

\*\*\*\*\* **Matthew** \*\*\*\*\*

As early as AD 140, a Christian named Papias wrote that Matthew had compiled the sayings of the Lord.

Matthew's name appears in all the biblical lists of the twelve apostles, though Mark and Luke refer to him as Levi. His history as a tax collector distinguished him from the other apostles, and immediately after his call to follow Jesus—an event he recorded in Matthew 9:9—Matthew hosted a feast for Jesus in his home with an invitation list made up of Matthew's sinful friends. Apparently Matthew did not think it odd that Jesus and he would associate with the sinful and downtrodden of society.

### **Where are we?**

Matthew is the most Jewish-centric of the four gospels. The apostle regularly invoked the writings of the Old Testament prophets in an effort to illustrate Jesus's identity as Israel's long-awaited Messiah.

Several factors speak to a date ranging from AD 60–65. First of all, the book makes no mention of the destruction of the temple, an event which occurred in AD 70. Such a cataclysmic event likely would have received some comment, particularly in a book so clearly influenced by Judaism. The largely Jewish character of the book also suggests it was written at a time when much of the evangelism by Christians was directed more exclusively at Jews, something that became less and less common as the decades passed. Finally, many scholars believe Mark to have been the first gospel composed, making it most probable that Matthew was written soon after.

### **Why is Matthew so important?**

The apostle Matthew, a Jew himself, offered a decidedly Jewish perspective on the ministry of Jesus. He included more than fifty direct citations—and even more indirect allusions—from the Old Testament. This exceeds any of the other gospels and indicates that Matthew had the Jewish population in mind when he sat down to write. Matthew's extensive connections between Jesus and the Old Testament provide ample prophetic evidence for Jesus's ministry but also give contemporary readers a glimpse into how first-century readers approached the Old Testament with a Christ-centered mind-set.

In addition, Matthew's gospel answers the question on the mind of every Jewish reader: "If Jesus is the King of the Jews, then where is God's promised kingdom?" Matthew reveals that Jesus did offer the kingdom to Israel, but the offer was rejected (Matthew 4:17; 16:13–28; 21:42–43). God's primary work

in the world is now accomplished through the building of Christ's church, after which Jesus will come again to earth and establish His kingdom—ruling the world from Israel.

### **What's the big idea?**

Matthew wrote his account of Jesus's ministry to show that Jesus was and is indeed the King, Israel's long-awaited Messiah. He reflected this concern in his opening line, "The record of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham" (Matthew 1:1). From there, Matthew consistently took his readers back to the Old Testament, providing Old Testament testimony regarding the birth of Jesus, Bethlehem as the location of Jesus's birth, the flight to Egypt, Herod's slaughter of the infants, and the beginning of Jesus's ministry. In a world where many in the Jewish community had claimed the role of Messiah for themselves, Matthew's commitment to grounding the life of Jesus in the Old Testament raised Jesus above the multitude of these false messiahs. The apostle painted a portrait of our Lord that highlights His uniqueness among all others to ever walk this earth.

### **How do I apply this?**

After enduring four hundred years of prophetic silence, God's people must have wondered whether or not He had deserted them. After centuries of regular communication from God, the people found themselves without a genuine prophet or spokesman for God. However, the ministries of John and Jesus reminded God's people that He had not forgotten them. God's silence during that period was merely a precursor to pulling the linchpin of His redemptive plan. God hadn't forgotten—He remembered His people. Matthew made that clear.

It was true then, and it is certainly true today. Do you ever feel as though God has deserted you or that He sits in silence in the face of your requests? As we read through the pages of Matthew, not only do we see Jesus Christ revealed as Israel's King and Messiah, but His coming to earth as God in the flesh reminds us of His deep love for us. Now resurrected and ascended, the Lord Jesus will always be with us, even to the end of time (Matthew 28:20).

Christ's commission to His followers is still His mandate to us today: "Make disciples of all the nations" (Matthew 28:19). Christ's work of building His church is the work He does through each of us.

\*\*\*\*\* **Mark** \*\*\*\*\*

The Bible records more information about Mark than any of the other gospel writers aside from the apostle John. Luke mentioned Mark's name several times in Acts. A budding Jerusalem church met in his mother's home. Mark also started the first missionary journey with Paul and Barnabas but went home early, though he later travelled with Barnabas to Cyprus for more mission work. He became significant in the life of Paul, being one of the last people the apostle mentioned in his final letter (2 Timothy 4:11).

However, Mark's most significant personal connection was the one he had with Peter, who was likely Mark's source for the material in the gospel. Mark's mother's house was a regular enough stop for Peter that the servants recognized him by voice alone (Acts 12:12–14). And it appears that Mark was present at Gethsemane, a young man watching the proceedings from a safe distance (Mark 14:51–52), leading some scholars to believe the Last Supper took place in Mark's home.

Where are we?

Because Mark offered no further comment on Jesus's prophecy regarding the destruction of the temple—an event that occurred in AD 70—we can safely assume that Mark composed the gospel sometime before that tragic event. Also, the gospel has a distinctly Roman feel to it, particularly when compared with the Jewish emphasis of the book of Matthew. Mark chose to leave aside most comments on fulfilled prophecy (compare Matthew 21:1–6 and Mark 11:1–4), and when he felt compelled to use an Aramaic term, he interpreted it (Mark 3:17). This suggests that Mark was in Rome, writing from Peter's recollections sometime before that apostle's death (ca. AD 64–68), possibly composing the gospel between AD 57 and AD 59.

Why is Mark so important?

Mark's gospel portrays Jesus as constantly on the move. The forward motion in Mark's writing keeps the knowledgeable reader's mind continually looking ahead to the cross and the resurrection. Thirty-nine times Mark used the word immediately, giving a sense that Jesus's time on earth was short and that there was much to accomplish in His few years of ministry.

What's the big idea?

While Matthew's gospel portrays Jesus as the King, Mark reveals Him as God's Servant. Jesus's work was always for a larger purpose, a point clearly summarized in Mark 10:45, "For even the Son of Man did not come to be

served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many.” Mark filled his gospel with the miracles of Jesus, illustrating again and again both the power and the compassion of the Son of God. In these passages, Mark revealed more than Jesus as the good teacher who offered people spiritual renewal; the book also portrays Jesus as the true God and the true man, reaching into the lives of people and effecting physical and circumstantial change.

But Jesus’s life as the agent of change wasn’t without an ultimate purpose. Amid His hands-on ministry, Jesus constantly pointed to the definitive way in which He would serve humanity: His death on the cross and His resurrection from the dead. It is only through faith in these works of Jesus Christ that human beings find eternal redemption for their whole selves. Moreover, Jesus becomes our model for how to live our lives—serving others as He did.

How do I apply this?

Three times in three consecutive chapters—8, 9, and 10—Mark pictured Jesus informing His disciples of His great sacrifice and ultimate victory. His disciples either rejected the teaching altogether (Mark 8:31–32) or they showed themselves concerned with other matters (9:31–34; 10:32–37). As Jesus prepared to perform the greatest service in the history of the human race, His disciples could only think about themselves—their position or safety.

Do you find it a struggle to get yourself oriented toward sacrificial service, as Jesus’s disciples did? The temptations we all wrestle with when faced with an opportunity to serve another person are to pull back within ourselves, to seek our comfort, or to protect our own interests.

The challenge that Jesus presents to us in the book of Mark involves breaking out of those patterns of self-absorption and giving ourselves in service and love to others.

\*\*\*\*\* **Luke** \*\*\*\*\*

Luke’s own introduction to his gospel indicates that Luke composed the letter with the purpose of providing a careful rendering of the events of Christ’s life in chronological order. As a physician, Luke would have been trained as a careful observer, a quality that would have been invaluable in this project. The result was the first part of a two-volume work written to Theophilus. We know the subsequent volume as Acts.

Where are we?

Much of the dating of the book of Luke depends on the dating of Acts. Luke's second volume cuts off with Paul imprisoned in Rome, before Paul's death (AD 68) and even before the persecution of Christians broke out under Nero (AD 64). It stands to reason that the book of Luke was completed before Acts. But when?

Acts 21:17 says that Luke accompanied Paul on the apostle's final visit to Jerusalem, a visit that occurred in AD 57–58. Eventually, the Jews had Paul arrested in the temple, a two-year ordeal which ended with Paul's imprisonment in Caesarea. Luke likely used this time apart from Paul to begin gathering information for writing the gospel from primary sources—those people who had witnessed the ministry, death, and resurrection appearances of Jesus. If Luke took to writing his gospel soon after the information was gathered, then it would have been completed around AD 60, after Paul had been transferred to a Roman prison.

Why is Luke so important?

Luke's interest in people is undeniable. Much of the material unique to Luke's gospel involves Jesus's interactions with individuals, many of them on the fringes of "acceptable" society—sinners, women, and children among them. Like Matthew and Mark, Luke recorded the incident of a woman coming to pour perfume on Jesus's feet. But Luke was the only gospel writer to point out the fact known to all present that she was an immoral woman (Luke 7:37). In a similar way, we find in Luke alone the conversation between the robbers crucified alongside Jesus, one of them defending Jesus and receiving the promise of paradise. Luke's portrayal of Jesus reveals in our Lord a man come to minister and show compassion to all people, no matter their station in life.

What's the big idea?

Just as Matthew portrays Jesus as the King, and as Mark reveals Him as the Servant, so Luke offers a unique perspective of Jesus as the Son of Man. This phrase, "Son of Man," was Jesus's favourite way to refer to Himself.

Most famous among the people unique to Luke's gospel is the tax collector Zaccheus, a short man who had to climb a tree to see over the crowds as Jesus approached his town. Jesus ended up sharing a meal with Zaccheus at his house, much to the chagrin of the local religious leaders. When Zaccheus expressed his regret over his former way of life and vowed to make restitution, Jesus responded with what became the theme of Luke's gospel: "For the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost" (Luke 19:10). Luke

portrayed Jesus as God’s ideal Man, who offers salvation to all humanity — Jew and Gentile alike.

How do I apply this?

The richness of Luke’s portrayal of Jesus has profound implications for our relationship with God today. Jesus walks through Luke’s gospel illustrating His deep and abiding care for people, regardless of what they have done or their status in society.

Do you believe that God loves you no matter what you’ve done? The fact that the eternal Son of God condescended to lower Himself, take on human flesh, make Himself subject to human limitations, and seek out His people in bodily form shows us clearly how much God cares for us and, in turn, how we are to care for others.

