

TABLE OF CONTENTS

<i>Introduction</i>	4
<i>Romans</i>	5
<i>1 Corinthians</i>	21
<i>2 Corinthians</i>	37
<i>Galatians</i>	50
<i>Ephesians</i>	56
<i>Philippians</i>	62
<i>Colossians</i>	66
<i>1 Thessalonians</i>	70
<i>2 Thessalonians</i>	75
<i>1 Timothy</i>	78
<i>2 Timothy</i>	84
<i>Titus</i>	88
<i>Philemon</i>	91
<i>Hebrews</i>	92
<i>James</i>	105
<i>1 Peter</i>	110
<i>2 Peter</i>	115
<i>1 John</i>	118
<i>2 John</i>	123
<i>3 John</i>	124
<i>Jude</i>	125
<i>Reorder Information</i>	126
<i>Other Books by Kent Groethe</i>	127

INTRODUCTION

Almost every Christian would affirm that the Bible is essential for properly understanding and living out the faith. Yet, fewer and fewer believers are regularly or enthusiastically engaged with it. It is a vital task of the church today to encourage a renewed interest in and use of God's Word. Unfortunately, many people find the Scriptures difficult to read and hard to understand at first. As a pastor, I have often heard members of the churches I serve say they find it hard to simply pick up the Bible and read from it. They find it difficult to comprehend.

The purpose of this book is first of all to encourage Christians to read God's Word on a regular basis. Secondly, I hope this format will help the reader to slow down, concentrating on each chapter before moving on to the next. May God's Spirit teach you and inspire your faith in Jesus Christ as you encounter the Scriptures and use this guide to reading the Epistles.

1 Corinthians 1

Theme

Paul exhorts the Corinthian church to stop quarreling about which Christian leader they preferred and instead strive for unity. He also pointed out the differences between God's wisdom and human wisdom.

Truths for Today

- God desires Christians of all denominations to put aside their differences over non-essential issues of faith and find agreement and unity in Jesus Christ (v. 10).
- Gospel truths cannot be comprehended by the human mind but come through revelations given by God's Spirit (vs. 18-31).
- Because we are saved solely by God's mercy, all boasting about our relationship with the Lord should be excluded (vs. 30-31).

Special Focus

Paul makes an important distinction between loyalty to particular Christian leaders with their particular emphases and loyalty to Jesus Christ. The Corinthians were focusing on their differences in human loyalties and as a result, were experiencing division. Paul told them their human loyalties in the church were minor matters and of little consequence in the Kingdom of God. Instead, he told them to focus on loyalty to the One who gives them true and sufficient unity: Jesus Christ. What an apt word for today! Some follow Luther, some Calvin, and others Wesley. They are so loyal to their own denominational doctrines on non-essential issues that these differences have become a point of contention and division. It's all right to have a great variety of traditions which make the faith richer. It is not acceptable, however, to make loyalty to those traditions an obstacle to unity. We have to remember that we are all united on the single necessary issue: supreme and absolute loyalty to the risen Jesus Christ.

Key Verse

"He will keep you strong to the end, so that you will be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ." 1 Corinthians 1: 8

Prayer

I pray for unity among denominations, Lord. May our loyalty to Jesus be the one issue that we stress, and the one thing in which we find unity. In His name I pray, Amen.

2 Corinthians 3

Theme

The Holy Spirit completes the ministry that proclaims the new covenant of Christ's grace and righteousness by faith. It is much more effective than the old covenant's law in bringing people to life with God.

Truths for Today

- We are ministers of a new covenant of grace and mercy (v. 6).
- People can only discover Christ by divine revelation (v. 14).

Special Focus

At night the moon reflects the glory of the sun and illuminates the part of the world that is presently in darkness. The moon has no light of its own but simply makes its surface available to the sun's rays. On earth we are able to experience the presence of the sun during the hours of darkness as its rays are reflected by the moon. Paul says that Christians "reflect the Lord's glory" (v. 18). The world that lives in spiritual darkness will never see the Son except as He shines through us. Are you surrendering your life, activities and ambitions more and more to the rays of God's Spirit so that others can behold a glimpse of Him in you? Surrender more of the landscape of your life to Him so that He can use you as a full, bright moon to reflect His love and mercy.

