

Spelunking Scripture:
The Letters of Paul

Exploring Important Passages of the Bible



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Contents



Introduction.....	v
Chapter 1: Not Ashamed of the Gospel	1
Faith Alone (Rom. 1:16-17).....	2
Live by Faith (Rom. 1:16-17).....	4
Coming to Faith (Rom. 1:16-17)	6
Chapter 2: Sighs Too Deep for Words	9
Too Deep for Words (Rom. 8:26-27)	10
When the Sky Is Silent (Rom. 8:28).....	12
All Things Work Together for Good (Rom. 8:26-28)	15
Chapter 3: Nothing Can Separate Us.....	19
Eucatastrophe (Rom. 8:28-39).....	19
Master of My Fate (Rom. 8:28, 31-39)	22
Swinging in the Rain (Rom. 8:31-39)	25
Chapter 4: Not Conformed, But Transformed.....	29
Transformed, Not Conformed (Rom. 12:1-2)	29
Countercultural Christianity (Rom. 12:1-2).....	32
A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life (Rom. 12:1-2)	34
Chapter 5: The Lord's Supper.....	39
Examine Yourselves (1 Cor. 11:23-28).....	40
We're in This Together (1 Cor. 11:17-28)	43
A Life Worthy (1 Cor. 11:23-28)	45
Chapter 6: The Love Chapter.....	49
The Greatest Is Love (1 Cor. 13:4-7, 13)	49
The Greatest Gift (1 Cor. 13:4-7, 13).....	52
It's All About Love (1 Cor. 13:4-8, 13).....	54
Chapter 7: We Do Not Lose Heart.....	59
Earthen Vessels (2 Cor. 4:7-18)	59
Living in the Light of Eternity (2 Cor. 4:16-18)	62
Live Like You Were Dying (2 Cor. 4:16-18).....	65

Chapter 8: All God's Children.....	69
The Great Equalizer (Gal. 3:26-29)	70
The Social Gospel (Gal. 3:23-26)	71
Created Equal (Gal. 3:26-28).....	74
 Chapter 9: Christian Freedom.....	 79
Freedom in Christ (Gal. 5:1, 13-14)	79
John Leland: Freedom Preacher (Gal. 5:1).....	82
Freedom and Responsibility (Gal. 5:1, 13-14).....	86
 Chapter 10: Imitate Christ.....	 89
Christ-Minded (Phil. 2:5-11)	89
He Humbled Himself (Phil. 2:5-11)	91
Overcoming Pettiness (Phil. 2:3-11).....	93
 Chapter 11: Clothe Yourselves With Love	 97
One in the Spirit (Col. 3:12-15)	97
The People of God (Col. 3:12-14).....	100
Where Healing Begins (Col. 3:12-17)	102
 Chapter 12: All Scripture Is God-Breathed	 107
Back to School (2 Tim. 3:10-17).....	107
Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth (2 Tim. 2:15, 3:14-17)	110
John Wycliffe: Scripture Alone (2 Tim. 3:14-17).....	113
 About the Author.....	 117

Introduction



It was a Saturday, June 23, 2018. The Wild Boars soccer team had finished their practice, and 12 of the boys, ages 11 to 16, along with their 25-year-old assistant coach, rode their bikes to the Tham Luang Nang Non cave system in northern Thailand. Most of them had been inside the cave before, but they wanted to explore it further as a group. They ignored the sign outside the entrance of the cave, warning against entering during the rainy season, July through November. Shortly after they had entered, heavy rains began to fall, partially flooding the cave and trapping the group inside.

Later that day, parents began calling the head coach to report that their children had not come home from soccer practice. After the coach checked his phone and saw about 20 missed calls, he began calling the assistant coach and many of the players, but to no avail. Finally, he reached a team member who had been picked up after practice, and who said that the rest of the boys had gone exploring in the Tham Luang cave. The head coach rushed to investigate, and he found bags and bicycles outside the entrance to the cave, but no boys or their assistant coach. He alerted the local authorities that the group was missing. The next day, handprints and footprints of the boys were discovered by officials. A day after that, Thai Navy SEAL divers entered the cave to search for the missing team members.

