

The Pauline Letters

Paul is probably the best known of all the early Christians. Before encountering Jesus Christ on the road to Damascus, he was a zealous Pharisee who sought to maintain the purity of Judaism. After his experience on the Damascus road, he turned his zeal to proclaiming Jesus Christ among the Gentiles. This brought him into conflict with some other early Christians, not least Peter, who thought that followers of Jesus Christ should convert to Judaism. He travelled around the Roman Empire (though primarily in Asia Minor – modern-day Turkey – and Greece) proclaiming the good news of Jesus Christ and founding communities of Christians as he went. He also wrote a large number of letters, 13 of which are preserved in the New Testament. Romans is regarded by many as being the most important of these.

The striking thing about Romans is that Paul lays out his theology carefully in chapters 1-11 but then goes on in 12-16 to talk about how this theology affects our lives now.

The first documents collected by early Christians were the Letters of St. Paul and other notable persons of the first generation of Christianity. Letters normally deal with personal things and do not have to be well organised. Friends who know us can fill in the gaps we leave in our letters. As many of the letters in the New Testament are private, at least in the sense that they come from one person to a group of friends, they will often perplex readers, just as any private correspondence will, if we don't know the parties involved. We will have difficulty in understanding the answer if we do not know (and we often do not) the question that has been asked. The letters of the New Testament invite the most careful scrutiny and, often enough, create the deepest bafflement.

Why letters?

Paul's letters are written to individual communities (and one individual person, Philemon) in response to particular needs and problems which had come to his notice in the Christian Communities which he had founded around the Mediterranean cities of the Greek-speaking worlds. With fiery enthusiasm, he instructs, encourages, persuades, cajoles, rebukes, lambasts – and, in doing so, he has given Christianity a body of insight and guidance which has formed the backbone of Christian thinking for 20 centuries.

Like the ancient prophets who spoke the word of the Lord, the letter writers of the New Testament treat everyday occurrences amidst the turmoil of history. As the prophets of old sought to protect little Israel from the evil worlds all around, so the letters sought to protect little groups of Christians scattered throughout the Roman empire as so many oases of faith in a desert of paganism. As the great preachers of the Gospel, Paul and the rest traversed the eastern empire spreading the word, they kept in touch with their little flocks by letter. It is these letters which keep today's Christians in touch with the fathers and mothers of our faith.

The Pauline Letters

- Paul wrote to the *Romans* to explain that salvation is offered through the Gospel of Jesus Christ.
- Paul wrote his first letter to the *Corinthians* to correct what he saw as erroneous views in the Corinthian church. He wrote his second letter because he heard that his first one had not completely accomplished its purpose.
- Paul wrote to the *Galatians* because he was arguing that the gentile Galatians do not need to adhere to the tenets of the Mosaic Law, particularly religious male circumcision, by contextualizing the role of the law in light of the revelation of Christ.
- The letter to the *Ephesians* is primarily written to Gentile (non-Jewish) followers of Christ to say that salvation through Christ is offered to Jews and Gentiles alike.
- The letter to the *Philippians* was written by Paul while he was in prison to say that his imprisonment was actually helping to spread the Christian message, rather than hindering it.
- The letter to the *Colossians* declares Christ's supremacy over the entire created universe and exhorts Christians to lead godly lives.
- Paul wrote two letters to the *Thessalonians* from Corinth, Greece, and addressed to the Christians, who apparently believed that it was useless to work because the end of the world was at hand. Paul urges them to go on working quietly while waiting.
- Paul wrote to *Philemon*, a wealthy Christian of Colossae, [Asia Minor](#), on behalf of [Onesimus](#), Philemon's former slave. Paul, writing from prison, expresses affection for the newly converted Onesimus and exhorts Philemon to [manifest](#) true Christian love that removes barriers between slaves and free men.

And, then, there are the *Pastoral Letters* which will be discussed in the next section.

- Paul wrote two letters to *Timothy*. The first letter insists on the need to shun unorthodox teachings and dangerous speculations and reiterates the qualities expected of bishops and deacons. Judging by the text, St. Paul wrote the Second Letter to Timothy as a prisoner in Rome (2 Timothy 1:16-17) when he was soon to meet his fate (2 Timothy 4:6).
- This epistle was written to *Titus* by the apostle Paul to encourage his brother in the faith, whom he had left in Crete to lead the church which Paul had established on one of his missionary journeys (Titus 1:5). It advises Titus regarding what qualifications to look for in leaders for the church.
- The letter to the *Hebrews* was not written by Paul and had nothing to do with him; it was addressed to a Christian community whose faith was faltering because of strong Jewish influences.

Romans

Paul wrote to the Romans to explain that salvation is offered through the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

A favourite quote

"For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 8.38-39).

The Letter to the Romans

This letter is regarded as one of the most important letters that Paul wrote; and it is the longest of all his letters. It was Paul's first communication with the community in Rome since he had not founded that community; it announces his intention to go to Rome. We don't know, as a rule, what Paul said when he first arrived in a new place to proclaim the Gospel. Most of his letters are written to communities that he had founded – so they are the second or third communication to the community, not the first. For this reason, this letter to the Romans gives us an idea of what Paul might have said when he first arrived in a community.

