

You Can
STAND
The
STORM

HOW THE BIBLE
MAKES YOU ROCK SOLID

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DIANE M. KANNADY



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You Can Stand the Storm: How the Bible Makes You Rock Solid

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A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

You may have picked up this book because you're facing a catastrophic circumstance that can't be undone. My heart goes out to you. I too have been in that place of desperation. If I could take away your hurt and pain, I would. But I can't. I can only assure you that, although it may not seem like it now, you will survive this storm, and you won't always feel the way you do now. That gut-wrenching pain will subside.

I can also promise you that you are not alone. God is with you, and He sees, hears, and knows what you're dealing with. I urge you to hold tight to the Lord in the midst of your storm. As Israel's great king David wrote when storm winds roared all around him, "*O God...I will hide beneath the shadow of your wings until this violent storm is past*" (Psalm 57:1, NLT). You will make it through this tragedy by God's grace.

Although I don't want to discourage you from reading this book, I need to be honest. The book is aimed primarily at helping readers prepare for the next storm rather than helping them in their present circumstance. I don't want to limit the Lord. Something within these pages may give you a measure of relief now. But, if this volume doesn't seem to be what you need in the moment, don't discard it. Put the book aside and please revisit it at another time.

Diane M. Kannady
April 2022

PREFACE

We're living in crazy times. People are frazzled, frustrated, pressured, and fearful. There's lawlessness, division, acrimony, and deception all around us—not to mention the individual challenges all of us face as we try to make it through each day. I wrote this book to help equip you with the tools you need to survive these chaotic times. Those tools are found in the Bible. Not only does the Bible explain what's going on in our world, it gives wisdom and instruction on how to navigate through it all. God's Word "*is a lamp for [our] feet and a light for [our] path*" (Psalm 119:105, NLT).

We're nearing the end of this present age in human history. Jesus said that this period of time will be marked by increasing peril and calamity. It's going to take more than attending church or being part of a Bible study to make it through what's coming on the world. You need to know for yourself what the Bible says. Because of the seriousness of the times we're facing, Bible reading must become a priority.

Possibly you're thinking, "Please don't tell me to read the Bible. I already have too much to do!" I am going to tell you to read, but I'm also going to explain how to read effectively. I'll give you a strategy for utilizing the Bible in the most productive way so that you'll be equipped to handle the growing chaos and pressure. Every single person I know who has followed the plan for Bible reading laid out in this book will tell you that it had a dramatic effect on them and how they handle life. They'll tell you that it was, and is, the best thing they've ever done for themselves and for the people whose lives they affect.

I am well aware that any kind of reading is a challenge for many. People don't read like they used to unless it's a text message or

a Facebook post. That's actually part of the problem. We've lost the ability to focus on anything for more than a few minutes. The constant input from social media has greatly shortened people's attention span and filled our minds with constant chatter. You'll probably have to shut some of it off to find time to read. You may have to work to redevelop the ability to focus your attention on something other than a constantly changing screen. You might have to get creative. Perhaps reading the Bible online will work best for you. Or maybe listening to an audio version while you follow the text in a book will help you develop a reading habit. (I don't recommend simply listening to an audio Bible while you're driving or working out because it can easily turn into nothing more than background noise.) Becoming a regular Bible reader takes effort. But the benefits far outweigh the effort.

I had several goals as I wrote this book: One, keep it as short as possible, and two, make it as easy to read as possible. Consequently, there are many issues that I only briefly touch on. (In the book, I've recommended additional resources that address certain points more fully.) And, although you may find help for your most immediate problem, my primary aim is to prepare you for future trouble by inspiring you to read the Bible regularly. I'm not offering you an instant fix. There isn't one. But by helping you become an effective Bible reader, I'm offering you the opportunity to develop the skills that will carry you through whatever the future holds. I can guarantee you that once your present trouble ends, there's another storm on the horizon—and it may be worse. But this time, you'll be prepared.

*I*NTRODUCTION

We live in a broken world that has been badly damaged by sin. Consequently, troubles come to us all. Life's hardships sap our strength and rob us of hope. We go from feeling like we can conquer the world to being unable to get out of bed. We find ourselves not only doubting that God will help us but wondering if He even exists.

There's no way to avoid the challenges and pain of life. But it is possible to face hardship without vacillating or falling apart completely. It is possible to hold on to the confidence that you will survive and maintain the hope that your situation will get better. Do you have a Bible in your home? If so, then you have the resource you need to stand the storms of life and survive whatever difficulties come your way.

The Bible is unlike any other book in existence because it has come to us from God. Almighty God inspired the authors who penned the words written in its pages. The Bible is a supernatural book because the inspiration for its contents came from a dimension beyond this physical world. *Supernatural* means "of or relating to an order of existence beyond the visible observable universe" (Merriam-Webster 2021).

God's written Word is capable of producing growth and transformation in those who read and believe it. His Word can make you fearless in the face of trials and tribulation. The Word of God will give you real solutions to life's adversities and impart peace to your mind in the midst of the storm.

Sadly, few people reap these benefits because they don't understand what the Bible is or how to use it. In this book, we're going to address these issues and provide practical solutions that you can implement and benefit from. We can't stop difficult circumstances from invading our lives. But through the Word of God—through the Bible—we can get to the point where we aren't moved or destroyed by them. And we can learn how to thrive in the middle of the turmoil.



YOU CAN STAND THE STORM

When Jesus was on earth, He told a simple story about two houses that were hit by a severe storm. One house survived the onslaught of rain, wind, and floodwaters. The other was destroyed. The difference between the two houses was the foundation underneath each structure. One house was built on solid rock. The other house stood on sand. Jesus made it clear that each foundation was the result of the builder's response to God's Word (Matthew 7:24–27).

Through His parable, Jesus gave voice to a theme that is found from the beginning to the end of the Bible. Those who know God's Word and put it into practice can withstand the storms of life. And not only will they survive, they'll thrive in the midst of life's challenges.

A FLOURISHING TREE

Hundreds of years before Jesus talked about houses in a storm, King David of Israel composed a psalm about a man who delights *"in the law of the Lord, and on his law he meditates day and night"* (Psalm 1:2, ESV). David compared this man to a tree *"planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in its*

season, and its leaf does not wither” (Psalm 1:3, ESV). Just as trees have root systems that hold them in place when strong winds blow and can find nourishment in times of drought, those who ponder (think about) God’s Word will continually flourish in hard times.

Rooted in Christ

The apostle Paul echoed the idea of roots that sustain when he urged Christians to *“let your roots grow down into [Jesus]”* (Colossians 2:7, NLT). Paul originally wrote this passage in Greek. The Greek word translated *roots* means “to become stable” (Strong 2004). *Stable* means “firmly established” (Merriam-Webster 2021). A person who is rooted in Christ doesn’t change or fluctuate from faith to doubt when storms come his way. Nor does adversity move him from confidence in God or rob him of hope for the future. He doesn’t vacillate or fall apart. Those with deep roots *“draw up nourishment from [Jesus and]...grow in faith, strong and vigorous in the truth”* (Colossians 2:7, NLT).

We become rooted in Christ through the Bible. This unique book does more than inform us or move us emotionally. The Word of God imparts strength, joy, peace, wisdom, and faith to those who read it. The Scriptures produce inward growth and transformation that show up outwardly as our response to circumstances and our attitudes and actions toward people change. Remember, the Bible is a supernatural book. *“Every Scripture is God-breathed—given by His inspiration”* (2 Timothy 3:16, AMPC).

- Paul reported that *“the Word of God...is effectually at work in you who believe—exercising its [superhuman] power in those who adhere to and trust in and rely on it”*

(1 Thessalonians 2:13, AMPC).

- Peter the apostle instructed believers to crave the Word of God. *“As newborn babes, desire the sincere milk of the word, that ye may grow thereby”* (1 Peter 2:2, KJV). Getting milk is a baby’s top priority. He can’t survive without it and won’t stop crying until he gets it. And because he drinks his milk, not only will he survive, he’ll grow strong.

The Bible is food for the inner man. Jesus Himself said that *“man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God”* (Matthew 4:4, ESV). By comparing God’s Word to food, Jesus helps us understand the purpose and importance of the Word of God. When you eat, you take food in, and it becomes part of you. You don’t have to know how food imparts nutrients to your body that promote growth and make you strong. But you must eat the food in order for it to do its work. In the same way, you don’t have to understand how the Bible produces transformation and change in you, but you must read it in order for it to do its work. If you eat the Word of God (take it in by reading it), God’s Word will do what it is intended to do.

DON’T TELL ME I HAVE TO READ THE BIBLE!

I am well aware that reading the Bible is a struggle for many Christians. I’ve had more than one sincere person admit to me that they rarely, if ever, read their Bible. I frequently hear the following statements: “I don’t understand the Bible when I try to read.” “It’s boring and puts me to sleep.” “I don’t know where to begin reading.” “It’s overwhelming.”

We Set Ourselves Up for Failure

Bible reading is difficult, in part, because we set ourselves up for failure. We declare that we're going to get up an hour early every day and read. We oversleep on the first and second day and then throw the alarm clock across the room on day three and four. By day five, we don't even bother to set the alarm. Or we declare we're going to read ten chapters every night before we go to sleep. But, because we're so tired from a long and busy day, we quickly fall asleep. After a few more attempts, we give up.

Some of us try a "read the Bible in a year" program. We read our quota on January first and second, but then we miss several days. Before long we're too far behind to catch up. Even if we manage to complete the program, by the time we reach the end a year later, we have no idea what we read at the beginning.

When we do occasionally find time to read, we stop at every word that we don't understand and consult a dictionary or Scripture commentary. Or we spend our time reading the study notes at the bottom of the page because they're more interesting than the text itself. Consequently, we end up reading books and comments about the Bible rather than the Bible itself.

Regular, Systematic Reading

Allow me to suggest a way to read that will remedy these challenges and produce definitive results in your life: Become a regular, systematic Bible reader.

- By regular reading I mean read every day (or as close to that as possible) for a short period of time, say fifteen to twenty minutes. All of us can find that much time in our

crowded schedules at least a few days a week.

- By systematic reading I mean start at the beginning of the New Testament. Read as far as you can in your allotted time period. Leave a marker where you stop. Pick up tomorrow where you stop today. Don't worry about what you don't understand. Just keep reading. You can look up all the words that you don't understand and utilize commentaries and dictionaries at another time.
- Once you've made your way through the New Testament, read it again and again. Make reading the Bible a lifelong habit. Save the Old Testament until you've become proficient in the New Testament. (I'll address why later in the book.)

The purpose of this particular type of reading is to become familiar with the Scriptures. Understanding comes with familiarity, and familiarity comes with regular, repeated reading. As you read the New Testament over and over, you begin to see connections. You realize that a passage written in one of the epistles gives insight into a statement made in one of the gospels. You begin to recognize themes and ideas that come up over and over, which indicates they are important concepts. The Bible starts to make sense.

It can be a battle to get this reading habit going because we're all so busy, and the payoff may not be immediate. However, the Bible is a supernatural book, and it will produce change in you. You may be unaware of it at first, but those changes will show up. If you miss reading for a day or two, don't feel guilty. God's not mad at you. If you get away from reading for a week or two (or even a month or more), battle back. It's worth the effort.

People sometimes ask me how I learned the Bible well enough to teach it. I did it through regular, systematic reading of the New Testament. When I first began reading, I didn't understand most of what I read. But as I persisted, understanding came. Not only did it change my life, it has changed the lives of many others who have also become regular, systematic Bible readers.

If you commit to reading the New Testament all the way through, and stick with it, you'll be a different person a year from now and well on your way to becoming stable and unshakeable. You'll handle life differently. You won't be completely overwhelmed by life's adversities. You'll still be standing when the storm is over.



I sometimes encounter sincere Christians who consider themselves Bible readers, but they don't read in the manner I've described. Many of them are surprised to find out they aren't actually reading the Bible. This brings us to the next issue we need to address.



YOU MAY THINK YOU READ THE BIBLE, BUT...

*H*ave you ever played Bible roulette? It goes like this: You open the Bible to a random spot, read the first line your eyes land on, and the verse speaks to you. I realize that everyone, including me, can recount a time when we randomly opened to a verse, and it turned out to be exactly what we needed in the moment.

The problem with Bible roulette is that the Word of God wasn't written to be read like this because it isn't a collection of independent, unrelated verses. The Bible was not originally written in chapters and verses. Those designations were added centuries after the Scriptures were completed to serve as reference points and to make it easier to find specific passages. The Bible is actually a collection of books and letters that, like all books and letters, are meant to be read from beginning to end.

What if I write you a five-page letter and you read two sentences in the middle of page 3, one sentence at the top of page 5, and the last paragraph on page 2, and then you fold up the letter and pronounce that you've read it? Not only have you

not read my letter, you can't possibly have a good understanding of its content. And you may draw wrong conclusions about what I've written. Yet that's the way far too many of us read the most important book in the universe. We read random, isolated verses.

OF COURSE, I READ!

Although many Christians freely admit they don't read their Bible, others truly believe they do because they read daily devotionals, regularly attend Bible studies, read books about the Bible, and listen to sermons with Scriptures in them. I'm not necessarily telling you to stop these activities, but I am saying that none of them are substitutes for regular, systematic reading. Let me explain.

Daily Devotionals, Bible Studies, Books, and Sermons

Devotionals follow a similar pattern. Each page begins or ends with a particular Bible verse selected by the author who then uses the rest of the page to elaborate on the verse. He or she may give some words of explanation along with illustrative stories and examples of how to apply the verse in your life. There's nothing wrong with this approach per se. But you must understand that you're still reading random verses and not the Bible itself.

Bible studies also tend to focus on isolated passages. For many Christians, Bible study means gathering in someone's living room to read and discuss what they've read. Suppose a number of people who wanted to be doctors faithfully gathered every week and read random statements out of a medical textbook, thoroughly discussed every sentence, and shared what those words meant to them. No matter how committed they

were to their study, would you let any of those aspiring doctors operate on you or prescribe medicine for you? Probably not since you know that no matter how sincerely those would-be doctors approached their reading, they haven't actually studied the textbook. They've simply read and discussed portions of the content apart from its original context—like many of us do in our Bible studies.

