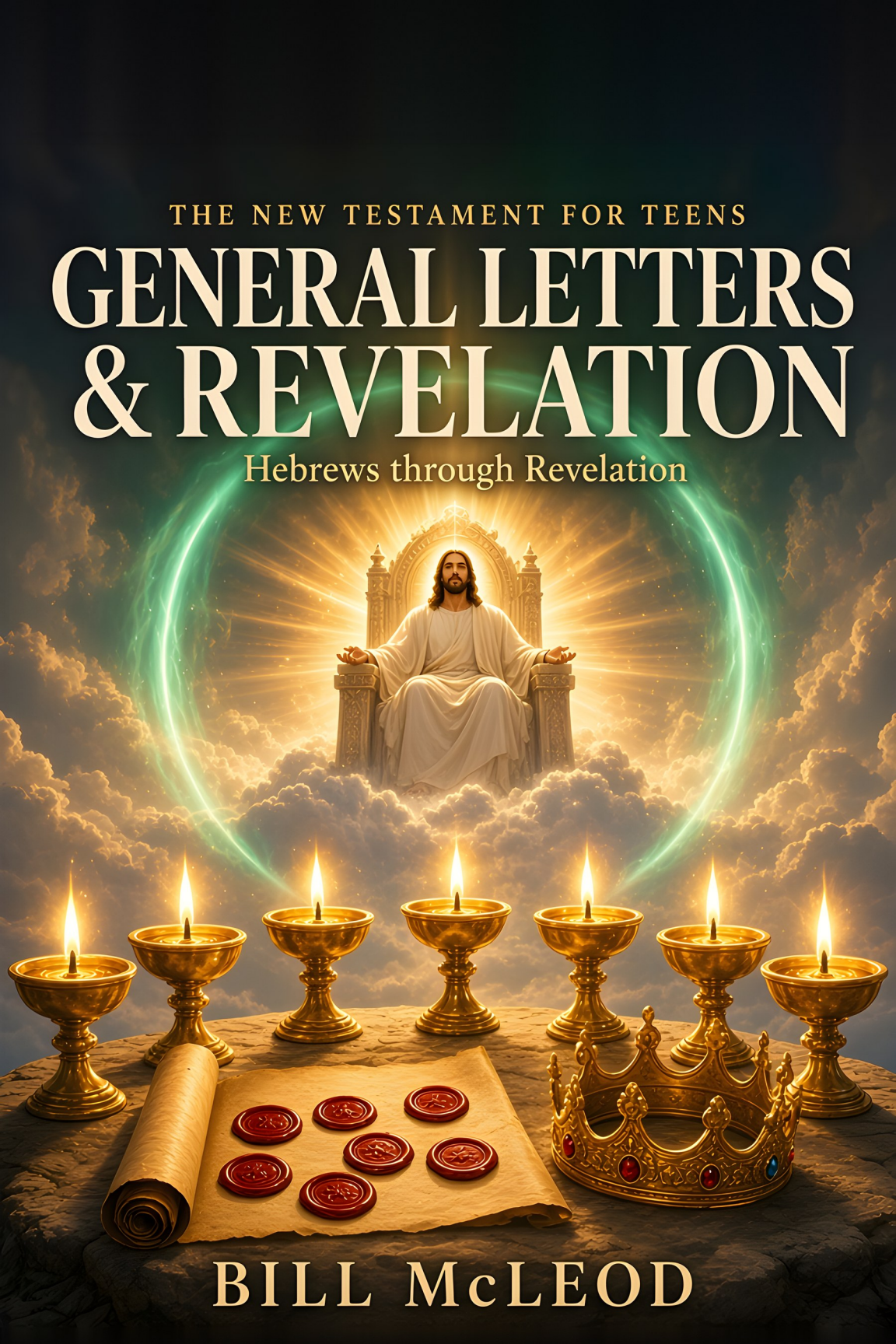
THE NEW TESTAMENT FOR TEENS

GENERAL LETTERS & REVELATION

Hebrews through Revelation



BILL McLEOD

THE LETTER TO THE HEBREWS

The King's Better Promise

Hebrews, Unfiltered

For teens who think they've heard it all

BILL McLEOD

Papa Bill Books

The King's Better Promise: The Letter to the Hebrews, 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. Hebrews is the first book in this series that Paul probably didn't write, but the saying is staying.

Hebrews is a mystery. Nobody knows for sure who wrote it. It doesn't start like a letter, with a name and a greeting. It doesn't say exactly who it was written to, or where. And it's full of things that can seem strange to modern readers: angels, priests, animal sacrifices, a tent in the desert, and a mysterious king named Melchizedek who appears out of nowhere.

But don't let that scare you off. Hebrews was written to people who were tired. Following Jesus had cost them a lot. Some had been insulted, some had lost their property, and some had been thrown in prison. A few had already stopped showing up. They were tempted to quit, and to go back to something that felt safer and more familiar.

The writer's answer is one word, repeated over and over: better. Jesus is better than the angels. Better than Moses. A better priest, with a better sacrifice, a better covenant, and better promises. Whatever you might go back to, Jesus is better. So don't quit. Hold on. Run your race with your eyes on Him.

Hebrews also contains some of the most comforting verses in the Bible, about a Savior who understands exactly what it's like to be

tempted, and who invites you to come to God with confidence. And it contains the famous Hall of Faith, a list of ordinary people who trusted God when it was hard. If you've ever felt like giving up, this book is for you. Let's go.

How This Book Works

This book walks through all thirteen chapters of Hebrews, in order, one chapter of this book for each chapter of the letter. Each one explains what the writer is saying in plain language and adds background about the Old Testament, the Jewish temple and its worship, and the world of the first readers.

Before chapter 1, a section called Setting the Scene explains the mystery of who wrote Hebrews, who it was written to, and when. It also explains the tabernacle, priests, sacrifices, and the Day of Atonement, which you'll need to understand much of the 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 Hebrews 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, 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 Hebrews 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).

The authorship of Hebrews is unknown. I've presented the main proposals, including Paul, Apollos, Barnabas, Priscilla, and Luke, fairly, along with the early church's own uncertainty. I refer to the author simply as the writer.

The warning passages in 6:4–6 and 10:26–31 are understood very differently by different Christian traditions. I've presented the main views fairly without endorsing one, and included a gentle word for anxious readers who fear they have gone too far. If your teen struggles with that fear, please talk with them, and with your pastor if needed.

Hebrews says a great deal about the old and new covenants. I've tried to explain its argument faithfully while making clear that it gives no license for contempt toward Jewish people or Judaism. The writer was very likely Jewish himself, as were Jesus and the apostles, and the letter honors the heroes of Israel's faith.

Several passages are highlighted as especially relevant for teens: the living and active word of God (4:12), a high priest who understands our weakness (4:15–16), the Hall of Faith (chapter 11), and running the race with our eyes on Jesus (12:1–2).

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 fix their eyes on Jesus, and keep running.

Grace and peace,

Bill McLeod

Papa Bill Books

BEFORE YOU OPEN THE LETTER

Setting the Scene

A Sermon in Writing

Most New Testament letters begin by naming the writer and the readers, followed by a greeting. Hebrews doesn't. It jumps straight in with a dramatic opening about God speaking through His Son. It reads less like a letter and more like a sermon. In fact, near the end, the writer calls it a word of exhortation (13:22), the same phrase used in Acts 13:15 for a sermon in a synagogue. It may have been preached, or written to be read aloud to a congregation.

But it ends like a letter, with personal news, greetings, and a blessing. So Hebrews is probably best described as a sermon sent as a letter, to a particular group of believers the writer knew and cared about. And it's a long sermon, but the writer calls it short (13:22). Preachers haven't changed much.

Who Wrote It?

The honest answer is that nobody knows. The letter never names its author. In the early church, opinions differed. Many Christians in the eastern part of the Roman Empire, especially around Alexandria in Egypt, believed Paul wrote it, and it was eventually included among his letters in many ancient manuscripts and in the King James Version's title. Clement of Alexandria, around AD 200, suggested that Paul wrote it in Hebrew and Luke translated it into Greek. Meanwhile, many Christians in the western part of the

empire, including Rome, doubted that Paul was the author. The North African writer Tertullian thought it was Barnabas.

Around AD 230, the great scholar Origen of Alexandria noted that the thoughts sounded like Paul's but the style didn't, and that some said Clement of Rome or Luke had written it. Then he made a famous statement, preserved by the historian Eusebius: who wrote the letter, only God truly knows.

The Candidates

Paul: The letter mentions Timothy (13:23) and has ideas similar to Paul's. But its Greek style is very different from his, more polished and elaborate, and the writer says he received the message from those who had heard Jesus (2:3), while Paul insisted he received his gospel directly from Jesus (Galatians 1:12). Most scholars today think Paul didn't write it.

Apollos: Martin Luther suggested him. Apollos was a Jewish believer from Alexandria, known for his eloquence and knowledge of the Scriptures (Acts 18:24–28), which fits Hebrews' style and its skillful use of the Old Testament. Many modern scholars find this an attractive guess.

Barnabas: Tertullian's choice. Barnabas was a Levite, from the priestly tribe (Acts 4:36), which might explain the letter's interest in priests and sacrifices, and his name means son of encouragement, which fits a word of exhortation.

Priscilla: The German scholar Adolf von Harnack suggested that Priscilla, who taught Apollos with her husband Aquila (Acts 18:26), wrote it, and that her name was left off because a woman author might not have been accepted. One objection is that in 11:32 the

writer uses a masculine form when speaking of himself in Greek, though some answer that this could be conventional.

Others: Luke, Clement of Rome, Silas, and Philip have also been suggested.

It's a fascinating puzzle. But the early church accepted Hebrews into the New Testament because its message was recognized as true and from God, not because everyone agreed on its author. In this book, I simply call the author the writer.

Who Were the Hebrews?

The title To the Hebrews was added later; it's not part of the original text. But it's a good guess. The letter assumes its readers know the Old Testament very well and care deeply about the priesthood, the sacrifices, and the covenant with Moses. Most scholars think the first readers were mainly Jewish Christians, though some think they included Gentile believers who had been taught the Jewish Scriptures.

We know a few things about them. They'd been believers for a while (5:12). In the past, they had suffered public insults and persecution, some had been imprisoned, and others had had their property taken, and they had stood firm with joy (10:32–34). But now some were growing tired, drifting, and skipping church gatherings (10:25). And they seem to have been tempted to turn back from following Jesus to the familiar practices of Judaism, perhaps to avoid persecution.

Where Were They?

The writer sends greetings from those from Italy (13:24). That could mean the writer was in Italy, or that Italians living somewhere else

were sending greetings home. Many scholars think the readers lived in or near Rome. The persecution described in 10:32–34 could fit the expulsion of Jews and Jewish Christians from Rome under Emperor Claudius around AD 49, mentioned in Acts 18:2. The earliest writer known to quote Hebrews, Clement of Rome, lived there too. Others think the readers were in Jerusalem or elsewhere in Judea, near the temple. We can't be sure.

Before or After AD 70?

In AD 70, the Roman army destroyed Jerusalem and its temple. The sacrifices the Old Testament commanded came to an end and have never resumed. You'd think that would come up in a letter all about priests and sacrifices, and about how Jesus' sacrifice made the old ones unnecessary. But Hebrews never mentions it.

Many scholars conclude that Hebrews was written before AD 70, probably in the 60s, while sacrifices were still being offered. The writer even speaks of the priests as still serving, in the present tense (8:4; 10:1–3, 11), and asks whether the sacrifices would not have stopped if they had worked. Others point out that the writer always talks about the tabernacle, the tent in the wilderness described in the Old Testament, not the temple in Jerusalem, so the present tense may simply describe what Scripture says. They date it later, between AD 70 and about 95. It can't be much later than that, because Clement of Rome seems to quote it in a letter usually dated around AD 96.

Better

If you want one word to sum up Hebrews, it's better. The writer uses it over and over. Jesus is better than the angels (1:4). He brings a better hope (7:19), a better covenant (7:22; 8:6), based on better

promises (8:6), through better sacrifices (9:23). Believers have better possessions (10:34) and look forward to a better country (11:16) and a better resurrection (11:35).

The writer isn't saying that the Old Testament, Moses, or the priests were bad. They were good gifts from God. But they pointed forward to something even better: Jesus. Going back to them, after Jesus has come, would be like going back to the trailer after seeing the movie.

The Tabernacle

To understand Hebrews, you need to know about the tabernacle. After God rescued Israel from Egypt, He gave Moses instructions to build a portable tent where He would dwell among His people (Exodus 25–31). It stood in a courtyard with an altar for sacrifices and a large bronze basin for washing.

The tent itself had two rooms. The first, the Holy Place, held a golden lampstand, a table with bread, and a small altar for burning incense. A thick curtain separated it from the inner room, the Most Holy Place, sometimes called the Holy of Holies. Inside was the ark of the covenant, a gold-covered chest containing the stone tablets of the law. Its lid, called the atonement cover or mercy seat, had two golden cherubim on it. This was where God's presence dwelled in a special way. Later, Solomon built a permanent temple in Jerusalem with the same basic design, and it was later rebuilt and expanded.

Priests and Sacrifices

God appointed Aaron, Moses' brother, and his descendants to serve as priests, from the tribe of Levi. They offered sacrifices of animals, grain, and wine, burned incense, and represented the people before God. Every day, morning and evening, sacrifices were offered.

People also brought sacrifices to give thanks, to keep promises, and to seek forgiveness when they had sinned.

The sacrifices showed that sin is serious: it brings death, and forgiveness is costly. They also showed that God provides a way back to Him. Hebrews' argument is that these sacrifices were real but temporary, like shadows pointing to the real thing.

The Day of Atonement

Once a year, on the Day of Atonement, called Yom Kippur in Hebrew, the high priest did something he did on no other day. After careful preparation and sacrifices for his own sins, he went behind the curtain into the Most Holy Place, carrying the blood of a sacrifice, and sprinkled it on the atonement cover to cover the sins of the whole nation. Then a second goat, called the scapegoat, had the people's sins symbolically placed on its head and was sent away into the wilderness (Leviticus 16).

This was the holiest day of the year. Only one man, on one day, could enter God's presence in the Most Holy Place, and only with blood. Hebrews 9 and 10 build directly on this background. Yom Kippur is still the holiest day of the year for Jewish people today, observed with fasting and prayer.

How Hebrews Reads the Old Testament

Hebrews quotes the Old Testament constantly, more than almost any other New Testament book. Its quotations usually follow the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures used by many Jews in the first century, which is why they sometimes differ slightly from the wording in your Old Testament. The writer especially loves the Psalms, quoting Psalm 2, Psalm 8, Psalm 95,

Psalm 110, and others, and builds long arguments on passages like Jeremiah 31.

The writer reads the Old Testament as pointing forward to Jesus. Its people, places, and practices are like sketches or shadows of what God would do in Christ. This way of reading Scripture is sometimes called typology.

A Word about Judaism

Hebrews argues that the new covenant in Jesus is better than the old covenant given through Moses. Sadly, over the centuries, some Christians have used passages like this to look down on, insult, or even persecute Jewish people. That's a terrible misuse of the letter. The writer was very likely Jewish, writing to Jewish believers, and the book's heroes, in chapter 11, are Israel's heroes. Hebrews is an argument among people who all honored Israel's Scriptures, about how God's promises to Israel had been fulfilled. Christians and Jews today disagree about Jesus, and it's fine to discuss those differences honestly. But contempt for Jewish people has no place in the Christian faith.

The Warning Passages

Hebrews contains five passages that warn readers about the danger of drifting away from Jesus (2:1–4; 3:7–4:13; 5:11–6:12; 10:26–39; 12:14–29). Two of them, in chapters 6 and 10, are among the most debated passages in the Bible. Christians from different traditions understand them in different ways, and we'll look at the main views when we get there. If you're someone who worries about whether you've gone too far for God to forgive you, there's a section in chapter 6 written especially for you.

The Map

Chapters 1–2: Jesus is greater than the angels, and He became fully human to rescue us.

Chapters 3–4: Jesus is greater than Moses; don't harden your hearts, but enter God's rest.

Chapters 5–7: Jesus is our great high priest, a priest like Melchizedek; a warning, and an anchor for the soul.

Chapters 8–10: A new covenant, a better sanctuary, and a once-for-all sacrifice; draw near to God and don't give up.

Chapter 11: The Hall of Faith.

Chapters 12–13: Run the race with your eyes on Jesus; how to live as God's people; final words.

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CHAPTER 1

Better Than Angels

Hebrews 1

Hebrews opens with one of the most magnificent sentences in the Bible. In Greek, verses 1 to 4 are a single, carefully crafted sentence. The writer starts with history. Long ago, God spoke to His people many times and in many different ways through the prophets. But now, in the final era of history, God has spoken through His Son.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **God Speaks**
>
> Think about all the ways God spoke in the Old Testament: through a burning bush, a still small voice, dreams, visions, the law on stone tablets, prophets who acted out messages, and poets who wrote psalms. The writer says all of that was real, but partial, like pieces of a puzzle. In Jesus, God has given us the full picture. If you want to know what God is like, what He thinks, and how He feels about you, look at Jesus. He isn't just a messenger from God. He is God's final word.

Then the writer piles up seven amazing statements about the Son. God has made Him the heir of everything. Through Him, God created the universe. He is the radiance of God's glory, like light shining from the sun. He is the exact representation of God's being. He holds everything together by His powerful word. He made purification for sins. And then He sat down at God's right hand in heaven.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Exact Representation**

The Greek word translated exact representation is charakter, which gives us the English word character. It was used for the mark a stamp or seal leaves in wax, or the image stamped on a coin. Every detail of the stamp shows up in the impression. The writer is saying that Jesus perfectly shows us who God is. Jesus said the same thing: anyone who has seen Him has seen the Father (John 14:9).

BACKGROUND CHECK **He Sat Down**

Notice the last thing the writer says: after Jesus made purification for sins, He sat down. That's a big deal, and the writer will come back to it later (10:11–12). In the tabernacle, there were no chairs for the priests. Their work was never finished; there was always another sacrifice to offer. But Jesus sat down, because His work was complete. There's nothing left to add to what He did for you.

The writer says the Son became far greater than the angels, just as the name He inherited is greater than theirs. And then he spends the rest of the chapter proving it, with seven quotations from the Old Testament.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Why Angels?**

Why would the writer spend a whole chapter comparing Jesus to angels? Jewish tradition taught that angels were involved in giving the law to Moses at Mount Sinai (see 2:2; Acts 7:53; Galatians 3:19). Angels were seen as powerful, glorious beings who served in God's presence. Some people may have been tempted to see Jesus as just another angel, or to give angels too much honor. The writer wants to make it clear that Jesus is in a completely different category. Angels serve God. Jesus is God's Son.

First, the writer quotes Psalm 2: God never said to any angel that He was His Son and that He had become His Father. And he quotes God's promise to King David that his descendant would be God's son (2 Samuel 7:14). The NIV footnotes list both sources. These passages

were originally about Israel's kings, but the writer sees them as ultimately fulfilled in Jesus, the true Son and King.

Then he says that when God sends His firstborn into the world, God commands all the angels to worship Him. The NIV footnote says this comes from Deuteronomy 32:43, in a version found in the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Septuagint. If angels worship the Son, He must be greater than they are.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Firstborn**
>
> In the Bible, firstborn doesn't always mean born first. It often means the one with the highest rank, the heir with the most honor. God called Israel His firstborn son (Exodus 4:22), and promised that David's line would be His firstborn, the most exalted of kings (Psalm 89:27). When Hebrews calls Jesus the firstborn, it doesn't mean that Jesus was created. The writer has just said that the universe was created through Him. It means He holds the highest place.

The writer contrasts the angels with the Son. Psalm 104 describes angels as winds and flames of fire, powerful but serving. But Psalm 45, addressed to the king, says that the Son's throne will last forever, and even calls Him God. And Psalm 102 says that the Lord set the earth on its foundations, and that the heavens will wear out like old clothes, but He will always stay the same. The writer applies those words to Jesus.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Jesus Is God**
>
> Hebrews 1 is one of the strongest passages in the New Testament about who Jesus is. The writer says that the universe was created through Him, that He holds it together, that He perfectly represents God, that angels worship Him, and he applies to Him Old Testament passages that speak of God Himself. At the same time, the writer distinguishes the Son from the Father. Christians have summarized this teaching in the doctrine of the Trinity: one God,

eternally existing as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It's a mystery, but it's at the heart of the Christian faith.

Finally, the writer quotes Psalm 110, the Old Testament passage most often quoted in the New Testament. God tells the king to sit at His right hand until God makes his enemies a footstool for his feet. God never said that to an angel. Angels, the writer concludes, are spirits who serve, sent to help the people who will inherit salvation.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Angels on Assignment**

The Bible says a lot less about angels than many people think, and a lot of popular ideas about angels come from movies, art, and imagination rather than Scripture. But the Bible does say that angels are real, that they serve God, and that He sends them to help His people. Hebrews 13:2 even suggests some people have welcomed angels without knowing it. You don't need to pray to angels or try to contact them. But it's good to know that God sends help you can't always see.

KEY VERSE

The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven.

Hebrews 1:3 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Hebrews says God has spoken to us through His Son. What does that mean for how you get to know God?
2. If Jesus is the exact representation of God, what does His life tell you about what God is like?
3. Why do you think it matters that Jesus sat down after providing purification for sins?
4. What ideas about angels have you picked up from movies or culture? How do they compare to what the Bible says?

TRY THIS *Read one of the Gospels this month, maybe Mark, and every time you read about something Jesus does, ask: what does this show me about God?*

CHAPTER 2

Our Brother

Hebrews 2

After all that talk about how great Jesus is, the writer gives his first warning. Because of all this, we need to pay very careful attention to what we've heard, so that we don't drift away.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Drifting**
>
> The word the writer uses for drift away was used for a boat that slips away from the dock because no one tied it up properly. Drifting doesn't take any effort. You don't decide to drift. You just stop paying attention, and the current does the rest. A lot of people don't walk away from Jesus in one dramatic moment. They just slowly stop praying, stop reading the Bible, stop going to church, stop caring. Months later, they look up and realize they're far from shore. What keeps you tied to the dock?

The writer reasons this way. The message God gave through angels, the law, was binding, and people who broke it were punished. So how will we escape if we ignore a salvation as great as this one? This message was announced first by Jesus Himself, and was confirmed to us by people who heard Him. God confirmed it too, with signs, wonders, miracles, and gifts of the Holy Spirit.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Second Generation**
>
> Notice the writer's words in verse 3. He received the message from people who had heard Jesus. So he wasn't one of the original disciples. He was part of the second generation of believers. That's one reason most scholars think

> Paul didn't write Hebrews, since Paul insisted that he received the gospel directly from Jesus (Galatians 1:11–12). It also means that the writer was in the same position you are: believing in Jesus because of what others told him. He's a good example of how faith gets passed down.

Then the writer returns to the angels. God didn't put the world to come under the control of angels. Instead, he quotes Psalm 8, which marvels that God pays attention to human beings at all. God made humans a bit lower than the angels for a while, gave them glory and honor as a crown, and placed everything under their control.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Psalm 8**
>
> Psalm 8 is a song about the amazing place God gave humanity in creation. When David looked up at the night sky, he felt tiny. Why would the God who made all of that care about people? And yet God gave humans glory and responsibility over His world (Genesis 1:26–28). The NIV footnotes show that the psalm's language can be translated about humanity in general or about a particular son of man. The writer seems to use both: Psalm 8 describes what humans were meant to be, and Jesus is the one human being who has fully become it.

The writer admits something obvious. Right now, we don't see everything under humanity's control. The world is broken. People suffer, nature is unpredictable, and death still wins. But then he writes, "But we do see Jesus, who was made lower than the angels for a little while, now crowned with glory and honor because he suffered death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone."

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **But We Do See Jesus**
>
> This might be the most hopeful phrase in the chapter. When you look at the world, you see a lot that's wrong. When you look at your own life, you probably do too. But we do see Jesus. He has already gone through suffering

and death, and come out on the other side, crowned with glory. Where He is, we're headed. When things look hopeless, look at Him.

God, the writer says, wanted to lead a huge family of children into glory, so it was fitting that He would make Jesus, the pioneer who leads them to salvation, perfect by means of suffering. That doesn't mean Jesus was ever sinful or flawed. It means He was made fully qualified to be our Savior by going through everything we go through.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Pioneer**

The Greek word for pioneer can mean a leader, a founder, or a trailblazer, someone who goes ahead and opens a way for others to follow. Imagine people trapped in a burning building, and a firefighter who goes in, finds them, and leads them out through the smoke. Jesus went ahead of us, through suffering and death, and opened a path to God's presence. The writer will use the same word again in 12:2.

Jesus and the people He makes holy are one family. That's why Jesus is proud to call them His brothers and sisters. The NIV footnote explains that the Greek word refers to believers, both men and women. The writer quotes Psalm 22 and Isaiah 8 to show Jesus speaking of God's people as His brothers, sisters, and children.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Not Ashamed**

Jesus isn't ashamed to call you His brother or sister. Think about that. He knows everything about you, including the things you're most embarrassed about. And He still claims you as family. You might feel ashamed of yourself sometimes, but He isn't ashamed of you.

Since God's children are flesh and blood, Jesus became flesh and blood too. By His death, He broke the power of the devil, who held the power of death, and set free the people who had been slaves all their lives to their fear of death.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Afraid of Dying**

A lot of people are afraid of death, even if they don't talk about it. Some people avoid thinking about it at all. Others are terrified of it. Fear of death can control people's lives in ways they don't realize. Hebrews says that Jesus came to free us from that fear. He went into death and came out the other side, and He'll bring us through too. Death is still sad and still painful, but for those who belong to Jesus, it is not the end.

Jesus didn't come to help angels, the writer says, but Abraham's descendants. So He had to become like His brothers and sisters in every way, so that He could serve as a high priest who is both merciful and faithful, and make atonement for the people's sins. This is the first time the writer calls Jesus a high priest, the idea that will dominate much of the rest of the letter.

And because Jesus went through suffering in His own temptations, He's able to help people who are being tempted.

BACKGROUND CHECK **He Gets It**

Jesus didn't just pretend to be human. He was really tempted. He felt hunger, exhaustion, loneliness, grief, pain, and the pull to take the easy way out (Matthew 4:1–11; 26:36–46). The difference is that He never gave in. That means He understands what you're going through better than anyone, because He felt the full force of temptation without ever giving way. When you're struggling with temptation, you don't have to hide from Him. He's the one who can help most.

KEY VERSE

Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted.

Hebrews 2:18 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. What are some ways people drift away from God without meaning to? What helps you stay anchored?
2. Psalm 8 says humans were made for glory. How does Jesus show what a human life was meant to be?
3. How does it make you feel that Jesus isn't ashamed to call you His brother or sister?
4. What temptation do you face most often? How might knowing that Jesus understands it help?

TRY THIS *Pick one specific thing that tends to pull you toward drifting, whether a habit, a schedule, or a set of friends. This week, add one thing that keeps you tied to the dock instead: a daily prayer, a Bible reading plan, or a friend who'll check in on you.*

CHAPTER 3

Today

Hebrews 3

The writer addresses his readers as holy brothers and sisters, people with a calling from heaven. And he tells them to fix their thoughts on Jesus, whom he calls our apostle and high priest.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Apostle and High Priest**
>
> This is the only place in the New Testament where Jesus is called an apostle. An apostle is someone sent with a message. A high priest represents people before God. So Jesus is both: He came from God to us, bringing God's message, and He represents us before God. He's the bridge between God and humanity from both sides.

Now the writer compares Jesus with Moses. For Jewish readers, there was no greater figure in history than Moses. He led Israel out of slavery in Egypt, received the law at Mount Sinai, and built the tabernacle. God Himself said Moses was faithful in all His house (Numbers 12:7, as the NIV footnote notes).

The writer doesn't criticize Moses at all. Jesus was faithful, just as Moses was. But Jesus deserves more honor than Moses, the same way the builder of a house deserves more honor than the house itself. Moses was a faithful servant in God's house. Jesus is the faithful Son in charge of God's house. And that house is us, if we keep holding on to our confidence and our hope.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Honoring Moses**

Hebrews is careful to honor Moses. He's one of the heroes in the Hall of Faith in chapter 11. The writer's point isn't that Moses was bad, but that Moses was pointing to someone greater. Moses himself promised that God would raise up another prophet like him (Deuteronomy 18:15). It's a good model for disagreement: you can say that something is better without trashing what came before.

BACKGROUND CHECK **God's House**

When the writer says we are God's house, he doesn't mean a building. In the Old Testament, God's house could mean His dwelling, the tabernacle or temple, or His household, the family of Israel. The writer means the people of God. The church isn't a place you go. It's a people you belong to.

Then comes the second warning. The writer quotes Psalm 95, a psalm that was often sung in worship in the synagogue and the temple. In it, God warns His people: if you hear His voice today, don't harden your hearts, like your ancestors did in the wilderness.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Wilderness Generation**

The psalm refers to the Israelites who left Egypt with Moses. They had seen incredible miracles: the plagues, the parting of the Red Sea, manna from heaven, water from a rock. But when they reached the edge of the promised land and heard that the people living there were strong, they panicked and refused to go in (Numbers 13–14). God said that generation would wander in the wilderness for forty years, and none of the adults except Joshua and Caleb would enter the land. They had seen God's power for themselves and still didn't trust Him.

Then the writer applies the psalm to his readers. Watch out, he says, so that no one among you has a heart full of sin and unbelief that turns its back on the living God. Instead, encourage each other every day, while it's still today, so that sin's deceitfulness doesn't harden anyone.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Hardened Hearts**

How does a heart become hard? Usually not all at once. It's a little like calluses on your hands. Every time you ignore your conscience, every time you hear God's voice and say not now, every time you make excuses for something you know is wrong, your heart gets a little tougher. Sin is deceitful. It promises freedom and fun, and it delivers emptiness. It whispers that it's not a big deal, that you'll stop later, that nobody's getting hurt. The longer you listen, the harder it is to hear God.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Encourage One Another Daily**

The writer's answer to hardened hearts is surprisingly simple: encourage each other every day. Not once a week at church. Every day. That's one reason Christian friends matter so much. You need people in your life who'll remind you of the truth, ask how you're really doing, pray for you, and tell you when you're drifting. And they need you to do the same for them. A text, a word at lunch, or a quick prayer together can help keep a heart soft.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Today**

The word today shows up over and over in this passage. God speaks today. Respond today. Encourage one another today. It's easy to say, I'll get serious about God later, after high school, after I've had some fun, when I'm older. But today is the only day you have. The writer says that if you hear God's voice, now is the time to respond.

The writer asks a series of questions. Who heard God and rebelled? Wasn't it all the people Moses led out of Egypt? With whom was God angry for forty years? Wasn't it with those who sinned and died in the desert? And who were the people God swore would never enter His rest? Wasn't it those who disobeyed? So, the writer concludes, they couldn't enter, because they didn't believe.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Unbelief**

The writer connects disobedience and unbelief. The Israelites didn't just break a rule. They refused to trust God. That's the root problem. When we

don't believe God is good and that His way is best, disobedience follows naturally. And when we do trust Him, obedience becomes something we want to do. Faith and obedience go together, as chapter 11 will show.

KEY VERSE

But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called "Today," so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness.

Hebrews 3:13 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. What's the difference between honoring Moses and following Jesus? Why does the writer do both?
2. What are some ways sin is deceitful? What lies does it tell people your age?
3. Who encourages you in your faith? Whom do you encourage?
4. Is there anything God has been asking you to do that you keep putting off until later?

TRY THIS *Choose one Christian friend and commit to encouraging each other every day this week, even with a short text. Share a verse, a prayer request, or just ask how they're really doing.*

CHAPTER 4

Sharper Than Any Sword

Hebrews 4

The writer continues his warning from chapter 3. God's promise that His people can enter His rest is still open. So we should be careful that none of us misses out.

The good news was preached to us, just as it was to the Israelites in the wilderness. But hearing it didn't do them any good, because they didn't combine it with faith. The NIV footnote mentions a different reading in some manuscripts, but the point is the same: hearing God's message isn't enough. You have to trust it.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Rest**
>
> What does the writer mean by God's rest? He uses the idea on several levels. For the Israelites, rest meant settling in the promised land after years of wandering. Then the writer points back further, to creation. When God finished creating, He rested on day seven (Genesis 2:2). And he points forward, to a rest that's still waiting for God's people. Most interpreters see it as both a present and a future reality: a rest we begin to enter now, by trusting Jesus instead of trying to earn God's favor, and a final rest when we're with Him forever.

The writer makes a clever argument. Psalm 95, written by David centuries after Joshua led Israel into the promised land, still tells people to listen to God's voice today. If Joshua had given the people

complete rest, God wouldn't have talked later about another day. So there must still be a Sabbath rest waiting for God's people.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Sabbath Rest**
>
> The word the writer uses for Sabbath rest in verse 9 appears nowhere else in the Bible. It connects God's rest with the weekly Sabbath, the day of rest God gave Israel (Exodus 20:8–11). Anyone who enters God's rest, the writer says, rests from their own work, just as God did. The NIV footnote says work could also be translated labor. In a culture that never stops, where your phone buzzes all night and there's always more to do, rest is a gift. God built rest into creation. He wants you to trust Him enough to stop. Many Christians practice a weekly day of rest and worship as a way of remembering that.

So, the writer says, let's work hard to get into God's rest, so that none of us falls by following the Israelites' example of disobedience. It's a little ironic: work hard to rest. But it makes sense. It takes effort to trust God, to stop striving, and to keep listening to His voice.

Then comes one of the most famous verses in Hebrews: "For the word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart."

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Alive and Active**
>
> Most books are just words on a page. You read them, you learn something, you put them down. The Bible is different. The writer says God's word is alive. It does things. When you read it, it reads you. It cuts through excuses, exposes motives you didn't know you had, comforts you when you're hurting, and challenges you when you're comfortable. Have you ever read a verse that felt like it was written just for you, at exactly the right moment? That's what the writer is talking about.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Deeper Than a Scalpel**

The writer isn't giving an anatomy lesson or teaching that soul and spirit are two separate parts of a person. He's using vivid pictures to say that God's word reaches deeper than anything else can, to the very core of who you are. A surgeon's scalpel can cut between joints and marrow. God's word cuts deeper, all the way into your thoughts and intentions.

No created thing can hide from God. Everything is uncovered and exposed before the eyes of the One we'll answer to. That could sound frightening. But the writer immediately follows it with the best news possible.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Fully Known**

Being completely seen can be terrifying. Most of us work hard to hide parts of ourselves, even from our closest friends. But God already sees everything, the thoughts you'd never say out loud, the things you've done that nobody knows about. And here's the amazing thing: He loves you anyway. Being fully known and fully loved is what every human heart longs for. In Jesus, you can have both.

Jesus, God's Son, is our great high priest, and He has gone up into heaven. So we should hold tight to the faith we confess. The NIV footnote says the Greek literally says that He has gone through the heavens, like the high priest going through the curtain into the Most Holy Place.

And this high priest isn't distant or cold. We don't have a high priest who can't sympathize with our weaknesses. We have one who faced every kind of temptation we face, without ever sinning. So we can come boldly to the throne where God gives grace, and we'll find mercy and the help we need, right when we need it.

BACKGROUND CHECK **He Understands**

Think about everything you might be tempted by: to lie to get out of trouble, to lash out when you're angry, to give in to lust, to fit in with the crowd, to give up when life is hard, to doubt that God cares. Jesus faced the same kinds of temptation. He didn't face every specific modern temptation, like social media, but He faced every kind of temptation. He knows what it's like to be tired, lonely, betrayed, misunderstood, and in pain. So when you go to Him, you're not talking to someone who can't relate. You're talking to the One who understands better than anyone.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Throne of Grace**

In the ancient world, approaching a king's throne was dangerous. You didn't just walk in. Queen Esther risked her life to go before the king uninvited (Esther 4:11). But the writer says God's throne is a throne of grace, and we can approach it with confidence. Not because we're good enough, but because Jesus is our high priest. You can bring God anything: your sin, your mess, your questions, your fears. You'll find mercy for what you've done, and grace to help you with what you're facing. That's not just for when you're doing well. It's especially for your time of need.

KEY VERSE

For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin. Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.

Hebrews 4:15–16 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. What does rest mean to you? How could trusting God help you rest?
2. Have you ever read a Bible verse that seemed to speak directly to you? What happened?
3. How does it feel to know that God sees everything about you? Does that scare you or comfort you, or both?
4. What would it look like to approach God with confidence this week, about something you've been hiding or struggling with?

TRY THIS *Memorize Hebrews 4:15–16. The next time you're struggling with temptation or feel like you've failed, say it to yourself, and then actually talk to God about what's going on.*

CHAPTER 5

A Priest Who Understands

Hebrews 5

Now the writer explains what a high priest is. Every high priest is chosen from among the people to represent them before God, bringing gifts and offering sacrifices for sin. Because he's human and weak himself, he can deal gently with people who don't know better or who are going astray. In fact, he has to bring sacrifices for his own sin before he deals with anyone else's.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Weak Priests**
>
> The writer is honest about the Old Testament priests. They were sinners too. On the Day of Atonement, the high priest had to offer a sacrifice for his own sins before he could offer one for the people (Leviticus 16:6, 11). That made them understanding, but it also limited them. Jesus is different. He understands our weakness completely, but He has no sin of His own to deal with.

And no one appoints himself high priest. God has to call him, just as He called Aaron. The same is true of Jesus. He didn't make Himself high priest. God appointed Him. The writer quotes Psalm 2 again, where God calls Him His Son, and then Psalm 110, where God declares that He will be a priest forever, like Melchizedek. We'll learn more about that mysterious figure in chapter 7.

Then the writer describes something remarkable. While Jesus lived on earth, He prayed with loud cries and tears to the Father, who had

the power to rescue Him from death. And God heard Him, because of His reverent submission.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Loud Cries and Tears**

This almost certainly refers to the night before Jesus was crucified, when He prayed in the garden of Gethsemane. He was so overwhelmed that He said His soul was crushed with grief, and He asked the Father to take the cup of suffering away from Him, if possible. But He also prayed, not My will, but Yours be done (Mark 14:32–36; Luke 22:41–44). Jesus didn't pretend to be fine. He cried. He begged. He was honest with God about His pain. If you've ever cried out to God in desperation, Jesus knows exactly what that's like.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Heard?**

The writer says God heard Jesus. But Jesus still died. So how was His prayer answered? God didn't save Jesus from dying, but He saved Him out of death, by raising Him from the dead. Sometimes God answers prayers in ways we don't expect. He doesn't always take us around suffering. Sometimes He takes us through it, to something better on the other side.

Even though Jesus was God's Son, He learned obedience through what He suffered. And once He was made perfect, He became the One through whom everyone who obeys Him receives salvation that lasts forever.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Learning Obedience**

How could Jesus learn obedience if He never disobeyed? The writer doesn't mean Jesus went from being disobedient to obedient. He means that Jesus experienced what obedience costs when it involves suffering. He learned it by doing it, the way an athlete learns endurance by running. Jesus' obedience was tested to the limit on the cross, and it held. Made perfect means fully qualified, complete, ready for His role as our Savior.

Then the writer interrupts himself. He has a lot more to say about Melchizedek, but it's hard to explain, because his readers have

become slow to learn. By now, they should be teachers, but they need someone to teach them the basics all over again. They need milk, not solid food.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Milk and Solid Food**
>
> Babies drink milk. That's normal and healthy. But if a fifteen-year-old could only drink from a baby bottle, something would be wrong. The writer says his readers had been believers long enough to be teaching others, but they were still stuck on the basics. Spiritual growth doesn't happen automatically just because time passes. It happens when you keep learning, asking questions, digging deeper, and putting what you learn into practice.

People who live on milk are still spiritual infants, not familiar with the teaching about righteousness. Solid food belongs to grown-ups, people who have trained themselves through constant practice to tell good from evil.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Training Your Conscience**
>
> The word for trained is related to our word gymnasium. The writer says mature people have exercised their spiritual senses until they can tell right from wrong. That's a skill you build over time. Every time you choose what's right in a small thing, you get better at recognizing it. Every time you read Scripture and apply it, your sense of what's good gets sharper. You're never too young to start training.

KEY VERSE

During the days of Jesus' life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with fervent cries and tears to the one who could save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission.

Hebrews 5:7 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Why does it matter that Jesus cried out to God with tears? What does that tell you about honest prayer?
2. Have you ever had a prayer answered in a way you didn't expect? What happened?
3. Would you describe your faith right now as milk or solid food? What would help you grow?
4. How do you train yourself to tell good from evil?

TRY THIS *Choose one question about God or the Bible that you've always wondered about. This week, dig into it. Read about it, ask a pastor or youth leader, and talk it over with a friend. Move from milk toward solid food.*

CHAPTER 6

An Anchor for the Soul

Hebrews 6

The writer urges his readers to move beyond the basics and go on to maturity. He lists six foundational teachings: turning away from actions that lead to death, faith in God, teaching about cleansing rituals, laying hands on people, the dead being raised, and God's final judgment. These are good things, but the readers shouldn't have to keep laying the foundation over and over. The NIV footnotes offer alternative translations, such as useless rituals and baptisms.

> BACKGROUND CHECK **Foundations**
>
> Every building needs a foundation. But nobody builds a foundation and then just stays there. You build on it. The basics of the Christian faith are essential, and you'll keep coming back to them your whole life. But the writer wants his readers to build a whole house on that foundation: deeper understanding, stronger faith, more Christlike character, and a life that helps others grow.

Then comes one of the most debated passages in the whole Bible. Here it is in the NIV: "It is impossible for those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, who have shared in the Holy Spirit, who have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the coming age and who have fallen away, to be brought back to repentance. To their loss they are crucifying the Son of God all over again and subjecting him to public disgrace."

The writer compares them to land. Land that soaks up the rain and produces a good crop receives God's blessing. But land that grows nothing but thorns and weeds is useless, close to being cursed, and will finally be burned.

BACKGROUND CHECK **What Does It Mean?**

Christians have understood this passage in several different ways. Here are four of the main views. Each is held by sincere, Bible-believing Christians.

Loss of salvation: Many Christians in Wesleyan, Methodist, Pentecostal, and some other traditions believe these verses describe genuine believers who truly knew Jesus and then deliberately and finally rejected Him, losing their salvation. The descriptions in verses 4 and 5, they say, sound like real Christians. Catholic and Orthodox Christians also believe that a believer can turn away from grace, though they emphasize that God's mercy remains open to those who repent.

A hypothetical warning: Some believe the writer is describing something that would happen if a true believer could fall away, as a way of showing how serious drifting is, while also believing that God keeps true believers from doing so. Warnings like this, they say, are one of the means God uses to keep His people faithful.

False believers: Many in Reformed and Calvinist traditions believe these verses describe people who were part of the Christian community and experienced many of its blessings, like Judas, but were never truly converted. Their falling away shows that their faith was never genuine. Verse 9, where the writer says he's confident of better things in his readers' case, things that accompany salvation, suggests to them that the people in verses 4 to 6 lacked something.

Loss of reward: Others believe the passage describes genuine believers who stop growing and become spiritually fruitless. They don't lose their salvation, but they lose rewards, usefulness, and the joy of a fruitful life, like the burned field, or like the believer in 1 Corinthians 3:15 who is saved, but only as one escaping through the flames.

BACKGROUND CHECK **A Few Details**

A few details may help. The NIV footnote says verse 6 can also be translated if they fall, rather than and who have fallen. Some scholars also note that the Greek for crucifying and subjecting Him to disgrace describes an ongoing action, and translate the verse to mean that repentance is impossible while they keep on rejecting Him. And all four views agree on something important: the writer is describing a deliberate, public rejection of Jesus after knowing the truth, not ordinary sins, struggles, or doubts. The early church took this passage very seriously. Some Christians in the early centuries debated whether believers who denied Christ under persecution could ever be restored, and the church generally concluded that they could, if they truly repented.

BACKGROUND CHECK **If You're Afraid You've Gone Too Far**

Maybe you've read this passage and felt a wave of fear. Maybe you've done something you're deeply ashamed of, or you went through a time when you walked away from God, or you've had doubts, or you're scared that you've committed an unforgivable sin. If that's you, please hear this. The very fact that you care, that you're worried about your relationship with God, is a sign that your heart is not hardened. The people described in this passage don't want to come back. They've turned their backs on Jesus and don't care. Peter denied Jesus three times, and Jesus restored him (John 21:15–19). God promises that if we confess our sins, He will forgive us (1 John 1:9). Jesus said that whoever comes to Him, He will never drive away (John 6:37). You can come back. Right now. And if this fear keeps coming back, even after you've confessed and trusted God, please talk to a pastor, a youth leader, or a parent. Sometimes anxious, intrusive thoughts attach themselves to faith and need a counselor's help. That's not a sign of weak faith. God is far kinder than your fears.

Immediately after the warning, the writer's tone changes. Dear friends, he says, even though we're talking this way, we're confident of better things for you, the things that go with salvation. God isn't

unjust. He won't forget the work you've done and the love you've shown Him by helping His people, as you still do.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Why Warn?**
>
> Why would the writer give such a strong warning if he was confident about his readers? Think of a parent who yells, stop, at a child running toward a busy street. The parent isn't saying the child is already dead. The warning is meant to keep the child safe. The writer warns because he loves his readers, and he wants them to keep going. Warnings and encouragement go together.

The writer wants each of them to keep working just as hard until the finish, so that their hope will be fully realized. He doesn't want them to get lazy, but to follow the example of people who inherit God's promises through faith and patience.

Then he gives an example: Abraham. When God made a promise to Abraham, He swore by Himself, since nobody is higher than God. He promised to bless him and give him more descendants than he could count. And Abraham waited patiently, and he got what God had promised.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Waiting**
>
> Abraham waited about twenty-five years for the son God promised him (Genesis 12:4; 21:5). Waiting is hard. You might be waiting for a prayer to be answered, for a situation to change, for a friend to come to faith, or for your future to become clearer. Abraham's story shows that God keeps His promises, even when it takes longer than we'd like.

When people make an oath, they swear by someone higher than themselves, and the oath ends any argument. God wanted to make it completely clear that His purpose would never change, so He backed His promise with an oath. So we have two things that can't change, God's promise and God's oath, and it's impossible for God to

lie. That's a huge encouragement for those of us who have run to Him for refuge and grabbed hold of the hope He's given us.

BACKGROUND CHECK **An Anchor**

The writer calls our hope an anchor for the soul, firm and secure. In the ancient world, the anchor became an early Christian symbol, painted on walls in the catacombs in Rome. An anchor doesn't stop the storm. The wind still blows and the waves still crash. But an anchor keeps the ship from being driven onto the rocks. And notice where this anchor is fixed: not in the sea, but in heaven, behind the curtain, in the very presence of God, where Jesus has gone ahead of us as our forerunner. Your feelings may go up and down. Your circumstances may change. But Jesus doesn't.

KEY VERSE

We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure.

Hebrews 6:19 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. What's one way you'd like to move beyond the basics in your faith?
2. Which of the four views of 6:4–6 makes the most sense to you? Why? What questions do you still have?
3. Why do you think the writer combines strong warnings with strong encouragement?
4. What storms are you facing right now? What does it mean to have an anchor in them?

TRY THIS *Draw an anchor on a card, and on the back, write Hebrews 6:19. Keep it in your wallet, phone case, or locker. When you feel overwhelmed this week, look at it and remember where your hope is fixed.*

CHAPTER 7

The Mysterious King

Hebrews 7

Finally, the writer gets to Melchizedek. He's been hinting about him since chapter 5, and now he explains.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Who Was Melchizedek?**
>
> Melchizedek appears in only three verses of the Old Testament story (Genesis 14:18–20). After Abraham rescued his nephew Lot by defeating a group of invading kings, a man named Melchizedek came out to meet him with bread and wine. He ruled the city of Salem, and he was also a priest who served God Most High. He blessed Abraham, and Abraham handed over a tenth of all he had taken in the battle. Then Melchizedek disappears from the story. About a thousand years later, Psalm 110 mentions him again, when God tells the king, David's Lord, that He will be a priest forever, the same kind of priest Melchizedek was. That's all the Old Testament says. Salem is usually identified with Jerusalem.

The writer notices several details. Melchizedek's name means king of righteousness. Salem sounds like the Hebrew word shalom, peace, so as ruler of Salem he's also a king of peace. And Genesis says nothing about his parents, his family tree, his birth, or his death. In that way, the writer says, he's like the Son of God, a priest who remains forever.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Without Father or Mother?**

The writer doesn't necessarily mean that Melchizedek literally had no parents or never died. He's pointing out that Genesis doesn't mention them, which is unusual. In a book full of genealogies, Melchizedek appears out of nowhere and vanishes without a trace. For priests in Israel, family tree was everything: you had to prove you were descended from Aaron. Melchizedek's priesthood didn't depend on ancestry at all. Christians have understood him in different ways. Most see him as a real historical king and priest whose story serves as a picture, or type, of Christ. Some have suggested he was an appearance of the Son of God Himself before His birth as a human. Ancient Jewish writers also speculated about him; one of the Dead Sea Scrolls describes a heavenly Melchizedek figure. The writer of Hebrews focuses on what Scripture says, and on what it leaves out.

Think how great Melchizedek must have been, the writer says. Even Abraham, the father of the whole nation, handed him a tenth of what he'd won. Under the law of Moses, the priests from the tribe of Levi collected a tenth from the other Israelites. But Melchizedek wasn't from Levi, and yet Abraham himself paid him a tenth and received his blessing. And everyone knows that the person who gives a blessing is greater than the person who receives it. You could even say, the writer adds, that Levi paid a tenth to Melchizedek through Abraham, since Levi was his great-grandson and wasn't born yet.

BACKGROUND CHECK **A Tenth**

Giving a tenth, often called a tithe, was an ancient practice. Abraham gave a tenth to Melchizedek, Jacob promised a tenth to God (Genesis 28:22), and the law of Moses required a tenth of the harvest to support the Levites and the poor (Numbers 18:21; Deuteronomy 14:28–29). Christians today hold different views about whether the tithe is still required, but almost all agree that generous, regular giving is part of following Jesus (2 Corinthians 9:6–7). Even

> if you don't have much money, you can start the habit of giving some of what you have.

Now the writer makes his main argument. If the priesthood of Levi and Aaron had been able to make people perfect, why would God, in Psalm 110, talk about a different priest, one like Melchizedek? And if the priesthood changes, the law has to change too. Jesus was from the tribe of Judah, and Moses never said anything about priests coming from Judah. So Jesus is a different kind of priest. He didn't become a priest because of a rule about His ancestry, but because of the power of a life that can't be destroyed.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **An Indestructible Life**
>
> The Levitical priests served until they died, and then someone else took their place. Jesus died too, but He rose again, and He'll never die again. His priesthood is based on His resurrection life. That's why He can be a priest forever. You'll never have to worry that your high priest will retire, get replaced, or stop caring about you.

The old rules about priests have been set aside because they were weak and couldn't make anything perfect. Now there's a better hope, and through it we can come close to God.

And there's more. The old priests took office without God swearing any oath. But when Jesus was made a priest, God swore an oath and promised never to change His mind. Because of that oath, Jesus guarantees a better covenant.

There were many priests in the old system, because death kept them from continuing. But Jesus lives forever, so His priesthood is permanent. That's why He can save completely those who come to God through Him, because He always lives to pray for them.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Jesus Prays for You**

Think about this: right now, Jesus is praying for you. The word intercede means to speak up on someone's behalf. Jesus prayed for Peter before Peter denied Him (Luke 22:31–32), and He prayed for all His followers, including us, on the night before He died (John 17:20). Paul says the same thing in Romans 8:34. When you feel like no one is on your side, when you don't know how to pray, when you've messed up again, Jesus is speaking up for you before the Father.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Save Completely**

The NIV footnote says the phrase translated save completely could also mean save forever. Both are true. Jesus doesn't save you halfway, leaving you to finish the job. And He doesn't save you for a while and then give up. His salvation is complete, and it lasts forever.

This is exactly the high priest we need: holy, without fault, pure, separate from sinners, and raised higher than the heavens. Unlike other high priests, He doesn't need to bring sacrifices every day, for His own sins first and then for everyone else's. He dealt with sin one time, permanently, by offering Himself.

The law put weak human beings in the role of high priest. But God's oath, which came later than the law, put His Son in that role, and the Son has been made perfect for all time.

KEY VERSE

Therefore he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them.

Hebrews 7:25 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. What do you find most interesting about Melchizedek? Why do you think the writer finds him so important?
2. How does it change things to know that Jesus is always praying for you?
3. What's the difference between being saved partly and being saved completely?
4. Why do you think it matters that Jesus offered Himself, rather than an animal?

TRY THIS *Read Genesis 14:17–20 and Psalm 110. Then write down three ways Melchizedek points to Jesus. Thank Jesus this week, every day, that He is praying for you.*

CHAPTER 8

A New Covenant

Hebrews 8

The writer sums up his main point. We have this kind of high priest, one who has taken His seat beside God's throne in heaven. He serves in the true sanctuary, the real tabernacle, which God built, not people.

High priests are appointed to bring gifts and sacrifices, so Jesus had to have something to offer too. If He lived on earth, He wouldn't even qualify as a priest, since there are already priests offering gifts under the law. But the place where they serve is only a copy, a shadow of the heavenly reality. That's why God told Moses to build the tabernacle exactly according to the pattern he'd been shown on the mountain (Exodus 25:40).

BACKGROUND CHECK **Copies and Shadows**

A shadow is real, but it's not the thing itself. If you see someone's shadow coming around a corner, you know a person is there, but you can't shake hands with a shadow. The writer says the tabernacle and its sacrifices were real, and God commanded them, but they were shadows of something greater. They showed the shape of what God would do in Jesus. Once the real thing arrives, you don't keep holding on to the shadow.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Present Tense**

Notice that the writer says there are priests who offer gifts, in the present tense. Many scholars take this as evidence that the temple in Jerusalem was

still standing and its sacrifices were still being offered when Hebrews was written, which would mean it was written before AD 70. Others note that the writer is describing the tabernacle as Scripture describes it, and that writers in that period sometimes spoke of the temple in the present tense even after it was destroyed.

The work Jesus has been given is much better than theirs, just as the covenant He brings is better than the old one, because it rests on better promises.

BACKGROUND CHECK **What Is a Covenant?**

A covenant is a binding agreement or relationship between two parties, with promises and commitments on both sides. In the Old Testament, God made covenants with Noah, Abraham, Israel at Mount Sinai, and David. The covenant at Sinai, given through Moses, included the law, the priesthood, and the sacrifices. It was like a marriage between God and His people: I will be your God, and you will be My people. But the people kept breaking it.

If that first covenant had been perfect, the writer says, there would have been no need for another. But God saw what was wrong with His people, and He promised a new covenant. The NIV footnote mentions another possible reading. Then the writer quotes Jeremiah 31:31–34, the longest Old Testament quotation in the New Testament.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Jeremiah's Promise**

Jeremiah lived around 600 BC, as the kingdom of Judah was collapsing. The Babylonians were about to destroy Jerusalem and its temple and carry the people away into exile. It was one of the darkest moments in Israel's history. In the middle of that disaster, God gave Jeremiah a promise. A day is coming when God will establish a brand-new covenant with Israel and Judah. It won't be like the old one, which the people broke, even though God had led them out of Egypt by the hand like a father leading a child.

Then comes the heart of the promise, which the writer quotes in full: "I will put my laws in their minds and write them on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people." In the new covenant, people won't need to tell each other to know the Lord, because everyone will know Him, from the least to the greatest. And God says, "For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more."

BACKGROUND CHECK **Written on Your Heart**

The old covenant law was written on stone tablets. It told people what to do, but it couldn't give them the desire or power to do it. The new covenant is different. God writes His law on our hearts. Through the Holy Spirit, He changes what we want, so that we love what He loves (Ezekiel 36:26–27). Following God becomes less like obeying a list of outside rules and more like living out who you really are. That doesn't happen overnight. But it's what God is doing in everyone who belongs to Him.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Remembered No More**

Does God have a bad memory? No. When God says He'll remember our sins no more, it doesn't mean He forgets they happened. It means He won't hold them against us. He won't bring them up again, use them against us, or punish us for them. They're dealt with, completely. If God has chosen not to remember your forgiven sins, you don't need to keep beating yourself up about them either.

Finally, the writer says that by calling this covenant new, God has shown that the first one is out of date, and anything aging and out of date is about to vanish.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Obsolete?**

Some readers see verse 13 as a hint that the temple was about to be destroyed, and that its sacrifices would soon end, as they did in AD 70. Christians have also discussed how the old and new covenants relate. Most agree that the moral heart of the old covenant, love for God and neighbor,

remains, while the sacrifices and priesthood have been fulfilled in Jesus. And most Christians today emphasize that the new covenant was promised first to Israel, that the earliest believers in Jesus were Jewish, and that God has not forgotten His people Israel (Romans 11:1–2, 28–29). Hebrews gives no basis for disrespect toward Jewish people.

KEY VERSE

This is the covenant I will establish with the people of Israel after that time, declares the Lord. I will put my laws in their minds and write them on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people.

Hebrews 8:10 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. What's the difference between a shadow and the real thing? What are some shadows people hold on to instead of Jesus?
2. What does it mean for God's law to be written on your heart? Have you noticed God changing what you want?
3. How does it feel to know that God has chosen to remember your sins no more?
4. Why is it important to read Hebrews 8 in a way that respects Jewish people?

TRY THIS *Read Jeremiah 31:31–34 in your Bible. Then make a list of sins you've confessed but keep feeling guilty about. Pray through the list, thank God that He remembers them no more, and tear it up or delete it.*

CHAPTER 9

Once for All

Hebrews 9

The writer now describes the tabernacle in more detail. The first covenant had rules for worship and an earthly sanctuary. In the first room, called the Holy Place, stood the lampstand and the table holding the sacred bread. Behind the second curtain was the Most Holy Place, with a golden altar for incense and the ark of the covenant, covered in gold. Inside the ark were three things: a golden jar holding manna, the staff of Aaron that had sprouted, and the two stone tablets with the law on them. Above the ark, the cherubim spread their wings over its cover. But, the writer says, there's no time to go into all that now.

BACKGROUND CHECK **What Was in the Ark?**

Each object in the ark told a story. The manna reminded Israel of the bread God sent from heaven in the wilderness (Exodus 16:32–34). Aaron's staff, which had miraculously sprouted, blossomed, and produced almonds overnight, showed that God had chosen Aaron's family as priests (Numbers 17). And the stone tablets held the Ten Commandments. By Solomon's time, only the tablets remained (1 Kings 8:9). The ark itself disappeared, probably when the Babylonians destroyed the temple in 586 BC. No one knows what happened to it, despite what you might have seen in the movies.

BACKGROUND CHECK **A Puzzle**

Exodus seems to place the altar of incense in the Holy Place, just outside the curtain, rather than in the Most Holy Place (Exodus 30:6). Why does Hebrews connect it with the inner room? Some scholars point out that the Greek word could refer to a golden censer, a container for burning incense, which the high priest carried into the Most Holy Place on the Day of Atonement (Leviticus 16:12–13). Others note that the altar was closely connected with the Most Holy Place, since it stood right in front of the curtain, and 1 Kings 6:22 describes it as belonging to the inner sanctuary. It's a good example of how careful study can help with difficult details.

The priests went into the first room regularly to do their work. But only the high priest went into the inner room, just one day each year, and he always brought blood, offered for his own sins and for sins the people had done without realizing it.

Through this, the writer says, the Holy Spirit was making a point: while the first tabernacle was still in operation, the path into God's inner presence hadn't been opened yet. The gifts and sacrifices couldn't clear the worshiper's conscience. They dealt with food, drink, and ceremonial washings, outward rules that applied until the time when God would set things right.

BACKGROUND CHECK **A Guilty Conscience**

The writer says the old sacrifices couldn't clean the conscience. They could make someone ceremonially clean, but they couldn't take away the inner sense of guilt and shame. Maybe you know that feeling. You've apologized, you've been punished, everyone has moved on, but you still feel dirty inside. Only Jesus can deal with that. His sacrifice doesn't just cover the outside. It cleans you from the inside out.

But Christ has come as the high priest of good things that have already arrived. He went through a greater, more perfect tabernacle, not built by people, not part of this created world. He

didn't go in with animal blood, but with His own. He entered God's inner presence one time, permanently, and won a redemption that lasts forever. The NIV footnotes offer slightly different readings of these verses.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Once for All**

Once for all is one of the key phrases in Hebrews (7:27; 9:12, 26; 10:10). Every year, on the Day of Atonement, the high priest had to do it all over again. Every day, more animals were sacrificed. It never ended. But Jesus offered Himself once, and it was enough, forever. There's nothing left to pay. You don't have to keep earning your way back to God. Jesus has done it once for all.

If animal blood and ashes could make people ceremonially clean on the outside, the writer argues, imagine how much more the blood of Jesus can do. He offered Himself to God, spotless, through the eternal Spirit, and His sacrifice can clean our consciences from the inside so that we can serve the living God.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Why Blood?**

For modern readers, all this talk about blood can seem strange, even disturbing. But in the Bible, blood represents life (Leviticus 17:11). The sacrifices showed that sin is deadly serious; it leads to death. Forgiveness isn't cheap. It costs a life. The writer says that, under the law, almost everything was purified with blood, and adds: "without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness." That's why Jesus' death matters so much. He gave His own life, so that we could have life.

That's why Jesus brings a new covenant and stands between God and us: so that people God has called can receive the eternal inheritance He promised. His death paid the price to free them from the sins they committed under the old covenant.

The writer makes a play on words. As the NIV footnote explains, the Greek word for covenant can also mean a will, like the kind people write to leave an inheritance. A will only takes effect when the person who made it dies. In the same way, the first covenant was put into effect with blood. When Moses read the law to the people, he sprinkled blood on the scroll and the people, and said that this was the blood of the covenant God had commanded them to keep (Exodus 24:8).

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **The Blood of the Covenant**
>
> Jesus used almost the same words at the Last Supper. When He gave His disciples the cup, He said it was His blood of the covenant, poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins (Matthew 26:28). When Christians share communion, also called the Lord's Supper or the Eucharist, they remember that Jesus' death established the new covenant. Christians from different traditions understand communion in different ways, but all of them connect it to this moment.

The earthly tabernacle and its objects were copies of heavenly things, and they were purified with animal sacrifices. But the heavenly realities needed better sacrifices. Christ didn't enter a man-made sanctuary that was just a copy of the real one. He went into heaven itself, to appear in God's presence for us.

And He didn't go in to offer Himself over and over, like the high priest who went in every year with an animal's blood. Otherwise, Jesus would have had to suffer over and over since the world began. Instead, He has appeared once, at the climax of history, to remove sin by sacrificing Himself.

People die once, and after that comes judgment. In the same way, the writer says, "Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of

many; and he will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him."

BACKGROUND CHECK **The High Priest Comes Out**

On the Day of Atonement, the people waited outside while the high priest went into the Most Holy Place. They couldn't see what was happening. They just had to wait and hope that the sacrifice had been accepted. When the high priest came back out, alive, it meant God had accepted the sacrifice, and the people could celebrate. The writer says Jesus has gone into God's presence for us, and one day He will come back out, so to speak, to bring His people the full salvation He has won. Until then, we wait with hope.

KEY VERSE

How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God!

Hebrews 9:14 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Why do you think God gave Israel such detailed instructions about the tabernacle and sacrifices?
2. Have you ever felt guilty even after being forgiven? How does Hebrews 9:14 speak to that?
3. What does once for all mean to you personally?
4. How should knowing that Jesus will return shape the way you live now?

TRY THIS *Look up a diagram of the tabernacle online or in a study Bible. Trace the path the high priest took on the Day of Atonement. Then read Hebrews 10:19–22 and notice what it says you can do now.*

CHAPTER 10

Draw Near

Hebrews 10

The writer sums up his argument about sacrifices. The law was a shadow of the blessings that were on their way, not the blessings themselves. That's why the same sacrifices, repeated every year, could never make the worshipers perfect. If they had worked, the writer asks, wouldn't people have stopped offering them? The worshipers would have been made clean permanently and wouldn't feel guilty anymore. Instead, the sacrifices were a yearly reminder of sin. Animal blood simply can't take sin away.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **A Yearly Reminder**
>
> Imagine having to bring up your worst mistakes every single year at a big public event. That's a little what the Day of Atonement was like. It reminded everyone that sin was still a problem. It pointed to the need for something more. Jesus' sacrifice is different. It doesn't remind God of our sins. It removes them.

Then the writer quotes Psalm 40, putting it in the mouth of Jesus as He came into the world. God didn't really want sacrifices and offerings. Instead, He prepared a body for His Son. And the Son says that He has come to do God's will, as the scroll had written about Him. The NIV footnote says the writer is following the Septuagint version of the psalm, which speaks of a body.

BACKGROUND CHECK **A Body You Prepared**

The Hebrew text of Psalm 40:6 says something like you have opened my ears, meaning God had made the psalmist willing to listen and obey. The Greek translation, the Septuagint, speaks instead of a body that God prepared. The writer uses the Greek version, which fits Jesus perfectly. God didn't want endless animal sacrifices. He wanted a life of complete obedience. Jesus came in a human body to offer exactly that, all the way to the cross.

The writer explains that God sets aside the first system to establish the second. And because Jesus did what God wanted, offering His own body, we've been made holy, permanently.

Every day, the writer says, priests stand and do their religious work, offering the same sacrifices again and again, and those sacrifices can never take away sin. But Jesus offered one sacrifice for sins, for all time, and then He sat down at God's right hand. Now He's waiting until His enemies are put under His feet. With that single offering, He has permanently perfected the people He's in the process of making holy.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Made Perfect, Being Made Holy**

Look closely at verse 14. Jesus has made us perfect forever: that's done, complete. And we are being made holy: that's ongoing. Both are true. In God's eyes, because of Jesus, you're completely forgiven and accepted. At the same time, God is still working on you, shaping your character to look more like Jesus. Christians sometimes call the first part justification and the second part sanctification. You're not a finished product. But you are completely loved and accepted right now.

