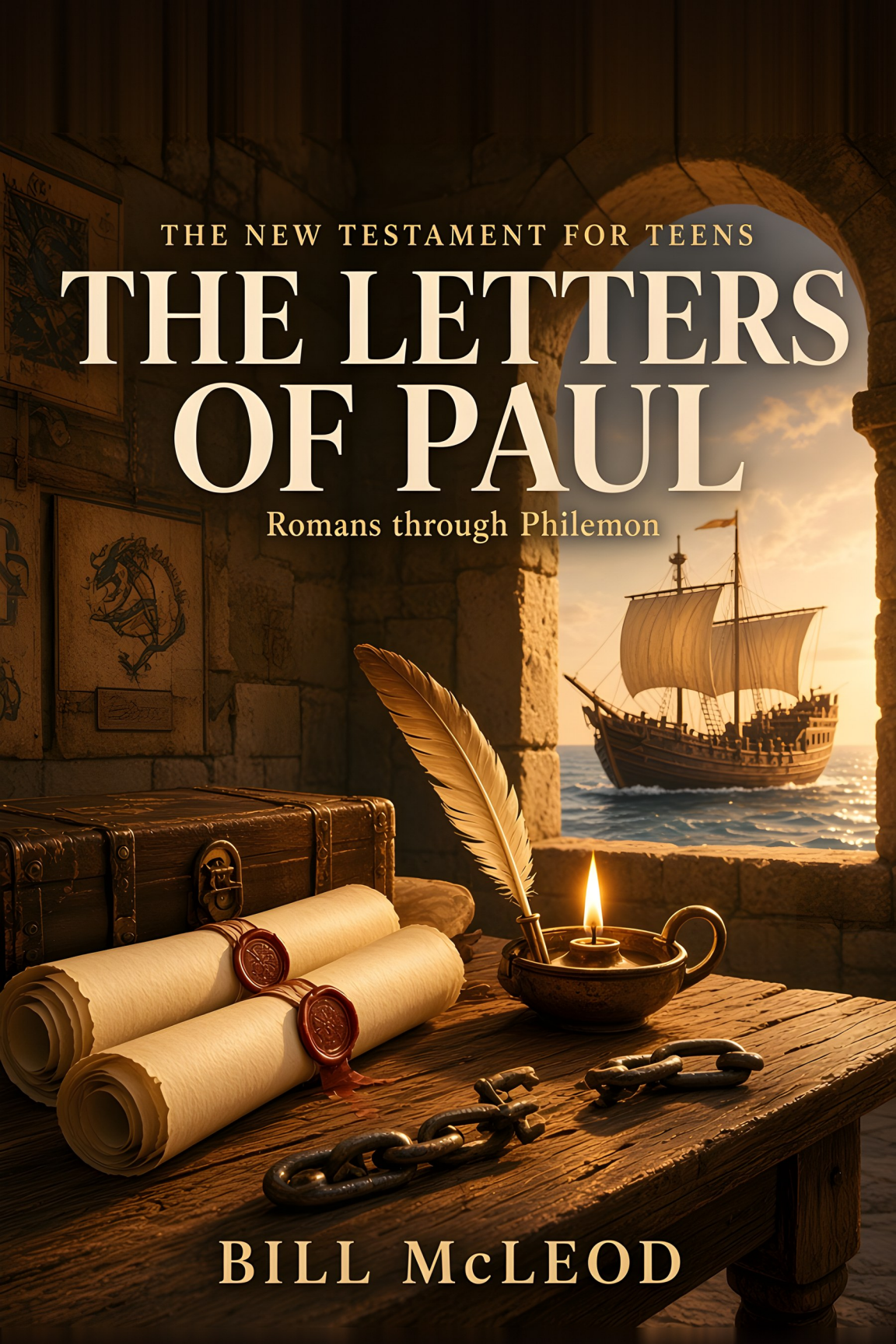
THE NEW TESTAMENT FOR TEENS
THE LETTERS OF PAUL
Romans through Philemon
BILL McLEOD

PAUL'S LETTER TO THE ROMANS

The King's Rescue Plan

Romans, Unfiltered

For teens who think they've heard it all

BILL McLEOD

Papa Bill Books

The King's Rescue Plan: Paul's Letter to the Romans, Unfiltered

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All Scripture quotations in this book are from the NIV. Some are abridged, with omissions marked by ellipses; paraphrases are not placed in quotation marks.

Pronouns referring to God the Father, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit are capitalized for reverence in the author's own words. Inside Scripture quotations, capitalization and wording follow the 2011 NIV exactly.

AI Disclosure. This book was written by Bill McLeod with the assistance of artificial intelligence tools for drafting, research, and editing. All content was reviewed and approved by the author, who takes full responsibility for it. Readers are encouraged to open the Scriptures and study them for themselves.

A WORD TO THE READER

Before You Start

If you've read the earlier books in this series, you know the saying by now: "If you want to get something done, hire a teenager while they still know it all." It's been in every book. It's not leaving now.

But this book is a little different, because Romans is a little different. Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, and Acts are stories. Romans is a letter. Nobody gets shipwrecked in it. Nobody walks on water. There are no prison breaks or riots. Instead, there's an argument, one long, carefully built explanation of what God has done through Jesus and why it changes everything.

Don't let that scare you off. Romans has changed more lives than almost any document ever written. A brilliant, wild young man named Augustine read a few lines of it in a garden in Italy and his life turned around. Martin Luther studied it, and what he found helped spark the Reformation. John Wesley heard someone read from Luther's preface to Romans and said his heart felt "strangely warmed." People who thought they knew it all have been knocked flat by this letter for two thousand years.

Romans answers the biggest questions people ask. What's wrong with the world? What's wrong with me? Is God fair? Can I ever be good enough? Why do I keep doing things I hate? Does God still care about the people who rejected Him? How am I supposed to live? Paul doesn't dodge any of them.

Here's the catch. You can't skim an argument. Each step builds on the one before it. If you skip chapter 3, chapter 5 won't make sense.

So take it slowly. Read a chapter of Romans, then read the chapter in this book that walks through it, then read Romans again. It's worth the effort. Romans is the King's rescue plan, laid out step by step.

How This Book Works

This book walks through all 16 chapters of Romans, in order, one chapter of this book for each chapter of the letter. Each one follows Paul's argument a step at a time, explains the hard words (justified, righteousness, grace, flesh), adds background about the world Paul and his readers lived in (Rome, its house churches, Jewish law and Roman life), and points out how each piece connects to the next.

Before chapter 1, a short section called Setting the Scene introduces Paul, the city of Rome, and the believers who first heard this letter read out loud. Don't skip it. Knowing who's in the room makes the letter come alive.

Each chapter ends with a Key Verse quoted word for word from the New International Version (NIV), the same translation used for every Scripture quotation in this book (pronouns for God are capitalized in the author's own words out of reverence; inside Scripture quotations, capitalization follows the NIV exactly); Real Talk questions to think through alone or argue about with friends; and sometimes a Try This challenge.

One more thing: this book is a guide, not a replacement. Keep a Bible open next to it and read each chapter of Romans for yourself. Paul wrote this letter to be read out loud to ordinary people, not to scholars. You can follow it. Don't take my word for it. Take His.

FOR THE ADULTS

A Note for Parents and Youth Leaders

Thank you for putting this book in a teenager's hands. Like the earlier books in this series, on Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, and Acts, it's written for readers who can smell a sermon coming a mile away. I've tried to write honestly, directly, with some humor, and with real respect for what these readers can handle.

Romans is the first letter in the series, so the format adapts. Instead of retelling events, each chapter traces Paul's argument through one chapter of Romans, in order, explaining key terms and connecting each step to the whole. Wherever Scripture is quoted directly, in the chapters and in the Key Verses, the wording is from the New International Version (NIV); elsewhere I paraphrase and explain. Background on Paul, Rome, and the early house churches is included where it helps, and I've tried to stay with what's well established rather than speculation.

Romans includes some of the most debated passages in the Bible: God's wrath and judgment, the struggle in chapter 7, election and God's choosing in chapter 9, the future of Israel in chapter 11, government in chapter 13, and Paul's words about sexuality in chapter 1. I have tried to present what the text says plainly and fairly, to note briefly where faithful Christians have understood a passage differently, and not to turn this book into a debate manual. These are good passages to talk through together.

Where the NIV notes that a verse is missing from the earliest manuscripts (Romans 16:24), or offers an alternative reading that matters for understanding (for example, 3:22, 5:1, 8:28, and 9:5), I've said so briefly, so that students aren't surprised when they see those notes in their own Bibles.

The Real Talk questions are designed for discussion. They work well for a youth group, a small group, a family dinner table, or a car ride. Don't rush to the right answer. Let them wrestle. Faith that has been thought through tends to last.

My prayer is that every reader will understand, maybe for the first time, that the gospel isn't good advice for people trying hard to be good. It's good news for people who know they can't be, and that nothing can separate them from the love of God in Christ Jesus.

Grace and peace,

Bill McLeod

Papa Bill Books

BEFORE YOU OPEN THE LETTER

Setting the Scene

Who Wrote It

The letter opens with its author's name: Paul. Before he met Jesus, he was Saul of Tarsus, a brilliant young Pharisee trained in Jerusalem, so serious about God's law that he hunted down Christians and dragged them to prison. Then, on the road to Damascus, the risen Jesus stopped him cold. (You can read the whole story in Acts 9.) The man who tried to destroy the church became its most famous missionary.

By the time he wrote Romans, Paul had been following Jesus for more than twenty years, and he had spent much of that time traveling the Roman world, planting churches in cities like Philippi, Thessalonica, Corinth, and Ephesus. He had been beaten, stoned, jailed, and shipwrecked. Thirteen of the New Testament's twenty-seven books carry his name, all of them letters. Romans is the longest, and most people would say it's the deepest.

When and Where

Most scholars date Romans to about AD 57. Paul was in Corinth, Greece, near the end of his third missionary journey (Acts 20 describes a three-month stay in Greece at about this time). He was staying with a believer named Gaius, and a man named Tertius wrote the letter down as Paul spoke it. That was normal. Letter writing in the ancient world often involved a trained scribe.

The letter was most likely carried to Rome by Phoebe, a leader in the church at Cenchreae, the port town just outside Corinth. Picture her traveling hundreds of miles by ship and road, carrying a scroll that would eventually change the world.

The City

Rome was the capital of the empire and the biggest city in the world, home to perhaps a million people. It had marble temples, public baths, chariot races, and the emperor's palace. It also had crowded, dangerous apartment blocks where most people lived, often several families to a building. A huge part of the population was enslaved, and many others were former slaves.

The emperor when Paul wrote was Nero. He was still young, and the worst of his reign was still ahead. About seven years later, after a great fire in Rome, Nero blamed the Christians and had many of them killed. Some of the people who first heard this letter read aloud likely died in that persecution. Keep that in mind when you read Romans 8 and Romans 13.

The House Churches

There were no church buildings. Believers met in homes, often in the house of a wealthier member who had room for a group. Romans 16 mentions a church that meets at the house of Priscilla and Aquila, and it greets several households and groups of believers. So the church in Rome was probably a network of small house churches spread across the city, maybe twenty to fifty people in each.

These groups were mixed: Jews and Gentiles, men and women, enslaved people and free people, all sharing a meal and worshiping together. That was unusual in the Roman world. It was also hard.

The Tension

Here's a piece of history that helps explain the whole letter. A Roman historian named Suetonius reports that the emperor Claudius expelled the Jews from Rome because of disturbances over someone he calls "Chrestus," which many scholars think is a garbled reference to Christ. Acts 18:2 mentions the same expulsion, in about AD 49. Priscilla and Aquila were among those forced to leave.

For about five years, the churches in Rome would have been mostly Gentile. When Claudius died in AD 54, Jewish believers began coming back. Imagine returning to your church and finding it run by people who eat different food, keep different days, and maybe think you're a little old-fashioned. Many scholars think this tension between Jewish and Gentile believers is a big part of why Paul wrote the way he did. Again and again, Romans says that God has no favorites, that everyone is in the same boat, and that Jews and Gentiles belong together.

Why Paul Wrote

Paul had never been to Rome. He hadn't started that church, and most of them had never met him. So why write them the longest letter he ever sent?

He tells us in chapter 15. He was about to take a gift of money to Jerusalem, and after that he planned to go to Spain, the far western edge of the known world. He wanted Rome to be his base and his support team. So he introduced himself by laying out the message he preached, carefully and completely. Along the way he dealt with the tension in the Roman churches and answered the objections people often raised against his message.

The Map

Romans is an argument, and it helps to see the whole shape before you start.

Chapters 1 to 4: The problem and the solution. Everyone, Jew and Gentile, has sinned and stands guilty before God. But God has provided a way to be made right with Him: by faith in Jesus, as a gift.

Chapters 5 to 8: The new life. What it means to be made right with God: peace, freedom from sin's control, the struggle that remains, and life in the Spirit, ending with the promise that nothing can separate us from God's love.

Chapters 9 to 11: The big question. If God's plan was always for Israel, why have so many of Paul's own people rejected Jesus? Has God's promise failed?

Chapters 12 to 16: The way to live. How people rescued by grace treat each other, their enemies, their government, and fellow believers they disagree with. Then Paul shares his plans and says hello to a long list of friends.

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CHAPTER 1

Not Ashamed

Romans 1

Letters in the ancient world started differently from ours. You didn't write Dear Rome at the top and sign your name at the bottom. You put your name first, then the people you were writing to, then a greeting. So Romans opens with a name: Paul. Then he tells us who he is in three phrases. He's a servant of Christ Jesus. He's been called to be an apostle. And he's been "set apart for the gospel of God."

The word gospel means good news. Before Paul even says hello, he's already explaining what that news is about. It's about God's Son, who came as a human descendant of King David, and who was shown to be the Son of God with power when He rose from the dead. In other words, before he gets to anything else, Paul puts Jesus at the center.

Then he finally greets his readers: "To all in Rome who are loved by God and called to be his holy people: Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ." Grace and peace. Keep those two words in mind. The whole letter is going to explain them.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Servant or Slave?**

The Greek word Paul uses to describe himself, doulos, can mean servant, but it often meant slave. In Rome, where a huge part of the population was enslaved, everyone listening would have known exactly what it meant. A doulos didn't belong to himself. Paul could have introduced himself by his education, his family, or his accomplishments. Instead he leads with this: I belong to Jesus.

Paul tells them he thanks God for them, because their faith is being talked about all over the world. He prays for them constantly. He's wanted to visit for years, but something has always gotten in the way. He wants to strengthen them, and then he quickly adds that he wants them to strengthen him too. He's not coming as a celebrity. He's coming as a brother.

Then comes the sentence many people think is the theme of the whole letter: "For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes: first to the Jew, then to the Gentile."

Why would anyone be ashamed of the gospel? Think about it from a Roman point of view. Christians worshiped a Jewish man who had been executed on a Roman cross. Crucifixion was the most humiliating death the empire had. It was reserved for slaves, rebels, and the lowest criminals. Telling people in Rome, the capital of the world, that a crucified man was Lord sounded ridiculous. Paul knew it. He says it anyway. The message may sound weak, but it's actually God's power.

And it's for everyone who believes. Not everyone who's smart enough, or good enough, or from the right family. Everyone who believes.

In the gospel, Paul says, "the righteousness of God is revealed." That's a big word, and you'll see it over and over in Romans, so let's slow down. Righteous means right, the way things should be. God is righteous: He is completely right and good, and He always does what is right. But God's righteousness also means His way of making things right, including making wrong people right with Him. And the way it comes, Paul says, is by faith from start to finish. He quotes the prophet Habakkuk: "The righteous will live by faith."

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **The Gentiles**
>
> In the Bible, the word Gentiles simply means everyone who isn't Jewish. For centuries, God's people Israel had lived as a separate nation, with the law of Moses, circumcision, food laws, and the Sabbath marking them off from the nations around them. One of the biggest questions in the early church was how Gentiles fit into God's people. Did they have to become Jewish first? Paul's answer runs all through Romans.

Then Paul turns a corner, and the tone changes fast. "The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of people, who suppress the truth by their wickedness."

Wrath sounds harsh, but think about it this way. A God who didn't care about evil wouldn't be good. If someone hurt a person you love, you'd want a judge who cared. God's wrath is His settled, holy opposition to everything that destroys what He made.

Before Paul can say how good the good news is, he has to explain how bad the bad news is. That's what the next three chapters are about.

He starts with humanity in general. People can't claim they never knew God existed, Paul says. Creation itself shows it. You can look at the stars, a storm, a newborn baby, or the way your own body works, and see that Someone made this. God's "eternal power and

divine nature" have been "clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse."

But people didn't respond by thanking Him. They pushed Him away. "Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools." They took the glory that belongs to God and gave it to idols made to look like people and animals. They traded the truth for a lie. Then Paul uses a phrase three times that's chilling: God "gave them over." He let them have what they wanted.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **A Hard Passage**
>
> Romans 1:26–27 is one of the passages in the Bible that speaks about same-sex sexual relationships, and today it's one of the most discussed. Most Christians throughout history have read Paul as saying such relationships go against God's design. Others today read the passage differently. Whatever you think, notice two things. First, Paul is describing all of humanity, not one group, and the list that follows includes gossip, greed, envy, arrogance, and disobeying parents. Second, Paul's very next words will turn to the people nodding along and say: you have no excuse either. Talk this passage through with a parent or youth leader you trust.

The chapter ends with a long list of what happens when people push God away. Greed. Envy. Murder. Lies. Gossip. Slander. Arrogance. Bragging. Inventing new ways to do evil. Disobeying parents. Having no love and no mercy. It's an ugly list, and if you read it honestly, you probably found yourself somewhere in it.

That's the point. Paul isn't describing those people over there. He's describing the human race. And he's about to make that very clear.

KEY VERSE

For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes: first to the Jew, then to the Gentile.

Romans 1:16 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Have you ever been embarrassed to say you believe in Jesus? What made it feel that way?
2. Paul says creation shows that God exists. What in the natural world makes you think most about God?
3. Read the list at the end of the chapter again. Which item on it is the easiest to excuse in yourself? Why?

TRY THIS *Go outside tonight and look at the sky for five full minutes with your phone put away. Then thank God for one specific thing you see.*

CHAPTER 2

Pointing Fingers

Romans 2

Imagine you're in a house church in Rome, listening to someone read Paul's letter out loud for the first time. Chapter 1 ends with that long list of sins: idols, immorality, murder, envy. If you were a Jewish believer, or a Gentile who had cleaned up your life, you might be nodding along. Yes. Those people. That's what's wrong with the world.

Then Paul turns and points at you.

"You, therefore, have no excuse, you who pass judgment on someone else, for at whatever point you judge another, you are condemning yourself, because you who pass judgment do the same things."

Paul has set a trap, and the judgmental reader just walked into it. It's easy to see other people's sins. It's much harder to see our own. And the very fact that we judge others shows that we know the difference between right and wrong, which means we're without excuse when we do wrong ourselves.

Paul warns that God's judgment is based on truth. You can't escape it by pointing at someone worse. And then he asks a question that should stop us all: "do you show contempt for the riches of his

kindness, forbearance and patience, not realizing that God's kindness is intended to lead you to repentance?"

Some people think God's patience means He doesn't care. Paul says the opposite. God's patience is a gift. Every day He doesn't judge you is a day He's giving you to turn back to Him.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Repentance**
>
> Repentance isn't just feeling bad. The Greek word means a change of mind, and in the Bible it means turning around: you were walking away from God, and you turn and walk toward Him. Feeling sorry can be part of it, but the heart of repentance is a change of direction.

Then Paul explains how God judges. He will repay each person according to what they have done. To those who keep on doing good, seeking glory, honor, and immortality, He gives eternal life. To those who are self-seeking, reject the truth, and follow evil, there will be wrath. And He does this for everyone the same way, "first for the Jew, then for the Gentile." "For God does not show favoritism."

Wait, you might think. Isn't Paul going to say we're saved by faith, not by what we do? He is. But first he has to show that nobody actually meets this standard. If you could keep on doing good, all the time, from the heart, you'd be fine. The question is whether anyone does. Keep reading.

Paul says Gentiles who never had the law of Moses will be judged without it, and Jews who had the law will be judged by it. Having God's law isn't enough. Hearing it isn't enough. What counts is doing it. And Gentiles who don't have the written law still show that God's requirements are "written on their hearts." That's what your conscience is: a built-in sense of right and wrong that sometimes accuses you and sometimes defends you.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Law**

When Paul says the law, he usually means the law God gave Israel through Moses: the Ten Commandments and the hundreds of other commands in the first five books of the Bible. It covered worship, sacrifices, food, festivals, justice, and everyday life. For Jewish people, the law was a precious gift. It showed them who God was and how to live as His people. Paul never says the law is bad. His point is that having it doesn't make anyone right with God.

Now Paul speaks directly to a Jewish reader. You call yourself a Jew. You rely on the law. You brag about your relationship with God. You know His will. You think of yourself as a guide for the blind and a light for people in the dark. Great. Then Paul asks a series of hard questions. You teach others; do you teach yourself? You preach against stealing; do you steal? You say don't commit adultery; do you? You hate idols; do you rob temples? When God's people break His law, the Gentiles look at them and mock God. Paul quotes the prophets: "God's name is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you."

That should make any religious person uncomfortable, including church kids. It's possible to know all the right answers, have a Bible app full of highlights, and still live in a way that makes people think less of God.

Then Paul talks about circumcision, the physical sign God gave Abraham's family. It has value, he says, if you keep the law. But if you break it, it's as though you were never circumcised. What matters is not the outside but the inside. True circumcision is "circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit." A person like that gets praise "not from other people, but from God."

Notice where the argument is going. In chapter 1, the irreligious world was guilty. In chapter 2, the religious world is guilty too. There's no group left to hide behind.

KEY VERSE

Or do you show contempt for the riches of his kindness, forbearance and patience, not realizing that God's kindness is intended to lead you to repentance?

Romans 2:4 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Why is it so much easier to notice other people's sins than our own?
2. Paul says God's kindness is meant to lead us to repentance. How is that different from thinking God's patience means He doesn't care?
3. Is there a way you live that might make people who don't believe think less of God? What would change if that changed?

CHAPTER 3

Not Even One

Romans 3

At the end of chapter 2, a Jewish listener might be getting frustrated. Paul, if being Jewish doesn't make you right with God, then what's the point? Was God's promise to Israel worthless?

Paul answers in a rapid back-and-forth, like a debate. He often writes this way, raising objections someone might throw at him and then answering them. "What advantage, then, is there in being a Jew?" "Much in every way!" Above all, Israel was trusted with the very words of God. And if some of them were unfaithful, that doesn't cancel out God's faithfulness. "Let God be true, and every human being a liar."

Someone might push it further. If my sin makes God's goodness look even better by contrast, why should He punish me? Shouldn't I get credit for helping Him look good? Paul says some people even accused him of teaching, let's do evil so good can come of it. He doesn't waste time on it. People who argue that way deserve the judgment they get.

Then Paul gives his verdict. Jews and Gentiles alike "are all under the power of sin." He backs it up with a string of quotes from the Psalms and Isaiah, like a prosecutor reading the evidence. "There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands;

there is no one who seeks God." The quotes move through the human body: throats like open graves, tongues that lie, lips with poison, mouths full of cursing, feet quick to shed blood, eyes with no fear of God.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Building a Case**
>
> Paul was a trained Jewish teacher, and Romans 3:10–18 is a technique rabbis used: stringing together verses from different parts of Scripture on the same theme. Paul pulls from at least five Psalms and from Isaiah. His audience would have recognized the lines. He's showing that the Scriptures themselves say the same thing he's saying: humanity's problem isn't new, and it isn't limited to one group.

The law speaks, Paul says, so "that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world held accountable to God." Picture a courtroom. The defense has nothing left to say. Nobody can be declared right in God's sight by keeping the law, because the law's main job here is to show us our sin, like a mirror that shows you the dirt on your face but can't wash it off.

And then come two of the most important words in the Bible: "But now."

"But now apart from the law the righteousness of God has been made known." After three chapters of bad news, the good news breaks through. God has made a way for people to be made right with Him, and it doesn't depend on keeping the law. It comes "through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe." "There is no difference between Jew and Gentile, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus."

Read that again slowly. All have sinned. That's the bad news, and it's universal. All are justified freely. That's the good news, and it's just as universal for everyone who believes.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Three Big Words**
>
> Justified is a courtroom word. It means declared not guilty, declared righteous. It's what a judge does. Grace means a gift you don't deserve. You can't earn a gift, or it isn't a gift. Redemption is a marketplace word. It meant buying back something, or paying the price to set a slave free. In Rome, where so many people were enslaved, everyone knew what redemption meant.

How can God declare guilty people not guilty without being a corrupt judge? Paul explains: God presented Jesus "as a sacrifice of atonement, through the shedding of his blood." The NIV footnote says the Greek word points to the cover of the ark of the covenant, the place in the temple where the high priest sprinkled blood once a year on the Day of Atonement. Jesus is where sin is dealt with and God's anger at sin is satisfied.

That's how God can be both "just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus." He doesn't pretend sin doesn't matter. He takes it seriously enough to pay for it Himself.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Faith in, or Faithfulness of?**
>
> The NIV says righteousness comes "through faith in Jesus Christ." A footnote gives another possible translation: "through the faithfulness of" Jesus Christ. The Greek can be read either way, and scholars disagree about which Paul meant. Both are true, and both are in Romans: we are saved by trusting Jesus, and we are saved because Jesus was faithful to God all the way to the cross.

So where's the room for bragging? Gone. "It is excluded." If we're made right by faith and not by our performance, nobody gets to show off. And since there is only one God, He is the God of Jews and Gentiles both, and He makes them right with Him the same way.

Does that mean the law is useless? Paul says no. Faith actually upholds the law. He'll explain how in the next chapter, using the most famous Jewish ancestor of all.

KEY VERSE

for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.

Romans 3:23–24 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Paul describes sin moving through the whole body: throat, tongue, lips, mouth, feet, eyes. Why do you think he described it that way?
2. Some people think they're basically good. How would Paul answer them?
3. What's the difference between being forgiven by a judge who pretends your crime didn't matter, and being forgiven by one who paid your fine himself?

CHAPTER 4

Father Abraham

Romans 4

If you were a Jewish believer in Rome, you might have one more objection. Paul, this faith thing sounds new. Our whole history is built on Abraham, and Abraham was circumcised. Didn't God accept him because of what he did?

Paul's answer is brilliant. He goes right to Abraham's story in Genesis, the most respected example he could choose, and shows that Abraham proves his point.

"What does Scripture say? 'Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.'"

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Credited**
>
> The word credited is a bookkeeping term. It means to put something on someone's account. The Greek word behind it shows up eleven times in this chapter. When you work a job, your paycheck isn't a gift. You earned it. But when someone deposits money into your account that you didn't earn, that's a gift. Paul says righteousness works the second way. God puts it on the account of people who trust Him.

If Abraham had been made right with God by his good works, he'd have something to brag about. But Scripture says he believed God, and God counted his faith as righteousness. Paul puts it this way: to someone who works, wages are owed. But to the one who doesn't

work but trusts God "who justifies the ungodly," their faith is credited as righteousness.

God justifies the ungodly. Not the people who've gotten their act together. The ungodly. That's the only kind of people there are, according to chapter 3, so that's very good news.

Paul brings in a second witness: King David. David knew what it was to fail badly. He had committed adultery and arranged a murder. And he wrote in a psalm, "Blessed are those whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered." David knew the happiness of someone whose sins the Lord doesn't count against them.

Then Paul makes a sharp point about timing. When was Abraham credited as righteous? Before or after he was circumcised? Before! Genesis 15, where Abraham believes God, comes years before Genesis 17, where he is circumcised. So circumcision wasn't what made him right with God. It was a sign, a seal of the righteousness he already had by faith.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Abraham's Story**
>
> Abraham lived around 2000 BC, give or take. God called him to leave his home in Mesopotamia and go to a land He would show him. God promised to make him into a great nation and to bless all the peoples of the earth through him. The problem was that Abraham and his wife Sarah had no children, and they were getting very old. Abraham was about a hundred and Sarah about ninety when their son Isaac was finally born.

That means Abraham is the father of everyone who believes, Paul says. He's the father of uncircumcised Gentiles who trust God, and the father of Jews who follow in the footsteps of his faith. He's not just the ancestor of one nation. "He is the father of us all."

This would have mattered a lot in Rome's mixed house churches. A Gentile believer could look at Abraham and say: he's my father too. A Jewish believer could look at a Gentile and say: we're family.

Then Paul describes what Abraham's faith was actually like, and it's worth noticing, because it's not wishful thinking. "Against all hope, Abraham in hope believed." He looked at the facts honestly. He knew his body was as good as dead and Sarah was past childbearing. He didn't pretend. But he didn't waver. He trusted God, the One "who gives life to the dead and calls into being things that were not."

Faith isn't believing something with no evidence. It's trusting Someone who has proven He keeps His word, even when the situation looks impossible.

The words it was credited to him, Paul says, weren't written for Abraham alone. They were written for us too, for everyone who believes in the God "who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead." And the chapter ends with a beautiful summary of what Jesus did: "He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification."

Chapters 1 through 4 are the foundation. Everyone has sinned. Everyone can be made right with God as a gift, through faith in Jesus, just like Abraham. Now Paul is ready to talk about what that means for the rest of your life.

KEY VERSE

Yet he did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God, but was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God, being fully persuaded that God had power to do what he had promised.

Romans 4:20–21 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. What's the difference between a wage and a gift? Why does Paul say being right with God has to be a gift?
2. Abraham faced the facts honestly and still trusted God. Is there a situation in your life where that kind of faith is hard right now?
3. Paul says Abraham is the father of all who believe, whatever their background. How should that change the way Christians from different backgrounds treat each other?

CHAPTER 5

Peace with God

Romans 5

Chapter 5 begins with one of Paul's favorite words: therefore. When you see therefore in Romans, ask what it's there for. It means Paul is about to draw a conclusion from everything he's just said. Since we've been made right with God by faith, here's what follows.

"Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ."

Peace with God isn't the same as feeling peaceful. It's a change in your relationship with Him. In chapters 1 to 3, humanity was at war with God, and God's wrath stood against our sin. Now, through Jesus, the war is over. You're not His enemy anymore.

> BACKGROUND CHECK **We Have, or Let Us Have?**
>
> The NIV footnote on 5:1 says that many manuscripts read let us have peace instead of we have peace. In Greek, the two words differ by a single letter, and they sounded almost the same when read aloud. Most modern translations go with we have, because it fits Paul's argument: peace with God is a fact Jesus has accomplished, not something we work up. Either way, the point stands. Through Jesus, the war is over.

Through Jesus we've also "gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand." In the ancient world, you couldn't just walk in to see a king. You needed someone to bring you in. Jesus brings us

into God's presence, and now we stand in grace. It's not a place you visit now and then. It's where you live.

And then Paul says something surprising. We don't only boast in the hope of God's glory. "We also glory in our sufferings." Really? Why would anyone celebrate suffering?

Paul explains: "suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope." He's not saying pain is good. He's saying God uses it. Hard times build endurance. Endurance shapes who you are. And a person who has been through hard things with God learns that His promises hold. "And hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit."

Remember who was listening. Christians in Rome lived with insults, poverty, and danger. Within a few years, some of them would die for their faith. Paul isn't writing greeting-card optimism. He's writing to people who knew what suffering was.

Then Paul shows just how big God's love is. When we were still powerless, at just the right time, Christ died for the ungodly. Think about how rare it is for someone to die for another person. Maybe, Paul says, someone might dare to die for a really good person. "But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us."

Not after we cleaned up. Not because we were worth it. While we were still sinners. While we were enemies.

And if God did that for His enemies, Paul argues, how much more will He keep us safe now that we're His friends? If Jesus' death brought us back to God, His life will surely carry us all the way home.

BACKGROUND CHECK **How Much More**

Watch for the phrase how much more in Romans 5. Paul uses it again and again. It's a way of arguing from the lesser to the greater. If God did the hard thing (loved and saved His enemies), how much more will He do the easier thing (keep and protect His children)? The logic is meant to give you confidence.

The second half of the chapter goes all the way back to the beginning of the Bible. "Sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all people, because all sinned."

The one man is Adam. In Genesis 3, Adam disobeyed God, and everything broke. Sin and death spread to the whole human race. Paul calls Adam "a pattern of the one to come," meaning Jesus. Adam and Jesus are like two heads of two families. Everyone starts out in Adam's family, which leads to death. But Jesus starts a new family.

Paul sets them side by side. One man's disobedience made many sinners. One man's obedience will make many righteous. One trespass brought condemnation. One righteous act brought justification and life. But the two aren't equal. "The gift is not like the trespass." Grace is far bigger than sin.

The law was added, Paul says, so that sin would show up for what it was. "But where sin increased, grace increased all the more." Whatever you've done, however much sin has piled up, God's grace is deeper.

KEY VERSE

Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ,

Romans 5:1 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. What's the difference between feeling peaceful and having peace with God?
2. Paul says suffering can produce perseverance, character, and hope. Have you seen that happen in your life or in someone else's?
3. Christ died for us while we were still sinners. Why does it matter that God didn't wait for us to get better first?

TRY THIS *Write down one hard thing you're going through. Under it, write one way God might be using it to build perseverance or character in you.*

CHAPTER 6

Dead and Alive

Romans 6

Right after Paul says grace is bigger than sin, he knows exactly what some people will think. Great! If more sin means more grace, let's sin as much as we want. God loves to forgive, and I love to sin. It's a perfect arrangement.

"What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase?"

"By no means!" Paul's answer is the strongest no he can give. Some older translations say God forbid. The NIV says by no means. It's a phrase Paul uses when an idea is so wrong it's offensive.

Why? Because "we are those who have died to sin; how can we live in it any longer?"

Paul explains using baptism. When people were baptized in the early church, they usually went all the way under the water and came back up. Paul says that's a picture of something real. When you were baptized into Christ, you were baptized into His death. You went down into the grave with Him. And just as Christ was raised from the dead, you came up to "live a new life."

> BACKGROUND CHECK **Baptism in the Early Church**
>
> In the first churches, baptism usually happened right after someone believed, often the same day, as you can see again and again in Acts. It was a public

way of saying, I belong to Jesus now. Going under the water pictured dying and being buried with Christ. Coming up pictured rising to new life. For Jewish and Gentile believers in Rome, it was the same baptism. Everyone went under the same water.

Here's the logic. Your old self, the person you were under sin's control, "was crucified with him." That person died. And someone who has died is set free from sin. A dead person can't be bossed around anymore.

So Paul gives a command. "Count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus." The word count is that bookkeeping word again, the same one he used about Abraham in chapter 4. It means to consider something true because it is true. You're not pretending. You're believing what God says about you.

That means sin doesn't get to be in charge anymore. Don't hand over your eyes, your hands, your mouth, or your phone to sin as tools for doing wrong. Instead, offer every part of yourself to God as tools for doing right. "For sin shall no longer be your master, because you are not under the law, but under grace."

Then Paul asks the question a second time, slightly differently. Since we're not under the law but under grace, can we sin? Again: "By no means!"

BACKGROUND CHECK **Slavery in Rome**

Paul's readers knew slavery from the inside. Some of them were enslaved. Others had been. In Rome, slaves did everything from scrubbing floors to managing businesses and teaching children. A slave was owned. Their time, their work, and their bodies belonged to someone else. When Paul talks about being slaves to sin or slaves to righteousness, he says he's using an example from everyday life. His point isn't to approve of slavery. It's that everyone serves someone.

Here's the hard truth Paul wants us to see. Nobody is truly independent. You will obey something. You might obey your desires, your friends, your fears, or your need to be liked. You might obey God. "When you offer yourselves to someone as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one you obey."

So whose slave do you want to be? Paul asks what you ever got from serving sin. Things you're now ashamed of. And where does that road end? In death. But serving God leads to holiness, and the end is eternal life.

Then Paul sums it up in a single sentence, one of the most famous in the Bible: "For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord."

Notice the difference. Sin pays wages. You earn them. And the paycheck is death. Eternal life isn't a paycheck. It's a gift.

KEY VERSE

In the same way, count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus.

Romans 6:11 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Some people think that if God always forgives, they can do whatever they want. Why is that the wrong conclusion from grace?
2. Paul says everyone serves something. What are some masters teenagers serve without realizing it?
3. What would it look like this week to offer your phone, your mouth, or your free time to God as a tool for doing good?

CHAPTER 7

The War Inside

Romans 7

Chapter 7 is one of the most honest chapters in the Bible. If you've ever thought, why do I keep doing the thing I promised myself I'd stop doing, Paul gets it.

He starts with an example from marriage law. A married woman is bound to her husband as long as he lives. If he dies, she's free to marry someone else. In the same way, Paul says, you "died to the law through the body of Christ," so that you could belong to someone else: to Jesus, who was raised from the dead.

Then he anticipates another objection. If we had to die to the law to be free, is the law evil? "Certainly not!" The law isn't the problem. The problem is what sin does with it.

Paul uses his own experience. He wouldn't have really known what coveting was if the law hadn't said, "You shall not covet." But as soon as he heard the command, sin used it to stir up every kind of coveting in him.

You know how this works. Tell a kid not to touch something, and suddenly it's the only thing they want to touch. A sign that says wet paint, do not touch, practically begs you to touch it. The command is good. But something in us rebels against it. "So then, the law is

holy, and the commandment is holy, righteous and good." The problem is in us.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **The Flesh**
>
> The NIV often translates the Greek word sarx, which literally means flesh, as sinful nature. A footnote explains that in passages like this, flesh refers to the sinful state of human beings, often presented as a power in opposition to the Spirit. Paul doesn't mean your body is bad. He means the part of fallen human nature that pulls away from God.

And then comes the famous struggle. "I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do." Paul wants to do good. He even delights in God's law in his inner being. But he sees another law at work in him, waging war against his mind, making him a prisoner of sin.

Read verses 15 to 23 slowly, and you'll probably hear yourself. I know I shouldn't say that, and I say it anyway. I promised I'd stop, and I didn't. I want to be different, and I'm not. It's frustrating, and it can make you feel hopeless.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Who Is the "I" in Romans 7?**
>
> Christians have debated this for centuries. Some think Paul is describing his life before he knew Jesus, looking back as a Jewish man trying to keep the law by his own strength. Others think he's describing the ongoing struggle of a believer who still battles sin. Others think Paul is speaking for Israel, or for anyone trying to live by the law alone. Good, faithful people hold each view. Whatever you decide, every Christian knows the struggle is real, and every Christian needs chapter 8.

Paul ends the struggle with a cry. "What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body that is subject to death?"

He doesn't ask what will rescue him. He asks who. And he answers right away: "Thanks be to God, who delivers me through Jesus Christ our Lord!"

The answer to the war inside isn't a better technique, a stricter rule, or more willpower. It's a person. Jesus. And in the next chapter, Paul will explain how Jesus, by His Spirit, does what the law never could.

KEY VERSE

What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body that is subject to death? Thanks be to God, who delivers me through Jesus Christ our Lord!

Romans 7:24–25 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Have you ever wanted to do the right thing and done the opposite? What was going on inside you?
2. Why do you think being told not to do something can make us want to do it more?
3. Paul asks who will rescue me, not what. Why does that difference matter?

CHAPTER 8

No Condemnation

Romans 8

If Romans were a mountain range, chapter 8 would be the highest peak. Many Christians call it their favorite chapter in the Bible. It starts with no condemnation and ends with no separation, and everything in between is about the Holy Spirit.

"Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus."

After the struggle of chapter 7, this is like sunlight. Condemnation means the guilty verdict and the sentence that goes with it. Paul says that for people who belong to Jesus, there is none. Not reduced. None. Your worst day doesn't change it. Your best day doesn't earn it.

How? The law couldn't do it, because our sinful nature made us too weak to keep it. So God did what the law couldn't. He sent His own Son in a human body like ours to be an offering for sin. Jesus took sin's condemnation on Himself, so that God's righteous requirement could be met in us, as we live by the Spirit.

> BACKGROUND CHECK **The Spirit in Romans 8**
>
> In chapters 1 to 7, the Holy Spirit is mentioned only a few times. In chapter 8, the Spirit shows up again and again. The Spirit gives life, lives in believers, leads them, assures them they're God's children, helps them in weakness,

and prays for them. Paul is showing that the Christian life isn't you trying really hard for God. It's God living in you.

Paul describes two ways of living. One is set on what the flesh wants, and it leads to death. The other is set on what the Spirit wants, and it leads to "life and peace." And if you belong to Jesus, His Spirit lives in you. The same Spirit who raised Jesus from the dead will give life to your mortal body too.

Then Paul says something amazing about who you are. "For those who are led by the Spirit of God are the children of God." You didn't receive a spirit that makes you a frightened slave. You received the Spirit of adoption. And by Him "we cry, 'Abba, Father.'"

BACKGROUND CHECK **Adoption in Rome**

The NIV footnote says the Greek word for adoption to sonship refers to the full legal standing of an adopted heir in Roman culture. In Rome, adoption was serious business. Emperors sometimes adopted the man they wanted to succeed them. An adopted son got a new name, a new family, and full rights as an heir. Abba is Aramaic for father, the word Jesus Himself used when He prayed. Paul says God has adopted you, with all the rights of a child.

And if we're children, then we're heirs, heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ. That includes sharing in His sufferings now, and sharing in His glory later.

Paul doesn't pretend life is easy. He admits we suffer. But "our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us." The whole creation is groaning like a woman in labor, waiting to be set free from decay. We groan too, waiting for our bodies to be made new. And when we don't even know how to pray, "the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans." On your worst night, when you can't find any words, the Spirit is praying for you.

Then comes one of the most loved verses in the Bible: "And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose."

It doesn't say all things are good. Cancer isn't good. Divorce isn't good. Betrayal isn't good. It says God works in all things for good. He doesn't waste anything.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **A Footnote on 8:28**
>
> The NIV gives other ways to translate the Greek here, including that all things work together for good, or that God works together with those who love Him to bring about what is good. Scholars debate the exact wording. The heart of the verse is the same in each: nothing in the lives of those who love God is outside His good purpose.

And what is that good? Paul tells us. God's purpose is for His people to be "conformed to the image of his Son," to become like Jesus. Then he lays out a chain that can't be broken: those God foreknew, He predestined; those He predestined, He called; those He called, He justified; those He justified, He glorified.

Then the chapter rises to its climax with a series of questions. "If God is for us, who can be against us?" If God didn't spare His own Son, won't He also give us everything we need? Who can bring a charge against us? God is the one who declares us not guilty. Who can condemn us? Jesus died, rose, and is praying for us right now at God's right hand.

"Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?" Paul lists the things that could happen to the Christians in Rome: trouble, hardship, persecution, famine, nakedness, danger, sword. These weren't hypothetical. Within a few years, Nero would make some of them very real.

"No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us."

And then the finale. Paul says he's convinced that nothing, not death or life, angels or demons, the present or the future, any power, height or depth, or anything else in all creation, can separate us from God's love in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Nothing. Not one thing.

KEY VERSE

And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.

Romans 8:28 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. What's the difference between feeling guilty and being condemned? Why does Paul say there's no condemnation in Christ?
2. What does it mean to you that God has adopted you as His child, not just forgiven you?
3. Romans 8:28 is often quoted to people who are hurting. When is it comforting, and when could it be said in a hurtful way?

TRY THIS *Copy Romans 8:38–39 onto a card and put it where you'll see it every morning this week.*

CHAPTER 9

Breaking Heart

Romans 9

Chapter 8 ended on the highest note in the Bible. Nothing can separate us from God's love. And then, suddenly, Paul's tone drops. "I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart."

Why? Because of his own people. Paul was Jewish through and through. Most of his fellow Jews had rejected Jesus as the Messiah. Paul loved them so much that he says he could almost wish himself cut off from Christ, if it would save them.

That's not a small thing to say right after chapter 8. Paul has just finished explaining that nothing can separate believers from God's love. And now he says he'd give that up for his people if he could. It's the kind of love Moses showed when he asked God to blot him out instead of Israel. It's the kind of love Jesus showed on the cross.

And it raises a huge question, the question chapters 9 to 11 are all about. If God made all those promises to Israel, and most of Israel has rejected the Messiah, did God's promises fail? And if God's promises to Israel can fail, how can believers in Rome be sure His promises in chapter 8 won't fail them too?

Paul lists Israel's privileges. Adoption as God's children, His glory, the covenants, the law, temple worship, the promises, the

patriarchs. And from them came the Messiah, "who is God over all, forever praised!"

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **A Comma That Matters**
>
> Ancient Greek manuscripts had almost no punctuation, so translators have to decide where sentences end. In 9:5, the NIV reads that the Messiah is God over all, forever praised. The NIV footnote gives two other ways to punctuate the verse, which turn the last part into a separate praise to God. Many scholars think the NIV's main reading is the most natural one, which would make this one of the clearest places in Paul's letters where he calls Jesus God. Either way, the rest of the New Testament makes it clear who Jesus is.

"It is not as though God's word had failed," Paul says. Then he explains: "not all who are descended from Israel are Israel." Being born into Abraham's family has never been the whole story. Abraham had two sons, Ishmael and Isaac, but God's promise came through Isaac. Isaac had twin sons, Esau and Jacob, and before they were born or had done anything good or bad, God said the older would serve the younger. Then Paul quotes the prophet Malachi: "Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated."

Why does that matter? Because it shows that God's choices depend on Him, not on our performance. "It does not, therefore, depend on human desire or effort, but on God's mercy."

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Loved and Hated?**
>
> Paul quotes Malachi 1:2–3, and it sounds shocking. But in Hebrew, love and hate were often used to describe choosing one and not the other, not personal feelings. Jesus used the same kind of language when He said you must hate your father and mother to follow Him (Luke 14:26), meaning love Him far more. In Malachi, Jacob and Esau stand for the nations of Israel and Edom. The point is that God chose Jacob's line to carry His promise.

Paul knows how this sounds, so he raises the objection himself. “Is God unjust? Not at all!” God told Moses He would have mercy on whom He chooses to have mercy. Then Paul brings up Pharaoh, whom God raised up to display His power. God has mercy on some and hardens others.

Someone asks the obvious question: Then why does God still blame us? Who can resist His will?

Paul doesn’t give a philosophy lecture. He answers with a picture. “But who are you, a human being, to talk back to God?” Does a clay pot talk back to the potter? The potter has the right to shape the clay as he wants.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **The Hardest Chapter**
>
> Romans 9 is one of the most debated chapters in the Bible. Christians have argued for centuries about how God’s choosing (sometimes called election or predestination) fits with human choice and responsibility. Some believe God chooses individuals for salvation. Others believe Paul is talking mostly about God choosing nations or groups for a role in His plan. Faithful Christians disagree. But notice that Paul holds both truths together. Chapter 9 says God chooses. Chapter 10 says everyone who calls on Him will be saved, and people are responsible for not believing. Paul doesn’t try to make the tension disappear.

Then Paul turns to the Gentiles. God has called people “not only from the Jews but also from the Gentiles.” He quotes the prophet Hosea, who said God would call people His people who weren’t His people before. And Isaiah, who said only a remnant of Israel would be saved.

Here’s the surprise at the end of the chapter. Gentiles who weren’t even looking for righteousness found it, by faith. But many in Israel, who worked hard pursuing righteousness through the law, missed

it. Why? "Because they pursued it not by faith but as if it were by works." They tripped over the stumbling stone. That stone is Jesus. Isaiah said God would lay a stone in Zion that people would trip over, "and the one who believes in him will never be put to shame."

KEY VERSE

It does not, therefore, depend on human desire or effort, but on God's mercy.

Romans 9:16 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Paul was heartbroken for people who didn't know Jesus. Who are you heartbroken for? If no one comes to mind, why might that be?
2. Is it comforting or troubling to you that salvation depends on God's mercy and not your effort? Why?
3. Paul doesn't try to explain everything about how God's choosing works. Is it okay for Christians to admit they don't fully understand something in the Bible?

CHAPTER 10

Beautiful Feet

Romans 10

Paul starts chapter 10 the same way he started chapter 9, with his heart. “Brothers and sisters, my heart’s desire and prayer to God for the Israelites is that they may be saved.”

He knows they’re zealous for God. Paul had been too. Before he met Jesus, he was so zealous that he persecuted the church. But zeal isn’t enough. Their zeal isn’t “based on knowledge.” They tried to build their own righteousness instead of accepting the righteousness God gives.

“Christ is the culmination of the law so that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes.”

> BACKGROUND CHECK **Culmination**
>
> The Greek word here, telos, can mean end, goal, or completion. Older translations say Christ is the end of the law. The NIV says culmination, the high point everything was building toward. Think of a story: the last chapter doesn’t throw away everything before it. It’s what the whole story was heading for. Jesus is where the law was always pointing.

Then Paul contrasts two ways. The law says the person who does these things will live by them. You have to keep it all. But righteousness by faith says something different. You don’t have to climb up to heaven to bring Christ down, or go down to the realm of

the dead to bring Him up. God has already done that. Jesus came down. Jesus rose. "The word is near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart."

And here's what that word is: "If you declare with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved."

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Jesus Is Lord**
>
> In Rome, people were expected to honor the emperor, and he was often called Lord. Saying Caesar is Lord was a statement of loyalty to the empire. When Christians said Jesus is Lord, they meant it as their highest loyalty. Jesus is in charge, not Caesar. For Jewish believers, Lord was also the word the Greek translation of the Old Testament used for God's own name. Calling Jesus Lord meant something huge.

It's not a magic formula. Paul is describing real faith: believing in your heart, and saying it out loud. Faith isn't just private. It's something you're willing to say.

"For there is no difference between Jew and Gentile." The same Lord is Lord of all, and He richly blesses everyone who calls on Him. Paul quotes the prophet Joel: "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved."

Everyone. Not just the religious kids. Not just the ones from good families. Everyone.

Then Paul asks a chain of questions that has inspired missionaries for two thousand years. "How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can anyone preach unless they are sent?"

Read it backward. Someone is sent. They speak. People hear. People believe. People call on the Lord. People are saved. Somewhere along the line, someone told you about Jesus. Who's next on the chain?

Paul quotes Isaiah: "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!" Feet aren't usually considered beautiful. But in Isaiah's time, the messenger ran on foot from the battlefield to the city with the news of victory. The people saw him coming on the mountains, and his dusty feet were the most beautiful thing they'd ever seen.

"Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word about Christ."

So why didn't more of Israel believe? Paul says they did hear. The message went out everywhere. And God had said through Moses and Isaiah that this would happen: that He would be found by those who weren't looking, and that He would make Israel envious through other nations. The chapter ends with a heartbreaking picture of God from Isaiah. "All day long I have held out my hands to a disobedient and obstinate people."

God isn't standing with His arms crossed. He's standing with His arms open.

KEY VERSE

Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.

Romans 10:13 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Paul says zeal isn't enough without knowledge. Can you think of an example of someone being passionate but wrong?
2. Why does Paul say we need to say Jesus is Lord out loud, not just believe it privately?
3. Someone told you about Jesus. Who was it? Who might God want you to tell?

TRY THIS *Thank the person who first told you about Jesus. Send a message, write a note, or tell them in person.*

CHAPTER 11

Grafted In

Romans 11

Paul has been building up to a question, and now he asks it straight out. “Did God reject his people?”

“By no means!” Paul himself is proof. He’s an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, from the tribe of Benjamin. And he’s a believer. So God hasn’t given up on Israel.

He reminds them of Elijah. Remember when Elijah thought he was the only faithful person left in Israel? He complained to God that everyone else had turned away. God told him, I have seven thousand others who haven’t bowed down to Baal. Elijah wasn’t alone. Neither is Paul. “So too, at the present time there is a remnant chosen by grace.”

And Paul adds a line that’s a great definition of grace: “if by grace, then it cannot be based on works; if it were, grace would no longer be grace.”

Then Paul asks the next question. Did Israel stumble so badly that they’ll never recover? “Not at all!” Instead, Israel’s stumble opened the door for the Gentiles. And the Gentiles coming in will make Israel envious and draw them back. If their stumbling brought riches to the world, imagine how much greater it will be when they come back. It will be like “life from the dead.”

BACKGROUND CHECK **Olive Trees**

Olive trees were everywhere in the Mediterranean world, and Paul's readers knew how they worked. Olive trees can live for hundreds of years. Farmers regularly grafted new branches into old trees: they cut a slit in the trunk or a branch and inserted a shoot from another tree so it would grow there. Usually they grafted good branches onto wild trees. Paul describes the opposite, grafting wild branches into a cultivated tree. He says that's contrary to nature. That's the point. It's grace.

Then Paul turns to the Gentiles in the Roman churches and speaks to them directly. And he gives them a picture to remember.

Israel is like an olive tree. Some of the natural branches have been broken off because of unbelief. You Gentiles, Paul says, are like a wild olive shoot that's been grafted in. Now you share in the nourishing sap from the root. But don't get proud. "You do not support the root, but the root supports you."

Remember the tension in Rome? Gentile believers had run the churches while the Jews were expelled. Maybe some of them were starting to look down on the Jewish believers coming back, or on Jewish people in general. Paul shuts that down. You didn't grow this tree. You were grafted in by grace. "Do not be arrogant, but tremble." If God didn't spare the natural branches, He won't spare you either. And God is able to graft the natural branches back in.

BACKGROUND CHECK **A Warning from History**

Sadly, Christians throughout history have often ignored Romans 11. For centuries, many treated Jewish people with contempt, blamed them for Jesus' death, and even persecuted and killed them, sometimes in the name of Christianity. Paul's warning is clear: Gentile Christians owe everything to the root God planted in Israel. Contempt for the Jewish people has no place in a Christian heart.

Then Paul reveals what he calls a mystery, something God has now made known. Israel has experienced a hardening in part, "until the full number of the Gentiles has come in, and in this way all Israel will be saved."

What exactly does all Israel will be saved mean? Christians understand it in different ways. Some believe there will be a large turning of the Jewish people to Jesus before He returns. Others think all Israel means the whole people of God, Jews and Gentiles together. Either way, Paul is certain that God hasn't abandoned His promises. "For God's gifts and his call are irrevocable."

Then Paul pulls back and shows the big picture. Everyone has disobeyed God: Gentiles first, then Israel. And God has used it all "so that he may have mercy on them all."

And at that point, Paul can't help himself. He stops explaining and starts worshiping.

"Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out!" Who has ever known the mind of the Lord? Who has ever given God something so that God owes them? Nobody. "For from him and through him and for him are all things. To him be the glory forever! Amen."

That's a good place for hard theology to end. Paul has wrestled with the toughest questions in the letter, and he doesn't pretend he can see everything. But what he can see makes him want to praise God.

KEY VERSE

Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out!

Romans 11:33 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Paul says grace can't be based on works, or it isn't grace. Why do people find that so hard to accept?
2. The Gentile believers were tempted to feel superior. Where do you see Christians today feeling superior to others? Where do you feel it?
3. Paul ends three hard chapters by worshiping. What do you think that teaches us about questions we can't fully answer?

CHAPTER 12

Living Sacrifice

Romans 12

For eleven chapters, Paul has explained what God has done. Now he turns to what we do in response. And the hinge is one word you've seen before: therefore.

"Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship."

Notice the order. Paul doesn't start with rules. He starts with mercy. Everything you're about to read is a response to eleven chapters of grace. You don't obey God to get Him to love you. You obey because He already does.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Sacrifice**
>
> Paul's readers knew all about sacrifices. In the Jewish temple in Jerusalem, priests offered animals on the altar every day. In Rome, temples to the gods were everywhere, and animals were sacrificed in public ceremonies. In every case, the sacrifice was killed. Paul says something new: offer yourself as a living sacrifice. Not dead on an altar, but alive, every day, belonging completely to God. Worship isn't only singing on Sunday. It's your whole life.

Then comes a verse every teenager should memorize. "Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind."

The pattern of this world is the shape everybody else's life takes, the pressure to think, talk, dress, post, and want what everyone around you wants. Conforming is easy. You don't have to do anything. Just go with the flow, and the world will squeeze you into its mold. Being transformed is different. It happens from the inside out, as God changes the way you think. Then, Paul says, you'll be able to figure out what God's will is, "his good, pleasing and perfect will."

Next Paul talks about the church as a body. Don't think of yourself more highly than you should. Each of us is like a part of one body. A body has many parts, and they don't all do the same job. In the same way, "in Christ we, though many, form one body." And each member belongs to all the others.

That means you have a part to play. God gives different gifts to different people: prophesying, serving, teaching, encouraging, giving, leading, showing mercy. Whatever your gift is, Paul says, use it. Teach, if you teach. Give generously, if you give. Show mercy cheerfully, if that's your gift.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **One Body in Rome**
>
> Imagine a house church in Rome. A wealthy Gentile homeowner. An enslaved woman who works in a kitchen across the city. A Jewish leatherworker just back from exile. A former soldier. A teenager. In Roman society, these people would never share a table. In the church, Paul says, they belong to one another, like parts of one body. Each one needs the others.

Then Paul gives a rapid-fire list of what love looks like, short commands that read almost like a text thread. "Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good." Be devoted to one another. Honor others above yourselves. Keep your spiritual fire burning. "Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer." Share with believers in need. Practice hospitality.

Then the list gets harder. “Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse.” Rejoice with people who are happy. Cry with people who are sad. Don’t be proud. Be willing to hang out with people others look down on.

And then the hardest one of all. Don’t repay anyone evil for evil. As far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. Don’t take revenge. Leave that to God. Instead, if your enemy is hungry, feed him. If he’s thirsty, give him something to drink. Paul says that will “heap burning coals on his head,” an Old Testament picture from Proverbs that probably means your kindness will make him burn with shame and maybe change his heart.

The chapter ends with a line that sums up how Christians are supposed to fight. “Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.”

KEY VERSE

Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.

Romans 12:2 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. What are some patterns of this world that teenagers are pressured to conform to? Which one pulls on you the most?
2. Paul says each part of the body matters. What gift might God have given you to use for others?
3. Is there someone you'd like to get back at? What would it look like to overcome evil with good in that situation?

TRY THIS *Pick one person who's been unkind to you and do one genuinely kind thing for them this week, without telling anyone.*

CHAPTER 13

The Debt That Never Ends

Romans 13

Romans 13 starts with a topic you might not expect in a letter about grace: the government.

"Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established."

That's a bold thing to say to Christians living in Rome under Nero. But Paul's point is that God is above every ruler. Governments exist because God wants order instead of chaos. Rulers are supposed to reward people who do right and punish people who do wrong. Paul even calls them God's servants. So Christians should obey the law, pay their taxes, and give respect and honor to the people they owe them to.

> BACKGROUND CHECK **Taxes in Rome**
>
> Roman taxes were heavy and often unpopular. Around this time, the Roman historian Tacitus reports, people complained so loudly about tax collectors' abuses that Nero considered abolishing some taxes altogether. Christians might have been tempted to think, since Jesus is our King, we don't owe Caesar anything. Paul says pay what you owe. Jesus said something similar: give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's.

Does that mean Christians must obey the government no matter what? Christians have wrestled with this for centuries. The rest of

the Bible shows that God's people sometimes have to say no to rulers, when obeying them would mean disobeying God. In Acts, when the authorities ordered the apostles to stop preaching about Jesus, Peter answered that they had to obey God rather than human beings. Paul himself was arrested many times for refusing to stop preaching. Romans 13 describes what governments are supposed to be. It doesn't say rulers can never be wrong.

Then Paul shifts from paying debts to a debt you can never pay off. "Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another."

You can pay off your taxes. You can pay back money you borrowed. But you never get to the point where you've loved people enough. That debt keeps going.

And love sums up all of God's commands. Don't commit adultery. Don't murder. Don't steal. Don't covet. All of those, and every other command, come down to this: "Love your neighbor as yourself." Love never harms a neighbor. "Therefore love is the fulfillment of the law."

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Waking Up**
>
> In the Roman world, most work began at dawn. People went to bed early and got up before the sun. Parties, drinking, and the worst kinds of behavior happened at night, in the dark. Paul uses that picture. The night is nearly over. The day is almost here. Jesus is coming back. So wake up and live like it's daytime.

"The hour has already come for you to wake up from your slumber, because our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed." Every day that passes, Jesus' return is one day closer. So put off the deeds of darkness like dirty clothes, and put on "the armor of light."

Don't live like the night crowd: partying, getting drunk, sleeping around, fighting, jealousy.

"Rather, clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ." Put Jesus on like clothes. Let Him be the first thing people see when they look at you. And don't spend your time thinking about how to feed your sinful desires.

These are the verses that changed Augustine's life, the brilliant young man from the beginning of this book. He was sitting in a garden in Italy, torn up inside. He had been living exactly the kind of life Paul describes. He heard a child's voice nearby, chanting a line over and over: take up and read. He picked up a copy of Paul's letters, opened it, and read these verses. Later he wrote that it was as if a light flooded his heart, and all the darkness of doubt disappeared.

KEY VERSE

Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for whoever loves others has fulfilled the law.

Romans 13:8 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Why do you think Paul told Christians to respect the government, even under an emperor like Nero?
2. When, if ever, should a Christian refuse to obey a law? How do you decide?
3. What would it look like to "clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ" at school tomorrow?

CHAPTER 14

Food Fights

Romans 14

You might think the biggest problems in the early church were persecution or false teaching. Those were real. But one of the problems Paul spends the most time on in Romans is food. And holidays.

Here's what was happening. Some believers in Rome ate anything. Others ate only vegetables. Some treated certain days as sacred. Others treated every day the same. And they were judging each other for it.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Why Food?**
>
> For Jewish believers, the law of Moses had food laws: no pork, no shellfish, meat prepared a certain way. They also kept the Sabbath and Jewish festivals. Many Jewish believers kept doing these things after they trusted Jesus. Meanwhile, much of the meat sold in Roman markets had been offered to idols first, and some believers, Jewish or Gentile, may have avoided meat entirely to stay away from anything connected to idols. Gentile believers who felt free to eat anything might look down on them. And the strict believers might judge the free ones as unspiritual.

Paul doesn't start by deciding who's right. He starts with how they treat each other. "Accept the one whose faith is weak, without quarreling over disputable matters."

Disputable matters are issues where faithful Christians can disagree. Not the core of the gospel, which Paul has spent eleven chapters defending, but things the Bible leaves room on. The one who eats everything must not look down on the one who doesn't. The one who doesn't must not judge the one who does. Why? "For God has accepted them."

And then Paul asks a question that should silence a lot of arguments: "Who are you to judge someone else's servant?" Every believer belongs to the Lord, and answers to Him. "Each of them should be fully convinced in their own mind."

"For none of us lives for ourselves alone, and none of us dies for ourselves alone." Whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord. And one day "we will all stand before God's judgment seat." So stop judging each other. Each of us will give an account of ourselves to God.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Disputable Matters Today**
>
> In Paul's day, it was food and holy days. Today, Christians disagree about all kinds of things: music styles, what movies are okay, how to observe Sunday, worship styles, drinking alcohol as adults, and many more. Paul's principle still applies. On the central truths of the gospel, stand firm. On disputable matters, give each other room, don't look down on each other, and don't make your freedom someone else's stumbling block.

Paul says which side he's on. He's convinced that no food is unclean in itself. He's with the strong. But then he turns the tables. If your freedom hurts a brother or sister, you're no longer acting in love. Don't let your food destroy someone Christ died for.

That's strong. Your right to eat a burger is not more important than a person Jesus died for. "For the kingdom of God is not a matter of

eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit."

So, Paul says, "make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification." Edification means building each other up. If something you're free to do would cause another believer to stumble, it's better to give it up around them.

And the chapter ends with a principle about conscience. If you have doubts about whether something is okay and you do it anyway, you're going against your own conscience. "Everything that does not come from faith is sin."

BACKGROUND CHECK **Where Does the Doxology Go?**

Some ancient manuscripts place the final praise of the letter (what is now 16:25–27) right after 14:23. Others put it after 15:33. Most put it at the very end, where our Bibles have it. The NIV footnote on 14:23 mentions this. Scholars think the letter may have been copied in shorter and longer forms in the early centuries. It doesn't change anything Paul teaches, but it's a reminder that our Bibles have been carefully handed down through many copies.

KEY VERSE

Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification.

Romans 14:19 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. What's the difference between a core belief and a disputable matter? Can you give an example of each?
2. Have you ever judged another Christian for something that's really a disputable matter? Have you ever been judged that way?
3. Is there something you're free to do that you should give up around someone else, for their sake?

CHAPTER 15

One Voice

Romans 15

Paul keeps talking about the strong and the weak, and he makes it personal. “We who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves.”

Why? Because that’s what Jesus did. “For even Christ did not please himself.” The strongest person who ever lived gave up His rights for the sake of the weak.

Then Paul says something about the Old Testament that applies to the whole Bible. “For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through the endurance taught in the Scriptures and the encouragement they provide we might have hope.” The Bible isn’t just a history book. It’s written for you. It gives you endurance, encouragement, and hope.

Then Paul prays for the Roman churches. He asks God to give them unity, “so that with one mind and one voice you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.” Picture it. A house church where Jews and Gentiles, rich and poor, slave and free, the strict and the free, all sing together. Not because they agree about everything, but because they all belong to Jesus.

“Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God.”

That's the whole point of chapters 14 and 15 in one sentence. How did Christ accept you? Before you were perfect. While you were still a sinner. With all your weaknesses. Accept others the same way.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **The Gentiles in Scripture**
>
> In 15:9–12, Paul quotes four Old Testament passages, drawn from all three parts of the Hebrew Scriptures: the Law (Deuteronomy), the Prophets (Isaiah), and the Writings (the Psalms). Each one says the Gentiles will praise God. Paul is showing that welcoming the Gentiles wasn't a new idea. It was God's plan all along, and the Scriptures had been saying so for centuries.

Paul ends this section with one of the most beautiful prayers in the Bible. "May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit."

Then the letter turns personal. Paul tells the Romans that he's confident in them. He knows they're full of goodness and able to teach one another. He's written boldly to remind them, because of the job God gave him: to bring the good news to the Gentiles.

He describes his work so far. From Jerusalem all the way around to Illyricum, on the coast across the Adriatic Sea from Italy, he has fully preached the gospel of Christ. And he's always had one ambition: "to preach the gospel where Christ was not known." He doesn't want to build on someone else's foundation.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Spain**
>
> Spain was the western edge of the known world, the place where the Mediterranean meets the Atlantic. Rome had ruled much of it for about two centuries, but it was a long way from the Jewish communities where Paul usually started preaching. Paul wanted to be the first to take the gospel there. We don't know for sure whether he ever made it. Acts ends with Paul under

> arrest in Rome. Clement of Rome, writing near the end of the first century, says Paul reached "the limits of the West," which some think means Spain.

Now Paul explains his plans. He's finally going to visit Rome on his way to Spain. He hopes they'll help send him on his way. But first, he's going to Jerusalem with money that churches in Macedonia and Achaia (Greece) have collected for poor believers there.

Think about how remarkable that gift was. Gentile believers in Greece were giving money to Jewish believers in Jerusalem, people they had never met. Paul says it makes sense. The Gentiles have shared in Israel's spiritual blessings. Sharing material blessings back is the least they can do. The gift was a picture of exactly what Paul has been teaching: Jews and Gentiles are one family.

Then Paul asks for prayer. "Join me in my struggle by praying to God for me." Pray that I'll be safe from the unbelievers in Judea. Pray that the gift will be accepted. Pray that I can come to you with joy.

Here's the ironic part. Paul did get to Rome, but not the way he planned. As you read in Acts, he was arrested in Jerusalem, imprisoned for two years, put on trial, shipwrecked, and finally brought to Rome in chains. God answered his prayer, but in a way Paul never expected.

KEY VERSE

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Romans 15:13 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Paul says the strong should bear with the weak instead of pleasing themselves. What does that look like among your friends?
2. How did Christ accept you? Who is someone you find it hard to accept?
3. Paul's plan to visit Rome happened, but not the way he planned. Has God ever answered a prayer of yours in a way you didn't expect?

CHAPTER 16

Names Worth Knowing

Romans 16

A lot of people skip Romans 16. It's mostly a list of names, many of them hard to pronounce. But if you slow down, this chapter is a window into the real church in Rome. These are the people who first heard the letter. They're not characters in a theology book. They're friends.

Paul starts with the woman who probably carried the letter. "I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a deacon of the church in Cenchreae." He asks the Romans to welcome her and help her with anything she needs, because she has been "the benefactor of many people, including me."

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Phoebe**
>
> The NIV calls Phoebe a deacon. A footnote says the word can also mean servant, and explains that a deacon was a Christian designated to serve with the church's leaders in a variety of ways. Christians disagree today about what roles women should hold in the church, and this verse is part of that conversation. What isn't debated is that Paul trusted Phoebe with his most important letter and called her a benefactor, someone who used her resources to support others, including Paul himself.

Next he greets Priscilla and Aquila, the couple you met in Acts. They were tentmakers like Paul, and they had been forced out of Rome when Claudius expelled the Jews. Now they're back, and a church

meets in their house. Paul says they "risked their lives for me." All the churches of the Gentiles are grateful to them.

Then come the names. Epenetus, the first convert in the province of Asia. Mary, who worked very hard. Andronicus and Junia, Jewish believers who were in prison with Paul and who became Christians before he did. Ampliatus, Urbanus, Stachys, Apelles. The households of Aristobulus and Narcissus. Tryphena and Tryphosa, women who work hard in the Lord. Persis. Rufus, and his mother, "who has been a mother to me, too."

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Who Were They?**
>
> Many of these names were common among slaves and former slaves in Rome, which tells us the church included many ordinary and poor people. Some names are Jewish, some Greek, some Latin. Roughly a third of the individuals Paul mentions in verses 1–16 are women, and Paul praises several of them for their hard work. Rufus may be the son of Simon of Cyrene, the man who carried Jesus' cross. Mark 15:21 mentions that Simon was the father of Alexander and Rufus, as though Mark's readers knew them. Many scholars think Mark wrote his Gospel for Christians in Rome.

There's one more name worth noticing. Paul says Andronicus and Junia are "outstanding among the apostles." The NIV footnote offers another possible translation: they are esteemed by the apostles. Scholars debate which reading is right. Either way, Paul honors them highly.

Read the list again, and you'll notice Paul says something kind about almost everyone. My dear friend. My co-worker. Who worked very hard. Whose faithfulness has been tested. That's a great model for how to talk about people.

Then Paul gives a warning. Watch out for people who cause divisions and lead others away from what they've been taught. Stay

away from them. They use smooth talk and flattery to fool people. Paul wants the Romans to be "wise about what is good, and innocent about what is evil." And he gives them a promise: "The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet."

That's an echo of Genesis 3:15, the first promise in the Bible, where God said the woman's offspring would crush the serpent's head. Jesus did that at the cross. And now His people share in His victory.

Then come greetings from Paul's companions in Corinth: Timothy, his co-worker; Lucius, Jason, and Sosipater; Gaius, Paul's host, whose home the whole church enjoys; Erastus, the city's director of public works; and Quartus. And in the middle of it, the man who actually wrote the letter down steps forward for a moment: "I, Tertius, who wrote down this letter, greet you in the Lord."

BACKGROUND CHECK **Erastus**

In 1929, archaeologists in Corinth found a stone pavement inscription saying that Erastus had laid the pavement at his own expense in return for his position as aedile, a city official in charge of public works and buildings. Many scholars think this may be the same Erastus Paul mentions in Romans 16:23, though not everyone agrees. If so, the church in Corinth included a wealthy city official sitting alongside slaves.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Missing Verse**

If you look at Romans 16 in the NIV, you'll see the numbers jump from 23 to 25. The NIV footnote explains that some manuscripts include a verse 24, a short blessing: May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with all of you. Amen. The earliest and most reliable manuscripts don't have it, so the NIV leaves it out of the main text. Nothing in Paul's teaching depends on it. The same blessing appears in verse 20.

Paul ends the letter the way he's been ending sections all along, with praise. He gives glory to God, who is able to make the Romans

strong through the gospel. This message was a mystery hidden for ages, he says, but now it's been revealed so that all the nations can believe and obey. And the last line of the letter says it all: "to the only wise God be glory forever through Jesus Christ! Amen."

Sixteen chapters. The whole story of the King's rescue plan. We were lost, every one of us. God made a way. Jesus died and rose. Everyone who trusts Him is made right with God, adopted into His family, and filled with His Spirit, and nothing can ever separate them from His love. And those people, Jews and Gentiles, slaves and city officials, men and women, sit in the same house church, call each other family, and greet each other by name.

KEY VERSE

The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet. The grace of our Lord Jesus be with you.

Romans 16:20 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Paul knew the names and stories of dozens of people. Who are the people in your church or youth group whose names you should know?
2. Paul said something kind about nearly everyone he named. What would change if you talked about people the way Paul did?
3. After reading all of Romans, what's one idea that changed the way you think about God or yourself?

TRY THIS *Write a short note to three people who've helped you in your faith, telling them specifically what they did and thanking them.*

THE END (AND THE BEGINNING)

Now What? The Bottom Line

You've just walked through the whole letter to the Romans. Paul built his case carefully, one step at a time. For centuries, people have used a handful of verses from Romans to explain the good news in a few minutes. Some call it the Romans Road. You've seen every one of these verses already, in context. Here they are together.

Here's what the Bible says, as plainly as I can put it.

1 God is real, and He's not hiding.

Paul says the world itself shows God's power and nature. You weren't an accident. You were made by Him and for Him.

2 We've all turned away.

Not just the obvious bad guys. The religious people too. Everyone. The Bible calls it sin, and it separates us from God.

> *for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,* **Romans 3:23 (NIV)**

3 Sin has a real cost.

God is good, so He doesn't shrug off evil. Sin pays a wage, and the wage is death, separation from God forever. But notice the second half of the verse.

> *For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.* **Romans 6:23 (NIV)**

4 Jesus paid it.

God didn't wait for us to clean up our act. Jesus died in our place, taking the penalty we deserved, and God raised Him from the dead.

> *But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.* **Romans 5:8 (NIV)**

5 You can't earn it. You receive it.

This is the heart of Romans. We are made right with God by grace, through faith, not by trying harder. Abraham simply believed God, and God counted it as righteousness. The same is true for you.

> *For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast.* **Ephesians 2:8–9 (NIV)**

6 Turn and trust.

Paul says it's as close as your own mouth and heart. Turn from running your own life, and trust Jesus as your Savior and King. It doesn't mean you'll never fail again. It means you belong to Him now, and nothing can separate you from His love.

> *If you declare with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.* **Romans 10:9 (NIV)**

So what do you do with that? You don't need perfect words. Paul says the Spirit helps us even when we don't know what to pray. You can talk to God honestly, right now, wherever you are. If it helps, you could pray something like this:

God, I've been running my own life, and I've sinned against You. I can't fix that myself, and I can't earn my way back. I believe Jesus died for me and that You raised Him from the dead. I'm turning to You. Forgive me. I trust Jesus as my Savior, and I want to follow Him as my King. Fill me with Your Holy Spirit, change the way I think, and help me live for You. In Jesus' name, amen.

If You Just Said Yes

Tell someone. A parent, a youth leader, a pastor, or a Christian friend. Paul says faith is believed with the heart and spoken with the mouth. Start there.

Read the real thing. Read Romans straight through in a Bible, a chapter a day. Then read Galatians, a shorter, fiercer letter where Paul makes many of the same points.

Find your people. Get connected to a church where the Bible is taught and Jesus is honored. Romans was written to a church, not to individuals. Ask about being baptized. Romans 6 explains what it means.

Talk to God every day. Be honest. When you don't know what to say, the Spirit helps. He can handle it.

Not Sure Yet?

Not ready? That's honest, and honesty is a good place to start. Paul spent a whole letter answering hard questions because he knew people have them. Keep asking. Keep reading. Talk to someone you trust. Just don't settle for "I already know all that."

Because if Romans is true, then nothing in all creation, not your past, not your doubts, not your worst day, is strong enough to keep God's love away from someone who trusts Jesus. That's worth finding out for yourself.

For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Romans 8:38–39 (NIV)

PAUL'S FIRST LETTER TO THE CORINTHIANS

The King's Messy Family

1 Corinthians, Unfiltered

For teens who think they've heard it all

BILL McLEOD

Papa Bill Books

The King's Messy Family: Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians, Unfiltered

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Pronouns referring to God the Father, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit are capitalized for reverence in the author's own words. Inside Scripture quotations, capitalization and wording follow the 2011 NIV exactly.

AI Disclosure. This book was written by Bill McLeod with the assistance of artificial intelligence tools for drafting, research, and editing. All content was reviewed and approved by the author, who takes full responsibility for it. Readers are encouraged to open the Scriptures and study them for themselves.

A WORD TO THE READER

Before You Start

If you've read the earlier books in this series, you know the saying by now: "If you want to get something done, hire a teenager while they still know it all." It's been in every book. It's not leaving now.

And it fits this book almost too well, because the church in Corinth thought it knew it all. They were gifted, smart, confident, and proud of it. They also had cliques, lawsuits, sex scandals, drunkenness at church dinners, arguments about food, and worship services so chaotic that visitors thought they'd lost their minds. If you've ever thought church people should have it all together, the Corinthians will cure you of that idea fast.

Here's the good news. God didn't give up on them. Paul, the man who started their church, wrote them a long, honest, sometimes funny, sometimes blunt letter to help them grow up. It's the letter we call 1 Corinthians. It deals with real problems: who to follow, how to handle sex and relationships, whether to get married, what to do when Christians disagree, how to worship, and what happens after you die.

It also contains some of the most beautiful words ever written. The famous chapter on love that gets read at weddings? It's here. It was written to a church that was being anything but loving. The clearest explanation in the Bible of why Jesus' resurrection matters? Also here. God put some of His best words in a letter to His messiest family.

So if your life is a little messy, or your church is, or your friends are, this letter is for you. Read it slowly. Read it honestly. And watch how often Paul brings every problem back to the same place: Jesus Christ and Him crucified.

