

Synopsis by David Matthew of

# THE LOST MESSAGE OF PAUL

Has the Church misunderstood the Apostle Paul?

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Numbers in brackets are Kindle location numbers.

## Chapter 1: The conversation

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...about Paul, the dominant NT figure after Jesus himself. His writing has been mangled and decontextualised to justify ideas that would have appalled him.

Scholarship is discovering much to put things right, but its findings are slow to filter down to everyday Christians. Not everyone will agree with my conclusions—but that's OK.

## Chapter 2: The revolutionary

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Slaves in the USA hated Paul because his teaching on 'slaves obey your masters' was used to keep them subdued. Others have used his writings to justify different evils. But far from being the champion of exclusion, as often portrayed, he was in fact the great includer.

We have read Paul through the words of others, notably Augustine, Luther and Calvin. Roman Catholicism, then Reformed Protestantism, used him to impose systems of control and guilt. It's time to take a fresh look at what he actually said himself.

## Chapter 3: Longing

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13 of the NT books are attributed to Paul. Some are disputed, and I will focus on the seven universally agreed to be his: Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, 1 Thessalonians and Philemon.

Born around 6 AD in Tarsus, Turkey, he was perhaps a decade younger than Jesus. He was born a Roman citizen, but raised as a strict Jew: a Pharisee. On a mission to destroy the infant church, probably in his late twenties, he encountered the risen Jesus on the Damascus road. He would go on to travel 10,000 miles in his service.

'Paul's task was to discover how to apply Jesus' life-transforming and liberating message to [Gentile] communities for whom the cultural trappings of Judaism were completely foreign' (269).

## Chapter 4: Air

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The culture we inhabit is like the air we breathe: taken for granted. We all live inside the same 'big story'. We have viewed Paul from within our own, to our confusion. In 1977 Ed Sanders' book, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, opened up Paul's own culture, his 'framing story': Second Temple Judaism. Sanders' ideas grew into the New Perspective on Paul (NPP).

The story of Israel's nationhood included the captivity in Egypt and the exodus, when God saved them as a *whole people* rather than as individuals. Though things later turned sour, they always held onto the conviction that their covenant-keeping God would remain with them and see them vindicated in the end.

Their First Temple was destroyed by the Babylonians at the time of the exile. After the exile, the returnees built the smaller-scale Second Temple. But they remained under the heel of a succession of Gentile empires. They looked for the promised Messiah to deliver them. This would be their 'salvation'; they never entertained other-worldly ideas of what salvation might entail. So when Jesus rode into Jerusalem, they expected him to be their military Messiah. But he was instead crucified.

This background was Paul's 'framing story'.

## Chapter 5: A new world

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Saul's encounter on the Damascus road didn't erase that story; it forced him to reappraise it, in the realisation that Jesus was in fact alive! Jesus was the real 'emperor'. So, in his travels, Paul pushed West, towards the seat of the empire, Rome, to proclaim Jesus there.

For Paul, a new world had been born. 'It was about a different order of thinking. It was about liberation rather than control. Liberation *from* the pursuit of power and self-interest rather than *through* the pursuit of power and self-interest. Liberation not *with* the sword, but *from* the sword' (446). Were he alive today, he would question the current empires we have put our trust in, like capitalism and globalism.

For Paul, the God of Israel now intended to put the *whole world* to rights. He did not therefore champion a set of intellectual ideas or beliefs but the changing of society. For him, the resurrection of Jesus changed everything. With death put in its place, a whole new world could emerge. God is renewing the whole of creation. This was his focus, not the notion of how we as individuals can be put right with God and 'go to heaven', a focus which only developed during the Middle Ages.

## Chapter 6: Perspective

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Recent cross-disciplinary studies of Paul have had a huge effect on hermeneutics. We realise more than ever that, if we fail to take account of what was happening at the time he wrote, we will misunderstand him.

1 Cor 7:26-29 has been used wrongly to accuse him of anti-sex, anti-marriage views. It was also key to the RC Church's policy of celibacy for the clergy. But he writes, '...because of the present crisis...' History tells us this referred to a series of severe famines at that time, when more marriages would mean more mouths to feed.

Paul's letters are addressed to specific churches in particular circumstances. His advice to them should not therefore be turned into universal principles. Nor should we, like Luther, be too quick to see in Paul's writings echoes of our own current situation. His equating of medieval Catholicism with the Judaisers that Paul addressed became, later, fuel for Nazi anti-semitism and the Holocaust. The Third Reich republished Luther's *On The Jews and Their Lies*. Bad theology costs lives.

'We all know the stories of the pain caused by the misreading of Paul through the centuries. We know how his words have been used to justify some of the most inhumane, brutal and repressive episodes in human history: to sanction crusades and inquisitions, to approve witch-hunts across Europe and North America, to portray African people as cursed by God and therefore to justify the enslavement of millions, to legitimize apartheid as well as anti-Semitism, to keep women subservient to men, to incite Islamophobia, to oppress gay people, to abuse the environment and more' (607).

## Chapter 7: A legal error

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We tend to read Paul as saying in Rom 3:28 that the OT law is dead, replaced by 'faith'. But he often underscores moral exhortations from the Ten Commandments as still valid.

The NPP reflects a variety of views. 'What, however, everyone agrees on is that the historic Lutheran perspectives on Paul, Judaism, faith and works were fundamentally misleading' (650). We need a radically revised view of his message. A decade before Sanders' book came out, Krister Stendhal had argued that powerfully.

