

INTRODUCTION TO THE BIBLE – SESSION 9

Academy of Christian Discipleship

The Letters

This presentation will tackle the New Testament Letters from both a literary and a theology perspective. We will spend the first hour investigating the major themes associated with each Pauline letter, along with the historical backgrounds and context of the Jewish and Greco-Roman environment which prompt those themes. In the second hour, our focus will turn to the non-Pauline letters of the New Testament. As with the Pauline epistles, we will examine each letter's purpose, date, author, and location from the literary and historical context of each letter. It will become evident in the first two lectures that Paul and the authors of the general epistles are not systematic theologians who wish to instill doctrines into their early-church congregants. Rather, they are pastors dealing with situations not unlike those our churches face today, some two thousand years later. Because of this, the focus of the third hour will be on Paul's understanding of the grand narrative of Scripture, and the relationship between what he understood to be a new reality as a result of the gospel and, thus, how the Church should live and function as participants in that new reality.

Notes

Key Dates And Events In Paul's Life

PAUL'S LETTERS

1. 1 & 2 Thessalonians

Missionary Journey:

Written From:

Responding To:

Key Themes:

2. Galatians

Missionary Journey:

Written From:

Responding To:

Key Themes:

3. 1 Corinthians

Missionary Journey:

Written From:

Responding To:

Key Themes:

4. 2 Corinthians

Missionary Journey:

Written From:

Responding To:

Key Themes:

5. Romans

Missionary Journey:

Written From:

Responding To:

Key Themes:

6. Prison Epistles: Philippians

Missionary Journey:

Written From:

Responding To:

Key Themes:

7. Prison Epistles: Ephesians

Missionary Journey:

Written From:

Responding To:

Key Themes:

8. Prison Epistles: Colossians

Missionary Journey:

Written From:

Responding To:

Key Themes:

9. Prison Epistles: Philemon

Missionary Journey:

Written From:

Responding To:

Key Themes:

10. Pastoral Epistles: 1 & 2 Timothy, Titus

Missionary Journey:

Written From:

Responding To:

Key Themes:

NON-PAULINE LETTERS

1. Hebrews

Author:

Written to:

Responding to:

Key Themes:

2. James

Author:

Written to:

Responding to:

Key Themes:

3. 1 Peter

Author:

Written to:

Responding to:

Key Themes:

4. 2 Peter

Author:

Written to:

Responding to:

Key Themes:

5. 1 & 2 & 3 John

Author:

Written to:

Responding to:

Key Themes:

6. Jude

Author:

Written to:

Responding to:

Key Themes:

7. Revelation

Author:

Written to:

Responding to:

Key Themes:

PAUL'S BIG PICTURE AND LIVING LIVES WORTHY OF THE GOSPEL

1. Indicative: CSER Structure: Salvation-Historical and Apocalyptic

2. Indicative: Union with Christ

3. Imperative: Be united!

4. Imperative: Be filled with the Spirit of life!

5. Imperative: Be God's chosen representatives!

Homework Assignments

- Read *Tortured for Christ*, Richard Wurmbrand's story of his various imprisonments by the Soviets as a result of his open Christian faith. This can be requested for free from the 'Voice of the Martyrs' website.
 - o Depending on participants' time availability, this homework assignment may take two weeks. It is an easy read, but one which should be tasted rather than be swallowed like a pill.
 - o I encourage you to request a copy so that you can read it in weeks two and three of the month between lectures.
 - o You can find it at: <http://www.persecution.com/>
 - o Take a look, also, at the 'Gallery' link on <http://torturedforchrist.com/>
- Watch 'How Paul Invented Christian Theology' by N. T. Wright
 - o <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WkcjFHYIugY>

Re-read Philippians, Hebrews, or 1 Peter, thinking through how the author's comments on suffering and persecution might have impacted the original audience and how they should impact the Church in its various locations and circumstances today.

Spiritual Discipline

- Prayer and fasting for the persecuted church around the world
- Prayer for unity within the local and global Church

Small Group Questions

- Why was unity so important to Paul? Where do we see unity and disunity in our church? Why do both exist? What needs to be addressed in order for unity to be dominant?

- In what ways does our church participate in helping fellow Christians who are persecuted around the world (as, for example, the Philippians did with Paul when in prison)?
- What ethical issues (e.g. idolatry, sexual practices, etc.) does Paul address head-on which our church tends to sweep under the table?
- How seriously does our church view the need for evangelism? Are we practicing evangelism as a church? Do we see it as the job of only the leadership? Are we challenging and training lay members of the church to also spread the gospel?
- What does it mean to be a follower of Christ in a post-Christendom world?
- If Paul was here and he did an assessment of our church, what would he say are its greatest strengths and weaknesses?
- To what extent does our congregation look and act differently than the secular world, in terms of: use of money, treatment of family, attitude toward work, sexual ethics, how we view justice, how we view politics, etc.
- Many of the New Testament letters are written to persecuted churches and are about enduring in the faith through persecution. In what ways are we persecuted? Is persecution a litmus test for true faith? Why is there less persecution here than elsewhere in the world? Is it *only* because of 'religious freedom', or are there perhaps other more insidious reasons?

Project

Consider some of the primary themes that resonate throughout either Paul's letters or the New Testament Letters as a whole: unity in the church, enduring persecution for the sake of the gospel, being aware of and dealing with false teachers, Christian identity (union and participation) IN Christ (i.e. the way Christian ethics relates to salvation), among others. Write an essay in which you choose ONE of these primary themes and in which you reflect on (a) its importance (including scriptural references) in Paul's letters or the NT letters, (b) the ways in which it is fostered, overlooked, viewed as significant or insignificant, etc. in your local church, (c) the ways it appears and is treated in the American Church, and (d) the ways it appears and is treated in the global Church. In short, consider how that primary theme appears in Christianity on all levels of Christian fellowship today, and reflect on the ways in which the Church is succeeding or not succeeding in that theme which was so important for the early Church.

Additional Notes
