

## **“Survey of the Scriptures”**

### **Session #10 – ROMANS TO REVELATION**

As Christianity spread through the Mediterranean world during the first century, groups of believers began to meet together in homes to read the Scriptures and pray. These young churches, as they were called, were helped and encouraged by visits and by letters written by the apostles.

The letters – or epistles – were God’s message to those who believed in His Son, Jesus Christ, a message which met the needs of those first century Christians and has proved just as effective through the years for Christians of every generation. Most of the epistles were written by Paul.

The letters were first read by the groups to whom they were addressed and then passed on to Christians in other areas. The writings were recognized as inspired and soon accepted as the Sacred Scriptures of the church.

On Paul’s second missionary trip he stayed for a time at Thessalonica, an important coastal town in Macedonia. When persecution drove him away he went to Corinth, and from there wrote both of his letters to the **Thessalonians**. These were the earliest epistles written.

At this time Claudius was emperor at Rome. Moral conditions throughout the empire had reached such a low ebb that there was talk of the end of the world. Some Christians in Thessalonica quit their jobs, believing in the immediate return of the Lord. But Paul urged them to occupy their waiting time with honest faithful service.

Several epistles were written by Paul during his third missionary journey. From Ephesus he wrote to believers in the province of Galatia and to the Corinthians. During his stay at Corinth he wrote a wonderful letter to the Christians in Rome, a city he was planning to visit. When Paul finally did reach Rome, several years later, he was a prisoner.

Although this letter in which the gospel is so clearly defined was addressed primarily to the **Romans**, Paul gives God’s message for all mankind when he writes that the gospel of Christ is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth.

In the light of God’s righteousness, man’s sin is revealed. But the main theme of the epistle to the Romans is the good news that by faith in Christ Jesus the sinner may receive Christ’s righteousness.

Among the churches in Galatia certain Christians were teaching that only those who became Jews and kept the law could be saved. Paul wrote his epistle to the **Galatians** to correct this mistaken idea.

Galatians is the epistle of Christian liberty. To show that salvation is by grace apart from works of the law, Paul points back to Abraham, who was justified by faith long before the Mosaic law was given. He says that the true purpose of the law is to show men their need of a Saviour.

Tentmakers, Aquila and Priscilla entertained Paul in their home during one of his missionary tours. They lived in the large and prosperous city of Corinth, trade center between east and west. The city was notorious for evil and immorality.

Paul wrote his first letter to the **Corinthians** when he learned that the active Christian church he had established there was slipping back into worldliness and paganism. His letter was stern yet tender, with plenty of good advice on practical Christian living.

In the second letter to the Corinthians, Paul wrote as a pastor to his beloved flock. His concern for the spiritual welfare of Christians is evident. It has been said that in this epistle Paul's great heart of love is revealed.

The next group of letters – Ephesians, Colossians, Philemon and Philippians – are called the prison epistles because they were written when Paul was a prisoner in Rome, between 61 and 63 A.D.

The temple of the pagan goddess Diana at Ephesus was one of the seven wonders of the first century world. Yet in this city – which was a stronghold of idolatry – a Christian church had been established, and the believers were well taught and deeply spiritual.

The Christian life is likened to a journey in Paul's letter to the **Ephesians**. In his daily walk the Christian must keep the right relationship to Christ and to the world in which he lives. His life should bring glory to God and be a constant witness to those around him.

Although Colosse was on the main highway from the coast, Paul had not visited the city when he wrote his epistle to the **Colossians**. The Christian work there was apparently started by Epaphras, who was later a prisoner with Paul in Rome.

In writing to the Christians at Colosse, Paul emphasizes the relationship of Christ – the Head – to the Church, His body. In Colosse some doubted Christ's deity and others were leaning toward angel worship, but in this beautiful God-inspired letter Paul upholds Christ alone as pre-eminent in all things.

From the short epistle to **Philemon** we learn the story of Onesimus, a slave who deserted his master Philemon and took refuge in Rome. There he met Paul, heard the gospel and was converted. Onesimus had to return to Philemon, but his return was made easier by the letter Paul gave him to take to his master.

At the hill city of Philippi, Paul and his fellow missionary Silas were once imprisoned. Their jailer was one of the first converts to Christianity in Europe. Here Lydia accepted the gospel and opened her home as a meeting place for the Christian church in that area.

When Paul dictated his letter to the **Philippians** he was a prisoner in Rome. The apostle counted it a privilege to suffer for the cause of Christ, and the whole theme of his epistle is the joy of Christian experience.

A young man by the name of Titus was entrusted with ministering to Christians on the island of Crete. Paul's pastoral letter to **Titus** points up the necessity for sound doctrine and good works, not only on the part of the leaders but also for all members of the assembly.