Luther hated the Epistle of James because it didn't fit his views on justification 'by faith alone'. But Paul clearly had no problem at all with 'good works'; he urged them upon his readers. The Jews of Paul's day saw themselves nationally as 'saved by grace', not by works, though some leant too much on the Jewish 'boundary markers' like kosher food, circumcision and having the Torah. In general, 'keeping the law was simply a way of living for people who were already redeemed' (704). The whole concept of grace is rooted in the Hebrew word *hesed* (unfailing covenant love).

Paul's entire message is about removing those boundary markers because Christ is Messiah for the whole world. The benefits enjoyed by the Jews are now for all. The only boundary marker now is being human!

## Chapter 8: Faithful

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Mother Teresa's letters, published after her death, revealed that for 50 years she had felt disconnected from God, and sometimes even doubted his existence. But she had doggedly persisted with her work of serving the poor. That is real 'faith'.

Luther promulgated the doctrine of *sola fide*, 'by faith alone'. Works were futile attempts to win God's favour. He rightly appreciated that salvation is by grace, but then misunderstood the nature of 'faith', effectively turning it into a work. This has led many into 'salvation anxiety' down the years as they have grappled with whether or not they have enough faith, or faith of the right kind and intensity.

Sanders and others have shown, however, that the Greek *pistis*, traditionally translated 'faith', is far better understood as *faithfulness*—dogged trust. That is a different thing altogether. It is a firm commitment to your convictions, regardless of doubts, fears or changing circumstances, and thus often requires a lot of effort. It embraces doubt as part of the journey. 'The problem with the word "faith" is that it always leads us in the direction of "belief", in the sense of an intellectual assent to a set of theories or doctrines, whereas "faithfulness" is instead about a life lived to a commitment made' (811).

When we replace 'faith' with 'faithfulness', Luther's problem with James disappears. James was addressing those who wanted to turn faith into mere intellectual assent, whereas he insisted it was a practical way of life. *Pistis* without works, he affirmed, is dead. By grace we are all 'in'; now we are called to live faithfully in the light of that. But 'in' what? In God's people.

## Chapter 9: Think like a Hebrew

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A pastor may ask his people to read through Romans. What are their chances of understanding it properly without any grasp at all of its background? Very slim indeed, because our ideas of faith, salvation, the kingdom of God, judgment and justification have been shaped by factors alien to those at work in Paul's thinking.

*Pistis* is a key component in this scenario. Is it 'faith' or 'faithfulness'? Paul was a Hebrew thinker, and that is vital. Hebrew is a language of the senses rather than concepts and, as such, uses a lot of concrete vocabulary. Psalm 1:3 is a typical example, including 'walking' to mean 'living well'. Thus the early followers of Jesus were followers of 'the Way'. English translations of the Bible have felt obliged to use abstract nouns where Hebrew uses concrete ones, e.g. Psalm 103:8, where 'anger' is literally 'nose'—because the nostrils flare when someone is worked up.

*Pistis* is a Greek word used by Paul and others to translate a Hebrew idea. But even in Greek thought, *Pistis* (Roman name *Fides*) was the goddess of trust, reliability, loyalty or fidelity, and conveyed those ideas rather than assent to a belief. *Pistis* was used as the Greek translation of the Hebrew *aman*, which is the word used in 'Abraham believed God...' It literally means 'to support with the arm', 'to carry a child' or 'to nurse'. So Abraham did far more than assent to God's promise; 'he threw himself into living in and working for this story, hook, line and sinker' (939).

So, 'Any serious reading of *pistis* that even begins to do justice to its Hebraic background and roots must recognize that, given all this context, it can only mean faithfulness (or faith in the sense of faithfulness and reliability); nothing else even begins to fit' (953).

The word also carries connotations of obedience and loyalty. Theologian Matthew Bates wrote a whole book arguing that ‘allegiance’ is a far better translation than ‘faith’, and that we should talk of ‘salvation by allegiance alone’. So biblical ‘faith’ is not assent to doctrines, or a mystical sense of well-being, but ‘a risky commitment to a radical way of living; a call to action, a way of walking, a summons to loyalty and allegiance. This, and only this, is *pistis*’ (979).

## Chapter 10: What if?

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Luther combatted medieval Catholicism with *sola gratia* (by grace alone) and *sola fide* (by faith alone). But the two, on examination, are mutually exclusive. Grace is, by definition, a free gift. Faith is to do with our choice, ability or effort. In the end, it is a ‘work’. But if this ‘faith’ is ‘the gift of God’ (Eph 2:8-9), you have no choice as to whether you have it or not. This notion is outworked in Reformed theology, where, through no fault of their own, the faithless are eternally damned to hell.

But what if the *pistis* that Paul mentions there is not our own ‘faithfulness’, but God’s? Then the meaning of that passage would be, ‘For it is by grace you have been saved, through Christ’s faithfulness – this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – not by works, so that no one can boast’ (999).

That fits perfectly with another phrase used more than once by Paul: *pistis Christou*, ‘the faith[fulness] of Christ’. Luther, Calvin and more recent translators have rendered it ‘faith in Christ’ and have hung their whole doctrinal system on it. We are saved, they say, by ‘putting our faith in Christ’. Before the Reformation, however, most translations rendered the phrase ‘the faith of Christ’. This was true of the English translation of William Tyndale, who was a stickler for accuracy, in spite of his Reformed leanings, and of the King James Version. Later translations sadly went back on that.

