

Note: Course resources utilized included NIV Biblical Theology Study Bible notes, ESV Bible and ESV Study Bible notes, John Sailhamer's Pentateuch as a Narrative, Stephen Dempster's Dominion and Dynasty, Tom Schreiner's The King in His Beauty, Carson, Moo, and Naselli's Introducing the New Testament, T. Desmond's Alexander's From Paradise to the Promised Land, Carson, Moo, and Morris Introduction to the New Testament, The Gospel According to John by D.A. Carson from the Pillar New Testament Series, The Letters of John by Colin G. Kruse from the Pillar New Testament Series, Bethlehem College and Seminary Old and New Testament Survey, Thirdmill.org website and others (TGC and TGC Online Commentaries).

From the outset allow me to say that this class cannot be a robust study of Paul's theology. That could very well be its own Equip class. Today will be a survey. A high-altitude survey giving us the 20,000 foot view.

As we approach the letters of Paul, we must appreciate the fact that they are precisely that- they are letters. Ancient letters. And this is an important detail. Of the New Testament's 27 individual works, 21 of them are letters. And of these 21 letters- 13 were written by Paul.

*The "letter" was a widely used means of communication in the ancient world. The Apostles, who are directly responsible for at least 19 of the 21 New Testament letters, used letters as a means of "shepherding" churches from a distance. When the apostles were unable to exercise apostolic influence in person, their letters served as a "stand-in" for their presence. The doctrine, the reproof, the training in righteousness that the letters afford **were and are** invested with the very same apostolic authority that the apostles would have exhibited in person. This should not surprise us- because we know that these inspired letters still carry with them that authority- being the very Word of God spoken through the Apostles or their close associates.*

*The letters of the NT deal with a wide variety of issues. Through his letters, Paul could thank churches for their support in advancing the gospel, he could address heresies and harmful teaching, he could offer encouragement amid persecution, he could rebuke individuals for indulging in idol worship and one-upmanship. Although the New Testament letters address a wide array of matters, the writers of the New Testament always engaged the various issues with truth- **truth concerning Christ and the gospel**. They did not resort to their own private opinions or human philosophies. They engaged the world around them with words of timeless truth. Therefore the letters, along with **all of God's word**, are imminently relevant. God's people then and God's people now- can know and understand Christ- his coming, his person, his work, his gospel through these words of truth in our New Testament. The New Testament letters especially, are truths that teach us how to put into practice the things that are true and righteous and holy and well-pleasing.*

*At this point, I think it might be helpful to say a few words about interpreting and applying the New Testament letters. As we interpret God's Word, we want to approach the Scriptures using **the analogy of faith**- which essentially means that we are to interpret Scripture in light of Scripture. This also means that the supreme arbiter in interpreting the meaning of a particular verse in Scripture is overall teaching of the Scripture. The things that are hard to understand, therefore, are to be interpreted in light of the things that are most clear. The reason we approach it this way is because the Bible is consistent and coherent, unified, harmonious and clear. Though written through many human authors, its ultimate author is God and is the product of the perfect divine mind of God.*

But this doesn't mean that Bible interpretation doesn't require some work. J.I. Packer offers wise words concerning some of the complexities that attend Bible interpretation-

*“The scientific study of Scripture is [a] complicated and exacting task. The biblical languages have their own distinctive idioms and thought-forms. Each writer has his own habits of mind, vocabulary, outlook and interests. Each book has its own character, and is written according to stylistic conventions which it is not always easy to see. **And each book has its own historical and theological background, and must be interpreted against that background.**”*

I want to emphasize that last observation.

“Each book has its own historical and theological background, and must be interpreted against that background.” The New Testament letters are what we might label “occasional”. In other words, they were originally written to a particular first-century audience and were dealing with issues relevant to its first century recipients. In other words- there is a historical background that we must wrestle with. We need to make an effort to understand the original issues that the author of the letter was addressing.

The fact that there is some historical distance doesn't minimize their relevance for today. Frankly, the issues the New Testament deals with in its ancient context are not all that far removed from the issues Christians face today. The adage that history repeats itself is generally very true- and though many, many years have elapsed since these inspired letters were first written, the root of the problem remains the same, human nature and its propensities and natural inclinations have not changed- there is still the world, the devil, the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the boastful pride of life.

