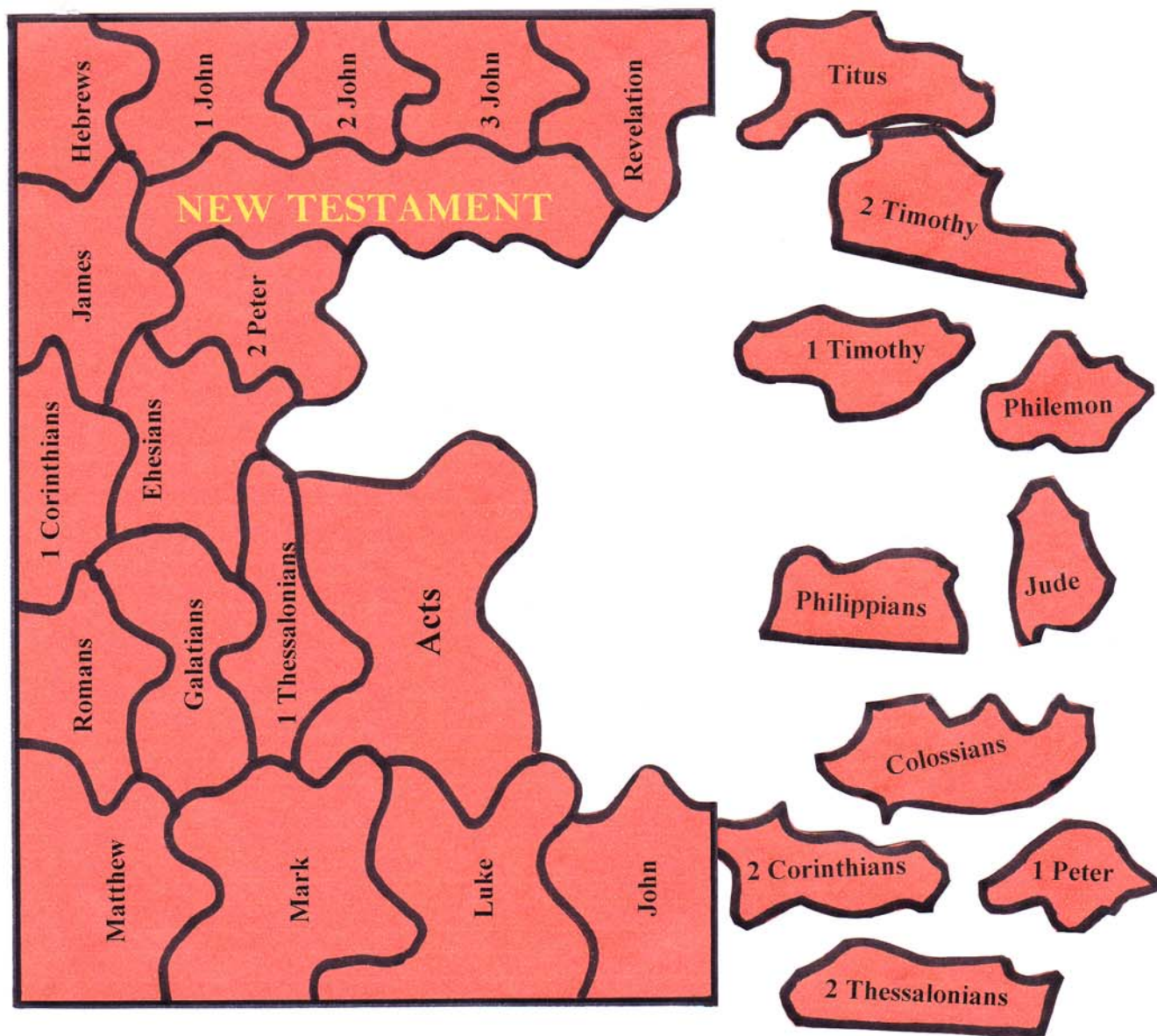


Piecing the New Testament together ...



A Study of New Testament History

New Testament Study Commentary - Part 9

Study Series prepared by Graeme Offer

Introduction to the Series

This series of Bible Studies is the result of a merger of a number of factors. I have long believed that there is a great need to study the New Testament books in their original context. I had observed that when I had undertaken exegetical studies of some New Testament books that the things that they taught, often did not match some of the points that people would extract from them when undertaking subjective studies.

I had taught the book of Acts (my favourite book of the Bible) on several occasions, and had developed outline notes to go with the studies. The thought occurred to me that I should develop some "proper" notes to go with the studies the next time that I taught the book.

As the final speaker at a lectureship dealing with the book of Ephesians, I was surprised to find that none of the speakers before me dealt with the context of the book – what was Paul trying to say to them, and why? When was the book written, and why did Paul write it? Whilst the studies were good, I observed that what we were doing was like "looking at the leaves on the tree" but we had not stepped back to observe the big picture – the structure of the tree and how it contributed to the whole effect of the garden – or even why someone planted it there in the first place.

