



OVERVIEW OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

Wonderful Day in the Lord

“Route 66”

The New Testament

Introduction: In our English Bibles, the Old Testament is comprised of 39 books. The Hebrew Bible has the same books, but groups and combines them differently so that it contains 22 books, the last being 2 Chronicles. The New Testament contains 27 books, and we could group them in 3 or 4 categories. Commonly, the first grouping is history, which contains the four Gospels and Acts; the second is the epistles, beginning with Paul’s letter to the Romans and concluding with Jude, and the final section is visions or apocalypse, which is the book of Revelation.

The New Testament then is laid out in logical order. The Gospels tell us the birth, life, teachings, ministry, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ our Lord. Acts picks up the narrative at the ascension and then moves to the establishment of the church, then follows the ministries of the apostles, as they spread the Gospel and organize local churches throughout the Roman Empire. About half the book follows the life and ministry of the apostle Paul. The next 13 books are inspired epistles, or letters, written by Paul to various churches and individuals. Hebrews through Jude are Holy Spirit inspired letters written by five other men. John writes the final book, the Revelation, which is in essence “The Revelation of Jesus Christ,” as the opening line informs us. But it also reveals God’s future judgments on the earth during a 7-year period we often call the Tribulation. By chapter 19, the Tribulation concludes with the return of Christ, who then sets up His kingdom on earth. The last two chapters describes the eternal state.

So, we have quite a marvelous journey in front of us as we now begin our travels on the second leg of our biblical Route 66 travels. Buckle up, and silence those cell phones, and let’s go.

The Synoptic Gospels and John

The New Testament begins with four Gospels written by four different men, sometimes call evangelists, because they are witnessing to the Good News about Jesus Christ, they tell us about the life and ministry of Jesus from just prior to His birth to His ascension back to the Father. Almost everything we know about the person and ministry of Jesus Christ is found in the Gospels.

We are given four Gospels because they each approach the life of Jesus from different perspectives, with different emphasis, depending somewhat on their target audience. Broadly: Matthew presents Jesus as the King of the Jews, who has come to offer His kingdom to them upon the condition of repentance. Mark focuses on the servanthood of Jesus, while Luke gives us the most information on the humanness of Christ. John, on the other hand, emphasizes the deity of Jesus. Put together, we have a comprehensive portrait of Jesus Christ, the Son of God who took on humanity, lived on the earth for over 30 years, died, resurrected and ascended.

There is considerable overlap among the Gospels, but especially among the first 3, which are often call the Synoptic Gospels, meaning "similar". These were all written probably in the AD 60s, all before the destruction of Jerusalem and the scattering of the Jews in AD 70. They stress the humanity of Christ and details His sermons, miracles and parables. There is of course, theology in the Synoptics, but their focus is on what Jesus did, while John is much more theological in nature. John is written some 30 years after the Synoptics and was needed to provide answers to questions the early Christians had.

There are no contradictions between the Gospels but since each looks at events from different angles they see things differently. Put together they provide a rich picture of Jesus Christ our Savior.

Matthew

Key word: Kingdom

Of the four Gospels, only Matthew and John were written by apostles, who were eye-witnesses of the life and teachings of Jesus. Matthew was a tax collector before his conversion and we hear little of him in the Gospels, but then the Holy Spirit uses him to be the human author of this important book of Scripture.

Matthew was a Jew, writing primarily to Jews. His task was to demonstrate clearly that Jesus was the long-awaited Messiah, the King of the Jews. To that end, he quotes the Old Testament about 130 times and uses the word "fulfill(ed)" 17 times, 4:14-16 is a good example. At the beginning of Jesus' public ministry in Galilee, we find it was a fulfillment of a prophecy by Isaiah.

Jesus' initial ministry as recorded in Matthew is two-fold (4:17). First, "repent." This is consistent with the Old Testament, which constantly told the people to repent in order to be right with God and receive His blessings. Even the Pharisees caught this message and knew the kingdom would not come until the nation repented. The "kingdom of heaven" is a central message in Matthew with the phrase found 32 times. Many view the Sermon on the Mount (5-7) as containing the laws/principles, which govern Christ's kingdom. The Jews eventually rejected Christ as their king, and the kingdom of righteousness He offered, by chapter 13. There Jesus withdraws the immediate establishment of His kingdom and, in 7 parables, outlines a mystery form of the kingdom that would exist until Christ would return and finally establish His kingdom. That return and kingdom is detailed in the Olivet Discourse (24-25) (see 25:1).

But before Jesus can sit on His throne, He must first be nailed to a cross. Before the kingdom can be established, sin would have to be atoned. The subjects of the eternal kingdom would have to have their sins forgiven and be given the righteousness of God. It would take the substitutionary death and resurrection of the God/Man to accomplish this, and prepare a people fit for the kingdom (27-28). Until that time, He sends us forth to make disciples of all nations (28:19-20).

Key verse: Matthew 28:19-20 – “Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.”

Mark

Key word: Immediately

Mark was a cousin of Barnabas and ministered with him and Paul for a time. However, he became a close companion with Peter and most believe his gospel reflects Peter's account. It was therefore written to a non-Jewish audience and emphasizes action more than teaching. The keyword is "immediately," found 42 times. Mark's purpose is to demonstrate that Jesus Christ was the Son of God (1:1) who had come to give His life a ransom for many (10:45 our kv).

Mark provides no nativity scene but opens with John the Baptist, followed by Jesus' public ministry in Galilee. The first appearance of Jesus is at His Baptism (1:9-11), followed by His temptation by the Devil (1:12-13), followed by Jesus' Gospel message (1:15), the kingdom of God is at hand so repent.

Mark records many miracles by Jesus, demonstrating His power and authority over virtually everything: nature (4:35-41), demons (5:1-20), death (5:21-24, 35-43), disease (5:25-34), and rituals (6:1-6a). Yet, while His miracles were signs of His deity most people refused to believe, so that even Jesus marveled at their unbelief (6:6).

A big part of their spiritual problem stemmed back to invalidating the Word of God by their traditions (7:7-8). Their traditions had replaced the Word of God and they were in no frame of mind to listen to Jesus. By chapter 8, the people had misidentified Jesus as a prophet or John, but not as the Christ (8:27-29), but Peter understood (v. 29), from this point on, Jesus is headed to the cross (v. 31). This is the first time Jesus has mentioned His death and resurrection to His disciples.

It is at this point that Jesus makes abundantly clear the characteristics of a true disciple, and its costs and rewards (8:34-37).

Key verse: 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."

Luke

Key word: "Son of Man"

This Gospel is the longest of the four. It is written by Luke, who was most likely a Gentile companion of Paul. He was a physician, a careful historian and researcher. He is writing his account to Theophilus, a high ranking official, and Luke addresses a second book, Acts to him as well.

Luke gives us more details about the humanity of Jesus than anyone else, beginning with an extended incarnation account (chapters 1-2). He seeks to give an accurate account of the life and ministry of Jesus and presents Him as the perfect God-man who would provide salvation for sinful humanity. We find in our key verse also our key phrase which was used 26 times.

Of note is how often Luke records Jesus praying. Of the 15 times the Gospels record Jesus praying, eleven of them is found in Luke (5:16).

