

EVERYTHING YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THE NEW TESTAMENT

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The Pauline Epistles I

Authorship

The Pauline Epistles were written by Paul the apostle. Paul was the most unlikely candidate to write almost a quarter of the New Testament and half of its epistles because he was an early opponent of Christ and the church. The book of Acts records that Paul was an aggressive persecutor, arresting and overseeing the deaths of many believers, including Stephen (Acts 8:1-3). However, as Paul was on his way to arrest more believers, Jesus supernaturally appeared to him on the road to Damascus, blinding him and calling him to repent (Acts 9:1-9). After being instructed to visit a disciple named Ananias in Damascus, Paul's vision was restored and he became a follower of Jesus. However, the Lord wasn't finished with him. Jesus told Ananias, *"Go, for he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel. For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name"* (Acts 9:15-16). Therefore, Jesus commissioned Paul to be an apostle, one sent by the Lord to take the gospel to the nations. Paul would later reflect upon his conversion and calling by stating, *"Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me. For I am the least of the apostles, unworthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain"* (1 Cor. 15:9-10). Paul is considered the greatest missionary and theologian of the early church.

1. Galatians

- a. **Date:** Most believe Paul wrote this letter in AD 48, which makes it the earliest inspired epistle.
- b. **Audience:** Dating the epistle is difficult because there are two theories concerning the location(s) of *"the churches of Galatia"* (1:2). The *"South Galatian"* theory suggests that Paul was writing to the churches in southern Galatia (Roman province, Asia Minor, modern Turkey) that he visited on his first missionary journey around AD 45-47 (Acts 13-14). These churches included Pisidian, Antioch, Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe. The *"North Galatian"* theory suggests that Paul was writing to the churches in northern Galatia (ethnic Gauls) that he visited on his second missionary journey (Acts 16:6; 18:23). While Carson weighs several reasons for both theories (Carson, 559-461), Beale reasons that since the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15) addresses the problem that Paul outlines in Galatians, it only makes sense that Paul was writing to the churches in South Galatia that he visited on his first missionary journey. He took this problem to the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15, before he went to the North Galatian on his second missionary journey. Therefore, Paul most likely wrote to the churches he visited first (Acts 13-14, South Galatia) before the Jerusalem Council took place (Acts 15) (Beale, 246).

- c. **Problem:** After Paul and Barnabas proclaimed the gospel and planted churches throughout southern Galatia (Acts 13-14), false teachers arrived proclaiming "a different gospel" (Gal. 1:6). Paul refers to these people as those who "trouble" and "unsettle" the church (1:7; 5:10, 12). These false teachers were proclaiming a gospel of faith plus works, specifically works related to the Old Testament Law, such as circumcision. Their message was most likely what Paul reported in Acts 15:1, "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved." In essence, they were teaching that Gentile people needed to obey and follow Jewish laws and lifestyles in order to be saved, to become a part of end-time Israel (Beale, 247). Therefore, Paul doesn't begin with the usual pleasantries, but quickly lashes out, "I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel" (Gal. 1:6).
- d. **Purpose:** In response to the false teaching, Paul writes to affirm that believers are "not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ...by works of the law no one will be justified" (Gal. 2:15-16). After all, "Abraham 'believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness'" (Gal. 3:6). Paul continues by making biblical and logical arguments about the old and new covenants. Therefore, believers are in danger of abandoning Jesus if they try to supplement their faith with works of the law. Paul further urges believers to "walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh....those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires" (Gal. 5:24). Finally, Paul responds to the accusation that he was inferior to the other apostles (e.g., Peter, John, James, etc.). However, he reminds the church he is indeed "an apostle – not from men nor through man, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead" (Gal. 1:1). To give evidence of his devotion to Christ, Paul concludes by saying, "From now on let no one cause me trouble, for I bear on my body the marks of Jesus" (Gal. 6:17).

