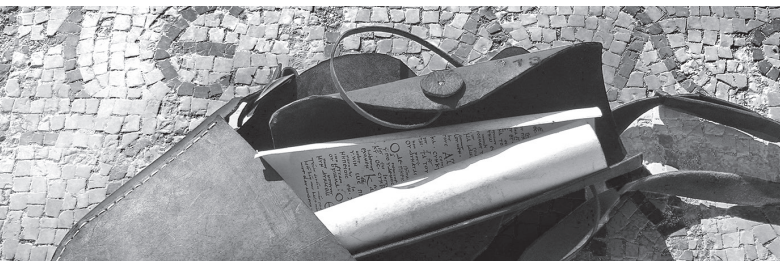


The LETTERS *of* PAUL



Mark Strauss



introduction

Understanding the Bible **The Letters of Paul**

Nearly half of the New Testament, 13 of 27 books, are written by the same person: the apostle Paul.

Writing to both individuals and churches, Paul brought the gospel of Jesus Christ to the lives of many. His letters contain the heights of theology and the depths of everyday living. But they are just that, letters. While they hold timeless truths about God and life, they

were penned to a particular group, for a particular reason, and at a specific time. Reading them can be confusing—even Peter admits that some of the things Paul writes are “hard to understand.” Hard, but not impossible. Turn these pages to be introduced to that man, his writings, and how they are for us today.

Our Daily Bread Ministries

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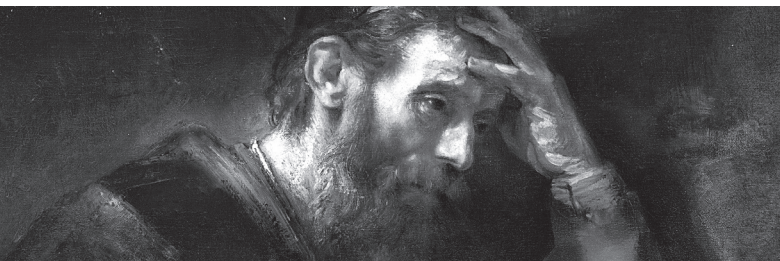
Reading Paul's Letters Today 27

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one

Introducing Paul

After beginning as the church's greatest enemy, the apostle Paul was transformed into its most able defender. Following a dramatic encounter with the resurrected Lord, Paul passionately fulfilled the commission Jesus gave him, traveling thousands of miles on foot and planting churches throughout the Roman Empire. He suffered extraordinary hardships: deprivation, beatings, stoning, shipwrecks, imprisonments, and assassination attempts. As a brilliant theologian, he corresponded frequently with his churches. Thirteen of these letters now comprise over a quarter of the New Testament.

Apart from Jesus himself, no one shaped Christianity to a greater extent than Paul. But from

Paul's own perspective, he was merely a "slave" of Jesus Christ, a laborer and field hand doing his duty in response to the extraordinary, undeserved, and unfathomable gift of salvation God had provided through our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. In this booklet we will examine the life and letters of Paul.

Who was Saul/Paul?

We know about Paul from two main sources: the book of Acts (written by Luke) and Paul's own letters. In his letters, he is always "Paul" (Greek: *Paulos*), but in Acts, he is both Saul and Paul. Saul was his Jewish name, given to him at birth. Paul was his Roman name, likely also given at birth, because his family had Roman citizenship. Luke calls him Saul until his first missionary journey, when he switches to Paul (ACTS 13:9). Saul probably began using his Roman name when his ministry turned primarily to the Gentiles (non-Jews).

Saul is first mentioned in Acts at the stoning of Stephen, the first Christian martyr (ACTS 6:1–7:60). The witnesses to the stoning laid their robes at the feet of a young man named Saul, who "approved of their killing him" (ACTS 8:1). Saul viewed Stephen as an enemy of Judaism because of his preaching about Jesus, who, from Saul's perspective, was a false messiah.

Saul calls himself a "Hebrew of Hebrews," meaning an authentic and faithful Jew (PHILIPPIANS 3:5–6). He was a member of the Pharisees (PHILIPPIANS 3:5; ACTS 23:6), a Jewish political and religious party that stressed meticulous observance of the Jewish Law. He was

trained by Gamaliel, one of the leading rabbis of his day (ACTS 22:3; CF. 5:34), “advancing in Judaism beyond many of my own age” (GALATIANS 1:14). Because of his zeal, Saul considered the followers of Jesus to be a threat to Judaism and he tried to destroy this new movement, arresting men and women and putting them in prison.¹

But there is another important side to Saul. He was born in Tarsus, a Gentile city, in the province of Cilicia (SOUTHEASTERN TURKEY TODAY; ACTS 21:39). He was therefore “Hellenized,” meaning he spoke Greek and had a good knowledge of Greek ways. This background prepared him well to be the “apostle to the Gentiles.”

