

*A Preacher's Guide  
to Topical Sermon Series*

24 THEMATIC PLANS

Compiled by Jessica Miller Kelley

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# Using This Resource

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*A Preacher's Guide to Topical Sermon Series* is designed to equip and inspire your sermon planning with twenty-four creative ideas for series that will educate and intrigue your congregation and help them grow as Christians. You may wish to use these outlines as they are or adapt them for your congregation's needs—or maybe a series included in this resource will spark a different idea of your own.

Contributors include twenty-four experienced preachers from seven denominational traditions offering sermon ideas on a wide variety of themes, from Sabbath to hell to our use of technology. Seasonal series will make for transformative Advent and Lent experiences, while other series are ideal for Black History and Pride months. Some series explore a single book of the Bible, and others draw lessons for discipleship from across the Bible's sections and genres.

Consider this a buffet of homiletical and creative inspiration. Take what appeals to you, try out something new, and plan a menu for years of compelling preaching with your congregation.

**What's Included** Each of the twenty-four series plans includes:

- A series overview introducing the overall message of the series.
- A chart outlining the sermon titles and focus Scriptures for each week of the series, along with a very brief description of each sermon's theme.
- Tips and ideas for the series, with suggestions for worship elements, visuals, fellowship activities, and/or outreach efforts that enhance the congregation's engagement with the series topic.

- Sermon starters for each Sunday to summarize the week's message, prompt your research and writing process, and offer sermon illustrations to enhance your preaching.

## **Making the Most of a Series**

Exploring a theme or book of the Bible across several weeks (as short as three weeks and as long as eight in this resource) gives congregants and visitors a memorable handle to latch on to from week to week. Knowing what is being preached on the following week keeps people engaged, coming back, and telling friends. Like a television show or miniseries, preaching in series can create a don't-want-to-miss-it desire to be there for each week of worship.

Maximize the impact of each series with the following tips:

*Use consistent visuals.* Even if you do not have a dedicated graphic designer in your church, you can create one image or typographic treatment for the series that can be used on your printed materials (bulletins, mailers, posters, etc.) and digital media (website, social media, or worship screen if you use one). Some of the “Tips and Ideas” sections of series plans include ideas for altar displays and other visual elements to enhance the worship space.

*Go beyond the sermon.* We all know that worship and spiritual growth do not hinge entirely on the sermon. Be intentional about choosing songs and other elements that support the theme. Plan special events at which congregants can discuss or put into practice the ideas being preached on in the series. Many “Tips and Ideas” sections have suggestions for such events.

*Spread the word.* Visitors may be more likely to give your church a try if they know an upcoming service will be addressing a topic or question they have wondered about. Promotion of the series can be done through social media, special mailings, and church newsletters. The week before a new series begins, introduce it in worship and through email, encouraging members to attend and suggesting they forward the email to family, friends, neighbors, and coworkers who may be interested in the topic.

Get your congregation excited about the opportunity to explore biblical stories and themes in depth across a number of Sundays, and watch their engagement grow.

# *Bible and Theology*

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# Brief: Small Books, Big Gospel

*A six-part series on the Bible's briefest books.*

JONAH P. OVERTON

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**Series Overview** The shortest books in the Bible don't pull any punches. These letters and visions may be brief, but they're fierce—wrestling with justice, power, community, and the gospel's radical call. Some are warm and intimate. Others are weird, wild, or downright enraging. But all of them have something urgent to say. In this series, we're slowing down the quick reads. Each week, we read an entire book aloud—start to finish—then dig in together to ask: What was that? Why is it in here? And what is the Spirit trying to say to us now? These books challenge us to rethink how we read Scripture. They remind us that the Bible isn't afraid to contradict itself, take risks, or make us uncomfortable. And if we let them, these books might just change how we understand the gospel itself—calling us to deeper belonging, sharper discernment, and a holy, liberating resistance to the powers of the world.

	Sermon Title	Focus Scripture	Theme
Week 1	Emails from the Early Church	2 John; 3 John	The gospel spreads through love, honesty, and trusted relationships.
Week 2	Not a Slave, a Sibling	Philemon	True Christian kinship dismantles hierarchy and embraces chosen family.
Week 3	God Takes Sides	Obadiah	Justice demands truth—complicity must be named and reckoned with.

	Sermon Title	Focus Scripture	Theme
Week 4	A Warning for Wandering Stars	Jude	Weird letter, real warning: stay grounded, bold, and loving.
Week 5	When the Church Sells Out	Titus	Whenever the gospel gets too respectable, empire sneaks back in.
Week 6	Salvation Is Not Assimilation	Galatians 3	The gospel transcends culture—liberating, blending, and creating belonging without erasure.

