



### Aim of lesson

To give an introduction to the letters written to the churches in Rome, Corinth, Ephesus, Philippi, Colosse, Thessalonica and Galatia.

### Bible background

Romans, 1&2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1&2 Thessalonians.

### Preparation required

Read through the notes and decide how much detail you want to go into or whether you want to spread this over two weeks. You will also need to decide how much you want the students to look up and how much you can tell them.

Try to make sure that the young people have access to Bibles with an introductory section to each of the letters.

### Outline of Lesson

Ask the students about the structure of a letter. It usually starts with a greeting and says who it's to. That would be followed by paragraphs on various subjects. What sort of subjects? At the end you would say who it's from. Even with texts and internet messages, you know who it's for and who it came from.

Get the students to look through the books in question to see how they are constructed, who the letters are from, etc. Depending on the size of your class and how much you are intending to get through, it may be best to share out the letters and to ask the young people to try to find out what they can about when and where the letter was written, and what it is about.

As the lesson progresses the students could fill in the table in their books and identify on the map where the churches are. They could also mark the dates on the timeline. The probable dates of Paul's missionary journeys are 1st AD 46-48, 2nd AD 50-52, 3rd AD 53-57 and the journey to Rome AD 59.

The order in the chart is the likely sequence in which the letters were written, not in Bible order. You could either tell the students the dates or get them to find out from a Bible which has a publisher's introduction. In many cases we can be sure when letters were written, and where Paul was at the time, by reading together the epistles and the Acts of the Apostles, and taking into account historical documents. Sometimes it's not so easy - in particular there are different opinions about the letter to the Galatians. There is a good summary of the views in the introduction to Galatians in the NIV Study Bible. The chart below assumes that Galatians was written to believers in Antioch, Iconium, Lystra and Derbe, soon after Paul had returned from his first journey.

The last column is to record anything interesting the students discover.

Letter	Author	Date	Written from	Notes
Galatians	Paul	AD 49	Antioch?	Jews were persuading believers that they had to obey the law.
1&2 Thessalonians	Paul	AD 51/52	Corinth (1 Thessalonians 3:1-6)	Written during 2nd missionary journey
1 Corinthians	Paul	AD 54	Ephesus (1 Corinthians 16:8, Acts 16:5-9, Acts 20:31)	3rd missionary journey. Greetings at the end from Priscilla and Aquila
2 Corinthians	Paul	AD 55	Macedonia (2 Corinthians 2:13-14, 7:5)	Some people think this was actually his 3rd letter to the Corinthians
Romans	Paul	AD 57	Corinth (Romans 15:24)	3rd missionary journey Many greetings at the end Dictated to Tertius (16:22)

Letter	Author	Date	Written from	Notes
Ephesians	Paul	AD 60	Prison in Rome (Ephesians 3:1, 4:1, 6:20) Acts 28:16-31	Circular letter? Tychicus take it? 6:21
Colossians	Paul	AD 60	Prison in Rome Colossians 4:18 Acts 28:16-31	They were to share it with Laodiceans (4:16) - Paul had written to them as well but we don't know what the letter said.
Philippians	Paul	AD 61	Prison in Rome Philippians 1:13-14 Acts 28:16-31	There were believers in Caesar's household 4:22

## Foolish Galatians

When Paul first visited the ecclesias in Galatia he immediately met with violent opposition from Jews who believed that salvation was about two things: being Jewish, and obeying the law. Paul was teaching that neither of those things could save us. The opposition continued after he left, and so Paul had to write this letter to restate the basics of the gospel. He explains in chapter 2 that we are not saved by being Jewish (he speaks of circumcision) nor (chapter 3) by keeping the law.

So Paul teaches the Galatians that we are made righteous before God by faith not by works. We can't earn our salvation by doing good things (Galatians 2:16, 3:11). It isn't that what we do is unimportant, quite the opposite, but what we do should be an expression of a living faith.

## Encouragement to Thessalonians

Remind the class what had happened at Thessalonica when Paul had visited it on his second missionary journey (Acts 17). Paul had already been there when he wrote these letters.