\*\*\*\*\* **John** \*\*\*\*\*

The book itself identifies the author as the disciple whom Jesus loved. This description likely pointed to John for three reasons: the author had to be one of the twelve disciples because he was an eyewitness to the events in the gospel (John 21:24); he was probably one of the inner circle of three disciples (James, John, and Peter) because he was among the first Mary told of the resurrection (20:1–10); and this disciple is distinguished from Peter in the book, while James died too soon after the resurrection to be the author.

The second significant evidence for John’s authorship is the unanimous testimony of early Christians, among them the second-century Christian Irenaeus, who declared that John was the disciple who laid his head on Jesus — the disciple “whom Jesus loved” (13:23) — and the author of the gospel.

Where are we?

In Christian tradition, John’s gospel has always been referred to as the fourth gospel, meaning it was composed after the other three. Polycarp, a second-century Christian martyr who knew John personally, told Irenaeus that John had written the book during the apostle’s time serving the church in Ephesus. These factors suggest that John wrote the book between AD 85 and AD 95.

Why is John so important?

John did not include the nativity story in his gospel; instead, he introduced his book by going back even further into history. Invoking the “in the beginning” language of Genesis 1:1, John made a direct link between the nature of God

and the nature of the Word, Jesus Christ. The emphasis on the deity of Christ is a striking quality of John's gospel. It also comes through clearly elsewhere in the book, particularly in John 8:58 when Jesus claimed the divine name—"I am"—for Himself, which led an angry mob of Jews to try and kill Him for blasphemy.

What's the big idea?

While the other three gospels portray Jesus as the King, the Servant, and the Son of Man, John portrays Jesus as the Son of God. John stated his theme more clearly than any of the other gospel writers. He wrote so that his readers might "believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God," so that they may have life in His name (John 20:31). To accomplish that goal, John presented a riveting and distinctive picture of Jesus Christ, one in complete unity with the portraits in the other three gospels, but one that also adds significantly to the Bible's revelation of Jesus Christ, the God-man.

John used a variety of techniques to communicate to his readers the nature of Jesus. These include his citation of Jesus's seven "I am" statements, in which Jesus spoke of Himself in terms such as "the Light of the world" (8:12), "the resurrection and the life" (11:25), and "the way, and the truth, and the life" (14:6). Much of John's gospel (chapters 2–12) might be called the Book of Signs, as it recounts Jesus's performing of seven different miracles—such as the turning water to wine at Cana and raising Lazarus from the dead at Bethany. These miracles illustrate His identity as the Son of God.

How do I apply this?

Jesus's identity as the divine Son of God sets Him apart from any other man who ever lived. He carries with Him the transcendence that comes only with God Himself. Therefore, His work on our behalf makes our salvation sure. Because He is God, His sacrifice on the cross has eternal implications, unlike the limited effect of the animal sacrifices in the Old Testament. Jesus, the God-man, has atoned for our sins. We can place our confidence in Him because of His divine nature.

For readers of John's gospel, the question is a simple, though significant, one: Do you believe that Jesus is Lord? If you believe, you will receive eternal life, claiming the truth that you will one day live in the presence of God in a place with no more pain, no more tears, and no more death.

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## Acts

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The title of the book of Acts comes from the Greek word *praxis*, a word often used in early Christian literature to describe the great deeds of the apostles or other significant believers. This title accurately reflects the contents of the book, which is a series of vignettes chronicling the lives of key apostles (especially Peter and Paul) in the decades immediately following Christ's ascension into heaven.

Luke's identification as the author of this work was unquestioned throughout ancient times. It shows a clear progression from the gospel according to Luke, picking up just where that book left off. An ancient prologue to Luke's gospel indicates that Luke was first a follower of the apostles and then became close with Paul.<sup>1</sup> This is exactly how the book of Acts unfolds, beginning with Peter and ending with Paul. Luke even began to speak in the first person plural in the latter portion of Acts, as he travelled the Roman Empire alongside Paul (Acts 16:10).

Where are we?

Acts ends abruptly with Paul imprisoned in Rome, waiting to bring his appeal before Caesar. It is worth noting that in this history of the early Christian church, Luke mentioned neither Paul's death (AD 64–68) nor the persecution of Christians that broke out under Nero (AD 64). More than likely, Luke completed the book before either of these events occurred, sometime between AD 60 and AD 62, while Paul sat in prison, awaiting the resolution of his appeal.

Why is Acts so important?

Acts is the only biblical book that chronicles the history of the church immediately after Jesus's ascension. As such, it provides us with a valuable account of how the church was able to grow and spread out from Jerusalem into the rest of the Roman Empire. In only three decades, a small group of frightened believers in Jerusalem transformed into an empire-wide movement of people who had committed their lives to Jesus Christ, ending on a high note with Paul on the verge of taking the gospel to the highest government official in the land—the Emperor of Rome.

What's the big idea?

Acts can be neatly divided into two sections, the first dealing primarily with the ministry of Peter in Jerusalem and Samaria (Acts 1–12) and the second following Paul on his missionary journeys throughout the Roman Empire (Acts

13–28). Acts is significant for chronicling the spread of the gospel, not only geographically but also culturally. It records the transition from taking the gospel to an exclusively Jewish audience—with Peter preaching to a small group in the Upper Room—to the gospel going out among the Gentiles, primarily under the ministry of the apostle Paul. The transition is best illustrated by Peter’s vision in which he heard a voice telling him, “What God has cleansed, no longer consider unholy” (10:15). This led Peter to then share the gospel with many Gentiles. The lesson? God wants His message of hope and salvation to extend to all people—“in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth” (1:8).

How do I apply this?

What opportunities for sharing the gospel can you take advantage of in the days to come? This question should ring through your mind as you page through the book of Acts. In virtually every chapter, apostles such as Peter and Paul powerfully present the gospel to individuals and groups of people. The apostles portrayed in Acts shine with evangelistic zeal, showing a striking transition from the often misguided disciples of the Gospels. Clearly the apostles’ faith in the death and resurrection of Jesus produced a noticeable change in their hearts through the power of the Holy Spirit.

\*\*\*\*\* **Romans** \*\*\*\*\*

Paul had never been to Rome when he wrote the letter to the Romans, though he had clearly expressed his desire to travel there in the near future (Acts 19:21; Romans 1:10–12). The apostle greeted twenty-six different people by name, personalizing a letter from a man who would have been a personal stranger to most of the recipients. No doubt they had heard of Paul and would have been honoured by the letter, but Paul always took opportunities to personally connect with his audience so that the message of the gospel might be better received.

Where are we?

The apostle Paul wrote to the Romans from the Greek city of Corinth in AD 57, just three years after the 16-year-old Nero had ascended to the throne as Emperor of Rome. The political situation in the capital had not yet deteriorated for the Roman Christians, as Nero wouldn’t begin his persecution of them until he made them scapegoats after the great Roman fire in AD 64. Therefore, Paul wrote to a church that was experiencing a time of relative peace, but a church that he felt needed a strong dose of basic gospel doctrine.

Writing from Corinth, Paul likely encountered a diverse array of people and practices—from gruff sailors and meticulous tradesmen to wealthy idolaters and enslaved Christians. The prominent Greek city was also a hotbed of sexual immorality and idol worship. So when Paul wrote in Romans about the sinfulness of humanity or the power of God’s grace to miraculously and completely change lives, he knew that of which he spoke. It was played out before his eyes every day.

Why is Romans so important?

The letter to the Romans stands as the clearest and most systematic presentation of Christian doctrine in all the Scriptures. Paul began by discussing that which is most easily observable in the world—the sinfulness of all humanity. All people have been condemned due to our rebellion against God. However, God in His grace offers us justification by faith in His Son, Jesus. When we are justified by God, we receive redemption, or salvation, because Christ’s blood covers our sin. But Paul made it clear that the believer’s pursuit of God doesn’t stop with salvation; it continues as each of us is sanctified—made holy—as we persist in following Him. Paul’s treatment of these issues offers a logical and complete presentation of how a person can be saved from the penalty and power of his or her sin.

What's the big idea?

The primary theme running through Paul’s letter to the Romans is the revelation of God’s righteousness in His plan for salvation, what the Bible calls the gospel:

For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, “But the righteous man shall live by faith.” (Romans 1:16–17)

Paul showed how human beings lack God’s righteousness because of our sin (1–3), receive God’s righteousness when God justifies us by faith (4–5), demonstrate God’s righteousness by being transformed from rebels to followers (6–8), confirm His righteousness when God saves the Jews (9–11), and apply His righteousness in practical ways throughout our lives (12–16).

How do I apply this?

The structure of Romans provides a hint into the importance of the book in our everyday lives. Beginning with eleven chapters of doctrine, the book then transitions into five chapters of practical instruction. This union between

doctrine and life illustrates for Christians the absolute importance of both what we believe and how we live out those beliefs. Does your day-to-day life mirror the beliefs you hold, or do you find yourself in a constant battle with hypocrisy? Take heed of the doctrine you find within the pages of Romans, but don't forget to put it into practice as well.

\*\*\*\*\* **First Corinthians** \*\*\*\*\*

Four years prior to writing the letter we know as 1 Corinthians, the apostle had spent eighteen months in Corinth, so he was intimately familiar with the church and many of its congregants. The recipients of the letter must have understood the letter's significance, not only to their own circumstances but for the church worldwide. In AD 95, Clement, the bishop of Rome, wrote a letter of his own to the Corinthians in which he invoked the authority of Paul's instruction in 1 Corinthians. Only a few decades after its origin, this letter to the Corinthians had travelled outside of Corinth and was considered authoritative beyond its initial Corinthian context.

Where are we?

Paul had been in Ephesus for more than two years on his third missionary journey when he received a disturbing report of quarreling within the Corinthian church, a report he received from people associated with one of its members, Chloe (1 Corinthians 1:11). The church he had founded so recently (Acts 18:1–17) had already developed deep divisions, a situation that required immediate action. Paul penned his letter in AD 55, just as he was planning to leave Ephesus for Macedonia (1 Corinthians 16:5–8).

Why is First Corinthians so important?

First Corinthians contains a frank discussion of the church and the issues that impacted real people in the first century. The Corinthian church was corroded with sin on a variety of fronts, so Paul provided an important model for how the church should handle the problem of sin in its midst. Rather than turn a blind eye toward relational division and all kinds of immorality, he addressed the problems head on. In his bold call to purity within the Corinthian church, Paul made it clear that he was willing to risk the good opinion of some in order to help cleanse the sin that tainted the church.