Some unique and powerful features of Luke include Jesus' conversation with Mary and Martha (10:38-42) in which He commends Mary for choosing the one thing necessary rather than being distracted by the mundane. Also, two of Jesus' most loved parables are found only in Luke. The first is the Prodigal Son, which showcases the love of God for His people; even when they stray (15:11-32). The second is that of Lazarus and the rich man, life after death, torment in hell, no second chance after death, and the impossibility of the dead communicating with the living. There is also the beautiful story of the disciples on the Emmaus Road (24:13-33) (See vv. 32, 34)

Key verse: Luke 19:10 – "For the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost."

John

Key word: "Believe"

The Gospel of John was written some 30 years after the Synoptics, in 90 A.D. By this time new questions and challenges to the person and work of Jesus Christ had arisen, and John writes to address these. As a matter of fact, everything John writes is for the purpose of convincing the reader that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing they will receive life in His name.

John's gospel, while covering much of the same territory, is also very unique from the Synoptics: for example, John skips over the birth of Jesus narrative but adds Jesus' first year of public ministry in Judea, that the others skip. Two outstanding features of John should be mentioned. First, it is far more theologically concerned than the others. It opens with a heavy discussion of Jesus being the Word, or the Logos. John also records the seven "I am's" of Christ: He says I am: the Door, the Light, the Bread of Life, Good Shepherd, the Way, Truth, Life, True Vine. In chapters 14-16, Jesus gives the most comprehensive teaching on the Holy Spirit found anywhere in Scripture.

Secondly, John is more evangelistic than other Gospels. Not only does John claim the whole point of the book is to lead us to believe in Christ and find true life (20:30-31), but we are given some of the best accounts of Jesus evangelizing in all the Bible. His conversation with Nicodemus in chapter 3 says that he must be born again to find eternal life. And his discussion with the Samaritan woman is a masterful example of how to witness, as found in chapter 4. Therefore, our key word must be "believe," for Jesus said over and over again that the human response to the gift of Salvation is to believe. It is summarized perfectly in 1:12.

Key verse: John 20:31 – but these have been written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name.

Acts

Key word: Holy Spirit

Acts is Luke's second contribution to the New Testament. Combined with his gospel, Luke is the most prolific writer of the New Testament Scriptures. The title often assigned to the book is "The Acts of the Apostles" as they spread the good news about Jesus Christ throughout the Roman Empire. Written in the early 60's, the events recorded begin with the ascension of Christ (1:9), His commission to the disciples (1:8), the Day of Pentecost, in which the Holy Spirit came to indwell the believers and establish the church (chapter 2). The early church devoted itself to five tasks – and these are still ours today: evangelism (2:41), the apostles' teaching (the Word), prayer, fellowship and the Lord's Supper (2:42).

Chapter 3-12 records the ministry of the apostles, with Peter being the central figure. He preaches the Gospel, faces persecution, is delivered, works miracles, and in chapter 10 opens the door to the Gentiles for the Gospel.

But others stand out in the first half, including John, Stephen (the first martyr), Phillip who takes the Gospel to the Samaritans, and to the first Gentile convert, and we are introduced to, and read of the conversion of Saul (chapter 9). But beginning with chapter 13, all the attention is turned on Paul, who was not part of the original apostles, but was appointed one by Jesus. Humanly speaking, Paul is the main character because the author of Acts, travels with Paul throughout much of his ministry. Paul would take three major, extensive missionary journeys, making converts and establishing churches throughout Asia and Europe. He desired to take the good news to Rome but was arrested due to Jewish resistance. Roman authorities decided to send Paul to Rome for trial, thus Paul made it to Rome as a prisoner. There, in rented quarters, he proclaimed Christ for two full years. From there, Paul wrote his prison epistles. Since we see the work of the Holy Spirit everywhere, He will be our key word.

Key verse: Acts 1:8 – "but you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth."

Romans

Key word: Righteousness

The early church was devoted to the apostles' teaching (Acts 2:42). We find this teaching in the New Testament epistles. The first of these epistles in order and in importance is Romans. Romans is surely the queen foremost of the epistles. It is the deepest, best systematized of the letters, and most theological, not to mention the longest. It was written by the Apostle Paul around A.D. 58 to the church at Rome, a church he had neither founded nor visited. He, therefore, had few personal relationships with the Christians there and kept his teaching general and applicable to Christians everywhere and for all times. Romans is the first of three letters based upon one Old Testament verse – Habakkuk 2:4b – “The just shall live by faith” (1:17). The key word describes the theme of Romans: righteousness and the key verse (1:16) tells us that the Gospel is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes.

The book can be nicely outlined by five subjects, all beginning with “s”

- Sin (1:18-3:20)
- Salvation (3:21-5:21)
- Sanctification (6-8)
- Sovereignty (9-11)
- Service (12:1-15:13)

Starting with sin, Paul builds a case for why we need salvation. Humans have suppressed the truth in unrighteousness (1:18), and therefore justly face the wrath of God. Chapter one and two develop this theme concluding that all people – Jew and Gentile alike, are sinners who have rejected God and His righteousness. Chapter three summarizes what has been taught in the first two chapters and proclaims that all are unrighteous (3:10-11) and fall short of God's glory (3:23). Therefore, we are in a hopeless and helpless state of sin and have no means of being saved or rescued.

This hopelessness drives us and prepares us for God's plan of rescue of salvation, beginning with 3:21 and continuing through the end of chapter 5. After getting us lost, the next step is showing us how to be saved. In 3:21-31, the key word is faith. Our natural inclination to our recognition of our lost condition is to figure out how we can solve this problem. What work, or religious rite, or effort can we make to please God? But Paul makes it

abundantly clear that none of our efforts are sufficient. It is a gift (3:24) received by faith (3:28). For the Jews who knew their Old Testament, Paul knew he might receive some pushback. So, he offers two of their greatest Old Testament heroes to prove that salvation has always been a gift received by faith: Abraham (4:3), and David (4:6).

But what about the issue of losing one's salvation? Maybe salvation is initially obtained by faith, but what if we sin too much, or begin to doubt Christ? What then? Paul assures us that if the Lord saved us while we were helpless and ungodly (5:6), sinners (5:8), and enemies of God (5:10), surely the Lord will keep us saved now that we are His friend (5:10 – cp 5:1). We have now been reconciled to God (5:11). And all of this was made possible because of the righteous act of obedience on the part of Christ (5:15).

The third major section of Romans deals with sanctification, or how we should live now that we are saved (6-8). We could wrap Paul's teaching on this subject around three statements:

1. We have died to sin (6:2). It often does not seem like we are dead to sin, but positionally we, as Christians, are no longer under the mastery of sin. We have died to its automatic control over our lives. We are now under the mastery of Christ. Therefore, we should consider ourselves dead to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus (6:11). We now must choose if we want to allow sin to reign in our bodies and obey its desires, or to present ourselves to God and His mastery (6:12-13).
2. We are dead to the law (7:4a). The law is great at condoning and pronouncing judgment for our sins. But it has no power to help us live for, or grow in Christ. Therefore, we have been released from the law, in order that we might serve in the newness of the Spirit (10:6).
3. We are to walk according to the Spirit (8:4). When we are trying to live for the Lord according to our own efforts (the flesh), we will fail because we lack the energy and power to mature. For that we need the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit (8:9).