In the 1980s Richard Hays wrote his seminal book *The Faith of Jesus Christ*. In it, he insisted that the only way to read Paul’s phrase *pistis Christou* authentically is in line with the old traditional reading of “the faith or faithfulness of Jesus Christ” (1082). The Eastern church has always taken that position.

Whether, in *pistis Christou*, the faith[fulness] is ours or Christ’s cannot be decided on grammatical technicalities alone (whether *Christou* is a subjective or objective genitive).

‘The idea that it is the “faithfulness of Christ” as opposed to the old concept of “faith in Christ” which is the basis of salvation would be nothing short of a revolution. It would turn our understanding of the message of the Bible upside down. It would stand Luther’s sixteenth-century idea on its head. It would be a paradigm shift’ (1121). Hence the opposition to it in many quarters.

## Chapter 11: Aha!

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Words in any language do not have a permanently fixed meaning. They are building-blocks of bigger concepts. Context is everything. ‘Hot dog’ is not usually a terrier left in the car in summer. Similarly, *pistis Christou* can only be understood against the wider cultural context within which the phrase is used. Seen in this light ‘the faithfulness of Christ’ is the only reasonable meaning, in view of the whole Hebrew context of the covenant faithfulness of God. This is liberating for all who have struggled with faith.

Romans 3:21-26 is generally considered the heart of the whole letter. How are *pistis* and *pistis Christou* employed here? The NIV has, ‘This righteousness is given by faith in Jesus Christ.’ But the scholars are telling us it should read, ‘This righteousness is given through the faithfulness of Jesus Christ.’ The two say completely different things. The most recent edition of the NIV does have a footnote giving the second rendering as an alternative.

That righteousness is given, Paul continues, ‘to all who believe’ (NIV). He is addressing the legalists in Corinth who insisted that God looked with favour only on those who observed the Jewish boundary markers. No, he says, the church is made up of ‘all who believe’, that is, who choose to live faithfully to the way of Christ, whether Jew or Gentile. Their faithfulness is their response to Christ’s.

## Chapter 12: Oxymoron

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In Romans 1:8 Paul refers to 'the wrath of God'. How do we square that with his grace and covenant faithfulness?

John Calvin was a lawyer and expressed Reformed doctrine in legal terms. He was keen to retain the 'grace' aspect preached by Luther, but realised the difficulties with 'faith', which is something that we ourselves exercise. The only way round that was to say that faith, too, was a gift of God. That led to his doctrine of 'limited atonement', because God clearly didn't give faith to all, and Christ must therefore have died only for those who did have it.

'Calvin (unconsciously or not) effectively replaced Jesus' image of God as a loving parent with that of God as a stern, courtroom judge' (1269). The non-elect were under his wrath.

The English words 'wrath' and 'anger' are one-size-fits-all terms that fail to reflect the nuances of Greek words, and even more the Hebrew words behind them. A survey of the OT terms 'reveals that typically they depict God's wrath in terms of a father's discipline towards his children, or a broken-hearted husband's yearning for an unfaithful wife, or a king's yearning for his wayward people' (1303).

The Hebrew *chemah* means 'hot', 'fevered' or 'gripped with passion'. Passions other than anger can cause those effects. The word can mean, for instance, 'embarrassment' or upset at being betrayed or rejected. God might feel that way when his people desert him. Other Hebrew words (*ebrah*, *qetseph*, *kaac*, *aph* and *ragaz*) have similar open-ended meanings. 'Far from being driven into a red-hot rage by our sin, the Bible reveals to us a passionate God who is taken aback, troubled, pained and broken with sorrow by our rebellion and rejection of his ways' (1316).

In the Greek NT the two main words are *thumos* and *orge*. Close examination reveals that *thumos* can indicate any strong feeling, not necessarily an angry one. *Orge*, too, can indicate a variety of emotions, usually of a more sustained kind. In saying, 'Be angry (*orge*), and yet do not sin', Paul is quoting David in Psalm 4:4. The 1984 NIV for that has 'In your anger (*ragaz*), do not sin'. But the 2011 NIV, in the light of more recent scholarship, has the broader 'Tremble and do not sin'.

Thus Rabbi Jonathan Sacks said we should 'understand God's anger as his anguish – a dimension of his love, but never an emotion in opposition to it' (1359). Since God is love, this makes good sense. 'The attempt to explain that God is love *but* that God is also wrathful is wrongheaded and nonsensical. There is no "but". God's love, and what we have come to refer to as God's anger, are part of the same whole which consists completely of love' (1372). God is a parent, not a judge, and that colours how we should view his 'wrath'. Reflecting this, John says, 'There is no fear in love, but perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment.'

## Chapter 13: The double whammy

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The Eastern church has never accepted the notion of 'original sin', which was developed by Augustine in the 5<sup>th</sup> century and later developed by Calvin as the doctrine of 'total depravity', that thanks to Adam we are all born with a fallen nature that delights in sin. We are sinners by both nature and practice: the double whammy. But 'the concept of original sin is a defective theological construct, which does not sit comfortably with the flow of the biblical narrative' (1434).

There is no Satan in the Adam and Eve story; that concept did not form until hundreds of years after the story was first written down. Neither is there any mention of sin in the story. Jewish teachers have never read into it anything like original sin; instead, they have seen it as an account of humanity's growing up: 'It is about the loss of innocence; the journey of humankind, as well as that of every individual, into moral responsibility' (1459). And, on that journey, God never forsakes them.

## Chapter 14: True

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God is love. What kind of love says it will smile on you if you are good but smash you if you fail? Even human parents are not like that.

