

The Heart of Paul's Theology

Lesson 1

Paul and His Theology

Manuscript



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INTRODUCTION

Have you ever had a friend you thought you knew really well, only to see a side of him you hadn't noticed before? Something like this often happens when Christians begin a serious study of the apostle Paul. Most Christians are familiar with Paul and his epistles. We hear lots of sermons based on his letters, and we often focus on them in Bible studies. In many ways, he feels like a familiar friend. But when we dig deeper into Paul's life and theology, we often see a side of him that we've never noticed before.

We've entitled this series *The Heart of Paul's Theology*. In this series, we'll explore the centerpiece, or heart, of the apostle's theological outlooks. This first lesson is called "Paul and His Theology." And we'll look at how becoming familiar with Paul's life helps us grasp the most essential and influential elements of his theology.

We'll touch on three main subjects. First, we'll explore some important aspects of Paul's cultural background to see how his background deeply influenced his Christian beliefs. Second, we'll look at how Paul's beliefs related to his ministry as an apostle. And third, we'll identify Paul's central theological outlooks, the crucial ideas on which Paul based many of the other things he believed. Let's begin with a look into Paul's cultural background.

CULTURAL BACKGROUND

We all know from common experience that many things influence what we believe about God, about ourselves, and about the world around us. No one has ever developed theology in a vacuum, and this was true of the apostle Paul as well. The Holy Spirit led Paul into the truth of the Christian faith, but the Spirit also used many aspects of Paul's cultural background in the process of leading him to the truth. And this means that if we want to understand the heart of Paul's theology, we have to become familiar with his background.

Unfortunately, we don't know many details about Paul's personal background, but we do know that he grew up under two strong cultural influences. On the one hand, Jewish culture greatly affected him. And on the other hand, his exposure to Gentile, Greco-Roman culture impacted him in significant ways. Let's begin by asking how Jewish culture influenced the apostle Paul.

JEWISH CULTURE

It's often easy for modern Christians to forget that Paul was a Jew, like Jesus, his other apostles, and many Christians in the first century. And like many other Jews in his day, the traditions of Israel touched every dimension of his life. Paul's Jewish upbringing impacted the concepts he believed, the priorities of his daily behaviors, and the depth of his emotional commitments to his faith. And for this reason, if we overlook the influence that Paul's Jewish heritage had on him, we're very likely to miss the heart of his theology.

Before Conversion

We can see how important Paul's Jewish culture was to him in at least two ways. On the one hand, the New Testament record makes it plain that Paul was very conscious of his Jewish heritage before his conversion to the Christian faith. His own description of his youth reveals that he was firmly committed to Judaism. For example, in Philippians 3:5, Paul claimed to have been:

... circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee (Philippians 3:5).

Paul was a religious conservative, fully dedicated to preserving and pursuing Israel's traditions. And listen to how Paul described himself in Galatians 1:14:

I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my own age among my people, so extremely zealous was I for the traditions of my fathers (Galatians 1:14).

Before his conversion, Paul's zeal for Judaism was so great that he violently persecuted the Christian church as a Jewish heresy.

Beyond this, Paul was highly educated in the traditions of Judaism. According to Acts 22:3, he had even been a student of one of the most famous rabbis in Jerusalem, Rabbi Gamaliel. Far from being an ignorant fanatic, Paul was highly trained and sophisticated in his understanding of Jewish theology and Scripture.

The apostle Paul, he was a brilliant man, a theologian. He studied under the feet of the teacher Gamaliel. And then, as a theologian, he did not like what was happening in Jerusalem and began to persecute the church, because he believed very strongly in Judaism. He says himself — if you have time to read, you can read in Philippians 3 you'll see how he describes himself — being a Benjaminite, being a Pharisee, observer of the law, and he was, therefore, a very brilliant

and gifted man who studied the law very carefully. And when, then, the Lord had him converted on the way to Damascus, he is able to use his brilliance to be able to defend the gospel and spread the gospel... He was a brilliant theologian, who then was able to very quickly explain every part of the law because he understood it.

— Prof. Mumo Kisau

After Conversion

On the other hand, Paul's Jewish culture was not simply important to him before he became a Christian; he also remained deeply indebted to this same heritage after his conversion. For instance, even as a Christian, Paul continued to observe many Jewish customs. As he said in 1 Corinthians 9:20:

To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (1 Corinthians 9:20).

The New Testament records many times when Paul the Christian carefully followed the traditions of his fathers to spread the gospel of Christ among the Jews. And even after the Jews had severely persecuted Paul because of his faith in Christ, Paul's ethnic identity and loyalty were so strong that he still wanted desperately to save them. Listen to Romans 9:2-5 and the way Paul revealed his feelings about his fellow Jews:

I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, my kinsman according to the flesh. They are Israelites, and to them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises. To them belong the patriarchs, and from their race, according to the flesh, is the Christ, who is God over all, blessed forever (Romans 9:2-5).

Paul's Jewish background raises a crucial question. How did his Jewish heritage influence his Christian theology? In many ways, this influence can be seen in everything he wrote, but two items are particularly important to remember.

First, both as a Jew and as a Jewish Christian, Paul believed in the authority of Old Testament Scriptures. He trusted and submitted to them without reservation. Paul would never have believed anything that contradicted the teachings of the Old Testament.

Paul was Jewish. He always was Jewish. His background was Jewish. Interesting, you know, being born in Tarsus — which was not in Palestine, which would be a part of what we call the Diaspora, the area where, you know, Jews lived sort of in the Greek world — he

maintained his Jewish identity, he maintained his Jewishness... When he tells the story in Galatians of his background, he talks about, his zeal far exceeded his peers in knowing his ancestors. And he's talking about Judaism there. He's talking about committing himself to the teachings of the Old Testament, you know, the teachings of the Hebrew Bible. And it's his Jewish background that comes into his teaching of who Jesus is when he goes to the Gentiles. When he goes to the nations, he wants them to understand that the coming of Jesus was the coming of the Jewish Messiah, that the coming of the gospel to the nations was the fulfillment of the promises made to Abraham... When we think of Paul's Jewish background prior to being converted, it was his Jewish background that drove him to persecute. But after meeting the risen Christ, it is his very understanding of his Jewish background, now through the lens of Christ, that makes him say there is no Jew or Greek, that circumcision is nothing.

— Dr. Mark A. Jennings

Listen to how Paul instructed his protégé Timothy about the Old Testament in 2 Timothy 3:14-15:

But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it and how from childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus (2 Timothy 3:14-15).

The Old Testament continued to be Paul's Bible throughout his life, and he called on all faithful Christians to submit themselves to these Scriptures — or “sacred writings” — as the Word of God.

In the second place, Paul's theology was also deeply impacted by the Jewish hope that God would one day send the Messiah, the great son of David, who would end Israel's suffering and extend the kingdom of God to the ends of the earth. In fact, the reason Paul became a follower of Jesus was that he believed Jesus to be this long-awaited Messiah. That's why Paul didn't hesitate to call Jesus the Christ, or *Christos*, which is the Greek translation of the Old Testament Hebrew word *Meshiach* or Messiah.

Paul didn't see Christianity as a replacement of Judaism. Rather, he firmly believed that Christianity was the fulfillment of his Jewish heritage. Complete submission to the Hebrew Scriptures, and hope for the worldwide victory of God's kingdom through the Messiah, were essential dimensions of Paul's Christian outlooks. In these and many other ways, Paul's central Christian beliefs rose out of his Jewish heritage.