Saul was also a Roman citizen, which brought him many rights and privileges that others in the empire did not have. They could not be beaten or imprisoned without a trial. They could appeal to Caesar and be tried before the emperor in Rome. Paul was born into his Roman citizenship. It was a valuable asset, and Paul used it to his advantage.²

Paul's Conversion

Paul's conversion is narrated in Acts 9:1–9 and is recounted twice by Paul elsewhere in Acts (22:6–16; 26:12–18) and mentioned in his letters (GALATIANS 1:13–16; PHILIPPIANS 3:4–8). It probably occurred three to five years after the resurrection of Jesus. Having begun

1 Gal. 1:13; 1 Cor. 15:9; Phil. 3:6; Acts 7:58; 8:3; 9:1–2.

2 Acts 16:37–40; 22:25–29; 23:27; 25:10–12; 26:32; 28:19

a major persecution against the Christians, Paul requested letters of reference from the high priest in Jerusalem to the synagogues in Damascus, Syria, for permission to arrest Christians there (FOLLOWERS OF “THE WAY”; ACTS 9:2).

On the road to Damascus, however, a bright light flashed around Saul, and a voice called out to him, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” Saul answered, “Who are you, Lord?” and the voice responded, “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.” Saul was blinded by the light, and led by his companions into the city of Damascus. There, the Lord sent a man named Ananias, who restored Saul’s sight and baptized him.

This encounter turned Saul’s life upside down. Before he had viewed Jesus as a false prophet and a messianic pretender; now he realized Jesus was the promised Savior of the world and the hope of all humanity. Jesus’s execution was not merely the tragic fate of a misguided zealot; it was God’s purpose and plan—an atoning sacrifice to pay for the sins of the world. The Christians Saul had persecuted were not deluded followers of a liar and blasphemer. They were the true people of God who had responded in faith to God’s plan of salvation.

The transformation of Saul is one of the great proofs of the truth of Christianity. What could have caused a zealous persecutor of the church to make a 180-degree turn and become its greatest supporter? The only reasonable explanation is what Paul himself says: *On that Damascus road he met the resurrected Christ,*

who called him into service. This is remarkable evidence that Jesus arose from the dead, confirming that he was who he claimed to be: the Savior of the world.

Paul's Commission

Paul viewed his mission as taking this good news of salvation to the ends of the earth, and to preach the good news to the Gentiles.³ This salvation was *first* for the Jews (ROMANS 1:16–17), the original recipients of the promise, so in every town Paul preached first in the Jewish synagogue.⁴ Israel was to be a light to the nations (ISAIAH 49:6), so Paul would first call Israel to faith in their Messiah (SEE ACTS 13:16–42).

The response was generally as follows: A small number of Jews would believe and a larger number of Gentile “God-fearers.” God-fearers were Gentiles who attended synagogue services to worship the one true God. If Paul got expelled from a synagogue, he would move to the town squares or other venues and continue to preach. Small “house churches” were started, with Christ-followers worshipping together and sharing the good news with others. Paul would then move on to the next town and repeat this pattern.

Despite great opposition, Paul started a remarkable number of churches throughout the Roman empire,

³ Rom. 1:1–4, 13; 11:13; 15:16–18; Gal. 1:16; 2:2, 7–9; Eph. 3:8; 1 Tim. 2:7; 2 Tim. 4:17; Acts 9:15; 13:47; 22:21; 26:17

⁴ Acts 13:14; 14:1; 17:1–2, 10, 17; 18:4, 19; 19:8

establishing a legacy as the greatest missionary, church planter, and theologian of all time. Yet Paul would claim no credit for any this, since it was all through God's grace: "All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation" (2 CORINTHIANS 5:18).

Paul's Gospel

We often speak of Paul's "conversion" to Christianity, but Paul would not have viewed his Damascus Road experience this way. For Paul, Christianity was not a new religion; it was Judaism "fulfilled." He now understood it completely. His conversion was the recognition that Israel's salvation had arrived through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus the Messiah and was now available to all people everywhere.

