

The Heart of Paul's Theology

LESSON
ONE

PAUL AND HIS THEOLOGY



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The Heart of Paul's Theology

Lesson One

Paul and his Theology

INTRODUCTION

Have you ever had a friend you thought you knew really well, only to have something happen to show a side of him you'd never seen before? Something like this often happens when Christians begin a serious study of the apostle Paul. Now, most Christians are familiar with Paul and his epistles. We hear lots of sermons based on his letters, and we often focus on them in Bible studies. In many ways he feels like a familiar friend. But many Christians who dig deeper into Paul's life and theology are surprised by what they find.

In this series of lessons, we're going to explore *The Heart of Paul's Theology*. We've called this first lesson, "Paul and his Theology." We'll begin this study by looking at Paul's life and writings to find the essential elements in his theology.

We'll touch on three main subjects. First, we'll explore some important aspects of Paul's background to see how these deeply influenced his Christian beliefs. Second, we'll look at how Paul's beliefs related to his ministry as an apostle. And third, we'll identify Paul's central theological outlooks, those crucial ideas on which Paul based many of the things he taught to others. Let's begin with a look into Paul's cultural background.

CULTURAL BACKGROUND

We all know from common experience that many things influence what we believe about God, about ourselves, and about the world around us. No one has ever developed theology in a vacuum, and this was true of Paul as well. Although the Holy Spirit led Paul into the truth of the Christian faith, the Spirit also used many aspects of Paul's background in the process of leading him to truth. And this means that if we want to understand the heart of Paul's theology, we have to become familiar with his life. Unfortunately, we don't know a lot about Paul's personal upbringing. But we do know that he grew up under two strong cultural influences. On the one hand, Jewish culture greatly affected him. And on the other hand, his exposure to Gentile, Greco-Roman culture impacted him in significant ways too.

JEWISH CULTURE

If we underestimate the influence Paul's Jewish heritage had on him, we're very likely to miss the heart of his theology. We can see how important this heritage was to him in several ways. On the one hand, the New Testament record makes it plain that Paul was very self-conscious of his Jewish heritage before he became a Christian. His own

description of his youth before his conversion reveals that he was firmly committed to Judaism. For example, in Philippians 3:5 Paul claimed to have been

... circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee (Philippians 3:5).

Paul was a religious conservative, fully dedicated to preserving and pursuing Israel's traditions. Listen to how he described himself in Galatians 1:14:

I was advancing in Judaism beyond many Jews of my own age and was extremely zealous for the traditions of my fathers (Galatians 1:14).

In fact, before his conversion Paul's zeal for Judaism was so great that he violently persecuted the Christian church as a Jewish heresy. Beyond this, Paul was highly educated in the traditions of Judaism. According to Acts 22:3, he had even been a student of one of the most famous rabbis in Jerusalem, Rabbi Gamaliel. Far from being an ignorant fanatic, Paul was highly trained and sophisticated in his understanding of Jewish theology and Scripture.

Paul's Jewish culture was not simply important to him before he became a Christian; he also remained deeply indebted to this same heritage after his conversion. For instance, even as a Christian he continued to observe many Jewish customs. As he said in 1 Corinthians 9:20:

To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (1 Corinthians 9:20).

The New Testament records many times when Paul the Christian carefully followed the traditions of his fathers. Even after the Jews had severely persecuted Paul because of his faith in Christ, Paul's ethnic identity and loyalty were so strong that he still wanted desperately to save them. For example, in Romans 9:2-5 he wrote:

I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were cursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, those of my own race, the people of Israel. Theirs is the adoption as sons; theirs the divine glory, the covenants, the receiving of the law, the temple worship and the promises. Theirs are the patriarchs, and from them is traced the human ancestry of Christ, who is God over all, forever praised (Romans 9:2-5).

With the importance of Paul's Jewish background in mind, we are now in a position to ask this question: How did Paul's background influence his Christian theology? In many ways, this influence is evident on nearly every page of Paul's epistles, but two items are particularly important to remember.

First, both as a Jew and as a Jewish Christian, Paul believed in the authority of the

Old Testament Scriptures. He trusted and submitted to them without reservation. Paul would never have believed anything that contradicted the teachings of the Old Testament. Unfortunately, at different times in the history of the church, and even in our own day, some theologians have suggested that Paul rejected the teachings of the Old Testament and replaced them with his new faith in Christ. But nothing could be further from the truth. Paul was fully rooted in the monotheism of Old Testament Israel and believed wholeheartedly in the moral requirements of the Hebrew Scriptures. Whatever else we may say about Paul, we know for certain that he never believed for a moment that his Christian faith drove a wedge between himself and the Old Testament. Instead, his commitment to Christ deepened his devotion to these Scriptures. Listen to how Paul instructed his protégé Timothy regarding the Old Testament in 2 Timothy 3:14:

But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it, and how from infancy you have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus (2 Timothy 3:14-15).