How This Book Works

This book walks through all 16 chapters of 1 Corinthians, in order, one chapter of this book for each chapter of the letter. Each one explains what Paul is dealing with, adds background about the world the Corinthians lived in (a rich, crowded Roman city full of temples, games, and trade), and shows how Paul brings the gospel to bear on everyday problems.

Before chapter 1, a short section called Setting the Scene introduces the city of Corinth, how the church began, and why Paul wrote. Don't skip it. This letter is one half of a conversation, and it helps to know what the other half was saying.

Each chapter ends with a Key Verse quoted word for word from the New International Version (NIV), the same translation used for every Scripture quotation in this book (pronouns for God are capitalized in the author's own words out of reverence; inside Scripture quotations, capitalization follows the NIV exactly); Real Talk questions to think through alone or argue about with friends; and sometimes a Try This challenge.

One more thing: this book is a guide, not a replacement. Keep a Bible open next to it and read each chapter of 1 Corinthians for yourself. Paul told the Corinthians to judge for themselves what he said. Do the same with me. Don't take my word for it. Take His.

FOR THE ADULTS

A Note for Parents and Youth Leaders

Thank you for putting this book in a teenager's hands. Like the earlier books in this series, on Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Acts, and Romans, it's written for readers who can smell a sermon coming a mile away. I've tried to write honestly, directly, with some humor, and with real respect for what these readers can handle.

Like the Romans volume, this book follows the letter chapter by chapter, explaining Paul's reasoning, key terms, and the setting in Corinth. Wherever Scripture is quoted directly, in the chapters and in the Key Verses, the wording is from the New International Version (NIV); elsewhere I paraphrase and explain. Background is included where it helps, and I've tried to stay with what's well established rather than speculation.

First Corinthians speaks directly to subjects teenagers face: sexuality, peer pressure, identity, divisions among friends, and what it means to belong to a church. It also includes several passages that faithful Christians interpret differently, including head coverings (chapter 11), spiritual gifts and speaking in tongues (chapters 12 to 14), women speaking in church (14:34–35), and Paul's teaching on marriage, singleness, and divorce (chapter 7), as well as his words on sexual sin (chapters 5 and 6). I have tried to present what the text says plainly, to note briefly and fairly where

Christians have understood it differently, and to leave room for you to guide the conversation in line with your own church's teaching.

Where the NIV notes significant manuscript differences or alternative readings, such as the placement of 14:34–35 after verse 40 in a few manuscripts, I've said so briefly, so that students aren't surprised when they see those notes in their own Bibles.

The chapters on sexuality address the subject honestly but without graphic detail, at a level suitable for younger teens. You may want to read chapters 5 to 7 together.

The Real Talk questions are designed for discussion. They work well for a youth group, a small group, a family dinner table, or a car ride. Don't rush to the right answer. Let them wrestle. Faith that has been thought through tends to last.

My prayer is that every reader will see that God's family has always been messy, that He loves it anyway, and that the way forward is always love, the most excellent way.

Grace and peace,

Bill McLeod

Papa Bill Books

BEFORE YOU OPEN THE LETTER

Setting the Scene

The City

Corinth sat on a narrow strip of land, only about four miles wide, that connects mainland Greece to the large peninsula to the south. It had a port on each side, one facing west toward Italy and one facing east toward Asia. Ships unloaded cargo on one side and carried it across to the other, and small ships were sometimes dragged across the land on a stone track. Almost everything traveling between Rome and the East passed through. That made Corinth rich, busy, and crowded with people from everywhere.

The old Greek city had been destroyed by the Romans in 146 BC. About a century later, Julius Caesar rebuilt it as a Roman colony, and many of its new settlers were freed slaves. By Paul's day it was the capital of the Roman province of Achaia, a booming city of new money where people could rise quickly and loved to show off their status.

Temples, Games, and Status

Above the city rose a huge rocky hill with a temple to Aphrodite, the goddess of love and sex. Temples to Apollo, Asclepius (the god of healing), and many other gods filled the city. Much of the meat sold in the market came from animals sacrificed in those temples, and temple dining rooms were where people held parties and business dinners.

Every two years Corinth hosted the Isthmian Games, one of the four great athletic festivals of the Greek world, along with the Olympic Games. Crowds poured in. Athletes trained for months to win a crown made of plants.

Corinth also had a reputation. In earlier Greek times, the word corinthianize was used to mean living immorally. Scholars debate how fair that reputation was by Paul's day, but Corinth was certainly a place where pleasure, money, and status were everywhere. Sound familiar?

How the Church Began

Paul first came to Corinth around AD 50 or 51, on his second missionary journey. You can read the story in Acts 18. He arrived from Athens, nervous and worn out. He found work making tents with a Jewish couple, Aquila and Priscilla, who had just been forced out of Rome. He preached in the synagogue until he was thrown out, then moved next door to the house of a Gentile named Titius Justus. Even Crispus, the synagogue leader, believed.

One night the Lord told Paul in a vision not to be afraid and to keep speaking, because He had many people in the city. Paul stayed a year and a half. An inscription found at Delphi tells us when Gallio, the Roman official in Acts 18, governed Achaia, which is one of the best clues for dating Paul's travels.

Who Was in the Church

The church Paul left behind was a mix. A few members were wealthy or influential, like Crispus, Gaius, and Erastus. Most were not. Paul reminds them that not many of them were wise or powerful or from important families. There were Jews and Gentiles,

slaves and free people, men and women. They met in homes, probably no more than a few dozen people in each house.

That mix created problems. Rich members and poor members didn't know how to eat together. People who had grown up worshiping idols and people who had grown up in the synagogue had very different instincts. And everyone had absorbed the values of Corinth: impress people, win arguments, climb the ladder, and look out for yourself.

Why Paul Wrote

A few years after leaving Corinth, Paul was in Ephesus, across the Aegean Sea, around AD 53 to 55. News reached him from two directions. Some people from the household of a woman named Chloe told him that the church was splitting into rival groups. Then three men from Corinth, Stephanas, Fortunatus, and Achaicus, arrived, probably carrying a letter from the church with a list of questions.

Paul had actually written them an earlier letter that we don't have; he mentions it in 5:9. So 1 Corinthians is really Paul's second letter to them, and it's half of an ongoing conversation. Sometimes he quotes their own slogans back to them. When you see phrases in quotation marks in your Bible, like everything is permissible or I have the right to do anything, Paul is often quoting what the Corinthians were saying, and then answering it.

The Map

First Corinthians isn't built like Romans, as one long argument. It's more like Paul working through a list of problems and questions, one at a time, always bringing them back to Jesus.

Chapters 1 to 4: Divisions. The church is splitting into fan clubs. Paul points them to the cross, which turns human ideas of wisdom and status upside down.

Chapters 5 and 6: Moral problems Paul has heard about. Sexual sin the church is tolerating, and believers suing each other.

Chapters 7 to 14: Answers to their questions. Marriage and singleness, food offered to idols, Paul's rights as an apostle, worship, the Lord's Supper, and spiritual gifts, with the famous chapter on love right in the middle.

Chapter 15: The resurrection. Some of them doubted that the dead would be raised. Paul explains why everything depends on it.

Chapter 16: Practical matters. A collection for poor believers, travel plans, and greetings.

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CHAPTER 1

Fan Clubs

1 Corinthians 1

Paul opens the way letters did in his day: his name, the people he's writing to, and a greeting. He writes with "our brother Sosthenes." That might be the same Sosthenes who led the synagogue in Corinth and got beaten up in front of the Roman governor in Acts 18. If so, the Corinthians knew him well.

Then Paul calls the church something surprising. He writes "to those sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be his holy people." Sanctified means set apart for God, made holy. Wait until you see what this church has been up to. Paul calls them holy anyway. That's not because they've earned it. It's because of what Jesus has done for them. Their behavior needs to catch up with who they already are.

Paul thanks God for them. They have every spiritual gift. They're rich in speech and knowledge. And God will keep them firm to the end. "God is faithful." Paul starts with grace, even for a church this messy.

Then he gets to the problem. "My brothers and sisters, some from Chloe's household have informed me that there are quarrels among you."

BACKGROUND CHECK **Chloe's People**

We don't know much about Chloe. She was probably a businesswoman, and the people from her household may have been slaves or workers who traveled for her between Corinth and Ephesus. What's interesting is that Paul names his source. He isn't spreading anonymous gossip. He tells them exactly where his information came from.

The church has split into fan clubs. "One of you says, 'I follow Paul'; another, 'I follow Apollos'; another, 'I follow Cephas'; still another, 'I follow Christ.'"

Think of it like rival groups of fans. Paul founded the church, so some people were loyal to him. Apollos was a brilliant speaker from Alexandria who came later, and some people liked his style better. Cephas is Peter's name in Aramaic, and some people may have preferred the original apostle. And then there was the group that said, we just follow Christ, which sounds great until you realize they were probably using Jesus' name to look more spiritual than everyone else.

Paul's response is a set of sharp questions. "Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Were you baptized in the name of Paul?" Obviously not. Paul is so worried about people making him into a celebrity that he says he's glad he didn't baptize many of them. Then he catches himself: well, there was Crispus and Gaius, and also the household of Stephanas, and beyond that he can't remember. It's a funny, very human moment.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Speakers and Status**

In Corinth, public speaking was entertainment and status. Professional speakers called sophists traveled from city to city, dazzling crowds with clever arguments and beautiful words, and charging high fees. People had their favorites, like fans of a celebrity or an influencer. The Corinthians were

> judging their Christian teachers the same way: who's more impressive, who's more eloquent, who makes us look better for following him.

Then Paul goes straight to the center of everything. Christ sent him to preach the gospel, "not with wisdom and eloquence, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power."

"For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God."

To the Corinthians' neighbors, the message of a crucified Savior was ridiculous. Jews wanted miraculous signs. Greeks wanted clever philosophy. "But we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles." A Messiah who dies on a cross looked weak. A God who saves people through an executed criminal looked foolish.

But that's exactly the point. "For the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength."

Then Paul tells them to look around the room. Not many of you were wise by human standards, he says. Not many were powerful. Not many came from important families. God chose the foolish things to shame the wise, the weak things to shame the strong, the nobodies to overturn the somebodies. Why? "So that no one may boast before him."

That's the cure for fan clubs. If you understand the cross, you can't brag about anything except Jesus. "Let the one who boasts boast in the Lord."

KEY VERSE

For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.

1 Corinthians 1:18 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. What are some ways Christians today form fan clubs around leaders, churches, or styles?
2. Why would the message of a crucified Savior have sounded foolish in Corinth? Does it sound foolish to anyone you know?
3. Paul says God chose the weak and the nobodies. How does that change the way you see yourself? The way you see others?

CHAPTER 2

The Mind of Christ

1 Corinthians 2

Paul keeps going on the same theme, and now he talks about how he first came to Corinth. “When I came to you, I did not come with eloquence or human wisdom.” He didn’t try to impress them. “For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.”

That’s an amazing statement from someone as brilliant as Paul. He was highly educated. He could quote poets and philosophers. He could have tried to out-argue the best speakers in Corinth. Instead he made a decision: I’m going to talk about Jesus and the cross.

And he admits he wasn’t confident. “I came to you in weakness with great fear and trembling.” Remember, he’d just come from Athens, where many people laughed at him. Acts 18 says the Lord had to tell him in a vision not to be afraid. Paul’s preaching wasn’t polished, but it came “with a demonstration of the Spirit’s power.” Why did God do it that way? “So that your faith might not rest on human wisdom, but on God’s power.”

> BACKGROUND CHECK **Weak and Afraid**
>
> It’s encouraging that the apostle Paul felt nervous. If you’ve ever been scared to talk about your faith, worried you’d say it wrong or that people would laugh, you’re in good company. God doesn’t need you to be impressive. He needs you to be faithful. The power is His.

Then Paul says that there is a real wisdom in the Christian message, just not the kind the world values. It's God's wisdom, a mystery hidden for ages and now revealed. The rulers of this age didn't understand it. If they had, "they would not have crucified the Lord of glory."

Paul quotes Isaiah: "What no eye has seen, what no ear has heard, and what no human mind has conceived"—that's what God has prepared for those who love Him. People often read this verse at funerals as a description of heaven, and that's not wrong. But Paul's point here is that God has now revealed these things to us by His Spirit.

Only a person's own spirit knows their thoughts, Paul says. In the same way, only God's Spirit knows the thoughts of God. And believers have received that Spirit, so that they can understand what God has freely given them.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Spiritual and Unspiritual**
>
> The Corinthians loved to think of themselves as spiritual, a step above ordinary believers. Paul turns their word around. The truly spiritual person isn't the one with the most impressive gifts or knowledge. It's the one who understands the cross, because the Spirit has opened their eyes. Without the Spirit, the gospel looks like foolishness. With the Spirit, it looks like the wisdom of God.

The person without the Spirit doesn't accept the things of God. They seem foolish to him, because they can only be understood through the Spirit. That's why arguing someone into the kingdom rarely works. You can explain, answer questions, and give reasons, and you should. But in the end, it's the Spirit who opens people's eyes.

The chapter ends with a stunning claim: "But we have the mind of Christ." Through the Spirit, believers can begin to think the way Jesus thinks. Not perfectly yet. But really.

KEY VERSE

For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.

1 Corinthians 2:2 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Paul came to Corinth in weakness and fear. Why do you think God often works through people who feel weak?
2. If you had to talk about your faith with a friend, what would you focus on? Why did Paul focus on the cross?
3. What would it look like for you to have the mind of Christ in one specific situation this week?

CHAPTER 3

Only God Makes It Grow

1 Corinthians 3

The Corinthians thought they were spiritually advanced. Paul tells them the truth: they're babies. He couldn't talk to them as spiritual people but as "mere infants in Christ." He had to give them milk, not solid food, and they still aren't ready for more.

How does he know? "For since there is jealousy and quarreling among you, are you not worldly?" The proof that they're spiritually immature isn't that they don't know enough. It's that they can't get along.

That's worth thinking about. Spiritual maturity isn't measured by how many verses you know, how loud you worship, or how impressive your gifts are. It's measured in large part by how you treat people.

Then Paul goes back to the fan clubs. What is Apollos, anyway? What is Paul? "Only servants." Then he gives a picture from farming. "I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God has been making it grow."

> BACKGROUND CHECK **Farming in Corinth**
>
> Most people in the ancient world lived close to farming, even in cities. Everyone knew that a farmer could plant, water, and weed, but no farmer could make a seed sprout. Growth was something only God could give. Paul's

readers would have gotten the point instantly. Leaders are workers. God is the one who gives life.

So neither the planter nor the waterer is anything special. Only God, who makes things grow. They each have a job, and they'll each be rewarded for their work. "you are God's field, God's building."

Then Paul switches pictures, from a farm to a construction site. He laid the foundation of the church in Corinth like a skilled builder, and others are building on it. But "no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ."

Everyone builds on that foundation with something: gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay, or straw. One day, the Day of judgment, each person's work will be tested by fire. Gold and silver survive fire. Hay and straw don't. If someone's work survives, they'll be rewarded. If it burns up, they'll suffer loss, but they themselves will be saved, like someone escaping through the flames.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Fire in Corinth**

Paul's readers knew about fire. When the Romans destroyed the old Greek city of Corinth in 146 BC, much of it burned. Buildings made of wood and straw disappeared. Some stone structures, like the old temple of Apollo, survived. Its columns still stand in Corinth today.

Paul is talking mostly about leaders and teachers here, about whether their work in the church will last. But the principle applies to everyone. What are you building your life with? Things that will last, or things that will burn?

Then Paul asks a question he'll ask ten times in this letter: don't you know? "Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in your midst?" The "you" is plural. Paul isn't talking about individual bodies yet; he'll do that in chapter 6. Here,

he's saying the church, all of them together, is God's temple. Corinth was full of temples. But the place where God really lives is His people. And anyone who destroys God's temple, by tearing the church apart with division, is in serious trouble.

So stop bragging about human leaders. "All things are yours," Paul says, Paul, Apollos, Cephas, the world, life, death, the present, the future. You don't belong to them. They belong to you. "And you are of Christ, and Christ is of God."

KEY VERSE

I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God has been making it grow.

1 Corinthians 3:6 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Paul says jealousy and quarreling show spiritual immaturity. Is that a surprising way to measure maturity? Why?
2. Who planted and watered seeds of faith in your life?
3. What are some things people build their lives with that won't survive the fire? What will?

TRY THIS *Pick one person who has helped your faith grow, and thank them this week.*

CHAPTER 4

Fools for Christ

1 Corinthians 4

The Corinthians had been judging their leaders like contestants on a talent show. Paul tells them how they should actually see leaders: "as servants of Christ and as those entrusted with the mysteries God has revealed."

The word Paul uses for those entrusted was often used for a household manager, usually a slave, who was put in charge of his master's property. And "it is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful." Not impressive. Not popular. Faithful.

So Paul says he doesn't care much about being judged by them, or by any human court. He doesn't even judge himself. "My conscience is clear, but that does not make me innocent." The only judge who matters is the Lord. So, Paul says, stop judging before the time. When the Lord comes, He'll bring to light what's hidden and reveal the motives of every heart.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Rating the Preachers**

Social media didn't exist, but the Corinthians had their own version of rating and ranking. They compared speakers, praised some, criticized others, and attached their own status to the ones they liked. Paul refuses to play. He's not trying to win their approval. He's trying to be faithful to his Master.

Then Paul asks three questions that cut straight through pride. "For who makes you different from anyone else? What do you have that you did not receive? And if you did receive it, why do you boast as though you did not?"

Think about it. Your talents, your brain, your looks, your family, your opportunities, even your faith. Where did they come from? You received them. So bragging about them is like bragging about a gift someone else gave you.

Then Paul gets sarcastic. Really sarcastic. "Already you have all you want! Already you have become rich! You have begun to reign—and that without us!" The Corinthians acted as if they'd already arrived, as though they were spiritual royalty.

Then Paul describes what life is actually like for the apostles. God has put them on display at the end of the parade, like prisoners condemned to die in the arena. "We are fools for Christ, but you are so wise in Christ! We are weak, but you are strong!" The apostles go hungry and thirsty. They wear rags. They get beaten. They're homeless. They work with their hands. When they're cursed, they bless. When they're persecuted, they endure. When they're slandered, they answer kindly. They've become "the scum of the earth, the garbage of the world."

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **The Arena Parade**
>
> When a Roman general won a great victory, he held a triumph, a huge parade through the city. At the very end came the captured prisoners, often on their way to be executed or to fight in the arena. Paul says that's where God put the apostles: last in line, a spectacle for the whole world to stare at. The Corinthians wanted to be at the front of the parade. Paul says following Jesus often puts you at the back.

Then Paul's tone softens. He's not writing to shame them, but to warn them "as my dear children." They may have ten thousand guardians, but they only have one father in the faith, and that's Paul, because he brought them the gospel. So he urges them to imitate him. He's sending Timothy, whom he calls his son, to remind them of how Paul lives.

Some of them are acting arrogant, as if Paul will never show up. He will, and soon. And then he'll find out whether these arrogant people have any real power, "for the kingdom of God is not a matter of talk but of power."

He ends with a question: Do you want me to come with a rod of discipline, or with love and a gentle spirit? It's up to them.

KEY VERSE

Now it is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful.

1 Corinthians 4:2 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. What's the difference between being impressive and being faithful? Which one does our culture reward?
2. Read Paul's three questions in verse 7 again. Is there something you're tempted to brag about that you actually received?
3. Paul describes the apostles as fools for Christ. Have you ever felt foolish for following Jesus?

CHAPTER 5

A Little Yeast

1 Corinthians 5

Paul has spent four chapters on pride and division. Now he turns to something he's heard about that's even worse, and worse still, the church is proud of it.

"It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that even pagans do not tolerate: A man is sleeping with his father's wife."

This was probably his stepmother. Even Roman law and Roman culture, which were not exactly strict about sex, considered this shameful. And the church wasn't just ignoring it. "And you are proud!" Maybe they thought it showed how free they were, how far beyond old rules their grace had taken them.

Paul says they should have been grieving, not bragging. And they should remove this man from their fellowship.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Church Discipline**
>
> Paul tells the church to "hand this man over to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved on the day of the Lord." That sounds terrifying, and scholars debate exactly what it means. Most think it means putting him out of the church community, back into the world where Satan holds power, in the hope that he'll come to his senses. Notice the goal: so that he may be saved. Church discipline in the Bible is never about revenge or

shame for its own sake. It's about rescue. In 2 Corinthians 2, Paul seems to urge the church to forgive and welcome back someone who has repented.

Then Paul uses a picture every Jewish reader would recognize. "Don't you know that a little yeast leavens the whole batch of dough?" Before Passover, Jewish families searched their homes and threw out every bit of yeast. Then they ate bread without yeast during the festival. Yeast, which spreads through dough, became a picture of sin, which spreads through a community.

So get rid of the old yeast, Paul says. "For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed." Just as the Passover lamb's blood protected Israel in Egypt, Jesus' death sets His people free. Now we live like the festival is always going on, not with the old yeast of malice and wickedness, but with "the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth."

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Earlier Letter**

In verse 9, Paul mentions a letter he wrote them before this one. That letter is lost. Apparently he had told them not to associate with sexually immoral people, and they misunderstood. They thought he meant to avoid all such people everywhere, or maybe they used his words as an excuse to do nothing at all.

Paul clarifies. He didn't mean people outside the church. If you avoided everyone in the world who was immoral, greedy, or worshiped idols, you'd have to leave the planet. Jesus Himself ate with sinners, and Christians are supposed to be friends with people who don't follow Jesus.

What Paul meant was people inside the church who call themselves believers but keep living in open, unrepentant sin. "What business is it of mine to judge those outside the church? Are you not to judge those inside?" God will judge outsiders. The church should take care of its own house.

That's almost the opposite of how many Christians act. It's easy to be harsh with the world and soft on ourselves. Paul says: be gracious with outsiders and honest with insiders.

KEY VERSE

For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed.

1 Corinthians 5:7 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Why do you think the Corinthian church was proud instead of grieving?
2. Paul says a little yeast spreads through the whole batch. How have you seen one person's attitude or sin affect a whole group?
3. Paul says don't judge outsiders, but do care about holiness inside the church. Why do Christians often get this backward?

CHAPTER 6

Bought at a Price

1 Corinthians 6

Next problem: Christians are suing each other in Roman courts.

"If any of you has a dispute with another, do you dare to take it before the ungodly for judgment instead of before the Lord's people?"

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Courts in Corinth**
>
> Roman courts were not neutral places. Judges and juries often favored the wealthy and well connected. Lawsuits were usually filed by people of higher status against people below them, and the rich could hire skilled speakers to win. So when one believer sued another, it was often the powerful taking advantage of the weak, in public, for all of Corinth to see.

Paul is amazed. Don't you know that God's people will one day judge the world, even angels? And you can't settle small disputes among yourselves? Isn't anyone in your church wise enough to help? Then he goes further. "The very fact that you have lawsuits among you means you have been completely defeated already. Why not rather be wronged? Why not rather be cheated?"

That's radical. Paul says it's better to be cheated than to drag a fellow believer through a public fight. Winning isn't everything. Love is.

Then Paul gives a list of people who "will not inherit the kingdom of God": the sexually immoral, idolaters, adulterers, "men who have sex with men," thieves, the greedy, drunkards, slanderers, and swindlers.

BACKGROUND CHECK **A Hard List**

The NIV footnote explains that the words men who have sex with men translate two Greek words that refer to the passive and active participants in homosexual acts. Most Christians throughout history have understood this verse to mean that God's design for sex is between a husband and wife, and that sex outside that design is sin. Some Christians today read these words differently. Whatever your questions, don't miss two things. First, the list includes things like greed and slander, sins that are easy to excuse in ourselves. Second, look at the next verse.

"And that is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God."

That's one of the most hopeful sentences in the Bible. Were. Past tense. The church in Corinth was full of people who had done those things. Paul doesn't pretend otherwise. But they've been washed clean, set apart for God, and declared not guilty. No matter what someone has done, Jesus can make them new.

Then Paul answers some of the Corinthians' favorite slogans. "'I have the right to do anything,' you say." Some of them had decided that because they were saved by grace, nothing they did with their bodies mattered. Food for the stomach, and the stomach for food. Sex was just another appetite.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Corinthian Slogans**

The NIV puts quotation marks around phrases like I have the right to do anything because many scholars think Paul is quoting what the Corinthians

> were saying. Older translations say everything is permissible. Paul doesn't simply say no. He says: not everything is beneficial, and I will not be mastered by anything. Freedom that makes you a slave isn't freedom.

Paul says the body matters. God raised Jesus' body, and He will raise ours. Your body is part of Christ. So you can't take what belongs to Christ and unite it with a prostitute. (Prostitution was common in Corinth, and many men saw nothing wrong with it.) Sex isn't just physical. It joins two people. Scripture says, "The two will become one flesh."

"Flee from sexual immorality." Notice Paul doesn't say fight it, or argue with it, or see how close you can get. He says run. Like Joseph in Genesis, who ran from Potiphar's wife and left his coat behind.

Then comes another "don't you know." Earlier, Paul said the church together is God's temple. Now he says each believer's body is a temple too. "Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your bodies."

Bought at a price. That's slave-market language. Everyone in Corinth knew what it meant to be bought. Jesus paid for you with His own life. You belong to Him now, body and all.

KEY VERSE

Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your bodies.

1 Corinthians 6:19–20 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Paul says it's better to be wronged than to win a fight against another believer. Is that hard for you? Why?
2. And that is what some of you were. Why is that sentence so important for people who feel like they've done too much wrong?
3. What does it mean in everyday life that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit?

CHAPTER 7

Married or Single

1 Corinthians 7

With chapter 7, Paul starts answering the questions the Corinthians had sent him in their letter. “Now for the matters you wrote about.” And the first one is about sex and marriage.

The Corinthians seem to have had two opposite problems. Some, as we saw in chapter 6, thought sex didn’t matter, so anything goes. Others went the other way and thought sex was unspiritual, even inside marriage. They had a slogan: “It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman.”

Paul answers both. Because sexual immorality is a real danger, husbands and wives should have sexual relations with each other. And here’s something revolutionary for the ancient world. The wife doesn’t have authority over her own body; she yields it to her husband. “In the same way, the husband does not have authority over his own body but yields it to his wife.” In a culture where husbands had most of the power, Paul says marriage is mutual. Each belongs to the other.

> BACKGROUND CHECK **A Mutual Marriage**
>
> In Roman society, a husband’s sexual unfaithfulness was often shrugged off, while a wife’s was punished severely. Paul uses the same words for husbands and wives over and over in this chapter. Husband to wife, wife to husband.

> The same obligations, the same faithfulness, the same respect. That was not how most people in Corinth thought.

Then Paul says something that surprises some people. "I wish that all of you were as I am," meaning single. Paul wasn't married, at least at this point in his life, and he found that singleness let him serve God without distraction. But he immediately adds that each person has their own gift from God. Marriage is a gift. Singleness is a gift. Neither one is second-class.

That's worth hearing in a culture that sometimes acts like you're incomplete without a boyfriend or girlfriend, or in churches that act as if marriage is the only goal. Jesus was single. Paul was single. Being single isn't waiting for life to start.

Paul also gives honest, practical advice. If unmarried people can't control their desires, they should marry, "for it is better to marry than to burn with passion."

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Divorce**
>
> Paul passes on Jesus' own teaching: married couples should not separate or divorce. If they do separate, they should stay unmarried or be reconciled. Then Paul addresses a situation Jesus didn't directly address: a believer married to an unbeliever. If the unbelieving spouse is willing to stay, the believer shouldn't leave. If the unbeliever leaves, the believer is "not bound in such circumstances." Christians differ on exactly what that allows, especially whether it permits remarriage, and on how Paul's words apply to situations like abuse. These are questions to work through with wise, caring pastors, not alone.

Then Paul gives a general principle. In whatever situation you were in when God called you, live for Him there. If you were circumcised, don't try to undo it. If you weren't, don't get circumcised. If you were a slave, don't let it trouble you, though if

you can gain your freedom, do it. "You were bought at a price; do not become slaves of human beings." Your identity isn't your status, your relationship, or your situation. It's that you belong to the Lord.

Paul gives his advice about engaged couples and unmarried people, and he's careful to say when he's giving a command from the Lord and when he's giving his own judgment. Because of "the present crisis," he thinks it's better for people to stay as they are. We don't know exactly what crisis he meant; it may have been a famine or persecution, or Paul may mean the short time before Jesus returns. But he also says clearly, "if you do marry, you have not sinned."

His real goal is that they would live "in undivided devotion to the Lord." Whether married or single, the question is the same: is Jesus first?

KEY VERSE

I am saying this for your own good, not to restrict you, but that you may live in a right way in undivided devotion to the Lord.

1 Corinthians 7:35 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Our culture often treats being single as a problem to solve. How does Paul see it differently?
2. Why do you think Paul's teaching that husbands and wives belong to each other equally was so surprising in his day?
3. Paul says to serve God in whatever situation you're in. What situation are you in right now, and how could you serve God there?

CHAPTER 8

Knowledge and Love

1 Corinthians 8

Next question on the list: "Now about food sacrificed to idols."

That probably doesn't sound like your biggest issue. But in Corinth, it was huge. Almost all meat came through the temples. Animals were sacrificed to a god, part was burned, and the rest was eaten at temple banquets or sold in the market. Birthday parties, weddings, business dinners, and club meetings were often held in temple dining rooms. If you were a Christian in Corinth, the question of idol food touched your job, your friendships, and your family.

> BACKGROUND CHECK **Temple Dining Rooms**
>
> Archaeologists have found dining rooms at the temple of Asclepius in Corinth, the god of healing. Invitations from the ancient world have been found that say things like, come dine at the table of the lord Serapis. For many people, eating in a temple was as normal as going to a restaurant. For new believers who had once worshiped those gods, it could pull them right back into their old life.

Some of the Corinthians had a slogan here too: "We all possess knowledge." They knew that idols weren't real gods. "An idol is nothing at all in the world." "There is no God but one." So, they reasoned, eating idol food doesn't matter. We're too smart to be bothered by it.

Paul agrees with their theology. He even gives one of the clearest statements of faith in the New Testament: for us there is one God, the Father, from whom all things came, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things came. That's remarkable. Paul takes the most basic statement of Jewish faith, that God is one, and includes Jesus inside it.

But then Paul says something that cuts through their pride. "But knowledge puffs up while love builds up."

Knowing the right answer isn't enough. Knowledge can make you proud, like a balloon. Love builds people up, like a building. And not everyone has the same knowledge. Some believers had worshiped idols for years. If they ate temple food, it felt to them like worshiping the god again, and their conscience was hurt.

So Paul warns the "strong" believers. Be careful that your freedom doesn't become a stumbling block to the weak. If a weaker believer sees you, with all your knowledge, eating in an idol's temple, they might be encouraged to do the same thing, even though they believe it's wrong. "So this weak brother or sister, for whom Christ died, is destroyed by your knowledge."

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **For Whom Christ Died**
>
> Notice how Paul describes the weaker believer: someone for whom Christ died. That changes everything. If Jesus thought this person was worth dying for, you can give up a meal for them. When you sin against them, Paul says, you sin against Christ.

Then Paul makes it personal. "Therefore, if what I eat causes my brother or sister to fall into sin, I will never eat meat again, so that I will not cause them to fall."

That's the question Paul wants every believer to ask. Not just, am I allowed to do this? But, will this help or hurt the people around me?

KEY VERSE

But knowledge puffs up while love builds up.

1 Corinthians 8:1 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Can you think of a time when being right made someone proud or unkind? Has that ever been you?
2. What are some modern situations where something might be okay for one Christian but a stumbling block for another?
3. How does remembering that Christ died for someone change the way you treat them?

CHAPTER 9

Run to Win

1 Corinthians 9

At the end of chapter 8, Paul said he would give up eating meat rather than make a fellow believer stumble. In chapter 9, he shows that he really lives that way. He uses his own life as an example of giving up rights for the sake of others.

He starts with a string of questions. “Am I not free? Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen Jesus our Lord?” Some people in Corinth were questioning whether Paul was a real apostle. He points out that the church itself is the proof. “you are the seal of my apostleship in the Lord.”

Then Paul lists his rights. He has the right to food and drink, paid for by the churches. He has the right to bring a believing wife along on his travels, like the other apostles and Jesus’ brothers and Peter do. He has the right to be paid for preaching. Soldiers get paid. Farmers eat from their vineyards. Shepherds drink the milk of their flocks. Even the law of Moses says, “Do not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain.” And Jesus Himself commanded that those who preach the gospel should earn their living from it.

> BACKGROUND CHECK **Making Tents**
>
> Instead of taking money from the Corinthians, Paul worked with his hands. Acts 18 says he made tents with Aquila and Priscilla. Leatherworking was

hard, dirty, low-status work. Wealthy Corinthians who were used to hiring teachers and philosophers may have looked down on a teacher who worked a manual job. But Paul didn't want anyone to think he was preaching for profit.

"But I have not used any of these rights." Paul would rather die than let anyone take away his boast that he preaches for free. He isn't preaching to get rich. "Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel!" He has to. It's what God called him to do.

Then comes a famous passage about Paul's strategy. "Though I am free and belong to no one, I have made myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible." With Jews, he lived like a Jew. With Gentiles, he lived like a Gentile, though always under Christ's law. With the weak, he became weak. "I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some."

That doesn't mean Paul changed the message to please people. The gospel stayed the same. What changed was everything else: his food, his habits, his style, his comfort. He was willing to adjust anything about himself that might keep people from hearing about Jesus.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Isthmian Games**

Every two years, crowds came to Corinth for the Isthmian Games. Athletes trained for months under strict rules. Runners, wrestlers, and boxers competed for a crown made of pine or wild celery, which would be dead within weeks. Paul probably saw the games. His readers definitely had.

So Paul uses an athletic picture they'd understand. "Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize." Athletes go into strict training for a crown that won't last. We train "to get a crown that will last forever."

Paul isn't saying Christians are competing against each other. He's saying the Christian life takes focus, effort, and discipline. He doesn't run aimlessly. He doesn't box like someone swinging at the air. He disciplines his body like an athlete, so that after preaching to others, he himself won't be disqualified.

Grace isn't lazy. Being saved by grace doesn't mean you coast. It means you run, because you already know the prize is yours.

KEY VERSE

Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize.

1 Corinthians 9:24 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Paul gave up rights he really had. What rights or preferences might God be asking you to give up for someone else's good?
2. What's the difference between changing yourself to reach people and changing the message to please them?
3. Athletes train hard for a prize that doesn't last. What would spiritual training look like in your life?

TRY THIS *Choose one spiritual habit, like reading a chapter of the Bible or praying for five minutes, and do it every day this week, like training for a race.*

CHAPTER 10

A Way Out

1 Corinthians 10

Chapter 9 ended with a warning: even Paul could be disqualified. In chapter 10, he explains why the warning is real, using Israel's history.

The Israelites who left Egypt had amazing spiritual experiences. They all passed under the cloud of God's presence. They all walked through the Red Sea. They all ate the manna God sent from heaven and drank water from the rock. Paul says "that rock was Christ," meaning that Christ was with His people even then.

"Nevertheless, God was not pleased with most of them; their bodies were scattered in the wilderness." They had every spiritual privilege, and they still fell, through idolatry, sexual immorality, testing God, and grumbling.

> BACKGROUND CHECK **Spiritual Experiences**
>
> The Corinthians had amazing gifts and powerful spiritual experiences. They had been baptized and shared the Lord's Supper. Some of them seemed to think that made them safe no matter how they lived. Paul says Israel had the same kind of experiences, and many of them still turned away. Spiritual experiences are wonderful, but they're not a substitute for faithfulness.

These things happened as examples, Paul says, and were written down as warnings for us. "So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall!"

And then, right after the warning, one of the most encouraging verses in the Bible: "No temptation has overtaken you except what is common to mankind. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can endure it."

Three promises. First, you're not alone. Whatever temptation you face, other people have faced it too. Second, God is faithful. He knows your limits. Third, there's always a way out. Sometimes the way out is literally walking out of a room. Sometimes it's turning off a screen, calling a friend, or saying a quick prayer. But it's there.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Testing or Temptation?**
>
> The NIV footnote says the Greek words for temptation and tempted can also mean testing and tested. The same word covers both. A hard situation can be a temptation to sin and a test of faith at the same time. Either way, the promise holds. God is faithful, and He provides a way through.

"Therefore, my dear friends, flee from idolatry." There's that word flee again, the same thing Paul said about sexual immorality. Some temptations you don't negotiate with. You run.

Then Paul returns to the question of idol food. When believers share the cup and bread of the Lord's Supper, they share in Christ. When pagans eat sacrifices in a temple, they're taking part in something real too. The idol is nothing, but there are demons behind idol worship. "You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons too." So Christians shouldn't join in temple feasts.

But what about meat sold in the market, or dinner at an unbelieving friend's house? Paul is practical. Eat whatever is sold in the market. "The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it." If an unbeliever invites you to dinner, go and eat what's served without asking questions. But if someone points out that the food was offered to an idol, don't eat it, for the sake of that person's conscience.

Then Paul sums up the whole discussion. "I have the right to do anything," the Corinthians said. Paul answers that "not everything is constructive. No one should seek their own good, but the good of others."

And then he gives a principle big enough to cover your whole life. "So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God."

Lunch. Homework. Practice. Gaming. Texting. Whatever you do.

KEY VERSE

No temptation has overtaken you except what is common to mankind. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can endure it.

1 Corinthians 10:13 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Why is it dangerous to think you're standing firm?
2. What does the way out look like for the temptations you face most often?
3. What would it mean to do something ordinary, like eating lunch or playing a game, for the glory of God?

CHAPTER 11

Head Coverings and a Broken Supper

1 Corinthians 11

Chapter 11 deals with two problems in Corinthian worship. The first is one of the hardest passages in the New Testament to understand. The second is easier to understand and harder to hear.

Paul starts with praise. “Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ.” He’s glad they hold on to the traditions he passed on. But there’s an issue about how men and women are dressed when they pray and prophesy in worship.

“Every man who prays or prophesies with his head covered dishonors his head. But every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her head.” Paul talks about headship, about creation, about hair, and even mentions the angels.

BACKGROUND CHECK **What Was Going On?**

Scholars have filled whole books with this passage, and Christians apply it in different ways. In Roman culture, a married woman normally covered her head in public, and appearing with her hair uncovered or loose could signal that she was available or disrespectful to her husband. Some think Paul is telling women not to send that kind of message in worship. Others think the issue was hair styles; the NIV footnote gives an alternative translation about long hair rather than a cloth covering. Some churches today practice head

coverings. Many others believe the principle, honoring God and each other by what we wear in worship, matters more than the specific custom. Most agree that Paul assumes women pray and prophesy out loud in worship, and that he wants worship to honor God, not draw attention to ourselves.

Paul also talks about the relationship between men and women. He says "the head of every man is Christ, and the head of the woman is man, and the head of Christ is God." Christians understand headship differently; some see it as a kind of authority and leadership in marriage and church, and others emphasize the meaning of source or origin. But Paul quickly balances his words: "Nevertheless, in the Lord woman is not independent of man, nor is man independent of woman." Woman came from man in creation, but every man is born of a woman. "But everything comes from God."

The second problem is the Lord's Supper. In the early church, it wasn't a small cup and wafer. It was part of a real meal that the church shared in someone's home.

And it was going badly. "When you come together, it is not the Lord's Supper you eat." Some people went ahead and ate their own food before others arrived. "As a result, one person remains hungry and another gets drunk."

BACKGROUND CHECK **Dinner in a Roman House**

A wealthy Roman home had a dining room that might hold nine to twelve people reclining on couches, and a larger open courtyard. At a church meal, the host's wealthy friends may have eaten the best food in the dining room, while poorer members, including slaves who worked late and couldn't arrive early, crowded into the courtyard with leftovers or nothing at all. That's how Roman dinner parties normally worked. The rich got the best. Paul says that in the church it's a disgrace.

Paul is furious. Don't you have homes to eat and drink in? Do you despise God's church by humiliating the poor? "What shall I say to you? Shall I praise you? Certainly not in this matter!"

Then Paul reminds them what the Lord's Supper actually is, and his words are some of the earliest written records of what Jesus said at the Last Supper. On the night He was betrayed, Jesus took bread, gave thanks, broke it, and said, "This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me." Then He took the cup and said, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me."

"For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes."

The Lord's Supper is a sermon you can taste. It tells the story of Jesus' death for us. And a meal that tells that story can't be one where the rich ignore the poor.

So Paul warns them to examine themselves before they eat. Those who eat "without discerning the body of Christ" bring judgment on themselves. Christians understand that phrase in different ways, but in context it includes recognizing the church, the body of Christ sitting around the table, including its poorest members.

His practical solution is simple. When you come together to eat, wait for each other.

KEY VERSE

For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

1 Corinthians 11:26 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Paul wanted worship that honored God and didn't draw attention to ourselves. What might that look like today?
2. The rich Corinthians ignored the poor at the Lord's Supper. Where do you see people left out at church or youth group?
3. What does it mean to you that communion proclaims Jesus' death until He comes?

CHAPTER 12

One Body, Many Parts

1 Corinthians 12

Next question: “Now about the gifts of the Spirit.”

The Corinthians loved spiritual gifts, especially the flashy ones, like speaking in tongues. They seem to have ranked people by their gifts. If you had an impressive one, you were a spiritual superstar. If you didn’t, you were second-class.

Paul starts by reminding them where they came from. Before they knew Jesus, they were led astray by mute idols. Now they have the Spirit. And here’s the basic test of whether someone is speaking by the Spirit: “no one can say, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ except by the Holy Spirit.” The Spirit always points to Jesus.

Then Paul lays out a basic truth: “There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit distributes them.” Different kinds of service, same Lord. Different kinds of working, same God. Notice Paul mentions the Spirit, the Lord Jesus, and God the Father together. All three are at work in the church.

And then: “Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good.” Each one. Every believer has a gift. And it’s given for others, not for showing off.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Spiritual Gifts**

Paul lists some gifts here: wisdom, knowledge, faith, healing, miraculous powers, prophecy, distinguishing between spirits, speaking in different kinds of tongues, and interpreting tongues. Other lists in Romans 12, Ephesians 4, and 1 Peter 4 include serving, teaching, encouraging, giving, leading, and showing mercy. None of the lists seems meant to be complete. Christians disagree about whether some gifts, especially tongues, prophecy, and healing, continue today in the same way as in the early church. Some believe they do; others believe they ended with the apostles. Both sides agree with Paul's main point: gifts are given by the Spirit, for the good of others.

Then Paul gives a picture: the body. A body has many parts, but it's one body. "So it is with Christ." Every believer, whether Jew or Gentile, slave or free, was baptized by one Spirit into one body.

Then Paul gets almost comical. Imagine if the foot said, because I'm not a hand, I don't belong to the body. Or the ear said, I'm not an eye, so I'm not part of this. "If the whole body were an eye, where would the sense of hearing be?" Imagine a giant eyeball rolling around. It can see beautifully, but it can't hear, smell, walk, or pick anything up.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Clay Body Parts**

At the temple of Asclepius in Corinth, the god of healing, archaeologists found many clay models of body parts: hands, feet, eyes, ears, legs. Sick people left them as offerings, either to ask for healing or to give thanks for it. The Corinthians walked past these broken, separate body parts. Paul gives them a different picture: a body made whole, every part connected, in Christ.

Some people think they don't matter. That's the foot saying, I'm not a hand. Others think they don't need anyone. That's the eye saying to the hand, "I don't need you!" Paul answers both. Every part belongs. Every part is needed. In fact, "those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable." God designed the body so

that its parts would care for each other. “If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it.”

“Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it.”

You are not a spectator in the church. You’re not an audience member. You’re a part of the body. And the body is missing something without you.

Paul ends with questions that expect no for an answer. Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Do all speak in tongues? No. God gives different gifts to different people.

Then, at the very end of the chapter, Paul says something that sets up the most famous chapter he ever wrote. “And yet I will show you the most excellent way.”

KEY VERSE

Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it.

1 Corinthians 12:27 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Have you ever felt like the foot, thinking you don’t really belong in the church? Or like the eye, thinking you don’t need others?
2. What gifts do you see in the people around you? What gift might God have given you?
3. If one part suffers, every part suffers. Who in your church or youth group is suffering right now? How could you suffer with them?

CHAPTER 13

The Most Excellent Way

1 Corinthians 13

You've probably heard this chapter before. It's read at weddings all the time. But Paul didn't write it for a wedding. He wrote it for a church that was fighting, bragging, suing each other, and showing off their spiritual gifts. Chapter 13 sits right in the middle of Paul's discussion of gifts on purpose. It's the most excellent way to use them.

Paul starts by imagining the most impressive spiritual person possible. "If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal."

> BACKGROUND CHECK **Gongs and Cymbals**
>
> Corinth was famous for its bronze. Bronze gongs and cymbals were used in pagan worship, especially in loud, wild ceremonies for certain gods. Some scholars think Paul is also thinking of large bronze sound vessels used in ancient theaters to make sound carry. Either way, the picture is the same: lots of noise, no meaning. Without love, even speaking in angelic languages is just noise.

Paul keeps going. If I have the gift of prophecy and understand every mystery and have all knowledge, and if I have faith that can move mountains, but don't have love, "I am nothing." If I give away everything I own to the poor and give my body to hardship, but don't have love, "I gain nothing."

That's a shocking list. Paul is saying that the best gifts, the deepest knowledge, the strongest faith, and the most extreme sacrifice are worth zero without love.

Then he describes what love is like. And he does it with verbs. Love isn't just a feeling. It's what you do.

"Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres."

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **A Portrait of Jesus**
>
> Read the description of love again, but put the name Jesus where it says love. Jesus is patient. Jesus is kind. Jesus doesn't boast. Jesus keeps no record of wrongs. It fits perfectly, because Jesus is what love looks like. Now try putting your own name there. That's harder. Most of us don't fit very well yet. That's the point. Love isn't something you work up; it's something the Spirit grows in you as you become more like Jesus.

Notice how many items on the list match the Corinthians' problems. They were envious of each other's gifts. They boasted. They were proud. They dishonored the poor at the Lord's Supper. They were self-seeking. They kept records of wrongs and took each other to court. Paul isn't just writing poetry. He's holding up a mirror.

"Love never fails." Everything else will end. Prophecy, tongues, and knowledge are for now. "For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when completeness comes, what is in part disappears."

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **When Completeness Comes**
>
> Christians disagree about what Paul means by completeness. Most understand it as the return of Jesus, when we will see Him face to face and know fully. Some think Paul means the completion of the New Testament,

> and they believe gifts like tongues and prophecy ended after that. Either way, Paul's point is clear: gifts are temporary, but love lasts forever.

Paul compares it to growing up. "When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put the ways of childhood behind me." The Corinthians were acting like spiritual kids, showing off their gifts like toys. Paul wants them to grow up.

And then he says we only see part of the picture now. "For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face." Ancient mirrors were made of polished bronze, often from Corinth. You could see yourself, but the image was dim and blurry. That's what knowing God is like now. One day we'll see Him clearly, face to face. "Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known."

God already knows you completely. Every thought, every failure, every secret. And He loves you anyway.

"And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love."

KEY VERSE

Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.

1 Corinthians 13:4–7 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Why do you think Paul put this chapter in the middle of his teaching about spiritual gifts?
2. Put your own name in place of love in verses 4 to 7. Which line is hardest to say honestly?
3. Why is love greater than faith and hope?

TRY THIS *Pick one line from verses 4 to 7 and practice it on purpose with one person every day this week.*

CHAPTER 14

Five Words

1 Corinthians 14

Paul has shown them the most excellent way. Now he applies it to worship. "Follow the way of love and eagerly desire gifts of the Spirit, especially prophecy."

Why prophecy? Because of love. The Corinthians were especially excited about speaking in tongues, but in church, tongues without interpretation don't help anyone else. "Anyone who speaks in a tongue edifies themselves, but the one who prophesies edifies the church."

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Tongues and Prophecy**
>
> In Acts 2, believers spoke in real human languages they had never learned. In 1 Corinthians, speaking in tongues seems to be prayer or praise in a language the speaker doesn't understand; Paul says the speaker talks to God, not people, and no one understands without an interpretation. Prophecy, in Paul's letters, means speaking a message from God that strengthens, encourages, and comforts others. Christians today disagree about whether and how these gifts continue. Some churches practice them; others believe they have ceased; many are somewhere in between. Paul's concern in this chapter is clear in any case: in public worship, choose what builds others up.

Paul isn't against tongues. He says he'd like all of them to speak in tongues, and he thanks God that he speaks in tongues more than all

of them. “But in the church I would rather speak five intelligible words to instruct others than ten thousand words in a tongue.”

He uses musical examples. If a flute or harp plays random notes, no one recognizes the song. If the trumpet doesn’t sound a clear call, who will get ready for battle? Speaking words no one understands is like “speaking into the air.”

So Paul gives a principle. “Since you are eager for gifts of the Spirit, try to excel in those that build up the church.” He’ll pray with his spirit, but also with his mind. If someone can’t understand what you’re saying, how can they say “Amen” to it?

Then Paul thinks about visitors. If an unbeliever walks into a church where everyone is speaking in tongues at once, they’ll think the people are out of their minds. But if they hear prophecy, they’ll understand, their hearts will be laid bare, and they’ll fall down and worship, saying, “God is really among you!”

Then Paul gives practical rules for worship. Everyone brings something: a hymn, a teaching, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation. “Everything must be done so that the church may be built up.” Two or three people at most should speak in tongues, one at a time, with interpretation. If no one can interpret, they should stay quiet. Two or three prophets should speak, and others should carefully weigh what they say. If someone else has something to share, the first speaker should stop. “For God is not a God of disorder but of peace.”

BACKGROUND CHECK **Women Silent in the Churches?**

Verses 34 and 35 say women should remain silent in the churches and ask their husbands at home if they want to learn. These verses are among the most debated in the Bible. Some facts help. In chapter 11, Paul assumed women would pray and prophesy aloud in worship, so he can’t mean total

> silence at all times. The NIV footnote also notes that in a few manuscripts these verses come after verse 40, and a minority of scholars think they may have been added later, though they appear in every surviving manuscript of the letter. Many scholars think Paul is addressing a specific problem, such as disruptive questions during worship or the weighing of prophecies. Others believe he is setting a lasting pattern for who leads and teaches in church. Churches today practice this in different ways. It's an important passage to discuss with your pastor or youth leader, carefully and respectfully.

Paul ends with a summary. Be eager to prophesy. Don't forbid speaking in tongues. "But everything should be done in a fitting and orderly way."

That's a good word for churches on all sides of the gifts debate. Don't shut down what the Spirit is doing. Don't let worship become chaos. Do everything with love, so that people are built up and visitors meet God.

KEY VERSE

But everything should be done in a fitting and orderly way.

1 Corinthians 14:40 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Paul would rather speak five words people understand than ten thousand they don't. What does that mean for how we talk about faith?
2. If someone who didn't know Jesus came to your church or youth group, what would they experience? Would they understand what's going on?
3. What could you bring to worship, like a song, a prayer, a word of encouragement, that would build others up?

CHAPTER 15

Death Loses

1 Corinthians 15

Paul saves the most important topic for last. Some people in Corinth were saying there's no resurrection of the dead. Many Greeks thought the body was a prison, and the goal was for the soul to escape it. A body coming back to life sounded ridiculous, even disgusting.

Paul starts with the basics. He reminds them of the gospel he preached to them, the message that saves them. And he passes on what he calls "of first importance": "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."

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **The Oldest Creed**
>
> Most scholars believe verses 3 to 7 are a summary of the faith that Paul received from the earliest Christians, possibly within a few years of Jesus' death. Paul says he received it and passed it on, the language Jewish teachers used for carefully handing down tradition. That means the belief that Jesus rose from the dead wasn't a legend that grew over centuries. It was there from the very beginning.

Then Paul lists witnesses. Jesus appeared to Peter, then to the Twelve, then to more than five hundred believers at once, most of whom were still alive when Paul wrote. In other words, go ask them. Then to James, Jesus' brother, who hadn't believed in Him

before. Then to all the apostles. "And last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born."

Paul calls himself the least of the apostles, because he persecuted the church. "But by the grace of God I am what I am."

Then Paul makes his argument. If there's no resurrection of the dead, then Christ hasn't been raised either. "And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith." The apostles would be liars. The Corinthians would still be in their sins. Believers who have died would be lost. "If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied."

That's honest. Paul doesn't say Christianity is a nice way to live whether or not it's true. He says everything depends on whether Jesus actually rose from the dead.

"But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep."

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Firstfruits**
>
> At harvest time, Israelites brought the first part of their crop to God as an offering. It was called the firstfruits. It was a promise that the rest of the harvest was coming. Paul says Jesus' resurrection is the firstfruits. He's the first one raised, never to die again. The rest of the harvest, everyone who belongs to Him, is coming.

Just as death came through one man, Adam, the resurrection comes through one man, Jesus. "For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive." Jesus will reign until He has defeated every enemy. "The last enemy to be destroyed is death."

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Baptized for the Dead?**
>
> In verse 29, Paul mentions people being baptized for the dead. No one knows for sure what he meant, and scholars have suggested dozens of explanations.

> Paul doesn't say he approves of it. He simply points out that the practice makes no sense if the dead aren't raised. It's a good reminder that we don't have to understand every verse to understand the main point.

Paul also points to his own life. Why would he face death every day if there were no resurrection? If the dead aren't raised, then "Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die." Then he quotes a Greek poet, Menander: "Bad company corrupts good character." Some of the Corinthians had been listening to the wrong voices.

Then someone asks, how are the dead raised? What kind of body will they have? Paul answers with a seed. When you plant a seed, it doesn't come up looking like a seed. It dies in the ground and comes up as a plant. The resurrection body will be connected to our present body, but gloriously different. "The body that is sown is perishable, it is raised imperishable; it is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power."

And it will happen fast. "Listen, I tell you a mystery: We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed—in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet."

Then Paul quotes the prophets and taunts death itself. "Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?" Death's sting is sin, and the law gives sin its power. "But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ."

The chapter ends with a practical conclusion. Because the resurrection is real, "stand firm. Let nothing move you." Give yourself fully to the Lord's work, because "your labor in the Lord is not in vain."

Nothing you do for Jesus is wasted. Not a single prayer, kind word, or act of service. The resurrection guarantees it.

KEY VERSE

Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?

1 Corinthians 15:55 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Paul says if Christ hasn't been raised, our faith is useless. Why does the resurrection matter so much?
2. Paul pointed to witnesses who were still alive. Why is that important evidence?
3. How does knowing that your work for the Lord isn't in vain change the way you think about ordinary acts of kindness?

CHAPTER 16

Do Everything in Love

1 Corinthians 16

After the heights of chapter 15, Paul comes back down to earth. "Now about the collection for the Lord's people."

Paul was collecting money from Gentile churches to help poor Jewish believers in Jerusalem. It's the same collection he mentions in Romans 15. Here he gives practical instructions. "On the first day of every week, each one of you should set aside a sum of money in keeping with your income." Regular. Planned. In proportion to what you have.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **The First Day of the Week**
>
> This verse is one of the earliest signs that Christians gathered on Sunday, the first day of the week, the day Jesus rose from the dead. Jewish believers had kept the Sabbath on Saturday. Over time, Sunday became known as the Lord's Day. Paul's instruction about setting money aside each Sunday suggests that this was already a regular rhythm for the church.

Paul shares his travel plans. He's staying in Ephesus until Pentecost, "because a great door for effective work has opened to me, and there are many who oppose me." Notice those two things together. Great opportunity and great opposition often come at the same time.

He asks them to treat Timothy well when he comes. Timothy was young, and some people might look down on him. “See to it that he has nothing to fear while he is with you.” He mentions Apollos too. Paul had urged him to visit Corinth, but Apollos didn’t want to go yet. Remember the fan clubs in chapter 1? Paul and Apollos weren’t rivals. They were co-workers, and Paul speaks of him warmly.

Then Paul gives a short, punchy list of commands, almost like a coach in a huddle. “Be on your guard; stand firm in the faith; be courageous; be strong. Do everything in love.”

Read those as a summary of the whole letter. Be on your guard against the pride and immorality of Corinth. Stand firm in the faith, especially the resurrection. Be courageous. Be strong. And do everything, all of it, in love. Not just the gifts. Not just worship. Everything.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **In His Own Hand**
>
> Paul usually dictated his letters to a scribe. At the end, he often picked up the pen himself to write a final greeting, partly to show the letter was really from him. “I, Paul, write this greeting in my own hand.” Picture the Corinthians looking at the scroll and seeing his handwriting change at the bottom.

Paul praises the household of Stephanas, the first converts in the region, who have devoted themselves to serving God’s people. He thanks Stephanas, Fortunatus, and Achaicus for visiting him. Aquila and Priscilla send greetings, along with the church that meets in their house, the same couple who had worked with Paul in Corinth years before.

Then Paul writes a strong line: if anyone doesn’t love the Lord, let them be cursed. And right after it, an Aramaic prayer: “Come, Lord!”

BACKGROUND CHECK **Maranatha**

The NIV footnote says the words Come, Lord translate an Aramaic expression, Marana tha, used by early Christians. Aramaic was the language Jesus and His first followers spoke. Paul is writing in Greek to a mostly Greek-speaking church, and he still uses this Aramaic prayer, which suggests it was a prayer the whole church knew, from Jerusalem to Corinth. It's one of the oldest Christian prayers we have.

The letter ends with grace, the same word it started with. "The grace of the Lord Jesus be with you." And then one last line that's very Paul. After all the correction, the sarcasm, the warnings, and the hard words, he signs off: "My love to all of you in Christ Jesus. Amen."

That's how the letter ends. Not with a scolding. With love.

KEY VERSE

Be on your guard; stand firm in the faith; be courageous; be strong. Do everything in love.

1 Corinthians 16:13–14 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Paul says great opportunity and great opposition often come together. Have you ever experienced that?
2. Paul wanted the church to treat young Timothy with respect. How can you show that people your age can be trusted to serve God?
3. Paul ended a hard letter with love. How can you be honest with someone and still make sure they know you love them?

TRY THIS *Memorize 1 Corinthians 16:13–14 this week, and say it to yourself every morning before school.*

THE END (AND THE BEGINNING)

Now What? The Bottom Line

You've just walked through Paul's whole first letter to the Corinthians. Every problem Paul dealt with, from cliques to lawsuits to chaos in worship, he brought back to the same message. He called it the message of the cross, and he said it was of first importance.

Here's what the Bible says, as plainly as I can put it.

1 God made you, and He wants you to know Him.

The world, with all its wisdom, didn't find God on its own. So God came looking for us. You weren't an accident. You were made to know Him.

2 We've all turned away.

Paul's list of sins in chapter 6 is long, and he says of the Corinthians, that is what some of you were. The same is true for every one of us. The Bible calls it sin, and it separates us from God.

> *for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,* **Romans 3:23 (NIV)**

3 Sin has a real cost.

God is good, so He doesn't shrug off evil. The Bible says the result of sin is death, separation from God forever.

> *For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.* **Romans 6:23 (NIV)**

4 Jesus paid it, and He's alive.

This is the message Paul says is of first importance. Jesus died for our sins, He was buried, and He rose again. If He hadn't risen, Paul says, our faith would be useless. But He did.

> *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,* **1 Corinthians 15:3–4 (NIV)**

5 You can't earn it. You receive it.

The Corinthians loved to boast. Paul kept asking them, what do you have that you didn't receive? Salvation isn't something you achieve. It's a gift you receive by trusting Jesus.

> *For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast.* **Ephesians 2:8–9 (NIV)**

6 Turn and trust.

Turn from running your own life, and trust Jesus as your Savior and King. It doesn't mean you'll never fail again. The Corinthians failed plenty. It means you belong to Him now. You were bought at a price.

> *If you declare with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.* **Romans 10:9 (NIV)**

So what do you do with that? You don't need perfect words. You can talk to God honestly, right now, wherever you are. If it helps, you could pray something like this:

God, I've been running my own life, and I've sinned against You. I can't fix that myself. I believe Jesus died for my sins, was buried, and rose again. I'm turning to You. Forgive me. I trust Jesus as my Savior, and I want to follow Him as my King. I'm not my own anymore; I belong to You. Fill me with Your Holy Spirit and teach me to love the way You love. In Jesus' name, amen.

If You Just Said Yes

Tell someone. A parent, a youth leader, a pastor, or a Christian friend. Start there.

Read the real thing. Read 1 Corinthians straight through in a Bible, a chapter a day. Then read 2 Corinthians, where you'll find out what happened next.

Find your people. Get connected to a church where the Bible is taught and Jesus is honored. It won't be perfect. Neither was Corinth. You're part of the body, and the body needs you. Ask about being baptized.

Talk to God every day. Be honest. When you're tempted, ask Him for the way out He promised. He can handle it.

Not Sure Yet?

Not ready? That's honest, and honesty is a good place to start. Some of the Corinthians had serious doubts about the resurrection, and Paul didn't kick them out. He gave them evidence and reasons. Keep asking. Keep reading. Talk to someone you trust. Just don't settle for "I already know all that."

Because if Jesus really rose from the dead, then death doesn't get the last word, and nothing you do for Him is ever wasted. That's worth finding out for yourself.

But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

1 Corinthians 15:57 (NIV)

PAUL'S SECOND LETTER TO THE CORINTHIANS

The King's Jars of Clay

2 Corinthians, Unfiltered

For teens who think they've heard it all

BILL McLEOD

Papa Bill Books

The King's Jars of Clay: Paul's Second Letter to the Corinthians, Unfiltered

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All Scripture quotations in this book are from the NIV. Some are abridged, with omissions marked by ellipses; paraphrases are not placed in quotation marks.

Pronouns referring to God the Father, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit are capitalized for reverence in the author's own words. Inside Scripture quotations, capitalization and wording follow the 2011 NIV exactly.

AI Disclosure. This book was written by Bill McLeod with the assistance of artificial intelligence tools for drafting, research, and editing. All content was reviewed and approved by the author, who takes full responsibility for it. Readers are encouraged to open the Scriptures and study them for themselves.

A WORD TO THE READER

Before You Start

If you've read the earlier books in this series, you know the saying by now: "If you want to get something done, hire a teenager while they still know it all." It's been in every book. It's not leaving now.

But this letter comes from someone who had stopped pretending to know it all. In 2 Corinthians, Paul is tired, hurt, misunderstood, and honest about all of it. He talks about despairing of life itself. He admits he cried while writing. He describes a painful problem God refused to take away. He defends himself against people who mocked the way he looked and talked. It's the most personal letter Paul ever wrote.

That makes it a great letter for anyone who has ever felt weak, criticized, or not impressive enough. The church in Corinth was falling for flashy leaders with big personalities, polished speeches, and impressive résumés. Paul had none of that, at least not the way they wanted. What he had was scars, tears, and a message about a crucified King.

And here's the twist that runs all through this letter: God's power shows up best in weak people. Paul compares himself to a cheap clay jar holding a priceless treasure. The jar is cracked and ordinary on purpose, so everyone can see the treasure is what matters.

You may feel like a cracked jar. Good. You're exactly the kind of person God loves to use.

How This Book Works

This book walks through all 13 chapters of 2 Corinthians, in order, one chapter of this book for each chapter of the letter. Each one explains what Paul is saying and why, adds background about Corinth, Paul's travels, and the people he was dealing with, and shows how each piece fits Paul's big theme of strength in weakness.

Before chapter 1, a short section called Setting the Scene tells the story of what happened between 1 Corinthians and this letter: a painful visit, a letter written in tears, a long wait for news, and a group of rival teachers. Don't skip it. This letter is hard to follow without it.

Each chapter ends with a Key Verse quoted word for word from the New International Version (NIV), the same translation used for every Scripture quotation in this book (pronouns for God are capitalized in the author's own words out of reverence; inside Scripture quotations, capitalization follows the NIV exactly); Real Talk questions to think through alone or argue about with friends; and sometimes a Try This challenge.

Because this is a short letter, this book quotes it sparingly and explains it mostly in my own words. So keep a Bible open next to it and read each chapter of 2 Corinthians for yourself. Paul told the Corinthians to examine themselves. Do the same with this book. Don't take my word for it. Take His.

FOR THE ADULTS

A Note for Parents and Youth Leaders

Thank you for putting this book in a teenager's hands. Like the earlier books in this series, on Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Acts, Romans, and 1 Corinthians, it's written for readers who can smell a sermon coming a mile away. I've tried to write honestly, directly, with some humor, and with real respect for what these readers can handle.

This book follows the letter format of the Romans and 1 Corinthians volumes, walking through the letter chapter by chapter. Because 2 Corinthians is short, I've quoted it sparingly and relied mostly on paraphrase and explanation. Wherever Scripture is quoted directly, in the chapters and in the Key Verses, the wording is from the New International Version (NIV). Background is included where it helps, and I've tried to stay with what's well established rather than speculation.

The events behind this letter have to be pieced together from hints in the letter itself, and scholars reconstruct them in slightly different ways. I've told the most widely accepted version and noted where there is real debate, including the long-running question of whether 2 Corinthians as we have it combines more than one of Paul's letters.

Second Corinthians is especially valuable for teenagers who struggle with insecurity, comparison, criticism, or suffering. It also

has important teaching on forgiveness and restoring someone who has done wrong (chapters 2 and 7), on generosity (chapters 8 and 9), on discernment about leaders who look impressive (chapters 10 to 12), and on dating or partnering closely with people who don't share one's faith (6:14), which I've addressed briefly and with care.

The Real Talk questions are designed for discussion. They work well for a youth group, a small group, a family dinner table, or a car ride. Don't rush to the right answer. Let them wrestle. Faith that has been thought through tends to last.

My prayer is that every reader who feels weak, ordinary, or not enough will hear Jesus' words to Paul as words to them: My grace is sufficient for you.

Grace and peace,

Bill McLeod

Papa Bill Books

BEFORE YOU OPEN THE LETTER

Setting the Scene

Where We Left Off

If you read 1 Corinthians, you remember the church in Corinth: gifted, proud, divided, and messy. Paul wrote that letter from Ephesus, across the Aegean Sea, around AD 54 or 55. He sent Timothy to visit them and planned to come himself after traveling through Macedonia.

You might expect the next letter to say, thanks for listening, everything is fixed. It doesn't. Things got worse before they got better. The story of what happened next has to be pieced together from clues in 2 Corinthians and Acts, and scholars tell it in slightly different ways. Here's the version most of them accept.

The Painful Visit

Something went wrong in Corinth, badly enough that Paul changed his plans and made a quick trip across the sea to deal with it. It didn't go well. In 2 Corinthians 2:1, Paul calls it a painful visit. Later, he talks about coming to them a third time, which tells us there had been a second visit we don't read about in Acts.

During that visit, it seems, one person in the church openly attacked or insulted Paul, and the rest of the church didn't stand up for him. Paul left hurt and humiliated. He decided not to come back right away, and some of the Corinthians accused him of being unreliable because he kept changing his travel plans.

The Tearful Letter

Instead of visiting again, Paul wrote a letter. He says he wrote it out of great distress and anguish of heart, and with many tears. It was a severe letter, calling the church to deal with the man who had wronged him and to prove their loyalty. Scholars often call it the tearful letter or the severe letter.

Where is that letter now? Some think it's 1 Corinthians, but most think 1 Corinthians doesn't match Paul's description. Many believe it was lost. Others think part of it survives as chapters 10 to 13 of 2 Corinthians. Either way, Paul sent it with his co-worker Titus and then waited anxiously to hear how the church responded.

The Long Wait

While he waited, Paul faced something terrible in the province of Asia, the region around Ephesus. He doesn't tell us exactly what it was. It may have been a riot, an imprisonment, or a serious illness. Whatever it was, Paul says he felt he had received the sentence of death.

Then he traveled north to Troas, a port city, hoping to meet Titus coming back with news. Titus wasn't there. Even though there was a great opportunity to preach in Troas, Paul was so restless that he left and crossed over to Macedonia, still looking for him.

Finally Titus arrived, and the news was good. Most of the church had repented, dealt with the offender, and longed to see Paul again. Paul was flooded with relief, and he wrote 2 Corinthians from Macedonia, probably around AD 55 or 56.

The Super-Apostles

The good news wasn't the whole story. A group of traveling teachers had arrived in Corinth. Paul sarcastically calls them super-apostles. They were Jewish, proud of their background, and gifted speakers. They carried letters of recommendation, boasted about their spiritual experiences, charged the church for their teaching, and compared themselves favorably with Paul. They said his letters were powerful but in person he was weak and his speaking was nothing special.

The Corinthians, who already loved impressive speakers, were tempted to follow them. Much of 2 Corinthians is Paul answering the question: what does a true servant of Jesus look like? His answer is not what anyone expected.

One Letter or Several?

Read 2 Corinthians straight through and you'll notice something. Chapters 1 to 9 are mostly warm and relieved. Then chapter 10 suddenly turns sharp, sarcastic, and fierce. There are other surprises too: a short section in 6:14 to 7:1 seems to interrupt the flow, and chapters 8 and 9 both talk about the same collection of money as if starting fresh.

Because of this, many scholars think 2 Corinthians combines two or more of Paul's letters, collected together when his letters were copied and shared. A common view is that chapters 10 to 13 were a separate letter, either part of the tearful letter or a later letter written after more bad news. Other scholars think it was always one letter, written over time as Paul dictated and received new reports, and that a change of tone is natural when he turns from the loyal majority to the rival teachers. No ancient manuscript shows the

letter in pieces; every copy we have contains it as it stands. Either way, all of it is Paul, and all of it is Scripture.

What Happened Next

Paul did visit Corinth a third time. Acts 20 says he spent three months in Greece, and that's where he wrote Romans, in about AD 57. He mentions in Romans that the believers of Achaia, the region around Corinth, had given generously to the collection for Jerusalem. That suggests this letter worked. The messy family listened.

About forty years later, a church leader in Rome named Clement wrote to the Corinthians because they were fighting again. Some things take a long time to change. But God never gave up on them.

The Map

Chapters 1 to 7: Paul explains his change of plans, the tearful letter, and what real ministry is like: weak clay jars carrying God's treasure, ambassadors of reconciliation, and hearts opened wide.

Chapters 8 and 9: The collection for poor believers in Jerusalem, and what generous giving looks like.

Chapters 10 to 13: Paul answers the super-apostles, boasts about his weaknesses, describes his thorn in the flesh, and prepares for his third visit.

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CHAPTER 1

The God of All Comfort

2 Corinthians 1

Paul starts this letter the usual way, with his name, the church's name, and a greeting of grace and peace. This time Timothy is listed with him. But right after the greeting, instead of jumping into the problems, Paul bursts into praise. And the word he can't stop using is comfort.

He calls God "the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort." In just a few sentences, Paul uses the word comfort, or a form of it, about ten times. God comforts us in all our troubles, he says, so that we can turn around and comfort others who are hurting, with the same comfort God gave us.

That's worth slowing down for. Your pain is not wasted. The hard thing you've been through might be the very thing that lets you help someone else someday. People who have been through grief can sit with the grieving in a way others can't. People who have fought anxiety can recognize it in a friend. God doesn't just comfort you for your sake. He comforts you so the comfort can keep moving.

> BACKGROUND CHECK **Comfort**
>
> The Greek word Paul uses, paraklesis, is related to a word Jesus used for the Holy Spirit in John 14, sometimes translated Advocate, Helper, or Comforter. The idea is someone who comes alongside you. Comfort in the Bible isn't just a soft feeling. In older English, comfort came from a Latin word meaning to

make strong. God's comfort doesn't just make you feel better; it gives you strength to keep going.

Then Paul gets honest about how bad things had been. Something happened to him in the province of Asia, the region around Ephesus. He doesn't say what. It may have been a riot, an arrest, or a serious illness. But he says the pressure was so far beyond what he could handle that he gave up hope of surviving. He felt like he'd already been sentenced to death.

Here's what's remarkable. This is the apostle Paul, the great missionary, the man who wrote much of the New Testament, admitting that he despaired. If you've ever felt like you couldn't go on, you're not a bad Christian. You're in Paul's company.

But Paul says something came out of it. It happened so that he would stop relying on himself and rely on God, "who raises the dead." When you've reached the end of your own strength, you find out what God's strength is like. And Paul thanks the Corinthians for praying for him. Their prayers were part of how God rescued him.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The God Who Raises the Dead**

This phrase was part of a famous daily Jewish prayer that praised God as the one who gives life to the dead. For Paul, it had a new meaning. He had met the risen Jesus. If God raised Jesus, He could rescue Paul from anything, and one day He will raise Paul too. That's where hope comes from when every other hope runs out.

Then Paul turns to an accusation. Some people in Corinth were saying Paul was unreliable. He had told them he would visit, and then he didn't. They said he was the kind of person who says yes and no in the same breath, who makes promises he doesn't keep.

Paul's answer is interesting. He says his message about Jesus was never a mix of yes and no. And then he says something beautiful: every one of God's promises finds its yes in Christ. All the promises God made in the Old Testament, to Abraham, to David, to the prophets, come true in Jesus. And that's why believers say "Amen" through Him, which means, so be it, it's true.

Paul's travel plans may have changed. God's promises never do.

So why didn't Paul come? He calls God as his witness: it was to spare them. If he had come back right then, it would have been another painful confrontation. He didn't want to lord it over their faith. He wanted to work with them for their joy.

KEY VERSE

For no matter how many promises God has made, they are "Yes" in Christ.

2 Corinthians 1:20 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Think of a hard thing you've been through. Could God use it to help you comfort someone else? How?
2. Paul admits he felt hopeless. Why do you think it's important that the Bible includes moments like that?
3. Paul's plans changed, but God's promises didn't. What's one promise of God you need to hold on to right now?

CHAPTER 2

Forgive Him

2 Corinthians 2

Paul keeps explaining why he didn't come back. He decided he wouldn't make another painful visit. He'd already had one, and it had hurt everyone. If he made the Corinthians sad, who would be left to make him glad?

So instead, he wrote them a letter. And he describes how he wrote it: "out of great distress and anguish of heart and with many tears." It wasn't written to hurt them, he says, but to let them know how deeply he loved them.

That's the tearful letter you read about in Setting the Scene. Sometimes love requires saying hard things. But notice how Paul did it: with tears, not with a smirk. There's a big difference between a friend who corrects you because they love you and someone who corrects you because they enjoy being right.

> BACKGROUND CHECK **The Man Who Caused Grief**
>
> Paul mentions someone who caused grief, not just to Paul but to the whole church. He doesn't name him, which is kind. Most scholars think this was the person who opposed Paul during the painful visit. For a long time, many readers assumed he was the man in 1 Corinthians 5 who was sleeping with his stepmother, but most scholars today think this is a different situation. Either way, the church had now disciplined him.

Then Paul says something surprising. The punishment the majority gave this man is enough. Now it's time to forgive him and comfort him, so he isn't crushed by too much sorrow. Paul urges them to reaffirm their love for him.

Think about that. This man had hurt Paul personally. And Paul is the one saying, that's enough, welcome him back. Paul says whoever they forgive, he forgives too.

Why does it matter so much? So that Satan won't outwit us. Paul says we know how he works. One of Satan's favorite tricks is to take a person who has sinned and repented, and convince them, or the people around them, that they can never be forgiven. A church that disciplines but never forgives isn't being holy. It's being outsmarted.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Discipline and Restoration**
>
> In the Bible, the goal of correcting someone is always restoration. Jesus told Peter to forgive not seven times but seventy-seven times. Paul tells the Galatians to restore someone caught in sin gently. Here he tells the Corinthians that once a person has turned around, the church must welcome them back with love. Holding on to someone's past when God has forgiven it is its own kind of sin.

Then Paul tells a short travel story. He went to Troas to preach, and God opened a door for him there. But he couldn't settle down, because Titus hadn't arrived with news from Corinth. So he said goodbye and went on to Macedonia.

Then, suddenly, Paul breaks into praise again. God, he says, always leads us like captives in Christ's victory parade. Remember the Roman triumph from 1 Corinthians 4? A conquering general marched through Rome with his army and his prisoners, and incense was burned along the route. Paul says believers are like that parade, spreading the fragrance of Christ everywhere they go.

To some people, that smell is the scent of life. To others, it's the smell of death. The same message of Jesus draws some people in and makes others angry. Who is up to a job like that? Paul's answer comes in the next chapter: nobody, on their own. But he adds that unlike many, he doesn't peddle God's word for profit. He's not selling the gospel like a street vendor. He speaks with sincerity, as someone sent by God.

KEY VERSE

For we are to God the pleasing aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing.

2 Corinthians 2:15 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. What's the difference between correcting someone out of love and correcting them because you like being right?
2. Is there someone you need to forgive, or someone a group you belong to needs to welcome back?
3. Paul says believers spread the aroma of Christ. What do people around you notice about Jesus when they're around you?

CHAPTER 3

Letters on Hearts

2 Corinthians 3

The rival teachers in Corinth arrived with letters of recommendation. That was normal in the ancient world. If you traveled to a new city, you'd carry a letter from someone important saying, this person is trustworthy, please welcome them. The super-apostles probably had impressive ones.

So Paul asks: do I need letters of recommendation to you, like some people? Then he answers his own question. You are my letter. You, the church in Corinth, are the proof of my ministry. He says they're a letter from Christ, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on stone tablets but on human hearts.

That's a powerful idea. The best evidence for Jesus isn't an argument or a certificate. It's changed lives. And here's the challenge: you're a letter too. People who never open a Bible are reading your life. What does it say?

> BACKGROUND CHECK **Tablets of Stone**
>
> When Paul mentions stone tablets, he's thinking of the Ten Commandments, which God wrote on stone and gave to Moses at Mount Sinai. But the prophets Jeremiah and Ezekiel promised that one day God would make a new covenant and write His law on people's hearts, replacing hearts of stone with hearts of flesh. Paul says that's exactly what the Spirit is doing now.

Paul says he isn't competent in himself for this job. His competence comes from God, who has made him a minister of a new covenant, a covenant of the Spirit. Then Paul makes a striking contrast: "the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life."

He doesn't mean the law is bad. He means rules written on stone can tell you what's right, but they can't change your heart. They can only show you where you've failed. The Spirit actually gives new life.

