

Introducing Jesus

Study 2: Paul's Picture of Jesus

The Life and Writings of Paul

St Paul did not write a Gospel (although Luke's Gospel and Acts are most closely associated with him since Luke was his companion on some of his missionary journeys – Phm 24, Col 4:14, 2 Tim 4:11). Nevertheless, his letters in the New Testament (Romans – Philemon) are some of the earliest writings we have about Jesus and predate the four Gospels by (10-30 years). He is therefore one of the first people to give us a written picture of Jesus, his teachings and the meaning of his death and resurrection. At the time Paul was writing, many eye-witnesses (those who had learnt from Jesus and witnessed his Resurrection) were still alive and, as we will see, there was an expectation that Jesus would return soon so there was no perceived need to write down a full biography of Jesus' life or a full record of his teachings. If you wanted to know anything about Jesus, you could ask someone who remembered him or just wait a while and ask him yourself.

Yet as the Gospel message began to spread geographically and misunderstandings and false teachings began to emerge it became necessary for some things to be clarified about Jesus' life and teaching. Before the Gospel writers began to put the whole story in writing in logical order, Paul's letters simply gave his readers snippets of the Jesus story, often in response to specific situations or questions. It is therefore difficult to get a full picture of Jesus from Paul's writings, but it is possible to pick up a few key themes – most of which would be fleshed out further by Matthew, Mark, Luke and John.

One advantage that Paul's writings have over the Gospels is that they were written over a period of 15 years (from about 50-65AD). It is therefore also possible to track some development in Paul's thought and understanding about Jesus over the years. We cannot know for certain when each of Paul's letters was written but the following dates are the best guess that modern scholars have and give us a good enough general picture.

Date (+/-)	Events	Paul's Writing	Other Writings
4BC	Jesus' birth		
30	Jesus' Crucifixion		
33	Saul/Paul's conversion		
47-48	First missionary journey		
50			James
50	Council of Jerusalem		
49-52	Second missionary journey		
52		1 Thessalonians	
53		2 Thessalonians	
55		Galatians	
57		1 Corinthians	
57		2 Corinthians	

58		Romans	
57-60	Paul arrested and sent to Rome		
62-63		Philippians	
62-63		Colossians	
62-63		Philemon	
62-63		Ephesians	
64	Paul's death		
65		1 Timothy	
65		Titus	
66		2 Timothy	
66			Mark
67			Hebrews
67			1 Peter
68			2 Peter
68			Jude
70	Destruction of Jerusalem		
85			Matthew
85			Luke
85			Acts
90			John
90-95			John's Epistles
??			John's Revelation

Q. Has your picture of Jesus changed over the years? In what ways?

Paul Meets Jesus on the Road to Damascus

In Acts 9 we read how Saul of Tarsus, who had “ravaged the church” (Acts 8:3) was converted in an encounter with the Resurrected Jesus while on his way to Damascus. Paul writes about this experience himself in Galatians 1:13-17 and Philippians 3:7-11.

¹³For you have heard of my former life in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God violently and tried to destroy it. ¹⁴And I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my own age among my people, so extremely zealous was I for the traditions of my fathers. ¹⁵But when he who had set me apart before I was born, and who called me by his grace, ¹⁶was pleased to reveal his Son to me, in order that I might preach him among the Gentiles, I did not immediately consult with anyone; ¹⁷nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me, but I went away into Arabia, and returned again to Damascus. Gal 1:13-17

The key thing we learn about Jesus from Paul's conversion story is the radical transformation that comes about in a believer's life when he or she encounters Jesus. For Paul Jesus is first of all the cause of a deep personal (existential) transformation and the source of a total new life. “I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me” (Gal 2:20). (See also Phil 1:21)

Jesus does not only transform Paul in relation to his standing before God in righteousness (Phil 3:8-9) but also gives Paul's life a new purpose and calling (1 Cor 9:16) to proclaim the gospel.

Q. Do all Christians experience Jesus as the cause of deep personal transformation and the source of a total new life? Should they?

The Expectation of Jesus' Return

Paul's earliest letters, 1 & 2 Thessalonians are dominated by the expectation of Jesus' imminent return.

¹³ But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. ¹⁴ For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep. ¹⁵ For this we declare to you by a word from the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep. ¹⁶ For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. ¹⁷ Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord. ¹⁸ Therefore encourage one another with these words.

1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

Consider this short description of the early Thessalonian Christians and their faith from 1 Thessalonians 1:9-10:

“how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, ¹⁰ and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come.”

Already in these early writings Paul shows a clear understanding of Jesus as the Son of God; of the fact that Jesus' Resurrection was the work of God; and that Jesus is the one who rescues us from “the wrath to come”.