But Paul wasn't influenced by his Jewish cultural background alone. The Holy Spirit also used Paul's contact with Gentile culture to shape his theology.

GENTILE CULTURE

From the time Israel was exiled from the Promised Land near the end of the Old Testament, large numbers of Jews had settled throughout the Mediterranean world. Some Jews did all they could to separate themselves from Gentiles. Others simply adopted the cultural values and practices of the nations where they lived. But there were also communities of devout Jews who continued to observe Jewish traditions as they lived and worked among Gentiles. As we've already seen, Paul was raised to be a devout Jew, but the New Testament also makes it clear that he was quite familiar with the Gentile, Greco-Roman culture in which he lived.

In the first place, we should note that, throughout his life, Paul lived not only in Jewish Palestine, but at different times in his life he lived in the Gentile world as well. According to Acts 21:39, Paul came from the Gentile city of Tarsus in Cilicia. In Acts 22:3, we read that he had been brought up in Jerusalem. But Acts 9:30 and 11:25 indicate that Paul again lived in Tarsus as an adult.

In addition to this, Paul's contact with the Gentile world was enhanced by the fact that he enjoyed full Roman citizenship. In fact, according to Acts 22:28, he hadn't purchased his citizenship, but had been born a Roman citizen. On several occasions in the book of Acts, we read that Paul actively asserted his rights as a Roman citizen to promote the gospel and to defend himself.

Beyond this, Paul's letters to Gentile churches demonstrate his awareness of Gentile customs. In 1 Corinthians 9:21, he made a remarkable declaration,

To those outside the law I became as one outside the law ... that I might win those outside the law (1 Corinthians 9:21).

Paul knew Gentile culture so well that he was able to walk the fine line of adapting his behavior to Gentile customs while still obeying Christ's law.

Finally, Paul also showed himself to be knowledgeable of sophisticated Greco-Roman literature. In passages like Acts 17:28 and Titus 1:12, Paul actually referred to and even quoted pagan philosophers. He was well educated in the philosophies and religions of the Greco-Roman world.

Now, we have to ask ourselves: What effects did Paul's awareness of Gentile culture have on him? How did Paul's exposure to Gentile culture influence his Christian outlooks? We should be clear that Paul's awareness of Gentile culture did not, as some have said, lead Paul to alter Christianity to make it acceptable to Gentiles. He remained distinctly Jewish in his basic orientation. Yet, Paul's contact with the Gentile world affected him in at least two ways.

On the one side, Paul's contact with Gentile culture equipped him to minister to Gentiles outside the church. Better than many others, Paul knew the values and beliefs of Gentiles, and he used this knowledge to bring the gospel to them in effective ways. For example, Paul's sermon at the city of Lystra in Acts 14, and his sermon in Athens in Acts 17, both illustrate how Paul was adept at shaping his presentations of the gospel of Christ in ways that Gentiles were well-prepared to understand. In Romans 11:13 Paul went so

far as to call himself, “The apostle to the Gentiles” because God had called and equipped him to bring the Gentiles the good news of Christ. Beyond this, Paul was also prepared to minister to Gentiles within the church, and even to fight for them.

Paul's commitment to reaching Gentiles for Christ embroiled him in one of the most serious controversies of the first-century church, namely, the question of whether or not to force male Gentile believers to be circumcised. When the majority of Christian believers in the first century were Jews, it was only natural for the church to continue this practice. But according to Acts 15, Paul played an important role in convincing the apostles and elders in Jerusalem that Gentile converts did not need to be circumcised. And in his letter to the Galatians, he spoke strongly in defense of the Gentiles' rights not to undergo circumcision.

But this one controversy represented a much broader concern Paul had for Gentiles in the church. While many Jewish Christians in his day considered Gentiles to be second-class believers at best, Paul insisted that Christ had destroyed the dividing wall between Jews and Gentiles. As he wrote in Galatians 3:28-29:

There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise (Galatians 3:28-29).

An important theme in many of Paul's epistles was that, in Christ, the kingdom of God was spreading from Israel to the ends of the earth. Jesus had flung open the door of salvation to the Gentile nations so that even Gentiles who were in Christ were counted as full-blooded Jews and heirs of God's promises to Abraham.

Paul taught that Gentiles could be true believers and followers of Jesus Christ and heirs of the promises made to Abraham, but the logic that he uses in letters like Galatians and elsewhere is that to be called a child of Abraham was to receive the promises that God made to Abraham, and believe in them and, by faith, being assured of being a true child of God. And all of that's actually prior to the giving the Law, prior to actually an inbuilt Jewish understanding that you needed to be circumcised to be marked out as a true follower of Jesus Christ. And so, every true believer, actually, could say that they're a child of Abraham if they exercise a faith in God that is trusting and believing.

— Rev. Dr. Simon Vibert

We see that Paul's background in Jewish and Gentile cultures influenced him in many ways. And with this dual background in mind, we're in a position to turn to the second major topic of our lesson: How was Paul's theology impacted by his apostolic ministry?

APOSTOLIC MINISTRY

In our day, we often think of serious theologians as scholars who sit in a quiet office and devote themselves to abstract, academic matters. This is why so many today think of theologians as disconnected from the challenges that ordinary Christians face day after day. But Paul's theological teachings were not disconnected from life. Rather, Paul's experiences of working as Christ's apostle with unbelievers, individual believers, and churches in many different places, deeply influenced what he believed. And for this reason, if we are going to understand the heart of Paul's theology, we must become familiar with his ministry.

We'll look specifically at three aspects of Paul's apostolic ministry: his office, his mission, and his writings. Let's start with his apostolic office.

OFFICE

On at least 20 occasions, Paul described himself as an "apostle," often with the qualification that he was "an apostle of Jesus Christ." This claim was very important because Christ ordained apostles to speak on his behalf with unquestionable authority. Now, we all know that Paul wasn't one of the original apostles whom Jesus had chosen during his earthly ministry. Still, Paul claimed to be Christ's authoritative representative. He insisted that he had received an apostleship equal to the original apostles. But how was this possible? The answer lies in the fact that Paul met a set of qualifications established for apostleship.

As the apostles awaited the outpouring of the Spirit on the day of Pentecost, Peter determined that a new apostle should replace Judas. And Peter explained that authoritative apostles of Christ had to meet three criteria. First, according to Acts 1:21, apostles had to have been taught directly by Christ during his three-year earthly ministry. Second, in Acts 1:22 we read that they had to be witnesses of Jesus' resurrection. And third, in Acts 1:23-26, we find that new apostles had to be chosen for the office by the Lord himself.

But what about Paul? At first glance, he failed to meet the first criterion for apostleship: after all, he didn't follow Jesus during his earthly ministry. But a closer look reveals that he met this qualification. In Galatians 1:11-18, we learn that immediately after his conversion on the road to Damascus, Paul spent three years in the Arabian wilderness. He mentioned the length of this period to demonstrate that it roughly equaled the time which the other apostles had spent with Jesus. During those years, Jesus himself revealed the gospel to Paul. Listen to Paul's words in Galatians 1:11-12:

The gospel that was preached by me is not man's gospel. For I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ (Galatians 1:11-12).

Paul also met the second criterion. In Acts 9:3, we read that on the road to Damascus Paul saw “a light from heaven,” the light of the resurrected Christ. In this special way, Paul had seen the risen Savior.

And finally, Paul met the third criterion, since he was chosen by the Lord himself. According to Acts 9:15, Jesus himself ordained Paul to his office. The Lord said:

He is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel (Acts 9:15).