Then Paul tells a story from Exodus 34. When Moses came down from the mountain after meeting with God, his face glowed so brightly that the Israelites were afraid to look at him. So Moses wore a veil over his face. That old covenant came with glory, Paul says. But that glory was fading. The new covenant has a glory that lasts and is far greater.

Paul uses the veil as a picture. He says that when the old covenant is read, it's as if a veil still covers people's hearts, keeping them from seeing clearly. But whenever anyone turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Freedom**
>
> "Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom." This doesn't mean the freedom to do whatever you want. Remember 1 Corinthians, where some people used freedom as an excuse for sin. The freedom Paul means is freedom from condemnation, from fear, from trying to earn God's approval, and from the veil that keeps us from seeing God. It's the freedom to see Him clearly and become like Him.

And here's the end of the chapter, one of the most hopeful verses about how Christians grow. All of us, with faces unveiled, look at the Lord's glory, and as we do, we're being changed into His image, from one degree of glory to the next.

You become like what you look at. Spend your time staring at a screen full of people who make you feel worthless, and you'll start feeling worthless. Spend your time looking at Jesus, and you'll slowly start looking like Him. It doesn't happen overnight. It's ever-increasing. But it's real, and it's the Spirit's work.

KEY VERSE

Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.

2 Corinthians 3:17 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Paul says the Corinthians were his letter of recommendation. If someone read your life like a letter, what would they learn about Jesus?
2. What's the difference between rules that tell you what's right and the Spirit who changes your heart?
3. You become like what you look at. What are you looking at most? How is it shaping you?

TRY THIS *Spend ten minutes this week reading about Jesus in one of the Gospels with no phone nearby. Then write down one thing about Him you want to imitate.*

CHAPTER 4

Treasure in Jars of Clay

2 Corinthians 4

Paul keeps talking about his ministry, and the theme is clear from the start: we don't lose heart. He uses that phrase twice in this chapter, once at the beginning and once near the end, like bookends.

He says he doesn't use tricks or twist God's word. He just sets out the truth plainly. If people still don't see it, it's because the god of this age, Satan, has blinded their minds so they can't see the light of the gospel. Then Paul makes an important point: what he preaches isn't himself. He preaches Jesus Christ as Lord, and himself as their servant for Jesus' sake.

That was a direct contrast to the super-apostles, who seem to have been very interested in promoting themselves.

Then Paul goes back to the very first page of the Bible. In Genesis 1, God said, let there be light, and light shone out of the darkness. Paul says the same God has made His light shine in our hearts, so we can see His glory in the face of Jesus. Becoming a Christian is like creation all over again. God speaks, and light floods into a dark heart.

And then comes the picture that gives this book its title. "But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us."

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Jars of Clay**
>
> Clay jars were the cheapest containers in the ancient world. They were used for everything from storing grain to carrying water to holding oil lamps. They cracked easily and were thrown away when they broke. Corinth was famous for its pottery, and broken pieces covered the ground around the city. Nobody kept treasure in a clay jar because the jar was impressive. Sometimes, though, people hid valuables in plain clay pots precisely because no one would look there. The Dead Sea Scrolls were found in clay jars in caves.

The super-apostles wanted to be impressive containers, golden vases that people would admire. Paul says he's a clay pot, ordinary and breakable. And that's the point. When people see something amazing come out of an ordinary jar, they know the power belongs to God.

Then Paul describes what life as a clay jar is like, in four pairs. Hard pressed on every side, but not crushed. Perplexed, but not in despair. Persecuted, but not abandoned. Struck down, but not destroyed.

Read those slowly. Paul doesn't say Christians never get pressed, confused, attacked, or knocked down. He says all of that happens. But it never has the final word. You may be hard pressed, but you won't be crushed.

He says he carries around the death of Jesus in his body, so the life of Jesus can show up there too. His suffering is a kind of daily dying, but it's producing life in others.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Wasting Away and Being Renewed**

Paul was probably in his late forties or fifties when he wrote this, and his body had been through beatings, stonings, shipwrecks, and years of hard travel. He knew he was aging and wearing out. But he says that while his outer self is wasting away, his inner self is being renewed day by day. Your body will get older. Your heart and spirit, with God, can keep getting younger.

Then Paul makes a comparison that seems almost unbelievable after everything he's been through. He calls his troubles light and momentary. Light? Momentary? Paul had been beaten nearly to death. But compared to the eternal glory that's coming, a glory that far outweighs everything, he says, his troubles are like a feather on a scale.

So where does Paul look? Not at what's seen, but at what's unseen. Because what you can see is temporary. What you can't see is forever.

KEY VERSE

But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us.

2 Corinthians 4:7 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. What makes you feel like a cracked clay jar? How could God use that very weakness?
2. Which of Paul's four pairs (pressed but not crushed, perplexed but not in despair, persecuted but not abandoned, struck down but not destroyed) describes your life right now?
3. What would change if you looked at your troubles in light of eternity?

CHAPTER 5

New Creation

2 Corinthians 5

Chapter 4 ended with Paul fixing his eyes on what's unseen and eternal. Chapter 5 keeps going in that direction. Paul talks about what happens when our bodies die.

He compares the body to a tent. A tent is temporary. You pitch it, live in it for a while, and one day you take it down. Paul was a tentmaker, so he knew tents well. If this earthly tent is destroyed, he says, we have something far better waiting: a building from God, an eternal house in heaven, not made by human hands.

Meanwhile, we groan. We feel the weight of living in bodies that get sick, tired, and old. But Paul says we don't want to be without a body, like a ghost floating around. We want to be clothed with a new, heavenly body, so that what is mortal is swallowed up by life. And God has given us the Spirit as a deposit, a down payment guaranteeing that the rest is coming.

> BACKGROUND CHECK **The Down Payment**
>
> The Greek word Paul uses for deposit was a business term for the first installment of a payment, money put down to guarantee the full amount would follow. In modern Greek, a form of the same word is still used for an engagement, a promise that a wedding is coming. The Holy Spirit living in you now is God's promise that everything else He has said will happen.

So Paul is confident. As long as we're at home in this body, we're away from the Lord in a sense, and he'd rather be with the Lord. In the meantime, "we live by faith, not by sight." Whether he lives or dies, his goal is to please Jesus.

Then Paul says something sobering. We must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, to receive what's due for what we've done in the body, good or bad.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **The Judgment Seat**
>
> In the middle of Corinth's marketplace, archaeologists have found a large raised stone platform called the bema, the judgment seat. It's very likely where Paul stood before the Roman governor Gallio in Acts 18. Everyone in Corinth knew what it looked like to stand before the bema. Paul says believers will stand before Christ's. For those who trust Jesus, this isn't about whether they're saved; Romans 8 says there's no condemnation. It's about how they lived, and what will last.

Because of that, Paul tries to persuade people. And what drives him isn't fear, but love. "For Christ's love compels us." Jesus died for everyone, so that those who live would no longer live for themselves, but for Him.

That changes how Paul sees people. He no longer looks at anyone from a worldly point of view, judging them by looks, money, popularity, or status. He used to see even Jesus that way, as a failed, crucified Messiah. Not anymore.

And then comes one of the most famous verses in the Bible: "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!"

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **New Creation**
>
> The NIV footnote gives another translation: if anyone is in Christ, that person is a new creation. Both are true. When you belong to Jesus, you are made

> new. But Paul's words are also bigger than one person. He's saying that God's whole new creation, the new world He promised, has already started. When someone trusts Jesus, they become part of it.

All this comes from God, Paul says. He reconciled us to Himself through Christ. Reconcile means to bring enemies back together as friends. God wasn't counting people's sins against them. And now He has given us the job of spreading that message.

So Paul calls himself an ambassador. An ambassador represents a king in a foreign country and speaks with the king's authority. Paul says God is making His appeal through us, and the message is simple: be reconciled to God.

The chapter ends with what's sometimes called the great exchange. God made Jesus, who never sinned, to be sin for us, so that in Him we could become the righteousness of God. Jesus took what we had, our sin. We get what He had, His right standing with God. It's the most unfair trade in history, and it's all grace.

KEY VERSE

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!

2 Corinthians 5:17 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Paul says we live by faith, not by sight. What's one area of your life where you need to trust God even though you can't see how it will work out?
2. Paul stopped judging people by worldly standards. What worldly standards are you tempted to use when you size people up?
3. What does it mean to be an ambassador for Christ at your school?

TRY THIS *Write down three things that were part of your "old" life and three things God has made new, or that you want Him to make new.*

CHAPTER 6

Open Wide Your Hearts

2 Corinthians 6

Paul keeps speaking as an ambassador. He urges the Corinthians not to receive God's grace in vain, as if it doesn't make any difference. He quotes Isaiah about God's time of favor, and then says it plainly: now is the time. Today is the day of salvation.

People often say, I'll get serious about God someday. When I'm older. After I've had my fun. Paul's answer is: now. Not because God is impatient, but because grace is offered today, and you aren't promised tomorrow.

Then Paul describes his life as a servant of God, and it's one of the most intense lists in the Bible. He commends himself not with letters of recommendation but with endurance. In troubles, hardships, and distresses. In beatings, imprisonments, and riots. In hard work, sleepless nights, and hunger.

But he also lists the character God built in him through all of it: purity, understanding, patience, kindness, the Holy Spirit, sincere love, truthful speech, and the power of God.

Then comes a series of contrasts that sounds almost like a poem. People called them impostors, but they were genuine. Unknown, yet well known. Dying, yet still alive. Beaten, but not killed.

Sorrowful, yet always rejoicing. Poor, yet making many rich. Having nothing, yet possessing everything.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Paradox**
>
> A paradox is something that sounds impossible but turns out to be true. The Christian life is full of them. You find your life by losing it. The first will be last. The weak are strong. Paul's list is a string of paradoxes. From the outside, Paul looked like a failure. From God's point of view, he was rich beyond measure.

Then Paul's tone turns tender. He's spoken freely to them, he says, and opened wide his heart. He isn't holding back his love. They're the ones holding back theirs. So, speaking to them like a parent to his children, he asks them to open wide their hearts in return.

Relationships take two people. Paul had done everything he could. Now it was their turn.

Then comes a section many scholars think interrupts the flow, beginning with the words, "Do not be yoked together with unbelievers."

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Unequally Yoked**
>
> A yoke was a wooden beam that joined two animals so they could pull a plow together. Deuteronomy 22 told Israel not to plow with an ox and a donkey yoked together; they're different sizes and strengths, and they'd pull in different directions. Paul uses that picture for close partnerships between believers and unbelievers. In context, he seems especially concerned about the Corinthians joining in idol worship or following false teachers. Christians often apply this verse to marriage and dating as well, and to business partnerships. Paul is not telling believers to avoid friendships with people who don't believe; in 1 Corinthians 5 he says that would mean leaving the world. He's warning against being bound so closely to someone that they pull you away from Jesus.

Paul asks a string of questions. What do righteousness and wickedness have in common? What fellowship does light have with darkness? What agreement is there between God's temple and idols? And then he reminds them who they are: we are the temple of the living God.

He quotes several Old Testament promises woven together. God will live among His people and be their God. He will welcome them. He will be a Father to them, and they will be His sons and daughters. Notice that daughters are included. The main passage Paul draws on, 2 Samuel 7, speaks of a son; Paul's version says sons and daughters, perhaps echoing Isaiah 43, where God gathers His sons and daughters from far away.

KEY VERSE

I tell you, now is the time of God's favor, now is the day of salvation.

2 Corinthians 6:2 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Why do people put off taking God seriously until later? What does Paul say about that?
2. Which of Paul's paradoxes (sorrowful yet rejoicing, poor yet making many rich, having nothing yet possessing everything) is hardest for you to understand?
3. How can you tell the difference between a healthy friendship with someone who doesn't believe and a partnership that pulls you away from God?

CHAPTER 7

Godly Sorrow

2 Corinthians 7

The chapter begins by finishing the thought from chapter 6. Since we have such amazing promises from God, Paul says, let's clean out of our lives everything that contaminates body and spirit, out of reverence for Him.

Then Paul goes back to the story he started in chapter 2. Remember, he had left Troas and gone to Macedonia, still waiting to hear from Titus. Now he tells us what happened next.

When he got to Macedonia, things didn't get easier. He had no rest. There was conflict on the outside and fear on the inside. Paul is honest again. He's not a superhero. He gets scared.

"But God, who comforts the downcast, comforted us by the coming of Titus."

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Titus**
>
> Titus was a Greek believer, not Jewish, and one of Paul's most trusted co-workers. In Galatians 2, Paul tells how he brought Titus to Jerusalem, and the apostles there didn't require him to be circumcised, a major moment for Gentile believers. Paul later left Titus in charge of organizing the churches on the island of Crete, and wrote him the short letter we call Titus. Here, Titus is the one Paul trusted with the hardest job: delivering the tearful letter and facing the church afterward.

God comforted Paul through a person. Titus showed up, and he brought good news. The Corinthians missed Paul. They were sorry. They were concerned for him. And Paul's joy was greater than ever.

Then Paul talks about the tearful letter. He admits he had regretted sending it at first. He knew it would hurt them. But now he's glad, not because they were hurt, but because their sorrow led them to repent. They were sorrowful in the way God wanted.

And then Paul explains the difference between two kinds of sorrow. "Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death."

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Two Kinds of Sorrow**
>
> Worldly sorrow is being sorry you got caught, sorry for how it makes you look, or sorry in a way that spirals into shame and self-hatred. It focuses on you, and it leads nowhere good. Godly sorrow is being sorry because you see how your sin hurt God and others, and it leads you to turn around and change. Peter and Judas both betrayed Jesus. Judas was filled with despair. Peter wept, turned back, and was restored. Same sin. Different sorrow.

Paul lists what godly sorrow produced in the Corinthians: earnestness, eagerness to make things right, indignation, alarm, longing, concern, and readiness to see justice done. That's what real repentance looks like. Not just feeling bad, but taking action.

Then Paul explains why he wrote the tearful letter in the first place. It wasn't mainly about punishing the person who did wrong, or even defending the person who was hurt. It was so the Corinthians would see for themselves how devoted they really were.

Paul is also thrilled for Titus. Titus had gone to Corinth probably expecting the worst. Instead, they welcomed him with respect and

obedience, and now he loves them even more. Paul had bragged about them to Titus, and they didn't embarrass him.

The chapter ends with a sentence that must have felt like sunshine to the Corinthians after everything that had happened: Paul says he's glad he can have complete confidence in them.

Chapters 1 to 7 started with Paul in despair and end with Paul full of joy. The relationship is being repaired. That's what reconciliation looks like in real life.

KEY VERSE

Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death.

2 Corinthians 7:10 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. God comforted Paul through Titus. Who has God used to comfort you? Could God use you to comfort someone else this week?
2. What's the difference between being sorry you got caught and being sorry you did wrong?
3. What does real repentance look like after you've hurt someone?

CHAPTER 8

The Grace of Giving

2 Corinthians 8

Chapters 8 and 9 change the subject to money. Paul was collecting a gift from the Gentile churches for poor believers in Jerusalem. You may remember it from 1 Corinthians 16, where Paul told them to set aside money every Sunday. The Corinthians had started strong a year earlier, but then the conflict with Paul happened, and the collection stalled.

So Paul tells them about the churches in Macedonia, the region to the north that included cities like Philippi and Thessalonica. Those churches were going through a severe trial, and they were extremely poor. But their joy overflowed into generosity. They gave as much as they could, and even more than they could afford. Nobody pressured them. They actually begged Paul for the privilege of helping.

> BACKGROUND CHECK **Macedonia and Achaia**
>
> Corinth was the capital of Achaia, the Roman province in southern Greece, and it was one of the wealthiest cities in the region. Macedonia, to the north, had been hit hard by wars and Roman taxes over the centuries, and the churches there faced persecution. So Paul is comparing a rich church with poor churches, and the poor churches were the generous ones. It's a pattern you still see today. People with the least often give the most.

Then Paul says something important. The Macedonians "gave themselves first of all to the Lord." That's where generosity starts. When you belong to God completely, your money belongs to Him too. Giving isn't really about money. It's about who owns your heart.

Paul calls giving a grace. The Corinthians were proud of their gifts: faith, speech, knowledge, earnestness. Paul says, great, now excel in this gift too, the grace of giving.

He's careful to say he isn't commanding them. He wants their love to be real, not forced. And then he points them to the greatest example of all: "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich."

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Rich and Poor**
>
> Before Jesus came to earth, He shared the glory of heaven with the Father. Then He was born to a poor family, laid in a feeding trough, grew up as a tradesman in a small town, had no home during His ministry, and died owning only the clothes that soldiers gambled for. Paul says He did it all for us. Everything we give is a small echo of what He gave.

Paul gives practical advice. Finish what you started. Give according to what you have, not according to what you don't have. God isn't asking for the impossible. If the willingness is there, the gift is acceptable.

The goal, Paul says, is equality. Right now the Corinthians have plenty and the Jerusalem believers are in need. Someday it might be the other way around. He quotes the story of the manna in the wilderness, when God fed Israel with bread from heaven: those who gathered a lot didn't have too much, and those who gathered a little didn't have too little. God's people take care of each other.

Then Paul explains who will carry the money. Titus is coming, eager to help. With him is a brother praised by all the churches, and another trusted brother. Why so many people? Because Paul wants to avoid any criticism of how the money is handled. He's taking pains to do what is right, not only in God's eyes but in people's eyes too.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Handling Money Honestly**

Paul knew that money and ministry can be a dangerous combination. His opponents may already have been accusing him of being in it for the money. So he made sure the gift was handled by several trustworthy people chosen by the churches, not by him alone. Churches and ministries today still follow this principle. It's not because leaders are assumed to be dishonest, but because honesty that can be seen protects everyone.

KEY VERSE

For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich.

2 Corinthians 8:9 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. The poorest churches were the most generous. Why do you think that often happens?
2. What does it mean to give yourself to the Lord first, before you give anything else?
3. What's something you have plenty of, whether money, time, skills, or attention, that someone else needs?

CHAPTER 9

A Cheerful Giver

2 Corinthians 9

Paul keeps talking about the collection, almost as if he's starting over. He says he doesn't really need to write about it, and then writes a whole chapter. (This is one reason some scholars think chapters 8 and 9 were once separate notes, though others think Paul is just being polite.)

He's a little worried. He'd bragged to the Macedonians about how eager the Corinthians were. A year ago, they were the first to say they wanted to help. Their enthusiasm had inspired others. But what if Paul shows up with some Macedonian believers and finds the Corinthians haven't actually collected anything? That would be embarrassing for everyone.

So he's sending the brothers ahead to make sure the gift is ready, a generous gift, not one squeezed out of them.

Then Paul uses a farming picture. If you plant only a few seeds, you'll get a small harvest. If you plant a lot, you'll get a big one. Generosity works like sowing.

> BACKGROUND CHECK **Sowing and Reaping**
>
> Paul isn't promising that if you give money, God will make you rich. Some preachers have twisted this passage that way. Look at the purpose Paul gives: God will supply what you need so that you can keep being generous. The

> harvest isn't luxury. It's more good work, more thanksgiving to God, and a heart that looks more like His.

And then a verse many people know by heart: "Each of you should give what you have decided in your heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver."

Notice what Paul doesn't do. He doesn't set a percentage. He doesn't use guilt. He says each person should decide in their own heart. And the attitude matters as much as the amount. God isn't impressed by a big gift given with a grumpy face. He loves a cheerful giver.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Cheerful**
>
> The Greek word Paul uses for cheerful is hilaros. You can probably hear the English word it eventually gave us: hilarious. Paul isn't saying giving has to be a joke. But he is saying it should come from a glad, light heart, not a heavy, resentful one.

Paul promises that God is able to bless them abundantly, so that in everything, at every time, they'll have what they need to do every good work. He quotes a psalm about a person who scatters gifts to the poor. And he says the God who gives seed to the farmer and bread to eat will also supply and multiply their seed.

Then Paul shows how far the effects of their gift will reach. It will meet the needs of the believers in Jerusalem. It will make many people thank God. The Jerusalem Christians will praise God for the Corinthians' faith and generosity, and they'll pray for them with real affection.

Think about what that means. Jewish believers in Jerusalem, who might have had doubts about Gentile Christians, would receive a gift from Greek believers they had never met. That gift would say: we're

one family. A few coins collected on Sundays in Corinth would help heal one of the biggest divisions in the early church.

And then Paul does what he always does. He turns from human generosity to God's. "Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!" Whatever we give, it's tiny compared to the gift God gave us in Jesus. Our giving is just a thank-you note.

KEY VERSE

Each of you should give what you have decided in your heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.

2 Corinthians 9:7 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Why do you think God cares about the attitude of a giver and not just the amount?
2. Some people say giving will make you rich. How does Paul's purpose for God's blessing (so you can keep giving) correct that idea?
3. Paul's collection helped bring Jewish and Gentile believers together. How could generosity help heal a division in your school, church, or family?

TRY THIS *Decide in your heart one specific thing to give this week, money, time, or something you own, and give it cheerfully without telling anyone.*

CHAPTER 10

Weapons That Work

2 Corinthians 10

Chapter 10 feels like a different letter. The warm, relieved tone of chapters 1 to 9 suddenly turns sharp and intense. That's why many scholars think these last four chapters were once a separate letter (see Setting the Scene). Others think Paul simply turned from the loyal majority to deal directly with the rival teachers and the people listening to them. Either way, Paul is now taking on the super-apostles.

He starts by appealing to them by the humility and gentleness of Christ. Then he quotes what people were saying about him. They called him timid in person but bold in his letters. In other words: Paul is brave on paper, but when he shows up, he's a pushover.

Paul says he hopes he won't have to show them how bold he can be in person.

Then he talks about how Christians fight. We live in the world, he says, but we don't fight the way the world does. Our weapons aren't the world's weapons: manipulation, insults, power plays, and slick talk. Instead, they have divine power to tear down strongholds.

> BACKGROUND CHECK **Strongholds**
>
> Ancient cities had fortresses, strongholds built on high ground, where defenders could hold out against attack. Corinth itself had one on the giant

rock of the Acrocorinth that towered over the city. Paul says the real strongholds he fights against aren't stone walls. They're arguments and proud ideas that set themselves up against knowing God. Pride, lies, and wrong ideas about God can wall people in.

Paul says he demolishes arguments and every proud idea that opposes the knowledge of God, and he takes every thought captive to make it obey Christ.

That's a powerful picture for your own mind. Not every thought that pops into your head deserves to stay. Some thoughts are lies: you're worthless, God doesn't care, nobody likes you, you'll never change. You don't have to let them run free. You can arrest them, hold them up to what Jesus says, and refuse to obey them.

Then Paul quotes one of his critics directly. Some people said his letters were weighty and forceful, but in person he was unimpressive and his speaking was nothing.

BACKGROUND CHECK **What Did Paul Look Like?**

The Bible never describes Paul's appearance. A second-century story called the Acts of Paul and Thecla describes him as a small, bald, bow-legged man with eyebrows that met in the middle and a slightly hooked nose, though it adds that he sometimes looked like an angel. No one knows if that's accurate. But his critics in Corinth clearly didn't think he looked or sounded like a star.

Paul doesn't argue that he's actually good-looking or a great speaker. He says what he is in his letters, he'll be in person too.

Then he makes a sharp observation about his rivals. They measure themselves by themselves and compare themselves with each other. That's not wise. It's like a group of people deciding who's tallest by comparing only with each other while all standing in a hole.

Comparison is a trap teenagers know well. Who has more followers, better clothes, a nicer house, more friends. Paul refuses to play. He will only boast about the work God actually gave him to do, which includes bringing the gospel to Corinth in the first place. And he hopes to go even farther, to preach in places beyond them where no one has heard about Jesus yet.

The chapter ends with a quote from Jeremiah: "Let the one who boasts boast in the Lord." Because in the end, it isn't the person who praises himself who is approved. It's the person the Lord praises.

KEY VERSE

we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ.

2 Corinthians 10:5 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. What weapons does the world use to win arguments or get its way? What would it look like to fight differently?
2. What's a thought you often have that isn't true? What does Jesus say instead?
3. Why is comparing yourself with others such a trap? Who are you most tempted to compare yourself to?

CHAPTER 11

Boasting Like a Fool

2 Corinthians 11

Paul hates what he's about to do, but he feels forced into it. The super-apostles were boasting about their credentials, and the Corinthians were impressed. So Paul says, put up with me while I act like a fool for a moment. I'm going to boast too.

But first he explains why he cares so much. He's jealous for them with a godly jealousy. He uses a wedding picture: he promised them to one husband, Christ, like a father arranging his daughter's marriage, and he wants to present them to Jesus pure and faithful. He's afraid that, just as the serpent deceived Eve, someone is leading them away from sincere devotion to Christ.

The rival teachers, he says, preach a different Jesus, bring a different spirit, and teach a different gospel. And the Corinthians put up with it easily.

Then Paul brings up money again. The super-apostles charged for their teaching. Paul preached for free. In Corinth, that made Paul look less important, because in their culture, good teachers were expensive. But Paul says he didn't want to be a burden to them. Believers from Macedonia had helped support him while he was there.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Masquerading**

Paul says Satan himself masquerades as an angel of light. Corinth had a big theater where actors wore masks to play different characters. Paul says the false apostles are doing the same thing, wearing a mask of righteousness. Evil rarely shows up looking evil. It usually shows up looking attractive, confident, and spiritual. That's why discernment matters.

Then Paul begins his foolish boasting. Are they Hebrews? So is he. Israelites? So is he. Descendants of Abraham? So is he. Servants of Christ? He says he's talking like a madman now, but he's more.

And here's where the boasting takes a strange turn. The super-apostles probably boasted about their successes, their gifts, their visions, their impressive speaking. Paul boasts about his sufferings. And the list is staggering.

He has worked harder, been in prison more often, been flogged more severely, and faced death again and again. Five times he received the thirty-nine lashes from Jewish authorities. Three times he was beaten with rods by Roman officials. Once he was stoned. Three times he was shipwrecked, and he spent a night and a day adrift in the open sea.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Thirty-Nine Lashes**

The law of Moses said a guilty person could be given up to forty lashes, and no more. Jewish authorities gave thirty-nine, to make sure they didn't accidentally break the limit. It was a brutal punishment that could leave scars for life, or kill. Paul received it five times. Being beaten with rods was a Roman punishment; Acts 16 describes it happening to Paul and Silas in Philippi. Of the three shipwrecks Paul mentions, none is the famous one in Acts 27. That one hadn't happened yet.

He's been in danger from rivers, robbers, his own people, and Gentiles. In danger in the city, in the country, and at sea. In danger

from false believers. He's gone without sleep, without food, without warm clothes. And on top of everything, every day, he carries the weight of worrying about all the churches.

Then Paul says something that flips the whole idea of boasting upside down. If he has to boast, he'll boast about the things that show his weakness.

He ends with a story that sounds almost funny. In Damascus, soon after he became a Christian, the governor under King Aretas had the city guarded to arrest him. So Paul's friends lowered him in a basket through a window in the city wall, and he escaped.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **The Basket and the Wall**
>
> In the Roman army, the highest honor for bravery was a crown awarded to the first soldier to climb over an enemy city's wall during an attack. Paul's story is the opposite. Instead of being first up the wall, he was the first down it, in a basket, running away. That's the story he chooses to end his boasting with. Some heroes.

KEY VERSE

If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness.

2 Corinthians 11:30 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Paul says evil often looks attractive and spiritual. How can you tell the difference between a true leader and a fake one?
2. Why do you think Paul boasted about his sufferings instead of his successes?
3. What's one weakness or embarrassing moment in your life that God might want to use?

CHAPTER 12

My Grace Is Sufficient

2 Corinthians 12

Paul keeps boasting, and he gets to the area where the super-apostles probably bragged the most: visions and revelations. Paul could top them. But watch how he does it.

He talks about "a man in Christ" who, fourteen years earlier, was caught up to the third heaven, into paradise, and heard things too amazing to put into words. He doesn't know whether it happened in his body or outside it. Only God knows.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **The Third Heaven**
>
> Jewish writers sometimes described the sky, outer space, and the dwelling place of God as layers of heaven. The third heaven meant the very presence of God. Paradise, a Persian word for a beautiful walled garden, was also used for God's presence. Paul is describing an experience of being brought right into the place where God lives.

Who was the man? Almost everyone agrees it was Paul himself. But he talks about it in the third person, as if it happened to someone else. Why? Because he refuses to make himself the hero. The experience was real, but he won't use it to build himself up. He'll boast about that man, but about himself, he'll only boast about his weaknesses.

Then Paul tells us something very personal. To keep him from becoming proud because of these amazing revelations, he was given a thorn in his flesh, which he calls a messenger of Satan, to torment him.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **The Thorn in the Flesh**
>
> No one knows what Paul's thorn was. People have guessed for two thousand years: an eye problem (Galatians 4 hints that Paul had trouble with his eyes), chronic pain, malaria, epilepsy, a speech problem, constant persecution, or a particular enemy. Maybe it's good that we don't know. Whatever your thorn is, a disability, an illness, anxiety, a family situation, or a struggle that won't go away, Paul's story can be your story.

Three times Paul begged the Lord to take it away. And the Lord said no. Not because He didn't love Paul, but because He had something better in mind. Here's what Jesus told him:

"My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."

That's not the answer Paul wanted. But it changed everything. Instead of complaining, Paul says he'll boast all the more gladly about his weaknesses, so that Christ's power can rest on him. He even delights in weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and difficulties, for Christ's sake. "For when I am weak, then I am strong."

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **When God Says No**
>
> Sometimes Christians are told that if you have enough faith, God will always heal you or take away your problem. Paul had more faith than almost anyone, and God said no. Sometimes God removes the thorn. Sometimes He gives grace to carry it. Both are His love. A no from God is never an absence of God.

Then Paul steps back. He's made a fool of himself, he says, but they drove him to it. They should have been defending him. He showed them the marks of a true apostle, including signs, wonders, and miracles. The only way he treated them worse than other churches was that he never took their money. Then, with a bit of sarcasm, he asks them to forgive him that wrong.

He's coming for a third visit, and he still won't be a burden. He doesn't want their stuff; he wants them. Parents save up for their children, not the other way around. He'll gladly spend everything for them. "If I love you more, will you love me less?"

The chapter ends with Paul's fear. He's afraid that when he arrives, he'll find quarreling, jealousy, outbursts of anger, selfish ambition, slander, gossip, arrogance, and disorder. And he's afraid he'll find people who never repented of sexual sin. He doesn't want to come and grieve over them.

KEY VERSE

But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."

2 Corinthians 12:9 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Why do you think Paul talked about his amazing experience as if it happened to someone else?
2. Do you have a thorn, something you've asked God to take away that hasn't gone away? What would it look like to hear Jesus say, My grace is sufficient for you?
3. What's the difference between being weak and being useless? How does God use weak people?

TRY THIS *Write down one weakness you've been hiding or ashamed of. Then write 2 Corinthians 12:9 underneath it, and pray about it every day this week.*

CHAPTER 13

Examine Yourselves

2 Corinthians 13

This is Paul's last chapter, and he's about to visit for the third time. He quotes the law of Moses, which said that every charge must be confirmed by two or three witnesses. He's warned them twice already. When he comes, he won't spare those who keep on sinning.

Some of them were demanding proof that Christ was really speaking through Paul. Paul's answer goes back to the cross. Jesus was crucified in weakness, but He lives by God's power. In the same way, Paul is weak in Him, but by God's power he'll live with Him, and deal with them.

Then Paul turns the tables. You want to test me? "Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves." They had spent so much time evaluating Paul that they'd forgotten to evaluate themselves.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Testing Yourself**

Paul's challenge isn't meant to make sincere believers anxious. It's meant to wake up people who are coasting. Here are some honest questions to ask yourself: Do I trust Jesus, or just know about Him? Do I want to obey Him, even when I fail? Is the Spirit producing change in me, even slowly? Do I love other believers? If the answer is yes, even weakly, take heart. If you're not sure, that's a great conversation to have with God and with someone you trust.

Paul says he hopes they'll discover that he hasn't failed the test. But that isn't really his concern. His prayer is that they'll do what's right, even if he ends up looking like a failure. He doesn't care about his reputation. He cares about them.

He says he's glad to be weak if they're strong. And his prayer is that they'll be fully restored. That's why he's writing these hard words now, while he's away, so that when he comes, he won't have to be harsh. The authority God gave him is for building up, not for tearing down.

Then Paul closes with five quick commands. Rejoice. Aim for full restoration. Encourage one another. Be of one mind. Live in peace. And he gives a promise: the God of love and peace will be with them.

After the warnings, the boasting, the sarcasm, and the hurt, the letter ends where Paul's heart always was: with love, peace, and family. Greet each other warmly. All God's people send greetings.

And then the final blessing, one of the most beloved in the whole Bible, still spoken at the end of church services around the world.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Father, Son, and Spirit**
>
> Paul's closing blessing mentions the Lord Jesus Christ, God the Father, and the Holy Spirit together, side by side. The word Trinity doesn't appear in the Bible. But verses like this one, written within about twenty-five years of Jesus' resurrection, show that the earliest Christians already worshiped one God who is Father, Son, and Spirit. The grace of Jesus, the love of the Father, and the fellowship of the Spirit: everything Paul has written in this letter comes down to that.

Grace from Jesus, who became poor so we could become rich. Love from the Father, who reconciled us to Himself. Fellowship from the

Spirit, who lives in us like a down payment on everything to come. That's what holds a messy, hurting, weak church together. It's what can hold you together too.

KEY VERSE

May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.

2 Corinthians 13:14 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. The Corinthians were busy testing Paul and forgot to test themselves. Why is it easier to judge others than ourselves?
2. Paul cared more about them doing right than about his own reputation. What would it look like to care about people that way?
3. Which of Paul's five final commands (rejoice, aim for restoration, encourage one another, be of one mind, live in peace) do you need most right now?

THE END (AND THE BEGINNING)

Now What? The Bottom Line

You've just walked through Paul's second letter to the Corinthians. Underneath all the hurt, the travel plans, and the arguments with rival teachers, there's one message Paul keeps coming back to. He calls it the message of reconciliation: God is making enemies into friends through Jesus.

Here's what the Bible says, as plainly as I can put it.

1 God made you, and He wants you back.

Paul says God is reconciling the world to Himself. That means there's a broken relationship He wants to fix. You weren't an accident. You were made to know Him.

2 We've all turned away.

Not just the obvious rebels. The proud, the impressive, the religious too. The Bible calls it sin, and it separates us from God.

> *for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,* **Romans 3:23 (NIV)**

3 Sin has a real cost.

God is good, so He doesn't shrug off evil. The Bible says the result of sin is death, separation from God forever.

> *For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.* **Romans 6:23 (NIV)**

4 Jesus traded places with you.

This is the great exchange at the center of 2 Corinthians. Jesus, who never sinned, took our sin on Himself on the cross. In return, everyone who trusts Him receives His righteousness. And then God raised Him from the dead.

> *God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.* **2 Corinthians 5:21 (NIV)**

5 You can't earn it. You receive it.

The super-apostles in Corinth loved to boast about their credentials. Paul said the only thing worth boasting about is the Lord. Salvation isn't a résumé you build. It's a gift you receive by trusting Jesus.

> *For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast.* **Ephesians 2:8–9 (NIV)**

6 Turn and trust.

Paul begged the Corinthians, on Christ's behalf, to be reconciled to God. That invitation is for you too. Turn from running your own life, and trust Jesus as your Savior and King. It doesn't mean you'll never fail again. It means you belong to Him, and you're a new creation.

> *If you declare with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.* **Romans 10:9 (NIV)**

So what do you do with that? You don't need perfect words. You can talk to God honestly, right now, wherever you are. If it helps, you could pray something like this:

God, I've been running my own life, and I've sinned against You. I can't fix that myself. I believe Jesus, who never sinned, took my sin on Himself, and that You raised Him from the dead. I want to be reconciled to You. Forgive me. I trust Jesus as my Savior, and I want to follow Him as my King. Make me new. When I feel weak, help me trust that Your grace is enough. In Jesus' name, amen.

If You Just Said Yes

Tell someone. A parent, a youth leader, a pastor, or a Christian friend. Paul says God has given His people the message of reconciliation. Start by sharing it with one person.

Read the real thing. Read 2 Corinthians straight through in a Bible, a chapter a day. Then read Philippians, a short, joyful letter Paul wrote from prison.

Find your people. Get connected to a church where the Bible is taught and Jesus is honored. Look for leaders who are humble and faithful, not just impressive. Ask about being baptized.

Talk to God every day. Be honest about your weaknesses. Paul was. He can handle it.

Not Sure Yet?

Not ready? That's honest, and honesty is a good place to start. Paul told the Corinthians to examine themselves and see whether they were really in the faith. Keep asking. Keep reading. Talk to someone you trust. Just don't settle for "I already know all that."

Because if Paul is right, the things that make you feel weak and ordinary are exactly where God's power wants to show up. That's worth finding out for yourself.

For when I am weak, then I am strong.

2 Corinthians 12:10 (NIV)

PAUL'S LETTER TO THE GALATIANS

The King Who Sets Us Free

Galatians, Unfiltered

For teens who think they've heard it all

BILL McLEOD

Papa Bill Books

The King Who Sets Us Free: Paul's Letter to the Galatians, Unfiltered

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All Scripture quotations in this book are from the NIV. Some are abridged, with omissions marked by ellipses; paraphrases are not placed in quotation marks.

Pronouns referring to God the Father, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit are capitalized for reverence in the author's own words. Inside Scripture quotations, capitalization and wording follow the 2011 NIV exactly.

AI Disclosure. This book was written by Bill McLeod with the assistance of artificial intelligence tools for drafting, research, and editing. All content was reviewed and approved by the author, who takes full responsibility for it. Readers are encouraged to open the Scriptures and study them for themselves.

A WORD TO THE READER

Before You Start

If you've read the earlier books in this series, you know the saying by now: "If you want to get something done, hire a teenager while they still know it all." It's been in every book. It's not leaving now.

Galatians is the angriest letter Paul ever wrote. There's no warm thank-you at the beginning. He calls his readers foolish. He confronts the apostle Peter to his face. He says some things about his opponents that would get a modern pastor in serious trouble. He's upset because he loves these people, and someone is trying to take away the most important thing they have.

What is it? Freedom. Not the freedom to do whatever you want, but the freedom of knowing that God accepts you completely because of what Jesus did, not because of what you do. Some teachers had come to the churches in Galatia and told the new believers that Jesus was a good start, but to really belong to God's people they needed to add a list of rules. Paul's answer is a loud, clear, six-chapter no.

You may not be tempted to get circumcised or keep the food laws of Moses. But you've probably felt the same pressure in other forms. You're a Christian, but are you a good enough Christian? Do you read your Bible enough, pray enough, look the part, fit in at church, keep the unwritten rules? Galatians is for anyone who has ever felt that God's love depends on their performance.

Martin Luther loved this letter so much that he called it his Katie, the name of his wife. People have called it the charter of Christian

freedom. It's short. You can read it in twenty minutes. But it might change the way you think about God for the rest of your life.

How This Book Works

This book walks through all six chapters of Galatians, in order, one chapter of this book for each chapter of the letter. Because Galatians is short and packed, each chapter here goes slowly, explains Paul's argument and the key words he uses (gospel, justified, law, flesh, Spirit, freedom), and adds background about the people, places, and controversies behind the letter.

Before chapter 1, a longer-than-usual section called Setting the Scene explains where Galatia was, who the troublemakers were, how this letter connects to the story in Acts, and why scholars still debate exactly when and to whom it was written. Don't skip it. Galatians makes much more sense when you know what was going on.

Each chapter ends with a Key Verse quoted word for word from the New International Version (NIV), the same translation used for every Scripture quotation in this book (pronouns for God are capitalized in the author's own words out of reverence; inside Scripture quotations, capitalization follows the NIV exactly); Real Talk questions to think through alone or argue about with friends; and a Try This challenge.

Because Galatians is so short, this book quotes it sparingly and explains it mostly in my own words. So keep a Bible open next to it. Read the whole letter in one sitting first, the way the Galatians heard it, and then go chapter by chapter. Don't take my word for it. Take His.

FOR THE ADULTS

A Note for Parents and Youth Leaders

Thank you for putting this book in a teenager's hands. Like the earlier books in this series, on the Gospels, Acts, Romans, and the Corinthian letters, it's written for readers who can smell a sermon coming a mile away. I've tried to write honestly, directly, with some humor, and with real respect for what these readers can handle.

This book follows the letter format of the Romans and Corinthians volumes, walking through Galatians chapter by chapter. Because the letter is short, I've quoted it sparingly and relied mostly on paraphrase and explanation, with extra background and discussion material. Wherever Scripture is quoted directly, in the chapters and in the Key Verses, the wording is from the New International Version (NIV).

Galatians raises several questions that scholars and churches discuss: where exactly the Galatian churches were and when Paul wrote; how Paul's account of his Jerusalem visits fits with Acts; what Paul means by works of the law; whether faith in Christ should be translated faithfulness of Christ, as the NIV footnotes suggest; and how Paul's statement that there is neither Jew nor Gentile, slave nor free, male nor female applies today. I've presented these briefly and fairly, without trying to settle every debate.

Paul's language is strong in places, especially in 1:8–9 and 5:12. I've explained these passages honestly and in context. Paul's harshness

is directed at teachers who were leading young believers astray, not at Jewish people; I've been careful to make that clear, since Galatians has sometimes been misused to support contempt for Judaism.

The Real Talk questions are designed for discussion. They work well for a youth group, a small group, a family dinner table, or a car ride. Don't rush to the right answer. Let them wrestle. Faith that has been thought through tends to last.

My prayer is that every reader who feels they have to earn God's love will discover that in Christ they are already His children, and that real freedom looks like serving one another humbly in love.

Grace and peace,

Bill McLeod

Papa Bill Books

BEFORE YOU OPEN THE LETTER

Setting the Scene

Where Was Galatia?

Galatia was in the middle of what is now Turkey, a region of high plains, mountains, and harsh winters. Its name comes from the Gauls, Celtic tribes from Europe who invaded the area around 278 BC and settled there. (They were related to the Celts of ancient France and Britain, and Galatia and Gaul come from the same root.) For centuries they were known as fierce warriors.

In 25 BC, the Romans made Galatia a province. Here's the tricky part. The Roman province of Galatia was much bigger than the old Celtic territory. It stretched south to include cities that weren't ethnically Galatian at all, like Pisidian Antioch, Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe. So when Paul writes to the churches in Galatia, he could mean two different places.

North or South?

This is one of the classic debates about Paul's letters. The North Galatia view says Paul was writing to churches in the old Celtic heartland in the north, around cities like Ancyra (modern Ankara, the capital of Turkey). Acts mentions Paul passing through the region of Galatia on his second and third journeys (Acts 16:6 and 18:23), and supporters of this view say that's when he founded these churches. Many older scholars, and many in Europe, held this view.

The South Galatia view says Paul was writing to the churches in Pisidian Antioch, Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe, cities in the southern

part of the Roman province. Acts 13 and 14 tell the story of Paul and Barnabas founding those churches on the first missionary journey. Many scholars today, especially in Britain and North America, favor this view, partly because Acts tells us a lot about those churches and nothing specific about churches in the north, and because Barnabas, whom the Galatians seem to know, traveled with Paul only on the first journey.

Which is right? We can't be certain, and nothing in Paul's message depends on it. But it does affect the next question.

When Did Paul Write?

If the South Galatia view is right, Galatians may be Paul's earliest surviving letter, written around AD 48 or 49, soon after his first journey and possibly just before the big meeting in Jerusalem described in Acts 15. That would make it one of the oldest documents in the New Testament.

If the North Galatia view is right, Paul wrote it later, probably in the mid-50s, around the time he wrote Romans and the Corinthian letters. Some scholars who hold the South Galatia view also date it to the 50s.

One clue people use is that Galatians and Romans cover many of the same ideas, like Abraham's faith and justification by faith, but Galatians is hotter and more urgent, while Romans is calmer and more organized. Whatever the date, you can read Galatians as Paul's first blast on a subject he explained more fully in Romans.

The Troublemakers

After Paul left the Galatian churches, some other teachers arrived. Paul never names them. They were probably Jewish Christians,

believers in Jesus, possibly connected with Jerusalem. Their message seems to have been something like this: Jesus is the Messiah, that's wonderful. But God's people have always been marked by circumcision, the food laws, and the Jewish calendar. If you Gentiles want to be full members of God's family, you need to be circumcised and keep the law of Moses.

These teachers are often called Judaizers, from a Greek word Paul uses in 2:14 for making Gentiles live like Jews. It's important to be clear: Paul's fight was not with Jewish people or with Judaism itself. Paul was Jewish and proud of it. His fight was with the idea that Gentiles had to become Jewish to belong to Jesus, because that would mean Jesus wasn't enough.

The teachers also seem to have attacked Paul personally, saying he wasn't a real apostle, that he got his message secondhand from the leaders in Jerusalem, and that he watered it down to make it easier for Gentiles. That's why Paul spends the first two chapters telling his own story.

Circumcision

Circumcision was the sign of the covenant God made with Abraham in Genesis 17, a small surgery for males that marked them as part of God's people. For Jewish families, it was a sacred, centuries-old practice, performed on baby boys eight days after birth. For adult Gentile men in the Roman world, it was a painful operation, without modern medicine. The Greeks and Romans also thought it was strange and embarrassing, because athletes competed naked in the gymnasium.

So the Galatian men were being asked to do something costly and permanent. And Paul says doing it as a requirement for belonging to God would be like saying the cross wasn't enough.

The Meeting in Jerusalem

Acts 15 describes a meeting of the apostles and elders in Jerusalem, sometimes called the Jerusalem Council, around AD 49. It happened because some men from Judea had come to Antioch teaching that Gentile believers had to be circumcised to be saved. Paul and Barnabas argued with them, and the church sent them to Jerusalem to settle the question.

At the meeting, Peter reminded everyone how God had given the Holy Spirit to Gentiles, like Cornelius, without circumcision. James, the brother of Jesus, quoted the prophets and concluded that the church should not make it difficult for Gentiles who were turning to God. The council sent a letter to the Gentile churches saying they did not have to be circumcised, asking only that they avoid a few things that would especially offend Jewish believers.

How does this connect to Galatians? In Galatians 2, Paul describes a visit to Jerusalem where the leaders agreed with his gospel. Some scholars think that's the Acts 15 meeting, seen from Paul's side. Others think it was an earlier, private visit, the famine relief trip in Acts 11, and that Galatians was written before the council. If so, it would explain why Paul doesn't mention the council's letter, which would have helped his argument. Either way, Galatians and Acts 15 are fighting the same battle, and the church came down on Paul's side.

How Paul Wrote It

Most of Paul's letters begin with a thank-you to God for the readers. Galatians doesn't. Paul skips straight to his astonishment. It's the only one of his letters to churches with no thanksgiving at all, which tells you how alarmed he was.

At the end, Paul picks up the pen himself and writes in large letters. Some think his eyesight was poor (Galatians 4 hints at an illness that may have affected his eyes). Others think he wrote big on purpose, like using bold type or capital letters, to underline his main point one last time.

The Map

Chapters 1 and 2: Paul's story. His gospel came from Jesus, not from other people. The leaders in Jerusalem agreed with him. And when Peter wavered in Antioch, Paul confronted him.

Chapters 3 and 4: Paul's argument. The Galatians received the Spirit by faith. Abraham was made right with God by faith. The law was a temporary guardian until Christ came. Now believers are God's children and heirs, not slaves.

Chapters 5 and 6: Paul's application. Stand firm in freedom. Don't use freedom as an excuse to sin. Live by the Spirit, who produces love, joy, peace, and more. Carry each other's burdens. And boast only in the cross.

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CHAPTER 1

No Other Gospel

Galatians 1

Paul opens the letter with his name, and right away he does something unusual. He says he is an apostle sent not by people or by any human authority, but by Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised Jesus from the dead. That's not just a fancy introduction. It's his first shot in the argument. Someone in Galatia had been saying Paul was a second-rate messenger, and Paul wants everyone to know exactly who sent him.

Then comes the greeting, grace and peace, and a one-sentence summary of the gospel. Jesus gave Himself for our sins, Paul says, to rescue us from this present evil age, because that was what the Father wanted. Notice the word rescue. The gospel isn't a self-improvement plan. It's a rescue mission.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Apostle**
>
> The word apostle means someone who is sent, like an ambassador or messenger with authority to speak for the one who sent him. The twelve disciples were apostles because Jesus personally chose and sent them. Paul wasn't one of the Twelve, and he hadn't followed Jesus during His ministry, so some people questioned whether he really counted. Paul's answer is that the risen Jesus appeared to him and sent him, which is what Acts 9 describes.

And then, where every other letter Paul wrote to a church has a thank-you, Galatians has this: "I am astonished." Paul can't believe

how fast they're turning away from the God who called them by grace and heading toward a different gospel. Then he corrects himself. It isn't really another gospel at all. There's only one. Some people are just confusing them and trying to twist the good news of Christ into something else.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Gospel**
>
> Gospel means good news. In the Roman world, the word was used for big public announcements, like the birth of a new emperor or a victory in battle. When the first Christians called their message the gospel, they meant an announcement: something has happened. Jesus died, rose again, and is Lord. The gospel isn't advice about what you should do. It's news about what God has done.

Paul's next words are some of the strongest in the New Testament. If anyone, even Paul himself, or even an angel from heaven, preaches a gospel different from the one the Galatians first received, let that person be under God's curse. And in case they missed it, he says it twice.

That sounds harsh. Why would Paul say something like that? Because he believed the stakes were life and death. If you tell a drowning person that the lifeguard can only save them after they've swum halfway to shore by themselves, you haven't given them a slightly different version of the truth. You've taken away their only hope. Paul's anger isn't about winning an argument. It's about protecting people he loves from a message that would cut them off from grace.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Under a Curse**
>
> The Greek word is anathema, which in the Old Testament Greek translation referred to something handed over to God for destruction. Paul isn't swearing. He's saying that a false gospel deserves God's judgment, and he

applies it to himself first. It's a reminder that the message matters more than the messenger. Nobody, no matter how impressive, gets to change it.

Then Paul asks a question that might hit close to home: is he trying to win people's approval, or God's? If he were still trying to please people, he says, he wouldn't be a servant of Christ. Apparently his critics said he told people whatever they wanted to hear. Paul's point is that if he were a people-pleaser, he'd have taken the easy road and told the Galatians to get circumcised. That's what would have kept everyone happy.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Approval Trap**

Everyone wants to be liked. It's built into us. But when other people's approval becomes the thing you can't live without, it starts running your life. You say what the crowd wants. You hide what you believe. You become whatever the room needs you to be. Paul had found something better: he already had God's approval in Christ, so he didn't need to earn everyone else's.

Now Paul starts telling his story, and he's going to keep telling it until the end of chapter 2. His main point is that his gospel didn't come from any human being. He didn't get it from a committee or learn it in a class. He received it by revelation from Jesus Christ.

He reminds the Galatians of his past. He was a rising star in Judaism, ahead of most people his age, extremely zealous for the traditions of his ancestors. And he persecuted the church violently, trying to destroy it. If anyone was the least likely person to become a Christian, it was Paul.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Zeal**

In Paul's day, zealous didn't just mean enthusiastic. It was connected to heroes in Israel's history, like Phinehas in Numbers 25 and the Maccabees, who used violence to defend God's honor and the purity of God's people.

When Paul says he was zealous, he means he was willing to hurt people for what he believed. That's what makes his change so dramatic.

But God, Paul says, had set him apart even before he was born, and called him by grace. The wording echoes the calls of prophets like Jeremiah and Isaiah's servant. God was pleased to reveal His Son in Paul, so that Paul would preach Him among the Gentiles.

After that, Paul didn't rush off to Jerusalem to get permission. He went to Arabia, then back to Damascus. Only three years later did he go up to Jerusalem to get to know Cephas, which is Peter's Aramaic name. He stayed with him fifteen days and didn't see any other apostle except James, the Lord's brother. And Paul adds, very seriously, that he isn't lying.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Arabia**

Arabia here probably doesn't mean the desert of modern Saudi Arabia. It likely refers to the Nabataean kingdom, south and east of Damascus, whose capital was Petra, the famous city carved into rock. We don't know what Paul did there. Some think he spent the time praying and rethinking the Scriptures in light of Jesus. Others think he started preaching, which may be why the Nabataean king's governor later tried to arrest him, as Paul mentions in 2 Corinthians 11.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Fifteen Days with Peter**

The Greek word for getting to know Peter is where we get our word history. It suggests visiting someone to learn from them firsthand. Imagine two weeks of Peter telling stories about Jesus: the fishing boat, the walk on the water, the denial by the fire, the breakfast on the beach. Paul insists his gospel came from Jesus directly, but he clearly valued hearing from Peter too.

After that, Paul went to Syria and Cilicia, the region around his hometown of Tarsus. The churches in Judea didn't even know his face. They only heard the news: the man who used to persecute us is

now preaching the faith he once tried to destroy. And they praised God because of him.

That's how the chapter ends. Not with Paul's achievement, but with people praising God for what He did in Paul. Your story can do that too. The point isn't how good you look. It's what God has done.

KEY VERSE

Am I now trying to win the approval of human beings, or of God? Or am I trying to please people? If I were still trying to please people, I would not be a servant of Christ.

Galatians 1:10 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Paul says there's only one gospel. Why do you think he took changes to it so seriously?
2. Where do you feel the most pressure to please people: friends, family, social media, church? What does that pressure push you to do?
3. Paul was the least likely person to follow Jesus. Who is someone you've written off? Could God change them?
4. If someone asked you to explain the gospel in one or two sentences, what would you say?

TRY THIS *This week, notice one moment when you're tempted to change what you say or do to get someone's approval. Pause and ask yourself whose approval you're really living for.*

CHAPTER 2

Face to Face

Galatians 2

Fourteen years later, Paul says, he went up to Jerusalem again, this time with Barnabas, and he brought Titus along. He went because of a revelation, not because anyone summoned him. And he met privately with the leaders of the church to lay out the gospel he was preaching among the Gentiles. He wanted to make sure he hadn't been running his race for nothing.

Then he mentions Titus, and you can tell this is important. Titus was a Greek, a Gentile believer. And the leaders in Jerusalem didn't force him to be circumcised. That was the test case. If Titus could be a full member of the church without circumcision, so could the Galatians.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Which Visit?**
>
> Acts describes several trips Paul made to Jerusalem after his conversion. Galatians 2 might describe the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15, where the same question was debated publicly. Or it might describe the famine relief visit in Acts 11:30, when Paul and Barnabas brought money from Antioch to the believers in Judea. Supporters of the second view point out that Paul says this meeting was private, and that Paul mentions being asked to remember the poor. Either way, the result was the same: the leaders agreed with Paul.

Some people Paul calls false believers had slipped in to spy on the freedom believers have in Christ Jesus, and to bring them back into

slavery. Paul didn't give in to them for a moment. Why? So that the truth of the gospel would remain for the Galatians. He was fighting for people he hadn't even met yet.

As for the leaders, the ones who seemed to be important, Paul says their reputation didn't matter to him, since God doesn't play favorites. And they didn't add anything to his message. Instead, they saw that God had given Paul the job of taking the gospel to the Gentiles, just as He had given Peter the job of taking it to the Jews. The same God was working through both of them.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Pillars**
>
> Paul names three leaders who were considered pillars of the church: James, Cephas, and John. James was the brother of Jesus, who hadn't believed in Him during His ministry but met the risen Jesus and became the leader of the Jerusalem church. Cephas is Peter. John is the son of Zebedee, one of the Twelve. A pillar holds up a building, and the early Christians thought of the church as God's new temple.

So James, Peter, and John gave Paul and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship, a handshake that meant partnership. They agreed: you go to the Gentiles, we'll go to the Jews. The only thing they asked was that Paul keep remembering the poor, which he says he was eager to do anyway. Paul spent years collecting money from Gentile churches for poor believers in Jerusalem, as you'll know if you've read 2 Corinthians.

Then comes one of the most dramatic scenes in the New Testament. Peter came to Antioch, the big city in Syria where Jewish and Gentile believers worshiped together. And Paul says, "I opposed him to his face."

BACKGROUND CHECK **Antioch**

Antioch was the third-largest city in the Roman Empire, after Rome and Alexandria. It was the place where followers of Jesus were first called Christians (Acts 11:26). It was also the church that sent Paul and Barnabas on their first missionary journey. It was a mixed church, Jewish and Gentile together, which made it the perfect place for this conflict to break out.

Here's what happened. When Peter first arrived, he ate with the Gentile believers. That was a big deal. Many Jewish people of the time avoided eating with Gentiles because of the food laws and concerns about ritual purity. But Peter had learned, through a vision and through Cornelius in Acts 10, that God doesn't call any person unclean.

Then some men came from James. And Peter began to pull back from the Gentile believers and eat separately, because he was afraid of the circumcision group. The other Jewish believers followed his lead. Even Barnabas, Paul's partner, was led astray. You can hear the hurt in that line. Even Barnabas.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Why Meals Mattered**

In the ancient world, eating together meant accepting each other. It was a sign of friendship and equality. The early church ate together regularly, and the Lord's Supper was often part of a shared meal. So when Peter moved to a different table, the message to the Gentile believers was loud and clear: you're not really one of us. You're second-class unless you become Jewish.

Paul saw that they weren't acting in line with the truth of the gospel. So in front of everyone, he confronted Peter. You're a Jew, he said, but you've been living like a Gentile. How can you now force Gentiles to live like Jews?

Think about how hard that must have been. Peter was the most famous apostle. He had walked with Jesus for three years. Paul was

the newcomer, the former persecutor. But Paul cared more about the truth than about keeping the peace or looking polite. He wasn't attacking Peter as a person. He was defending the Gentile believers who were being pushed out.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Did Peter Listen?**

Galatians doesn't say how Peter responded. But in Acts 15, Peter stands up at the Jerusalem Council and argues that God makes no distinction between Jews and Gentiles, and that both are saved by grace. And years later, 2 Peter 3 speaks of Paul warmly as a dear brother, while admitting some of his letters are hard to understand. It seems the friendship survived the confrontation.

Then Paul explains the heart of the issue. We who are Jews by birth, he says, know that a person isn't made right with God by doing what the law requires, but by faith in Jesus Christ. That's why even Jewish believers put their trust in Christ. If keeping the law could make people right with God, then nobody would need Jesus.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Justified**

To be justified means to be declared in the right, the way a judge declares someone not guilty. It's a courtroom word. But in Galatians, it also has a family meaning: to be counted as a member of God's people. The question in Antioch was who belongs at the table. Paul's answer is that everyone who trusts Jesus has been declared right with God, so everyone who trusts Jesus belongs.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Works of the Law**

What does Paul mean by works of the law? Traditionally, many readers understood it as doing good deeds to earn God's favor. Some scholars, in what's called the New Perspective on Paul, argue that Paul especially means the practices that marked Jews off from Gentiles, like circumcision, food laws, and the Sabbath. Both ideas are present in the discussion. Either way, Paul's point is the same: nothing we do can be the basis for our standing with God. Only Christ can.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Faith in or Faithfulness of?**

Where the NIV says faith in Jesus Christ in this chapter, a footnote offers another possible translation: the faithfulness of Jesus Christ. The Greek phrase can be read both ways. If it means faith in Christ, Paul is emphasizing our trust. If it means the faithfulness of Christ, Paul is emphasizing Jesus' perfect obedience to the Father, all the way to the cross. Scholars disagree, but both ideas are true and both appear in Paul's letters. We're saved because Jesus was faithful, and we receive it by trusting Him.

Paul then answers an objection. If we stop relying on the law, doesn't that make Christ someone who encourages sin? Absolutely not, Paul says. In fact, if he rebuilt the old system he had torn down, that's what would really make him a lawbreaker.

Then he writes one of the most loved sentences in the Bible. I have been crucified with Christ, he says, and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life he lives now, he lives by trusting the Son of God, who loved him and gave Himself for him.

Read that slowly. Paul doesn't say Jesus loved the world in general. He says Jesus loved me. Personally. The old Paul, the one trying to prove himself, is dead. Now Jesus lives in him. Being a Christian isn't about trying harder to be good. It's about a new life, Jesus' life, living in you.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Where Does the Speech End?**

Paul's words to Peter start in verse 14, but it's not clear where they stop. The NIV puts closing quotation marks at the end of verse 21, but a footnote says that some interpreters end the quotation after verse 14. Ancient Greek didn't have quotation marks, so translators have to decide. Either way, verses 15 to 21 explain the reasoning behind Paul's challenge to Peter.

Paul ends the chapter with a powerful claim. He refuses to set aside God's grace. Because if people could be made right with God by

keeping the law, then Christ died for nothing. Let that sink in. If you could earn it, the cross was a waste.

KEY VERSE

I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.

Galatians 2:20 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Peter moved tables because he was afraid of what others would think. Where do you see people at your school, or in your church, sitting at separate tables? What would it look like to change that?
2. Paul confronted Peter in public. When is it right to call someone out, and when should it be done privately?
3. What's the difference between trying to be good so God will love you, and being good because God already loves you?
4. Paul says Jesus loved me and gave Himself for me. How does it feel to think of Jesus' love as personal?

TRY THIS *This week, sit with someone who usually sits alone, at lunch, at church, or anywhere. Don't make a big deal of it. Just make room at the table.*

CHAPTER 3

Foolish Galatians

Galatians 3

Paul has finished telling his story. Now he turns to the Galatians directly, and he doesn't hold back. "You foolish Galatians!" he says. "Who has bewitched you?" It's as if someone had cast a spell on them. When Paul was with them, he had preached about Jesus' crucifixion so clearly it was like a public poster in front of their eyes. How could they now be looking somewhere else?

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Bewitched**
>
> The word Paul uses was connected to the evil eye, a common superstition in the ancient world. People believed someone could put a curse on you just by staring at you with jealousy. Paul isn't saying he believes in that. He's using a vivid picture: something has hypnotized you. And the cure for the evil eye was to fix your eyes on something else. Paul says: you saw Jesus crucified. Keep your eyes on Him.

Then Paul asks them one simple question. When you received the Holy Spirit, was it because you kept the law, or because you believed what you heard? They knew the answer. They had experienced God's Spirit, maybe even miracles, long before anyone told them about circumcision.

So, Paul says, are you really so foolish? You started with the Spirit. Do you now think you can finish by your own effort? That's like

being given a ride home in a car and then deciding to get out halfway and push it the rest of the way.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Flesh**
>
> Where the NIV says human effort in this chapter, the footnote notes that the Greek word is sarx, which literally means flesh. Paul uses it a lot in Galatians, and it doesn't just mean your body. It means human nature on its own, without God: our self-reliance, our pride, our weakness, and our tendency to sin. When the troublemakers wanted the Galatians circumcised, they were literally asking for a mark in the flesh, and Paul plays on that double meaning.

Now Paul goes back to Abraham. That makes sense, because the troublemakers were probably saying that you have to be a child of Abraham, through circumcision, to be part of God's people. Paul says: look at how Abraham himself was made right with God. Genesis 15 says he believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness. That happened before he was circumcised and centuries before the law of Moses.

So who are Abraham's real children? Those who have faith, like him. And Paul points out that Scripture saw this coming. When God first called Abraham in Genesis 12, He promised that all nations would be blessed through him. The gospel was announced to Abraham in advance. God's plan always included the Gentiles.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Credited**
>
> Credited is a banking or accounting word. It means to put something into someone's account. Abraham didn't earn righteousness. God put it into his account when he trusted God's promise. Paul uses the same picture in Romans 4. The idea is that God gives us a righteousness that isn't ours, the way a parent might pay off a child's debt and put money into their account besides.

Then Paul makes a hard point. Everyone who relies on keeping the law to be right with God is actually under a curse. Why? Because the law itself, in Deuteronomy 27, puts a curse on anyone who doesn't keep everything written in it. And nobody keeps everything. Paul then quotes the prophet Habakkuk: "the righteous will live by faith." Life with God comes through trusting, not through scoring perfectly.

But here's the good news. "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us." Paul quotes Deuteronomy, which says anyone hung on a pole is under God's curse. For a Jewish person, that made a crucified Messiah seem impossible. How could God's chosen one die under a curse? Paul's answer is that He took our curse on Himself, so the blessing God promised Abraham could come to the Gentiles, and so we could receive the promised Spirit by faith.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Redeemed**
>
> To redeem means to buy back or set free by paying a price. It was used for buying a slave's freedom or paying a ransom for a prisoner of war. In the Old Testament, God redeemed Israel from slavery in Egypt. Paul says Jesus paid the price to set us free from the curse. And as we'll see, freedom is one of the big words of this letter.

Next Paul uses an example from everyday life. Once someone makes a legal agreement, like a will, nobody can add to it or cancel it. God made promises to Abraham and his seed, Paul says, and the seed is Christ. The law came 430 years later. It couldn't cancel the promise God had already made. If the inheritance depends on keeping the law, then it isn't really a promise anymore. But God gave it to Abraham as a gift.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Seed**

Paul makes an argument from the fact that the word seed, or offspring, in Genesis is singular, not plural. To modern readers that can seem like a stretch, since seed can mean many descendants. But Jewish teachers often made points from single words, and Paul's bigger idea is that God's promises to Abraham's family find their fulfillment in one person, the Messiah, and then in everyone who belongs to Him. Later in the chapter, he applies the word to all believers.

So, someone might ask, what was the point of the law? Paul says it was added because of sin, until the promised seed came. It was temporary. It wasn't against God's promises, but it could never give life. It showed that the whole world was locked up under sin, so that what was promised could be given to those who believe.

Then Paul gives us a great picture. Before faith came, we were held in custody under the law. The law was our guardian until Christ came. But now that faith has come, we're no longer under a guardian.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Guardian**

The Greek word is paidagogos, where we get pedagogy, the study of teaching. But a paidagogos wasn't really a teacher. He was usually a slave who looked after a wealthy family's son from about age six until his teens. He walked the boy to school, carried his books, kept him out of trouble, and sometimes disciplined him. Every kid was glad to be free of him when they grew up. Paul's point: the law had an important job, but it was for a season. When you grow up, you don't need a babysitter anymore.

Now Paul reaches the high point of the chapter. In Christ Jesus, he says, you are all children of God through faith. Everyone who has been baptized into Christ has clothed themselves with Christ. And then he says: There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor

free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

That was explosive in Paul's world. A Jewish morning prayer recorded in later sources thanks God for not making the one praying a Gentile, a woman, or an ignorant person, with slave appearing in some versions, and Greek writers credited philosophers with a similar saying about not being born a barbarian, a slave, or a woman. Paul flips all three. In Christ, the walls that divided people into higher and lower are gone.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Neither Male nor Female**

Christians discuss how this verse applies today. Paul isn't saying differences disappear; Jews were still Jews and women were still women. He's saying that in Christ, none of these differences make anyone more or less a child of God, and none of them give anyone a better seat at the table. Some Christians believe this verse means all roles in the church should be open to everyone; others believe Paul's other letters describe some different roles for men and women. Both sides agree on the main point: everyone who belongs to Christ is equally God's child and heir.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Clothed with Christ**

In the Roman world, when a boy came of age, he put on a special adult toga as a sign that he was now a full member of the family and a citizen. Paul may be thinking of that. In baptism, believers put on Christ like a new set of clothes. When God looks at you, He sees you wearing His Son.

And if you belong to Christ, Paul says, then you are Abraham's seed and heirs according to the promise. The troublemakers said the Galatians needed circumcision to become Abraham's children. Paul says they already were. Everything God promised Abraham belongs to them, because they belong to Jesus.

KEY VERSE

There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

Galatians 3:28 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Paul asks the Galatians if they're trying to finish by their own effort what God started by His Spirit. Where do you try to do that in your own life?
2. What do you think it means that Jesus became a curse for us?
3. If Paul wrote verse 28 to your school or church today, what groups might he name?
4. The law was like a guardian for a season. What rules in your life now are meant to help you grow, and what would it look like to outgrow the need for them?

TRY THIS *Make a list of the labels people use to rank each other where you live: popular or not, rich or poor, smart or not, athletic or not. Next to the list, write: "you are all one in Christ Jesus." Pray for someone on the other side of a label from you.*

CHAPTER 4

Children, Not Slaves

Galatians 4

Paul keeps going with his picture of growing up. Imagine a wealthy family's son, the heir to everything his father owns. As long as he's a child, Paul says, he's no different from a slave. He owns the whole estate, but he can't make decisions. He's under guardians and managers until the date his father has set.

That's what we were like, Paul says. Before Christ came, we were like underage heirs, enslaved to the basic principles of the world.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Basic Principles**
>
> The Greek word stoicheia can mean the ABCs, the basic elements of something, like the letters of the alphabet or the elements earth, water, air, and fire. It can also mean spiritual powers, which many ancient people believed controlled the stars, the seasons, and human lives. The NIV footnote mentions both possibilities. Paul may mean that both Jewish life under the law and pagan religion were ways of living under elementary, limited powers, before the real freedom of God's children came.

But then, at just the right time, when the date the Father set had fully come, God sent His Son. Jesus was born of a woman, fully human. He was born under the law, a Jewish boy who kept the law perfectly. And He came to redeem those under the law, so that we could be adopted as God's children.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Adoption**

The NIV footnote says the Greek phrase means adoption to sonship. In the Roman world, a wealthy man without an heir might adopt an adult son to carry on his name and inherit his estate. Adoption was legal and permanent. The adopted son's old debts were cancelled, and he had all the rights of a natural-born son. Paul uses this picture to say that believers, male and female alike, have the full rights of heirs in God's family.

And here's how you know it's real. Because you are His children, God has sent the Spirit of His Son into your hearts, and the Spirit cries out, "Abba, Father." That's not just a theological fact. It's an experience. The Spirit inside you gives you the confidence to talk to God as your Father.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Abba**

Abba is the Aramaic word for father, the language Jesus spoke at home. It was the word Jewish children used for their dads, though adults used it too. It's warm and personal, but also respectful. Jesus used it when He prayed in Gethsemane (Mark 14:36). Paul keeps the Aramaic word even when writing in Greek to Gentiles, which suggests the early church remembered how Jesus prayed and learned to pray the same way.

So Paul sums it up: you're no longer a slave, but God's child, and if you're His child, God has made you an heir. You don't have to work your way up from slave to son. You've already been adopted.

That's why Paul is so frustrated. The Galatians used to worship gods that weren't really gods. Now they know God, or better, Paul corrects himself, they are known by God. So how can they turn back to those weak and miserable principles and want to be enslaved again? He says they're observing special days, months, seasons, and years, probably the Jewish calendar of festivals and Sabbaths that

the troublemakers were pushing as requirements. Paul is afraid all his work with them was wasted.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Known by God**
>
> Paul's correction is beautiful. It's good to know God. But it's even better to be known by Him. Your relationship with God doesn't depend on how well you know Him, how much theology you've learned, or how good you are at praying. It depends on the fact that He knows you and chose to love you. Your grip on Him may be weak. His grip on you isn't.

Then Paul changes tone completely. He stops arguing and starts pleading, like a parent. Become like me, he says, for I became like you. He reminds them of the first time he came to them. He was sick. It was because of an illness that he first preached the gospel to them. And though his condition was a trial for them, they didn't treat him with contempt or scorn. Instead, they welcomed him as if he were an angel of God, or even Christ Jesus Himself.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Paul's Illness**
>
> We don't know what Paul's illness was. Some have suggested malaria, which was common in the lowlands of Pamphylia, near the southern Galatian cities. Others point to an eye problem, since Paul says the Galatians would have torn out their own eyes and given them to him if they could, and later mentions writing in large letters. Some connect it with the thorn in the flesh Paul describes in 2 Corinthians 12. In the ancient world, some people spat to protect themselves from sick people, thinking illness might be a curse. The Galatians didn't. They loved him.

Where did that joy go? Paul asks. Has he become their enemy by telling them the truth? The troublemakers were working hard to win them over, but not for good reasons. They wanted to cut the Galatians off from Paul, so the Galatians would be devoted to them instead.

Then Paul calls them "My dear children" and says he feels like he's in the pains of childbirth again, until Christ is formed in them. That's a striking image for a man to use. Paul feels the agony of a mother in labor. He wants to see them become more and more like Jesus. And he wishes he could be with them in person and change his tone, because he's confused about what to do with them.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Christ Formed in You**
>
> Paul's goal for the Galatians wasn't that they would follow the right rules, or even the right teacher. It was that Christ would take shape in them, the way a baby grows in the womb. Christian growth isn't about becoming a better version of yourself through sheer effort. It's about Jesus' character growing in you, by His Spirit, over time. That's slow, and sometimes painful. But it's real.

Paul ends the chapter with an illustration from the story of Abraham that has puzzled readers for centuries. Abraham had two sons. Ishmael was born to Hagar, a slave woman, in the ordinary way, because Abraham and Sarah tried to fulfill God's promise on their own. Isaac was born to Sarah, the free woman, as the result of a promise, when Sarah was far too old to have children.

Paul says these two women can represent two covenants. Hagar stands for Mount Sinai, where the law was given, and for the earthly Jerusalem, which in Paul's view was in slavery with her children. Sarah stands for the Jerusalem that is above, which is free, and she is our mother. Paul quotes Isaiah 54, which tells a woman who has never had children to celebrate, because her children will be many.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Figuratively Speaking**
>
> Paul says he's reading the story figuratively. He isn't saying Genesis didn't happen. He's using it as an illustration, a way of seeing a pattern in the story. Jewish teachers sometimes read Scripture this way too. It's important to see what Paul is and isn't saying. He's not attacking Jewish people. He's saying

> that trying to belong to God through the law, rather than through God's promise, leads to slavery. And the teachers pressuring the Galatians were the ones who needed to hear it.

So, Paul says, we are children of the promise, like Isaac. And just as Ishmael mocked Isaac, the children of the flesh are now pressuring the children of the Spirit. Paul quotes Sarah's words from Genesis 21 about sending away the slave woman and her son. His conclusion: we aren't children of the slave woman, but of the free woman.

KEY VERSE

So you are no longer a slave, but God's child; and since you are his child, God has made you also an heir.

Galatians 4:7 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. What's the difference between relating to God as a slave and relating to Him as a child?
2. Paul says it's even better to be known by God than to know Him. Why might that be comforting on a day when you feel far from God?
3. The Galatians welcomed Paul when he was sick and weak. How do people at your school or church treat those who are struggling?
4. Paul says he's in labor until Christ is formed in the Galatians. Who has invested in you like that? Who could you invest in?

TRY THIS *When you pray this week, try starting with "Father" or "Abba, Father" and talk to God the way a child talks to a parent who loves them. Notice if anything changes.*

CHAPTER 5

Free to Love

Galatians 5

Chapter 5 opens with the sentence many people consider the theme of the whole letter: "It is for freedom that Christ has set us free." So, Paul says, stand firm. Don't let anyone put the yoke of slavery back on your shoulders.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Yoke**
>
> A yoke was a wooden beam fitted over the necks of two oxen so they could pull a plow or cart together. It became a picture for being under someone's control. Some Jewish teachers spoke positively of taking on the yoke of the law. Jesus said His own yoke was easy and His burden light (Matthew 11:30). In Acts 15:10, Peter warned against putting on Gentile believers a yoke that neither the Jews of his day nor their ancestors had been able to bear.

Now Paul gets very direct. If you get circumcised to be right with God, he says, Christ will be of no value to you at all. Everyone who does that is obligated to keep the whole law. You can't pick and choose. If you're trying to be justified by law, you've been cut off from Christ. You've fallen away from grace.

That doesn't mean circumcision itself was evil. Paul had Timothy circumcised (Acts 16:3), probably so he could minister among Jewish communities. The problem was treating it as a requirement for salvation. Paul says that in Christ, circumcision and

uncircumcision don't count for anything. What counts is faith expressing itself through love.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Faith Expressing Itself through Love**
> This phrase is a great summary of Paul's thinking. Faith isn't just believing the right facts. Real faith is alive, and it always shows up in love. Paul isn't against good works. He's against good works as a way to earn God's acceptance. When you know you're already accepted, love starts flowing out of you, not to earn anything, but because that's what God's Spirit produces.

You were running a good race, Paul says. Who cut in on you? Like a runner who trips another runner, someone had knocked them off course. And that pressure didn't come from God, who called them. Paul quotes a proverb: a little yeast works through the whole batch of dough. A little false teaching can spread through a whole church.

Then Paul says something that shocks modern readers. As for those agitators, he wishes they would go all the way and castrate themselves. If they're so eager to cut, let them keep cutting.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Did Paul Really Say That?**
> Yes. Paul is angry, and he uses biting sarcasm. In Galatia, there were priests of a pagan goddess, Cybele, who castrated themselves as an act of devotion. Paul may be saying that if the troublemakers think cutting the flesh makes you holier, they're no better than those pagan priests. It's not a model for how Christians should talk to each other on a normal day. But it shows how seriously Paul took anything that endangered the people he loved.

Now Paul turns a corner. He's spent four and a half chapters talking about freedom. But he knows freedom can be misunderstood. So he says: you were called to be free, but don't use your freedom as an excuse to indulge the flesh. Instead, serve one another humbly in love.

That's not what most people mean by freedom. We usually think freedom means doing whatever I want. Paul says real freedom is being free from the need to prove yourself, so that you can give yourself away for others. The whole law, he says, is summed up in one command: "Love your neighbor as yourself." But if you keep biting and devouring each other, watch out, or you'll destroy each other.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Freedom**

In the Roman world, a large share of the people in big cities, perhaps a quarter or more by some estimates, were slaves or former slaves. Everyone knew what slavery was, and everyone knew how precious freedom was. Paul uses that picture. But he turns it upside down. He tells free people to serve one another, using a word related to slavery. Freedom in Christ means choosing to serve out of love rather than being forced to serve out of fear.

