

PAUL

PRISONER OF HOPE

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1

INTRODUCING PAUL

This is the last in a series of three volumes reflecting on Paul's life and letters. Accordingly, this book starts near the end of a discussion that has already extensively covered Paul's known ministry. The first volume, *Paul—Messenger of Grace*, reflected on Paul's early life, as well as on some of his early letters: 1 Thessalonians, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, and Philippians (since I wonder if it was written while Paul was at Ephesus). The second volume, *Paul—Soldier of Peace*, reflected extensively on his letter to the Romans.

In this book, we finish reflecting on the remaining letters of the Pauline collection: Ephesians, Colossians, the Pastoral Letters, 2 Thessalonians, and Philemon. However, since you may not have read the two previous books on Paul, I want to summarize some of the key dimensions of Paul's life and ministry up to this point. Most of the letters in this volume differ in some interesting ways from Paul's earlier ones, and it is helpful to have an idea of the starting point before looking at the variations!

PAUL THE JEW

Paul was a Jew, just as Jesus was. Christians throughout the centuries have often seen this fact as irrelevant, as if when Paul became a Christian, he abandoned his Jewishness entirely. He is thought to have changed religions and perhaps even become a model for anger or hatred against Jews today. It is unfortunate, but evil hearts throughout the centuries have often used such ideas as an excuse to persecute or even slaughter Jews.¹

In part as a result of the Holocaust, the last few decades have seen a careful reexamination of some of these assumptions. What we have found is some glaring holes in this way of looking at Paul. For example, Paul identified himself as an Israelite and a “Hebrew” in more than one place long after he believed in Jesus (see 2 Cor. 11:22; Phil. 3:5; Rom. 11:1). In fact, Acts 23:6 has Paul identifying himself as a Pharisee in the present tense over twenty years after he became a Christ follower!²

It is only because Christianity and Judaism are two distinct religions today that we tend to see Paul as changing religions or converting from one religion to another. Paul would not have seen it that way. For him, the Jews remained the natural branches of the tree, with Gentiles being grafted in (Rom. 11:17–21). One of the most obvious mistakes is to think of “Paul” as his Christian name, as if Paul threw away his Jewish name Saul when he converted. Acts continues to call him Saul well over ten years after he believed in Jesus.

If the prevalent picture drawn of Paul’s Jewishness has often been skewed, even more so has the picture of Judaism.³ The old story was that Judaism was a legalistic religion that believed you had to earn your salvation by good works. Our hero Paul then came along and realized that works play no role at all in getting right with God. We are made right with God by faith alone, purely as a matter of God’s grace.

This interpretation of Paul has everything to do with the argument between Martin Luther and the Roman Catholic Church in the 1500s. But

it seriously skews Paul's argument with other Christians in the first century. The people Paul sparred with in Galatians were other Christian Jews—including Peter and James—and, even then, he was arguing on the proper understanding of Jewish faith rather than in terms of Christianity versus Judaism as a separate religion. He was arguing over the proper interpretation of the Jewish Scriptures, the only Scriptures that existed at the time.

It is also important to recognize that these arguments are not the central topic of Paul's letters as a whole. They come up primarily in Romans and Galatians, where the question of how Gentiles can be incorporated into the people of God is at issue. Even there, the topic is not "Can a person earn their salvation?" but "Does a Gentile need to convert fully to Judaism to be saved?" The works under discussion are not primarily good works, but "works of law"—especially the ones like circumcision that ethnically separated Jew from Gentile.

A thorough look through all the Jewish literature of Paul's day reveals both that there was a wide spectrum of Jewish beliefs at the time and that all or nearly all of them saw God's grace as the ultimate basis for right standing before him.⁴ Further, as Wesleyan and other traditions have always argued, how one lives remains an element in final salvation for Paul, not in terms of how good a person is but in terms of walking in faithful relationship with God. The older Lutheran version of Paul was wrong on both ends: about how graceless Judaism was and how works-less Paul was.⁵

Nor is it likely that Paul viewed himself as a moral failure before he "discovered" justification by faith. This was also one version of the older story. Paul, plagued by his moral failures as revealed in Romans 7, finally realized that he must depend entirely on Christ for his righteousness. Once he believed, he still could not do the good he wanted to do (7:19), but God now looked at Christ's righteousness rather than his. Paul was both sinner and righteous as long as he kept repenting.

Again, this scenario is a fair description of Martin Luther's pilgrimage, but it was not Paul's.⁶ In Philippians 3:6, Paul said that

before he believed in Christ, he was faultless, “as to righteousness under the law” (ESV). Indeed, Paul regularly told his churches confidently to imitate his way of living (see 1 Cor. 4:16–17; Phil. 4:9), and the word *repentance* rarely leapt from his subconscious in his writings—in fact never in relation to himself. Paul was not a bad Pharisee; he simply had an encounter with Christ that led him in another direction!

