



Part 42 ► The Way Home To God

Paul's final years

The apostle Paul is now in Rome, under house arrest. He lives there for two years, welcoming visitors, teaching and preaching (Acts 28:30-31). Historical records and clues in the letters of 1 Timothy and Titus tell us he's then probably freed, and may have lived another five years, continuing his missionary journeys, perhaps travelling to Spain (where he wanted to go—see Romans 15:24,28), then to what's now Greece, to Crete and to Asia Minor. He's rearrested and executed under the Emperor Nero, perhaps around AD65. And so Paul enters into the presence of the Lord he's served so faithfully.

Letters to God's people

Paul left behind him a wonderful treasury of truth—13 letters (often called 'epistles'), handed down to us in the New Testament. The other nine New Testament letters are written by other leaders of the early church: the Lord's half-brothers who wrote the letters of James and Jude; the apostle Peter; and the apostle John, who also very probably wrote the Book of Revelation (which is a letter to seven churches). We don't know who wrote the letter to the Hebrews, though there's no shortage of suggestions!

These letters are arranged in order. Paul wrote the most; his nine letters to churches are placed first, then his four letters to individuals; within each group, the order is longest to shortest.^[1] Then follow the eight letters written by other authors, and to a more general audience—Hebrews to Jude. They're arranged by author, and within that by size. Finally, Revelation is placed last because it's the final 'chapter' of the whole Bible story.

The Holy Spirit inspired these writers to teach, encourage and correct God's people. Through their letters, we learn what Jesus's life, death, resurrection and ascension achieved for us. Through them, God teaches us how to think and to live as His redeemed people. In them, God unveils the spiritual war that we're involved in, and trains us to stand firm against our enemies—Satan and the forces of evil. And, especially in the Book of Revelation, God unveils the final glorious climax of the Bible story to encourage and inspire us to remain faithful to Him to the end.

All 22 of these New Testament books—from Romans to Revelation—

“

The letters included in our New Testament are God's personal letters to us!

are *letters*, not essays or textbooks. Letters are *personal*. Paul and the other authors are writing either to people they know personally, or they know to be their brothers and sisters in Christ. Some of the letters are to individuals, such as Timothy; some are to local churches, such as the church in Corinth (or, in the case of Galatians, a group of churches); some are written to their brothers and sisters more widely, such as Jude's letter to "those who are called, beloved in God the Father and kept for Jesus Christ" (Jude 1). And because, under the Holy Spirit's guidance, these letters were included in our New Testament, they're also God's personal letters to us!

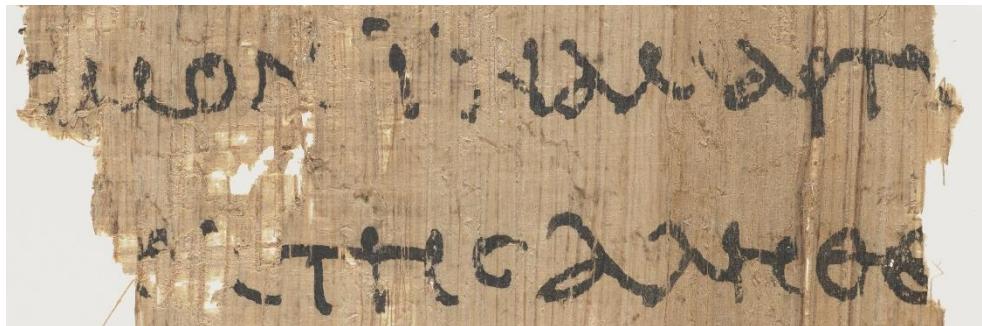


Image courtesy of Rylands Library Papyrus P52, CC BY-SA 4.0

A portion of Rylands Library Papyrus P52, that's been dated to around AD125-175 (only 45-95 years after John wrote his Gospel). It may well be the earliest New Testament manuscript yet found. The image shows a fragment of the Greek text of John 18:37-38.

The catastrophe in the garden

First and foremost, the New Testament letters show us what Jesus accomplished for us and for our world. But before we can fully appreciate what Jesus accomplished, we need to recall everything that went wrong in the first place. And so we have to go back to Genesis 3.

In Part 6, we saw how Adam's first sin unleashed catastrophic damage to himself, the human race, and the natural world. His act of disobedience:

- ▶ involved *us*, because we're connected to him; humans were "**made sinners**" (Romans 5:19)—we were born with a natural desire to do what *we* wanted, not what God wanted.
- ▶ alienated us from God
- ▶ spoiled our relationships with other people
- ▶ put us in debt to God and to others because of sin
- ▶ enabled Satan to gain power over this world; as Jesus said, "**the whole world is under the control of the evil one**" (1 John 5:19 NIV)
- ▶ made us slaves to sin
- ▶ led to physical, emotional, and mental pain, and subjected us to disease and injury, ageing and death
- ▶ brought a curse on the land, blighting its productivity, and brought creation into "**bondage to decay**" (Romans 8:21 NIV)
- ▶ crippled our dominion over the Earth
- ▶ brought exile from paradise—God expelled Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden.

Jesus, our perfect and complete sacrifice

However could God sort all this out and put everything right? As we saw in Part 6, right at the very beginning God seems to hint at the answer.

