



Encouraging the Churches

5

Key Theme

- Jesus will build His church.

Key Passages

- Ephesians 1:1–14, 4:17–24; Titus 1:1–2:10

Objectives

Students will be able to:

- Identify the audience of various epistles.
- Describe the purposes of various epistles.



Lesson Overview



Come On In

Write on the board, “What is the purpose of the epistles?”

Students will complete the Memory Verse Review Sheet and recite the verse together.



Studying God’s Word

God used the Apostle Paul to write 13 epistles. These letters were sent to churches he had visited and to godly men: Timothy, Titus, and Philemon. Paul encouraged the believers in these letters and instructed them in proper conduct. These letters are part of the New Testament and the inspired Word of God.

Study the Prepare to Share section.

Go Before the Throne.



Activity: The Purpose of Epistles

The students will examine selected passages from the epistles to identify the intended purposes of their writing.

Student Guides

Pencils



Prepare to Share

SCRIPTURAL BACKGROUND

Prepare to teach by preparing your heart. Read the key passages listed above with this background.

The Apostle Paul serves as a great example to all Christians today. He loved His Savior. God used him in a mighty way to further the gospel of salvation through Jesus Christ. Paul suffered trial after trial for Jesus's sake. He was beaten with rods, stoned, shipwrecked, in danger in the sea, in danger of robbers; his own people came against him; the Gentiles came against him; false teachers were against him; he was often weary, hungry, thirsty, and cold (2 Corinthians 11:25–27). Paul's experiences show clearly that he did not count his own life dear but longed to finish the race set before him with joy (Acts 20:24).

And Paul loved his fellow believers. As he travelled throughout the regions during his three missionary journeys and finally to Rome, he was intent on strengthening the churches the Lord had established and encouraging the believers (Acts 15:41). In fact, Paul was daily burdened for the churches and the people in them. He had deep concern that they continue to grow strong in the faith (2 Corinthians 11:28–29).

Paul's love, commitment, and dedication to Christ's church are made very evident by a brief look at the New Testament where he is credited with writing at least 13 different letters to churches and church leaders. It is widely believed that Paul wrote Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, 1 and 2 Timothy, Titus, and Philemon.

Many of these letters were written to the various churches Paul had taught during his visits. For example:

- “To the church of God which is at Corinth, to those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus . . .” (1 Corinthians 1:2).
- “To the churches of Galatia . . .” (Galatians 1:2).
- “To the saints who are in Ephesus, and faithful in Christ Jesus” (Ephesians 1:1).
- “To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, with the bishops and deacons” (Philippians 1:1).

Some of the letters Paul wrote, he wrote to specific men—friends and leaders in the church. These include the letters he wrote to Timothy who was Paul's beloved son in the faith.

- “To Timothy, a true son in the faith” (1 Timothy 1:2).

- “To Timothy, a beloved son” (2 Timothy 1:2).

Paul also wrote a special letter to Titus, who was a Gentile and a beloved disciple and worker in the gospel (Titus 1:4). And he wrote to a fellow believer named Philemon (Philemon 1:1).

We know that all Scripture is inspired by God and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness in order that the man of God may be complete and equipped for every good work (2 Timothy 3:16–17). And as you read the letters Paul wrote to his beloved friends and churches, that truth will be made clear to you. Paul wrote so that the early Christians would know how to conduct themselves in the house of God (1 Timothy 3:14–15). The “house of God” in verse 15 does not mean within the church building, but among the saints of God. Paul wanted the early Christians to understand how to act toward one another. In his letter to the Ephesians Paul gives clear instructions on Christian living and proper conduct among Christians. He writes that all bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor, and evil speaking should be put away as well as all malice. He admonished the church at Ephesus, and thus all believers in all churches, to be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God in Christ forgave them (Ephesians 4:31–32).

Paul was filled with genuine, heart-felt joy at the thought of fellow believers, and he wanted to encourage them in their faith. He often would write to the churches how grateful he was to God as he remembered their faith and fellowship in the gospel. Paul told the church at Philippi that he was confident that God, who started a good work in them, would complete it as the day of Jesus Christ approached (Philippians 1:3–6).

