

THE RESTORATION INITIATIVE

THRIVING CONGREGATIONS

Called & Sent: The Vital Role of the Church

Lesson 1: 1 Thessalonians

Background

Paul founded the church in Thessalonica, the capital city of Macedonia, on his 2nd missionary journey. (Read Acts 17.) Not long after he left, he sent Timothy back to check on them. The report was mostly good news: that the believers were enduring suffering and were growing in faith and love. Paul's response to this was to pray for the church and to write this letter.

While it's easy to jump past 1 Thessalonians to get to Paul's more "famous" letters like Romans and 1 Corinthians, there is so much here! Think about the significance of how the first words we have from Paul are that he's writing "to the church . . . in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ" (1:1).

*"A superficial reading of 1 Thessalonians might suggest that this letter is rather innocuous, but in fact it packs quite a powerful punch. In all likelihood it is Paul's earliest surviving letter (and thus probably the earliest New Testament document), revealing much about his understanding of the gospel for the Gentiles even before the great controversy associated with Galatians. In it Paul reminds the Thessalonian believers of the past effects, the present demands, and the future promises of the gospel among them, despite various forms of opposition to both Paul and the young church. In sum, Paul writes about eschatology and ethics, about holiness and hope in a pagan world." (Michael Gorman, *Apostle of the Crucified Lord*)*

Since this series is about the church—especially about the missional nature of the church!—it is worth remembering that Paul, in the words of Abe Malherbe, founded the church, shaped the church, and nurtured the church. He wasn't just converting people and moving on to other projects.

Perhaps a place to begin in class discussion is to ask what this first letter from the Apostle Paul says about: (1) what the church believes; (2) what the church is to do; and (3) what the church hopes for.

Textual Focus: Encouragement

Paul talks about how he was with the church, he dealt with them “as a father deals with his own children, encouraging, comforting and urging . . .” (2:11f). He also says that he sent Timothy back to continue the work of strengthening and encouraging them in their faith (3:2). And now he encourages them to encourage one another: “Therefore encourage one another with these words. . . . Therefore encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing” (4:18; 5:11).

1. What does it mean to encourage someone?
2. Describe a time when you were encouraged in your faith by another believer (or group of believers)?
3. What would it look like for the church to be actively involved in encouraging one another? (Note also Hebrews 3:13; 10:24f.)

Textual Focus: 1 Thessalonians 4:9-12

Right after discussion the church’s holy lifestyle (4:1-8), Paul moves into the church’s holy love.

1. Part of Paul’s concern is for their love for the broader family of God (v. 10). What does it mean that the church is a family?
2. In what ways do you see your church loving each other actively?

Textual Focus: 1 Thessalonians 4:13 - 5:11

Timothy reported back that the church was thriving in love and faith (3:6). Is it possibly significant that he didn’t affirm their hope? (Not how faith, hope, and love often come together in Paul’s writings.)

1. How does it impact the church's mission to believe that God is moving everything toward a grand future in Jesus Christ?
2. What impact should this future have on the way the church experiences its life even now (5:1-11)?

Closing

Perhaps close with these words from 3:11-13

Now may our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus clear the way for us to come to you. May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else, just as ours does for you. May he strengthen your hearts so that you will be blameless and holy in the presence of our God and Father when our Lord Jesus comes with all his holy ones.

Or these from 5:23f:

May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do it.

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Lesson 2: 1 Corinthians

Background

From reading 1 Corinthians, it seems that two things sparked the writing of the book.

First, there was a report “from Chloe’s household” about serious dissension in the church (1:10-12). As Paul address this for the first few chapters, it’s clear that more is going on than just disagreement about specific issues of doctrine. Apparently, there was some question about whether Paul was the kind of person they would want to ask in the first place! (This leads to his admission that people who follow Jesus may be treated the way the Lord was: “For it seems to me that God has put us apostles on display at the end of the procession, like those condemned to die in the arena. We have been made a spectacle to the whole universe, to angels as well as to human beings” (4:9).)

