

Confirmation 2020-21

Session 21 – Paul & His Theology

Background Information

The story of Saul turned Paul and his ministry is worthy of a Hollywood epic. He was an up-and-coming Pharisee, loathed and feared by the followers of Jesus. He held the cloaks for the people who stoned Stephen, the first Christian martyr, before his life-changing encounter with Christ. He took four missionary journeys. He was chased out of town. He was imprisoned. He endured persecution, an earthquake, and a shipwreck. Through it all, Paul became so important that for the last 2000 years, his name and ideas have been permanently linked to the theology, mission, church life, worship, and vocation of Christians around the world.

The churches Paul was involved with were small groups of believers who came to faith through the preaching of Paul and others. The Holy Spirit was hard at work as Paul proclaimed the Gospel in synagogues, at the Areopagus in Athens, and in many letters, we still have available today. Even as his missionary journeys carried him all over the Roman Empire, he maintained contact with these groups and with individuals such as Philemon to sustain their newfound faith and resolve questions that had arisen since he left. Each new issue required Paul to explain again the Gospel's call for unity, for faithfulness, and for love.

Paul's work in the early church brought with it three significant shifts in the way the first followers of Jesus understood their faith. The first was the inclusion of the Gentiles into the faith. Paul's letter to the Galatians states his clear position that people didn't have to become Jewish and follow all the Jewish laws to become Christians. The second shift came through Paul's willingness to shape his preaching of the Gospel for a particular audience. When he was with Jewish people, he followed Jewish practices, but among Gentiles, he lived as they did. Paul showed us that the way we proclaim the Gospel can change, even as the Gospel itself remains the same. The third shift was all about the invitation.

Paul didn't just say it was okay for Gentiles to be included in the church, he actively preached to them, going into communities made up mostly of Gentiles to share the good news of God's gift of salvation for all people.

Together, these three moves toward a more inclusive Gospel set the foundation for the church today. The call of the church has been and continues to be to use whatever tools are at hand to make Christ's benefits real for others. Paul reminds us that the church is never finished with his word, that we must always be bringing the Gospel into new places, new cultures, and new eras.

The content of Paul's teaching came to him in two ways. First, it grew out of his experience of the risen Jesus who appeared to him on the Damascus Road. Second, his teachings were constantly refined by the many situations he encountered in his preaching life. Paul first came to see the truth of who Christ was for himself (and, by extension, for others) and then had to figure out what that meant in practical terms as he dealt with all the questions that arose as he traveled around the Roman Empire.

Paul's theology begins with God revealed in Christ. The reality of the person Jesus who was crucified, died, and rose again reveals our own state of affairs: our lack of trust in God, and the sins and brokenness that follow, aren't something we can fix ourselves. If Christ died for us, then all our attempts at being good, religious, or spiritually successful aren't good enough. So Paul's goal is to give Christ to his hearers in such a way that they can learn to let go of their own goodness, power, and control, and instead see the crucified and risen Jesus as fully righteous and fully willing to hand himself over for our sake. Paul preaches and teaches Christ as the Son of God, the one we can latch onto and trust fully.

Paul's theology was foundational for Martin Luther who, almost 1500 years after Paul wrote his letters, drew upon Paul's writings to develop his theology. Most of Paul's letters, like many of Luther's works, were written to solve dilemmas that arose among specific groups of believers

or with particular individuals. But like Luther, we can extrapolate the central theme of justification through faith in Christ alone in all of Paul's letters. While they might be intended to address specific issues, Paul's writings hold timeless truth that has guided the church since its very beginning.

What you need to know

Acts and Paul's letters show that Paul's message met with a full range of responses. One look at the list of greetings he sends to fellow believers in Romans 16 makes it clear that Paul had plenty of what we might call success. But among the Jewish people in a local synagogue, Paul wasn't always well received. Sometimes the people reacted angrily or even violently and he was often arrested and thrown into jail.

While Paul's letters make up a major part of the New Testament, other followers of Christ also took the Gospel beyond Jerusalem and some did so even before Paul. After Paul's Damascus Road experience, he went to the believers in his destination city where, we know from accounts in Acts 9, there was already a group of disciples, including a man named Ananias. Acts 18:1-2 shows us that there were Christians in Corinth even before Paul got there: Priscilla and Aquila, among others, had come from Rome when the emperor expelled Christians from the city.

Paul was persistent and incredibly resilient. Despite nearly constant threats to his personal safety, jail, shipwrecks, and so on, Paul continued to write, travel, and preach until his death, presumed to come at the hands of the Roman government. He never married, probably didn't have a home to speak of, and earned whatever money he needed to survive by working as a tentmaker. In other words, Paul's life was not easy. He made real sacrifices to follow the call of Jesus on his life. But in his lifetime, the good news spread across the entire Roman Empire. Paul did what he set out to do.

Pause theology is what makes him so important to us, even two-thousand years after he wrote his letters. His preaching and teaching

about God in Christ, and what faith in Christ means for us, have shaped the church and the lives of Christians around the world for centuries.

We can't separate Paul's life history from his theology. As for all of us, Paul's understanding of God was formed amid his life experiences from being the scourge of Jesus' followers to his vision on the Damascus Road, to successes and arrests and imprisonment, all the way to house arrest in Rome itself. Paul knew cruelty and pain and suffering and joy, and he preached the good news in the midst of it all. He believed fully that if he could be loved and saved by God, then no one was out of God's reach.

Paul points to Jesus over and over and over. When he deals with factions in Corinth, he points to Jesus. When he deals with the demands for circumcision in Galatia, he points to Jesus. When he sends the slave Onesimus home to his master Philemon, he urges Philemon to treat Onesimus as a brother because of Christ. When he sits in prison, he rejoices on account of Christ. And not only does he point to Christ, but he's also eager, as he tells the Philippians, to go to the Savior to whom he's been pointing. Paul has a lot to say, but this main point is always the same: Jesus.

About the Lutheran Study Bible (LSB)

There is nothing specific about the Apostle Paul in the Lutheran Study Bible beyond what is listed in the table above. However, a map of his four missionary journeys is on page 2111.

Essay Questions

In your own words, answer two of the following questions below in 100-150 words each and return them to Pastor Jesse by email at pastor@zionohio.org no later than next Sunday, March 7.

1. Read Thessalonians 1:1-10. If our church or youth group received a letter like this from a good friend or mentor, how would you feel?

What emotions is Paul trying to convey to the church at Thessalonica?

2. Read Romans 8:31-39. What does Paul mean in :31 when he wrote that God is "for us"? Who in your life is "for you"? Who are you "for"? Read :38-39 again. Can you think of anything that CAN separate us from the love of God? What are some other modern illustrations Paul could have used today?
3. Do you know anything about another church body (Methodists, Baptists, Catholics, for example) that is different from the Lutheran church as far as what is taught there? Give examples.
4. Read Philippians 3:7-11. Is there anything that you once considered valuable but have discarded or given up because of Christ? What have you taken on because of Christ?