



THE LESSONS OF JESUS

Understanding The New Testament

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Jesus explains the books written about him

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How to Use This Book

There is one chapter for every book of the New Testament, twenty-seven in all, in the order your Bible prints them. You can read straight through. You can also keep this beside your Bible and open it to whatever book you are reading.

None of these books existed while I was alive. Every one of them was written after I died, by people talking about me. So in each chapter I do not tell you how I read the book. I tell you who wrote it, when and why, what it says, and how it compares with what my first followers remembered of me.

Here is how each chapter works.

It opens with a box called **At a Glance**. It tells you who wrote the book, when, who it was written for, what it remembers of me, how close it stays to what I taught, and which chapters to read if you only have time for three. The judgment about how close it stays is not a score. It is a plain answer in words, measured against five things I taught, which I set out at the end of the opening essay.

Then comes **Words to Know**, so any unfamiliar word is defined before you meet it.

Then comes **The Book in Brief**: what the book says, or what happens in it, from beginning to end, in plain words. If you have never read the book, it is all you need to follow the rest.

Then the chapter itself, in short sentences and plain words. The big books get long chapters. The small ones get short ones. Some of these letters fit on a single page, and their chapters do too.

After it there is a box called **Check It Yourself**. It sends you to your own Bible so you can see whether I told you the truth.

At the end there is **The Short Version**, the few lines that hold the whole chapter.

Every chapter also has its own free page on **LessonsOfJesus.com**, at the name of its book, such as LessonsOfJesus.com/romans. The pages add **Go deeper** sections with the longer history, the manuscripts and the arguments behind the chapter.

At the back of the book there is a **simple timeline**, a **Who's Who** of the people the book names, and the notes.

Two promises before we start.

One. You can check everything. Bible verses look like this: (Luke 4:18). That means the book of Luke, chapter 4, verse 18. History facts have a small number after them, and the notes at the back of the book tell you where each one comes from.

Two. I will not pretend to know more than anyone can know. Scholars argue about which of the words in the gospels go back to me and which were shaped by the people who told and wrote down my story. When I say *the gospels remember me saying*, that is what I mean. Remembered, and written down later by people who loved me. Where the experts disagree, I will tell you that they do.

Which Bible this book quotes. Every Bible quotation here comes from the **World English Bible**, a modern translation that is in the public domain. No one owns it, and anyone may copy it. Two of its habits are worth knowing before you start. Where most Bibles say *church*, it says *assembly*, which is closer to the Greek word. Where most Bibles say *gospel*, it often says *Good News*, which is what the word means. If your Bible words a verse differently, that is normal. Translators make choices. Where a choice changes the meaning, I will tell you.

BEFORE WE START: THE BOOKS ABOUT ME

I never wrote a book.

Not one line of your New Testament is in my hand. In all four gospels, there is only one moment when anyone sees me write anything. A woman had been dragged in front of me, and I bent down and *wrote on the ground with his finger* (John 8:6). Nobody recorded what I wrote.

And that story is not in the oldest copies of John. It was added to the gospel later.¹

So the first thing to know about the New Testament is that it is not my writing. It is twenty-seven books by other people, about me, written after I was gone.

Twenty years of talking

I was executed around the year 30. For about twenty years after that, as far as anyone can tell, nothing that survives was written down about me at all.

That does not mean I was forgotten. My followers told the stories out loud. They told them in Aramaic, my language, in the villages of Galilee and in Jerusalem. Then they told them in Greek, in the cities of the empire. They repeated my sayings, sang hymns, broke bread together and argued about what it all meant.

The oldest book in your New Testament is probably a short letter from a man named **Paul** to a small congregation in the Greek city of **Thessalonica**, written around the year 50.² Paul never met me during my life. He says he saw me after my death, *last of all, as to the child born at the wrong time* (1 Corinthians 15:8).

Paul wrote letters for about ten years. In all of them, he quotes my words only a handful of times. He passes on what I said about divorce and about workers being paid, and what I said over the bread and cup on my last night (1 Corinthians 7:10; 9:14; 11:23–25).³ Most of what he writes is about what my death and resurrection meant. Very little of it is about what I taught on the hillsides.

Then the gospels

The four gospels came after Paul's letters. Most scholars date them like this.⁴

Mark came first, around the year 70, the year Rome burned Jerusalem and its Temple.

Matthew and **Luke** came next, probably in the 80s or 90s. Both of them had Mark in front of them and copied large parts of it.

John came last, probably in the 90s or a little later.

So the earliest account of my life was written about forty years after I died. That is roughly the distance between you and something your parents lived through. It is not nothing. Some of the people who had known me were still alive. Most were not.

Luke tells you plainly how he worked. He was not there. He says that many others had already written accounts, that he had collected what the eyewitnesses passed down, and that he was now putting it in order (Luke 1:1–3).

The names on the books

The four gospels do not tell you who wrote them. None of them names its author.

The titles in your Bible, *according to Matthew*, *according to Mark* and so on, were added later. They appear on the oldest copies of the gospels that still have

their opening pages, from around the year 200.⁵ The earliest writer we know of who connects a gospel to Mark and another to Matthew is a bishop named **Papias**, writing in the early 100s.⁶

I knew a Matthew. He collected taxes, and I called him to follow me. I knew a John, the son of Zebedee, whom I nicknamed one of the *Sons of Thunder* (Mark 3:17). Whether either of them wrote the book that carries his name is one of the oldest questions about these books. I will tell you what the evidence says in each chapter.

Written in someone else's language

I spoke Aramaic. Every book of the New Testament was written in **Greek**.

That means almost every word you read from my mouth is a translation, made by people retelling my story in another language. A few of my actual Aramaic words survived, because they were too precious to translate. Mark keeps them. *Talitha cumi*, when I took a dead girl by the hand (Mark 5:41). *Ephphatha*, “Be opened” (Mark 7:34). *Abba*, the everyday Aramaic word for *father*, in the garden on my last night (Mark 14:36). And on the cross, *Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?* (Mark 15:34).

When you read those words, you are as close to my voice as the page can bring you.

Your order is not their order

Your New Testament opens with the four gospels, then Acts, then the letters, then Revelation. That is a sensible order for reading. It is not the order they were written in.

Paul's letters are the oldest books in it, and they come after the gospels and Acts. Within Paul's letters, the order is not by date either. It is roughly by length, longest first. **Romans** comes first because it is the longest letter, not because it was the first one written. The letters to churches come before the letters to individuals, and little **Philemon**, one page long, comes last.⁷

Who chose the twenty-seven

No one handed down a list of these books, and for a long time there was no agreed list at all.

Around the year 140, a wealthy shipowner named **Marcion** made the first known list. It had one gospel, a shortened Luke, and ten letters of Paul. He threw out the scriptures I grew up on altogether. The churches rejected him, but he forced them to start deciding what they did accept.⁸

For the next two centuries, they argued. The four gospels and most of Paul's letters were accepted early and widely. Other books were disputed for a long time: **Hebrews, James, 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, Jude and Revelation**. Around the year 325, the church historian **Eusebius** sorted the books into the accepted, the disputed and the rejected, and several of the books in your Bible were on his disputed list.⁹

Some books that did not make it into your Bible were read in churches as scripture. One of the oldest Bibles that survives, the **Codex Sinaiticus**, copied in the 300s, ends with two books you have never heard read on a Sunday: the *Letter of Barnabas* and the *Shepherd of Hermas*.¹⁰

The first list that matches your twenty-seven books exactly comes from **Athanasius**, the bishop of Alexandria, in a letter he wrote for Easter in the year 367.¹¹ That is more than three hundred years after my death.

Copies of copies

No one has the original of any of these books. Not one page. What survives are copies, and copies of copies, made by hand for fourteen centuries before printing.

There are more than five thousand Greek manuscripts of the New Testament, whole or in pieces, more than for any other ancient book. The oldest is a scrap of John about the size of a credit card, usually dated somewhere in the 100s.¹² No two of the manuscripts agree in every word. Most of the differences are spelling, word order and slips of the pen. A few are larger.

You will meet the largest ones in these chapters. The ending of Mark after chapter 16, verse 8. The story of the woman caught in adultery. A sentence about the Trinity in the first letter of John that was in many older English Bibles and is not in any Greek manuscript before the Middle Ages.¹¹³

Different Bibles handle these differently. Most modern Bibles print the ending of Mark and the woman caught in adultery, set off in brackets or with a note. The World English Bible follows the majority of the later Greek copies, so it prints both of them without brackets. When a passage I quote is one of these, I will tell you.

Letters in other people's names

Thirteen letters in your New Testament carry Paul's name. Most scholars are confident that seven of them are his: Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, 1 Thessalonians and Philemon. The others are argued over, and many scholars think some or all of them were written after his death by people who wrote in his name.¹⁴

That was a common practice in the ancient world, among Jews, Greeks and Christians alike. You wrote in the name of a great teacher to say what you believed he would say now. It was also criticized in its own time. I will not pretend the question is settled where it is not. In each chapter I will give you the case on both sides.

How I will read these books with you

My Bible was the scriptures of my people, the books Christians call the Old Testament. The New Testament was not my Bible. It was written about me.

Some of it I would recognize at once. Some of it sounds like men who knew me well. Some of it sounds like men who never met me, writing for churches I never saw, about questions nobody asked me in Galilee.

So in each chapter I will tell you who wrote the book, as far as anyone can tell, when and for whom. I will tell you what it says, what it says about me, and where it holds on to what I taught and where it went somewhere new.

You will notice that I keep coming back to the same few things: the poor, the hungry, the stranger, the debts people owe, and what people do with power. I kept coming back to them when I was alive. The question for every book that follows is whether it kept coming back to them too.

What I will measure them by

In each chapter's At a Glance box there is a line called **How close it stays to me**. It is not a score. It is a plain answer, and this is the yardstick I hold every book against: five things, each one from my own mouth as the gospels remember it.

One. God's kingdom, coming on earth. Not a place you go when you die. *Let your Kingdom come. Let your will be done on earth as it is in heaven* (Matthew 6:10).

Two. The poor and the outcast first. *Blessed are you who are poor, God's Kingdom is yours* (Luke 6:20).

Three. Forgive debts and enemies, and do not strike back. *Forgive us our debts, as we also forgive our debtors* (Matthew 6:12). *Love your enemies* (Matthew 5:44). *Whoever strikes you on your right cheek, turn to him the other also* (Matthew 5:39).

Four. Love your neighbor, and the stranger counts. *You shall love your neighbor as yourself* (Mark 12:31). *I was a stranger, and you took me in* (Matthew 25:35). When a lawyer asked me who his neighbor was, I answered with a story about a Samaritan (Luke 10:29–37).

Five. The greatest serves, and no one lords it over anyone. *You know that they who are recognized as rulers over the nations lord it over them ... But it shall not be so among you, but whoever wants to become great among you shall be your servant* (Mark 10:42–43).

A book can be close on some of these and far on others. Most are. Where a book stays close, I will say so gladly. Where it drifts, I will show you where, and you can open your Bible and judge for yourself.

PART ONE — THE GOSPELS

The word gospel is old English for good news. It translates the Greek euangelion. In my world that word was also used for an emperor's announcements: a victory, a birth in the ruling family, a new reign. These four books are the only accounts of my life that your Bible kept.

1. Matthew: The Teacher on the Mountain

AT A GLANCE

Who wrote it: Nobody signed it. From the 100s on, it was credited to Matthew, the tax collector who followed me. Most scholars doubt that, because the writer copied most of Mark, and an eyewitness would not have needed to. He was probably a Jewish follower of mine, writing for a community of Jewish followers, perhaps in Syria.

When: Most likely between 80 and 90, a decade or two after Rome destroyed Jerusalem. That is some fifty years after I died.

Written for: A community of Jewish followers of mine after Jerusalem fell. They were quarreling with the leaders of their synagogues over who were the true heirs of Moses, and needed to know that I had not abandoned the Law.

What it remembers of me: More of my teaching than any other gospel. The Sermon on the Mount, the Lord's Prayer as most people say it, and the sheep and the goats, which only Matthew kept. It also tells my birth, from Joseph's side.

How close it stays to me: Very close on the kingdom, enemies, debts and the poor. Far in chapter 27, on blaming my people.

If you only read three chapters: Matthew 5, Matthew 6 and Matthew 25.

WORDS TO KNOW

Gospel — *good news*. It became the name for a book telling my life.

Kingdom of Heaven — Matthew's way of saying *kingdom of God*. Out of reverence, many Jews often said *Heaven* in place of *God*. It does not mean a place you go when you die.

Q — scholars' name for a lost collection of my sayings that Matthew and Luke both seem to have used. It comes from the German *Quelle*, "source." No copy has ever been found.

Magi — the "wise men from the east." The word was used for Persian priests and for star-readers.

Assembly — in Greek, *ekklēsia*, the word your Bible usually translates *church*. It meant a gathering of citizens. Matthew is the only gospel that uses it.

THE BOOK IN BRIEF

Matthew begins with my family tree, from Abraham through King David to Joseph, the husband of Mary. Mary is found to be pregnant before they live together, and an angel tells Joseph in a dream that the child is from the Holy Spirit. I am born in Bethlehem in the days of King Herod. Wise men from the east, guided by a star, come to worship me with gold, frankincense and myrrh. Joseph flees with us to Egypt, and Herod has the young boys of Bethlehem killed. After Herod dies, the family settles in Nazareth, in Galilee.

In chapters 3 and 4, John baptizes me in the river Jordan, and the devil tempts me in the wilderness. Back in Galilee, I begin to announce that the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand, and I call four fishermen.

From chapter 5 on, the book moves between what I do and what I teach, and it gathers my teaching into five long speeches. The first is the Sermon on the Mount, in chapters 5 to 7. Then come healings, and my instructions to the twelve as I send them out. Opposition grows. I teach in parables by the sea. Another ruler named Herod has John beheaded. I feed more than five thousand people and walk on the water. In chapter 16 Peter says I am the Christ, and I call him the rock on which I will build my assembly. From then on I warn my friends that I will be killed in Jerusalem and raised on the third day.

In chapter 21 I ride into Jerusalem on a donkey and its colt, and drive the buyers and sellers out of the Temple. I argue with the leaders and condemn the scribes and Pharisees. On the Mount of Olives I speak of the end of the age, ending with the sheep and the goats.

Chapters 26 to 28 tell my death and what follows. Judas agrees to hand me over for thirty pieces of silver. I share the Passover with the twelve, pray in Gethsemane, and am arrested. Peter denies me three times. Judas throws the silver back and hangs himself. Pilate washes his hands, and the people call my blood down on themselves and their children. I am crucified, the earth shakes, and Joseph of Arimathea lays me in his own tomb. Guards are posted there. On the first day of the week an angel rolls back the stone, and I meet Mary Magdalene and the other Mary as they run to tell my disciples. The guards are paid to say that my body was stolen. On a mountain in Galilee, I send the eleven to make disciples of all nations.

Most of the words of mine that people know by heart come from this book.

Turn the other cheek. Love your enemies. Blessed are the peacemakers. Do to others what you want them to do to you. Where two or three are gathered. Our Father in heaven. I was hungry, and you gave me food.

Some of those are also in Luke, worded differently. Some are only here. If you were raised on my words, you were raised mostly on Matthew's version of them. For most of Christian history it was the most read and most quoted of the four gospels.

So it matters who wrote it, and how.

Who wrote it

The book never says. The writer never says *I*. He never claims to have been there.

Early in the 100s, a bishop in Asia Minor named **Papias** wrote that *Matthew collected the sayings in the Hebrew language, and each person translated them as best he could.*¹ That is the earliest statement linking this book to Matthew, and it

raises as many questions as it answers. The gospel in your Bible was written in Greek, not Hebrew. And it is not a collection of sayings. It is a full story.

There is a stronger reason scholars doubt the tradition. This writer copied most of Mark's gospel, often word for word. Mark was not one of my twelve. An eyewitness who had walked with me for years would not have needed to copy the account of a man who had not.

Look at one small change he made. Mark tells how I called a tax collector named **Levi**, son of Alphaeus (Mark 2:14). Matthew tells the same story, almost word for word, but the tax collector is called *a man called Matthew* (Matthew 9:9). Nobody knows why. It may be the moment the tradition attached this book to that man.

What the writer does tell you is who he was. He knew the scriptures of my people intimately. He read them in Hebrew and in Greek. He cared about the Law. And he once described a kind of man who sounds very much like himself: *every scribe who has been made a disciple in the Kingdom of Heaven is like a man who is a householder, who brings out of his treasure new and old things* (Matthew 13:52).

That is a good description of this book. Old treasure and new, brought out together, by a scribe who followed me.

Built out of Mark

Lay Matthew beside Mark and you can watch him work.

Nearly all of Mark is inside Matthew. Matthew follows Mark's order of events through most of the book. He also shares a large body of my sayings with Luke that is not in Mark, the material scholars call **Q**. And he has stories and sayings of his own that appear nowhere else.²

He also tidies Mark as he goes. In Mark, when I went back to my hometown, *he could do no mighty work there* (Mark 6:5). In Matthew it becomes *he didn't do many mighty works there* (Matthew 13:58). *Could not* became *did not*. You will find that kind of small correction all through the book. The awkward edges get smoothed.

That does not make Matthew dishonest. It makes him an editor. He had a source, and he made it say what he believed was true about me.

Five speeches, like five books of Moses

Matthew arranged my teaching into **five long speeches**: the Sermon on the Mount (chapters 5 to 7), my instructions to the twelve (chapter 10), the parables (chapter 13), how my followers should treat one another (chapter 18), and the end of the age (chapters 24 and 25).

He ends each of them the same way: *When Jesus had finished saying these things* (Matthew 7:28; compare 11:1, 13:53, 19:1 and 26:1).

Five books of teaching. Many scholars think that is deliberate, because the Law of Moses is five books too. And Matthew tells my early life so that it echoes the life of Moses. A king orders the killing of baby boys, and the child escapes (Matthew 2:16; compare Exodus 1:22). The family goes down into Egypt and comes out again. The teacher goes up a mountain, sits down and teaches (Matthew 5:1).

Matthew was showing his readers, most of them Jews, that I was not abandoning Moses. I was the teacher Moses had pointed toward.

Kingdom of Heaven is not heaven

Mark and Luke have me talking about the **kingdom of God**. Matthew almost always says **the Kingdom of Heaven**. He uses that phrase about thirty times.³

He was not changing the meaning. Out of reverence, many devout Jews often said *Heaven* in place of *God*, the way you might say *the White House* when you mean the President.

But for many centuries, English readers have heard *Kingdom of Heaven* and pictured a place above the clouds where the dead go. That is not what it meant. When I said *Repent! For the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand* (Matthew 4:17), I did not mean that a place was nearby. I meant that God's rule was about to arrive here.

The prayer Matthew gives you says so plainly: *Let your Kingdom come. Let your will be done on earth as it is in heaven* (Matthew 6:10). The kingdom comes down. The will of God gets done *on earth*. That is the whole point of the prayer.

Fulfilled

About ten times, Matthew stops the story to tell you that something happened *that it might be fulfilled* which a prophet had said.⁴ He loved my scriptures and he wanted you to see them everywhere in my life.

Sometimes it fits beautifully. Sometimes you can see him stretching.

He says that when my family came back from Egypt, it fulfilled the words *Out of Egypt I called my son* (Matthew 2:15). Those words are from Hosea. In Hosea they are about the people of Israel coming out of Egypt in the time of Moses. Hosea was looking back, not forward.

He says that I was born of a virgin to fulfill Isaiah: *Behold, the virgin shall be with child* (Matthew 1:23). Matthew was reading the Greek translation of Isaiah, which uses a word for *virgin*. The Hebrew word Isaiah used means a young woman, and in Isaiah the child is a sign for King Ahaz in his own time.

He says that I grew up in Nazareth so *that it might be fulfilled which was spoken through the prophets that he will be called a Nazarene* (Matthew 2:23). No such sentence appears anywhere in your Old Testament.

He says that the thirty pieces of silver paid to Judas fulfilled *that which was spoken through Jeremiah the prophet* (Matthew 27:9). The verse he quotes is mostly from Zechariah.⁵

And here is my favorite. Zechariah says the king will come *riding on a donkey, even on a colt, the foal of a donkey* (Zechariah 9:9). That is Hebrew poetry. It says the same thing twice, the way Hebrew poems do. One animal. Mark has me riding one colt. Matthew read the verse as two animals, so in Matthew the disciples bring *the donkey and the colt, and laid their clothes on them; and he sat on them* (Matthew 21:7).

On both of them, at once.

I am not laughing at him. He was working the way the teachers of my people worked, reading every word of scripture for hidden meaning. But when someone tells you that my life fulfilled exact predictions, it is worth opening the predictions and reading them where they stand.

I did not come to destroy the Law

Matthew is the most Jewish of the four gospels, and it is the one that cares most about the Law.

Only Matthew has me say, *Don't think that I came to destroy the law or the prophets. I didn't come to destroy, but to fulfill* (Matthew 5:17).

Only Matthew has me tell the crowds that the scribes and Pharisees *sat on Moses' seat*, so *whatever they tell you to observe, observe and do, but don't do their works* (Matthew 23:2–3).

Only Matthew, when I warn my followers to flee before Jerusalem falls, adds this: *Pray that your flight will not be in the winter, nor on a Sabbath* (Matthew 24:20). Many scholars take this as a sign that Matthew's community was still keeping the Sabbath, decades after I died.⁶

And in the Sermon on the Mount, I do not loosen the Law. I make it harder. *You have heard that it was said to the ancient ones, "You shall not murder", and I go on to say that anger and contempt are already on the road to murder* (Matthew 5:21–22). The Law said *An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth*, to limit revenge. I said, *don't resist him who is evil; but whoever strikes you on your right cheek, turn to him the other also* (Matthew 5:38–39). People had heard *love your neighbor and hate your enemy*. I said, *love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you* (Matthew 5:43–44).

That was not a new religion. That was a teacher of the Law telling people what the Law was for.

When I argued with Pharisees in Matthew, it was not because they kept the Law. It was because they kept the small parts and skipped the large ones: *you tithe mint, dill, and cumin, and have left undone the weightier matters of the law*:

justice, mercy, and faith (Matthew 23:23). Notice that I did not tell them to stop tithing their herbs. I told them not to forget justice while they did it.

The prayer you say

The Lord's Prayer that most Christians know by heart is Matthew's version. Luke has another, which in the oldest copies is shorter.

Matthew's version asks God to *Forgive us our debts, as we also forgive our debtors* (Matthew 6:12). The Greek word is the ordinary word for money owed. In my country debt was the thing that took your land and then your children. When I taught people to ask God for release from their debts, I tied it to releasing the people who owed *them*.

At the end of the prayer, many of you say, *For yours is the Kingdom, the power, and the glory forever*. The World English Bible prints it (Matthew 6:13). Most modern Bibles put it in a footnote, because the oldest copies of Matthew do not have it. It was a closing line that congregations said together, and it found its way into the text. A very early manual for churches, called the Didache, already gives the prayer with a version of that ending, and tells people to say it three times a day.⁷

The only gospel with a church in it

The word *ekklēsia*, the word your Bible translates *church*, appears in only two places in all four gospels. Both are in Matthew.

In one, I tell Peter, *you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my assembly* (Matthew 16:18). Peter's name means *rock*. Then I give him *the keys of the Kingdom of Heaven* (Matthew 16:19).

In the other, I tell my followers how to handle a member who wrongs another: go to him alone, then with witnesses, and then *tell it to the assembly* (Matthew 18:17).

Mark and Luke both tell the scene where Peter says I am the Christ. Neither of them has the words about the rock or the keys. Many historians doubt I said them. My message was about the kingdom of God, not about building an

organization. These verses sound like a community a generation later, settling who had authority and how to discipline its members.⁸

Whatever their origin, you know what was built on them. The bishops of Rome came to claim that they had inherited Peter's keys, and those two verses became the charter of the papacy.

Later in the book, Matthew has me saying something that cuts the other way: *don't you be called "Rabbi," for one is your teacher, the Christ, and all of you are brothers. Call no man on the earth your father* (Matthew 23:8–9).

Both are in the same book. Every church that claims Matthew has to decide which one to live by.

The hardest verse in the book

Matthew has one line that no other gospel has, and it may have caused more suffering than any other single verse in your Bible.

At my trial, Pilate washes his hands in front of the crowd and says, *I am innocent of the blood of this righteous person. You see to it.* Then *All the people answered, "May his blood be on us, and on our children!"* (Matthew 27:24–25).

Only Matthew has the hand-washing. Only Matthew has that cry.

Remember when Matthew was written. Jerusalem had been destroyed. Matthew's community of Jewish followers of mine was in a bitter fight with the synagogue leaders of their own towns over who were the true heirs of Moses. You can feel that fight in the woes against the scribes and Pharisees in chapter 23, and you can feel it in this verse. To Matthew's readers, the burning of Jerusalem looked like the blood coming down on the next generation.⁹

It was a family argument, written by Jews about Jews. But within a century or two it was being read by people who were not Jews at all. And for nineteen hundred years, that one verse was used to call my people *Christ-killers*. It was preached in Holy Week. It was quoted while synagogues burned.

In this one verse, the book is as far from my teaching as it ever goes. The same gospel has me tell you to love your enemies, and to forgive *until seventy times*

seven (Matthew 5:44; 18:22).

I was killed by Roman soldiers, on the order of a Roman governor, by a Roman method of execution. The crowd in front of Pilate, whatever it shouted, was a crowd. It was not a people, and it was not their children.

In 1965 the Catholic Church finally said so in writing: what happened to me *cannot be charged against all the Jews, without distinction, then alive, nor against the Jews of today.*¹⁰ It took the church nineteen hundred years to say what should have been obvious from the start.

The birth

Matthew is one of only two gospels that tell my birth. Luke is the other. They tell it very differently.

In Matthew, the story is Joseph's. Joseph finds that Mary is pregnant, plans to divorce her quietly, and is told in a dream not to. Matthew's family seems to live in **Bethlehem** already. Wise men from the east follow a star and ask Herod, *Where is he who is born King of the Jews?* (Matthew 2:2). Herod, frightened, has *all the male children who were in Bethlehem and in all the surrounding countryside, from two years old and under* killed (Matthew 2:16). The family flees to Egypt, and only after Herod dies do they settle in Nazareth, to avoid Herod's son.

In Luke there are no wise men, no star, no massacre and no Egypt. There are shepherds and a manger. The family lives in Nazareth, travels to Bethlehem for a census, and goes home.

No historian of the time mentions the massacre of the children. Josephus, the Jewish historian who wrote at length about Herod's cruelties, including the killing of his own wife and sons, does not mention it.¹¹ That does not prove it did not happen. Bethlehem was a small village, and Herod killed many people. But most historians read Matthew's birth story as he seems to have meant it: as a retelling of Moses' birth, with me in the place of Moses and Herod in the place of Pharaoh.

The sheep and the goats

Now the best thing in the book. It is only in Matthew.

At the end of my last long speech, I described the end of everything. All the nations are gathered before the king, and he separates them the way a shepherd separates sheep from goats.

To the ones on his right he says: *I was hungry, and you gave me food to eat. I was thirsty, and you gave me drink. I was a stranger, and you took me in. I was naked, and you clothed me. I was sick, and you visited me. I was in prison, and you came to me* (Matthew 25:35–36).

They are confused. When did we do that? And the king answers, *because you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me* (Matthew 25:40).

Read the whole scene and notice what is not in it. Nobody is asked what they believed. Nobody is asked whether they were baptized, or which church they attended, or whether they said the right words about me. Neither group even knew it was me. The only question is what they did for the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick and the prisoner.

Matthew put that at the very end of my teaching, just before the story of my death. Of all the things he could have left ringing in your ears, he chose that.

The same book has me say it another way: *Not everyone who says to me, “Lord, Lord,” will enter into the Kingdom of Heaven; but he who does the will of my Father* (Matthew 7:21).

Only to Israel, then to everyone

Matthew holds two things side by side, and he does not smooth them out.

When I send the twelve out in Matthew, I tell them, *Don’t go among the Gentiles, and don’t enter into any city of the Samaritans. Rather, go to the lost sheep of the house of Israel* (Matthew 10:5–6). When a Canaanite woman begs me to heal her daughter, I first answer, *I wasn’t sent to anyone but the lost sheep of the house of Israel* (Matthew 15:24). Only Matthew has these lines.

And yet the book ends on a mountain in Galilee, where I send my followers out to *make disciples of all nations* (Matthew 28:19).

Many historians think the first is closer to my own lifetime. I was a Jew, sent to my own people, and my work was the renewal of Israel. The second is the mission of the church that came after. Matthew kept both, the old treasure and the new.

The end of the book

Matthew's last scene has one small phrase that I want you to notice. When my eleven friends see me on the mountain, *they bowed down to him, but some doubted* (Matthew 28:17).

Some doubted. Matthew wrote that down, at the very end, and left it there.

Then the last words in the book: *I am with you always, even to the end of the age* (Matthew 28:20). The book that began by calling me *Immanuel*, which means *God with us* (Matthew 1:23), ends with *I am with you*.

CHECK IT YOURSELF

Look up: Zechariah 9:9, then Mark 11:7, then Matthew 21:7.

You will find: one animal in Zechariah's poem, one colt in Mark, and two animals in Matthew, with me sitting *on them*.

Then read Matthew 25:31–46 all the way through. Count the questions about belief.

Go deeper: the longer history behind this chapter, and every source it rests on, are free at LessonsOfJesus.com/matthew.

THE SHORT VERSION

- Matthew is **anonymous**. Its writer **copied most of Mark**, which is the main reason scholars doubt it was written by my apostle Matthew.
- It arranges my teaching into **five great speeches**, and tells my life so that it **echoes Moses**.
- Its **Kingdom of Heaven** means God's rule **on earth**, not a place for the dead.
- It is the most **Jewish** gospel, and its one line "**his blood be on us**" was turned against the Jews for nineteen centuries.
- Its last teaching, the **sheep and the goats**, judges people only by **what they did for the least**.

2. Mark: The First, and the Shortest

AT A GLANCE

Who wrote it: Nobody signed it. Early in the 100s, a bishop named Papias reported that Mark had been Peter's interpreter and wrote down what Peter remembered, "though not in order." Some scholars give that report weight. Many doubt it.

When: Around the year 70, close to the time Rome destroyed Jerusalem and its Temple, and about forty years after I died. It is the oldest gospel.

Written for: Followers of mine far from my country, most of them not Jews, during or just after Rome's war on Jerusalem. It shows them why I had to suffer, and what following me would cost.

What it remembers of me: A short, busy time in Galilee, told at a run, and my last week in Jerusalem, told slowly. It has no birth story, and in the oldest copies, no one sees me after I die.

How close it stays to me: Very close, above all on serving instead of ruling.

If you only read three chapters: Mark 1, Mark 8 and Mark 15.

WORDS TO KNOW

Immediately — Mark's favorite word. He uses it about forty times.

Son of Man — the title Mark has me use for myself. In Aramaic it can simply mean *a human being*. In the book of Daniel it is a figure who comes with the clouds.

The messianic secret — scholars' name for the way Mark keeps having me tell people not to say who I am.

Legion — a Roman army unit of about five thousand soldiers. In Mark it is also the name of a demon.

THE BOOK IN BRIEF

Mark has no birth story. It begins at the river Jordan, where John is baptizing. I come to be baptized. The Spirit comes down on me like a dove, and a voice from heaven calls me his beloved Son. The Spirit drives me into the wilderness, where Satan tempts me. After John is arrested, I go into Galilee announcing that God's Kingdom is at hand.

Chapters 1 to 8 move fast. I call four fishermen and a tax collector, and choose twelve. I heal the sick and drive out demons, and crowds press in. Religious teachers object when I forgive sins, eat with sinners and heal on the Sabbath. Those close to me say I am out of my mind. I teach in parables, calm a storm, and send the demons called Legion into a herd of pigs. King Herod has John beheaded. I feed five thousand men, and later four thousand people. Again and again I tell people to keep quiet about me.

Chapter 8 is the turning point. Peter says I am the Christ, and I begin to tell my friends that I will be killed and rise again. On a high mountain, three of them see me changed. Twice more I warn them, and they still do not understand. Whoever wants to be first, I tell them, must be the servant of all.

In chapter 11 I ride into Jerusalem on a young donkey and drive the buyers and sellers out of the Temple. The leaders come to argue with me, and I praise a poor widow who gives all she has. In chapter 13 I warn my friends that the Temple will be torn down and terrible days are coming.

In chapters 14 and 15, a woman pours perfume on my head, and Judas agrees to hand me over. I share the Passover with the twelve, pray in Gethsemane, and am arrested, and all my friends run away. The council condemns me, Peter denies me three times, and Pilate hands me over to be crucified. On the cross I cry out to God, and die. The centurion who watches me die says I was the Son of God. Women from Galilee watch from a distance, and Joseph of Arimathea buries me.

In chapter 16, three women come to the tomb at sunrise and find the stone rolled back. A young man in white tells them I have risen and am going ahead to Galilee. They run from the tomb and say nothing to anyone, because they are afraid. The oldest copies of Mark end there, and the verses printed after it in most Bibles were added later by other hands.

The oldest story of my life ends with three women running from an empty tomb, too frightened to tell anyone.

That is how Mark ends, in the oldest copies. Not with me appearing to anyone. Not with a commission or a farewell. With fear, and silence, and a sentence that stops short.

Hold on to that. We will come back to it.

The first one

Mark is the shortest of the four gospels, and it was written first. Matthew and Luke both had it in front of them, and they copied most of it. When you read Matthew or Luke, you are often reading Mark, edited.

Here is why most scholars think it came first. When the three tell the same story, Matthew and Luke tend to agree with Mark's wording. When they disagree with Mark, they rarely agree with each other. And Mark's Greek is rough, plain and fast. Matthew and Luke clean it up, never the other way around.¹

Most of all, Mark leaves in things that later writers found embarrassing, and you can watch them disappear.

The rough edges

Read Mark slowly and you will find a version of me that the other gospels quietly softened.

My own people thought I had lost my mind. *When his friends heard it, they went out to seize him; for they said, "He is insane" (Mark 3:21).* The Greek means those close to me, my own household. A few verses later my mother and brothers are standing outside, asking for me. Matthew and Luke both leave out that line.

I could not do much in my hometown. *He could do no mighty work there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people, and healed them (Mark 6:5).* Matthew changed *could do no* to *didn't do many*.

Not every healing worked the first time. When I put my hands on a blind man's eyes, he looked up and said, *I see men; for I see them like trees walking*

(Mark 8:24). I had to lay my hands on him again. Neither Matthew nor Luke tells that story at all.

I refused to be called good. A man ran up and called me *Good Teacher*. I said, *Why do you call me good? No one is good except one—God* (Mark 10:18). In the oldest copies of Matthew, my answer has been rewritten to “Why do you ask me about what is good?” Later copyists changed Matthew back to match Mark, and that later wording is the one the World English Bible and the King James print (Matthew 19:17).²

I did not know the day. *But of that day or that hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father* (Mark 13:32).

And I got a name wrong. In an argument about the Sabbath, I reminded the Pharisees how David once ate the holy bread *at the time of Abiathar the high priest* (Mark 2:26). In the story in 1 Samuel, the priest was Ahimelech, Abiathar’s father (1 Samuel 21:1). Matthew and Luke both tell this scene. Both of them dropped the name.³

These are the reasons most historians think Mark is older than Matthew and Luke. Later writers smoothed the edges. Nobody adds an edge.

Immediately

Mark writes in a hurry. The word *immediately* runs all through the book. *Immediately the Spirit drove him out into the wilderness* (Mark 1:12). Immediately they left their nets. Immediately the fever left her.

There is no birth story, no childhood, no family tree. The book opens with a grown man coming to the Jordan to be baptized by John. By the end of the first chapter I have called four fishermen, cast out a demon, healed a fever, touched a leper and become too famous to enter a town openly.

Then, about two-thirds of the way through, the book slows down. The last week of my life, from my ride into Jerusalem to the empty tomb, takes up six of Mark’s sixteen chapters. One scholar more than a century ago called the gospels *passion narratives with extended introductions*.⁴ It fits Mark best of all.

Tell no one

Over and over in Mark, I tell people to keep quiet. I heal a leper and say, *See you say nothing to anybody* (Mark 1:44). I silence demons who know my name. When Peter finally says *You are the Christ*, I command my friends *that they should tell no one about him* (Mark 8:29–30).

Why? In 1901 a German scholar named William Wrede argued that the secrecy was Mark's own device. In his view, my followers came to call me the Messiah only after my death, and Mark had to explain why nobody had said so during my life.⁵ Many scholars still find some version of that persuasive. Others think I really was careful with the word, because in my country *Messiah* meant a king, and a king meant a war with Rome.

Either way, Mark tells the story so that the people closest to me never quite understand. My disciples are slow, frightened and confused from start to finish. At the end, they all run.

The hinge

The whole book turns at **Caesarea Philippi**, a town near the source of the Jordan, in chapter 8.

I ask my friends, *But who do you say that I am?* and Peter answers, *You are the Christ* (Mark 8:29). For the first time someone has said it.

Then I start telling them that I am going to suffer and be killed. Peter takes me aside to argue, and I say, *Get behind me, Satan! For you have in mind not the things of God, but the things of men* (Mark 8:33).

Then I turn to the crowd: *Whoever wants to come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me* (Mark 8:34).

In my world, the cross was no mere figure of speech. It was what Rome did to slaves and rebels, along the roads, where everyone could see. Mark's first readers knew exactly what it meant.

Three times in all, I tell my friends what is coming (Mark 8:31; 9:31; 10:33–34). Each time they get it wrong. Twice they answer by arguing about who will be

greatest. The third time, I tell them, *You know that they who are recognized as rulers over the nations lord it over them ... But it shall not be so among you, but whoever wants to become great among you shall be your servant* (Mark 10:42–43).

That saying is in Mark, and so is my answer to the scribe who asked which commandment came first: love God with all you have, and *You shall love your neighbor as yourself* (Mark 12:31). Short and rough as it is, this book keeps the heart of what I taught.

A demon named Legion

In the country of the Gerasenes, east of the lake, I meet a man who lives among the tombs, chained and screaming. I ask the spirit in him its name. *My name is Legion, for we are many* (Mark 5:9). I send the spirits into a herd of pigs, and *The herd of about two thousand rushed down the steep bank into the sea, and they were drowned* (Mark 5:13).

A legion was a Roman army unit. One of the legions that fought my people in the great war carried a wild boar among its emblems.⁶ Now picture a village crowd in my country hearing that the demon's name was Legion, and watching it run into the sea in the form of pigs.

I will not tell you Mark meant it as a political joke. I will tell you that many readers have heard one, and that Mark's first readers had just lived through a war with Roman legions.

Written in a war

Mark wrote during, or just after, the war that destroyed Jerusalem. You can hear it in chapter 13.

My friends admire the great stones of the Temple, and I tell them, *There will not be left here one stone on another, which will not be thrown down* (Mark 13:2). Then I warn them about *the abomination of desolation, spoken of by Daniel the prophet, standing where it ought not*.

And right in the middle of my speech, Mark breaks in with a note of his own: *(let the reader understand)* (Mark 13:14).

Let the reader. Not the listener in front of me. The reader holding Mark's book, forty years later. The writer stepped out from behind my words to speak to you directly, because what I was describing was happening, or had just happened, in his own time.

For readers far away

Mark explains Jewish customs as if his readers did not know them. *For the Pharisees and all the Jews don't eat unless they wash their hands and forearms, holding to the tradition of the elders* (Mark 7:3). He translates my Aramaic words into Greek. He explains the value of a poor widow's two tiny coins by converting them into a Roman one, a *quadrans* (Mark 12:42).

So his first readers were mostly not Jews from my country. Early tradition said Mark wrote in **Rome**. Some scholars think Syria or Galilee more likely. The Latin words scattered through his Greek, like *legion*, *centurion* and *quadrans*, fit Rome but would fit any town with a Roman garrison.⁷

One small detail suggests he wrote for people who knew someone. A man named **Simon of Cyrene** was forced to carry my cross, and Mark calls him *the father of Alexander and Rufus* (Mark 15:21). Matthew and Luke drop the sons' names. Mark probably mentions them because his readers knew who they were.

And there is a detail so strange that it is probably true. When I was arrested and everyone ran, *A certain young man followed him, having a linen cloth thrown around himself over his naked body*. The guards grabbed him, *but he left the linen cloth, and fled from them naked* (Mark 14:51–52). Nobody knows who he was. Some have guessed he was Mark himself. It is hard to see why anyone would invent it.

Who said I was the Son of God

The very first line of Mark calls me *the Son of God* (Mark 1:1).⁸

After that, through the whole book, no human being calls me that. Demons do. A voice from heaven does. Not one of my friends.

The first person in Mark to say it is the Roman officer in charge of my execution. *When the centurion, who stood by opposite him, saw that he cried out*

like this and breathed his last, he said, "Truly this man was the Son of God!" (Mark 15:39).

In Mark, I have only one sentence on the cross, and Mark keeps it in my own Aramaic: *Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?* which is, *My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?* (Mark 15:34). No word of forgiveness. No promise of paradise. Those come from Luke. Mark gives you a man dying in anguish, quoting the first line of a psalm. And the man who killed me is the one who sees.

My disciples were nowhere. *They all left him, and fled* (Mark 14:50). The ones who stayed were women, *watching from afar*, women who had followed me in Galilee and served me there (Mark 15:40–41).

The ending, and the endings

Now back to the tomb.

Early on the first day of the week, three women come with spices. The stone is rolled away. A young man in a white robe tells them, *He has risen. He is not here.* He tells them to go and tell my disciples and Peter that I am going ahead of them to Galilee (Mark 16:6–7).

And then: *They went out, and fled from the tomb, for trembling and astonishment had come on them. They said nothing to anyone; for they were afraid* (Mark 16:8).

That is the last verse of Mark in the two oldest nearly complete Bibles that survive, both from the 300s. Two scholars of the early church, Eusebius and Jerome, said the most accurate copies they knew ended there too.⁹

People could not leave it that way. So other people wrote endings for it.

There is a **short ending**, a sentence or two saying the women told Peter after all. There is a **long ending**, the twelve verses printed in most Bibles as Mark 16:9–20, with appearances drawn from the other gospels. And there are copies that have both, one after the other.¹⁰ If an ending by Mark had come down to us, there would be only one.

Your World English Bible prints the long ending, and most modern Bibles put it in brackets or with a note. Read it, and you will find this: *they will take up serpents; and if they drink any deadly thing, it will in no way hurt them* (Mark 16:18).

In the early 1900s, a preacher in Tennessee named George Went Hensley began handling rattlesnakes in church on the strength of that verse. A small movement of snake-handling churches grew up in the Appalachian mountains, and it still exists. Hensley died of a snakebite in 1955. In 2014 a well-known snake-handling pastor in Kentucky, Jamie Coots, died the same way.¹¹

Those men died obeying a verse that a later hand added to Mark.

Why end in fear?

Scholars have argued for a long time about whether Mark meant to stop at verse 8, or whether his real ending was lost. Most now think he meant it.

Look at what the young man says. *He goes before you into Galilee. There you will see him* (Mark 16:7). Galilee is where the book began. Mark leaves the women running, and the disciples somewhere else, and the reader holding a message nobody has delivered yet.

Mark ends where an honest witness would have to end. With an empty place, a message, and fear. He does not show you what happened next. He hands it to you, and sends you back to Galilee, to the beginning of the book, to read it again.

CHECK IT YOURSELF

Look up: Mark 6:5 and Matthew 13:58, then Mark 2:26 and Matthew 12:3–4.

You will find: the same scenes, with the awkward words softened or dropped in Matthew.

Then find Mark 16:8 in your own Bible, and read the note printed after it.

Go deeper: the longer history behind this chapter, and every source it rests on, are free at LessonsOfJesus.com/mark.

THE SHORT VERSION

- Mark is the **first gospel**, written around **70**, and **Matthew and Luke copied most of it**.
- It keeps the **rough edges**: my family thinking I was mad, a healing in two tries, a name I got wrong.
- I keep telling people to **tell no one**, and my disciples **never quite understand**.
- The first human in Mark to call me the Son of God is **the centurion who watched me die**.
- The oldest copies **end at 16:8**, with the women afraid. The **snake-handling verses** come from an ending someone else added.

3. Luke: Good News to the Poor

AT A GLANCE

Who wrote it: Nobody signed it, but the same writer wrote Acts, and both books are addressed to a man named Theophilus. Around 180, Irenaeus named him as Luke, the doctor who traveled with Paul. Some scholars accept that. Many think the writer was a later admirer of Paul.

When: Most likely between 80 and 90. Some scholars place it in the early 100s.

Written for: Theophilus and readers like him across the Roman world, many of them Gentiles, who had already been taught about me. Luke wanted them sure of what they had learned (Luke 1:4), and sure that Rome had no case against me.

What it remembers of me: More about the poor, about women and about outsiders than any other gospel. The good Samaritan, the prodigal son, the rich man and Lazarus and Zacchaeus are only here. So are the shepherds, the manger, and my first sermon in Nazareth.

How close it stays to me: Very close, above all on the poor and the outsider.

If you only read three chapters: Luke 1, Luke 4 and Luke 15.

WORDS TO KNOW

Theophilus — the man Luke wrote for. The name means *friend of God*. He may have been a patron who paid for the copying, or the name may stand for any reader who loves God.

Magnificat — Mary's song in Luke 1, named for its first word in Latin.

Census — a Roman count of people and property, taken for taxes.

Samaritans — the people of Samaria, between Judea and Galilee. They worshipped the same God but on a different mountain, and my people and theirs despised each other.

Mammon — an Aramaic word for wealth or property, used as if it were a rival god.

THE BOOK IN BRIEF

Luke opens with a note to a man named Theophilus. Many have written about these events, he says, and he has traced everything carefully, so that Theophilus can be sure of what he was taught.

Chapters 1 and 2 tell of two births. The angel Gabriel tells an old priest, Zechariah, that his childless wife Elizabeth will bear a son, John. Gabriel tells Mary, a young woman in Nazareth engaged to Joseph, that she will bear a son by God's Spirit. Mary visits Elizabeth and sings a song of praise. A Roman census takes Joseph and Mary to Bethlehem, where I am born and laid in a feeding trough, and shepherds, told by angels, come to see me. At twelve, I stay behind in the Temple, asking the teachers questions.

In chapters 3 and 4, John preaches by the Jordan, and I am baptized. After forty days of testing by the devil, I read from Isaiah in the synagogue at Nazareth, and my own town tries to throw me off a cliff.

Chapters 5 to 9 follow my work in Galilee. I call fishermen and a tax collector, heal the sick, choose twelve apostles, and preach blessings for the poor and woes for the rich. I raise a widow's son from the dead. A woman known as a sinner washes my feet with her tears. Women travel with us and pay our way. I feed five thousand, and Peter says I am God's Christ.

Near the end of chapter 9, I set out for Jerusalem. Many of my best-known stories come on this road: the good Samaritan, the lost sheep, the lost coin, the lost son, the rich man and Lazarus. At Jericho a chief tax collector, Zacchaeus, climbs a tree to see me and promises half his goods to the poor.

In chapters 19 to 21, I ride into Jerusalem on a colt, weep over the city, drive the sellers out of the Temple and teach there daily.

In chapters 22 and 23, Judas agrees to hand me over. After the Passover meal I am arrested on the Mount of Olives, and Peter denies me three times. Pilate sends me to Herod, who sends me back. Pilate finds no crime in me but gives in to the crowd. I am crucified between two criminals and promise one of them Paradise.

In chapter 24, women find my tomb empty, and two men in dazzling clothes tell them I have risen. That day, two followers walking to Emmaus know me when I break bread. I appear to my friends in Jerusalem, then lead them out to Bethany

and am carried up into heaven. The book ends with them in the Temple, praising God.

This is the only gospel writer who tells you how he worked.

Every other gospel begins with its story. Luke begins with a note to his reader.

Since many have undertaken to set in order a narrative concerning those matters which have been fulfilled among us, even as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word delivered them to us, it seemed good to me also, having traced the course of all things accurately from the first, to write to you in order, most excellent Theophilus (Luke 1:1–3).

Read that carefully. Luke says that **many** had already written accounts. He says the material came from **eyewitnesses**, handed down to *us*, which means he was not one of them. And he says he investigated and put things in order.

That is a historian's preface, written the way educated Greeks wrote them. It tells you three things at once. Luke was not there. Other gospels existed before his, and one of them was Mark, which he copied. And he thought it was worth doing again, better.

Who was Luke?

Paul's letters mention a man named Luke: *Luke the beloved physician* (Colossians 4:14). Around 180, Irenaeus wrote that Luke, Paul's companion, set down the gospel that Paul preached.¹

The same writer wrote Acts, and in parts of Acts the story suddenly switches from *they* to *we*, as if the writer were traveling with Paul. That is the best argument that the writer knew him.

But the Paul in Acts does not always match the Paul of the letters, and the writer never seems to have read Paul's letters. So many scholars think the writer was a later admirer, writing a generation after Paul died. The question is open, and it does not change what the book says.

