

Introduction to Paul's Middle Letters

Philemon—a small little letter sent along with the letter to the Colossians

Why was it included in the NT?

What value has it for us today?

In this little letter, Paul is “doing theology in culture.”

He is taking the “household texts” and practicing the “first principles” in his cultural context around the issues of slavery.

Introduction to Paul's Middle Letters

Think about some of our key issues globally today

Inner cities in North America—the New Jim Crow, intergenerational poverty, Black Lives Matter

Global cities—shadow cities, India caste system, ethnicity

Introduction to Paul's Middle Letters

Think about Paul's "household texts"

Husbands, wives

Parents, children

Masters, slaves

Why does he include masters, slaves?

Does he accept slavery as okay?

Why does he not condemn slavery?

Why does he not challenge it politically?

What about the "New Jim Crow" in the USA? Black Lives Matter? Black reparations today?

What about the caste system in India? the Dalits? the Illiterates?

Introduction to Paul's Middle Letters

Issue: Significance of Philemon

Questions:

1. This letter was sent along with the major letter to the Colossians. Why was it included in the New Testament?
2. How is Philemon integrated with Colossians? How does it help us understand the significance of the Colossians letter?
3. In what sense is this letter an illustration of doing theology in culture? How is it an illustration of applying the “first principles” — specifically the household texts of Ephesians and Colossians — to a specific cultural situation?
4. Even though Paul is strong and authoritative to the churches in his letters, what does this teach us about Paul's heart and his care for his churches and individuals in the churches?

Introduction to Paul's Middle Letters

¹ Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother,
To Philemon our dear friend and co-worker, ² to Apphia our sister, to Archippus our fellow
soldier, and to the church in your house:

³ Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

⁴ When I remember you in my prayers, I always thank my God ⁵ because I hear of your love for
all the saints and your faith toward the Lord Jesus. ⁶ I pray that the sharing of your faith may
become effective when you perceive all the good that we may do for Christ. ⁷ I have indeed
received much joy and encouragement from your love, because the hearts of the saints have
been refreshed through you, my brother.

Philemon 1–7

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Introduction to Paul's Middle Letters

⁸ For this reason, though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do your duty, ⁹ yet I would rather appeal to you on the basis of love—and I, Paul, do this as an old man, and now also as a prisoner of Christ Jesus. ¹⁰ I am appealing to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I have become during my imprisonment. ¹¹ Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful both to you and to me. ¹² I am sending him, that is, my own heart, back to you. ¹³ I wanted to keep him with me, so that he might be of service to me in your place during my imprisonment for the gospel; ¹⁴ but I preferred to do nothing without your consent, in order that your good deed might be voluntary and not something forced. ¹⁵ Perhaps this is the reason he was separated from you for a while, so that you might have him back forever, ¹⁶ no longer as a slave but more than a slave, a beloved brother—especially to me but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord.

Philemon 8–16

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Introduction to Paul's Middle Letters

¹⁷ So if you consider me your partner, welcome him as you would welcome me. ¹⁸ If he has wronged you in any way, or owes you anything, charge that to my account. ¹⁹ I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand: I will repay it. I say nothing about your owing me even your own self.

²⁰ Yes, brother, let me have this benefit from you in the Lord! Refresh my heart in Christ.

²¹ Confident of your obedience, I am writing to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say.

²² One thing more—prepare a guest room for me, for I am hoping through your prayers to be restored to you.

²³ Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends greetings to you, ²⁴ and so do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke, my fellow workers.

²⁵ The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.

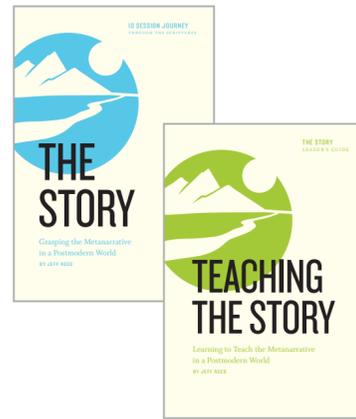
Philemon 17–25



Paul's Middle Letters

The Church Comes into Full View

Paul's Early Letters



Kerygma
Early Acts
Apostles' Teaching
6 months
Paul: 3 years "night and day"

