

Paul: Mission and Message



SABBATH—SEPTEMBER 12

READ FOR THIS WEEK'S LESSON: 1 Corinthians 1:22–24; 1 Timothy 6:12; 2 Timothy 4:7; 1 Corinthians 15:12–22; Acts 15:38–41.

MEMORY VERSE: “Brothers and sisters, I don’t [do not] consider that I have taken hold of it yet. But here is the one thing I do. I forget what is behind me. I push hard toward what is ahead of me. I move on toward the goal to win the prize. God has appointed me to win it. The heavenly prize is Christ Jesus himself” (Philippians 3:13, 14, NIV).

PAUL DEVELOPED THE CHRISTIAN IDEA OF SALVATION HISTORY. He did this based on Old Testament prophecies (special messages from God), Jewish history, and the life and teachings of Jesus.

Paul’s 13 letters to the believers encouraged faith in their lives. He touched on doctrine (Bible teachings), as well as on useful everyday topics. He advised, encouraged, and warned on matters of personal Christianity, relationships, and church life. But throughout his letters Paul’s main theme (idea; topic) was “Jesus Christ and Him crucified [put to death on a cross]” (1 Corinthians 2:2, NKJV).

Paul was not only a man of letters. He also became known as an outstanding apostle (teacher; leader) and an excellent missionary. He witnessed about the gospel from Syria to Italy, perhaps even to Spain. Within ten years Paul established churches in four areas of the Roman Empire.

This week we will take a look at both the mission and message of Paul.

GREEKS AND JEWS (1 Corinthians 1:22-24)

Read 1 Corinthians 1:22–24. How do these verses help us to understand the different ways people relate to truth? What can we learn here that can help us in our witnessing to different people groups?

In the Exodus from slavery in Egypt, God worked wonderful signs of care for Israel. Later generations¹ of Jews expected that any new messengers sent from God should make themselves known by signs and wonders and miracles.

But Greeks were different. They believed that there must be a reason for everything. This would satisfy their demands for human wisdom.

Paul did not forget the cultural and spiritual history of his target peoples. Instead, he used it as an entry point for preaching Christ crucified. Those who desired signs found them in the life and ministry (work done for God) of Jesus and in the early church. But those who wanted reasons for everything found it in Paul's arguments for the gospel message. Both kinds of persons had only one need. That need was to know the risen Christ and "the power of his resurrection" (Philippians 3:10). The method used depended upon the people to whom he was witnessing.

When Paul preached to Jewish listeners, he based his sermons on the history of Israel. He joined Christ to David and used the Old Testament prophecies (special messages) pointing to Christ and foretelling His crucifixion (death on the cross) and resurrection (Acts 13:16–41). Paul started out with what was familiar to them, with what they revered (held dear) and believed, and from that starting point he sought to bring them to Christ.

For Gentiles (non-Jews), Paul's message included God as Creator, Upholder, and Judge. He explained the entry of sin into the world, and salvation through Jesus Christ (Acts 14:15–17; Acts 17:22–31). Paul had to work from a different starting point with this group than he did with the Jews (or with Gentiles who believed in the Jewish faith). But Paul's main goal was to lead them to Jesus.

Think about your own faith. On what is it based? What good reasons do you have for it? How might your reasons differ from those of other people? And why is it important to recognize these differences?



Paul's message to the Gentiles (non-Jews) included God as Creator and Judge.

DEFINITIONS

1. generations—groups of people born or living during the same time.

SOLDIERS AND ATHLETES (1 Corinthians 9:24–27)

As a skilled speaker, Paul in his mission work used the familiar to explain the unfamiliar. He took everyday examples of the Greco-Roman world to show the reality of new life in Christ. Paul used examples from two areas of his converts' (new believers) world in his sermon letters. They were (1) athletes with their games and (2) the ever-present Roman soldier.

People in Paul's world loved athletic successes as much as we do today. Greeks in New Testament times loved racing contests. Over the centuries, they held no fewer than four separate Olympic-type contests, located in different parts of Greece. Romans "borrowed" the Greek idea of athletic contests. Foot races were the most popular events and included a race of men wearing full suits of military armor. Wrestling also was popular. Athletes trained hard, and winners were richly rewarded. Nationality and social class did not matter much. Instead, how well an athlete performed was the goal.

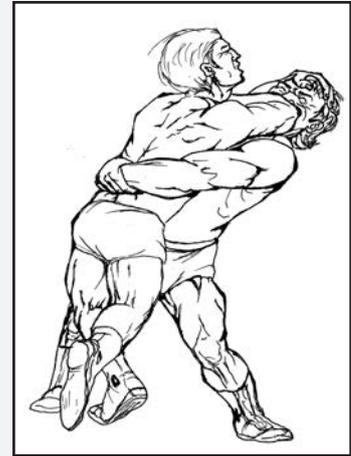
What key lessons for the Christian life would Paul's readers have found in 1 Corinthians 9:24–27; Galatians 5:7; 1 Timothy 6:12; and 2 Timothy 2:5?