Mary's song

Before I am even born, Luke gives my mother a song. She is a young woman from a village nobody had heard of, pregnant and unmarried, and this is what she sings:

He has put down princes from their thrones, and has exalted the lowly. He has filled the hungry with good things. He has sent the rich away empty (Luke 1:52–53).

It is a song about God turning the world upside down. It is modeled on the song of Hannah, a thousand years older, from the book of Samuel: *The LORD makes poor and makes rich. He brings low, he also lifts up* (1 Samuel 2:7).

That is my mother's voice as Luke remembers it. She did not sing about going to heaven. She sang about the hungry being fed and the mighty coming down. When people try to tell you I was not interested in such things, show them what my mother was singing before I was born.

The census

Luke tells you why I was born in Bethlehem when my family lived in Nazareth.

Now in those days, a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be enrolled. This was the first enrollment made when Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to enroll themselves, everyone to his own city (Luke 2:1–3). So Joseph took Mary from Nazareth to Bethlehem, *because he was of the house and family of David* (Luke 2:4).

Here historians run into trouble, and I will not hide it from you.

Quirinius did take a census of Judea. The Jewish historian Josephus describes it. It happened in the year 6, when Rome removed Herod's son from power and took over Judea directly. It provoked a revolt.² But Luke also says I was born *in the days of Herod, the king of Judea* (Luke 1:5), and Matthew agrees. Herod the Great died in 4 BC. That leaves a gap of about ten years.

There is also no record of any census of *all the world* under Augustus, and Roman censuses counted people and property where they were. Nobody was

sent back to the town of an ancestor who had lived a thousand years earlier.

Scholars have proposed ways to make it fit. Most historians think Luke combined a census he had heard of with the tradition that I was born in David's town. He was writing eighty years later, and he may have been doing what Matthew did with the star: telling you who I was by telling you where I came from.

No room

In the story, Mary *laid him in a feeding trough, because there was no room for them in the inn* (Luke 2:7).

Your Christmas plays have an innkeeper turning the family away. Luke never mentions an innkeeper. The Greek word translated *inn* is the same word Luke uses later for the *guest room* where I ate my last supper with my friends (Luke 22:11). Many scholars now think the picture is of a crowded family house, with the guest room full, and a baby laid in the manger where the animals were fed.³

Either way, Luke's point is the same. The first people told of my birth were shepherds, who were near the bottom of my world. And the first bed I had was an animal's feed box.

My first sermon

In Mark, I go back to Nazareth halfway through my work and am rejected. Luke moves that visit to the very beginning and makes it the first sermon of mine that he reports.

I stood up in the synagogue, was handed the scroll of Isaiah, found the place and read: *The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to heal the broken hearted, to proclaim release to the captives, recovering of sight to the blind, to deliver those who are crushed, and to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord* (Luke 4:18–19).

The acceptable year of the Lord is the year of release, when debts were forgiven and land returned. And notice where I stopped reading. The next words in Isaiah are *the day of vengeance of our God* (Isaiah 61:2). I stopped in the middle of the sentence, before the vengeance.

Then I sat down and said, *Today, this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing* (Luke 4:21).

At first my neighbors were pleased. Then I reminded them that in the great famine, Elijah was sent to none of the widows of Israel, *except to Zarephath, in the land of Sidon, to a woman who was a widow*, and that in Elisha's day only one leper was cleansed, *Naaman, the Syrian* (Luke 4:26–27). Two foreigners. God's help going outside the family.

They were all filled with wrath in the synagogue ... They rose up, threw him out of the city, and led him to the brow of the hill that their city was built on, that they might throw him off the cliff (Luke 4:28–29).

Luke put that at the start on purpose. It is the plan of his whole book: good news for the poor, and for the outsider, and the people at home furious about it.

Blessed are you who are poor

You know the Beatitudes from Matthew: *Blessed are the poor in spirit* (Matthew 5:3). Luke has a version too, and it is blunter.

Blessed are you who are poor, God's Kingdom is yours. Blessed are you who hunger now, for you will be filled (Luke 6:20–21).

Not poor in spirit. Poor. Not hungry for righteousness. Hungry, *now*.

And then Luke has something Matthew does not have at all: *But woe to you who are rich! For you have received your consolation. Woe to you, you who are full now, for you will be hungry* (Luke 6:24–25).

Which version is closer to what I actually said? Scholars disagree. Many think Luke's plainer form is older, and that Matthew, or his community, gave it a spiritual turn.⁴ Even where Matthew says *Therefore you shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect* (Matthew 5:48), Luke has *Therefore be merciful, even as your Father is also merciful* (Luke 6:36).

The stories only Luke kept

Some of the best-loved things I ever said survive in one book only, and it is this one. Without Luke you would not have any of these:

The good Samaritan. A lawyer asks, *Who is my neighbor?* (Luke 10:29). I tell him about a man beaten by robbers and left on the road. A priest passes by, then a Levite. *But a certain Samaritan, as he traveled, came where he was. When he saw him, he was moved with compassion* (Luke 10:33). Then I turn the question around: which of the three *seemed to be a neighbor* to the man? The lawyer cannot even bring himself to say *the Samaritan*. He says, *He who showed mercy on him. Go and do likewise* (Luke 10:36–37). For my listeners, a good Samaritan was a contradiction, like a good enemy soldier.

The prodigal son. A son takes his inheritance early, wastes it, and comes home starving, rehearsing a speech. *But while he was still far off, his father saw him, and was moved with compassion, and ran, and fell on his neck, and kissed him* (Luke 15:20). In my world, a grown man of standing did not run. The father does not wait for the speech.

The rich man and Lazarus. *There was a certain rich man, and he was clothed in purple and fine linen, living in luxury every day. A certain beggar, named Lazarus, was taken to his gate, full of sores* (Luke 16:19–20). The beggar has a name. The rich man does not. After they die, the places are reversed.

The rich fool, who builds bigger barns, and God says to him, *You foolish one, tonight your soul is required of you. The things which you have prepared—whose will they be?* (Luke 12:20).

The Pharisee and the tax collector, praying in the Temple. The tax collector *beat his breast, saying, “God, be merciful to me, a sinner!” and this man went down to his house justified rather than the other* (Luke 18:13–14).

Zacchaeus, the chief tax collector who climbed a tree to see me, and who said, *Behold, Lord, half of my goods I give to the poor. If I have wrongfully exacted anything of anyone, I restore four times as much* (Luke 19:8). In Luke, that is what salvation looks like. I said, *Today, salvation has come to this house*. He had just promised half of what he owned to the poor.

There are more: the ten lepers, where the only one who comes back to thank me is a Samaritan, *this foreigner* (Luke 17:18). The widow of Nain. The lost coin. The persistent widow who wears down a judge.

Ask where these came from, and nobody can tell you. Luke had sources that Mark and Matthew did not have, or did not use. Scholars call that material **L**. Whatever it was, it loved the poor, the despised and the foreigner.

The women

Only Luke tells you how my work was paid for.

With him were the twelve, and certain women who had been healed of evil spirits and infirmities: Mary who was called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out; and Joanna, the wife of Chuzas, Herod's steward; Susanna; and many others; who served them from their possessions (Luke 8:1–3).

Women traveled with us, and women paid for the food. One of them was married to a senior official in Herod's household. Luke names them.

Notice what Luke says about Mary Magdalene. She had been healed. He does not say she had been a prostitute. No gospel does. In the year 591, Pope Gregory the Great preached a sermon in Rome that merged her with an unnamed woman in Luke *who was a sinner* (Luke 7:37) and with Mary of Bethany.⁵ That merged figure, the penitent prostitute, became the Magdalene of Western art for fourteen hundred years. The Catholic Church quietly separated them again in 1969.

Luke also gives the women the first news of my rising. They go back and tell the apostles, and *These words seemed to them to be nonsense, and they didn't believe them* (Luke 24:11).

Money

Luke talks about money more than any other gospel.

John the Baptist, in Luke, is asked what people should do, and he answers, *He who has two coats, let him give to him who has none. He who has food, let him do likewise* (Luke 3:11).

I say, *Keep yourselves from covetousness, for a man's life doesn't consist of the abundance of the things which he possesses* (Luke 12:15). *Sell that which you have, and give gifts to the needy* (Luke 12:33). *When you make a feast, ask the poor, the*

maimed, the lame, or the blind (Luke 14:13). And, hardest of all, *whoever of you who doesn't renounce all that he has, he can't be my disciple* (Luke 14:33).

When I warn that *You aren't able to serve God and Mammon* (Luke 16:13), Luke adds that the Pharisees who heard it were *lovers of money*, and they scoffed.

Luke even tells you what rulers called themselves. At my last supper, when my friends argue about which of them is greatest, I say, *The kings of the nations lord it over them, and those who have authority over them are called "benefactors."* But not so with you (Luke 22:25–26). *Benefactor* was a real title. Greek kings had it carved on their coins.⁶

Pilate, three times

Luke wrote for readers in the Roman world, and he wanted them to know that Rome had no case against me.

In Luke, Pilate declares me innocent three times. *I find no basis for a charge against this man* (Luke 23:4). Then again after sending me to Herod, who found nothing either. Then *the third time, "Why? What evil has this man done? I have found no capital crime in him"* (Luke 23:22).

That is Luke making a point to his readers: the movement is no threat to the empire. He makes the same point again and again in Acts. It is worth asking why a Roman governor who found no crime had me crucified anyway, under a charge of being *King of the Jews*.

My last words, three different ways

The four gospels do not agree on what I said on the cross. In Mark and Matthew, I say one thing: *My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?* Luke does not have that at all.

Luke gives me three sayings no other gospel has.

Father, forgive them, for they don't know what they are doing (Luke 23:34). This one is missing from some of the oldest copies of Luke. Some scholars think a later copyist added it. Others think a copyist removed it because forgiving the people who killed me was hard to accept.⁷

To the man crucified beside me who asked me to remember him: *today you will be with me in Paradise* (Luke 23:43).

And at the end, not a cry of abandonment, but a prayer from a psalm: *Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!* (Luke 23:46).

Each writer gave me the last words that told his readers who I was. In Mark, I die abandoned. In Luke, I die forgiving and trusting. Both books are in your Bible. You are allowed to notice that they are different.

On the road to Emmaus

Only Luke tells the story of two followers walking home to a village called Emmaus on the third day, talking about what had happened. A stranger joins them. They tell him the whole story, and in the middle of it they say one of the saddest sentences in your Bible: *But we were hoping that it was he who would redeem Israel* (Luke 24:21).

We were hoping. Past tense.

They invite the stranger to eat with them, and *When he had sat down at the table with them, he took the bread and gave thanks. Breaking it, he gave it to them. Their eyes were opened and they recognized him, then he vanished out of their sight* (Luke 24:30–31).

In Luke, I am recognized at a table, in the breaking of bread.

Notice also where Luke puts the appearances. In Mark and Matthew, my friends are told to go to Galilee. In Luke, they are told to stay: *wait in the city of Jerusalem* (Luke 24:49). And at the end of Luke, I am carried up into heaven from Bethany on what reads as the same day I rose (Luke 24:50–51). At the start of Acts, the same writer says I appeared *over a period of forty days* (Acts 1:3). He did not mind telling it two ways.

CHECK IT YOURSELF

Look up: Matthew 5:3–12, then Luke 6:20–26.

You will find: *poor in spirit* in Matthew, *poor* in Luke, and four woes to the rich that are only in Luke.

Then read Luke 4:16–30. Notice where I stopped reading, and why the crowd turned.

Go deeper: the longer history behind this chapter, and every source it rests on, are free at LessonsOfJesus.com/luke.

THE SHORT VERSION

- Luke is the **only gospel writer who explains his method**. He says he was **not an eyewitness** and that **many others** had written before him.
- His **census** does not match the known history, and most historians think he joined two traditions.
- He keeps **the poor, the women and the outsiders**: Mary's song, the Samaritan, the prodigal son, Lazarus at the gate, Zacchaeus.
- His Beatitudes say **"you who are poor"** and add **woes to the rich**.
- He gives me **different last words** from Mark and Matthew, and has Pilate declare me **innocent three times**.

4. John: A Different Kind of Gospel

AT A GLANCE

Who wrote it: Nobody signed it. It says its witness was *the disciple whom Jesus loved*, who is never named (John 21:20–24). By about 180, tradition said he was my apostle John, son of Zebedee. Most scholars think the book came out of a community that traced itself back to that disciple, and that it was written and reworked over years.

When: Probably in the 90s, the last of the four gospels.

Written for: A community of my followers late in the first century, many of them Jews who had been put out of their synagogues. It was written *that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God* (John 20:31).

What it remembers of me: Long speeches about who I am, seven great signs, the raising of Lazarus, and the night I washed my friends' feet. It has almost none of the parables, and it puts my scene in the Temple at the start of my work instead of the end.

How close it stays to me: Close on serving and the stranger. Far on enemies, in how it speaks of "the Jews."

If you only read three chapters: John 1, John 9 and John 13.

WORDS TO KNOW

The Word — in Greek, *Logos*. It meant word, reason or the ordering principle of the world. John uses it as a name for me.

Signs — John's word for my miracles. They point to something beyond themselves.

Synoptic gospels — Matthew, Mark and Luke. The word means *seen together*, because their stories can be laid side by side.

The disciple whom Jesus loved — an unnamed follower who appears only in John, and whom the book names as its source.

Put out of the synagogue — expelled from the local Jewish community. The phrase appears only in John.

THE BOOK IN BRIEF

John begins before the world was made, with the Word, who was with God and was God, and who became a human being. John the Baptist calls me the Lamb of God, and some of his followers come after me.

Chapters 2 to 12 tell of my public work, through signs and long conversations. At a wedding in Cana I turn water into wine. At Passover I drive the traders out of the Temple with a whip. Nicodemus comes to me by night, and I tell him he must be born anew. At a well in Samaria I talk with a woman, and her town comes out to hear me. I heal a sick man at the pool of Bethesda. I feed five thousand, walk on the water, and call myself the bread of life, and many followers leave me.

In chapters 7 to 10 I go up to Jerusalem for the feasts, where leaders try to stone me. In a story missing from the oldest copies, I refuse to condemn a woman caught in adultery. I give sight to a man born blind, and the Pharisees throw him out. I call myself the good shepherd.

In chapter 11 I call my friend Lazarus out of his tomb, four days dead, and the council decides that I must die. In chapter 12 Lazarus's sister Mary anoints my feet, and I ride into Jerusalem on a young donkey.

Chapters 13 to 17 take place on my last night. I wash my friends' feet and give them a new commandment, to love one another. I speak about my going away and the Spirit who will come, and pray to my Father.

In chapters 18 and 19 I am arrested in a garden. Peter cuts off a servant's ear, and later denies me three times. I tell Pilate that my kingdom is not from this world. He has me flogged, and I carry my own cross to Golgotha. From the cross I give my mother to the disciple I love, and I die saying that it is finished. Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus bury me.

In chapter 20 Mary Magdalene finds the tomb empty, then meets me in the garden. That evening I come to my friends behind locked doors and breathe the Holy Spirit on them. A week later Thomas, who doubted, sees my wounds. The book, it says, was written so that you may believe.

Chapter 21 adds a morning by the Sea of Tiberias: a great catch of fish, breakfast on the shore, and three times I ask Peter whether he loves me. It ends by saying that the world could not hold all the books about what I did.

If you read Matthew, Mark and Luke, and then read John, you will feel the ground move under you.

The first three gospels are cousins. They share stories, order, even sentences. John is a different family.

In the first three, I speak in short sayings and parables, about the kingdom of God. I cast out demons. I go up to Jerusalem once, at the end, and turn over the tables in the Temple, and within a week I am dead.

In John, I speak in long, flowing speeches, mostly about myself. There are no parables of the kind the others remember, no mustard seed, no sower, no good Samaritan. There is not a single exorcism. The phrase *kingdom of God*, which the other three use constantly, comes up only twice, in one conversation (John 3:3, 3:5). I go up to Jerusalem again and again, for feast after feast, and the Temple scene comes in the second chapter, at the very beginning.

How long?

Here is a simple thing you can check.

The first three gospels mention only one Passover during my work, the one at which I died. John mentions three. *The Passover of the Jews was at hand* (John

2:13). *Now the Passover, the feast of the Jews, was at hand* (John 6:4). *Now the Passover of the Jews was at hand* (John 11:55).

That is where the idea that my public life lasted about three years comes from. It comes from John. If you only had the other three, you would think it lasted about one.¹

Which day I died

They also disagree about the day I was killed.

In Mark, Matthew and Luke, my last supper is the Passover meal itself, eaten on the evening the feast began. I die the next afternoon, on the feast day.

In John, my last supper happens *before the feast of the Passover* (John 13:1). I stand before Pilate on *the Preparation Day of the Passover, at about the sixth hour* (John 19:14), around noon, the day before the feast. In John I die that afternoon, at the hour when the Passover lambs were being slaughtered in the Temple.

John chose that on purpose, or kept it on purpose. At the start of his book, John the Baptist points at me and calls me *the Lamb of God*. At the end, I die with the lambs.

Both versions cannot be right. Many historians actually prefer John's date here, because a trial and execution on the Passover feast itself seems unlikely.² So John is not simply less historical than the others. On some points, he may be more.

The speeches

The biggest difference is how I talk.

In John I say things about myself that I never say in the other three. *I am the bread of life* (John 6:35). *I am the light of the world* (John 8:12). *I am the good shepherd* (John 10:11). *I am the resurrection and the life* (John 11:25). *I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father, except through me* (John 14:6). *I am the true vine* (John 15:1). And, most startling, *before Abraham came into existence, I AM* (John 8:58), using the name God gave Moses at the burning bush.

In the other three gospels, I talk mostly about God and God's kingdom, and I am careful about who I am. In John, I talk mostly about myself, openly, at length, from the first chapter.

Here is what most historians conclude, and I will tell you plainly. These long speeches are John's meditation on me, written in his own voice. The way I speak in John sounds exactly like the way the narrator speaks, and exactly like the letters of John. Long before modern scholars, around the year 200, Clement of Alexandria said that the other gospels had set down the outward facts, and John wrote *a spiritual gospel*.³

I am not telling you those words are worthless. A community spent sixty years thinking about who I was, and this is what they came to say. I am telling you that they sound like the man who wrote the book, not like the man in the other three. When someone quotes one of these speeches to settle a question about what I taught, you should know that.

In the beginning was the Word

John does not begin with my birth or with John the Baptist. He begins before the world.

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God (John 1:1).

In the beginning are the first words of Genesis. John is starting the story over. The *Word* was a term Greek thinkers used for the reason that holds the world together, and Jewish writers had already spoken of God's Wisdom as being with God at creation, the way Proverbs does. John took both and said they had come to earth: *The Word became flesh, and lived among us* (John 1:14).

That sentence did more to shape what Christians later believed about me than almost any other. Three centuries later, the great councils that defined me as fully God and fully human were arguing, line by line, over the gospel of John.

But John himself holds things together that later readers pulled apart. In this same book I say, *I and the Father are one* (John 10:30), and I also say, *the Father*

is greater than I (John 14:28). Both are in John. Each side in the fourth-century arguments had its favorite.

What John may get right

It would be easy to conclude that John is all theology and no history. That is not quite fair.

John knows Jerusalem well. He describes *a pool, which is called in Hebrew, "Bethesda", having five porches* (John 5:2). For a long time, readers took that as symbolism. Then archaeologists uncovered a large double pool near the old sheep gate, with colonnades on four sides and one across the middle. Five porches.⁴

He sends a blind man to *wash in the pool of Siloam* (John 9:7). In 2004, workers repairing a sewer pipe in Jerusalem uncovered the steps of a large pool from my time near the place where the pool of Siloam had long been placed.⁴

His repeated trips to Jerusalem, his date for my death, and some of his place names may all preserve real memory. John is a strange mixture. The details on the ground are often good. The words in my mouth are mostly his.

The washing of feet

At John's last supper there is no bread and cup. The words *This is my body* are not there. Instead, John gives you something none of the others has.

I arose from supper, and laid aside his outer garments. He took a towel and wrapped a towel around his waist. Then he poured water into the basin, and began to wash the disciples' feet (John 13:4–5).

Washing feet was a slave's job. Peter refused at first. When I had finished, I said, *If I then, the Lord and the Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet* (John 13:14). And then, *A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also love one another* (John 13:34).

Of everything in John, this is the scene I would ask you to keep. The other three remember a meal. John remembers a towel.

Lazarus

Only John tells you about Lazarus of Bethany, the brother of Mary and Martha, who had been dead four days when I came. Standing at his tomb, *Jesus wept* (John 11:35), the shortest verse in your English Bible.

In John, it is not the Temple scene that gets me killed. It is Lazarus. Word spreads, and the council meets in fear. *If we leave him alone like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation.* And the high priest, Caiaphas, answers, *it is advantageous for us that one man should die for the people, and that the whole nation not perish* (John 11:48–50).

That is how people with power talk when they are frightened of Rome. Better one man than all of us. John saw it clearly.

The woman at the well

The longest conversation any gospel gives me with a single person is in John, chapter 4. It is with a Samaritan woman at a well, at noon.

She is surprised that I speak to her at all: *How is it that you, being a Jew, ask for a drink from me, a Samaritan woman?* John adds, *For Jews have no dealings with Samaritans* (John 4:9). When my friends come back, they are astonished to find me talking with a woman. She goes back to her town and brings the whole village out to hear me.

A woman, a foreigner, of a despised people, becomes the first person in John to carry my message to a town.

“The Jews”

Now the hardest thing about John.

In John, my opponents are very often called simply *the Jews*. The phrase appears about seventy times, far more than in any other gospel.⁵ It is strange, because nearly everyone in the story is Jewish. I am Jewish. My mother, my friends, the man born blind and his parents are all Jewish. And yet the book says that the blind man’s parents were afraid *because they feared the Jews* (John 9:22).

At one point, in an argument, I say to a group of Jews who had believed in me, *You are of your father, the devil* (John 8:44).

Here is what most scholars think happened. The community behind John's gospel was made up of Jewish followers of mine who had been thrown out of their local synagogues, a generation or two after my death. John says so three times, using a word found nowhere else in the Bible: *put out of the synagogue* (John 9:22; compare 12:42 and 16:2). That was their experience, not mine. During my life, nobody was being expelled from synagogues for following me. John wrote the pain of his own community back into my story.⁶

It was a family quarrel, and a bitter one. But family quarrels written down outlive the family. When the gospel was read by people who were not Jews, *the Jews* became a name for the enemy of Christ. That one word has been used for centuries to justify hatred of my own people, including by men who quoted John 8:44 while they did it.

I was a Jew. I died a Jew. Whatever John's community suffered, I would not have them write my people out of my family.

My kingdom is not from here

Before Pilate, John has me say, *My Kingdom is not of this world* (John 18:36).

People have used that sentence to argue that I did not care about this world, about bread, or rents, or rulers. Read the whole verse. *If my Kingdom were of this world, then my servants would fight, that I wouldn't be delivered to the Jews. But now my Kingdom is not from here.*

The point is where my kingdom comes from and how it works. It does not come from Rome, and it does not come by the sword. That is why my servants do not fight. It was never a statement that the kingdom is somewhere else.

Pilate's answer is the most famous question in John: *What is truth?* (John 18:38).

Who said John 3:16?

For God so loved the world, that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life (John 3:16).

It is probably the best-known verse in your Bible. You will often see it printed in red, as words I spoke to a Pharisee named Nicodemus.

Greek manuscripts have no quotation marks. In John 3, my conversation with Nicodemus slides into the narrator's own reflection, and nobody can say exactly where one ends and the other begins. Some Bibles end my words at verse 15 and print verse 16 as John's comment. Others carry my words through to verse 21.⁷ The red ink in your Bible is a printer's decision.

Two endings

Read the end of chapter 20. *Therefore Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written, that you may believe* (John 20:30–31).

That is an ending. It sounds like an ending. And then the book starts again, with chapter 21, a fishing scene in Galilee, a breakfast on the shore, and a conversation with Peter.

At the very end of chapter 21, someone writes about the beloved disciple, *This is the disciple who testifies about these things, and wrote these things. We know that his witness is true* (John 21:24).

We know. That is someone else talking about the disciple. The book was finished by people who came after him. Most scholars think chapter 21 was added to the gospel, perhaps after the beloved disciple had died.⁸

And somewhere along the way, a beloved story was added too: the woman caught in adultery, which is missing from the oldest copies of John. It is a true picture of me. It is not a true part of John.

Blessed are those who have not seen

In John, the first person to see me after my death is Mary Magdalene, alone, in a garden. She thinks I am the gardener. I say her name, *Mary*, and she says,

Rabboni! which means *Teacher* (John 20:16).

Then there is Thomas, who would not believe until he could touch the wounds. When he does, I tell him, *Because you have seen me, you have believed. Blessed are those who have not seen, and have believed* (John 20:29).

John wrote that for his readers, sixty years later, none of whom had seen me. It was written for you.

CHECK IT YOURSELF

Look up: John 2:13, John 6:4 and John 11:55.

You will find: three Passovers in John. The other three gospels mention only the last one.

Then compare Mark 14:12 with John 19:14. Which day did I die?

Go deeper: the longer history behind this chapter, and every source it rests on, are free at LessonsOfJesus.com/john.

THE SHORT VERSION

- John is **unlike the other three** gospels: long speeches about myself, **no parables** of the usual kind, **no exorcisms**, three Passovers.
- Most historians think the **“I am” speeches are John’s meditation** on me, in his own voice.
- John sometimes preserves **good history**: the pools of Bethesda and Siloam, and possibly the **day I died**.
- His community had been **put out of the synagogue**, and his harsh use of **“the Jews”** has been used against my people ever since.
- His last supper has **no bread and cup**. It has a **towel and a basin**.

PART TWO — THE HISTORY

5. Acts: What My Friends Did Next

AT A GLANCE

Who wrote it: The same writer as Luke. It opens by reminding Theophilus of *the first book I wrote* (Acts 1:1). In a few passages the story suddenly says *we*, as if the writer were traveling with Paul. Whether that is memory, a borrowed travel diary or a style choice is debated.

When: Probably in the 80s or 90s. Some scholars place it as late as the early 100s.

Written for: Theophilus again, and readers across the Roman world. They needed to know how a Jewish movement came to welcome Gentiles and reach Rome, and that Rome had no case against it.

What it remembers of me: Almost nothing of my life, except that I *went about doing good and healing* (Acts 10:38). It does keep one saying of mine that no gospel has: *It is more blessed to give than to receive* (Acts 20:35).

How close it stays to me: Very close on the poor and the stranger.

If you only read three chapters: Acts 2, Acts 4 and Acts 15.

WORDS TO KNOW

Pentecost — the Jewish Feast of Weeks, a harvest festival fifty days after Passover. The Greek name means *fiftieth*.

Apostle — someone *sent*. It meant my twelve, but Paul and others claimed the title too.

Gentile — anyone who is not Jewish.

Hellenists — Jews whose everyday language was Greek, many of them from outside my country.

The Way — the earliest name for my movement in Acts, before anyone was called *Christian*.

THE BOOK IN BRIEF

Acts opens where Luke ends, with a note to the same Theophilus. For forty days after my death I show myself alive to my friends and speak about God's kingdom. They ask whether I will now restore the kingdom to Israel. I tell them to wait for the Holy Spirit and to be my witnesses to the ends of the earth, and a cloud takes me from their sight.

Chapters 2 to 7 stay in Jerusalem. At the Feast of Weeks the Spirit comes on my friends with wind and fire, and they speak in other languages. Peter preaches, and about three thousand are baptized. The believers share everything they own. Peter and John heal a lame man at the Temple gate, and refuse when the council orders them to stop preaching. A couple named Ananias and Sapphira lie about money they have given, and both fall dead. When Greek-speaking widows are left out of the daily food, seven men are chosen to serve. One of them, Stephen, is stoned to death while a young man named Saul looks on.

In chapters 8 to 12 the movement spreads. Philip preaches in Samaria and baptizes an Ethiopian official on a desert road. Near Damascus a light from the sky throws Saul to the ground, and he hears my voice. Blinded, then healed, he is baptized and preaches about me. Peter goes to the house of Cornelius, a Roman officer, and the Spirit comes on Gentiles. In Antioch my followers are first called Christians. King Herod kills James, John's brother, and jails Peter, but an angel frees him.

From chapter 13 on, the book follows Saul, now called Paul. With Barnabas he sails to Cyprus, then travels inland, where one town takes them for gods, then stones Paul. In chapter 15 the leaders meet in Jerusalem and decide that Gentile believers need not be circumcised. Paul and Silas cross into Macedonia. In Philippi Lydia takes them in, and an earthquake opens their prison. Paul speaks to the philosophers in Athens, stays a year and a half in Corinth, and is brought before Gallio. In Ephesus silversmiths who make shrines of Artemis start a riot.

In chapter 21 Paul goes back to Jerusalem. A crowd accuses him of bringing Gentiles into the Temple and tries to kill him, and Roman soldiers arrest him. He is held for two years at Caesarea, defends himself before Felix, Festus and King Agrippa, and appeals to the emperor.

Chapters 27 and 28 tell of his voyage to Rome as a prisoner, and a shipwreck on Malta. In Rome he lives for two years in a rented house, welcoming all who come

and preaching God's kingdom.

My first followers held everything in common. It is in your Bible twice.

All who believed were together, and had all things in common. They sold their possessions and goods, and distributed them to all, according as anyone had need (Acts 2:44–45).

Two chapters later, Luke says it again, in more detail. *Not one of them claimed that anything of the things which he possessed was his own, but they had all things in common ... For neither was there among them any who lacked, for as many as were owners of lands or houses sold them, and brought the proceeds ... and distribution was made to each, according as anyone had need (Acts 4:32–35).*

Neither was there among them any who lacked. That line is not an accident. It echoes the Law of Moses, where God tells my people what the land would look like if they kept the year of release: *there will be no poor with you* (Deuteronomy 15:4). Luke is telling you that my first followers finally did what the Law had asked for.

This is the earliest picture of the church in your Bible. Later Christians have called it a phase, an experiment, an ideal for monks. Luke does not call it any of those things. He tells it as the moment the Spirit came down and the community was what it was meant to be.

Eighteen centuries later, a German writer made famous a slogan about giving *to each according to his needs*. He was not the first to say it.¹

A second volume

Acts is the second half of a two-part work. The gospel of Luke takes the story from my birth to Jerusalem. Acts takes it from Jerusalem to Rome.

The plan is in the first chapter. Before I leave, I tell my friends, *You will be witnesses to me in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the uttermost parts of the earth* (Acts 1:8). That is the table of contents. The first chapters stay in Jerusalem. Then the movement spreads to Judea and Samaria. Then Paul carries it across the sea, and the book ends with him in Rome, the capital of the world.

Notice the question my friends asked me first, in that same scene: *Lord, are you now restoring the kingdom to Israel?* (Acts 1:6). Even after everything, they were still expecting what I had taught them to expect: God's rule, here, for my people. That question tells you more about what I preached than a hundred later sermons.

Pentecost

Fifty days after the Passover at which I died, my friends were together in Jerusalem for the Feast of Weeks. Luke describes wind and fire, and *They were all filled with the Holy Spirit, and began to speak with other languages* (Acts 2:4). Pilgrims from every part of the Jewish world heard them in their own languages.

Peter stood up and explained it with a passage from the prophet Joel: *I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh. Your sons and your daughters will prophesy. Your young men will see visions. Your old men will dream dreams. Yes, and on my servants and on my handmaidens in those days, I will pour out my Spirit* (Acts 2:17–18).

Sons and daughters. Young and old. Male and female servants. On the first day of the church, as Luke tells it, the Spirit was given to everyone, including the people with the least standing in any room. The first sermon of the church said that women would prophesy.

The first fight was about food for widows

The first quarrel inside my movement was not about doctrine. It was about dinner.

A complaint arose from the Hellenists against the Hebrews, because their widows were neglected in the daily service (Acts 6:1). There was a daily distribution of food, and the widows of the Greek-speaking believers were being missed.

The apostles did not ignore it. They appointed seven men, all with Greek names, to run the distribution. One of them was **Stephen**.

Stephen was the first of my followers to be killed. He was stoned outside the city after a speech against the Temple, and Luke adds a detail that will matter for the rest of the book: *The witnesses placed their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul* (Acts 7:58).

Saul, three times

Saul became Paul, and Acts tells the story of how it happened three times. Once in Luke's own voice, and twice in speeches by Paul. They do not agree.

In the first telling, the men traveling with him *stood speechless, hearing the sound, but seeing no one* (Acts 9:7). In the second, Paul says, *Those who were with me indeed saw the light and were afraid, but they didn't understand the voice* (Acts 22:9). In the third, *we had all fallen to the earth* (Acts 26:14), and the voice now quotes a Greek proverb: *It is hard for you to kick against the goads*.

Heard the voice, or did not hear it. (In the Greek of Acts 22:9, they plainly did not hear it.) Stood, or fell. Paul himself, in his own letters, never tells the story of the road at all. He says only that it pleased God *to reveal his Son in me* (Galatians 1:16), and that I appeared to him last of all (1 Corinthians 15:8; compare 1 Corinthians 9:1).

Luke was not careless. Ancient historians retold important events in different ways for different audiences. But it means that the famous scene, with the blinding light on the Damascus road, comes to you through a writer who did not mind telling it three ways.

Peter and the Roman officer

The turning point of Acts is not Paul. It is Peter, in chapter 10.

Peter has a vision of a sheet let down from heaven, full of animals the Law calls unclean, and a voice telling him to eat. He refuses. The voice says, *What God has cleansed, you must not call unclean*. Then messengers arrive from **Cornelius**, a Roman centurion who worships the God of Israel, asking Peter to come.

Peter goes into the house of a Gentile, an officer of the occupying army, and says, *You yourselves know how it is an unlawful thing for a man who is a Jew to join himself or come to one of another nation, but God has shown me that I shouldn't call any man unholy or unclean* (Acts 10:28). And then: *Truly I perceive that God doesn't show favoritism; but in every nation he who fears him and works righteousness is acceptable to him* (Acts 10:34–35).

Everything after that follows from it. If a Roman soldier and his household could belong, without first becoming Jews, then the door was open.

The meeting in Jerusalem

The door being open caused the biggest argument of the first generation. *Some men came down from Judea and taught the brothers, “Unless you are circumcised after the custom of Moses, you can’t be saved”* (Acts 15:1).

The leaders met in Jerusalem. Peter spoke. Paul and Barnabas spoke. And then my brother **James**, who led the community in Jerusalem, gave the decision: *my judgment is that we don’t trouble those from among the Gentiles who turn to God, but that we write to them that they abstain from the pollution of idols, from sexual immorality, from what is strangled, and from blood* (Acts 15:19–20).

No circumcision. Four rules, and every one of them made it possible for a Jew who kept the Law to sit at the same table as a Gentile believer.

Paul describes what seems to be the same meeting in his letter to the Galatians, and his account is different. He never mentions the four rules. In his version, the leaders asked only one thing: that he remember the poor (Galatians 2:10). Historians still argue over how the two accounts fit together.²

Luke’s Paul and Paul’s Paul

Acts is our only story of Paul’s travels. Without it, we would have only his letters. But the Paul in Acts and the Paul in the letters are not quite the same man.

In Acts, Paul goes to Jerusalem soon after his conversion, where Barnabas introduces him to *the apostles* (Acts 9:26–27). In Galatians, Paul swears he did *not* go up to Jerusalem then. He went away to Arabia, and only *after three years* went to Jerusalem, where he met Peter and *of the other apostles I saw no one except James, the Lord’s brother* (Galatians 1:17–19).

In Acts, Paul has his young helper Timothy circumcised, *because of the Jews who were in those parts* (Acts 16:3). In Galatians, Paul writes, *if you receive circumcision, Christ will profit you nothing* (Galatians 5:2).

In Acts, Paul is a Roman citizen and uses it more than once to protect himself (Acts 16:37; 22:25–28). In his letters, he never mentions it. In his letters, Paul fights fiercely to be called an apostle. In Acts, he is never called one, except twice together with Barnabas (Acts 14:4, 14). And Acts, which tells you so much about Paul, never once mentions that he wrote letters.³

Most scholars conclude that the writer of Acts admired Paul but did not have his letters in front of him, and that he smoothed Paul's story into a more peaceful one, with fewer fights with Jerusalem.

Speeches

About a third of Acts is speeches: Peter at Pentecost, Stephen before the council, Paul in Athens, Paul before governors and a king.

Nobody was taking notes. Ancient historians said openly that they composed speeches for their characters. The Greek historian Thucydides wrote that he gave his speakers the words he thought the occasion called for, keeping as close as he could to the general sense of what was said.⁴ The speeches in Acts all sound like the same man, and that man is Luke.

They are still worth reading. They tell you what the church of Luke's day thought the first preachers *should* have said. Just do not read them as transcripts.

A slip with the dates

In one speech, a respected teacher named Gamaliel urges the council to leave my followers alone. He reminds them of earlier movements that came to nothing. *For before these days Theudas rose up ... After this man, Judas of Galilee rose up in the days of the enrollment* (Acts 5:36–37).

The Jewish historian Josephus describes both men. Judas of Galilee led his revolt over the census in the year 6. Theudas led his crowd to the Jordan in the 40s, about ten years *after* the scene in which Gamaliel supposedly mentions him, and about forty years after Judas, not before.⁵

That is the kind of slip you make when you are writing a speech fifty years later.

Rome has no case

Acts was written for readers in the Roman world, and it keeps telling them the same thing. Roman officials keep finding that my followers have broken no Roman law.

In Corinth, the governor Gallio throws the case out: *if they are questions about words and names and your own law, look to it yourselves* (Acts 18:15). Gallio was a real man, the brother of the philosopher Seneca, and an inscription found at Delphi dates his time in Corinth to about 51 or 52. That inscription is one of the few fixed dates we have for Paul's life.⁶

Later, after hearing Paul, the Roman governor Festus and King Agrippa agree, *This man does nothing worthy of death or of bonds*, and Agrippa adds, *This man might have been set free if he had not appealed to Caesar* (Acts 26:31–32).

Luke wanted Roman readers to know that the movement was no danger to them. That was true in one sense. My followers were not raising an army. But the same book also shows a crowd in Thessalonica crying that *These who have turned the world upside down have come here also* (Acts 17:6). And when the council orders Peter and the apostles to stop preaching, they answer, *We must obey God rather than men* (Acts 5:29).

Both are in Acts. My followers were harmless to Rome's army, and dangerous to its way of life.

The women in Acts

Acts names women who led.

Lydia, *a seller of purple, of the city of Thyatira* (Acts 16:14), a businesswoman dealing in expensive cloth, is the first convert Luke names in Europe. The church in Philippi met in her house.

Priscilla and her husband **Aquila** were tentmakers who worked with Paul. When a gifted preacher named Apollos arrived in Ephesus, *Priscilla and Aquila ... took him aside, and explained to him the way of God more accurately* (Acts 18:26). In most of the places where the couple is mentioned, she is named first, which was unusual.⁷

Tabitha in Joppa *was full of good works and acts of mercy* (Acts 9:36). Luke calls her *a certain disciple*. It is the only place in the New Testament where the feminine form of the word *disciple* is used.

And the evangelist Philip *had four virgin daughters who prophesied* (Acts 21:9). Joel's prophecy from the first sermon, coming true in one house.

The ending that is not an ending

Acts ends in Rome. Paul has been brought there as a prisoner, to have his case heard by the emperor. Then:

Paul stayed two whole years in his own rented house and received all who were coming to him, preaching God's Kingdom, and teaching the things concerning the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness, without hindrance (Acts 28:30–31).

That is the last sentence. Luke does not tell you what happened at the trial. He does not tell you how Paul died, though by the time he wrote, he almost certainly knew. Early Christian tradition says Paul was executed in Rome under Nero, in the 60s.⁸

Why stop there? Nobody knows. Perhaps Luke wanted to end with the message moving freely through the capital of the world, *without hindrance*, rather than with an execution. His first book had already told of one execution. This one he ended with an open door.

CHECK IT YOURSELF

Look up: Acts 2:44–45 and Acts 4:32–35, then Deuteronomy 15:4.

You will find: the first church holding everything in common, and the Law's promise that there would be no poor among my people.

Then compare Acts 9:26–27 with Galatians 1:17–19. When did Paul first meet the apostles?

Go deeper: the longer history behind this chapter, and every source it rests on, are free at **LessonsOfJesus.com/acts**.

THE SHORT VERSION

- Acts is **the second volume of Luke**, taking the story **from Jerusalem to Rome**.
- The first church **held everything in common**, and **nobody among them was in need**.
- The first quarrel in the church was about **food for widows**, and the great argument was over **circumcision**, settled by my brother **James**.
- **Luke's Paul** is calmer than **Paul's own letters**, and Acts never mentions that he wrote any.
- The book keeps showing Rome finding **no crime**, and it ends with Paul preaching in Rome **“without hindrance.”**

PART THREE — THE LETTERS OF PAUL

Thirteen letters in your Bible carry Paul's name. Almost all scholars agree that he wrote seven of them: Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, 1 Thessalonians and Philemon. The other six are disputed. For the letters to Timothy and Titus, most scholars are now confident that Paul did not write them. They are printed in your Bible roughly by length, longest first, not in the order they were written.

6. Romans: The Letter to the Capital

AT A GLANCE

Who wrote it: Paul, who never met me. His secretary, a man named Tertius, adds his own greeting near the end (Romans 16:22). No serious scholar doubts that the letter is Paul's.

When: About 57, from Corinth, just before Paul carried a collection of money to the poor in Jerusalem.

Written for: The house churches in Rome, a city Paul had never visited. Their Jewish and Gentile members were judging each other, and Paul wanted their help for a journey to Spain.

What it remembers of me: That I was descended from David and was raised from the dead (Romans 1:3–4). Almost none of my teaching, though some lines sound very close to it: *Bless those who persecute you* (Romans 12:14).

How close it stays to me: Close on enemies, neighbors and the poor. Far in chapter 13, on rulers.

If you only read three chapters: Romans 8, Romans 12 and Romans 16.

WORDS TO KNOW

Justified — declared to be in the right, the way a judge declares someone innocent.

Righteousness — being in the right with God. In Paul it also means God's own faithfulness, God putting things right.

Grace — a gift that is not earned.

Works of the law — keeping the Law of Moses, especially the parts that marked out Jews from everyone else: circumcision, the food laws and the Sabbath.

Deacon — in Greek, *diakonos*, a servant or minister. Paul uses the word for himself, and for a woman named Phoebe.

THE BOOK IN BRIEF

Paul opens by introducing himself to the believers in Rome, whom he has long wanted to visit. Then he states his theme. The good news is God's power to save everyone who trusts it, the Jew first and also the Greek.

Next he builds his case. In chapter 1 he describes the Gentile world turning from God to idols and sinking into every kind of wrong. In chapter 2 he turns on the reader who judges them, and argues that having the Law does not help a Jew who does not keep it. By chapter 3 his conclusion is that everyone has sinned, and that God puts people right through faith, as a gift.

Chapter 4 offers Abraham as proof. God counted Abraham as righteous because he trusted God, before he was ever circumcised. Chapter 5 sets Adam beside Christ, one bringing death to everyone, the other bringing life. Chapters 6 and 7 answer objections. Does grace mean you may go on sinning? No. Is the Law itself bad? No, but it cannot make anyone good. Chapter 8 describes life in God's Spirit and a whole creation waiting to be set free, and ends by saying that nothing can separate us from God's love.

Chapters 9 to 11 take up the question that troubles Paul most: why most of his own people have not believed. He answers with the picture of an olive tree, warns the Gentiles not to boast, and ends with the hope that all Israel will be saved.

Chapters 12 to 15 turn to how to live. Offer yourselves to God. Love without pretending. Bless those who persecute you. Be subject to the authorities and pay your taxes. Owe no one anything except love. Stop judging each other over food and holy days. Paul then explains his plans. He is taking money to the poor in Jerusalem, and after that he hopes to visit Rome on his way to Spain.

Chapter 16 commends Phoebe, who probably carried the letter, and greets about two dozen people by name.

The most influential letter ever written was a letter of introduction.

Paul did not found the church in Rome. Nobody knows who did. By the time he wrote, there were already groups of my followers meeting in houses across the city.

Paul wanted to visit them on his way to Spain, where nobody had yet preached about me. *Whenever I travel to Spain, I will come to you ... and to be helped on my*

way there by you (Romans 15:24). He needed their welcome, and probably their money. So he wrote to a church that did not know him, to explain what he preached.

That is the setting of Romans. It is not a book of systematic theology written for all time. It is Paul introducing himself, carefully, to strangers in the capital, before asking for their help.

It became the foundation of Western Christianity anyway.

What was happening in Rome

To understand Romans, you need to know about a riot.

About eight years before the letter, the emperor Claudius expelled Jews from Rome. Historians still debate whether he expelled them all or only some. A Roman historian says they kept rioting *at the instigation of Chrestus*, which many scholars think is a garbled reference to arguments over me, *Christus*, in the synagogues.¹ Acts mentions the same expulsion. Priscilla and Aquila, the couple who later worked with Paul, were among those forced out (Acts 18:2).

While the Jews were gone, the groups of my followers in Rome would have been left mostly Gentile. When Claudius died in 54, Jews could come back. Now picture Jewish believers returning to find the congregations run by Gentiles who did not keep the Law, did not observe the Sabbath, and ate whatever they liked.

That is the tension running under the whole letter. It explains why Paul keeps saying *to the Jew first, and also to the Greek*. It explains why he spends three chapters on what will become of Israel. And it explains chapter 14, where he begs the *strong* and the *weak* to stop judging each other over food and holy days: *Therefore let's not judge one another any more* (Romans 14:13).

Everyone is in the same place

The first argument of Romans is that nobody stands higher than anyone else before God.

Paul starts with the Gentiles. In chapter 1, he describes what happens when people worship images instead of God. They are handed over to their own

desires, and the list grows: sexual sin, and then *covetousness, malice; full of envy, murder, strife, deceit ... backbiters ... arrogant, boastful ... disobedient to parents* (Romans 1:29–30).

A Jewish listener in Rome would have nodded along. That is what Gentiles are like.

Then Paul turns on him. *Therefore you are without excuse, O man, whoever you are who judge. For in that which you judge another, you condemn yourself. For you who judge practice the same things* (Romans 2:1).

It is a trap, and Paul springs it on purpose. Chapter 1 builds a case against *them*, so that chapter 2 can turn it on *you*. By chapter 3 he has his conclusion: *for all have sinned, and fall short of the glory of God* (Romans 3:23).

A passage used as a weapon

Two verses from that first chapter have been quoted, more than almost any others, against people who love someone of the same sex. Paul says that women *changed the natural function into that which is against nature*, and that men *burned in their lust toward one another* (Romans 1:26–27).

Scholars disagree about what exactly Paul had in mind. Some think he was condemning all same-sex relations. Others point out that the sex Paul's world knew best between men was between masters and slaves, or men and boys, and that he was describing excess and lust, not love between equals. Paul uses *nature* in other places to mean custom. He says that *nature itself* teaches that long hair is a dishonor to a man (1 Corinthians 11:14). And a few chapters later in Romans, he says that God himself grafted the Gentiles into Israel *contrary to nature* (Romans 11:24).²

I will not settle that argument for you here. But I will tell you what is not in dispute. These verses are not the point of the passage. They are the first half of a trap whose whole purpose is the sentence that follows: *you who judge practice the same things*. Anyone who reads Romans 1 to condemn someone else, and stops before Romans 2, has walked into exactly the trap Paul set.

By faith

Then comes the center of Paul's argument. If everyone is in the same place, how does anyone get right with God?

We maintain therefore that a man is justified by faith apart from the works of the law (Romans 3:28).

For Paul, the *works of the law* certainly included the things that separated Jews from Gentiles: circumcision, the food laws, the Sabbath. His point was that a Gentile does not have to become a Jew to belong to God's people. He reaches for Abraham, the father of my people, and quotes Genesis: *Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness* (Romans 4:3). Abraham trusted God before he was circumcised. So trust comes first, for everyone.

Fifteen centuries later, Martin Luther read *works* as meaning any good deed done to earn God's favor, and *faith* as the inner act of believing. That reading launched the Reformation. Many scholars now think Paul was arguing about something more specific: who can sit at the table, Jew and Gentile together.³

The man in chapter 7

For I don't know what I am doing. For I don't practice what I desire to do; but what I hate, that I do (Romans 7:15). *For the good which I desire, I don't do; but the evil which I don't desire, that I practice* (Romans 7:19).

For centuries, readers have heard in those lines a tortured conscience, Paul confessing his own inner struggle with sin. Augustine read them that way. So did Luther.

But in another letter Paul describes his life before he followed me very differently: *concerning the righteousness which is in the law, found blameless* (Philippians 3:6). He did not have a guilty conscience. In 1963 a Swedish scholar and bishop named Krister Stendahl argued that the West had read its own anxious introspection back into Paul, and that Romans 7 is an argument about the Law, not a confession.⁴ Both readings are still argued over. It is worth knowing that the second one exists.

Nothing can separate us

Chapter 8 is where Paul is happiest.

There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus (Romans 8:1).

