

MATTHEW

Theme: Christ the King

Author: Matthew

Verses: *He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" Simon Peter answered and said, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." (Matthew 16:15-16)*

Date: About A.D. 50

Matthew presents Jesus Christ as the King of Israel. His Gospel begins with a genealogy of Jesus through His legal father, Joseph, which goes all the way back to Abraham. This demonstrates His right to the throne of Israel through David. Matthew also shows how Christ fulfilled many Old Testament prophecies about the Messiah, including:

- His virgin birth
- His birth in Bethlehem
- His travel to Egypt
- His miracles
- His arrival in Jerusalem on a donkey

Matthew quotes from the Hebrew Scriptures repeatedly. The book was written to assure Jews who had believed in Jesus Christ that their faith was not in vain. He really is the Messiah, and someday He will return to set up the promised kingdom.

MARK

Theme: Jesus the Servant

Author: John Mark

Verses: *For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many. (Mark 10:45)*

Date: A.D. 55-56

Mark is the shortest of the four Gospels. The author focuses on Jesus Christ as a servant, with particular emphasis on His ultimate service of dying on the cross. One third of the book deals with the events of the week leading up to the crucifixion. Mark's emphasis can be seen in Mark 10:45: *For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many.* Mark includes many miracles that show Jesus' love for people. We read how Jesus healed many who were deaf, dumb or blind, raised a little girl to life, fed a hungry crowd of 5,000, and welcomed little children. Believers met in Mark's mother's house, and Peter visited there often. In fact, Peter was probably the source of much of Mark's information about the events of Christ's life.

LUKE

Theme: Christ the Man

Author: Luke

Verses: *For the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost. (Luke 19:10)*

Date: A.D. 63-68

Luke was a physician who often accompanied the apostle Paul on his missionary journeys. Luke's main purpose in his Gospel is to show Jesus Christ as a perfect man. It is from Luke that we get the most details of Jesus' birth and boyhood. He traces the genealogy of Christ back to Adam and continues through His life chronologically. Luke makes his purpose clear early on: *It seemed good to me also, having had perfect understanding of all things from the very first, to write to you an orderly account, most excellent Theophilus, that you may know the certainty of those things in which you were instructed (Luke 1:3-4).* Luke's Gospel is actually Volume 1 — his history continues in the book of Acts. The parables in this Gospel reflect the deep concern Christ had for lost mankind as expressed in Luke 19:10: *For the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost.* Luke also wanted his readers to understand that there was a solid historical basis for believing in Jesus Christ. The well-known opening to the account of the birth of Jesus Christ is just one example of how he ties his history to events and people in the secular world. *And it came to pass in those days that a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. This census first took place while Quirinius was governing Syria (Luke 2:1-2).*

JOHN

Theme: Christ the Son of God

Author: John

Verses: *And truly 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 that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name. (John 20:30-31)*

Date: A.D. 85-90

The apostle John gives a straightforward reason for writing his Gospel: *But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name. (John 20:31).* While the other three Gospels cover many of the same events (each with its own thematic emphasis), John describes different events to present Jesus as the Messiah, the Word made flesh, and the Son of God. Believe is the key word.

Seven key miracles are recorded:

- Turning water into wine (John 2:1-11)
- Healing the official's son (4:43-54)
- Healing the lame man by the pool of Bethesda (5:1-9)
- Feeding 5,000 people (6:1-13)
- Walking on water (6:16-20)
- Healing the blind man (9:1-7)
- Raising Lazarus from the dead (11:1-44)

John, in Chapters 13-16, gives us the Lord's teaching of His disciples about His death and the coming of the Holy Spirit. The book closes with an account of Jesus Christ's prayer in the garden, arrest, trial, death, resurrection, and last instructions to His disciples.

ACTS

Theme: The Early Church

Author: Luke

Verse: *But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth. (Acts 1:8)*

Date: About A.D. 60

Acts was written by the physician, Luke, and is a continuation of the Gospel of Luke. In it, he records the last acts of Christ on earth as He ascended to heaven to be with the Father.

The death and resurrection of the Messiah was prophesied in the Old Testament, but that didn't excuse the Jews of their guilt for killing Him. In the second chapter, Peter exhorts the Jews to repent of their sin and accept their Messiah. He offers them the kingdom they were promised by the prophets. Some Jews believed and were saved on the day of Pentecost, but most did not. The leaders of Israel were strong in their opposition and began persecuting the believers almost right away, eventually stoning Stephen.

