

Introduction: Letters To Live By

We live in an information rich culture in which it is possible to communicate almost instantly with anyone on the planet. Most of us are bombarded with an overload of information daily from a multiple of sources. A Silicon Valley research company reported that in 2015 an average of 196.4 billion emails and 23.5 billion text messages are sent everyday worldwide (anyone with a teenager in their home has no trouble believing these astronomically high numbers). These staggering statistics don't include phone calls, tweets, Instagram, Facebook, traditional (snail) mail, and other sources. To prevent sensory overload many have developed a click-delete reflex. One contemporary author said it well, "What culture we live in, we are swimming in an ocean of information and drowning in ignorance."¹

In a different time and culture information and communication was a much more precious commodity. It has been estimated that in the first century AD only 5 to 30 percent of the populace of the Roman Empire was literate. The only way to communicate to distant individuals was via hand delivered letters. The vast majority of those living in the culture and time of the Book of Acts would not receive a single letter in their entire lifetime. Yet of the 27 books that compose the New Testament 21 of them were letters written to the churches such as Jude and James, a specific pastor, such as Timothy and Titus, or a specific body of believers, such as Ephesians and Romans. The epistles were written by either an apostle or a relative of Jesus (James and Jude). These letters were dictated under the guidance of the Holy Spirit to a scribe (called an amanuensis) and reviewed by the author prior to delivery via a messenger to their recipient.

Of these 21 letters or epistles (*epistole* is Greek for letter) thirteen (not counting Hebrews) were written by Paul and compose about one-fourth of the volume of the New Testament. In looking at the first and last epistles of Paul we can see he consistently communicated the authority of these letters as the very word of God. In his last epistle (2 Timothy 3:16), Paul writes, "All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for the doctrine, for reproof, for correction,

¹ <http://www.goodreads.com/quotes/tag/information>

for instruction in righteousness” (NKJV). In his second epistle Paul writes, “Stand firm and hold to the traditions which you were taught, whether by word of mouth or by letter from us” (2 Thessalonians 2:15, NASB). John MacArthur comments on this passage, “He declares, first of all, that his epistles to them are authoritative, inspired truth. This verse is a clear statement that Paul himself regarded these epistles as inspired scripture.”²

In marked contrast to most of our quickly composed communications of today, each word of these letters had weight and carried deep meaning as if spoken by God Himself through the author working under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. While the epistles in this year’s study were directed to a specific audience at a specific time in church history, their spiritual truths and applications are timeless for believers of all generations. When reading and studying the epistles, it is important to remember they are a personal letters to each of us from the God of the Universe.

It is impossible to overestimate the impact of a personal handwritten letter of faith. Several years ago my parents began exhibiting the effects of old age. Of special concern was the early sign of the onset of pugilistic dementia in my father, a legacy of his boxing career. My parents had been regular church goers as long as I could remember, but I was never convinced they had a relationship with Christ, not just a religion. Repeated attempts to engage them in a discussion to determine their spiritual condition were met with ducks, dodges and dives. I agonized in prayer over the eternal destination of my parents for months until at 3:00 A.M. on a Monday morning, my prayers were answered. It was if the Holy Spirit was speaking to me, convicting me to get up and write them a personal letter. Under His conviction, I wrote my parents a letter, expressed my love for them, the basis and assurance I had for a heavenly home, and my sincere desire that they each had a saving faith. I went on to express my wish that we would all be able to enjoy heaven together and eagerly awaited confirmation of their faith. It was two weeks before I saw them again after mailing the letter and according to my mom, they had read and re-read the letter daily each morning. They both professed a saving faith and their relationship with Jesus, and I have the assurance of their salvation. An added blessing of the written word was that the letter was forwarded by my folks to my then unsaved sister and started her down the path that led to her salvation as well.

² <http://www.gty.org/blog/B140421/discernment-and-the-sufficiency-of-scripture?Term=authority%20of%20epistles>

Letters to Live By—Map of Galatia, Ephesus, Philippi & Colossae



Study Summary

Epistle	Date	Written From	Length Verses	Purpose
Galatians	49 AD	Antioch	149	Paul founded the churches of Galatia, composed of mostly former pagans with some Jewish converts. Jews, influenced by Judaizing teachers, sought to bring Jewish rites into their new faith. The epistle was written to counteract this false teaching, return to the simplicity of gospel and affirm Paul's apostleship.
Ephesians	60 AD	Prison	155	Paul spent three years with Ephesians. In absence of doctrinal errors, letter seeks to expand horizon of God's purpose and wealth of their inheritance in Jesus.
Philippians	60 AD	Prison	104	Paul founded the church (Acts 16) and wrote to exhort and encourage the church to find joy even in light of persecution.
Colossians	60 AD	Prison	95	The church was founded by a convert of Paul. The purpose of the epistle was to refute the heresies surrounding the person and sufficiency of Jesus.
2 Timothy	65 AD	Paul's Second Imprisonment	83	Anticipating his execution, Paul gives his protégé Timothy final marching orders and advice on how to be a true man of God.

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