Paul writes this letter to the Romans partly to enlist their support for his proposed mission to Spain, for the Romans knew Spain well (Romans 15:23-24). By way of introduction, Paul laid out his theology in great detail, explaining the good news that he proclaimed (chapters 1-11) and the consequences that he believed this should have in the lives of the Christian community (Romans 12-16).

Suggested Reading

Romans 5:1-8:39 is about how we have been justified by faith, and can have peace with God through our Lord, Jesus Christ leading up to one of the most important statements: that nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. Romans 12:1-21 tells us what the true marks of being a Christian are.

Who wrote this letter?

The author of Romans is named as Paul alone and is not said to have been written with anyone else, unlike many of Paul's other letters.

Liturgical notes

A large portion of the Letter to the Romans is read on Sundays 9-24 (Year A) and on three of the four Advent Sundays (Year A). The long period devoted to Romans is testimony not only to its length but, more, to its importance in the eyes of the Church, for it is the single fullest expression of Christ's saving work and of the need for faith. Romans provides also the single New Testament reading (about baptism into Christ and resurrection with Christ) for the Easter Vigil.

On weekdays, Romans is read semi-continuously in Weeks 28-31 (Year 1). The reading that nothing can separate us from the love of Christ is often used for funerals. It is also a very powerful reading for people who are struggling with accepting God's love and forgiveness.

How is it structured?

1:1-17	opening and greetings
1:18-3:20	the revelation of the wrath of God
3:21-4:25	the revelation of the righteousness of God
5:1-8:39	the nature of new life in Christ
9:1-11:36	the place of Israel in God's plan
12:1-21	what this new life means in terms of behaviour
15:14-33	Paul's encouragement and travel plans
16:1-27	Paul's greetings to those in Rome he already knows

God speaks to us

Through Paul's letter to the Romans, perhaps God is telling us that all people everywhere have free access to the riches of his grace in Christ as they respond in faith to the Gospel.

1 & 2 Corinthians

Paul wrote his first letter to the *Corinthians* to correct what he saw as erroneous views in the Corinthian church. He wrote his second letter to them because he heard that his first letter had not completely accomplished its purpose.

A couple of favourite quotes

“Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant; or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things...” (1 Corinthians 13:4-7).

"My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Corinthians 12:9).

The Letters to the Corinthians

In the first letter to the Corinthians, Paul is responding to an independent report from “Chloe’s people”. Paul replies in chapters 12 and 13 that they should approach all the ethical dilemmas that they faced and all the conflicts they were experiencing in the knowledge that they were all members of the body of Christ and that they should behave towards one another with love. This is a letter addressing the particular concerns and issues of its recipients. Possibly more than in any other epistle, in 1 Corinthians Paul addressed both what he had heard about the Corinthians and the questions that they had sent to him in a previous letter.

The second letter was written when things were going badly wrong between Paul and the Corinthians. It is clear that relationships between the Corinthians and Paul have deteriorated badly. He knows he has hurt them but it is clear he has also been hurt by them. As a result 2 Corinthians reveals a vulnerable Paul probably more clearly than any other letter. In it Paul lays out his love for the Corinthians, his passion for the Gospel as well as his belief that vulnerabilities are the way in which Christ’s power is made complete and God’s glory shines into the world.

Suggested Reading

1 Corinthians, chapter 13 on love is surely one you might read. Also in 1 Corinthians, chapters 3 and 4, which describe the qualities of a follower of Christ would be good to read. In 2 Corinthians, chapters 8:1-9:15, on the collection for the Lord’s people.

Tricky bits

Probably the trickiest bits in the first letter to the Corinthians are about sexual ethics. Paul’s comments about men and women and about women speaking in the churches have led to much disagreement and debate about his attitude to women. A well-known text often quoted is “women should keep silence in the churches....for it is shameful for a woman to speak in church” (1 Corinthians 14:34-35).

I would say that the best measure of Paul’s egalitarian sensibility lies in the way he talks about different Christian women. Paul did not act alone in his apostolic ministry, and many of his co-workers were women. Looking at the passages in Paul’s letters and in the Acts of the Apostles in which these women are mentioned, one finds a great sense of collegiality and many examples of women given authority.

Who wrote these letters?

Paul had spent 18 months (49-51 CE), working at his trade as a tent-maker while he established the Christian community there. He writes the first letter from Ephesus a couple of years later. It deals with a number of problems in this arrogant and quarrelsome community – particularly in its disorderly worship-assembly and dogged by social and gender problems. The second letter was written to establish Paul's authority as an apostle. The theological richness of the letter lies in Paul's reflection on the apostolate, which he sees as a ministry of light – outshining Moses.

Liturgical notes

Many of the issues which disturbed the Church at Corinth are still actual today. The first letter to the Corinthians is read on the first eight Sundays of each year; in Year A, the first six chapters (on the troubles in the community); in Year B, chapters 6-10 (on the problems about sexuality and about food sacrificed to idols); and in Year C, chapters 12-15 (mostly about the gifts of the Spirit). The passage on the Eucharist in assembly is read for the Mass of the Lord's Supper on Maundy Thursday, and also on Corpus Christi (Years A and C). It is read semi-continuously from Thursday of Week 21 till the end of Week 24 (Year 2).

The second letter gives more autobiographic details about Paul than any other and especially glories in the ministry of light which has been entrusted to him. It is read on Sundays 7-14 (Year B). On Weekdays of Weeks 1-11 (Year 1), it is read semi-continuously.

