

Big Picture - Chapter 6

Acts and Letters

Overview Review

1. The Law
2. History
3. Poetry
4. Prophecy
5. Gospels
- 6. Acts and Letters**
 - a. Acts through Jude
 - b. Letters from Apostles and others close to Jesus and the Apostles
 - c. Timeframe runs from about 15 years after Jesus' ascension until about AD 95

How did Acts get its name? Acts continues Luke's efforts to "*write an orderly account*" of what Jesus "*began to do and teach*" in the book of Luke, which he calls his "*first book*."¹ Thus Luke implies that Acts is a continuation of Jesus' work and teaching though it has come to be called "The Acts of the Apostles," or simply "Acts."

Are there timelines or maps that can help me see where and when things in Acts happened?

Yes. On the next few pages, there are several maps of Paul's Missionary Journeys to accompany your reading in Acts. Following the maps, there is also a timeline of the early church's history to help you see the flow of both biblical and extra-biblical events in the first century.

After Acts, we'll read a few of the letters. The Acts and Romans readings are fairly long this week. Rest assured that the readings ease up after these and don't shortchange yourself on those two foundational books.

Which books are the letters, or "epistles"? The 21 books in the NT from Romans to Jude.

Who wrote them? Seven of the eight **General Epistles** are named after their authors: **Peter** and **John**, apostles of Jesus; and **James** and **Jude**, half brothers of Jesus. The eighth is Hebrews, whose author is unknown but mostly likely not Paul.² **Paul** wrote the remaining 13 letters, the **Pauline Epistles**. Of these, four were written during Paul's house arrest in Rome and called the **Prison Epistles**: Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians and Philemon. Three others were written to church leaders regarding practices in the early church and are called **Pastoral Epistles**: 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus.

What is the purpose of the Letters as a whole? To paraphrase several NT passages, "The entire law is summed up in this, love the Lord your God and love your neighbor as yourself."³ The Law, the Prophets and the Poetry of the Old Testament pointed their spotlight forward, toward the coming Messiah. Jesus the Messiah came, fulfilling everything written of Him and establishing a New Covenant of mercy, grace, forgiveness and God's presence available to every person of every nation. In this chapter we'll read how the letters of the New Testament point their

¹ Luke 1:3, Acts 1:1

² Hebrews is not likely written by Paul both because it differs stylistically from Paul's other letters and because Paul claims to have received his revelation directly from Jesus, unlike the author of Hebrews who received it from "those who heard" (see Galatians 1:12 and Hebrews 2:3).

³ Matthew 22:37-40, Mark 12:30-31 and Galatians 5:14

spotlight back at Jesus in order to explain the meaning and the implications of His life, death, resurrection, ascension and future return.

Within this larger purpose, each letter has its own role. Some letters state their purpose (1 John 5:13, for example). In others, we deduce their purpose from comments made in the letter itself.

What should I know as I read each letter? Imagine receiving a letter. Even before you open it, you look for two things: the addressee ("Look, it's for me!") and the return address (it's from my favorite Aunt Helen). As you tear it open, your next question in some form, is "what did she write?" and underlying that is, "why did she write?" (she's coming out east and wants to visit us for a few days). Once I understand those things, I know how to properly respond (get the guest room ready, prepare for meals, etc).