Paul had similar sentiments for all the churches. In his letter to the saints at Colossae, Paul wrote that he gave thanks to God for them and prayed regularly for them because of their faith in Jesus Christ and their love for each other and all Christians (Colossians 1:3–4).

The life of the Apostle Paul presents an amazing testimony to the grace of God and the saving power of the gospel of Jesus Christ. From Paul's very dark background of persecuting, arresting, and killing the early Christians (Acts 8:3) to his unceasing drive to further the very gospel message that changed him, God has shown vividly what it means to truly become a new creation in Jesus Christ (2 Corinthians 5:17). We see in this remarkable life that God's grace can extend to anyone. And God does save to the uttermost all those who come to Him through Jesus Christ (Hebrews 7:25).

HISTORICAL/APOLOGETICS BACKGROUND

The letters of the New Testament are often called epistles. They were originally written as letters to churches or individuals. The word epistle comes from the Greek word *epistole*, which means “letter” or “message.” Epistles were a principal form of communication in the ancient world, especially during New Testament times.

An epistle would have been written on a scroll. Often, it was dictated to a secretary (also called an amanuensis) and then reviewed by the author before being delivered by a messenger. In one of Paul’s epistles, the amanuensis (or secretary) mentions himself when he writes, “I, Tertius, who wrote this epistle, greet you in the Lord” (Romans 16:22). Tychicus was one of Paul’s messengers; he delivered several of his epistles (Ephesians 6:21; Colossians 4:7). It appears that Paul signed each one of his epistles to verify that he was its author (1 Corinthians 16:21; Galatians 6:11; Colossians 4:18; 2 Thessalonians 3:17).

Epistles generally followed a similar format. Most of Paul’s epistles begin with an introduction that identifies the author and any of his associates. It then mentions the recipients and gives a greeting. There is an introduction followed by the main body of the letter. Most epistles conclude with a general blessing and personal notes to individuals within the church that received the letter.

Twenty-one of the New Testament’s twenty-seven books are epistles. Thirteen of these epistles were written by the Apostle Paul: Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, 1 and 2 Timothy, Titus, and Philemon. Paul’s epistles are often divided into subgroup. One group is called the Prison Epistles (Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon), so-called because they were written during Paul’s two-year house arrest in Rome (Acts 28:30–31). Another subgroup is the Pastoral Epistles (1 and 2 Timothy and Titus). These letters were written to church leaders and include many teachings regarding practices within the church.

God used Paul as he traveled on four missionary journeys and planted churches wherever he went. Paul kept the churches in his heart whether he was with them or not. He felt responsible for them, like a father for his children (1 Corinthians 4:14; 1 Thessalonians 2:11). The epistles he wrote to them were his way of encouraging, teaching, correcting, and staying in touch with those whom he loved.

The following is a breakdown of Paul’s letters and the possible dates and locations from which he wrote them:

- Galatians (AD 50–51, from Syrian Antioch)
- 1 and 2 Thessalonians (AD 51–52, from Corinth)
- 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians (AD 54–56, from Ephesus)
- Romans (AD 57–58, from Corinth)
- Ephesians, Philemon, Colossians, Philippians (AD 61–63, from Rome)
- 1 Timothy (AD 64–66, from Macedonia, Rome, or Philippi)
- Titus (AD 64–66, from Ephesus or Rome)
- 2 Timothy (AD 65–66, from Rome)

Although Paul either penned or dictated these letters, he made it clear that he was speaking under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. The other apostles, as well as the early church, accepted these letters as words from God, like the rest of the Scriptures (2 Peter 1:20–21, 3:15–16). In fact, when Jesus commissioned Paul to go, He told Paul that he was sending him as a witness of all Jesus would reveal to him (Acts 26:16–18).

These letters of Paul to the churches, along with the rest of the Bible, are inspired by the Holy Spirit. All 66 books of the Bible represent the final authority in all matters of faith and practice. It is the only written Word from God and is the only basis of truth for the Lord’s people and His church.



