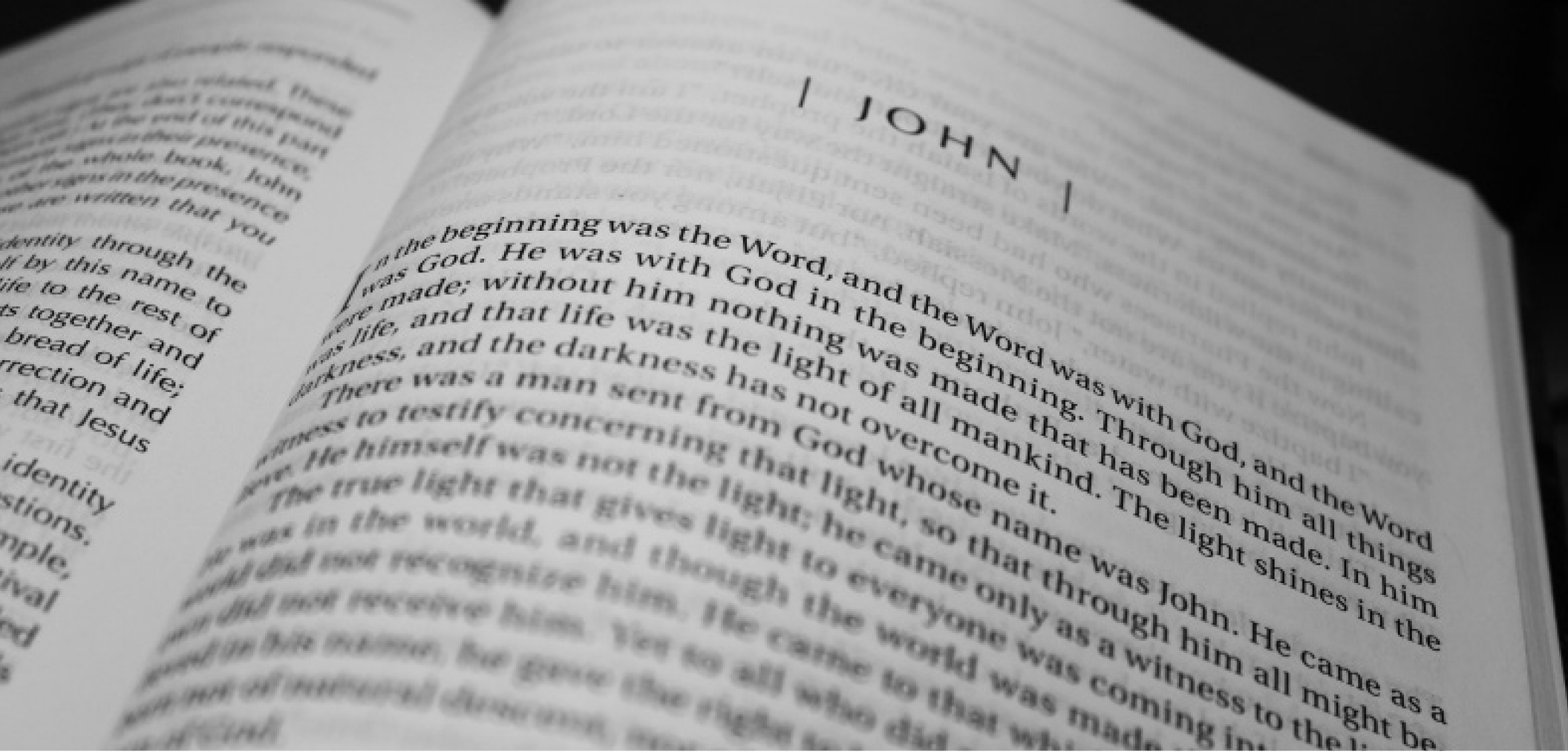

GROUP LEADER'S GUIDE

New Testament reading campaign

Covenant Community Bible Experience™

Created and Developed by Biblica

DEAR GROUP LEADER,

I'm delighted that you're a part of Covenant Community Bible Experience. "Reading big" for eight weeks will stretch your group in powerful ways. This guide has everything you need to lead them through this eight-week journey.

Whether you find the prospect of reading the New Testament exciting, daunting, or maybe a bit of both, I promise you this: it may not be easy, but when we immerse ourselves in the redemptive drama of God's Word, we'll discover our place in his story.

You don't have to have all the answers to be a great discussion group leader. Just think of your weekly gatherings more like a book club than a traditional Bible study, and come ready to explore the Bible with your fellow readers.

Thank you for sharing this journey with us. I'll be remembering your group in my prayers, asking God to transform lives through his Word.

In Christ,

Michelle Sanchez
Executive Minister of Make and Deepen Disciples
Evangelical Covenant Church

Connect with us

facebook.com/MakeAndDeepen

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ABOUT THIS JOURNEY

A better Bible experience

What would happen if we actually read the Bible? Not a verse here or there, but the whole New Testament?

What if, instead of going it alone, we could have a real conversation about the Bible—one anyone can join, no matter where they are in their faith journey?

Community Bible Experience is about reading the Bible as it was meant to be read—whole books, in community. It will take your church beyond Bible study, beyond reading in fragments, and beyond reading in isolation.

Discover the complete story. For eight weeks, let's read big, read real, and read together.

How it works

1. **Read big.** You'll cover the whole New Testament in 8 weeks—reading 5 days a week, around 12 pages a day. The average day's reading takes 30 minutes or so to complete.

2. **Read real.** You'll use a groundbreaking presentation of the Scriptures, called *The Books of the Bible*. It's designed to feel more like reading the original.

