

Reading Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians and Philemon

Galatians

Key Historical Background:

- After Paul went to Galatia with the Gospel and many gentiles came to faith in Jesus (3:1-5), he left for other regions. Within a short time, a group of Jewish Christian teachers came to Galatia and convinced them that Paul was wrong, and that they needed to convert to Judaism to truly follow Jesus as the Jewish messiah: Paul calls this “another gospel” (1:6-7).
- Although many Galatians followed the teachers (1:6), Paul is hopeful they will see the truth (3:4). The letter is an appeal that they return to the Gospel of justification by faith and not by following the Torah.

Summary of Main Themes: Jesus’ death and resurrection have inaugurated the age of the New Covenant (3:23-26; 4:4-5, 24), and believers do not have to convert to Judaism or follow the ritual commands of the Torah to truly follow Jesus (2:3, 11-12, 14). To require these things is to deny the heart of the Gospel, which says faith in Jesus, not obedience to the Torah, is what makes one right in God’s sight (2:16). The Torah didn’t have the ability to change the human heart, and so led to slavery, not freedom (ch. 4). In the New Covenant, Christians live by the guidance and power of the Spirit to honor and obey God (chs. 5-6).

Significant Things to Look For

- *The Gospel:* Galatians is one of Paul’s first attempts to defend the Gospel from distortions and misinterpretations. Even though the Jew-Gentile divide is not a pressing issue for most of us, keep track of how Paul talks about the Gospel in this letter, especially in the key passages: 1:4-5; 2:15-21; 3:10-14, 23-29. The themes of Jesus rescuing us, of faith and trust, salvation by grace and not works are all the core of Paul’s message.
- *The Holy Spirit:* Paul’s basic message is that salvation is by grace, and that believers can truly obey God by submitting to the work of the Spirit. Galatians 5:16-26 is one of Paul’s greatest descriptions of what a Spirit-filled Christian looks like. God wants to make us into these kinds of people.

Continued on next page (Ephesians)

Ephesians

Key Historical Background:

- Paul spent multiple years in Ephesus (Acts 19:10), and after being imprisoned in Rome (see 3:1 and Acts 28) he wrote this letter to the believers in Ephesus and surrounding area.
- There doesn't seem to be any particular problem Paul is addressing. He wanted to inform the Ephesians how he was faring in prison (6:21-22) and share his reflects on the cosmic significance of the cross and resurrection of Jesus and the implications for how we live.
- Ephesus was a center for magic and occult rituals in the ancient world (see Acts 19). This would explain Paul's emphasis on the "power" of God in Christ over all other spiritual powers (1:19, 21; 2:2; 3:7, 20; 6:12).

Summary of Main Themes:

The life, death, and resurrection of Jesus were part of God's eternal plan to rescue all creation, including a new family of redeemed humans from all nations (ch.1). Even though humanity was trapped in sin and selfishness, God showed his grace by offering grace and salvation through Christ (2:1-10). Gentiles who were once excluded from God's redemptive work among Israel are now included in the promises to Israel through their connection to Jesus the messiah (2:11-22). The Church is a multi-ethnic family of believers (3:1-13) who are indwelt with the presence of Christ (3:14-21). Paul calls them to demonstrate their unity amidst diversity (4:1-15) by living together in love and forgiveness (4:17-28), and by allowing God to recreate their moral character (4:29-5:14). He calls them to rely on the power of the Spirit (5:18-20) to help them live out the truth of the Gospel in all their relationships: in marriage (5:21-33), in family (6:1-4), and in transforming their cultural practice of debt slavery (6:5-9). As they strive to follow Christ, they should recognize they will face opposition from spiritual forces (6:10-20), but can be protected by God's power.

Significant Things to Look For

- *Christ as the center of all things:* In this letter Paul shows how Jesus is truly the ultimate revelation of God's will for our world, and that all humanity and creation finds fulfillment in him. God's purpose is to make Jesus king of all things (1:10), to bring all humanity under his rule (1:20-21). The church is the primary demonstration of Jesus' primacy (1:22-23). Therefore, racial reconciliation in the Church is of utmost importance, because it witnesses to Jesus' rule over all humanity (2:11-22). The unity of the church points to Jesus as the world's true king (4:1-16). The unity of Christian husbands and wives (5:21-33) also points to the same thing. Look for language about "unity, one, together, all things" in the letter.

Continued on next page (Philippians)

Philippians

Key Historical Background:

- The church in Philippi was the first Jesus community he founded in Europe (Acts 16:6-40). The first convert was a woman named Lydia (Acts 16), and women continued to play a prominent role in the church (Philippians 4:2). They were active supporters of Paul and his ministry (4:15-16).
- Paul wrote the Philippians from his prison cell, most likely in Rome (1:13; 4:22, see Acts 28), to thank them for a recent gift sent by Epaphroditus (4:18). He also wrote to encourage them for their devotion to Christ (1:3-11) and to remind them to follow the example of Christ in loving and serving others (2:1-4) as they wait for his return (3:20-21).

Summary of Main Themes

Paul is encouraged to hear of the Philippians faith and devotion to Jesus (1:1-11). Despite his imprisonment and possible execution, the Gospel is spreading (1:12-18), and is helping him see that Christ is his ultimate priority in life (1:19-26), though he does want to help spread the Gospel more if possible (1:27-30). He encourages them to keep loving and serving one another (2:1-4), and to follow the example of Christ who humbled himself to suffering and death for others (2:5-11). If they can do this for each other (2:12-18), and follow the example of people like Timothy and Epaphroditus (2:19-30), they will show their devotion to Jesus. Paul has faced much opposition to the Gospel of grace (3:1-11), but he has left behind all desire for status and recognition through religion (3:12-16), and wants to follow Christ through suffering into resurrection life (3:17-21). He challenges the Philippians to resolve any conflicts they may have (4:1-3), to follow his example of gratitude in poverty or wealth (4:4-20) and follow Christ.

