

Paul's Letters From Prison:
Ephesians-Philippians-Colossians-Philemon

-Numbers in parenthesis identify the lesson number. We will plan to study one lesson per week, beginning Sunday, January 7.

Sunday schedule

(1) Intro to the "Prison Epistles"

Ephesians

- (2) Background and intro 1:1-2
- (3) 1:3-14 *In Him* . . .
- (4) 1:15-23 Prayer for their growth in knowledge
- (5) 2:1-10 By grace you have been saved through faith; 2:11-22 Therefore, remember. . .
- (6) 3:1-13 The mystery is now openly known; 3:14-21 Prayer for their strength
- (7) 4:1-6 The unity of the Spirit; 4:7-16 He...gave gifts to men
- (8) 4:17-24 The mind of the old man versus The mind of the new man; 4:25-5:21 Walking in darkness versus Walking in light
- (9) 5:22-6:4 Spouses, Children, and Parents; 6:5-9 Servants and Masters
- (10) 6:10-20 Stand; 6:21-24 conclusion

Philippians

- (11) background and intro 1:1-2
- (12) 1:3-11 This I pray; 1:12-26 Joy in preaching
- (13) 1:27-2:4 Worthy conduct among one another; 2:5-11 The mind of Christ
- (14) 2:12-18 Shine in the world; 2:19-30 Timothy & Epaphroditus: Hold such men in esteem
- (15) 3:1-4:1 Rejoice and stand fast in the Lord
- (16) 4:2-9 Pursue the peace of God; 4:10-20 Your care for me has flourished again; 4:21-23 conclusion

Colossians

- (17) background and intro 1:1-2; 1:3-14 Prayer of thanks and for growth
- (18) 1:15-23 Christ: Who He is & what He has done
- (19) 1:24-2:3 The riches of Christ in you
- (20) 2:4-3:4 Warning and teaching every man
- (21) 3:5-17 Put off... and put on. . .; 3:18-4:1 Families and Workers
- (22) 4:2-6 Redeem the time; 4:7-15 Messengers and messages; 4:16-18 conclusion

Philemon background, intro v1-3, v4-7 Love and faith

- (23) 8-16 Receive him; 17-22 Refresh me; 23-25 conclusion

Background of Paul's Letters from Prison (Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, Philemon)

In Acts 21, Paul came to Jerusalem because of a vow he had taken and to deliver financial aid to needy saints there sent by churches in Macedonia, Achaia, Galatia, and other regions (1 Cor. 16:1; 2 Cor. 8:1ff; 9:2). While there, the Jews continued doing what they had done to Paul everywhere he went—stirred up the people of the city against Paul based on false charges (Acts 21:27ff). As a result, Paul was detained by the Romans, appeared before several Roman rulers, and appealed to Caesar (Acts 21-26). After a rough trip by ship, Paul arrived in Rome and “was permitted to dwell by himself with the soldier who guarded him... Then Paul dwelt two whole years in his own rented house, and received all who came to him” (Acts 28:16, 30).

Among the visitors Paul received was Tychicus (Eph. 6:21-22; Col. 4:7-8; Acts 20:4), Epaphroditus who was sent from Philippi (Phil. 2:25-30; 4:18), Onesimus whom Paul converted in Rome (Col. 4:9; Phile. 10), John Mark (Col. 4:10; Phile. 24; Acts 13:5, 13), Luke (Col. 4:14; Phile. 24), and Demas (Col. 4:14; Phile. 24). Two brethren were also imprisoned in Rome, Aristarchus and Epaphras (Col. 4:10, 12; Phile. 23). These are not meaningless names—they help us to partially understand why Paul wrote the letters we will study.

Why did Paul write to the Ephesians? When Paul was delivering funds to Jerusalem, one of the men who traveled with him, Trophimus, was from Ephesus (Acts 20:4; 21:29). Tychicus, who helped deliver these letters, was from Asia and possibly from Ephesus (Acts 20:4). The events that brought Paul to Rome had deep ties to Ephesus, in addition to Paul's ongoing interest in and involvement with the saints there (Acts 18-20; Ephesians; 1 Tim. 1:3)

Why did Paul write to the Philippians? They sent Epaphroditus to deliver funds to and help care for Paul in Rome. While there, Epaphroditus almost died, so Paul sent him home with this letter (Phil. 2:25-30).

