

# New Testament Genre: Epistles

By Donald Kim

## Pre-Session Assignments

One week before the session, participants will take the following assignments.

### Assignment One

Make two lists: (1) things we commonly thank God for, and (2) things we *should* thank God for. Prepare to share the two lists with your group.

### Assignment Two

Find a movie scene where a race is taking place. Note where the racers are looking while they race. Prepare to show the movie clip to your group.

### Assignment Three

Read John 1:1–12. List the various ways the light is described in this passage. Prepare to share your list.

### Scripture to Memorize

*I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.* Romans 12:1

### Session Goal

Consistent with God's Word and in the power of the Holy Spirit—by the end of this session, disciples will understand how a wide range of epistles in the New Testament address the church body.

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## It's in the Book

30 minutes

### Real-Life Scenario

Imagine getting a letter that you're dying to read. It's from someone you love—a parent, a sibling or a significant other. You've been waiting forever for the letter to arrive, and once it's in your hands you carefully open it with a great deal of excitement. You read it line by line, letting every word sink in. You read it through once and read it again. That letter is exciting to read because whoever wrote it knows who you are. The letter is great because it's personal. It's meaningful because it communicates genuine love.

The letters in the New Testament were meant to be personal messages to the church. They show the state of the churches during the time they were written. At the same time, the letters speak clearly to the church today, addressing spiritual issues in the church both then and now.

### Paul's Letters

**Read** 1 Thessalonians 1:1–5 out loud.

#### Studying the Passage

**Verse 1. Paul.** Paul's name appears first, so he is the one writing the letter. This was the way ancient letters were written. Today we begin with, "Dear . . ." **Silvanus and Timothy.** They were Paul's coworkers, his ministry associates. **the church of the Thessalonians.** They were the recipients of the letter. **Grace . . . peace.** This is a typical greeting in an ancient Christian letter, using the common Jewish greeting ("peace") and the common Gentile greeting ("grace"). Referring to Christ gave these words their fullest meaning.

**Verse 2. We give thanks.** They gave thanks to God for all of the Thessalonians. Verse three tells us why.

**Verse 3. faith . . . love . . . hope.** These believers exhibited this wonderful trilogy of Christian virtues, truly reflecting Christ's transformation of their lives.

**Verse 4. brothers loved by God . . . He has chosen you.** God greatly loved them, and He chose them.

**Verse 5. our gospel.** The good news was proclaimed by Paul and his associates. **not only in word.** This gospel was not merely words, because mere words could be false or deceptive. **power . . . Holy Spirit.** The power of the Holy Spirit confirmed the genuineness of the message. **with full conviction.** Paul and his coworkers truly believed the gospel message, and the Thessalonian believers saw this.

#### Assignment One Feedback

The person who completed **Assignment One** during the week can now share two lists: (1) things we commonly thank God for, and (2) things we *should* thank God for.

#### Discussion Question

In verse 7, Paul reported that the Thessalonian church had become an example to others. What effect did the gospel message have on you? Do you see ways you are an example to others?

## The Letter to the Hebrews

Read Hebrews 12:1–3 out loud.

### Studying the Passage

**Verse 1. Therefore.** This word refers back to the roll call of the saints in chapter 11. In this sermon-like letter, the author gave his recipients instructions on how to live. **cloud of witnesses.** Great heroes of the faith have left us encouraging and motivating testimonies. **let us.** The author included himself in the challenge he presented. **lay aside every weight.** This Greek phrase means to remove all obstructions or dead weights. **run with endurance.** The author compared the Christian life to running a foot race.

**Verse 2. Looking to Jesus.** Every runner in a race must focus on the goal. This “fixing of eyes” means all attention is placed on Jesus. **Founder and perfecter of our faith.** He alone brings salvation. **who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame.** This summarizes the gospel message. Jesus suffered for a purpose. He died, but He did not remain dead. He rose from the grave and ascended to the right hand of God. **and is seated.** To sit down shows the work has been completed. **at the right hand of the throne of God.** This is the position of power.

**Verse 3. consider Him.** Again, look to Jesus as the goal. **endured . . . such hostility.** Christ endured considerable opposition, and yet He was unrelenting in His act of love. He demonstrated faithfulness to His people to the point of death on the cross. **may not grow weary or fainthearted.** You will remain strong in the race as you focus on Christ. This message is an encouragement to those who are facing various struggles in life. Jesus is our goal, Savior, inspiration, example and guide.