Perhaps you love to read books written by gifted Christian authors, and you're careful to read all the scripture references the writers give. Or you always bring your Bible to church and diligently look up every verse that the pastor refers to in his sermon. Although your efforts are commendable, you still aren't reading the Bible. You're reading portions that have been selected by the presenter to support the point he or she is making in the book or sermon. And unless you're familiar with the setting or context in which those individual verses appear, you can't be certain that the speaker or the author's interpretation is accurate. If you haven't read and become familiar with the Bible for yourself, then you don't know enough about the context to check it out.

READING IN CONTEXT

To rightly interpret specific passages, we must consider context. Context involves more than reading the words that come just before and after a particular verse, although that is certainly important. Bible passages also have a historical context that helps explain the meaning.

- Everything in the Bible was written or spoken *by* someone *to* someone *about* something.
- Just as we speak or write to other people with the intention

of communicating information about real issues, so did the authors of the Bible.

- To rightly interpret Bible passages, we must know who is writing or talking to whom and about what.

You may wonder, “How can I possibly know those three things?” First, those questions are often answered in the text itself. That’s why you need to read more than random verses. Regular, systematic reading helps you learn context because you read entire books, not just isolated verses. Second, a good Bible teacher—one who is well-read in the Scriptures and understands the importance of historical context—can help you answer those questions.

What Does It Mean to Me?

Far too many of us have a tendency to approach the Bible from the standpoint of “What does it mean to me?” Actually, it doesn’t matter what it means to you. What matters is what the writer intended to say when, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, he put words on paper. Scripture verses cannot mean something to us that they would not have meant to the people to whom they were originally written. Of course, there are timeless truths and principles in the Bible that can be personally applied to all of us no matter when or where we were born. But knowing the historical context (who wrote to whom and why) is vital to accurate interpretation.

Without considering context, we can make the Bible say things that it doesn’t actually say. Consider two examples of taking verses out of context and altering the meaning. If you’ve been a Christian any length of time, you’ve no doubt heard both of the following verses used in sermons. But if you

aren't a regular Bible reader, you probably didn't recognize the misinterpretations.

- *“God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it”* (1 Corinthians 10:13, ESV). This verse is often used to say that God won't give you more trials than you can bear. But when we read the verse in context, we find it actually says that no temptation to sin is greater than what you can bear because God always provides us with a way of escape from the sin (1 Corinthians 10:1–12). This verse has nothing to do with God allowing tests and trials in our lives. (I provide a more in-depth explanation of this verse on pages 8 and 9 in my book *God is Good and Good Means Good*.)
- *“Give, and it shall be given unto you; good measure, pressed down, and shaken together, and running over, shall men give into your bosom. For with the same measure that you mete withal it shall be measured to you again”* (Luke 6:38, KJV). Possibly you've heard this verse quoted at offering time in a church service to encourage people to give generously. But the verse has nothing to do with money. Jesus was stating that what you give to others in terms of mercy and forgiveness will come back to you in the same degree (Luke 6:27–38).

I'm not questioning the sincerity of people who misunderstand and misuse these verses. But I am trying to challenge you to recognize the need for regular, systematic Bible reading.



To be successful at reading the Bible, not only do you need

to know how to read it, you must also understand the Bible's purpose. You will get more out of this wonderful book from God if you know why it was written and what it does for those who read it. That's our topic in the next chapter.



WHAT'S IT ALL ABOUT?

*S*incere Christians struggle with the Bible because they have inaccurate ideas about its purpose, and unrealistic expectations as to what it will and won't do for them. Desperate people sometimes ask me to give them a verse that will bring an end to whatever crisis they are facing. However, the Bible isn't a collection of quick-fix solutions for life's problems. Neither is it a self-help book designed to empower us to live an abundant life or give us principles for living a meaningful life.

I'm not saying that the information in the Bible won't help you live a better life, but that's not why it was written. The Bible was written to reveal Almighty God and His plans and purposes. It is a collection of sixty-six books and letters that reveal God's desire for a family and how He obtains His family through Jesus Christ. Every document in the Bible adds to or advances this story in some way.

THE PLAN INITIATED, THWARTED, RESTORED

The Bible opens with creation. Almighty God created men and

women to become His sons and daughters, and He fashioned the earth to be a home for Himself and His family (Genesis 1–2; Ephesians 1:4–5; Isaiah 45:18). The narrative moves quickly to the downfall of man when the first human being, Adam, chose independence from God through sin. As the head of the human race and earth’s first steward, his act of rebellion brought a curse of corruption and death to the entire race and to the family home (Genesis 3:17–19; Romans 5:12; Romans 8:20). Humanity was disqualified from sonship, and the earth was corrupted because of sin.

Immediately following Adam’s disobedience, God promised Adam (and the rest of humanity in Adam) that a Savior, or Redeemer, would one day come to earth and undo the damage (Genesis 3:15). Jesus is that Savior. God then directed men to begin to keep written records as He increasingly revealed aspects of His plan to recover His family through Jesus. Those first records grew into what is now called the Old Testament.

Early in the Bible record, the Lord identified the people group through which Jesus would come into this world—the descendants of a man named Abraham (Genesis 12:1–3). His offspring eventually became the nation of Israel (also known as the Hebrews and the Jews). The rest of the Old Testament is primarily the history of these people up until four hundred years before Jesus was born (1921 BC to 400 BC). It is a record of how God preserved Abraham’s descendants against overwhelming odds as He gave increasing information about His plan and the coming Savior. The New Testament is a record of Jesus’ coming and His work. All of its books and letters were written by men who closely observed the ministry, crucifixion, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. (I’ll say more about these men in a later chapter.)

Wise unto Salvation

The Lord inspired men to record the Scriptures so that we can understand why we need salvation from sin, how God provides it, and how it impacts our lives. Jesus came into this world to take the punishment due mankind for sin on Himself at the Cross. Through His death and resurrection, Jesus opened the way for all who believe on Him to become sons and daughters of God. To believe on Jesus means to acknowledge Him as your Savior and Lord and trust Him as the only source of salvation from sin.

“[The Scriptures] are able to instruct you and give you the understanding for salvation which comes through faith in Christ Jesus” (2 Timothy 3:15, AMPC).

“But these [Scriptures] are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah [Savior], the Son of God, and that by believing in him you will have life” (John 20:31, NLT).

God’s Word not only informs us about salvation, it is essential to producing salvation in our lives. When the Word of God is presented to us regarding the fact that Jesus died for our sins and rose from the dead, and we believe it, we experience the provision of salvation. We receive eternal life. A supernatural transformation takes place in us. The Holy Spirit, through the Word of God, imparts eternal life to our inner being, and we are literally born of God. We are changed from sinners into holy, righteous sons and daughters of God (John 3:3–5; 1 Peter 1:23; 1 John 5:1).

“But to all who believed...and accepted [Jesus], he gave the right to become children of God. They are reborn! This is not a physical birth resulting from human passion or plan—this

rebirth comes from God” (John 1:12–13, NLT).

The Scriptures show you your true purpose—to become God’s son or daughter through faith in Christ. And God’s Word assures you that your greatest need has been met—salvation from sin.

BUT I NEED REAL HELP

Possibly you’re thinking, “That’s all well and good, but I have real problems, and I need real help right now.” This is real help! You see, many sincere Christians have trouble trusting God in the storms of life because they aren’t certain He’s willing to help them. Multitudes of believers wrestle with doubts: “I’ve been too bad.” “God doesn’t love me as much as He loves others.” But when you know that God has already met your biggest need (salvation from sin), it’s a tremendous faith booster. If the Lord helped you with your most vital need when you weren’t yet part of His family, why would He be unwilling to help you with lesser issues now that you are His son or daughter? And compared to eternal salvation, everything else is a lesser issue.

“He who did not grudge his own Son but gave him up for us all—can we not trust such a God to give us, with him, everything else that we can need?” (Romans 8:32, J. B. Phillips).

Regular, systematic reading of the New Testament will produce a confidence in you that God does love you and that He will help you. As you become familiar with the New Testament, you begin to see what God has provided for you through salvation, both in this life and the life to come. And you learn how to walk in and experience this provision no matter what circumstances you face.



The Bible has real help for you. Not only does God's Word show you your true purpose and assure you that your greatest need has been met, it helps you see things the way they really are. When you learn to see reality as it truly is, you can survive anything that comes your way. What does the Bible reveal about reality? Let's answer that question next.



HOW YOU SEE WHAT YOU SEE

*L*ife's storms alone don't destroy people. If they did, none of us would survive since all of us experience hard times. It's your response in the hard times that determines whether or not you make it through. The way you respond comes out of your view of reality, or the way you see your situation. It's not what you see that makes or breaks you. It's how you see what you see. It's your perspective. If you learn to see your circumstances as they truly are according to God, you will survive the onslaught.

THE WAY THINGS REALLY ARE

When a storm hits, what you see and feel is real. However, sight and feelings can't give you all the facts in your situation because there is more going on than what you perceive with your senses. According to the Bible, there is an unseen realm, a dimension not normally visible to human beings. God, who is invisible, presides over an unseen kingdom of full power and provision that can and does affect our physical world (Colossians 1:15–16; 2 Corinthians 4:18). No matter how things look or feel at the moment, this is reality—Almighty God is with you, and nothing can come against you that is bigger than Him. The Bible reveals that:

- God is Omnipresent (present everywhere at once). There's no place God is not. This means that wherever you are, there He is (Jeremiah 23:23–24).
- God is Omnipotent (All-Powerful). This means that nothing is greater or stronger than Him, and nothing can stand against His power and might (Revelation 19:6).
- God is Omniscient (All-Knowing). He knows what is going to happen before it happens. This means that nothing takes Him by surprise or confounds Him. There is no problem for which He does not already have a plan or solution (Isaiah 46:9–10).

Not only is God Almighty with you, He is also for you. And the Lord is willing to demonstrate His bigness on your behalf. He proved it by sending Jesus to die for your sins. In the context of what God has done for us through Jesus Christ, the apostle Paul asked a rhetorical question, “*If God be for us, who [or what] can be against us?*” (Romans 8:31, KJV). Paul used this question for effect because the answer is obvious. If God willingly sent Jesus to die for you when you were His enemy because of sin, why would He be unwilling to help you now that you are reconciled to Him through the Cross (Romans 5:6–10)?

Regular, systematic Bible reading gives you a more accurate view of reality. Through its pages, you begin to see things the way they really are—God with you and for you, ready and willing to help. “*God is our mighty fortress, always ready to help in times of trouble*” (Psalm 46:1, CEV). God's Word persuades you that nothing can come against you that is bigger than Him. This new perspective enables you to respond with faith and trust in the Lord in your circumstances, which opens

the door to His help and provision.

A REAL-LIFE EXAMPLE

Consider an example from the historical record preserved for us in the Old Testament. This real-life event shows how our view of reality affects our actions in the face of a storm. This is an actual account of real people who faced a serious problem, and because of their view of reality and subsequent actions, some of them received help from Almighty God, while others did not.

Around 1490 BC, Abraham's descendants (Jews or Israelites) arrived at the border of Canaan (present-day Israel). They had recently left Egypt where, for many years, they lived as slave laborers. The Lord delivered them from this bondage through a series of mighty demonstrations of His power. Then, under the leadership of a man named Moses, the Israelites returned to their ancestral land.

Before the Israelites crossed the border, Moses sent twelve spies into Canaan on a reconnaissance mission. After a forty-day expedition, the men returned with their report. Canaan was a beautiful land of bountiful provision. But it was also a place of formidable obstacles—walled cities, warlike tribes, and unusually large people. Although all the spies agreed with the report, they had very different opinions about what to do next. Two spies, Joshua and Caleb, concluded that despite the obstacles, they should enter the land and conquer it. The other ten were certain they would all die if they tried to take possession of Canaan.

“[Joshua said,] ‘[The Lord] will bring us safely into that land and give it to us...Do not rebel against the Lord, and don't be

afraid of the people of the land. They are only helpless prey to us! They have no protection, but the Lord is with us! Don't be afraid of them!" (Numbers 14:8–9, NLT).

"[Caleb said,] 'Let's go at once to take the land,' he said. 'We can certainly conquer it'" (Numbers 13:30, NLT).

"[The other ten said,] 'We can't go up against [the people in the land]! They are stronger than we are...The land we explored will swallow up any who go to live there. All the people we saw were huge. We even saw giants there, the descendants of Anak. We felt like grasshoppers next to them, and that's what we looked like to them'" (Numbers 13:31–33, NLT).

These two vastly different assessments came out of each spy's view of the circumstances they faced. The ten spies assessed the situation in terms of what they could see. But Joshua and Caleb assessed it based on unseen realities. Even though they couldn't see Almighty God, they believed He was with them and would help them. Caleb and Joshua got this information from the Lord Himself when He commissioned Moses to lead Israel out of Egypt. The Lord God promised Moses that not only would He deliver Israel from Egypt, He would bring them safely into Canaan (Exodus 3:8; Exodus 6:6–8).

When the twelve spies gave their reports to the rest of the nation, all the people chose not to attempt to enter the land. Even though the Lord was with them to fight for them, they saw themselves as helpless. Instead of entering the land, that entire generation spent the next forty years living as nomads in a desert region between Egypt and Canaan. They were defeated, not by the tribes in Canaan, but by how they saw their situation. It wasn't the storm that beat the Israelites. It was

their perception of reality. Out of over two million people, only Caleb and Joshua eventually settled in the land God promised them.

Why Were Joshua and Caleb Different?

Joshua and Caleb were different because God’s Word shaped how they saw their situation, which affected how they responded to the storm. The historical record doesn’t give us the exact process by which Joshua and Caleb developed their view of reality. But we get a hint from something that the Lord told Joshua. When the wilderness wandering ended and the time came to again try to enter Canaan, God chose Joshua to lead the next generation of Israelites. Canaan was still a land filled with intimidating enemies. But God promised Joshua that he would be successful at conquering the land if he meditated on the Scriptures. To *meditate* means “to focus one’s thoughts on: reflect on or ponder over” (Merriam-Webster 2021).

