

Overview: The New Testament

History Books

The word *gospel* means "good news." Almost half of the New Testament consists of four accounts of the life of Jesus and the Good News he brought to earth. Each of these four books, or Gospels, has a different focus and a different audience; taken together, they give a complete picture of Jesus' life and teaching. About a third of their pages are devoted to the events of his last week on earth, including the crucifixion and resurrection.

Acts continues the history into the period after Jesus left the earth.

Matthew:	Written to a Jewish audience, this Gospel links the Old and New Testaments. It presents Jesus as the Messiah and King promised in the Old Testament. Matthew emphasizes Jesus' authority and power.
Mark:	Mark probably had pragmatic Roman readers in mind. His Gospel stresses action and gives a straightforward, blow-by-blow account of Jesus' work on earth.
Luke:	A doctor, Luke was also a fine writer. His Gospel provides many details of human interest, especially in Jesus' treatment of the poor and needy. A joyful tone characterizes Luke's book.
John:	John has a different, more reflective style than the other Gospels. Its author selected seven signs that pointed to Jesus as the Son of God and wove together everything else to underscore that point.
Acts:	Acts tells what happened to Jesus' followers after he left them. Peter and Paul soon emerged as leaders of the rapidly spreading church.

The Letters

The young church was nourished spiritually by apostles who set down their beliefs and messages in a series of letters. The first 13 such letters (Romans through Philemon) were written by the apostle Paul, who led the advance of Christianity to non-Jewish people.

Paul's Letters

Romans:	Written for a sophisticated audience, Romans sets forth theology in a logical, organized form.
1 Corinthians:	A very practical book, 1 Corinthians takes up the problems of a tumultuous church in Corinth: marriage, factions, immorality, public worship and lawsuits.
2 Corinthians:	Paul wrote this follow-up letter to defend himself against a rebellion led by certain false apostles.
Galatians:	A short version of the message of Romans, this book addresses legalism. It shows how Christ came to bring freedom, not bondage to a set of laws.
Ephesians:	Although written in jail, this letter is Paul's most optimistic and encouraging. It tells of the advantages a believer has in Christ.
Philippians:	The church at Philippi ranked among Paul's favorites. This friendly letter stresses that joy can be found in any situation.
Colossians:	Written to oppose certain cults, Colossians tells how faith in Christ is complete. Nothing needs to be added to what Christ did.
1 Thessalonians:	Composed early in Paul's ministry, this letter gives a capsule history of one church, as well as Paul's direct advice about specific problems.

2 Thessalonians:	Stronger in tone than his first letter to the Thessalonians, the sequel goes over the same topics, especially the church's questions about Christ's second coming.
1 Timothy:	As Paul neared the end of his life, he chose young men such as Timothy to carry on his work. His two letters to Timothy form a leadership manual for a young pastor.
2 Timothy:	Written just before Paul's death, 2 Timothy offers Paul's final words to his young assistant.
Titus:	Titus was left in Crete, a notoriously difficult place to nurture a church. Paul's letter gave practical advice on how to go about it.
Philemon:	Paul urged Philemon, owner of a runaway slave, Onesimus, to forgive his slave and accept him back as a brother in Christ.

Other Letters

Hebrews:	No one knows who wrote Hebrews, but it probably first went to Christians in danger of slipping back into their old, rule-bound religion. It interprets the Old Testament, explaining many Jewish practices as symbols that prepared the way for Christ.
James:	James, a man of action, emphasized the right kind of behavior for a believer. Someone who calls himself or herself a Christian ought to act like it, James believed, and his letter spells out the specifics.
1 Peter:	Early Christians often met violent opposition, and Peter's letter comforted and encouraged Christians who were being persecuted for their faith.
2 Peter:	In contrast to Peter's first letter, this one focused on problems that sprang up from the inside. It warns against false teachers.
1 John:	John could fill simple words, such as <i>light</i> , <i>love</i> and <i>life</i> , with deep meaning, and in this letter he elegantly explains basic truths about the Christian life.
2 John:	Warning against false teachers, John counseled churches on how to respond to them.
3 John:	Balancing 2 John, this companion letter mentions the need to be hospitable to true teachers.
Jude:	Jude gave a brief but fiery exposé of heretics.
Revelation:	A book of visions and symbols, Revelation is the only New Testament book that concentrates on prophecy. It completes the story, begun in Genesis, of the cosmic battle between good and evil being waged on earth. It ends with a picture of a new heaven and new earth.