Second, there was apparently a letter delivered with questions from the Corinthians (“now for the matters you wrote about . . . ” [7:1]). This included questions about sex outside of marriage (7:1-40); eating meat offered to idols (8:1 - 11:1); spiritual gifts (12:1 - 14:40); and Paul’s collection for the saints in Jerusalem (16:1-4).

Class members may come with lots of questions from their reading of the book. Try to keep the focus on the calling and nature of the church! Save questions about veil-wearing (11:2-16) and baptism for the dead (15:29) for another day.

Textual Focus: 1 Corinthians 1:1-9

1. It’s evident from 1 and 2 Corinthians that the Corinthian church had lots of problems. I doubt that anyone has the goal of restoring the 1st century church in Corinth! However, Paul describes them as “the church of God . . . those

sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be his holy people, together with all those everywhere who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ — their Lord and ours.” What does it say to us about the church’s calling that this identity is anchored in the work of God rather than their achievements?

2. We have been called by God in “fellowship with his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord” (1:9). What does this mean? How does our fellowship with Christ connect with our fellowship with other believers?

Textual Focus: 1 Corinthians 1-4

It seems that the divisions in the church are rooted in a deeper problem, according to Paul. They grow out of false understandings of wisdom and power rather than out of “Jesus Christ and him crucified” (2:2). Paul believes that believers can find unity only when they act out of love; and that love must reflect the self-giving, self-emptying “mind of Christ” (2:16).

1. Paul describes both the church (3:16f) and individual Christians’ bodies (6:18-20) as temples? What is the meaning of this image — in light of the larger Christian story?
2. What happens when the church gets its central guidance from someplace other than the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus?

Textual Focus: 1 Corinthians 12-14

We have all heard chapter 13 read at weddings. While it certainly speaks to Christian marriages, this wasn’t the initial point. Paul was charting a way for a church — notably, a church that was having problems with division, including the divisions that can come from people thinking their gifts are greater than those of others.

1. Ask the church to summarize Paul’s teaching about the church as the body of Christ (especially in 12:12-16). How can the church be sure to make sure all members of the body are honored and included?
2. Contrast the love of 1 Corinthians 13 with “love” as it is often described in contemporary shows and songs. And perhaps contrast it to an average day on Facebook feeds!

Closing

Perhaps end the brief exhortation in 16:14 ("Do everything in love") followed by a reading of this part of chapter 13:

"Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres."

Then finally (8:1-3):

"Knowledge puffs up while love builds up. Those who think they know something do not yet know as they ought to know. But whoever loves God is known by God."

Mike Cope
2024

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Lesson 3: 2 Corinthians

Background

After writing 1 Corinthians, Paul learns that not all is going well with the church in Corinth. Rumors are floating around that Paul's apostleship isn't impressive. Some of this undoubtedly comes from values held by people in Greece in the first century (a love for rhetorical flourish and impressive speech); and some from the so-called "Super-Apostles" who hinted that Paul just wasn't impressive enough. His life seemed, in a word, rather "weak."

So Paul quickly crossed the Aegean from Ephesus to Corinth to make what he calls a "painful visit" (mentioned in 2:1-4). Then this visit was followed up by a "severe letter" (2:4 — a letter apparently lost to us) that he sent with Titus. Paul meanwhile left Ephesus to go to Macedonia, but was restless until he received word back from Titus. While they were finally renewed, Paul received good news: "[Titus] told us about your longing for me, your deep sorrow, your ardent concern for me, so that my joy was greater than ever" (7:7). But it also sounds like the news wasn't 100% positive because Paul spends much of 2 Corinthians defending his apostleship. In this defense, we learn much about Christian ministry and the church.

What seems to be ultimately at stake is a "different Jesus" and a different gospel (11:4). Some who resisted Paul didn't like the cross-shaped nature of the Christian calling. They would much prefer a powerful gospel that impresses, conquers, and dominates.

