

Paul's Letters

Paul stopped in many cities while on his missionary journeys and began many new ecclesias. Each new ecclesia had its own set of problems to deal with. Some of the believers had been unkind and immoral before their conversion to Christ, and now they were having trouble trying to change their lives. Some of the new ecclesias had a lot of Jews who still wanted to follow the Law of Moses, and others were mainly Gentiles who were glad to be freed from the rituals of the Law. Each ecclesia had its own strong and weak points.

As problems arose in the new ecclesias, Paul did not have time to visit each city and handle the troubles himself. Therefore, he sent letters to the ecclesias to help them through their problems until he could come and visit them in person. Many of these letters were written while Paul was traveling on his journeys or in prison. From Paul's letters, we can learn many helpful ways to handle arguments and divisions among people. There were times when Paul had to be very firm in what he demanded an ecclesia must do, but he did it in gentleness and kindness, which made it easier for the believers to cooperate.

Here is a summary of the letters Paul wrote that form a big part of our New Testament Bible:

Romans: While the four Gospels present the words and works of Jesus Christ, **Romans** explores the significance of His death. Using a question-and-answer format, Paul records one of the best presentations of doctrine in the Bible. Paul explains that God forgives our sins and saves us because we want to live like Jesus Christ (*faith in Christ*). God cannot save people who follow a list of rules (*the Law of Moses*) to try to prove themselves righteous. **Romans** is more than just a book of doctrines, it is also a letter of practical exhortations. If we understand the teachings of Jesus Christ correctly, then these teachings will have a tremendous impact on the way we live.

First Corinthians: Corinth, the most important city in Greece during Paul's day, was a busy center of worldwide trade, immoral culture, and idolatrous religion. Paul began an ecclesia in Corinth (Acts 18:1-17) and two of his letters are written to the Corinthians. **First Corinthians** reveals the problems, pressures, and struggles of an ecclesia called out of a pagan society. Paul handles a variety of problems in the life-style of the Corinthians believers: divisions, lawsuits, immorality, questionable practices, abuse of the memorial service, and Spirit gifts. In addition to words of discipline, Paul shares words of counsel in answer to questions raised by Corinthian believers.

Second Corinthians: Since Paul's first letter, the Corinthian ecclesia had been swayed by false teachers who turned the people against Paul. They claimed he was proud, unimpressive in appearance and speech, dishonest, always changing his mind, and unqualified as an apostle of Jesus Christ. Paul sent Titus to Corinth to deal with these difficulties, and upon his return, rejoiced to hear that the Corinthians had changed their minds. Paul wrote this letter to express his thanks to most of the believers who had repented of their mistakes and to appeal to the few rebels to accept his authority. Throughout the letter, he defends his conduct, character, and his calling as an apostle of Jesus Christ.

Galatians: When the believers of Galatia were first baptized, they believed that they were saved through the forgiveness of sins by following Christ. But after a while they went back to the list of rules in the Law of Moses. Paul was very disturbed and disappointed. His letter to the Galatians is a strong attack against salvation by works of Law as he defends salvation by faith in Jesus Christ. Paul begins by proving he is a real apostle. He then delivers a message from God: blessing comes from God on the basis of faith, not works of Law. The Law declares people guilty and imprisons them. Faith releases people to enjoy freedom in Christ. Freedom in Christ does not mean the freedom to sin, but instead it means the freedom to produce the fruits of righteousness no longer limited by the list in the Law of Moses.

Ephesians: Paul's letter to the Ephesians is addressed to a group of believers who are rich beyond measure in Jesus Christ because of the blessings that God gives His children when they join His family. Paul begins by describing the wonderful benefits of being in Christ: adopted into God's family, acceptance, redemption, forgiveness, wisdom, inheritance, the seal of the Holy Spirit, life, grace, and citizenship in the kingdom to come. Later, Paul says the believer must develop a spiritual walk based on all the benefits of being in Christ.

Philippians: Paul writes a thank-you note to the believers at Philippi for the gifts they sent him in Thessalonica, and he uses this occasion to send along some instructions on ecclesial unity. His central thought is simple: Only in Christ are real unity and joy possible. With Christ as your model of humility and service, you can enjoy a oneness of purpose, attitude, goal and labor — a truth which Paul illustrates from his own life, and one the Philippians desperately need to hear.