“Be strong and courageous...Obey all the laws Moses gave you. Do not turn away from them, and you will be successful in everything you do. Study this Book of the Law [God’s written Word] continually. Meditate on it day and night so you may be sure to obey all that is written in it. Only then will you succeed” (Joshua 1:6–8, NLT).

When God spoke these words to Joshua, the Bible was known as the Book of the Law. At that time, it consisted of only five books authored by Moses during Israel’s nomadic wanderings. Joshua, as second-in-command to Moses, no doubt spent hours with Moses going over these writings. They contained specific instructions from Almighty God, as well as information about Israel’s history up to that time. Joshua’s view of reality was shaped by the Lord’s repeated promise to

deliver those who trust and obey Him, in addition to numerous historical examples wherein God gave His people victory over their enemies.

Joshua and Caleb became so persuaded of the truthfulness of what the Lord said that even when what they saw and felt contradicted the Bible, they sided with Him. God's Law dominated their thoughts and affected how they responded to their circumstances. Their response was not a formula or technique that, if worked properly, would end the trouble. It was their perspective. These two men saw things the way they really are according to God and, as a result, weren't moved by overwhelming circumstances.



Regular reading of the New Testament will change your perspective. You'll approach life with the awareness that nothing can come against you that is bigger than God, Who is with you and for you. And, like Joshua and Caleb, you'll respond to the storm with faith and trust in the Lord.

5

FULLY PERSUADED FAITH

*F*orty years after the people of Israel refused to enter Canaan, their descendants took God at His Word and crossed the border, and He safely settled them in the land despite its many obstacles. Almighty God worked in their situation by His grace through their faith. Faith opens the door to the Lord's power in difficult circumstances—power that defeats giants, moves mountains, and stills storms. Let's examine what this looked like for the Israelites and what it looks like for us.

VICTORY THROUGH FAITH

When this next generation of Israelites reached Canaan's first obstacle, the mighty walled city of Jericho, God gave Joshua what seemed like a strange battle plan. The Lord told him to order the people to march around the city once a day for six days. On the seventh day, they were to march seven times around the city and then give a great shout, after which the city walls would collapse (Joshua 6:2–5). Israel did as God commanded, the walls collapsed, and Jericho was defeated. Their victory came by God's power through their faith: *"It was by faith that the people of Israel marched around Jericho seven days, and the walls came crashing down"* (Hebrews 11:30, NLT).

The word *faith* comes from a Greek term that means “persuasion or conviction” (Strong 2004). Joshua and the Israelites were so convinced of what God said that even though they had no physical evidence to confirm it, they did as He instructed and prevailed against Jericho. They aren’t the only Old Testament people who overcame by God’s power through faith. Consider this list of exploits accomplished by others who, like Joshua and Caleb, received real help from God when they faced their storm.

“Well, how much more do I need to say? It would take too long to recount the stories of the faith of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel, and all the prophets. By faith these people overthrew kingdoms, ruled with justice, and received what God had promised them” (Hebrews 11:32, NLT).

“They shut the mouths of lions, quenched the flames of fire, and escaped death by the edge of the sword. Their weakness was turned to strength. They became strong in battle and put whole armies to flight. Women received their loved ones back again from death” (Hebrews 11:33–35, NLT).

Begging Doesn’t Work

All too often, when troubles come, God’s people go to Him and beg for help. But the Lord isn’t looking for people who beg. He’s looking for those who believe that He will help. *“The eyes of the Lord search the whole earth in order to strengthen those whose hearts are fully committed to him”* (2 Chronicles 16:9, NLT). When we read this verse in its entire context, we find that a fully committed heart is one that trusts God and believes His Word. Regular, systematic Bible reading will produce in you the kind of faith that believes what God says no matter how

fierce the storm.

FAITH AND GOD'S WORD

If you have been a Christian for any length of time, you've probably heard the statement: "*So then faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God*" (Romans 10:17, KJV). Faith comes to us through God's Word because the Scriptures reveal Almighty God. The Bible shows us what He is like and how He works in the lives of His people. Through His written Word, the Lord convinces us of His power, His goodness, and His faithfulness. Faith, or trust, is the response of our heart to this information. How much faith you have, how strong your trust in God is, directly relates to how well you know Him through His Word.

You can't believe what you don't know. And if you aren't a regular, systematic reader of the Bible, then there's a lot you don't know. There are over 31,000 verses in the Bible. Even if you've read 1,000 of them and can quote hundreds of them, that still leaves 30,000 verses that are unknown to you. Moreover, you have little understanding of the context of verses that you do know.

I'm Standing on the Word...

I sometimes encounter Christians who tell me they're believing God for something and standing on His Word. By this they mean they're expecting God to fulfill what they desire in their circumstance. They base this expectation on a particular verse, which they then quote to me. All too often, since I am a regular Bible reader and have been for many years, I recognize that they've taken the verse completely out of context and are misapplying it in their situation. Consequently,

they're expecting God to do for them something that He hasn't promised to do, and they're probably going to be disappointed.

There's a lot of talk in Christian circles about victory and overcoming. There's nothing wrong with such talk since the Bible uses these and other related terms to describe Christian life. However, some misinterpret these concepts to mean that we can banish all trouble from our lives and move any mountain that stands in our way. But that's not so. We live in a sin damaged world and troubles come to all of us (John 16:33). Some mountains of trouble can be moved. Some you can avoid. Others you have to climb over or tunnel through. If you're trying to move a mountain that requires climbing, you may not get the help you want because you're asking God to do for you what He has not promised. Regular, systematic Bible reading helps you discern how to handle specific situations and recognize which mountains can and can't be moved.

I Know I Read a Verse Somewhere...

Occasionally I come across someone who tells me what they think about a certain subject, and then they refer to the verse they believe supports their position. They admit they don't know where the verse is found and can't remember exactly how it goes. Nonetheless, they assure me that the passage is definitely in the Bible somewhere. Here's what I want to ask: How can they be certain that the verse says what they presume it says if they have no idea where to find it? What if their memory is faulty or they've taken the verse out of context? What if this mystery verse doesn't even exist? And unfortunately, it often doesn't, so they also are basing their faith on something God never said.

I realize that we all read passages and can't remember where we saw them. But if you are a regular, systematic reader, you have a better chance of locating the verse. You can narrow your search because you know where you've been reading recently. And as you become more and more familiar with the New Testament, you develop a general idea of where specific verses are located.

I Heard a Testimony on Christian TV...

In the face of life's hardships, many of our efforts to find help and obtain relief are based on the testimony of others rather than on what God Himself says in His Book. We listen to someone describe what they did in their difficulty and how it worked for them. So, we try it too. But that's not faith. We're simply copying another person's behavior. There's nothing wrong with being inspired by testimonies, but they're no substitute for the faith that comes from reading the Word of God.

FAITH IS CONFIDENT

When we examine the Bible record, we find that the people who received God's help in their circumstances had fully persuaded faith and were completely convinced that God would keep His Word to them. They didn't waver or doubt that He would come through for them, even when their situation worsened.

Abraham fathered a child with Sarah, a barren woman, when both were too old to have children. As we study their story, we learn that the Lord promised them a son and then repeatedly stated His promise until their faith grew to the point where they had no doubt. Knowing what God vowed to do for them gave Abraham and Sarah confidence.

“No unbelief or distrust made him [Abraham] waver or doubtingly question concerning the promise of God...[He was] fully satisfied and assured that God was able and mighty to keep His word and to do what He had promised” (Romans 4:20–22, AMPC).

“Because of faith also Sarah [Abraham’s wife]...received physical power to conceive a child, even when she was long past the age for it, because she considered [God] Who had given her the promise, reliable and trustworthy and true to His Word” (Hebrews 11:11, AMPC).

All too often, Christians try to trust God for help without the persuasion that comes from knowing what He has and hasn’t promised to do in their circumstances. The Lord reveals His will (what He wants to do) in the midst of the storm through His written Word. Almighty God assures us that when we ask for help according to His will (as revealed in the Bible), He hears us.

“And we can be confident that he will listen to us whenever we ask him for anything in line with his will. And if we know he is listening when we make our requests, we can be sure that he will give us what we ask for” (1 John 5:14–15, NLT).

Although the Scripture doesn’t necessarily give details specific to our individual situations, it gives general principles and promises that assure us of the kind of help God wants to provide. Discerning God’s will is a topic for another book. My point now is that confidence comes from knowing that your request is consistent with what God says in His written Word. But if you don’t know what the Bible says, then you can’t be certain that what you’re asking is in agreement with His will. And you won’t be able to maintain your confidence when storm

winds blow. Faith that stands up to the storm is fully persuaded faith.

You Can't Believe If You're Not Sure

Our faith is continually challenged in the hard times. When difficult circumstances don't quickly change, we get bombarded with tormenting thoughts: "Why hasn't God moved in my situation?" "Why isn't this working?" "What am I doing wrong?" Often, competing voices speaking in the name of the Lord rise up with varying ideas about His will, along with what we should or shouldn't do to get an answer from Him. And every voice seems to have a Bible verse that supposedly supports their particular idea. Hurting people desperately try to implement these various options, hoping that one will bring results:

- "You left a door open and let the devil in. That's why you're in this mess!"
- "You have a generational curse that must be identified and broken before you can be delivered!"
- "You missed a tithe payment and sowed lack in your life. Now you're reaping what you sowed!"

Which one of them is right, if any? The only way you can know for sure is to read the Bible for yourself. You can't believe what you don't know, and you can't be confident if you aren't certain. However, when we know what God's Word says because we've read it, "*we will no longer be like children, forever changing our minds about what we believe because someone has told us something different*" (Ephesians 4:14, NLT). Regular, systematic reading of the New Testament will

produce in you an unshakeable confidence in the Lord since you know what He has promised to do for you in the midst of your storm.



In the next chapter, we're going to address another factor that is vital to surviving life's trials. You must learn to live your life looking at Jesus, the source of your faith.



JESUS REVEALED

When Jesus was here on earth, He had a tremendous influence on the people close to Him. Consider one example. Not long after the Lord left this world, two of His original followers, Peter and John, healed a lame man in Jesus' name (Acts 3:1–11). Their actions angered the religious authorities, who arrested and jailed the men overnight. The next day, when these religious leaders questioned their prisoners, they were amazed at how Peter and John responded.

“When the [religious] Council saw the boldness of Peter and John, and could see that they were obviously uneducated non-professionals, they were amazed and realized what being with Jesus had done for them!” (Acts 4:13, TLB).

Being with Jesus for three-and-a-half years gave Peter and John a demonstrable confidence (persuasion or faith) that enabled them to stand strong in the face of a formidable circumstance. Even though Jesus is presently in Heaven, He can affect our lives just as He did the lives of these first century men. Our Lord does this through the Bible, especially the New Testament, which was written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit by men who walked and talked with Him, including John

and Peter.

LOOKING UNTO JESUS

Faith comes to us through the Word of God because it reveals what God is like and how He works. The Lord Jesus Christ is God's clearest revelation of Himself to mankind. Jesus is called the Word of God, the Word made flesh.

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God...And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us” (John 1:1; John 1:14, ESV).

“Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son” (Hebrews 1:1–2, ESV).

The New Testament instructs Christians to live with *“our eyes fixed on Jesus the source and goal of our faith”* (Hebrews 12:2, J. B. Phillips). We fix our eyes (fasten our attention) on Him in the pages of the Scriptures. Jesus Christ, the Living Word, reveals Himself through the written Word, the Bible. Looking at Jesus, as He is unveiled in Scripture, produces an unshakeable faith in our hearts that can withstand every challenge that comes our way.

If you haven't read the New Testament, then you haven't truly seen Jesus. I'm not implying that you don't know Him in a saving way. I'm saying that you can't possibly know Him in His fullness with a faith that doesn't waver in the storm. We may not realize it, but much of what we think we know about the Lord is based on subjective experience—how we feel and what we see in the moment. If we feel good and all is well in our lives, then we're convinced of God's love and care for

us. But when what we see and feel changes, our confidence in Him vanishes. The Lord Jesus Christ does not reveal Himself through our ever-changing emotions and circumstances. He reveals Himself through His written Word. The more you read, the more clearly you see Jesus, the better you know Him, and the stronger your faith.

While far too many sincere people misguidedly base their faith on what they see and feel, others rely on supernatural occurrences—such as dreams, visions, and voices—supposedly from the Lord. The Bible clearly states that God does sometimes communicate with His people through these kinds of supernatural manifestations. Nevertheless, the Bible also makes it clear that there are counterfeit supernatural occurrences. Therefore, we must judge any supernatural demonstration according to the written Word of God. Any genuine manifestation from the Lord will be fully consistent with the Scriptures.

If you aren't familiar with the Bible (and you are not if you don't read regularly), then you aren't equipped to judge whether or not a supernatural occurrence is genuine. The Bible is our only fully accurate, completely reliable revelation of the Lord God. Not only does unfamiliarity with what the Bible actually says prevent you from developing the faith you need to stand the storm, it's dangerous because you are ripe for deception.

DECEPTION

Shortly before Jesus was crucified, He listed some signs that will indicate His second coming is near. One of those signs is religious deception, specifically false christs and false prophets who will deceive many through counterfeit signs and wonders.

“Don't let anyone mislead you. For many will come in

my name, saying, 'I am the Messiah.' They will lead many astray" (Matthew 24:4–5, NLT).

"For false messiahs and false prophets will rise up and perform great miraculous signs and wonders so as to deceive, if possible, even God's chosen ones. See, I have warned you" (Matthew 24:24–25, NLT).

False christs

The Bible has much to say about world conditions at the time of Christ's return. Scripture describes a worldwide system of government, economy, and religion that will be controlled by a Satan-inspired and Satan-empowered man who will bring much destruction to this planet (Revelation 13). A universal antichrist religion will welcome this final world ruler and embrace him as a savior—the ultimate false christ.

