

INTRODUCTION TO THE EPISTLES

Who is Paul?

1. Paul is the most influential person to the Church other than Jesus because about one-third of the New Testament is about him or by him.
2. There are 21 epistles in the Bible of which 13 or 14 were written by Paul. We are not clear if the book of Hebrews was written by him.
3. Paul was a Jew, born in the tribe of Benjamin. He was a Pharisee. His name was originally Saul and he was named after King Saul, who was also a Benjamite.
4. Paul was called by God to be the Apostle to the Gentiles (in Acts 9:15) and to Kings & also to the Jews. He was also the 13th Apostle. Peter was the chosen one to minister to the Jews although Paul also had a ministry to Jews.
5. Paul was multi-cultural, Greek in thinking, Jewish in Religion and Roman in citizenship. He was therefore perfectly prepared by God for his role to minister to the Gentile's world. He was born in Tarsus (which was a cosmopolitan city in the Roman Empire). Greek was the common language of use in those days. He had a Greek education (secular-wise). Tarsus is in the south-eastern part of Turkey which is very near to Israel. His family migrated to Galilee but they sent Paul to Jerusalem to study under a top rabbi named Gamaliel. So Paul had his religious education in Jerusalem. His father was a Roman citizen, so he was born a Roman citizen.
6. Paul had a radical conversion on the road to Damascus. He was a good Pharisee, very zealous for his religion, hence he persecuted the Jewish believers of Christ. Before Paul's conversion, he said he was a Pharisee of Pharisees.
7. Paul was saved by God while he was an active persecutor. Prior to his salvation, he was even a witness at Stephen's martyrdom (the 1st Christian martyr). He was shocked that God would save him. (see 1 Tim 1:15, Paul called himself the chief of sinners)
8. Paul was blinded when he encountered Jesus while on the way to Damascus (to persecute Christians) due to the bright glory of Christ after His ascension. Jesus' glory was described as brighter than the Sun. Jesus is the Light of the world. Jesus made the Sun.
9. Acts 9:20 says that after the conversion, he preached immediately in the synagogue after his recovery from the 3 days of blindness. As a scholar, Paul knew everything about the coming Messiah, but he was blinded spiritually until God opened his spiritual eyes. So, once he saw it, he had a strong spiritual understanding like any Messianic Jew who believed. Paul preached to prove Jesus was the Messiah that they had crucified when He came as the Suffering King because most of the Jews missed this awareness! He then left Damascus due to persecution. The persecutor Paul became the persecuted victim.
10. After leaving Damascus, he spent 3 years in Arabia with God. He received direct theology from God besides his Old Testament knowledge of God.
11. After 3 years, he could not go to Jerusalem as he was treated as a betrayer by the Pharisees there! So, he went back to Tarsus (his birthplace) & spent 10 years there. Little was known about him in Tarsus.

12. When the Antioch church was formed, Paul and Barnabas were set apart by the Antioch church for missions. His first mission took place many years after his conversion (about 3 years + 10 years + time spent in Antioch before Paul's first missionary trip). It took more than 15 years of preparation to be the Apostle to the Gentiles!
13. Paul was brilliant, super logical in writing and had a "PhD-plus" type of brain.
14. Paul was also super focused. See Phil 1:21. He was single minded, to Paul, "to live is Christ" only. He was super bold, he effectively said, "If I have to die, then die, it's no big deal. Just see Christ earlier." His only desire was to meet Christ again, the one he met enroute to Damascus. This was why Paul spent 3 years after conversion in the Arabian Desert to get close to Christ without any distraction (Note that 3 years was just like Jesus' time with his 12 disciples).
15. In Romans 1:1, Paul introduced himself with the title of bond servant or slave of Christ.

Paul's missionary model

1. Paul would first go into a city to find a synagogue to share Christ. Sometimes, he was chased out, otherwise he would start a community of believers and train them to reach out to the surrounding areas. He would leave when they were ready or when he was chased out.
2. He would revisit the same churches he planted in his 2nd or 3rd missionary trip, or write epistles to these churches to encourage them or to help them resolve their problems.
3. He would appoint elders, who were more matured Christians, who were dependent on Holy Spirit.

What is an Epistle?

