

# Paul's Prison Epistles

LESSON  
ONE

## PAUL'S IMPRISONMENT



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# Paul's Prison Epistles

## Lesson One

### Paul's Imprisonment

#### INTRODUCTION

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In the year 1675 in Bedford, England, the famous puritan preacher and writer John Bunyan was arrested for preaching publicly without a license, and he was jailed for six months. Previously, he had spent twelve years in prison, during which time he had written many books and pamphlets. So, rather than seeing this new imprisonment as a great tragedy, he took an optimistic view of it.

He is reported to have said, "I have been away from my writing too long. Maybe this is not so much a prison as an office from which I can reach the world with Christ's message."

Whether or not these were Bunyan's precise words, his ministry during this short imprisonment is undeniable. It was during these months that he wrote *The Pilgrim's Progress*, an allegory of the Christian life that is perhaps the most famous book ever written in the English language.

Now, we should all admire someone who accomplishes so much for Christ while in prison. But as significant as John Bunyan's work has proven to be, the apostle Paul's work accomplished something much greater. During his four years of imprisonment in Caesarea and Rome, he wrote epistles that are far more important than even Bunyan's *Pilgrims Progress*.

This is the first lesson in our series *Paul's Prison Epistles*. In this series we study the letters of Paul that are commonly called his "prison epistles." These are letters to various churches and people that Paul wrote while he was in prison for his service to Christ. We have entitled this lesson "Paul's Imprisonment." In this lesson we will be looking at the circumstances that gave rise to Paul's letters to the Colossians, Philemon, the Ephesians, and the Philippians.

Our discussion of Paul's imprisonment will address three main subjects: First, we will look at the background of Paul's imprisonment first in Caesarea and later in Rome. Second, we will explore Paul's ongoing ministry during his imprisonment, seeing how he continued to serve as Christ's apostle even while incarcerated. And third, we will examine the theological unity of the prison epistles, focusing on some major themes that they all share. Let's begin with the background of Paul's imprisonment.

#### BACKGROUND

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One of the first things we should mention is that scholars are somewhat divided on the place Paul was imprisoned when he wrote his letters to the Colossians, Philemon, the Ephesians, and the Philippians. Some believe that he wrote from Caesarea, while others believe that he wrote from Rome. In this lesson we will argue that Paul probably

wrote from Rome, although this detail will not be critical to any of our interpretations. Nevertheless, because respected scholars disagree on these matters, we should discuss his time in both cities.

Our investigation of the background of Paul's imprisonment will begin with a survey of the events preceding his arrest. Next, we will explore the events surrounding his arrest in Jerusalem, and then his initial imprisonment in Caesarea. Finally, we will turn to his subsequent imprisonment in Rome. Let's look first at the events preceding his arrest.

### EVENTS PRECEDING ARREST

Near the end of Paul's Third Missionary Journey, probably around the year A.D. 56 or 57, Paul and his traveling companions were making their way from Asia Minor to Jerusalem, primarily by boat. Their intention was to deliver funds to the poor Christians in Jerusalem who were enduring a famine. On their way they stopped in Miletus where Paul met with the elders from the nearby church of Ephesus. During this meeting Paul revealed that the Holy Spirit had warned him that he would be imprisoned when he arrived in Jerusalem.

We read his prophetic words in Acts 20:22-24:

**Compelled by the Spirit, I am going to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there. I only know that in every city the Holy Spirit warns me that prison and hardships are facing me. However, I consider my life worth nothing to me, if only I may finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me — the task of testifying to the gospel of God's grace (Acts 20:22-24).**

In many cities Paul visited believers prophesied Paul's coming imprisonment. But the Holy Spirit compelled Paul toward this imprisonment. So, Paul knew that these prophecies were not intended to dissuade him from his course, but rather to prepare him for his coming hardships. Paul had many enemies in Jerusalem, and he knew he might be arrested and imprisoned when he arrived. But he also knew that this suffering was part of God's plan for him.

From Miletus Paul and his company sailed to Cos, then to Rhodes, then to Patara. In Patara they found a ship that took them past Cyprus before arriving in Tyre. In Tyre the Holy Spirit moved many more believers to warn Paul of the coming hardships in Jerusalem. But Paul was still determined to reach his goal.

From Tyre the group sailed to Ptolemais, then to Caesarea on the coast of Samaria. Because there were so many cities named Caesarea in the ancient world, this particular city is sometimes called "Caesarea Maritima" which means "Caesarea by the Sea," to distinguish it from the others.

During his stay in Caesarea Maritima, Paul was warned yet again not to go to Jerusalem. In a well-known dramatic scene, the prophet Agabus bound his own hands and feet as a prophetic sign, warning that Paul would be arrested and bound if he continued to Jerusalem. It is easy to understand why Paul's friends did not want him to be

arrested. They probably feared for Paul's safety, and did not want him to come to harm. But Paul knew that God was planning to use his arrest and imprisonment to further the gospel. As we read in Acts 21:13:

**Paul answered ... "I am ready not only to be bound, but also to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus" (Acts 21:13).**

Paul understood that his coming imprisonment would be "for the name of the Lord Jesus." That is, the Holy Spirit was going to use Paul's coming imprisonment as a means to advance the gospel and minister to the church.

And Paul had good reason to trust the Holy Spirit as he faced these dangers. Earlier during his second missionary journey, Paul had seen the Holy Spirit's care for him. According to Acts 16:6-10 Paul had wanted to preach the gospel in Asia and Bythia, but the Holy Spirit had prevented him. Although this must have seemed strange to Paul, he obeyed the Spirit and traveled to Troas.

In Troas, Paul received a vision that revealed God's plan: Paul was to carry the gospel to Macedonia. Paul's work in Macedonia turned out to be quite fruitful. But had Paul disobeyed the Holy Spirit by preaching in Asia and Bythia, he would not have been able to preach in Macedonia. Through this experience and many others, Paul had come to know that God works in Mysterious ways. For Paul, it was enough to know what God wanted him to do and to trust that God would use this hardship to accomplish something wonderful and unexpected.

With this limited knowledge of his future, but also with sure trust in God's Spirit, Paul committed himself to facing prison. He completed his third missionary journey by traveling to Jerusalem, probably in the year A.D. 57. According to Acts 20:16 he may have arrived near the time of Pentecost, around the beginning of summer.

### **ARREST IN JERUSALEM**

Now that we are familiar with the events preceding Paul's arrest, we are in a position to investigate the circumstances of his arrest in Jerusalem. How did Paul come into conflict with the authorities in Jerusalem? Why was he imprisoned?

When Paul arrived in Jerusalem, he stayed with a believer named Mnason and was well received by the church. The next day Paul visited James who was the brother of Jesus and the author of the New Testament book of James. The elders of the church in Jerusalem also gathered to meet Paul.

Presumably, it was at this point that Paul delivered to the church the famine relief funds that he had collected during his third missionary journey. From Paul's earlier letters such as Romans and 1 and 2 Corinthians, we know that Paul was very concerned with the role these funds would play not only in aiding the poor Christians in Jerusalem, but also in reconciling Jewish and Gentile believers.

Paul hoped that when the Jewish Christians received this gift from the Gentiles their thankfulness would make them more eager to receive the Gentiles as full brothers in Christ. But Luke's account in Acts does not mention the delivery of the famine relief funds. Instead, it highlights certain concerns the Jerusalem church had regarding Paul's

ministry. Probably, this indicates that the Jerusalem church did not appreciate the famine relief funds as greatly as Paul had hoped they would.

Instead of rejoicing in the generosity of the Gentile Christians and affirming Paul's ministry, James and the elders informed Paul that certain rumors had reached Jerusalem concerning Paul's teachings and practices. Specifically, it was rumored that Paul taught Jewish Christians living among Gentiles to disregard traditional Jewish practices such as circumcision. Now, the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem strongly believed that all Jewish Christians should maintain traditional Jewish practices. And James and the elders were concerned that the local Jewish Christians would oppose Paul because of these rumors.

We should pause for a moment to point out that these rumors about Paul were false. Throughout his epistles Paul affirmed the validity of the moral law of God found in the Old Testament. And beyond this, he did not even encourage Jewish communities to abandon the traditions they had added to the Mosaic law. On the contrary, he himself followed Jewish tradition when he was in Jewish communities. However, he did teach that with the death and resurrection of Christ a new age had dawned. And as he explained in his epistles, neither Gentiles nor Jews were *required* to maintain these traditions. Christians should generally hold Jewish traditions in high regard, but only for the sake of spreading the gospel among unbelieving Jews.

Listen to the way he described his position on these matters in 1 Corinthians 9:20-21:

**To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law), so as to win those not having the law (1 Corinthians 9:20-21).**

Paul did not hesitate to behave like a Gentile when he was among Gentiles. But he was also happy to follow Jewish traditions for the sake of the gospel. Now, God did not obligate Paul to maintain these traditional Jewish applications of Old Testament law. As Paul said here, he was free to abandon these traditional practices. But he was not free from the law's moral requirements in Christ. In short, Paul believed that the applications of God's law had changed now that Christ had come, but that it was still acceptable to maintain the traditions for the sake of the gospel.

It is not hard to imagine how such a carefully nuanced doctrine might have been misunderstood, or why it might have been rumored that Paul taught Jews to abandon their traditions. In any event, James and the elders came up with a solution that they believed would satisfy the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem.

Specifically, they suggested that Paul demonstrate his commitment to the Mosaic law by participating in the rituals of the temple in Jerusalem. In particular, they urged him to undergo purification rites with four men who had taken Nazirite vows. This would show Paul's obedience to the law and submission to Jewish tradition. They also asked Paul to pay the associated expenses for these four Nazirites, which would demonstrate the depth of Paul's piety.

As the apostle to the Gentiles, Paul knew that his actions would affect the way the Jewish Christians perceived not only him, but also the Gentile Christians. Probably, he hoped that by supporting the Nazirites and purifying himself he would accomplish what the Gentiles' financial gift had not accomplished, namely, the warm reception of the Gentile Christians by the Jewish Christians. So, for the cause of Christ among the Jews, especially for the reconciliation of Jews and Gentiles within the church, Paul submitted to the Jerusalem church's judgment in this matter and began his week of purification.

Near the end of Paul's week of purification, he was spending time in the inner court of the Temple. The temple grounds included both an outer court and inner court. The outer court was separated from the inner court by a gate. The outer court was called the court of the Gentiles because people from all nations were permitted to enter it. But the inner court, the court of Israel, was reserved for Jews alone. Gentiles who entered the court of Israel were liable unto death.

While Paul was in the court of Israel, he was recognized by some Jews from Asia Minor. These were very likely unbelieving Jews rather than Christian converts from Judaism. Earlier, these same Jews had seen Paul with a man named Trophimus who had accompanied Paul to Jerusalem. Trophimus was also from Asia Minor, and the Asian Jews knew that he was a Gentile. So, when they saw Paul in the court of Israel, they wrongly assumed that Trophimus had also entered that court, and they were outraged.

In response these Jews roused the city against Paul, and an angry mob dragged him from the court of Israel intent on killing him. But when the commander of the Roman garrison in Jerusalem heard that the city was rioting, he rushed to quell the disturbance, chained Paul, and took him into custody. The commander, a man named Claudius Lysias, initially planned to flog Paul in order to compel him to explain the crowd's anger, but relented when he learned that Paul was a Roman citizen. As a citizen of Rome, Paul was entitled to special legal protections including the right not to be chained or beaten without a trial.

The next day Lysias presented Paul before the Sanhedrin, the Jewish ruling body, in order to discover the allegations against him. Apparently, no witnesses came forward to testify that Trophimus had entered the court of Israel, so Paul was free to defend himself by explaining why so many Jews had taken offense to his teachings.

As we read in Acts 23:6-8:

**Paul, knowing that some of them were Sadducees and the others Pharisees, called out in the Sanhedrin, "My brothers, I am a Pharisee, the son of a Pharisee. I stand on trial because of my hope in the resurrection of the dead." When he said this, a dispute broke out between the Pharisees and the Sadducees, and the assembly was divided. (The Sadducees say that there is no resurrection, and that there are neither angels nor spirits, but the Pharisees acknowledge them all.) (Acts 23:6-8).**

Paul claimed that the Sadducees opposed him because he was a Pharisee and that the gospel he preached agreed with the teachings of the Pharisees on many points. In fact, this was true, especially with regard to the resurrection. The Sadducees did not believe in



the bodily resurrection of the dead, and as a result, they would not tolerate Paul's Christian teaching about the resurrection of Christ.

On the previous day, Paul had addressed the angry mob by explaining that Jesus had risen from the dead and had appeared to him in a vision, and had explained the gospel to him. So, when Paul proclaimed to the Sanhedrin that he preached a gospel based on his vision of the resurrected Christ, he gained some sympathy from the Pharisees.

Once the Pharisees realized that Paul counted himself a Pharisee and agreed in many ways with their beliefs, they began to defend him in the Sanhedrin. But the Sadducees did not back down, and the meeting became extremely violent. So, once again, Lysias took Paul into custody.

The next day Lysias intended to present Paul before the Sanhedrin once again in order to get to the bottom of the allegations against him. But Paul's nephew warned Lysias that forty zealous Jews planned to ambush and kill Paul before he could reach the Sanhedrin. Now, since Paul was a Roman citizen, Lysias was bound to protect him. So, instead of sending him to the Sanhedrin, he transported Paul out of Jerusalem to the neighboring city of Caesarea Maritima and into the custody of Felix, the governor of the Roman province of Judea.

Now that we have reviewed the circumstances of Paul's arrest in Jerusalem, we should turn our attention to his imprisonment in Caesarea in the custody of Marcus Antonius Felix, the governor of Judea.

### IMPRISONMENT IN CAESAREA

During the period of Paul's imprisonment, the Roman province of Judea consisted essentially of the regions known as Judea in the south, Samaria in the middle, and Galilee in the north. You will recall that Caesarea Maritima was on the coast of Samaria. It was also the capital city of the Roman province Judea.

When Paul first arrived in Caesarea, probably in A.D. 57, he was kept in custody for five days until his accusers arrived from Jerusalem. Those accusing him included the high priest Ananias, a number of Jewish elders, and Tertullus who was the lawyer for the group.

When the accusers arrived, Felix held a hearing. At this hearing Tertullus argued that Paul disturbed the peace and incited riots. This was a very serious charge in the eyes of Governor Felix since it was his duty to keep peace in Judea. But even more importantly, from the Jewish point of view, they also accused Paul of trying to violate the temple. The Jewish elders who were present affirmed this accusation, although none of them came forward as official witnesses.

Evidently, the Jews wholeheartedly believed the false rumors about Paul. They seem to have been convinced that Paul sought the downfall of Judaism and that he would proudly admit to trying to desecrate the temple. And so the only witness the Jewish accusers called upon by name was Paul himself!

We read Tertullus' closing words to Felix in Acts 24:8:

**By examining [Paul] yourself you will be able to learn the truth about all these charges we are bringing against him (Acts 24:8).**

Now, Paul was not a lawyer, but his response to his accusers was compelling. His defense had four main points:

First, he pointed out that there were no witnesses against him for any of the alleged crimes. This meant that there was no basis for any of their charges. This was an important point because Paul was accused of committing his crimes in broad daylight in a crowded area. If he had been guilty, certainly someone should have seen it.

Second, he rightly argued that others had disturbed the peace, not he. The riot had been started by Jews from Asia Minor. Paul was not a disturber of the Roman peace; the Jews were. This fact was confirmed by the letter from Lysias that accused the Jews of planning to assassinate Paul.

Third, and perhaps to the surprise of his accusers, Paul insisted that he had had no desire to defile the temple. On the contrary, he believed everything written in the Scriptures, and he had come to the temple to worship.

Fourth, Paul reminded the court that the Sanhedrin had not found him guilty. This argument was quite damaging to the prosecution. The proper Jewish ruling body, the Sanhedrin, had not proven him guilty of the alleged crimes. Why then did they still seek to have him executed?

Now, in God's mysterious providence, Felix was a dishonest ruler. Based on the insufficient accusations against Paul, Felix could have released him. But he didn't. Instead, he saw an opportunity for personal gain, so he held off ruling on the case, preferring to wait for Paul to offer him a bribe.

In Acts 24:26, Luke explained,

**[Felix] was hoping that Paul would offer him a bribe, so he sent for him frequently and talked with him (Acts 24:26).**

Initially, Felix said he would rule on Paul's case when Lysias the Roman commander arrived in Caesarea. But Felix put off ruling on Paul's case for two years.

At the end of these two years, however, Felix was replaced as governor by Porcius Festus. When Festus took his seat as governor in A.D. 59, Paul's Jewish opponents in Jerusalem saw another opportunity to kill Paul. They planned another ambush and petitioned Festus to deliver Paul to Jerusalem under the pretense that they wished to have his case reopened and handled locally. So, Festus convened a hearing in which he asked Paul if he would be willing to have his case heard in Jerusalem rather than in Caesarea.

At this point, rather than agreeing to have his case heard in Jerusalem, Paul appealed to his right as a Roman citizen to have his case heard by Nero Caesar himself, and Festus had no choice but to grant this request. Scripture does not record Paul's specific motivation for this appeal, but we do know a few details that might explain it.

First, Paul had little reason to believe he would be released after a trial in Jerusalem. He had already spent two years in prison because Felix had not dealt with him fairly. He had no reason to believe that Festus would judge the case more fairly.

Second, Paul was probably aware of the Jewish plot to kill him. Luke, the author of Acts, was a friend of Paul, and he was aware of the plot to assassinate Paul during Paul's transfer from Caesarea to Jerusalem. So, we can reasonably expect that Paul was also aware of this plot.

Third and most importantly, when Paul had been arrested by Lysias, the Lord himself appeared to Paul in a dream, assuring Paul that he would live to proclaim the gospel in Rome.

As we read in Acts 23:11:

**The Lord stood near Paul and said, "Take courage! As you have testified about me in Jerusalem, so you must also testify in Rome" (Acts 23:11).**

That Paul received this vision at the time of his arrest gave him reason to think that his imprisonment would eventually give him opportunity to proclaim Christ in Rome. As we have seen, the Holy Spirit had already led Paul to believe that his imprisonment would further his gospel ministry. At this point, he learned that his imprisonment would open the door to go to Rome.

Any combination of these reasons would have been sufficient motivation for Paul to appeal his case to Caesar. But whatever his motivation, one thing is clear: Paul was finally going to be able to preach the gospel in Rome, even if it would be from prison.

Now, before Paul was sent to Rome, he had the opportunity to explain his case before the young King Herod Agrippa II. And after hearing Paul's arguments, Agrippa told Festus that Paul could have been set free had he not appealed to Caesar.

But the Lord had something very different in mind for Paul. For reasons that were unclear even to Paul at this time, the Lord planned to use Paul's imprisonment in Rome to extend the reach of the gospel.

Having explored Paul's two-year imprisonment in Caesarea, we are now prepared to look at his subsequent imprisonment in Rome. We will begin by focusing on the long journey from Caesarea to Rome.

## **IMPRISONMENT IN ROME**

Because Paul was a prisoner of Rome, he had to be transported under Roman guard. So, he was placed under the authority of a Roman centurion name Julius and put on a ship heading for Asia Minor. Paul's traveling companions Luke and Aristarchus were permitted to accompany him.

The ship sailed from Caesarea, probably in late A.D. 59. They made land first in Sidon where Paul was allowed to visit some of his friends. From Sidon they sailed past Cyprus and along the coast of Cilicia and Pamphylia before making port in Myra in the region of Lycia.

In Myra they boarded a ship headed for Italy. From this point on, they experienced rough sailing. They made their way to Cnidus, then they were forced to turn south, sailing to the island of Crete and eventually docking in Fair Havens.

Because it was now winter, the weather had become dangerous for sailing. The dangers of sailing at this time led Paul to advise the centurion Julius not to put out for Italy. Although it may seem odd for Paul to have advised experienced sailors, it is important to remember not only that he had prophetic insight, but also, according to 2 Corinthians 11:25, that Paul had survived three shipwrecks prior to this. Paul wanted to preach the gospel in Rome. He did not advise against sailing because he wanted to avoid his fate in Rome, but because he wanted to reach Rome safely.

In any event, the captain and owner of the boat convinced Julius that their journey would be successful, and the ship set out once again. Before long, however, they were caught in a violent storm that blew them past Cauda, far out into the Mediterranean Sea. The storm lasted for two weeks, during which time Paul ministered to those on board and encouraged them that God had revealed to him that they would all survive. Eventually, the ship struck a reef near the Isle of Malta and was destroyed by the surf.

With the ship destroyed, the sailors, soldiers, prisoners, and everyone else from the ship was stranded on Malta. Paul, his companions and his guards remained in Malta for three months and were cared for during this time by the island's residents.

During Paul's stay in Malta, some remarkable events occurred. At one point, Paul was bitten by a poisonous snake. The natives initially took this as a sign that Paul was a murderer and expected him to die. But Paul suffered no ill effects from the snakebite. As a result, the natives changed their mind about Paul and began to think he was a god.

Now, we know from other contexts that Paul must not have allowed the natives to continue to consider him a god. For example, when the Lystrans mistook Paul for the god Hermes, Paul protested that he was a mere man and used the opportunity to present them with the gospel. We can rightly assume that this is also what he did in Malta.

Paul also performed many miraculous healings in Malta. His healing ministry began when he healed the father of Publius. Publius was the chief official of Malta. And when news spread that Paul had healed Publius' father, everyone else on Malta who was sick also came to Paul and was healed.

Three months later, in the early part of A.D. 60, winter passed, so Paul and his companions and guards set sail once again for Italy. Leaving Malta they sailed north to the Island of Sicily, putting in to port at Syracuse. From Syracuse they sailed to Rhegium on the southern tip of the mainland of Italy. When they left Rhegium, a strong south wind carried them rapidly up the coast to Puteoli where believers came from surrounding regions to visit Paul. After a week, Paul was finally moved on to Rome. He arrived in Rome later in A.D. 60 and was placed under house arrest.

Paul lived under house arrest in Rome for two years, from A.D. 60 to 62. During this time, he was under guard, but he was also permitted to receive guests and to teach freely. Because the Jewish leadership in Judea had not informed the Roman Jews about Paul's case, the Roman Jews made their own inquiries of Paul. Through his preaching, some of them were converted to Christianity. But others rejected his claims about Jesus and his arguments from the Old Testament.

Luke summarized Paul's stay in Rome in Acts 28:30-31:

**For two whole years Paul stayed there in his own rented house and welcomed all who came to see him. Boldly and without hindrance he**

**preached the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ (Acts 28:30-31).**

Paul's arrest in Jerusalem had been unjust, painful, and even life-threatening. And his imprisonment in Caesarea had been one long miscarriage of justice. His journey to Rome had involved many hardships as well. But in the end, Paul's hopes were realized and God's word was fulfilled. Paul made it to Rome. And for two years he was able to preach the gospel "boldly and without hindrance" — despite his imprisonment — in the capital city of the most powerful empire of his day.

## ONGOING MINISTRY

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Now that we have surveyed the background of Paul's imprisonment, we are in a position to explore his ongoing ministry during his imprisonment. As we will see, Paul was not idle during his time in prison. Rather, he continued to serve actively as a minister of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Paul was an apostle. Jesus had personally called and trained Paul and appointed him to serve as his ambassador, his covenant emissary. And as strange as it may sound to us today, Paul's appointed tasks were not put on hold when he was imprisoned. On the contrary, in God's providence prison was exactly where God wanted Paul to be at this time in his life. God himself had orchestrated events so that Paul's imprisonment in Rome would provide the opportunity for Paul to spread the Gospel of Christ to the heart of the western world.

We have two major sources of information about the apostle Paul's ongoing ministry during his years of imprisonment. On the one hand, the book of Acts tells us many things about Paul's ministry at that time. And on the other hand, Paul's various letters to churches offer insight into his ministry from prison. Let's begin by examining what the book of Acts tells us about Paul's ministry.

## BOOK OF ACTS

Paul's experiences of imprisonment were very important for Luke, the author of Acts. He dedicated nearly nine chapters to events related to this period in Paul's life. From Paul's decision to go to Jerusalem and Rome in Acts 19:21 to the end of Luke's book in Acts 28:31, Luke detailed Paul's purposeful move toward his arrest in Jerusalem and the imprisonment that followed.

These chapters are full of many details, but at least three major themes appear on many occasions: Paul's awareness of his coming suffering, his awareness of God's purpose for his coming suffering, and his awareness of the way God's blessings would be poured out through his suffering.

First, Paul was aware that his service to Christ was about to bring severe hardship and suffering into his life.

## Awareness of Suffering

In Acts 19–28, Luke described Paul as well informed about his coming hardships. Paul knew that he would be imprisoned and suspected that he would even be put to death.

For instance, listen to these ominous words from his speech to the Ephesian elders in Acts 20:22-25:

**Compelled by the Spirit, I am going to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there. I only know that in every city the Holy Spirit warns me that prison and hardships are facing me... I consider my life worth nothing to me ... None of you ... will ever see me again (Acts 20:22-25).**

And he later told the believers in Caesarea in Acts 21:13:

**I am ready not only to be bound, but also to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus (Acts 21:13).**

Paul was acutely aware of the difficulties that awaited him in his service to Christ and his gospel, and was willing even to be martyred.

## Awareness of Purpose

In the second place, Paul was well aware of the purpose of his suffering. He knew that if God planned to let him suffer, the Lord also planned to use this suffering to promote the gospel.

Paul believed that God would use his hardships to spread the Christian gospel. He knew that any sacrifice he might have to make would be worthwhile because it would be God's way of promoting the good news of salvation in Christ.