He clothes Adam and Eve with animal skins (Genesis 3:21). To provide them, we may assume that God sacrificed animals. He seems to be telling us that to deal with human sin and all its consequences, *there needs to be sacrificial death*. And as we read through the Bible, we discover whose death this is. *It's Jesus's death.*

We've seen this foreshadowed in the Old Testament sacrifices, which we looked at in Part 18. These sacrifices enabled God to forgive His people and welcome them back into fellowship with Himself—something the Bible calls *atonement*. They point to Jesus.

Leviticus 1:1-7:38 describes the five major sacrifices offered in the Tabernacle and Temple—the purification offering, restitution offering, burnt offering, grain offering, and fellowship offering. Together, they restored a sinner to fellowship with God. Jesus fulfilled *all* of them. He's cleansed us from the guilt and pollution of sin, made restitution for our sin—both to God and to others—and brought us into fellowship with God. As Peter writes, *"Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God"* (1 Peter 3:18).

Jesus, our Passover Lamb

Just before the Exodus, and annually thereafter, God's people celebrated the Passover. At this festival, lambs were sacrificed. They died instead of the firstborn sons, who represented the whole of God's people. Now *"Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed"* (1 Corinthians 5:7). Jesus died instead of us. Jesus is our perfect Passover Lamb: ● The Passover lamb had to be *"without blemish"* (Exodus 12:5). Peter writes of *"the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot"* (1 Peter 1:19). ● The bones of the Passover lamb weren't to be broken (Exodus 12:46). After His death, the soldiers didn't break Jesus's legs, as they did to the criminals crucified alongside Him. ● Jesus died at the Passover, and almost certainly at the very time the Passover lambs were being sacrificed in the Temple.

Jesus, our atoning sacrifice

Jesus fulfills the sacrifice of the two goats on the great annual Day of Atonement: ● One was killed; then the high priest entered the Most Holy Place, and sprinkled its blood there (Hebrews 9:7-8). This cleansed God's people from the guilt and impurity of sin, and God's house from the spiritual pollution caused by Israel's sin. ● Then the high priest confessed the nation's sins over the other goat (the 'scapegoat'). This animal was now symbolically responsible for the nation's sins over the past year. It was then led into the wilderness and released. This pictures the complete removal of Israel's sin. And the scapegoat symbolically suffered the nation's *penalty* for sin—exile from God's presence.

These two goats together picture what Jesus did on the Cross. ● He fulfilled what happened to the first goat. He entered the *true* Most Holy Place, Heaven, with His *own* blood. He's cleansed *us* from the guilt and impurity of sin. And He's cleansed *the creation*, polluted by sin; one day, God will live among us on the renewed Earth (Revelation 21:3). ● And He fulfilled what happened to the second goat. Just as the goat was loaded with the nation's sins, God *"laid on him the iniquity of us all"*

“

"Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God"

(1 Peter 3:18).

“

Through Jesus's death, resurrection and ascension, God reverses every one of the consequences of Adam's sin.

(Isaiah 53:6). Just as the scapegoat was removed from the camp, so our sins have been removed “as far as the east is from the west” (Psalm 103:12). And just as the scapegoat suffered exile in the wilderness, so Jesus was exiled from God's presence in our place on the Cross, crying out, “**My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?**” (Matthew 27:46). In other words, He suffered spiritual death.

“Such a great salvation”

The New Testament—especially the letters—confirms, explains and adds to what we read in the Old Testament. It sets out everything that Jesus achieved for us. Through His death, resurrection and ascension, God reversed *every one* of the consequences of Adam's sin we listed earlier. He has brought about “**such a great salvation**” (Hebrews 2:3):

- ▶ Jesus has ‘disconnected’ us from Adam, and joined us to Himself. Now, in Christ, we're “**made righteous**” (see Romans 5:12-21).
- ▶ We're no longer alienated from God; now the Holy Spirit lives in us and, by the Spirit, the Father and the Son make Their home in us, too (see John 14:15-17, 23).
- ▶ We're able to love one another (see John 15:12, Romans 12:10).
- ▶ Jesus paid the debt we owed God and other people because of our sin (see Colossians 2:13-14).
- ▶ We've been released from Satan's power (see Acts 26:18, Colossians 1:13); we're no longer slaves of sin, but “**slaves of righteousness**” (Romans 6:18).
- ▶ Jesus's resurrection guarantees that we, too, will rise from death with new bodies like His (Philippians 3:21); we'll be free from pain and disease and death (see Revelation 21:4). And His resurrection guarantees that, one day, the whole creation will be renewed and freed from its “**bondage to decay**” (Romans 8:21 NIV) and from the curse imposed on it at the Fall.
- ▶ In the new creation, we'll exercise our dominion over creation as God planned from the beginning.
- ▶ Most wonderful of all, we'll live there in the presence of our Father. “**God's dwelling-place**” will be “**among the people, and he will dwell with them**” (Revelation 21:3 NIV). *No longer will we be in exile; we'll return to paradise.* We'll come home, and live in our Father's house for ever (see John 14:2-3).

“

When God renews the creation, we'll no longer be in exile. We'll come home, and live in our Father's house for ever.

Next time . . .

We'll take a closer look at all that Jesus did for each one of us on the Cross, and at the new life He brings us into as believers.

Bible Reading and Question

You may like to read Ephesians 1:1-23. Here's a question to think about:

- ▶ Imagine the Ephesian letter has just dropped through your letterbox, with your own name and address on the envelope. How might this affect how this first chapter of Ephesians impacts you when you read it?