What's the big idea?

First Corinthians addresses reports that Paul received from Chloe's household, as well as a letter he received from the church itself (1 Corinthians 7:1). In this

letter to the church at Corinth, Paul covered a number of different issues related to both life and doctrine: divisions and quarrels, sexual immorality, lawsuits among believers, marriage and singleness, freedom in Christ, order in worship, the significance of the Lord's Supper, and the right use of spiritual gifts; he also included a profound teaching on the resurrection.

The line of thought that joins these topics together was Paul's emphasis on Christian conduct in the local church. The apostle expected that Christian people would live according to Christian ideals, or as he told them, "You have been bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body" (6:20).

How do I apply this?

Corinth was a large, international metropolis, filled with people from different backgrounds. Idol worship to gods such as Aphrodite was particularly prominent in the city, though Corinth contained numerous temptations far beyond her temples. In this sense, Corinth was very much like a modern urban area, containing unending opportunities to engage in sinful behaviour without any apparent consequences.

Such a community clearly had a negative influence on the Corinthian church. But notice that Paul's instruction to the believers was not to retreat from their city. This was not Paul's vision for the church then or now. Instead, he directed us to live out our commitment to Christ ever more faithfully in the midst of nonbelievers. Paul expected that we Christians would shine our light into the dark places of their world by worshiping in a unified community that was accountable to one another. He expected that we would settle our problems internally, that we would encourage one another in the pursuit of purity, and that we would strive together by holding tightly to the hope of our bodily resurrection to come.

What can you do within your local church to make this kind of community more of a reality?

\*\*\*\*\* **Second Corinthians** \*\*\*\*\*

Paul wrote 2 Corinthians at a vulnerable time in his life. He had learned that the church at Corinth was struggling, and he sought to take action to preserve the unity of that local body of believers. The letter is riddled with personal comments as Paul revealed details about the persecution he had suffered for the sake of Christ as well as about a mysterious thorn in the flesh that kept him reliant on God.

Where are we?

After sending Timothy off from Ephesus to deliver the letter of 1 Corinthians, Paul, in his concern for the church, made a quick visit of his own to Corinth. Afterward, Paul returned to his work in Ephesus, where he wrote a sorrowful letter to the Corinthians that has not been preserved (see 2 Corinthians 2:1–11; 7:8). Paul then departed for Macedonia. Once there, he received a good report from Titus regarding the Corinthians (7:13), which led Paul to write a fourth letter to them, titled “2 Corinthians” in the Bible. (See 1 Corinthians page to read about Paul’s first two letters to the Corinthians.) The apostle composed this letter near the end of AD 56, possibly in the city of Philippi.

Why is Second Corinthians so important?

This letter offers a great deal of personal insight into Paul’s life that is not present in any other New Testament book. However, in chapters 8 and 9, his letter also clearly reveals God’s plan for His people to give to others. Paul first focused on the generous example of the Macedonian churches, largely Gentile, who gave to their Jewish Christian brothers and sisters in Jerusalem. Then he exhorted the Corinthian believers to make donations of their own to the work in Jerusalem. Several realities about Christian giving become clear in these two chapters: Christians give generously according to, and at times beyond, their financial abilities; Christians give their money across racial and national lines; Christians who make commitments to give should follow through with those promises; and Christians should give cheerfully, rather than under compulsion.

What's the big idea?

The church at Corinth had recently been struggling with divisions and quarrels. But for a majority of the believers, the problem had been solved by the time Paul wrote 2 Corinthians. Many had repented of their sinful ways and had come back into unity with one another and with the leadership of Paul.

However, Paul still felt the need to articulate a defence of his apostleship and his message. Some in the church had apparently taken his meekness among them to be a sign of moral weakness or lack of authority (2 Corinthians 10:1–2). These accusations led Paul to defend himself by arguing that he was on the same level of importance as the other apostles, that he had deep knowledge of the Christian faith, that he had suffered profound physical punishment in the name of Christ, and that he had received visions and revelations from God (11:1–12:13).

How do I apply this?

Just as Paul wrote to the Corinthians in the wake of their repentance from divisions and quarrels, the message for today is clear: living in unity requires us to humbly forgive one another and to follow our leaders. Second Corinthians reminds us that even as Christians, we hurt each other and need to forgive those who wrong us (2 Corinthians 2:7). That Paul was willing to exhort the Corinthian believers to forgive those who had fallen away and repented, even as he defended his own apostleship against a vocal opposition, illustrates the apostle's commitment to this way of life among God's people.

In what ways do you struggle to forgive others and/or to follow your godly leaders? An overinflated sense of ourselves often leads us to strike out on our own or hold on to our frustration and anger regarding the choices of others. However, just as Paul reminded us of Jesus's ministry of reconciliation (5:17–19), we must seek to reconcile relationships in which disunity reigns. Look out for the pitfall of disunity with leaders and other believers in your own life while striving to live among all people in humility.

\*\*\*\*\* **Galatians** \*\*\*\*\*

Paul wrote to the churches in southern Galatia after having a hand in starting them on his first missionary journey to Asia Minor. Paul's close relationship to these churches helps to explain the extremely strong tone he took with them from the very beginning of the letter.

Where are we?

Upon arriving back in Antioch from his first missionary journey after eighteen months on the road, Paul received a report that the churches he had started in Galatia had fallen into hard times—specifically, they had fallen into error. A group of Judaizers—those who sought to make living under the Mosaic Law a requirement of the Christian faith—had gained an influence in the Galatian churches. Paul wrote the book a few months before his attendance at the Jerusalem Council in AD 49, a meeting where the apostles would take up this very topic (Acts 15:1–30).

Why is Galatians so important?

In advance of the Jerusalem Council, Paul's letter speaks wisdom and clarity into the first real controversy that plagued the church in its early years—the relationship between Christian Jews and Christian Gentiles. Paul's aggressive tone shows just how important it was to him that the people embrace unity in

Christ, no matter their racial distinctions. For him, this was no minor issue, as he went so far as to call the Galatians deserters of Christ, people turning from the truth toward a gospel contrary to the one they had received from Paul (Galatians 1:6–9).

What's the big idea?

When the Galatians fell away so quickly from the gospel of grace Paul had preached to them, they also made clear their disloyalty to Paul's authority as an apostle. Therefore, Paul began the letter to the Galatians by spending two chapters defending that very issue. Only in chapter 3 did he begin to get to the heart of their error; namely, that these Galatians sought to be justified by the Mosaic Law. In contrast, Paul presented his argument that justification comes to people by faith in Jesus Christ, not by their works under the Law.

Part of the problem that confronted the Galatians came in one of the arguments made by the Judaizers. These false teachers suggested that to live by grace and in freedom meant to live a lawless and therefore degenerate life. And so in the final chapters of the letter, Paul made clear that justification—an act of grace through faith—need not result in a sinful lifestyle. Because Christians have been freed from bondage to the sinful nature, we now have the path of holiness open to us.

How do I apply this?

Unfortunately, the false teaching brought to the Galatian churches by the Judaizers has been extremely difficult to root out even today. We must walk a fine line—on one hand, we do not want to fall into the legalism that the Galatians struggled with, but on the other, we cannot just live as if anything goes. The Christian's commitment to Christ is based on the free gift of grace through faith, but as Paul articulated at the end of Galatians, it also results in a life of walking by the Spirit.

Is the fruit of the Spirit evident in your life, or do you find yourself living according to the flesh or “the compulsions of selfishness”? Too often we lose ourselves at the extremes, ending in a legalistic attempt to earn our salvation or a devil-may-care attitude about our sin.

Use Paul's words in Galatians as an encouragement to pursue a life of holiness, not in your own strength but in the knowledge of God's empowering grace in your life.

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## Ephesians

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For a brief time at the end of his second missionary journey, and then for more than two years on his third missionary journey, Paul ministered to the church at Ephesus (Acts 18:18–21; 19:1–41). During his time in this city that housed the famous temple to the Greek goddess Artemis, Paul saw many converted to faith in Jesus Christ and many others who opposed his preaching in the synagogues and homes. One prominent silversmith, Demetrius, who made implements for the worship of Artemis, found his business suffering greatly because people were converting to Christianity. The ensuing near-riot led Paul to leave the city, but only after the apostle had done much to stabilize and grow the Christian community there.

Where are we?

Paul wrote the letter to the Ephesians sometime in AD 60–61, around the same time he wrote Colossians and Philemon, as he sent all three letters by the hand of Tychicus, accompanied by Onesimus (Ephesians 6:21; Colossians 4:7–9; Philemon 1:10–12). It was during this time that Paul sat in Rome undergoing his first Roman imprisonment (Ephesians 3:1; 4:1), making Ephesians one of the four epistles commonly known as the Prison Epistles. The others are Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon.

Why is Ephesians so important?

Second Corinthians and Galatians abound with personal touches from Paul, either about his own life or that of the recipients. Ephesians, on the other hand, stands at the opposite end of the spectrum as one of Paul's most formal letters. While Galatians offers instructions particularly important for those churches overrun with legalism, Ephesians deals with topics at the very core of what it means to be a Christian—both in faith and in practice—regardless of any particular problem in the community.

What's the big idea?

Paul divided his letter to the Ephesians into two clear segments; applying the truths of the first makes possible the actions and lifestyle of the second. Paul spent the first three chapters of the letter discussing God's creation of a holy community by His gift of grace in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The members of this community have been chosen by God through the work of Christ, adopted as sons and daughters of God, and brought near to the Father through faith in His Son. All people with this faith—Jews and Gentiles alike—were dead in their transgressions and sins but have been made alive because of the person and work of Jesus Christ.

While Paul was not responding to a particular theological or moral problem, he wanted to protect against future problems by encouraging the Ephesians to mature in their faith. So after laying out profound theological truths in the first half of the book, Paul made his purpose clear: he expected that this community of faith would walk in accordance with its heavenly calling (Ephesians 4:1). As a result of the theological realities Christians accept by their faith in God, several practices should follow in their relationships within the church, in the home, and in the world.

How do I apply this?

The book of Ephesians hits on a wide range of moral and ethical behaviours, designed to ensure believers are living up to our heavenly calling. As we continue in our faith from day to day, month to month, and year to year, the temptation to get comfortable will always exist. However, Paul presented the gift of God in Christ and the benefits we receive so clearly that we cannot help but ask ourselves if our lives reflect that reality as they should.