But God is a God of grace, and He gave the Jews every chance. Throughout the book of Acts, we see Jews in almost every region of the civilized world hearing the message of the risen Messiah and rejecting it. Even Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles, went to the Jew first. Finally, in Chapter 28, with the rejection of Christ by the Jews in Rome, God's chosen people are cast aside. Paul declared: "Therefore let it be known to you that the salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles ..." (Acts 28:28). (Of course, God's promises are unconditional and the Jews will once again receive the offer — and accept it — after the rapture.)

God, in His foreknowledge, knew what choice the Jews would make. He didn't wait until Acts 28 to act. In Chapter 9, shortly after the stoning of Stephen, He appeared to Paul, the chief tormentor of the believing Jews, and saved him. Paul became God's messenger of a new gospel — that anyone, Jew or Gentile, could be saved

by grace alone through faith alone without the law. Side by side with the history of the Jews' rejection of Christ as their Messiah is the spread of Paul's gospel through his three missionary journeys around Asia and Europe.

The final chapters record Paul's arrest and journey to Rome as a prisoner.

ROMANS

Theme: Righteousness of God

Author: Paul

Verse: *But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. (Romans 5:8)*

Date: A.D. 58

Romans was written during the apostle Paul's third visit to Corinth. It contains the most detailed explanation of the newly-revealed gospel of Christ. Although he had not yet visited the church in Rome, the apostle had heard of the believers' great faith in Christ, and he anticipated visiting them soon. Paul's major concern was to establish them firmly in the truth of his gospel. (Paul refers to it as his gospel because he was appointed by God to be the minister of this new message.) He explains it in a logical, step-by-step method.

- Humanity is sinful and separated from God. We are His enemies and deserve death.
- We are powerless and incapable of solving this problem, and we cannot obtain salvation by observing the law.
- God stepped in and offered His solution — His Son, Jesus Christ.
- We access this solution by faith — by simply believing that Christ's death is sufficient to pay for our sinfulness.
- When we do this, we are no longer slaves to sin. Christ is in us and nothing can separate us from Him.
- We still carry around our sin-corrupted bodies for now, and we still sin.
- But it's not about us anymore. *There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus, who do not walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has made me free from the law of sin and death (Romans 8:1-2).*
- But what about the Jews? God made them many promises in the Old Testament. Those promises will still be fulfilled. In Chapter 11, Paul makes the following points: 1) A small number of Jews were still being saved as members of the Body of Christ; 2) Israel's rejection of Christ was not a surprise to God; 3) The Gentiles should realize that Israel's current situation is part of God's plan; 4) Israel has been cut off from the olive tree (Christ) but they will be grafted back in (Romans 11:23-24); 5) All of God's promises will be fulfilled in the future and Israel will resume its place as God's chosen people.

In the final five chapters of Romans, Paul explains how we should live in the light of all he's just explained.

1 CORINTHIANS

Theme: Christian Conduct

Author: Paul

Verse: *Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your labor is not in vain in the Lord. (1 Corinthians 15:58)*

Date: A.D. 55

The apostle Paul established the Corinthian church during his second missionary journey. The people in the church were saved — Paul makes this very clear — but they weren't living like it. Paul calls them carnal, which means they were living in their old, sinful natures instead of in their new, Holy Spirit-powered natures. Paul corrects and instructs them on:

- Divisions in the church caused by various members bragging about following different leaders
- Allowing a man living in open sin to be part of the fellowship
- Taking other Christians before secular courts instead of resolving their differences themselves
- Marrying nonbelievers
- Eating meat offered to idols
- Abusing the Lord's Supper
- Speaking in tongues which was causing confusion in the church
- Claiming there was no resurrection from the dead

Paul ends on a positive note, encouraging the Corinthians to walk with the Lord. Near the end of this letter he writes: *Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your labor is not in vain in the Lord (1 Corinthians 15:58).*

2 CORINTHIANS

Theme: Christian Righteousness

Author: Paul

Verse: *For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him. (2 Corinthians 5:21)*

Date: A.D. 56

Not long after Paul sent the letter known as 1 Corinthians, he received word, probably from Timothy, that the church in Corinth was still having problems. Enemies, perhaps those who were encouraging the people to return to Judaism, had been opposing Paul and attacking his credentials. In response, Paul sent Titus with a second letter, which has not been preserved. Titus reported back to Paul that most of the members of the Corinthian church had resumed their loyalty to Paul's message of the gospel but that some were still in rebellion.