The Hebrew Bible continued to be Paul's Bible.

In the second place, Paul also held firmly to the Jewish belief that God would one day send the Messiah, the great son of David, who would end Israel's suffering and extend the kingdom of God to all the Gentile nations. In fact, the reason Paul converted to Christianity was that he believed Jesus to be this long-awaited Messiah. That's why Paul did not hesitate to call Jesus the Christ, or *Christos*, which is the Greek translation of the Hebrew word *Meshiach* or Messiah. Paul did not see Christianity as a replacement of Judaism. Rather, he believed that Christianity was the branch of Judaism which recognized that Jesus was the true Messiah.

These pillars of Jewish faith — complete submission to the Scriptures, and hope in the Messiah — were essential dimensions of Paul's Christian outlooks. In these and many other ways, Paul's central Christian beliefs depended on his Jewish heritage.

But Paul wasn't influenced by his Jewish heritage only. The Holy Spirit also used Paul's contact with Gentile culture to shape his theology.

GENTILE CULTURE

In the first place, we should note that throughout his life, Paul lived not only in Jewish Palestine, but at different times in his life he lived in the Gentile world as well. According to Acts 21:39, Paul came from the Gentile city of Tarsus in Cilicia. In Acts 22:3 we read that he had been brought up in Jerusalem. But Acts 9:30 and 11:25 indicate that Paul again lived in Tarsus as an adult.

In addition to this, Paul's contact with the Gentile world was enhanced by the fact that he enjoyed full Roman citizenship. In fact, according to Acts 22:28 he hadn't purchased his citizenship but had been born into it. On several occasions in the book of Acts, we read that Paul actively asserted his rights as a Roman citizen in order to promote the gospel and to defend himself.

Beyond this, Paul's letters to Gentile churches even demonstrate his willingness to observe Gentile customs for the sake of the Christian gospel. In 1 Corinthians 9:21 he made a remarkable declaration,

To those not having the law I became like one not having the law ... so as to win those not having the law (1 Corinthians 9:21).

Paul knew Gentile culture so well that he was able to walk the fine line of adapting his behavior to Gentile customs while still obeying Christ's law.

Finally, Paul also showed himself to be knowledgeable of sophisticated pagan literature. In passages like Acts 17:28 and Titus 1:12 Paul actually referred to and even quoted pagan philosophers. He was well educated in the philosophies and religions of the Greco-Roman world.

Now, we have to ask ourselves, what effects did Paul's awareness of Gentile culture have on him? How did Paul's exposure to Gentile culture influence him? First of all, we should be clear that Paul's awareness of Gentile culture did not — as some have said — lead Paul to alter Christianity to make it acceptable to Gentiles. He remained distinctly Jewish in his basic orientation. Yet, Paul's contact with the Gentile world affected him in at least two ways. On the one hand, it equipped him to minister to Gentiles outside the church. Better than many, he knew the values and beliefs of Gentiles and was well prepared to bring the gospel to them in effective ways. This is why we read in Romans 11:13 that Paul called himself "the apostle to the Gentiles."

Beyond this, Paul was also prepared to minister to Gentiles within the church and even to fight for them. In fact, Paul's Gentile ministry embroiled him in one of the most serious controversies of the first-century church, namely, the question of whether or not to force Gentile believers to be circumcised. According to Acts 15, Paul played an important role in convincing the apostles and elders that Gentile converts did not need to be circumcised. And in his letter to the Galatians, he spoke strongly in defense of the Gentile's rights not to undergo circumcision. But this one controversy represented a much broader concern Paul had for Gentiles in the church. While many Jewish Christians in his day considered Gentiles to be second-class believers at best, Paul insisted that Christ had destroyed the dividing wall between Jews and Gentiles. As he wrote in Galatians 3:28-29:

There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise (Galatians 3:28-29).

A central theme in many of Paul's epistles was that Jesus had flung open the door of salvation to the Gentile nations so that any Gentile who was in Christ was counted as a full-blooded Jew and perfect Law-keeper in God's eyes.

So we see that Paul's background in Jewish and Gentile cultures influenced him in many ways. And with this dual background in mind, we're in a position to see how Paul's theology related to his ministry.

APOSTOLIC MINISTRY

As we will learn, Paul's service to the church provided a constant reference point for his theology and deeply influenced what he believed. And for this reason we should look into several dimensions of his ministry. We'll look specifically at three aspects of Paul's ministry: his apostolic office, his apostolic mission, and his apostolic writings.

OFFICE

On at least twenty occasions, Paul described himself as an "apostle," often with the qualification that he was "an apostle of Jesus Christ." This claim to apostleship was very important because Christ ordained apostles to speak with absolute authority to the church on his behalf. Now, we all know that Paul wasn't one of the original apostles whom Jesus had chosen during his earthly ministry. Still, Paul claimed to be Christ's authoritative representative. Paul insisted that he had received an apostleship equal to the original apostles. But how was this possible? The answer lies in the fact that Paul met a set of qualifications established for apostleship.