The fourth section of the book of Romans details the sovereignty of God using Israel as the object lesson (9-11). Having just affirmed that there is nothing that can separate the child of God from the love of God, someone might ask –

but what about Israel? The Old Testament records both God's love for Israel and Israel's frequent rebellion against God. Paul uses this situation as exhibit "A" in his argument. If anyone deserved to be kicked out of God's love it would be Israel. Yet, the Lord handpicked Israel to be His, not because they deserved but because of His mercy (9:16). Where Israel has stumbled was in trying to create their own righteousness instead of, by faith, receiving God's (10:2). It is only those who believe in Christ who will never be disappointed (10:11). It is those who call on the Lord in faith who will be saved (10:13).

Chapter 11 makes it clear that the Lord has not rejected Israel (11:5). Most Jews, at this time, have rejected Christ, but the Lord still has a remnant (11:5). Additionally, Israel's present hardness has resulted in the reception of the gospel by the Gentiles (11:11). But we need not worry for God's gifts and calling are irrevocable (11:29). No wonder Paul closes this section (chapters 9-11) with the great prayer of wonder at God's unfathomable ways (11:33).

The final major section of Romans might be seen as the application of all that he has written so far (12-16). For convenience we call this section, "service." It begins with the word "therefore," which introduces the incomparable twelfth chapter, which calls us to present our bodies as a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, and to not be conformed to this world, but to be transformed by the renewing of our mind. All other applications in the remainder of the book bank off these first two verses. The triune commands will determine:

1. Our function in the body of Christ (12:3-13).
2. How we deal with those who harm us (12:14-21).
3. Our response to government (13:1-8).
4. Our walk, in love and purity (13:8-14).
5. Our attitude toward those who have different preferences and convictions from us (14:1-15:13).

Paul closes the book with personal information and requests. So, he has gotten his readers lost, saved, put on the road of Godly living, taught them the sovereignty of God and sent them out to serve the Lord in a manner worthy of God. What a book.

Key verse: Romans 1:16 – 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.

1 Corinthians

Key word: Cross

Paul writes two inspired epistles to the young church at Corinth, which was in southern Greece, due west of Athens. It was comprised of many immature believers who struggled with a variety of sins, from division, to moral issues, to pride, suing one another, to marital problems, and abuse of the Lord's supper. They were spiritual babies who had not yet broken cleanly from the sinful practices of the world around them. Doctrinally, they were pretty sound, as Paul only addresses one theological concern – the resurrection in chapter 15. The biggest issue of all was their resistance to the apostleship and authority of Paul – we see this even more clearly in Paul's second letter to them; but we see this in the first chapter (1:1, 12). Because they did not honor Paul's apostleship, they also did not honor his message. And this was crucial when it came to the gospel. They were fascinated with Greek wisdom and philosophy (1:22). And because they compromised and diluted the true gospel. Paul makes it clear that the message of the cross is foolishness to the unsaved, but for the believer it is the power of God (1:18). For that reason, Paul said his message was not framed in worldly wisdom, but was the simple message of Jesus Christ and Him crucified (2:2). Our faith must not rest on the wisdom of men but on the power of God (2:5). They were trying to impress the world by engaging philosophically with them. But Paul informed them that the unbeliever is not impressed with this approach because they cannot comprehend spiritual things – to them it is all nonsense. But things should be different for the Christian because we have the mind of Christ (2:14-16). With all this as a foundation Paul says it was time for them to move out of their spiritual nursery and to grow up (3:1-3). The rest of the book addresses issues in which they needed to mature.

Key verse: 1 Corinthians 1:18 – For the word of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.

2 Corinthians

Key word: Apostle

Paul's second inspired epistle to the Corinthians followed the first one within a year. It was necessitated because the first letter was poorly received and the church had deepened its resistance to the apostleship of Paul. While there are many great themes developed in the book, such as comfort (chapter 1), the intermediate state of a believer after death and before the rapture. (chapter 5), the Judgment Seat of Christ (5:10), principles concerning handling money, and especially generous giving to the Lord's work (chapters 8-9) and battling deception (10-11), it is the defense of Paul's apostleship which is central throughout the book.

At the heart of the issue is who has the authority to proclaim the word of God? Who is teaching truth? Who should be listened to and obeyed? Someone has the authority to speak and write the inspired word of God. Who is that? Some had arisen in the Corinth church and claimed to be the true apostles and spokesmen for God. In the process they vilified Paul as a fraud (11:4). To these claims Paul had strong words. He says the Corinthians were being deceived, not only about Paul's authority, but also about his message (11:3). They were in danger of losing the gospel message by following false apostles. Paul does not mince words about what he thought about these teachers: they are false apostles, deceitful workers who disguise themselves as apostles of Christ, when they really are emissaries of Satan, that master of disguises (11:13-15). If they choose to reject Paul's apostleship and follow the deceivers, they will live their lives in the web of deceit. They must choose to listen to Paul, the true apostle and spokesman for God, if they are to live as God has designed. Our key verse is 11:13, which serves as a warning to us all.

Key verse: 2 Corinthians 11:13 – For such men are false apostles, deceitful workers, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ.

Galatians

Key word: Gospel

Although there is some uncertainty, Galatians most likely was one of Paul's first epistles. It is written to a group of churches in Galatia – a region in Asia Minor, or modern Turkey. Unlike the Corinthians who seemed solid in theology if not in practice, the Galatians had some serious doctrinal errors, many of which had to do with proper understanding and the role of the Old Testament law. But even more fundamental was the gospel itself (1:6-9). Someone had introduced to this church a gospel message that Paul had not given them. To Paul, this was not an unfortunate spin on the gospel, it was a "different gospel," a distortion, a contradiction, of the true gospel. Such people are deserving of condemnation. This is perhaps the strongest statement by Paul condemning false teachers. The distortion of the gospel at Galatia had to do with the misuse of the law. Some were claiming the gospel of grace that Paul preached was inadequate, and that works of the law must be added to faith to obtain salvation, which is stated clearly in 2:16 three times. He states in a positive manner how he lives his life and his life is focused in our key verse 2:20.

Yet living for Christ is not a walk in the park – actually it should be a walk in the Spirit – a subject Paul covers well in 5:16-26. Here he confirms our on-going struggle with the flesh, yet by walking in the Spirit we will not hand the victory to the flesh (5:16). Instead, the fruit of the Spirit will be produced in our lives (5:22-23). And so, an epistle, which begins with condemnation of false teachers, and continues by correcting those who misuse the law of Moses, ends on the positive note of walking in the Spirit in such a way that the Spirit transforms the very essence of our being.

Key verse: Galatians 2:20 – I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself up for me.

Ephesians

Key word: Riches

Paul was a prisoner, because of the gospel, in Rome around 62 A.D. At that time, he wrote four inspired letters – three to churches and one to an individual. These letters are now known as the prison epistles, and Ephesians is the first. Ephesus was a very important Roman city located in modern day Turkey. The church was founded by Paul on his second missionary journey. Paul stayed 3 years at Ephesus, longer than any other place, preaching the gospel and teaching the truth, so that Ephesus became the hub of Christianity in Asia and in much of the Roman Empire. Later, both Timothy and John would minister there; Paul called the Ephesian elders to his location for final instructions before his imprisonment (Acts 20) and it was the first church addressed in Revelation (of seven) (Revelation 2).

