

The New Testament Epistles (and Paul's Final Days)

The Story: part 30

May 7, 2017

DAY 1: Paul's difficult life

1. No matter how short or long you've been a Christian, it's extremely easy to be naïve about the difficulties of life and the difficulties of growing as a Christian. The greater our naiveté, the greater our discouragement!

2. Let's take a sneak peek at some of the difficulties Paul encountered:

2 Corinthians 11:23 Are they servants of Christ? (I am out of my mind to talk like this.) I am more. I have worked much harder, been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again.

²⁴ Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one.

²⁵ Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea,

²⁶ I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my own countrymen, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false brothers.

²⁷ I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked.

²⁸ Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches.

²⁹ Who is weak, and I do not feel weak? Who is led into sin, and I do not inwardly burn?

³⁰ If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness.

3. What is your overall reaction to Paul's litany of the different kinds of trials he'd faced?

4. To what extent does it surprise you that even the apostle Paul was required to face these kinds of trials?

5. When you go through trials, what kinds of responses most "naturally" come out of you?

6. How would you like to respond in your trials?

7. Finish today with prayer, asking God to give you faith to face your trials.

DAY 2: Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians

1. During the next three days we are going to look at thumbnail sketches of each of the epistles of the New Testament. I am writing each of these **as if** God is speaking to you and me. (Remember, what I have in quotation marks are not God's words, but my own).

2. Paul wrote thirteen letters, called epistles that make up thirteen of the twenty-seven books of the New Testament. The rest of the epistles are written by different authors. Under each thumbnail is listed one or more of my favorite verses in each book.

Romans: "The solution to the problem of human sin, and its awful consequences, both in this life and the next has been solved. My righteous justice against sin has been meted out. Jesus paid the price for your sin. My long-suffering mercy and grace has also been meted out: you can come into My presence as a wanted and holy member of My family!"

Romans 1:16; 3:21-26; 12:1-2

1 Corinthians: "The power to build Christ into your nature is a slow, tedious process. It involves learning to be a part of my body, the church, to find your place of service, to utilize the gifts I've given you, and to learn how to love others more than yourself."

1 Corinthians 13

2 Corinthians: "As you read about My servant, the apostle Paul, you will see how I utilized the many and varied kinds of difficulties and challenges, some that will make you want to throw in the towel, in order to shape My Son into your very nature. No matter how difficult your life's circumstances become, continue to find ways to reflect the wonder of grace to those around you, especially in how you relate to people."

2 Cor. 1:8-11; 12:9-10

Galatians: "You will find yourself wanting to trade the wonder of My grace for a way to leverage My power to get the life you really want. When you once tried to get the life you want, you found out it wasn't enough. The same will be true now, even though you try to get it with My power. The treasure of the gospel is not 'the good life.' The treasure of the gospel is for Christ to live in you."

Galatians 2:20; 5:22-23; 6:7-10

Ephesians: "I want to pour out every spiritual blessing of My character and person into you. The more aware of My presence in your life, the more aware you will become of the lingering sin that still must be expelled from your soul. But don't be discouraged! You were saved by grace, and you can grow in grace. Let the gospel affect every aspect of your personal life and relationships. Be prepared for a spiritual war toward that end!"

Ephesians 2:8-10

Philippians: "Even if you are thrown into prison, My purpose will continue through your life. There is always reason for joy, no matter how bleak the lower story of your life appears. I can take you through anything! Don't be discouraged by emptiness. It is a doorway through which you will become thirsty for Me to become your greatest delight."

Philippians 1:21; 4:6-7, 13, 19

DAY 3: Colossians, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, 1 and 2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon

Colossians: “You will be tempted to twist the gospel into some sort of spiritual “mechanics” or “ritual” in order to feel really good about yourself. Rather than feeding your soul, you’ll be feeding your pride! Do not make spiritual “experience” your first pursuit. The spiritual life is more rooted in a growing freedom over temptation and sin. Stay rooted in what My Son did for you on the cross.”