Textual Focus: 2 Corinthians 2:14 - 6:13

New Testament scholar N. T. Wright calls this section “the engine room of 2 Corinthians.” It’s where Paul lays out a long defense of his apostleship.

1. Why do you think Paul goes to such lengths to talk about his sorrows, his suffering, his challenges, his weakness? See 4:7-12; 6:3-10; 11:21-33; and 12:10.

So unimpressed are some with Paul! It’s a bit embarrassing that the founding apostle was imprisoned, that he was in-and-out of town quickly, that he was “raising money for a good cause” (what WERE his motives, after all?) — that he was weak and unimpressive.

But to Paul, these things he had suffered for the gospel were the very mark of his calling. For he had learned through the story of Jesus and through his own experiences that when he was weak, then he was strong (12:10). He was following in the steps of the Messiah who was “crucified with weakness” yet lives by God’s power (13:4).

2. When he begins this section (2:14-17), he uses the images of a triumphal parade and of “the aroma of Christ.” How might these images guide our understanding of ministry?

On the procession, compare his earlier words in 1 Corinthians 4:8-13. The Greeks were familiar with triumphal parades of returning generals who were celebrating their victories. (Do some research on the Triumphal Arch of Titus in Rome — celebrating his victory in Jerusalem in AD 70.) In the procession, the victorious army would lead the POWs. To Paul, the apostles were like the prisoners being led. They looked like they were pathetic and defeated to the crowds; yet ironically, it was God who was leading them in Christ. There is an interesting mixture of apparent defeat and gospels victory in the passage — one that aligns well with the story of Jesus himself.

At the end of the victory parade, sacrifices would be made with the smells wafting through the surrounding streets. Paul says that believers are this “fragrance” (v. 14) or this “aroma of Christ” (v. 15). What are some implications of this imagery for your church? What does it mean to be “the aroma of Christ”?

“And who is equal to such a task?” Paul asks in words that echo the story of Moses (using nearly the same words that are in the Greek translation of Exodus

4:10). Note that the answer will come in a couple paragraphs: “our competence comes from God.”

3. What does it mean for the believers in Corinth to be “a letter from the Messiah” (3:1-3).

When some suggested that it might be nice if Paul presented some “letters of recommendation” (as we commonly do in university and job applications today), his response was that they themselves were his letter.

Note that the letters were “written” (v. 3) — they didn’t write themselves. The church itself is the result of the work of the Spirit of the living God.

And remember that letters are intended to be sent! The very image implies that they are not only containers of the work of the Spirit; they are also conduits. They are to be sent into the world.

4. What do you learn about Paul, his apostleship, and (by extension) about believers through the image of “jars of clay” (4:1-15)?

Note that the jars are important — yet the real “treasure” is what they contain. In this sense, the church may appear weak and powerful, yet it “contains” the very power of the gospel. So it only makes sense that “we do not preach ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus ’sake” (4:5).

Closing

Perhaps end with the Trinitarian benediction at the end of the book—a benediction which (in part) summarizes the work of God the Father, the Son, and the Spirit throughout the book: “May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you.”

Mike Cope, 2024

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Lesson 4: Romans

Background

Revival often begins in Romans! And no wonder — with its powerful focus on the gospel, the Holy Spirit, salvation, and so many other themes.

However, too often Romans has been approached as a kind of “best of Paul.” As if the apostle sat in a library to compile his theological perspective in one volume.

Increasingly, serious students have known that this book is focused on ecclesiology (“a study of the church”) — what it means that God has called Jews and Gentiles together into one body for the sake of the world. As different as the backgrounds might have been — one group having grown up with stories of the Old Testament and other with stories of Homer — they share so much in common: all humans have the same crisis of sin (3:23); and all have need of the saving work of God through “the faithfulness of the Messiah Jesus” (3:21-26).

