

PAUL'S NINE LETTERS TO THE CHURCHES

By

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1. Galatians

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A papyrus sheet was a little wider than this A4 paper but about the same length. About 250 words would have fitted on it comfortably. It was unusual for letters to be longer than one sheet. Paul wrote an average of 1,300 words in his epistles (Romans 7,101). Writing on papyrus scrolls was difficult. The style indicates that Paul probably dictated at speed to a scribe (*amanuensis*), sometimes losing his train of thought, sometimes digressing, sometimes breaking off, sometimes giving an outline for the scribe to complete and editing the final draft himself.

'It is a great pity that Paul's letters were ever called *epistles*. They are in the most literal sense *letters*' (Barclay). Paul wrote a series of genuine letters addressing specific issues for the new Christians of New Testament times.

For each book we consider four main points:
Background; Theme; Passages; Outline and application.

Particular attention in Galatians is given to the following passages:

Galatians 1:1-2:21

Galatians 3:1-14

Galatians 3:26-4:7

Galatians 5:16-26

STUDY 1

GALATIANS

1. Background

In the ancient world letters were usually undated. The New Testament arranges Paul's letters to the churches in order of length but it is also interesting to read the letters in chronological order, which we will do in this series as far as possible, though some doubt inevitably remains over precise chronology.

Galatians is generally presumed to be the earliest of Paul's New Testament epistles to the churches. Galatia was a huge Roman province extending almost coast-to-coast through the mountain and plain of central Turkey. Galatia is therefore not one town or city but a whole geographical area, hence Paul writes to the churches of Galatia.

Debate has centred on the intended recipients of the letter. Did they live in North Galatia (that is north of the cities of Pisidian Antioch, Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe) or were those cities included? The Romans added southern districts when they made (north) Galatia a province.

Evidence revolves around the key event of the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15). If Paul knew of that Council why does he not mention its decisions, as they are very relevant to the issue discussed? The South Galatian theory adopts the view that Paul wrote the letter before the Jerusalem Council and that the visit to Jerusalem in Chapter 2 is the one mentioned in Acts 11:27-30.

Paul also mentions Barnabas three times as though he were well known to the readers. Barnabas travelled with Paul only in South Galatia. By the time Paul visited North Galatia the two leaders had separated because of their disagreement about John Mark. 'While there are some quite good arguments for holding that the letter was written to churches in the northern part of Galatia, they do not seem strong enough to counter those considerations that point to those in the south of the area, churches that Paul is known to have visited and indeed to have founded' (Morris). The South Galatian view and earlier date is widely accepted, though somewhere about 50 AD is about as close as we are going to get.

2. Theme

In the course of the thirty or so years between his conversion on the road to Damascus and his imprisonment in Rome, Paul travelled widely throughout the Roman Empire preaching the gospel and establishing small groups of believers. Letters to the New Testament churches supplemented these visits.

Galatians has been called the 'Magna Carta of Christian liberty'. Since Paul founded the Galatian churches other Jewish teachers had arrived in Galatia. Whereas Paul had taught that repentance and faith were all that was needed to receive God's forgiveness and the gift of new life, these other teachers insisted that Gentile converts must be circumcised and observe the law in order to be saved. This meant in effect that the Gentile converts would have to become Jews. The Gentiles in Galatia were accepting this teaching. The reasons for doing so were fairly obvious. As far as we know, Jesus had never ministered among Gentiles. He had lived as a devout Jew and never questioned the propriety of circumcision, a basic requirement for Jewish males. Jesus kept the Jewish festivals. The Judaizers could easily appeal to the example of Jesus. It was a desperate situation, requiring the most forthright and strongly worded of Paul's letters.

The other teachers not only undermined Paul's teachings but his credentials as an Apostle of Jesus Christ and of the gospel. The letter therefore has two main themes, a defence of Paul's apostolic authority and a statement of his gospel of justification by grace alone, through faith alone and an insistence that for salvation nothing more than faith in Jesus Christ was needed.

Paul refers to people who opposed him in every chapter (1:6-7, 2:4-5, 3:1, 4:17, 5:7-12, 6:12-13). Paul believed that the addition of the Jewish observances to the Christian message was striking at the very roots of the gospel. Salvation and new life are God's gift to all that believe. No one can earn God's grace by living the perfect life that the standards of God demand. The other teachers (Judaizers) contended that faith alone is not enough; there are things that must be done to merit salvation. Although initiation into Judaism was by circumcision, Paul asserts most strongly that circumcision is not necessary for salvation. It is not necessary that Gentile converts become Jews by the outward rite.

3. Passages

Galatians 1:1-2:21

Galatians is ‘a passionate letter, the outpouring of the soul of a preacher on fire’ (Morris). Paul’s urgency can be sensed right from the start. He abruptly asserts his authority (1:1) and there is no characteristic word of praise or encouragement. Instead Paul immediately and violently introduces his reason for writing. He is shocked that the Galatians are deserting to another gospel, which in reality is no gospel at all. Their so-called ‘gospel’ is nothing other than a return to the works of the law. Paul’s brief autobiography is intended to show the gospel of God’s grace did not come from his background in Judaism but by direct revelation from Jesus Christ. The Jerusalem Apostles acknowledged this gospel on his rare and brief visits. When Peter made legalistic distinctions over eating with Gentiles it seems he yielded to Paul’s rebuke.

Galatians 3:1-14

From the very beginning of the letter, Paul defends the gospel of grace. Paul points out that anyone who exchanges Christian freedom for Jewish legalism is a fool, that is a person who has failed to think things through. The gospel is about salvation by grace through faith. After all, this is how the Galatians first became Christians. If works can achieve salvation the cross is unnecessary. The only explanation that Paul can offer for such muddle-headedness is that the Galatians had been under the spell of a magician. The heart of the gospel is ‘Christ crucified’. The Jews (and the legalistic ‘Judaizers’) talk about making the Gentiles sons of Abraham through circumcision (Genesis 12 and 17) but Gentile Christians are already sons and heirs for they share his faith, after all even Abraham was blessed through faith and not through circumcision. Abraham was the man that God started with, the father and prototype of Israel. Abraham believed God and it was credited to him as righteousness (Genesis 15:6) that is he was in a ‘right standing before God’ because he believed him. Abraham’s faith was the same kind of faith as his spiritual heirs who believe. The promise to Abraham from the beginning was that Gentiles (all nations) would be blessed. As no one can ever be justified by the law the two principles must be kept separate. The law brings death but faith leads to life, ‘the righteous will live by faith’ (Habbakuk 2:4).

Galatians 3:26-4:7

By faith in Jesus Christ all Christians are children of God, regardless of race status or sex.

Galatians 5:16-26

It is not circumcision that matters but what it stands for. Christ has saved us and set us free, not to live permissive self-indulgent lives, but to put ourselves at God’s disposal. When we live to please ourselves it shows in the way that we behave. When we live to please God, we show a character produced in us by the Holy Spirit as he controls and transforms our living.

4. Outline and application

1:1-10	Greetings and introduction
1:11-12	Paul's direct revelation of the gospel
1:13-24	Paul did not receive the gospel from human sources
2:1-10	Paul acknowledged by Jerusalem Apostles
2:11-21	Paul's rebuke of Peter's legalism
3:1-14	The sufficiency of faith; the curse of the law
3:15-25	The law and the promise
3:26-4:7	The law demonstrates divine grace
4:4-5:12	Allegory of Christian freedom from Abraham's sons
5:13-6:10	A warning against antinomianism (lawlessness)
6:11-18	Conclusion and benediction

The letter to the Galatians is so closely tied to a historical issue (that is of little concern to us) that some may question its use. Luther found the Epistle helpful in his struggles against legalism. Justification by faith was as relevant to Luther, as it was to the Galatians, as it is to us today. Any form of legalism is bondage, which is alien to Christianity as Paul saw it. Any approach to Christianity that rests upon the rigid observance of external rules as a means of salvation is no better than that which the Galatians were in danger of adopting. Galatians disproves the erroneous teaching that baptism (either for infants or adults) or anything other than faith in Jesus and his death on the cross is necessary to salvation. The doctrine of justification by faith delivers the church from a mere formalism to which the neglect of its preaching leads.

The legalistic method is dangerously attractive. It is simpler to follow a pattern of observances than personal faith. Justification by faith in Christ alone will inevitably be suspicious of priestly mediators. The opposite course is also a possibility, not legalism but libertinism or lawlessness (antinomianism). Paul makes it clear that freedom in Christ is not an excuse for self-indulgence. The type of Christianity that Paul advocates (I am crucified with Christ) makes rigorous demands despite its anti-legalistic approach.

Particular attention in 1 Thessalonians is given to the following passages:

- 1 Thessalonians 1:8-10
- 1 Thessalonians 4:1-12
- 1 Thessalonians 4:13-5:11
- 1 Thessalonians 5:12-28

STUDY 2

1 THESSALONIANS

1. Background

Thessalonica was the capital city of Macedonia, a Roman province of Northern Greece. It was on the main highway from Rome to the East (Byzantium, Istanbul) and was also a prosperous port on the Aegean Sea, across the bay from Mount Olympus. Paul visited the city on his second missionary journey. Silas and probably Timothy accompanied him. They had just left Philippi where Paul and Silas had suffered for their faith and had been imprisoned (Acts 16:22-24; 1 Thessalonians 2:2). Their mission in Thessalonica was an immediate success and many believed. Among these were some Jews, probably merchants, who had settled there and had a well-established synagogue (Acts 17:1), as well as devout Greeks (or God-fearers) and not a few important women.

Paul often began preaching the gospel in the synagogue, proclaiming Jesus as the promised Messiah (Christ) and explaining that Jesus had to suffer and rise from the dead. According to Acts 17:2 Paul spent three Sabbaths preaching in the synagogue at Thessalonica and, in addition, it is likely that Paul taught the Christians on weekdays as well as on the Sabbath. Later there was a riot, though whether this was immediately after the third Sabbath is not clear. It seems that Paul was in the city for more than two or three weeks because he was engaged in gainful employment there (1 Thessalonians 2:9), received at least two special gifts from Philippi and had a considerable number of Gentile converts (1 Thessalonians 1:9).

