

# BIBLE OUTLINE: THE LETTERS

## BIBLE OUTLINE OVERVIEW

- The Bible is a very large collection of writings that can be confusing to read. We have created these outlines as way to give you an overview of each section of the Bible and to remind each reader that the Bible is a story that points to God and is fulfilled in Christ.

## SETTING AND WRITING

- The New Testament is set in the first-century and primarily takes place in the Roman provinces known as Judea. This included areas like Galilee, Samaria, Bethlehem, Nazareth, Capernaum, and Jerusalem.
- The New Testament's setting is deeply influenced by Jewish tradition and history as well as the culture and traditions of both Greek and Roman empires. During the time of the New Testament, Rome was in political power, while Greek was the most common or vernacular language used.
- The New Testament writings were influenced by the agricultural surroundings, socioeconomic standings, and ethnic differences of the day.
- The New Testament writings contain Gospel accounts, historical narratives, twenty-one letters, and one "apocalypse", writing by eye-witnesses and apostles of Jesus.

## THE NEW TESTAMENT

- The Bible is 66 books. 39 are found in the Old Testament, and 27 are found in the New Testament. The word "testament" is used to describe each part of the Bible in connection to God's covenant with His people and the world. The Old Testament details the covenants to the Hebrew people, while the New Testament explains the new covenant found in Christ Jesus that is offered to all people. This new covenant is prophesied in Jeremiah 31-34, and we see it clearly fulfilled through Jesus' birth, life, death, resurrection, ascension, and promise to return.
- The New Testament begins with four Gospel accounts that detail the life of Jesus. It also includes the book of Acts, which explains the ongoing work of God's people called the church. And then it includes letters written to various churches calling them to the ways of Christ.

## JUDAISM

- The New Testament is filled with important Jewish beliefs and sects. Especially because of Rome's oppressive rule, the Jewish people were awaiting the Messiah to come. They especially hoped for the Messiah to overthrow Rome and reinstall Israel as a political and national power.
- The Jewish religious leaders and groups were made up of the:
  - Pharisees: Law-focused teachers emphasizing tradition and everyday holiness
  - Sadducees: Temple elites rejecting oral law, aligned with Rome
  - Zealots: Radical nationalists advocating violent revolt against Rome
  - Essenes: Ascetic separatists awaiting God's apocalyptic intervention
- The beliefs, temple, and practices of Judaism had a massive impact on the writings of the New Testament

## NEW TESTAMENT LETTERS

- 22 out of the 27 books in the New Testament are classified as letters. Because letters were a common way of communication in the first century, the writers of the New Testament used this style of writing to communicate with people and churches.
- The New Testament letters were different from other letters in the way that they consisted of characteristics from all traditions. In other words, they were vernacular, or accessible for every person to read and/or hear. This leveled the playing field for both writer and audience, and emphasized the Church as a family through their Oneness in Christ.
- New Testament Letters, like many letters of the day, maintained a specific format, including an opening introduction of who the letter was to and who was writing, a grace and/or peace wish to the audience, a prayer, the main body of content, a closing (with greetings to 3<sup>rd</sup> party recipients), and a final grace and/or peace wish.

## LETTER THEMES

New Testament letters carried specific themes for the early Church. These letters offered correction and direction for the early Church to remember, reflect on, and reconsider how they might worship God, bear witness to Christ, and live righteous and holy lives empowered by the Holy Spirit. The common goal of these letters was to call the Church to look like Jesus through their beliefs (orthodoxy) and practices (orthopraxis).

During this time, many letters were being written under false names and with messages inconsistent with the teachings of Christ and the call to live according to His life, death, and resurrection. This was an important and deciding factor in deciphering which letters belonged in the New Testament and which letters were not included.

Although some scholars dispute who wrote the letters, we can rest assured knowing that the letters we have in our Bible today are letters selected by the early Church leaders that hold the most consistent messages in alignment with Christ Jesus and the most commonly held beliefs about worship and witness.

Our goal in approaching the New Testament letters and their themes can best be summarized in these points:

- What is the original context of the letter?
- What does the message to the original audience mean for the church today concerning:
  - our belief in God,
  - our lives of righteousness, holiness, and love,
  - and our witness to God.

## A SPECIAL NOTE ON REVELATION

One of the most famous New Testament letters is a book called *The Revelation of Jesus Christ*, also known as Revelation. This book has long mystified audiences and created a variety of different viewpoints for Christians and the Church. Some have seen this book as fulfilled in the past (preterist) or fulfilled throughout history (historiscist). Some have interpreted this letter as symbols (idealist) or simply as things that will come to be in the future (futurist). It is important to notice that the letter of Revelation was written at a certain time to a certain audience, and is classified as a specific style of writing. First, we must recognize that Revelation was written in the first century (AD/CE) to Christians in Rome. Second, we must recognize it was a letter, written by John to these Christians and churches. Thirdly, we must recognize it is both prophetic and apocalyptic in its genre, imitating and quoting from Old Testament prophets. Fourthly, we must recognize that Revelation is about Christ Jesus and His call to His Church then and now to repent of our sinful ways, to resist the markers of the beasts, dragons, and harlots representing evil and empire, and to remain faithful to God by following the Lamb always. The goal of Revelation is not to predict times or dates, which Jesus says nobody will know, but rather to examine our own lives, prophetically challenge the beastly markers of empire around and within us, and faithfully worship God alone, giving witness to our eternal hope in God and His promise of making all things new.

## ROMANS OVERVIEW AND OUTLINE

**Author, Audience, and Purpose:** Paul's letter of *Romans* was written to the Church in Rome in the 50s AD/CE. His purpose was to reveal the truth of the Gospel of Christ Jesus to both Jews and Gentiles in Rome in order to reconcile and bring unity between the divided and persecuted Church. The letter reveals the message of Christ Jesus that creates new humans that are unified in their love of God and love of others through lives of worship.

**Roman Context:** The Roman Church was made up of Jews and non-Jews, but because of the Jewish people being ordered to leave Rome under Emperor Claudius (Acts 18), the Church had become more non-Jewish in their practices and customs. When the Jews returned to Rome, this led to divides in the Church over beliefs, worship, and customs. The influence of Roman culture, governance, and the Emperor and his followers (Imperial Cult) all led to more division, persecution, and disruption in the Roman Church. Due to the Church's location in the capital of the Empire, Paul's writing to this Church was highly important and continues to provide helpful insights for the Church today in context.

The content of Romans can be broken into the outline (from *Bible Project* and *Introducing the New Testament*):

- Letter Opening - 1:1-7
- Letter Body - 1:8-15:13
  - The Gospel Reveals God's Righteousness - 1-4
  - The Gospel Creates a New Humanity - 5-8
  - The Gospel Fulfills God's Promise to Israel - 9-11
  - The Gospel Unifies the Church - 12-16
- Letter Closing - 15:14-16:27

Themes:

- The Gospel - the central theme of Romans is the Gospel. Paul writes to explain the work of God through Christ Jesus in making a sacrifice for humanity's sins to bring justification, sanctification, and righteousness to all who would receive the free gift of God's grace. The Gospel is not just something that is done for us to receive, but for us to experience and extend to others through love, humility, service, and unity.
- Righteousness - Paul uses the theme of righteousness to explain God's right standing and how Christ's work brings us into right standing/relationship with God (justification). He also uses this phrase to explain God's fairness and mercy revealed through Christ taking our sin and fulfilling the Law for us to be given His righteousness.
- Life in the Spirit - the work of Christ creates a new humanity who live in the life of the Spirit. As those who have been justified and are being sanctified, we actively participate in the Spirit's life through moving from bondage to sin to freedom in Christ.
- Israel and God's Promises - Paul explains how the Jews were the elect people of God, offered the Gospel first. Upon their rejection of this Good News, the door was opened for the Gentiles to receive it and be grafted into the family of God. God's promise is to save and restore ALL who will receive it.
- Unity - Because the Gospel is for all, Paul urges the Church to be united across ethnic, social, and cultural lines. He calls for the Church to stand together as a unified sacrifice to the Lord, expressing their unity through worship to God, service to others, and choosing the most united method of resolving their disputes over worship, practices, and customs.