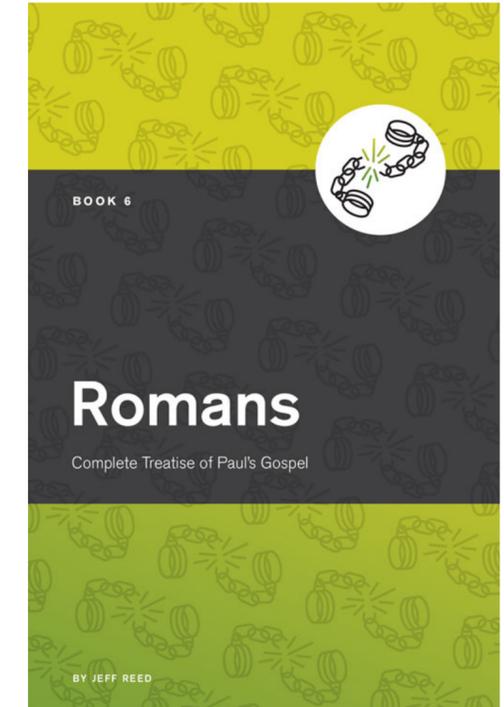
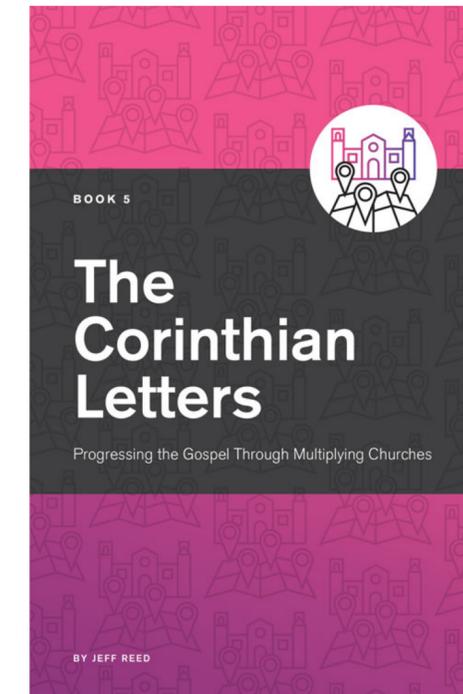
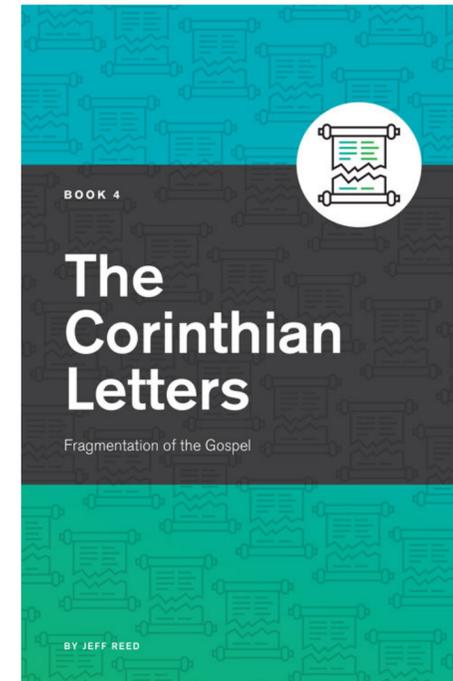
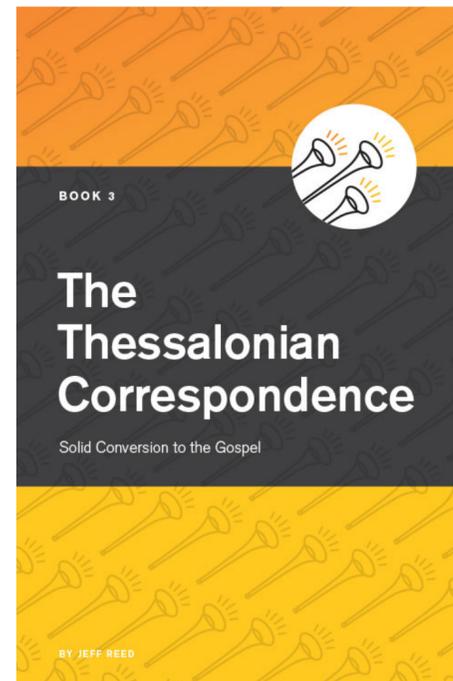
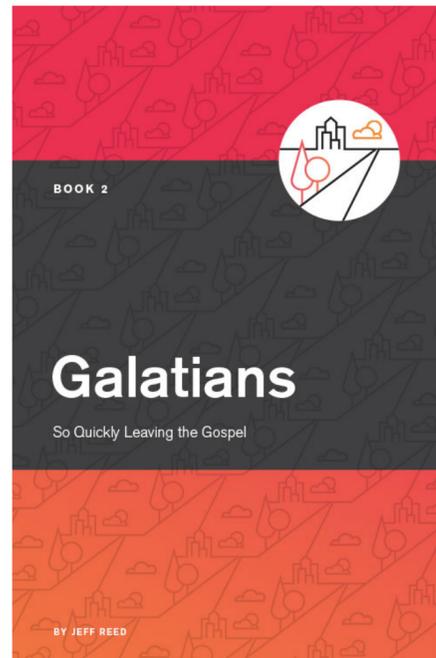
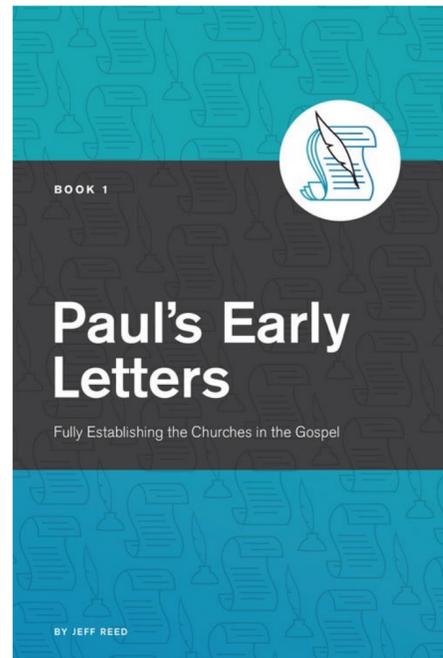


Didache
Body of Acts
Theology of Paul
1½ years

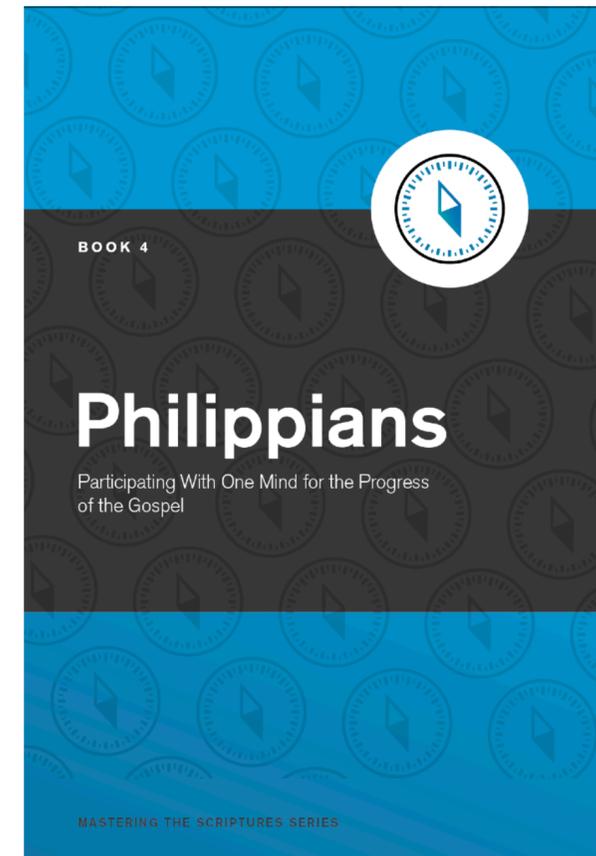
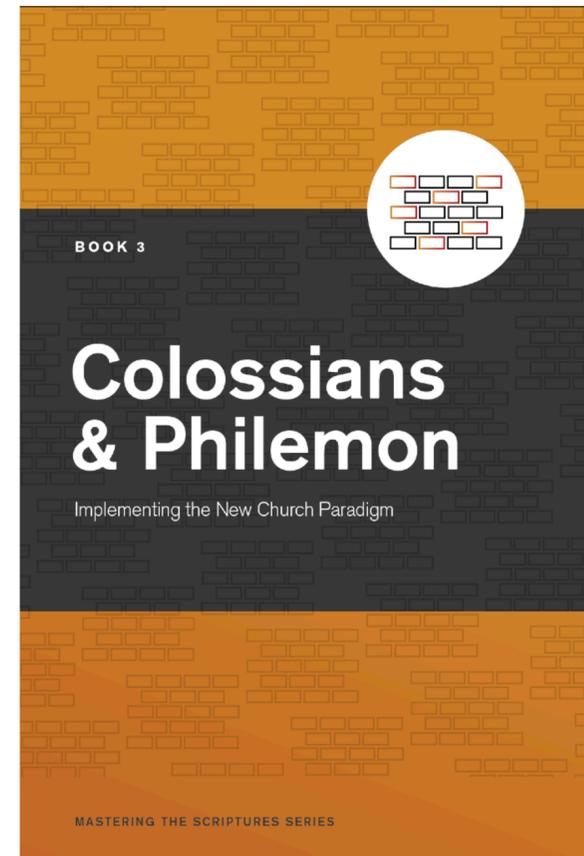
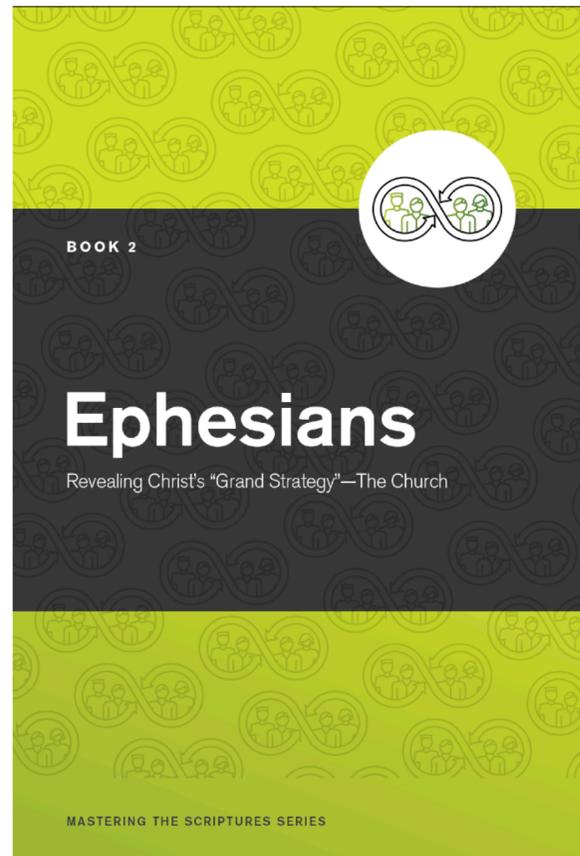
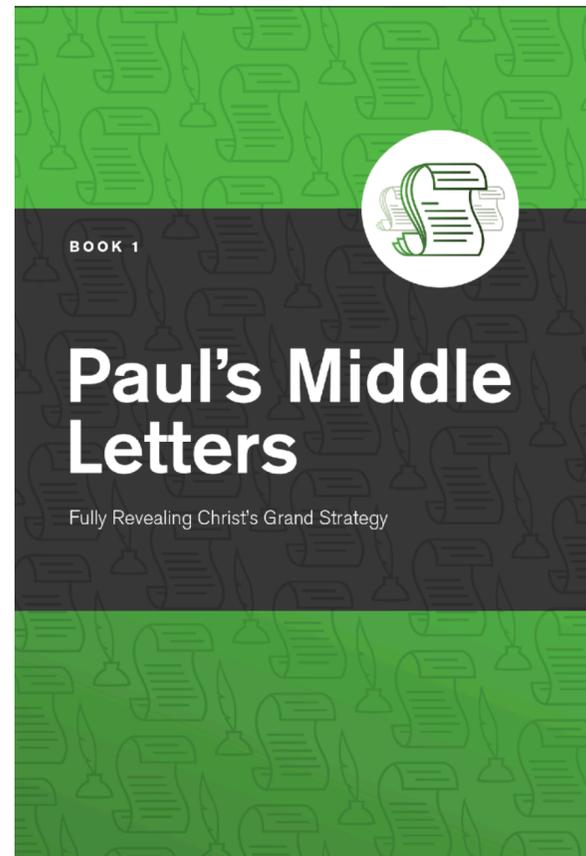


