

An Overview of the Letters of the Apostle Paul

AD 50/51 – 53/54

Galatians
1 and 2 Thessalonians

AD 53/54 – 57/58

1 and 2 Corinthians
Romans

AD 60/61 – 63

Colossians
Philemon
Ephesians
Philippians

AD 63 – 67

1 Timothy
Titus
2 Timothy

AD 64 – 70

Hebrews

Galatians

Written before his arrest in Jerusalem and subsequent imprisonment in Rome, either after his first missionary journey or at the end of his third missionary journey. Either Galatians or 1 Thessalonians was probably Paul's first letter. Galatians was written about the same time as 1 and 2 Thessalonians.

Purpose: To address specific problems in certain churches where false teachers were attacking Paul and teaching that the Gentiles had to be circumcised.

1 Thessalonians

Probably written from Corinth after Paul received a report from Timothy about the condition of the church at Thessalonica.

Purpose: To stress the return of Christ and the coming day of judgment which appears to have been an evangelistic focus of Paul in preaching to Gentiles. Since he had only been able to spend a few months with the Thessalonians, Paul encourages them to live godly lives in anticipation of the return of Christ.

2 Thessalonians

Written shortly after 1 Thessalonians.

Purpose: To correct wrong a understanding that the day of the Lord had already arrived and to insist that the Christians work and provide for themselves, since many of them thought that the Lord would return any day or had already returned and that working would show a lack of faith.

1 Corinthians

Written from Ephesus during Paul's third missionary journey.

Purpose: To address a number of serious problems in the church including sexual immorality, abuse of the sacraments, divisions in the church, disorderly and irreverent worship and personal attacks on Paul, as well as to answer specific questions sent to him from the church.

2 Corinthians

Written after Paul left Ephesus and after he had received a report from Titus concerning their genuine repentance and their love and loyalty to Paul.

Purpose: To express his joy at their repentance and renewed obedience to God, to urge them to finish their collection for the suffering Christians in Jerusalem, and to defend his ministry against those who were attacking his authority.

Romans

Probably written from Corinth shortly before Paul traveled to Jerusalem with the gift from the Gentile congregations.

Purpose: Paul introduces himself to the Roman church in order to prepare the way for a personal visit to Rome. Since the Roman church had received no ministry from an Apostle, Paul writes in order to give them a thorough understanding of the gospel. The result is the grand manifesto of the Christian faith. "All the Reformers saw Romans as the God-given key to understanding all Scripture." [RSB]

Colossians

Written while Paul was a prisoner in Rome.

Purpose: To address a serious error in the church that taught that Christians were vulnerable to spiritual forces that had to be placated by veneration, by observing dietary restrictions, and by celebrating certain special, religious days required in the OT ceremonial law.

Philemon

Written while Paul was in prison in Rome and probably sent to Philemon along with the letter to the Colossians.

Purpose: To persuade Philemon to receive Onesimus back as a Christian brother instead of a slave. Onesimus had been Philemon's slave and had run away. He later met Paul in Rome and had come to faith in Christ. Paul emphasizes Christian love as the primary standard for Christian relationships.

Ephesians

Probably written while Paul was a prisoner in Rome.

Purpose: To instruct the churches in God's eternal purpose and grace and God's grand plan for the church.

Philippians

Written while Paul was a prisoner in Rome.

Purpose: To encourage the church as they faced persecution and to warn them against the false teachings of legalists and practices of libertines.

1 Timothy

Written from Macedonia during Paul's fourth missionary journey prior to his second imprisonment at Rome.

Purpose: To instruct Timothy to refute the false teachers who had gained leadership positions in the church and to organize and supervise the church.

Titus

Written during Paul's fourth missionary journey about the same time as 1 Timothy.

Purpose: To instruct Titus to complete his work on the island of Crete by finalizing the organization of the churches, refuting the false teachers, and instructing the churches in proper conduct. He wanted Titus to meet him in Nicopolis.

2 Timothy

Written from his second imprisonment in Rome before his execution. This is Paul's last letter.

Purpose: To instruct Timothy to visit him in Rome and to encourage him in his ministry and struggles with the false teachers at Ephesus.

Hebrews

Written before the destruction of the temple in AD 70. Most scholars reject Pauline authorship for a number of reasons. However, Paul was considered the author for about 1200 years.

Purpose: To encourage the Jewish Christians of the Diaspora who were suffering persecution and confusion in foreign countries and were faced with temptations to turn away from faith in Christ.

Outline

- I. Greetings (1:1-2)
- II. The Divine Purpose: The Glory and Headship of Christ (1:3-14)
- III. Prayer That Christians May Realize God's Purpose and Power (1:15-23)
- IV. Steps Toward the Fulfillment of God's Purpose (chs. 2-3)
 - A. Salvation of Individuals by Grace (2:1-10)
 - B. Reconciliation of Jew and Gentile through the Cross (2:11-18)
 - C. Uniting of Jew and Gentile in One Household (2:19-22)
 - D. Revelation of God's Wisdom through the Church (3:1-13)
 - E. Prayer for Deeper Experience of God's Fullness (3:14-21)
- V. Practical Ways to Fulfill God's Purpose in the Church (4:1-6:20)
 - A. Unity (4:1-6)
 - B. Maturity (4:7-17)
 - C. Renewal of Personal Life (4:17-5:20)
 - D. Deference in Personal Relationships (5:21-6:9)
 1. Principle (5:21)
 2. Husbands and wives (5:22-33)
 3. Children and parents (6:14)
 4. Slaves and masters (6:5-9)
 - E. Strength in the Spiritual Conflict (6:10-20)
- VI. Conclusion, Final Greetings and Benediction (6:21-24)