‘But we live in a consequential universe, and wrongdoing has its consequences. Which is why God is filled with anguish and frustration at our selfish and short-sighted decisions’ (1496).

The idea that sin is its own punishment appears in the OT, e.g. in Psalm 7:14-16. Jesus teaches us that God is kind even to the evil and ungrateful (Luke 6:35-36). ‘We are punished *by* our sins rather than *for* our sins’ (1510). When Paul says in Romans 1:18 that ‘The wrath of God is being revealed...’, he goes on to explain how. In his anguish at their folly he ‘gives them over’ (v24, 26, 28) to the natural outworking of their sin. He doesn’t punish them, and does not give up on them. As Paul says, ‘Love never fails’ (1 Cor 13).

But, sadly, too many Christians have been taught that God will punish them if they step out of line.

## Chapter 15: The crux

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‘We preach Christ crucified,’ says Paul. The cross is central to the Christian faith.

But for Paul, ‘the death of Jesus is effective only because it stands within the radius of the victory of the resurrection’ (1622). It was his encounter with the *living* Christ that turned him around and inspired his ministry. ‘For Paul, Jesus’ death and resurrection mark the new exodus, the ultimate exodus, through which the whole of creation is rescued and renewed. The Pharaohs of this world have been defeated once and for all. Because of the cross and the resurrection – which Paul sees as two scenes in one event – a new world order has been launched’ (1639).

The idea that, on the cross, Jesus was somehow placating God’s anger is completely foreign to Paul. Jesus absorbs the consequences of the hatred and violence of evil forces but does not submit to them. Instead, he rises from death victorious. That is the outcome of his faithfulness to his Father’s purpose and to us, the beneficiaries. ‘The cross speaks not of anger, but of love – summed up for all time in Jesus’ own words: “Father forgive them, for they know not what they do”’ (1684).

God’s power is thus revealed in weakness, not in strength, and we are called to live the same way in our dealing with society around us. ‘Has Christ’s death on the cross any relevance or significance beyond the eternal destiny of his individual followers? Does the meaning of the cross speak to our government’s foreign policy, the future of the Middle East, the war on terrorism, the challenge to the market economy of ethical trading, people trafficking and climate change? Does it address the hopes, ambitions and fears of our generation?’ (1698).

Yes, it does. It is far more than ‘get saved and go to heaven when you die’, avoiding hell.

## Chapter 16: Shades

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What factors framed Paul’s view of the afterlife? Very different ones from those that frame our own.

The ancients observed the movements of the sun and began to draw parallels with what might happen to the soul after death: first, into darkness, then out again into the realm of the stars. The Sumerians envisaged a dreary subterranean place called Kur for all, regardless of their moral performance, whereas the Egyptians brought in an element of moral fitness that determined your lot. Other civilisations had similar vague notions, including the Romans, particularly through the ideas of Virgil, who in turn would influence Dante’s *Divine Comedy*.

The Old Testament, like many of the civilisations above, was unclear about the afterlife. Everyone went to a shadowy *sheol*, which was not particularly to be dreaded. When the OT was translated into Greek around 200 BC, *hades* was used to translate *sheol*. But the Jews generally held that there was hope rather than damnation somewhere there, because of God’s faithful love, and this was the worldview that Paul would have inherited.

## Chapter 17: Layers

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We ourselves inherit a very different one.

The notion of hell that became dominant did not appear until long after Paul’s life. In the 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD, Tertullian wrote about the pleasure believers would have on Judgment Day in seeing the wicked tortured. Augustine, in the 5<sup>th</sup>

century, developed this further in *The City of God*, where the wicked endure 'eternal sufferings'. At the same time, other religions, including Buddhism and Hinduism, were forming similar concepts in order to attract devotees. In these, hell consisted of many levels, or layers.

But 'it was not until the bishops of the Western, Latin-speaking Church gathered in Rome's Lateran Palace for the fourth Lateran Council, convened by Pope Innocent III in 1215, that they formally committed to the doctrine of 'perpetual punishment with the devil' for those unworthy of Christ' (1842). Payment could be made to avoid its worse extremes, helping fill the church's coffers. Aquinas taught that one of the joys of those in heaven would be to watch the spectacle of the damned in hell.

As the Middle Ages went on, painter Hieronymus Bosch and writer Dante did much to popularise these grotesque ideas. Dante's *Divine Comedy*, interestingly, included nine layers in hell, with different levels of suffering. Michelangelo depicted much of this on the walls of the Sistine Chapel in Rome. These artists, it seems, did far more to shape medieval concepts of hell than any theologian. And so hell became a one-way trip with no escape.

## Chapter 18: Different

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Many of us have been taught that only those 'born again' will 'go to heaven', while the rest of humanity will spend eternity in God's torture-chamber of hell. We were led to believe that this is 'what the Bible teaches'. This is not in fact the case.

Certainly the early Christians never taught that, and the Eastern church has never done so. The Eastern church has focused on 'the harrowing of hell', whereby Jesus descended after his crucifixion to the realm of the dead and delivered them all, bringing them into his salvation. He closed hell down, in effect. Quotations from several Christian leaders from the early centuries of the church underscore this conviction.

The 16<sup>th</sup> century Reformers focused on how we find salvation and never questioned the views on heaven and hell that the Roman Catholic Church had come to embrace. So preachers and hymnwriters like Jonathan Edwards and Isaac Watts helped perpetuate those views. But some solid evangelical Protestants have questioned them from time to time, including John Stott, who favoured annihilationism. That makes some angry, but 'when we attack, slander and condemn others in aggressive and toxic tones from our pulpits – be they literal or digital – we reveal our understanding of the god we serve' (2016).

