



The Life and Writings of St. Paul

Lesson 3

Lesson 3 Commentary
Lesson 4 Questions

The Second Journey and the Beginning of the Third Journey
The Remainder of the Third Journey and Paul's Return to Jerusalem

Introduction

When we left off last session, Paul had returned from his first journey and then headed to the Council of Jerusalem. Another mission trip is planned, but Paul picks another companion, Silas.

Paul's Second Journey



Paul and Silas depart by land this time. They pass through Syria and Cilicia and re-visit Derbe and Lystra. In Lystra they pick up another companion, Timothy, the son of a Jewish mother and a Greek father. Here, Paul does something that seems odd based on the positions that he has taken to date. He has Timothy circumcised. What? Did not the Council of Jerusalem just say that it was not necessary to be circumcised. Did not Barnabas and Paul fight to keep Titus from being circumcised? What is different now? We must put a few pieces of the puzzle together to get to the answer. First, Timothy's mother is a Jew. While there is nothing in writing from the time period supporting the position, later rabbinic law says that the child follows the mother's religious affiliation. It is believed that the same "rule" existed in Paul's day. Therefore, Timothy was Jewish, and Titus was a Gentile. Second, the discussion in the Council of Jerusalem applied to Gentiles. Jews were still permitted to be circumcised. Since Paul, Silas and Timothy are going to be dealing with Jews, it was necessary that all Jews be circumcised to avoid scandal. Lastly, we can look to 1 Corinthians and see that Paul would do what was necessary to "convert" someone to become a Jesus follower.

To the Jews I became like a Jew to win over Jews; to those under the law I became like one under the law—though I myself am not under the law—to win over those under the law. To those outside the law I became like one outside the law—though I am not outside God's law but within the law of Christ—to win over those outside the law. To the weak I became weak, to win over the weak. I have become all things to all, to save at least some. All this I do for the sake of the gospel, so that I too may have a share in it.¹

While it is not explicitly stated, it appears that Luke also joined Paul, Silas and Timothy in or near Lystra. Note that the "voice" changes from a third person to a first person.² Some argue that this is just a literary device used by Luke, but the details are so vivid that this explanation seems unlikely. The change of voice appears three other times in Acts.³ Luke's presence with the group is also supported by the fact that Luke included by Paul in the greetings in Colossians, Philemon, and 2 Timothy.⁴

The group continues to Philippi, another Roman colony and home of the Philippians. Philippi was named after the father of Alexander the Great, Philip II king of Macedonia from 382 to 336 BC. Since there was no synagogue in Philippi, Jews would gather in a "place to pray" on the sabbath. After casting a demon out of a slave girl, Paul and Silas are stripped, beaten, and thrown into prison. We have no information as to why Timothy or Luke were not also punished. An earthquake occurs, loosening the chains and throwing the door open. The guard's first reaction is to kill himself. To allow a prisoner to escape would normally mean the guard would be tortured and/or killed by his superiors. Paul uses this opportunity to convert the guard and his

¹ 1 Cor 9:20-23. All Biblical citations are from the NABRE.

² Acts 16:8 and 10.

³ Acts 20:5-15, Acts 21:1-18, and Acts 27:1-28:16.

⁴ Col 4:10, Phlm 24, and 2 Tim 4:11.

entire family. In addition, Paul uses his Roman citizenship to extract an apology from the magistrate. Based on Luke's rendition, you would think that Paul spent very little time in Philippi. This seems unlikely based on how the Philippians supported him while he was in prison.

Next, the party goes on to Thessalonica, the home of the Thessalonians. This was not a Roman colony at the time, but it was a very influential city. The amount of information that Luke gives us is very little. Irrespective of the short amount of time that Paul spent Thessalonica, a strong loving relationship developed. We see this in the two letters that he wrote to the Thessalonians. While Thessalonica did have a synagogue, his reception was not pleasant. After being taken out of town under the cover of dark, Paul goes on to Berea. There, he meets a more receptive audience, until the Jews from Thessalonica arrive! He then heads to Athens.

