

**The Letters of Paul**  
Series: The Bible  
June 12, 2022

Thank you again for being part of worship today.

We are in our 7<sup>th</sup> week in our series “The Bible” as we look at the entirety of the Canon, recognizing the overarching themes and message of Scripture.

Here is our graphic representation of the Bible. Like a bookshelf, the Bible has many sections: Law, History, Poetry, the Prophets (both Major and Minor) are in the Old Testament. In the New Testament are the Gospels, a single book on Church History, then the Letters written by Paul, followed by General Letters, and concluding with the Book of Revelation.

Today, we are going to take a 30,000 foot look at the seventh section, The Letters of Paul. We will ask three questions: What are the mega themes of the section? What is the key verse of that section? And how does it point to Jesus, the Son of God? I am so glad you have joined us on this spectacular journey!

It’s revealing to note that one third of the New Testament content is letters. That is unique to the rest of Scripture. No book of the Old Testament is like the epistles. Twenty-one of twenty-seven books in the New Testament are epistles, of which thirteen were written by Paul.

The story of Paul is a fascinating one. He was a Jew, born in Tarsus, brought up in Jerusalem and educated at the feet of Gamaliel, the famous teacher of the Law. He came a Pharisee. One has to wonder if he ever heard or squared off against Jesus. He was very being zealous for God and the Law. We first learn of him at the beginning of Acts 8, that he was at and approved of the stone of Stephen. He went on to persecute the Christians, hounding them to prison, even death. Then, on a journey to Damascus to persecute Christians there, he testified, “about noon a great light from heaven suddenly shone around me. And I fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to me, ‘Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?’ And I answered, ‘Who are you, Lord?’ And he said to me, ‘I am Jesus of Nazareth, whom you are persecuting.’”<sup>1</sup>

He was saved and began to witness to the truth of the Gospel. Then God called him to preach all around the Mediterranean Sea. He engaged in 4 missionary journeys and was eventually imprisoned in Rome. That is where Acts ends. Hints from his letters suggest he was released from jail, traveled and preached more, maybe even into Spain, before he was arrested again and martyred by Nero in the persecution following the burning of Rome.

During Paul’s ministry, he started and strengthened many churches. Then, when he was away from them, he wrote letters to instruct, encourage, and sometimes chastise the believers and leaders.

His letters have been organized into 2 sections. First, letters to churches. Thus, we find a letter to the church in Rome, 2 letters to the church in Corinth, a letter to churches in the region of Galatia, or modern Turkey. Then to the Greek churches in Ephesus, Philippi, Colossae, and to Thessalonica.

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<sup>1</sup> Acts 22:6-8 (ESV)

The section group of letters is to individuals. He wrote 2 letters to his spiritual son Timothy. Another was written to Titus, a co-worker for Christ. And finally, he wrote to an old friend Philemon. All these letters are written over a 15 year period.

This collection of letters is as vital to Christianity as are the Gospels. Why? Because we get most of our theology, guidelines for conduct of the believer, and the order of the church from Paul. Consider the Apostle's Creed that we affirmed earlier. Look at it again. The first section about God comes from the Old Testament. The second section focuses on Jesus, which we get from the Gospels. The line about the Holy Spirit comes mainly from John's Gospel. But everything else comes from Paul. We would know nothing about the holy catholic (or universal) church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting, without Paul. The importance of his letters to what we know and understand of Christianity cannot be overstated.

The order they are placed in is intentional in two ways. First, they go from largest to smallest, both in the church section and the individual section. But there is also a progression in the experience of the believer.

Romans address our natural nature and lays out the Gospel message of Salvation. It goes from unsaved to saved.

1 and 2 Corinthians, as well as Galatians, are addressed to local churches and deal with the problems and perplexities of what might be called the carnal man, the person who is still the center of their life instead of Jesus. Paul addressed issues of Christians being people instead of Christians.

The next three – Ephesians, Philippians, and Colossians – portray the position and privilege of the spiritual man. They are addressed to the individual saints "in Christ" who find their life in Him and rise above circumstances.

