

Faith

Hope

Love

*and the greatest
of these is love.*

Billboard

Top Hits

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INTRODUCTION

During the days of cassettes, did you ever tape your favorite songs? Or did you ever buy an album of your artist's greatest hits? This study is the best of Paul's greatest hits. In this series you will explore the most popular passages from his epistles.

In many cases people who never darkened the doors of a church know lines like, "faith, hope, and love abide, these three, and the greatest of these is love" (1 Corinthians 13:13), but they do not know where it comes from. Learn the backstory and the context of Paul's famous soundbites in this series.

For many, you either love Paul or hate Paul. It depends on which passage you are reading. The best way to understand him is to see him first and foremost as a pastor who is wrestling with real-life issues in all-too-human congregations and offering practical direction. His letters are not theological treatises with systematic arguments, and so what he writes must be read in light of the context.

It is well established among biblical scholars that there are two different kinds of letters. There are letters which were written by Paul himself ("authentic" or "undisputed" Pauline letters). And there are letters which were written later by his students or admirers which were penned with his name in honor of him ("deuteron," "pseudo," or "disputed" Pauline letters). A close reading of the letters reveals differences in style, word usage,

ideas, themes, and problems between the latter and former types of letters. This study focuses on the “authentic” letters: Romans, 1 Corinthians, 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philipians, 1 Thessalonians, and Philemon.

Regardless of authorship, all Scripture is a gift from God that when read with faith can be a conduit for spiritual growth. To help you discover the Holy Spirit through these selections, each week offers a different approach to reading Paul’s greatest hits. In addition to reading the featured passage, you will read the surrounding passage and related passages to help you better understand it.

The weekly reflection questions are designed to help you explore the contemporary relevance of these passages. There are seven questions for each session. They can be examined collectively at the end of each week, or you can read one question each day.

Also, consider reading these passages and discussing the questions with others. This study is ideal for small group use. You can also use it for family and couples’ devotions. Each week’s reflection questions are suitable for both personal meditation and conversation. At the end of the study there is a guide for how to facilitate a small group.

My prayer is that you will be enriched by this deep dive into some of the most beloved and famous passages in the New Testament.

Pastor Darren



SESSION 1: LIVE CONFIDENTLY

Romans 8:1-2, 14-17

Daily Readings

Each day, read the verses. Then memorize or write down the key verse and read it periodically throughout the day.

Sunday: Overview; v. 1-8, key verse: 1

Monday: v. 9-11, key verse: 11

Tuesday: v. 12-17, key verse: 15

Wednesday: v. 18-25, key verse: 19

Thursday: v. 26-27, key verse: 26

Friday: v. 28-30, key verse: 28

Saturday: v. 31-39, key verse: 38-39

Overview

Romans 8 has given hope to people in their hardest hours. For this reason, it is one of the key readings used in United Methodist funerals (also called “A Service of Death and Resurrection”) and verse 11 — “If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will give life

to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you.” — is traditionally read during the committal at the graveside.

Paul’s words are reassuring for all who struggle in their faith. From time to time all of us lose that special feeling of God’s presence and cannot find the words to pray. We become overwhelmed with challenges that make us doubt and question God. Romans 8 provides a counter-narrative of assurance that nothing can separate us from the love of God we have in Christ Jesus.

He describes the challenges as a choice between living “according to the flesh” versus “living according to the Spirit.” Sometimes the Greek word *sarx* (flesh) simply refers to physical existence, but the phrase *kata sarx* (according to the flesh) is a short-hand description of making ourselves and the things of this world the center of our attention instead of orienting our lives toward God. It is not a choice of body versus soul but a struggle between following our sinful desires and our desire for God.

God is a compassionate parent which we can call *Abba*. This is the Aramaic word for “father” that connotes an intimate relationship which could be translated “daddy.” It appears only two other times in the Bible (by Paul in Galatians 4:6, which is similar to Romans 8, and Mark 14:36 when Jesus prays in the Garden of Gethsemane). God our *Abba* is not a stern and distant deity but a God who deeply cares for us.

God is faithful to us and will fulfill our lives if we keep living according to the will and ways of the Holy Spirit. This is the point of Paul's description of God's work in verses 28-30. These verses have troubled many theologians because they outline a five-fold process of God's grace coming to completion in us: foreknew, predestined, called, justified, glorified. These words are confusing but can be translated in ways that may make them easier to understand: decree or determined beforehand (predestined), made-for (called), forgave (justified), fulfilled (glorified).

