



grow. pray. study.

**March 10, 2023 *The Difficult Sayings of Paul*
2 Peter 3:15-16 (CEB)**

Paul's guiding context: build up the church

MONDAY 3.11.24 Romans 14:17-20, 1 Corinthians 14:12, 26, Ephesians 1:22-23

Serious Bible students know the truth of the saying, "A text without a context is a pretext." This week we study some parts of Paul's letters that perplex us, make us uncomfortable or seem out of harmony even with Paul's own message in other places. We need to begin by understanding the larger context of Paul's ministry. Paul's driving passion, reflected in today's readings, was to establish and build up the very young Christian church he was committed to spreading throughout the Roman Empire.

- We rarely argue about holy days or food's "holiness." It may feel easy to live out Romans 14:17. But we DO differ, often strongly, about many other topics! Paul said, "Don't destroy what God has done because of food [or any other secondary subject]." Most of Paul's "perplexing" passages, we find, urged people to avoid damaging the church in a particular circumstance. Did that, like including a woman taken in adultery or a thief on a cross, weaken or strengthen the church?
- Perplexing passages lead some readers to just give up on the Bible, even on God's kingdom. But the full context of any confusing passage is the Bible's big story about God's mission to restore our broken world to God's wholeness by self-giving love. "The reformers recognized that some scriptures were confusing or raised legitimate questions. These scriptures were to be interpreted in the light of the clearer texts." * How can you not let the puzzles obscure the clear good news?

Prayer: Lord God, only you are wise enough to judge each person's mind and heart. Help me release the urge to judge others, and instead to seek to show all people your peace and love. Amen.

* Adam Hamilton, *Making Sense of the Bible: Rediscovering the Power of Scripture Today* (pp. 295-296). HarperCollins. Kindle Edition.

Jesus died for all

TUESDAY 3.12.24 Romans 1:5, 11:32, 2 Corinthians 5:14-15

In Acts 16:30, a scared Roman jailer asked the apostle Paul an age-old question: “What must I do to be rescued (or saved)?” All of Paul’s letters gave the same answer about salvation he gave the jailer: “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved.” Some Christians hold a different view. Based mainly on [Romans 8:29-30](#) and [Ephesians 1:4-5](#) they say God already settled every person’s final destiny. If Paul believed that, he and his letters should have said, “You have no choice—God’s already decided if you’re saved or lost.”

- Paul (and the whole Bible) made it clear that we all fall short, (“locked up” in disobedience—[Romans 11:32](#)). But Paul was just as clear in today’s text (2 Corinthians 5:14) that “one died for the sake of **all**” (not just some). God did not arbitrarily “predetermine” who would be saved or condemned. Jesus came to offer us ALL (including you) salvation. No matter how you’ve fallen short, God loves you. How does God’s saving love for you and those you care about shape the way you feel about yourself?
- Jews and Gentiles had widely opposing worldviews (like today’s Democrat vs. Republican landscape). If God wanted to save only some people, most Jews believed it would be “us,” not “them.” [Romans 1:5](#) instantly made it clear that God loved Gentiles just as much as Jews. How does God’s desire for ALL people to choose his loving salvation guide how you navigate your disagreements with “others”? How could you be more loving toward those you don’t understand or agree with?

Prayer: Loving God, thank you for loving ALL people, not just me and my people. Thank you for answering my biggest questions with your love. Help me to embrace your love and trust that it is the ultimate answer to anything I may face. Amen.

“There is no distinction”

WEDNESDAY 3.13.24 Romans 1:25-2:1, 3:20-26

Context is more than one or two verses. Sometimes people quote Romans 1:26-27, by themselves, as proof that God never accepts people of the same gender who love each other, no matter how committed they are to Jesus and each other. A broader reading of Romans 1-3 shows that a) Paul did not write verses 26-27 to single out the Roman world’s kind of same gender intimacy (which did **not** involve commitment *) as uniquely awful, b) his real point was that **all** humans, not just some, need a savior, and c) Paul’s summary, in 3:22, was “There’s **no distinction**.” If Romans 1:26-27 meant God (and the church) can never accept any type of same gender love, then God and the church could also never accept people who are greedy, proud, or even gossips.