Athens, wow! This is the center of the world for philosophers. It also was the home of a plethora of altars and temples to many, many gods. We see that Timothy and Silas did not join him on this journey to Athens. We find out from his first letter to the Thessalonians that Timothy was sent back to Thessalonica to check on the fledgling church.⁵ Paul met with the Epicureans and the Stoics, the two primary philosophical schools of the time. Their interest in Paul was because of his view of God's relationship to the world. What Paul was saying about one God fit with neither's view of God or gods.⁶ The Epicureans believed that gods may exist, but they live in their own world separate from the world of the humans. The world of the humans carries on under its own power. The Stoics were pantheists. That is, God and nature are the same. The Epicureans and Stoics also heard Paul speak of "Jesus" and "Resurrection" and believed that Paul was promoting two separate foreign deities. The Greek word for resurrection is *anastasis* which is a feminine noun. They believed that Resurrection was the consort of Jesus, like Isis and Osiris.⁷ Because Paul was talking about foreign gods, they took him to the court that ruled Athens, the Areopagus. They would have taken him to the Hill of Mars, which is where the Areopagus met. You get the impression that Paul is simply talking to a group of people who are interested in understanding Paul's view, but that is a misperception. The Areopagus was a court of law that only heard the most grievous of cases. "Though the status and role of the body changed as political reforms came and went, it continued to be a powerful influence in Athenian public life, and it also functioned as a court to try serious offenses, including homicide, arson, and some religious cases."⁸ Paul was on trial! Paul, evidently, makes his case when refers to the altar to an Unknown God and proclaims that this is the God of Israel. The court apparently did not believe that Paul was breaking any laws because after his presentation, some were converted and Paul leaves Athens.

⁵ 1 Thess 3:1-2.

⁶ N. T. Wright, *Paul: A Biography* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2018), 197.

⁷ Wright, *Paul*, 198-199.

⁸ Wright, *Paul*, 194.

Paul moves west across the Isthmus of Corinth to the City of Corinth, the capital of the province of Achaëa. “Its position on the isthmus gave Corinth considerable strategic importance as the shortest means to travel from the Adriatic to the Aegean Sea.”⁹ Several Roman emperors tried digging a canal across the isthmus but failed. “Indeed, people spoke of a curse on the project; Caesar, Nero and Caligula all died violently after trying to get the scheme [digging the canal] going.”¹⁰ Corinth was known as a place where just about anything goes. In fact, many terms for sexual vices were coined using the name of the city (e.g., *korinthiazomai*, “commit fornication”; *korinthiastēs*, “whoremonger”; and *korinthia korē*, “prostitute”).¹¹ It was the site of the Isthmian Games, which provides insight as to why Paul used references to athletic games when writing to the Corinthians.¹² Paul meets fellow Christians and fellow tentmakers, Aquila and Priscilla. Paul uses what appears to be a nickname for Priscilla in his letters, Prisca.¹³ Luke cites the reason that Aquila and Priscilla were in Corinth was because “Claudius had ordered all the Jews to leave Rome.”¹⁴ This is believed to be the expulsion that occurred as a result of riots in Rome in 48 or 49 AD. Paul spends a considerable amount of time in Corinth (a year and a half)¹⁵. We see that Silas and Timothy rejoin Paul in Corinth.¹⁶ This is the key indicator as to the place where Paul wrote the first letter to the Thessalonians. Every Sabbath he would enter the synagogue and he eventually converted the head of the synagogue, Crispus. Then we see the event that gives us the most solid dating, by which all other dates are based. We see that, after a year and a half in Athens, Jews who had not converted revolted against Paul and took him before the Roman proconsul, Gallio. “Roman sources indicate that [Gallio] was proconsul almost certainly in A.D. 52; based on this date it is possible to estimate the arrival of Paul in Corinth at A.D. 50.”¹⁷ Gallio showed very little interest in the case, considering it a squabble between two different sects of Judaism. This ruling, though, was important for the Jesus followers in Corinth. One privilege that the Jews had that no other religion had was permission from Rome to practice their own religion and not worship the Roman gods. This was a deal struck by Augustus Caesar to receive cooperation from the Jews.¹⁸ Now the non-Jew Jesus followers were excused from worshipping the Roman gods without fear of punishment.

I believe that it is from Corinth that Paul pens both letters to the Thessalonians. Unlike the Galatians, in the first letter to the Thessalonians do not seem to be dealing with the circumcision issue. Paul seems to be very pleased with them and urges them to keep doing what they are

⁹ Scott Hahn, ed., *Catholic Bible Dictionary* (New York; London; Toronto; Sydney; Auckland: Doubleday, 2009), 161.

¹⁰ Wright, *Paul*, 211.

¹¹ Hahn, ed., *Catholic Bible Dictionary*, 161.

¹² See 1 Cor 9:24-27.

¹³ 1 Cor 16:19.

¹⁴ Acts 18:2.

¹⁵ Acts 18:11.

