

THE POWER OF THE GOSPEL

Reading the letters of Paul



Wednesday Bible Study with Pastor Wayne

12:00 Noon beginning August 28
classroom 102

THE POWER OF THE GOSPEL

Galatians: Paul fights for the gospel

The Gospel of Jesus Christ became real to Paul. Very real. The gospel of Jesus Christ became so real to Paul that his life was transformed. He was literally stopped in his tracks. His life took a radical turn, a turn he describes to the Galatian churches.

“I was violently persecuting the church of God and was trying to destroy it.” (Galatians 1:13) But then God revealed his Son to Paul. (1:16) Not only did God reveal his Son to Paul, but God also set Paul apart to proclaim the Son of God to the Gentiles. The radical transformation that took place in the life of Paul is captured in the words of those who heard of his faithful witness, “The one who formerly was persecuting us (the Christian believers) is now proclaiming the faith he once tried to destroy.” (1:23)

The faith Paul was proclaiming is what we know as the Gospel, the good news of Jesus Christ. That good news, the Gospel, was proclaimed to the Galatians churches. Although the Galatians embraced the Gospel, a troubling issue had arisen.

Richard Hayes, a New Testament theologian gives this background on Galatians.

Paul’s angry, passionate letter to the churches of Galatia provides a glimpse of the controversy that surrounded the expansion of the Christian movement into Gentile communities in the ancient Mediterranean world. The identity of the newly established mission churches was up for grabs: Were they to be understood as branches on the tree of Judaism, or were they to be understood as belonging to a new and distinctive community, neither Jewish nor pagan? Were Gentile converts bound to accept Jewish practices and values? In what ways were they free to maintain their former ways of life? By the middle of the first century CE the struggle over such questions had burst into open conflict. Paul visualizes the struggle for identity formation of the Galatian churches in a vivid image: As the apostle whose preaching had brought them into being, he is like a mother in the throes of labor until they are fully formed according to the image of Christ (Galatians 4:19)¹

With this brief introduction, take time to read the entire letter of Galatians.

Add notes, comments or questions as you read.

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

¹ Richard B. Hayes, New Interpreter’s Bible Commentary, Galatians, 183.

After reading the letter, use your notes to look back through Galatians and write responses to the following

How would you describe or define the gospel? (according to Paul)

How would you describe the gospel Paul's opponents were preaching?

The Old Testament (Jewish Scriptures) play a key role in Paul's defense of the gospel. How would you describe what Paul says about Abraham? (Chapter 3)

How would you describe what Paul says about the Law? (chapters 3 and 4)

How would you describe what Paul says about Hagar and Sarah? (Chapter 4)

Chapters 5 and 6 explore what it means to be set free by Christ, to live no longer under the law, but to live through the Holy Spirit. What do you hear Paul saying about the life that Christians live as they are led by the Spirit?

Reflection: In Galatians, Paul reveals his own deeply personal encounter with the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The Gospel is evident in passages throughout the letter.

- Jesus Christ gave himself for our sins (1:5)
- A person is justified not by the works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ (2:16)
- I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God (2:19,20)
- The Gospel is for all people, for in Abraham God declared the Gospel beforehand, "All the Gentiles shall be blessed in you." (3:8)
- Through baptism in Christ, we are clothed with Christ. In Christ there is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female; for we are all one in Christ Jesus. (3:28,29)
- The Gospel sets us free from the works of the law and the power of sin to live by the Spirit. Paul sums up our responsibility in terms as simple as "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (5:14) and "Bear one another's burdens." (6:3) This new and transformed life in Christ bears the fruit of the Spirit, "Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness, and self-control."

Paul's encounter with the living Christ changed his life in a profound way. Knowing that we are all at different stages on our journey of faith, how would you describe your encounter with the living Christ, and what the good news of the Gospel means in your life?

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Ephesians: How wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ

At the heart of Ephesians is a prayer that the believers would “have the power to comprehend with all the saints, how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.” (3:18-19)

The Gospel of Jesus Christ proclaims that the fullness of God’s love was revealed through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. As you read the letter to the Ephesians, allow yourself to be swept up in the full scope of the Gospel, to imagine and experience the amazing breadth of the Gospel, to explore the wonder of how wide and long and high and deep the love of Christ is.

