

WHERE WOULD WE BE WITHOUT PAUL?

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If you've been "Following the Bible" using the daily reading guide you'll know that we're about to hit the block of letters written by the apostle Paul. We've been introduced to Paul in the book of Acts where Luke tells us about his amazing conversion and subsequent missionary exploits, but it is only through Paul's letters that we begin to get a feel for his character, personality and theology.



Some people find Paul's writings a bit heavy, but the understanding of God's character which Paul gives us is a very necessary part of the New Testament. Certainly we have the full gospel in the other books but without Paul, Christianity wouldn't be what it is today.

For a start Paul leans much more towards the Greek culture than the other writers. His mission is to take the gospel to the Gentiles - in other words, to translate the gospel from its Jewish context and put it in a context that the whole world can understand. During his lifetime Paul did this in a practical way through his travels and his preaching, but through his writings the process has continued up until the present day. If it hadn't been for Paul it's just possible that Christianity might have remained as closed and exclusive as Judaism had become.

Throughout his writings Paul seems to have one dominant theme: grace. There is good reason for this. As human beings it is incredibly difficult for us to accept that we can be given something we don't deserve. Although Christ's birth, life and sacrificial death were all about grace, even His own disciples struggled to grasp the concept. So Paul hammers home the message, again and again, that yes, God does justify the ungodly and undeserving (see Romans 4:5 for example). Just how He does this can only be understood by understanding God's grace and love towards His children - "the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus," as he puts it in Ephesians 2:7.

Closely allied with grace in Paul's writings, is freedom. For Paul, grace is something that is given freely by God and acquired freely by His children.

In Ephesians 1:6 he talks about God's "glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves." In Romans 3:23,24 he says that even though we have all "sinned and fall short of the glory of God," we are "justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus."

But grace goes even further than this: it gives total freedom to those who truly accept God's gift of grace. "It is for freedom that Christ has set us free," Paul says in Galatians 5:1. "Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery."

Of course, such a radical view, to Jewish, Greek, and even modern minds, was bound to cause a stir. One very positive outcome was that Christianity spread like wildfire across the Roman Empire and further. This was genuine good news,

unparalleled by any other major religion, and people really wanted to hear it. It transformed lives, cultures and politics, and led eventually to Christianity becoming the largest of the world religions.

However, the marvellous message of God's grace and the freedom that we have in Christ, was, even during Paul's lifetime, twisted and corrupted by some.

In some cases this was because they couldn't accept that God could be so generous; in others it was because they loved their sins more than they loved Christ. Sad? Yes, but if Paul had not written about how to combat these two opposite, and equally wrong reactions to God's grace, we might not know how to tackle those who still champion them today.