

*Paul's Epistles – Part I***Introduction**

In lesson six, we surveyed Paul's life and ministry. The church was spreading and lives were being changed. These new Christians were taught to relate differently to everything from their spouse to their money to their enemies. The Holy Spirit was bringing about a revolution in people's lives. But revolutions are confusing and people don't always know exactly what a revolution demands. So God gave us twenty-one epistles that tell us how to live this revolutionary life. Paul wrote thirteen of those twenty-one epistles. Each was written to a specific church or persons. The other eight were written by four different writers: James, Peter, John, and the unknown author of Hebrews. Some of these letters were written to the church at large and are referred to as the General Epistles. John's three letters and the book of Revelation, along with his gospel, are known as the Johannine literature. We will study those eight letters in later lessons, but in the next two lessons we will survey the thirteen Pauline epistles. By the way, although there are slight differences between a letter and an epistle, it is legitimate to use the terms as synonyms.

We must remember that this is a survey course on the New Testament. Our purpose is to introduce the New Testament books and not to study their content in detail. We focus more on why each book was written, to whom it was written, what its main idea is, and how its content is organized. Our Daily Bread University offers individual courses on each of these New Testament books that study their background and content in greater depth. You would be well served to continue your study of God's Word through these courses.

**I. Romans**

The first of Paul's letters we come to in the New Testament is Romans. This, along with Colossians, was one of the two letters he wrote to churches he didn't plant. In these letters he wrote to people who knew him by reputation but that he hadn't ministered to personally. The theme of Romans is the gospel, and the idea of the letter is that God's good news is an essential message. Because

Paul had never personally presented the gospel to these people, his purpose for writing was to make sure they understood what he meant by the term *gospel*. There were many distorted versions of the gospel and Paul, in preparation for a visit to Rome, was clarifying what he meant by the term. So the compelling question in the book of Romans is: What really is the gospel? Consequently Paul gives the most thorough explanation of the gospel we find in any of his letters. A key statement in the book of Romans is “I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in [the gospel] the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, ‘But the righteous [person] shall live by faith’” (Romans 1:16–17 NASB). Romans is a great theological treatise. It’s Paul’s thorough explanation of the gospel and his *magnum opus*.

There are two major divisions in the book. In chapters 1–11 Paul explains the gospel of Jesus Christ, and this section is primarily theological in nature. In chapters 12–16 Paul explains how believing the gospel of Jesus Christ should influence our daily life. It’s more practical in nature. It was inconceivable to Paul, and should be to us, that anyone could understand the truth of Romans 1–11 and not feel compelled to respond to its demands in chapters 12–16. Romans give us our deepest and most complete explanation of the gospel. We use it today as a foundational text for much of our theology and as instructions for practical Christian living.

## II. 1 Corinthians

The next book in the New Testament is 1 Corinthians. Paul’s purpose for writing this letter was to address some serious issues in this troubled church. People from Corinth had visited Paul in Ephesus, and their news about the church in Corinth was so disturbing that Paul wrote this letter to address the problems. Paul was planning a trip to Corinth, but he felt these concerns couldn’t wait until his visit. Among other problems, Paul addressed the divisions in the church. There were also two people in the church living in an immoral relationship—and the members had failed to address it.

In the second half of 1 Corinthians, Paul answered specific questions the Corinthians had asked him in a letter they had sent. They had concerns about marriage relationships, questionable

behavior for Christians, church order, spiritual gifts, and the validity of Jesus' resurrection. The big idea of 1 Corinthians is that the gospel is too powerful to ignore in daily life. Because they were Christians, Paul insisted they live by Jesus' teaching.

Paul knew many of the Corinthian believers well. He had spent eighteen months there when he planted the church in AD 51–52. But new people who didn't know Paul had become Christians and joined the church. Many of them preferred Apollos, their current pastor (1 Corinthians 1:10–12), while others preferred Paul. Paul's response was that he and Apollos were teammates. He wrote, "I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the increase" (1 Corinthians 3:6 NKJV). So Paul responded to reports he had heard about the Corinthians in chapters 1–6 and answered their specific questions in chapters 7–16.

