

Well, today we're on part five of our Lenten journey through the Bible, and I'll be talking about the Epistles. Epistles, meaning the various different letters we find in the New Testament. Now it may seem strange, but the portion of the New Testament that most closely provides us information about the time and life and death and mission of Jesus Christ is a collection of letters. Not any official or historical documentation, no biographies, or philosophy, or poetry, but just letters, written by various apostles and others.

Now of the 27 books in the New Testament, 21 of them are letters. You know the other six – four Gospels, the Acts of the Apostles, and Revelation. When the Bible, as we know it, was finally put together sometime in the third century, the letters were arranged by their length, not by their chronological order, although no one can say for certain why this is. Some think the letter to the Romans is first because it represents the fullest and most exact representation of Christian doctrine. Some say it's first because Rome presided over the whole world at the time, and it's put first as a tribute. But no one really knows.

So now let's break down the 21 letters. Fourteen of them are known as the Pauline epistles, seven of which are regarded as undisputedly authored by St. Paul: Romans, 1st and 2nd Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, 1st Thessalonians, and Philemon. Three are disputed as to whether Paul wrote them or not: Ephesians, Colossians, and 2nd Thessalonians. That's ten. Three others are collectively known as the Pastoral letters, probably written by Paul when he was a prisoner in Rome: 1st and 2nd Timothy, and Titus. Now the authorship of Hebrews has been debated since the beginning of the Christian church, and that makes fourteen. The remaining seven letters of the New Testament are called the General Epistles, considered written by the actual Apostles. These include the letters of James, 1st and 2nd Peter, 1st, 2nd and 3rd John, and Jude. Not the Beatle's Jude, who everyone has heard of, but the brother of Jesus, Jude, who few of us have heard of.

Whew, now that I've totally confused you with all these details, let's get to the meat of today's discussion. As you learned last week in our study of Acts, St. Paul was called by Jesus to take his message to the non-Jewish world – to the Gentiles. Remember the church began in Jerusalem. After Jesus' death and

resurrection, the Holy Spirit came upon the disciples and they preached and performed miracles. Plus there were many other eyewitness' accounts of Jesus Christ and what had happened to him. And that was a major reason the church grew so much in what I mentioned last week, was called the Jerusalem crusade. Converts were made in Jerusalem, and spread all the way north into Antioch in Syria. But none of this Good News reached the world beyond Antioch, the world of the Gentiles. So, that becomes Paul's mission. Now not far from Antioch is Tarsus, where Paul was born. That's important because Tarsus was part of the Roman province of Cilicia, which made Paul a Roman citizen by birth. And more than once, that citizenship saved Paul from death and serious misfortune as he went on his missionary journeys. Now in order to support himself, Paul was a tent maker, or leather worker. Just like Jesus was a carpenter, everyone had a trade those days. Very few worked from home on their computer. And here are two other interesting facts about Paul. First, it appears he had a physical infirmity of some sort, since he refers to himself as having a "thorn in his flesh." No one knows what it was, but three times Paul begged the Lord to take it away. And three times the Lord said, "My grace is sufficient for you." Yes, even to the most faithful, sometimes God says 'no.' And second, before his conversion, Paul was sent as a young man to study under the tutelage of a renowned Pharisee in Jerusalem. And guess who that Pharisee was – Rabbi Gamaliel! If you remember from last week, it was Gamaliel who saved the disciples and their new movement called "the Way," by telling the Sanhedrin "to leave these men alone... for if this movement is from men it will die out, but if it's from God, you may actually find yourself fighting against God." And so they left the apostles alone! And just look what happened!

So now it's time for Paul go to the Gentiles, since he had been in Antioch for some time. You remember Antioch... that's where followers of "the Way" were first called Christians. And he eventually goes out on three missionary journeys, though some scholars call his final trip to Rome a fourth missionary journey as well. These are all described in detail in Acts, but I'm going to review some of the highlights of these missionary journeys so you can see why these letters, these Epistles, were written in the first place. You see, wherever Paul traveled, he established fledgling churches, if you could even call them that. Paul would first enter a town and preach in the local synagogue. All went well until he got to the Good News of Christ Jesus. Then he would inevitably be asked to leave the synagogue – most Jews didn't believe Jesus was the Messiah. Sometimes he would be arrested or beaten or flogged for his efforts. But invariably, he would convince some of the Jews to follow him. Then he would preach to the Gentiles and he would gain followers among them as well. Then he would leave that town and go on to the next. He was, to use United Methodist lingo – an itinerant preacher. As these various congregations

grew, his converts would send messages and give reports back to Paul, and they would ask questions or ask his advice on how to resolve a particular issue. Paul would write back letters in return, letters meant to offer encouragement, instruction, to answer questions, and sometimes even to admonish.

