

The New Testament For Dummies Series

THE EPISTLES

Sunday Evening, April 2, 2006

! LETTERS are the earliest documents in the New Testament.

! For example, I Thessalonians dates to before 50 AD, twenty years *before* Mark's gospel.

! There are twenty-one separate letters (epistles) in the New Testament. Thirteen of those are from Paul (they are called Pauline epistles).

\$ Romans
\$ 1 and 2 Corinthians
\$ Ephesians
\$ Philippians
\$ Colossians
\$ Galatians
\$ 1 and 2 Thessalonians
\$ 1 and 2 Timothy
\$ Titus
\$ Philemon

(The identity of the writer to the Hebrews remains in question.)

Another seven letters are attributed to other apostles:

\$ 1 and 2 Peter
\$ 1, 2 and 3 John
\$ James
\$ Jude

! 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus are often referred to as *The Pastoral Epistles* as they are addressed to Paul's assistants who are youthful bishops (pastors) of local churches.

! THE CONTENT OF THESE EPISTLES IN SIMPLEST DESCRIPTION:

\$ Romans: Chapters 1 - 11 show that we are saved by faith. Chapters 12-16 are given to encourage the Romans to live the Christian life.

- \$ 1 and 2 Corinthians: These books were written to the church at Corinth. Paul founded (started) this church for all intents and purposes. First Corinthians tells of the many problems this church had (perhaps the most Pentecostal of all the European congregations). Paul tells the Corinthians to correct those problems. Second Corinthians shows that some of those problems had been overcome.
- \$ Galatians: This letter shows that Christians do not live under the law of Moses for salvation. We are justified by FAITH.
- \$ Ephesians, Philippians, and Colossians: These letters were written while Paul was in prison in Rome. The letters teach us that unity should be among Christians and that Christ is above and over all.
- \$ 1 and 2 Thessalonians: These letters deal with the second coming of Christ. Some Christians had stopped working since they thought Christ's return was that imminent. Paul told them they should continue to occupy until He indeed returns.
- \$ 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus: Timothy and Titus were two young preachers. They had been helping churches that Paul had established. He gave them great counsel in these letters, counsel that remains valid for all in the ministry.
- \$ Hebrews: This epistle shows clearly the greatness of the new covenant (grace) over the old covenant (the law), although it does not *exclude* the law.
- \$ James: He was a brother of Christ. The book was written to Jews who had become Christians. One of its main teachings is that faith without works is dead.
- \$ 1 Peter: This book was written to encourage those who were being persecuted for Christ's sake. It shows that it is eternally profitable to suffer for Christ.
- \$ 2 Peter: Warning is given against false teachers. It also teaches concerning the second coming of Christ.

\$ 1, 2, and 3 John: 1 John is mostly about love. 2 John is the shortest book in the Bible, addressed to “the elect lady.” 3 John is written to Gaius, whom John praises for his love for the Lord. Gaius is warned against Diotrophes.

FIRST AND SECOND CORINTHIANS

1. I have often been to Athens and Corinth. These two letters (epistles) were addressed to the church there after Paul had spent some time founding the church. *It is said by many historians that Corinth of that day was the SIN CENTER of the Roman Empire.* Its location is about 40 miles west of Athens on the narrow strip of land (called an isthmus between Peloponnesus and the mainland). It was a great naval center and commercial port for Greece.

The ruins were covered by debris and then a fishing village for hundreds of years until 1928 when an earthquake uncovered them.

2. The Corinth of Paul’s day was a splendid city of about 400,000 inhabitants. It had been built by Julius Caesar. The population was a composite of Greeks, Jews, Italians and a mixed multitude.

3. On top of the Corinthian acropolis stood the temple built for the Greek goddess Aphrodite (The Romans called her Venus). In the temple were a thousand priestesses who were actually prostitutes for the religion was primarily concerned with sex.

4. Greek philosophy was paramount there which preached hedonism - or the pleasure to yourself of riches, feelings, and selfishness.

5. Paul came to this city and declared: **1 Cor. 2:2**

For I determined not to know any thing among you, save Jesus Christ, and him crucified.