Paul wrote 2 Corinthians to defend his ministry and authority as an apostle and to rejoice in those who had repented ... *I rejoice, not that you were made sorry, but that your sorrow led to repentance ... (2 Corinthians 7:9).* The apostle then switches topics and encourages the Corinthians to keep their promise to give a large gift to the church in Jerusalem. *But as you abound in everything — in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in all diligence, and in your love for us — see that you abound in this grace also (2 Corinthians 8:7).* Paul then finishes with a message for those still in rebellion against him. *Examine yourselves as to whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves. Do you not know yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you? — unless indeed you are disqualified (2 Corinthians 13:5).*

GALATIANS

Theme: Christian Liberty

Author: Paul

Verse: *Stand fast therefore in the liberty by which Christ has made us free, and do not be entangled again with a yoke of bondage. (Galatians 5:1)*

Date: A.D. 55

Galatians is Paul's angriest letter. He wrote it to the church in Galatia, which he'd founded on his second missionary journey. The members of the church were being swayed from their faith by the Judaizers — men from Jerusalem who were trying to force the Gentiles to obey the Jewish law. In the letter, Paul corrects two errors. He explains that: 1) Man's salvation is not dependent upon him keeping parts of the law, in addition to faith in Christ. 2) The justified believer cannot become perfect by keeping the law. In this epistle, Paul wrote the most severe warnings against those who preach another gospel, and he made it clear that the law is not binding on Christians. The Christian life is not doing things to be saved or to gain special favor from God. The two systems, law and grace, cannot exist together. Paul ends the letter with a clear explanation of how we are to live under grace.

EPHESIANS

Theme: Christian Standing

Author: Paul

Verses: *For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast. (Ephesians 2:8-9)*

Date: A.D. 61

Paul visited Ephesus during his second and third missionary journeys. He wrote this letter to the believers there, but he also wanted it to be passed around to other churches in the area. This is the first of four Prison Epistles, which he wrote while imprisoned in Rome. The other Prison Epistles are Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon. Ephesians contains the deepest truths about the Church and the believer's wonderful position

in Christ. The first three chapters show the believer's standing in Christ. This standing is unalterable, whether the believer is strong or weak. Paul explains that believers are:

- Blessed with every spiritual blessing in Christ (Ephesians 1:3).
- Adopted as God's sons (1:5).
- Forgiven of all sins (1:7).
- Sealed by the Holy Spirit (1:13).
- Alive in Christ by grace (2:5).
- Members of the Body of Christ (3:6).
- Able to approach God with freedom and confidence (3:12).

Because of this wonderful truth, the last three chapters instruct the believer on how he should live the Christian life. Paul encourages the readers to ... *walk worthy of the calling with which you were called* (Ephesians 4:1). He then goes into detail about what this looks like. Chapter 6 describes the believer's conflict with the forces of darkness.

PHILIPPIANS

Theme: Christian Joy

Author: Paul

Verse: *Fulfill my joy by being like-minded, having the same love, being of one accord, of one mind.* (Philippians 2:2)

Date: A.D. 61

Paul visited Philippi on his second missionary journey. When he wrote this letter to the Philippians, he was under house arrest in Rome. One of his reasons for writing was to thank the believers for sending him a gift. He also wanted to encourage believers who were being persecuted. Paul wrote about his imprisonment and how he was still able to spread the gospel. Paul stated that he did not know whether he would live on for a while and continue his ministry or die and be with the Lord. Whatever was to occur, he wasn't worried. His rejoicing wasn't an act — He only wanted Christ to be glorified. He told the Philippians to follow his example, to lay aside their worries, rejoice, pray and be content with God's provision in all circumstances. Paul also urged his readers to be humble and show interest in other's needs, not just their own. By doing so, they would follow the example of Christ, who humbled Himself and came to earth as a servant to die for our sins. Paul was a man of status and achievement before he was saved, but he made it clear that his past life was worth nothing compared to knowing Christ. His goal was to know Christ more.