Full Kerygma
After Acts
Apostles' Gospels
1 year

Paul's Early Letters



Paul's Middle Letters



Introduction to Paul's Middle Letters

In the middle letters, we get a full revelation of Christ's grand strategy after He inaugurated the Kingdom—that is the Church.

We will also look at the letters from the viewpoint of Paul building his global apostolic network, as we began to do in his Early Letters.

I will try to be here 20 Sundays to teach the series. Between those times, the apostolic team, under Michael, will mix in other teaching from these letters.

Introduction to Paul's Middle Letters

These letters were all written close together (Acts 28:30), during the 2 years Paul was under house arrest—from February, 60, to March, 62. Most likely...

Ephesians was written Autumn, 60

Colossians and Philemon—Autumn, 61

Philippians—early Spring, 62

These letters give us the full revelation of the Church. But think of the battles that were fought before this.

Introduction to Paul's Early Letters

The battle for the gospel went from Autumn, 47 AD, until the writing of Romans in the middle of November, 56 AD—10 years

Paul's first confrontation with Peter—Autumn, 47 AD (Gal. 2:1–10)

Peter in Antioch—Autumn, 49 AD (Gal. 2:11–16)

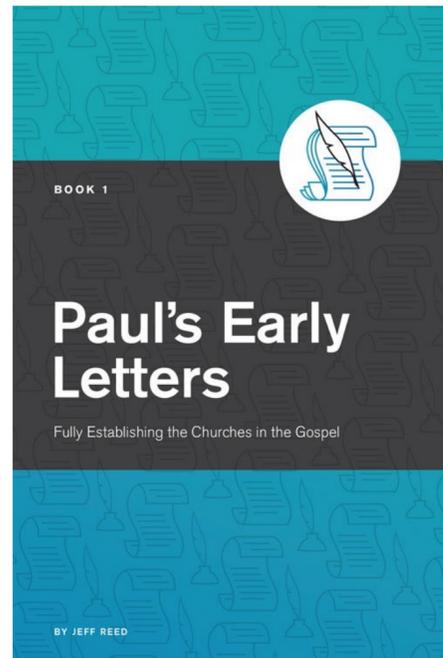
Jerusalem Council—Autumn, 49 AD

Then the early letters of Paul—Autumn, 49 AD to Romans in 56 AD

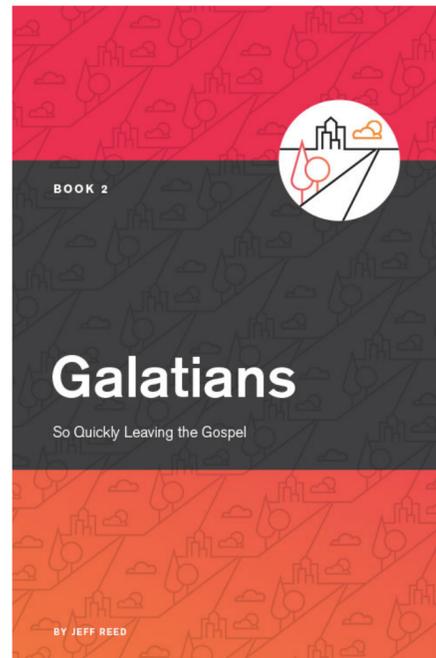
It took Paul a decade to win that argument, which he completed with his Romans manifesto on the gospel.

Now on to his rather compact, full unveiling of the Church.

