

Bible Through the Year 2017

Week 50 Notes (Romans 11-16, Acts 20-28, Colossians, Philemon, and Ephesians.)

Introduction to Week 50...

It's probably best that I go ahead and say that there is virtually no-way that I can introduce all of these books or even mention the scope of the content that we are going to be reading this week because it is so massive. Our reading this week contains five books covering an endless number of subject; some of which are going to change the scope of eternity. Dozens of cities are covered in the latter portion of the book of Acts and then there's Paul's trial that takes him from Jerusalem all the way to Rome.

Then there's the end of the book of Romans, the practical end where Paul seeks to show the impact that the gospel is to have on our homes, our churches, our city and our world. This week we will read the book of Philemon, which is one of the smallest letters in the New Testament but it is also one that makes a huge impact on how we understand relationships through the lens of the gospel.

Then we will turn our attention to the book of Ephesians which is a fascinating study in itself. In Acts 19, Paul came to the city of Ephesus and found a group of disciples there but these folks knew nothing of the Holy Spirit who had come down at Pentecost. They had also not been baptized as followers of Jesus so Paul baptized them and laid his hands on them that they might receive the Holy Spirit. This marked the founding of the Christian church in Ephesus.

Later in Acts 20, Paul went back to Ephesus and he warned the elders of the church that they ought to pay careful attention to the congregation and to their doctrine. He warned them in this way because he feared that some among them might stray from the truth and lead others astray. Now, it seems that Paul's letter to the church is aimed at making sure that they hold on to the true doctrine of the gospel because this letter is filled with rich theology that pertains to the good news of salvation by faith in Christ.

This week we are also going to read Paul's letter to the church in Colossae, which is one of the shortest of Paul's letters but it is also one of the most exciting. In this letter Paul is writing to a young church that is just discovering what it means to be Christians, what it means to trust in and follow Christ, and they are learning how their newfound faith interacts with the philosophies of the culture around them.

In chapter 1:15-20 we see one of only four *Christological hymns* found in the NT. In this hymn we learn some of the clearest and most amazing teaching about the deity and humanity of Christ, we learn about His involvement in the work of creation and we learn about how He rules over His church and His world. Jesus and His gospel are the major theme of this letter.

But coming in at a very close second is a theme of warning for the church. This is a church filled with new believers and that means that everything is new to them and one of the main reasons Paul is writing this letter is to warn the church and protect the church from false teaching that had crept its way into this brand-new baby church.

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Something to discuss...

When we first started reading the book of Acts, a few weeks ago, the scene of the book was quite a bit different than what we see this week and on into chapter 28. In the beginning, the crowd was small: 11 apostles along with Mary, Jesus' mother and James and Jude his brothers were together in Jerusalem with a group of disciples that totaled 120.

In the beginning, the charge was simple, "Go and make disciples in my name...preach the good news of the kingdom of God...be my witnesses from Jerusalem, to Judea, then Samaria and into every corner of the earth."

In Chapter 2, God sent His Holy Spirit who empower the apostles to preach the gospel with boldness and power and after Peter's first sermon 3000 Jews believed and the church in Jerusalem was born. By Acts 8 the gospel had already gone through the region of Judea and into Samaria, the message of Christ had reached the ears of the Jews.

Then Paul was converted to Christ and called by Jesus to be the apostle to the Gentiles, in fulfillment of God's promise made to Abraham that through the seed of promise all the nations of the earth will be blessed. Paul obeyed the call of Christ and he went forth with a fearless passion taking the gospel into the Roman Empire to the Jew first and then to the Greek.

But during his ministry, he began to see the hearts of the Jews become hardened to the good news of the Messiah. The long awaited One had come and fulfilled his purpose of atoning for sin through his death. His message was going out and rather than uniting the people of God to people from other nations of the world, the gospel became a source of division.

Have you ever wondered why some people who hear the same message, on the same day, by the same man on the same subject can come away with different opinions? We see that throughout this wonderful book and it is sad because God's plan is to create one people from all the different nations of the world and bring them together under the banner of Christ. The New Testament writers even refer to this as the manifold wisdom of God, that He would unite all people and reconcile all things to Himself through Jesus and the gospel.

But the gospel is not just the ultimate reality that unites God's creation; in this age it is also the ultimate reality that divides mankind as well. In **Matthew 10:34**, Jesus said, "I have not come to bring peace, but a sword."

The gospel of Jesus Christ has not only become the dividing line of this age but also the dividing line of eternity. This is what we learn in **Mark 16:15**,

"And He said to them, "Go into all the world and proclaim the gospel to the whole creation. Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned."

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One of the things that the book of Acts presses home to us is that the Cross of Christ and the good news that there is salvation in no other name than Jesus, is the ultimate dividing line in both this life and the life that is to come. There are other divisions in this world as well, but in the end, this is the only one that will matter. Everything hinges on the gospel.