How have you grown in your Christian life since you came to faith in Jesus Christ? The latter half of Ephesians makes clear that spiritual growth occurs primarily in community with others, iron sharpening iron (Proverbs 27:17). Your Christian “walk” (in other words, your daily life) is to be characterized by unity, holiness, love, wisdom, and perseverance in spiritual warfare.

Maturity yields benefits in believers’ moral lives, but it extends far beyond that as well. Increased maturity benefits the community at large, leading us as Christians to present a more consistent witness to the working of God in our lives as well as protecting us from the harmful divisions and quarrels that have plagued so many communities throughout history.

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**Philippians**  
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Paul ministered at Philippi during his second missionary journey, spending about three months in the city. The ministry at Philippi marked Paul’s entrance into Macedonia, which came about as a result of a vision he had in the city of Troas, just across the northeastern corner of the Aegean Sea from the port city of Neapolis and its close neighbour Philippi (Acts 16:8–12).

During this first stay in Philippi—he later briefly visited the city on his third missionary journey (20:6)—Paul brought to faith in Christ people who would form the core of the burgeoning congregation in the city. Among them were Lydia, a businesswoman who opened her home to Paul and his co-workers

(16:13–15), and the Philippian jailer, who was converted under Paul’s ministry after an earthquake miraculously broke open the prison (16:22–34).

Where are we?

Of the four Prison Epistles, Paul wrote Philippians last, near the end of his Roman imprisonment in AD 61 or 62. Paul sent the other three Prison Epistles—Ephesians, Colossians, and Philemon—by the hand of Tychicus, as their destinations were near one another. However, the letter to the Philippians was to be delivered by Epaphroditus, who had come to Paul in Rome with financial help from the church at Philippi (Philippians 2:25; 4:18). But during his time in Rome, Epaphroditus took ill, which delayed his return home and, therefore, the delivery of the letter (2:26–27).

Why is Philippians so important?

The apostle Paul did not write Philippians in response to a crisis, as he did with Galatians and Colossians. Instead, he wrote to express his appreciation and affection for the Philippian believers. More than any other church, the believers in Philippi offered Paul material support for his ministry (2 Corinthians 8:11; Philippians 4:15–18). Paul’s affection for these people is clear throughout the letter as he encouraged them to live out their faith in joy and unity (1:3–5, 25–26; 4:1).

What's the big idea?

Philippians brims over with often quoted passages: “He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus” (Philippians 1:6), “To live is Christ and to die is gain” (1:21), and “I can do all things through Him who strengthens me” (4:13) are just a few. But the portrait of Jesus Christ as a humble servant serves as the core of Paul’s teaching in this letter (2:5–11).

Paul’s joy at the mere thought of the Philippian church is undeniable in the letter, and it’s that same joy that he wanted the recipients to possess as well. To lead the Philippians to this truth, Paul took them directly to Jesus, teaching them that a community of believers living in harmony with one another comes only through mutual humility modelled after the Saviour. Paul wrote that he poured out his life as an offering for the sake of Christ, leading Paul to find great joy and contentment in Christ’s service. His letter to the Philippians showed them that by centering their lives on Christ, they, too, might live in true joy.

How do I apply this?

Though we all have much to be thankful for, the pace and the pressure of life often squeeze the joy from us. Our shoulders slumped and our heads bowed, we find some days—or months—very difficult to get through. Desperate, we often search for joy in all kinds of ways—acquiring possessions, visiting places, or seeing people. But none of these can provide lasting joy. Where do you find joy in the midst of a trying circumstance?

Paul knew, as did the Philippians, that true joy comes only through humble faith in the saving work of Jesus Christ, joining ourselves in harmony with His followers, and serving others in the name of Christ. This was the life experienced by the Philippian believers, and it is a life available to us today.

Allow the joy you find in Christ to keep you from useless quarrels and divisions and to instead guide you into harmonious relationships with God's people.

\*\*\*\*\* **Colossians** \*\*\*\*\*

Before Paul wrote this letter to the Christians in Colossae, he had never been to their city (Colossians 2:1). This helps explain the personal greetings he included at the end of the letter, a practice he usually reserved for letters to churches he had not visited (for example, Romans). Paul sought to develop personal connections with the people he hoped to teach and serve, rather than just going around from city to city asserting his apostolic authority. The more personal tone at the close of this letter would have been especially significant in creating a connection with the Colossian believers, given the fact that part of Paul's reason for writing involved calling out the heretical teachers who had infiltrated the Colossian church.

Where are we?

In AD 60–61, during his first imprisonment in Rome, Paul penned this letter to the Colossian church after he had received a report that they were struggling with a christological heresy. The report came from Epaphras, likely the leader of the church at Colossae and a convert of Paul's from his more than two-year ministry in Ephesus. Epaphras had come to Rome in part to serve Paul during his imprisonment (Philemon 1:23) but also to confide in him regarding the dangerous teachings the Colossians were hearing. So Paul sent this letter, along with the letters to Philemon and to the Ephesians, with Tychicus, accompanied by Onesimus (Colossians 4:7; Philemon 1:10–12). Tychicus was a coworker of

Paul who would have been able to help the Colossian believers understand and apply the apostle's teachings in the letter.

Why is Colossians so important?

The church at Colossae was under attack from false teachers who were denigrating the deity of Jesus; they were teaching that He was not actually God. Though Paul had never been to the church itself, he addressed these issues head-on. The nature of Jesus Christ as Creator and Redeemer was nonnegotiable, so Paul wrote to them that he might bring his wisdom to bear on this difficult and trying situation. It was critical to him that this church know God in His greatness and glory, rather than in the deficient view given them by the false teachers (Colossians 1:25; 2:1–2).

What's the big idea?

In this book, the apostle Paul described Jesus with some of the loftiest language in all the New Testament, focusing on Christ's preeminence and sufficiency in all things. Paul presented Christ as the center of the universe, not only as the active Creator but also as the recipient of creation—in His taking on of human flesh. Christ was and is the visible image of the invisible God, containing within Himself the fullness of Deity (Colossians 2:9). Because of His divine nature, Jesus is sovereign, above all things with an authority given Him by the Father. As such, Jesus is also Head over the church. He has reconciled all things to Himself through His death on the cross, making believers alive to God and setting them on the path to right living. This proper view of Christ served as the antidote for the Colossian heresy as well as a building block for Christian life and doctrine both then and now.

How do I apply this?

Your view of Jesus Christ will impact every area of your life. Many today want only practical instruction and helps for living, eschewing “esoteric” topics such as doctrine and theology because they seem to be out of touch with their day-to-day reality. Paul's view was different. He saw that the christological problems in the Colossian church had practical importance as well. Believers have died with Christ; therefore, we need to die to our sins. We have also been raised with Christ; therefore, we must live well in Him and put on qualities that are motivated by Christian love. And because He is Lord over all, the life of the Christian is a life of submission to Jesus. Are you following after Jesus as you should? Our faith in Jesus Christ should transform the relationships we have in every area of our lives—in our homes, our churches, and our world.

\*\*\*\*\* **First Thessalonians** \*\*\*\*\*

After Paul started the church in Thessalonica, he wrote this first letter to the believers there within just a few months of leaving. In Acts, Luke recorded that Paul preached for three Sabbath days to the Jews in the local synagogue (Acts 17:2). However, most scholars believe Paul spent about three months, rather than three weeks, with the Thessalonians because he would have had to have been there long enough to receive more than one offering from the Philippian church (Philippians 4:15–16).

Paul's ministry in Thessalonica obviously touched not only Jews but Gentiles as well. Many Gentiles in the church had come out of idolatry, which was not a particular problem among the Jews of that time (1 Thessalonians 1:9).

Where are we?

Paul wrote his first letter to the Thessalonian church from the city of Corinth around AD 51, just a few months after having preached in Thessalonica on his second missionary journey. Upon leaving Thessalonica under duress, Paul, Silas, and Timothy travelled to Athens by way of Berea. But after a short time in Athens, Paul felt the need to receive a report from the newborn church in Thessalonica, so he sent Timothy back to serve and minister to the new believers there. Paul wanted to check on the state of the Thessalonians' faith, for fear that false teachers might have infiltrated their number. However, Timothy soon returned with a good report, prompting Paul to pen 1 Thessalonians as a letter of encouragement to the new believers.

Why is First Thessalonians so important?

Everyone would like to know how the present difficulties will play out for their future. Should believers have no interest in the return of Christ? Should they be so obsessed by it that they stop doing anything? Or should they continue living the Christian life, in the knowledge that God will conform everything according to his will, when he returns.

What's the big idea?

Impressed by the faithfulness of the Thessalonians in the face of persecution, Paul wrote to encourage the Christians in that community with the goal that they would continue to grow in godliness. Paul knew that the people had been exposed to errant teaching from those in opposition to the way of Jesus Christ and the grace of God. And Paul also understood that unless the young church continued to mature in its faith, the danger would only increase over time.

With that in mind, Paul taught the people that any spiritual growth would ultimately be motivated by their hope in the ultimate return of Jesus Christ. Paul was never interested in simply telling people to pull themselves up by their bootstraps, for he knew that what ultimately inspired change was a life of consistently walking in the power of God's Spirit. And so to a group of young Christians with questions and uncertainties, Paul offered the hope of Christ's return, providing both comfort in the midst of questions and motivation to godly living.

How do I apply this?

Do you ever feel as though your Christian faith has grown stale, that you are withering on the vine when you would rather be flourishing in His service? Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians is the perfect remedy for such a feeling. Its focus on Christ's return provides water for the thirsty soul today, encouraging growth in maturity by providing hope in the midst of suffering or uncertainty.

Paul's specific, practical instruction for this process of sanctification can be applied directly to our current circumstances. By clinging to our hope in Christ, we may see several clear results in our lives: avoiding sexual immorality, refusing to defraud others, appreciating those Christians who serve on your behalf, refusing to repay evil for evil, rejoicing always, praying without ceasing, and giving thanks in all things—to name a few (1 Thessalonians 4:3–7; 5:12–23). This list, of course, is not exhaustive, but the first letter to the Thessalonians makes clear that every Christian should expect to grow in holiness over the course of his or her life.

\*\*\*\*\* **Second Thessalonians** \*\*\*\*\*

Paul visited a city, preached the gospel for weeks or even months, and founded a church by guiding converts to the faith. Yet, this did not protect the new church from scheming heretics. In fact, the immaturity of any new church presented a perfect target for those who meant to mislead and distort the truth. Paul, worried about his friends and their troubles with false teachers, wrote this second letter to the believers at Thessalonica in the hope of encouraging their young but burgeoning faith.