Why did Paul write to Colossae? Onesimus and Epaphras were in Rome but were from Colossae. Onesimus was returning (Col. 4:9, 12).

Why did Paul write to Philemon? Apparently, Philemon was from Colossae and his slave, Onesimus, found Paul in Rome, became a Christian, and agreed to return to serve Philemon (Phile. 10-16).

In each of these four letters, Paul references his imprisonment (Eph. 4:20; Phil. 1:7, 13-14; Col. 4:18; Phile. 9, 13, 23) and the overlapping names helps tie the books together and to the events recorded in Acts.

For class, be prepared to briefly explain why Paul wrote to the saints in these particular places.

Lessons we learn from this overview

1. How the written word was spread

Col. 4:16 What could churches do with the letters they received from apostles or prophets?

Gal. 1:1; Rev. 2-3 When an epistle was specifically written to multiple congregations, what are some possible ways that they all received the same epistle?

1 Cor. 12:4-11, 27-29 If a miraculously-gifted prophet, teacher, or discerner of spirit could aid in identifying genuine versus fraudulent teachers, they could do the same with letters claiming to be from apostles or prophets.

2. How churches operated and cooperated

Eph. 4:11 Which of the leaders were primarily local leaders and workers?

Phil. 1:1; 4:15-16 Who oversaw the church's decision to send aid to Paul?

In Acts 20:4-5, why are all these men travelling with Paul? (also see 1 Cor. 16:3-4)

Modern practices which contradict these original practices include churches donating their funds to human organizations/overseers who oversee the distribution of the funds (sometimes called "institutionalism") and churches donating funds to other churches who are intentionally spending more than they can afford (some times called "sponsoring churches"). Modern examples of this include:

- "Churches of Christ Disaster Relief Inc.," a private organization which collects and oversees funds from churches.
- Several "schools of preaching" throughout the United States are overseen by one church who collects donations from other churches.
- A few decades ago, the budget of many colleges was heavily financed by the donations of churches of Christ (Pepperdine University, Harding University, Libscomb University, Abilene Christian University).

3. The value of knowing brethren in other places/congregation

- What benefits might the churches have received by the messengers of Acts 20:4-5 travelling together?

4. Add one: _____

Ephesians

Introduction

Ephesus was located in Asia Minor and ruled by Rome, with a population of 200,000-300,000. The Temple of Diana, one of the seven wonders of the ancient world, was its main attraction. Statues of Diana often represent her fully nude or with her breasts uncovered because one of her perceived roles was the goddess of fertility. Hence, expressions of devotion to her were lewd and immoral. There are a variety of tools available for further background on Ephesus.

Paul's work in Ephesus for the Lord was fruitful. His first visit there was brief but he returned and stayed for two years *so that all who dwelt in Asia heard the word of the Lord Jesus, both Jews and Greeks* (Acts 19:10). He decided to leave when the riot at Diana's temple put the lives of himself, his coworkers, and the brethren in additional danger (Acts 18:18-21; 19-20:1). Soon thereafter, he was arrested and while waiting for his trial in Rome, he wrote this letter.

General Outline

Chapters 1-3 Who we were and Who we are

Chapters 4-6 How we lived and How we are to live

Outline of study

Chapters 1-3 Who we were and Who we are

1:1-2 intro

1:3-14 *In Him* . . .

1:15-23 Prayer for their growth in knowledge

2:1-10 By grace you have been saved through faith

2:11-22 Therefore, remember. . .

3:1-13 The mystery is now openly known

3:14-21 Prayer for their strength

Chapters 4-6 How we lived and How we are to live

4:1-6 The unity of the Spirit

4:7-16 He...gave gifts to men

4:17-24 The mind of the old man versus The mind of the new man

4:25-5:21 Walking in darkness versus Walking in light

5:22-6:4 Spouses and Parents

6:5-9 Servants and Masters

6:10-20 Stand

6:21-24 conclusion

Chapters 1-3 Who we were and Who we are

1:1-2 intro

Define and discuss the role of “apostle” and “saint”

In how many of Paul’s 13 letters, did he use the words “grace” and “peace”?

Comments or questions

1:3-14 *In Him* . . .

How many times in verses 3-14 do you find the words “in Him” or some identical expression?

Choose two places where Paul says we are “in Him” (or something similar) and then explain what Paul is explaining about being “in Him.”

