

Valley Bible Church - Bible Survey

Bible Survey Lesson 67: **Introduction to the Epistles of Paul**

Introduction:

No one man, apart from Jesus Himself, shaped the history of the Christianity like the apostle Paul. Thirteen New Testament books bear his name and, with the Book of Acts, give insight into Paul's life, beliefs, and ministry.

Paul's Epistles generally focus on tough issues within the church. He was a concerned, doting and disciplining father. (After all, he personally or second-handedly birthed many of them.) As a result, his letters are extremely personal and contain instruction; advice; rebuke; and exhortation. They deal with theological, ethical, social, personal, and church body matters.

Paul was uniquely suited to become the "Apostle to the Gentiles."

He said of himself, ". . . *I have become all things to all men that I might by all means win some.*" (I Cor. 9:22) No one else possessed the mental resources, unique and incredible gifts, broad education, and multi-cultural heritage to operate "*by all means.*"

Paul was:

1. Cross ethnic--both a Jew, and a Roman citizen
2. Cross cultural--both Jewish and Greco-Roman
3. Cross Religious--both Jew and Christian

He was called by Jesus at the **right time**, received the **right training**, gifted with the **right talents**, and inspired by the Holy Spirit with **powerful teaching**.

HIS TIMES

Paul's world was the world of the Roman Empire. It was a perfect time for Jesus to come, and it was a perfect time for His Gospel to be spread. It was:

1. A time of Pax Romana (Peace by the power of Rome)

The Roman armies had conquered the known world and allowed much freedom, if not legal rights, to their conquered peoples. They allowed people to live among their own, work and trade freely, as long as they paid their taxes and did not threaten the peace. This meant that there was quite a bit of latitude for travel and sharing the Gospel throughout the Empire as long as riots didn't occur and laws were not broken.

Paul took advantage of the protection of the Roman system, especially since he was a Roman citizen.

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2. A time of Safe Travel

The Roman Empire prided itself on the fact that there were roads to virtually every town and village in the Empire. More than that, there were major highways between all the main cities of trade, commerce and government centers which were patrolled by the Roman army. The Romans also prided themselves on their shipping. They built great port cities and protected their shipping lanes.

These factors made it possible for Paul to travel throughout the Empire effectively and safely.

3. A time of Common Language

The Romans choose to insist on a common language of commerce for the Empire. Even though many languages were spoken, the Romans educated their people in a common Greek.

This meant wherever Paul went he could personally communicate with the people.

4. A time of Rule of Law

The Roman Empire had strict rules to ensure justice for their citizens. An entire court system was developed from the local to the federal level to ensure that Romans would always have a voice. It guaranteed redress to have their civil and criminal cases heard, with appeal all the way to the Caesar.

Paul, of course, used this privilege to escape a mock trial by the Jews, and to get the opportunity to minister even in the Caesar's household.

HIS TRAINING

It is unlikely that Paul would have become a Christian evangelist, missionary, theologian, and writer if not for five things:

1. HAD HE NOT BEEN BORN IN TARSUS

Tarsus was a busy river port city which became a center of world trade and a melting pot of all races, popular cultures, philosophies, and religions. It had palaces for the rich, and even the poor lived in brick and wood houses.

The city centered on public baths, racecourse, gymnasium, gardens, and an open-air theater. But the pride of the city was in its universities, with teachers from all over the world teaching every known philosophy. It became a center of learning which surpassed even that of Athens and Alexandria.

Paul was exposed to all these influences as a boy, son of a prominent man who, as a Jew had obviously done some great service or paid a great price to become a citizen of the Roman Empire.

2. HAD HE NOT BEEN RAISED IN A GRECO-ROMAN WORLD

Paul was raised Jewish. He was Saul to his family, Paul for business. He was, remember, "*Hebrew of Hebrews, a Pharisee, son of a Pharisee, blameless in regards to the ceremonial law.*" He was undoubtedly schooled at home and in a local synagogue, becoming expert in the Pentateuch.

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But, being also brought up by a citizen of the Empire in Tarsus, Paul was exposed to the Roman educational system that was based on Greco-Roman culture. He learned world religions, art, literature, mythology, philosophy, a thoroughly pluralistic approach to life. He also learned a trade, probably his father's, tent making.

3. HAD HE NOT BEEN SENT TO JERUSALEM

When Paul became a young man, his father sent him to Jerusalem "be *educated in the strict manner of the law*" under a famous teacher of the Law, Gamaliel. His name is prominent in secular historical sources. Gamaliel's students were hand picked and came from the brightest and the best, so Paul must have been a fine student. He became a Pharisee, like his father, and was drafted as an agent for the Sanhedren.

His commission was, of course, to ferret out the members if the new heretical followers of the "false Messiah," Jesus, arrest them, bring them to the Council for trial and punishment. Some were put to death, as was the Deacon, Stephen. Paul relished the job, seeing himself as a protector of the true religion.