As some have read Romans looking just for nuggets about “salvation” (in a very narrow sense), they haven’t quite known what to do with chapters 12-16. But when you realize that Paul is writing to actual house churches in Rome about their life together in the Spirit, these chapters come into sharp focus. They are basic instructional pieces on the meaning of Christian community.

Textual Focus: Romans 12:1-8

As Paul seeks to shape the cross-shaped identity of the people of God, he reminds them that they are to be a living sacrifice, constantly “transformed by the renewing of [their] mind.”

1. In what ways does 12:1-2 expand your understanding of the church’s worship?

There is a rich importance to the gatherings of the church for public worship and encouragement. But when the assembly is over, worship is not. It just moves into a new context!

2. In what ways does the church benefit from the diverse gifts of God? How is it possible to be “one body with many members,” knowing that these various members have different gifts of the Spirit?

Textual Focus: Romans 14-15

Historians and New Testament scholars think it’s likely that the “rub” in the churches of Rome may lie along differences between Jewish believers and Gentile believers. It is likely that the edict of Claudius (mentioned in Acts 18) to evict Jews from Rome also impacted Jewish Christians; now, Nero has reversed the policies and the churches find themselves with both Jews and Gentiles again.

1. In what ways might we hear the “weak” and “strong” language in light of this possible background? And in what ways have we experienced our differences in our own churches?
2. The climax of this section (and perhaps of all the exhortation in Romans!) seems to come in 15:7: “Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God.” Read through the two chapters to see what attitudes and actions lead toward such welcoming and accepting of one another.

Textual Focus: Romans 16

It’s easy to get to the powerful end of Romans 15 (“The God of peace be with you all. Amen.”) and move on. What, after all, are we to do with all the names in the final chapter.

But Paul knew that community isn’t built on good arguments alone — even ones as important as those in Romans. For true unity we must have a new way to “see” each other.

1. What are the terms of relationship he uses in the first 16 verses?

2. What affirmations does Paul offer about the various people? And what would happen in our churches if we knew each other well enough that we could name the ways in which God had used various members in the life of faith?

Closing

Perhaps close with your own version of Romans 16:1-16. Imagine the impact if the class leader could write out ahead the sort of greetings that Paul offers for the church in Rome. What significant things could be said about the members of your class and your church?

“May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit” (15:13).

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Lesson 5: Philippians

Background

From prison — traditionally from Rome, but recently more New Testament scholars have thought likely from Ephesus — Paul writes to the believers in Philippi. Imagine four “levels” of his instruction to them:

At the top level, he is writing to urge them to live a certain way. “Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ” (1:27). “Do everything without grumbling or arguing, so that you may become blameless and pure, ‘children of God without fault in a warped and crooked generation.’ Then you will shine like stars in the sky as you hold firmly to the word of life” (2:14-16).

But “beneath” that instruction is a deeper concern: that the believers continue to develop a Christian way of thinking. “In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus” (2:5). Rather than having minds that are set on earthly things, believers should think in a way that reflects their belief that the Risen Christ will one day transform them fully (3:19-21).

But even that is anchored in a deeper level — that the kingdom mindset is embodied in stories of people like Epaphroditus, a “co-worker and fellow soldier” of Paul’s who risked his life for the work of Christ (2:25-30); Timothy, who looks out for the interests of Jesus Christ rather than his own concerns (2:19-24); and Paul, who had learned to consider everything a loss because of the “surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus” (1:12-16; 3:8; 4:11-13). (We could also note there are negative examples in chapter 3—what the Christian life does NOT look like!)

There is one other level, of course: the foundation upon which everything else rests. Paul lays out what Michael Gorman called his “master story” — the one that defined his calling and his life — in 2:6-11. “Philippians is above all an

extended commentary on one portion of the letter, the famous text in Philippians 2:6-11,” Gorman points out.