The Thessalonian epistles picture the hope and end of the Church of Christ here on earth.<sup>2</sup>

Several of the letters were written while Paul was on the road preaching the Gospel, while others were written while he was in prison for that same Gospel.

What are the mega themes of the section?

### **First, the life of the Christian.**

Paul shows us how to live successful Christian lives. We can become mature by being so identified with Christ that His attitude of humility and self-sacrifice becomes ours. Christ is both our source of power and our guide. Developing our character begins with God's work in us. But growth also requires self-discipline, obedience to God's Word, and concentration on our part.<sup>3</sup> We are to live by Christ's new standards. God provides His Holy Spirit to enable us to live His way. To utilize the Spirit's power, we must lay aside our evil desires, submit our will to Christ, and seek to love others.<sup>4</sup>

### **Second, the life of the Church.**

Paul describes the nature of the church. The church, under Christ's control, is a living body, a family, a dwelling. God gives believers special abilities by His Holy Spirit to build the church. We are part of Christ's body, and we must live in vital union with

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<sup>2</sup> From "An Introduction to the New Testament: Volume 2 The Pauline Epistles." D. Edmond Hiebert. Moody Press: Chicago. 1977 Page 21.

<sup>3</sup> Life Application Study Bible, Philippians

<sup>4</sup> Life Application Study Bible, Ephesians

Him. Our conduct must be consistent with this living relationship, so we must use our God-given abilities to equip believers for service, fulfilling our role in the living church.<sup>5</sup>

### **Third, Hope.**

One day all believers, both those who are alive and those who have died, will be united with Christ. To those Christians who die before Christ's return, there is hope—the hope of the resurrection of the body. If we believe in Christ, we will live with Him forever. All those who belong to Jesus Christ—from throughout history—will be present with Him at His second coming. We can be confident that we will be with loved ones who have trusted in Christ.<sup>6</sup>

### **Fourth, Sound Doctrine.**

Paul instructed Timothy to preserve the Christian faith by teaching sound doctrine and modeling right living. Timothy had to oppose false teachers, who were leading church members away from belief in salvation by faith in Jesus Christ alone. We must know the truth in order to defend it. We must cling to the belief that Christ came to save us. We should stay away from those who twist the words of the Bible for their own purposes.<sup>7</sup>

### **Fifth, Suffering.**

Paul encouraged the church to persevere in spite of troubles and trials. God will bring victory to His faithful followers and judge those who persecute them. God promises to reward our faith by giving us His power and helping us bear persecution. Suffering for our faith will strengthen us to serve Christ. We must be faithful to Him.<sup>8</sup>

Friends, we can expect trials and troubles as well. We need to stand firm in our faith in the midst of trials, being strengthened by the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit helps us to remain strong in faith, able to show genuine love to others and maintain our moral character even when we are being persecuted, slandered, or oppressed.<sup>9</sup>

### **Sixth, Resurrection.**

Some people denied that Christ rose from the dead. Others felt that people would not physically be resurrected. Christ's resurrection assures us that we will have new, living bodies after we die. The hope of the Resurrection forms the secret of Christian confidence. Since we will be raised again to life after we die, our life is not in vain. We must stay faithful to God in our morality and our service. We are to live today knowing we will spend eternity with Christ.<sup>10</sup>

### **Finally, the End Times**

The last two letters written to churches – the Thessalonian pair – focus extensively on the Second Coming of Christ, the nature climax of the Christian life.

In the final days before Christ returns, there will be false teachers, spiritual dropouts, and heretics. The remedy for error is to have a solid program for teaching Christians. Because of deception and false teaching, we must be disciplined and ready to reject error. Know the Word of God as your sure defense against error and confusion.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Life Application Study Bible, Ephesians

<sup>6</sup> Life Application Study Bible, 1 Thessalonians

<sup>7</sup> Life Application Study Bible, 1 Timothy

<sup>8</sup> Life Application Study Bible, 2 Thessalonians

<sup>9</sup> Life Application Study Bible, 1 Thessalonians

<sup>10</sup> Life Application Study Bible, 1 Corinthians

<sup>11</sup> Life Application Study Bible, 2 Timothy

No one knows the time of Christ's return. We are to live moral and holy lives, ever watchful for His coming. Believers must not neglect daily responsibilities, but always work and live to please the Lord. The Gospel is not only what we believe but also what we must live. The Holy Spirit leads us in faithfulness, so we can avoid lust and fraud. Live as though you expect Christ's return at any time. Don't be caught unprepared.<sup>12</sup>

There were many nominees for the key verse in Paul's letters.