## 1 CORINTHIANS OVERVIEW AND OUTLINE

**Author, Audience, and Purpose:** Paul wrote the letters of 1 and 2 Corinthians to the early Christians in Corinth. In 1 Corinthians, Paul wrote to promote unity in the Church through explaining Christ Jesus as Lord, wisdom, and power, calling them to live in the resurrection. There are instructions on Eucharist, care for the poor, spirituality, love, order in worship, Christ's death and resurrection, and unity in the midst of it all.

**Corinthian Context:** Corinth was an Ancient Greek city that was located on the Aegean Sea. It was port city and a massive hub for trade, which meant it was an incredibly affluent location that was influenced by the cultural values of the Empire and their trade partners. Corinth was known for loving money, large athletic events, parties, having very loose sexual limits, and promoting a "do-whatever-feels-good-to-you" ethic. The Church in Corinth had been in correspondence with Paul and both letters are Paul's response. In fact, Paul is often quoting the Corinthians in his letters and offering Christ-centered insights to call them away from the surrounding negative influences.

The content of 1 Corinthians can be broken into the outline (from Bible Project and Introducing the New Testament):

- Letter Opening and Prayer - 1:1-9
- Letter Body - 1:10-16:4
  - Addressing the Divisions of the Church - 1-4
  - Responses to the Corinthians' Letter - 7:1-11:1
    - Marriage - 7, Food Sacrificed to Idols - 8-11, Christian Freedom & Paul's Apostleship - 9
  - Conduct in Christian Worship - 11:2-14
    - Proper Conduct and Communion - 11, Spiritual Gifts and Order - 12-14, Love - 13
  - The Resurrection of Christ - 15
  - The Collection for Christians in Jerusalem - 16
- Letter Closing - 16

Themes:

- Unity - Paul intentionally focuses on the topic of unity amidst the ongoing divisions of the Corinthians. Because of Christ and His Gospel, Paul calls the Church to unity through rebuking their factions and exhorting them to love, value, and serve one another in orderly lives and worship gatherings.
- Wisdom - Paul expresses how the Good News and work of Jesus is wisdom and power, over and against the foolishness and weakness of this world. Because of the Corinthian context, this was important to explain the Church's call to live differently than the loose ethics masquading as power found in their setting. This was revealed through the humility of Christ and the ways in which Paul and the apostles ministered the Gospel.
- Sexual Purity - Because of the grossly overly sexualized culture of Corinth, Paul expresses the need for the Christians to pursue purity and live righteously with regard to their sexuality. This included orders for those who were single and married, male and female, etc.
- Order in Worship - Paul spends much of 1 Corinthians detailing how the Church was called to present orderly worship through their dress, speech, actions, utilization of the gifts of the Spirit, and most importantly, their love for God and one another.
- Love - Perhaps the most important theme of this letter, Paul emphasizes the need for love (the selfless, sacrificial, action-oriented commitment to the well being of others) to be the grounding ethic for the Corinthian Church and all Christians in their relationships, ethics, worship, speech, and actions.
- The Resurrection - Paul explains the validity and necessity of Jesus' resurrection, assuring the present tense implications and future hope of what Christ has secured through His resurrection.

## 2 CORINTHIANS OVERVIEW AND OUTLINE

**Author, Audience, and Purpose:** Paul wrote the letters of 1 and 2 Corinthians to the early Christians in Corinth in the 50s AD/CE. In 2 Corinthians, Paul writes concerning his apostolic authority, relationships with unbelievers, generosity, and the centrality of Christ in understanding the new self and ministry in Him. He once again promoted unity and love amongst the Church of Christ in Corinth.

**Corinthian Context:** Corinth was an Ancient Greek city that was located on the Aegean Sea. It was port city and a massive hub for trade, which meant it was an incredibly affluent location that was influenced by the cultural values of the Empire and their trade partners. Corinth was known for loving money, large athletic events, parties, having very loose sexual limits, and promoting a “do-whatever-feels-good-to-you” ethic. The Church in Corinth had been in correspondence with Paul and both letters are Paul’s response. In fact, Paul is often quoting the Corinthians in his letters and offering Christ-centered insights to call them away from the surrounding negative influences.

The content of 2 Corinthians can be broken into the outline (from Bible Project and Introducing the New Testament):

- Letter Opening and Prayer - 1:1-7
- Letter Body - 1:8-13:10
  - Paul’s Reconciliation with the Corinthians and Defense of His Apostleship Through the Proofs of Suffering and Poverty - 1-7
  - The Call for Gospel-Motivated Generosity - 8-9
  - Paul’s Continued Challenge Concerning His Apostolic Calling and the Need for Corinthian Repentance - 10-13
- Letter Closing - 13:11-13

Themes:

- Reconciliation - Paul seeks to reconcile with the Corinthians because of their rejection of him during his first visit. He anchors this appeal through the Gospel of Christ and the ministry of reconciliation that has been given to all Christians. He also challenges them to reconsider their posture toward him through defending his authentic apostolic calling given by Christ Jesus.
- Defense of Paul’s Apostleship - Paul’s second letter to Corinth is predominantly about defending his being an apostle of Christ. He explains this through a number of important themes and factors. They are:
  - False Apostles - Paul explains that the false apostles or super apostles that had come to Corinth were seeking title and accolade, as well as proclaiming incorrect beliefs about the Old and New Covenants.
  - New Covenant - Paul describes the difference between the Old Covenant centered on Moses and the Law, and the New Covenant centered in Christ’s fulfillment of the Law and giving of the Holy Spirit to those who believe. Paul shows the validity and necessity of preaching and receiving the New Covenant rather than how the other apostles had centered their preaching on the Old Covenant.
  - Suffering, Poverty, and Weakness - The markers that Paul uses to defend his apostlicity include suffering for Christ, voluntary poverty, and weakness. In contrast to the “super apostles” who were well fed, well paid, and seen as strong, Paul shows the marks of true leadership are found in dependence on God through every trial. In fact, it is in his weakness that God’s strength is perfected and proves his apostleship.
  - Generosity - Paul calls for the affluent Corinthians to contribute to an annual collection for Christians in Jerusalem. His call is centered on the generosity of Christ’s gift to each one of us and calls for a standard in Christian giving through prayerfully deciding to give generously and allowing space for God to bless that generosity (both in giving and receiving).

## GALATIANS OVERVIEW AND OUTLINE

**Author, Audience, and Purpose:** Paul wrote the letter of Galatians to the early Christians in Galatia in the 50s AD/CE. Paul writes for three major purposes. First, to defend his legitimacy as an apostle of Christ. Secondly, to explain the sufficiency of Christ's grace and our trust in Him over and against the common belief system of legalism and earned favor from God through reliance on the Law and bodily circumcision. And thirdly, to call the Church to leave behind the old way of life and use their Christian freedom to serve in love, be united in Christ, and bear the fruit of the Spirit.

**Galatian Context:** Galatia was a Roman Province in Asia Minor (modern Turkey) and was one of the original church plants from Paul's ministry. It was mainly filled with Gentile believers who were being persuaded by a group called the "Judaizers" to receive salvation by adding to their trust in God the ways of the Jewish heritage including circumcision and fulfilling the Old Testament Law. As Paul wrote to this group of Christians, he adamantly defends his apostleship and the true Gospel with the hopes of calling the Galatians away from the false teachings of the Judaizers and into the only way of salvation: faith in Christ empowered by God's grace.