How are they structured?

First Letter to the Corinthians

Second Letter to the Corinthians

1:1-9	greeting and thanksgiving	1:1-2	opening and greeting
1:10-6:20	divisions and scandals	1:3-7:16	reflections on authority, glory and reconciliation
1:10-4:21	factions in the Corinthian Church	8:1-9:15	the importance of giving
5	incest in Corinth	10:1-13:10	on boasting and the super-apostles
6:1-11	recourse to Gentile Courts	13:11-13	final greetings and blessing
6:12-20	sexual immorality		
7	marriage and virginity		
8:1-11:1	food offered to false gods		
11:2-14:40	decorum in public worship		
15	the Resurrection of the Dead		
16	conclusion		

God speaks to us

Through the letters to the Corinthians, God is telling us that the Gospel of Jesus Christ is relevant – and there is still much for the Church today to learn from this important letter.

Galatians

The Letter to the Galatians is an angry letter written to a Christian community that included both Jew and Gentiles.

A favourite quote

"By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things" (Galatians 5.22-23).

The Letter to the Galatians

The Letter to the Galatians is written in view of a very particular situation. After Paul had founded the Galatian Christian community, a community that included both Jews and Gentiles, Jewish Christian evangelists had arrived arguing that those who wanted to follow Christ had to be Jewish and so needed to be circumcised. Paul's vehement rejection of this message is what makes up the letter to the Galatians, where he argues that it is faith in Christ, not observance of the Jewish law, that justifies people with God. It is faith, not anything else that allows them to participate in the dying and rising of Christ into a new way of being, a way of being marked with true freedom.

The letter to the Galatians is raw. Paul is at his most abrasive. There is no initial thanksgiving, no final greetings. Though they once helped him devotedly, he calls them "mad" (Galatians 3:1) and uses a bitter wit, sarcasm and even coarse language. Paul had always insisted that faith, not observing the minutiae of Jewish laws, must be the hallmark of believers in the salvation won by Christ Jesus. He rebukes Peter (Cephas) and all backsliders who want to change the freedom of the Gospel for the shackles of law. For Paul, the Gospel makes Jews and pagans, slaves and freeborn, women and men, equal in God's sight for all are redeemed in Jesus. All are called to freedom, not legal entanglement. Paul begs his "foolish Galatians" to live in love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

It was some time after Paul's initial visit to proclaim to them the message of Christ, Jewish believers in Christ came and had some success in persuading them that to be full Christians they must accept circumcision and the other obligations of the Law. Paul replies to this by proclaiming his own prophetic authority, dependent on a revelation of Christ and no human delegation (chapter 1). Furthermore, Paul has the full agreement of the Church authorities at Jerusalem, to the extent that Paul dared to rebuke Peter for departing from best practice (chapter 2). Paul then appeals to the Christian experience of the activity of the Spirit, which must be attributed to faith along the lines of Abraham's, not to the Law (chapter 3). The letter ends with a glowing exhortation to practise the works of the Spirit and shun those of the flesh.

Suggested Reading

Galatians 5:1-6:20: in light of all that Paul has said previously, he now challenges the Galatians to walk in the truth he has presented.

Who wrote this letter?

A very angry Paul wrote this letter. Paul's argument about the law and the relationship to the law is notoriously complex, involved and hard to follow. This letter focuses on one key issue: the question of how someone is justified with God and what difference that makes to their life.

Liturgical notes

Galatians helps us to look again at issues such as division in the community and the relationship of Christianity to Judaism. It is used for the Solemnity of Mary, the Jewish Mother of God, and also provides the second reading for Sundays 9-14 (Year C). It is read semi-continuously on the weekdays of Weeks 27 and 28 (Year II).

How is it structured?

1:1-5	opening and greeting
1:6-10	Paul's astonishment about what has happened
1:11-2:14	how Paul began to preach the Gospel
2:15-21	the nature of that Gospel: being justified by faith in Christ
3:1-4:31	how Paul supports this assertion (arguments from experience, from tradition, from Scripture and elsewhere)
5:1-6:10	the freedom that the Gospel brings
6:11-18	what this means

God speaks to us

One of the issues that bemused Paul in this letter was why the Galatians, who had been offered true freedom in Christ, were so keen to turn their back on that freedom. Perhaps God is asking us how we turn our backs on the freedom we have been offered in Christ.

Ephesians

The letter to the *Ephesians* is primarily written to Gentile (non-Jewish) followers of Christ to say that salvation through Christ is offered to Jews and Gentiles alike.

A favourite quote

"Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power. Put on the whole armour of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil" (Ephesians 6:10-11).

The Letter to the Ephesians

This letter is unlike any of Paul's other letters. Ephesus was a magnificent city; and for some years, it was Paul's base in Asia Minor. The vision of Ephesians is that, in Christ, Jews and Gentiles have been unified into a single household. The letter seeks to encourage its recipients to live this unity in practice. The first half of the book lays out the theology that lies behind this unity exploring in particular the way in which the church is the body of Christ. The second half of the book discusses in more detail what living this unity in practice might look like.

