



# Paul

An independent Bible study class  
2028?

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Course Syllabus  
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### **General Material**

These notes provide the framework for a class on the ideas of Paul as recorded in the Pauline epistles of the Bible, and in the context of its peers, and as matched with history. The class meets Sunday evenings 6:30-8pm in room 3191 at Valley Church, Cupertino, California, starting when we finish the History of Israel class, if there is enough interest.

The latest version of these notes is always available on the web page for this class:

<http://www.nemecfamily.net/fan/writing/Paul/>

This class explores the ideas of Paul, with special attention to how and why they differed from ancient Judaism, Second Temple Judaism, and other religious thought of the region and time. It covers the New Testament books in (as best we can tell) the order in which they were written, starting with the undisputed Pauline epistles (Romans, 1 Corinthians, 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, 1 Thessalonians, Philemon). It might next cover the “Deutero-Pauline” epistles (2 Thessalonians, Colossians, Ephesians). Note the focus on the ideas, rather than the actions, of Paul. We have no corroboration of Paul in the historical record, or of Saul in the Jewish religious record.

Most of these were 'occasional' letters, written on a specific occasion to address a specific set of problems or issues in a specific local assembly. But they are all that survive of Paul's writings. The ideas of Paul appear (anachronistically) in the gospels, since all the gospels were written after Paul's writings were complete. They appear prominently in John, written even later.

## Disclaimers

I accepted the role of leader or facilitator of this class by request of the people attending this Sunday evening Bible study. I intend to encourage attention to certain questions and issues, as can be seen by the rest of this syllabus. I intend to offer some of my ideas on these and related subjects. I do not speak as a teacher or other official of Valley Church. The ideas are mine, not those of Valley Church, its elders, pastors, or staff. This is not an official Discipleship Elective of Valley Church.

The first item in the [doctrinal statement of Valley Church](#) reads, “We believe in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments as being inspired by God and completely inerrant in the original writings and of supreme and final authority in faith and life.” This encapsulates a Fundamentalist position. Mine is Conservative, but not Fundamentalist. I discuss this in my [notes on the gospels](#). I neither insist nor expect that people agree with me on this or any other opinion I have or express.

When I express a view about biblical scholarship in class, unless I say otherwise, it is generally a consensus or a broadly held view among modern biblical textual scholars (not theologians), and of scholars of the history and religions of the Ancient Near East.

I say so when I express an idea that is my own. But because of my memory problems, I may forget that I've read it somewhere. Significant ideas in my written notes are nearly always annotated with their source.

The primary source for this class is the Bible texts themselves. The objective is to read them and understand them, not to read into them.

## Guiding Questions

1. Note each idea new with Christianity.
  - a) Is this idea found in the gospels? How?
  - b) Is the idea at home in Jewish thought? Greek thought?
  - c) Does Paul identify the source of the idea?
2. What does Paul say about Jesus?
  - a) Was he human? Divine? Both?
  - b) Where does Paul cite anything Jesus said or did during his lifetime besides die?
3. Identify each idea and person Paul disagrees with.
  - a) How does he handle this?
  - b) What evidence does Paul present for his side of each issue?
4. Is this something Paul might have said or taught? If not, how does it differ from Pauline teachings? This question is most suitable for the deuter-Pauline epistles and the pastoral epistles.

## Evidence

Hearsay evidence is evidence from someone who was not an eyewitness. Eyewitness testimony is “I saw Fred shoot Charlie.” Hearsay evidence is “Louise told me that Fred shot Charlie.” In a court of law, hearsay is unacceptable for determining fact. In history, it is also unacceptable for determining fact, but it is very useful for determining what someone at the time believed.

The first part of this study will be constrained to eyewitness testimony. For that, the only primary source we have is the undisputed writings of Paul. Using only those, “Paul said” is appropriate. For the second part, “The author of Colossians, writing in the name of Paul, said” is appropriate. For Acts, “The anonymous author of Acts, writing at least two decades after Paul died, said that Paul said/did” is

appropriate.

## Literary Genre

Paul writes in the tradition of ancient Greek rhetoric. That explains things we today find strange. Paul can flash from glowing praise to scathing condemnation with no transition. Paul writes in character, using styles and masks. He writes to convey a message, not to show what he is like personally. 2 Corinthians lacks the overall organization one would expect from this genre, leading many scholars to conclude it is a collection of smaller letters or excerpts. Ephesians seems to be a circular letter, intended to be passed among several churches. If Pauline, it's likely from late in his life, with an established reputation. (Johnson, lecture 10) “2 Timothy has the form of a personal paraenetic letter (a letter of advice) with elements of protreptic exhortation. This literary form was available to Paul. 1 Timothy and Titus are perfect examples of mandata principis letters, known from the third century BCE and used to instruct delegates who represented a ruler in a particular region.” (Johnson, lecture 11).