The Holy Spirit also confirms this through Jeremiah's promise of the new covenant, which the writer quotes again. God will write His laws on people's hearts, and He'll never again call to mind their sins

and their lawless deeds. And once sins are forgiven, no further sacrifice is needed.

Then the writer turns from teaching to application. Because of Jesus' blood, we can boldly go into God's inner presence. He has opened a new, living path for us through the curtain, which is His body. And He's our great priest, in charge of God's house. So the writer urges three things.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Through the Curtain**
>
> For centuries, a thick curtain kept everyone out of the Most Holy Place except the high priest, once a year. When Jesus died, the Gospels say, the curtain in the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom (Mark 15:38). The writer says the way into God's presence is now open, through Jesus' body, given for us. You don't need a priest, a special place, or a special day to come to God. Through Jesus, the door is open, all the time.

First, let's come close to God with honest hearts and complete confidence, our hearts made clean from a guilty conscience and our bodies washed in clean water. Many interpreters see a reference to baptism here.

Second, let's hold on tightly, without wavering, to the hope we confess, because God, who made the promise, is faithful.

Third, let's think about how we can push each other toward love and doing good. Don't give up meeting together, as some people have gotten into the habit of doing. Instead, encourage one another, even more as the Day of the Lord gets closer.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Spur One Another On**
>
> The word translated spur on is a strong one. It can mean to stir up or provoke. Usually people provoke each other to anger. The writer says to provoke each other to love and good deeds. That takes thought. How can you encourage a friend to be kinder, braver, more generous, or more faithful? It might mean

inviting them to serve with you, praying for them, or simply noticing and praising the good things they do.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Don't Skip**

Some of the first readers had stopped coming to church gatherings, maybe because they were afraid of persecution, or because they were tired or discouraged. The writer says not to do that. You need other believers, and they need you. It's easy to think you can follow Jesus on your own, watching sermons online and reading the Bible by yourself. Those are good things. But they can't replace being with real people: worshiping together, praying together, eating together, and holding each other up. A coal pulled out of a fire goes cold quickly.

Then comes the second severe warning. Here it is: "If we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins is left, but only a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God."

The writer reminds them that under the law of Moses, someone who rejected it could be put to death if two or three witnesses testified against them. How much worse punishment does someone deserve who has trampled on the Son of God, treated the blood of the covenant as worthless, and insulted the Spirit of grace? God has said that vengeance belongs to Him and that He will judge His people. The NIV footnotes trace these words to Deuteronomy 32 and Psalm 135. "It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God."

BACKGROUND CHECK **What Kind of Sin?**

Christians understand this passage in the same range of ways as 6:4–6: as describing a real believer who loses salvation, a hypothetical warning, people who were never truly converted, or a believer who faces God's discipline and

loss of reward. Look back at chapter 6 for a fuller explanation of each view. But notice what kind of sin the writer is describing. He's not talking about a believer who keeps struggling with a habit, gives in to temptation, or has doubts. The Greek describes an ongoing, deliberate choice, and verse 29 explains what it is: treating Jesus with contempt, rejecting His sacrifice, and insulting the Holy Spirit. If you reject the only sacrifice that can take away sin, the writer says, there's no other sacrifice left. It's like refusing the only lifeboat.

BACKGROUND CHECK **If This Scares You**

If this passage frightens you, read the If You're Afraid You've Gone Too Far box in chapter 6 again. Then notice what the writer says right after this warning: he reminds his readers of their faithfulness and says that they're not the kind of people who turn back. Struggling with sin is not the same as trampling on the Son of God. Worrying that you've gone too far is a sign that you haven't. God's arms are still open.

Then the writer encourages them. Remember the early days, after you first believed, when you stood firm through a hard struggle with suffering. Sometimes you were publicly insulted and persecuted. Sometimes you stood with others who were treated that way. You suffered alongside people in prison, and when your property was taken from you, you accepted it joyfully, because you knew you had something better that would last.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Joy When Things Are Taken**

Imagine losing your house, your possessions, and your savings because you follow Jesus, and responding with joy. That's what these believers did. They knew they had something no one could take away. Christians in some parts of the world today face exactly this. Most of us won't. But we can ask ourselves: how tightly am I holding on to my stuff? Would I be willing to lose it for Jesus?

So don't throw away your confidence, the writer says. A rich reward is coming. You need to keep going, so that after you've done God's

will, you'll receive what He promised. He quotes Isaiah and Habakkuk: soon, very soon, the One who is coming will arrive without delay. The person God considers righteous lives by trusting Him, and God is not pleased with anyone who turns back in fear.

The chapter ends with confidence: "But we do not belong to those who shrink back and are destroyed, but to those who have faith and are saved."

KEY VERSE

Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.

Hebrews 10:23–25 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. What's the difference between being made perfect forever and being made holy? Why do both matter?
2. What does it mean to you that the way into God's presence is open through Jesus?
3. Why do you think some people give up meeting together? What helps you stay connected?
4. How can you push someone toward love and doing good this week?

TRY THIS *Think of a Christian friend who's been drifting or missing church or youth group. Reach out to them this week, not to guilt them, but to encourage them. Invite them to come with you.*

CHAPTER 11

The Hall of Faith

Hebrews 11

Chapter 10 ended with the words live by faith. Now the writer explains what faith looks like, with a long list of people who lived by it. It's often called the Hall of Faith.

He starts with a definition: "Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see." This is what God's people long ago were commended for.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **What Faith Is**
>
> Some people think faith means believing something without any reason, or believing something even though you know it isn't true. That's not what Hebrews means. Faith is confidence in God and His promises. It's trusting what He has said, even about things we can't see yet. Everyone lives by some kind of faith: you trust a chair to hold you, a doctor to give the right medicine, a friend to keep a secret. Christian faith is trusting God, based on who He is and what He has done, especially in Jesus. And the examples in this chapter show that real faith always does something.

By faith, the writer says, we know that God created everything by His command, so that the visible world came from what can't be seen.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Faith and Science**
>
> Hebrews 11:3 says that faith helps us understand where the universe came from. That doesn't mean Christians have to ignore science. Many of the

> founders of modern science were Christians who believed that studying creation was a way to understand the God who made it. Christians today hold different views about how and when God created, and those views are worth discussing. But they agree on the main point: the universe isn't an accident. It exists because God spoke.

Then the writer starts naming names. Abel offered God a better sacrifice than his brother Cain, and God approved of him. Even though Abel is dead, his faith still speaks.

Enoch was taken up by God without dying, because he pleased God. And then the writer adds a key principle: "And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him."

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Seek Him**
>
> Notice what verse 6 says. Coming to God involves two beliefs: that He exists, and that He rewards people who seek Him. In other words, God is real, and He's good. He doesn't hide from people who are honestly looking for Him. If you have questions or doubts, keep seeking. Jeremiah 29:13 promises that people who seek God with all their heart will find Him.

Noah was warned by God about things that hadn't happened yet, and in reverent fear he built a huge boat to rescue his family. By doing that, he showed that the world was wrong, and he received the righteousness that comes by faith.

Abraham obeyed when God called him to leave home and go to a land he'd receive later, even though he didn't know where he was going. He lived in tents in the land God had promised, as if he were a foreigner there, and so did Isaac and Jacob. He was looking forward to a city with foundations, designed and built by God.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Not Knowing Where**

Abraham packed up everything and left, without a map, without a destination, without knowing how it would turn out. He just knew God had told him to go. Maybe you don't know where your life is heading. What college, what job, what city, whom you'll marry, whether things will work out. Faith doesn't mean having all the answers. It means trusting the One who does, and taking the next step He shows you.

Sarah, too, though she was past the age of having children, was able to have a child, because she trusted that God would keep His promise. The NIV footnote offers another way to read the verse, with Abraham as the subject. Either way, from one old man, practically dead, came more descendants than anyone could count, like the stars overhead or the grains of sand on a beach.

All these people died still trusting God. They didn't receive what was promised. They saw it from far away, welcomed it, and admitted that this world wasn't really their home. They were looking for a homeland. If they had been thinking about the country they'd left, they could have gone back. Instead, the writer says, "they were longing for a better country—a heavenly one." And so God is proud to be known as their God, and He has a city ready for them.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Strangers Here**

Have you ever felt like you don't quite fit in? Like this world isn't really your home? Hebrews says that's how God's people have always felt. We live here, we love the people around us, and we try to make the world better. But our true home is still ahead. That's not an excuse to check out of life. It's a reason for hope. Whatever you're going through here isn't the end of the story.

Then the writer returns to Abraham. When God tested him, Abraham was ready to offer Isaac, the son through whom God had promised to give him descendants. Abraham figured that God had

the power to bring the dead back to life, and in a way, he did get Isaac back from death (Genesis 22).

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **A Hard Story**
>
> The story of Abraham and Isaac is one of the hardest in the Bible. Why would God ask a father to sacrifice his son? Remember how the story ends: God stopped Abraham and provided a ram instead, and the Bible elsewhere condemns child sacrifice in the strongest terms (Jeremiah 7:31). Many readers see the story as a test of Abraham's trust, and as a picture of what God Himself would do when He gave His own Son. The writer of Hebrews focuses on Abraham's faith that God could raise the dead.

Isaac blessed Jacob and Esau about their future. Jacob, at the end of his life, gave a blessing to each of Joseph's sons, then bowed in worship, leaning on his staff. Joseph, near the end of his life, spoke about Israel leaving Egypt someday and gave instructions about his bones, so they could be taken to the promised land.

Then comes Moses. His parents hid him as a baby, because they saw he was special, and they weren't afraid of the king's order to kill Hebrew boys. When Moses grew up, he refused to be known as a member of Pharaoh's family. He chose to suffer with God's people rather than enjoy sin's short-lived pleasures. He considered disgrace for the sake of the Messiah worth more than all the wealth of Egypt, because he had his eyes on the reward ahead. He left Egypt without fear of the king's anger. He kept going because he saw the invisible God. He kept the Passover, so that the destroyer would not touch Israel's firstborn.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Choosing Hard Things**
>
> Moses could have had it all: wealth, power, comfort, and status as a member of the royal family. He gave it up to stand with an enslaved people. That's a picture of faith that costs something. Sometimes following Jesus means

choosing what's hard over what's easy, what's right over what's popular, what lasts over what feels good right now. Moses made that choice because he could see something others couldn't.

The people crossed the Red Sea as if it were dry land, but the Egyptians drowned trying to follow. Jericho's walls collapsed after a week of the army marching around the city. And Rahab, a prostitute, wasn't killed with the disobedient, because she welcomed the Israelite spies.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Rahab**

Rahab is one of the most surprising people in the Hall of Faith. She wasn't an Israelite. She was a Canaanite from Jericho, and she worked as a prostitute. But she believed that Israel's God was the true God, and she risked her life to protect His people (Joshua 2). She later became an ancestor of King David and of Jesus (Matthew 1:5). The Hall of Faith isn't a list of perfect people. It's a list of people who trusted God. That means there's room for you.

What more can I say? the writer asks. He doesn't have time to talk about Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel, and the prophets. Through faith they conquered kingdoms, did what was right, received God's promises, shut the mouths of lions, put out raging fires, escaped the sword, found strength in weakness, became mighty in battle, and drove back foreign armies. Women received their dead back, raised to life.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Flawed Heroes**

If you know their stories, some of these names might surprise you. Gideon was fearful and asked God for sign after sign. Barak refused to go into battle without Deborah. Samson was impulsive and kept making terrible choices. Jephthah made a rash vow with tragic results. David committed adultery and arranged a murder. The writer doesn't hold them up as perfect role models. Their faith was real, even though they were deeply flawed. God works through imperfect people, and He's honest about their failures.

But not everyone was rescued. Some were tortured and refused to be released, because they wanted a better resurrection. Some were mocked and whipped, chained and imprisoned. Some were stoned, sawed in two, and killed with the sword. They wandered around in sheepskins and goatskins, poor, persecuted, and mistreated, living in deserts, mountains, caves, and holes in the ground. The world wasn't worthy of them.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Faith That Isn't Rescued**
>
> This part of the list is important. Faith doesn't always lead to victory, healing, or escape. Sometimes faithful people suffer and die. An old Jewish tradition says that the prophet Isaiah was sawed in two by the wicked king Manasseh. Many Christians in the early church were tortured and killed. Faith isn't a guarantee that life will go well. It's trust that God is good and will keep His promises, even when we don't see the answer in this life. Some of the people with the greatest faith in this chapter never saw their prayers answered the way they hoped.

All these people were commended for their faith, the writer says, but none of them received what was promised. God had planned something better, so that they would be made perfect only together with us.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Together with Us**
>
> The last verse is beautiful. The heroes of faith are waiting for us. God's plan includes them and us, the whole family of faith across history. They won't receive the full promise without us, and we won't receive it without them. You're part of the same story as Abraham, Moses, Rahab, and David. And the story isn't finished yet. You're writing your own chapter right now.

KEY VERSE

Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see.

Hebrews 11:1 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. How would you explain faith to a friend who thinks it means believing something without reason?
2. Which person in the Hall of Faith do you relate to most? Why?
3. Why do you think the writer included flawed people like Samson and Rahab?
4. What does it mean to have faith even when God doesn't rescue you from a hard situation?

TRY THIS *Write your own entry for the Hall of Faith: By faith, [your name]... Write about one way you're trusting God right now, or one step of faith you want to take. Then take that step this week.*

CHAPTER 12

Run the Race

Hebrews 12

After the Hall of Faith, the writer turns to his readers. Picture a stadium. The heroes of chapter 11 fill the stands all around us, a huge crowd of witnesses. So let's get rid of everything that slows us down, especially the sin that trips us up so easily, and let's run, and keep running, the race God has set in front of us. And as we run, let's keep our eyes on Jesus, who started our faith and will bring it to completion. Because of the joy ahead of Him, He endured the cross, ignoring its shame, and now He's seated beside God's throne.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Crowd in the Stands**

Who are the witnesses? Some readers picture the heroes of faith in heaven watching us run, like fans cheering in a stadium. Others think the writer means they're witnesses in the sense of people who testify: their lives bear witness to God's faithfulness, showing us that the race can be finished. Either way, you're not running alone. Countless believers have run this race before you, through hardships far worse than yours, and they made it. Their stories shout: keep going.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Run Light**

No runner competes wearing a heavy backpack, jeans, and boots. They strip down to what's essential. The writer mentions two kinds of things to throw off. One is sin, which tangles your feet. The other is everything that hinders, which might not be sinful at all, but slows you down: too much screen time,

an unhealthy relationship, a habit that drains your energy, an obsession with what other people think. What's weighing you down? What would it take to drop it?

BACKGROUND CHECK **Eyes on Jesus**

Runners who keep looking back or sideways lose time, and sometimes trip. The writer says to fix your eyes on Jesus. He calls Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of faith: the one who blazed the trail, and the one who finishes what He starts in you. Notice what kept Jesus going through the cross: the joy set before Him. Part of that joy was you. When the race gets hard, look at Him. He's already crossed the finish line, and He's waiting for you there.

Think about Jesus, the writer says, who endured so much hostility from sinners, so that you won't get tired and give up. In your fight against sin, you haven't yet had to resist to the point of bleeding.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Not Yet**

The writer's readers had faced insults, prison, and the loss of their property, but none of them had been killed for their faith, at least not yet. Jesus had. The writer isn't minimizing their suffering. He's putting it in perspective. Whatever hardship you face for following Jesus, He has been through worse, and He knows how to help you through it.

Then the writer talks about hardship as discipline. He quotes Proverbs 3: don't take the Lord's discipline lightly, and don't lose heart when He corrects you, because God trains and corrects those He loves, like a father with a son he delights in.

The writer says to treat hard times as training. It's a sign that God is dealing with you as His own kids. What child isn't disciplined by a parent? If you were never disciplined, it would mean you didn't really belong to the family. Our human parents disciplined us for a short time as they thought best, and we respected them. How much

more should we accept the discipline of our heavenly Father, and live? God trains us for our benefit, so that we can share His holiness.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Discipline Isn't Abuse**
>
> It's important to understand what the writer means and doesn't mean. Discipline means training: the coach who makes you run extra laps, the teacher who makes you redo an assignment, the parent who sets limits because they love you. The writer says God uses hard things in our lives to train and strengthen us. That doesn't mean that every bad thing that happens to you is a punishment from God, or that God causes evil. And it never means that abuse is okay. If an adult is hurting you, physically, emotionally, or sexually, and calling it discipline, that's wrong. It's not God's will, and it's not your fault. Tell a trusted adult, and keep telling until someone helps.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Training Hurts**
>
> The writer is honest. No discipline feels good at the time. It hurts. But later it produces a harvest of right living and peace in people who let it train them. Every athlete knows this. The workouts that make you stronger are the ones that hurt. God isn't trying to make you miserable. He's making you strong.

So, the writer says, strengthen your tired arms and wobbly knees. Make straight paths for your feet, quoting Proverbs 4:26, so that those who are limping won't be injured further, but healed.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Straight Paths for Others**
>
> Notice why the writer wants straight paths: for the sake of those who are limping. Your choices affect other people, especially those who are weaker or struggling. When you live with integrity, you make it easier for others to follow Jesus too. When you're careless, you can make them stumble.

Work hard at living at peace with everyone, and at being holy, because nobody will see the Lord without holiness. Make sure no one misses out on God's grace, and that no root of bitterness sprouts, causing trouble and poisoning many people.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Bitter Roots**

Bitterness starts small, like a seed. Someone hurts you, and instead of dealing with it, you replay it in your mind again and again. Over time, the root grows. It shows up in sarcasm, gossip, suspicion, and anger. And it doesn't just hurt you; it spreads. Bitter people often make others bitter too. The answer isn't pretending you weren't hurt. It's bringing the hurt to God, forgiving, and, when it's safe, working things out.

Make sure no one is sexually immoral, the writer adds, or godless like Esau, who traded away his rights as the oldest son for a single meal (Genesis 25:29–34). Later, when he wanted the blessing, he was turned down. He couldn't undo what he'd done, even though he begged with tears.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Esau's Bowl of Stew**

Esau came home starving and traded his inheritance, which was worth a fortune, for a bowl of stew. It seems ridiculous. But people do it all the time: trading something precious for something that satisfies right now. Trading purity for a moment of pleasure. Trading a friendship for popularity. Trading your integrity for a better grade. Esau's story is a warning about short-term thinking. Some interpreters note that Esau's tears were about losing the blessing, not about turning from his sin, and that the passage is not saying God refuses people who truly repent.

Then the writer paints a contrast between two mountains. When Israel came to Mount Sinai to receive the law, the mountain was burning with fire, wrapped in darkness and storm. There was a trumpet blast and a voice so terrifying that the people begged not to hear any more. Even an animal that touched the mountain had to be killed. Even Moses said he was shaking with fear (Exodus 19–20; Deuteronomy 9:19).

But you have come to a different mountain, the writer says: Mount Zion, the living God's city, Jerusalem in heaven. You've come to

countless angels in a joyful celebration, to the gathering of God's firstborn children, whose names are recorded in heaven. You've come to God, who judges everyone, to the spirits of righteous people made perfect, and to Jesus, who brings the new covenant, and to His sprinkled blood, which speaks a better word than Abel's.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **A Better Word Than Abel's**
>
> When Cain murdered his brother Abel, God said that Abel's blood cried out from the ground (Genesis 4:10). It cried out for justice. Jesus' blood speaks a better word. It cries out for mercy and forgiveness. Every time you come to worship, the writer says, you're joining a celebration in heaven, with angels and believers from every age, and you're standing on the ground of Jesus' blood, which says: forgiven.

So don't refuse the One who is speaking, the writer warns. If people didn't escape when they refused God's warning on earth, we certainly won't escape if we turn away from the One whose warning comes from heaven. At Sinai, God's voice shook the earth. Now He promises to shake the earth and the heavens too, quoting Haggai 2:6. That means everything that can be shaken will be removed, so that what can't be shaken will remain.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Unshakable**
>
> Everything around you can be shaken: your health, your friendships, your family's finances, your country, your plans, your feelings. That can be scary. But the writer says we're receiving a kingdom that can never be shaken. When everything else falls apart, God's kingdom stands. That's why we can be thankful, and worship God with reverence and awe. As the writer reminds us, quoting Deuteronomy 4:24, God is a consuming fire. He isn't tame. But He's good.

KEY VERSE

Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

Hebrews 12:1–2 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. What's slowing you down in your race right now? What would it take to throw it off?
2. How can you tell the difference between God's loving discipline and something that is simply wrong or harmful?
3. Is there a bitter root growing in your life? What would it take to pull it up?
4. What in your life feels shaky right now? How does knowing God's kingdom can't be shaken help?

TRY THIS *Write down one thing that hinders you and one sin that easily entangles you. Make a specific plan to throw each one off this week, and tell a trusted friend or mentor so they can run alongside you.*

CHAPTER 13

The Same Forever

Hebrews 13

The last chapter is full of practical instructions for everyday life. The writer packs a lot into a few verses.

Keep loving each other like family. Don't forget to welcome strangers, because some people have welcomed angels without realizing it, like Abraham did (Genesis 18). Remember people in prison as though you were there with them, and people who are being mistreated as though you were the one suffering.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Welcome Strangers**

In the ancient world, travelers depended on hospitality, and inns were often dangerous or disreputable. Christians became known for welcoming travelers, missionaries, and people in need into their homes. Today, hospitality might look like inviting the new kid to sit with you at lunch, welcoming a visitor at church, being kind to a refugee family in your community, or opening your home to a friend who needs a place to stay. You never know whom you might be welcoming.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Remember the Prisoners**

In the first century, prisoners depended on friends and family for food and clothing. Visiting them could be risky, because it identified you with them. The writer says to remember them as if you were in chains too. Today, many Christians around the world are imprisoned for their faith, and many other people in prisons need friendship and hope. Some churches run prison

ministries. You can pray for persecuted believers, write letters through organizations that support them, and remember that Jesus said visiting prisoners is like visiting Him (Matthew 25:36).

Everyone should honor marriage and keep sex within marriage, because God will judge those who commit adultery and sexual immorality.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Sex and Marriage**

The writer's words are clear: God designed sex for marriage, and He takes sexual faithfulness seriously. That's a countercultural message in a world that often treats sex casually. But notice that the writer says marriage should be honored. God isn't against sex; He created it, and He thinks it's good. He wants to protect it, and you. If you've already made mistakes in this area, remember everything Hebrews has said about grace and forgiveness. God offers you a fresh start. And if anyone has ever pressured or forced you into something sexual, that's not your sin. Tell a trusted adult.

Don't let love of money control your life. Be satisfied with what you have, since God has promised that He will never leave you or abandon you. That's a quotation from Deuteronomy 31:6. So we can confidently say, with Psalm 118, that the Lord is our helper, so we won't be afraid. What can mere people do to us?

BACKGROUND CHECK **Never Leave You**

Why connect contentment with God's promise never to leave? Because we often chase money and possessions out of fear: fear of not having enough, fear of being left out, fear of the future. The writer says that if God is with you, you already have what you need most. In Greek, the promise in verse 5 uses several negatives for emphasis, something like: I will never, no never, leave you; I will never, ever abandon you. Whatever happens, He'll be there.

Remember your leaders, the writer says, who taught you God's word. Think about how their lives turned out, and imitate their faith.

Then comes one of the best-known verses in Hebrews, and the Key Verse for this chapter: "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever."

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **The Same**
>
> Everything changes. Friends move away. Trends come and go. Your body changes. Your feelings change from hour to hour. Even leaders you respect, like the ones mentioned in verse 7, eventually die. But Jesus doesn't change. The Jesus who healed the sick, welcomed sinners, and died for the world is the same Jesus who knows you today. His love for you won't change tomorrow. You can count on Him.

Don't get carried away by all sorts of strange teachings, the writer says. Grace is what strengthens our hearts, not ceremonial food rules, which don't help the people who follow them.

The writer says that we have an altar that the priests who serve at the tabernacle aren't allowed to eat from. On the Day of Atonement, the bodies of the animals sacrificed for sin were burned outside the camp. In the same way, Jesus suffered outside the city gate of Jerusalem, so that His own blood would make His people holy. So let's go out to Him, outside the camp, and share the shame He experienced. This world isn't our permanent city. We're looking forward to the city that's coming.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Outside the Camp**
>
> Jesus was crucified outside Jerusalem's walls, in a place for criminals and outcasts. The writer invites his readers to go to Him there. For the first readers, that may have meant leaving behind the safety and respect of their old community and accepting the disgrace of being associated with a

crucified man. For you, it might mean being willing to be unpopular, misunderstood, or left out because you follow Jesus. It's also a reminder that Jesus is found with outsiders. If you want to find Him, look among the people others reject.

Through Jesus, the writer says, let's always offer God a sacrifice of praise, words that openly honor His name. And don't forget to do good and share with others, because God is pleased with those kinds of sacrifices.

BACKGROUND CHECK **New Sacrifices**

The animal sacrifices are over. Jesus offered the final sacrifice for sin. But the writer says there are still sacrifices Christians can offer: praise, and doing good, and sharing. These aren't ways of paying for sin. They're ways of saying thank you. Singing, praying, thanking God out loud, helping someone in need, and sharing what you have are all ways of worshiping.

Trust your leaders and follow their direction, because they watch over you, knowing they'll have to give an account to God. Let them do their work with joy, not with groaning, because that wouldn't help you.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Following Leaders**

The writer asks his readers to trust and support their church leaders, who care for their souls and will answer to God for how they lead. Good leaders deserve respect and cooperation. Making their job miserable hurts everyone. At the same time, the rest of the Bible makes clear that no leader is above God's word, and that leaders who abuse their position must be held accountable. Following leaders never means doing something God forbids or keeping quiet about abuse. Healthy churches have leaders who serve, and members who support them.

Then the writer asks for prayer. He's confident that his conscience is clear, and his goal is to live honorably in everything. He

especially asks them to pray that he'll be able to come back to them soon.

Then comes a magnificent blessing, which also closes this book. The writer prays that the God of peace, who raised Jesus, the great Shepherd, from the dead by the blood of an everlasting covenant, will equip you with everything good to do His will, and work in us what pleases Him, through Jesus, to whom be glory forever. Amen.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Great Shepherd**

This is the only place in Hebrews where the writer explicitly mentions Jesus' resurrection, though he's assumed it all along, since Jesus is seated at God's right hand. And he calls Jesus the great Shepherd. Jesus called Himself the good shepherd who lays down His life for the sheep (John 10:11). The God who raised Jesus from the dead is the same God who will equip you for everything He asks you to do. You don't have to do it in your own strength.

Finally, the writer urges them to put up with his word of exhortation, adding that he has written only briefly. He shares news that Timothy has been released, presumably from prison, and that if Timothy comes soon, they'll visit together. He sends greetings to all their leaders and all God's people, and passes on greetings from those from Italy. And he closes with a blessing of grace for them all.

BACKGROUND CHECK **A Short Letter?**

Hebrews takes about an hour to read aloud. The writer calls it brief. Maybe he meant that he could have said much more, which is probably true, given how many times he says he doesn't have time to explain everything (5:11; 9:5; 11:32). The mention of Timothy is one of the few personal details in the letter, and it's one reason some people connected the letter with Paul. It shows that the writer was part of the same network of early Christian leaders.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Don't Quit**

That's the message of Hebrews in two words. Jesus is better than anything else you could turn to. He's greater than angels, greater than Moses, the perfect high priest, the final sacrifice, the guarantee of a better covenant. He understands you. He prays for you. He has opened the way to God. So hold on. Draw near. Encourage each other. Run your race with your eyes on Him. And don't quit.

KEY VERSE

Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.

Hebrews 13:8 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Which of the practical instructions in this chapter is hardest for you to live out? Why?
2. What would it look like for you to go to Jesus outside the camp, to people others reject?
3. How does knowing that Jesus never changes help you when everything else does?
4. Looking back over all of Hebrews, what's one thing you want to remember?

TRY THIS *Pick one practical instruction from this chapter and do it this week: welcome a stranger, pray for a persecuted Christian, write a thank-you note to a leader, or give something to someone in need.*

THE END (AND THE BEGINNING)

Now What? The Bottom Line

You've just read the whole sermon called Hebrews. Its message is that Jesus is better than anything else we could trust, because He's the Son of God who became one of us, the high priest who offered Himself as the final sacrifice for sin.

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

1 God has spoken.

God made you, and He wants you to know Him. He has spoken most clearly through His Son, Jesus.

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 a holy 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 is the final sacrifice.

Jesus, our high priest, offered Himself on the cross for our sins, once and for all, and rose again. The way into God's presence is open.

> *But he has appeared once for all at the culmination of the ages to do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself.* **Hebrews 9:26 (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 your eyes fixed on Him.

> *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 come to God with confidence, 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, my high priest, offered Himself once for all for my sins. 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 fix my eyes on Him and keep running. 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 Hebrews straight through, maybe a chapter a day. Then read James, the next letter in the New Testament, about faith that works.

Find your people. Don't give up meeting together, Hebrews says. Get connected to a church where the Bible is taught and Jesus is honored. Ask about being baptized.

Talk to God every day. Come to Him with confidence. Jesus understands what you're going through, and He's praying for you.

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 Hebrews is right, God has spoken to us through His Son, and it's worth finding out for yourself.

Now may the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep, equip you with everything good for doing

his will, and may he work in us what is pleasing to him,
through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen.

Hebrews 13:20–21 (NIV)

THE LETTER OF JAMES

The King's Wisdom

James, Unfiltered

For teens who think they've heard it all

BILL McLEOD

Papa Bill Books

The King's Wisdom: The Letter of James, 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. James might be the most practical book in the Bible, and he'd probably say: fine, but now go get something done.

James doesn't waste time. His letter is short, five chapters, and it hits like a series of punches. Do you say you have faith? Show me. Do you say you love God? Watch your mouth. Do you treat rich kids better than poor kids? Stop it. Are you going through hard times? Find the joy in them. Are you making big plans? Remember you're a puff of smoke.

Some people find James uncomfortable, and that's kind of the point. He's not interested in religion that stays in your head or only shows up on Sunday. He wants faith that changes how you talk, how you treat people, how you spend your money, and how you handle pain.

The writer was very likely James, the brother of Jesus. He grew up in the same house as Jesus, didn't believe in Him at first, and later became the leader of the church in Jerusalem. You'll hear echoes of Jesus' teaching all through his letter.

So get ready to be challenged. Not to feel guilty, but to grow. James believes your faith is meant to be real, and real faith works. Let's go.

How This Book Works

This book walks through all five chapters of James, in order, one chapter of this book for each chapter of the letter. Each one explains what James is saying in plain language and adds background about the early church in Jerusalem and the world of the first readers.

Before chapter 1, a section called Setting the Scene explains which James wrote this letter, what we know about him and his death, when the letter may have been written, and how closely it echoes Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. 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 James 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, Paul's letters, and Hebrews, 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 James 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).

James 2:14–26, on faith and works, has been discussed for centuries, especially alongside Paul's letters. I've explained the apparent tension fairly, including Martin Luther's famous criticism, and described how Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant traditions understand the relationship between faith and works, without endorsing one tradition's view. You may want to talk with your teen about your own church's teaching.

I've also described the debates over which James wrote the letter and when, and the different traditions about how James was related to Jesus. The instructions about anointing the sick in 5:14–16 are explained with the main views, and with a clear statement that

prayer and medical care go together; no reader should take this book as a reason to avoid medical treatment.

Several passages are highlighted as especially relevant for teens: joy and wisdom in trials (1:2–5), hearing and doing (1:22), favoritism (2:1–13), the power of words, applied to social media and gossip (3:1–12), drawing near to God (4:7–8), and holding our plans loosely (4:13–15).

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 a faith that is real enough to change Monday morning.

Grace and peace,

Bill McLeod

Papa Bill Books

BEFORE YOU OPEN THE LETTER

Setting the Scene

Which James?

James was one of the most common names among Jews in the first century. In Hebrew and Greek, it's actually the name Jacob; the English form James came later through Latin and French. The New Testament mentions at least four men named James. There was James the son of Zebedee, one of the twelve apostles and the brother of John, who was executed by King Herod Agrippa around AD 44 (Acts 12:1–2), probably too early to have written this letter. There was James the son of Alphaeus, another apostle we know almost nothing about. There was a James who was the father of an apostle named Judas, not Iscariot (Luke 6:16). And there was James the brother of Jesus.

The writer simply calls himself James, a servant of both God and Jesus. He doesn't explain which James he is, which suggests he was so well known that he didn't need to. Since the early centuries, most Christians have believed he was James the brother of Jesus.

The Brother Who Didn't Believe

The Gospels tell us that Jesus had brothers named James, Joseph, Simon, and Judas, and also sisters (Mark 6:3). During Jesus' ministry, His brothers didn't believe in Him (John 7:5). At one point, His family even tried to take Him home, thinking He had lost His mind (Mark 3:21). Imagine growing up with Jesus, and then thinking your big brother had gone crazy.

But something changed. Paul says that after Jesus rose from the dead, He appeared to James (1 Corinthians 15:7). After that, James is with the believers in Jerusalem, praying with the apostles (Acts 1:14). Within a few years, he had become one of the main leaders of the Jerusalem church. Paul calls him one of the pillars of the church (Galatians 2:9). When the early church met to decide whether Gentile believers had to follow the law of Moses, it was James who summed up the decision (Acts 15:13–21).

Brother, Half-Brother, or Cousin?

Christians understand Jesus' brothers in different ways. Most Protestants believe that James was a younger son of Mary and Joseph, born after Jesus, and so a half-brother, since Jesus had no human father. Orthodox Christians, and many in the early church, believe that Mary remained a virgin throughout her life, and that James was a son of Joseph from an earlier marriage, making him an older stepbrother. Catholic tradition, following the scholar Jerome around AD 400, has often understood brothers in a wider sense, meaning close relatives such as cousins, since the words for brother in Hebrew and Aramaic could include relatives. Whichever view is right, James knew Jesus as family, and that makes his faith in Jesus remarkable.

James the Just

Early Christian writers remember James for his deep prayer life and his commitment to living rightly. They called him James the Just, or James the Righteous. A second-century writer named Hegesippus, quoted by the historian Eusebius, says that James spent so much time on his knees in prayer that they became as hard as a camel's. That may be an exaggeration, but it shows how he was

remembered. He was respected even by many Jews in Jerusalem who didn't follow Jesus.

The Death of James

We know how James died from a surprising source: Josephus, a Jewish historian who wasn't a Christian. In his Antiquities of the Jews, written in the 90s AD, Josephus describes what happened in AD 62. The Roman governor Festus had died, and his replacement, Albinus, hadn't arrived yet. During this gap, the high priest Ananus called a meeting of the Jewish council and brought before it the brother of Jesus, who was called Christ, whose name was James, along with some others. He accused them of breaking the law and had them stoned. Josephus says that many people in Jerusalem were upset by this, and that Ananus was removed from office as a result.

Hegesippus tells a more dramatic version, in which James was thrown from the temple and then stoned and beaten to death, while praying for his attackers. Historians generally consider Josephus' account more reliable. Either way, James was killed for his faith around AD 62. Josephus' passage is also one of the earliest references to Jesus outside the New Testament.

When Was It Written?

Scholars disagree about the date. Many who believe James the brother of Jesus wrote the letter date it early, possibly in the 40s AD, before the church council in Acts 15 around AD 49. If so, James could be the earliest book in the New Testament. They point to the letter's very Jewish feel; it even calls the church gathering by a word usually used for a synagogue (2:2). It doesn't mention the debates about circumcision and Gentile believers that dominated the late

40s and 50s. Others who accept James as the author date it later in his life, closer to AD 62, perhaps in response to people who had misunderstood Paul's teaching about faith.

Some scholars think the letter was written after James' death, by someone writing in his name, perhaps late in the first century. They point to its polished Greek, which seems unusual for a Galilean villager, and to the fact that it took a long time to be widely accepted; the historian Eusebius, in the fourth century, still listed it among the books some people questioned. Others answer that Galilee was a bilingual region where Greek was widely spoken, that James had decades to improve his Greek, and that he may have used a skilled helper. Christians on all sides agree that the letter belongs in the Bible. In this book, I call the author James.

Who Were the Readers?

James addresses his letter to the twelve tribes, scattered across the world. That phrase originally described the Jewish people living outside the land of Israel, the Diaspora. James probably means Jewish believers in Jesus who lived in many different places. Acts says that after Stephen was killed, many believers fled from Jerusalem and scattered to other regions (Acts 8:1; 11:19). Some of them may have been among James' first readers. Many were poor, some were being exploited by wealthy landowners, and they were facing many kinds of trials.

The Proverbs of the New Testament

James doesn't read like Paul's letters, with long, carefully built arguments. It reads more like the book of Proverbs, a collection of short, punchy sayings about how to live wisely. In just 108 verses, James gives around fifty commands. He jumps from topic to topic,

but keeps returning to a few big themes: trials, wisdom, words, wealth and poverty, and faith that shows up in action. He also uses vivid pictures from everyday life: waves, flowers, mirrors, horses, ships, forest fires, springs, fig trees, mist, moths, rust, and farmers waiting for rain.

James and the Sermon on the Mount

James mentions Jesus by name only twice (1:1; 2:1). But his letter is full of Jesus' teaching, especially the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5–7). Here are some of the echoes. Joy in trials: Matthew 5:11–12 and James 1:2. Ask, and God will give: Matthew 7:7 and James 1:5. Hearing and doing: Matthew 7:24–27 and James 1:22. The poor inheriting the kingdom: Matthew 5:3 and James 2:5. Mercy: Matthew 5:7 and James 2:13. Peacemakers: Matthew 5:9 and James 3:18. Don't judge: Matthew 7:1 and James 4:11–12. Treasures destroyed by moths and rust: Matthew 6:19 and James 5:2–3. Let your yes be yes: Matthew 5:34–37 and James 5:12. James doesn't quote Jesus word for word. He seems to have absorbed His teaching so deeply that it comes out naturally, the way you might use your parents' sayings without thinking about it. Maybe he heard some of it at the family dinner table.

Why James Matters

Some people have struggled with James because it says relatively little about Jesus' death and resurrection, and because it seems to disagree with Paul about faith and works. We'll look at that question carefully in chapter 2. But James fills an important place in the Bible. He reminds us that the gospel isn't just about what we believe. It's about who we become. Grace changes everything,

including how we treat the poor, how we speak, and how we handle money and trouble.

The Map

Chapter 1: Joy in trials, wisdom from God, where temptation comes from, and hearing versus doing.

Chapter 2: Favoritism toward the rich, and why faith without deeds is dead.

Chapter 3: The power of the tongue, and two kinds of wisdom.

Chapter 4: Where fights come from, drawing near to God, and making plans with humility.

Chapter 5: A warning to the rich, patience in suffering, and the power of prayer.

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CHAPTER 1

Joy, Wisdom, and Mirrors

James 1

James introduces himself in just a few words. He doesn't mention that he's Jesus' brother, or that he leads the church in Jerusalem. He calls himself a servant, or more literally a slave, of God and of Jesus, whom he calls the Lord Jesus Christ.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Humble Brother**
>
> Think about this. If your older brother were the Son of God, you might be tempted to mention it. James doesn't. He calls himself a servant. Maybe he remembered how he had once doubted Jesus. Maybe he understood that being related to Jesus didn't make him more important than anyone else. Jesus Himself said that whoever does God's will is His brother and sister (Mark 3:35). And notice that James calls his own brother the Lord Jesus Christ. That's an amazing thing for a sibling to say.

Then James jumps right into a surprising command. When you face all kinds of trials, he says, count it as pure joy. Why? Because when your faith is tested, it develops endurance. And when endurance has done its full work, you'll be mature and complete, missing nothing.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Joy in Trials?**
>
> This sounds crazy at first. Be happy when bad things happen? James isn't saying that pain is fun, or that you should pretend you're fine when you're not. He's talking about a deeper kind of joy that comes from knowing God is

using even hard things to make you stronger. Think about training for a sport or learning an instrument. The hard practices are where you grow. James says trials are like that for your faith. The pain is real. But it isn't pointless.

BACKGROUND CHECK **When It's Not a Trial, It's Trauma**

Some hard things in life aren't just tests or challenges. They're deep wounds: abuse, the death of someone you love, serious illness, a family falling apart, or depression. James isn't telling you to smile through those. The Bible is full of people who wept, grieved, and cried out to God in pain, including Jesus. If you're going through something that feels overwhelming, it's okay not to be okay. Talk to God honestly, and talk to a trusted adult or counselor. God can bring good out of the worst things, but He doesn't ask you to pretend they don't hurt.

Next, James talks about wisdom. If you don't know what to do, he says, ask God. He gives generously to everyone who asks, and He doesn't scold you for asking. He'll give you wisdom.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Ask for Wisdom**

Wisdom isn't the same as intelligence. You can be smart and still make foolish choices. Wisdom is knowing how to live well, how to apply what you know to real situations. James says God loves to give it. He doesn't roll His eyes or make you feel stupid for not knowing. When you're facing a hard decision about friends, school, relationships, or your future, ask God for wisdom. Then read the Bible, listen to wise people, and pay attention to what you learn.

But when you ask, James says, trust God. Don't be like someone who's constantly unsure, tossed back and forth like an ocean wave pushed by the wind. Someone like that is divided inside, unsteady in everything.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Double-Minded**

James uses a word that literally means two-souled. It describes someone who's split inside, wanting God and wanting their own way at the same time,

trusting God and not trusting Him. That's different from having questions or doubts. Honest questions are normal, and God welcomes them. James is talking about someone who keeps one foot in and one foot out, never really committing. Picture a surfer trying to stand on two boards at once. It doesn't end well.

Then James addresses rich and poor. Believers who are poor should celebrate their high position, because in God's eyes they're honored. And the rich should celebrate their humiliation, because their wealth won't last. Like a wildflower that dries up in the scorching sun, rich people will fade away, even in the middle of their busy lives.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Upside Down**

James is turning the world's values upside down. Our culture says that rich, famous, and good-looking people are the most important. James says that in God's kingdom, the poor are lifted up and the rich are brought low. That doesn't mean money is evil or poverty is good. It means that money can't buy what matters most, and it won't last. Whatever your family has or doesn't have, your worth comes from God.

God blesses the person who keeps going under pressure, James says. When that person has passed the test, they'll receive the crown of life, the reward God has promised everyone who loves Him.

Then James turns to temptation. When you're tempted, don't say that God is tempting you. God can't be tempted by evil, and He doesn't tempt anyone. Instead, temptation comes from inside us. Our own desires drag us away and lure us, like bait on a hook. Desire gets pregnant and gives birth to sin. And when sin grows up, it gives birth to death.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Trials and Temptations**

In Greek, the same word can mean trial or temptation. The difference is in where it's going. A trial is something God allows to make you stronger. A temptation is a pull toward sin, and it comes from your own desires, not from God. The same situation can be both. Losing a friend can be a trial that teaches you to trust God, or a temptation to become bitter. James wants you to see that God is always on your side. He never sets you up to fail.

BACKGROUND CHECK **How Sin Grows**

James describes sin like a life cycle. It starts with a desire. Then the desire hooks you. Then it produces an action. Then, if it's left to grow, it leads to death. Think about how that works. A little curiosity turns into a habit. A little resentment turns into hatred. A little lie turns into a web of lies. The best time to deal with sin is at the beginning, before it grows. Ask God for help the moment you feel the pull.

Don't be fooled, James says. Every good thing in your life comes from God, the Father who made the lights in the sky. Unlike the sun and moon, which move and cast changing shadows, God never changes. He chose to give us new life through His true message, so that we would be the first of His new creation, like the first fruits of a harvest.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Every Good Gift**

Look around at the good things in your life: friends, family, laughter, music, food, sunsets, a warm bed. James says every one of them is a gift from God. That's worth remembering when you're tempted to think God is holding out on you. He isn't the problem. He's the source of everything good. A thankful heart is one of the best defenses against temptation.

Then James gives some of the most practical advice in the Bible. Be fast to hear, careful to talk, and slow to lose your temper. Human anger doesn't produce the kind of right living God wants.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Quick, Slow, Slow**

Most of us have this backward. We're quick to speak, quick to get angry, and slow to listen. Think about the last argument you had, in person or online. How much of it was listening? James' advice works everywhere: with parents, siblings, friends, teachers, and in comment sections. Before you reply, listen. Before you post, pause. Before you blow up, breathe. Anger isn't always wrong; Jesus got angry at injustice. But most of our anger isn't like that. It's selfish, and it makes things worse.

So get rid of all the moral filth and evil around you, James says, and humbly welcome the message God has planted deep inside you, the message with the power to save.

Then comes the heart of this chapter. Don't just listen to God's word, James says, and fool yourself. Do what it says. Someone who hears the word but doesn't do it is like a person who looks in a mirror, walks away, and immediately forgets what they look like.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Mirror**

Imagine looking in a mirror and seeing that you have food stuck in your teeth and your hair is a mess, and then walking away without doing anything about it. That's ridiculous. But James says that's what we do when we read the Bible, hear a sermon, or go to youth group, and then don't change anything. God's word shows us who we really are. The point isn't just to look. It's to act.

But the person who looks carefully into God's perfect law, the law that sets people free, and keeps at it, not forgetting but doing, will find God's blessing in their actions.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Law That Sets You Free**

James calls God's law the perfect law of freedom. That might seem strange. Don't laws restrict freedom? Think of it this way. A train is most free when it's on its tracks. A fish is most free in water. People are most free when they live

the way God designed them to live. God's commands aren't a cage. They're a guide to the kind of life that actually works.

Finally, James says that if you think you're religious, but you can't control your tongue, you're fooling yourself, and your religion is worthless. The kind of religion God the Father accepts as pure is this: caring for orphans and widows in their trouble, and keeping yourself from being stained by the world.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Real Religion**

James' definition of religion is short and practical. It has two parts. One is looking outward: caring for the most vulnerable people around you. In the ancient world, orphans and widows often had no one to protect or provide for them. The other is looking inward: keeping your heart clean. Some people focus only on the first and forget personal holiness. Others focus only on the second and forget the poor. James says you need both. Who are the orphans and widows in your world? Maybe a kid without a dad, an elderly neighbor living alone, or a family new to the country.

KEY VERSE

Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves.
Do what it says.

James 1:22 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. What's a trial you've been through that made you stronger? How did you see that at the time?
2. What's a decision you need wisdom for right now? Have you asked God about it?
3. Are you more often quick to listen or quick to speak? How could you change that?
4. What's one thing you've heard from the Bible recently that you haven't done yet?

TRY THIS *Each day this week, read a short passage of the Bible and write down one thing it asks you to do. Then do it that day. At the end of the week, look back at what you did.*

CHAPTER 2

Faith That Works

James 2

James starts this chapter with a scenario. Suppose two people walk into your church meeting. One is wearing expensive clothes and gold rings. The other is poor and wearing dirty, worn-out clothes. You give the rich person the best seat and tell the poor person to stand in the back or sit on the floor. James asks: haven't you just made yourselves into judges with evil motives?

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **The Best Seat**
>
> In the ancient world, where you sat showed how important you were. People expected the rich to get the best seats at dinners, in theaters, and even in synagogues. James says the church must be different. There's no VIP section in God's family. That's still a challenge today. Do we treat people differently because of how they dress, what they drive, how popular they are, where they live, or what they look like? At school, it might look like making room at the table for the popular kid, but not for the new kid who doesn't fit in.

Listen, James says. Hasn't God chosen people who are poor in the world's eyes to be wealthy in faith and heirs of His kingdom? But you've insulted the poor. And isn't it the rich who are oppressing you, dragging you into court, and slandering the name of Jesus?

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **God's Heart for the Poor**
>
> All through the Bible, God shows special care for the poor and vulnerable. He commanded Israel to leave the edges of their fields for the poor to harvest

(Leviticus 19:9–10). The prophets condemned people who got rich by crushing the poor (Amos 5:11–12). Jesus was born to a poor family and said He came to preach good news to the poor (Luke 4:18). Many of the first Christians were poor, and some wealthy people were mistreating them. That doesn't mean all rich people are bad or all poor people are good. It means God doesn't measure people by their bank accounts, and neither should we.

James says that if you truly obey Scripture's royal law, which tells you to love the people around you the way you love yourself, you're doing well. The NIV footnote traces it to Leviticus 19:18. But if you play favorites, you're sinning, and the law convicts you.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Royal Law**

Why does James call the command to love your neighbor the royal law? Maybe because it's the law of the King, Jesus, who said it was the second greatest commandment (Mark 12:31). Or because it's the law that rules over all the others. Every command about how to treat people is really an application of this one. If you love the people around you as you love yourself, you won't lie to them, steal from them, gossip about them, or look down on them.

James explains that if you keep the whole law but fail at one point, you're guilty of breaking it all. The same God who said not to commit adultery also said not to murder. If you don't commit adultery but you do murder, you're still a lawbreaker.

BACKGROUND CHECK **One Broken Link**

Think of the law like a chain holding you up over a cliff. It doesn't matter whether you break one link or ten. Either way, you fall. James' point is that nobody can say, I'm basically a good person, I only struggle with one thing. Favoritism might seem small, but it's still breaking God's law. Everyone needs mercy.

So, James says, speak and act like people who will one day face judgment under the law of freedom. Anyone who refuses to show mercy will face judgment with no mercy. But mercy wins over judgment.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Mercy Wins**
>
> This is one of the most beautiful sentences in James. Jesus said the merciful will be shown mercy (Matthew 5:7), and that we should forgive others as God forgives us (Matthew 6:12–15). James says that people who receive God's mercy should show mercy to others. When you're merciful, you're showing that you understand how much mercy you've received.

Then James turns to one of the most famous and debated passages in the New Testament. What good is it, he asks, if someone says they have faith but has no actions to show for it? Can that kind of faith save them?

He gives an example. Suppose a brother or sister in the church doesn't have clothes or enough food. And you say to them, have a nice day, stay warm and eat well, but you don't actually give them anything. What good is that? Faith works the same way. On its own, with no action, it's dead.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Thoughts and Prayers**
>
> James' example sounds a lot like people today who say, I'll be praying for you, and then do nothing. Prayer is powerful, and James will say so in chapter 5. But if someone is hungry and you can feed them, praying isn't enough. Real faith rolls up its sleeves. It shows up with a meal, a ride, a coat, or a helping hand.

Someone might say, you have faith, and I have deeds. James answers: try showing me faith with no deeds at all, and I'll let my deeds do the showing. You believe there's one God? Great. Demons believe it too, and they tremble.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Demons Believe Too**

James is making a point that might sting. Believing that God exists isn't enough. Even demons know God is real. In the Gospels, they recognized Jesus before almost anyone else (Mark 1:24). But they don't love Him or follow Him. Real faith isn't just agreeing with facts about God. It's trusting Him with your life, and that always shows up in how you live.

Then James points to Abraham. Wasn't Abraham declared right with God because of his actions, when he placed Isaac on the altar? His trust and his obedience were a team, and his obedience brought his faith to completion. That fulfilled the Scripture about Abraham trusting God and being counted righteous, and he became known as God's friend. The NIV footnote traces the quote to Genesis 15:6.

James draws his conclusion: "You see that a person is considered righteous by what they do and not by faith alone" (2:24). He gives another example: Rahab, who welcomed the Israelite spies and helped them escape. She was counted righteous for her actions too. Then he ends with a picture: "As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead" (2:26).

BACKGROUND CHECK **Paul and James**

Here's the puzzle. Paul writes that a person is justified by faith apart from works of the law (Romans 3:28), and uses Abraham as his main example, quoting Genesis 15:6 (Romans 4:1–5). James uses the same verse and the same Abraham, and says the opposite seems true: works count, and faith alone doesn't. Do they contradict each other? Many readers have thought so. Here are some things to notice. Paul and James seem to use key words differently. When Paul says works, he usually means the works of the law, especially things like circumcision and food laws that marked people as Jewish, and any attempt to earn God's approval. When James says deeds, he means acts of love, like feeding the hungry. When Paul talks about faith, he means a living trust in Jesus. The faith James criticizes is mere belief, the kind

demons have. And Paul points to Genesis 15, when Abraham first believed God's promise, while James points to Genesis 22, many years later, when Abraham's faith showed itself in action. Paul himself says that what matters is faith expressing itself through love (Galatians 5:6), and that we're saved for good works (Ephesians 2:10). Many readers conclude that Paul and James are fighting different problems: Paul is fighting people who try to earn salvation, and James is fighting people who think belief without a changed life is enough.

BACKGROUND CHECK **An Epistle of Straw?**

Martin Luther, the German reformer who started the Protestant Reformation in 1517, struggled with James. Luther's great discovery was that we are justified by faith alone, through God's grace, not by our works. James 2:24 seemed to contradict that. In the preface to his German translation of the New Testament in 1522, Luther called James a right strawy epistle compared with books like John, Romans, and Galatians, because he felt it didn't preach Christ clearly. He even placed it near the end of his New Testament. But Luther never removed James from the Bible, he preached and quoted from it, and the strawy comment was dropped from later editions of his preface. Many Lutherans and other Protestants today value James highly.

BACKGROUND CHECK **How Christians Put It Together**

Christian traditions explain the relationship between faith and works in different ways. Here's a brief, simplified summary of each, in its own terms. Many Protestants teach that we are justified, declared right with God, by faith alone, but that the faith that justifies is never alone. As the reformer John Calvin put it, it always produces good works. In this view, James is talking about how true faith is shown and proven, while Paul is talking about how a person is made right with God. The Catholic Church teaches that justification is God's work of grace, received in faith and baptism, by which God both forgives and inwardly renews a person; that faith working through love is what justifies; and that good works done by God's grace are real and necessary, though no one can earn the first gift of grace. In 1999, Catholic and Lutheran leaders signed a joint statement saying they share a basic

understanding that we are saved by grace alone, through faith in Christ, not because of our merits, while noting remaining differences. Orthodox Christians often describe salvation as a lifelong journey of being united with God and transformed into His likeness, in which God's grace and human response work together, and they tend to see Paul and James as two sides of the same truth. All three traditions agree on a lot: salvation is God's gift of grace, faith in Jesus is essential, and real faith changes how we live.

KEY VERSE

In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.

James 2:17 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Where do you see favoritism at your school or church? Have you ever been on the receiving end of it?
2. What does it mean that mercy wins over judgment?
3. How would you explain the relationship between faith and works to a friend?
4. What's one way your faith could show up in action this week?

TRY THIS *Find a practical way to meet someone's physical need this week. Donate clothes, help with a food drive, buy lunch for someone who can't afford it, or help a neighbor. Then notice how it affects your faith.*

CHAPTER 3

Taming the Tongue

James 3

James opens this chapter with a caution for anyone eager to be a teacher. Only a few of you should take that role, he says, since God holds teachers to a higher standard. Every one of us trips up, over and over. A person who never once said the wrong thing would be mature enough to rein in everything else about themselves too.

> BACKGROUND CHECK **Teachers Beware**
>
> In the early church, teachers were highly respected. Some people wanted the title without the responsibility. James says that teaching is serious, because teachers shape what other people believe and how they live. That's true for pastors and youth leaders, but also for anyone with influence. If you have followers online, younger siblings who copy you, or friends who listen to your opinions, you're teaching too. Your words carry weight.

Then James paints three pictures of how powerful our words are. First, a bit in a horse's mouth: a little strip of metal lets a rider guide an animal many times their size. Second, a ship's rudder: even a massive vessel driven by fierce winds goes wherever the captain points that small rudder. Our tongues are tiny too, James says, yet they brag about huge things.

Third, a wildfire. A single spark can burn down an entire forest. Speech works the same way, James says. It's a flame, a little universe of wickedness sitting inside us. It can stain someone

through and through, setting the whole course of a life ablaze, and the fire itself comes from hell.

BACKGROUND CHECK **One Spark**

Anyone who's seen news footage of wildfires in California or Australia knows how fast a small flame can become a disaster. A campfire left burning, a spark from a power line, or a single cigarette can destroy thousands of homes. Words work the same way. One comment can wreck a friendship. One rumor can ruin a reputation. One post can go viral and follow someone for years. James isn't exaggerating. Words can destroy.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Gehenna**

The word James uses for hell is Gehenna. It comes from the Valley of Hinnom, outside Jerusalem, where in the Old Testament some kings of Judah had sacrificed children to false gods (2 Kings 23:10; Jeremiah 7:31). Later, Jewish writers used its name as a picture of God's final judgment. Jesus used the word often (Matthew 5:22). James is saying that destructive words get their fire from the worst possible source.

People have tamed all kinds of animals, James says: birds, reptiles, sea creatures. But nobody can tame the tongue. It's restless and evil, full of deadly poison.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Can't Be Tamed?**

If no one can tame the tongue, should we just give up? No. James is being realistic. You can't control your words by willpower alone. You need God's help. Jesus said that what comes out of the mouth reveals what's in the heart (Luke 6:45). So the best way to change your words is to let God change your heart. Pray about your words. Ask God to set a guard over your mouth, as the psalmist did (Psalm 141:3).

James notices something strange. We use one mouth to bless God our Father, and then use that very mouth to curse human beings, who were made to look like God. Blessing and curses come pouring

from one place. That's not okay, he says. Does a single spring gush both sweet and bitter water? Does a fig tree produce olives, or a grapevine produce figs? A salty spring can't give fresh water either.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Sunday Praise, Monday Trash Talk**

James points out something many of us do without noticing. We sing worship songs at church on Sunday, and then we trash-talk people at school on Monday. We pray before lunch, and then we gossip during lunch. James says that doesn't make sense. Every person you talk about is made in God's image (Genesis 1:27). When you insult them, you're insulting someone God made and loves. It's like saying you love an artist while ripping up their paintings.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Tongue Online**

James never saw social media. But everything he says about the tongue applies to keyboards and phone screens too, maybe even more. Online, it's easy to say things we'd never say in person. We can hide behind screens or anonymous accounts. Words spread faster and further, and they can last forever in screenshots. Some questions to ask before you post, comment, or text: Is it true? Is it kind? Is it necessary? Would I say this to their face? Would I be okay with my parents, my future boss, or Jesus reading it? If someone is being bullied online, you can refuse to join in, report it, reach out to the person being targeted, or tell a trusted adult. And if you're the one being targeted, please tell someone. You don't have to handle it alone.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Gossip**

Gossip is talking about people behind their backs, especially spreading things that are private, unkind, or untrue. It can feel harmless, even fun. It makes us feel included, and it's interesting to know what's going on. But Proverbs says gossip separates close friends (Proverbs 16:28). Here's a simple test: if you wouldn't say it with the person standing next to you, don't say it. If someone starts gossiping to you, you can change the subject, say something kind about the person, or just walk away. And remember that anyone who gossips to you will probably gossip about you.

In the second half of the chapter, James describes two kinds of wisdom. Do you think you're wise? Then prove it with a good life, he says, with actions done in the gentle, humble spirit that real wisdom produces.

But if bitter envy and me-first ambition fill your heart, stop boasting and stop covering up what's true. That kind of cleverness isn't from God above. It belongs to this world. It's unspiritual and even comes from demons. Where envy and selfishness live, chaos and all sorts of evil live too.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Jealousy and Ambition**

Jealousy and selfish ambition are everywhere, especially when we spend hours seeing everyone else's best moments online. Someone has better clothes, a better phone, more followers, better grades, or a better relationship. It's easy to become bitter. Selfish ambition is wanting to get ahead no matter who you push down. James says these attitudes create chaos in friendships, families, teams, and churches. Ambition isn't wrong in itself. Working hard to do your best is good. The problem is when it's selfish, when it's all about me.

Heaven's wisdom is different. Its first mark is purity. Then it loves peace, it's gentle, it listens to reason, it overflows with mercy and good fruit, it plays no favorites, and it doesn't fake anything. People who make peace are like farmers sowing peace, and what grows from those seeds is righteousness.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Two Kinds of Smart**

James describes two kinds of wisdom. One is the world's: clever, competitive, and self-focused. It might win arguments and get you ahead, but it leaves a trail of broken relationships. The other is God's: pure, peaceful, gentle, open to reason, merciful, and sincere. It might not always win, but it makes life better for everyone around it. Look at James' list again. It's a good

description of Jesus. It's also a good list to check yourself against. Which of these qualities do you already have? Which do you need to ask God for?

KEY VERSE

Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this should not be.

James 3:10 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Can you think of a time when a few words, said by you or to you, caused a lot of damage?
2. Which is harder for you: controlling what you say in person, or what you post and text?
3. How can you tell whether someone has worldly wisdom or God's wisdom?
4. Which quality of heavenly wisdom (3:17) do you most want to grow in?

TRY THIS *Go on a gossip and put-down fast for one week. No gossip, no insults, and no sarcastic put-downs, online or in person. Each time you catch yourself, stop and say something kind instead. At the end of the week, notice what changed.*

CHAPTER 4

Come Near to God

James 4

James opens this chapter with a question. Why do you people keep fighting and arguing? Isn't it because of cravings that are at war inside you? You want something and can't have it, so you're ready to kill for it. You're jealous of what others have and can't get it, so you start battles.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Where Fights Come From**
>
> James says conflicts on the outside come from conflicts on the inside. When we fight with our parents, siblings, or friends, it's usually because we want something and aren't getting it: attention, control, respect, our own way. When James mentions killing, he might be talking about actual violence among his readers, or he might mean that anger and hatred are like murder in the heart, as Jesus taught (Matthew 5:21–22). Either way, the next time you're in a fight, ask yourself: what do I want right now that I'm not getting?

You don't have what you want, James says, because you don't ask God. And when you do ask, you don't receive, because you're asking with wrong motives, wanting to spend it on your own pleasures.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Wrong Motives**
>
> James says God answers prayer, but not prayers that are just selfish wish lists. God isn't a vending machine. Prayer isn't about getting God to do what we want; it's about bringing what we want to God and trusting Him. It's okay to

ask God for things you want. Jesus taught us to ask (Matthew 7:7). But it's worth asking yourself why you want them.

Then James uses strong language. You adulterers, he says. Don't you know that being friends with the world means being an enemy of God? Anyone who chooses to be the world's friend becomes God's enemy. The NIV footnote explains that James is using a picture of unfaithfulness to God, the way the prophets described Israel, comparing them to a spouse who cheated (Hosea 3:1).

BACKGROUND CHECK **Friendship with the World**

What does James mean by the world? He doesn't mean the earth, or people. God loves the world (John 3:16). He means the way of thinking and living that leaves God out, that's all about pride, selfishness, and pleasure. Being friends with the world means making those values your own. James says you can't be loyal to God and to the world's values at the same time. It's like trying to date two people at once.

Next comes a verse that's hard to translate. James says that Scripture speaks of God's jealous longing for the spirit He placed within us. The NIV footnotes offer other possible readings: that the Spirit God sent to live in us is the one who yearns jealously, or that the human spirit God put in us is prone to envy. Either way, James goes on to say that God gives even more grace. Then he quotes Proverbs 3:34, which says, as the NIV puts it, "God opposes the proud but shows favor to the humble" (4:6).

BACKGROUND CHECK **More Grace**

After all the warnings, James gives this wonderful promise: God gives more grace. Whatever you've done, however far you've gone, God's grace is bigger. But grace flows to the humble, like water flowing downhill to the lowest place. Pride says, I don't need help. Humility says, I need God. That's the only posture that can receive grace.

Then James fires off a string of commands. Put yourself under God's authority. Stand up to the devil, and he'll run away. Move toward God, and He'll move toward you. Sinners, scrub your hands clean. Split-hearted people, make your hearts pure. Be sorry, grieve, and cry. Let your laughing turn to tears and your happiness to sorrow. Get low in God's presence, and He will raise you high.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Resist and Come Near**

James 4:7–8 is one of the most encouraging passages in the Bible. It has two halves. First, resist the devil. The devil is real, and he wants to pull you away from God. But you're not helpless. When you say no to temptation and stand firm in God's strength, the devil runs. Second, come near to God. Every step you take toward God, He takes toward you. Think of the father in Jesus' story of the lost son, who saw his son a long way off and ran to meet him (Luke 15:20). God doesn't wait with His arms crossed. He runs toward you.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Mourning?**

Why would James tell people to stop laughing and start crying? He isn't against joy. He began this letter talking about joy. He's talking to people who were laughing off their sin, not taking it seriously. Before we can receive God's grace, we need to be honest about our need for it. That can mean real sorrow. But the sorrow doesn't last. James promises that God will lift up the humble.

Next, James warns against slander. Stop tearing each other down, he says. When you trash a fellow believer or condemn them, you're really putting God's law on trial. And if you sit in judgment over the law, you're no longer obeying it. You've appointed yourself judge. But God alone writes the law and judges by it. He alone can rescue or ruin. So what makes you think you can condemn the person next to you?

BACKGROUND CHECK **Who Are You to Judge?**

James echoes Jesus' teaching, do not judge (Matthew 7:1). That doesn't mean we can never say that something is wrong. James himself says plenty of things are wrong! It means we shouldn't put ourselves in God's place, condemning people, assuming the worst about them, or speaking about them as if we were better. Only God sees the whole picture. Our job is to love people and leave final judgment to Him.

Then James turns to planning. Pay attention, he says, those of you who announce your plans: this week or next we'll travel to some city, stay twelve months, run a business, and get rich. You have no idea what tomorrow will bring. "What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes" (4:14). What you should say instead is, "If it is the Lord's will, we will live and do this or that" (4:15). But you're proud of your big plans, and bragging like that is wrong. So whoever knows what's good and right, and still fails to do it, is sinning.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Plans and Mist**

James isn't against planning. Thinking ahead about college, a job, or your future is wise. He's against planning as if God doesn't exist, as if you're in total control. You aren't. Life is short and unpredictable, like the mist from your breath on a cold morning. That's not meant to scare you. It's meant to help you hold your plans with open hands. Some Christians say, Lord willing, when they talk about the future. The words matter less than the attitude: God, my life is in Your hands.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Knowing and Not Doing**

The last verse of chapter 4 may be one of the most uncomfortable in the Bible. James says that sin isn't only doing wrong things. It's also failing to do right things you know you should. Theologians sometimes call these sins of omission. Not standing up for someone being bullied. Not helping when you could. Not apologizing when you know you should. Not speaking up when

you know the truth. Is there something good you know you should do, but haven't?