We must learn to disagree peaceably with those whose views we don't accept. I can't accept Billy Graham's views of life after death, but respect him enormously. Neither can I embrace N.T. Wright's view that those who persist in rejecting God will eventually cease to be human, but I have huge admiration for him and his scholarship.

## Chapter 19: The elephant

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Do we really believe that 'the God of love punishes people with infinite, eternal torment based on decisions and actions taken in their few short years of life on earth?' (2065). It is unjust, and we would look down on any human parent who behaved that way.

We live in a world of many peoples, cultures and religions. Christians are just one group among many. Would a God of love write off to eternal hell those who just happen to have been born in the 'wrong' place? 'If God's grace is real grace – amazing, undeserved, non-discriminatory, uncontainable, extraordinary grace – then why isn't it available to everyone regardless of their geography, religious beliefs, social background or mental capacity?' (2075).

Hell has no place in Paul's message. He doesn't mention it once in any of his writings. Acts doesn't refer to it either when recording his teaching. In the passages where he touches on the future, he has different emphases. In Romans 5:12-19 he compares the effect of Adam's sin with the effect of Christ's sacrifice, and concludes that what God did for the Jewish people he has now done for all: delivered them. All will enjoy God's presence. That is his plain meaning, though some find devious ways to try to get around it, in support of their theological position.

Similarly, in Romans 11:28-29 he concludes that God's purpose is 'to have mercy on all.' Such universal blessing was hinted at in several OT passages that Paul was familiar with, like Isaiah 25, Genesis 19 (along with Ezekiel's assurance of Sodom restored to blessing), Lamentations 3:31-33, and Psalms 30, 103, 65 and 22. Paul summarises in Philippians 2:5-11 this universal prospect that 'every knee' will bow to King Jesus in the end. Again, 'since *all* have sinned...*they* are now justified by his grace as a gift' (Rom 3:23-24). In 1 Tim 4:10 he affirms that God is 'the Saviour of *all* people, and especially of those who believe'—the latter being those who enter into a conscious commitment to him and enjoyment of him.

## Chapter 20: Credo

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The early Fathers of the church—like Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Gregory of Nyssa and Gregory Nazianzus—all held to the conviction of universal reconciliation to God through Christ. The great creeds of the church were formulated to counter doctrinal error, but none took issue with universal reconciliation.

More recently, some Western theologians have been a bit more reticent on it, like John Stott, N.T. Wright and Miroslav Volf. The latter said, 'I'm not a universalist, but maybe God is.' It is strange how some people find it hard to believe that God could be that good! 'What an extraordinary view of the Creator of the universe. Why believe in a god who, in the final analysis, is morally less than even we can imagine a God of love might be?' (2294).

It is worrying, too, that so many Christians claim to know precisely who will be 'in' and who 'out' in the end. And they don't usually agree with Jesus, whose remarks about judgment were directed at those who were judgmental towards others and thus turned their own lives into a living hell. He was also quick to include in his loving embrace the very folk that the religious authorities rejected.

'Let's be honest. The idea of untold masses of people suffering for ever brings no glory to God. The thought of everlasting acrimony and agony undermines any real discussion of a God of love. Only the promise of restoration and reconciliation can do the opposite' (2321).

## Chapter 21: A twist in the tale

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We return to the big question: are we saved by grace or by faith?

Theologian James Dunn holds that Sanders' understanding of Paul still suffers from a Western 'individualising exegesis'. Today, in the West, the emphasis is always on 'me', whereas in the ancient Mediterranean world it was always on 'us'. Not surprisingly, as we read Paul from our perspective, "'faith in Christ" rather than the "faithfulness of Christ to all" became the banner under which the Western reformers dismantled the theology of grace extended to all and opened the door to modern individualism' (2359).

Paul's theology is collective. God was pleased to reconcile 'all things' to himself in Christ. Resurrection, always a metaphor for the restoration of Israel, has now become about the renewal of the whole cosmos. In Romans 8 Paul sees the whole cosmos being liberated. His assertion that nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ (v38-39) clearly includes all people. Jesus is, as Karl Barth put it, 'the reconciler of all'. He does not mean that all religions lead to God (the understanding that most people have of 'universalism'), but that Christ has reconciled all people to God. In Christ, all are 'elect'.

In this, Barth turns his back on the Calvinism in which he was reared. And we should remember that his reassessment of the biblical data was done against a backdrop of appalling evil: the Nazi regime in Germany, so it was no soft liberalism. 'John Calvin's work was all about grace, but a deficient grace because it was not grace for all. In Barth, grace is for all – even those who defy grace remain objects of grace. Despite their folly all are claimed by grace' (2436).

Many who agree that Jesus is the only way then make the mistake of insisting that only those with an explicit knowledge of him can be saved. That is not what Paul teaches. He holds that all are reconciled through Christ alone, whether they know it, and know him, or not.

## Chapter 22: Judgement

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Paul is clear: we must all face judgement, 'so that each of us may receive what is due us for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad' (2 Cor 5:10. See also Rom 2:16; 14:10-13). We tend to focus on the judgement of the wicked. But who exactly are the wicked, and what does the judgement consist of?

We are quick to categorise people and so often fail to see the connection between, say, 'the innocent child who is habitually sexually abused and the 30-year-old who has become a habitual sexual predator?' (2472).

