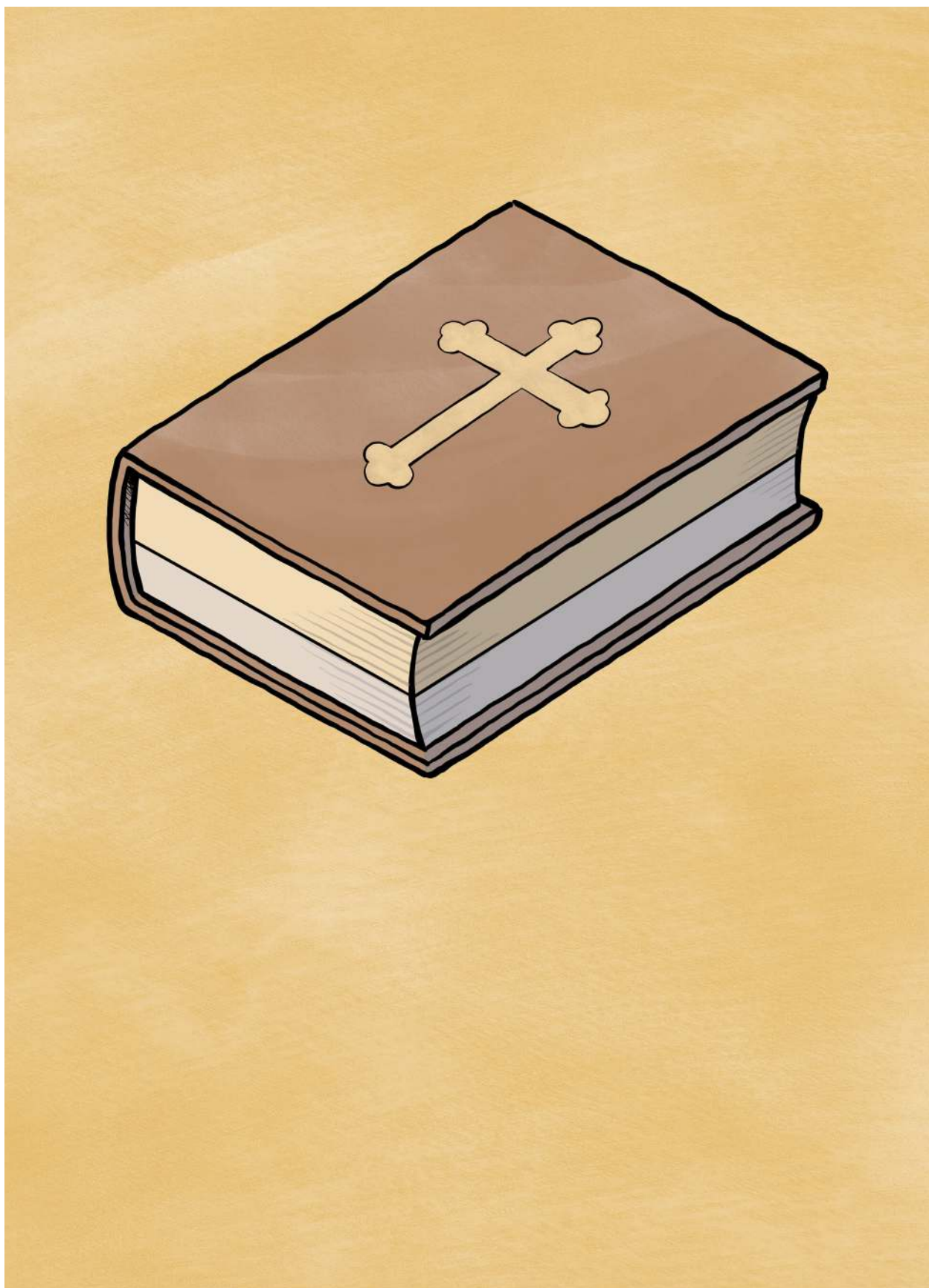


DEVELOPING LEADERS

BIBLICAL THEOLOGY

THE LETTERS

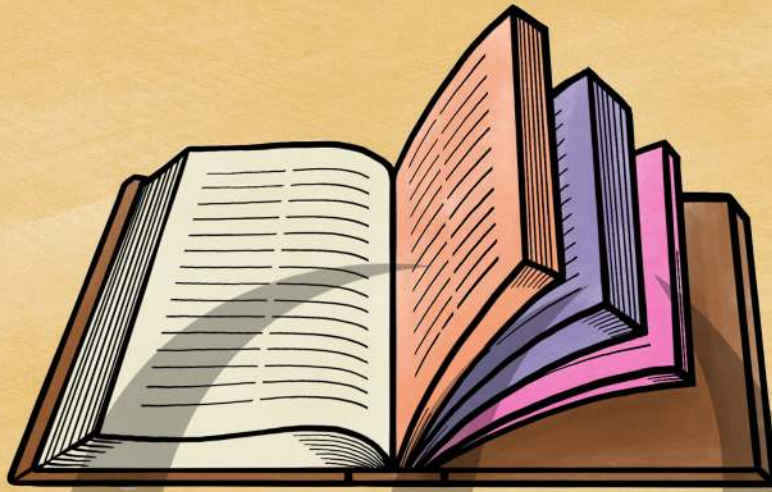


1. There are two sections in the Bible. It is very important for Christians to be familiar with both sections.

There are two major sections in the Bible. Both of them have been “breathed out by God.” Both of them are “profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work” (see **2 Timothy 3:16-17**). The first section is called the Old Testament. All thirty-nine books in the Old Testament were written before the coming of Jesus Christ. The second section is called the New Testament. All twenty-seven books in the New Testament were written after the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ.

The fact that Jesus has already come does not mean that the Old Testament is no longer important. In fact, the books in the Old Testament were the books that were used by Jesus and the apostles. To say this another way, the Old Testament was their Bible! There was no New Testament at that time. The Old Testament was also the Bible of the early church. The New Testament was just being written and the different parts of the New Testament had not yet been gathered into a book! Christians today have the blessing of having the things that were written by the prophets in the Old Testament plus the things that were written by the apostles in the New Testament. This is why **Ephesians 2:20** says that the church is “built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets.” The apostles were used by God to complete the writings in the New Testament. The prophets were used by God to complete the writings in the Old Testament. The church treasures the work of the apostles (the New Testament) and the prophets (the Old Testament). The fact that the apostles are listed first in **Ephesians 2:20** demonstrates that they are, for Christians, the ones whom we look to first in order to determine meaning. To say this another way, the apostles are the interpreters of the prophets.

Both sections of the Bible are about Christ and his kingdom (see, for example, **Luke 24:25-27, 24:44-48, John 5:39-47, and Acts 3:18-26**). The fact that all parts of the Bible are about Christ, means the gospel of Jesus Christ may be preached from every book in the Bible. This is why preachers and teachers must learn to use books from the Old Testament and the New Testament.



2. The New Testament may be divided into three different sections.

The New Testament includes twenty-seven books. These books may be organized in different ways. In this curriculum, we have divided these books into three different sections. Each section features a different type of literature and each section accomplishes a different task.

1. Books of narrative

The first five books in the New Testament are all books of narrative. A narrative is a story. These are not fairy tales or made up stories. All of the stories in the Bible are true (see, for example, **Psalms 18:30, Proverbs 30:5, John 21:24, 2 Timothy 3:16, and Titus 1:2**). This means Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, and Acts are telling the true story of Jesus, the apostles, and the early church. These books were written so that people might hear the true story of Jesus and, through these stories, come to believe that Jesus is the Christ. According to the Bible, everyone who puts their trust in Jesus receives eternal life (see **John 20:30-31**). The first five books of the New Testament have the task of persuading people that Jesus is the Christ, of calling people to place their faith in Jesus, and of calling people to join with other people who have placed their faith in Christ. In other words, these first five books are meant to call people to place their faith in Jesus and to join a local church.

It is impossible to be a Christian without knowing the story of the death and resurrection of Jesus because an essential part of the gospel is **faith** in Christ's resurrection from the dead (see **Romans 10:9**). Therefore, it is very important for people to know the things that have been written in these five books of narrative.

This narrative section of the New Testament is for non-Christians and for Christians. It is for people who have never heard about the Christ. It is for people who are currently part of other religions and who currently worship other gods. No one can come to God the Father except through Jesus Christ (see **John 14:6**). Therefore, it is important for all people to know the story being told in these five books.

The fact that these books contain the **story** of Jesus's life, death, and resurrection makes them easy to understand. All humans understand the basic "rules"

of stories. Stories have a beginning, middle, and an end. Typically, stories don't use many metaphors or symbols. The simplicity of its stories is why this first section of the New Testament is easier to understand than the other two sections in the New Testament. This doesn't make the other two sections less important than this first section. Again, all parts of the New Testament are "breathed out by God" (see **2 Timothy 3:16**). Therefore, all of the sections are equally important.

The books of narrative all quote from the Old Testament Scriptures frequently. This is a reason it is important for the preacher or teacher to be familiar with the Old Testament Scriptures.

2. Epistles

The second section of the New Testament contains letters. The letters are to churches (for example, **Romans** and **1 Peter**) and to individuals (for example, **1 Timothy** and **Philemon**). There are twenty-one letters in the New Testament. Scholars sometimes refer to the letters in the New Testament as **epistles**.

The New Testament letters are all connected, in one way or another, to the story of Jesus's life, death, and resurrection. This means the letters are impossible to understand if one does not know the story being told in the gospels. And the letters are also all connected to real churches. This means it is impossible to understand the letters if one does not understand the importance of the local church. This means the reader of the letters must know the story being told in the book of Acts.

What is the task being accomplished by the epistles? These letters were written to help churches. These churches are not pretend churches. They actually existed in the first century. The letters helped first century churches by **encouraging** them when they were weak, by **correcting** them when they were in sin, and by **instructing** them when they did not know what to do. Most of all, **the letters strengthened churches by building their theology**. This means the letters helped the churches understand God and his kingdom and their place in his kingdom. The letters protected the churches from false teaching.

But the letters weren't just for real churches in the first century. They are for real churches today. The letters help churches today by encouraging them when they are

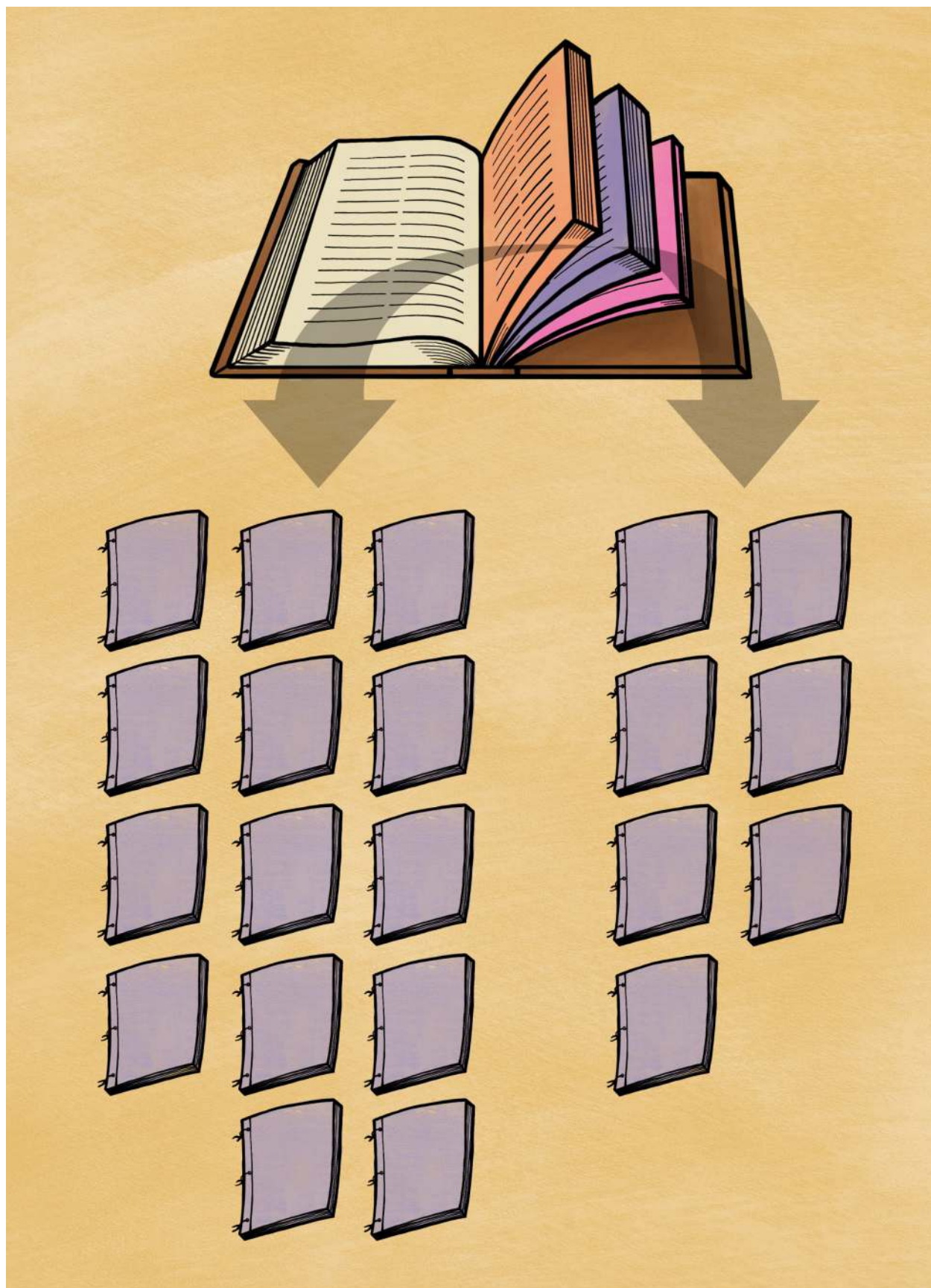
weak, by correcting them when they are in sin, and by instructing them when they do not know what to do. Most of all, the letters strengthen churches today by building their theology. This means the letters help churches today understand God and his kingdom and their place in his kingdom. The letters protect churches today from false teaching.

The letters all quote from the Old Testament Scriptures frequently. This is a reason it is important for the preacher or teacher to be familiar with the Old Testament Scriptures. Beyond this, the letters frequently refer to events described in Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, and Acts. The preacher or teacher must be familiar with the first five books of the New Testament.

3. Apocalyptic literature

The final section of the New Testament contains just one book—the book of Revelation. This book is different from all of the other books in the New Testament because it is the only book of **apocalyptic** literature. This type of literature is often used in books describing cataclysmic (earthshaking) visions or events which are hard to describe using normal language. This type of literature makes heavy use of visions and symbols. While there are no other books using apocalyptic literature in the New Testament, there are books of apocalyptic literature in the Old Testament. Portions of Daniel, Ezekiel, and Zechariah all include apocalyptic writing.

What is the task being accomplished by the book of Revelation? This book was written to give courage to churches and to individual Christians facing persecution and temptation to sin so that they might endure to the end and be saved. This book was written for Christians in the first century. But it was also written for Christians living in every other century. This means it is for Christians today.



3. The letters in the New Testament may be divided into two categories.

The **first category** contains **Paul's letter collection**. The **second category** contains the **general epistles**. The general epistles are sometimes referred to as the **catholic epistles**. The word **catholic** is not a reference to the Roman Catholic church. In the Greek language used at the time when the New Testament was being gathered together, the word catholic referred to things of a "general" or "universal" nature. These letters, then, are called the catholic epistles because of their more "general" or "universal" nature.

It is easy to see that the "general epistles" are different from Paul's letters because the general epistles are not specifically addressed to individual churches. There are not many specific details about specific churches in the "general epistles."

That is not the case with the letters in Paul's letter collection. It is easy to determine the recipients of all of the letters in Paul's letter collection. That is why all of the letters in Paul's letter collection (including Hebrews) are named after the recipients. This means Paul's letters are named after the places or people these to whom letters were addressed. For instance, "Ephesians" tells the reader that this letter is addressed to the church in Ephesus. "Colossians" tells the reader that this letter is addressed to the church in Colosse.

But it is difficult to determine the recipients of the "general epistles." The title "James" does not tell the reader anything about the recipients of this letter. It only tells the reader that James is the author of the letter. The reader needs to read further in order to find out about the recipients of the letter. Usually, in the general epistles, it is difficult to find specific information with specific details.

However, in spite of the fact that Paul's letters are named after individual churches (for example, Ephesians) and the general epistles are named after the authors (for example, Peter), the reader needs to remember that all of the New Testament letters are for the local church. Therefore, the difference between these two letter collections is not as large as it may at first appear to be. The "general epistles" were, like Paul's epistles, intended to be read by real local churches struggling with real

problems in the first century. They are also intended to be read by real local churches struggling with real problems in this century.

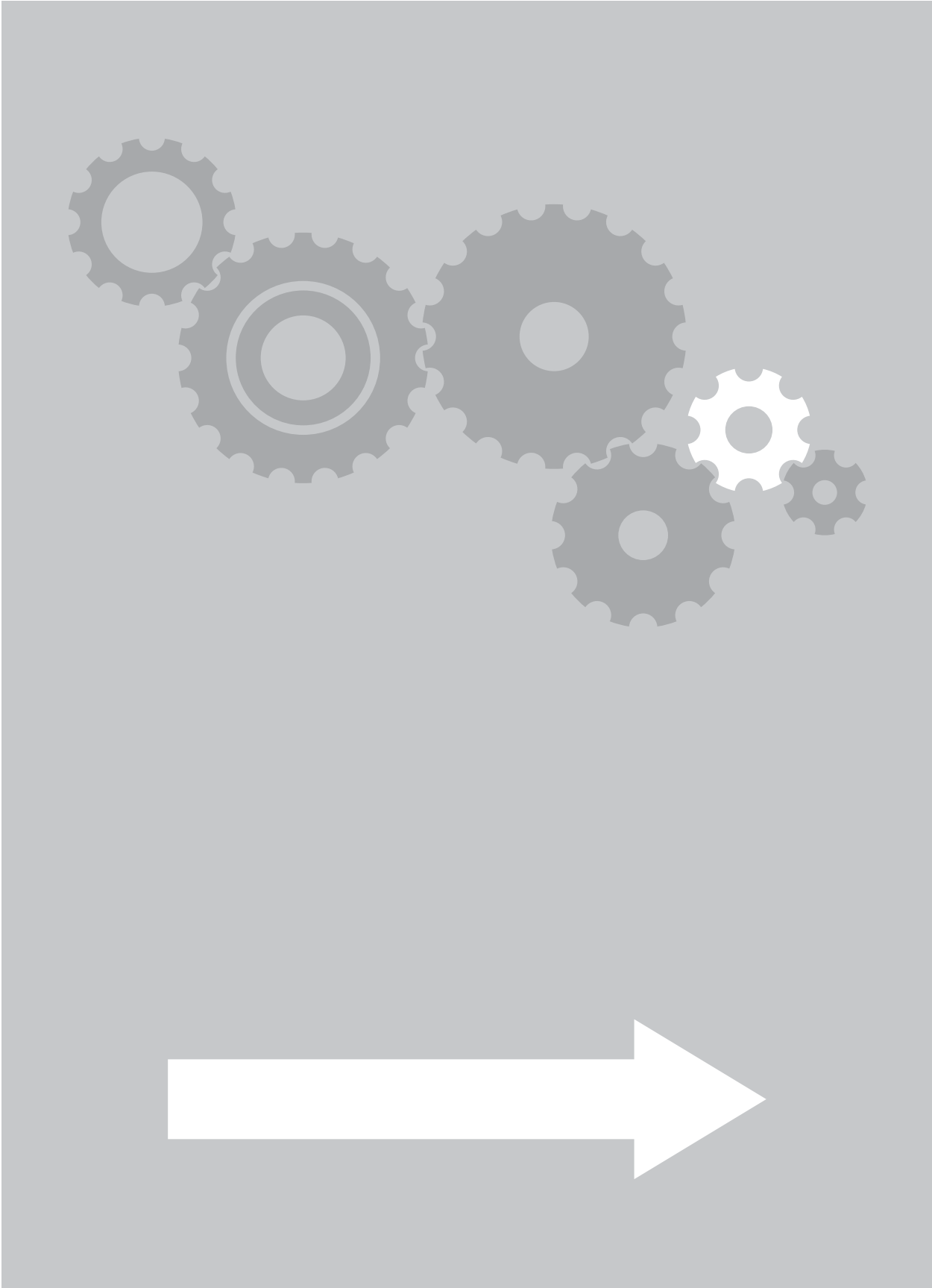
How are the letters in the New Testament arranged?