**Tips and Ideas  
for This Series**

Use email or postcard imagery to represent these short books. Choose script readers who can convey the drama of each text and hold people’s attention. Engage artistic expressions of brevity—flash fiction, micro-poetry, or minimalist design. Encourage staff and leadership to consider all their internal communications regarding church life as fodder for the future church millennia from now.

**Week 1: Emails from the Early Church**

2 John; 3 John

*Beloved, do not imitate what is evil, but imitate what is good. Whoever does good is from God; whoever does evil has not seen God. (3 John 1:11)*

Welcome to Brief, the sermon series where we dive into the shortest books of the Bible—the ones so quick that, if you blink, you’ll miss them. These little messages are often overlooked, but they’re packed with heart, theology, and drama. The goal of this series is simple: to give us a taste of what it’s like to read whole books of Scripture in one sitting. We’re not cherry-picking verses here—we’re letting the texts speak as a whole, the way they were written and the way they were first received.

This additional context doesn’t mean *everything* will make sense. These are letters from another time, another place—like reading someone else’s email thread without all the attachments. But when we let the words wash over us, we start to notice what matters. Themes emerge. And we get to hear the voice of our ancestors of the faith, trying to figure out how to follow Jesus in a world that made it really hard.

This week, we’re starting with the shortest of the short: 2 John and 3 John. These read like quick emails from a tired church leader who’s trying to hold things together. There’s not a lot of theology

packed in—just straight-up reminders about who we are and how we’re supposed to live. Which, honestly, might be exactly what we need sometimes.

Second John is a love letter and a warning. It says, “Hey church—remember the basics? Love one another. Stick with Jesus. Don’t get sucked into teachings that pretend Jesus didn’t come in the flesh.” This isn’t some abstract doctrinal argument; it’s about making sure we don’t lose sight of the incarnate God, the One who shows up in bodies and stories and messy communities. That’s still good advice.

Third John shifts gears. It’s more like an accountability email—lifting up one person (Gaius) for being faithful while calling out another (Diotrephes) for being a power-hungry gatekeeper. The early church was dealing with the same kind of internal drama we face today—people trying to hoard power, exclude others, and shape the gospel around their own egos. And the elder says, “Don’t imitate that. Stick with what’s good.”

This introductory sermon gives a taste of what Brief is all about: reading whole books, even the tiny ones, and discovering the complicated, deeply human lives and communities at the heart of them. These aren’t abstract doctrines—they’re real letters to real people who were trying to follow Jesus together. And the wisdom holds up: stay rooted in love, resist false power, and don’t forget that the gospel is embodied. Even when it shows up in your inbox.

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## Week 2: Not a Slave, a Sibling

### Philemon

*Perhaps this is the reason he was separated from you for a while, so that you might have him back for the long term, no longer as a slave but more than a slave, a beloved brother—especially to me but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord. (Philemon 1:15–16)*

This letter is short, but it’s loaded. Paul is writing to Philemon, a man of status, about Onesimus, who used to be enslaved in Philemon’s household and is now with Paul. Somehow, Onesimus has become dear to Paul—dear enough that Paul calls him his own heart. And now Paul is sending him back, but with a new understanding: Onesimus is not property. He’s family.

Paul doesn’t come out swinging against slavery as an institution here, which is frustrating to modern readers—and honestly, it should be. But what he *does* do is gently (and not-so-gently) dismantle the logic of slavery through relationship. He calls on Philemon not just to release Onesimus but to recognize him as a beloved brother in Christ.

Paul is drawing a theological circle big enough that both enslaver and enslaved are now siblings, and that's going to make things awkward for Philemon if he wants to keep playing master.

And Paul knows it. This letter is soaked in passive-aggressive grace. "I could command you," Paul says, "but I won't. I'll just appeal to your better nature. And also, remember, you owe me your life. No big deal."

Paul is using all his tools—emotional connection, spiritual authority, communal accountability—to push Philemon toward doing the right thing. It's a master class in pastoral pressure and using the resources you have to make powerful people feel uncomfortable about their sin—in public, no less. And it's based in Paul's deep conviction that, in Christ, everything changes. The old hierarchies don't hold. The gospel reshapes how we treat one another, especially across lines of power.

We don't get to hear how Philemon responds. Maybe he frees Onesimus and welcomes him home as a sibling. Maybe he doesn't. But the letter itself stands as a challenge to anyone who has benefited from systems of domination: Are you willing to be transformed by love? Are you willing to release your grip on status and control to embrace someone as family?

This isn't just a sweet story about Paul doing Onesimus a favor. It's a radical disruption, a call to repair what empire has broken. And it still speaks—loudly—to every system of oppression we've inherited and upheld. Who have we treated as less than? Who are we willing to see with new eyes, not as someone beneath us, but as our own heart? And how is the gospel advocating for our own freedom from oppression?

The gospel demands righteousness of us in our relationships. Are we willing to risk comfort, control, and even reputation to live out the truth that we are siblings in Christ?