Theologian Jürgen Moltmann concluded from his studies in the Scriptures that 'final judgement was originally the idea of hope for the losers of history, and that only under Augustine was it transformed from this liberating expectation into a threatening and fear-filled idea' (2497).

Our perspective on others is usually too narrow. In particular, we can't see the deep psychological and emotional scars left by people's sufferings, so we condemn them as 'wicked' when they act antisocially in response to those hurts.

In 1 Cor 5, Paul addresses the situation of a church member who is sleeping with his father's wife. He proposes that the church 'hand this man over to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved on the day of the Lord.' 'Flesh' (Greek *sarx*) is Paul's metaphor for 'our human condition in its fallenness or our human opposition to the Spirit of God' (2523). So he is talking redemptively. He says they should let the man go his own way to face the consequences of his sin; that alone will bring him to his senses and turn him round. It is a form of the 'giving people over' that we saw in Romans 1.

In the OT, God's coming judgement is seen as a good thing, to be longed for. Things will be put right; injustices will be corrected. 'The wolf will live with the lamb...etc.' (Isaiah). Some OT writers saw this great prospect as touching not just Israel but the whole world (e.g. Psalm 98:1-9), and this outlook was in Paul's background. But by his lifetime it had narrowed in popular expectation to a Jewish hope alone, in which the Gentile yoke would be cast violently away. This prospect is what set Paul about persecuting Christians. But then he encountered grace in his Damascus road experience, and never got over it. It showed him that 'God's justice is always grace-filled, always restorative, but never retributive' (2572).

In Western thinking, 'judgement' has become almost synonymous with 'punishment'. As a result, we have come to view Paul's teaching on God's redemptive action in Christ in terms of 'the doctrine of justification'. But thanks to Luther, who made it a technical term, we have lost its original meaning. He saw it strictly in a lawcourt setting. We are all in the dock; God is the judge; we are all guilty. An individual could escape the consequences through 'faith in Christ'.

But Paul's view is that we—all of us—are cleared or justified by 'the faithfulness of Christ'. Justification is good news not just for individuals who 'exercise faith' but for everyone. The sting is taken out of its tail, and also out of the phrase 'the righteousness of God' (Greek *dikaiosyne theou*), which has been such a frightening concept for so many. Tom Wright has shown that the phrase in fact refers to God's 'covenant faithfulness'. Once we grasp undeserved grace the way Paul did, we will be less quick to demonise other people without understanding their inner story.

## Chapter 23: The pruning

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Paul may not have mentioned hell, but what ideas on judgement generally did he inherit from Jesus?

It is the word *Gehenna* that is mostly translated 'hell' or 'hell fire' in English versions of the NT. That translation is not helpful, because people associate it with medieval images of hell, whereas it is in fact a geographical location. It was the smouldering town rubbish dump outside Jerusalem. The citizens regarded it as cursed because, in OT times, some of Israel's kings had offered child sacrifices to the god Molech there. As dogs and wild animals fought there over scraps of food, the sound of snarling and the gnashing of teeth was commonplace. Jesus used it as a metaphor for God's judgement.

Isaiah and Jeremiah had done that long before him, and Jesus' listeners knew that, so he didn't need to explain. His references may have been in part to his predictions of what would happen to the Jews if they persisted in opposition to Rome: the events of AD 70 and the destruction of Jerusalem. But they go beyond that, to human relationships and the tensions they bring, like hatred and murder (e.g. Matt 5:21-22).

Two prophecies were well known to Jesus and his hearers. One is Jer 31:38-40 NASB. It declares that the Valley of Hinnom will become 'holy to the LORD', encompassed within the boundaries of Jerusalem. So its fire is not everlasting! The other is Joel 3:18, which predicts that 'the ravines of Judah will run with water', including, therefore, Ge Hinnom—the Valley of Hinnom, *Gehenna*. So, 'when Jesus warned his contemporaries about Gehenna, he wasn't telling them that unless they repented in this life they would burn for ever in the next one. Instead he was warning them that to live out of sync with the values that he was teaching (the values of the kingdom of God) was stupid and self-destructive. Don't settle for living on life's rubbish dump – it stinks!' (2675).

But what about the parable of the Sheep and Goats, where those who fail to help the needy are sent away to 'eternal punishment' (Matt 25:31-46). The Greek phrase is *kolasis aionios*, which is better rendered as 'a time of pruning'. The *kolasis* element means 'pruning', which is the suffering—by a plant—that produces improvement. If used of punishment, it refers to what William Barclay calls 'remedial punishment'. That contrasts with the word *timoria*, which is punishment for the satisfaction of the person inflicting it.

*Aionios* means 'pertaining to an age', that is, a limited period of time. It does not mean eternity. Other Greek words meaning 'endless' existed, but Jesus chose not to use them—most commonly *aidios*. The Pharisees had come to believe in eternal (*aidios*) punishment, but Jesus warned his followers against their teachings (Matt 16:12). He did not teach eternal punishment, but his warnings did indicate 'a time of pruning'.

*Hades* and *Tartarus* also get translated 'hell' in some Bible versions. *Hades* had never been seen as a place of everlasting punishment. Modern translations, reflecting the latest scholarship, render it as 'the grave', 'the pit' or 'death'. *Tartarus* appears just once, in 2 Peter 2:4, and concerns fallen angels, not humans. It is probably used here just as an alternative to *Hades*.