The content of Galatians can be broken into the outline (from Bible Project and Introducing the New Testament):

- Letter Opening and Prayer - 1:1-5
- Letter Body - 1:6-6:17
  - Defense of Gospel and Paul's Apostolic Authority - 1:6-2:10
  - Defense of True Gospel and Christ's Sufficiency - 2:11-3:25
  - Why the Church Worships - 3:36-4:7
  - How the Church Worships - 4:8-5:26
  - Church Conduct - 6:1-17
- Benediction - 6:18

Themes:

- True Gospel - One of Paul's major themes and defenses in Galatians is through explaining the true of Gospel of Christ which offers salvation to all people. This free gift is received by grace as people experience justification through faith in Christ, not by works. This stood against the teaching of the Judaizers—one is only truly saved when they add adherence to the Mosaic Law and circumcision to their lives—which many of the Galatians believed. Paul explains that working for one's salvation did not make them a free child of Christ, but a child of slavery. But for all who were in Christ through faith and grace alone, they were welcomed to be heirs with Christ and live according to Christ's sufficiency.
- True Apostleship - Once again, Paul defends his apostleship to an early Church. Not for the sake of title or accolade, but rather to defend the Gospel connected to his apostleship. In doing this, he explains the reasoning of the Judaizers as incorrect and affirms his calling, preaching, and the message of the Gospel of Christ to the Church.
- Christian Freedom - Christians are not only those who are not identified by legalistic efforts, but also those who should not use their freedom in God's grace to do whatever they want or feels good. Paul explains that Christians ought to use their freedom in Christ to be united, to serve others in love, and to bear the fruit of the Spirit.
- Fruit of the Spirit - Rather than pursuing the desires of the flesh, Paul encourages Christians to submit their flesh and old ways to the Spirit of God who would bear fruit in and through their lives. This fruit is marked by love, peace, joy, patience, goodness, kindness, gentleness, faithfulness, and self-control. These fruits would lead the Christian to know how they could worship God, give witness to Christ, and humbly serve others in love.
- Church Conduct - Paul highlights the importance of proper Christian conduct including helping others to carry their burdens, forgiving, serving, and loving one another—the true fulfillment of the Law.

## EPHESIANS OVERVIEW AND OUTLINE

**Author, Audience, and Purpose:** In the 60s AD/CE, while imprisoned, Paul wrote the letter of Ephesians to the early Church in Ephesus. Paul wrote to these early Christians to unify them as a family brought together in their universal calling to be loved and love through the grace of God as they witness to Christ through their unity. He explains this by detailing how God creates a new humanity through Christ Jesus and then invites this new humanity (the Church) to live in unity and love empowered by the Lord's Spirit.

**Ephesian Context:** Ephesus was one of the most influential locations in the first century. It was a very affluent city that was filled with temples worshipping most of the deities of the Greeks and Romans, including the temple of Artemis (one of the seven wonders of the ancient world). The city was also a major trading location and capital of the Roman Province in Asia Minor, meaning it was a melting pot of cultures, religions, traditions, and influence from the Roman Empire. Paul started his ministry and the Church in this city in Acts 19, and the Church was incredibly divided between Jews and Gentiles, leading to Paul's writing to these early Christians to reveal the mystery of God's universal gift of salvation.

The content of Ephesians can be broken into the outline (from Bible Project and Introducing the New Testament):

- Letter Opening and Prayer - 1:1-2
- Letter Body - 1:3-6:20
  - The Gospel Story - 1-3
    - Christ's Power Over All (1), God Creates a New Humanity (2-3), The Mystery of the Gospel is for ALL (2-3), Prayer for the Church to Experience the Gospel Story (3:14-21)
  - The Call to Join God's Story in Unity - 4-6
    - Unity (4), New Life (4-5), Walk in the Way of Life, Light, and the Spirit of God (5-6), United Against the True Enemies (6)
- Benediction - 6:21-24

Themes:

- Unity - Paul's main message and calling to the Ephesians is to understand that God's purpose through Christ was to bring all things into unity in Him (1:10). Because of Christ's power and sacrifice, any barriers humanity has set up to divide (ethnicity, sex, socioeconomic status, etc.) have been broken down and ALL are invited to be united in God's family. As they live in unity, Paul describes the ways they can make every effort to keep this unity through love and following the ways of the new life found in the Spirit of God.
- Mystery - Paul uses the metaphor of a mystery to symbolize the extravagance of God's free gift of salvation extended to all people (including Jew and Gentile).
- Grace - Paul highlights that salvation is given by grace through faith in Christ alone. He uses this to defend the truth of the Gospel against any arguments claiming Gentiles must add works to their faith in order to be saved.
- The New Life and Way of Love - Because of the unity offered to all through Christ, Paul calls the Church to live in holiness by putting off their old lives and living in their new lives in Christ. This way of life is the way of love, and it's marked by being filled with the Spirit of God, submitting to others, and standing firm in the armor of God.
- Christ's Power - Paul begins and ends the letter of Ephesians by pointing the Church to know the all-powerful nature of Christ Jesus. In His power, Christ reigns over all, breaks down barriers, offers salvation to all, creates a new humanity, and strengthens us to live united in love and stand strong in Christ's victory.

## PHILIPPIANS OVERVIEW AND OUTLINE

Philippians is a letter that Paul wrote from prison to the churches in Philippi to thank them for their financial support and to offer them insights concerning Christian conduct, the Gospel, and correction to surrounding false teachings from a group called the Judaizers.

Philippian Context: Philippi was previously known as Macedonia until it was conquered by Greece, which took control of the area and renamed it after Philipp II. Philippi was then conquered by the Romans and became an important Roman outpost/way station on the Via Egnatia (Roman Road) that connected the Adriatic Sea to the Northern parts of "Asia" (Greece, Turkey, etc.). According to Acts 16, Philippi was first reached by Paul, and he wrote to them because of ongoing conflicts both internally and externally. The main external conflict they faced (besides Roman persecution) was from the Judaizers, who perverted the Gospel of Jesus by calling Christians to become Jews through circumcision to receive the full effect of salvation. Paul adamantly refutes this claim and calls for the community to reject this doctrine and instead live according to Christ's righteousness. Finally, Philippi was a poorer community, but still found a way to give generously to Paul, which he highlights, celebrates, and gives gratitude for in his writings.

The content of Philippians can be broken into the following outline from *Introducing the New Testament*:

- Letter Opening, Prayer, and Thanksgiving - 1:1-11
- Letter Body - 1:11-4:20
  - Hope in the Unchained Gospel - 1
  - The Invitation to Live Worthy of the Gospel by Imitating Christ - 1-2
  - Argument Against the Judaizers Doctrine - 3
  - Christian Conduct and Gratitude for the Philippian Gift - 3-4
- Letter Closing - 4:21-23

Themes:

- Joy - Joy is one of the central themes in Philippians, with invitations for early Christians to rejoice in the Lord ALWAYS and see how Paul's joy was anchored in God despite his current imprisonment or previous hardships.
- The Gospel of Christ - Paul writes about the true Gospel of Christ, which corrects the viewpoints of the Judaizers who claimed that Christians must be circumcized in order to inherit salvation. Paul anchors his argument in the Gospel of Jesus and in the invitation for Christ followers to imitate Christ's humility, joy, unity, and generosity in the midst of their lives. In this manner, Christians could be partners with Paul and many others in the Gospel of Christ Jesus.
- Unity and Humility - Paul highlights a strong call for the early Church to be united in Christ and to practice this unity through humility that was modeled by Jesus.
- Suffering and Perseverance - Paul uses his current imprisonment, previous hardships, and the liminal space of awaiting Christ's return to point the Philippians to stay faithful in the midst of their suffering through the strength of Christ. He calls them to postures of perseverance, prayer, and joy in the midst of their sufferings.
- Generosity - Paul highlights how the Philippians were extremely generous, even in their poverty, and how this practice was a gift to Paul, noteworthy among other Christians, and the lifestyle of generosity that should be practiced by all as we give and trust God to provide.
- Conflict Resolution - Multiple times in the letter, Paul addresses conflict between internal members of the Church community and the opposing Judaizers. The Gospel leads to reconciliation with God and with one another, and Paul makes it clear that the Philippian Christians should exemplify this through their reconciliation efforts.

## COLOSSIANS OVERVIEW AND OUTLINE

Colossians is a letter that Paul wrote the church in Colosse to combat false teachings through reminding Christians of the supremacy, sufficiency, and completeness of Jesus in all things. Paul made it clear that because of Christ's preeminence in all things, Christians do not have to worship angelic beings or practice extreme forms of ascetism to overcome the spiritual powers in their lives. Paul finishes his writing by inviting the Colossians to know that they are complete in Christ and can live new lives because of this truth and reality.

