

Bible Study

Paul's Letters to the Early Churches

An 8-Week Bible Study to Read and Explore Eight of Paul's Letters

This study is designed for both personal devotion and small-group discussion. It can be used by an individual on a quiet morning, or by a group meeting weekly around a table. Either way, the aim is the same: to encounter Christ through Paul's words and to be changed by what we find.

David Arthur Marshall

This Bible Study is part of the New Testament Learning Series

The New Testament Learning Series is an ongoing study exploring the foundational elements of the early Christian message and framework. This series focuses on three elements:

1. Applying Truth

Living out the practical and spiritual teachings of Jesus and his early followers.

2. Learning Together

Using group study to share, discuss, and grow with others on the same path.

3. Personal Growth

Coming to know Christ more deeply and being formed into his likeness.



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New Testament Learning Series

Paul's Letters to the Early Churches

**An 8-Week Bible Study to Read and
Explore Eight of Paul's Letters**

David Arthur Marshall

Published by Living Truth Media LLC
Denver, Colorado

First Edition

2026

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ISBN: 979-8-9964286-0-1

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info@livingtrughmedia.com

Living Truth Media LLC
Attn: Book Department
6732 W Coal Mine Ave, Unit 501
Littleton, CO 80123

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Welcome

Make this 8-Week Bible Study Joyful

Few voices in the New Testament shape Christian thought and practice as profoundly as the Apostle Paul. A former Pharisee and fierce persecutor of the church, Paul became the most prolific missionary and theologian of the first century. His letters — written in marketplaces, prison cells, rented rooms, and on the road — addressed real congregations facing real problems: division, persecution, false teaching, confusion about Christ's return, immorality, identity, and how to live as people of the Way in a culture that did not yet have a category for them.

Over the next eight weeks, we will walk through eight of Paul's letters — the joyful, the corrective, the deeply theological, the wonderfully personal — and listen for what the Spirit said then and continues to say now. Each letter is a snapshot of a community in transformation, and a window into how the gospel transforms us still.

This study is designed for both personal devotion and small-group discussion. It can be used by an individual with a journal and a quiet morning, or by a group meeting weekly around a table. Either way, the aim is the same: to encounter Christ through Paul's words and to be changed by what we find.

What You Will Need

Everything you need to read about this topic is included in this book. It is designed to support personal devotion as well as small-group discussions. To really get the most out of this study, we recommend having the following items close at hand:

- A Bible (we will quote both NIV and KJV side by side; bring whichever translation you love)
- A notebook or journal for reflection responses
- A pen, and a quiet place to read and pray

Most importantly, you will need an open heart and mind — and roughly 30 to 60 minutes per week to dedicate to this study.

How to Use This Bible Study

Each of Weeks 1 through 7 follows the same rhythm. Move through the sections in order, but do not feel rushed. If a passage stops you, stay there. The goal is not completion of pages but transformation of heart.

Each weekly session includes:

- **Historical Background**
The city, the people, and the setting Paul in which wrote his letters
- **Why Paul Wrote**
The occasion and pastoral concern behind each letter
- **Key Scripture Passages**
Printed in NIV and KJV, side by side, so you can compare
- **Explanation and Modern Application**
Unpacking what Paul meant and how it lands today
- **Reflection Questions**
Five prompts for personal journaling
- **Prayer Focus**
An optional weekly prayer to carry into the days ahead

Week 8 is Different

It is a closing session built for group discussion (or solo synthesis), pulling together the major themes you have walked through and asking the most important question of any study: *What changed in me?*

A Suggested Rhythm

If you have one week per letter, consider this pattern:

- Day 1: Read the historical background and the full biblical letter
- Day 2: Re-read the key passages slowly, NIV and KJV
- Days 3–5: Work through the explanation and answer one reflection question per day
- Day 6: Pray through the prayer focus and review your journal
- Day 7: Rest. Let the Word do its work.

A Word on the Two Bible Translations

The King James Version (1611) carries the cadence and weight of four centuries of English worship. Its formality slows you down and helps you hear the text as Scripture. The New International Version (NIV) reads in contemporary English and often clarifies what older language can obscure. Read both. Where they differ in wording but not in meaning, you will often find the truth illuminated from two angles at once. Where they differ in shade or emphasis, ask why — and let the question lead you deeper.

NOTES

[illegible]

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

BEFORE WE BEGIN

Get to Know Paul

The man, the moment, and the letters that changed the world

Before we open Paul's letters, we should meet the man who wrote them. The thirteen letters in our New Testament that bear Paul's name were not written in a library or a quiet study. They were written on the road, in borrowed rooms, in prison cells, by a man who had been violently interrupted by Jesus Christ and spent the rest of his life trying to explain what that interruption meant.

Paul did not invent Christianity. He did not even know Jesus during his earthly ministry. He was, by his own admission, the last person anyone would have expected to become an apostle of Christ. But he became the most important interpreter of the gospel the church has ever had — and the letters in this study are the reason.

To read his letters well, it helps to know three things: who he was before, what happened to him, and what he was doing when he wrote.

I. The Man Before Christ

Paul was born sometime around AD 5, in Tarsus — a thriving Greek-speaking city in what is now southeastern Turkey. His Jewish name was Saul; his Roman name was Paul. He carried both worlds inside him from birth.

Tarsus was no backwater. It was a center of learning, commerce, and Roman administration. To grow up there was to grow up speaking Greek fluently, hearing the philosophies of the day debated in public squares, watching the machinery of the empire at work. But Saul's home was Jewish to its core. He was a Pharisee, the son of Pharisees (Acts 23:6) — meaning his family was devoted to the careful keeping of the Mosaic law and the traditions of the elders.

As a young man, Saul was sent to Jerusalem to study under Gamaliel (Acts 22:3), one of the most respected rabbis of the era. This was elite training. Gamaliel was the grandson of the great rabbi Hillel and a member of the Sanhedrin. To sit at his feet

was the equivalent of studying at the most prestigious seminary of the day. Saul was being groomed for leadership in Israel.

He also held Roman citizenship from birth (Acts 22:28), which was rare and valuable. It gave him legal protections most people in the empire did not have — the right to a fair trial, exemption from certain punishments, the ability to appeal to Caesar. This citizenship would later shape the path of his ministry in ways he could not have foreseen.

By the time he appears in the New Testament, Saul is a young man, probably in his late twenties or early thirties, brilliant, intense, and absolutely convinced that the followers of Jesus of Nazareth were a dangerous threat to true Judaism. To his trained mind, the claim that a crucified man was the Messiah was not just wrong — it was blasphemy. The law was clear: “anyone who is hung on a tree is under God’s curse” (Deuteronomy 21:23). For Saul, the cross was proof that Jesus could not possibly be the Messiah.

He acted on that conviction. We first meet him in Acts 7, standing in approval as Stephen, the first Christian martyr, is stoned to death. The men who killed Stephen laid their cloaks at Saul’s feet (Acts 7:58). From there, Saul becomes the leading persecutor of the church. He went house to house, dragging off men and women and throwing them in prison (Acts 8:3). He later admitted that he had voted for the death of Christians, hunted them in foreign cities, and tried to force them to blaspheme (Acts 26:9–11).

This is the man you need to picture when you read Paul’s letters. Not a kindly grandfather. Not a religious bureaucrat. A zealot. A man with blood on his hands. A man who believed, with all the fervor of his soul, that he was serving God by stamping out the followers of Jesus.

It is essential that we see him this way. Because what happens next is not a gentle religious deepening. It is a collision.

II. The Damascus Road

The story is told three times in the book of Acts (chapters 9, 22, and 26), and Paul refers to it repeatedly in his own letters. It clearly was the defining moment of his life. Around AD 33 or 34 — only a year or two after the crucifixion — Saul was traveling north from Jerusalem to Damascus, a journey of about 135 miles. He carried letters from the high priest authorizing him to arrest any followers of Jesus he found there and bring them back in chains.

He never made it to Damascus on his own terms.

As he neared the city, a light from heaven, brighter than the noonday sun, flashed around him. He fell to the ground. And he heard a voice say, in Aramaic: “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?”

Saul asked the question every person eventually has to ask. “Who are you, Lord?”

And the answer came: “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.”

Pause on that. The man Saul believed was a dead heretic was alive. The followers Saul was hunting were not deluded — they were right. And in persecuting them, Saul had been persecuting Christ himself. Every chain he had locked, every prison door he had slammed, every approving nod at a stoning had been done not against confused Jews but against the risen Lord of glory.

Saul stood up blind. His companions led him by the hand into Damascus. For three days he sat in darkness, neither eating nor drinking. We are not told what he thought about during those three days, but we can guess. Every verse he had memorized, every argument he had made, every conviction he had built his life on now had to be rebuilt around a single shattering fact: Jesus is alive, and I have been wrong about everything that matters.

On the third day, a Christian named Ananias came to him — sent by the Lord, terrified of the man he was visiting. Ananias laid hands on Saul, called him “Brother Saul,” and told him that the Lord Jesus had sent him so that Saul might see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit. Something like scales fell from Saul’s eyes. He could see. He was baptized. He ate. And immediately, in the synagogues of Damascus, he began to preach that Jesus is the Son of God.

❶ **A Note on Conversions**

Not every conversion is as dramatic as Paul’s. Most are not. But every genuine conversion shares the same essential structure: a person who was opposed to or indifferent to Christ comes to see who he really is and what he has done, and surrenders to him. The light may be quieter. The voice may be a verse, a sermon, a friend’s question, a long slow drawing. But the turning is real. If you have ever had your understanding of Jesus broken open and remade, you and Paul share something profound, no matter how different the circumstances.

Paul spent the next several years mostly out of public view. He went to Arabia (Galatians 1:17), probably for time alone with God to rethink everything he thought he knew. He returned to Damascus. Eventually he went up to Jerusalem to meet Peter and stayed with him for fifteen days (Galatians 1:18). And then he went home to Tarsus, where he stayed for years, probably preaching locally and waiting on God.

It was not until around AD 46 — more than a decade after his conversion — that Barnabas came to find him in Tarsus and brought him to Antioch, where the great mission of his life finally began.

III. The Missionary and the Letters

From Antioch, the church in Syria, Paul was sent out on what we now call his missionary journeys — three of them, spanning roughly fifteen years and thousands of miles across what is now Turkey, Greece, and beyond. He walked Roman roads, sailed the Mediterranean, slept in cheap inns and friends' houses, supported himself by making tents, and preached the gospel in city after city.

His pattern was consistent. He entered a city, found the local synagogue, and preached Jesus to the Jews who gathered there. Some believed; many did not. When the synagogue closed to him, he turned to the Gentiles, who often received the message with joy. A small church would form — Jews and Gentiles together, slaves and free, rich and poor — and Paul would teach them, appoint elders, and move on to the next city.

The letters in this study were written into the life of those young churches. They are not theological essays composed in calm reflection. They are pastoral correspondence — sometimes urgent, sometimes tender, always direct — written to address real situations in real congregations that Paul knew by name.

Why he wrote

Paul wrote his letters for four overlapping reasons. The first was correction. False teachers had infiltrated some of his churches, twisting the gospel or adding requirements to it. Other churches had drifted into division, immorality, or confusion. Paul wrote to set them straight — sometimes gently, sometimes with fire.

The second reason was encouragement. Some of his churches were facing persecution. Others were discouraged, tired, or grieving. Paul wrote to remind them what they had in Christ and to lift their eyes.

The third reason was instruction. Many of his readers were new believers from pagan backgrounds with no Jewish framework for understanding what God had done in Christ. Paul wrote to teach them — about salvation, about the church, about marriage, about work, about money, about hope, about the end of the age.

The fourth reason was relational. Paul loved these churches. He genuinely missed his people. When he could not visit, he wrote — often telling them how often he prayed for them, how he longed to see them again, how much they meant to him.

How the letters fit together

The thirteen letters traditionally attributed to Paul fall into a few natural groupings. The earliest are likely Galatians and the two letters to the Thessalonians, written in the late 40s and early 50s. The great middle letters — 1 and 2 Corinthians and Romans — come from the mid-to-late 50s and represent his most extended theological work. The four “prison letters” — Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon — were written from confinement in the early 60s. And the “pastoral letters” — 1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, and Titus — come at the end of his life, written not to churches but to two younger pastors he was mentoring.

This study covers nine of those letters across seven weeks — the ones richest with teaching for ordinary Christian living. We will not work through every book. We will not catch every detail. But by the end, you will have walked through the heart of Paul’s message: the gospel of grace, the freedom of life in Christ, the call to love, the hope of resurrection, and the steady work of growing into the person God is making you to be.

How Paul died

Paul’s story ends, as best we can reconstruct it, in Rome. Arrested in Jerusalem, he appealed to Caesar as a Roman citizen and was sent to Rome for trial. The book of Acts leaves him there under house arrest, still preaching. Early Christian tradition tells us he was eventually released, traveled briefly again, was arrested a second time, and was executed under the emperor Nero around AD 67 — beheaded outside the city, the death of a Roman citizen.

He wrote his last letter, 2 Timothy, from that final imprisonment. In it he says, with no self-pity and no fear: “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day — and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing” (2 Timothy 4:7–8).

The man who began as a persecutor ended as a martyr. The man who once held the cloaks of those who killed Stephen now gave his own neck for the same Lord. The interruption on the road to Damascus had carried him all the way home.

As You Read

Keep this man in mind as you read his letters. The fire you will feel in Galatians is the fire of a former Pharisee who knows exactly how the law can be twisted into a chain. The joy in Philippians is the joy of a man writing in chains himself. The towering vision of Christ in Colossians is the vision of a man who once thought Jesus was a fraud and now cannot stop describing his glory. The patience with the Corinthians is the patience of a pastor who knows the gospel is bigger than the messes his people make. The grace in Romans is the grace that found him on a road, blinded him, named him, and would not let him go.

Paul is not writing about religion. He is writing about a person who met him in light and called his name. He is writing because he wants you to know that person too.

So let's begin...

WEEK 1

Galatians

Freedom in Christ vs. Legalism

We begin this study with one of Paul's earliest, most urgent, and most personal letters. Galatians is short, but it burns. There is no thanksgiving section, no warm preamble — Paul moves straight from his greeting to a thunderclap: "I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you." Whatever else this letter is, it is the writing of a pastor who believes the gospel itself is on the line. And as we will see, he was right.

Historical Background

Galatia was not a single city but a Roman province in the central highlands of what is now Turkey. Paul most likely planted churches in this region during his first missionary journey (around AD 47–49), visiting cities such as Antioch in Pisidia, Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe — places where he preached the gospel, made disciples, faced opposition, was stoned and left for dead in Lystra, and yet returned to strengthen the believers (Acts 13–14).

The population of these churches was largely Gentile. Some were former pagans drawn out of Greco-Roman polytheism; others had attended synagogues as "God-fearers" without becoming full Jewish converts. When Paul preached that salvation came through faith in Jesus the Messiah — apart from circumcision and the Mosaic law — it was, for many of them, unimaginably good news. They received the Holy Spirit. They formed worshiping communities. They believed.

