Rebecca and her sons Jacob and Esau	Examples of God's choice in Christ	9:10–13
Moses and Pharaoh	Examples of God's choice. Moses is quoted to show the distinction between salvation by perfect obedience to the law and salvation by faith.	9:14–18 10:5–10
Phoebe	She lived in Cenchrea, the port city of Corinth and was a deaconess. She probably carried the letter of Romans (10:8).	16:1–2
Aquila and Priscilla	A husband and wife team expelled from Rome with other Jews. They met Paul at Corinth and worked the same trade with him. They risked their lives for Paul, possibly at Ephesus (Acts 19:30).	16:3–5

Themes

God's Power. The apostle Paul was writing to citizens of the most powerful city at the time. The Roman believers knew about power. God's power to save and condemn, as the righteous owner of the whole universe, was manifested in the law of Moses and in the gospel. His power, along with his justice, grace, mercy, and holiness, has reached out to save humanity from the hold of sin and evil.

Justification. In Christ, God has justified us and opened the way to serve him and love him. Justification is a word that comes from the courts of law. Paul uses this word to explain to the Romans—well acquainted with the court system—the effects of Jesus' death for believers. In Christ, God has declared us just, or acceptable, before God.

Sin. Humanity is a slave to sin, death, and evil. Through Christ's sacrifice, however, God has redeemed us—made us free—from the tyranny of sin and death. God has empowered us to live in a new way for God.

Emperors

Rome was under Nero at the time Paul wrote Romans. Roman government had descended into an empire where the Caesars were quickly becoming powerful tyrants. Caligula had already made his evil and insane mark on the office—his cruelty and sexual perversity were well known. Fortunately, the more competent and moderate Claudius had replaced him. Nero came next after his stepfather Claudius died. The sixth Caesar, Nero, was restrained at first. In time, however, Nero became so cruel and evil that his contemporaries called him the "beast." Tradition says that both Peter and Paul were martyred under the persecution of Nero.



Nero, Roman Emperor AD 54–68

Key Verses

For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.—Rom. 3:23

For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.
—Rom. 6:23

Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship.
—Rom. 12:1

Propitiation

Propitiation is a key word used in Rom. 3:25. Often translated as “sacrifice of atonement” or “expiation,” the word carries the idea of “turning aside anger.” It points back to Paul’s opening statement in 1:18, “The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of people.”

Being God’s People

Believers in Rome faced many challenges to their faith. A powerful, rich, and influential city like Rome harbored many different religions, ideas, and practices that contradicted the Christian faith. Paul’s desire to present the Christian faith in some detail and his exhortations to keep the unity hint at the problems that confronted believers then. In the face of persecution, Paul reminded them that God has promised that nothing shall separate us from his love in Christ (8:28–39). The apostle Paul also reminded the Romans that the Christian faith is always a missionary faith.

The Christian faith continues to be assailed by different religions, ideas, and practices. Paul’s exhortations to faithful belief and the practice of Christian unity are still important for us today. God challenges us in view of his great mercy to present ourselves as living sacrifices (12:1). The reminder that our faith is at its core missionary must shape our Christian life and practice.

Jesus in Romans

A large part of the letter includes Paul’s presentation of the gospel. Jesus is the central figure and the climax of the gospel story. In his letter, Paul presents the power of God through Jesus, his full grace displayed in his sacrifice, and his justice fulfilled in his death and resurrection. The Holy Spirit, fulfilling Jesus’ promise of sending the Counselor, empowers all believers to follow Jesus, do as he commanded, and work “so that all nations might believe and obey him” (16:26).



The Forum Romanum in Rome, Italy

1 CORINTHIANS

THE WAY OF LOVE



Purpose

This letter was a reply to specific problems at the church in Corinth. The apostle Paul had previously written a letter to the church addressing sexual immorality (see 1 Cor. 5:9). It appears that Paul received, perhaps, an oral report about the church having misunderstood his first letter (5:10). The letter that we know as 1 Corinthians was written to correct those misunderstandings, and also to deal with further problems of division, doctrinal confusion, and social snobbery (1:10; 5:1; 11:18).

In 1 Corinthians, the apostle Paul writes some basic teachings on Christian behavior and doctrine for this congregation, which was exhibiting some childish behavior (5:1, 6:1). Some of the doctrinal concerns the apostle addresses in the letter are spiritual gifts, the true nature of love, and bodily resurrection (12:1; 13:1–13; 15:1–8).

Outline

1. Greeting and Prayer of Thanksgiving (1:1–9)
2. Division and Harmony Addressed (1:10–4:17)
 - a. Divisions in the church (1:10–17)
 - b. Human wisdom is not God's way (1:18–2:5)
 - c. Godly wisdom is beyond human ways (2:6–3:23)
 - d. Christ is the beginning and end of all wisdom (4:1–17)
3. Church Discipline Addressed (4:18–11:33)
 - a. Arrogance, immorality, and lawsuits (4:18–6:11)
 - b. Human body belongs to God (6:12–20)
 - c. Marriage and celibacy (7)
 - d. Food sacrificed to idols (8)
 - e. Rights vs. respect for the gospel's sake (9)
 - f. Warnings – Israel as an example (10:1–22)
 - g. Freedom and deference for the gospel's sake (10:23–11:1)
 - h. Proper decorum in worship and the Lord's Supper (11:2–33)
4. Doctrinal Issues Addressed (12:1–15:58)
 - a. Spiritual gifts (12)
 - b. Love (13)
 - c. The loving use of spiritual gifts (14)
 - d. The resurrection (15)
5. Practical Issues Addressed (16:1–18)
 - a. Famine relief collection for the church of Jerusalem (16:1–4)
 - b. Future plans to visit by Paul and others (16:5–12)
 - c. Recognition of certain leading brethren (16:13–18)
6. Final Greeting (16:19–24)

Stephanas

The household of Stephanas is mentioned twice in 1 Corinthians: once at the beginning of the letter (1:16) and then at the end (16:15). Stephanas and his family were the first converts to Christ that Paul baptized in that part of Greece. Stephanas along with two others (16:17) came to Paul from Corinth bringing greetings. These men may have also carried the letter of 1 Corinthians back with them. Paul recommended these people to the Corinthians as trustworthy leaders to be followed. In a place like Corinth, good role models were very much needed.

Background

Author: The apostle Paul is the author of this letter (1:1).

Date: Paul wrote 1 Corinthians from Ephesus (16:8) about AD 55–56. The letter may have been carried to Corinth by the three persons mentioned in 16:15–18. Clement of Rome mentioned the epistle when he wrote to the Corinthian church in AD 95.

Audience: Paul's readers were Christians in the port city of Corinth. They comprised a church that was situated at a diverse commercial crossroad. Such diversity resulted in competing ideas and factions. Lifestyle issues and basic moral questions needed to be addressed in this confusing environment. From the list of issues addressed in 1 Corinthians, the church seems to be largely Gentile, but the problem of meat sacrificed to idols may indicate a Jewish-Christian element in the congregation as well.

Themes

Unity of the Church (1:10; 12:4–26). The apostle Paul writes about the unity of the church using the image of a building. The apostles, in this case Paul, laid the foundation upon which others build up the church. Every person in the church is responsible to build up the church by being sensitive to those new in the faith (10:28–33) and using the gifts of the Spirit to strengthen other believers and the church (11:2–16; 12:12–30; 14:1–35). The celebration of the Lord's Supper is another image of the unity of the church: "Because there is one loaf, we, who are many, are one body, for we all share the one loaf" (10:17).

Freedom and Mature Behavior of a Godly Lifestyle (3:1–3; 6:12; 10:23–24). Freedom should not lead to immoral behavior. Rather, believers should use their freedom to lead a godly lifestyle, a behavior that honors God and other believers.

The Nature of Love (13:1–13). Paul writes to correct the Corinthians' view of spiritual gifts—they were emphasizing some spiritual gifts over the others—and the divisions caused by that doctrinal error. The apostle teaches that, although all spiritual gifts are equally important, they are meaningless if practiced apart from love: "Follow the way of love and eagerly desire gifts of the Spirit" (14:1). As he explains the way of love in 1 Corinthians 13, Paul presents in unforgettable words the nature of love.

The Centrality of Christ's Resurrection (15:1–58). The resurrection of Jesus is not just a teaching of the apostles; it is the very center of the Christian faith: "And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith" (15:14). Furthermore, Christ's resurrection guarantees our own resurrection, a resurrection of our bodies (15:35–58). Because Christ rose from the dead, Paul, and all believers, can affirm: "Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?" (15:55).

Key Verses

For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.
—1 Cor. 2:2

For I received from the Lord what I passed on to you: The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me." In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me."—1 Cor. 11:23–25

And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.
—1 Cor. 13:13

For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve.—1 Cor. 15:3–5

Paul's Short List

In 1 Corinthians 15, Paul lists eyewitnesses to Jesus' resurrection. Along with information from the Gospels and Acts, there were at least eleven separate appearances to over 500 individuals spanning a forty-day period.

Reference	Eyewitness
John 19:1–18	Mary Magdalene
Matt. 28:8–10	The women (probably Mary Magdalene, Mary mother of James and Salome, Joanna, and others; Mark 16:1; Luke 24:10)
1 Cor. 15:5	Peter (see also Luke 24:33)
John 20:19–25	The Twelve minus Thomas (see also Luke 24:36–49)
1 Cor. 15:5	The Twelve (probably the same as John 20:26–29)
Luke 24:13–35	Two on the road to Emmaus
John 21:1–25	Seven fishing on Lake Galilee
1 Cor. 15:6	Five hundred believers (probably in Galilee—Matt. 28:7, 16–20)
1 Cor. 15:7	James the brother of the Lord
1 Cor. 15:7	All the apostles (see also Mark 16:19–20; Luke 24:50–53; Acts 1:9–11, 21–22)
1 Cor. 15:8	Paul on the road to Damascus (see also Acts 9:1–19; 22:1–18; 26:12–18)

Being God's People

God promised to bring the Corinthians into the fullness of his love. He challenged them to make their lifestyle inside and outside the church consistent with their high calling.

God still calls us to preserve the unity of Christ's body (the church). As we exercise spiritual gifts, celebrate the Lord's Supper, and deal with other believers, the apostle's advice to build up Christ's body remains as relevant for us today as ever.

Jesus in 1 Corinthians

The apostle's main interest is with the unity of Christ's body. As promised, God sent the Holy Spirit to guide and empower us to become faithful followers of Jesus. Jesus' resurrection is at the heart of the Christian proclamation of the good news and of our faith. His resurrection gives us hope in uncertain times, courage for the times of trials, and guidance when we feel disoriented.

2 CORINTHIANS

TOUGH LOVE



Purpose

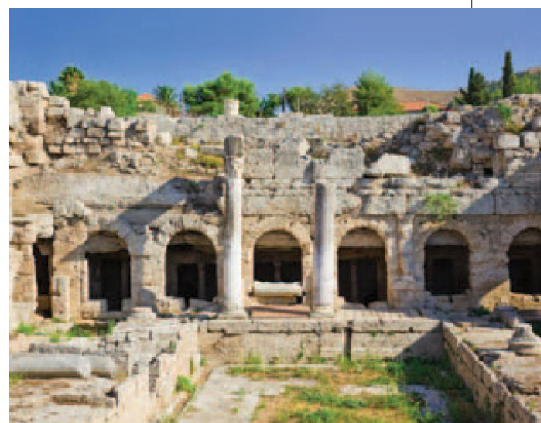
The letter of 2 Corinthians is one of Paul's most personal works. His emotions of anguish, joy, stern anger, and love are clear. Much of what Paul writes about involves his ministry and personal relations with the Corinthian believers. One of Paul's main purposes in writing this letter was to clarify his first letter. The apostle wanted to reinforce what he had said in his first letter. He also wanted to help his readers understand the spirit of anguished, loving concern in which he intended his remarks (6:11–13).

The collection of money for the relief of the poor in Judea was also a major concern in this letter (8:1–9:15). Judea had undergone a food shortage that had actually been predicted earlier in the reign of Claudius (Acts 11:27–30). A collection was taken then, but this appears to be another relief collection some ten years later.

False apostles and their attempts to discredit Paul are addressed in this letter, though their teaching is not (10:1–12:13). Paul offers a passionate defense of his ministry in the face of many attacks—ministry is an important word in the letter. Paul explains in a moving and powerful way what it means to be a servant and ambassador of Christ.