3. **Read together.** Your group will meet once a week for a book club-style conversation about the Bible.

ABOUT THIS JOURNEY

The Books of the Bible

During Community Bible Experience, you'll read from a revolutionary presentation of Scripture called *The Books of the Bible*.

When you open your copy, the first thing you'll notice is that this is no ordinary Bible. There are no chapter or verse numbers. No study notes or cross references. No red lettering.

That's because none of these features are original to the Scriptures. Most were added centuries later to help us find things. But the Bible isn't a reference book; first and foremost, it's a story. It's a collection of books, each of which was meant to be experienced as a whole. Modern Bible formatting imposes a different structure on the text, one that encourages us to read in fragments.

***The Books of the Bible* is designed to be read from beginning to end.** We've stripped away centuries of artificial formatting, leaving behind nothing but pure Bible text in a presentation that's easier to read and understand.

We've formatted each book so you can see the natural section breaks put there by the authors. We've rearranged the books for easier understanding—for example, putting Paul's letters in a more chronological order (instead of longest to shortest), so you can follow along more easily.

The Books of the Bible features the complete text of the New Testament in the NIV®, the most widely read contemporary English translation of the Bible.

PREPARING FOR THE JOURNEY

Five tips for reading

1. **Read what you can.**
   Don't get discouraged if you fall behind. Keep at it, even if you don't make it all the way through each day's reading. If you have trouble keeping up, listening to the audio version can help.

2. **Read every day.**
   Plan on reading five days a week, Monday – Friday. The pace is a little intense, but reading large portions of Scripture is also incredibly rewarding. (And remember, you only have to keep this pace up for eight weeks.)

3. **Be fully present.**
   Avoid distraction while reading. (Turns out we're not that good at multitasking.) Instead, devote your full attention to the text.

4. **Read the book intros.**
   The Books of the Bible includes brief introductions or "invitations" to each book, unpacking the context and literary structure of what you're about to read. Trust us, they're well worth your time.

5. **Don't worry about the parts you don't understand.**
   The goal is to read big, not to catch every detail. You can always go back and study a specific passage in greater detail later. For now, take in the big picture; let that be your focus for the next eight weeks.

Community Bible Experience

made the Bible come alive

in a way I don't think I've ever experienced.

– Gabe Lyons

PREPARING FOR THE JOURNEY

Planning your weekly gatherings

Discussion groups should meet once a week during Community Bible Experience. The next few pages cover some of the basics to help you make the most of your weekly gatherings.

When should we meet?
If possible, meet on weekends. There are no readings assigned for Saturday and Sunday, which makes the weekend a good time to get together.

How often should we meet?
Plan on meeting nine times during your reading campaign. Hold your first gathering the weekend before you start reading.

How much time should we spend together?
Most discussion groups meet for 60 – 90 minutes each week, but feel free to adjust this based on the needs of your group.

What will we cover?
Here's a general outline of each week's discussion time, which you can adapt as needed:

- Introduction (15-20 minutes, first week only)
- Reflecting on the previous week (30-60 minutes)
- Preparing for the week ahead (15-30 minutes)

See pages 14–34 for a week-by-week guide.

PREPARING FOR THE JOURNEY

Five conversation starters

Each week, participants will share their reflections on the text with their discussion groups, using these five simple prompts:

1. What's something you noticed **for the first time**?
2. What **questions** did you have?
3. Was there anything that **bothered** you?
4. What did you learn about **loving God?**
5. What did you learn about **loving others?**

OK, these are a bit different from your average Bible study questions. Then again, this isn't your average Bible study.

When people read whole books of the Bible, they notice things for the first time. They may have questions they never thought to ask before. They may even come across things that trouble them. These discussion prompts are meant to help readers navigate the text without giving them all the answers. They're an invitation to wrestle with the Bible and ponder its implications for how we live.

Encourage your group to treat weekly gatherings more like a book club than a Bible study, to allow the discussion to be free-flowing and wide-ranging.

We've seen relationships form that wouldn't have formed

any other way.

People who never wanted to be part of a group—now they don't want to leave.

– Janine, pastor

PREPARING FOR THE JOURNEY

Five tips for weekly gatherings

This may be one of the easiest discussion groups you've ever led. You don't have to have all the answers; you just need to get the ball rolling each week. Chances are, participants will come full of things to talk about. Here are four tips for a great book club experience.

1. **Don't stress.**
   You don't have to do any advance preparation to lead your group on this journey. Just do your best to keep up with each week's reading.

2. **Think "book club."**
   Participants will come with different perspectives, backgrounds, and assumptions. Some may be new to the Bible; others may be lifelong students. Your job isn't to settle every debate or answer every question. Let the Bible speak for itself, and let each person absorb the story as it unfolds.

3. **Give everyone a voice.**
   Encourage everyone to join the conversation, but don't pressure someone to share if they don't want to. Make sure no one inadvertently monopolizes the conversation. If they do, invite some of the quieter participants to chime in.

4. **Share the reins.**
   Anyone can facilitate a Community Bible Experience discussion group. If you feel like a change of pace, give yourself the night off and invite another member to guide the conversation.

5. **Watch the overview videos together.**
   There's an overview video for each book (or group of books, in some cases). Take a few moments each week to watch these videos together, so you can prepare for what you're about to read. We've provided links to the appropriate videos for each week in the discussion guide pages 14–34. Just watch for the symbol.

   You can also access the overview videos at **CovChurch.org/CBE.**

PREPARING FOR THE JOURNEY

New Testament reading plan

Read five days a week, Monday through Friday. Most readings takes around 30 minutes to complete. Some daily readings are longer or shorter, because each one ends at the close of a book or a natural section break within a book. Section breaks are indicated by line spaces—the bigger the space, the bigger the break.

