



A BIG  
GOD  
in small letters

4 Studies  
*for Individuals, Groups or 1:1*



**TRINITY  
MOUNT BARKER**  
A TRINITY NETWORK CHURCH

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# Welcome to A Big God in Small Letters

This series of studies is designed to accompany the Sunday teaching series during August 2014.

It looks at some of the smaller letters found at the end of the New Testament. They are perhaps little read and poorly known, but are just as much Holy Scripture as the better-known books.

Philemon, for example, the shortest of Paul's letters, is written in the first place to an individual, but is not just a letter to one person, it is God's Word to his people today. The letters of 2 & 3 John, and Jude are part of what are generally called the *General Epistles*, because they seem to speak to the Christian church in general, rather than to individual churches.

Together these letters reflect the essential challenge Christians faced in the Roman Empire 'back then' and also to us today — how to follow Jesus in a tough environment. Early Christians faced problems such as slavery, favouritism, and abuse by the rich and powerful. They dealt with harsh words and conflicts. They dealt with the real tensions between ambition and dependence on God, and the fear that doing things God's way would put them in conflict with those in authority. In general, they felt a sense of alienation living and working in a world that seemed incompatible with following Jesus.

We do hope this teaching series practically encourages you, builds up your knowledge and understanding of God and helps you as you daily contend for the faith (Jude 3).

Bible Study Groups normally explore a study in the week leading up to the sermon. Our purpose in adopting this approach is to encourage the study of Scripture that is not influenced by having already heard the sermon, and allows groups and individuals to independently 'wrestle with the Bible' in each of the studies.

These studies can also be used for private study or undertaken with a friend, but we encourage you to join a Bible Study Group to gain the benefit of group learning that promotes our growing toward maturity in Christ. If you are doing these studies individually, we encourage you to let someone know, and arrange a time to meet with them to tell them how God's Word is changing your life.

Before starting a study, it is always a good idea to surround your time looking into God's Word with prayer, asking God to change your heart and life so that you — with God's people — might become more and more like our Lord Jesus Christ.

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## **Recommended Resources**

*Colossians and Philemon, (Focus On the Bible)*. John Woodhouse  
*Colossians and Philemon, (New Covenant Commentary)*. Michael F. Bird  
*Colossians and Philemon, (Tyndale New Testament Commentary)*. N. T. Wright  
*The Message of John's Letters, (The Bible Speaks Today)*. David Jackman  
*The Letters of John, (NIV Application Commentary)*. Grant Burge  
*2 Peter and Jude, (Tyndale New Testament Commentary)*. Michael Green  
*2 Peter & Jude, (The Bible Speaks Today)*. Dick Lucas & Christopher Green  
Also check out - <https://bible.org/>

# **Study 1 — Like Father, Like Son**

## **Philemon**

The little book of Philemon (only 335 words in the Greek text) is the only surviving letter of Paul to an individual friend and convert about a private matter. In it we learn that Onesimus, one of Philemon's slaves, had stolen from his master and run away to Rome. There he met Paul and became a Christian. Under Roman law, Philemon had the right to brand a returned slave and even kill him.

Paul applies what he wrote in Colossians: 'Here there is no Greek or Jew . . . slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all' (Col 3:11). Philemon and Onesimus are given the chance to participate in a revolutionary new process for reconciliation. Paul's letter to Philemon identifies principles for bringing reconciliation between two Christians who know the pain of wronging another and being wronged.

### **Conversation Starter Questions**

1. Did you ever steal anything as a teenager? What happened next?
2. Recall a time when you wanted to restore a broken relationship. What were some of your fears and thoughts in approaching the situation?
3. How have you observed conflicts resolved in church communities? What were good methods? What were bad—even ugly—methods?

# Unity in Christian Love

4. Why might Paul have begun his letter to Philemon with words of affirmation?
5. How would *faith in action* (forgiveness of Onesimus) give the already faithful Philemon 'a full understanding of every good thing we have in Christ' (v6)?
6. Despite having authority to order Philemon to sort the issue out with Onesimus (v8), Paul appeals to him on the basis of love. What does Paul believe Philemon ought to do, and what surrender will this require from Philemon?
7. Why is [Christian] love so essential for mending a fractured relationship (v14-15)?

8. How does obedience to God's ways mutually benefit people involved in resolving conflict?
9. Paul appeals to the unity of the Gospel [v16; see also Colossians 3:11] and his partnership with Philemon as a reason to welcome Onesimus back (v17). What principle about reconciliation and [mutual] acceptance does Paul teach here?
10. What do you think Paul had in mind when he said that Philemon would 'do even more' than he asked in this situation (v21)?
11. Despite being made a new creation in Christ (2 Corinthians 5:17) Onesimus was obligated to return to his master (Philemon) and stand accountable for his wrongdoing. What principle(s) does this teach about Christian responsibility in reconciliation?