Here are few questions to help you discuss this with others. How is the gospel bringing people together today? How is the gospel serving a unifying purpose in the world that is unique? How is the gospel bringing division today? How can you and all Christians be more equipped to engage the world with the truth?

Something to meditate on...

This week I want us to meditate on what I consider to be one of the most important passages in the book of Colossians or the entire New Testament for that matter.

Col 1:15 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.

Most scholars agree that this passage deserves to be called a poem or a hymn and you can see how it might have served that purpose. The passage is structured like a hymn with repetitive phrases. There are also themes of creation, of authority, and of redemption that divide the passage into stanzas. If this is a hymn then it is one of the most important ones ever sung because this hymn reveals things about Jesus that are awesome.

When we come upon a passage like this it demands that we slow down and think and that is what Paul wants his readers to do. He wants us to know these amazing things about Jesus and the first thing He wants us to know is that Jesus is the image of the invisible God. The word image here is the Greek term *εικων* which is where we get our word **icon** from. An icon is something that looks like or represents something else, but it's not just the word that stands out here, it's the entire phrase.

Jesus is not just *an* image; He is *the image of the invisible God*. If you want to know who God is, if you want to know what God is like, if you want to understand how He behaves, how He cares, how He feels, how He responds; then you need to look at Jesus. If you want to see the invisible God in the flesh, then look at Jesus. **"He is the visible image of the invisible God (NLT)."**

According to **John 1:18** "No one has ever seen God. But the unique One, who is himself God, and who is near to the Father's heart. He has revealed God to us." In **Genesis 1** man was *made* in the image of God, but Jesus **is** the image of God that we were fashioned from. From

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all eternity Jesus has been the perfect image/reflection of the Father's being and nature. So when Jesus came onto the scene 2,000 years ago it was as if God was stepping out from behind the curtain for all the world to see.

He healed the sick, He gave sight to the blind, He made men who were cripple stand up and walk again. He turned water into wine, He turned a small meal into a feast for thousands, twice. He walked on water, He commanded the obedience of the sea, the wind and the storm. He cast out demons and commanded them where to go. He called three people back from death and when He called, they came. Jesus shows us that God is powerful.

At the same time Jesus shows us that God is full of compassion. He cares about people. He doesn't embrace the celebrity status that everyone, including His disciples, want to give Him. When He goes into a town He weeps over the lostness of the people. When blind beggars cry out to him He goes to them and heals them while everyone else simply ignores them.

When social outcasts come to him He doesn't shew them away like everyone else does, He looks them in the eye and helps them. He touches the leper without hesitation, He ignores the threats of the Pharisees and heals on the Sabbath. Jesus meets people in the midst of their suffering and He shows them the compassion of God.

He also shows us the love of God.

John 15:13 No one has greater love than this—that one lays down his life for his friends.

Jesus allowed Himself to die. He died willingly and the reason He willingly laid down His life was on account of His love. Jesus makes it clear to us that God loves. If you ever doubt that the God of creation loves sinners like you and me, then look no further than the lengths to which Jesus went to show us His love.

I John 4:9 In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. ¹⁰ In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation (the sacrificial substitute) for our sins.

Jesus shows us the power of God, the compassion of God and sacrificial love of God but there is so much more. At every turn Jesus is revealing more of God to us.

Hebrews 1:3 tells us that, "(Jesus) is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of His nature."

The heavens declare the handiwork of God, the earth shows us beauty that makes our hearts long for God, the oceans depth and the mountains heights help us get a sense of the grandeur of God, but nothing in all of creation reveals the image of God like Jesus.

Something to pray about...

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The book of Ephesians helps us to grasp the deep things of God but it also shows us how those deep truths shape us in our daily lives. John Stott wrote a commentary on this book years ago and he titled it, "God's New Society." This is a great title because in this book God wants to show us how the gospel of Jesus Christ is meant to work in the world to create a whole new humanity. From every tribe, tongue and nation of the world God is creating a people and He is calling us together under the banner of Christ.

Ray Ortlund writes:

At Immanuel (Ray's church), we love to say that "gospel doctrine creates gospel culture." That is what Ephesians is all about. The wonderful letter from Paul teaches gospel doctrine (1:1-3:13), in order to create gospel culture (4:1-6:24). But you will notice that I have just left out 3:14-21. That section, in between the doctrine and the culture, is a prayer. That's significant. Building gospel culture is not as simple as just deciding that we accept gospel doctrine, essential as that is. But more profoundly, *we pray our way from gospel doctrine to gospel culture!* A vibrant, beautiful community in Jesus is a living miracle in this world of exhaustion, aloofness, superiority and conflict. So, the link between the doctrine and the culture is dependent prayer, as we lean into God, call upon his power for our weakness, and give him alone all the glory.¹

Let's be sure to spend time this week in prayer not simply that we can understand what we are reading, but that we would be shaped by what we are reading. Let's pray that God would develop in us a gospel heart, life and culture.

¹ Ray Ortlund, *Journey Through the Bible 2016* (Immanuelnashville.com)