The Jews had more than likely stirred up the mob violence because they were unhappy that so many of their proselytes were now embracing Christianity. Their hypocrisy is similar to the chief priests who rejected Jesus as their king, out of feigned loyalty to Caesar (John 19:15). A street-corner gang was goaded to attack Jason's house where Paul was staying. However, Paul was out. Jason was bound over and then released.

In order not to bring any further trouble upon Jason and the other believers (Acts 17:10), Paul moved on through Berea to Athens but persecution of the Christians in Thessalonica continued. When Timothy rejoined Paul in Athens, Paul was very anxious to know news from Thessalonica and sent Timothy back to the city so that he could encourage the Thessalonian Christians in their time of persecution (1 Thessalonians 3:1-5) and return with a report.

Paul preached in Athens (Acts 17:16-34) but his ministry was not especially fruitful. He, therefore, journeyed from Athens to Corinth. When Timothy joined Paul at Corinth his report was so encouraging that Paul wrote this letter, 1 Thessalonians, almost immediately. In this letter, Paul answers questions that had arisen and repeats his teaching on matters where the church was weak.

Acts 18:11-18 makes reference to Gallio. Secular evidence, such as inscriptions, helps us to put a date on this letter of Paul to the Thessalonians. Considerable support is given to a date of AD 50 but the letter was almost certainly written between AD 50 and AD 52.

2. Theme

The news from Timothy prompts Paul to write about a number of practical things. He touches briefly on a number of themes of which the most important, in this letter, is the theme of eschatology (the doctrine of what happens at the end of the world).

In the first major section Paul congratulates the Thessalonians on their conversion and progress in the Christian life. Their faithfulness even in persecution was proving to be an example to other Christians in Macedonia and Greece (Achaia). Important lessons about Christian evangelism and how the church spreads the gospel can be learned from this section. In the middle of this section Paul reminds his readers of the kind of ministry that he exercised among them. It could be that Paul is defending himself against slanderous accusations but just as likely is the idea that he is glad that his labours were not in vain. In any event important teaching about the Christian ministry and how pastors serve the gospel and the church is given.

The second major section is a list of exhortations to Christian behaviour. This includes teaching not only against immoral behaviour but also to increased mutual love, to comfort and watchfulness in view of the Lord's return, and to a variety of practical matters. Paul's concern is that the Christians at Thessalonica should continue making progress in the gospel.

An important issue in the life of the church was the teaching about the Lord's return, which is all the more understandable in a period of persecution. The Thessalonians seem to have been sorrowing over their brothers and sisters who had died, apparently because they did not realise that their fellow Christians who had died would share in the joy of the return of the Lord Jesus. They may even have thought that death before the 'Parousia' (the future coming of the Lord in glory, sometimes called 'second coming') was a chastisement for sin, or even an indication of loss of salvation. In this context Paul gives a message of Christian hope and reassures his readers by explaining that Christians who have died will be resurrected before the rapture so that they may be taken up along with Christians who are still alive on earth.

Towards the end of the letter the emphasis shifts from comfort to warning. Christians must watch for the day of the Lord so that it does not take them by surprise. Watchfulness does not mean mental awareness alone but obedience and service. Most of all, they are called to be a Christian community, a church dedicated to the gospel.

3. Passages

1 Thessalonians 1:8-10

Paul commends the Thessalonians for from them the gospel message has rung out so that it is heard 'everywhere'. In many ways these verses are the gospel in a nutshell. Paul had preached the character of God, with the effect that people turned to him in faith from the worship of idols. This was not simply an abstract belief but one that was demonstrated in service and anticipation of the Lord's return. God alone is worthy for he alone is living, in contrast to lifeless idols, and true, in contrast to the false representations of the divine being. Paul had preached of about Jesus, God's Son, who died to deliver mankind from judgment. He had also preached about the resurrection and the return of the Lord Jesus Christ from heaven. The promise of the Lord's return is especially precious to those who suffer. Had Jesus not been raised from the dead, appeared and ascended, he could never return (1 Thessalonians 2:19; 3:13; 4:15; 5:2; 5:23). It is Jesus who will return to rescue his people from the coming wrath. (To desire to flee from the coming wrath was the essence of membership among the early Methodists.) Christians look to this time with hope because it is a time of rescue and not of doom.

1 Thessalonians 4:1-12

The standards to which Christians are called to live are different. They have already been given instruction of how they must live in order to please God but the pull of worldly ways is always strong for Christians. Paul commends them for the life they are living now rather than condemning them for the life they led before. 'Brotherly love' here relates to love within the family of God, under his fatherhood. If we bear in mind that even the most loving families have their differences, we can understand Paul's urging the Thessalonians to love all the brothers 'more and more'. The Greeks may have despised manual labour but Christians must not make the Lord's return an excuse for opting out of hard work.

1 Thessalonians 4:13-5:11

Paul had taught that the Lord would return but some had died between Paul's stay in Thessalonica and the writing of his letter. Paul reassures the Thessalonians that those who have died will not lose out. The expression, 'those who sleep', points to the temporary nature of death. They will be raised first when Christ comes in glory and the living will join in the Lord's triumph and enjoy his presence. Christians are not immune from sorrow (Philippians 2:27), but they do not mourn without hope. This hope is based on history – Jesus died and rose again. Paul does not refer to Jesus' death as 'sleep'. Jesus suffered real separation from God for the world's sins – but because of his real death a Christian's death has been transformed into sleep. The Christian's ultimate expectation is not simply of being raised but of being with Jesus forever.

1 Thessalonians 5:12-28

Paul concludes dealing with a number of matters (constrained by time or space) briefly. He never ceases to pray for his readers and he is always aware of how much he is need of their prayers.

4. Outline and application

1:1-10	Greetings and thanksgiving
2: 1-16	Paul joyfully recalls his visit and its fruit
2:17-3:13	Paul reminds them how he and the others behaved
4:1-8	Paul urges sexual self-control
4:9-12	Paul encourages brotherly love and daily work
4:13-18	Paul encourages the bereaved to be steadfast
5:1-11	Watchfulness for the Lord's return is urged
5:12-28	Exhortations to fellowship and worship

The first letter to the Thessalonians gives us a good insight into a newly planted church. We discover how it came into being, what the apostle taught in it, its strengths and weaknesses, its theological and moral problems, and how it was spreading the gospel. The key points to note are how the church developed in New Testament times and how the issue of those who had died before the Lord's coming in glory is addressed.

Despite our structures it is important too understand that in the authentic Christian church the gospel creates the church and the church spreads the gospel. The gospel shapes the church as the church seeks to live a life that is worthy of the gospel. This means that it is more than permissible to question the way we do things or have always done things. It is vital that we do so.

The Christian church has seriously neglected the Lord's future in glory and Christian teaching about eschatology (the doctrine of the last things) has been very patchy. Despite some of the difficulties in presenting the Bible's teaching systematically, Christians need reminding of the glorious hope that Christ will come again in glory, that those who are asleep in him will be with him and those who are alive and waiting expectantly will join with them in worship. John Stott suggests the following outline for the letter:

1:1-10	Christian Evangelism: How the church spreads the gospel
2:1-3:13	Christian Ministry: How pastors serve the gospel and the church
4:1-12	Christian Behaviour: How the church must live according to the gospel
4:13-5:11	Christian Hope: How the gospel should inspire the church
5:12-28	Christian Community: How to be a gospel church

Particular attention in 2 Thessalonians is given to the following passages:

- 2 Thessalonians 1:5-10
- 2 Thessalonians 2:1-12

STUDY 3

2 THESSALONIANS

1. Background

Paul's interest in the Thessalonians did not end with his first letter. Their continued discipleship was important to him. Some of the things in Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians are not repeated in the second letter. If Paul was defending his own personal integrity against attacks from his critics then the issue seems to have been settled, for there is no mention of this in the second letter.

It is likely that while Paul was still in Corinth a further report of the church at Thessalonica came to him and that this news was sufficiently important to prompt him to write this letter. The three main items that Paul appears to be concerned about are that the persecution of the Christians had grown worse, that false teaching had crept into the church and that the nearness of Christ's return had been misused and made an excuse for shirking responsibility.

In order to respond to the three main concerns, Paul urged the Thessalonians to persevere a little longer by describing the reward and retribution issuing from the future judgment of God (2 Thessalonians 1:3-10). In the first letter Paul stressed that the Lord will come in glory suddenly. Some Thessalonians had concluded that the Lord had already come and Paul is at pains to correct this misunderstanding by clarifying prominent events belonging to the day of the Lord to prove the falsity of claims that the day had already arrived (2 Thessalonians 2:1-12). Another point that needed to be stressed again is particularly relevant to those whose speculations about the Second Advent have caused them to give up their work and live in meddlesome idleness. Having made reference to his example and the example of those who worked with him in the previous letter, this time Paul is less confident that the Thessalonians will take much notice of his warnings. He therefore gives instructions as to how the church should treat the disobedient (2 Thessalonians 3:6-15).

Paul takes advantage of the second letter to give further encouragement to the believers in their continuing difficulties, to request their prayers and to give general counsel. If we are right in assuming a date of about AD 50 for the first letter then we can narrow the time of the second epistle down quite considerably. Paul must have written this second letter before his visit to Macedonia (Acts 20:1) for it is hard to think that Paul would have needed to write such a letter after having had the opportunity to deal with these issues in person, or at least without making reference to any visit. As Corinth is the only place where we know that Paul, Silas and Timothy were together before Acts 20, the second letter to the Thessalonians probably came soon after the first.

2. Theme

Most of the 'second letters' in the New Testament stand very much in the shadow of the 'first letters' and 2 Thessalonians is no exception to this. It is a much shorter letter than Paul's first letter to the church at Thessalonica.