## Authorship and Dating

I cite Bart Ehrman for his representation of the consensus of modern biblical textual scholarship, making use of all relevant texts discovered to date. That includes the body of New Testament texts and fragments, early translations of those texts, early writings quoting those texts, and peer writings of the era, showing what people thought and how they used words and phrases. I cite Emory University Professor Luke Timothy Johnson for the best researched and presented, and most plausible, argument for Pauline authorship of more of the texts. The consensus:

### ***Undisputed Pauline epistles***

- Romans
- 1 Corinthians
- 2 Corinthians
- Galatians
- Philippians
- 1 Thessalonians
- Philemon.

### ***“Deutero-Pauline” epistles (likely by students of Paul, authorship debated)***

- 2 Thessalonians
- Colossians
- Ephesians

### ***Pastoral Epistles (pseudonymous)***

- 1 Timothy
- 2 Timothy
- Titus

The Deutero-Pauline epistles contain enough differences in style, vocabulary, and content that they were more likely written by students of Paul, probably after his death. I notice that we never see Paul in any way passing on his apostolic authority to anyone. Some posit that these could have been written under the direct supervision of Paul during his lifetime. That's not impossible, though we see no supporting evidence. It is plausible for even Paul to change his rhetorical style to match the need.

Commonalities in style, letter structure, and named people are used as evidence both for common authorship and for pseudepigraphical imitation or copying. If you're writing an epistle in the name of Paul, you'll tend to write in the style of Paul, and to copy identifying features such as names. Pseudepigrapha of that era very commonly included claims of "This is really me."

## Audience Reception

I have only these starter notes from James Carvin, in response to my question, "Do you have a good reference for that transition in how Paul's letters were viewed?"

The basic problem is you are looking for something that is consistently absent. That is, any reference to Paul's writing being inerrant because God dictated it to him. What you have, instead, is people like Justin mentioning the "memoirs" of the apostles to Trypho in the mid second century. Polycarp quotes from Paul in writing to the Philippians as a way of showing affinity rather than as a way of asserting Paul's authority. Ignatius of Antioch only mentions Paul in one of his letters.

## Authority of Paul

Jesus would not have called him an apostle. In the gospel narratives, only Peter is shown graduating to the role of apostle. That was someone appointed by the master to carry on his teachings. Paul never met Jesus. Paul never carried on the teachings of Jesus. Paul was a self-appointed apostle, and that by the Christian rather than the Jewish definition. Paul claimed to have been a Pharisee, yet shows no evidence of that. Mishnah never mentions him. The Sanhedrin met in Jerusalem, nowhere near Tarsus. Since Paul never mentioned it, his name change from Saul was more likely legend / tradition than fact.

Paul does cite Torah (Deuteronomy 25:4) in 1 Corinthians 9:9 about muzzling the ox. I'll collect exceptions here as I find them. I was given a reference to Rosner, [Paul and The Law](#). 1 Cor 15:21, "For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive." -- Here, Paul makes a simple analogy between two men, Adam and Christ. It didn't require intensive Jewish education to know about the Hebrew story of Adam. There were also plenty of other protoplasts. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Protoplast\\_\(religion\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Protoplast_(religion))

## Epistemology of Paul

The only place where Paul clearly cites a source for some of his information is in Galatians 1:11-12, "For I would have you know, brothers, that the gospel that was preached by me is not man's gospel. For I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ." For this, he claims direct revelation.

Yet, in 1 Corinthians 15, he attributes this to the passing on of oral tradition. "I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received." That's what this phrase meant. Paul uses the same language in 1 Corinthians 11 about the rite of the eucharist.

In other places, Paul seems to be reciting an existing hymn or creed. One example is Philippians 2:5-11. Nowhere else does Paul cite a source for any of his ideas.

## Conversion

Paul doesn't tell us about it, but the author of Acts does in chapter 9. A Facebook post by Rosemary

Lyndall-Wemm from 7/16/2013:

Neuro-scientists use Paul as an historical example of Temporal Lobe Epilepsy (TLE). His reported symptoms, across several biblical books, fit perfectly. That makes his "vision" on the Road to Damascus an epileptic "aura" that warns of an impending partial seizure. It is an Altered State of Consciousness that draws on features of the current environment and mixes them with material from the person's culture and personal history. In other words, these abnormal brain events use socially acquired material to weave a free-form hallucination.