Outline

1. Greeting (1:1–2)
2. Tough Love—Praise for God’s Comfort in Suffering (1:3–11)
3. Tough Love—Paul’s Anguish and Glory in the Corinthian Church (1:12–7:16)
 - a. Uncertainty of human words and plans vs. the “Yes” and “Amen” of Christ (1:12–2:13)
 - b. Apostolic ministry explained (2:14–7:4)
 - c. Assuring news from Corinth (7:5–16)
4. Tough Love—Sacrificial Giving (8:1–9:15)
5. Tough Love—Dealing with False Apostles (10:1–12:13)
 - a. Humility and pride, weakness and power (10:1–18)
 - b. Professional and amateur apostles (11:1–15)
 - c. Suffering and weakness—The signs of an apostle (11:16–12:13)
6. Tough Love—Get Ready for Another Visit (12:14–13:10)
7. Final Greeting (13:11–14)



The Roman fountain in ancient Corinth, Greece

Background

Author: The author of 2 Corinthians is the apostle Paul (1:1). Comparisons with the first letter to the Corinthians make it plain that the two letters have the same author.

Date: Paul wrote the letter somewhere in Macedonia, probably Philippi. The letter was written soon after 1 Corinthians, around AD 56.

Audience: Paul specifically addressed the church in the city of Corinth, but he also intended the letter to be read throughout the province of Achaia (1:1). This wider scope may have been because he desired to reach as many as possible in his collection effort for the relief of the famine stricken Christians in Judea (9:2). Alternatively, the wider scope may have been necessary in order to combat the threat of the “false apostles” and the spread of their corrupt teaching (11:10–15).

Themes

Humility and Power/Authority. The Christian life and whole way of thinking is opposite of the way the rest of the world runs and understands things. True power/authority comes with humility not pride. True success comes with suffering and service, not a life of ease. In fact, true wisdom, the wisdom of God, looks like foolishness to the rest of the world (4:7–18, 10:7–18, 11:16–32, 12:7–10).

Tough Love. God’s love is not mere sentimentalism. God’s love actually has a goal of healing, restoring, and transforming people. Being transformed into a follower of Christ can be a painful transformation (3:18, 5:1–4).

New Creation. God transforms us into new creations in Christ (5:16–21). Being a new creation allow us to become effective ambassadors of Christ to carry on the ministry of reconciliation.

Key Verses

For no matter how many promises God has made, they are “Yes” in Christ. And so through him the “Amen” is spoken by us to the glory of God.—2 Cor. 1:20

Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord’s glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.—2 Cor. 3:17–18

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here! —2 Cor. 5:17

The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds. We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ.—2 Cor. 10:4–5

Paul’s Heartfelt Language

Emotion	What Paul Says	2 Cor.
Despair	“We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired of life itself.”	1:8
Distress, Anguish, Tears, Grief, Love	“For I wrote you out of great distress and anguish of heart and with many tears, not to grieve you but to let you know the depth of my love for you.”	2:4
Confident Hope	“We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body.”	4:8–10
Affection	“We have spoken freely to you, Corinthians, and opened wide our hearts to you.”	6:11
Longing, Sorrow, Concern, Joy	“[Titus] told us about your longing for me, your deep sorrow, your ardent concern for me, so that my joy was greater than ever.”	7:7
Stern Anger	“I already gave you a warning when I was with you the second time. I now repeat it while absent: On my return I will not spare those who sinned earlier or any of the others, since you are demanding proof that Christ is speaking through me.”	13:2–3



Temple of Apollo in ancient Corinth, Greece

Being God's People

Despite the confusion in Corinth about Christian behavior, worship, and doctrine, God's many promises to his people were confirmed as "Yes" in Jesus (1:20). God challenged his people in Corinth to be transformed into the likeness of his Son.

God's promises are still kept to his people today even in the confusing world we live in. God challenges believers to live out the life of a new creation in Jesus.

Jesus in 2 Corinthians

The apostle Paul's ministry was modeled after Jesus' own ministry of reconciliation. His authority as an apostle does not derive from his own personal strength or abilities. Rather, in his weakness, Christ's glory is more fully displayed. Jesus shone in Paul's suffering, was revealed in Paul's preaching, and was glorified in Paul's ministry.



Mosaic at the Temple of Apollo in ancient Corinth, Greece

GALATIANS

JUSTIFICATION BY FAITH AND FREEDOM IN CHRIST



Purpose

Galatians is a strong warning against a corrupted view of the gospel. Paul is writing to the churches of Galatia in order to defend his apostolic authority and argue that justification is by *faith* alone against some “preachers” who were corrupting the gospel. These preachers were Judaizers, Jewish Christians who believed that certain Jewish rites were still necessary and should be enforced by the church. According to Judaizers, all Gentile Christians should be circumcised. Apparently, Judaizers were also questioning Paul’s authority and convincing the Galatians that Paul had removed certain legal requirements in order to make the gospel more appealing to Gentiles.

In his letter to the Galatians, Paul adamantly defends his apostolic authority and the true gospel he preaches. He stresses that a person is justified by grace through faith in Jesus and only faith in Jesus. Life is renewed by grace through faith alone, and life in Christ depends on and flows from the Spirit. The Spirit shapes the life of a Christian and the fruit of the Spirit is good and beneficial to the community. The ways of the flesh—the ways of the law—do not produce good fruit and to follow these ways is futile.

Outline

1. Introduction and Warning against Other Gospels (1:1–10)
2. Paul Defends His Apostolic Call (1:11–2:21)
3. Justification by Faith (3:1–4:31)
4. Freedom in Christ (5:1–12)
5. Living by the Spirit (5:13–6:18)

Background

Author: The author of Galatians is the apostle Paul (1:1).

Date and Audience: Dating the book of Galatians depends on the audience. Paul addresses his letter “to the churches in Galatia” (modern-day Turkey). Paul traveled through the southern part of Galatia on his first and second missionary journeys, and the northern part of Galatia during his third missionary journey. If Paul was writing to churches in southern Galatia—such as Antioch, Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe—scholars suggest he wrote the letter from Syrian Antioch around AD 48–49 during his second missionary journey. If Paul was writing to churches in northern Galatia—such as Pessinus, Ancyra, and Tavium—scholars suggest he wrote from Ephesus around AD 54–55 during his third missionary journey.

The Gentile Problem

After Paul had left Galatia on one of his missionary journeys, several “preachers” arrived in Galatia and began teaching that although faith in Jesus was important, justification was not complete without obedience to the laws and rituals of Judaism. Faith in Jesus needed to be accompanied by circumcision (Gal. 6:12–13) and adherence to the Jewish calendar (4:10).

The question of whether Gentile converts should adhere to Jewish laws and rites came up over and over again in the early church. In AD 49, Paul met with the leaders in Jerusalem to discuss this issue. In response to those arguing in favor of these requirements, the apostle Peter stood up and said, “Brothers, you know that some time ago God made a choice among you that the Gentiles might hear from my lips the message of the gospel and believe. God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us. He did not discriminate between us and them, for he purified their hearts by faith. Now then, why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of Gentiles a yoke that neither we nor our ancestors have been able to bear? No! We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are” (Acts 15:7–11).

Themes

- We are saved (justified) by grace through faith alone. Doing good works or obedience to the law is not the means by which we receive salvation.
- We are free in Christ. We are free from a strict adherence to the Old Testament ritual and purity laws. Adhering to the law in such a rigid way is the same as “slavery” (5:1).
- Good fruit flows from the Spirit. We do good things because God saved us by his grace; we don’t do good things in order to achieve salvation.

Fascinating Facts

- Galatians is often referred to as the “Magna Carta of Christian Liberty.”
- Because Martin Luther used Galatians to support his doctrine of justification by faith alone, Galatians is often called “Luther’s Book.”
- Galatia was settled by Celts around 270 BC. Celtic culture and language were still present when Paul traveled through the region.

Key Verses

A person is not justified by the works of the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ. So we, too, have put our faith in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the law, because by the works of the law no one will be justified.—Gal. 2:16

So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.—Gal. 3:26–28

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law.—Gal. 5:22–23

Being God’s People

God’s promises made to Abraham were fulfilled with Christ. Just as Abraham believed God and it was credited to him as righteousness (Gal. 3:6), by God’s grace, our faith in Jesus is credited to us as righteousness. We are no longer slaves to rituals, laws, and observances.

Sometimes, adherence to rituals, laws, and doing good works as our sole purpose in order to attain salvation can be tempting. Our good works are important, not because they earn us salvation, but because they show the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives.

Jesus in Galatians

By the grace of God, Jesus died so that all who believe in him are saved. To say that faith needs to be accompanied by strict adherence to the laws and rituals of Judaism is to return to the yoke of slavery from which Jesus freed us. To suggest one is justified by anything other than faith in Jesus is corrupting the grace of God that is Jesus Christ, his death, and his resurrection.

EPHESIANS

THE RICHES OF GOD’S GOODNESS



Library of Celsus in Ephesus, Turkey (c. AD 135)

A Circular Letter

Some very early manuscripts of the epistle do not contain the name Ephesus in the title. This might suggest that the letter was originally intended to be a circular letter. The name of the church would have been read or added in as the epistle made its rounds. That the name Ephesus became attached to many manuscripts may be due to the prominence of this city in the area of circulation. Perhaps since Ephesus was a port city, its ability to share this epistle with other churches throughout the growing Christian world led to this association as well.

Purpose

The apostle Paul wrote to believers in Ephesus to encourage and help them realize and lay hold of the riches of God’s grace in Christ (1:3–23). The language of the letter makes it clear that Paul is enraptured by the overflowing goodness of God. His words of praise stream out like a gushing river. Paul explains to his readers the incredible gift believers have been given in Christ. In Ephesus, a city with a powerful and influential pagan cult—the worship of Diana of Ephesus—the apostle emphasizes the universal and supreme nature of Christ’s power and authority.

The apostle wrote to encourage believers to live a life worthy of God’s calling in a spirit of gratitude (2:8–10; 4:1). Paul had been accused of preaching a gospel that made good deeds irrelevant. However, the apostle shows that good deeds are a thankful response to what God has done for the world through Jesus. “For we are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do” (2:10).

Outline

1. Greeting (1:1–2)
2. Prayer of Praise and Request (1:3–23)
 - a. Praise for grace, adoption, and the Spirit (1:3–16)
 - b. Request for wisdom, knowledge, and insight (1:17–23)
3. Past Position, Present Reality, and Future Intention (2:1–22)
 - a. Once dead in sin (2:1–3)
 - b. Now alive by grace through faith (2:4–10)
 - c. Reconciled in Christ (2:11–22)
4. Paul the Prisoner (3:1– 6:20)
 - a. For the sake of the gospel for the Gentiles (3:1–13)
 - b. Prays for the church (3:14–21)
 - c. Encourages a life consistent with Christ (4:1–6:20)
5. Conclusion (6:21–24)

Background

Author: The author of Ephesians is the apostle Paul (1:1).

Date: The letter was written sometime in AD 60–62, while he was under house arrest in Rome.

Audience: The audience was the church at Ephesus. But since Ephesus was a cosmopolitan city and probably included believers from Greek, Roman, and Jewish backgrounds, the letter was likely circulated to other churches in the area and so would have had an additional audience as well.

Ephesus (in modern-day Turkey) was an important cultural center of the ancient world, only behind Rome and Alexandria. The amazing temple to Diana of Ephesus, one of the Seven Wonders of the ancient world, dominated the social life of the city. Diana, among many other things, was the goddess of new life and birth.

It's traditionally thought that Ephesus was the home of the apostle John in the latter part of the first century.

God's Riches to Believers

In his many letters, Paul often uses the phrase, "in Christ." The letter of Ephesians contains the most examples. The phrases "with Christ" and "through Christ" are also used. In Christ, believers:

- Have every spiritual blessing reserved in heaven (1:3).
- Are chosen before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless (1:4, 11).
- Are predestined to be adopted as children of God (1:5, 11).
- Are given grace, have redemption and forgiveness, and receive wisdom (1:6–8).
- Are marked with God's seal of the promised Holy Spirit as a guarantee (1:13–14).
- Have resurrection power (1:19–20).
- Are made alive (2:5).
- Are created anew (2:10, 15–16).
- Are brought near to God (2:13).
- Have access to the Father through the Spirit (2:18).
- Are built and joined together into a spiritual temple (2:21–22).
- May approach God with freedom and confidence (3:12).

