

LIVING BETWEEN JESUS' FIRST COMING AND HIS RETURN – WHAT IS IN THE NEW TESTAMENT?



AS WE CONCLUDE “WAY OF DISCIPLESHIP”

we have seen how the daily life of a disciple, an “apprentice to Christ”, means growing in being with God, becoming like Christ and joining in with the Spirit. It is also about learning to pay attention to what God is saying and responding to Him.

The 23 books and letters in the New Testament (after the gospels), written over 30 to 40 years, give us the story of how early Christians lived as disciples who had experienced Jesus' first coming, and looked for His return.

The early Christians' historical situation (under the Roman Empire) is not the same as ours, and the challenges they had to deal with (can we include non-Jewish Christians in God's people?) were different – so some of the things in the New Testament have to be interpreted with this in mind.

But like them, we live as disciples in the same history-shaping time – the period between Christ being lifted up as Lord and giving us His Spirit and the “age to come”, when He returns. Only then will the whole story of the Bible will be complete as the plan God has always had for a restored people in a renewed world is fulfilled.

So the books and letters draw heavily on the story of Jesus, but are rooted in the whole story of the Bible – in ideas, images and language – showing how Jesus is the one who leads God's people out “Babylonian exile”, who rescues us from slavery, who becomes the Passover lamb, who re-creates us as a new people, a new temple and a new creation. Finally, humans are restored to rule the world together under God's love.



The story of how the church carried on Jesus' mission in Acts, the unpacking of the meaning of God's story through the letters, and the fierce victory over evil and promise of a renewed creation in Revelation can form us and help us have the mind of Christ as we follow Him in the world today.



BOOKS OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

After Acts (written by Luke as a continuation of his gospel) there are **21 letters**.

The 13 connected to **Paul** are ordered from the longest to the shortest, not by they were written. There is debate about whether Paul wrote six of them because of style, language and theological differences. The writer nevertheless attributed them to Paul for authority - a common practice at the time.

We don't know who wrote **Hebrews** but they seem to have known some of the first apostles.

There are letters by **James, Jude, Peter and John** (brothers of Jesus and two first followers).

The final book, **Revelation**, is a prophetic letter written to seven persecuted churches, filled with Old Testament imagery and with two perspectives. It gives comfort in their present sufferings, and finishes with the picture of God's future promise for all creation.

Book by book, with key Bible themes highlighted:

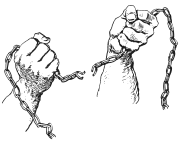
ACTS



The story of the first three decades after Jesus' ascension. Commissioned by Jesus, the disciples live **under God's rule** and begin to share the good news, inspired by the Spirit, and starting in _____.

In the second half of the book, through Paul the message begins to go "to the ends of the earth" - God's family is now a multi-ethnic community under the **Lordship of Christ**. The book ends with Paul's arrival in Rome.

ROMANS



Writing to Christians he does not yet know who are experiencing tensions, in his longest letter Paul lays out his foundational teaching - God's plan of **salvation** from the beginning, showing how Jesus is its _____, and the place of Israel within it.

It is a teaching that unites all Christians - Jewish and non-Jewish are all made righteous, as **one new humanity** in Christ. The last part of the letter unpacks what this means in their **life together**.

1 CORINTHIANS



Paul addresses five problems in the church (divisions and how Christ is the true centre, sexual behaviour, whether to eat meat sacrificed to idols and what "freedom" means, ordering _____ well, the reality of the resurrection). In each he shows how **every area of life is addressed by the good news**, and encourages the disciples to live in response - mostly by remembering that they are all members of the body of Christ and should behave towards one another with love.

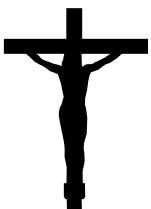
2 CORINTHIANS



Not the second letter he wrote to the Corinthians (maybe his fourth?), but an honest one in which Paul finalises reconciliation with the church there, defending his apostleship, despite its "weak" appearance. In Christ, true leadership is marked by humility and suffering.

So Paul challenges the Gentile Corinthians to be generous to Jewish Christians in need. He asks them to accept his _____ as one who is weak but in whom God's "**grace** is sufficient."

GALATIANS



Written into a particular situation - Jewish Christian evangelists were arguing that Gentile Christians needed to be circumcised. Paul's strongly rejects this "boundary marker", famously arguing that we are one multi-ethnic _____ in Christ through trusting in God what God has done for us, not by keeping certain laws.