Paul does not say that each step is inevitable. Rather, we have free will to interpret and stop the progression. Instead, Paul is making the point that God made us in such a way that our desire and fulfillment is in God (predestined). God activates our faith by drawing us and inviting us back to God without coercing us (called). God takes us every step of the way of renewing our lives from beginning (justified) to the end (glorified). And so with confidence, we can trust that nothing "will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (v. 39).

This week, hear God's assurance so that you can live confidently.

Reflection Questions

Do you ever doubt yourself? How can Romans 8 help you?

When is it hard for you to find the words to pray?

What does it mean for you to “walk according to the spirit and not according to the flesh?” What makes it hard to “walk according to the spirit?”

When you look back over your life, can you see moments when God was at work directing and protecting you even though you were not aware of it at the time?

When you pray, how do you refer to God?

What threatens your connection with God? How does God overcome these threats?

How does Romans 8 give us hope for the future — both for our personal eternal life (v. 11) and for the restoration of creation (v. 19-21)? How are these two hopes connected?

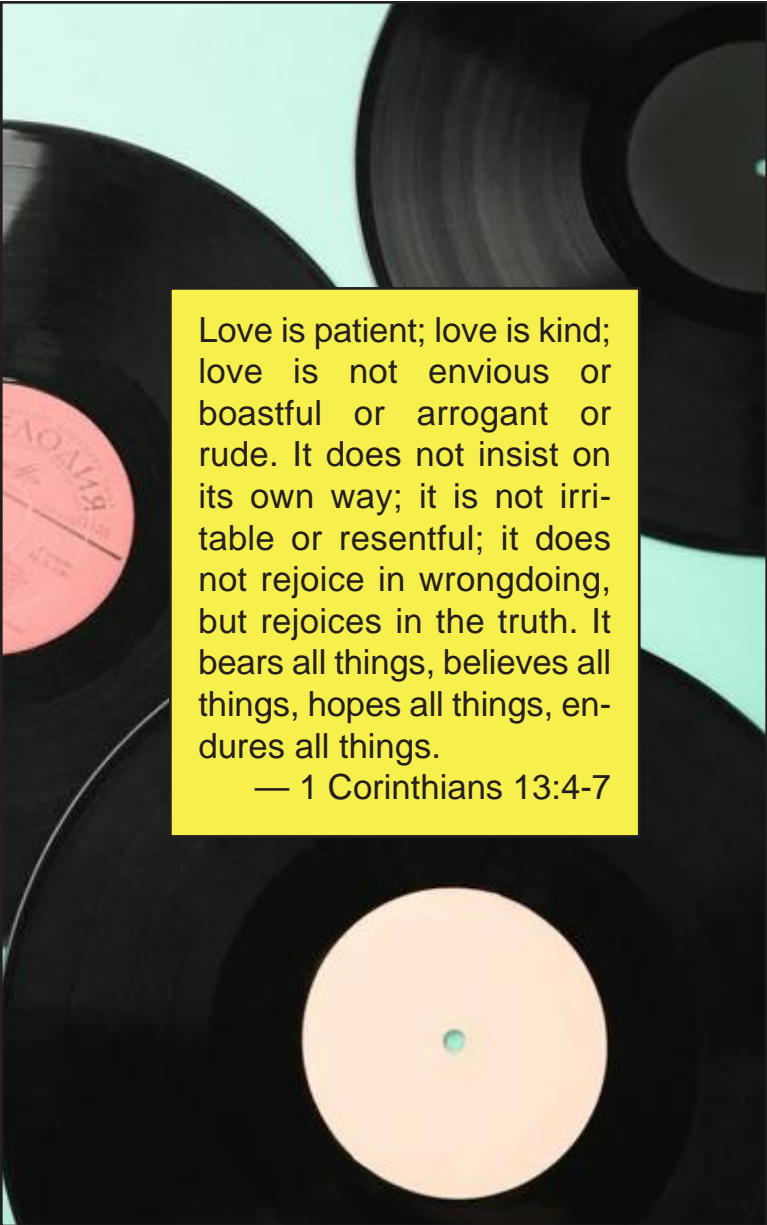
Song of the Week: “Blessed Assurance”

Blessed assurance, Jesus is mine!
O what a foretaste of glory divine!
Heir of salvation, purchase of God,
born of his Spirit, washed in his blood.

Refrain: This is my story, this is my song, praising my Savior all the day long; this is my story, this is my song, praising my Savior all the day long.