The divers could go only so far into the cave system until they were stymied by floodwaters. American and British military divers were sent to Thailand to help with the search. They entered the cave but were repelled by more flooding. Then, heavy rains halted the rescue operation temporarily. Pumps were delivered to extract some of the water from the cave passages. After a brief pause in the rainfall, the search resumed. Finally, on the night of July 2, British divers found the team stranded inside the cave on an elevated ledge about two and a half miles from the entrance. The team members had stayed hydrated by licking condensed water from the cave walls. Their assistant coach, who had trained at a Buddhist monastery, led the boys in meditation exercises to stay calm. Although weak and hungry, they were still alive.

The rescue operation took another eight days. Divers delivered food, water, and medical supplies and an air tube to provide oxygen. Incredibly, all the boys and their assistant coach were delivered to safety. Tragically, a member of the rescue team perished. A 38-year-old Thai volunteer diver lost consciousness and died as he was bringing oxygen tanks into the cave.

Spelunking, or exploring underground passages in cave systems, is a popular pastime in many parts of the world. It can be exciting, but it also can be dangerous, especially without a trained guide. The assistant coach later apologized for acting without permission and leading the boys into a perilous situation.

Spelunking scripture, or exploring passages of the Bible, can be exciting, but it also can be dangerous. Frankly, exploring some passages of the Bible without a trained guide can lead to all sorts of dead ends and misinterpretations and unfortunate outcomes.

For example, some passages of the Bible have been (mis)used to justify slavery, the subjugation of women, and the condemnation of persons of a different sexual orientation. Misinterpreting passages of scripture can lead to bad theology and, even worse, practical abuses that negatively affect the lives of people.

JUSTIFICATION OF SLAVERY

As a two-time graduate of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, I was dismayed to learn that two founding faculty members of the seminary, John A. Broadus and James P. Boyce, were slaveowners.

Broadus was an outstanding preacher and New Testament scholar. His textbook for homiletics, *On the Preparation and Delivery of Sermons*, is still in print and in use in evangelical colleges and seminaries. The renowned British Baptist pastor Charles Spurgeon called Broadus “the greatest living preacher.” Boyce was a systematic theologian who served as the first president of Southern Seminary. His text, *Abstract of Systematic Theology*, was widely used. Broadus and Boyce were among the most acclaimed Baptist leaders of their era. Yet, both owned slaves. In fact, Boyce, owner of 23 slaves at the beginning of the Civil War, described himself as “ultra pro slavery.”¹ Boyce served as a chaplain in the Confederate army before being elected to the South Carolina legislature. Broadus also served as a chaplain in the Confederate army. In 1886 Broadus declared in an address at Cave Hill Cemetery in Louisville that fallen Confederate soldiers had not died in vain.²

How could Broadus and Boyce possibly have defended slavery? Like many southern preachers of their era, they found warrant for slavery in selected passages of scripture. Alexander McClain, a Methodist minister, wrote a pamphlet that argued slavery was ordained by God. After having read the pamphlet, John C. Calhoun, then vice president of the United States, wrote: “My Dear Sir, I have read with pleasure your pamphlet, entitled, ‘*Slavery Defended from the Scriptures Against Abolitionists.*’ You have fully and ably made good that title. You have shown beyond all controversy that slavery is sanctioned both by the Old and New Testament.”³

The Bible does have a lot to say about slavery. Slavery was common in the Old Testament. Abram and his wife Sarai were slaveowners. According to Genesis 16, Sarai instructed Abram to impregnate her slave Hagar. Today, we would call this act “rape.” Such was the fate of some slaves in the Old Testament. In the New Testament, 19 of the 27 books mention slavery, and some passages explicitly command slaves to obey their masters. Consider these words from the apostle Paul:

Slaves, obey your earthly masters with respect and fear, and with sincerity of heart, just as you would obey Christ. (Eph. 6:5 NIV)

Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything; and do it, not only when their eye is on you and to curry their favor, but with sincerity of heart and reverence for the Lord. (Col. 3:22 NIV)

All who are under the yoke of slavery should consider their masters worthy of full respect, so that God's name and our teaching may not be slandered. (1 Tim. 6:1 NIV)

Teach slaves to be subject to their masters in everything, to try to please them, not to talk back to them. (Titus 2:9 NIV)

Paul was not the only New Testament writer who told slaves to obey their masters. In 1 Peter 2:18 we read: "Slaves, in reverent fear of God submit yourselves to your masters, not only to those who are good and considerate, but also to those who are harsh" (NIV).