Listen again to what he told the Ephesian elders in Acts 20:24:

**I consider my life worth nothing to me, if only I may finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me — the task of testifying to the gospel of God's grace (Acts 20:24).**

Paul was convinced that his ministry in prison would include testifying to the gospel, and that it was part of his task as an apostle to undergo these hardships. Rather than hindering Paul's apostolic ministry, imprisonment would be the means through which Paul accomplished his ministry.

And in fact, as we read elsewhere in Acts, this is precisely what happened. In Acts 22:1-21, we read that when Paul was arrested in Jerusalem, he presented his Christian testimony to the mob that sought his death.

In Acts 23:1-10, Luke explained that Paul testified to the gospel and Christ's resurrection before the Sanhedrin, the Jewish ruling body.

Then in Acts 24:14-26, we learn that Paul proclaimed the gospel to the Caesarean court both publicly at his hearing and privately to the governor Felix and his Jewish wife Drusilla. We are also told that Felix regularly spoke with Paul for a period of two years.

Following this, in Acts 25:18-26:29, Luke tells us that Paul proclaimed the gospel to the new governor, Festus, as well as to the Jewish king Agrippa and his wife Bernice.

And In Acts 28:23-31 Luke explains that Paul regularly preached the gospel of the kingdom of God to all who had come to see him in Rome.

In Acts 23:11, Christ's words to Paul summarize the purpose of all of this suffering:

**Take courage! As you have testified about me in Jerusalem, so you must also testify in Rome (Acts 23:11).**

Paul suffered to spread the good news of Christ from Jerusalem to Rome.

## **Awareness of Blessings**

In the third place, Paul was very aware of God's blessing on his ministry during this time. Luke's account in Acts 19-28 makes it clear that Paul's gospel testimony spread with the dramatic blessings of God's Spirit.

Luke also tells us that Paul's ministry included other things that contributed to his ability to proclaim the gospel and to apply it to the lives of individuals. For example, he received and interpreted visions to protect the lives of those on the ship that eventually crashed on the reef. He healed the sick on Malta. And he ministered to the individual needs of the believers who came to see him.

In addition to the information that is included in the book of Acts, we can learn much about Paul's ongoing ministry during his imprisonment from his New Testament letters to the churches of Colosse, Ephesus, and Philippi, and to the Colossian man Philemon.

## **LETTERS TO CHURCHES**

There are many ways to summarize Paul's ministry, but at least four matters come to the foreground. Although he was physically confined, Paul continued to minister by preaching the gospel to various dignitaries and to his visitors, praying on behalf of churches and believers around the world, suffering many hardships for the benefit of the church, and of course, writing letters to various churches and individuals around the world. First, Paul preached the gospel during this time.

## Preaching

As we have seen, Paul endured prison mainly to gain new opportunities to proclaim the gospel. And his letters from prison reinforce this idea. We see this not only in his regular identification of himself as Christ's ambassador in chains, but also in the prayers he solicited from the churches to which he wrote.

For instance, listen to his request in Ephesians 6:19-20:

**Pray also for me, that whenever I open my mouth, words may be given me so that I will fearlessly make known the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it fearlessly, as I should (Ephesians 6:19-20).**

Paul knew that, even in prison, his primary responsibility was to proclaim the gospel. And so, he asked the Ephesians to pray for him so that he would have the strength to fulfill his apostolic responsibility.

Similarly, in Colossians 4:3-4 he wrote:

**And pray for us, too, that God may open a door for our message, so that we may proclaim the mystery of Christ, for which I am in chains. Pray that I may proclaim it clearly, as I should (Colossians 4:3-4).**

Paul wanted prayer so that he would have the opportunity to preach the gospel so that he could take good advantage of the opportunities before him.

## Praying

Second, Paul was in constant prayer for the churches. According to Paul's letters, his ministry extended beyond proclaiming the gospel to unbelievers. It also included constant prayers for various churches and believers around the world.

Practically speaking, it is very likely that Paul's imprisonment actually increased the time he was able to spend in prayer. During his missionary journeys, he was generally busy traveling, or even working to support himself. But in prison he had no job to do, no places to travel, and few distractions. This allowed him a great deal of time to pray. And from the testimony his letters provide, it would appear that Paul considered himself both obligated and honored to spend much of that time praying for others.

Listen to Paul's testimony regarding his prayers for other believers in Ephesians 1:16-18:

**I have not stopped giving thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers. I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ ... may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation ... I pray also that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened (Ephesians 1:16-18).**



Paul regularly and consistently prayed for the Ephesians. He believed that prayer was powerful, and he hoped that God would honor his prayers by blessing the Ephesians. Paul's efforts in prayer constituted a vibrant and valuable ministry to those who were not near.

In much the same way, in Philippians 1:3-9 he explained that he regularly prayed for the church in Philippi:

**I thank my God every time I remember you. In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy ... And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight (Philippians 1:3-9).**

And in Colossians 1:9 we read of his commitment to the church in Colosse:

**We have not stopped praying for you and asking God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all spiritual wisdom and understanding (Colossians 1:9).**

He also prayed for specific individuals such as Philemon, Apphia, and Archippus in the Colossian church. For example, in Philemon 6 he wrote:

**I pray that you may be active in sharing your faith, so that you will have a full understanding of every good thing we have in Christ (Philemon 6).**

In all these passages we see that Paul committed himself to praying for his fellow believers, seeking many blessings from God on their behalf.

## **Suffering**

In the third place, in addition to preaching and praying, Paul's ministry in prison included suffering on behalf of others. Now, in and of itself, suffering is a hardship, not a ministry. But when the goal and product of suffering is the advancement of God's kingdom through the promotion of the gospel, suffering is rightly thought of as a form of Christian ministry.

Christians have always suffered, and always will suffer until Jesus returns. The Bible assures us of this. Now, that doesn't mean that all Christians suffer equally or to the extent that Paul did. But God has ordained that until Jesus returns to finish his work, until he has consummated his kingdom on earth, his enemies will still fight against him. And this means that Jesus' people will continue to suffer.

But Paul's life proves something — our suffering is not in vain. On the contrary, our suffering blesses the church. Our suffering testifies to the gospel, our suffering increases the glory that the church will inherit.

Suffering for the sake of the gospel is a powerful and purposeful ministry. For one thing, it is an indisputable testimony to the truth of the gospel. This is why we commonly

refer to Christians who die for their faith as “martyrs” or “witnesses.” We have already seen a number of ways that Paul’s suffering provided opportunities for him to preach the gospel. But it also encouraged others to proclaim the gospel as well.

Listen to Paul’s words to this effect in Philippians 1:14:

**Because of my chains, most of the brothers in the Lord have been encouraged to speak the word of God more courageously and fearlessly (Philippians 1:14).**

In addition to this it is right to think of suffering as a ministry because it secures benefits for others. After all, Jesus Christ suffered on behalf of sinners, and he died to save us. And Scripture teaches us to follow Christ’s example specifically by suffering for the sake of others. As believers, we should be willing to suffer hardship and even death for the benefit of others, and we should be thankful of the suffering that others endure for this cause.

As the apostle John wrote in 1 John 3:16:

**This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers (1 John 3:16).**

Paul believed this. And as we have seen, he was willing to go to prison, and even to die, if doing so would promote the gospel.

We read about his willingness to suffer for others in Ephesians 3:13:

**I ask you, therefore, not to be discouraged because of my sufferings for you, which are your glory (Ephesians 3:13).**

Paul’s point here was that his imprisonment allowed him to promote the gospel in new places and to new people, thereby bringing more and more people to faith in Christ. When the gospel spreads and the church grows, it increases the glory that all believers will inherit.

In the third place, Paul’s letters demonstrate that his suffering was a continuation of the suffering of Christ himself. In Colossians 1:24, Paul made the grandest claim of all regarding his suffering:

**Now I rejoice in what was suffered for you, and I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ's afflictions, for the sake of his body, which is the church (Colossians 1:24).**

In Colossians 1 Paul emphatically asserted the absolute sufficiency of Christ. So, when he said that Christ’s afflictions were “lacking,” Paul did not mean that Christ’s death was insufficient to save us, or that believers add their own merit to Christ’s death. Rather, Paul meant that Jesus’ work is not yet finished. When Jesus died and then ascended into heaven, he struck a major blow against evil, and effectively won the war against his demonic enemies. But Paul knew that satanic forces continue to skirmish

against Christ and his kingdom. Jesus will not fully and completely abolish his enemies until he returns in glory.

Until that time, the church must endure the suffering God has ordained for us. And because Jesus loves us so dearly, and because he is united to all believers, he suffers when we suffer. In a very real sense, the suffering of the church is the suffering of Christ.

This is the very point that Jesus himself made to Paul during Paul's conversion on the Road to Damascus. Paul, then known as Saul, was actively persecuting Christians throwing them into prison and seeking their deaths. But while he was on his way to Damascus to arrest the Christians there, Jesus met him on the road, knocking him to the ground, and revealing the truth to him.

Part of the conversation between Jesus and Paul is recorded in Acts 9:5:

**"Who are you, Lord?" Saul asked.**

**"I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting," he replied (Acts 9:5).**

Jesus made it clear to Paul that to persecute believers is to persecute Jesus himself, and therefore, when a believer suffers, Jesus suffers too.

In summary then, Christ must suffer until his return, and he suffers through the suffering of his body, the church. But when his suffering is done, he will finally and completely defeat all his enemies, and he will glorify his church. Paul was privileged to help Christ fulfill that appointed suffering.

Besides indicating that he preached, prayed, and suffered as an apostle, Paul's letters also demonstrate that he engaged in a vibrant writing ministry while incarcerated.

## Writing

Paul's writing ministry during the years of his imprisonment is demonstrated by his New Testament letters to the churches in Colosse, Ephesus, and Philippi, and to the Colossian man, Philemon. Through these letters Paul was able to provide relevant pastoral ministry to churches and individuals. And since these writings were preserved for us in the New Testament, Paul's ministry has been multiplied throughout the world for the past two thousand years.

Paul's writings reveal a rich ministry to churches and individuals with whom he had ongoing relationships. He knew many things about their circumstances and about them personally. And as a result, Paul was able to address many specific issues that concerned his audiences, both personal and theological. He even instructed some individuals by name. Despite his inability to travel, Paul's ministry was informed and carefully tailored to the specific situations of the churches and individuals to whom he wrote.

Consider, for instance, that in his letter to the Philippians Paul engaged in pastoral ministry by exhorting two women, Syntyche and Euodia, to reconcile with one another. These were women Paul knew, women who had labored alongside him, but who had come into disagreement with one another. Paul's concern for them was personal and loving, and his solution to their problem was tremendously tender.

We read his words to them in Philippians 4:2:

**I plead with Euodia and I plead with Syntyche to agree with each other in the Lord (Philippians 4:2).**

In much the same way, Paul also pleaded for reconciliation between believers in the book of Philemon. There he interceded on behalf of a slave named Onesimus who had fled his Colossian master Philemon. In fact, the entire book of Philemon is dedicated to petitioning Philemon to be gracious to Onesimus.

Apparently after fleeing his master, Onesimus had sought out Philemon's friend, Paul. And under Paul's ministry, Onesimus had become a Christian. Moreover, Onesimus had remained with Paul and had ministered to him in prison. So, Paul's ministry to Onesimus and Philemon was deeply personal, and he took care as their pastor and as their friend to reconcile their relationship.

Paul also directed his letters to the theological issues that involved the church as a whole, providing authoritative apostolic instruction with a pastoral hand. His teaching ministry as an authoritative representative of Christ did not falter during his imprisonment. Rather, Paul continued to provide infallible revelations of truth during this time and continued to apply that truth to the church through his letters.

As we have seen, both Acts and Paul's New Testament letters indicate that Paul was actively involved in ministry during his imprisonment. He knew that God had provided prison to him as an opportunity spread the gospel and to provide an example for the saints. And inspired with this knowledge, he conducted a robust ministry of preaching, praying, suffering, and writing, through which he faithfully discharged all his duties as an apostle of Jesus Christ.

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## THEOLOGICAL UNITY

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Now that we have introduced the background of Paul's imprisonment and explained his ongoing ministry during his imprisonment, we are ready to turn to the theological unity of his letters from prison. In this section we will explore some of the doctrinal themes that the prison epistles share in common and explain how they fit into Paul's broader system of theology.

Paul's letters from prison share some important doctrinal foundations. Most basically, they all affirm the same gospel. But beyond that, they all share a common way of presenting that gospel, and they tend to emphasize the same aspects of that gospel. This is not to say that they are identical to one another. But there is a big picture that unites them, a common foundation on which all of them depend. And that common foundation is the fact that Jesus Christ is the conqueror and ruler of all creation.

Our discussion of the theological unity of the prison epistles will emphasize three main doctrines: First, we will look at the doctrine that Jesus Christ is King of Creation. Second, we will focus more closely on a particular aspect of Jesus' kingship over creation, namely, believers' union with Christ in his kingship. And third, we will

concentrate on the requirements of ethical living that the first two doctrines imply. We'll begin with the doctrine that Jesus Christ is the King of Creation.

## KING OF CREATION

Paul's emphasis on Christ's kingship over creation is perhaps more pronounced in his letters from prison than in any of his other writings. We will focus on three aspects of Christ's kingship that appear frequently in his prison epistles: his sovereignty, which entails his power and his authority; his honor, including his glory and his worthiness to be respected, emulated and worshiped; and his determination to return again to consummate his kingdom on earth. Let's begin by looking at Christ's royal sovereignty.

### Sovereignty

When we say that Christ is sovereign, we mean that he has the strength and power to accomplish his will, and that he has the legal authority and right to do so. In the ancient world, kings and emperors commanded the military forces of their countries, giving them the power to accomplish what they desired. The laws of their countries also acknowledged their right to rule and to govern, meaning that they also had the authority to accomplish what they desired. Many modern governments have similar power and authority.

According to Paul, when Jesus ascended into heaven, God the Father vested him with this type of sovereignty over all creation. Jesus is so powerful and so authoritative now that his sovereignty extends over all other kings and rulers as well, whether they are on earth or in the spiritual realm.

In Ephesians 1:20-22 Paul described the sovereignty that the Father granted to Christ in this way:

**[The Father] seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every title that can be given, not only in the present age but also in the one to come. And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church (Ephesians 1:20-22).**

Right now, Jesus Christ rules over the entire creation with absolute power. And his sovereignty is not simply limited to the heavenly realms; he rules over earth as well.

As Jesus himself proclaimed in Matthew 28:18:

**All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me (Matthew 28:18).**

Jesus Christ, our lord and savior, rules over all creation, from the furthest galaxy to the tiniest spot of earth. He rules over earthly governments and nations, and over every angel and demon. Clearly, not everything in creation obeys him as it should. But even so,

Jesus has the right to command its obedience, and the power to make it obey. And he has the power and right infinitely to bless those he approves and utterly to destroy his enemies.

Besides emphasizing the sovereignty of Christ, Paul drew attention to Christ's honor, which consists of his glory and value and demands the responses of respect, emulation and worship.

## Honor

Christ is honored because he is perfect, holy, and righteous. And he is honored because he holds a position of highest authority, and because he executes that authority justly and righteously. He is also honored because he himself is the most valuable being in all of creation, the one whom God values more highly than any other. And he is honored because he is the creator and sustainer of the universe. We could easily list hundreds of reasons that Jesus is worthy of honor. But perhaps the greatest reason that Jesus deserves honor and praise is that he is divine; Jesus is God, and God is worthy of the highest honor imaginable.

One reason Paul emphasized Jesus' honor so greatly was that some people in the church did not appreciate how special Jesus was. Apparently, false teachers had introduced the veneration of angels and spirits into the church and had suggested that Jesus was just one of these many similar beings. One way that Paul refuted these false teachings was by emphasizing Christ's unique and surpassing greatness.

Listen to the way he contrasted Christ with other spiritual beings in Colossians 1:16-17:

**For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together (Colossians 1:16-17).**

Jesus is unique because he is the creator of everything that is — even of the angels and spirits that the false teachers revered. Jesus is not just the greatest ruler in the universe. He is also the one who established all the lower offices that other rulers hold, both in the spiritual realm and on earth. And he is the one who created the other rulers, including both human beings who rule on earth and beings such as angels and demons who have authority in the spiritual realm.

In addition to speaking of Christ's kingship in terms of Christ's sovereignty and honor, Paul emphasized Christ's determination to return to earth in order to consummate his kingdom.

## Determination

To understand Paul's outlook on the return of Christ, we must remember that his teaching about the end times (or his eschatology) grew out of traditional Jewish views of

the end times. In the traditional Jewish theology of Paul's day, it was thought that Scripture presented two main ages of humanity. Before Christ came, the world was in the present age, which was characterized by sin, death and corruption.

This present age was to be followed by the age to come, which the Bible also refers to as the kingdom of God and the kingdom of heaven. This replacement was to happen all at once when the messiah or Christ came.

But according to Paul and the other New Testament authors, Jesus revealed that this traditional Jewish conception was not entirely accurate. The age to come would replace the present age, but not all at once. Instead, the two ages would overlap for a period of time, beginning from the earthly ministry of Christ, which we will refer to as the inauguration of the kingdom of God, and extending until Christ's return or second coming, which we will refer to as the consummation of the kingdom of God. In between the inauguration and consummation is the period we will call the continuation of the kingdom of God. This middle period is the time in which the church existed in Paul's day, and in which it continues to exist today.

This was an important concept for Paul to describe to his audiences because it explained so many of their problems. The present age of sin, death, and corruption had not been abolished, which is why the believers continued to suffer. Nevertheless, some day Jesus would return to bring final blessings to all believers. In the meantime, Christians must trust that Jesus really will return. And we may have great hope that this will happen because Christ is determined to finish what he started.

Right now, Jesus reigns as king from heaven. But he is not satisfied with that. He wants and plans to rule over every inch of creation as fully and gloriously as he now reigns in heaven. He will not be satisfied until he has finally and completely destroyed and punished all his enemies and ultimately blessed all his faithful believers. And he plans to do this by spreading his kingdom across the entire earth.

Because Paul knew Christ's plan to rule over all creation, he confidently asserted that Christ was determined to consummate his kingdom. It was for this reason that he commonly wrote of believer's having a future inheritance, and that he placed his great hope in the rewards that would be his when Christ returned.

For example, consider his words in Ephesians 1:13-14:

**Having believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance (Ephesians 1:13-14).**

Paul insisted that our future inheritance is guaranteed — God has promised and will not change his mind. As a result, Jesus must return in order to deliver our inheritance in the consummated kingdom.

And in Philippians 3:20-21, Paul wrote of Christ's return in these terms:

**Our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, who ... will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body (Philippians 3:20-21).**

When Christ returns to consummate his kingdom on earth, our inheritance will include new, glorified bodies. Paul could speak of this inheritance with great confidence because he knew that Jesus had promised to return, and that Jesus was determined to fulfill that promise.

Throughout his prison epistles, Paul relied on Christ's royal sovereignty, honor, and determination as cornerstones for his teachings. These themes arise repeatedly in these letters, providing the basis for many of Paul's teachings to the Colossians, Ephesians, and Philippians.

Now that we have looked at the doctrine that Jesus Christ is the King of Creation, we should turn our attention to the second point of doctrine common to the prison epistles, namely, believers' union with Christ in his kingship — our union with Jesus that results in him sharing his blessing with us.

### UNION WITH CHRIST

According to Paul, when we believe in Jesus, we are united to him in a mysterious, spiritual way. And because we are united to Jesus, we are counted as if we were Jesus. For example, Jesus is blameless before God, and because we are united to him, we are also counted as blameless before God with all our sins being forgiven.

Paul returned to this concept frequently in his prison epistles as he encouraged his readers that they shared in Christ's kingship. Often he pointed out that because believers share in Christ's kingship they receive blessings during the present continuation of Christ's kingdom and look forward to even greater blessings at the consummation of the kingdom.

For instance, in Colossians 3:1-4, Paul wrote:

**Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God... For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory (Colossians 3:1-4).**

Through our union with Christ, we are united to Christ's death so that we also died with him. And we are united to Christ in his resurrection and life so that we are also raised with him. We are also united to Christ in his ascension and kingship so that when he returns in glory we will rule with him.

As Paul wrote in Ephesians 2:6-7:

**God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace (Ephesians 2:6-7).**

According to Paul, even now we are seated with Christ in the heavenly places, being united to him in his present kingship over all creation. As a result, we share his honor and his blessings in a spiritual way right now even though our earthly circumstances may not



reflect it. And when Jesus returns, our spiritual blessings will be increased, and we will receive earthly blessings as well.

But Paul also appealed to our union with Christ in his kingship to speak of things that are less pleasant, like suffering. He spoke of our union with Christ in order to encourage believers that they did not suffer alone and that they did not suffer in vain. We have already seen that this was true in Paul's life. But Paul also wrote that it was true in the lives of his readers.

Listen to his words in Colossians 1:24:

**Now I rejoice in what was suffered for you, and I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ's afflictions, for the sake of his body, which is the church (Colossians 1:24).**

The Christian life can be hard, and it can include great suffering.

Although our king reigns in heaven, he has not yet abolished all his enemies, and those enemies often turn their forces against us. But Paul took comfort in the fact that when we suffer for the gospel, our union with Christ ensures that Christ suffers and sympathizes with us. Paul also took comfort in knowing that through our union with Christ the king our suffering benefits others in Christ's kingdom, namely, the church. Finally, he taught that our suffering completes the appointed suffering of Christ, setting the stage for our King's triumphant return.

For reasons like these, Paul's prison epistles commonly drew upon the theme of our union with Christ. For Paul, our union with the King of Creation was the source of great confidence in our salvation, great encouragement in times of trouble, and great hope in the future.

Having examined Paul's use of the idea that Jesus Christ is the King of Creation, as well as believers' union with Christ in his kingship, we should turn to the final point regarding the theological unity of the prison epistles, namely, the requirement of ethical living that is implied by Christ's kingship and our union with him.

## **ETHICAL LIVING**

Those who are familiar with Paul's writings know that the apostle spent as much time teaching about ethical Christian living as he did addressing doctrinal matters. In fact, nearly every time he introduced a doctrinal subject, he went on to explain how believers should apply that doctrine to their lives. And this application was not limited to correct thinking and proper doctrine. It also extended to believers' emotions and behavior. Paul even went so far as to say that unless doctrine is applied to our lives in ways that change our emotions and behavior, it is worthless to us.

Listen to Paul's words to this effect in 1 Corinthians 13:2:

**If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing (1 Corinthians 13:2).**

If we fathom all mysteries and have all knowledge, then we have a perfect understanding of God's revelation on all matters. In other words, we have perfect doctrine. But having good doctrine, even perfect doctrine, is not enough. If that doctrine does not change our lives — if it is not joined with love, and if it does not result in the ethical treatment of others and respectful obedience to Christ — it is worthless to us.

So, it should come as no surprise to us that Paul's prison epistles regularly emphasize ethical living. On the one hand, that fact that Christ is King obligates us to obey him. On the other hand, the fact that we are united to Christ obligates us to live in accordance with his character. Let's focus first on the obligation to live ethically that flows from Christ's kingship.

## Christ as King

As we have already said, because Christ is King, he is sovereign. That means that he has the legal right to command our obedience. This in turn means that we have a legal obligation to obey him.

And as we have also said, Christ is a perfectly righteous and just king. And this means that his judgments and commands are perfectly ethical so that we also have an ethical obligation to obey him. Because Christ is both sovereign and just, we are legally and ethically obligated to obey everything that he commands.

This is the type of argument that Paul made in Philippians 2:9-12, where he wrote these words:

**God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth ... Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed ... continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling (Philippians 2:9-12).**

Jesus is ruler and Lord over everything in heaven, on earth and under the earth. In other words, he is the King of Creation. And on the basis of Christ's kingship, Paul exhorted the Philippians to obey Christ.

Moreover, as we have seen, Christ's kingship includes his honor. Accordingly, Paul also argued that Christians must live holy lives out of respect for their King's honor. For one thing, obeying Christ preserves his reputation. For another, because Christ is holy and righteous and honorable, he deserves to be obeyed.

Paul wrote of this in Philippians 1:27, saying:

**Conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ (Philippians 1:27).**

And in Colossians 1:10 he encouraged his readers by writing:

**We pray this in order that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and may please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work (Colossians 1:10).**

Paul was deeply concerned that Christ's honor and reputation be respected and protected, and he indicated that believers accomplish this when they do good works, that is, when they obey the Lord's commands.

Throughout his prison epistles, Paul exhorted his readers to obey Christ, to live ethically by following the Lord's commands to think, feel, and behave rightly. And although he did not always make the connection with Christ's kingship explicit, he did so often enough to make it clear that Christ's kingship should always be one of our fundamental motivations to live godly lives.

Besides teaching that Christians should live ethically because Christ is King, Paul explained that because we are united to Christ we are both obligated and enabled to live in accordance with his character and commands.

## **United to Christ**

Our union with Christ obligates and enables us to live ethically for at least three reasons: First, Christ indwells us by his Spirit, giving us a new nature and compelling us to do good works. One result of the Spirit's indwelling presence is that our natures are being conformed to Christ's nature. As a result, we are transformed and motivated to obey Christ. In all this, God works within us to submit us to himself and to conform us to Christ's example.

Listen to the way Paul spoke to these issues in Philippians 2:12-13:

**Continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose (Philippians 2:12-13).**

Our union with Christ consists partly of our being indwelled by the Spirit of God. And the Holy Spirit moves our wills and compels us to act in obedience to God so that we live rightly and ethically.