Perfect submission, perfect delight,
visions of rapture now burst on my sight;
angels descending bring from above
echoes of mercy, whispers of love. (Refrain)

Perfect submission, all is at rest;
I in my Savior am happy and blest,
watching and waiting, looking above,
filled with his goodness, lost in his love. (Refrain)



Love is patient; love is kind;
love is not envious or
boastful or arrogant or
rude. It does not insist on
its own way; it is not irri-
table or resentful; it does
not rejoice in wrongdoing,
but rejoices in the truth. It
bears all things, believes all
things, hopes all things, en-
dures all things.

— 1 Corinthians 13:4-7



SESSION 2: LOVE BOLDLY

1 Corinthians 13:1-13

Daily Readings

This week, try to memorize 1 Corinthians 13 by reading it a little bit each day. The week begins and ends with Paul's closing comments in the letter, and on both of those days read the entire chapter.

Sunday: Overview; 1 Corinthians 13:1-13

Monday: 1 Corinthians 13:1-3

Tuesday: 1 Corinthians 13:4-7

Wednesday: 1 Corinthians 13:8-10

Thursday: 1 Corinthians 13:11-12

Friday: 1 Corinthians 13:13

Saturday: 1 Corinthians 13:1-13

Overview

Often called “The Love Chapter,” 1 Corinthians 13 is one of the few biblical passages that is widely known in our society. It is the most popular reading at a wedding, and so we immediately associate it with romance and marriage.

And yet, marital relations were not on Paul's mind when he wrote it. It is about church relationships. In the chapters preceding and following it, he is addressing problems among church members. He centers all church relationships in love for God and one another in this chapter. The church is the result of God's love in Christ and the central feature of the church's fellowship and witness is love for one another.

These were challenging words in the context of these believers. Paul wrote the letter to address a myriad of problems that were dividing the church in Corinth. In all, there are nine problems he mentioned in this letter, from sex scandals and lawsuits between church members, to problems in worship and false teachings. This was a very troubled congregation, and love was the key to resolving their disputes.

Sound familiar? The church in every generation and in every situation has faced the challenge of how to love as Jesus loves. Within every congregation there are personality conflicts and differences of opinion that rub us the wrong way. And every congregation is struggling to follow the Lord of love in a world of hate, prejudice, and violence.

Throughout all of his letters, Paul is creating an alternative ethical foundation for their lives centered on the love of Christ. This "love ethic" is defined by what God has done for us in Jesus Christ and is doing through the Holy Spirit. It is a bold move because it demands that the believer put their trust in Christ to empower and

guide them in every situation without a simple set of instructions. It challenges believers to examine their hidden motives and desires.

This week we explore how God is love and how Jesus shows us how to love boldly.

Reflection Questions

What is your favorite love song? How does it compare with 1 Corinthians 13?

1 Corinthians 13 was originally written about church relationships. What does this chapter tell us about the nature and mission of the church?

How do we express our love for God?

What makes it tough to love someone?

Read 1 Corinthians 13:4-7 and rate yourself on how well or poorly you practice each aspect of love.

How does God's love make us whole (v. 10)?

What would it mean for you to be "fully known" by God (v. 12)?

Song of the Week: "Gift of Love"

Though I may speak with bravest fire,
and have the gift to all inspire,
and have not love, my words are vain,
as sounding brass, and hopeless gain.

Though I may give all I possess,
and striving so my love profess,
but not be given by love within,
the profit soon turns strangely thin.

Come, Spirit, come, our hearts control,
our spirits long to be made whole.
Let inward love guide every deed;
by this we worship, and are freed.



SESSION 3: PERSIST GRACIOUSLY *2 Corinthians 12:9-10*

Daily Readings

This week you will learn how to read in context. The meaning of most Bible verses are understandable once you learn about the surrounding passages and the book in which the key verses are found. Think of this way of reading as concentric circles that begin with the key verses at the center and then reading out to the wider circles that surround it and give it meaning. The week begins with the key verses. Then the next three days you will read the surrounding passages. The last three days end with readings from the entire book of 2 Corinthians.

Sunday: Overview; 2 Corinthians 12:9-10

Monday: 2 Corinthians 11:16-33

Tuesday: 2 Corinthians 12:1-8

Wednesday: 2 Corinthians 12:11-19

Thursday: 2 Corinthians 1:1-11

Friday: 2 Corinthians 4:1-12

Saturday: 2 Corinthians 8:1-15

Overview

The believers in Corinth hit a nerve with Paul. They were questioning his authority over them and his credentials as an apostle. He wasn't the best public speaker and he did not look the part of a successful leader. In this week's selection from 2 Corinthians 12 Paul is defending his authenticity by appealing to the grace of God as the source of his credibility as their leader.