Week 1: Luke-Acts

Luke consists of a prologue and three main sections which tell the story of Jesus as he ministers in Galilee, journeys to Jerusalem, and lays down his life—only to rise again and become Ruler and Savior of the world.

Day 1	p. 1–11	read until "...he left him until an opportune time."
Day 2	p. 11–24	read until "...whoever is not against you is for you."
Day 3	p. 25–33	read until "...worked all through the dough."
Day 4	p. 33–42	read until "...and kill them in front of me."
Day 5	p. 42–54	read until the end of Luke

Week 2: Luke-Acts, 1–2 Thessalonians

Acts (days 6–9) has six parts, each describing a successive phase in the expansion of the church outward from Jerusalem. The apostle Paul's first two letters, 1 and 2 Thessalonians (day 10), were written to encourage a Christian community facing persecution and to assure them of their coming vindication.

Day 6	pages 55–64	read until "...priests became obedient to the faith."
Day 7	pages 64–75	read until "...continued to spread and flourish."
Day 8	pages 75–86	read until "...spread widely and grew in power."
Day 9	pages 87–102	read until the end of Acts
Day 10	pages 103–115	read until the end of 2 Thessalonians

PREPARING FOR THE JOURNEY

New Testament reading plan

Week 3: 1–2 Corinthians, Galatians, Romans

1 and 2 Corinthians (days 11–13) address a number of problems facing a dysfunctional church in a cosmopolitan city. Paul wrote Galatians (day 14) to refute the claim that Gentile Christians had to observe Jewish customs in order to be saved. In his letter to the Romans (day 15), Paul insists the good news of Jesus is for everyone, Jew and Gentile.

Day 11	pages 117–126	read until "...I too have the spirit of God."
Day 12	pages 127–138	read until the end of 1 Corinthians
Day 13	pages 139–153	read until the end of 2 Corinthians
Day 14	pages 155–163	read until the end of Galatians
Day 15	pages 165–177	read until "...love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord."

Week 4: Romans, Colossians, Ephesians, Philemon, Philippians, 1 Timothy, Titus, 2 Timothy

The rest of Paul's letters address various challenges facing churches in different parts of the Roman Empire. These letters, which are presented in the order they were most likely written, also include Paul's personal correspondence with three individuals: Philemon, Timothy, and Titus.

Day 19	pages 177–188	read until the end of Romans
Day 20	pages 189–195	read until the end of Colossians
Day 21	pages 197–210	read until the end of Philemon
Day 22	pages 211–226	read until the end of 1 Timothy
Day 23	pages 227–238	read until the end of 2 Timothy

PREPARING FOR THE JOURNEY

New Testament reading plan

Week 5: Matthew

Matthew tells the story of Jesus from a distinctly Jewish perspective. This gospel is arranged into five major sections (not unlike the Torah, the first five books of the Jewish Bible). Each section highlights a different theme of Jesus' life and ministry, through a combination of story and teaching.

Day 21	pages 239–251	read until "...and not as their teachers of the law."
Day 22	pages 251–262	read until "...new treasures as well as old."
Day 23	pages 262–270	read until "...your brother or sister from your heart."
Day 24	pages 270–283	read until "...but the righteous to eternal life."
Day 25	pages 283–290	read until the end of Matthew

Week 6: Hebrews, James, Mark

Like Matthew, the books of Hebrews and James were addressed to predominantly Jewish audiences. Hebrews (days 26–27) is a plea for Jewish believers to stay faithful to the Messiah, while James (day 28) is a collection of practical wisdom, much like the Old (or First) Testament book of Proverbs. Mark's gospel (days 29–30) presents the story of Jesus as a two-part drama. Each part contains three acts.

Day 26	pages 291–297	read until "...to whom we must give account."
Day 27	pages 297–309	read until the end of Hebrews
Day 28	pages 311–318	read until the end of James
Day 29	pages 319–334	read until "...not to tell anyone about him."
Day 30	pages 334–350	read until the end of Mark

PREPARING FOR THE JOURNEY

New Testament reading plan

Week 7: 1–2 Peter, Jude, John

Many believe that Mark (week 6) recorded the memoirs of Peter in his gospel. The next two books (days 31–32) are letters from Peter himself, encouraging believers in what is now Turkey to hold on to their faith and assuring them Jesus will return as promised. Jude's letter (day 32) has many similarities to 2 Peter. John's gospel has two main parts: the "Book of Signs" (days 33–34), chronicling seven miracles performed by Jesus, and the "Book of Glory" (day 35), detailing his death and resurrection.

Day 31	pages 351–358	read until the end of 1 Peter
Day 32	pages 359–368	read until the end of Jude
Day 33	pages 369–382	read until "...was later to betray him.)"
Day 34	pages 382–395	read until "...what the Father has told me to say."
Day 35	pages 395–408	read until the end of John

Week 8: 1-3 John, Revelation

John's first letter emphasizes the importance of believing that Jesus came in the flesh, while his second and third letters instruct churches on how to deal with false teachers and faithful ministers of the gospel, respectively. Revelation is an apocalyptic book meant to encourage persecuted believers to endure to the end.

Day 36	pages 409–423	read until the end of 3 John
Day 37	pages 425–431	read until "...what the Spirit says to the churches."
Day 38	pages 431–444	read until "...because the plague was so terrible."
Day 39	pages 444–453	read until the end of Revelation
Day 40	catch-up day	

WEEKLY DISCUSSION GUIDES

Week 1: Luke-Acts

Introduction (*15-20 minutes*)
Be sure to cover the following points at your first gathering:

- Introduce Community Bible Experience by sharing the information on pages 4-6 of this guide.
- Discuss the challenge of reading 12 pages a day. Remind participants that most readings take around 30 minutes to complete—about the same time it takes to watch a short TV show.
- Invite each group member to share what they hope to get from their journey through the New Testament.