But after Paul moved on, other teachers arrived. Scholars call them "Judaizers" — Jewish Christians who insisted that to be truly part of God's covenant people, the Galatian Gentiles needed to be circumcised and to keep the Mosaic law. Their

argument was not necessarily that Jesus didn't matter; it was that Jesus was not quite enough. Faith was the entry door, but obedience to the law was the house. The Galatians began to listen. And Paul, hearing of it, sat down and wrote.

Most scholars date the letter to around AD 48–49, possibly written just before the Jerusalem Council of Acts 15, which addressed this very controversy. That places Galatians as quite possibly Paul's earliest surviving letter — and one of the earliest documents of the Christian movement.

Why Paul Wrote This Letter

Paul wrote Galatians because a different gospel was being preached, and a different gospel is no gospel at all. The Judaizers were not adding a hobby to the Christian life; they were redefining how a person is made right with God. If righteousness comes through law-keeping, then Christ's death was unnecessary. If circumcision is required, then grace is no longer grace. Paul saw clearly what was at stake: take away grace alone, and you take away the gospel.

But the letter is more than a theological argument. It is a passionate, pastoral cry. Paul defends his apostolic authority (chapters 1–2), unpacks the relationship between law and faith using Abraham as the test case (chapters 3–4), and then turns to the practical question that always follows such a freedom: how do you live a holy life if you are not under the law? His answer — walk by the Spirit, and the fruit will come (chapters 5–6) — has shaped Christian spirituality ever since.

Galatians is, in many ways, the first long argument for what we now call the gospel of grace. Martin Luther loved this letter and called it “my Katie von Bora,” his wife — meaning, the letter to which he was wedded. It is worth our time.

Key Takeaways You'll See in This Letter

- Salvation is by grace through faith in Christ — not by works of the law.
- In Christ, all believers — Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male or female — share the same standing.
- Christian freedom is not license; it is freedom to love and to walk in the Spirit.
- The evidence of a Spirit-filled life is not religious performance but the fruit of the Spirit.

Key Passages from the Scriptures

Note: The following passages are printed in the New International Version (NIV) and the King James Version (KJV) side by side. Read them slowly. Read them aloud if you can. Notice where the wording diverges, and ask what each rendering surfaces.

Galatians 2:16

NIV	KJV
know that a person is not justified by the works of the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ. So we, too, have put our faith in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the law, because by the works of the law no one will be justified.	Knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law, but by the faith of Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Jesus Christ, that we might be justified by the faith of Christ, and not by the works of the law: for by the works of the law shall no flesh be justified.

Explanation

This single verse is the theological hinge of the entire letter. Paul uses the word “justified” — a courtroom term meaning to be declared in the right, acquitted, restored to right standing. The question is: how does a person get into that standing before God?

Paul’s answer is direct: not through “works of the law.” The phrase refers to the requirements of the Mosaic covenant — circumcision, dietary regulations, festival observance, ritual purity — but the principle extends far beyond those specifics. Any system in which my standing with God is earned by my performance falls under this critique. Justification, Paul insists, comes “by faith in Jesus Christ.”

Notice the threefold repetition: not by works, but by faith. Not by works, but by faith. Not by works — period. Paul will not let the point be softened or split.

Modern Application

Many of us have been told the gospel of grace, but we still live as if our acceptance with God depends on how spiritually disciplined we have been this week. Did I read

enough? Pray enough? Avoid the sins I keep failing at? Quietly, the law creeps back in — not Moses' law, but a personal law of religious performance. Paul calls this what it is: a return to the very thing Christ set us free from.

To live in the freedom of this verse is to wake each morning already accepted. Your prayer life does not earn that. Your failures do not erase it. Christ's faithfulness has secured your standing, and you are now invited to live out of it — not toward it.

Galatians 3:26–29

NIV	KJV
²⁶ So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, ²⁷ for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. ²⁸ There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. ²⁹ If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise.	²⁶ For ye are all the children of God by faith in Christ Jesus. ²⁷ For as many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ. ²⁸ There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus. ²⁹ And if ye be Christ's, then are ye Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise.

Explanation

These verses are the social and spiritual revolution of the gospel compressed into four sentences. Paul takes the three great dividing lines of the ancient world — ethnicity, social class, and gender — and says that in Christ, none of them determines a person's standing before God.

This was unimaginable. In the synagogue prayer of Paul's day, a Jewish man might thank God that he was not born a Gentile, a slave, or a woman. Paul, a former Pharisee, dismantles all three lines with a single sentence. In Christ, we have been

clothed with him — meaning his identity has covered ours. The defining label is no longer Jew, Gentile, slave, free, male, female. The defining label is “in Christ.”

Verse 29 then folds the Gentile believer into the family promise of Abraham itself. Through Christ, Gentile Galatians do not become Jews — they become co-heirs of a promise that always pointed forward to them.

Modern Application

Paul is not erasing real human differences. He is denying that those differences create a hierarchy of access to God. In Christ, the wealthy executive and the unhoused man, the immigrant and the lifelong native, the seminary professor and the brand-new believer, the man and the woman — all stand on the same ground.

If your church or your heart still uses some other ladder — education, family background, ethnicity, financial standing, denominational pedigree — to measure who is closest to God, Galatians 3 is the demolition of that ladder. There is one Christ. We are all clothed in him. We are all heirs.

Galatians 5:1

NIV	KJV
It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery. ²⁹ If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise.	Stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free, and be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage. ²⁹ And if ye be Christ’s, then are ye Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise.

Explanation

If 2:16 is the theological hinge, 5:1 is the pastoral rallying cry. The KJV’s “stand fast” is military language — hold your ground. Paul tells the Galatians that the freedom they have in Christ is not a side benefit of the gospel; it is the very purpose of the cross. “It is for freedom that Christ has set us free.”

The danger he warns against is subtle. The Galatians are not in danger of abandoning Christ outright. They are in danger of letting Christ plus law become their new yoke. Paul calls that a return to slavery. To add anything to Christ as a condition for acceptance is to walk willingly back into the prison whose door he opened.

Modern Application

Spiritual slavery rarely announces itself. It comes dressed as seriousness, devotion, sometimes maturity. “I should be doing more.” “A real Christian would...” “God can’t really love me unless I...” Each phrase is a thread in a yoke being lowered onto your shoulders.

Paul’s word to that yoke is to stand fast. Freedom in Christ is not the absence of structure or discipline — those still have their place — but the presence of grace as your starting point. You do not pray to be accepted; you pray because you are. You do not obey to earn love; you obey because love is already yours. Stand there. Do not move.

Galatians 5:22-23

NIV	KJV
²² But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, ²³ gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law.	²² But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, ²³ Meekness, temperance: against such there is no law.

Explanation

If a person is justified by faith and not by law, how then do they live? Paul’s answer is in the metaphor of fruit. A tree does not grunt and strain to produce fruit; it draws on what is inside it, and what is inside comes out. The Christian, indwelt by the Spirit, will bear what the Spirit produces.

Note that the word is “fruit” — singular. Paul does not give us nine fruits to pick like items on a menu, with permission to be loving but not patient. He gives one fruit with nine facets: love that is also joyful, peaceful, patient, kind, good, faithful, gentle, and self-controlled. The list reads like a portrait of Jesus.

“Against such things there is no law,” Paul adds — a small phrase with a large meaning. No law was ever written to restrain love or patience. The Spirit produces in us the very things the law was always trying to point toward, and produces them from the inside out rather than from the outside in.

Modern Application

Ask yourself which fruit feels least present in your life right now. Joy when you are exhausted? Patience with that one person? Self-control around the screen, the snack, the comment thread? The first move is not to try harder. It is to ask the Spirit who indwells you to grow what only he can grow.

Christian growth happens largely as a by-product. We do not pursue patience directly; we pursue Christ, and patience grows as we walk with him. We do not white-knuckle self-control; we surrender, day by day, and find we are gentled. The fruit comes from staying connected to the vine.

Bringing It Together

Galatians teaches us that grace is not a stage of the Christian life we pass through on the way to maturity. Grace is the soil, the air, and the water of every step. The mature Christian is not the one who has graduated from grace into rule-keeping; the mature Christian is the one who is more deeply rooted in grace than ever, and whose life — by the Spirit’s quiet work — has begun to look more and more like Jesus.

If you remember nothing else from this week, remember this: you are accepted by God through the faithfulness of Jesus Christ. Nothing you do today will increase that acceptance, and nothing you fail at today will decrease it. Now — walk in the Spirit.

Personal Reflection

Take your time with these. Don't try to answer all five in one sitting — one a day is a good rhythm. Write your responses in a journal so you can return to them later in this study.

Where in your life have you slipped from grace-based living back into performance-based living? What does that “yoke of slavery” look like for you right now — religiously, relationally, internally?

Galatians 3:28 dismantles every social hierarchy in the family of God. Is there a category of person you quietly believe is closer to God, or further from God, than you? What would it look like to repent of that?

Read Galatians 5:1 aloud, slowly, three times. Then write what comes to mind when you finish the sentence: “To stand firm in my freedom in Christ this week would look like...”

Walk through the nine facets of the fruit of the Spirit (love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control). Which is most evident in your life right now? Which is least? What might the Spirit be wanting to grow in you?

Paul wrote Galatians because the gospel itself was being distorted. In your own words — without using churchy phrases you've absorbed — write out the gospel as you understand it today. What is the good news?

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

Prayer Focus for Week 1

In the space below, write a prayer based on the following words of Paul from his letter to the Galatians:

...the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law.

Draw on this week's themes — grace over performance, freedom in Christ, the work of the Spirit — and shape the prayer around what's actually going on in your life right now. Where do you most need love this week? Patience? Self-control? Name it honestly.

Then return to your prayer each morning and let it set the tone for your day.

[illegible]

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

WEEK 2

Philippians

Joy in Every Circumstance

If Galatians is fire, Philippians is light. Paul writes this letter from a Roman prison cell — chained, uncertain whether he will live or die — and the word that appears more than any other is joy. Sixteen times in four short chapters, Paul uses the words “joy” or “rejoice.” This is not the cheerfulness of a man whose circumstances are good. This is the deeper, stranger thing the New Testament keeps insisting is possible: joy that does not depend on what is happening to you.

Historical Background

Philippi was a Roman colony in what is now northeastern Greece — a city of veterans, retired soldiers settled there by Rome on conquered land. As a colony, Philippi enjoyed Roman citizenship, Roman law, and Roman customs in a Greek world. Its people were proud of their Roman identity. They walked the famous Via Egnatia, the main east-west highway of the empire, and considered themselves a little piece of Rome set down in Macedonia.

Paul came to Philippi during his second missionary journey, around AD 49–50, after a vision in the night directed him across the Aegean Sea into Europe (Acts 16:9–10). What happened there was remarkable. By a riverside outside the city — apparently because Philippi lacked the ten Jewish men needed to form a synagogue — he met Lydia, a wealthy dealer in purple cloth from Thyatira. She believed, was baptized with her household, and opened her home as the gathering place for the new church. The Philippian church was, from its first day, marked by hospitality and generosity.

Paul’s time in Philippi also included exorcising a spirit from a slave girl, being beaten and imprisoned, and singing hymns at midnight in his cell until an earthquake shook the prison open. The Philippian jailer and his household believed that same night

(Acts 16). When Paul left, the church remained — a small, mixed community of a Jewish businesswoman, a Roman jailer, a delivered slave girl, and others — bound together by Christ. They were the first church Paul planted on European soil.

Years later, when Paul was imprisoned (most likely in Rome around AD 60–62), the Philippians sent him financial help by way of a man named Epaphroditus.

Epaphroditus nearly died in the effort. Paul writes Philippians as a thank-you letter, an update on his condition, and a pastor's heartfelt encouragement to a church he deeply loves.

Why Paul Wrote This Letter

Philippians is, on the surface, a personal letter — closer in tone to a letter you might write to old friends than to the polished theological treatise of Romans. Paul writes to thank the Philippians for their gift, to send Epaphroditus home with news, and to address several pastoral concerns. There is a whisper of division in the church between two women, Euodia and Syntyche (4:2). There are warnings about false teachers (3:2). There is real suffering: Paul in chains, the Philippians facing opposition.

But underneath the practical concerns runs the great theme of the letter: joy. Not denial. Not pretending things are fine. Joy that is anchored in something deeper than circumstance — anchored in Christ himself, in the certainty of his return, and in the assurance that whatever happens, God is at work. Paul does not preach this from a comfortable study. He preaches it from a chain.

Key Takeaways You'll See in This Letter

- God who began a good work in you will complete it — your sanctification is in his hands.
- The humility of Christ — emptying himself even to death — is the pattern for our life together.
- Forgetting what is behind, we press on toward Christ; the past does not define the future.
- Anxiety yields to prayer, and the peace of God guards the heart.
- We can do all things — endure plenty and want alike — through Christ who strengthens us.

Key Scripture Passages

Note: The following passages are printed in the New International Version (NIV) and the King James Version (KJV) side by side. Read them slowly. Read them aloud if you can. Notice where the wording diverges, and ask what each rendering surfaces.

Philippians 1:6

NIV	KJV
being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.	Being confident of this very thing, that he which hath begun a good work in you will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ:

Explanation

Paul writes this almost in passing, embedded in his opening prayer for the Philippians — but the sentence is one of the great anchor verses of the New Testament. The “good work” is the work of salvation and sanctification: God’s transforming work in the believer’s life, which began at conversion and continues toward the day of Christ’s return.

Paul’s confidence is striking. He does not say, “I am hopeful.” He says, “I am confident.” And his confidence rests not on what the Philippians are doing, but on what God is doing. The verb tenses matter: he began, he will carry on, he will complete. The whole arc is God’s.

“The day of Christ Jesus” is Paul’s term for Christ’s return — the moment of consummation when every promise will be made whole. Until that day, God is not finished. He does not begin a work and walk away.

Modern Application

Many believers move through their Christian life quietly afraid that they are the exception — that everyone else is being sanctified but God has somehow given up on them. This verse is the death of that fear. The one who started the work is the one finishing it. He is not surprised by your slow growth. He is not exhausted by your relapses. He is not waiting for you to finally get serious so he can begin.

Live this week in the confidence that your sanctification is not a self-improvement project you might fail at. It is a divine work, already begun, already underway, already guaranteed. Your part is to cooperate. His part is to complete.

Philippians 2:3-11

NIV	KJV
³ Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, ⁴ not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others. ⁵ In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus: ⁶ Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; ⁷ rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. ⁸ And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death — even death on a cross! ⁹ Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, ¹⁰ that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth,	³ Let nothing be done through strife or vainglory; but in lowliness of mind let each esteem other better than themselves. ⁴ Look not every man on his own things, but every man also on the things of others. ⁵ Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus: ⁶ Who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God: ⁷ But made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men: ⁸ And being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross. ⁹ Wherefore God also hath highly exalted him, and given him a name which is above every name: ¹⁰ That at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of things in heaven, and things in earth, and things under the earth;

NIV	KJV
¹¹ and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.	¹¹ And that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Explanation

Many scholars believe verses 6–11 are an early Christian hymn that Paul is quoting — one of the oldest pieces of Christian poetry we possess, possibly older than the Gospels themselves. It traces the entire arc of the incarnation in seven verses: from the eternal Son in the form of God, downward to servanthood, downward further to death on a cross, then upward to the highest exaltation and the universal confession that Jesus is Lord.