This salvation was necessary because of human brokenness. When Adam and Eve disobeyed God in the Garden (GENESIS 3), they rejected God's authority and became fallen human beings, alienated from their Creator. In his letters Paul outlines the consequences of human sin—spiritual and physical death. Sin and death spread to all people everywhere (ROMANS 1:18–3:20; 5:12–19). Yet God set in motion a plan to bring humanity and a fallen creation back to himself. Through Christ's perfect life and sacrificial death on the cross, he bore our sin and opened the way to be reconciled to God. Human beings can now be "justified" (declared righteous) through faith in Christ's death on the cross (ROMANS 3:21–26;

2 CORINTHIANS 5:17–21). We participate in his new life “in Christ” by identifying with him through faith in his death, burial, and resurrection (ROMANS 6:3–6).

What is presently a spiritual reality will become a universal one when Christ returns to establish his kingdom and judge all that is right and wrong in his world. Meanwhile, we experience Jesus’s presence and power through the Holy Spirit, who lives in every follower of Jesus. The Spirit is the seal or confirmation of our salvation in the present and the guarantee of its completion in the future (ROMANS 8:1–39; 2 CORINTHIANS 1:21–22; EPHESIANS 1:13–14).

Paul’s Early Ministry (APPROX. AD 34–48)

Immediately after his conversion, Saul began preaching about Jesus in the synagogues of Damascus, where his message of a crucified Messiah was not widely accepted and his enemies attempted to kill him (SEE ACTS 9:18–25). He then spent time in Arabia, the Nabatean kingdom south of Damascus, probably preaching the gospel there (GALATIANS 1:16–17). After three years he went up to Jerusalem, where he met James, the brother of Jesus, and spent fifteen days with Peter (GALATIANS 1:18–20; ACTS 9:26–28), no doubt learning the stories about Jesus. When his Jewish opponents in Jerusalem made another attempt on his life, the believers there sent him home to Tarsus in Cilicia, where Paul spent the next eight to ten years preaching in Cilicia and Syria (ACTS 9:29–30; GALATIANS 1:21).

Near the end of this period, the Jerusalem church

heard that Gentiles had responded to the gospel in Antioch, Syria. They sent Barnabas to Antioch to work with the church. Barnabas went to Tarsus and brought Paul back to help him. Paul and Barnabas ministered together in Antioch (ACTS 11:19–29). From there the Holy Spirit called them for their first missionary journey (ACTS 13:1–3). In the next chapter, we will survey the missionary journeys of Paul and the letters written during these journeys.

Questions

1. In what ways did Paul's perspective on Jesus and on the early Christian movement change as a result of his Damascus Road experience (describe Paul before and after)?
2. What things in Paul's life uniquely qualified him for his role as apostle to the Gentiles?
3. What is your commission from the Lord? What has he called you to do?



two

Paul's Letters in Context

In this chapter we will briefly survey the missionary journeys of Paul and the letters written during those journeys. In our New Testament, Paul's letters are ordered according to their length (with letters to churches first; then letters to individuals), not their chronological order. The following chart indicates the biblical order on the left and the likely chronological order on the right.

**BIBLICAL
ORDER**

Letters to
Churches (9)

Romans

1 Corinthians

2 Corinthians

Galatians

Ephesians

Philippians

Colossians

1 Thessalonians

2 Thessalonians

Letters to
Individuals (4)

1 Timothy

2 Timothy

Titus

Philemon

**HISTORICAL (CHRONOLOGICAL)
ORDER** *Dates are approximate*

GalatiansAD **49**

1st Missionary Journey: Galatia (ACTS 13–14; AD 48–49)

1 ThessaloniansAD **52**

2 ThessaloniansAD **52**

2nd Missionary Journey: Greece (ACTS 16–18; AD 50–52)

1 CorinthiansAD **55**

2 CorinthiansAD **56**

RomansAD **56**

3rd Missionary Journey: Asia Minor (ACTS 19; AD 53–56)

EphesiansAD **60–62**

PhilippiansAD **60–62**

ColossiansAD **60–62**

PhilemonAD **60–62**

Arrest, Trial, & Journey to Rome (ACTS 20–28; AD 57–62)

1 TimothyAD **62–64?**

TitusAD **62–64?**

After Acts: Release & further travels (AD 62–64?)

2 TimothyAD **65?**

Second Imprisonment (AD 65–67?)