Reflecting on the previous week (*0 minutes*)
There's no prior reading to discuss this week, so proceed to the next section.

Preparing for the week ahead (*15-20 minutes*)
Introduce everyone to the first grouping of New Testament books by sharing the information below.

- Our journey through the New Testament begins with Luke-Acts and the letters of Paul. We're starting with these books because, together, they provide an overview of the entire New Testament period.

Next, introduce your group to the first two books by sharing the points below or by watching the **video overview of Luke-Acts.**

- Luke and Acts are two volumes of a single work. They were addressed to Theophilus, who may have been a Roman official who sponsored Luke's work.
- Luke wrote to convince Theophilus that he could believe what he'd heard about Jesus and the church. Together, the books of Luke and Acts show how everything unfolded according to God's plan—how Jesus the Messiah brought salvation not only to the Jews, but to all nations.

WEEKLY DISCUSSION GUIDES

Week 1: Luke-Acts (continued)

Here's some information specific to Luke, which you can share with your group.

Overview of Luke

- Like other historians, Luke says he carefully researched his account so he could paint a compelling portrait of Jesus' life.
- Luke wanted to show how God kept a promise made long ago to the people of Israel by sending Jesus as their Messiah, or king. But Luke also reveals another dimension to God's plan: Jesus is "a light for revelation to the Gentiles." Centuries earlier, God had told Abraham, Israel's forefather, that "all peoples on earth" would be blessed through him. According to Luke, Jesus came to fulfill that promise.

Structure of Luke

- Luke begins with a preliminary introduction describing Jesus' early life (p. 3–11). This is followed by three main sections. The first describes Jesus' ministry in Galilee, to the north of Jerusalem (p. 11–24). The second follows Jesus' fateful journey to Jerusalem; along the way, Jesus teaches what it means to follow him (p. 25–42). The final section tells how Jesus laid down his life in Jerusalem, only to rise again and become Ruler and Savior of the world (p. 42–54).

What to watch for in Luke

- Notice how important location is to Luke. A third of his gospel highlights Jesus' journey toward Jerusalem (and toward his own death). Luke's follow-up, the book of Acts, will highlight the spread of the good news out from Jerusalem after Jesus' resurrection from the dead.
- Keep watch for some unlikely cast members in Luke's drama. Luke highlights Jesus' compassion toward the outsiders and outcasts of his day: the poor, the disabled, tax collectors, women, children, and others. According to Luke, Jesus is for everybody.

WEEKLY DISCUSSION GUIDES

Week 2: Luke-Acts, Letters of Paul

Reflecting on the previous week (30-60 *minutes*)
Use the conversation prompts on page 8 of this guide, if needed.

Preparing for the week ahead (15-20 *minutes*)
Introduce your group to the book of Acts by sharing the information below. You may also want to **re-watch the overview of Luke-Acts** from last week.

Overview of Acts

- Like its predecessor, Luke's second volume is fairly short when compared to other historical works of the day. Acts covers roughly the first 30 years of the movement ignited by Jesus after his resurrection and ascension.
- Luke's first volume showed how God kept his promise to the people of Israel by sending Jesus as their Messiah, or King. Next, God invites non-Jews (known as Gentiles) to follow Jesus as well. Acts picks up the story where the gospel of Luke leaves off, with the risen Jesus about to return to heaven. Before going, he commissions his disciples to spread the good news about him "to the ends of the earth."

Structure of Acts

- Acts consists of six parts, each describing a successive phase in the expansion of the community of Jesus-followers. First, the community is established in Jerusalem (p. 55–64). Then it expands into the surrounding area (p. 64–70). Soon, Gentiles are welcomed into the community alongside Jews (p. 70–75). In part four, the community spreads into the Roman province of Asia (p. 75–81) and in part five, Europe (p. 81–86). Finally, the gospel reaches into the highest levels of Roman society in the empire's capital city (p. 87–102).

WEEKLY DISCUSSION GUIDES

Week 2: Luke-Acts, Letters of Paul (continued)

What to watch for in Acts

- Notice how God uses hardship to advance the good news about Jesus. In Acts, the church's expansion beyond Jerusalem is a direct result of persecution. The religious crackdown backfires, and before long, what started as a local movement becomes an empire-wide phenomenon.
- Acts gives a glimpse into some of the early church's growing pains. You'll see, for example, how Jewish believers struggled to welcome Gentiles at first (day 8). The issue of Gentile inclusion—and what Gentiles must do to be accepted into the community—also features prominently in several letters written by Paul, a key figure in the book of Acts.

Next, introduce your group to 1 and 2 Thessalonians. You can also watch the **video overview of Paul's letters.**

Overview of 1-2 Thessalonians

- 1 and 2 Thessalonians are among the apostle Paul's earliest letters. In his first letter to the young church at Thessalonica (in modern-day Greece), Paul encourages believers to hold on to their faith in spite of intense opposition. Paul wrote his second letter to correct a false report that the "day of the Lord" (that is, the day of God's final victory) had come without the vindication the Thessalonians were hoping for.

Structure of 1-2 Thessalonians

- Both letters follow the usual pattern for correspondence of the time. Each begins with an opening greeting, followed by a thanksgiving and prayer. Then comes the main body of the letter, followed by a closing section.