**Timothy** was a fellow worker of Paul's from the time of the apostle's second missionary journey. This young man was well-versed in the Scriptures and was given a good report by elders of his home church.

After Paul was imprisoned a heavy portion of the pastoral work fell on Timothy's shoulders. Paul wrote urging the gentle Timothy to be a good soldier for Jesus Christ, fighting to restrain evil and resist false doctrine. In his second epistle to Timothy, Paul said he had fought a good fight and was now handing over the warfare to others.

We see then that during his missionary travels Paul wrote to the Romans, Corinthians, Galatians and Thessalonians. His epistles to the Ephesians, Philippians and Colossians were written from prison. He also wrote to friends and workers Timothy, Titus and Philemon. The second letter to Timothy was the last Paul wrote before his death.

The epistle to the **Hebrews**, or Jews, beautifully sets forth the superiority of Jesus Christ over Judaism. We read that the old order has been set aside and God has spoken by His Son. Some attribute this epistle to Paul, but the writer is not mentioned by name. However, it is obvious that he was a student of the Old Testament and a perceptive listener to the teachings of Christ.

Under the new covenant Christ is our Great High Priest, our Representative before a Holy God. The superiority of His person and His priestly work are clearly shown in the book of Hebrews. Christ's ministry is eternal and heavenly. The law of God is now written on the hearts and minds of believers rather than on parchment and stone.

**James**, who wrote the epistle bearing his name, was a pillar of the Christian church at Jerusalem. A half brother of Jesus, it was not until after the resurrection that he became a servant of the Lord Jesus Christ. His letter is one of several general epistles in the New Testament, addressed to Christians in general rather than one particular church.

James insists that the "tree" of faith must bear the "fruit" of good works. His epistle abounds in graphic pictures to emphasize his words. Perhaps his teaching on the tongue – that little member which causes us so much trouble – is the best known of his writings.

The two epistles of **Peter**, addressed to Christians throughout Asia Minor, were also for general reading. Peter mentions the fact that the Christians had been scattered to many

different countries, yet he draws all together in the bond of Christ when he writes to “*all who have obtained like precious faith with us.*”

Peter encourages Christians who are called to bear suffering and trial because of their faith in Christ. The hope of glory shines all the brighter against the backdrop of persecution.

Three letters were written by the aging **John**, last of the apostles. Although he does not identify himself by name, both phraseology and content indicate that these words undoubtedly were written by the author of John’s Gospel. Again he stresses the deity of Christ.

In the first epistle John writes of the light and love enjoyed by all who are in God’s family. In the second he warns against false teachers. In the third he points out that all who maintain faithful testimony for the truth are in fellowship one with another.

Like many New Testament epistles, the letter **Jude** is an exhortation to turn from apostasy and hold fast to faith. He chooses Old Testament examples such as Cain, Korah and Balaam to point up his message. Jude was a half brother of Jesus. He probably wrote his letter about 70 A.D.

The last book in the Bible is an epistle written to seven churches in Asia Minor. It is a book of prophecy, the **revelation** of things to come as seen by the Apostle John. In his closing years John was exiled to Patmos, possibly as a result of the persecution of Christians under Roman Emperor Domitian.

The seven churches of Asia were seven literal churches, but at the same time are representative of conditions which may be found in any church at any time. Some Bible scholars also believe these churches are prophetic pictures of the history of the church of Christ through the ages.

The symbolic language of Revelation with the series of sevens – seven seals, seven trumpets, seven vials – has led to varied interpretations but certain facts emerge without shadow of doubt. The world must pass through a time of judgment and Christ will return in power and glory.

John’s account of the heavenly Jerusalem he saw by vision is awe-inspiring and uplifting, and yet we must remember that he was limited by his own vocabulary and experience, and the glories of heaven surpass human description. This glorious future shines all the more brightly because of the contrasting darkness of world conditions today.

New Testament epistles make up the last 22 books of the Bible. Some of these letters were addressed to churches; some were written to individuals; some were for Christians in general. All were written by inspiration of God and are “*profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness.*” They are God’s word to the Christian church, and time cannot dim their truth and effectiveness.

Today and through every age the church of Christ has the same problems to face – worldliness and paganism with pride, superstition, idolatry, brutality and immorality. But the Word of God is the Living Word, and just as applicable today as it was at the time of writing.

Yes, the epistles – from Romans to Revelation – were written to Christians of that day and this, to show us the truth and bring us strength, encouragement and assurance, even as John wrote: “*These things are written unto you that ye may know that ye have eternal life...that ye may know Him that is true, even Jesus Christ.*”

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