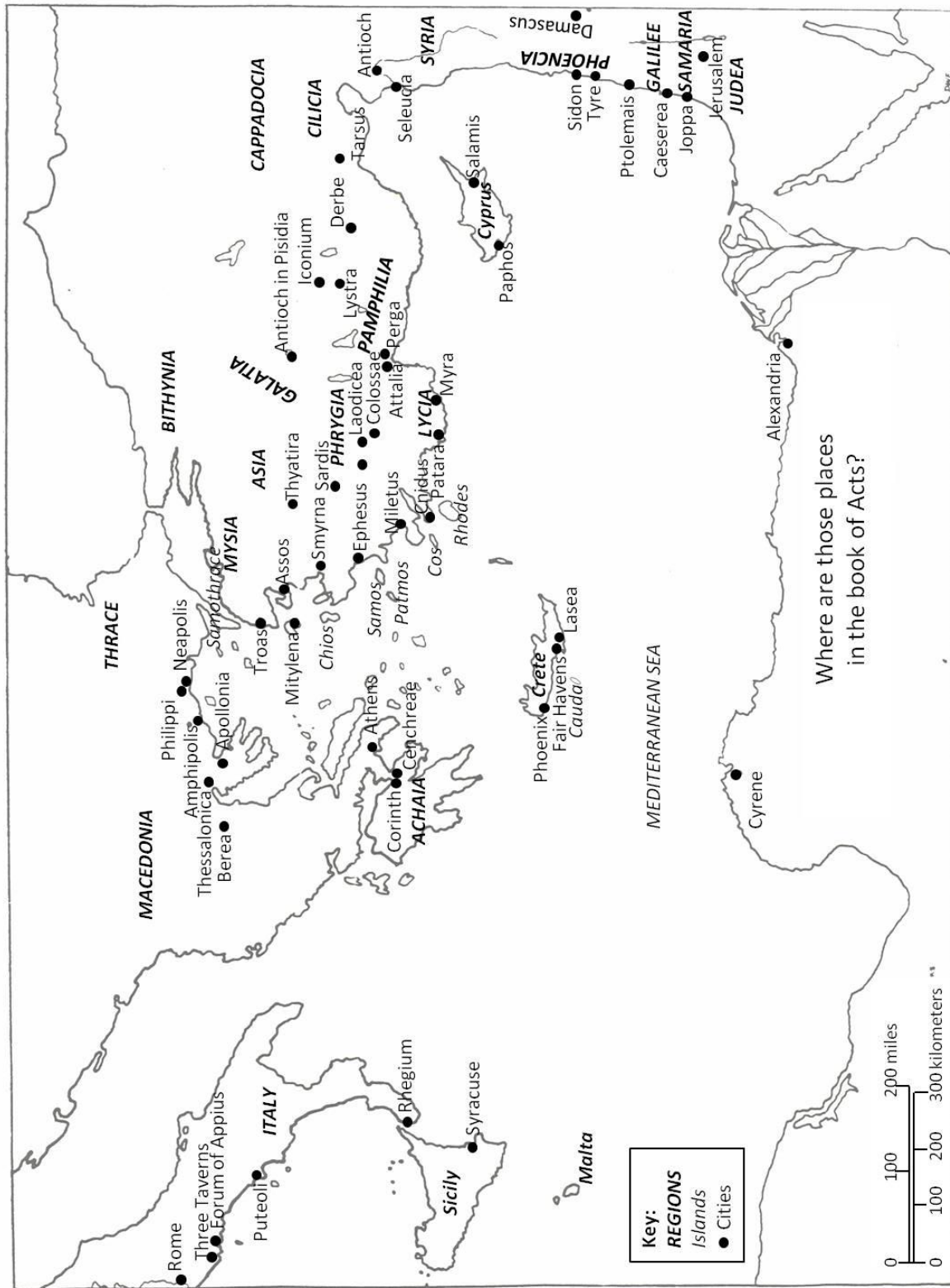
Granted we often do this via email, text or message these days, but the importance of knowing from whom, to whom, what, why and how do I need to respond, remains the same, just as it does for the NT letters. The letter itself is **what** was written. To understand better how it **applies** to our lives, however, we do well to investigate also the **author**, the original **audience** and the **purpose** for which it was written. This background information is called the letter's **prolegomena**, or "critical introduction to the book."

Where can I find the background information for books of the Bible, including the letters?

A study Bible will give most of the prolegomena. Some commentaries will include it as well. GotQuestions.org also contains free and accurate background information on each book of the Bible.

Whenever you read the Bible and specifically when you read the letters this week, build as much background information as you can from the letter itself. The format of the letter will help with this.

Was there a standard format for letters back then, as there is today? Yes. Biblical letters differ slightly from letters today in that they usually beginning with a greeting that identifies both the author(s) and the recipient(s). The body follows and closing greetings end the letter.



Where are those places
in the book of Acts?