What to watch for in 1-2 Thessalonians

- To better appreciate the context of these letters, think back to Paul's experience in Thessalonica (covered on day 8). Take a moment to refresh your memory by rereading page 83 of Luke-Acts.

WEEKLY DISCUSSION GUIDES

Week 3: Letters of Paul

Reflecting on the previous week (30-60 *minutes*)
Use the conversation prompts on page 8 of this guide, if needed.

Preparing for the week ahead (15-20 *minutes*)
Introduce your group to Paul's next two letters by sharing the points below or by watching the **video overview of 1-2 Corinthians.**

Overview of 1 Corinthians

- Corinth was a wealthy, cosmopolitan center of the ancient world. 1 Corinthians is Paul's response to a letter he received from the church he'd founded in Corinth. In it, he addresses several of questions from the community there and also challenges some of their beliefs and practices.

Structure of 1 Corinthians

- Paul opens with a brief greeting and thanksgiving (p. 119). In the main body of his letter to the Corinthians (p. 119–137), Paul addresses a number of issues, including their tolerance of immorality, their participation in pagan ceremonial meals, their discrimination against the poor during the Lord's Supper, and their questions about Jesus' resurrection. Paul then gives some instructions for an offering he's collecting for the poor (p. 137). Finally, he shares his travel plans and closes his letter (p. 137–138).

What to watch for in 1 Corinthians

- 1 Corinthians is not for the faint of heart. At times, Paul is intense, angry, even sarcastic. That's because the church in Corinth was on the brink of destroying itself. As you read, imagine how you might respond if someone you loved was in a similar situation today.

WEEKLY DISCUSSION GUIDES

Week 3: Letters of Paul (continued)

Overview of 2 Corinthians

- Paul experienced a great deal of conflict with the church he started in Corinth. After they reaffirmed their respect for his authority, Paul wrote 2 Corinthians to reassure them—and to address some new problems.

Structure of 2 Corinthians

- Paul retraces his steps since his last visit to Corinth. He explains why he had paid an unexpected visit (p. 141–142), then recounts his time in Troas (modern-day Turkey), where he was separated from his ministry partner Titus (p. 142–146). Paul then relates his reunion with Titus in Macedonia (modern-day Greece) and his relief at hearing about the Corinthians' change of heart (p. 146–149). Finally, Paul looks ahead to his next visit, including some difficult confrontations still to come (p. 149–152) and shares a benediction (p. 153).

What to watch for in 2 Corinthians

- Watch for the recurring theme of comfort. (Paul uses the word 13 times in his letter.) God comforts us in our afflictions, Paul writes, so that we can comfort others.

Introduce your group to Paul's next two letters by sharing the points below or by watching the **video overview of Galatians and Romans.**

Overview of Galatians

- Paul wrote this letter to Gentile (non-Jewish) believers in Galatia, a province in central Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey). After Paul had established a church there, some "agitators" came along, insisting that Gentile converts had to observe Jewish customs in order to be saved. Paul wrote to refute this idea.

What to watch for in Galatians

- Notice how Paul connects Jesus to the story of Israel, arguing that all who follow Christ are children of Abraham. For Paul, the "new creation" matters more than circumcision or other religious rituals.

WEEKLY DISCUSSION GUIDES

Week 3: Letters of Paul (continued)

Overview of Romans

- Unlike his earlier letters, Paul addressed Romans to a church he hadn't met before. Paul was planning a journey into the western half of the Roman Empire, and he wanted to make Rome a base of operations. So he wrote to introduce himself to the believers there and to ask for their support. The main theme of Paul's letter (and his motivation for taking the gospel to new places) was his belief that Jesus is for everyone—both Jewish and non-Jewish.

Structure of Romans

- Though longer and more complex, Romans follows the same basic pattern as Paul's other letters. The main body has two basic parts. There's a teaching section (p. 167–182), in which Paul argues that God wants to rescue Jews and non-Jews alike through Jesus' death and resurrection. In the practical section (p. 182–185), Paul challenges the Roman church to live as a new, redeemed humanity.

What to watch for in Romans

- Romans contains a good deal of complex theology. In fact, it's one of the most hotly debated books in the New Testament. Whatever you make of Romans, keep in mind Paul's main purpose for writing it. His mission was to call Gentiles to "the obedience that comes from faith." That's how he begins and ends this letter. Romans, then, is basically Paul's defense of his ministry to Gentiles.

WEEKLY DISCUSSION GUIDES

Week 4: Letters of Paul

Reflecting on the previous week (30-60 *minutes*)
Use the conversation prompts on page 8 of this guide, if needed.

Preparing for the week ahead (15-20 *minutes*)

Since you'll be finishing Romans this week, you may want to **re-watch the video overview.**

Introduce your group to Paul's next letters by sharing the points below or by watching the **video overview of Paul's prison letters.**

Overview of Colossians

- Paul's last recorded visit to Jerusalem sparked a riot that led to his arrest. After numerous hearings, he invoked his rights as a Roman citizen and appealed to Caesar. While in Rome awaiting trial, Paul wrote the church in Colossae (modern-day Turkey) to warn about those who insisted on religious observances, secret spiritual knowledge, or harsh treatment of the body as necessary for salvation. Paul argues there's no need to add anything to the salvation already found in Christ.

What to watch for in Colossians

- Notice how Paul alternates between pragmatic exhortation and almost lyrical prose. For example, many scholars think the first paragraph on page 192 is an early Christian hymn to the supremacy of Christ.

