

THE LETTERS OF SAINT PAUL: PART I

AN INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW OF THE THEMES

I. St. Paul was raised a well-educated Jew, who persecuted Christians at first, but later became a Christian, dying a martyrs death in Roma about 67 A.D.

A. Most of what we know about St. Paul comes from Acts of the Apostles, the Pauline letters, and Ecclesiastical History by Eusebius, the court historian of the Emperor Constantine.

B. St. Paul was born in Tarsus probably about 10 A.D., was of the tribe of Benjamin, and was given the name Saul. Presumably of a prominent family, he was well educated as a Pharisee by Gamaliel, a leading Jewish scholar. He also knew Greek well and was a Roman citizen.

C. At first, he persecuted Christians and was present and approved fo the stoning of the deacon Stephen. Acts 7:58-60, 9:1-2. However, Christ called him while he was on the way to Damascus to persecute Christians. In a blinding light, Jesus identified Himself and told him to begin proclaiming the Gospel. He then proceeded onto Damascus, where his sight was restored by Ananias, as Christians leader; and he began proclaiming Christianity. See Acts 9:1-9, 22:5-16, 26:12-18. All this probably happened in the mid-30s, within two or three years after the resurrection..

D. After his conversion, he went into Arabia and resided there for about three years. He then returned to Damascus, but was soon forced to flee. He then proceeded to Jerusalem and met Peter, James and John, who confirmed his mission. Gal. 1:17. It is possible that he began preaching in Damascus immediately after his conversion, and went to Jerusalem for a short time before his long retreat in Arabia. See Acts 9:23-30.

E. Then St. Paul began his missionary main missionary activity as the “Apostle to the Gentiles.” St. Paul went on at least three major missionary journeys, in addition to other journeys.

1. After an apparently successful relief mission to the Christians in Jerusalem, the apostles, guided by a revelation from God, laid hands on Saints Paul and Barnabas (possibly consecrated them as what we now call bishops) and sent them on their missions.

2. The first major journey, with St. Barnabas, was from 46-49 A.D. and covered Cyprus, Greece and Asia Minor. St. Mark accompanied them on part of this mission, but left near the end of it. See Acts 13:1-14:28, 15:37-38.

3. After this journey, St. Paul attended the Council of Jerusalem, at which the Apostles handed down the decision that the ritual laws of Judaism are not applicable to Christians. Paul and his assistant Barnabas were entrusted with bringing this message to the Christians at Antioch and elsewhere. See Acts 15:1-29.

4. The second major missionary journey, from 50-53 B.C. was to Asia Minor, Macedonia and Greece. See Acts 15:36-18:22. He took this journey without Barnabas and Mark because of a disagreement about whether to take Mark along. See Acts 15:36-40. Instead, St. Paul took Silas and St. Luke along, the latter of whom would write acts of the Apostles. During this journey, he was in Athens and made his famous Areopagus speech, arguing that the Greeks were seeking the God he now proclaimed. See Acts 17:22-34. There and elsewhere controversy swirled around him. He stayed for some time in Corinth, where he was brought up on charges of violating Jewish law. The Roman consul Gallio bounced the issue back to the Jews. See Acts 18:12-17. He may have written Philippians here or during a later captivity. In Corinth he also began calling up other missionaries such as Aquila and Priscilla. In Corinth, he probably wrote the first Biblical letter, 1 and/or 2 Thessalonians.

4. The third major missionary journey, from 54-58 A.D. was also to Asia Minor Macedonia and Greece, mostly visiting churches he had founded earlier. See Acts 18:23-21:14. On this journey, he probably wrote 1 and 2 Corinthians, Romans, and Galatians.

F. When he returned to Jerusalem, the Jewish authorities there had him arrested and charged before the Roman authorities.

1. St. Paul returned to Jerusalem and joined other church leaders there about 58 A.D. He soon began preaching there, and was arrested by the religious leaders. However, he used the difference between the Pharisees and Saducees over the question of whether there is a resurrection of the dead to confuse the accusers. See Acts 21:15-23:11.
2. Because of threats on St. Paul's life, the Roman tribune had him shipped to Caesarea for his own protection. There the proconsuls Felix and then Festus did not know what to do with him. St. Paul appealed to be tried in Rome by the Emperor, a request they had to grant. Acts 24-26.
2. Although he was shipwrecked in Malta along the way, Paul got to Rome, where he was under house arrest, but allowed to correspond freely. Here he probably wrote the letters to the Philippians and to Philemon. Assuming that the letters to the Ephesians and Colossians were written by St. Paul, he probably wrote these letters during this time as well. These letters are traditionally attributed to St. Paul, but currently many theologians argue that they were later written by an associate.
3. According to Eusebius, he was released, and free for awhile and apparently traveled to Crete, Macedonia, and Asian Minor. See Eusebius, Ecclesiastical History XXII:3. According to this tradition, during these journeys, he apparently wrote Titus and 1 Timothy. However, many historians dispute that this release took place and many theologians now dispute whether St. Paul or an associate wrote this letter. A late first century letter from Pope St. Clement to the Corinthians and a second-century list of books used in early liturgies called the Muratorian Canon also say that St. Paul traveled to Spain during this time of release, as apparently he had long wanted to do. See Rom. 15:24-28. But there is little other evidence of this travel, including no places in Spain that preserve any record of a visit from St. Paul.