He says the whole world is waiting to be set free, not just human beings. *For we know that the whole creation groans and travails in pain together until now* (Romans 8:22). For Paul, the future is not souls escaping the earth. It is the earth itself being healed.

And he ends the chapter with the lines people read at funerals: *neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing will be able to separate us from God's love* (Romans 8:38–39).

What about my people?

Chapters 9 to 11 are about the question that hurt Paul most. Most of my own people had not followed me. What did that mean?

I have great sorrow and unceasing pain in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed from Christ for my brothers' sake, my relatives according to the flesh (Romans 9:2–3).

He asks it outright: *did God reject his people? May it never be! For I also am an Israelite* (Romans 11:1).

Then he gives the Gentile believers in Rome a picture. Israel is an olive tree. Some branches have been broken off, and the Gentiles have been grafted in, like wild branches. *Don't boast over the branches. But if you boast, it is not you who support the root, but the root supports you* (Romans 11:18).

And he ends with this: *and so all Israel will be saved* (Romans 11:26), and *the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable* (Romans 11:29).

Remember those verses. For most of the next two thousand years, churches taught that God had rejected the Jews and replaced them with Christians. Paul,

the man those churches quoted most, wrote that God had not. The Gentile branches were warned not to boast. They boasted for nineteen centuries.

The closest Paul comes to my sermon

Chapter 12 is the closest Paul ever comes to the Sermon on the Mount, and he never says he is quoting me.

Bless those who persecute you; bless, and don't curse (Romans 12:14). Repay no one evil for evil (Romans 12:17). Don't set your mind on high things, but associate with the humble (Romans 12:16). If your enemy is hungry, feed him. If he is thirsty, give him a drink (Romans 12:20, quoting Proverbs 25:21). Don't be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good (Romans 12:21).

If you want to know what Paul thought a follower of mine should actually do, day to day, read chapter 12.

Chapter 13

Then comes the passage that every government has loved.

Let every soul be in subjection to the higher authorities, for there is no authority except from God, and those who exist are ordained by God (Romans 13:1). The ruler is a servant of God to you for good ... he doesn't bear the sword in vain (Romans 13:4). For this reason you also pay taxes (Romans 13:6).

Remember who Paul was writing to. A small, mixed group of believers in the emperor's own city, a few years after an expulsion, a few years before Nero would burn them alive as torches.⁵ Paul was telling them not to give Rome a reason. It was advice for survival.

But he wrote it without limits. *No authority except from God*, with no exception for a cruel one. That sentence has been quoted to support kings against their subjects, slave law against slaves, and in the last century, by many German churches, the Nazi state.⁶ It has also been quoted, on the other side, to remind rulers that they answer to God.

Read the next verses too, because they are usually left off. *Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for he who loves his neighbor has fulfilled the law*

(Romans 13:8). *Love doesn't harm a neighbor. Love therefore is the fulfillment of the law* (Romans 13:10). That is my teaching, from Leviticus, and Paul puts it right after the passage about rulers. The one thing a follower owes without limit is love.

The collection

Near the end, Paul tells the Romans where he is going next. *I am going to Jerusalem, serving the saints. For it has been the good pleasure of Macedonia and Achaia to make a certain contribution for the poor among the saints who are at Jerusalem* (Romans 15:25–26).

For years Paul had been gathering money from his Gentile churches for the poor among my followers in Jerusalem. It was the one thing the leaders in Jerusalem had asked of him, to remember the poor. He carried it there himself. According to Acts, he was arrested in Jerusalem soon after he arrived, and he went to Rome after all, in chains.

The greatest theological letter in the Bible was written on the way to deliver money to the poor.

The women in chapter 16

Most people skip the last chapter of Romans. It is a list of greetings. It is also one of the most important chapters in your New Testament.

It begins: *I commend to you Phoebe, our sister, who is a servant of the assembly that is at Cenchreae ... for she herself also has been a helper of many, and of my own self* (Romans 16:1–2). The word translated *servant* is *diakonos*, deacon, the same word Paul uses for himself. The word translated *helper* means a patron, someone with money and standing who protects others. Phoebe was probably the person who carried this letter to Rome.⁷ The first person to read Romans aloud to the Romans, and to answer their questions about it, was probably a woman.

Next comes *Prisca and Aquila, my fellow workers, and the assembly that is in their house* (Romans 16:3–5). Prisca is named before her husband.

And then: *Greet Andronicus and Junia, my relatives and my fellow prisoners, who are notable among the apostles* (Romans 16:7).

Junia is a woman's name. Most scholars read Paul as calling her outstanding among the apostles, though some read *well known to the apostles*. Early Christian writers knew she was a woman. John Chrysostom, a bishop around the year 400, praised her for being worthy of the name of apostle. But in the Middle Ages, readers and later printers turned her into a man, *Junias*, a name that has never been found anywhere in the ancient world. For much of the twentieth century, standard Greek editions and many English Bibles printed the man's name. Most modern Bibles have given her back.⁸

A woman apostle was not something they could believe Paul wrote. So they changed her.

What Romans did afterward

Few letters have changed history more.

In 386, a young teacher of rhetoric in Milan heard a child's voice saying *take up and read*. He opened Paul's letters at random and read, *not in reveling and drunkenness ... But put on the Lord Jesus Christ* (Romans 13:13–14). He became Augustine, and his reading of Paul shaped Western Christianity for a thousand years.⁹

In the 1510s, a monk named Martin Luther, terrified of God's judgment, read Romans 1:17, *the righteous shall live by faith*, and said he felt reborn. In 1738, in a meeting room on Aldersgate Street in London, a priest named John Wesley heard someone read Luther's preface to Romans and felt his heart *strangely warmed*, and that night became a turning point for the Methodist movement. In 1919 a young Swiss pastor named Karl Barth published a commentary on Romans that shook the theology of Europe.⁹

Today, a popular way of explaining salvation is called the *Romans Road*, a handful of verses from this letter laid end to end. *For the wages of sin is death* (Romans 6:23). *If you will confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved* (Romans 10:9).

It is worth remembering what the road leaves out. It leaves out the riot in Rome, the strong and the weak, the olive tree, chapter 12, the money for the poor, and Phoebe. It takes a letter written to bring Jews and Gentiles to one table, and turns it into a private transaction for one soul.

CHECK IT YOURSELF

Look up: Romans 1:28–32, and then keep reading into Romans 2:1.

You will find: a long list of other people's sins, and then the turn: *you who judge practice the same things*.

Then read Romans 16:1–7. Count the women.

Go deeper: the longer history behind this chapter, and every source it rests on, are free at LessonsOfJesus.com/romans.

THE SHORT VERSION

- Romans is Paul **introducing himself** to a church he did not found, before visiting it on the way to **Spain**.
- It was written to a church split between **Jewish and Gentile believers**, after an emperor had **expelled the Jews** from Rome.
- Its argument is that **everyone stands in the same place** before God, and that God puts people right **by faith**, Jew and Gentile alike.
- Paul insists that **God has not rejected Israel**, and that **all Israel will be saved**.
- It ends by greeting **Phoebe the deacon**, who probably carried it, and **Junia**, a woman Paul calls **notable among the apostles**.

7. 1 Corinthians: A Church That Ate Apart

AT A GLANCE

Who wrote it: Paul, with a co-worker named Sosthenes listed beside him (1 Corinthians 1:1). Nobody seriously doubts it.

When: About 53 to 55, from Ephesus, where Paul says he will stay *until Pentecost* (1 Corinthians 16:8). That is about twenty-five years after I died.

Written for: The Christians of Corinth, a rich and proud port city. They were quarreling, eating apart and boasting of their gifts, and they had written to Paul with questions.

What it remembers of me: More than any other letter of Paul's. The oldest written account of my last supper (11:23–26), a ruling of mine on divorce (7:10–11), and the oldest list of the people who said they saw me after I died (15:3–8).

How close it stays to me: Close on the poor, the weak and love. Far on slavery, and torn on women.

If you only read three chapters: 1 Corinthians 11, 1 Corinthians 13 and 1 Corinthians 15.

WORDS TO KNOW

Corinth — a rich Greek port city, rebuilt by Rome as a colony a century before Paul arrived.

The Lord's Supper — the meal my followers shared in memory of my last supper. In Corinth it was still a full meal.

Spiritual gifts — abilities the Corinthians believed came from the Spirit: prophecy, healing, speaking in tongues.

Speaking in tongues — speech in unknown languages during worship, highly prized in Corinth.

Cephas — the Aramaic form of Peter's name. Both mean *rock*.

THE BOOK IN BRIEF

Paul writes to the church in Corinth, together with a co-worker named Sosthenes. He has heard from members of Chloe's household that the congregation is splitting into parties, each following a favorite teacher. In chapters 1 to 4 he answers that the message of a crucified Christ looks like foolishness to the world, and that he and Apollos are only servants.

Chapters 5 and 6 deal with scandals. A man in the church is living with his father's wife, and nobody has acted. Members are taking one another to court before unbelievers. Paul tells the church to put the man out, to settle its disputes among itself, and to keep away from sexual immorality.

From chapter 7 on, Paul answers questions the Corinthians wrote to him. Chapter 7 is about marriage, staying single, divorce, and whether slaves and free people should change their place. Chapters 8 to 10 are about meat offered to idols. Knowledge puffs up, he says, but love builds up. In chapter 9 he describes the rights he has given up, and in chapter 10 he warns them with the story of Israel in the wilderness.

Chapters 11 to 14 are about worship. Paul writes about what men and women should wear on their heads when they pray and prophesy. He rebukes the church for the way it eats the Lord's Supper, with the rich eating first and the poor going hungry, and he recalls what I did on the night I was betrayed. Chapters 12 to 14 take up spiritual gifts. There are many gifts and one Spirit, as there are many parts and one body. Chapter 13 praises love above every gift. Chapter 14 asks that worship be orderly, and prefers prophecy to speaking in tongues.

Chapter 15 is about resurrection. Paul recalls what he handed on: that I died, was buried, was raised on the third day, and appeared to many people, last of all to him. Some in Corinth say there is no resurrection of the dead. Paul answers that if Christ has not been raised, their faith is empty. He describes the body the dead will have, and ends in triumph over death.

Chapter 16 asks them to set money aside each week for the believers in Jerusalem. Paul gives his travel plans, speaks of Timothy, Apollos and Stephanas, and ends with greetings, in his own hand.

The oldest written account of my last supper comes in the middle of a complaint about dinner.

Paul had heard bad news from Corinth. When the congregation met for the Lord's Supper, it was not one meal. It was two.

For in your eating each one takes his own supper first. One is hungry, and another is drunken. What, don't you have houses to eat and to drink in? Or do you despise God's assembly and put them to shame who don't have enough? (1 Corinthians 11:21–22).

Picture how it worked. My followers in Corinth met in the house of one of their wealthier members. A Roman dining room held perhaps nine or ten people reclining on couches. Everyone else stood or sat in the courtyard outside. The host and his friends, who did not have to work late, came early and ate well. The slaves and laborers arrived after work, to whatever was left. Some went home hungry. Some of the early ones were drunk.¹

Paul's answer is to remind them what the meal was. *For I received from the Lord that which also I delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night in which he was betrayed took bread. When he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "Take, eat. This is my body, which is broken for you. Do this in memory of me"* (1 Corinthians 11:23–24).

This was written around the year 54, perhaps fifteen years before Mark. It is the oldest written record of the words you hear at communion. And Paul quoted it to shame the rich members of a church for eating before the poor arrived.

Then come the verses that have frightened people away from communion for centuries: *whoever eats this bread or drinks the Lord's cup in a way unworthy of the Lord will be guilty of the body and the blood of the Lord* (1 Corinthians 11:27). Churches have read that as a warning about private sin, and have used it to keep people away from the table. Read in its place, it is about eating while your neighbor goes hungry. Paul's own conclusion is simple: *when you come together to eat, wait for one another* (1 Corinthians 11:33).

The city

Corinth was a new city built on an old one. Rome had destroyed it in 146 BC. A century later, Julius Caesar refounded it as a Roman colony and settled it largely

with freed slaves.² It sat on the narrow neck of land between two seas, with a port on each side, and it was rich, busy, mixed and proud.

Paul spent about eighteen months there, according to Acts, working as a tentmaker. The church he left behind was made up mostly of ordinary people. He reminded them of it: *not many are wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, and not many noble; but God chose the foolish things of the world that he might put to shame those who are wise* (1 Corinthians 1:26–27).

Not many. A few were rich, and those few owned the houses.

Not the first letter

The letter you call *First Corinthians* was not Paul's first letter to Corinth. In chapter 5 he says, *I wrote to you in my letter to have no company with sexual sinners* (1 Corinthians 5:9). That earlier letter is lost. Another, which he mentions in his next letter, may be lost too.

What you have is part of a long, messy correspondence between Paul and a church that argued with him. He was answering reports he had heard, *from Chloe's household* (1 Corinthians 1:11), and questions they had written to him.

Whose side are you on?

The first problem was factions. *Each one of you says, "I follow Paul," "I follow Apollos," "I follow Cephas," and, "I follow Christ"* (1 Corinthians 1:12).

Paul's answer includes a lovely moment of forgetfulness that made it into your Bible. He thanks God he baptized almost none of them, so nobody could claim to belong to him: *I thank God that I baptized none of you, except Crispus and Gaius ... (I also baptized the household of Stephanas; besides them, I don't know whether I baptized any other)* (1 Corinthians 1:14–16).

He corrects himself in the middle of the sentence, and then admits he cannot remember. That is a man dictating a letter, not a man writing scripture. It became scripture anyway.

Then he gives them the heart of what he believed: *For the word of the cross is foolishness to those who are dying* (1 Corinthians 1:18). *We preach Christ*

crucified: a stumbling block to Jews, and foolishness to Greeks (1 Corinthians 1:23). A crucified man was the lowest thing in the Roman world. Paul said God had chosen exactly that.

Sex, marriage and the end of the world

Much of the letter answers questions about sex and marriage, and it is easy to misread.

Chapter 7 opens with a line that sounds like Paul's own opinion: *it is good for a man not to touch a woman* (1 Corinthians 7:1). But it follows the words *the things about which you wrote to me*, and many scholars think it is a slogan from Corinth that Paul is quoting before he answers it. He does the same thing elsewhere with *All things are lawful for me*.³

His answer is surprisingly equal for his time. *Let the husband give his wife the affection owed her, and likewise also the wife her husband. The wife doesn't have authority over her own body, but the husband. Likewise also the husband doesn't have authority over his own body, but the wife* (1 Corinthians 7:3–4). In a world where a husband was assumed to have rights over his wife's body, Paul said each had rights over the other's.

On divorce he quotes me, and makes a point of it: *But to the married I command—not I, but the Lord—that the wife not leave her husband* (1 Corinthians 7:10). It is one of only a handful of times in all his letters that Paul says he is passing on something I said.

And then the reason behind much of his advice. *Because of the distress that is on us ... the time is short ... For the mode of this world passes away* (1 Corinthians 7:26, 29, 31). Paul expected the world to end soon, perhaps within his own lifetime. Stay as you are, he said. Do not bother changing your situation. There is no time.

Even his advice to slaves is caught in that urgency, and in a Greek phrase nobody can settle. *Were you called being a bondservant? Don't let that bother you, but if you get an opportunity to become free, use it* (1 Corinthians 7:21). The Greek for the last part can mean *take the freedom*, or it can mean *make the most of your*

slavery instead. Translators have gone both ways for centuries.⁴ Either way, nowhere in this letter does Paul say that holding a person as property is wrong.

My brothers had wives

Here is a small fact from this letter that most people never notice. Defending his right to be supported by the churches, Paul asks, *Have we no right to take along a wife who is a believer, even as the rest of the apostles, and the brothers of the Lord, and Cephas?* (1 Corinthians 9:5).

Peter was married. Mark says so too, because I healed his mother-in-law. My brothers were married, and they traveled with their wives as they spread the word. The first leaders of my movement were family men, with wives at their side.

Love builds up

The Corinthians were proud of their knowledge and their spiritual gifts, especially speaking in tongues. Paul kept bringing them back to the people in the room who had neither.

On meat sacrificed to idols: *Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up* (1 Corinthians 8:1). You may know the idols are nothing. But if your eating causes a weaker believer to stumble, you have failed him.

On the church as a body: *The eye can't tell the hand, "I have no need for you" ... those members of the body which seem to be weaker are necessary ... God composed the body together, giving more abundant honor to the inferior part* (1 Corinthians 12:21–24). *When one member suffers, all the members suffer with it* (1 Corinthians 12:26).

Read that against the dinner in chapter 11. The parts of the body Corinth treated as least important were the ones arriving late and hungry. Paul says God gives them *more* honor.

The love chapter

And then chapter 13, which is probably read at more weddings than any other passage in the Bible.

If I speak with the languages of men and of angels, but don't have love, I have become sounding brass, or a clanging cymbal (1 Corinthians 13:1).

Love is patient and is kind. Love doesn't envy. Love doesn't brag, is not proud, doesn't behave itself inappropriately, doesn't seek its own way, is not provoked, takes no account of evil (1 Corinthians 13:4–5).

For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then face to face (1 Corinthians 13:12).

But now faith, hope, and love remain—these three. The greatest of these is love (1 Corinthians 13:13).

It is beautiful at a wedding. But it was not written for a couple. It was written to a quarreling congregation where the rich ate first, the gifted showed off, and everyone had a favorite apostle. *Love doesn't seek its own way* was a rebuke, aimed at people who were eating their own supper first.

Women speaking

The letter has two passages about women in worship that do not sit easily together.

In chapter 11, Paul takes for granted that women pray and prophesy aloud in the assembly. He only argues about what they wear on their heads while they do it: *every woman praying or prophesying with her head uncovered dishonors her head (1 Corinthians 11:5).*

In chapter 14 he says, *Let the wives be quiet in the assemblies, for it has not been permitted for them to be talking ... for it is shameful for a wife to be talking in the assembly (1 Corinthians 14:34–35).*

Women may prophesy aloud in chapter 11, and must be silent in chapter 14. Some scholars think the second passage refers only to a particular kind of disruptive talk. Others notice that in one family of old manuscripts these two verses are found in a different place, after verse 40, and argue that they began as a note in the margin and were later copied into the text. Others do not go that far.⁵ But the conflict is in the letter, and you are allowed to see it.

Notice also how Paul describes a normal meeting just before that passage: *When you come together, each one of you has a psalm, has a teaching, has a revelation, has another language, or has an interpretation* (1 Corinthians 14:26). Each one. There is no priest, no pastor and no pulpit in that picture. Everyone brought something.

What I received

Chapter 15 contains the oldest account of what my followers said happened after my death. Paul says he is handing on what was handed to him.

For I delivered to you first of all that which I also received: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to over five hundred brothers at once, most of whom remain until now, but some have also fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, and last of all, as to the child born at the wrong time, he appeared to me also (1 Corinthians 15:3–8).

This is a formula Paul had learned, probably within a few years of my death. Most historians agree that it is very old.⁶ It is the earliest evidence you have.

I promised I would not settle what happened. So I will only tell you what this passage says, and what it does not.

It lists Peter, the twelve, more than five hundred people at once, my brother James, all the apostles, and Paul himself, who counts his own vision on the same list as the others. It does not mention the women. In every one of the four gospels, women are the first to find the tomb empty. In Paul's list, there are none.

Paul also never mentions an empty tomb, though he says I *was buried* and *was raised*. And when the Corinthians ask what kind of body the dead will have, he answers, *It is sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body, and flesh and blood can't inherit God's Kingdom* (1 Corinthians 15:44, 50). Scholars have argued for a long time about what Paul meant by a *spiritual body*. The gospels written later describe me eating fish and being touched. Paul describes something harder to picture.

Some in Corinth were already saying there was no resurrection at all (1 Corinthians 15:12). Paul answered them plainly: *If Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain, and your faith also is in vain* (1 Corinthians 15:14). He staked everything on it.

The collection

The letter ends with money. *Now concerning the collection for the saints ... On the first day of every week, let each one of you save, as he may prosper* (1 Corinthians 16:1–2).

This is the earliest mention in your Bible of setting money aside on the first day of the week. It was not for a building or a salary. It was for the poor among my followers in Jerusalem, a city most of the Corinthians had never seen.

And Paul signs off with two words of Aramaic that he did not bother to translate, *marana tha*. Your Bible renders it *Come, Lord!* (1 Corinthians 16:22).⁷ It is a prayer from the very first generation of my followers, in my own language, still sitting in a Greek letter to a Roman city.

CHECK IT YOURSELF

Look up: 1 Corinthians 11:17–34, and read it as one passage.

You will find: the words said at every communion, set inside a complaint that the rich were eating before the poor arrived.

Then compare 1 Corinthians 11:5 with 1 Corinthians 14:34–35.

Go deeper: the longer history behind this chapter, and every source it rests on, are free at LessonsOfJesus.com/1-corinthians.

THE SHORT VERSION

- 1 Corinthians is part of a **longer, messy correspondence** with a quarreling church. At least one earlier letter is **lost**.
- The oldest account of **my last supper** is quoted to rebuke the rich for **eating before the poor arrived**.
- Paul expected the **world to end soon**, and much of his advice on marriage and slavery says **stay as you are**.
- The **love chapter** was written to a church that was not loving, and the letter is in tension with itself over **women speaking**.
- Chapter 15 holds the **oldest list** of those who said they saw me after my death. It **names no women**.

8. 2 Corinthians: Strength in Weakness

AT A GLANCE

Who wrote it: Paul, with Timothy named beside him (2 Corinthians 1:1). Nobody doubts that Paul wrote it. Many scholars think it is two or more of his letters joined together.

When: About 55 or 56, from Macedonia, a year or so after 1 Corinthians.

Written for: The church in Corinth again, after a painful visit and a furious letter. Rival preachers had turned some against Paul, and he wrote to win them back and to finish the collection for the poor.

What it remembers of me: Very little of my life. It speaks of *the humility and gentleness of Christ* (10:1), and says that *though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor* (8:9).

How close it stays to me: Close on the poor and on strength in weakness. Far when Paul turns on his rivals.

If you only read three chapters: 2 Corinthians 4, 2 Corinthians 8 and 2 Corinthians 12.

WORDS TO KNOW

The letter of tears — a painful letter Paul says he wrote to Corinth between 1 and 2 Corinthians. It may be lost, or it may survive inside this one.

Super-apostles — Paul's sarcastic name for rival preachers who came to Corinth.

Letters of commendation — letters of introduction that travelers carried, vouching for them.

Thorn in the flesh — an affliction Paul never names.

THE BOOK IN BRIEF

Paul writes with Timothy to the church in Corinth. He begins by blessing God, who comforts people in trouble, and tells of a danger in Asia that brought him

close to death. He explains why he did not come to Corinth as planned. He did not want to come again in sorrow, so he wrote them a painful letter instead. He asks them now to forgive and comfort the man who caused the trouble. He tells how anxious he was when he did not find Titus at Troas, so that he went on to Macedonia.

In chapters 2 to 7 Paul describes his work as a servant of a new covenant. He and his companions are like clay jars, pressed on every side and not crushed. Anyone who is in Christ is a new creation, and God has given them the work of reconciling. Paul begs the Corinthians to open their hearts to him. Chapter 7 returns to the story. Titus has come with good news, and Paul is full of joy that their sorrow led them to change.

Chapters 8 and 9 are about the collection for the poor believers in Jerusalem. Paul holds up the churches of Macedonia, who gave out of deep poverty, and the example of Christ, who became poor. He sends Titus and two other brothers to finish the collection, and asks the Corinthians to give freely and cheerfully.

Chapters 10 to 13 change tone. Paul defends himself against those who say he is weak in person and bold only in letters. He calls his rivals false apostles, boasts like a fool about his hardships, and tells of an escape from Damascus in a basket, a vision, and a thorn in the flesh that God would not remove. He warns that he is coming a third time, urges them to examine themselves, and closes with greetings and a blessing.

This is Paul at his most wounded.

Between his first letter and this one, things in Corinth got worse. Rival preachers had arrived, more impressive than Paul, and the congregation was comparing. Paul made a painful visit. Then he wrote a furious letter.

For out of much affliction and anguish of heart I wrote to you with many tears (2 Corinthians 2:4).

And then he worried that he had gone too far. *For though I grieved you with my letter, I do not regret it, though I did regret it (2 Corinthians 7:8).*

I do not regret it, though I did regret it. That is not a saint carved in stone. That is a man who sent an angry message and lay awake.

A letter in pieces

Read 2 Corinthians straight through and you will notice something strange.

Chapters 1 to 9 are mostly warm and relieved. The crisis has passed. Paul is glad they responded well. Then chapter 10 begins, and the tone turns on a coin. Suddenly Paul is sarcastic, defensive and furious, boasting and mocking his rivals for four chapters, as if the crisis were at its height.

Many scholars think chapters 10 to 13 are part of a different letter, perhaps the *letter of tears* itself, or a letter written after this one when things went bad again. Chapters 8 and 9 both make the case for the same collection, as if they were once two separate notes. And a short passage in the middle, from 6:14 to 7:1, interrupts Paul's plea to open their hearts and uses language Paul uses nowhere else, including the name *Belial* for the devil (2 Corinthians 6:15), which appears nowhere else in your New Testament.¹

Other scholars argue that it is all one letter, written by a man whose mood changed as he dictated. If the first group is right, what you hold is not a single letter as Paul sent it. Someone gathered Paul's correspondence with Corinth and stitched what survived together.

The rivals

Who were the rivals? Paul never names them. He calls them, with acid, the *very best apostles* (2 Corinthians 11:5; 12:11). The Greek means something like *super-apostles*.²

From his complaints, you can sketch them. They carried *letters of commendation* (2 Corinthians 3:1) from somewhere important. They were polished speakers. They accepted pay from the Corinthians. And they had told the Corinthians what they thought of Paul, because he quotes it: *His letters, they say, are weighty and strong, but his bodily presence is weak, and his speech is despised* (2 Corinthians 10:10).

That is the only description of Paul's appearance in any letter. He wrote well and spoke badly, and they told him so.

Paul had refused to take money from Corinth. He worked with his hands and let other churches support him. *I robbed other assemblies, taking wages from them that I might serve you* (2 Corinthians 11:8). The rivals seem to have used that against him: a real apostle gets paid. Paul turned it around. He took nothing so that nobody could say he preached for money.

He was not gentle with the rivals. He called them *false apostles, deceitful workers*, and said that even Satan *masquerades as an angel of light* (2 Corinthians 11:13–14). The man who praised weakness was hard on the people who opposed him.

The fool's boast

Then, in chapter 11, Paul does something remarkable. He agrees to boast, the way his rivals did, but he calls it foolishness, and he boasts about all the wrong things.

Five times I received forty stripes minus one from the Jews. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I suffered shipwreck. I have been a night and a day in the deep (2 Corinthians 11:24–25). Then a long list of perils, from rivers, robbers, his own people, Gentiles, cities and wilderness, *in hunger and thirst ... in cold and nakedness* (2 Corinthians 11:26–27). And at the end, the thing that weighed on him most: *anxiety for all the assemblies* (2 Corinthians 11:28).

The *forty stripes minus one* was a punishment from the synagogue courts. The Law limited a flogging to forty lashes, and they stopped at thirty-nine to be sure of not going over (Deuteronomy 25:3). Paul took it five times. He was still going to synagogues, as a Jew among Jews, and still being punished as one.³

And then the climax of his boasting. Not a victory. An escape. *In Damascus the governor under King Aretas guarded the Damascenes' city, desiring to arrest me. I was let down in a basket through a window by the wall, and escaped his hands* (2 Corinthians 11:32–33).

In Rome, one of the highest honors for a soldier was a crown given to the first man up the wall of an enemy city. Paul's great boast is being the first man *down* a wall, in a basket, running away.⁴ He was mocking the whole idea of a résumé.

The thorn

Paul then tells of *a man in Christ*, fourteen years earlier, *caught up into the third heaven*, who *heard unspeakable words* (2 Corinthians 12:2–4). He is talking about himself, but he will not say so. He will not boast of it.

Instead, he tells them about something he could not get rid of. *A thorn in the flesh was given to me: a messenger of Satan to torment me ... Concerning this thing, I begged the Lord three times that it might depart from me* (2 Corinthians 12:7–8).

Nobody knows what it was. People have guessed at an eye disease, epilepsy, migraines, a speech problem, malaria, depression, or a persistent opponent.⁵ Paul does not say. What he says is the answer he got: *My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness* (2 Corinthians 12:9). And his conclusion, which sums up this whole letter: *For when I am weak, then am I strong* (2 Corinthians 12:10).

Treasure in clay jars

The warmer chapters hold some of Paul's most beautiful lines.

But we have this treasure in clay vessels, that the exceeding greatness of the power may be of God, and not from ourselves. We are pressed on every side, yet not crushed; perplexed, yet not to despair; pursued, yet not forsaken; struck down, yet not destroyed (2 Corinthians 4:7–9).

Therefore if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old things have passed away. Behold, all things have become new (2 Corinthians 5:17).

God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, not reckoning to them their trespasses (2 Corinthians 5:19).

And a line every preacher and lawyer should keep on the wall: *the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life* (2 Corinthians 3:6).

So that there may be equality

Chapters 8 and 9 are about money, and they say more than most sermons on money ever repeat.

Paul was still collecting for the poor among my followers in Jerusalem. He tells the Corinthians how the churches of Macedonia, who were poor themselves, had given: *their deep poverty abounded to the riches of their generosity* (2 Corinthians 8:2).

Then he reminds them of me: *though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, that you through his poverty might become rich* (2 Corinthians 8:9).

And then he says what the collection is for. *For this is not that others may be eased and you distressed, but for equality. Your abundance at this present time supplies their lack, that their abundance also may become a supply for your lack; that there may be equality* (2 Corinthians 8:13–14).

Equality. Paul says it twice. And he backs it with the story of the manna in the wilderness, where everyone gathered and, when it was measured, *He who gathered much had nothing left over, and he who gathered little had no lack* (2 Corinthians 8:15; Exodus 16:18).

The next chapter gives you a verse you have probably heard at an offering: *God loves a cheerful giver* (2 Corinthians 9:7). It is often used to raise money for church buildings and salaries. In its place, it is about sending relief to the poor in another country, so that nobody has too much and nobody has too little.

New covenant, old covenant

One more thing to notice in this letter. In chapter 3, Paul contrasts the *new covenant* he serves with the Law given to Moses, and speaks of *the reading of the old covenant* (2 Corinthians 3:14). This is the first time anyone in your Bible calls the scriptures of my people *the old covenant*.

Paul meant something specific: the old covenant was glorious, but its glory was fading, the way the shine faded from Moses' face. Later Christians took his phrase and made it the name of the first part of their Bible. They called it the Old Testament, and too often treated it as old in the sense of finished, outgrown and replaced. Paul was a Jew who still took thirty-nine lashes in the synagogue. He was not finished with it.

CHECK IT YOURSELF

Look up: 2 Corinthians 9:15 and then 2 Corinthians 10:1–2.

You will find: a warm close of thanks, and then, in the very next line, a sudden turn into anger.

Then read 2 Corinthians 8:13–15. Count how often Paul says *equality*.

Go deeper: the longer history behind this chapter, and every source it rests on, are free at LessonsOfJesus.com/2-corinthians.

THE SHORT VERSION

- 2 Corinthians comes after a **painful visit** and a **letter written with tears**, and Paul is not sure he was right to send it.
- It may be **several letters stitched together**. The tone changes sharply at **chapter 10**.
- Paul's rivals, the **"super-apostles,"** were impressive speakers who took pay. Paul **boasts of his weaknesses** instead, down to escaping **in a basket**.
- His **thorn in the flesh** is never named, and the answer he got was **"my power is made perfect in weakness."**
- He says the collection for the poor was **"for equality,"** and quotes the manna: **nobody had too much, nobody too little.**

9. Galatians: The Angriest Letter

AT A GLANCE

Who wrote it: Paul. He even calls attention to his own handwriting at the end: *See with what large letters I write to you with my own hand* (Galatians 6:11). No one seriously doubts it.

When: Somewhere between about 48 and 55. Scholars disagree about the date and about exactly which churches it went to.

Written for: The churches Paul founded among Gentiles in Galatia, in what is now Turkey. Other teachers were telling them they must be circumcised, and Paul wrote to stop them.

What it remembers of me: That I was *born to a woman, born under the law* (4:4), that I had a brother named James (1:19), and that I was crucified, which Paul says he made vivid before their eyes (3:1).

How close it stays to me: Close on the poor, the neighbor and equality. Far on enemies and in the Hagar allegory.

If you only read three chapters: Galatians 1, Galatians 2 and Galatians 5.

WORDS TO KNOW

Galatia — a region in the middle of what is now Turkey, named for Celtic tribes who settled there, and a Roman province that stretched south of it.

Circumcision — the cutting of the foreskin, the sign of God's covenant with Abraham, required of every Jewish male.

Works of the law — keeping the Law of Moses, especially circumcision, the food laws and the Sabbath.

Pillars — Paul's word for the three leaders in Jerusalem: my brother James, Peter and John.

Fruit of the Spirit — the qualities Paul says the Spirit grows in a person.

THE BOOK IN BRIEF

Paul writes to the churches of Galatia. He skips the usual thanks. He is astonished that they are turning to a different message, and he says that anyone who preaches another good news, even an angel from heaven, should be cursed.

In chapters 1 and 2 Paul defends himself. He did not get his message from men but from a revelation of Jesus Christ. He tells how he once persecuted the church, how God called him, and how he went to Arabia and then back to Damascus. After three years he went to Jerusalem and met Peter and James. Fourteen years later he went up again with Barnabas and Titus. The leaders there agreed that Titus, a Greek, need not be circumcised, and asked only that Paul remember the poor. Later, at Antioch, Paul opposed Peter to his face, because Peter had pulled back from eating with Gentile believers.

Chapters 3 and 4 make Paul's argument. The Galatians received the Spirit by trusting, not by keeping the Law. Abraham believed God, and the Law came four hundred thirty years after the promise. The Law was a tutor until Christ came. In Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female. Paul pleads with the Galatians, and he reads the story of Abraham's two sons, one born to a slave woman and one to a free woman, as a picture of two covenants.

Chapters 5 and 6 turn to how to live. Stand firm in freedom, and do not take on circumcision. Serve one another through love, for the whole law is fulfilled in loving your neighbor. Paul sets the works of the flesh against the fruit of the Spirit. He tells them to bear one another's burdens and to do good to everyone. He ends in his own large handwriting, with a blessing.

In every other letter Paul certainly wrote, he begins by thanking or blessing God. Not this one.

Romans begins, *First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you* (Romans 1:8). Philippians begins, *I thank my God whenever I remember you* (Philippians 1:3). Even the stormy letters to Corinth open with thanks or a blessing.

Galatians opens with a greeting, and then this: *I marvel that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ to a different "good news"* (Galatians 1:6).

No thanks. No warm words. Paul goes straight for the throat, and two verses later he is calling down a curse: *even though we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you any “good news” other than that which we preached to you, let him be cursed* (Galatians 1:8).

What happened

Paul had founded these churches among Gentiles. He had told them they belonged to God’s people by trusting in me, without becoming Jews first.

After he left, other teachers came. They were followers of mine too, probably Jewish believers, and they told the Galatians that Paul had given them half the message. To belong fully to the people of Abraham, a man had to be circumcised, the way Abraham was. They had scripture on their side. God told Abraham that circumcision was an everlasting covenant (Genesis 17:13).

The Galatians were persuaded, or starting to be. Paul heard about it and wrote this letter in a fury.

My gospel came from no man

Paul’s first move is to defend his own authority, because the newcomers had attacked it. They seem to have said that Paul got his message secondhand, from the real apostles in Jerusalem, and got it wrong.

Paul answers that he got it from nobody. *For I didn’t receive it from man, nor was I taught it, but it came to me through revelation of Jesus Christ* (Galatians 1:12).

Then he tells his own story, and it is the closest thing to an autobiography in your New Testament. He had *persecuted the assembly of God and ravaged it* (Galatians 1:13). After God revealed his Son to him, he did not go to Jerusalem. He went to Arabia, then back to Damascus. Only *after three years* did he go to Jerusalem, to visit Peter for fifteen days, and the only other leader he saw was *James, the Lord’s brother* (Galatians 1:18–19).

Fourteen years later he went up again, with Barnabas and a Greek co-worker named Titus, and laid his message before the leaders. *But not even Titus, who was with me, being a Greek, was compelled to be circumcised* (Galatians 2:3). The

pillars, James and Cephas and John, gave him the right hand of fellowship. He would go to the Gentiles and they to the Jews (Galatians 2:9).

And there was one condition: They only asked us to remember the poor—which very thing I was also zealous to do (Galatians 2:10).

Hold on to that line. At the most important meeting in the first generation of my movement, the leaders who had walked with me settled the biggest dispute of their day, and the one thing they asked of the man going out to the world was not a doctrine. It was the poor.

The quarrel at Antioch

Then Paul tells a story that does not flatter anybody.

Antioch, in Syria, was one of the first places where Jewish and Gentile believers ate together as one community. Peter came to visit and ate with the Gentile believers too. *For before some people came from James, he ate with the Gentiles. But when they came, he drew back and separated himself, fearing those who were of the circumcision. And the rest of the Jews joined him ... so that even Barnabas was carried away (Galatians 2:12–13).*

Paul confronted Peter in front of everyone. *I resisted him to his face, because he stood condemned (Galatians 2:11).*

Here is what Paul does not tell you: how it ended. He never says Peter backed down. He never says the church in Antioch took his side. Barnabas, his closest partner, had already gone with Peter. Many scholars think Paul lost that argument, and that after it he left Antioch and worked on his own.¹

So this is my followers, less than twenty years after I died, fighting over a dinner table. Peter, whom I had called first. My brother James, who led them. Paul, who had never met me. All of them trying to decide whether a Jew who kept the Law could share a meal with a Gentile who did not. I had eaten with tax collectors and sinners. It turned out to be harder for them.

Faith, not the works of the law

From there Paul makes his great argument: *a man is not justified by the works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ* (Galatians 2:16).

For Paul, *the works of the law* in this fight meant one thing above all: circumcision, along with the food laws that kept Jews and Gentiles at separate tables. His point was that a Gentile does not need to become a Jew in order to belong to God. Trust is enough, for Jew and Gentile alike.

There is a puzzle in that verse that you should know about. The Greek words translated *faith in Jesus Christ* can also mean *the faithfulness of Jesus Christ*. One reading says we are made right by believing in me. The other says we are made right by my own faithfulness to God, all the way to the cross. Scholars have argued about it for decades, and translations differ.²

Neither Jew nor Greek

In the middle of the letter comes the sentence that may be the most radical thing Paul ever wrote.

There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus (Galatians 3:28).

In Paul's world, those three pairs were the deepest lines dividing human beings. A Jewish blessing recorded a century or so later thanked God for not making a man a Gentile, a woman or an ignorant man. Later prayer books say a slave.³ Greek men had a similar saying. Paul takes the three lines and says that in me they are gone.

Many scholars think the sentence is older than Paul, part of what was said over new believers at their baptism.³ If so, it tells you what my earliest followers said to every person who came up out of the water. You are not first a Jew, a free man, a man. You are one.

Whether they lived it is another question. A generation later, letters written in Paul's name were telling slaves to obey their masters in everything and women to be silent. But this sentence came first.

Hagar

There is one passage in Galatians that is very hard to read kindly.

Paul turns the story of Abraham's two wives into an allegory. Sarah, the free woman, stands for his gospel. Hagar, the enslaved Egyptian woman who bore Abraham's first son, stands for *Mount Sinai ... in bondage with her children* (Galatians 4:24–25), that is, for the Law. And Paul ends with Sarah's words from Genesis: *Throw out the servant and her son* (Galatians 4:30).

In Genesis, those are the words of a jealous mistress demanding that a slave woman and her child be driven out, into a desert where they nearly died (Genesis 21:10–16). And Hagar, in Genesis, is the only person in all of scripture who gives God a name: *You are a God who sees* (Genesis 16:13). God saw her when Abraham did not.

Paul needed an argument, and he used her. Christians then spent centuries reading his allegory as a statement that the Jews were the children of the slave, to be cast out. Paul was angry when he wrote it. Anger makes poor theology.

The rudest line in the Bible

It is in this letter. Paul is so furious with the teachers who want the Galatians circumcised that he writes, *I wish that those who disturb you would cut themselves off* (Galatians 5:12).

The Greek means exactly what you suspect. If they are so eager to cut, let the knife slip. Galatia was home to the cult of the mother goddess Cybele, whose priests castrated themselves.⁴ Paul's readers would not have missed the point.

For freedom

And yet the same letter has some of the most beautiful lines Paul wrote.

Stand firm therefore in the liberty by which Christ has made us free (Galatians 5:1).

For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision amounts to anything, nor uncircumcision, but faith working through love (Galatians 5:6). Faith working through love. Not faith instead of doing. Faith that does.

For you, brothers, were called for freedom. Only don't use your freedom for gain to the flesh, but through love be servants to one another. For the whole law is fulfilled in one word, in this: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Galatians 5:13–14). Paul and I agreed on that. It is the commandment I put beside the love of God as the greatest in the Law.

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faith, gentleness, and self-control (Galatians 5:22–23).

Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ (Galatians 6:2).

Large letters

At the end, Paul takes the pen from his secretary. *See with what large letters I write to you with my own hand (Galatians 6:11).*

Perhaps his eyes were poor. Earlier in the letter he reminds the Galatians that he first came to them because of an illness, and that they would have *plucked out your eyes and given them to me* (Galatians 4:15). Perhaps he simply wanted them to see that he meant it. Either way, you can picture it: a sheet of papyrus covered in a professional scribe's small, neat hand, and then, at the bottom, big uneven letters from a man who could not stop himself.

Fifteen centuries later, Martin Luther loved this letter more than any other. He called it *my Katie von Bora*, after his wife.⁵ It became the battle flag of the Reformation. It was written to a handful of small churches in the middle of Asia Minor, by a man who was afraid they were drifting away from him, and who did not stop to say thank you.

CHECK IT YOURSELF

Look up: Galatians 2:1–14.

You will find: the leaders shaking hands and asking Paul to remember the poor, and then Peter and Paul in a public quarrel over who could eat together.

Then read Galatians 3:28 and ask which of its three pairs your own church has found hardest to live.

Go deeper: the longer history behind this chapter, and every source it rests on, are free at LessonsOfJesus.com/galatians.

THE SHORT VERSION

- Galatians is the only letter Paul certainly wrote that **skips the thanks** and opens in **anger**.
- Other teachers had told his Gentile converts they must be **circumcised**. Paul says **trust is enough**.
- He tells of the meeting where the leaders asked only that he **remember the poor**, and of his **public quarrel with Peter** at Antioch, which he may have lost.
- It holds Paul's most radical sentence: **neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female**.
- It also holds his harshest: the **Hagar allegory**, and his wish that his opponents would **castrate themselves**.

10. Ephesians: The Wall Torn Down

AT A GLANCE

Who wrote it: It says Paul, writing from prison. Most critical scholars think a follower of Paul wrote it after his death, leaning heavily on the letter to the Colossians. Others defend it as Paul's own.

When: If Paul wrote it, about 60 to 62. If not, probably between 80 and 100.

Written for: Gentile believers, perhaps in several churches and not only in Ephesus. It tells them they now belong with Jewish believers as one people, and how to live as one.

What it remembers of me: Nothing from my life on earth. It speaks of me raised from the dead and seated *at his right hand in the heavenly places* (1:20).

How close it stays to me: Close on the stranger, on giving and on forgiving. Far on slaves.

If you only read three chapters: Ephesians 2, Ephesians 4 and Ephesians 5.

WORDS TO KNOW

Circular letter — a letter meant to be passed from church to church.

Pseudonymous — written under someone else's name. It was common in the ancient world.

Household code — a list of duties for the members of a household: wives and husbands, children and fathers, slaves and masters.

Principalities and powers — Paul's words for the unseen forces behind the rulers and systems of the world.

THE BOOK IN BRIEF

The letter opens in the name of Paul, and is written to God's people with a long blessing. God chose us before the world began, adopted us, and means to gather everything in heaven and on earth together under Christ. The writer prays that

his readers will know the hope and the power God has given them, the same power that raised Christ from the dead.

Chapter 2 tells the readers that they were dead in their sins and have been saved by grace, through faith, as a gift, and that they were made for good works. They were Gentiles, strangers to the promises. Now Christ has made Jews and Gentiles one, broken down the wall between them, and made them fellow citizens in God's household.

Chapter 3 says that the secret now made known is that the Gentiles share the promise. The writer, a prisoner for their sake, was given the task of announcing it. He prays that they will know the love of Christ.

Chapter 4 begins the advice. Live in a way worthy of your calling, and keep the unity of the Spirit, for there is one body, one Lord, one faith. Christ gave different gifts to build up the church. Put off the old way of life and put on the new. Speak the truth. Do not let the sun go down on your anger. Stop stealing, and work so that you have something to share. Be kind and forgiving.

Chapter 5 calls for imitating God, living in love and in light, and being filled with the Spirit. Everyone is to be subject to one another. The letter then speaks to wives and to husbands, and tells the husband to love his wife as Christ loved the church.

Chapter 6 speaks to children and parents, and to slaves and masters. It ends with a call to be strong in the Lord and to put on the armor of God, since the struggle is against spiritual powers. Tychicus is bringing news, and the letter closes with a blessing.

The oldest copies of this letter do not say who it was sent to.

Your Bible opens it, *Paul ... to the saints who are at Ephesus* (Ephesians 1:1). But the words *at Ephesus* are missing from the three oldest manuscripts of the letter.¹ Around the year 140, a teacher named Marcion knew it as the letter to the Laodiceans.

The letter itself suggests why. According to Acts, Paul spent more than two years in Ephesus. He knew the church there as well as any church in the world. Yet this letter has no personal greetings at all, no names, no memories of time

together. And it says, *having heard of the faith in the Lord Jesus which is among you* (Ephesians 1:15), as though the writer had only heard about them.

That is not how you write to people you lived with for two years. Many scholars think it was a general letter, meant to travel from church to church, and that the name *Ephesus* was added later.

Did Paul write it?

This is one of the letters where scholars divide, and I will give you the arguments plainly.

The sentences. Paul's letters are full of quick questions, outbursts and short jabs. Ephesians flows in long, solemn waves. The passage from 1:3 to 1:14 is a single sentence in Greek, more than two hundred words long.²

Colossians. A large part of Ephesians closely follows Colossians, often in the same words and the same order. The note about the messenger Tychicus at the end is almost word for word the same in both letters (Ephesians 6:21–22; Colossians 4:7–8). It looks as if one letter was written with the other open on the table.

The church. In the letters everyone agrees Paul wrote, *the church* almost always means a local congregation that meets in someone's house. In Ephesians it means the worldwide church, one body across the earth.

The past tense. Paul usually says that believers *will be* saved, at the end. Ephesians says, *by grace you have been saved* (Ephesians 2:5), as something already finished.

Looking back. Ephesians speaks of the church *being built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets* (Ephesians 2:20), and of the mystery *now ... revealed to his holy apostles and prophets* (Ephesians 3:5). That sounds like someone looking back at the apostles as a founding generation, already in the past.

None of these alone proves anything. Together, they persuade most critical scholars that Ephesians was written by a gifted disciple of Paul's, perhaps a generation after his death, gathering up his teaching for a new time. Others

answer that Paul could have changed his style, used a different secretary, or written to a different audience.³

If a disciple wrote it, he knew Paul's mind well. Much of what is best in it is Paul's thought, made calmer.

The dividing wall

The heart of Ephesians is chapter 2, and it is about a wall.

For he is our peace, who made both one, and broke down the middle wall of separation, having abolished in his flesh the hostility ... that he might create in himself one new man of the two, making peace (Ephesians 2:14–15).

The *both* are Jews and Gentiles. And there really was a wall.

In the Temple in Jerusalem, where I taught, a low stone barrier separated the outer court, open to everyone, from the inner courts, open only to Jews. Signs were posted along it in Greek and Latin, warning foreigners not to go further, on pain of death. Two of those warning stones have been found. One, complete, is in a museum in Istanbul.⁴ Its message is that anyone who passes the barrier will have only himself to blame for the death that follows.

By the time Ephesians was written, that wall had probably been pulled down with the rest of the Temple by Roman soldiers. Ephesians says I had already torn it down another way. *So then you are no longer strangers and foreigners, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and of the household of God* (Ephesians 2:19).

Saved, and made for something

You may know these verses by heart: *for by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, that no one would boast* (Ephesians 2:8–9).

Now read the next verse, which is very often left off the poster: *For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared before that we would walk in them* (Ephesians 2:10).

Not saved by good works. Saved *for* good works. The two verses belong together, and separating them has done harm. A faith that stops at verse 9 can sit

still forever. Verse 10 tells it to get up and walk.

One body

Chapter 4 begins with the great call to unity: *There is one body and one Spirit ... one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all* (Ephesians 4:4–6).

Then come the practical lines, some of the best in all the letters.

Be angry, and don't sin. Don't let the sun go down on your wrath (Ephesians 4:26).