Themes

God's Gracious Choice to Save Believers in Christ (1:4–5, 11; 2:4–10). Salvation is all about what God does. Believers do well to remember that there can be no boasting or pride about what they have done to “get right with God.” All praise is due to the Father, Son, and Spirit.

The Richness of What We Have and Will Inherit in Christ (1:3–19; 2:4–7; 3:16–19). Paul tries to capture in words the magnificent treasure given to believer in Jesus. It defies description to think that every possible blessing has been given to those who are in Christ and these treasures are secure in heaven!

The Unity and Diversity of the Church (2:11–22; 4:3–16). Paul uses his famous metaphor of the body to describe how the church is made up of diverse members but is itself one organism. This unity and diversity encompasses all races and nationalities, every member working together under one head—Christ.

The Discipline of the Christian Life (4:17–6:18). The godly life requires discipline. Being disciplined is not always easy. In the end, Christian discipline is really about being a disciple and following Jesus.

Key Verses

For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ in accordance with his pleasure and will.—Eph. 1:4–5

For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast.—Eph. 2:8–9

Put on the full armor of God so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes.—Eph. 6:11

Being God's People

God promises to give believers everything in Christ. Christians, as God's adopted children, can rely on God's provision for all things in life. With that in mind, the apostle Paul exhorts the Ephesians to maintain the unity of Christ's body. The letter includes practical advice for the Christian life. God challenges believers to lay hold of the grace (new life) he has given us, and then live like his workmanship. The image of the armor that equips believers in their spiritual struggle to be children of light continues to be as important today as it was for the Ephesians.

Jesus in Ephesians

Paul describes the church as the body of Christ. Our identity as believers comes by our being in and with Christ. Jesus is at the center of the identity, activity, and future of the church. God has equipped all believers to serve Christ in the world.

PHILIPPIANS

THE ATTITUDE OF CHRIST



Jesus Washing the Feet of His Disciples at the Last Supper

Purpose

The apostle Paul wrote to the Philippians to call for unity and harmony among believers based on the imitation of Christ's humble servanthood (2:1–11, 14; 4:2). As in every human institution, people in the church at Philippi did not always get along. Complaints and arguments are common occurrences, but believers are called by God to look to a higher example in Christ. Jesus put all his personal preferences aside and went to the cross, first in obedience to the Father and second in order to redeem the world. We are called to this kind of life.

The letter also warns against certain false teachings and practices (3:2–6, 18–19). False teaching under the pretense of being the real thing has plagued the church from the beginning. The Philippians are warned against teachers that wished to exchange the grace of the gospel for a merit system of religion.

Finally, this letter encourages believers to live a life worthy of their calling (2:12–16; 4:8–9). The life believers are to follow is not easy. The model for the believer is Christ, who is the highest goal of all thought and action.

Outline

1. Greeting, Thanksgiving, and Prayer (1:1–11)
2. Paul's Imprisonment (1:12–30)
3. Imitating the Incarnation (2:1–18)
4. Timothy and Epaphroditus—Paul's Envoys (2:19–30)
5. Paul's Exhortations (3:1–4:9)
 - a. Warnings against Judaizers (3:1–11)
 - b. Encouragement to press on (3:12–4:1)
 - c. Plea for unity and high-mindedness (4:2–9)
6. Thanks and Final Greeting (4:10–23)

Background

Author: The author of Philippians is the apostle Paul (1:1).

Date: Paul wrote this letter while under house arrest in Rome, around AD 60–62.

Audience: Paul probably had a personal connection with the church at Philippi. Philippi was Paul's first stop in his preaching of the good news in Europe. The occasion of the letter centers on Epaphroditus who had been sent by the church with a financial gift for the apostle. The care that this body of believers had for Paul indicates a receptive audience.

Philippi was in northern Greece and was a Roman colonial city on the royal trade route. Though there was a Jewish presence, the population was predominantly non-Jewish and proud of its Roman connection. Although a small city, it received special favors from Rome. Roman citizenship was very important in the city, as Paul's use of citizenship as a metaphor reveals (3:20).

Themes

Servant Leadership (2:5–11). Just as Christ humbled himself and became one of us, our relationship ought to be modeled by the same humility.

Unity of Believers (2:1–4). Humility and love must be present in all our relationships, especially with other believers. This unity reflects our submission to Christ (1:21; 3:7–14).

Rejoicing in the Lord Always (1:18; 3:1; 4:4–13). Being under house arrest in Rome made this exhortation especially relevant to the apostle. His joy springs from the conviction that Christ provides for believers (4:13).

Epaphroditus

Epaphroditus was the Philippian believer who brought the church's financial gift to Paul. He apparently contracted a life-threatening illness while on this mission. Paul uses him as an example of someone who risked his life for the sake of the gospel (2:25–30).

Every day around the world there are believers who risk their lives for God's kingdom. It is good to remember them, and that we are all called, sometimes in simple ways, to put our lives on the line for Jesus.

Key Verses

... being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.—Phil. 1:6

For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.—Phil. 1:21

Your attitude should be the same as that of Jesus Christ: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross! —Phil. 2:5–8

Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! —Phil. 4:4

Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.—Phil. 4:6–7

Fascinating Facts

- Phil. 2:5–11 may have been an early Christian creed set in the form of a hymn. In many translations these verses are set apart in poetic style. Paul may have composed the lines himself or merely used something that was held in common already.
- Philippians has two endings: One is in 3:1 (“Finally my brothers...”) and the second at 4:8 (“Finally brothers...”). It looks like the apostle had an afterthought, what we might call a P.S.

Being God’s People

God promises to honor and glorify those who serve. Paul called believers to preserve the unity of all believers in love and humility. God challenges us to work against our selfishness and put others first as we serve him.

Jesus in Philippians

The view that Paul offers of Jesus in this letter is breathtaking. The glorious Lord humbled himself to become like one of us. Such humility is best demonstrated in his obedience, which led him to a gruesome death. Yet, God lifted him up (exalted him) from his humiliation and put him above all things. The apostle Paul makes this song a paradigm (an example) for all believers to follow: “Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus” (Phil. 2:5).

COLOSSIANS

THE SUPREMACY OF CHRIST



Gnosticism

Gnosticism was a philosophy that began during the first and second centuries AD. Gnostics believed one could “escape” the evil, physical world through a special knowledge (*gnosis*) typically obtained through a connection with a transcendent Being. Early Gnostics held the heretical belief that a special knowledge revealed to only a select group of souls could help them achieve salvation, escaping from the physical world into a spiritual reality.

Purpose

The church in the city of Colossae was dealing with some false beliefs. It appears the heresy in Colossae was a mixture of Jewish legalism and an early form of Gnosticism. Jewish legalism made the observation of Jewish practices like circumcision (Col. 2:11), festivals, and dietary laws (2:16) mandatory for Gentile believers.

Paul’s emphasis on Christ providing all the “understanding, mystery, and hidden treasures of wisdom” (2:2–3) seems aimed at early Gnostic beliefs. Some elements of extreme self-denying (2:21–23) and Greek philosophy (2:8) were also part of the misled beliefs of the Colossians.

Paul combats the Colossian heresy by emphasizing the supremacy and complete sufficiency of Christ while at the same time denouncing human philosophies and proving that they are inadequate.

Outline

1. Introduction, Thanksgiving, and Prayer (1:1–14)
2. The Supremacy of Christ (1:15–23)
3. Paul's Labor for the Church (1:24–2:5)
4. Freedom in Christ (2:6–23)
5. The Christian Life (3:1–4:6)
6. Final Greetings (4:7–18)



Paul Ends His Letter to the Colossians
by Julius Schnorr von Carolsfeld

Background

Author: The author of Colossians is the apostle Paul (1:1).

Date: The letter to the Colossians is one of the Prison Epistles, meaning that Paul wrote it during his house arrest in Rome, sometime between AD 60 and 62.

Audience: Paul wrote this letter to the church in Colossae (in modern-day Turkey). Prior to the first century AD, Colossae was an influential trading town in Asia Minor. However, by the time Paul wrote Colossians, the city had been on the decline for several centuries.

Themes

The Supremacy of Christ. Jesus is all that is necessary in life—over and above Jewish legalism, Gnostic beliefs, and any other human philosophy, which are empty, inadequate, and unfulfilling.

Family and Community Life in Christ. When Jesus is central, he will influence all we do and say within our families and within our societies.

The Prison Epistles

Paul had been sent to Rome where he spent two years under house arrest (AD 60–62). Paul was allowed to have visitors and share the gospel. Acts 28:30–31 reads, “For two whole years Paul stayed there in his own rented house and welcomed all who came to see him. He proclaimed the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ—with all boldness and without hindrance!” Epaphras, a minister to the church in Colossae and possibly the churches in Laodicea and Hierapolis (Col. 4:13), eventually joined Paul as a prisoner (Phil. 1:23).

While under house arrest in Rome, Paul wrote the Prison Epistles: Colossians, Ephesians, Philippians, and Philemon. According to his letter to the Colossians, Paul wrote another letter from prison to the Laodiceans (Col. 4:16). This letter was never discovered.

Key Verses

The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him.

—Col. 1:15–16

When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins, having canceled the charge of our legal indebtedness, which stood against us and condemned us; he has taken it away, nailing it to the cross.—Col. 2:13–14

Therefore, as God’s chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.—Col. 3:12–14

Being God’s People

Jesus Christ is sufficient in all things. No power, philosophy, or practice is effective in forgiving us and redeeming us other than Jesus. Jesus is the absolute truth and we can be assured of the effectiveness of Christ’s influence in our lives, the lives of our family, and the life of our community. It is important to be on guard and aware of false teachings, heresies, and idle promises from other religions and philosophies that claim salvation can be found in something or someone else besides Jesus. Unlike Gnosticism that claims to have “hidden knowledge,” God has revealed in the Scriptures everything we need to know and come to him.

Fascinating Facts

- Colossae was only 10 miles (16 km) from Laodicea and 13 miles (21 km) from Hierapolis. The three cities combined were known as the tri-city area.
- Philemon lived in Colossae and the church met in his house.
- Paul never visited Colossae. Many scholars believe that Epaphras planted the church in Colossae while Paul lived in Ephesus.

Jesus in Colossians

The epistle to the Colossians emphasizes Jesus’ divinity in a wonderful way: “The Son is the image of the invisible God” (1:15). Since Jesus is God, he is at the center of the whole universe, and through him, God is reconciling “all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross” (1:20).

1 & 2 THESSALONIANS

HOPE, HOLINESS, AND THE SECOND COMING



Purpose

Because of violent persecution, Paul and his companion Silas had to depart Thessalonica quickly, leaving the church vulnerable to persecution and discouragement (Acts 17:1–10). Therefore, Paul spends the first three chapters of 1 Thessalonians defending his actions and his absence, as well as the actions of his traveling companions.

After explaining why he had to leave so abruptly and why he wasn't able to return (2:1–3; 2:17–3:5), Paul exhorts the Thessalonians. Paul encourages them through their persecution, provides them with instruction on how to live a holy life that is pleasing to God, and teaches them about the return of Christ and about those who die before Christ returns.

But only a few months after writing his first letter to the Thessalonians, Paul learned that they misunderstood some of the details regarding Christ's second coming, so Paul wrote back to them to correct those misunderstandings. Some individuals had been trying to convince the Thessalonians that Jesus had already returned. In response to that, several Thessalonian Christians had resorted to laziness and idle

living: Why work or labor if the end is here or upon us? Paul wanted to encourage the Thessalonians to continue with their daily routines. The second letter to the Thessalonians reminded them to continue in diligence and productivity because first, Jesus had not returned at that point, and second, no one knows the hour, day, month, or year Jesus will return.

Outline

First Thessalonians

1. Introduction and Thanksgiving (1:1–10)
2. Paul's Relationship with the Thessalonians (2:1–3:13)
3. Living to Please God (4:1–12)
4. Believers Who Have Died (4:13–18)
5. The Day of the Lord (5:1–11)
6. Final Instructions (5:12–28)

Second Thessalonians

1. Introduction, Thanksgiving, and Prayer (1:1–12)
2. Man of Lawlessness (2:1–12)
3. Standing Firm and Praying through Persecution (2:13–3:5)
4. Warning against Laziness (3:6–15)
5. Final Greetings (3:16–18)

Was Paul the Author?