## Application

Corrie Ten Boom spoke at a church in Munich in 1947 following World War II, about the need for [Christian] forgiveness. After the service an old man held out his hand and asked if he could be forgiven for his time as a German soldier in the concentration camp in Ravensbruck. He had since become a Christian. Corrie Ten Boom recognised him from being imprisoned with her sister at Ravensbruck for hiding Jews. Her sister Betsie died in the camp at the hands of the Germans. She was paralysed as she faced her captor about how to respond. Then she remembered the Lord's Prayer that we are to 'forgive people their trespasses'; that forgiveness is not an emotion, but an act of obedience. '*forgive you brother, with all my heart*' she responded; taking his hand they cried as they both experienced God's reconciling love in action.

12. Think about a time you wronged, or were wronged by, a brother or sister in Christ. How was the situation resolved? If it hasn't been resolved, what stands in the way?
  
13. What principles in this letter could you use for mending a fractured relationship?

14. Paul intervened to restore these two brothers in Christ. When might we need the help of a friend or counsellor?
15. What conflict are you experiencing where it's hard to get beyond head knowledge of God's commands to an active love and faith? How can your church family help you get there?
16. What prejudices exist in our church today (world-wide church and/or Trinity Mount Barker) that causes conflicts? How do we resolve them?

# **Study 2 — This is Love**

## **2 John**

Theologian Francis Schaeffer wrote in his book 'The Mark of the Christian' that 'The church is to be a loving church in a dying culture. How, then, is the dying culture going to consider us? Jesus says, "By this shall all men know that you are my disciples, if you have love one to another." In the midst of the world, in the midst of our present culture, Jesus is giving a right to the world. Upon His authority He gives the world the right to judge whether you and I are born-again Christians on the basis of our observable love toward all Christians'.

### **Conversation Starter Questions**

1. Have you ever been in a situation where you felt you were torn between doing the right thing and the loving thing? Explain.
2. How would you describe the term **countercultural**? Does this term elicit a positive, negative, or neutral reaction in you? Explain.
3. Do you see the church today as being countercultural? If so, how? If not, explain.

# Obedience

4. In South Australia the speed limit for driving past road works is 25km/hr. If you believed that the road works didn't really affect your side of the road and you could safely drive past at normal road speeds, would you choose to ignore the speed limit? What does this teach about our beliefs regarding submission to authority?
5. Moses obediently led Israel through the desert for 40 years towards the 'promised land', despite the Israelites moaning about ever reaching their destination and without ever stepping foot into it himself. How do you think our churches today would deal with the discomfort of such [faithful] uncertainty?
6. Measurement and predictability are popular cultural trends that provide comfort and security for dealing with the issues and decisions of the world today. Should we be measuring our obedience to God by the outcomes of our faith, the performance of our church, or something else (see John 14:15; 2 John 6, 7)?

## **Love**

7. Do you agree or disagree with Schaeffer's comment that the world has the right to judge Christians on the basis of how they love one another? Explain.

In Jesus' story about the Samaritan traveller (Luke 10:30–37) two religious leaders (a priest and a Levite) walk past someone from a [Jewish] culture they did not get on with who desperately needed their help. We tend to love only those Christians who agree with us or who we feel are compatible with us. But what does it mean to love them "because of the truth"?

8. Do you see any parallels that could be drawn about modern day Christians too busy or caught up in their own affairs to extend love to someone? Explain.
9. Jesus exemplified uncommon love throughout His ministry and ultimately on the cross as He asked His Father to forgive those who had mocked, beaten, and crucified Him. Jesus calls on Christians to be marked out by mutual love (John 13:35). Can you think of someone today who demonstrates this type of uncommon love? What inspires you about this person's life and faith?

## **Doctrine**

10. Love (1, 3, 5, 6), Truth (1 [twice], 3, 4) and Deceit (7) feature prominently in this letter. Why might that be the case?

In the first two centuries of the church many false teachers taught that Jesus was not really a divine person, but only a man who was given extraordinary powers by God after he was baptised and crucified (i.e. God's Spirit was only 'playing' at appearing human); see also 1 John 2:18-27.

11. By denying that Christ had come in the flesh (v. 7), what fundamental truths were the false teachers rejecting?
12. Why is it important to identify right teaching from wrong teaching? How can we test / recognise right teaching (see 1 John 4:1-6; 2 John 9-10)?

## Application

C. S. Lewis once described the fears that threaten to suffocate our faith and the accompanying risk we take as followers of Christ in his book 'The Four Loves' as follows: 'Love anything and your heart will be wrung and possibly broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact you must give it to no one, not even an animal. Wrap it carefully round with hobbies and little luxuries; avoid all entanglements. Lock it up safe in the casket or coffin of your selfishness. But in that casket—safe, dark, motionless, airless—it will change. It will not be broken; it will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable. To love is to be vulnerable'.

13. Faithfulness that is characterised by obedience, selfless generosity, and an uncommon love is a countercultural influence for the cause of Christ in our generation. What fears do you have that prevents you from demonstrating this type of obedience, generosity and love?
  
14. Would you identify yourself as someone whose [doctrinal] truth needs to be balanced by love or whose love needs to be balanced by truth? Explain.

15. What practical steps can you take to move out of your comfort zone and see your life changed over the next year as a result of applying these principles?