Paul presented a similar argument in Colossians 3:5-10:

**Put to death ... whatever belongs to your earthly nature ... since you have taken off your old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator (Colossians 3:5-10).**

Because we are united to Christ, we have new natures. And because God has given us new natures, we have not only the obligation, but we are enabled to make use of them by doing good works and by resisting the temptation to sin.

Second, God has commanded that all who are united to his Son must live holy lives. In fact, God has not merely commanded this. He has actually predestined good works for us to do.

Paul wrote of this in Ephesians 2:10, where he taught:

**We are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do (Ephesians 2:10).**

We have been created in Christ Jesus, meaning that God has saved us through union with Jesus Christ. And part of the reason he has done this is because he has appointed good works for us to do.

Third, because we are all united to Christ, we are also united to one another through Christ. This obligates us to treat one another as we would treat Christ himself, and as we ourselves want to be treated.

As Paul wrote in Ephesians 4:25:

**Each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to his neighbor, for we are all members of one body (Ephesians 4:25).**

The phrase “we are all members of one body” might be more literally translated “we are members of one another.” Paul’s point was that we are united to one another in Christ and that this unity obligates us to treat one another with respect, not sinning against one another, but working for the benefit of all.

As he wrote in Philippians 2:1-3:

**If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ ... in humility consider others better than yourselves (Philippians 2:1-3).**

For at least these three reasons — our new nature, God’s command, and our union with one another — our union with Christ obligates us and enables us to live ethically, according to the standard that God has set down for us in Scripture.

We see then that Paul’s prison epistles are theologically unified by Paul’s rich and multifaceted doctrine of the kingship of Christ over all creation, including believers’ union with Christ and our consequent responsibility to live ethically.

As we will see in future lessons, Paul’s prison epistles share many other themes in common, as well. But the idea that ties most of these common themes together is the doctrine that Jesus Christ is the King of Creation.

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## CONCLUSION

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In this lesson we have examined the circumstances that gave rise to Paul’s prison epistles and the basic theological approach that Paul used in these letters. We have explored the events leading up to his arrest and the imprisonment that followed, and we

have looked at Paul's ongoing ministry in prison. Finally, we have introduced the main theological theme that unites all of Paul's letters from prison, namely, the doctrine that Jesus Christ is the King of Creation.

Paul's prison epistles are rich in theology, and well suited for instructing and encouraging the church today. In future lessons, we will look more closely at these letters. And as we do so, we will keep in mind the background that we have studied in this lesson.

Knowing the hardships that Paul endured and the ministry he maintained in prison will help us understand Paul's motives and goals in writing to the churches of Colosse, Ephesus, and Philippi. And understanding the theological themes that unite these letters will help us understand many of Paul's particular instructions to each of these churches. With these ideas in mind, we will be better equipped to understand Paul's teachings and to apply them in our own lives and churches.

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**Dr. Reggie Kidd (Host)** is Professor of New Testament Emeritus at Reformed Theological Seminary. He received his M.A.R. and M.Div. from Westminster Theological Seminary and his Ph.D. in Christian Origins from Duke University. He is a member of the Evangelical Theological Society and is an ordained priest in The Episcopal Church. Dr. Kidd teaches at the Robert E. Webber Institute for Worship Studies and has served as a pastor and elder at multiple churches. He is the author of *With One Voice: Discovering Christ's Song in Our Worship* (BakerBooks, 2005) and has contributed to many other publications, including *The Spirit of the Reformation Study Bible* (Zondervan, 2003) and *The Reformation Study Bible* (Ligonier Ministries, 2005).

# Paul's Prison Epistles

LESSON  
ONE

## Paul's Imprisonment Faculty Forum



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# Paul's Prison Epistles

## Lesson One: Paul's Imprisonment

### Faculty Forum

With  
Dr. Reggie Kidd

Students  
Chris Attaway  
Wes Sumrall

#### Question 1:

**Does the book of Acts contain a factual account of Paul's life?**

**Student:** Does the book of Acts contain a factual account of Paul's life?

**Dr. Kidd:** Well, Wes, one of the great things about the two volumes Luke and Acts, is that Luke tells us that he goes through a pretty elaborate research process to tell us what he knows. In the Gospel According to Luke, he talks about going back and talking with the eyewitnesses and making sure that he gets the story right. In the case of Acts, when we get around to his account of Paul's life we have the extra added advantage of knowing that he was Paul's traveling companion. By 2 Timothy, the last thing that Paul wrote is we know that Luke was the one man that stayed with Paul all the way through his ministry. So, as you read through Luke's account in Acts we find that there are these really nice touches of his own personal knowledge of what was going on. He is able to tell us for instance that it was one of Paul's nephews that let Paul know about the conspiracy to kill him while he was in prison in Jerusalem. Time after time, archeologists found the book of Acts being confirmed by archeological discoveries. And, there is this sense that we have as you read the book of Acts that whoever wrote this knew what he was talking about.

When Paul talks in 2 Corinthians 5 about us standing before the "Bema", the Judgment Seat of Christ, we know that he had in mind the bema or the judgment seat that the Roman Governor sat on in Corinth and archeologists have found that. Luke describes Gallio, the governor sitting on that bema when Paul is dragged before him in Acts 18. For the longest time, interpreters just scratched their heads over Paul mentioning this special office in Ephesus called Asiarch, which means "ruler of Asia". It wasn't until the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century when they started excavating Ephesus that they found inscriptions for the first time of this office of the Asiarchs. And, then as Ephesus was excavated they started finding all these inscriptions with magical formulas and amulets and until that time, we would read these passages where Paul has these confrontations with the magicians in Ephesus and not know exactly what he was talking about. But as the archeologists unearthed these things, we started to realize that Ephesus and that whole region had a lot of magical speculations. So, the Gospel According to Luke and the book of Acts overtime have just shown themselves to be full of more and more reason to trust them because of

what we have found among archeologists. Not to mention, the whole Christian persuasion is that God didn't just do, he explained. He used the unique personalities and individuals that he had gifted in order to tell us what he had done and interpret them for us. And we are so grateful that God gave this particular guy, Luke, the special relationship that he had with Paul.

### Question 2:

#### Why did Paul participate in Jewish rituals in Jerusalem?

**Student:** Paul thought it would compromise the gospel if Titus was circumcised. If this is true by what reasoning did Paul think it was okay for him to participate in the rituals in Jerusalem?

**Dr. Kidd:** Well, Paul being a Jew had absolutely no problem carrying over Jewish observance for himself. Titus was a Gentile and it was important for Paul to communicate that when a person became a child of God, son of Abraham with Jesus as an elder brother by faith, they did not have to become a Jew in order to have that relationship. So, if he felt that there was a really important principle at stake, in making it clear that Titus the Gentile did not have to get circumcised. But as far as himself carrying on the continuity of the form of worship of his forbearers, he felt God had given these traditions to the Jewish people. And they were a way for them to love him, to serve him, to celebrate their peoplehood under God and now in Christ. So, he felt that he could participate in these traditions himself.

### Question 3:

#### How should we view traditions that aren't required by Scripture?

**Student:** In another part of Acts, Paul takes what looks like a "Nazirite Vow". Talking about traditions, what traditions can we maintain today even if they aren't significant and at what point do we forgo traditions for the sake of the gospel?

**Dr. Kidd:** That's a great combined question about Paul and Jewish practice, and us and traditional practices for the church. Let's start with Paul's vow. I think what you are referring to is in Chapter 18, where it says he cut his hair at Cenchrea because he had taken a vow. It looks a lot like a Nazirite vow from Numbers 6. Now, in a formal Nazirite vow you would have to make a sin offering as well. I think it's really interesting that Luke doesn't tell us everything that he possibly could about this. And I think that we can assume that for Paul, like the writer to the Hebrews, one sacrifice had been offered, done. And if Paul is doing a Nazirite vow and what's interesting is that the text doesn't tell us straightforwardly that it's a Nazirite vow; it's just a vow. But if it's done kind of as a trajectory of a Nazirite vow, I think it's safe to assume that Paul would not have offered a blood sacrifice of some animal that doesn't do anything anymore. I think he would think that's totally inappropriate.

Nonetheless, as a Jew, he has this whole rich sense of thank offerings and free-will offerings that the redeemed would offer as just part of their relationship with the Lord. So, I think he would probably make some adjustments on the basis of the finished work of Christ but still feel it would be culturally appropriate to make a vow to the Lord.

Similarly, you have him being willing as an act of, if you will, second mile charity in Acts 21, when right after he has made this presentation of the offering from the Gentiles for the Jewish poor, a symbol of the unity of Jew and Gentile, which Paul talks a lot about in his letters but Luke doesn't tell us much about it at all. It just says the offering is made and all of the sudden the Christian leaders in Jerusalem are very concerned that Paul's being misunderstood as teaching that Jews do not have to keep the customs of Moses so they ask him if he will finance and support these four men who have made vows in the temple. And, Paul is willing to do that. I think that is expressive of how much Paul really wants Jews to get it, even though he knows that God has called him to minister to the Gentiles. So, Paul gives us a great sense of disciplined ability to step into traditions when they don't violate the gospel and use them to communicate the love of God in Christ. And, I think that's the posture we have to take with Christian traditions as well. When they serve the gospel, we can receive what the church before us has done when they're not against Scripture. But times may come when we have to move in a different direction again within the bounds of Scripture.

As I'm talking, I find myself thinking about Martin Luther. When he came along, he really wanted people to understand that what God had done for us in Christ was the most amazing thing. And he looked at the worship service that the Roman Catholic Church had developed, and he felt that it needed to be stood on its head because as it was received, and as it had developed, it was all about men reoffering Christ on the altar. And he felt like that was totally inappropriate and so he replaced all the language of us offering a gift to God to a celebration of God offering a gift to us. But he left the basic structure of the service intact. It moved from glorifying God, to confession, to the reading of Scripture, to reciting creeds, to the proclamation of the Word, then to coming to the table to celebrate what the Lord had done. And he felt that it was important to leave the traditional shape in place so that people don't get distracted by all kinds of change that isn't really central to the gospel so that the sermon could be the place where the gospel could be preached and then could be used to lean into a table that itself preached the gospel. And I think that's just a great example for us as heralds of the gospel to be able to receive what's good and to change and adjust it as we need to.

**Question 4:****Should we observe church seasons like Advent and Lent?**

**Student:** This brings up a question of things that are going on in the church today like an Advent or a Lent. How would you address those in relation to what Martin Luther said and what Paul was going through in his day?

**Dr. Kidd:** Those are great examples of places where historically the church has, in the spirit of the fact that God wanted to shape our sense of time as we come out of the Old Testament and with now, the cross being the center of time. Over time, the church developed a means of preparation for the celebration of his coming in Advent and then a time of preparation for the crucifixion and resurrection at Lent to help tell the story. And I think there is great gospel freedom in being able to use those periods of time as long as they are helping to tell the story. But when they become themselves sort of objects of worship and things that you just can't adjust or tweak, then I think you have to wonder whether there is some sort of subtle idolatry that's going on.

The thought is attributed to Luther; it says something along these lines: There is no New Testament book of Leviticus, that is there is no type prescription of exactly how to shape time, of exactly what we have to do to worship but there is a clear message and there is a clear pattern of Word and table that celebrates the sacrifice of Christ for us. And the patterns of God's people gathering to praise and pray to the Lord. And given those broad parameters, gives the specific teaching of the gospel a lot of freedom to figure out exactly what that would do. And the responsibility not to come under the dominion, say in Colossians 2, of new moons, Sabbaths, and feasts that would bind our consciences nonetheless the opportunity to let the Lord shape our sense of time as we tell the gospel story through the church year.

**Question 5:****Why did Paul wait to assert his rights as a Roman citizen?**

**Student:** If Paul was a Roman citizen, how come in all this trouble bounding around from prison to prison, why didn't he assert his rights as a Roman citizen sooner? It seems it would have saved him a lot of headache and maybe even would have made his ministry more effective.

**Dr. Kidd:** I think a really interesting thing goes on with Paul. He really believes that the gospel is to the Jew first and then to the Gentile or the Greek. And the way that that works itself out is that he wants to take the message to Jews first and he would love to see Jews get converted and then join him to go to Gentiles. But he realizes pretty soon that he is meeting really stiff opposition. In the first missionary journey, it's a Roman governor who happens to share one of his names, Paulus who bails him out. And I think it's then that he starts reflecting on the potential of his own Roman

citizenship to help keep doors open that Jewish opposition is going to close. And that really comes to a head when he is in jail, in Acts 16.

Again, what he has wanted and what he has done in Philippi is he has gone to the prayer place that's by the side of the river to speak to the Jewish audience first. He winds up in jail because he exorcises a demon from this girl and then they are going to start to abuse him. He wants to keep the ministry going, so he appeals to his Roman citizenship to help him at that point. Later on, he appeals to his Roman citizenship to get an audience with the Roman Caesar. And I think we get this sense of him figuring out how his Roman citizenship can play into his call to take the gospel to the Gentiles.

So, you then have a picture of a robust sense of self that's a gift in Christ where he can see himself as being, for the sake of the gospel, a steward of that part of him that's being a Roman citizen. Just like he sees himself being a steward of that part of himself which is: Hebrew of Hebrews, trained at the feet of Gamaliel. Or that aspect of who he is, that is a citizen of Tarsus, a no mean city. And it's like he becomes more alive to all these cultural forces that have made him who he is, so that each one of them can be a means for him to better understand, better embed himself, better embody the gospel in whatever setting he's in.

### Question 6:

#### Why did Rome allow Paul to teach about Christ?

**Student:** It's curious to me that in the Roman setting, why they would allow him to teach the things he did for so long. Do you have any thoughts? Wes asked that he seemed at times to wait to bring his Roman citizenship forth, but at the same time, from a Roman standpoint, they seem to allow him to teach it where he was, in prison or out.

**Dr. Kidd:** Paul is walking a really fine line. On the one hand, he is proclaiming that there is a new Lord and that every knee will eventually bow and every tongue will confess that Jesus is Lord, not pagan idols, not Caesar and in Thessalonica, he is charged with proclaiming that there is another king besides Caesar. And at the same time, he is talking about this one who in John's gospel said, "My kingdom is not of this world." He is about a much more subtle kingdom development, a commonwealth, that he says in Philippians 3 is a commonwealth that is in heaven. A king that is in Heaven, who calls us to worship, glorify and serve him. But that doesn't pull us out of our obligations of citizenship, our obligations of family, our obligations in the marketplace.

It's hard to say exactly why the Romans let him proclaim as long as they did. It's clear that his fellow Jews understood that he was calling for such a major adjustment to their own theology by bringing Jesus into the Godhead and by saying that the

world to come has already in some respect begun in Jesus' resurrection. And that now is the time when the nations would be blessed, only now through Jesus Messiah and they were not ready to go there. They understood where he was going and they were saying, "Uh-uh, no way." But I think it would be fairly typical for the Romans to give as much ground as possible. What they did was to go into a culture and they would conquer the people militarily but they try to leave them alone as much as they can, as far as their own worship practices and their own philosophies. So, they would have to sense a distinct definite military threat before they are going to shut somebody down. And that's why the Roman governor in Acts 18, Gallio, who is the brother of Seneca, who was Nero's teacher, when he is presented with Paul as a problem by the Jews he just says, "No that's something for you all to work out; Rome has no interest in shutting this guy down."

### **Question 7:**

#### **What does it mean to be all things to all people?**

**Student:** Reggie, Paul speaks about becoming all things to all people. Discuss how that works out in the life of a minister today, as far as, do we become all things? Are we devoid of culture ourselves or do we become like the culture that we're ministering to?

**Dr. Kidd:** That's a great question, Chris. I think it's really helpful to remember how full of what cultures had made and shaped what Paul was. We talked a little while ago about the fact that he is a Roman citizen. He talks about that he is a citizen of Tarsus and when he says that he says it like with his chest puffed out, "a city of no mean standing." And when talks about his Roman citizenship he was asked, "Did you buy your Roman citizenship?" And he replies, "I was born to my Roman citizenship," and he talks about the fact that he was trained at the feet of Gamaliel, as far as we know, one of the if not the preeminent teachers of his time. And, when Paul talks about becoming all things to all men he's not talking about the sort of shriveling up of who he is, like using as eraser to get rid of everything that is Paul. In 1 Corinthians 9, when he says that he has just been talking about the need for people to love and to use positions of authority for the sake of other people, not for their own self-aggrandizement. He has talked in chapter 7 of 1 Corinthians about the fact that because we belong to Christ we're slaves of no men. We're bought with a price so we are slaves of nobody. But what that means is the slave becomes the Lord's freed man and it's a sense of dignity and family that they never had.

Conversely, the person who was free becomes a slave of Christ and that when Paul thinks about himself, he thinks about a person who is free, who's advantaged in all kinds of ways: Roman citizens, citizen of Tarsus, Hebrew of Hebrews. And he's thinking about his own responsibility, not to base his self-worth on those sources of identity but to see them as means and opportunities to serve other people. And so that means there is sort of an emptying of self but it's not an erasing of self, it's a seeing



myself of being a steward of this identity so that my Roman-ness can be there for you, my Jewish-ness can be there for you, my Tarsian-ness can be there for you. And so, the challenge for ministers is to really own the good things that have made us who we are, our upbringing, our education, the good things in our lives and the bad things in our lives. Some things that put us more in touch with the glory of Jesus and things that put us in touch with the sufferings of Jesus and see those as being means and opportunities to build deeper relationships with people.

### **Question 8:**

**Should we engage foreign cultures or work mainly with cultures we already know?**

**Student:** It seems like Paul used the area of culture he was experienced in. How far should we go in terms of bringing all things to all people and exploring cultures that we don't really have any experience in? Should we do that or should we pretty much stick to our guns and do what we know?

**Dr. Kidd:** That becomes a matter of calling. For some of us it means really owning where we are and serving there. For other people, it means recognizing that there are people who are outside of my comfort zone, that my belonging to Christ calls me to go into their world knowing that I'm not the sum of my cultural influences but I am God's. And some of us are gifted in such a way as to be able to go into another culture and adapt, learn a language, and learn a whole other way of being precisely because we belong to Christ. But I don't think that you can answer that question apart from this mysterious thing that the Lord does inside a person.

The point though is to do this out of a position of strength of knowing who you are in Christ. And I think the more we get to know the Lord and are able to be thankful for who he has made us to be, and to not take our bearings from the world around us for getting our own ego needs made and having our identities built up. Then we can ask the question well, "Lord, do you want me to stay here and use all of this to serve you or are you calling me, as you have called men and women for centuries, to go out of this land into some other land so others can hear the good news and see you build them into new images of God?"

### **Question 9:**

**When should the church require Christians to conform to its own culture?**

**Student:** On the other side, at what point does the church say to those who are coming in and are not a part of their culture that this is how we do things here you are invited to come and be a part but this is how we do things?



**Dr. Kidd:** That's a great question too. I think the Lord gifts individuals and he also gifts congregations or communities. He plants certain gift mixes in them. You know, some churches are going to be stronger at teaching preaching, some churches are going to be stronger in mercy-ministry, some churches are going to have people with a gift and a knack for high-culture expression, and some churches are going to be gifted with people who have a knack for lower culture expression, folk music kind of things or more pop, more engaged with whatever is happening out there. And the wise congregation assesses, here is what we do well and says, "We are going to do what we do well as well as we can do it." But the wise congregation also says, "Did you know this is going to be a sort of porous circle we put around ourselves and there may very well be people who are gifted differently than we are who add more into this great jambalaya of kingdom life?"

And it is necessary that we keep the mentality of ever wanting our walls to expand to include more to have a greater expression of what the body of Christ can be. So, it means taking stock of your gifts, doing them well and being ready to accommodate people who come with different gifts of things and different visions of ministry. I've seen this in churches that just have this very generous attitude of having a security of being able to do well what they do well but not say, "Well, this is the way we do it and if you want to do it another way then there's another church down the street," but, "If you feel really connected to us, if you sense the spirit of God here and there's something that you can bring that we don't have, please help us become more of what the body of Christ can be."

### Question 10:

#### Why do Christians have to suffer?

**Student:** Reggie, throughout the New Testament it seems there is a consistent paradigm of suffering as the norm for the Christian life. Why is it that God has called his believers to suffer? Didn't Christ already suffer for us?

**Dr. Kidd:** He did suffer for us and now he suffers in and through us. The whole point is for us to be conformed to the image of the Son and there is a fellowship of his sufferings. You know, God could have just made it so that there was no fall and it would have been glorious. But somehow, he wanted a deal where at the very end there would be a higher glory for his creation going through the awfulness of exploding and then being put back together again. And the Redeemer, the eternal second person of the trinity always glorious, always in perfect fellowship and communion with the Father, always worthy of worship just because of who he is, will by virtue of his humiliation and exaltation, glorification, have — it seems ridiculous even try to say it, but a greater glory, a greater honor, a greater worthiness for being Redeemer. And the honor of belonging to him is that we don't just get a stamp that gets us out of Hell; we get that but we are called to know ourselves what it is to be refashioned and remade and to know him in a way that we wouldn't know him if we

didn't suffer and didn't know him in the midst of our sufferings. So, there is just a greater depth that is built into us by virtue of knowing him, knowing that side of him in the midst of suffering.

### **Question 11:**

#### **Why did Paul associate suffering with victory in spiritual war?**

**Student:** Now, it seems that Paul often equates suffering with winning in spiritual warfare. And I know when I have been in times of suffering, it seems like I'm losing. How do you relate that?

**Dr. Kidd:** It's a hard thing to talk about from outside; it's something that we have to walk through. The old spiritual gets it kind of wrong, "Jesus walks this lonesome valley. He had to walk it by himself and nobody else could walk in for him; he had to walk it by himself." You have to walk this lonesome valley, you have to walk it by yourself; nobody can walk it for you. You have to walk it alone. No, no, no. In the valley of suffering, Christ did walk it alone but we don't walk it alone. And, something happens in that valley where either you flip a switch and know that you're not alone or you really are alone.

I saw this with my dad. My dad slid into senile dementia and it was just a horrible thing to watch this man, who was an educator, who his whole value was what he knew, what he remembered, and what he could communicate and just losing that. But he had always been just too smart for Jesus, that God reduced him to this child-like simplicity so he could finally get what happened on the cross was for him. And that he needed to know that his sins were forgiven, and it wasn't about him being good, wasn't about him just being him; he needed a Savior. And I saw my dad have this sense that somebody came into his bubble of pain. And he asked him to come with him and so his death was no longer this really lonely thing. It was knowing that somebody was with him. And that's a really glorious thing and... In the place of suffering, there is a knowing of him that just doesn't happen apart from going into that really hard place.

**Student:** That's a great answer; that's a great story.

**Dr. Kidd:** I wish I wasn't becoming such an expert at it myself. But really I don't know what your guys' experiences are, but it's mine. The times that I hate, where finances are upside down, relationships are not what they want to be. The times that I look at the Psalms that call down curses on your enemies, and I'm going, "Yeah. I get it. Lord get him!" Those are the very times when the Lord just becomes more real. And I don't know why... Well, I think I do know why it has to be that way; it's because as broken sinners he wants us to understand that it's his pleasure to be with us. He stirred himself up and came after us when we were lost and his whole design is to pull us up and remake us, and to give us a life with him that is constituted by

gratitude and not guilt, by hope and not despair, by friendship instead of aloneness. And, the only way that he can get our attention is “bang!” and hit us over the head, so that we are looking at him and not our circumstances and not the situation we are in.

### Question 12:

#### Did Paul write all the prison epistles attributed to him?

**Student:** Reggie, we have all heard and read some people who question the authorship of Paul in the letters that are attributed to him, especially some of the prison epistles. How can we be sure that he wrote those letters?

**Dr. Kidd:** Well, Chris, in the series that we are working on here, the Prison Epistles, there are really only two letters that are in dispute: Colossians and Ephesians. And the kinds of things that scholars have observed... There are a lot of things but really there are two that are at the center of it. One is that the language is a little smoother and a little more flowing, a little more exalted and along with that, the ideas, the description of Christ and of the church is a bit more exalted. I think there are some things to realize.

First, in the letter to the Philippians, which is in this series that Paul wrote around the same time in prison, Paul pretty much puts an end to the law of circumcision debate. In the process, he finds himself meditating in Philippians 2 on this larger picture of Christ. It's always been there but he has this opportunity in talking with the Philippians about the one who was always in the form of God but didn't consider equality with God something to hold on to but emptied himself and came for us and, becoming identified with us, not just as man but as criminal and because of that God highly exalted him and set him up above every name. He made it so that every knee would bow and every tongue confess. And I think Paul himself has found himself thinking about this larger sense of who Christ is.

Meanwhile, people in Colossae have come under the impress of some teachers who have some rival beings and they are teaching in such a way as to challenge Christ's lordship, Christ's glory, and the honor of that's due his name. And they are suggesting that there are other beings that ought to get veneration right alongside Christ. And that combination of Paul putting an end to the law of circumcision debate in the letter to the Philippians and his thinking about a more cosmic universal lordship aspect of who Christ is and then finding this pastoral situation in where he finds the need to explain to the Colossians that there is no rival to Jesus. He is the Lord of all those supposed lords. He is the power who made all the principalities and dominions. And I think that has just led him very naturally to a more exalted kind of expression, and then it's led him in the letter to the Ephesians to talk about what flows from Christ's cosmic lordship. It's the role of the church as his bride, as this worldwide people that is the place where his life gets embodied.

