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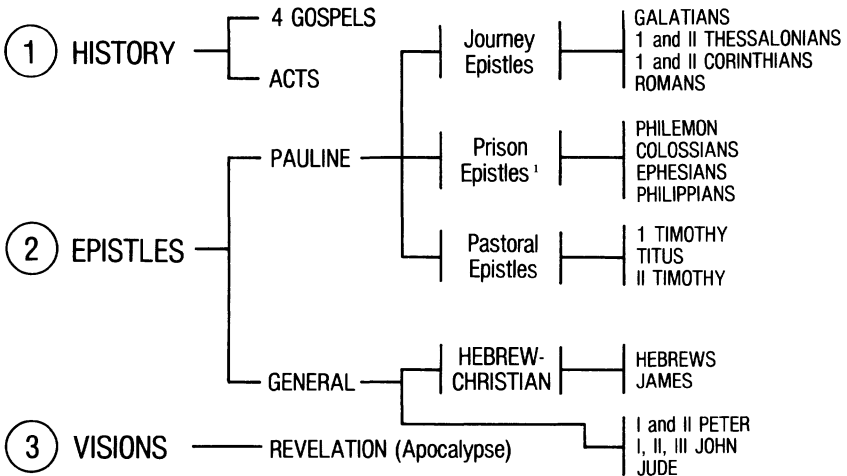
Lesson 1

Introduction to Paul's Epistles

The writings of Paul—at least thirteen of twenty-one epistles—constitute a major part of the New Testament. A fourteenth book, Hebrews, also may have been written by Paul. All twenty-seven New Testament books are shown in Chart A.

GENERAL OUTLINES OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

Chart A



Nine of Paul's letters are addressed to seven Gentile churches (in Rome, Corinth, Galatia, Ephesus, Philippi, Colosse, and Thessalonica). Locate these places on a map. Four of Paul's letters are addressed to individuals (Timothy, Titus, and Philemon). The epistle

1. These were written during Paul's first Roman imprisonment. Second Timothy, Paul's "dying letter," was written during his second imprisonment.

to the Hebrews was written especially for Jewish Christians and may have been intended as a circular letter.

The epistles of Paul are not listed chronologically in the New Testament canon. Chart B is an outline of highlights of Paul's life and indicates a probable chronological order of their writing.²

OUTLINE OF HIGHLIGHTS OF PAUL'S LIFE

Chart B

Birth of Paul	around the time of Christ's birth
Conversion of Paul	A.D. 33
First missionary journey	47-48
GALATIANS written after first journey ³	48
Apostolic council at Jerusalem	49
Second missionary journey	49-52
I and II THESSALONIANS written during second journey	52
Third missionary journey	52-56
I and II CORINTHIANS written during third journey	55
ROMANS written during third journey	56
Arrest in Jerusalem	56
Journey to Rome	60-61
In Rome awaiting trial, under guard	61
PHILEMON, COLOSSIANS, EPHESIANS, PHILIPPIANS written from prison	61
Paul released, revisits churches, resumes evangelistic ministry	62-66
I TIMOTHY, TITUS written	62-65
Paul arrested, imprisoned at Rome	66-67
II TIMOTHY written from prison	67
Paul executed	67

The order in which Paul's epistles are listed in the New Testament canon is generally topical, as shown below. Basically there are two main groups: epistles addressed to local churches (Rom. to 2 Thess.), and epistles addressed to individuals (1 Tim. to Philemon). Within each group the epistles are arranged in descending order of length.⁴

I. EPISTLES TO CHURCHES

These epistles teach the proper order of the church and her relationship to Christ the Head. They also instruct the church as to her position, possessions, privileges, and duties.

2. Some dates shown can only be approximated.
3. Some hold that Galatians was not written until a later date, for example after the third missionary journey, around A.D. 56.
4. There is one minor exception to this order since Galatians is slightly shorter than Ephesians.

Romans has naturally the first place in order, since it is the foundational epistle of the doctrines of salvation. Romans shows the material out of which God forms the church: man lost in sin, hopeless, helpless. It also shows how God by His mighty power transforms this unpromising material into living stones of which the church is built, Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone.