KEY VERSE

Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Come near to God and he will come near to you. Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded.

James 4:7–8 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Think about your last argument. What did you want that you weren't getting?
2. What does friendship with the world look like for teens today?
3. What's one way you could come near to God this week?
4. What plans do you have that you need to hold with open hands?

TRY THIS *Each morning this week, before you check your phone, take one minute to come near to God. Tell Him your plans for the day and say, God, if You want this, help me do it. Then each night, ask yourself: was there something good I knew I should do but didn't?*

CHAPTER 5

Patience and Prayer

James 5

James opens this chapter with a fierce warning. Pay attention, he says to the wealthy. Start crying and howling, because terrible trouble is on its way to you. Your riches are rotting. Your fancy wardrobes are full of moth holes. Your gold and silver have rusted, and that rust will be evidence against you. It will burn your bodies like fire. You've piled up treasure, even though the end is near.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Who Is James Talking To?**
>
> This passage reads like an Old Testament prophet speaking against injustice. James probably isn't speaking mainly to rich Christians, but to wealthy landowners outside the church who were exploiting poor workers, many of whom were believers. It's a warning of God's judgment, and an encouragement to the oppressed that God sees what's happening. But it's still a warning for anyone with money, including Christians. Wealth isn't the problem. Gaining it unjustly and hoarding it selfishly is.

James gets specific. The pay you cheated your field workers out of is shouting against you. God, the Lord of heaven's armies, has heard the harvesters crying for help. You've lived the high life, spoiling yourselves, stuffing yourselves like cattle fattened up for the butcher. The NIV footnote offers another reading: like people feasting on a holiday. You've condemned the righteous and killed them, and they didn't fight back.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Unpaid Wages**

In James' time, day laborers were paid at the end of each day. Without that pay, their families might not eat. The law of Moses commanded employers to pay workers before sunset (Deuteronomy 24:14–15). Withholding wages was a serious sin. Today, this passage speaks to issues like fair pay, the treatment of workers, and how the products we buy are made. You might not own a business, but you're a consumer. Christians have different views about economics, but they can agree that God cares about how workers are treated.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Innocent One**

Who is the innocent one in 5:6? Most interpreters think James means poor righteous people in general, who were being crushed by the powerful, sometimes literally to death. Some early writers saw a reference to Jesus, the Righteous One (Acts 3:14; 7:52), who didn't resist when He was killed. Interestingly, James himself would later be called the Just, and would be killed without resisting.

Then James turns to his struggling readers. Hang in there, brothers and sisters, until Jesus comes back. Think about farmers. They wait for the ground to give them a precious harvest, and they wait patiently through the seasons for the fall and spring rains to come. Be patient like that. Make your hearts strong. Jesus' return is close.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Waiting for Rain**

In Israel, farmers depended on two rainy seasons. The early rains in the fall softened the ground for planting. The late rains in the spring helped the crops grow before harvest. Farmers couldn't make it rain. They just had to wait. James says Christians wait like that for Jesus' return. We can't make it happen, and we don't know when it will happen. But we can be sure it will, and we can keep working faithfully until it does.

Stop complaining about one another, James says, or you'll face judgment yourselves. Look, the Judge is right outside, ready to walk in! If you want a model of patient suffering, think of the prophets,

who brought God's message. We honor people who hold on. You know the story of how Job endured, and you know how God brought his story to a good end. God is deeply kind and merciful.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **The Patience of Job**
>
> Job lost his children, his wealth, and his health. He didn't always handle it calmly. He complained, argued, and asked God hard questions. But he never gave up on God. In the end, God restored him (Job 42:10–17). Job shows us that patience doesn't mean never struggling. It means hanging on to God, even when you're confused and hurting. James reminds us that the story ended with God's compassion and mercy.

Most important of all, James says, don't make oaths, whether you swear by the sky, the ground, or anything at all. Just say yes when you mean yes, and no when you mean no, so that you won't face judgment.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Yes Means Yes**
>
> James repeats Jesus' words almost exactly (Matthew 5:34–37). People in James' time often swore oaths to prove they were telling the truth, and found ways to wriggle out of them. Jesus and James say that your word should be enough. You shouldn't need to say, I swear, or I promise, for people to believe you. Christians differ on whether this forbids formal oaths, like those in a courtroom. Some groups, like Quakers and Mennonites, choose to affirm rather than swear. Others believe Jesus was talking about everyday speech. Either way, the point is to be honest and reliable, every time.

As he wraps up, James talks about prayer. When you're going through hard times, pray. When you're cheerful, sing songs of praise. Then he gives instructions for sickness: "Is anyone among you sick? Let them call the elders of the church to pray over them and anoint them with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise them up. If they have sinned, they will be forgiven" (5:14–15).

BACKGROUND CHECK **Pray, Sing, Call**

Notice that James has a response for every situation. In trouble? Pray. Happy? Sing. Sick? Call for help. Prayer isn't only for emergencies. It's how we stay connected to God in every season of life, the good and the bad.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Anointing the Sick**

Christians understand James 5:14–15 in different ways. The Catholic Church sees it as the basis of the sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick, in which a priest anoints a seriously ill or elderly person with oil and prays for their healing and forgiveness. The Orthodox Church practices a similar sacrament called Holy Unction, often celebrated with several priests. Many Protestant churches have elders or pastors anoint sick people with oil as they pray, seeing it as a sign of God's presence and the Holy Spirit's work. Others understand the oil mainly as a symbol, or point out that olive oil was also used as medicine in the ancient world (Luke 10:34), so James may have had both prayer and medical care in mind. All of them agree that God cares about sick people, and that the church should pray for them.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Faith and Medicine**

Praying for healing doesn't mean refusing to see a doctor. Throughout history, many Christians have seen medicine as one of God's good gifts. Luke, who wrote a Gospel and Acts, was a doctor (Colossians 4:14). Paul told Timothy to take a little wine for his stomach (1 Timothy 5:23). Many hospitals were founded by Christians. Faith and medicine go together. If you're sick, pray, and also follow your doctor's advice and take your medicine. Never stop a treatment without talking to your doctor. Sometimes God heals through medicine, sometimes in ways we can't explain, and sometimes not in this life. But He's always with us, and He promises that one day every sickness will end (Revelation 21:4).

BACKGROUND CHECK **When Healing Doesn't Come**

What if you or someone you love prays for healing, and it doesn't come? That's one of the hardest experiences in the Christian life. Paul prayed three times for God to remove his thorn in the flesh, and God said no (2 Corinthians

12:7–9). Timothy had frequent illnesses (1 Timothy 5:23). Godly people get sick and die. The raising up James promises may happen in this life, or it may ultimately happen at the resurrection. Unanswered prayer doesn't mean you didn't have enough faith, or that God doesn't care. It's okay to be sad, confused, and even angry. Bring those feelings to God and to people who love you.

So, James says, admit your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you'll find healing. When a person who lives rightly prays, those prayers have real power and get real results.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Confess to Each Other**

James says that confession isn't only between you and God. It's also something we do with each other. Christian traditions practice this differently. Catholic and Orthodox Christians have the sacrament of confession, with a priest. Many Protestants confess to a pastor, small group, or trusted friend. Either way, there's something powerful about saying our sins out loud to another person. It breaks the power of secrecy and shame. Choose someone safe and mature, who will keep your confidence, pray for you, and help you change. One important note: if you've been hurt by someone, what happened to you isn't your sin to confess. And if someone tells you they're being harmed, or might harm themselves, that's a secret you shouldn't keep. Tell a trusted adult.

James gives an example of powerful prayer. Elijah was human, no different from us. He prayed hard for a drought, and the land stayed dry for three years and six months. Then he prayed once more, the clouds opened, and the ground grew crops again (1 Kings 17–18).

BACKGROUND CHECK **Just Like Us**

James says Elijah was a person just like us. That's encouraging. Elijah wasn't a superhero. Right after his greatest victory, he got so depressed and afraid that he asked God to let him die (1 Kings 19:4). God didn't scold him. He let him sleep, gave him food, and spoke to him gently. If God heard Elijah's

prayers, He hears yours too. You don't need fancy words or a perfect life. You just need to pray.

Then James ends his letter abruptly, without a greeting or goodbye. Brothers and sisters, he says, suppose one of you drifts away from the truth, and someone helps them return. Know that the person who leads a sinner back from their wandering rescues that person from death and covers over a great many sins.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Bring Them Back**

It's fitting that James ends his letter by talking about people who wander from the faith. Maybe he was thinking of his own story. He once didn't believe in his brother Jesus. Then Jesus came looking for him. You probably know someone who has drifted from God. You can't force them back, and it's not your job to fix them. But you can love them, pray for them, and stay in their life. Sometimes the person who brings someone back isn't the one who argues best, but the one who never gives up on them.

KEY VERSE

Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective.

James 5:16 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. What does James' warning to the rich say to people today, including us?
2. What are you waiting for right now? How can you wait patiently, like a farmer?
3. Do you have someone you can confess to and pray with? If not, who might that be?
4. Who do you know who has wandered from God? How can you love them this week?

TRY THIS *Make a prayer list with three columns: people in trouble, people who are sick, and people who've wandered from God. Pray for them every day this week. If you can, reach out to one person from each column to let them know you care.*

THE END (AND THE BEGINNING)

Now What? The Bottom Line

You've just read James, the letter of Jesus' brother. James knew Jesus as a big brother, didn't believe in Him, and then met Him alive after He rose from the dead. That changed everything. James spent the rest of his life as His servant.

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

1 God is good, and He made you.

God made you, and every good thing in your life comes from Him. He wants you to know Him.

> *Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows.* **James 1:17 (NIV)**

2 We've all turned away.

We've all gone our own way instead of God's. James admits that every one of us trips up. 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 get our lives together 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. And real faith shows up in a changed life.

> *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 let your faith get to work.

> *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 rose again. 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 wisdom, help me watch my words, and make my faith real in everything I do. 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 James straight through. Then read 1 Peter, the next letter in the New Testament, written to believers facing hard times.

Find your people. Get connected to a church where the Bible is taught and Jesus is honored. Ask about being baptized.

Do something. James would want you to put your faith into action. Help someone in need this week. Then talk to God about it. He loves to hear from you.

Not Sure Yet?

Not ready? That's honest, and honesty is a good place to start. Keep asking. Keep reading. Ask God for wisdom; James says He gives it generously. Just don't settle for "I already know all that."

Because if James is right, his big brother really did rise from the dead, and it's worth finding out for yourself.

Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up.

James 4:10 (NIV)

THE FIRST LETTER OF PETER

The King's Living Hope

1 Peter, Unfiltered

For teens who think they've heard it all

BILL McLEOD

Papa Bill Books

The King's Living Hope: The First Letter of Peter, 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. Peter would probably laugh at that one. He was the disciple who always spoke first, jumped first, and thought later. Jesus picked him anyway.

Peter is one of the most relatable people in the Bible. He walked on water and then sank. He said Jesus was the Messiah and then, minutes later, told Jesus He was wrong. He swore he'd never abandon Jesus and then denied knowing Him three times in one night. And then Jesus rose from the dead, found him on a beach, and gave him a second chance.

Years later, Peter wrote this letter to believers who felt like outsiders. They were mocked for their faith, misunderstood by their neighbors, and pressured to go back to the way they used to live. If you've ever felt like you don't fit in because of what you believe, this letter was written for people like you.

Peter doesn't promise that following Jesus will make life easy. He promises something better: a hope that's alive, a God who cares about every worry you carry, and a future no one can take from you.

So read it like a letter from someone who failed big and was forgiven bigger. Let's go.

How This Book Works

This book walks through all five chapters of 1 Peter, in order, one chapter of this book for each chapter of the letter. Each one explains what Peter is saying in plain language and adds background about the Roman world and the lives of the first readers.

Before chapter 1, a section called Setting the Scene tells Peter's story, explains the debate about who wrote the letter and when, and introduces the readers, the exiles scattered across what is now Turkey. 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 Peter 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, Paul's letters, Hebrews, and James, 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 Peter 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).

Several passages call for special care. The instructions to slaves (2:18–25) and to wives and husbands (3:1–7) are explained in their first-century setting, with the range of Christian interpretations, and with a clear statement that these verses never require anyone to stay in an abusive situation. The difficult passage about Christ preaching to the spirits in prison (3:18–22), and the verse about baptism (3:21), are presented with the main Christian views, without endorsing one.

I've also described the debate over whether Peter wrote the letter himself, with the help of Silas, or whether a later follower wrote it

in his name, and the reasons most interpreters take Babylon (5:13) as a code name for Rome.

Several passages are highlighted as especially relevant for teens: living hope in hard times (1:3–9), identity as God's people (2:4–10), being ready to explain your faith with gentleness and respect (3:15), resisting peer pressure (4:3–4), and bringing anxiety to God (5:7). The box on 5:7 encourages readers to seek help from trusted adults and professionals for anxiety; prayer and good care go 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 who feels like an outsider will discover that they belong to God's people, and that their hope is alive.

Grace and peace,

Bill McLeod

Papa Bill Books

BEFORE YOU OPEN THE LETTER

Setting the Scene

Simon the Fisherman

Peter's real name was Simon. He was a fisherman from the town of Bethsaida, on the Sea of Galilee, and later lived in nearby Capernaum with his wife and his mother-in-law (Mark 1:29–31). He ran a fishing business with his brother Andrew, and with two other brothers, James and John (Luke 5:10). He was a working man with rough hands, not a scholar.

Jesus gave Simon a new name: Cephas in Aramaic, or Petros in Greek. Both mean rock (John 1:42). That's like calling someone Rocky. It was a strange name to give a man who often seemed anything but steady. But Jesus saw who Simon would become.

The Disciple Who Spoke First

In the Gospels, Peter is almost always the first to speak. He asked to walk on the water with Jesus, did it for a few steps, then panicked and started to sink (Matthew 14:28–31). He was the first disciple to say out loud that Jesus was the Messiah (Matthew 16:16). Moments later, when Jesus said He would suffer and die, Peter pulled Him aside and told Him off, and Jesus rebuked him (Matthew 16:21–23). At the Last Supper, Peter refused to let Jesus wash his feet, then asked Jesus to wash his whole body (John 13:6–9). When soldiers came to arrest Jesus, Peter pulled out a sword and cut off a man's ear (John 18:10).

Then came the worst night of his life. Peter had promised he would never deny Jesus, even if it meant dying. But that same night, in the courtyard of the high priest, he denied knowing Jesus three times. When the rooster crowed, he remembered what Jesus had predicted, went outside, and cried bitterly (Luke 22:54–62).

The Second Chance

After the resurrection, the angel at the tomb told the women to tell the disciples and Peter that Jesus was alive (Mark 16:7). Notice that Peter is singled out. The risen Jesus appeared to Peter personally (Luke 24:34; 1 Corinthians 15:5). Later, on the shore of the Sea of Galilee, Jesus cooked breakfast for His disciples over a charcoal fire, like the one Peter had stood next to when he denied Him. Three times Jesus asked Peter whether he loved Him. Three times Peter said yes. And three times Jesus gave him a job: take care of My sheep (John 21:15–17). Three denials, three restorations.

Afterward, Peter became a bold leader. He preached the first sermon after Jesus' resurrection on the day of Pentecost, and about three thousand people believed (Acts 2). He was arrested, beaten, and thrown in prison, and kept preaching (Acts 4–5; 12). He was the first to welcome Gentiles into the church, in the home of a Roman officer named Cornelius (Acts 10). He wasn't perfect. Paul once confronted him publicly for refusing to eat with Gentile believers (Galatians 2:11–14). But Peter kept growing. He traveled as a missionary, and his wife traveled with him (1 Corinthians 9:5).

Peter in Rome

The New Testament doesn't describe Peter's death, but it hints at it. Jesus told Peter that when he was old, someone would stretch out his hands and lead him where he didn't want to go, which John

explains as a reference to the kind of death Peter would die (John 21:18–19). Early Christian writers agree that Peter died as a martyr in Rome. A letter called 1 Clement, written from Rome around AD 96, mentions the deaths of Peter and Paul. Later writers say Peter was crucified under the emperor Nero, sometime between AD 64 and 68. A later tradition, from a book called the Acts of Peter, says he asked to be crucified upside down because he didn't feel worthy to die the same way as Jesus. That story is uncertain, but it shows how Peter was remembered. St. Peter's Basilica in Rome is built over the place where, according to tradition, he was buried.

Who Wrote 1 Peter?

The letter opens by naming Peter, Jesus' apostle, as its writer (1:1), and near the end the writer calls himself an elder like the leaders he's addressing, and someone who saw Christ suffer (5:1). It was accepted early and widely. Second Peter refers to an earlier letter (2 Peter 3:1). Polycarp, a church leader who died around AD 155, quotes from it, and by the late second century, Irenaeus names Peter as its author.

Some modern scholars think a follower of Peter wrote it in his name after his death, perhaps between AD 70 and 95. They point out that the Greek is polished and elegant, and that the writer quotes the Old Testament from its Greek translation, called the Septuagint. Acts describes Peter and John as ordinary men without formal religious training (Acts 4:13). Some also think the letter sounds a lot like Paul, or that the persecution it describes fits a later time.

Others answer that Peter, from a region where Greek was widely spoken, had had thirty years of ministry to improve his Greek, and that the letter itself mentions a helper. Near the end, Peter says he

wrote the letter with the help of Silas (5:12). Silas, also called Silvanus, was a trusted leader from Jerusalem and Paul's traveling companion (Acts 15:22, 40; 1 Thessalonians 1:1). If Silas helped write the letter, that might explain both the polished Greek and the echoes of Paul. Others think the phrase means Silas carried the letter rather than wrote it. Christians on all sides agree that the letter belongs in the Bible and carries Peter's voice. In this book, I call the author Peter.

Greetings from Babylon

At the end of the letter, Peter sends greetings from a woman in Babylon, chosen along with the readers, and from his son Mark (5:13). What does he mean? The ancient city of Babylon, in modern Iraq, was largely abandoned by Peter's time, and there's no early tradition that Peter went there. There was also a small Roman fort called Babylon in Egypt, but again there's no early link to Peter. Most interpreters, ancient and modern, think Babylon is a code name for Rome. In the Old Testament, Babylon was the great empire that destroyed Jerusalem and carried God's people into exile. The book of Revelation uses Babylon as a name for Rome (Revelation 17–18), and some Jewish writings did too, especially after Rome destroyed Jerusalem in AD 70. For readers who saw themselves as exiles, it made sense to call the capital of the empire Babylon.

The woman is probably not a real person but the church in Rome. In the Bible, God's people are sometimes pictured as a woman or a bride. Some think it refers to Peter's wife. Mark was not Peter's biological son, but a younger believer he loved like a son. This is very likely John Mark, whose mother's house in Jerusalem was where Peter went after escaping prison (Acts 12:12). An early

church leader named Papias said that Mark wrote his Gospel based on Peter's preaching.

When Was It Written?

If Peter wrote the letter, it was probably written from Rome in the early 60s, shortly before Nero's persecution of Christians in AD 64. That year, a huge fire destroyed much of Rome. The Roman historian Tacitus says that rumors blamed Nero, so Nero blamed the Christians and had many of them executed in horrifying ways. The letter speaks of a fiery ordeal (4:12) that may have been coming soon, or already starting. If a follower wrote the letter in Peter's name, it may come from between AD 70 and 95.

The Readers

Peter writes to God's chosen people living as exiles in five Roman provinces: Pontus, along the Black Sea coast, then Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia. These were all in what is now Turkey. The order of the names may trace the route a messenger would have taken, landing at a port in Pontus, traveling in a loop, and leaving from Bithynia.

The readers were probably mostly Gentiles, people who weren't Jewish. Peter talks about the empty way of life they inherited from their ancestors (1:18), and about the time they used to spend doing what pagans do (4:3). He says that once they weren't a people at all, but now they're God's people (2:10). But Peter uses words and images that originally described Israel to describe these new believers: chosen, scattered, exiles, a holy nation.

Exiles and Strangers

Peter calls his readers exiles and foreigners. In the Roman world, those were legal and social categories. A resident foreigner lived in a place but didn't have full citizenship, rights, or belonging. Some scholars think many of Peter's readers really were displaced people and outsiders. Most think Peter also means it in a spiritual sense. When these people became Christians, they became strangers in their own hometowns. They stopped joining in festivals for the gods, family celebrations with sacrifices, and wild parties. Their neighbors found them strange, suspicious, even dangerous. Their true home was now with God. Christians have described themselves this way ever since: citizens of heaven, living as foreigners on earth.

Why Were They Suffering?

Peter's readers were suffering, but probably not mainly because of official, empire-wide persecution. That came later. Most of their suffering was social: insults, slander, suspicion, exclusion, family conflict, and occasional violence. Romans thought religion held society together. If you refused to honor the gods, you might bring disaster on everyone. Christians were accused of being atheists, because they rejected the gods, and of being antisocial.

About fifty years after Peter's letter, a Roman governor named Pliny the Younger wrote to the emperor Trajan from Bithynia, one of the provinces Peter wrote to. Pliny explained that he was executing people simply for admitting they were Christians, unless they cursed Christ and offered sacrifices to the gods. Christianity was spreading so fast that the temples were nearly empty. Pliny's letter shows that the trouble Peter warned about only got worse.

Peter's Fingerprints

Read 1 Peter closely, and you'll notice echoes of Peter's own story. He tells church leaders to be shepherds of God's flock (5:2), the same job Jesus gave him on the beach. He calls Jesus the living Stone, and calls believers living stones (2:4–5). Remember, Jesus named him Rock. He tells believers to clothe themselves with humility (5:5), maybe remembering the night Jesus tied a towel around His waist and washed his feet. He calls himself a witness of Christ's sufferings (5:1). He knew what it was like to fail Jesus, and to be forgiven.

The Map

Chapter 1: A living hope, joy in trials, and being holy.

Chapter 2: Living stones, a royal priesthood, and following Jesus' example in suffering.

Chapter 3: Wives and husbands, suffering for doing good, being ready to explain your hope, and Jesus' victory.

Chapter 4: Living differently, loving deeply, and not being surprised by suffering.

Chapter 5: Shepherds and humility, anxiety and the roaring lion, and God's promise to restore.

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CHAPTER 1

A Living Hope

1 Peter 1

Peter opens his letter the way people did in the ancient world, by naming himself first. He's an apostle, someone sent by Jesus. Then he names his readers. He calls them God's chosen ones, living like exiles, scattered across five provinces in what is now Turkey.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Chosen and Scattered**
>
> Those two words seem to pull in opposite directions. Chosen sounds like being picked first for the team. Scattered sounds like being lost, alone, far from home. Peter says his readers are both. They may feel like outsiders in their towns, but God picked them. If you've ever felt like you don't belong at school, on a team, or even in your own family, Peter has a word for you: God chose you. You belong to Him, wherever you are.

Peter explains that God the Father knew and chose them, that the Spirit set them apart as His own, and that the purpose was for them to obey Jesus and be made clean by His blood. Then he greets them with a wish for grace and peace, overflowing.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Father, Spirit, and Son**
>
> In just one verse, Peter mentions God the Father, the Holy Spirit, and Jesus Christ, each with a different role in our salvation. The Father chooses. The Spirit makes us holy. The Son's blood cleanses us. Peter isn't writing a theology textbook, and the word Trinity doesn't appear in the Bible. But

passages like this one are part of why Christians came to believe that the one God exists as three persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

BACKGROUND CHECK **What Does Chosen Mean?**

Christians have discussed for centuries what it means that God chooses people. Some, following thinkers like Augustine and John Calvin, believe God chooses specific people for salvation based on His own purpose and grace, not on anything He sees in them. Others, following thinkers like Jacob Arminius and John Wesley, believe God chooses based on His foreknowledge of who will freely respond to Him in faith, or that He chooses a people, the church, and individuals become part of it by faith. Catholic and Orthodox Christians have their own ways of holding God's grace and human freedom together. All agree that salvation starts with God, that He offers it freely, and that people must respond to Him. Peter's point here is comfort, not a puzzle: God knew you and wanted you.

Then Peter bursts into praise. Thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus! Because He's so merciful, He has caused us to be born all over again, into a hope that's alive, because Jesus came back to life. And we have an inheritance waiting for us, one that will never die, rot, or lose its color. God is guarding it in heaven, and He's guarding you too, by His power, through your faith, until He reveals the full rescue at the end of time.

BACKGROUND CHECK **A Living Hope**

Why does Peter call it a living hope? Maybe because he remembered what dead hope felt like. On the night Jesus was arrested and the day He died, Peter's hopes were crushed. He had left everything to follow Jesus, then denied Him, and then watched Him die. Then, three days later, the tomb was empty, and Jesus was alive. Peter's hope came back to life when Jesus did. That's the kind of hope Peter is talking about. It isn't wishful thinking, like hoping it doesn't rain on the weekend. It's confidence based on something that already happened: Jesus rose from the dead.

BACKGROUND CHECK **An Inheritance That Lasts**

Everything you own will eventually break, wear out, get lost, or go out of style. Phones get slow. Shoes fall apart. Clothes that were cool two years ago now look embarrassing. Even the people we love will eventually die. Peter says God has something waiting for you that will never break, decay, or fade. And it's not just stored up somewhere. God is keeping it safe for you, and keeping you safe for it.

Peter knows his readers are hurting. You have reason to celebrate, he says, even though right now, for a short time, you've had to grieve through many different kinds of hard times. Those hard times test whether your faith is real, the way fire tests gold. Gold is valuable, but it won't last forever. Your faith is worth much more. When it comes through the fire, it will bring praise and glory and honor on the day Jesus is revealed.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Refined by Fire**

In the ancient world, gold was purified by heating it until it melted. The impurities rose to the surface, and the goldsmith skimmed them off. What was left was pure gold. Peter says hard times work like that. They burn away what's fake and show what's real. That doesn't mean God enjoys watching you suffer, or that every bad thing is a test. But it means suffering is never wasted. God can use even your worst days to make your faith stronger and purer.

You've never seen Jesus, Peter says, and yet you love Him. You can't see Him now, and yet you trust Him, and you're full of a joy so glorious that words can't describe it. You're already receiving the goal of your faith: the rescue of your souls.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Loving Someone You Can't See**

Peter had seen Jesus with his own eyes. He had eaten with Him, walked with Him, and watched Him die and rise again. His readers never had. Neither have we. Peter isn't saying they're second-class believers. He's amazed by their

faith. Jesus said something similar to Thomas: people who believe without seeing are blessed (John 20:29). If you sometimes wish you could just see Jesus to be sure, you're not alone. But you can know Him and love Him now, through His word, through prayer, and through His people.

Peter says that the prophets in the Old Testament spoke about this rescue. They searched and studied carefully, trying to figure out when and how it would happen. Christ's Spirit, working within them, told them ahead of time about the Messiah's suffering and the glory that would come after. God showed them that they were serving future believers, not themselves. Even angels want to understand these things.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Angels Are Curious**

This is an amazing idea. Angels, who live in God's presence, long to peer into what God has done for human beings. They've never needed to be rescued from sin. They've never experienced grace the way we have. Your salvation is something even angels find fascinating.

So, Peter says, get your minds ready for action. Stay clear-headed. Put all your hope in the grace you'll receive when Jesus comes back. Like obedient children, don't let your old desires shape you, the ones you followed before you knew better. The God who invited you is holy, so let every part of your life be holy too. Peter quotes Leviticus, where God tells His people to be holy because He is holy.

BACKGROUND CHECK **What Is Holy?**

Holy means set apart, different, belonging to God. In the Old Testament, special objects in the temple were holy because they were reserved for God's use. Peter says you're like that. You belong to God, so your life should look different. That doesn't mean being weird or acting better than everyone else. It means letting God shape how you think, talk, act, and treat people, instead of just going along with whatever everyone else is doing.

Peter reminds his readers that God judges everyone fairly, without favorites. So live with reverence during your time here as foreigners. You know that you were bought back from the pointless lifestyle your families passed down to you. You weren't bought with silver or gold, which don't last, but with Christ's precious blood, like a perfect lamb with no flaws. God chose Him before the world began, and revealed Him now, at the end of the ages, for you. Through Jesus you trust God, who raised Him from death and gave Him glory, so everything you trust and hope for rests on God.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Ransomed**
>
> The word Peter uses for bought back is the word for redeem, or ransom. It was used for paying to free a slave or a prisoner of war. Peter says that Jesus paid the price to set us free. And the payment wasn't money. It was His own life. The picture of a perfect lamb points back to the Passover in Exodus, when the blood of a lamb protected God's people and led to their freedom from slavery in Egypt (Exodus 12). Jesus is the true Passover Lamb.
>
> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Empty Inheritance**
>
> Peter says his readers had inherited an empty, pointless way of life from their families. Every family passes things down: traditions, habits, attitudes, and sometimes harmful patterns like anger, addiction, or bitterness. Some of what we inherit is good. Some isn't. Peter's good news is that Jesus can break the chains of what you inherited. You don't have to repeat your family's mistakes. You can start a new pattern with God's help.

Since you've been made pure by obeying the truth, Peter says, and you now have real love for other believers, love each other deeply, with all your heart. You've been born again, not from seed that dies, but from seed that lasts forever: God's word, which is alive and never ends. Peter quotes Isaiah, who compares human beings to grass and wildflowers that wither and fall, while God's word lasts

forever. And that word, Peter says, is the good news that was preached to you.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Grass and Glory**

Isaiah's picture is a reminder that fame, beauty, popularity, and success fade quickly. Think about how fast viral videos and trends come and go. Today's celebrity is tomorrow's trivia question. Peter says that what's built on God's word lasts. That's worth remembering when you're tempted to build your life on likes, followers, looks, or status. Those things wither. God's word doesn't.

KEY VERSE

Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, for you are receiving the end result of your faith, the salvation of your souls.

1 Peter 1:8–9 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. What's the difference between a living hope and wishful thinking?
2. Have you ever been through something hard that made your faith stronger? What happened?
3. What does it mean to you to be holy? What would it look like this week?
4. What patterns or habits have you inherited from your family, good and bad?

TRY THIS *Make a list of five things you're hoping for right now. Then write down what Peter says is waiting for you in God's inheritance. Each morning this week, read 1 Peter 1:3–9 and thank God for one thing in it.*

CHAPTER 2

Living Stones

1 Peter 2

Peter starts this chapter with a list of things to get rid of: every kind of evil, lying, fake behavior, jealousy, and trash talk. Instead, like a newborn baby who desperately wants milk, crave the pure spiritual milk that will help you grow. After all, you've already experienced how good the Lord is.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Hungry Like a Baby**
>
> If you've ever been around a hungry newborn, you know they don't politely wait for lunch. They scream until they're fed. Peter says that's how we should want God's word: not as a chore, but as something we need. If you don't feel that hunger yet, that's normal. Appetite often grows as you eat. Start small, a few verses a day, and see what happens.

Then Peter uses one of his favorite pictures: stones. Come to Jesus, he says, the living Stone. People rejected Him, but God chose Him, and He is precious to God. And you are stones too, living ones, and God is building you together into a spiritual house, to serve as holy priests, offering spiritual sacrifices that please God through Jesus.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **A Rock Named Rock**
>
> Peter must have smiled as he wrote this. Jesus had named him Rock. Now he tells all believers that they're stones too. In Matthew 16:18, Jesus told Peter that on this rock He would build His church. Christians have understood that verse in different ways. Catholic tradition sees it as giving Peter a unique

leadership role, continued by the bishops of Rome. Many Protestants and Orthodox Christians understand the rock as Peter's confession that Jesus is the Messiah, or Peter as the first of the apostles, with the foundation shared among them. Here, Peter himself points to Jesus as the living Stone, and to every believer as a stone in God's house.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Living Stones**

A pile of bricks isn't a house. Stones become a building when they're put together. Peter says that Christians are like that. You can't really follow Jesus alone. God is building His people together into a temple where He lives. Each stone is different in shape and size, and each one matters. You're part of something much bigger than yourself. And unlike ordinary stones, you're alive.

Peter backs this up with three quotes from the Old Testament. Isaiah says that God is laying a precious, chosen cornerstone in Zion, and that whoever trusts in Him won't be put to shame. The Psalms say that the stone the builders threw away has become the most important stone in the building. And Isaiah says this stone will make people trip and fall. The NIV footnotes trace these to Isaiah 28:16, Psalm 118:22, and Isaiah 8:14. To people who trust Jesus, Peter explains, He is precious. But people who reject Him trip over Him, because they refuse to obey the message.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Cornerstone**

In ancient buildings, the cornerstone was the first stone laid, and the most important one. The builders lined up every other stone with it. If it was crooked, the whole building would be crooked. Jesus is the cornerstone of God's people. Everything lines up with Him. The builders, Israel's religious leaders, rejected Him. But God made Him the foundation of everything. Jesus Himself quoted this psalm about Himself (Mark 12:10–11).

Then Peter tells his readers who they are, in one of the most powerful passages in the Bible. You're God's chosen people. You're

priests who belong to the King. You're a nation set apart for Him, His own treasured possession. God did this so you could tell others about the amazing things He has done, the One who brought you from the dark into His incredible light. Once you were nobodies, but now you're God's people. Once you didn't know God's mercy, but now you've experienced it.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Who You Are**

Peter takes titles that God gave Israel at Mount Sinai (Exodus 19:5–6) and gives them to a group of mostly Gentile believers, many of them poor, mocked, and looked down on by their neighbors. Think about what that would mean to them. The world said they were nothing. God said they were royalty. If you struggle with who you are, with your worth, your looks, your popularity, or your failures, read 2:9 again. This is God's description of His people. It's who you are if you belong to Jesus.

BACKGROUND CHECK **A Royal Priesthood**

In the Old Testament, only certain men from the tribe of Levi could serve as priests. They offered sacrifices and went into God's presence on behalf of the people. Peter says all believers are now priests. Christians understand this in different ways. Protestants often speak of the priesthood of all believers, meaning every Christian can come directly to God through Jesus, without a human go-between, and every Christian has a ministry. Catholic and Orthodox Christians also teach that all the baptized share in a common priesthood, while also holding that some are ordained to a special ministerial priesthood. Everyone agrees that every believer is called to worship God, pray for others, and offer their life to Him.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Not a People**

Peter's words about once not being a people echo the prophet Hosea. God told Hosea to give his children names meaning not loved and not my people, as a picture of Israel's unfaithfulness. But God promised that one day He would call them loved and my people again (Hosea 1:6–10; 2:23). Peter says

that promise came true in a new way for Gentiles who were far from God and were welcomed into His family.

Then Peter gives some practical instructions. Dear friends, since you're foreigners and exiles in this world, stay away from the desires that fight against your soul. Live so well in front of your non-Christian neighbors that, even if they accuse you of wrongdoing, they'll see the good things you do and give glory to God when He comes.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Live So They Notice**

Peter's readers were being slandered. People said that Christians were antisocial, disloyal, and immoral. Peter's strategy is simple: prove them wrong by how you live. Be the kindest person on your team, the most honest student in your class, the most helpful kid in your neighborhood. People might still mock your faith. But it's hard to argue with a life that's genuinely good.

Then Peter tells his readers to submit to every human authority, for the Lord's sake, whether the emperor or the governors he sends to punish wrongdoers and reward people who do right. God wants you to silence foolish people's ignorant accusations by doing good. Live as free people, but don't use freedom as an excuse to do wrong. Live as servants of God. Respect everyone. Love your fellow believers. Have reverence for God. Give the emperor honor.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Honor the Emperor?**

Remember who the emperor probably was when Peter wrote this: Nero, a cruel ruler who would later execute Christians, possibly including Peter himself. Peter still tells believers to respect authority and do good. That's remarkable. But it has limits. When the religious authorities ordered Peter to stop preaching about Jesus, he refused, saying that we must obey God rather than human beings (Acts 5:29). Christians respect governments, pay taxes, and obey laws, but when a law requires disobeying God, God comes first.

Notice also the order: honor the emperor, but fear God. Only God gets our worship.

Next Peter speaks to household slaves. Submit to your masters with respect, he says, not only to the kind and gentle ones, but also to the harsh ones. It's a good thing if you endure pain from unfair treatment because you're aware of God. If you're punished for doing wrong, there's no credit in putting up with it. But if you do right, get hurt for it, and keep going, God sees and approves.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Slavery in the Roman World**

Slavery was everywhere in the Roman Empire. Perhaps one in five people in Italy were enslaved, and in cities the number may have been higher. People became slaves through war, debt, kidnapping, or being born to enslaved mothers. Household slaves might be teachers, doctors, cooks, or managers, and some were eventually freed. But slaves were legally property. They could be beaten, sexually abused, separated from their families, and even killed, with little or no protection under the law. It was a cruel system, and we shouldn't minimize that. Roman slavery wasn't based on race in the way slavery in the Americas later was, but it was still a brutal denial of human dignity.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Why Didn't Peter Condemn Slavery?**

Peter was writing to a tiny, powerless minority who had no ability to change Roman law. He speaks to slaves directly, as members of the church and as people who make moral choices, which was unusual; Roman writers usually spoke only to masters about their slaves. Peter doesn't say slavery is good. He tells slaves how to follow Jesus in the situation they were already in. Over time, Christians came to see that the gospel itself, which says that all people are made in God's image and equal in Christ (Galatians 3:28), is incompatible with slavery. Christians were leaders in the movements to abolish slavery, although tragically, other Christians used verses like these to defend it. Today, Christians across all traditions agree that slavery is evil.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Never an Excuse for Abuse**

This passage does not mean that you should stay in a situation where you're being abused. Peter is talking to people who had no legal way out. If anyone is hurting you, at home, at school, in a relationship, online, or anywhere else, that is wrong, and it's not your fault. Telling someone isn't disobedient or unloving. God cares about justice and about your safety. Tell a trusted adult, a teacher, a school counselor, or a pastor. If you're in danger, call emergency services.

Peter explains why suffering for doing good matters. This is what you were called to, because Jesus suffered on your behalf and left you a model, so you could follow in His footprints. Then he describes Jesus' suffering using words from Isaiah 53. Jesus never sinned, and never lied. When people insulted Him, He didn't insult them back. When He suffered, He didn't threaten revenge. He trusted Himself to God, who judges fairly. He took our sins on Himself, carrying them to the cross in His own body, so that we could be finished with sin and live for what's right. Peter quotes Isaiah's words, "by his wounds you have been healed." You were like sheep wandering away, but now you've come back to the Shepherd who watches over your souls.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Following His Footsteps**

The word Peter uses for example describes a pattern a child would trace when learning to write the alphabet. Jesus is the pattern we trace. When someone insults you, posts something mean about you, or treats you unfairly, your instinct might be to hit back. Jesus didn't. That doesn't mean He was weak or silent about injustice. He spoke truth boldly. But He didn't take revenge. He trusted God to make things right. You can do the same, while still standing up for what's right and getting help when you need it.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Back to the Shepherd**

Peter knew what it meant to wander away from Jesus. He had denied Him three times. And he knew what it meant to come back. On the beach, Jesus didn't shame him. He restored him and told him to take care of His sheep. If you've wandered, the Shepherd is still looking for you. You can come back.

KEY VERSE

But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.

1 Peter 2:9 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Which title in 2:9 means the most to you? Why?
2. How can your life make people curious about Jesus, or at least prove false ideas about Christians wrong?
3. When is it right to obey authority, and when is it right to say no?
4. How would you respond, with Jesus as your example, the next time someone insults you?

TRY THIS *Write 1 Peter 2:9 on a card and put it where you'll see it every morning, like your mirror or your phone's lock screen. Each day this week, read it out loud and do one thing that shows someone the light of God.*

CHAPTER 3

Ready with an Answer

1 Peter 3

Peter now turns to wives and husbands. He tells wives to accept their husbands' leadership, in the same spirit he described for citizens and household workers. His goal is that if a husband doesn't believe God's message, his wife's way of life might win him over, even without a word, when he sees how pure and respectful she is.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **A Christian Wife with a Pagan Husband**
> To understand this passage, picture the situation. In the Roman world, a wife was expected to follow her husband's religion. A Greek writer named Plutarch, who lived around the same time as Peter, said that a wife should worship only her husband's gods and shut the door on strange religions. So a woman who became a Christian on her own, without her husband, was doing something bold and countercultural. She might face anger, suspicion, or worse. Peter is speaking to women in that difficult position. Notice that he doesn't tell them to give up their faith to keep the peace. He tells them to keep following Jesus, and to let their lives speak.

Peter says a woman's beauty shouldn't come mainly from outward things like fancy hairstyles, gold jewelry, or expensive clothes. It should come from who she is inside, the lasting beauty of a gentle and calm spirit, which God treasures. That's how the godly women of the past made themselves beautiful, women whose hope rested in God. Peter mentions Sarah, who respected Abraham and called him

master. You are her daughters, he tells the women, if you do good and don't let fear control you.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Inner Beauty**

Peter isn't banning hairstyles or jewelry. He's saying they're not where real beauty comes from. That message matters for everyone, guys included, especially in a world of filters, edited photos, and constant comparison. You can spend hours trying to look a certain way and still feel like you're not enough. Peter points to a kind of beauty that doesn't fade with age, doesn't depend on your body type or your clothes, and is precious to God: a heart at peace. A gentle spirit isn't a weak one. Jesus described Himself as gentle (Matthew 11:29), and He was the strongest person who ever lived.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Don't Give Way to Fear**

Peter's instruction about not being afraid is important. A wife whose husband opposed her faith had plenty to fear. Peter tells her not to let fear rule her. She belongs to God. This isn't a call to submit to threats or intimidation. Peter is encouraging these women to stand firm in courage and hope.

Husbands, Peter says, in the same way, be understanding in the way you share life with your wives. Treat them with honor, as the more vulnerable partner, and as people who share with you equally in God's gift of new life. If you don't, your prayers will be blocked.

BACKGROUND CHECK **What About the Husbands?**

Peter's words to husbands were radical in his day. Roman law gave husbands enormous power over their wives. Peter tells husbands to honor their wives, to understand them, and to treat them as equal heirs of God's grace. He even warns that if husbands treat their wives badly, it will damage their relationship with God. The phrase weaker partner probably refers to physical strength, or to how vulnerable women were in that society, not to intelligence, value, or spiritual strength. In God's eyes, husbands and wives are equally His children.

BACKGROUND CHECK **How Christians Read These Verses**

Christians apply this passage in different ways today. Some, often called complementarians, believe God gives husbands a loving, servant leadership role in marriage and wives a role of supporting that leadership, while seeing both as fully equal in worth. Others, often called egalitarians, believe Peter was giving wise advice for a specific cultural setting, and that the deeper principle is mutual submission and partnership, as in Ephesians 5:21. Both groups agree that marriage should reflect Christ's self-giving love, and that husbands and wives are equal before God.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Submission Never Means Abuse**

Whatever view a church holds, no passage in the Bible requires anyone to accept abuse. Submission doesn't mean obeying someone who tells you to sin, and it never means staying silent about violence, threats, or control. If you see abuse at home, or if a boyfriend or girlfriend is controlling, threatening, or hurting you, that is not love, and it's not what God wants. Talk to a trusted adult, a school counselor, or a pastor. If you're in danger, call emergency services. Getting help honors God.

Then Peter speaks to everyone. Be united in your thinking. Feel for each other. Love like family. Be kind and humble. When someone does you wrong, don't hit back with wrong, and don't trade insult for insult. Instead, answer with a blessing. This is your calling, and God will bless you for it. Peter quotes Psalm 34: if you want to love life and enjoy good days, watch what you say, steer clear of lies, turn away from evil, and do good. Look for peace and go after it, because God watches over people who do right and listens when they pray, but He opposes those who do evil.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Blessing Instead of Insults**

Social media makes revenge easy. Someone posts something hurtful, and you can fire back in seconds, with an audience watching. Peter says there's a better way: bless them instead. That doesn't mean pretending it doesn't hurt

or that what they did is okay. It means refusing to play the same game. You might pray for them, say something kind, or simply walk away. And if it's bullying or harassment, block and report it, and tell an adult. Blessing doesn't mean letting yourself be a target.

Who will hurt you if you're passionate about doing good? Peter asks. But even if you do suffer for doing right, you're blessed. Don't be afraid of what they threaten. Don't let them shake you.

Then comes one of the most important verses in the letter. In your hearts, set Jesus apart as Lord. "Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have." But do it gently and respectfully, with a clean conscience, so that people who slander your good behavior will be embarrassed. It's better to suffer for doing good, if that's God's will, than for doing evil.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Always Be Ready**

1 Peter 3:15 is one of the best verses in the Bible for teens. You probably know people who don't believe in God, or who think Christianity is outdated, harmful, or just dumb. Sooner or later, someone will ask you why you believe. Peter says: be ready. That doesn't mean you need to have every answer or win every argument. It means you've thought about why you believe, and you can explain it in your own words. Here are a few ways to get ready. Think about your own story: how did you come to faith, and what difference has Jesus made in your life? Learn the basic reasons Christians believe Jesus rose from the dead. Write down the questions your friends ask, and look for answers with a parent, pastor, or youth leader. And it's always okay to say, I don't know, but I'll find out.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Gentleness and Respect**

The second half of 3:15 is just as important as the first. How you share your faith matters as much as what you say. You can win an argument and lose a friend. Some Christians come across as angry, arrogant, or judgmental, and it

pushes people away from Jesus. Peter says to be gentle and respectful. Listen more than you talk. Ask questions. Take other people's views seriously. Don't mock or insult anyone. Remember that the goal isn't to prove you're right. It's to point people to Jesus.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Set Apart Christ as Lord**

Notice where Peter's instruction starts: in your heart. Before you can explain your faith to anyone else, Jesus has to be Lord of your own life. Your words will carry more weight if your friends see that you actually live what you believe. That's why Peter talks about a clear conscience. If your life contradicts your words, people won't listen.

Then Peter explains why suffering for doing right is worth it. Christ also suffered, once for all, for sins, the innocent for the guilty, to bring you to God. His body was put to death, but He was made alive by the Spirit. The NIV footnote offers another reading: made alive in the spirit. Then comes one of the hardest passages in the Bible. Peter says that Jesus "went and made proclamation to the imprisoned spirits," who had disobeyed long ago, when God patiently waited while Noah built the ark. Only eight people were saved through the water.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Spirits in Prison**

Martin Luther said this might be the most difficult passage in the New Testament. Who were the spirits in prison, and what did Jesus tell them? There are three main views. First, some, following Augustine, think the preexistent Christ preached through Noah, by the Spirit, to the people of Noah's day, who rejected the message and are now imprisoned, awaiting judgment. Second, many think that between His death and resurrection, Jesus went to the realm of the dead. Some in this view believe He announced His victory, others that He brought the righteous dead to heaven, sometimes called the harrowing of hell, and some that He offered the gospel to the dead. This is connected to the phrase in the Apostles' Creed that Jesus descended

to the dead, or to hell. Third, many modern scholars think the spirits are fallen angels connected to the strange story in Genesis 6:1–4, which some Jewish writings, like the book of 1 Enoch, describe as being imprisoned for their rebellion in Noah's time. In this view, after His resurrection, Jesus proclaimed His victory over them. Christians who love Jesus and trust the Bible hold each of these views. Whatever the details, Peter's point is clear: Jesus has won, and every power is under His authority.

BACKGROUND CHECK **He Descended to the Dead**

The Apostles' Creed, an ancient summary of Christian belief, says that Jesus was crucified, died, and was buried, and that He descended to the dead, or in older translations, into hell. Christians understand this line differently. Some see it as Jesus entering the realm of the dead, as described in 1 Peter 3:19 and 4:6. Others see it as a way of saying that He truly died, or that He experienced the full weight of separation from God on the cross. Some churches leave the line out. But all agree that Jesus truly died and truly rose again.

Peter says that the water of Noah's flood is a picture of baptism. "This water symbolizes baptism that now saves you also," he writes. It's not about washing dirt off your body, but about a promise made to God from a clean conscience. The NIV footnote offers another possible reading: an appeal to God for a clear conscience. And it saves you through Jesus' resurrection. Jesus has gone up to heaven and sits at God's right hand, and every angel, authority, and power is under His rule.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Baptism Saves You?**

This verse has been understood in different ways. Catholic, Orthodox, and many Lutheran and Anglican Christians believe that baptism is a means God uses to give new life, forgiveness, and the Holy Spirit, and they often baptize babies as well as adults. Many Reformed Christians see baptism as a sign and seal of God's covenant promises, also given to children of believers. Baptists, Pentecostals, and many other Protestants see baptism as a public declaration

of faith that follows salvation, so they baptize people old enough to believe for themselves. Notice what Peter himself emphasizes: baptism doesn't work like a magic bath. It's connected to a clear conscience before God and to Jesus' resurrection. All traditions agree that baptism is commanded by Jesus (Matthew 28:19), that it's connected to faith, and that salvation comes through Jesus. If you haven't been baptized, talk to your pastor about it.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Noah and Baptism**

Why does Peter connect Noah with baptism? In the flood, water brought judgment on a corrupt world, but the ark carried Noah's family safely through it to a new beginning. In baptism, water pictures death to the old life and the start of a new one. Paul uses a similar picture: in baptism, we're buried with Christ and raised to new life (Romans 6:3–4). Jesus is the ark who carries us through judgment into new life.

KEY VERSE

But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander.

1 Peter 3:15–16 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. What do you think real beauty is? Where does our culture say it comes from?
2. If a friend asked you today why you believe in Jesus, what would you say?
3. Have you ever seen someone share their faith in a way that pushed people away? What would gentleness and respect look like instead?
4. Which view of the spirits in prison seems most convincing to you? Why?

TRY THIS *Write a one-page answer to the question, Why do you believe in Jesus? Include your own story and one or two reasons. Then share it with a parent, youth leader, or Christian friend and ask for feedback. Pray for one friend who might ask you someday.*

CHAPTER 4

Different on Purpose

1 Peter 4

Since Jesus suffered in His body, Peter says, arm yourselves with the same mindset, because whoever has suffered in the body has finished with sin. From then on, they no longer spend the rest of their lives chasing human desires, but doing what God wants.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Arm Yourself**
>
> Peter uses military language here. Get armed. Get ready for battle. The weapon is an attitude, the same attitude Jesus had: a willingness to suffer rather than give in to sin. What does it mean that someone who has suffered is finished with sin? Interpreters aren't sure. It may mean that when you're willing to suffer for Jesus, sin loses its grip on you, or that believers who share in Christ's death have broken with sin's power. Either way, Peter is saying that following Jesus will cost you something, and it's worth it.

You've already spent enough time doing what pagans like to do, Peter says: wild living, lust, getting drunk, partying, and worshiping idols. Now your old friends think it's strange that you don't join them in their reckless lifestyle, so they insult you. But they'll have to answer to God, who is ready to judge everyone, living and dead.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Why Aren't You Coming?**
>
> Peter describes something many teens know well: the pressure to go along with the crowd. If you're the one who doesn't drink at the party, doesn't watch what everyone else is watching, doesn't join in the group chat when it

turns cruel, or doesn't hook up, people might think you're strange. They might laugh at you, leave you out, or call you judgmental. Peter's readers faced the same thing. Their friends were shocked when they stopped joining in. It's hard to be different. But Peter says you're not missing out. You're living for something better. And having even one friend who shares your values makes it much easier. Look for that friend.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Pagan Parties**

In Peter's world, much of social life revolved around the gods. Trade guilds held banquets in temples, with sacrifices, heavy drinking, and sometimes sexual immorality. Family celebrations and city festivals honored the gods. For a new Christian, saying no could mean losing business, friends, and status. It wasn't just about avoiding a party. It was about changing your whole social life.

Peter adds a difficult sentence. The good news was preached even to people who have since died, so that although they were judged by human standards in the body, they might live in the spirit, the way God does.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Preached to the Dead**

Like 3:19, this verse is hard to interpret. Many think it refers to believers who heard the gospel while they were alive and have since died. The world condemned them, and they died like everyone else, but they live with God. Others connect it with 3:19 and think it means Jesus proclaimed the gospel to people who had already died. Most interpreters don't think it teaches that people get a second chance after death, but Christians discuss this. Peter's main point is clear: God will judge everyone fairly, and those who belong to Him will live.

Everything is about to reach its end, Peter says. So keep your head clear and stay alert, so you can pray. Most of all, keep loving each other deeply, since love throws a covering over a huge number of sins.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The End Is Near?**

Peter wrote nearly two thousand years ago that the end was near. Was he wrong? Christians believe that with Jesus' death and resurrection, the last chapter of history began. We're living in the last days, however long they last. Peter himself later explained that God isn't slow, but patient, giving people time to turn to Him (2 Peter 3:8–9). The point isn't to set dates. It's to live ready.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Love Covers Sins**

What does it mean that love covers sins? It doesn't mean love hides abuse or ignores serious wrongdoing. It means that love doesn't keep score. It forgives small offenses, gives people the benefit of the doubt, and doesn't broadcast other people's failures. Proverbs says something similar: hatred stirs up fights, but love covers wrongs (Proverbs 10:12). In a world where people screenshot every mistake and cancel people for one bad moment, that kind of love stands out.

Be hospitable to each other, without complaining. Each of you has received a gift from God. Use it to serve others, as good managers of the many forms of God's grace. If you speak, speak as though you're delivering God's words. If you serve, serve with the strength God gives you. That way, God will get the praise through Jesus in everything. Glory and power belong to Him forever. Amen.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Your Gift**

Peter says every believer has a gift from God. Maybe you're good at encouraging people, organizing things, teaching, making music, fixing things, listening, or welcoming new people. Paul lists other gifts in Romans 12 and 1 Corinthians 12. Your gift isn't for showing off. It's for serving others. Ask yourself: what do I love doing that helps people? What do others say I'm good at? Then use it, at church, at school, at home, and in your community. God gave it to you for a reason.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Hospitality**

In the ancient world, traveling Christians depended on believers opening their homes. Hospitality literally means love of strangers. Peter adds: without grumbling, because hospitality can be inconvenient. For you, hospitality might look like inviting the new kid to sit with you, having friends over, or making sure no one's left out of the group.

Dear friends, Peter says, don't be shocked by the fiery trial you're going through, as if something weird were happening to you. Instead, be glad that you're sharing in Christ's sufferings, so you'll be filled with joy on the day His glory is unveiled. If people insult you because of Christ, you're blessed, because God's glorious Spirit rests on you.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Don't Be Surprised**

Many people think that following Jesus should make life easier. Peter says the opposite: expect opposition. Jesus told His disciples that the world would hate them because it hated Him first (John 15:18–20). Around the world today, millions of Christians face discrimination, imprisonment, or violence for their faith. In some countries, simply owning a Bible or attending church can be dangerous. Take a moment to pray for persecuted believers. And if you face mocking or exclusion because of your faith, remember that you're not alone, and it's not strange. You're in good company.

But make sure you're not suffering for being a murderer, a thief, a criminal, or even a busybody. If you suffer for being a Christian, don't be ashamed. Praise God that you carry that name.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Not All Suffering Is Persecution**

Peter makes an important distinction. If you're mocked because you follow Jesus, that's honorable. But if people dislike you because you're rude, self-righteous, nosy, or judgmental, that's not persecution. That's the result of bad behavior. Some Christians confuse the two. Peter even includes meddlers on his list, people who stick their noses into other people's business. Before

you claim you're being persecuted, ask yourself honestly whether you're being treated badly for Jesus, or for acting like a jerk.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Name Christian**

The word Christian appears only three times in the New Testament: here, in Acts 11:26, where believers in Antioch were first given the name, and in Acts 26:28, when King Agrippa used it, maybe sarcastically. It probably started as a nickname from outsiders, meaning Christ's people, and possibly as an insult. Peter says to wear it proudly.

Judgment begins with God's own household, Peter says. And if it starts with us, what will happen to people who reject God's good news? He quotes Proverbs 11:31, which says that if it's hard for good people to be saved, things will be much worse for the ungodly and sinners. So when God allows you to suffer, place yourself in the hands of the Creator who keeps His promises, and keep doing good.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Faithful Creator**

Peter ends this chapter by calling God our faithful Creator. It's the only time that title appears in the New Testament. When everything around you is falling apart, remember who made you, and that He is faithful. He won't drop you. He knows how you're made, and He'll take care of what He made.

KEY VERSE

Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God's grace in its various forms.

1 Peter 4:10 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. When have you felt pressure to go along with the crowd? How did you handle it?
2. What does it mean to you that love covers a multitude of sins? Is there someone you need to stop keeping score with?
3. What gifts has God given you? How could you use one to serve someone this week?
4. What's the difference between being persecuted for Jesus and being disliked for bad behavior?

TRY THIS *Ask two people who know you well what they think your gifts are. Then pick one gift and use it to serve someone this week, at home, at church, or at school. Also, look up a ministry that serves persecuted Christians and pray for one country by name each day.*

CHAPTER 5

The Shepherd and the Lion

1 Peter 5

Peter now speaks to the leaders of the churches, the elders. He appeals to them as one elder to another, as someone who saw Christ suffer, and who will also share in the glory that's coming.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **A Fellow Elder**
>
> Peter could have reminded the elders that he was one of the Twelve, that Jesus had personally chosen him, and that he had seen the risen Lord. Instead, he calls himself a fellow elder, one of them. That's real humility. Catholic tradition sees Peter as the first bishop of Rome and the first pope, with a special role among the apostles. Protestant and Orthodox Christians honor Peter as a leading apostle but understand his role differently. Here, though, Peter simply stands alongside other leaders as a fellow servant.

Take care of God's flock that's in your charge, he tells them. Watch over them, not because you're forced to, but willingly, the way God wants. Don't do it to get money, but because you're eager to serve. Don't boss around the people in your care, but be an example for them. Then, when the Chief Shepherd appears, you'll receive a crown of glory that never fades.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Feed My Sheep**
>
> Peter is passing on the job Jesus gave him on the beach after the resurrection: take care of My sheep (John 21:15–17). A shepherd's job is to feed, guide, protect, and look for lost sheep. Good leaders aren't bosses. They're servants.

Jesus is the Chief Shepherd. Every pastor, youth leader, and parent is an under-shepherd, accountable to Him. And unlike the wreaths of leaves given to winning athletes in the ancient world, which wilted in a few days, the crown Jesus gives never fades.

BACKGROUND CHECK **When Leaders Fail**

Peter warns leaders not to abuse their power, use their position for money, or dominate the people in their care. Sadly, some church leaders have done exactly that, including some who have abused children and teens. If a leader at church, or anywhere else, makes you uncomfortable, asks you to keep secrets, touches you inappropriately, or uses their position to control you, it's not your fault, and you should tell a trusted adult right away. If they don't listen, tell another one. Good leaders welcome accountability. Jesus is fiercely protective of His sheep.

In the same way, Peter says, younger people, accept the authority of your elders. And all of you, put on humility like clothing in your dealings with each other. Peter quotes Proverbs 3:34, as James also did: God opposes the proud but is generous to the humble. So humble yourselves under God's powerful hand, and He will lift you up at the right time.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Respecting Older People**

Peter tells younger people to respect and listen to the older leaders in the church. That can be hard for teens who are figuring out their own beliefs and sometimes think adults just don't get it. And sometimes they don't. But older believers often have wisdom that comes from experience. Respect doesn't mean you can never disagree, ask questions, or think for yourself. It also doesn't mean obeying anyone who asks you to do something wrong or harmful. It means being humble enough to learn. And remember, Peter says all of you, older people too, should be humble toward each other.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Clothed in Humility**

The word Peter uses for clothe yourselves describes tying on an apron, the kind a servant wore to work. Maybe Peter was thinking of the night Jesus tied a towel around His waist and washed the disciples' feet, including Peter's (John 13:4–5). Peter had refused at first. Now he tells everyone to put on the servant's towel. Humility isn't thinking you're worthless. It's thinking about yourself less and about others more.

Then comes one of the most comforting verses in the Bible. Throw all your worries onto God, Peter says, because He cares about you.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Cast Your Anxiety**

The word Peter uses for cast means to throw something onto something else, like throwing a blanket over a donkey before loading it. Think of the things that make you anxious: grades, college, friendships, family problems, your future, your body, your phone, the news. Peter says: throw them on God. All of them. Not because your worries are silly, but because He cares about you. You can tell Him exactly what's bothering you, as often as you need to. Try naming your worries out loud or writing them down, and then giving them to God one by one. Jesus said something similar: don't worry about tomorrow, because your Father knows what you need (Matthew 6:25–34).

BACKGROUND CHECK **Anxiety Is Real**

Bringing your worries to God is powerful. But anxiety can also be a medical condition, and many teens struggle with it. If your worry is constant, keeps you from sleeping or eating, causes panic attacks, or makes it hard to function, it's not a sign that you lack faith. Talk to a parent, a school counselor, or a doctor. Counseling and, when needed, medication can be some of the ways God helps. Prayer and professional help go together. And if you ever have thoughts of hurting yourself, tell a trusted adult immediately or contact a crisis line in your country. You matter to God and to the people around you.

Then Peter gives a warning. Stay alert and clear-headed. "Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour." Resist him, standing strong in your faith, because you know that believers all over the world are going through the same kinds of suffering.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Roaring Lion**

In Peter's world, lions were terrifying predators, and some Christians would later be killed by lions in Roman arenas. Lions often target animals that are young, sick, or separated from the herd. The devil works the same way. He looks for people who are isolated, discouraged, worn out, or careless. That's why Peter connects this warning to staying alert and to the worldwide family of believers. You're safer with the flock. Peter knew this from experience. Jesus had warned him that Satan wanted to sift him like wheat, and Peter fell that night (Luke 22:31–34). But Jesus prayed for him, and he came back.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Not Paranoia**

Peter isn't telling you to be afraid of the devil or to see demons behind every bad thing. Christians hold different views about how the devil works, but they agree that evil is real, and that Jesus has already defeated it. The devil may roar, but Jesus is the Lion of the tribe of Judah (Revelation 5:5). Resisting the devil usually looks ordinary: praying, reading Scripture, staying connected to other believers, saying no to temptation, and telling the truth. You don't fight alone. Peter reminds you that believers around the world are standing with you.

After you've suffered for a little while, Peter promises, the God who gives every kind of grace, and who invited you into His eternal glory in Christ, will personally put you back together, and make you strong, solid, and steady. Power belongs to Him forever. Amen.

BACKGROUND CHECK **He Will Restore You**

Peter knew what it was like to be restored. After his worst failure, Jesus didn't give up on him. He restored him, made him strong, and gave him a purpose.

Peter promises the same for his readers. Your suffering is real, but it's temporary. God's glory is forever. Whatever you're going through, God is not finished with you.

Peter ends the letter by saying he has written briefly, and that Silas helped him. He considers Silas a faithful brother. He wrote to encourage them and to testify that this is God's true grace, and he urges them to hold their ground in it. The NIV footnote explains that the Greek has Silvanus, another form of the name Silas. Then he sends greetings from the church in Babylon, which shares their chosen status, and from Mark, whom he calls his son. Greet each other with a kiss of love, he says. May everyone who belongs to Christ have peace.

BACKGROUND CHECK **A Kiss of Love**

In Peter's culture, family members greeted each other with a kiss on the cheek, as many cultures still do. Peter tells believers to greet each other the same way, because they're family. Slaves and free people, rich and poor, Jews and Gentiles, men and women, all greeting each other as brothers and sisters. In your culture, it might look like a handshake, a hug, or a warm hello. The point is to treat other believers like family.

KEY VERSE

Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you.

1 Peter 5:7 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. What makes a good leader? Who's a leader in your life who serves well?
2. What does humility look like for a teenager?
3. What worries are you carrying right now? What would it look like to throw them onto God?
4. When are you most vulnerable to the roaring lion? What helps you stand firm?

TRY THIS *Make a worry list. Write down everything that's making you anxious. Then pray through it, one item at a time, telling God about each worry and giving it to Him. Keep the list, and in a month, look back to see how God has worked. If any worry feels too heavy to carry alone, share it with a trusted adult this week.*

THE END (AND THE BEGINNING)

Now What? The Bottom Line

You've just read 1 Peter, the letter of a man who failed Jesus badly and was forgiven completely. Peter knew what it was like to be ashamed. He also knew what it was like to be found, restored, and given a living hope.

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 loves you more than you can imagine. He wants you to know Him.

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

2 We've all turned away.

We've all gone our own way instead of God's. Peter certainly did. 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, who never sinned, died on the cross in our place and rose again, to bring us back to God.

> *For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God.* **1 Peter 3:18 (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. No failure is too big for Him to forgive. Just ask Peter.

> *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 rose again. 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 a living hope, help me bring my worries to You, and make me ready to tell others why I believe. 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 Peter straight through. Then read 2 Peter, the next letter in the New Testament, which Peter wrote near the end of his life.

Find your people. Get connected to a church where the Bible is taught and Jesus is honored. Ask about being baptized.

Talk to God every day. Bring Him your worries, your questions, and your thanks. He cares about you. Peter promised.

Not Sure Yet?

Not ready? That's honest, and honesty is a good place to start. Keep asking. Keep reading. Peter once had plenty of doubts too. Just don't settle for "I already know all that."

Because if Peter is right, Jesus really did rise from the dead, and He's still in the business of second chances.

And the God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast.

1 Peter 5:10 (NIV)

THE SECOND LETTER OF PETER

The King's Last Word

2 Peter, Unfiltered

For teens who think they've heard it all

BILL McLEOD

Papa Bill Books

The King's Last Word: The Second Letter of Peter, 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. Second Peter is written for people who think they know it all already, and its message is simple: keep growing, and don't let anyone talk you out of the truth.

This short letter presents itself as Peter's final words. He knows he doesn't have much time left. So he does what people often do at the end of their lives: he tells the people he loves what matters most. Grow in your faith. Remember what's true. Watch out for people who will lead you astray. And don't give up hope, because Jesus is coming back.