The vast majority of experts on Romans now agree that Paul never meant Romans 7 to depict a never-ending struggle for believers to do the right thing. Indeed, we are reading this chapter exactly the opposite of how Paul meant it if we do not read it in the flow of Romans 6–8. In these chapters, Paul contrasted what it is like to be a slave to sin with what it is like to have the Spirit within. The end of the argument is Romans 8, where he talked about the Spirit setting a person free from the law of sin and death (8:2).

On the way there, Paul vividly dramatized in Romans 7 the plight of the person, especially the Jew, who does not have the Spirit but wants to keep the essence of the law, such as the command not to covet. At the dramatic climax, he pictured this poor person crying out, “Who will rescue me from this body of death?” (7:24). The answer quickly followed, “through Jesus Christ our Lord!” (7:25). Now by the power of the Spirit, we can fulfill the “just requirement of the law” (8:4 NRSV), which Paul later told us is to love our neighbor (13:8–10).

Paul did say some things in his writings that paved the way for later Christians like Tertullian to consider Christians a “third race,” neither Jew nor Gentile.⁷ In 1 Corinthians 9:20–21, Paul said, “To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. . . . To those not having the law I became like one not having the law.” But these statements are really about keeping the Jewish Law—especially the parts like circumcision that distinguished Jew from Gentile—rather than about Paul abandoning his identity as an Israelite. Romans 11 gives us the bigger picture.

For a time, the hearts of many Jews were hardened not to believe. Certainly there remains a remnant of “true Israel” at present (see

Rom. 9:6), but most of ethnic Israel does not currently believe. God is instead at this time grafting into the tree of Abraham the “full number of the Gentiles” (11:25). Israel’s lack of faith in God’s plan created an opportunity for the Gentiles to hear and believe the good news as well (see 11:11). But once that full number of Gentiles comes in, then Israel itself will believe too: “all Israel will be saved” (11:26). The “part” that is hardened (11:25) will become the “all” that believes (11:26).

For Paul, Israel remained the people of God. Jews who believed remained part of true Israel. Gentiles who believed could become a part of true Israel as well.

PAUL THE CHRIST-FOLLOWER

Paul spoke of a time when God was pleased “to reveal his Son in [him]” (Gal. 1:16). In Acts 9, we get a fuller version of this event. On his way to Damascus, the risen Christ appeared to Paul and changed the trajectory of his life from someone zealous for the ethnic distinctives of the Jewish Law to someone who zealously proclaimed that Christ is king.

Like many Jews of his day, Paul may have already been looking for a messiah, a king, to come eventually to rule over a renewed nation of Israel. As a Pharisee, Paul would already have believed in a future resurrection, at least for those killed because of their faithfulness to God. But initially, the idea that Jesus might be this king did not compute for Paul. Messiahs were not supposed to die, and the resurrection was supposed to happen all at once, not just to one individual.

Not only that, but this Jesus was not zealous for the law the way he thought the messiah surely would be. Jesus ate with tax collectors and sinners. He did not seem to pay much attention to the rules about the Sabbath or matters of purity. He included people who were unclean in his fellowship.

All of that changed when Christ appeared to him, and Paul had to rethink his entire way of understanding. Jesus was (and is) the Messiah, the “anointed one,” the “Christ” in Greek. Paul now confessed that “Jesus is Lord,” perhaps the earliest Christian confession of faith. To say Jesus is Lord was to say that God raised him from the dead and enthroned him as king of the universe (Ps. 110:1). This is the heart of the gospel, the “good news,” for Paul: Jesus arrived as God’s king to set up his kingdom. He is the one Lord who goes with the one God (1 Cor. 8:6). He will come again to earth soon to finish what he started, to judge the earth while rescuing those who confess him as Lord.

However, the focus of Paul’s preaching was the cross (see 1 Cor. 1:23). In the cross, like the believers before him, Paul saw Christ’s death as a sacrifice for sins. Through the faith of Jesus, God showed his people his continuing faithfulness to them, his righteousness (see Rom. 1:17). But unlike most believers before him, Paul argued that this sacrifice could apply both to Jews and Gentiles. He believed that God would graciously accept Gentiles because of Christ’s death, as well as Jews.

In fact, Paul came to believe that God accepted Jews on exactly the same basis, that no amount of keeping the Jewish Law could establish a right relationship between a Jew and God. After all, he had been blameless at keeping the law and still needed Christ. God must obviously be looking for something other than law keeping, and it turned out to be the cross of Christ.