So, using these and other selected scripture passages, many southern preachers—including some esteemed Baptist seminary professors—defended the institution of slavery as ordained by God. How could they have so missed the mark?

Their biblical interpretation was a matter of failing to distinguish between the cultural conditions of the time and God's eternal intentions for human life. Slavery was a cultural condition of many parts of the ancient world, as reflected in the Old and New Testaments. But not every cultural institution was God-ordained.

Jesus gave us a clear picture of God's intentions for our lives, saying that, above all, we are to love God, and we are to love our neighbors as we love ourselves. There is no way that slavery can be squared with loving our neighbors as we love ourselves.

Despite his admonitions for slaves to obey their masters, Paul may have grasped a little of the incompatibility of slavery with love for neighbor. In his letter to Philemon, he urged the slaveowner to welcome back his escaped slave Onesimus. Paul did not challenge the institution of slavery, nor did he request that Onesimus be emancipated, although he may have hinted at it. Paul sent Onesimus back to his master, as the law required, but Paul did ask Philemon to accept Onesimus back into the household as "no longer a slave but more than a slave, a beloved brother ... in the Lord" (Phlm. 16, NRSV).

It took a long time, but eventually most Christians came to realize that slavery is abhorrent to the will of God. Rather than merely quoting those few isolated passages in Paul's letters and 1 Peter that admonish slaves to obey their masters, most Christians came to see the bigger picture of God's design for human community. God wants us to love each other, not to enslave each other. But the legacy of slavery is still with us, namely, in the racism upon which slavery in the American experience was based.

SUBJUGATION OF WOMEN

In many cultures in the ancient world, and in many cultures even into the 21st century, women have been suppressed and treated as inferior to men. For example, women did not gain suffrage in the United States until 1920 with the passage of the 19th Amendment to the Constitution. In many other countries, women did not gain the right to vote until even later in the 20th century. Women continue to be treated as inferior to men in many other ways. How did that come about? Once again, it was a cultural condition in many societies. And throughout much of Christian history, the Bible has been used to subjugate women.

In the first account of creation in Genesis 1, male and female are created together in the image of God: “Then God said, ‘Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness, and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth, so God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them, male and female he created them” (vv. 26-27 NRSV).

There is no suggestion in the first creation account in Genesis 1 that women are inferior to men. The second creation account in Genesis 2, however, has been misinterpreted to imply male superiority: “then the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being ... Then the Lord God said, ‘It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner” (vv. 7, 18 NRSV). This idea that the man was created first, and that the woman was created after him to be his helper, led some interpreters to conclude that the man was superior to the woman. Some misunderstood the meaning of the term, “helper.” According to Old Testament scholar Tony Cartledge, “the word usually translated as ‘helper’ (*ezer*) does not describe an aide or a maid.... in the Old Testament the word is used of God acting as a deliverer or protector or sustainer, the one who does what man alone cannot do. The woman is not inferior to the man but corresponds to him. She is not below him but beside him. She is not a servant but a partner; not a subordinate but an equal.”⁴

In the story of the Fall in Genesis 3, the serpent approaches the woman and tempts her to eat the forbidden fruit. She takes some and eats it, then gives some to her husband. When God questions the man about eating the forbidden fruit, the man blames the woman for giving it to him. When the Lord God questions the woman, she blames the serpent for deceiving her. So, the serpent and the woman and Adam all suffer consequences for what they have done. Adam and his wife are banished from the Garden of Eden. Some interpreters (including Paul in 1 Timothy 2) make the woman subservient because she was the first to sin. Genesis 3:16, “he shall rule over you,” has been used as a justification for husbands ruling over their wives. This (mis)interpretation argues that female submission is ordained by God.

In Genesis 19 we find a story about Lot, his wife, and their two daughters who are living in Sodom. Two angels arrive at Sodom, and Lot offers them hospitality. Later that evening their house is surrounded by the men of Sodom who demand that Lot send out his visitors so the men can “have sex with them” (v. 5, NIV). Lot replies, “No, my friends. Don’t do this wicked thing. Look, I have two daughters who have never slept with a man. Let me bring them out to you, and you can do what you like with them. But don’t do anything to these men, for they have come under the protection of my roof” (vv. 7-8, NIV). Such was the status of women in the Old Testament. Lot offered his daughters to be raped by the men of Sodom to try to protect his (male) guests.

