

Episode 6: Dear _____, how are you?

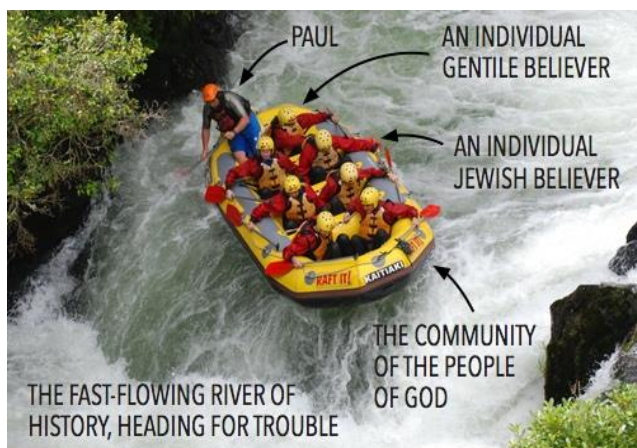
Letters and Revelation:

Much like digging through old boxes of letters from loved ones, we can only begin to scratch the surface of the meaning and intent by knowing more about the person, context, and focus of the letter. The same could be said about the twenty-one letters and Revelation in the Bible. It's important to consider the author, their personal experiences and expression for understanding Jesus Christ and to whom, and why, they are writing their letters.



Letters in the Biblical canon conveyed the authority and presence of the one who sent it—often conveying a longing for the author to be a part of the community and communicating the desire to remain in relationship with those who would be receiving the letter. Unlike postal carriers of today, letters were entrusted to individuals to ensure that they would arrive safely and that the letter would be read to the community with the intent with which it was written. It is important to remember that most people in these communities were often illiterate, the letters would be read aloud in a public space or home. Often the carrier would return with a message to the sender on its reception, concerns, or objections, and the correspondence would continue.

Romans



The apostle Paul's letter to the Roman church. As one of the longest epistles, Paul wrote this letter as a means of expressing his gratitude for the church of Rome's successes and for the desire for them to grow in a unified Christian faith. Written to both Jews and Gentiles, the book lays out arguments that speak to the challenges of two Christian communities, Jews and Gentiles, who were learning to live together despite their differences of religious practice. Paul wanted to communicate a message that reveals God's righteousness through Jesus. Paul does this by creating a new humanity, one where Jew and Gentile are on equal footing, which fulfills God's promise to Israel and

exemplifies unity within the church. Romans is often hailed as one of the leading books on church doctrine, emphasizing themes of salvation, grace, sanctification, and many other important themes about life together as a body of Christ.

1 and 2 Corinthians

1st and 2nd Corinthians are letters written to the people of Corinth. I Corinthians begins with an open address to the question of dissension between believers about which apostle is greater. Moving to the issues of the people of Corinth around immorality, marriage, and celibacy, eating of meat offered to idols, and who is worthy of receiving the Eucharist. Underlying all those communal issues are the spiritual matters of jealousy of spiritual gifts and who has received what, and the value that God places on the uniqueness of each individual gift each has received. No gift, whether great or small, has value if not grounded in and accompanied by love. II Corinthians picks up later when Paul has discovered more upheaval regarding the validity of Paul's authority as an apostle. Paul reminds them of the suffering for the sake of the gospel and urges them to repent for falling prey to false teachings.

Galatians

Galatians addresses a fundamental challenge to the people of God. Who is in, and who is not in? Central to the Galatians text are the questions of non-Jewish people who wondered do we follow the Torah or can do we follow the teachings of Jesus? Paul does this by reaffirming the gospel message and the promise of Jesus that all are included and fulfilled in the promise of Jesus the Messiah and that Jesus' death and resurrection are for all people.

Ephesians



Paul's letter to the church at Ephesus calls for unity in the body of Christ through the Holy Spirit. That sense of unity would breakthrough ethnicity, financial status, and cultural norms. The overarching concern is that the message of Jesus would be central to their everyday lives, permeating the way they live together in community, the way they deal with issues, and the ways in which they live out their call to love and serve one another. The hope is that, as one body of believers, to take off their old humanity and put on their new, restored identity in

Jesus. In doing so, they may resist the forces of evil that seek to undermine unity.

Philippians

Paul's letter to the church at Philippi arrives at a time of intense Roman persecution. Paul calls the people to live their lives in a way that exemplifies Jesus' life and ministry despite the suffering they have endured. Paul encourages Christians to be humble, strive for unity, and bring their worries and fears before God. Knowing God is in all things allows space to live out their faith through the lens of God's grace. The secret to finding peace during suffering, as Paul alludes to, is to place your dependence on God.

Colossians

Paul's letter to Colossians is a letter of encouragement to early Christians to stand firm in their faith despite the challenges of living in a world that would seek to change their lives. Colossians serves as an invitation to allow the gospel message to permeate their entire being, from family dynamics to suffering, temptations, and the work of loving their neighbor. In doing so, they are joined as a part of the liberating love of Jesus that extends to all people.

1 and 2 Thessalonians

1 Thessalonians was written as a word of encouragement to new Christians who were facing persecution from religious leaders. The invitation is to respond to persecution out of love, meeting opposition with grace and generosity, and being motivated by the transforming message of the gospel motivated by the return of Jesus. In 2 Thessalonians, Paul sought to clarify the message, having been waylaid by health concerns, to the people of Thessalonica who were fearful they had missed the return of the Messiah. Paul took time to clarify the message of the gospel and to rebuke those who were creating havoc in the community with false teachings.