- Paul’s Hebrew training (cf. [Acts 22:3](#)) usually divided the world into two groups: Jews (God’s people) and Greeks (all others). He used that language in verse 16: “To the Jew first and also to the Greek,” but for a different purpose. Now his central faith was that the gospel was for “**all** who have faith in God,” not for any one favored group. Who (if anyone) have you tended to see as exceptionally favored by God? What has helped or is helping you to reach an inner comfort level that lets you trust and act on Paul’s gospel message in accepting all those God accepts?

Prayer: Creator God, you came to save every member of your human family who is willing to trust you. Give me a heart willing to include everyone you yearn to redeem. Amen.

* The Greco-Roman actions Paul condemned in Romans 1:26-27 were NOT what we discuss today. “Greek males did not usually exhibit exclusive homosexual attraction; bisexual activity was more common.... Until late marriages, men often had intercourse with slaves, prostitutes **and** other males.... few people in antiquity considered the possibility of same-sex marriage, except occasionally in ridicule.” * In Romans 1:29 Paul listed “gossip” as just as bad as any sensual practices he cited. From NIV, *Cultural Backgrounds Study Bible*, eBook (Kindle Locations 255378-255388). Zondervan. Kindle Edition.

Making a pagan “household code” reflect Jesus

THURSDAY 3.14.24 Ephesians 5:18-31, 1 Timothy 2:8-12, 3:11-12

People too often read Ephesians 5:22 or 1 Timothy 2:11-2 in isolation, missing the verses’ larger context. Paul used a common Greco/Roman way of writing about family relations called a “Household Code.” But he adapted it in ways that strikingly shifted its message. Scholar N. T. Wright wrote, “Paul...insists that the husband should take as his role model, not the typical bossy or bullying male of the modern, or indeed the ancient, stereotype, but Jesus himself.” *

- Ephesians 5:21, just before verse 22, said, “Submit **to each other** out of respect for Christ.” “This places Paul among the **small proportion** of ancient thinkers who valued mutual concern and sensitivity.... Traditional household codes instructed male heads of households how to rule; Paul instructs husbands here only how to love self-sacrificially.” ** Paul infused one of his culture’s familiar forms with Jesus’ values. How can you do the same as you live in our culture today?
- Professor Scot McKnight noted that many who use 1 Timothy 2:11-12 to say women can never be church leaders don’t ever try to enforce verses 9-10***! Scholar Craig Keener wrote, “In a first-century setting, what might stand out as more unusual here was that... Paul expressly encourages women to learn.” **** In chapter 3, the letter likely said women served as deacons. ***** Jesus welcomed and uplifted women. Would Paul, devoted to Jesus, have systematically tried to suppress them?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, you walked among us as genuine love incarnate. Let your love be a robust force making every person I affect better, regardless of gender or other barriers. Amen.

* N. T. Wright, *Paul for Everyone: The Prison Letters*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004, pp. 67-68.

** NIV, *Cultural Backgrounds Study Bible*, eBook. (Kindle Locations 268545-268548, 268561-268562). Zondervan. Kindle Edition.

*** Scot McKnight, *The Blue Parakeet: Rethinking How You Read the Bible*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2008, pp. 186-188.

**** NIV, *Cultural Backgrounds Study Bible*, eBook. (p. 10551). Zondervan. Kindle Edition.

***** “Scholars debate whether ‘the women’ here refers to female deacons or to male deacons’ wives.... By the early second century, a Roman governor in Asia Minor is apparently familiar with female deacons.” (From NIV, *Cultural Backgrounds Study Bible*, p. 10557). Zondervan. Kindle Edition.) And [click here](#) to review Paul’s positive mentions of women as ministry partners in Romans 16.