6. The historical story of Paul’s initial 18 months there is found in Acts 18:1-18.

7. Over a period of time, the Corinthians drifted from their original purpose and became overwhelmed with church problems. That happens when churches forget their calling.

Rinehard Bonnke: “The church in America has lost its bearings.”

GALATIANS

1. Galatia was a province of central Turkey. Paul visited the churches there on each of his three missionary journeys.

The population was made up of Gauls, a grouping that today would be from France, Belgium and the Netherlands. They were not unlike the temperament you would find in people today in the United States. One of their negative attributes was that they were incredibly fickle. In the Book of Acts we read that they wanted to make Paul a god one day and the next day they stoned him (Acts 14).

2. Legalism had infected the churches. The teaching was becoming in vogue that one had to somehow earn his salvation. It made Paul quite angry to be truthful about it.

From J. Vernon McGee: "This epistle is a declaration of emancipation from legalism of any type. Martin Luther claimed it was favorite epistle. It was on the masthead of the reformation. It is the manifesto of Christian liberty!" P. 149/Volume V/Through the Bible

3. The theme echos that of Habakkuk in the Old Testament: **THE JUST SHALL LIVE BY FAITH!**

EPHESIANS

1. The Book of Ephesians presents the Church as the Body of Christ.. Paul makes a strong case for the Church being God's masterpiece. It is more wonderful than any temple made by hands. Paul teaches that the Church will one day be lifted off this planet and presented to Christ as His bride.

2. Acts tells us of Paul's ministry in Ephesus (located on the western coastline of Turkey): **Acts 18:19**

And he came to Ephesus, and left them there: but he himself entered into the synagogue, and reasoned with the Jews.

3. Paul had an extensive teaching/evangelistic ministry headquartered in Ephesus. For several years he brought the Gospel to a wide area there. **IN ALL PROBABILITY,**

THE SEVEN CHURCHES ADDRESSED IN THE SECOND AND THIRD CHAPTERS OF REVELATION WERE FOUNDED BY PAUL DURING HIS TIME HEADQUARTERED IN EPHESUS.

2. Ephesus was the principal city of Asia Minor (Turkey). In all probability it was second only to Rome.
3. The city was the headquarters for the worship of Diana, the multi-breasted goddess of the area. Her temple was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world - FOUR TIMES LARGER THAN THE PARTHENON IN ATHENS. Gross immorality was performed inside that temple.
4. There was a major silver trade there as craftsmen made statues, large and small, of the goddess. Paul's ministry was so powerful that it had a major negative factor on the sale of Diana statues, causing the huge riot in the outdoor theater.

Acts 19:23-41

And the same time there arose no small stir about that way. [24] For a certain man named Demetrius, a silversmith, which made silver shrines for Diana, brought no small gain unto the craftsmen; [25] Whom he called together with the workmen of like occupation, and said, Sirs, ye know that by this craft we have our wealth. [26] Moreover ye see and hear, that not alone at Ephesus, but almost throughout all Asia, this Paul hath persuaded and turned away much people, saying that they be no gods, which are made with hands: [27] So that not only this our craft is in danger to be set at nought; but also that the temple of the great goddess Diana should be despised, and her magnificence should be destroyed, whom all Asia and the world worshippeth. [28] And when they heard these sayings, they were full of wrath, and cried out, saying, Great is Diana of the Ephesians. [29] And the whole city was filled with confusion: and having caught Gaius and Aristarchus, men of Macedonia, Paul's companions in travel, they rushed with one accord into the theatre. [30] And when Paul would have entered in unto the people, the disciples suffered him not. [31] And certain of the chief of Asia, which were his friends, sent unto him, desiring him that he would not adventure himself into the theatre. [32] Some therefore cried one thing, and some another: for the assembly was confused; and the more part knew not wherefore they were come together. [33] And they drew Alexander out of the multitude, the Jews putting him forward. And Alexander beckoned with the hand, and would have made his defence unto the people. [34] But when they knew that he was a Jew, all with one voice about the space of two hours cried out, Great is Diana of the Ephesians. [35] And when the townclerk had appeased the people, he said, Ye men of Ephesus, what man is there that knoweth not how that the city of the Ephesians is a worshipper of the great goddess Diana, and of the image which fell down from Jupiter? [36] Seeing then that these things cannot be spoken against, ye ought to be

quiet, and to do nothing rashly. [37] For ye have brought hither these men, which are neither robbers of churches, nor yet blasphemers of your goddess. [38] Wherefore if Demetrius, and the craftsmen which are with him, have a matter against any man, the law is open, and there are deputies: let them implead one another. [39] But if ye enquire any thing concerning other matters, it shall be determined in a lawful assembly. [40] For we are in danger to be called in question for this day's uproar, there being no cause whereby we may give an account of this concourse. [41] And when he had thus spoken, he dismissed the assembly.