FIRST MISSIONARY JOURNEY (ACTS 13–14; AD 48–49)**The Gospel to Galatia**

Paul and Barnabas were working together in Antioch (ACTS 11:19–29) when the Holy Spirit called for their first missionary journey (i.e., major outreach): “Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them” (ACTS 13:2). They set out, preaching the

gospel to spread the word of a new kind of kingdom first on the Island of Cyprus, Barnabas's homeland, and then traveling north into what is modern central Turkey, the Roman province of Galatia. In Galatia, they started churches in Antioch-Pisidia, Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe. Paul's incredible tenacity is evident in Lystra, where an angry mob stones him, leaving him for dead. Amazingly, Paul gets up and the next day moves on to preach in the next town! (ACTS 14:19–20). The gospel is unstoppable because it is the work of God.

After retracing their steps and appointing elders in the churches, the missionaries return to Antioch, reporting that God “had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles”! (ACTS 14:27). A movement had begun! But when God is at work, Satan responds to oppose him, and the Galatian churches are soon under attack.

Letter to the GALATIANS: *Grace over Legalism*

(FROM ANTIOCH, SYRIA, AROUND AD 49)

After returning from his first missionary journey, Paul heard reports that false teachers had infiltrated the churches in Galatia. These false teachers, known as Judaizers, were telling the Gentile believers that they had to keep the Old Testament law (i.e., become Jews) in order to be saved. Some of the Galatians were accepting this message and even getting circumcised as a mark of Jewish religious compliance! In response, Paul wrote a passionate letter to the Galatian churches. He is hopping mad, “astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you to live in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—which is really no gospel at all” (GALATIANS 1:6–7).

No false gospel of works can save you. Salvation comes not by a person's identity as a Jew nor by their good deeds, but by God's grace alone. Paul writes, "It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery" (5:1).

SECOND MISSIONARY JOURNEY (ACTS 16–18; AD 50–52)

The Gospel to Greece

The issue of whether Gentiles needed to keep the Jewish law in order to be saved was a major question for the church, and so when Judaizers began preaching their false gospel in Antioch, a council was called in Jerusalem (ACTS 15:1–35). The decision reached at the Council of Jerusalem was that Jews and Gentiles were both saved by faith, and so Gentiles should not be required to be circumcised. They should, however, avoid certain behaviors that would be offensive to their Jewish brothers and sisters (15:20–21, 29). The good news of God's grace was affirmed.

On his second missionary journey (this time with Silas and Timothy), Paul revisited the churches in Galatia that had been started on the first journey. Along with several co-workers, he then tried to go west into the province of Asia Minor, but the Holy Spirit prevented them. They turned north toward the province of Bithynia, but Jesus prevented this as well. When they came to the city of Troas, on the northwestern shore of modern Turkey, Paul had a vision of a man beckoning them to cross over into Macedonia (ACTS 16:6–10). They did so and Luke reports

Paul's preaching in five cities in Greece, three in Macedonia (northern Greece: Philippi, Thessalonica, Berea) and two in Achaia (southern Greece: Athens and Corinth). The gospel has now arrived in Europe!

Two letters were written during this journey.

FIRST THESSALONIANS: *Encouragement for a Thriving Church* (FROM CORINTH, AROUND AD 52)

Paul evidently preached in the Macedonian city of Thessalonica for only about a month (ACTS 17:2), starting a vibrant and growing church there. When persecution forced him to leave, he traveled first to Berea and then to Athens. Yet along the way he was deeply concerned about the young church in Thessalonica. As new believers facing severe persecution, would they persevere? After trying unsuccessfully to return, Paul sent his assistant Timothy to check on the church. Timothy visited the church and then returned to Paul, reporting that the church was thriving despite persecution. In response Paul wrote the letter we call 1 Thessalonians to praise the church for their perseverance and to encourage them to further growth. This is a great letter to illustrate what a healthy and growing church looks like. Another key theme of the letter is the believers great hope in the return of Christ.

SECOND THESSALONIANS: *Instruction on the Day of the Lord* (FROM CORINTH, AROUND AD 52)

Some time after Paul wrote 1 Thessalonians, he heard of another problem in the church. Certain people were claiming that the Day of the Lord—the time of final

judgment—had already arrived. Paul therefore wrote a second letter to the Thessalonians to correct false views about the Second Coming of Christ and the Day of the Lord.