As the apostles awaited the outpouring of the Spirit on the day of Pentecost, Peter determined that a new apostle should replace Judas. So, Peter explained that authoritative apostles of Christ had to meet three criteria. First, according to Acts 1:21 they had to have been taught directly by Christ during his earthly ministry. Second, in Acts 1:22 we read that they had to be witnesses of Jesus' resurrection. And third, in Acts 1:23-26 we find that new apostles had to be chosen for the office by the Lord himself.

But what about Paul? At first glance he fails to meet the first criterion for apostleship — after all, he didn't follow Jesus during his earthly ministry. But a closer look reveals his qualification. In Galatians 1:11-18 Paul reported that immediately after his conversion he spent three years in the Arabian wilderness. He mentioned the length of this period to demonstrate that it roughly equaled the time which the other apostles had spent with Jesus. During those years, Jesus himself taught the gospel to Paul. Listen to Paul's words in Galatians 1:11-12:

The gospel I preached is not something that man made up. I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it; rather, I received it by revelation from Jesus Christ (Galatians 1:11-12).

Paul also met the second criterion. In Acts 9:1-6 we read that Paul actually saw the resurrected Christ on the road to Damascus. He had seen the risen Savior. Finally, according to Acts 9:15, Jesus himself ordained Paul to his office:

This man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel (Acts 9:15).

And lest there be any doubt about the validity of Paul's apostleship Galatians 2:7-8 tell us

that the original apostles confirmed his call and apostleship. As Paul wrote, the others

... saw that I had been entrusted with the task of preaching the gospel to the Gentiles, just as Peter had been to the Jews. For God, who was at work in the ministry of Peter as an apostle to the Jews, was also at work in my ministry as an apostle to the Gentiles (Galatians 2:7-8).

The other apostles recognized that Paul's apostleship was comparable to Peter's. Listen to Peter's words in 2 Peter 3:15-16:

Our dear brother Paul also wrote you with the wisdom that God gave him... His letters contain some things that are hard to understand, which ignorant and unstable people distort, as they do the other Scriptures, to their own destruction (2 Peter 3:15-16).

According to Peter, Paul's epistles were to be set on par with "the other Scriptures."

In the early church there were many false teachers who contradicted Paul's teachings. So, to counter these false teachers the New Testament made it clear that Paul was a legitimate apostle. More than this, Paul presented outlooks to the church which were difficult to grasp and even harder to accept. Yet, when he served in his role as Christ's ambassador, Paul spoke with the authority of other apostles and wrote with the authority of Scripture. No matter what anyone said, their perspectives had to be judged by the standard of Paul's teachings. His writings actually carry the authority of Christ himself. We cannot follow Christ without following Paul. Even today faithful Christians must conform their theology to his.

MISSION

Now that we have Paul's apostolic authority in mind, we should look at his apostolic mission. What did Paul do as an apostle? What was his job? We can get a good idea of the kind of work Paul did by looking at his three missionary journeys and at his trip to Rome. Let's begin with an overview of his first journey as an apostle of Christ.

First Journey

We learn about Paul's first missionary journey in Acts 13–14. It began when God told the church in Syrian Antioch to set aside Paul and Barnabas for a special work. Immediately after this the Holy Spirit led these men through the isle of Cyprus. After several opportunities for ministry there, they moved forward on an evangelistic tour of Asia Minor. Paul's initial practice was to proclaim the gospel primarily in the Jewish synagogues. But after meeting much resistance from the Jews, he began to preach to the Gentiles as well.

Paul successfully planted a number of churches on this journey, including quite a

few in the region of Galatia. After traveling to the east as far as Derbe, Paul and Barnabas reversed their direction. They returned through the cities of Galatia, eventually reaching the sea and sailing for home.

Paul's first journey as an apostle of Christ was relatively short and uncomplicated. But his second journey took him much further from the land of Palestine.

Second Journey

Paul's second missionary journey appears in Acts 15:36–18:22. This expedition began when the apostles and church leaders in Jerusalem selected Paul and Barnabas to deliver a letter to the churches in Antioch, Syria, Cilicia and Galatia, explaining that Gentile converts did not need to be circumcised or to keep the Law of Moses in order to gain salvation.

Now, just before the journey began Paul had a falling out with Barnabas, so they parted ways and Paul teamed up with Silas. These two traveled first through Syria and then through Cilicia until they reached Galatia. It was in Lystra of that region that Timothy joined Paul in his journey.

As Paul continued, he wanted to preach the gospel to the north in Asia and Bithynia, but the Holy Spirit prohibited him. So, Paul traveled to the coastal city of Troas. There the reason for the Holy Spirit's prohibition became clear through Paul's famous "Macedonian Vision." In this vision a man begged him to preach the gospel in Macedonia, the northern province of Greece. So, Paul and his party immediately responded to this dream by sailing for that province. Paul planted many churches in Greece, including those in Philippi and Thessalonica in the north.