Who, being in very nature God,
did not consider equality with
God something to be used
to his own advantage;
rather, he made himself nothing
by taking the very nature of a servant,
being made in human likeness.
And being found in appearance as a man,
he humbled himself
by becoming obedient to death —
even death on a cross!
Therefore God exalted him to the highest place
and gave him the name that is above every name,
that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord
to the glory of God the Father.

Textual Focus: Philippians 2:1-11

If Gorman is right (in his wonderful book *Inhabiting the Cruciform God*) that this is Paul’s “master story,” we should be prepared to be guided by it since being a Christian implies following Jesus.

1. Why do you think Paul focuses on the “downward mobility” of Jesus in verses 6-8?

This is a robust description of the self-giving of Jesus. His very story is one of love expressed in serving and laying down his life for others.

2. How might it impact the church if we followed the actions of Jesus in our interactions with one another?

Paul’s interest here isn’t “just” the all-important founding story of our faith. As 2:1-5 indicates, the self-giving story of Jesus is intended to guide the church in the way they greet each other. (Note in 4:2-3 a specific case in that church where the “mind of Christ” was needed.)

3. Paul seems to believe that in Timothy and Epaphroditus the church has models of what Christ-following looks like. What names come to mind to class members — of people who have helped them understand better what living out the gospel looks like?

Textual Focus: Philippians 1:27-30; 3:20

Twice in the book, Paul uses the word (1:27 as a noun, 3:20 as a verb) from which we get our word “politics.” His insistence is that our main identity is as citizens of the kingdom of Christ.

Describe what difference it makes that the church’s primary identity is in this citizenship. What happens when people draw their primary identity from some other source?

Textual Focus: Philippians 1:4, 4:4-7

Philippians has often been called “the epistle of joy.” And, indeed, references to “joy” and “rejoicing” abound. From the opening where Paul says that he’s praying for them “with joy” to the familiar command to “rejoice in the Lord always,” the church is invited into this joy which (like peace in 4:7) passes understanding.

Note that this joy doesn’t seem to depend on circumstances! Paul is writing from prison; and he’s writing to people familiar with suffering. But this is the joy of living out of a story of self-giving love. What might it mean in our neighborhoods if the church exhibited lives of joy, lives of thanksgiving, and lives of peace (4:4-7)?

Closing

Perhaps close with these words from Michael Gorman (*Becoming the Gospel*)

“As we live in that story we will be a missional people, each of us allowing our time to be at God’s disposal. To become the gospel is to allow Christ’s story to become our story, and our time — as well as our energy and other resources — to become his in the service of that gospel. In doing so, we take risks — Paul calls it living worthily of the gospel — that we would not ordinarily take. Why? We will let Paul have the final word or two. . . ‘It is my larger expectation and hope that I will not be put to

shame in any way, but that by my speaking with all boldness, Christ will be exalted now as always in my body, whether by life or by death' (Phil. 1:20)."

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Lesson 6: Colossians

Background

Colossians 2 sounds like some people in Colossae worried that Paul had presented a wonderful gospel that turned out to have little power to transform people. Listen to warnings he gives the church:

“My goal is that they may be encouraged in heart and united in love, so that they may have the full riches of complete understanding, in order that they may know the mystery of God, namely, Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. I tell you this so that no one will deceive you by fine-sounding arguments” (2:2-4).

“See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the elemental spiritual forces of this world rather than on Christ” (2:8).

“Therefore do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day” (2:16).

“Do not let anyone who delights in false humility and the worship of angels disqualify you” (2:18).

Paul writes in Colossians about God’s cosmic work in Christ . . . about the church that has been entrusted with “the mystery” (“Christ in you, the hope of glory” — 1:27) . . . about growth which God causes (2:19).

Textual Focus: Colossians 1:3-14

1. This opening section will take some unpacking. It's jammed full of rich theological insights. But specifically: what do you learn here about the church? How might it guide your own congregation as it moves forward?
2. Notice beginning here and through the book the occurrence of the word "all." God has entrusted "all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge" in Jesus. So contemplate this question: Is Jesus enough?

