

Paul's Letters to Titus and Philemon

Today we visit the last two of the 13 New Testament letters written by Paul in

turbulent 1st century A.D. Among the briefest of the Bible's 66 books, these two reek with relevance near Y2K.

Mourning our losses in Littleton, we struggle to make sense of life's twisting road. One minute it's a screamin' autobahn -- your clients are happy -- stocks are soaring -- second mortgage comes through so now you can pay off the Viper -- your family is speaking to each other -- life is sweet.

Then ZAP, a foggy hairpin curve -- your raise is nixed -- your promotion goes to the suck-up in the next cube -- you need 2-grand to fly the family to grandma's funeral -- your sideburns are turning gray -- and the doc wants to talk about the results of your tests.

Life is like a frog in a kettle -- the temp comes to a boil before it knows it's in hot water. Who has life's answers!?

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, born in 1906 in Breslau, Germany (now called Wroclaw, Poland, where my daughter and her family live), was tempted, like all Germans, to quietly accept Nazism in the '30s. But he publicly criticized their treatment of the Jews and joined the underground to overthrow der Fuehrer. In '43 he was hung as a traitor, only weeks before the war ended.

Bonhoeffer made life-or-death choices. He realized, "If Jesus truly lived, died, rose and is among His people today, it makes all the difference in the world. We simply cannot consider the earth apart from Christ's footsteps imprinted upon it."

If true, if Christ *is* the only reliable GPS in life, you and I must either *embrace* Him -- or *deny* all He stood for. He's the *one* Person in history about whom each of us *must* and *will* choose, for or against.

Is it just me, or do you find it curious that after disasters like Littleton and Jonesboro every channel has "live" coverage of memorial services, choirs singing "Amazing Grace," people -- from the President to a police chief -- praying or asking for prayer, Larry King interviewing Billy Graham's kid to find out "Why would God allow this?" But the rest of the year our courts are purging our land of anything that *smells* God-ish. Jesus couldn't buy a spot on Peter Jennings if He paid Super Bowl rates!

OK, OK, so what's God trying to tell me?

In these lunches we're on a whirlwind tour of God's love letter to us. For a detailed overview, log on to: (<http://www.worldpath.net/~legend1/kc/bible.htm>). But today we'll take a single victory lap instead of "doing Daytona!"

The Bible's Old Testament opens with Genesis describing Creation and Adam and Eve who, like us, "were made in the image and likeness of God," not some slimy slug that slithered on shore gazillion years ago.

The First Couple *chose* to disobey God (He calls it SIN). For that, God tossed them out of paradise into a world where, for the first time and for *all* time, they and we must work to eat, and face hate, illness and death. In the 5,000 years since, only 250 have brought quasi-peace amid wars and hatred -- so much for the squishy theory that we're moving toward perfection. Just look around the table!!

Because man *can't* save himself, the Bible says God intervened 2,000 years ago to give each of us *real hope* -- ultimate, forever reconciliation -- like the world has sought since Eden.

We meet Abraham, father of the Jews from whose perspective the Bible is written. In Exodus the Israelites are slaves in Egypt. *Again* God intervenes, miraculously freeing them from Pharaoh, whisking them across the Red Sea on dry ground, into the desert where at Mt. Sinai God gives Moses the "Big 10," saying, "Here's the deal: if Israel obeys Me, I'll bless 'em. If not, they'll pay." Or was that what Latrell Sprewell told his coach.....

Now Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. The Israelites end 40 years of desert wandering and enter the pre-TV version of the "Promised Land" where they've fought to survive for 3,450 years.

Next, the historical books (Joshua, Judges, Ruth, I and II Samuel, I and II Kings, I and II Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah and Esther) -- the roller coaster story of Israel's feckless (*flaky*) devotion to God. Saul, David and Solomon ascend the throne, followed by a royal line that led right down to God's only Son, Jesus Christ, who was born not in a palace but in a stable, to a humble virgin!

The 12 Jewish tribes split up after Solomon croaks. Both became morally and spiritually bankrupt. In the late 8th century BC. Assyria stormed Israel, taking them captive. 120 years later the Babylonian empire suck Judah right back into slavery. Not again!

