

“Paul’s Letters”

Romans-Philemon; Romans 3:21-28; Ephesians 2:8-9 ¹

As we make our way toward the “finish line” of our journey through the Bible, we come today and next week to two large sections of the New Testament known as “the letters,” or “the epistles.” Today’s subject is that section of thirteen books known as “Paul’s letters” or “the Pauline Epistles,” and next week we’ll look at the eight “General Letters.” After that, only the book of Revelation will remain.

Taken together, these twenty-one letters make up 78% of the New Testament. Besides the thirteen written by Paul, three were written by John, two by Peter, one each by James and Jude (the half-brothers of Jesus), and one by the unknown author of Hebrews. As would be the case if we were reading someone’s personal letters today, reading these letters is a bit like listening to one-half of a telephone conversation, in that much of what’s going on has to be inferred.

Sometimes the author and recipients are stated, sometimes not. There is no date written at the top of each letter as we might do, so we have to deduce the time of writing from clues given in the letter. Sometimes important clues about what’s happening on the recipients’ end come at the conclusion of the letters, so we do well to read a letter completely before beginning to make deductions. Among the major themes of the letters are these six:

1. Jesus the Christ is the fulfillment of God’s promises in redemptive history. He is Messiah, Lord, the Son of God, and the true revelation of God.
2. The new life of believers is a gift of God, anchored in the cross and empowered by the Holy Spirit.
3. Christians experience salvation by faith, and faith expresses itself in a transformed life. The Epistles spend considerable space elaborating on believers’ newness of life.
4. Believers belong to the restored Israel, the Church of Jesus Christ, which must live out her calling as God’s people in a sinful world.
5. In this present evil age, believers suffer affliction and persecution, but they look forward with joy to the coming of Jesus Christ and the consummation of their salvation.
6. False teachers dangerously subvert the true gospel of Christ.²

As I did with the Minor Prophets, I’m going to summarize Paul’s Letters in the order in which they were written rather than the order in which they appear in our Bibles. And, as is true for each message in this series, I’ll post a great deal more material online this afternoon than I have time to present here. While scholars have varying opinions about some of the things I’m going to present, I’m going to present things as they are generally accepted by conservative evangelical scholarship.

GALATIANS

As a Pharisee, Paul was a fiery opponent of Christians, and once he became a Christian, he became a fiery opponent of those Jewish Christians who wanted to require Gentile believers to observe the very same Jewish laws he himself had once revered. Although Paul learned to modulate and moderate his message over time, Galatians, his first letter of concern for churches he had established, is still pretty fiery.

¹ A sermon by David C. Stancil, Ph.D., delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, Maryland on August 18, 2013.

² *ESV Study Bible* (Crossway, 2008), p. 2148.

Paul is more critical of his audience in Galatians than in any subsequent letter, chastising them for being taken in by the spurious arguments of the “Judaizers.” Galatians emphasizes salvation through God’s grace, not by observance of the Jewish Law. It was in this very first letter that Paul affirmed what is sometimes called “The Magna Carta of Christian Freedom”—that now “*there is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus*” (Galatians 3:28). And it was in Galatians that Paul gave us the wonderful list of character qualities we know as “the Fruit of the Spirit”: “*But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control*” (Galatians 5:22-23).

1 & 2 THESSALONIANS

One of the early crises in the Church had to do with a very natural misunderstanding about when Jesus would return. Jesus had spoken of His return in ways that suggested its imminence, and the early believers, including Paul, fully expected that return during their own lifetimes. While we still regard Jesus’ return as imminent, and many in every generation have expected that return during their own lifetimes, Christians have also had to find ways to understand the obvious delay of His coming.

This crisis became acute when the first believers in that first generation began to die. Their families and friends were concerned that dying before Jesus’ return might cause their loved ones to miss out on Jesus’ coming Kingdom, and Paul’s two letters to the church at Thessalonica were his first efforts to address this concern.

The Thessalonian letters, written only a few weeks or months apart, also record Paul’s first commentaries on Christian response to persecution, on ethical issues such as the expectation that believers should be gainfully employed, and on the first of many false expectations that Jesus had already returned and they had been left behind.

1 & 2 CORINTHIANS

Paul’s letters to the church at Corinth have provided encouragement to countless congregations since, who, after reading these letters, have concluded, “Well, at least our church is not *that* messed up!”

Corinth sat on the isthmus connecting the Greek mainland to the Peloponnesian peninsula, and was a notoriously wicked seaport city. Paul spent eighteen months in Corinth in the early 50s, after which he lived in Ephesus, on the other side of the Aegean Sea, for three years.