The letter's opening greeting is followed by repeated thanks to God for the spiritual progress of the Thessalonian believers and for their patient endurance in persecution, but the commendation is much shorter than that of the first letter. Paul moves on very quickly to the main theme of his letter.

The main subject of the letter is the Lord's coming in glory. The theological word for this doctrine is 'eschatology'. Paul vividly describes the Lord's coming in glory (Second Coming / Second Advent / Parousia) when persecutors will be judged and the persecuted relieved of their sufferings. Paul's purpose in this is to encourage the Thessalonians to continued endurance by looking ahead to the time when the order will be reversed by Christ's return.

Several misunderstandings about the Lord's coming in glory need to be cleared up. Looking to the return of the Lord does not mean that normal living should cease. The Thessalonians should not be deceived by false prophecy.

There is a tension in the two letters between the sudden nature of the Lord's coming and the signs that precede his coming but this is a tension that runs through the eschatological passages in Scripture (e.g. passages in the gospels, Luke 17:22-37, Mark 13:33-37 – the sudden coming of the Lord, compared with Mark 13:5-32 – signs of the end of the age. It is also a mark of the authenticity of the two letters that Paul expresses diverse ideas about the Lord's coming as shaped by his own living experience in the New Testament church.

A sign of the last times is the revelation of the 'man of lawlessness'. This refers to the Antichrist, a world leader of dreadful wickedness, demanding worship and intent on persecuting the church. Some have thought that this has to do with one of the Roman Emperors, perhaps the Emperor - who took his claims to divinity very seriously - or one of the later Emperors, though associating this passage with rumours about Emperor Nero (died AD 68) coming back to life is an idea that sits uncomfortably with the dating of the epistle. If the 'Christ' is the fulfilment of the very best of all that had gone before (Abraham, Joseph, Moses, David) then it is not unreasonable to suggest that the Antichrist is the fulfilment of the very worst of all that has gone before.

3. Passages

2 Thessalonians 1:5-10

In a sense we find here the answer to the question ‘why doesn’t God do something?’ about the injustices and suffering in the world. God is already at work and will continue to be so. The universe is a moral universe and God is just. No Christian can gloat over the fact - but God’s judgment is already in operation and will be made complete at the end of time. The Christians at Thessalonica will be counted worthy on this day of reckoning. This worthiness is not self-earned but graciously given by God through faith in the Lord Jesus, who himself earned the believer’s forgiveness of sins and eternal life by dying a sacrificial death (1Thessalonians 5:10). Those who persecute the Christians can only expect God’s judgment against them. Christians receive strength in the hope of the Parousia for, when the Lord Jesus is revealed their unending fellowship and participation in his glory will begin.

Paul’s concept of what the future holds for the lost is bleak. It is a day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God. Being shut out from the presence of the Lord (2 Thessalonians 1:9) is the exact opposite of being with the Lord forever (1 Thessalonians 4:17). The ‘blazing fire’ of his coming recalls the glory of Old Testament theophanies (Exodus 3:2; 19:18; 24:17; Deuteronomy 5:4; Psalm 18:12; Isaiah 30:27-30; Daniel 7:9-10). Many have chosen to limit the ‘revelation’ or ‘appearing’ of the Lord Jesus Christ with a single event, identifying it with Christ’s return to earth at the close of the tribulation. However, it is possible also to see this as a complex of events, including various phases of end-time happenings.

2 Thessalonians 2:1-12

This is a notoriously difficult passage to understand. Perhaps it is a passage like this to which Peter refers (2 Peter 3:16).

Paul explains three important things. Firstly, some of the Thessalonian Christians thought that the day of the Lord had already begun, but that was not the teaching of Paul. Secondly, the passage teaches that before the Lord’s coming in glory there will be a great and final rebellion against God headed by one (Man of lawlessness / Antichrist, in 1 John, 2 John) totally opposed to him. At present there are forces at work restraining evil but in the end these will be swept away. What these forces are Paul does not say, perhaps because it was unnecessary to identify them. Thirdly, victory will come only through Christ at his coming.

The general interpretative issue here is whether the Parousia is a single event or whether it has a longer duration. In either case, Paul’s assurance of God’s righteous judgment is the basis for his imparting further information. It will take place at the Parousia (official visit) of Christ. Jesus Christ will return in person. He will punish those who refuse to recognise God and will not obey the gospel. The solemn words have the sense of separation from the presence of God.

4. Outline and application

1:1-12	The revelation of Christ
2:1-17	The rebellion of the Antichrist
3:1-18	The responsibility of Christians

It may be said in short that 2 Thessalonians offers a Christian perspective on history. In the context of unjust persecution, Paul writes about the righteous judgment of God. In the face of error, Paul proceeds to expound the truth and explain that such falsehood is to be expected. Indeed the Parousia cannot take place until such things have happened.

Some have used their beliefs to justify an inappropriate life-style. They claim to be awaiting the Lord's coming in glory but in reality they are idle busybodies. Discipline in the New Testament church was clearly taken seriously. The good of the whole church as well as of the individual rested on such matters.

It has been said that, "The question of meaning in history has become meaningless" (Bultmann). Christians who look to Scripture as their authority profoundly disagree with (such) gloomy assessments. For the God of the Bible is the God of history. He has entitled himself "the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob". He chose Israel out of the nations to be his covenant people and took about two thousand years to prepare them for the fulfilment of his promise to Abraham in the coming of their Messiah. Above all, he came to us in Jesus Christ when Augustus was Emperor of Rome, and "suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died and was buried". Then on the third day he rose again and, having sent his Spirit, has for two further millennia been pushing his church out into the world to take the good news to its furthest extremities. One day (known only to the Father), when the gospel has been "preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations", the end will come. For Christ will return in glory, terminate the historical process and perfect his reign' (Stott: *1 & 2 Thessalonians* BST).

Particular attention in 1 Corinthians is given to the following passages:

- 1 Corinthians 1:10-17
- 1 Corinthians 5:1-13; 6:12-20
- 1 Corinthians 11:2-33
- 1 Corinthians 13:1-13
- 1 Corinthians 15:1-8, 12-20, 35-38, 42-44

STUDY 4

1 CORINTHIANS

1. Background

The city of Corinth was situated on a narrow isthmus between Aegean and Adriatic Seas. It was a cosmopolitan port city, boasting two harbours and a trade centre as well as many taverns and drinking houses. The city received shipping from Italy, Sicily, and Spain, as well as from Asia Minor, Syria, Phoenicia, and Egypt. Its eastern port was Cenchrea, located on the Saronic Gulf (Acts 18:18; Rom 16:1); its western harbour was at Lechaemum on the Corinthian Gulf. This proximity to the seas and its nearness to Athens, only forty-five miles to the northeast, gave Corinth a position of strategic commercial importance and military defence. In New Testament times it was capital of the Roman province of Achaia. The athletic games at Corinth were second only to the Olympics.

Corinth was a rich and prosperous city and had many fine buildings. There were large outdoor and indoor theatres, temples, shrines and altars. The Acrocorinth, a steep flat-topped rock on top of which was the acropolis containing a temple to Aphrodite, dominated the city. Corinth had gained a reputation for immorality, not least because of the cult prostitution at the temple of Aphrodite (the goddess of love), which had more than 1000 women prostitutes. To 'Corinthianize' became a by-word for sexual immorality and corruption.

Paul arrived in Corinth on what we call his Second Missionary Journey (Acts 18:1-18). Such an important multi-cultural city was strategic for the spread of the gospel for from here the message could become widely spread. Yet it was not an easy place to proclaim the Christian message. At first Paul made his home with Priscilla and Aquila. He kept himself busy by making tents and on the Sabbath Days preached in the synagogue. Jewish opposition forced Paul to move to the house of Titus Justus. Crispus, the chief ruler of the synagogue, was converted and when the proconsul, Gallio, refused to take action against Paul it enabled him to stay in Corinth for 18 months.

There is a problem over how many letters Paul actually wrote to the Corinthians. A reasonable explanation is that there were at least four letters. The first letter was misunderstood (1 Corinthians 5:9-11). The second letter we call 1 Corinthians. The third letter is sometimes called the 'sorrowful' letter. The fourth letter we call 2 Corinthians. (This is not the only interpretation but it is the easiest). Helped by evidence such as the dating for the proconsulship of Gallio, scholars generally accept a date for 1 Corinthians of 53-57 AD.

2. Theme

There are two main reasons for the writing of 1 Corinthians. Paul had received reports about the church that had made him very uncomfortable, so there were issues that he felt he needed to address. The Corinthians had also sent to Paul asking his advice on certain questions, so there were issues to which he needed to respond.

In the first part of the letter, Paul takes up the matters that have been reported to him. Power struggles and factions are causing divisions in the church, which have even resulted in some members taking other members to court.

There are also problems associated with the extremely pagan society. The church had a diverse membership of Greek, Roman (attested by Latin names such as Gaius, Fortunatus, Crispus and Justus), Jewish and Oriental people that reflected the culture in which it was set. Nevertheless, this brought its own problems, not only the cultural divisions, but also the background of many of the new Christians, which had not even been the morality of Judaism. There has been a case of incest and Paul speaks against it.

In the second part of the letter, Paul answers a variety of questions from the Corinthian church and gives some teaching on various matters, some of which seem more relevant to our present day context than others. Many of the Christians were immature, undisciplined extremists. The services were chaotic and in particular there were problems in the celebration of the Lord's Supper, the right use of spiritual gifts, and over the dress and role of women in the church and its meetings.

There is a long section on marriage and the single life. There is also a discussion about whether it is appropriate to eat meat that has been associated with the worship of idols and whether a Christian can in good conscience attend social functions in a pagan temple.

Intellectually there may have been early Gnostic influences, such as the belief in the immortality of the soul rather than the resurrection of the body. Some of the members may have claimed some kind of superior knowledge. Possibly some did not understand the Christian teaching of the resurrection, which forms a large part of Paul's response.

