

WORD

New Testament
Highlights:
The Acts and
the Epistles

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God's words are alive. He reveals Himself through them, and they transform us as we put our faith and confidence in Him and what He has said. These words are our lifeline; they sustain us and point us to Jesus. God says that if we align our thinking and lives with His Word, we'll be transformed from the inside out.

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Congratulations

on taking part in one of our

Local Bible Studies

We're glad that you have taken this step to increase your Biblical knowledge, understanding and confidence. We want to help you to develop your skills in reading God's Word, understand it in context, and apply your lives to it wholeheartedly.

The topics for each week will be:

Week	Subject	Reference
One	The Birth of the Church	Acts 1-7
Two	The Expansion of the Church	Acts 8-20 plus Galatians, James, 1 + 2 Thessalonians, 1 + 2 Corinthians and Romans
Three	The Discipleship of the Church	Acts 21-28 plus Colossians, Ephesians, Philippians, Philemon, 1 + 2 Timothy and Titus
Four	The Persecution of the Church	1 + 2 Peter, Hebrews and Jude
Five	The Maturation of the Church	1-3 John
Six	The Future of the Church	The Book of Revelation

Have fun and all the best on your journey!



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Using this personal study guide:

This Personal Study Guide has been created for use within your Local Bible Study. It will help direct your study, highlight key things for you to think about and allow room for your thoughts and notes. Feel free to make it yours! Let us share with you what to expect along the way.

What to expect from this Personal Study Guide

These Bible studies are designed to be largely inductive. By this, we mean that by their very nature they will be explorative, fairly open-ended and very discussion-led. We want you to actively engage with God's living Word, rather than sit there and be told to write down a bunch of things that you're likely to forget by the end of the night...

To help this, our learning philosophy is built around four key questions. Knowing this will help you get the best out of your Bible Study.

1. What do we already know?

You – yes, even you – know something about the Bible (it might be as little as that it is a big, dusty book on Grandma's shelf). But you know something. Bring what you know to the table. Start on a win.

2. What would you like to know?

You might want to know about a particular person or event – like when God rescued the Israelites from Egypt (what was all that about?). Or you might have a situation in your life that you'd like advice on, so you want to know what God says about it. All of us have something that we want to know, so don't be afraid to ask.

3. What does God want you to know?

What's your blindspot? What is it that you don't even know that you don't know? While it's good to go looking for specific answers to specific questions, the power of God's Word often lies in the element of surprise – the way it manages to teach you something that you didn't realise you still needed to learn, but God did.

4. What is going to change now?

We expect your life to change. The strength of today's reading is seen in tomorrow's actions. Make a decision to look for (and pray about) areas of your life that need to grow or die. The Word of God is alive and it can mess you up in so many good ways if you're prepared to let it change the way you think, speak and act.

What you will find in your Personal Study Guide

Your Personal Study Guide has been crafted to help you along your journey. The Old Testament is massive, and we could not hope to cover every single piece of interesting information. So we'll help you with the general storyline, and then focus in on bits that are particularly interesting.

Use these headings to help you:

The story...

Here we'll try to let you know the general story of what's been happening along the way. It's not exhaustive, but it will help you keep track of the action.

Focus in...

This is where we focus in on something that is particularly good for you to know. It might be a specific person or event, or any other highlight that you just have to know about.

Read...

Read the scripture. It's not rocket science.

Respond...

Jot down the ideas and thoughts that are by now probably flooding into your head.

Discuss...

Here's the chance to get into it. Chat. Share. Discuss. Maybe even argue (nicely). Just make sure it's ultimately encouraging.

Reflect...

Take a moment to reflect on what this means to you. You can get as deep and philosophical as you like.

Prelude to New Testament Highlights:

The Acts and the Epistles

We left our last study at the conclusion of the Gospels and the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Matthew had reminded us that Jesus was the new ruling King, Mark had finished dramatically with the ascension of Jesus, Luke left us waiting on edge for the Holy Spirit and John reminded us that though Jesus may part now, He will be back in full glory. The disciples were given the 'Great Commission' – to go into all the world teaching people, baptizing new believers and making disciples of Christ.

Our final study of the Word follows the historical story of the disciples as they take the message of Jesus into their communities and nations. It is a story that we now continue to this very day.

The second half of the New Testament is roughly divided into three types of writing. The Book of Acts is essentially historical journalism following the church as it spread from Jerusalem across the Mediterranean. We then have the 21 'Epistles', or letters, written to churches and church leaders. In general, these epistles were written during the same time period covered in the Book of Acts, and they cover the beliefs and behaviours in churches as they wrestle with what it means to follow Jesus and be a part of His Church. Finally, we have the Book of Revelation, a prophetic book that looks deep into future history and assures us that Jesus and His Kingdom will one day return in spectacular glory.

It is important to know that the books in the second part of the New Testament are not placed in chronological order in your Bible. Rather, they are arranged according to their literary style: the historical Book of Acts is first, the letters from the Apostle Paul are second, numerous other letters are next, letters from the Apostle John follow, and the futuristic Book of Revelation finishes the canon. You'll see a similarity here with the Old Testament order, where you'll remember that the historical books were placed first, the wisdom and prophetic books (which interpret the history) followed.

As we did with the Old Testament, this study will look at each book in their actual chronological order. This will help you place each piece of writing in their historical context and understand why they

were written. We'll use the Book of Acts as our historical base, diving in and out of the letters as and when appropriate. It's also important for you to know that, as with most ancient documents, pinpointing the exact time of writing can be difficult (some of our epistles have disputed dates and authorship). For this study, we're following the guidance found in the resources referenced at the beginning of this book and where there are any particularly interesting debates, we'll let you know along the way.

As our reading will take us through many, many epistles, it's important for us to take a few moments to understand the genre of the epistles – their style and features that make them different from other forms of writing. In our world, we are used to many types of writing and we recognize their characteristics quickly. For instances, we know stories have a beginning, middle and end and we expect them to have interesting and colourful characters – but we don't expect them to be scientifically accurate. Likewise we know recipes will have a detailed list of ingredients and step-by-step instructions, but we don't expect them to rhyme!

Knowing the genre of the epistles helps us to understand what we can expect from them – and importantly what we can't expect and what we shouldn't be looking for. Knowing their features is the first step in reading and interpreting them with integrity.

Keep these hints in mind when reading an epistle:

- Firstly, an epistle is a letter written by an actual, real life person. It almost sounds silly to say this, but a particular person in history wrote each letter. This person had a personal background, a unique salvation experience with Jesus and they wrote the letter under unique and varied circumstances. Some letters were written by men who were free, while others by men who were prisoners. Some were written by men who had walked alongside Jesus for years, others by men who had only a single, powerful meeting with the Lord.

So when you read an epistle, ask yourself:

- Who wrote this epistle?
- What do we know about this person?
- What do we know about their walk with Jesus?
- What do we know about the time and place of their writing?

- Secondly, an epistle is a letter written to an actual, real life person (or people).

Again, it borders on insulting to say this, but the epistle wasn't (we repeat, was NOT) written just for you to read each morning in a coffee shop over a latte. It was written to a real person (or group of people) who were experiencing the joys and struggles of their growing faith when the church was very, very young. Some of the people were growing and flourishing, some were under persecution. Some were individuals wanting to learn how to pastor a church, yet others were whole churches ready to implode under the weight of false teaching.

So when you read an epistle, ask yourself:

- Who was this epistle written to?
- What do we know about this person or people?
- What do we know about their spiritual health?
- What do we know about the time and place of their reading?
- Finally, an epistle only addresses the specific theological concerns and behaviours that were in question.

In our world, we love textbooks (well, some of us do). We love books that have been set out clearly, neatly summarizing all the knowledge that we know about a particular topic and updated daily as technology and knowledge advances (thanks Wikipedia...). But epistles are not like this (none of the Biblical books are). They aren't designed to show off every iota of the author's understanding of God or His Church. They aren't a 'What I Believe' statement, nor are they a collection of short, pithy quotes that can be accurately read outside of their historical and literary context. The epistles are letters that were usually written because a problem surfaced or a question was asked. It might be a church that is struggling to understand if they still need to follow the Old Testament laws, so someone writes a letter about how grace and the law fit together (hello, Galatians). Or there may have been a young leader trying to figure out how he is supposed to lead a church and share the weight of ministry now that the super-pastor is about to retire (hello, 1 and 2 Timothy).

So when you read an epistle, ask yourself:

- What made the author put pen to paper? Is there an overarching theme to his writing?
- What are the key beliefs and behaviours that he is explaining? What are the incidental beliefs and behaviours? (The first are really important; the second, not so much.)
- What knowledge did the readers have that I never will? What knowledge do I have that they didn't?

Most of these answers can be found if you give the letter a really good, thoughtful reading. Key details such as the author and recipient are usually found in the opening few verses. Ideas and themes can usually be found when you read the epistle all the way through in one sitting.

However, if you can't find the information that you are looking for, don't despair! It's unlikely that you're asking a question that no one else ever has – a good commentary or support book can help you. And this study is also a pretty good place to start.

Enjoy your study of the beginning years of the church of Jesus!

Please feel free to use this page for your notes

Week One

Topic: The Birth of the Church

My Preparation

The Book of Acts is Luke's sequel to his Gospel. It is frequently called "The Acts of the Apostles", as it details the early movements and missions of the first church leaders. However, its probably more accurate to call it "The Acts of the Holy Spirit", as it is the Holy Spirit who comes in power, fills the apostles as promised, and empowers them to preach the Gospel, demonstrate God's power through mighty miracles, and push the message of salvation through Jesus to the very ends of the earth.

Luke wrote this piece in approximately 60-62 AD and addresses it to Theophilus (the same recipient as Luke's Gospel). His record covers the first 30 years following Jesus' ascension and sees the Gospel spread geographically from Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria to Rome, just as Jesus had declared it would (Acts 1:8). In addition to a geographic spread, Luke shows the Gospel's growth over cultural and racial lines and provides the story of how God 'opened the door of faith to the Gentiles' (14:27) which (we must be quick to remember) is how you and I are able to access God's plan for salvation. In a way, the birth of the church is to the nations of the world what the Exodus was to the nation of Israel: freedom has been granted and is now available to all who call upon the name of the Lord.

At the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the apostles in Jerusalem, the church is born. Peter and John begin to preach boldly to the local Jewish crowds. The church explodes in size and the believers begin to form new communities, caring for one another, worshipping together and sharing their blessings. This infant church is not without opposition though, and the earliest church leaders are subject to beatings, imprisonment and even death.

Today's session looks at those first vital moments of the church, from the Holy Spirit's descent until the point where the opposition finally drives the church to scatter from its home in Jerusalem. It takes place over the course of a few years in the early 30s AD, and is recorded for us in the opening chapters of the Book of Acts.

Read

- Acts 1-7

Respond

Write down 2 or 3 things that came to mind as you read this passage. Include any questions that arise when you think about it closely.

Our Discussion

The story of the birth of the Church

Luke reports that in the 40 days between Jesus' resurrection and His ascension, He gathered His disciples together, telling them '...you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now' (Acts 1:5). The apostles inferred this as a sign of the imminent restoration of the Israelite kingdom, but Jesus reframed their interpretation and declared that the Holy Spirit's first activity would be to empower them to be His witnesses and to take the message of the Gospel to all peoples (1:8).

Less than a fortnight after Jesus' ascension, the apostles had come together to celebrate Pentecost. Also known as the Festival of First Harvest or the Feast of Weeks (see Exodus 23:16, Leviticus 23:15-21), Pentecost was a thanksgiving festival to celebrate the newly harvested crops ('Pentecost' means 'fiftieth', and is celebrated 50 days after Passover). Jewish men from across the Roman Empire were gathered in Jerusalem for this occasion, as becomes evident in Acts 1:5-11.