# **Study 3 — Love and Hospitality**

## **3 John**

Helga Henry, wife of theologian Carl Henry once said 'Christian hospitality is not a matter of choice; it is not a matter of money; it is not a matter of age, social standing, sex, or personality. Christian hospitality is a matter of obedience to God'.

Like 2 John, 3 John was written to provide us with guidance about hospitality, but in a much more positive way. While 2 John tells us what we are *not* to do, 3 John emphasises what we *are* to do. For those genuine teachers who are totally dependent upon the body of Christ for all of their needs, we are to open not only our hearts but also our homes. This instruction is primarily found in John's commendation of Gaius, who has done this very thing, and in his denunciation of Diotrephes, who has refused. These two men become living examples of good and evil, truth and error.

### **Conversation Starter Questions**

1. How does praying for good health or financial relief for ourselves help us to trust God with our lives?
2. When is showing hospitality difficult?
3. It has been said that 'God is more interested in our character than our comfort'. Why is Gaius such a good example to follow?

# Health and Wealth

4. Some people have read v2 as a guarantee of perpetual wealth and perfect health for the Christian. Is wealth a sign of God's blessing (see Psalm 17:14-15; Matthew 19:16-26; Mark 12:41-44; Luke 6:20-21, 24-25; Luke 12:22-34; Luke 18:24-25)? Why is sharing God's blessings an excellent way of thanking God?
5. Jesus said, 'Well done, you *faithful* servant,' not 'Well done, you *successful* servant.' How does God provide for our needs (see v7-8)?
6. What is the difference between living by faith and praying for material prosperity?

# Love and Hospitality

7. How are both love and faithfulness demonstrated in Christian hospitality (v5-6)?
8. Why do you think Christian workers are to look to Christians for support and not to non-Christians (v7-8)?
9. In addition to hospitality, how else can we "work together" with such people?

10. Protestant Reformer John Calvin once said that '... many Christians [today] fashion God after their own presumptions rather than after the message of truth'. Is it unloving to shun Christians who do not embrace [people given over to proclaiming] the truth of the saving message of the Gospel? Why? Why not?
11. Does Christian Love trump Christian Truth? Does love always win?
12. How are the actions of Diotrephes consistent with his true heart's desire (v9-11)?

## Application

13. In contrast to Diotrephes, Demetrius was 'well spoken of by everyone' (v12). If those who know you best were asked about your love and hospitality, what might they say?
14. Theologian Don Carson says that the world today views Christianity as a threat to religious tolerance. Should 'real' Christians be ecumenical (i.e. embrace other religions) or not?
15. In light of this passage, what practical steps could you take to develop more of a ministry of hospitality?

# **Study 4 — Yourselves and Others in the Love of God**

## **Jude**

All mischief begins in the name of God.

Ancient German Proverb

Jude wrote in the same era as the Apostle Peter. Much of the information in Jude is also found in 2 Peter 2 (2 Peter 2-3 repeats most of Jude 4-18). Jude was written before 2 Peter and shares a very similar purpose; to oppose false teachers who were sexually immoral and whose teaching perverted Christian faith.

### **Conversation Starter Questions**

1. How do you think that people get tricked into perverted versions of the Christian faith? Can you give any examples?
2. Is it only bad people with bad motives whose teachings we should carefully examine? Why?
3. Whose job is it to contend for the Christian faith?

## **Twisted Teaching**

4. Jude 3 tells us something very important about the completeness of the Christian faith, doctrine and truth (see also 2 Peter 1:12-21; 3:1-2). Why is this insight so important in the fight against false teaching?

5. What five things were the false teachers guilty of (v 4, 8)?

I.

II.

III.

IV.

V.

6. One of the problems of these 'certain individuals' [who had slipped into positions of authority in the churches; see Jude 4; 2 Peter 2:1] was that they denied 'Jesus Christ our only Sovereign and Lord'. What harm could people like these do within a body of believers?

7. Jude uses three examples from the Old Testament [rebellion of those delivered from Egypt (v5), the fall of the angels (v6), Sodom and Gomorrah (v7)] to illustrate a point about privilege and security. What point is he making?

8. What do the examples of Cain (Genesis 4:5-8; 1 John 3:11-12), Balaam (Numbers 22:21-39; 2 Peter 2:15) and Korah's rebellion (Numbers 16:1-3, 31-35) in Jude 11 tell us about the nature of the false teachers and their attitude towards the Gospel (see Jude 8-10; 17-19)?

*Bonus question: Why does Jude assume his readers will know these Old Testament stories?*

9. Jude used a series of six metaphors in verses 12-13. How does each illustrate the danger of teachers who have perverted the gospel?

## Contending for the Faith

10. Jude gives two sets of instructions in response to the problem of false teaching: 'Remember' (v17) and 'Build yourselves up' (v20) [*notice the specific instructions under each of these*]. How would remembering, in the way Jude describes, help believers keep the essential ingredients of the Christian faith?



## Application

14. What errors in faith and life do you see as subtle dangers to today's Christians?
15. How can you protect yourself, and other believers whose lives you touch, from falling into these errors?
16. What message from Jude do you think the/our church most needs to hear today?

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