⁴ “World of the New Testament.” BIB5133 Acts to Revelation (Dr. William Larkin), 2010, Seminary and School of Missions at Columbia International University

Chronological Chart of First Century Christianity⁵

YEAR EVENT

Key to fonts in the chart:

30 *JESUS*: Died and Rose / Pentecost

STEPHEN: Martyred

32 *PAUL*: Converted

30s/40s *PETER & PHILIP*: Ministry in
Palestine

40s/50s JAMES (by James, Jesus' brother and leader of the Jerusalem church)

44 *PAUL & BARNABAS*: Bring famine relief to Jerusalem

46-48 **PAUL'S 1ST MISSIONARY JOURNEY (Acts 11-14)**

1. Syrian Antioch→ Cyprus: Sergius Paulus converted

2. Perga→ Pisidian Antioch: Synagogue preaching

3. Iconium→ Lystra: Cripple healed→ Derbe

4. Reverse Route: Perga→ Syrian Antioch

49 **Jerusalem Council** / GALATIANS (by Paul)

50-52 **PAUL'S 2ND MISSIONARY JOURNEY (Acts 15:36-18:17)**

1. Syrian Antioch→ Derbe→ Lystra: takes *TIMOTHY*→ Iconium→ Pisidian Antioch

2. Troas: Macedonian vision

3. Philippi: Lydia / Demon possessed girl / jailor→ Thessalonica→ Berea

4. Athens: Mars Hill speech

5. Corinth: 1 1/2 year ministry / Gallio refuses to condemn Paul /
1 & 2 THESSALONIANS (by Paul)

6. Cencreae→ Ephesus→ Caesarea→ Jerusalem→ Syrian Antioch

53-57 **PAUL'S 3RD MISSIONARY JOURNEY (Acts 18:18-20:13)**

1. Syrian Antioch→ Galatia/Phrygia→ Ephesus: Power encounter w/magicians

55 2. Ephesus: 1 CORINTHIANS (by Paul)

56 3. Macedonia: 2 CORINTHIANS (by Paul)

57 4. Greece: ROMANS (by Paul) / plot against Paul

5. Macedonia→ Troas→ Miletus: Farewell to Ephesian elders

6. Tyre→ Caesarea→ Jerusalem: Arrested in the Temple / Sanhedrin hearing /
ambush plot

57-59 Caesarea: Trial before Felix, Festus, Agrippa / Appeal to Caesar

IMPORTANT PEOPLE in the early church
BOOKS OF THE NT (and who wrote them)
Key events in the early church

⁵ Acts to Revelation Syllabus, Dr. William Larkin, Columbia International University

- 59-60 **PAUL'S JOURNEY TO ROME:** Caesarea→ Crete→ Shipwreck off Malta→ Rome (Ac 20-28)
- 61-63 Rome: House arrest / Awaits trial before Nero
- 61-62 PHILEMON / COLOSSIANS / EPHESIANS (by Paul)
- 62-63 PHILIPPIANS (by Paul) / ACTS (by Luke)
- 63-65 Release from prison / Further travel / 1 TIMOTHY / TITUS (both by Paul)
- 64-65 1 PETER (by Peter)
- 65-66 2 PETER (by Peter)
- 66-67 2nd Roman imprisonment
- 67 2 TIMOTHY (by Paul) / Martyrdom of Peter and Paul under Nero
- 60s HEBREWS (by an unknown author)
- 60s/70s JUDE (by Jude, brother of Jesus)
- 66-70 Jewish Revolt against Rome / Jerusalem Christians flee to Pella, south of the Sea of Galilee
- 70 Destruction of Jerusalem by the Roman general Titus / Temple destroyed
- 81-96 Reign of Domitian: Persecution toward the end of his reign
- 95 1-3 JOHN / REVELATION (by John the Apostle)

What questions do you have?

As a reminder, **pray** then consider the following questions each day:

1. What happens? What is the main message of this section/letter?
2. What does it say about God? About Jesus?
3. What questions does it raise?
4. How should I respond?