Several passages in the New Testament have been used to make women seem subject and inferior to men, for example:

Women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the law says. If they want to inquire about something, they should ask their own husbands at home; for it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church. (1 Cor. 14:34-35 NIV)

A woman should learn in quietness and full submission. I do not permit a woman to teach or to assume authority over a man; she must be quiet. For Adam was formed first, then Eve. And Adam was not the one deceived; it was the woman who was deceived and became a sinner. (1 Tim. 2:11-12 NIV)

Wives, in the same way submit yourselves to your own husbands, so that, if any of them do not believe the word, they may be won over without words by the behavior of their wives. (1 Pet. 3:1 NIV)

Husbands, in the same way be considerate as you live with your wives, and treat them with respect as the weaker partner and as heirs with you of the gracious gift of life, so that nothing will hinder your prayers. (1 Pet. 3:7 NIV)

In many cultures, men have been valued more than women, and women have been considered the “weaker partner.” But in the life of Jesus, and in some expressions of the early church, women were valued equally to men. For example, Jesus had many female followers. Women were not among those we call the “twelve disciples” because the Twelve were called to represent the 12 tribes of the New Israel, and the 12 tribes of the “old” Israel were all named after men. That does not mean that Jesus valued his female followers less than his male followers.

Jesus seems to have been extraordinarily close to a number of female followers, including: Mary Magdalene, to whom he appeared after the resurrection; the sisters Mary and Martha, who hosted Jesus in their home; and, of course, his mother Mary. All of these women were counted among those in the early church. Many women followed Jesus, were taught by him, and even supported him financially, including Joanna, the wife of Herod’s steward Chuza, Susanna, and many others (Luke 8:3). And, it was a group of women who went to the tomb early on Sunday morning and found it empty—the varying accounts of which are told in the Gospels.

In Matthew, the risen Jesus appears to these women and tells them to go tell the disciples. In Mark, the angel in the empty tomb tells the women to go tell the disciples that Jesus has been raised. In Luke, the women go and tell the disciples, but the women’s words seem to them “an idle tale” and they do not believe them (24:11). In John, Mary Magdalene runs from the empty tomb to tell Simon Peter and the beloved disciple, “They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him” (20:2b).

So, in all four gospels, it is women who are commissioned to be the first evangelists! After meeting the risen Jesus face to face, Mary Magdalene went again to the disciples to announce that she had seen the Lord. Against the expected conventions of the time, the

good news of the resurrection was first entrusted to women! Not surprisingly, considering the first-century disparagement of women, the disciples did not believe the women at first.

Women also played a surprising role in the early church, again against the societal norms of the time. Some women were church leaders:

- Phoebe was a deacon of the church at Cenchreae (Rom. 16:1).
- Lydia was the first Christian convert in Europe, and seemingly became the leader of the fledgling church in Philippi (Acts 16:11-15).
- Priscilla and her husband Aquila accompanied Paul near the end of his second missionary journey, and eventually the couple went on their own missionary journeys (Acts 18:18).
- In 1 Corinthians 16:19 we learn that Aquila and Prisca (Priscilla) were leaders of the church that met in their house.

So, women had surprising leadership roles in the early church, in contravention to the role of women at the time and those selected passages that seem to negate the possibility.

Sadly, many churches even today treat women as inferiors. Women cannot serve as pastors in Roman Catholic churches and in most Southern Baptist churches, simply because they are female. Even today certain passages of scripture are used in the subjugation of women.

CONDEMNATION OF DIFFERENT SEXUAL ORIENTATIONS

The Bible has long been used to condemn LGBTQ persons. Perhaps the origin of such condemnation is found in the story in Genesis 19, when the men of Sodom wanted to sexually violate Lot's guests. From that episode was coined the term "sodomy," to connote homosexual relations. Among its many prohibitions, Leviticus details unlawful sexual relations. One prohibition is the command, "Do not have sexual relations with a man as one does with a woman; that is detestable" (Lev. 18:22, NIV). The punishment for such an offense is detailed in Leviticus 20:13, "If a man has sexual relations with a man as one does with a woman, both of them have done what is detestable. They are to be put to death" (NIV). The death sentence is also prescribed in Leviticus 20 for those who curse their father or mother (v. 9) or commit adultery (v. 10), and for a man who has sexual relations with his father's wife (v. 11) or with his daughter-in-law (v. 12).