Ephesians and Colossians are often recognised to be companion books as their message is very similar. An Epistle, or letter – both Ephesians and Colossians are letters which offer a vision of how to live out the Christian faith. In both, the theology of the first half of the letter is applied in the second half of the letter to everyday living. Paul taught that the Christian lives with Christ's life. Now the Christian has already been given a place in heaven, though still being built into a dwelling-place of God in the Spirit. This letter is a triumphant summing-up of Paul's teaching on salvation.

Suggested Reading

Ephesians 5:1-6:10 about following God's example, walking in the way of love just as Jesus did.

Who wrote this letter?

The letter is attributed to Paul in 1.1; but, ever since the 18th century, New Testament scholars have questioned whether the different tone, style and vocabulary might suggest that it might have been written by a later member of the Pauline community using Paul's theology as a base.

Liturgical notes

The message of Ephesians gives especially valuable teaching on the Church, on Christ as its Head and on the obligations of its members to one another. The letter is read on Sundays 15-21 (Year B), and semi-continuously on the weekdays of Weeks 28-30 (Year II). The letter to the Ephesians about the exaltation of Christ (Ephesians 1:17-23) provides the second reading for the Ascension and about the revelation of the mystery (Ephesians 3:2-6) for the Epiphany. A favourite passage about Christ's devotion to the Church as his spouse is often used at weddings (Ephesians 5:21-33).

How is it structured?

1:1-2	introduction and greeting
1:3-3:21	a theological reflection on unity in Christ
4:1-6:20	guidelines as to how to live this unity in practice
6:21-24	final greeting

God speaks to us

Ephesians lays out a clear vision of what kind of behaviour was expected from Christians and what was not. This vision is still relevant today.

Philippians

The letter to the *Philippians* was written by Paul while he was in prison to say that his imprisonment was actually helping to spread the Christian message, rather than hindering it. He also wanted to thank the Philippians for the gift they had sent him upon learning of his detention at Rome.

A favourite quote

“And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him” ([Colossians 3:17](#)).

The Letter to the Philippians

Philippi was the first city in Europe to be evangelised by Paul (Acts 16:11-12). This is confirmed by Paul’s hint that his first converts came from Philippi (Philippians 4:15). Paul understood his mission as simple evangelisation, to plant the Gospel and march on; the watering of the seed was not his responsibility (1 Corinthians 1:17a). It was only two years later when he was forced to concern himself with the affairs of the church at Thessalonica that he became aware that facility of communications had to be a critical factor in the choice of a missionary base.

It reveals a vision of life in Christ which takes seriously the example of living that Christ modelled, interwoven with the importance of rejoicing at all times and in all things. The vision of a life focused on Christ that Paul held up focuses on two key themes: Christ as servant and Lord (Philippians 2:5-11) and Christ as Lord and Saviour (Philippians 3:20-21) – and, from these two flow the vision of how the Philippians should live.

Throughout [Philippians](#), Paul exhorts his readers to give of themselves gladly for the sake of Christ and others. Paul himself says that he is content even with imprisonment as long as Christ is lifted up ([Philippians 1:12–18](#)). He tells the Philippians that he will be glad to be “poured out as a drink offering” if it will strengthen their faith (Philippians [2:17](#)). In addition, throughout [Philippians](#), Paul describes the Christian life as one of joy ([Philippians 1:4, 25; 2:2, 29; 4:1](#)) and encourages his readers to rejoice (Philippians [3:1; 4:4](#)). This is the great call and the great need of the Christian church today. Whatever our circumstances, whether we are rich or poor, comfortable or afflicted, we are called to rejoice in God (Philippians [4:10–13](#)).

As we look around the world today, it is not hard to find reasons for discouragement. Joblessness, homelessness, illness, hunger, marital strife, economic hardship, persecution of believers both publicly and privately—the challenges of life in a sin-ravaged world quickly feel overwhelming. The battering that our hope takes comes not only from outside the Church but also from inside it. Gossip, slander, envy, disunity, laziness, grumbling, and simply the ongoing temptations and failings of believers all take their toll on the Church and the Church’s witness around the world.

Suggested Reading

Philippians 2:1-18; 3:1-17: about imitating Christ's humility; and, in your relationships with one another, have the same mind set as Christ.

Who wrote this letter?

The letter to the Philippians (or at least part of it) was written by Paul the [Apostle](#), while he was in prison (probably at Rome about AD 62 CE). From the way he introduces the topic of his imprisonment, it would appear that the Philippians knew that he had been imprisoned (Philippians 1:7, 12). His focus is on the impact of his incarceration with regard to the Christian community and those with whom he came into contact with while in prison.

Although his movements were hampered, the conditions under which Paul was imprisoned cannot have been too severe since he was able to communicate with his collaborators, who were held with him (Philippians 2:19-23). One of them may have served as the secretary he needed to write letters.

Liturgical notes

The letter to the Philippians is full of deep love – Paul's love for the community at Philippi and his love of Christ and the transforming power of the Cross, making Paul's life Christ's own life. It is read on Sundays 25-28 (Year A) and semi-continuously on weekdays of Weeks 30 and 31 (Year II). The hymn to Christ, "His state was divine . . ." (Philippians 2:6-11) is read on Paul Sunday. Readings from this letter are suggested for the anointing of the sick, for funerals and for religious professions.

How is it structured?

