

“This is not a typical introduction to the letters of Paul or his theology, nor a handbook for how to interpret the Pauline epistles, but something of a hybrid of the three. MaGee’s clear writing attests his experience as a gifted teacher of undergraduates; his Christian commitments as he handles the Word of God make this book something that pastors can circulate in their churches with confidence. Highly recommended.”

—D. A. Carson,
Research Professor of New Testament,
Trinity Evangelical Divinity School

“In this carefully crafted guide, Dr. MaGee provides a reliable introduction to the reading of Paul’s letters through an informed discussion of a host of methodological issues. Demonstrating his skills as a seasoned teacher, Dr. MaGee provides helpful tools for both the appreciation and application of the gospel that Paul preaches. Beginning students will find this volume helpful in grasping the content of Paul’s letters, while more advanced readers will benefit from the fair presentation of the current issues in Pauline studies.”

—David W. Pao,
Professor of New Testament and Chair of the New Testament Department,
Trinity Evangelical Divinity School

“For MaGee, ‘It takes wisdom to move from the original meaning of Paul’s letter to faithful responses that capture the potential of Paul’s teachings for transformed living in current context.’ Thus, writing from his wealth of experience in the college classroom, he challenges students to engage in a rigorous and thorough analysis of Paul’s writings in order to understand its original message, but always with an eye towards discovering Paul’s relevancy for personal transformation. MaGee provides a wide perspective in which to hear various viewpoints about Paul, without diminishing the greater desire for his readers to take Paul’s message to heart in practical Christian living.”

—David Sparks,
president of Footstep Ministries
and author of *The Daily Insight Series on Paul*

“Forged in the fire of the college classroom, *Studying Paul’s Letters with the Mind and Heart*, is an excellent, as well as accessible, introduction to the life and ministry of the apostle Paul. With precision and passion, Greg MaGee presents his readers with an up-to-date summary of Pauline studies while equipping them to thoughtfully read, carefully interpret, and meaningfully apply God’s Word for themselves. MaGee’s work is illustrated from Scripture as well as life, and his crisp footnotes nicely complement the text.”

—Randall J. Gruendyke,
Pastor of Ministry Leadership,
Grace Evangelical Free Church, La Mirada, CA

“For a fresh, well-informed guide to understanding Paul’s letters, Greg MaGee’s new book is just what students and teachers need. It provides a wealth of valuable information about the first-century background of Paul and his readers, guidance on how to interpret and apply Paul’s teachings for personal transformation, and a summary of Paul’s central theological ideas—all in a lively, focused style that is well-suited for individual study or for a classroom setting. Chapters on authenticity of the letters, on Paul’s use of the Old Testament, and on the New Perspective on Paul are particularly helpful. Highly recommended!”

—Buist M. Fanning,
Senior Professor Emeritus of New Testament Studies,
Dallas Theological Seminary



Studying Paul's Letters with the Mind and Heart

Gregory S. MaGee



 **Kregel**
Academic

Studying Paul's Letters with the Mind and Heart
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To my parents,
John and Ruby MaGee





CONTENTS

Acknowledgments	9
Abbreviations	11
Chapter One	
Introduction	13
Chapter Two	
Why Should I Listen to Paul?	19
Chapter Three	
How Do Paul's Letters Fit into His Life and Ministry?	29
Chapter Four	
How Did Paul's World and Background Shape His Writings?	47
Chapter Five	
Were All Thirteen Letters Really Written by Paul?	65
Chapter Six	
How Can I Get the Most Out of Studying Paul's Letters?	83
Chapter Seven	
How Can I Discern Paul's Train of Thought in His Letters?	95
Chapter Eight	
Are There Such Things as "Correct" Interpretations of Paul's Letters?	107
Chapter Nine	
How Can I Wisely Apply Paul's Teachings?	121

Chapter Ten

What Are Some Specific Interpretive Challenges
in Paul's Letters? 133

Chapter Eleven

From Where Does Paul Get His Material? 149

Chapter Twelve

How Does Paul Interact with the Old Testament? 163

Chapter Thirteen

What Are the Experts Saying about Paul These Days? 175

Chapter Fourteen

What Ideas Were Especially Important to Paul? 187

Appendix

Ephesians 203

Bibliography 207



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thoughts with her. She continues to listen patiently and offer wise feedback when I look to her to help process teaching and writing ideas.