These conditions won't come out of a vacuum. They are setting up now. We're living in a time when a lot of people are making contradictory claims about who Jesus is and why He came to earth. A false world religion is presently under development. Although this religion is fundamentally opposed to orthodox Christianity, it sounds Christian because it cites Bible verses that are taken out of context and misapplied. Are you familiar enough with the New Testament that you could recognize a misquoted and misused verse about Jesus?

This new form of Christianity seems much more loving and nonjudgmental than orthodox Christianity. It maintains that what you believe and how you behave is less important than the fact that you are spiritual, sincere, and trying to be a good person. This counterfeit Christian religion stresses inclusivity and diversity. Sadly, those words have been redefined to mean

that if you think a particular belief, opinion, or behavior is wrong for any reason, then you're a bigot and a hater and definitely not a true Christian. Are you able to address these kinds of spurious charges to sound doctrine with accurate information from the Bible?

We live in a time when absolute truth as a concept has largely been discarded by our culture. It's not unusual to hear people say: "That's your truth, not mine." Or "I'm trying to live my truth." But there is no such thing as your truth and my truth. Truth is objective. *Objective* means "expressing or dealing with facts or conditions as perceived without distortion by personal feelings, prejudices, or interpretations" (Merriam-Webster 2021). Truth isn't based on our feelings or opinions, and it's not subject to change. Two plus two equals four whether or not you feel it or believe it.

In the Western world, we have raised several generations of youth to whom objective facts no longer matter. They believe that what matters is how you feel. Every year, the *Oxford Dictionary* selects an international word of the year to show ways that our language is changing in response to current events. *Post-truth* was the word chosen for 2016. *Post-truth* is defined as "relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief" (Oxford Languages 2021). Sadly, such thinking has crept into Christian circles. A Barna Research Group Survey (2016) reported that 40% of practicing American Christians no longer believe in absolute truth. They base what they believe on how they feel.

Accurate knowledge from the Bible is our only protection against lying signs, false christs, and false doctrine. The Bible shows us the Truth. Truth is embodied in a Person—the Living

Word, the Lord Jesus Christ—who is revealed in the Truth, the written Word of God. Jesus Himself declared, “*I am the Way and the Truth and the Life*” (John 14:6, AMPC), and “*Your Word [Father God] is Truth*” (John 17:17, AMPC).



Not only does regular, systematic reading help you get to know the real Jesus and see Him as He truly is, it helps you keep your attention focused on Him.



KEEP YOUR FOCUS

*I*ntense storms put pressure on our faith in God. Remember when Jesus invited Peter to come and walk on the Sea of Galilee while a strong wind was blowing and churning up waves? Peter climbed out of his fishing boat and started toward Jesus. As long as he kept his eyes on the Lord, he was able to walk on the water. *“But when he looked around at the high waves, he was terrified and began to sink”* (Matthew 14:30, NLT). Jesus saved His friend but rebuked him for his doubt and lack of faith. Peter believed in Jesus but not enough to trust Him fully when the wind and waves looked really bad. His faith had not yet developed to the point where he could stand up to the storm.

Far too many of us are like Peter. We start out strong, but over time what we see and feel draws our attention away from the source of our faith, and we begin to doubt. If you’re going to stand up to the tempest, then you must learn how to keep your focus.

YOU NEED DEEP ROOTS

When Jesus was on earth, He often used short stories (parables) to convey spiritual truths. In one such parable, the

Lord compared the preaching of God’s Word to a sower who sows seed. Through this parable, Jesus made it clear that each person’s response to the message has a direct bearing on how much the Word of God affects their life. Jesus spoke of “*those who hear the message and receive it with joy. But...their roots don’t go very deep. At first, they get along fine, but they wilt as soon as they have problems*” (Mark 4:16–17, NLT). To survive the hard times, you must have deep roots that will prevent you from wilting because of what you see and feel in your circumstances. Deep roots develop as you focus your attention on Jesus and learn to keep it there.

Meditate on God’s Word

Christians are admonished to live their lives “*looking unto Jesus*” (Hebrew 12:2, KJV). The Greek word that is translated “looking unto” means “to consider attentively” (Strong 2004). When you consider something, you take time to reflect on and carefully think about it. You actually meditate on it. When you meditate, you contemplate, ponder, or carefully consider a thought or an idea. The Greek word used for *meditate* means “to revolve in the mind” (Strong 2004).

This is not some type of new age practice where you imagine Jesus in your mind. We meditate on the Lord by taking time to think about Him as He is revealed in the pages of the Scripture. We ponder what Jesus said and did and think about His character and power. Regular, systematic reading of the New Testament helps you do this. Not only does continual reading help you get familiar with the Bible as it increasingly reveals Jesus, it also keeps the Scriptures fresh in your mind. Therefore, as you go about your day, you have something to meditate on, think about, and carefully consider. And over time, your perspective begins to come in line with the way things really are according

to God. You start to automatically think in terms of what He says.

Have you ever spent a lot of time with someone and later realized that you picked up a few of their mannerisms? Or have you noticed that if the last image you see before you close your eyes at night is unsettling or frightening in some way, that's all you can think of as you try to go to sleep? Human beings are made in such a way that we are influenced by what we look at and where we place our attention. And if you don't make an effort to keep something at the forefront of your attention, it gradually becomes less distinct and fades away.

God intends that we be influenced and affected by Him as we live our lives looking at Him through His written Word. When you look at the Word of God repeatedly—read it regularly and make an effort to think about it—God's Word has a lasting effect on your mind. Remember, the Bible is no ordinary book. It's supernatural. It works in you and imparts strength as it persuades you of God's goodness and faithfulness. In other words, it helps you grow deep roots.

JUST CONFESS THE WORD!

Earlier in the book, we looked at two Old Testament passages that connect meditating on God's Word with surviving hard times. I pointed out in the first chapter that David wrote a psalm that compares a believer who continually meditates on God's Word to a flourishing tree. This person has a root system that holds him in place in the storm and draws up water in times of drought (Psalm 1:1–3). In the fourth chapter, I noted that the Lord told Joshua that if he meditated in the Scriptures, he would be successful in every challenge he faced as he led Israel into Canaan to conquer and settle (Joshua 1:8). The Hebrew

word for *meditate* used in these passages literally means “to mutter.” When used figuratively, it means “to ponder or carefully consider” (Strong 2004).

Unfortunately, because the literal translation of the Hebrew word means to mutter, some have turned the concept into a formula: Just say the right words enough times and God will come through for you. Meditating on the Scriptures is not about muttering words. Meditation involves making an effort to think about what you’ve read until it produces transformation in your perspective. By carefully considering the Word of God, you become persuaded that there is more to reality than what you see and feel in the moment. This persuasion (faith) then affects how you talk about your circumstances and the way you respond to the storm, not because it is a technique aimed at producing a result, but because your view of reality has changed.

We get insight into the value of meditating on God’s Word from something Paul wrote to believers who were facing a huge storm of increasingly severe persecution. The apostle reminded them that no matter what came their way, they had what they needed to deal with it because Almighty God was with them. Hoping to inspire confidence in his readers, Paul cited a declaration that the Lord made to the Israelites as they prepared to enter Canaan after the previous generation failed to do so (Deuteronomy 31:6–8). The Lord promised to fight for this new group and urged them not to fear.

*“For **God has said**, ‘I will never fail you. I will never forsake you.’ That is why **we can say** with confidence, ‘The Lord is my helper, so I will not be afraid. What can mere mortals do to me?’”* (Hebrews 13:5–6, NLT).

Pay close attention to the phrases that I put in bold lettering. God has said something so that we may say something. Notice that what we say is not a word-for-word quote of what God originally said. The reader has read the verse, thought about or meditated on it, and come to a settled conclusion that has reshaped his perspective and affected the way he responds to trouble. With this new point of view, he is able to confidently declare that he's not afraid because he is certain that God Almighty will help him.



Regular reading helps you learn to keep your focus on Jesus, the source of faith, as your trust in Him develops and your view of reality changes. You grow deep roots that can sustain you in the hard times.

“Blessed is the man who trusts in the Lord, whose trust is the Lord. He is like a tree planted by water; that sends out its roots by the stream, and does not fear when heat comes, for its leaves remain green, and is not anxious in the year of drought, for it does not cease to bear fruit” (Jeremiah 17:7–8, ESV).



DISTRACTIONS

*I*n His parable about the sower who sows seed, Jesus mentioned another type of hearer for whom God’s Word is ineffective. This hearer allows “*the cares and anxieties of the world, and distractions of the age...[to] creep in and choke and suffocate the Word, and it becomes fruitless*” (Mark 4:19, AMPC). The Greek word translated as cares or worries comes from a term that means “to draw in different directions” or “to distract” (Vine 1996). All sorts of distractions rise up to oppose us and draw our attention away from the source of our faith—Jesus, the Word of God. Successfully surviving the storms of life involves recognizing and dealing with these distractions.

THE BATTLE IN YOUR MIND

Sincere Christians try desperately to trust God in the trials and tribulations of life. But their faith is constantly challenged, not just by the wind and waves they can see and feel, but by the thoughts that bombard their minds. In the hard times, the biggest battle takes place in the mind. We have a very real enemy whose tactics are mental; the devil presents our minds with lies about God, ourselves, and our circumstances in an attempt to steal the Word of God (the seed) from us (Mark 4:15;

Ephesians 6:11–12).

- “You’re not going to make it. You’re a worthless failure. You deserve what’s happening to you. You’ve messed up too many times. No one cares about you, not even God. You’re going to die alone. Why don’t you kill yourself and get it over with?”
- “No one else has it this bad. You deserve better than this. You try harder than everyone else but end up with nothing. You’re a fool for serving God. This is His fault. He’s been unfair to you. It’s not worth it to serve God.”

If you can’t answer these mental challenges and gain control of your mind, then you won’t stand the storm. And if you aren’t familiar with the Bible or able to assess your circumstances according to what God says, then you won’t have the answers you need. Familiarity with God’s Word is critical to winning this mental battle. If you don’t know what God says about you and your circumstances, and aren’t persuaded of His faithfulness to keep His Word, then these distracting thoughts and emotions will choke what little faith you have.

Recognize the Process

When we face difficult, challenging circumstances, an automatic process begins. We see the storm, which stimulates our emotions. We feel anxious and afraid. Thoughts begin to fly through our head: “What am I going to do?” “How will I survive?” We all have a tendency to answer these questions based only on what we see and feel in the moment. Then we let the emotions and thoughts lead to even more dire thoughts that further stir us up emotionally. As emotions and thoughts feed each other, the way we talk to ourselves gets crazier and crazier.

- “How can anyone my age possibly get a job in this economy? I’ll never find another job. My neighbor was in a similar situation, and he lost everything!”
- “If my wife wasn’t so bad at handling money, we wouldn’t be in this situation! It’s all her fault! Why did I marry her in the first place?”
- “If I can’t pay my bills, I’ll lose my house. My family will end up living in a box in an alley. Then we’ll starve or freeze to death!”

In another teaching Jesus gave, He addressed how to deal with this spiraling process when He told His disciples not to worry about life’s necessities (Matthew 6:25–34). The Lord began His admonition with these words, “*So I tell you, don’t worry about everyday life—whether you have enough food, drink, and clothes*” (Matthew 6:25, NLT). *Worry* is the same Greek word used for “distracting care” in Jesus’ parable about the sower (Mark 4:19, Strong 2004). In other words, our Lord was saying don’t allow yourselves to be distracted by your circumstances, or keep asking yourself how will you get food, clothing, and shelter. He urged His listeners to take note of the birds and flowers that eat and are clothed because God provides for them. Jesus reminded His audience that they matter to Almighty God more than birds and flowers.

With this illustration, Jesus gives us some very practical instructions on how to deal with seed-destroying distractions. When you’re facing lack, feeling anxious, and thoughts begin to fly, you must exercise your will and put your attention back on the way things really are according to God. Instead of focusing on and talking about what you see and feel, begin to talk to yourself about your loving Father. Remind yourself that

just as He takes care of flowers and birds, He'll take care of you. In the face of a storm of lack, it's not unreasonable to ask yourself where provision will come from. But if you engage that thought, you must be able to answer it according to the Word of God. Jesus gives us the correct answer: Your heavenly Father will help you.

Jesus was not offering a formula for solving the crisis: Just stop saying certain words and start speaking other words and your problem will go away. This has nothing to do with a method or a technique. It's about changing your view of reality and learning to see your circumstances the way they really are. This is reality—Almighty God, who is also your Father, is with you and for you. And He will get you through the storm until it passes over.

CONTROL YOUR MIND

You cannot let your thoughts run wild. You must learn to control your mind. When I say control your thoughts, I don't mean that you never have another negative or doubt-filled thought. I mean that you learn to recognize thoughts that contradict God's Word and know how to answer them according to what God says. This is why it is so important to become a Bible reader. You can only control your thoughts with what is already in your mind. If you have not filled your mind with the Word of God through regular Bible reading, then you will lose the mental battle.

When troubles come and that process of sight, emotions, and disturbing thoughts begins, you must choose to bring your attention back to God and His Word. That's what Jesus meant when He exhorted His followers to look at the birds and flowers. Put your focus back on reality as it truly is. You have a heavenly

Father who takes care of those who belong to Him.

You Need an SOS

I encourage people to have an SOS, or a Sight-on-Savior phrase, that will help them pull their focus back to the way things really are. I personally know and can quote multitudes of Bible verses. But, like you, I also know what it feels like to get devastating news and suddenly be faced with something insurmountable. I've experienced the swirling emotions and the wild thoughts. In those times, my SOS phrase is, "Praise the Lord, this isn't bigger than God." I'm not making an emotional expression of joy. Rather, I'm acknowledging the bigness of God. This also stops anything that is contrary to God's Word from coming out of my mouth, taking control of my mind, and driving my actions.