So how do you live free without sliding into selfishness? Paul's answer is the Holy Spirit. Walk by the Spirit, he says, and you won't satisfy the desires of the flesh. The flesh and the Spirit want opposite things. They're in conflict with each other. The NIV footnote gives two possible ways to read the end of verse 17, but the struggle Paul describes is familiar to anyone who has tried to follow Jesus. But if you're led by the Spirit, you're not under the law.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Inner Battle**

If you've ever wanted to do the right thing and done the wrong thing anyway, you know what Paul means. Following Jesus doesn't mean you'll never struggle. In fact, the struggle can be a sign that the Spirit is at work in you, because before, you might not have cared. The answer isn't to try harder in your own strength. It's to keep in step with the Spirit, one step at a time.

Then Paul gives two lists. First, the acts of the flesh, which he says are obvious. They include sexual immorality, impurity, and

debauchery. Idolatry and witchcraft. Hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions, and envy. Drunkenness, orgies, and things like these. People who live this way, Paul warns, won't inherit the kingdom of God.

Notice how many of these are relational sins. Most of the list isn't about sex or partying. It's about fighting, jealousy, rivalry, and dividing into groups. Exactly the kinds of things that were happening in Galatia.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Witchcraft**
>
> The Greek word is pharmakeia, which is where we get the word pharmacy. In the ancient world, it referred to sorcery, magic spells, and potions, often involving drugs or poisons. Magic was everywhere in the Roman Empire. People bought charms and curses and tried to control the spirits. Paul includes it in his list because it's an attempt to get power without trusting God.

Then comes the second list, and Paul calls it not acts but fruit. The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against things like that, he says, there's no law.

Why fruit? Because fruit isn't manufactured. It grows. A tree doesn't strain to produce apples. It just stays connected to its roots, and the fruit comes in season. In the same way, these qualities grow in you as you stay connected to Jesus. Notice that Paul says fruit, singular, not fruits. It's one harvest with nine flavors. The Spirit doesn't give you love but skip patience. He grows the whole thing.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Forbearance**
>
> Forbearance is an old-fashioned word for patience, especially patience with people who frustrate you. Older translations say longsuffering. It's the ability to put up with someone's annoying habits, slowness, or even unkindness,

without exploding or giving up on them. It's one of the hardest fruits to grow, and one of the most needed.

Paul finishes the chapter by saying that those who belong to Christ have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. Since we live by the Spirit, let's keep in step with the Spirit. That's a marching image, like soldiers or a band keeping time together. And then a very practical warning: let's not become conceited, provoking and envying each other.

KEY VERSE

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law.

Galatians 5:22–23 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. How would you define freedom? How does Paul's definition compare?
2. Most of the acts of the flesh are about how we treat each other. Which ones do you see most among people your age?
3. Which fruit of the Spirit do you see growing in your life? Which one do you most need God to grow?
4. What do you think it looks like, practically, to keep in step with the Spirit on an ordinary school day?

TRY THIS *Pick one fruit of the Spirit and ask God to grow it in you this week. Look for a chance to practice it, especially with someone who makes it hard.*

CHAPTER 6

Carry Each Other's Burdens

Galatians 6

Paul's last chapter is full of practical advice for life together in a church. First, if someone gets caught in a sin, you who live by the Spirit should restore that person, gently. The word restore was used for setting a broken bone or mending a fishing net. The goal isn't to punish or shame. It's to heal. But Paul adds a warning: watch yourself, or you may be tempted too.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Gently**
>
> Gentleness was just listed as a fruit of the Spirit. Now Paul shows what it looks like in action. It's easy to be harsh with someone who has messed up, especially if you feel superior. Gentleness comes from remembering that you could be in their place. It's strength under control, like a doctor who knows how to set a bone without causing more pain than necessary.

"Carry each other's burdens," Paul says, "and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ." The troublemakers wanted the Galatians to keep the law of Moses. Paul says there's a different law that matters: the law of Christ, which is the way of love Jesus lived and taught.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **The Law of Christ**
>
> Paul doesn't define the law of Christ, but the context suggests it's the command to love one another, which Jesus called a new command in John 13:34. Jesus didn't just teach this law, He lived it. He carried our burdens all

the way to the cross. When we carry each other's burdens, we're living the way He lived.

Then Paul says something that sounds like a contradiction. If you think you're something when you're nothing, you're fooling yourself. Each person should test their own actions, without comparing themselves to someone else. Then Paul says each one should carry their own load. Wait, didn't he just say to carry each other's burdens?

BACKGROUND CHECK **Burden or Load?**

Paul uses two different Greek words. The burdens in verse 2 are heavy weights, the kind of crushing troubles nobody can carry alone, like grief, temptation, or a crisis. The load in verse 5 is more like a soldier's backpack, the ordinary responsibility each person is expected to carry. So both are true. Help others with what's too heavy for them, and take responsibility for your own stuff.

Paul also reminds them to share good things with those who teach them God's word. In other words, support your teachers. And then a serious warning: Don't be deceived. God cannot be mocked. A person reaps what they sow. If you plant seeds to please your sinful nature, you'll reap destruction. If you plant seeds to please the Spirit, you'll reap eternal life.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Sowing and Reaping**

Almost everyone in the ancient world knew farming. If you plant corn, you don't get tomatoes. If you plant nothing, you get weeds. Your habits are like seeds. What you watch, what you think about, how you spend your time, and who you spend it with all grow into something. The good news is that small, faithful seeds planted with the Spirit grow into a harvest too.

Then comes the Key Verse for this chapter, a great encouragement for anyone who is tired of trying to do the right thing. Don't get

weary of doing good, Paul says, because at the right time you'll reap a harvest, if you don't give up. So whenever you have the chance, do good to everyone, especially to the family of believers.

Notice Paul says everyone. Christians are called to do good to people who aren't Christians too. But the church is a family, and families take care of their own first. That's not exclusion. It's a starting point.

And now Paul takes the pen. "See what large letters I use as I write to you with my own hand!" Up to this point, Paul had probably dictated the letter to a scribe, which was normal at the time. Now he writes the last lines himself, in big letters, so everyone would know this was really from him and that this was the bottom line.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Ancient Letters**
>
> In the Roman world, most letters were written by professional scribes. The sender would dictate, and the scribe would write it down, sometimes in shorthand and then a clean copy. At the end, the sender often added a personal greeting in their own handwriting as a kind of signature. In Romans 16:22, the scribe, Tertius, even adds his own greeting. Paul mentions his own handwriting in several letters, including 1 Corinthians, Colossians, and 2 Thessalonians.

Paul's final summary is sharp. The people pushing circumcision want to look good in the flesh. They want to avoid being persecuted for the cross of Christ. Even they don't keep the whole law, he says. They just want to boast about how many Gentiles they've signed up, like collecting trophies.

But Paul wants something else. He never wants to boast except in the cross of the Lord Jesus Christ. Through the cross, Paul says, the world has been crucified to him, and he to the world. The world's way of keeping score, who's important, who's in, who's out, doesn't have any power over him anymore.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Boasting in the Cross**

In Paul's world, the cross was the most shameful thing imaginable. It was a punishment for slaves and rebels, designed to humiliate. Romans considered it so disgusting that polite people didn't talk about it. Boasting in the cross would be like bragging that your hero died in the electric chair. But Paul says the cross is the one thing worth boasting about, because it's where God's love was shown most clearly.

Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything, Paul says. What counts is the new creation. That's the whole point. God isn't just patching up the old world. He's making something new, and everyone who belongs to Jesus is part of it.

Peace and mercy, Paul says, to all who follow this rule, and to the Israel of God.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Israel of God**

This phrase is debated. Some think Paul means the church, Jewish and Gentile believers together, as the people of God. Others think he means Jewish believers in Jesus, or the Jewish people whom God has not forgotten, as Paul discusses in Romans 11. The NIV footnote shows that the Greek can be translated in slightly different ways. What's clear is that Paul ends with a blessing, not a curse.

Paul's last personal words are a little bit raw. From now on, he says, let no one cause me trouble, because I bear on my body the marks of Jesus. The troublemakers wanted to boast about marks of circumcision. Paul has a different kind of mark: the scars from being whipped, beaten, and stoned for preaching Jesus. In Lystra, one of the southern Galatian cities, he had been stoned and left for dead (Acts 14:19). The Galatians may have seen those scars themselves.

And then, after all the anger and argument, Paul ends the same way he began. With grace. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit, brothers and sisters. Amen.

KEY VERSE

Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up.

Galatians 6:9 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Think of a time someone helped you carry a heavy burden. What did they do that helped most?
2. When someone you know messes up, is your first instinct to restore them or to judge them? Why?
3. What seeds are you planting in your life right now? What do you think they'll grow into?
4. Paul says the only thing worth boasting about is the cross. What do people your age boast about? What would it look like to boast in the cross instead?

TRY THIS *Ask God to show you one person who is carrying a heavy burden right now. Then do one concrete thing to help them carry it: a message, a meal, a ride, a prayer, or just showing up.*

THE END (AND THE BEGINNING)

Now What? The Bottom Line

You've just walked through Paul's letter to the Galatians. Paul was willing to fight his friends, his fellow apostles, and even Peter over one question: is Jesus enough? His answer was yes. Jesus plus nothing. That's the gospel he refused to let anyone change.

Here's what the Bible says, as plainly as I can put it.

1 God made you, and He wants you as His child.

Paul says God sent His Son so that we could be adopted as His children, calling Him Abba, Father. You weren't an accident. You were made to belong to Him.

2 We've all turned away.

Religious people and irreligious people alike. Nobody keeps God's law perfectly. The Bible calls it sin, and it separates us from God.

> *for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,* **Romans 3:23 (NIV)**

3 Sin has a real cost.

God is good, so He doesn't shrug off evil. The Bible says the result of sin is death, separation from God forever.

> *For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.* **Romans 6:23 (NIV)**

4 Jesus took the curse.

Paul says Jesus did more than die for us. He took the curse we deserved on Himself when He was hung on a cross, so that the blessing promised to Abraham could come to us. And God raised Him from the dead.

> *Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us,* **Galatians 3:13 (NIV)**

5 You can't earn it. You receive it.

This is the whole point of Galatians. You don't add anything to what Jesus did. Not rules, not rituals, not performance. Salvation is a gift you receive by trusting Him.

> *For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast.* **Ephesians 2:8–9 (NIV)**

6 Turn and trust.

Turn from running your own life, and trust Jesus as your Savior and King. It doesn't mean you'll never fail again. It means you're no longer a slave. You're a child of God, and the Spirit lives in you.

> *If you declare with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.* **Romans 10:9 (NIV)**

So what do you do with that? You don't need perfect words. You can talk to God honestly, right now, wherever you are. If it helps, you could pray something like this:

God, I've been running my own life, and I've sinned against You. I can't fix that myself, and I can't earn Your love by trying harder. I believe Jesus died for me, took the curse I deserved, and that You raised Him from the dead. I'm turning to You. Forgive me. I trust Jesus as my Savior, and I want to follow Him as my King. Thank You that I'm Your child. Fill me with Your Spirit, and help me use my freedom to love others. In Jesus' name, amen.

If You Just Said Yes

Tell someone. A parent, a youth leader, a pastor, or a Christian friend. Start there.

Read the real thing. Read Galatians straight through in one sitting. Then read Ephesians, the next letter in the New Testament, which tells you who you are in Christ.

Find your people. Get connected to a church where the Bible is taught and Jesus is honored, and where grace matters more than looking good. Carry each other's burdens. Ask about being baptized.

Talk to God every day. You can call Him Father. Be honest. He can handle it.

Not Sure Yet?

Not ready? That's honest, and honesty is a good place to start. Paul himself spent years fighting against Jesus before he met Him. Keep asking. Keep reading. Talk to someone you trust. Just don't settle for "I already know all that."

Because if Paul is right, you don't have to earn God's love. You can stop performing and start living as His child. That's worth finding out for yourself.

It is for freedom that Christ has set us free.

Galatians 5:1 (NIV)

PAUL'S LETTER TO THE EPHESIANS

The King's Masterpiece

Ephesians, Unfiltered

For teens who think they've heard it all

BILL McLEOD

Papa Bill Books

The King's Masterpiece: Paul's Letter to the Ephesians, Unfiltered

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All Scripture quotations in this book are from the NIV. Some are abridged, with omissions marked by ellipses; paraphrases are not placed in quotation marks.

Pronouns referring to God the Father, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit are capitalized for reverence in the author's own words. Inside Scripture quotations, capitalization and wording follow the 2011 NIV exactly.

AI Disclosure. This book was written by Bill McLeod with the assistance of artificial intelligence tools for drafting, research, and editing. All content was reviewed and approved by the author, who takes full responsibility for it. Readers are encouraged to open the Scriptures and study them for themselves.

A WORD TO THE READER

Before You Start

If you've read the earlier books in this series, you know the saying by now: "If you want to get something done, hire a teenager while they still know it all." It's been in every book. It's not leaving now.

Galatians was a fight. Ephesians is a view from the mountaintop. There's no crisis in this letter, no named troublemakers, no angry outbursts. Instead, Paul, writing from a prison cell, steps back and shows his readers the biggest picture he can: what God planned before the world began, what He did through Jesus, and what kind of people He's making out of the mess of humanity.

Some of the most famous lines in the New Testament come from this short letter. Saved by grace through faith, not by works. God's handiwork, created to do good. The dividing wall torn down. The love of Christ that's wider and longer and higher and deeper than we can understand. Speaking the truth in love. The armor of God.

Ephesians is also a letter about identity. If you've ever wondered who you really are, whether you matter, whether you belong anywhere, Paul has answers. In Christ, he says, you're chosen, adopted, forgiven, sealed with the Spirit, raised up, seated with Jesus, and part of a new family that includes people you would never have picked. And then, in the second half, he shows what it looks like to live that identity out: in your words, your anger, your friendships, your home, and your battles.

There's a simple way to remember the shape of the letter. In chapters 1 to 3, you sit: you rest in what God has done. In chapters 4

and 5, you walk: you live it out. In chapter 6, you stand: you hold your ground against everything that tries to knock you down. Sit, walk, stand. Let's go.

How This Book Works

This book walks through all six chapters of Ephesians, in order, one chapter of this book for each chapter of the letter. Each one explains Paul's thinking in plain language and adds background about the city of Ephesus, the Roman world, and the words and ideas Paul uses.

Before chapter 1, a section called Setting the Scene explains Ephesus and its famous temple, what happened when Paul lived there, why he was in prison when he wrote, and some questions scholars still discuss about who first received the letter and who wrote it. It's worth reading first.

Each chapter ends with a Key Verse quoted word for word from the New International Version (NIV), the same translation used for every Scripture quotation in this book (pronouns for God are capitalized in the author's own words out of reverence; inside Scripture quotations, capitalization follows the NIV exactly); Real Talk questions to think through alone or argue about with friends; and a Try This challenge.

Ephesians is short and its sentences are long and rich, so this book quotes it sparingly and explains it mostly in my own words. Keep a Bible open next to it. Read each chapter of Ephesians first, then the chapter here. Don't take my word for it. Take His.

FOR THE ADULTS

A Note for Parents and Youth Leaders

Thank you for putting this book in a teenager's hands. Like the earlier books in this series, on the Gospels, Acts, Romans, the Corinthian letters, and Galatians, it's written for readers who can smell a sermon coming a mile away. I've tried to write honestly, directly, with some humor, and with real respect for what these readers can handle.

This book follows the letter format of the earlier volumes, walking through Ephesians chapter by chapter. Because the letter is short, I've quoted it sparingly and relied mostly on paraphrase and explanation, with extra background and discussion material. Wherever Scripture is quoted directly, in the chapters and in the Key Verses, the wording is from the New International Version (NIV).

Ephesians raises some questions that scholars and churches discuss: whether the words in Ephesus belong in 1:1, since some early manuscripts lack them; whether the letter was meant to circulate among several churches; whether Paul wrote it himself or a close follower wrote in his name; and how to understand God's choosing in chapter 1. I've presented these briefly and fairly, without trying to settle every debate. The letter presents itself as Paul's, and I refer to the author as Paul throughout.

Two passages need special care with teenagers: the instructions to wives and husbands in 5:21–33, and to slaves and masters in 6:5–9. I've explained them briefly and with balance, noting how they begin with mutual submission in 5:21, how they compare with the household rules of the Roman world, and how Christians hold different views on marriage roles. I've also said plainly that these passages never require anyone to accept abuse, and that the Bible's words to slaves are not an endorsement of slavery. You may want to talk these sections through together.

The Real Talk questions are designed for discussion. They work well for a youth group, a small group, a family dinner table, or a car ride. Don't rush to the right answer. Let them wrestle. Faith that has been thought through tends to last.

My prayer is that every reader will discover who they are in Christ, and grasp, even a little, how wide and long and high and deep His love really is.

Grace and peace,

Bill McLeod

Papa Bill Books

BEFORE YOU OPEN THE LETTER

Setting the Scene

The City of Ephesus

Ephesus was one of the great cities of the Roman Empire, on the west coast of what is now Turkey. It was the leading city of the Roman province of Asia (not the continent, but a region covering the western part of modern Turkey). Estimates of its population vary, but it may have had well over 100,000 people, which made it one of the biggest cities in the eastern Mediterranean.

Ephesus was a port city with a harbor connected to the sea, a center of trade where roads from the east met ships from the west. It had a huge marble main street, public baths, a library (the famous Library of Celsus came a little later), a stadium, and a theater carved into a hillside that could seat around 25,000 people. Today, its ruins are among the best-preserved ancient sites in the world. The harbor eventually filled with silt, and the coastline is now several miles away.

The Temple of Artemis

Ephesus was most famous for its temple to Artemis, the goddess the Romans called Diana. It was one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World, a gigantic marble building with more than a hundred columns, several times larger than the Parthenon in Athens. Pilgrims came from all over the world to worship there. The temple also worked like a bank, holding deposits for cities, kings, and ordinary people.

The Artemis of Ephesus wasn't quite the same as the Greek huntress. Her statue was covered with rows of rounded objects that have been interpreted as breasts, eggs, or other symbols, and she was honored as a powerful protector of the city. A whole economy grew up around her: priests, festivals, souvenir shrines, and craftsmen who made a living from her worship.

Magic and the Powers

Ephesus was also known for magic. People wrote spells and charms to protect themselves from evil spirits, curse their enemies, or gain love and money. So-called Ephesian letters, magical words written on scrolls or amulets, were famous. Many people believed their lives were controlled by spiritual powers, the stars, and fate.

That helps explain why Ephesians talks so much about powers and authorities in the heavenly realms. Paul wants his readers to know that Jesus is seated far above every power, and that they don't need to live in fear.

Paul in Ephesus

Acts 18 and 19 tell how Paul came to Ephesus. He visited briefly on his second journey, leaving his friends Priscilla and Aquila there. On his third journey, he came back and stayed about three years (Acts 20:31), longer than anywhere else on his missionary journeys.

At first he taught in the synagogue for three months. When some opposed him, he moved to a lecture hall belonging to a man named Tyrannus, and taught there daily for two years. Acts says that so many people heard the message that it spread throughout the province of Asia. Churches were probably started in nearby cities like Colossae, Laodicea, and Hierapolis during this time, often by Paul's coworkers.

God did extraordinary miracles through Paul in Ephesus. Some Jewish exorcists tried to use the name of Jesus like a magic spell and were beaten up by the demon-possessed man they were trying to help. As a result, many new believers who had practiced magic brought their scrolls and burned them publicly. Acts says the scrolls were worth fifty thousand drachmas, a fortune, maybe the wages of a hundred people for a year or more.

The Riot

Then trouble came. A silversmith named Demetrius, who made silver shrines of Artemis, realized that if people stopped worshiping idols, he and his fellow craftsmen would lose business. He gathered them and stirred them up. Soon the whole city was in an uproar. A crowd rushed into the theater, dragging two of Paul's companions with them, and shouted for about two hours, Great is Artemis of the Ephesians. Paul wanted to go in and face the crowd, but his friends wouldn't let him. Eventually the city clerk calmed everyone down.

After that, Paul left Ephesus. Later, on his way to Jerusalem, he asked the elders of the Ephesian church to meet him at Miletus, a nearby port. His farewell speech in Acts 20 is one of the most emotional scenes in Acts. They wept, hugged him, and walked him to the ship, knowing they would probably never see him again.

A Letter from Prison

Paul calls himself a prisoner three times in Ephesians, and near the end he calls himself an ambassador in chains. Where was he? The traditional view is Rome, where Acts 28 says Paul spent two years under house arrest, chained to a soldier but able to receive visitors, around AD 60 to 62. Some scholars suggest an earlier imprisonment,

perhaps in Caesarea, where Paul was held for two years before being sent to Rome.

Ephesians is one of four letters often called the Prison Letters, along with Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon. Ephesians and Colossians are especially similar. Both mention Tychicus as the one carrying the letter (Ephesians 6:21; Colossians 4:7), so they were probably delivered on the same trip.

The Missing Words

Here's something you might not expect. In 1:1, the NIV footnote says some early manuscripts don't have the words in Ephesus. Some of the oldest copies we have simply say something like to the holy people who are faithful in Christ Jesus, with no city named.

There are other clues too. Paul had spent three years in Ephesus and knew the church well, yet this letter has no personal greetings to anyone. He says he has heard about their faith (1:15) and assumes they have heard about his ministry (3:2), which sounds odd for a church he founded. In the second century, a teacher named Marcion called this letter the letter to the Laodiceans.

A Circular Letter?

Many scholars think Ephesians was a circular letter, written to be passed around several churches in the province of Asia, with Ephesus as the main city and perhaps the first stop. That could explain the missing city name and the lack of personal greetings. Some even connect it with the letter Paul mentions in Colossians 4:16, which the Colossians were to get from Laodicea.

Others think the letter was written to Ephesus but meant for a wider audience, or that the church had grown so much since Paul left that

many members didn't know him personally. Either way, Ephesians reads like a letter for the whole church, then and now.

Who Wrote It?

The letter says it's from Paul, and the early church accepted it as his. But many modern scholars think it was written by a close follower of Paul after his death, using Paul's name to apply his teaching to a new generation. They point to its style, with extremely long sentences (1:3–14 is one sentence in Greek), some vocabulary Paul doesn't use elsewhere, its close similarity to Colossians, and its focus on the worldwide church.

Other scholars argue that Paul wrote it. They note that writing style can change with subject, mood, and the use of a secretary; that a letter written to many churches would naturally be more general; that the similarities to Colossians make sense if Paul wrote both at the same time; and that writing in someone else's name was not as accepted in the early church as some suppose. Christians on both sides agree that Ephesians belongs in the Bible and speaks with authority. In this book, I follow the letter's own claim and call the author Paul.

The Map

Chapters 1 to 3: what God has done. Every spiritual blessing in Christ. Saved by grace. Jews and Gentiles made one new people. The mystery revealed. A prayer to know the love of Christ.

Chapters 4 to 6: how to live it. Keep the unity of the Spirit. Grow up together, speaking the truth in love. Put off the old self and put on the new. Live as children of light. Love and serve one another at home. And stand firm in the armor of God.

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CHAPTER 1

Every Spiritual Blessing

Ephesians 1

Paul begins the usual way: his name, his readers, and a greeting of grace and peace. He calls himself an apostle of Christ Jesus by God's will, and he writes to God's holy people, the faithful in Christ. (As you read in Setting the Scene, the words in Ephesus are missing from some early copies, so this may have been a letter for several churches.)

Then Paul takes a deep breath and starts praising God. And he doesn't stop for twelve verses. In the original Greek, verses 3 to 14 are one gigantic sentence of more than two hundred words. It's like someone so excited they can't find a place to put a period. It's been compared to a snowball rolling downhill, getting bigger as it goes.

> BACKGROUND CHECK **One Long Sentence**
>
> English translations break Paul's sentence into several, because nobody wants to read a two-hundred-word sentence in English. But in Greek, it's a single outpouring of praise. It's structured around the three persons of God: what the Father planned, what the Son accomplished, and what the Spirit guarantees. And three times, Paul says it all leads to the praise of God's glory.

The headline is this: God has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in Christ, in the heavenly realms. Not some. Every. If you belong to

Jesus, you're not waiting to get the important blessings later. You already have them.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **The Heavenly Realms**
>
> This phrase appears five times in Ephesians and nowhere else in Paul's letters. It doesn't just mean heaven as the place you go when you die. It means the unseen spiritual world that exists alongside ours, where Christ now reigns, where believers already belong, and where spiritual powers still oppose God. Paul's point is that what happens in the unseen world is real, and that in Christ you're on the winning side.

So what are these blessings? Paul starts with the biggest one. God chose us in Christ before He even created the world, to be holy and blameless in His sight. Before there was a single star, God had you in mind.

And in love He planned to adopt us as His children through Jesus. The NIV footnote explains that the word for adoption to sonship is a legal term for the full standing of an adopted heir in Roman culture. In Rome, an adopted son had every right a natural son had. His old debts were cancelled. He got a new name and a full share of the inheritance. Girls and guys alike, Paul says, that's you.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Chosen?**
>
> Paul's words about God choosing and predestining people have led to centuries of discussion. Some Christians, often called Reformed or Calvinist, believe God chooses specific individuals for salvation. Others, often called Arminian, believe God chose in advance to save all who would trust Christ, knowing ahead of time who they would be. Still others emphasize that Paul is talking about God choosing a people, the church, in Christ. What everyone agrees on is that salvation starts with God, not with us, and that Paul says this to make his readers worship, not worry.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **In Love**
>
> The NIV footnote on verses 4 and 5 points out that the phrase in love could go with the end of verse 4 (holy and blameless in His sight in love) or with the beginning of verse 5 (in love He predestined us). Ancient Greek had no punctuation, so translators have to decide. Either way, love is at the center of God's choosing.

Next, Paul says, in Christ we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins. God didn't just sprinkle grace on us. He poured it out, lavishly, like someone who doesn't care about the cost. Redemption means being set free by the payment of a price, like buying back a slave or ransoming a prisoner. The price was Jesus' own life.

Then Paul reveals God's big plan, which he calls the mystery of His will. When the time is right, God will bring everything in heaven and on earth together under Christ. The world feels broken into a million pieces: nations at war, families split apart, people divided by race, money, politics, and pride. God's plan is to gather all of it back together, with Jesus as the head.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Mystery**
>
> When we hear mystery, we think of a puzzle or a detective story. But in the Bible, a mystery is a secret that God has kept hidden and now reveals. It's not something you figure out by being clever. It's something God tells you. Paul uses the word six times in Ephesians, and in chapter 3 he explains exactly what the mystery is.

Paul then turns to his readers. You also, he says, were included in Christ when you heard the message of truth and believed. And when you believed, you were marked with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Sealed**

In the ancient world, a seal was a stamp, often carved into a ring, pressed into wax or clay. It showed who owned something, guaranteed it was genuine, and protected it from being tampered with. Merchants in Ephesus would seal their goods before shipping them. Paul says the Holy Spirit is God's seal on you. You belong to Him. You're the real thing. And He's protecting you until you arrive.

The Spirit is also a deposit, a down payment, guaranteeing our inheritance. The same word was used for a first payment that promised the rest was coming. The Spirit's presence in your life now is a taste of the full life with God that's still ahead.

Then Paul switches from praise to prayer. Ever since he heard about their faith in Jesus and their love for all God's people, he hasn't stopped thanking God for them. And he keeps asking God to give them the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that they will know Him better.

Notice what Paul doesn't pray for. He doesn't ask for their problems to disappear or for them to get more stuff. He prays that the eyes of their hearts would be opened. He wants them to really see three things: the hope God has called them to, the riches of God's inheritance in His people, and the incredible power God has for those who believe.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Eyes of Your Heart**

In the Bible, the heart isn't just your feelings. It's the center of who you are: your thinking, choosing, loving, and believing. When Paul prays for the eyes of the heart to be enlightened, he means for God to help people see what's true, not just know it in their heads. You can know facts about God and still not see Him. Paul wants them to see.

What kind of power is Paul talking about? The same power God used to raise Jesus from the dead and seat Him at His right hand. Jesus is now far above every ruler, authority, power, and dominion, and above every name anyone could call on, now and forever. For people in Ephesus who were afraid of spirits and fate and magic, that was huge news. Whatever power you're afraid of, Jesus is above it.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Every Name**
>
> In Ephesus, people called on the names of gods, spirits, and powers in magic spells, believing that knowing a name gave you power over it. Some magical texts from the ancient world list long strings of names. Paul says Jesus is above every name that could ever be invoked. You don't need a secret word or a charm. You have Jesus.

God placed everything under Jesus' feet, Paul says, and made Him head over everything for the church. And the church is His body, the fullness of the One who fills everything. Think about that. The Jesus who rules the universe has chosen to fill and work through ordinary people like you, in an ordinary local church.

KEY VERSE

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ.

Ephesians 1:3 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Paul says God had you in mind before He created the world. How does that change the way you see yourself?
2. Which blessing in this chapter means the most to you right now: being chosen, adopted, forgiven, sealed, or something else?
3. What are you afraid of? How does it help to know that Jesus is above every power?
4. Paul prays for the eyes of their hearts to be opened. Who could you pray that for this week?

TRY THIS *Read Ephesians 1:3–14 out loud and make a list of everything it says God has given you in Christ. Keep the list where you'll see it.*

CHAPTER 2

Dead Made Alive

Ephesians 2

If chapter 1 is the mountaintop, chapter 2 starts in the valley. Paul doesn't sugarcoat where we started. You were dead, he says, in your sins and wrongdoing.

Dead is a strong word. Not sick, not confused, not a little off track. Dead. A dead person can't help themselves. They can't make better choices or try harder. And Paul says that's what we were, spiritually.

He describes three forces that once controlled us. First, the ways of this world, the patterns everyone around us follows without thinking. Second, the ruler of the kingdom of the air, a way of describing the devil, the spirit at work in those who are disobedient. Third, our own flesh, its cravings and desires and thoughts. And Paul includes himself. All of us lived that way, he says. By nature, we deserved God's anger.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Flesh**
>
> The NIV footnote says that in contexts like this one, the Greek word sarx, flesh, refers to the sinful state of human beings, often presented as a power opposed to the Spirit. It doesn't mean your body is bad. God made your body, and Jesus had one. It means the part of us that wants to live without God, our self-centeredness and our pull toward sin.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Ruler of the Air**

Many people in the ancient world believed the air between the earth and the moon was full of spirits, some good and many evil. Paul uses that language to describe Satan's influence. He isn't saying the devil controls the weather. He's saying there's a real, invisible enemy who influences people and cultures. The good news, as chapter 1 already said, is that Jesus is seated far above every one of those powers.

Then comes one of the greatest turns in the Bible. "But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy," made us alive with Christ even when we were dead. It's by grace you have been saved.

Two words change everything: but God. We were dead, but God. We were helpless, but God. We deserved judgment, but God. The story doesn't end with what we did. It ends with what God did.

And He didn't just make us alive. He raised us up with Christ and seated us with Him in the heavenly realms. That's past tense. If you belong to Jesus, in God's eyes, you're already sitting with Him. Why did God do it? So that for all the ages to come, He could show off how rich His grace and kindness are. You are, in a way, God's exhibit of grace.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Grace**

Grace means a gift that's undeserved. In the Roman world, the word was used for a gift given by a patron, a wealthy person who supported others, often expecting loyalty in return. Paul takes that word and fills it with new meaning. God's grace isn't a loan to be paid back. It's love given to people who have nothing to offer and don't deserve it.

Then Paul writes the verses many Christians memorize first. It is by grace you've been saved, through faith. And even that isn't from you. It's God's gift, not a reward for works, so nobody can boast.

This is the same message as Galatians, but calmer. You can't earn God's love. You can't add to what Jesus did. Faith isn't a work that earns salvation, like a ticket you buy. It's more like an empty hand that receives a gift. And because it's all a gift, nobody gets to brag. Not the church kid, not the pastor, not the person who seems to have it all together.

But Paul doesn't stop there. Good works matter. They're just not the root. They're the fruit. We are God's handiwork, Paul says, created in Christ to do good works that God prepared in advance for us to do.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Handiwork**
>
> The Greek word is poiema, which is where we get the English word poem. It means something made, a work of art or craftsmanship. Some translations say workmanship or masterpiece. You're not a random product. You're something God designed and crafted on purpose. And the good things you'll do in life aren't a way to earn His love. They're part of the design. He already has them planned.

The second half of chapter 2 shifts focus. Paul reminds the Gentile believers what they used to be. They were called uncircumcised by Jewish people. They were outside the people of Israel, strangers to God's covenants and promises. Paul sums it up in a heartbreaking phrase: without hope and without God in the world.

But now, through Jesus' blood, those who were far away have been brought near. Jesus Himself is our peace. He has made Jews and Gentiles one, and He has destroyed the dividing wall of hostility between them.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **The Dividing Wall**
>
> In the temple in Jerusalem, there was a stone barrier separating the outer court, where Gentiles could go, from the inner courts, which only Jewish

people could enter. The Jewish historian Josephus says warning signs in Greek and Latin were posted along it. In 1871, a complete Greek one was found. It warns that any foreigner who goes past the barrier will have only himself to blame for the death that follows. Paul knew that wall well. In fact, he was arrested in Jerusalem after being accused of bringing a Gentile from Ephesus, a man named Trophimus, past it (Acts 21:29). That may be part of why he's in prison as he writes.

Jesus didn't just let Gentiles in through a side door. Paul says He created one new humanity out of the two, making peace, and reconciled both groups to God in one body through the cross. Through Him, both have access to the Father by one Spirit.

That's revolutionary. In Paul's world, the divide between Jews and Gentiles was one of the deepest there was. Today, we have our own dividing walls: race, nationality, class, politics, popularity. Paul says the cross destroys them all. Not by making everyone the same, but by making everyone family.

BACKGROUND CHECK **One New Humanity**

Paul doesn't say Gentiles became Jews, or that Jews became Gentiles. He says God made something new. The church isn't meant to be a club for one kind of person. It's meant to be a preview of what God is doing with the whole world: bringing every kind of person together under Jesus. When a church is made up of only one kind of people, it's missing part of the picture.

So, Paul concludes, you're no longer foreigners and strangers. You're fellow citizens with God's people, members of His household. And then he uses a building picture. The church is built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Jesus Himself as the chief cornerstone. The whole building is rising to become a holy temple. And together, you're becoming a home where God lives by His Spirit.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Cornerstone**

In ancient buildings, the cornerstone was the first stone set in place, often a large, carefully cut stone at the corner of the foundation. Every other stone was lined up with it, so it determined the shape of the whole building. Jesus is the stone everything else lines up with. The Temple of Artemis was one of the most magnificent buildings on earth. Paul says God is building something even more magnificent, made of people.

KEY VERSE

For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.

Ephesians 2:10 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Paul says we were dead, but God made us alive. Why do you think he starts with such bad news before the good news?
2. If salvation is a gift, why do so many people still feel like they have to earn God's love?
3. What dividing walls do you see at your school or in your town? What would it look like for the church to tear them down?
4. You're God's handiwork. What good works might God have prepared for you to do, even this week?

TRY THIS *Write the words "but God" at the top of a page. Underneath, write a few things from your life that were hard or broken, and how God showed up, or ask Him to.*

CHAPTER 3

Wider Than You Think

Ephesians 3

Paul starts to pray at the beginning of chapter 3. He gets as far as for this reason I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles, and then he stops himself. He interrupts his own prayer to explain something, and he doesn't get back to the prayer until verse 14. Paul's mind sometimes ran faster than his sentences.

Notice how he describes himself. Not a prisoner of Rome, but a prisoner of Christ Jesus. Paul believed that even his chains were part of God's plan. He was in prison because he preached that Gentiles could belong to God's people without becoming Jewish. So in a sense, he was in chains for them.

> BACKGROUND CHECK **Paul's Chains**
>
> In Rome, Paul was under house arrest, probably chained by the wrist to a soldier who was rotated in shifts. That meant Paul could never be alone, but it also meant that every few hours a new soldier had to sit and listen to him pray, dictate letters, and talk about Jesus. In Philippians 1, Paul says that the whole palace guard had heard why he was in chains. God was using his prison as a pulpit.

Now Paul explains the mystery he mentioned in chapter 1. He says God revealed it to him, and that it wasn't made known to earlier generations the way it has now been revealed to His holy apostles and prophets. And here it is. Through the gospel, the Gentiles are

heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Together**
>
> Paul uses three Greek words in a row that all start with syn, meaning together: co-heirs, co-body, and co-sharers. He even seems to invent one of them. It's as if regular words weren't enough to express how completely Gentiles and Jews now belong to each other in Christ. The Old Testament prophets had promised that the nations would one day come to Israel's God. What nobody saw coming was that they would come as equal members of the family.

Paul says he became a servant of this gospel by God's grace. Then he says something surprising about himself: he is less than the least of all God's people. Paul was a former persecutor of the church, and he never forgot it. But grace was given to him anyway, to preach the boundless riches of Christ to the Gentiles.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Less Than the Least**
>
> Paul made up a word here. He took the Greek word for least and added a comparative ending, creating something like leaster. It's bad grammar on purpose. It's a little like saying you're the most least person ever. Paul wasn't being falsely modest. He genuinely knew he didn't deserve what God had given him, which is exactly what grace means.

God's plan, Paul says, was that through the church His wisdom, in all its many colors, would be displayed to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms. Think about that. The invisible powers watch the church, and what they see is God's wisdom. When people who would naturally hate each other become a family, it's proof that God's way works.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Manifold Wisdom**

The word translated manifold means many-sided or many-colored. It was used for a richly embroidered cloth or a bouquet of flowers. God's wisdom isn't one plain color. It's like a tapestry woven out of every nation, language, personality, and story. A church full of different kinds of people is a picture of that.

Because of Christ, Paul says, we can approach God with freedom and confidence. In the ancient world, you couldn't just walk up to a king. You needed permission, a reason, and the right connections. In Christ, you have access to the King of the universe any time. So, Paul says, don't be discouraged by my sufferings. They're for your glory.

Now Paul finally returns to his prayer, and it's one of the most beautiful prayers in the Bible. He kneels before the Father. (Jewish people usually stood to pray, so kneeling may show how deeply Paul felt this.) The Father, he says, is the One from whom every family in heaven and on earth gets its name.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Every Family**

The NIV footnote points out a wordplay in Greek: the word for family, patria, comes from the word for father, pater. Paul is saying that God is the original Father, and every family takes its name and meaning from Him. Whatever your own family is like, good, hard, broken, or blended, God is the Father your heart was made for.

Here's what Paul asks for. First, that God would strengthen them with power through His Spirit in their inner being. Second, that Christ would dwell in their hearts through faith, settling in and making Himself at home. Third, that, rooted and established in love, they would have power, together with all God's people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ.

And fourth, that they would know this love that goes beyond knowledge, so they would be filled with all the fullness of God.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Rooted and Established**
>
> Paul mixes two pictures. Rooted is a farming image, like a tree with deep roots that can survive a storm. Established is a building image, like a house on a solid foundation. Both are about stability. When your life is rooted in Christ's love, you don't get blown over as easily by what people think, what you feel, or what happens to you.

Notice that Paul prays for them to grasp Christ's love together with all the Lord's people. You can't fully understand the love of Christ on your own. You need other believers, people who have experienced His love in ways you haven't, to help you see more of it. And notice the paradox: Paul wants them to know a love that surpasses knowledge. You'll never reach the end of it. But you can keep exploring it forever.

Then Paul bursts into praise again. To Him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to His power working in us, be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus forever and ever. Amen.

Whatever you can imagine God doing in your life, He can do more. Not a little more. Immeasurably more. That's not a promise that you'll get everything you want. It's a promise that God's plans for you are bigger than yours.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Doxology**
>
> A doxology is a short burst of praise, usually at the end of a prayer or a section. The word comes from the Greek doxa, glory, and logos, word. Paul's letters are full of them. Ephesians 3:20–21 marks the end of the first half of the letter. Everything after this is about how to live in light of what God has done.

> The order matters. Paul doesn't tell you what to do until he's told you who you are.

KEY VERSE

Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.

Ephesians 3:20–21 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Paul calls himself a prisoner of Christ, not of Rome. How could seeing a hard situation as part of God's plan change the way you handle it?
2. Why do you think God chose to show His wisdom through the church, with all its imperfections?
3. Which part of Paul's prayer in verses 16 to 19 do you most need right now?
4. Paul says we need other believers to grasp the love of Christ. Who has helped you understand God's love better?

TRY THIS *Pray Paul's prayer from Ephesians 3:16–19 for someone you know, using their name. Then pray it for yourself.*

CHAPTER 4

Grow Up Together

Ephesians 4

Chapter 4 is a turning point. For three chapters, Paul has told his readers who they are and what God has done. Now he says: so live like it. As a prisoner for the Lord, he urges them to live a life worthy of the calling they've received.

Worthy doesn't mean you have to earn your calling. You already have it. It means your life should match it, the way a person who has been given a scholarship to a great school would want to show up and do the work. Paul is saying: you're God's children, so act like family.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Therefore**
>
> Paul's letters often have a hinge where he moves from what God has done to how we should live. In Romans, it's at the start of chapter 12. In Ephesians, it's here. Bible teachers like to say that when you see a therefore, you should ask what it's there for. Paul's instructions in chapters 4 to 6 only make sense because of chapters 1 to 3. Christian living is a response to grace, not a way to get it.

What does a life worthy of the calling look like? Paul starts with attitudes: be completely humble and gentle, patient, putting up with one another in love. And make every effort to keep the unity the Spirit has created, held together by peace.

Notice that Paul doesn't tell them to create unity. The Spirit already did that. Their job is to keep it, to guard it. And that takes effort, because people are annoying, and we're annoying too.

Then Paul lists seven ones. One body, one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all. In a city full of temples to many gods, and in churches full of people from different backgrounds, Paul says what unites believers is far deeper than what divides them.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Humility**
>
> In the Greek and Roman world, humility wasn't considered a virtue. It was seen as weakness, the attitude of a slave. Strong people were supposed to be proud and seek honor. Christians changed that. Because Jesus, the King of the universe, humbled Himself, humility became something beautiful. Being humble doesn't mean thinking you're worthless. It means not needing to be the center of attention.

But unity doesn't mean everyone's the same. Paul says each of us has been given grace in a particular measure, the way Christ chose to give it. Then he quotes Psalm 68, about a conquering king going up on high, taking captives, and giving gifts.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Received or Gave?**
>
> The NIV footnote says Paul is quoting Psalm 68:18. But in the Hebrew of the psalm, the king receives gifts from people. Paul says He gave gifts. Why the change? An ancient Aramaic paraphrase of the psalm also reads gave, so Paul may be following a known Jewish interpretation. Or Paul may be making a point: a victorious king receives tribute and then distributes it to his people. Either way, Paul applies it to Jesus, who rose and ascended and now pours out gifts on His church.

Paul adds a short aside: if Jesus ascended, He must also have descended first, to the lower, earthly regions. The NIV footnote

offers another possible translation: the depths of the earth. Some think Paul means Jesus coming down to earth as a human being. Others think he means Jesus going down to the realm of the dead after His death. Either way, the One who came down is the same One who went up above all the heavens, to fill the whole universe.

What gifts did Jesus give? People. He gave apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers. And their job isn't to do all the ministry themselves. It's to equip God's people for works of service, so that the whole body grows strong.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Equip**
>
> The Greek word for equip was used for setting a broken bone, mending a fishing net, and outfitting a ship for a voyage. Pastors and teachers are like coaches. A coach doesn't play the game for the team. A coach trains the players so they can play. If you're a Christian, you're on the team. Your church needs what God has given you.

The goal, Paul says, is maturity. He wants the church to grow up into the full measure of Christ. Then they won't be like babies tossed around by waves and blown here and there by every new idea, or fooled by clever, deceitful people. Instead, speaking the truth in love, they'll grow up in every way into Christ, the head.

Speaking the truth in love is one of the most practical phrases in the Bible. Truth without love is harsh. It hurts people. Love without truth is weak. It lets people walk off a cliff. Jesus was full of both. And growing up means learning to do both at the same time.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **The Body**
>
> Paul loves the picture of the church as a body. Every part matters. Every ligament holds something together. When each part does its job, the whole body grows and builds itself up in love. A body where only the head and

mouth work is in big trouble. A church where only the pastor does anything is too.

Then Paul gets specific. You must not live like the Gentiles anymore, he says, meaning the pagans around them. Their thinking is futile, their understanding darkened, and they're cut off from God's life because their hearts have become hard. Having lost all sensitivity, they've given themselves over to every kind of impurity and greed.

That's not how you learned Christ, Paul says. You were taught to take off your old self, like a filthy set of clothes, to be made new in the attitude of your mind, and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Put Off, Put On**

The picture is changing clothes. In some churches of the following centuries, people being baptized took off their old clothes before going into the water and put on new white robes afterward. Paul's point is that following Jesus isn't just stopping bad habits. It's replacing them. You don't just stop lying; you start telling the truth. You don't just stop stealing; you start giving. Empty spaces don't stay empty.

Then Paul gives examples. Stop lying, and tell your neighbor the truth, because we belong to each other. Then he quotes Psalm 4: "In your anger do not sin." Don't let the sun go down while you're still angry, and don't give the devil a foothold.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Anger**

Paul doesn't say anger is always wrong. The NIV footnote notes that he's quoting Psalm 4:4 from the Greek translation of the Old Testament. Jesus Himself got angry at injustice. But anger is like a fire. It can warm a house or burn it down. Paul's advice is to deal with it quickly, before bedtime, before it turns into bitterness. Unresolved anger is an open door for the enemy.

Anyone who has been stealing should stop and get a job, so they'll have something to share with people in need. Notice the goal isn't just to stop taking. It's to start giving.

Don't let any rotten talk come out of your mouth, Paul says. Only say what builds others up and helps them. That includes texts, comments, group chats, and jokes at someone else's expense. Words can destroy or build. And don't grieve the Holy Spirit, the One who sealed you for the day of redemption. The Spirit is a person who can be hurt by how we treat each other.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Unwholesome Talk**
>
> The word Paul uses means rotten or decayed, like spoiled fruit or rotten fish. It's the kind of talk that makes everything around it worse: gossip, insults, crude jokes, and constant complaining. Paul's test is simple: is what you're about to say helpful for building someone up? If not, maybe don't say it, or post it.

Paul finishes the chapter with a list of things to get rid of, bitterness, rage, anger, brawling, slander, and malice, and then one of the most beautiful commands in the Bible.

KEY VERSE

Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.

Ephesians 4:32 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Paul says the Spirit has already created unity; our job is to keep it. What makes keeping unity hard in a church or friend group?
2. Are you more likely to speak truth without love, or love without truth? What would it look like to do both?
3. Is there someone you're angry with right now? What would it look like to deal with it before the sun goes down?
4. Think about your texts, posts, and comments from the last week. Would they pass Paul's test of building others up?

TRY THIS *For one day, try a words fast: before you say or post anything, ask yourself whether it's true, kind, and helpful. Notice how often you change your mind.*

CHAPTER 5

Children of Light

Ephesians 5

Paul starts chapter 5 with an amazing command: imitate God. Be like Him, the way dearly loved children copy their parents. Little kids watch everything their parents do: how they talk, walk, laugh, and react. Paul says, watch your Father. Copy Him. And the main thing to copy is love, the kind Christ showed when He gave Himself up for us.

Then Paul gets very direct about sex and greed. Among God's people, he says, there shouldn't be even a hint of sexual immorality, impurity, or greed. And no obscenity, foolish talk, or crude jokes. Instead, thanksgiving.

> BACKGROUND CHECK **Why Is Paul So Blunt?**
>
> In the Roman world, sexual behavior that Christians considered wrong was common and widely accepted, especially for men. Temple festivals, banquets, and public entertainment often included it. So when Paul tells Gentile believers to live differently, he isn't being prudish. He's saying that God's people have a new identity, and that God's design for sex, within the covenant of marriage between a husband and wife, is part of the new life. Paul links greed and sexual immorality because both treat people and things as objects to consume.

Notice that Paul puts thanksgiving as the opposite of crude talk. Gratitude and coarse joking come from two different places. One

sees people and the world as gifts. The other treats them as jokes or objects.

Don't let anyone fool you with empty words, Paul warns. You were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. So live as children of light. Light produces goodness, righteousness, and truth. Figure out what pleases the Lord. And don't take part in deeds of darkness, but expose them.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Darkness and Light**
>
> Paul doesn't say you used to be in darkness. He says you were darkness. And now you are light. It's not just about where you are. It's about who you are. Light doesn't have to try hard to shine. It shines because it's light. When you live as who you really are in Christ, people will see it.

Then Paul quotes what may be an early Christian hymn, perhaps one sung at baptisms: "Wake up, sleeper, rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you."

So, he says, be careful how you live. Not as unwise, but as wise, making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil. The phrase making the most of means buying up, like a shopper grabbing a bargain before it's gone. Every day is full of opportunities to do good. Don't waste them.

Don't get drunk on wine, Paul says, which leads to wild living. Instead, be filled with the Spirit. That's an interesting comparison. Being drunk means being under the influence of alcohol. Being filled with the Spirit means being under the influence of God. And the results are very different.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Filled with the Spirit**
>
> In Greek, be filled is a command in the present tense, which suggests something ongoing: keep on being filled. It's not a one-time experience. Paul

then describes what a Spirit-filled life looks like: speaking to one another with psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs; singing to the Lord from the heart; always giving thanks to God for everything; and submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ. Being filled with the Spirit shows up in worship, gratitude, and how we treat each other.

That last point, submitting to one another, leads into one of the most discussed passages in Paul's letters. "Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ." Mutual submission. Everyone puts others first. Then Paul applies that principle to three relationships in the household: wives and husbands, children and parents, and slaves and masters.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Household Rules**

Greek and Roman writers, like the philosopher Aristotle, wrote rules for managing a household. They addressed the male head of the house and told him how to rule over his wife, children, and slaves. Paul uses the same three relationships, but with surprising changes. He speaks directly to wives, children, and slaves, treating them as people with their own relationship to God. And he puts heavy responsibilities on husbands, fathers, and masters, limiting their power and calling them to serve.

Paul tells wives to submit to their husbands as to the Lord. In some of the oldest Greek manuscripts, verse 22 doesn't even have its own verb. It borrows submit from verse 21, so it reads something like: submitting to one another, wives to your husbands. Paul says the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church.

But then he turns to husbands, and he spends much more time on them. Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave Himself up for her. That's not about being the boss. That's about laying down your life. Jesus led by washing feet and going to the cross. Husbands should love their wives as their own bodies,

caring for them and providing for them the way Christ cares for the church.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Reading 5:21–33 Today**

Christians read this passage in different ways. Some, often called complementarians, believe husbands and wives are equal before God but have different roles, with the husband called to loving, sacrificial leadership and the wife to respecting and supporting that leadership. Others, often called egalitarians, believe Paul was working within the household structures of his day while planting seeds of equality, and that mutual submission in verse 21 is the principle for marriage today. Both views agree on the main points: husbands and wives are equally loved by God, and marriage should reflect the self-giving love of Jesus.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Never an Excuse for Abuse**

This passage has sometimes been twisted to excuse cruelty or control. That's the opposite of what it says. A husband who hurts, threatens, or controls his wife is disobeying it, not following it. Christ's love protects; it never abuses. If anyone in your home is being hurt or is afraid, that's not something you have to keep quiet about. Tell a trusted adult, a teacher, a counselor, or a pastor.

Paul quotes Genesis 2, about a man leaving his father and mother and becoming one flesh with his wife. Then he says this is a profound mystery, but he's really talking about Christ and the church. Marriage, at its best, is a living picture of how much Jesus loves His people. He ends with a summary: each husband must love his wife as himself, and each wife must respect her husband.

KEY VERSE

Follow God's example, therefore, as dearly loved children and walk in the way of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

Ephesians 5:1–2 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. What does it look like, practically, to imitate God the way a child imitates a parent?
2. Paul links gratitude and pure speech. Why do you think thankfulness changes the way people talk?
3. What's the difference between being under the influence of something else and being filled with the Spirit?
4. What do you think mutual submission looks like in a family, a friendship, or a church?

TRY THIS *Make the most of every opportunity this week. Each morning, ask God to show you one person you could encourage, help, or include, and then do it.*

CHAPTER 6

The Armor of God

Ephesians 6

Paul continues with the household relationships. Next: children and parents. Children, obey your parents in the Lord, because it's right. He quotes the commandment, Honor your father and mother, and points out that it's the first one with a promise attached: that things will go well with you and you'll enjoy long life.

That one's for you, so let's be honest. Obeying your parents isn't always easy, especially as a teenager, when you're becoming more independent and starting to see their flaws. But Paul says it's part of following Jesus. Honoring your parents means respecting them even when you disagree.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **In the Lord**
>
> Paul's words to children include the phrase in the Lord. That suggests obeying parents is part of obeying Jesus, not a replacement for it. If a parent ever asked a child to do something clearly wrong or harmful, obedience to God comes first. But in ordinary life, Paul expects children to listen to their parents, and honoring them is something you keep doing even as an adult.

Then Paul turns to fathers, and the NIV footnote says the word can also mean parents. Don't exasperate your children, he says. Don't provoke them to anger or discourage them with harshness, unfairness, or impossible expectations. Instead, bring them up in

the training and instruction of the Lord. In the Roman world, a father had nearly total power over his children. Paul limits that power and calls fathers to gentle, patient teaching.

Then Paul addresses slaves and masters. He tells slaves to obey their earthly masters sincerely, with respect, as if they were serving Christ, and not just when they're being watched. He reminds them that the Lord will reward everyone for the good they do, slave or free. Then he tells masters to treat their slaves the same way, to stop threatening them, and to remember that they have the same Master in heaven, who doesn't play favorites.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Slavery in Paul's World**

Slavery in the Roman Empire was common; by some estimates, somewhere between one in ten and one in five people was enslaved. Unlike slavery in the Americas, it wasn't based on race. People became slaves through war, debt, kidnapping, or birth, and many were eventually freed. But it was still slavery. Enslaved people could be beaten, sold, separated from their families, and sexually abused, with little protection under the law.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Does the Bible Approve of Slavery?**

Paul's words here are not an endorsement of slavery. He was writing to people who couldn't change the system, telling them how to live faithfully within it. But he also planted ideas that would eventually undermine it: that slaves and masters are equal before God, that masters answer to a higher Master, and, in Galatians 3:28 and Philemon, that a slave is a brother in Christ. Elsewhere Paul encourages slaves to gain their freedom if they can (1 Corinthians 7:21), and 1 Timothy condemns slave traders. Sadly, some later Christians twisted these verses to defend slavery. But many Christians, including leaders of the movements to end the slave trade and slavery in Britain and America, were driven by the Bible's teaching that every person bears God's image. Today, these verses are often applied to work: do your job honestly, and if you're ever in charge of others, treat them with respect.

Then Paul reaches his final word, and it's a call to battle. Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. Put on the full armor of God, so you can stand against the devil's schemes.

Why armor? Because, Paul says, our struggle isn't against flesh and blood. Our real enemies aren't people. They're the spiritual forces of evil behind the brokenness of the world. That's important. The person who hurt you, the person who disagrees with you, even the person who opposes your faith, isn't your ultimate enemy. They're someone Jesus loves and wants to rescue.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Schemes**

The word for schemes is where we get the English word method. The devil's attacks are usually not dramatic. They're strategic: a lie repeated until you believe it, a temptation that seems small, a discouragement that grows over time, a division between friends. Paul doesn't want believers to be paranoid, but he does want them to be alert.

Paul describes six pieces of armor. He may have had a Roman soldier in mind, maybe even the one he was chained to. But he was also thinking of the Old Testament. In Isaiah 59, God Himself puts on righteousness as a breastplate and salvation as a helmet. The armor Paul describes is God's own armor, which He gives to His people.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Armor, Piece by Piece**

The belt of truth held a soldier's tunic and gear in place, so he could move freely. Without truth, everything falls apart. The breastplate of righteousness protected the heart and vital organs, like living right protects you from many wounds. The shoes were a soldier's sandals, sometimes studded with nails for grip, ready for the gospel of peace, so you can stand firm and move where God sends you. The shield of faith was a large shield that could cover the whole body; some think soldiers soaked their leather-covered shields in water before battle to put out flaming arrows. Faith puts out the devil's burning lies.

> The helmet of salvation protected the head, your mind and identity. The sword of the Spirit, God's word, was a short sword for close combat, the only offensive weapon in the list. Jesus used Scripture to answer the devil when He was tempted in the wilderness.

Notice two things. First, most of the armor is defensive. The goal is to stand. Paul says stand four times in this passage. You don't have to win the war; Jesus already did that. Your job is to hold the ground He has won. Second, Paul's instructions are plural. Roman soldiers fought in formation, shields locked together. You aren't supposed to stand alone. You stand with your church.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Standing Together**
>
> Roman soldiers were trained to fight as a unit. When they locked their shields together, front and overhead, in a formation sometimes called the tortoise, they could advance under a rain of arrows. One soldier alone was vulnerable. A line of soldiers together was nearly unbreakable. The same is true for Christians. Faith is personal, but it was never meant to be private.

And then, the final weapon: prayer. Pray in the Spirit on all occasions, with all kinds of prayers and requests. Stay alert and keep praying for all of God's people. And Paul asks them to pray for him, too, not for his release, but that he'd have the right words and the courage to proclaim the gospel fearlessly. He calls himself an ambassador in chains. Ambassadors were normally protected and honored. Paul, Christ's ambassador, was chained up. But he was still on duty.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Tychicus**
>
> Paul says Tychicus will tell them all his news. Tychicus was from the province of Asia, and he traveled with Paul (Acts 20:4). He carried this letter and probably the letter to the Colossians as well. Imagine walking hundreds of miles carrying letters that would one day be read by billions of people.

Tychicus wasn't famous, but he was faithful. Paul calls him a dear brother and faithful servant. That's not a bad way to be remembered.

Paul's final words are a blessing of peace, love, and faith, and then grace for everyone who loves Jesus with an undying love. The NIV footnote offers another possible reading: grace and immortality to all who love our Lord. Either way, the letter that began with grace ends with grace.

KEY VERSE

Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power.

Ephesians 6:10 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. What's one way you could honor your parents this week, even if you disagree with them about something?
2. Paul says our struggle isn't against flesh and blood. How would it change things if you saw the people who frustrate you as people Jesus wants to rescue, not as enemies?
3. Which piece of the armor of God do you most need right now? Why?
4. Why do you think Paul ends a letter about God's power with a call to prayer?

TRY THIS *Every morning this week, as you get dressed, go through the armor of God in your mind, piece by piece, and ask God to help you stand. Then pray for one friend by name.*

THE END (AND THE BEGINNING)

Now What? The Bottom Line

You've just walked through Paul's letter to the Ephesians. At its center is one of the clearest explanations of the gospel in the whole Bible, in chapter 2. It goes from dead to alive, from far away to brought near, from strangers to family. All because of God's grace.

Here's what the Bible says, as plainly as I can put it.

1 God made you, and He chose to love you.

Paul says God planned, before the world was even created, to adopt people as His children through Jesus. You're not an accident. You're His handiwork.

2 We've all turned away.

We've all gone our own way instead of God's. The Bible calls it sin, and it separates us from God.

> *for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,* **Romans 3:23 (NIV)**

3 Sin has a real cost.

Paul doesn't say we were sick or confused. He says we were spiritually dead. And God is good, so He doesn't shrug off evil. The result of sin is death, separation from God forever.

> *For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.* **Romans 6:23 (NIV)**

4 God stepped in.

Jesus died on the cross for our sins and rose again. Because of God's huge love and mercy, He brings dead people to life.

> *But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved.* **Ephesians 2:4–5 (NIV)**

5 You can't earn it. You receive it.

Salvation isn't a reward for good behavior. It's a gift you receive by trusting Jesus. Nobody gets to brag.

> *For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast.* **Ephesians 2:8–9 (NIV)**

6 Turn and trust.

Turn from running your own life, and trust Jesus as your Savior and King. When you do, God seals you with His Spirit and brings you into His family.

> *If you declare with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.* **Romans 10:9 (NIV)**

So what do you do with that? You don't need perfect words. You can talk to God honestly, right now, wherever you are. If it helps, you could pray something like this:

> *God, I've been running my own life, and I've sinned against You. I can't fix that myself, and I can't earn Your love. I believe Jesus died for me and that You raised Him from the dead. Thank You for Your*

great love and mercy. I'm turning to You. Forgive me, make me alive, and bring me into Your family. I trust Jesus as my Savior, and I want to follow Him as my King. Fill me with Your Spirit and help me live as Your child. In Jesus' name, amen.

If You Just Said Yes

Tell someone. A parent, a youth leader, a pastor, or a Christian friend. Start there.

Read the real thing. Read Ephesians 1 to 3 again and underline everything God says you are in Christ. Then read Philippians, the next letter in the New Testament.

Find your people. Get connected to a church where the Bible is taught and Jesus is honored. You've been made part of one body, and you need the others. Ask about being baptized.

Talk to God every day. Pray in the Spirit on all occasions, Paul says. Be honest. He can handle it.

Not Sure Yet?

Not ready? That's honest, and honesty is a good place to start. Keep asking. Keep reading. Talk to someone you trust. Just don't settle for "I already know all that."

Because if Paul is right, the love of Christ is bigger than anything you've imagined, and it's worth finding out for yourself.

Grace to all who love our Lord Jesus Christ with an undying love.

Ephesians 6:24 (NIV)

PAUL'S LETTER TO THE PHILIPPIANS

The King's Unshakable Joy

Philippians, Unfiltered

For teens who think they've heard it all

BILL McLEOD

Papa Bill Books

The King's Unshakable Joy: Paul's Letter to the Philippians, Unfiltered

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All Scripture quotations in this book are from the NIV. Some are abridged, with omissions marked by ellipses; paraphrases are not placed in quotation marks.

Pronouns referring to God the Father, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit are capitalized for reverence in the author's own words. Inside Scripture quotations, capitalization and wording follow the 2011 NIV exactly.

AI Disclosure. This book was written by Bill McLeod with the assistance of artificial intelligence tools for drafting, research, and editing. All content was reviewed and approved by the author, who takes full responsibility for it. Readers are encouraged to open the Scriptures and study them for themselves.

A WORD TO THE READER

Before You Start

If you've read the earlier books in this series, you know the saying by now: "If you want to get something done, hire a teenager while they still know it all." It's been in every book. It's not leaving now.

Here's a strange fact. The happiest letter Paul ever wrote was written from prison. He was chained to a guard, waiting for a trial that could end in his execution. Some of the preachers in his city were trying to make his life harder. One of his best friends had nearly died. And yet the words joy and rejoice show up again and again, more often, for its length, than in any other letter Paul wrote.

Philippians is a thank-you note to Paul's favorite church. The believers in Philippi had sent him money and a friend to take care of him, and Paul writes back to say thanks, to update them on how he's doing, and to encourage them to stay united and keep going. Along the way, he writes some of the most loved lines in the whole Bible: about living and dying, about Jesus humbling Himself to the point of death on a cross, about pressing on toward the goal, about not being anxious, and about learning to be content.

If you've ever thought joy depends on things going your way, Philippians will mess with your head. Paul's joy didn't come from his circumstances. It came from Jesus. And he says that kind of joy is available to you too, on good days and on terrible ones.

It's only four chapters. You can read it in fifteen minutes. Read it once before you start this book, and notice how often Paul rejoices. Then come back and find out why.

How This Book Works

This book walks through all four chapters of Philippians, in order, one chapter of this book for each chapter of the letter. Because the letter is short, each chapter here goes slowly, explaining what Paul is saying, the background behind it, and what it might mean for you.

Before chapter 1, a section called Setting the Scene tells the story of the city of Philippi and how the church there began, in one of the most dramatic chapters in Acts. It also explains where Paul might have been in prison when he wrote, who Epaphroditus was, and why the Philippians sent Paul a gift. Read it first.

Each chapter ends with a Key Verse quoted word for word from the New International Version (NIV), the same translation used for every Scripture quotation in this book (pronouns for God are capitalized in the author's own words out of reverence; inside Scripture quotations, capitalization follows the NIV exactly); Real Talk questions to think through alone or argue about with friends; and a Try This challenge.

This book quotes Philippians sparingly and explains it mostly in my own words, so keep a Bible open next to it. Read each chapter of Philippians first, then the chapter here. Don't take my word for it. Take His.

FOR THE ADULTS

A Note for Parents and Youth Leaders

Thank you for putting this book in a teenager's hands. Like the earlier books in this series, on the Gospels, Acts, Romans, the Corinthian letters, Galatians, and Ephesians, it's written for readers who can smell a sermon coming a mile away. I've tried to write honestly, directly, with some humor, and with real respect for what these readers can handle.

This book follows the letter format of the earlier volumes, walking through Philippians chapter by chapter. Because the letter is short, I've quoted it sparingly and relied mostly on paraphrase and explanation, with extra background and discussion material. Wherever Scripture is quoted directly, in the chapters and in the Key Verses, the wording is from the New International Version (NIV).

Philippians raises a few questions that scholars discuss: where Paul was imprisoned when he wrote (Rome, Ephesus, and Caesarea have all been proposed); whether the letter as we have it combines two or more shorter letters; and whether 2:6–11 was an early Christian hymn that Paul quoted. I've presented these briefly and fairly, without trying to settle them.

Philippians speaks directly to issues many teenagers face: anxiety, comparison, conflict with friends, and the search for joy and contentment. I've tried to be honest that Paul's encouragement not

to be anxious is not a rebuke to those who struggle with anxiety, and that seeking help from parents, counselors, and doctors is wise and good.

The Real Talk questions are designed for discussion. They work well for a youth group, a small group, a family dinner table, or a car ride. Don't rush to the right answer. Let them wrestle. Faith that has been thought through tends to last.

My prayer is that every reader will discover the joy that doesn't depend on circumstances, and the peace of God that guards hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

Grace and peace,

Bill McLeod

Papa Bill Books

BEFORE YOU OPEN THE LETTER

Setting the Scene

A City with a Famous Name

Philippi was in Macedonia, in what is now northern Greece, about ten miles inland from the coast. It was named after Philip II, king of Macedon and father of Alexander the Great, who took over the town around 356 BC because of the gold mines in the nearby hills, and, naturally, renamed it after himself.

The city sat on the Via Egnatia, a major Roman road that ran across northern Greece, connecting the Adriatic Sea to the East. Travelers, soldiers, traders, and messengers passed through constantly.

A Little Rome

Philippi's big moment in history came in 42 BC. After Julius Caesar was assassinated, the armies of Mark Antony and Octavian (who later became Caesar Augustus, the emperor at the time Jesus was born) fought the armies of Brutus and Cassius, Caesar's assassins, on the plains outside Philippi. Antony and Octavian won. Afterward, they settled many retired Roman soldiers there, and Octavian later settled more.

Philippi became a Roman colony. That meant it was like a little piece of Rome planted in Greece. Its citizens had Roman citizenship, with all its privileges. Roman law applied. Latin was the official language, and many public inscriptions found there are in Latin, unusual for a city in Greece. People in Philippi were proud of being Roman.

That matters for reading the letter. When Paul tells the Philippians to conduct themselves in a way worthy of the gospel, the Greek word he uses is related to citizenship. And when he says our citizenship is in heaven, the Philippians would have caught the point immediately: you're a colony of heaven, living in a foreign land, representing your true home.

How the Church Began

Acts 16 tells the story. On his second missionary journey, Paul and his team were trying to figure out where to go next. Twice the Holy Spirit stopped them from going where they planned. Then, in the port of Troas, Paul had a vision in the night: a man from Macedonia begging him to come over and help them. They set sail immediately. This was the first time, as far as we know, that Paul preached the gospel in Europe.

Notice something in Acts at this point: the writer starts saying we. Luke, the author of Acts, seems to have joined Paul's team at Troas. The we sections stop in Philippi and pick up again when Paul returns there years later, so some think Luke stayed behind in Philippi to help the new church.

Lydia

Philippi doesn't seem to have had a synagogue. So on the Sabbath, Paul and his friends went outside the city gate to a river, where they expected to find a place of prayer. They found a group of women gathered there and sat down to talk with them.

One of them was Lydia, a businesswoman from the city of Thyatira, in what is now Turkey, who sold purple cloth. Purple dye was rare and expensive, worn by the wealthy and powerful, so Lydia was probably well off. She was a worshiper of God, a Gentile who

believed in the God of Israel. Acts says the Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message. She and her household were baptized, and she insisted that Paul and his team stay at her house. Her home probably became the church's first meeting place. The first known convert in Europe was a woman.

The Slave Girl

Then there was a very different woman. A slave girl followed Paul and his friends around the city for days, shouting that these men were servants of the Most High God telling people how to be saved. Acts says she had a spirit that let her predict the future, and her owners made a lot of money from her fortune-telling.

What she said was true, but Paul was troubled, perhaps because the spirit controlling her was not from God, and perhaps because she was being used. Finally, he turned and commanded the spirit, in the name of Jesus, to come out of her. It did. And her owners, realizing their income was gone, were furious. They dragged Paul and Silas to the city officials and accused them of causing trouble and promoting customs that Romans couldn't accept.

The crowd joined in. The officials had Paul and Silas stripped, beaten with rods, and thrown into prison, with their feet fastened in stocks.

The Jailer

Around midnight, Paul and Silas, bleeding and chained, were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening. Suddenly there was a violent earthquake. The prison doors flew open, and everyone's chains came loose.

The jailer woke up, saw the doors open, and drew his sword to kill himself. Under Roman law, a guard who lost his prisoners could face their punishment. But Paul shouted to him not to harm himself, because everyone was still there. The jailer rushed in, trembling, fell down before Paul and Silas, and asked, "what must I do to be saved?" They told him to believe in the Lord Jesus. That night he washed their wounds, and he and his whole household were baptized. He brought them into his home, gave them a meal, and was filled with joy.

The next morning, the officials sent word to let Paul and Silas go. But Paul revealed that they were Roman citizens who had been beaten publicly without a trial, which was illegal. The officials were alarmed, came personally to apologize, and asked them to leave the city. Paul and Silas visited Lydia's house to encourage the believers, and then left.

Think about who was in that first church: a wealthy businesswoman, a formerly enslaved fortune-teller (perhaps), and a Roman jailer with his family. Only Jesus could bring together a group like that.

Where Was Paul?

When Paul wrote Philippians, he was in chains, and he didn't know whether he would live or die. But where was he? Scholars have proposed three places.

Rome is the traditional answer. Acts 28 ends with Paul under house arrest there for two years, around AD 60 to 62. Paul mentions the palace guard (1:13) and those who belong to Caesar's household (4:22), which fits Rome well.

Ephesus is another possibility. Acts doesn't describe an imprisonment there, but Paul says in 2 Corinthians 11 that he was in prison many times, and he faced deadly danger in Ephesus. Supporters point out that Philippians describes several trips back and forth between Paul and Philippi, which would be much easier from Ephesus, a few days away, than from Rome, which was several weeks' travel. If so, the letter might date to around AD 54 or 55.

Caesarea, on the coast of Israel, is a third option. Paul was held there for two years in the palace of Herod (Acts 23:35), before being sent to Rome. Caesar's household could refer to imperial servants and officials anywhere in the empire, not only in Rome. We can't be sure, but the message of the letter is the same wherever it was written.

Epaphroditus and the Gift

The Philippians had a long history of supporting Paul. Right after he left them, they sent him money more than once while he was in Thessalonica, and again when he was in Corinth (2 Corinthians 11:9). Paul says no other church partnered with him that way. And they did it while they were poor themselves; in 2 Corinthians 8, Paul describes the churches of Macedonia giving generously out of extreme poverty.

When they heard Paul was in prison, they sent him another gift, along with a man named Epaphroditus to deliver it and to stay and help him. In the Roman world, prisoners often depended on friends and family for food and other basic needs, so this was a real lifeline.

But Epaphroditus became seriously ill and nearly died. The Philippians heard about it and were worried, and Epaphroditus was

worried that they were worried. When he recovered, Paul sent him back home, probably carrying this letter.

One Letter or More?

Some scholars think Philippians, as we have it, might combine two or three shorter letters Paul wrote to the church. They point to a sudden change at 3:1–2, where Paul says finally and then launches into a sharp warning about false teachers; to the thank-you for the gift coming near the very end, in chapter 4, which seems late; and to an early Christian leader named Polycarp, who, writing to the Philippians in the second century, mentions that Paul wrote them letters, plural.

Other scholars argue that Philippians is a single letter. They note that the word translated finally can also mean further or as for the rest, that Paul often changes tone suddenly in his letters, that many themes and words connect the different parts, and that ancient letter writers often put thanks at the end. Many readers today treat it as one letter. Either way, the whole thing is Paul, and it's all Scripture.

The Map

Chapter 1: Paul's situation in prison, his joy that the gospel is spreading, and his struggle between living and dying.

Chapter 2: A call to humility and unity, with the great hymn about Jesus humbling Himself. Updates about Timothy and Epaphroditus.

Chapter 3: A warning about those who trust in religious credentials, Paul's story of losing everything to gain Christ, and pressing on toward the goal.

Chapter 4: A plea for two women to make peace, instructions about joy, prayer, and peace, and a thank-you for the gift, with the secret of contentment.

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CHAPTER 1

To Live Is Christ

Philippians 1

Paul opens the letter with Timothy's name next to his own, and he calls them both servants of Christ Jesus. The word literally means slaves. In his other letters, Paul often reminds people that he's an apostle. Here he doesn't bother. The Philippians already trust him. He doesn't need to pull rank with friends.

He writes to all God's holy people in Philippi, along with the overseers and deacons. This is the only letter where Paul greets church leaders by their roles at the start.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Overseers and Deacons**
>
> The NIV footnote explains that deacons here are believers chosen to serve alongside the overseers, or elders, of the church in a variety of ways. Overseer translates a Greek word, episkopos, that later gave us the word bishop. Deacon comes from diakonos, which means servant. In the early church, overseers seem to have led and taught, while deacons took care of practical needs, like caring for the poor. Romans 16:1 calls a woman named Phoebe a deacon. Paul's greeting shows that even this early, the churches had some organization.

Then comes Paul's thank-you, and it's warm. He thanks God every time he thinks of them, and he prays for them with joy. That's the first mention of joy in the letter. It won't be the last. Why is he so

grateful? Because of their partnership in the gospel, from the very first day until now.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Partnership**
>
> The Greek word is koinonia, which is often translated fellowship. But it means more than hanging out after church. It was used for business partnerships, where people shared resources and risks to reach a common goal. The Philippians weren't just Paul's fans. They were his partners. They prayed for him, gave money, sent people, and suffered for the same message. That's what fellowship really means.

Then Paul says one of the most comforting things in the Bible. He's sure that God, who started a good work in them, will keep at it and finish it on the day Jesus returns. If God has started something in you, He doesn't abandon projects halfway through. You may feel like a construction zone. That's okay. The builder isn't done yet.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Under Construction**
>
> Some people feel like they have to be perfect to be real Christians. Paul says the opposite. Growth takes time. You'll make mistakes. You'll have seasons where you feel stuck. But God's commitment to finishing what He started in you is stronger than your commitment to Him. Your confidence doesn't rest on how well you're doing. It rests on who's doing the work.

Paul says he holds them in his heart, and that God knows how much he longs for them, with the very affection of Jesus. Then he tells them what he prays for them. He asks that their love would overflow more and more, with knowledge and deep insight, so they can tell what really matters and live pure and blameless lives, full of the good fruit that comes through Jesus.

Notice that Paul doesn't pray for them to feel more loving. He prays for their love to grow smarter. Love that's wise knows how to help,

when to speak, when to listen, and what's actually good for someone. Love isn't just a feeling. It's a skill you can grow in.

Now Paul updates them on his situation, and it's not what you'd expect. He wants them to know that what has happened to him, his arrest and imprisonment, has actually helped spread the gospel. Everyone in the palace guard knows he's in chains because of Christ. And other believers, seeing his courage, have become bolder about sharing their faith.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **The Palace Guard**
>
> The Greek word is praetorium. In Rome, it could refer to the Praetorian Guard, the elite soldiers who protected the emperor. But the word was also used for a governor's headquarters in a province, like Herod's palace in Caesarea, where Acts 23 says Paul was held. That's why the NIV footnote offers whole palace as another possible translation. Either way, Paul's guards were rotating through, hearing his story, and some were apparently becoming curious, or even believers.

Then Paul admits something painful. Some people are preaching about Jesus out of envy and rivalry. They're trying to make Paul look bad, maybe hoping to grab some of his influence while he's out of the picture. Others preach out of love and support him.

And Paul's response is surprising. So what? he says. As long as Jesus is being preached, he's happy about it. He isn't worried about his reputation or who gets the credit. He's thrilled that people are hearing about Jesus.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Who Gets the Credit?**
>
> It's easy to be glad when good things happen, as long as you get some of the credit. It's harder when someone you don't like gets the attention. Paul's joy didn't depend on being noticed. If you can be happy for others, even rivals, when God uses them, you've learned something many adults never do.

Paul says he'll keep rejoicing, because he knows that through their prayers and the help of the Spirit, what has happened will turn out for his deliverance. The NIV footnote says the word could also be translated vindication or salvation. Paul might mean being released from prison, or being proven right at his trial, or his final salvation with God. He may mean all of these.

His deepest hope is that he won't be ashamed but will have courage, so that Jesus will be honored through his body, whether he lives or dies. And then he writes the words this chapter is named for. For him, to live is Christ, and to die is gain.

Think about what that means. If Paul lives, he gets more time to serve Jesus, love people, and see the gospel spread. If he dies, he gets to be with Jesus, which is even better. There's no losing option. When Jesus is the center of your life, even death can't take away what matters most.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Torn Between Two**
>
> Paul honestly doesn't know which to choose. He wants to depart and be with Christ, which he says is better by far. But he thinks it's more necessary for the Philippians that he stays. Departing was a word used for a ship pulling up anchor, or soldiers taking down their tents to move on. For Paul, death wasn't the end of the journey. It was leaving for home. And he's confident that he'll stay alive for now, to help them grow and give them more reason to celebrate when he visits again.

