



Paul's Prison Epistles

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The books of Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon are among the Apostle Paul's notable works in the New Testament. Christians from ancient Asia Minor to modern America have looked to Paul's many New Testament epistles for insight and wisdom in the Christian faith. Paul is believed to have composed over half of the New Testament, but the epistles of Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon share a unique background. Paul wrote each of these epistles from the confines of a Roman prison cell. They also share the underlying tones of encouragement, joy, and overcoming trials. Each of these epistles were written to various churches that Paul had contact with and aided in giving counsel. The churches Paul wrote to were: Ephesus, Philippi, Colosse, and Philemon, who was a leader in the Colosse church. The interesting part of this is to consider Paul's upbringing and extensive education. He received an education from the school of Gamaliel (Dockery, 1992, pg. 46). No doubt, Paul had a bright future ahead of him among the ruling elite. Yet, Paul sacrifices everything and becomes a follower of the Gospel of Jesus. Taking into account this form of

context, the idea of Paul sitting in a prison writing to Gentile churches is almost unfathomable. Even after all of this though, Paul was able to keep in prison what Adam lost in the garden. Paul's prison epistles give Christians today a manuscript for being strong in the Lord and living an acceptable life before God.

The Apostle Paul

Saul was born and raised in the coastal city of Tarsus before venturing to Jerusalem to attend the school of Gamaliel. While attending, Saul would have learned about the inner workings of the Jewish political system of the day. No doubt he advanced quickly and soon moved into a role in the ruling elite (Emberson, 2012) Galatians 1:14 says, *“And profited in the Jews' religion above many my equals in mine own nation, being more exceedingly zealous of the traditions of my fathers.”* One can only speculate Saul's role in the Jewish sects or which role he was destined to fulfill. Many scholars have speculated he was a member of the Sanhedrin as Emberson states, “He was at this time probably a member of the great Sanhedrin, and became the active leader in the furious persecution by which the rulers then sought to exterminate Christianity.” (2012)

This background gave Paul tremendous context after his conversion. Paul understood the corruption and politics within the Jewish sects. He understood just how necessary it was for the Gospel of Jesus to be spread throughout the world. His unique background also gave him an interesting insight when he had to appeal before the Sanhedrin before his imprisonment. Consider the fact that Paul most likely knew many of the men that he was now appealing before. Most likely, had Paul's conversion never taken place, he would have been among those seated in the Sanhedrin. Yet, Paul does not allow this to corrupt his faith in the Lord. He knew what he had was true and he had been saved by the grace of God. Paul continues to uplift and teach the saints of God even from a prison cell.

Paul's Imprisonment

The imprisonment of Paul began in the city of Jerusalem. Jews in the city rose up against Paul due to the rumor he had taken a Greek man into the temple. If this accusation were true, the crime would be a capital offense (Jackson). Acts details the account that all the city came together against Paul in the attempt to murder him there on the spot. Roman officials in the city saved Paul from his impending fate. From here Paul was sent to Caesarea to appeal before Felix due to the fact that Paul was a Roman citizen (Tenney, 1985, pg. 314). Paul spends two years in Caesarea because Felix expected a bribe from Paul for his release. This bribe never came and Felix's reign came to a close, at this time Festus assumed his role. Not knowing how Festus would respond to the accusations brought to him by the Jews, Paul requested to appeal before Caesar. Festus had no choice but to comply with the wishes of Paul because of his citizenship (Jackson).

Paul was ship wrecked on the island of Malta during his transport from Caesarea to Rome (Antonian, 2001). Eventually, Paul was retrieved and taken to Rome for his appeal. It is believed that another two years were spent by Paul in Rome, a house arrest of sorts (Tenney, 1985, pg. 315). Paul was free to write and be visited by guests but could not venture out. It is unknown if Paul was tried and found innocent or if he was released after these two years. Even though Paul was detained and could not travel abroad to spread the Gospel and instruct the churches, he used this time of forced inactivity to write. Four letters that are known today were composed during this time.

Ephesians

Ephesians is based around the unifying concept of the body of Christ. Tenney says in his book *New Testament Survey*, “It is the one writing in the New Testament in which the word “church” means the church universal rather than the local group” (1985, pg. 319). The church body is without a doubt the central theme of the letter to the Ephesians (Taylor, 1999, pg. 5). The primary audience of Ephesians is the grounded saints in the church. Paul uses Ephesians to further expound on the knowledge and faith the saints have already gained.

Holman Bible Handbook gives account to how Paul used love as a unifying theme in the book also, “Paul used the noun or verb form of love (agape) nineteen times (about one-sixth of the total uses in all the Pauline Letters). Ephesians begins with love (1:4–6) and ends with love (6:23–24)” (1992, pg. 719). The first three chapters of the letter lay a foundation of the purpose of God by establishing the church (Tenney, 1985, pg. 319-320). Ephesians 1:4 is an example of this as Paul says, “*According as he hath chosen us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before him in love:*” Paul also expounds on God’s divine purpose for redemption in the church during these few chapters.