This chapter comes after a long exchange of letters between the apostle and the congregation. In all, scholars believe that five letters went back and forth with a visit in between and another visit being planned. Here is the chronology:

- The first letter, now lost, was sent from Corinth to Paul seeking clarification on issues about holy living.
- The second letter was I Corinthians, Paul's reply to their questions.
- Then, Paul visited Corinth and it was a negative meeting (alluded to in 2 Corinthians 2:1).
- Next came a third, "painful letter" from Paul, now lost (alluded to in 2 Corinthians 2:3-4).
- Titus delivered the letter and reported back to Paul that the "painful letter" was effective (2 Corinthians 7:6-16).
- 2 Corinthians 1-9 was a fourth letter from Paul following up with them to reinforce the positive results that Titus reported.
- Then, something happened that caused a rift between Paul and the Corinthians.
- Finally, a fifth letter, which is 2 Corinthians 10-13, from

Paul to the Corinthians.

You can hear the change of tone in 2 Corinthians from the first nine chapters (letter four) to the last chapters (letter five).

What happened? Maybe Paul failed to visit them and that sparked doubts about his credibility. Also, there were rival leaders who were more eloquent, had better pedigrees, and claimed to have special revelations. He chided the members for being swayed by these “super-apostles” (2 Corinthians 11:5). With a touch of sarcasm, Paul claimed his apostolic credibility does not come from supernatural visions but from the suffering he endured as part of his pastoral commitment to them.

When Paul talked about his “thorn in the flesh,” they all knew what he was talking about. It was something that made him look like a loser in comparison with these “super-apostles.” We do not know what it was, but over the years scholars has speculated about it. Was it a physical impairment, such as a speech impediment? Was it a mental disorder? Was it a spiritual vulnerability? We will never know.

But what we do know is that Paul is very relatable. We all have shortcomings that make us doubt whether we measure up, and impairments we wish we did not have. Paul tells us to find hope and strength in God’s grace that is stronger than any thorn in the flesh.

This week we examine how grace enables us to thrive

in the midst of pain and disappointment.

Reflection Questions

Have you ever been in a situation where you questioned your abilities? Have you ever had others doubt your authority, credibility, or abilities?

Has there been a time when you experienced God's strength when you were weak and discouraged?

What is your "thorn in the flesh" — a shortcoming or impediment that you wish you did not have but cannot get rid of?

What challenges do you need to surrender to God like Paul did?

What gives you peace of mind in a hard situation?

If grace is sufficient, as Paul says, how should this change our outlook on our circumstances?

Paul was a church leader whose credentials and ability were questioned because of his "thorn in the flesh." What should our criteria for selecting church leaders be? How should we deal with their flaws and shortcomings?

Song of the Week: "I Surrender All"

All to Jesus I surrender; all to him I freely give;
I will ever love and trust him, in his presence daily live.

Refrain: I surrender all, I surrender all,
all to thee, my blessed Savior, I surrender all.

All to Jesus I surrender; humbly at his feet I bow,
worldly pleasures all forsaken;
take me, Jesus, take me now. [Refrain]

All to Jesus I surrender; make me, Savior, wholly thine;
let me feel the Holy Spirit, truly know that thou art mine.
[Refrain]

All to Jesus I surrender; Lord, I give myself to thee;
fill me with thy love and power;
let thy blessing fall on me. [Refrain]

All to Jesus I surrender; now I feel the sacred flame.
O the joy of full salvation! Glory, glory to his name!
[Refrain]



By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things. And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit. Let us not become conceited, competing against one another, envying one another.

— Galatians 5:22-26



SESSION 4: **SERVE FREELY** *Galatians 5:1-6, 22-26*

Daily Readings

This week's approach to reading will focus on the question of circumcision, which was ubiquitous in the early church. We will begin with an overview of how the church resolved whether it should be a requirement. The issue involved several underlining issues about faith, the law, and the role of Christ. We will explore these issues by comparing what Paul wrote about them in his letters to the Romans and the Galatians.

