

Understanding the Bible

OLD TESTAMENT



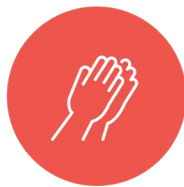
PENTATEUCH



HISTORICAL



WISDOM



PROPHETIC

Genesis	Exodus	Leviticus	Numbers	Deuteronomy
Joshua	Judges	Ruth	1 Samuel	2 Samuel
1 Kings	2 Kings	1 Chronicles	2 Chronicles	Ezra
Nehemiah	Esther	Job	Psalms	Proverbs
Ecclesiastes	Song of Solomon	Isaiah	Jeremiah	Lamentations
Ezekiel	Daniel	Hosea	Joel	Amos
Obadiah	Jonah	Micah	Nahum	Habakkuk
Zephaniah	Haggai	Zechariah	Malachi	

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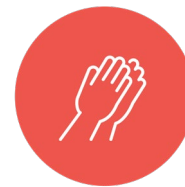
GOSPELS



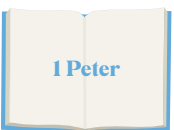
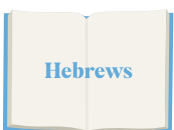
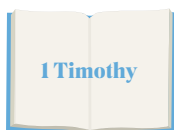
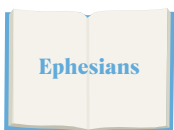
HISTORICAL



LETTERS



PROPHETIC



Letters & Revelation

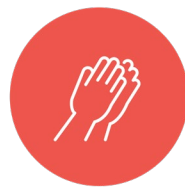
OF THE NEW TESTAMENT



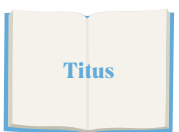
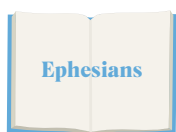
HISTORICAL



LETTERS



PROPHETIC



The Letters

SCRIPTURE: JUDE 1:3

Bible Readings:

Ephesians 4:1–3

DEAR CHURCH

The majority of the New Testament is made up of letters. Most of the letters (from Romans to Philemon) were written by the Apostle Paul. We can recognize them because they're named for their various recipients. With the exception of the author of Hebrews, whose identity is lost to us, the rest of the letters are named for their respective writers. James, the brother of Jesus, wrote James; the Apostle Peter wrote 1 and 2 Peter, the Apostle John—the same one who wrote the Gospel—also wrote 1, 2, and 3 John; and Jude, also James's and Jesus's brother, wrote Jude.

READ, COPY, SHARE

These books are often described as “occasional” documents because, much like our letters (or emails), something happened to “occasion” their writing. In other words, they were written to address particular issues faced by particular people living in particular places during a particular time in history. As we study these letters, it is helpful to remember that even though they were written to certain groups or individuals, they were circulated widely among believers. The first recipients of the letters not only read them aloud when they met for worship, they also shared them with neighboring church communities. As new churches received them, they copied them before sending them on to other churches who did the same. It was this process that preserved the letters, ultimately making them available for us to study centuries later.

READING OTHER PEOPLE'S MAIL

It may seem strange to us that the letters were read and circulated beyond their original audience. Many of them addressed messy—not to mention unflattering—situations. So why would the church share them, ultimately preserving their contents for all Christians to read? The book of Jude gives us some perspective.

In this letter addressed generally to all believers, Jude writes twenty-four verses to communicate one essential message: “contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints” (1:3). Although we only find this command in Jude, it helps us understand every letter’s message—no matter the circumstances and reasons for writing. As we study each letter, we find they can be summed up in Jude’s call. Contend for the faith!

The letters teach to contend for the faith by persevering in it (Hebrews), holding fast to God’s revelation (Romans) and the one true gospel (Galatians), by suffering well (2 Timothy, 2 Thessalonians, 1 Peter) and living in ways pleasing to God (Ephesians, Colossians, 1 Thessalonians) even as grace does its transforming work (1 Timothy, 2 Peter). They teach to contend for the faith by imitating Jesus (Philippians), in our conduct toward others (James, Philemon) and in the way we care for God’s church—its unity (1 Corinthians), purity (2 Corinthians), and doctrine (Titus). And above all, they teach to contend for the faith through love (1, 2, 3 John).