Not only was the church important, so was the epistle's message – perhaps the most valuable of any letter except for Romans. Ephesians follows a normative pattern of Paul's in which he begins with theology and concludes with application. This is especially noticeable in Ephesians as the first three chapters lay out essential truths, especially concerning our position and identity in Christ. No command is given in these three chapters except an injunction to "remember" our spiritual condition before salvation (2:11). Everything else in these chapters describe our positions, privileges, and riches in Christ (1:7). Riches will therefore be our key word. In particular, the opening paragraph lists some of these riches: We have been chosen, adopted, redeemed, informed, been given an inheritance and sealed by the Holy Spirit (1:3-14). Chapter two clearly lays out the salvation process: the need: dead in sin (vv. 1-3), God's merciful provision (vv. 4-7), God's grace/gift received by faith (vv. 8-9), and God's purpose – that we might live out the Lord's masterpiece (v. 10).

The applicational section begins in 4:1 with the word "therefore." On the basis of our provisions and riches in Christ, how should we live? The final three chapters inform us. Some highlights in this portion include:

1. God's method to equip us for spiritual maturity (4:11-16, esp. vv. 11-12).

2. The importance of putting off our former manner of living, replacing it with the new regenerated self, and being renewed in the spirit of our minds (4:22-24).
3. What does such a life look like – (4:24-32)? Living truthfully, without anger, honestly, with wholesome speech, and in kindness.
4. We will walk in love, following the example of Christ (5:2).
5. We will walk in light (5:8) not darkness.
6. We will walk in wisdom, understanding the will of the Lord (5:15-17).
7. We will have marriages patterned after God's design (5:22-33).
8. As well as family and personal relationship (5:4-9).
9. We will see our need to put on all the provisions of Christ (6:10-18), called here the armor of God, so that we can stand against the schemes of the devil.

With so much material, it is difficult to pick a key verse but 2:8-9 gets our nod, since everything in the book centers around God's redemptive plan.

Key verse: Ephesians 2:8-9 – For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast.

Philippians

Key word: Joy

The epistle to the Philippian church has a more relaxed feel than that to the sin-laced Corinthians, the gospel-diluting Galatians, and the doctrinally-heavy Ephesians. There seems to be no major doctrinal issue at Philippi, unless it was some confusion over the nature of the incarnation. And no outstanding sins, which needed correction, except for that fact that they were having a problem getting along. As a matter of fact, unity is one of two major themes running through the letter. We see this need for unity best in 2:1-2. The remedy for disunity is having the attitude of Christ (2:5), which was that of a humble servant. The opposing attitudes are mentioned in the letter: self-centeredness (2:21), and Christ-centeredness (1:21), which will be our key verse.

There is another theme found in the epistle – that of joy. The words “joy” or “rejoice” are used 17 times in this little letter. But Paul’s joy was not found in creature comforts – after all, he was a prisoner in Rome. But he rejoices because the gospel is being proclaimed (1:18), because the Lord uses him (1:25), when he witnesses harmony in the church (2:2), when they maintain doctrinal purity (3:1), in his fellowship with fellow believers (4:1), when God’s people are living in relational and personal peace (4:4, 5-9). Conflict, either outward or inward robs us of joy and peace. Therefore, Paul calls on the Philippian believers to lay aside their anxiety, let their minds dwell in the virtues of Christ, and practice the lifestyle Paul had modeled for them (4:5-9).

Paul closes by rejoicing in God’s financial provisions for both himself and the Philippian church. Joy is found in Christ and the strength He provides (1:21, 4:13).

Key verse: Philippians 1:21 – For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.

Colossians

Key word: Complete

Written to the church at Colossae in Southern Asia, modern day Turkey, while Paul was a prisoner in Rome around 62 A.D., it is more concerned about false teaching than Philippians and Ephesians. And whereas the Galatian churches were being infiltrated by false gospels, the Colossian church was being inundated with faulty philosophies, which were distracting them from the supremacy of Christ. We see these interrelated themes in the first two chapters, which comprise the doctrinal portion of the epistle. In chapter one, the preeminence of Christ is showcased. He is:

1. The very image of the invisible God (v. 15).
2. The firstborn of all creation (v. 15).
3. The creator of all things (vv. 16-17).
4. The head of the church (v. 18).

Over all, in this small letter, Christ is directly referenced a total of 77 times. He is definitely the central focus of the book.

But chapter two reveals that serious philosophical and theological errors were distracting the believers from the centrality of Christ. The concern is summarized in 2:8, but there were at least 4 enemies of the truth found in Colossae church.

1. Traditions of men were replacing the Word of God (2:8-10).
2. Fixating on rituals instead of Christ (2:16-17).
3. Mysticism (2:18-19) was being relied upon in place of Christ.
4. Asceticism mistaken for spiritual life (2:20-23).

Instead of embracing these distractions they should do five things:

1. Keep seeking things above (3:1).
2. Set your mind on things above (3:2).
3. Consider yourself dead to sin (3:5).
4. Put aside sin (3:8).
5. Put on Godliness (3:12-14).

The great news found in Colossians is that because of Christ, we have been made complete, our key word (2:10). Our great challenge is to set our minds on the things above – 3:2 key verse.

Key verse: Colossians 3:2 – Set your mind on the things above, not on the things that are on earth.

1 Thessalonians

Key word: Return

About 10 years prior to writing the prison epistles, Paul writes his first two inspired letters to the church at Thessalonica, which is in Northern Greece, or Macedonia (around 52 A.D.) Paul was thrilled by these believers who had turned to God from idols to serve a living and true God (1:9). This is one of the clearest examples in the New Testament of true conversion (see Acts 26:18, 20). Salvation is not consenting to some theological facts about Jesus and the crucifixion, it is turning from that which we used to worship to Christ by faith, resulting in serving Him.

But in the very next verse, Paul launched into his overarching theme throughout both epistles – the return of Christ (1:10). The return of Christ is mentioned in every chapter in both books, because apparently there was some major confusion about this event. In 1 Thessalonians there was concern that Christ was not actually going to return, or that He had secretly come back and they had missed out. To comfort them, as well as inform them of the truth, Paul crystalized this doctrine in 4:13-18 where he describes the rapture (a word we get from the Latin for “caught up” in v. 17). They had no reason to grieve, for the Lord was yet to come, and when He comes He will draw both the dead and living saints to meet Him in the air and take them back to heaven to be with Him forever. Therefore, they could be comforted by these truths (v. 18). Paul distinguishes this event from the Day of the Lord, or Second Coming in 5:1-11. The Second Coming will begin with judgment on those who have rejected Christ, but the believer is not destined for wrath (5:9) and need not fear it. They should actually be encouraged (5:11). The take away or understanding Eschatology should be that we encourage and build up one another (5:11), our key verse.

Key verse: 1 Thessalonians 5:11 – Therefore encourage one another and build up one another, just as you also are doing.