Let him who stole steal no more; but rather let him labor, producing with his hands something that is good, that he may have something to give to him who has need (Ephesians 4:28).

Look at that one again. A thief should stop stealing and start working, which you would expect. But the reason given is not so that he can support himself, or become respectable. It is so that he will have something to give to the needy. In this letter, the purpose of honest work is generosity.

And be kind to one another, tender hearted, forgiving each other (Ephesians 4:32).

The household code

Chapter 5 brings the passage that has shaped Christian marriages, and Christian arguments about marriage, for centuries.

It begins with a sentence meant for everyone: *subjecting yourselves to one another in the fear of Christ* (Ephesians 5:21). To one another. Every member of the household to every other.

Then: *Wives, be subject to your own husbands, as to the Lord* (Ephesians 5:22). In two of the oldest copies of the letter, that verse has no verb of its own. It reads, literally, *wives, to your own husbands, as to the Lord*. It borrows its verb from the sentence before, the one about everyone being subject to one another.⁵ Later copyists added the verb to make the command stand on its own, and that is the form your World English Bible prints.

The husband is called the head, and then he is given a command that no Roman husband had ever been given by law: *Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the assembly, and gave himself up for it* (Ephesians 5:25). He is to give himself up, the way I did on the cross.

Then children and parents. Then slaves: *Servants, be obedient to those who according to the flesh are your masters, with fear and trembling* (Ephesians 6:5). And masters: *You masters, do the same things to them, and give up threatening, knowing that he who is both their Master and yours is in heaven, and there is no partiality with him* (Ephesians 6:9).

This list did not start with Ephesians. It is copied and enlarged from Colossians, and lists like it were a standard feature of Greek writing on how to run a household. What is new is what Ephesians puts around it: mutual submission at the start, a husband told to die for his wife, and masters reminded that they have a master too.

That was more than the world around it said. It was less than *neither slave nor free ... neither male nor female*. It accepted slavery as a fact of household life and told the slave to obey with fear and trembling. For centuries afterward, that verse was read aloud to enslaved people by men who owned them, and the line about masters giving up threats was read much more quietly.

The armor of God

The letter ends with its most famous picture. *Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil* (Ephesians 6:11).

The writer may have been looking at a Roman soldier, perhaps the one guarding him. He goes piece by piece: belt, breastplate, boots, shield, helmet. Notice that every piece is for defense except one, and that one is *the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God* (Ephesians 6:17). The only weapon is a word.

And notice who the enemy is. *For our wrestling is not against flesh and blood, but against the principalities, against the powers, against the world's rulers of the darkness of this age* (Ephesians 6:12).

Not against flesh and blood. Not against people. That verse has been used to call Christians to a private war with invisible demons. It has also been read, by many in the last century, as a recognition that evil works through systems, empires and institutions, not only through individuals, and that a follower of mine should fight the system without hating the people inside it.⁶ Either way, it rules out one thing: making a human being your enemy.

CHECK IT YOURSELF

Look up: Ephesians 2:8–10, all three verses.

You will find: that the verse after *not of works* says you were *created ... for good works*.

Then read Ephesians 5:21 and 5:22 together, as one sentence.

Go deeper: the longer history behind this chapter, and every source it rests on, are free at LessonsOfJesus.com/ephesians.

THE SHORT VERSION

- The oldest copies **do not say “in Ephesus.”** It was probably a **circular letter** for many churches.
- Most critical scholars think a **follower of Paul** wrote it after his death, closely following **Colossians**.
- Its center is the **dividing wall** between Jew and Gentile, **torn down** in me. A real wall like it stood in the Temple.
- *By grace you have been saved* is followed at once by **created for good works**.
- Its **household code** begins with **mutual submission** and tells husbands to **give themselves up**, but it still tells slaves to obey **with fear and trembling**.

11. Philippians: Letter From a Cell

AT A GLANCE

Who wrote it: Paul, with Timothy named beside him. No one seriously doubts it. Some scholars think it combines two or three of his shorter notes to the same church.

When: Sometime between about 54 and 62, from prison. Nobody knows which prison: Ephesus, Caesarea and Rome have all been proposed.

Written for: The church in Philippi, the first Paul founded in Europe. It had sent him money in prison. He thanks them, tells them to stop quarreling and warns them against rival teachers.

What it remembers of me: One of the oldest hymns about me, which says I *emptied himself, taking the form of a servant*, and was obedient *to the point of death, yes, the death of the cross* (2:7–8).

How close it stays to me: Close, especially on serving and putting others first. Less close where Paul calls his rivals *dogs* (3:2).

If you only read three chapters: It has four. Read Philippians 1, 2 and 4.

WORDS TO KNOW

Philippi — a city in northern Greece, refounded by Rome as a colony for army veterans after a famous battle fought there in 42 BC.

Colony — a Roman settlement abroad whose citizens had the rights of citizens of Rome itself.

The emptying — in Greek, *kenosis*, from the verb in Philippians 2:7. It became the name for the idea that I gave up glory to become human.

Overseers — in Greek, *episkopoi*, from which comes the word *bishop*. Here they are local leaders, more than one in a single town.

THE BOOK IN BRIEF

Paul and Timothy write to the believers in Philippi. Paul thanks God for them and tells them about his prison, which he says has spread the good news. Some rivals preach out of envy, but either way Christ is announced. He does not know whether he will live or die, but expects to see them again, and asks them to stand firm together.

Chapter 2 asks them to put others first and to stop quarreling. Paul holds up a hymn about me. I was in the form of God, took the form of a servant, died on a cross, and was raised above everyone. He hopes to send Timothy, and sends Epaphroditus, who nearly died, home.

Chapter 3 warns against teachers who insist on circumcision. Paul counts everything he once boasted of as loss for the sake of knowing me, and says our citizenship is in heaven.

Chapter 4 urges two women, Euodia and Syntyche, to agree. He tells the church to rejoice, not to worry, and to think about whatever is good. He thanks them for the gift Epaphroditus brought, says he has learned to be content in plenty and in hunger, and sends greetings, including from Caesar's household.

The happiest letter Paul wrote, he wrote in chains.

Rejoice in the Lord always! Again I will say, "Rejoice!" (Philippians 4:4).

Words for joy and rejoicing run all through this short letter, more than a dozen times.¹ It was written by a man in prison, who did not know whether he would come out alive, to the one church that had never let him down.

The church that paid

Philippi was the first church Paul founded in Europe, according to Acts. It began with a group of women meeting for prayer by a river outside the city, and the first convert Acts names is **Lydia**, *a seller of purple*, a dealer in expensive dyed cloth, whose house became the church's meeting place (Acts 16:13–15, 40).

Paul refused money from most of his churches, so nobody could accuse him of preaching for pay. Philippi was the exception. *No assembly shared with me in the*

matter of giving and receiving but you only. For even in Thessalonica you sent once and again to my need (Philippians 4:15–16).

Now he was in prison, and prisoners in the Roman world were often fed only by friends from outside. The Philippians had sent a man named **Epaphroditus** with money and supplies. Epaphroditus fell ill, *nearly to death* (Philippians 2:27), and recovered. Paul sent him back home carrying this letter. Part of it is a thank-you note.

Which prison?

Paul says that his imprisonment had become known *to the whole palace guard* (Philippians 1:13), and he sends greetings from *those who are of Caesar's household* (Philippians 4:22). Those phrases made readers for centuries assume he was in Rome.

But the phrases do not settle it. The governor's headquarters in any province could be called the *praetorium*, and *Caesar's household* meant the emperor's slaves and freedmen, who worked across the empire. Many scholars now think Paul was jailed in Ephesus, closer to Philippi, which would explain all the messengers going back and forth.² The letter does not tell us, and that is fine. What it tells us is how he felt.

For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain (Philippians 1:21). *I am hard pressed between the two, having the desire to depart and be with Christ, which is far better* (Philippians 1:23).

A man who may be executed is thinking out loud about whether he would rather live or die. He decides he will go on living, because they still need him.

The hymn

In chapter 2 comes the most important passage in the letter, and one of the most important in your New Testament.

Have this in your mind, which was also in Christ Jesus, who, existing in the form of God, didn't consider equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being made in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself, becoming obedient to the point of death, yes,

the death of the cross. Therefore God also highly exalted him, and gave to him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow ... and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father (Philippians 2:5–11).

It has the shape of a poem or a hymn, and many scholars think it was sung by my followers before Paul quoted it. If so, it is one of the oldest Christian songs that survive, from within twenty or thirty years of my death.³

Notice the shape. It goes down, then up. Down from the form of God, to a servant, to a human, to death, and not just any death, *the death of the cross*. Crucifixion was the punishment Rome reserved for slaves, rebels and the lowest criminals. Romans called it the *slave's punishment*.⁴ The hymn says I went all the way to the bottom.

Then it goes up. *Every knee should bow ... every tongue should confess*. Those words come from Isaiah, where God says, *to me every knee shall bow, every tongue shall take an oath* (Isaiah 45:23). The hymn gives to me what Isaiah gave to God alone. It is one of the earliest places where you can watch my followers beginning to speak of me in the language they used for God.

Why Paul quotes it

Here is what people usually miss. Paul did not quote the hymn to teach doctrine. He quoted it to settle an argument.

The verses just before it say: *doing nothing through rivalry or through conceit, but in humility, each counting others better than himself; each of you not just looking to his own things, but each of you also to the things of others* (Philippians 2:3–4). Then: *Have this in your mind, which was also in Christ Jesus*.

The hymn is an example to copy. If I emptied myself and took the form of a slave, then my followers can stop competing with one another. The greatest statement about who I am, in the whole letter, is there to tell a congregation to stop putting itself first.

Citizens of where?

Philippi was proud of being a Roman colony. Many of its people were Roman citizens, living abroad. The city was laid out like a little Rome, and its veterans' families had the same rights as anyone born on the Tiber.

So when Paul wrote to them, *For our citizenship is in heaven, from where we also wait for a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ* (Philippians 3:20), every word of it pointed somewhere. *Citizenship. Savior. Lord.* Those were the emperor's words, the words of the city's own pride. Paul gave them to someone else.⁵

It does not mean their home was in the sky and the earth did not matter. A colony was a piece of Rome planted far away, living Rome's life where it stood. Paul was telling them to be a colony of heaven, living heaven's life right there in Philippi.

Paul's résumé

In chapter 3 the letter suddenly changes tone. *Finally, my brothers, rejoice in the Lord!* (Philippians 3:1) sounds like the end of a letter. Then the next verse snaps: *Beware of the dogs; beware of the evil workers; beware of the false circumcision* (Philippians 3:2). That sharp turn is one reason some scholars think this chapter came from a different letter.⁶

Paul is warning against the same kind of teachers he fought in Galatia, who wanted Gentile believers circumcised. And he answers them by listing his own credentials as a Jew. *Circumcised the eighth day, of the stock of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; concerning the law, a Pharisee; concerning zeal, persecuting the assembly; concerning the righteousness which is in the law, found blameless* (Philippians 3:5–6).

Found blameless. Paul did not describe himself as a tormented sinner who could not keep the Law. He said he kept it, perfectly, by any measure a Pharisee would use.

And then he throws it all away: *I count all things to be a loss ... and count them nothing but refuse* (Philippians 3:8). The Greek word translated *refuse* is a coarse one. It can mean dung.⁷

The women who argued

Near the end, Paul names two women. *I exhort Euodia, and I exhort Syntyche, to think the same way in the Lord. Yes, I beg you also, true partner, help these women, for they labored with me in the Good News* (Philippians 4:2–3).

Preachers have often used them as a warning about quarrelsome women. Read what Paul actually says. They *labored with me in the Good News*. They were his co-workers, important enough that their disagreement mattered to the whole church, important enough to be named in a letter read aloud to everyone. In a church that began with women praying by a river, it is no surprise that two of its leaders were women.

I can do all things

Now the most quoted verse in the letter. *I can do all things through Christ, who strengthens me* (Philippians 4:13).

It is painted on gym walls and printed on athletes' gear. It is used to mean that with my help you can win the game, close the deal, or get the job.

Read the two verses before it. *I have learned in whatever state I am, to be content in it. I know how to be humbled, and I also know how to abound. In everything and in all things I have learned the secret both to be filled and to be hungry, both to abound and to be in need* (Philippians 4:11–12).

Then: *I can do all things*.

Paul was in prison, thanking a church for its gifts. *All things* meant going hungry and being full, having plenty and having nothing. It is not a promise that you will win. It is a man in chains saying he can bear losing.

CHECK IT YOURSELF

Look up: Philippians 2:3–11, starting at verse 3, not verse 5.

You will find: the great hymn about me, quoted as an example of putting others first.

Then read Philippians 4:11–13 together. What were the *all things*?

Go deeper: the longer history behind this chapter, and every source it rests on, are free at LessonsOfJesus.com/philippians.

THE SHORT VERSION

- Philippians is the **most joyful** of Paul's letters, written **from prison** to the one church that **supported him with money**.
- Its center is an early **hymn**: I **emptied myself**, took the form of a **slave**, and died the **slave's death** of the cross.
- Paul quotes the hymn to tell a congregation to **stop competing** and look to **each other's interests**.
- To a proud **Roman colony**, Paul says *our citizenship is in heaven*, using the emperor's own words for **Savior** and **Lord**.
- *I can do all things* is about being **content when hungry**, and two women he calls **co-workers in the Good News** are named.

12. Colossians: The Town Paul Never Saw

AT A GLANCE

Who wrote it: It says Paul and Timothy. Scholars are divided roughly in half. Some think Paul wrote it from prison. Others think a follower wrote it soon after his death.

When: If Paul wrote it, about 55 to 62. If not, probably in the 70s or 80s.

Written for: The church in Colossae, a town Paul had never visited. A teaching there seems to have mixed strict rules, special days and visions of angels, and the letter answers it.

What it remembers of me: Nothing from my life. A hymn in the first chapter calls me *the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation* (1:15).

How close it stays to me: Close on forgiving debts. Far on wives and slaves, who are told to submit and to obey.

If you only read three chapters: It has four. Read Colossians 1, 2 and 3.

WORDS TO KNOW

Colossae — a small town in the Lycus valley in what is now western Turkey, near the larger cities of Laodicea and Hierapolis.

Household code — a list of duties for wives and husbands, children and fathers, slaves and masters. It is probably the earliest one in the New Testament.

Elements of the world — in Greek, *stoicheia*. It could mean the basic principles of a teaching, the physical elements, or spiritual powers thought to rule the world.

Certificate of debt — in Greek, *cheirographon*, a handwritten note acknowledging a debt.

THE BOOK IN BRIEF

Paul and Timothy write to the believers in Colossae, a town Paul has not visited. They thank God for the church's faith and love, as Epaphras reported it.

In chapter 1 a poem praises Christ. He is the image of the invisible God and the firstborn of all creation. All things were made through him, and through his cross God makes peace with them all. Paul says he suffers gladly for the church.

Chapter 2 warns against being taken captive by empty philosophy and human tradition. God has cancelled the debt held against us, nailing it to the cross. So no one should judge believers over food, festival days or the Sabbath, or demand self-denial and the worship of angels.

Chapter 3 says that since they were raised with Christ, they should put away anger and lies, and put on compassion, forgiveness and love. There is no Greek or Jew, slave or free, for Christ is all. Rules follow for wives and husbands, children and fathers, and slaves.

Chapter 4 begins with the rule for masters, then asks for prayer, promises news from Tychicus and Onesimus, passes on greetings, tells the church to share the letter with Laodicea, and ends in Paul's own hand.

Paul had never been to Colossae.

The letter says so. Paul writes of how he struggles *for you, and for those at Laodicea, and for as many as have not seen my face in the flesh* (Colossians 2:1). The church in Colossae was started by someone else, a local man named **Epaphras**, whom the letter calls *our beloved fellow servant* (Colossians 1:7).

So this is a letter to strangers, as Romans was. It was carried by the same messenger, Tychicus, who carried the letter called Ephesians, and it travels with the shortest of Paul's letters, to Philemon, who also lived in Colossae. The two letters share a whole cast of names: Epaphras, Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, Luke, Archippus, and a slave named Onesimus (Colossians 4:9–17; Philemon 1–2, 10, 23–24).

Did Paul write it?

This is one of the closest calls among the disputed letters. I told you I would not pretend otherwise.

For Paul: the names. A later writer could have copied them from Philemon, but the overlap is natural and detailed, and it fits a letter sent at the same time. The

letter closes the way Paul did, with a line in his own hand: *The salutation of me, Paul, with my own hand: remember my bonds* (Colossians 4:18).

Against Paul: the style, which is heavier and more elaborate than in Paul's undisputed letters. And the thinking, which has moved. In Romans, Paul says that believers *will also be part of his resurrection* (Romans 6:5), in the future. In Colossians, they *were also raised with him* (Colossians 2:12), already, in the past. *If then you were raised together with Christ, seek the things that are above* (Colossians 3:1). The future has moved closer to the present, and the church has started to settle in.

Scholars split about evenly. Whoever wrote it, it became the model for Ephesians, which copies large parts of it.

The hymn

The letter opens with a poem about me, and it is the grandest one in your Bible.

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by him all things were created in the heavens and on the earth, visible things and invisible things, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or powers. All things have been created through him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things are held together (Colossians 1:15–17).

The village carpenter from Nazareth, described as the one through whom the stars were made. The writer was taking what Jewish teachers had said about God's Wisdom, which was with God at creation, and saying it about me.

The hymn ends where the cross is: God was pleased *through him to reconcile all things to himself ... having made peace through the blood of his cross* (Colossians 1:20). Not some things. All things, on earth and in heaven.

Two and a half centuries later, a priest in Alexandria named Arius used the phrase *the firstborn of all creation* to argue that I was the first thing God made, and so was not God in the full sense. That argument split the church and led to the Council of Nicaea in 325. A line in a hymn, written to a small town in Asia Minor, became the center of a fight across an empire.¹

The debt nailed to the cross

There is one image in this letter that you should not miss.

Colossians says that God forgave us, *wiping out the handwriting in ordinances which was against us. He has taken it out of the way, nailing it to the cross* (Colossians 2:14).

The Greek word behind *handwriting* is *cheirographon*. It was a technical word. It meant a handwritten certificate of debt, the IOU a borrower signed.² In my world, that piece of papyrus was the thing that took your land, and then your freedom.

So the picture is this. Everything held against you, the whole account, written in your own hand, is taken down and nailed to the cross, cancelled. When I taught people to pray *forgive us our debts*, I meant real debts and the forgiveness of sin, together. This letter keeps the picture of the debt.

The next verse takes the picture further. God *stripped the principalities and the powers, and made a show of them openly, triumphing over them* (Colossians 2:15). That is the language of a Roman triumph, the parade in which a victorious general led his defeated enemies through the streets in chains. Here, the cross is the triumph, and the powers of the world are the ones in chains.

Don't handle, don't taste

Something was troubling the church in Colossae, and the letter never says exactly what. Scholars call it the *Colossian heresy* and argue about it endlessly.

You can see its outline in the warnings. *Be careful that you don't let anyone rob you through his philosophy and vain deceit ... after the elements of the world* (Colossians 2:8). *Let no one therefore judge you in eating, or in drinking, or with respect to a feast day or a new moon or a Sabbath day* (Colossians 2:16). *Let no one rob you of your prize by self-abasement and worshipping of the angels* (Colossians 2:18). And its slogans: *Don't handle, nor taste, nor touch* (Colossians 2:21).

It seems to have been a strict, mystical kind of piety, with fasting, special days and visions of angels, perhaps mixing Jewish practice with local religion. The

letter's answer is that all of that is a shadow, and that a person who has me does not need the rules of men to climb toward God.³

Something missing

Now set two verses side by side.

Galatians, which Paul certainly wrote: *There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus* (Galatians 3:28).

Colossians: *where there can't be Greek and Jew, circumcision and uncircumcision, barbarian, Scythian, bondservant, or free person; but Christ is all, and in all* (Colossians 3:11).

Greek and Jew are still there. Slave and free are still there. Barbarian and Scythian have been added. But *male and female* is gone.⁴

And seven verses later the household code begins: *Wives, be in subjection to your husbands* (Colossians 3:18).

The first household code

This is probably the earliest household code in your New Testament, and Ephesians builds directly on it.

Wives, be in subjection to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord. Husbands, love your wives, and don't be bitter against them. Children, obey your parents in all things ... Fathers, don't provoke your children (Colossians 3:18–21).

Then the slaves, who get more words than anyone else: *Servants, obey in all things those who are your masters according to the flesh, not just when they are looking, as men pleasers, but in singleness of heart, fearing God* (Colossians 3:22).

Obey in all things. For centuries that verse was read to enslaved people in the Americas by the men who claimed to own them, and by preachers paid to keep them quiet.

Read what comes after it. *But he who does wrong will receive again for the wrong that he has done, and there is no partiality* (Colossians 3:25). And then: *Masters,*

give to your servants that which is just and equal, knowing that you also have a Master in heaven (Colossians 4:1).

The word translated *equal* is the same word Paul used when he told the Corinthians that their gift to the poor was *for equality*.⁵ A master who gave his slaves what was equal would not long remain a master. That verse was read much less often.

The writer did not tell masters to free their slaves. He told slaves to obey and masters to be fair, inside a system he did not question. It was the voice of a church learning to live quietly inside the Roman household, a long way from *neither slave nor free*.

The lost letter

At the end, the letter gives an instruction that has puzzled readers ever since. *When this letter has been read among you, cause it to be read also in the assembly of the Laodiceans, and that you also read the letter from Laodicea (Colossians 4:16).*

There was a letter to Laodicea. It is lost. Some think it is the letter you call Ephesians, which in the oldest copies has no address.

But people did not like a gap. Sometime in the early centuries, someone wrote a short *Letter to the Laodiceans* in Paul's name, stitched together mostly from phrases in Philippians. It survives in Latin. It was copied into more than a hundred medieval Latin Bibles, and it was printed in German Bibles before Luther. For about a thousand years, many Christians in the West read it as Paul's.⁶

A verse mentioned a letter. Someone supplied one. And for centuries it sat inside the Bible.

CHECK IT YOURSELF

Look up: Galatians 3:28, then Colossians 3:11.

You will find: that the later letter keeps *Greek and Jew* and *slave and free*, but drops *male and female*.

Then read Colossians 3:18–4:1 straight through, and notice which group gets the most words.

Go deeper: the longer history behind this chapter, and every source it rests on, are free at LessonsOfJesus.com/colossians.

THE SHORT VERSION

- Colossians was written to a church **Paul never visited**, founded by **Epaphras**. Scholars are **divided about evenly** on whether Paul wrote it.
- It opens with a **hymn** calling me **the image of the invisible God** and **the firstborn of all creation**.
- It pictures our debts as a **certificate of debt nailed to the cross**.
- It repeats *neither Greek nor Jew, slave nor free*, but **drops “male and female,”** and then gives the New Testament’s **earliest household code**.
- It mentions a **letter to Laodicea** that is lost. A **forged replacement** sat in Latin Bibles for a thousand years.

13. 1 Thessalonians: The Oldest Christian Writing

AT A GLANCE

Who wrote it: Paul, with Silvanus and Timothy named beside him (1 Thessalonians 1:1). No one seriously doubts it.

When: About the year 50, from Corinth, a few months after Paul had been forced to leave Thessalonica. It is probably the oldest writing in your New Testament.

Written for: The young church in Thessalonica, which Paul had to leave after a short stay. Its members were harassed by neighbors, and they were grieving friends who had died, afraid that the dead would miss my coming.

What it remembers of me: That I was killed (2:15), that I *died and rose again* (4:14), and what Paul calls *the word of the Lord* about my coming (4:15).

How close it stays to me: Close on gentleness and on not repaying evil. Far in chapter 2, on my own people.

If you only read three chapters: 1 Thessalonians 1, 1 Thessalonians 4 and 1 Thessalonians 5.

WORDS TO KNOW

Thessalonica — the capital of the Roman province of Macedonia, a busy port on the main road across northern Greece. Today it is Thessaloniki.

Coming — in Greek, *parousia*. It was the word for the arrival of a king or emperor visiting a city.

To meet — in Greek, *apantēsis*. It was the word for a city's delegation going out to welcome an arriving dignitary.

The day of the Lord — the day, promised by the prophets, when God would come to judge and set things right.

THE BOOK IN BRIEF

Paul, Silvanus and Timothy write to the church in Thessalonica. In chapters 1 to 3 they thank God for the believers, who turned from idols to wait for God's Son from heaven. Paul recalls how the three of them lived among the church, gently, working night and day to burden no one. The church has suffered from its own countrymen, as the churches in Judea did. Paul was kept from returning, so he sent Timothy, whose good news cheered him.

Chapter 4 gives instructions about sexual conduct, love for one another, and quiet, working lives. Then it takes up the grief of believers whose friends have died. Those who have fallen asleep will not miss the Lord's coming. He will descend with a shout, the dead in Christ will rise first, and then the living will be caught up to meet him.

Chapter 5 says that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night, so they must stay awake and sober. Short commands follow: encourage the faint-hearted, do not repay evil for evil, rejoice always, pray, give thanks, test everything. The letter ends with a blessing and an order to read it to everyone.

The oldest piece of your New Testament is probably a worried letter about funerals.

About twenty years after I died, Paul wrote to a small group of my followers in Thessalonica. He had been with them only a short time before he was forced to leave. Acts says he preached in the synagogue there for *three Sabbath days* (Acts 17:2) before a riot drove him out by night.

Paul was frantic to know how they were. *When we couldn't stand it any longer*, he sent Timothy back to check on them (1 Thessalonians 3:1–2). Timothy returned with good news. They were holding on. Paul wrote this letter in relief.

But Timothy also brought back a question, and it is the question that makes this letter so important. Some of the believers in Thessalonica had died. And the ones still living were grieving in a particular way. They were afraid that their dead had missed it.

They were waiting

To understand their fear, you have to know what they were waiting for.

Paul reminds them how they began: *you turned to God from idols, to serve a living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven* (1 Thessalonians 1:9–10).

They were Gentiles, mostly, who had given up the gods of their city. And they were waiting. Paul had told them I would come back, and they understood him to mean soon, in their own lifetimes. They had arranged their lives around it.

Then some of them died before it happened. Would the dead miss the day? Had they believed for nothing?

Paul's answer

But we don't want you to be ignorant, brothers, concerning those who have fallen asleep, so that you don't grieve like the rest, who have no hope (1 Thessalonians 4:13).

Then he describes what will happen.

For this we tell you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will in no way precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel and with God's trumpet. The dead in Christ will rise first, then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air. So we will be with the Lord forever. Therefore comfort one another with these words (1 Thessalonians 4:15–18).

Notice two things.

First, *we who are alive, who are left*. Paul counted himself among the living who would be there to see it. He wrote this around the year 50. He expected to be alive when I came.

Second, the purpose. *Comfort one another*. This passage was written to grieving people at a funeral, to tell them their dead were not lost. It was not written as a timetable for the end of the world.

To meet him

Now look closely at the words *to meet the Lord in the air*.

The word Paul uses for *meet* had a specific meaning in his world. When an emperor or a general came to visit a city, the leading citizens went out through the gates to meet him on the road, and then escorted him back into the city. That going-out-to-meet was called the *apantēsis*.¹

You can see the word used exactly that way elsewhere in your Bible. When Paul was brought to Rome as a prisoner, the believers in the city heard he was coming, and *came to meet us as far as The Market of Appius and The Three Taverns* (Acts 28:15). They went out to meet him on the road, and walked back into Rome with him. In my parable of the bridesmaids, the cry goes up, *The bridegroom is coming! Come out to meet him!* (Matthew 25:6), and they go out to bring him back to the wedding.

So the picture in Paul's mind is not of believers being taken away from the earth. It is of the faithful going out to welcome the arriving king, and coming back with him. The direction of travel is toward the earth, not away from it.

Where the rapture comes from

In the 1830s, an Anglo-Irish preacher named John Nelson Darby, of a small group called the Plymouth Brethren, taught that this passage describes a secret event. Believers would vanish from the earth before a time of tribulation, and I would return again later. That idea, the *rapture*, spread through American churches by way of a popular study Bible in the early 1900s, and then through bestselling novels and films.²

Read the passage again. *With a shout, with the voice of the archangel and with God's trumpet*. Nothing in it is secret. It is the loudest arrival Paul could describe. And there is no second coming after it. It is one coming, with a welcome party.

The rapture is not in Paul. It is in a nineteenth-century reading of Paul.

Like a thief

After the comfort, Paul turns to the question everyone always asks: when?

But concerning the times and the seasons, brothers, you have no need that anything be written to you. For you yourselves know well that the day of the Lord comes like a thief in the night (1 Thessalonians 5:1–2).

That image is mine. I told my friends that if the master of the house had known when the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake (Matthew 24:43). Paul had heard it from someone. It is one of the very few places where his letters seem to echo my words.

And then a line aimed at the empire: *For when they are saying, “Peace and safety,” then sudden destruction will come on them* (1 Thessalonians 5:3). *Peace and safety* was close to a Roman slogan. The empire advertised itself as the bringer of peace and security, on its coins and its monuments. Many scholars think Paul’s first readers would have heard the jab.³

Work with your hands

The letter is full of practical advice, and much of it is about ordinary work.

Paul reminds them that while he was with them, he did not live off them. *For you remember, brothers, our labor and travail; for working night and day, that we might not burden any of you* (1 Thessalonians 2:9).

He tells them to *lead a quiet life, and to do your own business, and to work with your own hands ... that you may walk properly toward those who are outside, and may have need of nothing* (1 Thessalonians 4:11–12). Some of them, waiting for the end, may already have stopped working. Paul tells them to keep at it.

And he describes how he treated them: *we were gentle among you, like a nursing mother cherishes her own children* (1 Thessalonians 2:7). The man who is so often painted as stern described himself as a nursing mother.

Near the end, a string of short commands, among the best Paul ever wrote: *Admonish the disorderly; encourage the faint-hearted; support the weak; be patient toward all* (1 Thessalonians 5:14). *See that no one returns evil for evil to anyone,*

but always follow after that which is good for one another and for all (1 Thessalonians 5:15). *Always rejoice. Pray without ceasing. In everything give thanks* (1 Thessalonians 5:16–18). *Test all things, and hold firmly that which is good* (1 Thessalonians 5:21).

A hard passage

There is one passage in this letter that has done great harm, and you should know what scholars say about it.

Paul says the Thessalonians suffered from their own countrymen, just as the believers in Judea suffered *from the Jews who killed both the Lord Jesus and their own prophets, and drove us out, and don't please God, and are contrary to all men ... But wrath has come on them to the uttermost* (1 Thessalonians 2:14–16).

Killed the Lord Jesus. Contrary to all men. For centuries those words were used to brand my people as enemies of humanity and killers of God.

Some scholars think Paul did not write these verses at all. They argue that *wrath has come on them to the uttermost* sounds like someone looking back on the destruction of Jerusalem in the year 70, twenty years after this letter, and that the passage was added later. Others think Paul wrote it in a moment of fury, as a Jew speaking about some of his fellow Jews who had driven him out of town.⁴ Either way, it is not the same Paul who later wrote that God had not rejected his people, and that all Israel would be saved.

And either way, it was Roman soldiers who killed me.

The oldest

This is probably the oldest writing in your New Testament, older than any gospel. It was written to be read aloud: *I solemnly command you by the Lord that this letter be read to all the holy brothers* (1 Thessalonians 5:27).

Imagine that room. A few dozen people, in a house in a Greek port city, grieving the friends they had buried, hearing that their dead would rise first. They had never seen me. Most of them had seen Paul for only a few weeks. And they were holding on.

CHECK IT YOURSELF

Look up: 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18, then Acts 28:15.

You will find: Paul expecting to be alive at my coming, and the word for *meet* used of a welcome party walking a visitor back into the city.

Then read 1 Thessalonians 4:18. What is the passage for?

Go deeper: the longer history behind this chapter, and every source it rests on, are free at LessonsOfJesus.com/1-thessalonians.

THE SHORT VERSION

- 1 Thessalonians is probably **the oldest writing in your New Testament**, from about **50**.
- It was written to people who were **grieving their dead** and afraid they had **missed my coming**.
- Paul expected to be **alive** when I came: *we who are alive, who are left*.
- The word for **meeting** me in the air meant going out to **welcome an arriving king** and escort him back. The **rapture** came from a **nineteenth-century** reading.
- One passage blaming “**the Jews**” for my death may be a **later addition**, and it was **Rome** that killed me.

14. 2 Thessalonians: Not Yet

AT A GLANCE

Who wrote it: It says Paul, Silvanus and Timothy, like the first letter. Scholars are divided. Many think a follower wrote it later in Paul's name, to correct people who were reading the first letter as saying the end had arrived.

When: If Paul wrote it, about 50 or 51, soon after the first letter. If not, perhaps between 80 and 100.

Written for: The church in Thessalonica, still harassed by its neighbors. Some had been told that the day of the Lord had already come, and some had quit working to wait for it.

What it remembers of me: Nothing from my life. It describes my return *with his mighty angels in flaming fire* (1:7).

How close it stays to me: Close in keeping even the disobedient as brothers. Far on enemies, with flaming fire for persecutors.

If you only read three chapters: It has three. Read them.

WORDS TO KNOW

The day of the Lord — the day of God's judgment, promised by the prophets.

The man of sin — a figure of rebellion who, the letter says, must appear before the end. Many Bibles call him *the man of lawlessness*.

The restrainer — something, or someone, holding the man of sin back. Nobody knows who or what.

Idle — in Greek, *ataktōs*, in a disorderly way, out of line. The letter uses it of people who had stopped working.

THE BOOK IN BRIEF

Paul, Silvanus and Timothy write again to the church in Thessalonica. Chapter 1 thanks God for the church's faith and love, and for how it endures persecution. It

promises that God will repay those who afflict them and relieve the afflicted, when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his angels in flaming fire.

Chapter 2 deals with a rumor that the day of the Lord has already come. Do not be shaken, the letter says, whether by a spirit, a word or a letter claiming to be from us. That day will not come until the rebellion comes and the man of sin is revealed, who sets himself up as God in the temple of God. Something is holding him back for now. The Lord will destroy him when he comes. The chapter closes with thanks and a prayer.

Chapter 3 asks for prayer and warns against believers who live in idleness. They should follow Paul's example of working night and day. If anyone is not willing to work, he is not to eat. Those who defy the letter are to be avoided, but not treated as enemies. Paul signs the greeting in his own hand.

This letter warns you not to be fooled by letters falsely claiming to be from Paul.

Now, brothers, concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ ... we ask you not to be quickly shaken in your mind, and not be troubled, either by spirit, or by word, or by letter as if from us, saying that the day of Christ has already come (2 Thessalonians 2:1–2).

And at the end, Paul takes the pen to prove it is really him: *The greeting of me, Paul, with my own hand, which is the sign in every letter: this is how I write* (2 Thessalonians 3:17).

That is the first strange thing about this letter. It worries about forgeries. And the line meant to prove it is genuine is exactly the line a forger would add. Scholars have noticed the irony for a long time.

Two letters, two clocks

The second strange thing is the timing.

In the first letter, the end comes suddenly. *The day of the Lord comes like a thief in the night* (1 Thessalonians 5:2). No warning. Be ready.

In this letter, there is a sequence of events that must happen first, so nobody needs to panic yet. *Let no one deceive you in any way. For it will not be, unless the*

rebellion comes first, and the man of sin is revealed, the son of destruction, he who opposes and exalts himself against all that is called God ... so that he sits as God in the temple of God, setting himself up as God (2 Thessalonians 2:3–4).

First a thief in the night. Then a checklist. That is not impossible from the same man in the same year. People say different things to different worries. But it is one of the main reasons many scholars think this letter came later, from someone dealing with a new problem: believers who were so sure the end had come that the church was coming apart.¹

Copying the first letter

The third strange thing is how closely this letter copies the first.

The same three names open both letters, in the same words. The structure follows the same order, sometimes phrase by phrase. Yet the tone is cooler. The first letter is warm and personal: *We always give thanks to God for all of you* (1 Thessalonians 1:2). This one is formal: *We are bound to always give thanks to God for you, brothers, even as it is appropriate* (2 Thessalonians 1:3).

We are bound to. It sounds like duty. A German scholar named William Wrede argued in 1903 that the second letter was written by someone with the first in front of him, imitating its shape.² Others answer that Paul might have reread his own letter before writing again. The argument is still open.

The man of sin and the restrainer

The passage about the man of sin has fed more speculation than almost anything else Paul is supposed to have written.

He *sits as God in the temple of God*. Some of the first readers may have remembered the year 40, when the emperor Caligula ordered his own statue set up inside the Temple in Jerusalem, and my people were ready to die to stop it.³ Caligula was killed before it happened.

Then comes the most mysterious sentence in the letter. *Now you know what is restraining him ... Only there is one who restrains now, until he is taken out of the way* (2 Thessalonians 2:6–7).

You know, the writer says. They may have known. Nobody since has. The Roman Empire, the emperor, the preaching of the gospel, an angel, God himself and the Holy Spirit have all been proposed. Augustine, one of the greatest minds the church ever had, read the passage around the year 420 and said plainly that he did not know what it meant.⁴

Since then, the man of sin has been named as the pope, Muhammad, Napoleon and many others, depending on who was reading. The restrainer has been named as whatever the reader wanted to keep in place. It is a passage that tells you far more about its readers than about the end of the world.

Flaming fire

The first chapter has some of the hardest words about judgment in any of the letters.

It is a righteous thing with God to repay affliction to those who afflict you, and to give relief to you who are afflicted with us, when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels in flaming fire, punishing those who don't know God ... who will pay the penalty: eternal destruction from the face of the Lord (2 Thessalonians 1:6–9).

It was written to a small church being harassed by its neighbors, promising that their persecutors would get what was coming. You can understand why frightened people wanted to hear it.

Set it beside what I said about the people who persecute you: *love your enemies ... and pray for those who mistreat you and persecute you* (Matthew 5:44). And beside what Paul wrote in a letter nobody doubts: *Bless those who persecute you; bless, and don't curse* (Romans 12:14).

If anyone is not willing to work

Then comes the verse from this letter that the world remembers.

For even when we were with you, we commanded you this: "If anyone is not willing to work, don't let him eat" (2 Thessalonians 3:10).

Look at why it was said. *For we hear of some who walk among you in rebellion, who don't work at all, but are busybodies* (2 Thessalonians 3:11). Some members, believing the end had come, had quit working and were living off the others, perhaps eating at the common meals while contributing nothing. The rule was for a small community sharing its food, aimed at people who would not pull their weight because they thought the world was over.

The verse has had a long life since. In 1609, Captain John Smith used it to drive the starving colonists at Jamestown, in Virginia, to work, adding his own exception for those disabled by sickness. In 1917, Lenin quoted it. In 1936, the constitution of the Soviet Union wrote it into law as a principle of the state.⁵ And today it is quoted in nearly every argument about feeding the poor, usually by people arguing for feeding them less.

Read the word that is almost always skipped. *If anyone is not willing to work. Not if anyone does not work. Not if anyone cannot find work, or is too sick, or too old, or a child.* The rule was about willingness, in a community where everyone already shared food. It was never a reason to let a hungry person go hungry.

The same chapter ends with a line that belongs beside it: *But you, brothers, don't be weary in doing what is right* (2 Thessalonians 3:13). Two verses later, even the person who defies the letter is not to be written off: *Don't count him as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother* (2 Thessalonians 3:15).

CHECK IT YOURSELF

Look up: 1 Thessalonians 5:1–3, then 2 Thessalonians 2:1–4.

You will find: the end coming suddenly, like a thief, in the first letter, and a list of things that must happen first in the second.

Then read 2 Thessalonians 3:6–12 and ask who the rule about work was aimed at.

Go deeper: the longer history behind this chapter, and every source it rests on, are free at LessonsOfJesus.com/2-thessalonians.

THE SHORT VERSION

- 2 Thessalonians warns against **forged letters** claiming to be from Paul, and many scholars think it may be one.
- The first letter says the end comes **like a thief**. This one says **certain things must happen first**.
- Its **man of sin** and its **restrainer** have puzzled every reader since. **Augustine admitted he did not know**.
- Its **flaming fire** for persecutors is far from **love your enemies**.
- *If anyone is not willing to work* was aimed at people who **quit working** because **they thought the world was ending**. It was **never** about people who **cannot work**.

15. 1 Timothy: Rules for Running a Church

AT A GLANCE

Who wrote it: It says Paul, writing to his young co-worker Timothy, whom he had left in charge at Ephesus. Most critical scholars think a follower of Paul wrote it, together with 2 Timothy and Titus, a generation or more after Paul's death. Others still defend it as Paul's own. I never met Paul or Timothy.

When: If Paul wrote it, in the early 60s. If not, most likely around 100, give or take twenty years.

Written for: Timothy and the church at Ephesus, as the letter tells it. They were troubled by teachers of strange doctrines, and the letter answers with rules for leaders, women, widows, slaves and the rich.

What it remembers of me: That I *came into the world to save sinners* (1:15), and that I *testified the good confession* before Pontius Pilate (6:13). It is the only letter in your Bible that names Pilate. It also seems to quote a saying of mine as scripture.

How close it stays to me: Close on money. Far on women and slaves.

If you only read three chapters: 1 Timothy 2, 1 Timothy 5 and 1 Timothy 6.

WORDS TO KNOW

Pastoral Letters — 1 Timothy, 2 Timothy and Titus. They got the name in the 1700s because they are about caring for a flock, the way a pastor does.

Overseer — in Greek, *episkopos*. It is the word that later became *bishop*.

Elder — in Greek, *presbyteros*, an older man with authority in the community. Over time the word became *priest*.

Deacon — in Greek, *diakonos*, a servant or helper. The World English Bible translates it *servant*.

Widow indeed — a widow with no family to support her, whom the church would feed and put on its list.

THE BOOK IN BRIEF

Paul writes to Timothy, whom he left at Ephesus to deal with certain teachers there. They are caught up in myths and endless genealogies, and Timothy is to order them to stop. In chapter 1 Paul also looks back on his own life. He was once a persecutor, and he was shown mercy anyway.

Chapter 2 begins with prayer for everyone, including kings and those in high places. It then gives rules for worship. Men should pray without anger. Women should dress modestly. A woman should learn in quietness, and Paul does not permit her to teach or to have authority over a man.

Chapter 3 lists what an overseer must be, and then what the church's deacons must be. It ends with a few short lines about Christ, who was revealed in the flesh, preached among the nations and taken up in glory.

Chapter 4 warns that some will fall away, forbidding marriage and certain foods. Timothy is told to refuse silly stories, to train himself in godliness and to set an example, young as he is. He is to give himself to reading, encouraging and teaching until Paul comes.

Chapter 5 gives rules for treating older and younger people, for widows and for elders. Families must look after their own widows. The church supports only those who have no one else, enrolls none under sixty, and tells younger widows to marry. Elders who lead well deserve double honor, and an accusation against an elder needs two or three witnesses. Timothy is also told to take a little wine for his stomach.

Chapter 6 tells slaves to honor their masters. It warns against teachers who treat godliness as a way to get rich, and against the love of money. Timothy is charged to keep the commandment until Christ appears, and is reminded that I testified before Pontius Pilate. The rich are told to do good and to share. The letter ends by telling Timothy to guard what has been entrusted to him.

This is the letter that told women to be silent.

Of all the letters with Paul's name on them, this one has had the most to say about how churches are run today. Who may lead. Who may teach. What a bishop must be. What to do with widows, slaves and the rich.

It reads like a manual. That is what it was. And the first thing to know is that most scholars do not think Paul wrote it.

Who wrote it

The letter says it is from Paul, and that he left Timothy in **Ephesus** while he went on to Macedonia (1 Timothy 1:3). Nothing in the book of Acts fits that journey, but Acts does not tell everything, so that alone settles nothing.

Here is why so many scholars doubt it.¹

The words are different. About a third of the vocabulary in the three Pastoral Letters appears nowhere in the letters everyone agrees Paul wrote. Words Paul used constantly are missing, and new ones take their place.

The faith is different. In Paul's own letters, *faith* is trust, the way a person leans his whole weight on God. Here it has also become a body of teaching to be guarded, *that which is committed to you* (1 Timothy 6:20).

The church is different. In the letters Paul surely wrote, congregations meet in houses, the Spirit gives gifts to everyone, and the end may come any day. Here there are overseers, elders and deacons with written qualifications, an official list of widows, and a church settling in to stay. It looks like the churches of the early 100s.

And the oldest witnesses to Paul's letters do not have these three. Marcion, who collected Paul's letters around 140, did not include them. The oldest surviving collection of Paul's letters, a papyrus book copied around 200, does not have them either, though its last pages are lost.²

Those who defend Paul as the author answer that he could have used a secretary with a different style, that an older man writes differently, and that a letter about church order would naturally use new words. Both sides are serious. Most critical scholars come down on the side of a later writer, who used Paul's name the way students in that world often used a teacher's.

My words, called scripture

There is one line in this letter that I want you to see, because it tells you something about when it was written.

Arguing that church leaders should be paid, the writer says: *For the Scripture says, “You shall not muzzle the ox when it treads out the grain.” And, “The laborer is worthy of his wages”* (1 Timothy 5:18).

The first quotation is from Deuteronomy (Deuteronomy 25:4). The second is not in the scriptures I grew up on at all. It is something I said when I sent my followers out to the villages, and it is worded exactly as Luke has it: *the laborer is worthy of his wages* (Luke 10:7).³

So here, the writer seems to quote a gospel saying as *Scripture*, side by side with the Law of Moses. That is a sign of a later time, when the books about me had begun to be read as holy writing. If that is what he meant, it is the only place in all of Paul’s letters, real or disputed, where a saying of mine is called scripture.

What the letter said about women

Here is the passage.

Let a woman learn in quietness with full submission. But I don’t permit a woman to teach, nor to exercise authority over a man, but to be in quietness. For Adam was formed first, then Eve. Adam wasn’t deceived, but the woman, being deceived, has fallen into disobedience; but she will be saved through her childbearing, if they continue in faith, love, and sanctification with sobriety (1 Timothy 2:11–15).

Those verses have been used for nineteen centuries to keep women out of pulpits. Churches are still divided over them today. Some read them as a rule for all time. Others read them as an instruction for one troubled congregation. Read them for yourself, and then set them beside three other things.

First, the story they rest on. The writer says Adam was not deceived and the woman was. Open Genesis and read it. When the woman ate, *she gave some to her husband with her, and he ate it, too* (Genesis 3:6). He was standing right there. Genesis does not say he was wiser than she was. It says he ate.

Second, what I did. Women traveled with me through the towns and villages, and some of them paid for our food out of their own money (Luke 8:1–3). When Mary of Bethany sat at my feet to learn, the place where a student sits before a teacher, and her sister complained, I said, *Mary has chosen the good part, which will not be taken away from her* (Luke 10:42). And the first people to bring the news that I was risen were women, sent to tell the men.

Third, what Paul did. In a letter no one doubts, Paul commends **Phoebe**, a deacon of her church, and greets **Prisca**, his fellow worker, and **Junia**, whom he calls *notable among the apostles* (Romans 16:1–3, 7). He expects women to pray and prophesy aloud in the assembly (1 Corinthians 11:5). The same letter also tells wives to be quiet in the assemblies (1 Corinthians 14:34–35), though some scholars think those verses were added later. He wrote that in Christ *there is neither male nor female* (Galatians 3:28).

Somewhere between those letters and this one, something closed. The women who had led were being told to be quiet. The man who wrote this used Paul's name to do it.

Bishops, elders and deacons

The letter lays out qualifications for leaders. An overseer must be *without reproach, the husband of one wife, temperate, sensible, modest, hospitable, good at teaching* (1 Timothy 3:2). He must manage his own household well, not be a new convert, and not be a lover of money.

Most of that list is good sense. Notice that it is about character, not belief. It asks whether a man is gentle, sober and kind at home, and whether outsiders think well of him.

Notice too where the word *overseer* went. In this letter, overseers and elders still seem to be a council, more than one in each town. Within a few years of the probable date of this letter, a bishop named Ignatius was writing that each church should have a single bishop, and that nothing should be done without him.⁴ From there you can draw a line to everything that came after. Bishops, archbishops, popes.

I did not set up any of it. I told my friends that the greatest among them should be the servant of the rest. The word I used was the same word this letter uses for deacons.

The deacons' list has a curious verse in the middle: *Their wives in the same way must be reverent* (1 Timothy 3:11). The Greek word can mean *wives* or *women*. Many scholars think the verse is about women who were deacons themselves, like Phoebe.⁵

The widows

Chapter 5 shows you a church doing something I would recognize: feeding widows.

In my world a widow without sons had nothing. The church kept a list of widows it supported, and the letter sets rules for it. A widow's own children and grandchildren should support her first, *and don't let the assembly be burdened, that it might relieve those who are widows indeed* (1 Timothy 5:16).

One verse from this chapter is quoted often: *But if anyone doesn't provide for his own, and especially his own household, he has denied the faith, and is worse than an unbeliever* (1 Timothy 5:8). It is about grown children who let their widowed mothers depend on the church while they had the means to care for them. It is not a reason to stop feeding the people who have no one.

