



LOVE LETTERS FOR YOUR SOUL

By Rev. Will Nelken

Presented at Trinity Community Church, San Rafael, CA, on Sunday, August 16, 2020

Today begins with a challenge: This week, I challenge each of you to read four brief letters from Paul—written to the Christians in Galatia (a central region of modern-day Turkey, between the Black Sea and the Mediterranean), Ephesus (a Mediterranean port on the western edge of modern-day Turkey), Philippi (a city of northern ancient Greece), and Colosse (a town of western Asia Minor).

These four letters—Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, and Colossians—contain a total of 20 chapters, so if you commit to read just 3 chapters each day, you will complete all four in 7 days.

Each of these letters bears a theme that is unique to its readers, but all four are woven together by common threads as well, as we will see.

Let me introduce you to each of these powerful letters.

The Churches of Galatia

The Galatians were originally three tribes of Celts, mercenaries hired out of Europe to help fight a battle. They lost the war, but they settled and remained in the region, still speaking a dialect of the Celtic language in Paul's day.

Paul was detained due to sickness in Galatia on one of his missionary journeys, giving him a longer opportunity to preach the Gospel to them. (Do you view life's inconvenient interruptions like Paul did?)

It was here that the people, overwhelmed with superstitious fanaticism wanted to sacrifice to Paul and Barnabas, calling them Zeus and Hermes (gods of the Greeks), because of a miraculous healing they had performed in Jesus' name.

Fickle—as religious self-righteousness often is—a short while later, the same people stoned Paul in anger and left him for dead.

Eugene Peterson writes, “When men and women get their hands on religion, one of the first things they often do is turn it into an instrument for controlling others, either putting or keeping them ‘in their place.’ The history of such religious manipulation and coercion is long and tedious. It is little wonder that people who have only known religion on such terms experience release or escape from it as freedom. The problem is that the freedom turns out to be short-lived.”

Paul himself had been one of the purveyors of such religious brew, trying to stamp out the Christian way of life, until he was encountered by the living Christ while on his way to Damascus.

When he later learned that other Jews of that same sort, were taking advantage of his absence to reintroduce the old ways, “herding all these freedom-loving Christians back into the corral of religious rules and regulations,” he responded with fiery zeal and indignation.

His letter to the Galatians helps them, and us, to recover and retain the original freedom that Christ won for us.

Paul argued brilliantly that it is only the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives that is of any real spiritual value. Our efforts in religion, no matter how apparently noble or well-meaning, do not impress God if they are not inspired by the Spirit and carried out in dependence on Him. Religious works that satisfy the Law (of Moses) no longer count for anything in the economy of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, only acts of faith.

The Galatians had learned these lessons well from Paul, but were now being intimidated by a group of Jewish Christians who wanted to impose the old Jewish ways on the young Gentile believers.

Since the Galatians had come from a hardy warring stock of mercenaries, Paul minced no words in expressing his astonishment at their acquiescence and pulled no punches in venting his anger at the self-serving Jewish manipulators.

It may be needless to say that many young Christians today are equally gullible in their desire to be “teachable” and some spiritual teachers are equally corrupt in their efforts to control and conform God’s people to their arbitrary standards of behavior.

The Gospel sets people *free*. Those who receive it, love it. Those who observe it, fear it. Paul wanted to maintain genuine Christian liberty among the Galatians.

Galatians 5:6 For when we place our faith in Christ Jesus, there is no benefit in being circumcised or being uncircumcised. What is important is faith expressing itself in love.

If ours is not a life characterized by expressions of faith, it is not Christian. No amount of religious ritual can compensate for an absence of simple faith. And how do we know if we have this simple faith? It expresses itself in acts of love — Christian love, not only to the church, but also to our enemies and to the “least of these.”

Galatians 5:13 For you have been called to live in freedom, my brothers and sisters. But don't use your freedom to satisfy your sinful nature. Instead, use your freedom to serve one another in love. ¹⁴ For the whole law can be summed up in this one command: “Love your neighbor as yourself.”

Some seem to think that faith is our ticket to the good life, to getting the best out of this life, to having what we want. Instead of “getting for ourselves,” the Gospel teaches that faith in Jesus sets us free to give ourselves away. It is simply human nature — sinful human nature — to satisfy ourselves. This life is our opportunity to learn, instead, to truly love God and others. And it is the Holy Spirit who leads us in this new direction.