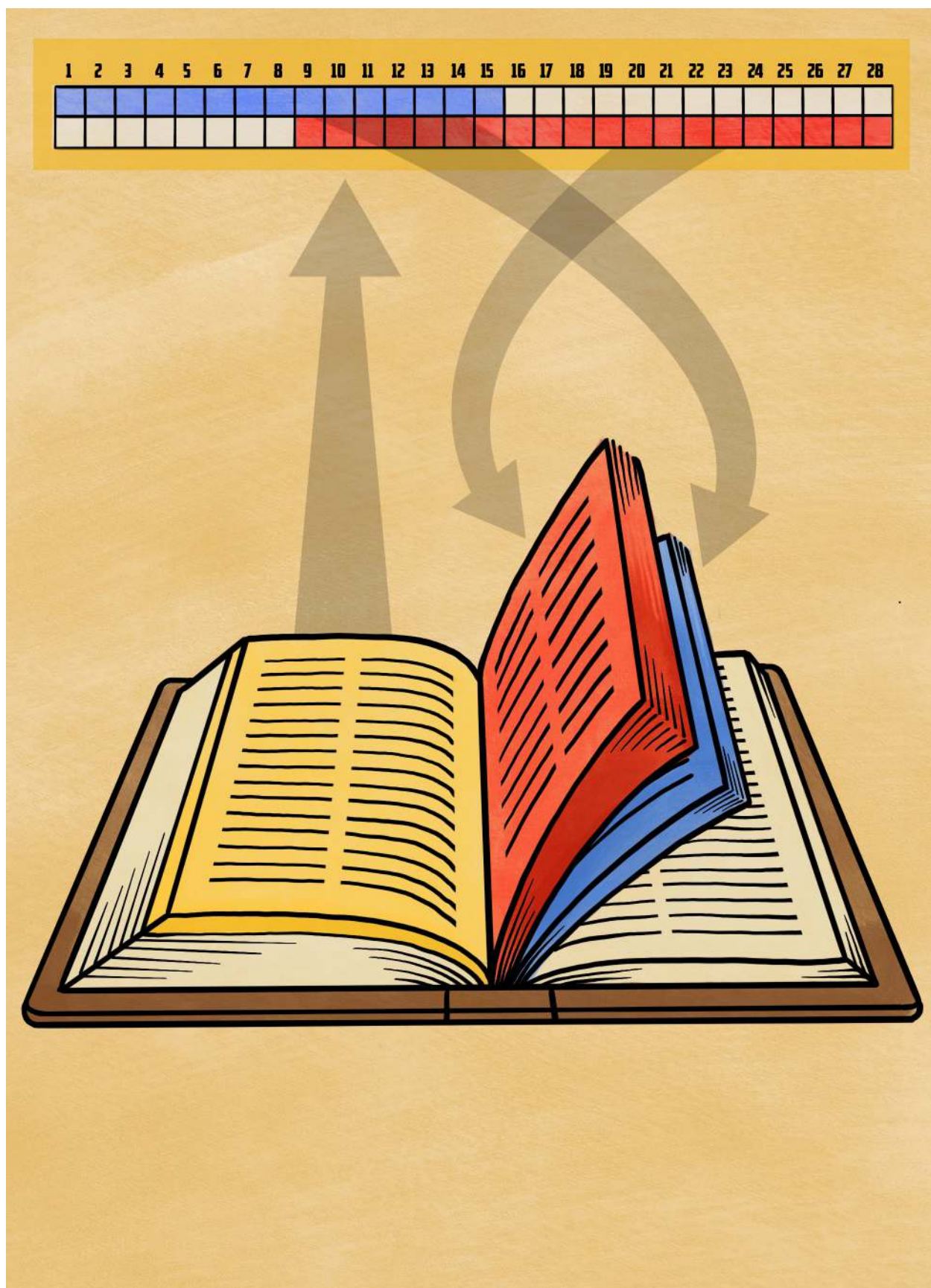
The first fourteen letters in this section of the New Testament are part of the apostle Paul's letter collection. These fourteen letters may be divided into three categories. The first nine books in Paul's letter collection are to churches. The next four books are written to individuals. The final book in Paul's letter collection is the book of Hebrews. Hebrews is last because it is different from all of the other letters in Paul's letter collection. This book does not name Paul as its author. In fact, conservative scholars are uncertain about the identity of the author of Hebrews. This appears to be why Hebrews is the last book in Paul's letter collection.

The next seven letters are referred to as the "general epistles." These books are James, 1 and 2 Peter, 1, 2, and 3 John, and Jude.

In some of the earliest ancient manuscript collections of the entire New Testament, these books appear immediately after the book of Acts and before Paul's letter collection. This arrangement makes sense, because the first part of Acts focuses on the things done by Jesus's first followers. This would include Peter and John, who were two of the twelve apostles, and James and Jude, who were Jesus's brothers. That is why these epistles would have been placed immediately after Acts. The second part of Acts focuses on the things done by the apostle Paul. This is why Paul's epistles would have been placed second.

In modern Bibles, however, Paul's letter collection appears before the general epistles. The arrangement of the letter collections makes no difference to the meaning of the letters or to the importance the letters have to the churches. All Scripture is important.



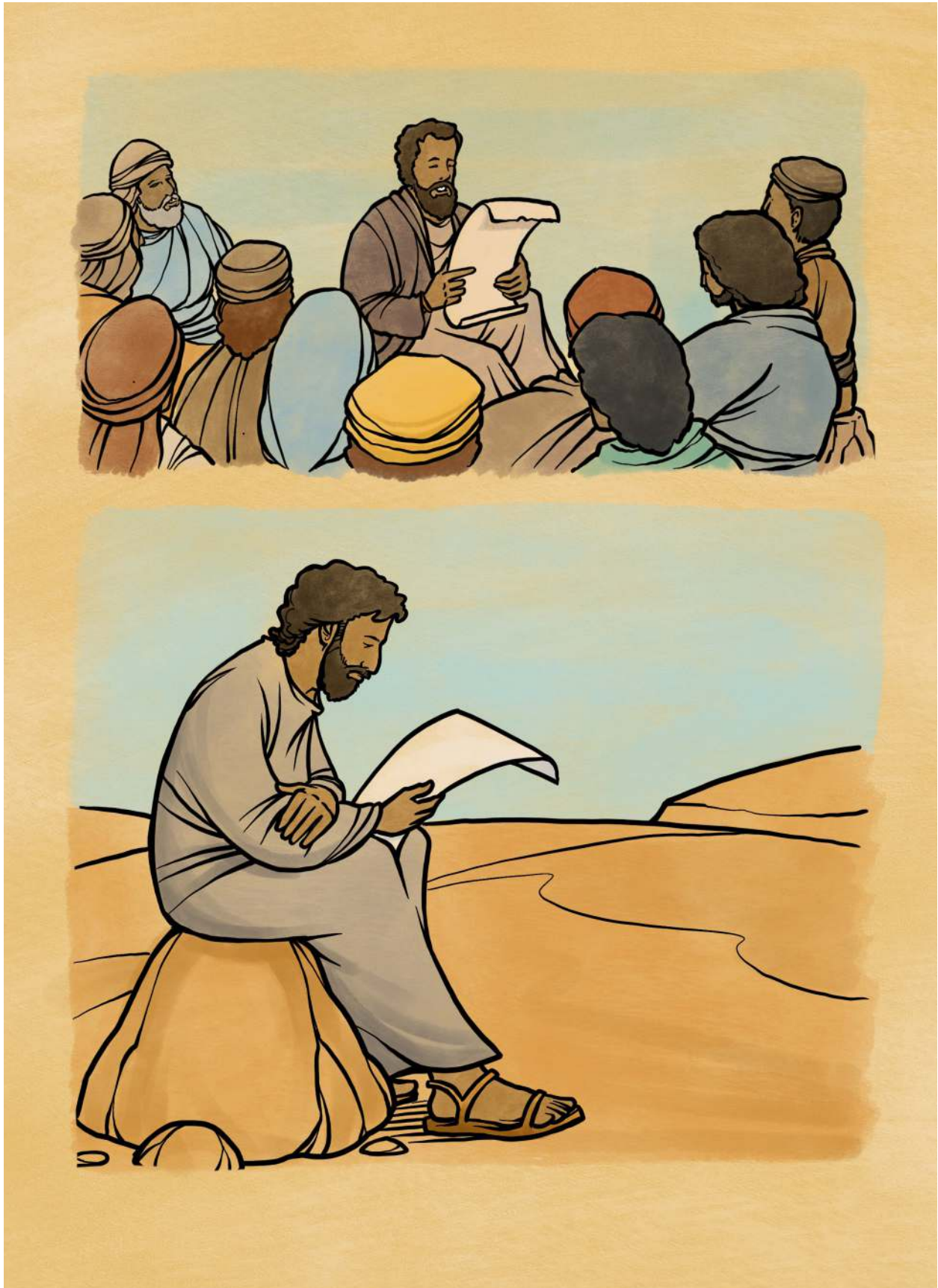


4. There are two categories of letters in the New Testament. The book of Acts prepares the reader for both sections of letters.

The first half of Acts prepares the reader for the general epistles. The books in the general epistles are James, 1 and 2 Peter, 1, 2, and 3 John, and Jude. The second half of Acts prepares the reader for Paul's letter collection. The books in this collection begin with Romans and end with Hebrews.

The book of Acts demonstrates that the two different letter collections in the New Testament do not have a different message. The book of Acts presents one unified gospel message. The unity of the book of Acts demonstrates the unity of the letters in the New Testament and prepares readers to accept these letters. The letters found in Paul's letter collection and the letters found in the general epistles are proclaiming the same truths.

People have sometimes said that these two letter collections are not unified. People will sometimes teach that Paul was teaching a gospel that was different from the gospel taught by Jesus and the apostles. For instance, people have said that the book of James is different from Paul's teaching. They say this because they think James teaches works while Paul teaches grace. This is a misunderstanding of James and of Paul. Both of these apostles teach that salvation is by grace through faith **and** that faith must include works because works prove that faith is real. James is not teaching something different from Paul. Both of their words are inspired by God.



5. The apostle Paul's letters are written to churches and to individuals.

The first nine books in Paul's letter collection are all written to churches. They are meant to bring help to whole churches. The letters are named after the city or village where the church was located. For instance, the letter titled Colossians was written to the church in Colosse.

The next four books in Paul's letter collection are written to individuals. These letters contain instructions to people who were somehow associated with Paul.

But while there are letters to entire churches and letters to individuals, it is important to remember that all of the letters in the New Testament, whether they are written to churches or to individuals, are related to churches. It is impossible to read the New Testament epistles correctly if you do not understand the importance of the local church.

At the same time, since the local church is made up of many individual Christians, all the letters in the New Testament, whether they are written to churches or to individuals, also relate to individuals. Christians must be careful to apply the Scriptures to themselves.

The book of Hebrews is the one book in the apostle Paul's letter collection that does not fit within this pattern. It is not grouped with the letters to the churches and it is not grouped with the individual letters. Hebrews probably appears at the end of the entire collection of Paul's letters because the author of Hebrews is unknown. This does not mean that Hebrews is of less value than the other letters in Paul's letter collection. Hebrews is, like all Scripture, "breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness" (see **2 Timothy 3:16**).



6. The letters in Paul's letter collection have been carefully arranged.

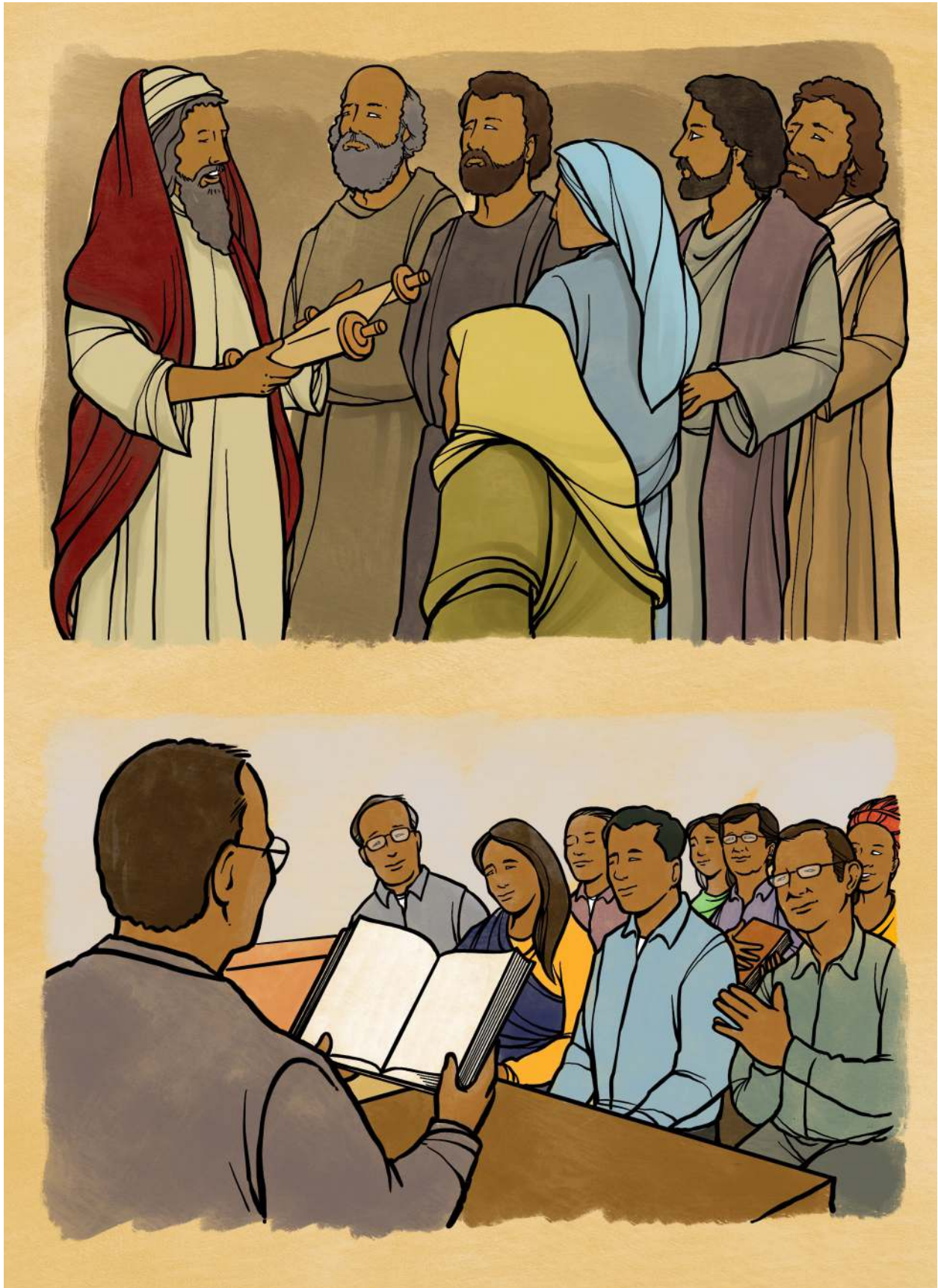
The letters to churches in Paul's letter collection are, for the most part, arranged in order of size. The largest letters are first. The smaller letters are last. The letters were probably arranged in this way because the individual letters were first gathered into scrolls. It was normal, when putting different works together in a scroll, to put the largest items in the work first. This is somewhat similar to packing clothes in a suitcase. You will normally pack the largest items first and put the smaller items in the suitcase afterwards. This appears to be how Paul's letter collection is arranged.

Romans appears first in Paul's letter collection. It is not first because it is the best letter. All of the letters in Paul's letter collection are perfect. They all perfectly fulfill the purposes for which they were written. Roman is not first because it is the most important letter. All of the letters in Paul's letter collection are important. And Romans is not first because it was the first letter written by Paul. Actually, 1 Thessalonians was probably Paul's first letter. Again, the books in Paul's letter collection are not arranged in chronological order.

Romans is first because it is the longest book in the apostle Paul's letter collection. The second longest book is 1 Corinthians. That is probably why it appears second in Paul's letter collection. 2 Corinthians is placed next to 1 Corinthians because the two letters to the Corinthian church belong together.

The letters to individuals are also arranged in order of size. 1 Timothy is first because it is the largest. 2 Timothy is next to Timothy because the letters to Timothy naturally belong together. Philemon is last because it is the smallest.

The letter to the Hebrews appears after the letters to individuals. However, Hebrews is not a letter to an individual. It probably appears at the end of the entire collection of Paul's letters because its author is unknown.



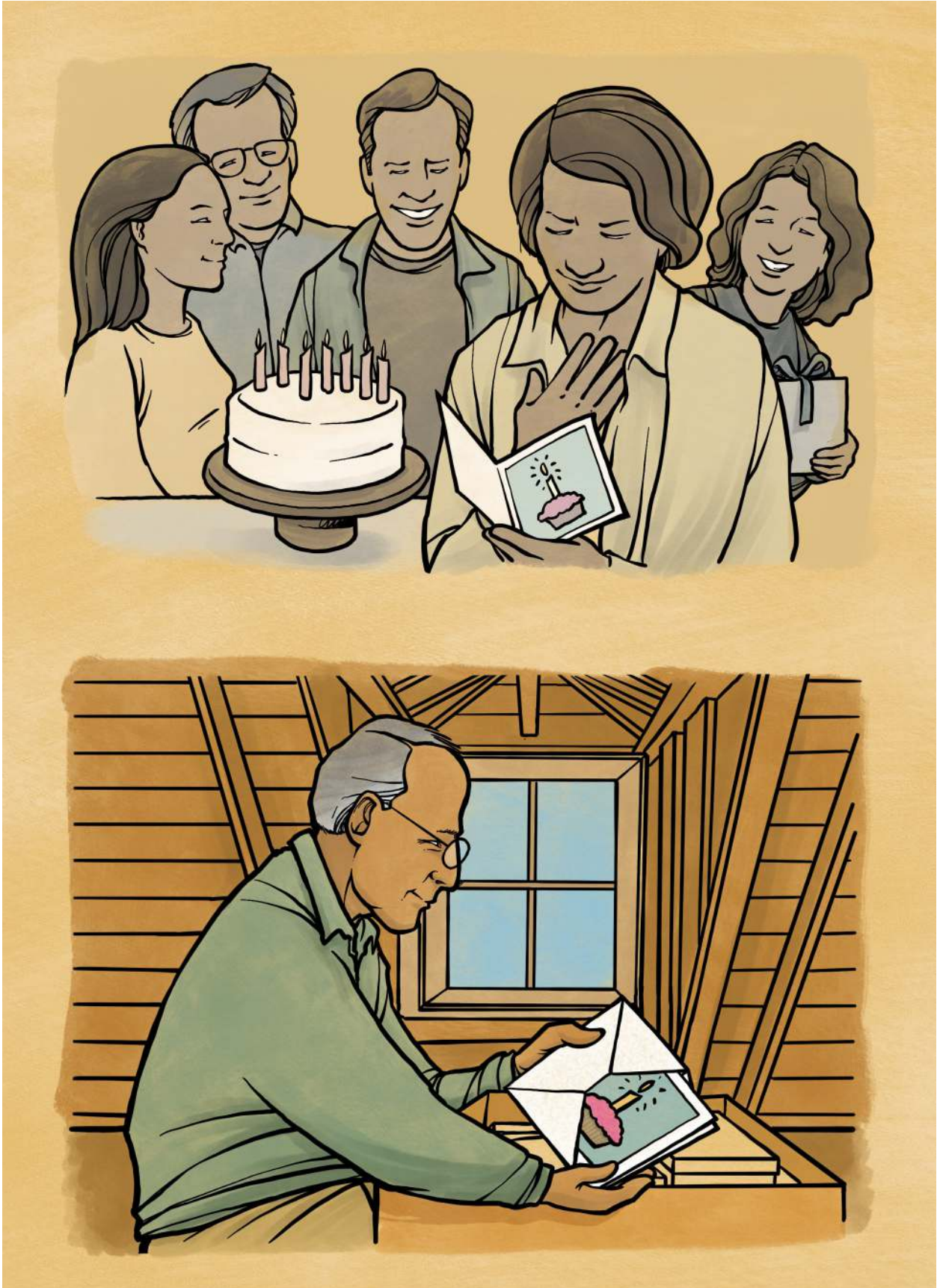
7. The letters in the New Testament were written to real churches in the first century, but they are meant to be read by all churches in every age.

Any church receiving a letter from Paul in the first century was supposed to do something with the letter when they received it. First, the church was supposed to receive the letter as if it came from God himself. They were supposed to carefully read the letter, and they were supposed to respond to the things that were written. To ignore Paul (or James, Peter, John, Jude, or the author of Hebrews) was to ignore God himself. To say this another way, to disobey Paul was to disobey God himself.

For instance, when Paul called the church in Corinth to remove a sinful man from the church, the church needed to obey Paul's words (see **1 Corinthians 5:2**). When Paul told the members of the church in Colosse to "Put to death therefore what is earthly in you" (see **Colossians 3:5**), the people in Colosse needed to obey Paul's instruction. To disobey the letter was to disobey God himself.

Even though the letters were addressed to one church, copies of the letter were quickly passed on to other churches (see **Colossians 4:16**). This explains why manuscripts of Paul's letter collection have been found in so many different locations.

But the letters weren't just for churches in certain places in the first century. They were written for God's people in every place and in every century. This means churches today are supposed to receive the letters as words from God and they are supposed to respond to his words. When the letters call the churches to flee from evil, the churches are to flee from evil. When the letters call the churches to appoint leaders in a certain way, the churches are to obey these instructions. Churches today need to carefully consider how they respond to God's words found in the epistles. Because all of the letters have been delivered to God's people, God's people are responsible to read the letters and to obey the things written in them. To disobey the letters is to disobey God.



8. The New Testament letters were all written for a specific reason.

Each of the letters was written for a specific reason. This is why scholars sometimes refer to the New Testament letters as **occasional documents**. This means the letters are all related to some particular **occasion**.

The author of the letter wrote his letter with the occasion in his mind. The people receiving the letter also knew about the occasion. They either knew it because everyone in the church was thinking about the same thing, or they quickly discovered the occasion as they read the letter and studied the information included in the letter. For instance, the occasion prompting Paul to write his letter to the Galatians was the fact that false teachers had confused the church in Galatia and the saints were now beginning to believe a false gospel. Anyone in Galatia would have known, instantly, that Paul's letter had been sent because of this particular occasion in the church.

An **example** of an occasional document is a **birthday card**. A birthday card is written and delivered because of a particular occasion—someone's birthday. Both the person writing the card and the person receiving the card know the occasion connected to the card.

However, imagine that this birthday card is put into a box. Would someone, even if this person lived many years later, be able to determine the "occasion" that prompted this card? The answer is almost certainly yes. The person finding this card would be able to use the words in the card and other clues in the card and on the envelope (like the festive color of the envelope or a picture of a birthday cake) to figure out that this was a birthday card. Knowing the occasion that prompted this letter would help the person reading the letter to understand why certain things were written in the card. It would also help that person understand why other things were not included in the card.