Words that only appear in 2 Thessalonians, a more formal style, and the reference to "the man of lawlessness" have made some question the authorship of the letter. Although some modern scholars believe the letter was written in the second century, the early church fathers accepted Paul as the author. For this reason, Paul's authorship continues to be the preferred option.

Background

Author: The author of 1 and 2 Thessalonians is the apostle Paul (1:1).

Date: Paul wrote the first letter to the Thessalonians during his second missionary journey while he resided in Corinth. Most scholars suggest a date for 1 Thessalonians from AD 50 to 52.

Paul wrote the second letter to the Thessalonians, also from Corinth, approximately six months after writing the first letter, most likely just after Silas and Timothy returned from delivering the first letter.

Audience: Paul wrote to the church in Thessalonica (in modern day Greece). Thessalonica was the largest city in Macedonia and the capital of that province. Thessalonica was a seaport city in the Thermaic Gulf of the Aegean Sea and a critical trading center along the great Egnatian Way, which connected Byzantium with the Greek Peninsula.

THE EGNATIAN WAY



Themes

- Encouragement during persecution
- The second coming of Christ and the end times
- Instructions on holy living
- Criticism against laziness and idle living

Key Verses

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.—1 Thess. 4:16–17

Now, brothers and sisters, about times and dates we do not need to write to you, for you know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night.—1 Thess. 5:1–2

Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.—1 Thess. 5:16–18

But we ought always to thank God for you, brothers and sisters loved by the Lord, because God chose you as firstfruits to be saved through the sanctifying work of the Spirit and through belief in the truth.—2 Thess. 2:13

May our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father, who loved us and by his grace gave us eternal encouragement and good hope, encourage your hearts and strengthen you in every good deed and word.—2 Thess. 2:16–17

Being God's People

Jesus warned his followers to be prepared for his return (Matt. 25). Paul encouraged the believers in Thessalonica to be alert and of sober mind—to be prepared (1 Thess. 5:1–10). Paul also warned them against idle living and laziness: “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” (2 Thess. 3:11–12). The Thessalonians thought the end had either come or was coming very soon. This attitude may have contributed to their laziness. Why work if Jesus is already here or will be here tomorrow?

We can definitely expect Jesus to return. We are encouraged to endure trials and persecution while we wait for our Lord to establish his kingdom on earth. God calls everyone to contribute to his or her society, be productive, and care for the welfare of others.



Paul Preaching to the Thessalonians by Gustave Dore

Paul, Silas, and Timothy

Before Paul set out on his second missionary journey, he had a disagreement with Barnabas. As a result, Barnabas and Paul went separate ways. “Barnabas took Mark and sailed for Cyprus, but Paul chose Silas” (Acts 15:39–41).

Paul and Silas traveled to Derbe and Lystra where Timothy joined the group (Acts 16:1), and together these three companions continued on the journey to spread the gospel. While in the city of Philippi, Paul and Silas were flogged, imprisoned, and placed in stocks. Paul explains this mistreatment in his first letter to the Thessalonians in (2:2). The Philippians asked Paul and his companions to leave Philippi, so they traveled to Thessalonica to preach the gospel there (Acts 17:1). After only three weeks, Paul and his companions

were sent on to Berea (Acts 17:10), and then Paul went on to Athens alone (Acts 17:14–15). While Paul was in Athens, he sent Timothy back to Thessalonica to encourage the believers there (1 Thess. 3:1–3) and Paul went on to Corinth.

By the time Paul arrived in Corinth (Acts 18:1), Silas and Timothy rejoined him (Acts 18:5). Since Paul mentions Timothy specifically returning to him from Thessalonica (1 Thess. 3:6), it is clear that Paul wrote the first letter to the Thessalonians at that point while he was in Corinth. Paul stayed in Corinth for 18 months (Acts 18:11), and during that time wrote the second letter to the Thessalonians. After his extended stay in Corinth, Paul sailed for Ephesus with Priscilla and Aquila (Acts 18:18–19).

Jesus in 1 & 2 Thessalonians

Jesus told his disciples that he would come again (Matt. 16:27; 24:30; Mark 14:21; John 14:1–4). Back in the book of Acts, after Jesus ascended into heaven, two men dressed in white came and stood next to Jesus' disciples and said, "This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven" (1:11). Someday, there will be a new heaven and a new earth. When Jesus returns, we will be in God's presence forever and God will "wipe every tear from [our] eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain" (Rev. 21:4).

When Christ returns, he will put an end to all the suffering and persecution we live through now. Jesus promises us that the Holy Spirit will comfort and strengthen us through these difficult times (John 14). Paul writes in 2 Thessalonians, "But the Lord is faithful, and he will strengthen you and protect you from the evil one" (3:3). Jesus kept, and continues to keep, his promises to strengthen and comfort us until the day of his second coming.

Fascinating Facts

- Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians may be the first epistle Paul wrote. (Galatians is the other epistle sometimes thought to be earliest, AD 48–49)
- First Thessalonians is jam-packed with apocalyptic language. Paul emphasizes the end times more in 1 Thessalonians than any of the letters he wrote later in life. First Thessalonians is one of the most important books of the Bible used to support the concept of the "rapture" (see 4:16–17).
- Most scholars believe that the "man of lawlessness" mentioned in 2 Thessalonians 2:1–12 is a reference to the Antichrist. The "man of lawlessness" is also called the "Son of Perdition," the phrase assigned to Judas Iscariot (John 17:12). Who that antichrist actually was, is, or will be, is much debated among Christian scholars worldwide.

1 TIMOTHY

THE BODY OF CHRIST



The Apostle Paul

Purpose

Paul wrote to Timothy to encourage and instruct the young pastor as he faced heretical teachings in the church and within the community of Ephesus. The major heretical teachings in Ephesus were an early form of Gnosticism, Jewish legalism, and asceticism.

Most of 1 Timothy involves detailed instructions on proper worship, discipleship, leadership training, and church organization. Paul is providing Timothy with the authority to guide the growing Ephesian church through some of the basic issues any church faces as it begins to influence the community.

Outline

1. Greetings and Timothy's Charge (1)
2. Instructions on Worship and Church Order (2–3)
3. Instructions on Teaching Correct Doctrine in the Midst of False Teaching (4)
4. Instructions on Dealing with Church Members (5:1–6:2)
5. Final Instructions to Timothy (6:3–21)

Background

Author: The author of 1 Timothy is the apostle Paul (1:1).

Date: Paul wrote the first letter to Timothy approximately eight years after Paul's three-year stay in Ephesus. Most scholars suggest a date from AD 62 to 66, after Paul was released from his house arrest in Rome.

Audience: Paul is writing to the young pastor Timothy who struggled to teach and pastor the church in Ephesus.

Themes

- Encouragement against false teachings: stand firm in the presence of heresy and embrace love.
- Instructions on worship: pray for all people, continue in faith, remain holy, and love continuously.
- Instructions on organization: elders and deacons should be of quality character.
- Instructions on care for church members: love and care for children, the elderly, and widows; respect the elders of your church.



Grandmother Lois, Timothy, and Mother Eunice
by Julius Schnorr von Carolsfeld

Who Was Timothy?

Timothy was from Lystra (in modern-day Turkey). His father was a Greek and his mother was a Jewish Christian (Acts 16:1). Timothy was well educated in the Old Testament (2 Tim. 3:15). Both Timothy's mother Eunice and his grandmother Lois modeled a life of sincere faith and raised Timothy to live similarly (2 Tim. 1:5)

Paul invited Timothy to travel with him when he passed through Lystra on his second missionary journey. Timothy became a pivotal missionary, evangelist, and friend to Paul as they together—with the help of several others—spread the gospel to Asia, Macedonia, and Achaia (Acts 17). Paul was very close to Timothy and referred to him as a “true son of faith” (1 Tim. 1:2).

Timothy was with Paul during his extended stay in Ephesus (Acts 19:22) and was present during Paul's first imprisonment in Rome (Phil. 1:1; Col. 1:1; Philem. 1:1). Paul entrusted Timothy to deliver six of his letters. Paul said the following about Timothy to the Philippians: “I have no one else like him, who will show genuine concern for your welfare. For everyone looks out for their own interests, not those of Jesus Christ. But you know that Timothy has proved himself, because as a son with his father he has served with me in the work of the gospel” (Phil. 2:20–22).

Key Verses

This is good, and pleases God our Savior, who wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth. For there is one God and one mediator between God and mankind, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all people.—1 Tim. 2:3–6

Beyond all question, the mystery from which true godliness springs is great: He appeared in the flesh, was vindicated by the Spirit, was seen by angels, was preached among the nations, was believed on in the world, was taken up in glory.—1 Tim. 3:16

Don't let anyone look down on you because you are young, but set an example for the believers in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith and in purity. Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to preaching and to teaching.—1 Tim. 4:13–14

Pastoral Epistles

Paul wrote three letters in the New Testament to pastors: 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus. These three letters are called the Pastoral Epistles.

Being God's People

The message in 1 Timothy calls us, as the body of Christ (the church), to live holy lives that are pleasing to the Lord. Paul encourages Timothy to raise up leaders who are above reproach, faithful to their wives, temperate, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not given to drunkenness, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, and not lovers of money (1 Tim. 3:2–3).

Jesus is the head of the body. All worship and organization within the body falls under Jesus' Lordship. As leaders of Christ's church today, we too keep our Lord in the forefronts of our minds as we lead and guide other members of the body.

Jesus in 1 Timothy

The letter to Timothy is a practical letter about the church, its life and teachings. Jesus is our Savior, our Mediator, and the Lord of the church. "For there is one God and one mediator between God and mankind, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all people" (1 Tim. 2:5–6). Because Jesus ransomed our sins on the cross, he can now carry those sins to God the Father and mediate on our behalf. Jesus is also the head of the body. Jesus serves as the head of the church. All worship and organization within the body falls under Jesus' Lordship.

Who Wrote 1 Timothy?

Some modern scholars question whether Paul wrote 1 Timothy because of the different vocabulary and style compared to the undisputed letters of Paul. These scholars also point out that there appears to be a more developed church structure and organization within 1 Timothy than what was actually evident in the first century. However, evidence from the letter itself and from the early church suggests that Paul was the author of the letter.

2 TIMOTHY

FINAL WORDS OF ENCOURAGEMENT



Paul in Prison by Rembrandt

Purpose

Imprisoned in Rome, the apostle Paul felt abandoned and lonely (2 Tim. 1:15; 4:16). Paul longed for Timothy, his close companion and brother in the Lord to come visit him (1:4; 4:9). Paul had been arrested in the city of Troas, in the northwestern tip of modern-day Turkey. In this second letter to Timothy, Paul asks Timothy to pick up the cloak, scrolls, and parchments that he left in Troas, and bring them with him when he comes to visit him in Rome (4:12).

Paul is also writing this letter to encourage the young pastor Timothy and the Ephesian church to persevere in the gospel through suffering and persecution, to continue preaching the gospel in all circumstances, and to guard the gospel against false teachings.

Outline

1. Greetings, Thanksgiving, and Appeal to the Gospel (1:1–2:13)
2. Encouragement against False Teachers (2:14–3:9)
3. Encouragement and Charge to Preach the Word (3:10–4:8)
4. Final Instructions and Greetings (4:9–22)

Background

Author: The author of 2 Timothy is the apostle Paul (1:1).

Date: Paul wrote the second letter to Timothy during his imprisonment in Rome. Scholars suggest 2 Timothy was written from approximately AD 66 to 67, shortly before Paul was executed in Rome.

Audience: Paul is writing to Timothy, the pastor of the church in Ephesus, as well as the Ephesian church as they continued to persevere under cruel persecution by the Roman Emperor Nero. Timothy was Paul's friend and fellow missionary. Timothy had stood by Paul through trials and persecutions and Paul longed to see his friend during the last days of his life.

Themes

- Appeal for Timothy to visit him in prison: Paul was lonely and felt abandoned by his friends. He hopes his apprentice and friend will visit him soon.
- Encouragement to proclaim the gospel in the midst of persecution, suffering, and false teaching.
- A final appeal to the Ephesian church to stand firm against persecution and false teachings.

Key Verses

He has saved us and called us to a holy life—not because of anything we have done but because of his own purpose and grace. This grace was given us in Christ Jesus before the beginning of time, but it has now been revealed through the appearing of our Savior, Christ Jesus, who has destroyed death and has brought life and immortality to light through the gospel.