Colossians 1:28-29; 2:6-8

1 Thessalonians: “Don’t be surprised when you discover how frustrated you can become with this life, others, and yourself! And don’t mistake spiritual “feelings” as the mark of spiritual maturity. Being engaged with My purposes as your top priority is a greater measure of spiritual maturity!”

1 Thessalonians 3:11-12; 4:3-8; 5:16-18

2 Thessalonians: “You will view this life with the greatest wisdom when you have on your radar screen the life that will begin upon My Son’s return. Serve Me with hope!”

2 Thessalonians 1:7-10; 2:13-18

1 Timothy: “Commit yourself to learning the truth, living the truth, and teaching My truth. This will strengthen others and it will solidify you in such a way as to fight the good fight of the faith.”

1 Timothy 1:5; 4:12; 6:6-12

2 Timothy: “Give yourself fully to My purposes. Give it your all the same way a soldier on duty does, or a star athlete trains, or a farmer waits patiently for the harvest. Don’t be discouraged when it looks like all have abandoned you. Finish strong! A crown awaits!”

2 Timothy 3:16-17

Titus: “As you lead and care for My church, teach the people how to live and how to relate to the people in their lives. There will be some that will come alive to My truth only through how My people live and relate.”

Titus 2:11-14

Philemon: “If you live to make sure ‘justice’ and ‘fairness’ is done you’ll miss the point of what I’m doing. You display something of My mercy and grace the most in those situations where you are wronged. Then, your response becomes an opportunity to reflect My Son’s response on the cross for those who wronged Him.”

Philemon vv. 8-10

DAY 4: Hebrews, James, 1 and 2 Peter, 1, 2, 3 John, Jude

Hebrews: “The life I call you to live requires faith! That means there will be plenty of ‘opportunities’ when you wonder where I am, or what I’m doing. Don’t shrink back from My purposes when life gets confusing.”

Hebrews 11:1, 6; 12:1-3

James: “Living for Me in this life will take a wisdom you don’t naturally possess. You’ll only seek it when your back’s against the wall of hardship. Take heart! I love to give My wisdom to My people to help guide them through any and every difficulty they endure.”

James 1:2-5

1 Peter: “Don’t be surprised by times of suffering. I am a redemptive God who will use every bit of suffering on your part to reach others, strengthen others and strengthen you.”

1 Peter 5:7-8

2 Peter: “Though it may not seem true to you in experience, the power you need to resist every temptation is available to you. It will empower you toward real ‘life’ in Me, and toward godliness.”

2 Peter 1:3-4

1 John: “I am making you alive, like My Son, especially to love like He does. Walk in the light to which I have drawn you. You will find real life in Me.”

1 John 1:9; 3:16-18; 5:11-13

2 John: “Don’t be misled in your faith. Spiritual formation is not most expressed as feeling close to God; it’s most expressed as our anchoring reality in this life.”

vv. 1-4

3 John: “It’s easy to become a spiritual critic. Resist the urge. Instead, determine that your life will be more deeply committed to loving even the most difficult people you know.”

vv. 3-4

Jude: “Don’t be discouraged by spiritual failure. I have the power to enable you to walk the narrow road, and to see you through this life no matter the difficulties or failures along the way.”

Jude 24-25

1. Which of the epistles interests you the most?

2. What caught your attention from the epistles?

DAY 5: Paul's last days

1. Paul spent his last years either in custody (on a ship or in a prison), house arrest, or back in Rome's prison.

2. 2 Timothy is his last epistle. He writes from prison in Rome. It is apparent that he knows his "time is at hand."

3. As he faces his last days before his execution, what would go through his mind? What would be important to him? If you were facing your own execution, what would you want to say in your last letter to someone important to you?

2 Timothy 4:6 (RSV) For I am already on the point of being sacrificed; the time of my departure has come.

⁷ I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.

⁸ Henceforth there is laid up 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 loved his appearing.

4. What strikes you most from these three verses?

5. What mattered most to Paul?

6. Is he more moved by death or hope? How can you tell?

7. Which of the verses would you like to characterize your attitude now?