Notice the verbs of descent: he did not grasp, he emptied, he humbled, he obeyed — even unto death. Then the great reversal: “Therefore God exalted him.” The path of glory in God’s economy is not the path of grasping but the path of giving. Down is the way up.

Paul does not quote this hymn for theological showcasing. He quotes it as an argument. “Have the same mindset.” The mind of Christ — humble, self-emptying, others-oriented — is to shape every relationship in the church. If the eternal Son did not consider equality with God something to be used for himself, no Christian gets to use anything for themselves.

Modern Application

Read the news of any week and you will see what self-promotion looks like. Read your own heart and you will see it more clearly. The instinct to be seen, to be right, to be ahead, to be vindicated — it is in all of us. Christ’s path runs in exactly the opposite direction.

What does it mean, practically, to have the mind of Christ in your marriage, in your workplace, in your church, in your family group chat? It means choosing the lower seat. It means listening longer than you defend. It means letting someone else’s interest matter as much as your own. It means absorbing a cost rather than passing it along.

And Philippians 2 promises something paradoxical: this path is not a path to obscurity but to true exaltation. God himself raised Christ from the lowest place to the highest. The way of the cross is, finally, the way of glory.

Philippians 3:13-14

NIV	KJV
¹³ Brothers and sisters, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, ¹⁴ I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.	¹³ Brethren, I count not myself to have apprehended: but this one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before, ¹⁴ I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus.

Explanation

Paul uses the language of an athlete here — a runner straining toward the finish line. He has just finished saying, in the verses before, that whatever credentials he once had (and they were impressive) he now counts as loss compared to knowing Christ. The Christian life is not a backward-glancing project of nostalgia, nor a backward-glancing project of guilt. It is forward motion.

“Forgetting what is behind” does not mean amnesia. Paul remembers his past — he is the man who persecuted the church. But he refuses to let his past, whether his accomplishments or his failures, exert gravitational pull on his future. He has fixed his eyes on Christ and is running.

Modern Application

Many Christians are functionally chained to their past. Either to their failures — the sin they cannot stop replaying, the marriage that ended, the years they wasted — or to their successes, which they cannot stop measuring everything else against. Paul's word is one word: forget. Not deny. Not pretend. Forget in the sense of refusing to let what is behind keep you from running what is ahead.

The image is a runner who looks over their shoulder mid-race. The moment you turn your head, your stride breaks and you slow. Paul keeps his eyes on the finish line, where Christ is waiting, and runs. That is the posture of Christian maturity.

Philippians 4:4-9

NIV	KJV
⁴ Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! ⁵ Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. ⁶ Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. ⁷ And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. ⁸ Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable — if anything is excellent or praiseworthy — think about such things. ⁹ Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me — put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you.	⁴ Rejoice in the Lord alway: and again I say, Rejoice. ⁵ Let your moderation be known unto all men. The Lord is at hand. ⁶ Be careful for nothing; but in every thing by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known unto God. ⁷ And the peace of God, which passeth all understanding, shall keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus. ⁸ Finally, brethren, whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things. ⁹ Those things, which ye have both learned, and received, and heard, and seen in me, do: and the God of peace shall be with you.

Explanation

This is one of the most beloved passages in the New Testament, and for good reason. Paul, writing from prison, gives the anxious heart a roadmap: rejoice, be gentle, refuse to be ruled by anxiety, pray about everything with thanksgiving, and the peace of God will stand guard over your inner life.

The word “guard” in verse 7 is a military term. Paul imagines the peace of God as a Roman soldier — perhaps inspired by the soldiers chained to him as he wrote — standing watch over the heart and mind of the believer. The peace does not depend on the storm subsiding outside; it depends on the Guardian within.

Then verse 8 turns to the discipline of attention. Anxiety is, in part, a problem of what we let our minds dwell on. Paul gives a list — true, noble, right, pure, lovely, admirable — and says: think on these things. We are not at the mercy of our thoughts. We can choose, day by day, what we feed our minds.

Modern Application

Modern life is engineered to keep you anxious. The news cycles, the notifications, the constant comparison economy of social media — all of it pulls the mind toward the unstable, the alarming, the dissatisfying. Philippians 4 is a striking contrast.

Pray about everything. Literally everything — not just the “spiritual” things. Pray about your finances, your kids, the conversation you are dreading, the lump you have not gotten checked, the meeting tomorrow. Paul’s promise is not that God will give you what you ask. His promise is that as you pray, God’s peace will guard you.

And then watch what you watch. Read what is true. Listen to what is noble. Look at what is lovely. The mind that is fed on what is excellent will not, over time, be the same mind that was fed on what is poisonous.

Philippians 4:13

NIV	KJV
I can do all this through him who gives me strength. What is behind and straining toward what is ahead,	I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before,

Explanation

This verse is famous, but it is often quoted out of context. “I can do all things” sounds like a triumphal promise that whatever I attempt — the new job, the dream, the championship — Christ will empower me to accomplish.

But look at what Paul says in the verses just before it. “I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want.” Then: “I can do all this through him who gives me strength.”

What is the “all this” Paul can do through Christ? Be content. In abundance and in lack. In a palace or in a prison. Whether full or hungry. That is the all-things Christ empowers Paul to do — not the all-things of accomplishment, but the all-things of contentment.

Modern Application

This is far more freeing than the popular misreading. The promise is not that Christ will make you great at everything you attempt. The promise is that Christ will give you the strength to be content in whatever season you find yourself in — the prosperous and the lean alike.

Are you in plenty right now? Christ can teach you not to make idols of comfort. Are you in want? Christ can give you a peace that does not depend on the want ending. The secret Paul learned in a prison cell is available to you in yours.

Bringing It Together

Philippians is the New Testament’s clearest portrait of joy that is not naive. Paul knows about suffering — he is writing in chains. He knows about division — he writes about Euodia and Syntyche. He knows about uncertainty — he does not know whether he will live or die. And yet, sixteen times, he uses the language of rejoicing. The joy of Philippians is not the joy of someone whose life is easy. It is the joy of someone whose anchor is held by Someone Else.

This week, let the letter teach you that joy is a discipline as well as a gift. It is something we cultivate — through prayer, through what we feed our minds, through choosing the mindset of Christ rather than the mindset of self-promotion — and

something we receive, again and again, from the God who guards our hearts in Christ Jesus.

NOTES

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Personal Reflection

Take your time with these. Don't try to answer all five in one sitting — one a day is a good rhythm. Write your responses in a journal so you can return to them later in this study.

Philippians 1:6 promises that God will complete the good work he began in you. Where in your spiritual life are you most tempted to think God has given up? Write a prayer reaffirming that he has not.

Read the Christ hymn (2:6–11) slowly. Where in your life right now is Christ inviting you to choose the downward path — the path of humility, service, or letting go of being right? Be specific.

What is one thing in your past — a failure, a season, even a success — that you tend to let define your present? What would it look like, in Paul’s language, to “forget what is behind” this week?

[illegible]

Make a list of every anxiety carrying weight in your life this week. Then, beside each one, write a short prayer turning it over to God with thanksgiving. Notice what happens to the list.

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This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

In the space below, write a prayer based on these words of Paul from his letter to the Philippians:

Draw on this week's themes — joy that doesn't depend on circumstances, peace in the middle of hard things, contentment learned through Christ — and shape the prayer around what's actually going on in your life right now. Where is anxiety pressing in this week? What are you tempted to grumble about? What good gift have you been too distracted to thank God for? Name it honestly.

[illegible]

WEEK 3

Ephesians

Identity in Christ & Spiritual Warfare

Ephesians is, in many ways, the most cosmic of Paul's letters. He pulls back from the immediate crises of individual congregations and writes about the church as a whole — what it is, where it sits in the purposes of God, and how it lives in a world charged with unseen powers. The letter divides cleanly down the middle: the first three chapters tell us who we are in Christ; the last three chapters tell us how to live out of that identity. Identity precedes activity. Indicative precedes imperative. This is the Pauline pattern, nowhere more beautifully arranged than here.

Historical Background

Ephesus, on the western coast of Asia Minor, was one of the great cities of the ancient world — population perhaps a quarter million, a major port, and the home of the Temple of Artemis, one of the Seven Wonders. Pilgrims streamed to Ephesus from across the empire. The city's economy revolved around the cult: silversmiths made shrines, magicians traded in spells, and the streets bustled with religious tourism. It was a city soaked in spiritual power — much of it dark.

Paul spent more time in Ephesus than in any other church he planted. Acts 19 records nearly three years of ministry there, including disciples being filled with the Spirit, miraculous healings, and an extraordinary moment when new converts publicly burned their books of magic — scrolls valued at fifty thousand silver coins. The gospel made such inroads that the silversmith Demetrius led a riot against Paul, fearing the temple's decline. Paul left a thriving, mature church behind when he finally departed.

Many scholars believe Ephesians was written from prison — likely the same Roman imprisonment from which Paul wrote Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon, around AD 60–62. Interestingly, some early manuscripts of Ephesians lack the

phrase “in Ephesus” in 1:1, leading many scholars to suggest this letter may have been a circular letter — written for several churches in the region and copied to each, with Ephesus being the most prominent. That fits the letter’s tone: less correction of specific problems, more grand description of what the church universally is.

By the time of this letter, the church in Ephesus had been operating for nearly a decade. The first wave of converts had children. The pagan opposition was real. The believers needed a vision of who they were that was as large as the gods of Ephesus that still surrounded them.

Why Paul Wrote This Letter

Paul writes Ephesians to give the church its self-understanding. Who are we, this strange new community of Jews and Gentiles together, scattered across hostile cities? What does it mean to be “in Christ” — a phrase that appears more than thirty times in this short letter? What does it mean that we, who once were dead in sin, have been raised and seated with Christ in heavenly places?

The letter’s strategy is to ground everything practical in something theological. Don’t lie. Don’t steal. Be kind. Forgive. Submit to one another. Wives and husbands. Parents and children. Slaves and masters. Resist the devil. All of that is in Ephesians 4–6. But none of it stands alone. It all flows from the towering vision of Ephesians 1–3: chosen before the foundation of the world, sealed with the Spirit, raised with Christ, members of one new humanity, dwelling place of God by the Spirit. Live out of that, Paul says, and the practical ethics will follow.

Key Takeaways You’ll See in This Letter

- Every spiritual blessing in Christ has already been given to us in him.
- Salvation is by grace through faith — we are God’s workmanship, created for good works.
- There is one body, one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father.
- We do not battle flesh and blood, but spiritual powers — and God has given us armor for the fight.

Key Scripture Passages

Note: The following passages are printed in the New International Version (NIV) and the King James Version (KJV) side by side. Read them slowly. Read them aloud if you can. Notice where the wording diverges, and ask what each rendering surfaces.

Ephesians 1:3-14

NIV	KJV
³ Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ. ⁴ For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love ⁵ he predestined us for adoption to sonship through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will — ⁶ to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves. ⁷ In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace ⁸ that he lavished on us. With all wisdom and understanding, ⁹ he made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, ¹⁰ to be put into effect when the times reach their fulfillment — to bring unity	³ Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who hath blessed us with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ: ⁴ According as he hath chosen us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before him in love: ⁵ Having predestinated us unto the adoption of children by Jesus Christ to himself, according to the good pleasure of his will, ⁶ To the praise of the glory of his grace, wherein he hath made us accepted in the beloved. ⁷ In whom we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of his grace; ⁸ Wherein he hath abounded toward us in all wisdom and prudence; ⁹ Having made known unto us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure which he hath purposed in himself: ¹⁰ That in the dispensation of the fulness of times he might gather

NIV	KJV
to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ. ¹¹ In him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will, ¹² in order that we, who were the first to put our hope in Christ, might be for the praise of his glory. ¹³ And you also were included in Christ when you heard the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation. When you believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, ¹⁴ who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession — to the praise of his glory.	together in one all things in Christ, both which are in heaven, and which are on earth; even in him: ¹¹ In whom also we have obtained an inheritance, being predestinated according to the purpose of him who worketh all things after the counsel of his own will: ¹² That we should be to the praise of his glory, who first trusted in Christ. ¹³ In whom ye also trusted, after that ye heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation: in whom also after that ye believed, ye were sealed with that holy Spirit of promise, ¹⁴ Which is the earnest of our inheritance until the redemption of the purchased possession, unto the praise of his glory.

Explanation

In the original Greek, verses 3–14 are one continuous sentence — Paul's pen never stops. It pours out praise like water from a broken pitcher. Twice he says "to the praise of his glory." He cannot get through a sentence about salvation without breaking into worship.

Trace the verbs: God blessed us. God chose us. God predestined us. God lavished grace on us. God made known to us the mystery of his will. God will gather all things together. We were sealed. The Spirit was given as a deposit.

And notice when this began: "before the creation of the world." Salvation is not God's reaction to humanity's fall. It is God's eternal purpose, present in the divine mind before there was a world to fall in the first place.

Modern Application

Many of us live with a fragile sense of being chosen. We feel chosen on the days when we're spiritually focused, and unchosen the days we're not. Ephesians 1 sweeps that fragility away. Your being chosen happened before the foundation of the world. It is not your performance that secures it. It is God's eternal purpose.

Read these twelve verses out loud, slowly, and notice what they do to your soul. If they do not move you, you have not understood them. The proper response to being told you have been chosen, loved, redeemed, forgiven, and sealed by God before time began is not to nod. It is to worship.

Ephesians 2:8-10

NIV	KJV
⁸ For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith — and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God — ⁹ not by works, so that no one can boast. ¹⁰ For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.	⁸ For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: ⁹ Not of works, lest any man should boast. ¹⁰ For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them.

Explanation

These three verses together capture the whole shape of the Christian life: not from works, but for works. Salvation is by grace through faith — a gift, not a wage. But the gift is not aimless. We are God's handiwork (the Greek word is *poiema*, from which we get "poem") — his crafted creation, fashioned in Christ Jesus to do the good works he has already prepared.

Think of that last phrase carefully. The good works God wants from you are not assignments you have to discover or invent. They are works he prepared in advance. Your obedience this week is not improvisation; it is participation in something God has already arranged. He has prepared the people you will encounter, the

conversation you will have, the kindness you will give, the patience you will need. Your part is to walk in them.

Modern Application

If verses 8–9 free us from earning salvation, verse 10 frees us from aimlessness. Some Christians live in fear of doing nothing; others live in anxiety about doing the right things. Both are answered here. You don't have to invent your obedience. God has prepared good works for you, and your job is simply to walk into them as they come.

Tomorrow morning, before your feet hit the floor, you might pray simply: "Father, I am your workmanship. Lead me into the works you have prepared for me today." Then watch how the day unfolds. The conversation that comes your way. The person who needs grace. The moment of quiet integrity no one will see. Walk in them.

Ephesians 4:1-6

NIV	KJV
¹ As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received.	¹ I therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you that ye walk worthy of the vocation wherewith ye are called,
² Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love.	² With all lowliness and meekness, with longsuffering, forbearing one another in love;
³ Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.	³ Endeavouring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.
⁴ There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called;	⁴ There is one body, and one Spirit, even as ye are called in one hope of your calling;
⁵ one Lord, one faith, one baptism;	⁵ One Lord, one faith, one baptism,
⁶ one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.	⁶ One God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all.