COLOSSIANS

Theme: The Preeminence of Christ

Author: Paul

Verses: *And He is before all things, and in Him all things consist. And He is the head of the body, the church, who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in all things He may have the preeminence.* (Colossians 1:17-18)

Date: Around A.D. 61

Colossae was a small city not far from Ephesus. As far as we know, Paul never visited — the church was likely founded by those, like Epaphras, who heard the apostle speak in the larger city. During his first imprisonment in Rome, Paul received word that the church members were being attacked by those with ... *persuasive words* (Colossians 2:4). Some Colossian believers had been attracted to angel worship, while others had fallen back into legalism. Paul urges them to stay focused on Jesus Christ. *As you therefore have received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in Him, rooted and built up in Him and established in the faith, as you have been taught, abounding in it with thanksgiving. Beware lest anyone cheat you through philosophy and empty deceit, according to the tradition of men, according to the basic principles of the world, and not according to Christ. For in Him dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily; and you are complete in Him, who is the head of all principality and power* (Colossians 2:6-10).

As he did in Ephesians, Paul encourages the Christians to live in a manner that reflects who they are in Christ. *If then you were raised with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God. Set your mind on things above, not on things on the earth* (Colossians 3:1-2).

1 THESSALONIANS

Theme: Christ's Return

Author: Paul

Verses: *For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And thus we shall always be with the Lord. Therefore comfort one another with these words.* (1 Thessalonians 4:16-18)

Date: A.D. 51

Thessalonica was the capital city of the Roman province of Macedonia (Greece). Paul visited and started the church on his second missionary journey, but was forced out of town by the Jewish leaders. Paul received word that the members of the church were remaining true to the faith and resisting all opposition. He wrote from Corinth to say: ... *we were comforted concerning you by your faith. For now we live, if you stand fast in the Lord* (1 Thessalonians 3:7-8).

Paul also used the letter to explain God's revelation to him regarding the rapture of the Church before the tribulation and establishment of Christ's millennial kingdom and how it would affect those who had already died in Christ.

2 THESSALONIANS

Theme: Stand Firm

Author: Paul

Verse: *Therefore, brethren, stand fast and hold the traditions which you were taught, whether by word or our epistle. (2 Thessalonians 2:15)*

Date: A.D. 51

Just a few months after Paul sent the first letter to the church in Thessalonica, he received the news that a misunderstanding had risen. Somebody had written a letter in Paul's name claiming that the day of the Lord (Christ's second coming to earth, at the end of the tribulation) had already occurred. As a result, some members of the church had stopped working. The apostle explained to the Christians that they were mistaken. He assured them that the day of the Lord won't happen until after the *man of sin* (the Antichrist) has come.

1 TIMOTHY

Theme: Leadership

Author: Paul

Verse: *Fight the good fight of faith, lay hold on eternal life, to which you were also called and have confessed the good confession in the presence of many witnesses. (1 Timothy 6:12)*

Date: A.D. 63

Paul's first letter to his young friend and coworker, Timothy, was a manual on effective leadership in the churches in Ephesus and other Asian cities. He stresses the importance of holding sound doctrine (Chapter 1); instructs on proper worship (2-3); warns against false teachers (4); teaches about church discipline (5); and explains the duties of a pastor (6). Paul's message can be summed up by 1 Timothy 4:11-16: *These things command and teach. Let no one despise your youth, but be an example to the believers in word, in conduct, in love, in spirit, in faith, in purity ... give attention to reading, to exhortation, to doctrine. Do not neglect the gift that is in you ... Meditate on these things; give yourself entirely to them, that your progress may be evident to all. Take heed to yourself and to the doctrine ...*

2 TIMOTHY

Theme: Endurance

Author: Paul

Verses: *All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work. (2 Timothy 3:16-17)*

Date: A.D. 67

At the end of Paul's life, when he knew he was about to die, he wrote this letter to Timothy. He was in Rome, enduring a much harsher imprisonment than he'd faced on earlier occasions. Christian persecution under Emperor Nero was in full force. Most of Paul's friends, afraid for their own lives, had abandoned him. Paul told Timothy to stand firm and ... *share with me in the sufferings for the gospel according to the power of God (2 Timothy 1:8).*

Paul foresaw an increase in apostasy (rejection of faith) and wickedness (the result of apostasy) and warned Timothy to watch out. The apostle filled the letter with advice and encouragement for the young man who was facing the challenges of pastoring the church in Ephesus, but he kept returning time and again to one theme — the importance of remaining true to Scripture.