Sunday: Overview; Galatians 5:1-6, 22-26

Monday: Acts 15:12-29 (Circumcision)

Tuesday: Galatians 3:15-18; 4:21-31 and Romans 4:1-18 (The example of Abraham)

Wednesday: Galatians 3:1-14, 19-29 and Romans 2:12-3:4 (The role of the law of God)

Thursday: Galatians 2:15-21 and Romans 5:1-11 (Faith and Christ)

Friday: Galatians 5:13-26

Saturday: Galatians 6:1-10

Overview

Sometimes an issue represents deeper disagreements. Such was the case over the issue of circumcision in Paul's letter to the Galatians. He was adamant that circumcision should not be a requirement to become a follower of Jesus, and he argued vigorously against Christian leaders who said it should be (Galatians 5:2-12).

Underneath this debate over the ritual of circumcision were two bigger issues.

One, there was the question of inclusion. Who gets counted among the people of God? Starting with Abraham, the people of God were those included in the covenant. The hallmark of participation in the covenant was our faithfulness to the law of God, which was symbolized by circumcision. Paul flipped the script and said that the covenant of Abraham begins with faith in Christ's faithfulness to save us, which does not require someone to be circumcised.¹ Thus, the people of God include Gentiles as well as Jews, and baptism is the ritual symbolizing this inclusion (Galatians 3:27-29).

Two, there was the question of freedom. So, if we are saved by faith in Christ and not by our observance of the law, then what is the basis for being ethical? Paul makes the case that Christ freed us from something and freed us for something. Christ on the cross freed

¹Paul reinterpreted the story of Abraham, based on his midrash of Genesis 15:6, in Galatians 3:10-18 and Romans 4:1-5, 13-18.

us from the power of sin, which produces a whole host of vices (Galatians 5:1, 13-21). But also, Christ frees us for joyful obedience to a life of love as the expression of our faith in Christ which produces a slew of virtues (Galatians 5:1, 22-25).

Paul's point is not that the law of God is wrong. There is nothing wrong with the law in and of itself. Indeed, it functions like guardrails for our behavior. Rather, what goes wrong is when we try to find our validation and identity in our faithful obedience to the law. Ironically, we are trying to replace God as the source of our validation with our faithfulness to God's law as the source of our validation. Instead, Paul urges us to find our validation and identity in God's faithfulness to us which is embodied in Jesus Christ. In turn, this faith in Christ's faithfulness frees us to serve others with love as our sole motivation.

This week explore the freedom Christ gives us to love and serve others.

Reflection Questions

What do you need to be freed from (Galatians 5:1)?

Based on Galatians 5:6, what are we freed for?

Why do people persist in harmful and self-destructive behavior in Galatians 5:19-21?

According to Galatians 5:22-26, what does it look like to be "guided by the Spirit?"

Which fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5:22-23 is your growing edge? Which one has yet to sprout in you?

Based on Paul's instructions in Galatians 6:1-5, what kind of community is the church supposed to be?

When have you experienced church members bearing one another's burdens?

Song of the Week: "Jesu, Jesu"

[Refrain:] Jesu, Jesu, fill us with your love,
show us how to serve the neighbors we have from you.

Kneels at the feet of his friends,
silently washes their feet,
Master who acts as a slave to them. [Refrain]

Neighbors are rich and poor,
neighbors are black and white,
neighbors are near and far away. [Refrain]

These are the ones we should serve,
these are the ones we should love;
all these are neighbors to us and you. (Refrain)

Loving puts us on our knees,
serving as though we are slaves,
this is the way we should live with you. [Refrain]

Kneel at the feet of our friends,
silently washing their feet,
this is the way we should live with you. [Refrain]



SESSION 5: **REJOICE EXTRAVAGANTLY** *Philippians 4:4-13*

Daily Readings

This week you will be reading the backstory to our key passage. You will find the backstory in the book of Acts.

Sunday: Overview; Philippians 4:4-13

Monday: Acts 16:1-10

Tuesday: Acts 16:11-15

Wednesday: Acts 16:16-40

Thursday: Philippians 1:1-13

Friday: Philippians 2:1-13

Saturday: Philippians 3:7-16

Overview

Paul counseled the Philippians to “rejoice in the Lord always” (Philippians 4:4).

They knew how hard this must have been for him. He was in prison in the city for his ministry (Philippians 1:13). He and Silas had met a slave girl in the marketplace of Philippi who was being exploited by her

masters to make money by fortunetelling. She was possessed by an evil spirit that gave her the lucrative power of divination, and the apostles performed an exorcism. The loss of revenue provoked her masters to have them beaten and arrested (Acts 16:16-40).

Paul's ministry in Philippi centered on women. The church began with his chance encounter with Lydia and a group of women outside the city gate by the river. Lydia was a trader in purple cloth who was a devout Gentile who worshipped the Jewish God. She was the first European convert to the way of Jesus. The congregation they founded was the first church in Europe (Acts 16:11-15).