1:1-2	introduction and greeting
1:3-11	prayers giving thanks and interceding for the Philippians
1:12-2:30	a life focused on Jesus, servant and Lord
3:1-4:9	a life focused on Jesus, Lord and Saviour
4:10-20	prayers, giving thanks and interceding for the Philippians
4:21-23	farewell greetings

God speaks to us

The letter to the Philippians addresses head-on the human tendency toward discouragement and hopelessness. In Christ, who was in the form of God yet emptied himself and went to a cross for our sake ([Philippians 2:5-11](#)), an invincible hope is given to all Christians everywhere, whatever we are facing.

Colossians

Colossians lays out a clear vision of Christian living focused around the person of Christ. (Make sure you read the beautiful Christ-hymn of Colossians 1.15-20).

A favourite quote

“Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him” (Colossians 3.16-17).

The Letter to the Colossians

The vision of Colossians is that what you believe about Christ must affect both what you do, and who you are. In Colossians, the vision of Christ is used as the underpinning for how those in Christ should now live from the very first chapter. If they have died and risen with the Christ, who created the world and is the head of the church, then their identity has now changed and they should behave accordingly. This message is very similar to the letter to the Ephesians; and, because of that, they are often recognised to be companion books.

Suggested Reading

1:18-23 shows how Christ is the head of the body, the church: who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead; that in all things he might become pre-eminent.

Who wrote this letter?

The letter is attributed to Paul and Timothy in 1.1 and is signed by Paul in 4.18. However, since the 18th century, New Testament scholars have questioned whether the different tone, style and vocabulary might suggest that it was written by a later member of the Pauline community using Paul's theology as a base.

Liturgical notes

Colossians provides the readings for Sundays 15-18 (Year C) and each year for Easter Day on newness of life (Colossians 3:1-4) and for the Holy Family on Christian behaviour in the home (Colossians 3:12-21). It is read semi-continuously in Weeks 22 and 23 (Year 1).

How is it structured?

1:1-2 opening greetings
1:3-12 prayers for the Colossians
1:13-20 Christ, creator and redeemer
1:21-2:5 Paul's proclamation of the eternal mysteries of God
2:6-19 a new identity in Christ
2:20-3:17 the consequences in attitude to dying and rising with Christ
3:18-4:1 implications of this for living in community
4:2-18 closing prayers and greetings.

God speaks to us

In both Colossians and Ephesians the theology of the first half of the letter is applied in the second half of the letter to everyday living.

1-2 Thessalonians

Paul wrote two letters to the *Thessalonians* from Corinth, Greece, about 50 CE and addressed to the Christian [community](#) he had founded in Macedonia to encourage and reassure the Christians there.

A favourite quote

“Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you” (1 Thessalonians 5.16-18).

The Letters to the Thessalonians

Thessalonika was an important city, capital of Macedonia, commanding the road from Rome to Byzantium and a fine port. According to Acts 17:2, Paul preached in the synagogue there for three consecutive Sabbaths before being hustled out of town by Jewish opposition; the letters suggest that the Christian community was entirely gentile. First Thessalonians may well be Paul’s earliest letter – possibly even the earliest of all Christian writings. After so short a stay, and despite a later visit by Timothy, it is not surprising that they were not yet fully instructed. They also needed encouragement in their difficulties, perhaps occasioned simply by the separation of Christians from Hellenistic social life.

Both letters are concerned chiefly with eschatology, the first reassuring that those who have died will not be at a disadvantage at the Coming of Christ, the second explaining that the Second Coming will not be immediate, and detailing the preliminary signs to the end.

A tricky element

Paul seems to believe that Jesus would return while he, Paul, was still alive. The question we need to wrestle with is whether Paul was wrong or whether we are misunderstanding what he was talking about. It also has one unusual feature which is that it is the only letter that has no quotes in it at all from the Old Testament.

Suggested Reading

1 Thessalonians 4:1-5:11: we are urged to live in a way that pleases God, as we have been taught.

Who wrote these letters?

These letters were written by Paul, Silvanus and Timothy from Corinth, Greece, about 50 CE and addressed to the Christian [community](#) Paul had founded in Macedonia. They are most encouraging and affirming letters and in them you can see clearly Paul’s real affection and admiration for the Thessalonian Christians. Paul reports that he had been worried about the faith of the Thessalonians but was reassured by Timothy, who went to visit them and reported back to him that their faith was strong and secure. Paul does offer them advice but it is advice that falls much more strongly into the category of “continue as you are” than, as in most of the other epistles, the need for them to change.

The second letter was written shortly after the first, but some question Pauline authorship because there is notable ambiguity about the proximity of Christ's Second Coming. Christians apparently believed that it was useless to work because the end of the world was close at hand. The letter thus explains that Christians must continue "to earn their own living" (2 Thessalonians 3:12), as did Paul himself in Thessalonica, who "did not eat any one's bread without paying" (2 Thessalonians 3:8).

Liturgical notes

As they are concerned with the Second Coming of Christ, these letters are read on Sundays at the end of the year, 1 Thessalonians on the last five Sundays (Year A), 2 Thessalonians on the last three Sundays (Year C). On weekdays, the first letter has semi-continuous reading in Weeks 21 and 22 (Year I) and the second three glimpses in Week 21 (Year II).

How are they structured?