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Greg MaGee
Upland, Indiana



ABBREVIATIONS

AB	Anchor Bible
BECNT	Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament
BSac	<i>Bibliotheca Sacra</i>
CBQ	<i>Catholic Biblical Quarterly</i>
CNTUOT	<i>Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament</i>
CTR	<i>Criswell Theological Review</i>
DLNT	<i>Dictionary of the Later New Testament and Its Developments</i> . Edited by R. P. Martin and P. H. Davids. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997.
DNTB	<i>Dictionary of New Testament Background</i> . Edited by Craig A. Evans and Stanley E. Porter. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000.
DPL	<i>Dictionary of Paul and His Letters</i> . Edited by Gerald F. Hawthorne and Ralph P. Martin. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993.
EncJud	<i>Encyclopedia Judaica</i> . Edited by Fred Skolnik and Michael Berenbaum. 2nd ed. 22 vols. Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2007.
ESV	English Standard Version
GNT	Good News Translation
HCSB	Holman Christian Standard Bible
HNTC	Harper's New Testament Commentaries
HTR	<i>Harvard Theological Review</i>
JBL	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
JETS	<i>Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society</i>
JSNT	<i>Journal for the Study of the New Testament</i>
JSNTSup	Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement Series
NASB	New American Standard Bible
NEB	New English Bible

NET	<i>NET Bible, New English Translation</i> . 1st ed. Dallas: Biblical Studies Press, 2005.
NICNT	New International Commentary on the New Testament
NIGTC	New International Greek Testament Commentary
NIV	New International Version
NKJV	New King James Version
NLT	New Living Translation
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version
NTS	<i>New Testament Studies</i>
<i>ProEccl</i>	<i>Pro Ecclesia</i>
SBLDS	Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series
SGBC	Story of God Bible Commentary
STR	<i>Southeastern Theological Review</i>
TNTC	Tyndale New Testament Commentaries
<i>TynBul</i>	<i>Tyndale Bulletin</i>
VE	<i>Vox Evangelica</i>
WBC	Word Biblical Commentary
WUNT	Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament
ZECNT	Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament



CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

An inspiration for this book comes from one of my favorite verses in Paul's letters: "And we also thank God continually because, when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as a human word, but as it actually is, the word of God, which is indeed at work in you who believe" (1 Thess. 2:13). This verse paints a picture of potent words, changed lives, and encounters with the God of the universe. Let's take a closer look at the verse and what it says about reading Paul's letters with the mind and heart.

GOD'S WORD WAS AT WORK IN THIS CHURCH

The Thessalonian church was a source of joy for Paul and his co-laborers, and Paul regularly thanks God for them in this letter (1:2–3; 2:19–20; 3:7–10). Paul had invested himself in these young believers, and he was thrilled that they were doing so well spiritually. In 1 Thessalonians 2:13 Paul highlights the reason for their initial growth—their hearts had been responsive to Paul's message and had recognized it as having a divine origin and authority. Paul had taught them the gospel in his own words, but they perceived that God's good, wise, and perfect mind shone through that message. Because they had received God's word with hearts of faith and obedience, the Thessalonians were experiencing the ongoing power of God's word in their lives: the word of God was "indeed at work in you who believe."

Let those final words of the verse sink in for a moment: God's word is *at work* in the lives of believers. Paul's teaching, which we encounter in his letters, is designed to penetrate our lives and carry out a reconstruction project in us. God's Spirit implants the word in the recesses of our lives so that the seed can sprout, grow, and "produce a crop—some thirty, some sixty, some a hundred times what was sown" (Mark 4:20). Reading Paul's letters, or any other book from the Bible, cannot be reduced to an exercise of understanding information or satisfying our intellectual curiosity. We fail to read God's Word as it is intended to

be read when we leave no time and space for the intersection of God's words and our needs as his children.

At some point in our Christian experience, most of us can identify with the joy and power of meeting with God through the Bible and seeing his word at work in us. God's words of grace and truth expose us to his wisdom and beauty, the darkness of sin in our lives, the power of Christ, the compelling vision of being part of his people, the challenges of walking by faith and obedience rather than by sight and selfishness, and the hope of God's kingdom returning in full glory. God's Spirit applies rich words and messages to our lives at the right time for the right purposes. We see growth in our lives, and we feel motivated to share what we are learning with others.