Second Peter might be the most debated book in the New Testament. Scholars have argued for centuries about who wrote it. We'll look at that question honestly. But whoever held the pen, Christians have recognized this letter as part of Scripture for more than sixteen hundred years, and it has a lot to say to a generation surrounded by voices telling them what to believe.

You live in a world of influencers, conspiracy theories, fake news, and people who confidently say whatever gets clicks. Peter's readers faced something similar: smooth-talking teachers who promised freedom and delivered slavery. This letter will help you tell the difference.

So read it like a last letter from someone who walked with Jesus, and who wants you to finish strong. Let's go.

How This Book Works

This book walks through all three chapters of 2 Peter, in order, one chapter of this book for each chapter of the letter. Each one explains what the letter is saying in plain language and adds background about the ancient world, the Old Testament stories Peter mentions, and the questions this letter raises.

Before chapter 1, a section called Setting the Scene explains why this letter reads like a farewell speech, presents the debate about who wrote it as fairly as I can, describes the false teachers it warns about, and introduces its close connection to the letter of Jude. 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 Peter 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, Paul's letters, Hebrews, James, and 1 Peter, 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 Peter 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).

Second Peter is the most disputed book in the New Testament. I've presented the reasons many scholars doubt that Peter wrote it, including its slow acceptance into the canon and its farewell-testament style, alongside the case for Peter's authorship, without forcing a verdict. I've also explained the letter's close relationship with Jude and the different views about which came first.

Several passages are presented with the main Christian interpretations: how prophecy and Scripture came from God (1:20–21), Tartarus and the fallen angels (2:4), the warning about those who turn away after knowing the truth (2:20–22), with a gentle note

for anxious readers, and whether the present world will be destroyed or renewed (3:10–13).

Passages highlighted as especially relevant for teens include the ladder of virtues (1:5–8), Peter's eyewitness testimony to the Transfiguration (1:16–18), discerning false teachers and online influencers (chapter 2), and God's patience, since He doesn't want anyone to perish (3:8–9).

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 keep growing, and won't be talked out of the truth.

Grace and peace,

Bill McLeod

Papa Bill Books

BEFORE YOU OPEN THE LETTER

Setting the Scene

A Last Letter

Imagine you knew you had only a few weeks to live. What would you tell the people you love? You probably wouldn't waste words. You'd remind them of what matters most, warn them about dangers ahead, and encourage them to keep going.

That's what 2 Peter sounds like. The writer says he knows that he will soon set aside the tent of his body, as Jesus had made clear to him (1:13–14). That probably refers to the time on the beach when Jesus told Peter that, when he was old, he would be led where he didn't want to go, which John explains as a hint about how Peter would die (John 21:18–19). So the writer wants to leave his readers a reminder they can hold on to after he's gone (1:15).

Farewell Speeches

In the ancient world, there was a popular kind of writing called a testament, or farewell speech. A famous person facing death gathers family or followers, looks back on their life, gives final instructions, and predicts what will happen after they're gone. The Bible has several. Jacob blesses his twelve sons before he dies (Genesis 49). Moses gives a long farewell to Israel (Deuteronomy 31–33). Paul says goodbye to the elders from Ephesus (Acts 20:17–38), and 2 Timothy reads like Paul's last will. Jesus Himself gave a long farewell talk to His disciples at the Last Supper (John 13–17).

Second Peter has many features of a testament: the speaker's approaching death, reminders of what he taught, warnings about false teachers who will come in the future, and encouragement to stay faithful. Outside the Bible, Jewish writers in the centuries around Jesus' time wrote many testaments in the names of famous ancient figures, like the Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs, which present the farewell speeches of Jacob's sons. Everyone knew that Jacob's sons hadn't written them. That's one reason some scholars think 2 Peter may belong to this kind of writing too. Others point out that real people really did give farewell messages, and that Peter, facing death, would naturally write one.

The Most Disputed Book

Of all twenty-seven books in the New Testament, 2 Peter is the one whose authorship has been most debated, and not just by modern scholars. The early church had questions too. Here are the main reasons many scholars today think it was written by someone else, perhaps a follower of Peter, after his death, writing in his name.

First, the style. The Greek of 2 Peter is very different from 1 Peter. It uses unusual, elaborate words and a style some describe as ornate. Around AD 400, the scholar Jerome noticed the difference and suggested that Peter may have used a different helper for each letter.

Second, slow acceptance. Unlike 1 Peter, 2 Peter isn't clearly quoted by any surviving writer until the third century. Origen, around AD 230, mentioned that some people doubted it. In the early fourth century, the historian Eusebius listed it among the books that were disputed, though accepted by many. It was included in Athanasius'

famous list of New Testament books in AD 367 and affirmed by church councils at Hippo and Carthage in the 390s.

Third, the letter refers to a collection of Paul's letters and seems to treat them as Scripture (3:15–16), which some think points to a later time. Fourth, the scoffers say that the ancestors have died and nothing has changed (3:4), which might suggest that the first generation of Christians had passed away. Fifth, the letter shares a great deal of material with the short letter of Jude, and many scholars think 2 Peter borrowed from it. Even John Calvin, the sixteenth-century reformer, had doubts about whether Peter wrote it himself, though he accepted it as Scripture and suggested that a disciple may have written it at Peter's direction. Scholars who hold the later view usually date it somewhere between AD 80 and 130.

The Case for Peter

Other scholars, and many Christians throughout history, believe Peter wrote this letter himself, probably shortly before his death in the mid-60s AD. Here are their main reasons.

First, the letter makes strong personal claims. The writer names himself Simeon Peter, an old Hebrew form of his name used elsewhere in the New Testament only once, by James (Acts 15:14). A forger might be expected to use the more familiar form. He claims to be an eyewitness of the Transfiguration, mentions Jesus' prediction of his death, and refers to his earlier letter (3:1).

Second, the different style might be explained by a different secretary, as Jerome suggested, or by the different subject. First Peter comforts suffering believers. Second Peter fights false teachers, and quotes or adapts material from Jude, which would affect its vocabulary.

Third, the early church was careful. It rejected many books written in Peter's name, like the Gospel of Peter and the Apocalypse of Peter, but accepted this one after long examination. Around AD 200, the writer Tertullian reports that a church leader who admitted writing a book about Paul in Paul's name was removed from his position. Supporters of Peter's authorship argue that this shows early Christians didn't accept writing in an apostle's name, even with good intentions.

Fourth, Paul's letters were shared among churches early (Colossians 4:16), and the ancestors in 3:4 could mean the Old Testament fathers, like Abraham, rather than the first Christians.

Christians who love the Bible and take it seriously hold both views. Those who think a follower wrote it usually see it as faithfully passing on Peter's teaching. All agree that it belongs in the Bible and speaks with God's authority. In this book, I call the writer Peter, as the letter does.

Who Were the Readers?

The letter doesn't say exactly where its readers lived. It's addressed broadly to believers whose faith is just as valuable as the apostles' own (1:1). But if the earlier letter mentioned in 3:1 is 1 Peter, the readers may be the same believers scattered across the provinces of what is now Turkey. Most of them were probably Gentiles who had turned to Jesus from a pagan background.

The False Teachers

Peter wrote to warn his readers about false teachers who had come into the church, or were about to. From what he says, we can piece together what they taught. They denied that Jesus would return, and they mocked the idea of a final judgment (3:3–4). They seem to have

called the apostles' teaching about Jesus' coming a set of clever myths (1:16). They claimed to offer freedom, but used it as an excuse for sexual immorality and greed (2:2–3, 13–14, 19). They were persuasive, arrogant, and good at manipulating people who were new in the faith (2:14, 18).

Some scholars think these teachers were influenced by ideas popular among Greek philosophers like the Epicureans, who taught that the gods don't get involved in human affairs, that there's no judgment after death, and that the goal of life is pleasure and freedom from fear. If there's no judgment, why not do whatever you want? Peter's answer is that God has judged before, and He will judge again.

Peter and Jude

One of the most interesting things about 2 Peter is how closely chapter 2 resembles the short letter of Jude, which comes just before Revelation in your Bible. Both warn against false teachers who are greedy, immoral, and arrogant. Both mention angels who sinned and are held in darkness for judgment, Sodom and Gomorrah, Balaam, slandering celestial beings, waterless clouds or springs, and scoffers in the last days. Many phrases are nearly identical. Clearly, one writer used the other, or both used a common source. We'll look at the different views in chapter 2.

Why 2 Peter Matters

Second Peter answers questions every generation asks. How do I know the story about Jesus isn't just a made-up myth? Where did the Bible come from? How can I tell a true teacher from a fake? If Jesus is coming back, why hasn't He come yet? What will happen to the world? And how do I keep growing instead of drifting? Peter's

answers are rooted in eyewitness testimony, Scripture, and the character of a patient God who wants everyone to come home.

The Map

Chapter 1: God's power and promises, the ladder of virtues, Peter's eyewitness testimony, and where Scripture came from.

Chapter 2: False teachers, examples of God's judgment and rescue, and the empty promise of freedom.

Chapter 3: Scoffers, God's patience, the day of the Lord, new heavens and a new earth, Paul's letters, and growing in grace.

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CHAPTER 1

Keep Climbing

2 Peter 1

The letter opens with a name: Simeon Peter. He describes himself as both a servant and an apostle of Jesus. He writes to people whose faith is every bit as valuable as his own, a faith they received through the fairness and goodness of Jesus, whom he calls our God and Savior.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Equal Faith**

Peter had walked with Jesus for three years. He had seen miracles, heard Jesus teach, and met Him after the resurrection. His readers had never seen Jesus at all. But Peter says their faith is just as precious as his. There's no first-class and economy seating in God's family. The newest believer and the oldest apostle stand on the same ground: the goodness of Jesus. If you ever feel like a second-rate Christian compared to people who seem more spiritual, remember that.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Our God and Savior**

In the opening verse, Peter calls Jesus our God and Savior. In Greek, both titles are joined under a single article, which most scholars think means they refer to one person: Jesus. It's one of several places in the New Testament where Jesus is directly called God (see also John 1:1; 20:28; Titus 2:13). For a Jewish fisherman who grew up saying that there is one God, this was an astonishing thing to write about a man he had eaten breakfast with.

Peter wishes them grace and peace in full measure, as they come to know God and Jesus better. Then he reminds them what God has already given them. By His power, God has provided everything they need to live a life that honors Him. It all comes through knowing the One whose own splendor and goodness invited them in. And through that splendor and goodness, God has given them amazing, valuable promises, so that they can share in God's own nature and get free from the rot that evil desires have brought into the world.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Everything You Need**

Peter says that God has already supplied all that's required for you to live for Him. Not most things. Everything. That doesn't mean you'll never struggle, or that you don't need other people, church, or wise advice. It means you're not missing some secret ingredient. You don't need a special experience or a more spiritual personality. If you know Jesus, you have access to His power, His promises, and His Spirit. The question isn't whether God has given you enough. It's whether you'll use what He's given.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Sharing in God's Nature**

This is one of the most remarkable phrases in the Bible. Peter says believers can share in, or participate in, the divine nature. What does that mean? It doesn't mean we become gods, or that we stop being human. Orthodox Christians speak of theosis, a lifelong process in which God's grace transforms believers more and more into His likeness, so that they share in His life and love, while God remains God and we remain creatures. Catholic Christians speak of sanctifying grace, by which God shares His own life with the soul. Many Protestants understand it as union with Christ and being renewed in God's moral character, becoming holy, loving, and good as He is. All agree that God doesn't just forgive us. He changes us from the inside out.

Then comes the ladder. Because of all this, Peter says, put in every effort. Start with faith, and build on it. To faith, add goodness. To

goodness, add knowledge. Then self-control. Then endurance. Then godliness. Then love for fellow believers as family. And finally, love. If these qualities are yours and keep growing, they'll keep your knowledge of Jesus from being useless and fruitless. But if someone lacks them, they're shortsighted, even blind. They've forgotten that their old sins were washed away.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Ladder of Virtues**

Peter's list is often called a ladder, because each quality builds on the one before. Ancient writers loved lists like this; teachers called it a chain. Here's what each word means.

Faith: trust in Jesus. It's the foundation, the first rung, and everything else stands on it.

Goodness: moral excellence, being good at being good. The Greek word described anything that did its job well, like a sharp knife or a fast horse.

Knowledge: understanding God and His ways, and knowing how to apply what you know.

Self-control: mastering your desires, instead of letting them master you.

Perseverance: hanging in there when life is hard, or when you're tempted to give up.

Godliness: a life centered on God, showing reverence for Him in everyday things.

Mutual affection: the Greek word is philadelphia, love among brothers and sisters. It's treating other believers like family.

Love: the Greek word is agape, the self-giving love that God shows us, love that seeks the good of others, even enemies. It's the top of the ladder.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Effort and Grace**

Notice that Peter says to make every effort, right after he says that God has already supplied all we need. Which is it? Is the Christian life God's work, or ours? Peter's answer is both. God gives the power, the promises, and the new nature. We respond by putting in the effort. Think of it like a gift card. Someone gives it to you, and it's totally free. But if you never use it, it does

you no good. Grace isn't opposed to effort. It's opposed to earning. You don't work to be saved. You work because you've been saved, and God works in you as you do (Philippians 2:12–13).

BACKGROUND CHECK **Climbing the Ladder**

Which rung on Peter's ladder is hardest for you? Maybe self-control is a struggle, with your phone, your temper, your appetite, or your thought life. Maybe perseverance is hard, because you quit things when they get difficult. Maybe loving other Christians is the challenge, because some of them are annoying. Peter doesn't expect you to master all eight at once. He says to keep growing in them. Pick one, ask God for help, and take one step this week.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Nearsighted**

Peter says someone without these qualities is nearsighted. A nearsighted person can see what's right in front of them, but everything far away is blurry. Spiritual nearsightedness means focusing only on the here and now: today's drama, this weekend's plans, what everyone thinks of you right now. You lose sight of the bigger picture: who God is, what He's done for you, and where you're headed. Peter says people like that have forgotten that they've been forgiven. Remembering grace is what keeps us growing.

So, brothers and sisters, Peter says, work hard to make your calling and choosing sure. If you do these things, you'll never fall. Jesus, our Lord and Savior, will throw the doors of His never-ending kingdom wide open for you.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Make It Sure**

What does it mean to make your calling and choosing sure? Peter isn't saying that you earn your place in God's family by being good. He's saying that a growing, changing life is evidence that God's call on your life is real. Christians from different traditions understand assurance of salvation in different ways. Some emphasize that believers can be confident because of God's promises. Others emphasize that faithful perseverance is needed until the end. All agree

that a life with no growth at all is a warning sign, and that a life of growing love is a sign of God at work. If you're worried about whether you really belong to God, look to Jesus first, not to your own performance, and talk to a mature Christian about it.

Peter says he'll keep reminding them of these things, even though they already know them and are standing firm. As long as he's still living in his body, which he pictures as a tent, he thinks it's right to keep refreshing their memories, because he knows he'll soon take the tent down, as Jesus made clear to him. And he'll do his best to make sure that after he leaves, they'll still be able to remember.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Reminders**

You might think, I already know this. Why does Peter keep repeating himself? Because knowing something and remembering it when it counts are two different things. You know you should be kind to your siblings, but do you remember when they're annoying you? Peter knows that people forget, drift, and get distracted. That's why we need to keep reading the Bible, hearing it taught, and talking about it, even when we've heard it before. Repetition isn't a waste. It's how truth sinks in.

BACKGROUND CHECK **A Tent and an Exit**

Peter calls his body a tent, a temporary home that will one day be taken down (Paul uses the same picture in 2 Corinthians 5:1). And the word he uses for his departure is exodus, the same word used for the Israelites leaving Egypt. Interestingly, it's also the word Luke uses when he describes Moses and Elijah talking with Jesus at the Transfiguration about His departure, His coming death in Jerusalem (Luke 9:31). For Peter, death isn't the end. It's an exodus, a journey home.

Then Peter makes a bold claim. The apostles' message about Jesus' powerful coming, he insists, wasn't a set of clever tales. In his words, "we did not follow cleverly devised stories." They had seen Jesus' majesty for themselves. God the Father honored Him and

gave Him glory, as a voice spoke from the Majestic Glory, calling Jesus His dearly loved Son who brought Him joy. Peter says he and the others heard that voice from heaven with their own ears, on the holy mountain where they stood beside Jesus.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Transfiguration**

Peter is talking about one of the most amazing events in the Gospels (Matthew 17:1–8; Mark 9:2–8; Luke 9:28–36). Jesus took Peter, James, and John up a high mountain. There, Jesus was transformed. His face shone like the sun, and His clothes became dazzling white. Moses and Elijah appeared and talked with Him. Peter, not knowing what to say, offered to build three shelters, one each for Jesus, Moses, and Elijah. Then a bright cloud covered them, and a voice from the cloud said that Jesus was God's Son, whom He loved, and told them to listen to Him. The disciples fell on their faces, terrified. When they looked up, they saw only Jesus. Tradition places the event on Mount Tabor in Galilee, though some think it was Mount Hermon, farther north. The NIV footnote on 1:17 points to the Gospel accounts.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Eyewitnesses**

The false teachers apparently said that the apostles' message about Jesus' power and return was a set of clever myths, the kind of stories ancient people told about gods and heroes. Peter answers: we were there. We saw it. We heard it. That's an important point. Christianity isn't based on a philosophy or a feeling. It's based on events that people claimed to have witnessed: Jesus' miracles, His death, His resurrection. The New Testament writers repeatedly say that they're reporting what they saw and heard (Luke 1:1–4; 1 John 1:1–3; 1 Corinthians 15:3–8). You can investigate their claims. You can ask whether they're reliable. But you can't say they were only trying to write inspiring fiction. They said it really happened.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Myths and Misinformation**

We live in a time when it's hard to know what's true. Deepfakes, edited videos, rumors, and conspiracy theories spread fast. Some people even say all religious claims are just myths. How can you tell the difference? Ask good

questions. Who's making this claim? Were they there? Do other sources confirm it? What do they gain from it? Were they willing to suffer for it? The apostles gained no money or power from their message. Most of them were persecuted, and many were killed. People rarely die for something they know they made up.

Peter goes on. We also have the message of the prophets, which is fully trustworthy. You'll do well to pay close attention to it, like a lamp lighting up a dark room, until dawn comes and the morning star comes up within you.

BACKGROUND CHECK **A Lamp in the Dark**

Peter compares Scripture to a lamp in a dark room. It doesn't light up everything at once, but it shows you enough to take the next step. Psalm 119:105 uses a similar picture. The morning star is the planet Venus, which shines brightly just before dawn. Revelation calls Jesus the bright morning star (Revelation 22:16). Peter seems to be saying that the Bible guides us now, in the dark, until Jesus returns and the full light of day arrives.

Then Peter says something important about where Scripture came from. First of all, understand this: no prophecy in Scripture came from the prophet's own interpretation. Prophecy never started with a human decision. Instead, "prophets, though human, spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit."

BACKGROUND CHECK **Not Their Own Interpretation**

Interpreters understand 1:20 in two main ways. Some think Peter is talking about where prophecy came from. The prophets didn't just make up their own ideas about the future or offer their personal opinions. Their message came from God. Others think Peter is talking about how prophecy is understood. No one should interpret Scripture privately, on their own, cut off from the teaching of the apostles and the church. The false teachers may have been twisting prophecies to suit themselves. Verse 21 seems to support

the first view, but both ideas are true and important: Scripture came from God, and we read it best together, not alone.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Carried Along**

The word Peter uses for carried along is the same word Luke uses for a ship being driven by the wind (Acts 27:15, 17). The prophets were like sailing ships, and the Holy Spirit was the wind in their sails. Notice that Peter says the prophets were still human. God didn't turn them into robots or take over their hands. They wrote with their own personalities, vocabularies, and styles. Isaiah sounds different from Jeremiah, and Paul sounds different from John. But the Spirit moved them, so that what they spoke came from God.

BACKGROUND CHECK **How Did God Inspire Scripture?**

Christians agree that the Bible is inspired by God, but they explain it in different ways. Some hold that God guided the human writers so that every word of the original texts is exactly what He intended, and is without error in everything it teaches. Others believe God inspired the writers' message and purpose, while allowing for human limitations in details of history or science, which don't affect the Bible's central teaching. Catholic and Orthodox Christians see Scripture as inspired and authoritative, and read it within the living tradition of the church. Through all these views runs a shared belief: the Bible is God's word, given through human beings, and it's trustworthy to guide us to salvation and to a life that pleases God (2 Timothy 3:15–17).

KEY VERSE

For this very reason, make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; and to godliness, mutual affection; and to mutual affection, love.

2 Peter 1:5–7 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Which quality on Peter's ladder is strongest in your life? Which needs the most work?
2. How do grace and effort work together in the Christian life?
3. Why does it matter that Peter says he was an eyewitness?
4. How would you explain to a friend where the Bible came from?

TRY THIS *Copy Peter's ladder of virtues onto a card. Pick one quality to focus on this week. Each day, write down one specific thing you did to grow in it. At the end of the week, ask someone who knows you well whether they noticed a difference.*

CHAPTER 2

Spot the Fakes

2 Peter 2

Peter now turns to the danger he's most worried about. In the past, he says, there were false prophets among God's people, and in the same way false teachers will show up in your churches. They'll sneak in destructive teachings, even rejecting the Master who paid the price for them, and they'll bring quick destruction on themselves.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Sneaking In**

Peter says the false teachers will sneak their teachings in. They won't announce, Hi, I'm a false teacher. They'll sound reasonable, attractive, and spiritual. They'll mix truth with lies. That's what makes false teaching dangerous. A lie that's 90 percent true is harder to spot than an obvious one. Jesus warned that false prophets would come in sheep's clothing (Matthew 7:15). The best way to recognize a fake is to know the real thing really well. Bank tellers learn to spot counterfeit money by handling real money until they know exactly how it feels.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Master Who Bought Them**

Peter says these false teachers deny the Master who bought them. That phrase has been debated. Some Christians, especially in the Reformed tradition, believe Christ's death was intended specifically to save those God chose. They understand this verse to describe how the false teachers claimed to belong to Christ, or how Christ's death was in principle enough for them. Other Christians understand this verse to show that Christ died for everyone,

including people who end up rejecting Him. Either way, the tragedy is clear: these teachers turned their backs on the very One who paid for them.

Many people will follow their immoral ways, Peter says, and because of them, the true way will be dragged through the mud. Out of greed, these teachers will use made-up stories to take advantage of you. But their judgment has been on its way for a long time, and their destruction is wide awake.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Following the Money**

Peter says the false teachers were driven by greed. That's still one of the clearest warning signs. Be careful with any teacher, preacher, or influencer who seems mainly interested in your money, promises that God will make you rich if you give to them, lives in extreme luxury paid for by followers, or won't let anyone hold them accountable. Some well-known religious leaders have built empires by manipulating people. That doesn't mean every pastor who receives a salary is a fake. Paul says workers deserve their wages (1 Timothy 5:17–18). But Jesus' true servants don't exploit people.

BACKGROUND CHECK **How to Spot a False Teacher**

Based on 2 Peter 2 and other passages, here are some warning signs. They change or deny core truths about Jesus, such as that He is Lord, that He died for our sins, and that He rose and will return. They live in ways that contradict what Jesus taught, especially in money and sex. They're arrogant and won't accept correction. They promise freedom from all rules. They take advantage of new or vulnerable believers. They isolate people from family, friends, and other churches. They demand total loyalty to themselves. If you see these signs in a leader, a group, or an online personality, talk to a trusted adult. Good teachers point you to Jesus, not to themselves.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Who Borrowed from Whom?**

As Setting the Scene mentioned, much of 2 Peter 2 closely matches the short letter of Jude. Compare 2 Peter 2:1–3:3 with Jude 4–18, and you'll find the same themes, the same examples, and many of the same unusual words.

Scholars explain the connection in three main ways.

2 Peter used Jude. This is the majority view today. Jude is shorter, and it's usually easier to explain why a writer would expand a short letter than why another would shrink a longer one. Jude also quotes directly from two Jewish books outside the Old Testament: 1 Enoch (Jude 14–15) and, according to early church writers, a book called the Assumption of Moses, which seems to be the source of the story of Michael and the devil (Jude 9). Second Peter covers the same ground but leaves out those quotations and the names, perhaps because some readers questioned those books. And 2 Peter puts the examples in Old Testament order, flood before Sodom, and adds hopeful examples of rescue, Noah and Lot, which look like a writer smoothing and reshaping Jude's material.

Jude used 2 Peter. Some scholars, especially those who hold that Peter wrote the letter in the 60s, think Jude came second. They note that 2 Peter speaks of false teachers who will come, in the future tense, while Jude says they've already slipped in. And Jude tells his readers to remember what the apostles predicted, that scoffers would come in the last times (Jude 17–18), which sounds a lot like 2 Peter 3:3. Jude may be quoting Peter's warning, and pointing out that it has come true.

Both used a common source. Others suggest that both writers drew on an earlier sermon, teaching, or list of warnings about false teachers that circulated among the churches, and each adapted it in his own way. That could explain why the two letters share so much while differing in the details. Each view has thoughtful defenders, and the evidence can be read more than one way. Whichever is right, it was normal in the ancient world, and in the Bible, for writers to use and adapt earlier material; Matthew and Luke seem to have used Mark, for example. Using a source doesn't make a book less inspired. The Holy Spirit can guide a writer's research as well as his words.

Then Peter gives a series of examples from the Old Testament to prove that God judges evil and rescues the righteous. First, God didn't spare the angels who sinned. He sent them to hell, where they're held in chains of darkness until the judgment. The NIV

footnotes explain that the Greek word here is Tartarus, and that some manuscripts say they're held in gloomy dungeons.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Tartarus**

Peter uses an unusual word here: Tartarus. It doesn't appear anywhere else in the Bible. In Greek mythology, Tartarus was the deepest, darkest pit of the underworld, far below Hades, where the Titans, the gods who rebelled against Zeus, were imprisoned. Some Jewish writers before Peter's time had already used the word for the place where rebellious angels are held. Peter isn't endorsing Greek myths. He's borrowing a word his readers would understand to describe a real place of confinement for rebellious spiritual beings, much as we might use a familiar word today to explain something.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Which Angels?**

Which angels does Peter mean? Many interpreters connect this verse to the strange story in Genesis 6:1–4, where the sons of God take human wives before the flood. Some Jewish writings, especially the book of 1 Enoch, which was well known in the first century, describe these sons of God as angels who rebelled and were imprisoned until the judgment. Jude, which is closely connected to 2 Peter, mentions the same angels and actually quotes from 1 Enoch (Jude 6, 14–15). Others understand Genesis 6 differently, as describing human beings, such as the descendants of Seth marrying the descendants of Cain, or powerful kings; on that reading, Peter's angels might refer to an original rebellion of angels with Satan before human history. Either way, Peter's point is clear: if God judged even powerful angels, false teachers won't escape.

Second, God didn't hold back His judgment from the old world when He sent the flood on ungodly people. But He protected Noah, who preached righteousness, along with seven others, Noah's family.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Noah the Preacher**

Genesis doesn't record Noah preaching. But Jewish tradition remembered him as calling his generation to turn back to God while he built the ark, and Peter follows that tradition. Imagine preaching for decades and seeing no one respond except your own family. Noah kept doing what was right, even when he was alone. Sometimes faithfulness means standing firm when nobody else does.

Third, God condemned Sodom and Gomorrah, burning them to ashes, as a warning of what will happen to the ungodly. But He pulled Lot out, a good man who was deeply troubled by the immoral behavior of the people around him. Day after day, Lot lived among them, and his righteous soul was tortured by the lawless things he saw and heard.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Sodom and Gomorrah**

Genesis 18–19 tells how God destroyed these cities with burning sulfur. What was their sin? The Bible gives several answers. Genesis 19 describes the men of Sodom trying to gang-rape two visitors, a horrific act of violence. Ezekiel says Sodom was arrogant, overfed, and unconcerned, and didn't help the poor and needy (Ezekiel 16:49–50). Jude mentions sexual immorality and perversion (Jude 7). Christians discuss how these passages apply to questions of sexuality today. But all agree that Sodom stands in Scripture as a picture of a society that had become completely corrupt, violent, proud, and cruel to the vulnerable.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Righteous Lot?**

If you've read Genesis 19, you might be surprised that Peter calls Lot righteous. Lot chose to live in Sodom for its wealth. He offered his own daughters to a violent mob, a shocking act. He hesitated when the angels told him to leave. Later, he got drunk, and his daughters took advantage of him. He was far from perfect. But Peter says that deep down, Lot was troubled by the evil around him, and he trusted God. That's encouraging and sobering.

God can rescue imperfect people. But Lot's compromises cost him dearly. Living close to sin, even while hating it, takes a toll.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Tormented by What He Saw**

Peter says that Lot's soul was tormented by what he saw and heard every day. We might not live in Sodom, but we're surrounded by images and messages that can wear us down: violence, cruelty, pornography, and mockery of everything good. Sometimes we get so used to it that it stops bothering us. Peter suggests that it should bother us. Pay attention to what you're watching, scrolling, and listening to. If something leaves you feeling dirty, anxious, or numb, that's worth noticing.

So, Peter says, God is fully able to get godly people out of from their trials, and how to keep the wicked under punishment until judgment day. That's especially true of people who chase their corrupt desires and look down on authority.

BACKGROUND CHECK **God Can Get You Out**

This is the heart of chapter 2. Peter tells these stories to make two points. First, God judges evil. He did it before, and He'll do it again. Second, God rescues the righteous. Noah and Lot were outnumbered, surrounded by evil, and looked like losers. But God saw them and rescued them. If you feel outnumbered, the only Christian on your team, in your class, or in your family, God sees you. He knows how to rescue you.

These false teachers are bold and arrogant, Peter says. They aren't afraid to insult heavenly beings, even though angels, who are far stronger, don't bring insulting accusations against them before the Lord. The NIV footnote mentions that many manuscripts say in the presence of the Lord. These people insult things they don't understand. They're like wild animals with no reason, driven only by their urges, good for nothing but being trapped and killed. And like animals, they'll be destroyed.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Celestial Beings**

It's hard to know exactly what Peter means here. Celestial beings might be angels, or perhaps fallen angels and demons. The false teachers may have mocked the idea of spiritual powers or of the devil, or bragged that they had nothing to fear from them. Peter says even good angels don't speak arrogantly against evil spiritual beings, but leave judgment to God. Jude 9 gives an example: the archangel Michael, disputing with the devil, didn't insult him, but said, the Lord rebuke you. The lesson: don't treat spiritual realities lightly, and don't be arrogant.

Peter's description gets more intense. The damage they've done will come back on them. They think it's fun to party in broad daylight. They're stains and blemishes, enjoying their pleasures while they eat with you. The NIV footnote mentions that some manuscripts say in their love feasts, the shared meals of the early church. Their eyes are full of adultery, and they never stop sinning. They lure unstable people. They're experts at greed. They live under a curse.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Love Feasts**

The early Christians often ate a meal together when they gathered for worship, which came to be called the love feast. It was a time of fellowship and sharing, where rich and poor ate at the same table. Peter says the false teachers were there too, sitting at the table, looking like part of the family, while spreading poison. That's a sobering reminder: not everyone who shows up at church is safe. That's one reason churches today need safeguards, especially for young people.

They've left the straight road and gone off course, Peter says. They've followed the path of Balaam, Bezer's son, who loved getting paid for doing wrong. The NIV footnote notes that the Greek has Bosor. But Balaam got a scolding for his sin from his own donkey. A creature that has no words suddenly talked like a person and put a stop to the prophet's insanity.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Balaam and the Talking Donkey**

The story of Balaam is one of the strangest and funniest in the Bible (Numbers 22–24). Balak, the king of Moab, offered Balaam, a famous prophet-for-hire, a fortune to curse Israel. Balaam wanted the money. On his way, an angel with a drawn sword blocked the road. Balaam couldn't see it, but his donkey could. The donkey kept turning aside, and Balaam kept beating her. Finally, God let the donkey speak, and she asked Balaam why he was hitting her. Then Balaam saw the angel. In the end, Balaam could only bless Israel. But later, he advised Moab to lead Israel into sin (Numbers 31:16). Peter's point: when a donkey has more spiritual sense than a prophet, something's gone badly wrong. Greed can make even smart people blind.

These people are springs with no water, Peter says, and mist blown away by a storm. The deepest darkness is waiting for them. They speak with big, empty, boastful words. They appeal to sinful desires to lure people who have only just gotten away from a life of deception.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Springs Without Water**

Imagine hiking through the desert, desperate for a drink, and finally reaching a spring, only to find it dry. That's what false teachers are like. They promise refreshment and deliver nothing. They're like clouds that look like rain but blow away. Lots of things promise to satisfy you: popularity, money, sex, achievement, partying, followers. Some of them are good things in their proper place. But none of them can quench your deepest thirst. Jesus offers living water, and He's the only spring that never runs dry (John 4:13–14).

BACKGROUND CHECK **Targeting the New**

Notice who the false teachers target: people who are just escaping, new believers who are still finding their feet. Predators of every kind look for the vulnerable: the young, the lonely, the new, the hurting. If you're new to faith, it's wise to stay close to mature, trustworthy believers who can help you think things through. And if you've been following Jesus for a while, look out for people who are new.

They promise people freedom, Peter says, while they themselves are slaves to corruption. Then he quotes a saying: whatever controls you owns you.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Slaves of Freedom**
>
> The false teachers promised freedom: no rules, no judgment, no limits. Do whatever you want. But Peter says they were actually slaves. Think about it. A person who can't stop drinking, gaming, watching porn, scrolling, or vaping isn't free. They're controlled. The things that promise the most freedom often end up becoming masters. Jesus offers a different kind of freedom: not freedom to do whatever you want, but freedom to become who you were made to be (John 8:34–36). And if you're struggling with something that has mastered you, there's no shame in asking for help. Talk to a trusted adult, a counselor, or a doctor. Freedom is possible.

Then Peter gives a serious warning. If people have escaped the world's corruption by knowing Jesus, and then get tangled up in it again and are defeated, they end up worse off than they were before. They'd have been better off never knowing the right way than to know it and then turn their backs on the holy command they were given. He quotes two proverbs. A dog goes back to its vomit, and a pig that's been washed goes back to rolling in the mud. The first comes from Proverbs 26:11, as the NIV footnote notes.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Worse Off Than Before**
>
> This passage, like the warning passages in Hebrews, raises a hard question. Who is Peter talking about? Christians understand it in different ways. Some believe Peter is describing genuine believers who fall away and lose their salvation. Others believe he's describing people who seemed to be believers, who knew the truth and looked clean on the outside, but whose hearts never truly changed. The proverbs might support this view: the dog and the pig never stopped being a dog and a pig. Still others focus on the loss of rewards

or the damage done by turning away. All agree that knowing the truth brings responsibility, and that walking away from Jesus is serious.

BACKGROUND CHECK **If You're Afraid You've Gone Too Far**

If you're reading this and feeling scared that you've drifted too far from God, here's something important. Peter himself denied Jesus three times. Jesus restored him. The people Peter describes here are arrogant false teachers who mock God, exploit people, and have no desire to come back. If you're worried about your relationship with God, that worry is itself a sign that God is still at work in you. People who have truly turned their backs on God don't usually lie awake wondering if they have. God's door is open. Come back to Him, talk to Him honestly, and talk to a pastor or trusted Christian adult.

KEY VERSE

They promise them freedom, while they themselves are slaves of depravity—for "people are slaves to whatever has mastered them."

2 Peter 2:19 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Why are false teachings that are mostly true more dangerous than obvious lies?
2. What warning signs would make you suspicious of a teacher, leader, or influencer?
3. What things in our culture promise freedom but end up enslaving people?
4. What does the story of Lot teach about living close to sin?

TRY THIS *Think about the voices that influence you most: online creators, musicians, friends, teachers, and leaders. Make a list. Next to each one, write whether they point you toward Jesus, away from Him, or neither. Consider*

unfollowing one voice that pulls you away, and following one that points you toward Him.

CHAPTER 3

The Patient God

2 Peter 3

Peter says this is his second letter to his readers. In both, he's tried to wake up their minds with reminders, so they'll think clearly. He wants them to remember what God's holy prophets said long ago, and what Jesus commanded through His apostles.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **The Second Letter**
> Which letter is Peter's first? Most think it's 1 Peter. Some suggest it's a letter that has been lost. Either way, Peter keeps returning to the theme of remembering. He mentions the prophets, representing what we call the Old Testament, and the apostles, representing the teaching that became the New Testament. Together, they're the foundation for the church's faith (Ephesians 2:20).

Most important, Peter says, know that in the last days, mockers will come, laughing at the truth and following their own desires. They'll ask what happened to Jesus' promise to come back. Since our ancestors died, they'll say, everything has stayed the same as it's been since creation began.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Scoffers**
> Mockers have always existed. In every generation, some people laugh at the idea that God will intervene in history, judge the world, and make things right. Today, you might hear: Christians have been saying Jesus is coming back for two thousand years. Science explains everything. Nothing ever changes. Peter

says the scoffers' real motive is often that they want to follow their own desires. If there's no judgment, there's no accountability. That doesn't mean everyone with questions is a scoffer. Honest questions are welcome. Scoffing is different. It's mocking without really listening.

But they deliberately ignore something, Peter says. Long ago, God spoke, and the heavens came into existence. God shaped the earth out of water and through water. And through water, that ancient world was drowned and wiped out. That same word of God is now keeping the present heavens and earth for fire, holding them until the day when ungodly people are judged and destroyed.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Nothing Ever Changes?**

The scoffers said that nothing ever changes. Peter says that's not true. God has already intervened in history in a huge way. He created the world by His word, and He judged the world in the flood. The universe isn't a closed machine running on its own. It exists because God spoke, and it continues because He holds it together (Hebrews 1:3). Peter connects water with both creation and judgment. Genesis 1 describes God separating the waters at creation, and in the flood the waters came back. Peter says the next judgment will be by fire.

Then Peter gives one of the most quoted passages in the letter. Dear friends, don't forget this one thing: "With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day." The Lord isn't slow about keeping His promise, the way some people think of slowness. Instead, He's being patient with you. He doesn't want anyone to be lost. He wants everyone to turn back to Him.

BACKGROUND CHECK **A Day Like a Thousand Years**

Peter is echoing Psalm 90:4, which says that a thousand years in God's sight are like a day that has just gone by. Peter's point is that God doesn't experience time the way we do. What feels like forever to us is nothing to Him. This verse is sometimes used to argue about the age of the earth or the length

of the days in Genesis, or to calculate when Jesus will return, but that's not what Peter is doing. He's simply saying that God's timing isn't our timing. Two thousand years doesn't mean God has forgotten. It's the blink of an eye for Him.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Not Slow, but Patient**

Why hasn't Jesus come back yet? Peter's answer is beautiful: because God is patient. He's waiting for more people to turn to Him. Every day that passes before Jesus returns is another day of mercy. Think about what that means. Maybe God is waiting for you, or for someone you love. His delay isn't neglect. It's love.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Not Wanting Anyone to Perish**

Christians understand 3:9 in different ways. Many believe it shows that God sincerely wants every person to be saved, and that people have a real choice to accept or reject Him (see also 1 Timothy 2:4). Some, especially in the Reformed tradition, read you as referring to God's chosen people, or distinguish between what God desires and what He has decreed, while still affirming that God takes no pleasure in anyone's death (Ezekiel 33:11). A small number of Christians, sometimes called universalists, hope that eventually everyone will be saved, though most traditions have rejected that view, partly because of passages like this letter's warnings about judgment. All agree on what Peter emphasizes: God is patient, merciful, and wants people to turn to Him.

Then Peter writes: "But the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything done in it will be laid bare." The NIV footnote mentions that some manuscripts say the earth will be burned up instead.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Like a Thief**

Peter borrows this picture from Jesus, who said that if a homeowner knew what time a thief was coming, he'd stay awake (Matthew 24:42–44). Paul uses

it too (1 Thessalonians 5:2). The point isn't that Jesus is like a criminal. It's that His coming will take people by surprise. No one knows the day or the hour (Matthew 24:36). Anyone who claims to have figured out the date is wrong. The right response isn't to calculate, but to be ready.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Laid Bare or Burned Up?**

The last phrase of 3:10 is one of the trickiest textual questions in the New Testament. Ancient manuscripts of 2 Peter disagree here. Some say that the earth and its works will be burned up, which is how older translations, like the King James Version, read. Others, including some of the earliest and best manuscripts, have a word that means found or discovered. The NIV translates it as laid bare, and notes the burned up reading in a footnote. If the original said laid bare, Peter may mean that on the day of the Lord, everything people have done will be exposed before God's judgment, with nothing hidden. That fits with Paul's picture of fire testing the quality of each person's work (1 Corinthians 3:13).

BACKGROUND CHECK **What Are the Elements?**

The Greek word for elements, stoicheia, can mean the basic building blocks of the physical world. In Peter's time, many thought of these as earth, air, fire, and water. It can also mean the heavenly bodies, like the sun, moon, and stars, or even spiritual powers. Peter probably means that the entire created order, as it is now, will be shaken to its foundations. He's using vivid, prophetic language, similar to Isaiah 34:4, which pictures the stars dissolving and the sky rolling up like a scroll. Christians differ on how literally to take these images, but all agree that when that day comes, everything will change.

Since everything will be dissolved like this, Peter asks, what kind of people should you be? Your lives should be holy and devoted to God, as you wait in hope for God's day and hurry it along. The NIV footnote offers another way to read that phrase: as you wait eagerly for the day of God to come. That day will set the heavens on fire and end them, and its heat will melt the elements. But God has made a

promise, and so we're eagerly waiting for a new sky and a new world, where right living is at home.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Speeding the Day?**

How can we speed up the day of God? Peter doesn't explain, but other passages give clues. Peter told a crowd in Jerusalem to repent so that times of refreshing might come and God might send Jesus (Acts 3:19–20). Jesus said the gospel would be preached to all nations, and then the end would come (Matthew 24:14). He also taught us to pray for God's kingdom to come (Matthew 6:10). So praying, sharing the good news, and living holy lives may all be ways we take part in God's plan. As the footnote notes, the phrase can also be translated as waiting eagerly, so Peter may simply be describing how much believers long for that day.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Destroyed or Renewed?**

Will God destroy the universe and start over, or will He purify and renew it? Christians hold different views. Some read 3:10–12 as describing a complete destruction of the present universe, followed by a brand-new creation. Others point out that Peter compares the coming fire with the flood, which didn't annihilate the earth, but cleansed it. They connect this passage with Romans 8:19–21, where Paul says creation itself will be set free from decay, and with Revelation 21:5, where God says He's making all things new, not making all new things. In this view, the fire refines and purifies, like a smelter's fire, and the laid bare reading would fit. Both views agree that God will judge evil, that the world as we know it will be radically transformed, and that the future is a real, physical new creation, not just floating on clouds forever.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Does It Matter How We Treat the Earth?**

If the world is going to burn anyway, why care about the environment? Christians who hold both views often answer that God made the world and called it good (Genesis 1:31), and gave humans the job of caring for it (Genesis 2:15). How we treat God's creation shows how we feel about the Creator. Even if a house will be renovated someday, you don't trash it while you're living in it. And if God plans to renew creation, our care for it now is a small preview of

His plans. Christians disagree about specific environmental policies, but most agree that caring for creation is part of honoring God.

BACKGROUND CHECK **New Heavens and a New Earth**

Peter's hope isn't escaping to heaven as a ghost. It's a new creation, heavens and earth made new, a renewed, physical world where everything is right. This promise comes from Isaiah 65:17 and 66:22, and Revelation describes it in breathtaking detail: God living with His people, no more death, no more crying, no more pain (Revelation 21:1–4). Imagine a world with no injustice, no abuse, no sickness, no loneliness, no war. That's where history is headed. And Peter says that knowing this should change how we live now.

So, dear friends, Peter says, since you're waiting for these things, do everything you can to be found by Him without stain or fault, at peace with Him. Remember that our Lord's patience means people are being saved, which is what Paul, our beloved brother, also wrote to you, with the wisdom God gave him. Paul writes about these things in all his letters. "His letters contain some things that are hard to understand," which ignorant and unstable people twist, just as they twist the rest of Scripture, leading to their own destruction.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Our Dear Brother Paul**

Remember the story from Galatians 2? Paul once confronted Peter publicly for hypocrisy, for pulling away from Gentile believers when some Jewish Christians showed up. That must have been humiliating. But here, Peter calls Paul our dear brother and praises his wisdom. There's no grudge. That's what reconciliation looks like among people who love Jesus. If someone has corrected you, even embarrassingly, can you thank them later?

BACKGROUND CHECK **Hard to Understand**

This is one of the most reassuring verses in the Bible. Even Peter, an apostle who walked with Jesus, found some of Paul's writing hard to understand! If you've ever read Romans and thought, what is he talking about?, you're in good company. The Bible isn't always easy. Some parts are clear and simple.

Others take careful study, patience, and help from others. That's okay. Peter's warning isn't against struggling with hard passages. It's against twisting them to say what you want them to say. Approach hard passages with humility, ask questions, read them in context, and get help from people who know more than you.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Paul's Letters as Scripture**

Peter says that unstable people twist Paul's letters, the same way they twist the rest of Scripture. That's remarkable. It's one of the earliest places where a New Testament writer refers to other New Testament writings as Scripture, placing them alongside the Old Testament. (Another is 1 Timothy 5:18, which quotes Jesus' words, also found in Luke 10:7, alongside Deuteronomy, calling both Scripture.) It shows that very early on, Christians recognized that the apostles' writings carried God's authority. Scholars who date 2 Peter later see this as evidence of a time when Paul's letters had been collected. Those who date it earlier point out that Paul's letters were read and shared among churches during his lifetime.

So, dear friends, since you've been warned ahead of time, be on guard. Don't let lawless people's errors sweep you off your feet, so that you lose your firm footing. Instead, keep growing in grace, and in knowing Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior. Glory belongs to Him, now and forever! Amen.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Grow**

Peter's last word, possibly the last thing he ever wrote, is grow. Not just believe. Not just know. Grow. Growth is gradual. You don't notice a plant growing by staring at it. But over weeks and months, the change is obvious. Spiritual growth is the same. Keep praying, reading, worshiping, serving, and spending time with other believers, and over time, you'll grow. Notice also that Peter's final words of praise are directed to Jesus: glory to Him forever. Peter ends his life the way he began his ministry, pointing to Jesus.

BACKGROUND CHECK **From Rock to Rock**

Think about Peter's journey. A loud, impulsive fisherman who sank in the waves, rebuked Jesus, cut off a man's ear, and denied Jesus three times. And the same man became a rock, a leader, a shepherd, and finally, according to tradition, a martyr. His last letter tells others to keep growing. That's what grace does. It doesn't leave you the way it found you. Whatever your story, Jesus isn't finished with you.

KEY VERSE

The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.

2 Peter 3:9 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Why do you think some people mock the idea that Jesus will return?
2. How does it change your view of God to know that His delay is patience?
3. Do you think the world will be destroyed or renewed? Why? How does that affect how you live?
4. Which parts of the Bible do you find hardest to understand? Who could help you with them?

TRY THIS *Think of one person you know who doesn't follow Jesus. Since God is patient and wants them to turn to Him, pray for them by name every day this week. Then look for one way to show them kindness, or to share a little of why you believe.*

THE END (AND THE BEGINNING)

Now What? The Bottom Line

You've just read 2 Peter, a letter about the truth, about a patient God, and about a promise that Jesus will come back. Peter says God is patient because He doesn't want anyone to perish. That includes you.

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 loves you more than you can imagine. He wants you to know Him.

> *For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.* **John 3:16 (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 get our lives together 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. God is patient, but don't put it off forever.

> *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 being patient with me. Thank You that Jesus died for me and rose again. 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 grow, keep me in the truth, and make me ready for the day He comes back. 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 2 Peter straight through. Then read 1 John, the next letter in the New Testament, which is all about knowing you belong to God.

Find your people. Get connected to a church where the Bible is taught and Jesus is honored. Ask about being baptized.

Keep growing. Peter's last words were to grow in grace and in knowing Jesus. Talk to God every day, and keep reading His word.

Not Sure Yet?

Not ready? That's honest, and honesty is a good place to start. Keep asking. Keep reading. Peter says God is patient. Just don't settle for "I already know all that."

Because if Peter is right, the Jesus he saw shining on the mountain is coming back, and He's waiting for you with open arms.

But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To him be glory both now and forever! Amen.

2 Peter 3:18 (NIV)

THE FIRST LETTER OF JOHN

The King's Love

1 John, Unfiltered

For teens who think they've heard it all

BILL McLEOD

Papa Bill Books

The King's Love: The First Letter of John, 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. John, who wrote this letter, was probably a teenager or barely older when Jesus called him. He spent the rest of his long life learning one lesson, and this letter is what he learned.

First John uses simple words. A lot of first-year Greek students read it first because the vocabulary is so easy. But simple doesn't mean shallow. In just five short chapters, John tells you that God is light, that God is love, that you can be forgiven for anything, that you can know for sure you belong to God, and that love drives out fear.

John wrote to a church that had been ripped apart. A group had walked out, claiming to have special knowledge about God, and the people left behind were confused and shaken. Were they wrong? Did they really belong to God? How could they tell? If you've ever wondered whether your faith is real, or felt shaken when people you respected walked away from it, this letter is for you.

John's answers are clear: believe in the real Jesus, keep living His way, and love each other. Those three things go together, and you can't have one without the others.

So read it like a letter from an old man who once wanted to call down fire on people and ended up being remembered as the apostle of love. Let's go.

How This Book Works

This book walks through all five chapters of 1 John, in order, one chapter of this book for each chapter of the letter. Each one explains what John is saying in plain language and adds background about the church he was writing to and the ideas he was answering.

Before chapter 1, a section called Setting the Scene explains the debate over who wrote the letter, introduces the split in the church that prompted it, and describes the early teachings about Jesus that John was answering. 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 John 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, Paul's letters, Hebrews, James, and Peter's 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 earlier volumes, walking through 1 John 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).

I've presented the debate about whether the letter was written by John the apostle, by John the Elder mentioned by Papias, or by a circle of John's followers, without forcing a verdict. I've also explained the background of the group that left the church, and early ideas about Jesus that John seems to be answering, such as Docetism and the teaching of Cerinthus.

First John's tests of genuine faith can trouble sensitive readers. I've included a gentle box for teens who worry about whether they're truly saved, pointing them to John's own purpose: that believers may know they have eternal life (5:13). The difficult passages on

sinlessness (3:6–9) and the sin that leads to death (5:16–17) are presented with the main Christian views. The antichrists (2:18–22) are explained in John's own sense, not as a platform for speculation, and the Johannine Comma (5:7–8) is explained as a late addition that doesn't appear in the NIV text.

Passages highlighted as especially relevant for teens include walking in the light and confession (1:5–2:2), not loving the world (2:15–17), God's lavish love (3:1), love in action (3:16–18), God is love (4:8, 16), perfect love driving out fear (4:18), and assurance (5:13).

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 know, not just hope, that they are loved by God and belong to Him.

Grace and peace,

Bill McLeod

Papa Bill Books

BEFORE YOU OPEN THE LETTER

Setting the Scene

A Letter Without a Name

Most ancient letters started the same way: the writer's name, the readers' names, and a greeting. First John doesn't have any of that. It doesn't name its writer or its readers, and it doesn't end with personal greetings either. It reads more like a sermon or a pastoral letter sent around to several churches. The writer clearly knows his readers well. He calls them dear children, dear friends, and brothers and sisters, and he speaks with the authority of someone who knew Jesus personally. But he never tells us his name. The title The First Letter of John was added later, based on early Christian tradition.

The Johannine Writings

Five books in the New Testament are traditionally connected with John: the Gospel of John; the three letters of 1, 2, and 3 John; and Revelation. Scholars call them the Johannine writings. The Gospel and 1 John are especially similar. Both open with the beginning and the Word (John 1:1; 1 John 1:1). Both love big, simple contrasts: light and darkness, truth and lies, life and death, love and hate. Both use favorite words like abide, or remain; know; believe; witness; and world. Both talk about being born of God, and about Jesus as the one and only Son. Most scholars agree that the Gospel and the letters come from the same writer or from the same circle of Christians. Revelation is written in a very different style of Greek,

and many scholars, ancient and modern, have thought it may come from a different John.

Which John?

For most of church history, Christians believed that 1 John was written by John the apostle, the son of Zebedee, one of the twelve disciples, whom many identify as the disciple whom Jesus loved in John's Gospel. Irenaeus, a church leader writing around AD 180, said he had heard Polycarp, who had known John, tell stories about him. Irenaeus says that John lived to an old age in Ephesus, in what is now Turkey, into the reign of the emperor Trajan, which began in AD 98.

But there's a puzzle. An early church leader named Papias, writing around AD 100–130, said he liked to ask people what the Lord's disciples had said, and he listed Andrew, Peter, Philip, Thomas, James, John, and Matthew. Then he mentioned what Aristion and the elder John were still saying. The historian Eusebius, writing in the fourth century, read this as describing two different men named John: John the apostle, and another disciple of Jesus called John the Elder. Second and Third John both come from someone who calls himself simply the elder (2 John 1; 3 John 1).

The Main Views

Scholars hold several views. Some believe John the apostle wrote the Gospel and all three letters, and point to the writer's claim to have heard, seen, and touched Jesus (1:1–3), the strong early tradition, and the possibility that Papias was simply mentioning the same John twice, first among the apostles and then among those still living. They note that Peter also called himself an elder (1 Peter 5:1), so an aged apostle could easily call himself the elder.

Others think the writer was John the Elder, a disciple of Jesus who wasn't one of the Twelve, possibly the beloved disciple himself, who became a respected leader in Ephesus. Still others think the letters were written by a leader within a community of believers shaped by John's teaching, sometimes called the Johannine community or school, who wrote in the voice of the eyewitnesses. Christians who love the Bible hold each of these views. Whatever the answer, the letter claims to pass on the testimony of people who knew Jesus personally, and the church has recognized it as Scripture from the beginning. It was quoted by Polycarp and accepted without serious dispute. In this book, I call the writer John. Most scholars date the letter late in the first century, around AD 85–100, and many think it was written in or near Ephesus.

The Son of Thunder

If the writer is John the apostle, his story is worth knowing. John and his brother James were fishermen on the Sea of Galilee, working with their father Zebedee, when Jesus called them (Mark 1:19–20). Jesus nicknamed them the Sons of Thunder (Mark 3:17), probably because of their fiery personalities. When a Samaritan village refused to welcome Jesus, James and John asked if they should call down fire from heaven to destroy it. Jesus rebuked them (Luke 9:51–56). Another time, they asked Jesus for the most important seats in His kingdom, which made the other disciples furious (Mark 10:35–41).

But John was also one of Jesus' closest friends, with Peter and James. He was there at the Transfiguration and in the garden of Gethsemane. If he's the beloved disciple, he leaned on Jesus at the Last Supper, stood at the cross when the other disciples had fled, and was given the care of Jesus' mother (John 19:26–27). He ran to

the empty tomb, believed, and later became a leader in the church (Galatians 2:9). The angry young man who wanted to burn a village became the old man who wrote that God is love.

Little Children, Love One Another

There's a famous story about John's old age, told by the scholar Jerome around AD 400. Jerome says that when John was very old in Ephesus, he was too weak to walk and had to be carried into church meetings. Each time, he would say only one thing: little children, love one another. Eventually, the believers got tired of hearing the same words and asked him why he always said that. He replied that it was the Lord's command, and if this alone was done, it was enough. We can't be sure the story is true. But it captures the heart of this letter.

The Split

Something painful had happened in John's churches. A group had left. John says they left the fellowship, which showed they had never truly been part of it (2:19). Scholars sometimes call them the secessionists, which simply means the people who withdrew. We don't know exactly who they were, but from what John says, we can piece together some of their claims. They seem to have denied that Jesus was the Christ who came in a real human body (2:22; 4:2–3). Some claimed to have no sin (1:8, 10). Some claimed to know God and live in the light, while ignoring His commands and failing to love other believers (2:4, 9). And they seem to have claimed special spiritual knowledge or anointing, and were still trying to lead others away (2:26–27).

Imagine being one of the people left behind. Maybe some of your friends, or even church leaders, had left. They seemed confident

and spiritual. Were they right? Were you missing something? John writes to reassure the believers who stayed, and to give them ways to tell truth from error.

Docetism and Cerinthus

Many scholars think the people who left were influenced by early ideas that later became widespread in the second century. Many Greek thinkers believed that the physical world was inferior, even evil, and that only the spiritual world was truly good. If you thought that way, it might seem impossible for God to become a real human being with a body that got tired, bled, and died. One group of early Christians, later called Docetists, from a Greek word meaning to seem, taught that Jesus only seemed to have a physical body. He was really a spirit who appeared to be human.

Irenaeus describes a teacher named Cerinthus, who lived in Asia Minor around John's time. Cerinthus taught that Jesus was an ordinary man, the son of Joseph and Mary, and that the divine Christ came down on Him like a dove at His baptism, empowered His ministry, and then left Him before the crucifixion. So the man Jesus suffered and died, but the Christ didn't. That may be why John insists that Jesus came not by water only, meaning His baptism, but by water and blood, meaning His death (5:6). Irenaeus also tells a story, from Polycarp, that John once ran out of a public bathhouse in Ephesus without bathing when he learned Cerinthus was inside, afraid the building might collapse on the enemy of the truth. That story may be legend. And we can't be certain that John was answering Cerinthus or Docetists specifically. But these ideas help us understand why John emphasizes that he touched Jesus with his own hands.

Why John Wrote

John tells us several reasons why he wrote. He wrote so his readers could share fellowship with the apostles and with God, and to make his joy complete (1:3–4). He wrote so they wouldn't sin (2:1). He wrote to warn them about people trying to lead them astray (2:26). And most important of all, he wrote so that believers would know that they have eternal life (5:13). John's Gospel was written so that people would believe (John 20:31). His first letter was written so that people who believe would know they belong to God.

How John Writes

John's writing style is unusual. Instead of building a step-by-step argument like Paul, he spirals. He introduces a theme, moves on, and then comes back to it from a different angle, like a melody that returns throughout a song. His main themes are truth about Jesus, obedience to God's commands, and love for each other. Scholars sometimes call them the tests of life: a doctrinal test, a moral test, and a social test. John also loves black-and-white contrasts. You're in the light or in the darkness. You love or you hate. You're a child of God or of the devil. That can sound harsh, but John isn't describing people who struggle. He's describing two completely different directions for a life.

The Map

Chapter 1: The Word of life, walking in the light, and confession and forgiveness.

Chapter 2: Jesus our advocate, keeping His commands, not loving the world, and the antichrists.

Chapter 3: Children of God, why believers don’t keep on sinning, and love in action.

Chapter 4: Testing the spirits, God is love, and perfect love driving out fear.

Chapter 5: Faith that overcomes, the testimony about Jesus, knowing you have eternal life, prayer, and idols.

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CHAPTER 1

Walking in the Light

1 John 1

John begins his letter without any greeting. He jumps straight into the most important thing he knows. He wants to tell his readers about something that existed from the very beginning, something he and others heard with their own ears, saw with their own eyes, studied closely, and even touched with their own hands. He's talking about the Word who gives life.

BACKGROUND CHECK **In the Beginning**

John's opening sounds a lot like the start of his Gospel: In the beginning was the Word (John 1:1). Both echo the first words of the Bible, In the beginning God created (Genesis 1:1). In John's Gospel, the Word is Jesus, the eternal Son of God, who was with God and was God, and who became a human being. John is saying that the One who existed before the universe began is the same person he ate meals with, walked beside, and watched die and rise again.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Touched with Our Hands**

Why does John stress hearing, seeing, looking, and touching? Remember the people who had left John's church. Some of them seem to have believed that Jesus only looked human, that He didn't really have a physical body. John answers: I touched Him. He wasn't a ghost, a hologram, or a vision. He was real flesh and blood. After the resurrection, Jesus invited Thomas to touch His wounds (John 20:27), and He ate fish in front of His disciples to prove He

wasn't a spirit (Luke 24:39–43). Christianity stands or falls on the claim that God really became human, really died, and really rose again.

John says this life became visible. He and the others saw it, and they're telling others about it: the life that lasts forever, which existed alongside the Father and was shown to them. They're passing on what they saw and heard so that their readers can share in their fellowship. And that fellowship includes God the Father and Jesus Christ, His Son. John is writing this, he says, so that their joy can be full.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Fellowship**

The Greek word for fellowship is koinonia. It means sharing something in common, a partnership, a deep connection. It's much more than hanging out at church and eating snacks, although that can be part of it. John says that through Jesus, we share life with God Himself, and with everyone else who knows Him. Think about how amazing that is. The God who made the galaxies wants a relationship with you, and He brings you into a family of people who share it.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Complete Joy**

John says he's writing to make joy complete. The NIV footnote mentions that some manuscripts say your joy instead of our joy. Either way, John's point is that joy grows when it's shared. Think about watching a great game, hearing amazing news, or seeing something beautiful. It's better when someone's with you. John's joy wouldn't be complete until his readers shared what he had found.

Then John gives the message he heard from Jesus. God is light, and there's no darkness in Him at all, not even a little.

BACKGROUND CHECK **God Is Light**

Light is one of the Bible's favorite pictures of God. Light shows things as they really are. It exposes what's hidden. It gives life and warmth. It shows the way.

When John says God is light, he means that God is completely pure, holy, true, and good. There's nothing shady about Him, no hidden agenda, no mixture of good and evil. That's both comforting and challenging. Comforting, because you can trust Him completely. Challenging, because when you come close to Him, His light shows your heart as it really is.

If we say we're close to God but keep living in the dark, John says, we're lying, and our lives don't match the truth. But if we live in the light, just as God Himself lives in light, we share life with each other, and Jesus' blood washes us clean from every sin.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Walking in the Light**

Walking in the light doesn't mean being perfect. Notice what John says happens when we walk in the light: Jesus' blood keeps cleansing us from sin. If we were perfect, we wouldn't need cleansing. Walking in the light means living honestly before God, not hiding, not pretending, and letting Him see everything. Walking in darkness means living a double life: saying one thing on Sunday and doing another on Saturday night, hiding things from God and from the people who love you. Living in the light is scary at first. But it's the only way to be truly free.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Secrets**

Secrets grow in the dark. Maybe it's a habit you're ashamed of, something you've done that no one knows about, or a struggle you've never told anyone. Keeping it hidden can feel safer. But shame thrives in secrecy, and the longer something stays in the dark, the more power it has over you. Bringing it into the light, first to God, and then to a trusted person, is often the first step toward freedom. One important note: if someone has hurt you and told you to keep it secret, that's not your sin to hide. Tell a trusted adult. Some secrets should never be kept.

If we say we have no sin, John says, we're fooling ourselves, and the truth isn't in us. But if we admit our sins, God, who is faithful and fair, will forgive us and wash away every wrong. If we claim we've

never sinned, we're calling God a liar, and His word has no place in us.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Three False Claims**

In verses 6, 8, and 10, John answers three claims that may have come from the people who had left. First: I'm close to God, even though I live in darkness. Second: I don't have sin in me. Third: I've never sinned. Some of them may have thought that, since they had special spiritual knowledge, what they did with their bodies didn't matter. John says that all three claims are lies. We all sin. The question isn't whether you sin. It's what you do about it.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Confess**

1 John 1:9 is one of the most freeing verses in the Bible. Confess means to agree with God, to say the same thing about your sin that He does. Not making excuses. Not blaming others. Not saying, it wasn't that bad. Just being honest: God, I did this, and it was wrong. And look at His promise. He will forgive. Not maybe. Not if He's in a good mood. He is faithful, so He keeps His promises. He is just, so He forgives fairly, because Jesus has already paid for your sin. And He doesn't just forgive. He cleans. He washes away all of it.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Confession in Different Traditions**

Christians practice confession in different ways. Catholic and Orthodox Christians confess their sins to God in the presence of a priest in the sacrament of reconciliation or confession, and receive words of forgiveness. Many Protestants confess directly to God in private prayer, in prayers of confession during worship, or to a trusted friend or pastor, following James 5:16. All agree that God forgives those who honestly confess, and that forgiveness comes through Jesus.

BACKGROUND CHECK **When You Don't Feel Forgiven**

Sometimes you confess a sin, but you still feel guilty. You might confess the same thing over and over, wondering whether God has really forgiven you. Feelings are real, but they're not always reliable. God's forgiveness depends on His promise, not on your feelings. If you've confessed, you're forgiven,

even if you don't feel it. Sometimes lingering guilt is a sign that you need to make something right with someone you've hurt. Sometimes it's just a lie from the enemy. And sometimes it's connected to anxiety or depression, and talking to a counselor can help. Either way, God's promise stands.

KEY VERSE

If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.

1 John 1:9 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Why does it matter that John says he touched Jesus?
2. What does walking in the light look like for a teenager?
3. Why do you think it's so hard to admit when we've done wrong?
4. Is there something you need to bring into the light, to God or to a trusted person?

TRY THIS *Spend ten minutes alone with God this week. Ask Him to show you anything you need to confess. Write it down, confess it to Him honestly, and then read 1 John 1:9 out loud. Then tear up the paper or throw it away as a reminder that you're forgiven.*

CHAPTER 2

Light, Love, and Liars

1 John 2

John calls his readers his dear children. He's writing so they won't sin. But if anyone does sin, he says, we have someone who speaks to the Father on our behalf: Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. Jesus is the sacrifice that takes away God's anger against our sins, and not only ours, but the sins of the entire world.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Our Advocate**

An advocate is someone who stands beside you and speaks for you, like a defense lawyer. John says that when you sin, Jesus doesn't abandon you. He stands up for you before the Father. That doesn't mean God the Father is angry and Jesus has to talk Him out of punishing you. The Father sent the Son because He loves you. It means that Jesus, who died for you, is your representative. When the accuser points at your sin, Jesus points to His wounds. In John's Gospel, Jesus uses the same word for the Holy Spirit, the Advocate (John 14:16). So you have an Advocate in heaven and an Advocate in your heart.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Atoning Sacrifice**

The phrase atoning sacrifice translates a Greek word that has been debated. Some translations say propitiation, meaning a sacrifice that turns away God's anger against sin. Others say expiation, meaning a sacrifice that removes or wipes away sin. The NIV's atoning sacrifice can include both. Either way, Jesus' death deals completely with our sin. John adds that Jesus' sacrifice is for the whole world. Christians have different understandings of exactly what

that means. Some believe Jesus died to make salvation available to every person. Others believe His death was intended to save those God chose from every nation. But all agree that no one is beyond the reach of the gospel, and that the offer is for everyone.