3. Passages

1 Corinthians 1:10-17

Groups of Christians can get too attached to a leader (e.g. Paul for the Gentiles, Apollos for those who liked eloquent preaching, Peter for the Jews, Christ for those who feel so superior as to think themselves the only real Christians) but their unity is in Christ. He also implores them to ‘speak the same thing’ (KJV) or ‘agree with one another’ (NIV). Broad churches often glory in their diversity but Paul glories in unity in Christ. Paul’s preaching is not clever, yet it is in its apparent foolishness that the cross has its power.

1 Corinthians 5:1-13, 6:12-20

A case of sexual immorality, shocking even to the pagans, has occurred in Corinth. A man has married (implied by the context) his stepmother. No doubt some, through an appeal to Christian liberty, justified this when, in fact, freedom in Christ is freedom to obey Christ rather than lawlessness. Short-term discipline is important for the long-term good of the individual and of the whole church. Christians have to live in the world but they are not ‘in fellowship’ with people who were once part of the church community but are now living in gross immorality (not only sexual sin but also to other sins – greed, idolatry, slander, drunkenness, swindling/extortion). In the common meal Christians show their unity, but not with this kind of person. Paul deals with the issue of abuses of the principle of Christian liberty. What we do with our bodies matters, for Christians not only believe in the immortality of the soul but also in the resurrection of the body.

1 Corinthians 11:2-33

Paul rules that women should pray with their heads covered. An unveiled woman could be mistaken for a prostitute. It was very important that Christian worship looked different from the worship of Aphrodite. The interpretation that the wearing of a veil is determined purely by the cultural context is largely though not universally accepted. The symbolic nature of the meal in our modern celebrations means that a lot of the issues do not apply but the principle of self-examination is still very important. The celebration of the Lord’s Supper is handed down to us.

1 Corinthians 13:1-13

Christian love is different both from that offered at the temple of Aphrodite and from spiritual pride. It is Christ-like love, in the spirit of Jesus.

1 Corinthians 15:1-8; 12-20; 35-38; 42-44

The event on which the Christian faith either stands or falls is well attested. Paul expounds the resurrection hope. The historical validity of the resurrection is evidence by eyewitnesses. Christ died for our sins, implies his sinlessness. If he did not rise there is no resurrection for anyone.

Using the seed analogy, Paul shows that the body undergoes a transformation to be ready to live with God in eternity. Those who belong to Christ will ultimately be with him and like him.

4. Outline and application

Disorders reported to Paul

- 1:10-4:21 The Spirit of divisiveness
- 5:1-13 Discipline over immorality
- 6:12-20 Moral lapses
- 6:1-11 Appeals to pagan courts

Problems raised by the Corinthians

- 7:1-40 Marriage
- 8:1-9:1 Meat sacrificed to idols
- 11:2-34 Disorders in worship
- 12:1-14:40 Spiritual gifts
- 15:1-58 Resurrection

Conclusion

- 16:1-24 Collections, travel plans, greetings

The church at Corinth was facing so many of the problems and underlying issues that we face in the twenty-first century. In our society, for the first time in hundreds of years a Christian perspective on many matters can no longer be assumed. The background of the society in which we live becomes more 'pagan' and 'secular' each year.

Christians in Britain are not normally called upon to decide whether to eat meat that has been involved in idolatrous worship. But there are parallel issues that demand our careful consideration. There are also issues to be faced as a whole church to do with mission, fellowship, divisions, responsible giving, spiritual gifts, and the right order of worship. Authority, discipline and patterns of leadership are also relevant to us. Issues such as suffering, death and the resurrection hope need to be addressed, all the more so when even regular church-goers seem to be confused about matters such as reincarnation.

There are general issues that need to be faced by all Christians. The right exercise of Christian freedom and the danger of sexual immorality are as much contemporary problems as they were in the New Testament church.

Particular attention in 2 Corinthians is given to the following passages:

- 2 Corinthians 1:12-22
- 2 Corinthians 2:5-11
- 2 Corinthians 4:1-12
- 2 Corinthians 5:16-21
- 2 Corinthians 9:6-11
- 2 Corinthians 12:1-10

STUDY 5

2 CORINTHIANS

1. Background

The letter of 2 Corinthians gives us a glimpse into Paul's inner feelings. It tells us something of his pastoral relationship with the new churches for which he had been caring and also his apostolic ministry.

This part of Paul's life is difficult to reconstruct accurately and not everyone agrees with any particular order of events or timetable for Paul's writing of his several letters to Corinth. It appears that after the writing of 1 Corinthians Paul had visited Corinth again. It was a difficult visit because relationships between the Apostle and the church were strained. This second visit is often referred to as a 'painful visit' because Paul writes, 'I made up my mind that I would not make another painful visit to you' (2:1). This cannot refer to Paul's first visit, so there must have been a second. This visit is not mentioned in Acts. Verses in 2 Corinthians (12:14; 13:1-2) also mention that Paul is thinking about a third visit.

Verses in 2 Corinthians imply that Paul had written a letter different from 1 Corinthians because the description of it (2:4; 7:8) does not fit 1 Corinthians. This 'sorrowful letter' commanded that the church keep under discipline a particularly difficult person who was leading opposition against Paul (2:5-10). Titus took the 'sorrowful letter' to Corinth for Paul, while Paul left Ephesus for Troas and then went on to Macedonia. Here Titus joined Paul and reported that the church had repented of its rebelliousness against Paul and had disciplined the ringleader of the troublemakers (2:12-13; 7:4-16).

In short, it seems that the Corinthians responded positively to Paul's first letter (1 Corinthians), sorting out the problems of litigation among Christians and the abuse of the Lord's Supper. However, further problems arose, particularly the arrival of Judaizers (11:4; 11:22), who insisted that it was necessary to become a Jew (i.e. circumcised) to be saved. Paul, therefore, decided to visit the church – the 'painful visit'. When he did so a spokesman for an anti-Pauline clique directly opposed him (2:5-10; 7:12). After returning to Ephesus, Paul sent a further letter to the Corinthians (the 'sorrowful letter') calling for the wrongdoer to be punished and for the Corinthians to renew their support for the Christians in Jerusalem.

Paul later left Ephesus (Acts 19:23-20:1) and after preaching in Troas and Asia went to Macedonia, where he heard that his 'sorrowful letter' had been well received (7:5-16). When Paul heard of further problems at Corinth he wrote another letter, 2 Corinthians. Paul expresses his joy in 2 Corinthians that the majority of the church had accepted his 'sorrowful letter'. He describes his ministry and reminds them of the collection for Christians at Jerusalem. He further defends his authority against the minority.

It is possible to offer a tentative date for the writing of 2 Corinthians bearing in mind that 1 Corinthians was probably written between 53-57 AD. It appears that the letters followed one another quite quickly. In 2 Corinthians (8:10; 9:2) Paul uses the phrase 'a year ago/last year' suggesting that the matters considered arose in a relatively short space of time.

2. Theme

Paul opens this letter with a greeting and thanksgiving for comfort from God in the many persecutions and hardships that he has faced. Paul defends his sincerity and the nature of his ministry. Having had one confrontation with the Corinthians Paul thought it better to delay his planned visit in the hope that when he arrives it will be in much happier circumstances. As Paul's leading opponent has been disciplined Paul urges that the man be restored into the fellowship of the church and the celebration of the Lord's Supper.

Paul's first reason for writing is his joy at the Corinthians' positive response to his letter. The trouble at Corinth has caused Paul a great deal of heartache. He loves the Christian brothers and sisters deeply and is anxious that they make spiritual progress. It is for this reason alone that he felt compelled to write to them so strongly. As Paul writes again he is relieved to have had word back from Corinth through Titus that his 'sorrowful letter' has brought the Corinthians to their senses.

Secondly, in 2 Corinthians, Paul encourages the Corinthians to get some things sorted out before his next visit. He exhorts them to complete their promised collection for the saints at Jerusalem before he arrives and Paul urges the Corinthians to be generous in their giving, just as the Macedonians have been. He wants them to prepare for his visit with a time of self-examination and self-judgment so that they could discover the proper criteria for distinguishing between rival apostles. This will enable Paul to be spared the pain of having to exercise discipline within the church.

One of the interesting things about 2 Corinthians is that Paul, quite typically, digresses from his main themes (2:14-7:4). Sometimes, he even has digressions within digressions. In a short digression (6:11-7:1) Paul warns about the dangers of compromise with worldly standards. If the digression makes the letter seem disjointed, it is not necessary to conclude that it is not a genuine part of the original letter.

To counter the Judaizers, Paul describes how the gospel is superior to the Law of Moses for, whereas the glory of God on the face of Moses faded, the glory of the gospel of the New Covenant increases. The hope of resurrection spurs Paul on to the preaching of the gospel in whatever circumstances he may find himself.

If Paul appears only to be bold for the gospel in a letter he reminds the Corinthians both of his Apostleship and weakness. He was not a man who would retreat before an enemy only to resort to a letter and the intervention of his delegate Titus to gain what he himself had failed to achieve. It seems that Paul's letter (2 Corinthians) was successful for Paul did visit Corinth again (Acts 20:2-3). During this visit he either wrote or finished his letter to the Romans, mentioning that the Corinthians completed their collection for the saints at Jerusalem (Romans 15:26) but not mentioning any of the problems at Corinth.

3. Passages

2 Corinthians 1:12-22

To his critics, Paul explains his reasons for changing the arrangements for his visit to Corinth. He has acted and written plainly and sincerely. Neither in proclaiming the good news to them nor in telling them of his travel plans was his language ‘an ambiguous blend of yes and no’ (NEB).

2 Corinthians 2:5-11

If one of the members of the church had caused Paul a great deal of pain he should still be treated with compassion and love. This is different from mere toleration. Discipline and compassion go together for they are for the person’s own good, that is not only retributive but also remedial.