And to remove any doubt about the validity of Paul's apostleship, Galatians 2:7-8 indicates that the original apostles confirmed his call and apostleship. As Paul wrote:

They saw that I had been entrusted with the gospel to the uncircumcised, just as Peter had been entrusted with the gospel to the circumcised (for he who worked through Peter for his apostolic ministry to the circumcised worked also through me for mine to the Gentiles). (Galatians 2:7-8).

As we see here, the other apostles recognized that Paul's apostleship was comparable to Peter's. And listen to Peter's words about Paul in 2 Peter 3:15-16:

Our beloved brother Paul also wrote to you according to the wisdom given him ... There are some things in [his letters] that are hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other Scriptures (2 Peter 3:15-16).

According to Peter, Paul's epistles were to be set on par with “the other Scriptures.”

In the early church there were many false teachers who contradicted Paul's teachings. So, to counter these false teachers, the New Testament made it clear that Paul was a legitimate apostle. More than this, Paul presented outlooks to the church which were difficult to grasp and even harder to accept. Yet, when he served in his role as Christ's apostolic ambassador, Paul spoke with the authority of other apostles and wrote with the authority of Scripture. No matter what anyone said, their perspectives had to be judged by the standard of Paul's teachings. His writings actually carry the authority of Christ himself. We cannot follow Christ without following Paul. Even today faithful Christians must conform their theology to his.

Now that we have Paul's apostolic office in mind, we should look at his apostolic mission. What did Paul do as an apostle? What was his role in the mission of the church?

MISSION

As Christ's authoritative apostle, Paul had a very special role in the church. As he put it in his letter to the Ephesians, Jesus' apostles and prophets were the foundation upon

which God built the church. As such, God called Paul to spread the kingdom of God beyond the borders of Israel by traveling to Gentile nations, evangelizing, starting churches and teaching the people of God everywhere he went.

We can get a good idea of the work that Christ called Paul to do by considering four journeys he took as an apostle — three missionary journeys and a fourth journey that took him to Rome. Let's begin with an overview of his first journey as an apostle of Christ.

First Journey

We learn about Paul's first missionary journey in Acts 13, 14. It began when God told the church in Syrian Antioch to set aside Paul and Barnabas for a special work. Immediately after this, the Holy Spirit led these men through the isle of Cyprus. After several opportunities for ministry there, Paul and Barnabas moved forward on an evangelistic tour of Asia Minor. Paul's initial practice was to proclaim the gospel primarily in the Jewish synagogues. But after meeting with strong resistance from the Jews, he began to preach to the Gentiles as well.

Paul successfully planted a number of churches on this journey, including quite a few in the region of Galatia. After traveling to the east as far as Derbe, Paul and Barnabas reversed their direction. They returned through the cities of Galatia, eventually reaching the sea and sailing for home.

Paul's first journey as an apostle of Christ was relatively short and straightforward. But his second journey took him much further from the land of Palestine.

Second Journey

Paul's second missionary journey appears in Acts 15:36–18:22. This expedition began after the apostles and church leaders in Jerusalem selected Paul and Barnabas to deliver a letter to the churches in Antioch. The letter explained that Gentile converts did not need to be circumcised or to keep other Jewish traditions based on the Law of Moses to gain salvation. Now, after they'd delivered the letter in Antioch, Paul and Barnabas decided to visit the believers in every city where they'd proclaimed the gospel earlier. But they had a falling out, so they parted ways and Paul teamed up with Silas.

Paul and Silas traveled first through Syria and then through Cilicia until they reached Galatia. It was in Lystra of that region that Timothy joined Paul in his journey. As Paul continued, he wanted to preach the gospel to the north in Asia and Bithynia, but the Holy Spirit prohibited him. So, Paul traveled to the coastal city of Troas.

There, the reason for the Holy Spirit's prohibition became clear through Paul's well-known "Macedonian vision." In this vision, a man begged him to preach the gospel in Macedonia, the northern province of modern-day Greece. So, Paul and his party immediately responded to this dream by sailing for that province. Paul planted many churches in Greece, including those in Philippi and Thessalonica in the north. Eventually,

he moved southward, visiting Athens and planting a church in Corinth. Paul then sailed to Ephesus, and after a period of time there, he made his way back to Palestine.

Paul's second missionary journey was soon followed by a third journey on which he traveled far into the west again.

Third Journey

Paul's third missionary journey appears in Acts 18:23–21:17. In these travels Paul went from Syrian Antioch through Galatia and Phrygia, and then established a thriving ministry in Ephesus. After this, he spent several months traveling in Greece from North to South and back to the North again. He visited churches he had planted in his previous trip to the region. Then the apostle headed back toward Jerusalem by land and by sea.

When Paul returned to Jerusalem after his third journey, the Jews falsely accused him of sedition and the Romans arrested him. After spending two years in prison, Paul asserted his rights as a Roman citizen to have his case heard before Caesar. Paul's appeal to Caesar led to a fourth journey which took him to Rome.

Fourth Journey

The record of Paul's trip to Rome appears in Acts 27, 28. Paul traveled most of this journey by ship. Between Crete and the isle of Malta, a terrible storm completely destroyed the vessel which held Paul and a number of other prisoners. The crew, the guards, Paul and his companions were shipwrecked on the isle of Malta for three months before they were able to get passage to Rome. Paul remained under house arrest in Rome from A.D. 60 to 62. He was able to minister freely during this time.

Tradition tells us that Paul was acquitted by the Roman Emperor Nero, and that he then traveled toward Spain preaching the gospel. Some evidence from the epistles to Timothy and Titus also suggests that he traveled eastward, establishing and strengthening churches there as well. But probably around A.D. 65, or shortly thereafter, Nero had Paul arrested once again and finally executed the apostle.

A quick glance at the region between Jerusalem and Rome reveals that Paul visited many different places. He made contact with thousands of people in more than twenty-five cities. What are we to learn from the fact that he endured such extensive travels? What do they tell us about the heart of Paul's theology?

More than anything else, actually, Paul is a missionary. We have his letters today because as Paul was going out and starting churches he was corresponding with those churches to help them work through issues to give them a greater understanding of what they were called to believe, what they were called to do. But Paul's primary activity was not writing letters, it was beginning churches, it was starting churches. Paul's theology was a missionary theology and for us today

that means that our theology, if it's not steeped in the mission that God is calling us to, then in a sense it's not true theology.

— Dr. Donald Cobb

With Paul's office and mission in mind, we're in a position to turn to a third aspect of Paul's apostolic ministry: his apostolic writings, or his epistles in the New Testament.

WRITINGS

Have you ever wondered why we have more than one letter from Paul in the New Testament? Why didn't he simply write one letter and have it passed from one church to another? The answer is plain enough. Paul lived in the trenches of sacrificial ministry, and he was familiar with the different kinds of issues that troubled the churches he visited.

Now you can imagine that there were problems that were common to all Christians in the first century. But the problems in Galatia were different from the problems in Ephesus. And the issues in Ephesus were different from the challenges in Corinth. Every church faced its own unique problems. As a result, Paul wrote a number of letters with different emphases to address the various needs of believers in these situations.

In the New Testament, we have thirteen letters that Paul wrote at different times in his ministry. Now because Paul's letters were so occasional — that is, designed to address specific problems — none of his letters lays out the whole heart of his theology in an orderly or systematic way. Instead, his epistles contain pastoral applications of his theology. In most cases, it's evident that Paul addressed specific issues in the church, but many Christians also try to derive the entire heart of Paul's theology from a single letter.