Romans
1 and 2 Corinthians
Galatians
Ephesians
Philippians
Colossians
1 and 2 Thessalonians

II. EPISTLES TO INDIVIDUALS

The message of these epistles applies especially to individual Christians, concerning Christian living and service:

1 and 2 Timothy
Titus
Philemon

The Pauline Epistles were written by a special apostle (not one of the twelve), to a special body of people (the church), with a special object in view (the instruction of that body).

III. THE CHURCH IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

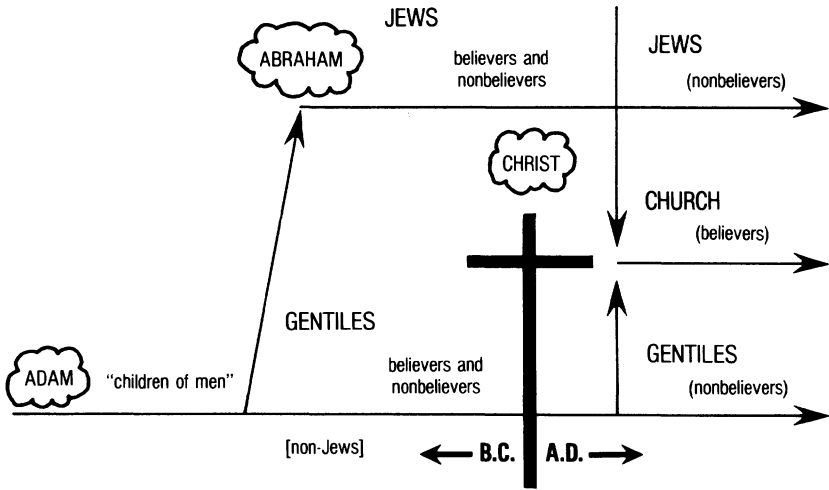
Broadly speaking, the group of people that is the main object of attention in the New Testament is the church. The gospels present Christ the foundation and Head of the church. The book of Acts records the beginning and early history of the church. The Epistles contain instructions for the church, and the book of Revelation prophesies concerning the church.

It is important to have clearly in mind just what the church is and who composes it. Read 1 Corinthians 10:32, and note the reference to three groups: Jews, Gentiles, and the church of God. Chart C identifies these in the stream of the human race.⁵

5. If Chart C included events of the last days, it would recognize Paul's prophecy of the rebirth of Israel (cf. Rom. 11:26).

THE STREAM OF THE HUMAN RACE

Chart C



In the early generations of the human race there were no group distinctions such as Jew and Gentile. All the descendants of Adam were as one family, “children of men,” and God spoke to the whole race, seeking to get all people to obey Him and fellowship with Him. The race as a whole refused to do this, although there were some individuals who responded acceptably. Men persisted in doing their own will rather than God’s will and became utterly rebellious and disobedient. God allowed men to go on in their self-chosen ways.

But from the multitudes of the world living around 2000 B.C. God selected one man of faith, Abraham. From him He made a nation that was to be His chosen people, special representatives to whom and through whom He could speak and act. The top line of Chart C represents the descendants of Abraham, known as Jews or Israelites. The name Gentiles shown on the bottom line represents all other people.

Not all Jews were believers, just as not all Gentiles were unbelievers. For nearly two thousand years God patiently dealt with this chosen nation of Israel, seeking to get more than just a remnant to obey and represent Him. But the nation as a whole repeatedly refused to do this, although there were individual Israelites who obeyed. The nation became so corrupt and rebellious that God allowed them to go on in their self-chosen ways. The pattern was the same as for the human race before the time of Abraham.

Finally the day came when God sent His only begotten Son into the world to redeem lost sinners (whether Jew or Gentile)

and form a new unique people, the church. Not long after Christ's death, resurrection, and ascension, the Holy Spirit came down from heaven to indwell and empower all members of that church. The church is now God's representative body of people on earth through whom He speaks to nonbelieving Jews and nonbelieving Gentiles (see Chart C). The true church of God is composed of all twice-born men, women, and children, who have received a divine nature from God upon believing on Jesus Christ as their Saviour.