2 Thessalonians

Key word: Second Coming

Apparently, Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians did not answer all their questions about the return of Christ. They now had a handle on the rapture – the next event on God's prophetic time table to be Christ returning in the air and catching up His people to Himself and returning to heaven. Seven years later Christ returns – but this time in judgment on unbelievers. Paul called this the Day of the Lord in 1 Thessalonians 5. This did not compute well in the Thessalonians' minds, and so, Paul returns to that theme in this second epistle. The purpose of the Second Coming is clear in 1:7-10. This will be an awful day of judgment, leading to "eternal destruction" (v. 9).

But there was still one more issue – the timing. Some seemed concerned that they might be caught off guard and have to endure the residual effects of the Day of the Lord. So, in chapter two Paul details three events that will take place before Christ returns:

1. A worldwide apostasy (2:3). "Apostasy" means falling away and normally refers to abandoning God's truth. Therefore, there will be a complete turning from truth – possible coming in the wake of the rapture.
2. Revealing of the man of lawlessness, who we usually call the antichrist (2:3). This is one who will set himself up as God and demand worship (2:4).
3. The removal of the restrained (2:6-7. Only the Lord has such power so, most likely then is a reference to the rapture and the removal of the Holy Spirit indwelt Christians.

Fear the antichrist, for the Lord will slay him with just a word (2:8). Our key phrase is the Second Coming, and our key verse is 1:9, which serves as a powerful reminder of the fate of the lost, and the importance of proclaiming to them the gospel before it is too late.

Key verse: 2 Thessalonians 1:9 – These will pay the penalty of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power,

1 Timothy

Key word: Church

Paul's final 4 inspired letters are all written to individuals, rather than churches. The two letters to Timothy, and the one to Titus, are written toward the end of his life as he is contemplating handing over the work of the ministry to a younger generation. Timothy had apparently been converted under Paul's ministry (1:2), and had traveled with Paul and served in many locations and in many ways. When Paul sends Timothy to the Philippians, he tells them that there was no one better than Timothy to come and aid them (Philippians 2:19-23). As Paul writes this letter to Timothy around 64-65 A.D. Timothy was pastoring the church at Ephesus. The apostle wanted to give to Timothy, in written form, instructions on how a local church is to function. As such, Paul is concerned about the teaching of sound doctrine, a subject he turns to time and again. But the goal was not just knowledge, but was intensely practical. In 1:5, he states clearly that the goal of our instruction is love from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith." On the negative side, warnings about false teachers are found throughout the letter. As a matter of fact, this is the first thing on Paul's agenda (1:3-4). In a detailed section (4:1-5) he calls these false teachings the "doctrines of demons" perpetrated by deceitful spirits (4:1).

A unique feature of the book, found only here and in Titus, is listing of the qualifications for elders (3:1-7), as well as deacons (3:8-13). His purpose in writing these things is so that Timothy, and all of us by extension, can "know how one ought to conduct himself in the household of God, which is the church of the living God" (3:15). We will make the latter half of this verse our key verse. The theme of the letter is the functioning of the local church, and it's key task is to be the pillar and support of the truth.

Key verse: 1 Timothy 3:15b – which is the church of the living God, the pillar and support of the truth.

2 Timothy

Key word: Scripture

This is Paul's final inspired letter as he awaits what appeared eminent execution in a Roman prison. This imprisonment was about 5 years after the imprisonment in which he wrote the 4 prison epistles. Since Paul is expecting to die soon, he felt the urgency to prepare the younger Timothy for the ministry without his leadership, thus the letter is full of extremely valuable insights and reminders that Timothy, as well as ourselves need. Let's highlight just a few of these:

1. The gospel (1:8-10). The good news is Christ saved us by grace, through no merit of our own. As a result, He abolished spiritual, and ultimately physical death and brought life and immortality to light.
2. A powerful warning of the difficulties facing the child of God due to deceptive teachers (3:1-9).
3. The clearest presentation of the inspiration and transforming power of scripture found anywhere in the Bible (3:15-17).
4. The biblical methodology of making disciples, starting with accurately handling, interpreting and teaching God's word (2:15). Then concentrating on those who desire to be faithful servants of the Lord, who in turn will disciple others (2:2).
5. Charging us to "preach" the Word, no matter the cost or resistance (4:1-5).
6. Ending with the goal of the Christian life as that of fighting the good fight, finishing the course the Lord has set before us, and keeping the faith. Such a life leads to the crown of righteousness (4:6-8).

Our key verse has to be 3:16-17 and our key word will be Scripture.

Key verse: 2 Timothy 3:16-17 – All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work.

Titus

Key word: Regeneration

Titus was a young minister, a contemporary with Timothy. Toward the end of his life, Paul writes to these two men to instruct them concerning essentials in the local church. Timothy was ministering in Ephesus, while Titus was on the Island of Crete. There is some overlap between Paul's first epistle to Timothy and this one to Titus, still a number of essentials for the church of Christ are identified:

- Church leadership – elders (1:5-9). While the list of qualities for elders is similar to 1 Timothy 3, one emphasis stands out – elders must be able to hold fast to the word, teach it (exhort) and defend it (1:9).
- Good deeds: 7 times, and in every chapter, Paul mentions doing good deeds (1:16, 27, 14; 3:1, 5, 8, 14). Good deeds do not save us (3:5) but they should flow out of our redemptive lives (3:1).
- Doctrine: 9 times doctrine or doctrinal related words are found in this little epistle. The church of Christ must be doctrinally sound and living in such a way as to adorn the doctrine of God (1:1, 4, 9, 13, 14; 2:1, 5, 7, 10).
- The doctrine of regeneration is specifically highlighted (3:4-5). Here we learn that the Lord saved us, not on the basis of our good deeds, but on the basis of God's love, kindness, and mercy. Paul adds that our salvation is accomplished through an act of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit. Regeneration speaks of new life, of what Jesus called being born again. It is the act whereby the Spirit radically transforms us from rebellious enemies of God, into the children of God who are now new creations in Christ (2 Cor 5:17). We, as a result, have a new nature, with new desires, and new capacities. We are now in the process of being transformed by the renewing of our mind and living to the glory of God. Our key word is regeneration and our key verse will be 3:5.

Key verse: Titus 3:5 – He saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit,

Philemon

Key word: Useful

It is unfortunate that those who arranged the order of the New Testament books in our English Bibles chose to put Philemon after Titus, instead of after Colossians. They helpfully grouped all 13 epistles of Paul together in the center of the New Testament, but placed Philemon last, probably due to its size, and comparative insignificance. But it was written to a member of the church at Colossae at the same time Paul wrote Colossians from a prison in Rome in A.D. 62. It is therefore one of the 4 prison epistles, but while the other 3 were addressed to church, Philemon is sent to one individual with a unique problem.