But we can also likely identify with Bible study that becomes dry or merely academic. Seemingly endless processing of information doesn't appear to make much difference in our worship or service to the Lord. The word no longer seems to be at work in our lives.

All Christians go through seasons of vibrancy and dryness in their spiritual lives. Sometimes the stresses and distractions of life weigh us down and sap our motivation to dive into the Scriptures. But I suspect that flawed approaches to studying God's word are also to blame for lack of forward movement. Reading too skeptically or with a desire simply to amass knowledge of the letters' contents can quickly lead us astray. Or if we just passively wait for others to tell us what the letters really mean, we are never spurred on to wrestle with the letters on our own. In this book I hope to provide guidance and direction for a more fruitful study of Paul's letters, even within an academic context. I want readers to experience the stirrings of anticipation and wonder when they open the pages of Paul's letters.

THE PURPOSE OF THIS BOOK

This book is not a traditional introduction, a handbook for interpretation, or a theology of Paul, but a hybrid of those three, with the goal of guiding readers in self-discovered learning. There is a danger of making introductions to Paul a bit dry and impractical. The focus of this book is both mind and heart. I want readers to have what they need to develop both the motivation and the ability to pursue transformational learning in the Pauline Epistles. A secondary source should not eclipse the primary source but should allow it to remain on the center stage. That is especially true when the primary source is the Bible. This book on Paul is designed to keep the spotlight on Paul's letters. I also hope that this book's focus on practical questions, skills in interpretation, and spiritual growth will appeal to a wide audience of readers both in university Bible classes and within churches that honor and study God's Word.

The chapter titles for *Studying Paul's Letters with the Mind and Heart* are in the form of questions. The book addresses questions readers

typically ask (or need to ask) about the letters in order to fully engage with the material in a meaningful and life-changing way. Readers may feel embarrassed to voice some of these questions, out of fear that everyone else already knows the answer, or that it is somehow spiritually immature to have such questions in the first place. This book is an open invitation to ask and explore the answers to these questions. These questions and answers serve a greater purpose: to prepare us to plunge into Paul's letters and to "taste and see that the LORD is good" (Ps. 34:8).

THE PLAN OF THIS BOOK

Following this introduction, in **chapter two** we will answer the question, "Why listen to Paul?" In the chapter we will take an honest look at the theological and historical legitimacy of reading Paul's letters as God-breathed Scripture. Paul's authority is linked to his status as an apostle, so we will explore the significance of apostleship in early Christianity and the topic of why Paul was counted among the apostles. This important first step of receiving Paul's teaching as God's word made all of the difference for the Thessalonians, and I believe that this is an urgent topic for us as well. This will prompt us to open ourselves to God's work in us when we read his letters.

Chapter three analyzes where Paul's letters fit into his life and ministry. We will locate Paul's letters within the chronological, geographical, and missional settings of his church-planting ministry. We will also meet some of the cherished colleagues who assisted Paul along the way. Paul did not write from the comfort of his library or as part of an academic think-tank. He wrote in the midst of a grueling but rewarding life of ministry to churches throughout the Roman world.

Chapter four orients readers to Paul's world and background. Paul did not live in a vacuum but in a complex world of multiple cultures and fast-changing conditions. The chapter will examine the significance of Paul's background as a Pharisee and Roman citizen of Tarsus. The realities of travel, visiting influential cities, living under a Roman government, and enduring multiple imprisonments will be unfolded as well.

Chapter five tackles the issue of whether all thirteen letters were really written by Paul. This chapter looks at the claim that Paul did not actually write some of the letters bearing his name. This leaves us with the categories of the "disputed" and "undisputed" letters of Paul. There are actually a couple of known imitations of Paul's letters in circulation. We will look at some excerpts from 3 Corinthians and the Epistle to the Laodiceans in this chapter and see what so obviously marks them as pretenders. After that, we will examine and respond to some common arguments against the authenticity of some of Paul's canonical letters and consider the historical and theological implications of these debates.

In **chapters six and seven** I hand the keys of the car to the reader. The goal of these chapters is to prepare you to dive into Paul's letters on your

own. The chapters will prepare and equip you for your own transformative reading of Paul's letters. I will walk you through a process of preparing a letter summary for any of Paul's letters. The whole point of this process is to foster self-discovered learning. I typically remember the things I have learned on my own (or as part of a small group Bible study) for a much longer time than things someone else has told me. We will look at how to study Paul's letters through observing, interpreting, and applying both the parts and the whole of each letter.

