

JESUS  
the LORD according to  
PAUL  
the APOSTLE

A CONCISE INTRODUCTION

GORDON D. FEE

*Foreword by Cherith Fee Nordling*

  
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## Foreword

The idea for this book was born on a sun-dappled day as my father and I sat together on our deck on Galiano Island, British Columbia, reviewing pages for his soon-to-be-published *Pauline Christology*. The dry day held a gentle breeze. Water lapped on the rocks below us. There were sounds of a boat's sail snapping as it passed, the snort of a seal fishing below the deck, and the occasional whoops and laughter of kids jumping from the nearby tree swing. And in the midst of it all, warmth and enthusiasm radiated from my father as we read the page proofs together. They beautifully and rigorously described Paul's understanding of and relation to the person of Jesus of Nazareth, Son of God, Lord and Christ. As we worked that afternoon, I realized again how deeply and similarly Paul and my father loved Jesus. And once more, as had happened so many times when reading through the lens of Paul alongside my father, something moved from knowledge to understanding, from understanding to wisdom, from knowing *about* to *relational* knowing. Paul and my father had again drawn me into deeper knowledge of and more profound love for Jesus.

That summer day I secretly hoped that the summary chapters we were reading from *Pauline Christology* would one day be accessible to the wider church and that it would offer as much life and joy as my father's other smaller summary book on Paul's understanding of and relation to the Holy Spirit, *Paul, the Spirit, and the People of God*. And here it is! This book is another gift to thoughtful believers who want

to know Jesus and his whole life in relation to their own human lives, meaningfully renewed in his image. Moreover, this is most likely the last book that my father will publish in his long career. This realization, coupled with the deeply transformative impact this material has had on my own life and work and that of my students, has led me to write this personal foreword gratefully and unapologetically.

In the larger *Pauline Christology*, and now in these pages, we meet the very same, still incarnate Lord who encountered Saul of Tarsus two thousand years ago while Saul was transporting deadly warrants for Damascene Christians. When that brilliant Jewish scholar, Pharisee, and zealot met the Lord, Yahweh himself, in the resurrected flesh of Jesus, accompanied by the blinding, healing power of the Holy Spirit, everything he understood in relation to God and the world was upended and reoriented, undeniably and forever. God's embodied grace, love, and righteousness were made radically self-evident in the revelation of his Son, and this cruciform love transformed Saul of Tarsus into Paul, apostle of the Lord, Jesus Christ. God's grace in Christ, which had reordered the world's *telos*, or goal, now reordered Paul's world, transforming his identity and calling to a new, predominantly gentile people for God's name. His devotion to Yahweh and his recognition of God's purposes from first creation through new creation took on a trinitarian cast—to the one Holy Spirit, the one Lord Jesus, and the one God and Father of all.

Over the years, Paul became a dear friend of my dad, who had also experienced the love and grace of our risen Lord and a subsequent call to bear witness to him. My father first introduced me to his friend Paul when I was young. As an early teen I found Paul rough, unpredictable in tone, and sometimes a little arrogant—for example, when he appealed to the Thessalonian church to imitate him. One evening while in junior high, I confessed to my father that I wasn't sure I liked Paul. That night he sat with me in his basement study and asked me what I heard in Paul's words and what images and feelings they brought up in me. He also shared with me a bit of Paul's perspective. He told me backstories about these churches and Paul and the relationships between them. As we talked, I realized that my ambivalence revealed my small, rather legalistic gospel and its concomitant nagging shame.

My father's questions, however, also revealed in me a longing for Paul's fearless love of God and his joy of being loved by God. I recognized this same fearless love in my father, and I realized then that my dad knew and loved Jesus much like he knew and loved Paul. Moreover, my father knew and loved Paul with empathy, gratitude, and respect. And most of all, he trusted Paul's experience of God. If Paul was unapproachable and at times unassailably holy to me, he was not so to my father. My father helped me realize that Paul's call for the Thessalonian community to imitate him was rooted in a shared love for and trust in the Lord and one another. I began to consider that some people addressed in Paul's letters would hear him differently because they knew him so much better than I did. And some, like me, would hear him with ambivalence because they didn't yet know and trust God—or Paul—like my father and others did. Yet for all of us, trusting and ambivalent alike, Paul's words occasioned experiences of God's gracious renewal in our lives, through his consistent message of God's lavish, costly love in and through his Son and the nonnegotiable life of God's people by the Holy Spirit.