Luke records that during this gathering, the sound of a violent rushing wind filled the house and 'tongues as of fire' rested on each person. All were filled with the Holy Spirit and were given the ability to speak in other languages (Acts 2:1-4). The commotion must have caused quite a stir in the surrounding areas, as a crowd quickly developed. It is evident here that the 'other tongues' of 2:4 are real and authentic foreign languages, as we see that the foreign visitors remark that the disciples seem to be speaking in words that they can fully comprehend (2:11-12). The crowd demanded an explanation.

Focus in...

Peter (isn't it always Peter?) seizes the opportunity to preach the Gospel, humbly but boldly declaring to his Jewish listeners that this was a sign that God – through the death, resurrection and exaltation of Jesus – was fulfilling the prophecies of Joel and David, and was now pouring out His Spirit on all of mankind. Peter was speaking just weeks after the crucifixion of Jesus and just minutes from His tomb. Had the crowd wanted to investigate Peter's claims, they were perfectly placed to inspect the tomb or question other witnesses. But Peter's boldness in speaking to the crowds came from one simple truth: the tomb remained undeniably and unarguably empty, and multitudes of witnesses were willing to proclaim this!

Discuss...

- Pentecost is a festival of first fruits and first harvests. How is this related to the Holy Spirit experience at Pentecost?
 - Luke uses the imagery of wind and fire to explain the appearance of the Holy Spirit. How does this relate to other Biblical imagery of the appearance of God?
 - When the Holy Spirit moved, the chaos of multiple and unintelligible languages came, at least momentarily, to an end. How does this remind you of:
 - God's work in Genesis 1?
 - God's actions in Genesis 11?
 - God's promise in Isaiah 11:11?
 - How does Luke describe the response of Peter's listeners? How does this compare to your first response when you heard the message of Jesus?
 - What did Peter urge them to do? Write it here (yep, it's just that important).
-
-

And suddenly there came from heaven a noise like a violent rushing wind, and it filled the whole house where they were sitting.

ACTS 2:2



The story of the new community

The very first church grew from 120 people to over 3000 on the day of Pentecost. Luke describes for us how the new believers desired to be in a spiritual community with one another, encouraging one another in their faith and their fellowship. The informal community that marked Jesus' walk with His disciples is being continued by the Twelve.

Focus in...

The idea of the people of God living as a community before God is a recurrent theme throughout the Scriptures. Abraham and his family would be essentially treated as one entity under God's blessing (see Genesis 12), and the fate of the nation of Israel rose and fell as one (see Jeremiah 29). It can be tempting to want to retreat into our own personal walk with God and ignore the larger church body, but this is not God's intention for us. When God calls us to Him, He calls us to His people.

Discuss

- What were the four features of the Christian community recorded in Acts 2:42?
- How is this significant for us? How can our lives reflect this original community?

The story of increasing opposition

In the very earliest stages of the church, the community enjoyed good favour with their neighbours (Acts 2:47). The first Christians (the majority who were converted Jews) continued to worship in the Temple. Peter and John performed miracles and healings which left the crowds awe-struck (3:10) and God's blessing and the people's generosity ensured that there was no unmet need in the church (4:32-35). However, Peter's bold preaching saw many thousands of people repent and turn to Christ (4:4) and the apostle's preaching of the Gospel was beginning to catch the attention of the ruling Jewish leaders (4:1-22). The priests arrested the duo and held them overnight, but were frightened that keeping them imprisoned any longer would lead to a riot. With a threat of further punishment if they were caught again preaching the Name of Jesus, the leaders released Peter and John.

Never one to back down from a challenge and emboldened with love for the people, Peter continued preaching widely in the city and

bravely in the city's Temple. God verified his message with many signs and wonders (Acts 5:12), including the healing of multitudes (sometimes just by his passing shadow), the casting out of demons and the conversions of multitudes. After escaping miraculously from prison once (5:19), the duo were again dragged before the religious High Court and flogged (5:40).

Along with Peter and John, another disciple of Jesus that was seeing God's miraculous powers at work in his life was Stephen – a man described as being 'full of God's grace and power' (Acts 6:8). Stephen also came up against opposition and, when it was obvious that his detractors could not counter his wisdom and Spirit, they began to spread lies about his message. Just like his predecessors, Stephen was hauled before the Council and asked to refute the accusations.

It is at this point that Stephen launched into one of the most impressive, eloquent and historically-informed speeches recorded in all of Scripture. Rather than taking a defensive stance on his faith, Stephen went on the offensive with a coherent, logical and striking summary of God's work in history (Acts 7:1-53).

Focus in...

It is likely that we all will come across times where our faith is being called into question. Whether we are sharing our faith with friends or family, or having our behaviours and beliefs questioned by skeptical onlookers, a strong conviction of what we believe (and why!) is paramount. Stephen's response should be simultaneously encouraging and challenging for us all.

Discuss...

Read Stephen's response to the accusations in Acts 7:2-53.

- Stephen was accused of blaspheming in the Temple. How did he respond to this? What was the primary point Stephen was trying to make about the Temple? (Hint: see verses 49-50.)
- Who were the three key Biblical people discussed by Stephen?
 - _____
 - _____
 - _____
- What was the primary point (about Jesus) that Stephen was trying to make by raising these people? (Hint: see verse 52.)

- Thoughtfully consider the boldness and assertiveness of Stephen's response to his accusers. How could this positively impact the way that you respond to sceptics and critics of your faith?

The story of the scattered church

The Jewish leaders did not look favourably upon Stephen's courageous monologue. Infuriated that he was now placing them on trial, they rushed him, dragged him out of the city and stoned him (the accepted penalty for blasphemy, see Leviticus 24:14). With the hurling of the fatal rock, Stephen became the first known Christian to die (become 'martyred') because of his faith in Jesus and his refusal to recant his convictions. His final words echoed the final words of his Saviour.

After Stephen's martyrdom, the wave of goodwill towards the Christians spun into a surge of persecution (Acts 8:1). Fleeing from their homes and livelihoods, the believers scattered themselves throughout the surrounding regions of Judea and Samaria. Those that remained risked being imprisoned (8:3) by marauding squads (led by a man called Saul of Tarsus – we'll see more of him in the next session). The first of many outpourings of hate and oppression against the Body of Christ had begun.

Focus in...

For many of us who have grown up in a relatively "comfortable" Western Christianity, the idea of being persecuted because of our faith in Jesus is a foreign concept. But the reality is that the persecution of the Christian Church has been a close prospect for much the last 2000 years. Though there have been times when the Church has enjoyed (and sometimes abused) indubitable favour and power in some sections of the world, there have also been countless times when our brothers and sisters in Christ have been reviled, abused and even martyred because they – just like us – have chosen to carry the name 'Christ-follower'.

Prayer...

Take some time as a group to pray for the persecuted church worldwide. Thank God for their courage and ask Him to protect them and provide for them. Pray for those who are seeking to bring aid and relief (both physical and spiritual) to them, that their paths might be made straight. Ask for God's mercy upon the leaders of the persecutors, that they too might repent and receive His forgiveness.

And finally, pray for strong local churches to rise among the chaos and for Jesus' Name to be declared above all.

“Remember the prisoners, as though in prison with them, and those who are ill-treated, since you yourselves also are in the body.”
(Hebrews 13:3).

Reflect...

- What is 'profitable' for us from today's readings?
- What truths have we learnt? How have we been corrected?
How will you outwork what you have learnt?
- What is the game-changer? Write it in 10 words or less.



Please feel free to use this page for your notes

Week Two

Topic: The Expansion of the Church

My Preparation

As persecution spread the fledgling church into the surrounding districts and regions, the Holy Spirit empowered the scattered church to continue spreading the Gospel message. Samaria (the half-Jewish neighbours) are reached by Philip, whose strong message was supported by miraculous displays of God's power (Acts 8:4-8). In hearing his success, Peter and John quickly travel to join him and support his work. As they laid hands on the Samaritans the Holy Spirit moves again, showing that the power of the Gospel is now realised beyond the walls of that initial Jewish community.

Peter's ministry in Samaria quickly supersedes Philip's, and he is even witness to the resurrection of a beloved community member, a lady called Tabitha (Acts 9:36-43). In Caesarea, he meets a local Roman centurion and preaches the message of the Cross to his household (Acts 10:24-48). As Peter preaches, the Holy Spirit makes a third remarkable appearance, falling upon this group of Gentiles. It seems now that the power of the Gospel and the Person of the Holy Spirit is active in the Jewish (Acts 2:1-13), half-Jewish (8:17), and Gentile (10:44-48) communities. The door to salvation through Jesus Christ – as prophesied by Isaiah (42:1, 49:6) – is now extended to all corners of the earth. Significant churches are now based in both Jerusalem and Antioch (a city close to where modern Turkey and Syria meet).

By Acts 12, roughly fifteen years has passed since the Ascension, and the persecution of this first community of believers continues. Ruling northern Palestine on behalf of Rome was the insecure (and arguably incompetent) King Herod Agrippa I (grandson of Herod the Great, who you remember from the birth of Jesus). To solidify his rule in the eyes of the Jewish population, he too began to persecute the Christians. He sent for the apostle James and had him executed (Acts 12:2), and shortly after he had Peter imprisoned (12:3). It was a short-lived jail term – an angel was sent to lead Peter to freedom (12:9). The king is soon struck down and killed – or more accurately, he was “consumed with worms and died...” (12:23).

From Acts 12:25, the evangelism of the Gospel changes its primary focus. The mission work of Peter, James and John (mostly to the

Jews) now takes a secondary role and the primary missionary focus becomes the Gentiles in Asia Minor (what we know roughly as the areas around modern Turkey, Greece and Italy). The missionary baton is passed to Saul of Tarsus (we told you we'd come back to him). This session is going to be primarily focused on the work and writings of Saul (who we learn is also known as 'Paul', in Acts 13:9) as he takes the Gospel message from Damascus in Syria and spreads it across the northern reaches of the Mediterranean Ocean. Along the way he pens thirteen letters that will eventually become part of the Bible (in fact, they become two-thirds of the New Testament).

The vast majority of Christians would hold Paul to be the single-most significant figure in history when it comes to the interpretation of the Person and Work of Jesus Christ. His insight into the meaning and application of salvation – available to all by grace and through faith – is as profound as it is pervasive. His theological and doctrinal writings, as found in his epistles, tower above anything else that Christian thought has offered in the last two thousand years. His leadership, influence, and legacy led to the formation of multiple churches in his day and continues to influence churches worldwide even today.

Paul, even as a mere human, is truly in a league of his own.

Read...

- Acts 9 – 20:3

Respond...

Write down 2 or 3 things that came to mind as you read these passages. Include any questions that arise when you think about it closely.

Our Discussion

The story of Paul's conversion

Our journey with Saul/Paul actually begins before end of the ministry of Peter, James and John. Though it's difficult to say with complete confidence, most Bible scholars would agree that Paul was born at around the same time as Jesus. We do know with some certainty that he grew up in a devout Jewish family in the city of Tarsus – a large and influential city on the south-east coast of modern Turkey. Paul himself identifies as being both a thoroughly Jewish man (Philippians 3:5) and a rightful Roman citizen (Acts 16:37). He studied under the Rabbi Gamaleil (Acts 22:3), a highly respected teacher who would have given Paul an extensive education in literature, philosophy and ethics.

Luke tells us at the end of Acts 7:58 that Paul, as a zealous and ardent Jew, was a supportive witness to the execution of Stephen and an early leader in the persecution of the Christians (8:1-3). Seeking to arrest and imprison Christians, Paul made his way to the synagogues in Damascus. His life, however, was to perform a dramatic 180-degree turn along the way when he was confronted by the very Person of the risen Christ. This would have occurred roughly around 35 AD, and you can read it again in Acts 9:1-19.

Focus in...