But even when those issues are the same, faithfully interpreting the NT letters demands that we take into account the occasional nature of those letters- while nevering losing sight of the fact that God himself speaks to us by means of these ancient letters. They are the inspired words of God, addressing the church of every

age and of every place. As we hold to these things, we are better positioned to see more clearly their relevance and application to our lives.

What does all this mean practically? As “occasional” letters, we must ask questions like:

- When was it written?*
- To whom was it written*
- Why was it written?*
- What were the circumstances that prompted the letter?*

It is questions like these that we must ask ourselves as we survey Paul's letters.

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So let's get started-

It is helpful to know a few things about the man who wrote the letters? Who was Paul?

Prior to his conversion, Paul, also known as Saul of Tarsus, was a Pharisee, a member of Judaism's “strictest sect”. The Pharisees were zealous adherents to the “oral law”- a body of rules and regulations designed to interpret and supplement the written Mosaic law. Paul was advancing in Judaism beyond many of his contemporaries, and was so zealous for the traditions of his fathers that he intensely persecuted the church of God and tried to destroy it. But by the grace of God- the persecutor became the preacher, and his course of life shifted on its axis because of a sudden confrontation with the risen Christ on the road to Damascus. This encounter proved to be foundational and formative for Paul's understanding who God and Christ were. His conversion was sudden and dramatic.

On the heels of his conversion came a call to ministry- He was a chosen instrument of Christ's to carry his name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel. As we read the New Testament, it becomes patently clear that Christ appointed Paul to be an authoritative Apostle. Paul himself understood this. Peter, first among equals, recognized this. Others would come to acknowledge his status.

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As we consider Paul's Letters- it can be helpful to think of them in a four-fold division-

There are the Eschatological Epistles:

1–2 Thessalonians (thought to be written in the early 50s AD- approximately 20 years after Christ's resurrection and ascension). These two letters emphasize the importance of Christ's second coming.

There are the Theological Epistles:

Romans, 1–2 Corinthians, and Galatians (written in the mid 50s AD; Galatians possibly 48 AD). These letters are among Paul's longest and most theologically weighty letters. \These will take up the lion's share of our time today.

There are the Prison Epistles:

Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon (thought to be written in the early 60s AD). These letters were most likely written during Paul's first Roman imprisonment (AD 60–62)-Each letter contains words that make it clear that Paul was "in chains". There is some debate about which imprisonment is in view with the letter to the Philippians- I lean toward it having been written toward the end of his two year stint in a Roman prison. Each of these letters offer peculiar insights into the nature of Christ and his church, each letter making their own significant and unique contributions to our faith. And at the same time, they exhibit a clear unity of thought as many of their themes overlap.

Finally there are the Pastoral Epistles:

1–2 Timothy and Titus (written in the mid 60s AD). These three letters were written to Paul's apostolic delegates- Timothy and Titus. They include qualifications for church leaders, essential truth pertaining to pastoral ministry, and material that relates to how we are to conduct ourselves as the church.

Let's shift gears now, and look at Paul's letters individually.

We will start with the book of Romans. Arguably no other biblical book has exercised greater influence on the church's theology than the book of Romans. Romans covers many fundamental theological matters. But it is more than a theological treatise. Romans is a letter, written during particular historical circumstances addressing a particular set of issues.

As we try to acclimate ourselves to the historical circumstances, Paul has given us some help. In Chapter 15 Paul mentions an important turning point in his ministry. He explains that he has "fully proclaimed" the gospel "from Jerusalem all the way around to Illyricum (ill-lyric-um)"—areas where he has strengthened or planted flourishing churches. And now he is setting his sights on Spain. But before he begins this new endeavor, he has some unfinished business to take care of. He plans to travel to Jerusalem in order to bring aid to the church there. And then, Paul plans to visit Rome in person, in order to strengthen the church and receive mutual encouragement, while also enlisting their support in his mission to Spain.

To Whom Was Romans Written? This is an important question.

Paul addresses the letter “To all those in Rome who are loved by God and called to be saints” (Romans 1.7). Bear in mind that the New Testament does not explain how Christianity first came to Rome. Some have suggested that Jews from Rome, who were present in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost, were the first to bring the gospel to Rome as they returned to the city in those early days of the church. Acts 2:10 tells us that “visitors from Rome” were present that day.