For example, let's consider the book of Romans. All too often, evangelical Protestants have mistakenly treated this book as if it were written to be a systematic, abstract explanation of Paul's theology. And we've justified the emphases of our own evangelical theology by appealing to what we see in the book of Romans. To be sure, the book of Romans addresses many topics that are central in evangelical theology, especially topics like sin and salvation. But a closer examination reveals that Paul wrote about these themes to address specific pastoral problems in the early church in Rome. Primarily, Paul wrote Romans to address the problems that had arisen between Jewish and Gentile believers in the first-century Roman church.

An overview of the structure of Romans makes this pastoral focus very plain. In the first three chapters, Paul didn't simply focus on sin, as we often hear in evangelical circles. Rather, he concentrated on proving that both Jews and Gentiles are sinners, and that neither has a right to claim superiority over the other.

In chapters 4–8, Paul didn't simply address the way of salvation, as evangelicals often teach. Rather, he stressed how God had established the same way of salvation both

for Jews and Gentiles. Faith in Christ and sanctification by the Spirit place Jewish and Gentile believers on equal footing before God. In this light, it's no wonder that Romans 9–11 focus on the complementary roles of Jews and Gentiles in God's plan for human history. And it's no wonder that, in Romans 12–16, Paul tackled several practical issues that related to conflicts between Jews and Gentiles. For example, in chapter 12, Paul insisted that, despite their ethnic diversity, Christians should function as a unified body. In chapter 13, he urged Jewish and Gentile Christians to submit themselves even to the Gentile civil governments that God had ordained. And before closing his epistle, in chapters 14–16 Paul focused on the need for mutual understanding with respect to Jewish and Gentile customs.

This brief sketch of Paul's letter to Rome shows that Paul didn't write Romans as an abstract statement articulating the heart of his theology. Instead, this book applied Paul's theology to the relationships between Jews and Gentiles in the Christian church in Rome. The book of Romans was an application of Paul's theology to some very specific needs.

We read in Acts 20 that Paul spends three months in the city of Corinth, in southern Greece, in the early months of A.D. 57. And it was a kind of an extended study leave for him, a chance just to have a break in his travels, and that's the time in which almost certainly he writes the letter to the church in Rome. Why does he write it? Well, partly it's because he would have loved to have gone to the church in Rome, but right now he's got to go back the other way, to Jerusalem, taking his collection of money up to Jerusalem... There are other issues that maybe inspired Paul to write Romans as well. He's probably heard that the Jewish Christians who had been expelled from Rome back in A.D. 49, but had been able to return in A.D. 54 — that's just three years before he's writing — he's probably heard that they're coming back into this city, and there's a little bit of tension going on between the Jewish Christians and the Gentile Christians. Which one is in charge? Who has the upper hand? Should they be respecting each other? Are they meeting together — that kind of question. And so, some of what he writes there is driven by that agenda, to show the unity between Jew and Gentile in Christ, and to show that the weak and the strong need to care for one another, perhaps also to stop Gentiles thinking, "Oh, we're slightly more important now, who needs the Jewish Christians? We can, sort of, go it on our own." So, there's that kind of issue as well in his writing. I don't think that's the whole purpose of his writing, but that's certainly one of the things he really wants to touch on.

— Dr. Peter Walker

Now, we're right to believe that Paul had a well-formed, logical set of theological beliefs, or what we might even call a "system" of theology. But Paul's system of theology remained unwritten, even though it undergirded his epistles. As far as we know, Paul's system of theology never reached a fully written form. Nevertheless, we can reconstruct it to a great extent, based on the letters he did write.

To reconstruct Paul's coherent theological system, we don't look simply at the topics he emphasized most in his letters. As we just discussed, Paul spent most of his time applying his theology in his letters to meet the needs of churches in his day. So, we have to ask: What theological outlooks supported the specific things Paul wrote? What coherent patterns of belief best explain what we find in his letters? What logical doctrinal system connects all of the specific things Paul wrote to different churches? By answering questions like these, we'll be able to reconstruct the heart of Paul's theology.

Now that we've looked at Paul's background and ministry, we're ready to look directly at Paul's central theological outlooks.

CENTRAL OUTLOOKS

In one way or another, all followers of Christ organize their Christian beliefs. Even if we've never articulated how we do this, we have sets of basic beliefs that shape what we think about God, ourselves and the world around us. And these basic beliefs impact other things we believe. They guide us as we go about our daily lives. Well, the same was true for the apostle Paul. What were his basic beliefs? What sorts of theological outlooks undergirded everything he wrote in his epistles?

Through the centuries, scholars have described the central outlooks of Paul's theology in a number of ways. But we'll limit ourselves to two highly influential understandings of the heart of Paul's theology. First, the Reformation perspective on Paul's theology; and second, what's often called the "eschatological perspective." Let's look first at the Reformation outlook on Paul. How did the Protestant Reformers understand the central structures of Paul's theology?

REFORMATION

In the centuries prior to the Reformation, the Roman Catholic Church taught that salvation required both God's grace and human merit. According to these teachings, justification — becoming righteous in the eyes of God — is a long process by which God infuses grace into the believer. This grace then allows the believer to become more righteous by doing good works. In this view, people are fully justified before God when they have done enough good works to be counted truly righteous.

But, as leading Reformers like Martin Luther, Ulrich Zwingli and John Calvin read the letters of Paul, they concluded that the legalistic Catholic interpretation of Paul was wrong. They followed the teaching of Augustine that said justification is *not* infused

over a long period of time and mixed with human effort. Rather, it's imputed all at once and entirely apart from human works.

Protestants believed that sanctification — the long process of the Christian life — follows justification and continues for the entire life of a believer. But *justification* is God's once-for-all-time legal declaration in the court of heaven that a believer has been fully acquitted of the guilt of sin and credited with the righteousness of Christ. This belief came to be known as *Sola fide* — “by faith alone” — because justification comes solely by means of faith in Christ, and not by means of faith plus our good works.

Without a doubt, the Reformers were right to find this doctrine in Paul's writings. In the early church, some parties of Jewish believers, often called Judaizers, argued that righteousness before God results from a mixing of divine grace and human merit. But Paul opposed this legalism in the early church, and insisted that justification was a unique event that occurred by faith and apart from works of the law.

The parallels between the controversies of the Reformation and the controversies Paul faced are plain enough. The legalism of the Roman Catholic Church roughly corresponded to the legalism of the Judaizers. And *Sola fide* — justification by faith alone — of the Reformation, paralleled Paul's teaching about how God declares righteous every man, woman and child who has saving faith in Christ.

As a result of these parallels, traditional, evangelical Protestants have held through the centuries that the centerpiece of Paul's theology is how salvation comes to individual believers. In theological terms, Paul's entire theology was thought to have been structured around the *ordo salutis*, or the “order of salvation” — the process by which salvation in Christ is applied to individuals like you and me. So, in the tradition of the Reformation, most Protestants believe that the *ordo salutis*, and especially justification by faith alone, is the most central, integrative concept in Paul's theology. They believe it's the heart of his theology.

Of course, Protestants have also acknowledged that Paul believed many other things as well. For instance, he was concerned with how biblical history reached its climax in the death and resurrection of Christ. In theological terms, we call this aspect of his teaching *historia salutis*, or the “history of salvation.” But for the most part, until recent years, the traditional Protestant understanding of Paul's theology was that the history of salvation was less significant than the order of salvation.

As dominant as the Reformation view has been in the interpretation of Paul's central theological outlooks, it has not gone unchallenged. Another complementary point of view has come to the foreground, especially in recent decades, which we'll call the “eschatological perspective” on Paul's theology.