How can we be sure we know God? John says it's when we obey His commands. If someone says, I know Him, but ignores what He says, that person isn't telling the truth, and the truth has no home in them. But if someone keeps His word, God's love has truly reached its goal in that person. The NIV footnote offers another reading: God's love is made complete. That's how we can tell we belong to Him. If you say you live in Jesus, you should live the way He lived.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Obedience Test**

This is the first of John's tests. If you really know Jesus, it will show up in how you live. Not perfectly, but genuinely. You can't claim to know Jesus while ignoring everything He said. Think about it this way. If someone says they're your best friend but never listens to you, never shows up for you, and constantly does things that hurt you, you'd wonder whether they really know you at all. Knowing Jesus means more than knowing facts about Him. It means walking with Him, and that changes your direction.

Dear friends, John says, what I'm writing isn't a brand-new command. It's an old one, which you've had from the start. It's the message you've already heard. And yet it's also new, because the darkness is fading, and the real light has already begun to shine, in Jesus and in you.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Old and New**

What command is John talking about? Love one another. It's old, because it goes back to Leviticus 19:18, and because John's readers had heard it from the beginning of their faith. But it's also new, because Jesus called it a new command and gave it a new standard: love one another as I have loved you

(John 13:34). And it's new because a new age has begun. The light has come, and the darkness is on its way out.

If someone says they live in the light while hating a fellow believer, John says, they're still in the dark. Whoever loves their brothers and sisters stays in the light, and nothing in their path will make them trip. But whoever hates a fellow believer is living in the dark and walking around in it. They don't know where they're going, because the dark has made them blind.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Hate Is Blinding**

John says hatred blinds people. Think about what happens when you're really angry at someone or hold a grudge. You can't see them clearly. Everything they do annoys you. You assume the worst. You might even do things you regret. Hatred distorts everything. Love, on the other hand, helps you see clearly. That doesn't mean you have to like everyone or be best friends with people who hurt you. Love means wanting what's best for them and refusing to let bitterness take over your heart.

Then John writes a little poem to different groups in the church. He writes to the dear children, because their sins are forgiven for Jesus' sake, and because they know the Father. He writes to the fathers, because they know the One who has existed from the beginning. He writes to the young men, because they've defeated the evil one, they're strong, and God's word lives inside them.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Children, Fathers, Young People**

John might be speaking to three age groups, or to three stages of spiritual growth, or he might be using all three to describe every believer from different angles. Every Christian is forgiven like a child, knows God deeply like a father, and fights evil like a young warrior. Notice what John says about young people: they're strong, God's word lives in them, and they've overcome the evil one. John doesn't talk down to young people. He sees them as strong and capable in God's strength. So does God.

Then John gives a warning. Don't love the world or the things in it. If anyone loves the world, the Father's love isn't in them. The NIV footnote offers another reading: love for the Father. Everything the world offers, cravings of the body, desires of the eyes, and arrogance about what we have, doesn't come from the Father. It all comes from the world, and the world is fading away, along with everything it craves. But whoever does what God wants will live forever.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Loving the World**

Wait, doesn't God love the world? Yes (John 3:16). John uses the word world in different ways. Sometimes it means the people God made. Here it means the system of values and desires that leaves God out: greed, pride, selfishness, lust, and the endless chase for more. John names three of them. The cravings of the body: wanting to satisfy every physical desire. The desires of the eyes: wanting everything you see, which advertising and social media are designed to fuel. And pride in possessions or status: wanting to impress people with what you have or who you are. None of these will last. Ten years from now, the phone you want, the brand you're wearing, and the drama everyone's talking about will be gone. God's will lasts forever.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Three Temptations**

Some Bible teachers notice that the three desires John lists match the temptation in the garden. Eve saw that the fruit was good for food, pleasing to the eye, and desirable for gaining wisdom (Genesis 3:6). They also match Jesus' temptations in the wilderness: turn stones into bread, see all the kingdoms of the world, throw yourself down from the temple (Matthew 4:1–11). Where Adam and Eve failed, Jesus won. And He can help you win too.

Then John turns to the people who had left. Dear children, he says, it's the last hour. You were taught that an antichrist would come, and many antichrists have already come. That's how we know it's the last hour. They left us, but they never really belonged to us. If

they had, they would have stayed. Their leaving made it clear that none of them truly belonged.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Antichrists**

The word antichrist appears in the Bible only in John's letters (1 John 2:18, 22; 4:3; 2 John 7). Many people think of the antichrist as a single evil world leader at the end of time. John's readers had apparently heard teaching that such a figure would come, and many Christians connect that with the man of lawlessness in 2 Thessalonians 2 and the beast in Revelation 13. But notice what John does with the idea. He says many antichrists have already come, and he defines them clearly: whoever "denies that Jesus is the Christ," which means "denying the Father and the Son" (2:22), and anyone who refuses to acknowledge Jesus as truly come in the flesh (4:2–3). For John, antichrist doesn't mean a mysterious figure to speculate about, or a label to throw at politicians you don't like. It means anyone who opposes or replaces the real Jesus with a fake one. The prefix anti can mean against or instead of.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Last Hour**

John says it's the last hour. That was almost two thousand years ago. Was he wrong? The New Testament writers believed that with Jesus' coming, death, and resurrection, the last chapter of history had begun. Everything between Jesus' first coming and His return is the last days. The point isn't to set a date. It's to live alert, because the decisive event has already happened, and the end could come at any time.

BACKGROUND CHECK **When People Leave**

It's painful when people leave the church, especially if they were friends, leaders, or people you looked up to. You might wonder: were they right? John says something important. People leaving doesn't prove that the truth is false. In John's situation, their leaving showed they didn't really share the church's faith. That doesn't mean everyone who leaves a particular church is an enemy of Christ. People leave churches for many reasons, some good. Some who wander away come back, like the prodigal son. If someone you

know has walked away from faith, keep loving them, keep praying for them, and keep the door open. And keep your own eyes on Jesus.

But the Holy One has anointed you, John says, and every one of you knows what's true. The NIV footnote mentions that some manuscripts say that you know all things. I'm not writing because the truth is new to you, but because you already know it, and you know that lies never grow out of truth.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Anointing**

What is the anointing? Most interpreters think it's the Holy Spirit, whom Jesus promised would guide His followers into all truth (John 16:13). Some think it's God's word, the message they had heard from the beginning, taught and applied by the Spirit. The people who left may have claimed a special anointing or secret knowledge that only the spiritual elite had. John says: you all have the anointing. Every believer has the Spirit. You're not second-class Christians.

Who's the liar? John asks. It's anyone who says Jesus isn't the Christ. That person is the antichrist, rejecting both the Father and the Son. If you reject the Son, you don't have the Father either. But if you openly confess the Son, you have the Father as well. So make sure the message you heard at the beginning stays in you. If it does, you'll stay in both Son and Father. And He has promised us something: life that never ends.

BACKGROUND CHECK **You Can't Have the Father Without the Son**

Some people say they believe in God, but not in Jesus. Or they say Jesus was a good teacher, but not God's Son. John says you can't separate them. Jesus Himself said that no one comes to the Father except through Him, and that whoever has seen Him has seen the Father (John 14:6–9). That's a bold claim, and it can sound narrow. But Christians believe that it's true, and that it's good news: God has made Himself known in Jesus, and the way to Him is open to everyone.

I'm writing these things about people who are trying to deceive you, John says. But the anointing He gave you stays in you, and you don't need anyone to teach you. His anointing teaches you about everything, and it's true, not fake. So stay in Him, just as you've been taught.

BACKGROUND CHECK **No Need for Teachers?**

Does this mean you don't need pastors, teachers, or books? No. John himself is teaching in this very letter! And the New Testament says God gives teachers to the church (Ephesians 4:11). John means that his readers didn't need the false teachers, with their new, secret knowledge. They already had the truth and the Spirit. They didn't need some new teaching to complete their faith. Be careful of anyone who says that what you learned about Jesus isn't enough, and that you need their special insight to really know God.

And now, dear children, stay in Him, so that on the day He appears, we can be confident and not ashamed in front of Him. If you know that He's righteous, you can be sure that anyone who lives rightly is His child, born from Him.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Remain**

John's favorite word in this letter is often translated remain, abide, live, or continue. He uses it more than twenty times. It means to stay, to stick, to make your home somewhere. Jesus used the same word when He said, remain in Me, as I remain in you, and compared Himself to a vine and us to branches (John 15:4–5). A branch doesn't produce fruit by trying harder. It produces fruit by staying connected to the vine. Following Jesus isn't mostly about trying harder. It's about staying close to Him.

KEY VERSE

My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anybody does sin, we have an advocate with the Father—Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world.

1 John 2:1–2 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. How does it feel to know that Jesus is your advocate when you sin?
2. Which of the three desires in 2:16 do you think is the biggest temptation for teens today?
3. What does John mean by antichrist? How is that different from how people often use the word?
4. Have you seen someone walk away from the faith? How did it affect you?

TRY THIS *Take a one-week break from something that feeds the desires of the eyes for you: a shopping app, a particular social media feed, or ads that make you want more. Each time you feel the urge to check it, pray instead, or read 1 John 2:15–17. At the end of the week, notice what changed.*

CHAPTER 3

Children of God

1 John 3

Look how much the Father loves us, John says. He has poured out so much love on us that we get to be called God's children. And it's not just a name. It's who we really are! The reason the world doesn't recognize us is that it didn't recognize Him either.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Lavished**

The NIV says that God has lavished His love on us. Lavish means to pour out generously, more than enough, over the top. God doesn't ration His love or hand it out in tiny portions to people who earn it. He floods us with it. And His love makes us His children. Not employees. Not servants. Not barely tolerated guests. Children. John seems so amazed by this that he adds: and that's what we are! If you've ever felt unwanted, unloved, or like you don't belong anywhere, read 3:1 again. God calls you His child.

BACKGROUND CHECK **When Family Is Hard**

For some people, the words father and family bring up pain. Maybe your dad left, or your home isn't safe, or your family is falling apart. If that's you, hearing that God is a Father might be complicated. God isn't like the worst fathers you know. He's the perfect Father, who never leaves, never abuses, and never stops loving. Psalm 68:5 says He's a father to the fatherless. If your home situation is hurting you, please talk to a trusted adult, a counselor, or a pastor. God's family is meant to be a place where you find people who care for you.

Dear friends, John goes on, right now we're God's children, and we don't yet know what we'll become. The NIV footnote offers another reading: when it is made known. But we do know that when Jesus appears, we'll be like Him, because we'll see Him exactly as He is. Everyone with this hope keeps themselves pure, because He is pure.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **We Shall Be Like Him**
>
> John doesn't know all the details of what we'll be like in eternity. But he knows the most important thing: we'll be like Jesus. When we finally see Him face to face, the transformation God started in us will be complete. No more sin. No more shame. No more struggling with the same temptations. This hope isn't just a nice idea for later. John says it changes how we live now. If you know you're going to be like Jesus forever, you start becoming more like Him today.

Sin, John says, is breaking God's law. At its core, it's rebellion against God's rules. But Jesus came to carry our sins away, and He Himself has no sin at all. People who make their home in Jesus don't keep living a life of sin. People who keep on sinning as a way of life have never truly seen Him or known Him.

Dear children, John says, don't let anyone fool you. Whoever does what's right is righteous, just as Jesus is righteous. Whoever practices sin belongs to the devil, who has been sinning since the start. That's why God's Son came: to tear down everything the devil has built. "No one who is born of God will continue to sin," because God's seed stays inside them. They can't keep on sinning, because God is their Father.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Can Christians Sin?**
>
> This passage can be confusing, even frightening. In chapter 1, John said that anyone who claims to have no sin is lying. Now he seems to say that people born of God don't sin. How can both be true? Christians have offered several

explanations. Many point out that the Greek verbs here describe ongoing, habitual action, which is why the NIV says keep on sinning and continue to sin. In this view, John isn't saying that Christians never sin, but that they don't live in sin as a settled lifestyle without repentance. Others think John is describing the ideal, or what's true of our new nature, the part of us born of God, even though our old nature still struggles. Others think John means a specific kind of deliberate, defiant sin, like that of the people who had left. Some in the Wesleyan tradition teach that God can free believers from willful, known sin in this life, which they call Christian perfection or entire sanctification, while still acknowledging mistakes and weakness. All agree that John isn't saying Christians will be perfect, but that a life born of God will be changed.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Struggling Isn't the Same as Not Caring**

If you're struggling with a sin, maybe one you keep falling into again and again, this passage doesn't mean you're not a Christian. Notice that John is talking about people who keep on sinning without caring, who see nothing wrong with it, and who aren't fighting it. The very fact that you're bothered by your sin and want to change is a sign that God's seed is in you. Keep confessing (1:9). Keep fighting. Get help from a trusted adult or mentor. Paul struggled too (Romans 7:15–25). God isn't finished with you.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Destroying the Devil's Work**

John says that Jesus came to destroy the devil's work. Think about what the devil does: he deceives, accuses, divides, tempts, and destroys. Jesus came to undo all of it. He tells the truth, forgives, unites, frees, and gives life. Every time someone is forgiven, healed, freed from addiction, reconciled to an enemy, or rescued from despair, Jesus is tearing down the devil's work. And He'll finish the job when He returns.

Here's the difference between God's children and the devil's, John says. If someone doesn't live rightly, they aren't God's child, and the same goes for anyone who doesn't love their fellow believers. From the very beginning, you were taught to love one another. Don't

follow Cain's example. He was on the evil one's side, and he killed his own brother. Why? Because his own deeds were wicked, while his brother lived rightly.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Cain and Abel**
>
> The first murder in the Bible was a brother killing his brother (Genesis 4:1–16). Cain and Abel both brought offerings to God. God accepted Abel's offering but not Cain's. Instead of changing, Cain got jealous and angry. God warned him that sin was crouching at his door, ready to pounce, but that he had to master it. Cain didn't listen. He killed Abel. John says Cain hated Abel because Abel's goodness exposed his own evil. Sometimes people resent those who do right, because it makes them look bad. Jealousy, left unchecked, can lead to terrible places.

So don't be shocked, John tells them, when the world can't stand you. Our love for each other is how we know we've crossed over from death into life. Without love, a person is still dead inside. Hating a fellow believer is murder in the heart, and as you're well aware, eternal life doesn't live in a murderer.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Hate Is Murder?**
>
> John echoes Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount: anyone who is angry with a brother or sister will be subject to judgment (Matthew 5:21–22). John goes further. Hatred is murder in the heart. That doesn't mean hating someone is legally the same as killing them. It means that murder starts in the heart. Every act of violence begins with contempt, bitterness, or rage. That's why it's so important to deal with hatred early, before it grows. If you're holding hatred toward someone, bring it to God. Ask Him to help you forgive, even if it takes time.

Want to know what real love looks like? John asks. Look at Jesus, who gave up His life for us. And so we should be willing to give up our lives for one another. Suppose someone has more than enough and sees a fellow believer going without, but refuses to care. How

could God's love possibly be living in that person? Dear children, John says, let's not love with talk alone, but with action and honesty.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Love Is a Verb**

John's definition of love isn't a feeling. It's an action: Jesus laid down His life. That's the standard. Most of us won't be asked to die for someone. But we're asked to lay down our lives in smaller ways every day: giving up our time, our comfort, our money, our preferences, and our pride for others. John gives a practical example. If you have more than you need and someone else doesn't have enough, love shares. Love isn't just saying, I care. It's showing up. It's texting the friend who's struggling. It's giving to the food bank. It's helping your younger sibling with homework even when you'd rather play video games.

BACKGROUND CHECK **3:16**

Most people know John 3:16: God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son. But 1 John 3:16 is its partner. John 3:16 tells us how God loved us. 1 John 3:16 tells us how we should love others. God's love doesn't stop with us. It flows through us.

Loving like this, John says, shows that the truth is where we belong, and it lets our hearts rest when we come before God. Even when our own hearts accuse us, God is bigger than our hearts, and nothing is hidden from Him. And, dear friends, when our hearts aren't accusing us, we can come to God boldly and receive what we ask, since we're obeying Him and doing what He loves. What does He command? That we trust in the name of Jesus Christ, His Son, and that we love each other, just as Jesus told us to. People who obey Him make their home in God, and God makes His home in them. And the Spirit He has given us is how we can be sure of it.

BACKGROUND CHECK **When Your Heart Condemns You**

This is one of the most comforting passages in the Bible for people who struggle with guilt. Sometimes your heart accuses you. You feel like a failure,

like you're not good enough, like God must be disappointed in you. John says: God is greater than your heart. He knows everything, including your sin, but also your love for Him, your desire to change, and everything Jesus has done for you. Your feelings don't have the final word. God does. When your heart condemns you, look to Jesus, not to your feelings.

KEY VERSE

See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are! The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him.

1 John 3:1 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. What does it mean to you to be called a child of God?
2. How would you explain the difference between struggling with sin and living in sin?
3. What's one way you could love someone with actions, not just words, this week?
4. When your heart condemns you, what helps you remember that God is greater?

TRY THIS *Look for someone who has a need you can meet this week. It might be a classmate who needs help, a neighbor who could use a hand, or a family that's struggling. Do something practical to help, without being asked, and without telling anyone.*

CHAPTER 4

God Is Love

1 John 4

Dear friends, John says, don't trust every spirit. Put them to the test to see whether they're really from God, because lots of false prophets are out there now.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Test the Spirits**
>
> John's readers lived in a world full of spiritual voices: prophets, teachers, and people claiming visions and revelations. Some came from God. Many didn't. John says: don't believe everything you hear just because it sounds spiritual. Test it. That's still good advice. You'll hear a lot of spiritual-sounding messages: from influencers, books, songs, self-help gurus, and even preachers. Some will be true. Some won't. The question isn't whether it sounds inspiring, makes you feel good, or has lots of followers. The question is whether it's true.

Here's how you can recognize God's Spirit, John says. Any spirit that openly confesses that Jesus Christ came in a real human body comes from God. Any spirit that refuses to confess Jesus doesn't. That's the antichrist's spirit. You were told it was on its way, and it's already here.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **The Jesus Test**
>
> John's test for spiritual teaching is simple: what does it say about Jesus? Remember the people who had left John's church. Some of them seem to have denied that Jesus truly came in the flesh. John says that any teaching

that denies who Jesus really is, fully God and fully human, isn't from God. Today, you might hear people say that Jesus was just a good teacher, that He was one of many ways to God, that He didn't really die or didn't really rise, or that He was a spirit and not a real man. John's test still applies. A real Jesus with a real body who really died and really rose is the heart of the Christian faith.

Dear children, John says, you belong to God, and you've already beaten these false prophets, because God's Spirit living in you is stronger than the devil, who is at work in the world. The false teachers belong to the world, so they talk like the world, and the world is happy to hear them. We belong to God, and people who know God pay attention to what we say. People who aren't from God tune us out. That's how we can tell the Spirit of truth from the spirit of error. The NIV footnote mentions that spirit could also be translated as Spirit.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Greater Is He**

First John 4:4 is a favorite verse for many Christians facing fear or temptation. The One in you, God's Spirit, is stronger than the devil, who's at work in the world. You don't have to be afraid of evil. You don't fight in your own strength. That doesn't mean life will be easy, or that you'll never struggle. But it means that the final outcome isn't in doubt. God is stronger.

Then John reaches the heart of his letter. Dear friends, he says, let's love each other, since all love has its source in God. Anyone who loves is God's child and truly knows Him. If someone doesn't love, they don't know God, because "God is love."

BACKGROUND CHECK **God Is Love**

These three words, found in 4:8 and again in 4:16, may be the most famous description of God ever written. John doesn't just say that God loves, or that God is loving. He says God is love. Love is His very nature. Everything God does flows from love, even His justice, His discipline, and His judgment.

Christians have often connected this with the Trinity: before the world existed, the Father, Son, and Spirit were already loving each other. God didn't create us because He was lonely. He created us to share the love He already had. But be careful: this doesn't mean that whatever we call love is God. John defines love by looking at God, not God by looking at our ideas of love.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Love Defined**

Our culture uses the word love for lots of things: I love pizza, I love this song, I love you. Often it means a feeling, an attraction, or something that makes us happy. John's definition is different. Love isn't mainly a feeling. It's self-giving action for someone else's good. Real love isn't selfish. It doesn't use people. It doesn't manipulate or control. It's patient and kind (1 Corinthians 13:4–7). If someone says they love you but hurts you, controls you, or pressures you to do things you don't want to do, that's not love, no matter what they call it.

God made His love visible to us, John says, by sending His only Son into our world, so that we could have life through Him. That's what love is. It isn't that we first loved God. It's that God loved us first, and then sent His Son as the sacrifice that wipes away our sins. Dear friends, since that's how much God loved us, we should love each other too.

BACKGROUND CHECK **He Loved Us First**

John says real love didn't start with us. It started with God. We didn't love God first, and then He decided to love us back. He loved us when we didn't love Him at all. That's the foundation of everything. You don't have to earn God's love. You don't have to clean yourself up first. He loved you before you were born, and before you ever thought about Him. And when you understand how much He loves you, it becomes possible to love other people, even difficult ones.

Nobody has ever laid eyes on God, John says. But when we love each other, God lives within us, and His love reaches its full goal inside us. His gift of the Spirit is how we can be sure that God's home is in

us and ours is in Him. And we've seen with our own eyes, and we tell everyone, that the Father sent His Son to save the world. If anyone openly confesses that Jesus is God's Son, God makes His home in that person, and that person makes their home in God. So we've come to know God's love for us, and we lean on it. God is love. People who make their home in love make their home in God, and He makes His home in them.

BACKGROUND CHECK **No One Has Seen God**

John says that God has never been seen. But people can see God's love when Christians love each other. Think about that. You might be the closest some people ever get to seeing what God is like. When you love someone who's unlovable, forgive someone who hurt you, or include someone who's been left out, you show them a glimpse of God. Jesus said that people would know we're His disciples by our love for one another (John 13:35).

This is how love reaches its goal among us, John says, so that we can be confident on judgment day: in this world, we're like Jesus. Then he writes words that have comforted millions. Love has no fear in it. "But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment." Whoever is afraid hasn't been completely transformed by love.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Perfect Love Drives Out Fear**

Many people relate to God mainly through fear. They're afraid He's angry at them, afraid of being punished, afraid they're not good enough, afraid of hell. John says that God's perfect love drives out that kind of fear. When you really understand how much God loves you, and that Jesus has taken your punishment, you don't have to be terrified of God anymore. That doesn't mean you don't respect Him. The Bible still speaks of the fear of the Lord, meaning reverence and awe (Proverbs 9:10). But you don't have to cower before Him. You can come to Him like a child running to a loving father.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Fear and Anxiety**

This verse is about fear of God's punishment, not every kind of fear or anxiety. Some fears are healthy and keep you safe. Others, like panic attacks, phobias, or anxiety disorders, have physical and psychological causes. If you struggle with anxiety, it doesn't mean you don't love God enough or that your faith is weak. God's love is a powerful comfort, and prayer helps. But talking to a counselor or doctor is also a good and wise step. Faith and good care go together.

We love because He loved us first. If someone says they love God but hates a fellow believer, they're a liar. If they don't love a brother or sister they can see, they can't love God, whom they've never seen. And God has told us plainly: if you love Him, you must love your fellow believers too.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Love God, Love People**

John says you can't love God and hate people. They go together. It's easy to say you love God. He's invisible, and He never annoys you. It's harder to love the people right in front of you: your siblings, your parents, the kid who sits next to you, the person at church who drives you crazy. John says loving them is the proof that you love God. Jesus said the same thing when He named the two greatest commandments: love God with everything, and love your neighbor as yourself (Mark 12:29–31).

KEY VERSE

There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love.

1 John 4:18 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. How can you test whether a spiritual message is true?
2. What's the difference between how John defines love and how our culture defines it?
3. Do you relate to God more out of fear or out of love? Why?
4. Who's the hardest person for you to love? What would it look like to love them this week?

TRY THIS *Read 1 John 4:7–21 every day this week. Each day, write down one thing it teaches about God's love, and one way you can show that love to someone. At the end of the week, look back at what you wrote.*

CHAPTER 5

Know for Sure

1 John 5

Anyone who trusts Jesus as the Christ is God's child, John says. And if you love a parent, you'll love that parent's children too. We can tell we love God's children when we love God and do what He commands. Loving God means keeping His commands, and His commands aren't a heavy weight, because God's children win out over the world. Our faith is what wins the victory over the world. Who defeats the world? Only the person who believes that Jesus is God's Son.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Not Burdensome**

John says that God's commands aren't a crushing weight. That might surprise you. Doesn't following Jesus mean following a lot of rules? John's point is that when you love someone, doing what pleases them isn't a burden. Think about doing something for someone you love: planning a surprise, buying a gift, helping them move. It takes effort, but it doesn't feel like a burden because you love them. Jesus said His yoke is easy and His burden is light (Matthew 11:30). God's commands are a gift, showing us how to live well.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Overcoming the World**

The world, as John uses the word, is the system of values that leaves God out: pressure to fit in, to chase money and status, to give in to every desire, and to follow the crowd. John says faith overcomes it. Faith doesn't mean escaping the world or pretending it doesn't exist. It means trusting Jesus more than the

world's promises and threats. Every time you choose to trust God instead of going along with the crowd, you're overcoming the world.

Jesus Christ, John says, is the One who came through water and through blood. Not through water alone, but through both water and blood. And the Spirit is a witness to this, since the Spirit is truth itself.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Water and Blood**

What does John mean by water and blood? Most interpreters think water refers to Jesus' baptism and blood refers to His death on the cross. Remember Cerinthus, who taught that the divine Christ came on Jesus at His baptism and left before He died. John insists that the Son of God came through both His baptism and His death. The One who died on the cross was the Son of God. Others connect the water and blood with the water and blood that flowed from Jesus' side on the cross (John 19:34), or with baptism and the Lord's Supper. Whatever the details, John's point is that Jesus really lived, really was baptized, and really died as the Son of God.

So there are three witnesses, John says, and the three tell the same story: the Spirit, plus the water and the blood. If we trust what people tell us, we should trust God's word even more. And God Himself has spoken up for His Son. People who trust God's Son carry God's testimony in their hearts. People who refuse to trust God are treating Him like a liar, because they've rejected what He has said about His Son. And here's what God has said: He has given us life that never ends, and that life is found in His Son. If you have the Son, you have life. If you don't have God's Son, you don't have life.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Johannine Comma**

If you read 1 John 5:7–8 in the King James Version, you'll find some extra words: in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost, and these three are one, and there are three that bear witness in earth. These words are called the Johannine Comma, from a Latin word for a short clause. They aren't in

the NIV text, and almost all modern translations leave them out or put them in a footnote. Why? Because they don't appear in any Greek manuscript of 1 John until very late, and none of the early church fathers quote them, even when they were arguing about the Trinity and would have loved to use them. The NIV footnote explains that they're found in late manuscripts of the Vulgate, the Latin Bible, and in no Greek manuscript before the fourteenth century. They seem to have begun as a comment written in the margin of Latin manuscripts, perhaps in the fourth century, and were later copied into the text. When Erasmus published the first printed Greek New Testament in 1516, he left them out. After criticism, he added them to his third edition, and from there they made their way into the King James Version. Today, scholars across Catholic, Protestant, and Orthodox traditions agree that they weren't part of what John originally wrote.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Does That Change the Trinity?**

Some people worry that if the Johannine Comma isn't original, the doctrine of the Trinity is in trouble. It isn't. Christians believed in one God in three persons long before these words were added. The Trinity is based on the whole of Scripture: Jesus' command to baptize in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit (Matthew 28:19), the baptism of Jesus (Matthew 3:16–17), and many other passages (2 Corinthians 13:14; 1 Peter 1:2). And the fact that scholars can spot a late addition like this is actually good news. With thousands of manuscripts to compare, we can be confident about what the original text said.

Then John explains his purpose in writing. "I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life."

BACKGROUND CHECK **So That You May Know**

This is the key to the whole letter. John didn't write so that you'd always wonder, hope, or guess whether you belong to God. He wrote so you could know. Not because you're good enough, but because of who Jesus is and what He's done. John's tests in this letter are like signs on a road. Do you

believe that Jesus is God's Son, who came in the flesh? Are you trying, however imperfectly, to follow Him? Do you love other believers? If so, these are signs that God is at work in you. And if Jesus is yours, so is life. It's that simple, and that solid.

BACKGROUND CHECK **If You Doubt Your Salvation**

Some people read 1 John and become more anxious, not less. They read the tests and wonder: Do I love enough? Do I obey enough? Am I really saved? If that's you, take a breath. John wrote this letter to people who believed, so that they could have confidence. His tests weren't designed to make sincere believers miserable. They were designed to show that the people who left, who denied Jesus, didn't care about obeying Him, and didn't love others, were the ones on the wrong path. Your assurance doesn't rest on how strong your faith feels today. It rests on Jesus, His death for you, and God's promise. If you've put your trust in Jesus, He is yours. And if you're worried that you haven't, you can trust Him right now. Feelings of doubt are normal. Many great Christians have struggled with them. If doubts keep troubling you, talk to a pastor or a trusted Christian adult. And if your fears feel constant or overwhelming, a counselor can help, too.

John goes on. We can come to God with confidence. If we ask for anything that fits His will, He listens. And since we know He listens to whatever we ask, we can be sure that our requests are already granted.

BACKGROUND CHECK **According to His Will**

Does this mean God will give you anything you ask for? Not quite. The key phrase is according to His will. Prayer isn't a way to get God to do what we want. It's a way to bring our desires to Him and line them up with what He wants. Jesus prayed in the garden, not My will, but Yours (Luke 22:42). That doesn't mean prayer doesn't matter. It matters enormously. God loves to hear from you, and He answers. Sometimes He says yes, sometimes no, and sometimes wait. But He always hears.

If you notice a fellow believer committing a sin that isn't the kind that leads to death, John says, pray for them, and God will bring them life. I'm talking about those whose sin isn't deadly. "There is a sin that leads to death." I'm not saying you should pray about that. Every wrong thing is sin, but not every sin is deadly.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Sin That Leads to Death**

This is one of the most puzzling passages in the Bible. What is the sin that leads to death? There are several views. Some think it refers to physical death: some sins are so serious that God ends a person's life as discipline, as with Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:1–11) or the Corinthians who abused the Lord's Supper (1 Corinthians 11:30). Others think it refers to spiritual death, a final rejection of Christ. In the context of this letter, that might mean what the people who left had done: denying that Jesus is the Christ and walking away from the truth. Some connect it with Jesus' warning about blasphemy against the Holy Spirit (Mark 3:28–29). In Catholic teaching, the distinction between mortal and venial sin draws partly on this passage. Mortal sin is a grave sin, committed knowingly and deliberately, which breaks a person's relationship with God until they repent and are restored, especially through confession; venial sin is less serious. Notice that John doesn't forbid praying for anyone. He simply doesn't command it in that case. And he emphasizes that most sin isn't deadly, and that we should pray for each other.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Afraid You've Committed It?**

If you're worried that you've committed the sin that leads to death, or the unforgivable sin, here's something important. People who have truly and finally rejected Christ don't usually worry about it. They don't care. The fact that you're worried shows that God's Spirit is still working in your heart. Come to Him. Confess your sins. He has promised to forgive (1:9). And talk to a pastor or trusted Christian adult about your fears.

God's children don't make a habit of sin, John says. Jesus, God's own Son, guards them, and the evil one can't lay a finger on them. We're

sure that we're God's children, while the rest of the world lies in the evil one's grip. And we're sure that God's Son has come and opened our minds, so that we can know the true God. And we live in Him, the true One, by living in His Son Jesus Christ. Jesus is the true God, and He is life without end.

BACKGROUND CHECK **We Know**

In the last few verses of his letter, John says we know three times. In a world full of uncertainty, doubt, and opinions, John gives us three solid facts. We know that God protects His children. We know that we're His. And we know that Jesus has come and given us understanding of the true God. John ends by calling Jesus the true God and life that never ends. Most interpreters think this phrase refers to Jesus, though some think it refers to the Father. Either way, it's a powerful ending.

Then, out of nowhere, John ends his letter with a final instruction. "Dear children, keep yourselves from idols."

BACKGROUND CHECK **Idols**

Why does John end with idols? In Ephesus, where John likely lived, idols were everywhere. The temple of Artemis there was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. But John might also mean anything that takes God's place, including the false Jesus of the people who had left. An idol is anything you love, trust, or serve more than God. Today, idols rarely look like statues. They look like money, popularity, relationships, success, appearance, sports, grades, followers, gaming, or even our own image of ourselves. Good things become idols when we make them ultimate things. Ask yourself: what do I think about most? What do I spend most of my time, money, and energy on? What would devastate me to lose? Those questions can reveal your idols. John's final word is a loving warning: keep the real God, the real Jesus, at the center.

KEY VERSE

I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life.

1 John 5:13 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Why do you think God's commands aren't burdensome for people who love Him?
2. Does it surprise you that some words in older Bibles weren't in the original? How does it make you feel about the Bible?
3. Are you sure you have life that never ends? What does John say that gives you confidence?
4. What are the biggest idols in your life or in your culture?

TRY THIS *Make a list of five things that compete with God for first place in your life. Pick one, and this week, give it a smaller place: spend less time on it, put it down, or give some of it away. Each day, read 1 John 5:13 and thank God that you can know you belong to Him.*

THE END (AND THE BEGINNING)

Now What? The Bottom Line

You've just read 1 John, a letter written so that people could know for sure that they have eternal life. John says that God is love, and that He showed it by sending His Son. That love is for you.

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 loves you more than you can imagine. He wants you to know Him.

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

2 We've all turned away.

We've all gone our own way instead of God's. John says that if we claim to have no sin, we're fooling ourselves. 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. God didn't wait for us to love Him first.

> *This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.* **1 John 4:10 (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 running your own life, and trust Jesus as your Savior and King. Then you can know, not just hope, that you have eternal 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 for loving me first. Thank You that Jesus died for me and rose again. I believe You raised Him from the dead. I'm turning to You. Forgive me and make me clean. I trust Jesus*

as my Savior, and I want to follow Him as my King. Help me walk in the light, love other people the way You love me, and know that I belong to You. 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 John straight through. Then read the Gospel of John, which John wrote so that people would believe that Jesus is God's Son.

Find your people. Get connected to a church where the Bible is taught and Jesus is honored. Ask about being baptized.

Love someone. John says love is the proof that we know God. This week, show God's love to someone in a practical way.

Not Sure Yet?

Not ready? That's honest, and honesty is a good place to start. Keep asking. Keep reading. John wrote down what he saw and touched so you could check it out for yourself. Just don't settle for "I already know all that."

Because if John is right, God is love, and He loved you first.

We love because he first loved us.

1 John 4:19 (NIV)

THE SECOND LETTER OF JOHN

The King's Truth

2 John, Unfiltered

For teens who think they've heard it all

BILL McLEOD

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The King's Truth: The Second Letter of John, 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. Second John is for people who think truth and love are opposites. Spoiler: they're not.

Second John is one of the shortest books in the Bible. In Greek, it's about 245 words, short enough to fit on a single sheet of papyrus. You can read it in under two minutes. It's basically a postcard. But this little postcard tackles one of the biggest questions you'll ever face: how do you love people and stand for the truth at the same time?

Our culture often makes you pick one. Some people say that if you really loved others, you'd never tell anyone they're wrong. Others are so focused on being right that they forget how to be kind. John, an old man who had spent his life following Jesus, says you need both. Truth without love becomes harsh. Love without truth becomes empty.

This letter also has a warning about teachers who spread a fake version of Jesus. John's readers had to decide which traveling preachers to welcome into their homes. You have to decide which voices to welcome into your phone, your feed, and your head. The question is the same.

So read it like a postcard from a wise old friend who loves you enough to tell you the truth. Let's go.

How This Book Works

This book walks through 2 John in three short chapters, one for each section of the letter: the greeting and truth (verses 1–3), love and obedience (verses 4–6), and deceivers and hospitality (verses 7–13). Each one explains what John is saying in plain language and adds background about the early church and the world of the first readers.

Before chapter 1, a section called Setting the Scene explains who the elder was, who the lady and her children might be, how this letter connects with 1 John, and what life was like in the house churches and for the traveling teachers who visited them. 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.

Since 2 John has only one chapter, verses are cited by number alone, like verse 5 or verses 7–11. This book quotes 2 John sparingly and explains it mostly in my own words, so keep a Bible open next to it. Read each 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, Paul's letters, Hebrews, James, Peter's letters, and 1 John, 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.

Because 2 John is so short, I've divided it into three brief chapters and filled out the book with background that I hope is genuinely useful: ancient letter-writing, house churches, traveling teachers, the early Christian manual called the Didache, and the relationship between this letter and 1 John. Wherever Scripture is quoted directly, in the chapters and in the Key Verses, the wording is from the New International Version (NIV).

I've presented the main views of who the elder was and whether the lady chosen by God is a church or an individual woman, without forcing a verdict.

Verses 10–11, which tell the readers not to welcome a false teacher into their house, can easily be misread as permission to be unkind to people who believe differently. I've explained them in context, as instructions about officially hosting and endorsing traveling teachers in a house church, and I've stressed that John's command

to love one another, and Jesus' command to love our neighbors and even our enemies, still apply to everyone.

The letter's call to hold truth and love together is applied to teens' lives, including discernment about online influencers and how to disagree with people kindly.

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 learn to love the truth, and to speak it in love.

Grace and peace,

Bill McLeod

Papa Bill Books

BEFORE YOU OPEN THE LETTER

Setting the Scene

A Postcard from the Elder

Second John is one of the shortest books in the Bible. Only 3 John, the very next book, is shorter in Greek words. Second John has just thirteen verses, about 245 words in Greek. A standard sheet of papyrus, the paper of the ancient world, was about the size of a sheet of printer paper, and this letter would have fit on one side of it. Near the end, the writer mentions paper and ink (verse 12). He's using the ancient version of a quick note, and he says he'd rather talk in person.

But short doesn't mean unimportant. Some of the most important messages are short. Think of a text that says I'm sorry, or I love you, or Don't go there, it's not safe. Second John is a little like that. It's brief, but it's urgent.

How Ancient Letters Worked

Thousands of ordinary letters from the ancient world have been found, especially in the dry sands of Egypt, where papyrus can survive for centuries. They show that letters followed a standard pattern, a bit like the way emails today start with Hi and end with Thanks. First came the sender's name, then the recipient's name, then a greeting, often a wish for good health. Then came the body of the letter, the main message. At the end, there were greetings from other people and a farewell.

Second John follows this pattern closely. It opens with the sender, the elder, and the recipients, the lady and her children, followed by a greeting of grace, mercy, and peace. The body has a word of joy, a reminder about love, and a warning about deceivers. It ends with a hope to visit and greetings from the lady's sister's children. Christians took the ordinary letter format of their day and filled it with the good news about Jesus.

Paper and Ink

Writing a letter in the first century wasn't as simple as sending a text. Papyrus was made from the papyrus plant, which grew along the Nile River in Egypt. The stalks were cut into thin strips, laid in two layers at right angles, pressed together, dried, and polished. It wasn't cheap. Ink was usually made from soot mixed with gum and water, and writers used a reed pen cut to a point. Many people couldn't write well, so they used a trained secretary. There was no postal service for ordinary people, so letters had to be carried by friends, travelers, or paid messengers. That's why the arrival of a letter was a big deal, and why ancient writers often said, as John does, that they'd rather see you face to face.

Who Was the Elder?

The writer doesn't give his name. He calls himself simply the elder. In Greek, the word is presbyteros, which can mean an older man or a leader in the church. Our word presbyterian comes from it. The way he uses it, the elder, suggests that everyone knew exactly who he was, like a family calling their grandfather Grandpa instead of using his name.

From early times, Christians believed that the elder was John the apostle, who, according to tradition, lived to an old age in Ephesus

and wrote the Gospel of John and the three letters of John. Peter also called himself an elder (1 Peter 5:1), so an apostle could use the title. But an early writer named Papias, around AD 100–130, mentions both the apostle John and someone he calls the elder John. Some scholars think 2 and 3 John were written by this John the Elder, perhaps a disciple of Jesus who wasn't one of the Twelve. Others think the writer was a respected leader in John's circle of churches. The style and themes of 2 John are so close to 1 John that most scholars think they come from the same writer. In this book, as in my book on 1 John, I call him John, or the elder.

Who Was the Lady?

The letter is addressed to a lady whom God has chosen, and to her children. Who was she? There are two main views.

Many interpreters think the lady is a church, and her children are its members. In the Bible, God's people are often pictured as a woman: Israel as Daughter Zion (Isaiah 62:11), and the church as the bride of Christ (Ephesians 5:25–32; Revelation 21:2). Peter sends greetings from she who is in Babylon, which most take to mean the church in Rome (1 Peter 5:13). Several details in 2 John fit this view. The elder says that all who know the truth love her (verse 1), which sounds more like a well-known congregation than a private person. In verses 6, 8, 10, and 12, the word you is plural in Greek, as if he's speaking to a group. The command to love one another (verse 5) makes sense for a community. And in the last verse, the children of her sister, also chosen by God, send greetings (verse 13), which would mean the members of a sister church where the elder was staying. Writing in code may also have protected the church if the letter fell into the wrong hands.

Others think the lady was a real woman, probably a respected Christian leader in whose home a church met, and her children were her actual children, or perhaps the believers who gathered in her house. The New Testament mentions several women who hosted churches, like Lydia (Acts 16:15, 40), Nympha (Colossians 4:15), and Priscilla, with her husband Aquila (Romans 16:3–5). If so, 2 John is a personal letter to a woman of faith and influence.

Kyria and Electa

The Greek word for lady is kyria, the feminine form of kyrios, which means lord or master. It was also used as a personal name, and it appears as a name in some ancient papyrus documents. So some have suggested that the letter is addressed to a woman named Kyria, and should be translated to the chosen Kyria. In the early third century, Clement of Alexandria suggested a different idea: that the word for chosen, eklekte, was her name, and that the letter was written to a woman named Electa. But that creates a problem, because verse 13 uses the same word for her sister. Two sisters both named Electa seems unlikely. Most modern translations, including the NIV, take the words as a description, not a name. Whichever view is right, the message is the same.

The Link to 1 John

If you've read 1 John, much of 2 John will sound familiar. Both talk about truth and love, about a command that the readers have had from the beginning, about loving one another, about walking in the truth and in obedience to God's commands, and about joy being made complete. Both warn about deceivers who deny that Jesus Christ came in the flesh, and both call them antichrists (1 John 2:22;

4:2–3; 2 John 7). It's almost as if 2 John is a short summary of 1 John, written to one particular congregation.

Scholars aren't sure which came first. Some think 2 John was written before 1 John, as a quick warning to one church. Others think it was sent along with 1 John, as a cover letter. Most think it was written after 1 John, applying its teaching to a specific situation: the false teachers who had left John's church were now traveling around, trying to get a hearing in other congregations. Second John is a warning to one of those congregations not to give them a platform.

Churches in Houses

When you hear the word church, you might picture a building with a steeple, pews, or a stage. The first Christians didn't have any of that. For about two hundred years, they mostly met in homes. The oldest known building used as a church, found at Dura-Europos in modern Syria, was a house remodeled for Christian worship in the 240s AD.

The New Testament mentions several house churches (Romans 16:5; 1 Corinthians 16:19; Colossians 4:15; Philemon 2). A typical house church might have twenty to forty people, crowded into the largest room of a home, or into a courtyard. They shared a meal together, sang, prayed, read Scripture and letters from apostles, listened to teaching, and celebrated the Lord's Supper. The host was often a wealthier believer with a bigger house, and played an important role. They decided who came in, who got to speak, and who was welcomed as a teacher. That matters for understanding 2 John.

Traveling Teachers

In the early church, many Christian leaders traveled from town to town. Apostles, prophets, evangelists, and teachers carried the message about Jesus and visited churches to teach and encourage them. Paul spent years on the road. So did Peter (1 Corinthians 9:5), Apollos (Acts 18:24–28), and many others. Inns in the ancient world were often dirty, dangerous, and connected with immorality, so Christians traveling on the Lord's work relied on the hospitality of other believers. Jesus told His disciples to stay in the homes of people who welcomed them (Matthew 10:11–14). Paul asked the church in Rome to welcome Phoebe and give her whatever help she needed (Romans 16:1–2). Third John praises a believer named Gaius for welcoming traveling teachers, even strangers, and sending them on their way in a manner worthy of God (3 John 5–8).

But this system could be abused. Anyone could show up, claim to be a teacher sent by God, enjoy free food and housing, and spread whatever ideas they wanted. A second-century Greek writer named Lucian of Samosata wrote a satire about a con man named Peregrinus who joined the Christians, became a leader, and lived off their generosity, until they caught on. Lucian mocked the Christians as easy marks. Churches needed a way to tell the real teachers from the fakes.

The Didache's Tests

One of the most interesting documents from the early church is a short handbook called the Didache, which means the Teaching. It was probably written in the late first or early second century, around the same time as John's letters, and it was lost for centuries until a copy was rediscovered in 1873. It gives instructions about

baptism, prayer, fasting, the Lord's Supper, and church leaders. It also gives practical tests for traveling teachers and prophets.

The Didache says that a traveling apostle should be welcomed as the Lord. But he should stay only a day, or two if necessary. If he stays three days, he's a false prophet. When he leaves, he should take only enough bread to get to his next stop. If he asks for money, he's a false prophet. A prophet who claims to speak by the Spirit and orders a meal to be prepared for himself, and then eats it, is a false prophet. A teacher who teaches things that contradict the faith should not be listened to. Anyone who comes in the Lord's name should be welcomed, and then tested. If a traveler wants to settle down in the community, he should work for his food. If he refuses, the Didache uses a memorable word for him: he's a Christ-monger, someone who makes a business out of Christ.

The Didache's tests focus on three things: what a teacher teaches, how he lives, and whether he's in it for the money. Second John focuses on the first, what a teacher says about Jesus. Together, they show that the early church took discernment seriously.

Why 2 John Matters

Second John speaks to a world that often treats truth and love as enemies. Some people think that loving others means never disagreeing with anyone about anything. Others treat being right as more important than being kind. John holds them together. Truth matters, especially the truth about who Jesus is. Love matters, too, because it's what Jesus commanded. And this little letter also speaks to a world full of voices competing for our attention. Every day, we decide which teachers, influencers, and messages to welcome into

our lives. John's warning is still relevant: be careful who you give a platform to.

The Map

Chapter 1 (verses 1–3): The elder, the lady and her children, and truth that lasts forever.

Chapter 2 (verses 4–6): Walking in the truth, and the old command to love one another.

Chapter 3 (verses 7–13): Deceivers, staying in the teaching of Christ, not giving false teachers a platform, and the joy of meeting face to face.

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CHAPTER 1

Truth That Lasts

2 John 1–3

The letter opens with three words that tell us a lot: from the elder. The writer doesn't give his name, his credentials, or his title. He doesn't need to. His readers know him, trust him, and respect him. He's the elder, the older leader who has walked with Jesus longer than almost anyone.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Power of a Good Name**

John didn't need to introduce himself, because his life had already done it for him. His readers knew his character, his faithfulness, and his love. That's worth thinking about. What will people know about you when they hear your name? A good reputation isn't built in a day. It's built by thousands of small choices: telling the truth when it's hard, keeping your promises, being kind when no one's watching. Proverbs says a good name is more desirable than great riches (Proverbs 22:1). You're building yours right now.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Respect Your Elders?**

In John's world, age was respected. Older people were seen as wise, experienced, and worth listening to. Our culture often celebrates youth and treats older people as out of touch. The Bible honors both. Paul told Timothy not to let anyone look down on him because he was young (1 Timothy 4:12). But the Bible also says that gray hair is a crown of glory when it's earned by a righteous life (Proverbs 16:31). John had spent around seventy years following Jesus. He'd seen a lot, made mistakes, and learned from them. Do

you have older believers in your life you can learn from? Their experience is a gift.

He writes to the chosen lady and her children, whom he loves in the truth. And it's not only him. Everyone who knows the truth loves them too, because the truth has made its home in us and will stay with us for good.

BACKGROUND CHECK **A Church or a Woman?**

As Setting the Scene explained, the lady might be a church, with her children as its members, or an individual Christian woman, perhaps one who hosted a church in her home, with her actual children. Either way, notice how John describes her. She's chosen by God. She's loved, not just by John, but by everyone who knows the truth. If she's a church, this is a beautiful picture of how God sees His people: not as a building or an organization, but as a lady He loves and has chosen. If she's a woman, it shows how much the early church valued women who served faithfully. Both views remind us that the church is a family, held together by love and truth.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Chosen**

John calls the lady chosen, or elect. It's a word the Bible uses for God's people again and again (1 Peter 2:9; Colossians 3:12). Being chosen by God isn't about being better than anyone else. Israel wasn't chosen because they were impressive (Deuteronomy 7:7–8). It's about God's love and grace. If you belong to Jesus, you're chosen too. Not because you earned it, but because God loves you. In a world where you might not get picked for the team, the group, or the friendship circle, that's worth remembering.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Loving in the Truth**

John says he loves them in the truth. That could mean he loves them truly, sincerely, not fake. It could also mean he loves them because they share the same truth about Jesus. Both are probably included. Some love is fake. It flatters, uses people, or only lasts as long as it's convenient. John's love is real. And it's rooted in something solid: the truth about Jesus that they share.

Friendships built on a shared commitment to Jesus have a foundation that can weather storms.

BACKGROUND CHECK **What Is Truth?**

The word truth appears five times in the first four verses of 2 John. Truth is one of John's favorite words. In his Gospel, Jesus says, I am the way and the truth and the life (John 14:6). When Pilate questioned Jesus before the crucifixion, he asked, cynically, What is truth? (John 18:38), while Truth Himself stood in front of him. For John, truth isn't just a set of correct facts. It's a person, Jesus, and a way of life that matches who He is. Truth is something you know, something you believe, something you do, and Someone you follow.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Is Truth Real?**

You'll hear people say things like, That's true for you, but not for me, or, There's no such thing as absolute truth. There's something to this. People see things from different perspectives, and we should be humble about what we don't know. Your favorite music or food really is true for you. But some things are true for everyone, whether or not they believe them. Gravity works whether you believe in it or not. Two plus two is four everywhere. John believes that the truth about Jesus is like that: true for everyone. Christians believe Jesus really lived, really died, and really rose from the dead, and that if it's true, it's the most important truth in the world. That doesn't mean Christians have all the answers. It means we believe truth exists, and we can know it.

John says that this truth has moved in to stay, and it will never leave us. It's not something that changes with the times, goes out of style, or gets replaced by a newer version.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Truth That Lives in You**

Notice that John says truth lives in us. That sounds a lot like how Jesus talked about the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of truth, who lives with you and will be in you (John 14:17). Truth isn't just information stored in your brain. When you

belong to Jesus, His Spirit lives in you and keeps teaching you the truth. And it lasts forever. Trends come and go. Ideas that seem cutting-edge today will look dated in ten years. Some will be forgotten. God's truth doesn't expire.

Then John gives his greeting. Grace, mercy, and peace will be with us, he says. Their source is God the Father, and Jesus Christ, who is the Father's own Son. And they'll stay with us, wrapped in truth and love.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Grace, Mercy, and Peace**

Most of Paul's letters begin with grace and peace. Here, as in Paul's letters to Timothy, mercy is added. Grace is God's kindness to people who don't deserve it. Mercy is God's compassion for people who are hurting and helpless, holding back the punishment we deserve. Peace is the result: wholeness, a restored relationship with God, and calm in our hearts. Notice that John doesn't say may grace, mercy, and peace be with you, like a wish. He says they will be with us. It's a promise.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Father's Son**

John carefully describes Jesus as the Father's Son. That's important, because the false teachers he's about to warn against were denying the truth about Jesus. Some apparently said that Jesus was just a man, or that the divine Christ only came on Him temporarily, or that He didn't really have a body. John says: Jesus Christ is the Son of the Father. Grace, mercy, and peace come from both of them, equally. You can't have the Father without the Son.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Truth and Love**

The greeting ends with two words that summarize the whole letter: truth and love. John uses them together again and again. They're like two wings of a bird, two rails of a train track, or two oars of a rowboat. If you only row with one oar, you go in circles. Truth without love becomes harsh, cold, and judgmental. It can be used as a weapon to hurt people. Love without truth becomes soft, shallow, and confused. It can let people walk off a cliff without

warning them. Jesus was full of both grace and truth (John 1:14). That's who we're called to be.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Which Way Do You Lean?**

Most people naturally lean one way or the other. Some are truth people. They care about being right, getting the facts straight, and calling out what's wrong. Their danger is becoming harsh, argumentative, or proud. Others are love people. They care about relationships, harmony, and making people feel accepted. Their danger is avoiding hard conversations and going along with things that aren't right, just to keep the peace. Which way do you lean? Ask God to help you grow in the other direction. Truth people need more gentleness. Love people need more courage.

KEY VERSE

Grace, mercy and peace from God the Father and from Jesus Christ, the Father's Son, will be with us in truth and love.

2 John 3 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Why do you think John didn't need to give his name?
2. Do you think the lady is more likely a church or an individual woman? Why?
3. How would you respond to someone who says there's no such thing as truth?
4. Do you lean more toward truth or toward love? How could you grow in the other?

TRY THIS *Ask two people who know you well whether you lean more toward truth or love. Then pick one way to grow in the other this week. If you*

lean toward truth, do something kind for someone you disagree with. If you lean toward love, have one honest conversation you've been avoiding, gently.

CHAPTER 2

The Oldest New Command

2 John 4–6

After his greeting, John shares some good news. He's thrilled, he says, because he's found some of the lady's children living by the truth, exactly as the Father instructed us.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Some of Your Children**

Notice the word some. John found some of her children walking in the truth. That might be simple: John had met some of them, maybe while they were traveling, and was happy with what he saw. But it might also hint at something sadder: not all of them were walking in the truth. Maybe some had followed the false teachers. If the lady is a church, it might mean that the congregation was divided. If she's a mother, she might have been worried about some of her kids. Either way, John focuses on the good news first. That's a good model. When you need to warn or correct someone, start by noticing what they're doing right.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Walking in the Truth**

John says they're walking in the truth. Walking is a common Bible picture for how you live your life, step by step, day by day. It's not about one big leap. It's about the direction you're heading and the steps you take. Walking in the truth means that your life matches what you believe. You don't just know the truth. You live it. You can know all the right answers about Jesus and still walk in a completely different direction. John is happy because these believers aren't just believing the truth. They're living it.

BACKGROUND CHECK **No Greater Joy**

In 3 John, the elder says something similar: I have no greater joy than to hear that my children are walking in the truth (3 John 4). Think about the people who've invested in your faith: parents, grandparents, pastors, youth leaders, teachers, coaches. One of the best gifts you can give them is to keep walking with Jesus. You might never know how much joy it brings them. And someday, you might feel that joy yourself, when you see someone you've invested in walking in the truth.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Encouragement**

John's joy shows how much encouragement matters. When was the last time you told someone you were proud of them for following Jesus, standing up for what's right, or being kind? Encouragement is powerful. It can keep someone going when they're ready to quit. Hebrews tells us to encourage one another daily (Hebrews 3:13). Try sending a text this week to a friend, a younger kid, or even a leader, just to tell them you've noticed their faith.

Then John makes a request. And now, dear lady, he says, I'm not giving you a brand-new command. It's the same one we've had since the start. I'm asking that we love each other.

BACKGROUND CHECK **An Old Command**

John doesn't claim to be saying anything new. He's reminding them of something they've heard from the very beginning of their faith: love one another. Jesus gave this command at the Last Supper, the night before He died: love one another, just as I have loved you (John 13:34). He said it was how people would recognize His disciples (John 13:35). It's not new, but it never gets old. Some people are always looking for the next new spiritual idea, the hidden secret, or a deeper truth. John says that the deepest truth is the one you heard at the start. You'll never outgrow the command to love.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Old and New**

In 1 John, John says this command is both old and new (1 John 2:7–8). It's old because it goes back to the Old Testament, which tells us to love our neighbor

as ourselves (Leviticus 19:18), and because the readers had heard it from the start. It's new because Jesus gave it a new standard, as I have loved you, and because a new era has begun with His coming. Here in 2 John, he emphasizes that it's old. The false teachers were probably claiming to offer new, advanced teaching. John says: we're sticking with the original.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Love One Another**

Love one another sounds simple, but it's hard. John is especially talking about loving fellow believers, the people in your church, your youth group, your Christian friends. That includes people you don't naturally click with: the awkward kid, the know-it-all, the person who annoys you, the one who's different from you. It includes people who have hurt you. Loving them doesn't mean pretending everything's fine or letting them treat you badly. It means wanting what's best for them, treating them with kindness and respect, forgiving them, and helping them when they're in need. In a divided church, this command was urgent. It still is.

Then John defines love. Love means living in obedience to God's commands. And His command, as you've heard from the beginning, is that you live a life of love.

BACKGROUND CHECK **A Circle**

John's definition of love seems to go in a circle. Love means obeying God's commands, and God's command is to love. Which comes first? The answer is that love and obedience go together. You can't really love God without obeying Him. Jesus said, if you love Me, keep My commands (John 14:15). And you can't really obey God without loving people, because love is His central command. Paul says love fulfills the whole law (Romans 13:8–10). Love isn't a vague feeling. It has shape, and God's commands give it that shape.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Love Has Boundaries**

Our culture often defines love as accepting everything someone does or wants. If you love me, you'll support whatever I choose. But real love sometimes says no. A parent who loves their child doesn't let them play in

traffic or eat candy for every meal. A friend who loves you will tell you if you're making a dangerous choice. God's love includes His commands, because He knows what's good for us and what will harm us. When John says love means obeying God's commands, he's saying love isn't just about feelings. It's about doing what's truly good for others, even when it's hard.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Love Is a Choice**

Feelings come and go. Some days, you'll feel warm and loving toward people. Other days, you won't. John's definition of love doesn't depend on feelings. It's about how you walk, the choices you make, the way you treat people. You can choose to love someone even when you don't feel like it. And often, when you choose to act lovingly, the feelings eventually follow. That doesn't mean faking it. It means being faithful.

BACKGROUND CHECK **What Love Looks Like at School**

What does walking in love look like for a teenager? It might mean sitting with someone who's eating alone. Refusing to laugh at a joke that mocks someone. Standing up for a kid who's being bullied. Helping a classmate understand homework. Including someone in a group chat or game. Apologizing when you've been wrong. Listening to a friend who's going through a hard time. Being patient with your siblings. It doesn't have to be dramatic. Love usually looks like small, faithful choices made every day.

KEY VERSE

And this is love: that we walk in obedience to his commands. As you have heard from the beginning, his command is that you walk in love.

2 John 6 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Who are the people who have invested in your faith? How could you encourage them this week?
2. Why do you think John emphasizes that the command to love is old, not new?
3. How would you explain the connection between love and obedience?
4. Who is the hardest person in your church or youth group for you to love? What would walking in love toward them look like?

TRY THIS *Send a message this week to someone who has invested in your faith. Thank them, and tell them one specific way they've helped you. Then send another message to someone younger in the faith, encouraging them to keep walking in the truth.*

CHAPTER 3

Who Gets a Platform?

2 John 7–13

Then John explains why he's writing. Many deceivers have spread out into the world, he says. They refuse to admit that Jesus Christ came in a real human body. Anyone like that is the deceiver, the antichrist.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Coming in the Flesh**

The false teachers denied that Jesus Christ came in the flesh. As in 1 John, this probably means they believed Jesus didn't really have a physical human body, or that the divine Christ wasn't truly united with the human Jesus. Some people in the ancient world believed that the physical world was bad, and that God couldn't possibly become a real human being who ate, slept, sweated, bled, and died. John says this isn't a minor disagreement. It strikes at the heart of the gospel. If Jesus wasn't really human, He couldn't really die for us. If He didn't really die, He couldn't really rise. The good news is that God really became one of us.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Coming or Came?**

In 1 John 4:2, John says Jesus has come in the flesh. Here, the Greek wording is slightly different, and literally means coming in the flesh. Most interpreters think John means the same thing: Jesus' incarnation, God becoming human. Some think the present tense might also point to His future return in a body, or emphasize that Jesus remains fully human even now, at the Father's right hand. Either way, John insists on a real, physical Jesus.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Deceiver and the Antichrist**

John uses strong words: deceiver and antichrist. As in 1 John, he isn't talking about a single end-times figure, but about anyone who denies the truth about Jesus and replaces the real Jesus with a fake one (1 John 2:18–22). John's language is direct, but notice what he's focused on: not people who struggle with doubts or ask honest questions, but teachers actively spreading a false message about Jesus and trying to lead believers away. Having doubts doesn't make you an antichrist. Questions are welcome. John is warning about deception.

Be careful, John says, so that you don't lose what we've worked for, but receive your full reward. The NIV footnote mentions that some manuscripts say what you have worked for.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Don't Lose What You've Built**

John warns that following false teachers could cause the readers to lose what they had worked so hard for. Christians understand this in different ways. Some think John means losing rewards, the recognition God will give for faithful service. Others think he means the danger that the elder's and the church's work among them would be wasted if they abandoned the truth. Others see a warning about the danger of falling away. All agree that faithfulness matters, and that drifting from the truth has real consequences. Think of it like building a house. It takes months to build, but a fire can destroy it in an hour. Guard what God has built in your life.

Anyone who goes too far, John says, and doesn't stay in the teaching about Christ, doesn't have God. But whoever stays in that teaching has the Father, and the Son as well.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Running Ahead**

The NIV translates John's phrase as running ahead. The false teachers apparently saw themselves as progressive, advanced, cutting-edge. They thought they had moved beyond the simple teaching about Jesus to something deeper and more sophisticated. John says that if you move

beyond Jesus, you don't end up ahead. You end up lost. There's nothing wrong with learning more, asking hard questions, or growing in your understanding. Christians should be curious and thoughtful. But growth means going deeper into the truth about Jesus, not leaving it behind. Be careful of anyone who says, the Bible's view of Jesus is outdated, we've moved past that.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Teaching of Christ**

The phrase the teaching of Christ could mean the teaching about Christ, what the apostles taught about who Jesus is, or the teaching Christ gave, what Jesus Himself taught. Both are true and connected. Jesus taught about Himself, and the apostles passed on His teaching and the truth about Him. Christians have summarized this teaching in ancient creeds, like the Apostles' Creed and the Nicene Creed, which say that Jesus is the Son of God, truly God and truly human, born of the virgin Mary, crucified, risen, ascended, and coming again. These creeds have united Christians across traditions for more than sixteen hundred years.

Then comes the most debated instruction in the letter. "If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not take them into your house or welcome them." Anyone who welcomes them, John adds, becomes a partner in their evil work.

BACKGROUND CHECK **What John Is Not Saying**

This instruction has sometimes been misused to justify being cold, rude, or unkind to people who believe differently. That's not what John means. Remember who wrote this letter: the apostle of love, who just told his readers to love one another. Jesus told us to love our neighbors, and even our enemies (Matthew 5:43–48). He ate with sinners and tax collectors, talked with a Samaritan woman whose people had a different religion, and welcomed people everyone else rejected. Paul told Christians to be kind to everyone and to live at peace with everyone, as far as it depends on them (Romans 12:18). Peter told believers to explain their hope with gentleness and respect (1 Peter 3:15). John isn't saying you should refuse to be friends

with non-Christians, refuse to invite a classmate of another faith over for dinner, slam the door on people who knock with a different message, or treat anyone with contempt.

BACKGROUND CHECK **What John Is Saying**

To understand verse 10, remember what Setting the Scene explained about house churches and traveling teachers. Churches met in homes. Traveling teachers depended on believers for food, a place to stay, and a chance to teach. Welcoming a traveling teacher into your house church meant giving them a platform to teach the congregation, endorsing them as a genuine Christian teacher, and supporting their ministry with food, shelter, and supplies for their next trip. The word for welcome refers to a formal greeting that signaled acceptance and approval. John is saying: don't give these false teachers an official welcome, a platform, or support. Don't help them spread a message that denies who Jesus is. If you do, you're helping them do damage. It's like a school principal deciding not to invite a speaker who would teach students something harmful. It's not about refusing to be kind to a person. It's about refusing to give their harmful message a microphone.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Partners in Their Work**

John says that anyone who welcomes these false teachers shares in their wicked work. That sounds harsh, but think about it. If you give someone a platform, pay their expenses, and introduce them to your friends, you're helping them do what they do. If what they do is spread lies that pull people away from Jesus, you've become part of the problem. That's why it matters who churches invite to speak, which ministries we support, and what we share with others. Supporting someone's message, financially or publicly, makes you a partner in it.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Discernment and Influencers**

In John's day, the question was which traveling teachers to welcome into the house church. In your day, the question might be which influencers to follow, which podcasts to listen to, which videos to share, and which voices to let into your head. Every follow, like, share, and view is a kind of welcome. It

gives someone a bigger platform and helps them spread their message. That doesn't mean you can only listen to Christians or people you agree with. Understanding other views can be valuable. But be thoughtful. Use tests like the ones from John and the Didache. What does this person say about Jesus? How do they live? Are they in it for the money or the fame? Do they make you more loving and truthful, or more angry, proud, and cynical? Do they point you to Jesus, or to themselves? You don't have to give every voice a platform in your life.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Spiritual Influencers**

Some of the most popular online voices talk about faith, God, or spirituality. Some are faithful, wise, and helpful. Others mix truth with error, promise easy blessings, sell expensive products, or slowly lead people away from the real Jesus. Some Christian influencers have later been exposed for abuse, fraud, or hypocrisy. Here are some questions to ask about any spiritual voice you follow. Do they teach that Jesus is truly God and truly human, who died and rose again? Do they handle the Bible carefully, or twist it to support their own ideas? Are they accountable to a church or other leaders? Do they live with integrity? Do they ask for money in manipulative ways? Do they welcome questions, or demand total loyalty? Talk with a parent, pastor, or youth leader about the voices you're listening to. A second opinion is always wise.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Disagreeing Kindly**

How can you hold firm to the truth while still being kind to people who disagree? Here are a few ideas. Listen first, and try to understand what the other person actually believes and why. Don't mock or insult anyone, online or in person. Ask questions instead of only making statements. Remember that you were once wrong about things too. Focus on the most important issues, like who Jesus is, rather than arguing about everything. Be honest about what you believe, gently and respectfully. Know when to walk away from an argument that's going nowhere. And keep loving people, whether or not they ever agree with you. Truth and love can go together.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Primary and Secondary Issues**

Not every disagreement among Christians is as serious as the one in 2 John. Christians disagree about many things: how to baptize, how churches should be led, what worship music should sound like, how to understand the end times, and more. These are important, but sincere followers of Jesus disagree about them. The issue in 2 John was the very heart of the faith: who Jesus is. An old saying, often quoted by Christians, puts it this way: in essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; in all things, charity, which means love. Learning the difference between essential and non-essential issues will help you stand firm on what matters most without fighting over everything.