What happens in Acts? Acts begins with Jesus' ascension and progresses through the building of the early church, including earthquakes, miracles, stonings, arrests and imprisonments, OT quotations and sermons revealing how all of Scripture has pointed to Jesus. Paul takes a central role in the spread of the Gospel after his miraculous conversion in Acts 9. Luke, the author of Acts, accompanies Paul on two of his three missionary journeys and on Paul's first trip to Rome.

What's up with God killing Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5? While it may seem drastic for God to immediately kill two people who "lied to the Holy Spirit," it is not unprecedented. When the Israelites first entered the Promised Land, Achan coveted and took some of the things from Jericho that should have been devoted to God.⁶ Because of this God permitted the Israelites to be defeated by Ai and Joshua the Israelite leader fell on His face before God, asking why they were defeated. God told him point blank to, "Get up!" and take action: find and purge the sin out of Israel. When Achan was found guilty, he and his whole family were stoned. Only after the sin had been dealt with in this way did God enable the Israelites to defeat Ai in the next battle.

Similarly, in Acts we are in the beginning of the "Church Age" where the temple shifts from Jerusalem to the body of believers as a whole, and when God is no longer building an earthly kingdom, but a spiritual one. It could then be argued that the Promised Land is no longer Canaan, out of which sin must be purged, but is now each of our lives, out of which sin must be purged. Ananias and Sapphira covet and keep money for themselves. Then they lie about it to the Holy Spirit.⁷ Just as God actively demonstrated His hatred for sin in Israel at the beginning of their history, He repeats His hatred and rejection of sin in the church during its beginning. May we take sin in our own lives and in the church no less seriously today.

Good questions for further study: What activities is the early church involved in? What is their focus? How should that inform and direct our churches today? See Acts 2:42-47 for a brief overview of the early church.

What questions do you have?

⁶ Joshua 7

⁷ Acts 5:3

Read...	Summarize...	Notes, comments, questions
<i>1. Acts - early church beginnings, Saul's conversion, Peter's dream</i>		
<i>Acts 1</i>		Who replaced Judas to complete the 12 Apostles?
<i>Acts 2</i>		What prophecies are fulfilled? (2:17,21) What did the early church look like? (2:42-47)
<i>Acts 4</i>		
<i>Acts 5</i>		What was Gamaliel's advice? Is it wise? (5:34-39)
<i>Acts 7:1 - 8:3</i>		Who watched and approved Stephen's stoning?
Date:	Key Verse:	
Take away:		

What is up with Paul being called Saul? In Acts 13, "Saul" is sent out by the church and "Paul" returns. Something must have happened during this journey that we don't need to know, but in the same way that God changed many names in the OT and has already called Simon, "Cephas" or "Peter," so Saul becomes Paul.

Also, as you read you may want to find the towns mentioned on the maps of Paul's missionary journeys and follow along on the timeline of the early church.

For further study: Who are the other important people in Acts and the early church? Other names that come up are: Matthias, Gamaliel and Cornelius. Also consider the huge change in Peter from the man who denied Jesus to the one who stands before crowds and even chooses humiliation and punishment in order to "*obey God rather than men.*"⁸

What questions do you have?

⁸ Acts 5:29

Read...	Summarize...	Notes, comments, questions
2. Acts - early church beginnings, Part 2		
<i>Acts 9:1-31</i>		
<i>Acts 10:1-43</i>		What was God communicating through Peter's dream?
<i>Acts 11:19-26</i>		
<i>Acts 13:1-3</i> (Part of Paul's First Missionary Journey)		
<i>Acts 14</i> (Part of Paul's First Missionary Journey)		
<i>Acts 15:1-21</i> (Part of Paul's Second Missionary Journey)		How did the early church deal with disagreements?
<i>Acts 17:16-34</i> (Part of Paul's Second Missionary Journey)		Note Paul's explanation of the Gospel, tailored to his audience.
<i>Acts 20:24</i>		What is Paul's sole goal? What is yours?
Date:	Key Verse:	
Take away:		

What is Romans about? Unlike all of Paul's other letters, Romans is **not** written in response to a situation or problem. Instead, Paul writes it as an introduction of himself and his theology in preparation for his planned visit to the church in Rome. Though he has never met them in person before, He hopes to be "helped by them" on his way to Spain (Romans 15).