Read the entire letter. Add notes, comments or questions

Chapter 1 Paul describes the blessings that belong to those who have found themselves through a relationship with Jesus Christ.

Chapter 2 The blessings of Jesus Christ have come through faith, not by our works. Along with uniting our individual hearts in a relationship with Jesus Christ, through Christ God has torn down every dividing wall of hostility.

Chapter 3 Paul describes how he received the Gospel and how he is now a servant whose purpose is to bring to all (but specifically the Gentiles) the news of the boundless riches of Christ.

Chapters 4 and 5 We who receive the blessing of the Gospel are called to live a life worthy of the calling to which we have been called:

- Living in unity through the Body of Christ (4:1-16)
- Putting away our former way of life (4:17 ff)
- Being imitators of God, living in love as Christ loved us (5:1-20)

Chapters 5 and 6 Household rules

Key phrase: “Submit yourselves to one another out of reverence for Christ” (5:21)

- Husbands and wives
- Children and parents
- Slaves and masters

Chapter 6 The Armor of God: “Our battles is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers...and the spiritual forces of evil.” (6:10-20)

Reflection: The letter of Ephesians presents a very helpful opportunity to explore the issues of faith and the practice of faith in general terms. One author writes, “There is good reason to believe that Ephesians was intended to be read to new converts in a group of churches in the southwestern part of the province of Asia (modern Turkey), as a written substitute for a personal address by the apostle to the newly baptized.”²

As you consider the letter of Ephesians, imagine yourself as one who is newly converted, as one who is seeking to gain an understanding of what life is like now through the salvation brought through Jesus. How is the life of an individual changed? How is the life of a community shaped and changed? How are believers in Christ called to live?

Ephesians makes bold promises about unity. Looking at how Christ tears down the dividing wall of hostility that existed between Jew and Gentile (chapter 2:11-22), and the extended passage on unity in chapter 4:1-16, how do these passages shape your understanding of unity?

Regarding how we live our lives for Christ, what do you take from chapters 4-6 that is helpful to you? Are there things in these chapters that are a challenge for you and your understanding of faith?

Chapters 5 and 6 explore what it means to be set free by Christ, to no longer live under the law, but to live through the Holy Spirit. What do you hear Paul saying about the life that Christians live as they are led by the Spirit?

² The Writings of St. Paul, edited by Wayne Meeks, “The letter to the Ephesians”, p. 122.

THE POWER OF THE GOSPEL

Philippians: I want to know Christ

The Gospel of Jesus Christ is on full display in this beautiful letter the Apostle Paul wrote to the saints in Philippi. The letter expresses...

- Thanksgiving for the partnership of faith shared between Paul and the Philippians (1:3-11)
- Confidence that even hardships like imprisonment will not keep the Gospel from being shared (1:12-26)
- A call to have the same mindset as Christ, who emptied himself and took the form of a servant (2:1-11)
- Gratitude for faithful servants like Timothy and Epaphroditus (2:19-30)
- Paul's personal testimony that he has left behind the things that previously brought meaning and identity in his life, leaving him free to pursue with wholehearted devotion the goal of knowing Christ (3:1-16)
- Affirmation that in Christ we find joy and peace (4:1-9)
- Affirmation that we learn to be content in all situations, and that we are able to do all things through Christ Jesus our Lord (4:1-14)
- Affirmation that God will supply our every need, joined with a deep expression of thanksgiving to the Philippians who provided for Paul in his time of need

Use the space below to make notes about the readings

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Reflection: While there are hints of some of the challenges about circumcision and the law, by and large Philippians allows us a chance to see into the heart of Paul, and to explore the beauty of the relationship shared between Paul and the Philippians. This warm and encouraging letter can be a springboard for you to express the faith that is growing in your heart. Use one, two, or even more of the themes from Philippians to share the thoughts, hopes, and desires that come to mind

1. Thanksgiving for the partnership of faith shared between Paul and the Philippians (1:3-11)
2. Confidence that even hardships like imprisonment will not keep the Gospel from being shared

(1:12-26)
3. A call to have the same mindset as Christ, who emptied himself and took the form of a servant