Key Verse

"...we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory..."

2 Corinthians 3:18

Prayer

Son of God, your brilliant light has transformed me. Now, reflect your love through my life and through my actions, transforming others through me. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Galatians 1

Theme

Paul begins his letter with a rebuke to the Galatian church because they allowed themselves to be deceived by preachers who pervert the Gospel.

Truths for Today

- God has a plan for our lives from birth onward (v. 15).

Special Focus

Paul preached that a person was saved through faith in Jesus Christ. There is nothing that the individual can add to Christ's work to be saved. Wherever Paul went to preach this message of absolute grace, traditional-minded Jews who were Christians followed him and sought to undo his teaching. They condemned Paul's teaching about being saved only by grace through faith and tried to convince the churches that Old Testament traditions and laws must be obeyed. After Paul left Galatia, a region that is now present-day eastern Turkey, those false teachers came and began to poison the Galatians' opinion of Paul, apparently with some success. Paul claimed that some had been confused by the false teaching and were in danger of having their understanding perverted. Galatians is Paul's argument against the common conclusion that people have to do certain things to be saved. He adamantly hammers home the essential truth that salvation is by faith in what Jesus has done.

Key Verse

"...the Lord Jesus Christ, who gave himself for our sins to rescue us from the present evil age..." Galatians 1:3b-4

Prayer

Thank you, God, for the Scriptures that help us to avoid perverting the truths of the faith. Root out any self-righteousness in me and any trust in my own goodness and righteousness. Remind me that I am saved only by your grace. Give me a greater desire to read your Word, greater discipline to do it regularly, and greater inspiration of your Spirit that I may better understand. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Ephesians 4

Theme

Christians should live a life worthy of their calling which includes serving others and maintaining moral purity.

Truths for Today

- God wants believers trained for works of service (v. 12).
- God does not want us to hold on to anger, unforgiveness or bitterness (vs. 31-32).
- The church should be preparing God's people for works of service (vs. 11-13).

Special Focus

Chapter four is the transition from describing our position in Christ (*sitting*, chapters one through three) to showing how a Christian carries out his calling in everyday life (*walking*, chapters 4:1-6:9). Ephesians chapters 4:1-6:10 relate how a believer is supposed to live (*walk*) now that he has been seated with Christ. The Greek word “*live*” used in both of the following verses means literally “to walk around.” “*Live* a life worthy of the calling you have received” (v. 1), and “...you must no longer *live* as the Gentiles do,” (v. 17). Some translations have the word *walk* and some *live*, but both relate to how we are supposed to get somewhere in our service. Salvation is all Christ. As we repose in Him as we would in a chair, we are saved (chapters 1-3). When talking about what the Christian does now that salvation is accomplished (chapters 4:1-6:10), we use a metaphor that assumes our work or movement. Yet, Watchman Nee claims that even here, Christ is the power in us to aid our walk. He says that our serving God in the world is less like walking and more like being transported in a vehicle, the vehicle being the Holy Spirit. He empowers our lives and our service.

Key Verse

“*Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.*” Ephesians 4:32

Prayer

Empower me to be moral, O God. Empower me in my service to others so that my actions can change the world around me. I ask this in the name of Jesus Christ, Amen.

Philippians 2

Theme

Paul exhorts the Philippian Christians to model their lives and attitudes after Christ Jesus, Who gave up all to serve humanity.

Truths for Today

- Jesus Christ came to earth to serve (vs. 5-8).
- Christians are called to serve (vs. 3-7).
- We should not complain about the tasks we perform (v. 14).

Special Focus

Paul continues to talk about joy, even after saying that we should follow Jesus' example by giving up all to serve others. Paul had joy when there was unity in the church (v. 2), and he was glad and rejoiced even when he was "poured out like a drink offering" (v. 17). The key to joy is to abandon our own ambitions and desires and to serve God by caring for His people with all our hearts. This is to follow Christ Who "made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant" (v. 7). Scholars think that Philippians 2:6-11 was a well-used hymn or a liturgical piece in the early church. Jesus' sacrificial giving and servanthood were central themes from the beginning of Christianity. They remain the same today. As Jesus is the centerpiece of our faith, living like Him and following His example will be the centerpiece of our lives.