BEFORE THE THRONE

Lord Jesus, thank you. Thank you for your work in the Apostle Paul. Because of your marvelous grace, he became a faithful servant to you. And now, 2,000 years later, we are encouraged and instructed because of what he wrote under your inspiration. Your plan is always perfect. Your Word is always true. Use this lesson to build on that foundation with my students. Impress upon them the truth that you are building your church still today and that they can be a part of it as they yield to your Word, believe it, and apply it to their lives.

Review

Our last four lessons have focused on the work that Paul and his companions had done in spreading the gospel during four separate journeys over a period of more than 15 years. Paul had experienced beatings, multiple imprisonments, mob threats, shipwreck, snakebite, and many more hardships. In all of this, we see the power of God working through a man who had been called by Jesus Christ to minister. We have seen God's wisdom and sovereignty working alongside man's responsibility to obey God in bringing about God's perfect plans for mankind.

Despite the hardships Paul faced, he was an unstoppable ambassador of Jesus Christ and did his part toward fulfilling the Great Commission by making disciples and teaching them to follow Christ. While he surely did much of his discipleship work in person, he also disciplined many people as he wrote letters to the churches he had founded or had a connection to.

? **Who can tell me what an epistle is?** *An epistle is a letter, generally from one with authority. For example, the "letters" sent with Saul from the Jewish leaders in Acts*

9:2 are the same word translated as "epistle" in Romans 16:22. In the New Testament, the epistles we have are letters written to individuals or churches, most from an apostle. In fact, the words epistle and apostle share the same Greek root (stello), giving us a mental connection between the two words.

It is important to know the type of literature we are looking at in order to interpret it properly. In the Gospels and Acts, we have examined historical narratives and interpreted the content accordingly. As we look at an epistle, we have to understand the literary form to be able to rightly handle the truths in it. Further, we typically divide the 21 epistles into categories like pastoral epistles, general epistles, and other categories to help us understand their intent.

Today we are going to look at some representative parts of the epistles to understand some of the reasons they were written and some of their other characteristics. As we move forward, we will look specifically at some of the truths laid out in the epistles that guide how we live as Christians.



► **Pace your lesson!** Use the clocks to mark the time you want to finish each section. This will help you stay on track and finish on time. You may need to shorten or drop sections as necessary.





The Purpose of the Epistles

MATERIALS

- Student Guides
- Pencils

INSTRUCTIONS

We are going to start our lesson today with the activity The Purpose of the Epistles in your Student Guide. Our goal is to get a brief overview of the epistles. So, examine the passages and questions in the activity, and we will discuss them in a few minutes.

CONNECT TO THE TRUTH

Let's look at what this quick survey reveals about the epistles.

- ? **1. Who were the epistles written to?** (1 Corinthians 1:2; Galatians 1:2; 1 Timothy 1:2; James 1:1; 1 Peter 1:1–2) *Most of the epistles were written to churches in specific cities (e.g., Philippi) or regions (e.g., Galatia), but some were written to individuals such as Timothy and Philemon. Peter's epistles are addressed generally to all Christians who are dispersed.*
- ? **2. Who was to hear the teaching of the epistles according to Colossians 4:16?** *The epistle was to be read to the whole church and shared with other churches.*
- ? **3. Who wrote the epistles? (Romans 1:1, 16:22; 1 Corinthians 1:1; 2 Thessalonians 1:1, 3:17; Jude 1:1)** *Even the epistles we attribute to Paul mention others in the introduction (e.g., Timothy and Sylvanus), but in several cases there was a secretary (also called an amanuensis), like Tertius who wrote the letters for Paul. The closing of 2 Thessalonians indicates that Paul*

just signed the letter as a seal rather than writing the whole thing. 1 Peter 5:12 indicates that Sylvanus wrote for Peter.