Whatever happens, Paul says, live in a way that's worthy of the gospel. Here Paul uses a word related to citizenship, as you read in Setting the Scene. He's saying: live like citizens of the kingdom you really belong to. Then, whether he comes to see them or only hears about them, he'll know they're standing firm, united in one Spirit,

and striving side by side, like athletes on the same team, for the faith of the gospel.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Side by Side**
>
> The word Paul uses for striving together comes from athletics or the battlefield. It's the picture of teammates working together, or soldiers fighting shoulder to shoulder. The NIV footnote says the phrase in one Spirit could also mean in one spirit, meaning unity of attitude. Either way, Paul's point is that Christians are a team. Nobody wins alone.

Don't be frightened by those who oppose you, Paul says. Then he says something hard but important. It's been given to them, as a gift, not only to believe in Christ but also to suffer for Him. The Philippians were apparently facing opposition, maybe pressure from neighbors, loss of business, or trouble with local officials. Paul says they're going through the same struggle they saw him go through when he was beaten and jailed in their city, and now hear that he's still facing.

Suffering for Jesus isn't a sign that God has abandoned you. It's a sign that you belong to Him. That doesn't make it easy. But it means it's not meaningless.

KEY VERSE

For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.

Philippians 1:21 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Paul says God will finish the good work He started in you. How does that change the way you think about your failures?
2. Paul was glad Jesus was being preached, even by people who didn't like him. Why is it so hard to be happy for people we don't like?
3. If you finished the sentence For to me, to live is ..., what would honestly come next? Money, friends, sports, grades, approval?
4. Have you ever faced opposition, even small, because of your faith? How did you respond?

TRY THIS *Write down the name of someone who has been a partner to you in your faith: a friend, parent, leader, or mentor. This week, tell them thank you, and be specific about what they've meant to you.*

CHAPTER 2

The Mind of Christ

Philippians 2

Paul starts chapter 2 with a string of ifs. If being united with Christ gives you any encouragement, if His love brings you any comfort, if you share anything in the Spirit, if you have any tenderness and compassion, then make Paul's joy complete. How? By being united: having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose.

Of course, Paul knows the answer to all those ifs is yes. He's saying: since you have all these things in Christ, live like it with each other.

Then he gets specific. Don't do anything out of selfish ambition or empty pride. Instead, be humble and value other people above yourself. Don't just look out for your own interests, but also for the interests of others.

> BACKGROUND CHECK **Selfish Ambition**
>
> The Greek word Paul uses originally described people who worked for hire, and then came to mean someone who campaigns for themselves, like a politician who only cares about winning. It's the attitude that says, what's in it for me? Paul used the same word in chapter 1 for the people preaching to make trouble for him. Selfish ambition destroys teams, friendships, and churches. It's one of the most common sins, and one of the hardest to see in ourselves.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Humility**

In Philippi, a proud Roman colony, people cared a lot about status: titles, honors, positions, and being seen with the right people. Public inscriptions listed people's achievements. Humility was considered a weakness, the attitude of a slave. Paul flips that upside down. Valuing others above yourself doesn't mean thinking you're worthless. It means thinking about yourself less, and about others more.

How do you do that? Paul says: have the same mindset as Christ Jesus. And then he writes one of the most important passages in the whole New Testament.

BACKGROUND CHECK **A Hymn about Jesus**

Many scholars think verses 6 to 11 are a hymn or poem, maybe one the early Christians sang in worship. The lines have a rhythm and structure that's different from Paul's usual writing, and they fall into two halves: Jesus coming down, and God lifting Him up. Some think Paul quoted a hymn the churches already knew; others think Paul wrote it himself. If it was already in use, it means that within about twenty or thirty years of Jesus' death, Christians were singing that He was equal with God. That's one of the earliest pictures we have of what the first believers thought about Jesus.

Here's what the hymn says. Jesus was in very nature God. The NIV footnote offers another way to say it: He was in the form of God. That doesn't mean He just looked like God. It means He was truly God, with all His glory.

But He didn't think of His equality with God as something to use for His own advantage. Instead, He emptied Himself, Paul says, or made Himself nothing. He took the very nature of a servant, a slave, and became a human being.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Made Himself Nothing**

The Greek word is kenoo, which means to empty. Some Christians have taught that Jesus emptied Himself of being God when He became human. But most Christians throughout history have understood it differently. Jesus didn't stop being God. He emptied Himself by taking on something: human nature, with all its weakness, and the role of a servant. He didn't hold on to His rights. He set aside His privileges, not His divinity.

And it gets lower. As a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient, all the way to death. And not just any death, but death on a cross.

In Philippi, everyone knew what crucifixion meant. Roman citizens were normally exempt from it. Crucifixion was a punishment for slaves, rebels, and the lowest criminals, the most shameful way to die. The proud citizens of Philippi would have been shocked: the King of the universe went all the way down to the bottom of the social ladder, to a slave's death.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Ladder**

Picture a ladder of status in the Roman world. At the top: the emperor, the gods. At the bottom: slaves, and below them, crucified criminals. Most people spent their lives trying to climb up. Jesus did the opposite. He started at the very top and climbed all the way down, on purpose, for us. That's what Paul means by having the mindset of Christ.

Then the hymn turns. Therefore God exalted Him to the highest place and gave Him the name above every name. And one day, at the name of Jesus, every knee will bow, in heaven, on earth, and under the earth, and every tongue will declare that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Every Knee**

This line echoes Isaiah 45:23, where God says that before Him every knee will bow and every tongue will swear allegiance. In Isaiah, that honor belongs to the Lord, the one true God, alone. The hymn gives it to Jesus. For early Christians who believed in one God, that's an amazing claim. And for people in Philippi, where everyone was expected to honor Caesar as lord, saying Jesus is Lord was a bold, even dangerous, thing to say.

Paul draws the lesson. Since Jesus did all that, keep working out your salvation with fear and trembling, because God is the one working in you, giving you both the desire and the power to do what pleases Him.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Work Out Your Salvation**

This doesn't mean work for your salvation. Paul has spent whole letters saying we can't earn it. Work out is more like working out at the gym, or working out a math problem: bringing out what's already there. God has already saved you and put His Spirit in you. Now you live it out, carefully and seriously. And even the desire to grow comes from God. You don't do it alone.

Do everything without grumbling or arguing, Paul says. That sounds small after the hymn, but it's not. Complaining and fighting are exactly what destroys unity. Paul wants them to be blameless and pure, children of God without fault in a twisted and crooked world. He's borrowing words from Deuteronomy 32, where Moses described the grumbling Israelites in the wilderness. Paul wants the Philippians to be the opposite.

If they live that way, Paul says, they'll shine like stars in the night sky as they hold on to the word of life. In a dark world, a person who doesn't complain, gossip, or fight is noticeable. People will see the difference.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Like Stars**

In the ancient world, without electric lights, the night sky was full of stars, and travelers and sailors used them to find their way. Paul says believers shine like that. You don't have to be loud to shine. You just have to be different, in a good way, in a world that's often dark.

Paul says he's being poured out like a drink offering. In the Old Testament, and in Greek and Roman religion, a drink offering was wine poured out over a sacrifice. Paul might be hinting that he could soon be executed, his life poured out for them. And yet he says he's glad, and he wants them to be glad with him.

Then Paul talks about two friends. First, Timothy. Paul hopes to send him to Philippi soon. He says he has no one else like Timothy, who genuinely cares about them. Everyone else looks out for themselves, but Timothy has served with Paul like a son with his father.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Timothy**

Timothy was from Lystra, in Galatia. His mother was Jewish and his father was Greek (Acts 16:1). He joined Paul's team as a young man, and he was with Paul when the church in Philippi was founded. He became one of Paul's most trusted coworkers. Two books of the Bible, 1 and 2 Timothy, are letters Paul wrote to him. In 1 Timothy 4:12, Paul tells him not to let anyone look down on him because he is young. God uses young people.

Second, Epaphroditus. Paul calls him his brother, coworker, and fellow soldier, and the Philippians' messenger. He'd been sent with their gift to take care of Paul. But he got sick, so sick he almost died. God had mercy on him, Paul says, and on Paul too, sparing him grief on top of grief. Now Epaphroditus is homesick and upset because his church heard he was ill. So Paul is sending him back.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Epaphroditus**

His name comes from Aphrodite, the Greek goddess of love, so he probably came from a non-Jewish family. Paul calls him their messenger, and the Greek word is apostolos, the same word as apostle, meaning someone sent on a mission. Paul tells the church to welcome him with joy and honor people like him, because he risked his life for the work of Christ. The word for risked was a gambling term, meaning to roll the dice. Epaphroditus gambled his life for Jesus. He's one of the Bible's quiet heroes.

Notice how this chapter moves from the hymn about Jesus to real people. Timothy and Epaphroditus are examples of what the mind of Christ looks like in ordinary life. They put others first. They served. They took risks. That's the point. The mindset of Jesus isn't just for admiring. It's for living.

KEY VERSE

Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.

Philippians 2:3–4 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Where do you see selfish ambition at school, on teams, online, or in yourself?
2. Jesus went all the way down the ladder. What would it look like for you to go down a rung or two this week for someone else?
3. Why do you think grumbling and arguing are so destructive to a group?
4. Timothy and Epaphroditus were ordinary people who served faithfully. Who in your life is like them?

TRY THIS *Go one whole day without complaining, about anything. Each time you catch yourself, replace it with a thank-you, out loud or in your head. See how long you can last.*

CHAPTER 3

Pressing On

Philippians 3

Paul starts chapter 3 by saying finally, and telling them to rejoice in the Lord. He adds that he doesn't mind repeating himself, because it's good for them. (As you read in Setting the Scene, this is one of the places where some scholars think a different letter may begin, because of what comes next.)

Because suddenly, Paul's tone changes completely. Watch out for those dogs, he says, those evildoers, those mutilators of the flesh.

Whoa. Who is he talking about? Probably the same kind of teachers Paul fought in Galatians, people who told Gentile believers they needed to be circumcised and follow the law of Moses to really belong to God. We don't know if they had already arrived in Philippi, or if Paul was warning the church in advance.

> BACKGROUND CHECK **Dogs**
>
> In Paul's world, dogs weren't cute pets. Most were wild scavengers that roamed the streets and ate garbage. Calling someone a dog was a serious insult. Some Jewish people used it for Gentiles, who were considered unclean. Paul flips it around. He says the people insisting on circumcision are the real dogs. It's harsh language, aimed at false teachers who were threatening the church, not at Jewish people in general.

BACKGROUND CHECK **A Wordplay**

In Greek, the word for circumcision is peritome, meaning cutting around. The word Paul uses for mutilators is katatome, meaning cutting to pieces. It's a pun, and a sharp one. Paul is saying that circumcision done to earn status with God isn't a holy sign anymore. It's just cutting. True circumcision, he says, belongs to those who worship by God's Spirit, boast in Jesus, and don't trust in their own flesh.

Then Paul does something interesting. If anyone wants to compete on religious credentials, he says, he can win. He lists his résumé.

He was circumcised on the eighth day, as the law required, which meant he was born Jewish, not a convert. He was from the people of Israel and the tribe of Benjamin. He was a Hebrew born of Hebrews, from a family that kept its language and traditions. When it came to the law, he was a Pharisee, part of the strictest group. His zeal was so intense that he persecuted the church. And when it came to keeping the law, he says no one could find a fault in him.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Tribe of Benjamin**

Benjamin was the youngest son of Jacob, and his tribe had a proud history. Israel's first king, Saul, was from Benjamin, and Paul's Hebrew name, Saul, was probably given in his honor. When the kingdom split after Solomon, Benjamin stayed loyal to Judah and the line of David. Jerusalem itself was on Benjamin's border. For a Jewish person, being a Benjaminite was a mark of honor.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Pharisees**

The Pharisees were a Jewish group devoted to keeping God's law carefully, including the traditions about how to apply it to everyday life. They were respected by many ordinary people. In the Gospels, they often clash with Jesus, but not all Pharisees were the same. Some, like Nicodemus and Gamaliel, are presented sympathetically. Paul had studied under Gamaliel

(Acts 22:3). Paul never says being a Pharisee was evil. He says it couldn't make him right with God.

That's a pretty impressive résumé. But then Paul says all those things he once counted as gains, he now counts as losses, because of Christ. In fact, he considers everything a loss compared to the surpassing worth of knowing Jesus. He's lost everything for Him, and he considers it all garbage, so he can gain Christ.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Garbage**

The Greek word is skubala. It was used for food scraps thrown out for the dogs, or, more bluntly, for dung. Some older translations used the word dung. Paul is being deliberately shocking. His impressive religious achievements, compared to Jesus, are worth about as much as the stuff you'd scrape off your shoe.

Why would Paul say that? Because he wants to be found in Christ, not with a righteousness of his own that comes from keeping the law, but with the righteousness that comes from God through faith. The NIV footnote, as in Galatians, offers another possible translation: through the faithfulness of Christ. Either way, Paul's point is clear. He doesn't stand before God on his own record. He stands on Jesus'.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Your Résumé**

What's on your résumé? Maybe grades, sports, followers, looks, popularity, talent, or even being a good church kid who never misses youth group. None of those things are bad. But if they're what you're trusting in to make you valuable, Paul says they're garbage compared to knowing Jesus. Your worth doesn't come from your achievements. It comes from Him.

Paul's goal is to know Christ. Not just know about Him, but know Him personally. He wants to know the power of Jesus' resurrection,

and to share in His sufferings, becoming like Him in His death, so that somehow he will reach the resurrection from the dead.

That's an unusual wish list. Most people want the power, but not the suffering. Paul understood that you can't have one without the other. Following Jesus means following Him through the hard places, too, with the confidence that resurrection is on the other side.

Then Paul admits he hasn't arrived yet. He's not perfect, and he hasn't reached the goal. But he presses on to take hold of the very thing for which Jesus took hold of him. He says there's one thing he does: forgetting what's behind and straining toward what's ahead, he keeps pressing on toward the goal, to win the prize God is calling him to.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Race**

Paul pictures a runner in a race, leaning forward, straining every muscle toward the finish line. A runner who keeps looking back will slow down, or trip. The Greek world loved athletics, and races were held at festivals throughout the empire. Winners received a wreath and were honored by their cities. Paul says the prize he's running for is far better: Jesus Himself.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Forgetting What Is Behind**

Paul had plenty behind him to forget. His achievements, which could make him proud. And his failures, especially persecuting the church, which could have crushed him with guilt. Forgetting doesn't mean pretending they never happened. It means not letting them define you. Your past wins don't make you righteous, and your past failures don't disqualify you. Keep running.

Paul says that those who are mature should think this way, and if anyone sees things differently, God will make it clear to them. In the meantime, they should live up to what they've already learned.

Then he invites them to follow his example, and to pay attention to others who live the same way.

Then, with tears, Paul warns them about people who live as enemies of the cross. Their god is their stomach, he says. They brag about things they should be ashamed of, and their minds are set on earthly things. Paul may mean people who claim to be Christians but live only for pleasure. Their end, he says, is destruction.

But then Paul gives one of the best reminders in the letter. Our citizenship is in heaven, and we eagerly wait for a Savior to come from there, the Lord Jesus Christ.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Citizens of Heaven**
>
> In Philippi, Roman citizenship was a huge deal. It gave you legal rights, protection, and status. Paul himself was a Roman citizen and had used that fact to protect the church in Philippi (Acts 16:37). But he reminds them that their true citizenship is somewhere else. Just as Philippi was a colony of Rome, the church is a colony of heaven. And just as the emperor was called savior and lord, Paul says the true Savior and Lord is Jesus, and He's coming.

When He comes, Paul says, Jesus will transform our weak, mortal bodies to be like His glorious, resurrected body, by the same power that lets Him bring everything under His control. The Christian hope isn't floating on clouds as ghosts. It's resurrection, new bodies, and a renewed creation.

KEY VERSE

I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.

Philippians 3:14 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. What's on your résumé that you're tempted to trust in to feel valuable?
2. Paul wants to know the power of the resurrection and share in Christ's sufferings. Why do you think they go together?
3. Is there something behind you, a success or a failure, that you need to stop letting define you?
4. What does it mean to you that your citizenship is in heaven? How should it change the way you live now?

TRY THIS *Write your own résumé: everything you're tempted to be proud of. Then, across the top, write the words "the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord." Pray, and give it all to Him.*

CHAPTER 4

The Secret of Contentment

Philippians 4

Paul begins chapter 4 with a burst of affection. He calls the Philippians his brothers and sisters, the people he loves and longs for, his joy and crown. So, he says, stand firm in the Lord.

Then he names names. He pleads with two women, Euodia and Syntyche, to agree with each other in the Lord. Apparently they had a disagreement, and it was serious enough that Paul heard about it in prison.

> BACKGROUND CHECK **Euodia and Syntyche**
>
> We don't know what their disagreement was about. But we do know they were important. Paul says they fought side by side with him for the gospel, along with Clement and his other coworkers, whose names are in the book of life. These weren't troublemakers. They were leaders, probably in house churches. Their names have meanings: Euodia means something like good journey, and Syntyche means something like good fortune. Ironically, their relationship was on a rough road.

Notice how Paul handles the conflict. He doesn't take sides. He pleads with each one, separately, using the same word twice. And he asks someone he calls his true companion to help them reconcile. We don't know who that was. Some think the Greek word, syzygos, was actually a person's name. Others think it was Luke, or

Epaphroditus, or a church leader. Whoever it was, Paul believed conflict in the church needs help, not gossip.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Conflict Between Christians**
>
> Even good Christians disagree, sometimes strongly. Paul doesn't pretend it doesn't happen. But he doesn't let it slide either, because disunity damages the whole church. If you're in a conflict with another believer, remember that you're on the same team. Your names are written in the same book. Ask someone wise to help you work it out.

Then Paul says something he's been saying all letter, this time twice. Rejoice in the Lord always. I'll say it again: Rejoice!

Always? Even in prison? Even in conflict? Even in sickness? Yes, but notice the words in the Lord. Paul isn't telling them to pretend everything's fine or to feel happy all the time. He's telling them to find their joy in Jesus, who doesn't change, even when everything else does.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Joy versus Happiness**
>
> Happiness usually depends on what happens. When things go well, you're happy. When they don't, you're not. Joy, in the Bible, is deeper. It's a settled gladness that comes from knowing God is with you and for you. You can have joy and still cry. Paul wrote this letter in chains, with friends turning against him and possible execution ahead. His joy didn't ignore his circumstances. It was bigger than them.

Let your gentleness be evident to everyone, Paul says. The Lord is near. That could mean He's close to you right now, or that He's coming back soon. Either way, it's a reason not to fight for your own way.

And then come some of the most loved verses in the Bible. Don't be anxious about anything. Instead, in every situation, pray. Tell God what you need, and thank Him. And God's peace, which is beyond

anything you can understand, will guard your heart and mind in Christ Jesus.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Guard**

The word Paul uses for guard is a military word. It describes soldiers standing watch over a city. Philippi was a city full of retired Roman soldiers, and there were probably still soldiers stationed there. Paul says God's peace is like a garrison of soldiers posted around your heart and mind, keeping out the things that would attack them.

BACKGROUND CHECK **What about Anxiety?**

Some people read do not be anxious about anything and feel even worse, because they struggle with anxiety and can't just turn it off. Paul isn't scolding people who feel anxious. He's inviting them to bring their worries to God. Anxiety can also be a real health issue, like asthma or diabetes. Getting help from parents, a counselor, or a doctor isn't a lack of faith. God often works through people. Prayer and help go together.

Paul then tells them what to think about. Whatever is true, noble, right, pure, lovely, admirable, excellent, or worthy of praise, think about those things. What you fill your mind with shapes who you become. And whatever they have learned, received, or heard from him, or seen in him, they should put into practice. Then the God of peace will be with them.

BACKGROUND CHECK **What Are You Thinking About?**

Paul's list sounds a lot like lists of virtues written by Greek philosophers, which the Philippians might have recognized. He's saying that whatever is truly good and beautiful, wherever you find it, is worth your attention. Think about what you watch, scroll through, and listen to every day. Does it pass Paul's test? You don't have to cut out everything fun. But you are what you think about.

Finally, Paul gets to the thank-you. He rejoices that they've shown their concern for him again. They always cared, he says, but didn't have a chance to show it. And then he adds that he isn't saying this because he needs anything. He's learned to be content, whatever his circumstances.

He knows what it's like to have almost nothing, and what it's like to have plenty. He's learned the secret of being content in every situation, whether he's well fed or hungry, has plenty or has nothing. And what's the secret? He can do all this through Jesus, who gives him strength.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Content**

The Greek word Paul uses was a favorite of the Stoic philosophers. It meant self-sufficient, not needing anything or anyone outside yourself. The Stoics thought you could reach that by training yourself not to care about anything. Paul uses the word, but changes its meaning. He isn't self-sufficient. He's Christ-sufficient. His contentment doesn't come from not caring. It comes from Jesus, who gives him strength.

BACKGROUND CHECK **I Can Do All This**

Philippians 4:13 might be one of the most quoted verses in sports. You'll see it on shirts, eye black, and locker room walls. But in context, Paul isn't talking about winning games. He's talking about being content when he's hungry, in prison, or has nothing. The verse is less about doing great things and more about surviving hard ones. Jesus gives you strength not just to win, but to lose well, to go without, and to keep trusting.

Still, Paul says, it was good of them to share in his troubles. He reminds them that they were the only church that supported him when he first left Macedonia, and that they sent him help again and again in Thessalonica. He doesn't want their gifts for his own sake. He wants them to be blessed, like money credited to their account.

He's received everything Epaphroditus brought, and he has more than enough. Their gifts, he says, are a fragrant offering, a sacrifice that pleases God. Every time you give to help someone serving God, you're not just helping a person. You're worshiping God.

And then Paul makes a promise. My God will meet all your needs according to the riches of His glory in Christ Jesus. Notice he says needs, not wants. And notice it comes right after the Philippians had given generously. They gave to meet Paul's needs, and God would meet theirs.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Caesar's Household**

In his final greetings, Paul mentions that all God's people send greetings, especially those in Caesar's household. That doesn't mean the emperor's family had become Christians. Caesar's household included thousands of enslaved people and freed workers who served the emperor as administrators, clerks, and servants, in Rome and around the empire. The gospel had reached right into the emperor's own staff. For the Philippians, proud of their Roman connections, that would have been exciting news.

Paul ends with grace, as he began. The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. The NIV footnote says some manuscripts don't include the final Amen. But either way, the letter that began with joy ends with grace.

KEY VERSE

Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Philippians 4:6–7 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Is there someone you're in conflict with? What would it look like to be of the same mind in the Lord with them?
2. What's the difference between joy and happiness in your own experience?
3. What are you anxious about right now? What would it look like to bring it to God, with thanksgiving?
4. Paul learned to be content with little or with much. Which is harder for you?

TRY THIS *Make a worry list and a thank-you list side by side. Pray through both. Then share one worry with someone you trust, a parent, friend, or counselor, so you're not carrying it alone.*

THE END (AND THE BEGINNING)

Now What? The Bottom Line

You've just walked through Paul's letter to the Philippians. At its heart is a song about Jesus: the One who had every right to glory, but who came down, served, and died, so that He could lift us up.

Here's what the Bible says, as plainly as I can put it.

1 God made you, and He wants you to know Him.

Paul says nothing compares to the surpassing worth of knowing Jesus. You were made for that relationship.

2 We've all turned away.

We've all gone our own way instead of God's. The Bible calls it sin, and it separates us from God.

> *for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,* **Romans 3:23 (NIV)**

3 Sin has a real cost.

God is good, so He doesn't shrug off evil. The Bible says the result of sin is death, separation from God forever.

> *For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.* **Romans 6:23 (NIV)**

4 Jesus came all the way down.

The Son of God became a human being, served, and died on a cross for our sins. Then God raised Him and gave Him the name above every name.

> *And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death— even death on a cross!* **Philippians 2:8 (NIV)**

5 You can't earn it. You receive it.

Paul gave up all his religious achievements, because the only righteousness that counts is the one God gives to those who trust Jesus.

> *For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast.* **Ephesians 2:8–9 (NIV)**

6 Turn and trust.

Turn from running your own life, and trust Jesus as your Savior and King. He began a good work, and He'll finish it.

> *If you declare with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.* **Romans 10:9 (NIV)**

So what do you do with that? You don't need perfect words. You can talk to God honestly, right now, wherever you are. If it helps, you could pray something like this:

> *God, I've been running my own life, and I've sinned against You. I can't fix that myself. I believe Jesus came down, humbled Himself, and died on the cross for me, and that You raised Him from the dead.*

I'm turning to You. Forgive me. I trust Jesus as my Savior, and I want to follow Him as my King. Thank You for starting a good work in me. Give me Your joy and Your peace. In Jesus' name, amen.

If You Just Said Yes

Tell someone. A parent, a youth leader, a pastor, or a Christian friend. Start there.

Read the real thing. Read Philippians straight through, and circle every time you see joy or rejoice. Then read Colossians, the next letter in the New Testament.

Find your people. Get connected to a church where the Bible is taught and Jesus is honored. Paul called the Philippians his partners. You need partners too. Ask about being baptized.

Talk to God every day. Bring Him everything, with thanksgiving. Be honest. He can handle it.

Not Sure Yet?

Not ready? That's honest, and honesty is a good place to start. Keep asking. Keep reading. Talk to someone you trust. Just don't settle for "I already know all that."

Because if Paul is right, there's a joy that no prison can lock up, and it's worth finding out for yourself.

Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!

Philippians 4:4 (NIV)

PAUL'S LETTER TO THE COLOSSIANS

The King Above Everything

Colossians, Unfiltered

For teens who think they've heard it all

BILL McLEOD

Papa Bill Books

The King Above Everything: Paul's Letter to the Colossians, Unfiltered

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All Scripture quotations in this book are from the NIV. Some are abridged, with omissions marked by ellipses; paraphrases are not placed in quotation marks.

Pronouns referring to God the Father, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit are capitalized for reverence in the author's own words. Inside Scripture quotations, capitalization and wording follow the 2011 NIV exactly.

AI Disclosure. This book was written by Bill McLeod with the assistance of artificial intelligence tools for drafting, research, and editing. All content was reviewed and approved by the author, who takes full responsibility for it. Readers are encouraged to open the Scriptures and study them for themselves.

A WORD TO THE READER

Before You Start

If you've read the earlier books in this series, you know the saying by now: "If you want to get something done, hire a teenager while they still know it all." It's been in every book. It's not leaving now.

Colossians was written to a small church in a small town that Paul had never even visited. It's only four chapters long. But it contains one of the biggest, most mind-stretching descriptions of Jesus anywhere in the Bible.

Someone was telling the Christians in Colossae that Jesus was a good start, but if they really wanted to go deeper, they needed more: secret knowledge, special visions, strict rules about food and holidays, maybe even the help of angels and spiritual powers. Paul's answer is that nothing is missing. Jesus is the image of the invisible God. Everything was made through Him and for Him. He holds the universe together. And if you have Him, you have everything.

You live in a world full of offers to go deeper, level up, or find the missing piece: a new diet, a new routine, a new influencer, a new spiritual practice, a new set of rules that will finally make you feel complete. Colossians says you're already complete in Christ. You don't need Jesus plus something. You need more of Jesus.

And then, as usual, Paul gets practical. If Jesus is above everything, then He gets a say in everything: what you set your mind on, how you treat people, how you talk, how you work, and how you live at home. Let's dive in.

How This Book Works

This book walks through all four chapters of Colossians, in order, one chapter of this book for each chapter of the letter. Each one explains what Paul is saying in plain language and adds background about the town of Colossae, the people in the letter, and the ideas Paul was answering.

Before chapter 1, a section called Setting the Scene introduces Colossae and its neighbors, the man who started the church, the mysterious false teaching Paul was fighting, and how this letter is connected to two other books of the Bible, Philemon and Ephesians. Read it first.

Each chapter ends with a Key Verse quoted word for word from the New International Version (NIV), the same translation used for every Scripture quotation in this book (pronouns for God are capitalized in the author's own words out of reverence; inside Scripture quotations, capitalization follows the NIV exactly); Real Talk questions to think through alone or argue about with friends; and a Try This challenge.

This book quotes Colossians sparingly and explains it mostly in my own words, so keep a Bible open next to it. Read each chapter of Colossians first, then the chapter here. Don't take my word for it. Take His.

FOR THE ADULTS

A Note for Parents and Youth Leaders

Thank you for putting this book in a teenager's hands. Like the earlier books in this series, on the Gospels, Acts, and Paul's letters from Romans to Philippians, it's written for readers who can smell a sermon coming a mile away. I've tried to write honestly, directly, with some humor, and with real respect for what these readers can handle.

This book follows the letter format of the earlier volumes, walking through Colossians chapter by chapter. Because the letter is short, I've quoted it sparingly and relied mostly on paraphrase and explanation, with extra background and discussion material. Wherever Scripture is quoted directly, in the chapters and in the Key Verses, the wording is from the New International Version (NIV).

Colossians raises some questions that scholars discuss: what exactly the false teaching in Colossae was; whether 1:15–20 was an early Christian hymn; how Colossians relates to Ephesians and Philemon; and whether Paul wrote it himself or a coworker or later follower wrote in his name. I've presented these briefly and fairly. The letter presents itself as Paul's, and I refer to the author as Paul throughout.

The household instructions in 3:18–4:1, to wives and husbands, children and parents, and slaves and masters, are handled briefly

and with balance, in the same way as in the Ephesians volume of this series. I note how they compare with Roman household rules, how Christians hold different views on marriage roles, that these words never require anyone to accept abuse, and that the Bible's words to slaves are not an endorsement of slavery. You may want to talk these sections through together.

The Real Talk questions are designed for discussion. They work well for a youth group, a small group, a family dinner table, or a car ride. Don't rush to the right answer. Let them wrestle. Faith that has been thought through tends to last.

My prayer is that every reader will see how big Jesus really is, and find that in Him they already have everything they need.

Grace and peace,

Bill McLeod

Papa Bill Books

BEFORE YOU OPEN THE LETTER

Setting the Scene

A Town in the Valley

Colossae was a town in the Lycus River valley, in the region of Phrygia, in the Roman province of Asia, in what is now southwestern Turkey. It was about a hundred miles east of Ephesus, along a major road that ran from the coast into the interior.

Centuries earlier, Colossae had been an important city. Greek historians writing about the Persian wars called it a great city. It was famous for its wool, especially a dark red dyed wool that took its name from the town. But by Paul's time, Colossae had been overshadowed by two neighbors, and it was probably a fairly small, ordinary town. It may be the least important city Paul ever wrote a letter to.

Today, Colossae is a mound of earth that has never been fully excavated. Archaeologists hope to dig there someday.

The Neighbors

Just ten or so miles away was Laodicea, the leading city of the valley. It was wealthy, a center of banking, textiles (especially soft black wool), and medicine, with a famous medical school. When an earthquake damaged the area around AD 60, the Roman historian Tacitus says Laodicea rebuilt itself from its own resources without help from Rome. That's the church Jesus later tells, in Revelation 3, that it thinks it's rich but is actually poor, and that it's lukewarm.

Across the valley was Hierapolis, famous for its hot mineral springs, which people visited for healing. The springs left brilliant white terraces of mineral deposits on the hillside, still a tourist attraction today, called Pamukkale, or cotton castle. Some think Laodicea's lukewarm water, piped in from springs to the south, is behind Jesus' words in Revelation.

Paul mentions both cities in Colossians. There were churches in all three towns, and they seem to have been closely connected.

Epaphras

Paul didn't start the church in Colossae. He says that many of the believers there had never met him in person. The church was started by a man named Epaphras, who was from Colossae himself.

How did that happen? Acts 19 says that while Paul was teaching in Ephesus for two years, the message spread throughout the province of Asia. Epaphras may have traveled to Ephesus, heard Paul, believed, and then gone home to tell his own town, and probably Laodicea and Hierapolis too.

When Paul wrote Colossians, Epaphras was with him, apparently having traveled to report on how the church was doing. In the letter to Philemon, Paul even calls him a fellow prisoner. Paul describes him as someone who prays hard for the churches in the valley. He's a reminder that God often spreads His message not through famous people but through ordinary people going home and telling their friends.

The Colossian Problem

Something was threatening the church in Colossae, but Paul never names it or explains it fully. We have to piece it together from clues

in chapter 2. Paul warns against hollow and deceptive philosophy based on human tradition and the elemental spiritual forces of the world. He mentions rules about food and drink, religious festivals, New Moon celebrations, and the Sabbath. He mentions false humility, the worship of angels, people who brag about visions they've seen, and harsh treatment of the body, with rules like do not handle, do not taste, do not touch.

Scholars have offered several explanations. Some think it was a kind of Jewish mysticism, where people practiced strict rules and fasting to have visions of heaven and join the angels in worship. (The phrase worship of angels could mean worshiping angels, or joining in the worship that angels offer.) Others think it was an early form of the ideas later called Gnosticism, which taught that spiritual knowledge is the key to salvation and the physical world is bad. Others think it was mainly local folk religion, where people called on angels and spirits for protection; there is later evidence of angel veneration in the area. Many think it was a mix of all of these. Some even suggest it wasn't an organized false teaching at all, just pressure from the surrounding culture.

Whatever it was, the message seems to have been that Jesus wasn't enough. You needed something more. Paul's response is to show that Jesus is more than enough.

Philemon and Onesimus

Colossians is closely connected to the short letter to Philemon. Philemon seems to have been a wealthy Christian in Colossae, with a church meeting in his house. Onesimus was an enslaved man from Philemon's household who had left, perhaps running away, perhaps going to ask Paul for help after a conflict. Somehow, he

ended up with Paul, became a Christian, and became like a son to Paul.

Paul sent Onesimus back to Colossae with Tychicus, carrying both letters. In Colossians 4:9, Paul calls Onesimus a faithful and dear brother, who is one of you. The same people are mentioned in both letters, including Archippus, Epaphras, Mark, Luke, Aristarchus, and Demas. It's helpful to remember Onesimus when reading what Colossians says about slaves and masters. Everyone in the church would have known who was standing in the room as the letter was read.

Colossians and Ephesians

Colossians and Ephesians are like twins. Both were carried by Tychicus. Both describe Jesus as head of the body, the church. Both talk about putting off the old self and putting on the new. Both have household instructions. Some sentences are almost word for word the same, and a large share of Colossians has a parallel in Ephesians.

Most scholars think Colossians was written first, and that Ephesians develops its ideas for a wider audience. Colossians 4:16 also mentions a letter from Laodicea, which the Colossians were supposed to read. We don't know what that letter was. It may have been lost, or, as some suggest, it may be the letter we know as Ephesians, if Ephesians was a circular letter passed around the churches of Asia.

Who Wrote It?

Colossians says it's from Paul and Timothy, and it ends with Paul writing a greeting in his own hand. The early church accepted it as Paul's.

Some modern scholars think it was written by someone else, possibly after Paul's death. They point to differences in style, with long, flowing sentences; some words and ideas not found in Paul's undisputed letters; and a greater emphasis on believers already being raised with Christ. Others suggest a middle view: that Timothy, listed as co-sender, may have written the letter with Paul's approval while Paul was in prison.

Many scholars, though, hold that Paul wrote it. They note that the style differences are smaller than in Ephesians, that the subject matter explains the language, and that the detailed personal connections with Philemon, a letter almost everyone agrees Paul wrote, make most sense if the same man wrote both at the same time. In this book, I follow the letter's own claim.

When and Where?

Paul was in prison when he wrote. If, as traditionally thought, he was in Rome, the letter dates to around AD 60 to 62. Some scholars think Paul wrote from an earlier imprisonment in Ephesus, around AD 54 to 55, which would explain how easily Onesimus and Epaphras traveled between Paul and Colossae. Either way, it's one of the Prison Letters, along with Ephesians, Philippians, and Philemon.

The Map

Chapter 1: Paul's thanks and prayer for the Colossians, the great hymn about Christ, and Paul's mission to make the mystery known: Christ in you.

Chapter 2: Paul warns against teaching that adds to Jesus. You're complete in Him. Your debt is canceled, the powers are defeated, and you don't need to live by human rules.

Chapter 3: Set your hearts and minds on things above. Put off the old self and put on the new, especially love. Then instructions for life at home.

Chapter 4: Prayer, wise words for outsiders, and a long list of friends and coworkers.

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CHAPTER 1

The Image of the Invisible God

Colossians 1

Paul opens the letter with his name and Timothy's, and he writes to the believers in Colossae, calling them holy and faithful, his brothers and sisters in Christ. Then, as usual, he thanks God for them. He and Timothy have heard about the Colossians' faith in Jesus and their love for all God's people. And Paul says that faith and love grow out of hope, the hope that's stored up for them in heaven.

> BACKGROUND CHECK **Faith, Hope, and Love**
>
> Paul often groups these three together. In 1 Corinthians 13, he says they're the three things that last. Here he shows how they connect. Hope is like the root: knowing that God has a future waiting for you. Faith grows from that hope, trusting God now. And love is the fruit: because you're secure in God's future, you're free to care for others today. When you know your future is safe, you don't have to grab and protect everything for yourself.

Paul says the good news is spreading and producing fruit all over the world, just as it has among the Colossians since they first heard it and understood God's grace. And they heard it from Epaphras, whom Paul calls a dear fellow servant (the NIV footnote says the word can mean slave) and a faithful minister of Christ.

> BACKGROUND CHECK **Bearing Fruit and Growing**
>
> Paul uses the same words God used in Genesis 1, when He told the first humans to be fruitful and increase. The gospel is doing what God always

wanted for His world: spreading life everywhere. In just about thirty years, the message about Jesus had gone from a small group of followers in Jerusalem to towns like Colossae, hundreds of miles away, and on to Rome. It's still growing today.

Then Paul tells them how he prays for them. Since the day he heard about them, he hasn't stopped asking God to fill them with a clear understanding of what God wants, with the wisdom and understanding the Spirit gives. Why? So they can live in a way that honors the Lord and delights Him.

Paul describes what that kind of life looks like. Producing good fruit in all kinds of good deeds. Getting to know God more. Being strengthened with His power, so they'll have endurance and patience. And joyfully thanking the Father, who has made them fit to share what belongs to God's people, living in His light.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Qualified**

Some people in Colossae were apparently saying that you had to qualify for the deeper spiritual life through special rules, visions, or knowledge. Paul says the Father has already qualified you. You didn't earn it. He did it. You're already in. That theme runs through the whole letter.

Then Paul describes what God has done in two vivid pictures. God pulled us out from under the power of darkness and moved us into the kingdom of His beloved Son. In the ancient world, when one empire conquered another, it sometimes moved whole populations from one land to another. Paul says God has done that with us. He has transferred us out of the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of His Son. You have a new King and a new homeland. And in Jesus, we've been set free and forgiven.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Two Kingdoms**

Paul doesn't say we were in a slightly dim kingdom and moved to a brighter one. He says darkness and light. There are only two kingdoms, and every person belongs to one or the other. The good news is that the move doesn't depend on you being strong enough to escape. God did the rescuing.

Now Paul writes one of the most amazing passages in the Bible. Many scholars think verses 15 to 20 were an early Christian hymn, or that Paul wrote them in a poetic style. They fall into two parts. The first part is about Jesus and creation. The second is about Jesus and the new creation, the church and the reconciling of everything to God.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Christ Hymn**

Like Philippians 2:6–11, this passage has a poetic rhythm and structure, with repeated words and parallel lines. In the first stanza, Jesus is the firstborn over all creation; in the second, He's the firstborn from the dead. Some think Paul quoted a hymn the churches already sang; others think he wrote it himself. Either way, it shows that very early, Christians worshiped Jesus as the Creator and Lord of everything. This passage was likely written within about thirty years of Jesus' death and resurrection.

Here's what it says. Jesus is the visible image of the God no one can see. Nobody can see God. But if you want to know what God is like, look at Jesus. He's the exact picture of the invisible God, God made visible.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Image**

The Greek word is eikon, where we get the word icon. On your phone, an icon represents an app. But Paul means much more. In the ancient world, an image of a king, like his face on a coin or his statue in a city, represented his presence and authority. Genesis says humans were made in God's image. Jesus is the image of God in a perfect, complete way. He doesn't just represent God. He shows us God.

Then the hymn calls Jesus the firstborn over all creation. That doesn't mean Jesus was the first thing God created. The next verse says everything was created by Him. In the Bible, firstborn often means the one with the highest rank, the heir. In Psalm 89, God says He will make David His firstborn, the most exalted of the kings of the earth, even though David was the youngest son in his family. Jesus is the firstborn in the sense of being first in rank and the heir of everything.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **A Famous Debate**
>
> In the fourth century, a church leader named Arius taught that Jesus was the first and greatest being God created, but not truly God. He used verses like this one. The church gathered at the Council of Nicaea in AD 325 and rejected his view, declaring that Jesus is fully God, of the same being as the Father. The Nicene Creed, still recited in many churches today, comes from that debate. The very next verses in Colossians, which say all things were created through Jesus, were central to the discussion.

Everything was created in Him, the hymn says, heavenly and earthly things, seen and unseen, including thrones, powers, rulers, and authorities. Remember that people in Colossae were worried about spiritual powers and angels. Paul says Jesus made them all. Whatever powers exist, they're creatures, not equals. Everything was created through Jesus and for Him.

Think about that. Galaxies and atoms, mountains and oceans, sharks and hummingbirds, and you. Everything exists because of Jesus and for Jesus. You weren't made for yourself. You were made for Him.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Hold Together**
>
> The hymn says that in Jesus all things hold together. Scientists can describe the forces that hold atoms and galaxies together. But Paul says behind every

law of physics is a Person. If Jesus stopped holding the universe together, it would fall apart. That's a big claim. It also means that when your life feels like it's falling apart, the One who holds the stars in place is holding you.

The second part of the hymn turns from creation to the church. Jesus is head of His body, which is the church. He's the beginning, the first to be born out of death, the first to rise to a resurrection life that will never die again, so that He might have first place in everything.

It pleased God for all His fullness to live in Jesus. And through Jesus, God chose to bring everything back to Himself, on earth and in heaven, making peace by the blood Jesus shed on the cross.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Fullness**

The Greek word is pleroma. Later, some groups called Gnostics used it for the whole collection of spiritual beings between God and the world. If the false teachers in Colossae were using similar ideas, Paul may be taking their favorite word and applying it to Jesus. You don't need to climb a ladder of spiritual beings to reach God. All of God's fullness lives in Jesus.

Then Paul applies the hymn to the Colossians. Once, he says, you were alienated from God, enemies in your minds, shown by your evil behavior. But now God has reconciled you through Christ's physical body, through His death, to present you holy, spotless, and free from accusation. Paul emphasizes Christ's physical body, maybe because the false teachers looked down on physical things. Jesus saved us not by escaping the physical world, but by dying in a real body.

There's a condition, though. You have to keep going in your faith, steady and solid, not moving away from the hope of the gospel. Paul isn't saying you could lose your salvation by accident. He's warning

them not to be pulled away by the false teaching. The way to stay secure is to stay rooted in the gospel you first heard.

Then Paul talks about his own suffering, and he says something puzzling. He rejoices in what he's suffering for them, and he fills up in his body what is still lacking in Christ's afflictions, for the church's sake.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **What Is Lacking?**
>
> This doesn't mean Jesus' death wasn't enough to save us. Paul has just said that Jesus made complete peace through the cross. Most interpreters think Paul means that Jesus' people still suffer as they spread His message, and that Paul is taking his share. Jesus told Paul, when he was converted, that persecuting the church was persecuting Him (Acts 9:4). When the church suffers, Christ suffers with it. Paul is glad to carry some of that suffering so the gospel can reach others.

Paul says God made him a servant of the church, to make the word of God fully known: the mystery that was hidden for ages but is now revealed. And what is the mystery? Paul says it's Christ living in you, your hope of future glory.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Christ in You**
>
> In Ephesians, the mystery is that Gentiles are now included in God's people. Here, Paul puts it even more personally. The mystery is that the Christ who created the universe now lives in ordinary people, including Gentiles from a small town in Phrygia. And His presence in you is the guarantee of the glory to come. You don't need a secret vision to find God. If you belong to Jesus, He's already living in you.

That's why Paul proclaims Jesus, warning and teaching every person as wisely as he can, so he can present every person mature in Christ. Notice the word everyone, three times. The false teachers seemed to think only a special group could reach spiritual maturity.

Paul says it's for everyone. And to reach that goal, he works hard, with all the energy Jesus powerfully gives him.

KEY VERSE

He is before all things, and in him all things hold together.

Colossians 1:17 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Paul says Jesus is the image of the God no one can see. If someone asked you what God is like, what would you say about Jesus?
2. Everything was created through Jesus and for Him, including you. What difference does it make to know you were made for Him?
3. Have you ever felt like your life was falling apart? How does it help to know Jesus holds everything together?
4. Paul says the mystery is Christ in you. What does that mean to you?

TRY THIS *Go outside tonight and look at the sky, or look up a picture of a galaxy. Then read Colossians 1:15–20 slowly and thank Jesus for holding it all together, and for holding you.*

CHAPTER 2

Rooted in Him

Colossians 2

Paul begins chapter 2 by telling the Colossians how hard he's working for them, and for the believers in Laodicea, and for everyone who has never met him in person. He wants them to be encouraged, united in love, and to have full understanding, so they'll know the mystery of God, which is Christ. All the treasures of wisdom and knowledge are hidden in Him.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Hidden Treasures**
>
> The false teachers in Colossae probably claimed to have secret knowledge, available only to those who went deeper. Paul says the real treasure isn't hidden in secret rituals or visions. It's hidden in Christ. And it's not hidden from you. It's hidden in Him, like treasure in a field, waiting to be discovered by anyone who follows Him. If you want wisdom, you don't need a secret code. You need Jesus.

Paul says he's telling them this so that no one can fool them with smooth, persuasive arguments. Although he's not there in person, he's with them in spirit, and he's delighted to see how disciplined and firm their faith is. The church wasn't falling apart yet. Paul wanted to keep it that way.

Then Paul gives them the main instruction of the letter. Just as you received Jesus as Lord, keep living in Him, with deep roots in Him,

built up and made strong in what you were taught, and full to overflowing with thanks.

That's simple, but powerful. You don't start with Jesus and then move on to something more advanced. You keep going deeper into the same Jesus you started with. The way you begin the Christian life, by trusting Him, is the way you continue it.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Rooted and Built Up**

Paul mixes two pictures. A tree with deep roots can survive storms and drought. A building with a strong foundation can survive earthquakes, something people in the Lycus valley knew all about. Paul wants the Colossians to be both: deeply rooted and solidly built, so when strange teachings blow through, they won't be knocked over.

Then Paul warns them. Make sure nobody takes you captive through hollow, deceptive philosophy resting on human traditions and the world's elemental spiritual forces, instead of on Christ. The picture is of someone being kidnapped and carried off as a prisoner of war.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Philosophy**

Paul isn't against thinking or asking hard questions. He was a brilliant thinker himself. The word philosophy simply means love of wisdom. Paul is warning against a particular kind of teaching that sounded deep but was empty, built on human ideas rather than on Christ. Any idea, however impressive, that pulls you away from Jesus is hollow. Any idea that leads you deeper into Him is worth exploring.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Elemental Spiritual Forces**

The NIV footnote says this phrase could also be translated the basic principles, which is how it appears in Galatians 4. The Greek word, stoicheia, could mean the ABCs, the basic elements of the universe, or spiritual beings connected to the stars and elements. Many people in the ancient world

believed their lives were controlled by these forces. Paul says Christ rules over every power, so believers don't need to fear them or try to please them.

Then comes the heart of Paul's argument. Everything God is, His whole fullness, lives in Christ in a human body. And in Christ, you yourself have been filled. Jesus rules over every power and authority.

Read that again. Everything God is lives in Jesus, in a real human body. And because you're in Jesus, you're complete. Not almost complete. Not complete if you follow extra rules. Complete. You don't need Jesus plus something. You need Jesus.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Complete**

Our culture constantly tells you you're missing something. Ads promise that a product will finally make you happy. Social media shows you what everyone else has. Even religious people sometimes suggest you need a special experience or the right set of rules to be a real Christian. Paul says if you're in Christ, you're already complete. That doesn't mean you're done growing. It means nothing essential is missing.

Paul then explains what happened when they came to Christ, using pictures. They were circumcised, he says, but not by human hands. Christ removed their old self, ruled by the flesh. (The NIV footnote explains that flesh here means the sinful state of human beings.) They were buried with Jesus in baptism, and raised with Him through faith in God's power, the same power that raised Jesus from the dead.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Baptism**

In the early church, baptism usually meant going completely under the water. Paul sees it as a picture of being buried with Jesus and raised to new life. Going under the water is like dying to your old life. Coming up is like rising with Jesus. It doesn't save you by itself, but it's a powerful sign of what Jesus

has done. If you've trusted Jesus and haven't been baptized, ask your pastor about it.

Then Paul gives one of the most powerful pictures of forgiveness in the Bible. You were dead in your sins, but God brought you to life with Christ. He forgave every one of your sins. He canceled the record of debt that stood against you, with all its legal demands, and took it away by nailing it to the cross.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Nailed to the Cross**

The Greek word for the record of debt was used for a handwritten IOU, a document someone signed saying how much they owed. Imagine a list of every wrong thing you've ever done, signed by you. Paul says God took that document and nailed it to the cross. When someone was crucified, the Romans often posted the charge against them on the cross. Over Jesus' head, the sign said King of the Jews. But in a deeper sense, Paul says, your list was posted there. Jesus paid it in full.

And then Paul says Jesus disarmed the powers and authorities and put them on public display, celebrating His victory over them through the cross.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Triumph**

When a Roman general won a great victory, he was sometimes given a triumph, a huge parade through Rome. The general rode in a chariot, and behind him marched his defeated enemies in chains, along with their captured weapons, for everyone to see. Paul says the cross was Jesus' triumph. It looked like defeat. But on the cross, Jesus disarmed every spiritual power that opposes God and paraded them in defeat. The powers the Colossians feared were already beaten.

So, Paul says, don't let anyone judge you about food and drink, or about religious festivals, New Moon celebrations, or Sabbaths. These were a shadow of what was coming. The reality is Christ.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Shadow and Reality**

A shadow shows you that something real is nearby, but it isn't the real thing. If you saw the shadow of a friend coming around a corner, you wouldn't hug the shadow. You'd hug your friend. Paul says the Old Testament laws about food and festivals were good, God-given shadows pointing to Jesus. Now that Jesus has come, you don't have to cling to the shadow. Paul isn't saying these practices are evil. He's saying they can't be required to make you right with God.

Don't let anyone disqualify you, Paul says, who loves fake humility and angel worship, and goes on and on about visions they've seen. They're puffed up by their unspiritual minds. And they've lost connection with the head, Jesus, who holds the whole body together and makes it grow.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Spiritual Show-offs**

The false teachers apparently made a big deal of their humility, their fasting, and their visions. But Paul says their humility was fake, and their spirituality made them proud. That's a warning for every generation. It's possible to look very religious and still be disconnected from Jesus. Real spiritual growth doesn't make you feel superior to others. It makes you more dependent on Christ.

Since you died with Christ and are free from the world's elemental spiritual forces, Paul asks, why do you still live as if you belonged to the world, following its rules? Then he quotes the rules: "Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!"

These rules, he says, are about things that are all used up and gone. They're human commands. They look wise, with their self-made religion, fake humility, and rough treatment of the body. But they don't actually help in fighting the desires of the flesh.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Rules Can't Change Hearts**

Paul's point is surprising. You'd think strict rules would make people holy. But rules can only control behavior from the outside. They can't change a person's heart. In fact, sometimes being told not to do something makes you want it more. That's why Paul points to Jesus. What changes you isn't a longer list of rules. It's a new life, from being united with Christ. Rules have their place, but they can't replace Jesus.

KEY VERSE

So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live your lives in him, rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness.

Colossians 2:6–7 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. What are some things people today say you need, in addition to Jesus, to be complete?
2. How does the picture of your debt nailed to the cross make you feel? Is there something you have trouble believing God has forgiven?
3. Have you ever met someone who seemed very religious but proud about it? What makes real spirituality different?
4. Why do you think rules alone can't change a person's heart?

TRY THIS *Write down a few things you feel guilty about. Then, on top of the list, write Colossians 2:14 and tear the paper up, or throw it away, as a reminder that Jesus has taken it away.*

CHAPTER 3

Set Your Hearts Above

Colossians 3

Chapter 3 is where Paul turns from what Jesus has done to how we should live. And he starts with where to look. Since you've been raised with Christ, he says, fix your hearts on the things above, where Christ sits at God's right hand. Keep your minds on what is above, not on what is earthly.

That doesn't mean daydreaming about heaven all day or ignoring the real world. Paul is about to give very practical, down-to-earth instructions. It means letting Jesus, and His priorities, shape the way you see everything. Where your mind goes, your life follows.

> BACKGROUND CHECK **Seated at the Right Hand**
>
> In the ancient world, the seat at the right hand of a king was the place of highest honor and authority, for the king's most trusted official or heir. Psalm 110, one of the most quoted Old Testament passages in the New Testament, says God told the Messiah to sit at His right hand until His enemies were defeated. Jesus is there now, ruling. When Paul says to fix your hearts above, he's saying: look to the King.

Why should we look up? Because, Paul says, you died, and your real life is now kept hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, your life, is revealed, you'll also appear with Him in glory.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Hidden**

Your real life, your truest identity, is hidden with Christ. That means two things. First, it's safe. Nobody can steal it, because it's kept with God. Second, it's not fully visible yet. Right now, you might not look or feel much like a child of God. People might not see it. You might not see it. But one day, when Jesus returns, the real you will be revealed. Until then, you can live from that hidden identity, even when no one else notices.

So, Paul says, put to death everything in you that belongs to the earthly side of you: sexual sin, impurity, lust, evil desires, and greed, which is really idol worship. God's anger is coming because of such things. You used to live this way, he says, but now you must also get rid of anger, fury, malice, slander, and dirty talk. And don't lie to each other.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Greed Is Idolatry**

Paul says greed is a form of idol worship. That sounds strange, since most of us don't bow down to statues. But an idol is anything you look to for the security, happiness, or identity only God can give. Greed means believing that more stuff, more money, or more of anything will finally satisfy you. When you treat something that way, you're worshiping it. Paul's list covers both private sins, like lust, and social ones, like slander. God cares about both.

Put to death sounds intense. It is. Paul isn't talking about managing sin, or cutting back a little. He's saying to kill it. That doesn't happen in your own strength. It happens because you've already died with Christ and been raised with Him. You're becoming who you already are in Him.

The reason, Paul says, is that you've taken off your old self and its habits and put on a new self, which keeps being renewed, in knowledge, to look like the One who created it. Remember from chapter 1 that Jesus is the image of God. Now Paul says the new you

is being remade into that image. God is restoring in you what was damaged by sin.

Then Paul writes a line that would have shocked his readers. In this new humanity, there's no Gentile or Jew, circumcised or not, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free. Christ is everything, and He's in everyone.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Barbarians and Scythians**

To Greeks, a barbarian was anyone who didn't speak Greek. The word may come from the way foreign languages sounded to Greek ears, like bar-bar-bar. Scythians were nomadic people from the region north of the Black Sea, and many Greeks and Romans thought of them as the wildest, most uncivilized people on earth. Many slaves in the ancient world came from Scythia. Paul says in Christ, even those deep divisions disappear. The church is a family where the most respected and the most looked-down-on people sit together as equals.

So, Paul says, as people God has chosen, made holy, and deeply loved, put on a new set of clothes: compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience. Put up with each other and forgive each other, if anyone has a complaint against someone. Forgive just as the Lord has forgiven you.

And over all of these, put on love, which ties everything together in perfect unity. Love is like the belt or outer garment that holds the whole outfit together.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Forgive as the Lord Forgave You**

Forgiveness is one of the hardest things Jesus asks of us. It doesn't mean pretending the wrong didn't happen, or that it didn't hurt. It doesn't mean you have to trust someone again right away, or stay in an unsafe situation. It means letting go of your right to get even, and handing the situation to God. The reason we can do it is that we've been forgiven so much ourselves. When

you remember how much God has forgiven you, it gets easier to forgive others.

Let Christ's peace rule your hearts, Paul says. The word rule was used for an umpire or referee in athletic games. Let Christ's peace be the referee in your heart, making the calls when you're deciding what to do or how to respond. And be thankful.

Let the message of Christ live among you richly, he continues, as you teach and encourage one another wisely, through psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, singing to God with thankful hearts.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Singing**

Music was a big part of early Christian worship. A Roman governor named Pliny, writing to the emperor Trajan around AD 112, reported that Christians gathered before dawn and sang a hymn to Christ as to a god. Paul says singing isn't just for God. It's also a way we teach and encourage one another. The songs you sing shape what you believe. That's one reason it matters what the words say.

And whatever you do, Paul says, whether in what you say or what you do, do everything in Jesus' name, thanking the Father through Him. That covers homework, sports, chores, jobs, texts, friendships, and everything else. There's no part of life Jesus doesn't care about.

Then Paul turns to life at home, with a short set of instructions for wives and husbands, children and parents, and slaves and masters. It's very similar to the longer version in Ephesians 5 and 6.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Household Rules**

Greek and Roman writers, like Aristotle, wrote rules for managing a household. They usually spoke only to the male head of the house, telling him how to rule his wife, children, and slaves. Paul uses the same three pairs, but with important differences. He speaks directly to wives, children, and slaves,

treating them as people who answer to the Lord themselves. And he gives clear responsibilities to husbands, fathers, and masters, limiting their power and reminding them that they have a Master too.

Paul tells wives to submit to their husbands, as is right for those who belong to the Lord, and husbands to love their wives and not be harsh with them. The words in the Lord matter. Everything in this section is shaped by the Lord Jesus, who came to serve. And the command to husbands rules out any kind of bitterness or harshness.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Reading These Verses Today**

As with the parallel passage in Ephesians, which begins with a call for all believers to submit to one another, Christians read these instructions in different ways. Some believe husbands and wives are equal before God but have different roles, with husbands called to loving, sacrificial leadership. Others believe Paul was working within the household structures of his time, while planting seeds of equality that would later grow. Both agree that husbands and wives are equally loved by God, and that marriage should reflect the self-giving love of Jesus.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Never an Excuse for Abuse**

These verses have sometimes been twisted to excuse cruelty or control. That's the opposite of what they say. A husband who is harsh, threatening, or controlling is disobeying this passage. If anyone in your home is being hurt or is afraid, that's not something you have to keep quiet about. Tell a trusted adult, a teacher, a counselor, or a pastor.

Next, children should obey their parents in everything, because it pleases the Lord. That's for you. It's not always easy, especially when you're becoming more independent. But honoring your parents is part of following Jesus. (If a parent ever asked you to do

something clearly wrong or harmful, obeying God comes first, and you should talk to another trusted adult.)

And fathers, Paul says, don't embitter your children, or they'll become discouraged. The NIV footnote says the word can also mean parents. In a world where fathers had almost total power over their children, Paul tells them to be careful not to crush their kids' spirits with harshness, unfairness, or constant criticism.

Then Paul speaks to slaves, and he spends the most time on them. He tells them to obey their earthly masters sincerely, not just when they're being watched, but out of reverence for the Lord. Put your whole heart into your work, he says, as if you were doing it for the Lord rather than for people. The Lord will give them an inheritance as their reward. And wrongdoers will be paid back for their wrongs, because God doesn't play favorites.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Why So Much about Slaves?**

Paul may have written more to slaves here because Onesimus, an enslaved man from Colossae who had become a Christian, was coming home with this letter. Philemon, his master, was a member of the church. Everyone would have been listening closely. Notice that Paul tells slaves they will receive an inheritance, something slaves normally couldn't have in Roman law. In God's family, they're heirs.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Slavery and the Bible**

Slavery in the Roman world was common, and though it wasn't based on race, it was still cruel. Enslaved people could be beaten, sold, and abused with little protection. Paul's words here are not an endorsement of slavery. He was teaching people how to live faithfully in a system they couldn't change, while planting ideas that would undermine it: that slaves and masters are equal in Christ (3:11), that masters will answer to God, and, in his letter to Philemon, that a slave is a dear brother. Sadly, some later Christians twisted these verses to defend slavery. But many Christians who led the

movements to end slavery were driven by the Bible's teaching that every person bears God's image. Today, these verses are often applied to work: do your work wholeheartedly, as for the Lord, and if you're ever in charge of others, treat them fairly.

KEY VERSE

And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

Colossians 3:17 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. What do you set your mind on most during the day? How would setting your mind on things above change that?
2. Paul says your real life is hidden with Christ. How does that change how you see yourself when you don't feel very Christian?
3. Is there someone you need to forgive? What makes it hard?
4. What would it look like to do your schoolwork, chores, or job as if you were working for the Lord?

TRY THIS *Choose one item from Paul's new wardrobe in verses 12 to 14, compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience, forgiveness, or love, and put it on each morning this week. Look for chances to wear it.*

CHAPTER 4

Seasoned with Salt

Colossians 4

Paul finishes the household instructions with a word to masters: treat your slaves rightly and fairly, since you have a Master in heaven too. In a world where masters had nearly total power, Paul reminds them that they're under authority too. One day they'll answer to Jesus for how they treated the people under them. And fair was a strong word. It suggested equality.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Your Master in Heaven**
>
> This principle applies to anyone with power over others: team captains, older siblings, managers, teachers, parents, and leaders of every kind. Whatever authority you have, you have a Master too. Jesus will ask how you used it. The best leaders remember that they're servants first.

Then Paul turns to prayer. Devote yourselves to prayer, he says, being watchful and thankful. Devote means to stick with it, to keep at it, not just to pray when you feel like it or when something goes wrong.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Watchful and Thankful**
>
> Watchful means staying alert, like a guard on duty at night. When Jesus was praying in the garden of Gethsemane, He asked His disciples to stay awake and pray, but they kept falling asleep. Paul may be remembering that story. Prayer takes focus. Thankful means noticing what God has done and saying

so. Paul mentions thankfulness again and again in Colossians, more than in many of his other letters. A thankful heart is a protected heart.

Paul asks them to pray for him too, that God would open a door for the message, so he could proclaim the mystery of Christ, the very thing he's in chains for. And he asks them to pray that he'll proclaim it clearly. Notice that Paul doesn't ask them to pray for his release. He asks them to pray for open doors and clear words. Even in prison, his focus was on the message.

Then Paul gives advice about how to treat people outside the church. Act wisely toward outsiders, he says, and use every chance you get. Let the way you talk be gracious, flavored with salt, so you'll know how to answer each person.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Seasoned with Salt**

Salt was valuable in the ancient world. It preserved food and made it taste better. Some Greek writers used salt as a picture for witty, interesting conversation. Paul's point is that the way Christians talk should be gracious and kind, but also interesting and thoughtful, not boring, preachy, or bland. Jesus told His followers that they were the salt of the earth (Matthew 5:13). Your words can make conversations better, and make people curious about Jesus.

Notice what Paul doesn't say. He doesn't tell them to argue with outsiders, or avoid them, or preach at them constantly. He tells them to be wise, gracious, and ready to answer when someone asks. People notice how Christians talk, online and in person. Sometimes the way you speak says more than the words you use.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Outsiders**

How you treat people who don't share your faith matters. Are you kind to them? Do you listen? Do you make fun of them behind their backs? Paul wants Christians to be the kind of people others want to be around, so that

when the time comes, they'll want to know why you're different. That doesn't mean hiding what you believe. It means sharing it with grace.

The rest of the letter is a list of people. It's easy to skip this part, but it's actually fascinating. These were real people, and their stories are part of the bigger story of the early church.

First, Tychicus, whom Paul calls a dear brother, faithful minister, and fellow servant (the NIV footnote says the word can mean slave). He's carrying the letter and will tell them all Paul's news. He's traveling with Onesimus, whom Paul calls a faithful, dear brother and one of their own.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Onesimus**

Imagine Onesimus walking back into Colossae. He had left his master's house, possibly as a runaway. Now he's coming back as a Christian, carrying a letter from Paul that calls him a faithful and dear brother. Paul doesn't call him a slave here. He calls him one of you. The short letter to Philemon tells the rest of the story, as Paul asks Philemon to welcome Onesimus back no longer as a slave, but as a beloved brother. Some think he may be the same Onesimus who later became a leader of the church in Ephesus, mentioned in a letter by Ignatius in the early second century, though we can't be sure.

Then come greetings from Paul's coworkers. Aristarchus, his fellow prisoner, from Thessalonica, who had been dragged into the theater during the riot in Ephesus (Acts 19:29) and traveled with Paul to Rome. Mark, the cousin of Barnabas. And Jesus, called Justus. Paul says these three are the only Jewish believers among his coworkers, and they've been a comfort to him. (The NIV footnote says the Greek literally means the only ones of the circumcision group.)

BACKGROUND CHECK **Mark's Second Chance**

Mark is the same John Mark who left Paul and Barnabas partway through their first missionary journey (Acts 13:13). Later, Paul refused to take him on

the second journey, and the disagreement was so sharp that Paul and Barnabas split up (Acts 15:37–39). But here, years later, Mark is with Paul, and Paul tells the Colossians to welcome him. In 2 Timothy 4:11, Paul even says Mark is helpful to him in his ministry. Tradition says Mark wrote the Gospel of Mark. Failure isn't the end of the story. People can change, and friendships can be restored.

Epaphras, who started the church in Colossae, sends greetings too. Paul says he's always wrestling in prayer for them, that they'll stand firm, mature and fully confident in God's will. He's working hard for the believers in Colossae, Laodicea, and Hierapolis. Epaphras was far from home, but his heart was with his church. His main ministry for them right now was prayer.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Wrestling in Prayer**

The word Paul uses for wrestling comes from athletics. It's the root of our word agony. Prayer for Epaphras wasn't a quick, casual thing. It was hard work, like a wrestler straining against an opponent. Who is wrestling in prayer for you? Who could you wrestle in prayer for?

Luke, the dear friend Paul calls the doctor, sends greetings, along with Demas. This is the only place in the Bible that tells us Luke was a doctor. And since Paul lists him separately from the Jewish coworkers, Luke was probably a Gentile, which would make him the only Gentile author of a book of the New Testament. He wrote both the Gospel of Luke and Acts.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Demas**

Demas is mentioned here, and in Philemon, as one of Paul's coworkers. But in 2 Timothy 4:10, Paul says sadly that Demas deserted him, because he loved this world. We don't know what happened. Maybe he got tired of the danger, or wanted an easier life. His story is a warning. Starting well is good, but finishing well is what counts.

Paul sends greetings to the believers in Laodicea, and to Nympha and the believers who meet in her house. In the early days, there were no church buildings. Christians met in homes, often in the homes of wealthier members who had room. Several of those homes, like Lydia's in Philippi and Nympha's here, belonged to women.

After this letter is read in Colossae, Paul says, make sure it's read in the church in Laodicea too, and read the letter from Laodicea. (As Setting the Scene explained, we don't know for sure what that letter was.) Letters like this were read aloud to the whole church, since most people couldn't read, and copies were shared between churches. That's part of how the New Testament was collected.

Paul has a short message for Archippus, who may have been a member of Philemon's household: complete the ministry you received in the Lord. We don't know what that ministry was, but it's good advice for everyone. God gives every believer something to do. Finish it.

Finally, Paul takes the pen from his secretary and writes the last greeting in his own hand. Remember my chains, he says. Grace be with you.

Remember my chains. Paul was writing about the supremacy of Jesus and the freedom of the gospel while chained to a guard. He wasn't asking for pity. He was reminding them that the message was worth it. And his very last word to them, as always, was grace.

KEY VERSE

Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone.

Colossians 4:6 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Where do you have authority over other people? How should remembering that you have a Master in heaven affect how you use it?
2. What makes conversation full of grace and seasoned with salt? Who do you know who talks that way?
3. Mark failed, then got a second chance. Demas started well, then walked away. What do you learn from their stories?
4. Epaphras wrestled in prayer for his church. Who could you pray for that seriously?

TRY THIS *Make a list of five people who don't follow Jesus. Pray for them by name every day this week, and ask God to open a door for a gracious, salty conversation with at least one of them.*

THE END (AND THE BEGINNING)

Now What? The Bottom Line

You've just walked through Paul's letter to the Colossians. At its center is a Person: Jesus, the image of the invisible God, the Creator who holds everything together, who came to make peace through His blood shed on the cross.

Here's what the Bible says, as plainly as I can put it.

1 God made you, through Jesus and for Him.

Paul says everything was created through Jesus and for Him. That includes you. You were made to know Him.

2 We've all turned away.

We've all gone our own way instead of God's. Paul says we were once far from God, even His enemies, in our thinking and our actions.

> *Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior.* **Colossians 1:21 (NIV)**

3 Sin has a real cost.

God is good, so He doesn't shrug off evil. The Bible says the result of sin is death, separation from God forever.

> *For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.* **Romans 6:23 (NIV)**

4 Jesus canceled the debt.

Jesus died on the cross for our sins and rose again. Paul says it's as if He took the list of everything we owed God and nailed it to the cross.

> *He forgave us all our sins, having canceled the charge of our legal indebtedness, which stood against us and condemned us; he has taken it away, nailing it to the cross.* **Colossians 2:13–14 (NIV)**

5 You can't earn it. You receive it.

Salvation isn't Jesus plus rules, rituals, or secret knowledge. It's a gift you receive by trusting Him.

> *For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast.* **Ephesians 2:8–9 (NIV)**

6 Turn and trust.

Turn from running your own life, and trust Jesus as your Savior and King. In Him, you have everything you need.

> *If you declare with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.* **Romans 10:9 (NIV)**

So what do you do with that? You don't need perfect words. You can talk to God honestly, right now, wherever you are. If it helps, you could pray something like this:

> *God, I've been running my own life, and I've sinned against You. I can't fix that myself. I believe Jesus died on the cross for me, canceled my debt, and rose again. I'm turning to You. Forgive me. I trust Jesus*

as my Savior, and I want to follow Him as my King. Thank You that in Him I have everything I need. Help me set my heart on Him. In Jesus' name, amen.

If You Just Said Yes

Tell someone. A parent, a youth leader, a pastor, or a Christian friend. Start there.

Read the real thing. Read Colossians 1:15–20 every day for a week. Then read Philemon, the short letter that traveled with Colossians, and the letters to the Thessalonians that come next in the New Testament.

Find your people. Get connected to a church where the Bible is taught and Jesus is honored. Let the message of Christ live among you. Ask about being baptized.

Talk to God every day. Devote yourself to prayer, Paul says, watchful and thankful. Be honest. He can handle it.

Not Sure Yet?

Not ready? That's honest, and honesty is a good place to start. Keep asking. Keep reading. Talk to someone you trust. Just don't settle for "I already know all that."

Because if Paul is right, Jesus is bigger than anything you've imagined, and it's worth finding out for yourself.

Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things.

Colossians 3:2 (NIV)

PAUL'S FIRST LETTER TO THE THESSALONIANS

The King's Return

1 Thessalonians, Unfiltered

For teens who think they've heard it all

BILL McLEOD

Papa Bill Books

The King's Return: Paul's First Letter to the Thessalonians, Unfiltered

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All Scripture quotations in this book are from the NIV. Some are abridged, with omissions marked by ellipses; paraphrases are not placed in quotation marks.

Pronouns referring to God the Father, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit are capitalized for reverence in the author's own words. Inside Scripture quotations, capitalization and wording follow the 2011 NIV exactly.

AI Disclosure. This book was written by Bill McLeod with the assistance of artificial intelligence tools for drafting, research, and editing. All content was reviewed and approved by the author, who takes full responsibility for it. Readers are encouraged to open the Scriptures and study them for themselves.

A WORD TO THE READER

Before You Start

If you've read the earlier books in this series, you know the saying by now: "If you want to get something done, hire a teenager while they still know it all." It's been in every book. It's not leaving now.

1 Thessalonians might be the oldest book in the New Testament. Some scholars think Galatians came first, but either way, this short letter was written only about twenty years after Jesus died and rose again. It's like opening a time capsule from one of the very first churches and finding out what they were worried about, what they believed, and how they lived.

The church in Thessalonica was brand new. Paul had been there only a short time before a mob ran him out of town. The believers were young in their faith, many of them had just walked away from worshiping idols, and they were being harassed by their neighbors for following Jesus. Paul was worried sick about them. When he finally got good news, he wrote this letter, and you can feel his relief and love in almost every line.

They also had questions. Big ones. Some members of the church had died. What happens to them when Jesus comes back? Will they miss out? When is He coming, anyway? Paul's answers include some of the most famous, and most debated, verses in the Bible about the return of Jesus.

If you've ever lost someone you love, wondered what happens after death, or been told the world is about to end, this letter is for you. It's also for anyone who just needs to hear how to live a normal,

faithful life while waiting for Jesus: work hard, love people, keep your body holy, rejoice, pray, and give thanks. Let's go.

How This Book Works

This book walks through all five chapters of 1 Thessalonians, in order, one chapter of this book for each chapter of the letter. Each one explains what Paul is saying in plain language and adds background about the city of Thessalonica, the Roman world, and the questions the church was asking.

Before chapter 1, a section called Setting the Scene tells the story of how the church began, why Paul had to leave so suddenly, and what happened next. It also explains why this letter matters so much for understanding the earliest Christians. Read it first.

Each chapter ends with a Key Verse quoted word for word from the New International Version (NIV), the same translation used for every Scripture quotation in this book (pronouns for God are capitalized in the author's own words out of reverence; inside Scripture quotations, capitalization follows the NIV exactly); Real Talk questions to think through alone or argue about with friends; and a Try This challenge.

This book quotes 1 Thessalonians sparingly and explains it mostly in my own words, so keep a Bible open next to it. Read each chapter of the letter first, then the chapter here. Don't take my word for it. Take His.

FOR THE ADULTS

A Note for Parents and Youth Leaders

Thank you for putting this book in a teenager's hands. Like the earlier books in this series, on the Gospels, Acts, and Paul's letters from Romans to Colossians, it's written for readers who can smell a sermon coming a mile away. I've tried to write honestly, directly, with some humor, and with real respect for what these readers can handle.

This book follows the letter format of the earlier volumes, walking through 1 Thessalonians chapter by chapter. Because the letter is short, I've quoted it sparingly and relied mostly on paraphrase and explanation, with extra background and discussion material. Wherever Scripture is quoted directly, in the chapters and in the Key Verses, the wording is from the New International Version (NIV).

Paul's teaching about the return of Jesus in 4:13–5:11 is understood differently by sincere Christians. I've presented the main views, including pretribulation, midtribulation, and posttribulation readings, and amillennial readings, briefly and fairly, without choosing among them, and I've highlighted what Christians across these views agree on. You may want to share your own church's view with your teen and talk through why you hold it.

Paul's words about some of his Jewish opponents in 2:14–16 are sharp. I've explained them in context: Paul was Jewish himself, he

was speaking about particular people who opposed the message, and these verses must never be used to support contempt for Jewish people. I've also noted that a minority of scholars think the passage was added later.

The letter also addresses grief and death, and sexual holiness, directly. I've handled these honestly and gently. Some readers may have recently lost someone they love; the chapter on 4:13–18 is written with them in mind.

The Real Talk questions are designed for discussion. They work well for a youth group, a small group, a family dinner table, or a car ride. Don't rush to the right answer. Let them wrestle. Faith that has been thought through tends to last.

My prayer is that every reader will find real hope in the face of death, and learn to live each ordinary day ready for the King's return.

Grace and peace,

Bill McLeod

Papa Bill Books

BEFORE YOU OPEN THE LETTER

Setting the Scene

The City

Thessalonica was the capital of the Roman province of Macedonia, in what is now northern Greece. It was founded around 315 BC by a Macedonian general named Cassander, who named it after his wife, Thessalonike, a half-sister of Alexander the Great.

It was a busy port, with a harbor on the Aegean Sea, and it sat on the Via Egnatia, the great Roman highway across northern Greece. Ships, soldiers, merchants, and travelers came through all the time, which meant news traveled fast, in every direction. That's one reason Paul says the report of the Thessalonians' faith had spread everywhere.

The city had sided with the winners in Rome's civil war, Mark Antony and Octavian, and was rewarded by being made a free city, allowed to govern itself. Its leaders were called politarchs. Acts uses that exact title for the city officials, and inscriptions found in the city use it too. Thessalonica was proud of its loyalty to Rome and to the emperor, who was honored there with temples and coins. Today it's called Thessaloniki, and it's the second-largest city in Greece.

How the Church Began

Acts 17 tells the story. Paul, Silas, and Timothy arrived in Thessalonica on Paul's second missionary journey, right after they had been beaten and jailed in Philippi. Paul went to the synagogue, as he usually did, and for three Sabbaths he explained from the

Scriptures that the Messiah had to suffer and rise from the dead, and that Jesus was the Messiah.

Some of the Jewish listeners were persuaded, along with a large number of God-fearing Greeks, Gentiles who worshiped the God of Israel, and quite a few prominent women. And from the letter itself, it's clear that many in the church were Gentiles who had turned to God from idols. So the church was a mix, but mostly made up of former pagans.

Run Out of Town

Then trouble came. Some of the local Jewish leaders became jealous. They gathered some troublemakers from the marketplace, formed a mob, and started a riot. They rushed to the house of a man named Jason, where Paul and Silas had been staying, looking for them. When they couldn't find them, they dragged Jason and some other believers before the city officials.

Their accusation is famous. They said these men had caused trouble all over the world and were now here, and that they were defying Caesar's decrees by saying there is another king, one called Jesus. In a city proud of its loyalty to the emperor, that was a dangerous charge. Jason had to post bond, and that night the believers sent Paul and Silas away to the town of Berea.

We don't know exactly how long Paul was in Thessalonica. Acts mentions three Sabbaths, but Paul's letters suggest it was longer, perhaps a few months. He worked to support himself, and the Philippians sent him gifts more than once while he was there (Philippians 4:16). Still, it was a short time to start a church.

Worried Sick

From Berea, Paul was forced to move on again, this time to Athens. He was desperate to know how the young church in Thessalonica was doing. Were they still following Jesus? Had the persecution crushed them? He tried to go back, more than once, but something blocked him.

