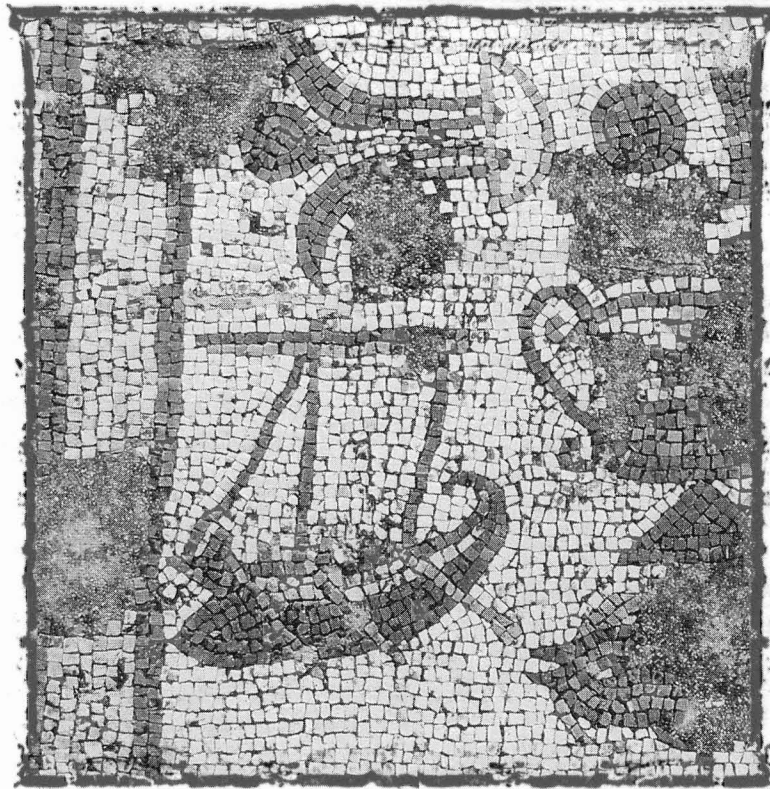


# FIRST CORINTHIANS SECOND CORINTHIANS GALATIANS EPHESIANS PHILIPPIANS COLOSSIANS



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Mosaic of a small ship from a first-century house in Magdala.

In this lesson we will briefly survey six New Testament letters. All of these letters claim Paul as the writer, but modern scholarship has raised questions about whether Paul wrote Ephesians and Colossians. He definitely wrote the other four.

First of all let us look at Paul's letters to the Corinthians. Unlike the situation with the Roman church, Paul is very familiar with the situation in Corinth. Acts 18:1-18 tells how Paul established the church in Corinth. When Paul visited this cos-

mopolitan and wealthy commercial center in Greece, he stayed there for over a year and a half. After he left, he kept in touch with the church. First Corinthians 5:9-11 refers to an earlier letter Paul wrote the congregation—a letter that is no longer in existence.

## **FIRST CORINTHIANS**

Paul wrote First Corinthians to help the church answer questions and deal with problems that were dividing it. According

to 1 Corinthians 7:1 the church had written Paul a letter asking his opinion on several issues. In addition, according to 1 Corinthians 1:11 a group called “Chloe’s people” had given Paul an inside report about matters in the church.

### **FIRST CORINTHIANS 1-6**

In First Corinthians, Paul discusses eleven major issues and topics. The church was divided into four factions. Some members stressed the importance of Paul, others Cephas, some Apollos, while others claimed to be followers of Christ. Paul discusses these divisions in Chapters 1 to 4. Paul tries to play down the importance of human figures in the church and stresses the unity of the church in spite of its diversity. Read 1 Corinthians 1:10.

In Chapter 5 Paul talks about immoral behavior. Apparently a Corinthian Christian is living with or is married to his father’s wife. The church interprets this action as an expression of Christian freedom, believing that Christians can live outside the law. Paul commands them to kick the man out of the church.

The problem of court cases between Christians is the topic of Chapter 6. Paul recommends that the church handle disputes between members, for the pagan courts cannot be expected to render Christian decisions. Better than all, Paul says, is the willingness to suffer injury at the hand of another member than to go to any form of court.

In Chapters 5–7 of First Corinthians, Paul discusses sexual morality. Read 6:12-20, and answer the following questions.

a. How should Christians think about their bodies? (verse 15)

b. How does sexual immorality differ from every other sin? (verse 18)

c. Polluting our bodies by engaging in sexual immorality is like polluting what holy place? (verse 19)

### **FIRST CORINTHIANS 7-16**

Beginning with Chapter 7 Paul discusses questions that the church has addressed to him. Throughout his discussion of marriage and celibacy, Paul points to the fact that the world is passing away and in its present form is near its end. Therefore, persons should remain in their present condition except to devote their full energies to the Lord’s business.