Significant Things to Look For

- *Challenge to Grow:* Paul's encouragement to the Philippians shows that even Christians who are growing and doing well can never become complacent. Even though they are excelling in their faith (1:3-11), he keeps challenging them to actively pursue their relationship with Christ and loving and serving each other. Look for Paul's words of challenge and make them your own (hint: some key challenge passages are in 1:27, 2:1-4; 2:12-18; 3:12-16, 17-21).
- *The Cross as THE Example:* Paul writes a beautiful poem about the story of Jesus' incarnation, humiliation and death, and resurrection (2:5-11). He says this pattern of giving up one's well-being for the sake of others should be characteristic of all Christian living. He models it himself (1:19-26; 3:2-11), and Timothy (2:19-24) and Epaphroditus (2:25-30) have demonstrated this life pattern as well. He challenges the Philippians to this way of life (1:27-30) and therefore, us as well.

Colossians

Key Historical Background

- Paul wrote to the Colossians from prison in Rome (most likely, Acts 28). Paul had never been to Colosse, rather a convert from his ministry in Ephesus named Epaphras responded to the Gospel (see Acts 19:10) and went back to his friends and family in Colosse and shared the good news about Jesus (see Colossians 1:7), resulting in the new church.
- Epaphras brought news to Paul in prison that a dangerous false teaching was threatening the church (4:12), and Paul wrote this letter to challenge the teaching and remind them of the foundation of the Gospel (2:4-23).
- The precise nature of the false teaching is not totally clear: there were elements of Jewish tradition (observance of Sabbath and Jewish festivals, 2:16-18) and an unhealthy interest in sacred interaction with angels (2:18). Paul does mention there is a particular person involved in some kind of mysticism and ascetic practices, trying to shift their focus away from Christ to angels and religious rituals.
- Paul's emphasis in the letter is calling them back to the foundation of the Gospel and Christ as the focus point of all Christian worship and hope (1:15-20; 2:19).

Summary of Main Themes:

Paul encourages the Colossians for their growing faith (1:1-8) and challenges them to keep growing and keeping the Gospel at the center of their common life (1:9-14). He emphasizes that Jesus is the revelation of the one true Creator God (1:15-19), and the one through whom the entire world has been rescued (1:20-23). He highlights Jesus as the one who holds all knowledge and wisdom (2:1-5), and not the strange religious mysticism that the false teacher has introduced (2:6-8): it's only in Jesus that God's true character is revealed, and it's only through Jesus, by his death and resurrection, that we can have relationship with God (2:9-15). He warns them of any teaching that makes angels or religious rituals more important than Christ's work on the cross (2:16-23). He then encourages them to live consistently with their identity as God's holy people (3:1-11), who will love and serve one another (3:12-17), and allow all their relationships to be formed by the Gospel: marriage, family, and home life (3:18-4:1).

Significant Things to Look For

- *Focus on Jesus, not religion:* Whatever the false teaching at Colosse was, people were beginning to focus on religious practices (holidays and such) and mystical experiences more than on the simple relationship with Jesus through prayer, Scripture, community, that results in holy living. Look for the ways that Paul describes Christ and our relationship to him (especially in chs. 1-2) and how that must remain the focus point of the Christian life.

Philemon

Key Historical Background

- Philemon was a Christian who lived in Colosse, and this letter was sent along with Paul's letters to the Colossians and Ephesians in the hands of Tychicus and Onesimus (Ephesians 6:21; Colossians 4:7-9).
- Philemon became a Christian during Paul's ministry in Ephesus (Acts 19-20), and now lives in Colosse. At some point, one of Philemon's bondservants named Onesimus fled to Rome, likely having stolen money from Philemon (see v. 18). Somehow, Onesimus became a Christian, came into contact with Paul in his Roman prison, and was now growing in his faith and helping Paul (see vv. 10-13).
- This letter is Paul's appeal to Philemon, that he accept Onesimus back, forgive him of any wrongdoing, and treat him no longer as a bondservant, but as a brother in Christ (vv. 15-16)

Summary of Main Themes

Paul prays that Philemon will understand the gospel and live it consistently (vv. 4-7). He appeals on Onesimus' behalf: Paul wants to keep him near, but knows that the two must reconcile (vv. 8-14). He asks that Philemon receive him back (v. 15), forgive him and treat him not as a slave but as a brother in Christ (v. 16). Paul's offers to pay for any damages Onesimus has done to Philemon (vv. 17-18); Paul wants Philemon to see that reconciliation is the only action consistent with the Gospel and their friendship (vv. 19-20).

Significant Things to Look For

- This short letter contains one of the most explosive ideas Christianity has brought to human civilization. Paul prays that Philemon will understand how the Gospel about Jesus should be worked out in daily life (v. 6), and then asks him to forgive and receive back a fugitive slave (vv. 8-18). But not only that, Paul believes that Philemon must change his relationship to Onesimus, and no longer treat him as a slave, but as a brother in Christ (vv. 15-16). In 1st century Roman culture, this would be absolutely unheard of: slaves were near the bottom of the social hierarchy, and could easily be executed or imprisoned for theft. In Paul's mind, the Gospel of God's grace in Jesus should fundamentally transform the slave-owner relationship: both Philemon and Onesimus have been freely forgiven by God's grace, and they stand on equal ground before Jesus.
- In this letter we see Paul demonstrate how the Gospel should completely transform not simply our personal relationships in dealing with conflict and forgiveness, but also we see the roots of how the Gospel can transform an entire culture's view of social status and hierarchy.