2 Corinthians 4:1-12

If we are in danger of losing heart we must take encouragement. The glorious ministry that is entrusted to us is a valuable treasure. Paul says that if the gospel is veiled it is because of unbelief – for Christ is the visible and perfect ‘image’ of the invisible God. In persecution Paul remembers that a ministry that costs nothing accomplishes nothing. In the midst of darkness and death the Christian message is one of light and life in Christ. Paul proclaims Jesus Christ as Lord.

2 Corinthians 5:16-21

The commission of Christ is to the ministry of reconciliation. The relationship between God and a lost world is thoroughly changed through all that Christ has accomplished on the cross. Treated as if he were a sinner, Christ became the object of God’s wrath and bore the penalty and guilt of sin. So complete was the identification of the sinless Christ with the sin of the sinner, including its consequence of separation from God, Paul says, ‘God made him ... to be sin for us.’

2 Corinthians 9:6-11

Giving is not something that is new in the Christian church. Paul sees giving not so much as sacrifice but as opening the door to great blessing. We reap in measure as we sow.

2 Corinthians 12:1-10

If Paul’s Apostolic credentials are in doubt he now makes reference to both his ecstatic rapture and his thorn in the flesh. In this Paul contrasts spiritual blessing with earthly weakness. Paul had received a special revelation, though he was uncertain as to whether he was physically removed to the third heaven or whether it was a vision – probably an indication of the profoundness of the vision. To keep him from being conceited Paul was also given a thorn in his flesh. What this weakness is we do not know (though many have speculated) but it was

tormenting enough for Paul to plead that it be taken away on at least three occasions. This seems to be a very special example of power and weakness existing together.

4. **Outline and application**

Paul's ministry

- 1:12-2:17 His future plans
3:1-7:16 The character of the ministry

The collection scheme

- 8:1-9:5 Practical arrangements
9:6-9:15 Christian giving

Paul's Apostolic credentials

- 10:1-18 He was the first to preach the gospel to them
11:1-12:13 His credentials are better than his rivals
12:14-13:10 He hopes this dispute will end before his visit

Conclusion

- 13:11-14 A parting appeal to the Corinthians to mend their ways, greetings

The modern Christian church faces problems that are very similar to those at Corinth. These problems need to be addressed and not conveniently sidestepped.

Factions, personal jealousies, immorality, and the relationship between individual liberty and the discipline of the church and its leaders are all familiar to the church of today. Personal factions and personal jealousies must be set aside if the unity and purpose of the church are to be as Christ intended.

The church must be realistic about its problems and how it will deal with them. It needs to discipline the wayward in the hope of restoring them and preach reconciliation through the cross whatever the cost. It seems that spiritual strength and physical (human) weakness go side by side, in the Lord Jesus Christ and in his followers.

Particular attention in Romans is given to the following passages:

- Romans 1:16-32
Romans 3:21-31
Romans 5:1-11
Romans 8:1-17
Romans 12:1-8

STUDY 6

ROMANS

1. Background

Romans is Paul's greatest letter and takes prime place among the New Testament letters. The importance of the letter was clearly recognised by the early church that placed it first among Paul's writings. The impact of the letter cannot be measured for it has changed the lives of such great men as Augustine, Luther, Bunyan and Wesley, as well as the lives of countless ordinary men and women.

According to tradition Rome was founded on seven hills in 753 BC. It was a meeting place and a melting pot for people and ideas. Rome became the capital of a great empire. In New Testament times it probably had a population in excess of one million.

As Roman control of Italy and Mediterranean lands extended, Roman citizenship was conferred on a number of people who were not Roman by birth. Paul was born in Tarsus a major town in Cilicia. The grant of Roman citizenship was within the power of generals and it is possible that under Pompey, or one of the other generals, Roman citizenship had been granted to Paul's father or grandfather, giving Paul the status of a Roman citizen by birth. However, by the time he wrote his great letter to the Romans Paul had still not visited the capital of the empire. The empire stretched from Britain in the West across Europe to Arabia. Rome became the centre of politics and trade for the known world. Its citizens benefited from the Roman peace (*pax Romana*) that made travel safe and the excellent roads. Constant comings and goings made Rome a wealthy and cosmopolitan city.

It is not known who founded the church at Rome, certainly not Paul or Peter. According to Ambrosiaster (4th century), unnamed Hebrew Christians rather than one of the apostles established the church at Rome. Perhaps those who returned there after the Day of Pentecost took the gospel to Rome. The secular historian Suetonius records that the Emperor Claudius banished Jews from Rome in AD 49 or 50 because of rioting over one called 'Chrestus' (the confusion of 'i' and 'e' was not unknown in Latin renditions of Greek). It is possible to conclude from this statement that the Roman Jews had become unusually agitated and disorderly over the proclamation in their midst of Jesus as the Christ (Christus), provoking the emperor to take action against them. By the time Paul wrote, the church at Rome had become famous far and wide for its faith (1:8). There are passages in the letter that are of great interest to Jews (especially chapters 9-11) but it seems that the majority of the recipients were Gentiles (1:13; 11:13; 11:28-31; 15:15-16).

Paul was on his third missionary journey, staying in Corinth, when he wrote this letter to Rome (probably about AD 57). He had just completed the collection for the Jerusalem church (15:25-26) and was staying at the home of Gaius (16:23), one of the most prominent of converts during the apostle's mission at Corinth (1Cor 1:14). Erastus (16:23) was the City Treasurer of Corinth. It would be an intelligent guess that Phoebe (16:1-2) carried the letter from Corinth to Rome.

2. Theme

The letter to the Romans is rather more formal than Paul's other letters, presumably because Paul has not visited the church. Paul intended to visit Rome but had been prevented from doing so. It is possible that Paul wrote this letter to Rome to prepare the Christians in the capital for his arrival so that Rome could become a strategic base for his mission in the West, as Antioch had been his base in the East. Paul had already preached the gospel in the strategic centres of population at the eastern end of the Mediterranean basin and wanted to journey through Rome and on to Spain to plant the gospel there (15:22-28). He hoped to encourage the Christians at Rome, strengthening their faith and winning their support for his continued mission.

It is also possible that Paul realised that he might never reach Rome in person. A passage requesting prayer for his safety and success follows the section that sets out his plan for future mission on his journey to Judea before leaving for Rome (15:31). If that were to be the case then Paul would need to write a systematic and comprehensive letter to Rome so that the church could continue his work, proclaiming the gospel to the farthestmost parts of the empire.

The major theme of Romans is justification by grace through faith (chapters 1-5). Though this doctrine is found throughout Scripture it receives its most thorough and systematic treatment in this letter. After a short introduction Paul states his theme (1:16-17). Everything that comes after is an exposition of that theme. Justification is needed because of human sinfulness (1:18-3:20) among Jews and Gentiles alike. Individual 'sins' are symptoms of the big problem 'sin'. God's remedy for sin is justification (3:21-5:21). Paul contrasts the unbeliever's position in Adam, where there is sin and death, with the believer's position in Christ, where there is righteousness and eternal life.

The outcome of justification should be sanctification. That is Christians are called to holy living (chapters 6-8). Sanctification has nothing to do with keeping Old Testament law, which could only give a sense of failure; rather the Spirit of Christ gives the believer the power to overcome all things.

Paul's Jewish background causes him to turn his attention to a discussion of Israel and the unbelief of the Jews (chapters 9-11). Gentile Christians must not lose sight of the fact that the Christian gospel was the fulfilment of all that had been promised to Abraham. God has the right to choose those he wishes. Even though Israel in her self-righteousness has been temporarily set aside, a Jew may receive salvation in the same way as a Gentile by believing in Christ.

In the so-called practical section of the Epistle (chapters 12-15) the effect of these great truths ('the mercies of God') is set out in terms of transformed conduct. Christians have a life to live in this world as well as a faith to hold and a fellowship to enjoy. Paul was pastor as well as preacher. In Romans, as in his other letters, his theological teaching was given not merely for the sake of information, but to build up and encourage the people of God.

Paul concludes the letter with some practical exhortations. To these he adds some personal greetings (chapter 16).

3. Passages

Romans 1:16-32

Paul glories in the gospel message for he knows its power to save and to transform lives. God is able to save anyone who has faith in him – to forgive their sins and restore them to wholeness. Paul gives an exposure of human sinfulness. Men and women clearly need to be made right with God (justified) because all are caught in an evil whirlpool of sin and death. There is a place for deliverance and salvation and a place for condemnation and punishment. It is clear that there is an inseparable relationship between idolatry and immorality. God allows humankind free will and ‘gives them over’ to their desires and their effects.

Romans 3:21-31

Paul returns to the theme of God’s righteousness. Justice demands that those who are found guilty of rebellion against God (sinners) should be punished. Consequently we are all under sentence of death for we have all sinned. Jesus has provided a way for us to be acquitted by standing in for guilty sinners at the cost of his own life. God will forgive those who come to him in faith on the basis of the death of Christ, as atonement for sin taking the wrath of a righteous God. However, this does not mean that people are saved on account of their faith in Christ, a construction that might encourage the notion that faith makes a contribution and has some merit. Rather, faith is simply the ‘hand of the heart’ (Godet). It takes what God gives but adds nothing to the gift. Sinners are justified ‘freely’, through the blood of Christ. ‘Justification’ is not simply forgiveness but being declared ‘righteous’. This is the good news that Paul feels compelled to preach.

Romans 5:1-11

Paul sums up the preceding chapters saying, ‘therefore’. Christ’s death and resurrection give the Christian a new standing before God. One man’s death can count for many because of the unity of humanity. Sin and disobedience began with one man and spread to all his descendants. Similarly, Jesus, as the head of a new humanity, has made acquittal and life available to all.

Romans 8:1-17

Paul again draws conclusions from the previous chapters and begins ‘therefore’. The inward witness of the Holy Spirit convinces the Christian that he or she is a child of God.