- ? **4. What purpose for writing is given in each of the following passages?**
 - a. **1 Corinthians 5:11** *This is a specific command to avoid interacting with Christians involved in sinful activities.*
 - b. **Hebrews 13:22** *Here we see a call to heed the exhortations given in the letter.*
 - c. **1 Peter 5:12** *The letter has been a testimony and an exhortation.*
 - d. **1 John 2:26** *This is a warning against being deceived by false teachers.*
 - e. **1 John 5:13** *This is an encouragement for the readers.*
 - f. **Jude 1:3** *This is an exhortation for the readers to contend for the faith.*

- ? **5. In light of 2 Timothy 3:16–17, what are the four general categories we could apply to the teaching of the epistles?** *The four general categories for which Scripture, including the epistles, is profitable include doctrine, reproof, correction, and instruction in righteousness. You may wish to define each of these ideas. Doctrine (also translated as teaching) is instruction in what is true, especially from the Bible. Reproof (also translated as rebuking) is to identify sin in thought or deed. Correction is pointing to right behavior and thinking. Instruction in righteousness (also translated as training) is describing how to act and think in righteous ways that are pleasing to God.*

Now that we have a big-picture view, let's look at some of the specific ways that Paul used his epistles to continue to build the churches he wrote to.



► Write on the board, “What is the purpose of the epistles?”

Ephesians 1:1–14,
4:17–24

► This form of greeting and introduction is common to all of Paul’s letters and most of the other epistles, with some variation.

Studying God’s Word

READ THE WORD

We are going to look at Paul’s epistle to the Ephesians with the intent of examining how he sought to build up the church in this letter. As we mentioned a minute ago, we are going to use the four-part framework from 2 Timothy 3:16–17. We obviously can’t examine the entire letter, so we are going to look at 1:1–14 and 4:17–24 as samples for our purpose today. *Have someone read the passages aloud.*

EXAMINE THE WORD

Observe the Text

- ? **How does Paul introduce himself?** *As an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God.*
- ? **How does he address the recipients?** *He calls them saints who are faithful to Jesus.*
- ? **Did Paul know the Ephesians?** *Yes. About five years before writing this letter, he had spent over two years there on his third missionary journey as described in Acts 19.*
- ? **What greeting does Paul offer them?** *He offers them grace and peace that comes from God the Father and Jesus the Lord.*
- ? **Looking at verses 1:3–14, is this section about doctrine, reproof, correction, or instruction in righteousness?** *This section is relating truths about God and what He has done, so it is a doctrinal section.*
- ? **What idea is repeated throughout this passage?** *The repeated idea is what has been done by God for the believer in Christ.*
- ? **Who are the “our” and “us” in verses 3–5?** *These pronouns point back to the saints, including Paul, whose Father is God and whose Lord is Jesus Christ. In short, the reference is to the Christians in Ephesus.*
- ? **If these things are true for the saints in Ephesus, are they true for Christians today?** *Since these are general truths about what God has done, we can understand these truths to be the same for all believers through the ages.*
- ? **What things have been given to Christians “in Christ” (also note that “in Him” and “by Him” are used in the passage)?** *Every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places (v. 3); Chosen before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless (v. 4); Predestined to adoption (v. 5); Made accepted (in the Beloved) (v. 6); Redemption and forgiveness of sins (v. 7); Knowing the mystery of His will (v. 9); Union with all believers and God in the end (v. 10); An inheritance in heaven (v. 11); Sealing with the Holy Spirit (v. 13); A guarantee of our inheritance (v. 14).*
- ? **How is the Trinity present in this passage?** *The Father is mentioned as the Father of Jesus. Jesus is mentioned as the one who secured our benefits through His death. The Holy Spirit is mentioned as the one who seals our redemption and guarantees our inheritance in heaven.*
- ? **Moving on to 4:17–24, which of the four categories is represented in this passage?** *This passage does not simply present truths, so it is not primarily doctrinal though there*

are truths within the passage. There is reproof directed toward the sinful thoughts and actions of unbelievers. There is correction in the “put off” statement, telling us what to avoid. There is instruction in righteousness as we are told what to “put on” to act and think in a way that is consistent with our union with Christ (4:1 refers to this as walking in a manner worthy of our calling in Christ).

