

# **Introduction to the Bible**

## **Week 5: The New Testament Letters & Revelation**

### **Introduction**

Briefly review the TIME-LINE.

Tonight we will survey the last 21 books of the New Testament (BOOK-SHELF). The first 20 are letters written by different apostles. The last book (Revelation) also contains letters, but is primarily the apostle John's description of a vision concerning the end of the age.

### **The New Testament letters**

**BOOKS INCLUDED:** Romans through Jude

**TYPE OF LITERATURE:** For the most part, these letters follow the letter structure that was normal in the first-century AD (GREETINGS, MAIN BODY, CLOSING). But their content is highly theological, as the authors explain and apply core teachings of Christianity.

**TIME PERIOD:** The earliest letters (James & Galatians) were written around 48/49 AD, making them the earliest New Testament documents. The latest letters (1-3 John) were written in the mid-80's to mid-90's AD.

**HUMAN AUTHORSHIP:** Paul wrote the majority (13) of these letters. Peter (Jesus' disciple) wrote two, John (Jesus' disciple) wrote three, James and Jude (Jesus' half-brothers) wrote one each. It is not clear who wrote Hebrews, though many scholars link it to Paul. Thus, the New Testament letters are apostolic and this is why they are authoritative (see Week 4).

**HISTORICAL ACCURACY:** Though these letters are not historical narratives, they do sometimes make assertions about historical matters. Most of these historical assertions can be shown to agree with extra-biblical historical information (e.g., Praetorian guard) and/or to fit within available chronological information (e.g., Paul's early visits to Jerusalem in Gal. 1,2).

#### **WHY THE NEW TESTAMENT LETTERS ARE IMPORTANT:**

It is difficult to exaggerate the importance of these letters. Here we find the core of early Christianity's message. We can divide this content into two categories:

Central doctrines about who Jesus is and what He has provided for us:

Jesus' deity and humanity (e.g., Col. 2:9)

Jesus' supremacy over all other rulers and powers, whether human or angelic (e.g., Col. 1:16)

Jesus' death and resurrection, which provide forgiveness of sins and a new identity for those who believe in Him (e.g., Col. 2:13,14)

Jesus' gift of the Holy Spirit for those who believe in Him (e.g., 1 Cor. 2:12) and His many ministries to the believer (e.g., Rom. 8)

The church as the people who believe in Jesus and are organically united with Him and one another (e.g., Col. 1:18)

Jesus' future return to judge God's enemies and establish God's kingdom in its fullness for His followers (e.g., 2 Thess. 1:7-10)

Central features of the Christian lifestyle:

Mind-set informed by and focused on what Jesus has provided for us (e.g., Col. 3:1-4; Rom. 12:2)

Ethical transformation by God's power (e.g., Col. 3:5-11). Note how the authors repeat and affirm the ethical priorities of the Old Testament.

Life in loving community with other Christians (e.g., Col. 3:12-16)

Representing Jesus accurately to the watching world, including both behavioral integrity and verbal witness (e.g., Col. 3:17-4:6)

Spiritual warfare (e.g., Col. 2:15). All but a very few of these letters make explicit reference to our warfare with Satan and demons, and instruct us on how to be victorious over them.

False teaching/teachers. Almost every letter warns against and/or exposes some heresy (Col. 2:4,8). The main falsehoods continue to plague the church today (e.g., denial of Jesus' deity; works-righteousness; anti-nomianism).

Significantly, the New Testament letters say hardly anything about ritual observance – and when they do address this issue, it is usually to warn Christians not to focus on rituals (e.g., Col. 2:16,17)!

Both the structure and grammar of these letters make it clear that this transformed lifestyle is something that God accomplishes as we receive Christ's provisions by simple faith. What we are to do ("imperatives") is based on what God has done, is doing, or will do for us ("indicatives"):

Many letters begin with half or more of their material on what God has provided to us through Christ (e.g., Rom. 1-11; Eph. 1-3; Col. 1,2). Only on that basis does the author call his audience to embrace the Christian lifestyle (e.g., Rom. 12-16; Eph. 4-6; Col. 3,4)..

Even in the passages which call us to embrace the Christian lifestyle, the authors often ground this call in what God has provided for us through Christ. EXAMPLES:

Col. 3:1-4 – Since Christ has made us new creatures with a new eternal destiny, we should keep growing in our appreciation of and focus on these amazing provisions.

Col. 3:9,10 – Since Christ has given us a new identity and is renewing us to His image, we should not lie to one another.

Col. 3:12,13 – Since we are beloved by God and have been forgiven by Him, we should love and forgive one another.