2. Romans

- a. **Overview:** Paul's epistle to the church in Rome is the longest and most theological of his letters. The great reformer, Martin Luther, stated that Romans is "the very purist gospel" (Carson, 391).
- b. **Date:** Following the chronology of Acts, Paul most likely wrote this letter at the end of his third missionary journey in Corinth, around AD 56-57 (Beale, 179).
- c. **Audience:** Paul states from the beginning that he is writing "to all those in Rome who are loved by God and called to be saints" (Rom. 1:7). While we're not told who planted the church in Rome, around AD 180, Irenaeus identified both Peter and Paul as the founding missionaries. However, the letter itself makes clear that Paul had never visited the church (cf. Rom. 1:10, 13). Likewise, there is virtually no evidence that Peter planted the church either. According to Carson, Rome was most likely evangelized by Jews who "were converted on the Day of Pentecost" who brought "the gospel to the great capital" (Carson, 395). But since Rome was

highly populated with Jews in the first century, Paul knew the Roman capital could be a major center for missionary work throughout the world. Therefore, he didn't want these Jewish Christians to misunderstand the gospel or believe something false, so he wrote the clearest and most compressive treatment of the gospel in the New Testament.

- d. **Purpose:** There seems to be at least two main purposes for Paul's letter to the church in Rome.
- **Personal Ministry:** Some have understood Paul to write with respect to a collection of funds for the Jerusalem church and to support his mission work in Spain (Rom. 15:28). In order to win the support of these believers, Romans serves as a doctrinal statement for Paul's ministry, a confession of what he believes concerning the gospel and Jewish/Gentile relations. Therefore, according to Guthrie, Romans "is more of a treatise than a letter and bore little reference to the historical situation out of which it arose" (409).
 - **Gospel Unity:** It's been noted that in AD 49, Emperor Claudius expelled many Jews from Rome, including Jewish Christians. During their absence, many Gentile believers joined the church, bringing more Gentile influence and understanding. Therefore, when Jewish Christians returned, there was likely doctrinal and relational friction between the two groups. Such confusion is evident in how Paul asks questions that seem to be on the minds of his readers. For example, "*What then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? By no means!*" (Rom. 6:1-2). Therefore, Paul wrote to give the Jews and Gentiles a more complete understanding of the gospel, and how the two groups belong to the same Savior and are saved the same way.
- e. **Key Verse:** "*For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, "The righteous shall live by faith."* – Romans 1:16-17
- f. **Structure and Outline**
- **Sin (1:18-3:23)** – According to Paul, the entire human race is sinful and stands condemned before God, deserving of death. In Romans 3:10-11, Paul quotes Psalm 14, declaring, "*None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one.*" He further adds, "*For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God (Rom. 3:23). Therefore, no one is without the curse of sin and death, and no one can save himself.*"
 - **Salvation (3:24-5:21)** – While both the Romans and Jews had different faith traditions, some of which involved many gods and religious practices, Paul reminds them that there is only one way to be saved: by grace through faith in the finished work of Christ. Paul writes, "But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it – the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ

for all who believe" (Rom. 3:21-22). He continues, *"But God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God"* (Rom. 5:8-9).

- **Spiritual Growth** (6:1-8:17) – After stating that salvation is through faith in Christ alone, Paul continues to show that such faith should produce a life of righteousness that continues to grow in godliness. Paul asks, *"What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it?"* (Rom. 6:1-2).
- **Sovereignty** (8:18-11:36) – Paul moves from discussing salvation and spiritual growth to the assurance believers have through faith in Christ. Such assurance is grounded in God's sovereignty over salvation. He writes, *"For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified"* (Rom. 8:29-30). Then Paul reminds us that nothing *"in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord"* (Rom. 8:28).
- **Service** (12:1-15:13) – A final aspect of the Christian life that Paul emphasizes is the responsibility of believers to use their spiritual gifts in serving God in the local church. Paul declares, *"For as in one body we have many members, and the members do not all have the same function, so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another. Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them"* (Rom. 12:4-6). He concludes with practical concerns such as honoring the government, loving one another, and not leading others into sin.