On this second missionary journey, Paul spent eighteen months in Corinth, establishing the church there (ACTS 18). He then returned to Jerusalem and to Antioch in Syria. On the way home, he stopped briefly in Ephesus, the chief city of the Roman province of Asia Minor. The people there wanted him to stay, so he promised to return (18:18–22). This set the stage for his third missionary journey.

THIRD MISSIONARY JOURNEY (ACTS 19; AD 53–56)

The Gospel to Asia Minor

On Paul's third missionary journey he traveled through Galatia to the Roman province of Asia Minor (western modern Turkey), ministering in Ephesus for three years (ACTS 18:23; 19:1–41). From this base of operations "all the Jews and Greeks who lived in the province of Asia heard the word of the Lord" (ACTS 19:10). We have three letters written during this period, 1 Corinthians, 2 Corinthians and Romans.

FIRST CORINTHIANS: *Correction for an Immature Church*

(FROM EPHEBUS, AROUND AD 55)

The city of Corinth was located on the isthmus connecting the Peloponnese of southern Greece with the north—a major crossroads of trade and commerce. As a thriving metropolis, it boasted a variety of cultures, religions, and

philosophical traditions. Many of the church members had come from a pagan background of idolatry and immorality. In contrast to churches like Philippi and Thessalonica, which were models of maturity and growth—Corinth was Paul’s “problem child,” a church struggling with the sin, pride, and disunity.

At some point during his three years in Ephesus, Paul received reports that the church was struggling with various issues. He wrote 1 Corinthians to respond to these problems and answer questions from the church. The letter is remarkably practical, dealing with many issues faced by churches today: pride and self-centeredness, disunity, sexual immorality, divorce and remarriage, and how to hold each other accountable in love and grace.

SECOND CORINTHIANS: *Reconciliation Amid the Sorrows and Joys of Christian Ministry*

(FROM MACEDONIA, AROUND AD 56)

In time Paul heard reports of continuing problems in the church at Corinth. He decided to visit the church personally to resolve these issues. This visit, however, ended in disaster when certain individuals challenged Paul’s authority and rejected his leadership (2 CORINTHIANS 2:1; 12:14, 21; 13:1–2). Paul returned to Ephesus in sorrow and disappointment (2:1). In response he wrote a strong letter “out of great distress and anguish of heart and with many tears” urging the church to repent (2:4; CF. 7:8) and sent it with Titus. Paul then traveled north, first to Troas and then to Macedonia, where he met Titus returning from Corinth (2:12–13; 7:5). Titus brought the good news that the majority of the church

had repented and wished to be reconciled with Paul (7:5–9). Paul was overjoyed! From Macedonia, he wrote the letter we call 2 Corinthians, and followed this letter with a visit to Corinth (ACTS 20:1–4). The letter is a great testimony to the joys and sorrows of Christian ministry and the power of reconciliation.

ROMANS: *Paul's Gospel: The Righteousness of God*

(FROM CORINTH, AROUND AD 56)

In Corinth Paul had been completing a collection of money for the poor Christians in Jerusalem, who were suffering through famine and persecution. His plans were to return to Jerusalem with the gift, then visit the church in Rome on his way to an outreach in Spain. Paul therefore wrote to the Roman Christians from Corinth to prepare them for his visit and to enlist their support for his trip to Spain (ROMANS 15:22–29).

Romans is considered Paul's magnum opus, his greatest theological work, a fitting summary of the gospel he preached. The central theme is the righteousness of God (SEE 1:16–17). All people are sinful and stand condemned before a perfect and righteous God. It is only through faith in Christ and his sacrificial death on the cross that mankind can renew a right relationship with God. On the basis of faith, God "justifies," or declares righteous those who believe. By virtue of their identification with Christ ("in Christ"), they die with him, leave their old self in the grave, and rise with him to resurrection life. The Holy Spirit, who now indwells believers, is the seal and guarantee of salvation and provides the power to live a victorious life.

ARREST & JOURNEY TO ROME (AD 57–60)

The Gospel to Rome:

Following his third missionary journey Paul returned to Jerusalem with the collection he had been gathering for the poor Christians in Judea (1 CORINTHIANS 16:1–4; 2 CORINTHIANS 8–9; ROMANS 15:25–28). He planned to go from there to Rome and then to Spain. But God had other plans. While in Jerusalem Paul was falsely accused of taking Gentiles into the temple area reserved for Jews. A riot broke out and Paul was arrested by the Romans and placed in protective custody (ACTS 21–22). The Roman commander first brought Paul to face charges before the Jewish Sanhedrin and then—when a plot to assassinate Paul was discovered—transferred him to Caesarea on the coast, where Paul stayed for two years, appearing before the two Roman governors, Felix and Festus, and the Jewish King Herod Agrippa II (ACTS 23–26). When the governor Festus threatened to send Paul back to Jerusalem for trial, Paul appealed to Caesar—a right of every Roman citizen. So Festus sent Paul to Rome to appear before Caesar.