(2:1-11)
4. Gratitude for faithful servants like Timothy and Epaphroditus (2:19-30)
5. Paul's personal testimony that he has left behind the things that previously brought meaning and identity in his life, leaving him free to pursue with wholehearted devotion the goal of knowing Christ (3:1-16)
6. Affirmation that in Christ we find joy and peace (4:1-9)
7. Affirmation that we learn to be content in all situations, and that we are able to do all things through Christ Jesus our Lord (4:1-14)
8. Affirmation that God will supply our every need, joined with a deep expression of thanksgiving to the Philippians who provided for Paul in his time of need

THE POWER OF THE GOSPEL

Colossians: Christ in you, the hope of glory

Writing to the faithful brothers and sisters in Christ in Colossae, Paul introduces an understanding of Christ that goes beyond the earthly life and ministry of Jesus.

- Christ is the image of the invisible God (1:15)
- The firstborn of all creation, and in him all things in heaven and earth were created (1:16, and see John 1:1-4)
- Christ is the head of the body, the church (1:18)
- In Christ all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell (1:19)
- And through Christ God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of the cross (1:20 and II Corinthians 5:18-21)

It is this “Cosmic Christ” who was proclaimed by Paul to the Colossians. This “mystery” (the mystery that Christ is in the hearts and souls of believers: 1:26, 27), a mystery hidden through the ages has been revealed to the saints (including the Colossians). Paul’s words to the Colossians include gratitude for the faith they have in Christ (1:4); a desire that they would grow to full maturity in Christ (1:28); an exhortation that having received Christ Jesus as Lord that they would live their lives in him, rooted and built in him and established in the faith (2:6), and the call to clothe themselves with the newness of life found in Christ (3:12-17).

In his commentary on Colossians, Ralph Martin gives this soaring introduction:

“The contribution of Colossians to our understanding of Paul’s mind and pastoral ministry is considerable. It is this factor which makes the letter so fascinating and worth our attention today. It shows the person of Jesus Christ as the answer to human questions about the cosmos of which we are such an insignificant, yet unique, part. Insignificant we may be, and terrified by the vast reaches of outer space, yet our life has meaning. For our human existence was once owned and dignified by the coming of God into our world in his Son. Henceforth the character of God is spelled out in terms of that human life. And the pattern of human existence is set and shaped by him as ‘the new humanity’ in whose image a distinctive quality of life is born and is growing.”³

With this brief introduction, take time to read the entire letter of Colossians.

Add notes, comments or questions as you read.

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

³ Ralph P. Martin, Interpretation Commentary, Ephesians, Colossians and Philemon, p. 81.

THE POWER OF THE GOSPEL

Thessalonians: You became imitators of us and of the Lord

Paul's writings to the church in Thessalonica represent perhaps his earliest letters. He is effusive in his praise for these believers who became imitators of the disciples like Paul, the churches of God, and of the Lord. To these believers so intent on imitation, Paul gives a vivid description of how to live a life pleasing to God. The letters to the church in Thessalonica bring to light the urgency shared among the early believers, as they lived in expectancy of the imminent return of the Lord Jesus. The believers had great concern for those who had died, wondering how those who had died would fare when Jesus finally returned. Although Paul writes words of comfort regarding the hope in Christ for both the living and the dead, he returns to a familiar theme of the New Testament, "For you yourselves know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night." Concern for the future and the return of Christ must never keep us from living in complete readiness in every moment of our lives. II Thessalonians presents a different dilemma, one concerning rumors that Christ has already returned. Addressing such rumors causes Paul to speak strongly against "The lawless one", the one whose presence in this world is marked by evil and destruction. The Thessalonians were fledgling believers with an earnest desire to live a faithful life in the midst of turbulent times. These early letters provide us the opportunity to explore faithful living in our own turbulent times. The closing exhortations bring comfort and hope.

I Thessalonians 5:23 "May the God of peace himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ."

II Thessalonians 3:16 "Now may the Lord of peace himself give you peace at all times and in all ways. The Lord be with you."

As you read these two early letters, pay attention to how the Thessalonians were seeking to be imitators through their faith and through their actions. When does Paul offer encouragement? When does he offer challenge?

Add notes, comments, and questions as you read.