Over the next few years, my father continued to invite me into shared conversations with him and Paul, and Paul became more approachable as I got to know him better. Both Paul and my dad were deeply moved by God's love, and I too wanted to know God that way. Since that evening in the study, as my life in Christ by the Spirit grew richer and more challenging, Paul and his churches became more real to me, and my curiosity grew. I was intrigued by the way Paul embedded Jesus's story and theirs in Old Testament stories and metaphors that he seemed to take for granted but that I didn't understand at all. Typical high schooler, I wanted the background drama and the dirt: What led to Paul's expressions of pastoral love, concern, frustration, joy, warning, celebration, scolding, and delight in these relationships, both assumed and named? In my finer moments, I wanted to understand better the context for this grand story of God and the world made known in the crucified Lord and to see it unfold in the lives of the New Testament communities so that I could better recognize this story unfolding in my own life and community.

My high school years in New England included belonging to a house church that met on our living room floor. Weekly we sang, shared, prayed,

cried, laughed, and ate together. And I watched my father regularly well up in tears of wonder and love at the grace of God in Christ, often expressed through Paul's love for Christ permeating that space as my dad would share from one of Paul's epistles. My dad's tears were not unique to our living room floor, however. I heard students in that gathering talk of how my dad couldn't make it through a lecture without tearing up. And then, early one November evening after my shift ended at work, I stopped by the seminary to pick up my dad on the way home. His office was the only one lit up, and I headed into the building to get him. The office door was open, but I didn't see him inside. Then I heard a muffled sound. Walking around the side of his desk, I found him on the floor, in tears. "Dad, are you OK?" "Sure am, honey," he said, as he sniffled, got up, and blew his nose. "I was just preparing the lecture for class tomorrow. The gospel never ceases to amaze me." Looking at his desk, I saw his Greek outline of one of Paul's epistles for an advanced exegesis class. Not everyone's devotional cup of tea, I grant you! But for my dad, who was spending time again with Paul, immersed in the lavish good news of God in Christ by the Spirit, this was familiar worship space. I had interrupted him there, on the floor, held in the love of the Triune God.

It is no wonder that during the winter months ahead, I voluntarily sat in a room full of church folk I didn't know, listening to my father teach a New Testament survey course. My personal hungers for God and for a less individualistic reading of the Scriptures grew together. And Paul's costly devotion to Jesus was always before me. When I was tempted to go off the rails at the end of high school, it was precisely because of the costliness of the gospel in my own life in regard to my friendships. My parents eventually called me back home in the most Pauline of ways, reminding me that our family belonged to each other, that we needed each other to be who we were made to be, and that without one another—shaped and held together in trust and unconditional love—we couldn't become who we were meant to be.

By the time I went off to college, my dad's friend Paul had become my grown-up friend. In Paul's letters I heard Jesus—and my dad—calling me to the grand realities of the gospel in the new relationships given to me, and I grew into greater conformity to Christ, individually and communally. Uniquely, Robert and I heard Jesus's voice ringing through

both my dad's and Paul's voices at our wedding, when my dad drew on Paul's words to call us to our shared life and union with the Triune God. I hope that my own voice echoed theirs when months later, fresh out of college, I led a group of women twice my age in a study of Paul's letter to the church at Philippi. That experience brought a whole new level of trust as we wrestled through life together under the transformative power of Jesus offered to us by our brother Paul: receiving his offering of life in the Spirit to the praise of our Father in heaven; recognizing that Paul not only was familiar with pain and hardship but also assumed that this was part of the reality of being joined to Christ; and seeing with Paul that Christ had joined himself to us and our pain in order to speak a different, glorious final word over our lives.