Where are we?

Paul wrote 2 Thessalonians from Corinth in AD 51 within months of writing the first letter. Since the subject matter of the second letter has a number of

thematic similarities to the first, Paul probably had received a second report from the city detailing continuing questions or problems regarding the return of Jesus and the confusion surrounding that return. Several of Paul's references indicate that some in Thessalonica were deliberately misleading these new believers, even to the point of false teachers forging letters to make them look as if they had come from Paul (2 Thessalonians 2:2).

Why is Second Thessalonians so important?

False teachers had been presenting fake letters as if from Paul and telling the Thessalonian believers that the day of the Lord had already come. This would have been especially troubling to them.

Paul describes that though there may be hardship and difficulties ahead, they need to "stand firm" and not be idle.

What's the big idea?

The apostle Paul, in concern for the Thessalonian believers who were trying to stand firm in their faith under pressure from false teachers, taught the Thessalonians in this letter that their hope in Christ's future return should serve as an encouragement to them in their suffering. Paul always connected his teaching on Jesus with the spiritual growth he expected to see as a result of such a deeply held faith.

How do I apply this?

Discipline and self-control are two qualities that quickly slip away in a society so focused on the material that its people forget the spiritual realities that should dictate their lives. Fat with financial and material success, many people today have descended into an unruly and lazy existence that possesses little care for others, especially of the kind that might conflict with our personal, fleshly desires. How does your daily life come into conflict with God's desire for you to live well and serve others?

Paul knew that hope in Christ would encourage perseverance in godly living. And hope is exactly what we lack today, one of the great roots of this gradual slip into increased self-centeredness. As you read the words of 2 Thessalonians, allow them to rekindle your hope and fan into flame your desire to live in God-honouring, industrious ways.

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**First Timothy** \*\*\*\*\*

The first of Paul's final series of letters—which along with 2 Timothy and Titus are called the Pastoral Epistles—1 Timothy offers practical and pastoral advice from the aging apostle Paul to a young pastor named Timothy working in the church at Ephesus. More than a decade prior to writing this letter, Paul had first met Timothy in the city of Lystra—in Asia Minor—where Timothy was known and respected by the Christians (Acts 16:1–4). Upon recognizing Timothy's impressive qualities, Paul recruited the young man to travel with him as he continued his second missionary journey. The presence of Timothy would have met an important need for Paul, their friendship coming on the heels of Paul's split with his close friend and partner in missions, Barnabas (15:36–41).

Where are we?

The Bible's silence on the ultimate fate of Paul has engendered a great deal of debate in modern times. The book of Acts ends with Paul sitting in a Roman prison awaiting his hearing before the Roman emperor, a privilege of appeal that all Roman citizens possessed. However, the writing of the Pastoral Epistles clearly dates to a time after the events of Acts. So where was Paul when he wrote 1 Timothy? Paul had expected the Romans to release him from prison, something that likely happened near the end of AD 62 (Philippians 2:24). His release allowed him the opportunity to travel to Ephesus and eventually place Timothy in ministry at that church. Paul then went on to preach in Macedonia, where he heard reports of Timothy's work at Ephesus that prompted him to write 1 Timothy, probably in AD 63.

Why is First Timothy so important?

First Timothy presents the most explicit and complete instructions for church leadership and organization in the entire Bible. This includes sections on appropriate conduct in worship gatherings, the qualifications of elders and deacons, and the proper order of church discipline. Paul advised Timothy on these practical matters in a way that would have helped the young pastor to emphasize the purity that should characterize Christian leaders and the gatherings they oversee.

What's the big idea?

Timothy's youth no doubt served him well, allowing for the energy and vigour he needed to serve his people. However, it also caused inevitable difficulties with older Christians who may not have taken quickly to the leadership of such a young man because of his lack of knowledge and experience in leadership. It

was important to Paul that Timothy set an example of consistent faith and a good conscience, remaining above reproach and exercising the spiritual gifts that God had given him (1 Timothy 4:12–16).

However, Paul knew that such a task would not be easy for the young man. Therefore, on two occasions Paul encouraged Timothy to “fight the good fight” (1:18; 6:12). Perseverance in what was good often became a slog for Timothy, one that required thick skin and a clear purpose.

How do I apply this?

The leaders of our churches fill important roles as they participate in encouraging the spiritual growth of Christians under their care. We know the significance of these men in our churches and in our personal lives, but 1 Timothy helps us to gain a clearer understanding of the proper qualifications and roles for church leaders. Paul’s letter shows us those things he hoped Timothy would address in his ministry, providing a template of sorts that our leaders can follow in their own ministries.

How do your leaders implement Paul’s exhortations in 1 Timothy? Our churches will be strongest when they are closest to the biblical vision laid out for them. As you look at your church or look for a new one, consider the priorities of the leaders. Look for an emphasis on sound doctrine, on purity within the leaders’ personal lives, and on living out the Christian faith by example. Find those qualities, and you will more than likely find a church where you can thrive.

\*\*\*\*\* **Second Timothy** \*\*\*\*\*

By the time Paul wrote his second letter to Timothy, the young pastor had been ministering to the church at Ephesus for four years, and it had been almost that long since he had received his first letter from Paul. Timothy had been a faithful servant to Paul since he had left home with the apostle more than a decade earlier. Since then, Timothy had ministered alongside Paul for the duration of both the second and third missionary journeys, in places such as Troas, Philippi, and Corinth. Timothy was not unfamiliar to the Ephesians when he settled in Ephesus to minister, having served there alongside Paul for a period of close to three years on Paul’s third missionary journey. Paul wrote again to this young leader in the church at Ephesus to provide him encouragement and fortitude in the face of difficulties and trials.

Where are we?

Paul wrote 2 Timothy from a dark and damp Roman prison cell, just before his death in AD 67. The Roman emperor Nero had been slowly descending into madness since his ascent to the throne in AD 54, a process exacerbated by the great fire of Rome in AD 64 that burned half the city. With the residents of Rome in an uproar, Christians became a convenient target for Nero, who used believers as scapegoats for his city's own lack of preparedness. Paul was one of those caught up in this persecution and was beheaded by Roman officials soon after writing this letter.

Why is Second Timothy so important?

The second letter to Timothy offers a picture of Paul at the end of his ministry, just before his death. Certain personal details in the letter reveal a man settling his accounts and preparing for the inevitable. At the close of the letter, Paul mentioned a significant number of people—some who had wronged him and others who had served faithfully alongside him (2 Timothy 4:9–21). It is as if Paul were giving Timothy a “state of the church” address, updating Timothy on the current state of their acquaintances and friends so that the young pastor could carry on after Paul's departure.

What's the big idea?

Paul understood that the ministry would only become more difficult for Timothy with the apostle's impending death. (Indeed, at some point after this letter from Paul, Timothy was imprisoned for his faith [Hebrews 13:23]). Paul knew that Timothy's task of keeping the church within the bounds of sound doctrine while encouraging believers to live their lives well for the sake of Christ would be an often thankless and difficult task. Though hardship would come, Paul wanted Timothy to continue in those things he had learned, drawing on the rich heritage of faith that had been passed down to the young pastor, not just from Paul but also from his mother and grandmother (2 Timothy 1:5–6; 3:14–15).

The most striking feature of Paul's encouragement comes when the aging apostle used a phrase that showed up prominently in his letter to Timothy four years prior. In that earlier letter, Paul exhorted Timothy to “fight the good fight” (1 Timothy 1:18; 6:12). But in this letter, Paul turned that phrase on himself, writing that he had “fought the good fight . . . finished the course . . . [and] kept the faith” (2 Timothy 4:7). What a great encouragement it must have been to the young pastor of the church at Ephesus to know that his mentor boldly modelled his perseverance in the faith, even to the point of death.

How do I apply this?

Second Timothy brings us to the brink of death, forcing us to consider its reality and how we might react when faced with it. Paul's response instructs us still today. His mind was not on himself, dwelling on the injustice that had befallen him. Instead, trusting that God had him right where He wanted him, the aging apostle turned his attention to others, specifically to the church and to his young protégé, Timothy.

Where do you hope your thoughts linger as you come to the end of your days?

\*\*\*\*\* **Titus** \*\*\*\*\*

Paul identified himself as the author of the letter to Titus, calling himself a “bond-servant of God and an apostle of Jesus Christ” (Titus 1:1). Titus accompanied Paul on his third missionary journey, during which the apostle sent him to Corinth at least once (2 Corinthians 2:12–13; 7:5–7, 13–15; 8:6, 16–24). Paul clearly held Titus in a position of great respect as a friend and fellow worker for the gospel, praising Titus for his affection, his earnestness, and his bringing comfort to others.

Where are we?

Paul wrote his letter to Titus from Nicopolis in AD 63, after the apostle's release from his first Roman imprisonment. Upon leaving Timothy in Ephesus to minister there, Paul accompanied Titus to the island of Crete, where he intended Titus to lead and organize the island's churches in their early years of existence. While the gospel had no doubt spread to Crete soon after Peter's sermon at Pentecost (Acts 2:11).

Why is Titus so important?

Three summaries of the incarnation dot the pages of Titus, providing a framework within which the Christian can view the work of God in the world and in individual lives (Titus 1:1–4; 2:11–14; 3:4–7). All three passages involve the manifestation, or appearance, of God in Christ, rooting the Christian faith in the incarnation of Jesus Christ. Only when God the Son took on human flesh in the person of Jesus was the believer's faith in God made sure. In other words, since God poured out His grace on all humanity, He cleanses His people from their sin and purifies believers for Himself. This grace of God instructs us to live upright and godly lives in this present age (2:11–3:8).

What's the big idea?

The doctrine of the incarnation in the letter to Titus grounds its message of producing right living through the careful attention to theological truth. The churches on Crete were just as susceptible to false teachers as any other church, so Paul directed Titus to establish a group of faithful elders to oversee the doctrinal purity and good conduct of the believers on Crete. Paul exhorted Titus to “speak the things which are fitting for sound doctrine” (Titus 2:1), a clear direction that this should be the young pastor’s primary role.

However, Paul also understood that when a body of believers embraces sound doctrine, the result is changed and purified lives that produce “good deeds” (mentioned in Titus 2:7, 14; 3:8, 14). God’s grace is the motivation for all good deeds. Paul gave instructions to Titus about the roles of specific groups of people—older men, older women, young women, young men, and slaves—as well as general instructions to all believers about their conduct. Right living was essential because Christ “gave Himself for us to redeem us from every lawless deed,” saving us “by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit” (Titus 2:14; 3:5).