- Paul received the truth directly from God and communicated it to Timothy. Now Timothy was to consider that truth something valuable that was committed to his care and to guard it with the help of the Holy Spirit (2 Timothy 1:13-14).
- Timothy needed to be diligent to labor to discover the truth of the Word, and to have the courage of his convictions (2:15).
- Timothy was to study the Word because it would teach him doctrine, point out and correct errors in his life, straighten him out when he got off the path and educate and discipline his character (3:16-17).
- Timothy was to preach the Word every chance he had, to correct those on the wrong path and to encourage those on the right path (4:2).

Near the end of the letter, Paul wrote about his own ministry in words that should be the pattern for every believer: *I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith (2 Timothy 4:7).*

TITUS

Theme: Encouragement

Author: Paul

Verses: *For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men, teaching us that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly in the present age, looking for the blessed hope and glorious appearing of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ. (Titus 2:11-13)*

Date: A.D. 63

Titus was a young Greek coworker whom Paul used as proof that a Gentile could be saved without being circumcised or following the Jewish law (Galatians 2:3). Some years later, Paul left Titus on the island of Crete to ... *set in order the things that are lacking, and appoint elders in every city ... (Titus 1:5).* This letter was the apostle's instructions on how to carry out those tasks. Scattered through the book, Paul includes statements that explain the spiritual truth behind his practical teaching.

PHILEMON

Theme: Forgiveness

Author: Paul

Verse: *But without your consent I wanted to do nothing, that your good deed might not be by compulsion, as it were, but voluntary. (Philemon 1:14)*

Date: A.D. 61

In his other letters, Paul lays out the doctrine given to him by the Holy Spirit and explains how we should live in light of that doctrine. In Philemon, we see an illustration of what that teaching and application looks like in an actual, real-life situation. Philemon, to whom the letter is addressed, was a believer living in Colossae. He was a man of considerable wealth. Onesimus, his runaway slave, had recently been led to the Lord by Paul, who was imprisoned in Rome. With this letter, Paul was sending Onesimus back to Colossae, and he begged Philemon to receive his slave as a Christian brother. "If Onesimus has done you any wrong or owes you anything," Paul wrote, "you can hold me responsible." Paul's love and concern for His friends and fellow believers is evident throughout the short letter.

HEBREWS

Theme: Christ's Sufficiency

Author: Unknown (though many believe it was the apostle Paul)

Verses: *Seeing then that we have a great High Priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. For we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need. (Hebrews 4:14-16)*

Date: A.D. 64

Hebrews is addressed to the Jewish believers of the first century. They had been brought up in the Jewish religion, based on the Old Testament, with its rituals and sacrifices and prophecies about the coming Messiah who would restore the nation to its land. Many of them believed in God as revealed in the Old Testament — some of them even believed that Jesus Christ was the promised Messiah. They did what they were told to do. They had faith in God and obeyed His commands.

Now Paul was saying that Israel had been set aside for a time and that a new body of believers known as the Church was being assembled. The promised kingdom hadn't arrived and the believers in Jerusalem were in pretty bad shape. The Jews needed to understand how things had changed and to be encouraged to remain faithful to Christ. The Holy Spirit inspired the writer to explain the new circumstances. He systematically demonstrates the superiority of Christ over the old Jewish system. Here are just a few of the comparisons (there are many others):

- Superior messenger — Under the law, God spoke through the prophets. Now He has spoken through His Son (Hebrews 1:1-20).
- Superior priesthood — Under the law, priests had to offer sacrifices because they were men with sin natures just like everyone else. Now Jesus is our eternal priest (7:24-25).
- Superior altar — Under the law, the priests offered sacrifices in the Holy of Holies. Now we have an altar in Christ's sacrifice apart from the Jewish tabernacle (13:10, 12).
- Superior blood — Under the law, the blood of goats and bulls was shed over and over to cover sins temporarily. Now the blood of Jesus Christ cleanses us forever (9:14).