Colosse Context: Colosse was a once-thriving city near Ephesus that was known for its production of wool and cloth-dying. However, in 60 CE, it was struck by a devastating earthquake and never fully recovered. Colosse had a large mixture of Jewish and Gentile believers. Paul mainly wrote to address the "Colossian Heresy," which was a form of Gnosticism or a belief that secret knowledge was given to this group. The "secret knowledge" they discovered held to several claims, including: Jesus did not come in the flesh, and in order to combat the spiritual forces, one must practice legalism or extreme adherence to the Law (be circumcized), to worship angelic powers, and to practice an intense form of ascetism (self-discipline). Paul wrote to dismantle this false doctrine by pointing to Christ's supremacy and our completion in Christ, leading to a new and different life.

The content of Colossians can be broken into the following outline from *Introducing the New Testament*:

- Letter Opening and Prayer - 1:1-14
- Letter Body - 1:9-4:6
  - A Hymn About Christ's Supremacy and Sufficiency - 1
  - The Effects of Christ's Reconciliation Work - 1-2
  - Correcting Falsehood/Philosophies through Christ's Completeness - 2
  - New Life and Christian Conduct Because of Christ's Work - 3-4
- Letter Closing - 4:7-18

Themes:

- Christ's Supremacy - Paul anchors his writing and arguments against the false philosophies of Colosse in the supremacy of Christ. From the first chapter and throughout the letter, Paul emphasizes Christ's superior, sufficient, and complete nature in relation to all of creation, all "spiritual forces", and all things. He argues that in Christ all of the Godhead dwelt in bodily form, dismantling the Gnostic arguments, and calling the Colossian Christians to live in Christ's completeness rather than in the false philosophies and practices of their time. It is because of Christ's sufficient work that we are offered redemption and reconciliation. Rather than our striving through rituals, ascetism, and mystical knowledge, we are made holy, protected, and complete in Him alone.
- Freedom and New Life in Christ - Because of Christ's supremacy and sufficiency, Christians are offered freedom from legalism and welcomed into a new way of life with different ethical values and implications than the world. Christians are invited to put off their old way of life and inherit a new way of holy living that is anchored in the characteristics of Christ's life and the Kingdom of God. This would include how believers treated one another in their relationships (familial, marital, work, masters and slaves, etc.). It is important to note that Paul's writing does not affirm the ancient practices of the Roman household or slavery, but rather offers an alternative way of love, humility, and treating all with dignity.
- Prayer - Paul calls for the people to commit themselves to prayer for him, for themselves, and for God's work to continue to be moved forward.

## 1 THESSALONIANS OVERVIEW AND OUTLINE

1 Thessalonians is a letter written by Paul to the church in Thessalonica. Paul wrote to the church to celebrate their faithfulness to God through expressions of gratitude, encouragement for their repentance and steadfastness in the midst of persecution, and declaring his love for them. He also challenged them to continue to grow as followers of Jesus through calling them to live holy lives full of love, generosity, and a focus on their eternal hope in Christ.

**Thessalonica Context:** Thessalonica was a Roman province near Philippi. It was founded by the Greek conquerors and named after a general of the army's wife. Thessalonica was a port city along a massive trade route in Asia Minor (Turkey) and was filled with pagan worship, self-governing politics, and a blend of influences due to its economy. Paul evangelized this city in Acts 17 and was very successful in his efforts. However, the surrounding Roman influence claimed Christians were dying Caesar by calling Christ Lord, and it led to incredibly oppressive persecution and many deaths of Christians. Paul writes to this early church to encourage them in their faithfulness, comfort them in the midst of their losses, and call them to grow in their love and holiness.

The content of 1 Thessalonians can be broken into the following outline from *Introducing the New Testament* and Bible Project:

- Letter Opening, Thanksgiving, and Prayer - 1:1-5
- Letter Body - 1:6-5:22
  - Paul's Celebration of the Thessalonians Faithfulness, Defense of the Gospel, and Encouragement in the Midst of Persecution - 1-3
  - Paul's Prayer and Challenge to Grow in Love and Holiness, Comfort in the Midst of Grief, and The Call to Live According to Eternal Hope - 3-5
- Letter Closing - 5:23-28

Themes:

- Faithfulness - Paul commends the early Christians because of their commitment to Christ in the midst of suffering, persecution, loss of other Christians, and present afflictions. He mentions their faithfulness is known all over the world, and he encourages them that their suffering is a way of participating in the way of Jesus and prays for their faithfulness to increase.
- Love, Holiness, and Hope - Paul's central prayer for the Thessalonians is that their love, holiness, and hope would increase (1 Thess. 3:11-13). This is his prayer for them to stay faithful in the midst of persecution, to live holy lives according to what God has done for them in Christ, and to remain hopeful in light of the promised return of Christ.
  - Holiness - Thessalonica was home to a highly sexualized society, and Paul's exhortation to the early church was to remain pure and live in response to Christ's death and resurrection.
  - Hope and the Return of Christ - Many of the early Christians were persecuted and killed on behalf of their faith in Christ. As the other Christians grieved, Paul wrote to comfort them with a reminder of the resurrection of the dead promised in Christ's return. It was because of this promised return that Christians could not only receive comfort but also live with hope and endurance in the face of trials and struggles.
- A Note on the Rapture - Many have implied rapture theology from 1 Thess. 5 and the phrase "caught up in the air". It is noteworthy to mention that this viewpoint was developed by John Nelson Darby and not held by early church fathers or other important theologians throughout church history. We would highly suggest recognizing the context of Paul's pastoral writing, offering comfort to those grieving by pointing them to a promised resurrection of the dead in Christ, by using political language similar to the scene of the Roman Caesar being welcomed into a city in that day.

## 2 THESSALONIANS OVERVIEW AND OUTLINE

2 Thessalonians is a letter written by Paul to the church in Thessalonica. After his first letter, Paul discovered that persecutions had grown worse for the Thessalonian Christians. Because of these sufferings, they had become scared and confused about Christ's return. Paul wrote in response to these concerns, calling these early Christians to remain faithful in persecution as they live according to their common hope in Christ's return.

**Thessalonica Context:** Thessalonica was a Roman province near Philippi. It was founded by the Greek conquerors and named after a general of the army's wife. Thessalonica was a port city along a massive trade route in Asia Minor (Turkey) and was filled with pagan worship, self-governing politics, and a blend of influences due to its economy. Paul evangelized this city in Acts 17 and was very successful in his efforts. However, the surrounding Roman influence claimed Christians were dying Caesar by calling Christ Lord, and it led to incredibly oppressive persecution and many deaths of Christians. Paul wrote to this early church to encourage them to remain faithful in the midst of persecution by living according to the hope Christians have in Jesus' return.

The content of 2 Thessalonians can be broken into the following outline from *Introducing the New Testament* and Bible Project:

- Letter Opening, Thanksgiving, and Prayer - 1:1-12
- Letter Body - 1:1-3:16
  - Hope in the Midst of Persecution - 1
  - Clarification on the Day of the Lord and Eschatology - 2-3
  - A Call to Live According to Our Hope in Christ's Return - 3
- Letter Closing -3:17-18

Themes:

- Faithfulness - Paul once again commends the early Christians because of their commitment to Christ in the midst of suffering, persecution, loss of other Christians, and present afflictions. He commends them for their faithfulness, hope, and love, and he encourages them that their suffering is a way of participating in the way of Jesus. In 2 Thessalonians, Paul highlights how they can live faithfully because of their hope in God's justice coming through Jesus' return.
- The Day of the Lord - Someone in this early church community was spreading a lie that Paul said the "day of the Lord" (God's final act of judgment and justice) was already upon them. This caused major fear and confusion concerning the last things (eschatology). So, Paul sets the record straight by correcting this theology and pointing the Thessalonians to a clarified statement on the day of the Lord. He uses images from Isaiah 13-14, Ezekiel 28, and Daniel 7-12 to provide a commentary on how many "rebels" or "men of lawlessness" have come through the years and inflicted violence. However, Paul reminds them that Christ will come and put an end to the reign of terror on earth, delivering His people and bringing true and final justice. Paul comforts them by calling them to return to the teachings of Christ and to stand firm in His promised return, which should cause hope and confidence rather than the fear they felt.
  - A Note on the Antichrist- Many have implied antichrist theology from 2 Thess. 2 and the phrase "man of lawlessness". It is important to note Paul's quotations and references to Old Testament passages in his clarification against this type of end-times theology. It is also important to note that the word "antichrist" is never mentioned in this passage.
- Faithful Living - Paul challenges those who are living "idly." This word implied a resistance and refusal to work, like many elite and wealthy Roman citizens. Paul calls for them to reconsider how their hope in Christ's return calls them to faithfully live in such a way that it would benefit others and not just themselves through idle living.