Written about AD57 during Paul's third missionary journey, Romans is a mature, carefully arranged explanation of Paul's theology toward the end of his ministry. As such, it can be read simply as pure theology (chapters 1-11) and its application (chapters 12-15).

Romans also shares a structure with Galatians, Ephesians, Colossians and shorter passages within many of his letters: Paul begins with what God has done (theology or orthodoxy⁹) then moves into our appropriate response (application or orthopraxy⁶). Right belief and right response necessarily go together.¹⁰ Or as has been said, "Faith alone saves, but a faith that saves is not alone."¹¹

As you read Romans, pay attention to the flow of thought. I've given you a box for each chapter, but feel free to break them up further and title or summarize shorter sections if you prefer. The first day's readings cover the doctrinal section of Romans. The second day covers the role and place of Israel, the appropriate response to God's mercies and Paul's closing greetings. Again, these sections contain long readings but be encouraged that they are worth it and that shorter readings follow.

What questions do you have?

⁹ Orthodoxy means "right belief" and orthopraxy means "right action or practice."

¹⁰ James 2:17-18

¹¹ Martin Luther

Read...	Summarize...	Notes, comments, questions
3. Theology		
<i>Romans 1</i>		
<i>Romans 2</i>		
<i>Romans 3</i>		
<i>Romans 4</i>		
<i>Romans 5</i>		
<i>Romans 6</i>		
<i>Romans 7</i>		
<i>Romans 8</i>		
Date:	Key Verse:	
Take away:		

What is the flow of thought in Romans? As a clear explanation of theology, Romans is very structured. Below is a summary of the flow of thought along with which chapters contain these ideas.

1	Romans begins with the normal greeting and well-wishing that would be expected in a letter of this era. As usual, his greeting is laced with grace, encouragement and truth. The
2	theology begins soon after: all people will fall short of God's standard whether that
3	standard is the general revelation of creation, man's conscience alone or the Law and rules
4-5	given by God Himself. Sin infuses all of man and will be held accountable before God. In
6	Jesus, however, God shows Himself to be both just and the Justifier of those who believe
7	in Jesus. Like Abraham, if we believe what God has said, God will count us as righteous.
8	Rather than giving us license to sin, however, this gift of grace frees us from slavery to sin
9	where we used to have no choice but to sin. Now in Jesus, we have the choice to consider
11	ourselves dead to sin and to choose to act in ways that are obedient to God from our heart,
12	not according to some written law. Choosing to not sin will continue to be a struggle, but
14	God is able to help us overcome it. The reward awaiting us, for which all of creation longs,
15	is so far beyond what we now know that its glory is incomparable with any amount of
16	struggle we face here.
9	But what about Israel? Israel is not cast out but rather, those who believe in Jesus are
11	grafted into Israel as trees can be grafted onto the trunks of other trees. Children of
12	Abraham and heirs of God's covenant with him are defined by their faith in Jesus, no
14	longer by their bloodline. And those who reject Jesus, Israelite or not, are cast out.
12	<i>"I appeal to you, therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God"</i> to live lives fully devoted to
14	God as if your life were not your own. Do this by renewing your mind. Love genuinely.
15	Hate evil. Cling to good. Submit to authorities. Don't judge but encourage and uphold one
16	another. Follow Jesus' example.
15	I hope to see you in person soon and that you might help me on my way to Spain. Greet
16	those I know and love. Watch out for those who cause divisions among you. Glory be to
	God through Jesus forever.

For further study: Is there a key passage in Romans? Revisit Romans 3:21-26. This has been called a complete summary of the Gospel. What points does this passage make? Who accomplishes our justification? How does He do this while remaining just Himself? That is, how does He make sure justice is done for everyone involved, including Himself? What about people who lived before Jesus? You might want to look up the heavy theological words in a Bible dictionary: righteousness, propitiation, justify.

What questions do you have?