We know from Acts 18 that somehow there were believers in Rome. Infact, Paul meets one in Corinth- Aquila, a native of Pontus who had recently left Rome with his wife Priscilla, because Emperor Claudius had expelled all Jews from Rome in AD 49. Clearly, Claudius was not overly discriminating, because Jewish believers in Christ were forced to leave Rome as well.

What this means for the church in Rome is that Claudius’s edict would have rendered the church in Rome predominantly Gentile essentially overnight. But in God’s providence, approximately five years later- the Jews who were expelled- including Jewish Christians, were permitted to return to Rome. And when they did, they would find a church that had become conspicuously Gentile in flavor, that is non-Jewish in its customs and practice. Jewish Christians would likely be a minority and perhaps looked down upon by the predominantly Gentile church. Tensions would rise. There would be debates concerning the Jewish Sabbath, clean and unclean foods, and so on. So, by the time Paul writes his letter, the church in Rome would likely be a mixture of both Jewish and Gentile believers, and there would be some measure of division.

This explains chapters 14 and 15 of Romans, where Paul rebukes two groups of believers for their intolerance toward each other. There is the “weak in faith” and the “strong in faith”. As you read these chapters, it appears that Paul comes down a little harder on the strong in faith, presumably Gentile Christians, who are becoming arrogant toward those in the minority group- those Christians with more Jewish sensibilities.

So, Why Was the Letter Written?

We just touched on part of the reason why Paul wrote this letter- he is seeking to address and heal this division in the church- and in order to do so, a careful and complete theology would prove essential. Nevertheless, his reasons for writing are probably born out of multiple burdens- and multiple experiences.

1. Up to this point- there has been instability in various churches, there have been hard fought battles in both Galatia and Corinth. We will talk about that. And it seems likely that Paul feels compelled to impart a repository of truth that will make for stability, especially as Jewish and Gentile believers try to do life together peacefully as one unified body.

2. *There is the matter of Paul's impending visit to Jerusalem- where undoubtedly Paul will have to testify concerning Christ and His gospel amid many dangers, toils, and snares. A full, clear unwavering, complete presentation of the gospel would be in the forefront of his mind.*

3. *There is the need to secure a missionary base and a launching point for gospel work in Spain.*

4. *And there seems to be a proliferation of misguided attacks against Paul's theology- labeling him as antinomian-(we get this impression from Romans 3:8, where some are accusing him of saying "why not do evil that good may come").*

These are all good reasons to write the letter.

Therefore, Paul would be compelled to write a letter in which he carefully sets forth his understanding of the gospel, addressing head on the nature of salvation, the relationship between Jew and Gentile, the relationship between law and gospel, matters of continuity and discontinuity, the relationship between the old covenant and the new covenant. These are the likely candidates for Paul's purpose in writing.

We have sought to reconstruct the circumstances- but all these things aside, what is the heartbeat of Paul's letter to the Romans? Can we identify the main thing?

*Thematically, we look no further than Romans 1:16–17 (ESV)- Paul writes: 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. 17 For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, "The righteous shall live by faith."*

So we are in good company to see the gospel as thematic and central to Paul's letter- the letter gives us the gospel systematically, in a coherent, logical, accessible way. And it is in the plain light of the gospel that we encounter many other glorious truths-

1. *The gospel is the righteousness of God by faith.*

So Paul explains that sin has gained a stranglehold on all people that only an act of God can break. The way sinners can be made right with God, righteous in God's sight, is through the sacrifice of his Son. This justification, being made right with God, can be gained only by faith as a free gift, as Paul's words concerning Abraham clearly illustrate. Romans is where we get perhaps the most robust articulation of justification by faith- to be "justified" is to be declared right with God. This judicial verdict, Paul insists, is a manifestation of pure grace on God's part and therefore can be attained by sinful human beings only through faith- receiving, resting, trusting. We see these things in Romans 1-4.

2. We learn that the gospel is the power of God for salvation both now and on the day of judgment. Having been justified results in peace with God and a sure and certain hope for vindication on judgment day. The ground for this hope is the person and work of Christ. Christians must confidently battle the powers of this present realm, we must war with our sin, as we put to death the deeds of the flesh. The Spirit of adoption assures that we are God's children and that we will one day be glorified. And these things we see in Romans 5-8.