¹⁶ 1Thess 3:2-7.

¹⁷ Hahn, ed., *Catholic Bible Dictionary*, 301.

¹⁸ Wright, *Paul*, 11-12.

doing.¹⁹ Paul wants to stress three things. “If we make a list of three topics beginning with “sex” and “money,” we might expect the third to be “power,” but in this case it is the *parousia*, the “appearing of Jesus.”²⁰ Paul stresses that sexual holiness is not an option, it is required. With respect to money, remembering the poor was also required. Finally, with respect to the return of Jesus, some Thessalonians thought it would happen in their lifetime. What would happen to the ones that have died? Paul clarifies that the dead will rise first.

We do not want you to be unaware, brothers, about those who have fallen asleep, so that you may not grieve like the rest, who have no hope. For if we believe that Jesus died and rose, so too will God, through Jesus, bring with him those who have fallen asleep. Indeed, we tell you this, on the word of the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will surely not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself, with a word of command, with the voice of an archangel and with the trumpet of God, will come down from heaven, and the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. Thus we shall always be with the Lord. Therefore, console one another with these words.²¹

The second letter to the Thessalonians appears to be a letter to clarify certain issues in the first letter. It seems that based on the first letter that the Thessalonians thought that the second coming of Jesus was imminent. Certain things must happen before the second coming. As a result of their belief that the second coming was imminent, some had quit their jobs. “The congregation is charged with addressing this problem decisively but charitably (2 Thess 3:14–15). In Paul’s mind, these freeloaders who live on the charity of others will better prepare themselves for Christ’s return by working than by sitting around waiting.”²²

After leaving Corinth, Paul makes a quick stop at Cenchreae to get a quick haircut. Seriously? Paul is most likely taking the “Nazirite” vow found in Numbers.²³ “Nazirites did not consume anything produced by the grapevine, including juice, wine, or grape skins, and they avoided all contact with corpses.”²⁴ They also cut their hair and allow it to grow throughout the time of the vow. From there, Paul heads to Ephesus. But it appears he did not stay long. He will return to Ephesus on his third journey. He sails to Caesarea and visits the church in Jerusalem. He then heads back to what seems to be his headquarters, Syrian Antioch.

¹⁹ 1 Thess 5:11.

²⁰ Wright, *Paul*, 217.

²¹ 1 Thess 4:13–18.

²² *The Ignatius Catholic Study Bible: The New Testament* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2010), 379.

²³ Num 6:1–21.

²⁴ Hahn, ed., *Catholic Bible Dictionary*, 641.

Paul's Third Journey

Without taking a breath, Luke leads us right into the third journey of Paul, where he traveled to the northern part of Galatia and quickly down to Ephesus, where he will spend a considerable amount of time.



We see the difference between John's baptism and the baptism that Jesus taught. In one you receive the Holy Spirit and the other you did not. He then entered the synagogue and "debated boldly" for three months. After having little success, Paul apparently stopped going to the synagogue and started holding daily meetings outside the synagogue "in the lecture hall of Tyrannus." This continued for two years. "So extraordinary were the mighty deeds God accomplished at the hands of Paul that when face cloths or aprons that touched his skin were applied to the sick, their diseases left them and the evil spirits came out of them."²⁵

²⁵Acts 19:11–12.

QUESTIONS FOR LESSON 4

The Remainder of the Third Journey and Paul's Return to Jerusalem

Day 1 – Scan the lecture notes. Write down one or two points that you consider most interesting.

Day 2 – Read Acts 19:23-40, and the handout on First Corinthians. Scan First Corinthians.

Write down one or two things that jumped out to you about First Corinthians.

Day 3 – Read the handouts on Philippians, Philemon, and Colossians. Scan Philippians, Philemon, and Colossians.

Write down one or two things that jumped out to you about Philippians.

Write down one or two things that jumped out to you about Philemon.

Write down one or two things that jumped out to you about Colossians

Day 4 – Read the handout on Ephesians and Acts 20:1-38. Scan Ephesians.

Write down one or two things that jumped out to you about Ephesians.

Day 5 – Read the handouts on Second Corinthians and Romans. Scan Second Corinthians and Romans

Write down one or two things that jumped out to you about Second Corinthians.

Write down one or two things that jumped out to you about Romans.

Day 6 – Read Acts 21:1 to 23:1-35

Given the amount you have had to read and scan, thank God for the strength to read and scan it all!