So let's talk about Paul's first missionary trip sometime around 47 AD, which lasted about two years. He went with Barnabas and John Mark, the author of the gospel of Mark. It took him from Antioch over to Cyprus, then into various towns in the province of Galatia, which is modern-day Turkey. The Emperor Caesar said this of the Galatians, "They are fickle in their resolve, fond of changing, and not to be trusted." This probably explains what Paul and his companions experienced on this trip. They got into town, and there they healed a man who had been crippled since birth. So the Galatians immediately want to worship Paul and Barnabas as the Greek gods, Zeus and Hermes. They of course, refuse saying, "Friends, why are you doing this, we are mortals just like you." But this is an indication of the paganism that existed at the time, so you can imagine the job ahead of Paul in trying to convert them. Now no sooner did they attain their "god status," when some Jews came and won over the crowds to their side, and they begin to stone Paul and dragged him out of the city, leaving him for dead. But through God's grace, he survived! And so they continue their work going from town to town. Regretfully, though, they were followed around by a group called Judaizers. They were converts to the faith, but they felt that following Jewish law was an essential part of salvation. In a sense, they were legalists. And this was completely opposite to what Paul preached; our salvation was by faith alone in Jesus Christ. The Judaizers came to Galatia and changed the minds of the Galatians by "clarifying" for them Paul's "misguided" theology. This then leads to what many believe is Paul's very first letter, which was written to, obviously, the Galatians. It's written as a rebuke that skips all courteous introductions and formalities. He basically boils it down to this, "You foolish Galatians, who has bewitched you?" And then he goes on to tell them not to put their hope in the law, but in Christ Jesus, telling them they, we, "are called to freedom" and saying that the whole law is really summed up in Jesus' single commandment, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." Then he goes on to talk about the fruits of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. And to put an exclamation mark on what he's just told them, he says, "There is no law against these things!" One final note of interest. Some have called this letter, Paul's "Emancipation Proclamation," freedom from legalism of any type. And, guess what... remember Martin Luther... whose ideas started the Protestant Reformation back in the 1600's... Galatians was Martin Luther's favorite epistle.

Paul's second missionary journey, took place around the year 50 AD and lasted some three years. But it starts off badly. His good companion, Barnabas, wanted John Mark to accompany them again, but Paul sharply refuses. For some unknown reason John Mark had left Paul and Barnabas on their first missionary journey to go back to Jerusalem. This didn't sit well with Paul, and he didn't want it to happen again. So Barnabas and John Mark leave for Cypress to work making converts there. Paul, meanwhile, heads toward Macedonia, modern-day Greece, where he is joined by Silas, and a new protégée, Timothy. They visit many towns and cities including Philippi, Thessalonica, Athens, Corinth and Ephesus. Some very interesting things happen on this trip. In Philippi there are three notable conversions to the faith. First, a business woman named Lydia who sold purple cloth, which meant she was successful. Only the wealthy could afford to buy purple cloth because of the difficult way it was made. She was so excited to hear Paul preach that she invites Paul and Silas into her home, where she is baptized – the first recorded baptism in Europe. Then there was a demonic slave girl who was set free of her demon and saved by Paul. However, her owners got angry because they couldn't make any more money off her phoney predictions. So they complained to the authorities who had Paul and Silas stripped and beaten and arrested. At midnight, in prison, they were praying and singing hymns to God, when suddenly there was an earthquake and every door was opened and everyone's chains fell off. When the jailer woke up and saw the prison doors wide open, he knew that he was in trouble and drew his sword in order to kill himself. But Paul shouted, “Do not harm yourself. We're all here.” The jailer, realizing the righteousness of these men, fell down trembling before Paul and Silas, asking, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?” Thus, once again Jesus is proven “Lord of all.” A wealthy business woman, a working class jailer, and the least of these, a slave girl are all converted to the faith.