Key Verse

"Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves." Philippians 2:3

Prayer

Change my attitude, Lord Jesus, so that I may humbly desire to give you glory and to serve your people more than anything else. It is in your name I pray, Amen.

Colossians 1

Theme

Paul shares the prayer that he regularly prays for the Colossians (vs. 9-14), claims that Jesus and the Creator share a profound unity (vs. 15-20), and states his commission from God (vs. 24-29).

Truths for Today

- Jesus is the visible manifestation of the invisible God (vs. 15-19).
- Christ's energy works within us as we serve Him (v. 29)

Special Focus

Paul claims that Jesus is God. He states: "He is the image of the invisible God" (v. 15), and "God was pleased to have *all* his fullness dwell in [Jesus]" (v. 19). If that does not state this truth clearly enough, Paul also says that all things were created by Jesus (twice in v. 16). This claim seems incredible because in Isaiah 45:18-19, God states, "This is what the Lord says – he who created the heavens, he is God; he who fashioned and made the earth, he founded it." Isaiah 45:12 says, "It is I who made the earth..." The only conclusion for those who trust the Bible is that Jesus is, in some profound way, God. Jesus created *all* things and God created *all* things. Jesus is the visible manifestation of the invisible God. He is the Creator poking His finger into the molecular world and declaring to humans, "I love you, and I am here to prove it." Then He died on the cross.

Key Verse

"For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins." Colossians 1:13-14

Prayer

Dear God, please help me to know your will. Give me spiritual wisdom. Help me to live my life in a way that is worthy of you. May I please you in every way by bearing fruit in every good work. Increase my knowledge of you and strengthen me by the power of your glorious might. In Jesus name, Amen.

1 Thessalonians 4

Theme

Paul urged the Thessalonians to be holy and to love others more and more. He also gave encouraging information about Christ's return.

Truths for Today

- We should make it our goal to please God (v. 1).
- We should be sexually moral and pure (vs. 3-7).
- A holy life should be our aim (v.7).
- We are to love one another (vs. 9-10).
- One day the Lord will return and take all who have died and are still alive to be with him forever (vs. 13-20).

Special Focus

We are saved by grace through faith, but now that God has freely given us eternal life, it is natural for us to want to please Him in the best way we can. Paul wrote that he “instructed [the Thessalonians] how to live in order to please God” (v. 1). Then Paul gave them reminders of how to do this: refrain from sexual immorality (vs. 3-6), be holy in conduct (v. 7), love others (vs. 9-10), and live simply (vs. 11-12). God's Word, including Paul's letter, helps instruct us in how to please God. In this way, the Scriptures function like a road map showing us how to get to a desired destination - in this case the glorification of God. Without the Word, it would take us longer to get there, and we would often stray in the wrong direction.

Key Verse

“For God did not call us to be impure, but to live a holy life.”

1 Thessalonians 4:7

Prayer

Increase my passion to please you in all I do, Lord. Give me the wisdom and strength to be moral in all things, holy in conduct, and loving toward others. I pray this in the precious name of Jesus Christ, Amen.

2 Thessalonians 2

Theme

Jesus is coming again, but first, “the man of lawlessness” will appear (v. 3). Satan will work through him; he will oppose the Lord and set himself up as God himself.

Truths for Today

- God chose you to be saved (v. 13).
- It is important to know and hold to the Apostle’s teachings (v. 15).

Special Focus

Paul claimed that Jesus will not return until there is a “rebellion” and the “man of lawlessness” (v. 3) appears, who will be given power by Satan to perform counterfeit miracles, signs and wonders. Satan will use this man to keep people from salvation. He will claim to be divine (v. 4) and apparently will be widely known. Is this the “antichrist” John writes about in 1 John 1:18? John also claims that this man will appear just before the Lord’s return. Jesus warned that “many will come in my name, claiming ‘I am he,’ and will deceive many...for false Christs and false prophets will appear and perform signs and miracles (see 2 Thessalonians 2:9) to deceive the elect - if that were possible. So be on your guard...” (Mark 13:5, 22-23a). We are not given many details about this lawless one, and he remains a mystery to us. Paul’s main concern was that believers would not let anyone deceive them in any way concerning Jesus’ second coming (v. 3). Jesus Himself warns us to be on guard. Nurturing our faith in Christ will allow us to distinguish between His voice and presence and that of the enemy.