This is similar to how the New Testament letters were written. The writer in the first century wrote the letter because of a particular occasion. The readers knew why the letter had been written. People today are different from people in the first century. We are like the person discovering the birthday card in the box. We must use the words in the letter to determine the occasion that prompted the letter.

Sometimes the **occasion** which prompted the letter is easy to see. For instance, the **occasion** prompting the letter to **Philemon** was the fact that a slave named Onesimus had run away from Philemon to Paul. Paul was sending him back. That explains why Paul sent the letter. He wanted Onesimus to be received by Philemon and the local church.

The occasion prompting 1 Timothy was chaos that had broken out in the church in Ephesus. Some of this chaos was due to false teachers. Paul gave Timothy specific instructions so that Timothy might deal with the problems in Ephesus (see **1 Timothy 1:3**).

The fact that **all of the letters** are occasional documents means the reader needs to pay careful attention to the words in the letter. What are the things being emphasized by the author? What commands is he giving? What promises from God is he emphasizing? These are connected, in some way, to the letter's occasion.

This teaches us that the letters in the New Testament are not just words on a page. Everything was written for a specific purpose. Every word in the epistles was written to help in specific situations. This means the words in the epistles will also be a help in churches today.

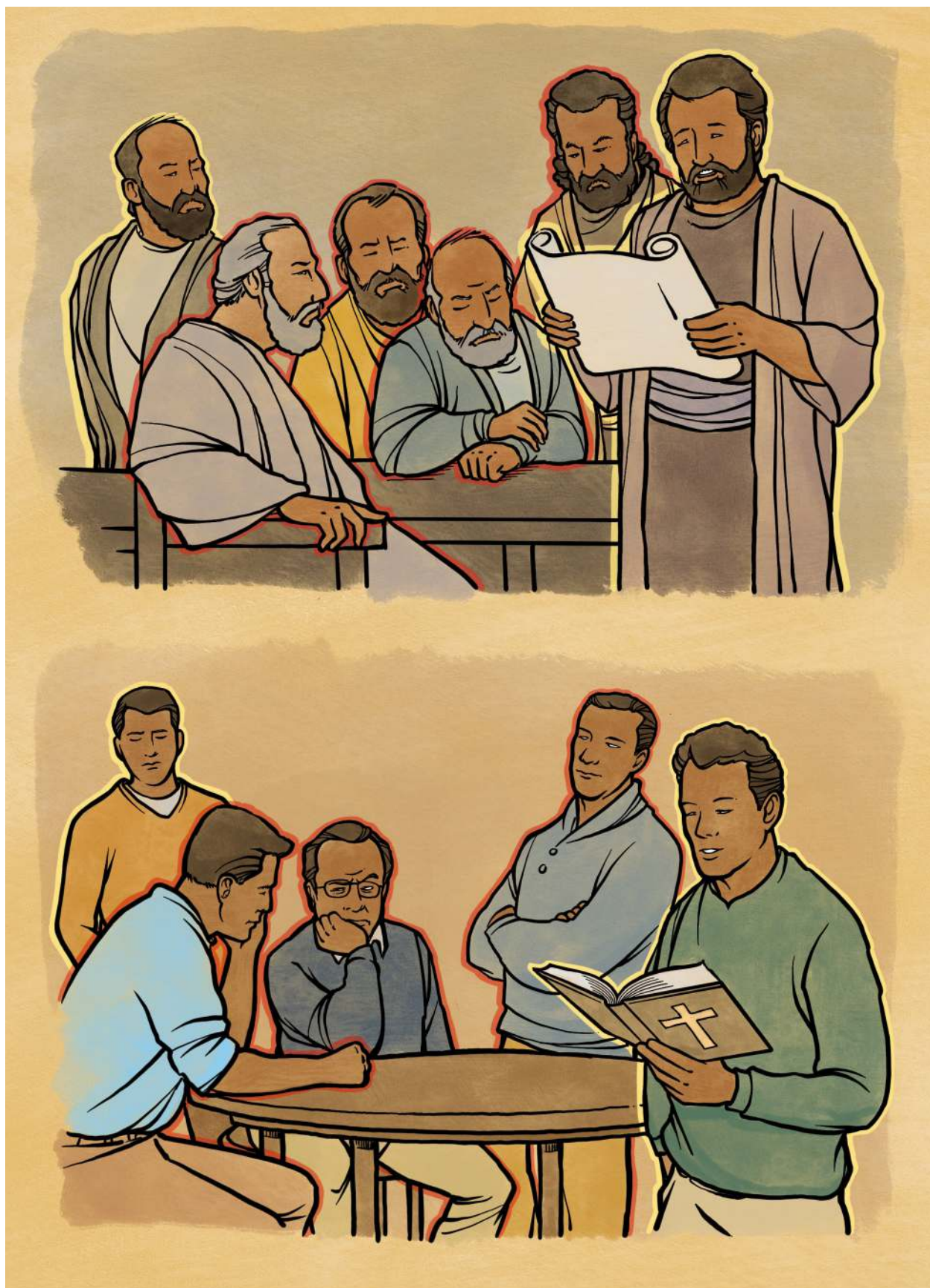
Usually, the occasion prompting the letter did not originate with the writer of the letter. Instead, the occasion was “birthed” on the reader's side. In other words, the writer (Paul, Peter, James, etc.) is normally responding to an occasion on the reader's side of things. For instance, Paul wrote 1 Corinthians because of sin in the church in Corinth. Thus, sinful worldliness in the church in Corinth was the occasion prompting Paul to write this letter. Paul wrote Galatians because the church in Galatia was embracing a false gospel. Thus, heresy in Galatia was the occasion prompting this letter. Paul wrote 2 Thessalonians because the believers in Thessalonica were worried that Jesus had already returned. Thus, fear in Thessalonica was the occasion prompting the letter.

Sometimes, however, the occasion is prompted by the writer. For instance, Paul wanted to visit Rome (see **Romans 1:8-15**). His desire to visit the saints in Rome was the occasion prompting Romans.

Understanding that letters are occasional documents helps readers today read the letters with far greater understanding. It explains why certain things are emphasized in the letter. It explains why other things are not emphasized. For instance, the occasion prompting Colossians is the fact that the church was embracing false teaching. False teachers had come into the church. They were telling the saints that they needed to do additional things in order to be holy (see **Colossians 2:8 and 2:16-23**). The church was becoming confused about the true gospel. Because of this false teaching, the people were adding “works” to the “grace” that had been given to them in Christ. Understanding that this was the **occasion** prompting Colossians explains many of the statements Paul makes throughout the letter. For instance, at the very beginning of the letter, Paul calls the believers in Colosse “saints and faithful brothers in Christ” (see **Colossians 1:2**). Even at this early point in the letter, Paul is counteracting the false teaching which this church has been embracing. Even at this early point in the letter, the occasion is influencing the things that are being said in the letter.

By God’s grace, the New Testament letters cover every type of occasion modern churches will ever face. Whether a church is wrestling with confusion, false teaching, legalism, sexual sin, or persecution, it will find specific instructions written to it. Beyond this, the epistles provide a warning to churches so that they might avoid the occasions that are seen in the first century churches.

It is important to know that the **occasion** prompting an author to write and to send a letter needs to be discovered by the reader. This demands careful reading of the letters. Why, for instance, did Peter write 1 Peter? The occasion prompting this letter may be found by careful reading of 1 Peter.



9. The New Testament letters must be heard by God's people.

The New Testament letters demonstrate that in order for a local church to be healthy, it must **obey** God's words. Obviously, in order for a local church to obey God's words, God's people in that local church need to **hear** God's word. This means when the church meets together, the preaching of God's word must be given great priority (see **1 Timothy 4:13** and **2 Timothy 4:1-2**). The church should allow enough time for God's word **to be read** to the people and **to be explained**. There should also be time for the church **to respond** to God's word.

The people will not always receive God's word. But leaders in the church must be willing to speak God's words even if those words are not popular. This is one of the main ways the leaders demonstrate their love for the people.

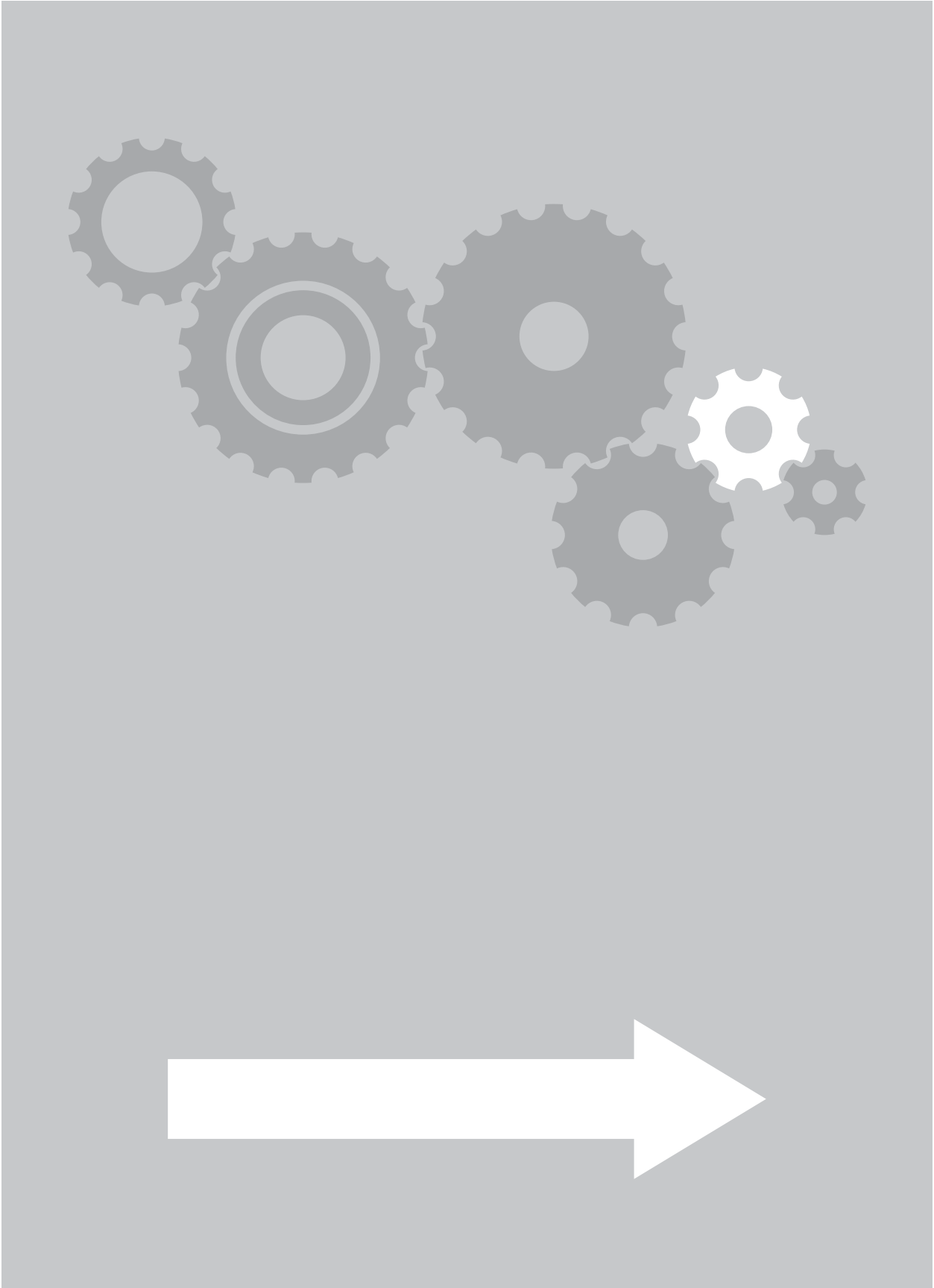
Preaching requires **preachers**. Gifted elders need to devote themselves to study, so they might faithfully teach and preach God's word to God's people (see **2 Timothy 3:14-4:4**). The church needs to treasure those who proclaim God's word to them (see **1 Timothy 5:17**). And churches need to raise up younger leaders who will also treasure God's word.

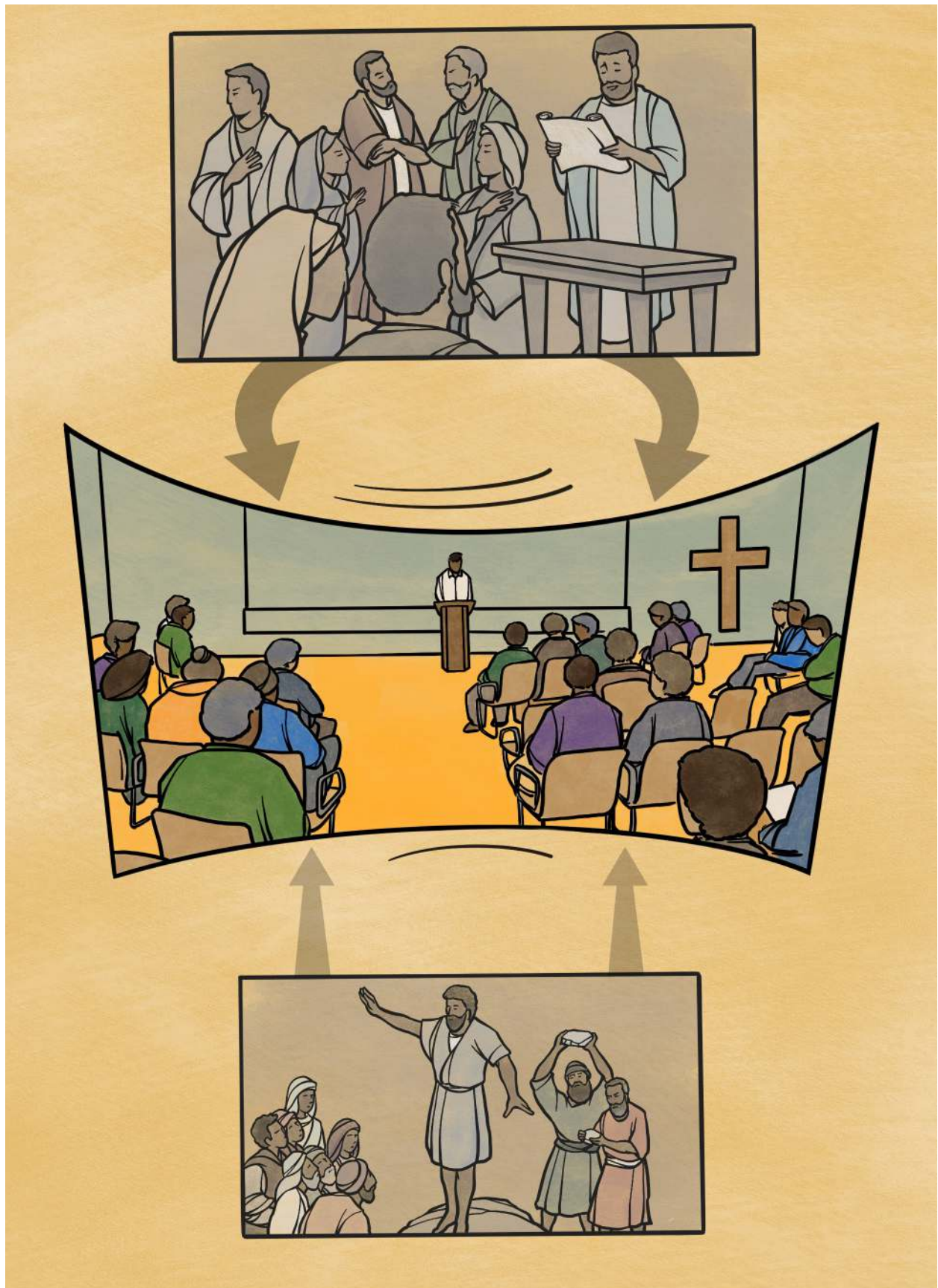
One helpful pattern is for the main preacher of the local church to systematically preach through different books of the Bible. For instance, a preacher may preach through the entire book of Ephesians, covering a few sections at a time. By going through an entire book, the preacher is forced to cover every topic in the book. The main "point" of the sermon is the main "point" of the biblical text. Focusing on preaching through biblical books is good for the church, and it is good for the preacher. It keeps him from focussing only on his favorite topics. By preaching through an entire book in the Bible, he will need to cover every single issue being covered in that book.

Preaching on specific topics is necessary at certain times. The preacher may need to preach on a certain matter impacting the entire church. For instance, because of outside pressure on the church, he may need to preach on facing persecution. He may use many different Scripture passages to do this. Or he may preach about the family using many different texts from the Bible. Focusing on specific topics can be

very helpful for the church. But there are dangers with **exclusively** preaching topically-based sermons (i.e., sermons where the subject isn't the main point of a passage in the Bible, it is, instead, a topic). A danger is the preacher may only preach on more pleasant topics. He may avoid subjects like sexual sin or divorce or relationships between husbands and wives. Preaching through books of the Bible is a way to avoid this danger. The person preaching is forced to preach about whatever the biblical author is writing about. For instance, the preacher speaking from **1 Corinthians 5** will be forced to speak about sin within the church and the need for church discipline.

Sometimes, people in the church will not like what they hear in God's word. They may want to "build" the church on things that are more "exciting" or more "current." Leaders must resist the urge to build on anything except God's word. Churches that do not regularly listen to the messages being proclaimed in the Bible and that do not obey the message found in the Bible will become unhealthy. Unhealthy churches are in real danger of ceasing to exist as true churches (see Jesus's warning to the churches in **Revelation 2:2-7, 2:12-17, 2:18-29, 3:1-6, and 3:14-22**).





10. The letters demonstrate that local churches in the first century had many struggles.

The New Testament letters teach God's people that they should not expect perfect conditions on this earth during this present age. Local churches on earth will always be struggling. Local churches are in constant danger and are in constant need of help from God.

Local churches in the first century faced dangers from within the church and dangers from outside the church. Both of these dangers demand God's people remain alert, strong in faith, and constant in prayer.

Local churches are in danger from **outside pressures**. Jesus said that we should not be surprised when we are hated (see **John 15:18-25**). While there have been times of peace for local churches (see **Acts 9:31**), persecution has been something which has been endured by local churches from the very beginning. This persecution comes in many different forms. It may come from the ruling authorities. It may also come from the followers of another religion. The New Testament letters provide great comfort to believers in these situations (see, for instance, **1-2 Thessalonians, Hebrews, and 1 Peter**). There are many words in these letters intended to strengthen Christians who are facing persecution from the outside (see also **Revelation 2:8-10 and 3:7-13**). It is clear that persecution from the outside can bring great harm to local churches. However, by God's grace, persecution also serves to strengthen the people within the churches. The New Testament letters remind local churches today to remain faithful even when facing these outside pressures. Often, local churches can do nothing in regard to their struggle with outside pressure except pray. God may, in answer to the prayers, grant relief from the outside pressures.

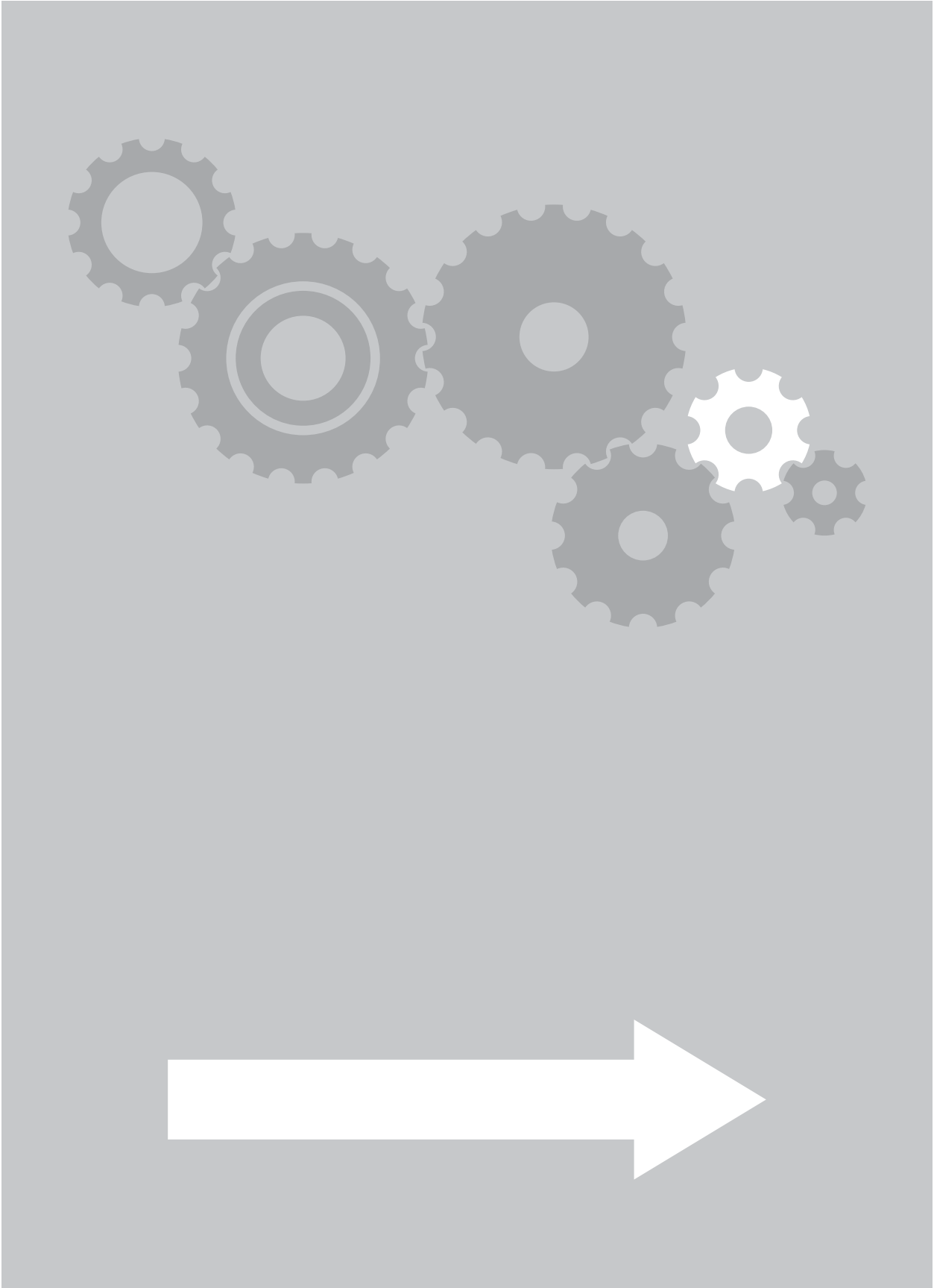
But while the pressures from outside of the church are very real and are very dangerous, the majority of the words in the New Testament letters are not related to dangers from outside of the church. Rather, most of the words in the letters relate to dangers arising from within the church. Local churches are in constant danger from **inward pressures**.