First Letter to the Thessalonians

Second Letter to the Thessalonians

1:1-10	opening, greeting and thanksgiving	1:1-12	opening and thanksgiving for faithful endurance (along with destruction for those who don't obey the Gospel)
2:1-20	Paul's past interactions with the Thessalonian Christians	2:1-12	further thoughts on the day of the Lord
3:1-13	Timothy's visit	2:13-3:5	prayer for the Thessalonians and requests for prayer
4:1-5:25	response to issues and concerns with the church (especially relationships to one another; mourning for those who have died and preparation for the day of the Lord)	3:6-15	warnings about idleness and disobedience
5:12-25	guidance on how Christians should behave	3:16-18	farewells
5:26-28	closing		

God speaks to us

The first letter closes with a reminder that the Day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night (1 Thessalonians 5:2). No one knows just when it will come, but all are admonished to live in such a way that they will be ready for it at any moment.

The Pastoral Letters

Three pastoral letters are generally thought to have been attributed to Paul pseudonymously, that is, they were attributed to Paul by their real author or authors in the conviction that they were what Paul would have written. Paul himself is presented as the heroic witness to Christ. This is a convention common in Jewish literature at the time; they show a believing community, a generation or so after Paul, finding its way among the values of Hellenistic society, still inspired by a Pauline view of salvation and looking forward to the appearance of Jesus.

They give a valuable insight into the organisation and spirituality of Christians near the end of the first century, the sometimes prosaic moral guidance being punctuated again and again by snatches of hymns of praise and confessions of faith.

Formally, the letters show Paul giving instructions to two trusted successors, partners in his own missionary activity, for the ordering of local communities and their officials and teachers. All three share the same tone, style and vocabulary. Second Timothy (not necessarily later, but shorter than First Timothy) is of a particular genre, a farewell-letter in which Paul is giving final instructions reflecting on his own ministry against the background of his approaching final departure. The Letter to Titus has the Church of Crete firmly in view and can be read as a charter for the dispositions of that community.

1-2 Timothy

The First Letter of Paul to Timothy insists on the need to shun unorthodox teachings and dangerous speculations, and reiterates the qualities expected of bishops and deacons. Judging by the text, Paul wrote the Second Letter to Timothy as a prisoner in Rome (2 Timothy 1:16-17) when he was soon to meet his fate (2 Timothy 4:6).

Favourite quotes

“This is a trustworthy saying, and everyone should accept it: ‘Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners – and I am the worst of them all’” (1 Timothy 1:15)

“God has not given us a spirit of fear but of power and of love and of a sound mind” (2 Timothy 1-7).

The Letters to Timothy

The first letter is addressed to Timothy in Ephesus from Paul who has left Ephesus for Macedonia. Paul intends to return but isn't sure when this will be possible – so, in the meantime, he sent instructions to Timothy about what he should do in his absence. Although the letter is addressed to Timothy, Paul is talking to more than just him when he offers guidance – especially regarding the character of those who are in leadership positions and regarding true and false teaching.

The receiver of this letter, Timothy, was born in Lystra in Asia Minor of a Jewish mother and Greek father. Acts 16.1-3 recounts his meeting of Paul in Lystra and of Paul's desire to take him with him on his journeys. Paul often sent Timothy to communities that he had founded to take letters to them and so that he could report to Paul about what was going on, as indeed he did with the Thessalonians (see 1 Thessalonians 3.2 and 6). Two letters in the New Testament (1 and 2 Timothy) are reputed to be letters of encouragement from Paul to Timothy in Ephesus. Christian tradition identifies Timothy as the first Bishop of Ephesus.

Features that mark these letters out as different from other Pauline letters are that they are addressed to one person, Timothy, not a whole community, like Galatians or Thessalonians. Whereas 1 Timothy feels as though there is a wider audience beyond just Timothy, 2 Timothy reads much more as a personal letter and is the most intimate of the three letters (1 and 2 Timothy, and Titus).

When he wrote the second letter to Timothy, Paul was chained (2 Timothy 1:8, 16) as an evildoer (2 Timothy 2:9). He may have been saying that this imprisonment was somehow more severe than those he had experienced previously. Paul knew he was near execution and offered a personal challenge to Timothy to keep following Jesus no matter the sacrifice and risk.

Suggested Reading

1 Timothy 1:12-20: Christ judges us faithful and appoints us to his service, despite what we might have been or done in our lives.

2 Timothy 3:10-17: about how All Scripture Is Breathed Out by God.

Who wrote these letters?

Both 1 and 2 Timothy give their author as the apostle Paul (1 Timothy 1:1; 2 Timothy 1:1). Despite their introductions, both letters to Timothy and the one to Titus are widely viewed by scholars not to be by Paul. The reason for this is a different style of writing (i.e., different words and sentence structures used) and a different focus.

1 Timothy is particularly focused on church order and leadership, which suggests that it is written to later church communities whose concerns have passed beyond the immediate questions of who Jesus was and what he had done for them, onto questions of how churches relate to each other. 2 Timothy is focused on reminding Timothy to maintain faith and hope in Jesus' resurrection and to raise faithful leaders who will teach the good news about Jesus.

Tricky elements

1 Timothy contains two notorious pieces of teaching: one on women where he says that women who profess the Christian religion should be modest in their apparel and be submissive as becomes their place (1 Timothy 2:8-15). The other one concerns homosexuality where he depicts the act of men having sex with men as sinful (1 Timothy 1:10). There are many different interpretations of these passages and people often disagree about what they are saying.