Key Verse

“...from the beginning God chose you to be saved through the sanctifying work of the Spirit and through belief in the truth.” 2 Thessalonians 2:13

Prayer

Help me, Lord, to better discern the difference between your voice and presence in the world and the enemy’s. Help me not to worry about the events of the future, but instead encourage my heart today and strengthen me in every good deed and word. In Christ’s name I pray, Amen.

1 Timothy 1

Theme:

Paul warns Timothy about false teachers and doctrines that draw people away from the faith. Paul then extols the incredible grace of God for saving him, in spite of the fact that he previously had dishonored God.

Truths for Today

- “Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners” (v. 15).
- Jesus has unlimited patience with sinners (v. 16).

Special Focus

Salvation is only possible because of God’s awesome grace. Paul had been overwhelmed by it when he first believed in Christ Jesus and continued to be profoundly awed by it. Even years after his conversion, Paul still had a hard time understanding how God could have stooped to save a sinner like himself. Paul had consistently dishonored the name of Jesus by cursing Him and persecuting His followers, and God repaid him by loving him and opening up the Kingdom to him. Paul knew that if God’s unlimited patience extended to him, it could reach anyone. He claimed that “the grace of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly...” (v. 14), and he was certain that God desired to do the same for everyone. The entire New Testament, including Paul’s letters, is a testimony to this great mercy that God has shown humanity by sending His Son.

Key Verse

“The grace of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly, along with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.” 1 Timothy 1:14

Prayer

I thank you, gracious God, for Your mercy and unlimited patience which You exhibited most profoundly in sending Your Son, Jesus. Thank you for saving a sinner like me. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

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1 Timothy 3

Theme

Spiritual leaders need to be models of godliness, moral conduct, and sound doctrine.

Truths for Today

- Recent converts should mature before being given leadership roles in the church (v. 6).
- Spiritual leaders should be above reproach morally (v. 2).

Special Focus

When Paul lived, there were no public buildings for Christian worship nor was there a complex system of church government. Individual congregations selected godly men to perform certain acts of leadership. In chapter three, Paul mentions two leadership positions that were already in place: overseers (v. 1), and deacons (v. 8). Paul states the moral and theological requirements for those positions and even addresses attitude requirements, such as not being a lover of money (v. 3) and not being conceited. It is not enough for leaders to understand theology. It is imperative that they also have a deep commitment to Jesus Christ, are morally pure, and have compassion for those they serve.

Key Verse

“...God’s household, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and foundation of the truth.” 1 Timothy 3:15

Prayer

I pray for the leaders of my church, Lord. Assist them in their daily tasks. Empower them in the work of furthering your Kingdom. Protect them from the evil one and from all danger and harm. Renew and inspire them. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

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2 Timothy 1

Theme

Paul begins this letter to Timothy by speaking of his love for him, and invites Timothy to share in suffering for Christ's sake. Paul also gives a brief update of his life as a prisoner in Rome.

Truths for Today

- God saved us because of His grace, not because of anything we have done (v. 9).
- The Holy Spirit lives in believers (v. 14).

Special Focus

The Apostles understood the faith because they were taught by Jesus Himself. Paul became an Apostle late, after Jesus appeared to him on the Damascus road; however, the church ascribed to him full apostolic authority. The New Testament is full of teachings about the faith, both from the Apostles and from individuals who were under the Apostles' care. These apostolic teachings form the foundations of basic Christian doctrine and truth. We are safe if we continue to listen to their articulation of the Gospel message. Paul's words to Timothy are just as appropriate for us: "What you heard from me, keep as the pattern of sound teaching, with faith and love in Christ Jesus" (v. 13). The whole New Testament cries out those very words as it teaches us the difference between true and false beliefs.

