

## The Letter to the Philippians

This letter is one of those (like Colossians, Ephesians and Philemon) written while Paul was in captivity. It is not certain whether this was in Rome or Ephesus, and this would offer dates of either **62AD** or **56AD**. Philippians is one of the least doctrinal letters but contains a beautiful Christological hymn.



## The Letters to the Corinthians

The first letter was written from Ephesus **c.57AD** while Paul was on his third missionary journey. It was in response to troubles that had developed in the Corinthian community and followed a delegation coming to see him (1 Cor.16). In it Paul answers their questions about marriage (ch.7) food offered to gods(ch.8), gifts of the spirit (ch.12) and resurrection (ch.15). It also contains his moving description of the supreme role of love (ch.13), a defence of his own authority (ch.2 and 9) and warnings against factions in the Church (ch.1). It appears that this letter was not the success he had hoped for, resulting in a personal visit (2 Cor.2). This, too, proved ineffectual leading to another ‘sorrowful’ letter, sent with Titus, which has not survived. However, this proved successful leading to what we know as Paul’s second letter to the Corinthians, which included his reply (ch.10 –13) to those who had apparently accused him of weakness.

## The Letter to the Romans

This letter was written from Corinth **c.58AD**, and presents Paul’s great theological synthesis of Mosaic Law and Christian beliefs, including his doctrine of Justification by Faith, that is that salvation ultimately comes from faith in Jesus, not from strict adherence to the Law. Abraham, Paul stresses, became justified by his faith over the sacrifice of Isaac, and that was before the giving of the Law on Sinai.

## The Letter to Philemon

Although ostensibly a private letter to Philemon, a Christian at Colossae and the owner of a runaway slave, Onesimus, it is really a letter to a House-church, urging love and forgiveness of the runaway. It was written when Paul was in captivity in Rome **c.62AD**.

# St. Paul

## 3. An Introduction to the Letters of St. Paul



## Questions for Reflection

1. Was the early Church right to associate Paul’s name with letters he had not written?
2. What does the crisis in the Corinthian Church teach us today?
3. Does it matter whether the theology in the Letters to the Colossians and Ephesians is St. Paul’s or not?

## What Are Paul's Letters?

Paul's letters are not what we take letters to be. They were not private correspondence (even Philemon) but intended for public reading to the community to whom they were addressed. They were written to teach and encourage the Church communities that Paul had established. Traditionally, 13 letters were associated with Paul's name, or 14 if Hebrews is included, but scholars generally agree that not all were actually written by him, certainly not Hebrews.

Those accepted as **genuine**, in order of writing, are: 1 Thessalonians, Galatians, Philipians, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Romans and Philemon.

Those letters that a majority of scholars think were written by disciples of Paul, so-called 'Deutero-Paul', are 2 Thessalonians, Colossians and Ephesians. **Ephesians** is a follow up letter to **Colossians** (like Rome, not a Church founded by Paul) to counter a crisis cause by Gnostic beliefs, the view that salvation was obtained by special knowledge. Both letters have a significantly different style and vocabulary to that of acknowledged Pauline letters while Ephesians has a highly developed theology extending the thoughts made in Colossians with an emphasis on **mystery**, and the Church now seen in cosmic terms as the Body of Christ, with Christ as the Head, going well beyond Paul's thoughts in 1 Cor.12 and Romans 12. This is why gentiles can now be saved and this revelation is the real mystery that comes about in Christ (ch.3). But Pauline authorship can be justified if it is supposed he asked someone else to write these **on his behalf** after giving detailed instructions about what to write, in the context of his newly developed theology to meet the new crisis.

It is almost universally accepted that the Pastoral letters of **1 and 2 Timothy** and **Titus** are not the products of Paul's hand. There are several reason for this: they present a hierarchy of the Church, with bishops (presiding elders), presbyters (elders) and deacons, that did not exist until after Paul's time. More crucially, although the Pastoral letters are similar to one another in vocabulary, grammar and style, they diverge sharply in all these aspects from the undoubted genuine letters of St. Paul and they contain concepts not used by Paul, like

piety (eusebia), good conscience and sound teaching.

## The Letters to the Thessalonians

The first letter was written from Corinth when Paul was on his second missionary journey **c.50AD**.

Thessalonica had been Paul's first community in Greece (Macedonia) and he had a special affection for it. He had sent Timothy to them while he had been in Athens 'to keep you firm and encourage your faith' (ch.3) and he began his letter by praising their steadfastness and thanking them for being a beacon to those around them for their faith. The main thrust of the letter (ch.4 and 5) is in response to their fears that those who are still alive at the Parousia, Jesus' Second Coming, will not have the benefit of the resurrection from the dead. But part of Paul's answer 'we who are still alive ..' implied that he would be one of those still alive at that time, that is, that the Parousia was imminent, and that it would come 'like a thief in the night'. Paul may well have believed this at the time, but 2 Thess. sets out to rectify the impression of imminence of the Parousia, and emphasises that it would be accompanied by many signs in advance. It is this sudden change in view that makes many scholars question its authenticity, that and its reference to 'every letter of mine' at the end which would imply a later date than that usually given it.



## The Letter to the Galatians

This letter was probably written **c.54AD** from Ephesus when Paul was on his third missionary journey. It is notable for several reasons: it starts with an admonition of the community for turning to what Paul calls 'a different gospel' or to a perversion of the gospel and it gives Paul the opportunity to begin to form his own structured theology. It appears that some had argued that Paul's preaching was a heresy, he himself had no authority and gentiles had to become Jews first to be saved. In answer, Paul distinguishes between the Law and the salvation brought by faith in Jesus and attempts his first synthesis of the two.