Finally, John says he has a lot more to tell them, but he'd rather not put it in writing. He hopes to visit soon and talk face to face, so their joy will be complete. And your chosen sister's children, he adds, send you their greetings.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Face to Face**

John had more to say, but he preferred to say it in person. Some things are better said face to face than in writing. Think about how easily texts and messages are misunderstood. Tone gets lost. Sarcasm reads as cruelty. Silence feels like anger. Hard conversations especially are usually better in person, where people can see your face, hear your voice, and know you care. And there's a joy in being together that a screen can't replace. John says that meeting face to face would make their joy complete. Make time for real, in-person friendships. Put the phone down at dinner. Show up.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Your Sister's Children**

John's final greeting comes from the children of the lady's sister, also chosen by God. If the lady is a church, her sister is probably the church where John was living, perhaps in Ephesus, sending greetings to a sister church. That's a beautiful picture: churches in different places, part of one family, caring for each other. Christians around the world today are still one family. When you pray for believers in other countries, support missionaries, or welcome Christians from other cultures, you're living out what John describes.

BACKGROUND CHECK **A Small Letter with a Big Message**

Second John is tiny, but it covers a lot of ground. It shows us that truth and love belong together, that following Jesus means walking in obedience and love, that the truth about who Jesus is matters, that we should be careful who we give a platform to, and that being together face to face is a gift. You could read this letter in two minutes and spend a lifetime learning to live it.

KEY VERSE

Anyone who runs ahead and does not continue in the teaching of Christ does not have God; whoever continues in the teaching has both the Father and the Son.

2 John 9 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Why do you think John took the false teachers' message about Jesus so seriously?
2. What's the difference between refusing to give someone a platform and refusing to be kind to them?
3. Which influencers or voices have the biggest platform in your life? Do they point you toward Jesus or away from Him?
4. Why are some conversations better face to face than by text?

TRY THIS *Go through the accounts you follow on social media and the creators you watch or listen to. For each one, ask: What does this voice say about Jesus, truth, and love? Is it making me more like Jesus or less? Unfollow at least one voice that's pulling you away, and follow one that's helping you grow. Then have one conversation this week face to face that you would normally have by text.*

THE END (AND THE BEGINNING)

Now What? The Bottom Line

You've just read 2 John, a short letter about truth and love. The truth at the center of it all is that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, really came in the flesh. And the love at the center of it all is God's love for you.

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 loves you more than you can imagine. He wants you to know Him.

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

2 We've all turned away.

We've all gone our own way instead of God's. John says that if we claim to have no sin, we're fooling ourselves. 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. God didn't wait for us to love Him first.

> *This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.* **1 John 4:10 (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 running your own life, and trust Jesus as your Savior and King. Then you can know, not just hope, that you have eternal 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 for loving me first. Thank You that Jesus died for me and rose again. I believe You raised Him from the dead. I'm turning to You. Forgive me and make me clean. I trust Jesus*

as my Savior, and I want to follow Him as my King. Help me hold on to the truth, love other people the way You love me, and walk in Your commands. 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 2 John straight through. Then read 3 John, its short companion, about welcoming people who serve the truth.

Find your people. Get connected to a church where the Bible is taught and Jesus is honored. Ask about being baptized.

Love someone. John says love is the proof that we know God. This week, show God's love to someone in a practical way.

Not Sure Yet?

Not ready? That's honest, and honesty is a good place to start. Keep asking. Keep reading. John wrote down what he saw and touched so you could check it out for yourself. Just don't settle for "I already know all that."

Because if John is right, Jesus really came in the flesh, and the truth about Him is worth knowing.

Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ.

Ephesians 4:15 (NIV)

THE THIRD LETTER OF JOHN

The King's Open Door

3 John, Unfiltered

For teens who think they've heard it all

BILL McLEOD

Papa Bill Books

The King's Open Door: The Third Letter of John, 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. Third John is about three people, and one of them definitely thought he knew it all. His name was Diotrephes, and he's a warning for all of us.

Third John is the shortest book in the Bible, by word count. In Greek, it's just over two hundred words, about the length of a long text message. But it's packed with real people and real drama. There's Gaius, a generous friend who opens his home to strangers. There's Diotrephes, a church leader who loves being in charge, spreads gossip, and kicks people out. And there's Demetrius, a man with a great reputation. You probably know people like all three. You might even recognize yourself.

This little letter is about hospitality, which is a fancy word for opening your door, and your life, to others. It's about supporting people who serve God. It's about what happens when someone in a group grabs for power. And it's about the kind of reputation you want to have.

It's also a letter from an old man who'd rather talk face to face than write. In a world of texts, DMs, and group chats, that might be one of its most countercultural ideas.

So read it like a personal note from a friend, and ask yourself which of these three people you're becoming. Let's go.

How This Book Works

This book walks through 3 John in three short chapters, one for each person the letter focuses on: Gaius and walking in the truth (verses 1–8), Diotrephes (verses 9–10), and Demetrius and the farewell (verses 11–15). Each one explains what John is saying in plain language and adds background about the early church and the world of the first readers.

Before chapter 1, a section called Setting the Scene explains why this is the shortest book in the Bible, how it pairs with 2 John, what hospitality meant in the ancient world, how traveling missionaries were supported, and who Diotrephes might have been. 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.

Since 3 John has only one chapter, verses are cited by number alone, like verse 4 or verses 9–10. This book quotes 3 John sparingly and explains it mostly in my own words, so keep a Bible open next to it. Read each 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, Paul's letters, Hebrews, James, Peter's letters, and 1 and 2 John, 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.

Because 3 John is so short, I've divided it into three brief chapters, one for each person the letter discusses, and filled out the book with background that I hope is genuinely useful: ancient letters, hospitality, letters of recommendation, how missionaries were supported, and the relationship between 2 and 3 John. Wherever Scripture is quoted directly, in the chapters and in the Key Verses, the wording is from the New International Version (NIV).

Verse 2, the elder's wish for Gaius' good health, has sometimes been used to teach that God promises wealth and health to all believers who have enough faith or give enough money. I've explained it as a standard, heartfelt greeting in ancient letters, shown that the Bible describes faithful believers who were sick or poor, and encouraged readers to see medical care as compatible with faith.

The section on Diotrephes (verses 9–10) is applied to power, gossip, and control in churches and friend groups. It includes a description of healthy and unhealthy leadership, and a clear note encouraging

teens to tell a trusted adult if any leader, in a church or anywhere else, uses their position to manipulate, control, shame, or harm them.

Other teen applications include supporting missionaries, imitating good role models, building a good reputation online and offline, and the value of face-to-face friendship in a world of screens.

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 become a Gaius: generous, faithful, and quick to open the door.

Grace and peace,

Bill McLeod

Papa Bill Books

BEFORE YOU OPEN THE LETTER

Setting the Scene

The Shortest Book in the Bible

Third John is the shortest book in the Bible by word count. In Greek, it has about 219 words. Second John is slightly longer, about 245 words. If you counted only verses, you might think Philemon or 2 John was shorter, but verse numbers can be misleading. The original letters didn't have chapters or verses at all. Chapter divisions were added in the 1200s, usually credited to Stephen Langton, an English church leader who later became archbishop of Canterbury. Verse numbers for the New Testament were added in 1551 by a French printer named Robert Estienne, who, according to a later story, worked some of them out while traveling on horseback. That's why 3 John has fourteen verses in some Bibles, like the King James Version, and fifteen in others, like the NIV, which divides the last verse into two.

A Real Letter to a Real Friend

Of all the letters in the New Testament, 3 John is one of the most personal. It's written by one person to one person, about specific people and a specific problem. It reads like the kind of letter you'd write to a friend, with news, encouragement, a complaint about someone causing trouble, and a promise to visit soon.

The writer calls himself the elder, just as in 2 John. As in my books on 1 and 2 John, I'll call him John, though Christians have different views about whether he was John the apostle, another disciple

called John the Elder, or a leader in John's circle of churches. Whoever he was, he was a respected older leader who cared deeply about the churches in his region, probably around Ephesus, in what is now Turkey.

Who Was Gaius?

The letter is addressed to Gaius. Gaius was one of the most common names in the Roman world, something like Chris or Alex today. The New Testament mentions several men named Gaius: a traveling companion of Paul from Macedonia (Acts 19:29), a Gaius from Derbe (Acts 20:4), and a Gaius in Corinth whom Paul baptized and who hosted Paul and the whole church in his home (Romans 16:23; 1 Corinthians 1:14). The Gaius of 3 John is probably a different person, living decades later in a different area. A document from the fourth century, called the Apostolic Constitutions, claims that John appointed a Gaius as a leader in the city of Pergamum, but we can't be sure that's the same man. What we do know is what John tells us: Gaius was a dear friend, he walked in the truth, and he was generous and hospitable, even to strangers.

Twin Letters

Second and 3 John are like twins. They're almost exactly the same length, short enough to fit on one sheet of papyrus. Both come from the elder. Both open by saying he loves the reader in the truth. Both rejoice that people are walking in the truth. Both end almost the same way: the elder has much more to say, but would rather not use paper or pen and ink, and hopes to come and talk face to face.

They also deal with the same issue from opposite sides: hospitality for traveling teachers. Second John warns a church not to welcome false teachers who deny that Jesus came in the flesh, because that

would mean supporting their evil work. Third John praises Gaius for welcoming true teachers, and urges him to keep supporting them, because that means working together for the truth. Put them side by side, and you get a complete picture: be careful who you welcome, but be generous to those who serve the truth. Discernment and generosity belong together.

Hospitality in the Ancient World

In the ancient world, hospitality was a sacred duty. Travelers faced real dangers: robbers, wild animals, and harsh weather. Inns were often dirty, expensive, and connected with drunkenness and prostitution. So people depended on the hospitality of strangers. The Greeks believed that Zeus himself was the protector of guests and strangers, and stories told of gods visiting humans in disguise to test their hospitality.

The Bible has its own stories like that. Abraham welcomed three strangers, ran to prepare a meal for them, and discovered that one of them was the Lord (Genesis 18:1–15). Hebrews tells believers to welcome strangers, because some people have entertained angels without knowing it (Hebrews 13:2). God commanded Israel to love foreigners living among them, because they had once been foreigners in Egypt (Leviticus 19:34). Jesus said that when we welcome a stranger, we welcome Him (Matthew 25:35, 40). Hospitality was one of the qualifications for church leaders (1 Timothy 3:2), and all believers were told to practice it (Romans 12:13; 1 Peter 4:9).

Christians became known for their hospitality and generosity. In the fourth century, the Roman emperor Julian, who tried to revive the old pagan religion, complained that Christians supported not

only their own poor but pagan poor as well, and that this kindness was helping Christianity spread.

Supporting Missionaries

The early church spread largely through traveling missionaries, teachers, and evangelists who went from town to town. Most of them didn't have regular income. They depended on Christians along the way for food, a place to stay, and supplies for the next leg of their journey. Third John says that the missionaries Gaius welcomed set out for the Name's sake, and took nothing from pagans (verse 7). In the ancient world, many wandering philosophers and religious teachers begged for money from anyone who would listen. Christian missionaries refused to do that, so no one could accuse them of preaching for profit. Paul did the same, often working with his hands so he wouldn't be a burden (1 Thessalonians 2:9; 1 Corinthians 9:12–18). That meant Christian missionaries depended on fellow believers. Supporting them made those believers partners in the mission.

Letters of Recommendation

How did early Christians know whether a traveling teacher was legitimate? One way was through letters of recommendation. A trusted leader would write a letter introducing the traveler and vouching for them. Paul mentions such letters (2 Corinthians 3:1), and he wrote one for Phoebe, who probably carried his letter to the Romans (Romans 16:1–2). Third John may be partly a letter of recommendation for Demetrius, whom John praises highly (verse 12). Many scholars think Demetrius was carrying the letter to Gaius. John had also written a letter to the church, which Diotrephes

refused to accept (verse 9). Maybe that letter was a recommendation for the traveling teachers that Diotrephes refused to welcome.

Who Was Diotrephes?

Diotrephes is the troublemaker in this letter. His name means nourished by Zeus, which suggests he came from a pagan, possibly wealthy, Greek family, since the name was used in noble families. We don't know for sure what his role was. He may have been the host of the house church where Gaius' friends worshiped, or a leader who had taken control of a congregation. Interestingly, John doesn't accuse him of false teaching. The problem wasn't what Diotrephes believed about Jesus. It was how he behaved: he loved being in charge, refused to accept the elder's authority, spread malicious talk, refused to welcome the traveling teachers, and expelled people who did.

Scholars have offered several explanations. Some think Diotrephes was simply an ambitious man who wanted to run his church without interference from outsiders. Some see a power struggle, as churches moved from being guided by traveling apostles and elders to being led by local leaders. Others wonder whether Diotrephes was overreacting to the danger of false teachers, and decided to shut out all traveling teachers, even true ones. Whatever his reasons, John saw his behavior as a serious problem.

Why 3 John Matters

Third John is a window into real church life in the first century. It shows that the early church wasn't perfect. Some people were generous and faithful. Others were selfish and controlling. That's still true today, in churches, schools, teams, and friend groups. This little letter shows us what to imitate and what to avoid. It

encourages generosity, faithfulness, and support for people who serve God. It warns against pride, gossip, and grabbing for power. And it reminds us that the best relationships happen face to face.

The Map

Chapter 1 (verses 1–8): Gaius, a dear friend who walks in the truth and welcomes strangers.

Chapter 2 (verses 9–10): Diotrephes, the man who always had to be number one.

Chapter 3 (verses 11–15): Imitating what is good, Demetrius' good reputation, and a promise to talk face to face.

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CHAPTER 1

The Friend Who Opens the Door

3 John 1–8

Like 2 John, this letter comes from the elder. This time, though, he writes to one person: his dear friend Gaius. He loves Gaius, he says, in the truth.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Dear Friend**

John calls Gaius dear friend four times in this short letter (verses 1, 2, 5, and 11). The Greek word is agapetos, which comes from agape, the Bible's word for self-giving love. It means beloved, someone who is deeply loved. John isn't writing a formal business letter. He's writing to someone he cares about. Do you have friendships like that, where you can be honest, encourage each other, and know you're loved? Friendships rooted in shared faith are one of God's best gifts. If you don't have one yet, pray for one, and look for someone you could be that kind of friend to.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Loving in the Truth**

As in 2 John, the elder says he loves his friend in the truth. That means his love is sincere, not fake, and it's grounded in the truth about Jesus that they share. Some friendships are based on convenience, popularity, or what you can get from someone. They fade when circumstances change. Friendships grounded in Jesus have a deeper foundation. You may not agree on everything, but you share what matters most.

Then John writes a prayer for his friend. “Dear friend, I pray that you may enjoy good health and that all may go well with you, even as your soul is getting along well.”

BACKGROUND CHECK **A Standard Greeting**

Thousands of ordinary letters from the ancient world have survived, and many of them start with a wish for the reader’s health. A typical letter might say something like, before all else, I pray that you are well. It was a bit like saying, Hope you’re doing well, at the start of an email today. John uses this common greeting, but he means it sincerely, and he adds a twist: he hopes Gaius’ body is as healthy as his soul. Gaius was doing well spiritually. John prays that the rest of his life would go just as well.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Does God Promise Health and Wealth?**

Some preachers have used 3 John 2 to teach what’s often called the prosperity gospel, the idea that God promises health and wealth to every believer who has enough faith, says the right words, or gives enough money, usually to their ministry. The King James Version says that thou mayest prosper and be in health, and some have taken the word prosper to mean get rich. But the Greek word simply means that things go well, and the verse is a friend’s prayer, not a promise to every Christian. It’s like writing, Hope you feel better soon, in a card. The Bible shows that faithful believers sometimes get sick and sometimes are poor. Paul had a thorn in the flesh that God didn’t remove (2 Corinthians 12:7–10). Timothy had frequent stomach problems (1 Timothy 5:23). Paul left his coworker Trophimus sick in Miletus (2 Timothy 4:20). Epaphroditus nearly died (Philippians 2:25–27). Jesus Himself had nowhere to lay His head (Matthew 8:20). Be cautious of anyone who promises that God will make you rich or healthy if you send them money. That’s not the gospel.

BACKGROUND CHECK **God Cares About Your Body**

At the same time, don’t overcorrect. John’s prayer shows that God cares about all of you, not just your soul. Your body matters to Him. He made it, Jesus healed bodies, and He promises to raise our bodies one day. It’s good

to pray for health, for yourself and others. And caring for your body is part of honoring God: sleep, exercise, eating well, and getting medical help when you need it. Prayer and doctors aren't enemies. Luke, who wrote a Gospel and Acts, was a doctor (Colossians 4:14). If you're sick or struggling with your physical or mental health, pray, and also talk to a parent or doctor. God often works through medicine and the people who practice it.

BACKGROUND CHECK **How's Your Soul?**

John's prayer contains a challenge. He hopes Gaius' health and life go as well as his soul. What if someone prayed that for you? Would it be a blessing or a curse? Many people put enormous effort into their bodies, appearance, grades, or achievements, and very little into their souls. John suggests a different priority. How's your soul doing? Are you growing closer to God, or drifting? A healthy soul isn't about looking spiritual. It's about being honest with God, staying connected to Him, and letting Him shape your heart.

John tells Gaius how happy he was when some believers arrived and told him about Gaius' faithfulness to the truth, and how he keeps living it out. There's nothing that makes him happier, he says, than hearing that his children are living by the truth.

BACKGROUND CHECK **A Good Report**

Some traveling believers had visited Gaius, and when they came back, they told John about him. Their report was so good that John was overjoyed. Think about that. When people leave your house, your table at lunch, or your youth group, what do they say about you? You're always giving a report, whether you realize it or not. People notice how you treat them, how you talk about others, and whether your faith is real. Your life is a message people read.

BACKGROUND CHECK **My Children**

John calls Gaius and others his children. He might have led them to faith, or he might simply be using an affectionate term as an elderly spiritual father. Either way, it shows how deeply he cared about them. Spiritual mentors are a

great gift. Is there an older Christian who invests in you, prays for you, and asks how you're really doing? If not, ask God to bring one into your life, and consider asking a pastor or youth leader to help you find one. And remember, someday you could be that person for someone younger.

BACKGROUND CHECK **No Greater Joy**

John says that nothing gives him greater joy than hearing that the people he's mentored are living by the truth. Not money, not success, not recognition. Just knowing that the people he loves are following Jesus. Parents, grandparents, teachers, and youth leaders who love Jesus often feel the same way. When you keep following Jesus, you give them one of the greatest gifts you can give.

Dear friend, John continues, you're being faithful in what you're doing for the believers, even though they're strangers to you. They've told the church how much you love them. Please help them on their journey in a way that pleases God.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Welcoming Strangers**

Gaius didn't just welcome his friends. He welcomed strangers, traveling believers he had never met. That's what hospitality really means. The Greek word for hospitality, philoxenia, literally means love of strangers. It's easy to be nice to your friends. It's harder to open your life to someone you don't know: the new kid at school, a family that just moved to your neighborhood, a visitor at church, someone from another culture. But that's exactly what Gaius did, and John calls it faithful.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Send Them on Their Way**

The phrase John uses for sending the missionaries on their way was a technical term in the early church. It meant more than saying goodbye. It meant providing what they needed for the next part of their journey: food, money, supplies, maybe a traveling companion. Paul uses the same word when he asks churches to help him and others on their way (Romans 15:24; Titus 3:13). Older translations say to send them in a manner worthy of God.

The NIV says in a way that honors God. In other words, treat them as you would treat God Himself. That's a high standard. Jesus said that whoever welcomes His messengers welcomes Him (Matthew 10:40).

They went out for the Name's sake, John says, and they didn't accept help from pagans. So we should support people like them, so that we can be fellow workers for the truth.

BACKGROUND CHECK **For the Name's Sake**

What name? Jesus' name. In the Bible, a person's name stands for who they are, their character and reputation. To do something for the Name's sake, as John puts it here, is to do it for Jesus, to make Him known and honored. The early Christians often spoke of the Name this way. After the apostles were flogged for preaching about Jesus, they left rejoicing that they had been considered worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name (Acts 5:41). These missionaries had left home, family, and security to tell people about Jesus. They weren't in it for money or fame. They were in it for Him.

BACKGROUND CHECK **No Help from Pagans**

Why didn't the missionaries accept support from pagans, people who didn't follow Jesus? In the ancient world, many wandering teachers and philosophers made a living by begging from their audiences. Christian missionaries wanted to make sure that no one could accuse them of preaching for profit, or think that the gospel was for sale. They didn't want to owe anything to people who might expect them to change their message. So they depended on believers like Gaius. That made Gaius more than a host. It made him a partner.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Fellow Workers**

John says that when we support missionaries, we become fellow workers with them. That's a powerful idea. Not everyone is called to travel to another country or start a church. But everyone can be part of the mission. When you pray for missionaries, give money, write them letters, or welcome them when

they visit, you're working alongside them. Their work is your work. And when people come to faith through them, you share in that joy.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Supporting Missionaries Today**

How can a teenager support missionaries today? Ask your church if it supports any missionaries, and learn their names and where they serve. Pray for them regularly. Write them a letter or send an email or video message, letting them know you're praying. Give some of your own money, even a small amount. Help with a fundraiser. When missionaries visit your church, introduce yourself and ask them questions. Consider going on a mission trip with your church. And remember that you're a missionary too, right where you are: at school, on your team, in your neighborhood. The same Name that sent those first missionaries sends you.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Opening Your Home**

Hospitality doesn't require a big house or fancy food. It's about making people feel welcome. You might not control who stays at your house, but you can still practice hospitality. Invite a friend over for dinner. Help your family welcome guests. Make a visitor feel at home at church. Save a seat at lunch for someone who looks lost. Learn the names of new students and use them. Hospitality is simply opening the door of your life a little wider.

KEY VERSE

I have no greater joy than to hear that my children are walking in the truth.

3 John 4 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. What would it look like for your body and life to be as healthy as your soul? Is that a blessing or a challenge?
2. How would you respond to someone who says that God promises wealth and health to anyone with enough faith?
3. Who is a stranger in your world that you could welcome?
4. What's one practical way you could support a missionary this year?

TRY THIS *Find out the name of a missionary your church supports. Learn where they serve and what they do. Pray for them by name every day this week, and send them a short message letting them know you're praying. If your church doesn't support missionaries, ask a pastor to recommend one.*

CHAPTER 2

The Man Who Had to Be First

3 John 9–10

Then John's tone shifts. He had written to the church, he says, but there was a problem. A man named Diotrephes, who always wants to be number one, refuses to welcome us.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Loves to Be First**

The Greek word John uses for Diotrephes means loving to be first, or loving to be in charge. It appears nowhere else in the New Testament, and may be a word John made up for the occasion. Diotrephes wanted to be the most important person in the room. He wanted control. He wanted people to answer to him. That's the opposite of what Jesus taught. When James and John asked Jesus for the best seats in His kingdom, He told the disciples that whoever wants to be great must be a servant, and whoever wants to be first must be the slave of all. Jesus Himself came not to be served, but to serve, and to give His life (Mark 10:35–45). John knew this lesson personally. He had once been the one asking for the top spot. Now, as an old man, he warns against the same attitude.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Desire to Be First**

Wanting to be first isn't always wrong. It's good to want to win the game, do your best in school, or lead well. The problem is when being first becomes more important than people, when you'd rather be in control than see others succeed, and when you can't stand anyone else getting attention. Ask yourself honestly: Do I get jealous when someone else gets praised? Do I need to have the last word? Do I need to be in charge of every group project? Do I

put others down to make myself look good? Everybody struggles with pride sometimes. The answer is to ask God to make you more like Jesus, who used His power to serve.

So when I come, John says, I'll point out what he's doing. He's spreading malicious nonsense about us. And that's not enough for him. He also refuses to welcome the traveling believers, stops those who want to welcome them, and throws them out of the church.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Four Things Diotrephes Did**

John lists four things Diotrephes did. First, he rejected the elder's authority, refusing to accept his letter or his messengers. Second, he spread gossip and malicious nonsense about John and his friends, trying to damage their reputation. Third, he refused to welcome the traveling missionaries. Fourth, he stopped others from welcoming them, and kicked out anyone who did. Notice how one problem led to another. His love of being first led to rejecting anyone who threatened his position. That led to gossip to undermine them, which led to cutting them off, which led to controlling everyone else. Pride rarely stays small.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Malicious Nonsense**

John says Diotrephes was spreading malicious nonsense. The word for nonsense describes talk that is empty and pointless, like babbling. It wasn't true or meaningful. But it was still dangerous. Gossip and slander don't have to be true to do damage. A rumor, a misleading screenshot, or an unkind comment can destroy someone's reputation and relationships. Diotrephes used words to protect his power and push others out. People still do that. If you hear gossip about someone, you don't have to believe it or pass it on. Ask, Is this true? Is it kind? Is it necessary? And if it's not, let it stop with you.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Diotrephes in Your Friend Group**

You don't have to be in church to meet a Diotrephes. Friend groups, teams, clubs, and group chats can have them too. They're the person who has to be in control, decides who's in and who's out, spreads rumors about anyone who

challenges them, and pressures everyone else to go along. Sometimes they're called the queen bee or the alpha. They might make it clear that if you're friends with the wrong person, you'll be cut off too. That's exactly what Diotrephes did: he expelled anyone who welcomed the people he rejected. If you're in a group like that, you don't have to go along with it. You can refuse to gossip, include people who are left out, and find friends who treat others well. It takes courage. And if you recognize a little of Diotrephes in yourself, it's not too late to change.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Healthy and Unhealthy Leaders**

Third John gives us a picture of healthy and unhealthy leadership. Healthy leaders serve others, point people to Jesus, welcome accountability, admit when they're wrong, are honest and transparent, encourage others to grow and lead, and treat people with respect, even those who disagree. Unhealthy leaders love power and attention, demand loyalty to themselves, refuse accountability, spread gossip or attack critics, control who's allowed in, punish people who disagree, and make others afraid to speak up. These patterns show up in churches, youth groups, schools, sports teams, and families. Learning to recognize them can protect you, and help you become a healthy leader yourself.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Spiritual Abuse**

Sometimes leaders in churches or religious groups use their position to control, manipulate, shame, or harm people. This is sometimes called spiritual abuse. Warning signs include a leader who claims you must obey them without question, uses God or the Bible to make you feel guilty or afraid, punishes or shames people who ask questions, tells you to keep secrets from your parents or others, isolates you from friends or family, or touches you in ways that make you uncomfortable. If any leader, at church, at school, on a team, or anywhere else, makes you feel this way, it's not your fault, and you don't have to stay silent. Tell a trusted adult right away: a parent, a teacher, a school counselor, or another pastor. If the first person doesn't listen, tell someone else. Jesus cares deeply about how leaders treat the people in their care, and so should His church.

BACKGROUND CHECK **How John Responded**

Notice how John responds to Diotrephes. He doesn't gossip back. He doesn't send an angry message. He doesn't start a rival group. He says he'll come in person and bring Diotrephes' behavior into the open. That's a model for handling conflict. Jesus taught that when someone sins against you, you should first talk to them privately, then bring one or two others if they won't listen, and then involve the church if needed (Matthew 18:15–17). Problems are best dealt with directly, honestly, and in person, not through gossip, passive-aggressive posts, or revenge. And when a leader abuses their power, it shouldn't be covered up. It should be brought into the light.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Even Then**

It might be surprising that a man like Diotrephes was in the early church, apparently a leader, in a church connected to an apostle. Some people imagine the early church was perfect. It wasn't. It was full of real people with real flaws, and some of them caused real harm. That's still true. If you've been hurt by a church or a Christian leader, that's real, and it matters. But don't let one Diotrephes convince you that Jesus is like him. Jesus is the opposite. He's the Good Shepherd who lays down His life for the sheep (John 10:11).

KEY VERSE

I wrote to the church, but Diotrephes, who loves to be first, will not welcome us.

3 John 9 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Why do you think wanting to be first is so dangerous for a leader?
2. Have you ever seen someone like Diotrephes in a friend group, team, or class? How did it affect people?
3. What are the signs of a healthy leader? Who's an example of one in your life?
4. What would you do if a leader made you uncomfortable or tried to control you?

TRY THIS *This week, look for a chance to let someone else be first. Let someone else choose, lead, get the credit, or have the last word. Notice how it feels. Then do one thing to include someone who's being left out by a group you're part of.*

CHAPTER 3

A Good Name

3 John 11–15

Dear friend, John says to Gaius, don't copy what's evil. Copy what's good. People who do good belong to God. People who do evil have never really seen God.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Imitate What Is Good**

The Greek word John uses for imitate is where we get the word mimic. We all copy someone. Little kids copy their parents. Teens copy friends, celebrities, influencers, and athletes. We pick up their words, styles, attitudes, and habits, often without realizing it. John tells Gaius: don't copy Diotrephes. Copy what's good. Paul said something similar: follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ (1 Corinthians 11:1). Who are you copying? Are they making you more like Jesus, or less?

BACKGROUND CHECK **Role Models**

Think about the people you look up to most. What do you admire about them? Their talent, success, popularity, looks, or character? It's fine to admire people for many reasons. But be careful about copying people just because they're famous or popular. Look for role models whose lives show goodness, honesty, kindness, courage, and faith. They might not be famous at all. They might be a grandparent, a coach, a teacher, or an older friend at church. And remember, someone younger is probably watching and copying you.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Doing Good Shows Who You Belong To**

John says that people who do good are from God, and people who do evil haven't seen God. That echoes a major theme of 1 John: how you live shows who you belong to. John isn't saying that doing good earns you a place with God, or that one mistake means you don't know Him. He's saying that a life changed by God will show it, and a life that keeps choosing evil reveals that someone doesn't really know Him. Diotrephes claimed to be a church leader, but his actions told a different story.

Then John recommends a man named Demetrius. Everyone speaks well of him, John says, and so does the truth itself. We speak well of him too, and you know we tell the truth.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Who Was Demetrius?**

We don't know much about Demetrius. He may have been carrying this letter to Gaius, or he may have been one of the traveling missionaries who needed hospitality. John's recommendation would help Gaius know that Demetrius could be trusted, especially since Diotrephes was rejecting John's friends. Some have wondered whether he was the same Demetrius as the silversmith of Ephesus who started a riot against Paul because the gospel was hurting his business of making idols (Acts 19:23–41). That would be an amazing story of transformation, but there's no evidence for it. Demetrius was a common name.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Three Witnesses**

John gives Demetrius three recommendations. First, everyone speaks well of him. His reputation was good among all who knew him. Second, the truth itself speaks for him. His life matched the truth so well that the truth itself was his witness. Third, John and his friends vouch for him personally. In the Old Testament, a matter was established by the testimony of two or three witnesses (Deuteronomy 19:15). Demetrius had three. That's a solid reputation.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Your Reputation**

What do people say about you when you're not around? A good reputation is built slowly, through consistent choices over time, and it can be damaged quickly. Proverbs says a good name is more desirable than great riches (Proverbs 22:1). That doesn't mean you should care too much about what people think, or try to please everyone. Jesus was criticized by many. It means living with integrity so that people who know you can trust you. Demetrius' life matched the truth. That's the best kind of reputation: not just a good image, but a good life.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Your Digital Footprint**

Today, your reputation isn't just what people say about you. It's also what you post, comment, like, and share. Your digital footprint can follow you for years. Colleges, employers, and future friends may see it. A single post made in anger or as a joke can be screenshotted and shared forever. Before you post, ask: Would I want my grandparents, a future boss, or Jesus to see this? Does it reflect who I want to be? Would Demetrius post it? You don't have to be perfect. But you can be thoughtful. And if you've posted things you regret, it's not too late to delete them, apologize if needed, and start building a better footprint.

Finally, John says, he has a lot more to write, but he doesn't want to use pen and ink. He hopes to see Gaius soon, and then they'll talk in person.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Pen and Ink, Screens and Texts**

John had more to say, but he'd rather say it in person. In his day, writing meant pen, ink, and papyrus. In our day, it means texts, DMs, emails, and group chats. Messages are useful. They help us stay connected when we're apart. But they have limits. Tone gets lost. A short reply can sound angry. A joke can sound cruel. People say things in messages they'd never say face to face. And some conversations, like apologies, hard news, and serious disagreements, are almost always better in person, where you can see someone's face and hear their voice.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Face to Face**

Studies have found that many teens today spend more time communicating through screens than in person, and many report feeling lonely. Screens can connect us, but they can't fully replace being together. There's something about sitting across from a friend, laughing together, or seeing someone's face when they're hurting that a message can't capture. John knew that. He'd rather talk face to face. Make time for real, in-person friendships. Put your phone away when you're with people. Invite a friend to do something together instead of just texting. Show up for people in person when they're going through hard times. Some of the best things in life happen face to face.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Before You Hit Send**

Here are a few guidelines for messages. Don't send anything when you're angry; wait until you've calmed down. If a conversation is getting heated, suggest talking in person or on a call. Don't use group chats to gang up on someone or talk about people who aren't there. Remember that screenshots exist. Never send anything you'd be devastated to see shared. And if someone sends you something hurtful, threatening, or inappropriate, don't respond; tell a trusted adult.

John ends with a blessing of peace. Then he passes along hellos from the friends who are with him. Greet each of the friends there by name.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Peace**

John's last word to Gaius is peace. That's fitting, after describing the conflict with Diotrephes. Peace doesn't mean the absence of problems. Gaius still had to deal with a difficult leader. It means a deep sense of security and wholeness that comes from God, even in the middle of trouble. Jesus told His disciples, peace I leave with you; My peace I give you (John 14:27). Whatever conflicts you're facing, that peace is available to you.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Friends**

John calls the believers friends, both those with him and those with Gaius. That's unusual. New Testament writers usually call fellow believers brothers and sisters. But Jesus called His disciples friends: I no longer call you servants, He said; instead, I have called you friends (John 15:15). John was there when Jesus said that. Christians aren't just members of the same organization. They're friends of Jesus, and friends of each other.

BACKGROUND CHECK **By Name**

John asks Gaius to greet each friend by name. He doesn't want a general, Hi, everyone. He wants each person to be greeted personally. Names matter. Using someone's name tells them they're seen and valued. Jesus said the Good Shepherd calls His own sheep by name (John 10:3). God knows your name. And you can show God's love by learning and using other people's names, especially people who are often overlooked: the new student, the custodian, the lunch server, the kid who sits alone. It's a small thing that makes a big difference.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Three People, Three Choices**

Third John introduces three people. Gaius was generous, faithful, and welcoming. Diotrephes was proud, controlling, and divisive. Demetrius had a good reputation that matched the truth. Every day, you're choosing which of these people you're becoming. Will you open your door to others, or close it? Will you serve, or demand to be first? Will your life match what you say you believe? The good news is that you don't have to become a Gaius or a Demetrius on your own. The same Jesus who changed a Son of Thunder into the apostle of love can change you too.

KEY VERSE

Dear friend, do not imitate what is evil but what is good. Anyone who does what is good is from God. Anyone who does what is evil has not seen God.

3 John 11 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Who do you find yourself imitating? Are they making you more like Jesus or less?
2. What would people say about you if they were asked to describe your reputation?
3. What are the advantages and disadvantages of texting compared to talking face to face?
4. Which person in 3 John are you most like right now: Gaius, Diotrephes, or Demetrius?

TRY THIS *This week, choose one conversation you'd normally have by text and have it in person instead. Then make a point of learning and using the name of someone you usually overlook, like a new student, a custodian, or a cafeteria worker. Greet them by name every day this week.*

THE END (AND THE BEGINNING)

Now What? The Bottom Line

You've just read 3 John, a short letter about opening the door to others. But the greatest open door of all is the one God opened for you through Jesus, so that you could be welcomed into His family.

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 loves you more than you can imagine. He wants you to know Him.

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

2 We've all turned away.

We've all gone our own way instead of God's. John says that if we claim to have no sin, we're fooling ourselves. 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. God didn't wait for us to love Him first.

> *This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.* **1 John 4:10 (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 running your own life, and trust Jesus as your Savior and King. Then you can know, not just hope, that you have eternal 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 for loving me first. Thank You that Jesus died for me and rose again. I believe You raised Him from the dead. I'm turning to You. Forgive me and make me clean. I trust Jesus*

as my Savior, and I want to follow Him as my King. Help me walk in the truth, open my door to others, and serve You instead of trying to be first. 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 3 John straight through. Then read Jude, the next letter in the New Testament, about holding on to the faith.

Find your people. Get connected to a church where the Bible is taught and Jesus is honored. Ask about being baptized.

Open your door. Like Gaius, look for a way to welcome someone this week: a new kid, a lonely neighbor, or a visitor at church.

Not Sure Yet?

Not ready? That's honest, and honesty is a good place to start. Keep asking. Keep reading. John wrote down what he saw and touched so you could check it out for yourself. Just don't settle for "I already know all that."

Because if John is right, God's door is open, and you're welcome.

Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it.

Hebrews 13:2 (NIV)

THE LETTER OF JUDE

The King Who Keeps You

Jude, Unfiltered

For teens who think they've heard it all

BILL McLEOD

Papa Bill Books

The King Who Keeps You: The Letter of Jude, 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. Jude grew up in the same house as Jesus, and for years he didn't believe his big brother was anything special. So if you've ever had doubts, Jude gets it.

Jude is one of the shortest books in the Bible, just twenty-five verses. It's also one of the most intense. It's full of fallen angels, an archangel arguing with the devil, ancient cities destroyed by fire, a talking donkey's owner, wild waves, wandering stars, and a quote from a mysterious ancient book that isn't in most Bibles. Some people skip it because it seems strange. That's a mistake.

Jude wrote because something dangerous was happening in the church. People had slipped in who were twisting God's grace into an excuse to do whatever they wanted. Jude tells his readers to fight for the faith. But read to the end, and you'll see that he also tells them to show mercy to people who doubt and to pull people out of the fire. Standing firm and being kind go together.

And Jude ends with one of the most beautiful prayers of praise in the Bible, a promise that God can keep you from falling and bring you into His presence with joy.

So read it like a letter from a little brother who finally figured out who his big brother really was. Let's go.

How This Book Works

This book walks through Jude in four short chapters, one for each section of the letter: the call to contend for the faith (verses 1–4), the examples and warnings (verses 5–16), how to stand firm and show mercy (verses 17–23), and the closing praise (verses 24–25). Each one explains what Jude is saying in plain language and adds background about the Old Testament stories and the Jewish writings he uses.

Before chapter 1, a section called Setting the Scene explains who Jude was, what happened to his family, what kind of trouble he was writing about, and why he quotes books outside the Bible. 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.

Since Jude has only one chapter, verses are cited by number alone, like verse 3 or verses 24–25. This book quotes Jude sparingly and explains it mostly in my own words, so keep a Bible open next to it. Read each 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, Paul's letters, Hebrews, James, and the letters of Peter and John, 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.

Because Jude is short, I've divided it into four brief chapters and filled out the book with background that I hope is genuinely useful: Jude's family and the account of his grandsons before the emperor Domitian, the Old Testament stories he draws on, and the Jewish writings he mentions. Wherever Scripture is quoted directly, in the chapters and in the Key Verses, the wording is from the New International Version (NIV).

Jude refers to the story of Michael and the devil disputing over Moses' body, which early writers connected with a book called the Assumption of Moses, and he quotes from 1 Enoch (verses 14–15). I've explained what these books are, how Christians have understood Jude's use of them, the parallel of Paul quoting pagan poets, and the fact that 1 Enoch is part of the canon of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church.

Jude's call to contend for the faith (verse 3) is presented as standing firm on the truth about Jesus while treating people with mercy,

gentleness, and respect, as Jude himself urges in verses 22–23. The letter's close relationship with 2 Peter is summarized, with a reference to the fuller discussion in the 2 Peter book of this series.

Passages highlighted as especially relevant for teens include building yourself up in faith and prayer (verses 20–21), showing mercy to those who doubt (verse 22), with a gentle box for teens who are struggling with doubts themselves, and the promise that God is able to keep believers from stumbling (verse 24).

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 stand firm, show mercy, and rest in the God who is able to keep them.

Grace and peace,

Bill McLeod

Papa Bill Books

BEFORE YOU OPEN THE LETTER

Setting the Scene

Jude, Judas, Judah

The name Jude is really the same as Judas, which was the Greek form of Judah, the name of one of Jacob's twelve sons and of the tribe that King David came from. It was a very popular name among Jews in the first century. Most English Bibles call the writer of this letter Jude, probably to avoid confusing him with Judas Iscariot, who betrayed Jesus. The New Testament mentions several men named Judas: Judas Iscariot; another apostle, Judas son of James, sometimes called Thaddaeus (Luke 6:16; John 14:22); Judas the Galilean, a rebel leader (Acts 5:37); and Judas called Barsabbas, a leader in the Jerusalem church (Acts 15:22). And there was Judas, the brother of Jesus (Mark 6:3).

The Brother of James

The writer introduces himself simply as Jude, a slave or servant of Jesus Christ, and James's brother. There was only one James so famous that he could be identified by his first name alone: James the brother of Jesus, the leader of the Jerusalem church and the writer of the letter of James. So most Christians throughout history have understood the writer to be Judas, who is listed in the Gospels as one of Jesus' brothers, along with James, Joseph, and Simon (Matthew 13:55; Mark 6:3).

That means Jude was also a brother of Jesus. Christians have understood that relationship in different ways, as I explained in my

book on James. Most Protestants think he was a younger half-brother, a son of Mary and Joseph. Orthodox Christians often think he was a son of Joseph from an earlier marriage. Catholic tradition has often understood Jesus' brothers as close relatives, such as cousins. Whichever view is right, Jude grew up in the same family as Jesus.

Why Didn't He Say So?

Here's something striking. Jude never mentions that he's Jesus' brother. He calls himself a servant of Jesus Christ instead. Like his brother James, he seems to have understood that being related to Jesus physically didn't make him more important. Once, when Jesus was told that His mother and brothers were outside, He said that whoever does God's will is His brother and sister and mother (Mark 3:31–35). Jude also had something else to be humble about. During Jesus' ministry, His brothers didn't believe in Him (John 7:5). But after the resurrection, they were among the believers praying together in Jerusalem (Acts 1:14). Something had changed Jude's mind completely. Many think it was seeing his brother alive again.

A Traveling Family

We don't know much about Jude's life after that. Paul mentions that the Lord's brothers traveled as missionaries, taking their wives with them (1 Corinthians 9:5), so Jude may have spent years traveling and preaching. Later traditions say he preached in various places, but they're not reliable.

Jude's Grandsons and the Emperor

One of the most fascinating stories about Jude's family comes from Hegesippus, a second-century Christian writer whose work is

quoted by the historian Eusebius. Hegesippus says that the Roman emperor Domitian, who ruled from AD 81 to 96, was worried about descendants of King David, since Jews hoped for a Messiah from David's family. Someone reported that the grandsons of Jude, the Lord's brother, were descendants of David. So Domitian had them brought before him.

The emperor asked whether they were descended from David, and they said yes. He asked how much property and money they had. They said that together they owned only a small farm, worth about nine thousand denarii, which they worked themselves to pay their taxes and support themselves. Then they showed him their hands, rough and calloused from hard labor. When Domitian asked about Christ and His kingdom, they explained that it wasn't an earthly kingdom, but a heavenly one, which would come at the end of the world, when Christ would return to judge the living and the dead. Domitian decided they were harmless, dismissed them, and, according to Hegesippus, stopped persecuting the church. Jude's grandsons became leaders in the churches, and lived until the reign of Trajan.

We can't confirm every detail. But it's a remarkable picture: the grandsons of Jesus' brother, ordinary farmers with calloused hands, standing before the most powerful man in the world and telling him about a heavenly kingdom.

Who Wrote Jude?

Most Christians throughout history have accepted that Jude, the brother of Jesus and James, wrote this letter. Some modern scholars think a later writer used Jude's name, pointing to the letter's good Greek and to verse 17, which looks back on what the apostles said,

as if from a later time. Others answer that Galilee was a region where Greek was common, that Jude had decades to develop his skills, and that he may have had help. Verse 17 may simply mean that Jude himself wasn't one of the twelve apostles, which is true. The letter is usually dated somewhere between AD 50 and 90.

Some early Christians questioned whether Jude belonged in the Bible, mainly because it quotes 1 Enoch. Jerome, around AD 400, mentioned that some rejected it for that reason. But it was accepted by many from early on. It appears in the Muratorian Fragment, an early list of New Testament books, and was quoted or used by Tertullian, Clement of Alexandria, and Origen. It became a settled part of the New Testament by the end of the fourth century.

Jude and St. Jude

In Catholic tradition, the writer of this letter is often identified with the apostle Judas son of James, also called Thaddaeus, and honored as St. Jude, the patron saint of desperate situations and lost causes. One popular explanation is that because his name sounded like Judas Iscariot's, people were reluctant to pray to him, so he became the saint people turned to when they had nowhere else to go. Many scholars think the writer was a different Jude, since the writer calls himself the brother of James rather than an apostle, and verse 17 seems to set him apart from the apostles. Either way, there's something fitting about it. Jude's letter ends with the promise that God can keep anyone from falling.

The Trouble

Jude had planned to write a happy letter about the salvation he shared with his readers. Instead, he had to write a warning. Certain people had slipped into the church unnoticed. They claimed to be

believers, and joined in the church's fellowship meals. But they were twisting God's grace into an excuse for immorality, rejecting authority, mocking spiritual realities, causing divisions, flattering people to get what they wanted, and denying Jesus as Lord in the way they lived. They claimed special dreams or visions to justify themselves (verse 8). Jude wrote to wake his readers up.

Jude and 2 Peter

If you've read 2 Peter, much of Jude will sound familiar. Jude 4–18 and 2 Peter 2:1–3:3 share many of the same themes, examples, and even phrases: false teachers who slipped in, angels held in darkness, Sodom and Gomorrah, slandering celestial beings, Balaam, waterless clouds or springs, and scoffers in the last days. Most scholars think 2 Peter used Jude, but some think Jude used 2 Peter, and others think both drew on a common source. I explained the evidence for each view in the box called Who Borrowed from Whom? in chapter 2 of my book on 2 Peter, so I won't repeat it all here.

Books Outside the Bible

Jude does something no other New Testament writer does so openly. He refers to two Jewish books that aren't in the Bible used by most Christians. He mentions a dispute between the archangel Michael and the devil over Moses' body (verse 9), a story that early Christian writers said came from a book called the Assumption of Moses. The NIV footnote says Jude is alluding to the Jewish Testament of Moses, from around the first century AD. And he quotes a prophecy of Enoch (verses 14–15), which comes from a book called 1 Enoch, as the NIV footnote explains. We'll look at

what these books are, and what it means that Jude used them, in chapter 2.

Why Jude Matters

Jude is short, intense, and sometimes strange. But it speaks to questions every generation faces. What's worth standing up for? How do you recognize people who twist the truth? How do you stay strong when people around you are drifting? And how do you treat people who doubt or wander? Jude's answers are surprisingly balanced: contend for the faith, but show mercy; watch out for danger, but trust the God who keeps you.

The Map

Chapter 1 (verses 1–4): Called, loved, and kept; the call to contend for the faith.

Chapter 2 (verses 5–16): Warnings from history, Michael and the devil, vivid pictures of false teachers, and Enoch's prophecy.

Chapter 3 (verses 17–23): Remember, build yourself up, pray, and show mercy.

Chapter 4 (verses 24–25): The God who can hold you up.

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CHAPTER 1

Called, Loved, Kept

Jude 1–4

Jude opens his letter the way most ancient letters began: with the writer's name, the readers, and a greeting. But even in these first lines, he packs in a lot.

He calls himself a servant of Jesus Christ. The Greek word is doulos, which really means a slave, someone who belongs completely to a master. That's an amazing thing for Jude to say. This is the brother who once thought Jesus had lost His mind (Mark 3:21) and who didn't believe in Him (John 7:5). Now he introduces himself as Jesus' slave. He doesn't call himself the Lord's brother, which would have given him instant status. He just says he's James's brother, so his readers will know who he is.

BACKGROUND CHECK **From Skeptic to Servant**

Imagine growing up with Jesus. You eat dinner with Him, share chores with Him, maybe argue with Him about whose turn it is to fetch water. He never sins, which might have been pretty annoying. Then He starts preaching and healing, and crowds follow Him. And you think He's gone too far. That's where Jude was. Something changed him so completely that he spent the rest of his life serving the brother he once doubted. The most likely explanation is the one the New Testament gives: Jesus rose from the dead, and appeared to His family (1 Corinthians 15:7 says He appeared to James). If

you have doubts, you're in good company. Jude had them too. Jesus didn't give up on him.

Then Jude describes his readers with three beautiful phrases. They have been called by God. They are loved by God the Father. And they are kept for Jesus Christ, guarded and protected until He returns. (The NIV footnote says the phrase can also be translated "by" or "in" Jesus Christ.)

BACKGROUND CHECK **Bookends**

Notice the word kept. Jude uses it at the very start of his letter, and he comes back to it again and again. The rebellious angels didn't keep their positions, so God keeps them in darkness (verse 6). Jude tells his readers to keep themselves in God's love (verse 21). And he ends by praising the God who can keep them from stumbling (verse 24). The whole letter is wrapped in the same promise. Before Jude says anything about danger, he reminds his readers that they're safe in God's hands. That's a good order to remember. Before you look at the threats around you, remember who's holding you.

His greeting is a prayer that mercy, peace, and love would be multiplied in his readers' lives. Most letters in the New Testament use "grace and peace." Jude says mercy, which is fitting, because mercy will be one of the big themes at the end of his letter.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Three Times Three**

Jude loves groups of three. His readers are called, loved, and kept (verse 1). He prays for mercy, peace, and love (verse 2). He gives three Old Testament examples of judgment (verses 5–7), then three things the false teachers do (verse 8), then three famous rebels: Cain, Balaam, and Korah (verse 11). Near the end, he describes three groups of people to show mercy to (verses 22–23). Some scholars think this was a deliberate way of writing, which made the letter easier to remember when it was read aloud. When you read Jude, look for the threes.

Jude says he had been really eager to write to his friends about the salvation they had in common. That was the letter he wanted to write. But something happened, and he felt he had no choice but to write a different one. He needed to urge them to contend for the faith.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **The Letter He Didn't Want to Write**
>
> Have you ever planned to talk to a friend about something fun, but then you had to talk to them about something serious instead? That's what happened to Jude. He would much rather have written a joyful letter about salvation. But when people you love are in danger, love sometimes means saying hard things. A good friend doesn't stay quiet when you're about to get hurt. Jude's warnings come from the same heart that wanted to celebrate salvation. Notice that he calls his readers dear friends, or beloved, three times in this short letter (verses 3, 17, and 20).

The word for contend is epagonizomai. It comes from agon, a word for an athletic contest or a struggle, the word that gives us agony. It's the kind of effort a wrestler or a runner puts in. Jude is saying: give everything you've got to defend and hold on to the faith.

But what does Jude mean by the faith? Here he doesn't mean your personal trust in God. He means the content of what Christians believe: the good news about Jesus, who He is, and what He has done. Jude says this faith was handed over to God's people once for all. It isn't something that needs to be updated or reinvented every generation. The core message about Jesus has been delivered, like a package, and our job is to receive it, keep it safe, and pass it on.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Contend, but with Mercy, Not Meanness**
>
> Some Christians have taken the word contend as permission to be harsh, to win arguments, to mock people, or to treat anyone who disagrees as an enemy. That's not what Jude means. Look at how the letter ends. He tells his readers to show mercy to doubters and to rescue people from the fire (verses

22–23). Contending for the faith means standing firm on the truth about Jesus, refusing to let it be twisted. It doesn't mean fighting people. Paul says that the Lord's servant must not be quarrelsome, but kind to everyone, gently instructing those who oppose them (2 Timothy 2:24–25). Peter says to answer anyone who asks about your hope with gentleness and respect (1 Peter 3:15). You can hold on to the truth with a firm grip and still offer an open hand to people. In fact, the more firmly you know what you believe, the less you need to be defensive about it.

BACKGROUND CHECK **What's Worth Contending For?**

Not every disagreement among Christians is a fight for the faith. Christians disagree about worship styles, how to baptize, the end times, and many other things. Those questions matter, but sincere believers who love Jesus come down in different places on them. What Jude was defending was far more basic: that Jesus is Lord, that God's grace calls us to holy lives, and that we can't twist the gospel into something that serves ourselves. A useful rule many Christians have followed is this: in essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; in all things, love. Learning the difference is part of growing up in faith.

Here's why Jude had to change his plans. Certain people had sneaked into the church. They didn't arrive with a sign saying "false teacher." They came in quietly, and they looked like everyone else. Jude says their judgment had been described long ago. (The NIV footnote offers another translation: they had been marked out for condemnation.) He probably means that the Scriptures had already warned about people like them, and that their fate was no surprise to God.

Jude describes them in two ways. First, they took God's grace and turned it into an excuse for sexual immorality and self-indulgence. They seem to have thought, "God forgives everything, so it doesn't matter what I do." Second, they denied Jesus, our only Master and

Lord. They may not have rejected Him in words, but they rejected Him with their lives, refusing to let Him be in charge.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Cheap Grace**

God's grace is free. You can't earn it. But that doesn't mean it's cheap. The German pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who was executed for resisting the Nazis, warned about what he called cheap grace: forgiveness without repentance, grace without following Jesus. He said real grace is costly, because it cost God the life of His Son, and because it calls us to follow Him. Paul asked the same question: should we keep on sinning so that grace may increase? His answer: by no means (Romans 6:1–2)! Grace doesn't give you permission to sin. It gives you the power to change.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Spotting the Twist**

How do you recognize when someone is twisting God's grace? Here are some warning signs. They talk a lot about freedom but never about holiness. They make you feel that anyone who talks about obeying God is a legalist. Their teaching always seems to justify what they already wanted to do. They don't like being accountable to anyone. And they talk about Jesus as Savior but never as Lord. Real grace makes you love Jesus more and want to follow Him more closely. Twisted grace makes Jesus fit your plans.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Master and Lord**

Jude calls Jesus our only Sovereign, or Master, and Lord. The Greek word for master is despotes, the word that gives us despot. It describes someone with complete authority. Remember, Jude called himself Jesus' slave in verse 1. Now he says Jesus is the only Master. Coming from Jesus' own brother, that's an incredible statement. He wasn't just saying his brother was a good teacher. He was saying his brother was Lord of all.

KEY VERSE

Dear friends, although I was very eager to write to you about the salvation we share, I felt compelled to write and urge you to contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to God's holy people.

Jude 3 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Jude once didn't believe in his own brother. What do you think changed his mind? What would it take to change yours, or strengthen what you already believe?
2. How can you contend for the faith without being mean? Can you think of someone who does this well?
3. What's the difference between an essential belief and a non-essential one? Give an example of each.
4. Have you ever heard someone use grace as an excuse to do whatever they want? How would you respond?

TRY THIS *Write down, in five sentences or fewer, the core of the Christian faith as you understand it: who Jesus is and what He has done. Then compare it with a creed, like the Apostles' Creed. What did you include? What did you leave out?*

CHAPTER 2

Lessons from History

Jude 5–16

Jude says his readers already know everything he's about to tell them. He's not giving them new information. He's reminding them. Sometimes the most important thing isn't learning something new, but remembering what you already know.

He gives three examples from the Old Testament and Jewish tradition, showing that God takes rebellion seriously.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Example One: The People Who Didn't Trust**

The first example is the people of Israel. The Lord rescued them from slavery in Egypt, splitting the sea, feeding them in the desert. But when they reached the edge of the promised land, they refused to trust Him. They listened to the scouts who said the land's inhabitants were too strong, and they wanted to go back to Egypt. So God said that generation would die in the wilderness (Numbers 14). The point: being rescued once doesn't mean you can keep rejecting God. Starting well isn't the same as finishing well. Hebrews makes the same point (Hebrews 3:16–19).

BACKGROUND CHECK **Jesus in the Exodus?**

The NIV footnote on verse 5 notes that some early manuscripts say Jesus instead of the Lord. That would mean Jude saw Jesus Himself as the one who rescued Israel from Egypt, before He was ever born in Bethlehem. That might sound strange, but Paul says something similar: the rock that went with Israel in the desert was Christ (1 Corinthians 10:4). Christians believe that the Son of

God existed before He became human, and was active all through the Old Testament story. Scholars debate which reading of Jude 5 is original, but either way, the one who rescued Israel is the God revealed in Jesus.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Example Two: The Angels Who Left**

The second example is angels who didn't stay in the place of authority God had given them, but left their proper home. Jude says God is keeping them in chains in deep darkness until the day of judgment. He's probably thinking of the strange story in Genesis 6:1–4, where the sons of God took human wives. Many Jews in Jude's time understood the sons of God as angels who rebelled, and 1 Enoch tells this story in detail. Peter mentions the same angels (2 Peter 2:4). Others understand Genesis 6 differently, as the godly line of Seth marrying ungodly people, or as powerful rulers. Whatever the details, Jude's point is clear: even angels who rebelled against God weren't exempt from judgment. Notice the wordplay: they didn't keep their position, so God keeps them in darkness.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Example Three: Sodom and Gomorrah**

The third example is Sodom, Gomorrah, and the nearby towns (Genesis 19). Jude says, like the angels, they gave themselves to sexual immorality and pursued unnatural desire, literally other flesh. Many interpreters think he's comparing the angels, who crossed the line between heaven and earth, with the men of Sodom, who wanted to abuse the angelic visitors staying with Lot. The prophet Ezekiel adds that Sodom was also arrogant, overfed, and unconcerned, and didn't help the poor and needy (Ezekiel 16:49). These cities became a picture of God's judgment, and Jude says they show what eternal fire means.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Why All the Judgment?**

Reading about judgment can be uncomfortable. But think about it this way. A God who never judged evil would be a God who didn't care about victims. If someone hurt you or someone you love, you'd want justice. Jude's examples show that God won't let evil win. But don't miss the other side of these stories. God rescued Israel from Egypt. He rescued Lot and his family from

Sodom. In every story of judgment, there's a story of rescue too. God's judgment and His mercy aren't opposites. Both come from His love.

Jude now turns to the people who had slipped into the church. Relying on their dreams, he says, they did three things. They defiled their bodies, like the people of Sodom. They rejected authority, like the rebellious angels. And they slandered glorious heavenly beings. These people probably claimed to have special visions that gave them permission to live as they pleased. Jude says those dreams were worth nothing.

BACKGROUND CHECK **When Someone Says "God Told Me"**

Be careful when someone uses a dream, a vision, or a feeling to justify doing something God has clearly said is wrong. God doesn't contradict Himself. If someone says God told them it's okay to cheat on their spouse, or lie, or hurt someone, you can be sure He didn't. Test every spiritual experience against Scripture (1 John 4:1). God may speak to people in many ways, but He'll never lead you away from what He's already said.

Then Jude tells one of the strangest stories in the Bible. Michael, the archangel, once argued with the devil over the body of Moses. But even Michael didn't dare to bring a slanderous accusation against the devil. Instead, he left it to God.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Who Is Michael?**

Michael is one of only two angels named in the Protestant Bible (the other is Gabriel). His name means "Who is like God?" In Daniel, he's described as a great prince who protects God's people (Daniel 10:13, 21; 12:1). In Revelation, he leads the angels in a war against the dragon (Revelation 12:7). Jude calls him the archangel, which means chief angel. If anyone had the authority to tell the devil off, it was Michael. But he didn't.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Body of Moses**

The Old Testament tells us that Moses died on Mount Nebo, outside the promised land, and that God buried him in a valley in Moab, and no one knows where his grave is (Deuteronomy 34:5–6). That mysterious burial led to many Jewish stories. The story Jude mentions isn't in the Old Testament. The NIV footnote says Jude is alluding to the Jewish Testament of Moses, from around the first century AD. Early Christian writers, like Clement of Alexandria and Origen, said the story came from a book called the Assumption of Moses. Scholars debate whether these were the same book or two related books. The surviving copy of the Testament of Moses is missing its ending, which may be where the story was told. According to later accounts, the devil claimed Moses' body, possibly arguing that Moses was a murderer (he had killed an Egyptian, Exodus 2:12) or that the body belonged to the material world, which he claimed to rule. Michael didn't argue the case himself. He left it with the Lord.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Lord Rebuke You**

Michael's words echo a scene in Zechariah 3, where Satan stands beside the high priest Joshua to accuse him, and the Lord rebukes Satan. Jude's point is humility. Even the mightiest angel didn't take judgment into his own hands, or speak about the devil with contempt. He trusted God to deal with him. The false teachers, by contrast, mocked spiritual powers they didn't understand. There's a lesson here about how Christians talk about spiritual things. Spiritual warfare is real, but it's not about swaggering or trash-talking the devil. It's about trusting God's power, not your own.

Michael's humility makes a sharp contrast. These people, Jude says, mock whatever they don't understand. And the things they do understand, they know only by instinct, like animals that can't reason. Those very things are destroying them.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Animals Without Reason**

Jude's point is that the false teachers claimed to have higher spiritual knowledge, but actually lived by their appetites, like animals. They were ruled

by what they wanted, not by God's Spirit. It's a warning to all of us. Our appetites, for food, sex, attention, comfort, or excitement, aren't evil in themselves. God made us with them. But when they take control, we become less human, not more. Freedom isn't doing whatever you feel like. It's being free from being ruled by your feelings.

Jude now pronounces a woe, a solemn warning of grief and judgment, like the woes Jesus spoke (Matthew 23). These people, he says, have followed in the footsteps of three famous rebels from the Old Testament.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Cain, Balaam, and Korah**

Cain was Adam and Eve's son, who murdered his brother Abel out of jealousy (Genesis 4). In Jewish tradition, he became a symbol of envy, hatred, and someone who teaches others to sin. Balaam was a prophet hired by the king of Moab to curse Israel (Numbers 22–24). God wouldn't let him curse them, and his own donkey talked to him. But Balaam later advised Moab to lead Israel into idolatry and sexual sin (Numbers 31:16). He became a symbol of someone who uses religion for money. Korah led a rebellion against Moses and Aaron, claiming that he and his followers had just as much right to lead (Numbers 16). The ground opened up and swallowed them. He became a symbol of rejecting God's chosen leaders. Together, the three rebels show the paths of hatred, greed, and rebellion. Notice Jude says the false teachers have already been destroyed in Korah's rebellion. Their fate is so certain he describes it as already done.

Now Jude paints some of the most vivid pictures in the whole Bible. He uses five images, drawn from every part of the natural world: the sea, the sky, the land, and the heavens.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Hidden Reefs at the Love Feast**

The early Christians ate fellowship meals together, called love feasts (in Greek, agape), which often included the Lord's Supper. These false teachers joined in, feasting without shame, caring only for themselves. The NIV calls

them blemishes, but the Greek word spilades can also mean hidden reefs, rocks just under the surface of the water that could tear open a ship. That's a frightening picture. You can't see the danger until it's too late. They look like part of the fellowship, but they're wrecking it.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Shepherds Who Feed Themselves**

Jude says they're shepherds who care only for themselves. He's echoing Ezekiel 34, where God condemns Israel's leaders for feeding themselves instead of the sheep, for exploiting the weak, and leaving the injured to fend for themselves. God promises to be the shepherd Himself. Jesus said He was that good shepherd, who lays down His life for the sheep (John 10:11). A true leader serves; a false one uses people. Watch out for any leader, in church or anywhere else, who treats people as a way to get money, attention, or power.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Clouds, Trees, Waves, and Stars**

Jude piles up four more pictures. Clouds without rain: they look promising, especially in a dry land, but the wind blows them away, and they give nothing. Trees in late autumn without fruit: at harvest time, when you'd expect fruit, there's nothing, and the trees are pulled up by the roots, dead twice over, dead because they're fruitless, and dead because they're uprooted. Wild waves of the sea: they throw up their shameful deeds like foam and garbage on the beach (compare Isaiah 57:20, which says the wicked are like a restless sea churning up mud). Wandering stars: in the ancient world, planets were called wandering stars, because they didn't stay in fixed places like the other stars. Sailors couldn't navigate by them. And in 1 Enoch, the stars that left their courses were pictures of the rebellious angels. Jude says the deepest darkness has been reserved for them forever.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Looking Good, Giving Nothing**

What do all these pictures have in common? They promise something but don't deliver. A cloud promises rain. A tree promises fruit. A star promises guidance. But these give nothing. That's what made the false teachers dangerous. They looked impressive from a distance. Today, you'll see plenty of people online and in real life who look amazing but have nothing real to

offer. Before you follow someone, ask: does their life produce good fruit? Do they give, or just take? Jesus said you'll recognize people by their fruit (Matthew 7:16).