Eventually he moved southward, visiting Athens and planting a church in Corinth. Paul then went to Ephesus, and after a period of time there, he made his way back to Palestine.

Third Journey

Paul's second missionary journey was soon followed by a third expedition on which he traveled far into the west again. Paul's third missionary journey appears in Acts 18:23–21:17. In these travels Paul went from Syrian Antioch through Galatia and Phrygia, and then established a thriving ministry in Ephesus. After this he spent several months traveling in Greece from north to south and back to the north again. He visited churches he had planted in his previous trip to the region. Then the apostle headed back toward Jerusalem by land and by sea.

When Paul returned to Jerusalem after his third journey the Jews falsely accused him of sedition, and the Romans arrested him. After spending two years in prison, Paul asserted his rights as a Roman citizen to have his case heard before Caesar. This appeal to Caesar led to a fourth journey, which took him to Rome.

Fourth Journey

The record of this trip appears in Acts 27–28. Paul traveled most of this journey by ship. Between Crete and the Isle of Malta, a terrible storm completely destroyed the vessel which held Paul and a number of other prisoners. The crew, the guards, Paul, and his companions were shipwrecked on the isle of Malta for three months before they were able to get passage to Rome. Paul remained under house arrest in Rome from A.D. 60 to 62. He was able to minister freely during this time.

Tradition tells us that Paul was acquitted by Nero and that he then traveled toward Spain preaching the gospel. Some evidence from the epistles to Timothy and Titus also suggests that he traveled eastward establishing and strengthening churches there as well. But probably around A.D. 65 or shortly thereafter, Nero had Paul arrested once again and finally he executed the apostle.

A quick glance at the region between Jerusalem and Rome reveals that Paul visited many different places making contact with thousands of people in more than twenty-five cities. What are we to learn from the fact that he endured such extensive travels? What do they tell us about the heart of Paul's theology?

Needless to say, there are many things we can learn about Paul's theology from his missionary journeys. But one of the most important things we learn is that Paul's theology did not allow him to be an armchair theologian. To be sure, Paul was well educated and was very intelligent. But his theology led him to a life of sacrifice and service. So, as we look into the heart of Paul's theology, we must not settle for a set of ideas or beliefs divorced from practical living. We must be looking for something radical and life-transforming. When we properly understand Paul's theology, it will inspire and guide us, as it guided him, into lives of radical service to Christ, the church, and the world.

We are now in a position to turn to a third aspect of his ministry: his apostolic writings, or New Testament epistles.

WRITINGS

Because Paul lived in the trenches of constant practical ministry, he was familiar with the particular issues that troubled the churches he visited. Now you can imagine that the problems in Galatia were different from the issues in Ephesus. And the problems in Ephesus were different from the challenges in Corinth. Every place he went was different. As a result, when Paul wrote his epistles he was concerned to address the specific needs of those situations.

In the New Testament we have thirteen letters which Paul wrote at different times in his ministry. Now, because Paul's letters were so occasional, that is, written to address specific problems, none of his letters lays out his whole theology in an orderly or systematic way. Instead, his epistles contain pastoral applications of his theology. It's evident in most cases that Paul wrote his letters to address specific issues in the church, and we will explore this reality in detail in future lessons.

But to illustrate how much this is true, let's think for a moment about the book of Romans. Many Christians have mistakenly treated the book of Romans as a systematic, abstract outline of Paul's theology. And so, they have concluded that the themes on the surface of the book form the heart of Paul's theological system. But a closer examination of Romans reveals that Paul wrote even this book to address particular problems. One of the main reasons Paul wrote to them was to stabilize relationships between Jewish and Gentile believers in Rome.

An overview of the structure of Romans makes this pastoral focus very plain. In the first three chapters, Paul focused on proving that both Jews and Gentiles are sinners and that neither has a right to claim superiority over the other. In chapters 4–8 he stressed how God has provided the same way of salvation both for Jews and Gentiles. Jews and Gentiles are on equal footing before God. In chapters 9–11 Paul focused on the complementary roles of Jews and Gentiles in God's plan for human history. Then, after stressing these doctrinal themes, in chapters 12–16 he tackled several issues of practical Christian living that were closely related to conflicts between Jews and Gentiles.

For example, in chapter 12 he insisted that despite their diversity Christians should function as a unified body. In chapter 13 he promoted stability by urging Christians to submit even to Gentile civil governments. And in chapters 14–16, before closing this epistle, Paul focused on the need for mutual understanding between Jews and Gentiles with respect to Jewish and Gentile customs.

