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A Beginner's Guide to Understanding **THE NEW TESTAMENT**

Whether you have been in church your whole life or are still unsure of what you believe regarding Jesus -- reading the Bible can be a daunting task. The New Testament was written a long time ago, by people living in a very different time, who were experiencing very different circumstances from many of us. Over the years, I have read countless books, some scholarly and some practical, in an effort to have a better grasp of the "Big Picture" of the New Testament story. In all of my study, I have found no single source to be more helpful or clear than *A Book You Will Actually Read* on the New Testament by Mark Driscoll. In the following pages, you will find a condensed version of this work -- supplemented with research from my own study over the years. I would encourage you to read it, and other books like it as you seek to become a student of God's Word. In the meantime, I pray this will give you a deeper hunger and understanding of this wonderful section of sacred scripture.



NEW TESTAMENT OVERVIEW

In the following pages we will explore issues such as authorship, genre, major themes, and the distinctive features of the 27 Books that comprise the New Testament.

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A BRIEF INTRODUCTION

The New Testament is actually a library of twenty-seven books written by at least eight different authors. The books of the New Testament are arranged not according to authorship or date of writing, but rather are grouped according to their type of literature. While numerous complicated divisions of literary genre could be made, for the purposes of this study we will simply break the books of the New Testament into four different types of literature: the Gospels, History, Epistles, and Apocalypse. In each section you will find a brief explanation of each type of literature and then an overview of each book of the New Testament in hopes that you will then read that book for yourself.

THE GOSPELS

The Gospels are historical accounts and biographies of Jesus' life and ministry. They accurately tell his story to varying cultural groups of people. Some critics of Scripture have argued that the differences between the Gospels are evidence of contradictions, which could not be further from the truth. The four Gospels simply operate like your local nightly news. The first three Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) function like local network television affiliates for ABC, NBC, and CBS, which generally report the same stories with some variance in eyewitness accounts and particular details. This explains why roughly 60 percent of the first three Gospels contain common and shared information. The Gospel of John, on the other hand, functions more like one of the national cable television newscasts—such as CNN—which has news stories that are rarely found on the local nightly news. This explains why roughly 90 percent of John is unique to his account.

MATTHEW

Matthew is an unlikely author of a book of the Bible. He was a Jew who worked as a crooked tax collector and extorted money out of people for the pagan Roman government. This explains why he speaks of money more than any other Gospel writer. Matthew was one of Jesus' disciples and therefore an eyewitness to the events he

recorded. Matthew wrote his Gospel primarily to convince Jews that Jesus was the fulfillment of the Old Testament. This explains why he begins by tracing Jesus' genealogy back to David and Abraham, highlights Old Testament prophecies that Jesus fulfilled, and repeatedly quotes and alludes to the Old Testament. As you read Matthew you will see that Jesus fulfills all of the Old Testament and human history, and that God has loved you enough to both tell you of his coming and then actually come to live, die, and rise for you.

MARK

Mark is a companion of Paul, Barnabas, and Peter in Acts and the New Testament letters. Though not an eyewitness to everything he records, he is in some ways the pen for Peter, who was an eyewitness. Mark is the shortest of the Gospels and was written for Romans who did not care much about Jesus' family lineage but did care about whether or not he accomplished his mission of salvation. Therefore, Mark is filled with action, present tense verbs, the miracles of Jesus, and Jesus' own teachings. In some ways Mark is the equivalent of a blue-collar Gospel that cuts out the details and simply shows that Jesus did his job, is God, and is worth following. In Mark you will hear the teachings and see the actions of Jesus in such a way that you will marvel at his authority and courage and find yourself drawn to trust in him and, by grace, be like him.

LUKE

Luke gathered his Gospel from eyewitness testimony, and his is the more historically detailed account of Jesus' life and ministry. Luke was a well-educated doctor whose Gospel carefully tells the story of Jesus in chronological order with special attention to Jesus' healing of those who were sick, his emotional life, and the ministry of angels. Luke also highlights Jesus' love for social outcasts and women. Luke was probably not a Jew, and his Gospel is written to show non-Jews that Jesus was indeed God who became a man. It does this by tracing Jesus' genealogy back to Adam, the father of the human race, and ultimately God himself. Luke is the longest book in the New Testament and is dedicated, along with his sequel book, Acts,

to a friend named Theophilus. In Luke you will see Jesus as the only perfect and sinless man who has ever lived, and by comparing yourself to him you will see your own sinful shortcomings and become keenly aware of why he had to live, die, and rise in your place.