In the first letter Paul talks quite a lot about the second coming of Jesus (4:13-18;5:1-11). It seems as though some believers had died and the others were concerned about what would happen to them.

## Problems tackled for Corinthians

Corinth was a cosmopolitan trading city, decadent and pagan. Paul had been there and set up this church (Acts 18). Practical issues dominate both letters to Corinth. Paul was able to give the Corinthians definitive answers to their questions. For example what to do about food offered to idols, resolving arguments over leadership, advice about marriage.

I Corinthians 13 has some very well known words on love. Read the chapter or at least verses 4-8 for the way we show love to each other.

## Mixed-up Romans

Paul wrote the letter to the Romans before he had visited Rome. This was another place where there had been conflict between Jews and believers, and for a while all Jews had been expelled<sup>1</sup> from Rome as a result (Acts 18:2). Paul trained to be a Pharisee and was used to arguing and debating the scripture in his life as a Pharisee, before he was converted. He uses all those abilities to the full in the letter to Rome.

Paul goes over the same ground in different ways explaining how we can be counted righteous by our faith and God's grace (Romans 3:23-4).

## Letters from prison to Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians

Paul visited Philippi and Ephesus on his second missionary journey (Acts 16 and 19). It seems he never went to Colosse; the believers there learned the gospel by Epaphras (Colossians 1:5-7). It was probable that some of the letters were intended to be read by more than one ecclesia - for example Ephesus, Colosse and Laodicea (Colossians 4:16).

These three letters were all written about the same time while Paul was under house arrest in Rome, and they have many themes in common.

One is the importance of Christ. In Ephesians 1:20-22 Paul writes that Jesus is at God's right hand, all things are under his feet and he is appointed head over everything. Colossians 1:15-20 he described as the image of the invisible God and the firstborn of all creation. The students could compare the words with those in Genesis 1 – image, creation, heaven and earth.

<sup>1</sup> There is an interesting confirmation of this in the record of The Lives of the Caesars by Suetonius. He writes of Claudius 'Iudaeos impulsore Chresto assidue tumultuantis Roma expulit.' - 'since the Jews constantly made disturbances because of Chrestus (Christ), he expelled them from Rome'. This confirms the statement in Acts 18:2, and gives us the added information that the troubles were caused by Jews because of disagreements over the gospel of the Lord Jesus. We also learn that the gospel was being taught in Rome at the time, though we do not know by whom.

Philippians also picks up this theme. In chapter 2 9-11 we read that Jesus has been given the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow. These words are taken from Isaiah 45:23, where God is talking about himself; but here they are applied to the Lord Jesus. God made him head over all things for the church.

The letter to the Philippians has a special point of interest. The believers in Philippi had, ever since Paul first visited them, helped him financially. They had just sent a further gift which was brought by Epaphroditus. Read Philippians 4:14-18.

Another theme common to these letters is the nature a follower of Christ should show – kindness, humbleness, meekness, patience, and forgiving one another because God forgave us (Colossians 3:12-13 and Ephesians 4:1-2,31-32).

The theme occurs again and again in scripture. Galatians 5:22 lists some of things someone who is saved by faith should do. Being kind and forgiving one another is not just a New Testament theme. Some examples are Genesis 18:19, Exodus 34:10, Deuteronomy 10:12, Jeremiah 22:3, Hosea 12:6, Micah 6:8, Zechariah 7:9.

We should try to develop these qualities because God shows them to us.

## **Relevance to our lives**

Looking at these letters in this way shows us that these were real people with real lives and problems. Paul's care for them shines out of what he wrote. The letters were written out by hand and carried on foot or by boat to the people he cared about. People are not that different today so we should take note of what he wanted to tell them.

The most important thing we can learn is that God won't count our sins against us and sees us as not deserving death if we are baptized in to the name of Jesus. Romans 6:4-5.

## **Extension activities**

- It is interesting to trace where Paul was in relation to the letters to the Thessalonians using Acts 17 and 18. There is a useful summary in the introductory notes to 1 Thessalonians in the NIV Study Bible.
- Similarly with tracing the collections for the poor brothers and sisters in Jerusalem. See introduction to Romans in the NIV Study Bible and Studies in the Acts of the Apostles by Harry Whittaker.