ESCHATOLOGICAL

The eschatological perspective on Paul's theology stresses that the most central feature of Paul's theology was how the history of the Bible reached its culmination in Christ. Now, many other outlooks on the heart of Paul's theology have been suggested in recent decades. Some prominent theologians have argued that Paul's theology focused primarily on merging his Jewish background with Greek philosophies. Others have seen

Paul as primarily endorsing rational ethical living over the passions of the flesh. Still others have argued that Paul's theology was deeply influenced by Hellenistic mystery religions. Some of these viewpoints offer some insights into Paul's theology, but none of them has proven to be as helpful as the eschatological outlook on his theology.

To explore the eschatological outlook on Paul's theology, we'll focus on three issues: first, the terminology used to discuss this outlook; second, the structure of Paul's eschatology; and third, the implications of Paul's eschatology for all of his theology. Let's look first at the terminology of eschatology.

Terminology

The term "eschatology" comes from the Greek word *eschatos* (ἔσχατος), which means "last" or "end," and the word *logos* (λόγος) which means "word" or "study." Eschatology, then, is:

the study or doctrine of the last days

The Old Testament frequently uses terms like "last days," "latter days" or "end times" to refer to the great climax of history that was to take place when the Messiah would come to earth and fulfill God's purposes for all of history. And, on a number of occasions, the New Testament points out plainly that the fulfillment of these Old Testament "last days" or "end times" comes through Jesus the Messiah.

Now in traditional systematic theology, the term "eschatology" has primarily referred to what the New Testament teaches about the second coming of Christ. But when we talk about eschatology in *Paul's* theology, we must expand the meaning of the term to refer to much more than just Christ's second coming. As we'll see, Paul understood everything about Christ, from his first coming to his second coming, as eschatology, or the end times; the culmination of history.

Eschatology, the word, has traditionally been defined as "the doctrine of the last things" based on the etymology of the word *eschatos* and *logos* — *eschatos* meaning the "last things" — and it's traditionally had to do with both individual eschatology and what we might call cosmic eschatology. Individual eschatology deals with death and the intermediate state; cosmic eschatology, things like the second coming of Christ, the final judgment, the general resurrection and eternal destinies, heaven and hell. I like to look at eschatology in a broader sense, however. If eschatology is associated with the second coming only, then we lose a lot of the eschatological aspects in the Gospels and in the teachings of Paul... Christ's first coming was just as eschatological as his second coming, and if we see that and understand that, then we can start to have a broader biblical theological view of eschatology, and the last things began with the first coming of Christ.

If we understand that, we realize that, also all of the Old Testament preparing for the first coming of Christ and looking forward to it is also eschatological.

— Dr. Keith Mathison

To understand how the term eschatology in Paul's theology includes everything Christ accomplishes from his first coming to his second coming, we have to turn our attention to the structure of Paul's eschatological views. How did Paul conceive of the last days or the end of time in Christ?

Structure

We'll touch on just three facets of the structure of Paul's eschatology: its origins, its development, and some of its main themes. Let's look first at the origins of Paul's eschatology.

Origins. Paul's eschatology was rooted in widespread Jewish outlooks of his day that stemmed from the Old Testament. Jewish theologians commonly thought that the Old Testament divided world history into two great ages. The first of these ages was the present age — the age of sin, trouble and death that Jewish teachers often called “this age,” or in rabbinical Hebrew, *olam hazeh* (עוֹלָם הַזֶּה). “This age” reached its low point when the Israelites suffered severe curses from God in their exile from the Promised Land. Not surprisingly, Jewish theologians spoke of “this age” in very negative terms.

But the rabbis of Paul's day also believed that there would be a future age of wondrous blessings from God that would follow this age of trouble. They called this future age “the age to come,” or in rabbinical Hebrew, *olam haba* (עוֹלָם הַבָּא). In the age to come, God would finally fulfill all of his promises to Israel and spread his kingdom to the ends of the earth.

Most Jewish groups in Paul's time believed that the appearance of the Messiah would be the crucial turning point between these great ages of history. When the Messiah came, he would bring the “day of the Lord,” the day when God would utterly destroy his enemies and bless his people throughout the world. This would be the day that would usher in the age to come, the final or eschatological age.

When we read Paul's epistles, it becomes apparent that he also held a similar two-age view of history. In fact, he directly referred to “this age” as the age of sin, trouble and death on at least twelve occasions. For example, in 2 Corinthians 4:4, Paul referred to Satan literally as “the god of this age” (NIV). And, in 1 Corinthians 1:20, he spoke of “the debater of this age.”

When Paul referenced “the god of this age” he was talking about, ultimately, the deceiver, Satan, who manages certain false gods that are not gods by nature. Even though they may be called “gods,”

they're really not gods at all. The prophet Isaiah in the Old Testament said, "Are there any gods beside me? I know of none." So, if Jehovah doesn't know of any gods, there aren't any. He's the only God. And the god of this age, he would be referring to the prince of the power of the air, Satan.

— Rev. Clete Hux

Similarly, Paul used the expression "the age to come" to refer to the future age when final judgment and blessings would come to the entire world. In Ephesians 2:7, he said that God raised Christ from the dead "so that in the coming ages he might show the ... riches of his grace."

Perhaps the best example of Paul's two-age outlook on history appears in Ephesians 1:21. There, he referred explicitly to both ages when he wrote that Christ was seated:

... far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come (Ephesians 1:21).

Paul inherited this basic two-age pattern from the Old Testament and his Jewish background.

So, with these origins in mind, we should turn to the development of eschatology that we see in Paul's theology.

Development. You'll recall that, by and large, traditional Jewish teachers believed that the turning point between this age and the age to come was the appearance of the Messiah. The Israelites had suffered the terrible consequences of the exile for centuries. But the faithful among them held onto the hope that when the Messiah came, God's enemies would be destroyed and God's faithful people would immediately receive his full blessings in the new heavens and new earth.

As a Pharisee who became a follower of Jesus, however, Paul faced a serious challenge to this longstanding belief. He knew that Jesus was Israel's Messiah, but he also knew that Jesus had not brought creation to its climactic end as Israel had expected. So, Paul followed the teachings of Jesus and received special revelation from God that caused him to deviate from traditional Jewish outlooks. As Paul explained it, the transition from this age to the age to come was not a simple, straightforward transition from one age to the next. Instead, it involved a period of overlap when both ages existed alongside each other simultaneously.

From his point of view, the age to come had been inaugurated through the death, resurrection, and ascension of Christ, and through the outpouring of the Spirit on the apostles of the first century church. Paul was also confident that there would be an indefinite period of time during which the gospel would continue to spread throughout the world. Then the age to come would reach its consummation when Christ returned in

glory. At that future time, this evil age would end and the age to come would arrive in all its fullness, with ultimate blessings for God's people and final judgment for his enemies. But in the meantime, both ages — this age and the age to come — would exist alongside each other.

This tension between what we call “the already and the not yet” is in fact very typical of Paul’s view of things. God has done a lot of wonderful things for us already: I’m justified, I’m saved, I’m redeemed, I’m adopted into the family of God. And yet, not yet am I fully adopted into the family of God the way I one day will be. Not yet am I glorified. Not yet am I free from sin, temptation, sickness, death. It’s this “already, not yet” that is kind of the overlap of the ages, as we sometimes like to say; that is, that the old age continues. I still have a body that’s falling apart, I still am tempted to sin, there’s evil in the world around, as we all know all too well. And yet, I also belong to the new age. I am a child of God. I do belong to him. I rejoice in that. I worship him. I have a certain future with him. And we Christians live all of our lives in the tension of that overlap of the old age and the age to come.