The auras of TLE are often very profound, and frequently religiously orientated. The inter-ictal (between seizure) history of people with TLE is hyper-religiosity, serial conversions (often to completely contradictory religions) and hyper-graphia (a compulsion to write about their profound pre-ictal experiences).

Todd's paresis (TP) is a temporary regional loss of function in whatever region just experienced the seizure, and its manifestation depends on where the seizure was located. Loss of motor function is most common, and can range from weakness to full paralysis. About 6% of patients who had tonic-clonic seizures experienced TP afterward, with loss of motor function sometimes accompanied with temporary numbness, blindness, or deafness.

## ***Undisputed Pauline Epistles***

### **1 Thessalonians**

This may be the earliest surviving Pauline writing. A key phrase to note is the Lord Jesus Christ (κυρίῳ Ἰησοῦ Χριστῷ). I think it's likely kurios (Lord) is not used the way modern Christians use the word. I suspect it's the more traditional meanings of a respected leader, a master, but probably not as a sovereign or emperor. The rest of the text seems consistent with a writing before the idea of Jesus as God.

### **Romans**

Romans is an epistle, a letter. A writer conveying his ideas to a reader. By nature, it's a private, one-way channel. It excludes the ideas of the readers and everyone else. I'll try to act on their behalf.

I think the reason that we have so much trouble coming up with a coherent explanation of the ideas of Paul is that Paul doesn't have a coherent idea. People write to communicate their ideas. If Paul has a consistent one, he has failed at communicating it. If you can't handle cognitive dissonance, you don't have a chance at understanding Paul.

Paul doesn't show evidence of knowing anything going on in the Roman church. Mostly he was looking for funding and a base of operations for his movement toward the west. He doesn't even acknowledge any church leadership. Had Peter really been the first leader of the Roman church, one would think Paul would know about it.

In Rom 1:16, Paul says his gospel is "the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek." The key is belief, but what does he mean by salvation? To Israel it

meant protection from, and victory over, their enemies. He answers that in verse 18, "For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men...." Now, what does he mean by [un]righteousness? Hold that thought.

In Rom 1:23, Paul is clearly talking about polytheists. If you're a polytheist, you're not righteous. If you're a polytheist, you don't believe that Jesus was the universal sacrifice because you don't believe in the god that Jesus represents. In Paul's view, any sacrifice you make (or don't make) is unacceptable. Therefore you're not even in contention for an apocalyptic judgment based on works. You're already disqualified.

Now back to what Paul means by righteous. Now that he has said that all polytheists are unrighteous, he tells us what he means by unrighteous for the rest of the chapter. It's violation of **common morality**. He thought homosexuality belonged in that list.

Rom 1:32 sneaks in a principle of moral society and rule of law. "Though they know God's righteous decree that those who practice such things deserve to die, they not only do them but give approval to those who practice them." A more modern expression of the idea is attributed to Edmund Burke, "All that is necessary for the triumph of evil is that good men do nothing."

Look again at that list. There's nothing uniquely Jewish or Christian about it. It's common morality. Paul doesn't refer to Torah to justify the list. He doesn't even say what he thinks makes people 'haters of God'. The list is simply bad behavior. Paul seems to reject Torah as his moral standard, yet offers no replacement beyond common morality. Had he read the preamble to the US Constitution, Paul might have said, "I hold these truths [moral standards] to be self-evident."

So, what happens if you violate common morality? Rom 2 explains that. You condemn yourself. You will incur judgment. You are "storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath when God's righteous judgment will be revealed." You are choosing your destiny under the apocalyptic worldview. From 2:6-11,

He will render to each one according to his works: to those who by patience in well-doing seek for glory and honor and immortality, he will give eternal life; but for those who are self-seeking and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, there will be wrath and fury. There will be tribulation and distress for every human being who does evil, the Jew first and also the Greek, but glory and honor and peace for everyone who does good, the Jew first and also the Greek. For God shows no partiality.

This is NOT the Jewish covenantal worldview! That was corporate (all Israel). This is personal, individual. You don't begin to see that idea in Tanakh until Ezekiel 18 and Jeremiah 31. Those texts overturned the earlier idea expressed in Exodus 34:7, "visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation." That doesn't replace the Covenantal Worldview. It just ends their idea that God punishes you for the sins of your ancestors. You start life with a clean slate. It's judgment according to works. There's nothing here about Jewish distinctives (kosher, Sabbath) or even sacrifices (universal). This is about morality, not religion!

In 2:12, Paul declares the destiny of those who sinned, whether or not they were Jews. By what authority does he say this? He doesn't say. This is his own philosophy.