Liturgical notes

First Timothy is read on Sundays 24-26 (Year C) and during weekdays of Weeks 23-25 (Year II). Other important occasions of its use are at the ordinations of bishops, priests and deacons where it defines clearly the qualities required of those who hold office and authority in the Church, their own self-discipline and their care for those in their charge.

Second Timothy is read on Sundays 27-30 (Year C) and on weekdays of Week 9 (Year II). The expression "the Appearing of our Saviour Jesus Christ" also earns it a reading on the second Lenten Sunday (Year B), to pair with the Gospel of the Transfiguration. It also gives an important exhortation at the institution of acolytes and in the rite of ordination of bishops, "Fan into a flame the gift that God gave you when I laid my hands on you" (2 Timothy 1:6).

How are they structured?

First Letter to Timothy

Second Letter to Timothy

1:1-2	introduction	1:1-2	opening greeting
1:3-20	the need to oppose false teachers	1:3-7	thanksgiving for Timothy's faith
2:1-15	instructions on prayer, worship and discipleship	1:8-18	reflections on suffering based on Paul's suffering
3:1-13	expectations of bishops, deacons (or overseers and servants)	2:1-26	reflections on leadership
3:14-16	the reason why Paul is writing	3:1-9	what false leaders look like
4:1-5:2	the duties of ministry	3:10-17	the need to remain faithful to the Gospel
5:3-6:2	the importance of order	4:1-5	keep preaching the Gospel
6:2-21	true and false teaching and a final blessing	4:6-22	farewells and greetings

God's message

The stress is on the humanity of Jesus as the mediator between God and humanity (1 Tim 2:5).

Titus

This epistle was written by the apostle Paul to encourage his brother in the faith, Titus, whom he had left in Crete to lead the church which Paul had established on one of his missionary journeys (Titus 1:5). This letter advises Titus regarding what qualifications to look for in leaders for the church.

An inspiring quote

"But when the goodness and loving-kindness of God our Saviour appeared, he saved us, not because of any works of righteousness that we had done, but according to his mercy, through the water of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit" (Titus 3.4-5).

The Letter to Titus

Titus is the recipient of the letter here not the author. The letter is addressed to only one person, Titus, not a whole community (like Galatians or Thessalonians). You don't have to read for long before it becomes clear, however, that this letter is not just written to Titus but is to be applied to the whole community.

Like 1 Timothy, Titus is particularly focused on church order and leadership which suggests that it is written to later church communities, whose concerns have passed beyond the immediate questions of who Jesus was and what he had done for them onto questions of how churches relate to each other.

According to Christian tradition, Titus was a Gentile who converted to Christianity and became the first Bishop of Crete. He is said to have come from Antioch and to have studied both Greek philosophy and poetry as a young man. He was a close companion of Paul – in Galatians Paul said he took Titus to Jerusalem for the Jerusalem council and in 2 Corinthians 2.13 Paul stated that he could not proclaim the Gospel in Troas because he couldn't find Titus there – and clearly trusted him.

The fact that there was a ministry of bishop or overseer reflected a developed church order that was post-Pauline. It rested its case on the twin assumptions that the earliest congregations had no structured ministries and that early Christian (theology and) praxis moved forward gradually and stage-by-stage as a block.

Suggested Reading

Titus 1:5-16: about the qualifications for elders.

Who wrote this letter?

Titus gives its author as the apostle Paul. Despite their introductions, both letters to Timothy and the one to Titus are widely viewed by scholars not to be by Paul. The reason for this is a different style of writing (i.e., different words and sentence structures used) and a different focus.

Liturgical notes

Titus is read on weekdays of Week 32 (Year II). The passages about the Appearing of our God and Saviour Jesus Christ (Titus 2:11-14 and 3:4-7) provide the second reading for Midnight and Day Mass on Christmas Day.

How is it structured?

1:1-4	opening greeting
1:5-16	the importance of good leadership
2:1-10	how to live well as a Christian
2:11-3:11	the importance of good works
3:12-15	farewells

God's message

The message of Titus is that sound teaching leads to godliness. As authentic apostolic doctrine is received and loved, all kinds of people will learn to live in ways that are pleasing to God.

Philemon

Paul, writing from prison, expresses affection for the newly converted Onesimus, slave of Philemon, asking him to [manifest](#) true Christian love that removes barriers between slaves and free men.

A favourite quote

"When I remember you in my prayers, I always thank my God because I hear of your love for all the saints and your faith toward the Lord Jesus" (Philemon verses 4-5).

The Letter to Philemon

This is the shortest letter (335 words in Greek) and the most personal of all the letters belonging to the Pauline corpus. It offers a fascinating window not only on a corner of the social world of the first century, but on Christian principles at work in a particular setting within the early church.

The subject of the letter is Onesimus, a runaway slave from the household of Philemon who had met Paul in prison and come to faith in Christ. Paul sent him back to the household with this letter, since he knew that under the existing laws Onesimus must be returned to his rightful owner. In the letter, Paul implores Philemon not only to receive (Philemon 17), forgive (Philemon 18) and acknowledge Onesimus' new status as a fellow believer (Philemon 16), but to relinquish all claims upon Onesimus so that he can continue serving with Paul (Philemon 13, 21).