The conversion of Paul is miraculous in both its means (a supernatural appearance of God) and its message (that a persecutor of Christians can become saved). The second point is driven home by the number of Christians who were still too scared to associate with him after his conversion: Ananias initially objected to God's command to meet with him (Acts 9:13) and the believers in Jerusalem thought his conversion was a fraud, possibly to cause them more harm (9:26). In fact, Paul needed the help of Barnabas, a respected Jewish convert (see 4:36) to convince the other Christians that he was a changed man (Acts 9:27).

Discuss...

- Paul wasn't just a failed Christian, he was fervently opposed to the work of God. Yet God chose to redeem Paul and use him as a unique servant anyway. How many other people in Scripture would you place in this "failure, but saved and used by God anyway" list? What does this tell you about the character of God?

- Think about Paul’s salvation experience. It has been said that ‘more is written of what Paul said and did because he was saved than what Paul said and did before he was saved.’ What do you think this means? What can you learn from this observation?
- Share your “conversion experience” with the group. What are the similarities in each story? What are the differences? What should be the essential similarities?

The story of Paul’s First Journey

Following Paul’s conversion, he immediately begins preaching about Jesus in the synagogues of Damascus. Like many before him, he is rejected by the Jewish leaders and is driven from the city. Luke then records that Paul arrived in Jerusalem (Acts 9:26), but we have good reason to believe that there was a period of three years between Paul leaving Damascus and arriving in Jerusalem (see Paul’s own writing in Galatians 1:13-18). When Paul and Barnabas had finished their mission to Jerusalem they head north to the church in Antioch (12:25). It is here that the Holy Spirit instructs the church to set apart the two to become missionaries to the nearby nations.

This trip, known now as ‘Paul’s First Missionary Journey’, saw Paul and Barnabas (with help initially from John Mark, who went on to write the second Gospel of the New Testament) travel from Antioch of Syria to Cyprus (an island in the Mediterranean), Pamphylia (the southern coast of modern Turkey) and Galatia (a large region covering central modern day Turkey). At first, their method of evangelism was to preach in the town synagogues (see Acts 13:14). Though they saw fervent interest and repentance in some cities (13:44), they began to be met with increasingly fierce opposition by the local Jewish leaders (13:45), which led the missionaries to follow God’s greater call of witnessing to the Gentiles (13:46).

Because of his bold testimony of Jesus, Saul the persecutor became Paul the persecuted. Those who rejected his message of salvation through Jesus Christ tried to stop and harm him. In one city, the locals planned to stone Paul and Barnabas (Acts 14:5). But God spared him, and he was able to see churches founded in many of the towns visited in this first journey. He and Barnabas ensured that elders were established to care for these congregations, before they returned home to Antioch of Syria, where they gave a report to their church on their successful journey (14:21-28).

For while we were still helpless, at the right time Christ dies for the ungodly. For one will hardly die for a righteous man; though perhaps for the good man someone would dare even to die. But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.

ROMANS 5:6-8



In summary, Paul's First Missionary Journey happened between approximately 47 and 49 AD, covered approximately 1200 miles and saw four churches planted (Pisidian Antioch, which is not to be confused with Syrian Antioch, Iconium, Lystra and Derbe). Luke records it for us in Acts 13 and 14.

Focus in...

Paul's early missionary work to the Gentiles was enormously blessed by God and as a result four new churches were planted as people heard the Gospel. Yet Paul's preaching seemed to raise as many questions as it did provide answers. Many of the first believers were converted Jews, the church was centered in Jerusalem, and it's "founder" was a Jew. For many, this seemed to indicate that Gentiles should become fully Jewish in order to be fully part of the Christian faith. Some leaders in the new churches even attacked some of Paul's teaching. Upon hearing this, Paul reacted strongly and sought to show that the new believers were becoming part of the Christian church, not the Jewish religion.

The Book of Galatians is believed by many to be Paul's first response to set the record straight. Written in approximately 49 AD (though this is debated by some), this was a circular letter that was to be distributed amongst all of the churches that had been built following his first journey. Responding to those who criticized his preaching, Paul uses this letter to both vigorously defend his credentials to preach (Galatians 1:11-24) and to reassert the Gospel message of salvation through faith – and not by obedience to the Jewish law, which Paul declares is a 'different gospel' (1:6).

Discuss...

Paul's letter to the Galatians is an exemplary defense of the true Gospel of Jesus, and exposes the marks of a false gospel. Use the following verses to help you identify the marks of a true and false message, according to Paul.

True Gospel:

Galatians

1:11-12 _____

2:20 _____

3:14 _____

3:21-22 _____

3:26-28 _____

5:24-25 _____

False Gospel:

Galatians

2:21 _____

3:12 _____

4:10 _____

5:4 _____

The story of church's first great debate

While Paul and Barnabas were back in Antioch of Syria, Luke tells us that men from Judea arrived and began teaching the church that the men had to be circumcised according to the law of Moses in order to be saved (Acts 15:1). Unsurprisingly, Paul and Barnabas vehemently disagreed with them. Seeking to get to the very root of the matter, the duo travelled to the primary founding church in Jerusalem to meet with the leaders and believers there. This meeting, where Paul and Barnabas met with Peter, James and the Jerusalem church to resolve the argument on whether the new believers needed to follow the Jewish Law, is known as the 'Jerusalem Council'.

The Jerusalem Council (50 AD) sought to answer the great doctrinal question: 'What must a person do to be saved?' Peter and James both offer passionate defenses of salvation by faith (Acts 15:7-11 and 13-21), while Barnabas and Paul described how God had been moving miraculously among the Gentiles (15:12). At the conclusion of the gathering, the church leaders wrote a letter to the churches of their consensus. You can read their conclusions in Acts 15:23-29.

The Jerusalem Council became a precedent and model for how the church handled doctrinal matters. At various times in history, the church's leaders have met to wrestle with matters of faith and creed. Their conclusions – particularly from the councils of Nicea in 325 AD and Chalcedon in 451 AD – have rippled across the centuries and continue to influence us today.

The story of Paul's Second Journey

Sometime after Paul and Barnabas returned to Antioch, they decided to return to the churches they had planted earlier and strengthen them in their faith. Unfortunately, the two argued on who should travel with them (Barnabas wanted John Mark, but Paul disagreed sharply and refused to travel with him) and they ended parting ways. Barnabas took to the waters and travelled with John Mark to Cyprus, while Paul remained on land and travelled north with Silas to Asia Minor (Acts 15:36-41). Through God's providence this split became a blessing, as there were now two missionary teams travelling the land.

Paul's visit to Derbe was followed by a visit to Lystra, and in Acts 16:1-2 we read that Paul meets a young disciple named Timothy (we'll see more of Timothy later, so remember this point). As they travelled up through Asia Minor, God redirects their journey and leads Paul to cross the sea and continue his mission into Macedonia and Greece, stopping and founding churches in the cities of Philippi and Thessalonica. In Philippi, an angry mob forms after Paul and Silas free a young slave girl from a demon (Acts 16:16-21) and the duo are captured, stripped, beaten and imprisoned (16:22-24). Despite their incarceration, God heard their praises from the jail cell and He caused an earthquake to shake the prison, break their chains and release the doors. At first the guard thought the duo had escaped, and was preparing to kill himself, but Paul and Silas approach him and share their testimony. After believing the testimony of the apostles, the jailer lets Paul and Silas walk free (16:25-40).

Continuing south through Greece, Paul and Silas resume their preaching in the towns and synagogues. Upon reaching Athens (the cultural and philosophical epicenter of Greece since the times of Socrates, Plato and Aristotle 400 years earlier), Paul preaches a remarkable message to an inquisitive crowd (Acts 17:16-34). Despite the Athenians fervor for worshipping their gods, Paul saw the city as the culmination of lost humanity, adrift in pagan idolatry and doomed without the message of Christ. Shortly after his preaching in Athens, Paul heads west to the city of Corinth and stayed there for 18 months, preaching and teaching to the local community (Acts 18:1-11).

During his stay, he hears reports about how the churches he had visited are doing. Before he returns to Antioch (via the cities of Ephesus and Jerusalem) he decides to write a letter to the church in Thessalonica.

Focus in...

The Book of 1 Thessalonians is Paul's first letter to a specific church and was written in 51 AD. The city of Thessalonica was the capital of Macedonia and was a major hub for political and commercial activity. We know from Acts 17 that when Paul first visited Thessalonica he spent a great deal of time reasoning with the people about Christ's suffering and resurrection. It seems that the believers are being persecuted, but are holding strong. This heartens Paul and he writes a letter of encouragement to them. It also is possible that one of the congregation has died, as Paul offers a significant part of the letter to address this question (see 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18). The much-discussed issue of the "rapture" (the possibility that, at some point in the future, all Christians will be lifted from earth to meet Christ in the heavens) comes largely from 4:17 (along with 1 Corinthians 15:51-54), just in case you were wondering...

While Paul is still in Corinth, he hears back that his first letter to the church in Thessalonica has been well received, but there has been a misunderstanding about Jesus' return (see 2 Thessalonians 2:2). To clarify this issue, Paul quickly writes another letter – the Book of 2 Thessalonians – to address the misunderstanding and give further instructions.

Following his letters to the Thessalonians, Paul returns to Antioch. In summary, Paul's Second Missionary Journey happened between approximately 50 and 52 AD, covered approximately 2800 miles and saw four churches planted (Philippi, Thessalonica, Berea and Corinth). Luke records it for us in Acts 15:40 to 18:23.

The story of Paul's Third Journey

Though around fifty years of age (which is considered quite elderly for the time), Paul once again sets off from Antioch to visit and encourage the churches in Asia Minor (Acts 18:23). He also travels to Ephesus, a major city on the very Western edge of modern day Turkey.

Paul spent three months here and his visit included powerful preaching (19:8), remarkable miracles (19:11) and a revival among followers of the occult (19:18-19).

When in Ephesus, Paul hears several alarming reports about the church in Corinth. It's time for him to once again address the problems of a fledgling church.

Focus in...

The church of Corinth was located in southern Greece, about 45 miles west of Athens. The city was on a key transport peninsula and controlled much of the trade routes of region, prospering its citizens and economy. Despite its fortune (or perhaps because of it), the city of Corinth soon became infamous for its moral corruption and debauchery. The city boasted a temple to Aphrodite, the Greek goddess of love, and the temple employed over a thousand temple priestesses – essentially religious prostitutes. The city was morally and religiously perverted and its perhaps surprising that a church even existed there at all. Nevertheless, the ungodliness of the metropolis was creeping into the lives of the church members. Paul's letters to the Corinthians tackles the sin problems creeping into what should be the redeemed Body of Christ.

Discuss...

- Paul recognized that in a city such as Corinth, there would be people leading unholy lives. What is Paul's advice in dealing with sin outside of the church, and how does it differ from dealing with sin inside the church? (Read 1 Corinthians 5:9-13)
- What kind of activities does Paul rebuke in 1 Corinthians 6:9-10? What can we learn from his comments in verse 11?
- Paul makes an interesting observation in 1 Corinthians 6:12. What does this tell us about how the Corinthians may have (mis) understood the message of grace?
- What message does this have for us today?

After two years in Ephesus, Paul felt compelled by the Spirit to return to Macedonia and Achaia before returning to Jerusalem (Acts 19:21). He was seen off in true apostolic style (a riot in Ephesus over his preaching that the wooden idols were not actually divine...) and he made his way to Macedonia. The troubles of the Corinthian church were still to be settled, however, and Paul hears that false teachers were arising in the church, slandering his name and his doctrine. So Paul again writes to the unsettled Corinthian church. The Book of 2 Corinthians is written in approximately 55-56 AD and through it Paul hoped to encourage the struggling church, reaffirm his credentials as an apostle and confront head-on the teaching of his slanderers. In all, Paul visited the Corinthian church at least three times (when he founded the church, following 1 Corinthians, and following 2

Corinthians) and wrote perhaps as many as four letters to them, two which are in the Bible and two which, sadly, were lost (you can see references to these two letters in 1 Corinthians 5:9 and 2 Corinthians 2:4).