Select two of these words/phrases from this section and be prepared to comment on them in class

v3 *every spiritual blessing*

v5 *predestined us to adoption as sons by Jesus Christ to Himself*

v7 *redemption through His blood*

v9 *having made known to us the mystery of His will*

v10 *the dispensation of the fullness of times*

v13-14 *sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise...the guarantee of our inheritance*

Comments or questions

1:15-23 Prayer for their growth in knowledge

- What did Paul pray God would give them?

- What three things did Paul desire for them to know?

- What did God’s mighty power work in Christ?

For personal study: Do you understand what Paul wanted them to understand? If not, pray for it. If you do then pray like Paul: think of someone who needs to know this and pray for them.

Comments or questions

2:1-10 By grace you have been saved through faith

As you read this section, don't forget the flow of thought back to 1:20ff---God raised Jesus from the dead and thereafter exalted Him. Now, Paul will talk about our death, resurrection, and new life.

- In what ways does Paul describe the time we spent outside of Christ?
- What does Paul say happens when God makes us alive?
- Why is it important to understand the subjects of grace, faith, and works?
- Name an occasion of grace, faith, and works from the Old Testament: _____
On this occasion, what did God offer?

On this occasion, how did man respond to God?

On this occasion, what changed?

On this occasion, who could boast?

Comments or questions

2:11-22 Therefore, remember. . .

- Where does Paul say the Gentiles used to be?
- How does Paul describe what "He, Himself" (Jesus) has done?
- On what/whom are we built and for what purpose are we being built?

Comments or questions

3:1-13 The mystery is now openly known

- Why does Paul call “the dispensation of the grace of God” a mystery? Is it still a mystery?

- How was “the mystery” made known to Paul?

- How was “the mystery” made known to the Ephesians (and us today)?

- What do verses 8-13 teach us about the mind of God?

Comments or questions

3:14-21 Prayer for their strength

- What things did Paul pray that they would receive from God? (HINT: pay attention to the frequent use of “that...”)

Comments or questions

This concludes the first section of Paul’s letter. What did Paul teach us concerning:
Who we were?

Who we are?

Chapters 4-6 How we lived and How we are to live

4:1-6 The unity of the Spirit

- Though we are not worthy to be called by God, can we walk worthy of this calling?

- What do verses 2-3 teach us about a worthy walk?

- Select any two items in verses 4-6 and find 1-2 other verses on the same subject.

- Select any item in verses 4-6 and give an example of man today deciding that it is okay for there to be more than “one.”

Comments or questions

4:7-16 He...gave gifts to men

To aid your study of verses 7-8, read Paul's discussion of grace, gifts, and unity in Romans 12:3-6.

- God gives grace in a variety of ways---even physical life itself is an unearned favor from God.

When you compare Eph. 4:7 with Rom. 12:6, what does Paul say God gives to each one by His grace?

Other passages also talk about gifts from God: Rom. 12:6-8; 1 Pet. 4:10-11

- What gifts does Paul list in Eph. 4:11? Who benefits from these gifts?

- Choose one of the workers mentioned in verse 11 and explain:

A. their responsibilities related to verses 1-6

B. their responsibilities related to verses 12-16

- How long until the work described in verses 12-16 is fully accomplished?

Comments or questions

4:17-24 The mind of the old man versus The mind of the new man

Notice Paul's explanation for the futility of the Gentile mind and walk in verses 17-18.

- What is the root cause of their ignorance?

- What did Jesus say is the root cause of people whose hearts are blind in Matthew 13:15?

Paul indicates they had heard and been taught by Jesus (v20). How could that be true since Jesus never visited Ephesus?

How does Paul describe the new man who has heard, learned, and been taught by Christ?

Comments or questions

4:25-5:21 Walking in darkness versus Walking in light

Here, Paul goes into specific detail about the inward and outward decisions of the old man walking in darkness and the new man walking in light. He begins by a series of statements about what to put off and put on (4:25-32). In this section, when he approves of something he includes a reason for this conduct, which shows that God is not only changing what we do but also our motives for what we do.

- What is the reason for speaking truth?
- What is the reason for working?
- What is the reason for pure speech?
- What is the reason for being kind, tenderhearted, and forgiving?

In 5:1-21, Paul again describes things to avoid and things to pursue. He does not give an explanation of each item, like he did at the end of chapter 4, but he begins by reminding them to imitate God and Christ. Then, he describes the effect of these decisions upon us and others around us.