Textual Focus: Colossians 1:15-20

We are used to answers to problems following the problems themselves. But in Colossians, Paul appears to address the issues raised in chapter 2 with this profound statement about Jesus in chapter 1.

1. When you read verses 15-17, what other Bible passages or biblical themes come to mind?
2. All the fullness of God dwells in Christ. And the church is the body of Christ. So often we focus on the problems the church faces (and there have been 20 centuries of such problems!); but what does this tell us about the church from God's perspective?
3. Invite people to dwell on and respond to this comment on Colossians by N. T. Wright:

"With this brief but breathtaking vision of Jesus, Paul puts the Colossians and himself into the picture. They have come to be part of it all, and Paul's own sufferings too are part of the way in which Jesus' lordship is implemented in the world. The Messiah, indeed, is living within them The ancient Jewish hope that the glory of the One God would return and fill the world is thus starting to come true. It may not look like it in Colossae, as ten or twenty oddly assorted people crowd into Philemon's house to pray, to invoke Jesus as they worship the One God, to break bread together, and to intercede for one another and the world; but actually the Messiah, there in their midst, is 'the hope of glory.' One day the whole creation will be flooded with his presence. Then they will look back and realize that they, like the Temple itself, had been a small working model, an advance blueprint of that renewed creation."

4. This may seem obvious, but it's worth asking the class: does it really matter what we believe about the Christian confession of faith?

Closing

Perhaps close with these words from 3:1-4, 15-17

Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory. . . . Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful. Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom through psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts. And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

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Lesson 7: Philemon

Background

In Colossians 4 we learned that Paul's letter to the believers in Colossae was delivered by Tychicus and Onesimus (4:7-10). What we now learn is that the two men actually carried two letters: one for the church and one specifically addressed to Philemon (along with Apphia and Archippus - v. 2).

It's easy to undervalue this powerful letter because of its brevity—just 25 verses in our English Bibles. But it's interesting that N. T. Wright begins his 1600-page, 2-volume *Paul and the Faithfulness of God* by looking in depth at Philemon. He saw in the small, personal note a way of seeing what Paul was seeking to do in his ministry (especially his writing ministry).

While Paul mentioned the conversion of the slave Onesimus (v. 16), the book is much more about the continued conversion of Philemon. Paul sought to deepen the faith of believers. He was in the "pains of childbirth" until Christ was formed in the churches (Galatians 4:19). And indeed, Philemon is given a chance to think deeply and conform to the way of Christ more fully through the challenges Paul makes.

Textual Focus: partnership

1. Paul twice mentions the fellowship/partnership believers have. He appeals to Philemon through this fellowship (vss. 6, 17). It's one of the few Greek words many of us know: *koinonia* (and a related form). What does it mean that church members live in fellowship with Christ and with one another?
2. What does this fellowship look like practically in the letter of Philemon — and in the church today? (For other passages that might help answer the latter part of the question, see Philippians 1:5; 2:1; 3:10; 4:15). How does this help clarify what we mean when we speak of the church?

Textual Focus: vss. 8-22

Try to picture Paul reaching out to both Philemon (vss. 4-7) and Onesimus (vss. 8-16) before he encourages Philemon to receive Onesimus on new terms (vss. 17-22).

1. What affirming words does Paul offer about Philemon? (Perhaps point out that refreshing the heart is a theme through the letter: vss. 7, 12, 20.)
2. How does he affirm Onesimus?
3. Paul says that he could appeal on the basis of duty (v. 8) but has chosen instead to appeal based on love (v. 9). How is this significant? What is it like to teach the church to think “Christianly”?