Jesus the Christ

Paul repeats very little of Jesus' teachings and does not dwell on many biographical details about Jesus' life and ministry, instead he focusses most of his attention on Jesus' Death and Resurrection. For Paul, these are the most important parts of the whole Jesus story – a conviction which we will see repeated by the gospel writers who devote the largest parts of their writings to the retelling of the Passion narrative.

The redemptive work of Jesus, the Christ, takes centre-stage in much of Paul's writing. Some of the key elements to the story in Paul's eyes are:

- That behind Jesus' tragic destiny is the agenda of the benevolent God of Israel. “in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them” (2 Cor 5:19);
- That this program was not an unexpected innovation but the result of a long history of prophecy in the Hebrew Bible. “Now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it” (Rom 3:21);
- That from Jesus' perspective his Passion was an act of obedience and love. “And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.” (Phil 2:8);
- That Jesus' death on the cross can be interpreted as an act of redemption. “through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, ²⁵ whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith.” (Rom 3:24-25); and
- That on the third day God vindicated his Son.

“that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, ⁴ that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures.”
(1 Cor 15:3-4)

Q. Paul speaks about Jesus as our “Saviour” or the source of our “Salvation”, but he often seems to assume that his readers know what it means to be “saved”? How would you explain what it means to be “saved”?

So for Paul, Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah, the Anointed One and as such the One who brings about God’s plan of redemption. In addition to this *work* of Christ, Paul also tells us something about the *person* of Christ. First, Paul insists that Jesus is fully and uniquely related to God:

¹⁵ He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. ¹⁶ For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. ¹⁷ And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together. ¹⁸ And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent. ¹⁹ For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, ²⁰ and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross. Colossians 1:15-20

Second, Paul insists on the full humanity of Jesus:

Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, ⁶ who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, ⁷ but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. ⁸ And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Philippians 2:5-8

By holding these two ideas in tension, Paul laid the foundation for the development of the Church’s doctrine of Jesus as fully God and fully human and the doctrine of the Trinity.

Paul in Conflict with Judaisers

We saw last week that, until the destruction of the Temple in 70AD, the House of Shammai dominated Jewish Rabbinic teaching. Shammai was strongly nationalistic and his followers rejected any accommodation with the Greek/Roman world. This thinking found its way into Christian circles too since Christianity started as a movement within Judaism. As a result there were those in the Church, especially in Jerusalem, who opposed the expansion of the message of Jesus to any non-Jews. For them, the only route open to Gentile would-be believers was to convert to Judaism first and then receive the benefits of Jesus’ redemption.

In the book of Acts we see a series of movements first led by Peter (Acts 10-11) and then Paul (Acts 15) that gradually open the church up to include non-Jews.

In his letter to the Galatians, Paul argues the case for God’s universal offer of salvation based on the idea that the work of Christ on the Cross supersedes the work of the Jewish law (Gal 6:13-16). He therefore interprets the message of Jesus as being even more inclusive than the School of Hillel allowed. Hillel taught that Gentiles could convert to Judaism and receive the benefits of being descended from Abraham. Paul teaches that the blessing of Abraham may come to the Gentiles through and because of the work of the Christ on the Cross (Gal 3:13-14), so that “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" (Gal 3:28-29).

It is unlikely that Paul (and Peter – Acts 11) would have been able to carry forward such a boldly inclusive program if the seeds for such a mission had not already been present in the life and teaching of Jesus himself.

Q. Can you think of any current or recent debates between inclusive and exclusive views of Christianity?

Paul and the Church of Jesus Christ

You may notice from the dates on our timeline that Paul's letters to Timothy and Titus were written sometime after he died. These are letters that come out of Paul's community even if they weren't actually penned by Paul himself. By this stage the focus has shifted from expectant waiting on Jesus' return to organizing the structures of the church so that it can survive after the first generation of Christians are gone. Paul therefore gives Timothy and Titus instructions for organizing leadership in the Church (1 Tim 3:1-13), opposing false teachers (1 Tim 1:3-11), maintaining good relationships (1 Tim 5), and so on.

The picture of Jesus has also begun to change. Already in his letter to the Ephesians, Paul describes Jesus as the one who appoints leaders in the Church (Eph 4:8-12). Jesus is the one who appointed Paul (1 Tim 1:12) and the one whom Christians are called to serve in and through the church (1 Tim 4:6-16). This is not a different picture of Jesus so much as a different expectation. Paul begins to see Jesus in his ongoing presence in and with the church (through the Holy Spirit).