It has been a joy and privilege as an adult to continue to walk alongside my father, to eavesdrop on his academic work, and to witness the transformative power of that work in each of our lives and communities and in the lives and communities of countless others. My dad's work on his Corinthians commentary flowed into my reading, prayer, and meditation, offering insight into my church community in California as we learned more about life in the Spirit. I remember similar conversations during my dad's work on his Philippians commentary as it impacted both his church and his community at Regent College. It was this deep recognition of the interrelationship between his academic work and the life of the church that led him and my mom to embark on the labor of love of turning the nearly one-thousand-page *God's Empowering Presence* into *Paul, the Spirit, and the People of God*—a shorter tour of the same material that would be affordable and manageable for a wider audience of brothers and sisters deeply in need of Paul's wisdom in their lives and the lives of their communities.

As I pursued my own doctoral work in systematic theology over the next decade, I returned again and again to these texts and to my father's reflections on Paul's writings in real time to real churches in particular situations. The systematic theology I read in my studies generally attempted to order belief about God into a coherent whole. But we don't find Paul doing theology like this in his letters. He doesn't reflect systematically on the person and work of Christ Jesus, or on that of the Holy Spirit, or on the Triune persons in relation, though all of these

are presupposed and surface in focused ways, especially in his prayers. Rather, Paul's letters emerge from the particular relationships he has with God's new people. He speaks to the unique concerns of these churches in light of their identity as God's children by the Spirit and the impact of the gospel on their communal relationships and in their broader cultural contexts as people living God's future kingdom life in the present. As I began teaching undergraduates and mentoring student leaders, *Paul, the Spirit, and the People of God* was an invaluable aid. The particularity of Paul's efforts to teach communal life in the Spirit to his New Testament communities helped the students I was teaching to glimpse life in the Spirit in their own contexts. Again and again, I was grateful that my parents had undertaken the journey of turning my dad's academic work into an accessible resource for the church. Through that book, Paul's words to the early church were helping transform twenty-first-century lives in the power of the Holy Spirit.

A similar transformation began to work its way through me that afternoon on Galiano Island as my father and I reviewed the page proofs for *Pauline Christology*. In Paul's letters, we hear him reflecting, provoking, rejoicing, wooing, criticizing, encouraging, blessing, and calling forward the church as God's new people, saved *from* sin and death and saved *for* renewed life as God's immortal human children made to rule over a new creation. Paul does so because he has met the world's new Adam, the firstborn from among the dead, whose life they share as coheirs with Christ by the resurrecting Spirit of adoption, who will bring to completion their glorious, eternal human life. With Paul, we discover the person of Jesus Christ as the self-revelation of God's triune life and purposes. Those purposes, in Paul's words, have been intended and moved forward from before creation to their climax in Christ and are now moving toward their ultimate, unstoppable beginning, held in Jesus until his final advent.

While much is written on Paul's soteriology, too often these studies sidestep Paul's understanding of and love for the person of Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of God. Paul does not separate Christ's person from his work. Systematic theology may try, but to do so is to fail to account for the fact that the person implies the work and vice versa. Both Christ's person and his work are firmly embedded in Israel's history. Jesus's title

*Kyrios* (Lord) emerges from the language of *Lord* in the Greek Old Testament; Paul presents Jesus as Israel's Messiah, or anointed one (Christ). Yet Paul grasps that through the climax of Israel's history in Christ Jesus, God has opened the future story of the entire cosmos.

As I read *Pauline Christology* with my dad that afternoon, I marveled in a new way at Jesus's humanity in particular. What struck me was the off-handed way that Jesus's humanity was taken for granted by Paul and by my father as Paul's companion. Sometimes our theology sidesteps Christ's humanity in making the case for his divinity so that we forget that Christ as the resurrected new Adam is not a metaphor but the primary reality and hope on which our present and future human life rests. For Paul there was nothing metaphorical about it. If Paul rarely brings aspects of Jesus's daily human life to the fore, it is because he takes the humanness of that life for granted. Jesus's authentic humanity did not surprise him, apart from Jesus's astonishing alignment with and sinless obedience to the Father by the power of the Spirit. "Why didn't Paul remind us of Jesus's human life by the Spirit more often?" I wondered aloud as I worked alongside my father. "Why would he think he had to?" my father asked me quizzically. The radicalism of Paul's Christology is not his emphasis on Jesus's humanity but his equation of Jesus with God: God Incarnate among us but not using that to his advantage (hence living submitted to the Spirit), crucified and resurrected, now exalted and reigning, and bringing God's Spirit-born children into the first stages of their new eschatological life together.