The story of Paul's 'Great Gospel'

As he made his way home to Syria, Paul stopped again in Greece, where he stayed for three months during winter (Acts 20:2-3). While in Greece, Paul hears reports of the church in Rome which had presumably been founded by believers who had been converted in Jerusalem on the Day of Pentecost and returned home to Rome with the good news. Paul had longed to visit this church (see Acts 19:21), but as of yet he hadn't made it that far west. Paul decides to write a letter of encouragement and instruction to the church in Rome.

Focus in...

The Book of Romans is considered by many to be Paul's definitive theological discourse, sometimes referred to as 'The Gospel according to Paul'. It is not just the most lengthy of Paul's letters, but it also presents the most complete summary of Paul's thoughts on the Gospel of grace, fundamental Christian beliefs and accepted behaviours for those carrying the Name of Christ.

Written in approximately 56 AD, the letter to the Romans is also unique in that it is Paul's only letter to a church that he had never met. Rather than penning a criticism or response to false teaching or erratic behavior, Paul's letter to Rome is a profoundly simple outline of the Gospel. Rome was the capital and most influential city in the Roman Empire, and with a population estimated to be over a million people (the largest city in history at that point in time), Rome boasted extraordinary wealth, magnificent buildings and cultural superiority. As with many cities though, astonishing affluence melded with both religious depravity and economic turmoil for the masses. Impoverished slums surrounded the city and the slave trade thrived. A life of peasant servitude was a reality for much of the population.

Nevertheless, a thriving church was blossoming in this great city, and Paul takes the opportunity to declare that the 'righteous man shall live by faith.' (Romans 1:17)

Discuss...

- We remember that the word ‘gospel’ literally means ‘good news’. How would you summarise the good news that Paul is declaring in Romans 1:1-17?
- Paul states that he is ‘not ashamed’ of the Gospel (1:16). Why does he have to declare this? In what ways could the Gospel be ‘shameful’?
- Paul outlines God’s plan for our lives in Romans 8:29-30. Look at this plan closely. What does it mean?

‘For those He foreknew...’

‘...He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son...’

‘...so that He would be the firstborn among many bretheren...’

‘... and these He predestined, He also called...’

‘... and these He called, He also justified...’

‘... and these whom He justified, He also glorified.’

After writing his letter to the church in Rome, Paul begins to make his way home, stopping at many of the cities that he had previously ministered in and collecting an offering for the church of Jerusalem (you can see Paul's references to this offering in 1 Corinthians 16:1-4, 2 Corinthians 8-9 and Romans 15:25-28). This draws Paul's Third Missionary Journey to a conclusion. In total, this journey covered approximately 1375 miles between 54 and 57 AD and saw one major church planted in Ephesus (some of Paul's colleagues planted other churches during this time) and six Biblical letters penned. Luke records this journey for us in Acts 18:23-21:17.

Paul wasn't the only apostle penning letters during the time we have covered today. At some stage (mostly scholars say between 44 and 49 AD, though some date this letter as late as 60 AD), Jesus' half brother James writes a letter of support and encouragement to his Jewish brothers who had come to know Christ. His letter was addressed to converts who had been 'scattered' (James 1:1), possibly following Stephen's martyrdom (Acts 7; 31-34 AD) or the persecution of Herod Agrippa I (Acts 12; 44 AD). James' letter addresses the concerns over how faith in Christ affects one's behavior and encourages the readers to live Godly lives of action blossoming out of their faith – 'faith, if it has not works, is dead' (James 2:17). His writing is distinctly Jewish in style, and unsurprisingly, contains many references to the Old Testament (see James 2:21-25; 5:11) and Matthew's Sermon on the Mount (see James 1:2 and Matthew 5:10-12; 1:4 and 5:48; 1:5 and 7:7-11; 1:9 and 5:3; 4:10 and 5:3-5; 5:2-3 and 6:19 as examples). James' letter is a punchy, no-holds-barred exhortation that our beliefs must birth our behaviours, and our character must control our conduct.

Reflect...

What is 'profitable' for us from today's readings?

What truths have we learnt? How have we been corrected?

How will you outwork what you have learnt?

What is the game-changer? Write it in 10 words or less.



Please feel free to use this page for your notes

Week Three

Topic: The Discipleship of the Church

My Preparation

The Apostle Paul was now entering late age, but his enthusiasm to preach the Gospel and support the churches was not waning. On his way down to Jerusalem to deliver his collection for them, Paul is met by a prophet named Agabus who warns him that upon his arrival in Jerusalem he would be captured by the Jewish leaders and turned over to the Roman authorities (Acts 21:1-14). Yet Paul's faith and drive was relentless and he gathered his things and continued on the journey.

The final chapters of the Book of Acts chronicle the unfolding of this prophecy as Paul is indeed arrested by the Jewish leaders and turned over to the Roman authorities, eventually finding himself in a Roman prison. One week after arriving in Jerusalem, some local Jewish men accuse Paul of teaching against the Mosaic Law and defiling the Temple by permitting Gentiles to enter. A mob quickly forms around him and attempts to beat him to death, but is only stopped by the intervention of the Roman commanders (Acts 21:26-36).

Paul pleads his defence before both the Roman commander and the Jewish mob. He summarises his background as a Jew and his encounter with Jesus. The crowd reluctantly listens to his testimony – until he declares his intention to preach the Gospel to the Gentiles. At this point, they reject him outright and roar that he isn't fit to live, so he is dragged off by the centurion and prepared to be lashed with whips (Acts 21:37-22:24). Remember though, Paul is an intelligent man. He makes it clear to the Roman soldiers that he too was a Roman citizen and they dare not whip him without a due trial.

The soldiers return Paul to be tried before the Sanhedrin (the Jewish High Council), but even they can't come to an agreement on his guilt. For his own safety, Paul is sent back to the Roman fortress. He is then required to appear before a procession of increasingly powerful authorities: Felix, the Roman governor in Judea who places Paul under guard for two years (Acts 24); Festus, Felix's replacement who hears Paul's request to appeal to Caesar in Rome (Acts 25); and King Herod Agrippa II, the ruler of northern and eastern Palestine who was prepared to let Paul go, but had to uphold Paul's appeal to Caesar (Acts 25:23-26:32). After two years of local imprisonment, Paul sets sail for Italy (Acts 27:1).

Read...

- Acts 20:3-28:31

Respond...

Write down 2 or 3 things that came to mind as you read this passage. Include any questions that arise when you think about it closely.

Our Discussion

Following months at sea, a shipwreck and a sojourn on the island of Malta, Paul arrives in Rome in approximately 61 AD. Many of the Roman church community come to greet him: four years ago he had written to them and expressed his desire to visit, but few would have imagined that his visit would be as a prisoner of Caesar! He is held under house arrest, and guarded closely by a Roman soldier (Acts 27-28:16).

For the next two years, Paul is able to receive guests, and preach and teach from within his house. The Gospel continues to advance, as Paul preaches to people in person, teaches the churches through his letters and disciples church leaders through his writings. Today's session will focus on the letters that Paul wrote to churches and church leaders while imprisoned in Rome between 61 and 62 AD.

The story of Paul's prison letters to the churches and church leaders

Churches throughout Asia Minor were still wrestling with what it meant to have faith in Christ and separate from the Jewish traditions, and they sought out Paul for his advice. Epaphras, one of the leaders of the church in Colosse, is so troubled by the increasingly mystical teaching in the church there, that he personally visited Paul in Rome to request help. He brings with him not only a report from the Colossians, but one from the church in Philippi as well. When he arrived at Paul's place in Rome, Epaphras updated Paul with his report from the churches. Paul also had another visitor in Rome:

Onesimus, a runaway slave. Though it's hard to say exactly how they crossed paths, we know that once Paul met Onesimus, he quickly led Onesimus to Christ.

Paul then drafted letters of encouragement and instruction to three churches in Colosse, Philippi and Ephesus. He also wrote a letter of support for Onesimus and sent it to his former master, Philemon. These four letters are known as the 'Prison Epistles'.

Focus in...

The city of Colosse was a city in the west of Asia Minor (modern day Turkey). A once-prosperous city, Colosse had been in decline since trade paths had been rerouted to bypass the city. A church had been founded there during Paul's three-year ministry in Ephesus (Acts 19) and was populated with both converted Gentiles and former Jews.

Church members in Colosse were being taught that they could experience the "fullness" of a union with God by observing the ceremonial laws of the Old Testament, through visions and angelic visitations and by handling only "clean" foods. This form of teaching appealed to both the former Jews and the former pagans in the congregation. Paul's letter to the Colossians, written in 61 AD, brings significant counterarguments to these false teachings in the church.

Discuss...

In the Book of Colossians, where can you find Paul making counterarguments against the following heresies (incorrect teachings about God and the Christian faith):

- One must follow ceremonies, rituals and restrictions in order to be perfected.
- Angels should be worshipped.
- Christ could not be both human and divine.
- That there is "secret knowledge" that can be obtained about God's plan.
- We can obtain union with God through certain practices.

Focus in...

The city of Philippi was the site of one of the most famous events in Roman history. In 42 BC the forces of Antony and Cleopatra defeated those of Brutus and Cassius at the Battle of Philippi, ending the era of the Roman Republic and ushering in the era of the Roman Empire.

Philippi became a Roman colony (see Acts 16:12): instead of reporting to the provincial government, citizens of Philippi had the same rights as those in Italy. They used Roman law, adopted Roman customs and enjoyed a privileged status as Roman citizens.

The church in Philippi, founded by Paul during his Second Missionary Journey (Acts 16:12-40), was the apostle's first church in Europe and held a special place in his heart. Paul's letter to his friends in Philippi is decidedly joyful and carries all of the hallmarks of a close bond between the author and his audience. With little need for correction in this church, Paul uses the opportunity to encourage them to follow him in one single endeavor – the pursuit of Christlikeness.

Discuss...

Paul's encouragement to the Philippians is to have the same attitude as Christ. What does this mean? Use Paul's description in Philippians 2:5-11 to help guide your answer.

Focus in...

Similar to the Philippians, the church in Ephesus had a special place in Paul's heart. Founded under the ministry of an exceptionally talented couple, Priscilla and Aquila (see Acts 18:26), Paul had spent three years with the church during his third journey. After Paul's departure, the young Timothy pastored it for around 18 months. The earliest manuscripts omit the word 'Ephesus' from 1:1, suggesting that the letter to the Ephesians was first a circular letter written to encourage multiple churches and build their understanding of the church being Christ's Body.

Discuss...

The first two chapters of Ephesians unveil the remarkable blessing of the gift of salvation offered by God. Use the first two chapters to finish the following statements:

But God, in His mercy, did this:

...having been buried with Him in baptism, in which you were also raised up with Him through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead.

COLOSSIANS 2:12



PINE

And now, we are this:

Focus in...

Philemon was a prominent and wealthy member of the church in Colosse. He had been saved under the ministry of Paul and his life had been fruitful for God. Philemon once owned a slave named Onesimus (who we've already met), who had stolen money from his master and fled to Rome. We know that the paths of Paul and Onesimus cross, and Onesimus receives the Gospel.

Paul encourages Onesimus to return home, and offers a letter to Philemon as a plea for mercy. This short, beautiful letter is a historical example of intercession for a slave, but it carries significant parallels with the message of the Gospel.

Discuss...

- Why was it necessary for Paul to intercede for Onesimus?
- Without Paul's intercession, what was due to Onesimus?
- What is Paul's request? Why does Paul think that Philemon should accept his request?
- How does Paul handle the debt that Onesimus owed Philemon?
- What parallels can you see between Onesimus' salvation story and ours?