Galatians 5:22 But the Holy Spirit produces this kind of fruit in our lives: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, ²³ gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against these things!

We cannot live such a life as that described in these verses apart from the powerful influence of the Holy Spirit. Only He can turn our fears into faith and our self-interest into service.

The Church in Ephesus

Ephesus was, in the days of Paul the second largest city in the world, boasting nearly 500,000 residents. It was an active commercial center and the capital city of Asia Minor, with one of the most advanced systems of aqueducts in the ancient world. It was home to the Temple of Artemis or Diana (one of the Seven Wonders of the World) and a bastion of women's rights. Commerce, technology, the arts and religion fed an astute, educated, and urban population.

Paul's approach here is more sophisticated and philosophical. He weaves together classic theological dissertation with contemporary practical application, showing that what we believe about Jesus clearly informs how we *should* behave. In the course of it, he exposes many of the common fractures of this linkage, where belief and practice have been divorced or compartmentalized from each other.

Paul emphasizes the “unity given by the Holy Spirit” to otherwise variant cultures and people and persuades them and us to lend every effort to cooperate with the Spirit's aim of reconciliation — socially and personally. He expresses that, as Eugene Peterson says, “the energy of reconciliation is the dynamo at the heart of the universe” over which Jesus Christ rules. God wants to reconcile us to Himself, to ourselves, and to others.

Ephesians 1:15 Ever since I first heard of your strong faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for God's people everywhere, ¹⁶ I have not stopped thanking God for you. I pray for you constantly, ¹⁷ asking God, the glorious Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, to give you spiritual wisdom and insight so that you might grow in your knowledge of God. ¹⁸ I pray that your hearts will be flooded with light so that you can understand the confident hope he has given to those he called—his holy people who are his rich and glorious inheritance.

Nothing is so necessary as growing in our personal knowledge of God. Not our knowledge *about* Him—though that is important—but primarily our knowledge *of* Him. Are you getting to know God better? Do you feel more comfortable in His presence? Do you trust Him more often? Nothing was more important to Paul than this. Really, nothing is more important for you.

Ephesians 1:19 I also pray that you will understand the incredible greatness of God's power for us who believe him. This is the same mighty power ²⁰ that raised Christ from the dead and seated him in the place of honor at God's right hand in the heavenly realms. ²¹ Now he is far above any ruler or authority or power or leader or anything else—not only in this world but also in the world to come. ²² God has put all things under the authority of Christ and has made him head over all things for the benefit of the church. ²³ And the church is his body; it is made full and complete by Christ, who fills all things everywhere with himself.

God has the power to accomplish His plans! He will do it! And this power is on our side when it comes to doing what the Holy Spirit inspires us to do. If He could bring life back from the dead, He can certainly do anything that you require in this life.

His purpose for you is fullness, completeness, maturity (in the King James Version: perfection). Not in you alone — the only single individual who is perfect is Jesus — but in the church. That is, as we are united by the Holy Spirit in the faith of Jesus and the love of God to do what He wants in His way, we, together, reveal more and more of the glory of God's Son. Christ's perfection can only be fully revealed through the remarkable unity of the immense diversity of His church.

Spiritual unity is the bedrock of social unity. Human governments — civic and religious — don't get this. They assume that unity can be legislated and regulated. It cannot. Humankind is broken. Sin does not permit such performance. Only the redeeming grace of Jesus Christ can transform people in this way and make us truly “one people under God.”

The Church in Philippi

Philippi was a city of northern Greece, farther to the west, along the major East-West trade route. It was here, for the first time on European soil, that Paul preached the Gospel and baptized a merchant woman named Lydia, who believed his message.

It was here that Paul and Silas were beaten and imprisoned for casting a demon from a slave girl.

And it was here that God shook the foundations of that jail until the cell doors sprung open and the shackles fell from their hands and feet. The jailer became another of the first Christians in Europe.

This letter is known as Paul's most joyful letter. Its happiness is almost infectious, right from the start. He does not write *about* joy; he simply *is* joyful, in spite of his imprisonment and the aggravation of other preachers, who assumed they were in competition with Paul for notoriety and a following.

His joy, evidently, came from within, from the life of Jesus in him, independent of his circumstances. Eugene Peterson notes, "It is this 'spilling out' quality of Christ's life that accounts for the happiness of Christians, for joy is life in excess, the overflow of what cannot be contained within any one person."