The book of Acts ends with an eventful sea voyage (ACTS 27–28) and Paul's arrival in Rome, where he remains under house arrest for two years awaiting trial. From a human perspective, Paul's ministry seems to be over. But God is at work, carrying his gospel forward. Luke ended the book by noting: "For two whole years Paul stayed there in his own rented house and welcomed all who came to see him. He proclaimed the kingdom of God and taught

about the Lord Jesus Christ—with all boldness and without hindrance!” (ACTS 28:30–31). You can chain up the gospel messenger, but the gospel message is unstoppable, because it is the work of God!

The four “Prison Epistles”—Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, Philemon—were written during Paul’s first Roman imprisonment.⁵

Letter to the EPHESIANS: *God’s Purpose in Christ*

(FROM ROME, AD 60–62)

Ephesians, sometimes called the “quintessential Paul,” is a concise and eloquent summary of Paul’s theology. The central theme is God’s sovereign purpose in providing salvation to his chosen people and the outworking of that purpose in the life of the believer. Many scholars believe Ephesians was an “encyclical” letter meant to circulate among the churches in Asia Minor.

Letter to the PHILIPPIANS: *The Joy of Knowing Christ*

(FROM ROME, AD 60–62)

Philippians is a letter of friendship to a church that had faithfully supported Paul throughout his ministry. The letter was sent for a variety of purposes: (1) to thank the church for a financial gift (4:10, 14–19); (2) to inform them of his circumstances (1:12–26; 2:23–24); (3) to send Epaphroditus back to Philippi with commendations for his faithful service (2:25–30); and (4) to warn the Philippians of threats to the church, including disunity (2:1–4; 4:2–3) and false teaching

⁵ Some scholars have suggested that one or more of these letters was written during another imprisonment, perhaps in Caesarea or Ephesus.

(3:2–3, 18–19). A theme Paul repeatedly returns to is the great joy that comes from his relationship with Christ.

Letter to the COLOSSIANS: *The Supremacy of Christ*

(FROM ROME, AD 60–62)

When Paul wrote Colossians, he had never personally visited the church (COLOSSIANS 2:1). It was likely established during Paul's three years in Ephesus (SEE ACTS 19:1, 8–10) by Epaphras, a native of Colossae and one of Paul's disciples (COLOSSIANS 1:7; 4:12; PHILEMON 1:23). Paul wrote to combat a heresy that had sprung up in the church. The identity of this heresy is uncertain, but it likely involved a syncretism (combining) of legalistic Judaism (COLOSSIANS 2:11, 16, 21–22) with an early form of Gnosticism. Gnostics considered the material world to be evil. Salvation was achieved by attaining special "knowledge" (gnōsis) of spiritual realities. Paul responds to the heresy, which devalued Christ, by asserting the supremacy of Christ. Any human wisdom or knowledge pales in comparison to Christ's person and work. He is the creator and sustainer of all things; the image of the invisible God. Through his death and resurrection, he brought reconciliation between God and human beings.

Letter to PHILEMON: *Reconciliation for Onesimus*

(FROM ROME, AD 60–62)

This letter was written to Philemon, a leader in the church at Colossae, and was probably sent at the same time as Colossians. Paul writes to encourage Philemon to welcome back Onesimus, a runaway slave. Onesimus had fled from

his master, perhaps after stealing from him (PHILEMON 1:18), and eventually ended up in Rome. There Paul met him and led him to Christ (v. 10). Paul now urges Philemon, his “dear friend and fellow worker” (1:1), to forgive his runaway slave and receive him as a new brother in Christ.

AFTER ACTS (1 & 2 TIMOTHY, TITUS)

The Pastoral Letters

The book of Acts ends with Paul in Rome awaiting trial. Was he tried and convicted? Was he released? Paul’s comments in Philippians 1:25–26 suggest that he expects to be released. This makes sense, since his opponents from Jerusalem probably never made the long journey to Rome to press charges against him. Furthermore, the Pastoral Epistles (1 & 2 TIMOTHY, TITUS) do not fit well in the chronology of Paul’s life prior to this and so were likely written after Paul’s release from this first Roman imprisonment.