3. The relationship between the church and Israel raises an important question concerning God keeping His promises- we see this is Romans 9 -11: Does transferring covenant privileges from Israel to the church mean that God has failed in his promises to Israel? Paul assures us that that is certainly not the case:

- a. God's promises were never intended to guarantee salvation to every Israelite by birth
- b. Some Israelites failed to embrace God's righteousness in Christ
- c. Some Israelites, like Paul, are being saved
- d. It is only through Israel that salvation has come to Gentiles, and God's promise to Israel will come to full realization when "all Israel will be saved". Time will not permit a nuanced handling of the Romans 11 passage. What we need to know is that God is keeping and will keep his promises- even if we are unsure what that will look like.

5. Romans 12 teaches us that the gospel transforms lives. By the mercies of God- God's grace- should give rise to sacrificial living characterized by love. Paul tells us that Christians may not ignore the government's legitimate claims over them in chapter 13, nor can we ignore the debt of love toward our neighbor. Stronger and weaker Christians must respect and tolerate each other's views on matters of food and rituals. These are matters taken up in Romans 14 and 15.

Romans is indeed a life-transforming message and teaches us that faith in Christ must always be accompanied by obedience to him as Lord. And Paul's words still make their appeal to us today- by the mercies of God, to present our bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.

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That brings us to 1 and 2 Corinthians. The Corinthians were those who did not exemplify these truths contained in chapter 12 of Romans. They continued to be conformed, in large measure, to the world around them.

But before discussing 1 and 2 Corinthians- it is helpful to consider matters pertaining to chronology and context concerning Paul's relationship with the Corinthian church.

In AD 51-52 Paul planted the church in Corinth on his second missionary journey. We read about this in Acts 18. God had appointed many in the city of Corinth to be his elect people. Subsequently Paul would stay in Corinth a year and six months, teaching the word. The Christian congregation in Corinth, composed of both Jews and Gentiles, would flourish.

Sometime after Paul's second missionary journey drew to a close, having left Corinth- he received news concerning difficulties in Corinth. So he sent a letter, referenced in 1 Corinthians 5:9, sometimes referred to as the "Previous Letter", warning the Corinthians to avoid and abstain from sexual immorality. This letter has not been preserved.

Eventually Paul received additional news from Corinth- and he becomes aware of several problems that plagued the church

- The church was rife with division.*
- Some in the congregation considered themselves spiritually superior when compared to other believers.*
- It seems that fulminating pride may have even given rise criticisms leveled against Paul.*
- Many were still engaging in sexual immorality despite the previous letter.*
- And there were lawsuits among Christians.*

Moreover, some from the church had written a letter to Paul requesting his take on matters such as

- marriage and divorce,*
- meat offered to idols*
- spiritual gifts, and*
- they sought clarity concerning the giving and distribution of money to help other churches.*

These things compel Paul to write the letter we now know to be 1 Corinthians.

So there were many questions and many problems in the Corinthian church- but the big question that many have asked themselves is "what was at the heart of all these issues?"

It appears that Corinthians were being unduly shaped and influenced by the surrounding culture. Corinth was a city where one could make money and make a name for themselves. Amid the affluence was an ethos of "you scratch my back and I'll

scratch yours”- one's reputation was both a commodity and currency. So dynamics within the Corinthian culture promoted this endless cycle of self-promotion. There was as love for rhetoric as well. Gifted speakers were idolized, so much so that the Corinthians looked down on Paul's commitment to preach Christ crucified rather than impress with eloquence and rhetorical flourish.

As we take in the big picture- we see that the problem that plagued the Corinthian' church was not a relapse into raw paganism; rather, their Christian faith, however sincere, had not yet transformed their worldview. They were conformed to the world, the surrounding culture, and not adequately transform by the renewal of the mind.

So the church in Corinth teaches us that if the gospel is not reshaping our perspectives, our values- if Christ and his gospel is not the driving force that is central in our hearts and minds- we will become captivated with other things that are not the gospel- and these things will in turn shape our lives.

Paul had his work cut out for him, and carried along by the Holy Spirit- he wrote 1 Corinthians in order to address these issues.

He structures his letter around the church's various problems and questions, moving from issue to issue. Each time we see Paul respond to the complex issues at hand with a powerful, coherent and frankly, simple theological message.

As his letter unfolds, Paul defines the problem and then responds to it with unadulterated gospel truth, illustrating how these church members were not living out the gospel truth that they professed.

