

EVERYTHING YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THE NEW TESTAMENT

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The Pauline Epistles IV

The Prison Epistles

According to Acts 21, Paul concluded his third missionary journey by arriving in Caesarea, where he was met by a prophet named Agabus. Luke records that the prophet *“took Paul’s belt and bound his own feet and hands and said, ‘Thus says the Holy Spirit, ‘This is how the Jews at Jerusalem will bind the man who owns this belt and deliver him into the hands of the Gentiles’ (21:10-11).* A few days later, Paul was arrested in the Jerusalem Temple for preaching the gospel. However, after facing a series of councils and trials, Paul appealed to Caesar (25:11), meaning that he would be transported to Rome for trial. Acts 28 records that Paul made it to Rome and spent two years in prison. While behind bars and wearing chains, Luke records that *“from morning to evening he expounded to them, testifying to the kingdom of God and trying to convince them about Jesus both from the Law of Moses and from the Prophets” (28:23).* However, Paul also used this time in prison to minister to churches and individuals by letter. He wrote to the churches in Ephesus, Phillippi, and Colossae, and to individuals, Timothy, Titus, and Philemon. Since Timothy and Titus were young pastors, those letters are categorized as the Pastoral Epistles.

In these letters, we find descriptions like:

- **Ephesians 6:20** – *“I am an ambassador in chains.”*
- **Colossians 4:18** – *“I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand. Remember my chains. Grace be with you.”*
- **Philippians 1:12-13, 4:22** – *“I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel, so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to all the rest that my imprisonment is for Christ....All the saints greet you, especially those of Caesar’s household.”*
- **Philemon 1:1** – *“Paul, a prisoner for Christ Jesus.”*

Therefore, the Prison Epistles contain Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon.

Ephesians

- a. **Overview:** Scholars have described Paul’s letter to the church at Ephesus as “a remarkable accomplishment” (Kruger, 267). In this letter, Paul is able to summarize the main core of his

teaching in six chapters. The book is evenly divided between the theological (chapter 1-3) and the practical (chapters 4-6), making it one of the most complete books in the New Testament.

- b. **Date:** Paul most likely wrote this letter during his imprisonment in Rome, early AD 60s.
- c. **Audience:** According to Beale, some of the earliest manuscripts leave out the location "Ephesus" in the opening verse, leading some to believe that Paul wrote this letter to all churches throughout Asia Minor (Beale, 271). Carson acknowledges not only the lack of manuscript evidence, but also the impersonal nature of the letter, as if Paul were writing to a group of people he didn't know (Carson, 489). Another theory is that Paul sent personal copies of this letter to several churches (a circular letter), and one copy was addressed to those in "Ephesus," which is why not all of the manuscripts contain this location.
- d. **Contents**
- **The Trinitarian Nature of Salvation:** Despite every human's fallen and dead spiritual condition, God has "*made alive*" those he has chosen in Christ. Paul emphasizes how the Father planned salvation (1:3-4), the Son accomplished salvation (1:5-12), and the Holy Spirit guarantees salvation (1:13-14). Paul's purpose is not to fuel theological debate and misunderstanding, but to give assurance that if you're a believer, you belong to God because of grace, and God will keep you according to grace until the end.
 - **Church Growth and Unity:** In Ephesians 4, Paul emphasizes church unity and spiritual growth. Only through walking in "*all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace*" (4:2-4) will the church be the people that God has called and commissioned. Likewise, God has given "*the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ*" (4:11-13), which leads to the work of ministry and spiritual maturity. Paul continues these exhortations through chapter five, where he addresses life in the church and life and order at home.
 - **Spiritual Warfare:** In one of the most familiar sections of the New Testament, Paul warns about the spiritual war taking place in the heavenly realm, where Satan and his forces aim to disrupt God's will and destroy the church's faith. He instructs believers to "*put on the whole armor of God*" (6:10) – the belt of truth, the breastplate of righteousness, shoes of gospel peace, the shield of faith, the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit (6:14-18).

Philippians

- a. **Overview:** It's been noted that Paul's letter to the church at Philippi is one of partnership, encouragement, and bereavement (Kruger, 285). On the one hand, he wants to remain in strong partnership with the church, arguing that even though he is in prison, they shouldn't shift their

support to someone else. On the other hand, he wants them to know that if he dies in prison, which could be soon, he will *"depart and be with Christ"* (1:23). Therefore, some view Philippians as a "farewell letter." Paul summarizes his situation by saying, *"to live in Christ, and to die is gain"* (1:21).

