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Session 14 - New/Old Paul, Romans

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Alright, today we're putting on our detective hats. We're on a mission to solve a puzzle that's almost 2,000 years old, and it's all about one of the most influential and maybe one of the most misunderstood writers in all of history, the Apostle Paul. You know that feeling when you're trying to piece together what's going on from just one side of a text chain? You can tell it's important, but you're only getting half the conversation.

Well, that is the exact challenge we're facing today. And this is really the heart of the problem. We have Paul's letters, which is great, but we don't have the letters he was writing back to.

So it's literally like listening to one side of a phone call. To figure out what he's actually talking about, we have to try and reconstruct the questions, the problems, the drama that was happening on the other end of the line. There's a term for this.

Scholars call it the occasional nature of his letters. See, Paul wasn't just sitting back writing a grand, systematic theology for the ages. He was an activist on the front lines, firing off urgent, passionate, and sometimes pretty feisty letters to deal with real-world messes in his churches.

Getting this one idea is the key to unlocking everything else. So who is the man writing these letters? Because the popular image we have of him, especially the guy he was before his big conversion moment, well, it might not be the whole story. For centuries, we've been given this very specific picture of Paul.

The idea is that he was a man just tormented by his own failure to keep the Jewish law. But what's fascinating is that the historical evidence from his own pen might be telling us a totally different story. Look at the difference here.

It's night and day. The traditional view says Paul was just drowning in guilt, totally frustrated that he couldn't be perfect. But when you actually read what Paul wrote about his old life, you see a guy who was incredibly confident, a guy who thought he was crushing it, advancing in his religion way beyond anyone else's age.

And here's the proof, right from the source. Paul himself says that when it came to righteousness under the law, he was blameless. That does not sound like a guy with a troubled conscience.

That sounds like someone who thought he was getting an A plus on the test. He was a top-tier Pharisee, totally zealous for his faith. So the big takeaway is this.

Paul's conversion wasn't the slow burn of a long, frustrating spiritual search. It was a lightning strike, a sudden, dramatic, world-shattering intervention. One minute he's a confident persecutor of this new Christian movement.

The next, he's literally knocked off his horse by an encounter with the very person he was trying to destroy. And that context changes how we have to read everything he wrote after. And that brings us right to the main event, the centerpiece of our whole investigation, his longest, his most famous, and his most influential letter, the one he sent to the Christians living in the heart of the Roman Empire.

So, Paul had a few reasons for writing this letter. First, he needed the church in Rome to be his home base for a new mission he was planning to Spain. He also really needed to lay out his version of the gospel, kind of defend his turf.

But the most urgent reason was pastoral. He was trying to fix a growing and ugly split in the church between Jewish Christians and non-Jewish or Gentile Christians. And that tension, that's the key to the whole letter.

And it's this letter, and really this tension, that has kicked off one of the biggest, most important debates in the entire history of Western thought. It really all comes down to how you read it. This is it.

This is the multi-million-dollar question. For centuries, this one phrase has been a theological battleground. What exactly are these works of the law that Paul says can't save you? Because your answer changes, well, pretty much everything.

Okay, so this table really lays out the two sides. The old perspective, which is most famously tied to Martin Luther, says the core problem is legalism. You know, people trying to earn their way to heaven through good deeds.

It's a vertical problem between God and me. But then you've got the new perspective, which argues the real problem was nationalism. That works of the law wasn't about earning salvation at all, but about the Jewish identity markers, things like circumcision, dietary laws, that were being used to keep non-Jews out.

It's a horizontal problem between them and us. For Martin Luther, this was so, so personal. He was a monk who felt totally crushed by his own sin.

He couldn't escape it. So he read Paul as answering his own gut-wrenching question. How can I, a totally flawed person, ever be good enough for a perfect God? And for him, Paul's answer was a breakthrough.

You can't earn it. You can only receive it as a gift through faith. But the new perspective comes along and reframes the entire debate.

It says Paul wasn't really writing to a person with a guilty conscience. He was writing to a community in the middle of a social crisis. The big question wasn't, "How do I get saved? It was, who gets to be in God's family now that Jesus has arrived? Is it just for Jews, or is it for everybody else too? And Paul's answer in this view is that faith in Jesus is what makes you part of the family, not following Jewish cultural laws.

Now you might be thinking this all sounds like a pretty dusty academic argument. But trust me, the way this one letter has been read has literally, and I mean literally, changed the course of history. I mean, just look at this timeline.

It really shows you the stakes. Paul writes this letter around 57 AD. Fast forward 1,500 years, and Martin Luther's reading of it helps kick off the Protestant Reformation, splitting Western Christianity in two.

400 years after that, Karl Barth writes a commentary on it that completely upends modern theology. The ripple effects from this single piece of ancient mail are just monumental. Because when you boil it all down, the debate over works of the law has always been about drawing boundaries.

How do we define our group? Is it about individual good behavior? Or is it about our shared cultural identity, which by definition keeps other people out? How we answer that question determines who we call in and who we label as out. And that really leaves us with one last big question to think about. If our understanding of this one single ancient letter can change so dramatically over time, it just forces us to ask what other huge ideas from the past might we be reading through the lens of our own time, possibly missing what they meant in their own context entirely.