A GOD WORTH SHARING

When the early believers studied these letters, they recognized something in them that is as true for us as it was for them. These letters don’t just teach about God and what it means to be a Christian. They present us with opportunities to encounter God and be transformed into the likeness of his Son. And that is something worth sharing.

Our lives look very different from those of our Christian brothers and sisters who lived in the first century. What might contending for the faith look like in your life—at your work, with your friends and neighbors?

**The letters are often described as “_____” documents because, much like our letters
(or emails), something happened to “_____” their writing.**

The Book of Revelation

“The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show to his servants the things that must soon take place. He made it known by sending his angel to his servant John, who bore witness to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ, even to all that he saw. Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear, and who keep what is written in it, for the time is near.

REVELATION 1:1-3

The book of Revelation makes clear the promise that Jesus is coming back.

Bible Readings:

It has a reputation for being hard to understand, and for good reason. This end-times book contains a significant amount of figurative language. It uses symbols like lampstands, horses, and numbers to communicate its message. Interpreting it can be daunting for even experienced Bible students, but it ultimately is a message about Jesus's future return.

Revelation 1:4-7

The book is full of references to conquest, judgment, and destruction. Some readers become so engrossed in trying to figure it all out, what it means and when these events will take place, they sometimes fall into the trap of missing the purpose of the book altogether. So, why bother? If this book is as demanding as it appears to be, and if its events are set to happen in some undisclosed future we can do nothing about, we might find ourselves wondering if it's really worth the effort.

BLESSED IS THE ONE WHO READS

The book gets its name from the opening sentence and from its genre as prophetic and apocalyptic literature. In this sense, the word “apocalyptic” means to reveal or unveil. And that’s exactly what we find when we read this book, a revelation, an unveiling of events through a vision given to John by the Holy Spirit.

John—who wrote the gospel and letters that bear his name—tells us he was on the island of Patmos “on account of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus” (1:9). While we don’t know the specific circumstances that led him there, history teaches that at the time Revelation was written, Patmos was a place reserved for criminals banished by Rome. So, when John addresses the book to “the seven churches that are in Asia” and calls himself their “brother and partner in the tribulation,” he meant it literally (1:4, 9). Forced from his home and stripped of the comforts of family and community, it is in this place that God drew near to John. In the midst of exile, where isolation, loneliness, and despair were meant to be his only companions, God graced him with a vision not of mourning but of joy. He graced him with hope.

HOPE REVEALED

So, why study the book of Revelation? Because, perhaps more than any other book in the Bible, this book is about hope, about the hope that comes from a God who keeps his promises. Written in a time of persecution, the book of Revelation reminds the church that Jesus is King and he will one day return. That our God is a God who gives rest to the weary, comfort to the brokenhearted, justice to the oppressed, and life to the dead. And as we study Revelation, the same God who met John in his place of exile will meet us in ours. Whether our pain is a broken marriage, a sick parent, or an empty bank account, the book of Revelation is our gift of hope. The hope that one day God will restore heaven and earth, wipe away every tear, and be with us, his people, forever. Because Jesus is our hope. This book is hope revealed.

“ Our God is a God who gives rest to the weary, comfort to the brokenhearted, justice to the oppressed, and life to the dead. ”

Are there things you feel hopeless about? What can you do to let hope permeate those areas of your life? How can you prepare your heart to be receptive to the hope God wants to share with you through the book of Revelation?

Revelation gets its name from the opening sentence and from its genre as _____ literature.

How Do These Books All Fit Together?

SCRIPTURE:
TITUS 3:3-7

Bible Readings:
Revelation 1:17-19

After Jesus rose from the grave, he spent forty days on earth continuing to witness to his disciples and others. After that time, he ascended into heaven. The disciples expected his return to be quick. As Luke described it in the book of Acts, after the birth of the church the new believers would gather together daily. They sold their belongings and shared whatever they had with one another, all as they waited for Jesus to return (Acts 4:32). But as time passed, it became clearer to the apostles and the early teachers of the church that their wait would be longer than they had originally anticipated, and life needed to go on. Motivated by their love and concern for the wellbeing of the church, they began teaching the early believers what it meant to live as followers of Jesus in their ordinary lives, even as they waited for their savior's return.