— Dr. Douglas Moo

With the origins and development of Paul's eschatology in mind, we should point out how a number of important themes in Paul's letters reflect these outlooks.

Themes. It's become common to describe Paul's eschatology as “already and not yet” because Paul believed that some aspects of the end times or last days had already become reality in Christ and that they would continue until Christ returned in glory. But what facets of the age to come had already become reality? What was yet to come? These were crucial questions because first-century Christians often went to extremes in these matters. And Paul had to address these extremes. Even faithful Christians today find it very difficult to balance these matters. So, at this point, we should unpack a bit of what Paul taught about the “already and not yet” dimensions of the Christian faith.

On the one side, according to Paul, the age to come, the age of the Messiah, has already been inaugurated and continues in a number of ways. We'll mention three significant ways this theme appears in Paul's writings.

In the first place, Paul emphasized that when Jesus ascended to his throne in heaven, he began the final stage of God's kingdom. For example, Paul wrote in Ephesians 1:20-21 that when the Father raised Christ from the dead:

He ... seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come (Ephesians 1:20-21).

Although, at the present time, Christ's reign is realized primarily in "the heavenly places" rather than on earth, he already reigns "above all rule and authority." In this sense, the reign of God, or the worldwide kingdom of God promised for the age to come, is a present reality.

A second aspect of the age to come which is already present with us, is the foretaste of our eternal inheritance in the Holy Spirit. Paul taught that when Christ ascended to his throne on high, he also poured out the Holy Spirit on the church on earth as a foretaste of the full inheritance for God's people that will come when Christ returns.

In Romans 8:23, Paul explained that believers are those "who have the firstfruits of the Spirit." "Firstfruits" is a translation of the Greek word *aparche* (ἀπαρχή), which is itself a translation of an Old Testament term designating the first portion of a harvest. In the Old Testament, the firstfruits indicated that a greater harvest was coming in the future. So, for Paul, the gift of the Holy Spirit in every believer's life is a foretaste of the great blessings that will come at the consummation when Christ returns. In a similar way, according to Ephesians 1:14, the Holy Spirit himself is:

... the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it (Ephesians 1:14).

The Greek term translated "guarantee" is *arrabon* (ἀρραβὼν). This terminology points to the Holy Spirit as God's down payment, or deposit, to us, guaranteeing that we will receive much more from God in the future. Once again, the Holy Spirit is a blessing of the age to come which God has already given to us prior to the consummation at Christ's glorious return.

A third feature of the age to come that is also present now, is the beginning of the new creation. Because of what Christ has done, believers now enjoy, in part — in their personal lives and in their corporate life together — the re-creation of the world. In the Old Testament, God promised his people that he would completely re-create the world in the last days and fulfill all that he had planned for the world from the beginning. Listen to how the Lord described the coming age in Isaiah 65:17:

Behold, I create new heavens and a new earth (Isaiah 65:17).

In Paul's mind, the fact that Christ was already defeating the powers of evil and saving people proved that the new creation had already begun. And 2 Corinthians 5:17 expresses this idea well:

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come (2 Corinthians 5:17).

When Paul and the early Christians thought about time and history, they understood that what happened in Christ was a revolution; there was a shift in the eras... They understood that there was a reality that was breaking into human history now that was quite real, yet human

history was not consummated entirely. So, what you have in Paul's understanding is that the realities, the powers, the things that Judaism looked for in the future, was now coming into reality in the present... So, as the church lives in this present age, it isn't just that we hope for good things in the future, and that we expect ourselves to be redeemed of our sins in the present, it's that we have access to the future now. So, it isn't just that the future is promised, the future is presented, and that's really a part, a huge part of Paul's gospel.

— Dr. Gary M. Burge

Paul taught that many aspects of the age to come had already been inaugurated when Christ first came, and that they continue throughout church history. But, Paul also believed that the blessings of the last days had not yet come in their fullness. So, on the other side, he looked forward to Christ's return as the time when Christ would fulfill God's final judgments and blessings. Once again, we'll mention three significant ways this theme appears in Paul's theology.

In the first place, as we've seen, Paul taught that Christ the King is now reigning from his throne in heaven. But Paul also believed that we still long for the day when Christ returns to bring in the fullness of God's kingdom. Listen to the way Paul put it in 1 Corinthians 15:24-26:

Then comes the end, when [Christ] delivers the kingdom to God the Father after destroying every rule and every authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death (1 Corinthians 15:24-26).

This passage makes it plain that Paul looked beyond the present reign of Christ to the future destruction of all rule, authority and power that stands against God's purposes. Christ will remain on his heavenly throne until every enemy is destroyed, including death itself. So, Paul believed that, in some ways, God's kingdom in Christ was already here, but in other ways, it was not yet here.

In the second place, as we've seen, Paul believed that the Holy Spirit is the firstfruits of the harvest of salvation and the down payment of our inheritance. But the terms "firstfruits" and "down payment" indicate that Christians must still wait to receive their full harvest and inheritance in the future. Listen to the way Paul put it in Romans 8:23:

Not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies (Romans 8:23).

Here Paul directly related the present reality of the gift of the Holy Spirit to the future. He knew that the age to come is already here because we already experience the

outpouring of the Spirit. But we still “groan inwardly” because we have not yet received “the redemption of our bodies.” In much the same way, as we read earlier in Ephesians 1:14, Paul wrote that the Holy Spirit is:

... the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it (Ephesians 1:14).

The Spirit who lives and works within and among us is a wondrous foretaste, but only a foretaste, of a greater redemption: our full inheritance.

In the third place, although the new creation has become a spiritual reality in the lives of believers, we also await the complete renewal of creation and our eternal reign over the new earth with Christ our King. As Paul wrote in Romans 8:21:

The creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God (Romans 8:21).

Paul looked forward to the return of Christ as the time when the new creation would come in all its fullness as we are physically resurrected from the dead.

Romans 8 talks about how the whole creation is under bondage, that it's groaning; we're under the curse. And it talks about not only we groan as people, but the creation itself groans... And sometimes, we narrow Christ's redemptive work as if all he does is snatch souls out of this world to go to heaven forever. And he's concerned about the redemption of our bodies. And the creation that fell under us, that fell on our coattails, so to speak, will rise on our coattails, looks forward to our redemption, the redemption of our bodies — the resurrection. And this is the great promise of God, that even as we led creation into destruction, we will lead it out — or Christ through our resurrection — will lead it out of destruction, so that there will be a new heavens and a new earth, a new redeemed universe.

— Dr. Randy Alcorn

Having considered the terminology and structure of Paul's eschatological views, we should turn to some important implications of these views that Paul repeatedly emphasized for his readers.

Implications

As we've seen, Paul's letters didn't focus much on abstract theology, but on the application of his theology to concrete human experience. Paul didn't write a treatise on his eschatology that explained the details of how Jesus brings in the last days. Instead, in

his letters, Paul concentrated on how the unfolding of the last days in Christ applied to the practicalities of Christian living. He understood that many difficulties facing the church resulted from the tension of living during the inauguration and continuation of Christ's kingdom. So, he explained how followers of Christ are to live between what God has already done in the first coming of Christ and the glory that awaits us at Christ's return.

Union with Christ. As we consider the practical implications of Paul's eschatology, we'll look at three prominent topics in Paul's writings: first, the believer's union with Christ; second, the divine purpose for the time between Christ's first and second comings; and third, Christian hope for the future. Let's look first at Paul's teaching about believers' union with Christ.