Although the circumstances surrounding Onesimus' arrival at the place of Paul's imprisonment and his conversion to the Christian faith are uncertain, the strong attachment that Paul has developed for his spiritual "son" (Philemon 10) and "brother" (Philemon 16) and the appreciation for Onesimus' ministry to him while he was under house arrest are very obvious.

What is tricky?

Paul asks an awful lot of Philemon— not just to forgive Onesimus for running away but to welcome him back as a brother in Christ. Paul does not say (as we might have hoped today) that Onesimus should be freed because slavery is wrong. At best it is implied; but the fact that Paul is requesting Philemon to return Onesimus to help him with his ministry overrides that implication. It also puts Paul into a dilemma: Onesimus, whose name means "useful" can only be of value to his master if he returns, and to Paul if he stays.

Suggested Reading

Since this letter is so short, the whole letter to Philemon could be read.

Who wrote this letter?

Philemon is not the author but the recipient of this letter; and very little is known about him other than what we read in this letter. He hosts a church in his house and owns a slave so he is probably quite wealthy. He has also worked alongside Paul (Philemon verse 1) presumably in the proclamation of the good news of Jesus Christ and not in tent making.

Liturgical notes

Much of the letter to Philemon is read in September on the 23rd Sunday (Year C) and more in November on the Thursday of the 32nd Week (Year II).

How is it structured?

vv 1-3	introduction
vv 4-7	thanksgiving and prayer
vv 8-20	Paul's appeal for Onesimus
vv 21-25	farewells

God urges us

This letter demonstrates the Gospel through action. Because they are now both believers, Paul urges Philemon to forgive Onesimus and to accept him back as an equal. He says that God's grace and healing mercy have made them partners under the new humanity Jesus established.

Hebrews

The Letter to the Hebrews was not written by Paul; it was addressed to a Christian community whose faith was faltering because of strong Jewish influences. The author shows how Jesus is the ultimate revelation of God's love and mercy and is worthy of our devotion.

An important quote

"Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing so, some have entertained angels without knowing it" (Hebrews 13:2).

The Letter to the Hebrews

This anonymous letter, subjoined to the letters of Paul was aptly entitled (in the second century) "To the Hebrews". It uses scriptural passages and Jewish patterns of interpretation throughout to show that the sacrifice and covenant of Christ fulfil God's promises and bring the faithful to perfection, contrasting them with those of the old dispensation. It contains a rich theology not only of Christ's effective priesthood but also of his divine and human nature, a human nature which enabled him to share in and sympathise with the agonies of human suffering.

Hebrews is designed to act as encouragement to a group of Christians who had stood firm through persecution but who, over time, had become discouraged and whose faith had begun to be shaky. The author of the book held up Jesus as an example to follow who, himself, had gone through great suffering into glory, making a way for others to follow. The author depicts Jesus both as a high priest enacting a sacrifice and as the sacrifice itself, which brings people into relationship with the God who is always faithful. Although it is often called an epistle, Hebrews reads much more like a sermon than a letter.

The emphasis in the letter on ceremonial suggests that it was addressed to Jewish priestly converts to Christianity who hankered after the splendour of the Temple worship and its ineffectual sacrifices. Explanations of Christ's priesthood alternate in the letter with passages of moral exhortation, encouragement and warnings; the author stresses that the pilgrimage of the Israelites through the desert was only an image of the Christian pilgrimage to the final place of rest and that the faith of the great patriarchs was a model for Christian faith and perseverance.

Is anything tricky?

This letter assumes that you know and understand how sacrifice in the temple worked. Without this knowledge it can be difficult to understand what is going on – so a reading of Leviticus may help you understand.

Suggested Reading

Hebrews Chapter 11: about how faith is now the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.

Who wrote this letter?

For a very long time, the author of Hebrews was thought to be the apostle Paul, largely because of the reference to Timothy (Hebrews 13:23). However, practically all exegetes now agree that Paul cannot have been the author, because of the language, which is so very different from the rest of the Pauline letters; but there are no other clues to identify the writer and so the author of Hebrews remains anonymous.

Liturgical notes

The Letter to the Hebrews is read in the period leading up to Advent on the last seven Sundays of the Year (in Year B) and on Sundays 19-22 (in Year C). It is read semi-continuously on weekdays of the first four weeks (of Year I). Because of its wonderful Christology about Christ's priesthood and his humanity, it also provides the readings for Christmas Day (Hebrews 1:1-6, Jesus as the final revelation of God) and on Good Friday (Hebrews 4:14-16; 5:7-9, on Christ as the supreme High Priest, who learnt obedience by suffering). It also finds a place in the rites for the Institution of Readers and Acolytes and in the Blessing of Abbots and Abbesses.

How is it structured?

Because of the complex nature of this letter, there are many different structures offered for it. One possible one is to focus entirely on Christ, like this:

1:1-2:18	Christ is superior to the angels
3:1-4:16	Christ is superior to Moses
5:1-7:28	Christ is superior to Aaron
8:1-10:39	Christ is superior to the old covenant
11:1-12:29	Christ is superior to old covenant believers
13:1-25	some final encouragements

Jesus is God's word

The Letter to the Hebrews compares and contrasts Jesus to key historical people and events from the Old Testament. Through these comparisons, we see his superiority. He is greater than angels, the Torah, Moses, the Promised Land, Priests, Melchizedek, sacrifices, and the covenant. He is God's word, the hope for a new creation, our eternal priest, and the perfect sacrifice.