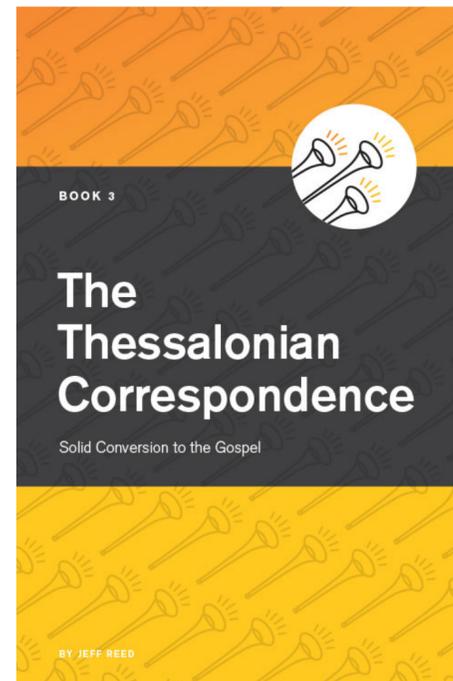
Paul's Early Letters



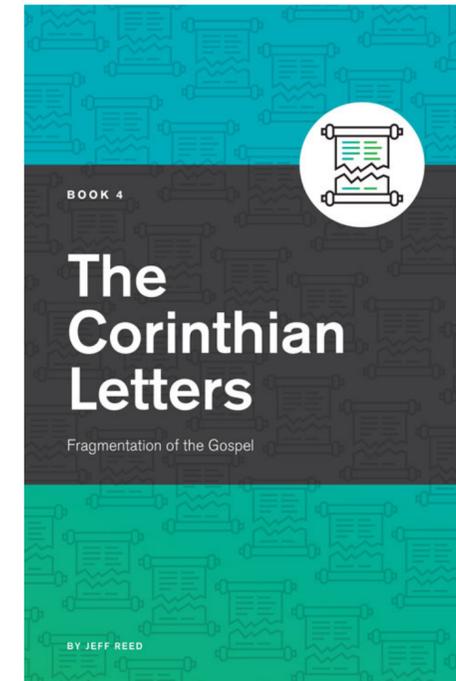
49–56 AD



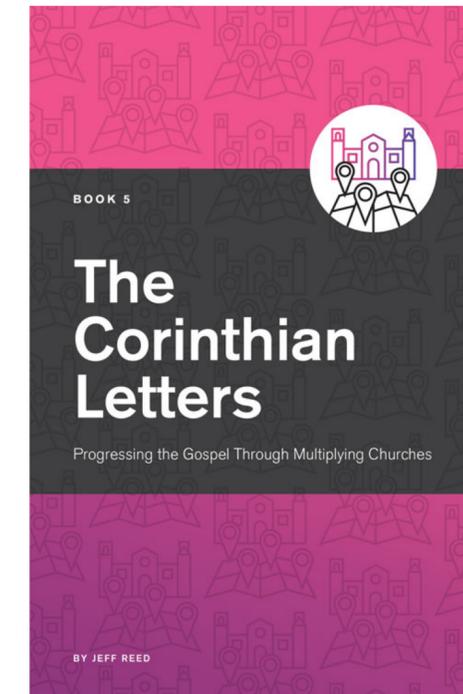
Autumn, 49



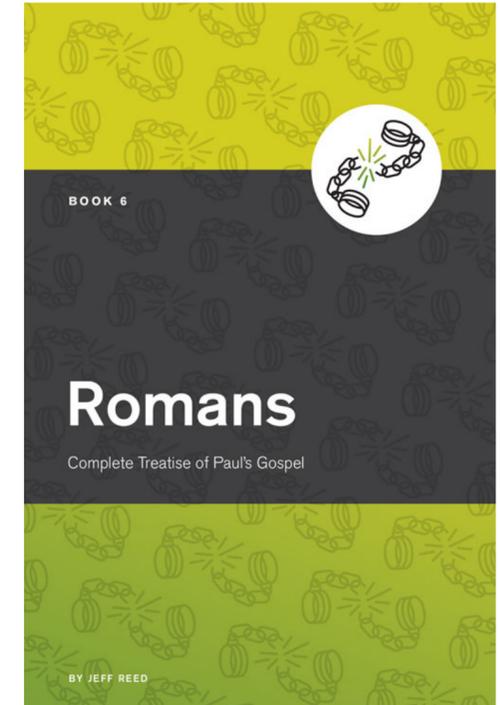
Winter/Sum, 51 AD



Sept, 53

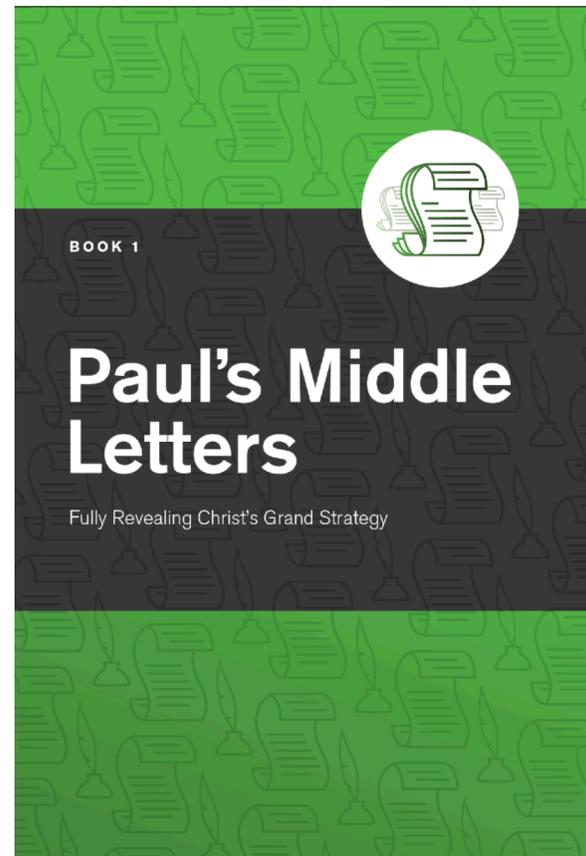


June, 56

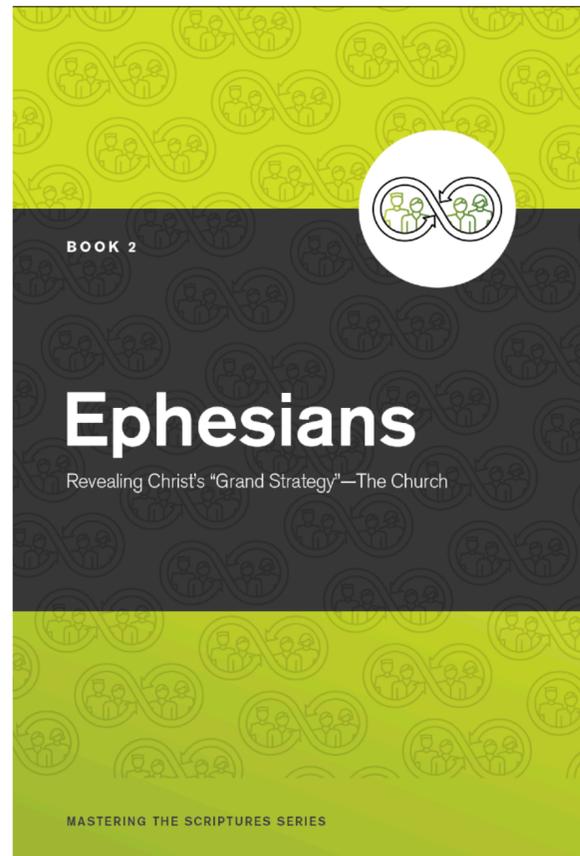


Nov, 56

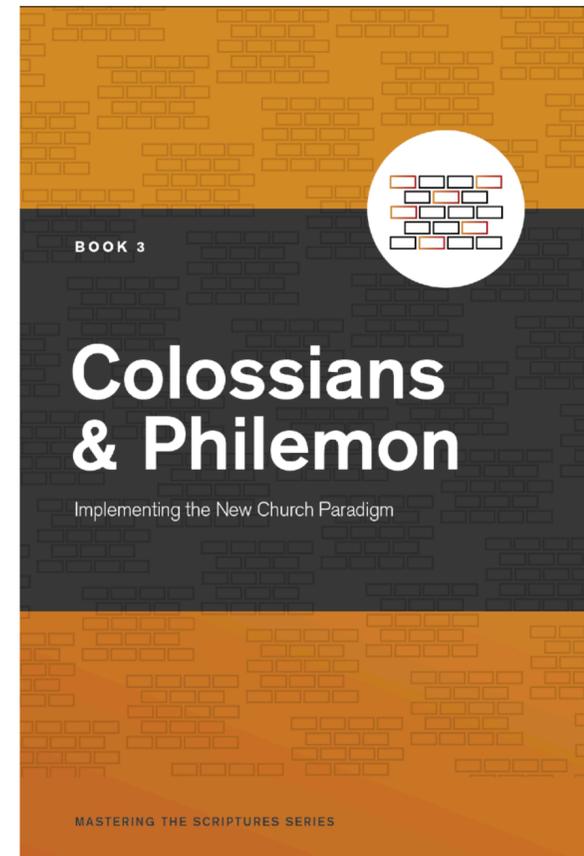
Paul's Middle Letters



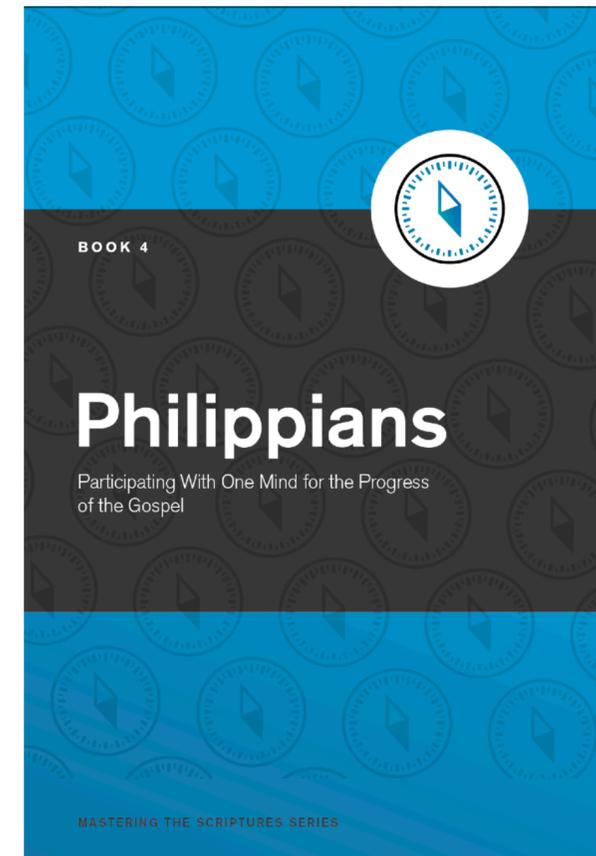
Feb, 60 to March, 62



Autumn, 60



Autumn, 61



Spring, 62

Introduction to Paul's Early Letters

As we learned in Paul's early letters, the gospel is not fully understood in Western Christianity today.

Some build legalistic systems, and others build a social gospel. But most importantly, the gospel is to be lined up with a set of teachings for the churches. Those teachings are not understood and often are not practiced by our churches today.

In this series, we will now get a fuller picture of the Church as Christ's grand strategy. And we will see that the Western Church, which is in decline everywhere in the West, is even further from Christ's strategy.

Introduction to Paul's Middle Letters

These letters were all written close together (Acts 28:30), during the 2 years Paul was under house arrest—from February, 60, to March, 62. Most likely...

Ephesians was written Autumn, 60 AD

Colossians and Philemon—Autumn, 61 AD

Philippians—early Spring, 62 AD

Here we are looking into the heart of Paul's network

Ephesians—hub churches

Colossians and Philemon—cluster churches

Philippians—node churches

Introduction to Paul's Middle Letters

Ephesians—Hub Churches

Ephesians: A manifesto revealing Christ's "grand strategy"—the Church—to his key "hub" churches in Ephesus, with special attention to training the elders of this strategic city in the whole plan of Christ, for an entire 3-year period.

We looked briefly at 4 key passages in Ephesians:

2:19–21; 3:7–10; 4:1–6; 4:11–16

Introduction to Paul's Middle Letters

In 2:19–21, we began to build the picture of the Church.

- It is a large household—one big global family
- It has one foundation built by the Apostles and prophets with Christ as the cornerstone.
- The whole structure is built by Christ; His tools are the Apostles and prophets.

Introduction to Paul's Middle Letters

In Ephesians 3:7–10, we see that the Church is the center of Christ's plan—His grand strategy after inaugurating the kingdom.

The organizing center of these letters:

⁷ Of this gospel I have become a servant according to the gift of God's grace that was given me by the working of his power. ⁸ Although I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given to me to bring to the Gentiles the news of the boundless riches of Christ, ⁹ and to make everyone see what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things; ¹⁰ so that through the church the wisdom of God in its rich variety might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places.