### Assignment Two Feedback

The person who completed **Assignment Two** during the week can now share a movie scene with a race taking place, noting where the racers tend to keep their focus.

### Discussion Question

Why is focusing on Jesus important for Christians as they run their race? Have you been through a difficult period, but you were still able to focus on Jesus and be victorious?

### On Your Own

Reflect on what it means to focus on Jesus and write some thoughts in the space below. How have you been successful in keeping that focus? In what ways can you grow in this area?

## The Letter of 1 John

Read 1 John 1:5–7 out loud.

### Studying the Passage

**Verse 5. This is the message we have heard from Him.** John related his personal encounters with Jesus in this letter written to the church. **God is Light.** This statement is clear about who God is. The expression is one of the common features this letter shares with John's Gospel.

### Assignment Three Feedback

The person who completed **Assignment Three** during the week can now share the occurrences of light in John 1:1–12.

### Studying the passage

**Verse 6. If we say we have fellowship with Him while we walk in the darkness.** To *walk* means to "live." Deception occurs when we say one thing and do another. John is addressing hypocrisy in the church. Fellowship with God means walking in the light, not walking in darkness.

**Verse 7. fellowship with one another.** The Greek word reflects unity that comes through sharing common experiences of God's forgiveness. **the blood of Jesus.** The death of Jesus is what brings about God's forgiveness for a believer in Jesus.

### Discussion Question

John addressed a situation in the early church around two thousand years ago, yet the challenge to remain true to God's way of life is still important today. How is this message still relevant in the church today? How can the church grow in this area?

### On Your Own

Write down your responses below to the following questions. What does walking with God look like in your life? In what ways is it easy to fall into the temptation of darkness? How can you consistently walk in the light with others?

## **Heart and Hands**

8 minutes

Read again the **Real-Life Scenario** near the beginning of the lesson. Consider whether your answers have changed during the session.

Be silent for two or three minutes. Thank Jesus for His sacrifice and for the gospel. Adore Him for His glorious reign on the throne of heaven. Then ask the Holy Spirit to reveal to you:

1. A way the Scriptures you studied today will change your heart for the glory of Christ.
2. Or a way those Scriptures will lead you to stop doing something for the glory of Christ.
3. Or a way those Scriptures will lead you to do something for the glory of Christ.

Write what the Spirit reveals to you below and then be ready to share what you have written with the group.

## **Since Last Week**

5 minutes

## **Grace-Filled Accountability**

5 minutes

## **Planning for Evangelism, Missions, and Service**

5 minutes

## **Prayer**

7 minutes

Every disciple will pray aloud, offering praise to Jesus, thanking Him specifically for His gracious acts, making heartfelt confession, committing to actions flowing from the Bible study, praying toward evangelism locally and globally, and interceding for others as prompted by the Holy Spirit.

## **At Home: Nail It Down**

The New Testament contains numerous letters with different authors and purposes, but they all are personal messages to the churches. In 1 Thessalonians, Paul wrote to encourage the church with the gospel message. The letter to the Hebrews reads much like a sermon and gives helpful instructions on how to live life with Jesus in view. First John is a letter to call the church to faithfulness and to remind them of Jesus.

Real people wrote these New Testament letters, but God inspired them to write through the Holy Spirit. Through these letters, God was raising up the church to mature believers in His grace. We need to see that these written words still speak to us today. We need the guidance of the Holy Spirit to see that His Word is living and active (Hebrews 4:12), breathing life into the church through His process of sanctification.

The New Testament letters call for Christians to live disciplined lives, but the purpose of the letters are not to give a list of rules by which to gain God's favor. God already loves each believer with perfect love. Rather, each believer should desire to obey God's Word out of gratitude for Christ's sacrificial death and the miracle of the gospel. Through such obedience one grows in the process of sanctification: being conformed by the Holy Spirit into the image of Christ for the glory of God.

Disciples link arms with other disciples as they grow in sanctification prompted by gratitude for grace. Walking in relationship happens through the church, and it happens through the family. Each disciple can have a valuable role in guiding their church and their family to worship Jesus and to join Him in representing what it looks like for someone to live under His rule on the earth.

### **Follow up Question**

*In what ways can we as a family walk more in the light?*

The Making Disciples curriculum is a gift from Southwestern Seminary to those who, for the glory of the Father and in the power of the Spirit, will spend a lifetime embracing the full supremacy of the Son, responding to His kingly reign in all of life, inviting Christ to live His life through them, and joining Him in making disciples among all peoples.