The writer shows how this new message was part of God's eternal plan. It was hidden in the Old Testament, but now that it has been revealed, we can look back at the events of the Old Testament and see how they point to Christ. Hebrews 13:20-21 reveals the purpose of the new covenant: so that ... *the God of peace who brought up our Lord Jesus from the dead, that great Shepherd of the sheep, through the blood of the everlasting covenant, make you complete in every good work to do His will, working in you what is well pleasing in His sight, through Jesus Christ ...*

The book also includes many warnings to the Jews not to shrink back, through unbelief or slothfulness, into their former beliefs and practices. Rather, through faith and confidence in the perfect sacrifice of Christ, they were admonished to go forward into maturity and usefulness.

JAMES

Theme: Living Your Faith

Author: James

Verse: *But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. (James 1:22)*

Date: A.D. 42

Like Hebrews, the book of James was written to Jews. James, the half brother of Jesus Christ, was one of the leaders of the Jewish assembly in Jerusalem. He was writing to Jews who lived in other countries, many of them forced to leave because of persecution. The book has a very Jewish feel, with references to Abraham, the synagogue and the law. James and his audience believed in the risen Christ, of course, but there is no mention of what the cross means.

James was most likely the first New Testament book, written long before the apostle Paul wrote any of his letters explaining the gospel that was entrusted to him for the Gentiles. When we read James, we need to remember that it was written to the Jews (just as we do when we read the requirements of the law in the Old Testament). But there is a great deal of practical application in the book for the Jews and for us. For example:

- Find comfort in spiritual, not physical, things (James 1:9-11).
- Don't favor the rich over the poor (2:1-4).
- Control your mouth and you'll have a better chance of controlling your body (3:6).
- Avoid the world and its temptations (4:4).
- Remember that every day could be your last (4:13-17).

1 PETER

Theme: Suffering and Glory

Author: Peter

Verse: *Who Himself bore our sins in His own body on the tree, that we, having died to sins, might live for righteousness — by whose stripes you were healed. (1 Peter 2:24)*

Date: A.D. 60

Peter sent his first letter to believing Jews who were suffering persecution for their faith. He begins with an explanation of why they experienced hard times. *In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while, if need be, you have been grieved by various trials, that the genuineness of your faith, being much more precious than gold that perishes, though it is tested by fire, may be found to praise, honor, and glory at the revelation of Jesus Christ (1 Peter 1:6-7).* The rest of the letter tells the believers how they should respond in the face of their suffering.

- Without fear, and with a clear conscience, be ready to explain why you believe what you believe (1 Peter 3:13-16).
- If you suffer for your testimony of Christ, don't be ashamed but praise God for the privilege (4:12-16).
- Stand firm against Satan's attacks, assured that they restore you to strength (5:6-10).

2 PETER

Theme: Faithfulness of Christ

Author: Peter

Verse: *The Lord is not slack concerning His promise, as some count slackness, but is longsuffering toward us, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance. (2 Peter 3:9)*

Date: A.D. 66

Not long after Peter wrote his first letter, he wrote a second one to the same audience with a different purpose. False teachers were corrupting the truth and influencing the believers. *These are wells without water, clouds carried by a tempest, for whom is reserved the blackness of darkness forever. For when they speak great swelling words of emptiness, they allure through the lusts of the flesh, through lewdness, the ones who have actually escaped from those who live in error. While they promise them liberty, they themselves are slaves of corruption; for by whom a person is overcome, by him also he is brought into bondage (2 Peter 2:17-19).*

Peter encouraged his readers to:

- Grow in their faith (2 Peter 1:5-8).
- Pay attention to God's Word (1:16-21).
- Be ready for the Lord's return (3:9-10).
- Be on guard against false doctrine (3:17-18).

1 JOHN

Theme: Fellowship

Author: John

Verse: *But if we walk in the light as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin. (1 John 1:7)*

Date: A.D. 90

The word love appears 52 times in some form in 1 John. Love is one of the characteristics that define God: *... God is love ... (1 John 4:16).* God's love is unconditional, untainted by impure motives and does not take into account our worthiness to be loved. It's also an active love because God wants the best for those He loves. That's why God sent His Son as a sacrifice for our sins.

On our own, we are incapable of loving God, but we can love God *... because He first loved us (1 John 4:19).* God's love makes it possible for us to love and it provides us with motivation to love God and others. We are so secure in God's love that we have no reason to fear. At the same time, we must be careful not to love anything more than we love God. If we do, it's possible that we don't love God at all (1 John 2:15).