The story of Paul's letters to church leaders

Luke finishes his Book of Acts by informing us that Paul had spent two years under house arrest in Rome. Paul's next steps are the source of much contention. Some say that he finally made his long-awaited trip to Spain (this thought is given some support by extra-Biblical historical writings), but the Bible doesn't record his movements after this first Roman imprisonment. The most likely scenario is that Paul made a final journey to a number of his churches, mentoring the younger generation of church leaders. It is during this time that he writes leadership letters to the young leaders, Timothy and Titus. These letters are less theological than they are practical: Paul guides the new leaders in living a life worthy of the honour of leadership in the Body of Christ, and offers practical advice on selecting other leaders and managing the functions of a church.

Paul's final writing, his second letter to Timothy written in approximately 66-67 AD, seems to come once more from behind the bars of a prison. His final letter to his beloved friend makes references to once again being in chains (2 Timothy 1:16, 2:9), probably under the persecution of the Emperor Nero. Unlike his optimism for release during his earlier imprisonment (see Philippians 1:19, 25-26; Philemon 22), this time Paul has no such hope (4:6-8). He is in a cold cell (4:13), felt abandoned by his friends (1:15; 4:9-12, 16) and desperately wants to see his friend Timothy before the cold of the winter sets in (4:21).

According to tradition, Paul remained in Roman custody until he suffered the martyrdom that he had foreseen to be his near fate (2 Timothy 4:6). We do not know whether Timothy made it in time to bring Paul, the church's greatest apostle and the carrier of the Holy Spirit's work to the nations, comfort in his last days.

Reflect...

What is 'profitable' for us from today's readings?

What truths have we learnt? How have we been corrected?

How will you outwork what you have learnt?

What is the game-changer? Write it in 10 words or less.



Please feel free to use this page for your notes

Week Four

Topic: The Persecution of the Church

My Preparation

In 54 AD, the reigning emperor of Rome, Tiberius Claudius Caesar Augustus Germanicus, died unexpectedly (though it was under reasonably suspicious circumstances). Power over the Roman Empire was handed to a young man, barely 17 years old, named Lucius Domitius Ahenobarbus – soon to become known as Emperor Nero, the fifth emperor of Rome. Nero's initial reign is celebrated for its generosity and clemency. His government forbade contests in the circus involving bloodshed; rather he inaugurated competitions in poetry, in the theatre, and in athletics as counterattractions to the gladiatorial combats. He banned capital punishment, reduced taxes, and gave permission to slaves to bring civil complaints against unjust masters. Nero himself pardoned writers of epigrams against him and even those who plotted against him. Unlike his predecessor Claudius who had put 40 senators to death, there were no such cases in Nero's early reign. He saw to it that assistance was provided to cities that had suffered disaster and, at the request of the Jewish historian Josephus, gave aid to the Jews.

His absolute power and freedom soon began to distract him from the task of ruling well, however. He began to focus his own personal attention to musical and artistic activities, and by the year 59 – 60 AD, the emperor was appearing in public musical performances. Needless to say, to the Romans these antics seemed to be scandalous breaches of civic dignity and decorum, and his credibility as a leader quickly began to wane.

The great fire that devastated Rome in 64 AD illustrates how low Nero's reputation had sunk by this time. The Roman populace believed that Nero himself had started the fire in Rome in order to make way for his own extravagant building projects. According to extra-Biblical historical sources, Nero tried to shift responsibility for the fire on to the Roman Christians, who seemed to make for an easy scapegoat.

The fallout of this accusation, according to the historian Tacitus, was catastrophic for the Christians in Rome:

Wherefore in order to allay the rumor he put forward as guilty, and afflicted with the most exquisite punishments those who were hated for their abominations and called 'Christians' by the populace. Christus, from whom the name was derived, was punished by the procurator Pontius Pilatus in the reign of Tiberius... They (the Christians under Nero) died by methods of mockery; some were covered with the skins of wild beasts and then torn by dogs, some were crucified, some were burned as torches to give light at night... whence commiseration was stirred for them, although guilty and deserving the worst penalties, for men felt that their destruction was not on account of the public welfare but to gratify the cruelty of one."

Tacitus, Annals xv.44

Many say that Emperor Nero was the first ruler to consciously sanction the systematic persecution of Christians. Though his tyranny was short lived (he died in 68 AD), he was the first of ten ruling Emperors who would reject, oppress and tyrannize the Christian church for the next 250 years.

The letters of 1 Peter, 2 Peter, Hebrews and Jude were all written in, or immediately following, the years of Nero's cruel reign. They are words of comfort and encouragement to a church in the midst of extreme suffering.

Read...

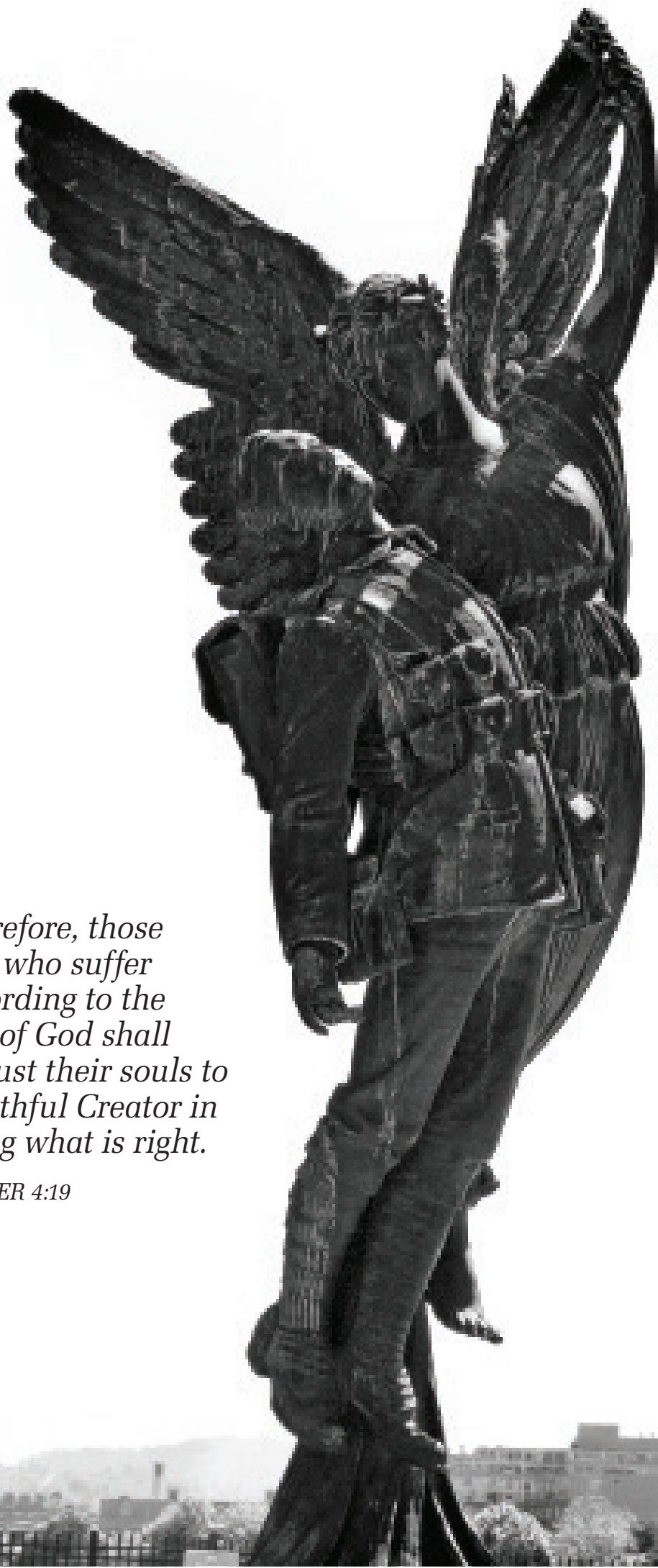
- 1 Peter, 2 Peter, Jude

Respond...

Write down 2 or 3 things that came to mind as you read these passage. Include any questions that arise when you think about it closely.

*Therefore, those
also who suffer
according to the
will of God shall
entrust their souls to
a faithful Creator in
doing what is right.*

1 PETER 4:19



Our Discussion

Our session today will cover four of the 'General Epistles'. Up to this point, we have covered only letters written by Paul. These four letters were written by other leaders of the early church, and were intended to be read by a more 'general' audience. The four letters are 1 Peter, 2 Peter, Hebrews and Jude.

These four letters were all written during the period from 64 – 70 AD, when the church was under increasingly severe persecution from Emperor Nero. Many of the believers had been scattered, and in the face of intimidation many of the Jewish converts may have begun to question their allegiance to Christ. The recipients of these four letters were largely Jewish believers and were encouraged to remain steadfast in their faith, be fortified by the supremacy of Jesus through all things, and pursue faithfulness in their doctrine and teaching.

Focus in...

Among the disciples of Jesus, Peter is probably the most recognised. A fisherman by trade, Peter instantly dropped his nets when Jesus spoke just two words: 'Follow Me' (Mark 1:17). He was brash and impulsive, and at times he seemed to speak first and think later. But Peter became one of the great apostles, confidently explaining the events on the Day of Pentecost to the curious crowds and boldly proclaiming the Gospel to a mostly Jewish audience in the early days of the church.

Thirty years after the Ascension of Christ, Peter finally gets the chance to write his own inspired letters. Both letters were probably written from Rome (which Peter refers to symbolically as 'Babylon' in 1 Peter 5:13). The first letter is a generic letter of encouragement and comfort to the Jewish Christians living throughout the Roman Empire: those who are beginning to see their lives turned upside down with fear and terror.

Discuss...

Try to place yourself in the conditions of the recipients of Peter's first letter. What would your responses be when you read the following passages?

- 1:3-12
- 2:13-17
- 2:18-25
- 3:13-22

- 4:12-19
- What does Peter have to say about the conduct of Christians in general?

Focus in...

Peter's second and final letter (written in approximately 67 – 68 AD) mirrors the warmth, compassion of Paul's final letter (2 Timothy). This is a fitting indication of this great man's realisation that his days were numbered and that the truth of the Gospel must endure beyond his death (tradition holds that Peter was martyred shortly after writing this letter, crucified upside down in Rome). Though his first letter largely addressed persecution (trial from outside of the church), this letter was written to warn believers about the dangers of a number of false teachers rising among them (trial from inside of the church).

Discuss...

Read 2 Peter 2:1-22, where Peter attacks the false teachers of his time.

What are the three most prominent warning signs of a false teacher?

1. _____ Verse: _____
2. _____ Verse: _____
3. _____ Verse: _____

- What can we learn from Peter's warning? What is significant for us today?

The story of Jude's letter

Jude, a half-brother of Jesus, was originally skeptical of Jesus' position as Messiah (John 7:1-9). From the Day of Pentecost though, Jude became a strong believer and a significant leader in the Jerusalem church following the Ascension. He was also one of the many active missionaries in the early church years (1 Corinthians 9:5). Jude had originally wanted to write a letter of encouragement about the believer's salvation in Christ, but chose instead to write a letter urging his readers to defend their faith against the ungodly teaching of some people in the church (Jude 1:3-4). It is difficult to say exactly who Jude's audience was (he just refers to them as 'friends'), but from the Old Testament references, we conclude that they were likely to be of Jewish background. Jude writes his letter in about 68 – 70 AD.

Discuss...

- What is the primary accusation that Jude has against the ungodly teachers in the church? (Hint: read verse 4).
- How does this compare with how Jude wanted his readers to live and act? (Hint: read verses 20-23).

The story of the Hebrew Letter

The letter to the Hebrews is where we will spend most of our time this session. Though all 39 of the Old Testament books were written to the Hebrew people, only one New Testament book was written specifically and uniquely for them – the Book of Hebrews. Another unique curiosity about this letter is the question over its authorship: we don't actually know who wrote it. Paul, Barnabas, Silas, Apollos, Luke, Philip, Priscilla, Aquila and Clement of Rome have all been proposed, but all suggestions remain inconclusive. The writer offers no introduction or greeting (which is usually seen in other letters), and simply identifies himself as one who has heard the Gospel, not from the Father or Son, but from another person (Hebrews 2:3). This makes dating somewhat difficult, but most would expect that this letter was written around 67 – 69 AD.