Philippi was strategically located for the expansion of the Gospel. Geographically, it was located on a major trade route. Socially, it was a Roman colony that was accorded special status in the empire.

Ultimately nothing could stop the spread of the Gospel. While Paul and Silas were in prison, they prayed and sang. As they rejoiced in the middle of the night an earthquake shook their cell door open and scared the jailer into believing in the power of God (Acts 16:25-40). So when Paul recommended that we rejoice in all circumstances, he knew the power of worshipping the Lord!

This week we learn the liberation of rejoicing.

Reflection Questions

What circumstances disturb you? What kinds of challenges do not phase you?

What challenge right now is intimidating to you? How might v. 13 help you face it?

When do you feel “the Lord is near?” When do you feel “the Lord is distant?”

When you are anxious, what do you do? At what point, if any, do you pray? And if you pray, what is that like?

How can you guard your thoughts and feelings so you can focus on the hope of Christ?

What makes it hard for you to praise God?

What do you do to praise and celebrate God?

What is one daily habit you need to do to cultivate joy?

Song of the Week: “Joyful, Joyful, We Adore Thee”

Joyful, joyful, we adore thee, God of glory, Lord of love;
hearts unfold like flowers before thee,
opening to the sun above.

Melt the clouds of sin and sadness;
drive the dark of doubt away.

Giver of immortal gladness, fill us with the light of day!

All thy works with joy surround thee,
earth and heaven reflect thy rays,

stars and angels sing around thee,
center of unbroken praise.
Field and forest, vale and mountain,
flowery meadow, flashing sea,
chanting bird and flowing fountain,
call us to rejoice in thee.

Thou art giving and forgiving, ever blessing, ever blest,
wellspring of the joy of living, ocean depth of happy rest!
Thou our Father, Christ our brother,
all who live in love are thine;
teach us how to love each other, lift us to the joy divine.

Mortals, join the mighty chorus
which the morning stars began;
love divine is reigning o'er us, binding all within its span.
Ever singing, march we onward,
victors in the midst of strife;
joyful music leads us sunward,
in the triumph song of life.



SESSION 6: **HOPE TENACIOUSLY** *1 Thessalonians 4:13-18*

Daily Readings

This week's readings are New Testament visions of hope that complement the imagery of the coming of Christ in 1 Thessalonians. Let them provoke your imagination to meditate on how you would describe God's hope for the future. Try writing, drawing, singing, or painting your description of God's hope for the world.

Sunday: Overview; 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

Monday: 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11

Tuesday: 1 Thessalonians 5:12-24

Wednesday: 1 Corinthians 15:12-20

Thursday: Revelation 19:1-8

Friday: Revelation 21:1-8

Saturday: Revelation 22:1-7

Overview

Next to the Book of Revelation, Paul's description of the Second Coming has sparked more fear and speculation than any other passage in the Bible. End-time predic-

tions and doomsday prognostications have produced bestselling books and videos in American Christianity. But are these interpretations of Paul correct?

Let's begin by understanding the original context of 1 Thessalonians. The church began as a mixture of Jewish and Gentile believers that Paul and Silas left behind after a mob attacked them (Acts 17:1-10). Thessalonica was noted for hosting a wide variety of religious sects, and the first followers of Jesus faced opposition and discrimination. Paul wrote the letter to encourage them to keep the faith.

One question troubled them. Like all first-generation Christians, they believed that Jesus would return within their lifetime. Obviously that did not happen, and as time went on several of their members died. Since they believed Jesus was going to return, did their deceased loved ones miss out on this great hope? Paul wrote to tell them to have hope for them and for themselves (1 Thessalonians 4:13). Paul affirmed that Christ would return, but that when he does he will raise their loved ones from the dead so that all of them will be included in this everlasting hope.

Paul's letter reflects an "apocalyptic" perspective. Apocalypse comes from the Greek word "reveal" or "disclose," and it was a genre used by a wide variety of religious writers, including some Christians. Not all perspectives of the future in the New Testament are written in this style (including other letters by Paul). But 1 Thessalonians reflects the features of apocalyptic thinking:

a sharp distinction between those who are good and those who are evil; two distinct eras, an old one that will pass away and a new one that is coming. In this letter, Paul describes this hope of a new era starting to impact the present but will be fulfilled with Jesus' return.

