



BIBLE CONFIDENCE SERIES

Understanding the New Testament Letters

A beginner-friendly guide to why the apostles wrote letters—and how to read them with confidence

You are reading a real conversation

The New Testament letters were written to real churches and individuals facing real questions. We understand them best when we first ask what the writer meant to the original readers—then consider how the same truth faithfully applies today.

WHY THIS MATTERS

A verse can sound very different when it is separated from the letter around it. Context helps us receive the writer's whole message rather than making one sentence say whatever we want it to say.

“When this letter has been read among you, cause it to be read also in the assembly of the Laodiceans.”

Colossians 4:16 WEB



START HERE

What are the New Testament letters?

A letter—sometimes called an epistle—was a familiar way to communicate across distance. The apostles and their coworkers used letters to teach, encourage, correct, answer questions, settle disputes, organize churches, and help believers live faithfully because of what Jesus had done.

The short answer

The letters explain the meaning of the gospel and show what following Jesus looks like in ordinary life. They were written to particular people, but the Holy Spirit preserved them as Scripture for the church (2 Timothy 3:16–17; 2 Peter 3:15–16).

Begin with four simple truths

01

Real writers

Paul, Peter, John, James, Jude, and other early Christian leaders wrote with recognizable personalities, concerns, and purposes (Romans 1:1; 1 Peter 1:1; 1 John 1:1–4).

02

Real recipients

Letters were addressed to churches, groups of churches, ministry leaders, or individuals—not to an imaginary audience (1 Corinthians 1:2; Galatians 1:2; Titus 1:4; Philemon 1–2).

03

Real situations

Questions, conflict, false teaching, suffering, relationships, worship, and church life often prompted the writing (1 Corinthians 1:10–11; 7:1; Galatians 1:6–9).

04

Enduring truth

Although the situations were specific, the letters teach truth about God, Jesus, salvation, holiness, love, the church, and Christian hope that still shapes believers today.

How were the letters written?

Writers sometimes worked with a trusted secretary, also called an amanuensis. Tertius identifies himself as the person who physically wrote Romans (Romans 16:22), while Paul sometimes added a closing line in his own handwriting (Galatians 6:11; 2 Thessalonians 3:17). This ordinary process does not lessen the letters' authority as Scripture.



MEET THE LETTERS

A simple map of Romans through Jude

The New Testament contains twenty-one letters. They are usually grouped by writer or by the communities and people who first received them. The categories below are helpful memory aids, not statements that every letter functions exactly the same way.

01 Romans	08 1 Thessalonians	15 James
02 1 Corinthians	09 2 Thessalonians	16 1 Peter
03 2 Corinthians	10 1 Timothy	17 2 Peter
04 Galatians	11 2 Timothy	18 1 John
05 Ephesians	12 Titus	19 2 John
06 Philippians	13 Philemon	20 3 John
07 Colossians	14 Hebrews	21 Jude

Paul's letters to churches

Romans through 2 Thessalonians explain the gospel and address unity, holiness, worship, suffering, spiritual gifts, false teaching, and Christian hope.

Paul's letters to individuals

First and Second Timothy and Titus guide ministry leaders in teaching and church care. Philemon is a personal appeal shaped by Christian brotherhood, forgiveness, and love.

Other New Testament letters

Hebrews through Jude call believers to mature faith, steadfast hope, practical obedience, truth, love, and perseverance. Hebrews does not identify its human author. It reads more like a sermon or “word of exhortation” sent with a brief closing note than a typical letter (Hebrews 13:22–25).

What about the order?

The letters are not arranged in the order they were written. Paul's letters are generally grouped first by letters to churches and then by letters to individuals, with longer letters usually appearing before shorter ones. The remaining letters follow. Their location in the Bible is organizational—not a timeline.

Keep Jesus at the center

The letters do more than offer rules. They proclaim what God has done through Jesus and then show how redeemed people respond in faith, love, worship, obedience, service, and hope (Romans 12:1–2; Ephesians 4:1; Colossians 3:1–17).