The content in 1 Corinthians is never out of date. This first letter to the Corinthians gives us insight into some of the struggles the early church faced and provides enormous instruction about how we can deal with those same problems as we face them today.

### III. 2 Corinthians

Second Corinthians was written a few months after 1 Corinthians around AD 55. Paul's purpose in this letter was to explain and defend his reputation as a person and an apostle. Some people in the church strongly opposed Paul. They accused him of being dishonest and fraudulent and were using Paul's change of plans to discredit him. He had told the Corinthians he would stop in Corinth on his way to Macedonia, but his plans changed and he went to Macedonia first. He wrote 2 Corinthians from Macedonia and informed the Corinthians that he planned to visit them on his way back to Ephesus.

Paul's enemies used this change of plans to accuse him of being deceitful. In addition, Paul had written a letter with needed, but harsh, rebuke to some disruptive and immoral members of the Corinthian church, and they were offended. He had some powerful enemies who were trying to destroy his reputation. So his primary purpose in writing this letter was to explain his behavior and defend his integrity as an apostle. It's a tough letter, but it was written as an attempt to make peace with his detractors. Paul cared about these Christians. Most of them were good friends; and although he confronted them, he did so with love and patience.

His goal was to restore the relationship that had been strained and, in some cases, fractured.

Paul's big idea in 2 Corinthians is that his conduct, his character, and his calling from God as an apostle legitimized his ministry. The letter contains three sections. In chapters 1–7 Paul explains his conduct and his ministry. In chapters 8–9 he encourages his readers to participate generously in his collection of funds for the church in Jerusalem. In chapters 10–13 Paul vindicates his character and ministry, and it contains some of his most intimate and personally transparent writing. Paul's greatest defense of his legitimacy was the quality of his life. Had his life contradicted his message, he would have lost his most powerful argument. The significant contribution 2 Corinthians makes to the New Testament is the insight it provides into Paul's personal life. We use it today as a model for how to resolve troubling interpersonal issues.

#### **IV. Galatians**

Galatians was probably written sometime during AD 50 to the churches Paul and Barnabas had planted on their first missionary journey during 48–50 and was most likely written before the Jerusalem Council in AD 50. The Galatians were abandoning the gospel message Paul and Barnabas had preached and were adopting a message that combined faith and works. Some Jewish Christian teachers came to these Galatian churches after Paul and Barnabas left and taught that Gentiles had to practice the Jewish ceremonial laws. (These people were called Judaizers.) They also accused Paul of not being a legitimate apostle as a way to minimize the authority of his message. Some Galatian believers were adopting the Judaizers' message.

The purpose of the letter to the Galatians was to combat this heretical teaching and call the Galatians to remain faithful to Christ. Consequently, it contains a powerful and simple presentation of the gospel. It clearly explains that salvation is God's free gift offered by His grace. A second purpose of the book was to explain and defend Paul's apostolic calling. In chapters 1 and 2 he presents clear evidence that he was a legitimate apostle.

Galatians' big idea is that the gospel of grace gives us freedom to grow in Christ. These new believers were preoccupied with the mechanics of becoming a Christian, and that was keeping them

from growing in their faith. Consequently, Christianity wasn't working for them and they were considering another option. Paul pointed out that the gospel, properly understood and lived, does work; and if they applied what Paul was teaching, they would discover its truth and power to change their lives. The gospel message, when followed, does produce God's spiritual fruit.

The tone of Galatians indicates that Paul was frustrated with the Galatians and with their abandonment of the gospel. It is the most impersonal and terse of all his letters and lacks his customary personal greetings. The letter is organized around three major themes. Paul defends his apostleship in chapters 1 and 2. He provides a thorough explanation of the gospel in chapters 3 and 4; and in chapters 5 and 6 he explains how the Holy Spirit uses the gospel to change lives and how his readers are to walk in the Spirit's teaching and power.