How do I apply this?

How seriously do you consider your beliefs about God in the overall scheme of your life? The book of Titus reminds us that our beliefs about God impact every decision we make. Sometimes it is difficult for believers today to see the point of getting all worked up about the person and nature of Christ or the doctrine of the Trinity. However, Paul made clear that a church that teaches and preaches sound doctrine will see results in the lives of its people. Not only will people be saved from their sins, but God’s grace will also motivate them to live out that saving faith with renewed and purified lives.

Many churches today focus more on the form of their worship—music styles, lighting, and building designs—than they do on the content of the faith they mean to proclaim. And while the form of a church’s worship is important, without a firm base of sound doctrine, the church will lay its foundation in shifting and sinking sand. Make doctrine a priority in your own life, as well as encouraging it in your churches. Nothing is more significant than a solid foundation in Christ. Nothing is more motivational than grace to live a life of good deeds.

\*\*\*\*\* **Philemon** \*\*\*\*\*

For more than two years during his third missionary journey, Paul ministered in Asia Minor among the people of Ephesus. This was a successful period for the apostle to the Gentiles, who saw many converts among both residents of Ephesus and visitors to the city. One of the visitors converted under Paul's teaching was a man named Philemon, a slave-owner from the nearby city of Colossae (Philemon 1:19). In the Bible book that bears Philemon's name, Paul addressed his "beloved brother" as a "fellow worker," a title given to those who served for a time alongside Paul. (Gospel writers Mark and Luke also received this title later in the letter [1:1, 24]). Clearly, a kinship existed between Paul and Philemon, one that would serve a significant purpose in light of the circumstance that brought about the letter.

Where are we?

A slave named Onesimus had escaped from his owner, Philemon, and had run away from Colossae to Rome in the hope that he could disappear into that populous, urban environment. Once in Rome, Onesimus, either by accident or by his own design, came in contact with Paul, who promptly led the runaway slave to faith in Jesus Christ. Paul had already been planning to send a letter to the Colossian church by the hand of Tychicus. So in AD 60 or 61 from a prison cell in Rome, Paul wrote a personal letter to Philemon and sent Onesimus the slave back to Colossae.

Why is Philemon so important?

The letter to Philemon reminds us that God's revelation to humanity is intensely personal. In more formal biblical works such as the Gospels or the epistle to the Romans or even Paul's letters to churches at Philippi or Colossae, it might be easy to get the impression that God does not care or have time for the trials and tribulations in a single household. Philemon stands as one piece of strong evidence to the contrary, revealing that lofty doctrines such as the love of God, forgiveness in Christ, or the inherent dignity of humanity have real and pertinent impact in everyday life. The book of Philemon illustrates that principles like these can and should profoundly affect the lives of believers.

What's the big idea?

Paul's message to Philemon was a simple one: based on the work of love and forgiveness that had been wrought in Philemon's heart by God, show the same to the escaped and now-believing slave Onesimus. The apostle's message would have had extra force behind it because he knew Philemon personally. Paul had explained the gospel to Philemon and had witnessed the profound

result: new life blossoming in a once-dead heart (Philemon 1:19). Paul knew that conversion is nothing to trifle with, but that it should be honored and fostered.

So Paul made a request. He wanted Philemon to forgive Onesimus, to accept the slave as a brother in Christ, and to consider sending Onesimus back to Paul, as the apostle found him useful in God's service (1:11–14). Paul did not minimize Onesimus's sin. This was not some kind of cheap grace that Paul asked Philemon to offer. No, there was sacrifice required in this request, and because of that, Paul approached the topic with gentleness and care (1:21). His letter to Philemon presents in full color the beautiful and majestic transition from slavery to kinship that comes as a result of Christian love and forgiveness.

How do I apply this?

Live long enough, and you will understand the difficulty of offering forgiveness when you have been wronged. It does not come easy, yet as believers, we have to recognize that our ability and willingness to offer it are the result of Christ's saving work on the cross. Because of that fact, forgiveness serves as a determining factor in who we say we are and how we hope to live our lives. When we do not forgive, bitterness takes root in our hearts and chokes the vitality out of us.

In what ways has forgiveness been a struggle for you since you accepted Christ's forgiveness? Allow Paul's letter to Philemon to encourage forgiveness in your own life, and trust God to foster renewed life in your heart and your relationships.

\*\*\*\*\* **Hebrews** \*\*\*\*\*

The author of the letter to the Hebrews remains shrouded in mystery. Even early in the church's history, a Christian as learned as Origen had to admit his ignorance of the true author of Hebrews. When asked whom he thought the author was, he answered, "God knows".

Yet, the unknown authorship of this book should not shake our confidence in its authority. Hebrews makes important theological contributions to the biblical Canon, it has been drawn upon as sacred Scripture since the first century, and Christians have for two millennia consistently upheld the divine inspiration and, therefore, the canonicity of the book of Hebrews.

Where are we?

The strongly Jewish character of the letter to the Hebrews helps to narrow down its date of composition, most likely AD 64–69. Significantly, the book makes no reference to the destruction of the temple at Jerusalem in AD 70, and the author wrote as if the sacrificial system were still in existence (Hebrews 10:1–2, 11). With its myriad references to Hebrew customs and the Old Testament, the book was likely sent to a Jewish Christian community, possibly in Rome.

Why is Hebrews so important?

Hebrews clearly lays out the present priestly ministry of Christ in the life of the believer. Jesus is both the divine Son of God and completely human, and in His priestly role He clears the way for human beings to approach the Father in heaven through prayer (Hebrews 4:14–16). The priesthood of Jesus is superior to the Old Testament priesthood of Aaron, because only through Jesus do we receive eternal salvation (5:1–9). Furthermore, Jesus became the permanent and perfect High Priest, going beyond all other priests by offering Himself as a sinless sacrifice on behalf of the sins of human beings (7:24–26; 9:28).

What's the big idea?

Throughout its pages, Hebrews makes clear that Jesus Christ exceeds all other people, pursuits, objects, or hopes to which human beings offer allegiance. Hebrews pictures Jesus as better than the angels, as bringing better lives to humanity through salvation, as offering a better hope than the Mosaic Law could promise, as a better sacrifice for our sins than a bull or a goat, and as providing a better inheritance in heaven for those who place their faith in Him (Hebrews 1:4; 6:9; 7:19; 9:23; 10:34). Jesus is indeed superior to all others.

This message of the superiority of Jesus would have been particularly important to Jewish Christians in Rome, who were struggling under Nero's persecution and were considering moving back toward the Mosaic Law. The writer to the Hebrews showed these Jewish Christian believers that, though they were faced with suffering, they were indeed following a better way . . . and they should persevere.

How do I apply this?

The ancients created idols fashioned of wood and stone. Modern society has set aside that type of idol in favour of new idols—idols of fancy gadgets, material wealth, a comfortable lifestyle, and even our children. Human beings have seen and experienced the limitless bounty of idolatry, where we place some created object or person in the place of the one true God. What idols do you hold dear in your life?

The letter to the Hebrews makes clear that only one Person deserves to hold the primary place in our lives. While we are busy idolizing our move up the corporate ladder or placing all our hopes in our kids, Jesus offers us a better position, a better priest, a better covenant, a better hope, and a better sacrifice.

Only when we give Jesus His rightful place in our lives will everything else in life fall into its rightful place.

\*\*\*\*\* **James** \*\*\*\*\*

The author is widely thought to be James the half-brother of Jesus. James was not a follower of Jesus during the Saviour's time on earth (Mark 3:21–35; John 7:5) but eventually became an apostle in the vein of Paul, as one who had seen and believed the Lord post-resurrection (1 Corinthians 15:7; Galatians 1:19). After witnessing the Lord's resurrected body, James became one of the leaders of the church at Jerusalem. Peter singled him out among the other Christians there following Peter's miraculous release from prison (Acts 12:17). James made the deciding speech at the Jerusalem Council (15:13–22), and Paul called James one of the pillars of the church (Galatians 2:9).

Where are we?

As one of the chief leaders in the church at Jerusalem, James wrote from that city prior to the meeting of the Jerusalem Council, which Luke recorded in Acts 15. At that council, James, along with Peter and Paul, affirmed the decision to take the gospel message to the Gentiles. This council met in AD 49, meaning James likely wrote his letter in AD 45–48. Such a significant event as the Jerusalem Council warranted comment from James, as he was writing to a Jewish Christian audience. But James made no mention of Gentile Christians at all, making an early date for the letter most likely. In fact, it was likely the first New Testament book written.

Why is James so important?

The book of James looks a bit like the Old Testament book of Proverbs dressed up in New Testament clothes. Its consistent focus on practical action in the life of faith is reminiscent of the Wisdom Literature in the Old Testament, encouraging God's people to act like God's people. The pages of James are filled with direct commands to pursue a life of holiness. He makes no excuses for those who do not measure up. In the mind of this early church leader, Christians evidence their faith by walking in certain ways and not others. For

James, a faith that does not produce real life change is a faith that is worthless (James 2:17).

What's the big idea?

In the opening of his letter, James called himself a bond-servant of God, an appropriate name given the practical, servant-oriented emphasis of the book. Throughout the book, James contended that faith produces authentic deeds. In other words, if those who call themselves God's people truly belong to Him, their lives will produce deeds or fruit. In language and themes that sound similar to Jesus's Sermon on the Mount, James rails against the hypocritical believer who says one thing but does another.

For James, faith was no abstract proposition but had effects in the real world. James offered numerous practical examples to illustrate his point: faith endures in the midst of trials, calls on God for wisdom, bridles the tongue, sets aside wickedness, visits orphans and widows, and does not play favourites. He stressed that the life of faith is comprehensive, impacting every area of our lives and driving us to truly engage in the lives of other people in the world. While James recognized that even believers stumble (James 3:2), he also knew that faith should not coexist with people who roll their eyes at the less fortunate, ignore the plight of others, or curse those in their paths.

How do I apply this?

More than any other book in the New Testament, James places the spotlight on the necessity for believers to act in accordance with our faith. How well do your actions mirror the faith that you proclaim? This is a question that we all struggle to answer well. We would like to point to all the ways our faith and works overlap but too often see only gaps and crevices.