HOW TO READ A LETTER

Six habits that make the letters clearer

01

Read the whole letter

If possible, read it in one sitting. Notice repeated words, changes in tone, main concerns, and how the ending connects to the beginning.

02

Identify the conversation

Ask who wrote, who received it, and what situation appears to have prompted it. Look for clues inside the letter before reaching for outside information.

03

Follow the writer's thought

Words such as therefore, because, but, so then, and finally show how one idea leads to another. Paragraphs belong to an unfolding argument.

04

Notice gospel before response

The writers often explain what God has done before describing how believers should live. Grace produces obedience; obedience does not purchase grace (Ephesians 2:1–10; Titus 2:11–14).

05

Find the enduring principle

Some instructions address local circumstances while revealing a truth that reaches beyond them. Name that truth before deciding how it applies today.

06

Compare Scripture with Scripture

Use clearer passages to help with difficult ones. Read the letter alongside the Gospels, Acts, the Old Testament, and other New Testament letters.

Do not rush to “What does this mean to me?”

Begin with: What did the writer mean to the original readers? Then ask: What truth does this reveal? Finally ask: How should that truth shape my beliefs, worship, choices, relationships, or obedience today?



CONTEXT CHANGES THE PICTURE

Three familiar examples

“I can do all things through Christ”

Philippians 4:13 is not a promise that Christians can accomplish any goal they choose. In Philippians 4:10–13, Paul is explaining that Christ strengthens him to remain content in both need and abundance. The surrounding verses reveal the kind of “all things” he has in view.

“All things work together for good”

Romans 8:28 belongs to a chapter about life in the Spirit, suffering, prayer, God’s purpose, and future glory. The “good” is not a promise that every circumstance will feel pleasant; verse 29 connects God’s purpose with believers being conformed to the image of His Son.

“Do all to the glory of God”

First Corinthians 10:31 appears at the end of Paul’s extended discussion about food offered to idols, conscience, freedom, and love (1 Corinthians 8:1–11:1). It certainly expresses a broad Christian principle, but the immediate context shows that glorifying God includes limiting personal freedom for another person’s spiritual good.

Context does not weaken a favorite verse

It gives the verse its God-given shape. The fuller meaning is usually richer, wiser, and more useful than an isolated slogan.

A quick context check

- Read at least the full paragraph before and after the verse.
- Ask what question, problem, or truth the writer is addressing.
- Look for connecting words and repeated ideas.
- Summarize the paragraph in one sentence before applying one verse.
- Confirm that your application fits the message of the whole letter.

Try it yourself

Read Philippians from beginning to end. Mark every reference to joy, partnership, suffering, humility, and the gospel. Then return to Philippians 4:13 and describe its meaning in the flow of the entire letter.



COMMON QUESTIONS

Are all the commands in the letters for Christians today?

Every passage is valuable for teaching, but faithful application requires interpretation. Some commands express a universal Christian obligation directly—such as love, honesty, sexual holiness, forgiveness, and prayer. Others involve a local practice or circumstance that carries an enduring principle. We should neither dismiss a command as “only cultural” too quickly nor copy an ancient practice without understanding its purpose (Romans 12:9–21; 1 Corinthians 11:2–16; 1 Timothy 5:23).

Did Paul invent Christianity?

No. Paul said he received and proclaimed the gospel of Jesus Christ, including Jesus' death and resurrection (Galatians 1:11–12; 1 Corinthians 15:1–11). He met with recognized leaders in Jerusalem, and they affirmed the same gospel mission while serving different audiences (Galatians 2:1–10; Acts 15:1–35). Paul's teaching develops the meaning of Jesus' work; it does not replace Jesus.

Why do some letters sound stern?

Pastoral love sometimes requires correction. Galatians confronts a distorted gospel. First Corinthians addresses division and serious disorder. Second Corinthians defends faithful ministry. The tone grows out of the spiritual danger and the writer's concern for the people—not a lack of compassion (2 Corinthians 2:4; Galatians 4:19–20).

What should I do with a difficult or debated passage?