In the New Testament, "sodomites" are condemned in 1 Corinthians 6:9-10, along with fornicators, idolaters, adulterers, male prostitutes, thieves, the greedy, drunkards, revilers, and robbers. In 1 Timothy 1:9-10, sodomites are included in a list that condemns murderers, fornicators, slave traders, liars, and perjurers. Jude 7 says, "Likewise, Sodom and Gomorrah and the surrounding cities, which in the same manner as they, indulged in sexual immorality and pursued unnatural lust, serve as an example of undergoing a punishment of eternal fire" (NRSV). Romans 1 details God's judgment on ungodliness and wickedness:

For this reason God gave them up to degrading passions. Their women exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural, and in the same way also the men, giving up natural intercourse with women, were consumed with passion for one another. Men committed shameless acts with men and received in their own persons due penalty for their error. And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind and to things that should not be done. They were filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, covetousness, malice. Full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, craftiness, they are gossips, slanderers, God-haters, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, rebellious toward parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless. (vv. 26-31, NRSV)

It would be easy to conclude that such persons are to be condemned. But consider what Paul wrote next in Romans 2:1: “Therefore you have no excuse, whoever you are, when you judge others; for in passing judgment on another you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, are doing the very same things” (NRSV).

Yes, it is possible to find isolated “proof texts” to condemn persons of different sexual orientations. But Jesus never condemned them. He had a heart for persons that the society of his day condemned.

What do all of these “dead end” scripture passages have in common? First, they represent human cultural conditions rather than God’s eternal purposes. Second, they represent the human tendency to marginalize and put other people down, whether they be people of another race or another gender or another sexual orientation. Third, they represent elevating certain dead-end passages over other scripture passages that lead to life. The Bible is inspired, but not all the passages of the Bible are of equal value. As Shakespeare wrote in *The Merchant of Venice*, even “the devil can cite Scripture for his purpose.”

One purpose of *Spelunking Scripture: The Letters of Paul* is to identify important passages of scripture that lead to life. Pauls’ letters convey truth about God’s intentions for our lives. But not every word of Paul is of equal value. Some words from his epistles convey the cultural conditions of the time rather than God’s purposes. The aim of this book is to explore some important passages from the Epistles that convey God’s eternal truth, for example:

- Not Ashamed of the Gospel (Rom. 1:16-17 NIV)
- Sighs Too Deep for Words (Rom. 8:26-28 NRSV)
- Nothing Can Separate Us (Rom. 8:31-32, 35-38 NLT)
- Not Conformed, But Transformed (Rom. 12:1-2 NRSV)
- The Lord’s Supper (1 Cor. 11:23-26 NRSV)
- The Love Chapter (1 Cor. 13:4-8, 13 NIV)
- We Do Not Lose Heart (2 Cor. 4:16-18 NRSV)
- All God’s Children (Gal. 3:26-28 CEB)
- Christian Freedom (Gal. 5:1, 13-14 CEB)
- Imitate Christ (Phil. 2:5-11 CEB)
- Clothe Yourselves with Love (Col. 3:12-15 NRSV)
- All Scripture Is God-Breathed (2 Tim. 3:16-17 NIV)

Thirteen letters in the New Testament are attributed to Paul. Although some scholars believe some of the letters may have been written, or edited, by Paul's followers, all of the letters begin by identifying Paul as the author. In some letters Paul mentions associates who also send greetings, such as Sosthenes (1 Corinthians), Timothy (2 Corinthians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, and Philemon), and Silvanus (1 and 2 Thessalonians). Most of the letters were addressed to specific churches (or groups of churches), although a few were addressed to specific individuals. Probably, most of the letters were intended to be read aloud to assembled congregations, and most were written to address particular needs within the churches. As such, Paul's counsel about certain situations was not meant to be applied universally to all the churches. The passages from Paul's letters identified for this study do have a universal application. Please join me as we explore together these important scripture passages.

NOTES

¹John A. Broadus, "Memoirs of James Petrigru Boyce," in *Selected Works of John A. Broadus* (Founders Press, 2001) 4:185.

²Bob Allen, Baptist News Global, June 23, 2015.

³Samuel M. Brooke. *Slavery and the Slaveholder's Religion as Opposed to Christianity* (Cincinnati, OH: 1846), 9.

⁴Tony Cartledge, *Sessions with Genesis* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2012), 8.