THE SWORD OF THE SPIRIT

All of us have issues in our mental and emotional makeup. We were born into a fallen world, raised by flawed human beings, and negatively affected by many life experiences. These various factors worked together to shape us for good and for bad. Consequently, all of us have weaknesses in our soul (mind and emotions) that can make life more difficult in the hard times. They affect how we interpret life's events as well as how we respond to them. If you view yourself as a failure because of certain thought patterns that developed as you were growing up, then you'll face every challenge through that mental and emotional filter. These preconceived viewpoints, these thought patterns that are unhealthy, self-destructive, and counterproductive, also make us vulnerable to particular lies and misinformation in the midst of the storm. Regular reading helps you recognize and reject these lies.

An in-depth discussion of this topic would require another book. Here's the point for our present topic: The Bible is a supernatural book. It works or effects change in those who repeatedly read it. If you become a regular Bible reader, God's Word will expose flaws in your makeup that are unknown to you but need to be dealt with. The Scriptures will also help you identify lies and misinformation that contribute to unhealthy thought patterns in your mind. The Bible is the particular instrument that the Holy Spirit uses to shape and mold our character. God's Word is His sword (Ephesians 6:17).

“For the word of God is full of living power. It is sharper than the sharpest knife, cutting deep into our innermost thoughts and desires. It exposes us for what we really are” (Hebrews 4:12, NLT).

“And all of us...[because we] continued to behold [in the Word of God] as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are constantly being transfigured into His very own image in ever increasing splendor and from one degree of glory to another; [for this comes] from the Lord [Who is] the Spirit” (2 Corinthians 3:18, AMPC).

Follow Jesus' Example

As the Word of God effects increasing change in us, we grow more Christlike in our responses. Jesus is our example of how sons and daughters of God relate to their Father in Heaven. Do you remember another time when Jesus and His disciples encountered a horrific storm while crossing the Sea of Galilee? The boat took on water and was in danger of sinking. The crew was terrified, but Jesus was unmoved. He knew that His heavenly Father was with Him and that He was authorized to calm the life-threatening storm in His Father's name. So He

commanded the storm to cease (Mark 4:35–41). What if you learned to deal with life like Jesus did? No storm could defeat you.



When the winds blow and the sea rages, we must choose to look “*away [from all that will distract] to Jesus, Who is the Leader and the Source of our faith*” (Hebrews 12:2, AMPC). We don’t deny the distracting thoughts and emotions or pretend that there is no storm. Instead, we recognize that there is more to our situation than what we see and feel. God, our Father, is with us and for us. He will uphold us until the storm is passed and get us through until He gets us out. He will sustain us until the storm is over.

Regular Bible reading helps you see the way things really are. It equips you to handle the mental and emotional challenges that can make this life much more difficult. Once again, making it through life’s trials comes back to reading the Bible.



YOU MUST HAVE HOPE

There's another element that is vitally important to surviving life's troubles. You must have hope, an expectation, that brighter days are ahead. Without hope you won't outlast the storm. Hope is an anchor that holds you in place no matter how strong the forces arrayed against you may be (Hebrews 6:18–19). Hope comes to us through the written Word of God. As the psalmist wrote, *“your word is my only source of hope”* (Psalm 119:114, NLT).

The Bible inspires hope in our hearts because it reveals the One for whom no obstacle is too big and no storm is too great. For Him, there is no such thing as an impossible situation or an unsolvable problem. Scripture shows us that not only is God able, He is more than willing to help His people. For those who serve this Omnipotent (All-Powerful) and Omniscient (All-Knowing) Being, there is no such thing as a hopeless situation. Every loss, hardship, and pain is temporary and subject to change by His power, either in this life or the life to come.

HOPE IN A BROKEN WORLD

Over half of the Bible is history. It is a record of real people

who received real help from God in the midst of really difficult circumstances. These accounts were written, in part, to give us the expectation that the Lord will help us just as He helped those men and women. “[These accounts] *were written in the Scriptures long ago to teach us. They give us hope and encouragement as we wait patiently for God’s promises*” (Romans 15:4, NLT).

Consider one example of a man who saw his hardships reversed, some in this life and some in the life after this life. David, who reigned as king over Israel three millennia ago, faced great adversity. Early in David’s life, God promised him that he would be king. However, before David took the throne, he endured many years of attacks from enemies bent on destroying him. But the Lord God delivered this man and kept His promise to him. On the other side of the storm, David was able to declare that hope in God sustained him in the hard times. He wrote:

“[What, what would have become of me] had I not believed to see the Lord’s goodness in the land of the living! Wait and hope for and expect the Lord; be brave and of good courage...wait and hope for and expect the Lord” (Psalm 27:13–14, AMPC).

Later in his life, David experienced the death of a child. Yet even in the face of this heartbreaking loss, David had hope because he knew his loss was temporary. He would see his son again. *“I fasted and wept while the child was alive, for I said, ‘Perhaps the Lord will be gracious to me and let the child live.’ But why should I fast when he is dead? Can I bring him back again? I will go to him one day”* (2 Samuel 12:22–23, NLT).

An Eternal Perspective

To fully appreciate the scope of the hope that is ours, we must have an eternal perspective. An eternal perspective recognizes that there's more to life than just this present life. No one ceases to exist when they die, and the greater and better part of our existence is after this life. The hardships of this life don't begin to compare with what is ahead. The great apostle Paul, a man who visited Heaven many years before he died, wrote: "*In my opinion whatever we may have to go through now is less than nothing compared with the magnificent future God has in store for us*" (Romans 8:18, J.B. Phillips). Paul was able to view his many hardships as momentary and light because he saw them from the standpoint of eternity. "*For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all*" (2 Corinthians 4:17, NIV). This perspective gave Paul hope that sustained him through all the adversities he faced. He knew that "*the Lord will deliver me from every evil attack and will bring me safely to his heavenly kingdom*" (2 Timothy 4:18, NLT).

- Paul recognized that in comparison to the life to come, even a lifetime of suffering is miniscule. No one presently in Heaven, including Paul, sheds any tears over the troubles they endured as they journeyed through this difficult life.
- The apostle also understood that God uses the hardships of life in a sin damaged world and causes them to serve His eternal purposes. And He can bring genuine good out of whatever comes our way (Romans 8:28; Genesis 50:20).

For an in-depth discussion of what awaits us when we die, read my book *The Best Is Yet to Come—What the Bible Says About Heaven*. To learn more about how God uses life's

hardships to produce eternal results, read my book *Why Did This Happen? What Is God Doing?*

UNSEEN REALITIES

Paul was able to respond to life's trials with hope because he knew how to look past what he could see. Immediately after he called his many challenges temporary and light, Paul wrote these words: "*So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal*" (2 Corinthians 4:18, NLT). In Paul's statement, the Greek word translated "fix our eyes on" implies mental consideration (Vine 1996). Just like you and me, Paul had to choose to focus his attention on what he could not see—Almighty God with him and for him. He had to keep his mind on the fact that not only is there provision and deliverance in this life, there is also restoration and reward in the life after this life.

The Bible reveals the unseen realities of God and His kingdom of power and provision—a kingdom that can and does affect this present life and will welcome us in when we draw our last breath. This revelation gives us hope that enables us to stand the storm. Even though you can't see God with your eyes, you know that He is with you and for you and will help you in this life. And even though you don't yet see the joys that await you in the life to come, knowledge of what is ahead sustains you until then.

Change Your Perspective

Regular Bible reading changes how you see your circumstances. God's Word helps you keep life's trials in perspective. In comparison to forever, your present troubles

don't seem so big. You realize that in eternity, you aren't going to be concerned about what you're dealing with right now. Although this perspective doesn't end your present pain, it lightens the emotional load because you know there's recompense, restoration, and reunion coming. And that gives you hope.



No matter what you're going through, it's not a hopeless situation because you serve the God who makes all things right—some in this life and some in the life to come. You serve the God of hope.

“May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit” (Romans 15:13, NIV).

10



JOY AND PEACE IN THE STORM

Let's take a closer look at the verse cited at the end of the last chapter: *"May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit"* (Romans 15:13, NIV). Peace and joy also play a critical role in surviving the hard times. And, like hope, they both are directly connected to knowledge from God's Word.

Experiencing joy and peace in the face of an overwhelming circumstance means more than having certain feelings. Feelings come and go based on what's happening around us. If you see something frightening, you feel fear. When the threat is removed, you feel relief. These emotional responses are normal and appropriate. But in the face of a prolonged trial where fear, anxiety, and emotional pain are constant, you need a deeper strength that will sustain you until you feel better. That strength is the peace and joy that come from the God of hope.

PEACE FROM GOD'S WORD

There's no way to avoid trouble in this broken world. Jesus Himself said that *"in the world you have tribulation and trials*

and distress and frustration” (John 16:33, AMPC). Note how He prefaced his statement about life’s unavoidable challenges: *“I have told you these things so that in Me you may have perfect peace and confidence”* (John 16:33, AMPC). Our Lord made this statement the night before He was crucified. Jesus had just finished a lengthy discourse as He prepared His disciples for the fact that He was going to leave them soon.

Space doesn’t permit a full discussion of all that Jesus said. But note one point that is relevant to this book’s subject: Jesus spoke words to His disciples for the purpose of imparting peace to them. And although Jesus returned to Heaven two thousand years ago, He continues to give His followers peace through His written Word. Remember, the Living Word reveals Himself—His character, power, plan, and provision—through the pages of the Bible.

Peace of Mind

The peace that Jesus provides is peace of mind or “freedom from disquieting or oppressive thoughts and emotions” (Merriam-Webster 2021). Life’s circumstances generate troubling thoughts and distressing emotions that can sometimes be as bad as the hardship itself. Peace in your mind lessens the pressure that comes from this torment. *“In the multitude of my (anxious) thoughts within me, Your comforts cheer and delight my soul”* (Psalm 94:19, AMPC). The Hebrew word that is translated *comforts* means “compassion” and “solace” or “the alleviation of grief and anxiety” (Strong 2004; *Webster’s New Students Dictionary* 1969).

Almighty God comforts us by His Spirit through His Word. The Bible imparts peace to our mind by assuring us that all pain and loss is temporary, and all will be made right, some in this

life and some in the life to come. This perspective doesn't end your present pain, but it gives you hope and lightens the mental and emotional pressure.

The Lord's promise to His people is peace of mind. But this promise is conditional. You must put your mind on Him and keep it there. *"You will keep in perfect peace all who trust in you, whose thoughts are fixed on you!"* (Isaiah 26:3, NLT). Don't forget what we've already covered so far. You keep your focus on God through His written Word. You can't fix your thoughts on Him if you don't know what His Word says. And you don't know what it says if you're not a regular Bible reader.

JOY FROM GOD'S WORD

Although a happy, joyful feeling is aroused when we encounter something that gives us pleasure and satisfaction, there's another kind of joy that isn't dependent on circumstances. This joy is a strength that is based on knowledge from God's Word, and it will sustain you in the midst of a painful trial. *"Because your words are my deepest delight [joy], I didn't give up when all else was lost"* (Psalm 119:92, TPT).

The Old Testament prophet Jeremiah faced many obstacles as he served the Lord, including rejection, false accusations, and imprisonment. Yet Jeremiah reported that he ate God's words and they produced joy in him. *"Your words were found, and I ate them, and your words became to me a joy and the delight of my heart"* (Jeremiah 15:16, ESV). The Bible is a supernatural book, and it produces results in those who eat it, or take it in, by contemplating and pondering it. You may recall that Jesus compared the Word of God to food (Matthew 4:4). Jesus' example helps us understand how the Bible works. Just as ingested food produces growth and change when we take

it in, so does God's Word. In Jeremiah's case, the Word of the Lord generated joy in him.

Perhaps you're familiar with this well-known passage of Scripture: "*Don't be dejected and sad, for the joy of the Lord is your strength*" (Nehemiah 8:10, NLT). When we read the context of this statement, we find that this strengthening joy comes from knowing and understanding the written Word of God. And as I've stated repeatedly throughout this book, understanding the Bible comes with familiarity, and familiarity comes with regular, systematic reading.

Rejoice in Hope

The Greek word that is most often translated joy and rejoicing in the New Testament is a word that means "to *be* cheerful" as opposed "to *feel* cheerful" (Strong 2004). Have you ever cheered someone on at an athletic event or tried to cheer up someone in a difficult situation? What did you do? You urged them to keep going and reminded them that they have what it takes to finish their race. You assured them that they will survive what they're facing and that better days are ahead. In other words, you cheered them by encouraging them with your words.

Paul, in the context of the many trials and troubles he faced, spoke of being sorrowful, yet rejoicing (2 Corinthians 6:10). Even though he felt the emotion of sorrow due to his troubles, he rejoiced (cheered himself) with God's Word, and was strengthened and sustained by it. Paul also wrote, "*Be joyful because you have hope*" (Romans 12:12, NCV). Note that he did not say *feel* joyful. Remember, Paul is the one who called his many troubles momentary and light when he looked past them to what he could not yet see (2 Corinthians 4:17–18). The

Word of God gave him the assurance of present help and future restoration.

When you call to mind what God has said and encourage yourself with His Word, joy or excitement about the future rises up and strengthens you to face the storm with peace of mind.

“Through him [Jesus]...we take our stand, in happy certainty of the glorious things he has for us in the future. This doesn’t mean, of course, that we have only a hope of future joys—we can be full of joy here and now even in our trials and troubles” (Romans 5:2–3, J.B. Phillips).



When we learn to cheer or encourage ourselves with the Word of God, His strength rises up to sustain us. Joy and peace of mind come to us as we get to know the God of hope by reading His Word.



LET'S GET READY TO READ

Hopefully, you're intrigued by what I've said so far and are considering accepting my challenge to read the New Testament all the way through, over and over. I must warn you though that on the opening page, you'll immediately encounter sixteen verses of begats: "*Abraham begat Isaac; and Isaac begat Jacob; and Jacob begat Judas*" and so forth (Matthew 1:2, KJV). Consequently, your first attempt at regular, systematic reading may become your last. Not only is this ancient genealogy hard to read because of its unfamiliar names, it doesn't seem to have any relevance to modern life. But if you were a first century Jew living in the land of Israel, you would have found this list of begats fascinating.