This brief sketch of Paul's letter to Rome shows that Paul did not intend Romans to be an abstract statement of his beliefs. Instead, this book primarily answered the pastoral issue of the relationship between Jews and Gentiles in the Christian church. Romans was an application of Paul's theology to some very specific needs.

We are right to believe that Paul had a well-formed, logical set of theological beliefs, or what we might call a systematic theology. But Paul's system of theology remained unwritten, even though it undergirded his epistles. As far as we know, Paul's system of theology never reached a fully written form. Nevertheless, we can reconstruct it to a great extent, based on the letters he did write.

To reconstruct Paul's theological system, we should not look primarily at the topics he mentioned the most. This is because he spent most of his time writing about matters that were of particular interest to the church in his day. Instead, we have to ask: What principles supported the specific things Paul wrote? What coherent patterns of belief best explain his specific teachings? What doctrines connect the various things he wrote to different churches? By answering questions like these, we will be able to reconstruct Paul's theology. And we will understand more clearly how Paul's letters were intended to guide the first century church and how they should guide us today.

Now that we have some basic perspectives on Paul's background and ministry, we're ready to look directly at Paul's theological outlooks.

CENTRAL OUTLOOKS

At this point we need to ask some critical questions: What was the structure of Paul's theology? What kinds of beliefs undergirded what he taught in his epistles? The

answers to these questions are essential to a proper understanding of Paul.

Now, Paul has been influential in so many Christian traditions that it is impossible even to mention every way his theology has been understood. We'll limit ourselves to two basic directions interpreters have gone: the Reformation perspective on Paul's theology, and what we will call the eschatological perspective which has become influential in recent decades. Let's look first at the Reformation outlook on Paul.

REFORMATION

How did the Protestant Reformers understand the structure of Paul's theology? In the centuries prior to the Reformation, the Roman Catholic Church taught that salvation required both God's grace and human merit. According to this teaching, justification is a long process by which God infuses grace into the believer, and this grace allows the believer to become more righteous by doing good works. People are fully justified and saved when they have done enough good works to be counted truly righteous by the standard of God's law.

But as leading Reformers like Martin Luther, Ulrich Zwingli, and John Calvin read the letters of Paul, they concluded that the legalistic Catholic interpretation of Paul was wrong. They followed the teaching of Augustine that justification is imputed all at once and entirely apart from human works, not infused over a long period of time and mixed with human effort. Sanctification, the long process of the Christian life, follows justification and continues for the entire life of believers. But justification is God's once-for-all-time legal declaration that a believer has been acquitted of the guilt of sin and credited with the righteousness of Christ.

This belief came to be known as *sola fide* — by faith alone — because it understood us to be justified solely by means of faith in Christ and not by means of faith plus our good works. Without a doubt, the Reformers were right to find this doctrine in Paul's writings. In the early church some parties of Jewish believers known as Judaizers argued that salvation results from a mixing of divine grace and human works. But Paul opposed this legalism in the early church and insisted that justification was a unique event that occurred apart from works of the law. The parallels between the controversies of the Reformation and the controversies Paul faced are plain enough. The legalism of the Roman Catholic Church roughly corresponded to the legalism of the Judaizers, and *sola fide* of the Reformation paralleled the teaching of Paul.

As a result, by and large Protestants have held that Paul developed his theology primarily around the theme of how salvation is applied to individual believers. In traditional theological terms, Paul's theology was thought to be structured around the *ordo salutis*, or the order of salvation, which is the process by which salvation in Christ is applied to you and me. In the tradition of the Reformation, most Protestants believe that the *ordo salutis*, and especially justification by faith alone, is the most central concept in Paul's theology. They believe it's the heart of his theology.

Of course, throughout the centuries Protestants have realized that Paul believed many things other than justification by faith alone. He was very concerned with the long history of God's redemption that climaxed in the death and resurrection of Christ. In theological terms, we call this aspect of his teaching *historia salutis*, or the history of

salvation. But for the most part, until recent years the traditional understanding of Paul's theology was that the history of salvation was less important than the order of salvation. Even now most Protestants don't see the history of salvation as the center of Paul's theology.

ESCHATOLOGICAL

As dominant as the early Protestant view has been in the interpretation of Paul, it has not gone unchallenged. Another complementary point of view has come to the foreground in recent decades, which we will call the eschatological perspective on Paul's theology. This perspective has reassessed the idea that the order of salvation was more central to Paul's theology than the history of salvation.

Now, it's true that many other outlooks on Paul's theology have also been suggested in recent decades. Some prominent theologians have argued that Paul's theology focused primarily on merging his Jewish background with Greek philosophies. Others have seen Paul as primarily endorsing rational ethical living over the passions of the flesh. Still others have argued that Paul's theology was deeply influenced by Hellenistic mystery religions or Jewish apocalypticism. Some of these viewpoints offer some insights into Paul's theology, but none of them has proven to be as helpful as the eschatological outlook on his theology.