Next was Paul's visit to Athens. He was alone at the time, since he had Silas stay in a town called Berea, and had sent Timothy to Thessalonica. As Paul is walking through the city he sees idols dedicated to so many different pagan gods, that he gets upset. Here is where he gives his famous Mars Hill message, in the exact same place where Socrates and Aristotle and Plato philosophized. He begins somewhat sarcastically with the words, “Men of Athens, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. (You worship so many, many gods.) I even found an altar with the inscription, ‘To an unknown God.’” And then Paul tells them that the ONE true God, previously unknown to them until that day, in fact created everything they know. And that God is Christ Jesus. Some mocked him, but many came to believe that day. He then goes on to Corinth where he meets a couple, Aquila and his wife Priscilla. They were also tent makers. So he worked and stayed together with them for 18 months preaching the Good News.

Now, just like today, every city has its own character. And Corinth had a pretty bad reputation. There was a temple there named after Aphrodite, which was staffed with over 1,000 prostitutes, both male and female. Its immoral reputation was known across the Mediterranean. Some felt Corinth was the most wicked city since Sodom and Gomorrah. Paul eventually leaves Corinth and then goes with Aquila and Priscilla to Ephesus, where those two start a church. Shortly thereafter he returns to Palestine, going first to Jerusalem and then returning to his home church in Antioch.

Paul's third missionary journey begins in 54 AD and lasts for four years. Luke, the same Luke who wrote the Gospel of Luke and Acts, accompanies him on much of this trip. Paul leaves Antioch and stops in a number of towns and cities, including Ephesus again. He spends most of his time shoring up the churches he had planted on his first two journeys. And he also performed many miracles and signs and wonders, with people turning to Christ in great numbers. There are three quick stories about his time again in Ephesus I want to tell you. The first involves an incident when the names of Jesus and Paul were used to expel an evil spirit. All the residents of Ephesus were awestruck at that, and then those who believed in black magic collected all their books and burned them in a public bonfire, the value of the books being worth over 50,000 silver coins. Another story involves a young man named Eutychus who is sitting in a third story window listening to Paul preach. Paul apparently was preaching for a very long time and this young man falls asleep, and then falls out the window. I'm sure all of you can relate to long sermons recently, but fortunately for you, you're at home sitting safely in your own chair. Anyway, everyone thought the young man dead, but Paul falls on him, embraces him, and brings him back to life. Then there's the story of Demetrius, a silversmith, who made shrines of the goddess Diana. Paul argues that gods made by hands are not gods at all. Obviously, this could be detrimental to business so Demetrius calls together all his fellow craftsmen, and motivated by greed, a trial of sorts begins and a near riot occurs once again. Fortunately, nothing comes of it, but Paul decides he's had enough and leaves. Just a quick side note, this business about the Roman goddess Diana, also known as the Greek goddess Artemis, was serious stuff. Her temple in Ephesus was so large it dwarfed any other shrine in existence, and is considered one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World. Paul ends this trip by returning to Corinth for three months before journeying back to Jerusalem. Corinth is where he probably wrote his Epistle to the Romans.

Now regarding this Epistle, Archbishop N.T. Wright notes that, "Romans is by common consent Paul's greatest masterpiece." Rev. Kalas adds, "Romans is Paul's most sustained doctrinal statement. He

declares that the knowledge of God is available to the whole human race through the creation of the world, and that God's power and nature have been revealed through the things he has made, so that we are without excuse.” And finally, “While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” Who can add anything to those statements?

Now let's review where we are. On Paul's second and third missionary trip we hear of the towns he visited, and subsequently, to which he sent his letters based on what was happening there: Philippi, Thessalonica, Corinth and Ephesus. Now obviously I'm not going to go over the details of every letter, but let's look at some of the things of interest we should know. First, all of these letters were sent at various different times, and for various different reasons. For example, the first letter to the Thessalonians was very early, when Paul was still in Corinth on his second missionary trip. Remember, Paul had sent Timothy to encourage the Thessalonians, and when Timothy rejoined him in Corinth, Paul was overjoyed at the news of the strong faith of the Thessalonians, and so he writes his letter to continue to encourage them. “Be joyful always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.” The letters to the Corinthians address several problems within congregations. They deal with sexual immorality (remember Corinth was the first century Sodom and Gomorrah), lawsuits among believers, arguments about who is the most spiritual, issues around orderly worship and the celebration of the Lord's supper, the resurrection of the dead, and so many more things. You see, to Paul, Christian behavior is firmly grounded in the message of Jesus Christ and the cross. And he makes this point right up front in his first letter to them, “The message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved, it is the power of God.” And that message of the cross, he writes, is to stop their selfish, sinful ways, and instead pursue love for one another. And this love is so perfectly verbalized by Paul, again in his first letter: “Love is patient, love is kind, love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things... And now faith, hope and love abide, these three, but the greatest of these is love.”