The list is actually Jesus' genealogy. As a good Jew awaiting the promised Messiah (Redeemer), you would have known that according to the Old Testament prophets, the Messiah must be a descendant of Abraham and David. And since Jesus' family tree shows that He was indeed descended from both men, you would have been captivated by this roster of names. This particular portion of the New Testament was actually written to prove to first century Jews that Jesus is the Savior that the Old Testament prophets wrote about. Once you know this, the

inclusion of the lengthy genealogy at the beginning of the New Testament makes sense.

In the next few chapters, I'm going to share some basic background information about the New Testament which will help you succeed in your reading.

WHY START WITH THE NEW TESTAMENT?

There are a couple of practical reasons for beginning your regular reading with the New Testament. First, it's much shorter than the Old Testament. Remember, understanding the Bible comes with familiarity, and familiarity comes with regular, repeated reading. You're more likely to be successful at this endeavor if you start with the smaller portion. Second, the Bible is progressive revelation. God has gradually revealed His plan for a family through the pages of Scripture until we have the full revelation given in Jesus. The Old Testament is easier to understand when it is filtered through the more complete light of the New Testament.

A Cohesive Book

The Bible was written by more than 40 authors over a 1,500-year period (roughly 1400 BC to AD 100). Yet it has a cohesiveness and continuity that runs from the first book to the last. From beginning to end, the Bible is ultimately a revelation of Jesus Christ, the One through whom God has obtained His family (John 5:39). As I pointed out in Chapter 3, the Old Testament is mostly a history of the nation of Israel, the people group through which Jesus came into this world. In addition to history, the Old Testament has many prophecies about Jesus as well as what are called types and shadows. Types and shadows are real people and events, but they also represent and

foreshadow the promised Savior (Colossians 2:17; Hebrews 10:1). The New Testament records the completion of what the Old Testament prophecies and types anticipated and predicted—the coming of Jesus to pay for sin and redeem God's family.

WHY ALL THE STRANGE NAMES?

Bible reading is difficult, in part, because the action is set in lands that are foreign to many of us. The Scriptures describe events that unfolded in the Middle East several millennia ago, primarily in the land of Israel. Not only are twenty-first-century readers unfamiliar with the geography and place names, many of the cultural references are a mystery. Talk of idol worship and blood sacrifices seems unrelated to anything that matters to us, particularly in the Western world. Modern readers also wonder why their particular homeland is not mentioned in the Bible. It's not that God doesn't care about places other than Israel or that His plan for a family includes only Middle Easterners. Rather, the Word of God is a record of redemptive history. It chronicles people and events that directly relate to His unfolding plan to redeem the world through Jesus. These people lived and the events occurred in the Middle East.

When you're aware of these geographic and cultural challenges and understand why they exist, you won't be as likely to give up reading when you encounter an unfamiliar term or activity. And as you become more familiar with the text through regular reading, you'll begin to recognize that certain words are probably names of people or places, and these seemingly strange statements must refer to a custom known to the people who lived back then. Remember, the Bible was written by real people to other real people to communicate important and helpful information. When the authors wrote, they used language their readers understood. This means there are figures

of speech we don't recognize and that mean nothing to us. But these strange words and statements, which are unfamiliar to us, made sense to the very first readers.

None of these issues are insurmountable. As I've already said, regular, repeated reading helps sort some of this out. A good Bible teacher is also invaluable. And many helpful resources are available to assist you, such as dictionaries, commentaries, and study Bibles with notes of explanation. Keep in mind that none of these resources are meant to take the place of regular reading. They are to be used in addition to it.

What Translation Should I Use?

People often ask me what translation they should use when they begin to read the Bible. Sincere Christians have heated debates over which translation is better. A complete discussion of this issue would require another book, but for now, consider a few points.

- Translations are necessary because the Old Testament was originally written in Hebrew and the New Testament in Greek. The vast majority of people do not speak Hebrew or Greek. If there were no translations, most of us would not be able to read the Bible.
- Some mistakenly think the King James Bible is the original Bible. However, it is also a translation, commissioned by James I of England and completed in AD 1611.
- Bible translation is a complicated task because no two languages are the same. For example, Greek has four words for love, each with a different shade of meaning. English has only one word for love. Various languages also arrange

parts of speech differently, and every language has its own idioms and figures of speech.

- Scholars who translate the Scriptures use two main approaches to translation—word for word and thought for thought. Both have value. In each case, translators must stay true to original word meanings and thoughts without sacrificing readability.

Which translation should you use? Read the one you can understand, the one with wording that is easiest for you to comprehend. The English Standard Version (ESV) and the New Living Translation (NLT) are two of my favorites. Reading passages from several different translations can often give you greater insight into the meaning. However, do this at a time other than your regular, systematic reading.



I believe that the information given in this chapter will encourage you to persevere and work through the initial challenges to Bible reading. You'll also be further motivated to stick with it when you understand who wrote the New Testament and why. Let's address this in the next chapter.



THE MEN WHO WROTE THE NEW TESTAMENT

*D*o you want to know Jesus more fully and develop a deeper relationship with Him? There's no better way to do so than by becoming a Bible reader. If you own a New Testament, then you have in your possession eyewitness accounts penned by men who walked and talked with Jesus Christ when He was here on earth. They witnessed something life changing and wrote to proclaim what they saw and heard.

EYEWITNESSES OF JESUS

Eight men, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, wrote the twenty-seven documents that make up the New Testament: Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Paul, James, Peter, and Jude. These authors were eyewitnesses of Jesus Himself or reported testimony that they received from eyewitnesses.

- Matthew, John, and Peter were part of Jesus' first twelve apostles and were chosen by the Lord at the beginning of His public ministry. These men spent over three years in continual close contact with Jesus. Not only did they observe and participate in Jesus' ministry up to His death

by crucifixion, they saw Him alive again after He rose from the dead (Matthew 10:2–4).

- Mark was not part of the original twelve, but he lived in the city of Jerusalem at the time Jesus ministered there and may have heard the Lord teach in the Temple. At some point, Mark was converted, possibly through Peter's influence. He later became a ministry partner with Paul the Apostle (1 Peter 5:13; Colossians 4:10; Acts 12:25).
- Paul was, at first, a zealous persecutor of Christians. He became a believer when the resurrected Lord Jesus Christ appeared to him as he was traveling to Damascus, Syria, to arrest local Christians. The Lord appeared to Paul on a number of subsequent occasions and personally taught him the message that he preached and wrote (Acts 9:1–6; Acts 26:15–16; Galatians 1:11–12).
- Luke was not an eyewitness of Jesus and was most likely a Gentile (non-Jewish). We have very little information about his conversion to Christ. At some point, he met Paul and traveled with the apostle on his missionary journeys. Luke did extensive research for his writings and interviewed a number of people who interacted with Jesus (Luke 1:1–4; Acts 1:3).
- James and Jude were half-brothers of Jesus. They did not follow the Lord prior to the crucifixion. In fact, these two brothers believed that Jesus was out of His mind. But both of them became believers when their brother came back from the dead (Matthew 13:55; Mark 3:21; John 7:5; Galatians 1:19; 1 Corinthians 15:7).

Proclaiming a Vital Message

The day that Jesus rose from the dead, His first apostles, along with other followers, were gathered together in a room when the Lord suddenly appeared to them. They were frightened because they thought He was a ghost. But Jesus reassured them that He was not. *“Why do you doubt who I am? Look at my hands. Look at my feet. You can see that it’s really me. Touch me and make sure that I am not a ghost, because ghosts don’t have bodies, as you see that I do!”* (Luke 24:38–39, NLT). Jesus asked for something to eat, and they watched as He consumed a piece of broiled fish. Then, using the Old Testament Scriptures, the Lord explained to them the significance of what He accomplished through His death and resurrection. He told them that salvation from sin is now available to all who believe on Him and commissioned his apostles to go out and tell the world what they had witnessed (Luke 24:45–48).

These men devoted the rest of their lives to proclaiming Jesus and His resurrection. The apostles were so convinced of what they saw and heard that they refused to deny it even in the face of severe persecution and death.

SPREADING THE MESSAGE

Jesus’ first followers did not set out to write a religious book. Instead, the apostles spread their message orally at first because they lived in an oral culture. Less than half the people at that time could read or write, and books (scrolls) were scarce and costly to produce. Therefore, information was memorized and communicated orally. Jewish teachers, known as rabbis, were famous for memorizing the entire Old Testament. Certain literary devices were included in oral stories to make them easier to remember.

It's highly likely that Jesus' disciples committed to memory much of what He said and taught while He was with them. Not only was memorization a common cultural practice, they would have been motivated to pay close attention to Jesus' words since they believed He was the promised Savior. Over the three years that they followed Jesus, they heard what He had to say many times as He proclaimed His message in multiple towns in Israel. And the night before Jesus was crucified, He promised His apostles that He would send His Spirit, the Holy Spirit, to indwell them and bring to their memories what He taught them. *"But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you"* (John 14:26, ESV).

A Natural Development

As the apostles went out to proclaim the good news of salvation from sin through faith in Christ, communities of believers (churches) were established. When the apostles moved on to other towns and cities, they maintained communication with fledgling churches through epistles. Although the epistles are sometimes referred to as letters, they are more like sermons. The epistles explain what Christians believe and give instruction on how Christians are supposed to live. These written sermons were meant to be read aloud, usually to a number of people at one time. Once an epistle reached a group of believers, it was copied and shared with other groups. These first New Testament documents were a natural outgrowth of the commission Jesus gave the apostles. When an apostle couldn't be there in person to deliver instruction, the epistle was his substitute.

The gospels were written a little later to record the testimony of eyewitnesses directly connected to Jesus. They are snapshots that detail Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, and were meant to

inspire faith in those who heard and read them. New Christians wanted more than one oral testimony given to them when an apostolic eyewitness visited their city. They wanted a written record of what was given orally. Not only did these documents preserve the words of eyewitnesses, they greatly expanded the apostles' reach because they could be copied and distributed to multiple places. Additionally, as the original eyewitnesses began to die off, their testimonies were preserved.

Real People, Real Issues

These New Testament documents were written by real people to other real people, all of whom had committed their lives to Jesus Christ. The authors did not write to produce stories for Sunday school. They wrote about real issues regarding their faith in Christ and their lives as Christians. They wrote to assure Christians that they could trust what they heard from them about Jesus.

- Peter reported in one of his epistles: *“For we were not making up clever stories when we told you about the power of our Lord Jesus Christ and his coming again. We have seen his majestic splendor with our own eyes. And he received honor and glory from God the Father when God’s glorious, majestic voice called down from heaven, ‘This is my beloved Son; I am fully pleased with him.’ We ourselves heard the voice when we were there with him on the holy mountain”* (2 Peter 1:16–18, NLT).
- In one of his epistles, John wrote: *“The one who existed from the beginning is the one we have heard and seen. We saw him with our own eyes and touched him with our own hands. He is Jesus Christ, the Word of life...We are telling you about what we ourselves have actually seen*

and heard” (1 John 1:1–3 NLT).

- At the end of his account of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection, John wrote: *“Jesus’ disciples saw him do many other miraculous signs besides the ones recorded in this book. But these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing in him you will have life”* (John 20:30–31, NLT).
- Luke, writing to a new believer in Jesus, prefaced his book with this statement: *“Having carefully investigated all of these [eyewitness] accounts from the beginning, I have decided to write a careful summary for you, to reassure you of the truth of all you were taught”* (Luke 1:3–4, NLT).

At the end of this book, you will find a short summary of each New Testament document that will give you further insight into why each one was written (pp. 87–101).



As I said at the beginning of this chapter, there is no better way to get to know Jesus than to become familiar with the documents that were written by men who walked and talked with the Lord and then saw Him conquer death through resurrection. Regular reading of their writings will strengthen your confidence in the reality of who and what you believe.



CAN WE TRUST THE NEW TESTAMENT?

*W*e live in a time when many voices are questioning the reliability of the New Testament. These contentious voices can dampen your enthusiasm to put forth the effort it takes to become a regular, systematic reader. Therefore, you need to know that you can trust the accuracy and truthfulness of this wonderful book from God. When you understand who wrote these documents and why, you can see that accurate communication and transmission of their message was critical to them and to their readers. All the New Testament authors wrote to tell the world that Jesus Christ conquered death through resurrection and that because of His sacrifice, salvation from sin is now available to all who believe on Him. We can trust the New Testament's accuracy for a number of other reasons as well.

WE MUST GET IT RIGHT

Accurate communication and transmission were critical, not only because these men were sharing a vital message but because they knew they were writing documents inspired by God (2 Peter 3:1–2; 2 Peter 3:15–16). They understood the weightiness of what they were doing. On top of that, thousands

of people in Israel saw or heard about Jesus at some point during His ministry as He traveled the countryside. This meant that if the apostles told the story incorrectly or added made-up details, there were plenty of people around who could, and would, correct them. They had to get it right.

A Coin Toss Determined the Books Included in the Bible

It has become increasingly common to hear people say that the books in the New Testament were chosen by church councils, centuries after Jesus lived, to advance political agendas and control people. But that's contrary to what we know about the spread of the early writings. As these documents circulated throughout the Roman Empire, they were accepted by the early Christians because it was well known that they came from the original eyewitnesses of Jesus—His first apostles.

A new type of manuscript, known as the codex, came into use in the first century and began to replace scrolls. Codexes (or codices) were made of sheets of papyrus (paper made from reeds) that were stacked, folded, and bound. Churches kept libraries of these ancestors of modern books. They were highly prized and carefully stored. As early believers gathered materials for their libraries, the criteria for accepting documents included whether or not they could be clearly tied to an apostolic eyewitness. No one picked these documents. Instead, they were recognized as authoritative or directly traceable to an original apostle. These documents ultimately became what we call the New Testament.

We know about this process from the writings of early church fathers. These men rose up as leaders in the early church and, in some cases, were personally instructed by the original apostles. For example, Jesus' disciple, John, taught Ignatius (AD 35–117) and Polycarp (AD 69–155). Both men became bishops in

key cities in Turkey. Polycarp, in turn, instructed a future leader named Irenaeus who became bishop of Lyons in what is now France (AD 130–200).