The letter is laden with Hebraic references: Abraham, Melchizedek, Moses, the Psalms, the covenant between God and Israel, the office of the High Priest, the Tabernacle, the Ark of the Covenant and the sacrificial system all make an appearance – and that is before we arrive at the spectacularly Jewish 'Hall of Faith' outlined in chapter 11. Recognising that his readers may be tempted to revert to Jewish practices under the threat of persecution (see Hebrews 10:32-39), the Book of Hebrews shows God's promise of hope through a better way.

Focus in...

We've already seen that the relationship of Christianity to Judaism was a critical issue in the early church. Twenty years before this letter, the Jewish leaders of the church were asking: 'What aspects of the Jewish life should be practiced by the Gentile converts?' (Remember the Council of Jerusalem in Acts 15?) In a way, the Book of Hebrews flips the question to ask: 'What aspects of the Gentile life should be practiced by the Jewish converts?' The answer, we shall see, is simple: faith in the supremacy of Christ alone, above all traditions and rituals. The author weaves a magnificent argument for the preeminence of Christ in all things. Jesus is supreme above any other

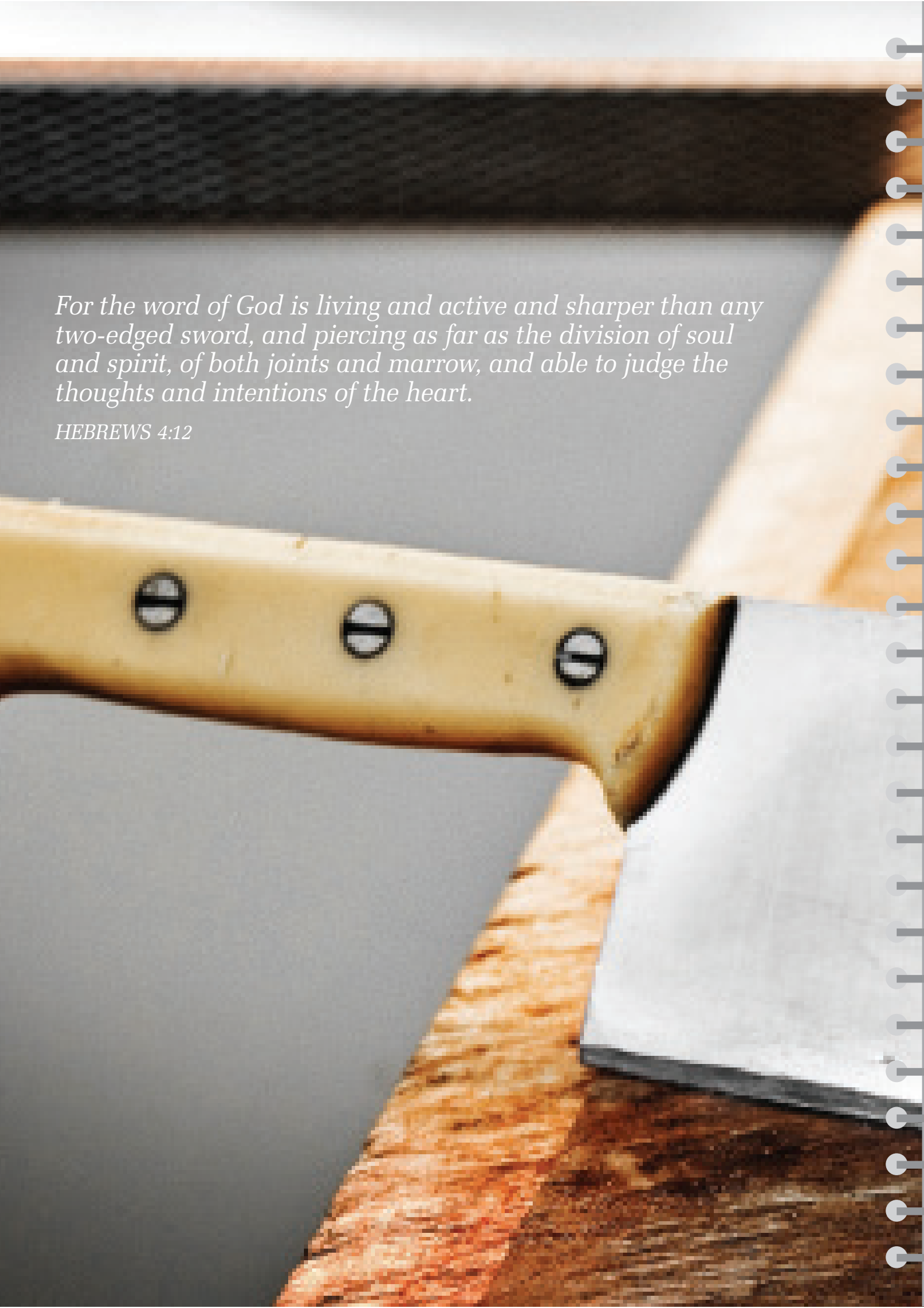
Reflect...

What is 'profitable' for us from today's readings?

What truths have we learnt? How have we been corrected?

How will you outwork what you have learnt?

What is the game-changer? Write it in 10 words or less.



For the word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart.

HEBREWS 4:12



Please feel free to use this page for your notes

Week Five

Topic: The Maturation of the Church

My Preparation

The decade of the 60s AD proved to be tumultuous on many fronts. While the Christians in Rome were facing an onslaught from the authorities, the Jews in Judea were planning their own uprising against the state. Small groups of Jews began to offer sporadic resistance against the occupying Romans, and they were met with severe countermeasures. In 66 AD, the Jews gathered in revolt and managed to expel the Romans from Jerusalem. A revolutionary government was set up and extended its influence throughout the whole country.

The Roman emperor Nero responded swiftly and dispatched Vespasian, a talented Roman general, to crush the rebellion. Titus (not Paul's mentee pastor, a different one) joined Vespasian and together the Roman armies entered Galilee to face Josephus (known widely as a historian) and the Jewish forces. After failed negotiations, the Jewish forces were overwhelmed and the Roman forces swept the country. Repercussions were harsh: by 70 AD the city of Jerusalem had fallen under the pressure of an impenetrable siege (where an army surrounds a city, preventing people, food and other goods from entering or leaving. Once a city is effectively seized, the likelihood that the population will soon succumb to starvation is almost certain).

The Jewish state disintegrates and the Temple (known earlier as the Second Temple or Zerubbabel's Temple from 515 BC) is torched, and then flattened, by the Roman army. Josephus describes the scenes of chaos and slaughter as the Romans swarm on Jerusalem:

“The slaughter within was even more dreadful than the spectacle from without. Men and women, old and young, insurgents and priests, those who fought and those who entreated mercy, were hewn down in indiscriminate carnage. The number of the slain exceeded that of the slayers. The legionaries had to clamber over heaps of dead to carry on the work of extermination.”

Josephus, ‘The War of the Jews’, VI.9.3

It is thought by Josephus that around one million people died in this first Roman-Jewish War, and he described the once-spectacular city of Jerusalem as no little more than a desert. Recalling the words of Jesus (recorded in Luke 21:20-24), the Christian population flees the city and is once again scattered throughout the surrounding regions (the first time following Stephen's martyrdom). The impact of this event on the Jewish community, and indirectly on the Christian community, was extraordinary.

The persecution of the Christians under Nero was reasonably short-lived, as he committed suicide in 68 AD. A series of passing emperors followed, but when Domitian became emperor in 81 AD, persecution of both Christians and Jews resumed. The Roman Empire would violently oppose the Christian Church from now until 325 AD. The final four books in our study of the Bible were written in the days of Domitian. The church is maturing beyond its initial formative years, the earliest converts were now established disciples of Christ, and the one remaining apostle, John, is now in his twilight years.

We have now completed 22 sessions of Bible study (remember when we started in Genesis all that time ago?) and this coming session will be slightly different from any that we have done before. By now you're a pro, ready to take on the world with your new-found confidence and knowledge. So it's time to show it.

For your preparation this week, you need to read, research and respond.

Read...

- 1 John, 2 John, 3 John

Research...

- Use a commentary, reference book or Internet search to help you understand the background information to each book. If you need some help to know where to start, the resources in the inside cover of this guide are helpful.

Use your research to prepare your own background notes for the questions we raised at the beginning of this study. Just to help your memory, they are written below.

Questions about the author:

- Who wrote this epistle?

- What do we know about this person?
- What do we know about their walk with Jesus?
- What do we know about the time and place of their writing?

Questions about the recipients:

- Who was this epistle written to?
- What do we know about this person or people?
- What do we know about their spiritual health?
- What do we know about the time and place of their reading?

Questions about the letter:

- What made the author put pen to paper? Is there an overarching theme to his writing?
- What are the key beliefs and behaviours that he is explaining? What are the incidental beliefs and behaviours? (The first are really important; the second, not so much.)
- What knowledge did the readers have that I never will? What knowledge do I have that they didn't? (This is a tough one, so it's kind of like a bonus question.)

Prepare your notes and thoughts so that when you next meet with your group, you can contribute confidently and enthusiastically to the discussion. Have fun!

Respond...

Write down 2 or 3 things that came to mind as you read these passages. Include any questions that arise when you think about it closely.

Our Discussion

As we have already mentioned, this session (our second to last), will be a chance for you to show that you can read and interpret an epistle well. You've done your research, you prepared your notes, so there's nothing more for us to say but get on with it!

Responding to 1 John

Question	Response:	How do we know?
Who wrote this epistle?		
What do we know about this person?		
What do we know about their walk with Jesus?		
What do we know about the time and place of their writing?		

Who was
this epistle
written to?

What do we
know about
this person or
people?

What do we
know about
their spiritual
health?

What do we
know about
the time and
place of their
reading?

What made the author put pen to paper?

Is there an overarching theme to his writing?

What are the key beliefs and behaviours that he is explaining?

What are the incidental beliefs and behaviours?
(The first are really important; the second, not so much.)

What knowledge did the readers have that I never will?

What knowledge do I have that they didn't?

Responding to 2 John

Question	Response:	How do we know?
Who wrote this epistle?		
What do we know about this person?		
What do we know about their walk with Jesus?		
What do we know about the time and place of their writing?		

Who was
this epistle
written to?

What do we
know about
this person or
people?

What do we
know about
their spiritual
health?

What do we
know about
the time and
place of their
reading?



*See how great a love the Father has bestowed on us, that we
would be called children of God; and such we are.*

1 JOHN 3:1

What made the author put pen to paper?

Is there an overarching theme to his writing?

What are the key beliefs and behaviours that he is explaining?

What are the incidental beliefs and behaviours?
(The first are really important; the second, not so much.)

What knowledge did the readers have that I never will?

What knowledge do I have that they didn't?

Responding to 3 John

Question	Response:	How do we know?
Who wrote this epistle?		
What do we know about this person?		
What do we know about their walk with Jesus?		
What do we know about the time and place of their writing?		

Who was
this epistle
written to?

What do we
know about
this person or
people?

What do we
know about
their spiritual
health?

What do we
know about
the time and
place of their
reading?

What made the author put pen to paper?

Is there an overarching theme to his writing?

What are the key beliefs and behaviours that he is explaining?

What are the incidental beliefs and behaviours?
(The first are really important; the second, not so much.)

What knowledge did the readers have that I never will?

What knowledge do I have that they didn't?

Reflect...

What is 'profitable' for us from today's readings?

What truths have we learnt? How have we been corrected?

How will you outwork what you have learnt?

What is the game-changer? Write it in 10 words or less.