## 1 TIMOTHY OVERVIEW AND OUTLINE

1 Timothy is a part of a set of letters that Paul wrote to Timothy and Titus concerning issues related to the structure and function of their community's worship, doctrine, and ministry. Timothy was ministering to the church in Ephesus, and Paul encouraged him to continue ministry there by correcting false teachings, calling the church to proper worship, exhorting the community to live holy lives, and inviting the church to be known by their service, integrity, and character that imitates the ways of Jesus.

Ephesian Context: Ephesus was one of the most influential locations in the first century. It was a very affluent city that was filled with temples worshipping most of the deities of the Greeks and Romans, including the temple of Artemis (one of the seven wonders of the ancient world). The city was also a major trading location and capital of the Roman Province in Asia Minor, meaning it was a melting pot of cultures, religions, traditions, and influence from the Roman Empire. Timothy was leading this church, and it was facing serious issues over doctrinal issues such as Gnosticism (see Colossians overview) and poor theology connected to myths and genealogies. The community lacked a healthy leadership structure and was known for its unhealthy habits, relationships, and communication.

The content of 1 Timothy can be broken into the following outline from *Introducing the New Testament* and Bible Project:

- Letter Opening, Thanksgiving, and Prayer - 1:1-2
- Letter Body - 1:2-6:19
  - Correcting False Teachings - 1:3-20; 2:9-15; 3:14-4:10; 6:3-5
  - Christian Worship - 2:1-15; 4:11-5:2; 5:22-23; 6:11-14
  - Church Leadership and Order - 3:1-13; 5:3-20
- Letter Closing - 6:20-22

Themes:

- True and False Teaching - Paul's main encouragement to Timothy is to remain in Ephesus to correct false teaching (1:3-4). The false teaching Paul mentions came from two men: Alexander and Hymenaeus. They held speculative views of the Scriptures and the Law, which caused controversy over consuming meat and getting married. Paul corrects their bad theology by pointing to the purpose of the Law: to show people their sinfulness and the provision of God's grace. He anchors this rebuke and correction through showing how Christ came to save us all from our sin that was revealed by the Law.
- Proper Worship - Paul calls for the church to be anchored in prayer (1 Tim. 2) and care for the marginalized (1 Tim. 5). He also encourages Timothy to recognize how certain wealthy women who had been influenced by the Artemis cult were making worship a fashion show, proclaiming false theology, and usurping leadership in the process. He calls for Timothy to teach them and disciple them in the ways of God's Word, the Gospel, and propriety/modesty (humility). This is not a once-and-for-all declaration that women cannot teach in the church, but rather a contextual challenge to the Ephesian Christian women who were acting disorderly in worship gatherings. The goal was not to shut them up forever, but to help them learn so they could lead in healthy manners, like many of Paul's ministry partners (Junia, Priscilla, Phoebe).
- Church Order - Paul calls Timothy to confront certain behaviors of disorder, including elderly men who were abusing alcohol, slaves disrespecting their masters, younger widows engaging in idle talk and gossip, and wealthy men and women misusing and idolizing their resources. He calls for them all to live faithful and holy lives, centered on Christ and His Gospel.
- Church Leadership - Paul calls for Timothy to appoint leaders (bishops, deacons, and elders) who have healthy marriages and families to lead the church as a healthy family with him.

## 2 TIMOTHY OVERVIEW AND OUTLINE

2 Timothy is a part of a set of letters that Paul wrote to Timothy and Titus concerning issues related to the structure and function of their community's worship, doctrine, and ministry. Paul wrote his second letter from prison to Timothy, who was ministering to the church in Ephesus. Paul wrote this pastoral letter to remind Timothy of his call and the power of the Gospel and ministry of Jesus. He also wrote to affirm Timothy's leadership and challenge him to correct the false teachers in his midst through teaching the Scriptures.

Ephesian Context: Ephesus was one of the most influential locations in the first century. It was a very affluent city that was filled with temples worshipping most of the deities of the Greeks and Romans, including the temple of Artemis (one of the seven wonders of the ancient world). The city was also a major trading location and capital of the Roman Province in Asia Minor, meaning it was a melting pot of cultures, religions, traditions, and influence from the Roman Empire. Timothy was leading this church, and it was facing serious challenges over doctrinal issues concerning the resurrection.

The content of 2 Timothy can be broken into the following outline from *Introducing the New Testament* and Bible Project:

- Letter Opening, Thanksgiving, and Prayer - 1:1-7
- Letter Body - 1:8-4:18
  - Paul's Reminder of Timothy's Call and the Power of Christ's Gospel - 1:1-2:13
  - Correcting False Teachers with the Scriptures - 2:14-4:5
  - Invitation for Timothy to Visit Paul in Prison - 4:9-13; 20-21
- Letter Closing - 4:19-22

Themes:

- Calling - Paul wrote his second letter to Timothy to remind him of the calling he had received from Christ Jesus. He gives thanks for those who helped Timothy to receive this calling, like Timothy's mother (Eunice) and grandmother (Lois), and those who laid hands on him. He anchors his reminder to Timothy in explaining his own calling from the Lord and the power of Christ's Gospel and ministry. Timothy was facing opposition from false teachers and those who discredited his leadership and ministry because it was connected to Paul, who had been imprisoned. Paul's simple reminder to Timothy was to be strong in Jesus' grace and faithful to his calling, no matter what.
- Faithfulness - Paul uses the metaphors of a soldier, a farmer, and an athlete to encourage Timothy to stay faithful to the call of Christ. He invites Timothy to consider how he might remain strong in the grace of God and even uses his own stories of suffering to provide proof of God's goodness in hardship and the power of remaining faithful throughout trials.
- False Teachers - Once again, Paul wrote a letter to Timothy to call him to correct the false teachers in his midst. Paul calls out Hymenaeus and Philetus, who claimed that the resurrection had already taken place. In this claim, they abandoned hope in the resurrection and new creation, and had influenced specific people to believe these false teachings. So, Paul reminds Timothy of his call and then exhorts him to raise up teachers to proclaim the truth of the Scriptures with him in order to correct the false teachings and point people to the hope of the resurrection.
- Invitation - Paul invites Timothy to come visit him while in prison and instructs him to bring specific items, to beware of certain people, and to be encouraged that just as Christ is with Paul in prison, so too, He is with Timothy.

## TITUS OVERVIEW AND OUTLINE

Titus is part of a set of letters that Paul wrote to Timothy and Titus concerning issues related to the structure and function of their community's worship, doctrine, and ministry. Paul wrote his letter from prison to Timothy, who was ministering to the church in Crete. Paul wrote to Titus to call him and the Cretan church to true worship of Jesus alone, to appoint new leaders and confront corrupt leaders, and to live faithfully to Jesus' Gospel as a way of reaching those around them.

Cretan Context: Crete was a Greek city that was well known for its culture in the times of the New Testament. The Greek phrase "to be a Cretan" was translated as "to be a liar." Their people and culture were known for their greed, violence, mercenary soldiers, pagan worship, and sexual corruption. Although it was filled with many unsafe and treacherous practices, Paul viewed it as a great place to plant churches from because of its numerous and strategic harbors. Because of all of these things, Paul wrote to Titus to offer instructions on how to set things straight and move the mission of Christ forward.