Explanation

Ephesians turns from indicative to imperative at chapter 4. Paul has spent three chapters telling the believers who they are. Now he turns to how they live. And the first word is unity. “Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.”

Notice the qualifier: every effort. Unity is not automatic. Paul does not say “the Spirit will produce unity if you wait passively for it.” He says: work for it. Strain for it. Make every effort. Then he names the dispositions that make unity possible — humility, gentleness, patience, forbearance, love.

Then comes the magnificent seven-fold “one.” One body. One Spirit. One hope. One Lord. One faith. One baptism. One God and Father. The grounds of unity are not personality compatibility or doctrinal niceties — they are these seven realities that hold the church together whether we feel close to one another or not.

Modern Application

Christian unity is not the same as agreement on every secondary matter. It is a hard-won, Spirit-empowered commitment to one another that holds even through disagreement. And it requires the very specific dispositions of verse 2: humility, gentleness, patience, forbearance.

Ask yourself: where in the body of Christ — your local church, your small group, your denomination, the global church — are you currently letting some other allegiance fracture the bond Paul describes here? Political tribe? Style preference? Personal hurt? The seven “ones” of verses 4–6 are deeper than any of those things. Make every effort to keep what the Spirit has already made.

Ephesians 6:10-18

NIV	KJV
¹⁰ Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. ¹¹ Put on the full armor of God, so that you can take your stand against the devil’s schemes.	¹⁰ Finally, my brethren, be strong in the Lord, and in the power of his might. ¹¹ Put on the whole armour of God, that ye may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil.

NIV	KJV
¹²For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. ¹³Therefore put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand. ¹⁴Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place, ¹⁵and with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace. ¹⁶In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. ¹⁷Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. ¹⁸And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the Lord's people.	¹²For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places. ¹³Wherefore take unto you the whole armour of God, that ye may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand. ¹⁴Stand therefore, having your loins girt about with truth, and having on the breastplate of righteousness; ¹⁵And your feet shod with the preparation of the gospel of peace; ¹⁶Above all, taking the shield of faith, wherewith ye shall be able to quench all the fiery darts of the wicked. ¹⁷And take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God: ¹⁸Praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit, and watching thereunto with all perseverance and supplication for all saints;

Explanation

Paul, who at this very moment is chained to a Roman soldier, looks at his guard and sees a sermon. The believer's battle, he writes, is not against human enemies — “flesh and blood” — but against unseen spiritual powers. And for that battle, God has provided armor.

Read the armor carefully. It is almost all defensive. Belt, breastplate, shoes, shield, helmet. The only offensive weapon is the sword — and even that sword is identified as the word of God, not our own clever arguments. Most of the Christian life, in Paul's picture, is held ground rather than gained ground. We stand. We resist. We hold our position in Christ until the evil day passes.

Notice also that each piece of armor is a reality already given in Christ. Truth, righteousness, peace, faith, salvation, the Word, prayer — these are not items we manufacture but realities we put on. The armor is Christ. We are clothed in him.

Modern Application

Modern Christians often respond to the language of spiritual warfare in one of two unhelpful ways. We either dismiss it as ancient cosmology that doesn't apply, or we sensationalize it and see demons behind every difficulty. Paul does neither. He soberly tells the believer: there is a real enemy, with real schemes, and you need real armor.

Practically, the armor is put on through the daily disciplines of faith. The belt of truth: knowing what God has said and refusing to be moved by what he has not. The breastplate of righteousness: walking in integrity, refusing the small compromises. The shoes of peace: a settled gospel-confidence in any encounter. The shield of faith: trusting God's character when circumstances scream the opposite. The helmet of salvation: protecting your mind from despair by remembering whose you are. The sword of the Spirit: knowing Scripture well enough that it comes to mind when you need it.

And then — verse 18 — prayer. Pray always. Pray in the Spirit. Pray for all the Lord's people. Paul ends the armor passage on prayer, because all the armor in the world is useless if you are not actually engaged with the God who gives it.

Bringing It Together

Ephesians is a letter for Christians who have begun to lose their sense of size. The world of our day, like the world of Ephesus, is saturated with smaller stories — the story of self, of consumer choice, of tribe, of political identity, of personal brand. Paul wants us to know we are caught up in a story larger than any of these: a story that began before creation, runs through the cross, and ends with all things united under Christ.

Live this week in the truth of your identity. You are chosen. You are sealed. You are God's poetry. You belong to a body that no power in heaven or earth can finally fracture. Stand firm. Pray always. And remember — the One in you is greater than the one in the world.

NOTES

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Personal Reflection

Take your time with these. Don't try to answer all five in one sitting — one a day is a good rhythm. Write your responses in a journal so you can return to them later in this study.

Re-read Ephesians 1:3–14 slowly. List every blessing Paul names that already belongs to you in Christ. Which of these do you most need to remember this week?

Ephesians 2:10 says you are God's workmanship, created for good works he has prepared in advance. What good works might God have prepared for you this week? Where might you have been resisting them?

Where in your relationships — at home, at church, online — are you finding it hardest to “make every effort” for unity right now? What disposition from Ephesians 4:2 (humility, gentleness, patience, forbearance) is most needed?

Walk through the pieces of armor in Ephesians 6. Which feels most worn-down for you right now — your truth, your righteousness, your peace, your faith, your sense of salvation, your knowledge of God's Word, or your prayer life? What might it look like to strengthen that piece this week?

When you imagine your daily struggles, do you tend to see them mostly as people-against-people, or do you also recognize the unseen spiritual dimension Paul describes? How might Ephesians 6:12 reshape how you respond to the next difficult person or situation?

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

In the space below, write a prayer based on these words of Paul from his letter to the Ephesians:

***Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power.
Put on the full armor of God, so that you can take your stand
against the devil's schemes. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood,
but against the rulers, against the authorities,
against the powers of this dark world
and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.***

Draw on this week's themes — your identity as a chosen and beloved child of God, the unity Christ has made possible, the spiritual battle that is real but already won — and shape the prayer around what's actually going on in your life right now. Where do you most need to remember who you are in Christ? What lie about yourself keeps creeping back in? Which piece of God's armor — truth, righteousness, peace, faith, salvation, the Word — do you most need to put on this week? Name it honestly.

Then return to your prayer each morning and let it set the tone for your day.

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

WEEK 4

1st and 2nd Corinthians

Holiness, Correction, and Love

If Philippians is a letter to a beloved church and Ephesians is a letter to a healthy church, Corinthians is a letter to a church in trouble. Divisions over leaders. Tolerated sexual immorality. Lawsuits between believers. Drunkenness at the Lord's Supper. Spiritual one-upmanship. Confusion about resurrection. False apostles undermining Paul's authority. Almost every problem the modern church faces has a first-century version in Corinth. And almost every chapter of these two letters is Paul's pastoral, sometimes anguished, always hopeful response.

Historical Background

Corinth was a city of contradictions. Destroyed by Rome in 146 BC, then rebuilt by Julius Caesar in 44 BC as a Roman colony, Corinth by Paul's day was a booming, cosmopolitan port — roughly 250,000 inhabitants on a narrow isthmus that controlled trade between the Aegean and Adriatic seas. Ships were literally dragged overland across the isthmus to avoid the long sea route. The city was rich, diverse, and famously immoral. The Greek verb “to Corinthianize” had become slang for sexual debauchery centuries before Paul arrived.

Above the city loomed the Acrocorinth, with its temple of Aphrodite. Ancient sources speak of a thousand temple prostitutes (the figure is likely exaggerated, but the cult was real). The city's gods were many, its trade routes constant, its newcomers continuous. A church planted in Corinth would never be a quiet country chapel.

Paul came to Corinth on his second missionary journey, around AD 50–52, and stayed for eighteen months (Acts 18) — longer than anywhere except Ephesus. He worked as a tentmaker alongside Priscilla and Aquila to support himself, preached in the synagogue until expelled, and saw conversions including the synagogue ruler

Crispus. The Lord encouraged him in a night vision: “Do not be afraid; keep on speaking, do not be silent. For I am with you... I have many people in this city” (Acts 18:9–10). The church Paul planted was mixed — Jew and Gentile, rich and poor, slave and free — gifted, lively, and very much shaped by the city around it.

First Corinthians was likely written from Ephesus around AD 54–55, in response to news Paul had received about the Corinthian church and a letter they had sent him with specific questions. Second Corinthians followed within a year or so, after a painful visit and a stern letter in between. By the time he writes 2 Corinthians, Paul is more raw, more autobiographical, and more vulnerable than perhaps anywhere else in his letters.

Why Paul Wrote This Letter

First Corinthians is a problem-solver's letter. Paul moves systematically through a series of issues: factions (chapters 1–4), a tolerated incest case (chapter 5), lawsuits and sexual immorality (chapter 6), marriage and singleness (chapter 7), food offered to idols (chapters 8–10), worship and the Lord's Supper (chapter 11), spiritual gifts (chapters 12–14), the resurrection (chapter 15), and a collection for Jerusalem (chapter 16). Each topic addressed pastorally, biblically, and with great patience considering the immaturity he is correcting.

Second Corinthians is more personal. Paul defends his ministry against false apostles who have questioned his credentials, opens his own heart about his sufferings and weaknesses, urges generosity in the Jerusalem collection (chapters 8–9), and pleads for reconciliation with a church that has hurt him deeply but that he still loves. Where 1 Corinthians teaches us how to fix problems, 2 Corinthians teaches us how to lead and love through them.

Taken together, these two letters give us the most complete picture in the New Testament of a real church in real trouble — and an apostle refusing to give up on it.

Key Takeaways You'll See in This Letter

- Christian unity is a non-negotiable; division around leaders or preferences is spiritual immaturity.
- Our bodies belong to God — bought with a price — and how we use them matters spiritually.

- Without love, every spiritual gift, sacrifice, and accomplishment counts for nothing.
- The resurrection is the heartbeat of the gospel — without it, faith is empty; with it, death is conquered.
- God’s power is made perfect in our weakness, not in our strength.

Key Scripture Passages

Note: The following passages are printed in the New International Version (NIV) and the King James Version (KJV) side by side. Read them slowly. Read them aloud if you can. Notice where the wording diverges, and ask what each rendering surfaces.

1 Corinthians 1:10

NIV	KJV
I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another in what you say and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly united in mind and thought.	Now I beseech you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you; but that ye be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment.

Explanation

Paul opens his first major correction of the Corinthian church with division. The believers had formed factions — “I follow Paul,” “I follow Apollos,” “I follow Cephas (Peter),” “I follow Christ.” Paul’s response is incredulous: “Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Were you baptized in the name of Paul?”

The Greek word translated “divisions” is *schismata* — schism — and refers to a tear, a split, a rip in a garment. Paul is saying the church has begun to rip itself along the lines of its favored teachers. He calls them back to one mind, one judgment, one allegiance — to Christ alone.

Note that Paul is not naive. He does not believe Christians will agree on every secondary matter. But he refuses to let personality-based, preference-based, or

party-based loyalties tear the church into competing factions.

Modern Application

The modern church suffers from a thousand versions of “I follow Paul, I follow Apollos.” I follow this celebrity pastor, I follow that podcast, I’m Reformed, I’m Pentecostal, I’m progressive, I’m traditional, I’m part of the real Christians while those over there are something less. Each loyalty contains some truth. Each becomes a schism when it eclipses Christ.

Take an honest inventory this week. Which secondary loyalty — to a teacher, a style, a political alignment, a denominational identity, a theological tribe — has begun to compete with your primary loyalty to Christ and his body? Paul’s pastoral surgery is gentle but firm: tear no garment. The church is one.

1 Corinthians 6:19-20

NIV	KJV
¹⁹Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; ²⁰you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your bodies.	¹⁹What? know ye not that your body is the temple of the Holy Ghost which is in you, which ye have ye have of God, and ye are not your own? ²⁰For ye are bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body, and in your spirit, which are God’s.

Explanation

Paul has just finished addressing sexual immorality in the Corinthian church. His argument is not primarily a moral one — “don’t do this because it’s wrong” — but a theological one: your body is a temple. The Spirit of the living God has taken up residence in you. You are not your own.

Read the implications. In the Old Testament, the temple in Jerusalem was the place of God’s presence on earth. To desecrate the temple was unthinkable. Paul transfers that category onto the believer’s body. The same God who once filled the Most Holy Place now indwells you. Whatever you do with your body, you do in a temple.

Then the great line: “You are not your own. You were bought at a price.” The Christian does not own themselves. They have been purchased — at the cost of the cross — and now belong to the one who bought them.

Modern Application

Modern culture insists on bodily autonomy as a sacred principle: my body, my choice, my decision. Paul’s gospel cuts directly across that grain. You are not your own. Your body is not your private property to do with as you please. It is the temple of the Spirit, and it has been bought.

This text speaks to sexual ethics — the immediate concern in 1 Corinthians 6 — but it speaks far beyond them. How you use your body matters: what you put into it, how you steward it, whether you exhaust it in service of idols or surrender it as a living sacrifice (Romans 12:1). Your body is part of your worship. Honor God with it.

1 Corinthians 13:1-13

NIV	KJV
¹ If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal.	¹ Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not charity, I am become as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal.
² If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing.	² And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries, and all knowledge; and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, and have not charity, I am nothing.
³ If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.	³ And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, and have not charity, it profiteth me nothing.
⁴ Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud.	⁴ Charity suffereth long, and is kind; charity envieth not; charity vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up,

NIV	KJV
⁵ It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. ⁶ Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. ⁷ It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. ⁸ Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away. ⁹ For we know in part and we prophesy in part, ¹⁰ but when completeness comes, what is in part disappears. ¹¹ When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put the ways of childhood behind me. ¹² For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known. ¹³ And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.	⁵ Doth not behave itself unseemly, seeketh not her own, is not easily provoked, thinketh no evil; ⁶ Rejoiceth not in iniquity, but rejoiceth in the truth; ⁷ Beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things. ⁸ Charity never faileth: but whether there be prophecies, they shall fail; whether there be tongues, they shall cease; whether there be knowledge, it shall vanish away. ⁹ For we know in part, and we prophesy in part. ¹⁰ But when that which is perfect is come, then that which is in part shall be done away. ¹¹ When I was a child, I spake as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child: but when I became a man, I put away childish things. ¹² For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known. ¹³ And now abideth faith, hope, charity, these three; but the greatest of these is charity.

Explanation

First Corinthians 13 is read at weddings the world over, but it was not written for weddings. It was written for a fractious church obsessed with spiritual gifts, especially the showier ones, and using those gifts as a measuring stick for spiritual maturity. Paul pulls the rug out from under all of it. Without love, he says, even the most impressive gifts are nothing.

Look at what he is willing to discount. Speaking in tongues of men and angels. Prophetic gifting. Knowledge of mysteries. Faith that moves mountains. Total generosity to the poor. Martyrdom itself. Strip love from any of these, and what remains is nothing.

Then comes the great portrait: love is patient, love is kind, love does not envy, does not boast, is not proud, does not dishonor, is not self-seeking, is not easily angered, keeps no record of wrongs. Every line of this can be tested against your own behavior over the last twenty-four hours. The chapter is at once the most beautiful and the most uncomfortable in the New Testament.