At a time when perhaps a third of the population of the Roman Empire were slaves, a slave, Onesimus, ran away from his master, Philemon, and eventually ended up in Rome. Somehow, he meets up with Paul, hears the gospel, and is converted. Onesimus name means useful, and he is that to Paul (vv. 11-13). But because it is the right thing to do Paul sends him back to Philemon (v. 12). He does not order Philemon to forgive and release his former slave, but Paul argues persuasively for forgiveness, release and returning Onesimus back to Paul, because Paul needs him (vv. 13-14). Another option is for Onesimus to stay with Philemon, but no longer as a slave, but as a beloved brother (v. 16). By doing so, Philemon and Onesimus will be reconciled, will serve Christ together as beloved brothers, will glorify God, and will "refresh" [Paul's] heart in Christ (v. 20). So, this little letter lays out a pattern for reconciliation between believers when one has wronged another. Our key word is useful, for not only is that the meaning of Onesimus, but it tells the story of a formerly useless man who becomes useful to Paul, Philemon and to Christ. Our key verse then is v. 11. May this verse reflect our lives as well.

Key verse: Philemon 11 – who formerly was useless to you, but now is useful both to you and to me.

Hebrews

Key word: Christ's superiority

Aside from Romans there is no more theologically heavy, and I would add, rich book than Hebrews. We do not know who wrote it, although there have been many theories. His immediate audience was Jewish Christians in the mid A.D. 60s, and thus were second generation believers. As a result, some had lost the passion for the church and New Testament living and were drifting away – some apparently into Judaism – from which their parents had emerged. Rather than drifting back into an inferior religion, the author encouraged them to press on to maturity – to grow up. But their foundational problem was they had lost the vision of the superiority of Christ. They had not, at least for the most part, abandoned Christ, or ceased to believe in Him. But they had removed Him as central to their lives, and replaced Him with inferior things. So, what they desperately needed was to once again understand the superiority of Christ and embrace it with all their hearts. Thus, the book outlines itself around five ways that Christ is superior to all things:

1. Christ is superior to all former revelation (1:1-3). The Lord reveals Himself and His truth through revelation – general, such as creation and nature, and specific – words spoken through and to prophets and fathers. These revelations were inspired, valuable and essential. But as important as they were, a superior revelation has come – and that is what has been spoken through the Son. The Son inherits all things, created all things, sustains all things, died to provide purification for our sins, and now rules over all things. In addition, He reveals the very nature of God because He is God and perfectly represents Him. Christ is far superior in every way than any spokesman from the past. He is the ultimate communication from God, the Logos as John describes Him (John 1:1).
2. He is superior to angelic beings (1:4-2:18). Beginning with verse 4, and continuing throughout chapter two, the author contrasts Christ with angels. Angels had played significant roles in the history of the world, and specifically Israel. They had even had a part in giving the Old Testament law. So respected were angels that some worshipped them, Gnostics made their worship part of their religion. But Jesus is far better than angels. "Better" is used 13x in Hebrews to contrast Christ and His new order from what had come before Him.

To show just how superior Christ was to angels the author launches into a series of 7 quotations from the Old Testament Scriptures in verse five:

- 1) He is the Son (1:5), angels are created beings.
 - 2) He is God (1:6-9), angels worship Him (1:6).
 - 3) He is creator (1:10-12), angels are created.
 - 4) He is the supreme ruler (1:13-14), angels are servants.
 - 5) He is the ultimate revelator (2:1-4). As important as the messages delivered by angels was Christ's message of salvation is far greater.
 - 6) He is the author of our salvation (2:5-16, 10), for people, not angels (v. 16).
 - 7) He is our great, high priest (2:17-18), a position, angels cannot attain or fulfill.
3. He is superior to Moses (3:1-4:13). Humans tend to become hero-worshippers of other people. We make idols of people we respect. But the Lord will not share His glory with another. When we elevate sinful creatures to forbidden levels, we depreciate Christ and are, at best, distracted from Him. This is what the Jews did with Moses, and the Christian Jews addressed in Hebrews had carried this idolization into their Christian life. Our author's task was to demonstrate that no matter how great a man Moses was, compared to Christ he was vastly inferior.
- 1) If Moses was the house, Christ was the builder (3:3).
 - 2) If Moses was a faithful servant, Christ is the Son (3:5-6a).
 - 3) If Moses, and Joshua, led the people to the rest of a promised land (4:8), only Christ can lead us to the full, complete eternal rest (4:9). We enter the door of this rest at salvation, but complete our journey when we enter glory.
 - 4) If Moses was a great leader, Jesus is our great high priest (3:1; 4:14-16). Moses could physically guide the people to the land of promise, and he could teach them the Lord's commandments, and set an example of faithfulness. But he could not forgive their sins, and he was not sinless – Christ was. Therefore, we can draw near to God to receive mercy and grace because Christ is our great high priest.
4. He is superior to the Old Testament (Levitical) priesthood (4:14-10:18). This long section constitutes the heart of the message found in the book of Hebrews. If these first century Jewish Christians are going to live

Christ-centered lives they must recognize that Christ's current priestly ministry is vastly superior to the Old Testament system which was a mere shadow of the priesthood of Christ (8:1-5). In chapters 5-7, a truth is introduced that is found nowhere else in Scripture, although it is hinted at in Psalm 110:4. And that is that Christ has introduced, and is now the high priest of a totally new and superior priesthood, not connected with the Levitical priesthood but after the order of Melchizedek (5:6). This means that Christians are not subject to the old covenant of Mosaic law, but have a better hope grounded in Christ (7:19), and look forward to a new covenant (7:22, 8:7-13). What does this mean to us? It means:

- 1) We have a high priest who can understand and sympathize with our weakness (4:15).
- 2) We can draw near to God because of Christ's ministry on our behalf (4:16). This is one of the main themes of this epistle. Under the law people were limited in their access to God, but now they are invited to draw near.
- 3) Christ intercedes on our behalf, which enables us to draw near and result in our salvation (7:25).
- 4) Sins can now be completely forgiven (10:10).

A direct application for us is to press on to spiritual maturity (5:11-14; 6:1). Five separate warnings are given throughout the book to those who do not heed this call to maturity. Let us not despise or neglect Christ's provisions for us.

5. He is superior to the law (10:19-13:25). The author, having now laid out the theological foundation, concludes his epistle with an extended applicational section. It begins with the standard "therefore," followed by a very general summary of the previous 10 chapters (10:19). Since we now have confidence to enter into the Holy Place, that is, the presence of God, because of the blood of Christ (vv. 19b-20), and since Christ now serves as our great high priest (v. 21); we are now exhorted, and privileged, to do three things:

- 1) Let us draw near (10:22). In many ways this is the theme of the book. Because of the superiority of Christ and His cross-work, we now, as Christians, are invited to draw near to God in faith.

- 2) Let us hold fast (10:23). We are now urged to hold fast to our confession of hope. But we can only do so because we have hope in One who is faithful. This verse points back to 6:19, which informs us that our hope is an anchor for our souls and is anchored to Christ in His position as our eternal, faithful high priest (6:20). No Christian should ever feel hopeless, for our hope is not in self, or any temporal thing, but in Christ Himself.
- 3) Let us consider others (10:24-25). If we have the joy of drawing near and holding fast to Christ, we will want others to experience the same joys. We will want to actively seek ways to stimulate others to walk in love and to serve through good deeds. We will look for every opportunity to encourage fellow believers in their faith. Life in this fallen, broken world can be extremely difficult, and we need one another to help us persevere in the faith, which is the subject of the rest of the book. Our key verse will be 4:16.