Romans 5:1:

*Therefore, since we have been made right in God's sight by faith, we have peace with God because of what Jesus Christ our Lord has done for us.*<sup>13</sup>

1 Corinthians 1:10:

*I appeal to you, dear brothers and sisters, by the authority of our Lord Jesus Christ, to live in harmony with each other. Let there be no divisions in the church. Rather, be of one mind, united in thought and purpose.*<sup>14</sup>

From Philippians 4:

*Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!*<sup>15</sup>

And:

*I can do all things through him who strengthens me.*<sup>16</sup>

But for me, the key verse in Paul's letters is Ephesians 2:8-9

*For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – not by works, so that no one can boast.*<sup>17</sup>

The Good News of salvation is that we can't be saved by living a good life; we are saved only by faith in Jesus Christ. But the Gospel transforms people's lives, so that they eventually perform good deeds. Our service won't save us, but we are saved to serve. A good life is a witness to the gospel's power. As Christians, we must have commitment and discipline to serve. Are you putting your faith into action by serving others?<sup>18</sup>

How do the Letters of Paul point to Jesus?

**First, Jesus is equal to God.**

This is coming from a former Pharisee who would have never suggested there was any deity except God.

The introductions to his letters give us the tale of the tape. Paul's favorite opening for his letters, one he used in 11 of 13 letters, is this: "May God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ give you grace and peace."<sup>19</sup>

He intentionally teaches that both the Father and the Son are the source of grace and peace. Jesus is equal to God.

**Second, the Grace of Christ has superseded the Law.**

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<sup>12</sup> Life Application Study Bible, 1 Thessalonians

<sup>13</sup> Romans 5:1 (NLT2)

<sup>14</sup> 1 Corinthians 1:10 (NLT2)

<sup>15</sup> Philippians 4:4 (NIV)

<sup>16</sup> Philippians 4:13 (NRSV)

<sup>17</sup> Ephesians 2:8-9 (NIV)

<sup>18</sup> Life Application Study Bible, Titus

<sup>19</sup> Romans 1:7 (NLT2); also 1 Corinthians 1:3; 2 Corinthians 1:2; Galatians 1:3; Ephesians 1:2; Philippians 1:2; 2 Thessalonians 1:2; 1 Timothy 1:2; 2 Timothy 1:2; Titus 1:4; Philemon 3

A group of Jewish teachers insisted that non-Jewish believers must obey Jewish law and traditional rules. They believed a person was saved by following the law of Moses (with emphasis on circumcision, the sign of the covenant), in addition to faith in Christ. Paul opposed them by showing that the law can't save anyone. We can't be saved by keeping the Old Testament law, even the Ten Commandments. The law served as a guide to point out our need to be forgiven. Christ fulfilled the obligations of the law for us. We must turn to Him to be saved. He alone can make us right with God through His grace.<sup>20</sup>

**Finally, the Church is the Body of Christ in the world today.**

Sixteen times, Paul refers to the church as the body of Christ.

1 Corinthians 12:27 reads:

*All of you together are Christ's body, and each of you is a part of it.*<sup>21</sup>

Christians must be good citizens in society, not just in church. Believers must obey the government and work honestly. How you and I fulfill our civic duties is a witness to the watching world. Your community life should reflect Christ's love as much as your church life does.<sup>22</sup>

Some wish to dismiss Paul. They don't like what they perceive to be some of his views. But we would not understand the church, mission, and outreach, if it were not for Paul.

Here's the thing: we are to be Paul today. He could relate to Jews and Gentiles alike. He loved God and people so much that he went to where the lost were and told them about Jesus. He gave his life so that you and I might know the Lord.

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<sup>20</sup> Life Application Study Bible, Galatians

<sup>21</sup> 1 Corinthians 12:27 (NLT2)

<sup>22</sup> Life Application Study Bible, Titus