The rest of the chapter is harder. Only women over sixty go on the list. Younger widows should remarry, the writer says, because otherwise they become idle gossips going from house to house. You can hear a church trying to stretch a small fund, and you can hear the voice of a man who did not much like young women with time on their hands.

Slaves and masters

The letter tells slaves to *count their own masters worthy of all honor* (1 Timothy 6:1). Slaves with Christian masters should serve them all the better, because their masters are brothers.

It does not tell the masters anything. It does not ask whether one brother should own another.

The love of money

And then, near the end, the letter says something I would sign my name to.

But godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into the world, and we certainly can't carry anything out. But having food and clothing, we will be content with that. But those who are determined to be rich fall into a temptation, a snare, and many foolish and harmful lusts, such as drown men in ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil (1 Timothy 6:6–10).

Then it turns to the rich members of the church, and it does not tell them they are blessed. *Charge those who are rich in this present world that they not be arrogant, nor have their hope set on the uncertainty of riches ... that they do good, that they be rich in good works, that they be ready to distribute, willing to share (1 Timothy 6:17–18).*

Ready to distribute. Willing to share. That was not the first thing a church manual was about. But the writer did not leave it out.

Before Pilate

One last thing. In the closing charge to Timothy, the writer calls on *Christ Jesus, who before Pontius Pilate testified the good confession (1 Timothy 6:13).*

Paul, in the letters everyone agrees are his, never names the man who had me killed. This letter does. Even in a manual about bishops and widows, the writer wanted his readers to remember that the one they followed had stood in front of a Roman governor and not backed down.

CHECK IT YOURSELF

Look up: 1 Timothy 2:11–14, then Genesis 3:6.

You will find: the claim that Adam was not deceived, and the verse where Adam stands beside his wife and eats.

Then read Romans 16:1–7. Count the women Paul greets, and notice what he calls them.

Go deeper: the longer history behind this chapter, and every source it rests on, are free at LessonsOfJesus.com/1-timothy.

THE SHORT VERSION

- **1 Timothy** says it is from Paul, but most scholars think a **follower wrote it** around 100, with 2 Timothy and Titus.
- It is a **manual for running a church**, with rules for **overseers, elders and deacons**, and a list of **widows** to feed.
- Its order for **women to be silent** stands against the women who **traveled with me** and the women **Paul himself** called a deacon and an apostle.
- It seems to quote a saying of mine, **the laborer is worthy of his wages**, as **Scripture**.
- It warns that **the love of money** is a root of all kinds of evil, and tells the rich to be **ready to share**.

16. 2 Timothy: A Last Letter in His Name

AT A GLANCE

Who wrote it: It says Paul, chained in prison in Rome and expecting to die, writing to Timothy. Many scholars think a follower wrote it along with 1 Timothy and Titus. Some who doubt those two think this one may be Paul's own, or may preserve pieces of his last notes.

When: If Paul wrote it, shortly before his death in the mid-60s. If not, most likely around 100.

Written for: Timothy, as the letter tells it, and the churches he served. It answers the fear of what comes after Paul: suffering, false teachers, and how to hold on to what he taught.

What it remembers of me: *Jesus Christ, risen from the dead, of the offspring of David* (2:8). It also has a little hymn whose line *If we deny him, he also will deny us* (2:12) sounds like something I said.

How close it stays to me: Close on forgiving and gentleness. Far where it says Alexander will be repaid.

If you only read three chapters: 2 Timothy 1, 2 Timothy 3 and 2 Timothy 4. It has four.

WORDS TO KNOW

Testament — in the ancient world, a famous man's farewell speech, giving his last instructions before he died. Many were written by other people in his name.

God-breathed — in Greek, *theopneustos*. The word appears only once in the whole Bible, in this letter. Many Bibles translate it *inspired*.

The parchments — scrolls or notebooks made of animal skin, which the letter asks Timothy to bring.

THE BOOK IN BRIEF

Paul writes from prison to Timothy, his beloved child. He recalls the faith of Timothy's grandmother Lois and mother Eunice. In chapter 1 he tells Timothy not to be ashamed of the good news or of Paul in chains, and to guard what he was given. Everyone in Asia has turned away from Paul, but Onesiphorus found him in Rome and was not ashamed.

Chapter 2 compares Timothy to a soldier, an athlete and a farmer, and tells him to pass on what he has heard to faithful people who can teach others. Paul warns against quarrels over words, names two men who have gone wrong about the resurrection, and says the Lord's servant must be gentle.

Chapter 3 warns of hard times ahead and tells Timothy to hold to the scriptures he has known since childhood.

Chapter 4 is Paul's farewell. He charges Timothy to preach the word and says his own time to leave has come. He asks Timothy to come before winter and to bring his cloak and his books. Friends have left, only Luke is with him, and no one stood by him at his first defense, though the Lord did. He ends with greetings.

This letter sounds like a man waiting to die. It may be exactly that, or someone may have written it to sound that way.

Of the three Pastoral Letters, this one is the most personal. Paul is in chains. Almost everyone has left him. He knows the end is near, and he says so: *For I am already being offered, and the time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight. I have finished the course. I have kept the faith* (2 Timothy 4:6–7).

People have read those words at funerals for centuries. They are worth reading slowly. Then it is worth asking who wrote them.

The cloak and the books

Here is the strongest reason some scholars think this letter really is Paul's.

Near the end, the writer asks Timothy to come before winter, and to bring a few things: *Bring the cloak that I left at Troas with Carpus when you come, and the books, especially the parchments* (2 Timothy 4:13). He mentions who has left and who has stayed. *Demas left me, having loved this present world ... Only Luke is*

with me. Take Mark, and bring him with you, for he is useful to me (2 Timothy 4:10–11). He left a man named Trophimus sick at Miletus.

Who would invent a cloak? It reads like a real man in a real cell, cold, missing his things.

The other side answers that writers of letters in a famous person's name did exactly this. Small, homely details made a letter feel genuine, and the ancient world had many such letters. The names here also match names in Paul's real letters, where Demas, Luke and Mark send greetings together (Philemon 24), so a later writer could have taken them from there.¹

A middle view is that a follower of Paul built this letter around a few genuine notes from the end of Paul's life. Nobody can prove it either way. The language and the setting are close to 1 Timothy and Titus, and most critical scholars think all three came from the same later hand.

A last testament

Whoever wrote it, the letter belongs to a kind of writing everyone in that world knew. It is a **testament**, a farewell.

My scriptures have them. Moses gives his farewell to Israel in Deuteronomy. Jacob blesses his sons before he dies. The Acts of the Apostles gives Paul a farewell speech too, to the elders of Ephesus at Miletus, where he tells them they will never see his face again (Acts 20:17–38). In the century before me and the centuries after, Jews and Christians wrote testaments for many famous figures who had died long before.²

A testament gives a dying man's last instructions to the people who come after him. Hold on to the truth. Guard what you were given. Beware of the teachers who are coming. That is what this letter does.

Left alone

The saddest lines in the letter are about being abandoned.

This you know, that all who are in Asia turned away from me (2 Timothy 1:15).
At my first defense, no one came to help me, but all left me. May it not be held

against them (2 Timothy 4:16).

I know something about that. On the night I was arrested, my friends *all left him, and fled* (Mark 14:50). And Luke remembers me saying, from the cross, *Father, forgive them, for they don't know what they are doing* (Luke 23:34).³

May it not be held against them. Whoever wrote that line, it is the right one.

The same letter is less generous to a man named Alexander the coppersmith: *The Lord will repay him according to his deeds* (2 Timothy 4:14). And to two men named Hymenaeus and Philetus, who taught *that the resurrection is already past, whose words will consume like gangrene* (2 Timothy 2:17–18). The letter also says *The Lord's servant must not quarrel, but be gentle toward all* (2 Timothy 2:24). Like most of us, it did not always manage both.

Every scripture

This letter has one sentence that has carried more weight than almost any other in the New Testament.

Every Scripture is God-breathed and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for instruction in righteousness (2 Timothy 3:16).

You may have been taught that this verse proves the whole Bible is without error, cover to cover. Read it in its place, and three things stand out.

First, which scriptures. The verse before says that Timothy had known *the holy Scriptures from infancy* (2 Timothy 3:15). When Timothy was a child, there was no New Testament. There were no gospels at all. The scriptures his mother and grandmother taught him were my scriptures, the Law, the Prophets and the Writings. This letter itself was not yet scripture to anyone. It was a letter.

Second, the grammar. The Greek can also be read *Every God-breathed scripture is also profitable*, and some older English Bibles translate it that way.⁴ Either way, the verse says scripture is breathed by God and useful. It does not explain what that means, and it does not list the books.

Third, what it is for. The sentence goes on: *that each person who belongs to God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work* (2 Timothy 3:17). The

point is not a theory about a book. The point is good work. That is what I always thought the scriptures were for.

The last days

The third chapter has a list of what people will be like *in the last days*. *For men will be lovers of self, lovers of money, boastful, arrogant ... lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, holding a form of godliness, but having denied its power* (2 Timothy 3:2–5).

Every generation since has read that list and recognized its own neighbors. That is because it does not describe one generation. It describes people.

But notice which sins come first. *Lovers of self, lovers of money*. And notice the last line, the people who keep *a form of godliness* without its power. The writer was not warning about people outside the church. He was warning about people inside it.

A grandmother and a mother

The letter begins with a small detail I like. It remembers *the sincere faith that lived first in your grandmother Lois, and your mother Eunice* (2 Timothy 1:5). Acts says Timothy's mother was a Jewish believer and his father was a Greek (Acts 16:1).

The letters to Timothy include the one that told women not to teach. And the young man they were written to learned his faith from two women.

How it ended

The letter expects death, and the real Paul did die in Rome. Acts ends with him there, under guard, still preaching, and does not tell what happened next. A letter written from Rome around the year 96, known as **1 Clement**, says that Paul gave his testimony before rulers and was taken from the world. Later tradition says he was beheaded under the emperor Nero, in the mid-60s.⁵

I have kept the faith. Whether Paul wrote those words in his cell, or a student who loved him wrote them afterward, they were true of him.

CHECK IT YOURSELF

Look up: 2 Timothy 3:14–17.

You will find: the scriptures Timothy knew *from infancy*, which could only have been the scriptures of my people, and a verse that ends with *every good work*.

Then read 2 Timothy 4:9–21. Notice the cloak, the books, the friends who left and the ones who stayed.

Go deeper: the longer history behind this chapter, and every source it rests on, are free at LessonsOfJesus.com/2-timothy.

THE SHORT VERSION

- **2 Timothy** is written as Paul's **last letter**, from a prison cell in Rome.
- Its personal details, like the **cloak left at Troas**, are the best argument that **Paul wrote it**. Most scholars still think **a follower did**, perhaps using **genuine notes**.
- It belongs to a known kind of writing, the **farewell testament**.
- *Every Scripture is God-breathed* meant **the Jewish scriptures**. The New Testament **did not exist yet**.
- *May it not be held against them* is the **right answer to being abandoned**.

17. Titus: All Cretans Are Liars

AT A GLANCE

Who wrote it: It says Paul, writing to Titus, a Greek co-worker he had left on the island of Crete. Most critical scholars think it came from the same later follower of Paul who wrote 1 and 2 Timothy.

When: If Paul wrote it, in the early 60s. If not, most likely around 100.

Written for: Titus and the churches on Crete, as the letter tells it. They needed trusted leaders, and an answer to teachers who, the letter says, were upsetting whole households.

What it remembers of me: That I *gave himself for us* (2:14). One verse may call me *our great God and Savior* (2:13), though the Greek can be read two ways.

How close it stays to me: Close on mercy and meeting needs. Far on women, slaves and Cretans.

If you only read three chapters: It has three. Read them.

WORDS TO KNOW

Crete — the large Greek island south of the Aegean Sea. By my time it was a Roman province.

Epimenides — a Cretan holy man and poet of the 500s BC. Later writers said he was the one who called his own people liars.

Sound doctrine — in Greek, *healthy teaching*. The Pastoral Letters use the medical word again and again.

Those of the circumcision — Jewish members of the churches, or Jewish teachers, who insisted that Gentile believers keep the Law of Moses.

THE BOOK IN BRIEF

Paul greets Titus, whom he calls his true child, and reminds him why he left him on the island of Crete: to set the churches in order and to appoint elders in every

city. Chapter 1 lists what an elder must be: blameless, hospitable, and no lover of dishonest gain. It warns of unruly teachers, especially some of the circumcision, who are upsetting whole households. It agrees with a Cretan prophet who called his own people liars, evil beasts and idle gluttons.

Chapter 2 tells Titus what to teach each group in the church: older men and women, younger men and women, and slaves. Titus himself is to be an example of good works. God's grace has appeared, bringing salvation to all people, and I gave myself to make a people eager for good works.

Chapter 3 tells believers to be subject to rulers, to speak evil of no one and to be gentle toward everyone. God saved them by his mercy, not by their own works. Titus is to avoid foolish arguments and to warn a quarrelsome man twice before avoiding him. The letter closes with a request that Titus join Paul at Nicopolis, and with greetings.

This is the only book in your Bible that quotes a poet calling a whole people liars, and then says he was right.

One of them, a prophet of their own, said, "Cretans are always liars, evil beasts, and idle gluttons." This testimony is true (Titus 1:12–13).

It is a short letter, three chapters long, and most of it is advice about choosing church leaders and keeping a household in order. But that line is the one people remember. Philosophers remember it too, for a different reason.

The man it was written to

Titus was one of Paul's most trusted helpers, and you meet him in the letters everyone agrees Paul wrote. He was a Greek. When Paul went up to Jerusalem to argue that Gentile believers did not have to become Jews, he took Titus with him on purpose, as a living example: *not even Titus, who was with me, being a Greek, was compelled to be circumcised* (Galatians 2:3). Later Paul sent him to Corinth to patch things up, and it was Titus who brought Paul the news of how one of his hardest letters had been received (2 Corinthians 7:6–8).¹

Oddly, the book of Acts never mentions him at all.

Paul on Crete?

The letter says Paul left Titus on Crete *that you would set in order the things that were lacking and appoint elders in every city* (Titus 1:5).

The only time Acts puts Paul near Crete, he is a prisoner on a ship bound for Rome. The ship works its way along the coast in bad weather, puts in at a harbor called Fair Havens, and then tries to reach a better port to spend the winter (Acts 27:7–13). There is no mission on the island and no churches planted.

Those who defend Paul as the author say he must have been released after the two years in Rome that Acts describes, traveled again, and worked on Crete then. Some early Christian writers believed in such a second journey.² Most critical scholars think the setting is part of the letter's frame, written later by someone who wanted Paul's authority behind the way the churches of his own day were being organized.

All Cretans are liars

The line about Cretans was famous long before this letter. Ancient writers credited it to **Epimenides**, the Cretan prophet. A Greek poet named Callimachus quoted its first words in a hymn to Zeus, written some three hundred years before me.³

Later philosophers noticed the puzzle inside it. If a Cretan says that Cretans always lie, and he is telling the truth, then he is lying. That puzzle is still called the **Epimenides paradox**.

The writer of this letter did not notice the puzzle. He noticed the insult, and agreed with it. *This testimony is true. For this cause, reprove them sharply.*

He seems to have had Cretan church members in mind, and especially one group: *many unruly men, vain talkers and deceivers, especially those of the circumcision* (Titus 1:10). He tells Titus to steer people away from *Jewish fables* (Titus 1:14).

I was one of those of the circumcision. So were my mother, my brothers and every one of my twelve. And the book of Acts says that Cretans were in the

crowd in Jerusalem on the first Pentecost, hearing the news in their own language (Acts 2:11). Nobody in that crowd was an evil beast.

When you write off a whole people, you will be wrong about most of them. This letter wrote off two.

Good works

Now the better part of the letter.

For a short book, Titus talks about **good works** more than almost any other. Titus is told to be *an example of good works* (Titus 2:7). I *gave himself for us*, it says, to make *a people for his own possession, zealous for good works* (Titus 2:14). Believers should *be careful to maintain good works* (Titus 3:8). And near the very end: *Let our people also learn to maintain good works for necessary uses, that they may not be unfruitful* (Titus 3:14). The phrase means meeting urgent needs. Helping where help is needed.

And yet the same letter also says, in words that sound like Paul at his best, that God saved us *not by works of righteousness which we did ourselves, but according to his mercy* (Titus 3:5).

Both are true. You are not saved by your good works. You are saved for them. A tree is not made good by its fruit, but a good tree bears it. I said something like that myself.

The household in order

The middle chapter tells each group in the church how to behave.

Older women should teach the younger women *to love their husbands, to love their children, to be sober minded, chaste, workers at home, kind, being in subjection to their own husbands, that God's word may not be blasphemed* (Titus 2:4–5).

Slaves should be told *to be in subjection to their own masters and to be well-pleasing in all things, not contradicting, not stealing* (Titus 2:9–10).

Notice the reason given: *that God's word may not be blasphemed*. The church was worried about what outsiders thought. Greek and Roman writers had long

taught that a proper household had a husband ruling his wife, a father ruling his children and a master ruling his slaves.⁴ Christians had a reputation for upsetting that order. Women and slaves were joining a new movement on their own. This letter tells them to settle down and look respectable.

I did not worry much about looking respectable. When my own mother and brothers came to take me home, I pointed at the people sitting around me and said, *Behold, my mother and my brothers! For whoever does the will of God is my brother, my sister, and mother* (Mark 3:34–35). That is a different household.

Our great God and Savior

One verse in the letter speaks of *the blessed hope and appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ* (Titus 2:13).

In the World English Bible and most modern Bibles, that calls me God outright. The King James Version reads it differently: *the great God and our Saviour Jesus Christ*, which can mean two persons, God and me. The Greek allows either reading, and scholars have argued over it for centuries.⁵ I mention it because you will hear it quoted, and because you deserve to know when a verse is clearer in English than in Greek.

CHECK IT YOURSELF

Look up: Titus 1:12–13.

You will find: a whole people called liars, beasts and gluttons, and the words *This testimony is true*.

Then read Acts 2:5–11 and find the Cretans in the crowd.

Go deeper: the longer history behind this chapter, and every source it rests on, are free at LessonsOfJesus.com/titus.

THE SHORT VERSION

- **Titus** says it is from Paul to a Greek co-worker on **Crete**. Most scholars think the **same later writer** wrote it as 1 and 2 Timothy.
- Acts never puts Paul on a **mission to Crete**, only on a prisoner's ship **sailing past it**.
- It quotes the old line "**Cretans are always liars**" and agrees with it.
- It says we are saved **not by our works but by mercy**, and then tells us to be **zealous for good works**.
- Its rules for **wives and slaves** were about **looking respectable** to outsiders.

18. Philemon: The Letter About a Slave

AT A GLANCE

Who wrote it: Paul, from prison, with Timothy's name beside his. Almost no one doubts that it is his.

When: Sometime between about 54 and 62, depending on where Paul was in prison when he wrote it: Ephesus, Caesarea or Rome.

Written for: Philemon, a believer in Colossae who owned a slave named Onesimus, and the church that met in his house. Paul asked him to take Onesimus back, no longer as a slave but as a brother.

What it remembers of me: Nothing I said or did. Only my name, which Paul uses to make his case.

How close it stays to me: Close in calling a slave a brother. Far in never plainly asking for his freedom.

If you only read three chapters: It has one chapter of twenty-five verses, the shortest letter Paul wrote. Read all of it. It takes two minutes.

WORDS TO KNOW

Onesimus — the slave the letter is about. His name means *useful*, a common name for slaves.

Philemon — a believer in the town of Colossae, in what is now Turkey, who owned Onesimus. A congregation met in his house.

Bondservant — a word the World English Bible often uses for a slave, though in Philemon it says *slave*. The Greek word, *doulos*, means a person owned by another.

THE BOOK IN BRIEF

Paul, a prisoner, writes with Timothy to Philemon, to Apphia, to Archippus and to the church that meets in Philemon's house. He thanks God for what he hears of Philemon's love and faith.

Then Paul turns to his request. He could give an order, but he would rather ask, as an old man and a prisoner. He asks on behalf of Onesimus, whose father in the faith he has become while in chains. Onesimus was once useless to Philemon, Paul says, and is now useful to both of them.

Paul is sending him back, and wants Philemon to receive him as he would receive Paul. He would have liked to keep Onesimus, but would do nothing without Philemon's consent. Perhaps Onesimus was parted from Philemon for a while so that Philemon could have him back for good, no longer as a slave but as a beloved brother. If Onesimus has wronged Philemon or owes him anything, Paul writes with his own hand that he will repay it. He is sure Philemon will do even more than he asks, and he asks him to prepare a guest room, because he hopes to visit. Five friends send greetings.

The shortest letter Paul wrote is about one slave. In the long argument over slavery, both sides quoted it.

It is not a letter to a church about doctrine. It is a personal note about one man. Paul is in chains. A slave named **Onesimus** has come to him, and Paul has brought him to faith. Now Paul is sending him back to the man who owns him, with this letter in his hand.

Read it, and you can watch Paul trying to change a man's mind without giving him an order.

What happened

The letter does not say exactly how Onesimus came to be with Paul. That is why people still argue about it.

The old explanation is that he ran away, perhaps after stealing something, and somehow ended up with Paul in prison. Paul hints at a wrong: *if he has wronged you at all or owes you anything, put that to my account* (Philemon 18).

Many scholars now think something else happened. Under Roman law, a slave in trouble with his master could go to a friend of the master and ask him to plead his case. A slave who did that was not legally a runaway. Onesimus may

have gone looking for Paul on purpose, because he knew Paul was a man his master respected.¹

Either way, Onesimus was in danger. Runaway slaves in the Roman world could be beaten, branded or worse, and the law was on the master's side.² Paul knew what he was sending this man back into.

How Paul asks

The letter is short, and every line of it is working.

Paul begins by praising Philemon for his love and for how *the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you* (Philemon 7). Then he says he could simply give an order, *yet for love's sake I rather beg, being such a one as Paul, the aged, but also a prisoner of Jesus Christ* (Philemon 9).

Then he names the slave. *I beg you for my child, whom I have become the father of in my chains, Onesimus, who once was useless to you, but now is useful to you and to me* (Philemon 10–11). It is a pun on the man's name. Useful used to be useless. Now he is useful again.

Then the heart of the letter: *For perhaps he was therefore separated from you for a while, that you would have him forever, no longer as a slave, but more than a slave, a beloved brother* (Philemon 15–16).

Receive him as you would receive me (Philemon 17).

And then Paul makes sure Philemon cannot easily say no. He offers to pay any debt himself, writing it *with my own hand*, and then adds, *not to mention to you that you owe to me even your own self besides* (Philemon 19). He says he is confident Philemon *will do even beyond what I say* (Philemon 21). He asks Philemon to get a guest room ready, because he hopes to visit soon (Philemon 22). He will be coming to see what Philemon decided.

And notice who the letter is addressed to. Not only Philemon, but also *Apphia, Archippus and the assembly in your house* (Philemon 2). This letter was going to be read out loud, in Philemon's own house, in front of the whole congregation that met there. Every eye in the room would be on Philemon when it ended.

What Paul did not say

Here is the hard part.

Paul never says that slavery is wrong. He never tells Philemon in so many words to set Onesimus free. *Beyond what I say* may mean freedom. *No longer as a slave* may mean freedom. Or it may mean only that Philemon should treat Onesimus as a brother while he went on owning him. Readers have argued over that sentence for centuries.

In another letter, Paul told slaves, *Don't let that bother you, but if you get an opportunity to become free, use it* (1 Corinthians 7:21). Even that verse is argued over. The Greek can be read as *use your freedom*, or as *make the most of your slavery*.³

Paul expected the world to end soon. He told people to stay in the situation they were in when they were called. He did not set out to change the laws of Rome. He set out to change what happened inside a house where people called each other brother.

What my scriptures said

My scriptures had something to say about a man like Onesimus.

You shall not deliver to his master a servant who has escaped from his master to you. He shall dwell with you, among you, in the place which he shall choose ... You shall not oppress him (Deuteronomy 23:15–16).

The Law of Moses told my people not to send an escaped slave back. Whether or not Onesimus was a runaway in the legal sense, Paul did send him back. He sent him with a letter that made it as hard as he could for his master to treat him as property. But he sent him.

The long argument

The letter was written to help one slave. It ended up being used against millions.

In the United States, in 1850, Congress passed a law requiring people in the free states to help return escaped slaves to their owners. Ministers who supported the law pointed to this letter. Paul sent the slave back to his master, they said, so a

Christian should do the same.⁴ Defenders of slavery quoted Philemon alongside the letters that told slaves to obey their masters.

The abolitionists answered with verse 16. *No longer as a slave, but more than a slave, a beloved brother.* They said that once you call a man your brother, you cannot go on owning him. If Philemon had really heard that sentence, he would have set Onesimus free.

Both sides had the same twenty-five verses. One side read what Paul did. The other side read what Paul said. I think the second side read it better. A brother is not property. Paul planted that sentence in the middle of a household that owned a human being, and it took the church eighteen centuries to let it grow.

How it turned out

Nobody knows what Philemon did. But there is one possible clue.

About fifty years later, a bishop named Ignatius, on his way to Rome to be executed, wrote a letter to the church at Ephesus. He praised their bishop, a man named **Onesimus**.⁵

It was a common name, and it may be a different man. But some scholars have wondered whether the slave in this letter became the bishop of Ephesus. If he did, it might explain why such a small, private letter was kept at all. Perhaps it was kept by the man it set free.

That cannot be proved. But it would be a good ending.

CHECK IT YOURSELF

Look up: Deuteronomy 23:15–16, then Philemon 12.

You will find: the Law of Moses forbidding anyone to send an escaped slave back, and Paul writing *I am sending him back*.

Then read the whole letter. It is twenty-five verses. Count the ways Paul makes it hard for Philemon to say no.

Go deeper: the longer history behind this chapter, and every source it rests on, are free at LessonsOfJesus.com/philemon.

THE SHORT VERSION

- **Philemon** is Paul's **shortest letter**, about a slave named **Onesimus**, whom Paul sends **back to his master**.
- Paul asks Philemon to receive him "**no longer as a slave, but ... a beloved brother**," and has the letter **read aloud to the whole house church**.
- Paul **never says slavery is wrong**, and never clearly asks for Onesimus's **freedom**.
- The **Law of Moses** said **not to return** an escaped slave.
- In America, **defenders of slavery** quoted this letter to return runaways. **Abolitionists** answered with "**a beloved brother**."

PART FOUR — HEBREWS AND THE GENERAL LETTERS

The last eight letters in your New Testament are not by Paul. Hebrews names no author at all. The other seven are called the General Letters, or the Catholic Letters, because most of them are addressed to believers in general rather than to one church. Catholic here means universal. Several of these books were among the last to be accepted into the New Testament.

19. Hebrews: Nobody Knows Who Wrote It

AT A GLANCE

Who wrote it: Nobody knows. It names no author. Some early churches credited it to Paul, and the King James Version's title calls it Paul's, but its style and thought are not his. Barnabas, Apollos and Priscilla have all been proposed. In the 240s, the great scholar Origen said that God alone knows who wrote it.

When: Sometime between about 60 and 95. A letter written from Rome around 96 already borrows from it. Whether it was written before or after the Temple fell in 70 is debated.

Written for: Believers, probably of Jewish background, who had been insulted and robbed for following me. Some were drifting away, and the writer urged them to hold on.

What it remembers of me: More about my human weakness than almost any other book after the gospels. That I was *in all points tempted like we are* (4:15). That I prayed *with strong crying and tears* (5:7). That I *suffered outside of the gate* (13:12).

How close it stays to me: Close on strangers, prisoners and sharing. Far on second chances, where it warns that some cannot return.

If you only read three chapters: Hebrews 4, Hebrews 11 and Hebrews 13.

WORDS TO KNOW

High priest — the chief priest of the Temple in Jerusalem. Once a year, on the Day of Atonement, he alone entered the innermost room of the sanctuary.

Melchizedek — a mysterious king and priest who meets Abraham in Genesis 14 and blesses him. He appears in only one other verse of my scriptures, in Psalm 110.

Tabernacle — the tent sanctuary the Israelites carried through the desert, before there was a Temple.

Covenant — a binding agreement. Jeremiah promised a *new covenant*. Hebrews quotes that promise at greater length than any other book in the New Testament.

THE BOOK IN BRIEF

Hebrews never names its writer or its readers. It begins like a speech and ends like a letter. It opens by saying that God spoke long ago through the prophets and has now spoken through his Son, who is greater than the angels. Chapter 2 adds that I shared our flesh and blood, to help those who are tempted.

Chapters 3 and 4 compare me with Moses, and the readers with the Israelites who died in the desert without entering God's rest. He warns them not to harden their hearts, and calls me a great high priest who understands their weakness.

Chapter 5 begins a long argument about priests, then scolds the readers for being slow to learn. Chapter 6 warns against falling away and encourages them with God's promise to Abraham. Chapter 7 says that I am a priest like Melchizedek, the priest and king who blessed Abraham, and a priest forever.

Chapters 8 to 10 explain what I have done. The old priests served in a copy of the heavenly sanctuary and offered sacrifices again and again. The writer quotes Jeremiah's promise of a new covenant, describes the tent in the desert and the Day of Atonement, and says that I offered myself once, so no more sacrifices are needed. He warns again against turning away, reminds the readers how they once endured insults and the loss of their property, and urges them not to give up.

Chapter 11 is a long list of people who lived by faith, from Abel and Noah to Abraham, Moses and Rahab, and many who suffered and died without receiving what was promised. Chapter 12 tells the readers to run the race with their eyes on me, calls hardship God's training of his children, and sets the fearful mountain of Sinai beside the heavenly Mount Zion.

Chapter 13 gives plain commands. Love one another. Welcome strangers. Remember prisoners. Do not love money. The writer asks the readers to go out to me outside the camp, and to keep on doing good and sharing. He ends with a prayer, news that Timothy has been freed, and greetings from the Italians.

This is a sermon with no name on it, written in the finest Greek in the New Testament.

It does not begin like a letter. There is no *Paul, to the church in such-and-such a place*. It begins like a speech, and a grand one:

God, having in the past spoken to the fathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, has at the end of these days spoken to us by his Son (Hebrews 1:1–2).

Near the end, the writer calls his work *the word of exhortation*, which is what a sermon was called in the synagogues of my time, and he adds, with a straight face after thirteen chapters, *for I have written to you in few words* (Hebrews 13:22). Then he closes like a letter, with greetings and news that *our brother Timothy has been freed* (Hebrews 13:23). It is a sermon, sent by post.

Who wrote it

The book's old title in the King James Version is *The Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Hebrews*. Neither Paul's name nor the word *Hebrews* appears in the text. Both were added.

The churches of the eastern Mediterranean came to count it as Paul's. In the oldest surviving collection of Paul's letters, a papyrus book from about 200, it comes right after Romans. The churches of the West were not convinced. Rome did not fully accept it as Paul's until the late 300s.¹

The doubts are old and good ones. The Greek is smooth and elegant, very unlike Paul's rough, rushing sentences. The ideas are different. Paul never calls me a high priest. And the writer says something about himself that Paul would never have said. He says the message *was confirmed to us by those who heard* (Hebrews 2:3). He learned it secondhand. Paul insisted the opposite, that he *didn't receive it from man* (Galatians 1:12).

So who was it? The North African writer Tertullian said Barnabas. Martin Luther suggested Apollos, an educated preacher from Alexandria whom Acts calls *mighty in the Scriptures* (Acts 18:24). In 1900 a German scholar named Adolf von Harnack proposed **Priscilla**, the teacher who worked beside Paul, and suggested her name was dropped because she was a woman. One problem with that idea is that the writer uses a masculine word for himself in one place.²

The honest answer is the one **Origen** gave in a sermon in the 240s: *who wrote the letter, God truly knows*.¹

A man like you

Here is what I value most in this book.

Many Christians came to picture me as so far above ordinary people that I was never afraid, never unsure, never tempted in any real way. Hebrews will not let you think that.

He was obligated in all things to be made like his brothers (Hebrews 2:17).

For we don't have a high priest who can't be touched with the feeling of our infirmities, but one who has been in all points tempted like we are, yet without sin (Hebrews 4:15).

And this, which no other letter says: *He, in the days of his flesh, having offered up prayers and petitions with strong crying and tears to him who was able to save him from death ... though he was a Son, yet learned obedience by the things which he suffered* (Hebrews 5:7–8).

Strong crying and tears. Learned obedience. The writer was probably thinking of the garden on my last night, where Mark remembers that I *began to be greatly troubled and distressed*, and fell on the ground, and asked for the cup to be taken away (Mark 14:33–36).

That is true. I was afraid. Whoever wrote this book understood that you cannot trust someone to help you with what he never felt.

A priest like Melchizedek

The longest argument in the book is about priests.

In the Law of Moses, priests came from the tribe of Levi. I did not. *It is evident that our Lord has sprung out of Judah, about which tribe Moses spoke nothing concerning priesthood* (Hebrews 7:14). So how could I be a priest?

The writer finds his answer in two short passages. In Genesis, a king of Salem named **Melchizedek**, *priest of God Most High*, brings out bread and wine and blesses Abraham (Genesis 14:18–19). And in Psalm 110, God says to the king, *You are a priest forever in the order of Melchizedek* (Psalm 110:4).

Genesis never mentions Melchizedek's parents, his birth or his death. So the writer reads him as a figure *without father, without mother, without genealogy, having neither beginning of days nor end of life* (Hebrews 7:3), a priest who never stops being one. It is the kind of argument a learned teacher in my time would make, building a great deal on what a verse does not say. Jewish writers of the same period were fascinated by Melchizedek too. One of the Dead Sea Scrolls makes him a heavenly figure who brings judgment and release.³

The end of sacrifice

From there the writer makes his central claim. The priests in the Temple offered sacrifices *year by year* and could never finish the job. *For it is impossible that the blood of bulls and goats should take away sins* (Hebrews 10:4). But I offered myself, *once at the end of the ages* (Hebrews 9:26). One sacrifice, never to be repeated.

Much of the Christian teaching about my death as a sacrifice was worked out in this book. You should know it was an interpretation, made by a brilliant writer reading the Temple rituals of my people as a picture of what my death meant.

And notice where he takes it. If sacrifice is finished, what is left for God's people to offer? He answers at the very end: *But don't forget to be doing good and sharing, for with such sacrifices God is well pleased* (Hebrews 13:16). The sacrifice God wants now is doing good and sharing.

The prophets said that long before. When people complained that I ate with sinners, I sent them back to Hosea: *go and learn what this means: "I desire mercy, and not sacrifice"* (Matthew 9:13).

Old and new

There is a verse in this book that did real damage, and you should know about it.

The writer quotes Jeremiah's promise of a *new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah* (Hebrews 8:8). Then he draws a conclusion: *In that he says, "A new covenant", he has made the first old. But that which is becoming old and grows aged is near to vanishing away* (Hebrews 8:13).

For centuries Christians read that to mean that God was finished with the Jewish people, and that the church had replaced them. That teaching has a name, **supersessionism**, and it helped make contempt for my people seem holy.⁴

Read Jeremiah. The new covenant was promised *with the house of Israel, and with the house of Judah* (Jeremiah 31:31). It was a promise to renew my people, not to replace them. Many churches today have rejected the idea that God broke his covenant with the Jews.

The hall of faith

Chapter 11 is the most loved part of the book.

Now faith is assurance of things hoped for, proof of things not seen (Hebrews 11:1).

Then the writer walks through my scriptures, naming people who lived by faith: Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses. Then **Rahab**, a foreign woman of Jericho, called here *Rahab the prostitute* (Hebrews 11:31). Then a rush of names: *Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel, and the prophets* (Hebrews 11:32).

It is a strange and honest list. Samson was a brawler. Jephthah made a vow and killed his own daughter to keep it. David took another man's wife. The writer did not choose saints. He chose people who kept going.

And then the line that holds the whole chapter together: *These all died in faith, not having received the promises* (Hebrews 11:13). They were not rewarded in their lifetimes. Some *went around in sheep skins and in goat skins; being destitute, afflicted, ill-treated—of whom the world was not worthy* (Hebrews 11:37–38).

That is the opposite of what is preached in some churches today, where faith is supposed to bring you health and money. In Hebrews, the heroes of faith were often poor, homeless and killed.

No second chance?

Some passages in this book have frightened sensitive readers for centuries.

For concerning those who were once enlightened ... and then fell away, it is impossible to renew them again to repentance (Hebrews 6:4–6). For if we sin willfully after we have received the knowledge of the truth, there remains no more a sacrifice for sins (Hebrews 10:26).

These verses were written to a congregation under pressure, where some members were drifting away and going back to their old lives. The writer was trying to shake them awake. But taken as a rule, they would mean that a person who falls away can never come back. Martin Luther thought these passages went against the gospels and Paul, and in 1522 he said so in the preface to this book.⁵

When Peter asked me how many times he had to forgive his brother, I told him *seventy times seven* (Matthew 18:22). I did not ask anything of Peter that God does not do.

Outside the gate

The last chapter brings it down to earth.

Let brotherly love continue. Don't forget to show hospitality to strangers, for in doing so, some have entertained angels without knowing it. Remember those who are in bonds, as bound with them, and those who are ill-treated (Hebrews 13:1–3). Be free from the love of money, content with such things as you have (Hebrews 13:5).

And then this: *Therefore Jesus also ... suffered outside of the gate. Let's therefore go out to him outside of the camp, bearing his reproach. For we don't have here an enduring city (Hebrews 13:12–14).*

I was crucified outside the walls of Jerusalem, where the city put the things it wanted out of sight. Hebrews tells you where to find me now. Not at the center. Outside the gate, with the strangers, the prisoners and the people the city threw out.

CHECK IT YOURSELF

Look up: Hebrews 5:7–8, then Mark 14:33–36.

You will find: the same night in two books, with prayers, tears and fear.

Then read Hebrews 11:32–40. Notice how many of the faithful died poor, and without receiving what they were promised.

Go deeper: the longer history behind this chapter, and every source it rests on, are free at LessonsOfJesus.com/hebrews.

THE SHORT VERSION

- **Hebrews** is a sermon with no author's name. It is **not by Paul**, and as Origen said, **only God knows** who wrote it.
- It insists I was **tempted like you** and prayed **with strong crying and tears**.
- It calls me a **priest like Melchizedek**, whose **one sacrifice** ends all sacrifices. What is left to offer is **doing good and sharing**.
- Its line about the **old covenant vanishing** was used to teach that the **church replaced the Jews**. Jeremiah promised **renewal**, not replacement.
- Its heroes of faith often **died poor**, and it tells you to find me **outside the gate**.

20. James: My Brother's Letter

AT A GLANCE

Who wrote it: It says *James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ* (1:1). Tradition says this is my brother James, who led my followers in Jerusalem after I died. Many scholars think a later writer used his name, mainly because the Greek is polished. Others think it could be his, perhaps with help.

When: If my brother wrote it, before he was killed in 62. If not, perhaps between 70 and 100.

Written for: Jewish believers living scattered outside the land of Israel. Some were poor and some were rich, and the church was favoring the rich. James wrote to say that faith has to show in what you do.

What it remembers of me: It names me only twice, and it tells no story from my life. But it is closer to my teaching than any other letter in your Bible. It echoes the Sermon on the Mount again and again, without ever saying it is quoting me.

How close it stays to me: Very close, especially on the poor.

If you only read three chapters: James 1, James 2 and James 5.

WORDS TO KNOW

James — in Hebrew, *Ya'akov*, the same name as Jacob. It was one of the most common names among my people.

The Dispersion — Jews living outside the land of Israel, scattered across the empire. The letter is addressed to *the twelve tribes which are in the Dispersion*.

Works — deeds. What you actually do.

Justified — counted as right before God.

The royal law — the letter's name for *love your neighbor as yourself*.

THE BOOK IN BRIEF

James writes as a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ to the twelve tribes scattered abroad. It is a letter of short, sharp pieces of advice, not one long argument.

Chapter 1 tells the readers to count their trials as joy, because testing builds endurance. Anyone who lacks wisdom should ask God for it. God tempts no one, and every good gift comes from him. The readers must be doers of the word and not only hearers, and pure religion is to care for orphans and widows and keep oneself unstained by the world.

Chapter 2 forbids favoring the rich. A man in fine clothes and a poor man in filthy clothes come into the meeting, and the poor man is told to stand. The writer then argues that faith without works is dead, and gives Abraham and Rahab as examples.

Chapter 3 says the tongue is a small fire that can burn down a forest. It sets the wisdom from above, which is peaceful and merciful, against jealousy and selfish ambition.

Chapter 4 blames quarrels on cravings, tells the readers to humble themselves before God, and warns those who plan to make a profit as though they were sure of tomorrow.

Chapter 5 begins with a warning to the rich, who have kept back their workers' wages. It then urges patience until the Lord comes, forbids swearing oaths, and speaks of prayer for the sick and for one another. It ends by saying that whoever turns a sinner back from error saves a soul from death.

My brother did not follow me while I was alive. After I died, he led my followers in Jerusalem. This letter carries his name.

The gospels remember it plainly. When I was going around Galilee, my family thought I had lost my mind and *went out to seize him; for they said, "He is insane"* (Mark 3:21). John says, *For even his brothers didn't believe in him* (John 7:5).

My hometown knew all of us by name. *Isn't this the carpenter, the son of Mary, and brother of James, Joses, Judah, and Simon? Aren't his sisters here with us?*

(Mark 6:3). James comes first on that list, which probably means he was the oldest after me.¹

Then something changed him. In the oldest list of the people who saw me after my death, Paul writes, *Then he appeared to James* (1 Corinthians 15:7). A few years later, when Paul went to Jerusalem, the leaders he met were Peter and *James, the Lord's brother* (Galatians 1:19). By the time the great argument over circumcision came to Jerusalem, James was the one who gave the decision.

How he died

You can read about my brother's death outside the Bible. The Jewish historian **Josephus**, writing around 93, tells it.

In the year 62, the Roman governor of Judea died in office. Before the next one arrived, the high priest, a man named **Ananus**, seized his chance. He called a council and brought before it *the brother of Jesus who was called Christ, whose name was James*, with some others, charged them with breaking the Law, and had them stoned.

Josephus adds that the most fair-minded people in Jerusalem, the ones most careful about the Law, were offended. They complained to the new governor and to the king, and Ananus was removed after only three months as high priest.²

Later Christians called my brother **James the Just**. Even people who were not his followers, it seems, thought he had been wronged.

Did he write this?

The letter is written in good Greek, with a wide vocabulary and some fine turns of phrase. That is the main reason many scholars doubt that my brother wrote it. We grew up in a village of a few hundred people. Our trade was building. Our language was Aramaic.

There are answers. Galilee had Greek-speaking cities nearby, and a leader in Jerusalem could have used a secretary or a translator. And if a forger wanted to borrow James's authority, he did not do much with it. The letter never claims to be from the brother of the Lord. It just says James.

The churches were slow to accept it. Origen, in the 200s, is the first writer known to quote it as scripture by name. Around 325, Eusebius listed it among the disputed books, noting that not many of the early writers had mentioned it.³

Whoever wrote it knew the earliest Jewish followers of mine and their teaching better than almost anyone else in the New Testament. When the letter describes the poor man walking into a meeting, it calls the meeting a *synagogue* (James 2:2). That is what my first followers were. A synagogue that believed I was the Messiah.

Faith without works

This is the passage everyone knows.

What good is it, my brothers, if a man says he has faith, but has no works? Can faith save him? And if a brother or sister is naked and in lack of daily food, and one of you tells them, "Go in peace. Be warmed and filled;" yet you didn't give them the things the body needs, what good is it? Even so faith, if it has no works, is dead in itself (James 2:14–17).

And then the sentence that has caused centuries of argument: *You see then that by works, a man is justified, and not only by faith* (James 2:24).

Paul wrote, *We maintain therefore that a man is justified by faith apart from the works of the law* (Romans 3:28). Both of them use the same example, Abraham, and the same verse from Genesis, *Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him as righteousness* (James 2:23; compare Romans 4:3). One says Abraham was justified by faith. The other says he was justified by works.

Are they contradicting each other? Read them closely, and they are not talking about the same works. When Paul says *works of the law*, he means, many scholars think, above all the things that marked a man as a Jew: circumcision, food laws, holy days. He was arguing that Gentiles did not need those to belong to God. When James says *works*, he means feeding the hungry and clothing the naked. He was arguing that a faith that leaves a brother cold and hungry is not faith at all.

Many scholars think James was answering people who had taken Paul's slogan and run with it, people who said, *We are saved by faith, so what we do does not matter*. Paul would have hated that as much as James did.⁴

My own teaching was simple about this. *Not everyone who says to me, "Lord, Lord," will enter into the Kingdom of Heaven; but he who does the will of my Father* (Matthew 7:21). And at the judgment, the question was what you did for the hungry, the thirsty and the stranger. On that question, my brother and I agreed.

An epistle of straw

Martin Luther did not like this letter.

He was building his reformation on Paul's words about faith, and James seemed to stand in the way. In the preface to his New Testament of 1522, he called James *an epistle of straw* compared with the letters he loved, because, he said, it had *nothing of the nature of the gospel about it*. Elsewhere he said he would not count it among the chief books of the Bible.⁵

The line about straw was dropped from editions after 1537. But as late as 1542 he still joked about throwing the letter into the stove. Either way, the judgment says more about what Luther was looking for than about the letter. A letter that tells you to feed your hungry brother has a great deal of the gospel in it.

My words, without my name

Here is the thing about this letter that I notice most. It is full of what I taught, and it never once says *Jesus said*.

I said, *don't swear at all ... But let your "Yes" be "Yes" and your "No" be "No"* (Matthew 5:34, 37). The letter says, *don't swear ... but let your "yes" be "yes", and your "no", "no"* (James 5:12).

I said, *Don't lay up treasures for yourselves on the earth, where moth and rust consume* (Matthew 6:19). The letter says, *Your riches are corrupted and your garments are moth-eaten. Your gold and your silver are corroded* (James 5:2–3).

I said, *Blessed are you who are poor, God's Kingdom is yours* (Luke 6:20). The letter says, *Didn't God choose those who are poor in this world to be rich in faith, and heirs of the Kingdom?* (James 2:5).

I said, *Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy* (Matthew 5:7). The letter says, *judgment is without mercy to him who has shown no mercy. Mercy triumphs over judgment* (James 2:13).

I said, *Ask, and it will be given you* (Matthew 7:7). The letter says, *let him ask of God, who gives to all liberally* (James 1:5).

There are more.⁶ It reads like someone who had absorbed my teaching so deeply that he no longer needed to say where it came from. It had become simply the way you talk. That is how sayings live in a family.

The poor man in filthy clothes

The second chapter has a scene you could film.

For if a man with a gold ring, in fine clothing, comes into your synagogue, and a poor man in filthy clothing also comes in, and you pay special attention to him who wears the fine clothing and say, "Sit here in a good place;" and you tell the poor man, "Stand there," or "Sit by my footstool" haven't you shown partiality among yourselves? (James 2:2–4).

Every congregation that has ever existed has been tempted to do exactly that. The rich man can help the church. The poor man needs help from it.

The letter does not just call it bad manners. *Don't the rich oppress you, and personally drag you before the courts?* (James 2:6). It reminds the congregation who the rich man is outside the building. Then it calls partiality a sin against *the royal law, You shall love your neighbor as yourself* (James 2:8–9).

Weep and howl

And then the fifth chapter, which is as fierce as any prophet in my scriptures.

Come now, you rich, weep and howl for your miseries that are coming on you ... Behold, the wages of the laborers who mowed your fields, which you have kept back by fraud, cry out, and the cries of those who reaped have entered into the ears of the

Lord of Armies. You have lived in luxury on the earth, and taken your pleasure (James 5:1, 4–5).

That is the Law of Moses speaking. *You shall not oppress a hired servant who is poor and needy ... In his day you shall give him his wages, neither shall the sun go down on it; for he is poor and sets his heart on it; lest he cry against you to the LORD* (Deuteronomy 24:14–15).

Wage theft is not a modern sin. My brother named it, and he said God hears the workers who cry about it.

The chapter before has a warning for people who make plans to get rich: *Come now, you who say, “Today or tomorrow let’s go into this city, and spend a year there, trade, and make a profit.” Whereas you don’t know what your life will be like tomorrow* (James 4:13–14). I told a story about a rich man who planned to build bigger barns and take life easy, and God said to him, *You foolish one, tonight your soul is required of you* (Luke 12:20).

Pure religion

If you want the letter in one verse, it is this one.

Pure religion and undefiled before our God and Father is this: to visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained by the world (James 1:27).

Not a creed. Not a ceremony. Orphans and widows, and a clean life.

My brother and I did not always agree. When I was alive, he thought I was out of my mind. But on the things that matter most, the letter that carries his name says what I said. It says it without needing my name on it.

CHECK IT YOURSELF

Look up: James 2:14–17, then Romans 3:28.

You will find: *faith without works is dead* in one, and *justified by faith apart from the works of the law* in the other. Ask what each writer means by *works*.

Then read James 5:1–6 beside Deuteronomy 24:14–15.

