

Under The Fig Tree



WEEK 45

This week, we will complete our reading of the Letters. Each of these letters was sent to a group of the Lord's disciples learning to live together. The letters addressed specific issues. These same issues arise in every generation. The Holy Spirit begins a new work in every new believer, whether born 2000 years ago or today. Believers were meant to help one another grow in the faith, to pass on knowledge and understanding, but not to be so locked into tradition as to take away new life in Yeshua. We were not intended to turn up at a church building and adopt lifeless traditions that are more a form of religious duty than an expression of our new life as part of a body/family together in Yeshua. The same issues arise in every generation. This is why we are able to read the letters of the New Testament as if they are addressed to us in our community.

There are many highlights, in the letters, which have become favourite verses. These verses have given rise to names of missionary organizations, made into mottoes, used on posters and used for titles of books. This was not the intent of the writer. He wrote with clear background understanding of the Tanach and the Gospel of Yeshua HaMashiach, with such care for the Lord's disciples that his letters were deemed worthy of inclusion in our Bibles. Should we be able to construct such letters ourselves? The Bible is complete, so we will not add new books to it. Yet, our understanding of Scripture should enable us to write letters with understanding and commitment, just as Paul did. Our careful study of the Bible this year has put us in a strong position, stronger than some of the disciples to whom Paul wrote. They had the benefit of having spent time in personal contact with the Apostles, which we have not had. Nevertheless, we have more resources than many would have had in those days. The scrolls of the Tanach were costly and so each person could not own a set. Few communities of disciples would have access to the entire written Tanach. The synagogues may have owned a set of scrolls but cooperation was needed if Yeshua's disciples were to access them. How wonderful it was when the Gospel accounts first arrived in a community! We can barely imagine this with the resources on hand today. Written Gospel accounts were not available until both the ministry of Paul and of Peter were almost over. Matthew, Mark and Luke were compiled after 60 AD and John, later still, after 80 AD. We, by contrast, having so many complete Bibles available all over the world, in our own language, are spoiled!

If we are serious Bible students, we are able to prepare ourselves to read the New Testament letters with understanding, as if written to us directly. We are in a position to understand the

letters in context of the entire Bible, tracing themes back to their beginnings in Torah, especially Genesis. The letters were not divided into chapters and verses. These divisions are just for convenience, enabling us to draw reference to the various sections. They are not dry theological documents. They are all about God and His purposes in our lives. Let us, therefore, read them as letters. The remaining letters are short enough to be read in one sitting. Perhaps you will read them more than once. Continue to keep your notes as you do so, completing the year's studies as we began. The letters were sent to groups of disciples, who would have read them together. You might consider doing this, either now or at some time in the future, discussing the points made, just as it would have been in Paul's day.

Day 1

Philippians Chapters 1 to 4. The letter was sent on account of divisions among the disciples. Paul's main exhortation, therefore, is for unity in Messiah. Notice how he constructed the letter in a winning way, rather than a confrontational way. He draws us into the purpose of his letter and leaves us with profound insights and challenging passages. Note down the special highlights that the Holy Spirit emphasizes for you. The letter was written while Paul was imprisoned in Rome at the end of his ministry. All he had learned and experienced in his ministry was available to him. There can be no more precious letter than from Paul the Apostle. No wonder the letter is full of memorable and quotable highlights. For example, Verse 8 of Chapter 4 is on a plaque at the BBC, the main broadcaster of radio and television programmes in the United Kingdom. It was taken as the original motto of the organization. This indicates the extent of Paul's influence as the Apostle to the Gentiles. His letters have such calibre that they are still used to transform societies. *I press forward to the goal for the upward call of God in Yeshua HaMashiach; Rejoice in the Lord always. Again I will say, rejoice! Let your gentleness be known to all men. The Lord is at hand; I know how to be abased and I know how to abound; I can do all things through Messiah who strengthens me; Let this mind be in you which was also in Yeshua HaMashiach...He made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a servant, coming in the likeness of men...;* these are some highlights to win us over to the unity that Paul had in mind. Read the letter for yourself and see what else you find.

Day 2

1 Timothy Chapter s 1 to 6. During his last years in Rome, Paul wrote two letters to Timothy and one to Titus. These were two young men who travelled with Paul. They learned from Paul and were equipped for their own ministries. This is such a good example; ministers today often seek to emulate Paul in raising up their “Timothies”. Paul is a model of ministry in every way. He did not set out to bring a theoretical model for us to copy; he simple ministered faithfully, leaving a testimony from which we might learn.