Modern Application

Try this exercise. Read verses 4–7 substituting your own name for every “love.” “Sarah is patient, Sarah is kind, Sarah does not envy...” Where does it ring true? Where does it expose you? That gap between Paul’s description and your behavior is the territory where the Spirit wants to work.

Then read those same verses substituting “Christ.” Every line fits him perfectly. He is patient. He is kind. He keeps no record of our wrongs. He bears all things. He hopes all things. Christ is love made flesh, and our growing in love is, finally, our growing into him.

1 Corinthians 15:51-58

NIV	KJV
⁵¹ Listen, I tell you a mystery: We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed — ⁵² in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet	⁵¹ Behold, I shew you a mystery; We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, ⁵² In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trump: for the trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be

NIV	KJV
will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. ⁵³ For the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality. ⁵⁴ When the perishable has been clothed with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality, then the saying that is written will come true: "Death has been swallowed up in victory." ⁵⁵ "Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?" ⁵⁶ The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. ⁵⁷ But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁵⁸ Therefore, my dear brothers and sisters, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain.	raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed. ⁵³ For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality. ⁵⁴ So when this corruptible shall have put on incorruption, and this mortal shall have put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written, Death is swallowed up in victory. ⁵⁵ O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory? ⁵⁶ The sting of death is sin; and the strength of sin is the law. ⁵⁷ But thanks be to God, which giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁵⁸ Therefore, my beloved brethren, be ye steadfast, unmoveable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, forasmuch as ye know that your labour in the Lord is not in vain.

Explanation

The Corinthians had begun to deny the resurrection of the dead. Some Greek philosophical traditions found the idea of a bodily resurrection embarrassing — the body was a prison to be escaped, not a temple to be raised. Paul takes an entire chapter (1 Corinthians 15) to defend the resurrection, calling it the very foundation of Christian faith: if Christ has not been raised, our faith is futile and we are of all people most to be pitied (15:17–19).

But he ends not with despair but with trumpet blast. The trumpet will sound. The dead will be raised. We will all be changed. The perishable will put on the imperishable. Death — that final enemy — will be swallowed up in victory.

Then the great cry, borrowed from the prophet Hosea: “Where, O death, is your sting?” Paul stares the last enemy in the face and mocks it. Through Christ, death’s victory has been undone. We grieve, but not as those without hope.

Modern Application

Christianity is not, finally, a strategy for coping with death. It is the announcement that death has been defeated. The resurrection of Jesus is not a metaphor for new beginnings; it is the historical hinge on which the universe turns. And because Christ has been raised, those who belong to him will be raised also.

When you stand at a graveside this side of resurrection, you grieve — but the grief is real and bounded. When fear of death whispers to you in the night, you can answer it with Paul: where is your sting? The end of the Christian story is not a body in a box. It is a body raised imperishable, transformed, glorified. Therefore — verse 58 — stand firm. Give yourselves to the work of the Lord. Your labor is not in vain.

2 Corinthians 12:9-10

NIV	KJV
⁹ But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me. ¹⁰ That is why, for Christ’s sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.	⁹ And he said unto me, My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness. Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. ¹⁰ Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in necessities, in persecutions, in distresses for Christ’s sake: for when I am weak, then am I strong.

Explanation

Paul has been speaking about a “thorn in the flesh” — some kind of persistent suffering whose exact nature he does not specify, perhaps physical illness, perhaps a relentless opponent. Three times he begged the Lord to remove it. Three times the Lord said no. Instead came this answer: “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.”

This is one of the great paradoxes of the New Testament. In the kingdoms of this world, power is the path forward and weakness is the path to defeat. In God's economy, the reverse is true. Christ's strength is most fully revealed in the place of our weakness, because there we finally stop relying on ourselves and lean entirely on him.

Paul does not say he likes his thorn. He says he has learned, by the grace of God, to delight in it — because in that place of weakness he meets a Christ he could not meet anywhere else.

Modern Application

Most of us spend our lives trying to engineer away our weaknesses. We hide our struggles. We project competence. We post our highlight reels and bury our failures. Paul, by contrast, leans into his weakness and finds Christ there.

What is your thorn? The chronic illness, the relentless temptation, the family pain that will not heal, the limitation that you would give anything to be free of? You may have prayed three times — or three hundred — for it to be taken. The Lord may yet remove it. But until he does, his word to you is the same word he gave Paul: my grace is sufficient for you. My power is made perfect in your weakness. Lean in. Let him be strong where you are not.

Bringing It Together

The Corinthians were brilliant, gifted, articulate, and a mess. They had every spiritual gift Paul could name, and they were tearing each other apart. The letters Paul wrote to them are God's mercy made visible: not abandoning a struggling church, but laboring with it, correcting it, calling it back, again and again, to the gospel that had made it.

These letters are God's mercy to us as well. We are, more often than we like to admit, the Corinthians. We have our factions. We have our compromises. We have our pride in our gifts. We have our weakness in love. And to us, the Spirit speaks: there is a more excellent way. The way of love. The way of weakness made strong. The way of resurrection hope. Stand firm in it.

NOTES

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Personal Reflection

Take your time with these. Don't try to answer all five in one sitting — one a day is a good rhythm. Write your responses in a journal so you can return to them later in this study.

Where in your life or church do you see Paul's pattern of "I follow Paul, I follow Apollos" — where loyalty to a teacher, tribe, or tradition has begun to compete with loyalty to Christ?

Read 1 Corinthians 13:4–7 substituting your own name for "love." Where does it fit? Where does it expose you? Pick one trait and ask the Spirit to grow it in you this week.

What is your “thorn in the flesh” — the persistent weakness, suffering, or limitation you most wish God would remove? How might his answer to Paul (“my grace is sufficient”) apply to your situation?

If you took 1 Corinthians 6:19–20 seriously this week — that your body is the Spirit’s temple, that you are not your own, that you were bought with a price — what specifically would change about how you treat your body?

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

Prayer Focus for Week 4

In the space below, write a prayer based on these words of Paul from his letters to the Corinthians:

If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but do not have love,

I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. ...

Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast,

it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking,

it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs.

Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth.

It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.

Draw on this week's themes — the call to unity over division, the holiness of a body that belongs to Christ, the love that outlasts every gift and gives every other gift its meaning, the strange grace that meets us in weakness — and shape the prayer around what's actually going on in your life right now. Where are you choosing to be right over being loving? Whose record of wrongs are you still keeping? Where is God asking you to let his strength carry what your strength cannot? Name it honestly.

Then return to your prayer each morning and let it set the tone for your day.

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WEEK 5

Colossians and Philemon

The Supremacy of Christ and Christian Reconciliation

This week we read two letters that arrived together. Colossians was written to a young church Paul had never met, facing a confusing blend of philosophy and false spirituality that was dimming their view of Christ. Philemon was a personal note to one member of that same Colossian church about a runaway slave who had become a brother. The two letters were carried by the same messenger, on the same journey, and they form a remarkable pair: the cosmic Christ of Colossians who is over all things, and the practical love of Philemon that reconciles a runaway and his master as fellow heirs of Christ.

Historical Background

Colossae sat in the Lycus River Valley in what is now southwestern Turkey, about 100 miles inland from Ephesus. Once a significant trade city, by Paul's day it had been eclipsed by its larger neighbors Laodicea and Hierapolis. Colossae was the smallest of the three, a town in decline, located in a fertile valley known for its wool industry and its hot springs.

Paul never visited Colossae himself. The church there was planted by Epaphras (Colossians 1:7), a native of the city who had likely been converted under Paul's ministry in Ephesus and returned home with the gospel. The Colossian church was small, predominantly Gentile, and meeting in homes — including the home of Philemon, where the letter to him was read aloud (Philemon 1–2).

Years after the church was founded, Epaphras traveled to visit Paul in prison and brought troubling news. A new teaching was making inroads in Colossae — what

scholars often call “the Colossian heresy.” Its exact contours are hard to reconstruct, but it appears to have blended several streams: Jewish legalism (circumcision, dietary laws, festival observance), philosophical speculation about cosmic powers and angelic mediators, ascetic practices (“don’t handle, don’t taste, don’t touch”), and a quasi-mystical spirituality that promised special insight. Underneath it all was a quiet diminishment of Christ — not denial, but addition. Christ plus rituals. Christ plus angels. Christ plus secret knowledge.

Philemon is set in this same Colossian context. Philemon was a wealthy believer whose home hosted the Colossian church. He owned a slave named Onesimus, who had run away — possibly stealing from his master in the process. Somehow, by what Paul calls divine providence, Onesimus had encountered Paul in prison, had been converted, and had become a beloved son to the apostle. Now Paul is sending him back to Philemon — but no longer as a slave only. Now as a brother.

Why Paul Wrote This Letter

Paul writes Colossians to lift up Christ. Wherever Christ has been diminished, the answer is not first argument but vision. So Paul gives the Colossians one of the most magnificent christological passages in the New Testament (1:15–20), then warns them not to be taken captive by hollow philosophy, religious performance, or angel worship (chapter 2), and finally tells them what life looks like for those whose minds are set on things above (chapters 3–4).

The letter’s logic is simple and devastating: if Christ is who Colossians 1 says he is — the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation, the one in whom all things hold together, the one in whom the fullness of God dwells bodily — then no philosophy, no ritual, no angelic intermediary, no ascetic practice can add anything to him. He is enough. He is more than enough. He is everything.

Philemon, by contrast, is short, tactical, and personal. Paul writes to ask Philemon to receive Onesimus back — not as a runaway slave to be punished, but as a brother in Christ to be welcomed. He does not command. He appeals. He stakes his own friendship and credit on Onesimus’s behalf. “If he has done you any wrong... charge it to me,” he writes. “I will pay it back.” In twenty-five verses, Paul shows the gospel quietly dismantling the most fundamental social hierarchy of the ancient world.

Key Takeaways You'll See in This Letter

- Christ is supreme over all creation — every visible and invisible power, every authority, every philosophy.
- We have died and been raised with Christ; our life is now hidden with Christ in God.
- Christian community is to be marked by compassion, forgiveness, and peace — clothing ourselves daily in love.
- The gospel transforms our most basic relationships, including those defined by inequality of status.

Key Scripture Passages

Note: The following passages are printed in the New International Version (NIV) and the King James Version (KJV) side by side. Read them slowly. Read them aloud if you can. Notice where the wording diverges, and ask what each rendering surfaces.

Colossians 1:15-20

NIV	KJV
¹⁵The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. ¹⁶For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him. ¹⁷He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. ¹⁸And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that	¹⁵Who is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of every creature: ¹⁶For by him were all things created, that are in heaven, and that are in earth, visible and invisible, whether they be thrones, or dominions, or principalities, or powers: all things were created by him, and for him: ¹⁷And he is before all things, and by him all things consist. ¹⁸And he is the head of the body, the church: who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead; that in all

NIV	KJV
in everything he might have the supremacy. ¹⁹For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, ²⁰and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.	things he might have the preeminence. ¹⁹For it pleased the Father that in him should all fulness dwell; ²⁰And, having made peace through the blood of his cross, by him to reconcile all things unto himself; by him, I say, whether they be things in earth, or things in heaven.

Explanation

Like the Christ hymn in Philippians 2, this passage may have been an early Christian hymn that Paul is quoting. It is one of the most exalted descriptions of Christ in all of Scripture — a soaring confession of who he is in relation to creation, the cosmos, and the church.

Move through it slowly. Christ is the image of the invisible God — to see Jesus is to see what God is like. He is the firstborn over creation — not first in time, as some heretics later argued, but supreme in rank and authority. All things were created in him, through him, and for him. Every throne, every power, every authority — including the spiritual powers the Colossians were tempted to revere — was made by Christ. They are creatures. He is the Creator.

He is before all things; in him all things hold together. The fabric of the cosmos coheres because Christ sustains it. He is head of the church, beginning of the new creation, firstborn from among the dead. In everything — Paul cannot say it strongly enough — he has the supremacy. And the fullness of God dwells in him bodily, not partially or temporarily but completely, so that through him God reconciles all things to himself, making peace through the blood of the cross.

Modern Application

Whenever the church is in danger of losing Christ, the answer is to look again at who he is. The Colossians were being told Christ was not enough — that they needed angelic intermediaries, secret knowledge, special practices. Paul's response is not

to argue point by point against those teachings. His response is to set Christ before them in such a way that the question answers itself. If this is who Christ is, what could possibly be added to him?

The same is true for us. When you are tempted to add something to Christ — your performance, your tradition, your political party, your spiritual experiences, your therapeutic insights — return to Colossians 1. Christ is the image of God. The fullness of deity dwells in him bodily. All things hold together in him. He is enough.

Colossians 2:6-10

NIV	KJV
⁶So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live your lives in him, ⁷rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness. ⁸See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the elemental spiritual forces of this world rather than on Christ. ⁹For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form, ¹⁰and in Christ you have been brought to fullness. He is the head over every power and authority.	⁶As ye have therefore received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk ye in him: ⁷Rooted and built up in him, and stablished in the faith, as ye have been taught, abounding therein with thanksgiving. ⁸Beware lest any man spoil you through philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men, after the rudiments of the world, and not after Christ. ⁹For in him dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily. ¹⁰And ye are complete in him, which is the head of all principality and authority.

Explanation

Paul follows the great hymn of Colossians 1 with a direct pastoral application. Just as you received Christ — by grace, by faith, in humility — continue to walk in him. Christian life does not graduate from Christ to some higher principle. The way you started is the way you continue.

Then comes a striking warning: “See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy.” The Greek word for “takes captive” is the language of slave traders. Paul is saying: there are teachings dressed up as wisdom that will literally enslave you. They sound deep. They feel spiritual. But underneath, they are hollow — empty — and they will lead you away from Christ.

The antidote is verses 9–10. In Christ all the fullness of God lives in bodily form, and in Christ you have been brought to fullness. The believer lacks nothing essential. What more could be added to all the fullness of God?

Modern Application

Our age is awash in spiritualities that promise fullness apart from Christ. Wellness mysticism, political messianism, self-actualization gospel, productivity religion, even some forms of “Christian” teaching that have quietly added some other foundation to the gospel. Paul’s warning is direct: see to it that you are not taken captive. Test what you are absorbing.

The test is simple. Does this teaching exalt Christ as he is exalted in Colossians 1? Does it acknowledge that fullness is in him alone? Or does it whisper, beneath its spiritual language, that Christ is a starting point but you need something more — a discipline, an experience, a knowledge, a movement — to truly arrive? If so, walk away. You are already complete in him.

Colossians 3:12-17

NIV	KJV
¹²Therefore, as God’s chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. ¹³Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you.	¹²Put on therefore, as the elect of God, holy and beloved, bowels of mercies, kindness, humbleness of mind, meekness, longsuffering; ¹³Forbearing one another, and forgiving one another, if any man have a quarrel against any: even as Christ forgave you, so also do ye. ¹⁴And above all these things put on charity, which is the bond of perfectness.

NIV	KJV
¹⁴ And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity. ¹⁵ Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful. ¹⁶ Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom through psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts. ¹⁷ And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.	¹⁵ And let the peace of God rule in your hearts, to the which also ye are called in one body; and be ye thankful. ¹⁶ Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom; teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord. ¹⁷ And whatsoever ye do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God and the Father by him.