In the years since, this renewed understanding of Jesus's humanity, glimpsed in the pages of *Pauline Christology*, has permeated my Christian understanding as well as my academic writing and teaching. Just as I relied on *Paul, the Spirit, and the People of God* in my early years of teaching and mentoring students in life in the Spirit, so too I have come to rely on the material in this book as I teach and mentor students regarding Jesus's resurrected and ascended humanity and the promises therein for our own renewed humanity. Jesus's ongoing, glorified humanity is such good news for the church. Yet without a shorter, more accessible version of the material in *Pauline Christology*, it remains out of reach for many. I have hoped for many years that this material would be made accessible for the broader church, the way my parents developed *Paul*,

*the Spirit, and the People of God* from the material in *God's Empowering Presence*. I am delighted that *Jesus the Lord according to Paul the Apostle* finally fulfills that hope.

Over the years, one of my great joys has been meeting others who have been similarly transformed by my father's writing and teaching on Paul. "His love for Jesus, the Father, and the Spirit, changed my life." "I've been drawn into the triune life and love of God by this man whose whole life has been committed and held therein." "I didn't know life in the Spirit until I heard the invitation through him." So often fellow academics, sisters and brothers in the church, students, and seminarians have told me these things—sometimes about Paul and sometimes about my father. My dad has spent so much time in Paul's company—this friend from among the great cloud of witnesses, his brother, soul mate, and coheir within the communion of the saints. And Paul has led my father over and over again to their shared Lord and elder brother, into whose image they both are being transformed. Paul's remarkable experience of being set free from legalism through an encounter with the divine Christ and his ministry in response to that relationship and calling have continued to draw my father—and through him, me and so many others—into deeper relationship with and transformation into the image of our ascended brother and Lord. If this is my father's last work, what better way could there be to finish?

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## Preface

In the course of a longtime interest in all things Pauline in the New Testament, I became aware of two considerable gaps in the scholarly literature that seemed worth pursuing: Paul’s understanding of the Holy Spirit and his understanding of the person of Christ. Since my personal concerns have always been with a biblical theology that flowed directly out of a careful analysis of the data, the two books that emerged out of those concerns, *God’s Empowering Presence* and *Pauline Christology*, ended up at a somewhat forbidding length.<sup>1</sup> I have long been concerned about books on biblical theology that give the reader only the final results of an author’s exegesis of the biblical texts without offering a look at how the author came to those conclusions. That concern played itself out in two very heavy tomes (what a *New York Times* reviewer of such a book once described as “big enough to kill a cockroach in a shag rug”!). But since the ultimate driving force of both projects was to make the results more accessible to any interested reader of Scripture, I decided to cull the theological material from both books and present it in a more accessible format, resulting in what one of my children regularly refers to as my “small Paul” books.

1. *God’s Empowering Presence: The Holy Spirit in the Letters of Paul* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011 [Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994]) came to 992 pages, while *Pauline Christology: An Exegetical-Theological Study* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007 [Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2007]) came to 740 pages.

The first “small Paul” book, published as *Paul, the Spirit, and the People of God*,<sup>2</sup> presents Paul’s doctrine of the Holy Spirit in a more accessible way than the longer *God’s Empowering Presence*. Likewise, the present book presents the theological synthesis of my exegetical work on Paul’s Christology in a way that might be more accessible to a wider readership than the larger *Pauline Christology*.