Paul followed through with the new revelation. The Jewish Law put the Jews under a curse. It only showed their inability to keep it. The death of Christ redeemed them from that curse. God in his grace had decided to reconcile the entire world to himself through Christ, apart from things like circumcision, the purity and food laws, or Sabbath observance. These are things Paul primarily had in mind when he said a person could not be made right with God or justified by works of law (see Rom. 3:28)—the things that most separated Jew from Gentile.

God was both the God of the Jews and Gentiles (3:29). He was the God of all who had faith in him (4:16), those who have trusted in what he has done through Christ (9:33). All who call on the name of the Lord Jesus will be saved from God's coming judgment (10:13).

The key for Paul was that people participate and get inside of Christ's death and resurrection. We are baptized into Christ. We are buried with him in baptism (Rom. 6:4), and we rise with him to live a new life in his resurrection (6:8; 8:11). The life that we now live, we live "in the faithfulness of the Son of God" (Gal. 2:20, author's translation). God accomplishes this transformation through the Holy Spirit, whom God has given us as both a guarantee and down payment of our inheritance that is to come (2 Cor. 5:5).

The result is that we now live a life according to the Spirit rather than the flesh, which is how we used to live (Gal. 5:16; Rom. 8:8). We live a life of love toward our neighbor. Paul's ethic for his Gentile converts was basically the Jewish Law stripped of its ethnic particulars. External matters like circumcision and purity rules, even Sabbath observance, were not part of God's expectation for Gentile believers. However, they remained under Christ's law (see 1 Cor. 9:21). They remained, for example, under the sexual prohibitions of the Jewish Scriptures, which Christians later came to call the Old Testament.

At least initially, Paul seemed to expect Christ to return within his lifetime. He told the Thessalonians that we who are alive and remain will be caught up in the air (1 Thess. 4:17). He advised the Corinthians that it was best not to marry because "the time is short" (1 Cor. 7:29). The question of what happened to believers who died did not even seem to have come up in the months he was at Thessalonica (see 1 Thess. 4:13). He must have focused almost entirely on escaping the coming judgment on the living (see 1 Thess. 1:10) and hardly mentioned the dead. His focus was almost the opposite of many today, emphasizing Christ's return to the earth rather than what happened after one died.

Language of salvation in Paul’s writings focused overwhelmingly on an event that was coming rather than on some internal experience. The gospel is also the positive truth that God enthroned Jesus as king and God’s kingdom was coming—it did not focus on some individual experience. Believers would still on the day of judgment give an account for how they had lived, even after God had forgiven their sins (see 2 Cor. 5:10). While there was no promise of salvation if a person did not continue in faithfulness (see 1 Cor. 9:26–27; Phil. 3:11), other believers might only get a bit burned in that judgment, while still making it into the kingdom (see 1 Cor. 3:13–15).

On the day when Christ returns, the material creation, including our physical bodies, will be transformed to become like Christ’s body after he was resurrected (1 Cor. 15:49; Phil. 3:21). Currently, the creation is enslaved to corruption and decay (Rom. 8:20), probably since the time of Adam’s sin. Our physical flesh, because it is a part of the creation, is also in its default state in subjection to the power of sin. This is why those without the Spirit cannot do good, even if they want to do so. However, the Spirit frees us now from this power of sin, and when Christ returns, the whole creation will be liberated. Paul likely located eternity on this renewed earth. This eternal kingdom of God on earth, where Christ would reign would thus not be a matter of “flesh and blood” (1 Cor. 15:50), but of transformed bodies.

In the meantime, believers live on earth as the body of Christ (1 Cor. 12:12–31). We each have different roles to play, but each is important. The Spirit lives in each local assembly (church) as the spirit in a body. Each local church is the temple of the Lord (see 1 Cor. 3:16) far more importantly than each person individually. Collectively as well as individually, a church presents its bodies to God as a singular living sacrifice (Rom. 12:2). Together as well as individually, the God of peace sets us apart and makes us his, sanctified and blameless (1 Thess. 5:23).

PAUL, APOSTLE TO THE GENTILES

Paul may have described himself as a “Hebrew of Hebrews” and a Pharisee before he believed (see Phil. 3:5; 2 Cor. 11:22), probably meaning that he spoke Aramaic as a first language. But we learn from Acts that he was born in Tarsus (Acts 22:3) in the Diaspora, among those Jews scattered throughout the world. Accordingly, Greek was also familiar language for him.

We also learn from Acts that he was a Roman citizen (see 16:37), which probably meant that he came from a family of some wealth. He wrote of working with his hands as a step down for the sake of the gospel (see 1 Cor. 4:12). He might have worked with leather and tent making in the mission field, but back home in Tarsus, he more likely was the boss.

These elements in his background no doubt equipped him to be the formidable apostle he turned out to be, even though he was not one of the Twelve. For example, he did not fit the list of qualifications for Judas Iscariot’s replacement in Acts 1:21–22, and he had not followed Jesus from the time of John the Baptist.

