

# Letters in Paul's Day

Letters in Paul's day were quite different from letters today.

## A Different Format

Letters in Paul's day were formal and structured rather than "newsy" and free-flowing like our letters today. Paul's letters followed a consistent pattern.

1. A salutation in three parts—naming the sender (Paul), naming the persons addressed, and then offering a formal greeting
2. A thanksgiving to God for the blessings bestowed upon the receivers of the letter and upon Paul
3. The body of the letter, in which Paul took up various matters related to the Good News, the behavior of the people receiving the letter, and problems in the local church
4. Final instructions, at times regarding things unrelated to the body of the letter, such as preparations for an upcoming visit by Paul
5. A closing in two parts—final greetings to various people and a concluding word, often in the form of a prayer

## Different Materials and Processes

In Paul's day, letters were ordinarily written on parchment (leather prepared for that purpose) or on papyrus (thin slices of the papyrus plant glued horizontally onto a backing formed by thin slices placed vertically). A pen was a split reed or a quill, and ink was a composite of materials like carbon and glue or gum. Creating a letter with these materials was such a tedious and lengthy process, and one requiring such skill, that it was normally done by professional scribes or writers.

In the case of his epistles, Paul would first think through what he wanted to convey to his intended audience. Just formulating his complex ideas may have taken weeks of work, especially in the case of a long letter like the one to the Romans. Then his ideas had to be dictated word by word to a scribe or, as was quite common, be expressed in more general terms, with the scribe acting as a kind of editor as well as a secretary.

A scribe could work no more than two or three hours at a stretch, normally crouched on the ground with a tablet in one hand and a quill in the other. It took the average scribe about one minute to write just three syllables, which comes to about seventy-two words per hour. (A skilled typist today can type about seventy-two words per minute.) The average sheet of papyrus could hold about 140 words. The First Letter of Paul to the Thessalonians, consisting of about 1,500 words, would have required about ten sheets of papyrus and more than twenty hours of work by a scribe. Paul's Epistle to the Romans, with more than 7,000 words, would have required fifty sheets of papyrus and nearly one hundred hours of writing time!



## Weeks, Not Hours

Any one epistle would have taken weeks, not hours, to complete. That may partly explain why some of the letters seem choppy, as if written in bits and pieces. The writing process was no doubt interrupted at times, when Paul would gain fresh ideas and insights. And to be sure, no scribe would have been inclined to go back to edit and polish a letter after it was completed!

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