Now the letters to the Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon, all come later, when Paul is under arrest or in prison in Rome. That's why they're also known as the prison epistles. Ephesians is addressed to the church started by his good friends Priscilla and Aquila, the tent makers. Paul reminds the Ephesian believers of the immense love God has for them, he lays out how they are to live their lives, and he ends by reminding them to be strong in the Lord. How? By putting on the whole armor of God – imagery that would have been powerful to them, as Roman soldiers patrolled and defended the city. “Put

on the belt of truth, the breastplate of righteousness, the shield of faith, the sword of the Spirit.” The letter to the Philippians reminds the church in Philippi to rejoice even in the midst of the tribulation and suffering. It's known as Paul's letter of joy, and is a reminder to press on toward goal that lies waiting ahead. The prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus. Colossians is written to the church in Colossi as a reminder to get back to the basics of Christianity. Namely that Christ alone is sufficient for salvation. Therefore, there is no longer Greek nor Jew, nor circumcised or uncircumcised, nor slave or free, but all are one in Christ. And Philemon is a final little gem. In it, the apostle Paul is asking his friend, Philemon, to forgive Philemon's slave, Onesimus who ran away, taking some money and possessions with him. It seems Onesimus has become a Christian through his association with Paul, and is now returning to Philemon with Paul's letter of endorsement for his freedom. Paul tells Philemon that Onesimus is no longer a slave to him, “but a beloved brother.” No one knows what happened when Onesimus returned, but a man by the exact same name became Bishop of Ephesus late in the first century. And it was in Ephesus where most of St. Paul's letters were collected and copied and distributed. Perhaps by a former slave who was forever indebted to the man who helped free him.

Now as I mentioned, there is the question concerning the Epistle to the Hebrews. No one knows for certain who authored this letter. Most think it was someone within Paul's close inner circle of disciples. Possibly even the first woman, Priscilla. But, in any case, it is aimed at Jewish converts to Christ. Basically it's a comparison of the heroes and teachings in the Hebrew Scriptures with the role and superiority of Jesus Christ. And it emphasizes the importance of faith through all the things we might endure.

So now it's time to get back to Paul and his return to Jerusalem after his third missionary journey. None of Paul's journeys were easy nor without persecution, but his journey back to Jerusalem was the worst. When he first arrives, things go well as he meets with James and the elders in Jerusalem. And they rejoice as Paul relates how God has blessed his missionary trips around the world, making so many converts to the faith. But then Paul is informed there's a rumor making the rounds that he was teaching all the Jews to forsake Moses, and saying that they shouldn't circumcise their male children. Well Paul gets attacked by a mob, but is saved from certain death by the commander of the Roman garrison and taken into the fort for safekeeping. After convincing the commander that he is not an outlaw, Paul is allowed to address the Jewish mob. Interestingly enough, he makes his defense on the very same stairs where Pilate had condemned Christ to death some 25 years earlier. In fact, the cries of the mob are

similar, and so Paul is taken back inside the fort. The Romans ordered him to be beaten, but Paul is spared when he informs the commander of his Roman citizenship. But he remains under arrest and held as a prisoner until things can get sorted out. One night, the Lord comes to him and tells him, “Paul, be of good cheer; because you have testified for me in Jerusalem, you must now bear witness for me also in Rome.” Paul had always wanted to go to Rome, maybe on a 10 day cruise with a few other interesting ports of call along the way, but probably not under the various circumstances that were about to unfold. You see, the Jewish mob still has plans to kill Paul, so the Roman commander moves him to Caesarea, where he is held prisoner for two years. Now what has happened to Paul up to this point had also reached the ears of King Herod Agrippa, and he too, wanted an audience with Paul. Paul is very persuasive in his defense, and Herod Agrippa even admits that Paul, “Almost made me a Christian.” But nothing comes of this. Finally, after some back and forth with the Roman governors, Paul appeals to the Emperor Caesar. As a Roman citizen he had that right. And this Caesar to whom Paul appeals is Nero, who began his reign in 54 AD. His early years were gentle in nature, and gave no hint of the cruelties which were to follow. Unfortunately Nero blamed the Christians for the great fire that engulfed Rome in 64 AD, thus beginning a horrendous period of Roman persecution of believers in the faith.