—2 Tim. 1:9–10

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.

—2 Tim. 3:16–17

I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day—and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing.—2 Tim. 4:7–8

Being God's People

Paul writes, “In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted” (2 Tim 3:12). Paul also assures Christians that death is not the end for those of us who persevere in the faith and stand firm in the gospel. God will reward our faith in Christ’s death and resurrection with eternal life—a “crown of righteousness” (4:7–8). The Christian life is difficult and we will encounter teachings and temptations that are contrary to the gospel. It is important to remain grounded in Scripture as our foundation for wisdom (3:16–17). It is comforting to know that even through suffering, we have hope in the reward of eternal life.

Two Magicians

Jewish tradition suggests that the two magicians who opposed Moses in Egypt (Ex. 7:11, 22) were also responsible for convincing the people to build the golden calf (Ex. 32). Even though these magicians were not named in the Old Testament, Paul repeats tradition by referencing them by name: Jannes and Jambres (2 Tim. 3:8).

Jesus in 2 Timothy

Eternal glory is the reward for all who have faith in Christ, who died and rose from the dead. Jesus is the righteous judge of everyone (2 Tim. 4:1, 8). Those who endure suffering for the sake of the gospel will someday be rewarded for their perseverance; those who live immoral lives and cause suffering to believers will be punished someday.

Paul's Last Days

Paul spent two years under house arrest in Rome and was released in AD 62. Evidence from 1 Timothy, Titus, and 2 Timothy suggest that Paul then spent several years traveling through Asia (2 Tim. 4:20), Macedonia (Titus 1:5; 3:12), and Crete (Titus 1:5). Paul was again arrested, this time in Troas (2 Tim. 4:13) and brought to Rome where he was thrown into prison to await execution. We see from his second letter to Timothy that Paul was not very optimistic about the outcome (2 Tim. 1:8, 15–18; 4:9–16).

When Paul wrote 2 Timothy, many of Paul’s fellow missionaries and evangelists had already deserted him (2 Tim. 1:15; 4:10). Others were away from Paul (2 Tim. 4:10–12), leaving him lonely and desiring companionship. This second letter to Timothy—the last epistle Paul wrote—appears to be a testimony of his “final words” as the apostle Paul prepared for the end. It’s traditionally thought that Paul was executed in Rome during Emperor Nero’s persecution of Christians.

TITUS

RESPONDING TO THE GOSPEL



Basilica of St. Titus in Gortyn, Crete

Purpose

Paul wrote this letter to Titus to encourage him as the pastor of the churches of Crete to appoint responsible elders in the midst of false teachings and immoral behavior (Titus 1:12) and to instruct Titus on proper doctrine. Paul also instructs Titus to meet him in Nicopolis (in Greece), the city from where Paul is writing this letter (3:12).

Outline

1. Greetings and Appointing Elders (1:1–9)
2. Rebuking False Teachers (1:10–16)
3. Dealing with Church Members (2:1–15)
4. Responding to the Gospel (3:1–11)
5. Final Instructions (3:12–15)

Background

Author: The author of Titus is the apostle Paul (1:1).

Date: Titus was written sometime between AD 64 and 66, shortly before Paul spent the winter in Nicopolis (3:12). This was a few years after Paul had been released from house arrest in Rome, but just before his second arrest and confinement in a Roman prison.

Audience: Paul is writing to Titus, the pastor Paul left in charge of the churches on the island of Crete (Titus 1:5). Titus was a Greek, a Gentile convert who traveled with Paul to Jerusalem (Gal. 2:1–5) and assisted Paul during his third missionary journey. Titus assisted the Corinthian church (2 Cor. 2, 7, 8) and also traveled to Dalmatia (2 Tim. 4:10).

Crete is the fourth largest island in the Mediterranean Sea. Cretans were excellent archers and shrewd in business. But Crete had developed a bad reputation and many people considered Cretans to be immoral and lawbreakers.

Themes

- Encouragement to Titus to make sure moral believers were leading and ministering to the church in Crete.
- Warnings against false teachers and the immoral.
- Doing good in response to our salvation in Jesus Christ.



Paul Writing His Epistles by Valentin Boulogne

Key Verses

For the grace of God has appeared that offers salvation to all people.—Titus 2:11

But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit.—Titus 3:4–5

Cretans

To emphasize the difficulties facing Titus on Crete, Paul quotes the Cretan philosopher Epimenides who said of his own people, “Cretans are always liars, evil brutes, lazy gluttons” (1:12). The saying “to act the Cretan” became synonymous with “to play the liar.”

Being God’s People

The gospel of Jesus Christ is such great news. We are saved by the grace of God (3:3–7). When responding to the gospel we are to renew our minds and do good. This isn’t how we achieve salvation, but it is our response to salvation.

Jesus in Titus

In his advice to Titus, Paul reminds us that Jesus is at the center of the gospel. Jesus is our Savior, blessed hope, and Lord. We no longer subscribe to the ways of the world. When we profess our faith in Jesus, our lives should line up according to that belief.

PHILEMON

THE PRACTICE OF FORGIVENESS AND LOVE



Purpose

Paul is writing to convince a wealthy believer, Philemon, to forgive the runaway slave Onesimus and receive him back as a brother in Christ. Onesimus may have wronged Philemon or stolen from him (Philem. 18), and according to Roman law, Onesimus could be put to death. After running away from Philemon, Onesimus met Paul, became a Christian, and wished to be reconciled with his former owner.

Outline

1. Introduction and Greetings (1–3)
2. Paul Commends Philemon's Love (4–7)
3. Paul's Appeal to Philemon (8–22)
4. Paul's Request and Final Greetings (23–25)

Paul's Tactic

Paul uses an ancient Greek prescription when writing to Philemon: flattery (4–10), persuasion (11–19), emotional appeal (20–21).

Background

Author: The author of Philemon is the apostle Paul (verse 1).

Date: Paul wrote this letter at the same time he wrote the letter to the church in Colossae—sometime during his house arrest (imprisonment) in Rome, between AD 60 and 62.

Audience: Paul is writing to Philemon, a leader at the church in Colossae and the owner of a slave named Onesimus. (The Colossian church met in Philemon's house.)

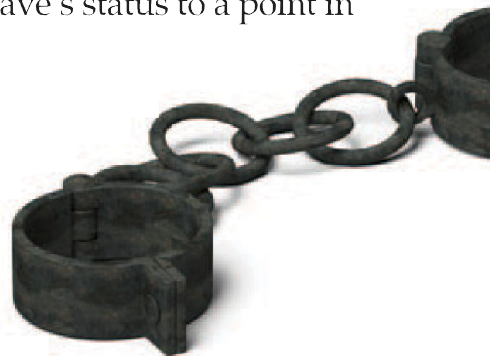
Themes

Forgiveness. Paul appeals to Philemon to forgive Onesimus.

Christian Love. Loving other believers as family will elevate a slave's status to a point in which the slave-owner distinction can be transcended.

Key Verses

Perhaps the reason he was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back forever—no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother. —Philem. 15–16a



Being God's People

Philemon had every legal right to punish Onesimus, but the love and grace found in Christ can overcome anything. Paul encourages Philemon to love Onesimus. Jesus commanded his followers, “Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another” (John 13:34–35). As followers of Jesus, the outward expression of love—even toward those who have wronged us—is a sign of our obedience to God.

Jesus in Philemon

Jesus said, “I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full” (John 10:10). Jesus died to provide life and freedom to all people, so that there is neither “slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all” (Col. 3:11).

Slavery in the First-Century

Slavery in the Roman world was unlike recent examples of slavery. Although mistreatment of slaves occurred, many slaves were too important to mistreat. Slaves owned property, could manage large portions or entire households or businesses, and, with enough money, could buy their own freedom and even Roman citizenship.

To understand Paul's views about slavery, we need to pay attention to all of his writings rather than just this letter:

- In 1 Corinthians 7:22 Paul affirms that a slave who has become a believer is “the Lord's freed person.”

- In Galatians 3:28, the apostle affirms that all people, regardless of social standing, are one in Christ.

- In Ephesians 6:5–9, Paul exhorts slaves to be obedient. However, he also exhorts masters to treat slaves with fairness because “you know that he who is both their Master and yours is in heaven, and there is no favoritism with him.”

- In Colossians 3:22–24 the apostle makes the extraordinary affirmation that the reward for servants' obedience comes from the Lord because “it is the Lord Christ you are serving.”

HEBREWS

A SUPERIOR COVENANT



The Last Supper by Philippe de Champaigne

Purpose

The main purpose of the letter to the Hebrews was to establish the superiority of Jesus. Jesus is better than angels, the prophets of the Old Testament, Moses, the law, the old covenant, the priesthood, the tabernacle (or sanctuary), and the Jewish sacrificial system. Jesus' death on the cross fulfilled the Old Testament. Jesus reveals God in a new and more complete way.

The letter aims to guide God's people into God's rest—his promised land. This is a journey of faith. Faith is the stance God's people take as they persevere in confidence toward the goal. The letter urges all Christians to strive to be holy and be like Jesus. Suffering was a catalyst for Christ's life of obedience and perfection. As imitators of Christ, suffering can help believers on their journey toward obedience in faith and love.

Outline

1. The Superiority of Christ over Angels, Moses, and Priests (1:1–7:28)
 - a. Supremacy of Christ's revelation (1:1–4)
 - b. Supremacy over angels (1:5–2:18)
 - c. Supremacy over Moses (3:1–4:13)
 - d. Supremacy over priests (4:14–7:28)
2. The Superiority of Christ as the High Priest of the New Covenant (8:1–13)
3. The Superiority of the New Tabernacle (9:1–12)
4. The Superiority of Christ's Sacrifice (9:13–10:18)
5. A Call to Perseverance, Faithfulness, and Discipline (10:19–12:29)
6. Rules for Christian Living (13:1–17)
7. Request for Prayer, Final Greetings, and Benediction (13:18–25)

Background

Author: The author of Hebrews is unknown. Some scholars suggest that the apostle Paul wrote Hebrews. However, Paul identified himself as the writer in his letters, and the author of Hebrews does not identify himself. Also, the difference in themes and style between Paul's letters and Hebrews argues against Paul as the author.

Date: Many scholars suggest a date from AD 60 to 69 for two main reasons: (1) The author of Hebrews mentions Timothy (13:23), and (2) the temple in Jerusalem, which was destroyed in AD 70, still appears to be standing. The author speaks of the temple in the present tense and doesn't reference the end of the Old Testament sacrificial system.

Audience: The author of Hebrews is writing to Jewish Christians. These converts appear to be tempted to resort back to Judaism or at least a hybrid version of Christianity mixed with Judaism. Some scholars suggest that the recipients of Hebrews were the large number of priests who converted to Christianity after the selection of the seven deacons in Acts 6:1–9. Because most people assumed that the audience of the book was Jewish, the book came to be called the letter to the Hebrews (or Jews).

Setting: The letter seems to address a group of Christians facing fierce persecution (10:32; 12:4). The persecution from the Roman government probably was not the only one. They might have experienced persecution from other Jews. During the first century, Judaism was a protected religion under Roman law; Christianity was not. The pressure of the persecution must have made it tempting for Christians to return to their Jewish roots in order to avoid persecution and possible death. Some scholars believe that in certain areas in the first century when Jews converted to Christianity, they were banned from the synagogue and their children couldn't attend the synagogue's schools.



Themes

The Superiority of Christ. Because of Jesus' superiority, what Christians have is superior to the old revelation. Jesus and the new covenant are superior to the old covenant, the old promises, the old sacrifices, the old "promised land," the old sanctuary, and the old priesthood.

Christ's Humanity. Christ became flesh to defeat the power of death, sin, and evil, and to give true freedom (2:14–15). Because Jesus became flesh, we know that Jesus understands our weakness and provides us with the grace to be faithful to him (4:15).

Faith, Perseverance, and Discipleship. Christ has given us a superior revelation and salvation.

As a response in gratitude to him, we are called to endure persecution and suffering. We press on to our goal with faith in Christ: to rest in God's presence for all eternity.