Key Verse

"God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power, of love and of self-discipline." 2 Timothy 1:7

Prayer

God, thank you for the Apostles and for the teachings they left us in the New Testament. Help me to listen to them more carefully and to conform my life to their words. In Jesus' name I pray, Amen.

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2 Timothy 4

Theme

Paul charges Timothy to be faithful in his pastoral duties (vs. 1-5); speaks about being at the close of his ministry; and concludes with references to a number of Christian leaders.

Truths for Today

- Pastors are responsible to preach, correct, rebuke and encourage (v. 2).
- God stands by our side and strengthens us as we share the Gospel where there is resistance to its message (v. 17).

Special Focus

Paul talks about a time when people in the church will scorn sound doctrine and instead, "...to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. They will turn their ears away from the truth..." (vs. 3-4). This happens to some degree in every generation when the common beliefs and convictions of a particular culture run contrary to God's Word, tempting many believers to embrace them and compromise the Gospel. Lax morals in a society can begin to corrupt the moral convictions of believers. Popular notions of religion and spirituality, such as reincarnation, contradict God's Word and win the imaginations of immature Christians. Modern philosophical ideas sound too good to pass up. We must heed Paul's warning. We must continue to increase our knowledge of the Scriptures and to recommit ourselves to be submissive to its teachings.

Key Verse

"The Lord will rescue me from every evil attack and will bring me safely to His heavenly kingdom." 2 Timothy 4: 18

Prayer

Protect the church, Holy Father, from false doctrines that corrupt the truths of the Gospel and weaken the Word's power to transform the world. In Jesus' name I pray, Amen.

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Titus 1

Theme

Paul states the qualifications of church leaders and warns Titus about those who seek to turn believers away from true doctrine.

Truths for Today

- Church leaders must be models of godliness (vs. 6-8).
- It is important to prevent those who corrupt Christian truth from deceiving believers (vs. 10-16).

Special Focus

As we read carefully through the epistles, we should be struck with how much ink is expended on warnings about false teachers and corrupt doctrines that threaten the truths of Christian belief and cause believers to stray from the truth. It becomes clear that with so many enemies seeking to undermine God's truth, it is imperative for both the church and individual believers to know the Scriptures inside and out. Christian leaders must be committed, not only to know the truth well, but to preach and teach it regularly. They also must address those who have corrupted the truth and are teaching it to others in the church. When Christian doctrine is cherished, protected and preserved, God's truth will continue to expose the darkness and bring light to a world corrupted and dulled by ignorance and spiritual blindness.

Key Verse

"To the pure, all things are pure, but to those who are corrupted and do not believe, nothing is pure." Titus 1:15

Prayer

Lord, purify your church of false doctrines. Renew her in thought, heart, and action. Raise up men and women from my congregation for full-time ministry as pastors, missionaries, and youth workers. In Jesus' name I pray, Amen.

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Titus 2

Theme

Paul tells Titus what to teach older men and women, younger men and women, and slaves, respectively. He then states that because Jesus died to save us, we ought to live godly and moral lives.

Truths for Today

- Self-control is an essential trait of Christian life (vs. 2,5,6,12).
- Jesus Christ is both God and Savior (v. 13).

Special Focus

Self-control is encouraged four times in this chapter (vs. 2, 5, 6, 12). Paul considers it an essential characteristic of Christian faith. Self-control would be unnecessary if worldly, fleshly passions and desires were eliminated when one becomes a Christian. The truth is that while believers may desire to please God in every way, the old, sinful nature continues to cling to its old, worldly desires. As Paul states elsewhere, there is a war waging within all believers between the old nature and the regenerated spirit. The selfish and the selfless butt heads and compete for loyalty. That is why self-control is so important. If we do not subdue and control our selfish nature, God will not be able to accomplish what He wishes in and through us.

Key Verse

“...Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good.” Titus 2:14

Prayer

Lord, help me control the selfishness and the ungodly ambitions that seek to detour me from serving you. Continually make me aware of my sin and self-interest, and by your Spirit enable me to die to self and live for you. In Jesus' name, Amen.