Paul actually wrote at least four letters to the church in Corinth, of which the letters we have are #2 and #4. The progression of letters went like this:

First, at some point while he was living in Ephesus, Paul got word of sexual immorality in the Corinthian church, and his first letter apparently dealt with this issue (1 Corinthians 5:9). Sometime later, Paul received a report that the Corinthians had not only misunderstood his first letter (1 Corinthians 5:10), but were plagued with serious problems of division, continued immorality, and social snobbery (1:10, 5:1, 11:18).

At about this same time, a letter arrived from Corinth that displayed considerable confusion about marriage, divorce, participation in pagan religions, the conduct of public worship, and the bodily resurrection of Christians (7:1, 8:1, 12:1, 15:12, 35). In response to these troubling developments, Paul felt compelled to write a substantial letter to Corinth, making

the case that much of their conduct was out of step with the gospel.³ This was the letter we know as 1 Corinthians.

Things in Corinth were in such a mess and the feelings of some in the church toward Paul were so hostile that Paul apparently made a return visit to Corinth that turned out to be very painful for all concerned. It was after that visit that Paul wrote his third letter to Corinth, a letter known as “the tearful letter,” that we do not have (2 Corinthians 2:3-4).

To Paul’s great joy, the tearful letter did result in a repentant spirit in most of the Corinthian church, though some continued to object that Paul suffered far too much persecution to be a genuine apostle of Jesus. Anticipating a third visit to Corinth (2 Corinthians 12:14, 13:1), Paul wrote what we know as 2 Corinthians in preparation for that visit.

In his final letter, Paul wrote very personally and vulnerably about his understanding of the relationship between suffering and the power of the Spirit in his life, ministry, and message. Paul’s final letter to Corinth is as autobiographical as anything we have from his pen, and is a powerful, personal apologetic for the transforming power of the Gospel.

ROMANS

Paul’s letter to the church at Rome is his most organized and carefully-presented statement of his faith, though he probably did not intend the letter as a summary of everything he believed, since it lacks any detailed explanation of his doctrines of Christ, the Church, or Last Things.⁴

The overarching purpose of this letter was to introduce himself to the church at Rome and to explain key aspects of his message prior to his first visit to Rome. Paul’s plan was to visit Rome on his way to Spain, and he hoped that the Roman church would help to underwrite the expenses of that mission (Romans 15:22-24).

There were apparently significant numbers of both Jewish and Gentile believers in the Roman church, and Paul’s lengthy letter addresses issues that would be significant in such a setting, such as:

1. Can one be right with God through obeying the Jewish Law? (1:1-3:20).
2. What can be learned from Abraham, and is he the father of both Jewish and Gentile Christians? (4:1-25).
3. What role does the law play with reference to sin? (5:20; 7:1-25).
4. What does the salvation of the Gentiles indicate about the future of Israel as God’s chosen people? (9:1-11:36); and
5. Should Christians observe Old Testament food laws, and how should they relate to fellow believers on such matters? (14:1-15:13).⁵

Romans is Paul’s most carefully-worded letter, and we’ll return to it briefly at the end of this message.

³ *ESV Study Bible*, pp. 2187-2188.

⁴ For Paul’s doctrine of Christ, see Philippians 2:6-11 and Colossians 1:15-20. For his doctrine of the Church, see Ephesians. And for his teaching on Last Things, see 1 Thessalonians 4:13-5:11 and 2 Thessalonians 2:1-12.

⁵ *ESV Study Bible*, p. 2152.

PHILIPPIANS

Paul was led to Philippi—the first church he founded in Europe—by a heavenly vision (Acts 16:9), and over time it became his very favorite church, though he had been famously beaten and jailed during his ministry there (Acts 16:16-40). This short letter is joyful, almost exuberant, using the words “joy” or “rejoice” more than a dozen times, and the strong, loving relationship between Paul and the Philippians is evident from start to finish.

Today, we might call Philippians a “missionary support letter.” Paul was writing to people who helped provide the prayer support and financial assistance necessary for his ministry as an apostle to the Gentiles. To fulfill his end of the partnership, Paul assured the Philippians of his prayers, updated them on his personal circumstances, reported on the effectiveness of gospel ministry in his area, offered spiritual encouragement, and expressed heartfelt gratitude for the many ways they supported his ministry.⁶

Philippians 2 contains one of Paul’s most powerful statements about Jesus, and Philippians 3 contains what have become what I call my “life verses”:

¹⁰ I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, ¹¹ and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead. ¹² Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already arrived at my goal, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. ¹³ Brothers and sisters, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, ¹⁴ I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus (Philippians 3:10-14).

