

THE EQUIP INSTITUTE

Theme: Christian Story

Topic: Paul’s Epistles

Fall 2023

Introduction

The Equip Institute exists to equip members of Taylors First Baptist Church to think rightly about God and His Word for the sake of living rightly before God in His world. This fall, we are spending twelve weeks studying the Christian Story. Last week, we discussed the Gospels and Acts. This week, we are looking at Paul’s Epistles. We will conclude next week with a discussion of the later Epistles and Revelation.

Paul and His Ministry

Saul of Tarsus was a devout, highly educated Pharisee who took a leading role in persecuting the earliest Christians in and around Jerusalem. Around 33 AD he was converted dramatically to faith in Jesus, and after a period of three years studying the Scriptures in Arabia, he reemerged as an evangelist in modern-day Syria. Taking the name Paul, his ministry was validated by the apostles in Jerusalem. He eventually became connected to Barnabas, another evangelist, and the two of them became leaders of the church in Antioch in the mid-40s.

Between 47 and 57, Paul undertook three missionary journeys throughout Palestine and Europe. His typical pattern was to begin his evangelistic work in the synagogues, some of which contained Jewish followers of Jesus, then he would pivot his ministry to Gentiles. Because of his emphasis on the latter, Paul is known as the Apostle to the Gentiles. During the final seven years of his life, Paul was often imprisoned or under house arrest, though it is possible during one of his periods of freedom he traveled to Spain. He was probably martyred in Rome during the reign of Nero in the years 64 or 65.

Paul personally knew many of the apostles who had been among Jesus’s earliest followers, including James the brother of Jesus and Peter, who along with Paul were the most influential leaders among first-generation Christians. Paul also worked alongside many partners during almost three decades of public ministry. The most notable included Barnabas, John Mark, Silas, Timothy, and Luke.

What Paul is best known for are his epistles, many of which were considered Scripture and became part of the New Testament. He wrote all his known epistles between 48 and 65. Some were written to individuals, while most were written to churches. Many of Paul’s letters were dictated and transcribed by an assistant, perhaps because Paul had poor eyesight. While liberal scholars question the authorship of some the letter’s attributed to Paul, the traditional view is that Paul wrote them all. There is no compelling reason to reject the traditional view.

The Pauline Epistles

Paul is often considered the most important theologian in the early church, for at least three reasons. First, many of his letters are filled with rich doctrinal content at the very time the church was growing and first becoming a transnational, multi-ethnic movement. Second, because he was a missionary who wrote to individuals and churches all over the Roman Empire, his ideas spread rapidly among the earliest believers. Finally, several of his letters were written before there were any Gospels and all the Pauline epistles were written before John and likely Luke wrote their Gospels. Except for the Book of James, Paul’s first half-dozen letters are the earliest Scriptures in the New Testament.

Galatians

Galatians is the earliest of Paul’s letters, likely written in late 48 or early 49. The main theme is that Jesus’s death has inaugurated the new covenant that has fulfilled the old covenant. Contrary to false Jewish teachers (“Judaizers”), both Jewish and Gentile believers are part of the one people of God and are justified by faith rather than observance of the ceremonial aspects of Mosaic law.

1 Thessalonians

1 Thessalonians was likely written between 49 and 51, during Paul’s second missionary journey. The main theme is the importance of the Second Coming of Jesus, which will result in eternal blessing for believers and God’s just wrath against sin for unbelievers. Christians should be motivated by the Second Coming to live holy and blameless lives.

2 Thessalonians

2 Thessalonians was likely written between 49 and 51, shortly after 1 Thessalonians. The main theme is further teaching about the Second Coming since some Thessalonians thought it had already happened. At the end of the present age, many false believers will rebel against the faith and an Antichrist will rise and persecute true believers. Jesus will return to conquer His enemies.

1 Corinthians

1 Corinthians was likely written between 53 and 55, during Paul's third missionary journey. 1 Corinthians is more topical. The church was deeply divided by factions, differing opinions over debatable ethical matters and extrabiblical practices, and the tolerating of significant sexual sin. Paul calls upon them to put their differences aside, repent of their various sins, unite around a gospel-centered love for each other and unbelievers, and to labor together to advance the good news.

2 Corinthians

2 Corinthians was likely written about a year after 1 Corinthians, probably no later than 55–56. The main theme is Paul's validation of his apostolic ministry and his call for the Corinthians to pursue holiness and endure persecution when necessary. Believers are new creations who are set apart to be ambassadors for Christ, and one sign that the Spirit is at work is that there is not only spiritual fruit, but also opposition to gospel advance.