The letters demonstrate that local churches must take sin within the church very seriously (see, for instance, **1 Corinthians**). Sexual sin, worldliness, anger, wrath, and

gossip are all deadly enemies attacking every local church. Far too often, local churches are not willing to face these “enemies” that arise from within. Sin is allowed to flourish. The letters demonstrate that the church must not give in to these enemies. Instead, it is to struggle against sin. This means individuals in the church are to actively fight against their own sin (see **Colossians 3:5-11**). We must actively fight sin by confessing our sin to others (see **James 5:16**) and to the Lord (see **1 John 1:9**). Beyond this, people in the church must be willing to speak to others in the church when they sin (see **Matthew 18:15-20**). The church is not to focus on judging those outside the church. Instead, it is to focus on judging those inside the church (see **1 Corinthians 5:12-13**). Churches where sin is tolerated cannot stand.

False teaching is another danger attacking local churches from within. As with other forms of sin, far too often local churches are not willing to face this enemy and it ends up destroying the church. People sometimes believe that confronting false teaching will bring trouble to the church. But that is not the case. Instead, the New Testament letters provide strong evidence that ignoring false teaching will destroy a local church. This was happening to the church in Galatia and the church in Colosse. The fact that both churches were tolerating false teaching was the **occasion** which prompted Paul to write his letter to the **Galatians** and his letter to the **Colossians**. Paul also wrote **1 Timothy**, in part, because of false teaching in the church in Ephesus. The letters tell local churches today that they must deal with the problems that arise from within the church. The letters tell the churches the things they must do in order to be healthy.

Facing all of these dangers requires God’s people to be brave. And it especially requires leaders of local churches to be brave (see **Acts 20:17-38**). This doesn’t mean leaders are never afraid. It means leaders put their trust in God’s word and in his good Spirit. They are willing to endure trouble because their eyes are on their Lord. They are willing, like good shepherds, to lay down their lives for their people.





11. The letters prove that local churches are directly responsible for their own actions and beliefs.

In the illustration above, leaders in a modern local church are reacting to something written in one of the New Testament letters. Something (an occasion) has happened in the church, and the leaders are looking in the New Testament letters to find out what they should do. Churches have needed to do this from the time of the first century until today. They will need to do this until Jesus returns.

The illustration above is of a church today. However, imagine that this illustration is of the church in Corinth in the first century. Imagine they have just read the first letter the apostle Paul has sent to them (1 Corinthians). They are reacting to the letter.

In this letter, Paul tells the church that he knows about certain things that have been happening within the church. He tells them, for instance, that he knows about their acceptance of the church member who is committing sexual sin with his father's wife (see **1 Corinthians 5:1-2**)! In his letter, Paul tells them he is astonished by the things happening in the church. Paul sternly rebukes the church for the things they are allowing to take place. Paul then tells them what they must do (see **1 Corinthians 5:3-13**). The leaders are deciding if they will receive the things written in the letter and do the things Paul is telling them to do, or if they will reject the things written in the letter and disobey Paul's words in the letter.

In regard to the church member who has been committing sexual sin, Paul has told the church that they must exercise **church discipline**. In other words, the church must no longer treat this man as if he is a believer in good standing with the Lord and with his church. The church needed to tell this man he was no longer welcome to take the Lord's Supper with the church and to officially remove this man from membership in the church (see, again, **1 Corinthians 5:1-13**). It is important to know that the word membership is not used in this passage, but the idea of membership is present. The man is clearly a recognized part of the church. But Paul is telling the leaders and the church that they must remove him from the church. To put this in modern terms, this man was to be excommunicated.

In **verses 1-13**, Paul was telling the church to do a very difficult thing. Instead of treating this man just like the other saints in the church, Paul was telling the leaders to treat this man as if he was in active rebellion against God. This would have meant that this man was no longer welcome to take communion (the Lord's Supper) with the other saints in the church. It would have also meant that all of the saints in the church would agree to treat him as if he were in rebellion against God. They would no longer have casual fellowship with this man until he repented from his sin. He would have been removed from membership in the church. Paul's words may sound unloving. However, Paul's goal was very loving. His goal was that this man "may be saved in the day of the Lord" (**1 Corinthians 5:5**).

But Paul did not physically come to the church and make the church obey his words. Instead, he told the church what they were supposed to do. The church needed to decide if they would obey Paul's words or if they would disobey Paul's words.

Paul had completed the task given to him by the Lord. He had faithfully delivered God's word to the church. But would the leaders in Corinth complete the task they have been given by the Lord? Would they lead God's people to obey God's words? Or would they allow sin to remain among themselves?

Even though the apostles were especially gifted by Jesus to bring help to local churches, Jesus did not give the apostles the authority to physically force local churches to obey. In his wisdom, God left the final decisions regarding the beliefs and the actions of the local church to the local churches themselves. Even though the New Testament letters are filled with commands from the apostles telling the churches what they must do, the apostles did not use force. The local churches needed to hear God's word and to make changes themselves.

The New Testament letters demonstrate that local churches in the first century were, in this way, independent. They were responsible before God for the things which had been put under their control. The apostles encouraged and pleaded with the churches, but the local leaders and the local people were responsible for the things that took place within the church.

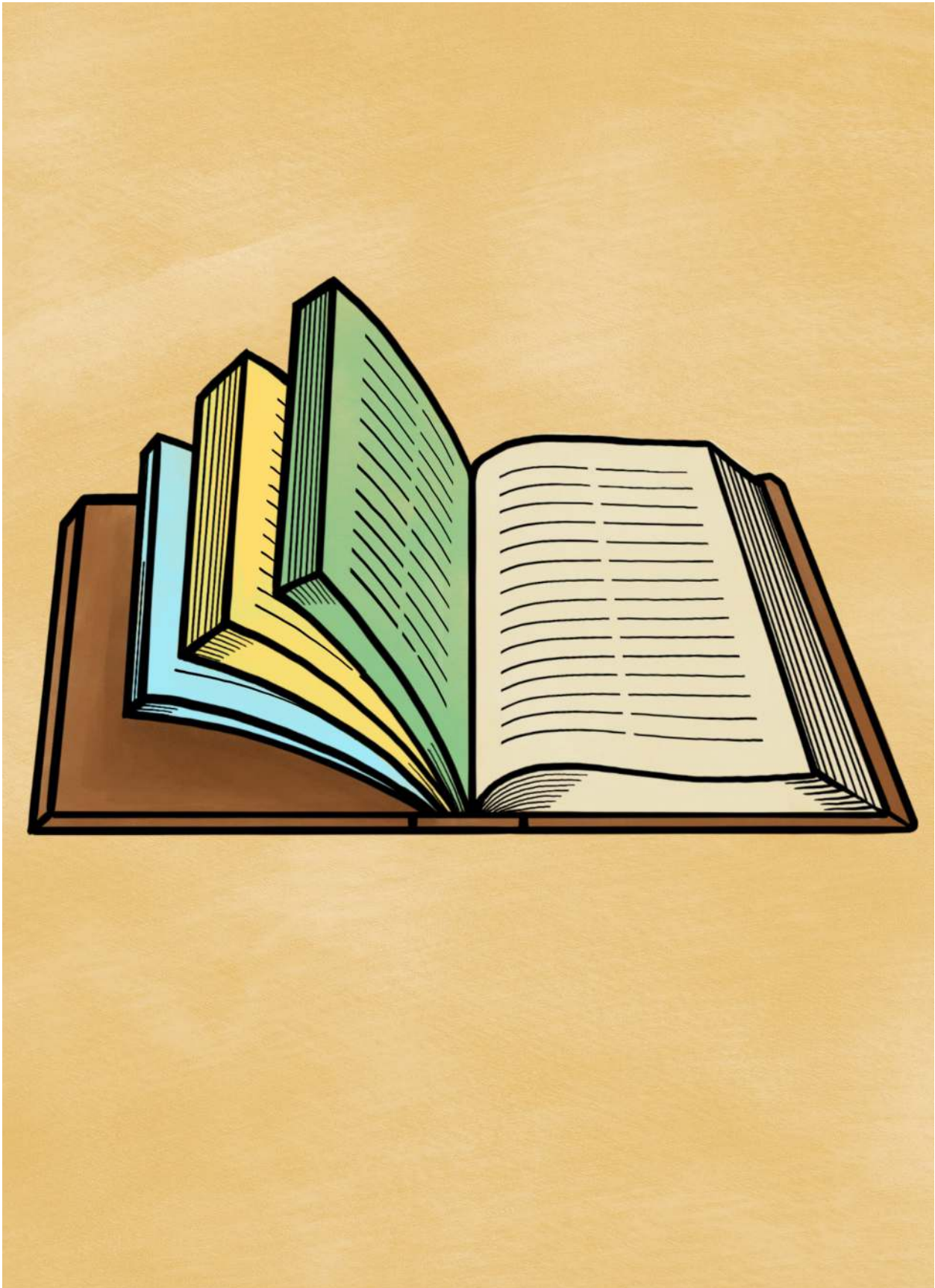
This is still true today. God's word has been faithfully delivered to local churches. Through the New Testament letters, the apostles are still pleading with local

churches to obey God. But the final decisions rest in the hands of the local churches themselves. What will the leaders say? What will the people do? Will they obey? Will they listen to the teaching of the apostles?

The fact that **real responsibility** rests in the local church demonstrates the importance of godly leaders in the church. Local churches must appoint godly elders who are not afraid but who boldly lead the people in obedience to God's words (see **1 Timothy 3:1-7**). This is why Paul tells the elders in Ephesus to "Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood" (**Acts 20:28**). Leaders will be tempted to ignore God's word. They will be tempted to be passive. They must reject this sort of weakness and, instead, urge God's people to obey what has been written.

This also demonstrates the importance of raising up the new leaders. Local churches always need to be thinking about the future of the church.

The New Testament letters clearly demonstrate that local churches are responsible for their beliefs and their actions. Every local church, no matter how small it might be, must read God's words with the understanding that they will be judged based on their obedience to that word.



12. The New Testament letters are closely connected with all three sections of the Old Testament.

The connections between the New Testament letters and the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings in the Old Testament can be seen in at least four ways.

First, the authors of the letters (Paul, Peter, John, etc.) **quote** from all three sections of the Old Testament. For instance, in **Romans 1:17**, Paul quotes from **Habakkuk 2:4**. This is a verse from the Prophets. In **Romans 3:4**, Paul quotes from **Psalms 51:4**. This is a verse from the Writings. In **Romans 4:17**, Paul quotes from **Genesis 17:5**. This is a verse from the Law. **Quotations** from all three sections are found throughout the New Testament letters.

Second, the authors of the letters frequently **allude** to things which were written in all three sections of the Old Testament. An allusion is not a direct quotation from a particular passage. Instead, it is a reference to characters or stories or words from a particular passage. For instance, in **Romans 4:9-25**, Paul speaks writes about two significant events in the life of Abraham. He writes about the time when Abraham was declared righteous by God and he writes about the time when he was circumcised. Paul wants his readers to think deeply about these two events. In **Romans 5:12-14**, Paul writes about Adam. He wants his readers to compare Adam with Jesus. In his letter, James writes about the suffering which was endured by the prophets and by Job (see **James 5:10-11**) and about Elijah (see **James 5:17-18**). **Allusions** to all three sections are found throughout the New Testament letters.

Third, the authors use language that isn't specific to one book but is, instead, related to the entire Old Testament. For instance, James describes the church as "the twelve tribes in the Dispersion" (see **James 1:1**). James's words are filled with meaning, but they will only be understandable to someone who knows the story being told in the Old Testament. Peter does something similar in **1 Peter 1:1**. He describes the churches to which he is writing as "elect exiles of the Dispersion." Again, Peter's words are filled with meaning. The ideas in his words are drawn from whole sections of the Old Testament.

Fourth, the authors sometimes take language from the Old Testament and creatively “transform” it so that God’s people may see how the passage is being fulfilled. The authors of the epistles are being accurate in their use of these Old Testament passages, even though they are not directly quoting the passage. For instance, in **Romans 16:20**, the apostle Paul writes, “The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet.” Paul is referring to a promise written in **Genesis 3:15**. In this passage in Genesis, God told Satan that an “offspring” was coming who would defeat Satan: “he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel.” This prophecy is fulfilled in Christ and the church. In **Romans 16:20**, Paul is referring to this verse in Genesis, even though he has changed the words so that the people in Rome (and people living today) might more clearly see the meaning.

The fact that the authors of the New Testament letters frequently use the Old Testament is a great help to people reading the letters today. We are able to see how the apostles interpret the Old Testament! Their interpretation of the Old Testament shows us how we are to interpret the Old Testament. Based on the words that Jesus spoke on the night of the Last Supper, it is clear Jesus wants believers today to listen to the apostles and to trust the things that they have written (see **John 14:25-28** and **16:12-15**).

We need to learn to trust the words of the apostles and receive the help they give in interpreting the Old Testament. Things that may have been hard to understand when they appeared in their “Old Testament setting” become easier to understand when they are used and explained by the apostles! And because the authors of the New Testament letters use all three sections of the Old Testament, readers today are able to learn from the apostles about how all three sections of the Old Testament should be understood. With the help of the apostles, we can read and interpret every part of the Old Testament.

The fact that the apostles (writing in the New Testament) use the things written by the prophets (who wrote in the Old Testament) explains why Paul was able to say that the church is “built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets” (see **Ephesians 2:20**). The word apostles appears first in this verse because the apostles are the perfect interpreters of the prophets.

A good strategy for people studying the New Testament letters today is to carefully investigate every quote that is taken from the Old Testament. For instance, whenever an apostle quotes from the Old Testament, the pastor or teacher should turn to the passage that is being quoted and should read the verses being quoted. This allows a person to be learning the Old Testament and the New Testament at the same time!

It shouldn't surprise readers today that the apostles used the Old Testament so frequently. The Old Testament, like the New Testament, is "breathed out by God" (see **2 Timothy 3:16**). In fact, readers today need to remember that the "Bible" of the church in the first century was what is now called the Old Testament. This was also the Bible used by Jesus and by the apostles. Jesus, the apostles, and the early churches did not have the New Testament at this time because it was not yet completed.



13. The NT letters include facts and commands.

The way the New Testament letters are organized is, in ways, similar to the conversation a mother might have with her child on a rainy day. If the child wanted to go outside of the house, the mother would first say, “***It is raining outside.***” This is not a command. The mother has not told her child what to do. She has merely told her child a fact: “It is raining outside.”

The mother didn’t tell her child this **fact** about the weather to give her child useless information. Rather, she told her this fact for a reason. The mother is interested in her child’s welfare and she doesn’t want her child to get wet and cold! The child needs to know that it is raining. But that is not all she needs. The mother knows the child needs additional help from her. That is why the mother would add a **command** to this fact. She would say something like, “***Use an umbrella.***” The fact (“It is raining outside”) lets the child know why the command (“Use an umbrella”) was given and why it must be obeyed.

In her first sentence, the mother used an **indicative verb**. An **indicative** verb is a verb that **indicates** the reality about something. The mother said, “It **is** raining outside” (the verb in this sentence is bold). The **indicative** verb “is” was used here because it allowed the mother to **indicate** that it was raining. That was the mother’s goal in the first sentence. She wanted to tell her child a fact about the weather. The indicative verb “is” allowed her to accomplish that goal. The indicative verb drew her child’s attention to a very important fact: “It is raining outside.”

But the mother had a different goal for her second sentence. That is why she used a different type of verb in her second sentence. In this second sentence, she no longer wanted to indicate the reality about something. Instead, she wanted to tell her child what to do. That is why she used an **imperative verb**. Imperative verbs are used when we want to tell people something they **must** do. **Imperative** verbs are used because they draw attention to actions that are **imperative**. Imperative actions are actions that must be done. The mother said, “***Use an umbrella***” (the verb is bold). The mother chose to use an **imperative** verb here (“Use”), because she wanted to **command** her child to do something. She wasn’t asking her child to take an umbrella. She was saying something like, “You **must** use an umbrella. I am not giving you a choice. I am not asking for your advice. You must do what I say.”

The two simple sentences used by the mother are a lot like the New Testament letters. After an initial greeting (“Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus”), the author will move on to the main **body** of the letter itself. In the main body of the letter, the reader will find facts and commands. Usually, the facts come first. Then, after having established those facts, the author begins using commands. **Both are necessary.** Christianity is not a religion of facts alone. We have also been commanded to do certain things. Christianity is not a religion of commands alone. These commands are based on certain truths.

Look at the mother’s words again: “It is raining outside. Use an umbrella.” The woman’s words to her child were almost perfectly divided in half. Half of her words were related to facts. That is why an indicative was used in this first half. Half of her words were related to commands. That is why an imperative verb was used in this second half.

Sometimes, as with Ephesians, the letters can also be divided in half! The first half of the letter is filled with facts about our faith. This may be seen, for instance, in **Ephesians 1-3**. There is not a single command in Ephesians 1-3. But there are many **indicative** verbs in these three chapters. This is appropriate, because Paul is **indicating** realities of our faith. But the second half of Ephesians is filled with commands telling the believer what to do (see **Ephesians 4-6**). This is appropriate, because Paul is commanding the believers to take action based on the things he said in the first three chapters.

Several of the letters are just like Ephesians. Galatians and 1 Thessalonians, for instance, are similar to Ephesians. There are very few commands in the first part of the letter and many commands at the end of the letter. In the book of Hebrews, the number of commands dramatically increases at the end of the book. The same is true in the last part of Romans. With the exception of portions of Romans 5-8, there are very few commands in Romans 1-10. But there are many, many commands in Romans 11-16.

Of course, some of the letters are not as neatly divided as Ephesians or 1 Thessalonians. However, both elements may be found in all the letters. The letters include facts (using indicative verbs) and they include commands (using imperative

verbs). These are connected. The facts almost always come first. After the facts have been established, the author gives a command based on those facts.

How does the reader know when the writer is moving from facts to commands? Fortunately, there are certain words the authors use to show the connection between the facts and the commands. These “connecting words” are similar to a bridge connecting two pieces of land. For instance, **1 Peter 1:1-12** contains no commands. In these first verses, Peter is telling his readers facts about the gospel. But after verse 12, Peter is ready to tell his reader what they must do. Peter helps his readers see that he is changing from **facts** to **commands** by using the word “**Therefore.**” “Therefore” is the “bridge” connecting the **indicative** section (verses 1-12) with an **imperative** section (which starts at verse 13).

Therefore,** preparing your minds for action, and being sober-minded, set your hope fully on the grace that will be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ. **1 Peter 1:13

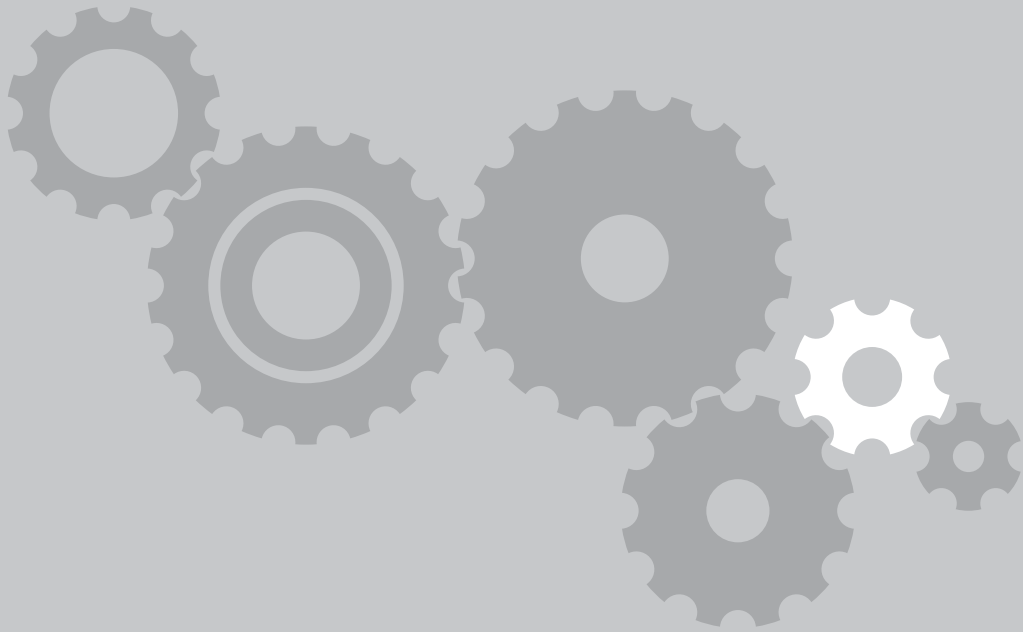
Peter’s command in verse 13 (“set your hope fully on the grace that will be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ”) is based on the facts he established in verses 1-12.