4. HAD HE NOT BEEN ABLE TO READ, UNDERSTAND, SPEAK, AND WRITE IN HEBREW AND GREEK.

Because of his Jewish training, he was able to operate well within the original Hebrew writing of Scripture. His Roman schooling gave him access to the Septuagint as well. He could also communicate equally as well to the gentile world in the common trade language speaking in the Greek idiom of his day. His knowledge of pagan religions and customs also allowed him to refer to information which would peek the interest of his listeners.

5. HAD HE NOT BEEN A ROMAN CITIZEN

As a Roman citizen, had free access to travel by land and sea, free access to public speaking forums, and a thorough knowledge of the Empire's education, culture, customs, and literature.

This helped him to free God's revelation from it's purely Jewish moorings so non-Jews could understand.

HIS TALENTS

One thing is certain. Paul was the man God chose and equipped for the job of extending His Kingdom to the Pagan Gentiles. He was supernaturally called by Jesus Himself and He was unusually gifted.

1. He was a student of great ability.

Witness his choice to study with Gamaliel, choice to join the Pharisees while still a young man, and the use of him to do the Council's dirty business. Also, notice his ability to grasp the Gospel from the men and women God brought into his life to train him after his conversion.

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2. He was zealous.

Witness his commitment to purify Judaism of the new heresy perpetrated by the followers of Jesus. That same excitement and commitment was transferred to his work for the Christ whom he had persecuted.

3. He was a communicator.

He could teach, preach, debate, or convince. His message was always tailored to reach the audience he addressed. The ultimate persecutor became the ultimate preacher.

4. He could think.

His logical treatment of hard questions of doctrine are what make him both fascinating and frustrating. He stands alone in Scripture. He can be understood easily by a child at a surface level, but can also stretch us to the extremities of our mental abilities with his masterful chains of logic.

HIS TEACHING

Paul was a master teacher: a theologian, an interpreter, an apologist, a preacher, and a missionary. He was a consummate:

1. THEOLOGIAN

Paul was a Theologian, in the purest sense. He studied to understand God. He looked for the revelation of God in Scripture, history, and experience in a thorough and organized manner. That is Systematic Theology.

But, he also studied to relate that understanding to people so that lives were changed. That is Applied Theology.

And he was more than an ivory towered egg-head. He was also an:

2. INTERPRETER

Paul was not just a disseminator of information, a simple purveyor of Jesus' life and words, like the Gospel writers. He was an interpreter of the meanings of the words, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

Take Romans, as an example. Paul not only presents the truth of God intellectually. He does do that, making Romans a book of deep systematic theology, ***but*** he also shares its meaning so it can be practically applied to our daily walk.

This is always Paul's style: Systematic Theology followed by Applied Theology. Understand the Word, then live the Word.

While doing all this, Paul was an example to us of a wonderful:

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3. APOLOGIST

Paul argued the faith against all opponents, anytime, anywhere. He was *"always ready to give an answer for the hope that was within him."* He worked hard to speak clearly and forcefully to each group he faced.

He was *"always ready to make a defense to everyone"* (I Peter 3:15) considering their arguments and tearing down their objections, one by one. When he was finished, they didn't always believe, but they always had to make a choice.

Many would also say he was a great:

4. PREACHER

If you feel called to preach, study the Book of Acts as Peter and Paul preach under the power of the Holy Spirit, proclaiming the Gospel to the lost world.

I know of no homiletics class (The Preparation and Delivery of Sermons) in any reputable Bible school or seminary that does not study these sermons along with the sermons of Jesus.

Last, he was a:

5. MISSIONARY

Even Missions Departments in schools today study Paul's approach to reaching *"even to the remotest part of the earth"* (Acts 1:8)

He organized and administered

He stayed flexible (open to the Holy Spirit)

He trained (mentored) and delegated leadership responsibility

He planted local churches and turned them over to local leaders

He developed fellowship and accountability

He created cross-cultural evangelism

With all this talent and technique he ministered as we must today. His solution to meeting the needs of the world whether they are personal, inter-personal, job-related, social, governmental, or whatever was always the same.

Man needs a personal supernatural transformation, by the grace of God, by faith in His Son, Jesus, and brought about through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Then those changed men and woman will change their world.

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Above all, Paul was a great theologian, but a very practical one.

He translated the great doctrinal truths of God into practical, life changing concepts that work everyday, everywhere, and in every situation.

Lessons:

1. Paul teaches through his life and his writing that salvation is a gift of God's grace by faith in Jesus.
2. God will draw those He desires to save to Himself through the Holy Spirit.
3. God uses our natural abilities, personalities, talents, and training then adds His gifts to make us usable servants.

Homework:

Read: Or re-read the Book of Romans

Think: Can I submit to God so he can use me to strengthen the Body?

Apply: Put yourself to death each day this week and let Jesus live in you.