And that's exactly what the New Testament letters bring to the story of the Bible. Beginning with Romans and all the way through Jude, whether we're studying Paul's instructions to Philemon about how to receive a runaway slave back into his home or John's call to love one another, the letters teach us how to live lives that reflect Jesus—what Paul called “walking in a manner worthy” of God's calling—in practical, ordinary ways all the while never letting go of “our blessed hope,” which is the day Jesus will return (2 Peter 3:11-12; Ephesians 4:1; Titus 2:13).

TEACHING THE CHURCH HOPE

But the letters aren't the only books that have something to teach. The book of Revelation does its own kind of teaching. While through their letters, Paul, Peter, James, the writer of Hebrews, Jude, and John teach us how to live as followers of Jesus, John's prophetic vision in the book of Revelation teaches us how the story of the Bible will come to its ultimate fulfillment. As John shares his vision of thrones and scrolls and trumpets, we see the story of the Bible, from Genesis to Judges to the Prophets and the Gospels and finally to Revelation, is all about God redeeming his people and offering a path to life. A redeemed life. A new life that is found in Jesus alone. A life where one day tears and injustice and death will be no more.

There's a word that captures that kind of life: *shalom*. Although this Hebrew word is often translated "peace," there's no English word that captures everything *shalom* represents. Because while *shalom* does stand for peace, it also stands for wholeness and harmony and completeness and prosperity. And not only does it stand for the presence of everything that is good, it also stands for the absence of everything that is not. *Shalom* is the rhythm of the life to come. It is the rhythm of life with God. As the letters teach us how to live, the book of Revelation teaches us to live with hope, knowing that the story of the Bible is a story of a God who moves all of history to restore his *shalom*.

May John's words take root in our hearts and lives. "Come, Lord Jesus!"
(Revelation 22:20)

“
**Revelation is
all about God
redeeming His
people and
offering a
path to life.**
”

As followers of Jesus, we are not only waiting for God's ultimate *shalom*, we are also called to be bearers of *shalom* in our communities and in our world. Where do you see a need for God's *shalom*? How can you bring a little bit of *shalom* to your neighborhood, workplace, friend group, or family?

_____ teaches us how the story of the Bible will come to its ultimate fulfillment.

What Do You Observe?

Interpreting the letters and the book of Revelation presents unique challenges. It can be tempting to think interpretation is for professionals, but we needn't feel that way. We don't have to be New Testament scholars to learn how to interpret these books well.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN? 2 TIMOTHY 3:16–17

Read 2 Timothy 1–2. In chapter 1, we learn that this letter was written by the apostle Paul to his young protégé, Timothy (1:1–2). Paul, who has not seen Timothy for some time, writes to encourage him to stay strong in the faith, remember what he has been taught, and continue serving God's people in Ephesus well (2 Timothy 2).

In chapter 3, Paul warned Timothy of the difficulties that lay ahead for him. Difficult times were coming, when people would love themselves more than others and live in ways that would not honor God (v. 1–4). “Avoid such people,” Paul warned (v. 5). “. . . Continue in what you have learned and have firmly believed,” he wrote (v. 14). It is in this context of warning and encouragement that we find verses 16–17. To help us get started with our observations of our two focus verses, let's begin with verse 15.

In verse 15, Paul tells Timothy that “the sacred writings,” that is, Scripture, “is able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.” They reveal to us the way of salvation. In verse 16, Paul tells us more about the Scriptures

“

For who knows a person's thoughts except the spirit of that person, which is in him? So also no one comprehends the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might understand the things freely given us by God. And we impart this in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual truths to those who are spiritual.

”

1 CORINTHIANS 2:11–13

Bible Readings:

2 Timothy 3:16–17,

Revelation 21:3–4

and their nature. **Who does verse 16 say is the source of all Scripture? What is the imagery Paul uses to describe how Scripture came to be?**

The imagery of being “breathed out by God” is significant because not only does it point to God as the source of Scripture, but it also serves as an allusion to God’s creative and animative power. Just as God breathed life into Adam in Genesis 2:7, animating him to life, as God breathes Scripture into being, it comes alive in our lives by God’s power.