## Chapter 24: Wired

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"'Twelve-year-old thug arrested for drug running.'" Why does the headline read that way? Why doesn't it read "'Twelve-year-old boy rescued from drug gang"?' (2757). We are still medieval in our way of thinking about human behavioural development. We offer excuses for our own failings or poor behaviour (e.g. environmental factors), but rarely for other people's (they are just bad)—the Fundamental Attribution Error.

Paul reveals that human minds can be renewed, and that love is the only way to achieve it. 'He articulates the principles of what we today would call a therapeutically informed approach to human development' (2768). In our society, things have moved on from the days of Bedlam, but still have a long way to go. The last 50 years have made great strides in our understanding of how the human brain works and the way it governs behaviour. It is able to make us decent, sociable people only provided we enjoy love and security with our early carers. Those deprived of that are *unable* to regulate their 'bad' behaviour—and we must understand that. Response to childhood trauma can also have deep, lasting effects.

Neural pathways are a key component in the way we think and behave. 'A neural pathway develops in the same way as a physical track across a field. If you keep using the same route, a pathway forms; a behaviour in response to a stimulus becomes a habit' (2859). This is key to the 'renewal of the mind'. Paul clearly knew that 'the threat of punishment doesn't work. It never did. It simply perpetuates the internal working model that sees others as threatening and dangerous. Only love, empathy and support create the possibility for recovery and secure attachment' (2909).

'A deeper multi-disciplinary conversation between theologians, psychologists and psychotherapists would help the Church into a less "black and white" understanding of "sin", and of what are more complex issues than our current thinking sometimes admits' (2939).

## Chapter 25: Refined

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Let's return to the notion that 'because God is love, when people choose to reject a relationship with God in this life, God honours their freedom and their free will and leaves them to their own hell for eternity' (2940).

If God really understands the human struggle, this makes no sense. Also, Paul holds that the 'fire' will cleanse them (read 1 Cor 3:10-15). Here he is drawing on Malachi's picture (3:2) of the day of judgement, where 'the purpose of the fire is to cleanse, not to destroy – as is made clear by the second metaphor, the launderer's soap' (2952). Some argue that in 1 Cor 3 Paul is only addressing those who have 'put their faith in Christ'. But no, it includes all, because we are saved by the faithfulness of Christ. And Paul is not talking about different levels of rewards. His metaphor is one of building, and 'in all these pursuits it is the thing itself that becomes the reward. It is the joy that is gained through the doing of it' (2968).

Paul is here extolling what evangelicals have looked down on as 'good works'. Judgement is according to the way we have lived. But what about those activities of ours that get 'burnt up'? 'Until the sixteenth-century reformers ditched it, the Western Church believed in some kind of purging or redemptive process after death where people were cleaned up and made ready for heaven' (2968). Clement of Alexandria, Origen and Gregory of Nyssa are examples of early church leaders who taught that explicitly.

Sadly, purgatory morphed under Roman Catholicism from being a process to being a place. The RCC has since modified its official view. Indeed, Pope Benedict XVI suggests that the 'fire' is in fact Christ. 'Jesus himself is the purging fire, burning away our dross through the heat of his transforming love' (2995)

## Chapter 26: In heaven's name

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When someone says, 'If everyone get to heaven, what's the point of being a Christian?' they echo 'the popular Protestant myth which assumed that the goal of the Christian life was to avoid God's anger by making sure you were "saved" and guaranteeing your seat in "heaven"' (3028).

We have thought of heaven as 'somewhere else', in line with Dante's portrayal of it—which incidentally was 'layered' like his portrayal of hell. But is this how we should see it? Paul admits that his view of the afterlife is hazy, at best (1 Cor 13:9-10, 12). But he is clear enough about the renewal of the whole cosmos described in Romans 8.

In the OT, 'heaven(s)' usually means 'sky'. But in the NT it chiefly means God's kingship, or rule, coming to birth here on earth. Rather than a 'place', it is God's dimension of present reality. The nearest Paul gets to the 'place' idea is his account of his being caught up into a new dimension in 2 Corinthians 12:2-4.

The Jews in OT times had envisaged 'the Day of the Lord', when he would come in judgement to put things right for them. Paul now realises that it will not be just for the Jews but for the whole of humanity, and Christ will be the judge. That day will see 'the dimensions of earth and heaven completely integrated' (3132) and the whole creation liberated from its 'bondage to decay'.

In Celtic Christianity, a 'thin place' was one where the divide between earth and heaven was a fine one. A community of Christian people can be just that.

## Chapter 27: Metaphor

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We all recognise metaphors from our own culture, but often fail to see those from others. We have not realised that the *parousia* of Jesus is a metaphor and so we tend to take it literally and believe in a literal 'rapture', where we take off for a different realm. Much of Paul's end-time teaching is in 1 Thessalonians, and it is full of metaphors.

Paul's readers would have fully appreciated these metaphors and never taken them literally. *Parousia* in general use meant simply 'presence' or 'arrival' (e.g. Phil 1:26; 2 Cor 7:6-7). Over time, it began to be used in two more nuanced ways. The first was for the official visit of a Roman dignitary—especially the emperor—to a town. The civic leaders would go out to meet him and accompany him back into the city. Second, 'it came to describe the perceived

presence or appearance of a Greek deity during worship' (3199). So this term, with its regal and divine overtones, was a good one for Paul to use. It also links two cultural narratives: the Greco-Roman (the diverse communities ruled by the emperor, and echoed in the churches) and that of Second Temple Judaism (the Day of the Lord).

Other 1 Thessalonians metaphors are clouds and trumpets. Both echo the phenomena surrounding Moses coming down from Mount Sinai having received the Torah.