This pattern of identifying the problem, followed by presenting the gospel solution is Paul's way of teaching the Corinthians to think like... Christians. He wants them to develop the skill of seeing all areas of life through the lens of the Gospel.

Sometime after the composition of 1 Corinthians, Paul apparently heard of continuing difficulties at Corinth. In response to this news, he decided to pay the church at Corinth another visit.

At this point, it appears the church had been invaded by some self-appointed Christian leaders whom Paul refers to as “false apostles” who opposed Paul (2 Cor. 11:13–15). This visit to Corinth did not go well at all- and he would later refer to it as a “painful visit” (2 Cor. 2:1). From Paul's perspective at the time, this visit was a disaster. He resolved not to return too soon in order to spare them another painful confrontation.

After this painful visit transpired, he wrote a third letter, sometimes called the “tearful letter” or “severe letter” because he wrote “out of great distress and anguish of heart and with many tears”. This letter he sent via an apostolic co-laborer and delegate named Titus. Meanwhile, Paul was deeply concerned- his spirit was not at rest. How would they respond to his letter? Would they repent and have a change of heart?

Eventually Titus and Paul reunite, and Titus brought good news that the Corinthians had (largely) repented and reaffirmed their commitment to Paul's authority. In response to this relatively good report- Paul writes 2 Corinthians to express thanksgiving for their repentance and renewed obedience. He also wrote to encourage them to complete their collection to aid the poor Christians in Jerusalem .

And we see this play out in the first 9 chapters of 2 Corinthians. As you read these chapters you get the sense that it is a very personal letter filled with expressions of deep emotion, giving us a glimpse into Paul's pastoral heart.

Several major themes appear in connection with forthright and open heart-

- there is the reality of God-given comfort and encouragement in the midst of suffering and troubles,*
- there is God's strength manifested through human weakness,*
- Paul's frequent suffering for the sake of the Church and for God's glory,*
- his love for all the churches and especially for the Corinthian church,*
- his apostolic authority to build up the Church and to oppose those who oppose her,*
- the glory of New Covenant ministry and -principles surrounding Christian stewardship and giving.*

But, as we read on in 2 Corinthians, we then come to chapters 10–13. And here we sense a shift in tone on Paul's part. The tone implies that the situation in Corinth had become tenuous and strained once more.

So what is going on here?

Some interpreters argue that the sudden change in tone in 2 Corinthians 10:1 is best explained if chapters 10-13 were originally a separate letter, written either before chapters 1-9 (in which case it might be the "severe letter") or written after them.

On the whole, it seems preferable to see the change in tone and subject matter as still part of one single letter, and not a patchwork quilt of letters later pieced together after the fact.

Quite simply, although many Corinthians have come around, Paul may be addressing those who remain recalcitrant. Moreover, we should not think that Paul finished this

letter in one sitting and then put it in the mail immediately. It is entirely possible that Paul received more bad news from Corinth after finishing chapters 1–9, but before completing the letter and sending it off, and therefore modified his tone in chapters 10–13.

In chapters 10-13, Paul makes his appeal for obedient faith. He condemns the boasting of those who oppose his apostolic ministry. He exposes “false apostles” and answers fools according to their folly, engaging in a little boasting of his own, but makes it a point to boast in his weaknesses- for Christ power is made perfect in weakness. Paul rebukes the Corinthians for not taking decisive action against the bad actors. He assures the Corinthians that he is not trying to exploit them or tear them down. He urges Corinthian believers to reconsider their course and warns them that- if necessary- he will take decisive action when he arrives on his third visit.

Paul was extraordinarily patient with the Corinthians- despite all their faults, their failures to live out the gospel. He knew that Christ had many people in that city. As we encounter the book of Galatians- we see a matter, a problem so grave, that Paul leaves off the customary words of thanksgiving in his letter. And it is replaced with this urgency and anguish- for the Galatians are in danger of losing the gospel altogether.

As we approach the letter to the Galatians, some knowledge of the historical situation is essential.

Not long after the Galatians had accepted the gospel as preached by Paul, agitators came among them preaching a distorted form of Christianity, essentially a different gospel.

Their so-called "gospel" required circumcision of Gentile Christians- an act that effectively signaled one’s commitment to seek salvation through works of the law.