Key Verses

For the word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account.—Heb. 4:12–13

Let us hold unwaveringly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.—Heb. 10:23–25

Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.—Heb. 12:1–2

Heroes of the Faith in Hebrews 11

Abel (Gen. 4:2–10)

Enoch (Gen. 5:21–24)

Noah (Gen. 5:30–9:28)

Abraham (Gen. 11:26–25:11)

Isaac (Gen. 24:4–66; 25:9–11, 19; 26:1–40)

Jacob (Gen. 25:19–35:29; 49:1–28)

Sarah (Gen. 11:29–31; 12:5–17; 16:1–8; 17:15–18:15)

Joseph (Gen. 37:2–36; 39:1–23; 40:3–50:26; Ex. 1:5–8; 13:19)

Moses (Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy)

Rahab (Josh. 2:1–24; 6:16–17, 22–25; James 2:25; Matt. 1:5)

Gideon (Judg. 6:11–8:35)

Barak (Judg. 4:1–5:15)

Samson (Judg. 13:1–16:31)

Jephthah (Judg. 11:1–12:7)

David (Ruth 4:17, 22; 1 Sam. 16:1–2; Sam. 24:25)

Samuel (1 Sam. 1:9–28:20; Ps. 99:6; Acts 3:24; 13:20)

Being God's People

God's promises of saving and transforming the world are made complete in Jesus Christ. Throughout the history of the Bible, heroes of faith have persevered through great trials and difficulties. These heroes provide us with insight into God's providence and faithfulness.

Throughout the book of Hebrews, the author gives five warnings to all believers:

1. Pay attention to everything you hear.
2. Fight against unfaithfulness and the hardening of your hearts.
3. Grow in spiritual maturity.
4. Persevere through trials and suffering.
5. Never refuse the Holy Spirit.

"Better Than"

The phrase "better than" occurs 13 times in the book of Hebrews—it is repeated in a couple of places:

- The prophets (1:1–3)
- Angels (1:4–2:18)
- Moses (3:1–18)
- Joshua (4:1–13)
- High priest (4:14–6:12)
- Abraham (6:13–7:10)
- Melchizedek (7:1–10)
- Aaron and priests (7:11–8:6)
- Sacrifices (8:7–10:39)

Jesus in Hebrews

Jesus Christ is the fulfillment of every promise that preceded him. Jesus Christ is superior to anything that came before him. In Jesus, we have a better hope, a better covenant, a better sanctuary, and a better inheritance. Jesus is the supreme and superior mediator, the sinless High Priest. There is no longer a need for repeated sacrifices because Jesus is the one and only sacrifice. Jesus' sacrifice provides all who believe in him access to the holy God.



Jesus Appearing to His Apostles by Duccio di Buoninsegna

JAMES

TEST OF A LIVING FAITH



Purpose

This letter emphasizes faith, testing, wisdom, and doing. The letter of James is concerned with helping readers see the importance of a living faith. The message of the book is clear: Go and do good things for others, rather than just talking about it.

The book of James was written to Christians who had become arrogant. Its message is different from Paul's letters. Paul dealt with one of the problems new Christians face: the belief that they can "earn" God's grace by being good enough. Paul concludes, "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast" (Eph. 2:8–9). In this book, James deals with the other side of that problem: a misunderstanding about grace that results in an inactive faith. "In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead" (James 2:17).

Outline

1. Greetings (1:1)
2. Test of a Living Faith (1:2–18)
3. Faith Tested by Its Response to the Word of God (1:19–27)
4. Faith Tested by Its Reaction to Favoritism (2:1–13)
5. Faith Tested by Its Doing of Good Works (2:14–26)
6. Faith Tested by Its Production of Self-Control in Speech and Humility (3:1–18)
7. Faith Tested by Its Reaction to Quarreling, Judgmentalism, Arrogance, Selfishness, and Suffering (4:1–5:12)
8. Faith Tested by Its Resort to Prayer (5:13–18)
9. Conclusion (5:19–20)

Background

Author: Because of his prominent role in the church, many scholars agree that the author of the epistle was “James, the Lord’s brother” (Gal. 1:19; Acts 15:13–29). According to an early tradition, James was martyred in Jerusalem in AD 62.

Date: The letter was likely written before the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15) in AD 49. The main reason to prefer this time is that the Gentile-Jewish controversies that caused the Jerusalem Council are not mentioned in the letter. In addition, the letter demonstrates a strong Jewish background, but with special familiarity with Jesus’ teachings. For example, the letter uses the word “synagogue” (the NIV translates as “your meeting”) (2:2), instead of using “church” (or “house church,” as in the book of Acts).

Audience: Although impossible to say for sure, our best guess is that the letter was meant for Christian Jews. One of the reasons for this guess is found in the expression “to the twelve tribes scattered among the nations” (1:1). Scholars identify these “twelve tribes” with: (1) Christian Jews, (2) Gentiles, (3) all Christians, both Gentiles and Jews. Most scholars believe number one is most likely correct.

Themes

Temptation and Maturity. The Christian life is faced with many temptations in this world. However, for James, temptations are tests that strengthen our faith (1:2–8; 12–18).

Wealth and Poverty. The book of James does not condemn wealth. Rather, just like other biblical texts about riches, it condemns the abusive use of wealth. That is, James condemns two attitudes toward money: (1) an attitude that abuses or ignores the poor, and (2) when riches are substituted for God and become an idol (1:9–11; 2:1–13; 4:8–10, 13–16; 5:1–6).

Sins of Speech. Self-control is an important feature of true faith. Our speech can be a source of great goodness or great evil (1:26–27; 3:1–12; 4:11–12; 5:12).

Patience and Prayer. Prayer becomes a test of faith when it requires patience. The patience James writes about is born from a great dependence on God, which is born from wisdom (5:7–11, 13–20).

Faith and Actions. James writes about the faith of those who have already been saved. It is a visible faith, a faith shown in deeds rather than words (1:19–25; 2:14–26; 3:13–18; 4:1–7, 17)

Key Verses

Blessed is the one who perseveres under trial because, having stood the test, that person will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him.—James 1:12

Therefore, get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent and humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you.—James 1:21

As the body without spirit is dead, so faith is dead without deeds is dead.—James 2:26

Being God's People

James is a strong reminder to all believers that faith must produce good fruit. With appealing images, a compassionate heart, and strong advice, James urges Christians to live out their faith. We must display a living, active faith. Faith without good deeds is constricted, unable to grow. Our faith must be visible in our self-control, maturity, treatment of weak people in society, and prayer.

Re-programming Our Minds

“Therefore, get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent and humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you” (James 1:21). Sin is pervasive and insidious; before we know it, we are slaves to our sin. Sin becomes second nature. However, the word of God, through the power of the Holy Spirit, transforms us and frees us from the slavery of sin. But like any “spring-cleaning project,” it requires much work and is challenging. Yet the word of God can re-program our minds so we can “be made new in the attitude of your minds,” and “put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness” (Eph. 4:23–24).

Jesus in James

Although the letter of James mentions Jesus only twice (1:1; 2:1), Jesus' wonderful Sermon on the Mount in the Gospel of Matthew shines throughout the letter. James does not directly quote Jesus, but there are many important parallels.

James	Teaching	Matthew
1:2	Joy in the midst of trials	5:10–12
1:4	Exhortation to be perfect	5:48
1:5	Asking God for good things	7:7–11
1:17	God the giver of all good things	7:11
1:20	Warnings against anger	5:22
1:22	Becoming hearers and doers of the Word	7:24–27
2:5	The poor inherit the kingdom	5:3, 5
2:10	Keeping the whole law	5:19
2:13	Being merciful to receive mercy	5:7
3:12	To be known by our fruits	7:16
3:18	The blessings of peacemakers	5:9
4:2–3	Ask and you will receive	7:7–8
4:4	Serving God vs. friendship with the world	6:24
4:9–10	Comfort for mourners	5:4
4:11–12	Warnings against judging others	7:1–5
4:13–14	Living for today	6:34
5:2–5	Moth and rust spoiling earthly treasures	6:19
5:10	Prophets as examples	5:12
5:12	Warnings against making oaths	5:33–37

1 & 2 PETER

HOLY LIVING IN TIMES OF TRIALS



Purpose

The main focus of the first letter of Peter is the problem of suffering. As persecution against believers in the time of the apostles increased, this letter encourages faithfulness and Christ-like behavior in difficult circumstances. All other themes—the ministry of Jesus and the Holy Spirit, the people of God as God’s flock, a life of holiness—come back to the issue of suffering. The letter teaches what it means to be God’s people in times of suffering, persecution, and trials.

The second letter of Peter warns believers against false teachers, encourages them to grow in their faith, and instructs them regarding the return of Jesus.

Outline

1 Peter

1. Greeting (1:1–2)
2. The Nature of the Gospel (1:3–2:10)
 - a. The blessings of the gospel (1:3–9)
 - b. Anticipation of these blessings (1:10–12)
 - c. Those who receive these blessings (1:13–2:10)

The Scribe

1 Peter, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, and the letter quoted in Acts 15:22–29 have a similar writing style. Some scholars have suggested that one writer/secretary was behind them all. The name Silas appears among all four works, making him the likely scribe behind these letters.

3. Holy Relationships (2:11–3:12)
 - a. In a pagan world (2:11–12)
 - b. With the government (2:13–17)
 - c. With the family (2:18–3:7)
 - d. In the church (3:8–12)
4. Christian Suffering and Service (3:13–4:19)
 - a. Blessings in suffering (3:13–17)
 - b. The example of Christ (3:18–4:6)
 - c. Call to a holy life (4:7–11)
 - d. Holiness in the midst of suffering (4:12–19)
5. Christian Discipline (5:1–11)
 - a. Discipline of the body of Christ (5:1–6)
 - b. Personal discipline (5:7–11)
6. Conclusion and Final Greeting (5:12–14)



Peter the Apostle by Giuseppe Nogari

2 Peter

1. Greeting (1:1–2)
2. God's Providence and Election Made Certain by a Godly Lifestyle (1:3–11)
3. Jesus is the Central Truth of the Testimony of the Apostles and Fulfillment of the Prophets (1:12–21)
4. A Warning Against False Prophets and Teachers (2:1–3:17)
5. Doxology (3:18)

Background

Author: The author identifies himself as Simon Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ (1 Peter 1:1; 2 Peter 1:1).

However, authorship of the letters has been much debated. First Peter gained entrance into the New Testament canon quicker than 2 Peter. First and Second Peter are written in a different style, and the first letter uses an advanced level of Greek writing, while the second letter is written in simpler Greek. Some scholars argue that the level of Greek in the first letter is too high for a non-native speaker like Peter.

First Peter 5:12 suggests that Silas might have been involved in the first letter's composition. Silas was a partner and possibly a secretary to Paul (Acts 15:40; 1 Thess. 1:1). The Greek of 1 Peter could be explained as Silas' influence on the letter of 1 Peter. The lower Greek and stylistic differences in 2 Peter might be explained by the use of a different secretary, or even Peter actually writing the letter himself.

Date: The first letter was written late in Peter's life (AD 64–65). Peter seems to have written just before Nero's extreme persecution (AD 64–68). Although persecution is a main focus of the letter, it does not appear to be referring to the horrifying persecution under Nero. The second letter may well have been written soon after the first epistle.

Audience: Peter addresses his first letter to believers in parts of Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey) (1:1). If 2 Peter was the follow up letter (3:1), then the audience for both letters was the same group of believers. The many references to the Old Testament suggest an audience familiar with the Jewish Scriptures. On the other hand, Peter also seems to be writing to an audience with a pagan past (1 Peter 1:14; 2:10; 4:3; 2 Peter 3:15) suggesting a largely Gentile group of believers. Peter was probably writing to both Jewish and Gentile Christians.

Themes

1 Peter

- **Suffering.** Christians are called to suffer for the sake of Christ (2:19–25, 4:12–19).
- **Christian Testimony.** Holy living in the face of persecution and suffering is a testimony to the lost world (3:13–17).

2 Peter

- **Revelation.** The prophetic word and apostolic testimony are not human creations. They are reliable testimonies (1:16–21).
- **False Teaching.** False teaching is dangerous and destructive (2:1–3).

Key Verses

Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, for you are receiving the goal of your faith, the salvation of your souls.—1 Peter 1:8–9

But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.—1 Peter 2:9

We did not follow cleverly invented stories when we told you about the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty.—2 Peter 1:16

Being God's People

God's people throughout the world continue to face persecution. God strengthens and is present with his people through times of suffering and the confusion of false teaching. The letters of Peter encourage all believers to hold on to Jesus, to be faithful and holy in the face of persecution, and to be on guard against false teachers.