Paul does the same thing in Ephesians. Remember, Ephesians 1-3 contains no commands. In these first three chapters, Paul is telling his readers facts about the gospel. In Ephesians 4:1, Paul finally gives his readers a signal that he is moving from facts to commands by using the word “**therefore.**” This word lets the reader know that the facts in Ephesians 1-3 are connected with the commands in Ephesians 4-6. “**Therefore**” is the bridge connecting these two different parts of the letter.

I therefore,** a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. **Ephesians 4:1-3

Knowing how the letters are organized allows the preacher to follow the author more closely. The preacher is able to see the arguments which the author is building. And the preacher is able to more effectively preach from the letters. The wise preacher,

in every sermon, will use facts about the gospel and commands based upon the gospel. The preacher must not just give commands. And the preacher must not just give facts. Both are necessary.





14. The New Testament letters teach local churches what to believe.

What are the central teachings of the Christian faith? What are the things which all Christians must believe? What are the teachings every church must embrace? Where do we find these teachings? While these things are found in every book of the Scriptures, and they are certainly summarized in creeds like **the Apostle's Creed**, most of all, these central teachings of the Christian faith are **summarized** in the New Testament letters. That is one of the reasons why the letters are so important. They are intended to build the local church's **theology**. This means the letters are intended to help local churches grow in their understanding of the true God and of true faith in him. The result of knowing and believing the truths about God and the salvation he has given in Christ should be joyful worship by his people. It should also result in joyful obedience to his commands.

The New Testament letters carefully present and explain many facts about God and the salvation he has given to people which is based on the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. The authors of the letters use all three sections of the Old Testament as they present these facts. The authors of the letters do not quote from Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, and Acts because these five books were not completed when the letters were being written. However, the authors of the letters did not need the completed Gospels and Acts. James, Peter, John, and Jude were eyewitnesses of the events recorded in the gospels and Acts. The apostle Paul was not an eyewitness of the events recorded in the gospels. However, the Lord Jesus appeared to Paul (see **1 Corinthians 15:3-11**). He saw the living Christ with his own eyes! Beyond this, Paul spent time with the apostles and with Jesus's brother James. That is why the writers of the New Testament letters did not need the gospels and Acts. They were, again, eyewitnesses of the events contained in those books. Therefore, the authors of the New Testament letters write with the authority of eyewitnesses.

As was already mentioned, in addition to teaching many **facts**, the New Testament letters also include many **commands** which the man or woman of God must obey. It is important for the believer to keep these two things (**facts and commands**) in their proper places. The facts about God and the work of Jesus are primary. The commands are secondary. This does not mean the commands are unimportant. It means, rather, that commands logically follow after the facts. God's

grace is not based on our actions. Our actions are based on his grace. We obey because God has saved us and changed us.

The following verses demonstrate the proper order of facts and commands. Notice, the first part of these three verses speak about what God has done and how he has done it. The second part speaks about what we are to do. The order of these things should not be changed.

For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.

Ephesians 2:8-10

As these verses make clear, God's actions are primary. Obeying God's commands does not "create" a person's relationship with God. People cannot earn God's grace. God's love cannot be purchased by doing good works. The Christian faith is not based on actions we do in order to become pleasing to God. Rather, the Christian faith is based on things which God has done. That is why, for the most part, the facts are presented first in the letters. They have a primary place in the Christian faith. The commands logically follow after the facts.

Because of the **primary importance** of facts, the preacher or teacher needs to carefully study the parts of the letters that teach facts about God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit, the church, the world, and the life of the believer. This demands hard work from the preacher or teacher. These sections (like Ephesians 1-3) are often more difficult to understand than the parts of the letters which include commands (like Ephesians 4-6). It may seem easier to "skip" these sections and to focus on the easier-to-understand parts of the Bible. **However, the preacher or teacher must not do this.** We must carefully study, understand, and then proclaim the parts of the letters that teach us the glorious facts about God and the salvation he has given us in Christ. We must work hard to understand the truths about the church and the truths about the world. The Holy Spirit will give us help. We must not be lazy in our approach to Scripture. If we are lazy in this area, it will result in weakness in the church.

Focusing on the facts in the letters means the leader must learn to slowly read and study the letters. Every word and phrase should be carefully considered. When the author quotes a passage from the Old Testament, the preacher or teacher should turn to that passage and read it, trying to understand why the author quoted that particular passage.

In the same way that a brick wall is built one brick at a time, the authors of the letters are building the theology of the reader one truth at a time (see **1 Corinthians 3:10-15**). If we try to read the letters and study the letters too fast, we will not see the individual “bricks” (truths) which are being laid by the authors.

For instance, carefully read the following two verses from **Ephesians 1**:

*Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. **Ephesians 1:3-4***

Notice there are no commands in these two verses. These verses are from a section in Paul’s letter to the Ephesians in which he is focused on teaching facts. Commands will be given later which are based on these facts. For now, however, Paul wants his readers to know certain truths about God. Again, the apostle Paul does not tell his readers to do anything in these verses. Instead he wants his readers to know and to believe certain things.

What are the truths Paul proclaims in these verses? There are at least five truths here:

1. God the Father is blessed.
2. God the Father is “the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.”
3. God the Father has “blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places.”
4. God the Father “chose us in him before the foundation of the world.”
5. God the Father chose us in him so that “we should be holy and blameless before him.”

These five “facts” are absolutely stunning! None of these facts are based on our actions. They are truths about God and his character, truths about our Lord Jesus Christ, truths about actions God took before the creation of the world, and truths about God’s purposes for his people. Each of these five facts could have entire sermons preached about their meaning!

Why did God move Paul to write these five things in this letter? That’s what the preacher or teacher needs to think about! These things should be meditated upon! Like a person eating the most expensive and most delicious meal which has ever been served, these things should be “savored” and “celebrated,” not just quickly “swallowed” and “forgotten.”

These five things are meant to lead God’s people to think about God’s beauty and greatness. These things are intended to teach us about God’s great wisdom, his overwhelming generosity, the faithfulness of Jesus, the greatness of God’s plan which existed even before the world was created, and his great purposes for people. This should lead us to praise God.

Let us consider just one of these facts. Paul speaks about the fact that God “chose us in him before the foundation of the world”? People would have no way of knowing this amazing fact if it were not revealed to us by God! We may think that we chose God. This is, of course, true. If we are Christians, we have chosen to follow him. **However, we did not choose him first.** Here, Paul tells us that something **preceded** our choice to follow God. God chose us before we chose him. When did he do this? Here, we learn that God chose us before the world existed. This means before you were born and before you had done anything worthy of being chosen, God decided to save you. God chose you to be a recipient of his forgiveness, love, life, and power so that, upon receipt of these gifts, you might be “holy and blameless before him.”

That is just one of these truths! Much more could be said about this truth and the others in these two verses. But this short look at this one truth in these two verses demonstrates that they must be studied! The New Testament letters are filled with incredible truths about our great God!

Notice, again, there are no commands in these two verses. Paul is not telling believers what they are to do. Instead, he is telling them who God is and what God has

done. Paul is teaching the church what is true and what they are to believe. He is teaching them **theology**.

God's people will not be strong if they never hear about who God is and what he has done. If they only hear commands, they will not know why they have been given those commands. If they only hear commands, they will begin to think they are earning God's favor by doing good works. If they only hear commands, they will not know about God's glorious character. This will hinder worship of him.

Leaders, we must, like a person building a strong wall, build the theology of the people. For this to happen, we must study the facts of our faith.



15. The New Testament letters include many commands. These commands tell individual believers and local churches what they must do.

Within the New Testament letters the reader finds many facts about God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit, the church, salvation, and the world. The letters are filled with these facts because the authors are concerned that God's people have right beliefs.

However, the New Testament letters include more than just facts about these important things. The New Testament letters also include many commands. These commands tell the believer what he or she must do. They tell local churches what they must do.

For instance, carefully read the following 12 verses in Ephesians. Count the number of commands in this short section.

Therefore, having put away falsehood, let each one of you speak the truth with his neighbor, for we are members one of another. Be angry and do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and give no opportunity to the devil. Let the thief no longer steal, but rather let him labor, doing honest work with his own hands, so that he may have something to share with anyone in need. Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.

Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children. And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

But sexual immorality and all impurity or covetousness must not even be

*nor foolish talk nor crude joking, which are out of place, but instead let there be thanksgiving. **Ephesians 4:25-5:4***

Because of the way Paul combines multiple things in one phrase, it is hard to precisely count the number of commands here. But there are at least fifteen commands in these twelve verses! If these verses were all people ever read from the letter to Ephesians, it would give them the idea that the Christian faith is all about keeping commands.

But most of the letter to the Ephesians is not like this! In fact, the first three chapters of Ephesians include no commands. All of the commands in Ephesians are in the second half of the letter to the Ephesians. The commands we are reading in Ephesians 4-6 are based upon the facts which were presented in Ephesians 1-3.

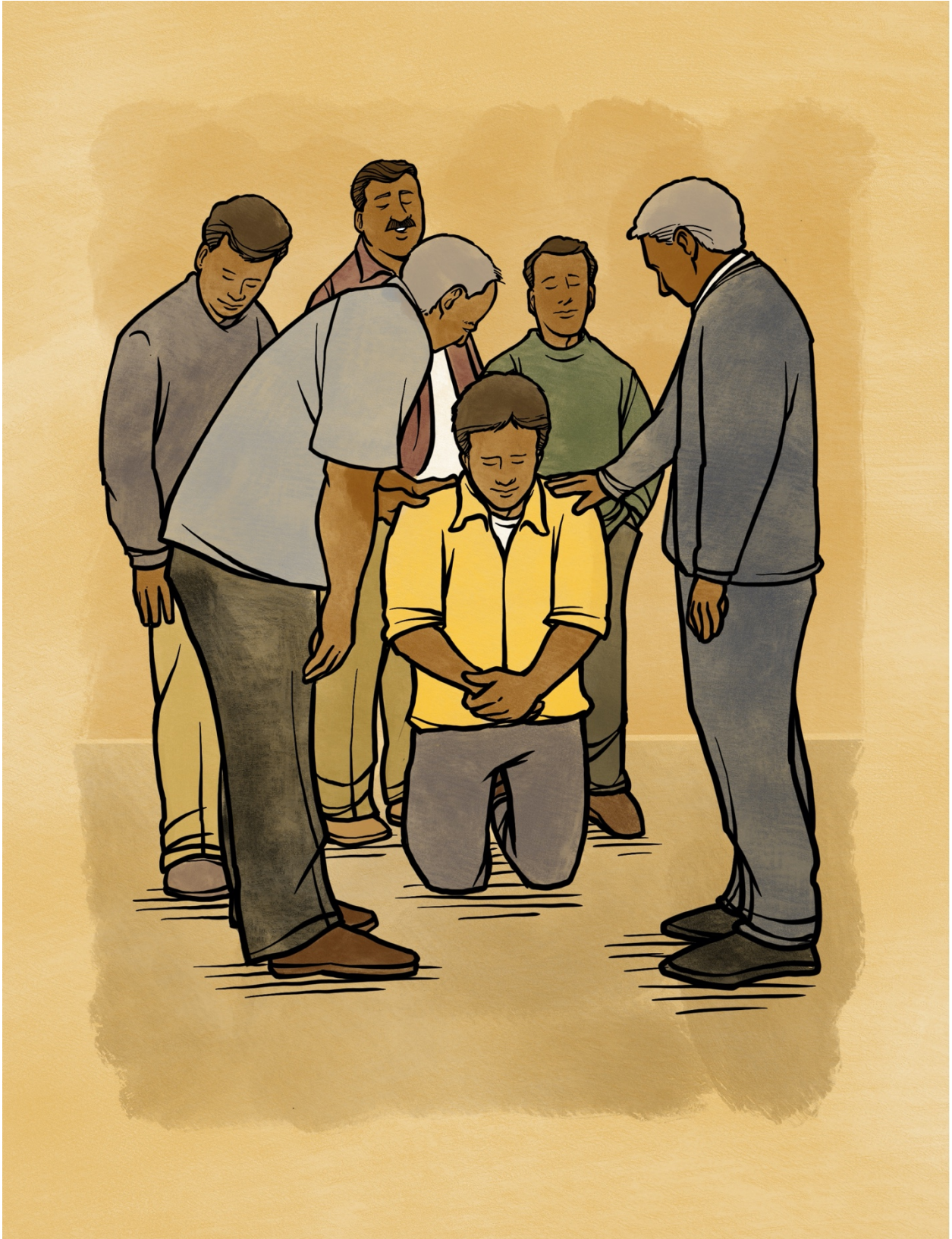
Based on the large number of commands in the New Testament letters, it is clear Christians need commands. If we did not need them, the letters would not include them. But why do God's new creations, people who have been filled with the Holy Spirit, need commands? Here are a few reasons:

1. We need commands from God's word because they are one of the ways God has chosen to help his people in this present age. The commands are a "means of grace." In other words, the commands are a way God brings his grace to his people. He can bring grace to his people using any method he wants to use. Commands are one of God's chosen methods to bring help to his people so they might do the things that please him. If we resist his commands, we need to know that we are choosing to resist his grace.
2. We need commands because God's people do not, in this age, perfectly know what to do. We need a sure guide so that we know what to do. The commands guide God's people into the right path (see **Psalms 119**).
3. Commands are necessary because we still sin. We can be self-deceived (see **1 John 1:8**). But God's word is perfect. The commands help God's people know what is sinful and they serve as a gracious gift intended to keep God's people from sin.
4. We need commands because obedience to God's commandments demonstrates that we love Jesus (see **John 14:15, 21, 23**).
5. We need commands because disobedience to God's commands serves as evidence that a person does not love Jesus (see **John 14:24**). Thus, local churches

are able to know if a person loves Jesus based on that person's actions (see **Matthew 7:15-20 and 12:33**).

6. We need commands because obedience to the commands by the believer demonstrates the power of the Holy Spirit living within that person (see **John 14:16-17 and Ezekiel 36:27**).
7. We need commands because they demonstrate that God has succeeded in creating a new kind of people who delight in keeping his words. Jesus's life, death, and resurrection has resulted in a new creation coming. This new creation is not like the rest of the world (see **Romans 3:9-18**). Instead, God's new creation people love his word and are grieved when they do not obey his commands. Christians delight to see God's commands and desire to obey them, even when it is difficult to obey them.
8. We need commands because they serve as evidence that we are still waiting for Jesus's second coming. The commands create a hunger in us for the day when we will no longer need commands. Commands are evidence that we are still living in the time between Christ's victory at the cross and the time of his second coming. We are already new creations, but we still happen to sin. We are waiting for the fulfillment of all of God's promises—a time when we will never sin again. Thus, the commands serve as evidence that we already have salvation, but we have not yet received the fullness of it. When the Lord Jesus returns and God's people are living in the new heavens and the new earth, commands will no longer be needed. However, in this present age, we need commands.

Commands are a gift from God! They are absolutely necessary. They are a beautiful part of God's good word. They are not primary. They do not save God's people. But they do serve as proof that God's people are saved.



16. The New Testament letters teach us the importance of healthy church structure.

The local church is Christ's body on earth (see **Ephesians 5:23-32**). Local churches are a precious gift to individual humans and to communities and to the world. They must be treasured by God's people. God's people demonstrate they treasure the church by being an active part of a local church and by praying for and speaking well of other true churches.

There is a great amount of freedom in certain aspects of the local church's actions. For instance, churches are not told if they need to meet in a building. They are not told how long their worship services must be. They are not told how many songs they must sing when they are together. They are not told how many meetings they should have during the week. Local churches will make decisions about many things that reflect the culture and preferences of the local believers. This diversity in the church is beautiful.

However, the Bible includes a great deal of information about things all local churches must do. This information is found throughout the New Testament. However, the instructions for local churches are particularly found in the New Testament letters. Here are just a few of the instructions to local churches found in the letters:

1. **Local churches must meet together.** This is a commandment (see **Hebrews 10:24-25**). Churches must not neglect gathering together. Of course, there are times when local churches cannot meet together. For instance, it may be impossible for local churches to meet together during times of war, severe persecution, or plague. However, the local church must, whenever possible, physically meet together. Humans were created for community. God himself is a Trinity—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This means he is a community within himself! People are made in the image of God (see **Genesis 1:26-27**). Therefore, we are to recognize that we are not created to be alone. We are created to be in community. The local church is the place where Christ's people experience Christian community here on earth.
2. **Individual believers must physically attend a local church.** This is a commandment (see **Hebrews 10:24-25**). This means non-attendance is a sin. Of course, there are times when individual believers cannot physically attend a local

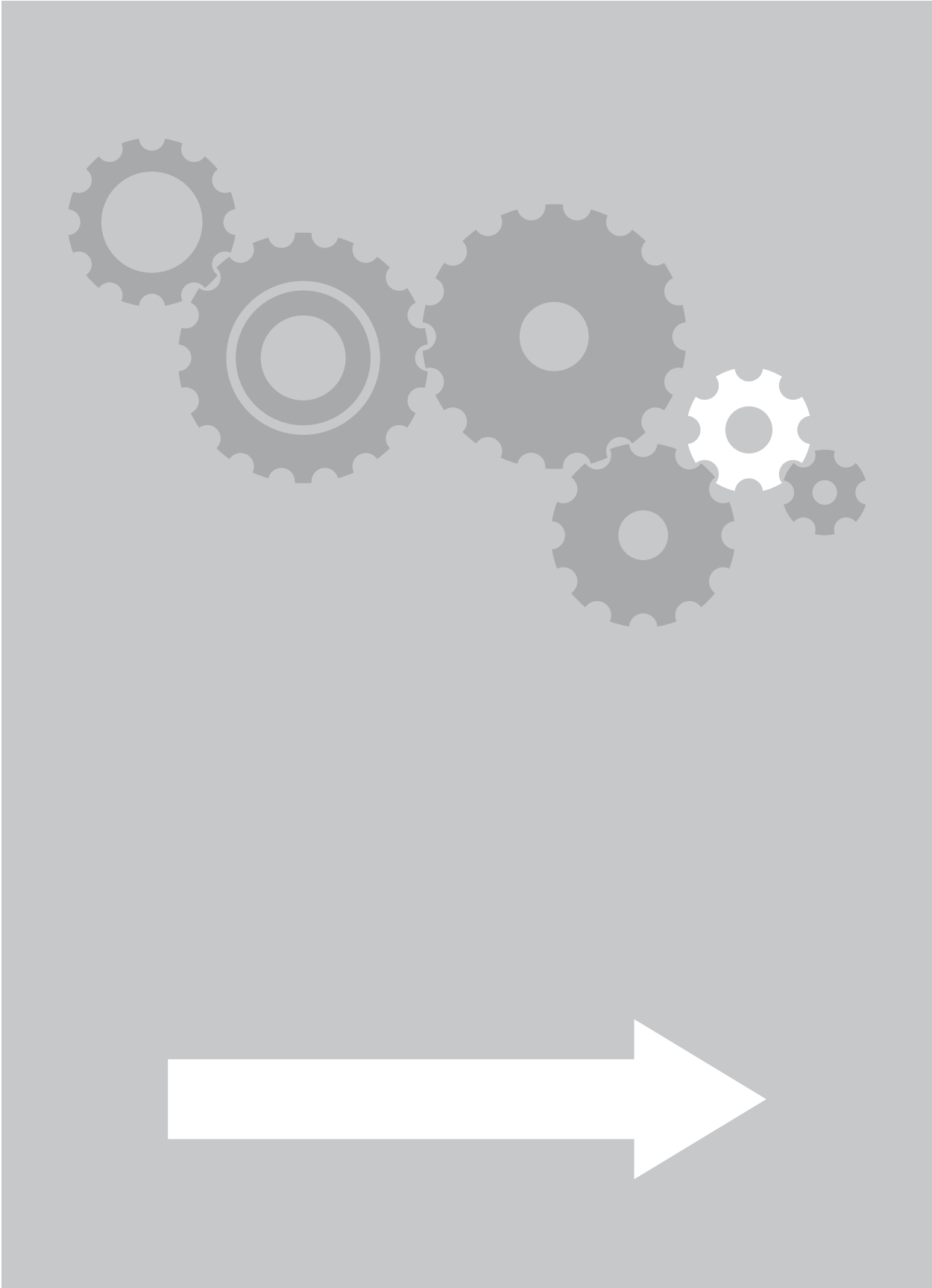
church. For instance, it may be impossible for an individual believer to be part of a church because of sickness or old age. Christians are sometimes in prison, making it impossible to join the local church. However, individual believers must, when possible, physically meet with the church. This is not something that should happen only **periodically**. It should happen **regularly**. Unfortunately, sometimes Christian people profess a love for Christ's church on earth, but they do not demonstrate that love by actually being part of a real local church. The local church is a primary place where Christians fulfill the second great commandment ("love your neighbor as yourself").