And what is really interesting in Ephesians is he is not so much making his case as much as he is praying his case. For the first three chapters in Ephesians, he is praying and he keeps interrupting himself to do a little teaching. But basically what he is doing is asking that the Lord would open the eyes of believers' hearts so that they would know the power that's theirs and they would know the place that is theirs. Paul talks about bowing his knee before the Father, from who every family on Heaven and earth has received its name, that we might be rooted and grounded in the incredible love that has been poured out upon us. And then he winds up talking about the spiritual warfare that we are called to, a warfare that is basically of prayer. That's not just arguing the case to the nations, not just going in a proclaiming, but being on our knees and asking the Lord to do what only he can do.

So, I think it's just kind of the narrowest perspectives that insist, well Paul can only express himself the way he does in Galatians and 1 Corinthians and Romans. And fail to see how adaptable his mind is and his heart and his spirit are to actual needs of people in real congregations. And the way that his view of Christ is just so big and so rich that there is always more of who he is to unpack. I think at the end of the day, everybody just has to read the whole corpus and take Colossians and Ephesians and see, like, well who else could have written this, except Paul the apostle?

**Student:** And it seems that they are not allowing him to do what we do every day, and that is writing differently about different topics under different circumstances?

**Dr. Kidd:** Yes, C.S. Lewis has a famous little essay that he writes about his critics and how these critics thought that this one essay he wrote was the best thing he ever wrote that he must have just poured himself into, and this other piece they thought was just trash and that Lewis was just having a bad day. And the reality was just the opposite. The one that he just kind of ripped out without really thinking about it was the one they thought was so deep and the one that he had sweated over was the one the critics didn't care for. So, it's just hard to decide ahead of time what a guy can or can't say. And like you said, to deny him the flexibility and the adaptability and the heart concern to speak to people where they really are about the issues that are on their hearts just doesn't make much sense.

### Question 13:

#### Why is Paul's personal letter to Philemon in the Bible?

**Student:** Reggie, how is it that a personal letter like Philemon made it into the New Testament canon? It seems a bit out of place and maybe trivial and I'm not sure what bearing that has on my understanding of the criteria for a book to make it into the Canon.

**Dr. Kidd:** I think the presence of Philemon is the perfect embodiment of the whole incarnation principle. Jesus didn't come just to save abstractions, he came to save to

save people; he came to redeem difficult relationships and difficult people. I think Philemon is just a treasure because if we didn't have it all we would have from Paul on masters and servants would be Colossians and Ephesians: servants obey; masters take care of your slaves. But, what we get in Philemon is a window into a relationship; we get a window into the way Paul expected people to work it out. We see Paul respecting the freedom and the liberty of the owner and the responsibility to make the right decision. And he doesn't even tell them what the decision has to be but he just sort of hems him in by surrounding him with all this great theological and personal considerations. And he talks and he has these wonderful wordplays about the change of identity in Onesimus, whose name means "beneficial". But, who before he knew Christ was worthless and now in Christ, he is worth much. Then he uses wordplay to challenge Philemon to do something useful for him. And he uses a wordplay using the Greek word behind Onesimus' name. He just expresses all kinds of confidence in Philemon that he is going to do the right thing. And do it out of love not out of dry duty and obligation.

So, why would this be the in the Canon? Well, it's because the Lord comes to redeem people and to take difficult relationships and situations and to make them new. I think we all need to take Philemon much more to heart and learn from it. That all the principles and the instructions and decrees that were given from Paul, we're expected to work out by the spirit of Christ in wisdom and humility and graciousness. So, I am so glad it's there.

### **Question 14:**

#### **Did Paul's imprisonment damage his respectability?**

**Student:** Reggie, as we have talked about these letters Paul has written in prison. What comes to mind for me is, did that have any consequence to respectability being that he was a man in prison?

**Dr. Kidd:** Well, Jews have a long history of the glory of martyrdom and one of the great things about the Jewish worldview is because it starts with creation and then a fall. And there is a sense of it's not necessarily the case that those who are high and exalted ought to be high and exalted. And it's not necessarily the case that those who are down in the dirt really deserve to be there. The Jewish theology has always been about, what God is going to do to reverse the evil that is here and martyrs. The Old Testament is full of people who die in order to tell the story of who God really is and especially in the inter-testamental period when the Greeks and Romans come in and take over. Even Greek and Roman theology, or Greek and Roman thinking, is aware of the noble teacher who is wrongly accused and put in prison or even executed. Socrates was forced to drink the hemlock. Seneca, who was Nero's teacher, winds up in a conspiracy to kill Nero when Nero goes bad, and he is forced to commit suicide. Socrates only gains esteem from having to drink the hemlock. Seneca, his voice is only amplified by virtue of his having to commit suicide. Musonius Rufus, who was

Epictetus' teacher, he was forced into exile. Dio Chrysostom, who was a young contemporary of Paul, he's forced into exile during his travels. It's almost like he is more famous for being sent into exile and that sort of gives him an authority, a man of, if you will, a Greek or Roman man of sorrows.

So, the fact that Paul writes from prison does not necessarily take away from his authority to speak. And you get that sense from Paul himself, "I am in prison, but does that mean the gospel is in prison? No." In Philippians he talks about "People out there are preaching the gospel because they think they're going to make it worse on me? Just let them go because the gospel is still going out, and that's all I care about." Especially, knowing that in Jesus Christ, Satan's best shot, trying to take out the second person of the trinity, winds up being the very means for the redemption of the human race. You know that Paul would have the sensibility that all this stuff is only enhancing my power and the power especially of my gospel.

### **Question 15:**

**Which cornerstone of Paul's teaching is most lacking in the modern church?**

**Student: Reggie,** in the lesson, you talk about three cornerstones of Paul's teaching in his epistles: Christ's royal sovereignty, his honor, and his determination to return in the future. Which of these is most lacking in contemporary evangelicalism today and what is the impact of this lack of emphasis?

**Dr. Kidd:** Which one is most lacking? What we are really missing is the robust sense of that they really go together. I mean, there are some churches that are all over Christ's sovereignty and it's: preach doctrine, preach doctrine, preach doctrine. And there are other churches that are about glory and honor, and worshipping him whether it's in that more dignified way or whether it's in a more happening way. But, it's all about getting the worship right and often it gets disconnected from the one that we are worshipping and winds up being all about the worship itself. And, then there are churches that are so focused on Christ's determination to come back that all you hear about is that he is coming back. And the whole notion of his being preeminent and his being sovereign now and the responsibility to pray for his kingdom to come on this earth and that his will be done here on earth as it is in Heaven and to ask the question about what we do with that in the here and now is kind of missing. So, what I'm missing is any one of those, what I am missing is those of us who are really into Christ sovereignty to understand the majesty and the need to worship this one and to love him with all of our heart and our affection along with the proclamation of the doctrine and then to live boldly and robustly now in anticipation of his return and for all these things really to be working together.



**Question 16:****What is union with Christ, and why is it important?**

**Student:** Reggie, this theme of union with Christ seems to be the most abstract theme in our lesson. I would like to ask, how does this union occur and why is it so important?

**Dr. Kidd:** Well, Chris, personally, I think the reason it can seem abstract is because of something Paul says. He says, "Our life is hidden with Christ." This life is very much a life by faith, and so it can seem like awfully out there and awfully remote. For me, one of the ways — and I think Paul would resonate with this — one of the ways that becomes more concrete, is remembering my baptism. My baptism is the place in my life where I took my place in the death and resurrection of Christ. The waters came over me and the people God were around me and I knew that his life was mine; his death was mine. And I think the realization and that union with Christ, like his life for mine, his life in me, his death in me, and my death in him, I think the reason God gave us something like that baptism is so that we would have an anchor in our experience to remember what it is, to come into this relationship with himself.

In my particular tradition, we use the language of "improving our baptism" by meditating on it, by seeking to walk with him, and in him, every day confessing our sin and giving gratitude for his presence in our lives and in hope that's ours as well. And it becomes less abstract when I choose to let each day's death be a death that he shares with me and when I chose to let each day's victory be a foretaste of the glory and a kiss of his love. And, how does it happen? I just think that's what the ministry of the Holy Spirit is. And there is this great exchange that goes on in Christ's ministry to us.

He talks in that section of John's gospel, John 13–17 where he is giving the disciples instructions and giving them this teaching that is preparing them for his leaving. He says, (paraphrase) "I am not going to leave you as orphans. I am going to send a paraclete so that I won't just be alongside you, I will be in you. And you will be able to do greater works than I have done here on this earth," and a lot of that has to do with his life not just being out there but his life being in us. So, I think it becomes less abstract when we remember the concrete place in our lives at our baptisms, where his life got connected to us. It has to do with each day seeking to remember and improve our baptism by letting each day being a conscious walking in his death and his resurrection and having this confident reliance on the Holy Spirit to make Christ present to us.

**Student:** So, that confidence of knowing that the Holy Spirit's doing that and is walking with us maybe why it matters as well? That we are not doing those things alone but we are in union and that's a proof positive of it.

**Dr. Kidd:** That's the great thing about the faith is that this isn't just a book with instructions on how to live or just some sort of self-standing philosophical system that we are supposed to go and make happen. It's a story about how God himself has engaged in our lives, so that Paul can say, "Work out your salvation with fear and trembling," but he can do that because he knows it's God that is in work within us to will and to obey. And God is about living in us and among us, and knowing that God is a thousand times more interested in getting you to glory and making you over in the image of Christ than you ever are. And he has set promises in motion on your behalf; he has put his own onboard computer, his own GPS in you, his own mind, the mind of Christ in you. That it is just beyond anything that you ultimately have to control; it's his life in you and your life in him.

### Question 17:

#### Who should benefit from our good works?

**Student:** Christians are saved to do good works but the good works that we're called to do, are they to benefit just the community of faith or the wider world?

**Dr. Kidd:** I think there are a range of consideration that you bring up, in the first place Paul says, "Do good to all, especially the household of faith." And he's going to close out his writing in Titus 3, which he writes along with 1 and 2 Timothy, which is the last thing he wrote, by talking about the need, not just to obey governing authorities but to be ready for every good work and that would mean in the political arena, the economic arena, wherever we are called to live and serve. There is this sense in the New Testament, beginning with Jesus' command to love one another the way Christ has loved you and that there is this sort of focus love for the neighbor in the brotherhood where Christ has most intensely identified himself that we are called to be a place where the world can look and say, "Oh look, they really are his disciples." And as he prays in John 17 that we love one another and that the world will know that the Father sent the Son and to see an intimacy among us that is reflective of the intimacy of the Father and the Son, and yet we do that so that others will see. And as God works in them, will say, "I want a piece of that; I want in on that." Even in our having this sense of inward fellowship and intense love of ourselves, it is for the sake of, as Francis Schaeffer used to say, a "watching world" who doesn't know what love is, who doesn't know what purity is, who doesn't know what deference is, who doesn't know what truthfulness is.

So, even our love for one another, it is for the sake of the world and then Paul talks about doing things...the church having good repute in the community and the church doing things that acknowledge that which is good and that which is true and that which is noble and that which is worthy of honor that even the world knows and understands. They are supposed to be able to look at us and see, "Oh, that's what it is to be a human being. Oh that's what it is to live in community, and that's what it is to



know the God that made us.” So, it’s good works. We’re made in Christ’s image. We are his workmanship, to love and serve each other and to love and serve the world.

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**Dr. Reggie Kidd (Host)** is Professor of New Testament Emeritus at Reformed Theological Seminary. He received his M.A.R. and M.Div. from Westminster Theological Seminary and his Ph.D. in Christian Origins from Duke University. He is a member of the Evangelical Theological Society and is an ordained priest in The Episcopal Church. Dr. Kidd teaches at the Robert E. Webber Institute for Worship Studies and has served as a pastor and elder at multiple churches. He is the author of *With One Voice: Discovering Christ's Song in Our Worship* (BakerBooks, 2005) and has contributed to many other publications, including *The Spirit of the Reformation Study Bible* (Zondervan, 2003) and *The Reformation Study Bible* (Ligonier Ministries, 2005).

# Paul's Prison Epistles

LESSON  
TWO

PAUL AND THE  
COLOSSIANS



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# Paul's Prison Epistles

## Lesson Two

### Paul and the Colossians

#### INTRODUCTION

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There is a very famous story by the American author Mark Twain called *The Prince and the Pauper*. In this story, a prince invites a poor beggar into his castle, and for fun, the two exchange clothes. As the story goes, the beggar, being mistaken for the prince, is kept in the castle and lives the life of a prince. But, unfortunately, the prince is mistaken for the beggar and is thrown out of the castle.

Now, had the prince known that he would be thrown out of the castle, I'm sure he never would have agreed to change clothes with the beggar. Dabbling in such simple fun could never be worth losing so much.

In some ways the situation in Colosse during the first century resembled the story of *The Prince and the Pauper*. The Christians in Colosse were being tempted to exchange the great privileges in Christ for the practice of pagan forms of worship. So, Paul wrote an epistle to remind the Colossians of the tremendous riches and royal privileges they enjoyed in Christ, and to warn them of the serious consequences of trading these blessings for the meager benefits that idolatry pretended to offer.

This is the second lesson in our series *Paul's Prison Epistles*. And we have entitled this lesson "Paul and the Colossians." In this lesson we will be studying Paul's canonical letter to the Colossians. As we will see, in this letter Paul responded strongly to heretical teachings that introduced the veneration of lesser spiritual beings into Christian worship.

Our study of Paul and the Colossians will divide into three parts: First, we will explore the background of Paul's letter to the Colossians. Second, we'll investigate the structure and content of his letter to the Colossians. And third, we will focus on the modern application of this letter. Let's turn first to the background to Paul's letter to the Colossians.

#### BACKGROUND

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Paul was an apostle of Jesus Christ, and writing letters was an aspect of his authoritative ministry as Christ's representative. Another part of being an apostle was pastoring churches and individuals. And so, Paul's letters were not just collections of authoritative teaching. Rather, they were personal and pastoral, motivated by love and concern for the churches and people to whom he wrote. And Paul's letters were also "occasional." That is, they were written to address specific issues in particular times and places.

So, as we study Paul's letter to the Colossians, it is important for us to know something about the occasion that prompted Paul's writing. We have to ask questions like: What problems did the Colossians face? What motivated Paul to write to them?

We'll approach the background to Paul's letter to the Colossians from two directions: First, we'll mention some details of his relationships with the Colossian church in general and with individuals within the church. And second, we'll investigate some of the problems in Colosse that concerned Paul. Let's begin by looking at Paul's relationships with the Colossians.

## RELATIONSHIPS

Paul did not have the same relationship with every Colossian Christian, so we will focus first on his relationship with the church in general and then on his relationship with specific individuals. Let's turn first to his relationship with the church in Colosse.

### Church

The city of Colosse was located in the Roman province of Asia in a region called Phrygia. It lay in the Lycus Valley a bit to the east of the larger and more popular city of Laodicea. Colossae was relatively small. And by the political and economic standards of the day, it was certainly the least important city to receive any of Paul's canonical letters. Paul had never actually visited the church in Colosse, but he cared deeply for them nonetheless. Listen to his words in Colossians 2:1:

**I want you to know how much I am struggling for you and for those at Laodicea, and for all who have not met me personally. (Colossians 2:1)**

Now, Paul had traveled through Phrygia during his second and third missionary journeys, but for some reason he had not visited the Colossian church. Possibly, he had been to Colosse prior to the establishment of the church there. Or, perhaps he had visited the city but not had the opportunity to meet the church. It is also possible that he had never even visited the city of Colosse. Whatever the case, Paul did not know most of these believers personally.

Nevertheless, we are able to learn some things about Paul's relationship with the Colossians from the details in Paul's letter to them as well as from his letter to Philemon, who lived in Colosse. For one thing, we read that Paul had an indirect relationship with the Colossians through representatives, such as his Colossian friends Epaphras, Philemon, and Onesimus, and his messenger Tychicus.

Second, although they had not met face to face, Paul and the Colossians corresponded with each other. For instance, Epaphras had brought reports of the Colossians to Paul. And Paul sent at least one letter to the church in Colosse, namely the New Testament epistle to the Colossians.

Third, Paul and the Colossians ministered to each other. For instance, besides struggling in prison on their behalf, Paul prayed specifically for the Colossians. As he wrote in Colossians 1:9:

**Since the day we heard about you, we have not stopped praying for you and asking God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all spiritual wisdom and understanding (Colossians 1:9).**

Paul regularly prayed specifically for the Colossians, asking for the blessings he knew would most benefit them.

Fourth, the Colossians ministered to Paul as well. We learn from Paul's letters to the Colossians and to Philemon that the Colossian men Epaphras and Onesimus visited Paul in prison. And since the Colossian church sent messengers to Paul, it is reasonable to assume that they prayed for him too.

In short, even though Paul had not personally met most of the Colossian believers, they shared affection and affinity for one another, making their relationship real and substantial.

Having seen the nature of Paul's relationship with the church in Colosse, we should look at his relationship with specific individuals within the Colossian church with whom he was more familiar.

## Individuals

Paul had a number of friends from Colosse. These were not just people with whom he was acquainted but personal friends, many of whom had labored alongside Paul in gospel ministry. Three such friends were Philemon, Apphia, and Archippus. Listen to Paul's words in Philemon 1-2, which form the salutation to that letter:

**To Philemon our dear friend and fellow worker, to Apphia our sister, to Archippus our fellow soldier and to the church that meets in your home (Philemon 1-2).**

Philemon, at least, was a close friend of Paul. And Paul's mention of Apphia would seem to indicate that he knew her as well. Many scholars believe that she was a member of Philemon's household, probably his wife. Since Archippus was a person of status within the church, Paul's address to him might be honorary. But it is more likely that he was also part of Philemon's family, perhaps his son.

Another of Paul's friends from Colosse was Epaphras. Paul referred to Epaphras as his fellow worker and fellow prisoner and mentioned that Epaphras was a faithful minister of Christ. Epaphras remained with Paul in prison when Paul sent his letter to the Colossian church.

Paul's friend Onesimus was also from Colosse. Onesimus was a slave who appears to have sought out Paul after fleeing from Philemon and who ended up ministering to Paul in prison.

Most of Paul's friends seem to have been associated in some way with Philemon. But whatever their relationships to one another, it is clear that Paul had closer relationships with these friends than he had with the church in Colosse in general. But as his letter to the Colossians shows, it is also clear that his relationships with these friends increased his love for all the believers in Colosse.

So then, generally speaking, Paul had a fairly minimal personal relationship with the Colossian church. But he also cared deeply and personally for several of its members. He had strong feelings for their church not only because he was an apostle, but also because of its association with his friends.

Having examined Paul's relationships with the Colossians in general and with particular individual Colossians, we are ready to investigate the problems in Colosse that concerned Paul. What difficulties did they face? What prompted Paul to write to them?

### PROBLEMS IN COLOSSE

While Paul was in prison, he was visited by a man named Epaphras, who was from the city of Colosse. And Epaphras told Paul about some false teachings that were threatening the churches of the Lycus Valley, including the church in Colosse. So, in order to defend the church against these false teachings, Paul wrote his letter to the Colossians. Although we do not know all the details of the errors that had come into the church in Colosse, Paul's letter tells us several things about it. First, the false teaching in Colosse seems to have mixed Christianity with elements of Greek philosophy. Second, it depended heavily on Jewish law. And third, it insisted that there were many spiritual beings that Christians were required to venerate and to appease. Let's look first at the aspects of this teaching that related to Greek philosophy.

### GREEK PHILOSOPHY

In the first century Mediterranean world, there was no sharp distinction between religious speculations on the one hand and intellectual study on the other hand. And as a result, the word philosophy was typically applied to occult religions, especially those that were based on religious traditions. Often, these traditions involved special mysteries and rites as well as secret knowledge and wisdom. Sadly, some of these occult philosophies were finding their way into the church at Colosse. We can see Paul's concern over this in Colossians 2:1-4:

**I am struggling for you ... in order that you may know the mystery of God, namely, Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge... so that no one may deceive you by fine-sounding arguments (Colossians 2:1-4).**

Paul's words here indicate that the Colossians valued mystery, wisdom and knowledge, all of which Greek philosophy and religion typically valued. So, in response to the claims



of the false teachers in Colosse, Paul emphasized that true mystery, wisdom and knowledge were found only in Christ, and not in pagan religion.

Then, in Colossians 2:8 Paul explicitly identified pagan philosophy as his target and condemned it in no uncertain terms:

**See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ (Colossians 2:8).**

Here, Paul directly labeled the false teaching hollow and deceptive philosophy. As we have seen, in typical Greek usage the word “philosophy” referred to religious speculations based on traditions, not to purely intellectual or rational study.

These verses strongly suggest that the false teachers in Colosse were enamored with beliefs and practices based in Greek religion and occult mysticism. To gain acceptance in the church, they probably embraced some elements of Christianity. But they clearly did not embrace Christianity as it was taught by the apostles, or else they would not have relied on occult tradition as the basis of their system.

The pagan philosophy advocated by the false teachers in Colosse also seems to have included elements of asceticism. Asceticism is an improper avoidance of physical pleasure. It is often rooted in the mistaken idea that pleasure is immoral, and it sometimes goes so far as to advocate inflicting physical pain on oneself. Paul denounced such asceticism in Colossians 2:20-23. Paul wrote:

**Since you died with Christ to the basic principles of this world, why ... do you submit to its rules: “Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!”? ... Such regulations indeed have an appearance of wisdom, with ... their harsh treatment of the body, but they lack any value in restraining sensual indulgence (Colossians 2:20-23).**

Paul objected to the ascetic practices in Colosse for at least two reasons. First, their asceticism was based on the basic principles of the world. As we will see later in this lesson, this language refers to spiritual beings and angelic powers. Second, it was of no value in resisting sin, and thus provided no benefits.

In summary then, the false teachers in Colosse tried to mix the church’s teachings with Greek traditions that were supposed to bring wisdom and strengthen believers against temptation. But in reality, the wisdom they offered was false, their practices were worthless, and their teachings denied the supremacy of Christ.

In addition to promoting Greek philosophy, the false teachers in Colosse incorporated many practices based on Jewish law. However, their use and understanding of Jewish law departed both from traditional Judaism and from proper Christian practices.

## JEWISH LAW

As we have seen in other lessons, Paul upheld the Mosaic law. And he was willing to accept and participate in many traditional Jewish practices for the sake of the gospel. So, if the false teachers in Colosse had employed the Law in a valid way, Paul would not have criticized their use of it. His criticisms indicate that the false teachers were using Jewish teachings and practices in corrupt ways.

In Colossians 2:16 Paul referred to a number of Jewish practices that the false teachers abused when he wrote:

**Do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day (Colossians 2:16).**

Evidently, the false teachers in Colosse stressed certain practices derived from the Old Testament law. These included observances of the Jewish calendar such as religious festivals, New Moon celebrations and the Sabbath day, as well as dietary restrictions. But they did not observe these Old Testament regulations in the way prescribed by the Mosaic law, nor did they apply them in the way that the apostles did. On the contrary, Paul declared that their practices distorted Old Testament law and endangered the eternal destinies of those who followed them. As he wrote in Colossians 2:17-18:

**These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ. Do not let anyone who delights in false humility and the worship of angels disqualify you for the prize (Colossians 2:17-18).**

The Mosaic Law did not associate holy days with the worship of angels, but with the worship of God. And it did not advocate a special diet as a means of humility or asceticism, but as a sign of being set apart as God's special people. The false teachers, however, had corrupted these laws, using them in idolatrous worship and pagan asceticism.

In Colossians 2:11-12, Paul added circumcision to the list of Jewish laws the false teachers abused:

**In him you were also circumcised ... not with a circumcision done by the hands of men but with the circumcision done by Christ, having been buried with him in baptism (Colossians 2:11-12).**

Apparently, the false teachers in Colosse were advocating a form of Christian circumcision. So, Paul associated circumcision and Christian baptism in order to teach the Colossians that because they had been baptized they did not need to be circumcised.

In short, in Colossians Paul wrote against abuses of the Mosaic law; he did not write against the law itself. Elsewhere, Paul affirmed that the law of Moses is a proper basis for Christian morality and practice and that it teaches us many true things about God. But here in Colossians he concentrated on refuting the specific teachings and

practices of the false teachers, condemning the ways that they had corrupted particular statutes in the law and insisting that the church reject these corruptions.

Besides employing Greek philosophy and adopting practices based on Jewish law, the false teachers in Colosse promoted the worship of spiritual beings, encouraging Christians to venerate and appease these powers.

## **SPIRITUAL BEINGS**

That the Colossian church was courting the worship of spiritual powers is evident in at least three ways: First, Paul wrote of the worship of angels. Second, he addressed the matter of rulers and authorities. And third, he dealt with problems related to the basic principles of this world. We should begin by looking at his mention of angel worship.

According to the Bible, angels are God's servants. And they have always played a role in creation. God delegates many jobs to them, from spiritual warfare, to influencing national politics, to delivering messages to his people, to caring for the earthly needs of believers. And the early church was well aware of these roles. As we read in Hebrews 1:14:

**Are not all angels ministering spirits sent to serve those who will inherit salvation? (Hebrews 1:14).**

Angels really are ministering spirits, and it is important to recognize their work. But according to the false teachers in Colosse, angels were much more than ministers; they were cosmic powers, oracles that revealed mysterious teachings to those who would perform their cultic rites and worship them. Paul directly condemned these practices in Colossians 2:18 where he wrote:

**Do not let anyone who delights in ... the worship of angels disqualify you for the prize. Such a person goes into great detail about what he has seen, and his unspiritual mind puffs him up with idle notions (Colossians 2:18).**

The false teachers claimed to have received visions from angels, and on this basis they encouraged other Christians to complete the proper rituals so that they might receive similar visions.