WEEKLY DISCUSSION GUIDES

Week 4: Letters of Paul (continued)

Overview of Ephesians

- Despite its name, this letter may not have been written to the church at Ephesus. The words "in Ephesus" don't appear in some early manuscripts. Also, Paul had spent a great deal of time in Ephesus. If he were writing to believers there, he probably would have included a personal greeting. It's possible this was a general letter circulated among the churches of Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey). In any case, Paul's letter encourages Gentile converts to replace their old way of life with one of purity and integrity.

What to watch for in Ephesians

- See if you catch any recurring themes from Paul's other letters. For example, Paul addresses the relationship between Jewish and Gentile believers, as he does in Romans. He also emphasizes the supremacy of Christ, echoing a key theme from his letter to the Colossians.

Overview of Philemon

- Philemon was a wealthy individual living in Colossae, a city in Asia Minor. Philemon's slave, Onesimus, had run away. While on the run, he put his faith in Jesus and became Paul's assistant. The apostle Paul sent Onesimus back to Asia Minor to deliver some letters for him. This meant going home and facing his former master. In this radical letter, Paul pleads with Philemon to welcome Onesimus "no longer as a slave, but . . . as a dear brother."

What to watch for in Philemon

- Notice how Paul employs every ounce of persuasion to prevail upon Philemon. He reminds Philemon that he has the authority to tell him what to do, but gives Philemon the opportunity to choose the right path for himself. (It didn't hurt that Paul's letter was likely read in front of Philemon's entire house church!)

WEEKLY DISCUSSION GUIDES

Week 4: Letters of Paul (continued)

Overview of Philippians

- The believers in Philippi (modern-day Greece) were some of Paul's most loyal supporters. Paul wrote this letter from prison in Rome to thank them for their friendship. Like Paul, the Philippians were experiencing hardship, so Paul counsels them to follow his example of patient endurance—and to stand united.

What to watch for in Philippians

- Joy is the dominant note of this letter—which is remarkable, given that both its author and its recipients were experiencing persecution. See if you notice how many times Paul mentions joy in Philippians.

Overview of 1 Timothy, Titus, and 2 Timothy

- Paul's final letters were written to two of his ministry partners, Timothy and Titus, whom he had dispatched to Ephesus and Crete, respectively, to bring order to renegade churches. Among other things, Paul advises his two young protégés on how to appoint properly qualified leaders.

What to watch for in 1 Timothy, Titus, and 2 Timothy

- These letters reveal another dimension to Paul's character. Paul could be a fierce leader at times, but he was also an affectionate mentor—especially to Timothy, whom Paul had handpicked as his ministry partner. Paul's letters to Timothy are full of fatherly advice for his "true son in the faith."

WEEKLY DISCUSSION GUIDES

Week 5: Matthew

Reflecting on the previous week (30-60 *minutes*)
Use the conversation prompts on page 8 of this guide, if needed.

Preparing for the week ahead (15-20 *minutes*)
Introduce everyone to the second grouping of New Testament books.

- Our journey continues with the second group of New Testament books. Matthew, Hebrews, and James are worth reading together because they share a common audience: Jewish followers of Jesus.

Next, introduce your group to Matthew by sharing the points below or by watching the **video overview of Matthew.**

Overview of Matthew

- Matthew tells the story of Jesus from a Jewish perspective, presenting him as Israel's promised king or Messiah.

Structure of Matthew

- Matthew draws a number of parallels between Jesus and Israel. Like the nation of Israel, Jesus wanders in the desert, where he faces a series of tests. Like Moses, Israel's most famous leader, Jesus narrowly escapes an attempt on his life as an infant.

  [Tip: **Share this chart** with your group to illustrate the parallels between Jesus and Israel in Matthew.]

- Matthew has five main sections, each of which reveals something about what Jesus calls "the kingdom of heaven." Each section starts by relating a series of events, which lead up to one of five major speeches by Jesus. The transitions from one section to the next are indicated by variations of the phrase, "When Jesus had finished saying these things . . ."

WEEKLY DISCUSSION GUIDES

Week 5: Matthew (continued)

Structure of Matthew (continued)

- The first main section (p. 242–251) shows how Jesus' kingdom is characterized by a particular way of life where outward action expresses inward character. In the next section (p. 251–256), Jesus sends his disciples on a mission to announce the good news of the kingdom to his fellow Jews. The third section (p. 256–262) explores the mysterious nature of the kingdom, while the fourth section (p. 262– 270) shows how Jesus' kingdom creates a new community. The fifth section (p. 270–283) reveals that members of Jesus' kingdom are destined to be scattered throughout the world by their enemies, giving them an opportunity to tell people everywhere about Jesus.
- Matthew concludes with an account of Jesus' death and resurrection. This too is connected to Israel's story. In Jewish religious practice, the Passover meal commemorated their deliverance from bondage in Egypt. Matthew presents Jesus as a new Passover—our deliverance from sin, oppression, and death.

What to watch for in Matthew

- Matthew uses the term "kingdom of heaven" about 30 times. As you come across each reference, think about what this kingdom looks like and how we can make its presence more visible in our world today.

WEEKLY DISCUSSION GUIDES

Week 6: Hebrews, James, Mark

Reflecting on the previous week (30-60 *minutes*)
Use the conversation prompts on page 8 of this guide, if needed.

Preparing for the week ahead (15-20 *minutes*)
Introduce everyone to the next two books by sharing the points below or by watching the **video overview of Hebrews and James.**

Overview of Hebrews

- Hebrews was written to Jewish Christians living at a time when Judaism was still a legal religion in the Roman Empire. Jewish followers of Jesus could avoid persecution by hiding their Christian identity. The author of Hebrews warns against doing so, urging readers to remain faithful to their Messiah.