You've seen them... people whose faces seem to glow, whose lives effervesce, regardless of their circumstances. Joyful Christians.

Philippians 4:4 Always be full of joy in the Lord. I say it again—rejoice! ⁵ Let everyone see that you are considerate in all you do. Remember, the Lord is coming soon.

We are to live our lives in the light of eternity and the inevitable return of Jesus for His church, approaching each day as a gift of opportunity from the Lord, being thoughtful, circumspect, and attentive.

Philippians 4:6 Don't worry about anything; instead, pray about everything. Tell God what you need, and thank him for all he has done. ⁷ Then you will experience God's peace, which exceeds anything we can understand. His peace will guard your hearts and minds as you live in Christ Jesus.

This is the key to radiating the peace of God. Nothing else, nothing more. "Don't worry... instead, pray." If we let our anxious thoughts inspire our prayers and our reflection on God's faithful kindness to us inspire our faith, we shall know God better and experience His peace and joy, even beyond our understanding.

The joy of the Lord is our strength. It is an Old Testament quote that bears New Testament reality. When our joy is in the Lord and His love for us, independent of our immediate circumstances, it produces patient (faithful) persistence in any situation. It gets us *through* our difficulties and *transforms* our obstacles.

The Church in Colosse

Colosse was also located on the great road from Ephesus to the Euphrates, though it was a town of little distinction. From Paul's letter it appears he had never personally visited this town; Epaphras had founded the church there.

Perhaps influenced by travelers along that great road, the Colossians (some of them, at least) seemed to give equal billing to a variety of religious leaders, as many do today with the likes of Buddha, Krishna, Moses, Socrates, and Muhammad. Jesus was important, but not central.

Paul's letter is an attempt to restore Jesus to the center of their lives. As Eugene Peterson comments, "Claims for the uniqueness of Jesus are common enough. But such claims about Jesus are frequently made with an arrogance that is completely incompatible with Jesus himself. Sometimes the claims are enforced with violence." Paul was neither arrogant nor threatening, but with humility, rooted in love, he appealed to his readers.

This letter in some ways is a summary of the other three, bringing together the chief elements of each in a single stream. Paul writes of the preeminence of Christ, the full reconciliation achieved by His grace, freedom from religious rules in the new life in Christ, and freedom from carnal behaviors, with instructions for living together as people united in the love of Jesus.

Colossians 1:9 So we have not stopped praying for you since we first heard about you. We ask God to give you complete knowledge of his will and to give you spiritual wisdom and understanding.
¹⁰ Then the way you live will always honor and please the Lord, and your lives will produce every kind of good fruit. All the while, you will grow as you learn to know God better and better.

This is what it's all about! This is the path — the only path — to spiritual growth and maturity. "You will grow as you learn to know God better and better." There are no shortcuts and no substitutes. You must learn to know God better.

This is why I am urging all the church to read through *all* the letters of the New Testament (Romans through Jude) with us this Fall. 121 chapters in 122 days, starting on September 1st! Not to accumulate more head knowledge, not so you can say "Look what I did," but so that you might *hear His voice*. So you may get to know Him better.

Colossians 3:15 And let the peace that comes from Christ rule in your hearts. For as members of one body you are called to live in peace. And always be thankful.

Does that peace *rule* in your heart? Does it govern your emotion, your volition? Does it govern your behavior, your relationships? It should. It can.

This peace comes from Christ, and nowhere else. It is the peace that results from knowing that your sin — all your sinful deeds and attitudes and even the sin-nature that dwells in your flesh — have been thoroughly forgiven by God because Jesus paid your debt.

It is the peace that results from knowing that God is for you, not against you, and has a plan of significance for your life. It is the peace that results from knowing that God the Holy Spirit is in you, as your Helper, Strengthener, Counselor, and Friend, and He will never leave you nor abandon you.

Let us learn to live together in this peace. Then, certainly, we will always be thankful. And the world around us will experience the influence of the Spirit of Christ.

To help you along in this good direction, I suggest you commit to read these four letters from Paul (Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, and Colossians) **this week**—just 3 chapters each day—and see how the Holy Spirit uses them to make a real difference in your life.

Then, on September 1st we'll back up and read *all* the New Testament letters (Romans through Jude)—just one chapter each day—and I'll include a daily devotional that follows the same plan! Mark it on your calendar now for September through December: Love Letters for Your Soul.