Finally, he sent Timothy back to check on them, while he stayed alone in Athens. Later Paul moved on to Corinth, and there Timothy returned with good news (Acts 18:5). The Thessalonians were standing firm. They loved Paul and wanted to see him. Paul was so relieved that he wrote this letter.

When Was It Written?

Paul wrote 1 Thessalonians from Corinth, probably around AD 50 or 51. We can date Paul's time in Corinth fairly precisely, thanks to an inscription found at Delphi that mentions Gallio, the Roman official Paul stood before in Acts 18. That makes this one of Paul's earliest letters, and possibly the earliest surviving Christian document of any kind.

That's amazing for a few reasons. It shows that within about twenty years of Jesus' death and resurrection, Christians were already calling Him Lord, praying to Him alongside God the Father, expecting Him to return from heaven, and believing He had died for them. These weren't ideas that developed slowly over centuries. They were there from the start.

Who Wrote It?

The letter is from Paul, Silas, and Timothy. (The NIV footnote explains that the Greek says Silvanus, a form of the name Silas.)

Much of the letter uses we, though Paul sometimes speaks for himself. Almost all scholars agree that Paul wrote 1 Thessalonians. It's one of the least disputed of his letters.

The one exception is a short passage in chapter 2, verses 14 to 16, where Paul speaks harshly about the Jewish leaders in Judea who opposed Jesus and the apostles. A minority of scholars think these verses were added later by someone else. Most think Paul wrote them, in a moment of frustration about the people who had driven him out of city after city. Either way, it's important to read them carefully, as you'll see in chapter 2.

Why Paul Wrote

Paul had several reasons for writing. He wanted to encourage the believers who were suffering for their faith. He wanted to answer critics who said he was just another traveling preacher out for money and attention, of the kind who were common in the Roman world. He wanted to remind them how to live holy lives, especially in sexual matters and in their work. And he wanted to answer their questions about believers who had died and about the return of Jesus.

The Coming of the King

Every chapter of 1 Thessalonians ends with a mention of Jesus' return. Paul uses a Greek word, parousia, which means coming or presence. In the Roman world, it was used for the official visit of an emperor or important official to a city. When the emperor came, the city would prepare, and leading citizens would go out to meet him on the road and escort him back into the city with celebration.

The Thessalonians knew all about honoring Caesar. Paul tells them that the true King is coming, and they should be ready. That's why this book is called The King's Return.

The Map

Chapter 1: Paul thanks God for the Thessalonians' faith, love, and hope, and for how they turned from idols to God.

Chapter 2: Paul remembers his time with them and defends his motives. He was like a mother and a father to them.

Chapter 3: Paul explains why he sent Timothy, and rejoices at the good news Timothy brought back.

Chapter 4: Instructions on sexual holiness, love, and work, and comfort about believers who have died.

Chapter 5: The day of the Lord, living as children of the day, and a rapid-fire list of instructions for church life.

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CHAPTER 1

A Faith People Talk About

1 Thessalonians 1

Paul begins with three names, his own, Silas, and Timothy, and a short greeting to the Thessalonian church, which lives in the Father and in the Lord Jesus. Notice how naturally Paul puts the Father and Jesus side by side. Only about twenty years after the cross, Christians were already speaking of Jesus in the same breath as God.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Silas**
>
> Silas, called Silvanus in the Greek of this letter, was a leader in the Jerusalem church who became Paul's partner on his second missionary journey (Acts 15:40). Like Paul, he was a Roman citizen. He was beaten and jailed with Paul in Philippi, where the two of them sang hymns at midnight in their cell. Later, he seems to have worked with Peter too (1 Peter 5:12). He's one of the unsung heroes of the early church.

Then Paul tells them how thankful he is. Every time they pray, he and his friends thank God for the Thessalonians. And Paul remembers three things about them: their work that came from faith, their hard labor that came from love, and their endurance that came from hope in Jesus.

That's the famous trio again: faith, love, and hope. But notice that Paul connects each one to action. Real faith gets to work. Real love does the hard labor. Real hope keeps going when things are tough.

These weren't just feelings for the Thessalonians. They were showing up in their lives.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Faith, Love, and Hope**
>
> Paul uses these three together in several letters, most famously in 1 Corinthians 13. In 1 Thessalonians, they show up at the beginning and again near the end (5:8), where faith and love are a breastplate and hope is a helmet. Some think 1 Thessalonians is the earliest place in Christian writing where the three appear together. Hope gets special attention in this letter, because the Thessalonians needed it.

Paul says he knows God has chosen them. How? Because when the gospel came to them, it wasn't just words. It came with power, with the Spirit at work, and with deep conviction. Something real happened. And they had watched how Paul and his team lived among them.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Not Just Words**
>
> In the Roman world, there were lots of traveling speakers who made money giving impressive speeches. Paul says his message was different. It wasn't just clever talk. God's Spirit was at work, changing people's lives. The proof that the gospel is true isn't only in good arguments, though Paul could make those. It's also in lives that have been transformed.

The Thessalonians had followed the example of Paul and of the Lord. They accepted the message even though it brought them a lot of suffering, and they did it with joy that came from the Holy Spirit. Suffering and joy at the same time. That's not something people can fake.

And as a result, they had become an example to believers all over Macedonia and Achaia, the two Roman provinces that made up most of Greece. In fact, Paul says, news about their faith in God had

spread everywhere. Paul doesn't even need to talk about it. Other people bring it up first.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Word Gets Around**
>
> Remember that Thessalonica was a port on a major highway. Travelers, merchants, and sailors passed through all the time. When something unusual happened there, people talked about it, and the news spread up and down the road and across the sea. A group of ordinary people who had given up their gods to follow a crucified Jewish teacher, and were joyful even while being persecuted, was definitely news.

What were people saying? They were telling the story of how the Thessalonians had welcomed Paul, and how they had left their idols behind and turned to God, to serve the real, living God. That was a huge change. In Thessalonica, like every Roman city, the gods were everywhere: in temples, in homes, in the marketplace, at festivals, at dinner parties, in the trade guilds that people depended on for their jobs. Walking away from them meant walking away from much of normal social life.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Idols**
>
> An idol was a statue or image of a god, but the idea was bigger than the statue. Worshiping the gods was woven into every part of Roman life. Families had shrines in their homes. Trade groups held feasts in honor of their patron gods. Cities honored the emperor with sacrifices. If you stopped joining in, your neighbors might think you were rude, disloyal, or even dangerous, since many believed the gods would punish the whole city if they weren't honored. That's part of why the Thessalonian believers were persecuted.

Today, most people don't bow down to statues. But we still have idols: anything we look to for the security, happiness, or identity that only God can give. Popularity. Money. Success. A relationship.

Our phones. Turning to God from idols still means choosing a different center for your life.

And the Thessalonians weren't just turning away from something. They were turning to something: serving the real God, and waiting for His Son to return from heaven. Paul describes Jesus as the One God raised from the dead, who saves us from the judgment that's coming. That's the first time the return of Jesus shows up in this letter. It won't be the last. Every chapter ends with it.

KEY VERSE

We remember before our God and Father your work produced by faith, your labor prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.

1 Thessalonians 1:3 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Paul says the Thessalonians' faith, love, and hope showed up in action. Where do yours show up in your everyday life?
2. The Thessalonians had joy even while they were suffering. Have you ever experienced joy in a hard time? What was it like?
3. What are some idols people your age are tempted to live for?
4. If people talked about your faith, what would they say?

TRY THIS *Make a list of three things that compete with God for first place in your life. Pick one and give it a smaller place this week, like turning off your phone during a certain time each day, and use that time to talk to God.*

CHAPTER 2

Not Just Words

1 Thessalonians 2

In chapter 2, Paul looks back on the time he spent in Thessalonica. He reminds them that his visit wasn't a failure. He and Silas had just been beaten and humiliated in Philippi, and yet, with God's help, they had the courage to keep preaching in Thessalonica, even though they faced strong opposition there too.

Then Paul begins to defend himself. Apparently, some people in Thessalonica were saying bad things about him. Maybe they said he was a fraud who had run away when things got tough, and that he was only in it for the money.

> BACKGROUND CHECK **Traveling Preachers**
>
> The Roman world was full of wandering teachers, philosophers, and religious salesmen. Some were sincere. But many were known for flattering their audiences, collecting money, and moving on before anyone could catch on. Some would take advantage of followers in other ways too. So Paul's critics had an easy target. Paul needed to show that he was nothing like those people.

Paul says his message didn't come from error or wrong motives, and he wasn't trying to trick anyone. God had approved him and trusted him with the gospel. His goal wasn't pleasing people. It was pleasing God, the One who examines our hearts.

He never used flattery, he says. He never hid greed behind a mask. God knows that's true. And he wasn't looking for praise from anyone, though as an apostle he could have demanded respect.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Flattery**
>
> Flattery means saying nice things to someone, not because they're true, but because you want something from them. It's the opposite of honesty. Paul never told people what they wanted to hear just to win them over. You've probably met people who flatter, maybe to get invited somewhere, to get a better grade, or to be liked. Real friends tell you the truth, even when it's hard.

Instead, Paul says, he and his friends were gentle among them, like a mother nursing her children. They loved the Thessalonians so much that they were glad to share not only the gospel but their very lives.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Infants or Gentle?**
>
> The NIV text says Paul and his friends were like young children among them, but the NIV footnote says some manuscripts read gentle instead. The two Greek words differ by just one letter, so copyists could easily have mixed them up. Scholars debate which is original. Either way, the point is the same. Paul didn't throw his weight around. He came alongside them with tenderness.

That's a beautiful picture of what ministry, and friendship, should look like. Paul didn't just preach at the Thessalonians and leave. He shared his life with them. He was like a nursing mother, caring for them, and also, as he says a few verses later, like a father, encouraging, comforting, and urging each of them to live in a way that honors God.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Mother and Father**

Paul uses both a mother picture and a father picture in this chapter. In the ancient world, mothers were known for tenderness and nourishing care, while fathers were known for training and guiding their children. Paul says he was both. Good spiritual leaders, and good friends, know when to comfort and when to challenge.

Paul also reminds them how hard he worked. He and his friends worked night and day so nobody would have to support them while they preached. Paul was a tentmaker (Acts 18:3), probably working with leather and cloth, and he likely set up shop in Thessalonica, talking with customers about Jesus while he worked. He didn't want anyone to think he was preaching for money.

They had seen how Paul lived: holy, right, and without blame. And they had received his message not as a human idea, but as what it truly is, God's own word, which was at work in them.

Then Paul says something about suffering. The Thessalonians had suffered at the hands of their own people, just as the churches in Judea had suffered at the hands of some of their own people. And then Paul says some very harsh words about the Jewish leaders who opposed Jesus and the apostles.

BACKGROUND CHECK **A Hard Passage**

In verses 14 to 16, Paul speaks sharply about some of the Jews in Judea, saying they had killed Jesus and the prophets, drove out the apostles, and tried to stop the gospel from reaching the Gentiles. It's important to read these verses carefully. Paul was Jewish himself, and he loved his people deeply (Romans 9:1–5). He wasn't talking about all Jewish people, but about particular leaders and groups who had opposed the message, just as the Thessalonians' own Gentile neighbors were opposing them. The NIV footnote on verse 16 also shows a translation question about God's judgment coming on them at last or fully. A minority of scholars think these verses were added

later. Sadly, words like these have been twisted throughout history to justify hatred and violence against Jewish people. That is a terrible misuse of Scripture, and it has no place among followers of Jesus, who was Himself Jewish.

Paul ends the chapter by telling them how much he missed them. He says he felt orphaned when he was torn away from them, even though it was only for a short time and only in person, not in heart. He tried to come back more than once, but Satan stood in the way. We don't know exactly what that means. It might have been a legal ban, ongoing danger, or illness.

But Paul says the Thessalonians are his hope, his joy, and the crown he'll boast about when Jesus comes. They're his glory and joy. That's how much Paul loved them.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Crown**

The crown Paul mentions isn't a king's crown. It's a wreath, like the ones given to winning athletes at the games or to people honored by a city. Paul says his reward, when Jesus returns, won't be fame or money. It will be the people he helped bring to Jesus. That's the best kind of prize.

KEY VERSE

Because we loved you so much, we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well.

1 Thessalonians 2:8 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Paul says his goal was pleasing God, not people. Where are you most tempted to please people instead of God?
2. Why is flattery so dangerous in friendships?
3. Paul shared his life, not just his message. What does it look like to share your life with someone?
4. Who has been like a spiritual mother or father to you? What did they do?

TRY THIS *Think of someone younger than you, a sibling, a neighbor, or a kid at church. Find a way to spend time with them this week, not to preach, but to share your life with them.*

CHAPTER 3

Now We Really Live

1 Thessalonians 3

Paul picks up where he left off. When he couldn't stand the worry any longer, he decided to stay behind alone in Athens and send Timothy to Thessalonica.

Think about what that meant. Athens was a huge city, full of temples and philosophers, and Paul didn't know anyone there. He chose to be alone in a strange city, so that the Thessalonians could have Timothy's help. That's real sacrifice.

> BACKGROUND CHECK **Paul in Athens**
>
> Acts 17 describes what Paul did in Athens while he waited. He was upset by all the idols in the city, so he talked with people in the synagogue and in the marketplace every day. Eventually, he was invited to speak to the Areopagus, a council of leading thinkers, and he gave a famous speech about the unknown god. A few people believed, including a man named Dionysius and a woman named Damaris. But it seems Paul's heart was still back in Thessalonica.

Paul sent Timothy, whom he calls his brother and God's coworker in the gospel, to strengthen and encourage their faith, so their troubles wouldn't shake anyone. Paul reminds them that they knew this would happen. When he was with them, he kept warning them that they would be persecuted. And that's exactly what happened.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Destined for Trials**
>
> Paul says that believers are destined for trials. That might not sound like good news. But Paul wanted the Thessalonians to know that suffering didn't mean God had abandoned them. Jesus Himself said His followers would face trouble (John 16:33). Hard times aren't a sign that you're doing something wrong. Sometimes they're a sign that you're doing something right.

Paul was afraid that the tempter, Satan, had somehow tempted them to give up, and that all his work had been wasted. He didn't know if he'd return to find a church or an empty room.

But then Timothy came back with good news. The Thessalonians were still trusting God and loving each other. They had good memories of Paul and longed to see him, just as he longed to see them.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Good News**
>
> The word Paul uses for Timothy's good news is the same word he usually uses for preaching the gospel. It's the only time in his letters he uses it for something other than the message about Jesus. That's how happy he was. Hearing that the Thessalonians were still standing firm was like hearing the gospel all over again.

Paul says that in all his distress and persecution, he was encouraged by their faith. And then he says something remarkable: now we're truly alive, because you're standing firm in the Lord. Paul's own well-being was wrapped up in theirs. When they were doing well, he felt alive.

How can he thank God enough for them, he asks, for all the joy they bring him? Night and day, he prays as hard as he can that he'll see them again, and that he'll be able to fill in what's still missing in their faith.

BACKGROUND CHECK **What's Lacking?**

Paul says there are still gaps in the Thessalonians' faith. That's not an insult. They were brand-new believers who had only had a few months of teaching before Paul was forced to leave. They needed more. That's why Paul wrote this letter, and why he answers their questions in chapters 4 and 5. Every Christian has things they still need to learn. Growth never stops.

Paul ends the chapter with a prayer. He asks God the Father and Jesus to clear the way for him to come back. He prays that the Lord would make their love grow and spill over, toward one another and toward everyone, the way Paul's love spills over toward them. And he prays that God would strengthen their hearts, so they'll be blameless and holy before God when Jesus comes back with all His holy ones.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Love That Overflows**

Paul prays for their love to overflow not only toward each other but toward everyone else. That includes the neighbors who were persecuting them. Christians aren't supposed to love only people inside the church. Their love should spill out onto everyone. That's what Jesus taught when He told His followers to love their enemies (Matthew 5:44).

And notice, once again, the chapter ends with the return of Jesus. Paul is constantly looking ahead. He wants the Thessalonians to live today in light of that day.

KEY VERSE

May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else, just as ours does for you.

1 Thessalonians 3:12 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Paul gave up his own comfort to help the Thessalonians. When has someone made a sacrifice like that for you?
2. Why do you think Paul warned new believers that they would face hard times?
3. Paul says he's truly alive because they're standing firm. Who do you care about that much?
4. What would it look like for your love to overflow toward someone who isn't easy to love?

TRY THIS *Write a short note or message to someone who has helped you grow in your faith. Tell them, like Paul, what they mean to you.*

CHAPTER 4

Hope When Someone Dies

1 Thessalonians 4

Paul now turns to some practical instructions. He says, in effect: you're already living in a way that pleases God, and we taught you how. Now keep doing it, more and more.

The first topic is sex. Paul says plainly that God's will is for them to be holy, or sanctified, and that means staying away from sexual immorality. Each of them should learn to control their own body in a way that's holy and honorable, not driven by lust like the people around them who don't know God.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Sanctified**

To be sanctified means to be set apart for God, made holy. It's both something God does and something we take part in. When you trust Jesus, God declares you holy and puts His Spirit in you. Then, over your whole life, He keeps shaping you to become more like Jesus. Paul says that's God's will for you. If you've ever wondered what God's will for your life is, here's a clear part of the answer.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Your Body or Your Wife?**

The NIV footnote shows that Paul's wording in verse 4 is unclear. The Greek literally says something like to possess your own vessel. That could mean to control your own body, as the NIV text says, or to live with your own wife, or to take a wife, as the footnote suggests. Either way, Paul's main point is the

same: God's people should treat sex as something holy and honorable, within God's design, not as something to grab whenever they want.

In the Roman world, sexual behavior that Christians considered wrong was common and widely accepted, especially for men. Many people saw nothing wrong with sex outside marriage, especially with slaves, prostitutes, or at religious festivals. So Paul's teaching was countercultural then, just as it is now.

Paul adds that nobody should cheat or exploit a fellow believer in this area. Sexual sin isn't just private. It hurts other people. It breaks trust, damages families, and treats people as objects. The Lord takes it seriously, Paul warns, and anyone who rejects this teaching isn't rejecting a person, but God, who gives His Holy Spirit.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Grace and Purity**

If you've already made mistakes in this area, Paul's words aren't meant to crush you. The whole gospel is about God forgiving and restoring people. Jesus treated people who had sinned sexually with great compassion, while still calling them to a new life (John 8:11). Purity isn't about being perfect. It's about starting fresh with God's help, today. And if anyone has ever hurt you or pressured you sexually, that wasn't your sin. Please tell a trusted adult.

Next, Paul talks about love. He says he doesn't really need to write about loving each other, because God Himself has taught them. They're already loving believers all over Macedonia. But he urges them to do it more and more.

Then he adds something unexpected. Make it your goal to live a quiet life, he says, take care of your own affairs, and do honest work. That way, outsiders will respect you, and you won't have to depend on anyone.

BACKGROUND CHECK **A Quiet Life**

Why would Paul need to say this? Some members of the church may have stopped working, perhaps because they thought Jesus was coming back any day, so what was the point? Or perhaps some were depending on wealthy believers to support them, as many people in the Roman world depended on patrons. Paul says faithful Christians work hard, pay their own way, and don't stir up drama. That might not sound exciting, but it's a powerful witness. A quiet, faithful life gets noticed.

Now Paul turns to a question that was breaking the Thessalonians' hearts. Some believers in the church had died. Maybe they were killed in the persecution, or died of illness. The Thessalonians were worried. Would those who died miss out when Jesus returned?

Paul says he doesn't want them to be uninformed about believers who have died, which he describes as falling asleep. He doesn't want them to grieve like people who have no hope.

BACKGROUND CHECK **No Hope**

Many ancient tombstones show how hopeless people felt about death. One saying was so common that it was sometimes carved in shorthand on Roman graves. It went something like this: I was not, I was, I am not, I don't care. Some Greek and Roman thinkers believed in some kind of life after death, but many ordinary people had little hope. Into that world, Paul brings a stunning message: for those who belong to Jesus, death is not the end.

Notice Paul doesn't say don't grieve. He says don't grieve like people who have no hope. Grief is normal, and it's good. Jesus Himself wept at the tomb of His friend Lazarus (John 11:35). Christians cry at funerals too. But our tears are mixed with hope.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Falling Asleep**

Paul describes Christians who have died as asleep. That doesn't mean they're unconscious or that death isn't real. It's a gentle picture that says death is

temporary, like sleep. You go to sleep expecting to wake up. Early Christians called their burial places cemeteries, from a Greek word meaning sleeping places. For believers, death is a bed, not a final grave.

Here's the reason for hope. We believe that Jesus died and rose again. And because He rose, God will bring with Him those who have died trusting in Him. They're not left behind. They'll be part of the celebration when He comes.

Then Paul explains what will happen, based on the Lord's own teaching. Those who are still alive when Jesus comes won't go ahead of those who have died. Jesus will descend from heaven in person, with a shout of command, an archangel's voice, and the sound of God's trumpet. Believers who have died will rise first. Then those still living will be snatched up along with them, in the clouds, to meet Jesus in the air. And from then on, we'll be with Him forever.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Caught Up**

The phrase caught up translates a Greek word that means to snatch or seize suddenly. When the Bible was translated into Latin, the word used was rapiemur, from which we get the English word rapture. So when Christians talk about the rapture, this is the passage they mean. The word rapture itself doesn't appear in English Bibles, but the idea of being caught up to meet the Lord does.

BACKGROUND CHECK **To Meet the Lord**

The Greek word for meet in verse 17 was often used for a special custom. When an emperor or important official came to visit a city, a group of citizens would go out of the city to meet him on the road, and then escort him back into the city with celebration. Some scholars think Paul has this picture in mind: believers rise to greet King Jesus and then accompany Him as He comes to reign on earth. Others point out that the word doesn't always carry that meaning, and that Paul doesn't say where believers go next.

Paul ends with a simple command. Encourage each other with these words. Paul isn't trying to start an argument about the end times. He wants grieving people to have comfort and hope.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **When You've Lost Someone**
>
> If someone you love has died, you might be reading this chapter with a heavy heart. It's okay to feel sad, angry, confused, or numb. Grief doesn't follow a schedule. Talk to God honestly about it; He can handle your questions. Talk to a parent, pastor, youth leader, or counselor too. If the person you lost trusted Jesus, Paul's words are for you: you will see them again. And if you don't know where they stood with God, you can trust Him to be perfectly good and just. He loved them even more than you did.

KEY VERSE

For we believe that Jesus died and rose again, and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him.

1 Thessalonians 4:14 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Paul says God's will for you is to be holy. What makes that hard for people your age? What helps?
2. Why do you think Paul tells Christians to live a quiet life and work hard? How does that help people outside the church respect the gospel?
3. What's the difference between grieving with hope and grieving without hope?
4. How does knowing that Jesus rose from the dead change the way you think about death?

TRY THIS *If you know someone who is grieving, find a simple way to encourage them this week: a note, a text, a hug, or just sitting with them. You don't need the perfect words. Just be there.*

CHAPTER 5

Children of the Day

1 Thessalonians 5

Paul keeps going with the topic of Jesus' return. The Thessalonians probably wanted to know when it would happen. Paul says he doesn't need to write about times and dates, because they already know: the day of the Lord will arrive like a burglar at night.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **The Day of the Lord**
>
> In the Old Testament, the day of the Lord was the time when God would step in to judge evil and rescue His people (Amos 5:18; Joel 2:31). The New Testament connects that day with the return of Jesus. A thief doesn't send a text before breaking in. Jesus used the same picture in Matthew 24:43. The point is that nobody knows the date. Jesus Himself said that no one knows the day or hour except the Father (Matthew 24:36). That's a good reason to be suspicious of anyone who claims to know exactly when the world will end.

While people are saying "Peace and safety," Paul says, sudden destruction will come on them, as suddenly as labor pains hit a woman about to give birth, and there will be no escape.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Peace and Safety**
>
> Peace and security was a popular slogan of the Roman Empire. Coins and inscriptions celebrated the peace of Rome, the Pax Romana, and the safety the emperor provided. Some scholars think Paul is pointing at that propaganda. People trusted Rome to keep them safe. But no empire can protect anyone from God's judgment. Only Jesus can rescue us.

But you're not in darkness, Paul tells the believers, so that day doesn't need to catch you by surprise. You belong to the light and the day. So don't sleep like everyone else. Stay awake and alert, and stay sober.

Paul uses a soldier's picture. Because we're people of the daytime, he says, let's wear faith and love as body armor, and our hope of being saved as a helmet. That's faith, love, and hope again, just like chapter 1. And it's an early version of the armor of God that Paul describes later in Ephesians 6.

Then Paul gives one of the clearest promises in the letter. God didn't choose us to suffer His anger, but to receive salvation through Jesus. Jesus gave His life for us so that, whether we're alive or have died when He comes, we'll live together with Him. So, Paul says again, encourage each other and build each other up, as you're already doing.

BACKGROUND CHECK **How Christians Read 4:13–5:11**

Christians agree that Jesus will return. But they understand the details of this passage, and others like it, in different ways. Here are the main views, briefly and fairly.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Pretribulation**

Many evangelical Christians, especially in North America, believe Jesus will catch up His church to meet Him in the air before a seven-year period of great trouble on earth called the tribulation, described in passages like Daniel 9, Matthew 24, and Revelation 6–19. Then, after the tribulation, Jesus will return to earth with His people to reign for a thousand years. This view was developed in the 1800s, especially by John Nelson Darby, and became widely known through the Scofield Reference Bible and, more recently, books and movies like the Left Behind series. Supporters point to 1 Thessalonians 5:9, which says God didn't appoint us to suffer wrath.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Midtribulation and Prewrath**

Some Christians believe the church will be caught up partway through the tribulation, often at the midpoint, before the most severe judgments begin. A related view, called prewrath, places the rapture later in the tribulation, just before God pours out His wrath. Supporters connect Paul's trumpet with trumpets in Revelation and emphasize that believers may face persecution but not God's wrath.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Posttribulation**

Other Christians believe the church will go through the time of tribulation, and that believers will be caught up to meet Jesus at His single, visible return at the end of it. In this view, believers rise to greet the King in the air, like citizens going out to meet a visiting emperor, and then return with Him to earth. Supporters note that the early church generally expected to face trouble before Jesus' return, and that this passage describes a loud, public event.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Amillennial Readings**

Many Christians, including much of the Catholic, Orthodox, Lutheran, and Reformed traditions, hold an amillennial view, which goes back to early church leaders like Augustine. They believe the thousand years in Revelation 20 is a symbolic picture of Christ's reign now, not a future earthly kingdom. In this reading, 1 Thessalonians 4 describes one great return of Jesus at the end of history, when the dead are raised, living believers are caught up to meet Him, and He judges the world and makes all things new. There is no separate rapture before His return. (A related view, postmillennialism, expects the gospel to spread and influence the world greatly before Jesus returns.)

BACKGROUND CHECK **What Christians Agree On**

Across all these views, Christians agree on what matters most in this passage: Jesus will really, personally return. Believers who have died will be raised. Believers who are alive will be transformed and gathered to Him. We'll be with the Lord forever. Nobody knows the date. And until then, our job is to stay awake, live as children of the light, and encourage one another. Paul

wrote this passage to comfort people, not to divide them. It's fine to have a view and discuss it. It's not fine to treat Christians who see it differently as enemies.

Paul finishes the letter with a rapid-fire list of instructions for church life. Respect the leaders who work hard among you, care for you, and correct you. Honor them highly and love them for the work they do. Live at peace with each other.

Warn the lazy troublemakers. Encourage those who are discouraged. Help those who are weak. Be patient with everyone. Don't get even when someone wrongs you, but always try to do good to each other and to everyone else.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Different People, Different Needs**

Notice that Paul doesn't treat everyone the same. Some people need a warning. Some need encouragement. Some need help. Everyone needs patience. Wise friends learn to tell the difference. If someone is discouraged, a lecture won't help. If someone is being careless, a hug might not be enough. Love pays attention.

Then come three of the shortest commands in the Bible. Rejoice always. Pray continually. Give thanks in all circumstances, because this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Pray Continually**

Paul doesn't mean you have to be on your knees twenty-four hours a day. He means a life that's always open to God, like a phone line that's never hung up. You can pray while walking to class, playing sports, doing homework, or lying in bed. Short prayers count. Help. Thank You. Show me what to do. Be with my friend. Over time, prayer becomes less like an appointment and more like breathing.

BACKGROUND CHECK **In, Not For**

Paul says give thanks in all circumstances, not for all circumstances. You don't have to thank God for something terrible, like a friend getting hurt. But even in the worst situations, you can thank God for who He is, for His presence, and for His promises. Gratitude doesn't deny pain. It holds on to God in the middle of it.

Don't quench the Spirit, Paul says, like throwing water on a fire. Don't look down on prophecy, but examine everything. Hold on to what's good, and reject every kind of evil. The early church valued spiritual gifts, but it also knew some people claimed to speak for God when they didn't. Christians should be open to God's Spirit, and also wise enough to test what they hear against Scripture.

Paul ends with a prayer. May the God who gives peace make you completely holy, and keep every part of you, spirit, soul, and body, blameless when Jesus comes. And then a promise: the One who calls you is faithful, and He will do it.

BACKGROUND CHECK **He Will Do It**

After all these instructions, you might feel overwhelmed. How can anyone live up to all this? Paul's last word on the subject isn't about you. It's about God. He's the One who will make you holy. He's faithful. He finishes what He starts. Your job is to trust Him and keep walking. His job is to get you home.

Paul asks them to pray for him and his team. He tells them to greet all the believers with a holy kiss, a common greeting in the ancient world, like a hug or handshake today, that showed they were family. He insists that this letter be read to the whole church, because it was for everyone, not just the leaders. And he closes, as always, with grace.

KEY VERSE

Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.

1 Thessalonians 5:16–18 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Jesus said no one knows the day or hour of His return. Why do you think people keep trying to predict it?
2. Which view of Jesus' return have you heard most? What questions do you have about it?
3. Paul tells us to warn, encourage, help, and be patient. Which of these do your friends need from you right now?
4. What would it look like to pray continually in your everyday life?

TRY THIS *For one week, set three random alarms on your phone each day. Every time one goes off, stop and pray a one-sentence prayer and thank God for one thing.*

THE END (AND THE BEGINNING)

Now What? The Bottom Line

You've just walked through Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians. It's a letter full of hope: hope that death isn't the end, that Jesus is coming back, and that we'll be with Him forever.

Here's what the Bible says, as plainly as I can put it.

1 God made you, and He's calling you.

Paul says God calls people into His kingdom and glory. You were made to belong to Him.

2 We've all turned away.

Like the Thessalonians before they met Jesus, we've all put other things in God's place. The Bible calls it sin, and it separates us from God.

> *for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,* **Romans 3:23 (NIV)**

3 Sin has a real cost.

God is good, so He doesn't shrug off evil. The Bible says the result of sin is death, separation from God forever.

> *For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.* **Romans 6:23 (NIV)**

4 Jesus died for us.

Jesus died on the cross for our sins and rose again, so that we could live with Him forever.

> *For God did not appoint us to suffer wrath but to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ. He died for us so that, whether we are awake or asleep, we may live together with him.* **1 Thessalonians 5:9–10 (NIV)**

5 You can't earn it. You receive it.

Salvation isn't a reward for being good enough. It's a gift you receive by trusting Jesus.

> *For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast.* **Ephesians 2:8–9 (NIV)**

6 Turn and trust.

Turn from whatever you've been living for, and trust Jesus as your Savior and King. He's coming back, and He wants you to be ready.

> *If you declare with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.* **Romans 10:9 (NIV)**

So what do you do with that? You don't need perfect words. You can talk to God honestly, right now, wherever you are. If it helps, you could pray something like this:

> *God, I've been living for other things, and I've sinned against You. I can't fix that myself. I believe Jesus died for me and rose again. I'm turning to You. Forgive me. I trust Jesus as my Savior, and I want to*

follow Him as my King. Thank You for the hope that death isn't the end. Help me live ready for His return. In Jesus' name, amen.

If You Just Said Yes

Tell someone. A parent, a youth leader, a pastor, or a Christian friend. Start there.

Read the real thing. Read 1 Thessalonians straight through. Then read 2 Thessalonians, the next letter in the New Testament, which Paul wrote to the same church soon afterward.

Find your people. Get connected to a church where the Bible is taught and Jesus is honored. Encourage one another and build each other up. Ask about being baptized.

Talk to God every day. Rejoice, pray, and give thanks, Paul says. Be honest. He can handle it.

Not Sure Yet?

Not ready? That's honest, and honesty is a good place to start. Keep asking. Keep reading. Talk to someone you trust. Just don't settle for "I already know all that."

Because if Paul is right, the King is coming back, and it's worth finding out for yourself.

The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do it.

1 Thessalonians 5:24 (NIV)

PAUL'S SECOND LETTER TO THE THESSALONIANS

The King's Justice

2 Thessalonians, Unfiltered

For teens who think they've heard it all

BILL McLEOD

Papa Bill Books

The King's Justice: Paul's Second Letter to the Thessalonians, Unfiltered

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All Scripture quotations in this book are from the NIV. Some are abridged, with omissions marked by ellipses; paraphrases are not placed in quotation marks.

Pronouns referring to God the Father, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit are capitalized for reverence in the author's own words. Inside Scripture quotations, capitalization and wording follow the 2011 NIV exactly.

AI Disclosure. This book was written by Bill McLeod with the assistance of artificial intelligence tools for drafting, research, and editing. All content was reviewed and approved by the author, who takes full responsibility for it. Readers are encouraged to open the Scriptures and study them for themselves.

A WORD TO THE READER

Before You Start

If you've read the earlier books in this series, you know the saying by now: "If you want to get something done, hire a teenager while they still know it all." It's been in every book. It's not leaving now.

2 Thessalonians is one of the shortest books in the New Testament, only three chapters. You can read it in about five minutes. But it deals with some of the biggest questions people ask: Why do good people suffer while bad people seem to get away with it? Is the world about to end? Who is the mysterious figure Paul calls the man of lawlessness? And what do you do in the meantime?

The church in Thessalonica was still young, still being persecuted, and now it was confused. Someone had told them that the day of the Lord had already arrived, maybe even using a letter that claimed to be from Paul. Some people were so stirred up that they had quit working and were living off others. The whole church was shaken.

Paul's answer is calm and steady. God sees what you're going through, and He will set things right. The end hasn't come yet, so don't be fooled by people who say it has. Evil is real, but it's on a leash, and Jesus will defeat it completely. In the meantime, stand firm, hold on to the truth, get back to work, and never get tired of doing good.

If you've ever been overwhelmed by scary predictions, viral rumors, or the feeling that the world is falling apart, this little letter has a lot to say to you. Let's go.

How This Book Works

This book walks through all three chapters of 2 Thessalonians, in order, one chapter of this book for each chapter of the letter. Because the letter is so short and packed, each chapter here goes slowly and includes extra background on the people, places, and ideas behind it, along with the main ways Christians have understood its hardest passages.

Before chapter 1, a longer-than-usual section called Setting the Scene explains what had happened since Paul's first letter, why some scholars question whether Paul wrote this one, and the Old Testament and Jewish background you need to make sense of chapter 2. Don't skip it.

Each chapter ends with a Key Verse quoted word for word from the New International Version (NIV), the same translation used for every Scripture quotation in this book (pronouns for God are capitalized in the author's own words out of reverence; inside Scripture quotations, capitalization follows the NIV exactly); Real Talk questions to think through alone or argue about with friends; and a Try This challenge.

This book quotes 2 Thessalonians sparingly and explains it mostly in my own words, so keep a Bible open next to it. Read the whole letter first, then each chapter here. Don't take my word for it. Take His.

FOR THE ADULTS

A Note for Parents and Youth Leaders

Thank you for putting this book in a teenager's hands. Like the earlier books in this series, on the Gospels, Acts, and Paul's letters from Romans to 1 Thessalonians, it's written for readers who can smell a sermon coming a mile away. I've tried to write honestly, directly, with some humor, and with real respect for what these readers can handle.

This book follows the letter format of the earlier volumes. Because 2 Thessalonians is so short, I've quoted it very sparingly and relied mostly on paraphrase, background, and discussion material. Wherever Scripture is quoted directly, in the chapters and in the Key Verses, the wording is from the New International Version (NIV).

Paul's description of the man of lawlessness and what is holding him back (2:1–12) is one of the most debated passages in the New Testament. I've presented the main Christian interpretations, futurist, preterist, historicist, and idealist readings, and the main proposals about the restrainer, briefly and fairly, without endorsing one. I've also noted that some Protestant Reformers identified the man of lawlessness with the papacy, a view the Catholic Church rejects and that many Protestants today do not hold. You may want to share your own church's view with your teen.

I've also presented the debate over whether Paul wrote this letter, giving the main arguments on each side. The letter presents itself as Paul's, and I refer to the author as Paul throughout.

Paul's rule that anyone unwilling to work shall not eat (3:10) is often quoted out of context. I've explained carefully that Paul was addressing able-bodied people who chose idleness and disrupted the church, not people who cannot work because of illness, disability, age, or circumstances, and that the early church was known for caring generously for those in need.

The Real Talk questions are designed for discussion. They work well for a youth group, a small group, a family dinner table, or a car ride. Don't rush to the right answer. Let them wrestle. Faith that has been thought through tends to last.

My prayer is that every reader will find steady confidence in a just and faithful God, and the courage never to tire of doing good.

Grace and peace,

Bill McLeod

Papa Bill Books

BEFORE YOU OPEN THE LETTER

Setting the Scene

Where We Left Off

If you read 1 Thessalonians, you know the story. Paul, Silas, and Timothy started a church in Thessalonica, the capital of Macedonia, on Paul's second missionary journey. After only a short time, a mob forced them out of the city (Acts 17). Paul was worried sick about the new believers, sent Timothy back to check on them, and was overjoyed when Timothy returned with good news. Then he wrote 1 Thessalonians to encourage them, answer their questions about believers who had died, and remind them that Jesus would return like a thief in the night.

The church was mostly made up of Gentiles who had turned away from idols, and they were being harassed by their neighbors for it. In a city proud of its loyalty to Rome and the emperor, people who said there was another king named Jesus were seen as troublemakers.

What Changed

2 Thessalonians shows that, some time later, things had gotten more difficult in three ways.

First, the persecution had continued, and maybe gotten worse. Paul talks about their persecutions and trials and promises that God will bring justice.

Second, someone had confused them about the return of Jesus. Some people were saying the day of the Lord had already come.

That might sound strange, but it may have meant that the final events had begun, and that the church's suffering was part of the end. Paul says this idea may have come through a prophecy, a spoken message, or a letter supposedly from him. Somebody may even have been using Paul's name to spread it.

Third, the problem of idleness that Paul mentioned briefly in his first letter had grown. Some members of the church had stopped working and were depending on others, while busying themselves in other people's affairs. Paul has to deal with it more firmly.

When Was It Written?

If Paul wrote it, 2 Thessalonians was probably written from Corinth, a few months after 1 Thessalonians, around AD 50 or 51. Silas and Timothy were still with Paul, and the situation in Thessalonica seems similar, only more intense. That would make it one of the earliest Christian writings we have.

A few scholars have suggested that 2 Thessalonians was actually written before 1 Thessalonians, since the New Testament usually arranges Paul's letters by length rather than date. But most think the order in our Bibles is the order they were written.

Who Wrote It? The Case Against

Most scholars agree that Paul wrote 1 Thessalonians. 2 Thessalonians is more debated. Some scholars think it was written later by a follower of Paul who used his name. Here are their main reasons.

It follows 1 Thessalonians very closely in its structure and some of its wording, which some think looks like someone copying. Its tone is more formal and less warm than the first letter. Its picture of the

end seems different: 1 Thessalonians says the day will come suddenly, like a thief, while 2 Thessalonians says certain events must happen first. And the emphasis on Paul's signature at the end, as the mark in all his letters, along with the warning about a letter claiming to be from him, makes some suspect the writer was trying hard to sound like Paul.

Who Wrote It? The Case For

Many other scholars hold that Paul wrote it. Here are their main reasons.

The early church accepted it as Paul's without question. It appears in the earliest lists of Paul's letters, and an early bishop named Polycarp seems to echo it. If Paul wrote both letters to the same church only a few months apart, it would be natural for them to sound similar. The difference in tone fits a new situation: Paul was dealing with a specific problem, not reuniting with friends. The teaching about the end isn't really a contradiction; Jesus Himself taught both that the end would come suddenly and that certain signs would come first (Mark 13). And Paul signed other letters in his own hand too (1 Corinthians 16:21; Galatians 6:11), especially if forged letters were going around.

Christians on both sides agree that 2 Thessalonians belongs in the Bible and speaks with authority. In this book, I follow the letter's own claim and call the author Paul.

Background: Daniel

To understand chapter 2, it helps to know some Old Testament background. The book of Daniel, written about a time when God's people lived under foreign empires, describes a proud ruler who would exalt himself above every god, speak against the true God,

and set up a terrible abomination in the temple (Daniel 9, 11, and 12).

Many Jewish readers saw that prophecy fulfilled in 167 BC, when a Greek king named Antiochus IV, who called himself Epiphanes, meaning God made visible, took over Jerusalem, banned Jewish worship, and set up an altar to the Greek god Zeus in the temple. The Jewish people rebelled under the Maccabees and eventually rededicated the temple, an event still remembered at Hanukkah.

Background: Caligula

Just about ten years before Paul wrote to Thessalonica, something similar almost happened again. Around AD 40, the Roman emperor Gaius, better known as Caligula, who wanted to be worshiped as a god, ordered a statue of himself to be set up in the temple in Jerusalem. The Jewish people were horrified, and many were ready to die rather than allow it. The plan was delayed, and Caligula was assassinated in AD 41 before it could be carried out. But the memory was fresh. When Paul talked about someone setting himself up in God's temple, claiming to be God, his readers knew exactly what that could look like.

Background: Jesus' Teaching

Paul's teaching in 2 Thessalonians also echoes what Jesus taught His disciples on the Mount of Olives, shortly before His death (Matthew 24; Mark 13; Luke 21). Jesus warned that false messiahs and false prophets would come, performing signs to deceive people. He spoke of the abomination that causes desolation from Daniel. He told His followers not to be alarmed or deceived, and said that no one knows the day or hour. Many of the same themes appear in 2

Thessalonians: don't be alarmed, don't be deceived, certain things must happen first, and Jesus will return in glory.

Later, the letters of John use the word antichrist, saying that many antichrists had already come, as well as a final antichrist to come (1 John 2:18). And Revelation describes a beast who demands worship. Many Christians connect these figures with Paul's man of lawlessness, though the Bible never explicitly says they are the same.

Why It Matters

2 Thessalonians was written to a church that was suffering, confused, and being misled. Paul's goal wasn't to give them a detailed timeline of the end of the world. It was to steady them. God is just. Jesus will win. Evil is limited. Don't believe every rumor. Hold on to the truth. Keep working. Keep doing good.

That makes it a very practical letter for anyone living in a world full of fear, rumors, and predictions.

The Map

Chapter 1: Thanks for the Thessalonians' growing faith and love, and a promise that God will bring justice when Jesus returns.

Chapter 2: The day of the Lord hasn't come yet. The rebellion and the man of lawlessness must come first. But God is in control, and the believers can stand firm.

Chapter 3: A request for prayer, and firm instructions about idleness, work, and church discipline.

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CHAPTER 1

God Will Set Things Right

2 Thessalonians 1

The letter opens almost exactly like 1 Thessalonians, with the same three names: Paul, Silas, and Timothy. (The NIV footnote reminds us that the Greek calls Silas by the longer form of his name, Silvanus.) They write to the Thessalonian church, which lives in the Father and in Jesus the Lord, and they wish them grace and peace.

Then Paul says something interesting. We ought to thank God for you, he says, and it's right to do so. The word ought sounds like an obligation, and some readers think it makes this letter sound cooler than the first one. But Paul may simply mean that thanking God for them isn't optional. It's the only fitting response to what God is doing in them.

What is God doing? Their faith is growing like crazy. And the love they have for each other keeps increasing. In his first letter, Paul prayed that their love would overflow (1 Thessalonians 3:12). Now he sees that prayer being answered.

> BACKGROUND CHECK **Growing Faith**
>
> Paul uses a word for growing that means growing beyond what's normal, like a plant shooting up much faster than expected. In 1 Thessalonians, Paul worried that something might be missing in their faith. Now he's bragging about it. Faith isn't static. It can grow, especially under pressure. Sometimes the hardest seasons are when faith grows fastest.

In fact, Paul says, he's boasting about the Thessalonians to other churches, telling them about their perseverance and faith in the middle of all the persecution and trouble they're going through.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Persecution**

We don't know exactly what the Thessalonian believers were facing. It probably wasn't official, empire-wide persecution; that came later. It was more likely local pressure: being shunned by family and friends, losing business or jobs, being mocked in public, being reported to city officials, maybe occasional violence. That's still what many Christians face in parts of the world today. For some, following Jesus costs relationships, jobs, safety, or even their lives. Organizations that track religious freedom estimate that hundreds of millions of Christians live in places where they face serious persecution.

Paul says their suffering actually shows that God judges rightly. That's a surprising statement. How can suffering be evidence of justice? Paul seems to mean that their faithful endurance shows that God is at work in them, preparing them for His kingdom. Their perseverance is a sign that they really belong to Him. And it's a reminder that God will one day make everything right.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Worthy of the Kingdom**

Paul says the Thessalonians will be counted worthy of God's kingdom, for which they are suffering. That doesn't mean they earned it by suffering. Paul's other letters make clear that salvation is a gift of grace. It means their faithfulness under pressure shows that they are the real thing. Gold is tested by fire to show that it's pure. The fire doesn't make it gold. It shows that it was gold all along.

Then Paul talks about justice. God is just, he says. He'll repay with trouble the people who are troubling them, and He'll give rest to them, and to Paul and his friends as well.

That's a big deal for people who are being treated unfairly. When you're bullied, mocked, or mistreated, one of the hardest things is the feeling that nobody sees and nothing will ever change. Paul says God sees. He keeps the books. And one day, He will settle every account.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Leave It to God**
>
> Knowing that God will bring justice frees you from having to get revenge yourself. Paul says the same thing in Romans 12: don't take revenge, but leave room for God's wrath, because He will repay. That doesn't mean you have to stay silent when you're mistreated. It's right to tell a trusted adult, to stand up for yourself and others, and to seek help. But you don't have to carry the burden of getting even. God will handle it, better and more fairly than you ever could.

When will this happen? Paul says it will be when Jesus is unveiled from heaven, surrounded by flaming fire and His mighty angels. Paul uses dramatic images, many of them borrowed from the Old Testament, where fire often represents God's holy presence, as at the burning bush or Mount Sinai.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Revealed**
>
> The Greek word for revealed is apokalypsis, where we get the word apocalypse. Today, apocalypse usually means a disaster, the end of the world. But the word actually means an uncovering or unveiling, like pulling a sheet off a statue. Right now, Jesus' rule is hidden from most people. One day it will be revealed for everyone to see. For people who love Him, that will be the best day ever.

Then Paul says something sobering. Jesus will punish those who don't know God and who refuse to obey the gospel. They'll be punished with everlasting destruction, shut out from the Lord's presence and from His glorious power. This will happen on the day

Jesus comes to be honored among His people and admired by all who have believed, including the Thessalonians, because they believed Paul's message.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **What Is Final Judgment Like?**
>
> Christians agree that the Bible teaches a real, final judgment, and that God's judgment will be perfectly just. They have discussed what it involves. Many Christians throughout history have understood passages like this one to describe eternal, conscious separation from God. Some Christians, sometimes called conditionalists or annihilationists, understand everlasting destruction to mean that the lost will finally cease to exist. A smaller number hope that God will ultimately rescue everyone, though most Christians believe that passages like this one rule that out. What Paul emphasizes here is that the worst part of judgment is being cut off from God's presence, the source of every good thing. And he says it so that his readers would trust that God is just, not so they would delight in anyone's destruction.

That's not an easy passage to read. But notice two things. First, Paul is writing to people who are being harmed by others, and he wants them to know that evil won't win in the end. Second, Paul's point is not that we should look down on anyone. Every one of us needs God's mercy. The same Jesus who will judge is the One who died to save. The gospel is an invitation to anyone who will turn to Him.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Justice and Mercy**
>
> People sometimes think a loving God wouldn't judge anyone. But think about it: if God didn't care about evil, would He really be loving? Imagine a judge who let a criminal who hurt your family walk away without consequence, because he was nice. You wouldn't call that love. You'd call it injustice. God's love and justice go together. And on the cross, they meet: God takes evil seriously enough to punish it, and loves us enough to take that punishment on Himself.

Paul ends the chapter with a prayer. With all this in mind, he says, we keep praying for you, that God will make them worthy of the life He's called them to, and that His power will bring to life every good desire you have and every action that comes from your faith.

Notice that Paul doesn't pray for their persecution to stop. He prays that they'll live well in the middle of it. He asks God to take their good intentions, the things they want to do for Him, and give them the power to actually do them.

And the goal is this: that Jesus' name would be honored through them, and they through Him, all by the grace of God and of Jesus Christ.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **God and Lord**
>
> The NIV footnote on verse 12 points out that the last phrase could also be translated our God and Lord, Jesus Christ. In that reading, Paul calls Jesus God directly. Greek grammar allows both translations, and scholars debate which Paul meant. Either way, this letter, written only about twenty years after Jesus' resurrection, puts Jesus right alongside God the Father as the source of grace.

KEY VERSE

With this in mind, we constantly pray for you, that our God may make you worthy of his calling, and that by his power he may bring to fruition your every desire for goodness and your every deed prompted by faith.

2 Thessalonians 1:11 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Paul says the Thessalonians' faith was growing under pressure. Have you ever seen your faith grow during a hard time?
2. How does knowing that God will bring justice change the way you respond when someone treats you unfairly?
3. Why do you think it's important that God is both loving and just?
4. Paul prays for God to give power to their good desires. What's one good thing you want to do for God but haven't done yet?

TRY THIS *Look up a ministry that serves persecuted Christians around the world. Read one story, and pray for that person or church by name this week.*

CHAPTER 2

Don’t Be Shaken

2 Thessalonians 2

Now Paul gets to the main reason he’s writing. It’s about the return of Jesus and the gathering of His people to Him. Paul begs the Thessalonians not to be easily shaken or panicked by a claim that the Lord’s day is already here.

Where did that idea come from? Paul lists three possibilities: a prophecy, someone’s spoken teaching, or a letter that was supposedly from him. He doesn’t know which it was, or he doesn’t say. But it’s possible that someone was spreading a fake letter with Paul’s name on it.

> BACKGROUND CHECK **Fake News, Ancient Edition**
>
> Rumors and fake messages aren’t new. In the ancient world, letters could be forged, and false reports could spread quickly along trade routes. Today, it’s even easier. A fake screenshot, a viral video taken out of context, or a confident post about the end of the world can spread to millions of people in a few hours. Paul’s advice still works: don’t get shaken. Check the source. Compare it with what you already know is true. And remember that panic is rarely a sign that God is speaking.

Why would anyone think the day of the Lord had already come? Maybe the Thessalonians’ suffering was so intense that it felt like the end times had begun. Maybe someone was teaching that the resurrection had already happened in a spiritual sense, as some

people taught later (2 Timothy 2:18). Whatever the reason, it was causing fear, confusion, and, as we'll see in chapter 3, some people to quit their jobs.

Paul says: don't let anyone fool you. That day won't come until two things happen first. There will be a rebellion, and the man of lawlessness will be revealed, the one who is destined for destruction.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **The Rebellion**
>
> The Greek word is apostasia, where we get the English word apostasy. It usually means a revolt or a falling away. Paul may mean a widespread rebellion against God in the world, or a large-scale falling away from the faith among people who had claimed to follow Jesus, or both. A few interpreters have suggested it means a departure, referring to the church being taken away, but most scholars think the word refers to rebellion.
>
> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Lawlessness or Sin?**
>
> The NIV footnote says some manuscripts call him the man of sin instead of the man of lawlessness. In the Bible, the two ideas are closely connected. 1 John 3:4 says that sin is lawlessness. The figure Paul describes is someone who rejects God's authority completely and puts himself in God's place.

Paul describes him. He will oppose God and exalt himself over everything people call God or worship. He'll even take his seat in God's temple, claiming to be God himself.

If that sounds familiar, it's because Paul is drawing on the book of Daniel, which described a proud king who would exalt himself above every god (Daniel 11:36) and set up an abomination in the temple. As you read in Setting the Scene, Jewish readers had seen something like that when Antiochus IV desecrated the temple, and again, almost, when Caligula tried to put his statue there only about ten years before Paul wrote.

Paul reminds them that he taught them all this when he was with them. Then he says something that has puzzled readers ever since. You know what's restraining him, Paul says, so that he'll appear only when the time is right. The hidden force of lawlessness is active already. But the one restraining it will keep doing that until he's removed.

After that, the lawless one will appear. And Jesus will bring him down just by breathing on him, and wipe him out by the brilliance of His arrival.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **The Breath of His Mouth**
>
> Notice how easy the victory is. After all the buildup, the man of lawlessness, with all his power, signs, and deceptions, is defeated by Jesus' breath. It's not a long, close battle. Isaiah 11:4 describes the coming King from David's line striking down the wicked with the breath of His lips. Evil looks powerful. But next to Jesus, it's nothing.

Paul says the lawless one's coming will be the work of Satan. He'll use all kinds of power, signs, and wonders that serve a lie, and every kind of evil deception, to fool those who are perishing. They're perishing, Paul says, because they wouldn't love the truth that could save them. And so God sends them a strong delusion, so they'll believe the lie, and so everyone who has rejected the truth and enjoyed wickedness will be judged.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **A Powerful Delusion**
>
> This is one of the hardest verses in the letter. Does God trick people? Paul's point seems to be that God gives people over to what they have already chosen. They wouldn't love the truth. They enjoyed wickedness. So God allows them to have what they wanted. Romans 1 describes something similar: three times Paul says God gave people over to the desires they had chosen. Judgment isn't God forcing people to reject Him. It's God honoring their choice. And the warning is for everyone: loving the truth matters.

So who is the man of lawlessness? And what, or who, is holding him back? Paul said the Thessalonians knew, because he'd told them in person. Unfortunately, we weren't there. Even one of the greatest early Christian thinkers, Augustine, admitted around AD 420 that he didn't know what Paul meant. Christians have offered many answers. Here are the main approaches, briefly and fairly.

BACKGROUND CHECK **View 1: A Future Individual**

Many Christians, often called futurists, believe the man of lawlessness is a specific person who will appear in the future, shortly before Jesus returns. They often identify him with the Antichrist and with the beast of Revelation 13. Some believe he will sit in a literal, rebuilt temple in Jerusalem. Others think the temple is a picture of claiming divine authority over people's worship. This view is common among many evangelical and premillennial Christians, and it has roots in early church writers like Irenaeus and Hippolytus.

BACKGROUND CHECK **View 2: Fulfilled in the First Century**

Other Christians, often called preterists, believe Paul was describing events that would happen soon, in his own century. Some point to the Roman emperors who demanded worship, such as Caligula or Nero. Others point to the Jewish revolt against Rome and the destruction of the temple by the Roman general Titus in AD 70, when Roman soldiers set up their standards in the temple area and offered sacrifices to them. In this view, Paul's words were a warning to his first readers about real events in their future, though many preterists also believe in a final return of Jesus still to come.

BACKGROUND CHECK **View 3: A Pattern in History**

A third approach, called historicist, reads Paul as describing a long-term power or institution that would arise in history and claim God's authority. During the Reformation in the 1500s, some Protestant leaders, including Martin Luther and John Calvin, identified the man of lawlessness with the papacy. That view was part of the bitter conflicts of that era. The Catholic

Church strongly rejects it, and many Protestants today do not hold it either. Other historicists have pointed to different powers in history.

BACKGROUND CHECK **View 4: A Recurring Reality**

A fourth approach, sometimes called idealist, sees the man of lawlessness as a picture of a pattern that repeats throughout history: rulers and powers that set themselves up in God's place, demand total loyalty, and persecute God's people. In this view, every age has its versions of this figure, and Paul's main point is that such evil is real, already at work, and doomed. Many Christians combine this approach with a futurist one, believing the pattern will reach a final climax before Jesus returns.

Then there's the question of the restrainer. Interestingly, Paul refers to it two ways. In verse 6, it's a what. In verse 7, it's a who. So the restrainer may be a force or institution with a person at its head, or Paul may simply be using both ways of speaking.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Who or What Is Holding Him Back?**

Here are the main suggestions.

The Roman Empire and its laws. Many early Christian writers, like Tertullian, thought Rome's law and order held back chaos, with the emperor as the person in charge. Paul may have been careful not to name it in writing for safety's sake.

The Holy Spirit. Some believe the Spirit, working through the church, restrains evil in the world. Many pretribulation Christians believe the restrainer is removed when the church is caught up to meet the Lord.

The preaching of the gospel. Some think God holds back the end until the gospel has been preached to the nations (Matthew 24:14), with Paul himself, or the apostles, as the one restraining.

An angel. Some point to Michael, the archangel who protects God's people in Daniel 10 and 12.

God Himself, in His sovereign timing, or something we simply can't identify with certainty.

BACKGROUND CHECK **What Christians Agree On**

Across all these views, Christians agree on the main points of this passage. Evil is real, and it's already at work. But it's restrained; it can't go one step further than God allows. Deception is dangerous, so loving the truth matters. The day of the Lord hadn't come when Paul wrote, and no one should be panicked by people who say they know the timeline. And Jesus will win, completely and easily. You don't have to solve every puzzle in this passage to receive its comfort.

BACKGROUND CHECK **End-Times Hype**

Every generation has had people who were sure the end was coming in their lifetime, and many have named dates or identified the antichrist. So far, every one of those predictions has been wrong. Paul's message to the Thessalonians was the opposite of hype: calm down, don't be deceived, keep living faithfully. If someone tells you they've figured out exactly when the world will end, remember what Jesus said: no one knows the day or hour (Matthew 24:36).

After that heavy section, Paul changes his tone completely. But we ought to thank God for you, he says, brothers and sisters whom the Lord loves. God chose you to be saved, through the Spirit's work making you holy and through your trust in the truth.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Firstfruits or From the Beginning?**

The NIV says God chose them as firstfruits, but the footnote says some manuscripts read from the beginning. The two Greek words look very similar. Firstfruits were the first part of the harvest, offered to God as a sign that the rest of the harvest would follow. If that's the right reading, the Thessalonians were among the first in their region to believe, a promise of many more to come. If it's from the beginning, Paul is saying God's choice of them goes back before time. Either way, their salvation started with God.

Paul says God called them through the gospel Paul preached, so that they could share in the glory of Jesus. Notice the contrast. The man

of lawlessness grabs at glory that isn't his. The believers receive glory as a gift.

So, Paul says, stand firm, and hold on to the teachings he passed on to them, whether in person or by letter.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Teachings or Traditions?**
>
> The NIV footnote says the word translated teachings can also mean traditions. It means something handed down. Paul is referring to the message about Jesus and the instructions he had given them. Christians have discussed how this applies today. Catholic and Orthodox Christians believe that the church's authoritative tradition, handed down from the apostles, stands alongside Scripture. Protestant Christians generally believe that what the apostles handed down is now preserved for us in the New Testament, which is the final authority. All agree that the apostles' teaching is the foundation the church must hold on to.

Then Paul prays. He asks Jesus Himself, and God the Father, who loved us and graciously gave us lasting comfort and a good hope, to encourage their hearts and strengthen them in every good thing they do and say.

After all the talk about lawlessness and deception, Paul ends with love, grace, encouragement, and hope. That's the point. He didn't tell them about the man of lawlessness to scare them, but to steady them. The God who controls the timeline loves them.

KEY VERSE

May our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father, who loved us and by his grace gave us eternal encouragement and good hope, encourage your hearts and strengthen you in every good deed and word.

2 Thessalonians 2:16–17 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Have you ever been scared by an end-times prediction, rumor, or video? How did you respond?
2. Paul says people perish because they wouldn't love the truth. What does it look like to love the truth, even when it's uncomfortable?
3. Which view of the man of lawlessness have you heard before? Which questions does this chapter raise for you?
4. How does it help to know that evil is restrained and that Jesus will defeat it easily?

TRY THIS *The next time you see a dramatic claim online, about the end of the world or anything else, practice Paul's advice: don't panic. Check the source, look for evidence, and compare it with what you know is true before you share it.*

CHAPTER 3

Never Tire of Doing Good

2 Thessalonians 3

Paul begins his final chapter with a request. Pray for us, he says, that the Lord's message will spread quickly and be honored, the way it was among the Thessalonians. And pray that we'll be rescued from wicked and evil people, because not everyone has faith.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Running Fast**
>
> The word Paul uses for spreading literally means running. It may echo Psalm 147:15, which says God's word runs swiftly. Paul pictures the gospel like a runner racing from city to city. In Paul's day, the message had already run from Jerusalem to Syria, Asia, Macedonia, and Greece in about twenty years. Paul asks the Thessalonians to pray that it keeps running, and that people will honor it when it arrives.

Paul knew he was facing real opposition. In Corinth, where he was probably writing, some of the local Jewish leaders opposed him so strongly that they eventually dragged him before the Roman governor, Gallio (Acts 18:12–17). Paul wasn't a superhero who didn't need help. He asked his friends to pray for him.

Then Paul turns from people who aren't faithful to the God who is. But the Lord is faithful, he says. He'll make you strong and guard you against the evil one.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Evil One**

Paul uses a phrase that Jesus also used in the Lord's Prayer, where He taught His followers to ask to be delivered from the evil one (Matthew 6:13). After all the talk in chapter 2 about Satan's deceptions, Paul wants the Thessalonians to know that they're not defenseless. God Himself guards them. Satan is real, but he's not equal to God. He's a defeated enemy on a short leash.

Paul says he's confident that they're doing what he taught them and will keep doing it. And he prays that the Lord will steer their hearts toward God's love and toward the endurance Christ showed. That's a beautiful prayer. When life is hard, you need two things: to know you're loved, and the strength to keep going. Paul prays for both.

Now Paul gets to a practical problem that's been building since his first letter. He mentioned it briefly in 1 Thessalonians, telling them to live quietly and work with their hands, and to warn those who were idle. Apparently, it hadn't gotten better.

With Jesus' authority, Paul says, stay away from any believer who is lazy and disorderly and doesn't live by the teaching he gave them. The NIV footnote says teaching here can also mean tradition, the same word as in chapter 2.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Idle and Disruptive**

The Greek word Paul uses originally described soldiers who broke ranks and wouldn't stay in formation. It came to mean disorderly, undisciplined, or out of line. The NIV translates it idle and disruptive, because these people weren't just lazy. They were also causing problems. They had stopped working, depended on others to support them, and spent their time meddling in other people's business.

Why had they stopped working? We don't know for sure. Some think it was connected to the end-times confusion in chapter 2: if Jesus might come back any day, why bother working? Others point

out that in Roman society, many poorer people attached themselves to wealthy patrons, who supported them in exchange for loyalty and public praise. Maybe some believers expected wealthier Christians to support them that way. Maybe it was a mix of both.

Paul reminds them of his own example. When he was in Thessalonica, he didn't sit around. He paid for every meal he ate. He and his team worked hard, night and day, so they wouldn't be a burden. And Paul adds that he had the right to ask for support, as a teacher of the gospel. But he chose not to, so he could be a model for them.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Paul the Tentmaker**
>
> Acts 18:3 says Paul was a tentmaker. That probably meant he worked with leather and heavy cloth, making tents, awnings, and other goods. Jewish teachers were often expected to learn a trade, so they wouldn't have to charge for teaching. Paul probably rented space in a workshop and talked with customers and coworkers about Jesus while he worked. Many Christians today follow his example by sharing their faith at work, at school, or wherever they spend their days.

Then comes the verse that has often been quoted, and misquoted. When we were with you, Paul says, we gave you this rule: "The one who is unwilling to work shall not eat."

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Read It Carefully**
>
> Notice exactly what Paul says. He doesn't say anyone who doesn't work shall not eat. He says anyone who is unwilling to work. Paul is talking about able-bodied people who could work but chose not to, and who expected others to support them while they stirred up trouble. He is not talking about people who can't work: children, the elderly, people who are sick or have disabilities, people who have lost their jobs, people caring for family members, or anyone else in genuine need. The Bible repeatedly commands God's people to care for the poor, the widow, the orphan, and the stranger (Deuteronomy 15:7–11;

James 1:27). The early church shared food with those in need every day (Acts 6:1), and Paul himself spent years collecting money for poor believers in Jerusalem.

BACKGROUND CHECK **A Verse Used Out of Context**

Paul's rule has been quoted in many settings over the centuries. Captain John Smith used it in the English colony at Jamestown in 1609 to force colonists to work. A version of it was written into the first constitution of Soviet Russia in 1918. Politicians and commentators still quote it in debates about welfare and poverty. Whatever your views on those debates, it's important to remember what Paul was actually addressing: a specific problem in a small church, where people who could work were choosing not to and were taking advantage of others' generosity.

BACKGROUND CHECK **How the Early Church Cared**

The early Christians became famous for their generosity. In the fourth century, the Roman emperor Julian, who wanted to bring back the old gods, complained in a letter that the Christians supported not only their own poor but pagans too, while the pagans did nothing for their own. An early Christian handbook called the Didache, probably from around AD 100, told churches to welcome traveling believers, but if a visitor wanted to stay, he should work for his food if he had a trade, and the church should help him find a way to make a living. It warned against people who used the name of Christ to make money without working. That's the balance Paul was aiming for: generosity to those in need, and responsibility for those who are able.

Paul says he's heard that some of them aren't busy, they're busybodies. In Greek, it's a pun, something like they're not working; they're working around. Instead of doing their own work, they were in everyone else's business.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Busybodies**

A busybody is someone who meddles in other people's lives, spreading gossip, stirring up drama, and minding everyone's business except their own.

Social media makes it easier than ever. You can spend hours following other people's drama, commenting on it, and passing it along. Paul's advice is simple: focus on your own work. Do what you're responsible for, and do it well.

To people like that, Paul says, in the Lord Jesus Christ, settle down and earn your own food. Get to work, quietly.

And then Paul turns to everyone else, those who had been working hard and supporting others, and who might have been getting frustrated. As for you, he says, never tire of doing good.

That's important. When some people take advantage of your kindness, it's tempting to stop being kind. Paul says don't. Use wisdom, but keep doing good. Don't let the people who abuse generosity make you stop being generous.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Work**

In the Bible, work isn't a punishment. Before sin ever entered the world, God gave Adam the job of working the garden and taking care of it (Genesis 2:15). Work is part of how we reflect God, who works too. Your work right now might be homework, chores, a part-time job, sports practice, or helping your family. Doing it well, without being asked twice, is a way of honoring God. And earning your own way, as much as you're able, is a gift to the people around you.

If anyone refuses to listen to what Paul says in this letter, take note of them, he says, and don't associate with them, so they'll feel ashamed. But don't treat them like an enemy. Warn them like a brother or sister.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Discipline with Love**

Paul's instructions about stepping back from someone can sound harsh. But notice his goal. It's not to punish or reject them, but to help them realize something is wrong and turn around. And he insists that they're still family.

> Don't treat them as an enemy. In healthy churches, correction is always aimed at restoring people, not pushing them out. If you ever need to step back from a friend who's making destructive choices, you can still care about them, pray for them, and hope for them to come back.

Paul finishes with a prayer for peace. He asks the Lord of peace to give them peace always, in every situation, and to be with all of them.

That's a great prayer for a church that had been shaken by persecution, confusion, rumors, and conflict. Paul doesn't promise that their circumstances will be peaceful. He prays that the Lord of peace will give them peace Himself, always and in every situation. Peace isn't just the absence of trouble. It's the presence of Jesus.

Then Paul takes the pen and writes the final greeting himself. He says this is the mark in all his letters, how they can tell a letter is really from him. Remember the possible fake letter from chapter 2. Paul wants them to recognize his handwriting so they won't be fooled again.

And his very last word, as always, is grace. He prays for the grace of Jesus to be with them all. Notice the word all. Even the idle and disruptive. Even the confused. Even the ones who needed a warning. Grace is for everyone.

KEY VERSE

And as for you, brothers and sisters, never tire of doing what is good.

2 Thessalonians 3:13 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Paul asks his friends to pray for him. Who could you ask to pray for you? Who could you pray for?
2. What's the difference between people who can't work and people who won't? Why is it important to be careful not to confuse them?
3. Have you ever stopped being kind because someone took advantage of you? What would it look like to keep doing good, with wisdom?
4. Where are you tempted to be a busybody instead of minding your own work?

TRY THIS *Pick one responsibility you usually put off, homework, a chore, practice, or a job, and do it this week without being reminded. Then find one way to quietly do good for someone who can't pay you back.*

THE END (AND THE BEGINNING)

Now What? The Bottom Line

You've just walked through Paul's second letter to the Thessalonians. It's a letter about justice: God will one day set everything right. That's good news for the people who've been hurt. But it raises a hard question for all of us, because we've all done wrong too. Here's the good news about how God's justice and His mercy meet.

Here's what the Bible says, as plainly as I can put it.

1 God made you, and He's calling you.

Paul says God calls people through the gospel so they can share in the glory of Jesus. You were made for that.

> *He called you to this through our gospel, that you might share in the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.* **2 Thessalonians 2:14 (NIV)**

2 We've all turned away.

We've all gone our own way instead of God's. The Bible calls it sin, and it separates us from God.

> *for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,* **Romans 3:23 (NIV)**

3 Sin has a real cost.

God is just, so He doesn't shrug off evil, ours or anyone else's. The Bible says the result of sin is death, separation from God forever.

> *For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.* **Romans 6:23 (NIV)**

4 Jesus took our place.

Jesus died on the cross for our sins and rose again. On the cross, God's justice and His love met. Jesus took the punishment we deserved.

> *But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.* **Romans 5:8 (NIV)**

5 You can't earn it. You receive it.

Salvation isn't a reward for being good enough. It's a gift you receive by trusting Jesus.

> *For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast.* **Ephesians 2:8–9 (NIV)**

6 Turn and trust.

Turn from running your own life, and trust Jesus as your Savior and King. Love the truth, and you'll find it sets you free.

> *If you declare with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.* **Romans 10:9 (NIV)**

So what do you do with that? You don't need perfect words. You can talk to God honestly, right now, wherever you are. If it helps, you could pray something like this:

> *God, You are just, and I've sinned against You. I can't fix that myself. Thank You that Jesus took the punishment I deserved when He died on the cross, and that You raised Him from the dead. I'm turning to You. Forgive me. I trust Jesus as my Savior, and I want to follow Him as*

my King. Help me love the truth, stand firm, and never get tired of doing good. In Jesus' name, amen.

If You Just Said Yes

Tell someone. A parent, a youth leader, a pastor, or a Christian friend. Start there.

Read the real thing. Read 1 and 2 Thessalonians side by side. Then read 1 Timothy, the next letter in the New Testament.

Find your people. Get connected to a church where the Bible is taught and Jesus is honored. Stand firm together. Ask about being baptized.

Talk to God every day. Pray for others, as Paul did, and ask them to pray for you. Be honest. He can handle it.

Not Sure Yet?

Not ready? That's honest, and honesty is a good place to start. Keep asking. Keep reading. Talk to someone you trust. Just don't settle for "I already know all that."

Because if Paul is right, God will one day set everything right, and it's worth finding out for yourself where you'll stand.

Now may the Lord of peace himself give you peace at all times and in every way. The Lord be with all of you.

2 Thessalonians 3:16 (NIV)

PAUL'S FIRST LETTER TO TIMOTHY

The King's Household

1 Timothy, Unfiltered

For teens who think they've heard it all

BILL McLEOD

Papa Bill Books

The King's Household: Paul's First Letter to Timothy, Unfiltered

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All Scripture quotations in this book are from the NIV. Some are abridged, with omissions marked by ellipses; paraphrases are not placed in quotation marks.

Pronouns referring to God the Father, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit are capitalized for reverence in the author's own words. Inside Scripture quotations, capitalization and wording follow the 2011 NIV exactly.

AI Disclosure. This book was written by Bill McLeod with the assistance of artificial intelligence tools for drafting, research, and editing. All content was reviewed and approved by the author, who takes full responsibility for it. Readers are encouraged to open the Scriptures and study them for themselves.

A WORD TO THE READER

Before You Start

If you've read the earlier books in this series, you know the saying by now: "If you want to get something done, hire a teenager while they still know it all." It's been in every book. It's not leaving now.

Up to now, Paul's letters in this series have been written to churches. 1 Timothy is different. It's a letter from an older mentor to a younger friend, a man Paul calls his true son in the faith. Timothy had been given a tough job: leading the church in a big, complicated city where some teachers had gone off the rails. He was younger than many of the people he was supposed to lead, and some of them seem to have looked down on him for it.

So Paul writes to encourage him and give him instructions. Along the way, the letter covers a lot of ground: how to deal with false teaching, how to pray, what to look for in church leaders, how to treat older and younger people, how to care for widows, and what to do about money.

That last topic might be the most relevant one for you. This letter contains one of the most famous warnings in the Bible: the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. In a world full of influencers, get-rich-quick schemes, and constant pressure to buy more, Paul's words about contentment hit hard.

And it contains a verse written especially for young people: don't let anyone look down on you because you're young, but set an example. Paul believed young people could lead, not someday, but now. Let's go.

How This Book Works

This book walks through all six chapters of 1 Timothy, in order, one chapter of this book for each chapter of the letter. Each one explains what Paul is saying in plain language and adds background about Ephesus, the early church, and the Roman world.

Before chapter 1, a section called Setting the Scene introduces Timothy, explains what was going wrong in Ephesus, and describes the debate over who wrote this letter and the two others like it, 2 Timothy and Titus. Read it first.

Each chapter ends with a Key Verse quoted word for word from the New International Version (NIV), the same translation used for every Scripture quotation in this book (pronouns for God are capitalized in the author's own words out of reverence; inside Scripture quotations, capitalization follows the NIV exactly); Real Talk questions to think through alone or argue about with friends; and a Try This challenge.

This book quotes 1 Timothy sparingly and explains it mostly in my own words, so keep a Bible open next to it. Read each chapter of the letter first, then the chapter here. Don't take my word for it. Take His.

FOR THE ADULTS

A Note for Parents and Youth Leaders

Thank you for putting this book in a teenager's hands. Like the earlier books in this series, on the Gospels, Acts, and Paul's letters from Romans to 2 Thessalonians, it's written for readers who can smell a sermon coming a mile away. I've tried to write honestly, directly, with some humor, and with real respect for what these readers can handle.

This book follows the letter format of the earlier volumes, walking through 1 Timothy chapter by chapter. I've quoted the letter sparingly and relied mostly on paraphrase, background, and discussion material. Wherever Scripture is quoted directly, in the chapters and in the Key Verses, the wording is from the New International Version (NIV).

Paul's instructions about women in 2:9–15 are understood differently by sincere, Bible-believing Christians. I've presented complementarian and egalitarian readings fairly, with the main arguments for each, without endorsing either. You may want to share your own church's view with your teen and talk through why you hold it.

I've also presented the debate over the authorship of the Pastoral Epistles (1 and 2 Timothy and Titus), giving the main arguments on each side. The letter presents itself as Paul's, and I refer to the author as Paul throughout. Other sensitive topics, including the list

of sins in 1:9–10, the instructions about slaves in 6:1–2, and the advice about wine in 5:23, are handled briefly and carefully.

The letter's teaching on money and contentment (6:6–19) and its encouragement to young believers (4:12) are highlighted as especially relevant for teens.

The Real Talk questions are designed for discussion. They work well for a youth group, a small group, a family dinner table, or a car ride. Don't rush to the right answer. Let them wrestle. Faith that has been thought through tends to last.

My prayer is that every reader will discover that they don't have to wait until they're older to set an example, and that they'll find the life that is truly life.

Grace and peace,

Bill McLeod

Papa Bill Books

BEFORE YOU OPEN THE LETTER

Setting the Scene

Who Was Timothy?

Timothy grew up in Lystra, a town in the Roman province of Galatia, in what is now central Turkey. His mother, Eunice, was a Jewish believer, and so was his grandmother, Lois (2 Timothy 1:5). His father was Greek. From childhood, Timothy had been taught the Scriptures (2 Timothy 3:15).

Paul probably met Timothy's family on his first missionary journey, when he preached in Lystra and was stoned and left for dead (Acts 14). When Paul came back on his second journey, Timothy had become a believer with a great reputation, and Paul invited him to join the team (Acts 16:1–3). From then on, Timothy was one of Paul's closest partners. He's named as co-sender of six of Paul's letters, and Paul sent him on many important missions, including to Thessalonica, Corinth, and Philippi. Paul told the Philippians he had no one else like Timothy (Philippians 2:20).

We also get hints about his personality. He seems to have been somewhat timid (2 Timothy 1:7), he had frequent stomach problems (1 Timothy 5:23), and he was young enough that some people didn't take him seriously (4:12).

How Young Was Young?

When Paul tells Timothy not to let anyone look down on him because he's young, Timothy probably wasn't a teenager anymore. If he joined Paul around AD 49 as a young man, he may have been

in his thirties when this letter was written. But in the Roman world, a man could be called young until around age forty. Older men were expected to lead, and many people automatically respected age over everything else. So in a church full of older leaders, Timothy was the young guy, and that made his job harder.

Back to Ephesus

Timothy was in Ephesus, the great city on the west coast of what is now Turkey. If you've read the Ephesians volume in this series, you'll remember it: the huge Temple of Artemis, the magic scrolls burned in public, the riot in the theater (Acts 19). Paul had spent about three years there and knew the church well.

When Paul said goodbye to the Ephesian elders, he warned them that savage wolves would come in among them, and that even some of their own leaders would twist the truth to draw followers after them (Acts 20:29–30). By the time of 1 Timothy, that warning had come true.

What Was Going Wrong?