Through faith we have been "crucified with Christ", **participating in Jesus' death and resurrection and made new**. This has always been God's plan through Abraham - the gift of the law to point us towards it. Christians no longer "keep laws", but are **transformed by the "fruit of the Spirit"**.

FIND THE WORDS
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MINISTRY

FULFILMENT

COMMUNITY

JERUSALEM

WORSHIP

EPHESIANS



Possibly a letter written for more than one church, and with similar content to Colossians. Paul lays out his understanding the story of the good news from the beginning, how in Jesus **God's plan to reconcile all things** reaches its climax.

This removes old barriers and results in the church as a **new unified humanity** and temple in Christ. He then _____ what this means living for a **new life in the Spirit** in everyday relationships, laying down our lives for each other, and being equipped to withstand spiritual attacks.

PHILIPPIANS



Written from prison to those under Roman rule, Paul offers a heartfelt and joyful vision of Jesus as an encouragement, a model to follow, and the route to true contentment. The disciple's **allegiance** is above all to Christ, to whom every knee will bow.

Compared to knowing Him personally everything else is "filth" and **dependence** on Him the source of joy and _____ in all things. His example of humility leads to a lifestyle of unity.

COLOSSIANS



Written from prison to a church he did not know, encouraging Christian living under huge cultural pressures. Paul draws on Old Testament promises to reveal Jesus as the centre of God's plan, the ruler and origin of creation, who is recreating a new multi-ethnic humanity and temple in His people, in whom He lives, and has **reconciled all things to God**.

God's _____ family no longer need the "boundary-markers" of Jewish laws about food, sacred days or circumcision - they are changed through the **resurrection**. One day their fully glory will be revealed when Christ returns and so in all their relationships - whether in families or even between slave and owner - they live in that **new identity**, in **anticipation of that future**, under Jesus as **Lord**.

1 THESSALONIANS



Written to the church in Thessalonica (where Paul had experienced persecution - Acts 17) from Paul, Silvanus and Timothy, expressing love and encouragement after Timothy had _____ of their continuing faith. Paul urges them to keep on living in **holiness** and **self-giving love**, motivated by the promise of Jesus' return.

2 THESSALONIANS



As the Thessalonians experience persecution and internal misunderstandings, Paul again urges them to persevere by trusting in God's final justice. The time of the final "Day of the Lord" is unknown, and beforehand there will be hardship, but they can trust that God has not abandoned them. Their response is not to cease working as they wait, but to work and serve to benefit others, as Paul himself modelled for them.

1 TIMOTHY



A letter from Paul to a young leader he has left in Ephesus. He encourages him to confront false teaching with confidence - genuine faith will naturally result in **transformed living**. Thus Paul gives _____ advice on integrity in leadership, affirming God's **creation as good**, serving those in need, particularly the most vulnerable, transforming **unjust structures** strategically, wealth and simple living. The aim is to bring glory to God in every part of life.

2 TIMOTHY



A more personal letter to Timothy, in which Paul is honest about his sufferings. Both he and Timothy must follow the example of Jesus in persevering, **being willing to sacrifice** themselves and bear the cost of being disciples.

Timothy must deal with false teachers who distort the hope of resurrection and trust in the God-inspired story of Scripture. In the darkness of the world Paul asks for Timothy's help and stands firm, _____ in Christ's presence.

TITUS



A personal letter to a church leader in Crete - a place with a reputation for lies. Believing in a trustworthy God, Titus should appoint leaders who have integrity and confront false teachers who continue to set up "boundary-markers" (circumcision) for Christians.

Christians **demonstrate God's kingdom** by living within their society, but _____ by the values of God's grace. By participating well within society, Christians can demonstrate the transforming nature of God's kingdom.

FIND THE WORDS
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PRACTICAL

THANKSGIVING

SHAPED

UNPACKS

TRUSTING

RENEWED

REPORTED

PHILEMON

Paul's shortest letter in which he applies the reality that **in Christ all are equal**, asking Philemon (who began the church in Colossae) to forgive a runaway slave, Onesimus, who has become a _____. Through Christ, Paul says that Onesimus is Philemon's brother in the Lord.