The present volume is divided into four parts. Part 1 describes Christ as Savior by offering an overview of what salvation in Christ meant for the Apostle and then examining the christological implications of Paul’s thoroughly christocentric worldview, especially as it emerges in his Christ devotion. That leads to an examination of Paul’s understanding of Christ as preexistent, since it is otherwise nearly impossible to account for such Christ devotion by an avid monotheist unless his understanding of the one God now included the Son of God in the divine identity.

Preexistence as God also means that the Jesus of history must be understood in terms of an incarnation, and such an understanding by Paul must be taken seriously: the divine Son of God lived a truly human life on our planet. So part 2 picks up the question of Christ’s humanity by way of Paul’s use of “Adam” and the crucial word *eikōn* (“image”) from Genesis 1–2, pointing out that the ultimate concern in this analogy is emphasis both on Christ’s genuine humanity and on his bearing and restoring the divine image lost in the fall.

Parts 3 and 4 pursue the two primary christological emphases that emerge regularly in the corpus and that arguably hold the keys to Paul’s answer to the question of who Christ is. The suggested answer is that Christ is, first of all, the Jewish Messiah and Son of God (part 3), and second, the now exalted “lord” of Psalm 110:1 (part 4), who for Paul has come to be identified with *Kyrios* (= Yahweh), which was how the Septuagint handled the divine name. Since this exclusive usage of “Lord” for Christ tends to dominate Paul’s understanding of Christ in his present kingly reign, I conclude not only with a rehearsal of the many ways that Paul refers to Christ by way of presupposition, attributing to him activities that a monotheistic Jew would attribute to God alone, but also by considering how Paul perceives the relationship of the Son to the Father, since he

2. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1996).

never abandons—indeed, he stoutly retains—his historic monotheism. On the one hand, there are those several texts where it appears certain that Paul understands Christ in terms of eternal divinity; on the other hand, and whatever else, there are not thereby two divinities. So in the end, larger theological questions regarding the Trinity must be raised.

A few observations about the present volume are in order. First, readers will notice that the four parts are not even close to being of equal length. This disparity is not intentional but is the result of my attempt to present each aspect of Paul's Christology in its own part. And since some aspects of Paul's Christology simply require more headings—each of which I have treated in a separate chapter—some unevenness inevitably results.

Second, readers familiar with *Pauline Christology* will notice that the present book omits not only the large first part of that volume, which offers my detailed exegetical analysis of each of Paul's letters, but also the two appendixes there, including the considerable appendix on "Christ and Personified Wisdom." As I discuss in that appendix, I believe that so-called wisdom Christology was one of the more misguided moments in the history of New Testament scholarship. In my view, wisdom Christology has not an exegetical leg of any kind on which to stand, and fortunately it seems to be waning in Pauline scholarship. In the language of Tennyson, this little system had its day and has now ceased to be. As Paul makes clear in his scathing demolition of the alleged wisdom of the believers in Corinth (1 Cor. 1:18–2:5), the only "wisdom" Paul knew or cared about was what he very deliberately called "God's foolishness," having to do with salvation through the ultimate oxymoron of a "crucified Messiah." God, Paul insists, has chosen to do away with human wisdom by way of this ultimate "divine folly." Only the eternal God is so "wise" as to demolish human pride in such an unimaginable way. As the gospel songwriter Edward Mote put it nearly two centuries ago, our hope is built on nothing less than Jesus's *blood* and righteousness. Our faith rests altogether on the crucifixion and resurrection of the incarnate one, the one who chose to enter our impoverished human existence and lived and died so that through the risen one we might have true life in the present and eternal life with the redeemer and his redeemed.

Third, as in all academic disciplines, New Testament scholarship has its own set of technical terms that are not always shared by readers

outside the discipline. I have therefore included a glossary of technical terms for the sake of nonspecialist readers, in hopes that it will somewhat alleviate what for some could easily become burdensome reading.

