

## Introduction to the Epistles

### Characteristics

- 1) They *explain* and *interpret* what the Gospels *report* about Jesus' death and resurrection.
- 2) They give the full and complete teaching about the **church** that the Gospels only mention (twice—Matt 16:18; 18:15-17). This teaching is both doctrinal and practical.
- 3) They connect the current church age (unanticipated in the OT) with the anticipated Davidic kingdom and the eternal state.

Paul used the basic model of letter writing of his time and adapted it for Christian purposes. There are three characteristics of Paul's epistles:

- 1) Length—most private letters in Paul's day were about 90 words in length. The average length of Paul's letters is 1,300 words!
- 2) Doctrinally oriented
- 3) Usually written to a church – truth is given through personal correspondence rather than a formal manual of instruction

“Paul's epistles arose out of actual life situations and were intended to meet real needs and answer vital questions. They were not composed as abstract studies in theology, nor were they doctrinal treatises produced by an erudite, cloistered scholar; rather, the ready outpourings of an alert, compassionate pastoral heart. Again and again troublesome questions arose in the churches that called for Paul's help. Frequently believers failed to understand the implications of Christianity for their lives and engaged in practices that demanded the rebuke and correction of apostolic authority. Current heresies threatened inroads upon the young churches and called forth Paul's instruction and counsel. These churches looked to him for help and cherished his assistance, which was often given in the form of letters. At other times Paul heard good news or received tokens of affection from these churches; this caused him to write or express his joy and to give encouragement and exhortation” (Hiebert, *General Introduction to the Pauline Epistles*, p. 18).

### Themes of the Epistles (including Revelation)

- 1) **Salvation** by Christ alone, through grace alone, by faith alone
- 2) The church is Christ's **body**, distinct from the saved *before* and *after* the church age
- 3) The Holy Spirit's roles and relationship to the church and Christians
- 4) How the church age fits in with the OT promises to **Israel**
- 5) The walk, service, and future destiny of **Christians**

- 6) **Prophecy**, covering the course and end of this age and the age to come

### General style—how most of Paul’s letters are written

- 1) Opening – sender, recipient, and greeting
- 2) Thanksgiving or blessing – sometimes including prayer for the recipients (except Galatians!)
- 3) Body – doctrinal teaching and practical issues
- 4) Closing – personal greeting

### Order

*Canonical Order* – usually according to length, from Romans (longest) to Philemon (shortest)

*Chronological Order*

- |                                   |                                     |
|-----------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| 1) Galatians (A.D. 49)            | 8) Philemon (around A.D. 61-63)     |
| 2) 1 Thessalonians (A.D. 51)      | 9) Ephesians (around A.D. 61-63)    |
| 3) 2 Thessalonians (A.D. 51)      | 10) Philippians (around A.D. 61-63) |
| 4) 1 Corinthians (A.D. 55)        | 11) 1 Timothy (around A.D. 63)      |
| 5) 2 Corinthians (A.D. 56)        | 12) Titus (around A.D. 63)          |
| 6) Romans (A.D. 56)               | 13) 2 Timothy (around A.D. 64-68)   |
| 7) Colossians (around A.D. 61-63) |                                     |

### How to Study the Epistles

- 1) Read the whole epistle in **one** sitting, as if it were a letter written to you personally or if you’re hearing it in your local church for the first time. You will never have a firm grasp of an epistle apart from continually reading it.
- 2) Note important **points** of the letter, such as *why* it was written, to *whom* it was written, its basic *theme*, and etc.
- 3) Follow the **outlines** provided here to help you see and grasp the author’s flow of thought.
- 4) Continue reading it, listing the different subjects and topics the writer addresses. Study individual paragraphs, looking at the main “point” each paragraph has. Interpret verses in light of the **context** of the paragraph and the epistle.
- 5) Pray, meditate, and digest the results of your study. Your **aim** in Bible study is a more Christ-like life!

## 6. Galatians

### A. Authorship

The letter clearly says that Paul the apostle is the author (1:1; 5:2).

### B. Recipients

This epistle was written to churches in the region of Galatia (1:2) that were started during Paul's first missionary journey. Paul most likely wrote this before the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15). If Galatians was written *after* that Council he would have undoubtedly referred to the decisions reached there.

### C. Occasion and Purpose

- 1) The Problem (Occasion) – false teachers from outside the churches required Gentile believers to **observe** the OT Law. They taught that being right with God (**justification**) was based on good works. These false teachers are often called *Judaizers* (those who demand obedience to the Law).
- 2) The Solution (Purpose) – Paul defends his apostleship, attacks false teaching, and gives instruction about what should govern and control Christians' lives

“Naturally the Epistle to the Galatians is a polemic from beginning to end—and a powerful, sharp polemic, too. It has just one purpose—to prevent the Galatian Christians from yielding to the demands of the Judaizers” (Machen, p. 125).

### D. Keys

- 1) Theme – Salvation is by **faith** alone in Jesus Christ
- 2) Word – **faith**
- 3) Verse – **2:16**

### E. Outline

*Here's a basic outline of Galatians—*

- 1) Personal Testimony, chapters 1-2
- 2) Polemical Treatise, chapters 3-4
- 3) Practical Teaching, chapters 5-6

*Here's a more detailed outline of Galatians—*

**1) Introduction, 1:1-9**

- a. Greeting, 1:1-5
- b. Occasion and theme, 1:6-9

Galatians are deserting the true gospel for a false gospel

**2) Defense of Paul's Authority, 1:10-2:21**

- a. The source of Paul's authority, 1:10-17

Paul takes the time to do this because the Judaizers have directly challenged it. Paul shows that he received his authority from Christ alone, and he is dogmatic about these things because it is from direct revelation.