Paul never describes the false teaching in Ephesus in full, but he gives clues. Some people were obsessed with myths and endless genealogies, family trees and speculative stories, perhaps based on Old Testament characters. Some wanted to be teachers of the law but didn't understand it. Some taught that people should avoid marriage and certain foods. Some claimed special knowledge. Some were in it for the money. And some were stirring up arguments over words.

A few leaders had gone so far off track that Paul names them, like Hymenaeus and Alexander. In 2 Timothy, Paul says Hymenaeus taught that the resurrection had already happened. The teaching

may also have spread especially through some households and among some women in the church, which may help explain some of Paul's instructions in chapters 2 and 5.

When Was It Written?

Paul says he had urged Timothy to stay in Ephesus while Paul went on to Macedonia. That's hard to fit into the story told in Acts. There are two main explanations.

One is that Paul was released from his first imprisonment in Rome, around AD 62, traveled again, possibly as far as Spain, and later was arrested again and executed under the emperor Nero, sometime around AD 64 to 67. An early Christian letter, 1 Clement, written around AD 95, says Paul reached the limits of the west. In this view, 1 Timothy was written in the mid-60s, during that later period of travel.

The other explanation, held by those who think a later follower of Paul wrote the letter, is that it was written after Paul's death, perhaps late in the first century or early in the second.

The Pastoral Epistles

1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, and Titus are often called the Pastoral Epistles, a name scholars started using in the 1700s, because they're written to leaders about shepherding, or pastoring, churches. They share a similar style, vocabulary, and set of concerns, so they're usually discussed together.

Who Wrote It? The Case Against

The letters say they're from Paul. But many modern scholars think they were written after Paul's death by a follower who wanted to

apply Paul's teaching to a new generation. Their main reasons are these.

The vocabulary and style are noticeably different from Paul's other letters; a significant number of words appear nowhere else in Paul. The church structure, with overseers, elders, deacons, and an official list of widows, seems more developed than in Paul's earlier letters. Faith often seems to mean a body of teaching to guard, rather than personal trust. The travel details are hard to fit into Paul's life as described in Acts. And an early teacher named Marcion, around AD 140, didn't include them in his collection of Paul's letters, though he may have rejected them for his own reasons.

Who Wrote It? The Case For

Many other scholars believe Paul wrote them. Their main reasons are these.

The early church accepted them as Paul's. Polycarp, writing in the early second century, seems to echo them, and Irenaeus, around AD 180, quotes them as Paul's. Their style could be different because they're written to individual coworkers about practical matters, not to churches about big theological questions, and because Paul may have used a secretary and given him some freedom; Luke was with him near the end (2 Timothy 4:11). Paul already mentions overseers and deacons in Philippians 1:1. The personal details, like a cloak left behind in 2 Timothy or Timothy's stomach trouble here, seem unlikely to be invented. And the travel details fit well if Paul was released from his first Roman imprisonment.

Some scholars take a middle view: that a follower of Paul may have used genuine notes or fragments from Paul, especially in 2 Timothy.

Christians on all sides agree that these letters belong in the Bible and speak with authority. In this book, I follow the letter's own claim and call the author Paul.

The Map

Chapter 1: Paul urges Timothy to stop the false teachers, and tells his own story as the worst of sinners saved by grace.

Chapter 2: Instructions about prayer for everyone, and about men and women in worship.

Chapter 3: Qualifications for overseers and deacons, and a short hymn about Jesus.

Chapter 4: Warnings about false teaching, training in godliness, and Paul's encouragement to young Timothy.

Chapter 5: How to treat different groups in the church: older and younger people, widows, and elders.

Chapter 6: Slaves and masters, the danger of loving money, and a final charge to fight the good fight.

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CHAPTER 1

The Worst of Sinners

1 Timothy 1

Paul opens with his name and title, an apostle of Christ Jesus, sent by order of God, who saves us, and of Jesus, our hope. Then he writes to Timothy, whom he calls his true son in the faith. Timothy wasn't Paul's biological son, but Paul had led him to faith, trained him, and traveled with him for years. Their relationship was like father and son.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Mentors**
>
> Everybody needs someone a few steps ahead of them in life, someone who can teach them, encourage them, and tell them the truth. Paul was that for Timothy. Who's that for you? A parent, a youth leader, a coach, a teacher, a grandparent? And who could you be that for? Even as a teenager, you can help someone younger than you grow in their faith.

Paul gets straight to the point. When he left for Macedonia, he asked Timothy to stay in Ephesus and stop certain people from teaching wrong things. They were obsessed with myths and endless family trees, which only led to arguments instead of helping people trust God.

The goal of Paul's instruction, he says, is love. Not winning arguments, not proving how smart you are, but love that comes from a pure heart, a clean conscience, and genuine faith. Some

people had wandered away from that and gotten lost in pointless talk.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Arguing about Everything**
>
> Some people love to argue about religion. They debate obscure details, fight over theories, and pick apart other people's beliefs, but their arguments don't make them kinder, humbler, or closer to God. Paul says that's a sign something has gone wrong. Good questions are great; Paul wasn't against thinking. But if your faith is mostly about arguing, and not about love, it's time to check your heart.

These teachers wanted to be experts in God's law, but they didn't actually understand it. Paul says the law is good, if it's used the right way. It isn't meant for people who are already living right. It's meant to expose and restrain sin. Then he gives a long list of the kinds of people the law addresses: those who rebel against God, those who are violent, the sexually immoral, liars, and others.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Paul's List**
>
> Paul's list in verses 9 and 10 follows roughly the order of the Ten Commandments: sins against God, against parents, murder, sexual sin, stealing (slave traders were kidnappers who stole people), and lying. Christians have discussed the meaning of some of the words in it, especially the term the NIV translates as those practicing homosexuality. Historic Christian teaching, held by most churches worldwide, understands verses like this to mean that sexual relationships outside marriage between a man and a woman fall outside God's design; some Christians today read these words differently. Whatever you conclude, notice two things. First, the list includes all of us; it mentions liars too. Second, Paul is about to call himself the worst sinner of all. Nobody gets to look down on anybody. And every person, whoever they are, deserves dignity and kindness. Mocking or bullying anyone is never what Jesus wants.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Slave Traders**

It's worth noticing that slave traders are on Paul's list. The Greek word described people who kidnapped others to sell them into slavery. In a world where slavery was everywhere, Paul names those who captured and sold human beings as among those who defy God's law. Centuries later, Christians who fought the slave trade pointed to verses like this one.

Then Paul tells his own story. He's thankful to Jesus, who gave him strength and trusted him with ministry, even though he used to be a blasphemer who persecuted believers and used violence. Paul had hunted Christians, dragged them to prison, and approved of their deaths (Acts 8:3; 22:4). But God showed him mercy, because he acted in ignorance and unbelief. And God's grace was poured out on him in overflowing amounts.

Then Paul shares a saying that the early Christians seem to have repeated often. He calls it trustworthy and worth accepting completely. Jesus came to rescue sinners, it says. And then Paul adds that he himself is the worst one.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Trustworthy Sayings**

1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, and Titus contain five sayings introduced with words like here is a trustworthy saying. They seem to be short summaries of truth that the early churches knew and repeated, a little like memory verses or mottos. This first one may be the best summary of the gospel ever written. Jesus came to save sinners. Not good people. Sinners.

Why would Paul call himself the worst of sinners? He wasn't being dramatic. He knew how much harm he had done to Jesus' people. And he says that's exactly why God showed him mercy: so that Jesus could use him as an example of His incredible patience. If God could save Paul, He can save anyone.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Nobody Is Too Far Gone**

Maybe you've done things you're ashamed of. Maybe you think God could never forgive you, or that you're too messed up to be useful to Him. Paul's story says otherwise. The man who once tried to destroy the church became its greatest missionary. Your past doesn't disqualify you. It might become the very story God uses to give someone else hope.

Paul is so overwhelmed by God's mercy that he breaks into praise: honor and glory forever to the eternal King, who never dies and can't be seen, the one and only God. Amen.

Then Paul turns back to Timothy. He reminds him of prophecies that were spoken about him, probably when he was commissioned for ministry, and tells him to use them to fight the battle well. Keep holding your faith and keep your conscience clean, Paul says. Some people have ignored their conscience, and their faith has been shipwrecked.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Shipwreck**

Paul knew about shipwrecks. He'd been through three of them by the time he wrote 2 Corinthians (11:25), and another one on his way to Rome (Acts 27). A ship usually doesn't sink all at once. It drifts off course, hits rocks, takes on water. Faith can be like that. People rarely walk away from God in a single moment. They ignore their conscience in small ways, again and again, until they're far off course. Paying attention to your conscience keeps you on course.

Paul names two people who had wrecked their faith: Hymenaeus and Alexander. He says he has handed them over to Satan so they'll learn not to blaspheme. That sounds frightening. It probably means Paul had removed them from the church's fellowship, putting them outside the community's protection, in the hope that the consequences would bring them back. Like the church discipline

Paul describes in 1 Corinthians 5, the goal was restoration, not revenge.

KEY VERSE

Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst.

1 Timothy 1:15 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Who is a mentor to you in your faith? Who could you mentor?
2. Paul says the goal of his teaching is love. How can you tell whether a religious conversation is helping people love God and others, or just causing arguments?
3. Paul called himself the worst of sinners. Why do you think it matters that the greatest missionary in the early church started out as an enemy of Jesus?
4. What are some small ways people ignore their conscience? How can you keep your faith from drifting?

TRY THIS *Write out 1 Timothy 1:15 and put it somewhere you'll see it. The next time you feel like you've messed up too badly for God, read it out loud.*

CHAPTER 2

One Mediator

1 Timothy 2

Paul's first instruction for the church in this chapter is about prayer. He urges that all kinds of prayers be offered for everyone: requests, prayers, intercession, and thanksgiving. And he specifically mentions kings and everyone in authority.

That's remarkable. The emperor at the time was probably Nero, who would later persecute Christians brutally. Paul tells believers to pray for him anyway. Why? So that Christians can live peaceful, quiet lives, full of godliness and respect. And because it pleases God, whose desire is for everyone to be rescued and come to know the truth.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Praying for Leaders**

It's easy to complain about leaders: presidents, governors, principals, coaches, even parents. Paul says to pray for them, whether you agree with them or not, whether they're kind or harsh, whether they're believers or not. Praying for someone doesn't mean approving of everything they do. It means asking God to work in their lives and through their decisions. And it can change your heart toward them too.

BACKGROUND CHECK **God Wants Everyone**

Paul says God's desire is for every single person to be saved. That means there's no one God isn't interested in: not the kid who sits alone at lunch, not the bully, not the friend who says they'll never believe, not the person who

seems too far gone. Christians have discussed how this fits with passages about God's choosing, and why not everyone is saved. But this verse makes God's heart clear. He doesn't want anyone to be lost.

Then Paul gives a short summary of the faith, which may have been another early Christian saying. There is one God. And there is "one mediator between God and mankind, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all people."

BACKGROUND CHECK **Mediator**

A mediator is someone who stands between two sides to bring them together, like a negotiator in a dispute or a translator between people who don't speak the same language. Because Jesus is fully God and fully human, He's the perfect go-between. He represents God to us and us to God. In a city like Ephesus, full of temples, priests, and spirits people thought they needed to appease, Paul says there's only one way to God, and it's open to everyone.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Ransom**

A ransom was a price paid to set someone free, like money paid to free a prisoner of war or buy a slave's freedom. Jesus used the same word when He said He came to give His life as a ransom for many (Mark 10:45). Paul says Jesus paid that price for everyone. That's how much you're worth to God.

Paul says he was appointed as a messenger and apostle to tell the Gentiles this message, and he adds, as if someone had doubted it, that he's telling the truth.

Then Paul gives instructions about men and women in worship. He wants the men in every place to pray with holy hands raised, not angry or quarreling. In the ancient world, people often prayed standing with their hands raised. Apparently some men in Ephesus were praying while fighting with each other. Paul says that's not okay.

Then Paul turns to women. He wants them to dress modestly and sensibly, not drawing attention with elaborate hairstyles, gold, pearls, or pricey outfits. Instead they should be known for doing good, which is what's fitting for women who say they worship God.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Modesty and Money**

Paul's words here are mostly about money and attention. In the Roman world, wealthy women displayed their status with elaborate braided hairstyles woven with gold and jewels, and with expensive clothing. In church, that could make poorer believers feel like second-class members. Some Roman writers also connected flashy fashion with a new, loose lifestyle among some upper-class women. Paul's point applies to everyone, guys and girls alike: don't use your appearance to show off, compete, or draw attention to yourself. Let people notice you for your character instead.

Next come the verses that Christians discuss more than almost any others about women in the church. Paul says a woman should learn quietly and with full submission. Then he writes, "I do not permit a woman to teach or to assume authority over a man; she must be quiet." He gives two reasons: God made Adam before Eve, and Eve, not Adam, was the one deceived. Then he adds, "But women will be saved through childbearing—if they continue in faith, love and holiness with propriety."

BACKGROUND CHECK **Some Things to Notice**

Before looking at the main interpretations, here are a few details. First, Paul tells women to learn. In much of the ancient world, women were rarely given religious education, so that instruction itself was significant. Second, the word for quietness is related to the word Paul used in verse 2 for the peaceful, quiet lives all believers should live; it can mean a calm, settled spirit, not necessarily total silence. Third, the NIV footnotes say the Greek words for woman and man can also mean wife and husband, so some think Paul is talking about marriage. Fourth, the word translated assume authority

appears nowhere else in the New Testament, and scholars debate whether it simply means to have authority or something more negative, like to domineer. Fifth, the NIV footnote says verse 15 literally says she will be saved, which has led to several interpretations.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Complementarian Reading**

Many Christians, often called complementarians, believe that men and women are equal in worth and dignity before God, but that God has given them different, complementary roles in the home and the church. They read these verses as a lasting principle: the role of pastor or elder, with its authority to teach the whole church, is reserved for qualified men. Their main reason is that Paul grounds his instruction in creation, in the order in which God made Adam and Eve, not in local circumstances. They note that Paul goes on in chapter 3 to describe the overseer as faithful to his wife. And they emphasize that women can and should serve in countless other ways, including teaching other women and children, leading ministries, praying, prophesying, and sharing the gospel. This view is held by many Catholic, Orthodox, and evangelical churches, though their practices differ.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Egalitarian Reading**

Many other Christians, often called egalitarians, believe that men and women are equal in worth and that all church roles, including pastor and elder, are open to both, based on gifting and calling. They read these verses as addressing a specific problem in Ephesus. False teachers were spreading their ideas, apparently with some success among women who had not yet had the chance to learn (see 5:13 and 2 Timothy 3:6). So Paul tells the women to learn first, and not to domineer or teach what they didn't yet understand. They note that Paul's word for authority is unusual and may mean domineer, and that I do not permit can describe a present practice rather than a rule for all time. They point to women Paul commended as ministry partners: Phoebe, a deacon (Romans 16:1); Priscilla, who taught Apollos (Acts 18:26); Junia, whom Paul calls outstanding among the apostles (Romans 16:7); and women who prophesied in church (1 Corinthians 11:5). They read the reference to Adam and Eve as an illustration of what happens when someone is deceived, not as

a rule about roles. This view is held by many mainline Protestant, Pentecostal, and evangelical churches.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Saved through Childbearing?**

Verse 15 is puzzling for both views. Paul clearly doesn't mean women are saved by having babies, since he teaches everywhere that salvation is by grace through faith. Some think he means women will be saved through the childbearing, the birth of Jesus, the promised offspring of Eve (Genesis 3:15). Some think he means women will be kept safe through childbirth, a dangerous experience in the ancient world. Some think he's affirming the value of marriage and motherhood against the false teachers, who were forbidding marriage (4:3). And some think he means women will be saved while living out their calling faithfully. The condition is the same for everyone: keep living in faith, love, and holiness.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Disagreeing Well**

Christians who love Jesus and take the Bible seriously have come to different conclusions about this passage. Both sides agree on a lot: men and women are equally made in God's image, equally saved by grace, equally gifted by the Spirit, and equally called to serve. They disagree about how these verses apply to specific church roles today. You'll probably encounter both views. Study the passage, listen to both sides, talk to the leaders in your church, and remember that the people on the other side are your brothers and sisters, not your enemies.

KEY VERSE

This is good, and pleases God our Savior, who wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth.

1 Timothy 2:3–4 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Who is a leader you find it hard to pray for? What would you pray for them?
2. Paul says there's one mediator between God and humanity. Why does it matter that Jesus is both God and human?
3. Paul's words about appearance are mostly about showing off. In what ways do people your age use their appearance to compete or draw attention?
4. What questions do you have about 1 Timothy 2:11–15? Who could you talk to about them?

TRY THIS *Make a list of leaders in your life, from the president to your principal to your parents, and pray for one of them each day this week.*

CHAPTER 3

God's Household

1 Timothy 3

In chapter 3, Paul turns to church leadership. He starts with another of his trustworthy sayings: if someone wants to be an overseer, that's a good thing to want. Leading God's people is a noble job.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Overseers, Elders, and Pastors**
>
> The Greek word for overseer is episkopos, which gives us the English word episcopal and is sometimes translated bishop. In the New Testament, overseers seem to be the same people who are called elders (compare Titus 1:5–7 and Acts 20:17, 28). They led, taught, and cared for local churches, and there were usually several of them in each church. Today, different churches organize their leadership differently, with pastors, priests, bishops, elders, or boards. But the qualities Paul lists here apply to Christian leaders of every kind.

Then Paul gives a list of qualities an overseer needs. What's striking is that almost all of them are about character, not talent. Only one, being able to teach, is really a skill. The rest describe the kind of person a leader should be.

An overseer should be above reproach, meaning no one can rightly accuse him of anything serious. He should be faithful to his wife, self-controlled, sensible, respectable, welcoming to guests, and able to teach. He shouldn't be a heavy drinker, violent, or a fighter, but gentle and peaceful. And he shouldn't love money.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Faithful to His Wife**

The Greek phrase literally means a one-woman man. Christians have understood it in several ways. Some think it rules out men who have more than one wife at a time (polygamy was rare but not unknown among Jews in that time). Some think it rules out men who have remarried after divorce or after their wife's death. Many think it simply means a man who is completely faithful to his wife, with no affairs and no wandering eyes. Whatever the exact meaning, the heart of it is clear: a leader's love life should be marked by faithfulness.

An overseer also has to lead his own household well, making sure his children obey and treat him with respect. Paul's logic is simple: if a man can't lead his own family well, he won't be able to look after God's church. He shouldn't be a new believer, either, or he might become proud and fall into the same trap as the devil, whose downfall church tradition has long linked to pride. And he needs a good reputation with people outside the church.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Translation Note**

The NIV footnote for verse 4 gives another possible reading. Instead of the father leading in a way that deserves respect, the Greek could mean that he makes sure his children obey him with proper respect. Either way, Paul is describing a home where love and respect go both ways, not one where a father rules by fear.

Then Paul turns to deacons. The word means servant. In the early church, deacons seem to have handled practical needs, like caring for the poor, so that the elders could focus on teaching and prayer (Acts 6:1–6 is often seen as the first example). Deacons also need to be respected, sincere, not heavy drinkers, and not greedy. They need to grip the faith's deep truths and keep their conscience clean. They should be tested first and serve only if there's nothing against them.

Verse 11 adds instructions for women. They also need to be respected, not gossips but self-controlled and trustworthy in everything. The NIV footnote says this could mean deacons' wives or women who are deacons. Since Paul calls Phoebe a deacon in Romans 16:1, many think he means women who served as deacons. Others think he means the wives of deacons, who would share in their husbands' work. Churches today differ on this.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Character First**

Paul's list is a great checklist for anyone, not just church leaders. Are you self-controlled? Are you gentle, or quick to fight? Do people trust you? Are you the same person at home that you are at church? Is your online life consistent with your faith? Leadership in God's kingdom doesn't start with charisma or popularity. It starts with character. You can start building that now.

Paul tells Timothy why he's writing all this. He hopes to visit soon, but in case he's delayed, he wants Timothy to know how people should behave in God's household. And then he describes the church in three ways: God's household, "the church of the living God, the pillar and foundation of the truth."

BACKGROUND CHECK **Pillar and Foundation**

The temple of Artemis in Ephesus was one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World, a massive building supported by more than a hundred huge marble columns. Everyone in Ephesus knew those pillars. Paul says that the real column holding up the truth isn't a building of marble. It's a community of people: the church. That means your church, with all its imperfections, has a very important job. It holds up the truth about Jesus for the world to see.

Then Paul quotes what most scholars think was an early Christian hymn or creed about Jesus. It's short, with six lines that move from Jesus' coming to earth to His return to heaven. It's the key verse for this chapter.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Hymn**

Look at the six lines: Line one is Jesus' birth: He came in a human body. Line two is probably His resurrection, when the Spirit proved He was who He said He was. Then angels saw Him. Then the message about Him went out to the nations. Then people around the world put their faith in Him. And the last line is His ascension into glory. The NIV footnote says vindicated by the Spirit could also be translated vindicated in spirit. Notice the way the lines go back and forth between earth and heaven. This may have been sung in the very first churches, making it one of the oldest Christian songs we know.

KEY VERSE

Beyond all question, the mystery from which true godliness springs is great: He appeared in the flesh, was vindicated by the Spirit, was seen by angels, was preached among the nations, was believed on in the world, was taken up in glory.

1 Timothy 3:16 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Why do you think almost every quality on Paul's list is about character rather than skill?
2. Which of the qualities in this chapter come most naturally to you? Which do you need to grow in?
3. Paul calls the church the pillar and foundation of the truth. What does that mean for how your church acts?
4. Which line of the hymn in verse 16 means the most to you? Why?

TRY THIS *Pick one quality from Paul's list in verses 2 and 3 that you want to grow in. Ask God every day this week to help you with it, and look for one chance each day to practice it.*

CHAPTER 4

Don’t Let Anyone Look Down on You

1 Timothy 4

Paul warns that the Spirit has made it clear that in the last days, some people will walk away from the faith. They’ll follow spirits that deceive them and teachings that come from demons. These teachings come through liars and hypocrites, whose consciences have been burned until they can’t feel anything anymore.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Later Times**
>
> When Paul talks about later times, he doesn’t necessarily mean some distant future. The New Testament writers saw the whole period between Jesus’ first coming and His return as the last days (see Acts 2:17 and Hebrews 1:2). Paul believed this was already happening in Ephesus. False teachers had shown up, just as Jesus warned they would (Matthew 24:11).

What were these false teachers saying? They were telling people not to marry and to avoid certain foods. That might sound strange. But in the ancient world, some groups believed the physical world was bad and that truly spiritual people should reject physical pleasures like food and marriage. Paul says no. Everything God created is good. Nothing should be rejected if it’s received with thanks, because it’s made holy by God’s word and prayer.

BACKGROUND CHECK **God Made It Good**

Some people think being spiritual means being against everything fun or physical. That's not Christianity. God created food, friendship, marriage, music, sports, nature, laughter, and the human body, and He called it good (Genesis 1:31). That doesn't mean anything goes. God's gifts are meant to be used His way. But we can enjoy them with gratitude, knowing they come from Him. Saying grace before meals is a small way of remembering that.

Paul tells Timothy that if he teaches these things, he'll be a good servant of Jesus, nourished by the truths of the faith. He tells him to reject godless myths and silly stories, which the NIV calls old wives' tales. Instead, Timothy should train himself to be godly.

Then Paul makes a comparison that every athlete will understand. Physical training is worth something, but godliness is worth something in every area, and it holds promise for this life and the next.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Training for Godliness**

The word Paul uses for training is gymnazo, which gives us the word gymnasium. Ephesus had several gymnasiums where young men trained their bodies, and athletes there competed in games. Paul isn't against exercise. He's saying that if you work that hard on your body, which won't last forever, how much more should you work on your soul, which will? Training for godliness works like physical training. It takes regular practice: reading the Bible, praying, worshiping, serving, and making good choices again and again, even when you don't feel like it. You don't get spiritually strong by accident.

Paul says this, too, is a trustworthy saying worth accepting completely. That's why we work hard and keep going, because our hope is in the living God, the Savior of everyone, especially of those who believe.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Savior of All?**

What does Paul mean when he calls God the Savior of all people, especially of believers? Some think it means God cares for and preserves all people in this life, and saves believers eternally. Some think it means Jesus died for everyone, but only those who believe receive the gift. Very few Christians have read it to mean that everyone will be saved no matter what, since Paul talks elsewhere about the need for faith. What's clear is that God's love is offered to every single person.

Then come the verses that are the highlight of this chapter for teenagers. Paul tells Timothy to command and teach these things. And then he says, "Don't let anyone look down on you because you are young."

BACKGROUND CHECK **How Young Was Timothy?**

Timothy had been traveling with Paul for more than ten years by the time Paul wrote this letter, so he was probably in his thirties. That might not sound young to you. But in the ancient world, people were often considered young until they were around forty. Leaders were expected to be older, and age was associated with wisdom. Timothy was leading a church where many of the elders were probably older than him. Some people may have dismissed him because of his age. Paul tells him not to let that stop him.

But Paul doesn't say, demand that people respect you, or argue with anyone who doesn't take you seriously. He says to set an example. In other words, earn respect by how you live. Paul names five areas: speech, conduct, love, faith, and purity.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Five Ways to Set an Example**

Speech: How do you talk? Are your words kind, honest, and encouraging, or harsh, crude, and gossipy? That includes texts, comments, and posts. Conduct: How do you act, especially when no one's watching? Love: Do you treat people well, including the ones who are hard to love? Faith: Do you trust God, even when life is hard? Purity: Do you keep your thoughts and actions,

including your relationships and what you watch, clean before God? You don't have to wait until you're an adult to be a leader in these areas. You can be an example to adults right now.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Young and Influential**

Throughout the Bible, God uses young people. Joseph was a teenager when God gave him dreams. Samuel heard God's voice as a boy. David was young when he faced Goliath. Josiah became king at eight and later led a revival. Jeremiah said he was too young, and God told him not to say that (Jeremiah 1:6–7). Mary was probably a teenager when she agreed to be the mother of Jesus. God doesn't wait until you're older to use you.

Paul continues. Until he comes, Timothy should focus on reading Scripture publicly to the church, preaching, and teaching. In the early church, many people couldn't read or afford copies of Scripture, so hearing it read aloud in worship was how they learned it.

Paul tells Timothy not to neglect the spiritual gift he received when the elders laid hands on him and prophesied over him. He should work hard at these things and throw himself into them completely, so everyone can see him growing.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Don't Waste Your Gift**

God has given every believer spiritual gifts (1 Corinthians 12:7). Maybe you're good at encouraging people, teaching, organizing, serving, praying, making music, or welcoming newcomers. Timothy may have been tempted to hold back, maybe because he was young, or shy, or intimidated. Paul says, use it. And notice that Paul talks about progress, not perfection. You don't have to be perfect. You just need to keep growing.

Finally, Paul tells Timothy to pay close attention to his own life and his teaching, and to stick with them. Both matter. If Timothy does that, he'll save himself and the people who hear him. Paul doesn't

mean Timothy can earn salvation. He means that staying faithful will keep Timothy on the path of faith and help others find it too.

KEY VERSE

Don't let anyone look down on you because you are young, but set an example for the believers in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith and in purity.

1 Timothy 4:12 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Have you ever felt like people didn't take you seriously because of your age? How did you respond?
2. Which of the five areas in 4:12 is your strongest? Which is your weakest?
3. Paul compares spiritual training to physical training. What does your spiritual workout look like right now? What could you add?
4. What spiritual gifts do you think God has given you? How could you use them more?

TRY THIS *Choose one of the five areas in 4:12 and set a specific goal for this week, like going a whole day without saying anything negative about anyone, or reading a chapter of the Bible every day. Tell a friend or parent so they can check in with you.*

CHAPTER 5

Family Matters

1 Timothy 5

Paul begins chapter 5 with advice for how Timothy should treat people in the church. Instead of harshly scolding an older man, Timothy should appeal to him the way he would to his own father. He should treat younger men like brothers, older women like mothers, and younger women like sisters, keeping everything completely pure.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **The Church Is a Family**
>
> Paul has already called the church God's household (3:15). Now he spells out what that means. The people at church aren't just an audience or a club. They're family. That changes how you treat them. You show respect to older people, even when you disagree with them. You treat people your own age like brothers and sisters, not as rivals, and not as people to use or impress. The phrase with absolute purity is a strong reminder for dating and friendships: treat others the way you'd want someone to treat your own brother or sister.

Then Paul spends a long section on widows. In the ancient world, a woman whose husband had died was often in serious trouble. There were few jobs for women, no government programs, and no insurance. Without a husband or grown children, a widow could easily end up hungry or homeless. From the beginning, the church

took care of widows (Acts 6:1). But by the time Paul wrote this letter, the church in Ephesus needed some guidelines.

Paul says the church should honor and support widows who are truly in need. But when a widow has kids or grandkids, the family should look after her first. Faith starts at home, and caring for your parents and grandparents is a way to repay them for caring for you. That pleases God.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Faith Starts at Home**
>
> Paul says that anyone who refuses to provide for their relatives, especially the people in their own home, has turned their back on the faith and is acting worse than someone who doesn't believe. That's strong. Even people who don't follow Jesus usually take care of their families. Christians should do better, not worse. For you right now, this might mean helping out at home without being asked, being kind to your siblings, spending time with your grandparents, or simply honoring your parents. Someday it may mean caring for your parents when they're old. Faith that doesn't show up at home isn't real faith.

A widow who's truly alone trusts God with her future and keeps praying day and night. But a widow who lives only for pleasure is spiritually dead, even though she's alive.

Then Paul talks about a list of widows. This seems to have been an official group that the church supported and who probably served the church in return through prayer and good works. To be on the list, a widow had to be over sixty, faithful to her husband, and known for good deeds like raising children, welcoming guests, washing the feet of believers, and helping people in trouble.

Paul says younger widows shouldn't be put on the list. He's concerned that they might make a pledge to serve Christ without remarrying and then break it when they want to marry again. He

also says some were going from house to house, gossiping and saying things they shouldn't. So he advises younger widows to remarry, have children, and manage their homes, so that critics of the church have no reason to attack it.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Reading This Section Today**
>
> Some of Paul's words about younger widows can sound harsh to modern ears. Remember the context. Paul is dealing with a specific situation in Ephesus, where false teachers were apparently spreading their ideas from house to house (compare 2 Timothy 3:6), and where the church had limited resources. He's not saying all young women are gossips, or that women's only value is in marriage. Elsewhere Paul praises single people who devote themselves to the Lord (1 Corinthians 7:8, 34). The principle behind Paul's advice is that the church should care wisely for people in need, families should do their part, and everyone should live in a way that gives no one a reason to criticize the gospel.

Next, Paul turns to elders. Elders who lead well, especially those who preach and teach, deserve double honor. Paul backs this up with two quotes. The first is from the Old Testament law: "Do not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain" (Deuteronomy 25:4). The second is "The worker deserves his wages," which is exactly what Jesus said in Luke 10:7.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Double Honor**
>
> Double honor probably means both respect and financial support. Just as farmers let the ox eat as it worked, churches should provide for those who work hard to teach and lead them. It's interesting that Paul calls the words of Jesus Scripture, alongside the Old Testament. That suggests the teachings of Jesus, maybe even the Gospel of Luke, were already being treated as Scripture very early. The NIV footnotes note both sources.

Paul also gives guidelines for when an elder is accused of wrongdoing. Timothy shouldn't accept an accusation unless two or

three witnesses support it, which protects leaders from false charges. But elders who keep sinning should be corrected publicly, so that others will take sin seriously. And Timothy must do all this fairly, without favoritism. He shouldn't be quick to appoint leaders, either, or he'll share responsibility for their sins.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Protecting People**

Paul's guidelines protect both sides. Leaders shouldn't be destroyed by rumors or false accusations. But leaders who do wrong shouldn't be protected because they're powerful or popular. Sadly, some churches have covered up abuse by leaders to protect their reputation. That's the opposite of what Paul teaches here. If someone in a position of authority ever hurts you or someone you know, at church or anywhere else, tell a trusted adult. If they don't listen, tell another one. You will not be in trouble for speaking up.

Then, in the middle of all this, Paul gives Timothy some personal advice: stop drinking only water, and have a little wine to help your stomach, since you're sick so often.

BACKGROUND CHECK **What about the Wine?**

Water in ancient cities was often contaminated and could make people sick. Wine, often mixed with water, was safer to drink and was also used as medicine. Timothy may have been avoiding wine completely, perhaps to set himself apart from the false teachers or from drunkenness, and his health was suffering. Paul's advice is medical, not a party invitation. It doesn't give teenagers permission to drink. The Bible strongly condemns drunkenness (Ephesians 5:18), and the law where you live sets an age limit for alcohol for good reasons. Christians today hold different views about whether adults should drink at all, but they agree that following the law and avoiding drunkenness matter.

Paul ends the chapter with an observation. Some people's sins are obvious. Others only become clear later. Good deeds are the same

way. Some are seen right away, and even the hidden ones will come to light eventually.

KEY VERSE

Do not rebuke an older man harshly, but exhort him as if he were your father. Treat younger men as brothers, older women as mothers, and younger women as sisters, with absolute purity.

1 Timothy 5:1–2 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. How would your behavior change if you really treated the people at church like family?
2. What are some practical ways you can care for your family right now?
3. Why do you think Paul wanted both leaders and the people accusing them to be treated fairly?
4. Paul says even hidden good deeds will eventually come to light. Why might it be good to do good things where no one sees?

TRY THIS *Do something kind for a grandparent or an older person at church this week. Call them, write them a note, help with a chore, or just ask them about their life and listen.*

CHAPTER 6

Godliness with Contentment

1 Timothy 6

Paul gives a brief instruction to Christians who were slaves. They should treat their masters with respect so that no one would have reason to insult God or the Christian message won't be criticized. If their masters are also believers, they shouldn't take advantage of that or disrespect them, but serve even better, because those who benefit are fellow believers whom they love.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Slavery Again**
>
> As in Ephesians and Colossians, Paul is writing to people living in a world where slavery was everywhere. Some historians estimate that a large share of people in Roman cities were enslaved, though numbers are uncertain. Paul doesn't launch a campaign to overthrow the system, which would have been impossible for a tiny, persecuted group. But remember that he has already condemned slave traders (1:10), told slaves to gain their freedom if they can (1 Corinthians 7:21), and taught that slave and free are one in Christ (Galatians 3:28). The NIV footnote on 6:2 says it could also mean that masters benefit from the service of their slaves. Over time, the Christian teaching that every person is made in God's image helped lead many believers to work for the end of slavery.

Then Paul returns to the false teachers one last time. Anyone who teaches something different from Jesus' sound teaching is proud and doesn't understand anything. They love controversies and

arguments over words, which lead to jealousy, fighting, insults, suspicion, and constant conflict. And many of them think that godliness is a way to make money.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Religion for Profit**
>
> Ephesus had a booming religious business. Silversmiths made a fortune selling small shrines of Artemis, and when Paul's preaching hurt their sales, they started a riot (Acts 19:23–41). Apparently some false teachers in the church saw faith as a way to get rich too. Sadly, that still happens. Some people today use religion to sell things, to build their own fame, or to promise that God will make you rich if you give them money. Paul says real godliness isn't about getting rich.

Instead, Paul says, "godliness with contentment is great gain." We didn't bring anything into the world, and we can't take anything with us when we leave. So if we have something to eat and something to wear, that's enough.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Contentment**
>
> Contentment means being satisfied with what you have. It's not the same as being lazy or never wanting anything. It means your happiness doesn't depend on getting more. That's hard in a world full of ads, unboxing videos, influencers showing off their stuff, and a constant feeling that you need the newest phone, shoes, or game. Paul learned contentment in every situation, whether he had plenty or nothing (Philippians 4:11–12). He says the secret is Jesus, who gives us strength. Contentment is a choice you practice, often by being thankful for what you already have.

Then Paul warns that people who are eager to get rich stumble into temptation and get caught in traps. Foolish, harmful cravings drag them down to ruin. Then comes one of the most quoted verses in the whole letter: "For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil." Some people, Paul says, wanted money so badly that they wandered away from their faith and caused themselves a lot of pain.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Money Isn't Evil**

People sometimes misquote this verse as money is the root of all evil. But Paul doesn't say money is evil. He says the love of money is the root of many different kinds of evil. Money itself is a tool. It can be used to help people, support your family, give to the church, and do good. The problem is when you love it, when it becomes what you trust, what you chase, and what you think will make you happy. Then it starts pushing God out, and it can lead you into lying, cheating, stealing, greed, and broken relationships.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Get Rich Quick**

Teenagers today are targeted by lots of schemes that promise easy money: online gambling and sports betting apps, loot boxes, crypto hype, and influencers selling courses about how to become a millionaire by the time you're twenty. Many of them are designed to make someone else rich at your expense. Paul's warning fits perfectly: the eagerness to get rich traps people. That doesn't mean you shouldn't work hard, save, or plan for your future. Those are good. But if you find yourself obsessed with money or chasing a quick win, it's time to step back and ask who's really in charge of your heart.

Then Paul speaks directly to Timothy. As a man of God, Timothy should run away from all this and chase after things like right living, godliness, faith, love, staying power, and gentleness. Paul says to "Fight the good fight of the faith." Timothy should grab hold of the forever life God called him to, which he publicly confessed in front of many witnesses.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Flee and Pursue**

Notice the two-part strategy: run away from some things and chase others. It's not enough just to avoid bad things. You also need to go after good things. If you're trying to break a bad habit, replace it with a good one. If you're trying to avoid temptation, fill your life with things that help you grow. A life that's only about saying no feels empty. A life full of good things leaves less room for the bad.

Paul gives Timothy a solemn charge, in the presence of God, the giver of all life, and of Jesus, who boldly made His confession before Pontius Pilate. Timothy should keep this command spotless and blameless until Jesus returns. God will make that happen at the right time. And then Paul bursts into praise again, describing God as the blessed One who alone rules, the King over every king and the Lord over every lord. He is the only One who cannot die. He lives in light no one can approach, and no one has ever seen Him or can see Him.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **King of Kings**
>
> In Paul's day, the Roman emperors claimed grand titles. Some were worshiped as gods, and people in cities like Ephesus built temples to honor them. Paul's words remind Timothy that there's only one true King. Every emperor, president, and celebrity will one day bow before Him. That's why this book's title talks about the King's household. The church belongs to Him.

Paul has one more word for people with money. Timothy should tell wealthy people not to be proud or to trust in money, because money can vanish. They should trust God instead, who generously gives us everything to enjoy. They should do good, do lots of good deeds, give freely, and share. That way, they'll store up treasure for the future and "take hold of the life that is truly life."

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Are You Rich?**
>
> You might not think of yourself as rich. But if you have enough food, a place to live, clothes, a phone, and access to education, you're better off than a huge portion of the people who have ever lived, and than many people living today. Paul's words are for you too. Notice that he doesn't say it's wrong to have money, or that you can't enjoy what God gives you. He says God gives us things to enjoy. But he warns against pride and trusting in wealth, and he calls us to be generous. Generosity is the antidote to the love of money. Every

time you give something away, you remind your heart that money isn't your master.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Life That Is Truly Life**

Paul's phrase is worth thinking about. The world says real life is found in having more, buying more, and showing off more. But many rich and famous people say that money didn't make them happy. Jesus said He came so that we could have life to the full (John 10:10). Real life is found in knowing God, loving people, and giving yourself away. That's a life that lasts forever.

Paul closes with a final plea. Timothy, guard what God has entrusted to you. Stay away from godless chatter and from the opposing ideas of "what is falsely called knowledge." Some people, Paul says, claimed to have that knowledge and wandered away from the faith because of it. Then he signs off: grace be with you all.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Falsely Called Knowledge**

The Greek word for knowledge is gnosis. In the second century, a group of movements called Gnosticism claimed to have secret spiritual knowledge that only a chosen few could understand. Many of them taught that the physical world was evil, which fits with the false teaching Paul describes in 4:3. Scholars debate whether Paul was facing an early form of these ideas. Either way, his warning still applies. Watch out for anyone who claims to have secret knowledge about God that makes them better than other believers. The truth about Jesus is open to everyone.

KEY VERSE

But godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it.

1 Timothy 6:6–7 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. What's the difference between money and the love of money? How can you tell which one you have?
2. Where do you feel pressure to have more stuff? What helps you feel content?
3. What are some things you need to run away from, and some things you need to chase after?
4. What do you think the life that is truly life looks like?

TRY THIS *For one week, keep track of every time you feel the urge to buy something or wish you had something someone else has. Each time, thank God for something you already have. At the end of the week, give something away, whether it's money, an item, or your time, to someone who needs it.*

THE END (AND THE BEGINNING)

Now What? The Bottom Line

You've just walked through Paul's first letter to Timothy. At its heart is a simple, trustworthy saying that Paul says deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners. Paul called himself the worst of them. If Jesus could save him, He can save anyone.

Here's what the Bible says, as plainly as I can put it.

1 God made you, and He wants you to be saved.

Paul says God wants all people to be saved and to know the truth. That includes you.

2 We've all turned away.

We've all gone our own way instead of God's. The Bible calls it sin, and it separates us from God.

> *for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,* **Romans 3:23 (NIV)**

3 Sin has a real cost.

God is good, so He doesn't shrug off evil. The Bible says the result of sin is death, separation from God forever.

> *For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.* **Romans 6:23 (NIV)**

4 Jesus paid the ransom.

Jesus died on the cross for our sins and rose again. He's the only One who can bring us back to God.

> *For there is one God and one mediator between God and mankind, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all people.* **1 Timothy 2:5–6 (NIV)**

5 You can't earn it. You receive it.

Salvation isn't a reward for being good enough. It's a gift you receive by trusting Jesus.

> *For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast.* **Ephesians 2:8–9 (NIV)**

6 Turn and trust.

Turn from running your own life, and trust Jesus as your Savior and King. Take hold of the life that is truly life.

> *If you declare with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.* **Romans 10:9 (NIV)**

So what do you do with that? You don't need perfect words. You can talk to God honestly, right now, wherever you are. If it helps, you could pray something like this:

> *God, I've been running my own life, and I've sinned against You. I can't fix that myself. Thank You that Jesus came into the world to save sinners like me, and that He gave Himself as a ransom. I believe You raised Him from the dead. I'm turning to You. Forgive me. I trust*

Jesus as my Savior, and I want to follow Him as my King. Help me set an example and take hold of the life that is truly life. In Jesus' name, amen.

If You Just Said Yes

Tell someone. A parent, a youth leader, a pastor, or a Christian friend. Start there.

Read the real thing. Read 1 Timothy straight through. Then read 2 Timothy, the next letter in the New Testament, Paul's final letter to his young friend.

Find your people. Get connected to a church where the Bible is taught and Jesus is honored. Find an older believer who can mentor you, the way Paul mentored Timothy. Ask about being baptized.

Talk to God every day. Pray for everyone, Paul says, including leaders. Be honest. He can handle it.

Not Sure Yet?

Not ready? That's honest, and honesty is a good place to start. Keep asking. Keep reading. Talk to someone you trust. Just don't settle for "I already know all that."

Because if Paul is right, Jesus came to save sinners, even the worst of them, and it's worth finding out for yourself.

Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory for ever and ever. Amen.

1 Timothy 1:17 (NIV)

PAUL'S SECOND LETTER TO TIMOTHY

The King's Finish Line

2 Timothy, Unfiltered

For teens who think they've heard it all

BILL McLEOD

Papa Bill Books

The King's Finish Line: Paul's Second Letter to Timothy, Unfiltered

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All Scripture quotations in this book are from the NIV. Some are abridged, with omissions marked by ellipses; paraphrases are not placed in quotation marks.

Pronouns referring to God the Father, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit are capitalized for reverence in the author's own words. Inside Scripture quotations, capitalization and wording follow the 2011 NIV exactly.

AI Disclosure. This book was written by Bill McLeod with the assistance of artificial intelligence tools for drafting, research, and editing. All content was reviewed and approved by the author, who takes full responsibility for it. Readers are encouraged to open the Scriptures and study them for themselves.

A WORD TO THE READER

Before You Start

If you've read the earlier books in this series, you know the saying by now: "If you want to get something done, hire a teenager while they still know it all." It's been in every book. Paul would probably have smiled at it. He spent his last days writing to a younger friend he believed in.

Imagine getting a letter from someone you love, and realizing as you read it that it's probably the last one they'll ever write. That's what 2 Timothy is. Paul is in prison in Rome. He's been abandoned by most of his friends. He's cold, he's lonely, and he knows he's about to be executed. And from that cell, he writes to Timothy.

You might expect a letter like that to be full of fear or bitterness. It isn't. It's full of courage, love, and hope. Paul tells Timothy not to be timid. He tells him to hold on to the Scriptures he learned from his mother and grandmother. He tells him to keep going when things get hard. And he says that he himself has fought the good fight, finished the race, and kept the faith.

This letter is short, just four chapters. But it might be the most personal thing Paul ever wrote. It's a mentor's final words to the young man he called his dear son. And it's written for anyone who has ever wondered whether faith is worth it when following Jesus costs something.

It's also written for anyone who has ever felt afraid. If you've ever felt too shy, too nervous, or too young to stand up for what you believe, Paul has something to say to you. Let's go.

How This Book Works

This book walks through all four chapters of 2 Timothy, in order, one chapter of this book for each chapter of the letter. Each one explains what Paul is saying in plain language and adds background about Rome, prisons, the early church, and the people Paul mentions.

Before chapter 1, a section called Setting the Scene explains where Paul was when he wrote, what was happening to Christians in Rome, who Timothy was, and the debate over who wrote this letter. Read it first.

Each chapter ends with a Key Verse quoted word for word from the New International Version (NIV), the same translation used for every Scripture quotation in this book (pronouns for God are capitalized in the author's own words out of reverence; inside Scripture quotations, capitalization follows the NIV exactly); Real Talk questions to think through alone or argue about with friends; and a Try This challenge.

This book quotes 2 Timothy sparingly and explains it mostly in my own words, so keep a Bible open next to it. Read each chapter of the letter first, then the chapter here. Don't take my word for it. Take His.

FOR THE ADULTS

A Note for Parents and Youth Leaders

Thank you for putting this book in a teenager's hands. Like the earlier books in this series, on the Gospels, Acts, and Paul's letters from Romans to 1 Timothy, it's written for readers who can smell a sermon coming a mile away. I've tried to write honestly, directly, with some humor, and with real respect for what these readers can handle.

This book follows the letter format of the earlier volumes, walking through 2 Timothy chapter by chapter. I've quoted the letter sparingly and relied mostly on paraphrase, background, and discussion material. Wherever Scripture is quoted directly, in the chapters and in the Key Verses, the wording is from the New International Version (NIV).

2 Timothy contains one of the Bible's most important statements about Scripture itself (3:16–17). Christians hold a range of views about what it means for Scripture to be inspired, and about related ideas such as inerrancy. I've described the main views fairly and briefly, without arguing for one. You may want to share your own church's understanding with your teen.

I've also presented the debate over the authorship of the Pastoral Epistles fairly, as in the 1 Timothy volume. The letter presents itself as Paul's, and I refer to the author as Paul throughout. Paul's

warning about the last days (3:1–5) is explained in context, without predicting dates.

Several themes are highlighted as especially relevant for teens: courage instead of fear (1:7), the faith passed down from Timothy's grandmother and mother (1:5), friends who stay and friends who leave (4:9–16), and finishing well (4:6–8). Some readers may be dealing with anxiety; the chapter on 1:7 encourages them to talk to a trusted adult and makes clear that anxiety is not a sign of weak faith.

The Real Talk questions are designed for discussion. They work well for a youth group, a small group, a family dinner table, or a car ride. Don't rush to the right answer. Let them wrestle. Faith that has been thought through tends to last.

My prayer is that every reader will find the courage to follow Jesus all the way to the finish line.

Grace and peace,

Bill McLeod

Papa Bill Books

BEFORE YOU OPEN THE LETTER

Setting the Scene

Paul in Chains Again

When Paul wrote 2 Timothy, he was a prisoner in Rome. He mentions his chains (1:16) and says he's suffering like a criminal (2:9). He'd been in Roman custody before. At the end of Acts, he spends two years under house arrest in Rome, living in a rented place and welcoming visitors (Acts 28:30–31). But this imprisonment sounds very different. Friends have trouble finding him (1:17). Most people have abandoned him. He's had a first hearing where nobody stood up for him (4:16). And he doesn't expect to get out alive (4:6).

Many Christians believe Paul was released after the imprisonment described in Acts, traveled for a few more years, and was arrested again. 2 Timothy, in that view, comes from this second, harsher imprisonment, shortly before his death.

Rome under Nero

In AD 64, a huge fire swept through Rome and destroyed much of the city. Rumors spread that the emperor Nero had started it himself to clear space for a new palace. According to the Roman historian Tacitus, Nero blamed the Christians instead. Many were arrested and executed in horrible ways. Some were thrown to wild animals, and some were burned as torches to light Nero's gardens at night.

Suddenly, being a Christian in Rome was dangerous. That may explain why so many people were afraid to be associated with Paul,

and why Paul keeps telling Timothy not to be ashamed of him or of the gospel.

A Roman Prison

Roman prisons weren't designed for long sentences. They were usually places where people waited for trial or execution. They could be dark, cold, crowded, and filthy. Prisoners often depended on friends and family to bring them food, clothing, and other necessities. That's why Paul asks Timothy to bring his cloak before winter (4:13, 21), and why he's so grateful for Onesiphorus, who found him and wasn't embarrassed to visit (1:16–17).

A later tradition says Paul was held in the Mamertine Prison, an underground cell near the Roman Forum that you can still visit today. We can't be sure that tradition is accurate, but it gives a sense of the kind of place Paul may have written from.

Paul's Death

2 Timothy doesn't tell us how Paul died, but early Christian writers do. Around AD 95, a letter called 1 Clement says Paul gave his testimony before rulers and was taken from the world. Later writers, including Eusebius in the fourth century, say Paul was beheaded in Rome under Nero, which fits the tradition that he was a Roman citizen, since citizens were usually spared crucifixion. The same traditions say Peter was crucified in Rome around the same time. Most historians place Paul's death sometime between about AD 64 and 67, though the exact date is uncertain.

Timothy and His Family

If you've read the 1 Timothy volume, you've already met Timothy. He grew up in Lystra, in what is now central Turkey. His father was

Greek, and his mother, Eunice, was Jewish (Acts 16:1). In this letter, we learn that his grandmother's name was Lois, and that both women had a sincere faith that Timothy inherited (1:5). They taught him the Scriptures from the time he was a baby (3:15).

Timothy joined Paul on his second missionary journey and became his closest partner. By the time of this letter, he was probably in his thirties and was most likely still leading the church in Ephesus. He seems to have been a sensitive person who sometimes struggled with fear. Paul remembers his tears (1:4) and tells him not to be timid (1:7).

A Farewell Letter

2 Timothy reads like a farewell. The Bible contains several final speeches from leaders who knew they were about to die: Jacob blessing his sons (Genesis 49), Moses' final words to Israel (Deuteronomy 31–33), Joshua's charge to the people (Joshua 23–24), David's instructions to Solomon (1 Kings 2), and Jesus' words to His disciples on the night before He died (John 13–17). Paul himself gave a farewell speech to the Ephesian elders (Acts 20:17–38). These speeches look back on a life, warn about dangers ahead, and pass on the work to the next generation. 2 Timothy does all three.

Who Wrote It? The Debate

2 Timothy is one of the three Pastoral Epistles, along with 1 Timothy and Titus. As explained in the 1 Timothy volume, many modern scholars think these letters were written by a follower of Paul after his death, while many others believe Paul wrote them. The arguments against Paul writing them include differences in vocabulary and style from his other letters, a church structure that

some see as more developed, and travel details that are hard to fit into Acts.

Why 2 Timothy Is Different

Among the three Pastoral Epistles, 2 Timothy is the one that many scholars find most likely to come from Paul himself. It's full of personal details that seem unlikely to be invented: Timothy's tears, his grandmother's name, a cloak left in Troas, scrolls and parchments, friends who left, a metalworker who caused harm, a coworker left sick in Miletus. It also has much less about church organization than 1 Timothy or Titus. Some scholars who think a follower wrote 1 Timothy and Titus suggest that 2 Timothy may include genuine fragments of Paul's last letters. Those who believe Paul wrote it point to these details, to the early church's acceptance of the letter as his, and to the possibility that Luke, who was with him (4:11), helped him write. Christians on all sides agree that the letter belongs in the Bible. In this book, I follow the letter's own claim and call the author Paul.

The Map

Chapter 1: Paul remembers Timothy's faith and family, urges him not to be afraid or ashamed, and names friends who left and a friend who stayed.

Chapter 2: Pictures of a faithful life (soldier, athlete, farmer), a trustworthy saying, and how to handle God's word and difficult people.

Chapter 3: A warning about terrible times, and why Scripture matters.

Chapter 4: Paul's final charge, his reflections as he faces death, and his last personal messages.

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CHAPTER 1

Not Timid

2 Timothy 1

Paul opens the way he usually does. He introduces himself as an apostle of Jesus, sent by God's will to share the promise of life found in Christ. That's an interesting way to begin a letter written from death row. Paul is about to lose his life, and the first thing he talks about is life.

Then he greets Timothy as his dear son and wishes him grace, mercy, and peace. Paul tells Timothy that he thanks God for him constantly and prays for him day and night. He remembers Timothy's tears, probably from the last time they said goodbye, and he can't wait to see him again.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Tears**
>
> Paul doesn't say why Timothy was crying. Maybe it was when Paul was arrested, or when they parted ways for the last time. But notice that Paul doesn't tell him that real men don't cry, or that strong Christians don't get sad. He remembers Timothy's tears with tenderness. Jesus wept too (John 11:35). Crying isn't a sign of weak faith. It's a sign that you love people.

Paul remembers something else about Timothy: his genuine faith. And he points out where it came from. It first lived in his grandmother Lois and his mother Eunice, and Paul is sure it now lives in Timothy too.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Lois and Eunice**

These two women are only mentioned here, but their influence shaped the history of the church. Timothy's father was Greek and may not have shared their faith (Acts 16:1). So it was his mother and grandmother who taught him the Scriptures, prayed for him, and showed him what faith looked like in everyday life. They probably had no idea that the little boy they were raising would become one of the most important leaders in the early church, or that their names would be read by millions of people two thousand years later.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Faith Passed Down**

Maybe you have a parent or grandparent whose faith has shaped you. If so, thank them. Ask them how they came to believe, and what they've learned. But notice that Paul says the faith that lived in Lois and Eunice now lives in Timothy. At some point, it became his own. You can't live on your family's faith forever. And if no one in your family follows Jesus, that's okay too. You could be the first. You could be the Lois of your family, the one whose faith gets passed down for generations.

Then Paul tells Timothy to stir up the gift God gave him, the one he received when Paul laid his hands on him. The picture is of a fire that has died down to glowing coals. It hasn't gone out, but it needs air to blaze up again.

Why does Timothy need that reminder? Paul explains in the next verse, which is one of the best-known verses in the letter. God's Spirit doesn't make us timid. Instead, the Spirit gives power, love, and self-discipline.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Power, Love, and Self-Discipline**

Look at those three gifts. Power means the strength to do what God asks, even when it's hard. Love means that power is used to help people, not to push them around. Self-discipline, which some translations call a sound mind, means clear thinking and self-control, not being ruled by panic or

impulse. All three come from God's Spirit. None of them depends on whether you're naturally brave, outgoing, or confident.

BACKGROUND CHECK **What about Anxiety?**

Some people read this verse and feel worse, because they struggle with fear or anxiety and think it means they don't have enough faith. That's not what Paul means. Paul himself admitted to feeling afraid and overwhelmed (1 Corinthians 2:3; 2 Corinthians 1:8). Paul is talking about being too timid to stand up for Jesus, not about the normal feelings of fear everyone has, or about anxiety disorders, which are real health conditions. If you deal with anxiety, God isn't disappointed in you. Talk to a parent, a counselor, or a doctor. Getting help is a wise and brave thing to do. And keep bringing your fears to God. He's with you in them.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Shy Is Not the Same as Timid**

Some people are quiet by nature. That's not a problem. Introverts and shy people make great friends, leaders, and witnesses for Jesus. Paul isn't telling Timothy to change his personality. He's telling him not to let fear stop him from doing what God has called him to do. Courage doesn't mean feeling no fear. It means doing the right thing anyway.

So, Paul says, don't be ashamed to tell people about Jesus, and don't be ashamed of me, even though I'm a prisoner. Instead, be willing to suffer alongside me for the good news, relying on God's power.

Then Paul describes what God has done. He rescued us and invited us to live holy lives, not because we earned it, but because of His own plan and His grace. That grace was given to us in Jesus before time even began, and now it's been revealed through Jesus' coming. Jesus has destroyed death and has shown us the way to life that never ends.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Death Destroyed**

Paul is writing this while waiting to be executed. For him, the claim that Jesus has destroyed death isn't a nice idea. It's the only thing that matters. Death is still real, and it still hurts. But because Jesus rose from the dead, it doesn't have the last word. That's why Paul can face his own death without despair.

Paul says God appointed him to preach this message. That's why he's suffering. But he isn't ashamed. And then he says one of the most confident things he ever wrote: "I know whom I have believed." He's convinced that God can guard what he's entrusted to Him until the day Jesus returns.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Know Whom, Not Just What**

Notice that Paul doesn't say, I know what I have believed, though he did know that too. He says he knows whom. Faith isn't just agreeing with a set of ideas. It's trusting a person. When everything else was falling apart, Paul's confidence wasn't in his own strength or his ministry. It was in Jesus, whom he knew personally.

Paul tells Timothy to hold on to the sound teaching he heard from him, with faith and love. He calls it a good deposit, a treasure entrusted to Timothy for safekeeping. Timothy must guard it, relying on the Spirit living inside him.

Then Paul gets personal again. Just about everyone in Asia, the Roman province around Ephesus, has turned their backs on him, including two men named Phygelus and Hermogenes. We don't know anything else about them. Their only legacy is that they left.

But one man was different. Onesiphorus often encouraged Paul and wasn't embarrassed by his chains. When he came to Rome, he searched hard for Paul until he found him. Paul prays that God will show mercy to Onesiphorus and his household, and reminds Timothy how much Onesiphorus helped back in Ephesus.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Friend Who Searched**

Imagine Onesiphorus arriving in Rome, a huge city of perhaps a million people, during a time when Christians were being hunted. He goes from prison to prison asking about Paul, knowing that being connected to a Christian prisoner could get him arrested too. And he keeps going until he finds him. Some interpreters think Onesiphorus may have died by the time Paul wrote, since Paul greets his household rather than him (4:19), but we don't know for sure. Either way, his courage is remembered forever.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Who Shows Up?**

When you're going through something hard, you find out who your real friends are. Some people disappear. Others show up. Which kind of friend are you? Do you stick with people when they're unpopular, in trouble, or going through a hard time? Sometimes the most Christlike thing you can do is simply show up, sit with someone, and not be ashamed to be seen with them.

KEY VERSE

For the Spirit God gave us does not make us timid, but gives us power, love and self-discipline.

2 Timothy 1:7 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Who has passed faith down to you? What did you learn from them?
2. When are you most tempted to be timid about your faith? What would courage look like in that situation?
3. Paul says he knows whom he has believed. What's the difference between knowing about Jesus and knowing Jesus?
4. Think of a time someone showed up for you when you needed it. What did that mean to you?

TRY THIS *Write a thank-you note to someone who has helped you grow in faith, whether a parent, grandparent, teacher, or friend. If there's someone going through a hard time right now, be their Onesiphorus this week: find them, and show up.*

CHAPTER 2

Soldier, Athlete, Farmer

2 Timothy 2

Paul calls Timothy his son again and tells him to be strong. But not in his own strength. He means strong in the grace that comes from Jesus.

Then Paul gives Timothy a plan for the future. The things Timothy heard Paul teach, in front of many witnesses, he should pass on to trustworthy people who will be able to teach others too.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Four Generations**
>
> Count the generations in verse 2: Paul taught Timothy. Timothy will teach reliable people. Those people will teach others. That's four generations of believers in one sentence. That's how the Christian faith has spread for two thousand years: not mainly through famous preachers, but through ordinary people teaching others what they've learned. Somewhere along that chain, someone taught the person who taught you. Now it's your turn to pass it on.

Then Paul gives Timothy three pictures of what faithful living looks like.

First, a soldier. Timothy should be willing to suffer hardship like a good soldier of Jesus. A soldier on duty doesn't get distracted by ordinary civilian business. He focuses on pleasing his commander.

Second, an athlete. An athlete doesn't win the prize unless he follows the rules. In the ancient games, athletes had to swear that

they had trained properly for months, and anyone caught cheating was disqualified, no matter how talented they were.

Third, a farmer. The farmer who works hard deserves to be the first to enjoy the harvest.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Three Pictures**

Each picture teaches something different. The soldier is about focus and loyalty: don't get so tangled up in other things that you forget whom you serve. The athlete is about integrity: how you play matters, not just whether you win. The farmer is about patience and hard work: you plant now and harvest later. All three require discipline, endurance, and sacrifice. None of them is easy. But all three lead to a reward.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Distracted**

What tangles you up? For a soldier in Paul's day, it might have been a side business. For you, it might be your phone, an endless stream of videos, a relationship that's pulling you away from God, or just a schedule so packed that there's no room for Him. Not all of those things are bad. But Paul asks whether they're keeping you from what matters most.

Paul tells Timothy to think about what he's saying, because God will help him understand. Then he writes, "Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, descended from David." That's Paul's gospel, the message he's suffering for, so much that he's in chains as if he were a criminal.

But then Paul adds a wonderful line: "But God's word is not chained." Paul could be locked up. The message couldn't. In fact, Paul's letters from prison have traveled farther than he ever did.

So Paul puts up with anything for the people God has chosen, so that they too can be saved and share in eternal glory.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Can't Be Stopped**

Throughout history, people have tried to stop the gospel by banning Bibles, closing churches, and imprisoning believers. It has never worked. Today, in some countries where Christians face severe persecution, the church is growing fast. God's word still isn't chained. You can pray for believers who are persecuted today, and learn about them through organizations that support them.

Then comes another trustworthy saying. Many scholars think it may have been part of an early Christian hymn. It's worth reading in your Bible. If we've died with Jesus, we'll share His life. If we keep going, we'll share His rule. If we deny Him, He'll deny us. If we're faithless, He stays faithful, because He can't deny who He is.

BACKGROUND CHECK **He Remains Faithful**

The first three lines of the saying make sense. They're about what we do and what happens as a result. But the last line breaks the pattern. You'd expect it to say that if we're unfaithful, He'll be unfaithful to us. Instead, it says that even when we're faithless, He stays faithful. Christians have discussed how the third and fourth lines fit together. Many see a difference between permanently rejecting Jesus and the failures and doubts every believer goes through. Peter denied Jesus three times, and Jesus restored him (John 21). Your faithfulness matters. But God's faithfulness to you doesn't depend on how strong you feel today.

Paul tells Timothy to remind people of these things and to warn them not to fight about words. It's useless and destroys the people listening.

Instead, Timothy should do his best to present himself to God as a worker with nothing to be ashamed of, someone who handles God's word correctly. This is the Key Verse for this chapter.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Handling the Word**

The phrase translated correctly handles literally means to cut straight. People have pictured a stonemason cutting a straight stone, a farmer plowing a straight row, or a road builder cutting a straight path. The idea is that God's word should be handled carefully and accurately, not twisted to say what we want it to say. That means reading the Bible in context, asking what it meant to the first readers, comparing Scripture with Scripture, and being humble about what we don't understand. It's a skill you can learn.

Paul warns Timothy to stay away from godless chatter, because people who get into it keep sliding further from God, and their teaching spreads like gangrene. He names two of them: Hymenaeus, whom we met in 1 Timothy 1:20, and Philetus. They were teaching that the resurrection had already happened, and it was upsetting some people's faith.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Already Happened?**

What did they mean by saying the resurrection had already taken place? We don't know for sure. Maybe they taught that the resurrection was only spiritual, something that happened when you became a believer, and that there would be no future bodily resurrection. Some people in the ancient world thought the body didn't matter. Paul strongly disagreed. Christian hope includes the resurrection of the body, just as Jesus rose bodily (1 Corinthians 15).

But Paul is confident that God's foundation stands firm, and it carries two inscriptions. One says God knows the people who belong to Him. The other says everyone who calls on His name must turn away from evil.

Then Paul uses a picture from everyday life. A big house has some dishes made of gold and silver and others made of wood and clay. Certain ones are used for special occasions and others for ordinary things, including, probably, garbage. If people clean themselves

from the wrong things, they'll be like the special dishes, set apart and useful to God for every good purpose.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Useful to God**
>
> You don't have to be famous, talented, or popular to be useful to God. You just have to be available and clean. Think of it this way: if you were thirsty, you wouldn't care whether a cup was gold or plastic. You'd care whether it was clean. God wants to use you. The question is whether you're ready.

Paul tells Timothy to run from the wrong cravings that tend to come with being young, and to chase after righteousness, faith, love, and peace, together with others who call on God with pure hearts.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Run Away**
>
> Paul doesn't tell Timothy to stand and fight temptation. He tells him to run. Joseph did that when Potiphar's wife tried to seduce him (Genesis 39:12). Sometimes the smartest thing to do is get out. Leave the party. Close the app. End the conversation. And notice that Paul says to chase good things together with others. You weren't meant to fight temptation alone. Find friends who'll help you.

The chapter ends with advice about dealing with difficult people. Avoid stupid, pointless arguments, because they just lead to fights. The Lord's servant shouldn't be someone who picks fights, but should be kind to all people, a good teacher, and patient with people who wrong them. Opponents should be corrected gently, hoping God will lead them to repent and know the truth, and that they'll escape the devil's trap.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Kindness Online**
>
> Paul's words in verses 23 to 26 are perfect for the internet. Don't get sucked into pointless arguments. Be kind to everyone, even the people who disagree with you. If you need to correct someone, do it gently. Remember that the person you're arguing with isn't your enemy. They're someone God loves and

wants to rescue. Before you post a reply, ask whether it sounds like the Lord's servant described here.

KEY VERSE

Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth.

2 Timothy 2:15 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Who could you pass on what you've learned about Jesus to? A younger sibling, a friend, a kid in your church?
2. Of the three pictures (soldier, athlete, farmer), which one speaks to you most right now? Why?
3. What distractions tangle you up and keep you from focusing on God?
4. How can you disagree with people, online or in person, without being quarrelsome?

TRY THIS *Pick one passage of the Bible you'd like to understand better. This week, read it slowly, read the verses around it, look up what you can about its background, and then explain it to someone else in your own words.*

CHAPTER 3

God-Breathed

2 Timothy 3

Paul begins chapter 3 with a warning. Terrible times are coming in the last days. Then he gives a long, grim description of what people will be like.

They'll love themselves and love money. They'll brag, be arrogant, and insult others. They'll disobey their parents and be ungrateful. They'll have no respect for anything holy, and no love. They'll refuse to forgive, spread lies about people, and have no self-control. They'll be cruel, and they'll hate what is good. They'll betray their friends, act recklessly, and be full of pride. They'll love pleasure more than they love God. And here's the part that hits hardest: they'll look religious on the outside, but deny the power that real faith has.

> BACKGROUND CHECK **The Last Days**
>
> When people hear the phrase the last days, they often think of the end of the world. Christians hold different views about the timing of the end and the events leading up to it. But in the New Testament, the last days usually means the whole period between Jesus' first coming and His return (Acts 2:16–17; Hebrews 1:1–2). Paul clearly thinks these things are already starting, because he tells Timothy to stay away from such people. Every generation of Christians has seen people like the ones Paul describes. So rather than trying to use this list to predict dates, it's more useful to use it as a mirror.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Look in the Mirror**

Read Paul's list again slowly. Which of these do you see in the world around you? Now the harder question: which ones do you see in yourself? Lovers of themselves comes first on the list, and it's probably the root of the rest. We live in a culture that tells us constantly to put ourselves first, follow our hearts, and build our personal brand. Paul says loving yourself above everything else leads somewhere dark. The opposite is loving God first, and others as yourself (Mark 12:30–31).

BACKGROUND CHECK **Looking Religious**

Paul's description of people who have a form of godliness while denying its power is a warning for church people. It's possible to go to church, know the right words, wear the right T-shirt, and post Bible verses, without letting God actually change you. Real faith isn't a costume. It transforms how you treat people, how you spend your money, and what you love.

Paul says some of these people sneak into homes and take advantage of vulnerable women who are weighed down by sin and pulled around by their desires. These women keep learning but never manage to grasp the truth. In a world where women were often denied education, false teachers may have targeted them because they were eager to learn and had few chances to study Scripture carefully. That might help explain why Paul wanted women in Ephesus to learn (1 Timothy 2:11).

BACKGROUND CHECK **Always Learning, Never Knowing**

It's possible to watch endless videos, read endless posts, and listen to endless podcasts about God without ever actually coming to know Him or changing how you live. Information isn't the same as transformation. Learning is great, but the goal of learning about God is knowing God and following Him.

Paul compares these false teachers to Jannes and Jambres, who opposed Moses. Those names aren't in the Old Testament, but

Jewish tradition said they were the Egyptian magicians who tried to copy Moses' miracles in Pharaoh's court (Exodus 7:11). Just as those magicians were eventually exposed, Paul says, these teachers won't get far. Their foolishness will become obvious to everyone.

Then Paul turns to Timothy. You're different, he says. You know my teaching, how I live, what I'm aiming for, my faith, my patience, my love, and my endurance. You know about the persecutions and suffering I went through in Antioch, Iconium, and Lystra. And you know that God got me through every bit of it.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Antioch, Iconium, and Lystra**
>
> These were the cities on Paul's first missionary journey (Acts 13–14). In Pisidian Antioch, he was driven out of town. In Iconium, people plotted to stone him. In Lystra, Timothy's hometown, he was stoned and left for dead. Timothy may have been a teenager at the time. He may have watched it happen, or heard about it from his mother and grandmother. When Paul came back to Lystra a couple of years later, Timothy joined him anyway. He knew what following Jesus could cost, and he chose it.

Paul then makes a statement that isn't very popular: "In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted." Meanwhile, evil people and frauds will keep getting worse, fooling others and being fooled themselves.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Will I Be Persecuted?**
>
> Persecution looks different in different places. In some countries today, Christians are imprisoned, attacked, or killed for their faith. For most teenagers reading this book, it's more likely to look like being mocked, left out, called names, or treated as weird or judgmental. Paul doesn't say this to scare Timothy, but to prepare him. If following Jesus costs you something, it doesn't mean you're doing something wrong. It might mean you're doing something right. Jesus said those who are persecuted for His sake are blessed

(Matthew 5:10–12). And remember: being persecuted for your faith is different from being disliked for being rude or self-righteous.

But Timothy should keep going in what he's learned and become convinced of. He knows the people he learned it from, and he's known the Holy Scriptures since he was a baby. Those Scriptures can give him the wisdom that leads to salvation, by trusting Jesus.

Then come two of the most important verses in the Bible about the Bible: "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work."

BACKGROUND CHECK **God-Breathed**

The Greek word is theopneustos, made up of theos, God, and pneo, to breathe. It appears nowhere else in the Bible, and Paul may have coined it. The picture is of Scripture coming from God's own breath, the way God breathed life into Adam (Genesis 2:7). Older translations often say inspired by God, from a Latin word meaning to breathe in. Paul doesn't say that God dictated the words or that the human authors were passive. Elsewhere the Bible describes people speaking from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit (2 Peter 1:21). The writers kept their own personalities, vocabulary, and styles. But Paul says the result is God's word.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Which Scripture?**

When Paul wrote this, the Scriptures Timothy had known since childhood were what Christians now call the Old Testament. The New Testament was still being written. But very early on, Christians began treating the writings of the apostles as Scripture too. In 1 Timothy 5:18, a saying of Jesus is quoted alongside the Old Testament as Scripture, and 2 Peter 3:16 puts Paul's letters alongside the other Scriptures. Most Christians believe Paul's words apply to the whole Bible. Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant Christians also differ somewhat about which books belong in the Old Testament, as you may have noticed if you've seen a Catholic Bible.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Views on Inspiration**

Christians agree that Scripture is inspired, but they understand what that means in different ways. Many evangelical Christians hold to inerrancy: the belief that the Bible, as originally written, is without error in everything it affirms, including history and science, when properly interpreted. Some prefer the word infallibility, meaning that Scripture never fails in what it intends to teach about faith and life, while allowing that it may reflect the scientific understanding or historical methods of its time. The Catholic Church teaches that Scripture is inspired and teaches without error the truth God wanted recorded for the sake of our salvation, and that it is interpreted within the church's living tradition; Orthodox Christians similarly read Scripture within the tradition of the church. Many mainline Protestants see Scripture as an inspired human witness to God's revelation, through which God speaks, though written by people in their own times. And Christians in all these traditions argue about the details. What they share is the belief that, through Scripture, God speaks.

BACKGROUND CHECK **A Translation Question**

The Greek sentence in verse 16 doesn't contain a verb, so translators have to supply one. Most translations, including the NIV, read it as All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful. A few older translations read it as Every Scripture that is God-breathed is also useful. Most scholars prefer the first reading, but the second is grammatically possible. Either way, Paul's main point is the same: Scripture comes from God, and it's useful.

BACKGROUND CHECK **What Scripture Is For**

Notice the four uses Paul lists. Teaching shows us what's true. Rebuking shows us where we've gone wrong. Correcting shows us how to get back on track. Training in righteousness shows us how to stay on track. Someone has compared it to directions on a road trip: this is the road, you're off the road, here's how to get back, here's how to stay on it. And the goal isn't just knowing more. It's being equipped to do good. The NIV footnote says verse 17 could also be translated that you, a man of God, may be fully equipped, a reminder that Paul is writing to Timothy personally.

KEY VERSE

All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.

2 Timothy 3:16–17 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Which items on Paul's list in 3:2–5 do you see most in the world around you? Which do you struggle with yourself?
2. What's the difference between having a form of godliness and having the real thing?
3. Has following Jesus ever cost you something? What happened?
4. What do you think it means that Scripture is God-breathed? What questions do you have about it?

TRY THIS *Make a Bible reading plan for the next month. Start with something manageable, like one chapter a day, maybe beginning with the Gospel of Mark. Each day, write down one thing it teaches you, one way it challenges you, or one thing it asks you to do.*

CHAPTER 4

Finishing the Race

2 Timothy 4

Paul gives Timothy a solemn charge. He makes it with God and Jesus as his witnesses, Jesus who will judge everyone, living and dead, when He appears and establishes His kingdom. That's how seriously Paul means it.

Here's the charge: Preach the word. Be ready whether the timing seems good or bad. Correct people, warn them, and encourage them, with great patience and careful teaching.

> BACKGROUND CHECK **Whatever the Season**
>
> Paul tells Timothy to be ready whatever the season. That means when it's convenient and when it isn't, when people want to hear it and when they don't, when you feel like it and when you don't. Following Jesus isn't just for Sunday mornings or youth group. It's for the cafeteria, the locker room, the group chat, and the moments when it would be easier to stay quiet.

Why is this so urgent? Because a time is coming when people won't want sound teaching. Instead, Paul says, they'll collect teachers who tell them what they want to hear. Paul uses a vivid phrase: their ears will itch. They'll turn away from the truth and toward myths.

> BACKGROUND CHECK **Itching Ears**
>
> Itching ears is a great picture. It's people who are only interested in hearing what scratches their itch, what makes them feel good, confirms what they

already think, and doesn't ask them to change. Today, algorithms are designed to feed us more and more of what we already like. It's easy to only follow people who agree with us, and to only listen to teachers who never challenge us. Paul's warning is a good question to ask yourself: am I looking for the truth, or just for someone who'll tell me what I want to hear?

But Timothy is to keep a clear head in every situation, put up with hardship, keep sharing the good news, and fulfill his ministry completely.

Then Paul explains why he's passing the baton. In some of the most moving words he ever wrote, he says: "For I am already being poured out like a drink offering, and the time for my departure is near."

BACKGROUND CHECK **A Drink Offering**

In the Old Testament, a drink offering was wine poured out on the altar along with a sacrifice (Numbers 15:1–10). Pagan worshipers in the Roman world also poured out wine to their gods. Paul pictures his life as an offering being poured out to God, drop by drop, until it's gone. He'd used a similar image years earlier (Philippians 2:17). Now he knows the last drops are being poured.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Departure**

The word Paul uses for departure was used for a ship pulling up its anchor and setting sail, for soldiers taking down their tents and breaking camp, and for a prisoner being set free. For Paul, death wasn't the end. It was leaving for home. He once said that he'd rather leave the body and be at home with the Lord (2 Corinthians 5:8), and that for him to die was gain (Philippians 1:21).

Then Paul looks back on his life with three short statements. He has fought the good fight. He has finished the race. He has kept the faith. This is the Key Verse for this chapter.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Three Pictures of a Life**

The first is a soldier or a wrestler: Paul has fought hard, and he's still standing. The second is a runner: he has crossed the finish line. The third may be a guard or a steward: he has kept the treasure safe that was entrusted to him. Paul isn't bragging. He's grateful. Remember, this is the same man who called himself the worst of sinners (1 Timothy 1:15). His life had been full of beatings, shipwrecks, prison, and betrayal (2 Corinthians 11:23–28). But he didn't quit.

Now, Paul says, there's a crown of righteousness waiting for him, which Jesus, the Judge who is always fair, will give him on that day. And not just him, but everyone who has longed for Jesus to return.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Crown**

In ancient athletic contests, winners received a crown, usually a wreath of leaves, that would wilt in a few days. Paul says the crown waiting for him won't fade (1 Corinthians 9:25). Notice too that Paul expected to be condemned by a Roman court. But he knew there was a higher court, with a Judge who is truly just. Human judges might call him a criminal. Jesus would call him faithful.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Finish Well**

Lots of people start strong. Not as many finish well. Some people are excited about Jesus at camp or at a big event, and drift away a few months later. Some leaders start well and fall away later in life. Paul's goal wasn't just to start the race but to finish it. You're near the beginning of your race. What would it take to still be following Jesus at fifty, or eighty? Probably a lot of the things in this letter: good mentors, faithful friends, time in Scripture, courage, and dependence on God's grace.