Now Jude does something remarkable. He quotes a prophecy from Enoch, who was the seventh generation from Adam. In the prophecy, Enoch sees the Lord coming with countless thousands of holy ones, coming to judge all people, and to convict the ungodly of all the ungodly things they've done and all the harsh words they've spoken against Him. Jude says this prophecy is about the false teachers.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Who Was Enoch?**

Enoch appears briefly in Genesis 5:21–24. He was the father of Methuselah, the oldest man in the Bible. Genesis says Enoch walked faithfully with God, and then he was no more, because God took him away. He's one of only two people in the Bible who didn't die (the other is Elijah, 2 Kings 2:11). Hebrews says he was taken from this life because he pleased God (Hebrews 11:5). Counting from Adam, he was the seventh generation (Adam, Seth, Enosh, Kenan, Mahalalel, Jared, Enoch). Seven was a number of completeness, so Jews saw Enoch as an especially significant figure. Because Genesis says so little about him, many stories grew up around him.

BACKGROUND CHECK **What Is 1 Enoch?**

The words Jude quotes come from a Jewish book called 1 Enoch, which the NIV footnote dates to around the first century BC. It's really a collection of writings, probably written by different authors between about 300 BC and the time of Jesus, all claiming to come from Enoch. It describes Enoch's visions of heaven, the rebellious angels of Genesis 6 (called the Watchers), the coming judgment, and the Messiah. The passage Jude quotes is from 1 Enoch 1:9. Fragments of 1 Enoch in Aramaic were found among the Dead Sea Scrolls, which shows that it was popular in Jesus' time. Many early Christians read it too. But most Jews and Christians never accepted it as Scripture. The full text survives only in Ge'ez, an ancient Ethiopian language.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Enoch in Ethiopia**

One Christian church does include 1 Enoch in its Bible: the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church, one of the oldest churches in the world, with tens of millions of members. Its Bible has more books than most, including 1 Enoch and another book called Jubilees. That's the reason the complete text of 1 Enoch survived at all: Ethiopian Christians copied and preserved it for centuries when it had disappeared almost everywhere else. Other Christian traditions, Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant, don't include it in their Bibles, though many scholars study it closely because it helps us understand the Jewish world of the New Testament.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Did Jude Think Enoch Was Scripture?**

Christians have understood Jude's quote in different ways. Some, like the early writer Tertullian, thought 1 Enoch deserved respect partly because Jude quoted it. Most Christians have concluded that quoting a book doesn't mean you think the whole book is inspired Scripture. Jude says Enoch prophesied, which suggests he believed this particular prophecy was true. But he never says the book is Scripture, and he doesn't introduce it with "it is written," which New Testament writers usually used for Scripture. He was quoting something his readers knew and respected, to make a point they would understand. Some Christians think Jude may simply have recognized that this saying, whatever its origin, spoke truth that matched the rest of Scripture.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Paul Quotes Pagan Poets**

Jude isn't the only New Testament writer to quote books outside the Bible. In Athens, Paul quoted Greek poets: "in him we live and move and have our being," and "We are his offspring" (Acts 17:28), lines associated with the poets Epimenides and Aratus. Paul wasn't saying their poems were Scripture, or that everything they wrote was true. They were writing about the Greek god Zeus! He was showing that, in these lines, they had glimpsed something true about the real God. Paul also quoted a line from the playwright Menander: bad company corrupts good character (1 Corinthians 15:33), and a Cretan prophet in Titus 1:12. Christians have long said that all truth is God's truth, wherever it's found. Jude used a book his readers respected in the same way.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Does This Shake Your Trust in the Bible?**

Some teens get nervous when they learn that the Bible quotes other books. But it shouldn't shake you. Bible writers lived in real places and real cultures, and they used the books, stories, and poems of their time to communicate. That's actually a sign the Bible is rooted in real history. God's inspiration didn't make Bible writers live in a bubble. He worked through their minds, their reading, and their cultures, to say exactly what He wanted said.

Jude finishes the section with one more description. These people are grumblers who complain about everything. They find fault with everyone else. They follow their own desires. They brag loudly about themselves. And they flatter other people when they want something from them.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Grumblers and Flatterers**

Grumbling was Israel's big sin in the wilderness, the same generation Jude mentioned in verse 5. Complaining might seem minor, but it's often a sign of a heart that doesn't trust God. And flattery is the opposite of honest love. Flatterers say what you want to hear, because they want something from you. A true friend tells you the truth, even when it's hard. Notice the combination: boasting about themselves, flattering others. It's all about getting ahead. It's the opposite of the humility Michael showed.

KEY VERSE

But even the archangel Michael, when he was disputing with the devil about the body of Moses, did not himself dare to condemn him for slander but said, "The Lord rebuke you!"

Jude 9 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Which of Jude's three Old Testament examples do you find most surprising? Why?
2. What can we learn from the way Michael spoke about the devil? How does that apply to the way Christians talk about people they disagree with?
3. Which of Jude's pictures from nature is the most vivid for you? Can you think of a modern picture that would make the same point?
4. Why do you think Jude quoted 1 Enoch? Does it change how you think about the Bible?

TRY THIS *Go one whole day without grumbling or complaining. Every time you catch yourself, stop and thank God for something instead. At the end of the day, write down what you noticed.*

CHAPTER 3

Stand Firm, Show Mercy

Jude 17–23

After all those warnings, Jude turns to his readers again, calling them dear friends. Now he tells them what to do.

First, remember. The apostles of Jesus had warned this would happen. They had said that in the last days, there would be people who mock the faith and live by their own ungodly desires.

BACKGROUND CHECK **What the Apostles Said**

Jude doesn't tell us exactly which apostles he's thinking of, but we have examples. Paul warned the Ephesian elders that savage wolves would come in among them, and that even some of their own would distort the truth (Acts 20:29–30). He told Timothy that in later times some would abandon the faith (1 Timothy 4:1), and that in the last days people would be lovers of themselves (2 Timothy 3:1–5). Peter wrote that scoffers would come in the last days (2 Peter 3:3), using almost the same words as Jude. Jesus Himself warned about false prophets (Matthew 24:11). The point: false teachers aren't a sign that God has lost control. They were predicted. That should make you more watchful, but not afraid.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Last Days**

When the New Testament talks about the last days or last times, it usually means the whole period between Jesus' first coming and His return. Peter said the last days began at Pentecost (Acts 2:17). So we're living in the last days now, and have been for two thousand years. That's why the warnings

still apply. Every generation of Christians has had to deal with scoffers and false teaching.

These people, Jude says, are the ones causing divisions. They follow their natural instincts, and they don't have the Spirit. That's ironic. They probably thought they were the spiritual ones, with their special dreams and visions. But Jude says they're the ones who are unspiritual. The evidence is that they divided the church.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Division**

How do you tell the difference between someone who stands for the truth and someone who divides a church? It's not always easy. But here's a clue from Jude: the false teachers divided people because they followed their own desires and wanted their own way. People who truly stand for the truth do so humbly, with love, and they want people brought together around Jesus, not around themselves. Watch out for anyone who wants to create an inner circle, who makes people feel that they're more spiritual than everyone else, or who pulls people away from the wider church to follow them.

Then comes the heart of Jude's advice. He gives four instructions. Three are things to do; one is the main command they support. Build yourselves up on your most holy faith. Pray in the Holy Spirit. And, the main command, keep yourselves in God's love. And wait expectantly for the mercy of Jesus, which leads to eternal life.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Building Yourself Up**

Notice that the word yourselves is plural. Jude is talking to the whole church. You build yourselves up together. But it applies to you individually too. How do you build yourself up in faith? Read the Bible, not just a verse, but whole books, like this one. Learn what Christians believe and why. Join a group that studies Scripture. Ask hard questions and look for answers. Worship with other believers. Faith is like a muscle: it grows when it's used and exercised. The best defense against false teaching isn't memorizing a list of errors. It's knowing the truth so well that a fake sounds wrong.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Praying in the Holy Spirit**

What does it mean to pray in the Holy Spirit? Christians understand it in different ways. Some, especially Pentecostal and charismatic Christians, think it includes praying in tongues (1 Corinthians 14:14–15). Most understand it more broadly: praying with the help and guidance of the Spirit, who helps us when we don't know what to pray (Romans 8:26). Paul tells believers to pray in the Spirit on all occasions (Ephesians 6:18). Either way, the point is that prayer isn't just you trying hard. It's God's Spirit working in you. If you don't know how to pray, ask the Spirit to help you. That's a prayer He loves to answer.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Keep Yourselves in God's Love**

This is the main command. Remember, at the start of the letter, Jude said his readers are kept by God (verse 1). Now he tells them to keep themselves in God's love. Is it God's job or theirs? Both. God holds you, and you stay close to Him. Jesus said something similar: remain in My love (John 15:9–10). Think of it like standing in the sunshine. You don't make the sun shine. But you can choose to stay in it, or walk into the shade. You stay in God's love by trusting Him, obeying Him, praying, and staying connected to His people.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Waiting for Mercy**

Jude says to wait for the mercy of Jesus that leads to eternal life. That's interesting. He doesn't say wait for judgment, or wait for a reward. He says wait for mercy. Even on the day Jesus returns, what believers will need most is His mercy. We don't get to heaven because we're good enough. We get there because He is merciful. That's good news for anyone who's worried they don't measure up.

And then Jude says something that might surprise you, after all his warnings about false teachers. He tells his readers to show mercy to people who are wavering. He describes three groups. Be merciful toward doubters. Rescue others by snatching them out of the fire. And to others, show mercy, but carefully, with caution and fear,

hating even their sin-stained clothes. (The NIV footnote points out that the Greek manuscripts vary here. Some have two groups instead of three, but the message of mercy is the same.)

BACKGROUND CHECK **Mercy for People Who Doubt**

Notice that Jude doesn't tell his readers to attack doubters, or kick them out, or shame them. He says be merciful. Doubters aren't the enemy. They're people who need help. If you have a friend who's struggling with doubts about God, don't panic, and don't lecture them. Listen. Take their questions seriously. Share what you've found. Pray for them. And stay their friend. Jude knew something about doubt. He once doubted his own brother.

BACKGROUND CHECK **If You're the One Who Doubts**

Maybe you're reading this, and you're the one with doubts. Maybe you wonder whether God is real, or whether Christianity is true, or whether God could love you. Maybe you feel guilty about doubting, or you're afraid to tell anyone. Here's what I want you to know. Doubt isn't the same as unbelief. Some of the greatest people in the Bible had doubts: Abraham, Moses, Elijah, John the Baptist, Thomas, and Jude himself. A father once said to Jesus, I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief (Mark 9:24). Jesus didn't send him away. He helped him. God isn't afraid of your questions. Bring them to Him. Talk to someone you trust, like a parent, youth leader, or pastor. Read and look for answers; there are many thoughtful books by Christians who wrestled with the same questions. And remember the last two verses of this letter: you are held by a God who can keep you. Your grip on Him may be weak right now. His grip on you isn't.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Snatching from the Fire**

The picture of snatching someone from the fire also comes from Zechariah 3:2, the same passage Michael's words echoed, where the high priest Joshua is called a burning stick snatched from the fire. Some people are in real danger, heading toward destruction. Mercy sometimes means urgent action. If a friend is in danger, hurting themselves, being drawn into something

harmful, or being exploited, don't just watch. Get help. Tell a trusted adult. Love sometimes acts fast.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Mercy with Fear**

The third group needs mercy too, but Jude adds a caution: show mercy with caution and fear, hating even the clothes that the flesh has stained. That also echoes Zechariah 3, where Joshua's filthy clothes are taken off and replaced with clean ones (Zechariah 3:3–5). Jude means: love people, but be careful not to be pulled into the same sin. Some situations are dangerous for you, too. If you're helping a friend with an addiction, a toxic relationship, or a destructive lifestyle, you need wisdom, boundaries, and the help of mature adults. Paul says something similar: restore people gently, but watch yourself, or you also may be tempted (Galatians 6:1). Love the person; hate the sin that's hurting them.

KEY VERSE

But you, dear friends, by building yourselves up in your most holy faith and praying in the Holy Spirit, keep yourselves in God's love as you wait for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ to bring you to eternal life.

Jude 20–21 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. What's one practical way you could build yourself up in your faith this month?
2. What does it mean to you to keep yourself in God's love? What tends to pull you into the shade?
3. Why do you think Jude tells his readers to show mercy to doubters, right after warning them about false teachers?
4. Have you ever had doubts about your faith? What helped, or what would help?

TRY THIS *Think of one friend who's struggling, whether with doubts, hard circumstances, or something harmful. Pray for them by name every day this week. Then do one kind, practical thing for them, without preaching at them.*

CHAPTER 4

The God Who Can Hold You Up

Jude 24–25

Jude has warned his readers about danger, reminded them of history, and told them how to stand firm. Now he ends, not with one more warning, but with praise. These two verses are called a doxology, from the Greek word doxa, meaning glory. A doxology is a word of glory, praise offered to God.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **A Famous Ending**
>
> Jude's doxology is one of the most loved passages in the New Testament. It's often used at the end of church services as a benediction, a blessing spoken over the congregation as they leave. There are other doxologies in the New Testament, like Romans 16:25–27 and Ephesians 3:20–21, which also begin by praising the God who is able. Many Christians have memorized Jude's words, because they're a perfect way to end a day, a service, or a life.

Jude praises God as the one who has the power to keep his readers from stumbling. After all those warnings about people who had fallen, this is the answer. You won't stand firm because you're strong. You'll stand firm because God is holding you. The word for stumbling describes a horse or a person tripping and falling on a rough path. God is like a hand that steadies you on a rocky trail.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Kept**
>
> Here's the letter's theme one last time. In verse 1, Jude's readers are kept for Jesus. In verse 21, they keep themselves in God's love. In verse 24, God is able

to keep them from stumbling. The false teachers didn't keep their place, like the rebellious angels. But God's people are kept, from beginning to end. You can't keep yourself safe. But you don't have to. Jesus said no one can snatch His sheep out of His hand (John 10:28–29). That doesn't mean you'll never struggle or fail. It means God won't let go of you.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Faultless and Full of Joy**

Jude says God is able to bring His people into His glorious presence, blameless, and with great joy. Think about that. One day you'll stand before God, the King of the universe. You might expect to be terrified, ashamed of everything you've ever done. But Jude says you'll stand there faultless, not because you never sinned, but because Jesus has made you clean. Remember Joshua's dirty clothes in Zechariah 3? God replaced them with clean ones. That's what He does for you. And the main emotion won't be fear. It will be great joy. Joy for you, and joy for God. Jesus told stories about the party in heaven when one lost person comes home (Luke 15).

Finally, Jude gives glory to the one and only God, our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord. He piles up four words: glory, majesty, power, and authority. And he says these belong to God across all of time: before all ages, now, and forever. Then he says amen, which means "it's true" or "so be it."

BACKGROUND CHECK **Glory, Majesty, Power, Authority**

Glory is God's shining greatness. Majesty is His royal greatness, the dignity of a King. Power is His strength to do anything He wants. Authority is His right to rule. Jude says all of these belong to God through Jesus Christ. Remember the false teachers who rejected authority (verse 8) and denied Jesus as Master and Lord (verse 4)? Jude ends by giving all authority back to the one who deserves it.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Before All Ages**

Jude's phrase is remarkable: God's glory belongs to Him before all ages, now, and forever. It covers the past, the present, and the future. Before the

universe existed, God was glorious. Right now, while you're reading this, He is glorious. And when the world as we know it ends, He will still be glorious. Your life fits into a much bigger story. When you feel small, remember that the eternal God has chosen to hold you, and that one day you'll share in His joy.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Brother Who Became a Worshiper**

Think about who's writing these words. Jude grew up with Jesus. He doubted Him. Maybe he even laughed at Him. Now, at the end of his letter, he gives glory to God through Jesus Christ our Lord. His older brother has become his Lord. The person he once thought was out of His mind is now the one through whom all glory goes to God. That's what Jesus can do with a skeptic. And He's not done doing it.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Ending with Praise**

Jude's letter is full of warnings, but it doesn't end in fear. It ends in worship. That's a good pattern for your own life. When you're worried about the world, the culture, your friends, or yourself, end by looking up. Whatever is going wrong, God is still able, still glorious, still on His throne. Praise isn't pretending things are fine. It's remembering who's in charge.

KEY VERSE

To him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy—to the only God our Savior be glory, majesty, power and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all ages, now and forevermore! Amen.

Jude 24–25 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. What does it mean to you that God can keep you from stumbling?
2. How do you feel when you imagine standing before God? Does Jude's description change that?
3. Why do you think Jude ended a letter full of warnings with praise?
4. Which of the four words (glory, majesty, power, authority) means the most to you right now? Why?

TRY THIS *Memorize Jude 24–25 this week. Say it out loud every night before you go to sleep. When you've memorized it, pray it for a friend or family member by name.*

THE END (AND THE BEGINNING)

Now What? The Bottom Line

You've just read Jude, a letter from a man who grew up with Jesus and didn't believe in Him, until he did. Jude ends by praising the God who has the power to hold you up and bring you into His presence with joy. That God is calling you.

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 loves you more than you can imagine. He wants you to know Him.

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

2 We've all turned away.

We've all gone our own way instead of God's. John says that if we claim to have no sin, we're fooling ourselves. 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. God didn't wait for us to love Him first.

> *This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.* **1 John 4:10 (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 running your own life, and trust Jesus as your Savior and King. Then you can know, not just hope, that you have eternal 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 for loving me first. Thank You that Jesus died for me and rose again. I believe You raised Him from the dead. I'm turning to You. Forgive me and make me clean. I trust Jesus*

as my Savior, and I want to follow Him as my King. Keep me from stumbling, help me stand firm in the faith, and make me merciful to people who doubt. 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 Jude straight through. Then read Revelation, the last book of the Bible, with a parent or youth leader. It shows the end of the story: Jesus wins.

Find your people. Get connected to a church where the Bible is taught and Jesus is honored. Ask about being baptized.

Build yourself up. Jude says to build yourself up in the faith and pray in the Holy Spirit. Make time with God a daily habit.

Not Sure Yet?

Not ready? That's honest, and honesty is a good place to start. Keep asking. Keep reading. John wrote down what he saw and touched so you could check it out for yourself. Just don't settle for "I already know all that."

Because if Jude is right, the big brother he once doubted is the Lord of everything, and He can hold on to you.

But the Lord is faithful, and he will strengthen you and protect you from the evil one.

2 Thessalonians 3:3 (NIV)

THE BOOK OF REVELATION

The King Who Makes All Things New

Revelation, Unfiltered

For teens who think they've heard it all

BILL McLEOD

Papa Bill Books

The King Who Makes All Things New: The Book of Revelation, 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. Here's a confession: nobody knows it all about Revelation. Some of the smartest Christians who ever lived have admitted they were puzzled by it. So you're in good company.

Revelation is the last book of the Bible, and probably the most misunderstood. Some people are terrified of it. Some people ignore it. Some people turn it into a code for predicting the news, and some people make movies about it. But Revelation wasn't written to scare you or to give you a puzzle. It was written to give hope to Christians who were small, poor, and under pressure, by showing them who was really in charge.

Yes, it's full of strange things: a lamb with seven eyes, a dragon with seven heads, horsemen, locusts with human faces, a woman dressed in the sun, a beast whose number is 666, and a city made of gold. But there's a key that unlocks it. Most of these images are symbols, and most of them come from the Old Testament. Once you learn to read them, Revelation becomes less like a horror movie and more like a giant painting of the greatest story ever told.

And at the center of the painting is Jesus, pictured as a Lamb who was killed and is alive again, standing on the throne of the universe. Everything else revolves around Him.

This is the last book in this series. We started with Matthew's family tree and we end with a new heaven and new earth. So take a deep breath, open your Bible, and don't be afraid. That's actually one of the first things Jesus says in this book. Let's go.

How This Book Works

This book walks through Revelation in nine chapters, each covering a major section of John's vision: Jesus among the lampstands (Revelation 1), the letters to seven churches (2–3), the throne room and the Lamb (4–5), the seals (6–7), the trumpets (8–11), the woman, the dragon, and the beasts (12–14), the bowls and the fall of Babylon (15–18), the rider on the white horse and the thousand years (19–20), and the new heaven and new earth (21–22).

Before chapter 1, a section called Setting the Scene explains what kind of book Revelation is, how its numbers, colors, and creatures work, who John was and why he was on an island, and the main ways Christians have interpreted it. Read it first. It will save you a lot of confusion.

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.

On questions where sincere Christians disagree, such as how to read the timeline, what the thousand years means, and the rapture, I'll lay out the main views fairly and leave the decision to you, your family, and your church. This book quotes Revelation in places and

explains it mostly in my own words, so keep a Bible open next to it. Read each section of Revelation 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. It completes a series that has walked through the whole New Testament, from Matthew to Revelation, 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.

Revelation can frighten young readers, and it has often been used to frighten them. This book aims to do the opposite. It explains apocalyptic writing as a genre, shows how its numbers, colors, and creatures draw on the Old Testament, and keeps attention on the book's center: the Lamb who was slain and now reigns. A gentle box encourages anxious readers to talk with a trusted adult, and reminds them that anxiety is not a sign of weak faith.

Christians read Revelation in different ways. The four main interpretive approaches (preterist, historicist, futurist, and idealist), the three main views of the millennium (premillennial, postmillennial, and amillennial), and the main views of the rapture are presented fairly, without endorsing one. I'd encourage you to share your own church's view with your teen, and to explain why others see it differently.

The number 666 is explained with the ancient practice of gematria and the widely discussed connection with Nero, along with the early variant reading 616. A box cautions against date-setting and against

fear of accidentally receiving the mark of the beast. Babylon is explained as Rome and as a picture of proud, oppressive empire in every age.

Throughout, the worship scenes and hymns of Revelation are highlighted, along with passages that have shaped Christian worship for centuries. Wherever Scripture is quoted directly, in the chapters and in the Key Verses, the wording is from the New International Version (NIV).

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 finish this book, and this series, less afraid of the future and more in love with the Lamb who holds it.

Grace and peace,
Bill McLeod
Papa Bill Books

BEFORE YOU OPEN THE LETTER

Setting the Scene

Revelation, Not Revelations

First, a small thing that's a big giveaway. The book is called Revelation, singular. People who say Revelations usually haven't read it. The first word of the book in Greek is apokalypsis, which means an unveiling, like pulling a curtain back so you can see what's really there. That's where we get the word apocalypse. Today apocalypse means the end of the world, with zombies or asteroids. But in the Bible it means a revealing. Revelation pulls back the curtain on the world so you can see what's really going on behind the headlines: God is on His throne, and Jesus is winning.

Three Kinds of Book in One

Revelation is three kinds of writing rolled into one. It's an apocalypse, a type of Jewish writing full of visions, angels, and symbols, like parts of Daniel, Ezekiel, and Zechariah. It's a prophecy, a message from God that calls people to faithfulness, not just predictions about the future (1:3). And it's a letter, addressed to seven real churches in what is now western Turkey (1:4). Whatever else it means, it had to make sense to those first readers. That's a good rule to start with: before you ask what Revelation means for the news tonight, ask what it meant for a Christian in Ephesus in the first century.

Apocalyptic Writing

Apocalyptic writing was popular among Jews from about 200 BC to AD 100. It usually came in times of crisis, when God's people were suffering under powerful empires. It used vivid, sometimes bizarre symbols, often explained by an angel. It showed the struggle between good and evil on a cosmic scale. And it promised that God would soon step in, judge evil, and rescue His people. Daniel 7 is a great example: four beasts come out of the sea, representing four empires, and then a figure like a son of man receives an everlasting kingdom from God. If you read Daniel 7 before Revelation, you'll understand Revelation much better.

Apocalyptic writing works like a political cartoon. A cartoonist might draw a country as an eagle or a bear, or a company as an octopus. Nobody thinks the cartoon is a photograph. But everybody understands the point. The symbols aren't less true than a photograph. In some ways they're more true, because they show what things are really like underneath.

Reading the Symbols

Here's the most important tip for reading Revelation: don't picture it like a movie; picture what it means. Take the Lamb in chapter 5, with seven horns and seven eyes. If you try to draw it, it looks like a monster. But horns in the Bible stand for power, eyes stand for knowledge, and seven stands for completeness. So the Lamb has all power and knows everything. That's not scary. That's wonderful.

Often Revelation explains its own symbols. The seven stars stand for the churches' angels, and the lampstands are the churches themselves (1:20). The dragon is Satan (12:9). The waters are peoples and nations (17:15). The woman is the great city (17:18).

When it doesn't explain a symbol, the Old Testament usually does. Revelation never formally quotes the Old Testament, but scholars count hundreds of allusions to it, more than any other New Testament book. John's mind was soaked in Scripture.

Numbers

Numbers in Revelation are mostly symbols, not math. Seven, the most important number, means completeness or perfection, like the seven days of creation. That's why there are seven churches, seven seals, seven trumpets, and seven bowls. Four stands for the whole world, as in the four corners or four winds of the earth. Twelve stands for God's people, from the twelve tribes of Israel and the twelve apostles. Ten often means fullness. Three and a half, which also appears as forty-two months, 1,260 days, or three and a half "times," is half of seven: a limited, broken period of trouble that won't last forever. A thousand means a vast number. So 144,000 is twelve times twelve times a thousand: the complete people of God, as big as it could possibly be. And 666, as we'll see, may be a name in code. Some Christians take more of the numbers literally; most agree that many of them are symbolic.

Colors

Colors carry meaning too. White stands for victory, purity, and holiness, so Jesus has white hair and the saints wear white robes. Red stands for war and bloodshed, like the red horse and the red dragon. Black stands for famine and mourning. The fourth horse is pale, a sickly green-gray, the color of a corpse, and its rider is named Death. Purple and scarlet were the colors of royalty and luxury, so Babylon is dressed in them. Gold stands for value and glory, so the throne room and the new Jerusalem shine with it.

Creatures

Revelation is full of creatures. The Lamb is Jesus, the sacrifice for sin, like the Passover lamb. The Lion from Judah's tribe is Jesus too, the promised King from David's family. The dragon is Satan. The beast from the sea seems to represent an oppressive political power, and the beast from the earth (also called the false prophet) seems to represent the religion and propaganda that support it. The four living creatures around God's throne look like a lion, an ox, a human, and an eagle, echoing visions in Ezekiel 1 and Isaiah 6. They seem to represent all of creation worshiping God. Locusts, frogs, and horses echo the plagues of Egypt and the warnings of the prophets. Once you see that the creatures are characters in a story, not monsters in a nightmare, they're much less frightening.

Who Wrote It?

The writer calls himself John four times (1:1, 4, 9; 22:8), but he never says which John. Early Christian writers, like Justin Martyr and Irenaeus in the second century, said it was John the apostle, the son of Zebedee, who also wrote the Gospel of John. That's been the traditional view. But in the third century, Dionysius, a bishop of Alexandria, noticed that the Greek of Revelation is very different from the Greek of John's Gospel, and suggested it was written by a different John. Some scholars today think it was John the Elder, whom we met in the books on John's letters, or another prophet named John. Others think the differences come from the different kind of writing, or from John writing without a secretary in exile. Whoever he was, his first readers knew exactly who he was, and trusted him.

Patmos

John says he ended up on Patmos, an island, on account of God's word and his testimony about Jesus (1:9). Patmos is a small, rocky island in the Aegean Sea, about 35 miles off the coast of what is now Turkey, roughly 13 square miles in size. The Romans sometimes sent troublemakers into exile on islands like this. Early tradition says John was exiled there for preaching about Jesus, and later released. Today, visitors to Patmos can see a cave where, according to tradition, John received his vision. Picture an old man, separated from the churches he loved, staring at the sea, when suddenly heaven opens.

When Was It Written?

Most scholars date Revelation to around AD 95, near the end of the reign of the emperor Domitian. That's what Irenaeus said, writing around AD 180. Others date it earlier, around AD 68, during or just after the reign of Nero, who had persecuted Christians in Rome in AD 64. Both dates have good arguments. Either way, the readers lived under the shadow of the Roman Empire, which was the most powerful empire the world had ever seen.

Domitian and the Emperor Cult

Domitian ruled from AD 81 to 96. According to the Roman historian Suetonius, he liked to be addressed as "our Lord and God." Across the province of Asia, cities competed to build temples to the emperors and to the goddess Roma. Emperor worship was part of everyday life: festivals, sports, trade guild meetings, and city celebrations often included sacrifices or honors to the emperor. Refusing to join in made you look disloyal, even dangerous. Historians debate how much official persecution there was under

Domitian. It seems that most of the pressure was local: losing customers, being shut out of trade guilds, being reported to officials, or facing mobs. At least one Christian, Antipas, had already been killed (2:13). Revelation was written to Christians facing that pressure, and its message was simple: Caesar is not Lord. Jesus is.

The Seven Churches

Revelation was sent to seven churches in the Roman province of Asia, in what is now western Turkey: Ephesus first, then Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis and Philadelphia, ending with Laodicea. They're listed in the order a messenger would visit them, traveling in a loop along the Roman roads. These were real cities with real problems. You can still visit their ruins today. We'll look at each one in chapter 2.

Four Ways to Read Revelation

Christians have read Revelation in four main ways. Each has been held by faithful, Bible-loving Christians.

The preterist view (from a Latin word meaning past) says most of Revelation was fulfilled in the first centuries, in events like the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70 and the persecution and eventual fall of pagan Rome. Most preterists still believe Jesus will return in the future, as chapters 19–22 describe.

The historicist view says Revelation is a map of church history from the first century to the end, so its events can be matched to events in history. Many Protestant Reformers read it this way, often identifying the beast with the papacy, a view most Protestants today don't hold.

The futurist view says that most of Revelation, from chapter 4 on, describes events still to come, at the end of history: a great tribulation, the Antichrist, and the return of Christ. This view is popular among many evangelical Christians today.

The idealist view says Revelation isn't mainly about specific events, but shows timeless truths about the battle between God and evil, in every age, and God's final victory.

Many Christians combine these views. They think Revelation spoke first to its own time, speaks to every age, and also points to a final future victory. As we go, I'll note how the different views read key passages.

The Thousand Years and the Rapture

Revelation 20 mentions a thousand-year reign, called the millennium. Christians hold three main views about it, which we'll look at in chapter 8: premillennial (Jesus returns before a thousand-year reign on earth), postmillennial (Jesus returns after a long period when the gospel transforms the world), and amillennial (the thousand years is a symbol for the present age between Jesus' first and second coming).

Many Christians also believe in the rapture, when believers will be caught up to meet the Lord (1 Thessalonians 4:17). The word comes from the Latin translation of caught up. Christians agree that Jesus will return and gather His people. They disagree about when the gathering happens. Some believe it will happen before a seven-year tribulation (pre-tribulation), some in the middle (mid-tribulation), and some at the end, when Jesus returns visibly (post-tribulation). Many Christians, especially amillennial and postmillennial ones, don't think of the rapture as a separate event at all, but as part of

Jesus' single return. The pre-tribulation view became widespread through the teaching of John Nelson Darby in the 1800s, and later through popular books and movies. Revelation itself never uses the word rapture, so each view rests on how you connect Revelation with other passages.

If the End Times Scare You

Some teens get really scared reading Revelation, or hearing people talk about the end of the world. Maybe you've lain awake worrying about being left behind, or about wars, disasters, or the mark of the beast. If that's you, here's what I want you to know. Being anxious doesn't mean your faith is weak. Anxiety is a real thing that happens in your body and mind, and lots of strong Christians struggle with it. You don't have to handle it alone. Talk to a trusted adult, like a parent, youth leader, pastor, or school counselor. If the worry is constant, or it keeps you from sleeping, eating, or enjoying life, ask for help from a doctor or counselor too. And remember what Revelation was written to do: it was written to comfort frightened Christians, not to frighten comfortable ones. The first thing Jesus says to John in this book is: Do not be afraid (1:17).

The Map

Chapter 1 (Revelation 1): Jesus among the lampstands.

Chapter 2 (Revelation 2–3): Letters to seven real churches.

Chapter 3 (Revelation 4–5): The throne room and the Lamb.

Chapter 4 (Revelation 6–7): The seals, and a multitude no one can count.

Chapter 5 (Revelation 8–11): The trumpets and the two witnesses.

Chapter 6 (Revelation 12–14): The woman, the dragon, and the beasts.

Chapter 7 (Revelation 15–18): The bowls and the fall of Babylon.

Chapter 8 (Revelation 19–20): The rider on the white horse and the thousand years.

Chapter 9 (Revelation 21–22): A new heaven and new earth.

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CHAPTER 1

The Jesus You Didn't Expect

Revelation 1

Revelation begins by telling you what it is and where it came from. It's an unveiling that comes from Jesus Christ. God gave it to Jesus, Jesus sent it through an angel to John, and John wrote down everything he saw. So this isn't John's guesswork about the future. It's a message passed down a chain, from God, through Jesus, to John, to the churches, and finally to you.

John says the message is about things that must happen soon. That little word soon has puzzled readers for two thousand years. Preterists say it shows that much of the book was about to be fulfilled in John's own day. Others point out that in God's eyes a thousand years is like a day (2 Peter 3:8), or that soon means the end could come at any time, so we should always be ready. Whatever your view, soon means this book was meant to matter to its very first readers, not just to people living two thousand years later.

> BACKGROUND CHECK **The Only Book with a Built-In Blessing**
> Revelation is the only book of the Bible that begins by promising a blessing to the people who read it: "Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear it and take to heart what is written in it, because the time is near." Notice three things. First, it was meant to be read aloud, in church, to a group of people who couldn't own their own copies. Imagine sitting in a house church in Ephesus and hearing the whole

> thing in about an hour and a half. Second, the blessing isn't for people who crack the code. It's for people who take it to heart, who live differently because of it. Third, there are seven blessings in Revelation (1:3; 14:13; 16:15; 19:9; 20:6; 22:7; 22:14). Of course there are seven.

Like any letter, Revelation begins with a greeting. John writes to the seven churches in Asia, and he sends them grace and peace from three sources. First, from God, the one who is, who was, and who is still to come. That's a fresh way of describing God's name, the I AM of Exodus 3:14. God isn't stuck in the past or limited to the present. He owns the future too. Second, from the seven spirits who stand before God's throne. Third, from Jesus Christ.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **The Seven Spirits**
>
> Who are the seven spirits? Some think they're seven high-ranking angels. But most Christians have understood them as a symbolic way of describing the Holy Spirit in His fullness, since seven means completeness and they're listed between God the Father and Jesus. Isaiah 11:2 describes the Spirit resting on the Messiah in a sevenfold way, and Zechariah 4 links seven lamps with God's Spirit. If that's right, John's greeting comes from the whole Trinity: Father, Spirit, and Son.

John then gives Jesus three titles. He is the faithful witness, who told the truth about God even when it cost Him His life. He is the firstborn from the dead, the first to rise to a resurrection life that will never end, with many more to follow. And He is ruler of every earthly king, including the emperor in Rome, though the emperor didn't know it yet.

That makes John burst into praise. He praises Jesus, who loves us, who has released us from our sins at the cost of His own blood, and who has turned us into a kingdom, a people of priests serving God.

Notice that loves is present tense. Jesus didn't just love us once on the cross. He loves you right now.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **A Kingdom of Priests**
>
> When God rescued Israel from Egypt, He told them they would be a kingdom of priests (Exodus 19:6). Peter used the same idea for Christians (1 Peter 2:9). A priest stands between God and people, bringing people to God and representing God to people. John says that's what Jesus has made every believer, not just pastors, but the teenager in the back row. Revelation is going to describe a world where empires claim to rule everything. Before it gets there, John reminds his readers that they already belong to a better kingdom.

Then John announces the theme of the whole book. Jesus will come on the clouds, and every person will see Him, including the very people who pierced Him. All the peoples of the earth will mourn over Him. John is blending two Old Testament prophecies: Daniel 7:13, where a figure like a son of man arrives on heaven's clouds, and Zechariah 12:10, where people mourn for the one they pierced. Jesus used the same picture to describe His return (Matthew 24:30).

Then God Himself speaks, for one of only two times in the whole book (the other is 21:5–8).

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Alpha and Omega**
>
> Alpha is the first letter of the Greek alphabet, and omega is the last. So when God says He's the Alpha and the Omega, it's like saying He's the A and the Z, and everything in between. He was there before anything began, and He'll be there when everything is finished. Later in the book, Jesus uses exactly the same title for Himself (22:13). The early Christians took that as a clear statement that Jesus shares God's identity. In old churches, you'll often see the Greek letters alpha and omega carved on either side of a cross.

John introduces himself not as an apostle, a bishop, or an important leader, but as his readers' brother, and their partner in three things: suffering, the kingdom, and patient endurance. Those three words sum up the Christian life in Revelation. You belong to God's kingdom now, but you live in a world that often opposes it, so you need endurance. John was living it. He had been sent to Patmos, a small, rocky island in the Aegean Sea, because he preached God's word and testified about Jesus.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **The Lord's Day**
>
> John says his vision came on the Lord's Day. This is the earliest time that phrase is used for Sunday, the day Jesus rose from the dead. Christians gathered to worship on the first day of the week (Acts 20:7; 1 Corinthians 16:2). So John, alone on his island, was keeping Sunday, probably at the same time his churches were gathering on the mainland. And that's when heaven opened. The Roman emperors had special days named in their honor. The Christians had a day that belonged to their Lord.

John says he was in the Spirit, which means God's Spirit took hold of him and gave him a vision. Behind him, a voice as loud as a trumpet blast, told him to write down what he saw on a scroll and send it to seven churches, which it named one by one.

John turned to see who was speaking. First he saw seven golden lampstands, and in the middle of them, a figure who looked like a son of man. Then John describes Him, piece by piece. Remember the rule: picture what it means, not what it looks like.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Reading the Portrait**
>
> Each detail of the portrait comes from the Old Testament, and each one means something. His long robe and the golden sash across His chest are what a priest or a king would wear. His hair is white like wool or snow, like the Ancient of Days in Daniel 7:9, which means He shares God's eternal wisdom and holiness. His eyes are like flames, seeing straight through everything. His

feet glow like bronze heated in a furnace, strong and unshakable. His voice is like the roar of a waterfall or the ocean, a sound that drowns out everything else. In His right hand He holds seven stars, which means He holds the churches' fate in His hand. A sharp, two-edged sword comes out of His mouth, which means His words have power to judge and to cut to the heart (Hebrews 4:12). And His face shines like the sun at full strength, like Jesus on the mountain of the Transfiguration (Matthew 17:2). This isn't the gentle Jesus of a children's picture book. It's the risen Lord in all His glory.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Son of Man**

The phrase son of man can simply mean a human being. But in Daniel 7:13–14, a figure like a son of man arrives on the clouds at God's throne and receives authority, glory, and a kingdom that will never end. Jesus called Himself the Son of Man more than any other title, and He connected it with Daniel's vision (Mark 14:62). So when John sees a figure like a son of man, he's seeing the human Jesus who is also the divine King.

John's response was to collapse at Jesus' feet like a dead man. That's how people in the Bible usually react to seeing God's glory (Isaiah 6:5; Ezekiel 1:28; Daniel 10:9). But then Jesus did something tender. He put His right hand on John, the same hand that holds the stars. And He said: "Do not be afraid. I am the First and the Last. I am the Living One; I was dead, and now look, I am alive for ever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and Hades."

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Keys**

Keys mean authority. Whoever has the keys decides who goes in and who comes out. Hades was the Greek word for the realm of the dead, the grave. Some ancient people imagined it as a prison with locked gates. Jesus says He holds those keys. He went into death and came out again, and now He has authority over it. That's the reason He can tell John not to be afraid. Whatever happens in the rest of this book, whatever happens in your life, death doesn't get the last word. Jesus does.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Do Not Be Afraid**

Remember this. Before Revelation shows a single beast or plague, Jesus says, Do not be afraid. That's how you should read the rest of the book. It's not meant to fill you with dread. It's meant to show you that the one who loves you holds the keys to everything. If you feel scared reading Revelation, come back to this verse. Feel His hand on your shoulder.

Jesus told John to write about what he had seen, what is happening now, and what will happen later. Some interpreters see this as an outline of the book: what John saw (chapter 1), what is (chapters 2–3, the churches), and what comes later (chapters 4–22). Others think the whole book mixes past, present, and future.

Then Jesus explained the mystery of the stars and lampstands. The seven lampstands stand for the seven churches. The stars stand for the angels of the churches.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Angels of the Churches?**

Who are these angels of the churches? Christians have suggested three main answers. They might be guardian angels assigned to each church. They might be the churches' human leaders or messengers, since the Greek word angelos simply means messenger. Or they might be a way of describing the spiritual character of each church. Whichever is right, the picture is comforting. Jesus walks among the lampstands. He's not distant from His churches. He's right in the middle of them, even when they're small and struggling. And a lampstand doesn't make its own light. It holds a light up so others can see. That's what a church is for.

KEY VERSE

"I am the Alpha and the Omega," says the Lord God, "who is, and who was, and who is to come, the Almighty."

Revelation 1:8 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. What did you expect Revelation to be like before you started reading it? Has chapter 1 changed that?
2. Which detail in John's description of Jesus stands out most to you? What does it say about who He is?
3. Why do you think Jesus' first words to John were "Do not be afraid"?
4. John was alone on an island when he saw this vision. When have you felt isolated? How might this chapter speak to that?

TRY THIS *Read Revelation 1 aloud, the way its first hearers would have heard it. Then read Daniel 7. Make a list of every connection you can find between the two chapters.*

CHAPTER 2

Letters to Real Cities

Revelation 2–3

Now Jesus dictates seven short letters, one to each church. Remember, these were real churches in real cities, about forty to fifty miles apart, linked by Roman roads. A messenger carrying the scroll would have traveled in a loop: from Ephesus north to Smyrna and Pergamum, then southeast to Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Pattern**

Most of the letters follow the same pattern. Jesus introduces Himself with a detail from the vision in chapter 1. He says, I know, and describes what's going on in the church. He gives praise, criticism, or both. He calls them to repent or hold on. He says that whoever has ears should listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches, plural. That means each church was supposed to read all seven letters. And He makes a promise to whoever is victorious, or overcomes. Notice what's missing: two churches, Smyrna and Philadelphia, receive no criticism at all. Two, Sardis and Laodicea, receive almost no praise.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Seven Eras of Church History?**

Some Christians, especially in the historicist and dispensational traditions, have read the seven churches as a preview of seven periods of church history, beginning with the apostolic church (Ephesus) and ending with a lukewarm church in the last days (Laodicea). Most interpreters think the letters were written to seven real churches of John's time, and that, because seven means completeness, they also speak to every church in every age. Either way, every

church today can find itself somewhere in these letters. So can every Christian.

Jesus writes first to Ephesus. He praises the church for its hard work, its endurance, and its refusal to put up with evil people. They had tested people who claimed to be apostles and caught them lying. They had kept going through hardship for Jesus' sake without giving up. But then comes the hard part: "You have forsaken the love you had at first."

BACKGROUND CHECK **Background Check: Ephesus**

Ephesus was the biggest and most important city in the province of Asia, with perhaps two hundred thousand people. It had a great harbor, a huge theater that held about twenty-five thousand people, and the temple of Artemis, one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. Paul had spent more than two years there, and his preaching nearly caused a riot among silversmiths who made idols of Artemis (Acts 19). Paul wrote Ephesians to the church, and tradition says John spent his last years there. Ephesus's harbor was slowly filling up with silt from the river, and the city eventually declined. Today its ruins are miles from the sea. A lampstand can be removed.

What does it mean to lose your first love? It may mean their love for Jesus had cooled, or their love for each other, or both. They were so focused on being right that they forgot to be loving. Jesus tells them to remember where they fell from, turn around, and go back to doing the things they did at the start. If not, He'll come and remove their lampstand, meaning the church would stop existing.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Right but Cold**

The church in Ephesus did lots of things right. They worked hard. They had good theology. They could spot a fake teacher a mile away. But they had lost the love. It's possible to be completely right about the Bible and still miss the point. Paul said that without love, even the most impressive spiritual gifts are just noise (1 Corinthians 13:1–3). If your faith has become all rules and

arguments, ask Jesus to light the fire again. And notice His remedy: go back to what you did at first. Sometimes feelings follow actions. Start praying, reading, serving, and loving again, and the love often returns.

Jesus also praises them for hating the practices of the Nicolaitans. We don't know much about this group. Early writers like Irenaeus linked them with Nicolas, one of the seven men chosen in Acts 6:5, but that's uncertain. From the letter to Pergamum, it seems they taught that Christians could eat food sacrificed to idols and practice sexual immorality. In other words, they taught a way to fit in with pagan culture. Notice that Jesus hates their practices, not the people.

The letter to Smyrna is all encouragement. Jesus introduces Himself as the one who died and then came back to life. He knows their suffering and poverty, but they're actually rich. He knows the slander they face from some in the local synagogue. And He tells them not to be afraid of what's coming. Some will be thrown into prison, and they'll suffer for ten days. Then He says: "Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you life as your victor's crown."

BACKGROUND CHECK **Background Check: Smyrna**

Smyrna, today the city of Izmir in Turkey, was a beautiful, wealthy port city about thirty-five miles north of Ephesus. It was fiercely loyal to Rome, and in AD 26 it won the honor of building a temple to the emperor Tiberius. Its buildings circled the top of a hill called Mount Pagos, and people called this ring of buildings the crown of Smyrna. So when Jesus promises the believers a crown, they would have smiled. Around AD 155, Polycarp, the elderly bishop of Smyrna, who according to tradition had known John, was burned alive for refusing to call Caesar Lord. When he was ordered to curse Christ, he said that he had served Christ for eighty-six years, and Christ had never done him wrong, so how could he blaspheme his King who saved him?

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Synagogue of Satan?**

Jesus' words about people claiming to be Jews who are not have sometimes been twisted to justify hatred of Jewish people. That is a terrible misuse of this passage. John was Jewish. Jesus was Jewish. The earliest Christians were Jewish. This was a sharp disagreement within a local community in which some synagogue members were reporting Christians to the Roman authorities, putting their lives at risk. It's not a statement about Jewish people in general, and it never gives anyone permission to hate or mistreat anyone. Christians have a shameful history of antisemitism, and we must reject it completely.

What about the ten days? Like most numbers in Revelation, it's probably symbolic: a short, limited time of suffering. Daniel and his friends were tested for ten days (Daniel 1:12). The point is that the suffering would be real, but it would have a limit, and Jesus would be with them through it.

Jesus introduces Himself to Pergamum as the one with the sharp two-edged sword. He knows they live where Satan's throne is. Yet they've held on to His name and didn't deny their faith, even when Antipas, Jesus' faithful witness, was killed in their city.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Background Check: Pergamum**

Pergamum (also spelled Pergamon) had been a royal capital, and it was perched on a hill about a thousand feet high. It had a library of about two hundred thousand scrolls, second only to Alexandria's. Parchment, writing material made from animal skin, is named after the city. What was Satan's throne? There are three main suggestions. On the hilltop stood a huge altar of Zeus, shaped like a throne; today it's in a museum in Berlin. Pergamum also had a famous healing center dedicated to Asclepius, whose symbol was a snake. And it was the first city in Asia to build a temple to a living emperor, Augustus, in 29 BC. The emperor cult was probably what put believers in the most danger.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Antipas**

We know nothing about Antipas except this verse. He's the only Christian martyr named in Revelation. But notice what Jesus calls him: My faithful witness. That's the same title Jesus has in 1:5. The Greek word for witness is martys, which eventually came to mean martyr, someone who witnesses to Jesus even to death. Antipas is forgotten by history, but Jesus knows his name.

But there's a problem. Some in the church were following the teaching of Balaam, who showed Balak how to lead Israel into idolatry and sexual sin (Numbers 25; 31:16), and some held to the Nicolaitans' teaching. In Pergamum, eating meat sacrificed to idols was part of social life, trade guild dinners, and civic festivals. Refusing would cost you. Jesus calls them to repent.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Hidden Manna and a White Stone**

To those who overcome, Jesus promises hidden manna and a white stone inscribed with a new name. Manna was the bread God gave Israel in the desert, and Jewish tradition said a jar of manna was hidden away until the Messiah came. Instead of idol feasts, believers would eat God's food. The white stone has many possible meanings. In ancient courts, jurors voted with white stones for not guilty and black stones for guilty. White stones were also used as tickets to banquets. And a new name means a new identity. Whatever exactly it refers to, it means you're accepted, welcomed, and known by Jesus personally.

The longest letter goes to the smallest city, Thyatira. Jesus introduces Himself as the Son of God, the only time that title appears in Revelation, with eyes like fire and feet like polished bronze. He praises their love, faith, service, and endurance, and says they're doing more now than at first. That's the opposite of Ephesus. But they tolerated a woman He calls Jezebel, who called

herself a prophet and was leading people into sexual immorality and eating food sacrificed to idols.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Background Check: Thyatira**

Thyatira was a busy trading town famous for its trade guilds, more than any other city in the region: wool workers, linen workers, dyers, leather workers, potters, bakers, slave dealers, and bronze smiths. Lydia, the businesswoman Paul met in Philippi, was a dealer in purple cloth from Thyatira (Acts 16:14). Each guild had a patron god and held feasts in its honor. If you wanted to make a living, you were expected to join a guild and attend its feasts. That's why Jezebel's teaching was so appealing. She probably said it was fine for Christians to go along with it. The city's own god was Apollo, called a son of Zeus, so it's striking that Jesus calls Himself the Son of God here. Thyatira was also known for its bronze work.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Who Was Jezebel?**

Jezebel was probably not this woman's real name. The original Jezebel was a queen of Israel who led the nation into the worship of Baal (1 Kings 16:31; 2 Kings 9:22). Jesus uses her name as a label, the way we might call someone a Judas. This woman was a real leader in the church who claimed to speak for God. Jesus had given her time to repent, but she refused. Notice the patience: even for a false prophet leading people astray, Jesus gave time to turn around. But He also warned that He searches hearts and minds and gives to each according to what they've done.

To those who don't follow her teaching, Jesus gives no extra burden. They should just hold on until He comes. To those who overcome, He promises authority over the nations, and the morning star. Later, Jesus calls Himself the bright Morning Star (22:16). The greatest reward isn't power. It's Jesus Himself.

Jesus' words to Sardis are some of the most chilling in the Bible. He knows their deeds; they have a reputation for being alive, but they're dead. He tells them to wake up and strengthen what little is

left, before it dies too. If they don't wake up, He'll come like a thief, when they least expect it.

> BACKGROUND CHECK **Background Check: Sardis**
>
> Sardis had once been one of the richest cities in the world, the capital of King Croesus, whose name became a byword for wealth. Gold was found in the river that flowed through it. Its fortress sat on a steep hill that seemed impossible to attack. But it was captured twice, by the Persian king Cyrus in 547 BC and by Antiochus III in 214 BC, both times because soldiers climbed the cliffs at night and found that no one was keeping watch. Wake up! would have hit hard in Sardis. By John's time it was living on its past glory. An earthquake in AD 17 had badly damaged it, and it had been rebuilt with help from the emperor Tiberius.
>
> BACKGROUND CHECK **Reputation vs. Reality**
>
> The church in Sardis looked good. Maybe it had great programs, a big crowd, and a good name in town. But Jesus saw what was underneath. It's possible to look like a strong Christian on social media or at youth group and be spiritually asleep on the inside. Jesus isn't impressed by reputation. He looks at hearts. If you've drifted, don't despair. Jesus says wake up, not give up. He still says there are a few in Sardis who haven't soiled their clothes, and they'll walk with Him in white.

He promises that He will never erase the name of anyone who overcomes from the book of life. Ancient cities kept a register of citizens, and a citizen's name could be erased if they committed a crime or died. Jesus' register is different. Your name is safe with Him.

Philadelphia means brotherly love. This church, like Smyrna, receives only praise. Jesus introduces Himself as the holy and true one, who holds David's key. When He opens a door, nobody can close it, and when He closes one, nobody can open it (an echo of Isaiah 22:22). Then He says: "See, I have placed before you an open

door that no one can shut." They had little strength, but they'd kept His word and hadn't denied His name.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Background Check: Philadelphia**

Philadelphia was a younger city, founded in the second century BC by a king named Attalus II, whose love for his brother earned him the nickname Philadelphus. It sat at the edge of a high plateau on an important road leading east, which made it a gateway, a kind of open door, for spreading Greek culture inland. It was in an earthquake zone, and after the great earthquake of AD 17, aftershocks went on for years. Many people lived outside the city in tents, afraid that buildings would fall on them. So Jesus' promise to make the overcomers pillars in God's temple, which they would never have to leave, would have meant a lot. The city was renamed Neocaesarea in honor of the emperor for a while. Jesus promises a better new name: God's name, the name of the new Jerusalem, and His own new name.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Little Strength**

Jesus says the church in Philadelphia had little strength. Maybe it was small, poor, or without influence. But that didn't stop Jesus from opening a door for them. The open door may mean an opportunity to share the gospel (1 Corinthians 16:9), or the door into God's kingdom. Either way, you don't need to be strong or important for Jesus to use you. You just need to stay faithful.

Jesus also promises to keep them from the hour of trial coming on the whole world. Christians interpret this in different ways. Pre-tribulation readers see a promise that believers will be removed from the earth before a great tribulation. Others see it as a promise of protection through the trial, not removal from it, just as Jesus prayed that the Father would protect His followers from the evil one, not take them out of the world (John 17:15). In context, it's a promise that this little church would be kept safe by Jesus.

The last letter is the most famous, and the most uncomfortable. Jesus introduces Himself as the Amen, the true and faithful witness,

the one who rules over all God created. And He doesn't have one good word to say: "I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the other! So, because you are lukewarm—neither hot nor cold—I am about to spit you out of my mouth."

BACKGROUND CHECK **Background Check: Laodicea**

Laodicea was a wealthy banking and trading city. It was so rich that when an earthquake devastated it in AD 60, it rebuilt without accepting help from Rome. It was famous for a fine black wool and for a medical school known for an eye ointment. But it had a weakness: no good water supply of its own. Water came through an aqueduct from hot springs several miles away, and by the time it arrived, it was lukewarm and full of minerals, the kind of water you'd spit out. Nearby Hierapolis had hot springs, good for healing. Nearby Colossae had cold, refreshing water. Laodicea's water was neither. Every detail of Jesus' letter fits the city: the church claimed to be rich, but Jesus says they're poor, blind, and naked. He tells them to buy from Him gold refined in fire, white clothes, and salve for their eyes.

BACKGROUND CHECK **What Does Lukewarm Mean?**

Many people think hot means on fire for God and cold means against Him, so Jesus would prefer that you hate Him rather than be half-hearted. But the city's water supply suggests a different meaning. Hot water heals, and cold water refreshes. Both are useful. Lukewarm water is useless. So Jesus isn't saying He'd rather you be against Him. He's saying the church was useless, neither healing nor refreshing anyone. They were comfortable, self-satisfied, and making no difference. That's a challenge for any comfortable Christian. Does your faith refresh or help anyone?

Jesus says He rebukes and disciplines those He loves. That's important. Even His harshest letter is written out of love. Then He says the words that have become one of the most famous verses in the Bible.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Behold, I Stand at the Door**

In older translations, Revelation 3:20 begins with the word Behold. The NIV says, Here I am! The verse is often used to invite people to become Christians, as if Jesus is knocking on the door of an unbeliever's heart. That's a fair application, and many people have opened the door to Jesus this way. But look at the context. Jesus is speaking to a church. He's standing outside His own church, knocking, waiting to be let back in. They were so comfortable and self-satisfied that they hadn't noticed He'd been shut out. So the first meaning is a call to complacent Christians: let Jesus back into the center. And the promise is personal. If anyone hears His voice and opens the door, He'll come in and share a meal with them. In the ancient world, eating together meant friendship. Jesus doesn't want to inspect you. He wants to have dinner with you.

BACKGROUND CHECK **A Painting with No Handle**

In the 1850s, the English artist William Holman Hunt painted a famous picture called The Light of the World, based on Revelation 3:20. It shows Jesus at night, holding a lantern, knocking on an overgrown door. People noticed something odd: there's no handle on the outside of the door. The artist explained that this was deliberate. The door can only be opened from the inside. Jesus knocks, but He doesn't force His way in. He waits for you to open it.

To those who overcome, Jesus makes the most amazing promise of all: they'll sit with Him on His throne, just as He overcame and sat with His Father on His throne. The lukewarm, useless church is offered a place on the throne of the universe. That's grace.

KEY VERSE

Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with that person, and they with me.

Revelation 3:20 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Which of the seven churches is most like your church? Which is most like you?
2. The church in Ephesus was right but cold. How can someone hold on to the truth without losing love?
3. What would it look like for your faith to be hot (healing) or cold (refreshing) for someone this week?
4. How does reading Revelation 3:20 in context change how you understand it?

TRY THIS *Write a short letter to yourself in the style of Jesus' letters. Start with what you think Jesus would praise in your life, then what He'd challenge, and end with one of His promises. Keep it somewhere you'll see it.*

CHAPTER 3

The Throne and the Lamb

Revelation 4–5

After the letters, the scene changes completely. John looks up and sees an open door in heaven. The trumpet-like voice tells him to come up, and he'll be shown what must happen next. Immediately he's in the Spirit, and before him is a throne, with someone sitting on it.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Come Up Here**

Some Christians who hold a pre-tribulation view see 4:1 as a picture of the rapture: John, representing the church, is called up to heaven before the judgments begin, and the word church doesn't appear again in chapters 4–19. Others answer that John is simply being taken up in a vision, as prophets like Ezekiel were, and that God's people (called saints, servants, and witnesses) appear all through the rest of the book. Either way, notice what John sees first when the door opens. Before any seals, trumpets, or bowls, he sees a throne. Everything that follows comes from that throne.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Throne**

The word throne appears more than forty times in Revelation, more than in any other New Testament book. That's the point of the whole book. In John's world, Caesar sat on the throne. But John is shown the real throne room of the universe, and it's not in Rome. Whatever happens on earth, God is still on His throne. When the news is frightening, and your life feels out of control, Revelation 4 is a good chapter to read.

Notice that John doesn't describe the one on the throne. He doesn't try to draw God. He describes only colors and light: He looked like jasper and carnelian (a deep red stone), and around the throne was a rainbow that looked like an emerald. The rainbow is a reminder of God's promise to Noah never to destroy the earth with a flood again (Genesis 9:13). Even in the throne room of judgment, mercy surrounds the throne.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Twenty-Four Elders**

Around the throne are twenty-four other thrones, with twenty-four elders sitting on them, dressed in white, wearing gold crowns. Who are they? Many think they represent all of God's people from both Testaments: the twelve tribes of Israel and the twelve apostles. The new Jerusalem will have the names of both on its gates and foundations (21:12–14). Others think they're a high order of angels who lead heaven's worship, or that they echo the twenty-four divisions of priests in the temple (1 Chronicles 24). Whichever is right, their main job is to worship.

From the throne come lightning and thunder, like at Mount Sinai when God gave the law (Exodus 19:16). Seven blazing lamps stand for God's sevenfold Spirit. In front of the throne is something like a glassy sea, as clear as crystal. In the ancient world, the sea was a symbol of chaos and danger. Here the sea is calm, still, and under control, like a mirror before God's throne.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Four Living Creatures**

Around the throne are four living creatures, covered with eyes, each with six wings. One is like a lion, one like an ox, one has a human face, and one is like a flying eagle. They combine the creatures of Ezekiel 1 and the seraphim of Isaiah 6. A Jewish saying said that the lion is the noblest of wild animals, the ox the strongest of farm animals, the eagle the swiftest bird, and humans the greatest of all. So the four creatures probably represent all of creation, wild and tame, in the air and on land, worshiping God. Their eyes mean they see

everything. In the second century, Irenaeus connected them with the four Gospels, and in Christian art you'll often see Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John pictured as a human, a lion, an ox, and an eagle.

Day and night, the creatures never stop praising God. They sing, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was, and is, and is to come."

BACKGROUND CHECK **Holy, Holy, Holy**

When Hebrew wanted to make something extra strong, it repeated it. Saying something three times was the strongest way possible. God is not just holy. He is holy, holy, holy, utterly pure, set apart, and beyond anything we can imagine. The seraphim sang the same song in Isaiah 6:3. In 1826, the English bishop Reginald Heber wrote a hymn called Holy, Holy, Holy based on this chapter, and it's still sung all over the world. When you sing it, you're joining a song that's been going on in heaven since before the world began.

And every time the creatures praise God, the elders, all twenty-four, fall down, worship, and throw their crowns before the throne. They sing: "You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they were created and have their being."

BACKGROUND CHECK **Throwing Down Crowns**

Laying their crowns before the throne means the elders are saying that their crowns, their honor, their authority, everything they have, belong to God. In the Roman world, kings who were defeated by Rome would lay their crowns before the emperor. And according to the Roman historian Tacitus, a Parthian prince once laid his crown before a statue of the emperor Nero. Here, the elders give their crowns not to Caesar but to God. Worship means saying, God, You're worth more than anything I have. What's your crown? Your talents, grades, looks, popularity, plans? What would it look like to lay it before Him?

In chapter 5, John sees a scroll in the right hand of the one on the throne. It has writing on both sides and is sealed with seven seals. The scroll seems to contain God's plan for history, His plan to judge evil and set the world right. A mighty angel shouts out a question: Who has the right to break the seals and unroll the scroll? And no one anywhere in creation, in heaven, on earth, or below it, was able to do it. John cries and cries.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Why Did John Cry?**

John's tears are important. If no one can open the scroll, then God's plan to set the world right can't go forward. Evil wins. Suffering never ends. The martyrs die for nothing. Have you ever looked at the world, at war, injustice, sickness, or your own pain, and wondered whether anyone can fix it? John felt that. And God doesn't scold him for crying. He answers him.

One of the elders tells John to stop weeping: "See, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has triumphed. He is able to open the scroll and its seven seals." So John turns to look at the Lion. And here's the most important moment in the whole book. He sees a Lamb.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Lion Is a Lamb**

John hears about a Lion, but when he looks, he sees "a Lamb, looking as if it had been slain, standing at the center of the throne." This is the key to Revelation. The Lion of Judah, the conquering King, wins not by tearing His enemies apart, but by being slaughtered like a sacrificial lamb. Jesus' victory came through the cross. Throughout Revelation, John often hears one thing and then sees another that explains it. Here he hears Lion and sees Lamb. God's power looks like self-giving love. The word Lamb is used for Jesus nearly thirty times in Revelation. It's the main way the book describes Him. Notice too that the Lamb is standing. He was slain, but He is alive.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Center of Everything**

Where is the Lamb standing? In the middle of the throne. Not off to the side. Not in a corner of the room. If you're ever confused by Revelation, lost among the beasts and bowls and plagues, come back to this picture. The Lamb who was slain is at the center of the universe. The future isn't controlled by dictators, chance, or the devil. It's controlled by the one who loved you enough to die for you. Everything in Revelation, the judgments and the new creation, flows from the Lamb's victory on the cross.

The Lamb has seven horns and seven eyes. Remember the rule: horns mean power, and eyes mean knowledge. Seven means complete. The Lamb is all-powerful and all-knowing, and He sends God's Spirit out into all the earth.

The Lamb takes the scroll, and heaven erupts. The four creatures and the elders bow down before the Lamb. Each holds a harp, and golden bowls of incense, which John says stand for the prayers of God's people. Then they sing a new song: "You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, because you were slain, and with your blood you purchased for God persons from every tribe and language and people and nation. You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God, and they will reign on the earth."

BACKGROUND CHECK **Your Prayers in Golden Bowls**

Notice what's in the golden bowls: the prayers of God's people. Your prayers don't disappear into the ceiling. In heaven, they're kept in golden bowls before the throne, as precious as incense. Later in Revelation, those prayers will be part of what moves God to act (8:3–5). Every prayer you've ever prayed, even the clumsy ones, even the ones that felt pointless, God has kept.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Every Tribe and Language**

The Lamb's people come from every tribe, language, people, and nation. That four-part phrase, which appears seven times in Revelation, describes the whole world. The church isn't one race, one nationality, one culture, or one language. It's the most diverse family in the world. Racism and prejudice have no place in the Lamb's family. Next time you worship, remember that you're singing alongside believers in Nigeria, Brazil, China, India, Iran, and everywhere else.

Then John hears countless angels, thousands upon thousands, tens of thousands times tens of thousands, joining the song. And then every creature in the universe joins in, everything in heaven, on earth, under the earth, and in the sea: "To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be praise and honor and glory and power, for ever and ever!" And the four living creatures say, Amen, and the elders fall down and worship.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Worshiping the Lamb**

Notice who's being worshiped: the one on the throne and the Lamb, together. In chapter 4, God is worshiped as Creator. In chapter 5, the Lamb receives the same worship. In Revelation, angels refuse worship (19:10; 22:9). Only God is to be worshiped. So when all of heaven worships the Lamb, John is making clear that Jesus is God. The early Christians didn't slowly decide that Jesus was divine. They worshiped Him from the start.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Worthy Is the Lamb**

The hymns of Revelation 4–5 have inspired worship for centuries. George Frideric Handel ended his famous oratorio Messiah, first performed in 1742, with a chorus called Worthy Is the Lamb, based on Revelation 5:12–13, followed by a great Amen. Many modern worship songs, like Revelation Song, draw on these chapters too. Revelation is full of worship songs because worship is the main thing heaven is doing. Revelation shows that worship

isn't something we do to fill time before the sermon. It's what we were made for, and what we'll be doing forever.

KEY VERSE

In a loud voice they were saying: "Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise!"

Revelation 5:12 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Why do you think John describes God on the throne only with colors and light, instead of describing what He looks like?
2. What does it mean that the Lion turned out to be a Lamb? How does that change the way you think about power?
3. What's a crown in your life that you could lay before God?
4. How does knowing that your prayers are kept in golden bowls change the way you think about prayer?