Ignatius, Polycarp, and Irenaeus were church fathers. They, and other men like them, wrote extensively about the early church, its practices, and doctrine. All the existing works of these ancient and influential Christians have survived and been translated into English. Their writings give us information about the New Testament, including what books were universally recognized as authoritative from the very beginning, long before any church councils were convened.

THE ORIGINAL WORDING HAS BEEN CHANGED

Let's talk for a moment about the copies of the New Testament that have come down to us. Can we trust that we have the actual words the eyewitnesses wrote? There are no original manuscripts of the Old Testament or New Testament still in existence. This isn't surprising because there are no original manuscripts of any other books from antiquity. Ancient books were written on highly perishable materials such as papyrus and vellum (animal skins). What we have today are copies. Therefore, the question is, "How reliable are the copies?" We have more than 24,000 manuscript copies of all or portions of the New Testament. These copies can be compared to each other for accuracy to see if they all say the same thing. No other ancient document comes even close to such numbers. The next closest one is the *Iliad* by Homer. Only 643 manuscripts of this work still survive.

Not only is the number of surviving manuscripts important for comparison, another important issue is how close to the

time of the originals were the copies made. The closer to the originals, the less chance alterations have occurred. Once again, the Bible is superior to every other ancient writing. Homer's *Iliad* was written about 900 BC. The earliest copies date from 400 BC, a 500-year time span. The New Testament was written sometime between AD 40 and AD 100, and the earliest copies date from AD 125. That's only a 25-year time span.

The New Testament texts that have survived are in better shape than the 37 plays of Shakespeare, which were written in the 1600s. In every one of William Shakespeare's plays, there are gaps in the printed text. We have no idea what the original said, so scholars have had to make guesses to fill in the gaps. But nothing is missing from the New Testament. The abundance of manuscripts demonstrates this fact. In addition, the early church fathers cited the New Testament so frequently that we find almost every single verse in the New Testament quoted in their writings. We can be certain that the New Testament we possess has the right words—the same words written by the original authors.

The Bible is Full of Mistakes and Contradictions

Probably the most common charge leveled against the reliability of the New Testament is that it is filled with mistakes and contradictions. A full discussion of this point requires more space than is available in this short book. But consider a few points about the so-called errors and contradictions. As I mentioned earlier, all surviving Bible manuscripts are copies, not originals. They were all copied by hand since the printing press was not invented until AD 1453. And copyists (scribes) sometimes made mistakes as they worked. There are textual variants, or differences, in the copies—8% in the New Testament. The overwhelming majority are spelling or

grammar errors and words that have been reversed, left out, or copied twice. These errors are easy to recognize and don't affect the meaning of the text.

Occasionally, a copier tried to harmonize two passages in different gospels or add a detail known to him but not included in the original. For example, John 7:53–8:11 describes a woman caught in the act of adultery. However, this incident is not found in manuscript copies written prior to the fifth century. Many modern translations include the account today because it is consistent with what Jesus taught and did according to earlier manuscripts. (These translations usually include a marginal note stating that the story seems to be a later addition.) Sometimes scribes tried to make the meaning clearer by explaining what they thought a passage meant, but they weren't always correct. All of these changes are insignificant because they don't alter the narrative, and they don't affect the major doctrines (teachings) of Christianity. Plus, we have hundreds of early manuscripts that show us what the text looked like before these additions were made.

What about the charge that the Bible is full of contradictions? When we carefully examine the seeming contradictions, we find that they don't contradict. Most of the examples that people bring up are found in the gospels, which were written by four different men for a variety of reasons. Their books have more or less information, or different details, depending on each author's purpose. The information is different, not contradictory. And again, none of the differences affect the narrative or the doctrines of Christianity.

For example, Matthew 8:28–34 reports that Jesus freed two demon-possessed men in the country of the Gergesenes, while Mark 5:1–20 and Luke 8:26–40 mention only one demoniac

in the country of the Gadarenes. How do we account for these supposed contradictions? The explanation is simple when you know a few facts about geography and note a few more details about the accounts. The incident actually occurred in the city of Gadara. Gergesa was another town in the same region. The terms *country of the Gergesenes* and *country of the Gadarenes* were general geographic labels used for the area where both cities were located. Mark and Luke were not part of the original twelve apostles and weren't present when Jesus cast the devils out. But Matthew was (Matthew 8:23). Mark and Luke's accounts are less complete but not contradictory. If you have two demon-possessed men, then you clearly also have one. Perhaps Mark and Luke focused on the more prominent man or the one who was the more violent of the two.



We can trust the New Testament. Not only is there overwhelming manuscript evidence that we have the original wording, we can trust Almighty God's sovereignty. He is the One who placed the stars and planets in the heavens with such precision that we can calculate their movements down to the day and hour they will next appear. Surely, He was able to ensure that the most important book in the universe has come down to us intact. If you would like more information about the Bible's reliability, the following books are excellent resources.

- *God Breathed: The Undeniable Power and Reliability of Scripture*, by Josh McDowell; published by Barbour Publishing, Inc., 2015
- *Evidence That Demands a Verdict: Life-Changing Truth for a Skeptical World*, by Josh McDowell and Sean McDowell, PhD; published by Thomas Nelson, 2017

- *When Critics Ask: A Popular Handbook on Bible Difficulties*, by Norman Geisler and Thomas Howe; published by Victor Books, 1992
- *How We Got the Bible*, by Timothy Paul Jones, PhD; published by Rose Publishing, 2015
- *The Case for Christ: A Journalist's Personal Investigation of the Evidence for Jesus*, by Lee Strobel; published by Zondervan, 2016
- *Cold-Case Christianity: A Homicide Detective Investigates the Claims of the Gospels*, by J. Warner Wallace; published by David C Cook, 2013

*S*OME FINAL THOUGHTS

Through the years, I've challenged many people to read the Bible regularly and systematically. Everyone I know of who has accepted this challenge will tell you that it changed them for the better. If you become a regular, systematic Bible reader (especially the New Testament), you will be a different person a year from now, better able to handle life with more peace, joy, confidence, and hope.

Although it takes some effort to establish and maintain regular Bible reading, it's well worth it. Once you get a habit going, you can vary your routine. Remember, the point is to read each New Testament book from start to finish in as short a time as possible. Many years ago, after I became a consistent reader, I set up the following routine for myself. I'd read one gospel all the way through and then read each epistle from start to finish. Then I moved on to the next gospel, followed by all the epistles again. Once I completed the gospels, I read Acts and the epistles again. (A minister I greatly respected told me that the epistles were written specifically to instruct Christians on what to believe and how to behave. That's why I decided to read the epistles so frequently.) I ignored the Book of Revelation for several years because I couldn't make sense of any of it. I revisited it after I grew in my understanding of basic Christian doctrine and the second coming of Jesus.

If you hit a rough patch and stop reading for a while, don't give up. Start over. God's not mad at you. You're not reading to gain brownie points from God. You can't earn His love and favor. You already have it as His son or daughter through faith in Christ. You're reading to get to know Him better and to allow Him to produce change in you by His Spirit, through His Word.

Not only will regular reading deepen your relationship with the Lord and make you more Christlike, you can also expect the following results:

- Regular reading will help you keep this life in perspective. We're only passing through this life as it is, and the greater and better part is ahead of us. If this becomes your view of reality, fear will vanish because you know there's a good end ahead. And you'll never again be moved by the circumstances of life.
- Regular reading will help you deal with the thoughts and emotions generated not only by the personal challenges you face but by the increasing chaos coming on the world as Jesus' return draws near. In this time of growing religious deception, God's Word will help you recognize false teachings.
- Regular reading will help you set priorities. Eternal things matter more than temporal or temporary things. What matters most is that people come to saving knowledge of Jesus. We need to shine the light of Christ in our corner of the world. And you can't help but shine when God's Word dominates your mind and heart.

The greatest gift you can give yourself and the people you impact is to become a regular, systematic reader of the New Testament. Don't waste anymore time. Begin today.

A BRIEF SUMMARY OF THE NEW TESTAMENT DOCUMENTS

The New Testament documents aren't arranged in the order in which they were written. We don't know who placed them as they are, but the arrangement has a logical progression to it. The New Testament opens with the four gospels, followed by the Book of Acts, and then the epistles. The gospels are biographies of Jesus, written by men who knew Him well or interviewed people who had personal interactions with Him. Acts is a historical record of the activities of Jesus' first followers as they went out to proclaim the resurrection of Jesus. The epistles are letters that were written to churches established during the period covered by the Book of Acts. The New Testament concludes with the Book of Revelation, a description of the second coming of Jesus and the completion of God's plan for a family.

THE GOSPELS AND ACTS

The gospels are named for the authors Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. *Gospel* comes from a word that means "good news" (Strong 2004). The writers themselves did not refer to their books as gospels. The term was first applied to the books in the second half of the second century.

These documents provide historical information about Jesus from His birth up to His return to Heaven. All the gospels cover the same basic story line. Jesus presents Himself to the Jewish people in fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies of a coming Savior. He performs miracles and healings as He preaches that the kingdom of God is at hand. There is initial acceptance of Him, but most people later reject Him. Jesus is turned over to the Roman government, crucified, and buried. Three days later He rises from the dead.

The gospels give few details of Jesus' early life, but every one of them places great emphasis on the week leading up to His crucifixion. Biographies in the ancient world were different than those of today. Ancient biographers did not give equal proportion to every period of an individual's life. Childhood and formative years were considered unimportant at that time, so much of the writing was devoted to the most important events in a person's adult life—hence the emphasis on Jesus' three-year ministry, and His death and resurrection.

Because the gospels cover the same basic information, there is a fair amount of repeat material. However, each gospel was written to a different audience for a distinct purpose. When the gospels are harmonized, or put together, with all the events in order and nothing repeated or left out, only about fifty days of Jesus' ministry are covered. Even though the writers had a tremendous amount of information to draw from, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, they wrote what was needed to convince people that Jesus is God, our Lord and Savior.

“This is that disciple who saw these events and recorded them here. And we all know that his account of these things is accurate. And I suppose that if all the other things Jesus did were written down, the whole world could not contain the books” (John 21:24–25, NLT).

“But these [Scriptures] are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah [Savior], the Son of God, and that by believing in him you will have life” (John 20:31, NLT).

The Gospel of Matthew, AD 58–68

Matthew wrote his gospel to a Jewish audience to convince them that Jesus is the Messiah promised by the Old Testament prophets. His gospel is located at the beginning of the New

Testament, not because it was the first to be written but because it clearly shows Jesus' connection with the Old Testament. Matthew quotes from and alludes to the Old Testament more than the other gospels. He presents Christ as the Savior and King of Israel in fulfillment of prophecy. Based on the writings of the prophets, first century Jews were expecting the Messiah to establish His kingdom on earth. Consequently, the coming kingdom of God is a primary theme in Matthew's book.

The Gospel of Mark, AD 55–65

Mark's gospel was most likely the earliest to be recorded. It is the shortest and simplest and emphasizes action rather than teaching. Mark wrote to a Gentile (non-Jewish) Roman audience to convince them of Jesus' deity. Romans were impressed by action, so Mark presented Jesus as a man of action and power who performed miracles and conquered death through resurrection. He gave no details about Jesus' childhood because such information would have been unimpressive to his readers. He did not quote much from the Old Testament, included no genealogies, and made no references to Jewish laws or customs. Those details would have meant little to non-Jewish Romans.

The Gospel of Luke, AD 60–68

The gospel of Luke is the first of a two-part work written to a man named Theophilus to assure him of the historical reality of the events of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. Theophilus was probably a Gentile convert, and Luke (also a Gentile) placed great emphasis on the fact that Jesus is the Savior of all men—Jew and Gentile alike. His gospel is longer than the other three, and over half of the material is unique. Luke's book includes details about Jesus' ancestry, birth, and early life not found in the other gospels, as well as accounts of the Lord's interactions with women, children, and outcasts from Jewish

society. Because of the numerous verifiable historical details included in his work, the author has earned a reputation as a historian, even among scholars who don't believe that Jesus is God.

The Gospel of John, AD 80–90

John's gospel is distinctly different from the other three. Matthew, Mark, and Luke were written around the same time, share much of the same material, and view the life and ministry of Jesus from a similar perspective. John wrote twenty to thirty years later to supplement the earlier gospels. Ninety-two percent of his material is found only in his book. By the time John penned his gospel, false teachers were beginning to deny both Christ's deity and His incarnation. John wrote to a universal audience to address these challenges. Although the other writers presented Jesus as God in human flesh, John put the most emphasis on His deity. John's document is more theological than historical and more concerned with portraying the person and purposes of God. The apostle chose events from Jesus' life that specifically demonstrate He is God Incarnate—God become man without ceasing to be God.

The Book of Acts, AD 60–68

Acts is the second part of Luke's writings to Theophilus and is also aimed at assuring him that his faith in Jesus was not in vain. Luke opened this document with the assertion that the resurrected Lord Jesus "*appeared to the apostles from time to time [over a forty-day period] and proved to them in many ways that he was actually alive*" (Acts 1:3, NLT). Luke then picks up the narrative where his gospel left off, recounting the coming of the Holy Spirit to empower Jesus' first followers to go forth and bear witness of Him. The Book of Acts chronicles the spread of the good news of Jesus' resurrection throughout the Roman world. The first twelve chapters relate the activities

of the apostles as they preached first in the city of Jerusalem, and then expanded to Judea and Samaria (regions to the west and northwest of the city). Peter and James became the leaders of the church at Jerusalem. From Chapter 13 to the end of the book, the focus shifts to the ministry of Paul the apostle. Paul was converted to Christ a few years after the resurrection, and Jesus commissioned him to go to the Gentiles. Paul traveled the known world and took his message of salvation through faith in Christ across the Roman Empire. The last half of Acts relates three different missionary journeys undertaken by Paul in Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey) and Greece.