THE FIRST LETTER OF SAINT PAUL TO THE CORINTHIANS

Purpose Nearly five years had elapsed between Paul's founding of the Church in Corinth and the arrival of this letter. During his absence the community had fallen prey to a number of vices that were beginning to fracture its unity and drag members away from the faith. Although Paul planned to visit Corinth to disentangle these problems in person (see 11:34b), he sent the letter we know as 1 Corinthians to hold things together until his arrival. His instructions were tailored to address the information he had received about their struggles.

Paul was first informed that a crisis was brewing in Corinth through delegates of a woman named Chloe (1:11; 11:18). Their disturbing report included news of internal divisions (1:12–15), a case of incest (5:1–5), sexual immorality (6:12–20), multiplying lawsuits (6:1–8), and outspoken denials of the Resurrection (15:12). Liturgically, the Corinthians were becoming careless in their celebration of the Eucharist (11:17–34), and some were exercising charismatic gifts in a manner more disruptive than edifying (14:1–40). Paul confronted these problems by censuring the Corinthians' immorality and calling them back to the basics of Christian doctrine.

Paul also gave personal responses to select questions asked by the Corinthians. In a letter unknown to us, the young Church had written to Paul asking for spiritual direction on various matters, such as marriage, celibacy, and food offered to idols (7:1; 8:1; 12:1; 16:1). Much of 1 Corinthians consists of Paul's addressing these issues one by one.

In the end, Paul was deeply concerned for this troubled Church. His pastoral guidance is that of a spiritual father aiming to restore peace and unity among children by fortifying their commitment to Jesus Christ (4:14–15).

Themes and Characteristics First Corinthians reveals more about the struggles and conditions of a young, apostolic Church than any other NT letter. It gives a clear picture of the wide range of pressures that the earliest Christians had to face, pressures both from within their communities and from their surrounding pagan environment. Paul shows himself sensitive to these challenges throughout the letter and offers spiritual direction that is sometimes bold and confrontational but always full of charity and fatherly wisdom. Because the problems in ancient Corinth are problems that plague the Church in every age, this letter was the most widely cited of Paul's epistles in early Christianity and continues to speak to our situation today.

The leading themes of the letter follow the doctrinal and moral issues that Paul was forced to address, especially those related to immorality, arrogance, liturgical abuse, and erroneous opinions about death and resurrection. These problems shook the local Church in Corinth down to her foundation and made the community look more at times like a pagan society than a spiritual

family. To reverse this trend, Paul takes aim throughout the letter at two vices that underlie the Corinthians' multiple struggles: pride and selfishness. **(1) *Pride*** manifested itself among the Corinthians in the form of intellectual arrogance that paid more respect to human knowledge and eloquence than to the humble message of the gospel (1:18–25; 3:18–21; 8:1–3). Paul takes occasion to reprimand their attitude of superiority by appealing to the warnings in Scripture (1:19, 31; 3:19–20) and reminding them that true “wisdom” is imparted through the gospel of the Cross (1:18; 2:6–10). In the apostle's mind, there is no room among believers for arrogance or boasting, because every good thing they possess is a gift from God (4:6–7). **(2) *Selfishness*** manifested itself in various ways among the Corinthians. Law-suits among believers were a growing problem (6:1–8); certain believers asserted their freedoms in a reckless way (8:1–13); some were guilty of discrimination toward the poor (11:21–22); and some exercised spiritual gifts as a way of attracting attention to themselves (14:1–40). Paul's prescription for each of these ailments is a return to Christian charity (14:1; 16:14, 22). Only God's love within us “builds up” (8:1) the Church in a way that glorifies Christ. Chapter 13 is the most beautiful in the letter, portraying love as patient, caring, and oriented toward others. This is the supreme law of the New Covenant (Rom 13:8–10) and the crown jewel of the Christian virtues (1 Cor 13:13). For Paul, only the divine love that we receive from Christ can deliver us from the chains of self-centered living and carry us into eternity with God (13:8–12).²⁶

²⁶ *The Ignatius Catholic Study Bible: The New Testament*, 283–284.