Read slowly, compare translations, trace the argument, examine the historical and biblical setting, and consult trustworthy teachers without surrendering your own responsibility to study. Faithful Christians sometimes differ about details. Hold convictions with humility, distinguish central doctrines from secondary questions, and refuse to build a major conclusion on one unclear verse (Acts 17:11; 2 Timothy 2:15; 2 Peter 3:15–18).

A humble posture

The goal is not to make the Bible agree with a preferred conclusion. The goal is to receive what God has said, admit what is not yet understood, and remain teachable through continued study.



WANT TO GO DEEPER?

A closer look at how letters communicate

Letters are “occasional” documents

In Bible study, occasional means that a real occasion or need prompted the letter. We usually hear only one side of the conversation, so we reconstruct the situation cautiously from clues in the text. This helps explain why some details are clear to the original readers but less obvious to us.

Watch for indicative and imperative

An indicative states what is true—especially what God has done in Christ. An imperative gives a command or response. New Testament letters often ground Christian conduct in Christian identity: because believers belong to Christ, they are called to live differently (Romans 6:1–14; Ephesians 1–3 and 4–6; Colossians 3:1–17).

Paul and James address different errors

Paul rejects the idea that people can earn right standing with God through works of the Law; justification is received by faith (Romans 3:21–28; Galatians 2:16). James rejects a claim to faith that produces no obedient fruit (James 2:14–26). Paul confronts self-righteous earning; James confronts empty profession. Both expect genuine faith to result in a transformed life (Galatians 5:6; Ephesians 2:8–10).

Household instructions require careful reading

Passages concerning marriage, parenting, servants, masters, leadership, and church order were written within first-century social settings (Ephesians 5:21–6:9; Colossians 3:18–4:1; 1 Peter 2:11–3:7). Study the setting, the entire paragraph, and the way allegiance to Jesus reshapes power, responsibility, love, sacrifice, and accountability. Christians may differ about some applications while agreeing that Christ is Lord and every person bears God-given dignity.

Some authorship questions remain debated

The letters themselves name Paul as the sender of Ephesians, Colossians, 2 Thessalonians, 1–2 Timothy, and Titus. Some modern scholars question whether Paul personally wrote every one of them, while other scholars defend the traditional attribution. This guide follows the names given in the letters while acknowledging that the wider scholarly discussion exists. Hebrews is different because the book itself never names its human author.

Go deeper without losing the center

Historical background and word studies can clarify a passage, but they should serve the text—not replace it. The goal remains to understand God’s Word, recognize Jesus, and respond faithfully.



YOUR NEXT STEP

Practice with one short letter

Begin with Philippians, Colossians, 1 Thessalonians, James, or 1 John. Read the entire letter once without stopping. On the second reading, use the questions below. Let the letter set the agenda instead of beginning with a favorite verse or topic.

A simple reading path

Read Philippians in one sitting. Then reread 1:1–11; 1:27–2:18; 3:1–4:1; and 4:2–23. Ask how Paul connects the gospel, humility, unity, suffering, joy, contentment, and hope.

Questions to carry with you

- Who wrote, and who first received the letter?
- What situation, concern, or question seems to have prompted it?
- What does the letter reveal about God, Jesus, and the gospel?
- What repeated words, contrasts, commands, or promises shape the message?
- How does each paragraph connect to what comes before and after it?
- What enduring truth should shape my life today?
- Is my application faithful to the whole passage—not just one sentence?

Helpful passages for further study

Luke 1:1–4; Acts 15; Romans 1:1–17; 1 Corinthians 1:1–17; 7:1; 8:1–11:1; Galatians 1:1–2:10; Ephesians 1:1–14; 4:1–6; Colossians 4:16; 1 Thessalonians 5:27; 2 Timothy 3:14–17; 2 Peter 3:15–18.

The goal is confidence—not dependence

Use this guide as a starting point, not a substitute for Scripture. Open your Bible, read complete letters, examine each passage in context, and ask the Holy Spirit for wisdom as you learn.

Made to be shared

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