As the letter continues the word “walk” becomes a common theme. Paul equates this to the Christian lifestyle and contrasts it with various aspects of life. The walk of faith every Christian leads is one that must be done: not according to the course of the world (2:2), in good works (2:10), worthy of his calling (4:1), not in vanity of mind (4:17), as children of light (5:8), with wisdom (5:15), and in love (5:21).

Paul concludes Ephesians with a dialogue on the elements of the armor of God. This teaching gives the church a practical example to follow after in spiritually defending and fighting for the faith. In his epistle Paul gives practical concepts for the body of Christ to follow after in order to further their personal walks in the Lord. Ephesians was written as a foundation manuscript where the edification of the church body is paramount.

Philippians

Philippians is a letter composed to the church that was located in Philippi. Paul himself assisted in founding the church on his second missionary voyage (Taylor, 1999, pg. 20). It is believed that Paul had a very close connection with the church. Tenney asserts in his book, “Philippians is the most personal of all the epistles of Paul that were not written to individuals” (1985, pg. 324). The Philippian church was one that had been very loyal to Paul and believes in his apostleship. One could suggest due to this that Paul felt he could be open with the church due to this relationship.

The letter of Philippians does not show any signs of Paul attempting to correct the church for heretical behavior, rather it suggests Paul wrote to kindle the fire within the church. Paul makes “the gospel” a primary theme in the epistle. He gives mention to it at least nine times some of these are: the fellowship of the gospel (1:5), confirmation of the gospel (1:7), the progress of the gospel (1:12), the defense of the gospel (1:16), worthy of the gospel (1:27), striving for the gospel (1:27), service in the gospel (2:22), labor in the gospel (4:3), and the beginning of the gospel (4:15).

Another topic that Paul presents in the letter is joy. Holman Bible Handbook states, “A continuous note of joy in Christ is sounded throughout the letter. Despite Paul’s tests and the difficulties encountered by the church (Phil 1:27–30), the theme of joy in Christ is echoed eighteen times in the four chapters of this letter” (1992, pg. 719). Certainly, at this point things were not going great for Paul. Currently detained without promise of a positive outcome, Paul refused to identify with his predicament.

Throughout the letter Paul uses joy and faith to negate any worrisome feelings the Philippians may have harbored due to his current state of affairs. Philippians 4:6 is a good example of how Paul refused to focus on the negative aspects of his situation, “*Be careful for nothing; but in every thing by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known unto God.*” Paul is rejoicing in the understanding that even though he is confined the spread of the gospel continues. Paul used the letter to encourage the saints and challenge them to continue their walk in the Lord.

Colossians

The letter of Colossians is composed to the church located at Colosse. The letter is practically identical to the Ephesians' letter. This similarity has led some to believe Ephesians is only a copy of Colossians with additional information (Tenney, 1985, pg. 321). There is no absolute way for one to determine this to be fact or fiction, due to lack of information.

What one can determine though is the nature of why Colossians was written in the first place. The church at Colosse was known to be fascinated with mystical forces and rely on emotional highs in religion (Taylor, 1999, pg. 10). The dabbling in mystical forces by the saints of the church was bound to inhibit and hinder the truth of the Gospel. These false doctrines and practices were forming cult practices in Colosse. It is believed a portion of the heresy in the Colossian church was centered on the person of Jesus Christ. Scholars have speculated that this heresy was a form of syncretism, or combination of Judaism and Eastern religious thought (Tenney, 1985, pg. 322). Paul knew that these practices must be dealt with quickly and effectively in order to restore the church located there. This concept has been derived from the theme of Christ through the epistle (Taylor, 1999, pg. 10). Holman Bible Handbook says, “The false teachers challenged the true nature and deity of Jesus Christ... The false teachers declared that salvation was achieved by knowledge rather than faith. Paul's answer to these matters begins in this important section” (1992, pg. 719-722). Colossians 3:11 is an example of this where Paul explicitly says that Christ is in all, “*Where there is neither Greek nor Jew, circumcision nor uncircumcision, Barbarian, Scythian, bond nor free: but Christ is all, and in all.*”

The epistle can be divided into two topics of thought: doctrinal and practical. The doctrinal aspect of the letter was to correct the errors found within the church regarding doctrine, as well as to educate the church in an understanding of the Apostle's Doctrine. Paul used the letter to teach the church the doctrine in an attempt to correct their erroneous ways and guide them back into a proper doctrinal understanding. The second topic theme in the letter is practical application in the Christian walk. Paul uses examples such as life at home (3:18-21) or employer-employee relations (3:22-4:1) to educate the church in the Christian walk. The letter of Colossians was intended to show the church the truth of the Apostle's Doctrine, and educate them on the consequences against those who did not follow it.