Go deeper: the longer history behind this chapter, and every source it rests on, are free at LessonsOfJesus.com/james.

THE SHORT VERSION

- **James** was **my brother**. He did not follow me in my lifetime, then **led my followers in Jerusalem** until he was **stoned in 62**.
- Whether **he wrote this letter** is debated. It is in **polished Greek**, and the churches were **slow to accept it**.
- It says **faith without works is dead**. Its **works** are **feeding and clothing** people, not the rituals Paul argued about.
- **Luther** called it **an epistle of straw**. It is the letter **closest to my own teaching**.
- It condemns **partiality to the rich** and **stolen wages**, and defines **pure religion** as caring for **orphans and widows**.

21. 1 Peter: Strangers and Exiles

AT A GLANCE

Who wrote it: It says *Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ* (1:1), writing from *Babylon*, which many take to be a code name for Rome, with the help of a man named Silvanus. Many scholars doubt that Peter, a Galilean fisherman, wrote its fine Greek, and think his followers in Rome wrote it after his death. Others think Silvanus wrote it for him. I knew Peter better than almost anyone.

When: If Peter wrote it, before he was killed in Rome in the 60s. If not, most likely between 70 and 95.

Written for: Mostly non-Jewish believers in five regions of what is now Turkey, whose neighbors had begun to treat them as outsiders and to slander them. The letter told them how to suffer well and that they belonged to God.

What it remembers of me: My suffering, above all. That *When he was cursed, he didn't curse back. When he suffered, he didn't threaten* (2:23). It also echoes what I said about those who suffer for doing right.

How close it stays to me: Close on not striking back and on leaders who serve. Far on slaves and wives, told to submit.

If you only read three chapters: 1 Peter 2, 1 Peter 3 and 1 Peter 4.

WORDS TO KNOW

Foreigners — in Greek, *paroikoi*, people living in a place where they had no citizen's rights. Many Bibles say *exiles* or *sojourners*.

Babylon — the empire that destroyed Jerusalem the first time. After Rome destroyed it the second time, Jewish and Christian writers used the name for Rome.

Christian — a nickname for my followers. It appears only three times in the whole New Testament, and this letter is one of them.

Spirits in prison — beings to whom, the letter says, I preached after my death. Nobody is sure who they were.

THE BOOK IN BRIEF

Peter, an apostle, writes to believers living as foreigners in five regions of what is now Turkey.

Chapter 1 begins with praise to God, who has given his people a new birth and a hope that cannot fade. The readers are suffering various trials, and the writer says these test their faith as fire tests gold. He tells them to be holy, to love one another, and to remember that they were bought with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish.

Chapter 2 calls them living stones, built into a house for God, and a chosen people, a royal priesthood, who were once no people at all. They are to live well among neighbors who speak against them, and to honor the emperor and the governors. Slaves are to obey their masters, even harsh ones, and my suffering is held up as the example.

Chapter 3 tells wives to submit to their husbands and husbands to honor their wives. All the readers are to answer insult with blessing and to be ready to explain their hope with gentleness. The chapter ends with Christ, who suffered once, preached to the spirits in prison and now sits at the right hand of God, and it compares the flood in Noah's day with baptism.

Chapter 4 says that the readers' old companions think it strange that they no longer join in their wild living. The readers are told to love one another and welcome guests, not to be surprised by the fiery trial, and to rejoice if they suffer for being Christians.

Chapter 5 speaks to the elders: shepherd God's flock willingly, and do not lord it over them. Younger people should accept the elders, everyone should be humble, and all should stand firm against the devil. The letter closes with a note that it was written briefly through Silvanus, greetings from Babylon and from Mark, and a blessing of peace.

This letter was written to people who did not belong anywhere. It told them they belonged to God.

It is addressed to *the chosen ones who are living as foreigners in the Dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia* (1 Peter 1:1). Those are five regions of what is now Turkey. The readers were mostly Gentiles who had

become my followers, and their neighbors had begun to treat them as outsiders. The letter tells them to stop trying to fit in.

The fisherman

Simon was a fisherman from the shore of the Sea of Galilee. I gave him a nickname, *Cephas* in Aramaic, *Petros* in Greek, which means *rock*. He was one of the first I called. In the first three gospels, he is the first to say I was the Messiah. And he is the one who swore he had never known me. On the night I was arrested, he stood by a fire in the high priest's courtyard and said, *I don't know this man of whom you speak!* Then the rooster crowed, and *he wept* (Mark 14:71–72).

After my death he became one of the leaders of my followers. Acts says the council in Jerusalem saw that he and John were *unlearned and ignorant men* (Acts 4:13). Early Christian tradition says he went to Rome and was crucified there under the emperor Nero, in the 60s.¹ John's gospel hints at it, when I tell him that when he is old, *you will stretch out your hands, and another will dress you and carry you where you don't want to go* (John 21:18).

Who wrote it

That brings us to the problem. This letter is written in good, educated Greek. It quotes the scriptures in the Greek translation, smoothly and often. It was sent to churches in regions where Peter is not known ever to have gone. It calls Rome *Babylon* (1 Peter 5:13), a code name that other surviving writers used only after Rome destroyed Jerusalem in 70, years after Peter died.²

It also mentions people suffering *for being a Christian* (1 Peter 4:16). Being punished simply for the name fits what we know from around the year 112, when a Roman governor in Bithynia, one of the regions this letter names, wrote that he was executing people for being Christians.³

On the other side, the letter says plainly, *Through Silvanus, our faithful brother ... I have written to you briefly* (1 Peter 5:12). That could mean Silvanus carried the letter. It could also mean Silvanus wrote it, in his own good Greek, for a

fisherman who could not. Silvanus is probably the same man as Silas, Paul's companion, and he would have been able to do it.

Many scholars think the letter came from a circle of Peter's followers in Rome, writing in his name after his death. Others think Peter stands behind it, with Silvanus holding the pen. Either way, it carries the memory of the man I called the rock.

Foreigners and pilgrims

One word the letter uses for its readers is *paroikoi* (1 Peter 2:11). It meant resident aliens: people who lived in a town without being citizens of it, without full rights or protection.

Some scholars think many of the readers really were resident aliens, displaced and low in status, and that the church gave them what society would not: a household to belong to.⁴ Others read the word as a picture of every believer, at home nowhere in this world. Either way, the letter turns being an outsider into an identity.

But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God's own possession ... In the past, you were not a people, but now are God's people (1 Peter 2:9–10).

Those are words that once belonged only to my people. *You shall be to me a kingdom of priests, and a holy nation*, God told Israel at Sinai (Exodus 19:6). Hosea promised that God would say to *those who were not my people, You are my people* (Hosea 2:23). Here they are given to Gentiles in Asia Minor who had been nobody. It is a beautiful gift. It is also the beginning of a habit, of taking the promises made to the Jews and handing them to the church instead.

Suffering without striking back

The heart of the letter is suffering, and the example it gives is mine.

For you were called to this, because Christ also suffered for us, leaving you an example, that you should follow his steps ... When he was cursed, he didn't curse back. When he suffered, he didn't threaten, but committed himself to him who judges righteously (1 Peter 2:21, 23).

Not rendering evil for evil, or insult for insult; but instead blessing (1 Peter 3:9). *But even if you should suffer for righteousness' sake, you are blessed* (1 Peter 3:14). I said that too: *Blessed are those who have been persecuted for righteousness' sake* (Matthew 5:10).

Now look at who the letter says this to first.

Servants, be in subjection to your masters with all respect: not only to the good and gentle, but also to the wicked. For it is commendable if someone endures pain, suffering unjustly (1 Peter 2:18–19). It means slaves. It goes on to say that if a slave does right and still has to *patiently endure suffering, this is commendable with God* (1 Peter 2:20).

Then wives: *be in subjection to your own husbands*, even husbands who do not believe, so that they may be won over by their wives' behavior. *So Sarah obeyed Abraham, calling him lord* (1 Peter 3:1, 6).

The writer was speaking to slaves and wives who had joined a new faith that their masters and husbands did not share, in a world where they had no way out. He was telling them how to survive, and how to keep their dignity while they did. But for centuries afterward, these verses were read to slaves to keep them working and to beaten wives to keep them at home. That is not what my example was for.

I did not curse back, and I did not threaten. I also did not tell anyone to stay where they were being beaten. I told people that the kingdom belonged to the poor and that the last would be first. Refusing to return evil for evil is courage. Telling the victims of evil that God wants them to stay is something else.

To be fair to the letter, it does tell husbands to honor their wives as *joint heirs of the grace of life* (1 Peter 3:7). In that world, that was more than many husbands were told.

Fear God, honor the king

Therefore subject yourselves to every ordinance of man for the Lord's sake: whether to the king, as supreme; or to governors ... Honor all men. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the king (1 Peter 2:13–14, 17).

The king here is the Roman emperor. If Peter wrote this in the 60s, the emperor was Nero, who had Christians burned in his gardens.⁵

Your New Testament has two answers to Rome, and they sit only a few books apart. This letter says *Honor the king*. Revelation, written from the same empire to churches in the same province of Asia, calls Rome a beast and a whore, and says, *Come out of her, my people* (Revelation 18:4). Both letters call the city *Babylon*.

But read the four commands slowly. *Honor all men. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the king*. God is the only one you fear. The king gets honor, the same honor as everyone else. That is not worship. Caesar was not God.

Ready with an answer

There is a line in chapter 3 that every Christian should keep: *Always be ready to give an answer to everyone who asks you a reason concerning the hope that is in you, with humility and fear* (1 Peter 3:15).

People quote the first half, about being ready with an answer. They usually forget the second half, about humility. The letter wanted you to answer gently, without contempt for the person asking.

And in chapter 4: *above all things be earnest in your love among yourselves, for love covers a multitude of sins. Be hospitable to one another without grumbling* (1 Peter 4:8–9).

The spirits in prison

Chapter 3 has one of the strangest passages in the New Testament. After my death, it says, *I went and preached to the spirits in prison, who before were disobedient ... in the days of Noah* (1 Peter 3:19–20). The next chapter adds that *the Good News was preached even to the dead* (1 Peter 4:6).

Nobody knows exactly what that meant. Some think the spirits were the people who drowned in the flood. Others think they were the fallen angels of Genesis 6, whom some Jewish books of the time pictured as imprisoned until the judgment.⁶

This passage helped give the church an idea that grew into a whole tradition: that between my death and resurrection I went down to the dead and set the captives free. You may have said it yourself, if you have recited the Apostles' Creed: *he descended into hell*.⁷ Whatever else it means, it says the reach of God goes further down than anyone thought it could.

Not lording it over them

The last chapter speaks to the leaders. *Shepherd the flock of God which is among you ... not for dishonest gain, but willingly; not as lording it over those entrusted to you, but making yourselves examples to the flock* (1 Peter 5:2–3).

That sounds like the man I spoke to on the beach after my death. Three times I asked him if he loved me, and three times I told him to feed my sheep (John 21:15–17). And it sounds like what I told all of them, when they argued over who was greatest: rulers *lord it over* their people, *But it shall not be so among you* (Mark 10:42–43).

Whether or not Peter wrote this letter, its last chapter sounds like he finally understood.

CHECK IT YOURSELF

Look up: 1 Peter 2:13–17 and 5:13, then Revelation 18:1–4.

You will find: two books of your New Testament, both calling Rome *Babylon*, one telling you to honor the king and the other telling you to come out of her.

Then read 1 Peter 4:16 and Acts 11:26. Notice when the name *Christian* first appears, and what it was costing people by the time of this letter.

Go deeper: the longer history behind this chapter, and every source it rests on, are free at LessonsOfJesus.com/1-peter.

THE SHORT VERSION

- **1 Peter** carries the name of my friend **Peter**, but its **fine Greek** and its **Babylon** code for Rome lead many scholars to think his **followers wrote it after his death**.
- It calls its readers **foreigners and pilgrims**, outsiders who **belong to God**.
- It makes **my suffering without cursing back** the model for believers.
- Its rules telling **slaves and wives to submit**, even to cruelty, were later used to **keep the abused in place**.
- It says **Honor the king**, while Revelation calls the same empire a **beast**. Both are in your Bible.

22. 2 Peter: The Last Book Written

AT A GLANCE

Who wrote it: It says *Simon Peter, a servant and apostle of Jesus Christ* (1:1), and it claims to have been on the mountain with me. Almost all critical scholars think it was written long after Peter's death, by someone using his name. Even in the early church, many doubted it.

When: Most scholars place it between about 80 and 150. Many think it was the last book of the New Testament to be written.

Written for: Believers whose hope for my return was fading. Mockers laughed at the delay, and false teachers were leading people astray. The letter does not say which churches.

What it remembers of me: The day on the mountain when Peter, James and John saw me changed, and heard a voice say *This is my beloved Son* (1:17). And something I made clear to Peter about his death (1:14).

How close it stays to me: Close on God's patience and a world made right. Far in its harsh words for false teachers.

If you only read three chapters: It has three. Read them.

WORDS TO KNOW

Tartarus — in Greek myth, the deepest pit of the underworld, where the gods imprisoned the Titans. This letter is the only book in the New Testament that uses the word.

Mockers — people who laughed that I had not come back.

Pseudonymous — written under a false name. In the ancient world, writing in a famous teacher's name was common. Whether it was meant and taken as a tribute or as a trick is still debated.

Testament — a farewell speech, in which a famous man looks ahead to his death and warns of what will come after.

THE BOOK IN BRIEF

Simon Peter writes to fellow believers. He lists the qualities to add to faith, ending in love, and promises a share in God's own nature and an entrance into the eternal kingdom. He says he will soon die, and wants them to remember. He says he saw my glory on the holy mountain and heard the voice from heaven.

Chapter 2 warns that false teachers will arise. They live in greed and lust and lead many astray. The writer recalls how God punished rebel angels, the world of Noah's day, and Sodom and Gomorrah, while saving Noah and Lot, and says the same judgment waits for these teachers.

Chapter 3 says that mockers will ask where the promise of my coming is, since everything goes on as before. The writer answers that a day with the Lord is like a thousand years, that the Lord is patient and wants everyone to repent, and that the day will come with fire. He tells the readers to live holy lives and look for new heavens and a new earth. He calls Paul a beloved brother, says Paul's letters are hard to understand, and ends with a call to grow in grace and knowledge.

The last book of your New Testament to be written may be the one that tries hardest to sound like one of the first.

It opens with Peter's full name, *Simon Peter*. It says Peter knows he will soon die, *even as our Lord Jesus Christ made clear to me* (2 Peter 1:14). It insists that its writer saw me with his own eyes. And it is very probably not by Peter.

We were eyewitnesses

For we didn't follow cunningly devised fables when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty. For he received from God the Father honor and glory when the voice came to him from the Majestic Glory, "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased." We heard this voice come out of heaven when we were with him on the holy mountain (2 Peter 1:16–18).

The gospels tell that day. I took Peter, James and John up a high mountain, *and he was changed into another form in front of them*. Peter, frightened, offered to build three tents, *For he didn't know what to say* (Mark 9:2, 6).

No other letter in your New Testament makes so strong a claim to have been there. And that is part of the problem. A writer who really was there would hardly need to insist on it so hard.

Why scholars doubt it

The reasons are many, and some of them are old.¹

The Greek. It is ornate and full of rare words, and it is very different from the Greek of 1 Peter. Jerome noticed this around 400. He wrote that most people rejected the letter because its style did not match the first one.

Jude. Most of the second chapter is a rewritten version of the short letter of Jude. The same false teachers, the same examples, the same images, in the same order: angels kept in darkness, Sodom and Gomorrah, Balaam, clouds and springs without water.² Most scholars think this writer had Jude in front of him. It would be strange for Peter, the leader of the twelve, to copy most of his warning from a much smaller letter by someone else.

Paul's letters. The writer speaks of *our beloved brother Paul* and of *all of his letters*, and he puts them beside *the other Scriptures* (2 Peter 3:15–16). That means Paul's letters had already been collected and were being read as scripture. That took time. It most likely did not happen in Peter's lifetime.

The fathers. The mockers in this letter ask what happened to the promise of my coming, *from the day that the fathers fell asleep* (2 Peter 3:4). Most scholars take this to mean the first generation had died. The writer is looking back at them.

The church. It was one of the most doubted books in the New Testament. No early writer clearly quotes it before the 200s. Origen knew it was disputed. Eusebius put it on his list of disputed books.³

So who wrote it? Someone who honored Peter, writing in the form of a farewell testament, as Jews and Christians of that age often did for great figures of the past. He wanted Peter's voice to speak to a new crisis. I am not going to call him a liar. But when you read *We heard this voice*, you should know that you are most likely not hearing Peter.

Where is the promise?

The new crisis was this. I had not come back.

My first followers expected to see it. Paul told the Thessalonians that *we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord* would meet me (1 Thessalonians 4:15–17). Mark remembers me saying, *this generation will not pass away until all these things happen* (Mark 13:30).

By the time this letter was written, that generation had passed away. And people were laughing. *In the last days mockers will come ... saying, “Where is the promise of his coming? For, from the day that the fathers fell asleep, all things continue as they were from the beginning of the creation”* (2 Peter 3:3–4).

The writer gives two answers.

The first is that God does not keep time the way we do. *Don’t forget this one thing, beloved, that one day is with the Lord as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day* (2 Peter 3:8). He took that from a psalm: *For a thousand years in your sight are just like yesterday when it is past* (Psalm 90:4).

The second is the better one. *The Lord is not slow concerning his promise, as some count slowness; but he is patient with us, not wishing that anyone should perish, but that all should come to repentance* (2 Peter 3:9).

If the end has been delayed, it is because God is giving people time. That is not a bad answer. And it is the New Testament itself admitting, out loud, that the end did not come when the first believers thought it would.

I said, *But of that day or that hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father* (Mark 13:32). Whoever wrote this letter was trying to be faithful to that. The ones who set dates were not.

But the patience has an edge. In chapter 2 the false teachers are *born natural animals to be taken and destroyed* (2 Peter 2:12), and *the blackness of darkness has been reserved forever* for them (2 Peter 2:17). I spoke sharply to teachers who led people astray (Matthew 23:13). I also told you to love your enemies (Matthew 5:44), and this letter has no mercy for its opponents.

The earth burned up

The same chapter describes the end with fire. *The heavens will pass away with a great noise, and the elements will be dissolved with fervent heat, and the earth and the works that are in it will be burned up* (2 Peter 3:10).

Some people have read that to mean the earth does not matter. If God is going to burn it anyway, why look after it?

Two things to know. First, the oldest copies of this verse do not say *burned up*. They say the earth and the works in it *will be found*, meaning laid bare before God, exposed for judgment. The World English Bible follows the later copies.⁴ Second, the writer goes straight on to what he is waiting for: *new heavens and a new earth, in which righteousness dwells* (2 Peter 3:13). He took that from Isaiah (Isaiah 65:17). The hope was a world made right, not a world thrown away.

And the question he asks next is the right one: *what kind of people ought you to be in holy living and godliness?* (2 Peter 3:11). The end of the world, in this letter, is a reason to live better now, not a reason to stop caring.

Our beloved brother Paul

There is one more thing in this letter worth noticing.

When Paul and Peter were alive, they had a bitter public quarrel in Antioch, over whether Jewish believers could eat with Gentiles. Paul wrote, *I resisted him to his face* (Galatians 2:11).

This letter, written in Peter's name, calls him *our beloved brother Paul*. It says his letters contain *some things that are hard to understand, which the ignorant and unsettled twist* (2 Peter 3:15–16).

The quarrel is gone. The two great apostles are brothers, and the problem is the people who misread Paul. That is how the church came to remember them, side by side, the founders of the church in Rome. It is a kinder picture than the one Paul painted of that day in Antioch. It was also a way of telling people that Paul belonged to the church, not to those who twisted him.

And notice that even inside the New Testament, someone found Paul hard to understand. You are not the first.

Partakers of the divine nature

One more line, because it has had a long life. The letter says that through God's promises *you may become partakers of the divine nature* (2 Peter 1:4).

The Orthodox churches built a great deal on that sentence. They teach that the goal of a human life is to be drawn so close to God that you share in God's own life. They call it *theosis*. Whatever you make of it, it is a large hope to find in a small and late letter.

CHECK IT YOURSELF

Look up: 2 Peter 3:3–9, then Mark 13:30–32.

You will find: believers being mocked because I had not come back, and my own words that no one knows the day or the hour.

Then compare 2 Peter 2:1–17 with Jude 4–13. Count how much of one is in the other.

Go deeper: the longer history behind this chapter, and every source it rests on, are free at LessonsOfJesus.com/2-peter.

THE SHORT VERSION

- **2 Peter** claims to be from **Peter** and to be an **eyewitness**, but almost all critical scholars think it was written **long after his death**, perhaps **last of all** the New Testament books.
- It **copies most of Jude**, treats **Paul's letters** as a collected **scripture**, and looks back on **the fathers** as dead.
- It answers people **mocking** the delay of my return: **a day is like a thousand years**, and God is **patient, not wishing that anyone should perish**.
- Its **burning earth** leads to **new heavens and a new earth**, a world made right.
- It calls Paul **our beloved brother**, and admits his letters are **hard to understand**.

23. 1 John: Love, and a Church Split in Two

AT A GLANCE

Who wrote it: It names no author. Tradition credits my apostle John, the same John said to have written the fourth gospel. Most scholars think it came from the same community as the Gospel of John, and perhaps from the same school of teachers, but not from my friend John himself.

When: Probably around 100, some years after the Gospel of John.

Written for: The community behind John's gospel, just after a split. Some members had left over what to believe about me. The writer wanted those who stayed to be sure of their faith and to love one another.

What it remembers of me: That I came *in the flesh* (4:2), and that people saw me with their eyes and touched me with their hands (1:1). That I gave a *new commandment*, to love one another. And that I *laid down his life for us* (3:16).

How close it stays to me: Close on love shown in deed and on sharing with the needy. Far on enemies.

If you only read three chapters: 1 John 1, 1 John 3 and 1 John 4.

WORDS TO KNOW

Antichrist — a word that appears only in the letters of John, nowhere else in the Bible. Here it means people who had left the community and denied that I came in a human body.

In the flesh — in a real human body, with real blood.

Fellowship — in Greek, *koinōnia*, sharing a common life.

Atoning sacrifice — the World English Bible's words for what this letter calls my death. Older Bibles say *propitiation*.

THE BOOK IN BRIEF

The writer begins by saying that he and others heard, saw and touched the Word of life, and that he is writing so that their joy may be complete. He says that God is light. Anyone who walks in the light is honest about sin, and God forgives those who confess it. If anyone does sin, Jesus Christ, the righteous, is our Counselor with the Father.

Chapter 2 says that the one who knows God keeps his commandments, above all the commandment to love a brother or sister. It warns against loving the world. It says that many antichrists have appeared, and that they went out from the community. Chapter 3 tells the readers that they are God's children, and that they must love one another, not only in words but in deed.

Chapter 4 tells them to test every spirit, and says that the spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God. Then it says that God is love, and that whoever says he loves God and hates his brother is a liar.

Chapter 5 says that faith overcomes the world, and that God has given us eternal life in his Son. The writer says he has written so that his readers may know they have this life. The letter ends with a word about prayer, and a warning to keep away from idols.

This is the book that says *God is love*. It was written to a church that had just split in two.

Beloved, let's love one another, for love is of God; and everyone who loves has been born of God, and knows God. He who doesn't love doesn't know God, for God is love (1 John 4:7–8).

Those are some of the most beautiful words in your Bible. You should know the circumstances in which they were written. The people who wrote them had just watched part of their community walk out the door.

Not really a letter

The book is called a letter, but it has no greeting and no signature, no names and no news. It reads more like a sermon, or a pastor's message read aloud to a hurt congregation.

It opens with a sentence that sounds like the start of John's gospel, and it insists on the body. *That which was from the beginning, that which we have heard, that which we have seen with our eyes, that which we saw, and our hands touched, concerning the Word of life* (1 John 1:1).

Heard. Seen. Touched. Why does the writer press so hard on that? Most likely because some people had begun to teach that I did not really have a body.

They went out from us

They went out from us, but they didn't belong to us; for if they had belonged to us, they would have continued with us (1 John 2:19).

That is a sentence written after a split. A group had left. The letter tells you what they believed by telling you what they denied. *Every spirit who doesn't confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is not of God* (1 John 4:3).

There were teachers in that age, and more of them in the next, who could not accept that God would take on a body that ate, sweated, bled and died. They said I only *seemed* to be human. The idea is called **docetism**, from the Greek word for *seem*. Around the year 110, the bishop Ignatius was still fighting it, insisting that I was *truly* born, *truly* ate and drank, *truly* was crucified.¹

I was truly all of those things. I was hungry in the desert. I was tired at a well. I wept for a friend. I was afraid in a garden. If anyone tells you that I only seemed to be a man, this letter is on my side.

The antichrists

This is where the word **antichrist** first appears. Read what it actually means here.

Little children, these are the end times, and as you heard that the Antichrist is coming, even now many antichrists have arisen (1 John 2:18). *Who is the liar but he who denies that Jesus is the Christ? This is the Antichrist* (1 John 2:22).

The antichrists in this letter are not a world ruler at the end of history, with a mark and a number. They are many, and they are already here. They are former members of the congregation who had left over what to believe about me.²

Later Christians took this word, which appears in only two short letters, and fused it with the beast of Revelation, the *man of sin* in 2 Thessalonians and the little horn in Daniel, to build a single figure, the Antichrist, who has been assigned a new face in every century. The letter that invented the word would not recognize him.

God is love

Now the heart of the book. Read chapter 4 straight through.

In this is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son as the atoning sacrifice for our sins. Beloved, if God loved us in this way, we also ought to love one another (1 John 4:10–11).

No one has seen God at any time. If we love one another, God remains in us (1 John 4:12).

God is love, and he who remains in love remains in God, and God remains in him (1 John 4:16).

There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear (1 John 4:18).

And the line that leaves no room to hide: *If a man says, “I love God,” and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who doesn’t love his brother whom he has seen, how can he love God whom he has not seen?* (1 John 4:20).

That is the whole of my teaching on the subject, said as well as anyone has ever said it. On the night before I died, John’s gospel remembers me telling my friends, *A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also love one another* (John 13:34). This letter takes that commandment and makes it the test of everything. You know God if you love. If you do not love, you do not know God, whatever you say you believe.

Love in deed

And the letter will not let love stay a feeling.

But whoever has the world’s goods and sees his brother in need, then closes his heart of compassion against him, how does God’s love remain in him? My little children,

let's not love in word only, or with the tongue only, but in deed and truth (1 John 3:17–18).

Love is a meal. Love is a coat. Love is rent paid for someone who cannot pay it. My brother James said the same thing about faith. The letters of John say it about love.

Love for whom?

But read closely, and you will see the limit of this letter.

The love it commands is love *for the brothers*, for the members of the community. *We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brothers* (1 John 3:14). The people who left are called liars, deceivers and antichrists.

I asked for more than that. *You have heard that it was said, "You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy." But I tell you, love your enemies* (Matthew 5:43–44). My Father, I said, *makes his sun to rise on the evil and the good* (Matthew 5:45).

This letter was written by wounded people, holding together what was left of a church after a bitter split. Their love turned inward, toward the ones who stayed. I understand why. But even the letter that says *God is love* had trouble loving the people who walked out. Most churches since have had the same trouble.

Without sin?

The letter also has a puzzle about sin.

In chapter 1 it says, *If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves ... If we confess our sins, he is faithful and righteous to forgive us the sins* (1 John 1:8–9). In chapter 3 it says, *Whoever is born of God doesn't commit sin ... he can't sin, because he is born of God* (1 John 3:9).

Readers have struggled to fit those together for centuries. Many think the writer was fighting on two fronts at once, against people who claimed they had no sin

and against people who said that sin did not matter. The first verse is the one I would keep beside your bed. Everyone sins. Everyone can be forgiven.

The verse that was added

There is one more thing you should know about this letter, because it is one of the most famous changes ever made to the text of the New Testament.

If you open a King James Bible to chapter 5, you will read: *For there are three that bear record in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost: and these three are one* (1 John 5:7, King James Version).

That sentence is not in any Greek manuscript of the letter for well over a thousand years. It first appears in Latin, around the end of the 300s, and seems to have begun as a note in the margin explaining the verse. It crept into Latin Bibles from there.³

When the scholar **Erasmus** printed his Greek New Testament in 1516, he left it out, because he could not find it in any Greek manuscript. Critics attacked him for leaving out the Trinity. By his third edition, in 1522, a Greek manuscript containing it had turned up in England, apparently produced recently, and he put it in. From his text it went into the King James Version of 1611, and millions of people learned it as scripture. It is called the **Johannine Comma**.³

The World English Bible, like almost every modern Bible, does not have it. It reads simply, *For there are three who testify: the Spirit, the water, and the blood; and the three agree as one* (1 John 5:7–8).

Whatever you believe about God, it should not rest on a sentence that someone added to the Bible.

CHECK IT YOURSELF

Look up: 1 John 3:17–18, then 1 John 4:20–21.

You will find: love defined as helping a brother in need, and a man who says he loves God while hating his brother called a liar.

Then compare 1 John 5:7–8 in the World English Bible or any modern Bible with a King James Bible. See what was added.

Go deeper: the longer history behind this chapter, and every source it rests on, are free at LessonsOfJesus.com/1-john.

THE SHORT VERSION

- **1 John** comes from the same community as the **Gospel of John**. It names no author.
- It was written after a **split**, against people who said **I did not really have a body**.
- Its **antichrists** are **many**, and they are **former church members**, not a ruler at the end of time.
- It says **God is love**, and that love means helping the brother **in need, in deed and truth**.
- The famous Trinity verse in older Bibles, the **Johannine Comma**, was **added** in Latin and is **not in the Greek**.

24. 2 John: Do Not Let Them In

AT A GLANCE

Who wrote it: A man who calls himself only *the elder*. Tradition says my apostle John. An early bishop named Papias listed John among my apostles and then, separately, *the elder John*. Eusebius took these to be two men, and many scholars think the elder who wrote this letter, and 3 John, was someone other than my friend.

When: Probably around 100, close to the time of 1 John.

Written for: A house church, or the woman who hosted it, called *the chosen lady and her children*. Traveling teachers who denied that I came in the flesh were looking for a welcome, and the elder said not to give it.

What it remembers of me: That I *came in the flesh* (verse 7), and the commandment *that we love one another* (verse 5).

How close it stays to me: Close on love for one another. Far on the stranger at the door.

If you only read three chapters: It has one chapter of thirteen verses. It is one of the two shortest books in your Bible. Read it.

WORDS TO KNOW

The elder — in Greek, *presbyteros*, an older man with authority. Here it is the writer's only name for himself.

The chosen lady — the person the letter is addressed to. She may have been a woman who led a congregation in her house, or the phrase may stand for the congregation itself.

Hospitality — taking travelers into your house and feeding them. My early followers who traveled to teach depended on it completely.

THE BOOK IN BRIEF

The elder writes to the chosen lady and her children, whom he loves in truth. He is glad to have found some of her children walking in the truth. He asks her to love one another. This is no new commandment, he says, but the one they have had from the beginning.

Then he warns that many deceivers have gone out into the world, people who do not confess that Jesus Christ came in the flesh. His readers must watch themselves, so that they do not lose what they have worked for. Anyone who brings a different teaching is not to be received into the house or welcomed.

The elder has much more to write, but he would rather come and speak face to face, so that their joy may be full. The children of her chosen sister send greetings.

This is the only place in your Bible where believers are told not to let someone into their house because of what he believes.

It is a very short letter, written on what would have been a single sheet of papyrus. It says two things. Love one another. And do not let certain people into your house.

Love one another

The first half could have come straight from the first letter of John.

Now I beg you, dear lady, not as though I wrote to you a new commandment, but that which we had from the beginning, that we love one another. This is love, that we should walk according to his commandments (2 John 5–6).

It is the old commandment, the one my followers had heard from the beginning. The elder did not think he had anything new to say. He wanted it remembered.

The deceivers

Then the warning, in the same words as the first letter. *For many deceivers have gone out into the world, those who don't confess that Jesus Christ came in the flesh. This is the deceiver and the Antichrist (2 John 7).*

These were the same people. Teachers who said I had not really been human. They had left the community, and now they were traveling around to other

congregations, teaching what they believed.

Shut the door

And here is the instruction.

If anyone comes to you, and doesn't bring this teaching, don't receive him into your house, and don't welcome him, for he who welcomes him participates in his evil deeds (2 John 10–11).

You need to understand what that meant then. There were no inns that a poor teacher could afford, and the churches met in homes. A traveling teacher lived on hospitality. If you took him in, you were not only feeding him. You were giving him a place to teach your congregation, and sending him on to the next town with your blessing. A guide for churches written around the same time, called the **Didache**, has its own rules for testing travelers who claimed to be apostles or prophets. An apostle could stay a day or two. One who asked for money was a fraud.¹

So the elder was protecting a small community from teachers he believed were destroying it. I can understand that.

But read it beside my scriptures and my life. Abraham ran from his tent to meet three strangers, bowed to the ground, and begged them to stay and eat (Genesis 18:2–5). The Law of Moses told my people again and again to love the stranger. I ate with people the religious leaders said I should not touch, and they complained, *This man welcomes sinners, and eats with them* (Luke 15:2). At the judgment, I said, the king will say, *I was a stranger, and you took me in* (Matthew 25:35). Another letter in your New Testament says, *Don't forget to show hospitality to strangers, for in doing so, some have entertained angels without knowing it* (Hebrews 13:2).

When I sent my friends out, I told them that if a town would not receive them, they should *shake the dust off your feet* and move on (Matthew 10:14). I told my followers what to do when the door was shut on them. I did not tell them to shut it on anyone.

This little verse had a long future. Churches have used it to justify shunning, to cut off family members, and to refuse a meal to anyone whose beliefs had changed. It was written to stop false teachers from using a congregation's homes as a base. It was never meant as a rule for how to treat a hungry person, or your own child.

Face to face

The letter ends with a line I like very much.

Having many things to write to you, I don't want to do so with paper and ink, but I hope to come to you, and to speak face to face, that our joy may be made full (2 John 12).

The elder knew the limits of a letter. Some things should be said in person, where you can see the other person's face. That is good advice for anyone writing angry words about someone who disagrees with them.

Two Johns?

Who was the elder?

Around the year 120, Papias wrote that he had made a point of asking what the elders said, and he listed what Andrew, Peter, Philip, Thomas, James, John and Matthew had said, and then, separately, what *Aristion and the elder John* were saying. Two hundred years later, the historian Eusebius read that passage and concluded that there had been two different men named John: my apostle, and a later teacher known as John the Elder. He even reported that there were two tombs in Ephesus, each said to be John's.²

Not everyone agrees with Eusebius's reading of Papias. But it is possible that the man who simply called himself *the elder* was that second John. If so, he was not one of my twelve. He was a respected old teacher at the center of a network of house churches, trying to hold them together.

CHECK IT YOURSELF

Look up: 2 John 10–11, then Hebrews 13:2.

You will find: two books of the New Testament, one telling you not to let certain people into your house and the other telling you to welcome strangers.

Then read Matthew 25:35 and ask which one I would have written.

Go deeper: the longer history behind this chapter, and every source it rests on, are free at LessonsOfJesus.com/2-john.

THE SHORT VERSION

- **2 John** is a one-page letter from **the elder** to **the chosen lady**, probably a congregation.
- It repeats the old commandment: **love one another**.
- It warns against teachers who denied I came **in the flesh**, and says **do not receive them into your house**.
- That made sense for a small church protecting itself, but it stands against **my welcome to strangers** and has been used to justify **shunning**.
- The **elder** may have been a later teacher, **John the Elder**, not my apostle.

25. 3 John: The Book That Never Names Me

AT A GLANCE

Who wrote it: *The elder*, the same writer as 2 John, to a believer named Gaius. Tradition says my apostle John. Many scholars think it was a later teacher known as John the Elder.

When: Probably around 100.

Written for: Gaius, a friend of the elder, who had been welcoming traveling believers. The elder thanked him, and warned him about Diotrephes, a church leader who refused them.

What it remembers of me: Nothing. It is the only book in the New Testament that never mentions me by name. It speaks only of *the Name* (verse 7).

How close it stays to me: Close on welcoming strangers, and on who is first.

If you only read three chapters: It has one chapter, fourteen or fifteen verses depending on your Bible. By the count of words in Greek, it is the shortest book in the New Testament. Read it.

WORDS TO KNOW

Gaius — a common Roman name. Several men called Gaius appear in the New Testament, and nobody knows which one, if any, this is.

Diotrephes — a church leader who refused to welcome the elder's messengers. His name means *nourished by Zeus*.

The Name — a reverent way of speaking about me without saying my name, the way my people spoke of God as *the Name*.

THE BOOK IN BRIEF

The elder writes to his friend Gaius, whom he loves in truth. He prays that Gaius will prosper and be healthy. Traveling believers have told the elder how faithfully

Gaius has welcomed them, though they were strangers. They set out for the sake of the Name, taking nothing from the Gentiles, so others ought to receive them.

The elder has written to the church, but Diotrephes, who loves to be first, will not accept what he says. Diotrephes speaks against him with wicked words, refuses to receive the traveling brothers, and throws out of the church those who want to. If the elder comes, he will call attention to what Diotrephes does.

He urges Gaius to imitate what is good, and says that Demetrius is well spoken of by everyone. He hopes to see Gaius soon and speak face to face, and he sends greetings from the friends.

This is the shortest book in the New Testament. It is about a church fight over who gets let in the door.

It is a private note from the elder to a friend named **Gaius**. Gaius had been taking in traveling believers. A leader named **Diotrephes** had been turning them away. The elder is grateful to the first and angry at the second.

It does not mention my name once. And yet it may tell you more about what life inside my early churches was really like than many longer books.

A wish for good health

The letter opens with an ordinary greeting: *Beloved, I pray that you may prosper in all things and be healthy, even as your soul prospers* (3 John 2).

That was how letters began in that world. Many ancient letters found in the sands of Egypt open the same way, with a wish that the person reading is well.¹ It was the equivalent of *I hope this finds you well*.

In your time, some preachers have taken that one line and made it a promise that God wants every believer to be rich. They have built churches, private jets and television networks on it. It is a polite greeting at the top of a note to a friend. It promises nothing to anyone.

Gaius, who opened his door

Beloved, you do a faithful work in whatever you accomplish for those who are brothers and strangers (3 John 5).

Gaius had welcomed traveling believers, people he did not know, and sent them on their way with what they needed. *Because for the sake of the Name they went out, taking nothing from the Gentiles. We therefore ought to receive such, that we may be fellow workers for the truth* (3 John 7–8).

That is how my message moved in those years. Not through buildings or budgets, but through people walking from town to town, and through other people who opened their doors and fed them. Every person who gave a stranger a bed was part of the work.

Diotrephes, who loved to be first

Then the trouble.

I wrote to the assembly, but Diotrephes, who loves to be first among them, doesn't accept what we say ... neither does he himself receive the brothers, and those who would, he forbids and throws out of the assembly (3 John 9–10).

Diotrephes would not take in the elder's messengers, and he threw out anyone in his congregation who did.

Notice the irony. In the letter just before this one, the elder told a congregation not to receive certain teachers into their houses. Here a man named Diotrephes is doing the same thing to the elder's own people. We do not know what Diotrephes thought. Perhaps he believed the elder's messengers were the dangerous ones. Every side in a church fight thinks it is protecting the truth.

The phrase the elder uses for him is one word in Greek: he *loves to be first*. I knew that kind of man. Some of them were my own friends. When James and John asked to sit at my right and my left, I told all twelve: *Whoever of you wants to become first among you, shall be bondservant of all* (Mark 10:44).

The first quarrel over power in a congregation was not the last. Read this little letter and you will recognize every church board you have ever heard about.

Do good

In the middle of the quarrel, the elder stops and says the thing that matters most.

Beloved, don't imitate that which is evil, but that which is good. He who does good is of God. He who does evil hasn't seen God (3 John 11).

Not *he who believes correctly. He who does good*. After all the fighting about doctrine in the letters of John, that is where the last one lands.

The friends

The letter closes the same way as 2 John, with the elder saying he would rather talk in person than write with *ink and pen*. Then: *Peace be to you. The friends greet you. Greet the friends by name* (3 John 14).

The friends. Not the members, not the brothers, not the saints. The friends. John's gospel remembers me saying to my disciples on my last night, *No longer do I call you servants ... But I have called you friends* (John 15:15).

My name is not in this letter. But that word is. Greet the friends by name. That is not a bad place for a book about me to end up.

CHECK IT YOURSELF

Look up: 3 John 9–11, then Mark 10:42–44.

You will find: a church leader who *loves to be first*, and what I told my friends about being first.

Then read the whole letter. Notice that my name never appears in it.

Go deeper: the longer history behind this chapter, and every source it rests on, are free at LessonsOfJesus.com/3-john.

THE SHORT VERSION

- **3 John** is the **shortest book** in the New Testament, a note from **the elder** to his friend **Gaius**.
- It is the only New Testament book that **never names me**.
- Its opening wish for **prosperity and health** was an **ordinary letter greeting**, not a promise of wealth.
- It praises **Gaius** for **welcoming strangers** and condemns **Diotrephes**, who **loves to be first** and threw people out.
- Its best line: **He who does good is of God**.

26. Jude: The Letter That Quotes Enoch

AT A GLANCE

Who wrote it: It says *Jude, a servant of Jesus Christ, and brother of James* (verse 1). That would make him my brother Judah, the brother of James. He does not call himself my brother. Many scholars think someone wrote it later in his name. Others think it may be his. If it is, I grew up with the man who wrote it.

When: Uncertain. Estimates run from the 50s to the early 100s. Many scholars place it late in the first century.

Written for: Believers the letter does not name, in a church where false teachers had slipped in. Jude meant to write about their shared salvation, but wrote instead to urge them to contend for the faith.

What it remembers of me: Nothing from my life. It calls me *our only Master, God, and Lord, Jesus Christ* (verse 4), though the oldest copies lack the word *God* there. It remembers the warnings of my apostles (verse 17).

How close it stays to me: Close on greed and on mercy. Far in its fury at opponents.

If you only read three chapters: It has one chapter of twenty-five verses. Read it.

WORDS TO KNOW

Jude — in Greek, *Ioudas*, the same name as Judas. English Bibles spell it *Jude* to keep him apart from Judas Iscariot. In my language it was *Yebudah*, Judah.

Enoch — the man in Genesis who *walked with God* and was taken. A long book written in his name, now called **1 Enoch**, was widely read in my time.

Michael — the archangel, the chief of the angels in Jewish tradition.

Love feasts — the shared meals my early followers ate together when they met.

THE BOOK IN BRIEF

Jude calls himself a servant of Jesus Christ and the brother of James. He had meant to write about their shared salvation, but must urge them to contend for the faith, because certain people have crept in, turning God's grace into an excuse for indecency.

He reminds them of earlier judgments: the people saved from Egypt and later destroyed, angels who left their places, and Sodom and Gomorrah. Jude tells of Michael arguing with the devil over the body of Moses. The intruders have followed Cain, Balaam and Korah. They are reefs at the shared meals, shepherds who feed themselves, clouds without water. Jude also quotes Enoch's prophecy of judgment.

He tells his readers to remember what the apostles foretold, to build themselves up in the faith, and to have compassion on those who doubt. He ends with praise to the God who is able to keep them from stumbling.

This short letter quotes a book that is not in your Bible, and calls it prophecy.

About these also Enoch, the seventh from Adam, prophesied, saying, "Behold, the Lord came with ten thousands of his holy ones, to execute judgment on all" (Jude 14–15).

That is a quotation, almost word for word, from the opening chapter of the book of Enoch.¹ Your Bible does not contain the book of Enoch. Jude's did. Or at least, Jude read it as true prophecy, and so did many of my people.

My brother Judah

When my hometown turned against me, the people listed my family: *brother of James, Joses, Judah, and Simon* (Mark 6:3). This Judah is the man the letter claims as its writer. He calls himself only *a servant of Jesus Christ, and brother of James*. Perhaps he thought calling himself my brother would be presuming too much. Perhaps a later writer chose the name of a man the churches remembered with respect.

There is a story about Judah's family that I want you to know. A Christian writer of the 100s named **Hegesippus** told it, and the historian Eusebius preserved it. The emperor Domitian, afraid of anyone descended from King David, had two of Judah's grandsons brought before him. He asked them how much property they owned. They told him that all they had between them was one small piece of land, worth nine thousand denarii, which they worked with their own hands to pay their taxes and feed themselves. They showed him their hands, hard and callused from work. The emperor decided that such men were no threat, and let them go.²

That was my family. Farmers with callused hands, too poor to frighten an emperor.

Enoch

The book of Enoch was one of the most important books of my people in my lifetime, even though it never became part of the Hebrew scriptures. It tells of angels who came down, took human wives, and taught people forbidden things, and of the judgment that would come for them. Pieces of it, in Aramaic, were found among the Dead Sea Scrolls.¹

Jude draws on it more than once. His *Angels who didn't keep their first domain, but deserted their own dwelling place, whom God has kept in everlasting bonds under darkness for the judgment of the great day* (Jude 6), are Enoch's fallen angels, the ones Genesis mentions in a few strange verses about *God's sons* and the daughters of men (Genesis 6:1–4).

Then he quotes Enoch outright, by name, as a prophet.

That caused trouble. Some early Christians defended the book of Enoch partly because Jude quoted it. The writer Tertullian argued around 200 that it should be accepted as scripture. Others rejected Jude because of it. In 392, Jerome wrote that many people rejected this letter because it quoted the book of Enoch, which was apocryphal.³

Most churches ended up with Jude in their Bibles and Enoch out. One church tradition kept both. The **Ethiopian Orthodox Church** has the book of Enoch

in its Bible to this day, and it is because of the Ethiopians that the whole book survives.

Michael and the devil

Jude also mentions a story you will not find anywhere in your Bible. *But Michael, the archangel, when contending with the devil and arguing about the body of Moses, dared not bring against him an abusive condemnation, but said, "May the Lord rebuke you!"* (Jude 9).

Deuteronomy says only that God buried Moses and that no one knows where his grave is. Early Christian writers said Jude took this story from a Jewish book about the death of Moses, whose ending has been lost.⁴ The words *May the Lord rebuke you* come from the prophet Zechariah, where the LORD says them to the accuser (Zechariah 3:2).

So a book of the New Testament, in twenty-five verses, draws on at least two books that never made it into your Old Testament: one that only Ethiopia's church kept, and one whose ending is lost. The edges of scripture were softer in my world than you may have been told.

Sodom and strange flesh

Jude uses Sodom as one of his warnings. *Even as Sodom and Gomorrah and the cities around them, having in the same way as these given themselves over to sexual immorality and gone after strange flesh, are shown as an example* (Jude 7).

In the same way as these points back to the angels in the verse before, who went after human women. *Strange flesh* means flesh of another kind. In Genesis, the men of Sodom surrounded the house where two angels were staying and demanded that Lot bring them out, *that we may have sex with them* (Genesis 19:5). The angels crossed the line between heaven and earth one way. The men of Sodom tried to cross it the other way.

Some readers take *strange flesh* to mean sex between men. Many scholars read it, because of the parallel with the angels, as the attempt to violate heavenly visitors.⁵ You should know both readings. And you should know that when my

prophet Ezekiel summed up Sodom's sin, he spoke of pride and of ignoring the poor and needy (Ezekiel 16:49).

Shepherds who feed themselves

Most of the letter is a storm of images against false teachers who had slipped into the congregation. They are *hidden rocky reefs in your love feasts when they feast with you, shepherds who without fear feed themselves; clouds without water, carried along by winds; autumn trees without fruit, twice dead, plucked up by the roots; wild waves of the sea* (Jude 12–13).

It is fierce. It is also vivid enough that you can see each one.

Shepherds who feed themselves. That is Ezekiel, who cried out, *Woe to the shepherds of Israel who feed themselves! Shouldn't the shepherds feed the sheep?* (Ezekiel 34:2). And Jude says these men show *respect of persons to gain advantage* (Jude 16). They flattered people with money. At the shared meal of the church, where rich and poor were supposed to eat as one, they were feeding themselves. That was what made Jude so angry, and Ezekiel before him.

Mercy at the end

For all its fury, the letter ends gently.

On some have compassion, making a distinction, and some save, snatching them out of the fire with fear (Jude 22–23).

After the reefs, the clouds and the dead trees, Jude remembers that people can be pulled back out of the fire. And then he closes with words that many churches still use as a blessing:

Now to him who is able to keep them from stumbling, and to present you faultless before the presence of his glory in great joy, to God our Savior, who alone is wise, be glory and majesty, dominion and power, both now and forever. Amen (Jude 24–25).

I told my followers to *love your enemies* (Matthew 5:44). Jude's anger at the intruders is far from that. But his mercy for the doubters (verse 22) is close to my own.

CHECK IT YOURSELF

Look up: Jude 14–15, then Genesis 5:21–24.

You will find: Enoch quoted as a prophet in Jude, and in Genesis only a few lines about a man who *walked with God*. The words Jude quotes come from the book of Enoch, which you can read for free online.