To examine the eschatological outlook on Paul's theology we will focus on three subjects: first, the terminology of eschatology; second, the structure of Paul's eschatology; and third, the implications of Paul's eschatology. Let's look first at the term "eschatology."

Terminology

The term "eschatology" comes from the Greek word *eschatos*, which means "last" or "end." Thus, eschatology is the doctrine or teaching of the last things, or the end of time. The Old Testament frequently uses terms like "last days" or "end times" to refer to the great climax of the history of salvation that was to take place when Messiah finally came to earth. And on a number of occasions, the New Testament points to the fulfillment of these Old Testament "last days" or "end times" in Jesus, the Messiah. It is from this use of the Greek word *eschatos* that we derive our theological term "eschatology," the doctrine of the "last days" or "end times."

Now in traditional systematic theology, the term "eschatology" has primarily referred to the Bible's teaching about the second coming of Christ. But when we talk about the "eschatological" approach of Paul, we must expand the term to refer to much more than the second coming of Christ. As we will see, Paul understood everything about Christ, from his first to his second coming, in terms of eschatology, or the end times.

Structure

To see how we are expanding the term “eschatology” to include more than the second coming of Christ, we have to turn our attention to the structure of Paul’s eschatology. How did Paul conceive of the last days, or the end of time? Our exploration of this topic will divide into three parts: the origins, the development, and themes of Paul’s eschatology. Let’s look first at the origins of Paul’s eschatology.

Origins. In Paul’s day, Jewish theologians commonly thought that the Old Testament divided world history into two great ages. The first of these was the present age of sin and trouble, which they termed “this age,” or in Hebrew, *olam hazeh*. “This age” reached its low point in Israel’s suffering the divine curse of exile from the Promised Land. Not surprisingly, Jewish theologians spoke of “this age” in very negative terms.

But the rabbis also believed that there would be a future age of blessing to follow this age of trouble. They called this future age “the age to come,” or in Hebrew, *olam haba*. In the age to come, God would finally fulfill all his promises of blessings to Israel.

Most Jewish groups in Paul’s time believed that the appearance of the Messiah would stand as the crucial turning point between these ages. When the Messiah came, he was to bring the day of the Lord, the day when God would ultimately bless his people and destroy his enemies. This was the day that would usher in the age to come.

When we read Paul’s epistles, it becomes apparent that he also held this same basic two-age view of history. In fact, he directly referred to the age in which he lived as “this age” on at least twelve occasions. For example, Paul referred to Satan as “the god of this age” in 2 Corinthians 4:4. And he spoke of the pagan philosopher as “the philosopher of this age” in 1 Corinthians 1:20.

Similarly, Paul used the expression “the age to come” to refer to the future age when final judgments and blessings will come to the human race. For instance, in 1 Timothy 6:19 Paul encouraged believers to be faithful in order to lay for themselves “a firm foundation for the coming age.” And in Ephesians 2:7 he said that God raised Christ from the dead so that “in the coming ages he might show the . . . riches of his grace.”

Perhaps the best example of Paul’s two-age thinking appears in Ephesians 1:21. There he referred explicitly to both ages when he wrote that Christ was seated

far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every title that can be given, not only in the present age but also in the one to come (Ephesians 1:21).

With this basic two-age pattern in mind, we should now turn to the way Paul developed a distinctively Christian eschatology.

Development. You’ll recall that in traditional Jewish eschatology the turning point between this age and the age to come was the appearance of the Messiah. For centuries the Jews had believed that when the Messiah came God’s people would immediately receive his full blessings, while his enemies would meet immediate destruction. As a follower of Jesus, however, Paul faced a serious challenge to this longstanding belief. He knew that Jesus was Israel’s Messiah — but he also knew that Jesus had not brought the

world to a climactic end as Israel had expected. Like Jesus himself, and like the rest of the New Testament, Paul answered this problem by modifying traditional Jewish eschatology.

As Paul explained it, the transition from this age to the age to come was not a simple shift from one age to the next. Instead, it involved a period of overlap when both ages occurred simultaneously. From his point of view the age to come had been inaugurated through the death, resurrection and ascension of Christ. Paul was also confident that when Christ returned in glory this evil age would end, and the age to come would arrive in all its fullness with ultimate blessings for God's people and final judgment for his enemies. In the meantime, however, both ages — this age and the age to come — exist alongside each other.

With the origins and development of the structure of Paul's eschatology in mind, it will be helpful to describe some themes in Paul's letters that must be understood in terms of the overlapping ages of history.

Themes. It has become common to describe Paul's view of eschatology as "already and not yet," because Paul believed that some aspects of the end times or last days had already become reality in Christ, while other aspects had not yet been realized. Let's unpack what this description means.

On the one hand, according to Paul, the age to come is already here in a number of different ways. We will mention three ways this theme appears in Paul's writings. In the first place, Paul taught that the final stage of the kingdom of God began when Jesus ascended to his heavenly throne. For example, Paul wrote in Ephesians 1:20-21 that when the Father raised Christ from the dead, he

... seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every title that can be given, not only in the present age but also in the one to come (Ephesians 1:20-21).