- b. **Date:** It's believed that Paul wrote this letter either from his imprisonment in Ephesus or Rome, meaning the date should be late AD 50's to early AD 60's.
- c. **Audience:** Paul visited Philippi on his second missionary journey in AD 51, about 10 years prior to writing this letter (Acts 16). Rather than continuing his plans to reach people in Asia Minor, the Holy Spirit spoke to Paul through a vision of a Macedonian man urging Paul to help them (16:6-10). After changing his travel plans and arriving in Philippi, Paul evangelized and baptized a prominent businesswoman named Lydia. Even though his work led to persecution and arrest, the Lord used Paul and Silas to lead their jailer and his household to faith in Christ (16:25-34). These conversions led Paul to plant his first church in Europe. Like other cities along the Egnatian Way, Philippi was a thriving commercial center, where people from east and west would pass through on business. Therefore, having a church here was strategic for the advancement of the gospel. However, Paul knew the church had been under attack, both from the inside and outside. Within the church, some were causing trouble and dividing the body. From the outside, Judaizers were proclaiming a different gospel, one that combined Jewish rituals with Christian teachings. Paul urged the church to avoid such people. Overall, Paul wanted the church to remain healthy and strong, keeping their focus on Jesus.

d. **Contents**

- **Joy in Christ:** Even though Paul and the church had suffered at the hands of persecutors, he kept them focused by discussing the joy of knowing Jesus. The concept of "joy" or "rejoicing" appears sixteen times in four chapters. Regardless of what takes place in life – success, sorrow, pain, or death – we have joy in knowing Jesus. As Paul writes in 4:4, *"Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice."*
- **Unity and Humility:** In an attempt to bring the church together as one, Paul emphasized the humility necessary to achieve that goal. Therefore, he describes the humility that Jesus displayed in his own life and sacrifice, calling believers to follow his example by doing *"nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus"* (2:3-5).
- **Faithful Living:** As Paul emphasized to all the churches, resisting the world and staying committed to Jesus is the essence of true faith. He writes, *"Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure"* (2:12-13). He continues in 3:13-14, *"Brothers, I do not*

consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. Let those of us who are mature think this way" (3:13-15).

Colossians and Philemon

- a. **Overview:** Benjamin Gladd summarizes Paul's letter to the church at Colossae with the simple message, "Christ is better – better than all forms of human teaching, and better than outdated Jewish regulations" (Kruger, 301). In one of Paul's most compact letters, he articulates Jesus' divine and human nature, and how he is the only One who can make peace between God and sinners. Despite the false claims of Judaizers, faith in Jesus alone is the only way to be reconciled to God and have everlasting life. Because Onesimus is mentioned in 4:9, many have connected the letter of Colossians with Philemon.
- b. **Date:** Paul makes clear that he wrote this letter from prison (4:18), which is why most scholars group it together with Ephesians and Philippians, which were written in the early AD 60s.
- c. **Audience:** The ancient city of Colossae was located around 100 miles east of Ephesus, in Lycus River Valley of Phrygia. While it was once a thriving city, trade routes changed and it was surpassed by the neighboring towns on Laodicea and Hierapolis (4:13). Eventually, Colossae was destroyed by an earthquake. Based on Acts and Colossians, Paul didn't plant the church, nor did he visit them. It's likely that the church was planted by Epaphras, who had been sent by Paul to preach there (1:7). Based on Paul's words in 4:17, Archippus was their pastor. The main thrust of the letter dealt with false teachers who were leading the church to believe a false gospel. Based on Paul's teaching, these leaders were partly pagan and partly Jewish, and they were propagating a synchronistic religion, or a mixture of beliefs. Therefore, Paul wrote to correct the church's doctrine and to call them to follow Jesus in faithful living.
- d. **Contents**
 - **The Divine-Human Nature of Jesus:** Paul's teaching concerning Jesus' nature are some of the clearest words we see in the New Testament. "*[Jesus] is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities – all things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross" (1:15-20).*
 - **The True Gospel:** False teachers were proclaiming a synchronistic gospel, a mixture of several religions, pagan and Jewish. Paul writes, "*If with Christ you died to the elemental spirits of the world, why, as if you were still alive in the world, do you submit to regulations—*

“Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch” (referring to things that all perish as they are used)—according to human precepts and teachings? These have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting self-made religion and asceticism and severity to the body, but they are of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh” (2:20-23).

- **Putting On the New Life of Faith:** Knowing Jesus means living for Jesus, and Paul calls the church to follow him in faithfulness. He writes, *“If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory”* 3:1-4). He continues by giving them a list of sins to “put to death,” and a list of virtues to “put on.” He concludes by giving the church specific rules to follow in the home and workplace.
- **Philemon:** In one of the shortest letters of the New Testament, Paul wrote to a man named Philemon. He was a wealthy man and leader in the Colossian church, and the church met in his home. However, Paul learned that one of his slaves named Onesimus had stolen money and run away, which meant that he could be beaten, jailed, or even killed according to Roman law. While Onesimus was on the run, he providentially heard the gospel from Paul in Rome and was converted to Christ. Therefore, Paul writes to Philemon, stressing Onesimus’ new life in Christ as a reason to offer him forgiveness and restoration. Paul writes, *“For this perhaps is why he was parted from you for a while, that you might have him back forever, no longer as a bondservant but more than a bondservant, as a beloved brother—especially to me, but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord”* (Philemon 1:15-16). The short letter reveals the forgiving spirit believers should have toward one another, and the way believers should make peace between those at odds.