As you read the letter from James, focus on those areas that he mentioned: your actions during trials, your treatment of those less fortunate, the way you speak and relate to others, and the role that money plays in how you live your life. Allow James to encourage you to do good, according to the faith you proclaim.

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## **First Peter**

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The first word of this epistle, Peter, identifies the author, who called himself "an apostle of Jesus Christ" (1 Peter 1:1). He wrote this letter to a group of Christians scattered throughout the northern areas of Asia Minor, where he may have previously preached the gospel.

Peter wrote to a group of people that probably included both Jews and Gentiles. The apostle addressed the letter's recipients as "aliens" (1:1), a word indicating that Peter was speaking not just to Jews or just to Gentiles but to Christians who were living their lives in such a way that they would have stood out as aliens among the surrounding culture.

Where are we?

In this letter, Peter spoke much about persecution, which anticipated the persecution he and other Christians would endure in the final years of Nero's reign. At the time he wrote, Peter had not yet been arrested, an event that would lead to his martyrdom around AD 66–68. First Peter 5:13 indicates that Peter sent greetings from the local church—calling it "Babylon"—but it's most likely that the apostle was writing in a common metaphor there. He used the name of the ancient Mesopotamian city as a stand-in for Rome, the modern city that, like Babylon, gave itself over to idol worship and false gods. While the fact is not recorded in the Bible, Peter has long been thought to have spent his final years serving the church in Rome. Based on the numerous references to suffering and persecution in this letter, Peter likely wrote in AD 64, just as the persecution of Christians under Nero was ramping up.

Why is First Peter so important?

First Peter focuses on the importance of believers bearing up under unjust suffering yet continuing to live well (1 Peter 2:20). In this way, 1 Peter might be called the Job of the New Testament, providing encouragement for the true believer to continue on in the way that Jesus has laid out for all His followers. The endurance Peter called these believers to is similar to Job's, a man who suffered despite his righteousness. Peter maintained that this was the kind of true perseverance that God expects from His people.

What's the big idea?

Living in close proximity to Jesus Christ for more than three years had provided the apostle Peter the best possible example of what it looked like to live in holiness amid a hostile world. More than any other man who walked the earth, Jesus modelled that lifestyle. Peter therefore pointed his readers in the best possible direction, to Jesus Himself. The apostle called Christians to "sanctify Christ as Lord" in their hearts, that believers might live and act as Jesus desires during their short time here on earth (1 Peter 3:14–18). This would include submission to authority—even unjust authority—in the government, in the home, and in the workplace. Jesus becomes the focal point for ordering one's life in the midst of trials and tribulations. By rooting their

perseverance in the person and work of Christ, believers can always cling to hope in the midst of suffering.

How do I apply this?

Unjust or unforeseen suffering is one of the great problems that grips the hearts of people today. We struggle with frustration, anger, and uncertainty when trials strange and unexpected land on our doorsteps. Too often in those most difficult moments of our lives, confusion reigns while contentment wanes; questions arise while prayer subsides.

How do you react when suffering comes? Many crumble at the mere thought of another pain or trial. Others rise to the occasion. Most of us are probably somewhere in between. Peter's encouragement to his Christian readers is one of perseverance in faith. It isn't enough for us to simply get up every morning and trudge through each day; neither is it advisable to paste a smile on our faces and ignore troubles. Instead, the lesson of 1 Peter is to push through the troubles, recognizing their temporary presence in our lives while walking in holiness and hope as people of faith.

So press on! It is in the darkest times that our collective light shines brightest.

\*\*\*\*\* **Second Peter** \*\*\*\*\*

Peter introduced himself at the beginning of the letter as “a bond-servant and apostle of Jesus Christ,” and he addressed the letter “to those who have received a faith of the same kind as ours” (2 Peter 1:1). Only later does it become apparent that Peter was writing to the same group of believers who had received his first letter. In 2 Peter 3:1, the author reflected that this is “the second letter I am writing to you.”

Where are we?

Peter wrote this letter from Rome soon after he wrote 1 Peter in AD 64–66. So what would have prompted another letter to the same group so soon after the first? From the contents of the letter, it appears that Peter had received reports of false teachers in and among the churches in Asia Minor. The apostle warned them about the insidious presence of those who spread heresies among the people (2 Peter 2:1), marking such difficulties as a sign of the last days (3:3). Peter wanted to encourage his people to stand firm and to instruct them on how best to do that.

Why is Second Peter so important?

The churches of Asia Minor were not just struggling with the persecution and suffering addressed in Peter's first letter; they also had strife and dissension within their ranks. In an effort to stem the tide of heresy and false teaching among the Christians, Peter emphasized the importance of learning and clinging to the proper knowledge of God. In fact, this concept was so important to him that the word knowledge appears—in one form or another—some fifteen times in the span of this short, three-chapter letter.

What's the big idea?

Peter's theme in his second letter is a simple one: pursue spiritual maturity through the Word of God as a remedy for false teaching and a right response to heretics in light of Christ's promised second coming (2 Peter 1:3, 16). When false teachers begin to whisper their sweet words into the ears of immature Christians, the body of Christ begins to break apart, to lose what makes it distinctive in the first place—faith in the unique person and work of Jesus Christ. Peter repeatedly points to the Word of God as the primary means of growth for the Christian (1:4, 19–21; 3:1–2, 14–16).

Peter encouraged his readers to apply themselves to acquiring the true knowledge of God and living out the life of faith with “all diligence,” so that they may “be found by [Jesus] in peace, spotless and blameless” (1:5; 3:14). And if believers did not follow his advice, they would be giving their Christian community over to the heretics, people who look to “exploit . . . with false words” (2:3).

How do I apply this?

As with the recipients of Peter's letter, we all go through difficult times. Those trials seem to hit us even harder when the source of the struggles comes from somewhere or someone close to us. We know intuitively this is true in our personal lives: a rift in a marriage, an unwed daughter's unexpected pregnancy, or an abusive relationship with a relative. But it holds true within the church as well.

Believers can create dissension in multiple ways, particularly in the areas of relationships and theology. To guard against that kind of discord—both in our families and our churches—God's people need to know who He is. Our knowledge of God through His Word is the first line of defence against the conflicts that threaten to tear us apart. As Peter wrote: “Be on your guard so that you are not carried away by the error of unprincipled men . . . but grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ” (2 Peter 3:17–18).

With that in mind, what means are you taking to grow in your faith? Let's take the time to guard our minds with the proper knowledge of God so that we may not drift off from the path that God has laid out for us.

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**First John**  
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The author of this epistle never identified himself by name, but Christians since the beginning of the church have considered this letter authoritative, believing it was written by John the apostle. That group of witnesses includes Polycarp, an early second-century bishop who as a young man knew John personally. In addition, the author clearly places himself as part of a group of apostolic eyewitnesses to the life and ministry of Jesus, noting that “what we have seen and heard we proclaim to you also” (1 John 1:3).

Where are we?

John did not specify the recipients of this letter, but given his addresses in Revelation 2–3 to seven churches in the immediate vicinity of Ephesus—the city where John ministered late in his life—he likely had those same churches in mind for this letter. The letter offers little in the way of specifics, so pinpointing the date of its composition can be difficult. However, its similarity with the gospel composed by John means it was probably written near the same time. A date of about AD 90, with John writing from his exile on Patmos, ends up being the best proposition.

Why is First John so important?

The parallelisms in 1 John are striking for their simplicity: Christ vs. antichrists, light vs. darkness, truth vs. falsehood, righteousness vs. sin, love of the Father vs. love of the world, and the Spirit of God vs. the spirit of the Antichrist. While this is not a complete list, it reveals a letter that presents the world in an uncomplicated way—there is right and there is wrong, period. This emphasis by John, while striking, is not without love. It's quite the opposite, in fact. John recognized that love comes from God, and he encouraged the believers to love one another (1 John 4:7). John's first epistle teaches that while it is important to recognize the lines between truth and error, it must always be done in a spirit of love.

What's the big idea?

As he did in his gospel, John stated with clarity the purpose of his first letter. He proclaimed the good news about Jesus to the recipients of this letter, saying “so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is

with the Father, and with His Son Jesus Christ” (1 John 1:3). Later, John added “so that you may not sin” (2:1) and “so that you may know that you have eternal life” (5:13). John wanted his readers to experience true fellowship with God and with God’s people. But he knew that would not happen until the Christians set aside their own selfish desires in favor of the pursuits God had for them.

To help them attain that goal, John focused on three issues: the zeal of the believers, standing firm against false teachers, and reassuring the Christians that they have eternal life. John wrote to churches full of people who had struggled with discouragement—whether due to their own sinful failures or the presence of false teachers in their midst. The aging apostle hoped to ignite the zeal of these believers so that they might follow the Lord more closely and stand firm against those who meant to sow discord among the churches. In doing so, they would solidify their relationship with God and gain confidence in His work in their lives.

How do I apply this?

We all go through ups and downs in our Christian faith. Whatever the struggle—whether outside of us or inside—we often feel ourselves blown about by the winds of emotion or circumstances. Yet God calls us to lives of increasing consistency, with the evidence of our inner transformation becoming more and more apparent as the months and years pass by. How would you characterize your relationship with God—consistent and fruitful or sporadic and parched?

John knew that we would never find in ourselves the faithfulness God requires. Instead, we have to place complete trust in the work and grace of God, believing that He will certainly conform us to the image of His Son, Jesus. That sense of being grounded in God only comes when we set aside our sin in the pursuit of the one true God. Or, in the words of John, “if we love one another, God abides in us, and His love is perfected in us” (1 John 4:12).

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**Second John** \*\*\*\*\*

John did not identify himself by name in this letter, but he did adopt the term “elder” for himself (2 John 1:1). There has been some debate about whether an author named John the Elder wrote this letter (as well as 3 John, which is addressed the same way) or if John the apostle was using a different title for himself. However, the earliest church tradition from the second century on testified in unison that this letter and its companion, 3 John, were written by

the apostle, not by a mysterious and unknown elder. In fact, an apostle using the term “elder” for himself was not at all unprecedented—Peter did that very thing in his first epistle (1 Peter 5:1).

Where are we?

John offered little in the way of detail in the short letter we call 2 John. Nothing in the circumstances John discussed in the letter would lead a reader of the time to think that it did not go to the same churches that received 1 John. The apostle addressed the letter “to the chosen lady and her children,” a mysterious phrase that has been much debated (2 John 1:1). It either refers to an actual woman or serves as a metaphor for a church. In either case, whether to a smaller family group joined by blood or to a larger one joined by confession, the application of the letter should remain unchanged. With this letter’s thematic similarity to 1 John, it is best to suggest that John wrote from Patmos in about AD 90.