Structure of Hebrews

- The writer of Hebrews alternates between theological arguments and lessons from Israel's history. In the first of four sections (p. 293–295), the author argues that the salvation offered by Jesus is greater than the Law of Moses. The next section (p. 295– 297) teaches that Jesus leads his people into a promised land greater than the one into which the Israelites were led. In the third and longest section (p. 297– 304), the writer says Jesus is a greater high priest than those who serve in the Jewish temple. The last main section (p. 304–308) includes a plea for readers to respond to all God has done for them by stepping out in faith.

What to watch for in Hebrews

- With its rich imagery and complex theology, Hebrews is one of the most challenging books in the New Testament. If you find yourself getting bogged down, focus on the writer's main argument: the new covenant, given to us by Jesus, is superior to the first covenant.

WEEKLY DISCUSSION GUIDES

Week 6: Hebrews, James, Mark (continued)

Overview of James

- Though it begins like a letter, James is actually a collection of practical wisdom, similar to the Old (or First) Testament book of Proverbs. It's possible these sayings were adapted from sermons given by James, the brother of Jesus. The book, addressed to Jewish believers scattered throughout the Roman Empire, focuses on questions of daily living: the pursuit of wisdom, caring for the poor, the responsible use of wealth, controlling the tongue, and more.

What to watch for in James

- The book of James consists of several short sayings, as well as a few slightly longer discussions of practical topics. Slow down as you read James; allow yourself time to ponder each nugget of wisdom.

Next, introduce everyone to the third grouping of New Testament books.

- This week, we'll also start the third group of New Testament books: those written or influenced by the apostle Peter. These include the gospel of Mark, thought to be written from Peter's viewpoint; two letters from Peter himself; and a letter from Jude, which bears a lot of similarities to Peter's second letter.

Next, introduce your group to Mark by sharing the points below or by watching the **video overview of Mark.**

Overview of Mark

- Mark was written to a Roman audience. Given the eyewitness nature of Mark's account, many scholars believe he recorded the memoirs of his old friend and ministry partner, Peter.
- Mark's gospel highlights the importance of being willing to suffer for Jesus. A master storyteller, Mark builds dramatic tension around the question of Jesus' identity and his conflict with elements of the religious establishment.

WEEKLY DISCUSSION GUIDES

Week 6: Hebrews, James, Mark (continued)

Structure of Mark

- Mark reads like a drama comprised of two halves. Each can be further divided into three acts.

  [Tip: **Share this outline** of Mark as a six-act drama with your group.]

- Throughout the first half, Mark confronts readers with the question of Jesus' identity. In act one (p. 321–324), Jesus teaches and heals, as crowds swarm to him. Act two (p. 325–329) shines a spotlight on the opposition Jesus encounters as he introduces a radically new way of life. During the third act (p. 329–334), Jesus' disciples struggle to understand who he is.
- The second half of Mark highlights the overt conflict between Jesus and the leaders of the religious establishment. Act one (p. 334–339) sees Jesus and his disciples traveling to Jerusalem. Upon their arrival in act two (p. 339–345), Jesus teaches in the temple and clashes with the authorities. In the final act, the establishment has Jesus executed, seeming to overturn all he has done. But God overturns their deed by raising Jesus from the dead (p. 345–350).

What to watch for in Mark

- The shortest of all four gospels, Mark moves at breakneck pace. To get a feel for the tempo, try reading as quickly as you comfortably can. Rather than trying to catch every detail, allow yourself to get caught up in this action-packed drama from a master storyteller.

WEEKLY DISCUSSION GUIDES

Week 7: 1-2 Peter, Jude, John

Reflecting on the previous week (30-60 *minutes*)
Use the conversation prompts on page 8 of this guide, if needed.

Preparing for the week ahead (15-20 *minutes*)
Introduce everyone to the next three books by sharing the points below or by watching the **video overview of 1-2 Peter and Jude.**

Overview of 1-2 Peter

- While living in Rome, the apostle Peter wrote two letters to encourage believers in what is now Turkey. His last letter came near the end of his life, shortly before he was executed by the Roman emperor Nero.

Structure of 1-2 Peter

- Peter's first letter consists of three parts. First, he reminds readers that they are called to a new way of life (p. 353–355). Next, he assures them their new life will make an impression on those who mistreat them (p. 355–357). Finally, Peter comes to the main point of his letter: to encourage believers to remain faithful in the face of intense persecution (p. 357–358).
- Peter's second and final letter also has three parts. First, he challenges readers to godly living and stresses the reliability of what they've been taught (p. 361– 362). Then he condemns false teachers who were claiming that Jesus would never return (p. 362–363). Finally, Peter explains why Jesus hasn't come back yet (p. 363–364).

What to watch for in 1-2 Peter

- Watch for the recurring theme of endurance in the face of suffering and false teaching. This theme can also be found in the letter from Jude.

WEEKLY DISCUSSION GUIDES

Week 7: 1-2 Peter, Jude, John (continued)

Overview of Jude

- Jude, like James, was one of Jesus' brothers. He was less well known than James, but likely an important church leader. Jude's letter bears a striking resemblance to 2 Peter—so much so, that it's possible the two men were addressing the same situation. Like Peter, Jude exhorts his readers to "contend for the faith," actively resisting false teaching. However, he also calls on them to be "merciful to those who doubt."

What to watch for in Jude

- As you read, think about how you can "contend for the faith" while giving people space to process their doubts and ask honest questions.

Next, introduce everyone to the fourth and final grouping of New Testament books.

- This week, we'll also start on the fourth and final group of New Testament books, which includes John's gospel and his three letters, along with the book of Revelation.