Jesus in 1 & 2 Peter

Jesus gave his life for us; he knows suffering. God is with us, even in times when we feel alone and defeated. Knowing that Jesus will return gives us hope to continue being faithful and obedient to God. When Jesus returns, all our pain and suffering will be redeemed and we will be with him forever.

1, 2 & 3 JOHN

THE LOVE LETTERS



Purpose

1 John: John's first letter refutes false teachings that claimed that Jesus only appeared to be human. The letter affirms Christ's full humanity. This letter also stresses our adoption into God's eternal family and our brotherhood and sisterhood expressed in Christian love. The main focus of the letter is God's love through Christ. Because of God's love, we are called to love one another. The letter also assures believers of their salvation and corrects their beliefs regarding proper Christian discipline and morality.

2 John: Since false teachers were corrupting the gospel, John warned believers to use discernment when welcoming teachers into their homes. John also encouraged believers to seek love, hospitality, unity, and recognize the truth that Jesus came "in the flesh" (1:7).

3 John: The third letter of John—the shortest book in the Bible—was written to commend Gaius for his love, faithfulness, and hospitality, and also to denounce Diotrephes because of he was arrogant, gossiped maliciously about John and other leaders, and refused to welcome other Christians.

Outline

1 John

1. The Incarnation (1:1–4)
2. Living in the Light as God’s Children (1:5–3:10)
3. Living in Love and in the Spirit (3:11–5:12)
4. Concluding Affirmations (5:13–21)

2 John

1. Greetings (1–3)
2. Love One Another (4–6)
3. Warning against False Teachings (7–11)
4. Final Greetings (12–13)

3 John

1. Greetings (1–2)
2. Commendation of Gaius (3–8)
3. Condemnation of Diotrephes (9–10)
4. Encouragement and Final Greetings (11–14)



Background

Author: The author of 1, 2, and 3 John, is John the son of Zebedee. John was an apostle, one of the twelve disciples of Jesus, and the author of the Gospel of John and Revelation. John was one of three disciples in Jesus’ inner circle, and was called the “disciple whom Jesus loved” (John 13:23). In 2 and 3 John, he calls himself “the elder” (2 John 1:1; 3 John 1). Although some scholars think the name refers to a different John, the title of “elder” was common in the early church, even for the apostles (see 1 Peter 5:1 “To the elders among you, I appeal as a fellow elder”).

Most scholars agree that the apostle John penned all three letters: 1, 2 and 3 John. The style within each letter has numerous similarities to the Gospel of John. They are all written in simple Greek and present contrasting terms such as light/darkness, love/hate, life/death, good/evil, and truth/lies.

Date: Most scholars agree that 1, 2, and 3 John were written at the same time as the Gospel of John, from AD 85 to 95. The late date is based on evidence from early church witnesses (Irenaeus and Clement of Alexandria), and the early stage of the Gnostic heresy.

Audience: John's first letter was a circular letter intended for several churches in Asia Minor—perhaps including, but not limited to, the seven churches of Revelation: Ephesus, Smyrna, Thyatira, Pegamum, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea.

John's second letter was addressed to "the chosen lady," who is unidentified. Some think that the expression stands for the church. The letter was probably sent to a house church in Asia Minor.

John's third letter was addressed to "Gaius," a Christian in one of the churches in Asia Minor. Gaius was a common Roman name at the time so it is difficult to identify who he was.



Ruins of the temple of Diana or Artemis in ancient Sardis

Setting: An early form of what became Gnosticism is an important background. It was a philosophy where all physical matter—including the human body—was considered evil and all spirit was good. According to early Gnostic beliefs, salvation was an escape from this evil flesh and was attained through a special knowledge (*gnosis*) and not by faith in Jesus' death and resurrection. Gnostics had two problematic views of Jesus: (1) Docetism—Jesus was 100% spirit and only *appeared* to have flesh, and (2) Cerinthianism—Jesus' spiritual divinity joined him at his baptism and left him before he died. Since Gnosticism taught that matter was evil, extreme asceticism (abstaining from all pleasure) and hedonism (indulging in pleasure) often developed. In their way of thinking, if the flesh has no consequence, then one can either mistreat the body or act immorally.

It was common practice for early believers to welcome itinerant missionaries and teachers into their homes. False teachers were taking advantage of this hospitality and spreading false beliefs among Christians.

Themes

- Jesus is the "Word made flesh." Jesus was not a ghost, nor did God's spirit latch on to the human Jesus at his baptism only to escape from that body prior to his crucifixion.
- The Christian life is an expression of love, obedience, and hospitality.

Key Verses

If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.—1 John 1:8–9

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.—1 John 3:16

Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love.—1 John 4:7–8

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.—2 John 6

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

Being God's People

One of the greatest promises in John's letters is the promise of God's love and the assurance of our salvation in Christ. Everybody sins; the good news is that if we confess our sins, God will forgive us (1 John 1:8–9). We can't be perfect, no one can. Satan masquerades as an angel of light and his servants masquerade as servants of righteousness (1 Cor. 11:14–15). We must always be on the watch for those who wish to deceive us. Everything we encounter must be tested with Scripture.

Jesus in 1, 2 & 3 John

Jesus came to this world in the flesh and he died for the forgiveness of sins and the salvation of those who believe in him. When we believe in Jesus we are adopted into God's family. We are God's beloved children. As God's children, we love and obey God our Father and we love our fellow brothers and sisters and treat them with kindness and hospitality.



The Apostle John

JUDE

REMEMBER AND PERSEVERE



Michael Fights Rebel Angels by Sebastiano Ricci

Purpose

This short letter warns believers against false teachers and the dangers of their teachings. It encourages believers to remain faithful to the teachings of the apostles. Using examples from the history of God's people and God's judgment on apostates, Jude teaches that God will also judge all other false teachers. Finally, Jude urges believers to help others in danger of being misled.

Outline

1. Greetings (1–2)
2. Reason for the Letter (3–4)
3. Warning against False Teachers (5–19)
 - a. Examples God's judgment against false teachers (5–13)
 - b. Witness against the false teachers (14–19)
4. Exhortation to Believers (20–23)
5. Doxology (24–25)

Background

Author: The author identifies himself as Jude the brother of James (verse 1). Tradition holds that this is James the brother of Jesus who became the head of the Jerusalem church. This would make Jude (“Judas” in Greek) Jesus’ brother mentioned in Matthew 13:55 and Mark 6:3. Jude might also have been a traveling missionary that Paul mentions in 1 Corinthians 9:5.

Date: Being so short a letter, it is difficult to determine when it was written as well as the false teachings the letter opposes. Any proposed date must be held tentatively. Thus, the date might vary from the AD 60s to the 80s. Some scholars suggest that Jude wrote his letter prior to AD 62 because if he wrote it after AD 62 when James was martyred, Jude would have used a word like “blessed,” “good,” or “just” to describe James (verse 1), which was the customary way to describe martyrs. However, it is still possible that Jude wrote much later in his life because in his letter he urges Christians to not forget what they had learned from the apostles (verses 17–18).

Audience: There is no specific audience mentioned in the letter. Jude may have been addressing a Jewish Christian audience—the use of the Old Testament suggests it. However, the letter applies just as well to Gentile believers.

Themes

Christ’s Faithfulness. Christ is faithful and able to keep believers from falling (verses 1, 24).

God’s Judgment. God is merciful. However, he judges evil, as the history that Jude reviews shows.

Key Verses

To him who is able to keep you from falling 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.—Jude 24–25

Being God’s People

God promises to keep us from falling into serious error if we trust in him. God challenges believers to stand up for the true faith and not be led astray.

Jesus in Jude

Jesus protects us and helps us reach the goal to be in his presence. While our task is to remain aware and cautious of false teachings, Christ gives us the strength to be faithful.

Jude’s Strange Quotations

Jude quotes Michael the archangel and Enoch (Gen. 5:18–24; Jude 9, 14–15). Where did he get these quotations? It is possible that Jude obtained them from oral tradition handed down through the rabbis. More likely he is quoting from two books: *The Assumption of Moses* and the book of *1 Enoch*. These two books are not part of the Jewish or Christian Bibles. However, they are important for understanding the period between the Old and New Testaments. Jude’s quotation of Enoch can be found in 1 Enoch 1:9, but his quotation of the archangel Michael no longer exists in the fragment left of the manuscript of *The Assumption of Moses*.

REVELATION

ALL GLORY AND PRAISE TO THE LAMB



Purpose

The book of Revelation describes the famous vision that the apostle John had while living on the island of Patmos in the Aegean Sea. We often think of Revelation as only focusing on the end of the world, but this book had a bigger purpose. Its message was to give hope to Christians who were going through several trials. They faced severe persecution, dealt with dangerous false teachers, and faced the temptations of immorality, idolatry, and spiritual complacency.

John wrote Revelation to instruct, guide, comfort, and reassure Christians in their journey through difficult times. It shows, with vivid images and powerful language, that even if evil seems too strong, God is in control of history. Although God's people suffer and can be in danger, God takes care of them. Even if evil seems to win the day, God will defeat Satan and his followers and show his justice and mercy to the entire creation. The book of Revelation speaks of the dearest longing of all believers: the return of the Lord as King and Savior. Then, God will renew creation, and his people will live with him forever. Until that day, all Christians join in with the final plea of the book: Come, Lord Jesus!

Outline

1. Introduction (1:1–19)
 - a. Blessings (1:1–7)
 - b. Vision of Christ (1:8–19)
2. Seven Messages to Churches (2:1–3:22)
 - a. Ephesus (2:1–7)
 - b. Smyrna (2:8–11)
 - c. Pergamum (2:12–17)
 - d. Thyatira (2:18–29)
 - e. Sardis (3:1–6)
 - f. Philadelphia (3:7–13)
 - g. Laodicea (3:14–22)
3. Seven Seals (4:1–8:1)
 - a. Interlude: Vision of heaven (4:1–11)
 - b. Scroll with seven seals and the Lamb (5:1–14)
 - c. Opening of the first six seals, including the four horsemen (6:1–17)
 - d. Interlude: 144,000 sealed and the great multitude (7:1–17)
 - e. The seventh seal (8:1)
4. Seven Trumpets (8:2–11:19)
 - a. First four trumpets (8:2–12)
 - b. Interlude: Woe! Woe! Woe! (8:13)
 - c. Fifth and sixth trumpets (9:1–21)
 - d. Interlude: The little scroll and the two witnesses (10:1–11:14)
 - e. The seventh trumpet (11:15–19)
5. Seven Symbolic Histories (12:1–14:20)
 - a. History of the dragon (12:7–12)
 - b. History of the woman (12:13–17)
 - c. The sea beast (13:1–10)
 - d. The earth beast (13:11–18)
 - e. The 144,000 (14:1–5)
 - f. The angelic announcers (14:6–13)
 - g. The harvest (14:14–20)
6. Seven Bowls (15:1–16:21)
 - a. Commission of the angels (15:1–8)
 - b. The Seven Bowls (16:1–21)
7. The Fall of Babylon (17:1–19:10)
 - a. Judgment against Babylon (17:1–17)
 - b. Announcement of the fall of Babylon (18:1–3)
 - c. Call to God's people to leave Babylon (18:4–8)
 - d. Lament for the fall of Babylon (18:9–20)
 - e. Announcement of the fall of Babylon (18:21–24)
 - f. Celebration of the coming of the King (19:1–10)



John the Apostle on Patmos
by Hieronymus Bosch

Apocalyptic Literature

The book of Revelation is unique in the New Testament. It is written in an apocalyptic style. Apocalyptic is a word derived from a Greek word meaning "to unveil, to uncover." Apocalyptic is a type of literature that reveals God's plans that had been hidden to humanity. The message is conveyed through signs, symbols, dreams, and visions.

8. Visions (19:11–22:5)
 - a. The rider on a white horse (19:11–16)
 - b. The defeat of the two beasts (19:17–21)
 - c. The reign of the King for 1,000 years (20:1–6)
 - d. The defeat of Satan (20:7–10)
 - e. The last judgment (20:11–15)
 - f. The new heaven and the new earth (21:1–22:5)
9. Epilogue (22:6–21)

Background

Author: John received the revelation from Jesus (1:1–2). Identifying who this John was, however, is not a simple task. An early tradition identified John with the beloved apostle, the author of the Gospel of John and the three letters of John. However, making a definite identification is difficult because the author did not write any details about himself in the book of Revelation—understandable, since the revelation is about Jesus and the events that would take place later. Another difficulty is that the name John—*Yohanan* in Hebrew—was the fifth most common name in first-century Jerusalem. Another difficulty is the vocabulary and writing style of the book. There is nothing like the book of Revelation in the New Testament.