'Although Paul does not explain, nor does he know, exactly how the presence of the risen Christ will be recognized around the world by all humanity, his use of the term *parousia* is simply another way of referring to that moment when the dimension of heaven that is already here will become so real and so solid that a new world is born; when the kingdom of God will appear in its fullness, when swords will be beaten into ploughshares, when nation will not take up sword against nation nor train for war any more' (3247).

## Chapter 28: Rescued

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If, because of Christ, everyone is 'in', why did Paul spend so much of his life travelling and preaching, at great personal cost?

As a Jew, he believed that the people of Israel had been delivered from exile by God's grace alone, and they trusted his promises to be with them into the future, and tried to live faithfully in gratitude for that grace. 'The motto of their prophets would have been something like: 'In spite of ourselves we are all in, so now let's live like it!' (3276). So what did Paul mean when he spoke about 'salvation' and being 'saved'? Answer that, and the first question will be solved.

We ourselves see it, because of our heritage, as little more than the hope of life beyond death. But Hebrew thinking was altogether broader. It wasn't even all about the future; it was concerned very much about being made whole in the here and now—*shalom*. Paul's word for salvation is *soteria*, which primarily meant physical health, as did the related verb *sozo*, meaning to bring to health, wellbeing and wholeness. The Gospels use it of the healings of Jesus. So it has a far broader sense than to do with the life beyond this one.

Paul said, 'I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation (*soteria*) to everyone who believes: first to the Jew, then to the Gentile' (Romans 1:16). 'He is saying that salvation for those "who believe" – those who choose to live faithfully to the message of Jesus – starts right here. The purging love – the refiner's fire – has already begun to do its therapeutic work. Which is exactly the point he makes in 1 Corinthians 1.18, where he explains that the message of the cross "is the power of God" to those of "us who are being saved (*sozo*)". The multi-dimensional offer of well-being is about life after birth, not just life beyond death' (3305)

Paul can sometimes talk about salvation in a future sense, too (e.g. Rom 13:11-12). But he is not envisaging the soul in some disembodied state but the coming of 'the Day of the Lord' and the renewal of the cosmos. It has a very material (as distinct from 'spiritual') aspect. Also, the Jews regarded 'salvation' (most often the word *yasha*) as far more communal than individual. And Paul sees that what God had initially done for the people of Israel he had now, through Christ, done for the whole world, with massive blessings to be enjoyed here and now, as well as in the future. That is why he travelled to preach.

## Chapter 29: The revolution

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'Too often, religion breaks people. It promises freedom but delivers control' (3344). Luther saw this at work in medieval Catholicism, but the Reformation he triggered turned into just a different system of control. 'It creates and then abuses power. It excludes. It induces shame, fear and guilt. 'Do this and that, refrain from this and that – then you will be happy! But if you don't . . .' (3357)

But Paul says it is for freedom that Christ has set us free, and we should not allow ourselves to be enslaved again (Gal 5:1). Even Nietzsche in his brokenness realised that virtue is the outcome of hope. We must find a way of following Christ that offers liberation and welcome rather than control, where people are happy because, in line

with their conviction, they choose to live well. Paul constantly urges us to live in a righteous and godly manner as the way of experiencing salvation now. But it is about carrots rather than sticks: 'Since you are already counted in, Paul is saying, live like it!' (3372).

Then he assures us that the Holy Spirit is at work in us to make this possible (Gal 5:19-23). We co-operate with his dynamic in us by making a conscious effort to live in a godly way. It is both/and, not either or as in the 'let go and let God' proposal. "Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit," he tells the Galatians' (5:25). This works corporately in local churches, too. The Holy Spirit does his work, and we choose to do ours. There are forces ranged against us, so this will sometimes be a battle.

The real opponents were not the Roman guards who kept Paul imprisoned, but the juggernaut of the Roman imperial system that had taken away his liberty. Such forces are the 'principalities and powers' (Eph 6:12). So, 'For Paul, the integrated thinker, the lines between what we call "politics" and "religion" are non-existent' (3399). We are thus required not only to develop our own Christian character but also to challenge systemic and corporate evil. They too must face the refiner's fire. Walter Wink has opened up this topic in his *The Powers* trilogy.

Right now, God does not always get what God wants, and Paul clearly recognises this. His will is not yet done on earth as it is in heaven. His beneficent rule is here at present in pockets across the world, but it is also yet to come in its fulness. This is the 'now and not yet' of inaugurated eschatology. Dominic Crossan uses the phrase 'collaborative eschatology': our task is to collaborate with God to change things in the right direction. Contrast this with 'spectator eschatology, where we just wait for God to fix everything supernaturally, or disregard everything beyond our 'personal salvation'.

Let's rise to the challenge. 'Paul summed it up brilliantly: "Let us live up to what we have already attained" (Phil 3:16). We are all in. Now let's live like it!' (3469).

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## *Appendix: What did the ancient Greeks think about the afterlife?*

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According to Homer, Persephone was queen of the underworld. She was abducted by her uncle, Hades, and forced to become his wife. But she could escape the darkness and return to the surface world for two thirds of each year. So she became associated with the cycle of death and rebirth. Some were able to visit her in the underworld and return afterwards.

By the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC some groups had developed the ideas of reincarnation or rebirth. 200 years later, Plato painted a picture of life after death that builds on that, but also included rewards and punishment. These are expanded in the story of Er.

But Plato's student, Aristotle, undid all of that, holding that the human soul ceased to exist at death.