COLOSSIANS

So far as we know, Paul never visited Colossae, a small town about 100 miles inland from Ephesus in what we know today as western Turkey. It appears that during the three years Paul lived in Ephesus, a Colossian named Epaphras visited Ephesus, met Paul, and became a follower of Jesus (Colossians 1:7-8).

At the time of this writing (c. A.D. 62), Epaphras is with Paul in Rome—where Paul is under house arrest—and has probably shared the news that there was a dangerous teaching threatening the church in Colossae (4:12). Paul wrote this letter at about the same time that he wrote Philemon and Ephesians, and he sent all three letters with Tychicus and Onesimus (Ephesians 6:21; Colossians 4:7, 16).

What had apparently happened was that a shaman-like figure had joined the Colossian church and had begun teaching spiritual principles currently in vogue—like many who call themselves “spiritual” do today—principles contradictory to life in Christ.

As one of the most thoroughly Christ-centered books in the Bible, Colossians focuses on the divine and exalted person of the resurrected Christ. “The letter presents variations on this central theme, with Christ celebrated as the object of the believer’s faith, the image of the invisible God, the creator of all dominions, the head of the church, the firstborn from the dead, the unifier and reconciler of all things, the Savior through his sufferings on the cross, the treasury of all wisdom and knowledge, the triumphant victor over sin and Satan, the exalted Lord of life and glory, and the true pattern for the life of Christian faith.”⁷

⁶ *ESV Study Bible*, p. 2277.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 2291.

PHILEMON

The theme of this short, personal letter is the power of the Gospel to transform lives and human relationships. Philemon was a wealthy Christian who lived in Colossae. Philemon apparently heard the Gospel and was saved during Paul's years in Ephesus (A.D. 52–55), either through hearing Paul himself or through talking to Epaphras. After his conversion, Philemon became the host for a church that met in his house.

At some point, Onesimus, one of Philemon's slaves or indentured servants, ran away to Rome, perhaps after having stolen money or property from Philemon. Living as a fugitive in Rome, Onesimus somehow came into contact with Paul and became a Christian. As he grew in Christ, Onesimus became a great help to Paul during his imprisonment.

As much as Paul would have liked to keep Onesimus with him, he knew that Onesimus's wrongdoing against his master needed to be addressed. Paul wrote this letter as an appeal to Philemon to appreciate the transformation that had occurred in Onesimus's life and to receive him back not merely as a bondservant but as a "beloved brother" (v. 16).

While it's hard to know whether or not Paul was seeking Onesimus's full emancipation, it's clear that Paul was seeking a transformed relationship between slave and master that would defy all of the distinctions of the surrounding Greek and Roman culture. There's no doubt that it would have been difficult for servitude to survive in the atmosphere of love envisioned by the letter, and in fact Paul's appeal has helped to lay the foundation for the abolition of such servitude in many places around our world.⁸

EPHESIANS

Ephesians has long been known as "The Queen of the Epistles," and it has long been my own favorite book in the Bible. Apparently a "circular" letter intended to be read in a number of churches, Ephesians contains Paul's clearest contrast between what it means to be "lost" and what it means to be "saved." Ephesians contains Paul's clearest statement about the nature of the Church. And Ephesians gives us our clearest glimpse of "what God is up to," both in time and in eternity (which requires more explanation than I have time for right now).

Like Philippians, Ephesians is quite positive in tone, and it includes two beautiful prayers of blessing that we might well pray for one another. Ephesians contains Paul's best-known affirmation of salvation "by grace, through faith" (2:8), and it ends with a famous extended metaphor about the nature of our personal spiritual warfare with the forces of Darkness.

Paul's first Prayer of Blessing

¹⁷ I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better. ¹⁸ I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in his holy people, ¹⁹ and his incomparably great power for us who believe (Ephesians 1:17-19).

Paul's second Prayer of Blessing

¹⁴ For this reason I kneel before the Father, ¹⁵ from whom every family in heaven and on earth derives its name. ¹⁶ I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, ¹⁷ so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, ¹⁸ may have power, together with all the Lord's holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is

⁸ Ibid., p. 2353.

the love of Christ,¹⁹ and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God (Ephesians 3:14-19).

By Grace, through Faith!

⁸ For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—⁹ not by works, so that no one can boast (Ephesians 2:8-9).

The Key to Understanding the Bible

¹⁰ His intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms, ¹¹ according to his eternal purpose that he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord (Ephesians 3:10-11).

On Spiritual Warfare

¹⁰ Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. ¹¹ Put on the full armor of God, so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes. ¹² For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. ¹³ Therefore put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand.

¹⁴ Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place, ¹⁵ and with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace. ¹⁶ In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. ¹⁷ Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. ¹⁸ And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the Lord's people (Ephesians 6:10-18).