Although these are important observations, the early, well-documented tradition among several church fathers, still makes John the disciple of Jesus the most likely author of the book.

Date: The content of the book suggests that the book was written during a time of severe persecution against Christians. Scholars have identified two possible periods when Christians suffered persecution under the Roman government: During the reign of Emperor Nero (AD 54–68) and the reign of Emperor Domitian (AD 81–96). Those arguing for the earlier date base their suggestions on some ancient versions of the book of Revelation that mention Nero’s name, the severe persecution of believers during his reign, and the lack of references in the book about the destruction of the temple which occurred after Nero’s reign in AD 70.

However, most scholars believe the later date is more likely correct. Significant testimony from early church fathers reports that John wrote the book during the reign of Domitian. An important argument for this date is what scholars call “emperor worship.” Emperor worship was practiced since the time of Emperor Augustus (he ruled in Rome from 27 BC–AD 14). However, it was Emperor Domitian who required that he be addressed as *dominus et deus* (“lord and god”). Although there is little evidence of severe persecution of Christians during Domitian’s reign, persecution increased steadily until it became terrible in a short time. Many scholars prefer the later date during Emperor Domitian’s reign, somewhere around AD 90–96.

THE SEVEN CHURCHES OF REVELATION



Audience: The author wrote primarily for the seven churches addressed in chapters two and three. Since these churches were located by widely traveled roads that connected them, the book of Revelation was meant to be a circular letter—a messenger would read the letter to Christians in one place, then take it to another place to read it to the believers there, and so on. However, the book of Revelation deals with essential issues for all believers. In this sense, the seven churches stand to represent all believers, in all parts of the world and throughout time.

Themes

The Trinity

1. **God, the Father:** God rules the universe. His power and authority rule over all areas of the universe, visible and invisible (4:11; 5:13; 11:17; 19:1–3). He is a good and compassionate God, who is deeply engaged with the world in general and his people in particular (7:12; 21:4).
2. **Jesus Christ:** He is the Lamb who is worthy of judging the nations and defeating evil (5:9–10). Jesus is the star of the book and all of history, from beginning to end (1:8). Before his death on the cross, Jesus promised his disciples that he would return and ordered them to be ready (22:7). The book of Revelation shows what it will be like when he returns. All the things that were prophesied, that have already happened and are still to happen, find their



Emperor Domitian,
reigned AD 81–96

climax in this book (19:10). When Jesus returns, all things will be brought together, evil will be destroyed, justice will be done (20:7–15), and God will create a new heaven and a new earth where all believers will dwell forever (21:1).

3. **The Holy Spirit:** A crucial ministry of the Holy Spirit is to bring God's revelation to his servants.

The Agents of Evil. Evil is a reality, and the agents of evil are actively opposing God in the world. Even if evil seems to be winning the day, Revelation makes it clear that evil is under God's control and will be ultimately defeated.

1. The dragon
2. The beast from the land
3. The beast from the sea
4. The harlot
5. The Antichrist

Worship. Worship is central to the vision of God, the one sitting on the throne (ch. 4) and of the Lamb (ch. 5). Worship is the proper way for humans to approach and know God. Worship, which requires humility and trust in God, shows that the ultimate defeat of evil and the total transformation of the world is something God does. In his visions, John sees two realities: heaven and earth. What happens in heaven is the model of what should happen on earth—hence the prayer, “your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven...” (Matt. 6:10). In heaven, God is worshiped as the true God and the Ruler of all: “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” (Rev. 4:11).

Key Verses

Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear it and take to heart what is written in it, because the time is near.

—Rev. 1:3

Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise!—Rev. 5:12

He [an angel] said in a loud voice, “Fear God and give him glory, because the hour of his judgment has come. Worship him who made the heavens, the earth, the sea and the springs of water.”—Rev. 14:7

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.—Rev. 22:17



Christ as King of Kings

Four Approaches to the Book of Revelation

Four Views	How Revelation is Viewed	More about This View	Example: The Trumpets Rev. 8:1–13
Futurist <i>Revelation is like a road map for the future.</i>	The book of Revelation is prophecy primarily about the future end of the world.	In the futurist view, all or nearly all of Revelation is yet to occur. Revelation is a prophecy that describes the end of time and the years leading immediately to the end.	The trumpets describe the events of the tribulation in the last days.
Historical <i>Revelation is like a history textbook for the past, present, and future.</i>	The book of Revelation is prophecy about church history from the time of John to the end of the world.	Historicists view the events in Revelation as symbolic descriptions of historical events throughout church history. (Some futurists also understand the Seven Churches listed in Revelation 1–3 in a historical manner, treating each church as descriptive of a particular era of church history.)	The trumpets are the stages of church history, perhaps from about AD 400 until the fifteenth century (or to the present).
Idealist <i>Revelation is an allegory for all times and places.</i>	The book of Revelation is a non-historical and non-prophetic drama about spiritual realities.	This view treats the images, visions, and dreams as symbolic expressions of struggles between good and evil throughout history. These symbols represent the struggle between the kingdom of God and the powers of evil.	The trumpets are about the cycles of human sin, consequences, and God's salvation.
Preterist <i>Revelation is like an ancient newspaper.</i>	The book of Revelation is prophecy that was fulfilled primarily in the first century AD.	“Partial Preterism” views most of Revelation as prophecy fulfilled in the first century AD, though final chapters of Revelation describe future events to occur at the end of time. “Full Preterists” contend that the return of Jesus was spiritual and occurred in AD 70.	The trumpets represent a vision of the Roman war with the Jews in the first century AD and extend the seals' description in further detail.



The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse (Rev. 6) by Victor Vasnetsov

Being God's People

The book of Revelation presents the climax of God's plans for the world. Evil, starting with Satan and all of his agents, will be destroyed. God will judge all who would set against him and claim glory and authority for themselves as if they were divine. Jesus, who died in humility for the sins of the world, resurrected with power, and ascended in glory, returns as the victorious King to claim what has always been his, judge all people, and restore his creation. The book of Revelation is not just a book of comfort for those who suffer; it is also a book of guidance. Like the North Star that guides ships, the book of Revelation guides us to the brightest star of all: Jesus, the Lamb who gave his life for us and the King who claims his throne in victory and righteousness.

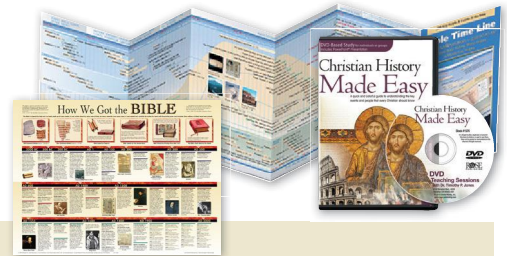
Jesus in Revelation

In his visions of heaven, John sees Jesus as he is: the ascended and glorified Lord, who is worthy of all worship. Jesus has authority over all things, including Satan and death. His judgment is righteous and just. His promises to give rest and peace to his followers will be fulfilled in the new heavens and the new earth.

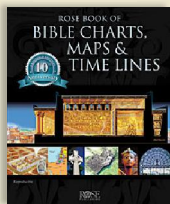
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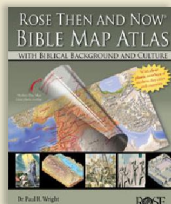
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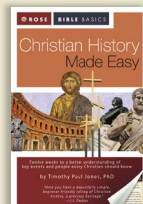
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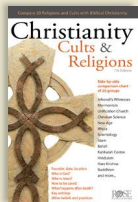


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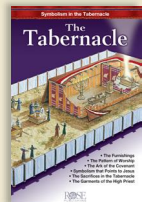


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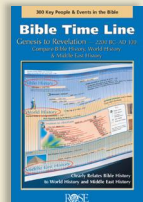
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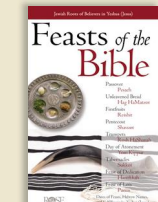
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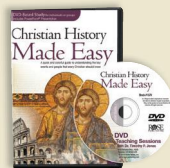


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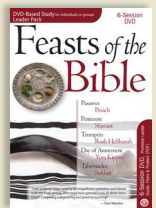


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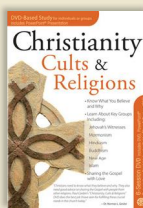
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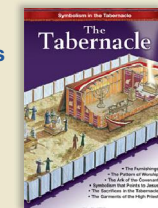
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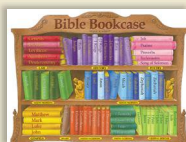


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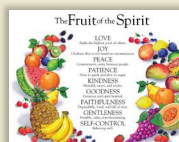
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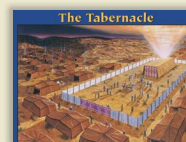
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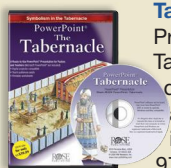


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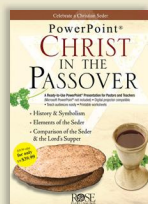


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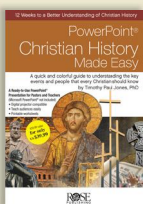
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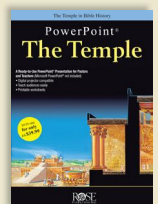
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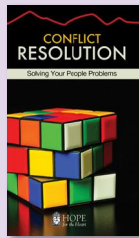
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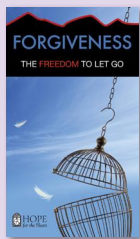
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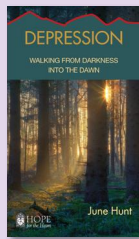
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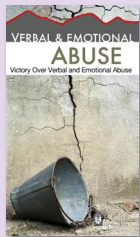
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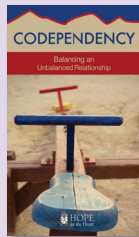
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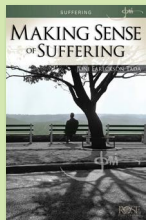
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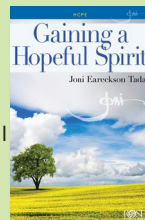
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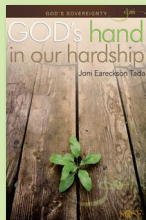
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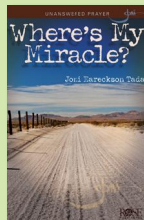
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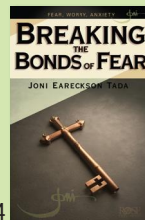
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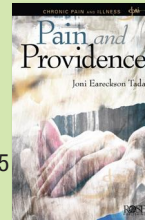
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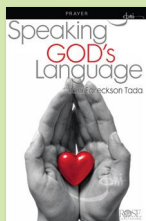
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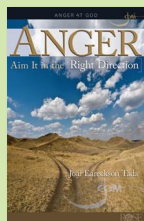
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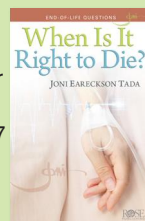
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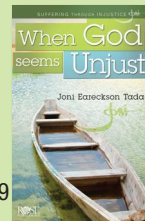
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Joni Eareckson Tada, the founder and Chief Executive Officer of Joni and Friends International Disability Center, is an international advocate for people with disabilities. A diving accident in 1967 left Joni Eareckson, then 17, a quadriplegic in a wheelchair, without the use of her limbs. After two years of rehabilitation, she emerged with new skills and a fresh determination to help others in similar situations. Joni has written over 50 books and numerous magazine articles. She was inducted into the Christian Booksellers' Association's Hall of Honor in 1995 and received the Gold Medallion Lifetime Achievement Award in 2003 from the Evangelical Christian Publishers Association.

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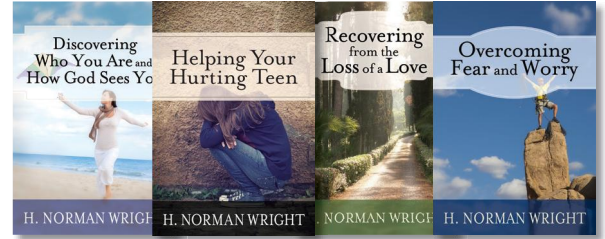
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