Then Paul's letter gets very personal. He asks Timothy to come quickly. Demas has left him because he loved this world, and has gone off to Thessalonica. Crescens is in Galatia, and Titus is in Dalmatia, which is on the coast of modern Croatia. Paul doesn't criticize Crescens and Titus, who were probably sent on ministry

assignments. But Demas left for the wrong reasons. Only Luke is still with him.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Demas**

Demas had once been one of Paul's coworkers. Paul mentions him in Colossians 4:14 and Philemon 24, right alongside Luke. But at some point, Demas walked away, because he loved this present world. We don't know exactly what that means. Maybe he was afraid of being arrested. Maybe he wanted a comfortable life. Maybe he just got tired. It's a sad reminder that being close to great Christians doesn't make you faithful. Each person has to choose for themselves.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Luke**

Luke, the doctor, the author of the Gospel of Luke and Acts, stayed. He had traveled with Paul for years, through storms and shipwrecks (Acts 27). Now, when almost everyone else was gone, he was still there. Some scholars think Luke may even have helped Paul write this letter. There's something beautiful about the fact that the man who wrote down the story of Jesus and the early church chose to stay with his friend to the end.

Paul asks Timothy to get Mark and bring him along, because Mark is helpful to him in ministry. That's a remarkable sentence.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Mark Gets a Second Chance**

Years earlier, a young man named John Mark had abandoned Paul and Barnabas partway through their first missionary journey (Acts 13:13). When Barnabas wanted to give him another chance, Paul refused, and the argument was so sharp that Paul and Barnabas split up (Acts 15:36–40). But now, at the end of his life, Paul asks for Mark by name and says he's useful. Somewhere along the way, Mark grew, and Paul's heart softened. Tradition says this same Mark wrote the Gospel of Mark. If you've failed, your story isn't over. And if someone has failed you, maybe they deserve a second chance too.

Paul says he has sent Tychicus to Ephesus, perhaps to deliver this letter and take Timothy's place while he travels. Then he asks Timothy to bring the cloak he left with Carpus in Troas, along with his scrolls, especially the parchments.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **A Cloak and Some Books**
>
> This is one of the most human moments in the Bible. The great apostle is cold, and winter is coming, so he asks for his coat. And he wants something to read. We don't know what the scrolls and parchments were. They may have been copies of the Old Testament, his own notes, or legal documents for his trial. But even facing death, Paul wanted to keep learning. Faith doesn't make us less human. Paul needed warmth, books, and friends, just like everyone else.

Paul warns Timothy about Alexander the metalworker, who did him a lot of harm and strongly opposed the message. Paul leaves it to God to pay him back. This may be the same Alexander mentioned in 1 Timothy 1:20, though the name was common.

Then Paul describes his first hearing in court. Nobody came to support him. Everyone deserted him. But Paul prays that God won't hold it against them. He sounds like Jesus on the cross, and like Stephen, praying for the people who stoned him while Paul looked on (Acts 7:60).

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **When Everyone Leaves**
>
> Have you ever been let down by the people you counted on? Paul knew that feeling. But he didn't let bitterness win. He forgave, and he focused on the One who didn't leave. Paul says that the Lord stood by him and gave him strength, so that the message could be fully preached and all the Gentiles could hear it. He was rescued from the lion's mouth, which might mean literal lions, or might be a picture of death or great danger. Even when people abandon you, Jesus never will (Hebrews 13:5).

Paul is confident that the Lord will rescue him from every evil attack and bring him safely into His heavenly kingdom. That doesn't mean Paul expects to escape execution. He's just said his departure is near. He means that nothing can keep him from reaching God's kingdom. And then he breaks into praise.

Paul ends with greetings. He sends his love to Priscilla and Aquila, the couple who had worked with him in Corinth and Ephesus, and to the household of Onesiphorus. The NIV footnote says the Greek has Prisca, a variant of Priscilla. He mentions that Erastus stayed in Corinth and that he left Trophimus sick in Miletus. Even Paul couldn't heal everyone.

One more time, Paul urges Timothy to come before winter. Ships stopped sailing the Mediterranean in winter because it was too dangerous, so if Timothy waited too long, he might not make it in time. Paul passes on greetings from several believers in Rome: Eubulus, Pudens, Linus, Claudia, and the rest of the believers there. A later tradition identifies Linus as an early leader of the church in Rome, after Peter.

And then the last words Paul ever wrote, as far as we know: a blessing that the Lord would be with Timothy's spirit, and that grace would be with them all.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Did Timothy Make It?**
>
> We don't know whether Timothy reached Rome before Paul died. Hebrews 13:23 mentions that Timothy was released from prison, which suggests that at some point he was arrested too, maybe because he came to be with Paul. Later tradition says Timothy continued to lead the church in Ephesus and eventually died as a martyr there. But whether he arrived in time or not, Timothy carried Paul's faith forward, and passed it on, just as Paul asked.

KEY VERSE

I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.

2 Timothy 4:7 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Where do you see people with itching ears today? How can you make sure you're listening for the truth, not just what you want to hear?
2. What do you think it would take for you to finish your race well?
3. Demas left, Luke stayed, and Mark came back. Which of their stories speaks to you most? Why?
4. Has anyone ever let you down when you needed them? How might Paul's example help you respond?

TRY THIS *Write your own finish line statement: a few sentences about what you hope people will be able to say about your faith at the end of your life. Then write down one thing you can do this week to move toward it. Keep it in your Bible.*

THE END (AND THE BEGINNING)

Now What? The Bottom Line

You've just read Paul's last letter. Facing execution, he wasn't afraid, because he knew whom he had believed. He was convinced that Jesus had destroyed the power of death. And he wanted Timothy, and everyone who would ever read his letter, to know that too.

Here's what the Bible says, as plainly as I can put it.

1 God made you, and He loves you.

God made you on purpose, and He wants you to know Him. His grace was planned before time began.

2 We've all turned away.

We've all gone our own way instead of God's. The Bible calls it sin, and it separates us from God.

> *for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,* **Romans 3:23 (NIV)**

3 Sin has a real cost.

God is good, so He doesn't shrug off evil. The Bible says the result of sin is death, separation from God forever.

> *For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.* **Romans 6:23 (NIV)**

4 Jesus defeated death.

Jesus died on the cross for our sins and rose again. He broke the power of death and opened the way to eternal life.

> *He has saved us and called us to a holy life—not because of anything we have done but because of his own purpose and grace.* **2 Timothy 1:9 (NIV)**

5 You can't earn it. You receive it.

Salvation isn't a reward for being good enough. It's a gift you receive by trusting Jesus.

> *For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast.* **Ephesians 2:8–9 (NIV)**

6 Turn and trust.

Turn from running your own life, and trust Jesus as your Savior and King. Then run your race with Him all the way to the finish line.

> *If you declare with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.* **Romans 10:9 (NIV)**

So what do you do with that? You don't need perfect words. You can talk to God honestly, right now, wherever you are. If it helps, you could pray something like this:

> *God, I've been running my own life, and I've sinned against You. I can't fix that myself. Thank You that Jesus died for me and broke the power of death. I believe You raised Him from the dead. I'm turning to You. Forgive me. I trust Jesus as my Savior, and I want to follow*

Him as my King. Give me courage instead of fear, and help me finish the race. In Jesus' name, amen.

If You Just Said Yes

Tell someone. A parent, a grandparent, a youth leader, a pastor, or a Christian friend. Start there.

Read the real thing. Read 2 Timothy straight through. Then read Titus, the next letter in the New Testament, another of Paul's letters to a young leader.

Find your people. Get connected to a church where the Bible is taught and Jesus is honored. Find an older believer who can mentor you, the way Paul mentored Timothy. Ask about being baptized.

Talk to God every day. Be honest with Him, even about your fears. He can handle it.

Not Sure Yet?

Not ready? That's honest, and honesty is a good place to start. Keep asking. Keep reading. Talk to someone you trust. Just don't settle for "I already know all that."

Because if Paul is right, Jesus has defeated death itself, and it's worth finding out for yourself.

The Lord will rescue me from every evil attack and will bring me safely to his heavenly kingdom. To him be glory for ever and ever. Amen.

2 Timothy 4:18 (NIV)

PAUL'S LETTER TO TITUS

The King's Kindness

Titus, Unfiltered

For teens who think they've heard it all

BILL McLEOD

Papa Bill Books

The King's Kindness: Paul's Letter to Titus, Unfiltered

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All Scripture quotations in this book are from the NIV. Some are abridged, with omissions marked by ellipses; paraphrases are not placed in quotation marks.

Pronouns referring to God the Father, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit are capitalized for reverence in the author's own words. Inside Scripture quotations, capitalization and wording follow the 2011 NIV exactly.

AI Disclosure. This book was written by Bill McLeod with the assistance of artificial intelligence tools for drafting, research, and editing. All content was reviewed and approved by the author, who takes full responsibility for it. Readers are encouraged to open the Scriptures and study them for themselves.

A WORD TO THE READER

Before You Start

If you've read the earlier books in this series, you know the saying by now: "If you want to get something done, hire a teenager while they still know it all." It's been in every book. Titus is a short letter, but the saying is staying.

Titus is one of the shortest books in the New Testament. You can read it in about ten minutes. But don't let the size fool you. It contains some of the clearest summaries of the gospel anywhere in the Bible.

It's a letter from Paul to one of his most trusted coworkers, a Greek believer named Titus, who had been left on the island of Crete with a tough assignment. The churches there were new and disorganized. Some teachers were spreading confusion and making money off it. And Crete had a reputation in the ancient world that wasn't exactly flattering.

Paul's answer to all of it is surprisingly simple: grace. Not a list of rules, though the letter has instructions. Grace, the undeserved kindness of God that showed up in Jesus, rescues people, changes them from the inside out, and teaches them how to live.

That's the big idea of this letter. What you believe about God shapes how you live. And the kindness of God can change anyone, no matter where they come from or what they've done. Let's go.

How This Book Works

This book walks through all three chapters of Titus, in order, one chapter of this book for each chapter of the letter. Each one explains what Paul is saying in plain language and adds background about Crete, the early church, and the Roman world.

Before chapter 1, a section called Setting the Scene introduces Titus, describes the island of Crete and its reputation, explains what was going wrong in the churches there, and briefly describes the debate over who wrote this letter. Read it first. Titus is short, so Setting the Scene is a little longer than usual.

Each chapter ends with a Key Verse quoted word for word from the New International Version (NIV), the same translation used for every Scripture quotation in this book (pronouns for God are capitalized in the author's own words out of reverence; inside Scripture quotations, capitalization follows the NIV exactly); Real Talk questions to think through alone or argue about with friends; and a Try This challenge.

This book quotes Titus sparingly and explains it mostly in my own words, so keep a Bible open next to it. Read each chapter of the letter first, then the chapter here. Don't take my word for it. Take His.

FOR THE ADULTS

A Note for Parents and Youth Leaders

Thank you for putting this book in a teenager's hands. Like the earlier books in this series, on the Gospels, Acts, and Paul's letters from Romans to 2 Timothy, it's written for readers who can smell a sermon coming a mile away. I've tried to write honestly, directly, with some humor, and with real respect for what these readers can handle.

This book follows the letter format of the earlier volumes, walking through Titus chapter by chapter. I've quoted the letter sparingly and relied mostly on paraphrase, background, and discussion material. Wherever Scripture is quoted directly, in the chapters and in the Key Verses, the wording is from the New International Version (NIV).

Titus 1:12 quotes an ancient Cretan poet's insult about his own people. I've explained its background and context carefully, and made clear that it is not a license to stereotype any group of people, ancient or modern. The instructions to households in 2:1–10, including the instructions to slaves, are handled briefly and with balance, in the same way as in the Ephesians, Colossians, and 1 Timothy volumes, and the differing ways Christians apply the instructions to wives are presented fairly.

The debate over the authorship of the Pastoral Epistles is described briefly and fairly. The letter presents itself as Paul's, and I refer to

the author as Paul throughout. Views about the washing of rebirth in 3:5 and its relation to baptism are also presented without taking sides.

The letter's teaching on grace that trains us to live well (2:11–14) and on the kindness and love of God (3:4–7) is highlighted, along with the qualities of good leaders (1:5–9) and Paul's instruction to young men (2:6–8).

The Real Talk questions are designed for discussion. They work well for a youth group, a small group, a family dinner table, or a car ride. Don't rush to the right answer. Let them wrestle. Faith that has been thought through tends to last.

My prayer is that every reader will discover the kindness of God, and that it will change them from the inside out.

Grace and peace,

Bill McLeod

Papa Bill Books

BEFORE YOU OPEN THE LETTER

Setting the Scene

Who Was Titus?

Titus is one of the most important people in Paul's story, but he's never mentioned in Acts. Everything we know about him comes from Paul's letters. He was a Greek, not a Jew, and he seems to have become a believer through Paul, since Paul calls him his true son in the faith (1:4).

Titus first appears when Paul takes him to Jerusalem to meet the leaders of the church there. Some believers insisted that Gentile Christians had to be circumcised and follow the Jewish law. Paul refused to let Titus be circumcised, and the Jerusalem leaders agreed. Titus became living proof that Gentiles are welcomed into God's family by grace, through faith in Jesus (Galatians 2:1–5).

Titus the Troubleshooter

Titus seems to have been the person Paul sent when things got difficult. When Paul's relationship with the Corinthian church was at its worst, Titus went to Corinth to help. He came back with good news that the church had changed its attitude, and Paul says Titus's arrival comforted him when he was discouraged (2 Corinthians 7:5–7). Titus also helped organize the offering for poor believers in Jerusalem, and Paul calls him his partner and coworker (2 Corinthians 8:16–23).

In other words, Titus was dependable, tactful, and tough. That's probably why Paul left him on Crete. Later, Titus went to Dalmatia,

on the coast of modern Croatia (2 Timothy 4:10). According to later tradition, he returned to Crete, led the church there for many years, and died there as an old man. A church dedicated to him still stands in ruins at Gortyn, the old Roman capital of the island.

The Island of Crete

Crete is a long, mountainous island in the Mediterranean Sea, south of mainland Greece. It's about 160 miles from end to end, the largest of the Greek islands. Thousands of years before Paul, it was home to the Minoans, one of the earliest advanced civilizations in Europe, who built the great palace of Knossos. Greek myths placed the labyrinth and the Minotaur there, and said the god Zeus had been born and raised in a cave on the island.

By Paul's day, Crete was part of the Roman Empire. The Romans had conquered it in the 60s BC and combined it with Cyrene, in North Africa, into a single province. The island had many towns, a lot of farmland, and busy harbors on the sea routes between Rome, Egypt, and the east.

Christianity Comes to Crete

We don't know exactly how the gospel first reached Crete. Acts mentions that there were people from Crete in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost, when Peter preached and thousands believed (Acts 2:11). Some of them may have taken the message home. There were Jewish communities on the island, and some of the first believers there may have come from them.

Paul himself sailed along the southern coast of Crete as a prisoner on his way to Rome. His ship stopped at a harbor called Fair Havens, and Paul warned the crew not to sail on, but they ignored him and were caught in a terrible storm (Acts 27:7–21). That stop

doesn't seem to have been long enough to plant churches. So many scholars think Paul came back to Crete later, after being released from his first imprisonment in Rome, and left Titus there to finish what they'd started.

Crete's Reputation

In the ancient world, Crete had a bad reputation. Greek writers accused Cretans of lying so often that the Greek language developed a verb, kretizo, which meant to act like a Cretan, that is, to lie or cheat. Cretans were famous as skilled archers who fought as hired soldiers for whoever paid them, and the island was sometimes associated with piracy. Some writers also accused Cretans of greed.

One reason Cretans were called liars was religious. Cretans claimed to have the tomb of Zeus on their island. To other Greeks, who believed Zeus was immortal, that claim seemed like an outrageous lie. A Greek poet named Callimachus, writing around 280 BC, complained about it in a hymn to Zeus.

It's important to remember that these were stereotypes, the kind of insults neighboring peoples have always thrown at one another. Plenty of Cretans were honest, hardworking people. We'll look at how Paul uses one of these insults, and how we should and shouldn't use it, in chapter 1.

What Was Going Wrong?

The churches on Crete were young. They didn't have leaders yet, and some people were taking advantage of that. Paul describes rebellious people who talked a lot but said nothing worthwhile, and who deceived others. Many of them seem to have been Jewish Christians who insisted that Gentile believers follow Jewish laws and traditions. They were interested in myths, genealogies, and

arguments about the law. They were upsetting whole families. And they were doing it for money.

Paul's response is to have Titus appoint good leaders, teach sound doctrine, and above all, help believers live lives that show the beauty of the gospel. The word good, as in good works or doing what is good, shows up again and again in this short letter.

When Was It Written?

Paul tells Titus to meet him at Nicopolis, where he planned to spend the winter (3:12). Several cities had that name, which means city of victory, but most scholars think Paul meant the Nicopolis in western Greece, founded by the emperor Augustus to celebrate a famous naval victory.

If Paul wrote Titus, it was probably written in the mid-60s AD, after his release from his first Roman imprisonment and before his final arrest, around the same time as 1 Timothy. Those who think a follower of Paul wrote it date it later, perhaps toward the end of the first century.

Who Wrote It?

Titus belongs with 1 and 2 Timothy in the group known as the Pastoral Epistles. As explained in the earlier volumes on those letters, many modern scholars think these three letters were written by a follower of Paul after his death, pointing to differences in vocabulary and style, a more developed church structure, and travel details that are hard to fit into Acts. Many other scholars believe Paul wrote them, pointing to the early church's acceptance of them as Paul's, the personal details they contain, and the possibility that Paul traveled again after the events at the end of Acts, perhaps writing with the help of a secretary. Christians on all sides agree

that the letter belongs in the Bible. In this book, I follow the letter's own claim and call the author Paul.

The Map

Chapter 1: Paul greets Titus, describes the kind of leaders the churches need, and warns about the false teachers on Crete.

Chapter 2: How different groups in the church should live, and how God's grace teaches us to live well while we wait for Jesus.

Chapter 3: How to live as good citizens and neighbors, one of the Bible's best summaries of the gospel, and Paul's final instructions.

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CHAPTER 1

Leaders Worth Following

Titus 1

Paul's opening is longer than you'd expect in such a short letter. He describes himself as God's servant and as an apostle sent by Jesus. His job, he says, is to help God's people grow in faith and in the knowledge of the truth, the kind of truth that leads to a godly life. And all of it rests on the hope of life that never ends, a promise God made long before time began. Paul adds a small but important detail: God never lies.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **The God Who Doesn't Lie**
>
> It's probably no accident that Paul describes God this way at the start of a letter to people living on Crete, an island known for its liars. The gods of Greek mythology lied, cheated, and tricked people all the time. The God Paul preaches is different. Every promise He makes, He keeps. That's why you can build your life on what He says.

Now, at the right time, God has revealed that promise through the message Paul was given to preach. Paul then greets Titus as his true son in the faith they share and wishes him grace and peace.

Then Paul gets to the point. He left Titus on Crete to finish organizing the churches there and to appoint elders in every town. The NIV footnote says the word for appoint can also mean ordain.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Unfinished Business**

Paul admits that he left things unfinished on Crete. Even the great apostle couldn't do everything himself. He trusted Titus to finish the job. God's work is always a team effort, and it always involves passing responsibility to the next person. Someday someone may leave you with unfinished business to take care of. Paul's confidence in Titus is a reminder that being trusted is an honor.

Then Paul describes the kind of person who should be an elder. The list is similar to the one in 1 Timothy 3, and once again, it's almost entirely about character.

An elder must have a reputation that no one can rightly attack. He must be faithful to his wife. His children should be believers, and they shouldn't have a reputation for being wild or rebellious. The NIV footnote says this could also mean his children are trustworthy.

Paul then calls the elder an overseer, which shows that the two words refer to the same role. Because he's in charge of the household that belongs to God, his life must be beyond criticism. He can't be arrogant or bossy, quick to lose his temper, a heavy drinker, violent, or greedy for money he hasn't earned honestly.

Instead, he must be welcoming to strangers, love goodness, be sensible, fair, devoted to God, and disciplined. And he must hold tight to the reliable message he was taught, so he'll be able to encourage people with healthy teaching and correct those who oppose it.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Elders and Overseers**

Titus 1:5–7 is one of the clearest places in the New Testament where elder and overseer are used for the same people. Elder comes from a word meaning an older person and emphasizes maturity and respect. Overseer emphasizes the job: watching over and caring for a church. Today, churches organize

leadership in different ways. Some have bishops, priests, and deacons. Some have pastors and elder boards. Some have congregational votes. All of them look to passages like this one to describe what a leader should be like.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Faithful to His Wife, Again**

As in 1 Timothy, the Greek phrase is literally a one-woman man. Christians understand it in different ways: as ruling out polygamy, as ruling out remarriage after divorce, or most commonly as describing a man who is completely faithful in marriage. Christians also differ on whether this list means that only men can serve as elders, just as they differ on 1 Timothy 2:12, which the 1 Timothy volume in this series discusses in detail.

BACKGROUND CHECK **What about His Kids?**

Paul says an elder's children should be believers, or perhaps trustworthy, and not wild or disobedient. This doesn't mean that parents are to blame for every choice their children make, or that a leader is disqualified if a grown child walks away from faith. Paul seems to be talking about children still living at home and about the overall atmosphere of the family. If a man's household is chaotic and out of control, that's a sign he isn't ready to lead a church. If you're the child of a pastor or church leader, you know there can be a lot of pressure. Your parent's job doesn't make you responsible for their ministry. But your choices do affect your family.

BACKGROUND CHECK **A Leadership Checklist**

Look at the qualities in verses 7 and 8. Not bossy. Not hot-tempered. Not a drunk. Not violent. Not greedy. Welcoming. Loves what is good. Self-controlled. Fair. Devoted to God. Disciplined. You don't have to be a church elder to work on these. Team captains, student council members, older siblings, and anyone with friends who look up to them can use this list. Which of these qualities do people see in you?

Why does Titus need such good leaders? Because, Paul says, there are many people on Crete who refuse to submit to anyone. They talk a lot, but it's empty talk, and they deceive people. Many of them

belong to the circumcision group, Jewish Christians who taught that Gentile believers had to keep the Jewish law. They have to be stopped, Paul says, because they're turning whole families upside down, teaching things they shouldn't, and doing it to make money.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Circumcision Group**

If you've read the Galatians volume in this series, you know about this group. They taught that faith in Jesus wasn't enough; Gentiles also had to be circumcised and follow the Jewish law to be fully accepted by God. Paul strongly opposed that. He wasn't against Jewish people. He was Jewish himself, and so were Jesus and all the first apostles. He was against any teaching that added requirements to God's grace. Titus, an uncircumcised Greek, was the perfect person to stand against this group.

Then comes the verse that makes many readers uncomfortable. Paul quotes one of Crete's own prophets, who said, "Cretans are always liars, evil brutes, lazy gluttons." And Paul adds that this saying is true.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Who Said It?**

The NIV footnote says the quote comes from the Cretan philosopher Epimenides, who probably lived around 600 BC. Ancient writers described him as a poet, prophet, and wise man, and many legends grew up around him, including one that he slept in a cave for fifty-seven years. Some scholars think Paul may also quote a line from Epimenides in Acts 17:28, when he tells the Athenians that in God we live and move and have our being. Paul knew the poets of the Greek world and used their words to communicate with Greek audiences.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Liar Paradox**

Epimenides' line became famous among philosophers for another reason. If a Cretan says that all Cretans are always liars, is he telling the truth? If he is, then he's lying, because he's a Cretan. If he's lying, then some Cretans tell the truth. This puzzle, known as the liar paradox, has been debated by

philosophers and logicians for centuries. Paul probably wasn't thinking about the logic puzzle at all. But it's a fun question to argue about.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Handle with Care**

So was Paul saying that every person from Crete was a liar, a brute, and a glutton? No. Notice a few things. First, Paul is quoting a Cretan describing his own people, the way people sometimes joke about their own hometown or culture. Second, Paul uses the quote to describe the false teachers specifically, the people who were deceiving others for money. When he says the saying is true, he means it's true of them. Third, the churches Paul loved on Crete were made up of Cretans, and Titus was spending his life serving them. Paul believed God's grace could transform anyone. That's the whole point of the letter. Finally, the New Testament teaches that in Christ there's no room for looking down on any ethnic group (Galatians 3:28; Colossians 3:11). This verse should never be used to stereotype people from Crete, Greece, or anywhere else. Using it that way would be the opposite of what Paul is doing.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Stereotypes Today**

Stereotypes are everywhere: jokes about people from a certain country, state, city, or school; assumptions based on race, accent, religion, or how much money someone has. They can seem harmless, but they make it easy to stop seeing people as individuals. And they hurt. Jesus constantly crossed lines that people of His time drew between groups: Jews and Samaritans, insiders and outsiders, respectable people and sinners. Before you laugh at or repeat a stereotype, ask whether it treats someone the way Jesus would.

Because of how serious the problem is, Paul tells Titus to correct these people firmly, so that they'll have a healthy faith and stop paying attention to Jewish myths and to rules made up by people who have turned their backs on the truth.

Then Paul makes a famous statement: to people who are pure, everything is pure. But to people who are corrupt and don't believe, nothing is pure, because their minds and consciences are polluted.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Pure Things**
>
> The false teachers seem to have been obsessed with rules about purity: which foods were clean and which weren't, what you could touch and what you couldn't. Jesus taught that it's not what goes into a person that makes them unclean, but what comes out of their heart (Mark 7:14–23). Paul's point is that purity is a matter of the heart. A pure heart can enjoy God's good gifts with thanks. A corrupt heart can twist even good things into something ugly. This verse doesn't mean anything goes, though. Paul is talking about the false teachers' rules, not about things God's word clearly calls sin.

Paul ends the chapter with a sharp description. These people claim to know God, but their actions deny Him. They're disobedient and useless for anything good.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Say and Do**
>
> Paul's harshest criticism isn't about what the false teachers believed, though that mattered. It's that their lives didn't match their words. They said they knew God, but you'd never know it from how they acted. That's a challenge for all of us. Does the way you live back up what you say you believe? People notice when it doesn't.

KEY VERSE

Rather, he must be hospitable, one who loves what is good, who is self-controlled, upright, holy and disciplined.

Titus 1:8 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Paul's list of qualities for leaders is almost all about character. Why do you think character matters more than talent in a leader?
2. Which quality on Paul's list would you most like other people to see in you?
3. Why do you think Paul quoted a Cretan poet's insult? How should Christians respond to stereotypes about any group of people?
4. Is there any area of your life where your actions don't match what you say you believe?

TRY THIS *This week, pay attention to the jokes and comments you hear about different groups of people, at school, online, or at home. When you hear a stereotype, don't repeat it. If you can, gently push back. And pray for someone from a group that's often looked down on.*

CHAPTER 2

Grace That Teaches

Titus 2

Paul tells Titus that he, unlike the false teachers, must teach what fits with sound doctrine. Then Paul shows what that looks like in everyday life, group by group.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Doctrine You Can See**
>
> Doctrine just means teaching, especially the core beliefs of the Christian faith. Some people think doctrine is boring or only for scholars. But in Titus, Paul connects doctrine with how people live, again and again. Sound doctrine produces healthy lives. What you believe about God shows up in how you treat your family, your friends, and the people you work for. You could say that your life is the best evidence of what you actually believe.

First, older men. They should be sober-minded, respected, self-controlled, and healthy in their faith, their love, and their perseverance.

Second, older women. They should live in a way that honors God. They shouldn't spread rumors or be addicted to wine. Instead, they should teach what is good. They can encourage the younger women to love the husbands and kids in their lives, to have self-control and purity, to manage their homes, to be kind, and to submit to their husbands, so that nobody has a reason to speak badly of God's word.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Older Teaching Younger**

Notice that Paul expects older women to teach and mentor younger women. That's not a minor role. In a world where women had few opportunities for education, Paul gives them an important ministry in the church. And the whole passage assumes a church where generations know one another, learn from one another, and care for one another. Do you know any older believers at your church? They have a lot to teach you, and you probably have something to teach them too.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Reading 2:4–5 Today**

Paul's instructions to young women reflect the culture of his day, when most women married young and worked mainly in the household, which was often also a family business. Christians apply these verses in different ways today. Some believe they describe a lasting pattern, with husbands leading lovingly and wives supporting that leadership, and many in this group also encourage women to work outside the home when it fits their family. Others believe Paul's main concern was the church's reputation in that culture, and that today the same concern for the gospel's reputation might look different, with husbands and wives sharing leadership equally. Both views agree on a lot. As in Ephesians 5, where Paul tells all believers to submit to one another and tells husbands to love their wives as Christ loves the church, marriage is meant to be a partnership of love and respect, never control or abuse. And Paul's reason is clear in both views: live in a way that makes the gospel look good.

Third, young men. Titus should encourage them to be self-controlled. That's all Paul says. One word, essentially. But it's a word that covers almost everything: anger, desires, words, money, screen time, and how you treat people.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Self-Control**

Self-control shows up again and again in Titus: for elders (1:8), older men (2:2), younger women (2:5), young men (2:6), and everyone (2:12). In Crete, a culture where people had a reputation for doing whatever they wanted, this

was countercultural. It's countercultural today too. Our world says that if you want something, you should have it, now. Self-control means being able to say no to what you want in the moment for the sake of what you want most. The good news is that self-control isn't something you have to manufacture by yourself. Paul lists it as part of the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22–23). God grows it in you.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Set an Example**

Paul tells Titus, who was probably a fairly young man himself, to set an example for the young men by doing good in everything. In his teaching, he should show integrity and seriousness, and his message should be so healthy that no one can criticize it. That way, opponents will be embarrassed because they can't find anything bad to say. It's very similar to Paul's words to Timothy (1 Timothy 4:12). Young people can be examples, not just learn from them.

Fourth, slaves. Paul tells Titus to teach slaves to submit to their masters in all things, to work at pleasing them, not to argue with them, and not to steal. Instead, they should show that they can be completely trusted, so that their lives make the teaching about God attractive.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Slavery in Titus**

As in Ephesians, Colossians, and 1 Timothy, Paul is writing to believers living in a world where slavery was a normal part of life, and where enslaved people could do little to change their situation. Historians estimate that a large portion of people in the Roman world were enslaved, though the numbers are uncertain and varied from place to place. Paul's instructions here are about how believers could live faithfully in that situation, not an endorsement of slavery. Elsewhere, Paul encourages enslaved believers to gain their freedom if they can (1 Corinthians 7:21), condemns slave traders (1 Timothy 1:10), and teaches that slave and free are one in Christ (Galatians 3:28). Notice too what Paul says about slaves here: their lives could adorn the teaching about God. Society treated them as property, but Paul treats them as people whose lives

can display the beauty of the gospel. Over time, the Christian conviction that every person bears God's image helped lead many believers to fight to end slavery.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Making the Gospel Attractive**

The word Paul uses in verse 10 for making the teaching attractive is the word you'd use for arranging jewels or decorating something beautifully. It's where we get the English word cosmetic. Your life can make the good news about Jesus look beautiful to the people around you, or ugly. Most people won't read the Bible. But they'll read you.

Then Paul explains why all this matters, in one of the most beautiful passages in the letter. God's grace has appeared, bringing salvation for everyone. And this grace doesn't just forgive us. It teaches us. It trains us to say no to godlessness and to the desires this world pushes on us, and to live sensible, right, and godly lives here and now, while we wait for what Paul calls the blessed hope. That hope is the day when the glory of Jesus Christ, our great God and Savior, is revealed.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Grace Is a Teacher**

Some people think that if God forgives everything, it doesn't matter how we live. Others think the only way to make people live right is with strict rules and threats. Paul says neither. Grace itself is a teacher. The word Paul uses was used for training and raising children. When you really understand how much God loves you and what Jesus did for you, it changes what you want. You don't obey God to earn His love. You obey because you already have it. Grace says no to some things and yes to others, and it changes you from the inside out.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Our Great God and Savior**

Verse 13 is one of several places in the New Testament where Jesus seems to be called God directly. Most translations, including the NIV, read it as describing one person, Jesus, who is both our great God and Savior. A few

translations read it as describing two persons, God and the Savior Jesus Christ. Most scholars think the NIV reading is the more natural one grammatically. Either way, the letter makes something interesting clear: Paul calls God our Savior and Jesus our Savior, sometimes in back-to-back verses (1:3–4; 3:4–6). Christians believe that's because Jesus is God, the Son, who came to save us.

Paul says that Jesus gave Himself for us, to set us free from all wickedness and to make us clean, His own special people, eager to do good.

BACKGROUND CHECK **His Very Own**

The idea of a people that belong to God comes from the Old Testament, where God calls Israel His treasured possession (Exodus 19:5; Deuteronomy 7:6). Paul says that through Jesus, God has formed a people who belong to Him, made up of Jews and Gentiles, Cretans and Greeks and everyone else. You're not just a forgiven individual. You're part of a family, God's very own people. And notice what marks that people: they're eager to do good. Not grudgingly, not because they have to, but eagerly.

Paul ends the chapter by telling Titus to teach these things, to encourage and correct with full authority, and not to let anyone disregard him.

KEY VERSE

For the grace of God has appeared that offers salvation to all people. It teaches us to say "No" to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, while we wait for the blessed hope—the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good.

Titus 2:11–14 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. What's one way older believers have helped you? What could you learn from an older Christian in your church?
2. Where do you find self-control hardest? What would help?
3. What do you think it means that grace teaches us? How is that different from rules and threats?
4. Is your life making the gospel look attractive to the people around you? What's one thing that could change?

TRY THIS *Pick one area where you want to grow in self-control, like your phone, your temper, your words, or your eating. Set one small, specific limit for this week, and each time you keep it, thank God for His grace that's teaching you.*

CHAPTER 3

Kindness Appeared

Titus 3

Paul tells Titus to remind the believers to respect rulers and authorities, to obey them, and to be ready to do good. They shouldn't slander anyone, but should be peaceful and considerate, and gentle toward everyone.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Good Citizens**

Paul's instruction to respect authorities is similar to Romans 13:1–7 and 1 Peter 2:13–17. In the first century, Christians were a small, misunderstood group, and some people suspected them of being troublemakers. Paul wanted believers to be known as the best neighbors and citizens in town. Christians have always discussed the limits of this. When rulers command something God forbids, the apostles said we must obey God rather than people (Acts 5:29). But in everyday life, Paul's words are clear: be respectful, be helpful, be kind.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Gentle toward Everyone**

Paul says believers should show true gentleness toward everyone. Not just to other Christians, not just to people who are nice to them, but everyone. On Crete, the believers' neighbors probably included people who mocked them, cheated them, or worshiped other gods. Paul says to be gentle with all of them. That includes the kid who annoys you, the teacher you don't like, and the person who disagrees with you online.

Why should believers be so gentle with people who don't know God? Because, Paul says, we used to be just like them. We were once foolish and disobedient ourselves. We were fooled, and we were slaves to every kind of craving and pleasure. We lived with hatred and envy. People hated us, and we hated each other.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **We Too**
>
> Notice that Paul says we. He includes himself. Before he met Jesus, Paul was a religious man, but he was also full of anger and hatred toward Christians (1 Timothy 1:13). It's easy for church people to look down on people who aren't Christians. Paul says, remember where you came from. Anyone who has been rescued by grace has no right to look down on anyone else.

But then everything changed. And Paul describes how in one of the clearest summaries of the gospel in the Bible. When the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, He saved us. Not because of the good things we'd done, but because of His mercy.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Kindness**
>
> The Greek word for love in verse 4 is philanthropia, which gives us philanthropy. It means love for humanity. In the Roman world, people praised emperors and rich benefactors for their philanthropy, their generosity to cities and citizens. Paul says the true philanthropy, the greatest act of kindness the world has ever seen, came from God when Jesus appeared. And it wasn't given to people who deserved it. It was given to people who were foolish, disobedient, and full of hatred.

God saved us, Paul says, through the washing of rebirth and the renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom He poured out on us generously through Jesus. The result is that, made right with God by His grace, we have become heirs, with the hope of eternal life.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Washing of Rebirth**

What does Paul mean by the washing of rebirth? Christians have understood it in different ways. Many, including Catholic, Orthodox, Lutheran, and some other churches, believe it refers to baptism, through which God gives new birth. Many other Christians believe it describes the spiritual cleansing and new birth that the Holy Spirit brings when someone believes, of which baptism is an outward sign. Either way, the point is that God is the one who washes us and makes us new. Jesus talked about the same idea when He told Nicodemus that people must be born again, of water and the Spirit (John 3:3–5).

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Whole Trinity**

Look at verses 4 to 6 again. God our Savior shows His kindness. The Holy Spirit renews us. Jesus Christ our Savior is the one through whom the Spirit is poured out. The word Trinity doesn't appear in the Bible, but passages like this one show why Christians came to believe in one God in three persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, all working together to save us.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Heirs**

An heir is someone who will receive an inheritance. In the Roman world, people often adopted adult heirs to carry on their family name and receive their property. Paul says that God has made us His heirs. Everything that belongs to God's family is ours, and the best part is still to come: eternal life with Him. You may not feel rich, important, or secure. But if you belong to Jesus, you have an inheritance that can never be taken away (1 Peter 1:4).

Paul says this is a trustworthy saying, the last of the five trustworthy sayings in the Pastoral Epistles. He wants Titus to emphasize these truths, so that people who trust God will make sure to give themselves to doing good. These things are excellent, Paul says, and helpful for everybody.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Saved for Good Works**

Paul is very clear in verse 5: we're not saved because of good things we've done. But in verse 8, and verse 14, and throughout this letter, Paul talks about doing good. Is that a contradiction? Not at all. We're not saved by good works, but we're saved for good works (Ephesians 2:8–10). Good works aren't the root of salvation. They're the fruit. A tree doesn't produce apples to become an apple tree. It produces apples because it already is one.

But Titus should stay away from foolish controversies, genealogies, and fights about the law. They're pointless and don't help anyone.

As for people who cause division, Paul says to warn them once, then a second time. After that, Titus should have nothing more to do with them. People like that, Paul says, are twisted and sinful, and they're condemning themselves.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Divisive People**

The word Paul uses for divisive is the Greek word that gives us the English word heretic. Originally it meant someone who chose to form a faction or split a group. Paul isn't talking about people who ask honest questions or disagree respectfully. He's talking about people who keep stirring up conflict and dividing the church, even after being warned. Notice that Paul gives them two warnings first. The goal is always to win people back. But sometimes, for the health of a community, people who refuse to stop causing harm need to be removed. That's true in friend groups too. You can love someone and still set boundaries with them.

Paul ends with personal notes. He plans to send Artemas or Tychicus to Crete, probably to replace Titus, and he asks Titus to come to him at Nicopolis, where he's decided to spend the winter. Tychicus also shows up in Ephesians, Colossians, and 2 Timothy as one of Paul's trusted messengers. We don't know anything else about Artemas.

Paul also asks Titus to do all he can for Zenas the lawyer and for Apollos and make sure they have everything they need. Zenas may have been an expert in Roman law or in the Jewish law. Apollos was the gifted preacher from Alexandria who had worked in Corinth (Acts 18:24–28; 1 Corinthians 3:6). They may have been the ones carrying this letter to Crete.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Helping People on Their Way**

Traveling in the ancient world was hard and expensive, and there were few hotels that respectable people would stay in. Christians helped missionaries and other believers by giving them food, money, and a place to stay, and by sending them on their way. That's still a great way to serve. You might help support a missionary, welcome a new student, or make sure a visitor at church feels at home.

Paul repeats his theme one last time. Believers must learn to give themselves to doing good, so they can meet urgent needs and live productive lives. Then Paul passes on greetings from everyone with him, sends greetings to all who love him in the faith, and closes with a blessing of grace for them all.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Productive Lives**

Paul's last instruction is very practical. Learn to do good, especially when people have urgent needs. Don't waste your life. You don't have to wait until you're an adult to do this. You can learn now: helping at home, volunteering, serving at church, being a good friend, noticing people who are struggling. The Cretans had a reputation for being lazy. Paul says that people who've been changed by God's kindness should be known for exactly the opposite.

KEY VERSE

But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life.

Titus 3:4–7 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Why do you think Paul wanted Christians to be known as good citizens and neighbors?
2. Paul reminds believers of what they used to be like. How does remembering your own need for grace change how you treat others?
3. What do you think is the difference between being saved by good works and being saved for good works?
4. What urgent needs do you see around you? How could you help meet one of them?

TRY THIS *This week, do one act of kindness for someone who can't pay you back, and don't tell anyone about it. Let it be a small picture of the kindness God showed you.*

THE END (AND THE BEGINNING)

Now What? The Bottom Line

You've just read one of the shortest letters in the Bible. But it's packed with the good news. Paul says that God's kindness and love appeared in Jesus, and that God saved us, not because of anything good we'd done, but because of His mercy.

Here's what the Bible says, as plainly as I can put it.

1 God made you, and He's kind.

God made you on purpose, and He wants you to know Him. His grace is for everyone.

> *For the grace of God has appeared that offers salvation to all people.* **Titus 2:11 (NIV)**

2 We've all turned away.

We've all gone our own way instead of God's. The Bible calls it sin, and it separates us from God.

> *for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,* **Romans 3:23 (NIV)**

3 Sin has a real cost.

God is good, so He doesn't shrug off evil. The Bible says the result of sin is death, separation from God forever.

> *For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.* **Romans 6:23 (NIV)**

4 Jesus came for you.

Jesus died on the cross for our sins and rose again. He didn't wait for us to clean up our lives first.

> *But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.* **Romans 5:8 (NIV)**

5 You can't earn it. You receive it.

Salvation isn't a reward for being good enough. It's a gift you receive by trusting Jesus.

> *For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast.* **Ephesians 2:8–9 (NIV)**

6 Turn and trust.

Turn from running your own life, and trust Jesus as your Savior and King. His grace will teach you a new way to live.

> *If you declare with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.* **Romans 10:9 (NIV)**

So what do you do with that? You don't need perfect words. You can talk to God honestly, right now, wherever you are. If it helps, you could pray something like this:

> *God, I've been running my own life, and I've sinned against You. I can't fix that myself. Thank You for Your kindness and mercy, and that Jesus died for me. I believe You raised Him from the dead. I'm turning to You. Forgive me. I trust Jesus as my Savior, and I want to*

follow Him as my King. Make me new by Your Spirit, and teach me to live Your way. In Jesus' name, amen.

If You Just Said Yes

Tell someone. A parent, a youth leader, a pastor, or a Christian friend. Start there.

Read the real thing. Read Titus straight through. It takes about ten minutes. Then read Philemon, the next letter in the New Testament, Paul's short, personal letter about a runaway slave.

Find your people. Get connected to a church where the Bible is taught and Jesus is honored. Find an older believer who can mentor you, the way Paul mentored Titus. Ask about being baptized.

Talk to God every day. Be honest with Him. Thank Him for His kindness. He can handle anything you bring Him.

Not Sure Yet?

Not ready? That's honest, and honesty is a good place to start. Keep asking. Keep reading. Talk to someone you trust. Just don't settle for "I already know all that."

Because if Paul is right, the kindness of God has shown up in Jesus, and it's worth finding out for yourself.

Grace be with you all.

Titus 3:15 (NIV)

PAUL'S LETTER TO PHILEMON

The King's Welcome

Philemon, Unfiltered

For teens who think they've heard it all

BILL McLEOD

Papa Bill Books

The King's Welcome: Paul's Letter to Philemon, Unfiltered

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All Scripture quotations in this book are from the NIV. Some are abridged, with omissions marked by ellipses; paraphrases are not placed in quotation marks.

Pronouns referring to God the Father, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit are capitalized for reverence in the author's own words. Inside Scripture quotations, capitalization and wording follow the 2011 NIV exactly.

AI Disclosure. This book was written by Bill McLeod with the assistance of artificial intelligence tools for drafting, research, and editing. All content was reviewed and approved by the author, who takes full responsibility for it. Readers are encouraged to open the Scriptures and study them for themselves.

A WORD TO THE READER

Before You Start

If you've read the earlier books in this series, you know the saying by now: "If you want to get something done, hire a teenager while they still know it all." It's been in every book. Philemon is the shortest letter of Paul's we have, but the saying is staying.

Philemon is tiny. It's 25 verses long, one page in most Bibles, shorter than some text threads. You could read it out loud in about three minutes. It's a private note from Paul to a friend, about one person.

That person is a man named Onesimus. He was a slave. Somehow, he had ended up away from his owner, a Christian named Philemon, and had found his way to Paul, who was in prison. While he was with Paul, Onesimus became a follower of Jesus. Now Paul is sending him back, with this letter in his hand.

What will Philemon do? Under Roman law, he could punish Onesimus harshly. Paul asks for something radically different: welcome him back, not as property but as a brother. And if he owes you anything, Paul says, put it on my account.

This little letter raises big questions. What does the gospel say about slavery? How do you forgive someone who has wronged you? How do you ask a friend to do something hard without forcing them? And what does it look like when Jesus takes our debts and puts them on His own account? Let's go.

How This Book Works

Philemon has only one chapter, so this book divides it into four short sections, following the flow of Paul's letter: his greeting and thanks (verses 1–7), his appeal for Onesimus (verses 8–16), his offer to pay (verses 17–22), and his final greetings (verses 23–25). Each chapter of this book covers one section and explains what Paul is saying in plain language.

Because the letter is so short, Setting the Scene is longer than usual. It explains slavery in the Roman world, introduces the people in the letter, describes the different theories about what happened between Onesimus and Philemon, and shows how this letter connects to Colossians. Read it first. It will make the letter come alive.

Each chapter ends with a Key Verse quoted word for word from the New International Version (NIV), the same translation used for every Scripture quotation in this book (pronouns for God are capitalized in the author's own words out of reverence; inside Scripture quotations, capitalization follows the NIV exactly); Real Talk questions to think through alone or argue about with friends; and a Try This challenge.

This book quotes Philemon sparingly and explains it mostly in my own words, so keep a Bible open next to it. Read the section of the letter first, then the chapter here. Don't take my word for it. Take His.

FOR THE ADULTS

A Note for Parents and Youth Leaders

Thank you for putting this book in a teenager's hands. Like the earlier books in this series, on the Gospels, Acts, and Paul's letters from Romans to Titus, it's written for readers who can smell a sermon coming a mile away. I've tried to write honestly, directly, with some humor, and with real respect for what these readers can handle.

Philemon has only one chapter, so this book divides it into four sections. I've quoted the letter sparingly and relied mostly on paraphrase, background, and discussion material. Wherever Scripture is quoted directly, in the chapters and in the Key Verses, the wording is from the New International Version (NIV).

This letter is set against the background of Roman slavery. I've described that institution honestly, without minimizing its cruelty, and explained how it differed from, and resembled, the race-based slavery of more recent centuries. I've also described, briefly and factually, how this letter was used on both sides of the debates over slavery in the nineteenth century, including by defenders of slavery.

Scholars hold several theories about why Onesimus was with Paul. I've presented the main ones fairly. I've also noted the early tradition linking Onesimus to a later bishop of Ephesus, and labelled it as uncertain.

The letter is a beautiful picture of forgiveness and reconciliation, and that theme is applied to teens' lives. I've been careful to make clear that forgiveness does not mean excusing harm, pretending it didn't happen, or staying in an unsafe situation, and to encourage any reader experiencing abuse to tell a trusted adult.

The Real Talk questions are designed for discussion. They work well for a youth group, a small group, a family dinner table, or a car ride. Don't rush to the right answer. Let them wrestle. Faith that has been thought through tends to last.

My prayer is that every reader will discover that Jesus has paid what they owe, and that they will learn to welcome others the way He has welcomed them.

Grace and peace,

Bill McLeod

Papa Bill Books

BEFORE YOU OPEN THE LETTER

Setting the Scene

A Letter in a Slave's Hand

Picture the scene. A young man walks up a road toward the town of Colossae, in what is now western Turkey. He's carrying letters. One is addressed to the whole church in Colossae; you can read it in your Bible as Colossians. The other is a short, personal note to a wealthy believer in town named Philemon.

The young man is Onesimus. He's a slave, and Philemon is his owner. Some time ago, Onesimus left Philemon's household. Now he's coming back. He has no idea how Philemon will respond. Everything may depend on the note in his hand.

Slavery in the Roman World

To understand Philemon, you need to understand Roman slavery, and you need to see it honestly. Slavery was everywhere in the Roman Empire. Historians estimate that in Italy perhaps one in five to one in three people were enslaved, and in other provinces the share may have been lower, though all such numbers are uncertain. People became slaves in many ways: they were captured in war, kidnapped by pirates or slave traders, born to enslaved mothers, abandoned as babies and raised as slaves, or sold to pay debts.

Under Roman law, a slave was property. An owner could buy, sell, rent out, or give away a slave like a piece of furniture or an animal. Enslaved people couldn't legally marry, and their children belonged to the owner. Families could be split up and sold separately. Slaves

could be beaten, chained, branded, and sexually exploited, and they had almost no legal protection. When slaves were witnesses in court, Roman law required that their testimony be taken under torture.

Not Gentler, Just Different

People sometimes say that Roman slavery was milder than slavery in the Americas. That's only partly true, and it can be misleading. Roman slavery wasn't based on race; people of any ethnicity could be enslaved. Some enslaved people worked as teachers, doctors, accountants, or managers and lived better than many poor free people. Many urban slaves were eventually freed, and freed slaves could become citizens and even wealthy.

But millions of others worked in brutal conditions in mines, quarries, and on huge farms, and many died young. A slave's life depended entirely on the character of the owner. And every enslaved person, however well treated, lived under the constant possibility of violence, sale, and separation from the people they loved. Slavery in any form treats human beings made in God's image as things. It is never gentle.

Runaways

Running away was one of the few ways enslaved people could resist, and owners feared it. Runaway slaves could be hunted by professional slave catchers. If caught, they could be whipped, branded on the forehead, forced to wear a metal collar, sold to a harsher owner, sent to the mines, or even executed. Archaeologists have found Roman slave collars with inscriptions telling anyone who found the wearer to return him to his master. Anyone who

sheltered a runaway could be held legally responsible for the owner's loss.

That's the world Onesimus lived in. If he had run away, returning to Philemon was an enormous risk.

What Happened to Onesimus?

Paul never tells us exactly why Onesimus was with him. Scholars have suggested three main possibilities.

The traditional view, going back at least to the fourth-century preacher John Chrysostom, is that Onesimus was a runaway. Maybe he had stolen something, which could explain Paul's offer to pay anything he owed (verse 18). Somehow he ended up near Paul, perhaps by chance, perhaps because he'd heard of him in Philemon's house, and became a believer.

A second view is that Onesimus wasn't running away for good, but went looking for Paul on purpose. Roman legal writers discussed slaves who, after a falling-out with their owner, went to a friend of the owner to ask him to plead on their behalf. A slave who did this wasn't legally considered a runaway. In this view, Onesimus knew that Philemon respected Paul, and asked Paul to help him make things right.

A third view is that the church in Colossae, or Philemon himself, had sent Onesimus to help Paul in prison, and Paul is now writing to ask Philemon to let him stay and serve. A few scholars have even suggested that Onesimus wasn't a slave in the usual sense at all, or that Archippus, not Philemon, was his owner, but these are minority views.

Each theory has strengths. The letter itself doesn't settle the question. But in every version, Paul is asking Philemon to treat Onesimus in a way Roman society would never have expected.

Where Was Paul?

Paul says he's a prisoner (verses 1, 9, 10, 13). Traditionally, Christians have thought he wrote this letter during his house arrest in Rome, described at the end of Acts, around AD 60 to 62. Many scholars think it's more likely that he was in prison in Ephesus, around AD 54 to 55, which is only about a week's walk from Colossae, making it easier for Onesimus to get there and for Paul to plan a visit (verse 22). A few suggest Caesarea, where Paul was held for two years (Acts 24:27). Wherever he was, Paul was in chains, and he hoped to be released soon.

The People in the Letter

Philemon was a believer in Colossae, probably fairly wealthy, since he owned at least one slave and had a house large enough for the church to meet in. He seems to have become a Christian through Paul (verse 19). Apphia is greeted next, and most scholars think she was Philemon's wife. Archippus may have been their son or another church leader; Paul calls him a fellow soldier. The church met in their home, since there were no church buildings yet.

With Paul were Timothy, his longtime partner; Epaphras, who had first brought the gospel to Colossae (Colossians 1:7); and Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke.

The Colossians Connection

Philemon and Colossians were almost certainly sent together. Colossians says that Tychicus is coming, along with Onesimus, our

faithful and dear brother, who is one of you (Colossians 4:7–9). Both letters mention Epaphras, Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke as being with Paul. And Colossians includes a message for Archippus, telling him to complete the ministry he has received (Colossians 4:17).

That means that when Colossians was read aloud to the church, Onesimus would have been in the room. And when the church heard Paul's instructions to slaves and masters in Colossians 3:22–4:1, including the command that masters treat slaves fairly, remembering that they have a Master in heaven, everyone would have thought of Philemon and Onesimus. If you've read the Colossians volume in this series, you'll recognize the setting.

Bishop Onesimus?

About fifty years later, around AD 110, a church leader named Ignatius of Antioch was taken to Rome to be executed. On the way, he wrote letters to several churches. In his letter to the church in Ephesus, he praises their bishop, a man named Onesimus, and even seems to make a pun on the name, the same pun Paul makes in Philemon.

Was this the same Onesimus? It's possible. If Onesimus was a young man when Paul wrote, he could have been in his sixties or seventies by then. Some scholars have suggested that Bishop Onesimus helped collect Paul's letters, which would explain why such a short personal note was preserved. But Onesimus was a very common name, especially for slaves, so we can't be sure. It's an intriguing possibility, not a proven fact.

Who Wrote It?

Almost no one doubts that Paul wrote Philemon. Even scholars who question whether Paul wrote some of the letters with his name on them accept this one as genuinely his. Its personal details, warmth, and style all fit Paul. That also makes Colossians, which is linked so closely to it, important evidence, though as explained in the Colossians volume, scholars debate whether Paul wrote that letter too.

The Map

Chapter 1 (verses 1–7): Paul greets Philemon and his household and thanks God for Philemon's love and faith.

Chapter 2 (verses 8–16): Paul appeals to Philemon on behalf of Onesimus, his son in the faith, and asks him to receive him as a brother.

Chapter 3 (verses 17–22): Paul offers to pay whatever Onesimus owes, and asks Philemon to get a room ready.

Chapter 4 (verses 23–25): Greetings from Paul's companions, a blessing, and what happened next.

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CHAPTER 1

A Friend Worth Asking

Philemon 1–7

Paul starts his letter in an unusual way. In most of his letters, he introduces himself as an apostle, someone with authority from Jesus. Here, he calls himself a prisoner of Christ Jesus. He's not pulling rank. He's in chains, and he wants Philemon to remember that.

> BACKGROUND CHECK **Prisoner, Not Boss**
>
> Paul could have opened with his title. He was the apostle who had probably led Philemon to faith. He had every right to tell Philemon what to do, and he says so later (verse 8). But he chooses to start from weakness, not power. That's a hint about how the whole letter works. Paul is going to persuade, not command. When you need to ask someone to do something hard, starting with humility instead of authority usually works better, and it's more like Jesus.

Paul writes along with Timothy, whom he calls our brother. The letter is addressed to Philemon, a dear friend and coworker; to Apphia, our sister; to Archippus, whom Paul calls a fellow soldier; and to the believers who gather at Philemon's house.

> BACKGROUND CHECK **Not Exactly Private**
>
> Philemon is the most personal of Paul's letters, but it isn't entirely private. Paul addresses it to Philemon's whole household and to the church that met there. The NIV footnote on verse 3 points out that the Greek word for you is

plural in verses 3, 22, and 25, while everywhere else in the letter it's singular. So Paul is speaking to Philemon personally, but he's making sure the church is listening in. That means whatever Philemon decides, he'll decide in front of his church family. Paul is gently reminding him that his response to Onesimus isn't just a private matter. It's a matter for the whole family of believers.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Church in a House**

For the first two or three centuries, Christians didn't have church buildings. They met in homes, usually the homes of members who had enough space. A wealthy believer's house might have a courtyard or dining room that could hold a few dozen people. Picture it: on Sunday, the church gathers in Philemon's house to sing, pray, hear Scripture, and share a meal. Philemon, the owner, is there. So is Apphia. And so, probably, are the slaves of the household, serving the food. Now Onesimus is coming back, and he's a believer too. Where will he sit?

Then Paul offers his usual greeting: grace and peace from God the Father and from Jesus, the Lord.

Next, Paul tells Philemon that he thanks God for him every time he prays for him. Why? Because Paul keeps hearing about Philemon's love for all God's people and his faith in Jesus.

BACKGROUND CHECK **All God's People**

Notice the word all. Paul praises Philemon's love for every believer. That's a compliment, but it's also a setup. Onesimus is now one of God's people. If Philemon's love really reaches all of them, it will have to reach Onesimus too. Paul hasn't mentioned Onesimus yet. But a careful reader can already see where this is going.

Paul prays that Philemon's partnership in the faith will be effective, so that he'll understand more and more fully all the good things believers have in Christ. The Greek word for partnership is

koinonia, which also means fellowship or sharing. It describes the deep connection believers have because they share life in Jesus.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Koinonia**
>
> Koinonia is one of the richest words in the New Testament. It describes believers sharing their lives, their possessions, their joys, and their struggles (Acts 2:42–47). It's much more than hanging out together after church. It means belonging to one another. Paul will use a related word in verse 17, when he asks Philemon to treat him as a partner. Fellowship isn't just a warm feeling. It has practical consequences. It changes how you treat people.

Then Paul says that Philemon's love has given him great joy and encouragement, because Philemon has refreshed the hearts of God's people. The word Paul uses for hearts literally means inner parts, the place where people felt deep emotion. It's the same word Paul will use in verse 12 to describe Onesimus, and in verse 20 when he asks Philemon to refresh his own heart.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Refreshers**
>
> Some people drain you. You leave a conversation with them feeling tired, discouraged, or worse about yourself. Other people refresh you. They listen, encourage, notice when you're struggling, and leave you feeling stronger. Philemon was a refresher. He used his home, his money, and his time to bless other believers. Who refreshes you? And whom do you refresh? You don't need a big house or lots of money to do it. A text, a note, a ride, an invitation to sit together at lunch, or an honest question about how someone's really doing can refresh someone more than you know.
>
> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Paul's Strategy**
>
> Some readers notice that Paul's opening is carefully crafted. Ancient teachers of rhetoric, the art of persuasion, taught speakers to begin by winning the goodwill of their audience. Paul praises Philemon sincerely, and he also lays the groundwork for his request. He mentions love, partnership, all God's people, and refreshed hearts, all ideas he'll come back to when he asks

Philemon to welcome Onesimus. That doesn't make Paul's praise fake. He means every word. But it shows that he's thought carefully about how to say something difficult. That's a skill worth learning.

KEY VERSE

Your love has given me great joy and encouragement, because you, brother, have refreshed the hearts of the Lord's people.

Philemon 7 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Why do you think Paul introduced himself as a prisoner instead of as an apostle?
2. Paul's letter is personal, but the whole church is listening in. How does it change things when others know how we respond to people who have hurt us?
3. Who refreshes your heart? Whose heart could you refresh this week?
4. What's the difference between flattering someone and sincerely encouraging them before asking something hard?

TRY THIS *Think of someone who has refreshed you, and tell them specifically how. Then look for one person this week who seems drained, and do something to refresh them.*

CHAPTER 2

No Longer a Slave

Philemon 8–16

Now Paul gets to his request. He says that, as an apostle, he could be bold and simply order Philemon to do the right thing. But he'd rather appeal to him out of love.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Ask, Don't Order**
>
> Paul had the authority to command. He chose not to use it. Why? Because forced kindness isn't really kindness. If Philemon welcomed Onesimus only because Paul ordered him to, his heart wouldn't have changed. Paul wants Philemon to choose love freely. Parents, coaches, and leaders sometimes have to give orders. But the best leaders often persuade instead of commanding, and they treat people as partners, not subordinates. When you have power over someone, like a younger sibling, a newer player on your team, or someone less popular, how do you use it?

Paul describes himself as an old man, and a prisoner for Jesus besides. Some scholars think the Greek word may mean ambassador instead of old man, since the two words were very similar. Either way, Paul is appealing to Philemon's sympathy and respect.

Then, finally, Paul names the person the letter is about. He's appealing for his son Onesimus, who became his son while Paul was in chains. In other words, Onesimus became a believer through Paul in prison.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Paul's Son**

Paul calls Onesimus his son, the same word he used for Timothy and Titus. To Roman society, Onesimus was a slave, maybe a runaway, maybe a thief, with no legal rights and no family name of his own. To Paul, he was family. Notice too where it happened: in prison. Paul's chains didn't stop the gospel. They put him right where he could meet Onesimus.

Then Paul makes a pun. The NIV footnote explains that the name Onesimus means useful. It was a common name for slaves, the kind of name an owner gave someone he thought of as a tool. Paul writes that Onesimus "was useless to you, but now he has become useful both to you and to me."

BACKGROUND CHECK **Mr. Useful**

Paul's pun works on several levels. The name Onesimus means useful, and the words Paul uses for useless and useful are achrestos and euchrestos. They sound a lot like Christos, Christ, and in Paul's day they were probably pronounced almost the same. So Paul may be saying something like: he used to be without Christ, but now he's with Christ. Onesimus finally lives up to his name, not because he's a better tool, but because he's a new person. And notice that he's become useful to Paul as well, not as property, but as a partner in ministry.

BACKGROUND CHECK **You Are Not Your Label**

People get labels: the troublemaker, the weird kid, the screwup, the one who always quits, the one from that family. Onesimus had a label too: a slave named Useful who had turned out useless. But in Jesus, people aren't stuck with the labels others give them, or the ones they give themselves. Paul saw Onesimus as a son, a brother, and a partner. God sees you through the eyes of grace too. And He calls you to see others the same way.

Paul says he's sending Onesimus back, and calls him his very heart. That's the inner-parts word again. Sending Onesimus away was like tearing out part of himself.

Paul admits he would have liked to keep Onesimus with him, so he could help Paul in prison in Philemon's place. But he didn't want to do that without Philemon's agreement. He wanted any kindness Philemon showed to be voluntary, not forced.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Why Send Him Back?**

Many modern readers struggle with the fact that Paul sent Onesimus back to his owner at all. Why didn't Paul just keep him or help him escape? There are several things to consider. Under Roman law, sheltering a runaway was a crime, and Paul was already a prisoner. Onesimus could not have lived safely as a fugitive. Paul also seems to want a real reconciliation between two believers, not just an escape. And he may be hoping that Philemon will free Onesimus and send him back to work with Paul, which many readers think verses 13, 14, and 21 hint at. Still, it's fair to feel the tension. Paul worked within the world he lived in, while planting ideas that would eventually challenge that world at its roots.

Then Paul offers a new way of looking at what happened. Maybe, he says, the reason Onesimus was separated from Philemon for a little while was so that Philemon could have him back for good. Not as a slave anymore, but as something better: a beloved brother.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Perhaps**

Notice that Paul says perhaps. He doesn't claim to know exactly why God allowed things to happen as they did. But he suggests that God may have been at work even in a painful separation, maybe even in Onesimus's wrongdoing, to bring about something better. It's like Joseph telling his brothers that what they meant for evil, God meant for good (Genesis 50:20). That doesn't make wrongdoing okay. But it does mean God can bring good out of situations that seem hopeless.

Paul says Onesimus is very dear to him, and he should be even dearer to Philemon, both as a person and as a fellow believer. The NIV translates the first phrase as a fellow man; the Greek literally

says in the flesh. Some think Paul means that Philemon should value Onesimus as a human being and in their everyday relationship, not only spiritually.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Brother**

This is the heart of the letter. Paul asks Philemon to see Onesimus as a brother. In the Roman world, that idea was explosive. Masters and slaves didn't eat together, didn't socialize, and certainly didn't call each other brother. Paul had already written that in Christ there is neither slave nor free (Galatians 3:28). Now he applies it to one particular slave and one particular master. Paul doesn't explicitly say, free him. But if Philemon really treats Onesimus as a beloved brother, what will that mean for their relationship? Many readers, both ancient and modern, have concluded that the logic of this verse points toward freedom.

KEY VERSE

Perhaps the reason he was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back forever—no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother. He is very dear to me but even dearer to you, both as a fellow man and as a brother in the Lord.

Philemon 15–16 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Why do you think Paul chose to appeal to Philemon instead of commanding him?
2. What labels do people put on you? What labels do you put on others? How does the gospel change them?
3. How do you feel about Paul sending Onesimus back? What questions does it raise for you?
4. Can you think of a time God brought something good out of a painful situation in your life?

TRY THIS *Think of someone at school or church who's often labeled or looked down on. This week, treat them like a brother or sister. Sit with them, talk with them, include them, and learn their real name and story.*

CHAPTER 3

Charge It to Me

Philemon 17–22

Paul's appeal reaches its climax. If Philemon considers Paul a partner, he should welcome Onesimus the same way he would welcome Paul himself.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Welcome Him as Me**
>
> Imagine the apostle Paul showing up at Philemon's door. Philemon would throw open the doors, prepare the best room, cook a feast, and invite the whole church. Paul says: that's how I want you to welcome Onesimus. Not with suspicion, not with a lecture, not as a returning slave put back to work in the kitchen, but as an honored guest and a partner. Jesus said something similar: whoever welcomes the least of His people welcomes Him (Matthew 25:40).

Then Paul makes an extraordinary offer. "If he has done you any wrong or owes you anything, charge it to me."

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Did Onesimus Steal?**
>
> Paul's words in verse 18 suggest that Onesimus may have caused Philemon some financial loss. Maybe he had stolen money or property when he left. Or maybe the loss was simply the work he hadn't done while he was gone, which an owner would have counted as a debt. Paul doesn't say. He doesn't make excuses for Onesimus, either. He just offers to pay.

BACKGROUND CHECK **An IOU**

Paul says he's writing this part with his own hand, and promises to repay. Paul usually dictated his letters to a secretary and added a few lines in his own handwriting at the end (see Galatians 6:11 and Colossians 4:18). Here, he signs what amounts to a legal IOU. In the Roman world, a handwritten promise like this could be used to collect the debt. Paul is putting his own name, and his own money, on the line.

Then Paul adds, a little playfully, that he won't mention that Philemon owes Paul his very self. In other words, Paul had probably led Philemon to faith in Jesus. Compared to that, whatever Onesimus owes is small change.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Charge It to Me**

For centuries, Christians have seen Paul's words as a picture of what Jesus does for us. We have wronged God. We owe a debt we could never repay. And Jesus says to the Father: put it on My account. Martin Luther, the sixteenth-century reformer, wrote that we are all God's Onesimuses. Jesus takes our debt and gives us His standing, so that God welcomes us the way He would welcome His own Son. Paul himself wrote that God made Jesus, who had no sin, to be sin for us, so that we could become right with God in Him (2 Corinthians 5:21). Theologians call this kind of exchange imputation: our sin counted to Jesus, and His righteousness counted to us. Onesimus could walk back into Philemon's house carrying Paul's promise. We can come to God carrying Jesus' promise.

Paul asks Philemon to give him some benefit in the Lord, and to refresh his heart in Christ. The word Paul uses for benefit sounds like the name Onesimus, another little pun. Then Paul says he's confident Philemon will obey, and that he knows Philemon will do even more than Paul asks.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Even More**

What does Paul mean by even more? He doesn't say, and that's probably on purpose. Many readers think he's hinting that Philemon should free Onesimus, or send him back to help Paul, or both. Paul leaves it to Philemon to figure out what love requires. That's often how it works with God too. He doesn't give us a rule for every situation. He calls us to love, and lets us discover how far love goes.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Tact**

Paul's letter is a masterpiece of tact. He never insults Philemon. He never threatens him. He praises him sincerely, reminds him of their friendship, appeals to love instead of authority, offers to pay any debt himself, and expresses confidence that Philemon will do the right thing. And yet, by the end, it would be very hard for Philemon to say no. Tact isn't the same as manipulation. Manipulation tries to trick someone into doing what benefits you. Tact helps someone choose what's good, in a way that respects their freedom and dignity. Learning to say hard things kindly is one of the most useful skills you can develop.

Finally, Paul asks Philemon to get a guest room ready, because he hopes to be released, in answer to their prayers, and to visit soon. That's a friendly request. It's also a gentle reminder that Paul will be able to see for himself how Onesimus has been treated.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Forgiveness Is Hard**

Paul is asking Philemon to forgive. That may be the hardest thing anyone can do. Maybe someone has lied about you, betrayed your trust, hurt someone you love, or done something that cost you a lot. Forgiving them might feel impossible, or even unfair. The Bible doesn't pretend forgiveness is easy. But it calls us to forgive because God has forgiven us so much (Colossians 3:13). Forgiveness means releasing your right to get even and trusting God with justice. It's often a process, not a single moment. You may need to forgive the same hurt many times as the feelings come back.

BACKGROUND CHECK **What Forgiveness Is Not**

Forgiveness doesn't mean pretending what happened was okay. It doesn't mean the other person faces no consequences. And it doesn't mean you have to trust someone again right away, or put yourself back in harm's way. Reconciliation, restoring a relationship, takes two people, and it requires the person who did wrong to change. In Philemon, Onesimus had become a new person, and Paul was there to vouch for him. If someone is hurting you, whether a friend, a boyfriend or girlfriend, a family member, or an adult, forgiveness never means staying in an unsafe situation. Tell a parent, a counselor, a teacher, or another trusted adult. You can forgive someone and still keep yourself safe. God cares about your safety.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Saying Sorry**

Onesimus had a hard job too. He had to go back and face the person he had wronged. Maybe you're in his position. You've hurt someone, and you need to make it right. That takes courage. A real apology names what you did, doesn't make excuses, and, where possible, tries to repair the damage. You may not be able to control how the other person responds. But you can do your part, and trust God with the rest.

KEY VERSE

So if you consider me a partner, welcome him as you would welcome me. If he has done you any wrong or owes you anything, charge it to me.

Philemon 17–18 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. What would it look like to welcome someone the way you'd welcome your favorite person in the world?
2. How does Paul's offer to pay Onesimus's debt help you understand what Jesus has done for you?
3. What's the difference between forgiveness and reconciliation? Why does that difference matter?
4. Is there someone you need to forgive, or someone you need to apologize to?

TRY THIS *Write down the name of someone you're struggling to forgive. Pray for them every day this week, and ask God to help you release your right to get even. If you need to apologize to someone, do it this week. If anyone is hurting you, talk to a trusted adult today.*

CHAPTER 4

What Happened Next

Philemon 23–25

Paul ends with greetings from his companions. Epaphras, whom Paul calls his fellow prisoner, sends greetings. Paul's coworkers Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke add their greetings too.

BACKGROUND CHECK **A Familiar Crew**

These names show up in other letters too. Epaphras brought the gospel to Colossae and kept praying for the church there (Colossians 1:7; 4:12–13). Mark had once abandoned Paul, but was now back on the team (Acts 15:37–39; 2 Timothy 4:11). Aristarchus was from Thessalonica and had been through a riot and a shipwreck with Paul (Acts 19:29; 27:2). Luke, the doctor, wrote the Gospel of Luke and Acts. And Demas would later desert Paul because he loved this world (2 Timothy 4:10). Even the people around Paul had stories of failure, faithfulness, second chances, and sadly, walking away.

Paul closes with a one-line blessing of grace from Jesus. As the NIV footnote notes, the you here is plural again. Paul's blessing is for the whole church.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Grace at the End**

Paul ends almost every letter with grace, and it's fitting here. The whole letter is about grace: the grace that turned Onesimus from useless to useful, the grace Paul asks Philemon to show, and the grace of Jesus, who paid our debt. Grace is getting what you don't deserve. Onesimus didn't deserve to be welcomed as a brother. Neither do we. That's what makes it grace.

So what did Philemon do? The Bible doesn't say. But we have some clues. The letter was kept, copied, and included in the New Testament. It seems unlikely that Philemon would have preserved a letter that made him look bad if he had refused. Many readers think Philemon welcomed Onesimus, and possibly freed him. And, as described in Setting the Scene, it's possible, though uncertain, that the Onesimus who later became bishop of Ephesus was the same man.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Letter and Slavery, Then**

Some people wonder why Paul didn't simply tell Philemon that slavery was wrong and that he must free Onesimus. Christians have discussed this for centuries. Paul's churches were tiny, powerless communities in a vast empire, and a call to overthrow slavery would have been impossible for them to carry out and would likely have brought swift, brutal suppression. Instead, Paul planted principles that undermined slavery from within: every person is made in God's image, slave and free are equal in Christ, masters have a Master in heaven, and a slave can be a beloved brother. Some readers wish Paul had gone further, and that wish is understandable. Others point out that the seeds Paul planted grew into a tree that eventually helped bring slavery down. Both responses take the letter seriously.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Letter and Slavery, Later**

In the nineteenth century, Philemon became part of a bitter argument. In the United States, some defenders of slavery pointed to it as proof that the Bible accepted slavery. Since Paul had sent a runaway back to his master, they argued, the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, which required escaped slaves to be returned, was biblical. Abolitionists, many of them Christians, strongly disagreed. They pointed to Paul's words no longer as a slave and as a dear brother, to the Bible's condemnation of kidnapping and slave trading (Exodus 21:16; 1 Timothy 1:10), and to the teaching that all people are made in God's image. Formerly enslaved Christians like Frederick Douglass condemned the way slaveholders twisted Scripture to defend cruelty. Some historians note

that enslaved people were sometimes given edited Bibles with passages about freedom removed. Today, Christians overwhelmingly agree that slavery is a grave evil, and many see the misuse of Philemon as a warning about reading the Bible selectively to defend what we want.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Slavery Today**

Slavery isn't only history. Human rights organizations estimate that tens of millions of people around the world today are trapped in forced labor, human trafficking, forced marriage, or debt bondage, including many children and teenagers. Christians and many others are working to end it. You can learn more, pray, support organizations that rescue and restore victims, and be thoughtful about where the things you buy come from. If you ever encounter a situation where someone seems to be controlled or trafficked, including online, tell a trusted adult or contact the authorities.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Small Letter, Big Idea**

Philemon is the shortest of Paul's letters, about one person, one owner, and one debt. But it shows what the gospel does in the real world. It takes people society keeps apart and makes them family. It turns enemies into brothers and sisters. It reaches into living rooms, kitchens, and workplaces, and changes how people treat each other. That's still what the gospel does. And it starts with the One who said: charge it to Me.

KEY VERSE

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.

Philemon 25 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Which of Paul's companions do you relate to most: Epaphras, Mark, Aristarchus, Luke, or Demas? Why?
2. What do you think Philemon did? What would you have done?
3. Why do you think some people in the past used the Bible to defend slavery? How can we avoid twisting Scripture to support what we already want?
4. Where do you see people being kept apart today, by race, money, status, or popularity? How could the gospel bring them together?

TRY THIS *Read the whole letter to Philemon out loud, then read Colossians 3:11–4:1, which was probably read aloud in the same room. Write a short letter of your own, either to someone you need to reconcile with, or to God, thanking Him for paying your debt.*

THE END (AND THE BEGINNING)

Now What? The Bottom Line

You've just read a letter about a man who owed a debt he couldn't pay, and a friend who said, charge it to me. That's a picture of the good news about Jesus.

Here's what the Bible says, as plainly as I can put it.

1 God made you, and He wants you home.

God made you on purpose, and He wants you in His family, not as a servant, but as His child.

2 We've all turned away.

We've all gone our own way instead of God's. Like Onesimus, we've walked away from the One we belong to. The Bible calls it sin.

> *for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,* **Romans 3:23 (NIV)**

3 Sin has a real cost.

God is good, so He doesn't shrug off evil. The Bible says the result of sin is death, separation from God forever. It's a debt we can't pay.

> *For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.* **Romans 6:23 (NIV)**

4 Jesus said, charge it to Me.

Jesus died on the cross and took our sin on Himself, and He gives us His righteousness in exchange. Then He rose again.

> *God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.* **2 Corinthians 5:21 (NIV)**

5 You can't earn it. You receive it.

Salvation isn't a reward for being good enough. It's a gift you receive by trusting Jesus.

> *For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast.* **Ephesians 2:8–9 (NIV)**

6 Turn and trust.

Turn from running your own life, and trust Jesus as your Savior and King. He'll welcome you home.

> *If you declare with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.* **Romans 10:9 (NIV)**

So what do you do with that? You don't need perfect words. You can talk to God honestly, right now, wherever you are. If it helps, you could pray something like this:

> *God, I've been running my own life, and I've sinned against You. I owe a debt I can't pay. Thank You that Jesus took my sin on Himself and paid it all. I believe You raised Him from the dead. I'm turning to You. Forgive me. I trust Jesus as my Savior, and I want to follow Him as my King. Thank You for welcoming me home. Help me forgive others the way You've forgiven me. In Jesus' name, amen.*

If You Just Said Yes

Tell someone. A parent, a youth leader, a pastor, or a Christian friend. Start there.

Read the real thing. Read Philemon straight through. It takes three minutes. Then read Colossians, the letter Onesimus carried with it, and Hebrews, the next book in the New Testament.

Find your people. Get connected to a church where the Bible is taught and Jesus is honored, where people from every background are welcomed as family. Ask about being baptized.

Talk to God every day. Be honest with Him. Ask Him to show you anyone you need to forgive, or ask forgiveness from. He can handle it.

Not Sure Yet?

Not ready? That's honest, and honesty is a good place to start. Keep asking. Keep reading. Talk to someone you trust. Just don't settle for "I already know all that."

Because if Paul is right, Jesus has already offered to pay what you owe, and it's worth finding out for yourself.

Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you.

Colossians 3:13 (NIV)