But don't we all fail to love God frequently? Remember, God's love is unconditional. He doesn't expect us to be perfect, but He does expect us not to habitually choose the things of the world over Him. And when we fail *... we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous (1 John 2:1).*

2 JOHN

Theme: Steadfastness

Author: John

Verse: *And now I plead with you, lady, not as though I wrote a new commandment to you, but that which we have had from the beginning: that we love one another. (2 John 1:5)*

Date: A.D. 90

John's second letter was written to a Christian woman and her children. This woman often showed hospitality in her house, probably offering food and lodging to other Christians who were traveling in the area. John commended her for walking in the truth, but warned her that false teachers were also out and about. He wanted her to stand fast in her faith and not associate with those who taught falsehood. He probably had in mind the Gnostics, who denied that Christ was human or even that He had a physical body.

3 JOHN

Theme: Walk in Truth

Author: John

Verse: *I have no greater joy than to hear that my children walk in truth. (3 John 1:4)*

Date: A.D. 90

John wrote this letter to a man name Gaius, who also provided hospitality to traveling Christians. The apostle was very happy when he said to Gaius: I have heard ... *of the truth that is in you, just as you walk in the truth (3 John 1:3)*. But there was a man in the local church named Diotrephes who was opposed to Gaius' ministry. Evidently he wanted to be in charge and didn't want any interference from John or anybody else. John encourages Gaius to avoid Diotrephes and his faction and, instead, to imitate Demetrius, a man who ... *has a good testimony from all, and from the truth itself ... (3 John 1:12)*.

JUDE

Theme: Keep the Faith

Author: Jude

Verse: *Beloved, while I was very diligent to write to you concerning our common salvation, I found it necessary to write to you exhorting you to contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints. (Jude 1:3)*

Date: A.D. 70-80

We don't know very much about Jude. He is described as the brother of James, which would make him a half brother of Jesus Christ. He was writing to a group of believers who were under attack by false teachers ... *who turn the grace of our God into lewdness and deny the only Lord God and our Lord Jesus Christ (Jude 1:4)*.

These evil men were fellowshiping with the believers and tempting them to fall into sin. Jude reminded the believers that the apostles (Paul and Peter) had warned them in advance that this would happen. He compares the false teachers to Cain, Balaam and Korah, and, in some of the most descriptive language in the Bible, calls them ... *clouds without water, carried about by the winds; late autumn trees without fruit, twice dead, pulled up by the roots; raging waves of the sea, foaming up their own shame; wandering stars for whom is reserved the blackness of darkness forever (Jude 1:12-13)*.

Jude also reminded the believers how God has dealt with the wicked in the past: the Egyptians, the fallen angels, and the inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah. He used a lot of strong words, but he ended his short book with strong words of praise in Jude 1:24 for... *Him who is able to keep you from stumbling ... even in the face of strong opposition*.

REVELATION

Theme: Eternal Triumph

Author: John

Verse: *The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave Him to show His servants — things which must shortly take place. And He sent and signified it by His angel to His servant John. (Revelation 1:1)*

Date: Around A.D. 95

Through an angel, the Lord revealed to John a picture of events that would mark the end of the world as we know it and the manifestation of the kingdom of God. These events, while prophecies in their own right, give further details about other prophecies that appear throughout Scripture. As the end approaches, the world will become a place of unspeakable evil and misery. God will judge all sin and make things right. Satan will meet his final doom. Revelation depicts Jesus Christ in all His power and glory. It tells how He will return to conquer evil and set up His rule on the new heaven and new earth.

John opens with letters to seven churches. Each church is commended for the good it has done, counseled to clean up those things it has done wrong, and given promises for the future.

The book then describes the horrors of God's judgments on sinful man through the seven seals and the seven bowls. These are followed with a description of the Lord's second coming to earth and the final judgments of Satan and unbelievers. There are a lot of very frightening scenes in Revelation — because God is a God of justice. But He's also a God of grace and He had John write: ... *And let him who thirsts come. Whoever desires, let him take the water of life freely (Revelation 22:17)*.

In Chapters 21 and 22, we see how humans will finally realize the purpose for which we were created — to love, worship and enjoy the Lord in perfect fellowship forever.