Chapter eight confronts a question that is increasingly becoming more of a debated topic: Are there such things as "correct" interpretations of Paul's letters? The chapter challenges readers to think about where meaning is found in Paul's letters, using concepts such as authorial intent, speech-act theory, and the distinction between interpretation and application as conversation-starters.

For the word to be at work in us, interpretation must lead to application. **Chapter nine** asks, "How can I wisely apply Paul's teachings?" This chapter builds off of the interpretation/application distinction from the previous chapter. The chapter will look at helpful principles for transferring Paul's teaching from one culture to another. Even Paul "contextualized" his message when he responded to specific problems in his churches. We can observe how Paul contextualized his teachings in his culture for guidance about how to do likewise in our settings.

Chapter ten looks at specific interpretive challenges in Paul's letters. Certain interpretive issues in each of Paul's letters require special attention. For instance, in 1 Corinthians, how do we identify and deal with the so-called Corinthian slogans that surface throughout the letter? Also, what relevance do "household codes" have to teachings on family life in Ephesians and Colossians? You will also be introduced to a process for deciding between competing interpretations for debated passages.

An intriguing question surfaces in **chapter eleven**: From where does Paul get his material? Topics in this chapter include the relationship between Paul's letters and Jesus's teachings, the significance of Paul's conversion for his message, the relevance of other revelations, and the prominent contribution of the Old Testament to Paul's thinking. Since the Old Testament plays such a major role in Paul's teaching, **chapter twelve** analyzes how Paul interacts with the Old Testament in both sweeping and specific ways.

Chapter thirteen looks at the question, "What are the experts saying about Paul these days?" The chapter serves as a springboard for further academic study of Paul's letters. Readers will learn about several areas of disagreement about how to understand Paul, which has led to schools of thought known as the Old Perspective, New Perspective, and Apocalyptic Perspective on Paul.

Building off of the previous chapter, **chapter fourteen** seeks to forge a common way forward from the various perspectives on Paul, asking,

“What ideas were especially important to Paul?” The chapter will identify some of Paul’s theological ideas that have the most explanatory power, such as the gospel, union with Christ, the arrival of God’s eternal kingdom, and “imperatives” for Christian living that are built upon “indicative” theological truths.

A NOTE TO TEACHERS USING THIS BOOK AS A TEXTBOOK

Each year at Taylor University I teach undergraduate students from Paul’s letters, in both a general New Testament Survey course and an upper-level Pauline Epistles class. I have watched students delve into challenging discussions of Paul’s letters during classroom sessions. Students also display what they are learning in reflection journals, letter summary assignments (see chapters six and seven), and validation papers (see chapter ten). In my office or over coffee I listen to the struggles some of the students face when they seek to understand, embrace, and apply Paul’s letters. I also witness their excitement when they resonate with an idea from Paul’s letters that they have never considered before. This book is the product of those conversations inside and outside the classroom.

I have written this book as a supplement to the primary sources of Paul’s letters. Each chapter should help equip students to interact with Paul’s letters in a more informed and substantive way. Additional readings—of other primary sources such as the Epistle to the Laodiceans or of articles or essays that go deeper into certain topics—can further facilitate the students’ preparation. Feel free to adjust the order of the chapters when you assign them. Many of the chapters can be read as separate essays, though there are some chapters that are best read as pairs. Chapters six and seven work in tandem to orient students to the method of preparing a letter summary. The tasks and challenges of interpretation and application are treated together in chapters eight and nine. Chapters eleven and twelve broach the subject of Paul’s sources in two parts. Finally, after chapter thirteen explores the competing “camps” in Pauline studies, chapter fourteen aims to identify commonly acknowledged central themes in Paul’s teachings.

Using this book for course reading should free you up to lead students through specific passages and topics of interest during class time. I often consult students’ letter summary assignments immediately after they turn them in, in order to know what questions they are asking about the letters. Sometimes I adapt my lesson plan, taking my cues from the questions they ask in their assignments, since that means that students already feel motivated to explore those topics. Ideally, you and the students will have your Bibles open with a sense of anticipation each class period. I sincerely hope that this book helps foster that type of atmosphere!