In 539 BC Babylon (Iraq) fell to the Medes and Persians (Iran), freeing the Jews. The Persians get crushed by Greece's Alexander the Great in 331 BC (as Daniel had predicted!). Then the Greeks are dumped by the Romans into which era Christ was born.

The books of poetry (or wisdom) are Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon.

Next, the “major prophets” (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Lamentations, Ezekiel and Daniel). God begs man to turn from sin to avoid impending disasters, beyond which the prophets speak hopefully of a time yet to be when peace pervades the earth under God’s rule, not NATO or the UN. Hundreds of years before, these men of God nailed the exact details of Christ’s birth, naming the *village* where He’d be born and live a sinless life, die a gruesome death and bolt from the grave.

Ending the OT, the "minor (in length) prophets" are Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi. They pled with Israel to repent, describing a still-future, awful judgment, followed by unending peace presided over by Messiah, Jesus Himself.

The New Testament is *not* a John Grisham re-release

After a 400-year period of biblical silence, the NT’s 27 books were written. The first four (Matthew, Mark, Luke and John) cover Christ’s 33 years on earth. His divinity was authenticated by His many miracles which, along with His teaching about love, peace and humility, put Him at odds with the local religious stud Pharisees and Sadducees. He irked ‘em by calling God His *Father*. He said those who follow Him and become “born again” would have “eternal life.”

Fed up, the religious dons had Jesus crucified on a cross between two thieves. But three days after He was buried, up He pops, appearing to 500 witnesses, validating forever His victory over death! He tells His followers that only His Father knows the date when He, Jesus, will return to earth to set up His kingdom.

‘til then, he said, we’re to relay the good news that His death on the cross paid the price that allowed His Father to cancel, once and for all, sin’s price on each of our heads. **It comes down to this -- because Christ busted out of the grave and will spend eternity with His Father, so can we!** Our grim options -- some choice! -- are to (a) reject Christ’s free gift of forgiveness or (b) *do nothing* about it. Either one is a bummer. The Bible says when a follower of Christ dies, he/she instantly enters the presence of God. But one who snubs Christ’s offer will spend forever in a place the Bible calls *hell* that’s literally burning with unquenchable torment.

Next, Acts covers the time after Christ’s return to heaven when His “good news” was exported to the nearby Gentile nations. Out in front was a Jew -- and former Jesus-hater - - named Paul who’d been converted into SuperEvangelist (but without the bolo tie).

In the next 25 years Christ’s message spread to Rome where Jews and Gentiles began worshipping God together, placing their faith in Christ whose forgiveness is ours for the asking -- no strings.

This was the heart of Paul's 13 letters to Christ's people in Rome, in Greece (Corinth and Thessalonica), in Turkey (Galatia, Ephesus, Philippi and Colosse) and in letters to Timothy, Titus and Philemon.

Hebrews is written by an unknown author to Jews who'd decided to come to Christ in repentance and faith. Then seven books written by James and Jude (Jesus' half-brothers) and by Peter and John (two of Jesus' twelve disciples).

The Bible's last book is Revelation, a dramatic presentation of the climax of Time on earth and the beginning of the rest of Eternity when Christ rules over all. Revelation's message is clear: BIG things are coming. Skeptics aside, Jesus IS coming back to earth, and each of us would do well to be ready.

Titus: tough man for a tough job

Titus was one of Paul's young mentees. A real leader type, he'd been in Rome with Paul who'd just been released from jail there for teaching about Jesus. Paul a Jew and Titus a Gentile (two ethnic groups who at that time were sworn enemies) traveled to the isle of Crete, now called Candia, south of Greece to start a church. Crete is one of the largest islands in the Mediterranean -- about 140 miles long and 35 across. At one time it was very prosperous, having about a hundred cities. Paul left Titus there in a difficult setting. Soon afterward, about AD 63, Paul writes this letter to him from Corinth in southern Greece.

Apparently the Cretans were creeps -- evil, violent, lazy, gluttonous and widely known as liars, hypocritically posing as religious guys.

