

BIBLE OVERVIEW - NEW TESTAMENT 4

The Letters: Romans to Philemon

Traditionally Paul regarded as the author of all of these letters.

- Who was he?
- What were First Century churches like?

We will look at these letters in the order in which we think they were written. Each letter written to meet a practical problem! Paul a *practical* theologian!

LETTER TO THE GALATIANS

Possibly written from Syrian Antioch in AD 48-49
Where is Galatia?

Doctrinal problems: ‘Another’ Gospel

‘Galatians reads like a dramatic court trial. On one side of the courtroom stand Paul’s accusers. Persuasive and powerful, these “Judaizers” have followed Paul from town to town, spreading rumours and contradicting his version of the Christian faith. On the other side sits the jury, the Galatian Christians.... Paul, acting in his own defence, paces the courtroom. He uses a variety of debating styles: tight logic, historical reviews, and personal outrage. His integrity, and ultimately Jesus Christ’s integrity, is at stake’ (*The Insight Bible*)

Outline

- *A valid apostleship* (1-2)
‘God in his grace chose me even before I was born, and called me to serve him’ (1.15 GNB).
- *A valid gospel* (3-4)
‘Tell me this one thing: did you receive God’s Spirit by doing what the Law requires or by hearing the gospel and believing it?’ (3.2 GNB)
- *A valid ethic* (5-6)
‘You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature’ (5.13 TNIV)
‘Magna Charta of Christian liberty’

LETTERS TO THE THESSALONIANS

Both probably written from Corinth AD 51, the second ca 6 months after first.

Orientation problems: Obsessed with the Last Things

Every chapter in 1Thess ends with a reference to the second coming.

Outline of First Letter

1.1-3.13 Thanksgiving
4.1-12 Exhortation
4.13-5.11 Instruction
5.12-28 Final exhortations

Outline of Second Letter

1.1-12 Praise and commendation
2.1-17 The second coming of Christ
3.1-15 Exhortation to Christian conduct
3.16-18 Final words

‘Whole generations since [Paul] have been caught up in frenzied speculations on the exact time and place of the second coming, only to watch their predictions misfire. Paul shrugs off such speculation (5:1-2). He presents the right way and the wrong way to prepare for Jesus’ return’ (*The Insight Bible*).

LETTERS TO THE CORINTHIANS

1Cor. written ca AD 55 from Ephesus (16.8); 2Cor. some six months later from Macedonia ((2.13; 7.5).

Lifestyle problems: A church of former idolaters, adulterers, thieves and drunkards

Outline of First Letter

- Sectarianism! (1.10-4.21)
- Sex! (5.1-7.40)
- Food! (8.1-11.1)
- Worship! (11.2-14.40)
- Death! (15.1-58)
- Money! (16.1-4)

Outline of Second Letter

- | | |
|-------------------|------------------------------|
| 1.1-7.16 | Clarifying misunderstandings |
| 8.1-9.15 | Finish the fundraising! |
| 10.1-13.10 | Setting the record straight |

LETTER TO THE ROMANS

Probably written from Corinth in AD 57

Relational problems: Power struggle between the ‘strong’ and the ‘weak’

Strategic purpose and sophisticated audience

Systematic presentation.

The imaginary heckler

How many churches in Rome?

Outline

- **1.1-17**
‘God gave me the privilege... to lead people of all nations to believe and obey’ (1.5 GNB)
- **1.18-4.25**
‘God’s way of putting people right with himself’ (3.21 GNB); 3.21-31.
- **5.1-8.39**
‘Living in fellowship with God through Christ Jesus’ (6.11 GNB)
- **9.1-11.36**
‘God has not rejected his people whom he chose from the beginning’ (11.2 GNB)
- **12.1-13.14**
‘Offer yourselves as a living sacrifice to God’ (12.11 GNB)
- **14.1-15.33**
‘Let us stop judging one another.’ (14.13)
- **16.1-27**
‘I send greetings to...’ (16.3 GNB)

Extraordinary impact

LETTER TO THE COLOSSIANS

Probably written from Rome in ca AD 60

First of the ‘prison epistles’ (others – Ephesians, Philippians and Philemon)

'Then, as now, many cults don't reject Jesus Christ outright; they merely worked him into a more elaborate scheme' (*The Insight Bible*).