5. The church at Ephesus was truly one of the greatest churches of all history. In his letter to the Ephesians, the first three chapters deal with our heavenly calling in Christ and contain strong doctrine. The last three chapters concern the Christian and his or her conduct in this world.

It is in this latter section that Paul gives us husbands God's definition of a real husband:

Ephes. 5:25

Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it;

Ephes. 5:33

Nevertheless let every one of you in particular so love his wife even as himself; and the wife see that she reverence her husband.

PHILIPPIANS

1. This is one of Paul's prison epistles. They are Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians and Philemon.

2. Paul ministered in Philippi on his second missionary journey. It was here that he and Silas took the Gospel for the first time into Europe. It was here that the two men were beaten and imprisoned after Paul cast the evil spirit out of the woman. There the two men sang at midnight, despite their pain, and there was an earthquake. The warden and his entire family were saved.

3. This letter (epistle) was an expression of thanksgiving for the Philippian believers. The only negative factor was Paul's admonition to two women Euodias and Syntyche.

4. The great heart of Paul was expressed magnificently in these writings:

Philip. 3:10-14

That I may know him, and the power of his resurrection, and the fellowship of his

sufferings, being made conformable unto his death; [11] If by any means I might attain unto the resurrection of the dead. [12] Not as though I had already attained, either were already perfect: but I follow after, if that I may apprehend that for which also I am apprehended of Christ Jesus. (From the Message: “I’m not saying that I have this all together, that I have it made. But I am well on my way, reaching out for Christ who has so wondrously reached out for me.”)

[13] Brethren, I count not myself to have apprehended: but this one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before, [14] I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus.

5. And Paul teaches us believers how to think in:

Philip. 4:8

Finally, brethren, whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things.

COLOSSIANS

1. It is believed that the church in Colosse (in Turkey/Asia Minor) probably met in a home - perhaps the home of Philemon.
2. Colosse was a fortress city. Rome ruled the world with its “pax Romana” (Roman peace) which relieved the necessity of strong defense against other nations. In the wake of such peace came paganism and gross immorality - not unlike we are seeing in America today.
3. We have no record that Paul ever actually visited Colosse, although he was in the vicinity on occasion. The founder of the church, probably under Paul’s guidance, was Epaphras.
4. The dominating teaching of Colossians is the magnificent of Christ. While I love the fact that the Gospel is “reasonable,” there must be heart-felt love for Jesus as well as head-knowledge. Colossians gives us the fragrance of Christ.

FIRST AND SECOND THESSALONIANS

1. After Paul and Silas had been beaten (nearly to death) in Philippi, they made their way a bit to the west to great city of Thessalonica (about 50 miles west of Philippi and

100 miles north of Athens.”

2. The city was originally named Therma because of hot springs in the area. However, when Alexander the Great died, one of his generals, Cassander, became ruler of the area and renamed the city in honor of his wife Thessalonike (who was the half-sister of Alexander the Great).

3. The church founded here by Paul was a high caliber congregation as Paul acknowledges: **1 Thes. 1:7**

So that ye were ensamples to all that believe in Macedonia and Achaia.

4. Paul was only in Thessalonica for about a month but during that time he opened the church there and taught them the great Christian doctrines. Enemies of the Gospel forced his departure from the city and he went on to Athens, leaving Timothy and Silas at Berea. From there Paul went to Corinth where he was rejoined by Timothy and Silas who brought him news of concerns in the church.

5. In 1 Thessalonians, Paul addressed the question of the rapture. Some of the believers in Thessalonica believed the rapture was so imminent they felt that believers who had died had somehow missed the “boat.” Paul taught them that the dead in Christ would rise in the rapture.

