

Note

Introduction to Epistles – Part 1 of 1

Summary

Introduction to Epistles - Part 1 of 12

The Epistles cover the theology of the New Testament church and comprise 21 letters, most of which were written by Paul – making him the most influential person to us apart from Jesus Christ. There are three types of epistles: personal ones to specific people, general letters about what is good and right and letters that address a problem. While written by man, every word was inspired by God.

Romans is the longest and most important epistle. It was a letter to a real church with real problems and emphasises the theology of justification by faith.

Transcript

Introduction to Epistles – Part 1 of 1

Today, we begin the section on the Epistles. Let's first have an introduction on who Paul is, because he wrote most of the Epistles. Then, an introduction to the Epistles, and then a short introduction on Romans.

Who is Paul? Paul is the most influential person to each of us, other than Jesus Christ. One third of the entire New Testament is about him or by him. Now because of what he has written in the Epistles, which is really the theology of the New Testament Church, he has impacted our lives more than anyone else other than Christ. And because most of the countries in Europe and then subsequently, America, Australia, etc. were Christian countries, they were also most influenced by this man, Paul.

Out of all (21) Epistles, 13 or 14 were written by Paul. Why do I say 13 or 14? Because there is some debate who wrote the book of Hebrews.

Paul is a Jew born into a Pharisee family, of the tribe of Benjamin. He was named Saul, after the first king of Israel who was a Benjamite, King Saul. And though he came from a Pharisee family, he was born in a different kind of place, but we will talk about that later. And Paul was called by God to be the apostle to the Gentiles.

Acts 9:15 ESV

But the Lord said to him, "Go, for he is a chosen instrument of Mine to carry My name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel.

So he was an apostle to the Gentiles and to kings. He reached many governors and kings, and Caesars. And also, the children of Israel. He's also considered the 13th apostle in the sense that he was not the original 12. He never claimed to be one. Some people say that he replaced Judas but he never claimed that. He knew it was not right for him to be one of the 12.

Now, most of you know that Peter, particularly, was the chosen one for the Jews. But Paul also had a ministry with them, but he was apostle particularly to the gentiles.

He was the perfect person to be chosen because he was multicultural. He was Greek in a sense-in his outlook, his thinking. He is Jewish in his religion. He is Roman in his citizenship. So he was actually perfectly prepared by God for this role to the Gentile world. So shall we say, he's multicultural, the perfect man for reaching the Gentile world.

How did he become so multicultural? The Bible says he was born in Tarsus. Now, Tarsus was one of the major cosmopolitan cities of the Roman Empire, on the eastern side of the Mediterranean Sea, very near Antioch. Tarsus was a big cosmopolitan centre, therefore, obviously, Greek was the language of use. Greek was the lingua franca that time. It was like what English is today. So he probably grew up with a Greek kind of education. Tarsus is in southeast Turkey.

So, education - likely Greek. Then, at some stage of his life, his family probably migrated - Pharisee family, they migrated to Galilee. But while they lived in Galilee, they sent Paul to Jerusalem to pursue his religious study under a top rabbi called Gamaliel. So we see he had a Greek secular education and a Jewish religious education in Jerusalem.

But the interesting part is his father was a Roman citizen. We do not know how, he must have done something for the Romans, and he got citizenship. So he was all the three: Greek, Jewish, and Roman, in a sense.

Now, he had a very radical conversion. We all know the story about him going with letters to persecute the Jews who had become believers of Jesus Christ in Damascus because he was so zealous for his Jewish religion. A good Pharisee, a Pharisee of the Pharisees, that's what he called himself. Now as he was going to Damascus, a super bright light shone around him, he fell to the ground and heard this voice "Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou Me?" He had an encounter with the Lord in all His glory. And so, he was saved while he was an active persecutor of the Christians. In fact, he was one of those who was at the stoning of Stephen, the 1st martyr. He was one of the people who kept all the clothes of the Jewish people as they put their robes aside so they could take stones and throw at Stephen. And he was one of them consenting, happily watching the martyrdom of Stephen.

Now, imagine getting saved while you are on active duty as a persecutor. You know, that was so shocking to him -that God would save him of all

people, that God would choose him of all people, to be His apostle to the Gentiles.

For three days after his conversion he was blind. He was blinded by the brightness of Christ in all His glory. Remember at the transfiguration, Christ's glory shown through His dress. But this is different. Christ had already risen up to Heaven, and now He came down in greater glory. And the brightness, he said, was brighter than the sun because Jesus says, "I am the Light of the world".