The whole concept of being in Christ is so central to Paul's teaching for the believer. And I guess the best way I would put it is that being in Christ means that you are one with him, you are united with him, just as a man and a woman are united in marriage. When a believer turns from sin, puts faith in Jesus, we are made one with Christ, and all of his righteousness, all of his wealth, all of his privileges somehow then accrue to us. We are then invited into the family of God, we are seated at the table with Jesus himself and with his father. We become massively and enormously rich in the spiritual sense of that word. And so, Paul wants believers to have this as their critical identity, their essential identity. Who am I? I am essentially one with Jesus Christ as my Lord and my master. And that identity as being in Christ is preeminent over any other identity that anybody could have, whether it's their family or their culture or their successes or their business or whatever it may be. It's the essential identity of the children of God that we enter by faith in Jesus.

— Rev. Dan Hendley

In Romans 6:3-4, Paul indicated how our union with Christ actually moves us from this age to the next age. Listen to what Paul said in this passage:

Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life (Romans 6:3-4).

As we've seen, Paul believed that the transition in history from this age to the age to come took place in the death and resurrection of Christ. Now, it was obvious to everyone that the transformation of the world into the new creation of the age to come had not happened. But every time men and women come to Christ in saving faith and are

baptized into Christ, they are joined to Christ in his death and his resurrection. As a result, we no longer live under bondage to sin and God's judgment of this age. Instead, just as Christ was raised from the dead, we are raised up so that "we too might walk in newness of life." As Paul continued to explain in Romans 6:10-11:

The death [Christ] died he died to sin, once for all, but the life he lives he lives to God. So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus (Romans 6:10-11).

Notice here that Paul referred to the fact that "[Christ] died to sin" and "he lives to God." But Paul was also speaking here of the believers in Rome. He said that they were "in Christ Jesus," or in union with Christ. And what did this mean for their lives? They were to "consider [themselves] dead to sin and alive to God." By their union with Christ, the Roman believers were to consider themselves delivered from this age of sin, trouble and death and transformed into people who experienced the new life of the age to come.

I think one of the central teachings in the apostle Paul, in particular, is that we're united with Jesus Christ; that we belong to him. When we look at all of biblical revelation, I think the Bible teaches that we are either in Adam, or we're in Christ. Of course, Adam was the first human being. All human beings are born as sons and daughters of Adam. And therefore, they come into the world as sinners. They have a sin nature. They are alienated from God. What it means to be saved and redeemed and to trust in Christ is to be incorporated into Christ, to belong to Christ. Paul makes it very clear in Romans 6 that when we are baptized, we are united with Christ... Those who belong to Christ have Christ as their federal head. So, their righteousness is in Christ. Their righteousness is not in themselves anymore; they look to Christ for their righteousness.

— Dr. Thomas R. Schreiner

In addition to Paul's emphasis on union with Christ, we also see the implications of Paul's eschatology for practical Christian living in his descriptions of the divine purpose for the time between the first and second comings of Jesus.

Divine Purpose. Paul's own missionary work among the Gentiles testifies to what Paul believed about God's purpose for the overlap of the ages. During this time, Christ is expanding God's kingdom beyond the boundaries of Israel so that believing Jews and Gentiles from all over the world will become one people of God.

Time and again, Paul stressed that the church must be united. Divisions between Jews and Gentiles, as well as other social and economic barriers, must be put aside because Christ has brought the age to come. At times, Paul portrayed this idea of unity by describing his ministry in terms of building the temple of God, as in Ephesians 2:19-22.

At other times, he spoke of the church as a maturing human body, as in Ephesians 4:15-16. These metaphors illustrated how the church is a growing kingdom of united, holy people. Paul believed that the growth of the church throughout the world was one of God's central purposes for the time between the first and second comings of Christ.

Paul realized that this outlook on the slow, incremental growth of the church throughout the Gentile world had not been predicted in the past. In fact, he spoke of it as a "mystery" that God had revealed to him and that he had to explain to others. In Romans 11:25, Paul wrote these words:

Lest you be wise in your own sight, I do not want you to be unaware of this mystery, brothers: a partial hardening has come upon Israel, until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in (Romans 11:25).

In this passage, Paul indicated that God's purpose during the present age, when many Jews have been hardened to the gospel, was to save the "fullness" — or full number — "of the Gentiles." As he said in Ephesians 3:4-6:

When you read this, you can perceive my insight into the mystery of Christ, which was not made known to the sons of men in other generations as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit. This mystery is that the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel (Ephesians 3:4-6).

Paul's outlook on God's purposes provides a crucial orientation for all believers living between the first and second comings of Christ. This is not a time for simply waiting for Christ to bring the fullness of the age to come at his return. On the contrary, God has designed this period of time for great activity. We are to build the church in every nation on earth. Paul devoted his own life to spreading the gospel and building up the church in unity and love. And he called others to join him in that service as well.

The mission of the church is to achieve the objectives that Jesus gave to us, first off in the great command: to love him with all our heart, soul and mind and to love our neighbor as ourselves. Beyond that he gives us the Great Commission, and that mission is to reach the world with the gospel. So, to make disciples — the core part of that is making disciples — so when he says, "Go and make disciples," it's meaning, as you go, you are to make disciples of all nations. Thus, the mission of the church boils down to these concepts: to love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength, and then finally, or with that, to love our neighbor as our self, and then to go and make disciples of all nations.

— Rev. Joseph Handley

Paul's eschatology not only focused on our union with Christ and on the divine purpose during the overlap of this age and the age to come. His outlook on the last days was also the basis of what he taught about Christian hope for the future.

Christian Hope. Paul knew much suffering in his own ministry as an apostle, and he knew that all Christians suffer in one way or another. But in his letters, Paul applied his conviction that Christ would return to give hope to Christians in at least two ways.

On the one side, Paul's eschatology gave hope by pointing out that Christ's followers have already begun to enjoy many blessings of the age to come. When we look at our lives and recognize those blessings that we already possess, even in the midst of our struggles, it gives us hope that we will possess even greater and fuller blessings in the future. As Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 4:16-18:

So we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day... [W]e look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen (2 Corinthians 4:16-18).

On the other side, Paul also gave Christians hope by pointing out how the blessings that will come when Christ returns are so astounding that they will utterly overshadow all the trials we experience in this life. It was this belief that led Paul to write in Romans 8:18 that:

The sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us (Romans 8:18).

Our present distresses are only temporary. Jesus will eventually end this present evil age and re-create the world as a glorious gift for his children.

Many times in his epistles, Paul admitted that Christ's followers suffer in this life. But he declared that we are to fix our eyes on what is not seen and to consider our current troubles as nothing compared to the glory that will be ours when Christ returns.

In Romans 8 Paul tells us that our present sufferings are not worth being compared with the glory that will be revealed in us. We want to notice how Paul contrasts this future hope of glory with our present reality of suffering and affliction. The first thing we want to notice is that Paul says... He doesn't say, "Downplay the present sufferings; deny that they're real; deny that they're painful." Paul's logic is just the opposite. He says, "Take all that you know about affliction and suffering and sorrow in this broken world, magnify it, look at it in its fullness, and know that God's glory is even greater than that." So, Paul's logic is from lesser to greater, that the greater glory will overwhelm and wipe away all the tears of the lesser sorrows.