JOHN

John was the youngest disciple, and he spent three years learning from Jesus while living life with him in a warm relationship, much like that of an older and younger brother. John outlived all of the other disciples, who were murdered, and went on to lead the early church through the attacks of heretics from within and persecutors from without. John wrote five books of the Bible, but is best known as simply being the “one whom Jesus loved.” Along with Peter and James, John was among the inner circle of Jesus’ disciples and therefore saw the most intimate and amazing moments of Jesus’ life, which he faithfully recorded for us. When too old and weak to preach or even stand, it is recorded in church history that John had himself carried into the church and with a feeble voice simply articulated the heart that Jesus had for all of his followers, saying, “Little children, love one another.” John’s Gospel was the last written and is emphatic to repeatedly show that Jesus is God so that people will trust in him for salvation. John contains a great deal of personal interaction between Jesus and individuals, few (roughly nineteen) Old Testament quotes, no parables, and no demonic encounters. John is written primarily to Greeks who are not as familiar with the Old Testament, which also explains why, among Americans whose culture is influenced so greatly by the Greeks, John perennially remains the most popular Gospel. In reading John you will learn to love Jesus as your God and worship him alone.

HISTORY - ACTS of the APOSTLES

The brilliant doctor Luke, who wrote the Gospel that bears his name, also wrote the book of Acts. As a compendium, they provide for us the most thorough history of the life of Jesus and the early church. As much as his Gospel focuses on Jesus, Acts focuses on the Holy Spirit, who opens the understanding of people to trust in Jesus, gifts them for ministry, and empowers them to bring the good news of Jesus to others in word and deed. As you read Acts you will see the power of God poured out through average people like yourself who endured hardship, trial, confusion, and opposition because they met Jesus. You will be compelled to love the church and labor for its health and growth like your early brothers and sisters in Jesus Christ did by the power of the Holy Spirit.

THE EPISTLES

The Epistles, or “letters,” were written to people and churches for the purpose of instruction, correction, warning, and encouragement. Because the disciples that Jesus had personally trained (also called the apostles) were busy traveling to preach to people who had not heard the gospel or were sitting in jail suffering for their faith, they could not be present with people and churches that needed them. So, they wrote letters that were to be read in the churches and obeyed by the Christians.

Paul wrote thirteen of the Epistles in the New Testament—possibly fourteen if he also penned Hebrews, whose authorship is unknown. Paul zealously persecuted Christians before he was knocked on his rear by Jesus and was converted to become a pastor who suffered and died to preach God’s love to the enemies he formerly hated. The conversion of Paul would be akin to Adolf Hitler halfway through the Holocaust apologizing to Jews and living a life of poverty and suffering to become a Jewish rabbi who preached God’s love for Jews. Paul’s letters untangle some of the messiest knots in the church, including homosexuality, women in ministry, and baptism. Because of his often unpopular teachings, Peter noted that although Paul’s words are sometimes hard to understand, we must not distort or ignore them, or we will find ourselves facing the justice of God. As you read Paul, you may get the sense that he is attacking you. Paul is a fearless pastor who loves you so much that he will not permit you to reduce Jesus to someone less than he is, or allow you to continue in sin and folly. He is satisfied with nothing less for you than the fullness of life in Jesus Christ.

ROMANS

Romans is the longest letter in the New Testament. Paul wrote it to clearly explain the universality of human sinfulness and the work of Jesus to save us from Satan, sin, death, and ourselves. Romans, therefore, is about what the gospel, or “good news,” of Jesus is and how we receive it by faith in and grace from him. Anticipating a future trip to Rome, Paul sent this letter on ahead of himself to a church that was not likely started by an apostle or ever visited by an apostle, in an effort to strengthen its faith and help fund his upcoming missionary church-planting trip to Spain. At various times in church history, God has seen fit to light the wicks of certain books of the Bible. Of all such books, Romans is arguably packed with the most gunpowder.