According to verse 16, in what ways is Scripture profitable?

Verse 17 gives us the purpose of Scripture. What is that purpose?

REVELATION 21:3-4

If we’re going to understand the significance of Revelation 21:3–4, we have to start with Revelation 1–20. Following a brief introduction (Revelation 1), the first 18 chapters of the book of Revelation are characterized

primarily by struggle and judgment. But beginning with chapter 19, we see an important shift. Babylon—symbolizing the enemy of God—is defeated and God calls his people from every corner of the earth to celebrate at the marriage supper of the Lamb (Revelation 19). By the end of chapter 20, death is defeated once and for all, and when chapter 21 opens, it does so with the most glorious part of John’s vision.

What does John see in Revelation 21:1?

What does he see in verse 2?

Verse 3 helps us interpret the significance of John’s vision in verses 1 and 2—what it means that the holy city is coming down out of heaven. **In light of all of that context, what do you observe about verses 3 and 4?**

What Does it Mean for You?



But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks intently at his natural face in a mirror. For he looks at himself and goes away and at once forgets what he was like. But the one who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres, being no hearer who forgets but a doer who acts, he will be blessed in his doing.

JAMES 1:22-25

Bible Readings: : 2 Timothy 3:16-17, Revelation 21:3-4

WRITTEN TO THEM, PRESERVED FOR US

As we study the letters and Revelation, we might find ourselves wondering how we can possibly apply them to our lives. These books were written to specific people for specific reasons at specific times in history. And while it's true that the letters and Revelation were not written *to* us, it is equally true that every book in the Bible has been *preserved for us*.

But, if we're honest, affirming that these books are valuable for us is the easy part. Understanding how they apply to us in relevant and practical ways has its challenges. So, how do we do it? How do

we get from a set of books written almost two millennia ago—in specific circumstances and to particular people—to how we live our lives today?

THE LETTERS: TWO PRINCIPLES

When it comes to the letters, two principles can help us navigate the tricky world of application. First, there's the "To Them/For Them" principle. This principle reminds us that not everything in the letters has an application for us today. There are some passages that were truly meant only for the original readers. Second Timothy 4:13 is a helpful example. Paul wrote to Timothy asking him to visit him. And "when you come," he wrote, "bring the cloak that I left with Carpus at Troas." There's nothing in this passage for us. So, while we might think applying the Scriptures means we have to draw some spiritual value from every verse, the truth is that's not necessary. By accepting that some verses weren't meant for us, we can better focus on those that are.

Second is the "Then, Always, Now" principle. We use this principle by asking three questions of the passage we're studying. Let's take 2 Timothy 3:16–17 as an example.

Looking back on the work we did yesterday, what do we know of what was going on in the passage *then*?

What do we read in these two verses that we recognize to be always true of all people, in all places, and in all times?

Finally, how should what is always true of all people, in all places, and in all times in this passage impact our lives right *now*? What does it invite us to believe about God? What does it challenge us to do in response to that belief?

REVELATION: HOPE

When it comes to Revelation, it may seem like application is beyond us. After all, the book often focuses on future events. How can we possibly apply something today that hasn't happened yet? As is the case with all things related to the book of Revelation, the key to application comes down to hope. We can apply our key Scriptures, Revelation 21:3–4, by asking:

How does the hope we have for Jesus's return impact how we love God and others?

How does this hope change the way we live our lives?

The way we face adversity?

The way we respond to setbacks and disappointments?

And finally, what can we do to share this hope with others in practical ways? How can our lives today be foretastes of the life that is to come?

Learning how to apply the Scriptures is a process. Thankfully, it's a process we don't have to undertake alone. God has given us a helper in the Holy Spirit to guide us and instruct us and a community in the church to hold us accountable.

**Praise God that, as Paul wrote, it is God who works
in us, “both to will and to work for his good pleasure.”**

Philippians 2:13