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“...Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good.” Titus 2:14

Prayer

Lord, help me control the selfishness and the ungodly ambitions that seek to detour me from serving you. Continually make me aware of my sin and self-interest, and by your Spirit enable me to die to self and live for you. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Philemon

Theme

Paul encourages Philemon to free his Christian slave, Onesimus, who had helped Paul's ministry for a time.

Truths for Today

- We should encourage each other to share the faith (v. 6).
- We ought to encourage each other to be compassionate to all our brothers and sisters.

Special Focus

Paul walks a fine line between commanding Philemon to release his slave, Onesimus, and letting him do as he pleases. In the letter, Paul claims that he is not using his authority as an Apostle to order Philemon to free his slave (v. 8), but he throws his weight around in subtle, yet effective ways. First of all, Paul praises Philemon's faith and love (v. 5), which puts pressure on Philemon to prove it by setting his slave free. Paul then states that Onesimus is his "very heart" (v. 12), which could make Philemon feel guilty if he kept him in slavery. Paul also throws in, "...not to mention that you owe me your very self" (v. 19), as if to imply that Philemon owes him a favor. He seeks to remove any obstacle to Philemon's setting his slave free by promising to pay any debt that Onesimus might owe. Finally, Paul concludes with, "...prepare a guest room for me..." (v. 22). In other words, Paul tells Philemon he is coming for a visit to see for himself if Onesimus has been set free.

Key Verse

"I pray that you may be active in sharing your faith..." Philemon 6

Prayer

Teach me to influence other believers without seeking to control them. Help me to encourage others to do what is right. Give me opportunities to share Christ with those who do not yet have faith. In Jesus' name I pray, Amen.

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Theme

Paul encourages Philemon to free his Christian slave, Onesimus, who had helped Paul's ministry for a time.

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Hebrews 1

Theme

Jesus Christ is greater than angels.

Truths for Today

- Jesus is God's communication to us (v. 2).
- Angels are ministering spirits (v. 14).

Special Focus

We do not know who the author of Hebrews is, but we know his intentions. His goal is to make clear that Jesus is “the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being” (v. 3). Hebrews shows us that Jesus is greater than angels (chapters 1-2), Moses (chapter 3), or any human high priest (chapters 4-10). Apparently, the author's audience was not sure about who Jesus really was; consequently they were in danger of missing the salvation He offered. The first chapter of Hebrews is one of the clearest statements of Jesus' divinity found anywhere in the New Testament. God made the universe through Him (v. 2), and angels worship Him (v. 6). Added to verse three, it is impossible to conclude anything else: Jesus is both God and man. As such, He is the greatest communication of God's love and of His desires for us, greater than any that have come before or ever will be.

Key Verse

“In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son...” Hebrews 1:1-2

Prayer

Holy God, thank you for communicating yourself to me in the profound manner of coming to this world in person to tell me of your concern for me. I praise you in Jesus' name, Amen.

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James 1

Theme

Christians are subject to trials and temptations (vs. 2-15), but we should remember that God will guide us through those times and mature our character through the experiences. Christian maturity manifests itself in various ways: controlling one's anger (vs. 19-20); being moral (v. 21); hearing and obeying God's Word (vs. 22-25); controlling one's tongue (v. 26); and caring for the weak (v. 27).

Truths for Today

- Suffering produces Christian maturity (vs. 2-4).
- Religion is worthless if we don't control our tongues or care for the weak and needy.

Special Focus

James makes sure that people do not get by with claiming they are Christians while at the same time exhibiting little or no interest in conforming their actions to Christian ideals of service and good works. Faith in Jesus Christ may be what gives one spiritual life, but one's actions prove or disprove whether one has true Biblical faith. In chapter one, James boldly states it is impossible to be truly religious if we do not control our tongues, care for the weakest and most vulnerable people in society (e.g. orphans, widows), or indulge in worldly immorality (vs. 26-27). It is as if James is demanding those who say they follow God to prove it by their lives.

Key Verse

"Every good and perfect gift is from above..." James 1:17

Prayer

Lord God, how genuine and real is my faith? Show me where I do not obey your Word or prove my faith by my faithfulness in action. It is in Jesus' name I pray, Amen.