Ephesians 3:7–10

Introduction to Paul's Middle Letters

Paul lays out his job description very clearly.

Paul's 2-fold job description:

1. Preach the gospel to the Gentiles (a 10-year battle for the gospel)
2. Fully reveal the heart of Christ's grand strategy—the Church

The Church is Christ's strategy for progressing the gospel. It will be the heart of his unfolding kingdom, and it will stun the rulers and authorities even in the heavenly places. It was a mystery (hidden) until this time.

Introduction to Paul's Middle Letters

In 4:1–6, we see more about that foundation:

- There is just one foundation being laid—one body, one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism and one God—weaving it all together in His great plan for fully realizing His kingdom with Christ on the throne.
- The one hope and one faith are essentially overlapping concepts referring to *the kerygma*—the gospel story, the core of our hope; and the faith—the didache, the teaching, the deposit, the sound doctrine.

Introduction to Paul's Middle Letters

In the final passage, Ephesians 4:11–16, we see how the Church is built and what it does.

- It is built by those gifted leaders—Apostles, prophets, evangelists, and pastors and teachers. They equip the saints in the churches to do the work of the ministry—service.
- The saints do the work of the ministry (not hired ministers). And when they are equipped and doing the ministry, the church will mature. And when the church fully matures in Christ, the watching world will see Christ, and it will stun rulers in the heavenly places.

Introduction to Paul's Middle Letters

Colossians—Cluster Churches

Colossians: Almost identical letter to Ephesians (along with Philemon), written to the house churches scattered throughout the Lycus Valley (Colossae, Laodicea, and Hierapolis) one year after writing his “manifesto” to the Ephesian churches, to help them at a very practical level to implement the new church paradigm in their network of churches—a model as a framework for the entire history of clusters of churches down through the centuries.

Philemon: Written to the network of churches in the Lycus Valley to practically illustrate “doing theology in culture” based upon the “first principles,” based on the “household texts,” which restructured all their social relationships—including slavery—around the church as a family of families, which is the household social structure of the church, which was evident in the Greek “republic” ideal of the day, but was fully realized in the emerging kingdom of Jesus Christ.

Introduction to Paul's Middle Letters

Paul wants to see them established in the faith—rooted and built up in the faith. He is concerned about the “firmness of their faith,” 2:5, and them being “established in the faith, just as you were taught,” 2:7.