The agitators insisted that the Galatians not only had to believe in Christ for salvation- but needed to be made complete by circumcision and a commitment to observe the laws of the Mosaic Covenant. In this way they would become true children of Abraham and be vindicated on the last day. Paul's view of the matter is clear in Galatians 3. Having begun by the Spirit, they are now seeking to be perfected by the flesh- and all who rely on works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, “Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law, and do them.”

But the agitators sought to undermine Paul, and it appears that they were saying that Paul was not a true apostle—at least not an apostle on par with the likes of Peter and John- men who had accompanied Jesus throughout his ministry. This would imply that

Paul received his message secondhand- only through what others told him about Christ, and in the process got the message wrong.

To address these issues and counter the danger posed by these teachers, Paul wrote his letter to the Galatians. The undercutting of his apostleship required Paul to begin his letter by insisting that he received both his apostleship and his message not from human sources but through a revelation from Jesus Christ himself.

After defending his message and his status as an apostle- Paul turns to the issue of law observance. Granted, the law prescribes a path to righteousness and life by obeying its commands, but since human beings transgress these commands and are imprisoned under sin, neither righteousness nor life is attainable through the law.

But Christ, in dying, took upon himself the law's curse on transgressors- Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree- so that we who are subject to that curse might be delivered from it and live a new life, empowered by the Spirit.

This does not make the law a bad thing, but it does mean that God never intended the law to provide the path to life; its purpose is more limited, and God intended the covenant to which it belonged to apply only for the period from Moses until the coming of Christ.

For the Galatians to be circumcised would therefore mean binding themselves to a covenant that required fully observing its commands- abiding by all things written in the Book of the Law- this would effectively cut them off from Christ and his grace. Galatians 5:4 (ESV): You are severed from Christ, you who would be justified by the law; you have fallen away from grace.

It is no secret that Galatians has played a central role in Reformed theology- because with absolute clarity, Paul declares that salvation is the gift of God's grace. Galatians 2:21 (ESV): I do not nullify the grace of God, for if righteousness were through the law, then Christ died for no purpose. Salvation is unearned and undeserved and is received by faith alone Galatians 2:16 (ESV): "a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law." Paul showed deep anger over the agitators' denial of this truth, warning that those who reject it cannot expect to be saved.

But in the absence of the Mosaic Law Covenant, are there any assurances that the Christian life will be characterized by righteousness? Or will it be a life characterized by conduct unbecoming?

Paul tells us that believers, though they are no longer “under the law”, are to “walk by the Spirit”. As they do so, God’s Spirit within them will produce both the fruit of the Spirit that no law condemns and love that represents the fulfillment of God’s law (5:14).

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These 4 letters are some of the weightiest theologically.

*Moving forward I must limit my discussion of detailed content- and focus primarily on **why the remaining letters were written, and the unique or significant contributions they make to our understanding of the Christian faith.***

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Let’s consider The Letter to the Ephesians.

From a cultural and religious standpoint- Ephesus was renowned for of being the “guardian of the temple of the great Artemis and of her image, which fell from heaven”. The temple of Artemis was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world, and the influence of the Artemis cult pervaded every facet of life in the city. Artemis was considered the guardian of the city, her temple served as the primary banking institution of the city, her image was imprinted on coins, and festivals and games were held in her honor. The worship of Artemis was not restricted to Ephesus. Demetrius, a silversmith in Ephesus, claimed that Artemis was “worshiped throughout the province of Asia and the world” (Acts 19:27).

I can’t help but think that Paul rejoiced in revealing to the Ephesians that they, as the church, Jew and Gentile together- are being joined together as a holy temple in the Lord. That in Christ the church is being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.

Why Was Ephesians Written?

Most of Paul’s letters were written for a specific purpose on a specific occasion- but in the case of Ephesians- we cannot identify a glaring problem. There is no specific false teaching among the Ephesians at this point, there is nor glaring deficiency in their faith, no failure to thrive. Nevertheless- Paul was convinced that the Ephesian church needed to be reminded to pursue unity and a distinctively Christian ethic.

What Does Ephesians Contribute to Our Understanding of the Faith?

1. In Ephesians 1:3-1 we see God’s sovereignty in salvation. God chose believers before the creation of the world. We do not earn salvation; God planned it according to the purpose of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace.