The first two questions concern marriage and celibacy. With regard to marriage Paul recommends that persons accord each other their conjugal rights, as neither controls his or her own body. Each rules over the other’s body. Once married, Paul forbids divorce, and here he refers to one of Jesus’ sayings. Paul does make an exception in the case of a Christian who marries an unbeliever. If the unbeliever desires a divorce, he or she is to receive one.

On the question of celibacy, or those who are unmarried, Paul does not appeal to any authority. He gives his own opinion. Persons who are currently single should remain so. However, it is better to marry than to give way to immorality. Read Paul’s discussion in 1 Corinthians 7:8-9.

The sixth problem Paul elaborates on is the issue of eating meat sacrificed to idols. Chapters 8, 9, and 10 deal with this issue. During Paul’s day, the sacrificial animals dedicated to foreign gods were afterward sold in the marketplace for a cheap price. Many members bought and ate this meat—

not only because it was cheap but because it showed their total disdain for the pagan gods. For some members, eating meat that was used in pagan worship created great problems. Paul recommends that the stronger Christians give up this practice, when necessary for the sake of the weaker members' consciences. Or, as Paul writes, "If food is a cause of their falling, I will never eat meat, so that I may not cause one of them to fall."

The role of women in worship is the topic of 1 Corinthians 11:2-16. Women can pray and prophesy in church only if they cover their heads. Such a covering or veil indicates dependence or subordination. Here Paul reflects the typical understanding of the Old Testament in his day. Man is made in the image of God, but woman is made from man and therefore subordinate.

Paul discusses the abuse of the Lord's Supper observance in 1 Corinthians 11:17-34. He recommends order and respect while stressing unity in the body and blood of Jesus. He condemns the Corinthians for eating and drinking too much at the meal, as well as for eating in isolated groups.

Paul informs them about spiritual gifts in Chapters 12, 13, and 14. According to Paul the greatest spiritual gift is love. While Paul appreciates all the gifts in the church—including speaking in tongues—he admonishes the Corinthians to use their gifts for the benefit of the whole church. The use of spiritual gifts in worship is to be "done decently and in order."

The question of resurrection and life after death is the topic of Chapter 15. Here Paul affirms for the doubting Christians that God will resurrect Christians from the dead just as he resurrected Jesus.

Finally in Chapter 16 Paul mentions the collection that he has been taking up in all the churches. This collection will be sent to the church in Jerusalem. Paul asks them to put aside an offering every Sunday. He will then pick it up and carry it to Jerusalem.

First Corinthians 15 is the great passage on the Resurrection. Read verses 51-58, and answer these questions.

- a. What will happen after the last trumpet sounds?
- b. If we are alive at the coming of the Lord, how will we be affected?
- c. Over what is Jesus Christ victorious?

## **SECOND CORINTHIANS**

We have discussed the Book of First Corinthians in some detail since it allows us to see what problems and issues arose in the church and how Paul tried to answer them. Paul wrote Second Corinthians only after another visit to the church failed to solve the problems there firsthand. He had written at least one other letter to the church.

By the time Paul wrote Second Corinthians, he and the church were again on good terms and the personal attacks on him had quieted down. Much of this letter—Chapters 1 through 7—is Paul's reflection on the Corinthian situation and his troubles with the congregation. He describes his understanding of the ministry of an apostle. He closes this section with the statement: "I rejoice, because I have complete confidence in you."

The special collection for the Jerusalem church is the topic of Chapters 8 and 9. In Chapters 10 to 13 Paul strongly defends his ministry and authority. These chapters do not seem to fit the context very well. Many persons argue that these chapters were actu-

ally part of one of Paul's earlier letters, written when he was still at odds with many in the Corinthian congregation.

## **GALATIANS**

Next we turn to Paul's Letter to the Galatians. In this book Paul is anxious to call the Galatians back to his understanding of the gospel. Paul defends himself and his gospel. Read Galatians 1:11-12.

In the first two chapters Paul argues for the divine origin of his gospel, a gospel that he did not receive from human sources. We find the heart of Paul's message in Galatians, as well as the heart of his gospel, in Galatians 2:16: "A person is justified not by the works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ."

The Galatians had decided that one had to keep the law—especially the law of circumcision—in order to be a Christian. Paul attempts to show that works of the law are not required for salvation, for if justification were through the law, then Christ died to no purpose.

In Chapters 3 and 4 Paul tries to prove the truthfulness of his understanding of the gospel. He does so by first appealing to the experience of the Galatians themselves. Notice his question in Galatians 3:2: "Did you receive the Spirit by doing the works of the law or by believing what you heard?" Then, as in Romans, Paul presents Abraham as the man of faith and shows that Abraham was justified before the law and on the basis of his faith. Through faith all are Abraham's offspring. In discussing this point Paul states that no differences exist within the body of Christ. As Galatians 3:28 tells us: "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus."

The final two chapters of the book discuss the freedom that the believer has in Christ. Paul describes it as a freedom to live out of love, being led by the Spirit.