Note: It’s hard to study Philemon without wondering why Paul doesn’t just put an end to slavery among believers. This fits with his other letters, however. Paul tried to transform the master-slave relationship, not overturn this societal structure. See 1 Corinthians 7:21-24; Ephesians 6:5-9; Colossians 3:22 - 4:1; 1 Timothy 6:1-2; Titus 2:9-10.

In Sarah Ruden’s *Paul Among the People*, she writes:

[Paul] turns his sermonizing into a bomb, presses down the detonator, and walks away, leaving glittering fragments of absurdity in place of the conviction that people solve problems. This could be called a cop-out, a pie in the sky. But in the most practical terms, he was justified: the early Christian church, without staging any actual campaign against slavery, in the course of the centuries weakened it until it all but disappeared from Europe. Slavery was doomed simply because it jarred with Christian feeling — the same basic circumstance that doomed it in the modern West.

Closing

Possibly close with “The Prayer of St. Francis” (so-called not because it was written by Francis but because it rings true with his life):

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace.
Where there is hatred, let me sow love;
Where there is injury, pardon;
Where there is doubt, faith;
Where there is despair, hope;
Where there is darkness, light;
And where there is sadness, joy;
O Divine Master,
grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled as to console;
to be understood, as to understand;
to be loved, as to love.
For it is in giving that we receive;
it is in pardoning that we are pardoned;
and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.
Amen.

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Lesson 8: Ephesians

Background

N. T. Wright has often encouraged people to imagine how differently we would read Paul's writings if we gave priority to Ephesians rather than Romans. Unfortunately, some have reduced Romans to little more than a "road to salvation." So they then approach all of Paul as a guide to being saved by faith rather than by works.

But if we started with Ephesians, Wright says, we would have understood all along that Paul's themes were bigger. We would see that God's grand plan of reclaiming all things begins with the church—the body of Christ, "the fullness of him who fills everything in every way"—as they live into God's future through the power of the crucified and risen Christ.

In this rich book — apparently a kind of circular letter for many churches (the words "in Ephesus" aren't in the best and earliest manuscripts of the New Testament) — there is so much to help us understand what it means to be the people who are "called and sent."

Textual Focus: Ephesians 1:15-23

1. One of the highest statements made in the New Testament about the church is that it is "the fullness of him who fills everything in every way" (1:23). In what sense is the church the fullness of Jesus Christ?
2. What is Paul praying for — and how might the content of Paul's prayer help guide the church in its sense of calling and mission?
3. What does it imply that Jesus is the "head" over his body, the church?

Textual Focus: Ephesians 2:1-22

A central focus of Ephesians is peace. Note how Paul speaks at the end of “the gospel of peace” and then closes with blessings of peace, love and grace.

“The church...is—or should be—a sign of hope in a fractured world. It can be the bridge between enemies, between the realities of this broken age and those of the coming age of shalom, and between the hatred and violence in our own hearts and in the hearts of others.” (Michael Gorman)

1. Read carefully these passages about peace: 1:2; 2:14, 15, 17; 4:3; 6:15, 23. In what sense is the church a place of peace?
2. How might God’s plan for unity among Jews and Gentiles speak to the divisions present in society and the church?
3. Note that the focus on God’s work of salvation among people (2:1-10) is followed immediately by the section on peace and reconciliation (2:11-22)? How might the two themes be related?

Textual Focus: Ephesians 6:10-20

Wright says about this well-known passage at the end of the book: “You might not have seen it coming, but when you get there it turns out not to be an appendix on an unrelated topic, but rather the deeper reality that makes sense of all that has gone before.”

1. How does this imagery speak to the presence of God’s people in a world that often doesn’t share its values and behavior?
2. In what ways is this insight into cosmic warfare essential for the life of the church today?
3. When you read this passage, what names of believers you have known come to your mind — people who embodied the call to depend on God in the battle against “powers and principalities”?

Closing

Perhaps close with these words from 3:14-21

For this reason I kneel before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth derives its name. I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the Lord's holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God. Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.

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2024**