- ? **What does “walk” mean in verse 17?** *This is a common phrase used in the New Testament for a manner of life. We often talk of our “Christian walk” as a phrase describing our day-to-day activities as a Christian.*
- ? **What is the phrase “the rest of the Gentiles” meant to distinguish between?** *The Ephesians were Gentiles, but the Ephesian Christians were instructed not to act like the other, non-believing Gentiles.*
- ? **What distinctions did Paul make between Gentile Christians and unbelieving Gentiles?** *He described the unbelievers as having futile minds, being alienated from God, ignorant, blind in their hearts, beyond feeling having given themselves over to lewdness and uncleanness with greediness. The Christians are not to be like this.*
- ? **Who did Paul point to as the source of truth?** *He said that truth is in Jesus. This is a reflection of Jesus’s claim to be the way, the truth, and the life in John 14:6.*
- ? **How did Paul offer them a prescription for no longer acting as the unbelieving Gentiles around them?** *Paul used a metaphor of putting off and putting on certain things, much as you would put off old, dirty clothes and put on new, clean clothes.*
- ? **What distinction does Paul give between the old man and the new man?** *The old man is corrupt through deceitful lusts, and the new man is created by God to be righteous and holy. These are two opposite ways of living and thinking.*
- ? **Using these two passages as samples of the entire epistle, how was Paul building up the Ephesian church in his letter?** *He opens the epistle with a reminder of doctrines he had surely taught them during his years in Ephesus (Acts 19:8–10) and then moves on to give them correctives and instruction in righteousness. In the first three chapters, he reminds them of all that God has done for them in Christ and by the power of the Spirit; in the last three chapters he calls them to think and act in a way that is consistent with those truths. He reminds them that they are set apart as saints and are to live in a way that reflects that new position they have as children of God rather than children of the devil.*
- ? **How does Ephesians 5:5 affirm that he had already taught them many of these things?** *“For this you know” indicates that Paul had already taught them these truths and that this letter was a reminder. There were undoubtedly new members in the church, and people can always use reminders of the truth.*

Discover the Truth

As we read through Ephesians, there is a hinge between the end of chapter three and the beginning of chapter four. The first three chapters are primarily doctrinal in nature, and the final three chapters are generally practical in nature. While not every one of the Pauline epistles is so neatly divided, this general pattern in his writings is evident as he offers encouragement and truth to his readers and then moves on to correcting errors and offering instructions in righteous living.

FAITHFUL

? **What attributes of God was Paul bringing to the minds of the Ephesian believers in 1:3–14?** *Eternal (before the foundation of the world); Holy (that we should be holy as He is holy); Infinite (every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places); Love (in love having predestined us, see also 2:4–5); Sovereign (according to the good pleasure of His will); Omniscient (He purposed in Himself to reveal the mystery of salvation to us); Omnipotent (according to the counsel of His will); Just (redemption through Christ's blood); Faithful (sealed with the Holy Spirit as a guarantee of our inheritance); Merciful (forgiveness of sins); Wise (which He made to abound toward us in all wisdom and prudence); Gracious (to the praise of the glory of His grace).*

There can be no doubt that Paul wanted to build up the saints of the church in Ephesus by reminding them of all of the wonderful things that God had done for them. In just these few short verses (which are all one sentence in the original Greek!), the glories of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit are put on display in an amazing way.

Knowing all of these truths about God would have been a great motivator. God is faithful to bring about all of these promises and to empower the saints to live as they should. In fact, the “therefore” in the first verse of chapter 4 could be thought of as the motivation for holy living. Paul was saying, in essence, “Look at all of these magnificent truths about God, what He has done for you and in you, and who you are in Him! In light of these truths, live a life that is glorifying to the One who gave you new life.” As Paul was seeking to build up the church, he didn’t just tell them to work harder—he reminded them of glorious truths and directed them to walk in light of those truths and in the power of the Holy Spirit.

Paul doesn’t simply give them vague ideas, but very practical things to avoid and things to do in their place. He tells them to put aside lying and instead to speak truth to one another (4:25). He tells them to speak words that edify (build up) rather than those that are filled with corruption (4:29). He tells them to imitate God and walk in love as Christ loved them (5:1–2). As saints, they should have nothing to do with filthiness, foolish talking, and coarse jesting, but rather they should be giving thanks (5:3–4). They were once darkness, but as light in the Lord they have the impulse and power to walk as children of light in a way that is acceptable to the Lord (5:8–10). Paul told them all of these things to build them up and encourage them as they lived as the church among their Gentile neighbors.