THE LETTER OF SAINT PAUL TO THE PHILIPPIANS

Purpose Philippians does not address any doctrinal or disciplinary crisis; rather, it is a letter of thanks and encouragement to a congregation of dear friends. The gratitude that Paul expresses throughout the letter is a response to their generosity. The Philippians supported the imprisoned apostle through their constant prayers (1:19), as well as by sending him financial assistance by the hand of Epaphroditus (4:18). The Philippians had come to Paul's assistance several times in this way, acquiring for themselves a reputation as one of his most gracious congregations (4:15–16). Paul sent this letter back to them by the same messenger, Epaphroditus (2:25–30), to thank them for their gift, to update them on personal matters, and to assure them of God's rich blessings in return (2:25–30; 4:19). The only real concerns that Paul addresses in the letter have to do with resolving a personal conflict between two Philippian women (4:2–3) and with putting the congregation on guard against Judaizing missionaries, who, should they make their way to Philippi, would likely pressure them to receive circumcision (3:2–3). Lastly, Paul wrote to prepare the Philippians for the arrival of Timothy (2:19–23) and to express his own desire to see them if possible (2:24).

Themes and Characteristics Philippians follows an informal structure and is marked by a joyous and personal tone. The letter is almost entirely positive, with only brief warnings and almost no polemics. Because Paul is not formulating an extended argument on a controversial issue, his thoughts sometimes skip from one topic to another, much as a personal letter is loosely arranged according to the wishes of the sender. Doctrine is present in the letter but is not predominant. Paul gives most of his attention to exhortation and encouragement.

Much of this letter challenges the Philippians to grow in spiritual maturity by imitating both their Savior and their founding apostle. For this reason, Paul holds up Jesus Christ as the model of humility and selfless love and himself as a model of patient endurance. **(1) Jesus the Servant.** The example of Christ comes in 2:1–11, where Paul admonishes readers to serve one another in the Lord. To overcome pride and disunity, he summons them to live like Jesus by putting their neighbors' interests above their own (2:4). This calls for a spirit of sacrifice and humility (2:3). Inspiration for this is drawn from a poetic account of the humiliation and exultation of Jesus (2:5–11). Although divine and infinitely glorious, Christ freely “emptied himself” to become a man (2:7). He lived entirely at the service of others, and his heroic obedience to the Father carried him all the way to the Cross. This, says Paul, was so pleasing in God's eyes that he exalted Christ to the highest summit of heavenly glory. A similar inheritance awaits believers who tread the same path of suffering and obedience marked out by their Lord (2:12–18). **(2) Paul the Servant.** Paul is likewise a worthy model for imitation (3:17; 4:9). Though in prison, his apostolic zeal emboldens others to witness to the faith as he did (1:14). Though persecuted, his joy and optimism go forth to encourage readers undergoing their own struggles (4:4–7). Paul's confidence reaches its peak in his devotion to Jesus Christ, whom he is prepared to honor with his whole life, whether by

preaching the gospel after his release or by marching to his death as a martyr (1:19–26). The secret of Paul’s serenity is in the Lord, who sustains his spirit even in the most trying circumstances of life. He shares this secret with the Philippians, urging them to follow his lead by taking everything in stride—be it prosperity or persecution—confident that Jesus will supply the strength needed to live every moment for the glory of God (4:10–13).²⁷

²⁷ *The Ignatius Catholic Study Bible: The New Testament*, 355–356.

THE LETTER OF SAINT PAUL TO PHILEMON

Purpose The letter is Paul's impassioned appeal to Philemon, urging him to welcome back one of his runaway slaves, Onesimus (10). Formerly, Onesimus was a useless servant who not only deserted his master but may have stolen money or property from him, as well (11, 18). In the meantime, Onesimus has become a Christian through an encounter with Paul. The apostle is now sending him back to Philemon and asking that he be received, no longer as a bondservant, but as a beloved brother in Christ (16). Secondly, Paul asks that preparations be made for his own arrival, pending his expected release from prison (22).

Themes and Characteristics Philemon is the shortest of Paul's surviving letters and certainly one of his most personal. Throughout the epistle, Paul shows himself adept at the art of persuasion, as he tries to win over both the head and heart of Philemon. So insistent are his pleas on behalf of Onesimus that Paul is barely able to hold back from demanding that Philemon comply with his requests (8–9). Theological and spiritual themes, so prominent in Paul's other writings, are more often assumed than asserted in Philemon.

The impact of this short letter cannot be felt without some understanding of its background. Slavery was an accepted institution in the Roman civilization of the first century. In fact, the slave population in Paul's day outnumbered the population of free citizens. This unbalanced situation was kept under control by Roman law, which made runaway slaves liable to the death penalty. Aware that such consequences could be in store for Onesimus, Paul decides to intercede for the life and well-being of this newly baptized slave. Paul insists that he return to his master to make amends for his desertion and thievery, and the apostle is even willing to pay Philemon whatever Onesimus owes him to ensure that justice is served (18–19). On the other end, Paul is challenging Philemon with a standard far higher than any Roman law. It is a standard of Christian mercy. Not only should this master forgive and forget the wrongdoing of his returning slave, but Paul drops several hints that Philemon should emancipate him entirely (16, 21)! Since Philemon himself has experienced the mercy and freedom of Christ in his own life, Paul reasons it is now time for him to extend that gift to Onesimus, who has likewise been freed by Christ and is coming home as a brother in the Lord.²⁸

²⁸ *The Ignatius Catholic Study Bible: The New Testament*, 409.