Paul contrasts the Cretans' reputation for lying -- with God who "*cannot* lie." None of us wants a liar to handle our insurance, investments, real estate, banking or be our business partner. Nor do we really want to trust our eternal destiny to a fibber.

Into this cauldron of corruption Paul drops Titus and says, "Get this young church on its feet!" Since God's people are to infect the world around them with Jesus' love, this was a perfect lab test.

Titus was to appoint church leaders, root out heresies, teach the Gospel and motivate the congregation to do good. If we're to change the culture and prevent more Littletons, you can't force behavioral change. People need to be transformed from the inside. That's what salvation -- a healthy relationship with God through Christ -- is all about. That's the Truth people desperately need to hear -- "the hope of eternal life" Paul writes about. The word here for "hope" implies not a glimmer but certainty! People who have this hope, based on the sure promises of God's Son Jesus, not only live a transformed life themselves; they can transform their world -- whether it's Colorado or Kosovo.

In Titus Paul spells out the Gospel as clearly as anywhere in the Bible. Christ had personally revealed to him that we're saved by God's grace alone through faith in what

Jesus did for us on the cross -- welcome news to a former Jesus-hater, just as it is to you and me. When you need to “hang tough,” turn to Titus. **Now let’s read this little book, pausing after each chapter.**

Philemon: Sound your “Ph” as in Forgiveness

If you’d been on the Titanic and were fortunate enough to land in a lifeboat, what one and only possession would you take? I’m sure you’re different, but many times I act like my grudges are treasures to guard in the lock box of my heart. It’s hard to forgive, especially when someone’s cheated you out of what’s yours.

Like the entire Bible, forgiveness is the theme of this micro-book/post card -- how much more practical can Paul get? Grudges and unforgiveness are at the root of Littleton -- and the ethnic war in Kosovo. “Why can’t we all get along?”

Unlike Paul’s 12 other letters, this one has no instruction, correction or doctrinal teaching. It simply synergizes all of Paul’s writings about love, acceptance, forgiveness, grace and getting along.

It’s 62 AD. Paul is under house arrest in Rome, his first of two imprisonments there. 900 miles away in Colosse (in today’s Turkey) lived his wealthy friend Philemon whom he’d led to Christ earlier.

Phil owned slaves, a socially acceptable practice then. One apparently robbed him and fled to Rome to hide in the big city, home to hundreds of thousands of slaves. In the Roman Empire slaves knew only oppression, not forgiveness. The penalty for runaways was you-name-it, whatever. This fugitive, named Onesimus, met Paul there, and fell in love with Christ.

Paul grew to love Onesimus but both knew a loop must be closed. So Paul wrote to Phil, the only one of his 13 letters that he penned in his own hand, signifying how much of his heart was in it. Paul’s buddy Tychicus, carrying Paul’s other letter to the Colossians, accompanied Onesimus.

In his poignant dispatch Paul says God’s pardoning grace erases the line between slave and free. He appeals to Phil to welcome Onesimus home, as God accepts us because of Christ. If Onesimus owes his master Phil anything, Paul promises to cover his debt.

Martin Luther said, “*All of us were God’s Onesimus!*” We were slaves to sin, before a holy, perfect God. But Jesus, in His great love for us, paid with His life for all of our sins, paving the way for God the Father to accept us totally.

Only in Christ can mortals dwell in harmony, transcending cultural, political, racial and economic differences. Hatred, jealousy and hurt feelings, like in the Rockies or in the Balkans, would disappear.

'tho Paul doesn't condemn slavery in this letter, he lays out principles that would undermine it -- and eventually did. Philanthropist and Member of Parliament William Wilberforce lobbied the House of Commons for 45 years to abolish slavery in England's colonies. A third of African slaves who landed in the West Indies died in the first few months after arriving, many by suicide. Wilberforce died in 1833, three weeks before Parliament passed a bill ending slavery in the West Indies. As a passionate follower of Christ, Wilberforce had read Philemon often, devoting his life to freeing the Onesimuses of his bigoted world.

Christ's love -- laws, social engineering, PSA's or bombs -- changes hearts, freeing us from our slavery to sin and its fatal attractions.

Now let's read this radical, little book.

His Deal

www.HisDeal.org

george@HisDeal.org

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