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## Week 3: God Takes Sides

### Obadiah

*On the day that you stood aside,  
on the day that strangers carried off his wealth  
and foreigners entered his gates  
and cast lots for Jerusalem,  
you, too, were one of them. (Obadiah 1:11)*

Obadiah is the shortest book in the Hebrew Bible, but it is intense. This is one long, furious rant—poetic, prophetic, and deeply political. Obadiah is mad, and God is too.

The target? Edom. It is a neighboring nation, kin to Israel by

blood (descended from Esau), whose people stood by—or maybe even participated—when Jerusalem was ransacked and its people were exiled. Obadiah is calling out Edom’s betrayal, their smugness, their opportunism in the midst of Judah’s suffering. This is the cry of someone who watched their people get crushed while their so-called siblings cheered or looted in the aftermath.

And here’s the thing: God hears that cry. God is not neutral here. God is *not* shrugging and saying, “Well, that’s just geopolitics.” God is promising justice, promising reckoning, promising that the very empire Edom tried to cozy up to will eventually fall—and take Edom down with it.

This book reminds us that God takes sides. Not petty, tribal sides, but the side of the trampled, the displaced, the ones whose wounds were laughed at. And God remembers betrayal, especially betrayal that props up systems of violence and supremacy.

Now, if you’re thinking, “Oof, this feels personal,” it should. Because while Obadiah is a sharp rebuke to Edom, it’s also a mirror to anyone who has stood by and benefited while others suffered. It asks us: When empire is stomping through the city, are we helping people escape—or are we just keeping our heads down, hoping to come out ahead?

The warning to Edom is sobering. But it’s also hopeful, because it means the story isn’t over. Empire doesn’t get the last word. God does. Obadiah ends with a vision of restoration: that the devastated people of God will return, reclaim their land, and build something new. That’s the part we sometimes miss in these fire-and-brimstone passages. The point isn’t just punishment—it’s the promise that justice is possible. That betrayal can be named. That solidarity matters: that the kingdom of God is rising, even while empire looks unbeatable.

So maybe this book doesn’t have a lot of verses—it’s doing big theological work. It’s calling us to pay attention to who we align ourselves with; to reckon with our participation in injustice; to remember that God isn’t interested in neutrality and that God never forgets the ones who’ve been crushed. Most of all, it reminds us: Human empires may feel eternal, but God’s justice is *coming*. And it starts with truth-telling.

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## Week 4: A Warning for Wandering Stars

Jude

*These are blots on your love feasts, while they feast with you without fear, feeding themselves. They are waterless clouds carried along by the winds; autumn trees without fruit, twice dead, uprooted; wild waves of the sea, casting up the foam of their own shame; wandering stars, for whom the deepest darkness has been reserved forever. (Jude 1:12–13)*

Jude is weird. There's no way around it. It's got angels arguing with the devil, fallen beings chained in darkness, and references to ancient texts that didn't even make it into our Bibles. If 2 and 3 John were short and sweet emails, Jude is more like a panicked group text from someone who's *really* mad and starting to spiral out of control.

But beneath the chaos, there's something real here—something ancient and urgent. Jude is worried. He's watching the early church get pulled apart by charismatic teachers who are using grace as an excuse to do harm. These folks aren't just misguided—they're predatory. And Jude is not having it.

This letter is a warning, and not a polite one. It's more like someone slamming the brakes and yelling, "Wake up!" It's a reminder that the early church was not some perfect utopia. From the very beginning, there were power struggles. There were liars and manipulators. But there were also people willing to stand up and say that this is not what Jesus meant.

Jude is one of those people. He pulls from all kinds of ancient sources—1 Enoch, the Testament of Moses, apocalyptic stories that his readers would've known well—to paint this intense picture: God sees what's going on. And God is not OK with it. The people twisting the gospel for their own gain and leading others into exploitation and destruction will face judgment.

Now, depending on your baggage with judgment language, that might feel either deeply satisfying or deeply uncomfortable. But for Jude, judgment isn't about wrath for wrath's sake. It's about protection. This is a shepherd throwing rocks at the wolves, not the sheep.

What's most striking, though, is how Jude ends. After all the fire, all the rebukes, all the weird cosmic drama, he tells the faithful to stay rooted. Build yourselves up. Pray. Stay in love with God. Be merciful. Save others when you can—but don't get dragged under by the chaos. There's wisdom in that balance. Jude knows that confronting corruption is exhausting and that sometimes the best thing we can do is stay grounded, stay loving, and help one another hold on to what's good.

So, yes, Jude is weird. But weird doesn't mean irrelevant. It means human. It means that this ancient letter understands what it feels like to watch your community fray under the pressure of bad leadership, bad theology, or plain old bad behavior—and still choose to stay, to speak up, to hope, and to love.