1 and 2 CORINTHIANS

1 and 2 Corinthians are letters Paul wrote to one of the worst churches of all time. The church at Corinth (a.k.a. the church of Jerry Springer) was an arrogant church that was prone to having a lot of illicit sex, including homosexuality and prostitution, getting drunk at communion, suing each other, getting divorced, stealing, and even approving of one guy in the church who was having sex with either his mother or stepmother. Paul's first letter is a response to a series of questions they asked him; his answers often begin with the statement "Now . . ." or "Now concerning. . . ." While 1 Corinthians is basically a stern series of rebukes, 2 Corinthians takes a kinder and more personal, pastoral tone, which shows that they heeded his commands and changed their ways after reading the previous letter.

One of the most confusing things about 1 Corinthians is that 1 Corinthians is technically not 1 Corinthians. First Corinthians is actually the second letter Paul wrote to the church, but since the first letter has been lost, we have no idea exactly what it said. In addition, Paul's other letter to the church, 2 Corinthians, is also not technically 2 Corinthians. It is actually Paul's fourth letter to the Corinthians, because the third letter to the church was also lost. Therefore, the total of four letters Paul wrote to the Corinthians were as follows:

Letter 1: The first lost letter mentioned in 1 Corinthians 5:9-11. Letter 2: First Corinthians, which is in the Bible. Letter 3: The second lost letter mentioned in 2 Corinthians 2:3-4, 9; 7:8, 12. Letter 4: Second Corinthians, which is in the Bible. We cannot be exactly sure why two of Paul's four letters to the Corinthians have been seemingly lost forever. We can only speculate that perhaps they were not inspired by God and therefore God chose not to preserve them for the canon of Scripture. This would not be altogether surprising since not everything Paul wrote was sacred and inspired Scripture—his grocery list did not make the Bible either.

GALATIANS

Galatians is a strong attack on false teachers who had infected the church in Galatia with the heretical teaching that salvation is by things we do (such as morality and good works) and not solely by the work of Jesus. Therefore, Galatians explains what the gospel of Jesus is not. In Galatians you will learn that who you love (Jesus) is more important than what you do (works of the law) because you can be a good person and still go to hell if you don't love Jesus. But if you love Jesus you will live like a loving and good person, because

he will transform you. Galatians is a good book for you to read if you are a self-righteous, self-appointed judge, or if you happen to encounter one, or, God forbid, a pack of them, as they tend to roam like wild dogs as Paul says elsewhere.

EPHESIANS

Ephesians is a general letter written to a number of churches, not to address a crisis, but rather to explain how Jesus has taken away sin to reconcile us to himself as Christians and to each other as the church. Paul wrote the letter (along with Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon) while in jail for preaching about Jesus. He spends the first three chapters stressing what Jesus has accomplished for us and the final three chapters emphasizing how this impacts our lives and makes us responsible in our families, at our jobs, and in our lives. Ephesians is filled with some of Paul's most beautiful prayers and is a book that will stir your heart to love both Jesus and the church and live your life out of love for God and your neighbor.

PHILIPPIANS

Philippians is written to one of the healthiest early churches, which had generously given a great deal of money to fund the planting of new churches in regions that had not previously heard about Jesus. The letter is therefore predominated by the mood of joy. This mood is rather surprising because Paul writes it while sitting in a prison cell, which proves that he received his joy from the freedom of the gospel rather than his own freedom. In the letter, Paul mentions two women who are in some sort of cat fight, and Epaphroditus, who faithfully brought a large sum of money from the church to Paul to help him expand the gospel, but nearly died after growing ill. In chapter three we also encounter one of the most insightful background summaries of Paul's pre-Christian life. Philippians is an encouraging book to faithful Christians and churches who give generously of their finances to plant new churches and fund missionaries.