4. If he was released, he was then brought back to Rome, and again put under arrest. In 64, there was a colossal fire in Rome, which the Emperor Nero may have started and in any case, did not attempt to stop. Trying to divert the blame, he launched the persecution of the Christians. As a part of this persecution, he martyred Saints Peter and Paul between 65 and 68 A.D. Eusebius dates their deaths on the same day in 67 A.D. See Eusebius, Ecclesiastical History XXV:6. Because he was a Roman citizen, St. Paul could not be crucified and so was beheaded. Shortly before his death, he apparently wrote 2 Timothy. Again, many theologians argue that this letter was written later by an associate..

5. As the Second Letter of Peter indicates, the letters of St. Paul quickly became authoritative, and there were some misunderstandings of them. See 2 Peter 3:16.

G. St. Paul was unmarried in order to minister the more effectively. See 1 Cor. 7:8. He described himself as an Apostle, called as the others were although at a late time.

- Eusebius does read a passage in 1 Corinthians 9:5 to indicate that St. Paul was at one married, but almost all theologians reject this view, especially in light of the earlier passage plainly indicating that he was unmarried. See Eusebius XXX:1.

II. Paul's letters reflect a proclamation of the Gospel mostly or entirely before any of the Gospels we know were written.

A. If one includes the letter to the Hebrews, which summarizes Pauline thought, there are 14 Pauline letters: Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colosians, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, 1 and 2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon, and Hebrews.

- In some cases, such as 2 Thessalonians, Ephesians, Colosians, 1 and 2 Timothy, Titus, and Hebrews, the

authorship is heavily debated, but these letters are clearly Pauline in thought.

- Except Hebrews, which is at the end of the Pauline corpus, or in a separate category altogether, the letters are generally arranged from longest to shortest in the Bible, except to the extent necessary to place related letters together.

B. The Pauline letters use the term *evangelion*, which is often translated Good News, 71 times. In Hebrew thought, the term especially has a connotation of good news in battle. In Hellenistic thought, it was often associated with the rise of a ruler. In all cases, it is a proclamation that demands a response.

- The term was apparently understood by early Christians to mean the good news of Christ's victory, but St. Paul frequently must correct their understanding, even saying many who pretend to be Christian are presenting a different gospel. See Gal. 1:8-9.

- The Pauline letters generally begin with a doctrinal section outlining the teachings of the Gospel and then go onto practical applications.

- Related to the idea of the gospel is the Pauline notion of mystery, which occurs 20 times in the Pauline corpus. the idea that God's plan is unknown to the worldly wise, but revealed in Christ. See, e.g., 1 Cor. 2:1, 13:2, 14:2, 15:51; Eph. 3:3-9, 5:32; Col. 1:26-2:2.

C. Overall, the Pauline letters in different ways develop the themes of human sinfulness, the law and old covenant as good but inadequate to overcome that sinfulness, and Christ alone as able to restore us to God. They then develop the theme of living in Christ.

1. In one way or another the Pauline letters emphasize repeatedly the slavery to sin and death that is the human condition. See, e.g., Rom. 3:9-31; Gal. 3:11; Eph. 2:1-10; Col. 3:5-7; Heb. 10:11-13.

2. St. Paul presents the law as good in itself, but only to limit and make clear sin, even sometimes bringing out sinfulness, in order to make clear the need for redemption. See, e.g., Rom. 3:19-21; 7:7-12; 1 Cor. 1:56-57; Gal. 3:19-29. Usually, by the law, he means God's revealed commandments, but sometimes, he also means people's natural understanding about what is right. See, e.g., Rom. 2:12-16.

3. Thus, as the letters repeatedly emphasize, Christ brings about the redemption in a new covenant that the law was wholly inadequate to bring. See, e.g., Romans 3, 9:28-38; Phil 3:7-11; Heb. 9:11-22. The longer letters usually begin with declarations of belief in salvation through Christ. See, e.g., Romans. 1:1-7, 1 Cor. 1:1-3, Gal. 1:1-5; Eph. 1:7-10; Col. 1:9-14.

- With regard to the events of Jesus' earthly life, St. Paul focuses almost entirely on the true humanity, the death, and resurrection of Christ, with an emphasis in 1 Corinthians on the Eucharist. See 1 Cor. 11:17-24. He does not describe the other events of Jesus' earthly life, primarily because these events were not the center of the disputes he is dealing with.

- St. Paul plainly understands that Jesus is God, see Romans 9:5, Titus 2:13, although he often tries to distinguish between the persons of the Trinity by referring to the Father simply as God, the Son as Christ or the Lord, and the Holy Spirit as the Spirit. See, e.g., Eph. 4:1-4.

4. Faith is the needed response to the sacrifice of Christ. Such faith stands in contrast to the worldly wisdom and to reliance on the works of the old law.

- One enters into the mystery of Christ's death, which makes sense from God's standpoint but confounds human thought. See, e.g., 1 Cor. 1:18-25; Romans. 16:25-27; Eph. 1:3-22; Col. 2:4-9.

- Faith, however, is not merely a belief, but a joining into the life of Christ. See, e.g., Romans. 8:14-17; Eph. Phil 2:5-11; Col 2;24-29.

5. The new life with Christ makes very definite moral demands, including the needs to accept the sufferings fo this age. See, e.g., Romans 6, Gal. 5:13-23; Eph. 5:1-20; 2 Thess. 1:5-10; 3:6-16.

6. St. Paul also has a strong notion o f the one Church as the body of Christ and the family of God through which the Holy Spirit works for the salvation of all. See, e.g., 1 Cor. 12; Eph. 1:15-23. Col. 1:15-20.

7. St. Paul also emphasizes looking forward to the Resurrection of the body as the final joining with Christ, although as he repeatedly says, we cannot know the time of it. 1 Cor. 15:12-58; Phil 3:10-11; 1 Thess. 4:13-18.