Explanation

Having established who Christ is, and warned against false teaching, Paul turns to the question of community life. The clothing metaphor governs this passage — having taken off the old self (3:9), the believer now puts on the new. Compassion. Kindness. Humility. Gentleness. Patience. Forbearance. Forgiveness. And above all, love, which is the belt that binds the whole outfit together.

The standard for forgiveness is striking: “Forgive as the Lord forgave you.” Not as you feel like forgiving. Not as the offender deserves. As Christ has forgiven you — freely, completely, while you were still his enemy. The same impossible standard is held up in the Lord’s Prayer (“as we forgive our debtors”).

Then comes a triple commendation of gratitude. Be thankful (v.15). Sing with gratitude (v.16). Give thanks to God (v.17). The Christian life is, at its best, a continuous act of thanksgiving — to the God who in Christ has given us the Way.

Modern Application

If Christ is who Colossians 1 says he is, this is the kind of life that follows. Not external rule-keeping, not religious performance, but the patient clothing of the heart in the very dispositions of Christ. Compassion. Kindness. Humility.

Try this as a daily practice: each morning, name the virtues of verse 12 one by one — compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience — and ask the Spirit to clothe you in each one. Then in the evening, review your day. Where did you wear them well? Where did you take them off? Confess, receive forgiveness, and put them on again tomorrow.

Philemon 15-16

NIV	KJV
¹⁵ Perhaps the reason he was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back forever — ¹⁶ no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother. He is very dear to me but even dearer to you, both as a fellow man and as a brother in the Lord.	¹⁵ For perhaps he therefore departed for a season, that thou shouldest receive him for ever; ¹⁶ Not now as a servant, but above a servant, a brother beloved, specially to me, but how much more unto thee, both in the flesh, and in the Lord?

Explanation

Onesimus's name in Greek means “useful” — a common slave name. Paul plays on the meaning earlier in the letter (verse 11). And in this short letter to Philemon, Paul does something quietly revolutionary. He sends a runaway slave back to his master, and he asks the master to receive him “no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother.”

Paul does not directly command the abolition of slavery — though it is hard to read this letter and miss its trajectory. What he does is undermine the institution from beneath, by insisting that the gospel has made these two men brothers. They sit in the same congregation. They eat at the same Lord's Table. They are co-heirs of the same kingdom. The old social hierarchy cannot survive that reality unchanged.

Verse 15 contains a gentle theological reframing. Maybe Onesimus's running away — which Philemon would have experienced as theft and betrayal — was actually God's providence at work, separating them temporarily so they could be reunited eternally. Paul is suggesting that the very wound Philemon suffered may have been the doorway through which something far better entered.

Modern Application

Philemon is the most concrete demonstration in the New Testament of what the gospel does to human inequalities. It does not erase the social realities — Onesimus is still legally a slave when Paul writes — but it puts a charge under them that, given time, must blow them apart. “Brother” is a stronger word than any title the empire could give.

Where in your life are there relationships defined more by inequality than by brotherhood? Employer and employee. Manager and managed. Insider and outsider. Long-time member and newcomer. Citizen and immigrant. The gospel does not necessarily remove the role distinctions, but it utterly transforms them. The Christian boss and the Christian janitor are first brothers in Christ. Live the brotherhood, and watch the inequality bend.

And consider: Is there a relationship in your life that has been broken — by betrayal, by running away, by long absence? Could Paul's reframing of verse 15 apply? Could God have been at work even in the wound, preparing a reunion or a reconciliation deeper than what was before?

Bringing It Together

Colossians and Philemon together show us the two scales on which the gospel works. On the cosmic scale, Christ is supreme over every power and authority, the head of every principality, the one in whom all things hold together. On the personal scale, that same gospel reaches into the household of Philemon and turns a master and his runaway slave into beloved brothers.

The same Christ who fills the universe also reconciles your most personal relationships. The same gospel that holds the galaxies together is at work in your kitchen, your marriage, your office, your friendships. Live this week with both scales in view: a Lord who is high above every authority, and a Lord who comes near enough to make brothers of enemies.

Personal Reflection

Take your time with these. Don't try to answer all five in one sitting — one a day is a good rhythm. Write your responses in a journal so you can return to them later in this study.

Read Colossians 1:15–20 aloud, slowly, as a hymn. What attribute of Christ in this passage most catches you this week? Why?

Where might you be tempted to add something to Christ — a teaching, an experience, a discipline, a movement — as if he were a starting point and not the fullness of God? What would it look like to remember you are already “complete in him”?

Colossians 3:12 lists virtues to clothe yourself in: compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience. Which feels most missing in your wardrobe right now? What would it look like to deliberately “put it on” tomorrow morning?

Is there someone you need to forgive “as the Lord forgave you”? Not because they deserve it, not because you feel like it, but because you have been forgiven much. Write what holding the unforgiveness has cost you, and what releasing it could cost — and gain.

Philemon transforms a master-slave relationship into a brother-brother relationship without erasing the social context. Where in your relationships does the gospel call you to recognize someone first as a brother or sister in Christ — even while other roles remain? Be specific.

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Prayer Focus for Week 5

In the space below, write a prayer based on these words of Paul from his letters to the Colossians:

***Therefore, as God’s chosen people, holy and dearly loved,
clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and
patience. Bear with each other and forgive one another
if any of you has a grievance against someone.
Forgive as the Lord forgave you.
And over all these virtues put on love,
which binds them all together in perfect unity.***

Draw on this week’s themes — the supremacy of Christ over every rival, the call to clothe yourself in his character each day, the costly reconciliation Paul asked of Philemon and asks of us — and shape the prayer around what’s actually going on in your life right now. Who is harder for you to forgive than you want to admit? Which of these virtues — compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience — feels furthest out of reach this week? Where has something other than Christ quietly taken first place in your heart? Name it honestly.

Then return to your prayer each morning and let it set the tone for your day.

NOTES

This image shows a single page of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

WEEK 6

1st and 2nd Thessalonians

Hope, Endurance, and Christ's Return

The Thessalonian letters are among the earliest writings of the New Testament — possibly the earliest. They give us a remarkable window into a very young church, planted only weeks before Paul wrote, already enduring real persecution and wrestling with real confusion about the end of the world. Paul writes as a pastor who had to leave too soon, who worries about his new converts, who hears they are doing better than he hoped, and who turns his anxious heart into letters full of comfort, instruction, and the steady reminder that Christ is coming back.

Historical Background

Thessalonica, the leading city of Macedonia and capital of the Roman province, was a busy seaport on the Via Egnatia, the great east-west Roman highway. With perhaps 100,000 inhabitants, it was a major commercial center, home to merchants, sailors, civic officials, a Jewish community with its synagogue, and the typical Greco-Roman pantheon. The city had a reputation for fierce loyalty to Rome — it had backed the right side in several civil wars and been rewarded with the status of a free city, governed by its own assembly under Roman protection.

Paul came to Thessalonica in AD 49 or 50, during his second missionary journey, immediately after being imprisoned and beaten in Philippi (Acts 17). His time in the city was short — perhaps only three or four weeks of sustained ministry, based on Acts's description of him reasoning in the synagogue “on three Sabbath days.” During that brief window, a remarkable thing happened: some Jews believed, many God-fearing Greeks joined them, and a significant number of leading women came to faith. A church was born.

But the same hostility that had nearly killed Paul in Philippi caught up with him in Thessalonica. A Jewish-led mob accused Paul and his companions before the city officials of “defying Caesar’s decrees, saying that there is another king, one called Jesus” (Acts 17:7) — a politically explosive charge in a city that prided itself on Roman loyalty. Paul was hustled out of town under cover of night and sent on to Berea, then Athens, then Corinth, where he settled for eighteen months and from which he wrote both Thessalonian letters.

Paul was deeply anxious about what he had left behind. He had only weeks to teach this young, persecuted congregation. Would they hold? He sent Timothy back to check on them and to bring word. When Timothy returned to Paul in Corinth with good news — the church was standing, the faith was holding, the love was growing — Paul sat down and wrote 1 Thessalonians. A few months later, when further questions arose about the timing of Christ’s return and the behavior of certain idle members, he wrote 2 Thessalonians.

Why Paul Wrote This Letter

First Thessalonians is largely a letter of encouragement and gentle instruction. Paul commends the church for its faith, hope, and love (1:3) — three words that will become a permanent triad in Christian vocabulary. He reminds them of his pastoral love, urges them to continue in sexual purity and brotherly love, and answers a question that was troubling them: what happens to believers who die before Christ returns? Will they miss out on the resurrection? Paul’s answer, in 4:13–18, becomes one of the most comforting passages in all of Scripture.

Second Thessalonians follows up on issues that had emerged or worsened. Some in the church seem to have been told that the day of the Lord had already come — perhaps through a forged letter claiming to be from Paul (2:2). The result was confusion, fear, and a strange byproduct: people quitting their jobs to wait for the end. Paul writes to settle the eschatological confusion (chapter 2), to reaffirm God’s protection of his people (1:6–10), and to deliver a stern but loving word to those who had stopped working: “If a man will not work, he shall not eat.”

Both letters share a common heartbeat: hope. The Thessalonians were facing pressure, persecution, and uncertainty. Paul’s pastoral strategy is not to minimize their hardships but to lift their eyes to the return of Christ. The end of the story is good. Hold on.

Key Takeaways You'll See in This Letter

- Believers who have died will not miss the resurrection — they will rise first when Christ returns.
- Christ's return is certain, but its timing is not for us to predict; we live ready.
- Joy, prayer, and thanksgiving are not optional moods but God's will for us in Christ.
- Christian hope does not retreat from work; it presses into faithful daily life.

Key Scripture Passages

Note: The following passages are printed in the New International Version (NIV) and the King James Version (KJV) side by side. Read them slowly. Read them aloud if you can. Notice where the wording diverges, and ask what each rendering surfaces.

1 Thessalonians 4:13–18

NIV	KJV
¹³ Brothers and sisters, we do not want you to be uninformed about those who sleep in death, so that you do not grieve like the rest of mankind, who have no hope. ¹⁴ For we believe that Jesus died and rose again, and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him. ¹⁵ According to the Lord's word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep. ¹⁶ For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and	¹³ But I would not have you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning them which are asleep, that ye sorrow not, even as others which have no hope. ¹⁴ For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so them also which sleep in Jesus will God bring with him. ¹⁵ For this we say unto you by the word of the Lord, that we which are alive and remain unto the coming of the Lord shall not prevent them which are asleep. ¹⁶ For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the

NIV	KJV
with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first.	trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first:
¹⁷ After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever.	¹⁷ Then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord.
¹⁸ Therefore encourage one another with these words.	¹⁸ Wherefore comfort one another with these words.

Explanation

Some members of the Thessalonian church had died — likely from the ordinary causes of ancient life, possibly accelerated by persecution. The surviving believers were grieving, and they were also confused. Would their loved ones be left behind when Christ returned? Had they missed the great reunion?

Paul's answer is one of the most pastorally tender passages he ever wrote. We are not to be uninformed, he says — meaning, get this clear. Then he gives the deepest comfort possible: not that grief is wrong, but that Christian grief is different. The pagan world had no hope at death; ours is anchored in the resurrection of Christ.

His sequence is precise. Christ will descend with a command, with the voice of an archangel, with the trumpet of God. The dead in Christ will rise first — not be left behind, but raised first. Then the living will be caught up together with them. And the goal is not the events themselves but the destination: “so we will be with the Lord forever.”

The chapter ends with a simple pastoral instruction: “Therefore encourage one another with these words.” These are not abstract doctrines for theological debate. They are words to speak to one another at gravesides, in hospital rooms, in seasons of loss.

Modern Application

Christian grief is real grief. Paul does not say “do not grieve.” He says, “do not grieve like those who have no hope.” There is a Christian way to weep — a weeping that holds, in the same heart, the genuine sorrow of loss and the genuine certainty of reunion.

If you have stood at a grave this year — or if you stand at one in your imagination, thinking of someone you love who is not yet there but will be — this passage is for you. Speak it. Memorize verse 17. “And so we will be with the Lord forever.” The forever is not a comforting metaphor. It is the literal promise of the gospel. Encourage one another with these words.

And consider what difference this hope should make in how you live now. If you truly believe your loved ones in Christ will be raised, that you will be raised, that you will be with the Lord forever — what fear loses its grip? What loss becomes bearable? What can be risked now because the eternal is secure?

1 Thessalonians 5:16–18

NIV	KJV
¹⁶ Rejoice always, ¹⁷ pray continually, ¹⁸ give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.	¹⁶ Rejoice evermore. ¹⁷ Pray without ceasing. ¹⁸ In every thing give thanks: for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you.

Explanation

Three short verses. Three commands. Eight Greek words in the original. And yet they contain a whole spirituality.

Rejoice always. Not when circumstances warrant it, but always — meaning, the Christian’s joy has a source that is not subject to circumstances. Pray continually. Not literally every second, but with a posture of ongoing communion, the day woven through with prayer like a thread through cloth. Give thanks in all circumstances. Not for all circumstances — some circumstances are evil and should not be thanked for — but in them. In every season, find what God is doing and thank him.

Then Paul says something striking: “This is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.” People often ask, “What is God’s will for my life?” — meaning, what job, what spouse, what city. Paul’s answer here is simpler and harder. God’s will for your life is that you rejoice, pray, and give thanks. Get that right, and the rest will sort itself out.

Modern Application

These three habits — rejoicing, praying, thanksgiving — are like a tripod for the Christian soul. Remove any one and the whole structure wobbles. Rejoicing without prayer becomes self-conjured cheerfulness. Prayer without rejoicing becomes anxious supplication. Thanksgiving without either becomes performative gratitude.

Try this for one week. At three set times of day — perhaps morning, midday, and evening — pause for sixty seconds. Rejoice in something. Pray a short prayer. Thank God for something specific. That’s it. Three minutes a day, three times. Watch what it does to your interior life over seven days.

2 Thessalonians 3:6–13

NIV	KJV
⁶In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, we command you, brothers and sisters, to keep away from every believer who is idle and disruptive and does not live according to the teaching you received from us. ⁷For you yourselves know how you ought to follow our example. We were not idle when we were with you, ⁸nor did we eat anyone’s food without paying for it. On the contrary, we worked night and day, laboring and toiling so that we would not be a burden to any of you. ⁹We did this, not because we do not have the right to such help, but in	⁶Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye withdraw yourselves from every brother that walketh disorderly, and not after the tradition which he received of us. ⁷For yourselves know how ye ought to follow us: for we behaved not ourselves disorderly among you; ⁸Neither did we eat any man’s bread for nought; but wrought with labour and travail night and day, that we might not be chargeable to any of you: ⁹Not because we have not power, but to make ourselves an ensample unto you to follow us.