COLOSSIANS

Colossians is a letter written to exalt Jesus as the eternal God over all creation, in refutation of some false teachings from the local folk religions that had corrupted the church's understanding of Jesus. Paul also wrote this letter while sitting in prison. He refutes the exaltation of non-Christian philosophy, the worship of angels, and false teachers who are slick speakers but heretics nonetheless. The book neatly breaks into two parts: doctrine in chapters 1 and 2, and practical Christian living in chapters 3 and 4. Colossians is

particularly helpful to those who find themselves in educated and spiritual cities where Christians may feel compelled to mingle their Bible with philosophers and spiritual teachers, thereby diluting the pure truth of Jesus, because of social and academic pressure to bend in the face of a stiff, southerly headwind.

1 and 2 THESSALONIANS

1 and 2 Thessalonians were written to a young and zealous church that Paul had started, only to leave roughly one month later. These letters continue Paul's teaching to them in his absence. The Thessalonians were new Christians who were fired up for Jesus, so Paul commended them on their sincere zeal for Jesus. But these new Christians also faced some persecution and wrongly believed that Jesus would return very quickly, and so they stopped working and likely spent their time sitting around reading the same kinds of books that are so popular today that tell us Jesus is coming back any minute so we should be sure to use up our vacation days. Paul encouraged them to continue to mature as Christians and get back to living their lives for Jesus, including being good witnesses at their jobs.

1 and 2 TIMOTHY and TITUS

1 and 2 Timothy and Titus are commonly referred to as the "Pastoral Epistles" because they are written from Paul to young pastors whom he loved as sons. Paul was a pioneering church planter and evangelist who would storm into a city, lead people to Christ, plant a church, and then leave—sometimes within a matter of weeks. In his wake would remain a great deal of work to be done in organizing the church, and so he would send in Timothy and Titus to clean up the messes, appoint leaders, and run off heretics and the like. These great personal letters are particularly beneficial to those Christians who care about the health of their church, church leaders, emerging church leaders, and young men who aspire to be elders in God's church.

PHILEMON

Philemon is written by Paul to a Christian slave owner named Philemon regarding one of his Christian slaves named Onesimus. In Paul's day, slavery was widespread, with roughly half of the Roman world made up of slaves. In some ways, Roman slavery resembled slavery as was practiced in America, but in other ways it was different. While some people were forced into slavery (because they were born into it or had lost a war, for example), others sold themselves into slavery (perhaps to pay off a debt). Paul wrote this

letter while he was imprisoned. His letter seeks to bring the gospel of Jesus to bear in the life of one slave. It shows God's great concern for individual people even if they are poor and powerless. Philemon was apparently a godly man, as the short letter states. The church met in his home, and Onesimus the Christian slave apparently stole money from his Christian master and fled to Rome. Paul urges Onesimus to return to his Christian owner and work hard for him, and promises to repay Philemon from his own pocket. He urges Philemon to treat the slave as a brother worthy of love and freedom. Philemon is a wonderful book for those who doubt God's love for them because of their poverty and powerlessness. It is also a strong word for those Christians with power who rule over others to continually show the grace of Jesus to all people, especially fellow Christians.

HEBREWS

Hebrews is an amazing book that connects the great themes of the Old Testament to Jesus as the fulfillment. The author of Hebrews is unknown. Hebrews shows the superiority of Jesus over every aspect of Old Testament faith: he is our Temple and the presence of God with us, he is our High Priest who intercedes on our behalf, and he is our Lamb who was slain for our sin. Throughout the book, Jesus is explained to be superior to the angels, Old Testament prophets, Moses, Joshua, Aaron and the priests, and worthy of all worship and devotion. Hebrews is most appreciated by those Christians who desire to better understand the Old Testament and how it is fulfilled in Jesus.