Col. 3:23,24 – Since Christ will reward us for our work for Him, we should do our earthly work heartily.

Here we find practical counsel for many of the problems that commonly occur: e.g., materialism, sexual sin, other relational sins, singleness and marriage, etc.

#### TIPS FOR READING:

Spend a disproportionate time in the letters to churches if you are a young Christian. This is the period of salvation history in which we live, and their content is the heart of the Christian message. Get firmly grounded in this content, starting with whatever letters grab your attention – and then expanding from there. Memorize many of its promises (EXAMPLES)!

Remember that though these letters apply to all Christians, they were written to Christians in a specific historical and cultural context. Knowledge about this context is important for proper interpretation and application.

Since most of the letters are brief, it is easy (and advisable) to read them straight through in one setting, deliberately ignoring the theological material at first and focusing instead on the historical setting.

#### Colossians

Author	Audience	Opponents
<b>Who wrote the letter?</b>  <i>Paul (1:1)</i>	<b>To whom is the letter written?</b>  <i>The Church at Colossae (1:2)</i>	<b>Are there any key 3<sup>rd</sup> parties? If so, who are they?</b>  <i>False teachers</i>
<b>What information does the author provide about himself?</b>  <i>1:24 1:29; 2:1 4:3,4,10,18</i>	<b>What information does the author provide about his audience?</b>  <i>1:7 2:4,5,8</i>	<b>What information does the author provide about the 3<sup>rd</sup> parties?</b>  <i>2:4,8 2:16,18,20,21</i>

Then go back through each paragraph/passage and focus on its theological material, asking these questions:

What does it teach about God, Jesus, the Holy Spirit, the Christian life, the church, Satan, etc.?

How does this theological content contrast to beliefs and values in our culture?

How can I/we act on this theological content in our current relationships, situations, etc.?

For the most comprehensive explanation of salvation by grace through faith, see Romans. For the most comprehensive treatment of the church, see Ephesians. For the most comprehensive treatment of how Christianity fulfills and is distinct from Old Testament Judaism, see Hebrews.

The “pastoral letters” (1 & 2 Timothy & Titus) provide important principles of church leadership. These letters will become more relevant to you as you develop a personal ministry and/or become a home church leader.

## **Revelation**

**BOOKS INCLUDED:** Revelation

**TYPE OF LITERATURE:** Revelation has features of the New Testament letters (Rev. 2,3), but it is mainly a description of the four visions given to the author. These visions are “apocalyptic” in style, which means that they are highly symbolic.

**TIME PERIOD:** Revelation was written around 95 AD.

**HUMAN AUTHORSHIP:** The author identifies himself as “John” (1:4,9), and early church writings identify him as Jesus’ disciple, who also wrote the gospel of John and the letters 1-3 John.

**WHY REVELATION IS IMPORTANT:**

Revelation ends the Bible, appropriately, with a prophetic picture of Jesus’ future defeat of Satan and his followers, and of His re-establishment of God’s rulership over all of the earth. The root problems of humanity that began in the Garden of Eden are resolved in the New Heavens and New Earth (22:1-5). Instead of separation from God, there will be free access to the “tree of life.” Instead of loss of benevolent rulership, Jesus’ followers will “reign forever.” And the “Lion” who will rule humanity is also the “Lamb” who was first slain for the sins of humanity (5:5,6).

Revelation’s original recipients were Christians facing persecution. Jesus exhorts them (and us) to remain faithful to Him, even to death, because He has conquered death and will bring us safely into His eternal kingdom. This message has fortified persecuted Christians for 2000 years, and it can fortify us even if we don’t suffer persecution.

Jesus’ letters to the seven churches (chapters 2,3) describe challenges that commonly face local churches and individual Christians: flagging zeal for Jesus, persecution, moral compromise, toleration of moral compromise and false teaching, resting on one’s spiritual laurels, materialism, etc. Jesus’ counsel, warnings, and encouragement is highly applicable to us today (e.g., Rev. 2:1-7).

The visions of the New Heavens and New Earth (Rev. 21,22) are the most comprehensive biblical picture of God’s eternal kingdom. This description alludes to dozens of Old Testament passages about God’s future kingdom. The symbolic descriptions convey the literal reality of eternal life in God’s presence, relationships with God’s people, and the healing of all of the damaging effects of sin and evil (21:4).

**TIPS FOR READING:**

Notice the basic 3-part outline of Revelation given by Jesus in 1:19.

“The things you have seen” refers to the revelation of Jesus described in chapter 1.