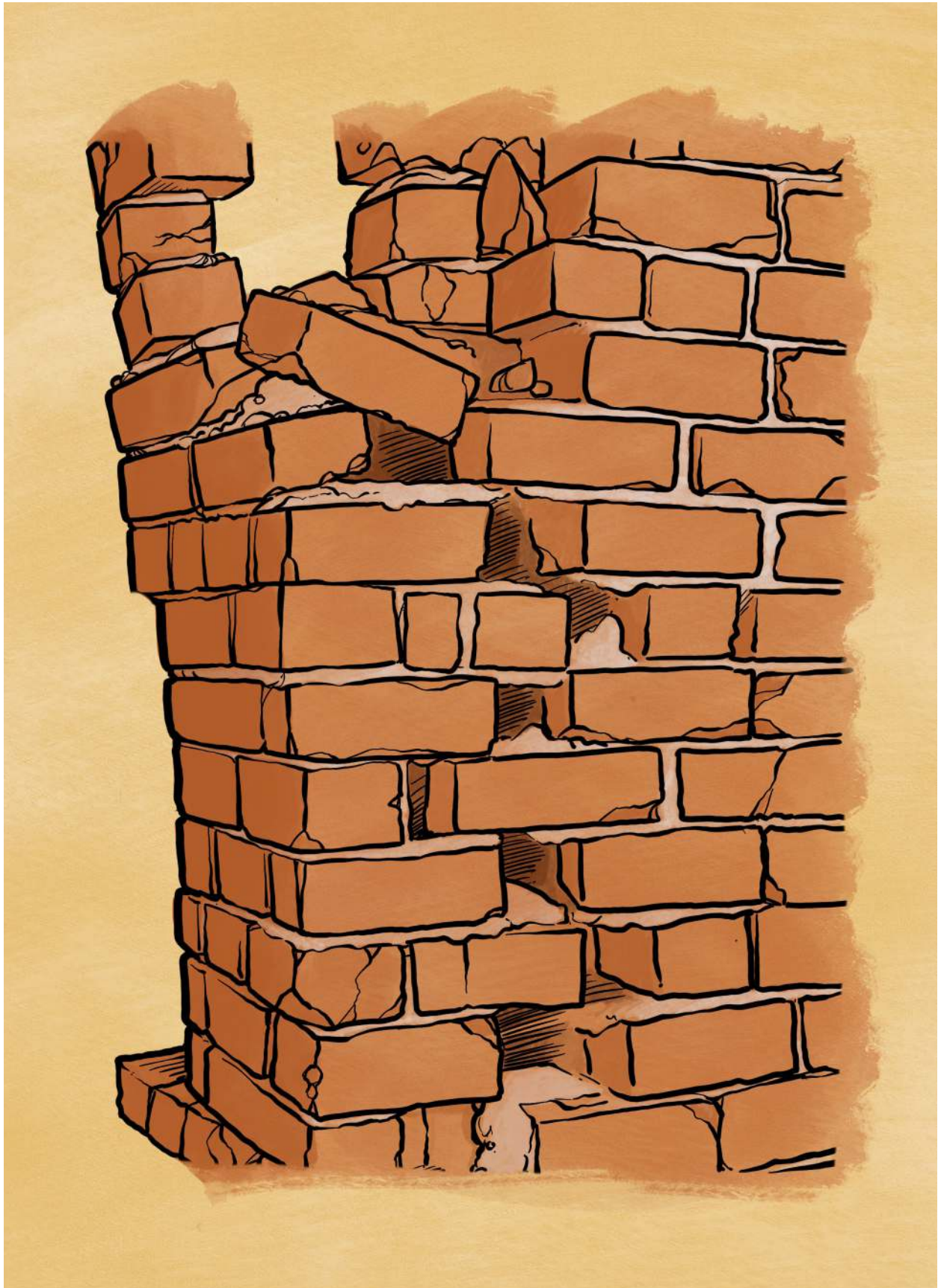
3. **Jesus is the head of the church** (see **Ephesians 5:23**). This means the church must submit to Christ in everything. Local churches are not free to do whatever they want. They must obey Christ. This means obeying the things written in God's word—the Bible.
4. **Local churches need elders**. The New Testament letters are clear about who is to lead local churches. Local churches are to be led by elders (see **1 Timothy 3:1-7** and **Titus 1:5-9**). The word "overseer" is sometimes used to describe elders (see **Philippians 1:1**). Churches cannot appoint anyone they want to be an elder. The elders must meet certain standards (see **1 Timothy 2:11-3:7**). An elder should not be appointed too quickly. Instead, believers should carefully consider his manner of life over a period of time (see **1 Timothy 5:22-25**). Elders need to know that they are shepherds working under the "Chief Shepherd", the Lord Jesus Christ (see **1 Peter 5:1-5**). Elders are not free to shepherd God's people in whatever they want. They must follow their Chief Shepherd. This means they must cherish Christ's words and obey him in everything.
5. **The elders are to keep watch over the people in the local church** (see **Hebrews 13:17** and **1 Peter 5:1-5**). The elders are to guard the people and watch out for false teaching (see Acts 20:17-35). They must stop false teaching when it is taking place.
6. **The people in the local church are to obey the elders and submit to their authority** (see **Hebrews 13:17** and **1 Peter 5:1-5**). In addition to obeying their elders, the people in the local church should honor the elders God has given to them (see **1 Timothy 5:17**). This means, among other things, making sure they are paid in some way for their labors in preaching and teaching God's word.
7. **Local churches must practice church discipline**. This means local churches must not ignore sin within the church. Instead, local churches are to speak with those who are walking in sin, calling them to repentance. Those who repent are to be

forgiven. Those in the church who refuse to repent are to be “judged” by the church (see **Matthew 18:15-20 and 1 Corinthians 5**). No church members are “above” judgment. Leaders are also subject to church discipline (see **1 Timothy 5:19-21**). Sometimes, local churches do not practice discipline because they believe this will create problems in the church. This is disobedience. Churches that do not practice church discipline will have increased sin and difficulty in the church (see **1 Corinthians 5:6**).

8. **Local churches must proclaim the gospel.** This means the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus must be clearly and regularly proclaimed. People must be called to put their faith in the work that Jesus accomplished. People must be called to turn from their sins. Sometimes, local churches ignore the gospel message and begin relying on other methods in attempts to build the church. This is dishonoring to the Lord Jesus. Beyond this, it will not work. We must imitate the example set by the apostle Paul (see **1 Corinthians 1:18-2:5**).
9. **God’s word must be preached in the local church.** God’s word should be regularly, completely, and carefully preached in the local church (see **2 Timothy 4:1-2**). **God’s word should be preached regularly.** This means preaching should be an “activity” that forms a major part of the gatherings of the church. The words God has said should shape what the church believes and what the church does. The sermon should be a main and cherished part of every Lord’s Day gathering. **God’s word should be preached completely.** All parts of the Bible are useful for God’s people (see **2 Timothy 3:16-17**). Therefore, the elders of the church should make sure that all parts of God’s word are being proclaimed to God’s people. They need to hear about sin, repentance, faith, family relationships, work, giving, etc. This means the preacher should be careful to preach all of the things God has said. And **God’s word should be preached carefully.** The church must ensure that the word which is being preached is not a “different doctrine” (see **1 Timothy 6:3-5**).
10. **The local churches should regularly celebrate the Lord’s Supper** (see **1 Corinthians 11:17-34**).
11. **Local churches should practice baptism.** Baptism is regularly talked about in the New Testament letters (see **Romans 6:1-4, Ephesians 4:5, Colossians 2:12, and 1 Peter 3:21**). It is also frequently mentioned in the book of Acts. This “act” marks a believer’s entrance into the church. It is a public declaration to the church that a person is a member of Christ’s body and, thus, part of a local church.

These are just a few of the instructions for local churches which are focused upon in the New Testament letters. The rest of the Bible, obviously, also provides great help to local churches.





17. The New Testament letters teach us the importance of dealing with sin and false teaching. Leaders must address sin and false teaching in the local church.

The local church is one of the most powerful forces on the earth. However, local churches can disappear. Local churches have many enemies. They can be destroyed from the outside. Severe persecution (whether by individuals, other religious groups, or from the government) or war can result in a church disappearing or going “underground.” Sadly, this has happened many times in the history of the church. From an earthly perspective, it may appear that local churches in these situations have been defeated. However, these churches have not been defeated. Rather, these local churches have conquered! They have been faithful—sometimes to the point of death. God, in his wisdom, has allowed them to, like the apostle Paul, be “filling up what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions for the sake of his body” (see **Colossians 1:24 and Revelation 2:8-11**). There is no shame when a local church is destroyed for these reasons.

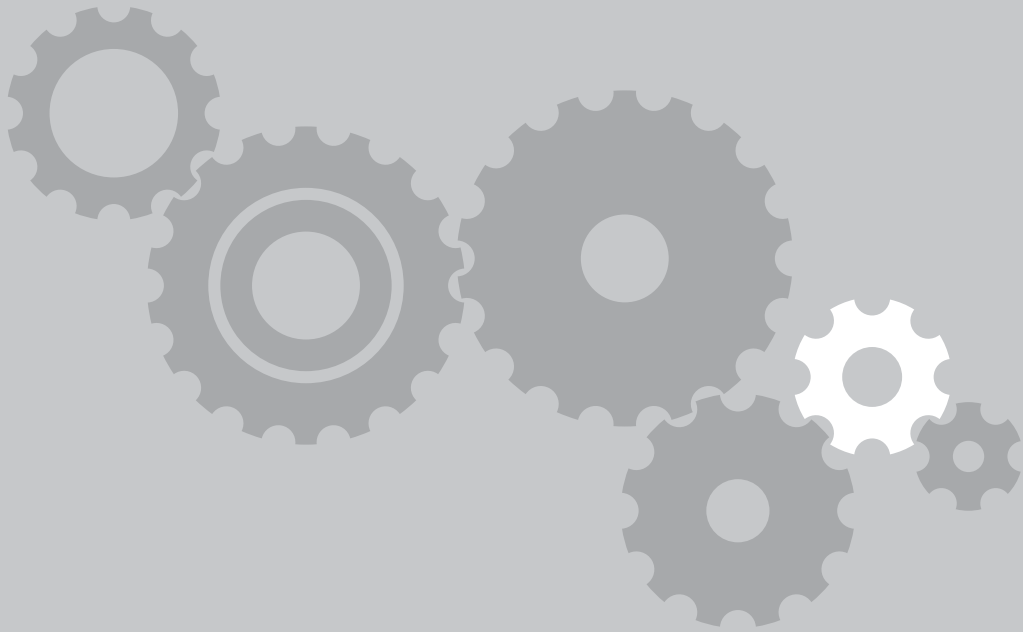
But churches can also be destroyed from the inside. In the same way that a strong brick building can begin falling apart, local churches can, for one reason or another, begin falling apart. The New Testament letters (along with the letters to the churches in Revelation 2-3) outline many reasons why local churches fall apart from the inside. Here are a few of those reasons:

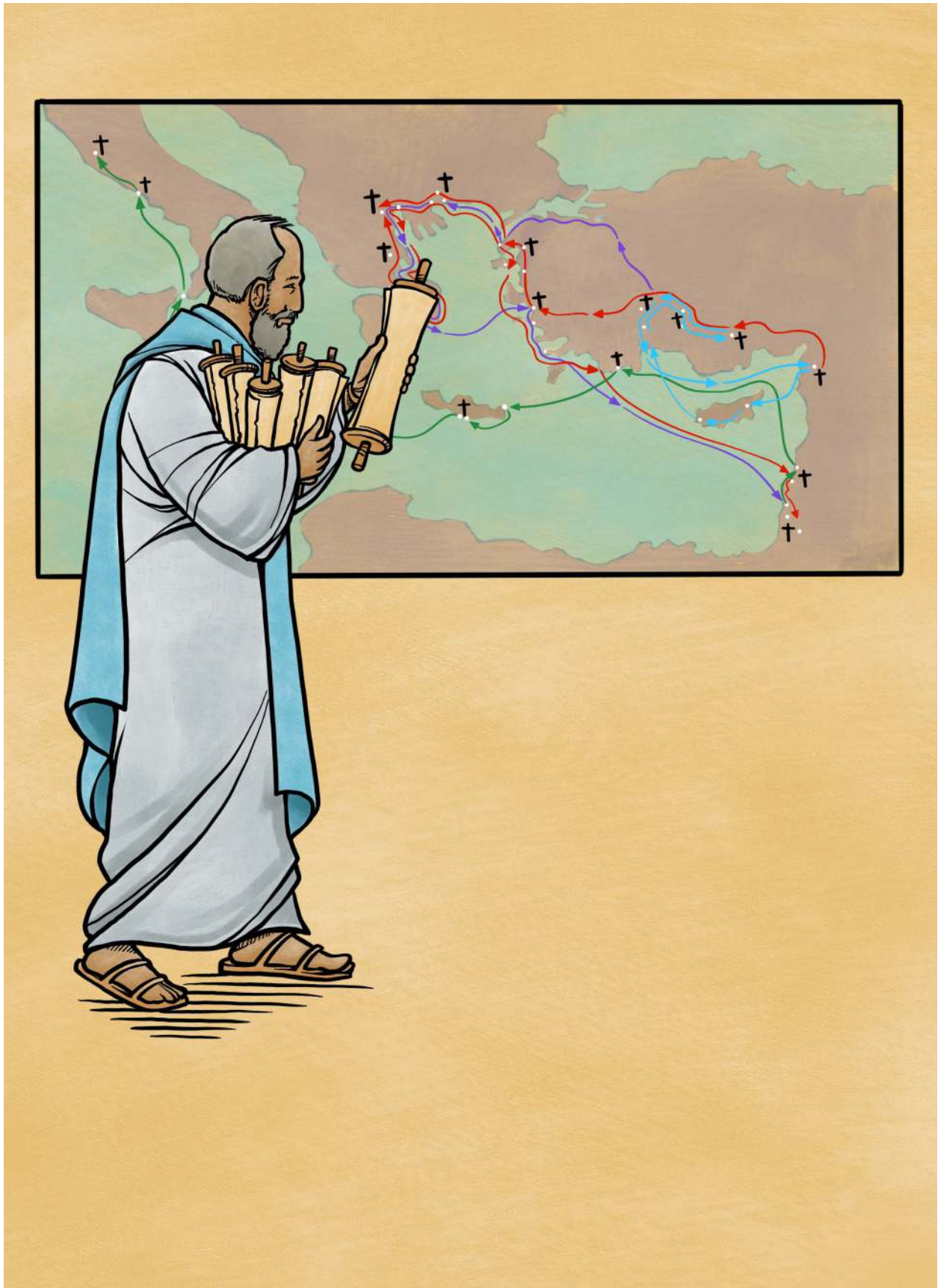
1. **The church ignores the commandments from the New Testament regarding the establishment of godly leadership** (see **1 Timothy 3:1-7**).
2. **The elders and members of a local church refuse to deal with sin within the church.** This was happening in the church in Corinth (see **1 Corinthians 5:1-2**). In fact, in Corinth, sin was being celebrated. This often happens in local churches.
3. **The elders and members of a local church permit false teaching to take place in the church.** This was happening in the church in Galatia (see **Galatians 1:6-10**) and in the church in Colosse (see **Colossians 2:8, 2:16-23, and 2 Timothy 2:24-26**).
4. **The members of the church have revolted against their leaders** (see **Hebrews 13:17**).

5. **The leaders in the church refuse to obey Christ's commands** (see **3 John 9-10**).
6. **The word of God is not faithfully preached in the church** (see **1 Timothy 5:17, 2 Timothy 4:1-5, and Titus 2:1**).
7. **People in the church are no longer walking in love with one another** (see **Philippians 4:2**).
8. **The people in the church turn from the true faith that was taught be earlier generations** (see **Philippians 4:9 and Hebrews 13:7**).

These things should not happen. Unlike the situation when persecution rises from the outside, the church crumbling from within can be prevented. God has given great gifts to the church so that it might not collapse. He has given the following as gifts to the church:

1. **He has given his Son as a gift to the church.** Jesus sees and knows all that is happening in each local church (see **Revelation 2:1-2**). The Lord Jesus is interceding for the churches as High Priest (see **Romans 8:32-34 and Hebrews 5:5-6**).
2. **He has given the Holy Spirit to help the church** (see **Acts 9:31 and Romans 8:26-27**).
3. **He has given gifts to the members of the local church** (see **Romans 12:3-8 and 1 Corinthians 12:1-11**).
4. **He has given the Scriptures to the church** (see **2 Timothy 3:14-17**).





18. The apostle Paul is the author of many of the letters in the New Testament.

The apostle Paul wrote at least thirteen of the letters in the New Testament. Nine of the letters are to churches. Four of the letters are to individuals. A fourteenth letter, Hebrews, is traditionally considered to be part of Paul's letter collection. However, scholars are not certain who wrote the letter to the Hebrews.

Paul is first “introduced” to readers of the New Testament in **Acts 7:58**. He was, at that time, opposed to the Christianity. In fact, he aggressively persecuted the church (see **Acts 8:1-3**). The facts of Paul's early life may be found in many Scriptures (see **Acts 13:9, 22:3, 22:22-28, 23:16, Romans 11:1, and Philippians 3:4-7**). Paul's conversion to Christ is outlined in **Acts 9:1-19**.

Paul was focused on ministry to the Gentiles (see **Acts 13:46, 15:7, 21:19, Romans 1:13, 11:13, 15:16-18, Galatians 1:16, 2:2, 2:8-9, Ephesians 3:1, 3:8, 1 Timothy 2:7, and 2 Timothy 4:17**). This is important, because Paul is careful to demonstrate that the benefits of Christ's life, death, and resurrection are for all people, not just Jewish people.

Paul frequently quotes the Old Testament. This is a great help to believers because he shows Christians how the Old Testament writings should be interpreted.

In **2 Peter 3:15-16**, the apostle Peter compares Paul's writings to “the others Scriptures.” This is a significant statement, because one of Jesus's original apostles is declaring Paul's writings to be Scripture! This demonstrates that even in the first century, Paul's writings were understood to be Scripture.



19. An overview of each book written in Paul's letter collection written to a church.

Romans

Romans is the first letter in Paul's letter collection. It may have been placed first because it is the longest letter in Paul's letter collection. Scholars believe Romans was the sixth letter Paul wrote. It was probably written in AD 56 or 57. Paul had never visited the church in Rome (see **Romans 1:13-15**). The church in Rome had been in existence for many years before this letter was written (see **Romans 15:23**). Even though Paul had never been there, Paul knew many of the people in the church in Rome. In fact, in the last chapter of Romans, Paul greets 26 different individuals who were members of the Roman church!

Why was Romans written? What was its **occasion**? This information can be found in the letter. Romans was written as Paul's official "introduction" to the church in Rome. He wrote the letter to prepare the church for a personal visit. He wanted to tell the church, ahead of time, how they could help him in his work. Paul wanted to preach the gospel in Spain, and he hoped that Rome would become a "base" for his missions to the west (see **Romans 15:24**).

The book was also written in order to present the gospel to the church in Rome (see **Romans 1:16-17**). Romans provides believers with the most complete treatment of Christian doctrine in the Bible. The word gospel means "good news." However, in order to present the "good news" of the salvation and life God gives to people because of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, Paul first presents a complete treatment of the "bad news" of all people's sinfulness God and God's righteous anger and coming judgment (see **Romans 1:18-3:20**). Beginning in **Romans 3:21**, Paul describes the work accomplished by the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Romans 8 is one of the most beautiful chapter in all Christian Scripture.

1 Corinthians

The apostle Paul planted the church in Corinth around AD 51 (see **Acts 18:1-18**). He wrote this letter only a few years later. This was not the first letter Paul wrote to the church in Corinth. Based on **1 Corinthians 5:9**, it is clear Paul had already sent an

earlier letter to Corinth in order to help them. That earlier letter has not been preserved and is, therefore, not a part of the New Testament. 1 Corinthians was written after that first letter.

Paul wrote 1 Corinthians because the church in Corinth was in trouble. Paul knew this because people from “Chloe’s household” (these people were apparently members of the church in Corinth) visited Paul and told him about the unhealthy conditions in the church. They told Paul there was quarreling and division in the church (see **1 Corinthians 1:11-17**). The people told Paul that the church was tolerating sexual sin by one of their members. The people in the church were not mourning about this sin. Instead, they were proud (see **1 Corinthians 5:1-2**)! Paul also learned there were lawsuits between members in the church (see **1 Corinthians 6:1-11**). People in the church had become arrogant (see **1 Corinthians 4:18**). And they were sinning grievously when they took the Lord’s Supper (see **1 Corinthians 11:17-34**). Because of this, a number of people in the church had become sick and some had even died!

But Paul wasn’t just responding to things he learned from Chloe’s household. In 1 Corinthians he also responds to a letter the church sent to him (see **1 Corinthians 7:1**). In this letter, the church asked Paul a number of questions. Their questions led Paul to write about a wide variety of topics: marriage, sexual purity, spiritual gifts, food sacrificed to idols, proper order in worship, and the resurrection of the dead.

The entire book of 1 Corinthians demands very close study. Here are a few highlights: 1 Corinthians 5 is a great help for local churches dealing with sin among its members, 1 Corinthians 13 describes the nature of love, and 1 Corinthians 15 is a very significant chapter related to the resurrection of Christ and why Christ’s resurrection guarantees the resurrection of the Christian.

This letter clearly demonstrates how Paul helped local churches. He treated them like a good father treats his children (see **1 Corinthians 4:14-16**). He prayed for them. He sent letters to them. He sent people to the church to help them (see **1 Corinthians 4:17**). And, when possible, he traveled to the cities himself (see **1 Corinthians 4:18-21**).

2 Corinthians

2 Corinthians was probably written 2-3 years after 1 Corinthians. In 1 Corinthians, Paul strongly rebuked the church regarding various things that were happening within the church. After that letter had been written, Paul had planned to visit the church. For a number of reasons, he felt it was necessary to cancel that visit (see **2 Corinthians 1:12-2:4**). Unfortunately, these things resulted in a strained relationship between the church and Paul. It appears many in the church started to think lightly of Paul and his ministry. Some were beginning to accept other teachers. Paul refers to these other teachers as “super apostles.” This does not mean they were genuine. Paul knew they were damaging the church. For the sake of the gospel, Paul felt the need to defend his ministry to the church (see **2 Corinthians 10-12**). Paul wrote this letter to explain his actions and to prepare the church for a visit from him. This would be his third visit to the church (see **2 Corinthians 13:1**). When he arrived, Paul wanted to collect an offering from the Corinthian church for the believers in Jerusalem (see **2 Corinthians 8-9**). Other churches had been participating in this generous offering, and Paul wanted the Corinthians to give as other churches had given.