Then read Jude 12 beside Ezekiel 34:2.

Go deeper: the longer history behind this chapter, and every source it rests on, are free at LessonsOfJesus.com/jude.

THE SHORT VERSION

- **Jude** claims to be from **Judah, my brother** and the brother of James.
- His grandsons were **poor farmers** whose **callused hands** convinced an emperor they were harmless.
- The letter **quotes the book of Enoch** as prophecy and tells a story about **Michael and the body of Moses** from a lost book.
- Its **strange flesh** at Sodom points back to **angels and humans** crossing the line between them.
- It attacks **shepherds who feed themselves**, and ends with **compassion** and a **blessing** churches still use.

PART FIVE — THE PROPHECY

Your New Testament ends with a single book of prophecy, the only one of its kind among the twenty-seven. It was written to be read aloud in seven small churches. Many early Christians doubted it, and few books in the Bible have been argued over more.

27. Revelation: My Name on the First Line

AT A GLANCE

Who wrote it: A Christian prophet named John, writing to seven churches in the Roman province of Asia. Later tradition said he was my apostle John. The book never says so, and most scholars think he was someone else.

When: Most likely around AD 95, under the emperor Domitian. Some scholars argue for the late 60s, just after Nero.

Written for: Seven churches in the Roman province of Asia, under social and sometimes official pressure to honor the emperor. It told them that the Lamb, not Rome, rules, and that Rome would not last.

What it remembers of me: Almost nothing of my life on earth. Only that I came from the line of David (5:5), had twelve apostles (21:14), was *pierced* (1:7), was crucified in *the great city* (11:8), and rose from the dead (1:5). It pictures me as *a Lamb standing, as though it had been slain* (5:6).

How close it stays to me: Close on empire and on God's kingdom coming to earth. Far on enemies.

If you only read three chapters: Revelation 5, Revelation 18 and Revelation 21.

WORDS TO KNOW

Apocalypse — from the Greek word for *uncovering*. It is the first word of this book. It is also the name of a whole kind of Jewish writing that talks about empires in code, through beasts, numbers and visions.

Patmos — a small island in the Aegean Sea, off the coast of what is now Turkey, where the writer says he was when he saw his vision.

Babylon — the empire that burned Jerusalem's first temple. By the time of this book, Jewish and Christian writers used the name as a code word for Rome.

Gematria — counting a name as a number. In Hebrew and Greek, letters were also used as numerals, so every name added up to a sum.

Antichrist — a word that does not appear anywhere in Revelation. It turns up only in the short letters of John.¹

THE BOOK IN BRIEF

John, a Christian prophet, writes to seven churches in Asia. On the island of Patmos he hears a loud voice and turns to see me, standing among seven golden lampstands. I say that I am the first and the last, that I was dead, and that I am alive forever. He is to write down what he sees.

Chapters 2 and 3 are seven short letters, to Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea. Each praises, warns or both, and each ends with a promise to the one who overcomes.

In chapter 4 a door opens in heaven, and John sees a throne with twenty-four elders and four living creatures around it, all worshiping. In chapter 5 the one on the throne holds a scroll sealed with seven seals, and no one is worthy to open it. Then I appear as a Lamb that looks as if it has been slain, and I take it.

In chapters 6 to 8 the seals are opened. Four riders go out, bringing conquest, war, famine and death, and the martyrs cry out for justice. Chapter 7 shows 144,000 sealed from the tribes of Israel, and then a crowd no one can count, from every nation. Seven angels blow seven trumpets in chapters 8 to 11, and disaster after disaster strikes the earth.

Chapters 12 to 14 tell of a woman about to give birth, and a dragon waiting to devour her child. The child is taken up to God, and the dragon is thrown down. He gives his power to a beast from the sea, whose number is 666, and a second

beast makes everyone worship the first. I stand on Mount Zion with the 144,000, and an angel announces that Babylon has fallen. In chapters 15 and 16, seven bowls of God's anger are poured out, and the kings of the earth are gathered at the place that is called in Hebrew Megiddo, or Armageddon.

Chapters 17 and 18 show a woman called Babylon the great, seated on the beast and drunk with the blood of the saints. She falls, and the kings, merchants and sailors who grew rich from her mourn. In chapter 19 heaven celebrates, and a rider on a white horse defeats the beast. Chapter 20 brings a thousand years, a last battle and the judgment of the dead.

In chapters 21 and 22 John sees a new heaven and a new earth, and the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven. God lives with people, and there is no more death or crying. A river runs through the city, and the tree beside it heals the nations. The book ends with my promise that I am coming quickly.

Read the mail before you read the map.

The first word of this book is *apokalypsis*. The next two are my name.

This is the Revelation of Jesus Christ (Revelation 1:1).

I did not write it.

A man named **John** wrote it, and he tells you his name four times. He says he was on an island called **Patmos** “because of God's Word and the testimony of Jesus Christ” (Revelation 1:9), which most readers take to mean he had been sent there for preaching. He never says he was one of my twelve. When he mentions the twelve apostles, he mentions them the way you talk about people you are not (Revelation 21:14).²

One small thing before we go on, because it tells you who has actually opened the book. It is called **Revelation**. One revelation. There is no *s* on the end. When someone tells you what “Revelations” says, ask him to open it to the first page.

It was mail.

Before the beasts and the trumpets, before anything you have seen on a church sign, the book tells you what it is.

It is a letter. It is addressed to **seven real congregations** in seven real cities in the Roman province of Asia: **Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea** (Revelation 1:4, 1:11). It was meant to be read out loud in their meetings. It even blesses the one who reads it aloud and the ones who hear it (Revelation 1:3).

Chapters 2 and 3 are seven short letters, one to each church, and they are full of local detail.

Laodicea was a rich city. When an earthquake knocked it down around the year 60, the Roman historian **Tacitus** noted that it rebuilt itself from its own wealth, without help from Rome.³ Now read what the letter says to the church there:

Because you say, “I am rich, and have gotten riches, and have need of nothing;” and don’t know that you are the wretched one, miserable, poor, blind, and naked (Revelation 3:17).

Smyrna got the opposite letter: *I know your works, oppression, and your poverty (but you are rich)* (Revelation 2:9).

Pergamum is the city “where Satan’s throne is” (Revelation 2:13). Pergamum had one of the first temples in the province built for the worship of Rome and the emperor.⁴ A man named Antipas had already been killed there.

Look at what these seven letters are about. They are not about dates or world events. They are about whether a small congregation would bend to keep its place in town, eat at the guild feasts, keep its head down and get along (Revelation 2:14, 2:20). They are about whether it had grown comfortable.

Most people with charts for this book skip these two chapters. They are the chapters that ask the most of the person reading.

When it was written

Irenaeus, a bishop writing around 180, said the vision was seen near the end of the reign of the emperor **Domitian**, which ended in 96. Most scholars accept a date close to that. Some argue for an earlier date, just after Nero, in the late 60s. Either way, it was written somewhere between thirty-five and sixty-five years after I died, by a man living under Rome.⁵

Domitian liked to be addressed as “our Lord and God.”⁶ In the cities of Asia, temples to the emperors stood in the middle of town, and offering incense before the emperor’s image was what a loyal person did. About fifteen years after this book, a Roman governor in the next province over wrote to the emperor Trajan to say he was executing Christians who refused to do it.⁷

Be careful here, because the old story is told bigger than it was. Historians no longer think Domitian ran an empire-wide hunt for Christians. The pressure was local, social and about money. Your trade guild met under a patron god. Your neighbors noticed who stayed home from the festival. Sometimes a governor got involved. That is the world this book is talking to.

I recognize almost every piece of it.

Revelation is built out of the scriptures I grew up on. It borrows from **Daniel, Ezekiel, Zechariah, Isaiah, Exodus and the Psalms** on nearly every page. It has hundreds of echoes and not one formal quotation.⁸ Its writer eats a scroll the way Ezekiel did (Ezekiel 3:1–3; Revelation 10:9–10). Its plagues are the plagues of Egypt.

And its beasts come from Daniel.

In Daniel, four beasts rise out of the sea: a lion, a bear, a leopard and a fourth with ten horns. Daniel is told plainly what they are. They are kings. They are empires (Daniel 7:3–8, 7:17).

In Revelation, a beast rises out of the sea with ten horns. It is like a leopard, with feet like a bear’s and a mouth like a lion’s (Revelation 13:1–2). The writer took Daniel’s four empires and rolled them into one.

That is the kind of book this is. It is called apocalyptic, and in my time my people had a whole shelf of it. You write about the empire as a monster because you cannot safely write about the empire by name. Every listener in those seven churches knew that a beast meant a kingdom, because Daniel had told them so.

The code was not hard for them.

The book all but tells you who the beast is.

The woman who rides the beast is seated on **seven mountains** (Revelation 17:9). Rome was the city on seven hills, and everybody in the empire knew it.

She is “the great city, which reigns over the kings of the earth” (Revelation 17:18). In that century there was exactly one.

Her name is **Babylon**. Babylon was the empire that burned the first temple in Jerusalem. Rome burned the second one in the year 70. After that, Jewish and Christian writers called Rome “Babylon” in other books too, including the first letter of Peter, which most scholars date after 70 (1 Peter 5:13).⁹

Then the number.

He who has understanding, let him calculate the number of the beast, for it is the number of a man. His number is six hundred sixty-six (Revelation 13:18).

“Calculate” means exactly that. Hebrew letters were also numbers. Write “**Nero Caesar**” in Hebrew letters, spelled the way it was spelled in that period, and the letters add up to **666**. Spell Nero the Latin way, without the final *n*, and they add up to **616**.

Some of the oldest copies of Revelation say **616**. A papyrus fragment from Egypt, copied in the late 200s, reads 616. Irenaeus, around 180, knew of copies that read 616 and thought they were mistakes.¹⁰ The likeliest explanation is that a copyist who knew the riddle changed the number to match the spelling he used.

That does not prove the beast is Nero. It is the answer most scholars find strongest, and nothing else fits as well.

Here is what else fits. Nero had killed Christians in Rome after the great fire of 64. He died in 68, by a blade to his own throat. Afterwards a rumor spread that he was not really dead, or that he would come back, and more than one impostor turned up claiming to be him.¹¹ Now read the beast. One of its heads had a mortal wound that was healed (Revelation 13:3). It “had the sword wound and lived” (Revelation 13:14). It “was, and is not; and is about to come up out of the abyss” (Revelation 17:8).

The first readers did not need a decoder ring. They were living inside the code.

What it actually says

Here is the turn the whole book hangs on.

In chapter 5, a sealed scroll is held out and nobody is worthy to open it, and John weeps. An elder tells him to stop crying, because **the Lion who is of the tribe of Judah** has overcome.

So John turns to look at the lion.

And he sees **a lamb**, standing, as though it had been slain (Revelation 5:5–6).

He hears lion. He sees lamb. That is the book. The one who wins is the one who was killed and did not kill back. His followers win the same way. They overcame “because of the Lamb’s blood, and because of the word of their testimony. They didn’t love their life, even to death” (Revelation 12:11).

The same thing happens in chapter 7. John hears a number: **144,000**, twelve thousand from each tribe of Israel. Then he looks, and he sees a crowd that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language (Revelation 7:4, 7:9). Many readers have noticed the pattern. What he hears is the old expectation. What he sees is what it turned into.

Even in the battle near the end, the rider on the white horse carries a sword, and it comes out of his mouth (Revelation 19:15, 19:21). His weapon is his word. I once told Peter to put his sword away. The man on Patmos understood that much.

Then read **chapter 18**, which is almost never preached. Babylon falls, and the people who weep for her are the kings, the merchants and the ship owners, because nobody buys their cargo anymore. Then the writer lists the cargo: gold, silver, jewels, pearls, fine linen, purple, silk, ivory, cinnamon, incense, wine, oil, wheat, sheep, horses, chariots, and, at the very end, *people’s bodies and souls* (Revelation 18:11–13).

The last item on the list is people.

And here is the instruction the book gives its readers about living in Babylon: *Come out of her, my people, that you have no participation in her sins* (Revelation

18:4). It does not ask you to read the news for signs. It asks you to stop living off an empire that trades in human beings.

Then look where the book ends. **Nobody is carried up and away.** The new city comes *down*, out of heaven, to the earth (Revelation 21:2). “God’s dwelling is with people” (Revelation 21:3). There is no temple in it (Revelation 21:22). Its gates are never shut (Revelation 21:25). The kings of the earth, the same kings who stood with the beast a few chapters earlier, walk in (Revelation 21:24). And the leaves of the tree beside the river are “for the healing of the nations” (Revelation 22:2).

The problem with “soon”

I will be honest about something that cuts against the writer.

He said it was soon. The book opens with “the things which must happen soon” and “the time is at hand” (Revelation 1:1, 1:3). It closes with “Yes, I come quickly” (Revelation 22:20). He meant his own listeners. He was writing to people squeezed by Rome and telling them it would not last.

He was right that Rome would not last. He was not right that the end of everything was near. He wrote that more than nineteen hundred years ago.

When my own friends asked me for the date, I told them that nobody knows the day or the hour, not the angels in heaven, not even me (Mark 13:32). Every person who has pulled a calendar out of this book has had to forget I said that.

There is a second thing I must say plainly. The martyrs under the altar cry out, *How long, Master, the holy and true, until you judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?* (Revelation 6:10). When Babylon falls, heaven is told, *Rejoice over her* (Revelation 18:20). I told my followers to love their enemies and to pray for those who persecute them (Matthew 5:44). The Lamb who wins by dying is close to that. A book that longs to see its enemies fall is far from it.

The church never fully trusted it.

You may assume this book was always at the heart of the Bible. It was not.

Around 250, **Dionysius**, the bishop of Alexandria, studied its Greek and concluded that the man who wrote it could not be the man who wrote the Gospel of John. The style was too different and the Greek too rough. He did not throw it out. He said honestly that its meaning was beyond him.¹²

For centuries, many churches in the eastern half of the empire left it off their lists. The old Syriac Bible did not include it. To this day, the Orthodox churches do not read from it in their Sunday liturgy. It is the only book of the New Testament left out of that cycle.¹³

Martin Luther wrote in 1522 that his spirit could not fit itself into this book, and that Christ was neither taught nor known in it. He softened that later.¹⁴

John Calvin wrote commentaries on nearly every book of the New Testament. He never wrote one on Revelation.¹⁵

It is in your Bible. It nearly was not. Some of the most serious readers the church ever had came to it with their guard up.

What people have done with it

The record is long, and every entry ends the same way.

In the 170s a prophet named **Montanus** renamed a village in Phrygia called Pepuza “Jerusalem,” and his movement came to expect the new Jerusalem to come down there.¹⁶ It did not.

In 1534 radical reformers took over the German city of **Münster**, declared it the New Jerusalem and waited for the end. Their prophet predicted it for Easter. When Easter came and nothing happened, he rode out against the army besieging the city with a handful of men and was killed. Another leader then crowned himself king. The city fell in 1535, and the leaders’ bodies were hung in iron cages from a church tower. The cages are still there.¹⁷

In the 1840s thousands of Americans followed **William Miller**, who worked mainly from the book of Daniel, the book Revelation borrows from. One of his followers fixed the date at **October 22, 1844**. Some believers left their crops in the field. What followed is still called the **Great Disappointment**.¹⁸

In 1993, in **Waco, Texas**, David Koresh taught that he was the Lamb who could open the seven seals. When his compound burned at the end of a siege, seventy-six people died, about two dozen of them children.¹⁹

In 2011 a radio preacher named **Harold Camping** paid for billboards announcing that the end would come on May 21. When it did not, he moved the date to October 21.²⁰

And every generation has been handed its beast. First it was Nero. Then the Reformers named the popes. After that came Napoleon, Hitler, Stalin, and a long parade of presidents, prime ministers, bar codes and microchips. The name most of them reached for was Antichrist, a word that is not in this book. And the beast has never once turned out to live in the reader's own house.

Why sensible people lose their heads over it

It is fair to ask why. The people who do this are not foolish in the rest of their lives. They run businesses and raise children and pay their bills on time. So what is it about this book?

It is hard to read, and hard books get handed to experts. The moment you need a man with a chart to explain a letter, the man with the chart matters more than the letter.

It turns bad news into good news. Wars, earthquakes and plagues stop being frightening and start being proof that the plan is on schedule. That is a very comfortable feeling, and it is easy to sell.

It puts you at the end of the story. Nobody wants to live somewhere in the middle. Every generation has believed it was the last chapter, and every generation has been wrong.

It hands you an enemy with a number on him, and he never looks like you. He is always across the border, or in the other party, or in the other church.

It feels like secret knowledge. Working out who the beast is feels like being let in on something. A puzzle is more fun than a letter, especially a letter that calls you lukewarm.

Fear sells. Books, films, radio programs, gold coins and buckets of canned food have all been sold on the back of this book, and the people selling them are rarely the ones waiting on the mountain.

And the last reason is the real one. If the world is about to end, you are excused. You do not have to come out of Babylon, because Babylon is about to fall on its own. You do not have to free anyone, feed anyone or fix anything. You only have to be on the right list.

The man on Patmos would be appalled. He wrote to seven small churches to tell them that the emperor was not God. He told them that the lamb wins and not the lion, that comfort is a danger and poverty is no shame, and that the city of God comes down to earth with its gates open.

He did not write it so you could watch the news with a chart in your lap.

He wrote it so you would stop bowing.

CHECK IT YOURSELF

Look up: Revelation 1:1–3, then Revelation 22:20.

You will find: “soon” at the beginning and “quickly” at the end, written to people who died more than nineteen hundred years ago.

Then read chapters 2 and 3 straight through. Which of the seven churches sounds most like yours?

Go deeper: the longer history behind this chapter, and every source it rests on, are free at LessonsOfJesus.com/revelation.

THE SHORT VERSION

- **Revelation**, one revelation with no *s*, is a letter to **seven real churches** in the Roman province of Asia. A man named **John**, who saw his vision on **Patmos**, wrote it most likely around **95**.
- It belongs to a known kind of Jewish writing that talks about empires in code, and it borrows its beasts from **Daniel**.
- **Babylon** is Rome, the **seven hills** are Rome, and **666** most likely spells **Nero**, which is why some old copies read **616**.
- Its central picture is a **slain lamb**, not a lion, and its ending brings God's city **down to earth**.
- Many early churches doubted it, and **everyone who has used it to set a date has been wrong**.

AFTER THE LAST PAGE

You have read through every book that was written about me and kept.

You may have noticed how often they disagree. Matthew has me say that not one stroke of a letter will pass from the Law (Matthew 5:18), and Paul writes that I am *the fulfillment of the law* (Romans 10:4) and tells Gentiles they do not need to keep it. Paul says a person is justified by faith, and James says by works. John's gospel has me talk about myself from the first chapter, and the other three remember a man who talked about God's kingdom and kept quiet about who he was. Acts tells Paul's early years one way, and Paul tells them another. Romans says that the authorities *are ordained by God* (Romans 13:1), and Revelation says that the beast was given *authority over every tribe, people, language, and nation* (Revelation 13:7). Some letters say women led and prophesied, and others say women must be silent. Some say *neither slave nor free man*, and others tell slaves to obey.

The churches kept all of it. They argued about some of these books for three hundred years, and in the end they put them all on the same shelf, between the same covers, the way my people had kept the Law and the Prophets and the Writings side by side. That was not carelessness. It was honesty. The people who knew these books best did not pretend that they all said the same thing.

So when someone holds up one verse and says, *The Bible says*, you now know to ask which book, written by whom, when, to whom, and why. And what the

book beside it says.

You may also have noticed the things that never change, from the first gospel to the last letter. Feed the hungry. Welcome the stranger. Pay the worker. Do not show favor to the rich man in the fine clothes. Love one another, in deed and not only in words. When Paul went up to Jerusalem to settle the great argument over the Gentiles with my brother and my friends, there was one thing they asked of him, and he did not need to be asked: *They only asked us to remember the poor—which very thing I was also zealous to do* (Galatians 2:10). In the first days in Jerusalem, Acts says, *they had all things in common, and neither was there among them any who lacked* (Acts 4:32, 34).

That is what lasted, through all the arguing. It was what I had been saying all along.

None of these books was written by me. All of them were written by people trying to remember me, or trying to work out what I meant for a world I never saw. Some of them remembered well. Some of them went places I would not have gone. You are allowed to notice the difference. That is what this book has been for.

Near its end, the last book of your Bible holds out an invitation, not a threat. *He who is thirsty, let him come. He who desires, let him take the water of life freely* (Revelation 22:17). And then the last prayer, the one my first followers prayed in Aramaic before any of these books were written: *Yes, come, Lord Jesus* (Revelation 22:20).

They were waiting for me to come back. I would say I never left the places I told you to look for me. The hungry. The stranger. The sick. The prisoner. The least of these.

Freely. That is how the water is given, and that is how it is meant to be passed on.

IF THIS BOOK MEANT SOMETHING TO YOU

You have read all twenty-seven chapters. Thank you for staying.

Pass it on. This book is free to copy and share, whole or in part. The simplest way is the address: **LessonsOfJesus.com**.

Leave a tip, if you want to. Nothing is owed. The book was given freely, and it stays free whether or not anyone pays for it. If you would like to thank the person who made it, you can leave a tip at **LessonsOfJesus.com/give**.

A tip buys nothing that everyone else does not already have. That is the point.

BACK OF THE BOOK

A Simple Timeline

Read down the left column only, if that is easier. The dates are there so you can check them.

Rome comes to the Holy Land

- **63 BC** — The Roman general Pompey takes Jerusalem, and Rome begins to rule the Jewish homeland.
- **40–4 BC** — Rome names Herod king of Judea, and he rules until his death. (Luke 1)
- **about 4 BC** — Jesus is born in Bethlehem near the end of Herod’s reign. (Matthew 2; Luke 2)
- **4 BC** — Herod dies, and his son Herod Antipas takes Galilee, which he rules until AD 39. (Matthew 2; Luke 3)
- **AD 6** — Rome removes Herod’s son Archelaus and takes over Judea, and a census provokes a revolt. (Acts 5:37; compare Luke 2:1–2)

Jesus

- **AD 26–36** — Pontius Pilate governs Judea. (Luke 3)
- **about AD 28–29** — John the Baptist begins to preach by the Jordan, in the fifteenth year of Emperor Tiberius. (Luke 3)
- **about AD 28–30** — Jesus teaches and heals in Galilee, and then goes up to Jerusalem. (Mark 1–11)
- **about AD 30** — Pilate has Jesus crucified in Jerusalem, and his followers say he is alive again. (Luke 23–24)

The first followers

- **about AD 30** — Fifty days after Passover, at the feast of Pentecost, Jesus’s followers begin to preach in Jerusalem. (Acts 2)

- **about AD 33–36** — Saul, who has been hunting Jesus’s followers, becomes one of them and is known as Paul. (Acts 9)

Paul’s journeys and letters

- **about AD 46–48** — Paul and Barnabas carry the message to Cyprus and Galatia. (Acts 13–14)
- **about AD 48–49** — The leaders of the church meet in Jerusalem and decide that non-Jewish believers do not have to be circumcised. (Acts 15; Galatians 2)
- **about AD 48–55** — Paul writes an angry letter to the churches of Galatia about circumcision. (Galatians 1)
- **about AD 49** — Emperor Claudius expels the Jews from Rome. (Acts 18)
- **about AD 49–52** — On his second journey, Paul takes the message to Philippi, Thessalonica, Athens and Corinth. (Acts 16–18)
- **about AD 50** — From Corinth, Paul writes 1 Thessalonians to the young church in Thessalonica, probably the oldest writing in the New Testament. (1 Thessalonians 1)
- **about AD 50–51, or AD 80–100** — Paul, or someone writing in his name, sends a second letter to Thessalonica. (2 Thessalonians 1)
- **about AD 51–52** — The Roman governor Gallio throws out the case against Paul in Corinth, and a stone at Delphi fixes the date. (Acts 18)
- **about AD 53–57** — On his third journey, Paul spends years in Ephesus and then travels on through Macedonia and Greece. (Acts 19–20)
- **about AD 53–55** — From Ephesus, Paul writes to the quarreling church in Corinth. (1 Corinthians 1)
- **about AD 54–62** — Paul writes to his friends in Philippi from prison. (Philippians 1)
- **about AD 54–62** — Paul writes from prison and asks Philemon to welcome Onesimus as a brother. (Philemon 1)
- **about AD 55–56** — From Macedonia, Paul writes again to Corinth. (2 Corinthians 1)

- **about AD 55–62, or the AD 70s or 80s** — Paul, or a follower writing in his name, sends a letter to the church in Colossae. (Colossians 1)
- **about AD 57** — From Corinth, Paul writes to the house churches in Rome, a city he has never visited. (Romans 1)
- **about AD 60–62** — Paul waits in Rome under guard for two years, preaching “without hindrance.” (Acts 28)

Nero, the fire, and the war with Rome

- **about AD 60–62, or AD 80–100** — Paul, or a follower writing in his name, writes a letter about Jews and Gentiles becoming one people. (Ephesians 2)
- **about AD 60–95** — An unknown writer sends a letter to believers who are under pressure. (Hebrews 1)
- **the early AD 60s, or about AD 100** — Paul, or a later follower, writes to Timothy about running a church. (1 Timothy 1)
- **the early AD 60s, or about AD 100** — Paul, or a later follower, writes to Titus about the churches on Crete. (Titus 1)
- **before AD 62, or about AD 70–100** — A letter is written in the name of James, whom tradition says is the brother of Jesus. (James 1)
- **about AD 62** — James, the brother of Jesus, is stoned in Jerusalem.
- **AD 64** — A great fire burns much of Rome, and Emperor Nero blames the Christians.
- **traditionally the mid-AD 60s** — Early tradition says Paul is beheaded and Peter is crucified in Rome under Nero.
- **the mid-AD 60s, or about AD 100** — Paul, or a later follower, writes a last letter to Timothy from a Roman prison. (2 Timothy 4)
- **the AD 60s, or about AD 70–95** — Peter, or his followers, writes to believers who are suffering, and calls Rome “Babylon.” (1 Peter 5)
- **AD 66** — The Jews of Judea rise in revolt against Rome.
- **about AD 70** — Mark writes the first gospel as Rome destroys Jerusalem. (Mark 13)

- **AD 70** — Rome takes Jerusalem and burns the Temple. (Luke 21)
- **AD 73 or 74** — Masada, the last fortress of the Jewish rebels, falls to Rome.

The last books are written

- **about AD 80–90** — Matthew’s gospel is written, with Mark’s gospel in front of its writer. (Matthew 1)
- **about AD 80–90** — Luke’s gospel is written by a man who says he collected what the eyewitnesses passed down. (Luke 1)
- **the AD 80s or 90s** — Acts, the second volume of Luke, is written, telling the story from Jerusalem to Rome. (Acts 1)
- **about AD 80–150** — A letter in Peter’s name, 2 Peter, is written, and many think it is the last book of the New Testament to be written. (2 Peter 1)
- **the AD 90s** — John’s gospel, the last of the four gospels, is written. (John 1)
- **uncertain, the AD 50s to the early AD 100s** — A short letter in the name of Jude, “brother of James,” warns believers about people who have slipped in among them. (Jude 1)
- **about AD 95** — A prophet named John writes Revelation to seven churches in Asia, most likely under Emperor Domitian. (Revelation 1)
- **about AD 100** — The three letters of John, 1 John, 2 John and 3 John, are written some years after John’s gospel. (1 John 1; 2 John 1; 3 John 1)

How the New Testament was gathered

- **the AD 100s** — A scrap of John’s gospel, about the size of a credit card, is copied, and it is the oldest piece of the New Testament that survives. (John 18)
- **the early AD 100s** — Papias, a bishop in Asia Minor, writes that Mark wrote down what Peter remembered and that Matthew collected the sayings of Jesus.
- **about AD 140** — Marcion, a shipowner, makes the first known list of New Testament books, with one gospel and ten letters of Paul.
- **about AD 180** — The bishop Irenaeus is the first writer known to name all four gospel writers: Matthew, Mark, Luke and John.

- **about AD 200** — A papyrus book of Paul’s letters, Papyrus 46, is copied, and copies of Luke and John carry the titles “according to Luke” and “according to John.”
- **about AD 325** — The church historian Eusebius sorts the books into the accepted, the disputed and the rejected.
- **the AD 300s** — Codex Sinaiticus and Codex Vaticanus, the two oldest nearly complete Bibles, are copied.
- **AD 367** — Athanasius, the bishop of Alexandria, lists exactly the twenty-seven books of the New Testament in his Easter letter.
- **about AD 382–405** — Jerome makes the Latin Bible called the Vulgate.
- **1516** — The scholar Erasmus prints his Greek New Testament.
- **1522** — Erasmus adds a sentence about the Trinity to 1 John in his third edition, though no early Greek copy has it. (1 John 5)
- **1522** — Martin Luther publishes his German New Testament.
- **1526** — William Tyndale’s English New Testament is printed.
- **1611** — The King James Version of the Bible is published.
- **1844** — The German scholar Tischendorf finds the first pages of Codex Sinaiticus at a monastery on Mount Sinai.
- **1859** — Tischendorf returns to the monastery and is shown most of the rest of the codex, including the whole New Testament.

Who's Who

The people this book names, in one place. If you have forgotten anyone, look here.

Jesus's family and first followers

James — the brother of Jesus, who led the movement in Jerusalem after Jesus's death and was killed about AD 62. Scholars debate whether he wrote the letter of James.

James, son of Zebedee — an apostle and the brother of John. In Acts, King Herod has him killed.

John — an apostle, the son of Zebedee, whom Jesus nicknamed one of the Sons of Thunder. Tradition credits him with the fourth gospel, the letters of John and Revelation, but most scholars think others wrote them.

John the Baptist — the preacher who baptized Jesus. Luke dates the start of his preaching to about AD 28–29, and Matthew and Mark say a Herod had him beheaded.

Joseph — the husband of Mary. In Matthew an angel tells him in a dream that her child is from the Holy Spirit, and in Luke he takes her to Bethlehem for the census.

Joseph of Arimathea — the man who buried Jesus in his own tomb after the crucifixion.

Judas Iscariot — the disciple who agreed to hand Jesus over for thirty pieces of silver. In Matthew he throws the silver back and hangs himself.

Jude — called Judah in the chapter on his letter, and one of Jesus's brothers. The letter claims him as its writer, but many scholars think a later writer used his name.

Lazarus — a name for two people. In John he is the brother of Mary and Martha of Bethany, whom Jesus calls out of his tomb, and in Luke's parable he is the poor beggar at the rich man's gate.

Mary — the mother of Jesus. Luke gives her a song of praise, called the Magnificat.

Mary Magdalene — a woman Jesus healed, who followed him. In John she is the first person to see him after his death, and no gospel says she was a prostitute.

Mary of Bethany — the sister of Martha and Lazarus. In John she anoints Jesus's feet.

Matthew — the tax collector Jesus called to follow him, whom Mark and Luke call Levi. From the 100s on, tradition credited him with the first gospel, but most scholars doubt it because the writer copied most of Mark.

Nicodemus — a Pharisee who came to Jesus by night, according to John. John also says he helped bury Jesus.

Peter — Simon, a Galilean fisherman and the leader of the twelve, whom Jesus called the rock. Early tradition says he was crucified in Rome under Nero, and many scholars doubt he wrote the letters that carry his name.

Philip — an evangelist in Acts who baptized an Ethiopian official. Acts says his four daughters prophesied.

Simon of Cyrene — a man forced to carry Jesus's cross. Mark calls him the father of Alexander and Rufus, probably because Mark's readers knew them.

Stephen — one of seven men appointed to run the daily food for widows. He was the first of Jesus's followers to be killed, stoned after a speech against the Temple while Saul looked on.

Thomas — the disciple who doubted until he saw Jesus's wounds, according to John. In John, Jesus calls blessed those who believe without seeing.

Zacchaeus — a chief tax collector in Luke who climbed a tree to see Jesus and promised half his goods to the poor.

Paul and the people around him

Apollos — a preacher from Alexandria whom Priscilla and Aquila taught further in Ephesus. Martin Luther guessed he wrote Hebrews.

Aquila — a tentmaker who worked with Paul and the husband of Priscilla. Acts says the two had left Rome when Claudius expelled the Jews.

Barnabas — Paul's partner on his first journey. In Acts he introduces Paul to the apostles in Jerusalem, and the two later split in a quarrel over his cousin Mark.

Epaphras — a local man who started the church in Colossae, a town Paul had never visited.

Epaphroditus — the man the church in Philippi sent to Paul with a gift. He nearly died, and Paul sent him home.

Erastus — a man Paul greets from Corinth as the city's treasurer in Romans. A paving stone in Corinth names an Erastus who paid for the pavement, but scholars cannot say whether he is the same man.

Euodia and Syntyche — two women in Philippi whom Paul urges to agree with each other.

Junia — a woman Paul greets in Romans 16 as notable among the apostles, though some scholars read the phrase as known to the apostles. Later readers and printers turned her name into a man's, Junias.

Luke — the doctor who traveled with Paul, according to Irenaeus, who around AD 180 named him as the writer of the third gospel and Acts. Some scholars accept that, but many think a later admirer of Paul wrote them.

Lydia — a seller of purple cloth from Thyatira and the first convert Luke names in Europe. The church in Philippi met in her house.

Mark — called John Mark in Acts, who set out with Paul and Barnabas on their first journey and then went home. Papias reported that a Mark, Peter's interpreter, wrote the second gospel, which names no author, and many scholars doubt it.

Onesimus — the slave Paul sent back to his owner Philemon, asking Philemon to take him back as a brother. About fifty years later Ignatius praised a bishop of Ephesus with the same name, and some scholars wonder whether he was the same man.

Paul — a Jewish Pharisee, called Saul in Acts, who persecuted Jesus's followers and then became their great missionary to non-Jews. Seven of the thirteen letters in his name are generally accepted as his, and early tradition says he was beheaded in Rome under Nero.

Philemon — a believer in Colossae who owned Onesimus. A church met in his house, and Paul's short letter was written to him and that church.

Phoebe — a deacon of the church at Cenchreae and a helper of many, whom Paul commends in Romans 16. She probably carried the letter to Rome.

Priscilla — also called Prisca, the wife of Aquila, who worked beside Paul and helped teach Apollos. In 1900 Adolf von Harnack proposed that she wrote Hebrews, a letter whose writer nobody knows.

Silas — Paul's companion who crossed into Macedonia with him in Acts. The book takes him to be the Silvanus named beside Paul and Timothy in 1 Thessalonians and in 1 Peter, which says it was written through him.

Sosthenes — a co-worker whom Paul lists beside himself at the start of 1 Corinthians.

Tertius — Paul's secretary for Romans, who adds his own greeting near the end of the letter.

Timothy — Paul's young helper, named beside him at the start of several letters. 1 and 2 Timothy are addressed to him, though most critical scholars think a later follower of Paul wrote them.

Titus — a Greek co-worker whom Paul took to Jerusalem as a living example that non-Jewish believers need not be circumcised. Acts never names him, and most critical scholars think a later follower of Paul wrote the letter to Titus.

Tychicus — the messenger Paul names at the end of both Colossians and Ephesians. The note about him is almost word for word the same in both letters.

Rulers and officials

Agrippa — the king who, with the governor Festus, heard Paul in Acts and agreed that he had done nothing worthy of death. He added that Paul might have been set free if he had not appealed to Caesar.

Ananus — the high priest who, according to Josephus, had James stoned in AD 62, after the governor died and before the next one arrived. He was removed from office after only three months.

Antiochus IV — the Greek king who in 167 BC put a pagan altar in the Temple in Jerusalem and dedicated it to Zeus. Jews read the book of Daniel as describing this deed.

Augustus — the Roman emperor whose decree sends Joseph to Bethlehem in Luke's story. Earlier, as Octavian, he and Mark Antony defeated Brutus and Cassius at Philippi in 42 BC.

Caiaphas — the high priest who tells the council in John that it is to their advantage for one man to die for the people.

Caligula — also called Gaius, the Roman emperor who in AD 40 ordered a statue of himself set up in the Temple. He was murdered before it could be done.

Claudius — the Roman emperor who expelled Jews from Rome about AD 49 and died in AD 54. A letter of his found at Delphi helps date Paul's time in Corinth.

Domitian — the Roman emperor who reigned AD 81–96, under whom Revelation was most likely written. He liked to be addressed as lord and god, but historians no longer think he ran an empire-wide hunt for Christians.

Felix — a Roman governor before whom Paul defended himself in Acts. Paul told him he had come to Jerusalem to bring gifts for the needy of his nation.

Festus — a Roman governor who, with King Agrippa, found that Paul had done nothing worthy of death. Josephus says he died in office about AD 62.

Gallio — the Roman governor of Achaia who threw out the case against Paul in Corinth. An inscription at Delphi dates his time there to about AD 51–52, one of the few fixed dates in Paul's life.

Gamaliel — a respected teacher who told the council in Acts to leave Jesus's followers alone. His speech places Theudas too early, since Theudas led his crowd about ten years after that scene.

Herod Antipas — a son of Herod the Great who ruled Galilee from 4 BC until AD 39. In the gospels a Herod has John the Baptist beheaded, and in Luke Pilate sends Jesus to Herod.

Herod the Great — the king Rome named over Judea in 40 BC, who ruled until his death in 4 BC and rebuilt the Temple. Matthew says he had the children of Bethlehem killed, which no historian of the time mentions.

Josephus — a Jewish historian who wrote around AD 93. He describes Herod, the census of AD 6, the death of James and the siege of Jerusalem.

Nero — the Roman emperor who blamed the Christians for the great fire of Rome in AD 64. Early tradition says Paul was beheaded and Peter crucified under him, and many scholars think the number 666 in Revelation spells his name.

Pharisees — a Jewish group known for careful keeping of the Law of Moses. They argue with Jesus in the gospels, and Paul says he was one.

Pilate — the Roman governor of Judea from AD 26 to 36, who had Jesus crucified about AD 30.

Pliny the Younger — the Roman governor of Bithynia whose letter to Trajan, about AD 112, says he ordered executed those who still said they were Christians after three questions. He also reported that they met before dawn and sang a hymn to Christ as to a god.

Pompey — the Roman general who took Jerusalem in 63 BC and walked into the Holy of Holies. From then on Rome ruled the Jewish homeland.

Quirinius — the governor of Syria named in Luke's story of the census. Josephus dates his census of Judea to AD 6, about ten years after Herod died, which is a problem for Luke.

Seneca — a Roman philosopher, the brother of Gallio and tutor to the young Nero. Nero forced him to take his own life in AD 65.

Tacitus — a Roman historian who says Laodicea rebuilt itself without help from Rome after its earthquake in AD 60. He also describes Nero's punishment of Christians after the fire of AD 64.

Tiberius — the Roman emperor during Jesus's adult life. Luke dates John the Baptist's preaching to the fifteenth year of his reign, about AD 28–29.

Titus (the Roman general) — the general whose army took Jerusalem in AD 70, and later one of the Flavian emperors. Josephus has him remind the defenders of the warning on the Temple barrier.

Trajan — the Roman emperor who answered Pliny about AD 112. He said Christians must not be hunted out, but that anyone openly accused and proved guilty must be punished.

The early church

Arius — a priest in Alexandria who used a line in Colossians to argue that Jesus was the first thing God made. The dispute split the church and led to the Council of Nicaea in AD 325.

Athanasius — the bishop of Alexandria whose Easter letter of AD 367 gives the first list that matches exactly the twenty-seven books of the New Testament.

Augustine — of Hippo, the most influential teacher of the Western church, whose life changed in Milan in AD 386 when he opened Paul's letters and read a verse of Romans. Around AD 420 he said he did not know what the restrainer in 2 Thessalonians meant.

Cerinthus — a teacher in Asia about the time of 1 John. Irenaeus says he taught that the Christ came down on the man Jesus at his baptism and left before he died, and nobody can prove he was the man 1 John fights.

Clement of Alexandria — a teacher who said around AD 200 that the other gospels set down the outward facts and John wrote a spiritual gospel.

Cornelius — a Roman centurion who worshiped the God of Israel, whose house Peter visited in Acts, where the Spirit came on Gentiles. A bishop of Rome with the same name, about AD 251, counted more than fifteen hundred widows and people in distress whom his church supported.

Dionysius of Alexandria — the bishop who around AD 250 studied the Greek of Revelation and concluded that its writer was not the writer of John's gospel.

Diotrephes — a church leader whom 3 John says loves to be first and refuses to receive the traveling believers the elder sends. The letter gives only the elder's side of the quarrel.

Eusebius — the church historian who around AD 325 sorted the books into the accepted, the disputed and the rejected. He also preserved the words of Papias and Hegesippus.

Gaius — the friend to whom 3 John is written, praised for welcoming traveling believers. Several men named Gaius appear in the New Testament, and nobody knows which one, if any, this is.

Hegesippus — a Christian writer of the late 100s whose accounts of the death of James and of Jude's grandsons survive because Eusebius copied them out.

Ignatius of Antioch — a bishop who wrote letters on his way to Rome to be executed, about AD 110. He argued that each church should have a single bishop.

Irenaeus — a bishop in Gaul around AD 180, the earliest writer to name all four gospel writers. He dated Revelation to the end of Domitian's reign.

Jerome — the scholar who made the Latin Bible called the Vulgate, about AD 382–405. He knew that many manuscripts of Mark ended at verse 8.

John Chrysostom — a great preacher of Antioch and Constantinople around AD 400 who left sermons on Matthew and John but none on Mark. He praised Junia as worthy of the name of apostle.

John the Elder — a teacher whom Papias names separately from the apostle John. Eusebius took them for two different men, and many scholars think this John wrote 2 and 3 John.

John the prophet — the Christian prophet who wrote Revelation to seven churches in Asia. Later tradition said he was the apostle John, but the book never says so, and most scholars think he was someone else.

Justin Martyr — a Christian teacher who around AD 150–155 described a Sunday gathering in Rome. Around AD 160 he wrote that Jewish teachers said the disciples had stolen Jesus’s body.

Marcion — a wealthy shipowner who around AD 140 made the first known list of New Testament books: one gospel, a shortened Luke, and ten letters of Paul. The churches rejected him, but he forced them to start deciding what they accepted.

Montanus — a prophet of the AD 170s who renamed the Phrygian village of Pepuza “Jerusalem,” expecting the new Jerusalem to come down there. It did not.

Origen — a theologian of the 200s who said that only God knows who wrote Hebrews. He also wrote that Marcion cut Romans off after chapter 14.

Papias — a bishop in Asia Minor in the early 100s who reported that Mark was Peter’s interpreter and wrote down what Peter remembered. He also said that Matthew arranged the sayings in Hebrew.

Polycarp — the bishop of Smyrna who wrote to the church at Philippi in the first half of the 100s. He repeated 1 John’s test that anyone who denies that Jesus came in the flesh is an antichrist.

Tertullian — a North African Christian writer around AD 200. He told of a church elder in Asia who was removed from his post for writing the Acts of Paul, and he named Barnabas as the writer of Hebrews.

Theophilus — the man to whom Luke and Acts are addressed. His name means friend of God, and he may have been a patron who paid for the copying, or the name may stand for any reader.

Later readers, translators and scholars

Adolf von Harnack — a leading German church historian. In 1900 he proposed that Priscilla wrote Hebrews, and in 1906 he took up the case that Luke's language showed its writer was a doctor.

Christian Hermann Weisse — a German philosopher who proposed in 1838 that Matthew and Luke used two sources, Mark and a lost book of Jesus's sayings. Scholars later called that book Q.

Erasmus — the scholar who printed his Greek New Testament in 1516. He left the Trinity sentence out of 1 John at first, then added it in 1522, and from there it passed into the King James Version.

Gregory the Great — the pope whose sermon in 591 merged Mary Magdalene with an unnamed sinful woman in Luke and with Mary of Bethany. That merged figure became the penitent prostitute of Western art.

Heinrich Julius Holtzmann — a German scholar who in 1863 made the view that Matthew and Luke used Mark and a lost sayings source the leading one.

John Calvin — a Reformation leader who wrote commentaries on nearly every book of the New Testament. He never wrote one on Revelation.

John Nelson Darby — an Anglo-Irish preacher of the Plymouth Brethren who taught in the 1830s that believers would be taken from the earth before a time of trouble, the idea called the rapture. The Scofield Reference Bible of 1909 carried it into American fundamentalism.

John Wesley — an English priest who in 1738 heard Luther's preface to Romans read in London and felt his heart strangely warmed. That night became

a turning point for the Methodist movement.

Karl Barth — a Swiss pastor whose 1919 commentary on Romans shook the theology of Europe. He drafted most of the Barmen Declaration of 1934, which rejected the claim that the state could become the single and total order of human life.

Krister Stendahl — a Swedish scholar and bishop who argued in 1963 that the West had read its own anxious conscience into Paul. He held that Romans 7 is an argument about the Law, not a confession.

Martin Luther — the German reformer whose German New Testament of 1522 added the word alone to Romans 3:28. He loved Galatians but judged James and Revelation harshly.

Tischendorf — the German scholar who in 1844 found the first pages of Codex Sinaiticus at a monastery on Mount Sinai. In 1859 he returned and was shown most of the rest, including the whole New Testament.

William Miller — an American preacher who worked mainly from the book of Daniel to predict Christ's return about 1843–44. One of his followers fixed the date at October 22, 1844, and its failure is called the Great Disappointment.

William Tyndale — a translator whose English New Testament was printed in 1526, before the King James Version of 1611.

William Wrede — a German scholar who argued in 1901 that Mark invented Jesus's orders to keep quiet about who he was. In 1903 he argued that a writer with 1 Thessalonians in front of him wrote 2 Thessalonians.

Notes

The Bible references are in the text itself. These notes give the sources for the history, and the details behind anything that is debated. Tap a note number in the text to come here, and tap ↩ to go back.