1 and 2 Timothy

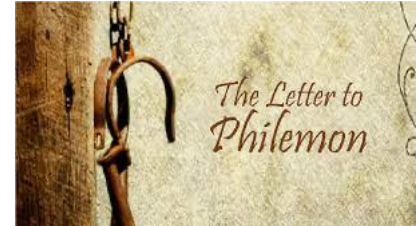
Paul writes to Timothy returns to Ephesus with a message to address the rise of false teachers and leaders in the church. Paul presents a hopeful message of transformation that begins in the person of Jesus and exudes from every individual in the worship life and in service to others. Being counter to the cultural norm takes its toll, however, and in 2 Timothy, we hear a message of encouragement to Timothy and other leaders to keep the faith in the good news of Jesus Christ. Noting that contained within the Biblical story are the words of truth when it comes to faith.

Titus

Paul writes to Titus, who is tasked with bringing a message of good news to the people of Crete. Crete, known for its corruption and sin (Titus 3:3-6), had seen the transformational power of Jesus' message but now faced the daunting task of raising leaders who would continue to follow that message. Paul warns against religious leaders who add works to the gift of grace and who hold law over gospel.

Philemon

Paul's letter to Philemon illustrates this new household dynamic where people are treated equally rather than slave and master. Onesimus, who once was a slave to Philemon, is now a brother in Christ, a worker called to spread the message of Jesus to the world. We are called as people to be set free for relationship rather than be in bondage to one another and reconciled through the cross of Christ. Paul willingly bears the burden of responsibility for Onesimus' actions, living out the exemplified Christian life.



Hebrews

As the church had established itself, there came the point in time that people's enthusiasm began to fade. Jesus had not returned with immediacy as expected, and people began to wonder about the truth of the message. Hebrews serves to bolster the faith of those who had struggled and to inform and enlighten them of the significance of Jesus over and against the other heroes of faith found in the Old Testament. In the face of growing opposition, people had wavered from following Christ and now considered returning to Judaism. Yet the author, not Paul, urges people to hear a message that Jesus' death on the cross comes as a permanent fulfillment of the covenant of God.

James

The book of James serves as a guardrail to keep you from falling off a cliff while looking at the big picture of the Gospels. Combining the teachings of Jesus with wisdom from the book of Proverbs, James lays out some rather deep theology for those who are wrestling with their faith. Using Scripture to emphasize the importance of words, James invites us to wonder about how Scripture, and how we communicate it, reveals our core values and identities. There should be no discrepancies between lived faith and lived actions. (i.e., how we care for the poor, the needy, etc.)

1 and 2 Peter

1 Peter is a message of hope to persecuted Christians. From the beginning, God's people have been on the margins of the community. Yet, despite always being a minority, God has remained faithful to God's people. Therefore, suffering is a part of the story and part of the redemption of God's people. Where 1 Peter is a message to the suffering, 2 Peter is a message of hope. A word of hope to remain faithful to God despite false teachers who lead people astray. 2 Peter ends with a message of hope for the day of the Lord, which exposes evil and grants freedom to Christ-followers.

1,2, and 3 John

1,2 and 3 John are a series of letters that echo the Gospel of John. These letters address people in communities who were seeking to deceive others about the truths of Jesus. The hope of these rabble-rousers was to question the personhood of Jesus and to force people to reconcile questions of belief. These letters serve as a correction and encouragement to keep the faith, hold fast to the teachings they have heard, which

are rooted in the gospel, and live out their faith in relationship with one another. They also serve as an encouragement to welcome those who carry the message to their communities.

Jude

Utilizing the Old Testament as a guide, Judah (Jude) serves to disrupt and negate the message of false teachers who seek to disconnect the message of Jesus and allow room for corrupt and immoral living. Judah calls to persevere in faith, to pray, and stay watchful for the coming return of Jesus.

Revelation

Revelation is often one of the most confusing books in the entirety of Scripture. Utilizing a familiar type of writing, the author of Revelation outlines a vision for a new creation using apocalyptic storytelling. Left as simply storytelling, one can easily assume God's wrath and destruction of creation. Placed in the larger narrative of Scripture, Revelation speaks a word of warning to communities, much like the previous letters, and outlines a return and redemption of God's creation. Speaking to seven communities of faith facing persecution for the faith in Jesus and often facing realities of issues within the way they live out their faith. Using images found in Daniel 7-8, Revelation 12 paints a portrait that readers could connect to, had familiarity with and saw as deeply rooted in the faith they understood. Revelation points to a bigger question of the time, under which Kingdom should we live? Should our allegiance be to the kingdoms of the earth which seek to destroy us or to God's ultimate fulfillment of the Kingdom? While the message seems destructive at times, one can find comfort in the final lines of the book. "He who testifies to these things says, 'Yes, I am coming soon.' Amen. Come Lord Jesus. The grace of the Lord Jesus be with God's people. Amen." (Rev. 22:20-21) It is Jesus who has the final word on creation.



Binge the Bible Weekly Reading Plan:

Instead of a formal weekly reading plan, we invite you to spend each day in one of the books listed above.

1. What specific issues is the author hoping to address?
2. What does this book say about who Jesus is during the challenges?
3. What message of hope do you hear this week?