When he regained his sight, he was filled with the Holy Spirit and he was baptized and do you know what was the first thing he did? In Acts 9:20, immediately he preached the gospel in the synagogues to prove that Jesus is the Messiah.

You see, the Jews who were scholars read everything about the Messiah, but they were somehow blinded that the Messiah is the suffering Savior. When they see it, there's a huge conversion. Even today among Messianic Jews, those who suddenly realize that they persecuted their Messiah, there's a radical change. So he became a preacher immediately, and preached so strongly in Damascus, that he was going to be a victim of martyrdom. And so he had to leave Damascus.

Now, what happened after Paul left Damascus? The Bible tells us subsequently he spent three years in Arabia, in the desert, alone. I think he just wanted time with God. So his theology came from the Scriptures he knew, and also directly from God. Then after three years in Arabia, the Bible tells us he couldn't go to Jerusalem because he was considered a traitor by the Jews in Jerusalem. And so, he was asked to go back to his home place, his birthplace, Tarsus. And he spent 10 years there, but not much is known of what he did there.

And then when the church in Antioch was formed, as we learned in the book of Acts, the first multicultural church in Christian history, Paul went there with Barnabas to be the guides of the Antioch church. So he was 3 years in Arabia, 10 years in Tarsus, a couple of years in the Antioch church before he went on his first mission trip sent by the church of Antioch. So he was, maybe 15 or more years in preparation for the mission that God had called him: "To be My apostle to the Gentiles".

Now, what kind of person was Paul? He was brilliant. Looking at his writing, he was super logical, clear. He was, secondly, very focused. This is his statement: "For me to live is Christ, and to die is gain. - Philippians 1:21.

There's only one mission for living: Christ. That's called single-mindedness. And he's super bold because he said, "To die is gain, I'll be with Christ faster." So he had only one desire and that is to meet the Christ he had met on the road to Damascus. You see, once you have that encounter with Christ, your life will never be the same again. All you want to do is be with Him. That's why, I think, he went to Arabia for 3 years, to get as close as he can to Christ without people around him distracting him, and then his desire was to go home to be with Christ. So that's why he was so different. In Romans 1:1, he introduces himself as a bond servant or slave of Jesus Christ. Some people introduce themselves as a doctor of this or that, but Paul says he's a servant/slave of Jesus Christ.

Now his mission strategy was basically like this - he would go to a city, not a small town. Because from the city, he can reach out to the rural areas. He would go to the synagogue because that is the most obvious place he could find people he could share Christ. Sometimes he would be chased out, sometimes he wasn't. If he wasn't chased out, then he would start a community: share the Gospel, and when people get saved, he would start a community; what we would call a church or ecclesia - a community of believers.

After training this community of believers to reach out to the surrounding area; then, if he felt he was ready to go, he would go or if he was chased away, he would have to go. And then, he did not just leave them alone, because often they were very new believers. He would then revisit if he had the opportunity on the second visit, or the third visit, or if he had no opportunity (in those days it was not easy to travel), he would then write Epistles, which is what we're going to read. These are the letters to the churches that he had started. Maybe, he wrote to encourage them about something or some problems he heard about them that he would write a letter to help them. If he revisited them, then he would probably appoint elders in each church so that it could be properly run. When he used the word 'elders', they would not be really that long in the faith. They may be like a little bit more mature than the rest. That's how the early church was. And I think that's the right way to go. We don't need to be an expert on everything, but depend more on the Holy Spirit. So that's a little introduction on the life of Paul.

Secondly, let's have a short introduction on what is an epistle. An epistle is just a letter. Now, in the days where there was no postal service, letters

were not common. It was very expensive, you had to pay somebody to carry the letters to a certain person. So obviously, people didn't send letters for no good reason. There were official letters announcing the appointment of someone, or a wealthy person announcing the marriage of his son, or the death of his father.

Now most letters were of very few words, simply because people were not readers in those days. 99% of people were illiterate, they couldn't read. Of course, if they couldn't read, they couldn't write either. In fact, if 1% could read, maybe half a percent could write. And so, even if ever there was a letter, there were very few words in it. A little scroll was brought to you by somebody. And most people couldn't write their own letters, they were illiterate, even kings were illiterate. So, the secretary or a scribe had to write it for you.