Starting with Marius, Roman emperors replaced temporary (serving only a short time) soldiers with full-time career warriors. They were stationed across the Roman Empire. Their armor and weapons were always upgraded. By Paul's time, soldiers were recruited from different national groups, whether or not they were Roman citizens. In return for rewards at the end of their term of service, soldiers pledged total loyalty to the ruling emperor, who in times of war personally led them into battle.

In 2 Corinthians 10:4, 5; Ephesians 6:10–18; 1 Timothy 6:12; and 2 Timothy 2:3, 4, what comparisons did Paul make between soldiering and the Christian life?

In what is perhaps his final letter, Paul used both soldiering and athletics to explain his own view of his life as a Christian missionary: "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith" (2 Timothy 4:7, NIV).

In what ways is faith a fight and in what ways a race? How have you experienced the reality of both metaphors (word-pictures) in your own Christian life? Which metaphor best describes your own experience, and why?



Paul used the sport of wrestling to explain the gospel.

PAUL AND THE LAW (Romans 3:31)

“Does faith make the law useless? Not at all! We agree with the law” (Romans 3:31, NirV). What law must Paul be talking about here?

In English translations of Paul’s letters, the word *law* appears about one hundred thirty times. In the Acts of the Apostles (Teachers and Leaders), it appears about twenty times. Paul tried to get his hearers and readers, no matter what cultural background they came from, to understand that “law” carried several meanings, especially for Jews.

In his writings the apostle used the word *law* to mean rules for religious ceremonies, civil (having to do with people) law, health laws, and purification laws.² He wrote about being “under the law” (Romans 3:19) and about being “released from the law” (Romans 7:6, NIV). He described a “law of sin” (Romans 7:25) but also “law [that] is holy” (Romans 7:12). He mentioned “law of Moses” (1 Corinthians 9:9) but also “law of God” (Romans 7:25). These phrases may seem confusing to non-Jews. But for the Jewish believer brought up in the Hebrew culture, careful reading would make clear which law was meant.

How do Romans 13:8–10; Romans 2:21–24; 1 Corinthians 7:19; Ephesians 4:25, 28; Ephesians 5:3; and Ephesians 6:2 help us to understand that God’s moral law, the Ten Commandments, was not removed or done away with at the cross?

The ceremonial laws explained how one approached God through priesthood, Hebrew sanctuary, and sacrifices. Paul realized these laws ceased to apply after the crucifixion. They had served their purpose in their time but were now no longer needed. (This point would become very clear after the temple was destroyed.)

But with the Ten Commandments, however, matters are different. In his letters, Paul quotes some of the Ten Commandments and speaks in general terms about others of the Ten Commandments. In all cases, he mentions that the Ten Commandments are worldwide and legal for all people, Jewish as well as Gentile. Having written against the practice of sin, Paul would not in any way have removed the very law that defines what sin is. That would make about as much sense as telling someone not to break the speed limit while at the same time telling them the speed limit signs are no longer legal.

DEFINITIONS

2. purification laws—laws that dealt with making someone spiritually clean.

THE CROSS AND THE RESURRECTION (RETURN TO LIFE FROM THE DEAD) (1 Corinthians 2:2)

“I made up my mind to pay attention to only one thing while I was with you. That one thing was Jesus Christ and his death on the cross” (1 Corinthians 2:2, NIV).

The cross of Christ was important for all that Paul lived and taught. But Paul did not teach the Cross out of nothing. Instead, he taught it with other teachings too. One of them, perhaps the one most closely linked to the Cross, was the resurrection. Without the resurrection, the Cross would have no meaning.

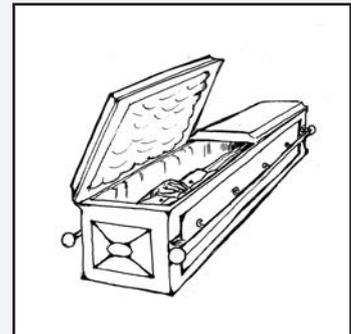
Read 1 Corinthians 15:12–22. What do these verses say that reveal how important the death and resurrection of Jesus are to the gospel? Why is a proper understanding of death as a sleep important for making sense of these verses? If the dead in Christ are already in heaven, what is Paul talking about here?

Unfortunately, the majority of Christian traditions, as well as non-Christian religions, believe falsely that the human soul lives forever. But against this belief, Paul pointed out that

1. only God can live forever (1 Timothy 6:16);
2. eternal life is a gift from God to the saved (1 Thessalonians 4:16); and
3. death is a sleep until Christ returns (1 Thessalonians 4:13–15; 1 Corinthians 15:6, 18, 20, 23).