Christians in every generation are tempted to fall back on old habits when new ones take time to develop. Paul's questions to the Galatians are timeless,

I would like to learn just one thing from you: Did you receive the Spirit by the works of the law, or by believing what you heard? Are you so foolish? After beginning by means of the Spirit, are you now trying to finish by means of the flesh? (Galatians 3:2–3 NIV)

Paul reasoned that they were converted to Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit, but now they were trying to live the Christian life by the power of their own flesh. Consider the contrast he made in chapter 5 between the destructive deeds of the flesh in verses 19–21 and the constructive fruit of the Spirit in verses 22–23. That contrast makes it clear why Paul commanded us to

Walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. For the flesh desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the flesh. They are in conflict with each other, so that you are not to do whatever you want. (Galatians 5:16–17 NIV)

Galatians contributes to the New Testament teaching by presenting the gospel of grace in clear, compelling language. We use it today to present the gospel to unbelievers who have not yet come to Christ and to help believers understand how to walk in the power of God's Spirit.

## V. Ephesians

Ephesians is one of the four Prison Epistles. From AD 62 to 64, while he was under house arrest in Rome, Paul wrote letters to the churches in Ephesus, Philippi, and Colossae, and to his friend Philemon. Ephesians wasn't written to address doctrinal or behavioral issues but to instruct and encourage a healthy church on to greater heights of Christian living. His purpose was to urge his readers to, "walk worthy of the calling" (Ephesians 4:1 NKJV). Paul had stopped in Ephesus very briefly at the end of his second missionary journey in 52. But he had used Ephesus as a base of operation for about three years during his third missionary journey and had built strong relationships there. He knew many of these people well, and we can imagine his sincerity when he wrote, "Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, to the saints who are in Ephesus and who are faithful in Christ Jesus: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ" (Ephesians 1:1–2 NASB). Likewise we imagine that when the Ephesians received the letter from Paul, they were excited to hear from their beloved mentor.

The big idea of Ephesians can be taken from Paul's exhortation in Ephesians 4:1–3 (ESV).

I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

Note that there are two infinitives in the passage. He exhorted them "*to walk* worthy of their calling" and "*to maintain* the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace." So the big idea of Ephesians is that we walk worthy of our calling when we walk in unity.

The letter has two movements. Chapters 1–3 teach us that God has made unity possible. Chapter 1 explains how our holy God established unity with sinful humanity. In chapter 2 he tells us that God made unity between Jews and Gentiles possible in the church. And in chapter 3 Paul expressed how enthusiastic he was about being chosen by God to proclaim His message of peace and unity. Then in chapters 4–6 Paul explained how unity can be possible in the church, in all human relationships, in the home, and in the workplace. He closed the letter by telling us that our battle is not against each other but against Satan, our sinister



and powerful enemy. So unless we are equipped with all of God's armor we will never be able to fight against his efforts to destroy us. Like many of Paul's letters, the first half (chapters 1–3) presents a theological foundation and the second half (chapters 4–6) teaches the practical application of that theology.

Ephesians contributes to the New Testament by explaining how crucial unity is to the church. It is important today because it provides some of our most important teaching on how church life works and how we can live in unity with one another.

## VI. Philippians

Philippians is the next epistle in the New Testament. The church at Philippi was the first church Paul planted in Europe. He had received a vision of a Macedonian man asking him to come and help them, and Luke recorded that, "When Paul had seen the vision, immediately we sought to go into Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them" (Acts 16:10 ESV). The Philippian church was planted in AD 50 on Paul's second missionary journey. Philippians is an extended thank you note. In 1:3–5 and 4:10–19, Paul expressed his deep appreciation to his Philippian friends for supporting him with their prayers and money. His purpose was to let them know how encouraging their gifts and prayers were and to thank them for their support.

The Philippians felt deep care and concern for their beloved teacher; and because he was in prison, he wrote to assure them that he was not only well but thriving. He also warned them about false teachers and encouraged them to stand strong in the face of opposition and persecution. Paul obviously had great affection for the Philippians, and they for him. The big idea in Philippians is "to live is Christ" (Philippians 1:21 NASB). The outline is a simple one. Chapters 1 and 2 provide examples of Christian living. Chapters 3 and 4 exhort the readers to follow those examples. Philippians makes an enormous contribution to the New Testament because we gain so much insight into Paul's life and mind. As we read it today, we are exhorted to superlative Christian living.

These six epistles present the same basic message: The good news of the gospel is too powerful to ignore. Anyone who accepts Jesus' gift of eternal life must also accept His invitation to live the abundant life He offers.