I Thessalonians

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

II Thessalonians
Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

THE POWER OF THE GOSPEL

I Corinthians Chapters 1-8 I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified

Richard Hays gives this introduction in his commentary on I Corinthians.

“Paul had founded the Christian community in Corinth through his preaching and teaching (Acts 18:1-11); consequently, he describes himself as having planted the community (I Corinthians 3:6), or having laid its foundation (3:10; or even having ‘fathered’ it (4:15). According to Luke’s account in Acts, Paul spent eighteen months in Corinth (Acts 18:11), sufficient time to develop significant relationships there and to provide extensive instruction. In accordance with his mission of organizing new communities, once the church was up and running, he moved on. It is likely that Paul left Corinth during the year 51 C.E. and that the letter known to us as I Corinthians was written some time later, probably during the interval of 53-55 C.E...Paul had been away long enough for new problems and serious misunderstandings to arise within the Corinthians community.”⁴

Reading I and II Corinthians draws us into a fascinating and complex correspondence between pastor and congregation, where the foundational themes of Christianity are repeated and revisited in numerous ways, and the implications of the Christian faith are explored as the Corinthians navigate the new way of living that comes as we seek to faithfully follow Jesus Christ. Pay attention to how Paul reaffirms the foundations of faith to the Corinthians and seeks to apply that faith to the very real challenges and conflicts confronting this early community of believers.

Add notes, comments and questions as you read

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

⁴ Richard B. Hayes, First Corinthians (Interpretation Commentary), p. 5

THE POWER OF THE GOSPEL

I Corinthians Chapter 9-16 And now these things remain: Faith, hope, and love. And the greatest of these is love

These chapters in the second half of Paul's letter to the church in Corinth are of great value to the Christian community. Here we read about instructions for the Lord's Supper, the chapter about the Body of Christ and the importance of each part of the body and each gift of the Spirit, the famous chapter about love, and what Paul's writes of as being of first importance: "That Christ died for our sins in accordance with scriptures, that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day..." (I Corinthians 15:3,4)

These important and unifying themes, such as communion, the unity of the Body of Christ, the primacy of love, and the importance of the cross and resurrection, are given to us in the midst of other instruction that can be both helpful and also confusing. These chapters raise the issue of women having their head covered and on speaking in church, as well as the potential divisiveness of a gift like speaking in tongues. We who read these passages which are far removed from our present day setting and situation face the challenge of interpreting and applying God's word to our lives. May the cross of Christ, the power of the resurrection, and the very real presence of the Holy Spirit give us wisdom and insight as read God's Holy Word.

Add notes, comments and questions as you read

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

Chapter 14

Chapter 15

Chapter 16

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II Corinthians chapters 1-7 If anyone is in Christ, there is new creation

Paul's second letter to the Corinthians serves to inspire and encourage believers as we discover who Christ is and what Christ has done. Paul's soaring images are tempered as he spends a good amount of the letter defending himself and his ministry, which in some people's eyes pales in comparison to ones whom he labels "Super Apostles." As Paul defends himself, his defense is much more than personal. He is encouraging the Corinthians to hold fast to the faith which has been proclaimed to them, a faith that is not dependent on the skills or powers of humans, but which is founded on Jesus Christ and the reconciliation he has brought between human beings and God.

Read chapters 1-7 of I Corinthians

Paul introduces many memorable images related to our faith and the person of Christ. Make note of these as you read. Also, pay attention to the many times Paul defends his ministry and reminds the Corinthians of the special relationship they share.

Chapter 1

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Chapter 7

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II Corinthians chapters 8-13 Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord

Here in the latter half of II Corinthians two things emerge.

1. Paul encourages the Christians at Corinth to be generous in their giving. Chapters 8 and 9 are a valuable resource as we get a first-hand glimpse of giving in the early church, and as we consider our own stewardship and explore how we can also grow in our generosity.
2. In chapter 10 Paul gives an extended defense of his ministry, and he himself recognizes what he writes could well be boasting. Remember as you read that his purpose is call the Corinthians to a faithful adherence to the gospel, and so his words are meant to contrast the ones who came to Corinth and have gained a reputation as “Super Apostles.” Give thought to how Paul’s “boasting” ultimately moves the attention from himself and toward Christ.

Add notes, comments and questions as you read

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Chapter 13