Galatians

Scholars are not certain when Galatians was written. Some believe it was Paul’s earliest letter. Why was Galatians written? What was its **occasion**? The occasion prompting this letter is easy to see. It is announced in **Galatians 1:6**. Based on the contents of this letter, it is clear that after Paul and Barnabas had planted the church in the Roman province of Galatia, false teachers had come in. These false teachers were teaching a “gospel” which was based on keeping the Law. The church in Galatia did not resist this dangerous teaching. Instead, the church was starting to accept this false gospel (see **Galatians 3:1**). Beyond this, they were no longer looking favorably on Paul and his teaching. In Galatians, Paul vigorously fights against this false teaching. He writes about true faith, walking by the power of the Holy Spirit, and the “fruit” that comes to those who are filled with the Holy Spirit.

Galatians is unique because it includes a great deal of autobiographical material. This means Paul tells his readers more about himself in this letter than in any of his other letters. He does this because his own story demonstrates that his gospel had

been accepted by the apostles in Jerusalem. His story should have helped the church reject the false gospel and to return to the true gospel.

Galatians includes important information about how all Christians are, because of Christ, counted as Abraham's heirs. This includes Jews and Gentiles. Paul's teaching on the Christian's connection to Abraham provides a great deal of help in interpreting significant Old Testament passages like **Genesis 12:1-3**.

Ephesians

Ephesians is one of Paul's four "prison epistles." The other three are Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon. Paul spent several years in Ephesus (see **Acts 18:18-21 and 19:1-41**). He knew the elders of the church well (**Acts 20:17-38**). This letter was probably written sometime between AD 60-62 during Paul's first imprisonment in Rome. The letter was delivered to the Ephesian church by a man named Tychicus (see **Ephesians 6:21-22**). Tychicus was also carrying with him Paul's letter to the Colossians (see **Colossians 4:7-8**) and his letter to Philemon. This explains why there are similarities between Ephesians and Colossians.

Why was Ephesians written? What was its **occasion**? It appears the letter was written to provide churches in towns throughout the Roman province of Asia (modern day Turkey) with a complete treatment of the gospel.

In some ways, the letter is very generic. This is not a fault in the letter. Instead, it may have been written like this on purpose. Unlike other letters written by Paul (see, for instance, 1 Corinthians, Galatians, or Colossians), Ephesians does not seem to be very specific to one particular place. The letter doesn't talk about any specific problems in the church in Ephesus. And Paul doesn't greet people by name in the church in Ephesus. These may be indications that Ephesians was always intended to be a "circular" letter. In other words, it was written for many churches. The church in Ephesus was one of the churches this letter was written for, but the letter was to be passed on to other churches. Thus, the **occasion** for Ephesians seems to be a need for God's people to more fully understand God's great actions and their responsibilities because of what God had done in saving them.

The letter to the Ephesians is evenly divided between a focus on statements of fact (see **Ephesians 1-3**) and a focus on commands based on those statements of fact (see **Ephesians 4-6**).

The facts in this letter are amazing! Paul writes about God's work for his people even before the world was created (see **Ephesians 1:4-6**). He writes about specific actions God has taken for sinful people through Christ (see **Ephesians 2:1-10**). He writes about the new "temple" God is building (see **Ephesians 2:11-22**).

The commands in chapters 4-6 include a beautiful section explaining how husbands and wives ought to relate to one another. This section demonstrates how Paul understood Christ's relationship with the church. There are also commands related to "God's armor." These verses demonstrate how Paul understood passages speaking about God and his armor in the book of Isaiah (see **Isaiah 59:17**). There are obvious connections between this book and the letter to the Colossians. These letters were probably written and delivered at the same time.

Philippians

Philippians is one of Paul's four "prison epistles" (see **Philippians 1:13 and 4:22**). The other three are Ephesians, Colossians, and Philemon. All three of those were connected. They were sent at the same time to the same general area within the Roman Empire. Philippians is in a different area. Readers can find out quite a bit about the church in Philippi from the book of Acts (see **Acts 16:6-40**). It is not certain where Paul was imprisoned when he wrote this letter. He spent two years imprisoned in Caesarea, therefore it is possible he wrote the letter from there. Some have suggested he wrote the letter when he was imprisoned in Ephesus. However, it is not at all certain he was ever imprisoned in Ephesus. And Paul was imprisoned in Rome. It seems most likely Philippians was written from Rome.

Why was Philippians written? What was its **occasion**? Paul does not refer to any major problems with false teaching (like in Galatians or Colossians) or with sexual sin (like in 1 Corinthians) in the church in Philippi. In fact, the church seems to have been very healthy. But this does not mean the church was perfect. Two women were quarreling with each other in the church (see **Philippians 4:1-3**). This issue was serious enough that Paul felt he needed to address it in his letter. But, based on the very short

reference Paul makes to this quarrel, the quarrel within the church doesn't seem to be the primary occasion prompting Paul to write and send the letter. The **occasion** prompting Paul to write and to send the letter seems to have been gifts that the church had sent to Paul in care of a man named Epaphroditus (see **Philippians 4:10-19**). Philippians was a thank-you letter from Paul to the church. Beyond this, Epaphroditus had become sick when he was with Paul. Thus, this letter is intended to explain why Paul was sending Epaphroditus back to the church in Philippi (see **Philippians 2:25-30**)

But the letter includes more than words of thanks from Paul. He warns the church to watch out for false teachers (see **Philippians 3:1-4**). He speaks about his goals for his life and ministry (see **Philippians 3:7-14**). And one of the most important statements about Christ is found in **Philippians 2:6-11**.

Colossians

Paul wrote this letter when he was imprisoned (see **Colossians 4:18**). Colossians is one of Paul's four "prison epistles." The other three are Ephesians, Philippians, and Philemon. This letter was probably written in AD 62 during Paul's first imprisonment in Rome. The letter was delivered to the Colossian church by a man named Tychicus (see **Colossians 4:7-8**). Tychicus was also carrying with him the letter to the Ephesians (see **Ephesians 6:21-22**) and the letter to Philemon. Tychicus was traveling with a man named Onesimus (see **Colossians 4:9 and Philemon 10-19**).

Why was Colossians written? What was its **occasion**? Paul had never been to the church in Colosse. However, he knew people in the area because he had spent three years in Ephesus, a large city in the same Roman province as Colosse. Paul wrote the letter because of news he received from a man named Epaphras (see **Colossians 1:7-8**). Epaphras told Paul about events that were taking place in the church at Colosse. It appears false teachers had entered the church and were confusing the believers with arguments that sounded convincing (see **Colossians 2:4-8**). These false teachers were drawing the church members away from the true gospel and toward themselves. The false teachers were pulling the Christians toward works and away from reliance on Christ. These false teachers called into question the Christians' normal eating and drinking habits and the days on which they did, or did not, worship. The false teachers also established new laws which the Colossian

Christians were to keep. The false teachers delighted in “false humility and the worship of angels” (see **Colossians 2:18**) and talked a great deal about what they had seen spiritually. According to Paul, these teachers were “not holding fast to the Head” (see **Colossians 2:19**), that is, Christ.

Colossians provides believers with the very important message that Christ is in you! He is your source of holiness. He is your strength.

1 Thessalonians

The apostle Paul, along with Timothy and Silas, planted the church in Thessalonica. Paul’s preaching ministry in Thessalonica was extremely difficult (see **1 Thessalonians 2:2**). During his three weeks of preaching in the synagogue Paul “reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and proving that it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead, and saying, ‘This Jesus, whom I proclaim to you, is the Christ’” (see **Acts 17:2-3**). The Lord graciously opened the hearts of many to receive the gospel. Unfortunately, Paul, Silas, and Timothy were forced to flee from Thessalonica because of persecution (see **Acts 17:5-9**). Paul would have liked to stay in Thessalonica longer. Paul was torn away before those in the church were firmly established in their faith (see **1 Thessalonians 2:17**).

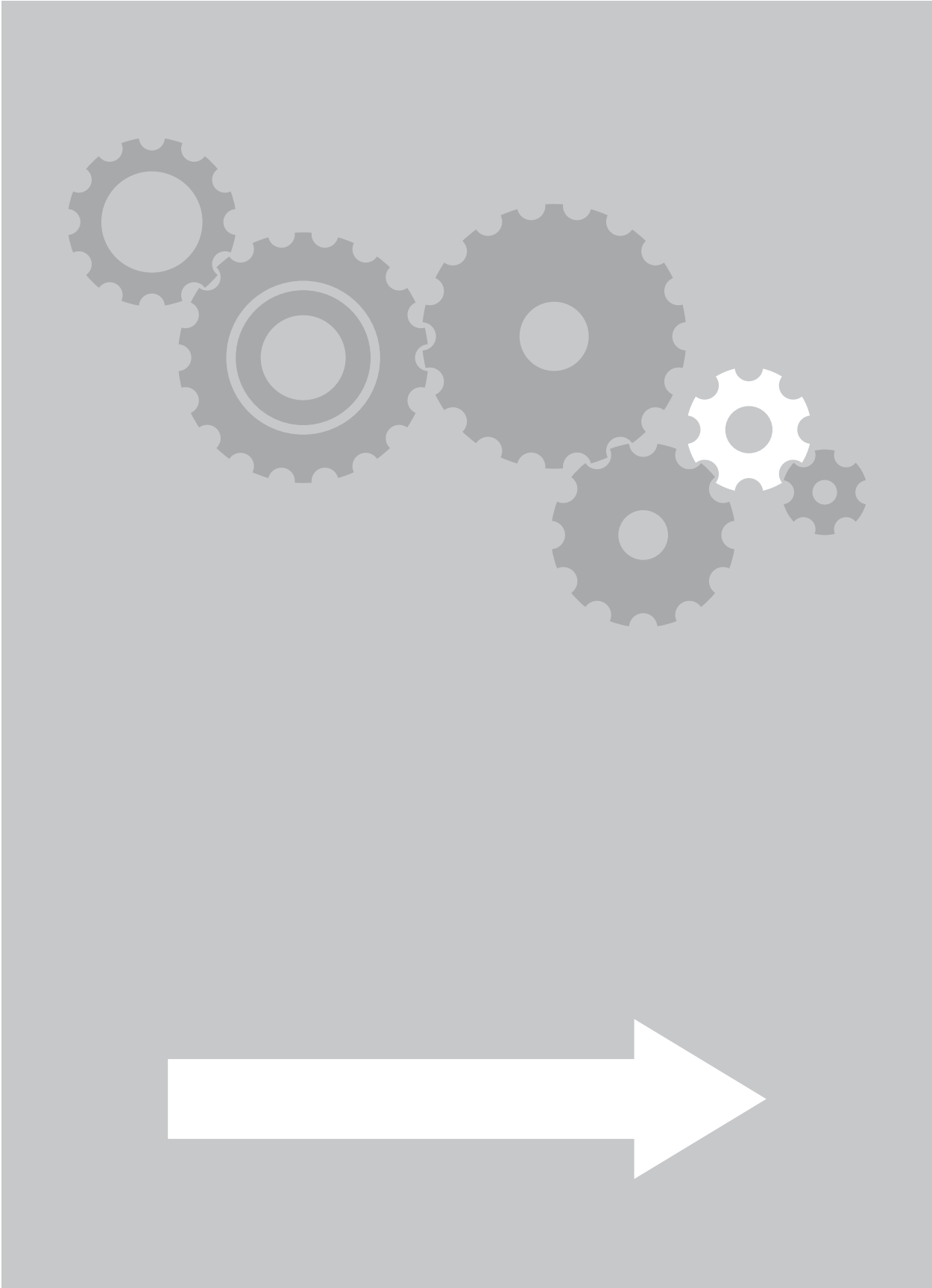
Unfortunately, Paul was not able to return to Thessalonica for quite some time. He urgently desired to return to the church. He feared that Satan would tempt them and their faith would be destroyed (see **1 Thessalonians 3:5**). But Paul was not able to return to the church. He was “hindered” by Satan (see **1 Thessalonians 2:17-18**). Satan’s hindrance prompted Paul to do what he often did when he couldn’t travel to a certain place; he sent a trusted co-worker (Timothy) instead (see **1 Thessalonians 3:1-3**). Eventually, Timothy returned to Paul with the news that the church was healthy (see **1 Thessalonians 3:6-7**). In fact the church in Thessalonica became an example to other churches in other areas (see **1 Thessalonians 1:7-8**).

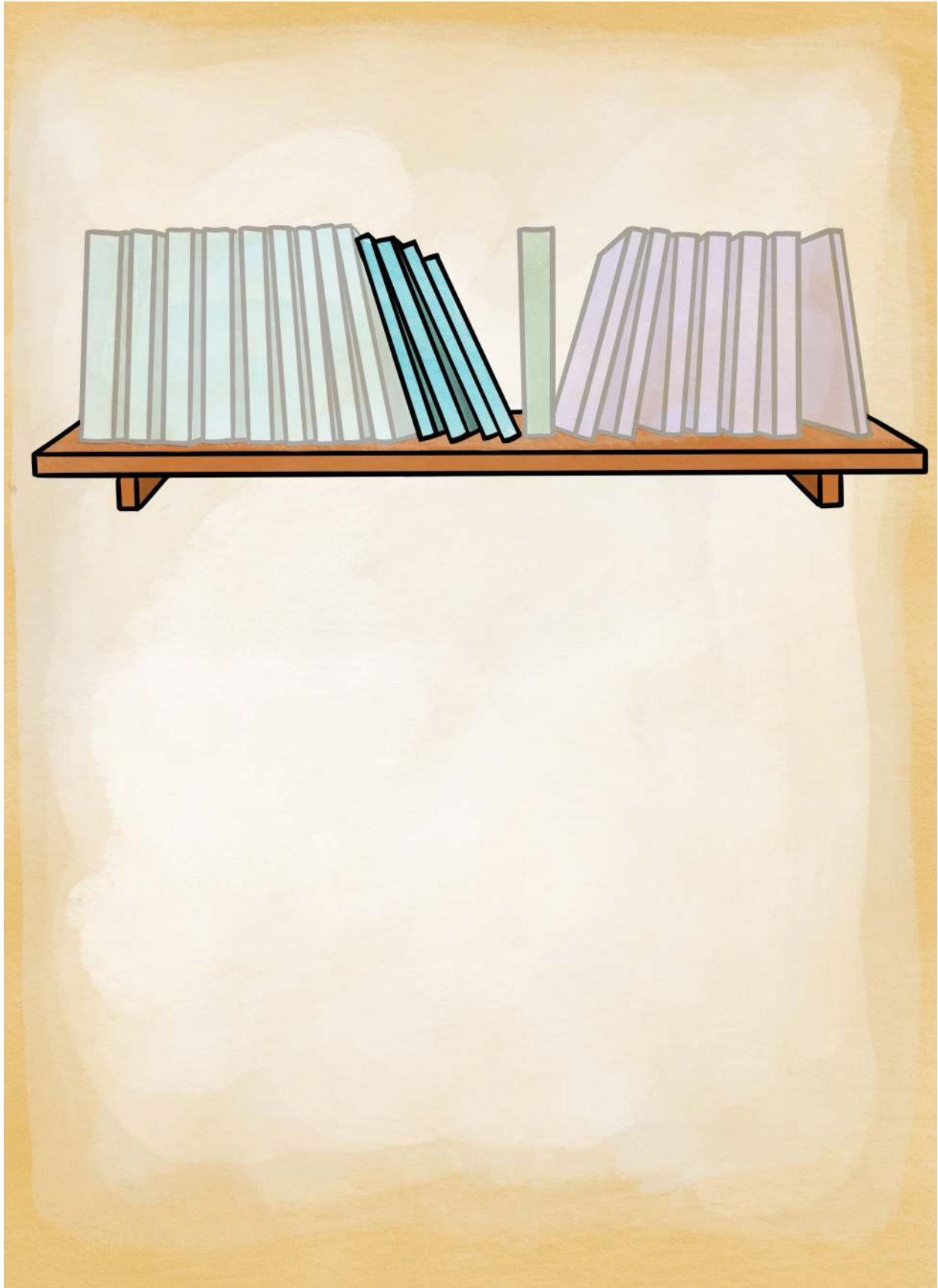
Timothy’s return prompted Paul to write his first letter to the Thessalonians. Paul sent the letter somewhere between A.D. 49-51. It was probably Paul’s second letter. In the letter, Paul proclaimed his love for the church—a love they perhaps questioned due

to his prolonged absence, expressed his joy at the discovery that they were faithfully serving the Lord, reminded the saints of truths they had learned from him earlier, and taught and encouraged the saints regarding the coming of the Lord Jesus. This letter is unique because of its focus on “the day of the Lord” (see **1 Thessalonians 4-5**).

2 Thessalonians

Why was 2 Thessalonians written? What was its **occasion**? Based on **2 Thessalonians 2:1-2**, it appears the church had been told that “the day of the Lord” had already come. In fact, based on **2 Thessalonians 2:1-2**, someone may have written a letter with these false teachings and signed Paul’s name to it! Paul did not want the church to be alarmed and he did not want them to be deceived. Paul wanted the church to know that the second coming of Christ had not yet taken place, and there were certain things that must take place before the day of the Lord (see **2 Thessalonians 2:3-12**). In this letter, Paul writes about God’s judgment (see **2 Thessalonians 1:5-12**), the second coming of Christ, the “man of lawlessness” (see **2 Thessalonians 2:3-12**), the need to work pray, the need to work hard. Paul ends this letter by saying that he was signing the letter in his own hand (see **2 Thessalonians 3:17**). He wanted the church to know that this was a genuine letter from him.





20. An overview of each letter in Paul's letter collection written to an individual.

The letters in this part of Paul's letter collection are not named after a church in a specific place. All four letters are named after the person who received the letter. This does not mean, however, that the letters are not related to the local church. All four letters are related to local churches and would have been read in local churches.

1 Timothy

Paul wrote this book to give Timothy instructions about how Timothy was to help the church in Ephesus (see **1 Timothy 1:3**). Paul wanted to come to the church, but he was delayed (see **1 Timothy 3:14 and 4:13**). For this reason, Timothy needed to do the work Paul himself would have done in the church in Ephesus. Paul was asking Timothy to do a difficult task, for the church was, at this time, very unhealthy.

Readers of the New Testament are first introduced to Timothy in **Acts 16:1-5**. Timothy traveled with Paul and helped Paul in many ways. Paul sometimes sent him to places that he could not go to himself. That is what happened in 1 Timothy. Paul sent Timothy to Ephesus because the church had begun falling apart.

First Timothy is one of three "pastoral" epistles written by Paul. Bible scholars designated this epistle as "pastoral" because the matters addressed in this letter pertain, at least in a good measure, to church oversight. But while this letter deals with many issues that are especially applicable to pastors and leaders within the church, it is not solely for those who are leaders. It is for all the church.

Paul's stated goal was that Timothy would know "how one ought to behave in the household of God" (see **1 Timothy 3:14-15**). The "household of God" is a reference to the local church. This is an important book because there is a right and a wrong way to behave in the local church. There is a right and a wrong way to organize the local church. Therefore, the local church must know the truths presented in this letter, for if they are ignored or forgotten, as they have been at many times and in many places, weakness, or even worse, the collapse of a local church, will be the inevitable result.

This letter includes instructions for many items: how to deal with false teachers, how men and women are to behave in the church, who may and may not be an elder, who may or may not be a deacon, and how to help widows in the church.

1 Timothy is, in some respects, a counterpart to the book of Romans. Romans outlines the inner workings of salvation, while 1 Timothy outlines the inner workings of the church. For a Christian to be well-grounded in the faith, an understanding of both is essential. A careful, systematic study of this book will be a great help to individual Christians and to the local churches of which they are a part.

It is significant to note that there are three letters related to the church in Ephesus in the New Testament: **Ephesians**, **1 Timothy**, and **Revelation 2:1-7**. All three of these letters present the church in different circumstances. Churches today can learn a great deal from this. In the letter to the Ephesians, the church in Ephesus seemed rather healthy. But at the time of 1 Timothy the church was very unhealthy. By the time Revelation 2:1-7, the church had “lost the love it had at first.” The “up and down” history of the local church in Ephesus demonstrates that local churches need to constantly pay attention to what is happening in the church. Just because a church was healthy five or ten years ago does not mean that it will be healthy today. Leaders must always pay attention to themselves and to the doctrine being taught in the church. Leaders must always preach the truth and watch out for false teachers.

2 Timothy

2 Timothy is very different from 1 Timothy. In 1 Timothy, Paul was giving Timothy instructions about work that needed to be done in the church in Ephesus. Paul expected that he might soon be able to travel to Ephesus himself (see **1 Timothy 3:14**). This is not the situation in 2 Timothy. 2 Timothy is not related to the church in Ephesus. It is related to Paul himself. Paul was in prison (see **2 Timothy 2:9**). He believed the time of his departure to be with the Lord was drawing near (see **2 Timothy 4:6**). Paul was giving Timothy information about his situation. He told Timothy about people who had acted with great faith and courage during the time of his imprisonment (see **2 Timothy 1:16-18**). He told Timothy about people who had deserted him (see **2 Timothy 4:10**). He asked Timothy to come to him soon (see **2 Timothy 4:9 and 21**). He also asked him to bring his books and parchments (see **2 Timothy 4:13**). The fact that Paul wanted his copies of the Scriptures is evidence that Paul, even in imprisonment,

was still actively working! He was planning to study Scripture even more! He was planning, it appears, to write more helpful things for the churches. Paul's words are a great encouragement for all believers to end their days in faith and courage.

2 Timothy includes significant verses about the nature of God (see **2 Timothy 2:11-13**), instructions for leaders in the church (see **2 Timothy 2:14-26 and 4:1-5**), warnings about difficult days to come in the last days (see **2 Timothy 3:1**). Paul also writes about the nature and the power of Scripture (see **2 Timothy 3:14-17**).

The early church unanimously testifies that Paul was put to death by Emperor Nero. But Nero and the Roman government were not able to silence Paul. He is now with Christ. And he is still speaking to those on earth through his writings. God is still using the result of Paul's imprisonment and death to strengthen the church.