And perhaps the false teachers really had experienced visions, though these would have been from demons rather than from God's holy angels. Alternatively, they may simply have experienced self-induced or even drug-induced ecstatic trances. Or they might even have been lying.

Whatever the case, this exaggerated view of the power and influence of angels was not uncommon in the ancient world. Some Jewish teachers maintained comparable ideas about angels. And some Greek philosophies taught similar things about their oracles and astral powers. Sadly, the familiarity of these ideas to the Colossian Christians probably made the false teachings sound reasonable, allowing these false doctrines to gain a foothold in the Colossian church.

Now that we have looked at Paul's direct references to the worship of angels, we should turn to his discussion of rulers and authorities. In the language of the first century, the terms "powers" and "authorities" referred to spiritual beings such as angels.

As we have seen, the false teachers in Colosse encouraged believers to worship angels and spiritual beings. Paul responded to this heresy by emphasizing Christ's superiority over every power and authority in heaven and on earth. He wrote of Jesus' supremacy in Colossians 1:16:

**For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him (Colossians 1:16).**

Here Paul mentioned thrones, powers, rulers and authorities. Thrones and powers translate forms of the Greek words *thronos* and *kuriotēs*. Both these words commonly referred to human kings and other earthly rulers, but they could also refer to spiritual beings. Rulers and authorities, in turn, translate forms of the Greek words *archē* and *exousia*, words that usually refer to invisible spiritual powers such as angels and demons.

In the worldview of the false teachers in Colosse, the angelic and demonic spiritual authorities were significantly greater than their earthly human counterparts. The false teachers greatly exaggerated the power of angels and demons, so much so that they attributed to these invisible rulers actions and abilities that in reality belong to Christ alone.

Paul pointed out their error by praising Christ as the Lord of all creation. Rather than distinguishing between the spiritual and earthly authorities, Paul treated them as one, indicating that the spiritual and the earthly were far more similar than they were different. They were both created, and both were inferior to Christ. The real contrast to be drawn was not of the spiritual over the earthly, as the false teachers insisted, but of Christ over all. Again, as he said in Colossians 1:16:

**For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth (Colossians 1:16).**

Paul went on to say that the spiritual forces and Christ were in direct conflict. The false teachers thought that worshiping Christ was compatible with worshiping spiritual authorities. But Paul indicated that regardless of how the false teachers envisioned the spiritual beings they worshiped, the truth was that only demons allow themselves to be worshiped. God's holy angels have no part in such idolatry. And Christ does not permit the worship of his enemies.

Paul addressed this point in Colossians 2:15 where he wrote:

**Having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross (Colossians 2:15).**

Through the cross of Jesus Christ, God disarmed and triumphed over the spiritual powers and authorities. In other words, the spiritual powers and authorities opposed God in spiritual war — they were rebellious, evil spirits, enemies of God. They were demons, not holy angels. But through Jesus Christ, God had stripped these demons of their ability to fight and had humiliated them in defeat. These fallen, powerless, defeated demons were the spiritual powers worshiped by the false teachers in Colosse, the ones to which Paul referred as “rulers and authorities.”

Now that we have explored Paul’s mention of angels and of spiritual rulers and authorities, we are in a position to see how Paul spoke of the basic principles of this world. As we have already said, this was yet another phrase that referred to spiritual beings.

In the first century the Greek term *stoicheia*, which may be translated “basic principles,” commonly referred to the gods and spiritual powers that were associated with the stars and planets. *Stoicheia* was also used to refer to the four basic physical elements: earth, wind, fire and water. These basic principles or elements were thought to influence and even control the fates of men and women.

Paul clearly used *stoicheia* in this way in Galatians 4:8-9, where he wrote:

**Formerly, when you did not know God, you were slaves to those who by nature are not gods... how is it that you are turning back to those weak and miserable principles? (Galatians 4:8-9).**

Here, the word “principles” translates the Greek word *stoicheia*, and it refers to those who by nature are not gods. That is, it refers to the demons that masquerade as pagan gods. This same meaning of *stoicheia* is also the one Paul intended in Colossians 2:8, where he condemned these basic principles:

**See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ (Colossians 2:8).**

Paul pointed to the basic principles or *stoicheia* as the basis for the philosophy of the false teachers. In other words, he was arguing that the religious traditions of the false teachers should be rejected because they appealed to false gods.

Interestingly, similar ideas about the elements and spiritual powers were held by some branches of Judaism, especially during the intertestamental period. This seems to have set the stage for the Christian heresy that appeared in Colosse in Paul’s day. The false teachers in Colosse appear to have combined Jewish legalism, pagan religion, and Christianity, and to have encouraged the worship of these astral or cosmic powers commonly known as basic principles or *stoicheia*.

The church in Colosse faced some real challenges in the first century. Unlike other churches they apparently had never received apostolic training. Although the church had been planted by godly men, it had not been solidly grounded in the theology of the apostles. This made the Colossian Christians particularly vulnerable to false teaching. So, when false teachers began to bombard them with corruptions of Judaism

and pagan idolatry, it was hard for them to tell the difference between truth and heresy. Wisely, they recognized their problem and appealed to Paul for help.

## STRUCTURE AND CONTENT

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Now that we have surveyed the background to Paul's letter to the Colossian church, we should turn to our second topic: the structure and content of Paul's letter to the Colossians.

Paul's letter to the Colossians can be divided into four major sections: A salutation in 1:1-2; encouragements of thanksgiving and intercession in 1:3-14; the main body dealing with the supremacy of Christianity in 1:15-4:6; and final greetings in 4:7-18.

### SALUTATION

The salutation in 1:1-2 identifies the apostle Paul as the authoritative author of this letter and mentions that the letter also comes from Paul's disciple Timothy. It is clear that Paul is the primary author because only he signed the letter. Also included in the salutation is a short blessing that functions as a greeting.

### ENCOURAGEMENTS

The encouragements of thanksgiving and intercession found in 1:3-14 follow reports about the Colossian church that Paul received from Epaphras. Epaphras was the minister who founded the church in Colosse. You will recall that he also spent time with Paul during his imprisonment. While visiting Paul, Epaphras informed the apostle of the faith and love of the Colossian believers, and the two men spent much time in prayer for the Colossian church. So, when Paul wrote to them, he told them how he continually thanked God for their faith and salvation. And he let them know of his constant prayer that the Lord would bless them especially by giving them spiritual discernment and by strengthening them to do good works.

### FINAL GREETINGS

In the closing portion of Colossians, the section of final greetings in 4:7-18, Paul sent greetings to the Colossians from the many people who were with him in prison. The closing indicates that Paul sent this letter to the Colossians in the care of Tychicus and Onesimus. Tychicus also delivered the letter to the Ephesians, and Onesimus delivered the letter to Philemon. This seems to indicate that all three letters — Colossians, Ephesians and Philemon — were written and delivered at approximately the same time.

The closing also mentions a letter to the church in Laodicea and instructs the Colossians to read that letter as well as to share their own letter with the Laodiceans. This lets us know that even though Paul wrote these letters to specific people in particular circumstances, he also intended them to be applicable to different audiences. As we will see in a later lesson, it is possible that Paul's letter to the Ephesians is the very one mentioned here as the letter to the Laodiceans.

## **SUPREMACY OF CHRISTIANITY**

The main body of Paul's letter to the Colossians begins in 1:15 and runs through 4:6. This section details the supremacy of Christianity over the religion of the false teachers.

Paul's discussion of the supremacy of Christianity falls roughly into four main subdivisions: first, the supremacy of Christ in 1:15-20; second, the supremacy of Christ's ministers in 1:21-2:5; third, the supremacy of salvation in Christ in 2:6-23; and fourth, the supremacy of Christian living in 3:1-4:6. We will briefly survey each of these sections beginning with the first section, which focuses on the supremacy of Christ himself.

### **Supremacy of Christ**

False teachers were trying to persuade the Colossian church to worship cosmic, spiritual powers. And they were encouraging an ascetic lifestyle, thinking that such harsh living would placate the spiritual powers and reap some benefit from these false gods. So, Paul began to refute these heresies by showing that Christ is supreme over all other so-called gods.

On the one hand, Paul insisted that Christ is the king of all creation and that he possess all perfections and authority. On the other hand, Paul taught that the basic principles of the world are incapable of delivering the blessings of salvation and are unworthy of reverence.

Paul listed many important aspects of the supremacy of Christ in Colossians 1:15-20, and most of these details contrast with the false teachings in Colosse. Among the details Paul outlined here, he spoke of Christ as the image of God in Colossians 1:15, the firstborn over all creation also in Colossians 1:15, the agent of creation in Colossians 1:16, the supreme Lord in Colossians 1:18, God incarnate in Colossians 1:19, and the only reconciler in Colossians 1:20.

Paul began by saying that Christ is the image of the invisible God. This description placed Christ in stark contrast to the gods of the false teachers. Listen to how Paul described Jesus in Colossians 1:15-16:

**He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation...  
all things were created by him and for him (Colossians 1:15-16).**

Although the Scriptures speak many times of all human beings as the image of God, here Paul had in mind something that was unique about Jesus, something associated with his power and authority over creation. He had in mind the way the false teachers in Colosse used the expression “image of God” as they borrowed it from Greek philosophy.

In at least some Greek philosophies of Paul's day, the universe itself was thought to be God's image, meaning that it was the greatest revelation of God and that one could obtain knowledge and wisdom through its revelation. We find references to this idea in writings as old as Plato's *Timaeus*, which is from the fourth century B.C., as well as in Gnostic writings about the god Thrice Great Hermes that come from the second and third century A.D.

So, whereas the false teachers looked to the planets and elements as the image of God, Paul pointed to Christ as the image of God. He adopted this Greek philosophical meaning of the term “image of God” in order to show that Christ, and not the demons worshiped by the false teachers, was the ultimate revelation of God, the one to whom believers should look for greater wisdom and knowledge of God.

Second, Paul mentioned that Christ is the firstborn over all creation. Again, Paul chose his words carefully to refute the false teachers. Listen again to what he wrote about Christ in Colossians 1:15-16:

**He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation...  
all things were created by him and for him (Colossians 1:15-16).**

The Greek term *prōtotokos*, here translated “firstborn,” often referred to superiority and authority rather than to order of birth.

In the ancient world, the firstborn child in a family was not necessarily the one who was born first. Rather, the firstborn was the one who had the greatest rights of inheritance. He was typically the one who would lead the family after his father's death. For instance, the oldest male child was considered the “firstborn” even if he had older sisters. And beyond this, a younger male child could become the firstborn if the oldest son was demoted from his position for some reason.

Now, we should point out that some rather prominent cults have wrongly understood this term “firstborn” to indicate that Christ was actually “born” before the world was created. That is, they believe that Christ has always been a creature so that he is not equal to God the Father in power and authority. But Paul associated Christ's status as “firstborn” with his authority and supremacy over all creation, and said nothing about a time when Jesus did not exist.

When Paul said that Christ was the firstborn over all creation, he meant that Christ was the one who possessed the birthright of the Father, not that Christ was born or created before all others. He did not mean that Christ was part of creation, but that Christ was Lord over it. The false teachers had no power or authority to give any blessings to anyone. Christ, and Christ alone, was the firstborn, the one who inherited all the blessings of God and who alone could give them to others.

Third, Paul said that Christ was the agent of creation, the one through whom God created the universe. Jewish mysticism often attributed prominent roles to the angels in creation — roles that the Bible ascribes to God and to Christ, but not to angels. And in Greek philosophy, the elements and other astral powers were commonly assigned similar



roles. But Paul insisted that Christ was the only agent of creation, and that these other powers were inferior to him and subject to him. Listen to what he wrote in Colossians 1:16:

**For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him (Colossians 1:16).**

As we have already seen, the words “rulers and authorities” refer to spiritual powers such as the demons worshiped by the false teachers. And according to Paul, these rulers and authorities are all subject to Christ. Christ’s priority as the agent of creation makes him far superior to everything within creation.

Fourth, Christ is the supreme Lord because God placed him as head over the church. Listen to Paul’s words in Colossians 1:18:

**He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy (Colossians 1:18).**

Paul argued that Christ has been given special status in the church and among the dead “so that in everything he might have supremacy.” The Father sought to honor the Son, and to place him as Lord over all. Therefore, any system that seeks to supplant or qualify Christ’s unique sovereignty must be false.

Fifth, Paul explained that Christ is God incarnate. This remarkable statement surpasses any claim made about the so-called rulers and authorities of Greek paganism and Jewish mysticism. Listen to Paul’s words in Colossians 1:19:

**For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him (Colossians 1:19).**

All the fullness of God dwells in Christ, making Christ the incarnation of the supreme God. The rulers and authorities worshiped by the false teachers in Colosse were lesser spiritual beings. Although they were sometimes called gods by Greek philosophy, they were not generally thought of as supreme deities.

By contrast, all the fullness of God dwells in Jesus Christ. This means that Christ is the incarnation of the God who created the universe, the one whom all others must obey as Lord. This makes Christ far superior to the lesser spiritual beings worshipped by the false teachers.

Finally, Paul spoke of Christ as the only reconciler between God and man. Paul explained this fact about Christ in Colossians 1:19-20:

**For God was pleased ... through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross (Colossians 1:19-20).**

God plans “through Jesus to reconcile to himself all things.” That is, Jesus Christ is the agent and the means through whom God is purging sin from the world and making peace with humanity.

The feeble powers worshiped by the false teachers were demons concerned with stealing glory and authority from Christ and using it to tyrannize their worshipers. Their goals were petty, and they lacked the ability to bless their worshipers in a meaningful way. But Christ was the way to God. The gospel Paul preached was that God was restoring all of creation to a sinless, pristine, and eternally blessed condition. And he was doing this through Jesus Christ, and only through Jesus Christ. Through Jesus alone sins could be forgiven and God's favor gained. There was no need to bother with the petty and powerless spirits of the false teachers. Access to God and his eternal blessings was freely available in Jesus.

In at least these six ways — Christ as the image of God, the firstborn over all creation, the agent of creation, the supreme Lord, God incarnate, and the only reconciler — Christ is superior to all the so-called gods worshipped by the false teachers in Colosse.

## Supremacy of Christ's Ministers

After demonstrating the supremacy of Christ over the spiritual powers, Paul asserted the supremacy of Christ's ministers. This portion of his argument appears in Colossians 1:21-2:5.

Paul argued that because Christ was superior to the false gods, Christ's ministers were superior to those who served the false gods. Paul's argument consisted of five main ideas: the reconciliation accomplished through the Christian gospel, which he mentioned in Colossians 1:21-23 and in 2:5; Paul's own altruism in Colossians 1:24; Paul's divine commission in Colossians 1:25; the superior revelation provided by the gospel in Colossians 1:25-28 and in 2:2-4; and the empowerment of Christ's ministers, which Paul addressed in Colossians 1:29-2:1. Paul began by focusing on the reconciliation that the Colossians had already experienced through the gospel, as we read in Colossians 1:22-23:

**He has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation ... This is the gospel that you heard ... and of which I, Paul, have become a servant (Colossians 1:22-23).**

Christ's ministers are superior because they preach a gospel that actually reconciles believers to God.

The false teachers in Colosse encouraged people to placate demons, and perhaps they also offered reconciliation with God. But in reality, no reconciliation ever took place for them because their so-called gospel had no power to save.

By contrast, the Colossian believers had already experienced the true reconciliation that comes through the true gospel preached by God's ministers. They were already forgiven and stood before God clothed in the righteousness of Christ. This should have encouraged them to trust in Paul's word and to reject the false teachers.

Second, Paul pointed to his own altruism, speaking of his suffering on behalf of the church. As he wrote in Colossians 1:24:

**I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ's afflictions (Colossians 1:24).**

As we saw in a prior lesson, Paul's suffering benefited the church by providing a powerful witness to the gospel, encouraging the church, and completing the sufferings of Christ. By contrast, the false teachers in Colosse were neither imprisoned nor persecuted. By highlighting his willingness to suffer on behalf of the church, Paul made it clear that Christ's ministers were more altruistic than the false teachers.

Third, Paul spoke of his divine commission. Unlike the self-appointed false teachers in Colosse, Paul had been appointed to his apostleship by the Lord himself. Paul described his commission in Colossians 1:25:

**I have become [the church's] servant by the commission God gave me to present to you the word of God in its fullness (Colossians 1:25).**

As we see here, God himself called Paul as an apostle.

In his younger days, Paul had been a zealous persecutor of the church. But then the risen Lord Jesus had appeared to Paul and converted him. At this time, Jesus also appointed Paul to be his apostle, giving him authority to speak on Jesus' behalf. This meant that Paul's authority was far superior to that of the false teachers.

Paul described their teachings in Colossians 2:8, where he wrote:

**See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ (Colossians 2:8).**

The false teachers relied on ideas that idolatrous human beings had invented. Unlike Paul, they had not been granted authority to speak for God, and had not been called by God to teach the church.

Fourth, the revelation that Paul had received was superior to that attested by the false teachers. Listen, for example, to Paul's words in Colossians 2:4:

**I tell you this so that no one may deceive you by fine-sounding arguments (Colossians 2:4).**

Paul described the words of the false teachers as "deceptive." And by contrast, his own words revealed the truth, helping Christians avoid the false teachers' deception.

In fact, according to Galatians 1:15-18, Paul had spent three years in the desert of Arabia and in Damascus receiving revelations from God. The false teachers, however, relied on traditions that had been passed down through human hands. This made Paul's revelations far superior to those of the false teachers.

Now, it was very significant that Paul's revelations came from God, that they were not mere human inventions like the teachings of the heretics in Colosse. But even

more importantly, the content of Paul's revelations was superior to the false teachings in Colosse. In his letter to the Colossian church, Paul described his revelations as a "mystery" that God had revealed to him, and as "treasures of wisdom and knowledge." And Paul did not keep these treasures to himself — they were the very gospel that he preached. They were the truths of reconciliation to God and participation in his kingdom, on the basis of Christ's sacrifice, received by means of faith. This proclamation was better than anything the false teachers offered.

Fifth, Paul wrote of the superior empowerment of Christ's ministers, speaking of the fact that God gave power to his ministers. Paul did not labor in his own strength. Rather, God empowered and motivated Paul to work and to suffer as his apostle. The Holy Spirit gifted Paul with astounding gifts, providing him with words to speak and opportunities to speak them, and miracles to confirm his witness in order that Paul would advance the kingdom of God on earth. As Paul wrote in Colossians 1:29:

**I labor, struggling with all his energy, which so powerfully works in me (Colossians 1:29).**

Paul's authority, words and power came from God himself. And the false teachers in Colosse could not compare. Their ministry and their message were devoid of power and worthless in meaning.

In summary, then, we see that Paul emphasized the superiority of Christ's ministers by writing about the reconciliation accomplished through the Christian gospel, their altruism, their divine commission, the revelation they had received, and their empowerment by the Holy Spirit.

## **Supremacy of Salvation in Christ**

After emphasizing the supremacy of Christ and his ministers, Paul insisted on the supremacy of salvation in Christ in 2:6-23.

Paul's discussion of the supremacy of salvation in Christ divided into two main sections: his praise for life in union with Christ in Colossians 2:6-15, and his condemnation of life lived under subjection to the elements in Colossians 2:16-23.

In the first section, Paul described several benefits of salvation in union with Christ beginning with the benevolent and invigorating aspects of the Lordship of Christ in Colossians 2:6-10.

In these verses, Paul indicated that because Christ is our Lord, we are rooted, built up and strengthened in him, and we feel great thankfulness toward him as a result. Those who followed the false teachers were captives to the petty spiritual powers they worshiped, but those under Christ's Lordship were given authority to rule with him. As Paul wrote in Colossians 2:9-10:

**For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form, and you have been given fullness in Christ, who is the head over every power and authority (Colossians 2:9-10).**

Christ has divine authority over every other power. And because believers are united to Christ, they share in that divine authority.

Second, Paul also mentioned the spiritual vitality that believers have because we are in union with Christ. Paul explained this blessing in Colossians 2:11-13. For example, in Colossians 2:12 he wrote:

**[You were] buried with him in baptism and raised with him through your faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead (Colossians 2:12).**

Because we are united to Christ, believers participate not only in Christ's death, resulting in our forgiveness, but also in Christ's resurrection and life, resulting in the rebirth of our spirits.

Third, because believers are united to Christ, we obtain forgiveness from sin, and we are freed from having to merit salvation through works of the law. Paul expressed these ideas in Colossians 2:13-15. As he wrote in Colossians 2:13-14:

**He forgave us all our sins, having canceled the written code ... nailing it to the cross (Colossians 2:13-14).**

God's law condemns fallen mankind to death. But because we are united to Christ in his death, we have already died the death that the law requires. We have served our sentence so that we are now free from all condemnation.

Against the backdrop of these blessings in Christ, Paul condemned the message of the false teachers in Colosse. Life in union with Christ is characterized by the blessings of Christ's lordship. But life under subjection to the elements places one under the tyrannical lordship of mere creatures. As Paul wrote in Colossians 2:16-18, this results not only in judgment, but also in the loss of the blessings Christ offers.

Further, whereas union with Christ produces spiritual vitality, subjection to the elements results in separation from Christ and therefore in spiritual weakness. As Paul indicated in Colossians 2:19:

**He has lost connection with the Head, from whom the whole body, supported and held together by its ligaments and sinews, grows as God causes it to grow (Colossians 2:19).**

Finally, while union with Christ grants forgiveness and frees one from the Law's condemnation, subjection under the elements led only to asceticism. Paul commented on the worthlessness of such asceticism in Colossians 2:23:

**Such regulations indeed have an appearance of wisdom, with their self-imposed worship, their false humility and their harsh treatment of the body, but they lack any value in restraining sensual indulgence (Colossians 2:23).**

Subjection to the false gods of the heretical teachers in Colosse resulted in harsh living that was of no use against sin. Although such harsh living was supposed to lead to blessings, the demons had no power to bless anyone. By contrast, union with Christ provided freedom rather than subjection, and truly destroyed the power of sin over the believer.

Through these contrasting aspects of life in union with Christ and life lived under subjection to the elements, Paul demonstrated that the salvation offered in the true Christian gospel was far better than the so-called blessings offered by the false teachers in Colosse.

## Supremacy of Christian Living

Finally, after addressing the supremacy of Christ and his ministers, and of the salvation offered in Christ's gospel, Paul turned to the supremacy of Christian living in Colossians 3:1-4:6. In this section, Paul demonstrated that the Christian lifestyle is far more ethical than the lifestyle advocated by the false teachers.

The false teachers in Colosse seem to have been very concerned with ethical living. After all, the goal of their harsh living was to avoid fleshly indulgence. And in some respects, it may have been that their ethical standards or goals agreed with those of the Christian church regarding these kinds of sins. But there was a problem with their approach. Simply put, asceticism doesn't work. The fact of the matter is that fallen human beings lack the will power to resist sin. So, no matter how hard we fight to avoid sin, we always lose. This means that in order to live ethically, in order to obey the ethical standards that God has set for us, we have to rely on something bigger and more powerful than ourselves.

In some ways, Paul's teachings on Christian living resembled the teaching of the false teachers. In fact, Paul even went so far as to say that it was right to focus on the heavenly and spiritual and not on the earthly. Listen to his words in Colossians 3:2:

**Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things (Colossians 3:2).**

According to Paul, we are to value the spiritual and heavenly things more highly than the earthly things. This perspective was also shared by the ascetic teachers, at least superficially. Also, like the ascetic teachers, Paul taught strongly against fleshly indulgence. For instance, in Colossians 3:5 he wrote:

**Put to death ... whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry (Colossians 3:5).**

Paul agreed with the false teachers that fleshly indulgence is evil. But he disagreed on how to avoid such sin.

Paul and the false teachers also differed in many other ways. For example, although the false teachers ostensibly believed that they should focus on heavenly things, their teachings that Paul criticized were all rather earthly. Although they may have had

the goal of spirituality, they tried to reach that goal through a constant focus on earthly matters. In Colossians 2:21, Paul summarized their teachings as being:

**Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch! (Colossians 2:21).**

Although the ascetics claimed to point to the spiritual realm, their teachings focused on mundane, earthly matters.

The ascetics seem to have been so preoccupied with their ascetic practices that they did not bother to emphasize ideals that were truly heavenly and spiritual. Although their goal may have been spiritual, all their efforts were spent on earthly things.

Paul, on the other hand, taught specific ways that believers could focus on and strive for things that were spiritually oriented. He insisted that they cease their earthly sins, but he also knew that this was impossible from a fallen, human perspective. Listen to his words in Colossians 3:9-11.

**You have taken off your old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator... Christ is all, and is in all (Colossians 3:9-11).**

Paul explained that the key to ethical living is this: Believers are united to Christ — Christ is in all. And because of this union with Christ, we have “new selves” or “new natures.” And we are being inwardly renewed by God. This union and renewal enable us to live ethically.

The false teachers were not true believers. They did not believe the gospel, and therefore they were not united to Christ. They did not have new natures, and they were not being renewed by God. As a result, all their attempts to avoid sin were doomed to failure.

Believers, however, are united to Christ, and therefore we are empowered to obey God's ethical standards. But Paul did not stop with this idea. Rather, he pushed on to offer some practical ways that believers can rely on God's power rather than on their own will power to overcome sin. Listen to his instructions in Colossians 3:12:

**Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience (Colossians 3:12).**

Believers can succeed in ethical living by emphasizing heavenly, spiritual virtues like compassion and kindness rather than by focusing on the sins we are trying to avoid. And we can be motivated to live ethically by focusing on God's love for us and choice of us rather than by concentrating our efforts on placating the whims of false gods.