Read...	Summarize...	Notes, comments, questions
<i>4a. A parenthesis about the Jews</i>		
<i>Romans 9</i>		
<i>Romans 10</i>		
<i>Romans 11</i>		
<i>4b. Our appropriate response</i>		
<i>Romans 12</i>		
<i>Romans 13</i>		
<i>Romans 14</i>		
<i>4c. Closing thoughts and greetings</i>		
<i>Romans 15</i>		
<i>Romans 16</i>		
Date:	Key Verse:	
Take away:		

Can you remind me of those resources for finding the background information? Of course.

As a reminder, the key points you are looking for are:

- **Who** wrote the book?
- **To whom** is it written?
- **When** was it written and what important events happened around that time?
- **Why** was it written? What is the author's purpose in writing?
- **Where** was it written? (This yields significant insight into the book only occasionally, however, so it is not considered here.)
- **What** is written in the book? A brief outline can help reveal the general ideas and flow of thought in the book.

As much as possible, get the information from the book itself.

A study Bible will often contain the basic prolegomena at the beginning of each book. Some commentaries will do this as well. If you don't have access to either of those, GotQuestions.org also has accurate book information.

What questions do you have?

Read...	Summarize...	Notes, comments, questions
5. Example of Paul's general letters, Part 1		
<i>Prolegomena for 1 Corinthians</i>	Who wrote it? (1:1) To whom? (1:2) Use a study Bible, commentary or GotQuestions.org to find out... Why did they write?	
<i>1 Cor 1</i>		
<i>1 Cor 3</i>		
<i>1 Cor 5:9 - 6:20</i>		
<i>1 Cor 7:17-24</i>		
<i>1 Cor 9:19-27</i>		
Date:	Key Verse:	
Take away:		
6. Example of Paul's general letters, Part 2		
<i>1 Cor 11:17-32</i>		
<i>1 Cor 12</i>		
<i>1 Cor 13</i>		
<i>1 Cor 15</i>		
Date:	Key Verse:	
Take away:		

Are we going to read all of the NT letters? Sadly, no. But in order to read a good variety of letters, we'll look at two other Pauline letters: Philippians (a prison epistle) and 1 Timothy (a pastoral epistle). From the general epistles, we'll read James and 1 John. 1 Peter is optional but strongly recommended because its audience had a great deal in common with believers today.

What questions do you have?

Read...	Summarize...	Notes, comments, questions
7. Example of Paul's "prison epistles"		
<i>Prolegomena for Philippians</i>	Who wrote it? (1:1) To whom? (1:1) Why did they write?	
<i>Phil 1</i>		
<i>Phil 2</i>		
<i>Phil 3</i>		
<i>Phil 4</i>		
Date:	Key Verse:	
Take away:		
8. Example of Paul's pastoral letters		
<i>Prolegomena for 1 Timothy</i>	Who wrote it? (1:1) To whom? (1:2) Why did they write?	
<i>1 Timothy 1</i>		
<i>1 Timothy 2</i>		
<i>1 Timothy 3</i>		
<i>1 Timothy 4</i>		
<i>1 Timothy 5</i>		
<i>1 Timothy 6</i>		
Date:	Key Verse:	
Take away:		

What is Hebrews about? Hebrews is an encouragement and exhortation to Christians during a time of trial. More than any other letter, it shows how Jesus is the reality and fulfillment of all that to which the OT pointed. In fact, the author calls the old temple system with its priests, structure and sacrifice, a "*copy and shadow of the heavenly things*."¹² We now know about the heavenly things because of Jesus.

The author further encourages us that we are far from alone in our journey by listing in the "Faith Hall of Fame"¹³ many familiar names from the OT and alluding to others who suffered unspeakably because they believed God, even though they died before receiving what was promised in Jesus. These now are our "witnesses"¹⁴ with whom we stand if we endure.

Endurance in the faith and repeated exhortation to not "fall away" is another theme in Hebrews. Those who have been taught that after our initial "profession of faith" we can rest assured that we will end up with Jesus in heaven would do well to read Hebrews carefully. Such warnings are not absent from other letters but they are most prevalent here.

Who wrote Hebrews? Although this was mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, it bears highlighting because Hebrews is so often wrongly attributed to Paul. Not only does Hebrews differ stylistically from Paul's other letters, but more importantly, Paul claims to have received his revelation directly from Jesus,¹⁵ unlike the author of Hebrews who received it from "*those who heard*."¹⁶ Thus we are left with only educated guesses based on extra-biblical sources at who else may have written it.