Worship in almost all religions includes many false teachings based on the false idea that the soul lives forever. These errors include things like reincarnation,³ praying to saints, veneration (worship) of spirits, an eternally burning hell, and many New Age practices, such as communication with spirits. A true understanding of the Bible’s teaching on death is the only real protection against these great lies. How unfortunate, too, that those who rebel (fight) against accepting this truth often are Christians from other kinds of churches.

A believer closes his or her eyes in death. After what seems like a moment of darkness and silence, he or she is awakened to eternal life at the Second Coming. What does the truth about the state of the dead teach us about God’s character (thoughts; feelings; actions)?



Death is a sleep until Christ returns.

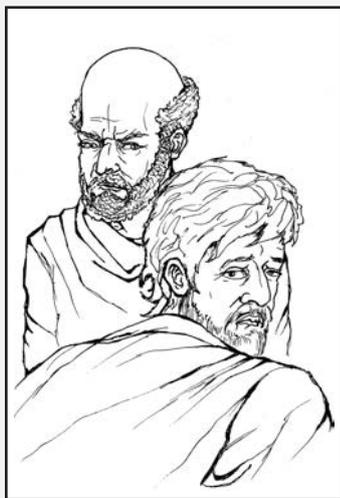
DEFINITIONS

3. reincarnation—the idea or belief that people are born again with a different body after death.

GETTING ALONG (Acts 15:38–41)

Paul was a hard worker with a strong personality driven by one purpose. Such persons can be loners with few friends but many admirers. But on his travels, two or three fellow workers often went with Paul. At least eight of these close fellow workers are named (Acts 13:2; Acts 15:22, 37; Acts 16:1–3; Acts 19:22; Colossians 4:7, 10, 11; Philemon 24). To this must be added Paul's greetings to 24 people in Romans 16, in addition to general greetings to households.

Read Acts 15:38–41. What happened here? And what does it tell us about how human these great workers for the Lord were?



Paul judged John Mark severely for leaving the ministry.

“It was here that Mark weakened. He was overcome with fear and discouragement. For a time he was not sure if he could give himself wholeheartedly to the Lord's work. Unused to hardships, Mark was disheartened by the dangers and hardships of the way. . . . So he left the work God had for him to do. His leaving caused Paul to judge Mark severely for a time. Barnabas, on the other hand, was inclined to excuse Mark because of his inexperience. Barnabas felt anxious that Mark should not leave the ministry, for he saw in Mark qualifications that would fit him to be a useful worker for Christ.”
—Adapted from Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, pages 169, 170.

The story in Acts reveals that Paul expected his companions to be patient in the work and the dangers of their mission. Paul believed in the importance of setting a good example of mission. Dutiful yet loving relationships among team members became a pattern for the churches, which were often based on households. The team also provided an ideal setting for the training of new evangelists⁴ and missionaries. Of course, at times things did not always run smoothly, as the case of John Mark revealed.

Read 2 Timothy 4:11. What does this verse teach about growth and forgiveness?

We all make mistakes. How can you learn to forgive those whose mistakes have hurt you? And think also about those whom you have hurt with your mistakes. How have you tried to bring healing in those situations? Or if you have not yet, why not do it now?

DEFINITIONS

4. evangelists—preachers who go from place to place to spread the gospel.

ADDITIONAL STUDY: The apostle Paul has been compared⁵ with the butterfly effect⁶ in chaos theory.⁷ This means that “the flap of a butterfly’s wings in California causes a hurricane in Asia.” Paul’s work as a writer and preacher helped turn a small Jewish group in a hidden corner of the Roman Empire into a world religion. The ideas put forth in Paul’s 13 letters have probably given greater influence than any other old-time Greek literature of comparable size.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

① Paul avoided martyrdom (dying for his beliefs) by fleeing to Athens, the intellectual center of the Greco-Roman world. Cities give shelter for escapees, including Christians. The apostle wasted no time. After studying the city’s religious statues, Paul reasoned with the Jews and preached in the marketplace. Read Acts 17:16–31. What method does Paul take with these people? And how does it help us to understand the need to fit the message to different people groups? At the same time, look at how Paul did not in any way weaken truth in order to reach these people. In our work to reach others, how can we be certain that we do not weaken important beliefs?

② Why is the state of the dead such an important teaching? What are some of the many errors that an understanding of this truth protects us against? What about your own culture? What are some of the false beliefs that this truth can be a strong wall against?

③ Think more on the question of the part that miracles have in making our faith strong. Think also about the role of reason too. In class, let those who are willing talk about how they came to faith and what part signs had in their experience. Also, what role should they have, not just in coming to faith but in keeping faith strong?

④ What about the larger group of people in your society? What kind of background do they have? What kind of beliefs are the most common? Based on your understanding of their beliefs and background, think through carefully the best way to reach out to them. What are some opening messages that will not turn them away?

DEFINITIONS

5. compared—to show how two or more things are the same or different.

6. butterfly effect—the idea that a very small change or difference on earth can make a big difference to the earth later on.

7. chaos theory—an unproved idea that says that things that seem to happen by chance actually have an underlying order.