Key verse: Hebrews 4:16 – Therefore let us draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

James

Key word: Works

James is almost certainly the first book written in the New Testament. James is a common name in the Bible. One of Jesus' most valued apostles, and the first one martyred, is one example, and must be distinguished from our author, who was the half-brother of Jesus and recognized head of the early church in Jerusalem. Written around 45 A.D., James ministry was exclusively to Jewish believers, so we are not surprised that he addresses his audience as the 12 tribes of Jews scattered throughout the known world (1:1). He begins with the recognition that his readers were facing trials, but rather than getting down about this situation, James calls for joy, knowing that the Lord uses such trials as His instruments to produce maturity (1:2-4). But he does not minimize the difficulty in having such a perspective in the midst of trials, and therefore commands the need for wisdom, which is available to the child of God who asks in faith (1:5-6).

The great burden of this epistle was to show the place and importance of works in the life of the believer. James does not add works to faith. As a requirement for salvation, contrary to some who have misunderstood his message in chapter two. But he highlights the role of works as an evidence of our salvation: when he writes that faith without works is dead (2:17). He means that a supposed faith in Christ, which does not produce the fruit of a changed life evidenced by works, is useless. Such a Christian has no outward evidence of salvation that he can see, and others can not see evidence of our faith either (2:18).

Our key verse is 2:22, which captures the essence of the book. If we are mere "hearers" of the word, but not doers, we delude ourselves. We are to live out God's word, not just listen to it. Works is our key word – works not for salvation, but works as evidence of our faith is the theme of James. Some have called James the New Testament Equivalent of the Old Testament book of Proverbs. The central theme of Proverbs is wisdom, and wisdom plays an important role in James. It virtually begins with wisdom, and tells us if we lack it we are to call on God and in faith believe that He is able to provide it. In the first chapter, the context was wisdom in the face of trials. It is a wisdom that enables us to mature in Christ, regardless of the circumstances. In chapter

three, James returns to the subject of wisdom and distinguishes between two kinds.

1. Earthly/natural demonic, characterized by jealousy, selfish ambition (3:14-15). Such wisdom leads to disorder, which is translated as unstable in 1:18, and restless in 3:8. Living by earthly wisdom leads to an unstable life that lacks foundation. It also leads to all sorts of evil, for it is unable to distinguish between right and wrong (3:16).
2. Wisdom from above, which is marked by the Fruit of the Spirit (3:17-18), such wisdom leads to peace (3:18).

Key verse: James 2:22 – You see that faith was working with his works, and as a result of the works, faith was perfected;

1 Peter

Key word: Suffering (15x)

Peter is writing in the mid-60s to believers scattered throughout the known world because of persecution for the faith. They may be in distressed now, but these trials will purify their faith (1:6-7). Peter writes to comfort them, but to also call them to action (1:13-16). In light of their salvation, and in the midst of trials, Peter issues five commandments:

1. Prepare your minds for action (v. 13a). We need to be ready theologically to know how to live for the Lord under any circumstance.
2. Keep sober (v. 13b). This is to be serious minded – to not be flippant about our walk with the Lord.
3. Fixing our hope in Christ's return (v. 13c). Believers who live with realization that Christ will return, live a far richer the meaningful life from those who don't.
4. Do not be conformed to former lust (v. 14). We have been saved out of a life of sin and evil desire – we should not return to that lifestyle.
5. Be holy (vv. 15-16). Rather our goal is to be holy, for the one we serve is Himself holy.

The epistle has much to say about salvation as well. For example:

1. We were redeemed with the precious blood of Christ (1:18-19).
2. Born again through the word of God (1:23).
3. Based on Christ, the corner stone (2:6-8).
4. Made possible because of the substitutionary death of Christ (2:24) – our key verse.

And because of all this our mission is to proclaim the excellencies of Christ (2:9)

Beginning with 2:13, Peter shows us what a life dedicated to proclaiming the excellencies of Christ looks like:

1. Humble submission to God-ordained authorities (2:13-20).
2. A God-honoring marriage (3:1-7).
3. Harmonious and humble lifestyle (3:8-22).

4. Fervent in love (4:1-11, v. 8).
5. Sharers in the sufferings of Christ (4:12-19, 13)
6. Under Godly shepherding (5:1-6).
7. Humble before God (5:6-14, 6)

Key verse: 1 Peter 2:24 – and He Himself bore our sins in His body on the cross, so that we might die to sin and live to righteousness; for by His wounds you were healed.

2 Peter

Key word: Knowledge (known, knowing) 11x

Peter's second epistle is addressed to the same audience as his first, but now, three years or so later, he has shifted from the subject of suffering to warning. Chapter two rivals Jude as the most intense warning against false teachers, and teaching, found anywhere in Scripture (see 2:1-3). The word destructive, destruction, and destroyed pops up here and will be used by Peter eleven times. What these false teachers teach leads to destruction of lives and to their own judgment from God. No wonder Peter is so concerned. Apparently, one of the false teachings being spread had to do with end times, and chapter three is devoted to that. It would seem that they were denying that at some point the present heavens and earth will cease and be replaced (3:12-13). Peter's application was that the temporary nature of the present creation should incite us to holy and Godly living (3:11). Rather than live for that which will someday pass away, our goal should be to grow in grace and knowledge of Jesus Christ (3:18).

But before Peter leaps into the warning section of his letter, he lays a foundation in chapter one. There are several planks comprising this foundation:

1. We have been supplied everything we need for life and Godliness through the true knowledge of Christ (1:3) (our key verse)
2. We are to be diligent about our spiritual maturity (1:5-11).
3. We have the certainty of the person and work of Jesus Christ (1:16-18).
4. We have the sure word of Scripture which guides into truth (1:19-21).

With this foundation in place we are equipped to defend ourselves against any false doctrines that might tempt to lead us astray.

Key verse: 2 Peter 1:3 – See that His divine power has granted to us everything pertaining to life and godliness, through the true knowledge of Him who called us by His own glory and excellence.

1 John

Key word: Know

Twenty-five or so years after the completion of the rest of the New Testament, the Apostle John begins to add 5 inspired books: the Gospel of John detailing the life of Jesus and the foundation of Christianity; three epistles, which inform of faith; and the Revelation, which looks to the future and the conclusion of our faith, as our faith is turned to sight at the coming of Christ and establishing of the eternal kingdom.

The first epistle is an interesting study, as it is filled with repetition of key words that help us understand John's theme and purpose. Know (or knowledge), appears 35x, love 21x, world 23x and light 6x. John's burden is that we must know the truth if we are to have the life God intends for us. Our key verse (5:13) sums up this message very clearly.

There are three powerful statements about God, that we must know:

1. God is light (1:5), that is, He is the essence of holiness and purity. If we are His people, our life is to be an imperfect reflection of that light.
2. God is righteous (2:29; 3:7), that is, God is just and whatever He does is right. Again, our lives should reflect righteousness as His followers.
3. God is love (4:8), that is, He relates to people in unselfish compassion and grace, and our lives should too.