Romans

Romans was likely written in 57, during Paul's third missionary journey. The main theme is an extended meditation on the gospel and its implications for the Christian life. All humans are sinners, but salvation has been accomplished through the perfectly obedient life, sacrificial death, and victorious resurrection of Jesus. The Mosaic law has no power to save, so all people, whether Jews or Gentiles, must be justified by grace through faith in Jesus. This has been God's plan of salvation from before the foundation of the world.

Philippians

Philippians was likely written around 60, when Paul was imprisoned in Caesarea. It is the first of Paul’s Prison Epistles. The main theme is an encouragement to remain joyful, no matter our circumstances, because we are citizens of God’s kingdom. Jesus is fully God and fully man, the Servant-King who calls for us to imitate Him.

Colossians

Colossians was likely written around 62, when Paul wrote several letters while imprisoned in Rome. The main theme is that Jesus is Lord over all of creation, including both the seen and unseen realms. He has redeemed us and given us new spiritual life. He calls upon believers to live out the implications of our new life in Him.

Philemon

Philemon was likely written around 62, when Paul wrote several letters while imprisoned in Rome. It is a short letter to Philemon, a believer, asking him to be reconciled with Onesimus, a runaway slave who has since become a follower of Jesus. While Paul does not overtly call for Onesimus to be emancipated, the new relationship between Philemon and Onesimus as brothers in Christ would have undermined the Roman practice of slavery.

Ephesians

Ephesians was likely written around 62, when Paul wrote several letters while imprisoned in Rome. The letter has two main themes. First, God has an eternal plan of salvation, through Jesus, that includes the reconciliation of individual humans and the restoration of the entire created order. Second, because all believers share in their union with Christ, they should be united, regardless of ethnic distinctions, social status, or familial roles.

1 Timothy

1 Timothy was likely written between 63 and 65, when Paul was imprisoned in Rome and wrote all three of his Pastoral Epistles. The letter was written to Timothy, but was also clearly intended for a wider audience as well. The main theme is a reflection on the relationship between the gospel and godly living. An important sub-theme is a discussion of church order, including elders and deacons.

2 Timothy

2 Timothy was likely written between 63 and 65, when Paul was imprisoned in Rome and wrote all three of his Pastoral Epistles. The letter was written to Timothy, but was also clearly intended for a wider audience as well. The main theme is to persevere in faithfulness, including the advance of the gospel, even in the midst of suffering. Either 2 Timothy or Titus was Paul’s final canonical letter.

Titus

Titus was likely written between 63 and 65, when Paul was imprisoned in Rome and wrote all three of his Pastoral Epistles. The letter was written to Titus, but was also clearly intended for a wider audience as well. The main theme is a reflection on protecting the gospel from false teachers and persevering in godly living. Like 1 Timothy, an important sub-theme is a discussion of church order. Either Titus or 2 Timothy was Paul’s final canonical letter.

Brief Summary of Paul’s Thought

- The Triune God is glorified in both creation and redemption
- God has a sovereign plan of salvation that stretches from eternity past into eternity future
- All people are sinners, are incapable of reconciling themselves with God, and obedience to the Mosaic law is powerless to save anyone
- The gospel is the saving announcement that Jesus perfectly obeyed God’s commands, died on the cross for human sin, and was bodily resurrected as a fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecies and promises
- Justification is by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone, resulting in our spiritual union with Christ and adoption into God’s family
- In Christ, the spiritual unity of believers transcends earthly distinctions, especially the distinction between Jews and Gentiles, who comprise the one people of God
- Believers are called to gather into local churches, cultivate lives of personal holiness, engage in urgent evangelism, including across cultures, and serve those who are need (beginning with fellow believers in need)

- Those who redefine the message of the gospel are false teachers who should be confronted by leaders and avoided by believers
- Jesus will one day return, resulting in the resurrection of the dead, judgment against sin, and the final restoration of the created order

Recommended Resources

D. A. Carson and Douglas J. Moo, *Introducing the New Testament: A Short Guide to Its History and Message*, ed. Andrew David Naselli (Zondervan, 2013).

Andreas J. Köstenberger, L. Scott Kellum, and Charles L. Quarles, *The Cradle, the Cross, and the Crown: An Introduction to the New Testament*, 2nd ed. (B&H Academic, 2016).

Charles L. Quarles, *The Illustrated Life of Paul* (B&H Academic, 2020).

Thomas R. Schreiner, *Paul, Apostle of God's Glory in Christ: A Pauline Theology*, 2nd ed. (IVP Academic, 2020).