Paul's strategy for ethical living was superior to that of the false teachers in two very important ways: First, it was effective because it relied on God's power rather than on our own. Second, it was effective because it focused attention away from sin and earthly matters and onto positive virtues and spiritual values. And the bottom line was that Paul's strategy worked. Unlike ascetic practices which are of no value against sin, Paul's method actually made ethical living possible.

Paul's letter to the Colossians was designed to address the idolatrous heresies introduced by the false teachers. The false teachers advocated pagan ways of relating to the spiritual powers, and ineffective ways of pursuing righteousness. In response to these problems, Paul preached Christ. He preached the supremacy of Christ as lord and king and the superiority of Christ's ministers. He preached the incomparable value of salvation in Christ and victory over sin through Christian living. At each and every point, he made it clear that what the false teachers promised, only Christ could deliver.

## MODERN APPLICATION

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Now that we have explored the background of Paul's letter to the Colossians and its structure and content, we should turn our attention to our third subject: the modern application of Paul's letter to the Colossians. How can we, as modern Christians, apply these ancient teachings to our lives?

Although there are many ways we might rightly apply Paul's teaching to our modern lives, we will focus on the two types of application that most concerned Paul and his original audience: the necessity of remaining loyal to Christ alone; and the value of focusing on spiritual matters on a daily basis. Let's begin by looking at the necessity of remaining loyal to Christ alone.

### LOYALTY TO CHRIST

In the Colossian church, the believers were being encouraged to mix their worship of Christ with the worship of other spiritual powers. Although these other spiritual powers were not presented as demons, we have seen that any power they actually had, and any benefits that actually came to their worshipers, were demonic. But whether these powers were demons or elements or angels, the Colossians should not have worshiped them. Sadly, the social climate of the first century made it hard for the Colossians to see the truth of this matter.

During the first century the dominant religious ideas in the Roman Empire were polytheistic. That is, most people believed that there were multiple gods and spiritual powers. And most societies within the Empire not only acknowledged the existence of many gods, but also worshiped many gods. For most people with the Roman Empire at this time, it was normal to worship the dominant gods of the civic cult such as Zeus as well as local gods and even household gods. So, although Christ demanded that believers worship him exclusively, there was great social pressure encouraging the early Christians to worship other gods as well.

In fact, when the Roman Empire began to persecute Christians during the first century, it was largely because the Christians refused to acknowledge and to worship the gods of the civic cult. It was argued that the Christians had angered the gods by refusing to worship them and that the gods would punish the whole of Roman society if the



Christians were not called to account. The Romans did not demand that Christians stop worshiping Christ, but only that they also worship the Roman gods.

From the first-century Roman perspective, one could worship many gods and without any sense of conflicting allegiance. But Christ demands exclusive worship. If we worship Christ we cannot worship anything else. This is why Paul insisted that the Colossians remain steadfast in their faith. As he wrote in Colossians 1:22-23:

**[God] has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation — if you continue in your faith, established and firm, not moved from the hope held out in the gospel (Colossians 1:22-23).**

If we do not remain faithful to Christ, then we prove that we have not been truly reconciled to God. And if we are not reconciled to God, then we do not share in the hope held out in the gospel. Simply put, if we do not remain faithful to Christ, we are not saved. Loyalty to Christ is of utmost importance.

Sadly, our modern world frequently challenges our loyalty to Christ by presenting many different gods for us to worship. Polytheism can be found in eastern religions such as: Taoism, one of the three classical religions of China; Hinduism, the dominant religion of India; and Shinto, the traditional religion of Japan. And in the western world, the New Age movement has adopted many aspects of these eastern religions. Beyond this, Mormonism teaches that Mormons are gods in the making. Then, too, there are many smaller polytheistic religions, from tribal and folk religions in Africa and Asia to Scientology in Hollywood, California. The list could go on and on.

But modern Christians also face additional problems. For instance, some modern governments and societies persecute Christians if they remain loyal to Christ alone. This is why many of the churches in the People's Republic of China remain underground. And in Islamic nations, persecution against Christians often results in slavery and even death. But as horrifying as these persecutions may be, and as much as they may press us to reject our Lord, we must remain loyal to our Christ — even unto martyrdom — if we are to be reconciled to God.

In other modern societies, Christians are constantly pressured by atheism, so that they are encouraged to abandon all belief in God and Christ. Christianity is often ridiculed as a primitive and barbaric set of beliefs that cannot stand the scrutiny of science. Many believers who have not studied theology and science sufficiently are unable to provide answers to these challenges, and their faith is shaken.

In other cases, the philosophical relativism of modern society leads to a strong insistence on religious tolerance. As a result, all exclusive claims to truth and salvation are condemned. Paul taught that loyalty to Christ is the only way to salvation. But when modern Christians echo this idea, we are often accused of arrogance and intolerance. And we feel pressured by society to acknowledge other ways of finding eternal blessings.

But not all pressures come from outside the church. For instance, in some liberal Protestant churches, praise is now offered to Wisdom, or Sophia, who is personified as a female deity. Other liberal Protestant churches endorse the philosophical relativism of their societies, teaching that many or even all religions are valid paths to salvation — even if they deny Christ.

The truth is that no matter where we live it is likely that we feel pressures to be disloyal to Christ. These may be pressures to accept the validity of other religions and gods, or pressures to deny the God of the Bible. They may come from the government, from our schools, from our neighbors and friends, from our families, or even from our church leaders.

But if we are to remain true to Paul's teachings, we must reject these false notions and embrace Christ alone. Only Christ is worthy of worship, and only he offers true salvation and spiritual blessings. We must remain steadfast in our loyalty to Christ alone.

### **SPIRITUAL FOCUS**

Now that we have looked at the importance of remaining loyal to Christ alone, we should turn to our second type of modern application: the value of focusing on spiritual matters every day of our life. Although attention to earthly matters is of some value, we benefit most greatly when we approach life from a spiritual perspective.

When we come to faith in Christ, a miraculous thing happens — our spirits are renewed within us. Before we come to faith, we are dead on the inside, unable to respond positively to God. We are God's enemies not only because we have sinned against him and deserve his judgment, but also because we hate him and will not submit to him. But God loves us so much that he refuses to allow us to remain his enemies. And so, he sends the Holy Spirit to renew our spirits so that we are inwardly restored, and so that we eagerly repent of our sin and submit to our Lord. At the same time, the Spirit of God indwells us, uniting us to Christ, and guaranteeing our future blessings in him. Our salvation does not depend upon our earthly pursuits, but upon the spiritual realities of our restored spirits and our union with Christ. And it is for this reason that Paul encouraged the Colossians to focus less on earthly matters and more on spiritual ones.

Theologians often describe those who have not come to faith as unregenerate. By contrast, the term regenerate is applied to those who have faith. These terms identify the state of the spirit or soul of each person. To be unregenerate is to be spiritually dead, and to be regenerate is to be spiritually alive.

Those who are unregenerate are under God's judgment because of sin. Also, they have no moral ability; that is, they cannot do things that God counts as morally pure. Moreover, they have no moral desire; that is, they do not want to do things that God counts as morally pure. In short, the unregenerate are not saved, cannot save themselves, and do not want to be saved by God.

On the other hand, those who are regenerate are forgiven because they are united to Christ, who died for their sin according to the requirements of God's law. Further, their renewed spirits possess moral ability so that they are able to obey God, as well as moral desire so that they also want to obey God.

It is hard to overestimate the value of the spiritual change that takes place within us when we come to faith. Regeneration makes us new people. We are not just forgiven; we are also spiritually changed. Regeneration is the spiritual change that Paul described in Colossians 2:13, where he wrote:

**When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your sinful nature, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins (Colossians 2:13).**

We were once dead in our sins, meaning that we were under God's judgment. But then God made us alive and forgave our sins. We were also dead in our sinful nature, meaning that we had evil natures with no moral ability or desire. But again, God made us alive. As a result, we now have the ability to desire good and to do good.

Our old unregenerate spirits had no moral ability or desire. But our renewed spirits have both moral ability and desire. When we were spiritually dead, before we were regenerated and united to Christ the king, it would have been useless for us to focus on spiritual things, or "things above," even if we had wanted to. But now that we are regenerate, the most reasonable thing for us to do is to focus our new lives in a new direction. Our spirits have been made new; now we are spiritual people. And the most logical thing — and the most natural thing, and the most beneficial thing for us to do as spiritual people — is to focus on our spiritual lives. And so, Paul continued in Colossians 3:1-2 by writing this exhortation:

**Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things (Colossians 3:1-2).**

Because we are seated above with Christ, we should focus our minds on things that pertain to heaven. We are now aware of the true authority structure of the universe; we know how the world works and what things bring true blessings. And this knowledge should change the way we live our lives.

Now, at some points in history, Christians have mistakenly thought that when Paul said to focus on heavenly things and not on earthly things, he meant that we should withdraw from the normal human life in order to pursue heaven without distraction. The medieval ascetic monks are a good example of this type of thinking. Some lived as hermits, sequestered from the rest of society. Some sat in caves or on top of poles for huge periods of time. Others caused themselves physical harm. They earnestly believed that the best way to grow spiritually is to escape the influence of the normal, unspiritual world. But they were wrong. In fact, in some respects, they made the same mistakes that the false teachers in Colosse had made.

The famous educator Booker T. Washington, founder of the school that is now called Tuskegee University, is credited as the author of this American proverb:

**One man cannot hold another man down in the ditch without remaining down in the ditch with him.**

In many ways, Washington applied to human relations what Paul taught about the inner lives of Christians; that is to say, if we focus all our energies on suppressing our sinful desires, we are still focusing on sinful desires. Yes, suppressing sin is a good thing, even a good work. And Paul encouraged believers to put their fleshly sins to death. But Paul's point was not simply that we must adopt a new approach to earthly matters; it was also

that we should refocus our attention away from earthly matters and onto spiritual matters. But the “spiritual” or “heavenly” matters Paul had in mind require our participation in the world. Listen to his words in Colossians 3:12-16:

**Clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience... Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity. Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly (Colossians 3:12-16).**

To be heavenly minded is to focus on the one who has ascended to heaven, namely Christ, in order that we might be more like him while we are here on earth.

And notice the kinds of matters that Paul called “heavenly” or “spiritual.” Most of them are interactive virtues, virtues that are primarily, and in some cases only, expressed toward other people, such as compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience, forgiveness, love, and peace in the context of community. These virtues cannot be exercised apart from active life in the present world.

And in fact, in Colossians 3:16-4:6, Paul explained many different ways that believers can apply these virtues within the context of their many earthly relationships. For instance, he wrote that believers should teach and admonish one another by singing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs together. He directed wives to submit to their husbands, and husbands to love their wives. He instructed children to obey their parents, and parents to encourage their children. He exhorted slaves to be obedient and productive, and he commanded masters to treat their slaves in the same way that Jesus, who is the master of us all, treats his church. He asked for prayers that God would strengthen him as he proclaimed the gospel. And he directed the Colossians to be diligent and wise when their own opportunities for evangelism arose. All of these instructions pertain to “spiritual” or “heavenly” matters. And yet they can only be carried out through active involvement in the present world.

For Paul, to be heavenly or spiritually minded is to reflect on how wonderful heaven is right now, and to find ways of making the present world more like heaven. It is to concentrate on our new spiritual natures and on the good works that are appropriate to them. It is to do the same good works on earth that are always done in heaven. It is to love others, to forgive others, to be kind, and gentle, and humble. It is to treat others in the same way that Jesus treats them. In short, in order to focus on spiritual matters, we have to concentrate on building the kingdom of God — right here, right now, on this earth.

## CONCLUSION

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In this lesson we have taken a close look at the apostle Paul and his association with believers in Colosse. We have explored the background of Paul's letter to the

Colossians, as well as its structure and content. Finally, we have discussed the modern application of the teachings the Colossians received from Paul.

Paul's letter to the Colossians contains many important lessons for us today. It teaches us about Christ's supremacy, and of the high regard we should have for his apostles and their teachings. It explains our role in the kingdom of God and the great salvation we now enjoy. And it encourages us to live with spiritual attitudes as people who participate in heaven and work to bring our heavenly values to earth. As we move forward in our Christian lives, remembering the lessons Paul taught in this letter will help us maintain our faith and live as productive and blessed members of God's kingdom.

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**Dr. Reggie Kidd (Host)** is Professor of New Testament Emeritus at Reformed Theological Seminary. He received his M.A.R. and M.Div. from Westminster Theological Seminary and his Ph.D. in Christian Origins from Duke University. He is a member of the Evangelical Theological Society and is an ordained priest in The Episcopal Church. Dr. Kidd teaches at the Robert E. Webber Institute for Worship Studies and has served as a pastor and elder at multiple churches. He is the author of *With One Voice: Discovering Christ's Song in Our Worship* (BakerBooks, 2005) and has contributed to many other publications, including *The Spirit of the Reformation Study Bible* (Zondervan, 2003) and *The Reformation Study Bible* (Ligonier Ministries, 2005).

# Paul's Prison Epistles

LESSON  
TWO

Paul and the Colossians  
Faculty Forum



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# Paul's Prison Epistles

## Lesson Two: Paul and the Colossians

### Faculty Forum

With  
Dr. Reggie Kidd

Students  
Christopher Caudle  
Larry Gwaltney

### Question 1:

#### How did Paul decide which cities to visit?

**Student:** The list mentioned that Colossae was the least important city to get a letter from the apostle Paul. How did Paul decide which cities to visit? Was it by design or just more based on circumstances?

**Dr. Kidd:** That's a great question and it fascinates me that we would have in our Canon a letter not to a big, fabulous, big steeple church kind of place. It was Paul's missionary strategy, it appears, to go to major metropolitan areas to follow the travel patterns of his time and ultimately he was seeking to get to Rome. Colossae was when the sphere of influence was in the church was at Ephesus, so the church at Colossae seems to have been founded by following Paul's ministry in Ephesus and so it's a part of Paul's ministry in that area which was centered in a major metropolitan area. But the fact that he would write to a church that probably seemed pretty insignificant, I think, says something wonderful about the whole nature of Paul's mission and behind him, Jesus' mission. It's not that there aren't unimportant people and there aren't unimportant little cow-town churches as far as the Lord is concerned. Paul's heart was for people, important and unimportant, Jewish and gentile, male and female, slave and free. So, it was very much a part of his heart, which was shaped like Jesus' heart that would make him want to write to these folks. Especially when he sees an opportunity in ministering to them, to articulate his gospel at a deeper level. I mean they're messing around with venerations and spirits and stuff. I think it really became an occasion for him to think a little bit more out loud and on paper about ideas that were already in his theology.

### Question 2:

#### If we discover another letter from Paul, should we add it to the Bible?

**Student:** Just talking about this has got me thinking about something else. If he had written to one small town he may have well written to another small town in records that we don't have. Now, what would happen if we were to uncover one of these today, let's say he wrote to Laodicea, do we just stick that in the Bible? How would that be determined?

**Dr. Kidd:** Well, it would be really interesting if something like that happened and I think we always have to be open to the possibility that something like that might happen. One of the things that we'd also have to recognize is the situation that existed for the first at least, half millennium of the church's life that enabled the Canon to be acknowledged with the unanimity that it was acknowledged. That situation, those circumstances don't exist. We are at the beginning of the third millennium, and around 1000 the Eastern and the Western churches divided and then the middle of the second millennium the Catholic and Protestant church divided among themselves. And it would be very, very, very difficult for the church at large to come together and deliberate in charity and before the Lord in prayer, under his Word about whether the letter that got surfaced really did come from Paul. And, just what we should do about it. It's really quite possible. It's more than likely that Paul wrote letters that we didn't get into our Canon and I think the best posture we can take is to be grateful for what's here, assumed that since nothing has really emerged since Paul wrote that has credible claim to be his that we got that God wanted us to have, but we always have to be open to the prospect that something else could emerge. But, it would take a lot of time for something like that to be acknowledged as really being his.

### **Question 3:**

#### **How common was syncretism in the ancient world?**

**Student:** Reggie, our lesson talks quite a bit really about how other beliefs and systems kind of mixed and merged with Christianity in Colossae and this is what Paul is talking about. My question is, is this a common thing in the ancient world? Does this happen in everyone's belief system?

**Dr. Kidd:** My goodness, Larry. That is like the number one issue that Israel always had to deal with. Coming out of Egypt, God had come in with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm to rescue his people from slavery. And while Moses is on the mountain getting the words from the finger of God to outline the terms of the relationship and while he was being given the instructions for the place that was to picture the presence of God with his people, the people are down there making a golden calf because they need to have in their own terms a picture of who their God is. And the cow or the bull that they brought, that was a conception they had brought with them from Egypt. So, they were trying, and they were like "here is your lord," the one who brought you out. So, Israel characteristically was syncretistic, trying to add worship of cultural artifacts along with the God who was revealing himself to them. It was the story of struggle over the Baals and Asherahs; it was what stole Solomon's heart away from the Lord through the gods that his thousands of wives introduced him to.

And what is so unique about Judaism and Christianity is that they call in their best voices for exclusive loyalty to one and only one Lord. And that's in contrast...like in

Paul's world, it was the Greek and the Romans who lived with syncretism; they were adding deities upon and deities and then reconciling worship of deities with philosophical systems. And what was striking about Jews was they kept calling one another to exclusive loyalty to Yahweh alone. What would distinguish Christians from the Jews was their recognizing that the God that was to be worshiped was three persons and not just one but they weren't becoming polytheists either; they weren't creating a new pantheon, they were simply recognizing that there was a deep texture to the nature of the deity who had been revealing himself all along.

#### **Question 4:**

#### **Did syncretism come just from Gentile converts, or also from Jewish Christians?**

**Student:** So, was Syncretism just primarily a problem that Gentile converts brought into the church or was this an ongoing struggle with Jews who recognized Jesus as Messiah?

**Dr. Kidd:** It was definitely a struggle that Jews wrestled with as well. In fact, if you go to Israel today and you go over to Tiberius, which was the large city on the southwest corner of the Sea of Galilee that Jesus just seemed to pretty much ignore, no record of his ever having gone in there, but there are ruins of an ancient Jewish synagogue that has on the floor a stunning mosaic of God as the pagan god Helios, the sun god, and he is surrounded by the signs of the zodiac. And there is a synagogue with a floor like that in Cephorus as well, which was just a couple miles away from Nazareth where Jesus was born. Now, those synagogues emerged probably three or four centuries or so after Jesus' birth because what seems to happen in Jewish worship in Palestine after Christians start coming in, after Constantine's mother Helena becomes a believer and they start building buildings to honor places where Jesus was that Jews start doing these depictions of God, which was just an extraordinary thing for Jews to do in view of the second commandment.

But there was very little written, in fact none that I am aware of that was written to articulate why they would do this. And so, modern scholars are having the conversation among themselves whether this was just pure selling out, syncretism or whether it was Jews trying to say, "No, it's not Helios. Who's really the Lord? It's our God." But what's striking is that they felt the need to depict in human terms who their God was, personally I think, prompted to do so by the emergence of Christianity worshiping God in a whole different way since he had taken on flesh for them. But it simply reflects the fact that Jews as well as Gentiles wrestled mightily with syncretism all the time. And that is what makes it interesting here in Colossians where you have people probably from a more pagan background but they are living in an environment where the likelihood is they have Jews who are also wrestling with how you reconcile exclusive loyalty to the true God with all these competing claims of powers and spiritual powers that are out there.

**Question 5:**  
**Why is syncretism dangerous?**

**Student:** Given that syncretism was so common in the ancient world, what makes it so dangerous? People were mistaken about lots of things. If there is one true God then why does it really matter if people are spending their time on things that are not true?

**Dr. Kidd:** Well, the scriptural God says he's a jealous God and he made us for a relationship with himself and it's an exclusive relationship and he puts it in terms of the intimacy of marriage. He says that the intention of marriage is exclusive, an exclusive relationship. So, I don't know that there is any more of a profound answer than that. He wants a relationship with us and he doesn't want our eyes focused on some other lover.

**Question 6:**  
**Is syncretism still an issue in the modern church?**

**Student:** What's gotten me thinking about all this, for instance, the only mercury I know about is the car but we talk about all these other ancient gods and I wonder if this has any relationship to today. For the modern person today is syncretism an issue?

**Dr. Kidd:** Well, one of the advantages that people in the ancient world had over the people in the modern and postmodern world is they at least were able to give names to their gods. They recognized that they were worshiping money in the form of the god "money" or they were worshiping fate or fortune or they would go to healing gods to get healing. We, because we live in the secular world where no really thoughtful person believes in the supernatural out there, we tend to worship without being able to acknowledge that it's worship. So, we worship things, we worship relationships, we worship success, we worship money, we worship power and prestige. But we are not really able to own that it is worship. And the great danger for the church is that we, just like people in the ancient world, can say, "I love God." But we can also be loving mammon, or we could be loving success or we can have other relationships that are in competition with the Lord. So, it's as much a problem for us as it was for them. If anything though it's just more difficult for us to name it because in the post-enlightenment West, we were supposed to have banished all the gods from the heavens and we are just left with ourselves.

**Question 7:**

**Are there real spiritual powers other than God, or are they just personified concepts?**

**Student:** Which way of thinking about this is more true: are there really spiritual powers that people in our time have just turned into metaphors or concepts, or are there really just metaphors and concepts that ancient people turned into spiritual powers?

**Dr. Kidd:** Well, the view of the Bible — and it is one that had impressed itself on me for being real — is that we only see a part of the real and that there are all around us spiritual forces and beings that we can't see. One of the great things about the letter to the Colossians is Paul not just acknowledging that there are powers and principalities that we can't see but that when believers have to wrestle with, what is their relationship to those powers, it's the same answer as they have when they wrestle with how good do I have to be to have a relationship with God. Christ did it all; Christ did everything that I need to be seen as being obedient to the Father. And Christ did everything that is necessary to subdue whatever forces there are out there and I don't need to be afraid of any boogieman. I don't need to be afraid of any avatars; I don't need to be afraid of any other deities that other religions say are out there because I'm told that Jesus is the one who made all spiritual forces. And in the cross there was, for now, a pacification imposed even on that world and that the Devil and his minions cannot do anything more than God will give them permission to do. And I don't need to honor them, I don't need to revere them, I don't need to fear them; I need to just stay in Jesus.

**Question 8:**

**How real is spiritual warfare?**

**Student:** I have a question about what a lot of people talk about nowadays; they call it spiritual warfare. Some churches talk about it quite a bit, others hardly mention in and I think at this juncture I'd like to know how real spiritual warfare is.

**Dr. Kidd:** It's very real. I'm not always so sure that the churches who are addressing it most forthrightly know how deep and how subtle it is. And sadly, churches that don't address it are having to wrestle with it even without knowing. Tim Keller has said that the believing church in the West has spent a lot of its energy in the last couple hundred years trying to prove its respectability to the enlightened secular West. But now, what we are finding is the emergence of the church in other parts of the world where the issue for Western believers is not to persuade these brothers and sisters that we are intellectually respectable enough but the challenge for us is to convince them a) that we are as concerned as the Bible is about the morality out of which we live. And that we take it seriously as the world has described in the Bible.

Many believers in the Western church are taking courageous stands in their own churches resisting secular forces in theology and just downright disobedience to the Word and are coming under the authority of spiritual leaders in third world country churches and are finding that those spiritual leaders are themselves much more aware of the presence and the reality of spiritual supernatural forces. And what is going to be really interesting I think over time — and this is not going to be like next week's news headlines or even next year's, it's going to take generations for these new relationships to emerge. And probably what we will find is that we Westerners will find that our imaginations really have to be re-stimulated by the strong supernaturalism that under girds biblical revelation. And our brothers and sisters in other parts of the world are probably going to find that the Word tames lots of wild speculation and provides means of testing spirits. It's going to be really exciting and interesting to see how these relationships emerge.

For me, the writer who has been the most help in understanding spiritual warfare has been C.S. Lewis. I think he really understands the struggle that people in the West have had in reckoning with the reality of the supernatural and with spiritual powers. A great place to start is his *Screwtape Letters* where the tempting organization is presented as a Western bureaucracy. And where the challenges that we face are far more subtle than just looking for demons around every corner; and his space trilogy that starts with *That Hideous Strength* and then goes to *Perelandra* which is Venus and then to *That Hideous Strength* which is about — did I get that right — the first book is *Out of The Sight of The Planet*, which is about Mars and which he just creates this world — and the title says it all — and as far as the heavens are concerned earth has been the silent place, where the bent one has taken over and they are waiting for things to be resolved and for earth to be brought back into communion with the whole rest of the universe. And then *Perelandra* is his retelling of the story of the garden of Eden, set on Venus. And *That Hideous Strength* is set back on earth and it's a story of the tower of Babel. The story hinges on this conspiracy by supposed secularist scientists to bring Merlin up from the grave and to use magical powers that they think he might have for their ends, not realizing that there are — and they were kind of doing it like play. It's a cynical thing, just one more possible way of getting power — But what they fail to realize is they are calling very real, very sinister evil powers down on themselves. And then on the other side are the angelic powers that are actually coming in to overthrow them, working through very ordinary small and weak people.