John tells us the great hindrance to this understanding of God, and subsequent life that glorifies Him, is a trinity of enemies that seek to keep us in the darkness and living wasted, fruitless lives. These three enemies spring from one sinful source – the love of the world, rather than a love for God (2:15):

1. The lust of the flesh (2:16a) desires of our fleshful nature
2. Lust of the eye (2:16b) placing value on the superficial
3. Pride of life (2:16c) living for selfish ambitions

All of these things will perish but the one who does the will of God abides forever.

Key verse: 1 John 5:13 – These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know that you have eternal life.

2 John

Key word: Truth

John writes two very short letters that are placed in the New Testament immediately following his longer letter. There are distinctions between these epistles, but there are also significant similarities. Both emphasize truth, which is found five times in 2 John and seven times in 3 John. Both speak of love and identify true and false love. Both are concerned with how we are to receive those who come to us in the name of the Lord, and here is the major distinction between the two letters. While 3 John talks about who we should receive with open arms and become partakers with the truth, 2 John talks about those we should reject, so that we do not partake in their evil deeds (vv. 7-11).

But before John gets to his main subject, we find that he is writing to a chosen lady and her children. While this lady could be an individual, most believe John is speaking metaphorically of a local church. In the first four verses truth is on John's mind, and he is glad to find some of these children walking in truth (v. 4). But it is possible that this church has so majored on truth that their love had grown cold and their obedience was selective. So, John reminds her the Lord commands us to love (v. 5), and true love is evidenced by obedience (v. 6). Truth, love, and obedience is a package that must not be separated.

John applies this 3-fold message to a group of deceivers who are spreading a false message that Jesus Christ was not the incarnate Son of God (v. 7). If they are taken in by this heresy, they are not truly Christians (v. 9). Therefore, if these deceivers show up do not receive them, because to aid them is to participate with them in the spread of their false teaching and evil deeds (vv. 10-11). Truth and love are compatible with identifying and turning away false teachers. If we love the truth, we cannot be partakers with those who seek to destroy it.

Key verse: 2 John 1:6a – And this is love, that we walk according to His commandments.

3 John

Key word: Walking

Much like 2 John, the final epistle by John emphasizes truth and love. Truth is mentioned 6x and love once, and love is found 3x. But while 2 John focuses on not receiving and participating with deceivers, 3 John focuses on supporting those who speak the truth. As a matter of fact, nothing gives the apostle greater joy than seeing His spiritual children walking in the truth – our key verse (v. 4).

John addresses his letter to his beloved Gaius (v. 1) who apparently was the official leader, perhaps lead elder or pastor of the church. He was a good and faithful man, who has been especially attentive to traveling evangelists, missionaries and church planter, who came through their location. Such people should be financially and spiritually supported in a manner worthy of God (v. 6), for they are ministering for the sake of the Name, and refuse to accept support from the Gentiles (v. 7).

But Gaius' local church was facing a major conflict. A power-hungry man by the name of Diotrephes rejected John's authority, slandered him, refused to accept or aid the traveling missionaries, bullied those who did, even to the point of removing them from the church (v. 10). If John can get to the church, he will deal with Diotrephes, but in the meanwhile Gaius, and the rest of the church, should not follow Diotrephes' example, but should imitate men like Demetrius (v. 12), who like Gaius is a man of truth, and well-respected by everyone.

We are going with the word "walking" as our key word. For although it is found only in v. 4, the idea permeates the whole epistle. Gaius and Demetrius walk in truth, as do the traveling missionaries, however, Diotrephes walks in deception and in self-importance. He loves himself, not Christ, not God's people, not the truth. The letter is an encouragement to not be like Diotrephes, but to walk in truth.

Key verse: 3 John 1:4 – I have no greater joy than this, to hear of my children walking in the truth

Jude

Key word: Contend

Jude was the half-brother of Jesus, and full brother of James that wrote the epistle by that name. He sets out to write to Christians in general an uplifting message about salvation (vv. 1, 3), but under the current circumstances found it necessary to appeal to his leadership to stand and contend (our key word) for the faith once for all delivered to the saints (1:3b – our key verse). Jude goes on to write the only epistle in the New Testament dedicated entirely to defending the faith. This defense was necessary because a certain kind of persons have “crept” into the fellowship, bringing with them a potential deconstruction of the faith. The marks of these deceivers were (v. 4): ungodliness. In v. 15, Jude uses this word 4x to describe these people. Their lives are devoid of God and driven by their own sinful desires (v. 16). Secondly, they pervert the grace of God, turning it into a license to sin. Rather than turn from their ungodliness they lived any way they wanted and claimed that God’s grace would permit them to live this way. Third, they went so far as to deny Jesus Christ. By using “Master” and “Lord” before Jesus, Jude may be indicating that these deceivers did not wholesale reject Him, but they rejected His sovereign rule over their lives. In essence they were their own Lord (v. 4).

In light of these warnings how should we live? Three exhortations are given:

1. Remember the teaching of the apostles who warned that such people would creep in among them (vv. 17-19).
2. Build yourself up in your faith (vv. 20-21). Rather than caving into the pressure of ungodly false teachers, get busy and grow in the faith, love and mercy of Christ. Prayer is commended as one of the means of doing so.
3. Reach out to others in Mercy (vv. 22-23). Just as we have received the mercy of God (v. 21), so we should show mercy to those who have yet to come to Christ.

Jude closes with perhaps the most beautiful benediction found anywhere in the Bible (vv. 24-25).

Key verse: Jude 1:3b – I felt the necessity to write to you appealing that you contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all handed down to the saints.

Revelation

Key word: Revelation

The last book in the Bible is unique in many ways. Written by the apostle John in his old age, while exiled on the Isle of Patmos, and addressed specifically to seven churches of Asia (modern Turkey), it has been subject to many interpretations. But one thing all agree on is that the book is the Revelation of Jesus Christ (1:1). It showcases Christ in all His splendor in ways no other book in Scripture does. Among other characteristics, Jesus is depicted as the one who is, who was, and who is to come – He has always existed, was incarnated, and is coming again (v. 4). (This description is true in different ways for both the Father and the Son (1:8; 4:8). It is Jesus' return that is on display throughout the book. When He came the first time He came largely unnoticed, but when He returns every eye will see Him (1:7). He is seen as the Almighty, the Alpha and Omega (v. 8), the first and the last, The Living One, and I was dead and behold I am alive forever and ever (v. 18). When John sees Jesus, he sees Him in all His glory (1:12-16), so, it is no wonder that John fell at His feet like a dead man (1:17). Jesus admonishes John not to be afraid (1:18) and then commissioned him to write this book (1:19). This verse serves as the table of contents for Revelation:

- Things which you have seen (1:1-20) would be the current content found in chapter one.
- Things which are (2:1-3:22) would encompass the message the Lord has for the seven churches which existed at the time John writes.
- Things that will take place after these things (4:1-22:21) here John reveals future events leading up to the return of Christ, including the Tribulation, the Antichrist, the Battle of Armageddon, Christ's second coming, the final judgment, and the eternal kingdom.

Revelation ends with a simple prayer: "Come Lord Jesus" (22:2). What a fitting end to the completion of the Word of God.

Key verse: Revelation 1:19 – Therefore write the things which you have seen, and the things which are, and the things which will take place after these things.