Romans 12:1-8

‘Therefore’ establishes a connection with the previous chapters. ‘Living sacrifice’ is an apparent contradiction. The cost of the cross calls for a response of total commitment. The dedicated life is also the transformed life. Paul seems to say that every believer has some spiritual gift but that these gifts are to be used not proudly or self-indulgently but with humility.

4. Outline and application

1:1-17	Introduction and Greetings
1:18-3:20	Universal Sinfulness
3:21-5:21	Justification by grace through faith
6:1-8:39	Sanctification of justified sinners
9:1-11:36	The unbelief of Israel
12:1-15:13	Practical Exhortations
15:14-16:27	Conclusion

Paul's letter to the Romans is as relevant now as it was to the New Testament church. The New Testament church needed teaching in Christian Doctrine. Over the years, and especially in recent years, ordinary Christians have lost sight of the great doctrines of the Christian Faith, to such an extent that 'doctrine' has almost become a dirty word in some quarters.

The doctrine of justification by divine grace through faith needs repeating over and over again. We live in a world where sin is not taken seriously enough. The fall of humanity (mankind) is real and has real consequences, past, present and future. A life of religion or good works will never be adequate to put a guilty sinner in a right standing before God. Indeed, nothing that we can ever do can make us right with God. Into this hopeless situation God has come himself, in the person of Jesus Christ, his Son. The sacrificial death of Jesus Christ appeases God's anger against human wickedness. Jesus Christ is the sacrifice of atonement (3:25) or 'propitiation' (KJV) for our sins. God forgave sins in the Old Testament times in anticipation of the death of Christ and on that basis alone.

'God's holiness has been satisfied because Jesus paid the penalty for human guilt. God's love has likewise been satisfied because the death of Christ provides a way by which the sinner may be forgiven' (Gundry). There is nothing that the world more urgently needs to hear.

Particular attention in Colossians is given to the following passages:

Colossians 1:13-18

Colossians 1:19-23

Colossians 2:1-23

STUDY 7

COLOSSIANS

1. Background

Colosse was a small town in the mountains about 100 miles east of Ephesus, in the Roman province of Asia (an area that is part of modern Turkey). Although it had been important in the time of the Persian and Greek empires, by the New Testament times it was a rather insignificant market town. Even though the River Lycus passed through it Colosse was overshadowed by Laodicea (10 miles away) and Hierapolis (13 miles away), which were neighbouring cities further up the river. Both Laodicea (2:1) and Hierapolis (4:13) had communities of believers. The church at Colosse was 'the least important to which any epistle of Paul is addressed' (Lightfoot).

There is no record of the founding of the church but it seems probable that Epaphras (1:6-7), who had become a Christian through Paul's ministry at Ephesus, founded the church. Perhaps Epaphras was responsible for the founding of churches along the course of the river. Paul says that he has heard of the Christian faith of the church at Colosse (1:4) and this implies that he had never visited the church.

The immediate occasion for the writing of Colossians seems to have been the arrival of Epaphras (1:8) with disturbing news from Colosse. The letter is apparently written to counter the heretical views of the church at Colosse, though no details of this false teaching are given. If it professed to be a 'philosophy', Paul calls it 'hollow and deceptive' (2:8). If the influence of the Judaizers, with their emphasis on circumcision (2:11), dietary laws (2:14, 16) and holy days (2:16) had become prominent, it should be noted that Paul still classed the Colossians among the uncircumcised (2:13) and seems to be referring to them as Gentiles (1:27). It is a possibility that some at Colosse were affirming the mediation of various supernatural powers both in creation and salvation undermining the glory of Jesus Christ. Colosse was on a trade route meaning that many people would pass through. This could explain why the heresy at Colosse was a blend of Greek philosophic speculation, Jewish legalism, and possibly of Eastern Mysticism. This mixing of elements from all kinds of religious thought is termed 'syncretism'. There is also the possibility that Paul was combating an early form of 'Gnosticism', which taught that salvation is not by faith but by superior knowledge (perhaps even occult 'knowledge'). Whatever Paul's reason for writing, Colossians is a strong statement of Christian orthodoxy.

Colossians is closely associated with the letter to Philemon and it seems likely that Paul wrote and sent both letters at the same time and from the same place. Piecing together information from both letters, including the fact that Luke was with Paul when Paul wrote Colossians (4:14), Paul probably wrote from Rome. Luke accompanied Paul to Rome and the themes of the letter suggest the period of Paul's Roman imprisonment (4:10, 18). The letter was probably written in about AD 62. It is difficult to say whether Colossians was written before or after Ephesians. Both were written out of an experience of imprisonment. Both were entrusted to Tychicus (4:7, Ephesians 6:21) as messenger. Many of the themes of the two letters are the same. They seem to have been written very close together. A possible solution is that the letter to the Colossians is

Paul's quick response to the doctrinal problems at Colosse and that Ephesians represents Paul's calm reflection on many of the matters that have arisen.

2. Theme

Paul's earlier letters have been dominated by the Judaizing controversy. Jewish legalism had a way of creeping into the New Testament churches, not least because Jews were the first converts and in every important city there would be a Jewish community and perhaps a synagogue. Jews would also have been travelling through Colosse as traders but although Colossians undoubtedly touches on related issues the major theme of the letter is a statement of orthodox Christian belief against the ideas that had become popular in Colosse. Whether these had been a particular philosophy or 'superior knowledge', Paul says that apart from the divine revelation this is nothing more than empty speculation. Orthodox Jews did not, however, worship angels neither did they regard the physical nature of the universe (matter) as evil. Paul's teaching against the worship of angels and his remarks about the nature of the universe are a firm rebuttal of these pagan ideas.

As with all heresy an area under significant attack was the person and nature of Christ. The way that Paul chooses to refute the error of the false teaching that was threatening the Colossian church was to teach the truth about Jesus Christ. He confronted the false representation of Christ by a positive setting forth of the Lord's exalted nature and unmatched glory. In Colossians, we have a 'full-length portrait of Christ' (Robertson).

'He is God's Son (1:14), the object of the Christian's faith (1:4), the Redeemer (1:14), the image of God (1:15), Lord of creation (1:15), head of the church (1:18), reconciler of all things (1:20). In him dwells all the fullness of the Godhead (2:9) and under him every power and authority of the universe is subjected (2:10). He is the essence of the mystery of God and in him all God's treasures of wisdom and knowledge lie hidden (2:2-3). He is the standard by which all religious teaching is to be measured (2:8) and the reality of the truth foreshadowed by the regulations and rituals of the old covenant (2:17). By his cross he conquered the cosmic powers of evil (2:15) and following his resurrection he was enthroned at the right hand of God (3:1). Our life now lies hidden with God in Christ, but one day both he and we will be gloriously manifested (3:3-4).'

(Gæbelein, ed.: *Expositors' Bible Commentary*)

In the face of all manner of false teaching, Paul clearly stresses the supremacy or pre-eminence of Christ (1:18). There can be no negotiation on this for the Christian.

3. Passages

Colossians 1:13-18

In this brief passage Paul mentions so many things about Christ that some scholars think it is a quotation from an early hymn of praise. Paul tells of Christ's kingdom, redeeming work ('he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness', i.e. ignorance, falsehood and sin) and forgiveness. Though redemption and forgiveness do not mean the same, by putting the two in apposition Paul teaches that the central feature of redemption is the forgiveness of sins. Paul proclaims the unqualified Lordship of the Christ the Redeemer, his nature as the 'image' of God by the incarnation made manifest in human form, by whom the nature and being of God are perfectly revealed, his supremacy over creation as Master and Heir (first-born: not first to be created – i.e. priority in time, but heir – i.e. first in rank), his creatorship, pre-existence, sustaining of the universe, headship over the church (assembly or congregation) and his primacy in rising from the dead never to die again. Paul's description reaches its climax in the telling phrase, 'So that in everything he might have the supremacy'. 'Supremacy' (NIV) or 'pre-eminence' (KJV) literally mean 'have the first place' or 'come first'. A good translation would therefore be, 'that he might be alone supreme among all' (C Moule). Christ has an unshared supremacy.

Colossians 1:19-23

Paul would not accept the Greek idea that it was impossible for Jesus to be both fully divine and fully human. Christ has always been God and always will be God. He is the one and only Mediator. His death provided the way for all to come to God. In our sinful state we are enemies of God and alienated from him and his way of thinking. For salvation we must rely totally on the grace of God, who in Christ reconciles us (i.e. changes from enmity to friendship) to himself. The message for the respectable person and the criminal is the same. The general aspect of the reconciling work of Christ has to be applied personally. Before this saving reconciliation the Colossians were estranged from God inwardly and outwardly (in their minds and by their behaviour). By the grace of God such people are now reconciled to him through Christ.

Colossians 2:1-23

If the Gnostics maintained that they had secret knowledge Paul countered that in Christ we have all the knowledge we need. Paul does not condemn philosophy but is against teaching that discredits Christ as the sole answer to life's problems. In Christ we have everything we need for salvation. It is unnecessary to seek God by any other means than Christ.

The modern desire to be inclusive and tolerant must not cloud the issue of the importance of the uniqueness of Christ both in his person (fully God, fully man) and in his work (of salvation). Paul and the New Testament Christians lived in a cosmopolitan society but the supremacy of his Christ and work could not be compromised. Whatever else people may think we need - we need nothing other than Christ, not circumcision, not the law, not angels or intermediaries, not ritual or tradition. Outward observances are not important - there are many forms of worship, traditions and ceremonies but what matters is drawing close to God in Christ.

4. Outline and application

Colossians neatly divides into two parts, doctrine and exhortation. The emphasis of the doctrinal section is on the person and work of Christ (Christology).