And where C.S. Lewis helps me in dealing with spiritual warfare is to let me know that there are spiritual forces, but the way that you fight against them isn't necessarily a frontal assault, it's staying in Jesus and living in the reality of his person and work, leaning more and more daily into my share of his death and his resurrection, and calling upon him for wisdom and for guidance, for protection and covering, and for power. And what happens is, as I obey the Lord Jesus Christ he fights my battles. And to me that's the great trick; it's not so much... Paul calls us to battle against spiritual forces. But our role is very simple: it's faith, it's hope, it's love, it's prayer,



it's obedience, it's knowing Jesus. And then the real warrior here is him who fights for us and we have no way of knowing how he is fighting for us day in and day out.

### **Question 9:**

#### **How should Christians think about angels and demons?**

**Student:** Well, given that reality of spiritual warfare and the importance of being centered in Christ, what is a healthy way for Christians today to think about angels and demons? Should we pay any attention to them at all? Should we study these two topics at all?

**Dr. Kidd:** One of my spiritual mentors' professors was a theologian named John Murray who was a Scottish man. And he used to talk about knowing that there were angels because he knew that angels were controlling his foot on the break in his car. The writers of the Hebrews were first angels as ministering spirits. We don't know how the Lord uses them in our lives and I think the thing to do is to take confidence that our life is hidden with Christ in God. And to know that part of his provision for us is to put around us what protection we need. There are millions of contingent forces that we don't know; there is so much about our lives that we have no control over.

About a year ago, I was hit when I was driving. I was hit by a drunk red-light runner, going 65 mph and I was at a red light and the light turned green and I couldn't see what was happening because there was a car next to me — I was in a two-lane turn lane — and I couldn't see past the guy who was next to me. And of course he could see that a car was coming and I couldn't. I waited just long enough that only the front of my car got out there and this guy just plowed right through. You know, what are all the factors that preserved me in that? Well, it was the wonderful technology of Toyota that built a very safe car. There was the fact that I hesitated, prudently. But beyond that how was the Lord himself through angelic intervention working in the crafting of the technology, in that little the "don't go just yet," whether there was an angelic finger on my shoulder; we don't know. All I know to do is to seek to stay centered in Jesus knowing that I don't have to know; he knows. And that somehow these spiritual forces are in his control and play a role in my protection and in the advancement of his kingdom, in the forming of his church, and in making his kingdom life possible.

### **Question 10:**

#### **Why did the false teachings sound wise to the Colossians?**

**Student:** Reggie, the lesson mentioned that Paul criticized the false teachers as having the appearance of wisdom; in fact their advice wasn't really wise. What made their teaching sound wise to the Colossian Christians?



**Dr. Kidd:** I think that their teaching probably gave people a sense of control over forces that were beyond them, a sense of control over their own sinfulness, control over the power of their own flesh, and control over these forces that are out there. I think that's a hallmark of pretend wisdom when it is offering a control that you can't have on your own and a sort of a simplistic way to deal with your personal stuff. What Paul argues for is a wisdom that comes from above, and wisdom just takes a slower... Proverbs 9 talks about "lady wisdom" who builds her house, goes into the kitchen and processes things and then knows how to speak and just doesn't kind of fly of the handle with really simplistic answers that don't get to the heart of things. So, I think one of the things that give the appearance of wisdom for these folks is just answers that are just too simple, that put them in charge instead of bringing them deeper into an obedient relationship with the Lord Jesus himself.

### **Question 11:**

#### **Are Paul's arguments against false teaching effective against modern philosophies?**

**Student:** Well, Reggie — this has gotten me to thinking — there is an ancient philosophy but philosophies change a lot over the years and one thing has been spilling over the other: modernism, Marxism, logical positivism, existentialism, and now the hot thing is deconstructionism. And what I was wondering is, the argumentation that Paul uses, is that effective against these modern philosophies?

**Dr. Kidd:** Well, in the end Paul's call to bow at the feet of Jesus and no other "ism" is always the answer. The church has always had to struggle with how to articulate its vision of truth and to stay under the authority of Jesus and nobody else in any generation because we are as much shaped by the worldview around us as the people around us are. The only thing that distinguishes us — and it's like we can't help but to think in terms of the language and the categories of thought that's around us — but what distinguishes us is that by God's grace, and totally by God's grace, we have some altitude so we can be in it but not of it and we can speak meaningful words of hope to the problems that are often very well diagnosed by contemporary philosophies but where there aren't answers because the answer comes from a redeemer that's outside any particular philosophical system.

But from the very beginning, Christians have had to try self-consciously to figure out how Christ relates to the philosophy of the day. From Augustine, who could not help but think in terms of platonic philosophy, Aquinas who really thought that in the recent discovery of Aristotle's thinking that you had a way of creating a grand Christian philosophy. And in many ways I think Aquinas' thinking was very helpful but there are also places where it looks like it is more of a compromise than redemption. We saw especially in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, you mentioned Marxism but in that form of materialism, the positivism, the romanticism, and the Western church, I

think, failed in large measure to find a way to stand above these and find redemptive words to say. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, I think the mainstream churches in the U.S. and in Europe especially came under the sway of Existentialism. And especially under the leadership of the systematician, Paul Tilliche and in the biblical scholar Rudolf Bultmann, there was just this self-conscious blending of Christianity and Existentialism and which guess who won. Existentialism won and churches have really been struggling.

I think what God has done in the meantime was raised us, an evangelical believing voice, that has listened to the analysis of existentialism and its explanation of our cosmic alone-ness; but have gone to the Scriptures to say, "But you know this helps us understand why we feel so alienated." But you can't just accommodate Christianity and make its worldview fit this worldview and find hope. No, you have to go back to the Word itself and take seriously that, "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God." And he himself came and took our flesh to bear our sins to rise, to be the beginning of a new humanity and one in whom we can have a real hope for eternal life.

And deconstructionism has helped those of us who are pretty aware of the fallibility of our own motives, the fallibility of any authority that's out there, and has made us pretty aware of how many competing stories there are around which to orient our lives and those voices give us the ability to go back and say, but you know there is one story that is compelling and that we can commend as true. And we don't have to have all the answers; all we have to do is know that there is one who does know all the answers. So, I think it's a matter of having an ear to the diagnosis and the analysis of the human situation that a contemporary philosophy will often have keen insight into but then we have to build bridges. We have to stay anchored in Scripture and tell its story, sing its song, and to proclaim its truth as nobly, as winsomely, and as passionately as we can.

### **Question 12:**

#### **What did the false teachers in Colossae promote?**

**Student:** Given the need for the church to provide gospel answers to questions that philosophies raise, what question was the false teaching in Colossae saying that Paul gave an answer to?

**Dr. Kidd:** I think they were suggesting that there was another source of wisdom beyond Jesus and that there were these rival powers that they needed to placate in order to know their security and the assurance of their salvation. It was put in terms of Sabbath cycles. It was put in terms of foods that you avoid to gain security. And Paul's answer was to say, "Christ has come and the calendar is about him. It's not your getting control. And you don't control your flesh by controlling what foods you eat or don't eat. You control your flesh by going deeper into Jesus."

**Question 13:****How can Christ be both God and the image of God?**

**Student:** Reggie, I saw something in our lesson and I guess it's also reflected in Scripture but I think some people might be confused by it. But it refers to Christ as God and it also refers to Christ as the image of God, and how can something be an image of itself?

**Dr. Kidd:** Well, Larry, you're right at the heart of the great mystery that Christians have been trying to understand and articulate from the very beginning. In the early church, they formulated what has come to be called the "hypo-static union", this understanding that Jesus is one person who happens to have two natures, unlike any individual who ever was or ever will be, who is God of God, very God of very Gods. And at the same time, is one of us. And it was the early churches understanding that because he is God, he has the power and the strength to come and actually heal us. But because he is one of us, well it's us that he is able to come and heal. He is able to take on our afflictions and our diseases and thus he is able really to heal us and to raise us up. He comes as the Son of God down to us because we need him to come but as the Son of Man, he rises so that our humanity can be redeemed.

And I really love the way that Paul reflects on Jesus as the very image of God, who yes, is God but is also able to reflect on God and show us what God is like. And, in showing us what God is like, it shows us what we have been made to be like. I love what he does in chapter 3 where he talks about putting to death what's earthly in you and then he lists some things like fornication, impurity, passion, evil desires, covetousness, idolatry, and talks about how we used to live in those things. But then tells us in verse 12 to put on, as God's chosen ones, compassion, kindness, lowliness, meekness, and patience, forbearing one another and forgiving one another as Christ has forgiven. And I think part of what he is talking about is we have a relationship with one who came to live all of these things. We have a relationship not with a theological concept, redemption, or a thing, a cross; we have a relationship with a person who imaged God and showed us what it was like to be made after the fashion of God. And he comes to live in us teaching us forbearance, and patience, and love.

I think verses like this for Paul were a sort of a call — well, I don't think I mean sort of a call — I think they were a call to these people to pay attention to the Jesus that his traveling companion, Luke was writing about and collecting stories about. And in Jesus you had a model of what it is to be a real live human being, who was obedient to his mom and dad, who grew in favor with God and man, in wisdom, and in stature, who went to the temple and who worshiped the Lord, and who came bearing God's heart and showed us...and would call Zacchaeus down from a tree and who would show forgiveness to a woman who washed his feet with her tears and with her hair. So, I think the image of God thing is remarkable and there is a theological mystery there. How can he be God and the image of God? But by being the image of God, he

shows us a picture of who God is but he shows us there in a sense in which we are called to be images of God. And we won't be an image of God quite the same way he is because we won't be perfect, and we won't have this hypo-static union going on. We are mere humans, but we are redeemed humans and his life is what we are called into in our redemption.

### **Question 14:**

#### **Why is Christianity superior to other faiths?**

**Student:** Reggie, the lesson made an emphatic point that Christ was superior to the other spiritual beings, but it also made the point that Christian faith was superior to other faiths. How is it that Christian faith, which has people like us in it, how is it that that in fact is superior?

**Dr. Kidd:** The only thing that makes it superior is him and it's the faithfulness of his ministers that make them superior. It's not that I'm a perfect person or you're a perfect person or that any Christian minister has some magic line. It's simply that they are called to proclaim his Word. And their superiority really lies in their recognizing their inferiority to him. What made the Colossian false teachers inferior was that they took a position that compromised Christ's lordship and they were offering other lords as being in competition with him. And they were offering another route to personal growth through their own control of their bodies and their own veneration of these angels. And that's what made them inferior. The only thing that made Paul superior and the ministers that he was endorsing was that they did not step from underneath Jesus' lordship and they did not step from underneath the authority of God's Word and they did not try to find wisdom from some place besides the Lord himself.

### **Question 15:**

#### **How are Christian ministers superior to ministers of other religions?**

**Student:** This touches upon what I was going to ask you. I am a church leader myself; I am a church elder and part of our job is to get other people interested in various ministries including being an elder. But so many times I hear the answer from people that they're not good enough, or that God expects a certain high level of performance, or that, "there is something lacking in my life." When we say, for instance that Christian ministers are superior we really have to qualify that I think, for our people.

**Dr. Kidd:** We really do. I mentioned my spiritual mentor a while ago — his name was Mort Whitman — and he is a missionary in Romania even as we speak. And when I was in college, he was a minister at a church in that local town and early on in my Christian journey I said to him, "I don't see how I could ever be called to ministry

because I sin, and I wrestle with sin and sometimes I don't even wrestle with it; I just have this overwhelming sense of my unworthiness." And he had the wisdom to look me in the eye and say, "That is the number one qualification: to recognize that you are not worthy." The moment you recognize your unworthiness and inadequacy you have placed yourself under his authority and that's where you start. And he can take all your stuff, he took it to the cross and he is so committed to seeing you through to the end of the goal that he has for you to be perfectly conformed to his image, he is not going to let go of you and your only job is to keep your eyes on him and maintain the sober awareness of your need for him, not just when you pray the prayer but daily to have him wash your feet and to cleanse you from each day's measure of your sinfulness.

**Student:** So, I guess it's a good thing that after I have taught Sunday school for an hour I think, you know, that really wasn't that good. So many people I talk to have the same feeling after they look back at something that just went on or something they did in the past week. I guess that's just the common feature of just the understanding how inadequate we all are.

**Dr. Kidd:** The point isn't our inadequacy; the point is his adequacy. And that I think is what set Paul apart, his keen awareness of it not being about him but being about this Lord who loved him and loved the people enough to use him as an earthly vessel. I think we need to hear that when we hear him say things like, "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me," it's talking about his adequacy not being from himself. I mean, he really did believe that there was an adequacy that was provided to him. So, he had this ability to not focus on his adequacy or his inadequacy but just on the task at hand, and to keep his eyes on the Lord and the people that the Lord was calling him to love.

### Question 16:

**Is our present salvation really better than the salvation other religions offer?**

**Student:** Our lesson talks about the present superiority of our salvation and for a lot of people in America that may be fine. We live in the suburbs and nice homes; things are comfortable. But for a lot of Christians, it's not. A lot of our leaders are in prison overseas some being tortured and have died for their faith. Is it really true and accurate to say that our present salvation is superior when all this is going on?

**Dr. Kidd:** Well, Larry, that's a great question. What is so different about Paul's, and Luke's, and the New Testament writers' understanding of salvation — what made it different from people in their own day — was that their salvation was not about rescue from sickness, rescue from financial insecurity, it was a salvation out of the dominion of Satan, out of his ultimate claim on us, out of his desire to destroy us for eternity and to cripple us emotionally, and to crush us. And what Paul believed is that

Jesus had taken the full weight of God's wrath against our sin and in his death and his resurrection had promised that all of creation would ultimately be restored. But between now and then there would be a path of knowing him that would follow his own path of humiliation and then glorification. So, our salvation is not about being taken out of hard things and put on easy street; our salvation is about being rescued from the claim of the evil one to take us out. And it's a salvation that's to a relationship of becoming more like Christ himself.

So, the hope that Christians have always known is a knowing of him in the midst of whatever circumstances we're in. You are right, for some Christians the circumstances look easy. For other Christians, the circumstances look hard. But the reality is...the reality is, the reality may be very different than the perception for some people that life of apparent ease is not easy at all. For people who look like they live in very comfortable circumstances are often beset by crippling physical problems, crippling relational problems and sometimes people who are called to live in what from the outside might look like catastrophic circumstances simply know a joy, simply know a privilege in the nobility of suffering with him, for him, and in him. So, it's just not really possible to judge how a person is doing or how they are experiencing salvation on the basis of those external things. And I think it's because what Jesus did when he came and strapped our humanity to himself and became one of us and suffered, died, and was raised again was that he turned everything upside-down. So, that sickness can just be a means to health in him and so that pleasurable circumstances can often belie very difficult psychological, personal, financial, relational struggles that become the place where Jesus is known.

And I think a lot of it has to do with recognizing the pattern that we keep taking about in these lessons over and over again. And that's the "already and the not yet", the coming of the kingdom, and a partial sense now in our forgiveness, in his assertion of his rule and authority in our lives, and his promise that he is with us and the "not yet", where his work is not done. Part of the "not yet" is that we are called to know a measure ourselves of his sufferings, and that is the privilege. Part of the key, I think, in the Christian life, is recognizing that every day's measure of sufferings, struggling with limitations is the privilege of knowing him better in a way that we would not have known him otherwise if it were not for those limitations that seem to be so bad but really are the occasions of his pressing his own life further upon us or taking his life deeper into us.

### **Question 17:**

**Was Paul's view of Christian liberty in Colossians consistent with his view in 1 Corinthians?**

**Student:** Reggie, something in this lesson reminded me of a different passage in 1 Corinthians when Paul encouraged the believers there, for the sake of other Christians, they should lay aside their liberties to not eat meat, and to not



participate in some things that they were free to do. But in this book, Paul seems to tell Christians that they should go ahead and taste and touch and that it was important for them to do so. Is Paul talking out of both sides of his mouth here or is there an underlying truth that we should see?

**Dr. Kidd:** Chris, that's a great observation. It so happens that there are different sicknesses that call for different medications and it's important to know where people are and what part of the gospel truth they need to hear. And sometimes it's going to sound really different. And here's where I think the "already, not yet" configuration that we have talked about in these lessons is exceedingly helpful. The Corinthians thought that they had arrived; they thought they were king's kids. They thought they could just enjoy every aspect of the "eschaton", the arrival. And what they were doing was exercising their liberties at one another's expense and they were leaving unattended problems of pride and lovelessness and Paul said, "It's important for you all to understand that you need to keep God's commandments and you need to not go beyond what is written." So, yeah, he was reeling them in and I think it's because they thought that they were in a resurrection state where they could write their own rules.

The Colossians are at a different place. They did not yet understand how much Christ's death and resurrection had benefited them. They needed to know more about the "already". The Corinthians needed to be reminded that there was a "not yet", that they had not yet arrived. Therefore the obligation to keep the commandments, especially to love one another and to defer to one another was still in play. In the case of the Colossians, they like the Galatians were not appreciating how much had already been done for them on the cross and in the resurrection of Jesus and in his presence among them. So, they were being coward into offering obeisance and veneration into gods that were not gods. And they were being told, "Okay, if you want to deal with your flesh, well, then you need to do this and you need to do that." Instead, they needed to be pointed to Christ in whom there is wisdom, in whom there is forgiveness. They need to be aware of the way that Christ had been... He was the circumcision of the human race. His blood had been shed so that their sins could be forgiven and he had been raised and they have life in him and they have been joined to all Jews and Gentiles, males and females, slaves and free who belong to him and are being shaped and refashioned to bear his image. So, they needed to be alerted to the value of the "already" and the Corinthians needed reminded that we're not yet there.

### **Question 18:**

**How can modern Christians enjoy liberty and still be sensitive to others?**

**Student:** Well, Reggie, in listening to you and Christopher talk, I was thinking and wondering if today's churches have the same confusion as to where they are

**positionally as the Corinthians did versus the Colossians, and what does that mean for us as church leaders and teachers for being sensitive to the situation we are in?**

**Dr. Kidd:** Sure, Larry, I think there are a lot of similarities to the modern day church. Some churches are so bound by legalism that believers need to be challenged to come out of their shell and appreciate the freedom that is theirs in Christ, the forgiveness, the grace, and the fact that God's not mad at them anymore. There are other churches that so have that that there are no boundaries and there are presumptive prayers about, well, if I believe enough then I can freedom from sickness, if I believe enough then God will give me financial security, if I believe enough God will do anything I want him to do. And pastoral wisdom calls for a community of leaders to be on our knees as we seek to relate to our congregation and understand what are the kinds of bonds are that we need to address and attack. And in some cases, we are going to find the need to proclaim more of the freedom and the liberty that are ours in Christ. And in other places we are going to need to say, "You all think that you are in the liberty and freedoms of Christ but you're in an area of presumption. You're claiming promises that are not ours for this age." So again, I think this is one of the really helpful things about the "already, not yet" paradigm. It helps us appreciate the fact that there are some believers that are bound up by pre-cross fear and need to be taken deeper into the reality that has already been delivered. And that there are other people that are in a bondage of thinking that they are beyond a need for discipline, care, for caution, that are themselves apart of going deeper into the wisdom, and the prudence, and the grace and the love that are in Jesus as well.

### **Question 19:**

**How should we express our loyalty to Christ in discussions with other religions?**

**Student:** You talk about loyalty to Christ in this lesson and what does that mean when it comes to challenging other belief systems, other religions? What does that imply for us today?

**Dr. Kidd:** Larry, in the world that we're called to minister in, I think it does mean that we are called to differentiate the claims of Christ from other claims. And just thinking off the top of my head, I think that to go back to something that Tim Keller had said about the need of Christians these days to add to our concern, to explain to the liberal secular West that Christianity is intellectually responsible, we need to add the responsibility to say to that part of the world that is being responsive to the rise of militant Islam that even though Islam promises a better way of living, a way to make you a better person, that its premise about how God is and how you have a relationship with him is wrong in the first place. In the face of Mormonism, the Church of the Latter Day Saints, which also is getting a real audience in the West and around the world largely because they promise community, they promise to help you live a better life, we need to say, "But no, we are not going to be gods ourselves. And



it is not about doing good and being good that puts you in favor with God. No, the only way to have a relationship with God is through his Son's death on the cross and growing into what it is to bear his image in our full humanity, not thinking that we are going to cross over the line into the deity ourselves and that the way to live the good life is to respond to his Holy Spirit." So, we do need to pay a lot of attention to the way that living in Christ shapes us and makes us new and different kinds of people, and the rise of some false religions like Islam, Mormonism — and I could add Jehovah's Witnesses and a lot of new age speculation too — we need to distinguish our view of who God is and particularly the need for a relationship through and only through his Son.

### **Question 20:**

**How should we express our loyalty to Christ when interacting with other Christians?**

**Student:** Well, Reggie, to bring the question of our loyalty to Christ a little bit more to home, how do we express our loyalty to Christ when we are interacting with other Christians, especially if we are convinced that they have some error in their teaching?

**Dr. Kidd:** Well, Chris, it's important to distinguish between the kinds of issues that we disagree on. It's very important to keep clear on the person and the nature of who God is, the person and work of his Son, and you start messing with this delicate articulation of his being a hundred percent divine and a hundred percent human; that's really important to go the mat for. And then, when you talk about the importance of understanding that salvation is what he did for us and not what we can do for ourselves, and the absolute authority of God's word, those are matters where we need to stay very firm. And yet, we also have to recognize that there are other kinds of issues where we're just going to have to extend some grace to each other and recognize that it's really possible for people who are trying to be obedient and trying to be submissive to God's Word, to come to some different conclusions. And to recognize that in the history of the church, the conversation has gone on and on and will continue to go on about things like, well, how old should a person be when they get baptized, and should water be put on them or should they be put under the water? And questions about how we should govern the churches, whether more hierarchically, more democratically, or with some sort of compromise. Matters like even the conversation over how do we understand or unpack the mystery of the fact that God's totally in charge and yet we are also responsible for making decisions.

And we've just got to lean into the importance of the central truths and find ways to become passionately and whole-heartedly persuaded on matters that are not central but also factor in that other brothers and sisters are going to come down differently and somehow we have to learn to love one another, listen to one another, and serve one another with those differences. And if we have anything to offer to the world, it is

this ability to love one another on the basis of a common creed, a common faith, a common person, and just because of his love for us and for one another, we learn to defer to one another and care about each other even though we are going to differ with some things.

And if I may, I think that in Richard Pratt's lessons on Building Your Theology, he has some great things to say about thinking less in binary terms on some issues and thinking more in analog terms where there are degrees of how certain you can be about some things. Some things you can be really certain about and other things, not so certain about and thinking in terms of a cone of certainty. Thinking about putting central truths at the center of things and more peripheral things on the outside and then sort of developing a scale for how you access those things. Richard has some very helpful things to say in Building Your Theology, the 3<sup>rd</sup> lesson.

### **Question 21:**

**How can we focus on things above without neglecting our earthly responsibilities?**

**Student: Reggie,** Paul encourages Christians to put their minds on things above. But how do Christians avoid the trap of focusing on things above without neglecting their earthly responsibilities?

**Dr. Kidd:** Yeah, Chris, that's a great question because I think a lot of people are naturally afraid that if they focus so much on heavenly things they will be no earthly good. But the reality is the reality couldn't be any further away from that. What is so wonderful, and I think this is one of the reasons that Colossians is such a gift to us, is that Paul speaks directly to that. He talks in the beginning of chapter 3 about the need to seek the things that are above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God and to set our minds on things that are above and not on things of this earth. Then he reminds us that we have died and our lives are hid with Christ in God. But then he turns to, okay, what does it mean to set your mind of heavenly things? And what he talks about is the very practical stuff of living in this life; we live in this life with a heavenly mindset. And what that means is that we do the things that are in the rest of Colossians 3 and chapter 4, putting to death that which is earthly in us: fornication, impurity, passion, evil desires, covetousness, which is idolatry, and recognizing that we used to be characterized by these things but we don't have to be characterized by them anymore.

So, in a word, to set our minds on things above is to put to death the things in us that are not like him. Then on the positive side, to put on precisely as those who know that we have been chosen and are called to be holy and beloved by him, to put on who Christ is: compassion as he was compassionate, kindness as he was kind, lowliness as he was lowly, meekness as he was meek, patience as he was patient, forgiving one another the way that he has forgiven us. And above all these things, to put on love,

which pretty much defines who he was and who he is. So, living a heavenly mindset is living in union with him, here and now, down here on earth and then he goes on to talking about how we worship together, and then he goes on to talk about living in relationships, as husbands and wives, as parents and children, as masters and slaves, and seasoning our whole lives with prayer. So, it's living before him and in him and with him but knowing that his interest is in filling our lives with him in the here and now. So, it's becoming so heavenly minded that we are actually of earthly good.

### **Question 22:** **Is regeneration a one-time event?**

**Student:** Well, if I'm hearing you right, and I'm thinking about regeneration, the tendency of a lot of Christians is to think of being born again as a one-time event and that's it and we are onto other things. But, what I'm hearing from you is that regeneration involves a lot more than just that one-time historical.

**Dr. Kidd:** But, Larry, praise God, there is a one-time regeneration where those of us who were just lost as can be find ourselves grabbed by a life that comes upon us and comes into us outside of ourselves. As Jesus told Nicodemus, "You must be born again; you must be born from above," — that life has come into us. But the wonderful thing — and it's the part that makes Colossians so powerful — is that it's a regeneration that goes on and on. Paul's way of talking about it is the renewal of the mind. Once God takes hold of us he wakes us up and he makes us new, but it's like daily he is making us new. There is the call in Romans 12 to present our bodies as living sacrifices and to be conformed, to be — help me with this verse — "I appeal to you brothers by the mercy of God, to present your bodies as living sacrifices. Don't be conformed to this world..."