Maybe that's Jude's real invitation: not just to call out what's wrong, but to fiercely protect what's worth saving—even if you have to use big, dark, wild imagery to get their attention.

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## Week 5: When the Church Sells Out

### Titus

*Urge slaves to be submissive to their masters in everything, to be pleasing, not talking back, not stealing, but showing complete and perfect fidelity, so that in everything they may be an ornament to the teaching of God our Savior. (Titus 2:9–10)*

OK, let's just say it: Titus is a mess. Not just because it's boring (which, honestly, it kind of is) but because it feels as if it's straight-up preaching the opposite of Jesus's good news. It says enslaved people should be extra obedient so that the church looks good. It says women should stay home, stay quiet, and stay out of sight so that the church looks good. It says church leaders should behave respectably so that, you guessed it, the church *looks* good.

But if we scratch the surface, we start to see what's really going on here: respectability politics. A once-radical movement is trying to go mainstream, and in the process, it's selling out the heart of the gospel.

This letter is attributed to Paul, but most scholars agree Paul didn't write it. It was probably written a few decades later, by someone in Paul's tradition, trying to preserve the Jesus movement by making it look more Roman, more respectable, more friendly to the empire. You know, the same empire that executed Jesus.

This shift isn't subtle. In earlier letters (like Philemon), Paul is pushing toward equality and radical love. By the time we get to Titus, the writer isn't challenging hierarchy; they're reinforcing it. Slaves, obey. Women, submit. Leaders, behave yourselves so that nobody gets mad. And here's where it gets extra slippery: They're still calling it gospel.

That's what makes this letter dangerous. It claims divine authority. It signs Paul's name. But it uses that authority to water down the gospel, to make it more palatable, more acceptable, more aligned with empire. It puts on sheep's clothing, but its teeth are sharp.

So what do we do with a text like this? First, we get honest. We name the harm it's done, especially in modern churches where texts like Titus have been used to justify patriarchy, slavery, and silencing dissent. Second, we read it in context. We remember that Scripture was not magically downloaded from the mind of God—it is a book written by people living in a specific time, trying to solve specific problems, with very human fears.

And third, we treat it like a cautionary tale. Because this right here is how a movement gets co-opted. First it's "tone it down a little," then "don't rock the boat," then "submit to empire so that no one gets the wrong idea."

But Jesus didn't come to make us respectable. Jesus came to make us free.

The good news is: We still have the real gospel. We still have Jesus. We still have Paul, the radical mystic, if we're willing to separate his voice from the voices that tried to tame him. So read Titus—not to obey it, but to learn from it. To see the warning signs. To ask: Where are we choosing palatability over truth? Where are *we* sacrificing liberation to protect our own reputation?

And then choose the gospel instead.

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## Week 6: Salvation Is Not Assimilation

### Galatians 3

*There is no longer Jew or Greek; there is no longer slave or free; there is no longer male and female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. (Galatians 3:28)*

**NOTE:** This is the only sermon in the series where we won't read the whole book aloud. Instead, read all of Galatians 3—and encourage everyone to read aloud the full letter (which takes about twenty minutes) with someone this week. The principle still holds: Reading larger chunks of Scripture, especially in community, opens us up to deeper meaning and surprising clarity—even in familiar texts.

Galatians is Paul turned all the way up. He's fiery, defensive, urgent—and completely unwilling to let the gospel be hijacked. Which is exactly what's happening in Galatia. Paul preached radical freedom, but now others are saying: "You can follow Jesus . . . as long as you also follow all the Jewish laws." And Paul is not having it.

The fight is about circumcision on the surface, but beneath that it's about belonging. Do you have to become Jewish to follow Jesus? Do you have to adopt someone else's culture to be accepted? Paul's answer is a resounding no.

The gospel, he says, is bigger than any one culture. Christianity was already syncretic—Jewish faith, Greek language, Roman infrastructure. The danger isn't cultural blending; it's supremacy. The danger is calling your culture the gospel and requiring everyone else to conform. That's what happened in colonial missions—Christianity enforced as a White, Western identity. But Paul's message in Galatians rejects that. The Spirit shows up in every culture. Jesus doesn't erase our distinctiveness. He honors it.



According to Paul, salvation doesn't come through rule following, purity codes, or cultural conformity—it comes through trust in the love of God, a trust that transforms and bears fruit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

So if you've been told you don't belong until you conform, Paul has something to say. And if you've ever felt as if your ancestors or rituals or ways of knowing God didn't "count," Galatians is good news for you. You belong just as you are. This is the gospel. It goes by many names, in many tongues, across many cultures. And in every one, it sets people free.

As we close this series, may we carry forward the habit of reading whole books, seeing the big picture, and digging for deep truth—even in small texts. May we keep finding freedom in unlikely corners. And may we live as if the gospel is as wide and wild as God's love.