6. Three great helps are given in 1 Thessalonians: 1) Confirming young converts in the basics of their faith; 2) Encouragement to righteous living; and 3) information concerning Christ’s return.

7. In 2 Thessalonians, Paul taught concerning Christ’s coming Kingdom to this earth. Remember that the rapture and the second coming of Christ are NOT the same event. The rapture, which comes first, will result in our meeting the Lord IN THE AIR. At the second coming, we return TO THE EARTH with the Lord to set up his kingdom (the millennium - 1,000 years).

FIRST AND SECOND TIMOTHY

1. These two epistles, along with the following one to Titus, belong together and are known as the “pastoral epistles.”

2. In 1 Timothy, Paul deals with the doctrine of the church in chapter 1; in chapter 2 he is concerned with the order of the church (God demands that there be an order in His work on this earth); in chapter 3 we learn about the officers of the church; in chapter 4 Paul tells of the reproach of coming apostasy (falling away) in the church; in chapter 5

and 6 Paul describes the duties of the officers in the church.

3. In 2 Timothy, Paul deals with difficulties in the church body; in chapter 2 he describes the activities of an on-fire church; in chapter 3 he tells about “back-sliding” of a congregation and in chapter 4 we read Paul’s final will and testament, one of the most moving documents ever given to us in Scripture. It was written from well below Nero’s palace in the historic Mamertinium Prison.

T I T U S

1. Paul and Titus ministered together on the Island of Crete. **Titus 1:5**

For this cause left I thee in Crete, that thou shouldest set in order the things that are wanting, and ordain elders in every city, as I had appointed thee:

2. We have no record of this in ACTS which means we do not have a complete scriptural record of everything Paul did - just as we don’t have a full record of everything Jesus did. **John 21:25**

And there are also many other things which Jesus did, the which, if they should be written every one, I suppose that even the world itself could not contain the books that should be written. Amen.

3. While Timothy was a Jew, we know Titus was a Gentile.

4. The primary lessons from this little book are: 1) The church is to be an orderly institution; 2) The church is to teach and preach the Word of God (not “about” the Word but the WORD itself); and 3) And the saints in the church are to live godly lives.

5. I love Paul’s teaching here in Titus that we are to be “peculiar” (which does NOT mean strange or weird): **Titus 2:11-15**

For the grace of God that bringeth salvation hath appeared to all men, [12] Teaching us that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly, in this present world; [13] Looking for that blessed hope, and the glorious appearing of the great God and our Saviour Jesus Christ; [14] Who gave himself for us, that he might redeem us from all iniquity, and purify unto himself a peculiar people, zealous of good works. [15] These things speak, and exhort, and rebuke with all authority. Let no man despise thee.

P H I L E M O N

1. This is a personal letter from Paul to one man, Philemon, a very rich man who lived in Colosse. He had come under the ministry of Paul and had become a believer.

However, he was a slave owner.

2. The whole population of the Roman Empire was not more than several hundred million people, while sixty million were slaves. They were nothing more than property to their “owners,” treated like chattel.

3. One of Philemon’s slaves was a fellow named Onesimus. He ran away and ended up in the great metropolis of Rome, perhaps hoping to become just a face in the crowd. But in Rome he, too, came under the ministry of Paul. He was converted and confessed to being a runaway slave. Paul told him he had to obey the law and return to Philemon but he would send along a letter asking Philemon to treat him on a whole different basis:

Philemon 1:10-16

[11] He was useless to you before; now he's useful to both of us. [12] I'm sending him back to you, but it feels like I'm cutting off my right arm in doing so. [13] I wanted in the worst way to keep him here as your stand-in to help out while I'm in jail for the Message. [14] But I didn't want to do anything behind your back, make you do a good deed that you hadn't willingly agreed to.

[15] Maybe it's all for the best that you lost him for a while. You're getting him back now for good— [16] and no mere slave this time, but a true Christian brother! That's what he was to me—he'll be even more than that to you. – The Message

Now you will note that I have not covered Romans, Hebrews, James, I and II Peter, I, II and III John, or Jude. I will pick these up as a separate series a bit later.

Next Wednesday we will deal with the great book of REVELATION.