HEBREWS



An anonymous letter written to strengthen Christians wavering under persecution by helping them to "fix their eyes on Jesus". He is the fullest **revelation** of God's nature - with the ultimate authority to bring God's truth (more than angels), to lead all people into God's promise, to be the high priest who knows their _____ and to be the sacrifice who brings them into relationship with a faithful God. As such He is the only one to rely on and to hold on to in faith in the midst of suffering.

JAMES



Written by James the brother of Jesus who was a leader in the Jerusalem church, the letter explores the kind of heart and action of a disciple, drawing on Old Testament Wisdom literature like Proverbs. James urges disciples to live out godly wisdom, rather than earthly wisdom and to express their trust and devotion to Christ through practical action. In a time of great need, James _____ Christians to live whole and holy lives.

1 PETER



Writing from Rome to persecuted Christians, Peter, the "Rock" encourages them to live hope-filled lives. They are God's church, founded on the rock of Christ, living under His kingship. As God's chosen ones, baptised into a new identity and family, they can meet suffering with strength and _____ evil with faithfulness, putting God's kingdom on display.

2 PETER



Peter writes with the conviction that these might be his last words to church communities who are struggling with corrupt teaching and living. In poetic language, and with strong love, he meets challenges to the apostles' own authority, confronts false teaching and the apathy of those who are losing sight of God's promised return. He looks to a time when God will judge the world by removing evil and **renewing His creation**.

1 JOHN

A poetic sermon, drawn from Jesus' final words in the gospel of John (chapters 13-17), reaffirming who **Jesus is as God's son** and assuring **forgiveness**. John calls _____ to follow Him in holy living and **self-giving love**. Love of God leads to love of each other.

2 JOHN

John writes a short letter to 'the elect lady' and her children, encouraging them to walk in **love of God and each other**, and not to be taken in by false teachers.

3 JOHN

A short letter to Gaius, asking him to help in confronting a false _____ named Diotrephes.

JUDE

In only 24 verses Jude warns an early Jewish Christian community, using many Old Testament examples, of the dangers of false and corrupt teachers who distort God's grace. He urges them to stay alert to the faithfulness and love of God.

REVELATION

Written to seven churches undergoing fierce persecution, Revelation is a series of symbolic visions in the style of "apocalyptic" ("revealing") books such as Daniel and Ezekiel. Rather than being a codebook for the end of the world, Revelation has two aims. The first is to encourage disciples to see how the evil they are suffering under the Romans is part of a _____ throughout history - but that one day God will win. The other is to share the vision of **ultimate hope** to which the whole story of the Bible has been leading - the removal of all evil, renewing of God's creation, and the restoration of humanity to God, **ruling in His image** as He always intended. These two aims were written to strengthen Christians at the time, but offer a resource of hope and promise for Christians of every generation.

The violent and weird imagery of the book reveals how decisively God will deal with evil, but nevertheless this victory is won through self-sacrificial love. Key passages reveal the only one who can open the meaning of _____ as a lion who turns out to be the self-giving lamb (5:6), and that the Jesus who defeats God's enemies is covered not with their blood but His own (19: 11-16).

The story of the Bible ends with the promise that disciples can live in the light of that future: "the Lord God will give them light. And they will reign for ever and ever.....Come, Lord Jesus." (Revelation 22)

FIND THE WORDS
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ENCOURAGES

TEACHER

HISTORY

CHRISTIAN

PATTERN

SUFFERINGS

DISCIPLES

RESIST



DATES OF LETTERS AND BACKGROUND TO PAUL'S LETTERS.

This timeline is one possibility.

30	Crucifixion of Jesus
32	Conversion of Paul
35	Paul's first visit to Jerusalem
40s	Paul's mission and teaching in Antioch
48	Jerusalem Council (Gal 2 / Acts 15)
50-52	Paul's mission to Corinth and the Aegean 1 & 2 Thessalonians Galatians
52	Jerusalem visit
53-55	Paul's mission to Ephesus and the Aegean 1 & 2 Corinthians Philippians, Colossians and Philemon? Or later.
56	Further mission in the Aegean Romans
57	Paul arrested in Jerusalem
57-59	Paul in prison in Caesarea
59-60	Journey to Rome
60-62	Paul in prison in Rome Philippians, Colossians and Philemon? Or earlier. Ephesians – or later
62-63	Possible temporary release and further mission?
62-64	Probable date of Paul's execution Ephesians? Letters to Timothy and Titus?