There are two philosophies, two traditions, two sets of “first principles” in view here—those of the world and those of Christ. The body of the letter lays out these two sets:

“the first principles” (core tradition, philosophy, teaching) of the world 2:16–23

There were two general philosophies of the world these churches were facing—Judaism and Greek philosophy and religions. Paul reviews their general principles.

“the first principles of Christ” (authoritative tradition, philosophy, teaching) 3:1–4:6

Here Paul lays out the core first principles (authoritative tradition, philosophy, and teaching of Christ).

Introduction to Paul's Middle Letters

Now let's turn to Philemon.

¹ Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother,
To Philemon our dear friend and co-worker, ² to Apphia our sister, to Archippus our fellow
soldier, and to the church in your house:

³ Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

⁴ When I remember you in my prayers, I always thank my God ⁵ because I hear of your love for
all the saints and your faith toward the Lord Jesus. ⁶ I pray that the sharing of your faith may
become effective when you perceive all the good that we may do for Christ. ⁷ I have indeed
received much joy and encouragement from your love, because the hearts of the saints have
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Philemon 1–7

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²⁵ The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.

Philemon 17–25

Introduction to Paul's Middle Letters

What was the situation of Paul sending this letter to Philemon?

We got a clue from the Colossians letter

⁷ Tychicus will tell you all the news about me; he is a beloved brother, a faithful minister, and a fellow servant in the Lord. ⁸ I have sent him to you for this very purpose, so that you may know how we are and that he may encourage your hearts; ⁹ he is coming with Onesimus, the faithful and beloved brother, who is one of you. They will tell you about everything here.

Colossians 4:7–9

Introduction to Paul's Middle Letters

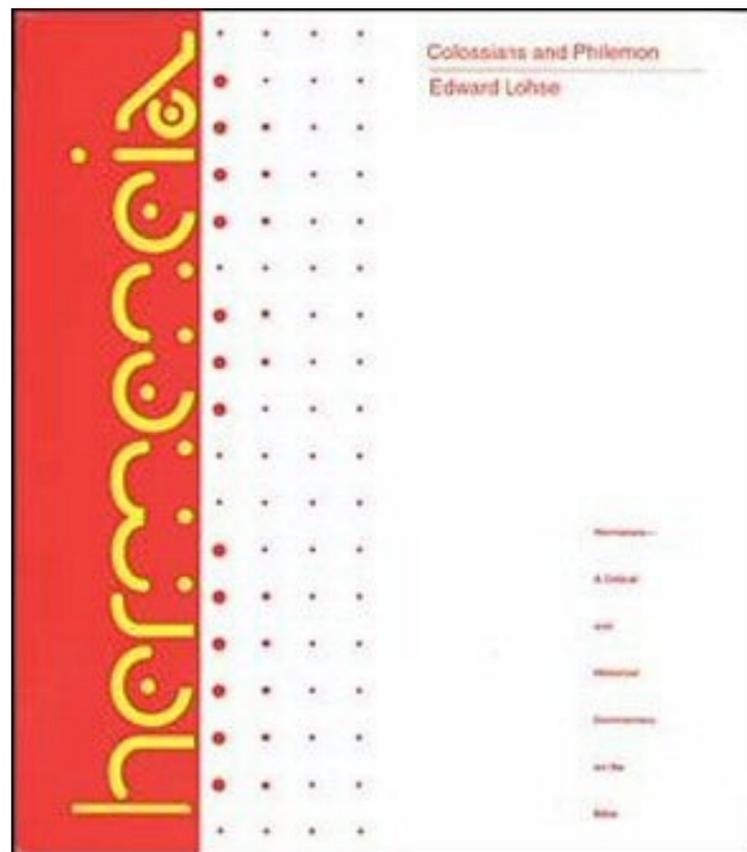
What was the context of Paul sending this letter to Philemon?

Evidently Onesimus, who was Philemon's slave, fled from Philemon and ended up with Paul. Paul invested in him, and he became very dear to Paul. Paul now refers to him as useful to Philemon, and asks him to take him back—not only as a slave, but also as a brother.

Introduction to Paul's Middle Letters

Let's look carefully at Paul's little letter?

Hermeneia quotes

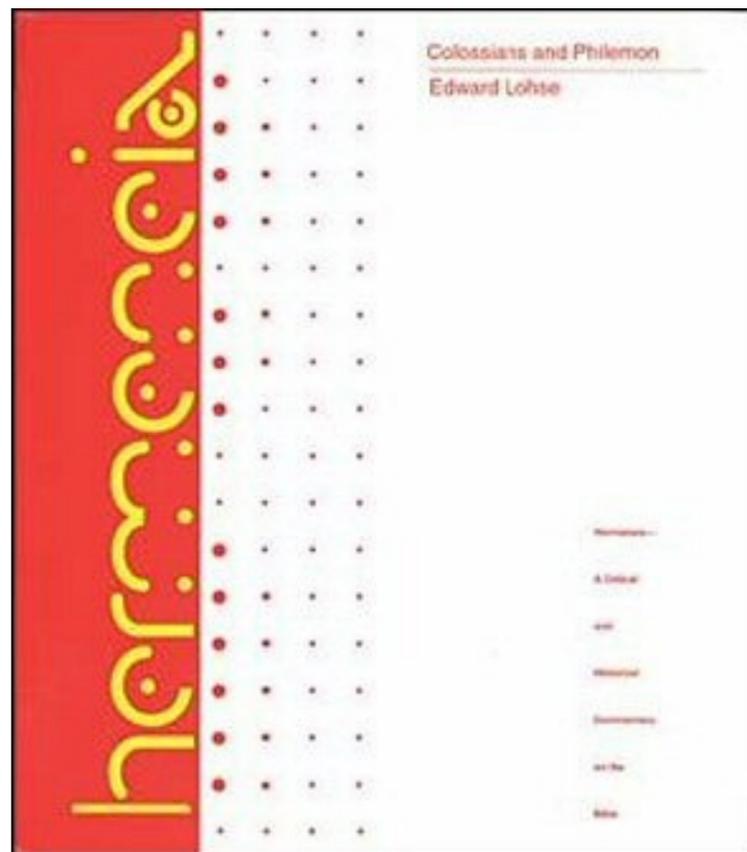


Paul addressed this letter to Philemon, whom he calls his beloved fellow worker. Additional addressees are the sister Apphia, the fellow soldier Archippus, and the community assembled in Philemon's house. Since Col expressly mentions that Onesimus (Col 4:9*) and Archippus (Col 4:17*) belong to the community at Colossae, it can also be assumed that Philemon, from whose house the slave Onesimus fled, lived in Colossae. Philemon was obviously well-to-do and had become a Christian through encountering Paul (v 19*) —possibly in Ephesus. He had placed his house at the disposal of the community for its meetings (v 2*) and had given concrete expression to his love for the saints (vv. 5*, 7*). Perhaps Apphia, whose name is mentioned alongside his, was his wife. It is unclear how Archippus was related to him.

Introduction to Paul's Middle Letters

Let's look carefully at Paul's little letter?