Shortly afterwards, circumstances (which I believe was God's providence) resulted in my relocation to a different city, with a different job. I had been given the skills, the background, and now the opportunity, and importantly, the time to prepare for and to teach classes on the books of the New Testament, and to write study notes to go with them. The first set of notes written was for Ephesians, and was followed shortly after by Acts and Hebrews. My intention was to write the notes to go with the studies, and then the next time that I taught the class, to re-write and improve the notes. [So far (October 2010) Ephesians, Colossians, Philemon, Acts, Romans and Revelation have been revised. There is much work still to do, although I have completed the notes in first draft form from Acts through Revelation].

My purpose is to equip people to be able to teach others also (2 Tim 2:2) as well as to provide a "commentary" on the New Testament that will help us to better understand God's word. Commentaries usually tend to be either very basic, which help the "ordinary bible reader" but provide little depth to the material, or, they are scholarly works which provide great depth but are not written to allow the "ordinary bible reader" to understand them. Also, there are a lot of good study guides around that ask probing questions on bible chapters, but then provide little information to help us understand the point that the writer was addressing in the first place. My aim is to have easily readable notes that help us to understand the letter in its broader context and each chapter in particular, be challenged by the material, and use it to teach others.

I have tried to draw all of these things together – a background study on the book that helps us to understand the context, the history, and the culture – as well as easy-to-read notes that can be understood by those who are new in the faith, whilst at the same time providing challenging thoughts to those mature in the faith. A revision study for each of the books (or in some cases, groups of books) is designed to refresh our memories, and to provide a succinct overview of the whole of the book. It is an excellent place to start when approaching the book, together with the background study.

The homework is designed to include a few thought-provoking questions that go beyond the things that we have covered in the class.

We must never think that we can improve God's word! The word stands alone, and we can only stand in awe of it! My sole aim is to help people to understand it better.

My prayer is that those who use this material will find it exciting, edifying, encouraging, and relevant to our present situation as together we consider some of the practicalities of the gospel and the implications and relevance of God's grace to our walk with God and our daily struggles to live the christian life.

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Foreword

As we develop in our Christian walk, we gain a firm grasp of the New Testament teachings (doctrine), and how to apply them to our lives. However very often, Christians (even those mature in the faith) have not “pieced together” how the books of the New Testament relate to one another – particularly how they relate to the development and the unfolding of the church in the first century.

My purpose in this series is to help us to understand the historical context of each of the books of the New Testament. From that, we can then better understand their teaching in their original context.

Much of the material for these studies is drawn from the introductory studies to each of the New Testament books from my study series, but here I want to “draw it all together”.

A significant part of the series will be a brief (relative to the full study on the book) review of the book of Acts. It is a book like no other in the New Testament, and shines much light onto the rest of the New Testament. It can be said that before embarking on a study of most of the other books in the New Testament, that you should first study what is said about the church (or the people) in the book of Acts.

Acts stands alone as a “history” book in the New Testament. Indeed, the historical context of the New Testament is nowhere expressed as strongly as it is in the book of Acts.

Throughout the studies, I have mostly quoted from the New International Version (NIV) or New King James Version (NKJV), and have attributed the quotations accordingly. Occasionally, I have sometimes used a word or two from another translation where that version (in my opinion) better describes the point Luke is trying to get across. On occasions where quotations appear that are not referenced, they are my paraphrase of what the verse says, and may or may not bear similarity to recognized translations.

My usual teaching style is to hand out the outline for each study at the start of the lesson. I will often discuss last week’s homework, or the background / introduction section as a way of getting the class “into gear” whilst I am handing out the outline at the start. The questions on the outline are designed to help us come to a grasp of the main issues, and to form an outline of the class. They are not designed to identify the micro-issues, although the class discussion may get into some of these. I hand out the notes at the end of the class. They are designed to answer all of the questions that were raised in the outline sheet – often in more detail than what was covered in the class. I almost never hand out the notes at the start of the class, and I have found that where I have done that it always results in people reading what is on the page and feeding that back during the class without really thinking about or sometimes even comprehending what is there. The notes also serve the very useful purposes of allowing those who may miss one of the classes to catch up, as well as providing a review of the material covered for those who were present.

I always set homework, and that includes a few thought-provoking questions that go beyond the things that we have covered in the class.

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My prayer is that those who use this material will find it exciting, edifying, encouraging, and relevant to our present situation as together we travel back in time to the exciting “first days” of the New Testament church, and their struggles to spread the gospel both at home and “into all the world”.

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This study series was initially prepared for the South-East church of Christ (Dandenong, Melbourne), beginning in September 2011.

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