However, he considered himself an apostle of equal authority to the others (see 2 Cor. 12:11). “Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen Jesus our Lord?” he asked the Corinthians (1 Cor. 9:1). An apostle was someone sent on an official mission representing a greater authority. Paul received this commission, this role as ambassador, from Jesus himself. Jesus appeared to him and sent him to be a witness of the good news that Jesus was king (see 1 Cor. 15:1–8).

Paul would eventually understand his specific mission as apostle to the Gentiles (see Gal. 2:7). Acts regularly shows Paul going first to the Jewish synagogue when he entered a new city, but we know from Paul’s own writings that the Jews in these synagogues were never his primary target (Rom. 15:16). He also felt led to places where the good news about Jesus’ kingdom had not yet taken hold. For this reason, he never planned to stay long in Rome because faith in Jesus was already well established there (15:20).

It is hard to know exactly when Paul fully understood the nature of his calling, even though in hindsight Paul clearly understood this to be God's purpose for him from the start (see Acts 22:21; 26:17). It is possible it was very early indeed. He said that after Christ revealed himself to him, he went to the Nabatean kingdom of Arabia even before he returned to Jerusalem (see Gal. 1:17). Since he apparently stirred up controversy while he was there (see 2 Cor. 11:32–33), it seems likely that he was preaching to Gentiles from the very beginning.

Paul wrote that it was about three years after he believed when he finally went back to Jerusalem (Gal. 1:18). Both Paul and Acts tell us he then spent about ten years thereafter back around his home city of Tarsus (Gal. 1:21; Acts 9:30). We can presume that he was preaching the good news during these years, even though we know very little about them. At some point, he became part of the exciting developments at the church of Antioch in Syria (see Acts 11:19–30).

It is conventional to speak of Paul's three missionary journeys, although Acts does not actually number them. At some point while Paul was part of the ministry at Antioch, he and another apostle named Barnabas embarked on a missionary journey west to the island of Cyprus and then north to the south central part of Asia Minor—modern-day Turkey. These cities in Asia Minor seem to be the places to which Paul would later send his letter to the Galatians.

But in between this first missionary journey and his second, several key things would happen. First, the question of whether Gentile believers needed to be circumcised to be saved became a big debate. Both Paul and the leaders of Jerusalem—James and Peter—agreed that they did not. Acts 15 portrays this decision as a fairly public one, while we get more of a somewhat private agreement from Galatians 2.

However, this question was only one among many. Even if Gentiles could be saved without fully converting to Judaism, how could Jewish and Gentile believers fellowship together if Gentiles did not follow at least some purity rules? I believe conflicts along these lines were also

part of the reason why Paul and Barnabas did not embark on a second journey together, in addition to disagreement over whether Mark should accompany them. The Jerusalem church seems to have disagreed with Paul as well.

So Paul embarked on his second journey with another coworker, Silas, along with a young man named Timothy. The journey started with villages they had previously visited, but before long they found themselves in Macedonia and Greece, where they founded churches in Thessalonica and Corinth. It was probably at Corinth that Paul wrote what would be the first of the letters we now find in the New Testament: 1 Thessalonians.⁸ Paul spent a year and a half in Corinth.

Paul did not likely write letters because he preferred to communicate in that way. Rather, his letters were a substitute for his presence, and he sent them in the hands of individuals he knew would represent him well as they read them. The vast majority of people at the time could not read, so they would be dependent on others reading the letters out loud publicly, probably in worship. Paul's letters were thus oral documents, written but meant to be read aloud.

Paul's so-called third journey focused on the city of Ephesus on the west coast of Asia Minor. Paul spent almost three years there. From there, he certainly wrote 1 Corinthians, but I have argued that Paul also wrote Galatians and perhaps Philippians from Ephesus as well. I side with those scholars who think Paul was actually imprisoned at Ephesus at least once and perhaps even twice, even though Acts does not mention it.

After leaving Ephesus, Paul wrote both 2 Corinthians and Romans. He wrote 2 Corinthians on his way to Corinth and then Romans once he was there. He was on his way ultimately to Jerusalem with an offering he had been collecting for the church there. We do not fully know what happened, except that in Jerusalem he was arrested and that he used his Roman citizenship to get to Rome. This is the point in Paul's story where the previous volume ended and this one begins.

FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

1. This chapter is a condensed version of the previous two volumes in this series, so it does not provide extensive arguments. What in this chapter did you find new? What is different from what you have heard before? What do you have questions about? Set aside some time and look deeper into those issues.
2. If some of the things that are new to you would prove to be right, how would it change the way you read Paul's letters? How would it change the way you think about God, Christ, or the Bible? How might it change the way you live?