Now, the letters or epistles were never used by any religion to teach the doctrine of a religion. Never been done before. Christianity is the only religion where the major doctrines of our faith, the New Testament Church, are in letters. Most of our doctrines, our New Testament doctrines, come from epistles, from letters. Now this is very strange. Why did God use letters rather than putting down these things through a guru to a group of students taking notes, and then writing it down in a proper note form? Why did God choose to use letters? Because God is a personal God. Letters are very personal, from someone to someone. God is our Father. And that is repeated over and over again that we have a very personal God.

Secondly, the letters often addressed problems. The letters were addressing practical problems in churches. God is a personal God, and God is a practical God.

Now, when Paul wrote these letters, he didn't know they were going to be part of the Bible. But, without him knowing, God was inspiring him to write. Inspiring means using him, not apart from him, and yet every letter, though written in Paul's character and Paul's style, every word was what God wanted to be written. That's the mystery of the inspiration of Scripture.

These 13 or 14 letters Paul wrote were not the only ones he wrote. Actually, he wrote many more, but God also inspired people to choose the right letters that He had inspired to be put into His inspired Scripture, this beautiful book we are reading. And I believe, too, that God inspired people

to arrange these books in the way that will be most beneficial for us to make this book the most beautiful book to represent Him, to show Him to the world. So, this is the mystery of this beautiful book. It's like nature, I don't know how it's created, but I can see the hand of God behind it. So it's very personal.

Now, there are three types of Epistles: personal Epistles - to Timothy, to Titus, to Philemon. There was a general Epistle - it's just to the church. Any church could read it and benefit. The Epistle to the Ephesians is very much like that. It doesn't address any real problems. But the rest of the Epistles were, what we call, Epistles written because of a reason. Maybe Paul heard of certain problems, or something happening in a church he had planted or he was concerned about, he would write. So those were the 3 types: 1. a personal Epistle to encourage somebody 2. a general Epistle to help us understand what is good and right as the ecclesia, as the believers 3. addressing a problem.

Now, how are the Epistles arranged in our Bible?

They are arranged from the longer to the shorter ones, that's why Romans, as the longest, is the first Epistle we're going to see and the short ones are pushed to the back. Furthermore, the personal ones tend to be more at the back. Though it tends to be arranged in this way, I believe there is still God's mysterious hand behind it.

What is the structure of an epistle?

Typically, they're quite simple. It starts with the name of the writer. When we write a letter, we put our name right at the bottom, "Yours sincerely" at the bottom. Their style was right at the top because when you open the scroll, you see who is this from. The scroll opens up this way. So you see the name of the person who wrote it, whether you want to receive the letter. After the name of the writer right at the top, is the address so the carrier would know the addressee : "Are you such and such?" and he gives it to the person. Then after that, it's a long greeting. And then after that, was the subject matter, so you see whatever the problem was. Then after the subject matter, the summary, and then greetings again, and then the signature. Often it was done by a scribe who knew how to write, but the sender probably knew how to scrawl his signature or stamp his seal.

Basically that was an Epistle. It's a very unique form of teaching our religion. And we must appreciate the fact that God taught us most of our doctrines,

not like a lecture from an impersonal person, but like a personal letter written to us.

So when you read an Epistle, read it like a letter written to you. If you have read love letters from someone you love, you keep reading it over and over again. So that's basically what God wants when you read the Epistles. I think that's the reason why God chose this form of teaching us about our faith.

Next, let's have a short introduction to the book of Romans before we begin our study of the book itself. The book of Romans is definitely the longest Epistle of all. In fact, some people say it's probably the longest letter ever written at that time. It is over 7,000 words in the original language. A typical letter was 20 words. And it's put in the first part of the Epistles because it's the longest, but that's not the main reason. The main reason is it's the most important Epistle.

The Gospels - the Messiah comes, Acts - how the good news of Jesus was spread. And the good news of Jesus is basically about one critical doctrine: justification by faith. We are made acceptable to God, by faith; we are made just in the eyes of God by faith. And this is the crux. This is the gem of our faith.

And this is what got Martin Luther so excited. Martin Luther was a monk struggling to find acceptance with God. And he realized the more he tried, the worse it became until he read the book of Romans. He was a monk, he never really read Romans before, like many Christian preachers today, they read every book except the Bible. We always say, the study of the Bible is not the Bible, but of books around the Bible, and 99% of Christians get all their theology, not from the Bible, but from devotionals, and theologians get it from theology books, and scholars get it from all kinds of scholarly texts, but very few actually see it. When Martin Luther read the Bible, he saw Romans and that changed his life, and 500 years ago, the Reformation started and changed our lives today. We are children of this Reformation.