At some time during his subsequent travels, Paul left Timothy in Ephesus (1 TIMOTHY 1:3) and Titus on the island of Crete (TITUS 1:5). He wrote letters of instruction to each.

FIRST TIMOTHY: *Church Order in Ephesus*

(FROM MACEDONIA; AROUND AD 64)

Paul had warned the leadership in Ephesus years earlier of the danger of false teachers (ACTS 20:29–31). They were now present in the church, so Paul writes Timothy concerning how to oppose them. He charges Timothy to “fight the

good fight of the faith” and to “guard what has been entrusted to your care” (1 TIMOTHY 6:12, 20). He also provides instructions on appointing elders, proper worship and family relationships. The letter’s purpose is expressed in 3:14–15: *“Although I hope to come to you soon, I am writing you these instructions so that, if I am delayed, you will know how people ought to conduct themselves in God’s household, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and foundation of the truth.”*

TITUS: Church Order on Crete

(PERHAPS FROM NICOPOLIS; AROUND AD 64)

This letter from Paul to his disciple Titus shares many characteristics with 1 Timothy since both relate to combating heresy, teaching sound doctrine, and appointing leaders in the church. Two major themes run through this letter. The first is the importance of sound doctrine and warning against those who distort the truth. Second is a major emphasis on good works and godly conduct.

Some time after writing 1 Timothy and Titus, Paul was arrested again, probably in Troas (2 TIMOTHY 4:13), and taken back to Rome. This time the charges against him were much more serious and he was imprisoned in the dark and dismal Mamertine prison, much harsher conditions than his previous house arrest. He was martyred shortly afterward. During the final days of his life, Paul wrote the letter we call Second Timothy.

SECOND TIMOTHY: *Guard the Gospel*

(FROM ROME, AROUND AD 64–67)

As Paul sat down to write this last letter, he was well aware that his time on earth was nearly over. He encourages Timothy to faithfully carry on the ministry God has given him and to “guard the good deposit that was entrusted to you” (1:14). Paul’s words in 2 Timothy 4:7–8 represent a fitting epitaph for his life: “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day—and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing.”

Questions

1. Can you name the thirteen letters of Paul and put them in their chronological order? What is the central message of each?
2. What do you think motivated Paul to keep going despite incredible suffering and hardship?
3. What characteristics or attributes from Paul’s life would you like to see more strongly in your life?



three

Reading Paul's Letters Today

The New Testament letters can be among the most challenging of the biblical genres. They seem so easy to apply to our lives. Yet we have to remember that these letters were not written specifically *to us*. They are personal correspondence written to various people and groups in the first century to address their needs and concerns.

Consider 1 Corinthians 15:58, where Paul says, “Always give yourself fully to the work of the Lord.” This certainly seems applicable to us. A few paragraphs later Paul writes, “Be on your guard; stand firm in the faith; be courageous; be strong. Do everything in love” (16:13–14). Again, this is easily applied to all Christians. Yet Paul says a variety of other things, such as:

On the first day of every week, each one of you should

set aside a sum of money in keeping with your income, saving it up, so that when I come no collections will have to be made. (1 CORINTHIANS 16:2)

After I go through Macedonia, I will come to you. (16:5)

When Timothy comes, see to it that he has nothing to fear while he is with you, for he is carrying on the work of the Lord, just as I am. (16:10)

These statements are clearly *not* written to us. Paul is not telling all believers to take up a collection every Sunday for the church in Jerusalem! He's not going to come to us after passing through Macedonia. Timothy will not show up at our door. Still other statements in the letter are difficult to tell whether they apply to us or not:

Greet one another with a holy kiss. (16:20)

Every man who prays or prophesies with his head covered dishonors his head. But every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her head. (11:4-5)

Are you pledged to a woman? Do not seek to be released. Are you free from such a commitment? Do not look for a wife. (7:27)

Should Christians greet each other with a kiss? Should men pray with their heads uncovered and women with their heads covered? Should Christians avoid marriage? Are these commands for all believers, or do they apply uniquely to the church at Corinth? Here are four principles of application to keep in mind when reading the epistles:

1 Determine the meaning of the text in its original context. When you open your mailbox and pull out a letter, you consider its nature and purpose. If it's an advertisement, you might toss it. If it's a bill, you might groan, but you probably won't toss it. If it's a letter from a close friend, you probably open it first and eagerly read it. In each case your goal is to identify the author, the recipient, the nature of the letter, and its purpose.