Please feel free to use this page for your notes

Week Six

Topic: The Future of the Church

My Preparation

The closing book of the Bible carries its own unique title: ‘The Revelation of Jesus Christ’ (Revelation 1:1), and in giving us this book, God made sure that His revealed chronicle of the world had a grand finale. What began in Genesis with the almighty Creation, and continued throughout Scripture with the Fall, Redemption and Restoration, finishes here with the final point in the narrative of Scripture: Consummation – the finishing, finalisation and completion of God’s work in our history. The study of things that will happen at the end of this age in history (as God ushers in a new age) is called ‘eschatology’.

A ‘revelation’ refers to something that once was hidden, but now it is visible. The grand revelation of this letter is not just a prophecy of what is to come in due time, but the revealing of Jesus Christ for Who He truly is: the glorious and all-conquering One.

The Book of Revelation is the fifth and final book written by John, the last surviving apostle and now an old, old man. After years of faithful preaching throughout Asia Minor, the Roman authorities finally banish John to the small island of Patmos in the Aegean Sea (in between modern Greece and Turkey). It is here (around the years 94-96 AD), that Jesus gives John a picture of things to come.

As you read through the book, you’ll come across a variety of writing genres. There are shorter letters to churches, visions of the very throne room of God, horrific natural disasters, strange creatures, and images of Heaven. This may at first seem confusing or even intimidating but don’t despair or give up! The Book of Revelation is the only book in the Bible that promises blessing to those who read and regard the words given (Revelation 1:3). This in itself should be an encouragement to take in this mysterious last book – remember, the purpose of the book was to make things clearer, not more confusing.

As you read, keep in mind that the Book of Revelation follows a relatively straightforward narrative. To begin with, we see that Jesus Christ Himself arranges for John to receive a ‘revelation’ of ‘things which must shortly come to pass’ (1:1). Jesus first gives John words of challenge and/or reassurance for seven churches – the good, the bad

and the fuzzy. Then the vision turns to the throne room of God where a Lamb, looking ‘as it had been slain’ (5:6) breaks seven seals from a scroll, unleashing conflict, scarcity, and other calamities across the globe.

A dragon and two beasts, united against God, arise to demand the worship of all people who have not been killed in the earlier catastrophe. The satanic forces and the people who follow them then incur seven ‘vials of the wrath of God’ (16:1). These bring outbreaks and epidemics, darkness and disruptions, and huge hailstones on earth. The upheaval destroys ‘Babylon the great’ – the wicked and proud world system – just before an angel from heaven seizes Satan, ‘that old serpent’ (20:2), and imprisons him for one thousand years. After a brief release to activate a worldwide war, Satan is thrown into ‘a lake of fire and brimstone’ where he will be tormented day and night for ever and ever’ (21:10). God unveils ‘a new heaven and a new earth’ (21:1), where He will ‘wipe away all tears’ (21:4) from His people’s eyes.

See? Easy...

Read...

- The Book of Revelation

Respond...

Write down 2 or 3 things that came to mind as you read this passage. Include any questions that arise when you think about it closely.

Our Discussion

Now that you’ve read the Book of Revelation, you’re probably wondering how best we should interpret the people, events and symbols. Are these things going to happen exactly and literally as it’s written (is there actually going to be a real beast rising out of the ocean?) or are the visions more symbolic? No other New Testament book poses such striking interpretive challenges.

To tackle this issue, a number of interpretive approaches have been produced. The preterist approach sees that the Book of Revelation is a description of first-century events and the church's interactions with the Roman Empire. The historicist approach sees the book as presenting a panoramic view of history from the apostolic times until the Second Coming. For the historicist, the characters and events represent such historical realities as the rising of the Catholic Church and the emergence of Islam. The idealist approach depicts the book as a sign of the timeless struggle between good and evil: it's not history or future, but eternal cosmic truth. Finally, the futurist approach sees the writings of chapters 6-22 as literal and symbolic depictions of people and events that are yet to come on to the world scene.

Which view is right, or closest to being right? On the basis of the text's own admission of its prophetic nature (Revelation 1:3), and the specific timing of the events (see 11:2, 12:6,14; 13:5, 14:1-20), it would seem that the preterist, historicist and idealist views have glaring inadequacies. Only the futurist approach interprets the book faithfully to its own descriptions and nuances.

The story of the Alpha and the Omega

The book begins with John exiled on the island of Patmos, when he hears a voice speak to him. John turns to see who was speaking to him, and he describes the Person that is before him (Revelation 1:12-18).

Discuss...

Read the description given by John. Who is this Person?
How do we know?

- How does John's description differ from how we usually picture Him?
- What difference does this make to your faith, your prayer life, and your obedience?

The story of Jesus' letters to the churches

We are familiar with the letters of Paul, Peter, James and John, who all wrote to local churches, groups and leaders to encourage, correct and train them. In Revelation 2 and 3, however, we see letters written to churches from Jesus Christ Himself. Jesus asks John to scribe for Him, as He dictates seven letters to the churches of Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea (1:11).

Focus in...

Each church mentioned here was an actual, historical church at the time of John's writing. In fact, if a messenger were to carry a letter from Patmos, they would travel along a road that linked all the churches in the exact order that the letters were spoken. In addition to their importance for the specific churches who would have received the letters, these mini-epistles are significant for us as well. In a way, they represent types of churches that perennially exist throughout the entire church age. What Christ says to each church is relevant to all times.

Discuss...

In each church's "report card" from Jesus, He typically gives a note of commendation, offers a firm rebuke, and encourages new behaviours. Read each church's letter and make note of His message to them.

Church	Reference	Commendation	Rebuke	Action
Ephesus	Rev. 2:1-7			
Smyrna	Rev. 2:8-11			
Pergamum	Rev. 2:12-17			
Thyatira	Rev. 2:18-29			
Sardis	Rev. 3:1-6			
Philadelphia	Rev. 3:7-13			
Laodicea	Rev. 3:14-22			

- What can we learn from these words of Jesus?

The story of the end event

At the beginning of Revelation 4, the message of John changes from letters to churches in Asia Minor to a message about the future of the universal church. John's writing is very apocalyptic (it describes the catastrophic end of the world as we know it), and you may even notice parallels with the visions of Daniel and Ezekiel.

We move quickly from the church on earth (chapters 2 and 3) to a vision of Heaven (chapter 4). The scene we encounter is one of worship. God is seated on the throne (Revelation 4:2), radiantly splendid, and surrounded by elders on thrones and creatures proclaiming His glory day and night (4:4, 4:8). But in chapter 5 the worship is broken. God is holding a "book" sealed with seven seals (a common Roman practice to ensure the security of the book's contents), but no one was found to be worthy to open the seals and read the book (5:2-3). John is so crushed by this that he breaks down in tears.

An elder steps forward to console John, and lets him know that there is One, just One in all of history, that is worthy to step forward and open the book: the Lion of Judah and the Root of David – He is worthy (Revelation 5:5). From the midst of the thrones steps One who, in John's words, looks like a Lamb that had been slain, and He reaches forward to take the book (5:6-7).

This 'Lamb' is Jesus, the One found worthy. He is stepping forward to take hold of the book from God the Father. He is about to bring all of human history to a close. He is about to unleash the forces of Heaven on the forces of darkness. He's about to deliver redeemed humanity back to God.

It's no wonder the creatures fall in worship.

In Chapter 6, Jesus begins to open the scroll. With each unraveling in Heaven, a corresponding event takes place on earth:

- The first seal releases a rider on a white horse. He conquers all of earth peacefully (6:1-2).
- The second seal releases a rider on a red horse. He declares war around the earth (6:3-4).
- The third seal releases a rider on a black horse. He causes widespread famine – food is available, but it's unaffordable (the prices seen in 6:5-6 show how precious food will become – it

would take a day's wage to supply a day's food for one person, and the basics like oil and wine will become carefully guarded luxuries).

- The fourth seal releases a rider on a pale horse. He causes death to a quarter of the earth's population (6:7-8). Peace. War. Famine. Death.
- The fifth seal reveals the sounds of those who had been martyred during this time. They are given robes and told to hang in there until the destruction comes to an end (6:9-11).
- The sixth seal releases natural catastrophes far beyond anything the earth has seen. An earthquake. Massive meteorological disturbances. The shifting of the land and sea. This causes the whole earth to tremble in fear (6:12-17).

At this point there is almost a lull in heaven. God instructs His angels to come to the aid of some of earth's inhabitants. They seal 144 000 'sons of Israel' (Revelation 7:4) and preserve them through this time of terror.

- The seventh and final scroll to be unraveled is almost a stamp on the previous six. It brings silence in Heaven as all are in wonder of the outpouring of God's power (Revelation 8:1).

Following the 7 scrolls come 7 trumpets. Again, at the sound of each trumpet, an act of Divine judgment is outpoured onto the earth:

- The first trumpet sounds and hail and fire mixed with blood are thrust upon the earth. A third of the earth and trees and all the grass are burned (8:7).
- The second trumpet sounds and something like a great mountain of fire is cast into the sea, killing a third of all marine life and ships (8:8-9).
- The third trumpet sounds and a star falls from heaven. It destroys a third of the world's waters, making them undrinkable (8:10-11).
- The fourth trumpet sounds and the lights of the sky (the sun, moon and stars) lose their brilliance. A third of the universe's natural light is lost (8:12).

Vegetation is destroyed. Oceans are contaminated. Fresh water is almost non-existent. The world is plunged into unprecedented darkness. The daily struggle to live becomes almost unbearable.

- The fifth trumpet sounds and a 'star from heaven which had fallen to the earth' is given the keys to a bottomless pit. As the pit is unlocked, a plague of creatures like locusts swarm across the face of the earth. Their goal is to torment all those not sealed with the protection of God (9:1-11).
- The sixth trumpet sounds and four angels are sent to do one task – kill a third of the wretched beings that are still alive. At this point, man's heart hardens against God, and the survivors refuse to turn from their wicked ways (9:13-21).

At chapter 10 we get another little break from all the killing and destruction, and chapter 11 shows us once again God's grace. He appoints two men to be His witnesses here on earth. They prophesy God's word for a short period of time, and if they are opposed they have the power to destroy those who come against them (or stop the rain, or turn the waters into blood, or bring forth pestilence and plagues). Basically, you wouldn't want to mess with them (11:1-6).

Though the people of the earth hate the two witnesses, they are powerless against them. It takes a remarkable supernatural creature to overcome them, and it comes in the form of a 'beast from the abyss' (Revelation 11:7). This beast declares war on them and kills them, leaving their bodies to rot in the streets of Jerusalem. All of earth celebrates. The festivities only last three and a half days, as the very breath of life from God revives them, and before the terrified crowds they are called home to Heaven (11:7-12).

- The seventh trumpet sounds and it signifies something incredible (but blink, and you'll miss it). The voices from Heaven proclaim that at this point, the kingdom of the world becomes the Kingdom of the Lord. That's right – at the sound of the seventh trumpet Jesus has claimed ownership of the earth and He's taking it back (Revelation 11:15-19).

Chapter 12 seems to go back in history and give us a little review of the historical struggle between Jesus and Satan. John writes about how the two have waged war since Satan's first rebellion, and how the angels of Heaven have long fought the demons of hell.

In chapter 13 we are introduced to a new character, the 'beast from the sea' (13:1). This beast (a powerful demonic being) has ten horns and seven heads, symbolizing complete military and political authority on earth. He has complete power on earth and he uses it to blaspheme the Name of God and to kill the remnants of His people. He commands

worship from every person, young and old (13:1-10).

A 'beast from the earth' supports this first 'beast'. This is another demonic being whose mission is to promote the first beast's power, and cause all to marvel at his perceived greatness. Later described as a false prophet (see Revelation 19:20), he counterfeits many of the miracles that we have seen God perform throughout Scripture and he eventually makes it impossible for individuals to buy and sell without marking themselves for the first beast (13:11-18). This mark, by the way, is described as the 'number of man', which is said to be '666' (but we'll discuss that in a little bit).