1:1-12	Introduction, greetings, thanksgiving and prayer
1:13-2:23	The supremacy of Christ in Christian Doctrine
3:1-4:6	The supremacy of Christ in Christian Conduct
4:7-4:18	Concluding remarks and courtesies

A major thrust of this letter is against syncretism. The temptation to introduce ideas from other philosophies and religions on a level with Christian truth is very much with us today. People, then as much as now, wanted to cling to their cherished ideas and incorporate them into Christianity. It was a practice that seemed harmless enough but Paul knew that it struck at the very root of Christian faith. The Colossians needed to take a hold on Christ, his complete supremacy and utter sufficiency - so do we.

We need a right balance in Christian teaching between doctrinal teaching and practical Christianity. Early Methodism excelled at this. Practical Christianity without doctrinal teaching is a house without a firm foundation. Doctrinal teaching without practical Christianity is merely another system of philosophies that are not lived out. Paul discussed what the divinity, death and resurrection of Jesus should mean to all believers. Because our eternal destiny is sure, heaven should fill our thoughts, sexual impurity and other worldly lusts should not be mentioned among Christians, rather our lives should be marked out by truth, love and peace. Our love for Christ should spill over into love for others. The Christian should be in constant, open communion with God in prayer and should take every opportunity to share the gospel. In Christ, Christians have all they need for salvation and living the Christian life.

Particular attention in Ephesians is given to the following passages:

- Ephesians 1:1-14
- Ephesians 2:1-10
- Ephesians 2:11-22
- Ephesians 4:1-16
- Ephesians 6:10-24

STUDY 8

EPHESIANS

1. Background

Paul founded the church in Ephesus on his second missionary journey (Acts 18:18-21). Unable to stay for a long time Paul later returned to the city and seems to have made it the base for his wider mission in the region. The work was delayed by the disturbance created by Demetrius (Acts 19:23-41) who made silver shrines of Artemis (Diana).

Most of Paul's letters were written to address particular circumstances or controversies but this does not seem to be the case with Ephesians. Paul describes himself as a prisoner of the Lord (3:1; 4:1; 6:20), which not only indicates his circumstances but also shows that he was aware of the divine purpose. Paul was imprisoned on several occasions. Here he implies that he was still able to preach the gospel despite his imprisonment (6:20), which seems to point to Rome (where he had constant visitors, Acts 28:30-31) rather than to Caesarea (where only friends could visit, Acts 24:22-23). It seems Tychicus (6:21-22), who carried the letter to the Colossians (Col. 4:7-8), carried the letter to Ephesus, perhaps on the same journey.

Critical scholarship has often suggested that Paul did not write Ephesians, because differences in phrases and style suggest that another hand is at work or because similarities in phrases and style suggest that Paul would not bother to repeat himself! However, Paul's name appears in the body of the letter (3:1) just as it appears in other letters (2 Corinthians 10:1; Galatians 5:2; Colossians 1:23; 1 Thessalonians 2:18). The self-portrait of the writer that emerges seems rather like the Paul that we meet in other New Testament letters. Ephesians was extraordinarily well attested in the early church and included with the other epistles of Paul. The suggestion that this letter was a late work of a student of Paul, or of anyone else other than Paul, seems unfounded.

The destination of the letter is rather more uncertain. The place name 'in Ephesus' (1:1) is absent in many of the best manuscripts (including the Chester Beatty papyrus dating from about AD 200). Paul had worked at Ephesus for two or three years and yet the letter lacks words of personal greeting or encouragement, saying only that Paul had 'heard' certain things of his readers (1:15) as they had 'heard' of him (3:2). There are also no personal greetings either from Paul and his friends (e.g. Timothy, who was with Paul in Rome and well known in Ephesus, Acts 19:22).

Several solutions are possible but the idea that this letter was a circular to churches in the Ephesian area, rather than to the city of Ephesus only, seems very reasonable. The seven churches of Revelation (Revelation 2 and 3), as well as Colosse, were in this area of modern Western Turkey.

The date of Ephesians depends on its place of origin. If Paul wrote from Rome then this letter dates from about AD 62-64. At this time one of Paul's closest friends, Tychicus – a native of Ephesus, was with him. A possible interpretation of events is that Paul wrote Colossians, the more personal letter to Philemon and the letter to the Ephesians in fairly quick succession.

2. Theme

Ephesians appears to be a letter to Gentile Christians (1:10) who are to be united in one body with Christians from a Jewish background. Colossians was probably written from Rome and the common ground suggests that Ephesians is a further 'prison epistle'.

Ephesians is a wonderful summary of the Christian gospel that has stirred the hearts of many great Christians including the eminent reformer John Calvin. Paul was the great Apostle to the Gentiles but he was not intent on presiding over a divided church. The great theme of the letter, therefore, is God's plan to bring people from every nation and background together in Christ (1:10).

The themes of Colossians and Ephesians are very similar. An important theme in Colossians was the headship of Christ while in Ephesians Paul emphasises the church as the body of Christ. Through his death upon the cross Jesus has brought reconciliation between God and humanity. By the power of the Holy Spirit individual Christians are brought together (reconciled to each other) in Jesus Christ.

In Colossians Paul had spelled out the supremacy of Christ. Christ is the one through whom all powers of the universe were created and who by his death and resurrection has triumphed over all that stood against him. Paul now considers the relationship of the church, the body of Christ, to its risen and exalted head.

The earlier letters (especially Romans and Galatians) show Paul's great concern with the doctrine of justification by faith. Ephesians does not neglect that important theme (2:8-10) but moves on to show that salvation is not purely some private matter but that the divine purpose is to bring all creation to a place where it finds its true headship in Christ.

The church is composed of men and women who have been reconciled to God through Christ - but this is not the whole story. The church is also composed of men and women who have been reconciled to one another in Christ, for they are united to him in faith. This is true of Jews and Gentiles and any other barrier that might be erected.

It is by fellowship in Christ that barriers are broken down and divisions removed. When Christian people are seen to be the community of the reconciled then the message of reconciliation is proclaimed more faithfully and powerfully.

The second part of the letter shows the practical implications of the theory that Paul has been expounding. The purposes of God must be furthered by the lives of his people. Christians are to show the effects of the new life in Christ in their daily living. This will come about by different kinds of people being one in Christ. It will also be shown by purity and love in Christian behaviour. The Christian is called to be a member of God's new society (Stott). This affects relationships at home and in the family and gives stability in the fight against all the principalities and powers of evil. The letter is, therefore, a blend of Christian doctrine and Christian duty, of Christian faith and of Christian life.

3. Passages

Ephesians 1:1-14

Paul brings a Christian dimension to a customary opening. The theme is wonder and thanksgiving that God has poured out his love in Christ. Paul speaks of God's love as a love that never began as well as a love that will never end. By his death Jesus sets us free from sin and his resurrection is something in which we can share. The work of the Father is made manifest (the mystery made known) in the Son and sealed by the promised Holy Spirit. To this Paul adds the analogy of the Holy Spirit as a 'deposit' (KJV 'earnest'), the first instalment of blessing.

Ephesians 2:1-10

Paul describes the hopelessness of being without God, cut off from him, dead in transgressions (lapses) and sins (shortcomings). People were wandering about the earth in the grip of sin but God in his grace has, by the power that raised Jesus, made us alive with him and made us part of a new creation. After his resurrection Jesus ascended to the right hand of the Father (1:20-21). These events have their counterpart in the experience of believers. The way that salvation is apprehended (made our own) is by faith. Any kind of self-effort is comprehensively ruled out. There can be no self-congratulation. It is all because of God's grace. Nevertheless, though works play no part in securing salvation, good works attest its reality.

Ephesians 2:11-22

Gentile Christians can easily forget the former disadvantages. Gentiles were 'separate' from Christ. God in Christ could bridge even the great divide between Jew and Gentile. In Christ any barrier can be overcome. 'Christ' and 'Messiah' mean the same but Paul now adds the historical name 'Jesus'. He is the meeting point for God with all humanity. Jesus' death on the cross is the one means of peace with God for all without distinction and the common bond in him surpasses all, not simply that Jews and Gentiles should be reconciled to each other but that both of them together should be reconciled to God, in one body by one Spirit.

Ephesians 4:1-16

Christians are bound together by one Lord, one faith, and one baptism. Yet we are all individuals too. We need to complement one another and grow together. Growing together means being in a right relationship with the head, which brings the body into the correct order. We must grow in love and truth.

Ephesians 6:10-24

'Finally' literally means 'for the rest'. The Scriptures never give the impression that the Christian life will be easy. It was anything but easy for Paul in prison. The Christian is engaged in a battle and it is a profound spiritual struggle but the Christian is not left without powerful weapons or full armour (panoply) with which to stand (standing ground).

4. Outline and application

1:1-2	Greeting
1:3-14	Praise for God's spiritual blessings
1:15-23	Thanksgiving and prayer for greater understanding
2:1-10	Sinners made alive by God's grace alone
2:11-22	Gentiles and Jews must be one in Christ
3:1-13	Paul's privilege in proclaiming the gospel
3:14-21	Prayer for stability through greater understanding
4:1-16	Unity in the body of Christ
4:17-5:14	Living as Christians
5:15-20	The filling with the Spirit
5:21-6:9	Mutual submission
6:10-20	Spiritual warfare and the whole armour of God
6:21-24	Concluding remarks and greetings

It is right to stress the message of justification by grace through faith and Paul does so but the story does not end there. The salvation of the individual must never be divorced from the community of the saved. Some of us might be happier with thinking of ourselves as individual Christians but we are part of the church, the body of Christ. This gives us both privileges and responsibilities.

Ephesians is not a letter that allows a privatised gospel and faith. God's purpose is to create new individuals in community, a new society. The new society of the people of Jesus Christ should stand out as light against the dark relief of the old world, because of the faith, oneness and conduct of its people.

As John Stott writes: 'For God's new society is characterised by life in place of death, by unity and reconciliation in place of division and alienation, by the wholesome standards of righteousness in place of the corruption of wickedness, by love and peace in place of hatred and strife, and by unremitting conflict with evil in place of a flabby compromise with it.'