'The Christians in Colosse were searching for "fullness" in the same way that modern people work to become "holistic" or "self-actuated"' (*The Insight Bible*)

'New Age' problems: The Cults. Astrology.

Outline

- 1.1-14** Introduction
- 1.15-2.10** 'Christ... is supreme over every spiritual ruler and authority' (2.10 GNB)
- 2.11-19** 'Therefore, do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink or with regard to a religious festival' (2.16)
- 2.20-4.6** 'For you died and your life is now hidden with Christ in God' (3.3).
- 4.7-18** Conclusion

LETTER TO THE EPHESIANS

Probably written from Rome ca AD 60 shortly after letter to Colosse. A circular letter?

No urgent problems!

Purpose: to help young Christians grasp 'how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ' (3.18)

Outline

- 1-3** God's cosmic plan for the human race
'To bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ' (1.10)
- 4-6** Christ's cosmic role of the church
'Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy... and to present her to himself as a radiant church...' (5.25-26)

'Ephesians is Paul's "summing up" book' (*The Insight Bible*)
'The Switzerland of the New Testament'

A sequel to Colossians?

LETTER TO PHILEMON

Written from prison in Rome ca AD 60 at the same time as Colossians (same carriers – Onesimus and Tychicus)

An *asylum seeker* problem: An appeal on behalf of a runaway slave.

'Onesimus was a runaway slave, a hunted fugitive whose life was in constant danger. He had two options. He could spend his days hiding in the dark, grimy alleys of a Roman city, dodging soldiers and bounty hunters. Or, he could do the unthinkable and return to his master. The laws of the empire were harsh. If Onesimus did return, his master Philemon had the legal power to sentence him to immediate execution. If Philemon mercifully decided to let him live, Onesimus would have the letter *F* (for *Fugitivus*) seared on his forehead with a branding iron, marking him for life' (*The Insight Bible*)

So Onesimus' life hung in the balance!

LETTER TO THE PHILIPPIANS

Written from Rome while under house arrest (1.13-14) ca AD 61

First church in Europe! A rare church without major defects!

Purpose: to say 'Thank you'

'Paul turned down money gifts from other churches, out of fear that his enemies might twist the facts and accuse him of being a crook. But he trusted the Philippians. At least four separate times they sacrificed to meet his needs. And they sent Epaphroditus on an arduous journey¹ to care for Paul in prison.' (*The Insight Bible*)

Key themes

- 'Be humble towards one another' (2.3)
- Thank you! (4.10-20)
- Key note: joy!

LETTERS TO TIMOTHY AND TITUS

1 Tim. and Titus written sometime after Acts 28 (AD 61-63). At least eight years after Paul's three year stay in Ephesus. 2 Tim. Probably written during Paul's second imprisonment (this time in a cold dungeon [4.13]) under Nero (ca AD 66-67)

Pastoral problems

Six of Paul's letters begin saying that Timothy was by his side. His PA.
There are 14 references to Titus in Paul's letters. Paul's troubleshooter.

Known as 'pastoral epistles'.

In relation to the pastoral epistles, both fulfilled the role of 'regional organiser'.

Key theme: Christian leadership

- 1 Timothy – 'Watch yourself and watch your teaching' (4.16)
- 2 Timothy – Passing the baton. Endurance: 'Keep alive the gift that God gave you' (1.6). 'Continue in the truths that you were taught' (3.14). A letter from death row!
- Titus – Actions, not words! (2.8-9)

Church in Ephesus: Vulnerable to false teaching (Acts 20.29-30). Sadly ten years later Paul's fears had materialised! Revelation 2 indicates that Timothy had only limited success in dealing with the problems identified in these letters.

'In contrast to professionals who specialise, a pastor must call on wide-ranging skills. In a given week a pastor may act as a psychologist, priest, social worker, hospital chaplain, administrator, personnel supervisor, philosopher, and communicator' (*The Insight Bible*)

¹ The distance from Philippi to Rome was 700 miles.