Our goals with the New Testament letters should be the same. These are real letters written to real historical readers. We need to understand that message in its original context before applying it to our own. *Who wrote it and to whom? When, where, and why was it written? What is its message?* The process of determining the original meaning of a text is called *exegesis*, which means drawing out the author's intended meaning.

To develop good exegetical skills, it's helpful to refer to the author's intention. For example, we should say, "Paul tells the Corinthians to greet one another with a kiss" instead of "Paul tells us to . . ." Once we determine the message to them, we can then ask, *How does this apply to us today?*

Exegesis allows us to determine the author's purpose in writing and apply the text in analogous situations today. This brings us to our next two principles.

2 Our application should reflect the author's original purpose. This principle asserts that the purpose of a particular instruction is even more important than the directive itself. To illustrate this, suppose I give my son \$10 and tell him to run the car through the

automatic carwash down the street. An hour later he returns, gives me my \$10 back and says he washed it himself, and also waxed it and vacuumed the interior. Although he did not directly obey my instructions, he fulfilled their purpose even beyond my expectations.

When Paul says to greet one another with a kiss, his goal is not to make sure there's lots of kissing in church. It is rather to encourage the church to demonstrate family love and affection for one another, because the church is a family. This purpose could be fulfilled in a variety of ways, depending on the cultural context.

Similarly, when Paul says, "Do not look for a wife" (1 CORINTHIANS 7:27) he is not forbidding marriage. In the same context he assumes most Christians *will* marry (7:2). His purpose is to encourage believers to be content in the state they are in and to affirm the spiritual benefits of *both* marriage and singleness.

This principal has a flip-side. When the purpose of a command is unclear, we should be cautious in enforcing its application today. The question of head covering in 1 Corinthians 11 is difficult. Scholars debate the meaning of Paul's command (is it about head coverings or long hair?), what do head coverings symbolize (the woman's authority or her submission?), and various other difficult questions (like the meaning of the reference to angels in v. 10). We should be cautious in how we apply this passage today.

3 Principle of Correspondence: Apply the passage in analogous situations. Determining the purpose of the command enables us to apply the passage in

truly analogous situations today. If the situation is essentially the same, it can be applied directly. For example, Paul says in Ephesians 5:18, “Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery.” Since drunkenness today causes much the same kinds of problems as in the first century, the command for us is similar to the command to them.

When the situation is not analogous, we can apply the command at the level of principle. For example, greeting with a kiss may not be an appropriate form of greeting in some contexts today. But the principle of Christian love and affection could be fulfilled in other ways, perhaps with a hug.

Or consider Jesus’s command to wash one another’s feet (JOHN 13:14; 1 TIMOTHY 5:10). In the first century, people walked in sandals on dusty roads. When an honored guest arrived at a banquet or dinner party, a servant would wash their feet. The one washing the feet was humbled, while the one receiving the washing was honored. This is not necessarily analogous to today’s cultural context. The principle and purpose behind Jesus’s command is to serve others, which may be fulfilled through other forms of service.

4 The Principle of Consistency: Make decisions based on the full testimony of Scripture.

A fourth principle operates on the assumption that the Bible is the inspired Word of God and will not contradict itself. Difficult or obscure passages should be interpreted in light of clearer ones and the whole testimony of Scripture should be taken into account.

For example, while the nature and function of spiritual gifts in 1 Corinthians 12–14 is greatly debated today, what is beyond dispute is that Paul places the greatest emphasis on the need for love and unity (1 CORINTHIANS 13). Debates on theological issues should take a back seat to our mission to take this message of salvation to the ends of the earth.

Conclusion

While these principles help us navigate the differences between the first-century culture and our own, most passages in the epistles can be applied directly to our lives. The good news of salvation has not changed in the last two thousand years. Nor have people changed. They still experience the same ups and downs, successes and failures, and joys and sorrows. The greater challenge for us is not understanding these imperatives, it is living them out. Yet, as Paul affirms, through Christ and in the power the Spirit, God is able to accomplish “more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us” (EPHESIANS 3:20). 🌿

Questions

1. What challenges do we face in applying the epistles today?
2. What principles do you think are most helpful for finding appropriate application of the epistles for today?
3. What is the most difficult or challenging command from God to obey in your life? What steps can you take to live in obedience to God?



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