NIV	KJV
order to offer ourselves as a model for you to imitate. ¹⁰For even when we were with you, we gave you this rule: “The one who is unwilling to work shall not eat.” ¹¹We hear that some among you are idle and disruptive. They are not busy; they are busybodies. ¹²Such people we command and urge in the Lord Jesus Christ to settle down and earn the food they eat. ¹³And as for you, brothers and sisters, never tire of doing what is good.	¹⁰For even when we were with you, this we commanded you, that if any would not work, neither should he eat. ¹¹For we hear that there are some which walk among you disorderly, working not at all, but are busybodies. ¹²Now them that are walk disorderly, working not at all, but are busybodies. ¹³But ye, brethren, be not weary in well doing.

Explanation

Apparently, some in the Thessalonian church had taken the doctrine of Christ’s imminent return as license to quit working. If Jesus is coming soon, why bother with daily labor? Paul’s response is sharp: “The one who is unwilling to work shall not eat.” He had modeled the alternative himself, working as a tentmaker while in their city so as not to be a financial burden on the new church.

Notice the wonderful turn of phrase in verse 11: “They are not busy; they are busybodies.” Idleness rarely stays idle. People who refuse to do their own work find time to interfere with everyone else’s. Paul wants the church to settle down — literally, to live quietly — and to earn the food they eat.

But Paul does not leave the rest of the church in self-righteous superiority. Verse 13 turns to those who are working: “Never tire of doing what is good.” Faithfulness can be wearying, especially when others around you are not pulling their weight. Don’t grow weary. Keep doing good.

Modern Application

The Christian doctrine of the second coming has, throughout history, occasionally produced strange behaviors — date-setting, withdrawal from society, quitting jobs, climbing hilltops in white robes. Paul's word is sharply practical. The right response to the expectation of Christ's return is not to opt out of ordinary life but to lean into it. Do your work. Pay your bills. Love your family. Be faithful in the small obligations of today.

Maturity in eschatology is not knowing when Jesus is coming. It is being the kind of person you would want him to find you being when he does. Settled. Working quietly. Doing good. Not weary in well-doing.

Bringing It Together

The Thessalonian letters give us the rare gift of seeing a very young church in real time — recently converted, freshly persecuted, honestly confused — and they show us how Paul pastored such a church. He did not give them deep theology first. He gave them hope. He gave them comfort about their dead. He gave them three simple commands for daily life: rejoice, pray, give thanks. He gave them the down-to-earth instruction that the expectation of Christ's return should not lead them out of their daily work but more deeply into it.

Living in light of Christ's return is not living elsewhere. It is living here, faithfully, with eyes lifted. Today's work matters because the One who is coming is the One who gave us the work to do. Hold on. Encourage one another. The trumpet will sound. The Lord himself will come.

NOTES

Personal Reflection

Take your time with these. Don't try to answer all five in one sitting — one a day is a good rhythm. Write your responses in a journal so you can return to them later in this study.

How does 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18 change the way you think about a Christian loved one you have lost — or a death that you fear? Write a short prayer of hope rooted in these verses.

Of the three commands in 1 Thessalonians 5:16–18 — rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances — which is hardest for you right now? Why?

Where in your life have you been tempted toward a kind of “spiritual idleness” — disengaging from ordinary responsibilities in the name of waiting on God or focusing on “more important” things? What would Paul say to you?

Paul writes, “Never tire of doing what is good” (2 Thes 3:13). Where are you in danger of growing weary in well-doing? What would help you to keep going?

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

Prayer Focus for Week 6

In the space below, write a prayer based on these words of Paul from his letters to the Thessalonians:

***Brothers and sisters, we do not want you to be uninformed
about those who sleep in death, so that you do not grieve
like the rest of mankind, who have no hope.
For we believe that Jesus died and rose again, and so we believe
that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him. ...
Therefore encourage one another with these words.***

Draw on this week's themes — hope that holds up under grief, perseverance in the long stretches when nothing seems to be changing, the certain return of Christ, and the daily faithfulness of just doing the next right thing — and shape the prayer around what's actually going on in your life right now. What loss are you still carrying that needs to meet the hope of resurrection? Where are you tempted to give up because the wait has been too long? Whom in your life could you encourage this week with the hope you have in Christ? Name it honestly.

Then return to your prayer each morning and let it set the tone for your day.

WEEK 7

Romans

The Gospel Fully Explained

We arrive at Romans — Paul’s longest, most carefully argued, and most theologically rich letter. If the other letters address particular churches with particular problems, Romans is something different: a deliberate, sustained presentation of the gospel itself. Paul has not yet been to Rome. He writes to a church he did not plant, introducing himself by way of his message. The result is the most complete single statement of the gospel in all of Scripture, the letter that has reshaped the church again and again — Augustine reading it in a garden, Luther wrestling it in a monastery cell, Wesley feeling his heart strangely warmed. Read Romans carefully, and something happens to you.

Historical Background

Rome in Paul’s day was the capital of the world, a city of perhaps a million inhabitants — staggering by ancient standards — and the political, military, and cultural center of an empire that stretched from Britain to Mesopotamia. Caesar Nero sat on the throne, though the worst of his reign was still ahead. The city teemed with people of every nation: senators and slaves, philosophers and prostitutes, soldiers from a dozen provinces and merchants from across the known world.

The origin of the Roman church is something of a mystery. Acts does not record any apostle planting it. Most likely, the gospel reached Rome through Jewish believers who had been present at Pentecost (Acts 2:10 specifically mentions “visitors from Rome”) and returned home with the message. Over the following two decades, the church grew, eventually composed of both Jewish believers and a swelling number of Gentile converts.

An important historical detail shapes the letter. Around AD 49, the Emperor Claudius expelled the Jews from Rome (Acts 18:2 mentions this in connection with Paul meeting Aquila and Priscilla). For several years, the Roman church became almost entirely Gentile in composition. When the expulsion was rescinded after Claudius's death and Jewish believers began returning to Rome, they found a church that had developed without them. Tensions emerged. Who were the real leaders? Whose practices were normative? Were the Gentiles now the true heirs of the gospel, and the Jews a problematic minority? Romans must be read with this Jewish-Gentile dynamic in mind — it surfaces throughout chapters 9–11 and 14–15.

Paul writes from Corinth, probably in AD 56–57, during a three-month stay at the end of his third missionary journey (Acts 20:2–3). He plans to deliver an offering from the Gentile churches to the impoverished believers in Jerusalem, after which he hopes finally to visit Rome on his way to a planned mission in Spain. He writes ahead to introduce himself, to ask for the Roman church's prayers and eventual support, and — perhaps most importantly — to set before them in writing the gospel he has preached across the empire.

Why Paul Wrote This Letter

Romans is not primarily a problem-solving letter. It is a sustained theological exposition. Paul moves step by careful step through the gospel: all are under sin, both Jew and Gentile (1:18–3:20); all are justified by faith in Christ apart from works of the law (3:21–5:21); those justified are united with Christ in his death and resurrection, freed from sin's reign (chapters 6–7); and now live in the Spirit with the certainty of God's love (chapter 8). Then he addresses the painful question of Israel's place in God's plan (chapters 9–11), before turning in chapters 12–16 to the practical shape of the gospel life: living sacrifice, transformed mind, love among believers, submission to authority, welcome of the weaker brother.

If you wanted to summarize Romans in a sentence, it might be this: God has acted in Christ to put both Jew and Gentile right with himself, by grace through faith, and the life that follows is one of transformation by the Spirit, security in his love, and love for one another. The implications of that single sentence have been the subject of two thousand years of Christian theology. There is no exhausting this letter. There is only beginning to drink from it.

Key Takeaways You'll See in This Letter

- All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God — and all are justified freely by his grace.
- Peace with God comes through faith in Christ, not through anything we have done.
- Nothing in all creation can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus.
- Christian life is the offering of our whole selves as a living sacrifice, transformed by renewed minds.
- Hope is not optional; God fills us with joy and peace as we trust in him.

Key Scripture Passages

Note: The following passages are printed in the New International Version (NIV) and the King James Version (KJV) side by side. Read them slowly. Read them aloud if you can. Notice where the wording diverges, and ask what each rendering surfaces.

Romans 3:23–24

NIV	KJV
²³for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, ²⁴and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.	²³For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God; ²⁴Being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus:

Explanation

Two verses, the second flowing immediately from the first, and between them the whole gospel. “All have sinned” — the universal diagnosis, without exception. Jew and Gentile, religious and irreligious, moral and immoral. “Fall short of the glory of God” — the standard is not how we compare to one another but how we compare to God himself, and on that scale every one of us falls short.

But then the great “and” of verse 24 — perhaps the most important conjunction in Scripture. The same “all” who have sinned are the “all” who can be justified freely by

his grace. The word “freely” in the Greek (dorean) means “as a gift, without cost, without cause in the recipient.” There is nothing in us that earned this. The redemption came in Christ Jesus, who paid what we could not pay.

Notice the precision. We are not justified partly by grace and partly by works. Freely. By his grace. Through the redemption in Christ. Three layers of unearnedness stacked on top of each other so that no one can mistake the source of their salvation.

Modern Application

Most of us, even after years of being Christians, still secretly believe a slight variation of the gospel: I was saved by grace, but I am now staying saved by some combination of grace and my own effort. Romans 3 demolishes that. The grace that justified you is the same grace that holds you. The unmerited gift that began your Christian life is the unmerited gift that sustains it.

Sit with the phrase “justified freely.” Let it work on you. There is no version of you that is more or less acceptable to God on the basis of your performance. You are justified freely. Live this week as one who has been given everything for nothing — because that is the truth.

Romans 5:1–8

NIV	KJV
¹ Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, ² through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we boast in the hope of the glory of God. ³ Not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance;	¹ Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ: ² By whom also we have access by faith into this grace wherein we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God. ³ And not only so, but we glory in tribulations also: knowing that tribulation worketh patience; ⁴ And patience, experience; and experience, hope:

NIV	KJV
⁴perseverance, character; and character, hope. ⁵And hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us. ⁶You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. ⁷Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, though for a good person someone might possibly dare to die. ⁸But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.	⁵And hope maketh not ashamed; because the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Ghost which is given unto us. ⁶For when we were yet without strength, in due time Christ died for the ungodly. ⁷For scarcely for a righteous man will one die: yet peradventure for a good man some would even dare to die. ⁸But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.

Explanation

The chapter opens with a “therefore” — meaning, in light of everything Paul has just said about justification by faith. And the first consequence of justification is peace. Not psychological peace primarily, but objective peace — the war between us and God is over. The hostility is ended. We now stand in grace, with access by faith into the very presence of God.

Then verses 3–5 trace a remarkable chain. Sufferings produce perseverance. Perseverance produces character. Character produces hope. And hope does not disappoint, because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Spirit. The Christian's suffering is not random; it is being worked into something. Through it, character is forged, and through that character, hope grows.

Then verses 6–8 give us the heart of the gospel. “At just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly.” The qualifying phrase is the staggering one. Not “Christ died for the deserving.” Not “Christ died for the spiritually impressive.” Christ died for the ungodly. While we were still sinners — not after we

had cleaned ourselves up, not as a reward for our reaching out to God — Christ died for us.

Modern Application

Verse 8 is the love verse of the New Testament that is harder than John 3:16. “God demonstrates his own love for us in this: while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” The love of God is not contingent on your becoming worthy of it. It was demonstrated — proved — while you were still actively his enemy. Now that you are in Christ, that same love holds you with even more certainty than the day it found you.

Sufferings in this passage are not punishments. They are formation. If you are in a hard season right now, this is one of the texts to hold. God is not absent. He is producing in you perseverance, character, and hope — three qualities you cannot acquire any other way. Most of what makes you most useful in the kingdom will be forged in seasons you would not choose. Romans 5 promises that those seasons are not wasted.

Romans 8:1, 28, 31–32, 37–39

NIV	KJV
¹ Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, ²⁸ And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. ³¹ What, then, shall we say in response to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? ³² He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all — how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?	¹ There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit. ²⁸ And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose. ³¹ What shall we then say to these things? If God be for us, who can be against us? ³² He that spared not his own Son, but delivered him up for us all, how shall he not with him also freely give us all things?

NIV	KJV
³⁷ No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. ³⁸ For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, ³⁹ neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.	³⁷ Nay, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him that loved us. ³⁸ For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, ³⁹ Nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Explanation

Romans 8 is the mountaintop of the New Testament. It begins with the four most freeing words in the Bible: “There is now no condemnation” — present tense, settled, not pending — “for those who are in Christ Jesus.” Whatever weight of guilt the believer drags into chapter 8 is set down at verse 1. There is no condemnation. None.

Verse 28 has been so often quoted that it has nearly lost its power, but read it again. “In all things God works for the good of those who love him.” Not most things. Not pleasant things. All things — including the things you would not have chosen, the things that broke you, the things you cannot yet imagine being worked for good. The promise is not that all things are good. The promise is that God is working in all things, and toward good.

Then comes Paul’s great rhetorical crescendo. If God is for us, who can be against us? If he gave us his own Son, what could he conceivably withhold? In all our troubles, we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. And then the final, magnificent list: nothing — not death, not life, not angels, not demons, not present, not future, not powers, not height, not depth, not anything else in all creation — can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Read those last verses aloud. They are the most secure ground in all of Scripture.

Modern Application

Read Romans 8:38–39 every day this week. Out loud. If you can, memorize them. They are the answer to the accusations you will hear from your own heart, from the enemy of your soul, from the world that wants you to forget what you have. Nothing in all creation can separate you from the love of God in Christ Jesus.

Notice what this does. It does not promise that you will be spared the things on Paul's list. Death will come. Life will be hard. Powers will assert themselves. Heights and depths will press in. The promise is not that they will be absent, but that they will be unable to separate you from God's love. The love holds. Always. No matter what.

Romans 12:1–2

NIV	KJV
¹ Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God — this is your true and proper worship. ² Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is — his good, pleasing and perfect will.	¹ I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service. ² And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and that acceptable, and that will of God.

Explanation

Notice the “therefore.” Paul has spent eleven chapters telling the Roman believers what God has done in Christ. Now, at chapter 12, he turns to what we do in response. And the response is everything we are. Not merely Sunday morning. Not merely the religious slice of life. The body — the whole self — offered as a living sacrifice.

The image is from the temple. Sacrifices were dead, killed, consumed by fire. Paul flips it. Your sacrifice is to be alive — given over, surrendered, but living. Every day, you place yourself again on the altar, not to die there but to live there.

Verse 2 then traces the inner work that makes this possible. The world has a pattern — a way of thinking, valuing, desiring, prioritizing that conforms us to its mold. The Christian is to be transformed instead, and the location of the transformation is the mind. As what we think is renewed, what we want and how we live follows.

Modern Application

The mind is the leverage point of Christian formation. The world is constantly pressing in to shape how we think — through the algorithms that feed us, the conversations we marinate in, the assumptions we never examine. To be transformed, we have to deliberately starve those inputs and deliberately feed different ones.

Pair this with Philippians 4:8 from week two. Whatever is true, noble, right, pure, lovely, admirable — fix your mind there. And pair it with Romans 12:1's surrender. The renewed mind is not just for thinking; it is for offering. The Christian life is, finally, a continuous offering of the whole self to God.

Romans 15:13

NIV	KJV
¹³ May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.	¹³ Now the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, that ye may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Ghost.

Explanation

Near the end of Romans, after the long theological journey, Paul drops this prayer like a benediction. Notice the titles and verbs. God is the God of hope. He fills. He empowers. And the result is that we overflow.