In chapter 14 we zoom back up from earth to Heaven, where we see the beginnings of victory. The angels are predicting the final fall of 'Babylon' and judgment is about to commence (Revelation 14:6-12). When it begins, it will be rapid:

- Six 'bowls of wrath' are poured out onto the earth, and God's fury is delivered to the inhabitants of the late, great planet earth (Revelation 16:1-12).
- Demonic forces then gather the armies of the world for one final act of rebellion and warfare with God. They gather on a plain of Armageddon but are met with the seventh bowl – a storm like has never been seen before (Revelation 16:13-21). An angel describes the end of this battle: 'So will Babylon, the great city, be thrown down with violence, and will not be found any longer' (18:21). Her destruction is so complete that she virtually ceases to exist. Music will no longer sound and light will no longer shine (18:22-23). Nothing. It's the end of everything. The party is over.

The story of Satan's absolute defeat and the final judgment

The party might be over on earth, but it is just warming up in Heaven. The creatures of Heaven rejoice that Almighty God reigns supreme. He has shown Himself to be true and just and He has destroyed His enemy and made vengeance on behalf of his victims. The heavens open and a final horse rider appears, this time on a white horse. His Name is 'Faithful and True' and He strides before the armies of Heaven. He is the King of Kings and Lord of Lords (Revelation 19:11-16). His army seizes the two beasts (the first 'beast' and his false prophet) and casts them into a lake of fire (19:20-21) before capturing the very leader of the rebellion, Satan. They imprison him for one thousand years (20:1-4), which makes way for Christ to reign

And I heard a loud voice from the throne, saying, "Behold, the tabernacle of God is among men, and He will dwell among them, and they shall be His people, and God Himself will be among them, and He will wipe away every tear from their eyes; and there will no longer be any death; there will no longer be any mourning, or crying, or pain; the first things have passed away.

REVELATIONS 21:3-4



peacefully on earth.

At the end of the thousand years, Satan is released and makes one last desperate attempt to make war with God. This time, however, his defeat is sudden and complete. He (and any followers) is devoured in a ball of fire from Heaven. Satan is thrown into the lake of fire with the two beasts, where they will be subject to God's punishment forever (20:7-10). Finally, after thousands of years of chaos and destruction, the root of sin and rebellion can cause no more harm.

John then tells us that he sees the great white throne of God (Revelation 20:11). At this point, all believers have been raised and glorified, and now all non-believers stand before God to be judged. They are judged according to their deeds, and as no man can match God's standard of holiness in his own strength, they are found to be guilty. Their punishment is also the lake of fire (20:12-15).

Focus in...

The Book of Revelation features many interesting and curious references to things that are yet to come. Because of the nature of the book, it can be easy to jump to quick judgments on who they are, when they will happen, or how they will come to pass. But it is important to only make conclusions based on what is actually presented in the Bible. Take a moment to reflect on the following, using only what we know from Scripture:

Discuss...

Below are four images from the Book of Revelation that you may have heard about at some time in your life (they frequently arise in popular culture).

- What do you know of them from popular culture?
- How does this compare to what is presented in Scripture (particularly the Book of Revelation)?
 - The 'antichrist'.
 - The number 666.
 - The 'Millennium'.
 - 'Judgment Day'.

The story of the New Beginnings

Revelation chapter 21 is the penultimate book of the Holy Bible. All of earthly history has come and gone, good has triumphed over evil, sin has been judged and sentenced, and God is ready to begin again. John tells us that he sees a new Heaven and a new earth (the first of each has passed away) and a city that is as glorious as a bride on her wedding day. The tabernacle of God is now in and among His people. The promise of Emmanuel ('God with us') is now realised in full glory, for God in all His fullness dwells among the citizens of His Kingdom (21:3). The tree of life, barred from the reach of humanity since Adam and Eve, is now freely open to all who reach for it. God's original intention for humanity is restored, what was lost is regained, and the saints reign with God in paradise, forever and ever (22:5).

Discuss...

- From Genesis to Revelation, the Bible narrative describes God's plan to restore what was lost at the Fall. How would you compare and contrast the Book of Genesis and the Book of Revelation?
- Throughout the Book of Revelation, what happens to people who continually trust God?
- Whose names are written in the Book of Life, and why?
- How does the Book of Revelation illustrate the sovereignty of God?
- How would you summarise the message of the book in one word?

Reflect...

What is 'profitable' for us from today's readings?

What truths have we learnt? How have we been corrected?

How will you outwork what you have learnt?

What is the game-changer? Write it in 10 words or less.



Please feel free to use this page for your notes

My Appendix

In ten words or less...

Describe these people. Include a Bible reference for where you can find them.

Paul _____

Stephen _____

Peter _____

John the Apostle _____

The Coming King _____

Anyone else from your reading who caught your eye:

In ten words or less...

Describe these events (in your own words). Include a Bible reference for where you can find them.

Pentecost

The early acts of the apostles _____

The Council of Jerusalem _____

Paul's First Journey _____

Paul's Second Journey _____

Paul's Third Journey _____

The Coming Kingdom _____

In ten words or less...

Describe these books (in your own words). Write a full verse from the book that you think captures the essence of the writing.

Acts _____

Verse _____

Romans _____

Verse _____

1 Corinthians _____

Verse _____

1 Corinthians _____

Verse _____

2 Corinthians _____

Verse _____

Galatians _____

Verse _____

Ephesians _____

Verse _____

Philippians _____

Verse _____

Colossians _____

Verse _____

1 Thessalonians _____

Verse _____

2 Thessalonians _____

Verse _____

1 Timothy _____

Verse _____

2 Timothy _____

Verse _____

Titus _____

Verse _____

Philemon _____

Verse _____

Hebrews _____

Verse _____

James _____

Verse _____

1 Peter _____

Verse _____

2 Peter _____

Verse _____

1 John _____

Verse _____

2 John _____

Verse _____

3 John _____

Verse _____

Jude _____

Verse _____

The Book of Revelation _____

Verse _____

The Beginnings:		Creation to 2100 BC
Genesis 1-9	written by Moses in 1445-1405 BC	God creates everything, but man rebels.
The Patriarchs:		2100-1800 BC
Genesis 10-50	written by Moses in 1445-1405 BC	God makes a covenant with Abraham, and they become a large people group (the Israelites). They migrate to Egypt, and split into 12 Tribes.
The Book of Job	written by Job at an unknown, but ancient time (possibly before Moses).	An upright man wrestles with God's sovereignty in his broken life.
Building a Nation:		1800-1406 BC
Exodus	written by Moses in 1445-1405 BC	The Israelites become slaves to the Egyptians, but God delivers them from Pharaoh. He gives them His law to show them what it looks like to live as the people of God.
Leviticus		
Numbers		
Deuteronomy		
Joshua	written by Joshua in 1405-1385 BC	
Possessing the Land:		1406-1050 BC
Joshua	written by Joshua in 1405-1385 BC	God makes a way for His people, the Israelites, to overcome their enemies and settle into their own land.
Judges	written by Samuel c. 1043 BC	
Ruth	written by Samuel (?) in 1030-1010 BC	
1 Samuel	written by an unknown author in 931-722 BC	

The United Monarchy: 1050-930 BC

1 Samuel and 2 Samuel	written by an unknown author in 931-722 BC	Israel's 12 Tribes unite under one king (Saul). His son, David, becomes Israel's greatest king, and his son, Solomon, becomes Israel's wealthiest and wisest king. David makes Jerusalem the capital of Israel, and Solomon builds a temple for God.
1 and 2 Kings	written by an unknown author in 561-538 BC	David records his poetry and wisdom.
1 and 2 Chronicles	written by Ezra (?) in 450-430 BC	Solomon records his great wisdom in a number of books.
Psalms	written by David, and others, in 1410-450 BC	
Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and Song of Songs	written primarily by Solomon, in 971-931 BC	

The Divided Monarchy 930-586 BC and the road to Exile:

1 and 2 Kings		Following Solomon's death, the kingdom is embroiled in civil war and splits into two nations. The 10 tribes of the north become Israel. The 2 tribes of the south become Judah.
1 and 2 Chronicles		Israel decays and struggles under ongoing local wars. God raises up prophets declare coming judgment of their rebellion and foreign invasions: Babylon begins to overrun Judah in 605 BC.
Psalms		
Proverbs		

Amos	written by Amos, c. 750 BC	Amos and Hosea prophecy of Israel's pending judgment and invasion by Assyria. Assyria captures Israel in 722 BC and Israel is not seen again.
Hosea	written by Hosea in 750–710 BC	
Obadiah	written by Obadiah in 850–840 BC	Obadiah prophesies against the Edomites for their violence against the city of Jerusalem.
Jonah	written by Jonah c. 775 BC	Jonah and Nahum prophesy of God's coming judgment of the Assyrians.
Nahum	written by Nahum in c. 650 BC	
Joel	written by Joel in 835–796 BC	Joel, Micah, Isaiah, Zephaniah, Habakkuk and Jeremiah prophesy of Judah's pending judgment and invasion by Babylon.
Micah	written by Micah in 735–710 BC	
Isaiah	written by Isaiah in 700–681 BC	
Zephaniah	written by Zephaniah in 635–625 BC	
Habakkuk	written by Habakkuk in 615–605 BC	
Jeremiah	written by Jeremiah in 586–570 BC	
The Exile: 586-538 BC		
Ezekiel	written by Ezekiel in 590-570 BC	Babylon invades Judah and systematically exiles its citizens to Babylon. Jerusalem is besieged and Solomon's Temple is destroyed.
Jeremiah	written by Jeremiah in 586-570 BC	
Lamentations	written by Jeremiah in 586 BC	
Daniel	written by Daniel in 536-530 BC	Daniel serves the Babylonian rulers while in exile.

The Post-Exile

538-6 BC

Ezra

written by Ezra in 457–444 BC

Persia captures Babylon in 538 BC and allow the Jews to return home to Jerusalem. The Jewish Queen, Esther, prevents the Persians from killing the Jews. Zerubbabel, a Jewish governor, leads the first wave of returnees in 538 BC. He begins to rebuild the Temple, but faces opposition. Ezra leads a wave of returnees in 458 BC. Nehemiah rebuilds Jerusalem's city walls.

Esther

written by an unknown author in 450–331 BC

Nehemiah

written by Ezra in 424–400 BC

Haggai

written by Haggai, c. 520 BC

Zechariah

written by Zechariah in 480–470 BC

Malachi

written by Malachi in 433–424 BC

The prophets Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi encourage the people to return to their worship, and declare the coming Messiah.

The Gospel Of Jesus:

6 BC – 30 AD

Matthew

written by Matthew in 50–60 AD

Mark

written by Mark in 50–60 AD

Luke

written by Luke in 60–61 AD

John

written by John in 80–90 AD

John announces the coming of Jesus. Jesus is born and lives as God incarnate on earth. He teaches people about the Kingdom of God and chooses 12 men to take His message to the world. Jesus is crucified and is resurrected.

The Birth of the Church 30 AD to eternity

The Book of Acts	written by Luke in 62 AD	The Holy Spirit is given to the church at Pentecost. Stephen becomes the first martyr and the believers are scattered. Peter preaches to the Jews and Paul preaches to the Gentiles.
James	written by James in 44–49 AD	
Romans, 1+2	written by Paul in 51–67 AD	Churches are planted and pastored.
Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philemon, Colossians, 1+2		
Thessalonians, 1+2		
Timothy, Titus, Philemon		
1+2 Peter	written by Peter in 64–68 AD	
Hebrews	written by a unknown author in 67–69 AD	
Jude	written by Jude in 68 – 70 AD	
1-3 John	written by John in 90–96 AD	
Revelation	written by John in 90–96 AD	John has his vision of the future.







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he said:

It is finished:

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