1 & 2 TIMOTHY and TITUS: The Pastoral Epistles

First and Second Timothy and Titus are known as “The Pastoral Epistles,” both because Paul wrote these letters to persons who had pastoral roles in the churches, and because they have to do with concerns related to church leadership. These letters also have the distinction of having been written near the end of Paul’s life.

The traditional way of understanding the chronology of these letters is that Paul was acquitted of the charges that brought him to Rome to appear before Nero, a trial he was still awaiting at the end of Acts (Acts 21-28). Paul then continued to travel and to preach for several years before being imprisoned a second time, and tradition holds that he was beheaded by Nero in A.D. 67 or 68.

Although the New Testament does not record that Paul actually made it to Spain as he had expressed the wish to do, 1 Clement 5:5-7, one of the very earliest post-New Testament Christian writings, recorded that Paul had “preached righteousness to the whole world . . . having come to the extremity of the West,”⁹ which would certainly appear to affirm that he did make it to Spain. Whether Paul made it to Spain or not, tradition has it that 1 Timothy and Titus were written between Paul’s imprisonments, and that 2 Timothy was written during Paul’s final imprisonment, not long before his death.

Timothy, the first “second generation” believer mentioned in the New Testament (2 Timothy 1:5), was a leader in—and was perhaps the pastor of—the congregation at Ephesus; and Titus, a long-time co-laborer with Paul, was, at the time of this writing, a leader among the churches on the island of Crete, which Paul had apparently visited between his imprisonments

⁹ www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/1clement-hoole.html

(Titus 1:5). First Timothy and Titus have the distinction of containing lists of qualifications we use to this day in considering persons for positions of church leadership (1 Timothy 3:1-13; Titus 1:5-9), providing the most complete biblical summary of the nature of pastoral ministry.

Second Timothy, as Paul's last letter before his death, is intensely personal and reflective, as we might expect such a letter to be. The letter is similar to other "farewell discourses" in the Bible.¹⁰ Some of the best-known and most-quoted words from 2 Timothy are these:

⁵ But you, keep your head in all situations, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, discharge all the duties of your ministry. ⁶ For I am already being poured out like a drink offering, and the time for my departure is near. ⁷ I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. ⁸ 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 (2 Timothy 4:5-8).

HOMILY

Well, we've now shot through Paul's thirteen letters in what may be record time. The one question that remains is this: If you had to pick one short passage or one verse or sentence that summarizes the heart, the core, the central truth in all of Paul's writing, what might that passage or sentence be? The task is daunting, but I have attempted it nonetheless.

While there is certainly no definitive answer, and while your answers might differ from mine, I've selected one passage and one sentence as my current understanding of the most central things Paul ever told us. And actually, it's just one thing.

The passage I selected is the one we read as our text earlier. It's the passage from Romans 3 that inspired Martin Luther to nail his Ninety-Five Theses to the door of the church in Wittenberg nearly 500 years ago, and it goes like this:

*²¹ But now apart from the law the righteousness of God has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. ²² This righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. **There is no difference between Jew and Gentile, ²³ for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, ²⁴ and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. . . . ²⁸ For we maintain that a person is justified by faith apart from the works of the law** (Romans 3:21-28).¹¹*

Finally, the sentence that seems to me to be the "burning center" of Paul's message is one that you probably already know by heart: "*For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast*" (Ephesians 2:8-9).

Just as Paul had found himself at once both extremely religious and also extremely lost, so it is with us. There is **no other way to God** except the way Jesus made for us; and yet the Good News is that, as Paul discovered, "Everyone who calls on the name of the LORD will be saved" (Romans 10:13).

¹⁰ Other farewell discourses include those of Moses (the entire book of Deuteronomy); Joshua (Joshua 23-24); David (1 Chronicles 28-29); and Jesus (John 14-16).

¹¹ "That is why faith alone makes someone just and fulfills the law; faith it is that brings the Holy Spirit through the merits of Christ. The Spirit, in turn, renders the heart glad and free, as the law demands. Then good works proceed from faith itself. That is what Paul means in chapter 3 when, after he has thrown out the works of the law, he sounds as though he wants to abolish the law by faith. No, he says, we uphold the law through faith, i.e. we fulfill it through faith."

www.ccel.org/1/luther/romans/pref_romans.html

It doesn't matter who you are or what you've done—God is able to do for you today what God did for Paul long ago. And it doesn't matter how many good deeds you do if you're not covered by the blood of Jesus. To be “almost saved” is to be “completely lost.” If that's your condition today, my friend, I urge you to “*declare with your mouth [that] ‘Jesus is Lord,’ and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, [so that] you will be saved*” (Romans 10:9).