- What things does Paul say are not fitting for saints?
- In addition to not participating in darkness, what else must we do with it (v11-13)?
- What does Paul say we will do if we are wise (v15-17)?

In 5:18-21, Paul says “do not be drunk,” so being “a little drunk” is too much. Paul says “be filled with the Spirit,” so being “a little influenced by the Spirit” is not enough.

Why is being drunk contrasted with being filled with the Spirit? Because both influence our mind, thinking, and decisions. Paul explains that being drunk is connected with activities like dissipation (the living of the youngest son, Lk. 15:13) while being filled with the Spirit is connected with activities like singing, giving thanks, and submitting to one another. When I am intoxicated my mind and thinking are suppressed and depressed, but when filled with the Holy Spirit, my mind and thinking are stimulated and lifted. These few words provide a rich contrast between how we once lived (darkness) and how we are to live (light).

This passage often raises the question of “social drinking.” A typical 12-ounce can of beer, a 5-ounce glass of wine, and a shot of liquor (1.5 ounces) all contain the same amount of alcohol. This alone is enough to intoxicate, and Paul’s words do not permit intoxication.

Comments or questions

5:22-6:4 Walk in light as Spouses, Children, and Parents

Wives 5:22-24, 33a (Col. 3:18)

- What two words does Paul use in exhorting wives?
- What factors influence our reaction to this instruction, and what must influence us the most?
- What are the similarities and differences between Jesus and a husband as leaders?
- Name a wife in Scripture who demonstrated these traits or failed to do so.

* Though Paul does not make the point here, Jesus also willingly submitted himself in everything. He also is an example for wives professing godliness.

Comments or questions

Husbands 5:25, 28-29, 33b

- What words does Paul use in exhorting husbands?
- Use a concordance to find the other passage where “nourishes” appears or the other passage where “cherishes” appears and comment on what you learn.
- Name a husband in Scripture who demonstrated these traits or failed to do so.

Comments or questions

A great mystery—marriage, Christ, and the church 5:26-27, 30-32

While marriage has often been abused and perverted by man, it remains the strongest human relationship, exceeding the bond between parents-children, grandparents-grandchildren, siblings, friends, fellow-citizens, etc. The depth of this devotion was God’s plan to be a visible illustration of the relationship between Christ and His church. Jesus’ death proved His devotion. What shows your devotion?

Comments or questions

Children & Parents 6:1-4

- Name a child or parent in Scripture who demonstrated these traits or failed to do so.

- Paul does not say this is a great mystery, but clearly the parent-child relationship offers mankind a glimpse into the responsibility man has toward God and the relationship God seeks with man. Find a Scripture that uses the language of “Parent-Child” to describe God and/or man and comment on what it teaches us.

Comments or questions

6:5-9 Walk in Light as Servants and Masters

Servants could be confident Paul practiced what he preached based on his conduct as a prisoner, though he deserved to be free. Masters were reminded *there is no partiality with Him*. If this is God’s expectations for slaves and masters, we ought to be able to conduct ourselves likewise in our “free market” economy and culture.

- Name a slave or master in Scripture who demonstrated these traits or failed to do so.

Comments or questions

6:10-20 Stand

- What does Paul say about our enemies?

- Select one of the pieces of armor Paul describes that are necessary in the following battles:

1. Fear and doubt that arises when we are discouraged.
2. Conflict within family due to significant, religious differences.
3. Teaching someone raised on the Protestant motto “Salvation by faith alone.”
4. The ongoing battle against long-standing temptations (like Simon in Acts 8:18ff).

- What does Paul say we must do as we put on this armor?

Comments or questions

6:21-24 conclusion

- What do we know about Tychicus, outside of the book of Ephesians? (review our introductory lesson: *Background of Paul's Letters from Prison* for help)

- Paul begins all of his letters with the words "Grace and peace." Comment on his final words regarding grace and peace to the Ephesians.

Comments or questions

Final thought, for personal study: This is not the end of our knowledge of the church in Ephesus. Even with the presence of elders, various problems would arise in the future (Acts 20:29-31; 1 Tim. 1:3; Rev. 2:1-7). Select one of these three passages, identify the problem described, and find something Paul said in *Ephesians* that would aid them in that struggle.