So, finally in the fall of 60 AD, Paul is now in route to Rome for his appeal before Caesar. The boat trip was bad. Storms, delays, a shipwreck, and he's even bitten by a snake. But Paul continues to minister to his companions and others. Finally, in the spring of 61, they arrive. Paul is still under house arrest of sorts, but he is allowed to meet with Roman believers and he continued to preach the Good News. Here, during his time in Rome, as I previously mentioned, he writes Ephesians, Colossians, Philippians, and Philemon. Many believe that after preaching Christ for years, he was probably martyred in Rome. And just before his death is when he wrote what is know as his Pastoral Letters – 1st and 2nd Timothy and Titus, a protégé of Paul's who was serving the church in Crete. In these letters he gives Timothy and Titus instructions on church organization and the duties of believers. For me these are best summed up in his first letter to Timothy, “Do not speak harshly to an older man, but speak to him as a father, to younger men as brothers, to older woman as mothers, and to younger woman as sisters, with absolute purity.” Imagine if we all treated each other in this manner, both in and out, of church. What a difference that could make!

Now I want to end by summarizing the remaining seven letters of the New Testament, known as the “General Letters.” They are called this because they were not written to anyone specifically. They were

written by the apostles Peter and John, by James the brother of Jesus, and by Jude, another brother of Jesus. The letter of James is the oldest letter written in the New Testament, and it was written to Jewish believers who were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria during the persecution following the stoning of Stephen in 35 AD. His letter provides guidance on the right Christian attitudes and beliefs for everyday living. In particular he stresses the need for faith and works. “What good is it my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith alone save you? If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food and one of you says to them, ‘Go in peace, keep warm and eat your fill,’ and yet you do nothing to supply their needs, what good is that? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.” That bears repeating – faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead. Another thing he talks about is the taming of the tongue. We all know how gossip and unkind words are hurtful, and James even goes further. He says, “every species of beast and bird, or reptile or sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by the human species. But no one can tame the tongue... A restless evil, full of deadly poison.” Jude wrote his letter in 65 AD, to Jewish Christians to discredit false teachings that were going around. Peter wrote his letters shortly before his death in Rome around 67 AD. He wanted to encourage those Jewish converts to Christianity who were scattered following the persecutions by Nero. He reminds them that he was with Jesus at the Transfiguration, on that mountaintop, when God spoke as to the glory of Christ Jesus, “This is my Son, my beloved, listen to him.” And he tells them not to become discouraged but to look forward to the second coming of Christ. John wrote his letters in the late first century. They have to do with the false teachings, specifically regarding the heresy called Gnosticism. Gnostics claimed that Jesus was divine, but not fully human. Another major theme of John's is the appeal to live out our faith. He says, “No one can claim to be a Christian, while hating a brother or sister. For this is the message you have heard from the beginning, that we should love one another.”

So what happened to all the epistle writers? Well, most believe Paul was eventually executed in Rome. Remember his words to Timothy from his prison cell, “I have fought the good fight, I have run the race, I have kept the faith... now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness.” Some say Jesus' brother James ruled the church in Jerusalem for thirty years until he died. Others say he was thrown from the pinnacle of the Temple and beaten to death. Jesus' brother Jude, according to tradition was martyred in Syria with an axe. St. John and St. Peter had to leave Jerusalem during the Roman wars, with Peter going to Rome, and John going to Ephesus. In Rome, according to tradition, Peter was eventually crucified upside down because he didn't feel worthy enough to be crucified in the same manner as Christ. John was exiled to the island of Patmos in the Aegean Sea.

As I said when I started my sermon today, the portion of the New Testament that most closely provides us information as to the time and life and death and mission of Jesus Christ is a collection of letters. Not any official or historical documentation, no biographies, or philosophy, or poetry, but just letters, written by various apostles and others. And Rev. Kalas adds, "I suspect that is why people around the world are still reading these letters about our Lord two thousand years later, written by relatively unknown teachers and preachers, to followers even more anonymous: while the letters of kings and emperors from that era, are now just part of the dust." Amen