“The things which are” refers to the seven letters of chapters 2,3.

“The things which will take place after these things” refers to Rev. 4-22.

Don’t let the symbols deter you. Their meaning is often explained in the following context (e.g., 1:20). Many of the symbolic visions are based on the prophetic visions given to Daniel, so familiarity with Dan. 2,7,9,11,12 especially is very helpful.

Look for the main theme or lesson in each vision/passage, instead of obsessing on the symbols or speculating on how Revelation applies to current events.<sup>1</sup>

It is likely that the various temporal judgments (seals, trumpets, and bowls) described in Rev. 6-16 refer to the Tribulation – the 3.5-7 year period immediately preceding the Second Coming of Jesus. Many of these judgments are *passive* in the sense that they involve God allowing His enemies to reap the consequences of their rebellion (e.g., the effects of warfare on people and nature). These same judgments are also *redemptive* in the sense that they influence many people to repent. As you read these judgments, remember that the One who judges is also the One who died (“the Lamb” – 28x) to offer forgiveness to all who will repent.

## Building a life in God’s Word

Remember that the Bible is God’s love-letter to you, and that His Spirit will tutor you into understanding and applying it. So pray Ps. 119:19 whenever you expose yourself to God’s Word.

Remember that *no time in God’s Word is wasted* – even if you feel like you got nothing out of it at the time. (Isa. 55:10,11; Jn. 14:26).<sup>2</sup>

God is committed to imparting *motivation* for you to build a life in His Word (Phil. 2:13).

So ask Him to give you an ongoing and deepening hunger for this!

Some read, study, and meditate because they like it. Some because they have Word gifting. Some because they must (i.e., life drives them to God’s revelation for help and insight). All of these motivations are valid; God uses all of them at various points in our Christian lives.

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<sup>1</sup> For a helpful overview of these themes, see Gary DeLashmutt’s teaching series at: <http://www.xenos.org/teachings/?series=208>

<sup>2</sup> “We say that the things we hear slip away from the memory; they do not really; they pass into the subconscious mind. It is the work of the Holy Spirit to bring back into the conscious mind the things that are stored in the subconscious. In studying the Bible, never think that because you do not understand it, therefore it is of no use. A truth may be of no use to you just now, but when the circumstances arise in which that truth is needed, the Holy Spirit will bring it back to your remembrance. . . . It is foolish therefore to estimate only by what you consciously understand at the time. There may be much of which you do not begin to grasp the meaning, but as you go storing your mind with Bible truth, the Holy Spirit will bring back to your conscious mind the word you need and apply it to you in your particular circumstances.” Oswald Chambers, *Studies in the Sermon on the Mount* (Discovery House, 1995), pp. 14,15.

One key to building a life in the Word is to be a *doer* of the Word (Jas. 1:22-25; Matt. 7:24-27). So ask Him how He wants you to apply His Word every time you expose yourself to it. (He may answer during your exposure, or later.)

EXAMPLES: Give thanks, share this truth with others, take scary step to serve, confess, etc.

Be involved in a *learning community* where you receive and give truth in the context of Christ-centered relationships (Col. 2:2; 3:16; Eph 4:15,16).

Develop the *habit* of regular scripture reading and meditation (Ps. 1; 119:29,34,36-37,72).

Reading plans:

“Discipleship Journal” Bible Reading plans

([www.navpress.com/Magazines/DJ/BibleReadingPlans.asp](http://www.navpress.com/Magazines/DJ/BibleReadingPlans.asp))

*The Original Discipleship Journal® Bible Reading Plan* – Readings from four places in the Scripture every day: a Gospel, the Old Testament, an Epistle and the Wisdom Literature.

*The Book-at-a-Time Bible Reading Plan* – Readings from two places in the Scripture every day: an Old or New Testament book and the Wisdom Literature.

M’Cheyne Reading Plan (<http://hippocampusextensions.com/mcheyneplan.html>)

Carson, D.A., *For the Love of God*, 2 Volumes (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway Books, 1998).

Practical tips:

Use a paper Bible and mark it up as you read (e.g., underline; marginal notes; theme passages in back; color/mark code verses in book on theme; etc.).

Have a plan, but change plans from time to time.

If you “fall off the wagon,” don’t waste time beating yourself up over this. Just thank God for His mercy and patience – and get back into His Word.

If possible, do your reading plan with another person.

If God is arresting your attention on a specific biblical truth, consider adjusting your plan to read and ponder more passages about that truth.

When a verse or small passage strikes you, memorize it and meditate on it for a period of time.