Finally, unless noted otherwise, all renderings of the Bible into English are taken from the New International Version (2011), on whose committee I have served with great pleasure since 1988. Aside from adding italics on occasion for emphasis or to highlight various features of the text, there is one point in which I alter this translation—namely, by inserting a comma between “Lord” and “Jesus Christ” in order to distinguish the “title” from the “name,” as I explain in part 4. I have chosen for convenience to present the biblical text at the outset of each discussion and without the verse numbers, which have their way of obstructing good reading. Fully aware that presenting the biblical text will get in the way of some people’s normal reading, I nevertheless thought that making it easier for readers to review the biblical text when I refer to specific passages would be better than forcing them to break up their reading by consulting the Bible on their own at each point. Still I believe it would benefit those who choose—as I could only wish they would—to be as the Berean Jews who “examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true” (Acts 17:11). In this case, of course, their examination will help them to determine the truth of the interpretation of Paul set forth in this study!

Gordon D. Fee

# Abbreviations

## General

=	equals	e.g.	exempli gratia (for example)
//	parallel passage	Gk.	Greek
ca.	circa (around)	i.e.	id est (that is)
CE	Common Era	lit.	literally
cf.	confer (compare)	trans.	translation
chap(s).	chapter(s)	v(v).	verse(s)

## Bible Versions

ESV	English Standard Version	NIV	New International Version
KJV	King James Version	NLT	New Living Translation
LXX	Septuagint (Greek Old Testament)	NRSV	New Revised Standard Version
NAB	New American Bible		

## Old Testament

Gen.	Genesis	1–2 Chron.	1–2 Chronicles
Exod.	Exodus	Ezra	Ezra
Lev.	Leviticus	Neh.	Nehemiah
Num.	Numbers	Esther	Esther
Deut.	Deuteronomy	Job	Job
Josh.	Joshua	Ps. (Pss.)	Psalms
Judg.	Judges	Prov.	Proverbs
Ruth	Ruth	Eccles.	Ecclesiastes
1–2 Sam.	1–2 Samuel	Song	Song of Songs
1–2 Kings	1–2 Kings	Isa.	Isaiah

Jer. Jeremiah  
 Lam. Lamentation  
 Ezek. Ezekiel  
 Dan. Daniel  
 Hosea Hosea  
 Joel Joel  
 Amos Amos  
 Obad. Obadiah

Jon. Jonah  
 Mic. Micah  
 Nah. Nahum  
 Hab. Habakkuk  
 Zeph. Zephaniah  
 Hag. Haggai  
 Zech. Zechariah  
 Mal. Malachi

## New Testament

Matt. Matthew  
 Mark Mark  
 Luke Luke  
 John John  
 Acts Acts  
 Rom. Romans  
 1–2 Cor. 1–2 Corinthians  
 Gal. Galatians  
 Eph. Ephesians  
 Phil. Philippians  
 Col. Colossians

1–2 Thess. 1–2 Thessalonians  
 1–2 Tim. 1–2 Timothy  
 Titus Titus  
 Philem. Philemon  
 Heb. Hebrews  
 James James  
 1–2 Pet. 1–2 Peter  
 1–3 John 1–3 John  
 Jude Jude  
 Rev. Revelation

# The Savior

The primary goal of this study is to offer a careful analysis of the apostle Paul's understanding of the person of Christ, that is, *who* it was who came among us and *why* he did so. I argue that Christ came among us for two basic reasons: first, to reveal the true nature and character of the eternal God and, second, to redeem us from our fallen, and thus broken, condition. But to get to those conclusions it seems wise to begin where Paul himself began: with what Christ *did* for us through his incarnation, including his life, crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension. The reason for beginning here is that what Christ accomplished by revelation and redemption (his *work*) is based altogether on who he was and is (his *person*). His work and his person are so tied together in Paul's view that we can begin to understand his person by first examining his work. Parts 1 and 2, therefore, offer an overview of the Apostle's understanding of Christ's saving work—the doctrinal locus that theologians refer to as *soteriology*. Before turning in part 2 to Christ's work as creator of a new humanity, in part 1 we focus on his work as Savior of humanity by examining how Paul views Jesus as both the divine Savior (chap. 1) and the preexistent and incarnate Savior (chap. 2).