Colossians: In the letter to the Colossians, Paul shows how Jesus Christ is the head of the ecclesia of God. Like Ephesians, the letter to the Colossians divides neatly in half with the first portion doctrinal and the second practical. Paul's purpose is to prove that Jesus Christ is first and foremost in everything, and the believer's life should reflect that priority. Because believers are rooted in Him, alive in Him, hidden in Him, and complete in Him, it is utterly inconsistent for them to live life without Him. Clothed in His Life, with His peace ruling in their hearts, they are equipped to make Christ first in every area of life.

First Thessalonians: Paul has many pleasant memories of the days he spent with the new Thessalonian ecclesia. Their faith, hope, love, and perseverance in the face of persecution are famous. Paul's labors as a spiritual parent to the infant ecclesia have been richly rewarded, and his affection is visible in every line of his letter. Paul encourages them to excel in their newfound faith, to increase in their love for one another, and to rejoice, pray, and give thanks always. He closes his letter with encouraging reminders about the return of Christ and resurrection of the dead, which gives hope and comfort to believers.

Second Thessalonians: Since Paul wrote his first letter, the seeds of false doctrine have been sown among the Thessalonians, causing them to doubt in faith. Paul removes these destructive seeds and again plants the seeds of truth. He begins by praising the believers on their faithfulness in the midst of persecution and encourages them by reminding them that present suffering will be repaid with future glory. Paul then deals with the central matter of his letter: a misunderstanding caused by false teachers regarding the day of Jesus Christ's return. False teachers claimed that Jesus already had returned, but Paul explains that Christ has not yet come because a false church must develop first. The Thessalonians need to labor for the gospel, rather than sit around waiting for Christ to return. Believers must continue to work until Jesus returns or they will become lazy and burden their ecclesia.

First Timothy: Paul, who is now an old and experienced apostle, writes to the young man Timothy who is facing a heavy burden of responsibility in the ecclesia at Ephesus. The task is challenging: false doctrine must be wiped out, public worship protected, and mature leadership developed. In addition to the conduct of the believers, Paul talks clearly about the necessary conduct of the ecclesial leaders. Timothy must be careful to not let his youthfulness keep him from being an effective ecclesial leader. He must avoid false teachers and greedy motives, pursuing instead righteousness, godliness, faith, love, perseverance, and the gentleness that befits a man of God.

Second Timothy: Paul is in prison in Rome and expects to die, but he sees the need to write a letter to Timothy to encourage him in his work. He begins by assuring Timothy of his continuing love and prayers, and reminds him of his spiritual heritage and responsibilities. Only the one who keeps working, whether as a soldier, athlete, farmer, or ecclesial leader, will reap the reward. Paul warns Timothy that his teaching will come under attack as men desert the truth for words they want to hear. But Timothy has Paul's example to guide him and God's Word to strengthen him as he faces growing opposition and new opportunities in the last days.

Titus: Titus was a young ecclesial leader who faced the rough assignment of setting in order the ecclesia at Crete. Paul writes advising him to appoint elders, men of proven spiritual character in their homes and businesses, to organize the work of the ecclesia. But elders are not the only individuals in the ecclesia who are required to excel spiritually. Men and women, young and old, each have their vital functions to fulfill in the ecclesia if they are to be living examples of the doctrine they profess. Throughout his letter to Titus, Paul stresses the necessary, practical working out of salvation in the daily lives of both the leaders and the members of an ecclesia. Good works are desirable and profitable for all believers.

Philemon: Philemon is a believer in the city of Colossae and a slave owner. Onesimus is a slave who ran away from Philemon and then was converted to Christ. Paul writes a short letter to Philemon, his beloved brother and fellow worker. He knows that Onesimus was formerly a deserter and worthless slave, but Paul informs Philemon that Onesimus is now his brother in Christ. With lots of careful words and tenderness, Paul asks Philemon to receive Onesimus back with the same gentleness with which he would receive Paul himself. Any debt Onesimus owes, Paul promises to repay himself. Knowing Philemon, Paul is confident that Philemon will show Onesimus brotherly love and forgiveness.

Hebrews: Many Jewish believers who originally left the synagogues of the Jews and joined the ecclesia of Christ now want to return to the synagogues of Judaism in order to escape persecution by their countrymen. Paul exhorts them instead to “go on to perfection”. His appeal is based on the superiority of Christ over the Law of Moses system. Christ can do more for the Jews than the angels, for angels worship Him. He can do more than Moses, for Christ saved his people. He can do more than the priesthood of Aaron, for his sacrifice was once for all time. He can do more than the Law of Moses, for he mediates a better covenant. Pressing on in Christ produces tested faith, self-discipline, and a visible love seen in good works.