THE LETTER OF SAINT PAUL TO THE COLOSSIANS

Purpose The same Epaphras who founded the Colossian Church (1:7) also traveled to Rome to update Paul on their recent successes and struggles (4:12). Among other things, he informed Paul that certain agitators were planting doubts in the minds of the Colossians about their new faith. Paul wrote to address this danger and to reassure these believing Gentiles of their Christian inheritance (1:12, 21–22). Unfortunately, commentators have reached no clear consensus on the precise identity of these Colossian troublemakers. Some view them as proponents of pagan religion, while others contend they were teachers of an early form of Gnosticism that combined religious and philosophical elements from Jewish and Hellenistic thought. More probably, Paul is addressing the growing friction between Jewish and Christian communities in Colossae. This would explain why Paul gives focused attention to controversies over Jewish legal rites like circumcision, dietary restrictions, and adherence to the liturgical feast days of the Old Covenant (2:11–13, 16–18). Apparently the local Colossian Jews were outspoken critics of the new Christian movement and dismissed the claim that Gentiles could enjoy full membership in God’s covenant family apart from the legal observances handed down through Moses.

Themes and Characteristics In many ways Colossians is unique among Paul’s letters. Its closest parallel is the Letter to the Ephesians, with which it shares several common themes and expressions and sometimes even identical teachings. Both letters were written to young believers unknown to Paul personally, and both were probably composed during Paul’s imprisonment in Rome in the early 60s. Nevertheless, while Ephesians has a calm and contemplative tone, Paul’s stance in Colossians is more aggressive, as he confronts false notions that are making inroads into the local Church and muddling the thinking of many young Christians.

Since Paul does not address his opponents directly, we are left to infer from his comments the basic thrust of their teaching. It may be said, along these lines, that Paul in Colossians is engaged in constructive apologetics, as he spends most of his energy clarifying the truth of Christian doctrine rather than attacking in detail the errors he deems so dangerous. Two motifs stand out in Paul’s preaching. (1) *The Supremacy of Christ*. Towering above every theme in Colossians is the doctrine of Jesus Christ’s preeminence over all things (1:18). Paul stresses this point by sketching for his readers a map of the cosmos, positioning Christ at its very summit. Every person, every nation, every angel—indeed, every created thing—is subject to the Lord Jesus and is compelled to acknowledge him as King. No corner of the universe lies outside his dominion because Jesus is the Creator who brought it into being and the Redeemer who renews it with the grace he pours out through the Church. Paul soars to these heights especially in the hymn of 1:15–20, but elsewhere too he proclaims the divinity of Christ (2:9) and reminds us that the crucified Christ has triumphed over the entire army of demonic spirits (2:15). We can assume from Paul’s emphasis on these matters that his Jewish opponents tried to depreciate the person and position of Jesus Christ in the minds of the Colossian Christians. (2) *The Completeness of Christians in Christ*. The practical side

of Christ's supremacy is, for Paul, Christ's sufficiency. This is something he needs to stress to the Colossian Gentiles, who are bending under the pressure of local Jews to adopt the Jewish way of life. Paul warns them against this in 2:8–23, where he drives home the point that Christians have no future in their Jewish past and that Judaism has nothing to offer them that they do not already possess in greater abundance in Jesus Christ. In a word, the baptized Colossians are already complete in Christ (2:12); they have no need for the shadows of the Old Covenant when they already possess the “substance” of the New (2:17). Fully furnished, then, with God's rich blessings, the Colossians are challenged to conform their lives to the gospel (3:5–17) and to allow Christ to transform their homes into places of love, forgiveness, and harmony (3:18–4:1).²⁹

²⁹ *The Ignatius Catholic Study Bible: The New Testament*, 363–364.

