



Year of St. Paul Archdiocese of Toronto

Letters of St. Paul | Background & Themes

From Sunday to Sunday, we encounter St. Paul in one of his letters as he is proclaimed typically in the second reading at Mass. Attentive listening from the 13 letters attributed to him in the New Testament reveal much about Paul's faith in Christ and his understanding of how this Jesus whom he encountered in his Damascus experience impacts on the life of the whole universal Church, local Christian communities, and on the life of each individual believer. In his letters, St. Paul addresses constantly real challenges and crisis as they arose in the life of the early Church. His letters offer instruction and encouragement all the while sharing his own personal difficulties and joys. In hearing, reading and studying St. Paul's testimony, we gain much insight into how the gift of faith in Christ and His gospels "is the power of God leading every one who believes in it to salvation" (Rom 1:16)

The letters, in the order as they appear in the New Testament:

Romans: Written in about the year 57-58 A.D., Paul is at Corinth preparing to go to Jerusalem and from there to proceed to visit the Christian community in Rome – the political/cultural center of the world. St. Paul offers his fullest, and most lengthy of statements of his thought on Jesus Christ and the Gospel. While dealing extensively with the revelation of Christ in relationship to Judaism and Mosaic Law, St. Paul's interest is to present Christianity as a faith for all humanity (i.e. dying to sin and living in the power of the Holy Spirit – chap 7 & 8).

1 Corinthians: At the time of Paul, Corinth was one of the more important political and commercial centers of the time period, and was notorious for every kind of vice. Paul's letters to the Corinthians reveal how difficult it must have been as a small Christian community to live in the midst of an extremely numerous pagan environment. In giving instruction to the challenges, factions and scandals faced, St. Paul offers us his great section on how Christian love, in essence, differs and exceeds all other false loves (chaps. 12-14). St. Paul also speaks beautifully on his faith and hope in the Resurrection (chap. 15). We are also offered the oldest accounts of the Lord's Supper (chap. 11).

2 Corinthians: Paul continues to address the people of Corinth, sometime during the years 55-57, after he was released initially from Rome. He begins by explaining his reason for not returning to visit the Christians in Corinth. He asserts his ministry of being an Apostle and reviews recent difficulties and misunderstandings (chaps. 1-7). St. Paul exhorts the people of Corinth to make good on their promise of a bountiful offering designated to the Christians at Jerusalem (chaps. 8-9). Lastly, Paul vindicates himself powerfully defending his ministry against the perversions of false Apostles (chaps. 10-13). Galatians: Written in about 54 A.D., the Jewish Christians of some of the Churches Paul had founded on his first missionary journey were being persuaded by some to insist that Gentile converts also be obliged to be



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circumcised and observe the Mosaic Law. Paul counters with the famous theme of salvation/justification through faith in Jesus Christ and His Cross alone.

Ephesians: Likely written in the years 61-63, from prison, while in Rome, this letter enlarges Paul's vision to reveal the universal unity of the Church, the Mystical Body of Christ (chaps. 1 & 4). In encouraging Christians to “live as children of the light” (Eph 5: 8), St. Paul applies the great mystery of spousal love to Jesus' love for the Church, Bridegroom for Bride.

Philippians: An example of Paul's affection and tenderness for the early Church that he founded during his second missionary journey in 50 A.D. The letter provides much encouragement for the people of Philippi to continue “to be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind” (chap. 2:2). The letter to the Philippians also contains the famous hymn of Christ's self-emptying act of salvation.

Colossians: Written while in captivity in Rome during the years 61-63 A.D., St. Paul is instructing the Church in Colossae in regards to certain specific errors concerning Christ's supreme nature. Consequently, this letter's central theme involves the preeminence of Christ – as head of the Church and also of the whole of creation (chap. 1:15-29).

1 Thessalonians: Acknowledged as the first piece of New Testament literature, written in the year 51 A.D. Acts of the Apostles relates the troubles that were stirred upon Paul's visit. In this letter, Paul offers encouragement on how to wait for “the coming of the day of the Lord” and describes a much-quoted look at the Second Coming. (chaps. 4:13-5:11)

2 Thessalonians: While continuing with the theme of the much-expected time of the Lord's imminent return, this second letter also warns the people of Thessalonica against living in idleness and failing to work for one's own living. (chaps .2-3)

Philemon: The shortest of Paul's letters; it is the only personally addressed letter to have survived. The content of the letter has Paul pleading for Philemon's run-away slave, Onesimus, whom Paul had befriended while imprisoned in Rome. Paul encourages Philemon to receive Onesimus back “no longer as a slave but more than a slave, a beloved brother in the Lord.”

1, 2 Timothy & Titus: The two epistles to Timothy and one to Titus offer the early Church pastoral instructions in regards to organizing and administrating the communities. The young pastors, Timothy and Titus, are some of Paul's early converts whom Paul is building up as his successors. The second letter of Timothy includes some of Paul's final words while writing as a prisoner in Rome; the tone is particularly emotional and personal as Paul acknowledges “the time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.”