IV. THE MAIN PURPOSES OF THE EPISTLES

All the New Testament epistles—Pauline and General—complement the historical books of the gospels and Acts by furnishing explanation and exhortation. The gospels emphasize especially the facts of Christ's redemptive ministry; the epistles interpret those facts and tell the redeemed ones how to live the Christian life. In the gospels Christ announces His purpose to build the church (Matt. 16:16-18). Acts shows the church in the first stages of construction. The epistles show how the church is built, what materials are used, and what are the position, relationships, privileges, and duties of the members of its glorious and mysterious fellowship.

Prominent in all Paul's epistles are the exhortations and commands based on the doctrines. Seemingly simple duties are based on sublime truths originating with the Person and work of Christ. Difficult commands (e.g., "present your bodies a living sacrifice," Rom. 12:1) are justified as being reasonable and consistent. Paul's epistles make clear that God offers all the help needed to fulfill His commands.

Every Christian should make a thorough study of Paul's epistles because of the tremendous truths that they reveal. Such truths must be clearly apprehended before we can enter into our full rights, privileges, and powers as children and representatives of God. They are truths without which we cannot live or work as God would have us. It is because Paul so fully understood and entered into these truths that he had such marvelous power and success; and, just in proportion as we fail to apprehend and apply these truths contained in the epistles, will there be weakness, failure, and misdirected effort in our lives.

In these epistles are revealed a number of vital truths about ourselves as Christians, any one which, if fully understood and apprehended, would humble us to the dust or lift us to the gates of heaven. Be sure to read the verses cited in this list:

1. What we were: lost sinners under condemnation of death; children of the devil, helpless in the power of the great enemy of our souls (Rom. 1-3).

2. Who we are now: children of God; heirs of God and joint heirs with Jesus Christ (Rom. 8:16-17).

3. What we are: the temple of God; the dwelling place of the eternal Maker of the universe (1 Cor. 3:16).

4. Where we are: in the heavenlies seated together with Christ (Eph. 2:6). "We live up there but we stay down here."

5. What we have: all things (Eph. 1:3; Rom. 8:32; 1 Cor. 3:21-22).

6. How we are to behave: walk worthy of our vocation (Eph. 4:1); worthy of the Lord (Col. 1:10); worthy of God (1 Thess. 2:12).

7. Who our enemies are: Satan and all his hosts (Eph. 6:11-12).

8. How we are to meet our enemies put on the whole armor of God (Eph. 6:10-11).

9. Where we are going: to be with Christ (1 Thess. 4:17).

10. How we are to get there: no commonplace way (1 Thess. 4:16-18).

11. What we are going to be like: like Christ (Eph. 4:13).

12. When this is to take place: when He shall appear (1 Cor. 15:51-55; 1 Thess. 4:16).

Little did Paul and the other writers of New Testament Epistles realize the impact that their letters would make on the lives of people for two thousand years. One church historian has evaluated the Epistles thus:

The Epistles of the New Testament are without a parallel in ancient literature. . . . Tracts for the times, they are tracts for all times. Children of the fleeting moment, they contain truths of infinite moment. They compress more ideas in fewer words than any other writings, human or divine, excepting the Gospels. They discuss the highest themes which can challenge an immortal mind—God, Christ, and the Spirit, sin and redemption, incarnation, atonement, regeneration, repentance, faith and good works, holy living and dying. . . . And all this before humble little societies of poor, uncultured artisans, freedmen and slaves!⁶

6. Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 1: 740-41.

Review questions:

1. Which epistles of Paul were addressed to churches?

2. Which of his questions were addressed to individuals?

3. Recall the approximate time and setting of the writing of each of his epistles.

4. Account for the order in which Paul's epistles are listed in the New Testament canon.

5. Contentwise, why is it appropriate that Romans stands first in the list of all the New Testament epistles?

6. What are the differences between Jew, Gentile, and the church?

7. What main purposes do Paul's epistles serve in the New Testament?

8. What are some of the important truths taught by his epistles?