THE LETTER OF SAINT PAUL TO THE EPHESIANS

Themes and Characteristics Ephesians sets before us a vision of Christ *reigning* in heaven next to the Father (1:20) and *renewing* the earth through his Church (3:10). Though Paul often attacks doctrinal error and moral laxity in his letters, he seizes the opportunity in Ephesians to step back from these controversies to contemplate and articulate in a more reflective way God’s saving work in Jesus. Instead of pastoral surgery, then, Paul gives the Ephesians a dose of preventative medicine, hoping that a deeper appreciation of God’s blessings will lead them to a more mature commitment to the gospel. Since many of Paul’s readers are recent converts, Ephesians might best be described as Paul’s mystagogical catechesis for the newly baptized.

The towering theme of Ephesians is the “mystery” of Jesus Christ once concealed but now revealed (1:9; 3:4, 9). This is first of all the mystery of Christ the Redeemer, whose violent death on the Cross was a vicarious sacrifice for the redemption of Israel and the Gentiles alike (1:7; 2:16; 5:2). Having died to restore peace between the Father and the human family, Christ now reigns supreme over all things at the right hand of the Father in heaven (1:20). So far is he exalted above creation that even the angels find themselves under his feet (1:21–22). As Paul reflects upon these redeeming achievements of Christ, he is not content to view them as events confined to the past. Rather, the Resurrection, Ascension, and Enthronement of Christ are saving mysteries that continue to grace our lives and souls in the present, making us participants in his royal, priestly, and prophetic mission to the world (2:4–6; 5:2).

The mystery of Christ is also the mystery of his ecclesial body, the Church. Nowhere does Paul give a more majestic presentation of this truth than in Ephesians. The Church he describes is nothing less than God’s new creation in Christ (2:10, 15; 2 Cor 5:17). She is a holy and universal community that shines out to a world shattered by sin. Her life comes from the divine Trinity, as her members are made the children of the Father (1:5), the body and bride of the Son (5:22–32), and the temple of the Holy Spirit (2:21–22). Her dimensions are international, as she gathers together all peoples and nations into the family of the New Covenant (2:11–22; 3:4–6). The grace that unites the Church with her Lord is the grace of being “in Christ” (1:3; cf. 1:7, 10, 13). This union between Christ in his glorified body and Christ in his mystical body was first revealed to Paul at his conversion (Acts 9:3–5). Now, after many years of preaching and meditation, he is able to explain its heights and depths in simple yet profound terms for those newly acquainted with the gospel.³⁰

³⁰ *The Ignatius Catholic Study Bible: The New Testament*, 343–344.

THE SECOND LETTER OF SAINT PAUL TO THE CORINTHIANS

Purpose Paul wrote 2 Corinthians for several reasons. (1) He hoped to strengthen his relationship with loyal supporters in Corinth and prevent them from falling prey to the groundless claims of the “false apostles” (11:13) who were infiltrating the Church and attacking his integrity. (2) He wrote to assert and defend his apostolic authority against those who doubted or denied it (10:10; 12:11–12). (3) He sought to resume his collection efforts for the poor Christians in Jerusalem and so appealed to the generosity of his readers in this regard (chaps. 8–9). (4) The second section of the letter (chaps. 10–13) was written to confront the “false apostles” (11:13) and their Corinthian followers. Paul warns that he will “not spare” (13:2) these detractors if they persist in their opposition to his ministry. (5) Paul also wrote to inform the Corinthians of his plan to visit them for a third time (12:14; 13:1).

Themes and Characteristics Second Corinthians is a deeply personal and emotional letter. This makes it sometimes difficult to follow, but it gives us a rare glimpse of both the tenderness and the tenacity of Paul. He was a spiritual father going through the painful experience of his own children rising up against him and going their own way. The highs and lows of this experience are stamped into the first and second halves of the letter: early on Paul is bursting with joy to hear that some of the Corinthians are turning back to him (chaps. 1–7), but later his anger and frustration return when he remembers that others are still acting in defiance (chaps. 10–13). Throughout the letter Paul makes use of the rhetorical arts to affirm and encourage the faithful as well as to denounce and expose the malice of his detractors for what it is.