For further study: Can we "lose" our salvation? Read Hebrews 3:12; Hebrews 6:4-6; Read Hebrews 10:26-27. In order to consider this question, it may help to ask, Is there a difference between "losing" salvation, as if by accident, and meandering away over time until we reach a point where we reject the faith we once had, which is called "apostasy"?

What questions do you have?

¹² Hebrews 8:5

¹³ Hebrews 11

¹⁴ Hebrews 12:1

¹⁵ Galatians 1:12

¹⁶ Hebrews 2:3

9. Hebrews, Part 1		
<i>Prolegomena for Hebrews</i> (This is a non-standard letter)	Who wrote it? (see discussion on the previous page) To whom? Why did they write?	
<i>Hebrews 1</i>		
<i>Hebrews 2</i>		
<i>Hebrews 3</i>		
<i>Hebrews 4</i>		
<i>Hebrews 5</i>		
<i>Hebrews 6</i>		
Date:	Key Verse:	
Take away:		
10. Hebrews, Part 2		
<i>Hebrews 7</i>		
<i>Hebrews 8</i>		
<i>Hebrews 9</i>		
<i>Hebrews 10</i>		
<i>Hebrews 11</i>		
<i>Hebrews 12</i>		
<i>Hebrews 13</i>		
Date:	Key Verse:	
Take away:		

What is James about? One of the earliest letters, James is sometimes called the "Proverbs of the NT." It is very practical, explaining what faith lived out should look like.

For further study: So...just how do faith and works interact? Are they mutually exclusive? Some people find it hard to reconcile Paul's salvation by faith alone¹⁷ with James' faith shown by works.¹⁸ Are these concepts contradictory? Explain your reasoning.

What is 1 Peter about? Peter wrote to believers who were in exile,¹⁹ disbursed among non-believers and facing persecution. As the western world today moves toward being "post Christian," this letter is becoming more and more applicable to the situation in which many Christians find themselves today.

What is 1 John about? One of the last letters written, 1 John clearly states John's purpose in writing: "*I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God that you may know that you have eternal life*".²⁰ Because of this, as you read 1 John, you can consider your life and experience in light of what John says and come away either assured of your eternal life...or not.

For further study: Is that a contradiction I see?? As with Paul's faith by grace alone and James' faith shown by works, John comes very close to contradicting himself. He writes, "*If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.*"²¹ But he also tells us, "*No one who abides in [Jesus] keeps on sinning; no one who keeps on sinning has either seen him or known him.*"²² If the Bible never contradicts itself, how are we to understand these two statements? See also Psalm 19:12-13, Leviticus 5:17 and Deuteronomy 17:12 to find two different categories of sin. Are there sins for which even Jesus' sacrifice is insufficient? (This is not asking about the "unforgivable sin" of Mark 3:22–30 and Matthew 12:22–32. That is another discussion entirely and well worth the study.)

Summary: Review your take-aways from each day during this Section. Are there any themes that stand out? What has God been teaching you or asking you to do or change?

¹⁷ Ephesians 2:8-9

¹⁸ James 2:18

¹⁹ 1 Peter 1:1

²⁰ 1 John 5:13

²¹ 1 John 1:8

²² 1 John 3:6

11. Example of letters by other authors, Part 1		
<i>Prolegomena for James</i>	Who wrote it? (1:1) To whom? (1:1) Why did they write?	
James 1		
<i>James 2</i>		
<i>James 3</i>		
<i>James 4</i>		
<i>James 5</i>		
<i>Optional: 1 Peter</i>		
Date:	Key Verse:	
Take away:		
12. Example of letters by other authors, Part 2		
<i>Prolegomena for 1 John</i>	Who wrote it? To whom? Why did they write?	
<i>1 John 1</i>		
<i>1 John 2</i>		
<i>1 John 3</i>		
<i>1 John 4</i>		
1 John 5		
<i>Optional: Jude</i>		
Date:	Key Verse:	
Take away:		