Philemon

The letter addressed to Philemon is a direct, personal plea from Paul to Philemon on the behalf of Onesimus. Philemon's slave Onesimus had apparently ran away from his duties; there is implication he stole from Philemon as well. Paul composed the letter to Philemon on the behalf of Onesimus to ask forgiveness. Holman Bible Handbook shows that Paul was seeking more than just mere forgiveness, “Paul wrote to Philemon to intercede for Onesimus, asking Philemon to allow him to return. Paul asked Philemon not only to receive him but to receive him as a brother” (1992, pg. 745).

It is believed that Paul met Onesimus while in prison where he repented and was converted (Taylor, 1999, pg. 29). The letter is extremely personal in nature and does not contain a theological process of thought. Yet, the letter to Philemon composes one of the greatest pictures of true forgiveness found anywhere in the New Testament (Tenney, 1985, pg. 318). As mentioned previously in the Holman Bible Handbook quote, Paul is seeking Philemon to receive Onesimus as a brother. This is an extreme example of forgiveness considering Onesimus was a run away slave. Nearly every element of forgiveness is covered in the short twenty-five-verse letter. Some of the examples given are: the offense (11,18), compassion (10), intercession (10, 18-19), substitution (18-19), restoration to favor (15), and elevation to a new relationship (16). In verses 18-19 Paul even agrees to pay the debt Onesimus owes, *“If he hath wronged thee, or oweth thee ought, put that on mine account; ¹⁹ I Paul have written it with mine own hand, I will repay it: albeit I do not say to thee how thou owest unto me even thine own self besides.”*

The short letter of Philemon gives Christians today a perfect picture of what forgiveness is and how it should operate in the body of Christ. Every Christian today should strive to forgive the way Paul has encapsulated in the letter to Philemon.

Unifying Themes

Paul begins the letter to Philemon in verses 1-2 with, “Paul, a prisoner of Jesus Christ...” Keep in mind that during the time Paul was composing this letter and the other letters discussed in this paper he was a prisoner of the Roman empire. Although Paul was in prison he refused to think as a prisoner. This concept is evident in each of his prison epistles. In Ephesians 3:1 Paul says, “For this cause I Paul, the prisoner of Jesus Christ for you Gentiles,” 6 In Philippians 3:12 Paul writes, “Not as though I had already attained, either were already perfect: but I follow after, if that I may apprehend that for which also I am apprehended of Christ Jesus.” 6 In Colossians Paul states, “Withal praying also for us, that God would open unto us a door of utterance, to speak the mystery of Christ, for which I am also in bonds:” 6 Even though Paul is in Roman captivity he refuses to think as a captive of men but applies it as a prisoner of the faith. Matthew Henry’s Commentary says in reference to Philippians 3:12, “Observe, [1.] Whence our grace comes—from our being apprehended of Christ Jesus. It is not our laying hold of Christ first, but his laying hold of us, which is our happiness and salvation.” Paul literally states he is a captive of God. According to Paul, being a Christian saved by God has entered one into being captive. This captivity is comprised of and has led to grace, happiness, and salvation. Paul shows that even in the midst of a dark situation, through faith in the grace of God, it is possible to attain victory. He did not allow prison to bring an unanticipated stop to his ministry. Even though it was now impossible to teach in person, Paul worked on spreading and teaching the Gospel through literary means. The prison epistles prove that faith can bleed through even while one is enduring physical hardship. Paul’s prison epistles are a testament to all Christians today.

Conclusion

Paul’s background and education in the upper hierarchy of the Jewish political system set him up for a successful life. From the time of Paul’s youth his life was on course for greatness. What Paul did not expect was the 180-degree change God had in store for him on the road to Damascus. It is true Paul was destined for great things, God’s plans were just beyond what he could anticipate. Paul’s understanding of the Jewish school of thought gave his wisdom in pulling the church away from Judaism to into foundational Christianity.

Paul established a walk with God after his conversation that was not predicated upon his personal emotions or feelings. His past was a perfect example of the saving grace of God; his life became a testament to the power of God’s anointing. In 2 Peter 3:15-16 we see an account about Paul’s revelation, *“And account that the longsuffering of our Lord is*

salvation; even as our beloved brother Paul also according to the wisdom given unto him hath written unto you; ¹⁶ As also in all his epistles, speaking in them of these things; in which are some things hard to be understood, which they that are unlearned and unstable wrest, as they do also the other scriptures, unto their own destruction.” Paul’s walk with God superseded fleshy desires. He had a strong walk with God both in a prison cell and while on the mission field.


The prison epistles of Paul are as relevant today as they were in the first century of the church. These epistles teach a practical understanding of: the church body, positive edification, doctrinal issues, the Christian walk, and forgiveness. One must remember that Paul wrote the teachings found in each of these letters from prison. He certainly must have felt the criterion covered within them was of the upmost importance. Paul founded numerous churches and taught in many more. The fact that these are the four letters Paul felt necessary to write at this time shows the validity of their message. Each of these topics should be understood and implemented in the modern day Christian’s life.

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