Although at the present time Christ's reign is realized primarily in the heavenly realms rather than on earth, it is still true that Christ already reigns above all rule and authority. In this sense, the reign of God in the age to come is a present reality.

A second aspect of the age to come which is already present with us is the foretaste of our eternal inheritance in the Holy Spirit. Paul taught that when Christ ascended to his throne on high, he poured out the Holy Spirit on the church as a foretaste of the full inheritance we will receive when Christ returns. In Romans 8:23 Paul explained this by saying that believers are those "who have the firstfruits of the Spirit." "Firstfruits" is a translation of the Greek word *aparche* which is itself a translation of an Old Testament term designating the first portion of a harvest. The firstfruits indicated that a greater harvest was coming in the future. So, for Paul, the gift of the Holy Spirit in every believer's life is a foretaste of the great blessings of the age to come.

In a similar way, according to Ephesians 1:14, the Holy Spirit himself is

... a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession (Ephesians 1:14).

The Greek term translated “deposit” is *arrabon*. This terminology points to the Holy Spirit as God’s down payment or deposit to us, guaranteeing that we will receive much more from God in the future. Once again, the Holy Spirit is a blessing of the age to come which God has already given to us.

Finally, Paul also pointed to the fact that Christ had inaugurated the new creation associated with the age to come. Because of what Christ has done, believers now enjoy, in part, the re-creation of the world. In the Old Testament God had promised his people that in the last days he would completely re-create the world, making it as perfect as it was before man’s sin in the Garden of Eden. Listen to how the Lord described the coming age to Isaiah in Isaiah 65:17:

Behold, I will create new heavens and a new earth (Isaiah 65:17).

In Paul’s mind the fact that Christ was already saving people proved that the re-creation of the world had begun. 2 Corinthians 5:17 expresses this idea well:

So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! (2 Corinthians 5:17, NRSV).

Even though Paul taught that many aspects of the age to come had already been inaugurated when Christ first came, Paul also believed that the blessings of the last days had not yet come in their fullness. So, he looked forward to Christ’s return as the time when Christ would fulfill the final judgments and blessings. Once again, we will mention three ways in which Paul’s perspective comes into view.

In the first place, as we’ve seen, Paul taught that Christ the King is now reigning from his throne in heaven. But Paul also believed that when Christ returns he will bring in the fullness of God’s Kingdom. Listen to the way he put it in 1 Corinthians 15:24-26:

Then the end will come, when [Christ] hands over the kingdom to God the Father after he has destroyed all dominion, authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death (1 Corinthians 15:24-26).

This passage makes it plain that Paul looked beyond the present reign of Christ to the future destruction of all dominion, authority and power that stands against the purposes of God. Christ will remain on his heavenly throne until every enemy is destroyed, including death itself. So, in one sense, Paul believed that Christ’s kingdom was already here, but in another sense, he believed that it was not yet here.

In the second place, as we’ve seen, Paul believed that the Holy Spirit is the firstfruits of the harvest of salvation and the down payment of our inheritance. But the terms “firstfruits” and “down payment” indicate that the full reception of our inheritance is in the future. Listen to the way Paul put it in Romans 8:23:

Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies (Romans 8:23).

Here Paul directly related the present reality of the gift of the Holy Spirit to the future. Because the age to come is already here, we already have the Spirit. But we still groan inwardly because we have not received the redemption of our bodies.

In much the same way, in Ephesians 1:14 Paul wrote that the Holy Spirit is

... a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession (Ephesians 1:14).

The Spirit is a wondrous foretaste, but only a foretaste, of a greater redemption — our full inheritance.

Finally, although the new creation has become a spiritual reality in the lives of believers, we also await the complete renewal of creation and our eternal reign over the new earth. As Paul wrote in Romans 8:21, at the same time that we receive our new bodies,

The creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God (Romans 8:21).

Paul looked forward to the return of Christ as the time when the new creation would come in all its fullness.

We have touched on only a few of the ways Paul handled important themes in terms of this age and the age to come. But we have sketched the basic pattern that underlies all of his outlooks. The age to come is a present reality with many blessings for believers. But this age will not end completely, and the age to come will not reach its fullness, until Christ returns in glory. In the meantime, the troubles of this age and the wonders of the next age exist side by side.

Having seen the structure of Paul's eschatology, we should turn to some important implications of his views.

Implications

As we've seen, Paul expressed his theology largely in the context of pastoral ministry. He didn't focus on abstract theology, but on concrete human experience. Even his eschatology wasn't an abstraction. Rather, Paul believed that many difficulties facing the church resulted from the tension of living during the overlap of this age and the age to come. So, in his writings, Paul explained what God had done for believers in the first coming and taught Christians how to live their lives as they waited for Christ's return.

