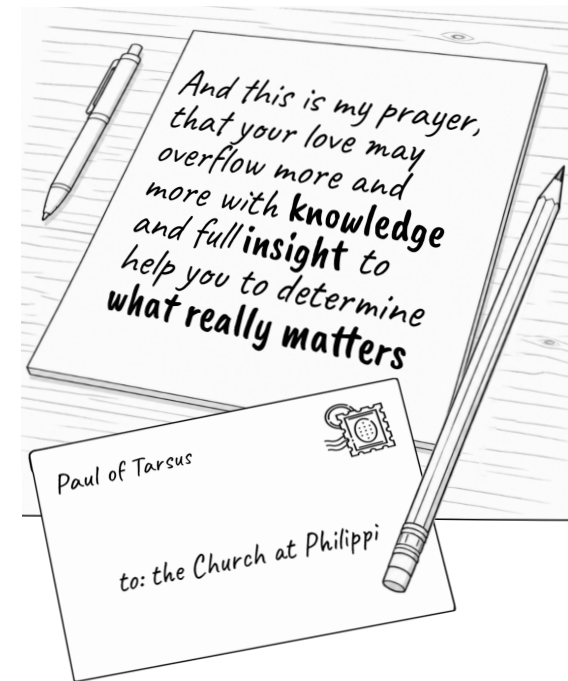


PAUL'S LETTER to the PHILIPPIANS

*"When we read Paul, we are reading somebody else's mail
– unless we know the situation, his letters can be opaque."*¹



References:

- a. "The First Paul", Marcus Borg & John Dominic Crossan, © 2009 HarperCollins p.7
- b. "Paul, A Biography", N.T. Wright, © 2018 HarperCollins
- c. "Why I Hate Paul (And The Religion He Made Up)" Andrew Springer, Apr 12, 2026, Substack: The Jesus Movement

Footnotes:

- 1 "The First Paul", Marcus Borg & John Dominic Crossan, © 2009 HarperCollins p.7

Week 1, Lesson One
Overview
"Context"

HISTORICAL CONTEXT:

Our New Testament contains 27 "books" consisting of four Gospels, one History (Acts), Pauline Epistles, General Epistles, and one Apocalyptic (Revelation).

Paul's life and ministry unfold amid two major conflicts; one between the Jerusalem Temple leadership and followers of "the Way," and another between followers of "the Way" and the Roman Empire. Frankly, all of the New Testament authors write out of conflict, danger, and oppression. Every gospel, the book of Acts, and every letter is penned under dangerous conditions. It is a Testament of living the Way of Jesus while living under the weight of the world.

Current scholarship agrees that Paul wrote Romans, 1st & 2nd Corinthians, 1st Thessalonians, Galatians, Philippians, and Philemon. These letters are the earliest Christian writings we have, as they were penned prior to our gospels. There is skepticism about the authorship of Ephesians, Colossians, and 2nd Thessalonians, given shifts in tone, emphasis, theology, and writing style. Theologians generally believe that 1st & 2nd Timothy and Titus are outright forgeries.

As a result, Paul is often maligned for writings he did not author. These have been labeled "forgeries," and they are, yet they are still given as much weight as his established works. Attributing these forgeries to Paul overlooks the possibility that, as persecution of the church intensified and as Jesus tarried, certain facets of the community may have sought to tone down Paul's rhetoric of equality for all within "the Way" because it was as radical as Jesus' teaching. Paul's message was counter-cultural and dangerous. Therefore, conservative voices gained strength in the movement and called for some control in the community (gender roles, slavery) in the name of safety. It is always the way of empire: tone down the extreme rhetoric, maintain control and order above all else.

Sadly, the radical Jewish Mystic's gargantuan missionary successes lost their cutting edge, making way for the return of patriarchy, thus smoothing the path for Rome to add Christianity to its pantheon of religions and ushering in the Roman Catholic Church.

Although there are portions of Paul's authorized letters that speak of local cultural mores and customs that are contrary to ours in the west

(see 1 Cor. 11), we'll place little weight on these passages. First, there is skepticism about the fact that many copies of Paul's letters either omit these passages or place them in different positions within the letter, which would lead one to assume they may have been added later. Second, Paul never, ever proposed writing new "rules" for following Jesus, for salvation, or for living in community. Unfortunately, his words have been misused by those in authority as a weapon against women and slaves. It is the same misogyny that's as old as the planet, and we won't waste time on that in this study.

In Philippians, Paul is writing to the first church he established in Europe. Philippi is in Greece, north of the Aegean Sea (see map). The letter was written in the mid-50s CE. Paul is in a Roman prison in Ephesus, awaiting trial. He is eventually taken to Rome, where he lives under house arrest and is beheaded by Nero sometime between 62 and 68 CE (see timeline). Beheading was Rome's capital punishment for Romans, of which Paul was one. Peter, on the other hand, a Judean, died by crucifixion.

Read Acts 7:51-8:4

1. Review Stephen's message to the temple leaders.
2. What makes the temple leaders so angry they seek to kill?
3. How does Stephen react to his suffering?
4. How does Jesus react to Stephen's suffering?
5. Can you name similarities in Jesus' and Stephen's deaths?
6. Who is approving of Stephen's death?
7. What major activity is instigated by his death?

Read Acts 9:23,29; 13:50; 14:2,5,19 Post conversion

1. What is happening during the growth of followers of Jesus?
2. Connect this to the Temple's response to Jesus, or to any prophets that come to mind.

Read 2 Corinthians 11:23-33

1. Discuss Paul's physical life. What is his reality?
2. What other consequences can arise out of Paul's circumstances?
3. How might Paul's physical life be reflected in his writing?