Paul left Timothy in Ephesus to strengthen the disciples. Notice that, by then, the communities were big enough to need structure. Elders and deacons were appointed in the same way that they were appointed in Jerusalem (Acts Chapter 6). Structure of the community is not intended to bring dominance, but service of others and a means of encouraging one another to grow in the Lord. We do not hear of paid ministers, or experts, but that older and more mature believers were chosen to oversee and administer affairs for the community as a whole, resolving disputes as they arose. The qualifications for elders and deacons are in Chapter 3. The principle involved is precisely the same as when Moses appointed elders in the wilderness (Exodus 18:19-22). Yeshua takes the place of Moses as Head over all, so elders and deacons are coworkers with Him on behalf of the community - *under-shepherds*, as it were. At the time of Yeshua, the 70 chief elders in Jerusalem were called the Sanhedrin. Yeshua took away their authority because they had turned their servant-calling into an office of power and status. He said He would give authority to others. This authority is now in local communities among the appointed elders. In our day it is important to notice that some branches of the Christian Church have done just what the Sanhedrin did. Central control, religious systems, rank and worldly authority have replaced servanthood. Consider carefully the qualifications Paul listed. Just as in Jerusalem, elders, filled with the Spirit of God, were to be mature in their understanding of the Scriptures and devoted to prayer. Deacons, filled with the Holy Spirit, were to serve in administrative ways, all for the protection and building up of the local disciples.

Read this letter as if it were sent to you, noting the points that Paul made to Timothy. 1 Timothy 3:16 is a summary statement of our faith. Notice the warning in Chapter 4, concerning a time of great apostasy. We are in such a time in our day.

Day 3

Titus Chapters 1 to 3. Paul, unable to leave Rome and recognizing that his life on earth would soon be over, must have spent much of his time praying for the believers in various towns and cities. He was concerned that everything would be left in order. Just as Timothy was left in Ephesus, Titus was left in Crete. The letter to Titus is for a similar purpose to the letter to Timothy. You will notice the similarities. Titus was to appoint elders. Paul also encouraged him in his own ministry. Read the letter carefully and note the details for yourself.

Day 4

2 Timothy Chapters 1 to 4. This is Paul's final letter. Pause for a moment to consider this. We have studied the lives of many of God's people who were called out for service. We have read, for example, the accounts of Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Ruth, the Judges, the Prophets and Kings. We have followed them through their lives and read about their deaths. We have studied the life and death of Yeshua and how He commissioned His disciples. We read about how David commissioned Solomon to build the Temple. Now we have the final recorded words of Paul the Apostle to the Gentiles. Read the letter as one receiving it. Read it also as one writing it. We, like Paul, are both ministers of the Gospel and encouragers of the next generation. The baton passes from generation to generation. We have much to learn from this short letter. Take note of subtleties, such as the balanced purpose of our study of the Bible (Chapter 3, Verses 16 and 17). The goal of our studies is not academic qualification, but to be equipped for service and to be approved by God (Chapter 2, Verse 15). What does *rightly dividing the word of truth* mean? Paul charged Timothy to be a *worker who does not need to be ashamed*. The idea behind the words *rightly dividing* was to compare Timothy with skilled craftsmen of the day. Imagine how, for example, a carpenter would cut a piece of wood. He would carefully and accurately *divide* a piece of wood into two with a straight cut of a saw. With this same care and accuracy, we must teach Bible truths. Paul's charge came to Timothy with the spiritual authority and serious intent through which it was sent (Chapter 4, Verses 1 and 2). Notice that, again, Paul warned Timothy of a falling away that was to come (Chapter 4, Verses 3 and 4). This was similar to other warnings given by Paul (2 Thessalonians 2, Acts 20:26-31). Take the letter as seriously as Timothy would have done.

Day 5

1 John. John was the young disciple who leaned on the Lord as they sat eating together. When he wrote his Gospel, the Book of Revelation, and his three short letters, he was an old man. Yeshua gave him responsibility for Mary (John 19:26 to 27). We do not have an accurate record of all that happened between the death of Yeshua and John's exile on the Isle of Patmos. Some historians think that he lived in Ephesus for part of this time and that this was where Mary died. It is also thought that John later died at Ephesus. Such historical accounts are to be treated with caution, even though they may be correct. The Bible records what we need to know. All of John's writing is thought to have been accomplished after 80 AD. The Temple in Jerusalem, by then, would have been destroyed and the Jews once more scattered across the world. John wrote his letter so that all disciples of the Lord might read it (Chapter 1, Verse 12 to 14). The content of the letter reminds us of his Gospel. It is a meditation on the love of God, who sent His Light into the world that we might have life. John urges us to live in the Light and to love one another. He exhorts us not to sin, knowing that if we walk in the Spirit of God we will not sin. Yet, if we sink into fleshly ways then we may sin, but, thankfully, our sins have been covered through the Blood of Yeshua: *if we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness* (1 John 1:9). We are exhorted, just as in John 15, to abide in Yeshua. Chapter 1, Verses 4-6, explain how to abide in Yeshua. John also warned about the spirit of the antichrist which manifests itself in the world in many ways. He warns us to be alert. This is a letter from an old man who had been among the three closest to Yeshua. At the end of his life he has this to pass on to us. Let us read it carefully.

Day 6

2 John. This is just a short letter. It reiterates the central message that John has for us all, and also the warning about deception in the world, including from false brethren.

3 John. We end our study of the Apostle's letters with John's short third and last letter. See how the Holy Spirit speaks to you as you read it for yourself.

Day 7

A Day for Rest and Further Reflection

We have just one Book of the Bible left to read; the Book of Revelation. This will be our task for next week. When we read the Tanach, we took time aside to read some of the Books of the New Testament. Because of this, we did not reread them when we turned more fully to the New Testament. Before turning to Revelation, therefore, you may find it useful to review some of these Books again. This might be a worthwhile activity for today.