2. *Christ's saving work is front and center in Ephesians. We have been blessed in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places. What Christ has accomplished through his reconciling death on the cross has cosmic, universal implications- it reverberates throughout the seen and unseen realms. All things are somehow united in him, things in heaven and things on earth. Jews and Gentiles are united in Christ in the church- For through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father.*

3. *Ephesians repeatedly references the revelation of mystery- things once hidden that are now revealed. For instance, Paul mentions the mystery of the gospel in chapter 6- these are things that we would never work out for ourselves- God has to make them known and he has made them known.*

4. *In Ephesians love is thematic as well. The word agape ("love") occurs more often in Ephesians than in any other NT book except 1 Corinthians and 1 John. Ephesians 3 tells us that we are rooted and grounded in love- a mixed metaphor that is botanical-rooted and architectural- grounded- built on the foundation of love. It is this picture of being a living building that grows- a living temple. Paul prays that we would know more of the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God- filled with the fullness of God, Paul drawing upon Old Testament imagery- as the temple was filled with Shekinah glory of God. We are to be filled with the Spirit of God, and the glory we radiate is the image of Christ being formed in us.*

5. *Clearly the Church is front and center in Ephesians. As the body and temple of Christ, the church occupies an important place in God's master plan and is to be characterized by unity in diversity.*

6. *Transformed living is the only appropriate response as we walk in a manner worthy of our calling- as God's holy habitation (We see this in Ephesians 4-6. Christians "must no longer live as the Gentiles do". Paul gives instruction for wives and husbands, children and parents, slaves and masters (5:22-6:9). Gospel-centered living as we put on the whole armor of God's is essential in our struggle against "spiritual forces of evil" (6:10-18).*

7. *Being "in Christ" is repeated 35 times- Michael Horton notes, "Union with Christ (soteriology) and communion with his body (ecclesiology) form an integral pattern throughout this epistle."*

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Let's look at Philippians together briefly.

Why Was Philippians Written?

There does not seem to be one driving theme that we could identify as the purpose of this letter. Rather, Paul seems to have been prompted by a number of concerns, both personal and pastoral.

What we do know is that he was imprisoned. And he was unsure if he would ever see release apart from being away from the body and at home with the Lord. And what a person says while in chains and facing the possibility of death are likely to be pressing, important, and weighty. And what we see in Phillipians is a man that is profoundly Christ-centered, cross-centered and gospel-centered, and these themes are infused throughout this letter.

Significant in the book of Phillipians is some of the bible's richest teaching on Jesus' humility and exaltation. The "hymn" that is Phillipians 2:6–11 highlights that Jesus, "in very nature God," condescended by taking the lowest place and dying on the cross to secure salvation. Now the Father has exalted him to the highest possible place. As Jesus was vindicated, so also shall his people be. And these things become this powerful incentive to emulate Christ in our lives, and to work out our own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you both to will and work for his good pleasure.

Joy is prominent in Phillipians- A joyful note is sounded throughout this letter (the noun "joy" occurs five times and the verb "rejoice" nine times), emphasizing that Christians are a rejoicing people.

4. Gospel preaching and Gospel partnership are important themes. Whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed, and in that Paul rejoices. The harmony between Paul and the Philippians illustrates the importance of working together for the sake of the gospel.

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Now as for the letter the the Colossians-

Paul writes Colossians primarily to refute the errors of false teachers who had come to Colossae. The precise nature of the false teaching is not clear. It appears to be a blend of Greek and Jewish teachings that minimized Christ and promoted asceticism, circumcision, and observation of the Jewish Sabbath.

What Does Colossians Contribute to Our Understanding of the Faith?

If I were to sum up the message of Colossians- it would be the supremacy of Christ.

Christ is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or

dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.

In every generation Christians are tempted to go along with the “hollow and deceptive philosophy” (2:8) of the times. There will always be a multitude of distractions and philosophies and practices that will undermine what is fundamental, causing us to lose sight of Christ and the gospel- even as these things generate a false humility and spirituality. We must hold fast to the Head, who is Christ, from whom the whole body, nourished and knit together through its joints and ligaments, grows with a growth that is from God.

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1 and 2 Thessalonians

When one thinks of the distinctive contribution of the Thessalonian letters, one thinks immediately of the branch of theology that deals with the “last things” or the end times. This is sometimes known as “eschatology”. Paul’s teaching on the “last things” is concentrated in 1 Thessalonians 4:13–5:11 and 2 Thessalonians 2:1–12.

What are the basic truths we see in these two letters concerning last things?