- b. Paul's first trip to Jerusalem, 1:18-24

In this and the next section Paul shows his contacts with Jerusalem

- c. Paul's second trip to Jerusalem, 2:1-10

Note 2:2-5

- d. Paul's encounter with Peter at Antioch, 2:11-21

**3) True Doctrine Explained, 3:1-4:31**

Here Paul sets forth justification by faith apart from the Law and circumcision

- a. The Galatians' previous Christian experience, 3:1-14

The Galatians were saved and sanctified by faith alone in Christ alone without any mixture of works whatsoever

- b. The relation of the Law to the Abrahamic Covenant, 3:15-22

The Law came later than the AC and can't change it.

- c. The relation of the Law to Christian faith, 3:23-4:7

The Law served as a custodian ("tutor") *until* Christ came and the individuals "grew up" to become full adults.

- d. The folly of returning to the Law, 4:8-20

e. The allegory of Abraham's sons, 4:21-31

#### 4) Christian Practice Exhorted, 5:1-6:10

a. Exhortation to stand firm in freedom, 5:1-12

b. Exhortation to walk by the Spirit, 5:13-26

c. Exhortation to fulfill responsibilities to others, 6:1-10

#### 5) Concluding Summary, 6:11-18

## 7. Romans

### A. Authorship

The letter clearly says that Paul the apostle is the author (1:1).

### B. Recipients

This epistle was written to "all who are beloved of God in Rome, called as saints" (1:7). This church was not founded by Paul (cf. 1:8-15 and 15:23ff). It was established sometime before Paul wrote his epistle. The church at Rome was probably founded either by converts from the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:10) or converts from elsewhere in the Empire.

### C. Occasion and Purpose

1) Paul was planning to visit Rome (15:22-25) and Phoebe was available to send a letter to them (16:1-2). He wanted their help in his missionary trip to Spain (15:24), including their prayer support (15:30-32).

2) Nowhere does Paul specifically state his purpose, so we must discern such from the *content* of the letter and his *personal situation* at the time of writing. So,

3) anticipating using Rome as a base for missionary work in Spain and the battles with Judaizers in his missionary travels so far, Paul writes this letter to carefully present his understanding of the gospel so he and the Romans would be unified around that.

"Romans is primarily **an exposition of the gospel of God's grace**, with special reference to the claims of the law and of the Jewish people, written in view of Paul's approaching visit to Rome" (Machen, p. 149).

## D. Keys

- 1) Theme – The gospel of God
- 2) Word – **gospel**
- 3) Verses – **1:16-17**

## E. Outline

*Here's a basic outline of Romans—*

- 1) Introduction and Theme, 1:1-17
- 2) Condemnation—The Wrath of God Revealed, 1:18-3:20
- 3) Salvation—The Righteousness of God Revealed, 3:21-8:39
- 4) Vindication—The Wisdom of God Revealed, chapters 9-11
- 5) Exhortation—The Will of God Revealed, chapters 12-16

*Here's a more detailed outline of Romans—*

### 1) Introduction, 1:1-15

- a. Address, 1:1-7
- b. Explanation of Paul's interest in the Roman church, 1:8-15

### 2) Statement of the Theme, 1:16-17

### 3) The Revelation of the Righteousness which is from God by Faith alone, 1:18-4:25

- a. The need of the righteousness which is from God, 1:18-3:20
  - Gentiles are condemned, 1:18-32
  - Jews are condemned, 2:1-3:8
  - All mankind is condemned, 3:9-20
- b. The manifestation of the righteousness which is from God in the gospel, 3:21-31
- c. The example of Abraham as proof that the righteousness which comes from God is by faith, 4:1-25

### 4) The Life Promised for those who are Righteous by Faith, 5:1-8:39

- a. A life characterized by the hope of glory, 5:1-21
- b. A life characterized by sanctification, 6:1-23
  - Dead to the principle of sin, 6:1-14
  - Dead to the practice of sin, 6:15-23
- c. A life characterized by freedom from the Law, 7:1-25
  - The believer's freedom from the Law, 7:1-6
  - The character of the Law, 7:7-25

- d. A life characterized by the indwelling Holy Spirit, 8:1-39
- 5) The Vindication of God's Righteousness in His Dealings with Israel, 9:1-11:36**
- a. Lament for Israel, 9:1-5
  - b. The saving purpose of God in election, 9:6-29
  - c. A righteousness of God for all who believe in Christ, 9:30-10:21
  - d. The mystery of Israel's future restoration, 11:1-32
    - Her present rejection is not complete, 11:1-10
    - Her rejection is not final, 11:11-32
  - e. A hymn of praise to God, 11:33-36
- 6) The Obedience to which those who are Righteous by Faith are Called, 12:1-15:13**
- a. In relation to God, 12:1-2
  - b. In relation to other believers, 12:3-13
  - c. In relation to the state, 13:1-14
  - d. In relation to the weak brother, 14:1-15:17
- 7) Conclusion, 15:15-16:27**
- a. Paul's account of his mission, 15:14-33
  - b. Personal greetings to Roman Christians, 16:1-27
  - c. Final praise to God, 16:24-27