1. An epistle is a letter.
2. Letters were expensive at that time because you need to send someone to deliver it and so it was only used for official matters e.g. appointment letter or announcements like marriage etc.
3. At that time, 99% of the people were illiterate. They could not read and even fewer could write. So even letters had very few words with a seal stamped on a scroll. And they were usually written by scribes.
4. Epistles were never used in any other religion to teach doctrines except in Christianity. Major doctrines of the New Testament Church were from the Epistles. Why did God use letters rather than giving notes through a guru in a classroom? This is because
 - a) Our God is a very personal God. Letters are very personal, from someone to someone!
 - b) Our God is our Father.
 - c) Our God is a very practical God because these letters addressed specific problems of the church.
5. At his time of writing, Paul did not know his epistles would be part of the Bible. But God inspired him to write (see 2 Tim 3:16-17) what God wanted although these letters were written in Paul's style and character. Paul wrote more than 13 or 14 letters but God is the one who inspired people to include only these 13 or 14 letters in the Bible!

God even inspired the arrangement or order of these letters as books in the Bible in a way that is most beneficial to us! This is a beautiful book just like nature is beautiful. We don't know how it was created but we can see God's hand behind it.

3 Types of Epistles

1. Personal Epistles are letters to individuals like Titus, Timothy and Philemon.
2. General Epistles are letters that any church can read e.g. the book of Ephesians which does not address any specific or real problems in a specific church.
3. Specific Epistles are letters to resolve specific issues in a specific church.

These epistles are arranged from long to short. Romans is longest, so it is placed at the front of all the other epistles while personal epistles are short and tended to be at the back. Though it is for convenience, God's inspiration is involved.

Structure of an Epistle:

1. An epistle would start with the name of the writer so that when you open the scroll, you could decide if you wish to receive the letter. It is unlike today's letters where the name of writer appears at the end of the letter.
2. Greetings come next.
3. Subject matter which was the main content of the letter.
4. Summary
5. Greetings and signature (or a stamp or seal)

Therefore, when reading the epistles, read it as a love letter from God to you. Love letters are meant to be read over and over again!

Introduction to Book of Romans

1. The book of Romans is the longest epistle. It might be the longest letter ever written at that time. It contains 7000 words in the original form versus only about 20 words in a typical letter at that time.
2. Although it was arranged in front of all other epistles, it was not just because it was longest but the main reason was that it is the most important epistle!
3. The book of Acts tells us of how the Gospel was spread. The Good News is about Justification by faith. Justification by faith is the crux of our faith.
4. Martin Luther as a monk was struggling to find acceptance by God. He did not get converted till he read the book of Romans. Martin Luther caused the Reformation period which started over 500 years ago.
5. We are to be witnesses of Christ for what He did! He justified us by paying the price of our redemption with His blood. We need faith in Christ's finished work alone.
6. Many people think that the book of Romans is written as a theology book rather than an epistle. But this is not true because the Roman church had real problems! God inspired the writing of this book which is also important to us today.
7. Paul never visited the Roman church.
 - a) On the day of Pentecost, the people from Rome were there and the Jews present, believed and returned to Rome (as they were traders).

- b) There were about forty thousand Jews in Rome as Rome was the capital of the empire. Jews always live together in a community due to their food, laws etc. Therefore, the Roman church started and grew.
 - c) Emperor Claudius was very anti-Jews and he expelled all the Jews. The church now was left only with the Gentile believers. Therefore, the church which was originally Jewish became Gentile. When Emperor Claudius died five years after expelling the Jews, the next emperor, Emperor Nero, wanted to rebuild the economy and needed Jews who were business people to return to Rome. So many Jews came back to Rome. But they found that their church had become very Gentile and clashed with them because the Jews observed special days like the Sabbath and food rules, etc. The book of Romans was written by Paul to say "Faith in Christ makes us One. Do not let cultural difference divide you!"
8. Paul wrote to the Roman church even though it was not founded by him because the city of Rome was the centre of the world at that time. He wanted this important church to be in good shape for his dream to move to the west (to Spain) and he needed a base (i.e. a mission base in Rome rather than Antioch which was very far away in the east) there.
9. Paul left us the greatest theology book on Justification by Faith.

Why read all these epistles?

1. Read them as personal letters from a personal God.
 - a) Our God is a personal God, so don't pray using formal Shakespeare type of English to impress others.
 - b) Be reverent but remember He is our heavenly Father. Fathers are always personal.
2. Epistles are practical letters to address practical issues. Our God is practical and is concerned about how we live rather than just how much head knowledge we gained.
3. Our personal God (our Father) wants us to live a practical life pleasing to Him.