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1 Peter 2

Theme

Peter gives many miscellaneous exhortations for moral behavior and godly attitudes.

Truths for Today / Special Focus

Avoid

Malice (v. 1)
Deceit (v. 1)
Hypocrisy (v. 1)
Envy (v. 1)
Slander (v. 1)
Sinful desires (v. 11)

Do

Desire spiritual growth (v. 2)
Offer spiritual sacrifices (v. 5)
Live respectable lives (v. 12)
Submit to authorities (v. 13)
Live as free people (v. 16)
Live as servants (v. 16)
Love other believers (v. 17)
Honor government leaders (v. 17)

Peter concludes this chapter with a look at Jesus' suffering and what it accomplished: "He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness..." (v. 24). Our godly actions and attitudes, in other words, spring only from what Jesus first accomplished through His action at Calvary.

Key Verse

"But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God..." 1 Peter 2:9

Prayer

Lord, I cannot live a godly life on my own. I ask that your Holy Spirit would give me the ability to avoid doing what displeases you and embrace all that honors you. In Jesus' name I pray, Amen.

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1 Peter 3

Theme

We are to respect and honor our spouse (vs. 1-7), our neighbor (vs. 8-13), Christ (v. 15a), and unbelievers (vs. 15b-16).

Truths for Today

- We should bless those who insult or hurt us (v. 9).
- Jesus died in order to bring us to God (v. 18).

Special Focus

Chapter three has perhaps the best advice to Christians about sharing their faith. First, Peter says that we should “always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks [us] to give the reason for the hope that [we] have” (v. 15). Being prepared means we have a good understanding of the Scriptures and Christian beliefs. It also means that we have an intimate and living relationship with God, giving us confidence when sharing our faith. We do not have to be pushy, but people will wonder and even ask about our hope during times of crisis, the way we show our love for the unlovable, our moral lifestyles, and our genuine care for them. When we share Christ, it must be done with “...gentleness and respect” (v. 15), which means lovingly and without arrogance or pride. In this way others can be won to Christ through us.

Key Verse

“...live in harmony with one another; be sympathetic, love as brothers, be compassionate and humble.” 1 Peter 3:8

Prayer

Help my life reflect your grace and love, Lord, so that others see you in me. Open up opportunities for me to share my faith in Jesus with people in my world. May your Spirit open hearts to you through my life and witness. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

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2 Peter 1

Theme

Peter encourages believers to continue to seek spiritual growth (vs. 5-11). He also reinforces the reliability of the apostolic witness of Jesus Christ (vs. 16-18), as well as the prophetic words of the Old Testament (vs. 19-27).

Truths for Today

- God has given us "...very great and precious promises" (v. 4).
- Christians should be eager to continually grow in faith (vs. 5-8).

Special Focus

Peter acknowledges that Christians can be "...ineffective and unproductive in [their] knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ" (v. 8). Knowing our Lord is the greatest thing in our lives, but does it produce fruit that makes a big difference in the world around us? Many people hang valuable quilts on the walls of their homes. Their value is often derived from the fact that deceased loved ones made them. The truth of the matter, however, is that they benefit no one though their original purpose was to warm people. They have become just a visual reminder of somebody important, satisfying the owner but performing no good in the world. How much is our faith like that? Jesus is a valuable part of our lives, but we can relegate Him to a personal, private part of our lives; it satisfies us while touching nobody else. Peter's solution is to nurture the characteristics of goodness, self-control, perseverance, godliness, brotherly kindness and love, for these will "keep you from being ineffective and unproductive" (v. 8).

Key Verse

"His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness." 2 Peter 1:3

Prayer

Make me effective and productive in my faith, Heavenly Father. Teach me how to express my life with you in service to others and a genuine love for all. In Jesus' name, Amen.

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1 John 1

Theme

John begins his letter by focusing on Jesus Christ as the source of life and Christian fellowship. John continues by observing that although Christians continue to struggle with sin, we are in God's light because we are purified from all unrighteousness by Jesus' blood.

Truths for Today

- If we have fellowship with God, we should live morally honorable lives (vs. 6-7).
- God forgives our sins when we are repentant (v. 9).