To unpack this practical focus of Paul's eschatology, we'll look at three topics: first, union with Christ; second, divine purpose; and third, Christian hope. Let's look first at Paul's teaching about union with Christ.

Union with Christ. In Romans 6:3-4 Paul indicated that our union with Christ actually moves us from this age to the next age. Writing of union with Christ again in terms of baptism, Paul asked:

Don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life (Romans 6:3-4).

Simply put, the shift from this age to the age to come took place objectively in the death and resurrection of Christ. But every time men and women come to Christ in saving faith, they are joined to his resurrection. As a result, we no longer live under slavery to sin and God's judgment against it. We are given new lives, resurrected lives, so that we may live in the freedom of service to Christ. As Paul continued to explain in Romans 6:10 and 11:

The death [Christ] died, he died to sin once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God. In the same way, count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus (Romans 6:10-11).

Paul's teaching about our union with Christ applied eschatology to the practical lives of all believers. Just as Jesus left this age and its judgment behind, we also have been delivered from sin and judgment. And just as Jesus now lives in the power of the age to come, we now live in that power too.

Once we have grasped how our union with Christ by faith has given us new life, we face a difficult question: Why has God designed a period of overlap between this age and the age to come? What is God's purpose?

Divine Purpose. Paul's own missionary work among the Gentiles testifies to his belief that God's plan for the overlap of the ages included uniting believing Jews and Gentiles into one people of God.

Paul also believed that God had designed the overlap between this age and the age to come so that the church might reach a measure of spiritual maturity. At times he portrayed this idea in terms of building the temple of God, as in Ephesians 2:19-22. At other times, he spoke of it in terms of a maturing human body, as in Ephesians 4:15-16. Paul understood that the spiritual maturing of the church was one of God's central purposes for the overlap between this age and the age to come.

Paul realized that this outlook on history was unusual. It hadn't been revealed in the past. That's why he spoke of it as a mystery which God had revealed to him and which he had to explain to others. In Romans 11:25, Paul wrote these words:

I do not want you to be ignorant of this mystery, brothers, so that you may not be conceited: Israel has experienced a hardening in part until the full number of the Gentiles has come in (Romans 11:25).

In this passage Paul indicated that God was using this present time when many Jews have been hardened to the gospel to save the “full number” or “fullness” of the Gentiles. As he indicated in Ephesians 3:4-6:

In reading this, then, you will be able to understand my insight into the mystery of Christ, which was not made known to men in other generations as it has now been revealed by the Spirit of God's holy apostles and prophets. This mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus (Ephesians 3:4-6).

Paul's outlook on God's purposes provided an orientation for all believers living during the overlap of this age and the age to come. Both on corporate and individual levels, Christians should not look at this period as a time for quietly waiting for the fullness of the age to come. On the contrary, God has designed this period for great activity. This is a time for rescuing many from every nation on earth, and for bringing the church to spiritual maturity. For this reason, Paul devoted his own life to spreading the gospel and building up the church, and he called others to join him in that work.

Paul's teaching about our union with Christ during the overlap of this age and the age to come also provides an essential source of hope for individual Christians as they struggle with the challenges of life.

Christian Hope. Paul knew much suffering in his own ministry as an apostle, and he knew that all Christians suffer in one way or another. But Paul's eschatology offered hope to Christians in at least two ways.

On the one hand, Paul's eschatology gives us hope for the future by pointing out that we have already begun to enjoy many benefits of the age to come. When we look at our lives and see those blessings of the age to come that we already possess, it gives us hope that we will possess even greater and fuller blessings in the future. As Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 4:16-18:

Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day... So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen (2 Corinthians 4:16-18).

On the other hand, the blessings that still lie ahead of us are so astounding that they utterly overshadow any trials we experience in this life. It was this belief that led Paul to write in Romans 8:18 that

Our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us (Romans 8:18).

Our present distresses are only temporary. Jesus will eventually end this present evil age and re-create the world as a glorious gift for his children.

Paul admitted that we are outwardly wasting away because of the troubles of this life, but he also declared that we are being inwardly renewed day by day because of the blessings of the age to come that are already ours. Freedom from sin and the power of the Spirit enable us to delight in this daily inward renewal so that we fix our eyes on our eternal hope in Christ. Our foretastes of the age to come help us look forward to the full banquet that awaits us at Christ's return.

CONCLUSION

In this lesson we have taken a brief look into Paul and his theology. We've seen how Paul's background deeply informed his theology, and how his apostolic ministry related to his Christian beliefs. We've also gained some important insights into the central focus of Paul's theology by exploring his eschatology. With these perspectives in mind, we will be better equipped to look deeper into Paul's life and epistles in future lessons. Not only will we have a better grasp of what Paul taught the early church in his day, but we will be able to see more clearly what his teachings mean for us today.

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