However, Christian freedom does not mean license to do what one wants, but freedom to walk in the Spirit—bearing the fruits of the Spirit.

In his letter to the Galatians Paul speaks of the example of Abraham. Read Galatians 3:6-14, and answer these questions.

- a. Why was Abraham considered righteous by God?
- b. Who are the descendants of Abraham?
- c. From what has Christ redeemed us?
- d. What blessing may Gentiles receive through faith?

## **EPHESIANS**

Let us now turn to the Book of Ephesians. The central theme of this work is that of unity. In Chapter 1 Paul stresses the fact that God's plan is to unite all things in Christ. Verses 9 and 10 of this chapter tell us more. Read Ephesians 1:9-10.

Chapter 2 focuses on the fact that Christ breaks down the wall separating Jew and Gentile. The writer makes this specially clear in verse 14: "For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us."

In Chapter 3 Paul presents himself as an instrument in making the mystery of the revelation and plan of God understandable to his audience. In Chapters 4 through 6 he urges them to live lives worthy of their high calling.



The theme of Ephesians is unity. The basis of that unity is our common salvation. God's purpose and a promise are contained in Ephesians 1:11-14. Read these verses to find the answers to these questions.

a. What is God's purpose for those who hope in Christ? (verse 11-12)

b. What is God's promise in verses 13-14?

### **PHILIPPIANS**

When we turn to the Letter to the Philippians, we encounter one of the letters Paul wrote while in prison. However, we never learn where he is imprisoned—whether in Rome, Caesarea, or some other place. In Philippians 1:12-26 Paul talks about his imprisonment.

In Philippians 2:4-11 Paul describes the humiliation and exaltation of Jesus. We often call this passage the Philippians hymn.

Despite imprisonment Paul says more about joy and rejoicing in this letter than in any other. Throughout the letter he rejoices in the relationships he has had with the church in Philippi and in the assistance they have given him. For Paul joy and contentment go together. In Philippians 4:11-13 he speaks of the nature of his contentment. Read these verses.

### **COLOSSIANS**

Our final book in this lesson is Colossians. In its four short chapters this work stresses the supremacy and sufficiency of Christ. Although this letter, like most of the New Testament letters, mentions many ordinary and practical matters, it also contains one of the noblest views of Christ in the New Testament. It provides much of the thought that finds later expression in the Christian doctrine of the Trinity. Read Colossians 1:15-20.

1. Paul's own profound philosophy of life is expressed in Philippians 1:21. Write it in your own words below.



2. Paul prayed for the Christians in Colossae (Colossians 1:9-14). Read this prayer, and answer these questions. Your answers will help you think about the prayer.

a. Why did Paul pray that the Colossians would be filled with the knowledge of God's will? (verses 9-10)

b. Why did Paul pray that they would be strengthened with all power? (verse 11)

c. Why did Paul assume that the Colossians would give thanks to God? (verse 13)

### SUMMARY

Five portions of these letters' literature are important to remember.

- (1) Paul's discourse in First Corinthians on spiritual gifts (1 Corinthians 12-14)
- (2) Paul's words on love, also in First Corinthians (1 Corinthians 13)
- (3) Paul's discussion in Galatians of the true purpose of the law (Galatians 3)
- (4) Paul's words in Philippians about his imprisonment (Philippians 1)
- (5) Paul's portrayal in Philippians of the humiliation and exaltation of Jesus (Philippians 2)

### QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Paul dealt with the problem of court cases between Christians in 1 Corinthians 6. Read 6:1-8 and discuss how a strong application of Paul's teaching might help the

cause of Christ in our age. How does disunity within the Christian community make it difficult to apply Paul's teaching today? How should controversies and damages be resolved among Christians?

2. In response to the problem of dissension among church members in Corinth, Paul stresses the unity of the church in spite of its diversity. Begin discussion of this question by defining *theological diversity*. This principle allows for differing views to be expressed with equal validity, as long as they are within the limitations of our Christian heritage. What parallels do you see between Paul's response and the idea of theological diversity?

3. Ephesians 5:21-33 uses marriage as an analogy of the relationship between Christ and the church. This question can open up controversial ideas about male superiority, the rights of women, and the marriage-divorce problem. But the passage has much to say about the marriage relationship itself. Read these verses and discuss how appropriate the ideas are to our modern situation.

4. The Letter to the Colossians contains one of the noblest views of Christ in the Bible. Read Colossians 1:15-23. What attributes does Paul give to Christ in these verses? What would you add to Paul's description? What would you take away?

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### DAILY READINGS FOR FIRST AND SECOND THESSALONIANS, FIRST AND SECOND TIMOTHY, TITUS, AND PHILEMON

- Day 1: 1 Thessalonians 1:1-10  
Day 2: 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11  
Day 3: 2 Thessalonians 2:1-17  
Day 4: 1 Timothy 3:1-16  
Day 5: 2 Timothy 4:1-22  
Day 6: Titus 3:1-15  
Day 7: Philemon 1-25