READ THE WORD

Ephesians is an epistle written to a church. We are going to shift gears a bit and look at Paul’s epistle to Titus, one of the Pastoral Epistles along with 1 and 2 Timothy. We are going to read a large section of Titus (1:1–2:10) and then key in on a few ideas since our goal today is to just get a survey of the many purposes of the epistles. *Have someone read the passage aloud.*

Titus 1:1–2:10

EXAMINE THE WORD

Observe the Text

- ? **How did Paul identify himself?** *He called himself a bondservant (literally, a slave) of God and an apostle of Jesus Christ.*
- ? **How did Paul describe Titus?** *He referred to him as a true son in the faith they have in common.*
- ? **How would Titus have responded upon hearing Paul's commendation?** *This would have been an encouragement to him.*
- ? **What does 2 Corinthians 8:16–17 tell us about Titus?** *He worked with Paul in ministering at Corinth. Titus is mentioned eight times in 2 Corinthians.*
- ? **Where had Paul left Titus?** *In Crete.*
- ? **What was his purpose in Crete?** *Titus was appointed by Paul to set in order the things that were lacking and to appoint elders in every city.*
- ? **What does the phrase "set in order the things that are lacking" mean?** *Titus was to correct doctrinal errors that were present in the churches in Crete. Paul used this similar phrase in 1 Corinthians 11:34.*
- ? **What qualities should those leading the churches possess?** *The qualifications are listed in verses 6–9. A similar list appears in 1 Timothy 3:2–4 followed by the qualifications for deacons.*
- ? **What two words does Paul use to identify the leaders?** *He uses "elder" (presbyteros) and "bishop/overseer" (episcopos) to refer to the leaders. Further, the word "pastor" (as in Ephesians 4:11—poimen) is also used to refer to the leaders in the church. These three terms are generally interchangeable as the same office of elder, but distinguished from the office of deacon (Philippians 1:1).*
- ? **In verse 9, how must an elder view doctrine?** *He must hold fast to the doctrine that he has been taught.*
- ? **How is an elder to use doctrinal truth?** *He is to exhort and convict those who contradict the truth. Verse nine has a clear connection to 2 Timothy 3:16–17, though it is not as fully developed.*
- ? **How does Paul describe those who contradict sound doctrine?** *He says that they are insubordinate, idle talkers, and deceivers.*
- ? **Which group does Paul single out?** *He says that "those of the circumcision" are especially problematic.*
- ? **What does "the circumcision" refer to?** *This refers to those who were demanding and teaching that the Jewish laws and customs needed to be followed. Circumcision was Paul's common shorthand way of referring to this group of false teachers. Luke uses this term in Acts 10:45 and 11:2 to refer to Jewish Christians. Paul uses this phrase in Galatians 2:12 to talk about the Jewish Christians who influenced Peter to act in a hypocritical manner. He also uses it in Ephesians 2:11 to distinguish between Jews and Gentiles. In Colossians 4:11 the phrase is used to refer to Paul's Jewish Christian companions.*
- ? **What were the elders to do to these false teachers?** *Paul wanted them to use the truth to "stop the mouths" of these false teachers.*

2 Corinthians 8:16–17

- ? **Why did Paul want the false teachers to be stopped?** *They were leading many people astray.*
- ? **How were Titus and the elders to approach these false teachers?** *They were to rebuke them sharply.*
- ? **What was the goal of this rebuke?** *To make them sound in the faith, not giving heed to Jewish fables and commandments of men.*
- ? **Beginning in chapter 2, what is Paul's prescription for the leaders of the church?** *He instructs Titus, and the other elders by extension, to speak sound doctrine to everyone in the church.*
- ? **What groups within the churches are to be taught sound doctrine?** *Older men, older women, young men, and bondservants.*
- ? **Who are the older women to teach?** *They are to teach the younger women who, in turn, teach the children. The broad sense is that everyone in the church, young to old, will hear sound doctrine.*

Discover the Truth

While there are certainly some clear doctrinal elements in this epistle, the main thrust is Paul giving Titus instructions about how to build up the churches on Crete and offering him encouragement. This is an epistle of instruction, reminding Titus of the importance of teaching the truths he had already learned from Paul as he ministered with him. While these exhortations were directed to Titus, we can look at these truths and apply them to our situation today. If the churches of Crete were to have elders leading each church, then the same should be true today. If those elders were to teach sound doctrine to their church and sharply rebuke false teachers, so should the elders (pastors) in our churches today. If Paul gave a list of requirements that elders must meet (as is paralleled in his first epistle to Timothy), then those qualifications stand today. God's truth does not change.