Introduce your group to the next few books by sharing the points below or by watching the **video overview of the writings of John.**

Overview of John

- John presents the story of Jesus as a story of new creation. That's why he starts by echoing the very first words of Genesis: "In the beginning…"
- Near the end of his gospel, John clearly states his purpose for writing: he wants people to "believe that Jesus is the Messiah." According to John, Jesus is nothing less than God in the flesh—a theme that will come through in one of his letters as well.

WEEKLY DISCUSSION GUIDES

Week 7: 1-2 Peter, Jude, John (continued)

Structure of John

- John starts with a prologue (p. 371), echoing the creation story in Genesis. This is followed by two main sections. First is the "Book of Signs" (p. 371–395), chronicling seven miracles which, for John, prove Jesus' divine identity. This is followed by the "Book of Glory" (p. 395–407), which focuses on the final days of Jesus' life—including his death and resurrection. The book ends with an epilogue (p. 407–408) that was probably added to refute a rumor that John wouldn't die until Jesus came back.

  [Tip: **Share this chart** with your group, highlighting the seven signs and statements in John's gospel.]

What to watch for in John

- Notice how the number seven features prominently in John's gospel. It's no coincidence, for example, that the "Book of Signs" features seven miracles. John's gospel also includes seven "I am" statements from Jesus, connecting him to one of the most important names for God in the Old (or First) Testament. John is not simply being clever; for Jewish people, the number seven represented completeness or wholeness—a finished work of God.

WEEKLY DISCUSSION GUIDES

Week 8: 1-3 John, Revelation

Reflecting on the previous week (30-60 *minutes*)
Use the conversation prompts on page 8 of this guide, if needed.

Preparing for the week ahead (15-20 *minutes*)
Since you'll be finishing the writings of John this week, you may want to **re-watch the video overview.** Or you can introduce your group to 1, 2, and 3 John by sharing the points below.

Overview of 1-3 John

- John's three letters give us a good picture of the Church toward the end of the first century AD. In some cases, it was a church embroiled in controversy. The recipients of 1 John, for example, had been heavily influenced by Greek philosophy—namely, the belief that all flesh is evil and only spirit is good. They struggled to accept the idea that God had come to earth in a human body.
- John wrote his first letter to remind believers of the truth they had "heard from the beginning," stressing the importance of the physical incarnation of Jesus and urging compassion for others. His second and third letters warned churches against providing assistance to false teachers and encouraged hospitality toward those promoting the true message of Jesus.

Structure of 1-3 John

- Rather than following a clear outline, John weaves together several themes in his first letter. His second and third letters are among the shortest books in the Bible.

What to watch for in 1-3 John

- As you read, see if you notice any parallels between John's letters (particularly 1 John) and his gospel.

WEEKLY DISCUSSION GUIDES

Week 8: 1-3 John, Revelation (continued)

Next, introduce your group to the last book, Revelation, by sharing the points below or by watching the **video overview of Revelation.**

Overview of Revelation

- By the end of the first century, Rome's power was virtually uncontested. Wealthy cities across the empire competed for Caesar's patronage, spawning a cult of emperor worship. Any resistance to this cult jeopardized a city's standing with the emperor. But in city after city, followers of Jesus acknowledged a different Lord. For these Christians, it was Jesus, not Caesar, who sat on the throne. Their refusal to toe the party line made them vulnerable to persecution.
- During one such period of intense opposition, God sent a vision to the churches of Asia (modern-day Turkey) through the prophet John. This vision was meant to encourage the faithful to stand firm, "even to the point of death."

Structure of Revelation

- Revelation is an apocalypse, a literary form well known in John's day. In an apocalypse, a heavenly visitor uses vivid symbols to reveal secrets of the future. The recipient of the vision typically goes on a journey through heaven and offers a review of history leading up to the present crisis between good and evil.
- Revelation is divided into four parts, each marked by the phrase "in the Spirit." In part one (p. 428–431), John brings words of warning and encouragement to the seven churches of Asia. In part two (p. 431–444), John is taken into heaven, where he sees the exalted Jesus execute judgment against his enemies. Section two is interrupted by section three (p. 444–449), where John is taken to the wilderness to see the true spiritual state of the Roman Empire. Section two then resumes (p. 449–451) with Jesus' triumph over his enemies. Finally, Revelation concludes with the new Jerusalem coming down from heaven (p. 451–453.)

What to watch for in Revelation

- Revelation has some of the most cryptic imagery in the Bible. Whatever you make of its content, remember the key message: Stand firm, because in the end, God wins. God is coming back to dwell with his people.

WEEKLY DISCUSSION GUIDES

Final gathering

Reflecting on the previous week (30-60 *minutes*)
Use the conversation prompts on page 8 of this guide, if needed.

Final reflections (15-20 *minutes*)
Give each person a chance to share how their journey through the New Testament impacted them, how it shaped their understanding of the Bible, and what implications it might have for their life.

And don't forget to celebrate your achievement together! Reading through the New Testament in just eight weeks is a major accomplishment.

AFTER THE JOURNEY

Tips for finishing strong

Here are things you can do to finish your New Testament journey as strong as you started it:

1. **Encourage everyone to finish.**
   If some participants fell behind in their reading, that's OK. Encourage everyone to continue reading the New Testament, even if it takes an extra week or two.

2. **Take time to reflect.**
   Be sure to meet one last time after the campaign is done, so everyone has a chance to reflect on their journey.

3. **Share your story.**
   Your experience can encourage others to try reading the New Testament. Encourage members of your group to share their stories at **facebook.com/MakeAndDeepen**.

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Group Leader's Guide, New Testament Reading Campaign
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