His description of this hope is rich with three metaphors that would have been easy for his original readers to understand. One, the cry of command was a technical military term, which imagines Christ being like a military leader. Two, the trumpet sound could either be to announce peacetime or to announce temple ceremonies. Three, the phrase to "meet the Lord in the air" is imagery of a delegation going out of the city to greet an approaching dignitary and to escort him into the city. Even if one would take this literally, it is not a "rapture" of Christians flying off to heaven.

How should we (or can we) apply this passage to our lives today? Because Paul is using imagery and metaphors, the best interpretation is the non-literal one. We can draw historical and literary analogies between Scripture and our contemporary context to discover timeless truths. Using Scripture to make predictions is a dead-end strategy that only leads to more anxiety and fear, whereas the purpose of the passage is to "encourage one another with these words."

This week we explore the message of Christ's hope for each of us and for the whole world.

Reflection Questions

What is your biggest fear about the future?

What gives you hope?

When have you seen the Bible used to scare people about the end-times?

How does one's view of the future influence their attitude and behavior?

How does the resurrection of Jesus impact our lives according to 1 Thessalonians 4 and 1 Corinthians 15?

What are the social dimensions of the vision of hope in the readings from the Book of Revelation?

What work of art expresses God's vision of hope?

Song of the Week: "Marching To Zion"

Come, we that love the Lord, and let our joys be known;
join in a song with sweet accord,
join in a song with sweet accord
and thus surround the throne,
and thus surround the throne.

Refrain: We're marching to Zion,
beautiful, beautiful Zion;
we're marching upward to Zion,
the beautiful city of God.

Let those refuse to sing who never knew our God;

but children of the heavenly King,
but children of the heavenly King
may speak their joys abroad,
may speak their joys abroad. (Refrain)

The hill of Zion yields a thousand sacred sweets
before we reach the heavenly fields,
before we reach the heavenly fields,
or walk the golden streets,
or walk the golden streets. (Refrain)

Then let our songs abound, and every tear be dry;
we're marching through Emmanuel's ground,
we're marching through Emmanuel's ground,
to fairer worlds on high, to fairer worlds on high.
(Refrain)

When I remember you in my prayers, I always thank my God because I hear of your love for all the saints and your faith toward the Lord Jesus. I pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective when you perceive all the good that we may do for Christ. I have indeed received much joy and encouragement from your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you, my brother.

— Philemon, 4-7





SESSION 7: EMBRACE DARINGLY

Philemon 1-16

Daily Readings

This week we will survey what the New Testament says about slavery so that we can put into context Paul's letter to Philemon. You will see different opinions among the different letters, which may be the result from the different types of letters (see Introduction). Note that there are no chapters in Philemon, only verses.

Sunday: Overview; Philemon 1-16

Monday: Galatians 3:26-29

Tuesday: 1 Corinthians 7:17-24

Wednesday: Ephesians 6:5-9

Thursday: Colossians 3:22-4:1

Friday: 1 Timothy 6:1-2

Saturday: Titus 2:9-10

Overview

How much influence should our religious beliefs have on our social and economic relationships?

Precise details of what prompted the letter are unclear, but Onesimus was a slave in Philemon's household who ran away. One cannot assume that Onesimus did anything wrong (e.g. theft; the possibility is implied v. 18) or that Philemon was a kind master (this could have been a case of cruelty). Onesimus (whose name means "useful") ended up with Paul, who was incarcerated, and under the apostle's mentorship he became a Christian.

Now Paul was writing to his master to take him back without punishing him and to have him as part of his household "no longer as a slave but more than a slave, a beloved brother" (Philemon 16). This was a friendly appeal from a friend of the master on behalf of a slave who fled for help and mediation. Such letters were not uncommon.

What was uncommon was the appeal to treat him as a brother. In what sense was he to treat him as a brother in a society where slavery was common?

Slavery in the Greco-Roman world often came from military campaigns, and skin pigmentation played no role in who was enslaved. Slavery was marked by a dynamic of tribute-protection: the conquered gave tribute and loyalty in exchange for protection and preservation. Slavery was widespread. In some locations slaves were 50 percent of the population, and a conservative estimate is that 30 percent of the empire were enslaved.

Once the enslaved were sold or exchanged, owners

had exclusive rights. They were required to protect their slaves, but they could legally inflict punishment. While Romans could be bonded or in debt slaves, the majority of slaves were foreigners. Slaves served at all levels of the economy, but mostly in manual tasks. They could marry, but their children could be sold.