— Dr. Jimmy Agan

CONCLUSION

In this lesson we've begun to explore the heart of Paul's theology by noticing the interconnections between the life of Paul and his theology. We noted how Paul's cultural background in both Jewish and Gentile contexts deeply shaped his theology. We looked into some of the ways Paul's apostolic ministry led him to apply his theology to the practical needs of the Christian churches to whom he wrote his epistles. And we explored how Paul's eschatology, his view of the last days as "now but not yet," formed central, theological outlooks that permeated everything he believed and everything he wrote in his epistles.

It would be difficult to overestimate how crucial these perspectives on Paul and his theology are. They open the way for understanding the original meaning of what the most prolific New Testament writer taught the Christian church in his day. And they point to the ways we should apply his sacred texts to our lives as well. Every time we read from Paul's letters, we must keep in view his cultural background, his apostolic ministry and his central beliefs about the last days. As we do, we'll gain a deeper awareness of what Paul taught the early church, and we'll also see more clearly how Christ's followers should receive Paul's teachings in every generation.

CONTRIBUTORS

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GLOSSARY

Abraham – Old Testament patriarch, son of Terah, father of the nation of Israel with whom God made a covenant in Genesis 15 and 17 promising innumerable descendants and a special land

already and not yet – View of the end times known as "inaugurated eschatology" which asserts that the coming age of eternal salvation is "already" here in some ways, but "not yet" here in its fullness

aparche – Greek term (transliteration) meaning "firstfruits" or the first portion of a harvest

apostle – Special New Testament office held by someone who had been taught by Jesus, had seen the risen Lord, and had been chosen for the office by the Lord himself; from a Greek word meaning "one who is sent"

Arabia – Large, arid, triangular peninsula in the southwest of Asia bordered by the Red Sea, Persian Gulf and Indian Ocean; desert region where Paul spent three years after his conversion

arrabon – Greek term (transliteration) meaning "down payment" or "deposit" that guaranteed full payment in the future

Augustine – (A.D. 354-430) Bishop of Hippo who believed in the Scriptures as our final authority in doctrine and considered the creeds of the church to be helpful summaries of scriptural teaching; wrote numerous works that continue to influence the church today

Barnabas – Friend of the apostle Paul and cousin of John Mark (author of the second gospel) who accompanied Paul on his first missionary journey

Calvin, John – (1509-1564) French theologian and key Protestant Reformer who wrote *Institutes of the Christian Religion*

Christ – From the Greek word "*christos*" meaning "the anointed" or "anointed one"; closely tied to the Old Testament Hebrew term "messiah"

christos – Greek word (transliteration) for Christ; used in the Septuagint to translate "*mashiach*," or "messiah," meaning "anointed one"

circumcision – The Jewish tradition of excising the foreskin of the male penis instituted by God as a sign and seal for his covenant people in Genesis 17:10-14

consummation – Third and final stage of inaugurated eschatology when Christ will return and fulfill God's ultimate purpose for all of history

continuation – Second or middle stage of inaugurated eschatology; the period of the kingdom of God after Christ's first advent but before the final victory

Corinth – Prosperous trade center in south-central Greece that had a reputation for sexual promiscuity; city where Paul planted a church on his second missionary journey and lived for 18 months

Cyprus – Island in the eastern Mediterranean Sea visited by Paul on his first missionary journey

David – Second Old Testament king of Israel who received the promise that his descendant would sit on the throne and reign forever

Ephesus – City in Asia Minor; visited by Paul on his third missionary journey; place where John probably wrote the fourth gospel; said to have lost their "first love" in Revelation

eschatological – Having to do with the study or doctrine of the last days

eschatos – Greek term (transliteration) meaning "last," "end," "final"

evangelical – Term used to describe a variety of Christians and Christian movements; often used by Reformers to distinguish Protestants from Roman Catholics; in modern use it usually refers to Christians who affirm the unquestionable authority of Scripture

firstfruits – The first yield of a harvest or endeavor; often presented to God as an offering of gratitude

Galatia – Roman province in Asia Minor where Paul planted a number of churches on his first missionary journey

Gamaliel – Respected rabbi, Pharisee, and member of the Sanhedrin who defended the apostles before the Jewish council; the apostle Paul's teacher before Paul's conversion

Gentile – Non-Jewish person

Hellenistic – Of or relating to Greek civilization, culture, or language, after the time of Alexander the Great

historia salutis – Theological term meaning "history of salvation"; the ways God accomplished the salvation of his people in history

inauguration – First stage in inaugurated eschatology; refers to Christ's first coming and the ministries of his apostles and prophets

justification – Initial declaration of righteousness when a believer is acquitted of the guilt of sin and is credited with the righteousness of Christ

logos – Greek term (transliteration) meaning "word" or "study"; title assigned to Christ (John 1:1)

Luther, Martin – (1483-1546) Sixteenth century German monk and Protestant reformer who initiated the Reformation when he posted his 95 Theses on the door of the Wittenberg church in 1517

Macedonia – Name of an ancient Roman province located in and to the north of present-day Greece; region where Paul was told in a vision to go and share the gospel during his second missionary journey

Malta – Island in the Mediterranean where Paul was shipwrecked on his fourth missionary journey

mashiach/meshiach – Hebrew word (transliteration) for "messiah"; anointed one

Messiah – Hebrew word meaning "anointed one"; the great King from David's royal line who would bring about the transition from this age to the age to come; translated "*Christos*" in Greek

Nero – Roman emperor from A.D. 54-68 who persecuted Christians; blamed the Christians for a fire in Rome in A.D. 64; executed Paul (according to tradition)

olam haba' – Hebrew term (transliteration) for "the age to come"; rabbinical phrase referring to the future age when God would fulfill all of his promises to Israel

olam hazeh – Hebrew term (transliteration) for "this age"; rabbinical phrase referring to the present age of sin, suffering and death that has existed since the Fall

ordo salutis – Theological term meaning “order of salvation”; the order by which salvation is applied to individual believers

Philippi – Important city in the Roman province of Macedonia, located on the main road that connected Rome to the eastern provinces; city where Paul planted a church during his second missionary journey

rabbi – Jewish name for "teacher"

Reformation, the – Also called the Protestant Reformation; sixteenth-century religious movement that began as an attempt to correct abuses and errors in the Roman Catholic Church; promoted beliefs such as the primacy of Scripture over church tradition, and justification by faith in Christ alone, not by faith plus good works

sanctification – The act of making people and things holy

Silas – Also called Silvanus; one of the leaders in the church at Jerusalem and Paul's companion on his second missionary journey; mentioned, along with Timothy, as coauthor of Paul letters to the Thessalonians

Sola fide – Latin phrase meaning "faith alone"; the belief that justification is by faith alone and not by works; one of the basic principles of the Reformation

synagogue – Place where Jews assembled for worship and instruction

Syrian Antioch – Capital of the Roman province of Syria located in what is now modern-day Turkey; Paul's starting point for his missionary journeys; city where Jesus' followers were first called Christians

Tarsus – Gentile city in the region of Cilicia in Asia Minor where Paul was born and also lived for a time as an adult; known as a great cultural and intellectual center; residents were granted Roman citizenship

theology – Any matter that refers directly to God or that describes subjects in relation to God

Thessalonica – Prominent Roman city and cultural center in northern Greece located along a major trade route; city where Paul planted a church on his second missionary journey and where unbelieving Jews started a riot in opposition to Paul's message

Timothy – Paul's young protégé and companion on his second missionary journey who brought Paul news from the church in Thessalonica; mentioned, along with Silas, as coauthor of Paul's letters to the Thessalonians

Zwingli, Ulrich – (1484-1531) Influential Swiss Reformer and priest who is regarded as the founder of Swiss Protestantism