BEFORE WE START: THE BOOKS ABOUT ME

1. John 7:53–8:11 is absent from the earliest manuscripts of John, including Papyrus 66 and Papyrus 75 (about AD 200) and Codex Sinaiticus and Codex Vaticanus (fourth century). Some later manuscripts place it after John 7:36, after John 21:25 or after Luke 21:38. It is printed in most modern Bibles with brackets or a note, and in the World English Bible, which follows the Byzantine majority text, without brackets. ↩
2. 1 Thessalonians is usually dated about AD 49–51, during Paul’s stay in Corinth (compare Acts 18:1–11). The Gallio inscription at Delphi dates Gallio’s proconsulship of Achaia (Acts 18:12) to about AD 51–52, which anchors the chronology. ↩
3. Paul’s explicit appeals to sayings of Jesus: 1 Corinthians 7:10–11 (divorce), 9:14 (support of those who preach) and 11:23–25 (the Last Supper). 1 Thessalonians 4:15 appeals to “the word of the Lord,” but it is debated whether this refers to a saying of the earthly Jesus or to a prophetic word. ↩
4. These are the majority datings. Mark is usually dated about 65–75, Matthew and Luke about 80–95, and John about 90–110. A minority of scholars date all of them earlier, and a few date Luke-Acts into the early second century. The dependence of Matthew and Luke on Mark (“Markan priority”) is the majority view. ↩
5. Papyrus 66 (John) and Papyrus 75 (Luke and John), both usually dated about AD 175–225, carry the titles “according to John” and “according to Luke.” Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3.1.1 (about 180), is the earliest writer to name all four evangelists. ↩
6. Papias of Hierapolis, quoted in Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 3.39.15–16. Papias says that Mark, Peter’s interpreter, wrote down what Peter remembered, “though not in order,” and that Matthew arranged the sayings “in the Hebrew language.” Papias is usually dated about 100–130. What he meant, and whether his “Matthew” is our Greek Gospel of Matthew, are debated. ↩
7. The letters to churches (Romans to 2 Thessalonians) and to individuals (1 Timothy to Philemon) are each arranged in roughly descending order of length. Galatians, slightly shorter than Ephesians, is the main exception. ↩
8. Marcion’s canon, about AD 140–150, contained an edited form of Luke and ten Pauline letters, without the Pastoral Letters. The main sources are Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 1.27.2, and Tertullian, *Against Marcion*. ↩
9. Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 3.25, written in the early fourth century. Among the disputed (*antilegomena*) he lists James, Jude, 2 Peter and 2 and 3 John. He places Revelation, with evident hesitation, both among the accepted and among the spurious. He mentions elsewhere (3.3.5) that some rejected Hebrews. ↩

10. Codex Sinaiticus, copied in the mid-fourth century, is now mostly in the British Library. After Revelation it contains the Epistle of Barnabas and part of the Shepherd of Hermas. Codex Alexandrinus (fifth century) includes 1 and 2 Clement. ↵
11. Athanasius, Festal Letter 39, AD 367. It lists the twenty-seven books of the New Testament and recommends the Didache and the Shepherd of Hermas for instruction, though not as part of the canon. ↵
12. Papyrus 52 (Rylands Library Papyrus P52), in Manchester, contains John 18:31–33 and 37–38. It is usually dated to the first half or middle of the second century, though some papyrologists allow a date as late as about 200. Counts of Greek New Testament manuscripts are usually given as about 5,800. ↵
13. The ending of Mark (16:9–20) is absent from Codex Sinaiticus and Codex Vaticanus, and early writers including Eusebius and Jerome knew that many manuscripts ended at 16:8. The added words in 1 John 5:7–8, known as the Johannine Comma, appear in no Greek manuscript before the late medieval period. Erasmus added them to his third edition of the Greek New Testament (1522), and from there they passed into the King James Version. ↵
14. The seven letters generally accepted as Paul's own are Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, 1 Thessalonians and Philemon. Opinion is divided on 2 Thessalonians and Colossians, and most critical scholars regard Ephesians and the Pastoral Letters (1 and 2 Timothy and Titus) as written by later followers of Paul. Each of these judgments is contested by other scholars. ↵

1. MATTHEW

1. Papias of Hierapolis, quoted by Eusebius, Ecclesiastical History 3.39.16. The word Papias uses, *logia*, can mean sayings or oracles. Papias wrote in the first half of the second century; dates from about 110 to 130 are commonly given. ↵
2. This is the “two-source hypothesis,” the majority view: Matthew and Luke independently used Mark and a lost sayings source (Q), each adding material of his own (called “M” and “L”). Of Mark's 661 verses, about 600 have parallels in Matthew. A minority of scholars argue that Luke used Matthew directly, which would make Q unnecessary. ↵
3. *Basileia tōn ouranōn*, literally “the kingdom of the heavens,” occurs about 32 times in Matthew and nowhere else in the New Testament. Matthew uses “kingdom of God” only four or five times (for example 12:28, 19:24, 21:31, 21:43). ↵
4. The “formula quotations” are usually counted as ten: Matthew 1:22–23; 2:15; 2:17–18; 2:23; 4:14–16; 8:17; 12:17–21; 13:35; 21:4–5; 27:9–10. Some lists add 2:5–6. ↵
5. Hosea 11:1. Isaiah 7:14 uses Hebrew *‘almah*, “young woman”; the Septuagint renders it *parthenos*. The quotation in Matthew 27:9–10 draws chiefly on Zechariah 11:12–13, with possible echoes of Jeremiah 18–19 and 32. No Old Testament text reads “he will be called a Nazarene”; proposals include a play on Hebrew *netser*, “branch” (Isaiah 11:1), or on the Nazirite vow. ↵
6. Mark 13:18 has only “Pray that your flight won't be in the winter.” The addition of “nor on a Sabbath” is unique to Matthew 24:20 and is widely taken as evidence that Matthew's community still observed the Sabbath. ↵
7. The doxology at Matthew 6:13 is absent from Codex Sinaiticus, Codex Vaticanus and other early witnesses. Didache 8.2–3 gives the prayer in Matthew's form, ending “for yours is the power and the glory forever,” and directs that it be said three times a day. The Didache is usually dated between about 70 and 120. ↵

8. The confession at Caesarea Philippi is in Mark 8:27–30 and Luke 9:18–21, without the words to Peter in Matthew 16:17–19. Many critical scholars regard those verses as coming from Matthew’s community or source; others defend them as authentic. *Ekklēsia* occurs in the gospels only at Matthew 16:18 and 18:17. ↩
9. On Matthew’s setting in conflict with the leaders of the post-70 synagogue, see for example Anthony J. Saldarini, *Matthew’s Christian-Jewish Community* (1994). Matthew 22:7, in which a king burns a city, is often read as an allusion to the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70. ↩
10. Second Vatican Council, *Nostra Aetate* §4 (28 October 1965). ↩
11. Josephus describes Herod’s execution of his wife Mariamne and of three of his sons (Antiquities 15.222–236; 16.392–394; 17.182–187) but says nothing of a massacre at Bethlehem. The story’s parallels with Exodus 1–2 and with Jewish retellings of Moses’ birth in Josephus (Antiquities 2.205–216) are widely noted. ↩

2. MARK

1. This argument for “Markan priority” is held by the large majority of New Testament scholars. Matthew and Luke rarely agree with each other against Mark in wording or order, and where they do (the so-called “minor agreements”) the cases are small. A minority holds that Mark was written after Matthew and Luke (the Griesbach or two-gospel hypothesis). ↩
2. Codex Sinaiticus, Codex Vaticanus and other early witnesses read Matthew 19:17 as “Why do you ask me about what is good? One there is who is good.” The Byzantine manuscripts, followed by the King James Version and the World English Bible, harmonize Matthew to Mark 10:18 and Luke 18:19. ↩
3. 1 Samuel 21:1–6 names the priest at Nob as Ahimelech. Abiathar was his son (1 Samuel 22:20). Matthew 12:3–4 and Luke 6:3–4 omit the name. Some copies of Mark also omit the phrase. ↩
4. Martin Kähler, *Der sogenannte historische Jesus und der geschichtliche, biblische Christus* (1892), in a footnote: the gospels could be called “passion narratives with extended introductions.” ↩
5. William Wrede, *Das Messiasgeheimnis in den Evangelien* (1901), translated as *The Messianic Secret* (1971). ↩
6. The Tenth Legion, Legio X Fretensis, took part in the siege of Jerusalem in AD 70 and was afterward stationed there. Its emblems included a boar, a bull, a ship and the god Neptune. The country of the Gerasenes was not Jewish territory, which explains the pigs. The place name differs among the manuscripts and gospels (Gerasenes, Gadarenes, Gergesenes). ↩
7. The tradition that Mark wrote in Rome appears in Clement of Alexandria (quoted in Eusebius, Ecclesiastical History 2.15 and 6.14.6–7). The anti-Marcionite prologue to Mark says he wrote “in the regions of Italy.” Irenaeus (Against Heresies 3.1.1) places Mark’s writing after the deaths of Peter and Paul, who had preached in Rome, but does not say where Mark wrote. Mark uses Latin loanwords such as *legiōn*, *kentyriōn* (15:39, where Matthew and Luke use a Greek term), *dēnariōn*, *kodrantēs* (*quadrans*) and *praitōrion*. Proposals for Syria or Galilee rest on the gospel’s geography and its focus on Galilee. ↩
8. The words “the Son of God” in Mark 1:1 are missing from the first hand of Codex Sinaiticus and from some quotations by Origen. Most editors keep them, but the question is open. ↩
9. Codex Sinaiticus and Codex Vaticanus both end Mark at 16:8. Eusebius, in his *Questions to Marinus*, and Jerome (Letter 120.3) report that the accurate copies, or nearly all Greek copies, ended there. ↩

10. The shorter ending stands alone only in the Old Latin Codex Bezae Cantabrigiae. Several Greek manuscripts have it followed by 16:9–20. Codex Washingtonianus (W) adds a further passage after 16:14, called the Freer Logion. The longer ending was known by the mid-second century; Irenaeus quotes Mark 16:19 around 180. ↩
11. George Went Hensley (about 1880–1955) began handling snakes around 1910 in southeastern Tennessee. He died after a snakebite in Florida in July 1955. Jamie Coots, pastor of the Full Gospel Tabernacle in Jesus Name in Middlesboro, Kentucky, and a participant in the television series *Snake Salvation*, died after a rattlesnake bite on 15 February 2014. Several states have outlawed the practice. ↩

3. LUKE

1. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3.1.1 and 3.14.1. Paul's letters mention Luke at Colossians 4:14, Philemon 24 and 2 Timothy 4:11. The "we" passages in Acts are 16:10–17, 20:5–21:18 and 27:1–28:16. ↩
2. Josephus, *Antiquities* 17.355 and 18.1–4, 18.26, places Quirinius's census of Judea in the thirty-seventh year after Actium, that is, AD 6, after Archelaus was deposed. Herod the Great died in 4 BC (*Antiquities* 17.167, 17.191). Proposed harmonizations include an earlier governorship or earlier census under Quirinius, for which there is no clear evidence. See Raymond E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah* (updated edition 1993), appendix VII. ↩
3. The Greek word is *katalyma*, also at Luke 22:11. Luke uses a different word, *pandocheion*, for the inn in the parable of the good Samaritan (Luke 10:34). See Kenneth E. Bailey, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes* (2008), chapter 1. ↩
4. Most scholars trace the Beatitudes to the shared sayings source (Q), a hypothetical document. Many reconstructions of Q follow Luke's second-person, unqualified form ("you poor"), but scholars differ. ↩
5. Gregory the Great, Homily 33 on the Gospels, preached in Rome in 591. The General Roman Calendar of 1969 ceased to treat Mary Magdalene as the penitent woman of Luke 7 and as Mary of Bethany. In 2016 Pope Francis raised her memorial to a feast. The Vatican decree honored her, in Thomas Aquinas's phrase, as the "apostle of the apostles." ↩
6. *Euergetēs*, "Benefactor," was the official epithet of several Hellenistic kings, including Ptolemy III Euergetes of Egypt (reigned 246–222 BC) and Ptolemy VIII. ↩
7. Luke 23:34a is absent from Papyrus 75 (about AD 200), Codex Vaticanus, the first corrector of Codex Sinaiticus, Codex Bezae (first hand) and other witnesses. It is present in the original hand of Sinaiticus and in most later manuscripts. ↩

4. JOHN

1. Mark, Matthew and Luke mention only the final Passover. Luke 3:1 dates the start of John the Baptist's work to the fifteenth year of Tiberius (AD 28–29), and the synoptic outline suggests a ministry of about a year. John 5:1 mentions an unnamed feast, which some take to be a fourth Passover. ↩
2. Mark 14:12–16 identifies the Last Supper as the Passover meal. John 13:1, 18:28 and 19:14 place the crucifixion on the day of preparation. Opinion is divided; many historians favor John's chronology, while others defend the synoptic dating or propose that different calendars were in use. ↩

3. Clement of Alexandria, in his lost *Hypotyposesis*, quoted by Eusebius, Ecclesiastical History 6.14.7: John, “perceiving that the external facts had been made plain in the gospels,” composed “a spiritual gospel.” ↵
4. The pools of Bethesda were excavated near the Church of St. Anne in Jerusalem from the late nineteenth century. The Copper Scroll from Qumran (3Q15) may name the site. The Second Temple–period pool of Siloam was discovered in 2004 by Eli Shukron and Ronny Reich during sewer repairs. ↵
5. The Greek *hoi Ioudaioi* occurs about seventy times in John, compared with five or six times in each of the synoptic gospels. It can also mean “the Judeans,” and in some passages it seems to mean the religious authorities in Jerusalem. ↵
6. The word *apōsynagōgos* occurs only at John 9:22, 12:42 and 16:2. J. Louis Martyn, *History and Theology in the Fourth Gospel* (1968), linked the expulsions to the rabbinic “benediction against the heretics” (*Birkat ha-Minim*). That specific link is now widely doubted, but most scholars still read the expulsions as reflecting the experience of John’s community late in the first century rather than events in Jesus’ lifetime. ↵
7. For example, the Revised Standard Version (1952) closes Jesus’ speech at John 3:15, and the current New International Version (2011) does the same, noting that some end it at verse 21. The King James Version printed no quotation marks. ↵
8. On the community behind the gospel and its composition in stages, see Raymond E. Brown, *The Community of the Beloved Disciple* (1979). The beloved disciple appears at John 13:23, 19:26, 20:2, 21:7 and 21:20. John 21:23 corrects a rumor that he would not die, which many read as a sign that he had. ↵

5. ACTS

1. Karl Marx, *Critique of the Gotha Programme* (1875): “From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs!” The formula was not original to Marx; versions appear in earlier French socialists such as Louis Blanc. The resemblance to Acts 4:35 has often been noted. ↵
2. Galatians 2:1–10. Many scholars identify this meeting with Acts 15; others identify Galatians 2 with the famine visit of Acts 11:30. The four requirements of Acts 15:20, 29 resemble the rules for foreigners living among Israel in Leviticus 17–18. ↵
3. Acts 22:25–28 and 23:27 also present Paul as a Roman citizen. On the differences between Acts and the letters, see Philipp Vielhauer, “On the ‘Paulinism’ of Acts” (1950), and for a more conservative view, the commentaries of F. F. Bruce. ↵
4. Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War* 1.22.1. ↵
5. Josephus, *Antiquities* 20.97–98, on Theudas under the procurator Cuspius Fadus (about AD 44–46); *Antiquities* 18.1–10 and 20.102 on Judas the Galilean at the time of the census of AD 6. Some scholars suppose a different, earlier Theudas, of whom there is no record. ↵
6. The Gallio inscription, a letter of the emperor Claudius found at Delphi, dates Gallio’s proconsulship of Achaia to about AD 51–52. ↵
7. Priscilla (Prisca) is named before Aquila at Acts 18:18, 18:26, Romans 16:3 and 2 Timothy 4:19, and after him at Acts 18:2 and 1 Corinthians 16:19. *Mathētria*, “female disciple,” occurs in the New Testament only at Acts 9:36. ↵
8. 1 Clement 5.5–7, written from Rome around AD 96, speaks of Paul’s endurance and death after he had reached “the limit of the West.” The tradition that he was beheaded under Nero is found in

later writers, including Eusebius, Ecclesiastical History 2.25.5. ↵

6. ROMANS

1. Suetonius, Claudius 25.4: Claudius “expelled from Rome the Jews, who were constantly making disturbances at the instigation of Chrestus.” The expulsion is usually dated to AD 49, partly on the basis of Orosius, History 7.6.15–16. Acts 18:2 refers to the same edict. ↵
2. On the range of scholarly views, compare Robert A. J. Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice* (2001), and Dale B. Martin, *Sex and the Single Savior* (2006). The phrase *para physin*, “contrary to nature,” occurs at Romans 1:26 and Romans 11:24. ↵
3. This is the so-called “new perspective on Paul,” associated with E. P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* (1977), James D. G. Dunn and N. T. Wright. It remains debated. ↵
4. Krister Stendahl, “The Apostle Paul and the Introspective Conscience of the West,” *Harvard Theological Review* 56 (1963). ↵
5. Tacitus, Annals 15.44, on Nero’s punishment of Christians after the fire of AD 64, including burning some as torches at night. ↵
6. Romans 13 was widely invoked in support of the state by the “German Christians” and by many Protestant leaders in Germany after 1933. The Barmen Declaration of 1934, drafted chiefly by Karl Barth, rejected the claim that the state could become the single and total order of human life. ↵
7. *Diakonos* (Romans 16:1); compare 1 Corinthians 3:5 and 2 Corinthians 3:6. *Prostatis* (Romans 16:2) means a patron or benefactor. The view that Phoebe carried the letter rests on the commendation itself, a standard feature of ancient letters of introduction. ↵
8. John Chrysostom, Homilies on Romans 31.2: “How great the wisdom of this woman must have been that she was even deemed worthy of the title of apostle.” The masculine *Junias* is unattested in ancient sources. See Eldon Jay Epp, *Junia: The First Woman Apostle* (2005), which documents how printed Greek texts and English translations handled the name. ↵
9. Augustine, Confessions 8.12.29. Luther described his discovery of Romans 1:17 in the preface to the 1545 edition of his Latin works. John Wesley’s Journal, 24 May 1738. Karl Barth, *Der Römerbrief* (1919; revised 1922). ↵

7. 1 CORINTHIANS

1. Gerd Theissen, *The Social Setting of Pauline Christianity* (1982), and Jerome Murphy-O’Connor, *St. Paul’s Corinth* (1983), drawing on excavated houses such as the villa at Anaploga. The reconstruction of the meal is widely accepted in outline, though its details are debated. ↵
2. Lucius Mummius destroyed Corinth in 146 BC. Strabo, Geography 8.6.23, says Caesar resettled it with colonists who were mostly freedmen. The refounding is dated to 44 BC. ↵
3. Many translations, including the World English Bible, put “All things are lawful for me” (6:12; 10:23) in quotation marks as a Corinthian slogan. Whether 7:1b is also a quotation is debated, but the view is now common. ↵
4. The Greek *mallon chrēsai* (“rather, make use of it”) does not say what is to be used. Interpreters from the early church to today divide between “use your freedom” and “make use of your present condition.” ↵
5. In the “Western” manuscripts (Codex Claromontanus, Codex Augiensis, Codex Boernerianus and some Old Latin witnesses), 1 Corinthians 14:34–35 follows 14:40. Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle*

to the *Corinthians* (1987), argued that the verses are an interpolation. Many commentators treat them as Paul's and debate their meaning. ↵

6. Paul uses the technical language of handing on tradition ("received ... delivered"). Many scholars date the formula to the 30s, within a few years of the crucifixion. Paul's visit to Peter and James in Jerusalem (Galatians 1:18–19) is often proposed as the occasion on which he learned it. ↵
7. *Marana tha*, "Our Lord, come!" The same Aramaic words appear at the end of the eucharistic prayer in Didache 10.6. Compare Revelation 22:20. ↵

8. 2 CORINTHIANS

1. Partition theories vary. A common view treats chapters 10–13 as a separate letter, either the "tearful letter" of 2:4 or a later one. Others separate chapters 8 and 9, or 2:14–7:4. The passage 6:14–7:1 has unusual vocabulary, and some scholars note its resemblance to the language of the Dead Sea Scrolls. Many commentators defend the unity of the letter as it stands. ↵
2. *Hyperlian apostoloi*, literally "over-much apostles" or "super-apostles" (2 Corinthians 11:5; 12:11). Paul also calls the rivals "false apostles" (11:13). ↵
3. The limit of forty lashes is Deuteronomy 25:3. The practice of stopping at thirty-nine is described in the Mishnah, Makkot 3:10–11. Beating with rods (11:25) was a Roman penalty. ↵
4. The *corona muralis* was awarded to the first soldier to scale the wall of a besieged city (Aulus Gellius, *Attic Nights* 5.6.16; Polybius 6.39.5). The comparison with Paul's escape is made by E. A. Judge and others. Acts 9:23–25 tells the same escape, but blames the Jews of Damascus rather than the governor of King Aretas IV of Nabatea. ↵
5. Galatians 4:13–15 mentions an illness when Paul first visited Galatia, and that the Galatians would have torn out their own eyes for him, which some take as a clue. No identification is certain. ↵

9. GALATIANS

1. Acts 15:36–40 reports a later split between Paul and Barnabas over John Mark. On the view that Paul lost at Antioch, see James D. G. Dunn, "The Incident at Antioch," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 18 (1983). The order of events and the outcome are debated. ↵
2. The phrase is *pistis Iēsou Christou*. On the "faithfulness of Christ" reading, see Richard B. Hays, *The Faith of Jesus Christ* (1983; second edition 2002). The objective genitive ("faith in Christ") remains the traditional view and is defended by many scholars. ↵
3. The Tosefta (Berakhot 6.18) gives three daily blessings thanking God for not being made a Gentile, a woman or an ignorant man. The Babylonian Talmud (Menahot 43b–44a) discusses a blessing for not being made a slave, and later Jewish prayer books thank God for not being made a Gentile, a slave or a woman. Diogenes Laertius (1.33) attributes a similar saying to Thales or Socrates. On Galatians 3:28 as a baptismal formula, see Wayne A. Meeks, "The Image of the Androgyne," *History of Religions* 13 (1974); compare 1 Corinthians 12:13 and Colossians 3:11. ↵
4. The Greek verb *apokoptō* was used of castration. The great sanctuary of Cybele was at Pessinus, in Galatia, and her eunuch priests were called *galli*. ↵
5. Luther, Table Talk: "The Epistle to the Galatians is my epistle. I have betrothed myself to it. It is my Katie von Bora." His great commentary on Galatians was published in 1535. ↵

10. EPHESIANS

1. The words *en Ephesō* are absent from Papyrus 46 (about AD 200) and from the original hands of Codex Sinaiticus and Codex Vaticanus. Origen and Basil of Caesarea knew copies without them. Tertullian (Against Marcion 5.11 and 5.17) reports that Marcion called the letter “to the Laodiceans.” Compare Colossians 4:16. ↩
2. Ephesians 1:3–14 forms a single sentence of about 200 words in the Greek text. ↩
3. Estimates commonly given are that roughly 70 to 80 percent of critical scholars regard Ephesians as pseudonymous. For the case against Pauline authorship, see Andrew T. Lincoln, *Ephesians* (Word Biblical Commentary, 1990). For the case in favor, Harold W. Hoehner, *Ephesians* (2002). ↩
4. Josephus, Jewish War 5.193–194 and Antiquities 15.417, describes the barrier (*soreg*) and its warning inscriptions in Greek and Latin. A complete Greek inscription was found in 1871 by Charles Clermont-Ganneau and is in the Istanbul Archaeology Museums. A fragment found in 1935 is in the Israel Museum. ↩
5. Papyrus 46 and Codex Vaticanus have no verb in Ephesians 5:22. Other manuscripts add *hypotassesthe* or *hypotassesthōsan* (“submit” or “let them submit”). ↩
6. See especially Walter Wink’s trilogy on the “Powers,” beginning with *Naming the Powers* (1984). ↩

11. PHILIPPIANS

1. The noun *chara* (“joy”) and the verbs *chairō* and *synchairō* (“rejoice,” “rejoice with”) occur about sixteen times in Philippians. ↩
2. The case for Ephesus rests partly on the number of journeys between Paul and Philippi implied by the letter. See for example George S. Duncan, *St. Paul’s Ephesian Ministry* (1929), and the commentary of John Reumann (2008). Rome remains the traditional view. ↩
3. On Philippians 2:6–11 as a pre-Pauline hymn, see Ernst Lohmeyer, *Kyrios Jesus* (1928), and Ralph P. Martin, *A Hymn of Christ* (third edition, 1997). Some scholars think Paul composed it himself. ↩
4. Crucifixion is called *servile supplicium*, “the slaves’ punishment,” by Roman writers; see Tacitus, Histories 4.11, and Martin Hengel, *Crucifixion* (1977). ↩
5. Acts 16:12 calls Philippi a Roman colony. It was refounded after the battle of 42 BC and again after Actium in 31 BC. *Sōtēr* (“savior”) and *kyrios* (“lord”) were used of the emperor in inscriptions and coinage. The word translated “citizenship” in 3:20 is *politeuma*. ↩
6. Many scholars treat 3:2–4:3 as part of a separate letter, and 4:10–20 as a separate note of thanks. Others defend the letter’s unity. ↩
7. *Skybala* (Philippians 3:8) means refuse, scraps for dogs, or excrement. ↩

12. COLOSSIANS

1. Arius appealed to Colossians 1:15 and Proverbs 8:22 among other texts. The Council of Nicaea (325) condemned his teaching. Athanasius answered that “firstborn” did not mean that Christ was created. ↩
2. *Cheirographon* is common in Greek papyri for a signed acknowledgment of debt. See the commentaries of Eduard Lohse (*Colossians and Philemon*, 1971) and James D. G. Dunn (1996). ↩
3. On the debate, see Morna D. Hooker, “Were There False Teachers in Colossae?” (1973), and Clinton E. Arnold, *The Colossian Syncretism* (1995). ↩

4. Compare also 1 Corinthians 12:13, which likewise names Jews and Greeks, slaves and free, but not male and female. ↩
5. *Isotēs*, translated “equal” in Colossians 4:1 and “equality” in 2 Corinthians 8:13–14. ↩
6. The Latin *Epistle to the Laodiceans*, twenty verses long, appears in Codex Fuldensis (546) and in many later manuscripts of the Vulgate. It was included in all eighteen German Bibles printed before Luther’s translation. Most scholars date its composition between the second and fourth centuries. ↩

13. 1 THESSALONIANS

1. On *apantēsis* as a civic welcome, see Erik Peterson, “Die Einholung des Kyrios,” *Zeitschrift für systematische Theologie* 7 (1930). The word is used of welcoming delegations in, for example, Polybius 5.26.8 and Josephus, *Antiquities* 11.327–329 (the reception of Alexander, using the related word *hypantēsis*). The interpretation is widely accepted but some scholars think the parallel is less precise. ↩
2. John Nelson Darby (1800–1882) developed the pretribulation rapture in the 1830s. The *Scofield Reference Bible* (1909) carried it into American fundamentalism, and the *Left Behind* novels (1995–2007) popularized it. ↩
3. Roman coins and inscriptions celebrated *Pax* and *Securitas*. The connection with 1 Thessalonians 5:3 is argued by, among others, Helmut Koester and Jeffrey A. D. Weima. ↩
4. Birger A. Pearson, “1 Thessalonians 2:13–16: A Deutero-Pauline Interpolation,” *Harvard Theological Review* 64 (1971). Most commentators regard the passage as authentic but read it as polemic within Judaism, not against Jews as a people. Compare Romans 11:1–2 and 11:26–29. ↩

14. 2 THESSALONIANS

1. Opinion is roughly divided among critical scholars. For authenticity, see the commentaries of I. Howard Marshall (1983) and Abraham J. Malherbe (2000). Against, see Maarten J. J. Menken, *2 Thessalonians* (1994). ↩
2. William Wrede, *Die Echtheit des zweiten Thessalonicherbriefs untersucht* (1903). ↩
3. Philo, *Embassy to Gaius* 188, 203–348; Josephus, *Antiquities* 18.261–309. Caligula was assassinated in January 41. ↩
4. Augustine, *City of God* 20.19: “I frankly confess I do not know what he means.” ↩
5. John Smith, *The Generall Historie of Virginia* (1624), book 3, describing his presidency in 1608–1609. Lenin, *The State and Revolution* (1917), chapter 5. Constitution of the USSR (1936), Article 12: “He who does not work, neither shall he eat.” ↩

15. 1 TIMOTHY

1. The classic statement of the linguistic argument is P. N. Harrison, *The Problem of the Pastoral Epistles* (1921). For a recent defense of Pauline authorship, see Luke Timothy Johnson, *The First and Second Letters to Timothy* (Anchor Bible, 2001). Estimates of the share of Pastoral vocabulary absent from the undisputed letters vary with the method used. Most critical scholars date the Pastorals between about 80 and 130. ↩
2. Tertullian, *Against Marcion* 5.21, says that Marcion rejected the two letters to Timothy and the letter to Titus. Papyrus 46 (Chester Beatty Library, Dublin, and University of Michigan), usually

dated about 200, contains Paul's letters but lacks the Pastorals. Its final leaves are missing, and scholars debate whether the remaining pages could have held them. ↵

3. Luke 10:7 reads "the laborer is worthy of his wages" (*misthou*). Matthew 10:10 has "food" (*trophēs*). Paul alludes to the same instruction in 1 Corinthians 9:14 without quoting it or calling it scripture. ↵

4. Ignatius of Antioch, letters to the Smyrnaeans 8.1 and the Trallians 2.2–3.1, about 110. 1 Timothy 3:1–7 speaks of the overseer in the singular, but 5:17 refers to elders in the plural, and Titus 1:5–7 seems to use "elder" and "overseer" for the same office. ↵

5. *Gynaikas* in 1 Timothy 3:11 can mean "women" or "wives." The absence of "their" in the Greek, and the parallel phrasing with verse 8 ("Servants, in the same way"), lead many commentators to read it as referring to women deacons. Pliny the Younger, Letters 10.96 (about 112), mentions two Christian slave women "who were called deacons" (*ministrae*). ↵

16. 2 TIMOTHY

1. For authenticity, see Luke Timothy Johnson, *The First and Second Letters to Timothy* (2001), and Jerome Murphy-O'Connor, "2 Timothy Contrasted with 1 Timothy and Titus," *Revue Biblique* 98 (1991), who argued that 2 Timothy is Paul's own while the other two are not. P. N. Harrison, *The Problem of the Pastoral Epistles* (1921), proposed that genuine Pauline fragments were worked into 2 Timothy. On personal details as a feature of pseudonymous letters, see Bart D. Ehrman, *Forgery and Counterforgery* (2013). ↵
2. Examples of Jewish testament literature include the Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs and the Testament of Moses, written in the centuries around my lifetime in the names of figures who had died long before. Compare Genesis 49, Deuteronomy 31–33 and Paul's farewell at Miletus in Acts 20:17–38. ↵
3. Luke 23:34a ("Father, forgive them...") is absent from several early manuscripts, including Papyrus 75 and Codex Vaticanus, but present in Codex Sinaiticus and most later manuscripts. Scholars are divided on whether it was added or removed. ↵
4. *Pasa graphē theopneustos kai ôphelimos* has no verb. It can be read "Every scripture is God-breathed and profitable" or "Every God-breathed scripture is also profitable." The American Standard Version (1901) reads, "Every scripture inspired of God is also profitable." *Theopneustos* occurs nowhere else in the Bible. ↵
5. 1 Clement 5.5–7, usually dated about AD 96. Eusebius, Ecclesiastical History 2.25.5–8, reports that Paul was beheaded in Rome under Nero, citing earlier writers. Tertullian, Prescription Against Heretics 36, compares Paul's death to John the Baptist's. ↵

17. TITUS

1. Galatians 2:1–3; 2 Corinthians 2:13; 7:6–15; 8:6, 16–23; 12:18. Titus is not named in Acts. ↵
2. Acts 28:30–31 ends with Paul in Rome under guard for two years. 1 Clement 5.7 says Paul reached "the limits of the west," which some read as Spain. Eusebius, Ecclesiastical History 2.22.2–3, reports a tradition that Paul was released, preached again, and was later imprisoned and killed in Rome. ↵
3. Clement of Alexandria, Stromata 1.14.59, attributes the line to Epimenides. Callimachus, Hymn to Zeus 8 (third century BC), has "Cretans are always liars." The ancient liar paradox is credited to

Eubulides of Miletus (fourth century BC). Its association with Epimenides is a later development.

↩

4. Aristotle, *Politics* 1.1253b, divides household management into the relations of master and slave, husband and wife, and father and children. The New Testament “household codes” follow a similar pattern: Colossians 3:18–4:1, Ephesians 5:21–6:9, 1 Peter 2:18–3:7. ↩
5. The construction in Titus 2:13 (one article governing “God” and “Savior”) is often cited under the rule named for Granville Sharp (1798) as referring to one person. Others argue that “God and Savior” was a fixed phrase that does not settle the question. The King James Version (1611) reads “the great God and our Saviour Jesus Christ.” ↩

18. PHILEMON

1. Peter Lampe, “Keine ‘Sklavenflucht’ des Onesimus,” *Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft* 76 (1985), drawing on Roman legal texts about slaves who sought out a friend of the master (*amicus domini*) to mediate. Others propose that Philemon had sent Onesimus to Paul. Allen Dwight Callahan, *Embassy of Onesimus* (1997), argued that Onesimus was Philemon’s estranged brother, not his slave, a view few have accepted. ↩
2. Roman law on fugitive slaves is collected in Justinian’s Digest 11.4 (*De fugitivis*). Recaptured runaways could be beaten, branded or made to wear iron collars, some of which survive with inscriptions asking that the bearer be returned to his owner. ↩
3. 1 Corinthians 7:21 ends with *mallon chrēsai*, “rather use [it],” without saying what is to be used. Translations divide between “use your freedom” and “make use of your present condition.” ↩
4. The Fugitive Slave Act was passed in September 1850. Among its clerical defenders, the Andover biblical scholar Moses Stuart, in *Conscience and the Constitution* (1850), argued from Paul’s return of Onesimus. On the use of Philemon in the American slavery debate, see J. Albert Harrill, *Slaves in the New Testament* (2006). ↩
5. Ignatius, Letter to the Ephesians 1.3, about 110. The identification of this Onesimus with the slave of Philemon was proposed by John Knox, *Philemon Among the Letters of Paul* (1935), who also suggested that Onesimus collected Paul’s letters. Most scholars regard it as possible but unprovable. Colossians 4:9 calls Onesimus “one of you,” placing him at Colossae. ↩

19. HEBREWS

1. Papyrus 46 (about 200) places Hebrews after Romans. Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 6.25.11–14, preserves Origen’s judgment that the thoughts are Paul’s but the style is not, and that “who wrote the epistle, in truth God knows.” In the West, Hebrews was not generally accepted as Pauline until the late fourth century, under the influence of Jerome and Augustine. 1 Clement 36 (about AD 96) draws on Hebrews 1. ↩
2. Tertullian, *On Modesty* 20, attributes Hebrews to Barnabas. Martin Luther proposed Apollos (compare Acts 18:24). Adolf von Harnack proposed Priscilla in “Probabilia über die Adresse und den Verfasser des Hebräerbriefes,” *Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft* 1 (1900). Hebrews 11:32 uses a masculine participle (*diēgoumenon*) for the writer. ↩
3. The Melchizedek scroll from Qumran Cave 11 (11Q13, 11QMelchizedek) presents Melchizedek as a heavenly agent of judgment and of the “release” proclaimed in Isaiah 61. Melchizedek is named in the Hebrew scriptures only at Genesis 14:18 and Psalm 110:4. ↩

4. Hebrews 8:8–12 quotes Jeremiah 31:31–34 in full, the longest Old Testament quotation in the New Testament. On the history of supersessionist readings, see for example R. Kendall Soulen, *The God of Israel and Christian Theology* (1996). The Catholic Church rejected the idea that God revoked his covenant with the Jewish people in *Nostra Aetate* (1965) and later documents. ↵
5. Martin Luther, Preface to the Epistle to the Hebrews (1522), Luther's Works 35:394–395, objects that Hebrews 6:4–6, 10:26 and 12:17 deny repentance to sinners after baptism, “contrary to all the Gospels and to St. Paul’s epistles.” ↵

20. JAMES

1. Mark 6:3; Matthew 13:55. Other references to the brothers include Mark 3:21, 31–35; John 2:12; 7:3–5; Acts 1:14; 1 Corinthians 9:5. James appears as leader in Acts 12:17, 15:13–21 and 21:18, and in Galatians 1:19 and 2:9, 12. Catholic and Orthodox tradition holds that Mary remained a virgin and that the “brothers” were cousins (Jerome, *Against Helvidius*, 383) or sons of Joseph by an earlier marriage (Epiphanius, *Panarion* 78; compare the *Protevangelium of James* 9.2). Most Protestant scholars take them as younger children of Mary and Joseph. ↵
2. Josephus, *Antiquities* 20.197–203. The governor Festus died about AD 62, and Ananus (son of the high priest Annas) acted before his successor Albinus arrived. King Agrippa II deposed him after three months. A different, legendary account of James’s death by Hegesippus is preserved in Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 2.23. ↵
3. Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 2.23.24–25 and 3.25.3. Origen cites James as scripture, for example in his *Commentary on John* 19.6. For authenticity, see Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Letter of James* (Anchor Bible, 1995). For a later, pseudonymous origin, see Dale C. Allison Jr., *James* (International Critical Commentary, 2013). ↵
4. Paul uses the phrase *erga nomou*, “works of the law” (Romans 3:20, 28; Galatians 2:16). James uses *erga* alone, illustrated by hospitality and care for the needy. The view that James responds to a distorted Paulinism is common; others think the two developed independently. ↵
5. Martin Luther, Preface to the New Testament (1522), Luther's Works 35:362, and Preface to the Epistles of St. James and St. Jude (1522), Luther's Works 35:395–397. The “epistle of straw” comparison was omitted from editions after 1537. In a disputation of 1542, Luther said, “I almost feel like throwing Jimmy into the stove” (Luther's Works 34:317). ↵
6. Further parallels with the Sermon on the Mount and the sayings of Jesus include James 1:2 and Matthew 5:11–12; James 1:22 and Matthew 7:24–26; James 4:4 and Matthew 6:24; James 4:10 and Luke 14:11; James 4:11–12 and Matthew 7:1; James 5:10 and Matthew 5:12. Counts of such echoes vary widely, from fewer than ten clear allusions to dozens of possible ones. ↵

21. 1 PETER

1. Mark 1:16–18; John 1:42; Matthew 16:16–18. On Peter’s death in Rome: 1 Clement 5.4 (about AD 96), alluding to it; Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 2.25.5–8 and 3.1.2, citing Origen for the tradition that he was crucified head downward. The upside-down crucifixion first appears in the apocryphal Acts of Peter 37–38 (late second century). ↵
2. Compare Revelation 14:8; 17:5; 18:2; 4 Ezra 3:1–2; 2 Baruch 11:1; Sibylline Oracles 5.143, 159. These sources date from after AD 70. ↵
3. Pliny the Younger, Letters 10.96, about AD 112, written as governor of Bithynia-Pontus, asking whether Christians should be punished “for the name itself” (*nomen ipsum*). The term *Christianos*

appears in the New Testament only at Acts 11:26, Acts 26:28 and 1 Peter 4:16. For Petrine authorship, see Karen H. Jobes, *1 Peter* (2005), who argues that the Greek of the letter shows Semitic influence and fits a writer like Peter. For composition by a Petrine group in Rome, see John H. Elliott, *1 Peter* (Anchor Bible, 2000). ↵

4. John H. Elliott, *A Home for the Homeless: A Sociological Exegesis of 1 Peter* (1981). Elliott argued that *paroikoi* and *parepidēmoi* describe the readers' actual social and legal status. Many interpreters read the terms metaphorically. ↵
5. Tacitus, *Annals* 15.44, describes Nero's punishment of Christians after the fire of AD 64, some of them set on fire as torches at night in his gardens. ↵
6. Compare Genesis 6:1–4 and 1 Enoch 6–16, where the rebellious angels ("Watchers") are bound until the judgment. 2 Peter 2:4–5 and Jude 6 also refer to imprisoned angels. ↵
7. The phrase *descendit ad inferna* ("he descended into hell," or "to the dead") is first attested in creeds of the mid-to-late fourth century, beginning with the Dated Creed of Sirmium (359) and is discussed by Rufinus of Aquileia, *Commentary on the Apostles' Creed* 18 (about 400). It entered the Old Roman Creed's later form, known as the Apostles' Creed. ↵

22. 2 PETER

1. Jerome, *Lives of Illustrious Men* 1, says that 2 Peter "is denied by most to be his because of its difference in style from the first." For a pseudonymous "testament of Peter" dated about 80–90, see Richard Bauckham, *Jude, 2 Peter* (Word Biblical Commentary, 1983). Many other scholars date it to the first half of the second century. ↵
2. Compare 2 Peter 2:1–18 and 3:1–3 with Jude 4–18. Jude's quotation from 1 Enoch and his reference to the dispute over the body of Moses are left out of 2 Peter. Most scholars hold that 2 Peter used Jude rather than the reverse. ↵
3. Origen, quoted by Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 6.25.8: Peter "left one acknowledged epistle, and perhaps a second, for it is disputed." Eusebius 3.3.1 and 3.25.3 lists it among the disputed books. Its earliest manuscript is Papyrus 72 (Bodmer VII–VIII), from the third or fourth century. ↵
4. At 2 Peter 3:10, Codex Sinaiticus and Codex Vaticanus read *beurethēsetai*, "will be found." Many later manuscripts read *katakaēsetai*, "will be burned up," followed by the King James Version and the World English Bible. Most modern critical editions print "will be found." The Nestle-Aland 28th edition (2012) prints "will not be found," a reading found in no Greek manuscript. ↵

23. 1 JOHN

1. Ignatius of Antioch, *Letter to the Trallians* 9–10 and *Letter to the Smyrnaeans* 1–3, about AD 110. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 1.26.1, describes the teacher Cerinthus, who distinguished the man Jesus from the Christ who descended on him; Irenaeus 3.3.4 preserves a story that John fled a bathhouse when Cerinthus entered. On the community behind the letters, see Raymond E. Brown, *The Community of the Beloved Disciple* (1979) and *The Epistles of John* (Anchor Bible, 1982). ↵
2. *Antichristos* occurs only at 1 John 2:18, 2:22, 4:3 and 2 John 7. Its fusion with the beast of Revelation 13, the "man of sin" of 2 Thessalonians 2 and the "little horn" of Daniel 7 developed in later writers, beginning with Irenaeus (*Against Heresies* 5.25–30) and Hippolytus (*On Christ and Antichrist*). ↵
3. The Comma is quoted in Latin by the Spanish writer Priscillian (died 385) and later appears in Vulgate manuscripts. It is found in about ten Greek manuscripts, all late, several with the words

added in the margin. Erasmus omitted it in his editions of 1516 and 1519 and included it in 1522 after learning of Codex Montfortianus (Trinity College Dublin), a Greek manuscript of the early sixteenth century. The popular story that Erasmus had promised to include it if a single Greek manuscript were found is doubted by many historians. ↵

24. 2 JOHN

1. Didache 11.4–6 and 12.1–5, usually dated between about AD 70 and 120: a traveling apostle may stay one day, or two if needed, but one who stays three days, or asks for money, is a false prophet. Travelers who wish to settle must work. ↵
2. Papias, quoted by Eusebius, Ecclesiastical History 3.39.3–7. Eusebius notes the two tombs at Ephesus each called John's (3.39.6) and suggests the Elder John may have written Revelation. Many scholars accept the distinction between the apostle and the elder. Others argue that Papias meant one man. 2 John has 245 Greek words and 3 John 219, making them the two shortest books in the New Testament. ↵

25. 3 JOHN

1. The opening health wish is standard in Greek papyrus letters from Egypt, for example in the formula "before all things I pray that you are well." See Hans-Josef Klauck, *Ancient Letters and the New Testament* (2006). ↵

26. JUDE

1. Jude 14–15 corresponds closely to 1 Enoch 1:9. The full text of 1 Enoch survives in Ge'ez (Ethiopic). Aramaic fragments of four of its five parts were found at Qumran, including 4Q204, which preserves part of 1:9. The oldest parts of 1 Enoch date from the third century BC. It is part of the canon of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church. ↵
2. Hegesippus, quoted by Eusebius, Ecclesiastical History 3.19–20 and 3.32.5–6. The grandsons of Jude owned between them land worth 9,000 denarii, measuring 39 *plethra*, a few hectares, which they farmed themselves. ↵
3. Tertullian, On the Apparel of Women 1.3. Jerome, Lives of Illustrious Men 4: "Because in it he quotes from the apocryphal book of Enoch, it is rejected by many." Jude is listed in the Muratorian Fragment and accepted by Clement of Alexandria, but Eusebius (Ecclesiastical History 2.23.25; 3.25.3) placed it among the disputed books. ↵
4. Deuteronomy 34:5–6. Origen, On First Principles 3.2.1, says the story came from a work called the Ascension (or Assumption) of Moses. Clement of Alexandria and Didymus of Alexandria also refer to it. A surviving Latin text, usually called the Testament of Moses, lacks its ending, where the story is thought to have stood. ↵
5. *Sarkos heteras*, "other flesh." See for example Richard Bauckham, *Jude, 2 Peter* (Word Biblical Commentary, 1983), who reads it as the attempt on angels, in parallel with Jude 6 and with Jewish traditions linking the Watchers and Sodom (compare Testament of Naphtali 3.4–5). ↵

27. REVELATION

1. The word *anticristos* occurs only at 1 John 2:18, 2:22, 4:3 and 2 John 7. Its later fusion with the beast of Revelation 13, the "lawless one" of 2 Thessalonians 2 and the "little horn" of Daniel 7 is the work of later interpreters, beginning in the second and third centuries. ↵

2. The writer names himself John at Revelation 1:1, 1:4, 1:9 and 22:8. Justin Martyr (Dialogue with Trypho 81, about 155) and Irenaeus identified him with the apostle John. The book itself makes no such claim, and most modern scholars regard the author as an otherwise unknown Christian prophet named John. Patmos lies in the Aegean about 65 km (40 miles) west-southwest of Miletus. Banishment to an island was a Roman penalty, but the book does not state why he was there. ↩
3. Tacitus, Annals 14.27, under AD 60: Laodicea, “one of the famous cities of Asia,” was overthrown by an earthquake “and recovered by its own resources, without help from us.” Reading Revelation 3:17 against this background is an inference, though a common one. ↩
4. Tacitus, Annals 4.37; Cassius Dio 51.20.6–7. In 29 BC Augustus allowed the province of Asia to dedicate a temple at Pergamum to Rome and himself. What “Satan’s throne” (Revelation 2:13) refers to is disputed. The imperial cult, the great altar of Zeus and the sanctuary of Asclepius have all been proposed. ↩
5. Irenaeus, Against Heresies 5.30.3: the vision “was seen not very long ago, almost in our own generation, toward the end of Domitian’s reign.” Domitian reigned 81–96. A minority of scholars date the book to about 68–70, after Nero’s death and around the destruction of Jerusalem. ↩
6. Suetonius, Domitian 13.2: Domitian issued a circular letter in the name of “our Lord and God” (*dominus et deus noster*), and the phrase became customary in addressing him. ↩
7. Pliny the Younger, Letters 10.96, about AD 112, written as governor of Bithynia-Pontus, which bordered Asia. He describes executing those who persisted in confessing Christ, and releasing those who offered incense and wine before the emperor’s image and cursed Christ. Most historians now doubt that Domitian conducted a systematic persecution. The pressures reflected in Revelation are generally read as local and social, including trade guilds and civic cult (Revelation 2:14, 2:20). ↩
8. Revelation contains no formal quotations introduced as scripture, but hundreds of allusions to the Hebrew scriptures. Counts range from about 250 to more than 600, depending on the criteria used. The scroll-eating scene follows Ezekiel 2:8–3:3. The trumpet and bowl plagues of Revelation 8–9 and 16 echo the plagues of Exodus 7–10. ↩
9. 1 Peter 5:13, which most scholars date after AD 70; also 4 Ezra 3:1–2, 2 Baruch 11:1 and Sibylline Oracles 5.143 and 5.159, all written after AD 70. Rome is the city of seven hills in Latin literature, for example Virgil, Georgics 2.535. ↩
10. In Hebrew characters, *nrwn qsr* (Nero Caesar) gives 50 + 200 + 6 + 50 + 100 + 60 + 200 = 666. This spelling is attested in an Aramaic document from Wadi Murabba’at (Mur 18), dated to the second year of Nero. The form without the final *n*, following the Latin *Nero*, gives 616. Irenaeus (Against Heresies 5.30.1) knew of copies reading 616 and rejected them. He did not himself identify the beast with Nero. Papyrus Oxyrhynchus 4499 (Papyrus 115), late third century, and Codex Ephraemi Rescriptus, fifth century, read 616. The Nero solution is the majority scholarly view, not a demonstrated one. ↩
11. Nero’s punishment of Christians after the fire of AD 64: Tacitus, Annals 15.44. His death in 68, by a dagger to the throat with the help of his freedman Epaphroditus: Suetonius, Nero 49. False Nero appeared in 69 (Tacitus, Histories 2.8) and about 88 (Suetonius, Nero 57). The expectation of his return also appears in Sibylline Oracles 4 and 5. ↩
12. Eusebius, Ecclesiastical History 7.25, preserving Dionysius of Alexandria’s work On the Promises. Dionysius did not reject the book, but argued from its vocabulary and grammar that its author was not the author of the Gospel and letters of John. He said he supposed its meaning to be deeper than he could grasp. ↩

13. Revelation is absent from the Syriac Peshitta and from the canon list of Cyril of Jerusalem (Catechetical Lectures 4.36, about 350). The list in Amphilochius of Iconium's Iambics for Seleucus (about 380) says that some accept it but most call it spurious. Eusebius (Ecclesiastical History 3.25) placed it, with evident hesitation, among both the accepted and the rejected books. Athanasius included it in his Easter letter of 367. It is not appointed for reading in the Byzantine Divine Liturgy. ↩
14. Martin Luther, Preface to the Revelation of St. John, 1522: "My spirit cannot accommodate itself to this book. For me this is reason enough not to think highly of it: Christ is neither taught nor known in it." Luther's Works 35:398–399. He replaced it with a longer and more favorable preface in 1530. ↩
15. Calvin's New Testament commentaries cover every book except 2 John, 3 John and Revelation. ↩
16. Eusebius, Ecclesiastical History 5.18.2, quoting Apollonius: Montanus named Pepuza and Tymion, small towns in Phrygia, "Jerusalem." The movement began about 170. The vision of the new Jerusalem descending at Pepuza is reported by Epiphanius, Panarion 49.1, who attributes it to the prophetess Quintilla or Priscilla. ↩
17. Jan Matthys, prophet of the Anabaptist kingdom at Münster, predicted the end for Easter 1534 and was killed that day leading a small sortie. Jan Bockelson (Jan of Leiden) then had himself proclaimed king. The city fell in June 1535. Bockelson, Bernhard Knipperdolling and Bernhard Krechting were executed in January 1536, and their bodies were displayed in three iron cages hung from the tower of St. Lambert's Church, where the cages still hang. ↩
18. William Miller (1782–1849) calculated from Daniel 8:14 that Christ would return about 1843–44. The date of October 22, 1844 was set by Samuel S. Snow and accepted by the movement shortly before it. Accounts of followers leaving crops unharvested come from contemporary and later testimony. ↩
19. The Branch Davidian compound at Mount Carmel, near Waco, burned on April 19, 1993, at the end of a 51-day standoff with federal agents. Seventy-six people died, about two dozen of them children. Koresh taught that he was the Lamb of Revelation 5 who could open the seven seals, and he was writing a manuscript on the seals during the standoff. ↩
20. Harold Camping (1921–2013), president of Family Radio, had earlier predicted 1994. After May 21, 2011 passed, he announced October 21, 2011. In March 2012 he publicly acknowledged that his predictions had been wrong. ↩

*Jesus never wrote a word of the New Testament.
Every book in it was written after he died.*

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Why does Matthew put Jesus on two animals at once?
Which letter carries the name of his own brother?
How did a sentence about the Trinity get into 1 John?*

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