Three gifts are named: joy, peace, hope. And the conduits are clear: trusting in him, the power of the Spirit. The Christian life is a flowing system — God filling, the Spirit empowering, the believer trusting, and out of that the soul overflows.

Modern Application

If your soul feels empty of hope right now, this is the prayer to pray. Not “give me hope, Lord” — though that prayer is valid — but more specifically, the framework of Romans 15:13. God, you are the God of hope. Fill me with joy and peace as I trust in you. Pour out your Spirit. Make me overflow.

Pray this for someone else this week, by name. Use their name in the prayer. The God of hope fills people. Sometimes he uses our prayers to do it.

Bringing It Together

Romans is the gospel laid out as fully as Paul ever laid it out. We are all sinners — Jew and Gentile alike. We are all justified freely by grace through faith in Christ. We have peace with God. We have the Spirit, who pours God's love into our hearts. We are secure in a love no power in heaven or earth can sever. And out of that security, we live: offering our whole selves, renewing our minds, loving one another, hoping in the God of hope.

If you remember nothing else from this study, remember Romans 8. There is no condemnation. God is for you. Nothing — nothing — can separate you from his love. Build your life on that ground, and the storms will not move you.

NOTES

Personal Reflection

Take your time with these. Don't try to answer all five in one sitting — one a day is a good rhythm. Write your responses in a journal so you can return to them later in this study.

Romans 3:23–24 says all have sinned, and all are justified freely. Where do you tend to live as if the justification depended even slightly on you? What would change if you fully believed it is “freely”?

Romans 5:3–5 traces a sequence: suffering produces perseverance, character, hope. Look back over a difficult season in your life. What did God produce in you that you would not have without it?

Memorize Romans 8:38–39 this week. Recite it before sleep each night. What changes in your interior life as those words become part of you?

Romans 12:2 talks about being transformed by the renewing of your mind. Identify one input shaping your mind — a feed, a podcast, a habit of thought — that is conforming you to the world's pattern. What might you replace it with this week?

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

In the space below, write a prayer based on these words of Paul from his letters to the Romans:

***Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters,
in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice,
holy and pleasing to God — this is your true and proper worship.
Do not conform to the pattern of this world,
but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.
Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is —
his good, pleasing and perfect will.***

Draw on this week's themes — the honest reckoning that all have sinned and fall short, the staggering grace that justifies us freely through Christ, the unshakable love that nothing in all creation can separate us from, and the call to a transformed life lived as worship — and shape the prayer around what's actually going on in your life right now. What part of yourself are you still holding back from being placed on the altar? Where is the pattern of this world quietly shaping you more than the renewing of your mind? What would it look like, today, to live as if Romans 8:31–39 were actually true of you? Name it honestly.

Then return to your prayer each morning and let it set the tone for your day.

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WEEK 8

Group Summary & Discussion

Living the Pauline Christian Life

Seven weeks. Seven letters. Hundreds of pages of Scripture and reflection. And now we come to the close — not the end of the journey, because the gospel is never finished with us, but the end of this season of walking together through Paul's letters.

This final session is different from the seven that preceded it. There are no new scripture passages here, no new historical city to enter. Instead, this week is for synthesis. We pull together the great themes we have been walking through, ask honestly what the Spirit has done in us along the way, and then sit around a table — physically or in your own heart — and talk about it.

Whether you are using this guide in a group or alone, do not skip this week. The hardest and most important question of any Bible study is the one Week 8 asks: what changed in me? Sit with it. Do not rush. The fruit of a study is not in finishing it but in being formed by it.

Major Themes Across All Letters

If you have walked carefully through these seven weeks, certain themes will have appeared again and again, from different angles, in different cities, addressed to different problems. They are the load-bearing walls of Paul's gospel. Here are eight of them.

1. Salvation by Grace, Not Works

It is the heartbeat of Galatians, the climax of Ephesians 2, the foundation of Romans. From his first letter to his last, Paul refuses to let the church drift back into the notion that we are made right with God by what we do. We are justified freely, by grace, through faith in Christ, on the basis of his finished

work. The Christian life begins with that gift, continues by that gift, and ends in that gift made full.

Whenever you are tempted — and you will be tempted — to measure your standing with God by how spiritual you have been this week, return to grace. The same grace that justified you on day one is the grace that holds you today.

2. Christian Identity — Who We Are in Christ

Paul's letters are saturated with identity language. "In Christ." "Children of God." "God's workmanship." "A new creation." "Co-heirs with Christ." "Citizens of heaven." "Members of one body." Before Paul ever tells believers what to do, he tells them — patiently, repeatedly — who they are.

This is the Pauline pattern: indicative before imperative. Identity before activity. You are loved, therefore love. You are forgiven, therefore forgive. You are dead to sin, therefore do not let it reign in you. Christian formation is not white-knuckled effort to become someone you are not. It is the steady appropriation of who you already are in Christ.

3. Spiritual Growth and Transformation

Paul never says the Christian life is static. From the moment of conversion, the believer is being changed — transformed from one degree of glory to another (2 Corinthians 3:18), being conformed to the image of the Son (Romans 8:29), bearing the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5), putting off the old self and putting on the new (Colossians 3, Ephesians 4).

The agent of this growth is the Holy Spirit. Our cooperation is real and necessary, but the work itself is God's. The good work he began he will complete (Philippians 1:6). The fruit will come from the vine. Our part is to stay connected, to walk in step with the Spirit, and to refuse the lie that we can do this on our own.

4. Christian Unity — One Body, Many Members

Across nearly every letter, Paul confronts the divisions of the early church and calls believers back to the unity that is theirs in Christ. The factions of Corinth. The Jew-Gentile tension of Romans and Ephesians. The quarrel

between Euodia and Syntyche at Philippi. The schisms threatening Galatia. In every case, Paul appeals to the deeper reality: one body, one Spirit, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all (Ephesians 4:4–6).

Christian unity is not a luxury or a nice-to-have. It is the visible witness of the gospel to a watching world. When believers love one another across every line that the world uses to divide — ethnicity, class, politics, generation, theology of secondary matters — something true about God becomes visible.

5. Perseverance Through Suffering

Paul wrote much of what we have read from prison. He preached the gospel under repeated beatings, imprisonments, shipwrecks, and the daily pressure of his concern for the churches (2 Corinthians 11:23–28). He knew a “thorn in the flesh” that would not leave. And his letters speak to churches under their own pressures — the persecuted Thessalonians, the troubled Corinthians, the Philippians facing opposition.

His message about suffering is consistent. It is real. It is hard. It is not random — God uses it to produce perseverance, character, and hope (Romans 5:3–5). And it cannot separate us from his love (Romans 8:35–39). The Christian is not promised an easy life. The Christian is promised the presence and the sufficiency of Christ in whatever life brings.

6. Holiness and Christian Living

Paul never separates the gospel from a life. He spends chapters on theological foundations, then turns to concrete instructions: how to handle conflict, how to treat your spouse, how to manage money, how to use your tongue, how to engage your sexuality, what to do with food and drink, how to relate to authority, how to forgive.

Holiness in Paul is not a list of rules to keep so God will accept you. It is the outflow of a life that has already been accepted. The new self is to be put on. The fruit of the Spirit is to grow. The mind is to be renewed. And the body — the actual body — is to be offered as a living sacrifice to God.

7. Christ-Centered Living

Open any Pauline letter and count how often the name “Christ” or “Jesus” or “Lord” appears. The numbers are staggering. Paul cannot finish a paragraph without circling back to Christ. He is the image of the invisible God (Colossians 1:15). He is the wisdom and power of God (1 Corinthians 1:24). He is our peace (Ephesians 2:14). He is our righteousness (1 Corinthians 1:30). He is our life (Colossians 3:4). To be absent from the body is to be present with him (2 Corinthians 5:8). To live is Christ, and to die is gain (Philippians 1:21).

If there is one center to all of Paul's thought, it is the person of Jesus Christ — crucified, risen, ascended, indwelling, returning. Strip Christ from Paul's letters and nothing of substance remains. Center your life on Christ and everything else finds its proper place.

8. Hope in Christ's Return

Every Pauline letter ends with eyes lifted. The dead in Christ will rise (1 Thessalonians 4). The trumpet will sound and we will be changed (1 Corinthians 15). All things in heaven and earth will be brought together under Christ (Ephesians 1). Creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay (Romans 8). We will see him face to face (1 Corinthians 13:12).

Christian hope is not wishful thinking. It is the settled confidence that history is going somewhere, that the One who began the story will finish it well, and that the suffering of this present time is not worth comparing to the glory that will be revealed (Romans 8:18). We live, work, love, and grieve in light of that hope. The end of the story is good.

What Changed in Me?

This is the most important question of the entire study. Before you turn to the group discussion section, spend a quiet hour with these questions. Write your answers in a journal. Take your time. The Spirit often speaks in the slow turn of reflection.

Looking back over these eight weeks:

- What surprised you about Paul, or about one of his letters?
- What truth did you hear as if for the first time, even if you had heard it many times before?

- Where did the Spirit convict you? What sin or pattern was named that you had not seen, or had not been willing to see?
- Where did the Spirit comfort you? What weight was lifted, even briefly?
- What new picture of Christ did you encounter? Of grace? Of yourself in Christ?

And then the harder question:

- What, in your actual daily life, is different now than it was eight weeks ago? Be specific. Naming the change is part of the change.

Do not rush past this. Many Christians complete Bible studies and move immediately to the next thing without ever asking what was actually formed in them. The study that does not change you has not yet done its work.

A Sentence to Finish

Write a single paragraph — five or six sentences — that completes this sentence:

“When I began this study, I believed _____. Now, I believe _____.”

Read it aloud to yourself. If you are in a group, consider sharing it.

Group Discussion Guide

If you are using this study in a group, this section is the heart of your final gathering. There are eight discussion questions, drawn from the themes of all seven previous weeks. You will not get through all of them in one session — and that is fine. Pick four or five that fit your group's journey best, or consider splitting Week 8 across two meetings.

Notes for the Group Leader

- Open with prayer. Ask the Spirit to make this a holy conversation, not just an informational one.
- Encourage everyone to speak — but never pressure anyone. Some of what people are bringing is tender.
- Resist the urge to fix or correct. The goal of this gathering is honest sharing, not theological precision.
- Hold confidentiality. What is shared here stays here.
- Close with prayer — and consider praying for each person by name.

Eight Questions for Group Discussion

Read each question aloud. Allow silence — sometimes the best answers come after five seconds of quiet. Invite one or two people to share before moving on.

1. Which of the seven letters challenged you most personally, and why? What was it about that letter — its themes, the way Paul spoke, the situation he addressed — that pressed on your life?
2. Which specific truth from these weeks changed your perspective the most? Try to name it concretely — not just “grace” or “hope” in the abstract, but a particular verse, idea, or phrase that has stayed with you.
3. What recurring themes did you notice across the letters? Which theme do you sense the Spirit was especially highlighting for you personally during this study?

4. How does Paul describe authentic Christian maturity? Looking at the qualities he praises — humility, the fruit of the Spirit, love that bears all things, contentment in any circumstance, perseverance through suffering — where do you see growth in yourself? Where do you see the most need?
5. Where do you struggle most personally with what Paul calls us to? Is there an area of obedience, a relationship, a habit, a fear, or a doubt that has been particularly exposed by these letters? Be as honest as you are able.
6. What is one practical action you will take as a result of this study? Not a vague resolution, but a specific, concrete next step — something you could begin in the next week.
7. How did the struggles of the early churches mirror the struggles of churches and Christians today? Which of Paul's responses to those struggles do you think the modern church most needs to hear?
8. What does grace mean differently to you now than it did before this study began? Has your understanding of what it is — and what it does — shifted? In what way?

Closing Challenge — A Spiritual Action Plan

Bible study without application is a road that ends in the parking lot. Paul never assumed his readers would understand his letters and then return to life unchanged. He assumed obedience. He assumed transformation. He assumed that grace, properly received, produces fruit.

Before you close this book, take an hour to set down — in writing — a simple action plan for what you will carry forward. This is not a legalistic to-do list. It is a quiet covenant with the Spirit who has been speaking to you over these weeks.

Four Things to Carry with You

Don't try to carry everything from these eight weeks forward — you won't, and you don't need to. Carry these four things, and let the rest do its quiet work over time.

Choose One Verse

From everything you have read over these eight weeks, which one verse most needs to live in you going forward? Pick it. Just one. Write it on a card and put it where you will see it daily — your mirror, your phone background, your refrigerator, the dashboard of your car. Memorize it. Recite it. Let it become part of you.

Name One Change

What is one habit, attitude, relationship, or pattern that the Spirit has named during this study? Don't try to change five things at once. Name one. Then, with the Spirit's help, take one small, concrete step this week to begin changing it. Confess if confession is needed. Reach out if reconciliation is needed. Begin again if you have lost the habit.

Build One Rhythm

What spiritual rhythm — daily, weekly, or seasonal — do you want to carry forward from this study? Perhaps it is daily Scripture reading. Perhaps it is the practice of rejoicing, praying, and giving thanks at three set times each day. Perhaps it is Sabbath. Perhaps it is fasting from a particular input that has been shaping you wrongly. Build it gently into your life. Small rhythms, faithfully kept, shape souls.

Pray One Prayer

Write a single prayer — short, personal, honest — that captures what you are asking God to do in you over the next season. Pray it daily for the next thirty days. Watch what God does.

NOTES

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

A Final Word

Carry this forward.

You have walked through some of the most important documents the church has ever received. You have sat with a man in a prison cell who refused to stop hoping. You have listened to a pastor's heart for churches he loved enough to correct. You have heard the gospel set forth in language that has converted saints and toppled empires.

Now you carry it with you. Not as information. As life.

***May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace
as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope
by the power of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.***

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

STUDY NOTES

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8-Week Bible Study

STUDY NOTES

123

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Living Truth Media partners with churches, schools, youth groups, and ministry leaders to deepen Christian study and spiritual growth. Through faithful teaching, thoughtful resources, and trusted relationships, we help people encounter Scripture in ways that take root and last.

Our team of authors, teachers, and ministry leaders works alongside organizations to strengthen Bible study programs — from planning and leader training to curriculum and long-term discipleship — with the goal of helping every participant grow closer to Christ.

Reach out to a Living Truth Media team member to learn how we can serve your ministry.

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Ancient Letters, Living Truth.

An 8-Week Study of Paul

“A rare combination of theological depth and pastoral warmth.

This study takes Paul seriously — his historical setting, his arguments, his urgency — without ever losing sight of the people actually sitting down to read it.”

— *Rev. Daniel Whitaker, Senior Pastor*

“The real gift of this book study is the way each week moves naturally from the first century into the choices we are making every week.”

— *Karen Mendoza, Small Group Leader*

“I picked this up expecting another devotional and found something much more substantial. Paul finally felt like a real person to me — a man with a story, writing real letters to real churches about things that still matter.”

— *Thomas Reed, PhD, Professor of Theology*



About the Author

David Arthur Marshall is a researcher, writer, Bible scholar, and founder of Living Truth Media. His work invites everyday readers into the depth and beauty of Scripture. He is passionate about helping ordinary Christians read the Bible with both clarity and wonder.