Titus

Titus was written by Paul to a young man named Titus. Titus was one of Paul's helpers (see 2 **Corinthians 2:13, 7:6, 7:13-14, 8:6, 8:16, 8:23, 12:18, Galatians 2:1-3, and 2 Timothy 4:10**). Paul sent him to Crete so that Titus might "put what remained into order." This is a reference to matters related to the churches in Crete. This letter contains Paul's instructions to Titus. His main task was to "appoint elders" in Crete (see **Titus 1:5**). Paul told Titus that he must not do this carelessly. Immediately after telling Titus to appoint elders, Paul outlined standards for elders. Titus was not to appoint any men who did not meet these standards (see also **1 Timothy 3:1-7**). These standards still apply for churches today.

Paul explains a major reason why establishing elders is so important in **Titus 1:10-11**:

For there are many who are insubordinate, empty talkers and deceivers, especially those of the circumcision party. They must be silenced, since they are upsetting whole families by teaching for shameful gain what they ought not to teach.

Churches need elders because there are so many false teachers who would like to deceive the church! Carefully establishing elders is one of the ways God protects his

churches from false teaching. The elders must “hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it” (**Titus 1:9**).

Local churches today need to carefully consider passages like these. If there are no local elders, the church is vulnerable to false teaching!

But this letter speaks of much more than just establishing elders in the church. Paul speaks about the proper way to deal with false teachers. He talks about how older men and older women should serve the church (see **Titus 2:2-5**). He talks about how young married women should behave (see **Titus 2:4-5**). He talks about proper behavior for young men in the church (see **Titus 2:6**). He talks about how the people are to relate to their rulers and authorities (see **Titus 3:1**). A major emphasis in this letter is on avoiding quarrels. Paul speaks about church discipline (see **Titus 3:10-11**). And he beautifully reminds Titus of the gospel (see **Titus 3:3-7**). This small letter was initially written to help the churches in Crete. It has been preserved, by God’s grace, to help all local churches in every place. It is packed full of help for all local churches to consider and to obey.

Philemon

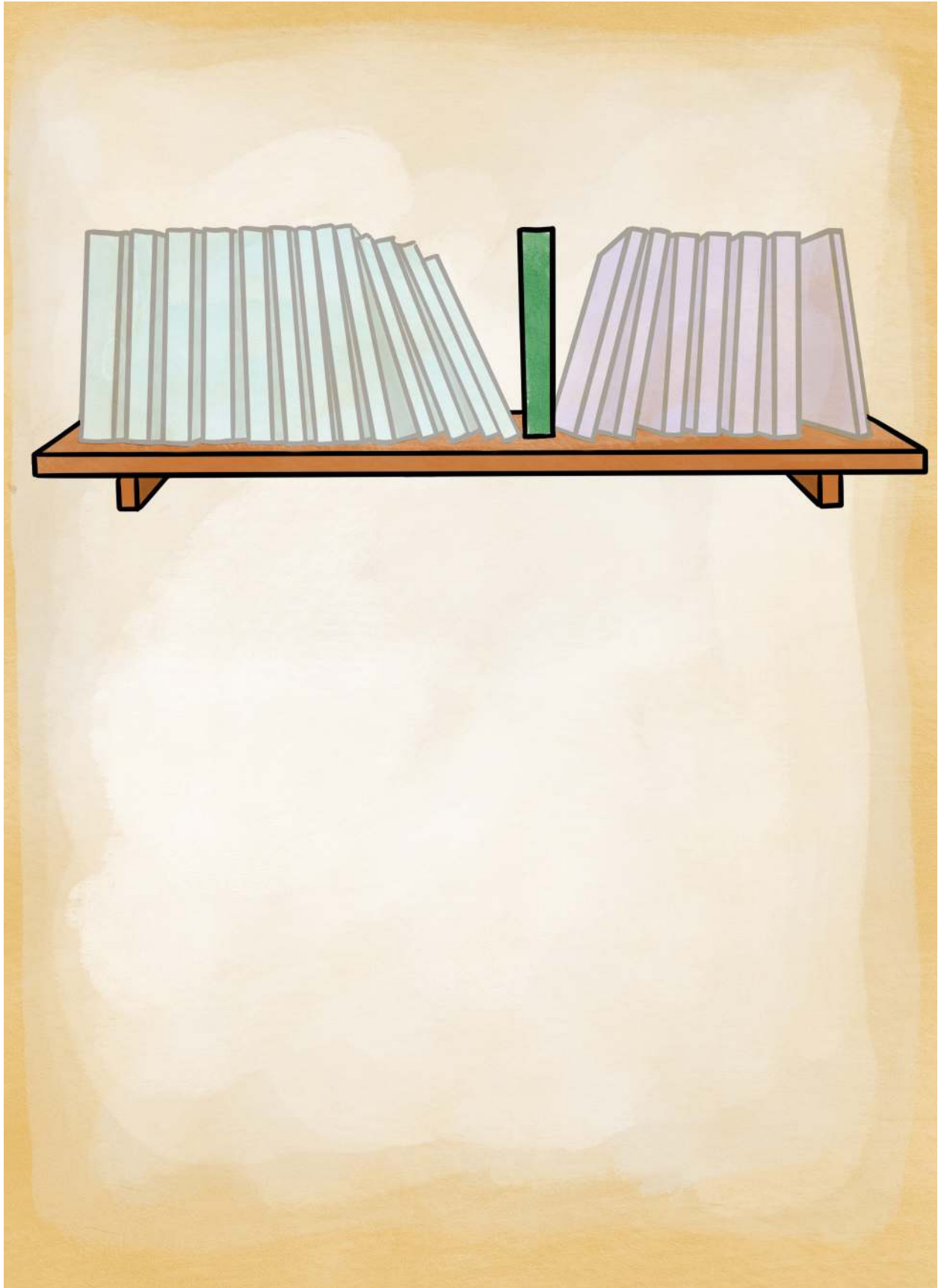
Philemon is one of Paul’s four “prison epistles.” The other three are Ephesians, Philippians, and Colossians. Philemon is Paul’s shortest letter. Even though the letter is named Philemon, Paul’s words are addressed to more than just this one man. In the greeting, Paul says that he is writing to “Philemon our beloved fellow worker and Apphia our sister and Archippus our fellow soldier, and the church in your house” (see **Philemon 1-2**). But even though Paul names “Apphia” and “Archippus” and “the church in your house”, he was clearly writing his instructions to Philemon alone. Why did he include these other names in the introduction? Paul did this because he wanted all of them to hear the contents of this letter. He wanted the entire church to hear his words to Philemon about a man named Onesimus.

Onesimus used to be Philemon’s bond-servant. However, Onesimus ran away from Philemon. Somehow, Onesimus came to Paul in Rome. He had become a Christian in Rome. He served Paul for a time period. Now, Paul was sending him back to Philemon. Paul was asking Philemon to extend forgiveness to Onesimus. But Paul

wasn't just asking Philemon to forgive Onesimus. The fact that the letter was written to the entire church demonstrates that he was asking the entire church to extend forgiveness to this man. That is why they need to hear the letter.

A man named Tychicus delivered this letter to Philemon. He was traveling with Onesimus (see **Colossians 4:7-9**). Thus, this letter was not sent months ahead of Onesimus's return to Philemon. Philemon received this letter at the very time when Tychicus brought Onesimus back to the Philemon and the church. This demonstrates the importance of forgiveness and reconciliation in the church.

The book of Philemon is connected to Colossians (see **Colossians 4:9**). The letters were sent at the same time and were delivered at the same time to the church in Colosse.



21. An overview of the letter to the Hebrews.

The letter to the Hebrews has traditionally been placed as the final letter in Paul's letter collection. This "last" position of the letter does not mean this letter is untrue or that it is the least important letter in Paul's letter collection. Hebrews is as important as every other letter in Paul's letter collection and as every other book in the Bible (see **2 Timothy 3:14-17**). The fact that Hebrews has been placed at the end of Paul's letter is a demonstration that this book is considered to be different from the other books in Paul's letter collection. For starters, the author of Hebrews is unknown. It is important to know that the author was not trying to be anonymous. Based on things which were said in the letter, it is clear the original readers of the letter in the first century certainly would have known the identity of the author (see **13:19** and **13:23**). But the author of Hebrews is not known today.

Who wrote Hebrews?

Some have argued that the Apostle Paul must have been the author. In fact, certain editions of the King James Version (a famous English translation) even included this title, "The Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Hebrews." Naturally, this title would have led generations of English-speaking people to believe Paul was the author. However, readers need to know this title was not part of the original Greek text. This title should not be taken as evidence that Paul wrote the letter. It was added to the text much later. The title does serve as evidence, however, that many people have thought that Paul wrote the letter.

There are significant differences between Hebrews and the other letters in Paul's letter collection. The author does not begin with an introduction of himself or a greeting (see **Hebrews 1:1**). However, this is something Paul does in all of his known letters (see, for instance, **Ephesians 1:1**). The author uses Greek words that Paul does not typically use. He writes in a style that is different from Paul's normal style. For instance, the author of Hebrews generally refers to the Lord using one title at a time. He refers to "Christ," or "Jesus," or "the Son." But Paul preferred combining titles and/or names when talking about the Lord. The name "Christ Jesus" is an example of this. And the author of Hebrews focuses on an aspect of Christ's **present** ministry (Christ serving as high priest) which Paul did not focus upon. None of these things prove Paul did not

write Hebrews. However, based on the differences between Hebrews and the rest of the letters in Paul's letter collection, his authorship of this book seems unlikely.

Some have argued Barnabas, Silas, or Apollos may have written the letter. While all three of these men were spiritually qualified to write the letter and may have actually written the letter, the evidence that any of these men wrote the letter is not very strong. Some have suggested that Luke might be the author of Hebrews. This is very possible. There are many similarities between the words and the writing style used in Hebrews and the words and the writing style found in the books written by Luke (Luke and Acts). In spite of the question about Hebrew's human author, Christians should not wonder whether the book is inspired. Hebrews is, like all Scripture, "breathed out by God." It should be accepted as fully authoritative. The Holy Spirit moved the author of Hebrews to write every word that was written in this great letter (see **2 Peter 1:21**).

While the name of the author is not known, certain things are known about the author. The author is able to write with authority to Jewish believers in the Lord Jesus because he himself is Jewish (see **1:1-2**). This is why he begins the book by referring to God speaking to "our fathers by the prophets." A gentile would not have said these words. The author was not an eyewitness of Christ's earthly ministry (see **Hebrews 2:3**). And the author knew Timothy (see **Hebrews 13:23**).

To whom was Hebrews written?

This book was a "word of exhortation" (see **Hebrews 13:22**) written to Jewish Christians. This is why the author writes about God speaking to "our fathers" (see **Hebrews 1:1-2**). It is not known where these Jewish Christians lived. Some have suggested they lived in Rome (see **Hebrews 13:24**). Others have suggested they lived in Jerusalem. The letter does not include enough information to know the answer to this question. In either case, however, readers need to remember that this is a letter written to a real local church in a real place.

Why was Hebrews written?

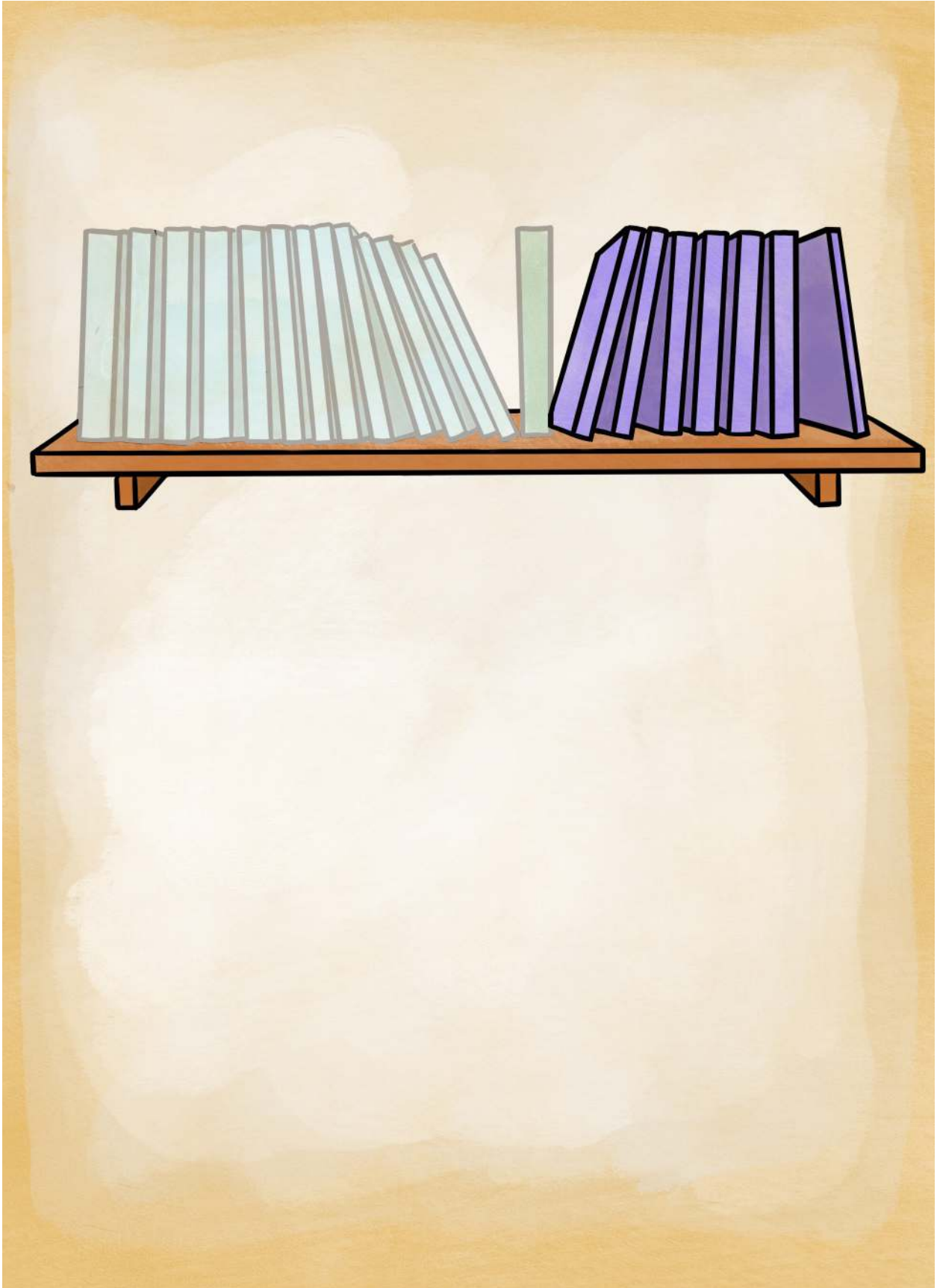
What was its **occasion**? This book was written to encourage the Hebrew Christians that they must not continue turning away from Christ. This is not a warning about something that might happen. It is a warning about something that was already

happening. Hebrews contains a great deal of information about the spiritual condition of the recipients. They were “drifting away” from Christ (see **Hebrews 2:1**). They were ignoring the salvation they had in Christ (see **Hebrews 2:3**). They had become “dull of hearing” (see **Hebrews 5:11**). Spiritually, they had “drooping hands” and “weak knees” (see **Hebrews 12:12**). There are several severe warnings in the letter (see, for instance, **Hebrews 2:1-3, 3:7-19, 6:4-12, 10:26-31, 10:38-39, 12:15-17, 12:25**).

This church had not always been weak. In the former days, they had held firm in their faith (see **Hebrews 10:32**). But they had, because of persecution, began pulling away from Christ and from one another (see **Hebrews 10:24-25**). The author was writing to remind them how far they had fallen and to call them to endurance and courage (see **Hebrews 10:32-39**). The Hebrew Christians were turning back to the keeping of the Law. They were turning back to the Jewish sacrificial system. This is why the author repeatedly declares that Christ is “better.” He is better than the angels, he is better than Moses, he is better than Aaron, he is better than the temple. He wants the Hebrew Christians to know that Christ is better than everything pictured in the Old Covenant. The Hebrew Christians were turning back to the pictures of Christ! They were doing this even though Christ himself had already come!

When was Hebrews written?

The letter must have been written prior to 70 AD (the year of the temple’s destruction by the Romans), because the author makes repeated references to the temple and the work currently going on there. If the temple had already been destroyed, the author would have been forced to refer to the temple, the priesthood, and the sacrifices in the past tense, rather than in the present tense.



22. An overview of each book in the general epistles.

It is important to understand that the books in the general epistles present the same gospel as the books in Paul's letter collection. They feel different, however, because the letters in this collection are written by four different authors and because these letters, with the exception of 1 Peter and 3 John, are not as directly "tied" to a specific local church as the letters in Paul's letter collection.

James

James is the first book in the general (or "catholic") epistles. The James who wrote the book of James is not the James who was one of Jesus's original twelve apostles (see **Mark 1:19-20**). The James who wrote this book was the half-brother of Jesus. While they shared the same mother (Mary), Jesus and James did not have the same father. James's father was Joseph. Jesus did not have an earthly father. He was born of a virgin. Even though James was Jesus's half-brother, during the time of Jesus's earthly ministry James did not believe Jesus was the Christ (see **Mark 3:31-35 and John 7:3-5**). However, Jesus appeared to him after his resurrection (see **1 Corinthians 15:7**). James put his trust in Jesus. He became the leader of the church in Jerusalem (see **Acts 15:13 and 21:18**).

The book of James is addressed to "the twelve tribes in the Dispersion" (**James 1:1**). This does not mean James is only writing to Jewish people. James is writing to all of God's people who have been scattered throughout the world. James speaks about enduring suffering (**1:2-4, 1:12-15, and 5:7-12**), the fact that true faith includes works (**2:14-26**), controlling the tongue (**3:1-12**), wisdom (**1:5-8 and 3:13-18**), avoiding sin (**4:1-12**), and prayer (**5:13-20**).

1 Peter

This book was written by Peter, one of Jesus's original twelve apostles. Peter describes his readers in an unusual way. He describes them as "elect exiles of the Dispersion" (see **1 Peter 1:1**). This is a reference to the fact that God's people are scattered around the world and are not presently in their true homeland—the New Jerusalem. This is similar to the introduction in the book of James (see **James 1:1**). 1 Peter was written to help Christians who are suffering. It provides grace to believers to

allow them to live effectively even when they are suffering trials of many kinds. Peter quotes many Old Testament passages in this book. A good summary of the book is found in **1 Peter 5:10-11**.

2 Peter

This book was also written by Peter. Peter writes about the need to “confirm your calling and election” (see **2 Peter 1:10**). He also writes about his experience at the transfiguration of Jesus (see **2 Peter 1:16-18**). Peter provides very helpful information about the nature of God’s word (see **2 Peter 1:19-21**). He declares that “no prophecy of Scripture comes from someone’s own interpretation. For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.” As in so many of the New Testament letters, Peter warns his readers about false teachers (see **2 Peter 2:1-22**). He also declares that the day of the Lord is coming (see **2 Peter 3:1-13**). This day will bring the judgment of God’s enemies and the destruction of the first heavens and the earth. The letter concludes with Peter encouraging his readers to endure to the end (see **2 Peter 3:14-18**). He declares that Paul’s writings are Scripture (see **2 Peter 3:15-16**).

1 John

This book was written by the apostle John. John builds upon themes that are also found in the gospel of John. However, 1 John was written for a different purpose. The gospel of John was written to prove that Jesus is the Christ (see **John 20:30-31**). This letter was written to help people who are already Christians (see **1 John 5:13**). It is intended to help true believers recognize false believers. It is intended to help true believers to continue walking in the truth. This letter does not appear to be written to just one church. Instead, based on the general nature of the information in the letter, it seems likely this letter was sent to a number of churches.

2 John

This short letter was written by the apostle John. The letter is addressed to “the elect lady and her children.” While it may appear this is a letter to one woman, this is almost certainly a letter to a church. The “elect lady” is the church. The “children” are the members of the church. John write to encourage the church members who have

been faithful and to warn them not to be deceived. He warns them that they must not welcome or help false teachers (see **2 John 10**). This instruction must be obeyed by churches today. If we welcome or help false teachers, we are sharing in their work (see **2 John 11**). Even though John sent this letter, he hoped to visit the church soon. This demonstrates the importance of face-to-face meetings. The letter ends in the following way: “The children of your elect sister greet you” (see **2 John 13**). This is probably a reference to another church. This is why it is referred to as “your elect sister.” This is a demonstration that churches need to be concerned for other churches.

3 John

This short letter was written by the apostle John. He writes to a man named Gaius (see **3 John 1**). As he did in **2 John 4**, John celebrates the fact that members of the church are walking in obedience (see **3 John 3-4**). John warns Gaius about a man named Diotrephes (see **3 John 9**). Immediately after this, he commends a man named Demetrius (see **3 John 12**). John hopes to visit Gaius soon.

Jude

The short letter named “Jude” was written by Jude, a brother of James and half-brother of Jesus. While they shared the same mother (Mary), Jesus and Jude did not have the same father. Jude’s father was Joseph. Jesus did not have an earthly father. Mary was a virgin when Jesus was born. Early in his letter, Jude tells his readers that he wanted to write a letter about the salvation we have received through Jesus. However, because of false teachers, he was forced to write to encourage the saints to “contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints” (see **Jude 3**). This letter includes strong words concerning false teachers (see **Jude 4-16**), Jude wants his readers to see that their deeds and their judgment were spoken about long ago. Jude then pleads with the saints to earnestly and actively persevere (see **Jude 17-23**). He encourages the saints to help those who are falling away from the true faith. Jude concludes with a beautiful benediction. This benediction is traditionally used by churches throughout the world (see **Jude 24-25**).