Titus, who had worked closely with Paul, would have known exactly what Paul meant by the use of the term "the circumcision." This is an example of how understanding the epistles and how they relate to one another helps us to understand the meaning of the phrase here in Titus. When we read and interpret the epistles, we must remember their purpose and understand them in light of the rest of Scripture, allowing Scripture to interpret Scripture and the context of the passage to help us rightly divide the word of truth.





Applying God's Word

WHAT YOU HEARD IN THE WORD

There is much more we could learn about the epistles and their relationship to the Gospels and Acts, but our goal today was to help us all see that the epistles were written to specific audiences for particular purposes. To understand the epistles and how to apply them to our lives today, it is very helpful to know these things. Without some of this background, we might read the epistle to the Galatians and think Paul was a little too harsh with those poor people. But understanding the influence of false teachers and what happened with the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15) is helpful to understand what Paul means by “those of the circumcision” and why it was so important to confront those who were perverting the gospel.

Despite who they were written to or who wrote them (we don't know who wrote Hebrews), the epistles are part of the Bible that God has given us to look to as the source of truth for our lives. While there are some cultural differences that we must work through and certain passages that may not apply to us individually, these letters were meant to offer instruction and encouragement to the early church, and they continue to do that for us nearly 2,000 years later. We can affirm to God that “the entirety of Your word is truth, and every one of Your righteous judgments endures forever” (Psalm 119:160).

GOD'S WORD IN THE REAL WORLD

- ? **How does the framework of 2 Timothy 3:16 (doctrine, reproof, correction, and instruction in righteousness) help you understand the intent of the epistles?** *While there are other kinds of information in the epistles, looking at them from this perspective helps us to see how they were given to build up the churches. As we examine the epistles, we can transfer the commands and instructions given to these churches and leaders to our situations today. If the Corinthian church was offered a correction about suing one another, then we can understand that is not appropriate for us today.*
- ? **In what sense were the epistles written to multiple audiences, including us?** *Although there is a specific audience mentioned in most of the epistles, as the Word of God they have a much broader audience. They were passed among the churches (Colossians 4:16), and we have them to study today. God has preserved His Word for our benefit. It is actually the epistles that provide much of our doctrine and understanding of how to live as the body of Christ in the church. Doctrines like church government, order in the church, exercising spiritual gifts, etc. are based in the epistles.*
- ? **What questions do you still have about the authors and purposes of the epistles?** *Discuss various answers, directing them toward pertinent resources.*

- ? Many people have a problem trusting the Bible because it was written by men. Now that you have seen that scribes wrote several of the letters, how could you use this information to point to the truth of the **inspiration of Scripture**? *This fact could be used to disarm a skeptic as you say something like, "Oh, I know Paul didn't write Romans . . . a scribe named Tertius wrote it for him." Being armed with the truth and a full understanding of how the epistles were written and distributed can provide answers to the skeptics and show them that your confidence in the text is by faith in what God has said, but also with an understanding of how it was communicated.*
- ? **How could you use the writing of letters as a tool for discipleship, as Paul, Peter, and others did?** *Discuss various strategies for writing letters of encouragement to various people, pointing them to the truths of Scripture. These could be small notes or extended correspondence with someone where you could offer instruction, correction, or help in growing to be more like Christ. Additionally, early Church Fathers, such as Clement and Polycarp, also wrote letters to local churches in the spirit of the epistles, though not with the same authority as the apostles.*



MEMORY VERSE

1 Corinthians 1:18 For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.



GROUP PRAYER TIME

Be sure to pray with your class before you dismiss them.

- Thank God for providing truth for us to follow in the epistles.
- Praise God for using earthen vessels to communicate His truths.
- Ask God for wisdom to offer encouragement and exhortation to other believers.