In its content, 2 Corinthians is mainly an apologetic letter. Apart from chapters 8–9, where he urges readers to make a generous donation for the poor, Paul directs most of his energy to a sustained defense of his apostolic authority. He has no desire to do this, but missionary intruders have backed him into a corner and forced him to fight his way out (10:11). First, Paul stresses that God has qualified him for ministry (3:4–6), just as he had qualified Moses to shepherd the people of Israel. This bold comparison actually works to Paul’s advantage: through the ministry of Moses, death came to faithless Israel; but through the ministry of the apostle, the Spirit is poured out in a powerful and life-giving way upon the people of the New Covenant (3:7–18). The Corinthians are living proof of this effect, having received the Spirit through the apostolic actions of Paul (3:2–3). Second, Paul brings up again and again his own experience of suffering as the credentials of which he is most proud (1:5–11; 2:4; 4:7–12; 6:4–8; 7:5; 11:23–29). This is to emphasize that God alone deserves the credit for his missionary successes (1:21–22; 5:18; 10:17). Unlike the false teachers (11:21), he boasts, not in himself, but in the power of grace made effective through his weaknesses (12:9–10). By reasserting his authority as an ambassador of Christ (5:20), Paul hopes to avoid a

further confrontation with the Corinthians, which would force him to use this authority in a disciplinary way (13:10).³¹

³¹ *The Ignatius Catholic Study Bible: The New Testament*, 311–312.

THE LETTER OF SAINT PAUL TO THE ROMANS

Purpose Three principal aims underlie the Letter to the Romans. (1) Paul wrote to introduce himself and his teaching to the Roman Christians in preparation for his planned visit (1:11–13). The Church in Rome was one of the few to which Paul wrote before making a personal visit. (2) Paul hoped to establish the Roman Church as his missionary base for a new phase of evangelization. Having completed his work in the eastern Mediterranean, Paul was now ready to turn his attention and energies toward Spain in the west (15:23–24). The letter is Paul’s initial attempt to enlist the support of the Romans in carrying out these apostolic plans. (3) Paul also hoped to ease tensions that were straining the unity and fellowship of the Roman Church itself. Boasting, it seems, was a problem for Jews and Gentiles alike: the Jews took pride in the blessings and advantages of the Old Covenant not shared by the Gentiles (2:1–3:20); and the Gentiles claimed to have replaced Israel as the new and beloved people of God (11:13–32). For this reason, Paul argues at length for the unity and equality of all peoples in Jesus Christ (3:28–30) and challenges believers of every nationality to welcome one another as servants and worshipers of the same Lord (10:12; 15:7–12).

Themes and Characteristics Romans is a work of profound theological reflection. As such, it has probably influenced Christian thinking and history more than any other epistle of Paul. It is his longest letter and, in the eyes of many, his most mature. Indeed, Paul had been preaching and defending the gospel for two decades before he wrote Romans, leaving us a work that is stamped with the imprint of his wisdom, depth, and spiritual energy. Even more than his other writings, however, Romans is full of things that are “hard to understand” (2 Pet 3:16). His style is more formal than usual, and his thoughts weave back and forth through a maze of theological mysteries concerning sin, judgment, righteousness, justification, sanctification, salvation, suffering, law, grace, sonship, election, mercy, sacrifice, and the triune God. If any NT epistle can claim to resemble a theological treatise, it is Romans.

The body of Romans divides neatly into three major parts. (1) *Salvation in Christ* (1:16–8:39). The letter begins with a sweeping indictment of mankind, declaring the world guilty before God. Here Paul states that the cancer of human rebellion that spread rampantly among the pagans (1:18–32) has also infected Israel (2:1–3:20). As a result, all nations without distinction stand trapped in the same predicament: entangled in sin and in desperate need of salvation (3:23). God responds to this tragedy by sending forth his Son, Jesus Christ, whose dying and rising rescues the fallen family of Adam and restores them to a righteous standing with God (5:1–21). At several points throughout this section Paul reflects deeply on the mystery of sin (6:12–23; 7:7–25) and the salvation we experience in Christ through the Spirit (8:1–39). (2) *Restoration of Israel* (9:1–11:36). The central section of Romans examines the place of Israel in the new economy of grace. Though many in Israel have repudiated the gospel, Paul insists that God has not abandoned his covenant people but is planning to save “all Israel” in Christ (11:26–27). This, according to Paul, is consistent with the pattern of God’s dealings with Israel in the Scriptures. These chapters also examine how the

Gentiles are related to Israel as branches grafted onto the trunk of an olive tree (11:17–24). **(3)** *Christian Living and Epilogue* (12:1–16:23). The final chapters of Romans are a practical application of the theology expounded in earlier chapters. Here Paul considers the obligations of the believer in the Church and society. His catechesis follows the main contours of Jesus’ teaching in the Gospels (12:9–21). In this section we find Paul’s most explicit instructions on the Christian’s relation to the State (13:1–7) and the need for believers to exercise Christian freedom with prudence, lest we cause others to fall (14:1–23).³²

³² *The Ignatius Catholic Study Bible: The New Testament*, 255–256.