The content of Titus can be broken into the following outline from *Introducing the New Testament* and Bible Project:

- Letter Opening - 1:1-4
- Letter Body - 1:5-3:14
  - Church Order and Correcting False Teaching - 1:5-16
  - Doing Good for the Sake of the Gospel - 2:1-3:11
- Letter Closing - 3:12-15

Themes:

- Church Order and Leadership - Paul urges Titus to appoint elders who "love what is good" and can help to raise spiritually mature followers of Christ, order worship properly, and manage the affairs of the church fairly. He also called for a rebuke to those who were failing to do good, specifically those who were false teachers of unsound doctrine and proclaiming salvation connected to circumcision.
- Belief and Works - One of the core messages of Titus is that Christian doctrine should be sound because it leads to doing good. When Christians believe rightly about Christ and His Gospel, they live holy lives that give witness to the world. Paul instructs a number of different people (women, slaves, young men, etc.) to practice this in their relationships with others. He calls for the Christians in Crete to be good citizens as a way of doing good and revealing the Gospel to those around them. Although Paul mentions the structures of the Cretan way of life, he affirms that Christians were to look similar but live differently as a way to do good, give witness to the Gospel, and engage in personal and communal transformation.
- Grace - Paul highlights the foundation of God's grace that offers salvation to all AND empowers them to say "NO" to the sin of this world. Crete was filled with many rebellious and sinful practices, and Paul makes it clear that Christians do not engage in those behaviors because of God's grace that empowers them. When Christians live empowered by the Spirit in these ways, it proclaims a message of God's grace to the world and shows the message of their "Saving God".
- A Note on Slaves, Women, and Submission to Governing Authorities - Paul writes specifically to women and slaves, calling them to engage in the cultural norms of their day. He also wrote to all of the Cretan Christians, calling them to submit to governing authorities. It is important to note that these were not a universal calls, but a contextual calls to wisely participate in culture by living in devotion to the One True God and acting in accordance with His will and ways. These passages do not affirm slavery as an institution, nor do they demean women, but rather they offer a way to live differently as Gospel witnesses to the world.

## PHILEMON OVERVIEW AND OUTLINE

Philemon was a letter written by Paul to a wealthy Colossian slave owner named Philemon, whose slave, Onesimus, had wronged him and then run away. In this ancient world, this type of behavior could have been treated with harsh punishment by a slave's master. However, Paul uses his brief letter to call Philemon to reconsider how he might treat Onesimus upon his return. Instead of using the punishment system of the world, Paul called Philemon to choose the ways of Christ and His love because, through Christ, Onesimus was no longer a slave, but a brother in the Lord.

The content of Philemon can be broken into the following outline from *Introducing the New Testament* and Bible Project:

- Letter Opening and Prayer - 1:1-7
- Letter Body - 1:8-22
  - Paul's Appeal - 1:8-21
  - Paul's Plan to Visit - 1:22
- Letter Closing - 1:23-25

Themes:

- Philemon - In this short letter, we discover that Philemon became a Christian through Paul's ministry (v. 19) and then later became a leader in the Colossian church that met at his household (v.2). One of Philemon's slaves, Onesimus, wronged Philemon and ran away. Onesimus met Paul during his time away and became a Christian. It is because of this that Paul took the time to write to Philemon to treat Onesimus as a brother in the Lord with forgiveness and love. This was revolutionary for the ancient world because Paul was essentially telling Philemon to not only accept Onesimus back into his household but also to release him from slavery and treat him as an equal in Christ. This is of the utmost importance to us as contemporary readers to see the intense invitation for forgiveness and love rather than retribution, as well as the truth that where the Christian community exists, slavery cannot and should not persist.
- Love and Partnership - Paul opens the letter by thanking Philemon for his love and faith in Christ Jesus that is displayed to God's people around him. Paul prays specifically for their partnership or "koinonia". This Greek word, along with love, was the basis of Paul's call for Philemon to reconsider how he would treat Onesimus upon his return. It is from Christ's equal love for and our equal partnership in God's grace, that our actions should reveal this radical truth.
- Reconciliation - Paul's challenge and invitation to Philemon was to reconcile with Onesimus, not as a slave, but as a brother in Christ. Paul called Philemon to forgive Onesimus because they were fellow family members and shared in the partnership/fellowship of God's Gospel. In essence, just as Christ forgave us, we are called to extend that type of forgiveness to others, especially fellow brothers and sisters in the Lord, no matter what other earthly titles they might hold. The ministry of reconciliation breaks down our barriers and welcomes us into a family of God's people.

## HEBREWS OVERVIEW AND OUTLINE

Hebrews is a letter that has an unknown author and original audience. Because of its extensive usage of the Old Testament, many scholars believe this letter was addressed to Jewish Christians living in Rome or Jerusalem who were experiencing intense persecution. The author wrote this letter to them to encourage them that Jesus is Superior to anything and anyone, and He is trustworthy in the midst of their current sufferings. The author also wrote to exhort the Jewish Christians to remain faithful to Christ despite their persecution.

The content of Hebrews can be broken into the following outline from *Introducing the New Testament* and Bible Project:

- Preface - 1:1-4
- Jesus is Superior as the Son - 1:5-4:13
- Jesus is Superior as High Priest - 4:14-7:28
- The Superiority of Jesus' Ministry - 8:1-10:18
- The Calling to Be Faithful - 10:19-13:19

Themes:

- The Superiority of Jesus - The letter begins by declaring that in the past God had spoken through prophets, angels, Moses, Joshua, and others, but now God has spoken through the Son. The author's claim is that Jesus is superior to anything and anyone, and their intent is to encourage the audience of the trustworthy nature of Christ Jesus by declaring His superiority. The author does this by crossexamining various Old Testament themes, people, and messages.
- Jesus the Son is Superior - The author points first to Jesus' sonship and claims He is better than angels, Moses, Joshua, and prophets because Jesus is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of God's being/nature. This claim reveals how Jesus is God and how, as the Son, He is far better than those who have come before Him. He is a better messenger than the angels, the fulfillment of the Law of Moses, a better leader than Joshua, and the promised Prophet God had spoken about through the prophets long ago. The goal was to point the audience to recognize that their hope was neither in the old covenant nor was it found in the promised land, but rather in the superiority of Jesus as the Word and His promise of a new creation.
- Jesus the High Priest is Superior - Next, the author calls for the audience to recognize how Jesus, as the Great High Priest, ministers from a perfect standing of righteousness. Unlike the Aaronic priesthood, Jesus' priesthood comes from Melchizedek, an Old Testament priest and king with no origin or ending. In this manner, Jesus is revealed to have no beginning or end, and offers a perfect sacrifice as a flawless high priest. The people are called to see how He is better than the priesthood before, and how His eternal standing as our priest offers us an eternal righteousness with God.
- The Superiority of Jesus' Ministry - Because Jesus is Superior, He brings a better covenant that Christians can be loyal to and trust in. He also offers a better sacrifice that is once-and-for-all, rather than repeated annually in the temple. Jesus' crucifixion is the better fulfillment of the day of atonement and offers forgiveness to all through His blood. The author is clear that walking away from this perfect sacrifice is turning one's back on God. The goal was show the perfection of Jesus' ministry and sacrifice, and invite the people to have hope and stay faithful.
- Faithful Living - The author ends the letter by calling for the people of God to remain faithful in the midst of their persecution because of Jesus' superiority. The author uses examples of people from the Old Testament to show that no matter what hardships God's people face, God will not abandon them. The author uses this as an invitation to follow Jesus, not turn away, and live according to His faithfulness through love, hospitality, generosity, and other practices that give witness to Christ Jesus as the Superior One.

## JAMES OVERVIEW AND OUTLINE

James is a letter written by the half-brother of Jesus to a largely Jewish Christian audience suffering persecution. James is filled with writing very similar to the wisdom writings of the Old Testament. The goal of his writing to this early community was to provide comfort for their suffering and to encourage them seek God for wisdom as they lived out that wisdom, revealing love for God and love for their neighbor.

