

The Bible In a Nutshell:

The Epistles of the New Testament

There are 21 books in the New Testament referred to as The Epistles. The definition of an epistle is “a poem or other literary work in the form of a letter or series of letters”. Each of these 21 books represent a message to believers in the early church.

11 of these books are under the authorship of the apostle Paul. We read about his missionary journeys in the book of Acts. On his four trips, he started many churches in the places he visited. The epistles he wrote are mostly named after the towns where the church was that he was writing to. Most of these epistles contain advice and teachings to the new churches; sometimes they also contain admonishments for reports of misbehavior or straying from their teachings after Paul left. Paul touches on many of the same subjects at issue in the church today: order of worship, personal holiness, and members getting along with one another.

Pauline Epistles



Romans Author: Paul The first of the epistles is the Book of Romans. Paul’s letter to the church at Rome is chock full of insight, wisdom, and deep teachings. Nowhere else in the Bible, outside of the Gospels and maybe Ecclesiastes, will you find so much information packed into such a tight space.

1 Corinthians Author: Paul This is the first of Paul’s letters that we have to the church at Corinth. Corinth was a major city in the middle of Greece, a center of commerce and learning in the Mediterranean. Paul gives the church quite a bit of advice on how to conduct itself, both in its church service and the conduct of the members. Much of the liturgy for communion comes from this book, and it is famous for chapter 13, Paul’s description of love.

2 Corinthians Author: Paul Paul had been unable to return as planned at the end of the first letter, which had led to some unhappiness from the church in Corinth, and a falling away from what Paul had taught them. The second letter is harsher in tone, urging them to give up many of their bad habits they had acquired from false teachers.

Galatians Author: Paul Paul’s letter to the church he founded at Galatia, This letter dives in with both feet into a discussion of whether or not Gentile Christians were required to keep Jewish law, and become Jews before they can become Christians. This was a huge argument in the early church, causing a split between the disciple James, who was nominally the head of the church in Jerusalem, and the apostle Paul, with Peter vacillating back and forth.

Ephesians Author: Paul A letter to the church at Ephesus. Best known for its passage on what it means to live a new life in Christ.

Philippians Author: Paul A letter to the church at Philippi. There had been strong resistance to Paul founding a church in Philippi, and much of Paul’s letter has to do with strength in the face of adversity. Unlike Corinth, an open city that entertained many different religions, Philippi resented the founding of any new religion.

Colossians Author: Paul A letter from Paul to the church founded at Colossae by Epaphras. Apparently a “false teacher” had been teaching the congregation, and much of the disputed teachings again had to do with Old Testament Jewish law, judging from Paul’s objections.

1 Thessalonians *Author: Paul* The seaport town of Thessalonica is home to two of Paul's letters. In it he addresses Christians living lives set apart from the rest of the population. He urges them to be patient for Christ's return.

2 Thessalonians *Author: Paul* Second letter to the church at Thessalonica. Paul speaks again of Christ's second coming, but warns believers not to be idle and unproductive waiting for Him to return, since no one will know when that time may be.

1 Timothy *Author: Paul* Unlike the other letters, this one is to Paul's disciple Timothy. Paul speaks of having strength in faith, and believing in the faith Timothy has been taught.

2 Timothy *Author: Paul* A second letter to Timothy. Eusebius reports that the early church knew that Paul was not the author of this letter, but does not list their reasons. In it, Timothy is urged to fight the good fight of faith, and to keep pure in a faithless world.

Titus *Author: Paul* A companion of Paul. Titus was a big focus of the early ministry, as Paul had brought Titus and baptized him, yet Titus was not circumcised according to Jewish tradition. Some of the church members in Jerusalem would not recognize Titus, since he was not circumcised.

Philemon *Author: Paul* Paul's plea for forgiveness for the runaway slave, Onesimus.

The Other Epistles

Hebrews *Author: Unknown* Written as a general letter to all Hebrew people, this epistle outlines the history of the Jewish faith, and urges the members of the new church to look to the past heroes of faith for inspiration.

James *Author: James, the brother of John* *James speaks of the need for members of the church to love one another.*

1 Peter *Author: Peter* Peter's letter of encouragement to those suffering for their faith. Contains many great passages devoted to personal ethics and behavior.

2 Peter *Author: Peter* Peter's second letter addresses the transfiguration, which he personally witnessed, and the return of Christ.

1 John *Author: John, the disciple* The three epistles of John are not so much letters as they are sermons. The early church historian Eusebius writes in his "Early Christian History" that the second and third epistles may have been written by John's followers. This first epistle contains very eloquent passages on the subject of Christian love, and how the spiritual love for one another and for God is superior to the love for any of the things of this world.

2 John *Author: John, the disciple, or possibly one of his followers* The second of John's epistles is extremely short, and warns against the dangers of false teachers. Many Biblical scholars suspect that the second epistle was attached to the first, serving as a kind of "cover letter" or epilogue to the first epistle.

3 John *Author: John, the disciple, or possibly one of his followers* This third and also brief epistle contains a warning to an individual to support fellow Christians, and to beware of those who put themselves first.

Jude *Author: "Jude", although who exactly Jude might be is uncertain.* Some Biblical scholars believe Jude may be "Judas": not the betrayer of Jesus, but one of Jesus' half-brothers, of which there were several in the early church. This very short epistle is a letter to Christians everywhere, warning against "false Christians", who cause divisions in the faith.