Particular attention in Philippians is given to the following passages:

Philippians 1:18-26

Philippians 2:5-11

Philippians 3:1-11

Philippians 4:4-9

STUDY 9

PHILIPPIANS

1. Background

Philippi was a Roman colony in Macedonia about ten miles inland from the Aegean Sea. In 42 BC it was the site of a famous battle at which Octavian defeated Brutus and Cassius. It became a military colony. After Octavian defeated Antony in 27 BC, Philippi was given an even more important status in the province and its citizens had many privileges.

Paul founded the church at Philippi on his second missionary journey (Acts 16). While the apostle was in Troas, he was instructed in a vision to proceed into Macedonia, and Philippi became the first European city in which he preached. Apparently the Jewish population in Philippi was small, at least there was no synagogue. Consequently, Paul met first with some women at a Jewish place of prayer by the riverbank outside the city. The first convert was Lydia, a “God-fearer” (a term denoting a Gentile who had become a partial adherent to Judaism) who responded to Paul by receiving Christian baptism and opening her home to the missionary party. Other significant incidents were the exorcism of the demon from a slave girl and the conversion of the jailer and his family. These early converts were a most diverse and unlikely group with which to found a local church, but the grace of God overcame their differences. Not surprisingly, Paul had a special affection for the church and rejoiced over its progress. The church sent gifts to Paul on several occasions and Paul wrote to them with gratitude (Philippians 4:15-16). Epaphroditus had brought the gift from Philippi. He had instructions to minister to Paul’s needs through personal service (2:25), but during his trip he had fallen ill and almost died. For some reason, Epaphroditus was embarrassed at falling ill. Perhaps, he felt that he had let Paul and the church down. The Philippians were naturally worried about him but Paul’s request that the church should receive Epaphroditus with all joy and that they should hold him in high regard (2:29) implies that some misunderstanding had occurred. When Epaphroditus recovered he wanted to return to Philippi and took Paul’s letter with him. Paul points out to the Philippians that Epaphroditus had been a real fellow soldier in the Lord’s work (2:25), that his illness had been extremely serious (2:27-30), and that he was worthy of a hero’s welcome (2:29).

Paul was certainly in prison at the time of writing but it is not clear to which time of imprisonment Paul refers. Paul hopes that he will be released quickly (1:25, 2:24) and hopes to send Timothy soon. Luke records in Acts (19:22) that Paul sent Erastus and Timothy from Ephesus. The sending of Timothy points to a possible Ephesian imprisonment, but why does Paul not mention Erastus in his letter to the Philippians? Luke accompanied Paul to Rome but although Paul mentions Luke in Colossians (4:14) he does not mention him in Philippians. The journeys between Rome and Philippi were also much longer than the journeys between Ephesus and Philippi. On the other hand, there is much to be said for the view that Paul wrote the letter towards the end of his Roman imprisonment when perhaps Luke had already moved on. In Philippians, Paul does not mention the collection for Jerusalem, which was much in his mind while at Ephesus. Acts does not say that Paul was even imprisoned at Ephesus. The palace guard (1:13) and Caesar’s household (4:22) point to the letter’s possible Roman origin. If this is the case then the letter can be dated about AD 59-61.

2. Theme

If written from Rome, Philippians is probably the last New Testament letter of Paul to the churches. Paul's special affection for the church at Philippi is revealed in the personal tone that runs through much of the letter.

The major theme is undoubtedly joy (1:4, 25-26; 2:2, 29; 4:1). The letter's informal style makes it difficult to outline. Paul seems to have started writing to renew his thanks to the Philippians for their gift and to reassure them of the well being of their messenger, Epaphroditus, as he returns home. Timothy's approaching visit (2:19), Paul's own hope of visiting the church (2:24), and the problem of a disagreement between two women at Philippi (4:2) could also have influenced his decision to write. However, now he is writing, Paul can warn the Philippians about the dangers of divisiveness and the false teaching of the Judaizers.

Against the spirit of divisiveness, Paul points out the importance of humility. Paul points out that this was the attitude of Jesus despite his eternal divinity and glory (2:5-11).

Preachers who use 'finally' half way through the sermon are in good company for Paul uses 'finally' (3:1) when there are two chapters to follow. Perhaps Paul had genuinely intended to close but had then received more news from Philippi for the letter does change in tone considerably at this point. Paul, with his impeccable Jewish background (3:4-6), still calls circumcision 'mutilation' (3:2). He calls the Judaizers 'dogs' (3:2), the very term with which Jews would label the despised Gentiles. If the Judaizers were looking for salvation by good works, Paul calls them 'evil-workers' (3:2). In effect the Judaizers oppose the work of Christ on the cross by requiring works of the law.

The letter closes with various exhortations. Paul includes a plea for unity between two women in the church. Exhortations to joy, patience, trust, prayer, thanksgiving, and nobility of thought follow, with promises of divine presence and peace and the return of Jesus.

3. Passages

Philippians 1:18-26

In prison Paul does not know what judgment awaits him. It was his great desire that whatever the circumstances, whether in release or in death, he would magnify Christ. In practical terms this meant showing courage and not being ashamed of his Lord. Paul concludes that whatever happens he can rejoice. He looks to the unfolding of his Christian life and his ultimate hope of standing unashamed both before human judges and before his Lord for, regardless of the outcome of his immediate physical circumstances, he has every reason to expect spiritual victory to be his. His own faith is unshaken.

Philippians 2:5-11

Paul takes the example of Jesus Christ as the greatest example of humility and in doing so provides a concise statement of the truth about his Lord. This passage is often thought to be a quotation from an early Christian hymn (1 Timothy 3:16 could be another example), but this need not be someone else's work. Paul could clearly write highly poetic passages (e.g. Romans 8:35-39 and 1 Corinthians 13). In any event, this passage is a magnificent summary of the person and work of Christ, pre-existent ('being in very nature God', literally 'existing in the form of God'), incarnate ('being made in human likeness', 'found in appearance as a man'), crucified ('death on a cross'), exalted ('God exalted him to the highest place', literally 'super-exalted') and glorified ('gave him the name that is above every name'). Controversy centres on what the phrase 'emptied himself' means. A modified form of the kenosis theory ('kenosis' Gk: empty) states that in the incarnation the Lord is stripped of his glory but not of his essential deity (*HP* 101, 216). The best interpretation of this passage is that the pre-incarnate Christ already possessed equality with the Father and resolved not to cling to it. The name given appears not simply to be 'Jesus', the name given before his birth and confirmed by Joseph (Matthew 1:25; Luke 2:21), but 'Lord' (i.e. God). The universal acknowledgment that 'Jesus is Lord' will include angels and departed saints in heaven, people still living on earth, and the satanic hosts and lost humanity in hell.

Philippians 3:1-11

'Finally' carries the sense of furthermore. The Judaizers, who insisted that Gentile converts must be circumcised and keep the law, followed Paul everywhere. Their 'gospel' was in effect no gospel at all for they altered the very basis of faith, which is salvation by the grace of God through faith alone. Paul is a worthy opponent for these Judaizers for his credentials are second to none, though he deems them irrelevant to salvation and the gospel.

Philippians 4:4-9

This advice is all the more powerful as it comes from a man in an ancient prison with the possibility of death looming over him. The secret of his joy seems to be emptying his mind of

the negative things and filling them with the positive, not in abstract terms alone - for the personification of every virtue Paul extols is seen in the Lord Jesus Christ.

4. Outline and application

1:1-2	Greeting
1:3-11	Thanksgiving, prayer and affection for Philippians
1:12-26	Paul's prison preaching, ready for release / death
1:27-30	Exhortation to worthy conduct
2:1-18	Unity by self-emptying in the example of Christ
2:19-30	The sending of Timothy and Epaphroditus
3:1-21	Warning against the Judaizers
4:1-3	Plea for unity between two women
4:4-7	Joy and trust
4:8-9	Nobility of thought
4:10-20	Gratitude of gift
4:21-23	Concluding greetings and benediction

Four themes can be drawn from this letter that need special evidence within the contemporary church. They are interdependent and one can never hope to have an abundance of any one of these attributes in isolation from the others.

Christian joy is a great theme of Philippians. The Christian rejoices in prayer, in the fruit of labours, in the preaching of the gospel, even in suffering.

Fellowship is also important. Pride, selfishness or factions must not mar it. Christians must share in the proclamation of the gospel in word and deed.

The gospel is the great basis of fellowship and joy. Christians have a partnership in the gospel. Going to the very heart of the gospel can often solve practical and doctrinal problems. It must not be modified in any way or it is no longer the gospel of Jesus Christ and his cross.

Philippians constantly brings the reader's attention back to Paul's great ambition. It is that Christ should be magnified.

END NOTES

There is a very real sense in which our study of Paul's nine letters to the New Testament churches has not finished. It has just begun. Rather than try to master all nine letters, it is a very good aim to gain some knowledge about one of them. Below are some suggestions for further reading.

FURTHER READING

General

Gundry: *A Survey of the New Testament* (PP)

The Lion Handbook to the Bible (Lion)

On individual books

Bible Speaks Today Series (IVP): A book is available on each of Paul's New Testament letters to the churches. There is just the one volume on 1 & 2 Thessalonians but there is a separate volume on 1 Corinthians and 2 Corinthians.

Crossway Bible Guides (Crossway Books): In this series no volume is yet published on Galatians. These are smaller, less technical and cheaper than the *Bible Speaks Today* series.

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Thessalonians

J Stott: *The Message of Thessalonians* (BST/IVP)

Corinthians

M Green: *To Corinth with love* (H&S)

D Prior: *The Message of 1 Corinthians* (BST/IVP)

Romans

F F Bruce: *Romans* (TNTC/IVP)

Colossians

R Lucas: *The Message of Colossians and Philemon* (BST/IVP)

Ephesians

J Stott: *The Message of Ephesians* (BST/IVP)

Philippians

Motyer: *The Message of Philippians* (BST/IVP)

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