The content of James can be broken into the following outline from *Introducing the New Testament* and Bible Project:

- Suffering and the Christian Life - 1:1-16; 5:10-11
- Wisdom - 1:5-8, 17;18; 3:13-18
- Warnings to the Rich, Comfort for the Poor - 1:9-11; 4:13-16; 5:1-6
- Impartiality - 2:1-13; 4:11-12
- Proper Use of the Tongue - 3:1-12
- Prayer and Endurance - 5:7-11; 13-20

Themes:

- Suffering and Completion - James first point is to encourage the persecuted church to recognize that even in suffering, God can bring them to maturity or completion. He uses this phrase 7 times throughout the letter, and the goal was to reveal how God can work in any situation, including their present suffering, to grow the Christian into a whole person filled with wisdom and living out the ways of God's love.
- Wisdom - James' letter is much less of an epistle and much more a wisdom writing. He uses specific teachings from Jesus' sermon on the mount and from the book of Proverbs to instruct the early church to ask God for wisdom, to seek God's wisdom through His Word, and to not just listen to it, but to practice it through a devoted lifestyle to God expressed through love and generosity in both word and deed.
- Rich and Poor - James uses a lot of references to both the rich and the poor, mainly giving warnings to the rich and comfort to the poor. His main idea is to point out the arrogance and downfall of placing one's trust in one's wealth. Instead, he calls this early community to use their wealth to help the poor in their midst, just as the wisdom writings and teachings of Christ commanded God's people.
- Favoritism - Numerous times, James makes it clear that God does not play favorites and His people should not either. Especially among the wealthy mistreating the poor, James commands them to recognize the royal law of mercy that is given to ALL and to treat one another not based on socioeconomic status but rather according to God's mercy.
- Faith and Works - James is abundantly clear that faith and works cannot be separated from one another. He argues that it makes zero sense to claim faith in Jesus, but not connect our actions to our loyal declarations to Christ's Lordship. As Christians, we must match our actions to our faith in Christ; otherwise, it is a dead faith.
- The Power of the Tongue - One of the ways the early community was called to express wisdom, love, and faith through their works was to control their tongues. James reveals how the tongue is small but incredibly powerful, like the rudder of a ship. The people of God were not called to praise God and to curse others, but rather to match their words of praise to God with their words of love to others, in wisdom and without partiality.
- Prayer and Endurance - James ends the letter by calling the people to postures of perseverance and endurance as they lived humbly and prayerfully. He calls them to practice this by praying for those who were sick or in trouble in their community, and to anchor their lives in the wisdom of seeking God in prayer.

## 1 PETER OVERVIEW AND OUTLINE

1 Peter is a letter written by Silvanus and commissioned by Peter to a group of persecuted Christians in Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey). The goal of the letter was to give hope to these Christians in the midst of their suffering by reminding them of their royal identity in God's family, revealing how suffering could be a brilliant witness to Christ's suffering, and how Christians were offered a present and eternal hope of Christ's triumph over evil and reign over all.

The content of 1 Peter can be broken into the following outline from *Introducing the New Testament* and Bible Project:

- Greeting and Praise to God - 1:1-12
- Letter Body - 1:13-5:9
  - Royal Identity in God's Family - 1:13-2:10
  - Suffering as a Witness to Jesus - 2:11-4:11
  - Future Hope in Present Suffering - 4:12-5:9
- Letter Closing - 5:10-14

Themes:

- Identity - The letter includes many mentions of the Christian's identity given through God's gift of Christ. Christians are called chosen like Abraham and exiled like Israel. They are referred to as the holy people, the people of the new covenant, the people of the new temple, and finally, a kingdom of priests. These Old Testament images are applied not only to Jewish Christians, but to Gentile Christians, and given as a reminder of how God invites ALL Christians into a new royal identity through the work of Jesus. This identity is not ended by persecution, but is rather revealed more brilliantly through it.
- Suffering - The people who received this letter were experiencing intense persecution. The letter was given to reveal how their suffering was an opportunity for witnessing to those around them. Christians were specifically called to witness to the government that oppressed them, the masters that were mistreating their Christian slaves, Christian husbands and wives mistreating their spouses, and for all of God's people suffering persecution. The goal was to show them that their faithful and patient response to suffering and the structures around them that were oppressive was a way to show Christ's Gospel to those mistreating them. The purpose of this letter was not to give a universal commandment to enforce slavery, to tell every wife to be submissive, or to let governments act unjustly, but rather to meet the persecution with patient endurance and responses of love, humility, and generous service to others. After all, it was through Christ's humble and sacrificial love that evil was overcome, and He generously offered life to ALL.
- Future Hope in Present Suffering - Through images of baptism and quotations from Christ's teachings, the audience is encouraged to rejoice in their suffering because of their future hope in Christ. They are reminded that Christ has and will triumph over all evil, bringing justice and restoration to all things. Therefore, they are to recognize that those oppressing them are not evil, but rather the evil one empowering the injustice they are experiencing. They can hope in Christ's conquering of this enemy and bringing of justice. They are reminded of this in the letter's closing when Peter refers to Rome as Babylon - the Old Testament description of corrupted nations oppressing God's people. This called the people to remember the voice of the prophets promising the day of God's justice on His enemies and restoration of His people.
- Leadership - The author calls for leaders to be appointed as shepherds to care for the church in their suffering, with the confidence that they, too, would be cared for by the Chief Shepherd.

## 2 PETER OVERVIEW AND OUTLINE

2 Peter is the second letter that Peter wrote to the persecuted church in Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey). Peter was near death and wanted to write a farewell letter to this group of Christians, challenging them to grow in their faith and love. He also wanted to warn them against false teachers and their bad theology, offering a hope of God's promise to overcome evil and bring restoration to all things.

The content of 2 Peter can be broken into the following outline from *Introducing the New Testament* and Bible Project:

- Letter Opening and Prayer - 1:1-2
- Letter Body - 1:3-3:18
  - Peter's Challenge and Teaching - 1:3-15
  - Warnings and Objections to False Teachers - 1:16-3:10
  - Correction of Distorted Theology - 2:12-22; 3:1-10
- Letter Closing - 3:14-18

Themes:

- Challenge - Peter begins by calling the early Christians to be reminded of God's invitation to participate in the divine nature. It's because of this precious gift that they are challenged to grow in their faith in Christ through characteristics such as goodness, knowledge, self-control, perseverance, godliness, mutual affection, and love. The goal was to call these early Christians to be encouraged by the reminder of God's gift to them in their suffering, and to affirm their calling to grow despite the present persecution.
- Objections to False Teachers - Overall, Peter objects to false teachings and false teachers, providing defenses to each claim.
  - Apostolic Message - First, Peter defends the truths of the apostolic message given from the eyewitnesses of Christ's life, death, and resurrection. He refutes the claims from false teachers who say the apostles made it up and calls for the early church (and generations after) to find confidence in these claims.
  - False Teachers - Secondly, Peter objects to false teachers and their ways of life. Using images from the Old Testament, Peter reveals the certainty of the coming divine judgment, especially upon false teachers. He also calls out these false teachers for being after money and sex, declaring that they misinterpreted Paul's teaching, and their claims of freedom in Christ were more accurately described as being slaves to sin.
  - Questions about Christ's Return - The false teachers asked questions about Christ's return, remarking that many generations had passed and it had not happened, ultimately, questioning if it ever would. Peter objects to their teaching and refutes it by pointing to the way in which God made creation from nothing and could do it again. He claims that the delay in Christ's return doesn't point to it not happening, but rather to God's compassionate and patient nature to see all be saved. Peter then uses language from the Old Testament connected to the day of the Lord to reveal the hope Christians have in God's overcoming of evil by bringing justice, restoration, and new life. He uses specific word pictures to display God's promise to bring a new heaven and earth, and call Christians to live according to that promise, rather than to the false teachings of those who deny it.
- Certainty and Hope - Peter ends the letter by reminding these early Christians that their eternal hope is in the reality of God's love for the world and promise to confront evil and bring a new heaven and earth. These were the words of Jesus and His apostles, and they could be certain and remain hopeful in them.

## 1, 2, 3 JOHN OVERVIEW AND OUTLINE

1, 2, and 3 John are a series of three letters that a man named “John the Elder” wrote to the early Christian community somewhere near Ephesus. John’s purpose in writing these letters was to refute the false teachings of a group of people who had left the church and were denying Jesus as Messiah and the Son of God. John’s writings offer correction to these teachings by claiming the true message of Jesus: God is Light, and God is Love. He then calls them to treat others according to these truths and to be wary of the false teachers in their midst.