Why is Second John so important?

Second John makes clear what our position should be regarding the enemies of the truth. Whereas 1 John focuses on our fellowship with God, 2 John focuses on protecting our fellowship from those who teach falsehood. The apostle went so far as to warn his readers against inviting false teachers into the house or even offering them a greeting (2 John 1:10). Such practices align the believer with the evildoer, and John was keen on keeping the believers pure from the stain of falsehood and heresy.

What's the big idea?

John began his second epistle proclaiming his love for “the chosen lady and her children,” a love he shared with those who know the truth (2 John 1:1). From the reports he had received, he understood that these believers were following the teachings of Christ. He summed up this kind of lifestyle in the exhortation to “love one another” (1:5), a clear reference to the great commandments of Jesus—to love God and love your neighbour (Matthew 22:36–40; John 13:34).

In other words, those who walk in the truth should be people who love others. But they should be cautious whom they love. Deceivers and false teachers had infiltrated the church—people who taught falsehoods about the person of Jesus, teaching that He was not truly a man but only appeared to be one.

How do I apply this?

John’s strong encouragement to the believers in 2 John involved loving one another. However, John did not leave love undefined but described it as

walking “according to His commandments” (2 John 1:6). This echoes the teaching of Jesus in John’s gospel, where the Lord told His followers, “If you love Me, you will keep My commandments” (John 14:15).

Our love is dependent on our obedience. When we don’t obey, we don’t love. Often we get in the mind-set that our obedience to God affects only ourselves. But that simply is not true. Our actions, whether obedient or disobedient, have ripple effects far beyond our own limited vision of a circumstance.

Consider your own life. In what ways might your obedience or disobedience impact those in your immediate circle of relationships? Second John reminds us not only of the dangers of falling away from the truth but also of the importance of making obedience a priority in our lives—for ourselves and for those most important to us.

\*\*\*\*\* **Third John** \*\*\*\*\*

The apostle John identified himself in 3 John only as “the elder” (3 John 1:1), the same as he did in 2 John. At the writing of this, his final epistle, John was nearing the end of his life, a life that had changed dramatically some six decades before, when Jesus had called John and his brother James out from their fishing boat. The boys had left their livelihood and their father Zebedee to follow Jesus (Matthew 4:21–22). While James was the first of the twelve disciples to die for his faith, John outlived all the others. John referred to himself in his gospel as “the disciple whom Jesus loved” (John 21:20), a title that highlights one of the great themes of all John’s biblical contributions, including 3 John—the love of God working itself out in the lives of human beings.

Where are we?

While we cannot pinpoint the date with certainty due to the lack of specific information in the letter, 3 John was probably written around AD 90 from the island of Patmos, where John was exiled at the time. John wrote his letter to Gaius, a leader of one or more churches in Asia Minor. The apostle had received a report of some difficulties caused by a man named Diotrefes, and John wrote to reinforce for Gaius the proper way to deal with the troubles.

Why is Third John so important?

While Gaius was dealing with certain troubles in his area, John wanted to direct him, not only in how to respond to the trials but also how to relate to those who proclaim the truth. John’s three epistles are largely concerned with

the issue of fellowship—with God, with enemies of the gospel and, in the case of 3 John, with those who proclaim the truth. John wanted to ensure a warm welcome from the churches to those who travelled around preaching the gospel, offering them hospitality and a send-off “in a manner worthy of God” (3 John 1:6).

What's the big idea?

Troubles had come to the church in Asia. Diotrefes had taken control of one of the churches there and used his power to ban certain travelling missionaries from coming to the church at all. At one point, the church had seen something of a leadership quality in him and had placed him in charge, but now in the top spot, the power had gone to his head. He refused to welcome those traveling ministers of the gospel to preach and take rest with his church. And even worse, upon receiving an earlier correction from John, Diotrefes refused to listen (3 John 1:9).

This troubling situation prompted John to write to Gaius, commending the believers for holding fast to the truth and doing so with a loving attitude. These Christians strove to make the gospel a reality in their lives through the way they treated one another. And John, in response to this good report about the behaviour of these “rank and file” Christians, encouraged them to continue to love and support those visiting believers who gave of themselves and ministered in the churches of Asia.

How do I apply this?

How do you show hospitality to other Christians, particularly those who serve you and others in your local church and at churches around the world?

Showing hospitality to others—particularly strangers—requires a level of trust and acceptance that is not necessarily required of us in our everyday lives. It forces us to rely on a common bond in Jesus Christ, rather than a particular blood relationship or shared experience. It forces us out of our comfort zones and into a territory where we must place our trust in God.

John used words such as love and truth to describe this kind of living, and he used the negative example of Diotrefes to illustrate the dangers of going down a different path. We have a responsibility as Christians to live according to the truth we find in the life and ministry of Jesus, to care for and support those who serve God’s people. Our Lord was surrounded by people who took care of Him. Third John teaches us that we should do the same for those who carry on the teaching of Jesus in our own day.

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## Jude

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Most scholars identify the writer as Jude the half-brother of Jesus for at least two reasons. First, he identified himself as the “brother of James” (Jude 1:1), meaning he was probably not the apostle named Jude, a man who was called “the son of James” (Luke 6:16). That the author of the book of Jude identified himself as the brother of James likely aligns him with the family of Jesus. Second, Matthew 13:55 records the names of the brothers of Jesus as James and Judas. Whereas the gospels record his name as Judas, English translations shorten it to Jude—probably for the same reason no one in the present day wants to name a child Judas, because of the association it has with Judas Iscariot, the disciple who betrayed Jesus.

Like his older brother James, Jude did not place his faith in Jesus while the Lord was still alive. Only after the crucifixion and resurrection did the scales fall from Jude’s eyes and he become a follower of his half-brother, Jesus. First Corinthians 9:5 offers a tantalizing piece of information, noting that the Lord’s brothers and their wives took missionary journeys. From this scant portrait, we begin to picture Jude as a man who lived in skepticism for a time but eventually came to a powerful faith in Jesus. And as he travelled on behalf of the gospel—telling the story in city after city with his name Judas butting up against that of Judas Iscariot—he would stand as a living example of faithfulness, a stark contrast to the betrayer.

Where are we?

The book of Jude is notoriously difficult to date, primarily because the Bible and tradition reveal so little about the personal details of its author while the book itself refrains from naming any particular individuals or places. The one clue available to present-day readers is the striking similarity between the books of Jude and 2 Peter. Assuming Peter wrote his letter first (AD 64–66), Jude probably wrote his epistle sometime between AD 67 and 80.

Why is Jude so important?

Jude’s edgy brevity communicates the urgency of his notion that false teachers needed to be condemned and removed from the church. Few words meant that Jude would not waste space dancing around the issue. He saw within the church people and practices that were worthy of condemnation, including rejecting authority and seeking to please themselves. In response to these errors, Jude marshalled much biblical imagery to make clear what he thought of it all—anything from Cain killing his brother Abel to the punishment of the sinful people who populated Sodom and Gomorrah (Jude 1:7, 11).

What's the big idea?

Jude's purpose in his letter was twofold: he wanted to expose the false teachers that had infiltrated the Christian community, and he wanted to encourage Christians to stand firm in the faith and fight for the truth. Jude recognized that false teachers often peddled their wares unnoticed by the faithful, so he worked to heighten the awareness of the believers by describing in vivid detail how terrible dissenters actually were. But more than simply raising awareness, Jude thought it important that believers stand against those working against Jesus Christ. Believers were to do this by remembering the teaching of the apostles, building each other up in the faith, praying in the Holy Spirit, and keeping themselves in the love of God (Jude 1:17, 20–21).

How do I apply this?

Fight for the truth! Stand up against error! The book of Jude is the very definition of punchy and pithy proclamations—with its short commands and statements popping off the page like machine-gun fire. But in our day and age, punchy has become rude or unacceptable. In many circles the forcefulness of Jude will not be tolerated, the crowds preferring a softer and gentler side of the Christian faith. But Jude reminds us that there is a time and a place for the aggressive protection of the truth from those who would seek to tear it down.

How can you participate in defending the truth from error?

\*\*\*\*\* **Revelation** \*\*\*\*\*

The author of Revelation mentioned his name, John, four times throughout the book (Revelation 1:1, 4, 9; 22:8). Christians throughout history have given almost unanimous affirmation to the identity of the book's author as John the apostle, who had been exiled to the island of Patmos by the authorities for preaching the gospel in Asia. Some traditions say that the Romans dropped John into a vat of boiling oil, but when the apostle did not die, they instead banished him to the barren rock of Patmos.

The title of the book, Revelation, comes from the Greek word for apocalypse and refers to an unveiling or a disclosure of something as yet unknown. This title is certainly appropriate for the book, a work so interested in making known the events of the future.

Where are we?

The apostle John wrote the book of Revelation while exiled on the island of Patmos. He addressed his work to seven Asian churches—Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea. Because John worked in Ephesus for so many of his later years, it would have been natural for him to communicate this vision to the churches under his immediate care and influence. Each of those seven churches received a message directed specifically to them (chapters 2 and 3)..

Why is Revelation so important?

The book of Revelation provides a grand overview of world history and the gospel. It is to be read as a “broad picture book” and not a microscope book.

It shows the difficulties and the trials the church will experience, but then it will overcome all of them to be victorious, where the King of Kings will reign supreme.

This grand judgment on the sinfulness of humanity shows the seriousness with which God views sin—payment will be exacted from those not covered by the blood of Jesus Christ.

What's the big idea?

Revelation portrays Christ's future triumph over the forces of evil and His recreation of the world for the redeemed. Ultimately, the book—and the world—end in a final victory for truth and goodness and beauty.

How do I apply this?

Usually when people mention the book of Revelation, they immediately think about judgment. And without a doubt, much judgment occurs in the book. However, Revelation does not end with judgment. Instead, it provides a striking bookend for the entire Bible, which begins in Paradise and ends in Paradise. More than judgment on the evildoers, Revelation is a book about hope for the faithful in Christ.

What pains or indignities have you suffered? What broken relationship have you wept over? Has death's sword struck deep into your heart? Revelation promises a world where pain and tears and death pass away. Revelation reminds us that there is indeed hope beyond the momentary trials and struggles of this life. One day the darkness will pass away, and we will all dwell in perpetual light.

Come quickly, Lord Jesus! God be praised.