**What is an Epistle?**

The word “epistle” comes from the Greek word *epistolé*, which means “letter,” “message,” or “dispatch.” In Hebrew, the word is *iggerah,*also meaning “letter” and mainly used for missives—long, official, formal letters, usually from someone in an important capacity.

It’s a distinctive kind of letter, one valued and worthy of honor.

Epistles differ from other letters primarily in their purpose. While letters can be about any topic and might be informal or even trite—think letters between friends catching up on life—epistles are instructional in nature. The tone is typically one of teacher to student. In short, epistles carry weight.

**What is an Epistle in the Bible?**

Epistles make up the majority of the Bible’s New Testament. Of the 27 books, 21 are epistles. The epistles were written by apostles, who were key Christian teachers infused with the power of the Holy Spirit and inspired to tell people how they, too, can live, think, and behave as a Christian.

Some are written to churches in specific cities, such as Epistle to the Ephesians, often called Letter to the Ephesians or simply Ephesians. Others are written to the church universal. However, all contain authoritative directives designed to help other believers in their Christian walk, from encouragement in suffering to what holy, Christ-modeled living looks like.

**Who Wrote the Epistles in the Bible?**

The Bible is the word of God, and we know the Holy Spirit entered the apostles on the Day of Pentecost ([Acts 2](http://www.biblestudytools.com/search/?t=niv&q=ac+2)), enabling them to speak with authority and wisdom in all tongues.

From this first Holy Spirit infusion began the church universal, with Christ Jesus as the cornerstone. The apostles set about teaching the Gospel in every way they could; the epistles were one of those ways. They were called by God to write these epistles as a way to be a sort of instructional manual on how to live the Christian life.

Most of the epistles were written by the apostle Paul, one of the fundamental leaders of early Christianity. Paul is thought to have written 13 of them, probably dictated to a scribe who would write the words on a scroll. Then, Paul would sign the letters as a way to verify authenticity before they would be ferried to the intended audience and read aloud many times over to the full church.

The rest were written by the apostles Peter, John, James, and Jude.

The author of Hebrews is unknown, though many believe Paul wrote it, or someone attempting to write in the style of Paul.

**What Were the Epistles of Paul About?**

The 13 epistles by Paul were written over the course of about 15 years. Scholars generally believe the earliest were **1 and 2 Thessalonians**, two letters to the church in Thessalonica, written around 52-53 A.D. Their purpose was to encourage new believers about living in a Christian manner and growing in holiness, as well as to remind them of the coming rapture, for which they should be ready.

His last epistles, to his companion and mentee Timothy and to Titus, were written around 65-66 A.D., likely from a prison cell. The last, **2 Timothy**, carried a tone of finality as he urged his young friend to stay strong in faith even in the midst of great suffering.

As Paul wrote, “I am already being poured out like a drink offering, and the time for my departure is near. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness … and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing” ([2 Timothy 4:6-8](http://www.biblestudytools.com/search/?t=niv&q=2ti+4:6-8)).

**What Were the Epistles of Peter About?**

Peter’s two epistles — **1 and 2 Peter** — are for a broader audience; the first is to groups of exiled Christians, while the second is to all who share the faith. At the time, Christians were experiencing great hardship as widespread persecution continued to plague followers of Jesus. In his missives, Peter urges them to cling to hope despite their suffering and to live godly, upstanding lives worthy of their savior. Because of this, they can rise above. He says: “Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. Resist him, standing firm in the faith, because you know that the family of believers throughout the world is undergoing the same kind of sufferings” ([1 Peter 5:8-9](http://www.biblestudytools.com/search/?t=niv&q=1pe+5:8-9)).

**What Were the Epistles of John About?**

John, one of the first apostles called by Jesus and who wrote the Gospel of John and the Book of Revelation, is also thought to have authored three epistles. The first addresses a broad audience, while two and three are to individuals.

While all three are different, the overarching theme of John’s epistles is love. As he urges, we are to love God above all, remain in perfect fellowship with God for eternal life, love others, and steer clear of loving the world. This was an important message for this time, as the epistle was written for Christians living in a hostile world, subject to arrest, torture, and execution because of their beliefs. They are to love even their enemies, John wrote, and especially their Christian neighbors:

**The “Brother” Epistles: James and Jude**

James wrote his five-chapter epistle to Jewish Christians. At the time of the writing, Christians were experiencing much injustice and poverty. James’ epistle offers wisdom on doing goodwill and walking the Christian path through peacemaking, mercy for the poor, kindness to strangers, and more.

One of its best-known verses is its wisdom on the importance of faith over works: “Suppose a brother or a sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to them, ‘Go in peace; keep warm and well fed,’ but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead” ([James 2:15-17](http://www.biblestudytools.com/search/?t=niv&q=jas+2:15-17)).

Jude, identifying himself as the brother of James, wrote a far shorter epistle, addressing it “to those who have been called, who are loved in God the Father, and kept for Jesus Christ” ([Jude 1:1](http://www.biblestudytools.com/search/?t=niv&q=jude+1:1)). His words also serve to build up the body of Christ by encouraging them in their faith and urging them to renounce worldly evils, as well as to watch out for ungodly deceivers who have slipped in among them.

**Hebrews: The Unknown Epistle**

The author of Hebrews is widely disputed. Many felt it was written by Paul, but given the more sophisticated language and style, scholars now believe it was written by someone else. The audience is Jewish Christians in Jerusalem well-versed in the Old Testament.

These men and women faced grave persecution, and possibly were tempted to return to their former Jewish ways and laws. But the epistle urges them to resist fear and instead cling to Jesus, the “high priest of the new covenant” ([Hebrews 8](http://www.biblestudytools.com/search/?t=niv&q=heb+8)).

**Why Do Epistles Make Up Such a Large Portion of the New Testament?**

While the Gospels are helpful and important because they detail the life and death of Jesus Christ, the epistles are just as valuable, for they help us understand what it means to live as a Christian without our savior right in front of us.

The Holy Spirit, which God poured into the apostles on the Day of Pentecost, set them ablaze with the Good News and got the church off and running. It enabled them to teach — and baptize — thousands upon thousands.

Through the epistles, they are now able to reach millions more on what it means to follow Jesus in practical, everyday, authentic ways.

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