“No longer as a slave”

FRIDAY 3.15.24 Philemon 1:15-16, Galatians 3:26-28, Ephesians 6:9

At various places in Paul's letters, he realistically told slaves to do their best to cooperate with their masters (e.g., [1 Timothy 6:1](#), [Titus 2:9](#)). But that did not mean that he saw slavery itself as good or wise. “Whatever Paul's views about the institution of slavery (see note on Ephesians 6:9), it would be quite unexpected for them to come up directly in his brief instructions to slaves or slaveholders.... Changing the predominantly anti-Christian society, however, could not occur as quickly.” *

- The letter to Philemon had only 335 Greek words. (If you have time, read the [full letter](#).) Paul sent it with Onesimus, one of Philemon's slaves who, against Roman law, had run away. Paul had won both men to faith in Jesus. He returned Onesimus to his owner (who by law could punish him any way he wished), asking Philemon to receive him “no longer as a slave,” but as “a dearly loved brother.” How did Paul's example show Christians that slavery could not be God's ideal?
- In Galatians 3:28, Paul said Christ overcomes “all ethnic barriers” (neither Jew nor Greek), “all social barriers” (neither slave nor free) and “all sexual barriers” (neither male nor female). **
“When we say Christ has abolished these distinctions, we do not mean that they do not exist, but that they do not matter.” *** We're all sinners at the foot of the cross. We're all saved by the grace of the one God. How can you let the gospel erase all those barriers in your own mind and actions?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, keep transforming me in Christ. Help me pursue unity in Christ and justice through Christ for people who are like me and people who are very different from me. Amen.

* NIV, *Cultural Backgrounds Study Bible* (p. 10348). Zondervan. Kindle Edition.

** Frank J. Matera, Galatians, in the *CEB Study Bible*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2013, p. 359 NT.

*** Stott, J. R. W. *The message of Galatians: Only one way*. Leicester, England, Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1986, p. 100.

The depth of God's wisdom and knowledge

SATURDAY 3.16.24 Romans 11:33-36, Col 2:2-3

This week we have taken a necessarily brief look at some major topics Paul spoke to in passages that many Bible readers find puzzling. We have pointed to evidence (clearer in some places than others) that Paul did not hold the offensive, bigoted views some attribute to him based on the puzzling passages. Today's readings showed Paul himself leaving hard issues to God's wisdom and mercy. As scholar William Barclay said, "Here theology turns to poetry. Here the seeking of the mind turns to the adoration of the heart. In the end all must pass out in a mystery that man cannot now understand but at whose heart is love.... Paul had battled with a heartbreaking problem.... He does not say that he has solved it, as one might neatly solve a geometrical problem; but he does say that having done his best, he is content to leave it to the love and power of God." *

- At Resurrection, we take the Bible seriously as a guide for our lives, so we're willing to wrestle with the questions its human words raise at times. Pastor Hamilton wrote, "You are not judging God by wrestling with the Bible; you are asking questions of the human authors of scripture.... when you wrestle with scripture, recognize both the weight of scripture's authority and our tendency to discard the inconvenient. Christians are meant to wrestle with and interpret difficult passages in the Bible in the light of the Bible's clearer passages, with the help of the church's teaching and consensus, the reflections of her scholars and leaders across the course of history, and our own intellect and experience of the Spirit in our lives." ** Paul wrote a powerfully clear statement: "All have sinned and fall short of God's glory, but all are treated as righteous freely by his grace because of a ransom that was paid by Christ Jesus" (Romans 3:23-24). How can you read his puzzling passages in the light of that clear one?

Prayer: Creating, redeeming God, your riches, wisdom, and knowledge are so deep! Thank you for a mind that can wrestle with hard questions, and for a heart that can trust you to know answers I cannot yet fathom. Amen.

* William Barclay, Daily Study Bible Series: *The Letter to the Romans (Revised Edition)*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1975, p. 155.

** Adam Hamilton, *Making Sense of the Bible: Rediscovering the Power of Scripture Today* (p. 299). HarperCollins. Kindle Edition.

Prayer Requests – cor.org/prayer