TRY THIS *Read Revelation 4–5 out loud, and every time you reach one of the songs, stop and sing it, say it, or pray it as your own. Then listen to the Hallelujah chorus and Worthy Is the Lamb from Handel's Messiah.*

CHAPTER 4

The Seals Are Broken

Revelation 6–7

Now the Lamb begins to break the seven seals on the scroll, one at a time. With each seal, something happens. Remember who's in control here. The Lamb opens the seals. Nothing happens on earth unless He allows it.

The first four seals release four horsemen, each one summoned by a different living creature with a thunderous Come! These are the famous four horsemen of the apocalypse, who have appeared in countless paintings, songs, and movies.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Four Horsemen**

The horsemen come from a vision in Zechariah 1:8–11 and 6:1–8, where colored horses patrol the earth. Each horse's color tells you what it brings. The first horse is white, and its rider carries a bow and wears a crown, riding out to conquer. The second horse is red like fire, and its rider is given a large sword and the power to remove peace from the world, so that people slaughter each other. The third is black, and its rider holds a pair of scales; a voice announces outrageous food prices, a whole day's pay for a small amount of wheat, which means famine. The fourth is pale, the sickly color of a corpse, and its rider is Death, with Hades following behind. They're given power over a quarter of the earth. In short, the horsemen are conquest, war, famine, and death. Sadly, these four have ridden through every century of human history.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Who Is the White Rider?**

The first rider has caused a lot of debate. Some think he's Christ, or the gospel going out to conquer, because Jesus rides a white horse in 19:11. But most interpreters think he's a picture of military conquest, like the other three. The bow was the weapon of the Parthians, a feared empire on Rome's eastern border, famous for its mounted archers. Some futurist interpreters think this rider is the Antichrist, a fake messiah who looks like Christ but brings war. Either way, the first four seals show the kinds of suffering that come when humanity rebels against God.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Spare the Oil and Wine**

In the third seal, a voice says to leave the oil and wine unharmed. That's an odd detail. Grain was the poor person's food, while olive oil and wine came from trees and vines that survived droughts better. So the picture may be of a famine where the poor can't afford bread, but the rich still have their luxuries. In AD 92, the emperor Domitian ordered half the vineyards in the provinces to be cut down to grow more grain, but he backed down after protests in Asia. Some scholars think John's first readers would have thought of that.

When the fifth seal is opened, John sees the souls of people who had been killed, lying beneath the altar, for God's word and for their testimony. They cry out loudly: "How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?"

BACKGROUND CHECK **Is It Okay to Ask How Long?**

The martyrs' prayer echoes the Psalms. How long, Lord? appears again and again (Psalm 6:3; 13:1–2; 79:5; 89:46). It's the prayer of people who are suffering and waiting for God to act. If you've ever asked God how long, you're in good company. Notice that God doesn't scold the martyrs for asking. He gives each of them a white robe, a sign of victory and purity, and tells them to rest a little longer. He hears. He hasn't forgotten. Justice is coming. If you're waiting for God to fix something, it's okay to tell Him you're tired of waiting.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Under the Altar**

Why are the martyrs under the altar? In the temple, the blood of sacrifices was poured out at the base of the altar (Leviticus 4:7). So the picture is that the martyrs' lives were poured out like an offering to God. Paul used the same picture for his own coming death (2 Timothy 4:6). Their deaths weren't wasted. They were offerings God received.

The sixth seal brings an earthquake, and the whole universe seems to fall apart. The sun goes black, the moon turns red like blood, stars fall like figs shaken from a tree, the sky rolls up like a scroll, and every mountain and island is moved. The most powerful people on earth, kings, generals, and the rich, along with everyone else, slave or free, hide in caves and beg the mountains to fall on them and hide them from the Lamb's anger and from the face of the one on the throne. They cry that the great day of wrath has come, "and who can withstand it?"

BACKGROUND CHECK **Is the Sky Really Going to Roll Up?**

The pictures of the sixth seal come almost word for word from the Old Testament prophets, who used them to describe God's judgment on nations (Isaiah 13:10; 34:4; Joel 2:31). When Isaiah said the stars would fall at the fall of Babylon, he meant that the whole world of the people being judged would collapse, as if their universe was ending. Jesus used similar language (Mark 13:24–25). Some Christians take these pictures more literally as cosmic events at the end of history. Others see them as symbols of the collapse of powers that oppose God. Either way, the point is clear: when God judges, no one is too powerful to escape.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Wrath of the Lamb**

The wrath of the Lamb is a startling phrase. Lambs aren't usually angry. But it reminds us that Jesus' love isn't soft or indifferent to evil. Because He loves, He's angry at what destroys people. And notice the irony: the people hiding

from the Lamb's wrath could find safety in the Lamb Himself. The question who can withstand it? is answered in the next chapter.

Before the seventh seal, there's a pause. This happens with the trumpets too. It's like an intermission, and it answers the question at the end of chapter 6: Who can stand? John sees four angels holding back the four winds at the earth's four corners, so that no harm comes yet. Another angel tells them to wait until God's servants have been sealed on their foreheads.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Seal**

In the ancient world, a seal was a mark of ownership and protection, like a brand or a signature. In Ezekiel 9:4, God tells an angel to put a mark on the foreheads of people who grieve over sin, so that they'll be spared. Paul says believers are sealed with the Holy Spirit (Ephesians 1:13). The seal doesn't mean God's people won't suffer; many of them are martyrs. It means they belong to God and are kept safe spiritually. Later, the beast will put its own mark on people (13:16). Everyone in Revelation is marked by someone. The question is: whose are you?

Then John hears the number of those who are sealed: 144,000, twelve thousand from every one of Israel's twelve tribes.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Who Are the 144,000?**

Christians have understood the 144,000 in several ways. Some, especially dispensational futurists, believe they're Jewish people who come to faith in Jesus during the tribulation. Others think they're Jewish Christians in John's time. Many interpreters, across several traditions, think they're a symbol for the whole people of God, Jew and Gentile, since 144,000 is twelve times twelve times a thousand, and since the New Testament often calls the church the true Israel (Galatians 6:16; James 1:1). The list itself is unusual. Judah is listed first, probably because Jesus came from Judah. Dan is missing, perhaps because of its history of idolatry (Judges 18). Some groups, like the Jehovah's

Witnesses, have taught that only 144,000 people will go to heaven. But most Christians point to what John sees next.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Heard and Seen**

Here's the pattern again. In chapter 5, John heard about a Lion and saw a Lamb. In chapter 7, John hears a number, 144,000 from Israel, and then he turns and sees a crowd so large that no one could count it, from every nation. Many interpreters think these are two pictures of the same group: God's people, seen first as the fulfillment of Israel, and then as a worldwide family. The number tells you that God's people are complete and none are missing. The crowd tells you how huge and diverse they are. Either way, the vision of the crowd is one of the most hopeful scenes in the Bible.

The great crowd is dressed in white, waving palm branches, and they shout out loud: "Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb." And all the angels fall on their faces and worship God, praising Him with a sevenfold song: amen, praise, glory, wisdom, thanks, honor, power, and strength forever.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Palm Branches**

Palm branches were waved at victory celebrations and at the Jewish Feast of Tabernacles, which remembered God caring for Israel in the wilderness. The crowd waved palm branches when Jesus entered Jerusalem (John 12:13). This crowd is celebrating the victory of the Lamb. It's Palm Sunday in heaven, and this time it never ends.

One of the elders asks John who the people in white robes are, and where they came from. John answers, Sir, you know. And the elder explains that these are the people who have come through the great tribulation and out the other side, and "they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb."

BACKGROUND CHECK **White in Blood?**

Washing clothes in blood to make them white makes no sense, unless you understand the symbol. In the Old Testament, the blood of sacrifices made people clean before God. Jesus' blood, His life given on the cross, washes away sin. Isaiah 1:18 says that even if your sins are like scarlet, they'll be as white as snow. No amount of trying harder can make your robe white. Only the Lamb can.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Great Tribulation**

What is the great tribulation? Futurists believe it's a specific period of intense suffering just before Jesus returns, often thought to last seven years, based on Daniel 9:27. Preterists connect it with the persecution of the early church and the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70 (Matthew 24:21). Idealists and many others see it as the suffering God's people endure in every age, since Jesus said that in this world we will have trouble (John 16:33), and John says he's a companion in tribulation already (1:9). Whatever your view, the people in white came out of it. Suffering is real, but it isn't the end of their story.

The elder goes on to describe their future. They serve God in His temple day and night. He spreads His tent over them, sheltering them with His presence. They'll never be hungry or thirsty again, and the sun's heat won't beat down on them. The Lamb, standing in the middle of the throne, will shepherd them and guide them to springs of water that give life. And God Himself will dry every tear they cry.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Lamb Is a Shepherd**

Here's another surprising picture: the Lamb is the shepherd. The one who became a sacrifice now cares for the flock. Psalm 23 says the Lord is my shepherd, who leads me beside quiet waters. Isaiah 49:10 and 25:8 promise that God will lead His people to springs and wipe away their tears. Jesus called Himself the good shepherd (John 10:11). If you're hurting right now,

> this is God's promise to you: He's going to wipe your tears Himself. Not an angel, not a servant. God.

KEY VERSE

After this I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands.

Revelation 7:9 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. The four horsemen represent conquest, war, famine, and death. Where do you see them riding in the world today?
2. Have you ever prayed How long? What were you waiting for?
3. What do you think the two pictures of God's people, the 144,000 and the great multitude, tell us?
4. What does it mean to you that God Himself will wipe away your tears?

TRY THIS *Find out about a group of Christians somewhere in the world who are suffering for their faith. Pray for them by name this week, and if you can, write a letter of encouragement through a ministry that supports persecuted Christians.*

CHAPTER 5

Trumpets and Witnesses

Revelation 8–11

When the Lamb opens the seventh seal, something unexpected happens. Heaven goes silent, for about half an hour. After all the singing, thunder, and shouting, there's total quiet.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Silence in Heaven**
>
> Why the silence? It may be the stillness before a storm, the hush before God acts. In the Old Testament, the prophets said, Be silent before the Lord (Habakkuk 2:20; Zephaniah 1:7; Zechariah 2:13). Jewish tradition also said that heaven's worship went quiet so that God could hear the prayers of His people. And that's exactly what happens next. Sometimes the most powerful moments in worship are silent. Try being still before God for a few minutes. It's harder than it sounds.

Seven angels are given seven trumpets. But before they blow them, another angel stands at the altar with a golden censer, and he's given incense to offer together with the prayers of every one of God's people. The smoke of the incense and the prayers rise up before God. Then the angel fills the censer with the altar's fire and throws it onto the earth, and there's thunder, lightning, and an earthquake.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Prayers That Shake the Earth**
>
> Look at the order of events. The prayers of God's people, including the martyrs who cried How long? in chapter 6, rise to God. And then God acts. The

trumpets that follow are, at least in part, God's answer to His people's prayers for justice. Your prayers aren't small. In Revelation, the prayers of ordinary believers go up to God's throne and come back down as fire. Never think your prayers don't matter.

Trumpets in the Bible were blown to announce a king, to call people to worship, and to warn of an attack. At Jericho, trumpets announced judgment (Joshua 6). Here, the trumpets warn the world. With the first four, disaster strikes the earth, the sea, the rivers, and the sky. Hail and fire, with blood mixed in, burn a third of the earth and trees. Something like a blazing mountain is thrown into the sea, and a third of the sea turns to blood. A star named Wormwood falls into the rivers and makes them bitter. And the sun, moon, and stars each lose a third of their light.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Plagues of Egypt**

If the trumpets sound familiar, it's because they echo the plagues of Egypt in Exodus 7–10: hail and fire, water turned to blood, darkness, and later locusts. In Exodus, the plagues showed that the gods of Egypt were powerless, and they were warnings that gave Pharaoh chances to repent before the final judgment. The trumpets work the same way. They show that God, not Rome, controls creation, and they call people to turn back to Him. And they free God's people, just as the plagues led to the exodus.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Why a Third?**

Notice that the trumpets affect a third of things. The seals affected a quarter (6:8). The bowls, later on, will affect everything. The judgments are getting stronger, but they're still partial. A third means a large part, but not all. That shows that the trumpets are warnings. God is giving people a chance to repent before the final judgment. His judgments are measured and limited, and they're mixed with mercy.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Wormwood**

Wormwood is a real plant with a very bitter taste. In the Old Testament, it's a symbol of bitterness and sorrow (Jeremiah 9:15; Lamentations 3:19). After the 1986 nuclear disaster at Chernobyl, in Ukraine, some people pointed out that one Ukrainian word for a type of wormwood is chornobyl. Many people took it as a fulfillment of Revelation 8:11. It's a striking connection, but it's a good example of how easy it is to read the news into Revelation. John's first readers would have understood Wormwood as a picture of bitter judgment, not as a code name for a city two thousand years later.

Then an eagle flies overhead, crying out three woes to the people on earth because of the three trumpets still to come.

The fifth trumpet is the strangest yet. A star that has fallen from the sky is given the key to the Abyss, a bottomless pit that was seen as a prison for demons (Luke 8:31). Out of the smoke come locusts, but they're not ordinary locusts. They look like horses ready for battle, with human faces, women's hair, lions' teeth, iron breastplates, and scorpion tails. They don't harm the grass, only people without God's seal, and they torture rather than kill, for five months. Their king is the angel of the Abyss, named Abaddon in Hebrew and Apollyon in Greek. Both names mean Destroyer.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Locusts with Human Faces**

Locust swarms were one of the most terrifying disasters in the ancient world. They could eat every green thing for miles, leaving people to starve. The prophet Joel described a locust plague as an invading army, with locusts like horses and the sound of chariots (Joel 2:4–5). John's locusts are demonic, a picture of spiritual torment unleashed on people who have rejected God. Some modern interpreters have tried to identify them with helicopters or modern weapons. But John's first readers would have heard echoes of Joel and Exodus. The five months may be because that's the life cycle of a locust, a

limited time. And notice that they can't touch God's people. Even the Abyss can only do what God allows.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Apollyon**

Some scholars think the name Apollyon was a jab at the god Apollo, whose symbols included the locust, and whom the emperor Domitian liked to be associated with. If so, John was saying that the god the emperors claimed as their patron was really the Destroyer. In John Bunyan's famous book The Pilgrim's Progress (1678), the hero Christian fights a terrible monster named Apollyon and defeats him with the sword of God's word.

The sixth trumpet releases four angels bound at the Euphrates River, and an enormous army of mounted troops numbering two hundred million. The horses have heads like lions and breathe fire, smoke, and sulfur, and a third of humanity is killed.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Two Hundred Million**

The Euphrates was the eastern border of the Roman Empire. Beyond it lay the Parthians, Rome's greatest enemy, with their feared cavalry. To John's readers, an invasion from beyond the Euphrates was a nightmare. Some modern interpreters have tried to identify the army with a specific modern nation that can field two hundred million soldiers. But the number, literally two myriads of myriads, seems to mean an uncountable army, like the angels in 5:11. The horses are not ordinary horses, either. They're demonic, a picture of the horrors of war.

BACKGROUND CHECK **They Still Did Not Repent**

The saddest verses in this section come at the end of chapter 9. Despite all these warnings, the rest of humanity still didn't repent. They kept on worshiping demons, and idols made of gold and silver, bronze, stone, and wood, which can't see, hear, or walk. And they didn't turn from murder, magic arts, sexual immorality, or theft. That shows the purpose of the trumpets: repentance. But it also shows how hard the human heart can become. Disaster by itself doesn't change people. Only God's grace does. The good

news is that in chapter 11, after the witnesses' testimony, people finally do give glory to God (11:13).

Before the seventh trumpet, there's another intermission. A mighty angel comes down from heaven, wrapped in a cloud, a rainbow above him, his face shining like the sun, and legs like columns of fire. He has a little scroll open in his hand. He plants one foot on the sea and the other on the land, and shouts like a roaring lion. Seven thunders speak, but John is told to seal up what they said and not to write it down.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Some Things We're Not Told**

John is told not to write down what the seven thunders said. That's a helpful reminder. Even in a book called Revelation, God doesn't reveal everything. There are some things He has decided to keep to Himself (Deuteronomy 29:29). Anyone who claims to have the whole future figured out is claiming more than John did.

The angel swears by the Creator that the waiting is over. Then John is told to take the little scroll and eat it. It tastes sweet as honey in his mouth, but it turns his stomach sour. Then he's told he must prophesy again to many nations, peoples, kings, and languages.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Sweet and Sour**

Ezekiel also ate a scroll that tasted sweet as honey (Ezekiel 3:1–3). Eating the scroll means taking God's word inside you so completely that it becomes part of you. It's sweet because God's word is good, and it's a joy to receive. But it turns sour because the message includes judgment and suffering, and proclaiming it is hard. Following Jesus is like that. Knowing God is sweet. But sharing His message in a world that resists it can be painful.

John is given a measuring rod and told to measure God's temple and the altar, and count the worshipers, but to leave out the outer court, which is given to the nations, who will trample the holy city for

forty-two months. Measuring something in the Bible means protecting it (Zechariah 2:1–5). God's people are protected spiritually, even while they suffer outwardly.

Then God appoints two witnesses, who prophesy for 1,260 days, dressed in sackcloth, a rough cloth worn in mourning and repentance. They're described as two olive trees and two lampstands (an echo of Zechariah 4). They have power to breathe fire on their enemies, to stop the rain, to turn water to blood, and to send plagues on the earth. When they finish their testimony, the beast from the Abyss kills them, and their bodies lie in the street of the great city, where their Lord was crucified. People celebrate their deaths and send each other gifts. But after three and a half days, God breathes life into them, they stand up, and a cloud carries them up to heaven as their enemies watch.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Who Are the Two Witnesses?**

Christians have suggested several identities for the two witnesses. Many think of Moses and Elijah, since stopping rain was Elijah's miracle (1 Kings 17:1) and turning water to blood was Moses' (Exodus 7:20), and the two appeared with Jesus at the Transfiguration. Some early Christians suggested Enoch and Elijah, the two people who never died. Futurists often think they're two prophets who will appear during the tribulation. Many others think they're a symbol of the whole church in its witnessing role, since they're called two lampstands, and lampstands represent churches (1:20). Two witnesses were required to establish testimony in court (Deuteronomy 19:15). Jesus sent out His disciples two by two (Luke 10:1).

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Pattern of the Witnesses**

Whoever they are, the witnesses follow the same pattern as Jesus. They testify faithfully. They're killed in the city where their Lord was crucified. Their enemies celebrate. Then they're raised to life and carried by a cloud into heaven. That's the pattern for every faithful Christian. Following Jesus may

lead to suffering, but it ends in resurrection. The forty-two months, 1,260 days, and three and a half days are all versions of three and a half, the broken number. Their time of suffering is limited. Their victory is permanent.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Sodom, Egypt, and Jerusalem**

John says the great city where the witnesses' bodies lie is symbolically named Sodom and Egypt, and it's the place where their Lord was crucified, which sounds like Jerusalem. But later, the great city is Babylon, which seems to be Rome. Many interpreters think the great city is a symbol of every human society that sets itself against God: as wicked as Sodom, as oppressive as Egypt, as blind as the Jerusalem that crucified Jesus, and as proud as Rome.

Finally, the seventh angel blows his trumpet, and loud voices in heaven announce the most important news in the book. The world's kingdom now belongs to our Lord and His Messiah, and His reign will never end. The twenty-four elders fall on their faces and worship, thanking God for taking His great power and beginning to reign. Then God's temple in heaven opens, and the ark of His covenant is seen inside.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Hallelujah Chorus**

If 11:15 sounds familiar, you may have heard it in Handel's Hallelujah chorus from Messiah, which uses the old King James wording of this verse, along with 19:6 and 19:16. Ever since King George II supposedly stood up during it in London, audiences have traditionally stood for the chorus. The verse sums up the whole Bible's story. The kingdom of the world, all its empires, presidents, kings, and powers, will become the kingdom of Jesus. The seventh trumpet doesn't bring more disaster. It brings the King.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Lost Ark**

The ark of the covenant was the gold-covered chest that held the stone tablets of the law, kept in the Most Holy Place of the temple. It disappeared, probably when the Babylonians destroyed Jerusalem in 586 BC. People have been searching for it ever since, and it was the subject of the movie Raiders of

the Lost Ark. In Revelation, John sees the ark in heaven. The point isn't where the box is. It's that God's covenant with His people is safe, and His presence is open to them.

KEY VERSE

The seventh angel sounded his trumpet, and there were loud voices in heaven, which said: "The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Messiah, and he will reign for ever and ever."

Revelation 11:15 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. What does the silence in heaven teach you about prayer and worship?
2. Why do you think people in Revelation 9 still didn't repent after all the warnings? What softens a hard heart?
3. What would it look like for you to be a faithful witness, like the two witnesses?
4. How does the seventh trumpet change the way you think about the news or the future?

TRY THIS *Spend five minutes in complete silence before God this week. No phone, no music, no words. Just sit, and remember that He's on the throne. Then write down anything that came to mind.*

CHAPTER 6

The Woman, the Dragon, and the Beasts

Revelation 12–14

Chapter 12 starts a new section, and it may be the key to the whole book. It's like the curtain is pulled back even further, and John shows us the spiritual war behind everything else in Revelation.

A great sign appears in heaven: a woman dressed in the sun, standing on the moon, wearing a crown made of twelve stars. She's in labor. Then a second sign appears: a huge red dragon, with seven heads, ten horns, and seven crowns. With its tail it drags down a third of the stars. The dragon waits in front of the woman, ready to devour her baby the moment it's born. She gives birth to a son, who is destined to rule the nations with a rod of iron (Psalm 2:9), and her child is snatched up to God and His throne. The woman escapes into the wilderness, where God takes care of her for 1,260 days.

> BACKGROUND CHECK **Who Is the Woman?**
>
> The child is clearly Jesus, the Messiah who will rule the nations. But who is the woman? Christians have given three main answers, and they're not mutually exclusive. Many see her as Israel, the people of God who gave birth to the Messiah. The sun, moon, and twelve stars recall Joseph's dream about his family, the twelve tribes (Genesis 37:9). Others see her as the church, God's people through the ages, persecuted by the dragon and protected in

the wilderness. And in Catholic and Orthodox tradition, she's often understood as also representing Mary, the mother of Jesus, and she's frequently pictured in art standing on the moon, crowned with stars. Many interpreters think the woman is mainly the faithful people of God, from Israel to the church, from whom the Messiah came.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Story Behind the Story**

Many people in John's world knew a myth that sounds similar. In one Greek version, the dragon Python tried to kill the goddess Leto before she gave birth to Apollo, who later killed the dragon. Roman emperors liked to compare themselves to Apollo, the hero who defeated chaos. John tells the true story. The real hero isn't the emperor. It's Jesus. And the real dragon isn't some chaos monster. It's Satan, who works through emperors.

Notice what John skips. He goes straight from Jesus' birth to His being snatched up to God's throne. Jesus' life, death, and resurrection are summed up in one sentence. The point is that the dragon failed. It wanted to destroy Jesus, and it couldn't.

Then war breaks out in heaven. Michael, leading his angels, fights against the dragon and his angels, and the dragon loses. It's thrown down to the earth. Now John tells us exactly who the dragon is: "The great dragon was hurled down—that ancient serpent called the devil, or Satan, who leads the whole world astray. He was hurled to the earth, and his angels with him."

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Ancient Serpent**

John's description links the dragon with the serpent in the garden of Eden (Genesis 3). Satan is called the devil, which means slanderer, and Satan, which means accuser. He's the deceiver of the whole world. And he's the one who accuses God's people day and night before God. But now he's been thrown down. When did this happen? Many interpreters connect it with Jesus' death and resurrection. Jesus said He saw Satan fall like lightning (Luke 10:18), and that the prince of this world would be driven out when He was

lifted up on the cross (John 12:31–32). Others think it describes Satan's original rebellion, or a future event. Whatever the timing, the point is clear. Satan has lost his place. He's a defeated enemy.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Accuser Is Silenced**

A loud voice in heaven celebrates that the accuser of God's people, who accused them in God's presence night and day, has been thrown down. Do you ever hear a voice in your head that says you're worthless, too far gone, a failure, unforgivable? That's the voice of the accuser. But the accuser has been thrown out of the courtroom. Jesus is your advocate (1 John 2:1). When you've confessed your sin, no accusation against you can stand (Romans 8:33–34).

How did God's people overcome the accuser? Not by their own strength. They overcame him in two ways: by the Lamb's blood, and by their own testimony. And they didn't love their lives so much that they were afraid to die.

BACKGROUND CHECK **How to Win Against Satan**

Here's the secret of victory in Revelation, and it's not what you might expect. It's not about being strong, famous, or powerful. It's the Lamb's blood, what Jesus did for you on the cross, which removes the accuser's power. It's the word of your testimony, your faithfulness in telling the truth about Jesus. And it's loving Jesus more than your own life. That's how the martyrs won. They looked like they lost, but they actually won, just like the Lamb.

Heaven rejoices, but there's a warning for the earth: the devil has come down in a rage, because he knows his time is short. That's important. The devil isn't raging because he's winning. He's raging because he's losing and knows it.

The dragon chases the woman, but she's given wings like a great eagle's, to fly to safety in the wilderness, where she's cared for through the three and a half times. The dragon spews a river of

water after her, but the earth swallows it. So the dragon goes off to make war on the rest of her children, those who obey God and cling to their testimony about Jesus.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Eagle's Wings**
>
> The eagle's wings recall God's words to Israel after the exodus: He carried them on eagles' wings (Exodus 19:4). The wilderness was where God provided for Israel, with manna and water from the rock. So the woman in the wilderness is God's people, protected and provided for, even in a hostile world. Isaiah promised that those who hope in the Lord will soar on wings like eagles (Isaiah 40:31). You might be in a wilderness season right now. God provides there too.

Then the dragon stands on the shore, and John sees a beast rise out of the sea. It has seven heads and ten horns, a crown on every horn, and a blasphemous name on every head. It looks like a leopard, with feet like a bear's and a mouth like a lion's. The dragon hands the beast his power, his throne, and huge authority. One of its heads looks as if it had received a deadly wound that has now healed, and the whole world follows the beast in amazement. People worship the dragon and the beast, saying no one is like the beast and no one can fight against it.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Daniel's Beasts**
>
> In Daniel 7, four beasts rise out of the sea: a lion, a bear, a leopard, and a terrifying beast with ten horns. They represent four empires. John's beast combines all four into one monster. It's the ultimate empire, every proud, violent, godless power rolled into one. To John's readers, the beast was clearly Rome, with its emperors who demanded worship and persecuted God's people. Notice that it rises from the sea: from the west, across the sea from Asia, where Rome's ships came from. But the beast is also a picture of every power that sets itself up as God, in every age.

BACKGROUND CHECK **A Fake Resurrection**

The beast's head with a fatal wound that is healed is a dark parody of the Lamb, who was slain and lives. Satan is not creative. He copies. The dragon, the sea beast, and the false prophet form a counterfeit trinity. The beast has a fake resurrection, receives fake worship, and claims fake authority. Many scholars think John's readers would have thought of a famous legend about Nero. After Nero killed himself in AD 68, rumors spread that he hadn't really died, or that he would come back from the dead, leading an army from the east. Several impostors claimed to be Nero returned. John may be using this legend as a picture of an evil power that seems to have been defeated, then comes back stronger.

The beast is allowed to speak arrogant, blasphemous words, and to rule for forty-two months. It makes war on God's people and conquers them. It's given authority over the whole world. Everyone whose name is missing from the Lamb's book of life worships the beast. Then John adds a call for endurance and faithfulness: if anyone is going into captivity, that's where they'll go, and if anyone is killed with the sword, that's how they'll die.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Conquered but Victorious**

It's painful to read that the beast makes war on God's people and conquers them. But remember chapter 12: they overcame by the Lamb's blood and their testimony, and didn't love their lives so much that they feared death. In Revelation, being killed for Jesus isn't losing. It's winning, the same way the Lamb won. The beast's victory is only for forty-two months, the broken number. The Lamb's victory is forever.

Then John sees a second beast, rising out of the earth. It has two lamb-like horns, yet it talks like a dragon. Later, it's called the false prophet (16:13). It makes everyone worship the first beast, performs great signs, even calling down fire from heaven, and deceives people. It sets up an image of the first beast, gives it breath so that it

can speak, and has everyone who won't worship it killed. And it forces everyone, small and great, rich and poor, slave and free, to take a mark on the right hand or forehead, so that no one can buy or sell without it.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Lamb-Like Beast**

The second beast looks like a lamb but speaks like a dragon. It's religion in the service of evil. In John's world, it probably stood for the priests of the emperor cult and the local leaders in the cities of Asia who promoted emperor worship. They organized festivals, built temples and statues, and made worship of the emperor part of everyday life. Some ancient temples even had statues that seemed to speak or move, using hidden tricks. In every age, there's a temptation to make religion serve power, to use God's name to support a nation, a party, a leader, or a cause. Watch out for any voice that looks like a lamb but speaks like a dragon.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Mark of the Beast**

What is the mark of the beast? In John's world, it would have reminded readers of many things: the brands or tattoos sometimes put on slaves, soldiers, or devotees of a god, and coins stamped with the emperor's image and titles, which you had to use to buy and sell. Economic pressure was real. If you didn't join the trade guild feasts and honor the emperor, you could lose your business. The mark is a parody of God's seal on His servants' foreheads (7:3; 14:1). It recalls Deuteronomy 6:8, where God told Israel to bind His words on their hands and foreheads, meaning that His law should shape what they think and what they do. So the mark of the beast is about allegiance: whose thinking and actions you belong to. Everyone is marked by someone.

Then comes the most famous number in the Bible. John says this calls for wisdom: "Let the person who has insight calculate the number of the beast, for it is the number of a man. That number is 666."

BACKGROUND CHECK **666 and Nero**

In the ancient world, letters were also used as numbers. In Greek and Hebrew, there were no separate number symbols, so each letter had a numerical value. Adding up the letters of a name was called gematria, and it was a popular puzzle. Graffiti found in Pompeii says, I love her whose number is 545. Many scholars think 666 is the value of the name Nero Caesar, written in Hebrew letters: nun (50), resh (200), vav (6), nun (50), qof (100), samekh (60), resh (200), which adds up to 666. Nero was the first emperor to persecute Christians, and he became a symbol of the evil emperor. The NIV footnote also suggests the number could be translated as humanity's number.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Mystery of 616**

Here's a fascinating clue. Some early manuscripts of Revelation say the number is 616, not 666. The church father Irenaeus, writing around AD 180, knew about this variant and thought it was a copying mistake. In 2005, scholars announced that a fragment of Revelation from around the third century, found at Oxyrhynchus in Egypt, reads 616. Why would anyone change the number? If you spell Nero Caesar in Hebrew from the Latin form of the name, Nero, instead of the Greek form, Neron, you drop the final nun (50), and the total becomes 616. That's a strong reason many scholars think the number pointed to Nero. Not everyone agrees. Some think the beast is a future Antichrist whose identity will become clear, and others see 666 as a symbol: six is one less than seven, the perfect number, so 666 is a triple failure to reach perfection, humanity trying to be God and always falling short. Here's a fun fact: the Greek letters of the name Jesus add up to 888.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Don't Fear the Mark, and Don't Set Dates**

Over the centuries, people have claimed that the mark of the beast was the Roman Catholic Church, Napoleon, Hitler, credit cards, social security numbers, barcodes, computer chips, and vaccines. They have all been wrong. People have also tried to set dates for Jesus' return. In the 1840s, William Miller taught that Jesus would return in 1843 or 1844, and when He didn't, his followers called it the Great Disappointment. A popular booklet in 1988 gave 88 reasons why the rapture would happen that year. In 2011, a radio host

named Harold Camping predicted the end of the world for May 21. Jesus said no one knows the day or hour, not even the angels (Matthew 24:36). So be wary of anyone who claims to know. And please don't be afraid that you could accidentally take the mark. In Revelation, the mark goes with worshiping the beast. It's a matter of who you worship and give your loyalty to, not a chip someone could slip into your arm. If you belong to Jesus, you're sealed by God, and no one can take that away.

After the darkness of chapter 13, chapter 14 shows the other side. John sees the Lamb on Mount Zion, with the 144,000, whose foreheads bear His name and His Father's. They sing a new song in front of the throne, and they go wherever the Lamb leads. They're described as pure, like soldiers set apart for a holy war, the firstfruits of the harvest of God's people.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Following the Lamb**

The beast's followers have his mark. The Lamb's followers have His name. The beast's followers are deceived. The Lamb's followers are truthful; no lie is found in their mouths. Everything in Revelation forces a choice between two kingdoms, two marks, two cities, and two destinies. But notice how the Lamb's followers are described: they follow Him wherever He leads. That's the simplest definition of a Christian. It doesn't mean you'll never fail. It means you keep following.

Then three angels fly through the sky with messages. The first proclaims the eternal gospel to the whole world, calling them to fear God, give Him glory, and worship the Creator. The second announces that Babylon the Great has fallen. The third warns that anyone who worships the beast and receives its mark will have to drink the wine of God's anger.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Gospel in the Middle of Judgment**

Notice that, in the middle of all the judgments, an angel proclaims the gospel to the whole world. Even at this late stage, God is calling people to turn to

Him. That's what God is like. His judgment is real, but His invitation is always open. If you've been thinking it's too late for you, it isn't.

Then John hears a voice from heaven say: "Write this: Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on." And the Spirit says yes, they'll rest from their hard work, and the good they've done will follow them.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Rest**

This blessing has been read at many Christian funerals. To believers who were facing death for their faith, it was a promise that dying in the Lord isn't the end. It's rest. If you've lost someone who loved Jesus, this verse is for you. They're resting, and nothing they did for Him is forgotten.

The chapter ends with two harvest pictures. A figure like a son of man, seated on a white cloud, swings a sickle and harvests the earth, which many see as the gathering of God's people. Then an angel gathers grapes and throws them into the winepress of God's wrath, and blood flows out for 1,600 stadia, about 180 miles. That's a picture of judgment. Like many of the numbers in Revelation, 1,600 is probably symbolic: four times four times a hundred, judgment covering the whole earth.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Harder Passages**

Some passages in Revelation, like the winepress of God's wrath and the smoke of torment in 14:10–11, are hard to read. Christians have different views about the nature of final judgment and hell. Most Christians through history have believed in eternal, conscious punishment for those who reject God. Some believe that the wicked will ultimately be destroyed rather than suffer forever. All agree that God's judgment is real, serious, and perfectly just, and that God doesn't want anyone to perish (2 Peter 3:9). If these passages trouble you, that's okay. Talk about them with a pastor or youth leader. Remember that the one who judges is the Lamb who died for sinners, and that the invitation to come to Him is still open.

KEY VERSE

They triumphed over him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony; they did not love their lives so much as to shrink from death.

Revelation 12:11 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Why do you think Revelation pictures the devil as raging because his time is short? How does that change the way you think about evil?
2. What are some voices today that look like a lamb but speak like a dragon?
3. What has the word mark meant to you before? How does understanding it as allegiance change things?
4. What would it look like for you to follow the Lamb wherever He leads?

TRY THIS *The next time you hear the accuser's voice in your head, telling you you're worthless or unforgivable, answer it out loud with Revelation 12:11 or Romans 8:1. Write one of those verses on a card and keep it with you this week.*

CHAPTER 7

Bowls and Babylon

Revelation 15–18

John sees another great sign in heaven: seven angels holding the last seven plagues. They're called last because with them God's anger against evil is finished. Before the plagues begin, though, John sees something beautiful.

Standing beside a sea of glass mixed with fire are the people who have overcome the beast, its image, and the number of its name. God has given them harps, and they're singing the song of Moses and of the Lamb: "Great and marvelous are your deeds, Lord God Almighty. Just and true are your ways, King of the nations. Who will not fear you, Lord, and bring glory to your name? For you alone are holy. All nations will come and worship before you, for your righteous acts have been revealed."

> BACKGROUND CHECK **The Song of Moses and the Lamb**
>
> After God brought Israel through the Red Sea, Moses and the Israelites sang a song of victory on the shore (Exodus 15). Now God's people stand beside another sea, singing about a greater rescue. Notice what's missing. The song doesn't celebrate the people's own courage. It's all about God: His deeds, His ways, His name, His holiness. And look at the hope at the end: every nation will come to worship. Even in a section about judgment, the song looks forward to the whole world turning to God. That's the heart of Revelation: God's judgment clears the way for the nations to be healed.

Then the temple in heaven opens, and the seven angels come out, dressed in shining linen with golden sashes, like priests. One of the living creatures gives them seven golden bowls, full of God's wrath. The temple fills with smoke from God's glory, and no one can enter until the plagues are complete.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Bowls**
>
> The golden bowls appeared earlier, filled with incense: the prayers of God's people (5:8). Now golden bowls are filled with God's wrath. Many interpreters see a connection. The bowls of judgment are God's answer to the bowls of prayer. The martyrs asked how long (6:10). Now God is answering.

A voice thunders from the temple, telling the seven angels to go and pour out the bowls on the earth. One after another, they pour them out. Painful sores break out on the people who have the beast's mark. The sea turns to blood like a dead body's, and every creature in it dies. The rivers and springs turn to blood. The sun scorches people with fire. The beast's throne is plunged into darkness, and people gnaw their tongues in pain. The Euphrates River dries up, opening the way for the kings of the east. And when the seventh bowl is poured into the air, a voice from the throne cries out, "It is done!" Then comes the greatest earthquake in human history, the great city splits into three parts, and huge hailstones, about a hundred pounds each, fall from the sky.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Seals, Trumpets, Bowls**
>
> The seals affected a fourth, the trumpets a third, and now the bowls affect everything. Some interpreters see the three sets of seven as happening one after another, in order. Others think they cover the same period of time from different angles, each one more intense, like a spiral staircase that keeps returning to the same point but rises higher each time. One reason is that each set seems to end at the very end of history, with earthquakes, thunder, and the arrival of God's kingdom (6:12–17; 11:15–19; 16:17–21). Whichever

view you take, the bowls show that God's patience has a limit. One day, evil will be completely finished.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Just and True**

In the middle of the bowls, an angel praises God for being just in His judgments, because the people who shed the blood of God's people and prophets are being given blood to drink. And the altar answers, agreeing that God's judgments are true and just. That might sound harsh. But think about how the first readers would have heard it. They had seen friends killed. They had been treated as if they didn't matter. Revelation tells them that God saw everything, and that He would make it right. Judgment is good news for victims. And notice the tragedy: even under these plagues, people curse God and refuse to repent (16:9, 11). The problem isn't that God won't forgive. It's that people won't turn.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Armageddon**

The sixth bowl brings three evil spirits that look like frogs, coming from the mouths of the dragon, the beast, and the beast's false prophet. They gather the world's kings for battle on God Almighty's great day, at a place called Armageddon in Hebrew. Armageddon probably means mountain of Megiddo. Megiddo was a city overlooking a large plain in northern Israel where many famous battles were fought (Judges 5:19; 2 Kings 23:29). It had been fought over so often that it became a symbol of decisive battle. Strangely, there's no actual mountain there, only a hill. Futurists often see Armageddon as a literal final battle in Israel. Others see it as a symbol of the final showdown between God and the powers of evil. Either way, notice what happens when the battle finally comes in chapter 19: there's no long war. Jesus wins with a word.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Stay Awake**

Right in the middle of the bowls, Jesus speaks: "Look, I come like a thief!" And He blesses the person who stays awake and keeps their clothes on, so they won't be embarrassed and exposed. Jesus used the same picture in the Gospels (Matthew 24:43–44), and He'd said the same thing to Sardis (3:3). The point isn't to make you jumpy. It's to keep you ready. A Christian who's ready

for Jesus' return doesn't need to know the date. They just live faithfully every day.

Now one of the seven angels takes John into the wilderness to show him the judgment of the great prostitute. She's riding a scarlet beast that has seven heads and ten horns, covered with blasphemous names. She's dressed in purple and scarlet, sparkling with gold, jewels, and pearls, and she holds a golden cup full of the filth of her immorality. On her forehead is a name: Babylon the Great, mother of all prostitutes. And she's drunk on the blood of God's people.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Who Is Babylon?**

The original Babylon was the empire that destroyed Jerusalem and the temple in 586 BC and took the Jews into exile. After the Romans destroyed Jerusalem and the temple again in AD 70, Jewish and Christian writers began using Babylon as a code name for Rome. Peter did the same (1 Peter 5:13). John gives a big clue: the angel says, "The seven heads are seven hills on which the woman sits." Rome was famous as the city built on seven hills. It was celebrated on coins as the goddess Roma, seated on its seven hills. And the angel says the woman is the great city ruling over the earth's kings (17:18). In John's time, that could only be Rome. Some futurists think Babylon will be a literal city rebuilt at the end of history, and others see it as a symbol of a worldwide system of power and wealth.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Babylon in Every Age**

Babylon is more than one city. It's a picture of what happens whenever a society, a nation, or a system becomes proud, rich, and powerful at the expense of others, especially the weak, and demands the loyalty that belongs only to God. Babylon is seductive. It looks glamorous, like a woman dressed in purple and gold. It offers wealth, pleasure, comfort, and belonging. But underneath, it's drunk on blood. Every age has its Babylon. Part of following Jesus is learning to recognize it, and refusing to let it own your heart.

The angel explains that the seven heads also stand for seven kings. Five are gone, one is reigning, and one is still to come for a short time. The beast itself is an eighth king, who belongs to the seven. Many interpreters have tried to count Roman emperors to match this, but scholars disagree about where to start counting and whether to include certain short-reigning emperors. Seven may simply mean the complete line of godless rulers. The ten horns are ten kings who will rule with the beast for one hour, a very short time, and make war against the Lamb. But they won't win.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **The Lamb Wins**
>
> Here's the turning point of chapter 17. The kings attack the Lamb, and the Lamb beats them, since He is the Lord over every lord and the King over every king. Alongside Him stand His people: called, chosen, and faithful. That's all you need to know about the future. Not who the ten kings are, or when they'll rule. Just this: the Lamb wins, and His people are with Him.

Then there's a surprising twist. The ten horns and the beast turn on the prostitute and destroy her. Evil eats itself. The empires and systems that seem so united against God eventually tear each other apart. And God is in control even of that.

In chapter 18, an angel with great authority comes down from heaven, lighting up the earth with his splendor, and shouts that Babylon the Great has fallen. It has become a home for demons and unclean spirits. Then another voice calls out to God's people: "Come out of her, my people," so that you don't share in her sins or her plagues.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Come Out of Her**
>
> God's people are told to come out of Babylon. That doesn't necessarily mean moving to a different city. The first readers were living in the cities of Asia, surrounded by Rome's power and wealth. It meant refusing to share in

Babylon's values: its pride, its greed, its idolatry, and its cruelty. Jeremiah gave a similar call to the Jews in the original Babylon (Jeremiah 51:45). For you, it might mean refusing to let your worth be measured by money, possessions, followers, or status. It might mean saying no to things everybody else is doing. You can live in the middle of Babylon without letting Babylon live in you.

Babylon boasts in her heart that she sits as a queen and will never be a widow or see grief. But her plagues come in a single day: death, mourning, and famine. Then three groups stand at a distance and mourn her fall: the kings who shared her luxury, the merchants who got rich from her, and the sea captains and sailors who made their living carrying her cargo.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Cargo List**

The merchants' cargo list is one of the most fascinating passages in Revelation. It reads like an inventory of the Roman economy: gold, silver, jewels, pearls, fine linen, purple, silk, scarlet cloth, rare citron wood, ivory, bronze, iron, marble, cinnamon, spices, incense, myrrh, frankincense, wine, olive oil, fine flour, wheat, cattle, sheep, horses, and carriages. These were the luxuries that flowed into Rome from all over the world. And then the list ends with the most shocking item: "and human beings sold as slaves." The Greek literally says bodies and souls of humans. Millions of slaves powered the Roman economy. By putting human beings at the end of a list of products, John shows how Babylon treated people: as merchandise. God sees it, and judges it.

BACKGROUND CHECK **What Do You Value?**

The kings and merchants mourn Babylon, not because they loved her, but because they lost money. Notice the repeated cry: in one hour, all this wealth has been ruined. It's a warning about what happens when life is built on stuff. Think about the things you buy. Where do they come from? Who made them, and were they treated fairly? Many Christians today are concerned about

> human trafficking and forced labor, which still exist. Caring about justice in the way we spend money is one way of coming out of Babylon.

Finally, a mighty angel lifts a boulder as big as a huge millstone and throws it into the sea, saying that Babylon will be thrown down like that and never found again. No more music, no more craftsmen, no more millstones grinding, no more lamps, no more weddings. Heaven is told to rejoice, because God has judged her for the blood of His people.

KEY VERSE

They will wage war against the Lamb, but the Lamb will triumph over them because he is Lord of lords and King of kings—and with him will be his called, chosen and faithful followers.

Revelation 17:14 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. The song of Moses and the Lamb is all about God, not about the singers. What would it look like for your worship to be more about God?
2. Where do you see Babylon today? What does it offer, and what does it cost?
3. What would it mean for you to come out of Babylon without leaving your city or school?
4. Why do you think John ended the cargo list with human beings?

TRY THIS *Look at the labels on five things you own, like clothes, shoes, or electronics. Find out where they were made. Then look up one organization that works against human trafficking or forced labor, and pray for its work this week.*

CHAPTER 8

The Rider on the White Horse

Revelation 19–20

After Babylon falls, John hears what sounds like a huge crowd in heaven shouting Hallelujah. Chapter 19 is the only place in the New Testament where the word Hallelujah appears, four times. It's a Hebrew word that means praise the Lord. The crowd praises God for His true and just judgments. Then the elders and living creatures fall down and worship, and a voice from the throne calls all God's servants, small and great, to praise Him.

Then John hears the loudest sound yet, like a huge crowd, like a roaring waterfall, like booming thunder: "Hallelujah! For our Lord God Almighty reigns. Let us rejoice and be glad and give him glory!" It's time for the Lamb's wedding, and His bride is ready.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Wedding of the Lamb**

The Bible often describes God's relationship with His people as a marriage (Isaiah 54:5; Hosea 2:19–20). Jesus called Himself the bridegroom (Mark 2:19–20). Paul said that Christ loves the church as a husband loves his wife (Ephesians 5:25–27). Now, at the end of history, the wedding finally arrives. The bride is the church, all God's people. She's given fine linen, bright and clean, which represents the righteous things God's people have done. Notice the contrast: the prostitute, Babylon, wore purple and scarlet and was drunk on blood. The bride is dressed in clean white linen. Revelation offers two women, two cities, and two ways to live. The angel says: "Blessed are those

who are invited to the wedding supper of the Lamb!" That invitation is for you.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Worship God**

John is so overwhelmed that he falls at the angel's feet to worship him. But the angel stops him. He says he's only a fellow servant, and tells John to worship God. John does the same thing again in 22:8–9. If even the great apostle John could be tempted to worship the wrong thing, we can too. It's easy to worship a gift instead of the giver: a famous preacher, a worship leader, an experience, a feeling. Revelation says: worship God alone.

Then John sees heaven standing open, and a white horse. Its rider's name is Faithful and True, and He judges and makes war with justice. His eyes are like fire, and He wears many crowns. A name is written on Him that only He Himself knows. "He is dressed in a robe dipped in blood, and his name is the Word of God." The armies of heaven follow Him on white horses, dressed in clean white linen. A sharp sword comes out of His mouth to strike down the nations. And on His robe and thigh is written His name: "king of kings and lord of lords."

BACKGROUND CHECK **Whose Blood?**

The rider's robe is dipped in blood before the battle even begins. Whose blood is it? Some think it's the blood of His enemies, echoing Isaiah 63:1–3, where God's garments are stained red from treading the winepress of judgment. But many interpreters think it's His own blood, the blood of the Lamb who was slain. Remember, in Revelation, the Lamb conquers by dying. The rider is the same Jesus who went to the cross. He doesn't change from a gentle lamb into a violent warrior. He's always the Lamb.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Word of God**

The rider is called the Word of God, the same title John's Gospel gives Jesus (John 1:1, 14). And His only weapon is a sword coming out of His mouth. That's His word. The army behind Him isn't dressed for battle; they're wearing

white linen, not armor. And they don't do anything. When the battle comes, it's over instantly. The beast is captured, along with the false prophet, and thrown alive into the lake of fire, and the rest are killed by the sword from the rider's mouth. There's no long war, no suspense. Jesus speaks, and evil is finished. That's how powerful His word is. The same word that created the world (Genesis 1:3) will put it right.

BACKGROUND CHECK **King of Kings**

In John's world, the Roman emperor claimed grand titles like king of kings. Earlier kings of Babylon and Persia had used them too (Daniel 2:37; Ezra 7:12). Revelation says those titles belong only to Jesus. Today, nations, leaders, companies, celebrities, and influencers may claim huge power and loyalty. But there's only one King of kings. Every other power will one day bow to Him (Philippians 2:10–11).

In chapter 20, an angel comes down from heaven holding a great chain and the Abyss's key. He seizes the dragon, the ancient serpent, the devil, Satan, and chains him up for a thousand years, then throws him into the Abyss and seals it, so he can't deceive the nations any more until the thousand years are over. After that, Satan must be released for a short time.

Then John sees thrones, and people seated on them who were given authority to judge. He sees the souls of people who had been beheaded for their testimony about Jesus, who had refused to worship the beast or receive its mark. "They came to life and reigned with Christ a thousand years." John calls this the first resurrection, and he says that those who share in it are blessed and holy, and the second death can't touch them.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Three Views of the Millennium**

The thousand years is called the millennium, from the Latin for a thousand years. It's mentioned only here in the whole Bible, six times in seven verses. Christians have held three main views about it.

Premillennialism says Jesus will return before (pre) the millennium, and then reign on earth for a thousand years, with Satan bound, before the final judgment. Many early Christians, such as Papias, Justin Martyr, and Irenaeus, held a version of this view. Today there are two main forms. Historic premillennialism sees the church going through the tribulation before Jesus returns. Dispensational premillennialism, which developed in the 1800s, usually includes a pre-tribulation rapture and a special role for national Israel in the millennium.

Postmillennialism says Jesus will return after (post) the millennium, a long golden age when the gospel spreads and transforms the world, bringing great peace and justice. This view was popular among many Protestants in the 1700s and 1800s, including leaders of great revivals and missionary movements.

Amillennialism says there is no literal (a means no) thousand-year reign on earth. The thousand years is a symbol for the whole period between Jesus' first coming and His return. Satan was bound at the cross, so that he can't stop the gospel from spreading to the nations (Matthew 12:29), and believers who have died reign with Christ in heaven now. This view was taught by Augustine around AD 400, and it's held by many Catholic, Orthodox, Lutheran, and Reformed Christians.

Faithful Christians who love the Bible hold each of these views. All of them agree on the most important thing: Jesus will return, defeat evil, and reign forever.

BACKGROUND CHECK **What Everyone Agrees On**

It's easy to get lost in arguments about the millennium. But don't miss what the passage says clearly. Satan's power is limited. He can only do what God allows, and his time is short. The faithful, even those who were killed, are not losers; they reign with Christ. And the second death can't touch those who belong to Him. Whatever your view of the thousand years, those are promises you can stand on.

At the end of the thousand years, Satan is released and deceives the nations again, called Gog and Magog, an echo of Ezekiel 38–39. They

gather for battle, as many as the sand on the seashore, and surround God's people and His beloved city. But fire falls from heaven and consumes them. And the devil is thrown into the fiery lake to join the beast and false prophet, forever.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Why Release Satan?**

Why would God release Satan at all? It's one of the puzzles of Revelation. Some think it shows that even after a long reign of peace, the human heart still needs to be changed by God's grace, not just by a better environment. Others think it shows that evil gets one last chance to show what it really is before it's destroyed forever. Either way, notice how short the final battle is. Again, there's no war. Fire falls, and it's over. Satan's final defeat takes one verse.

Then John sees a great white throne and the one seated on it. Earth and sky flee from His presence. He sees all the dead, the great and the small, in front of the throne. Books are opened, and so is the book of life. Each person is judged by their deeds, written in the books. The sea gives up its dead, and so do death and Hades. Then death and Hades themselves are hurled into the fiery lake, which is the second death. And anyone whose name is missing from the book of life goes there too.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Two Kinds of Books**

Notice that there are two kinds of books. There are books that record what people have done, and there's the book of life, which records the names of those who belong to the Lamb (13:8; 21:27). If we were judged only by the books of deeds, none of us would pass. That's why the book of life matters. Your name is written there not because you're good enough, but because the Lamb was slain for you. That doesn't mean what we do doesn't matter. It matters a lot. But our hope rests on the Lamb's book.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Death Is Thrown Away**

Don't miss one of the best lines in Revelation: death and Hades end up in the fiery lake. Death itself, the enemy that has haunted every human being since Adam, is destroyed. Paul said the last enemy to be destroyed is death (1 Corinthians 15:26). Jesus holds the keys to death and Hades (1:18), and now He gets rid of them for good. If you've lost someone you love, this is the promise that the story doesn't end with a funeral.

KEY VERSE

I saw heaven standing open and there before me was a white horse, whose rider is called Faithful and True. With justice he judges and wages war.

Revelation 19:11 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Why do you think the only weapon the rider uses is the sword from His mouth? What does that say about the power of God's word?
2. Which of the three views of the millennium makes the most sense to you? What would you ask someone who holds a different view?
3. What things are easy to worship instead of God?
4. How does knowing that death itself will be destroyed change the way you think about death?

TRY THIS *Ask a pastor or youth leader which view of the millennium your church holds, and why. Then ask what they think all Christians can agree on about Jesus' return. Write down what you learn.*

CHAPTER 9

Everything New

Revelation 21–22

And now we come to the end of the Bible, and the most beautiful vision of all. John sees a new heaven and new earth, because the first heaven and earth have passed away, and there is no longer any sea. Then he sees the new Jerusalem, the Holy City, descending from God out of heaven, made ready like a bride dressed beautifully for her husband.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Renewed or Replaced?**

Will God destroy the universe and start from scratch, or renew the one we have? Christians have held both views. Some point to the words passed away and believe God will replace this creation with a completely new one. Others notice that the word for new here usually means new in quality, not brand-new in time, and that Paul says creation itself will be set free from decay (Romans 8:21). They think God will renew and transform this world, the way Jesus' resurrection body was the same body, but glorified. I discussed this in more detail in the book on 2 Peter, in the box on how 2 Peter 3:10 describes the earth being laid bare. Either way, the future isn't floating on clouds playing harps forever. It's a real, physical new creation, with God living among His people.

BACKGROUND CHECK **No More Sea**

Why no more sea? It's not because God doesn't like beaches. In the ancient world, the sea was a symbol of chaos, danger, and evil. The beast came out of the sea (13:1). For John on Patmos, the sea was also what separated him from

the churches he loved. In the new creation, everything that threatens, separates, and destroys is gone.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The City Comes Down**

Notice the direction. The city doesn't go up; it comes down. Many people think the Christian hope is about leaving earth and going up to heaven. But at the end of Revelation, heaven comes down to earth. The new Jerusalem descends, and God makes His home with people. The prayer Jesus taught us, Your kingdom come, Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven (Matthew 6:10), is finally answered completely.

Then a voice from the throne speaks the most wonderful words in the Bible. God's dwelling place is now with His people, and He will live with them. They'll be His people, and He will be their God, living with them Himself. And then: "He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away."

BACKGROUND CHECK **No More Tears**

Read that slowly. No more death. No more mourning. No more crying. No more pain. Think of everything that makes you cry: losing someone you love, being lonely, being bullied, feeling like a failure, sickness, divorce, injustice, fear. God says all of that is the old order of things, and it will be gone. And notice who does the wiping. Not an angel. God Himself, with His own hand, wipes the tears from your eyes. That doesn't mean your tears don't matter now. It means God takes them so seriously that He's going to end the reasons for them forever.

Then the one on the throne says: "I am making everything new!" Notice He doesn't say I am making new things. He says He's making everything new, including you. He tells John to write it down, because these words can be trusted. And He says, It is done. He is the Alpha and Omega, the Beginning and End, and He promises to

give water from the spring of life, free of charge, to anyone who is thirsty.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Who Is Left Out?**
>
> Right after the promise of free water, there's a warning. The cowardly and unbelieving, murderers, the sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars will be in the lake of fire. That list can sound terrifying, especially if you see yourself in it. Who hasn't lied? But remember the context. The cowardly are those who deny Jesus to save their own skin, and the list describes people who keep on living this way and refuse God's free gift. The invitation comes first. Anyone who is thirsty can come. If you see yourself in the list, that's a reason to run to the Lamb, not away from Him. The same book says His blood washes robes white.

One of the angels who had the bowls now shows John the bride, the Lamb's wife. He takes John to a high mountain and shows him Jerusalem, the Holy City, descending from heaven, shining with God's glory like a precious jewel, clear as crystal.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **A City Shaped Like a Cube**
>
> John's description of the city is full of symbols. It has a massive, high wall, twelve gates, and the names of Israel's twelve tribes on the gates. It has twelve foundations, bearing the names of the Lamb's twelve apostles. God's people from both Testaments are one family. The angel measures the city with a golden rod. It's 12,000 stadia long, wide, and high. The NIV footnote says that's about 1,400 miles, roughly the distance from New York to Dallas. And it's a perfect cube. In the Old Testament, only one room was a perfect cube: the Most Holy Place in the temple, where God's presence dwelt (1 Kings 6:20). Only the high priest could go in, once a year. In the new Jerusalem, the whole city is the Most Holy Place, and all of God's people live in God's presence all the time. The wall is 144 cubits thick, twelve times twelve again.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Gold, Jewels, and Pearls**

The city is made of pure gold, as clear as glass, and its foundations are decorated with twelve precious stones, which are similar to the stones on the high priest's breastplate (Exodus 28:17–20). That means all of God's people are now priests. The twelve gates are each carved from one pearl. The street is pure gold, transparent as glass. Some people take these details literally. Others see them as a way of saying that the city is unimaginably beautiful and valuable, more than anything we know. Either way, there's an irony. On earth, people fight over gold. In the new Jerusalem, it's used to pave the street. The things the world values most are, in God's city, as ordinary as asphalt.

John notices there's no temple in the city at all. Its temple is God Almighty, together with the Lamb. Sun and moon aren't needed, because God's glory lights the city, and the Lamb is the lamp that shines there. Its gates stay open forever, because night never comes. The nations will walk in its light, and earth's kings will carry their splendor into it. Nothing impure gets in, only people whose names are listed in the book of life that belongs to the Lamb.

BACKGROUND CHECK **No Temple**

For the Jews, the temple was the place where heaven and earth met, where God lived among His people. In the new creation, there's no need for a temple, because God is everywhere, and nothing separates Him from His people. You won't have to go to a building to meet God. You'll live in His presence all the time. Notice too that the gates are always open, and earthly kings bring their glory in. The best of human culture, art, music, and creativity, purified from sin, may find a place in the new creation.

Then the angel shows John the river of life-giving water, sparkling like crystal, flowing out from God's throne and the Lamb's throne down the middle of the city's great street. On both banks of the river grows the tree of life, producing twelve kinds of fruit, a different crop every month. "And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of

the nations." There will be no more curse. God's throne and the Lamb's will stand in the city, and all His servants will worship and serve Him. "They will see his face," with His name written on their foreheads. Night will be gone for good, and they will reign forever.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Back to the Garden**

The Bible begins in a garden, with a river and the tree of life (Genesis 2:9–10). When Adam and Eve sinned, they were cut off from the tree of life, and the ground was cursed (Genesis 3:17–24). Now, at the very end, the tree of life is back, the river is flowing, and the curse is gone. But it's not just a return to the garden. It's better. The garden has become a city, full of people from every nation. Ezekiel saw a similar river flowing from the temple, with trees whose leaves were for healing (Ezekiel 47:1–12). The whole story of the Bible, from Genesis to Revelation, is God's plan to get back what was lost, and more.

BACKGROUND CHECK **They Will See His Face**

In the Old Testament, God told Moses that no one could see His face and live (Exodus 33:20). Seeing God face to face was the one thing no human being could do. But in the new creation, God's people will see His face. Jesus said the pure in heart will see God (Matthew 5:8). John wrote in his first letter that when Jesus appears, we'll see Him as He is (1 John 3:2). That's the greatest promise in the whole Bible. Not streets of gold. Not even the end of tears. Seeing God's face.

The book ends with a series of final words. The angel says the words can be trusted completely. Jesus says, three times, that He is coming soon (22:7, 12, 20). John falls down to worship the angel again, and again the angel stops him. John is told to leave the prophecy unsealed, because the time is near. Jesus says, "I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End." He blesses those who wash their robes, so they may enjoy the tree of life and walk into the city. He calls Himself David's Root and Offspring, and the bright Morning Star.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Don't Seal It Up**

Daniel was told to seal up his prophecy until the time of the end (Daniel 12:4). John is told the opposite: don't seal it up. Revelation isn't a locked code for some future generation. It's meant to be opened, read, and lived now. That's been the point all along. It's not a puzzle to solve, but a message to obey.

Then comes the greatest invitation in the Bible: "The Spirit and the bride say, 'Come!' And let the one who hears say, 'Come!' Let the one who is thirsty come; and let the one who wishes take the free gift of the water of life."

BACKGROUND CHECK **Come**

Revelation began with a vision of Jesus in glory, and it ends with an invitation. The Spirit says come. The church says come. And anyone who is thirsty is invited to come and drink, for free. The water of life isn't earned. It's a gift. If you've read this whole book, and this whole series, and you've never come to Jesus, this is your invitation. Come. And if you already belong to Him, your job is to join the Spirit and the bride, and say to your friends: come.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Don't Add or Take Away**

John ends with a serious warning: anyone who adds to the words of this prophecy, or takes away from them, will face the plagues and lose their place at the tree of life. That echoes Deuteronomy 4:2. In context, it's a warning about this book, not about the whole Bible, which hadn't yet been gathered together. It's a warning against twisting Revelation to say what you want, either by adding predictions it doesn't make, or by cutting out the parts you don't like. People who use Revelation to set dates, or who ignore its call to faithfulness, should take this warning seriously.

And then, the last words of Jesus in the Bible. The one who testifies to all this says it once more: Yes, I am coming soon. And John answers for all of us: Amen. Come, Lord Jesus.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Maranatha**

The early Christians had a prayer in Aramaic, the language Jesus spoke: Maranatha. It means Come, Lord, or Our Lord, come. Paul used it at the end of 1 Corinthians (1 Corinthians 16:22), and an early Christian manual called the Didache includes it in a prayer after the Lord's Supper. It's one of the oldest Christian prayers we know. John's Come, Lord Jesus is the same prayer. It's the prayer of people who love Jesus and can't wait to see Him. It's not a prayer of fear. It's a prayer of longing, like waiting at the airport for someone you love.

The very last verse of the Bible is a blessing: the Lord Jesus' grace, for all God's people. Amen. The Bible doesn't end with a beast, a battle, or a warning. It ends with grace.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The End of the Story, and of This Series**

We started this series with Matthew, and a family tree that began with Abraham. We followed Jesus through four Gospels: His birth, His teaching, His miracles, His death, and His resurrection. We watched His followers turn the world upside down in Acts. We read Paul's letters, and Hebrews, and the letters of James, Peter, John, and Jude. And now we've reached the end. Here's what the whole New Testament says: God loves the world. He sent His Son. The Lamb was slain and is alive. He's on the throne. And one day He'll come back and make everything new. The story isn't over, and you're part of it. Keep reading. Keep following the Lamb. And keep praying the last prayer in the Bible.

KEY VERSE

He who was seated on the throne said, "I am making everything new!" Then he said, "Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true."

Revelation 21:5 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. What do you most look forward to in the new creation? What do you most look forward to being gone?
2. How does knowing that heaven comes down to earth change the way you think about this world and how you treat it?
3. What does it mean to you that God's people will see His face?
4. Can you honestly pray Come, Lord Jesus? What makes it easy or hard?

TRY THIS *Read Genesis 1–3 and Revelation 21–22 side by side. List every connection you can find between the beginning and the end of the Bible. Then end your day by praying the last prayer in the Bible: Come, Lord Jesus.*

THE END (AND THE BEGINNING)

Now What? The Bottom Line

You've just read the last book of the Bible. The story that started in a garden ends in a garden city, where God lives with His people and wipes away every tear. At the center is the slain Lamb, alive again. And near the end, the Spirit and the bride both call out, Come. That invitation is for you.

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 loves you more than you can imagine. He wants you to know Him.

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

2 We've all turned away.

We've all gone our own way instead of God's. John says that if we claim to have no sin, we're fooling ourselves. 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. God didn't wait for us to love Him first.

> *This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.* **1 John 4:10 (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 running your own life, and trust Jesus as your Savior and King. Then you can know, not just hope, that you have eternal 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 for loving me first. Thank You that Jesus died for me and rose again. I believe You raised Him from the dead. I'm turning to You. Forgive me and make me clean. I trust Jesus*

as my Savior, and I want to follow Him as my King. Help me follow the Lamb everywhere He leads, and fill me with hope for the day You make all things new. 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 Revelation straight through, maybe in one sitting, the way its first hearers did. Then go back to Matthew and start the whole New Testament again. You'll see things you missed.

Find your people. Get connected to a church where the Bible is taught and Jesus is honored. Ask about being baptized.

Join the song. Revelation is full of worship. Make praise a daily habit, and worship with God's people every week.

Not Sure Yet?

Not ready? That's honest, and honesty is a good place to start. Keep asking. Keep reading. John wrote down what he saw and heard so you could check it out for yourself. Just don't settle for "I already know all that."

Because if Revelation is right, the Lamb is on the throne, the story has a good ending, and He's standing at the door, knocking.

He who testifies to these things says, "Yes, I am coming soon."
Amen. Come, Lord Jesus.

Revelation 22:20 (NIV)