

NEW TESTAMENT 3

Paul's Letters

GENERAL OVERVIEW

This is an introductory overview of Paul's Letters in the New Testament.

A close study of Galatians will serve as a model for us, then we will look briefly at other letters. Romans is a separate course.

Before we begin...

Do you receive many personal letters? What is special about receiving a physical letter? Why are the letters of the New Testament writers so important?

The Significance of Paul's Letters

- The Epistles pre-date the writing of the Gospels. They tell us about the development of the early church and the message and methods of the early church leaders.
- The Epistles show us how the pastoral problems of the early church were addressed by the apostolic writers, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.
- Paul's letters clearly dominate the NT, reflecting his place in the spread and development of Christianity.

The Significance of Paul's Letters

- Using letters to communicate the faith in Christ is a distinctive of the Christian Scriptures – without precedent
- Although they are sometimes circumstantially motivated, they all bear the marks of careful Theological thought and crafted language.
- They are a way of being "present ... in spirit" and continuing authoritative ministry among the geographically dispersed churches.

The Collection of Paul's Letters

- The letters to the different churches were gathered into a single corpus before the end of the 2nd C. after Christ.
- They were circulated among the churches by Paul's direct mandate and considered to be Scripture as early as the epistle of 2 Peter 3:15–16.
- Theological debate from the start of the 2nd C. recognizes a complete canon of NT Scripture including 13 of Paul's letters.

The Interpretation of Paul's Letters

We need a process for interpreting the important message of the Epistles to the Church if we are to understand their significance for today:

1. Read the whole letter, for structure and purpose.
2. Determine the historical and geographical context as much as possible.
3. Identify specific problems addressed to appreciate the response given.
4. Isolate the theological principles applied, which remain universally true and applicable

Introduction to Galatians

READ THROUGH GALATIANS 1-6 TOGETHER.

What are the main divisions of the argument in Galatians?

Make a list of subheadings

Note the purpose of each section in the argument.

What is Paul's purpose in writing Galatians?

The Destination of Galatians

Two views in the literature:

- Northern Galatia: Ethnically Galatian, difficult terrain.
 - View based on Galatians 16:6, where Paul turned North to Galatia.
- Southern Galatia: Roman Province, evangelised by Paul.
 - Cities of Antioch, Iconium, Lystra and Derbe (Acts 13–14)
 - Paul typically used the names of Provinces in his writings
 - Paul says in Gal 4:13 that he visited because of illness, making travel difficult.

The Time and Place of Writing

- Bracketing the letters chronologically
 - Comparing the contents of the other Pauline Epistles places it **a f t e r** the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15)
 - None of the decisions of the Jerusalem Council are evident in Galatians.
- Considering the autobiographical material of chapters 1–2
 - Galatians 1:18f fits with Acts 9:26–30
 - Galatians 2:1–10 can be matched with Acts 11:29f (Study 2 will address the difficulties)
 - This places the letter in Syrian Antioch, **be f o r e** the Jerusalem Council, as **one** of **t h e** **f i r s t** Epist l e s

The Occasion and Purpose of Galatians

- Problem of Judaizers (Christian Jews from Judea)
 - Attempting to make Gentile believers follow Jewish custom, particularly circumcision as a sign of inclusion in the Abrahamic promises
- Keeping the Law
 - OT ritual calendar seems to have been promoted (Gal 4:10)
 - Ritual perfectionism seems to have been offered (Gal 3:13)
- Challenge to Paul's authority
 - Possibly on the grounds that he did not require ritual purity (Gal 5:24)
 - Paul answers that those who try to keep the Law fail and end up serving the flesh.

Concluding

How are Christians tempted to add to the gospel today?

Why are we still tempted to do this?

Why is it imperative to defend the Biblical gospel, and heed the warning to the Galatians?

Read the articles on 'Galatians, Epistle to the', 'Council, Jerusalem', and 'Epistle' in the *New Bible Dictionary*

Consider the Tyndale or Bible Speaks Today commentaries, as well as the NBD article on 'Paul'