Running away was a serious crime, and those who attempted to flee faced severe punishment or death. Harboring a fugitive could result in being charged with theft. Runaways could seek asylum or mediation from an owner's friend who could provide temporary refuge, but the friend could also be liable for financial loss to the owner.

There was no emancipation movements in society, but slaves could be granted manumission,² which was a more limited form of freedom. One was still required to show honor and loyalty to their former owner. The system was gamed against the slave by extracting additional fees over time and work requirements without the protection accorded to a slave. Payment for manumission ranged from four to eight years of wages; in some cases, the state mandated additional requirements for manumission. However, manumission was prized for its status. Manumitted slaves had a voice in society, and their grandchildren could be considered full citizens.

Slavery existed in Israel, but not to the extent as other cultures, nor was the economy dependent on slavery. Un-

² The act of a slave owner setting slaves free.

like other cultures, Israel had legal rights and restrictions on slavery, including periodic general emancipations. In this context, Paul's letter is extraordinary. In the church, members saw themselves as members of the household of God (with God the father of the household), pushing the boundaries of social roles. How far would Philemon go in practical ways to treat Onesimus as a "brother in Christ?"

The letter to Philemon is like a case study for the church today. It raises the perennial question about the relationship of the church to society. It challenges us to wrestle with how our spiritual values should change our social relationships.

This week we examine how we are called to put into practice the ideals of the Gospel.

Reflection Questions

How does Paul describe his relationship with Philemon in verses 4-7?

What does Paul ask Philemon to do? Why does he ask him to do it?

What do you think Paul meant when he asked Philemon to welcome Onesimus back as "a beloved brother?" Is Paul talking about a change in the emotional dynamics of their relationship, or also a change in their business practices and legal relationship?

What does it mean for us to treat one another as "beloved?"

What are the similarities and differences among the New Testament letters and their views on slavery? Why do you think there are differences?

In what ways is the church supposed to be different from society? When is it OK for the church to adopt standards from secular sources and authorities?

The church today makes many aspirational statements about human relations. To what extent does the church live up to those statements?

Song of the Week: “We Shall Overcome”

We shall overcome, we shall overcome,
we shall overcome someday!
Oh, deep in my heart I do believe
we shall overcome someday!

We'll walk hand in hand. We'll walk hand in hand.
Oh, deep in my heart I do believe
we shall overcome someday!

We shall all be free. We shall all be free.
Oh, deep in my heart I do believe
we shall overcome someday!

We shall live in peace. We shall live in peace.
Oh, deep in my heart I do believe
we shall overcome someday!

The Lord will see us through.
The Lord will see us through.
Oh, deep in my heart I do believe
we shall overcome someday!



A GUIDE FOR SMALL GROUP LEADERS

Congratulations! You have been chosen to lead a small group of “St. Paul’s Greatest Hits.” As the facilitator, you do not need to know everything — or anything! You don’t need to have the answers or any special training or skills. All you need to do is use this step-by-step guide to help your group discuss the sessions’ topics. And if they get off topic, that is OK! The times listed below are guidelines if you want to keep the meeting to 60 minutes. Thank you for your willingness to serve!

Step One: Checking In (5-10 minutes)

Spend a few minutes allowing everyone to share what has been happening in their lives over the past week.

Step Two: Centering Prayer (5-10 minutes)

Ask everyone to center themselves in the presence of God by doing one of the following centering prayers:

1. Spend 2 minutes in silence. At the end of the time, simply say “Amen.”
2. Read the opening prayer from this Sunday’s bulletin, either in unison or ask someone to read it.
3. Invite everyone, as they are led, to offer an informal prayer. Say, “Let us pray,” and then allow for plenty of silence for anyone to share a prayer. Then, conclude the time with your own short prayer (or you

can use the opening prayer from Sunday's bulletin).

Step Three: Discussion (40 minutes)

Option A: Read one of the reflection questions to begin the discussion. If the discussion never returns to the other questions, that is OK. But if the discussion gets off track or comes to an end, read another question to direct the conversation.

Option B: Read (or have someone read) the overview and then read a lead question to get the discussion started.

Step Four: Closing (5-10 minutes)

A. If your group is using a different facilitator each week, assign next week's facilitator.

B. Read this blessing:

May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ
and the love of God
and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit
be with you and remain with you always. Amen.

C. Pass the peace of Christ to one another.

Notes

Notes

Sunday Lineup

8:30 a.m.: Early Service

9:45 a.m.: Sunday School

11 a.m.: Late Service

Join us!

3808 N. Meridian St.
Indianapolis