Hermeneia quotes

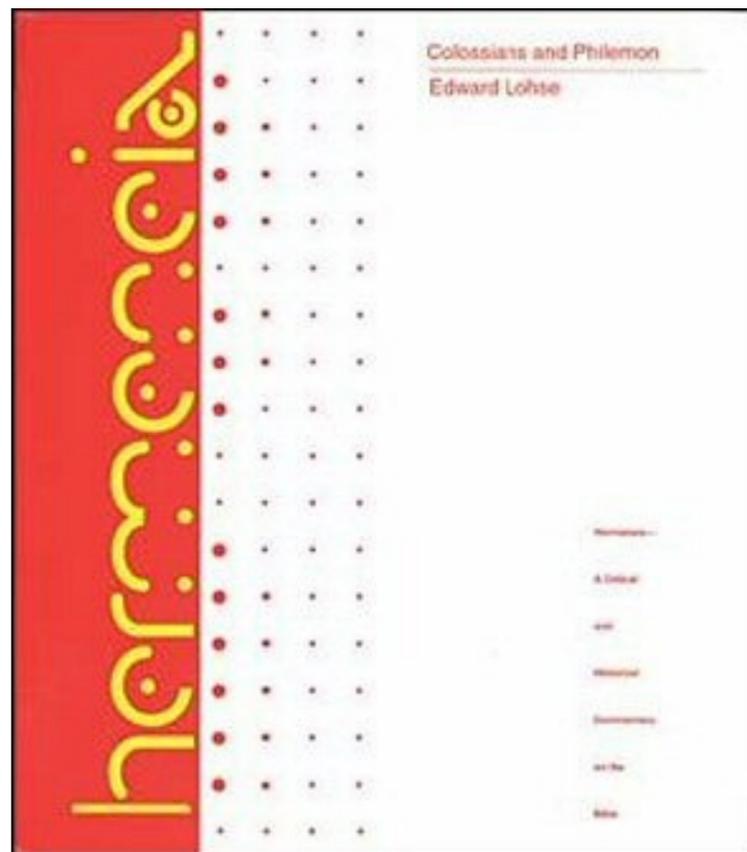


Paul writes to Philemon to intercede for his slave Onesimus. It is not said what caused Onesimus to flee. A slave who emancipated himself could take asylum in a sanctuary. He could also disappear in a large city and there eke out an existence by begging and thievery. If he were captured, he had to be taken back to his master. Then the least he could expect was to be enslaved again. A far worse fate, however, might be in store for him. The master could punish him at his discretion. He could put him up for sale. If he wanted to, he could even kill him. Onesimus had taken refuge with the imprisoned Apostle. He had certainly not been apprehended by the police and been thrown into prison. If that were the case, it would have been the duty of the authorities to take him back to his master.

Introduction to Paul's Middle Letters

Let's look carefully at Paul's little letter?

Hermeneia quotes



Perhaps he had heard the Apostle's name mentioned in the house of his Christian master and had now hastened to him for help in his perplexity. Paul took an interest in him, converted him to the Christian faith (v 10*), developed great affection for him, and benefited from his dedicated service (v 13*). Nevertheless, he could not retain him and had no authority to do so. Therefore, he sent him back to Philemon with an accompanying letter. Through this letter Paul used his influence on Philemon so that he would receive Onesimus as a beloved brother (v 16*), indeed that he welcome him as he would the Apostle himself (v 17*). Paul refrained from giving Philemon any command and from urging a distinct demand such as: give Onesimus his freedom. Rather he puts the matter in Philemon's hands. The decision is his. Paul's sole injunction to him is the commandment of love as the norm for his conduct.

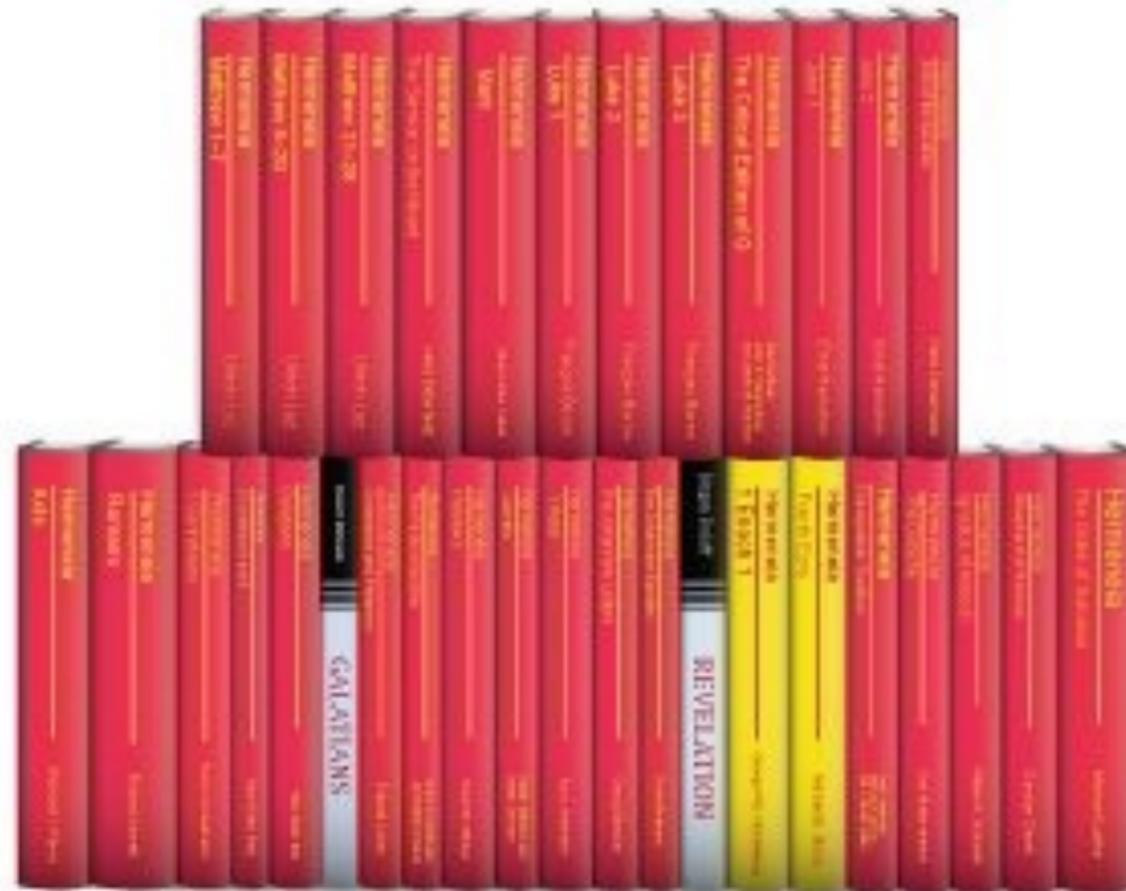
Introduction to Paul's Middle Letters

Hermeneia series—top shelf excursus

Definitive early church research

38 volumes

Beginning point of almost all the contemporary scholars in search of the early church in the Greco-Roman context—the body of work which sits at the base of most of my writings on the early churches.



Introduction to Paul's Middle Letters

Let's put Paul's little letter in its context of Ephesians and Colossians.

Paul is putting into practice the "first principles" he taught in the household texts in both Ephesians and Colossians:

Ephesians 5:22–6:9

Colossians 3:18–4:1

Husbands

Wives

Parents

Children

Masters

Slaves

Introduction to Paul's Middle Letters

Let's look carefully at both of them?