THE EPISTLES

As communities of believers were established during the period covered by the Book of Acts, the apostles found it necessary to continue to communicate with these churches. New believers needed further instruction about the salvation that Jesus provided through His death and resurrection. They also required direction about how to live godly lives in a world filled with temptations and distractions. And questions about beliefs and behaviors arose that had to be addressed. The twenty-one New Testament epistles were written to meet these needs.

The epistles are sometimes referred to as letters, but they aren't letters as we think of them. These writings are actually sermons or discourses. When the author couldn't be there in person to deliver the message, he sent an epistle. These discourses were meant to be read aloud, usually to a number of people at once, and they were written with that end in mind. The writer expected a co-worker to read or proclaim the contents orally. These documents were sent to individuals and groups of believers that had already received some teaching, usually from

the author. So, the information was not necessarily new to the recipients. They already had a context for it.

Some of the issues dealt with in the epistles seem strange to us. But we must remember that the authors were writing to real people about real situations that developed because of the culture in which these new believers lived. For example, throughout the Roman Empire, there were markets with meat that had been killed in sacrifice to various gods. So, the question of whether or not it was acceptable for a Christian to eat meat offered to idols arose. Another prominent issue developed as the gospel spread from Jewish believers to the Gentiles. Did non-Jews need to keep the Law of Moses, which governed Jewish life? These two issues don't seem very important to us, but at that time, in that culture, they were significant questions.

The epistles also addressed false teachings and heresies that began to develop almost immediately. Men known as Judaizers taught that Gentiles had to keep the Law of Moses to be saved. These men considered Gentiles second-class Christians, which led to conflict between Jewish and Gentile believers. Also, a heresy that eventually became known as Gnosticism began to develop. Gnostic teachers taught that salvation came to an elite few through secret knowledge. They said nothing about sin, guilt, or faith. These false teachers emphasized mental development and declared that matter was evil. Such ideas led them to deny the incarnation of Jesus as well as His bodily resurrection.

Paul's Epistles

Paul was the most prominent apostle in spreading the gospel after Jesus returned to Heaven. Therefore, his thirteen epistles are listed first in the New Testament. His letters are known by the name of the church or the individual they were sent to,

and they are arranged according to the rank or importance of the place or person. The Epistle to the Hebrews is located at the end of Paul's letters because, although the author does not self-identify in the text, most scholars believe that Paul wrote Hebrews.

When Jesus appeared to Paul at his conversion, the Lord told Paul that He would appear to him again with more information (Acts 26:18; Galatians 1:11–12). In subsequent appearances, Jesus revealed a number of mysteries to the apostle which he, in turn, preached and recorded in his epistles. The term *mystery* refers to something in the plan and purpose of God not previously revealed. These mysteries include the believer's union with Christ, the church as the body of Christ, the catching away of believers (commonly known as the rapture) prior to Jesus' second coming, and the nature of resurrected bodies (Colossians 1:26–27; Ephesians 5:30–32; 1 Corinthians 15:51–52). These revelations are sometimes referred to as the Pauline Revelation.

The Epistle to the Romans, AD 57

Rome was the capital city of the Empire and its largest and most prominent city. The Book of Acts does not mention how the church in Rome was established. The most commonly accepted view is that converts of Paul from Asia Minor and Greece moved to Rome and began a congregation there. Paul had never been to Rome himself but desired to meet with the believers in the city. He wrote this epistle to lay the groundwork for a visit. The Epistle to the Romans is his longest and most systematic presentation of the message he taught everywhere he went. Paul carefully explained that all men (Jew and Gentile) are guilty of sin before a holy God, and then demonstrated how all can receive the righteousness of God through faith in Christ. Paul detailed how a man who has been made righteous

through faith in Christ can be sanctified (progressively grow in righteous living) by the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit. He concluded his letter by showing how the righteousness of God can be lived out in the daily lives of believers.

The First Epistle to the Corinthians, AD 55–57

Corinth was the most splendid commercial city in southern Greece and the capital of the province in which it was located (Achaia). Despite strong opposition from unbelieving Jews, Paul had a successful ministry in the city, mainly among the Gentiles. He established a church in Corinth during his second missionary trip and remained with believers for a year and a half, instructing them in their new faith (Acts 18:1–18). After Paul moved on to another city, several groups from Corinth brought him a report about disturbing developments in the church, including divisions, lawsuits, and immorality. His visitors also posed a number of questions concerning marriage, the status of virgins and widows, the eating of meat sacrificed to idols, the conduct of women in the church, the taking of the Lord's Supper, the use of spiritual gifts, and resurrection of the dead. Paul wrote his epistle to address these issues and answer their questions.

The Second Epistle to the Corinthians, AD 55–57

Some time later, one of Paul's co-workers brought him good news about the Corinthian church. The majority accepted Paul's corrections and instructions and had mended their ways. Although a rebellious minority was still resistant to his authority, Paul wrote a second epistle to express his thanksgiving for the repentant majority. In the letter, he defended his conduct and character and revealed some information about himself found only in this epistle, including a visit to Heaven. This epistle is his most personal and least doctrinal.

The Epistle to the Galatians, AD 48–49

This epistle was sent to a group of churches located in the Roman province of Asia Minor known as Galatia (in modern-day Turkey). Paul established these churches during his first missionary journey (Acts 13:4–14:28). Paul and his co-workers had great success among the Gentiles in the region. But when Paul left Galatia, unbelieving Jews came into the area, challenged his apostleship, and proclaimed that Gentiles must be circumcised and keep the Law of Moses if they wished to be in right relationship with God. Paul wrote this epistle to counter these false teachings and to exhort believers to return to the true gospel.

The Epistles to the Philippians, the Ephesians, the Colossians, and Philemon, AD 60–63

Paul composed these four epistles about the same time from the same place. He was in Rome, as a prisoner under house arrest, facing the possibility of execution for his faith in Christ. During his confinement, Paul received several visitors from churches under his care with questions and concerns that led him to write these epistles.

During his second missionary journey (Acts 16:9–40), Paul established a church in Philippi, a city located in Macedonia (northern Greece). He developed a deep, personal relationship with these believers and kept in close contact with them even after he left the city. News of his imprisonment reached the Philippians, and they were quite upset. To get more information about Paul's circumstances, they sent Epaphroditus, a church member, to Rome with a monetary gift for the apostle. Paul eventually sent Epaphroditus back to Philippi with an epistle for the Philippians in hand. The apostle wrote to ease their concerns and tell them that despite his circumstances, the gospel of Jesus Christ was going forth. His letter is an expression of joy and

encouragement in the midst of trouble.

A man known as Epaphras also visited Paul with concerns about his church, which was located in the city of Colossae in Asia Minor. Paul did not directly establish the Colossian church. It probably came out of his ministry in Ephesus, a city about 100 miles away. When Paul proclaimed Jesus in Ephesus, his work was so effective that the gospel message spread and all of Asia heard the Word of God (Acts 19:1–20). After Paul left Asia Minor, a false teaching began to infiltrate the area. It combined elements of Greek philosophy, Jewish legalism, and oriental mysticism. For reasons unknown to us, Epaphras was imprisoned, so Paul sent a co-worker (Tychicus) back to Colossae with an epistle for the Colossians. The apostle also included an epistle for the Ephesians, written in part to comfort them over the news of his imprisonment. Ephesians is the least personal of Paul's letters, possibly indicating that it was intended to be passed around to several churches. The letters to the Colossians and Ephesians are called the twin epistles because out of 155 verses in Ephesians, 78 are repeated in Colossians with some variations.

Traveling with Tychicus (the letter carrier) was a runaway slave named Onesimus. Paul met Onesimus in prison and led him to Christ. This fugitive slave belonged to Philemon, who was also Paul's convert and lived in the city of Colossae. Paul sent a short letter explaining the situation to Philemon and urged him to receive his former slave as a brother in Christ.

The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians, AD 51–52

Paul wrote these epistles to believers in Thessalonica, the capital city of Macedonia. Paul established a church there but was forced to leave after a short time when persecution broke

out (Acts 17:1–10). Unbelieving Jews hired a mob to stir up unbelieving Gentiles who then attacked the house where the apostle was staying. Paul moved on to Athens and then to Corinth (both in Greece). He was concerned about his new converts in Thessalonica, so he wrote an epistle to encourage them in their faith as they faced continued persecution. Paul also gave them additional instruction concerning sexual purity, brotherly love, various spiritual duties, and the second coming of Jesus. Paul wrote a second epistle a few months later when he received word that his teaching on the coming of the Lord had been misunderstood by some.

The First and Second Epistles to Timothy and the Epistle to Titus, AD 62–66; AD 66–67; AD 62–66

These epistles were written to two men Paul placed as pastors over churches—Timothy and Titus. Timothy was converted to Christ through Paul’s ministry, and he and Titus traveled with Paul on some of his ministry trips. After his release from prison in Rome, Paul went to Ephesus and rejoined Timothy. Paul left Timothy in charge of the Ephesian church while he made a trip to Macedonia. When Paul’s return was delayed, he wrote to Timothy to guide his younger and less experienced assistant as he oversaw the work at Ephesus. Paul exhorted his son in the faith to combat false teaching with sound doctrine, develop qualified leaders, teach God’s Word, and encourage Christian conduct.

Paul eventually returned to Timothy, but then moved on to the island of Crete with Titus. After a period of ministry, Paul departed and left Titus to establish and direct the young church. The apostle knew that the work at Crete would be difficult for a variety of reasons, so he wrote an epistle to encourage his new pastor. Paul instructed Titus to ordain qualified elders, rebuke false teachers, speak sound doctrine, and maintain good works.

A few years later Paul was again imprisoned in Rome. This time he was sentenced to death. Paul penned a second epistle to Timothy from a prison cell just before the apostle was martyred. He wrote to strengthen and challenge Timothy and to urge him to remain faithful. Paul warned Timothy that false teachers were coming. He exhorted him not to be afraid but to carry out his ministry, suffer for Christ if necessary, and continue to proclaim the Word of God.

The Epistle to the Hebrews, AD 64–68

This epistle was written to Jewish Christians who were being pressured by their fellow countrymen to deny Jesus, reject His sacrifice at the Cross, and return to Judaism. These people had already experienced verbal assaults and lost personal property. And the threat of even more severe persecution was looming. The Epistle to the Hebrews was written to admonish them to stay faithful to Christ no matter what happened. *Better* is the key word in this epistle. The anonymous author uses the Old Testament to demonstrate the superiority of Jesus' person and work over the system these believers had left behind. The author reminds them that in Jesus, they have a better hope, a better covenant, better promises, a better country, and a better resurrection.

The General Epistles

The general epistles follow Paul's letters. They are referred to as general epistles because they were not addressed to a particular church or individual, but to Christians in general. The original destinations of these letters are often uncertain, and the greetings are general. They're known by the names of the authors (James, Peter, John, and Jude) rather than the people to whom they were written.

The Epistle of James, AD 46–49

This epistle is possibly the earliest New Testament writing. James wrote to Jewish believers living throughout the Roman Empire. The letter is filled with the teachings of Jesus and bears many similarities to His Sermon on the Mount. James' writing style is similar to the Old Testament Book of Proverbs and would have been familiar to Jewish men and women newly converted to Christ. James addressed a variety of topics, including the testing of faith through trials and the relationship of faith and works.

The First and Second Epistles of Peter, AD 64; AD 64–66

Peter wrote these epistles to Jewish believers living all over northern Asia Minor. Hostility and suspicion were growing against Christians in the Roman Empire, and although Christianity was not yet banned, the stage was set for serious persecution to begin. Even though Christians had not yet faced persecution from the government, local populations increasingly harassed them through verbal slander and social pressures. Peter exhorted Christians to follow Jesus' example and suffer patiently.

His second epistle was written shortly after the first when Peter himself was facing death by execution. False teachers were influencing believers in other parts of the Roman world and would soon reach Asia Minor. These heretics not only lived immoral lives, they denied the deity of Christ, repudiated His sacrifice for sin, and rejected belief in His second coming. Peter wanted his readers to have a permanent record of sound teaching after he died, so he wrote to remind them of the reality of what they had believed.

***The First, Second, and Third Epistles of John,
AD 81–96; AD 90; AD 90***

John was also aware of the false teachers that were infiltrating churches in Asia, and he too wrote to combat them. These insidious teachings would develop into a heresy known as Gnosticism in the second century. In addition to exposing false doctrine, John interwove the themes of love, obedience, assurance, and faith throughout his first letter.

John's second and third epistles are the smallest books in the Bible. They are personal letters, and both have similar contents. These epistles warn against false teachers and encourage genuine believers. John wrote to an unknown woman who hosted an assembly of believers in her home. He warned her not to let heretics spread their ideas into her house church. John also dealt with the attitudes and actions that Christians should have toward heretical teachers. He addressed his next letter to a believer named Gaius and urged him to deal with a situation that had developed in his church group.

The Epistle of Jude, AD 64–66

Jude intended to write about salvation through faith, probably to Jewish believers, and possibly even the same readers who received the epistles from Peter and James. But the threat of false teachers moved him to change his topic. These heretics were invading the local churches and rejecting the grace and holiness of Jesus, along with His lordship. Jude wrote to warn his readers to defend the faith in the face of these moral and doctrinal attacks. The entire epistle is devoted to false teachers and the judgment awaiting them.

THE BOOK OF REVELATION, AD 95

Revelation is the final book of the Bible and the last to be written. This is appropriate because Revelation is an eyewitness

account of the completion of God's plan for a family. About AD 95, the Lord Jesus Christ appeared to His apostle John and told him to write down what he saw and heard. Chapter 1 is a record of John's vision of Jesus, and Chapters 2 and 3 are instructions from Jesus addressed to specific churches in existence at that time. Chapters 4 through 20 detail prophetic information given to John. The apostle was shown events leading up to the second coming of Jesus and the establishment of God's eternal kingdom on earth. In his vision, John was taken up into Heaven. He saw a series of increasingly catastrophic events occur on earth as the world abandoned Almighty God for a final Satan-inspired and Satan-empowered world ruler. The last two chapters of Revelation give a description of the new heavens and new earth—this planet renewed and restored to a fit forever home for God and His family.

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