So, here we have this important book placed right there for us to spread our faith and make disciples. We are to be witnesses of Christ. Yes, but what did Christ do? He justified us, He paid the price for us. The way to be accepted to God is not by our works, but by faith in Christ's finished work.

Now, because this theology of justification by faith is so beautiful, many people thought the book of Romans was meant as a theology book. In other words, it wasn't really an Epistle. Paul didn't really write to a church because he had something to say to the church, but they believe Paul wrote it so that it will be theology left for future generations. I don't think so. I believe it was really a letter to a real church in Rome, which had real problems and we will study that in a while. Paul wrote this letter to address those particular problems of that particular congregation, but in the process, the inspiration of God made it such that it's a gem for us today! 2,000 years later, miles away from Rome and yet it is so pertinent to us today, as it was pertinent to them 2,000 years ago. That's the beauty of this amazing book.

Now what was this church in Rome that he was writing to? The interesting part is Paul never visited it. You see, most of Paul's Epistles were to churches that he had started, and he wrote to them as a follow up. But he had never been to this church in Rome. Who were these people? If he had never been there, how did it start? Now we know, on the day of Pentecost in Acts chapter 2, there were people from Rome, it's stated, and they got saved and they went back to Rome. There was a big Jewish community in Rome. Historians say about 40,000 Jews lived in Rome at that time. The Jews were traders. Rome was the capital of the world, and of course there were Jews there. So 40,000 lived in a Jewish ghetto. Jews always lived together because of their food laws, they couldn't mix with others. And so, these people who came back from Pentecost started this church which grew into a very strong Jewish church. But there was an emperor called Claudius, stated in the book of Acts. When Claudius became Emperor, he was very anti-Jewish. He expelled all the Jews, including Priscilla and Aquila. And so when he expelled the Jews, the church now was basically made up of Gentiles. At first, it was largely a Jewish church with a few Gentile believers. But now, the Jews were thrown out and Gentile believers were left and they witnessed to their Gentile friends. And so the originally Jewish type church became mostly Gentiles. Then Emperor Claudius died, and the next Emperor came in, Emperor Nero. Nero needed to build the economy of Rome and he needed the Jews because they were the best business people. So he invited the Jews back, and many came back. And when they came back to the church they had left five years earlier, it's now a Gentile church. And so there were many of the cultural clashes between the Jews and the Gentiles who didn't make much about the food rules of the Jews, didn't make much of the Sabbath rest. Paul probably heard about it, and was concerned. And he wrote this book, basically to tell them, "all these cultural things are no big deal. We are justified by faith. We are one.

The faith in Christ makes us one. That's the key thing, that's the gem of our faith. Don't let the little things divide us." So Paul wrote this probably for them.

Why did he write to them? It's not even his people. Because it's important. Rome was the centre of the world, and he wanted this church in this important city, to be in good shape. Secondly, some said it was Paul's dream to move further west. He wanted to go to the end of the Mediterranean Sea, which is Spain. He needed a mission base in Rome because Rome to Spain was not that far. And that's why he probably wrote this book. Nobody knows exactly. But the point is this, it was a letter to a real church, which had real problems and in the process of addressing it, he has left us the greatest gem - the theology of justification by faith. That's critical. That's why it was placed as number 1, not because it was longest though that looks like the apparent reason.

Before we end this, we have to ask ourselves, why are reading all these Epistles? I hope you realise that from now on, when we go to Epistles that they are letters, they are personal. And I hope you know your God who wrote these letters to you, is a personal God. For many of us, God is so impersonal-somebody up there. In fact, when you address God a little too personal, people get offended because their prayers are with "thou, "thee" and "thy" when they talk to God and use Shakespeare English, sounding so formal. And they get very offended when you pray a very informal prayer. I am not saying you should be irreverent. You should be reverent and yet realize He is your heavenly Father. Don't forget that! Heavenly - you got to know He is high up there, but He's your Father and that's very personal. When we get into the Epistles, we realize God is very personal to you and to me.

Secondly, because the Epistles address practical problems, God is a very practical God. I hope you know that. Christianity is not about you and I going to Bible studies forever. No! It's about how we live. And God is as concerned about how we live as how much we know about Him. Too many Christians claim to know all kinds of verses but their lives and their knowledge don't seem to be in synch. And so, as we look at the book of Epistles, remember your personal Father wants you to live a practical life before men.

God bless you.