⁵ Slaves, obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling, in singleness of heart, as you obey Christ; ⁶ not only while being watched, and in order to please them, but as slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart. ⁷ Render service with enthusiasm, as to the Lord and not to men and women, ⁸ knowing that whatever good we do, we will receive the same again from the Lord, whether we are slaves or free.

⁹ And, masters, do the same to them. Stop threatening them, for you know that both of you have the same Master in heaven, and with him there is no partiality

Ephesians 6:5–9

Introduction to Paul's Middle Letters

Let's look carefully at both of them?

²² Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything, not only while being watched and in order to please them, but wholeheartedly, fearing the Lord. ²³ Whatever your task, put yourselves into it, as done for the Lord and not for your masters, ²⁴ since you know that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward; you serve the Lord Christ. ²⁵ For the wrongdoer will be paid back for whatever wrong has been done, and there is no partiality. 4:1 Masters, treat your slaves justly and fairly, for you know that you also have a Master in heaven.

Colossians 3:22–4:1

Introduction to Paul's Middle Letters

What does this show us about “doing theology in culture” based on “the first principles”?

We can see several things here.

1. Paul's household texts on masters and slaves is similar but not the same—showing he is truly working with principles.
2. His focus is on the slaves, not the masters, because evidently he is working with a principle of authority from many angles—cultural reality, attitude toward authority, perspective on unjust treatment by authority, and God's perspective in light of eternity.
3. His extensive focus on slaves again in this letter sets the stage for the other letter he is sending with this one—Colossians.
4. He just gives a one line review of husbands and wives and parents and children, which shows he is focused on the Philemon situation.
5. In his letter to Philemon, he is giving us a clear illustration of “doing theology in culture” by using the principles to address the real live situation between Onesimus and Philemon.

Introduction to Paul's Middle Letters

What does this show us about Paul's view of authority? about his view of authority and government? about his view of culture?

1. Paul begins with slaves first (also wives first and children first), which means the principle of authority is in his mind throughout the household texts.
2. The principles of the two household texts shape his whole letter to Philemon.
3. He follows the principles himself, sending back Onesimus and instructing Philemon on the principles, not exercising authority over him. The letter is an appeal not an order.
4. Philemon was evidently a benefactor, both owning slaves and "refreshing the saints," with a greater capacity to do good. So Paul is asking him to use his authority the right way.
5. Specifically, Paul appeals to Philemon about Onesimus' development while with Paul, his new usefulness to Philemon, and challenges him to use his authority with love as he would toward a brother.

Introduction to Paul's Middle Letters

What does this show us about Paul's heart, even though he is very tough with his churches?

1. Even though Paul can be tough on the churches, at times full of frank speech, here we see Paul's heart in becoming a father to Onesimus.
2. He was clearly committed to Onesimus' development, as he calls him now useful to Philemon.
3. You can see Paul's love for Onesimus, in the midst of the need to follow the principles and send him back.
4. Paul calls him his child; he refers to sending him as sending his heart to Philemon and as a beloved brother to him.
5. Paul was willing to use his own resources to position Onesimus correctly with Philemon.
6. Again, Philemon was clearly a benefactor to Paul, with a church in his house and able to provide a guest room for Paul; and Paul refers to him as a partner. So Paul must have had some interaction with Philemon.

Introduction to Paul's Middle Letters

Why did Paul decide to handle the situation this way?

Why did Paul not condemn slavery?

Why did he not deal with the issue of injustice?

Why did he not try to right this wrong “politically” by calling on the churches to fight this in culture? to fight this in the Roman Empire?

Why did he not take his cause to Rome?

Introduction to Paul's Middle Letters

Paul's whole worldview was shaped by Christ's teaching—in this case, by the household texts he laid out in Ephesians 5:22–6:9 and Colossians 3:18–4:1.

Paul's purpose was to take the gospel to the Gentiles and then to reveal Christ's grand strategy of the Church as His strategy for unfolding the kingdom, which He inaugurated.

The church, when properly established, was to engage in good occupations and meet pressing needs, not to challenge the authorities of Rome and reform it.

The church is to model how to live and mature regardless of the cultural situation. The fundamental principle (already taught in Romans) is that as far as possible, obey your government.

Introduction to Paul's Middle Letters

What does this show us about how Paul is building his "complex apostolic network?"

It is very interesting how Paul positions his apostolic team in the Colossians letter and now in Philemon.

He sent greetings from them—a way of him commending them to the churches, thus strengthening his team in the Lycus Valley churches.

Significance of Colossians

Issue: Significance of Philemon for us today

Questions:

1. Why is Paul's letter significant for our churches today—both in the West and in the Global South?
2. How does it illustrate our “doing theology in culture” and applying “the first principles” to complicated cultural situations?
3. What are some of the ways Paul's illustration of doing theology in his culture applies to our inner cities in North America—inner city generational poverty and the “new Jim Crow”?
4. What are some of the ways Paul's illustration of doing theology in culture applies to the Global South—such as the large number of illiterate church members and the caste system in India?

Introduction to Paul's Middle Letters

Why did Paul decide to handle the situation this way?

Why did Paul not condemn slavery?

Why did he not deal with the issue of injustice?

Why did he not try to right this wrong “politically” by calling on the churches to fight this in culture? to fight this in the Roman Empire?

Why did he not take his cause to Rome?

Introduction to Paul's Middle Letters

Our whole worldview is to be shaped by Christ's teaching—in this case by the household texts he laid out in Ephesians 5:22–6:9 and Colossians 3:18–4:1.

Our purpose is to take the gospel to the Gentiles and to fully participate in Christ's grand strategy of the Church as His strategy for unfolding the kingdom, which He inaugurated.

Our churches, when properly established, are to engage in good occupations and meet pressing needs, not to challenge everything wrong in our culture and government and to bring reform through political means.

Our churches are to model how to live and mature regardless of the cultural situation. The fundamental principle, already taught in Romans, is that as far as possible, obey your government.

Introduction to Paul's Middle Letters

Let's go back to where we started in thinking about some of our key issues globally today.

Inner cities in North America—the New Jim Crow, intergenerational poverty, Black Lives Matter

Global cities—shadow cities, India caste system, ethnicity

Our churches cannot transform culture through political means, but are to transform ourselves into true communities that live as one in Christ, as brothers and sisters in one big family of families.

Then, as we mature ourselves, we are then to engage in good occupations and meet pressing needs.

Introduction to Paul's Middle Letters

This is what we are doing with our two initiatives:

North American Antioch Initiatives

I was just in Little Rock and Chattanooga last week? Why?

Global City/Shadow City Initiatives

I will be in Mumbai this trip? Why?

Our local strategy

Re:BUILD and our Central Iowa Antioch Initiative

Introduction to Paul's Middle Letters

Another important lesson from this little letter

It gives us a vivid illustration of how to “do theology in culture”

We must learn the teaching—the principles embedded in them (“the first principles”) —thus learning to think biblically.

This gives us the ability to solve problems in our lives and churches as they appear—thinking things through based on those principles just as Paul illustrates in this small little letter.

An amazing illustration.