He continues by saying that every human who does evil will be punished (with or without the 'law', whatever he means by that). Here, he seems to use law to refer to Torah for Jews. But then in verse 14, some Gentiles can do by nature what the law requires. But if you're not obeying kosher, Sabbath etc., you're not doing what Torah requires. Paul would know that if he really were Pharisee! 2:15 he mentions conscience. Effectively that's saying that any Gentile knows when he's doing wrong because his conscience is bothering him. That's the morality of Jiminy Cricket. 2:25-29 is not Jewish thought! Torah was corporate, not individual. If a person violates Torah, they are still a Jew.

Rom 3 Paul takes texts from Psalms out of context. They are speaking of the fool (Ps 14/53) or of evil men (Ps 140).

Rom 3:19-20 is important to Paul, but seems inconsistent with what he says elsewhere. He definitely misrepresents Law (Torah). Yes, Torah applies to Jews. No, the whole world is not accountable to it. Israel kept their end of the covenant by obeying Torah. It was not impossible. Perfection was not required. Paul is inventing new doctrine, not explaining old.

In the famous Romans 3:23, Paul says that all have sinned. This is a claim Paul makes but doesn't support. Since it's a letter, there's no one around to challenge or refute him. Even Jews didn't hold that doctrine, and certainly not Gentiles. Paul makes no case for why a Gentile would even be accountable to the God of Israel, who never made any demands of Gentiles beyond not hurting Israel. Does Paul make this claim in any of his earlier writings? Or is it an attempt to say that even the Roman audience needs the universal sacrifice?

5:12 death spread to all men because all sinned, NOT because Adam sinned!

Rom 6 explains Paul's view that it's baptism that transfers a person from the dominion of darkness to the dominion of light. His idea that baptism is essential is conveyed in the later addition to Mark in 16:16, "Whoever believes **and is baptized** will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned." A person then is no longer a slave to sin. They can now choose not to sin.

So far, we have three key ideas from Paul. Everyone sinned. The only way to avoid judgment for your sin is faith in Chrst. After baptism, you have the ability to choose not to sin.

Had Paul really been a Pharisee, as he claimed, then 'law' would have meant Torah, no more, no less. But that doesn't fit with his usage of the word in his writings. He also muddles usage of 'sin', sometimes with a Jewish meaning (a specific act violating Torah), sometimes with a Greek meaning (a cosmic force). That's one reason it's so hard to understand Paul.

In the famous Romans 6:23, "the wages of sin is death," Paul provides no support for this claim. That wasn't an idea of Judaism. Perhaps Paul misinterprets or misrepresents Ezekiel 18 and Jeremiah 31. Their point was that God punishes you for your sins, not for those of your ancestors. But death was never the only punishment specified in Torah.

The primary task for understanding Romans 7 is knowing, in each usage, what Paul means by law or sin.



Rom 8 says that the (only?) thing that changed is that a Christian is no longer condemned for sin. So, if I won't be punished for my sin, why bother to avoid it? Read on.

## **Philemon**

Philemon is a letter of recommendation. Philemon and Colossians greet the same set of people in the same places. Paul doesn't challenge the legal right of Philemon to own a slave. Instead, Paul urges him to treat Onesimus as a fellow brother in Christ rather than as a slave.

## ***Deutero-Pauline Epistles***

### **Ephesians**

Since Paul was so closely associated with the church at Ephesus, why so impersonal, abstract, and lacking personal notes? Also, some early manuscripts contain a blank where the name Ephesians should be. Some scholars plausibly conclude that this was likely a circular letter, to be read in several churches of the region. There are also so many differences in style, vocabulary, and theological positions that many scholars conclude this was unlikely written by Paul himself, but more likely by his followers after his death.

### **Colossians**

This also seems to be written to a group of churches in this region. The prison epistles share a common tone: more calm, more detached, more reflective, less embattled. There is little concern shown for Paul's authority, which seems to be well-established by this time. They are more concerned with moral qualities than practical events. Arguments are based less on Torah than on shared liturgical traditions, mainly baptism. (Johnson, lecture 10)

### **Next Logical Class**

The next logical class after this might be the remaining epistles, finishing with Hebrews. It might be called New Testament Odds and Ends, such as the pseudepigrapha.

### ***References***

I strongly encourage listening to these two courses for an overview of scholarly thought on the subject from two different perspectives. They can sometimes be found in libraries.

1. [The New Testament](#), Teaching Company course 656, Professor Bart D. Ehrman, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2000.
2. [The Apostle Paul](#), Teaching Company course 657, Professor Luke Timothy Johnson, Emory University, 2001.