-We see that Jesus will “rescue us from the coming wrath” (1 Thess. 1:10).

*-We see comfort. As a way of **comforting** the Thessalonians in light of their confusion regarding the relationship between believers who have died and believers who are alive at the time of Christ’s return, Paul goes into more detail than anywhere else on the precise sequence of events (4:13–18). When Jesus returns, God will regather all the saints with Jesus in a particular order: “the dead in Christ will rise first,” and only then will those believers who are still alive be “caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air” (4:16–17).*

-Paul speaks concerning the timing of the resurrection. The resurrection of dead Christians will occur at Jesus’ second appearing (4:13–16).

-Paul speaks of the day of the Lord, the time when God through Jesus intervenes to save his people and judge their enemies. This will occur only after other preliminary events namely, the “rebellion” and the revelation of the man of lawlessness.

-Paul speaks of the end times with a sense of imminency. Paul has the keen expectation that Christ’s coming could occur within a very short period of time. ! Thessalonians compares Christ’s coming to the coming of a thief in the night (5:2).

Believers, knowing that the day of Christ's return is coming, should prepare themselves for it by living appropriately.

-Paul is clear that God will judge those who are now tormenting the Thessalonians

There are undoubtedly other rich themes in these two epistles. But we must move on.

Let's consider now 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus- The Pastoral Epistles.

They are called the pastorals for two primary reasons. First, they are written to two men (Timothy and Titus) who are functioning in pastoral capacities.

Second, the letters deal with matters that are overtly pastoral. Therefore these letters are especially important to those who have been called to pastoral ministry. But the relevance of these letters must not be restricted to men in the ministry. The letters themselves give all Christians insight into a number of theological and practical issues.

Within the letters the reader will find issues related to Old Testament law and its relevance for today, the role of women and men within the church, what we are to do for widows, and the qualifications that Christians should look for in those they appoint to lead their churches.

1 Timothy especially draws attention to the problem of False Teaching and the Need for Church Order- False teaching is always en vogue and a threat to the church. We have seen that reality in our short survey of Paul's letter. The problem of false teaching in Ephesus stands behind the letter to Timothy (cf. Acts 20:29). Paul knew that the young minister would need sound advice, encouragement, and instruction- especially as opponents to orthodoxy inevitably enter the church. Paul writes to Timothy encouraging him to challenge false teachings while also calling for right order in the church. If Timothy and the Ephesian Christians were to stand firm in the midst of doctrinal error, the right ordering of the church would be essential.

As far as 2 Timothy is concerned, we see Paul passing the baton to Timothy. He wants Timothy to be unashamed of the gospel of Christ. Timothy would likely be ridiculed and harassed for the doctrines he believed and taught. Despite these things- Paul desires that Timothy remain faithful. To do so would mean treasuring the gospel and unashamedly proclaiming its message. The apostle longs for young Timothy to persevere in gospel ministry till the end, as Paul himself has done.

Titus draws our attention to the need perennial need for sound doctrine- Titus himself needs to teach what accords with sound doctrine, and he needs to appoint to leadership only those who hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that they may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also rebuke those who contradict it.

Philemon

As readers of this letter, we are not privy to all the details concerning the backstory. Onesimus has apparently wronged Philemon in some way. The traditional interpretation of the letter views the letter as Paul's request for Philemon to welcome back Philemon's slave Onesimus- perhaps he has fled from the house of Philemon. Another interpretation suggests that Onesimus was not a fugitive but had committed some misdeed- and personally sought out Paul to intercede for him with his master. Though we can't be sure- one thing is clear: meeting Paul in prison resulted in Onesimus becoming a Christian. Onesimus was now alive in Christ, and Paul wants to awaken Philemon's generous Christian spirit so that he will receive a returning Onesimus as his brother in Christ out of love, just as Paul expects Onesimus to act out of love in this situation.

Onesimus returns to Philemon with Paul's ringing endorsement but with no guarantee that Philemon will welcome him with mercy and kindness. Like the lost (prodigal) son returning home, he can only confess and cast himself on the mercy of his master- and trust God to work difficult circumstances for the good. We do not know the outcome of Paul's appeal, but we do have the letter- and it speaks volumes. It's inclusion in the canon suggests that Paul's words were well received. And at the end of the day, Paul's inspired plea shows how the Christian faith breaks down what seems to be insurmountable barriers.