The content of 1, 2, and 3 John can be broken into the following outline from *Introducing the New Testament* and Bible Project:

- 1 John, 2 John, and 3 John
  - Introduction - 1:1-4
  - The Message: God is Light - 1:5-3:10
  - The Message: God is Love - 3:11-5:17
  - Conclusion - 5:18-21
  - Don't Support the “Deceivers” - 2 John
  - Welcome the Brothers - 3 John

Themes:

- Word of Life - John begins by proclaiming the Word of Life, which is ultimately the message of Christ Jesus. He reminds the early Church of their fellowship with God and one another that was given through Jesus and invites them to participate in God’s life, light, and love together. It is this Word of Life that is the defense against the false teachings of those who have left their community.
- False Teachers - John’s writings include many references to false teachers in this early Christian community. John refers to them as antichrists, deceivers, and those generating hostility. These phrases were not used by John to describe a future coming enemy to the Church, but rather to describe the false teachers of this early community who had denied Jesus as Messiah and Son of God. In doing so, these antichrists and deceivers were misleading the people of God into antichristian beliefs and behaviors. John disputes their claims and calls for the church not to support them.
- The Message - John details the truth of the Word of Life through the message that God is Light and God is Love.
  - God is Light - Because God is light, God’s people are called to walk in His light through loving others, being God’s children, living righteously, and not loving the ways of the world.
  - God is Love - Because God is love and has revealed His love to us through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, Christians are invited to receive this love and express this love in our lives and relationships. In fact, John goes as far as to say that Christians who do not love others in word and deed do not know the love of God at all. The false teachers' beliefs about Jesus limited their doctrinal and practical beliefs about love, and John challenged these notions, offering the truth of God’s nature of love and the Christian’s calling to love.
- Eternal Life - In his writing, John mentions eternal life as an invitation for Christians to live and express now, and forevermore, through their reception and expression of God’s light and love. He calls them away from idols, sin, and other false teachings so that they may live out the teachings and commands of Christ, experiencing the fullness of life eternal.
- Welcome and Resistance - 2 and 3 John are both brief letters designed to call the early community to resist the false teachers seeking their financial support and to welcome the brothers of Christ coming for faithful ministry and fellowship.

## JUDE OVERVIEW AND OUTLINE

Jude is a brief letter written by Jude/Judas/Judah, one of the brothers of Jesus. He wrote to an unknown community of messianic Jews sometime in the first century (AD/CE). The purpose of the letter was to warn the early believers against false teachings that promoted using grace for immoral actions that denied Jesus. Jude's writings call for the church to hold fast to the faith of Christ expressed in prayer, love, and holiness.

The content of Jude can be broken into the following outline from *Introducing the New Testament* and Bible Project:

- Letter Opening - v. 1-4
- Refutation of False Teachings - v. 5-19
- Closing Challenge - v. 20-25

Themes:

- Contend for the Faith - Jude's main exhortation to these early Jewish Christians was to contend for the faith that was passed to them through Jesus and His apostles. He begins and ends the letter by calling the community to contend for the faith through praying in the Holy Spirit, being merciful, staying in God's love, and remaining pure in the midst of the corrupt and sinful actions around them.
- False Teaching - Jude's writing is against the false teachers from this community and their teachings that perverted God's grace as a license to do whatever they wanted and denied Jesus' Lordship. Jude calls these people ungodly and refutes their claims by pointing to examples from the Old Testament and similar books from that time (Enoch, Testament of Moses). In these writings, Jude reveals that the rebellion of Israel in the wilderness, angels and Sodomites in Genesis, and even the rebellion of Satan are all met with God's divine justice. He also includes the examples of corrupt leaders like Cain, Balaam, and Korah as a way of describing the corrupt leaders who were proclaiming false teachings and leading the people astray. Jude's main purpose in this is to say that just as corrupt leaders and teachings have come (even Jesus warned about this), the people were to remain faithful to Jesus and know that God would bring justice and judgment.
- Power, Sovereign, Authority - Jude uses these terms connected to Christ Jesus to disprove the claims of the false teachers and anchor the people of God in the truth of Christ's certain authority.
- Challenge - In Jude's objection to the false teachers, he makes it abundantly clear that Jesus is the Sovereign God who reigns over all. Jesus' offer of grace does not give Christians the license to do whatever they want, but rather demands a full response with every part of our lives. His prayer is that the early Christian community would respond with this type of grace and live holy and faithful lives to One who can keep them from stumbling.

## REVELATION OVERVIEW AND OUTLINE

Revelation is an apocalyptic, prophetic letter written by John to the early Christian communities located in Asia Minor. Using symbolism, metaphor, analogy, and Scriptural references, John invites the reader to be aware of their current situation and respond with repentance from sin, resistance to the ways of empire, and to remain faithful to the ways of the Lamb.

The content of Revelation can be broken into the following outline from *Introducing the New Testament and Bible Project*:

- Letter Opening and Message to the Churches 1-3
- The Throne of God - 4-5
- Visions of Divine Judgments (7 Seals, 7 Trumpets, 7 Signs, 7 Bowls) - 6-16
- God's Victory over Babylon and Satan - 17-20
- New Heaven and Earth - 21-22

Themes:

- Message to the Churches - This is a prophetic letter written by John to seven churches in Asia Minor with a message from Christ Jesus that speaks to what has come, what is, and what will be. The initial calling is to recognize Christ's power to bring all people into His redemptive work and empower them as faithful witnesses who carry His testimony, message, and word as He does.
- Throne Room - The vision shifts to a throne room scene that offers an eternal viewpoint of the One on the throne and the Lamb, who are worshipped by depictions of all of creation. There are distinctions between the Enthroned and the created beings who worship. This section ends with the Lamb who was slain taking the scroll with seven seals and being worshipped together with the One on the throne. The entirety of the symbolic vision anchors an eternal perspective through the Lamb and the One at the center of the throne as the way to understand the rest of the letter.
- Visions of Divine Judgments - John writes about various visions of divine judgments described through seven seals, trumpets, signs, and bowls. In each vision, John uses Old Testament references such as the plagues of Egypt or horsemen described in Zechariah's prophecies to remind God's people of God's promise to meet the evil and injustice of this world with His victory and reign. John describes specific creatures that call back to Daniel's prophecies of beasts representing rules, nations, and empires who are influenced by evil and carry out evil against God's people and the world. In all of these visions, judgment is poured out, but it doesn't lead to repentance from the nations. Rather, it is through the faithful witness of God's people to the Lamb that nations repent and glorify God. In other words, the way of overcoming evil and injustice in the world is not through the power of the corrupted beasts and empires, but through the blood of the Lamb and the faithful witness of His followers' testimonies.
- God's Victory over Babylon and Satan - The vision shifts to show the downfall of Babylon, represented as a drunk woman riding the beasts and committing adulteries with other kings and nations. The way she is described is the Scriptural metaphor of "Babylon", or the nations that have been anti-God, murderous, image-focused, militaristic, economically exploitative, arrogant, and opulent. John is told that this woman represents Rome and its military and economic power, and her downfall will come as the Lamb will overcome the evil of this world. This is matched with a picture of a heavenly battle between a rider on a white horse and Satan. Before the battle begins, the enemy is overcome, and the forces of spiritual evil are destroyed. There are differing views on how this pans out, but the main point is that Jesus will return and triumph over evil.
- New Heaven and Earth - Revelation ends with a description of heaven and earth being married together in God. This is described, with many Old Testament references, as a new heaven, new earth, and new Jerusalem, all of which are depicted as a beautiful bride, adorned for her husband, the Lamb. The description of this new heaven and earth reminds the reader of three important messages from the book: repent of sin, resist the empire, and remain faithful to the Lamb, knowing that Jesus will return and bring about justice and a new creation.

## BIBLE RESOURCES

You will find that there are many challenging passages to understand and apply to your life in Christ. We suggest the following resources to aid your study and application of Scripture.

- **Scripture Reading Practices:**

- SOAP
- Discovery Bible Study
- Lectio Divina
- Communal Reading of Scripture

- **Websites:**

- The Bible Project
- Bible Gateway

- **Commentaries:**

- New Beacon Bible Commentaries
- Word Biblical Commentaries
- Anchor Bible Commentaries

- **Books:**

- *How to Read the Bible for All It's Worth* by Fee and Stuart
- *Seven Things I Wish Christians Knew About the Bible* by Bird
- *Bruce and Stan's Guide to the Bible* by Bruce Bickel and Stan Jantz
- *Introducing the New Testament* by Joel Green
- *An Introduction to the New Testament* by Raymond Brown
- *Right of Malachi* by Norman Hubbard
- *Exploring the New Testament: A Guide to the Letters and Revelation* by Marshall, Travis & Paul
- *Revelation for the Rest of Us* by Scot Mcknight