JAMES

James is written by Jesus' half-brother. James's conversion, along with that of his other brother Jude and their mother Mary, is a strong argument that Jesus did not sin and did rise from death. After all, how else do we explain worshiping one's brother or son as God unless the evidence was absolutely overwhelming? James is a very practical book written to people who are familiar with only one kind of grace from God. These people understand and welcome God's saving grace that makes them a Christian, but then sit around being lazy, indifferent, fruitless, and worthless Christians. They do not understand God's empowering grace that transforms them to live new lives patterned after Jesus' life. While Paul is prone to stress what Jesus has done, James stresses what we should do in response to what Jesus has done. James is quite helpful to lazy Christians who are glad Jesus got out of his tomb for them but are unlikely to get off of their couch for him. James's fate was much like his brother

Jesus' fate. History records that he was thrown off of the temple but did not die and so was subsequently stoned with rocks by a mob and beaten in the head by a laundryman with the stick he used to beat dirty laundry.

1 and 2 PETER

1 and 2 Peter were written by Peter, the leader of Jesus' disciples, in response to a crisis, as Christians were being persecuted and slaughtered for their faith. These churches later witnessed Peter himself suffer the same fate, as history records that he was crucified. He was crucified upside down, however, because he did not consider himself worthy of dying right-side-up like Jesus. Peter's two letters help those people undergoing trials to extend their horizon beyond the grave and persevere both for and like Jesus. In the second letter, we see how persecution can tempt some Christians to compromise their doctrine and holy conduct to gain a reprieve.

1, 2, and 3 JOHN

1, 2, and 3 John were written to refute false teachings about Jesus and to defend the truth against critics and heretics who had infiltrated the church and threatened to destroy all that Jesus had accomplished. John tells us that he wrote the first letter so that people can know whether or not they are Christians by whether or not they have Jesus. He then breaks it down to show that when people meet Jesus, their lives change emotionally by being marked by joy, morally by hating and fighting sin, theologically by believing only the truth about Jesus, and socially by loving Christian brothers and sisters in the church. John's three letters are most helpful to those who wonder if they are a Christian, Christians who struggle with knowing if they are truly saved, and Christians who get tangled up in arguments with theological whack jobs who are prone to come up with yet another newfangled idea about Jesus after reading a book from some guy with a degree but no fruit of the Spirit in his life.

JUDE

Jude identifies himself as a brother of James, which means that he too was a half- brother of Jesus. Jude pastored the famed church in Jerusalem. Like the pastors in the early church and every day since, the heretics, nut jobs, oddballs, weirdos, and freaks seeking book deals and speaking engagements were climbing into the church like ants at a picnic. Jude is a short little book that is a great encouragement to faithful Bible teachers everywhere who spend significant amounts of time cutting the cancers out of their church

body before they spread and become fatal.

APOCALYPSE - REVELATION

Jesus' best friend, John, wrote Revelation as the last book of the Bible near the end of his life, long after the other apostles had all been murdered. Revelation is the most controversial book in the Bible because Western Christians have continually studied it as a book of eschatology (the study of the future and last things), focusing on the "how" and "when" of Jesus' second coming. Consequently, the shelves in Christian bookstores are filled with silly dogmatic arguments about the particular details, like flying people and the barcodes used at grocery store checkout lines. What is often overlooked in studying the book, however, is the "what" and "who" of Revelation.

The who, as stated in the opening line of the book, is "the revelation of Jesus Christ." The "what" of Revelation is worship, which is the end goal of all things, and explains why Revelation is the final book of the Bible.

The opening chapter of the book shows that Revelation was given to us directly from Jesus. Revelation closes with a command that God's people obey all that is written in the book, not by arguing about the details of Jesus' second coming, but rather by worshiping God until we see him face to face. Revelation includes repeated condemnations of unacceptable worship within false religions—of angels, men, and false gods. The pages of Revelation are also filled with some of the most beautiful and poetic imagery in all of Scripture, thereby demonstrating the lavish nature of worship. Revelation includes the composition of at least ten new songs and features musical instruments, singing, shouting, clapping, kneeling, falling face down, praying, and the wedding feast between Jesus and his church.

All of this worship is majestically directed to our exalted Lord Jesus who is ruling and reigning over all of his creation, blessing his people, and crushing their enemies from his throne; this appears in nearly every chapter of the book.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it is my sincere hope that this booklet has helped introduce you to the New Testament and has inspired you to read it for yourself. As you do, I pray God will reveal himself to you and that you will love Jesus and follow him faithfully as he teaches you to love God and love people.