Special Focus

John claims that "God is light; in him there is no darkness at all" (v. 5b). He goes on to say that anyone who walks in darkness can have no fellowship with Him. In this Scripture, darkness often refers to moral corruption. At first glance, we will probably get a little nervous because our lives are continually full of moral failures and imperfections. If there is no darkness at all in God, then how can we be received into his company? The answer is simple: "...the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin" (v. 7). To walk in the light means to allow our moral failings to be exposed in God's light. It means we are continually repentant of our sins. "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins..." (v. 9). We are able to walk in light and remain there because we are clothed in Christ's righteousness and God sees us as perfect.

Key Verse

"God is light; in him there is no darkness at all." 1 John 1:5

Prayer

I am sorry for my sins, gracious God. I admit that if left to myself, I would be covered in darkness. Because you forgave me and purified me of sin, I now walk in your marvelous light. In Jesus' name I pray, Amen.

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2 John

Theme

Christians are encouraged to obey God's commandments and to love others.

Truths for Today

- God commands us to live a life of love (v. 6).
- There are many who seek to turn Christians away from the true understanding of faith (vs. 7-10).

Special Focus

It gave John "...great joy to find some of your children walking in the truth..." (v. 4). It gives us great joy as well when our own children or parents or other family members are in the faith and it distresses us when they are not. We are tempted to get our loved ones interested in the faith through pressure, nagging or guilt. However, this usually backfires and pushes them farther away from Christ. We should begin by simply praying for them, that they would come to a saving faith in Jesus Christ. Secondly, we need to love them completely before they have faith. Thirdly, we should ask God for opportunities to share our faith naturally. Finally, we must be patient. Only God's Spirit can draw men and women to saving faith. We can't. We must wait for God's leading.

Key Verse

"I ask that we love one another." 2 John 5

Prayer

Give me the assurance, Lord, that you have done everything necessary for my salvation in Jesus' death and resurrection. I am grateful that my salvation isn't up to me, because then I would surely be lost. In Jesus' name I pray, Amen.

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3 John

Theme

John shares his joy in Gaius' continued faith.

Truths for Today

- We are to imitate all that is good (v. 11a).
- Our good deeds prove that we belong to God (v. 11b).

Special Focus

As in his previous letter, John here expresses joy that others are continuing in their faith. John's gratitude betrays the fact that many Christians apparently did not hold the faith, but returned to their unbelief and their disobedient lives. As we seek to further God's kingdom, we do so in two ways. First, we seek to share the Gospel of Jesus so those who don't know Him or don't live in Him may be restored to life with God. Secondly, we strive to deepen the faith and spiritual maturity of those who already believe because it is possible that they might lose the faith. John is concerned about the latter in all three of his letters. He seeks to encourage Christians to continue in faith and service.

Key Verse

"Do not imitate what is evil but what is good." 3 John 11

Prayer

Heavenly Father, make me serious about protecting and advancing my faith through spending time with you, contact with the Scriptures, and involvement in worship with other Christians. In Jesus' name, Amen.

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Jude

Theme

Christians should beware of false doctrines and those who teach them.

Truths for Today

- There are many who seek to twist and pervert Christian faith.
- God is able to keep you from falling (v. 24).

Special Focus

One of the constant themes throughout the Epistles is the danger posed by those who preach false teachings and seek to pull Christians away from true faith. With the constant warnings come the constant calls to be careful and diligent in nurturing faith. Keeping the faith is a constant struggle. When a garden is planted, the gardener is not free to relax until after harvest. There are too many enemies to the plants that are growing: flood, drought, animals, bugs and weeds. The gardener must be on guard for all of these dangers. Christian faith is like that. God plants the seed of faith, but we must constantly nurture it if our faith is to grow strong and mature. Care needs to be taken to keep our faith from dying. May God bless you as you seek to keep the faith and mature in it so you can bear the fruit that furthers God's kingdom.

Key Verse

"Contend for the faith." Jude 3

Prayer

Keep me diligent in guarding my faith, Lord. Discipline me to nurture it through prayer, Bible reading and gathering consistently with fellow Christians. Help my faith to grow into maturity. In Jesus' holy name I pray, Amen.

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