**Student:** "...Be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind."

**Dr. Kidd:** Thank you. "Be transformed by the renewing of your mind." That's something that we live in and that's very much a process. It has a beginning, but the beginning is just that. It's the start of something wonderful that goes on the rest of our lives. And he talks about it here in Colossians 3:9-10 as well. "Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put up the old nature with its practices and have put on the new nature, which is being renewed in knowledge, after the image of its creator." A lot of what Paul is doing in this letter is helping to prime the pump for people like you and me being progressively renewed, to be progressively renewed in our minds so that we might know him better, proclaim him more boldly and truly, and live him well.

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**Dr. Reggie Kidd (Host)** is Professor of New Testament Emeritus at Reformed Theological Seminary. He received his M.A.R. and M.Div. from Westminster Theological Seminary and his Ph.D. in Christian Origins from Duke University. He is a member of the Evangelical Theological Society and is an ordained priest in The Episcopal Church. Dr. Kidd teaches at the Robert E. Webber Institute for Worship Studies and has served as a pastor and elder at multiple churches. He is the author of *With One Voice: Discovering Christ's Song in Our Worship* (BakerBooks, 2005) and has contributed to many other publications, including *The Spirit of the Reformation Study Bible* (Zondervan, 2003) and *The Reformation Study Bible* (Ligonier Ministries, 2005).

# Paul's Prison Epistles

LESSON  
THREE

## PAUL AND THE EPHESIANS



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# Paul's Prison Epistles

## Lesson Three

### Paul and the Ephesians

#### INTRODUCTION

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People who have lived in more than one country often tell me how difficult it is to adapt to new cultures. Each nation has its own customs and laws and values, and what is appropriate in one nation isn't necessarily appropriate in others. Business people, tourists, and even missionaries have to spend a lot of time learning the ways of the new nation they are visiting.

In many ways the same is true of the Christian life. We were all born outside of Christ, separated from his kingdom. Many of us spent years learning and following the ways of the kingdom of darkness. And this presents challenges for us as we try to live according to the ways of our new nation, our new kingdom — the kingdom of light in Christ.

This challenge is nothing new. Even in the first century, Christians had to be taught how to live in ways that were appropriate for the kingdom of Christ. Many Christians had been converted from pagan religions. They had spent much of their lives following the ways of Satan before they came to faith in Christ. And they found it difficult to change the ways they thought, felt, and behaved. So, as the apostle Paul wrote his epistle to the Ephesians, he directly addressed this challenge by painting a sweeping, cosmic portrait of life in the kingdom of God in Christ.

This is the third lesson in our series *Paul's Prison Epistles*. And we have entitled this lesson "Paul and the Ephesians." In this lesson we will investigate Paul's epistle to the church in Ephesus, focusing especially on ways he designed this letter to teach Christians how to build, maintain, and thrive in God's kingdom.

Our exploration of Paul's epistle to the Ephesians will divide into three parts: First, we will examine the background of Paul's letter to the Ephesians. Second, we'll look at the structure and content of Ephesians. And third, we will discuss the modern application of this letter. Let's begin with the background to Paul's epistle to the Ephesians.

#### BACKGROUND

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Paul's job as an apostle was to provide authoritative teaching and leadership to the church, and he did this partly by writing letters. But Paul didn't just want to spread sound doctrine or record it for posterity. First and foremost, he wanted to minister to the church in his own day by applying sound doctrine. His letters were pastoral and caring, and they spoke directly to the problems that the church faced in the first century.

This means that as we study Paul's letter to the Ephesians, it helps to begin by asking questions like: To whom was this letter written? And what significant issues were



they facing in life? Knowing the answers to questions like these will help us make greater sense of Paul's teachings.

As we look at the background of Paul's epistle to the Ephesians, we'll focus our attention on three matters: First, we'll discuss Paul's authorship of the letter. Second, we'll identify the original audience. And third, we'll look at Paul's purpose in writing to them. Let's begin by looking at Paul's authorship of the letter to the Ephesians.

### **AUTHORSHIP**

A number of modern scholars have suggested that Paul did not actually write this letter. Instead, they have argued that Ephesians was written by one of Paul's students in order to continue Paul's legacy and apply his teaching in new ways. But there is great reason to reject this notion. For one thing, the letter states that it was written by Paul. Listen to the words of Ephesians 1:1:

**Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, to the saints in Ephesus (Ephesians 1:1).**

Now, it is true that in the early church some false teachers forged letters under the names of other people. But whenever the church discovered a letter to be a forgery, they rejected it. Listen to Paul's teaching on this matter in 2 Thessalonians 2:1-3:

**We ask you, brothers, not to become easily unsettled or alarmed by some prophecy, report or letter supposed to have come from us ... Don't let anyone deceive you in any way (2 Thessalonians 2:1-3).**

It is simply too hard to believe that an admirer or student of Paul would have contradicted Paul's own teaching by forging his name in this manner.

Beyond this, Ephesians closely resembles Paul's other letters in both doctrine and language. The connections are especially strong with Colossians, which should not surprise us since Paul probably wrote them both at about the same time. These connections are so powerful and natural that even if Paul had not stated his name in the letter, it is difficult to imagine the church ever crediting it to anyone else.

Finally, according to Acts 19-21, Paul had planted the church in Ephesus, and he had lived in Ephesus for two years. And even after that time, he had continued to maintain close relationships with its elders. It is simply unimaginable that the Ephesians would not have recognized this letter as a forgery. And similarly unimaginable is the idea that the early church would not have rooted out a forgery supposedly sent from such a prominent apostle to such a prominent church.

### **AUDIENCE**

Having looked at Paul's authorship, we should turn our attention to the original audience of the letter to the Ephesians.

We will investigate Paul's audience in two parts, turning first to his primary

audience, namely, the church in Ephesus, and then to his secondary audience, especially the churches of the Lycus Valley. Let's begin by looking at the church in Ephesus as Paul's primary audience.

## Primary Audience

Let's look once more at the words of Ephesians 1:1:

**Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, to the saints in Ephesus (Ephesians 1:1).**

In the address of this letter, Paul identified the church in Ephesus as his audience.

Ephesus was the capital city of the Roman Province of Asia which corresponds roughly to the modern region known as Asia Minor. During the first century, it was one of the most populous and important cities in the Roman Empire, serving as a gateway between the eastern and western worlds. Geographically it lay on the coast of the Aegean Sea not too far north of the Meander River.

Now, we should mention that some scholars believe that this letter was not originally sent to the Ephesians. There are a variety of reasons for their doubt, but all of them are poorly founded. For one thing, some scholars point to the fact that some manuscripts of this letter are missing the words "in Ephesus" in Ephesians 1:1. While this is true, most manuscripts actually do contain these words, and no known manuscript names a different audience.

Beyond this, many details in the letter would have been particularly relevant to Ephesus. Consider just two examples.

First, we know from Acts 19 that during his time in Ephesus Paul had clashed with worshippers of the pagan goddess Artemis and with many occult practices. Correspondingly, in Ephesians 5:11 he taught strongly against "fruitless deeds of darkness," and in Ephesians 6:11-12 he insisted that Christians battle against the false pagan gods.

Second, we know from archeological research that the city of Ephesus was considered to be the "nurturer" of Artemis, and Artemis was said to have made Ephesus the most "glorious" city in the province of Asia. In relation to this, in Ephesians 5:27-29 Paul spoke of Christ as "feeding" or "nurturing," the church and talked about how Christ is turning the church into his "glorious," radiant bride.

These and other details appear to have been tailored to resonate particularly with the Ephesian church.

Finally, several early church fathers testified that Paul sent this letter to the Ephesians. For instance, Clement of Alexandria, writing near the end of the second century, wrote these words in chapter 5 of his work *The Instructor*:

**And writing to the Ephesians, Paul has unfolded in the clearest manner the point in question, speaking to the following effect.**

Clement followed this preface with the full text of Ephesians 4:13-15.

Similarly, Tertullian, who wrote at the very beginning of the third century, had this to say in his work *Against Marcion*, book 5, chapter 17:

**We have it on the true tradition of the Church, that this epistle was sent to the Ephesians, not to the Laodiceans.**

According to Tertullian, the whole tradition of the church prior to that time had affirmed that this letter was sent to Ephesus. And no early church witness contradicts Tertullian on this point. In short, there is strong evidence for believing that Paul intended this letter to be read by the church at Ephesus.

Now that we have looked at the evidence that the church in Ephesus was Paul's primary audience, we should turn our attention to his secondary audience, particularly the churches of the Lycus Valley.

## Secondary Audience

In the first century a number of churches grew in the Lycus Valley. We know that there were churches in the cities of Colosse and Laodicea and have good reason to suspect that there was also a church in Hierapolis. Although these churches are not mentioned in Paul's letter to the Ephesians, there is good reason to suspect that Paul had them in mind as he wrote.

We will consider two types of evidence that point to the churches of the Lycus Valley as Paul's secondary audience: first, the evidence that Paul wrote to an unfamiliar audience, and second, the relevance of this letter to the churches of the Lycus Valley. Let's begin by looking at some details that suggest Paul's audience was unfamiliar to him.

Consider first Paul's words in Ephesians 1:15:

**Ever since I heard about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all the saints (Ephesians 1:15).**

Apparently, there was a significant portion of his audience whose faith he had not seen firsthand. His words in Ephesians 3:2-3 suggest the same thing:

**Surely you have heard about the administration of God's grace that was given to me for you, that is, the mystery made known to me by revelation, as I have already written briefly (Ephesians 3:2-3).**

Paul stated that his audience knew about his gospel, not because he had taught them previously, but because he had written about it in the earlier chapters of this very letter. But of course, Paul had personally taught the Ephesians.

Another indication that Paul wrote to many unfamiliar people is that his letter contains no personal references. In all his other canonical letters, Paul indicated that he knew his readers personally by including such things as:

- the names of individuals he knew in his audience;
- greetings to specific people;
- mentions of time he had spent with his readers;
- familiar terms of address, such as “brothers,” directed to the readers;
- expressions of his love for his readers; and
- his characterization of himself as the “spiritual father” of his readers.

In fact, Paul's epistle to the Ephesians is his only canonical letter that doesn't contain any personal references. And this is despite the fact that he had a very close relationship with the church in Ephesus. This indicates that Paul wanted his letter to circulate to a variety of churches beginning with the church in Ephesus, but continuing on to churches with which he was unfamiliar.

Having seen that Paul's audience included unfamiliar churches, we are ready to examine the evidence that he wrote to the churches in the Lycus Valley, including those in Colosse, Laodicea, and Hierapolis.

One connection to the Lycus Valley can be found in Paul's friend Tychicus. According to Ephesians 6:21-22 and Colossians 4:7-8, Tychicus delivered at least two letters for Paul: one to the church in Ephesus and one to the church in Colosse. And it is most likely that he delivered them on the same trip. Also, Paul simultaneously wrote a letter to the church in Laodicea, although this letter has not survived.

Paul mentioned his letter to the Laodiceans in Colossians 4:16, writing these words:

**After this letter has been read to you, see that it is also read in the church of the Laodiceans and that you in turn read the letter from Laodicea (Colossians 4:16).**

It is reasonable to assume that Tychicus also delivered the letter that Paul wrote to the Laodicean church. This would have been the best method of ensuring that both churches read both letters. And it is reasonable to think that he also carried copies of the Ephesian letter for them to read as well.

Another reason to think that Paul intended the churches in the Lycus Valley to read Ephesians is that these churches were prominent in Paul's mind during his imprisonment. Listen to his words in Colossians 2:1:

**I want you to know how much I am struggling for you and for those at Laodicea, and for all who have not met me personally (Colossians 2:1).**

Paul was worried about the false teachings in Colosse, and he apparently believed that similar problems existed in Laodicea, and perhaps in other churches in the region.

For example, Paul mentioned the church of Hierapolis in Colossians 4:12-13, writing:

**Epaphras ... is working hard for you and for those at Laodicea and Hierapolis (Colossians 4:12-13).**

Paul's mention of Hierapolis probably indicates an organized church there. The implication seems to be that the churches of the Lycus Valley were jointly paying for Epaphras to stay with Paul, making Epaphras a constant reminder of the churches he represented.

Paul's concern for the churches of the Lycus Valley suggests that he would not have overlooked an opportunity to minister to them, especially if it only required making an additional copy of a letter for Tychicus to carry.

A third factor that should incline us to think that Ephesians was intended for the churches of the Lycus Valley is that Paul's letters to the Ephesians and Colossians address similar problems. And so, it is fair to say the epistle to the Ephesians would have been relevant and appropriate for the churches of the Lycus Valley. We will mention just one example for the sake of illustration.

As we saw in a prior lesson, the Colossians struggled against false teachers who worshiped and venerated demons. Paul countered their heresies by emphasizing the surpassing greatness of Jesus Christ over the entire cosmos and especially over the demons.

For example, in Colossians 1:16 Paul described Jesus with these words:

**For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him (Colossians 1:16).**

Compare this to Ephesians 1:20-22 where Paul described Christ in these terms:

**Christ ... [is seated] ... far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every title that can be given... And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything (Ephesians 1:20-22).**

In this passage, just as in the one from Colossians that we just read, Paul used the Greek words *archē* and *exousia*, here translated rule and authority. Both these words referred primarily to spiritual beings. He also repeated his use of the Greek word *kuriotēs* which can refer either to human leaders or to spiritual beings like angels and demons. Finally, Paul employed the Greek word *dunamis*, here translated dominion. Although *dunamis* is often used to mean simply "strength" or "ability," first-century Judaism had come to apply this term to the demons that align themselves with Satan to fight against God.

The role of Tychicus as Paul's messenger, the special concern Paul had for the churches of the Lycus valley, and the similar themes between Ephesians and Colossians strongly suggest that Paul also had the churches of the Lycus Valley in mind as he wrote to the Ephesians.

Now that we have seen that Paul's original audience probably included both the church in Ephesus and the churches in the Lycus Valley, we are in a position to look more closely at his purpose in writing. Why did Paul feel the need to send this letter?

## PURPOSE

Normally, Paul tailored his letters to address the specific problems of a relatively localized group of people whom he knew directly or personally. But in Ephesians he did something different: he responded to the problems of several churches in different locations, many of which he had never met.

Now, Paul's purpose in writing this letter was to deal with the problems of all these churches. But his strategy was not to address each issue individually.

Our discussion of Paul's purpose will divide into two sections: First, we will consider the theme of the kingdom of God in Paul's letter to the Ephesians. Second, we will look at how Paul addressed several challenges to the church in terms of God's kingdom. Let's look first at the theme of the kingdom of God.

## Kingdom of God

Most Christians associate the expression kingdom of God with the synoptic gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke. But the kingdom of God was an important motif for Paul as well. He explicitly referred to God's kingdom sixteen times in his letters, and he used other royal vocabulary at least as often.

In prior lessons we have emphasized that Paul's eschatology, his doctrine of the last days, was central to his thinking. Paul understood that Christ was bringing history to its great climax, beginning with his earthly ministry, continuing in the age of the church, and eventually reaching completion in Christ's triumphal return. Paul commonly spoke of Christ's work in terms of the overlap between the present age of sin and death, and the age to come in which God will pour out ultimate blessings and curses.

But when Jesus and the gospel writers spoke of the age to come, they generally described it in terms of the kingdom of God. They saw it as the time when God's kingdom would be manifested on earth as it is in heaven. And of course, Paul believed this too.

From this perspective, it would be hard to overstate the importance of the kingdom of God in Paul's thinking. In fact, according to Paul's friend and traveling companion Luke, preaching about the kingdom of God formed the core of Paul's apostolic ministry. Listen to Luke's words in Acts 28:30-31:

**For two whole years Paul ... preached the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ (Acts 28:30-31).**

At the time in question, Paul was in prison in Rome — probably the very place and time that he wrote his epistle to the Ephesians. And notice how Luke described Paul's ministry there. Instead of saying that Paul preached "the gospel," Luke said that Paul preached "the kingdom of God."

In the modern church, people most often associate the "gospel" or "good news" with things like the forgiveness of an individual's sins and the promise of an individual's everlasting life. And these are wonderful aspects of our hope.

But in the Bible, the gospel is cosmic in scope. It is the message that our divine King is using his power and authority to subject his enemies and to conquer sin, to redeem his people from their bondage and to establish them as rulers over the new earth. This is why Jesus and the gospel writers so often spoke of “the gospel of the kingdom.” And so, it is fair to say that when Paul instructed the Ephesians regarding the nature of the kingdom of God, he was giving them the larger picture of the gospel.

Although Paul explicitly mentioned the kingdom of God only a few times in Ephesians, he alluded to it frequently. Often his vocabulary recalled both the Old Testament kingdom of Israel and the contemporary Roman Empire. Both these associations reminded Paul's readers that his gospel was about a kingdom, specifically, the kingdom of God.

Let's consider six ways that Paul drew attention to God's kingdom in Ephesians beginning with the concept of citizenship, which Paul mentioned in Ephesians 2:12, 19. In the Old Testament God's people were organized as a kingdom, specifically, the kingdom of Israel. God was their king and they were the citizens of his kingdom. Similarly, the most valuable and well-known citizenship in Paul's day was citizenship in the Roman Empire. For these reasons, when Paul spoke of Christians as “citizens,” his audience would have understood that they were citizens in a kingdom.

The same is true of the concept of inheritance, which Paul mentioned in Ephesians 1:14, 18 as well as in 5:5. In the Old Testament, only citizens of the kingdom of Israel were given an inheritance in the Promised Land. And in the Roman Empire, only citizens had rights of inheritance. In other words, inheritance rights were only available to citizens of the kingdoms. And in fact, Paul explicitly associated our inheritance with Christ's kingdom.

And consider military service which Paul mentioned in Ephesians 6:10-18. War was associated most directly with the concept of kingdoms. In the Old Testament, all able-bodied male citizens of the kingdom were required to serve in the army of Israel. And in the Roman Empire, only citizens were required to perform military service. So, Paul's insistence that Christians engage in spiritual warfare also implied citizenship in God's kingdom.

Further, rule over creation, mentioned in places such as Ephesians 1:20-2:6, was associated with God's kingdom. In the Old Testament one of Israel's chief goals was to expand its dominion over the earth. The same was true in the Roman Empire. So, when Paul taught that believers are seated with Christ in positions of authority over all creation, he indicated that Christ was a king and that believers are both citizens and authorities within his kingdom.

Even the reference in Ephesians 3:15 to the source of our names has royal associations. In the Old Testament God's people were called by his name because they were part of his kingdom.

For example, listen to the words of Amos 9:11-12:

**“In that day I will restore David's fallen tent... so that they may possess the remnant of Edom and all the nations that bear my name,” declares the Lord (Amos 9:11-12).**

When the Lord spoke of restoring David's tent, he meant that he would restore the

kingdom of Israel under the kingship of David's descendants as part of the climax of human history. And those who were added to this restored kingdom were to be called by God's name.

Naming also had a kingdom connection in the Roman Empire. Specifically, it was common for those who were granted citizenship in the empire to take the name of the one who sponsored them for citizenship, or the name of the emperor who granted citizenship. In either case, taking the name of another was an aspect of joining the empire.

Finally, in Ephesians 6:20, Paul spoke of himself as God's ambassador. In both the Old Testament and Roman settings, an ambassador was an official representative of the king or emperor.

In these and many other ways, Paul revealed that his broad concerns in this letter were directly related to his concept of the kingdom of God.

Now that we have looked at the theme of the kingdom of God in Paul's letter to the Ephesians, we are ready to turn to the challenges to God's kingdom that Paul addressed.

## Challenges

Paul mentioned many challenges that faced the churches in Ephesus and the Lycus Valley, but for the sake of time we will mention just three: the "old self" or sinful nature that fights against the "new self" within every believer encouraging us to sin; the racial tensions between the Jewish and Gentile Christians; and demonic forces.

First, when Paul wrote about our sinful nature and sinful habits, he appealed to kingdom language, teaching that sin must not characterize the citizens of God's kingdom. For example, in Ephesians 5:5, Paul wrote these words:

**No immoral, impure or greedy person ... has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God (Ephesians 5:5).**

Citizens in God's kingdom may either obey or disobey Christ. If they obey, being faithful to their king, they inherit the blessings of the covenant including things like forgiveness of sins, and eternal life. But if a citizen rejects Christ, rebelling against the king and the salvation he offers, that person has no inheritance in Christ's kingdom.

Second, Paul used the imagery of the kingdom of God to address the matter of racial or ethnic tension between Jews and Gentiles in the church. Listen to his words in Ephesians 2:11-13:

**Formerly you who are Gentiles by birth and called "uncircumcised" by those who call themselves "the circumcision" ... were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise ... But now in Christ Jesus you ... have been brought near (Ephesians 2:11-13).**

Here, Paul contrasted the condition of his "uncircumcised" Gentile readers before they came to faith in Christ with their condition after they came to faith. Before they



came to faith, they were foreigners rather than citizens of Israel, God's kingdom on earth. But once the Gentiles came to faith, they became full citizens of the kingdom.

Paul also said that when the Gentiles used to be excluded from the covenants of promise. The Old Testament covenants were national, theocratic treaties between God and Israel. They were the legal arrangements by which God administered his kingdom on earth. Once the Gentiles were grafted into God's kingdom by Christ, they came under the authority of these national covenants. And as a result, they were entitled to the covenant blessings.

Paul's discussion of the church in terms of citizenship and covenants indicated that Paul was speaking of the church as God's kingdom. In short, Paul taught that Jews and Gentiles are reconciled to one another partly because they are now citizens in the same kingdom.

Finally, Paul used kingdom language to address the matter of the demonic forces that challenged the church.

As we saw in a prior lesson, the churches in the Lycus Valley were troubled by false teachers. These false teachers borrowed from Greek religion and mistaken understandings of Jewish law in order to persuade Christians to worship various spiritual powers including demons as well as the basic elements of the universe: earth, air, water and fire. Paul characterized these demons and basic elements in a number of ways that related to his theology of the kingdom of God. But his most explicit statement to this effect appears in Ephesians 2:1-2.

**You were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient (Ephesians 2:1-2).**

Paul said that the demons have their own kingdom, which he called the kingdom of the air. This kingdom has a ruler, or king, who governs it. As we know from the rest of Scripture, that evil spirit is Satan. Not surprisingly, Paul later described the opposition between the church and the kingdom of Satan as a war between kingdoms. Listen to his words in Ephesians 6:12:

**Our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms (Ephesians 6:12).**

The church as God's kingdom is in a cosmic battle with the kingdom of darkness, which is ruled by Satan and his demons.

Paul's original audience had a fairly broad variety of problems, ranging from personal sin to racial tension to paganism and demons. And Paul determined that the best way to address these divergent problems was by relating them all to a common theme. So, he cast them all in light of the sweeping, cosmic reality of the kingdom of God in Christ, giving his readers the big picture of what God was accomplishing.

The Lord had created his people anew, giving them citizenship in his kingdom so

that they were no longer enslaved to their sinful natures or to Satan's kingdom. He had called them and enabled them to live in harmony with one another, partaking of the blessings of his kingdom. And he had armed them against their demonic foes.

By appealing to the theme of the kingdom of God in this manner, Paul gave these early churches a way to conceive of the Christian life as a whole, and encouraged them to live it with love and dedication.

## STRUCTURE AND CONTENT

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Now that we have explored the background to Paul's epistle to the Ephesians, we are in a position to survey the structure and content of Paul's letter to the church in Ephesus.

Paul's epistle to the Ephesians can be divided into five major sections. It includes a salutation in 1:1-2; praise to God in 1:3-14; an explanation of Paul's constant prayer for the Ephesians in 1:15-23; the main body contrasting the kingdoms of light and darkness in 2:1-6:20; and final greetings in 6:21-24.

### SALUTATION

The salutation appears in 1:1-2. It states that the letter comes from the apostle Paul, and mentions that he holds his apostleship "by the will of God." This reference to God's will identifies Paul as God's official representative so that Paul's words carry divine authority. The salutation concludes with a standard greeting in the form of a brief blessing.

### PRAISE

A section of praise to God appears next in 1:3-14. This is Paul's only canonical letter in which the salutation is followed by such a section of praise to God. Typically Paul followed his salutation with a personal reference or greeting. But as we have seen, there are no personal references of any type in the epistle to the Ephesians.

We don't know for certain why Paul decided not to include any personal greetings. Maybe he thought that a section of praise would work better in a circular letter. Or maybe he wanted to lay the groundwork for the doctrinal sections that followed. Some have seen this section as the beginning of a dialog of prayer that spans the first three chapters. Others have pointed out that in the ancient world doxologies to the king were common in official writings. In all likelihood, Paul's reasons for structuring the letter in this way were complex. Probably he did it for a variety of reasons, including at least some of those we have mentioned.

Figuring out Paul's motives for including this praise may be hard, but recognizing its content is easy. We might focus on such things as: its strong Trinitarian theology

throughout these verses, explicitly honoring the work of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit; or its emphasis on salvation through the atonement of Jesus Christ in verse 7; or the revelation of the mystery of the gospel in verse 9; or the promise of our future glory, ensured by the gift of the Holy Spirit, in verses 11-14. And all of these ideas are worthy of attention.

But there is a larger idea that not only includes all of these threads of Paul's praise but also explains many more details mentioned in this passage. And not surprisingly, that idea is the kingdom of God.

For example, in verses 4 and 5, Paul honored God for his sovereign rule, praising him for predestining certain individuals to be his special people. In verses 9 and 10 Paul also praised God for his sovereign rule over all creation that will eventually bring all things under the headship of Christ.

Beyond this, in verses 5-7, Paul praised God's benevolence toward his people. God demonstrated his mercy by adopting, redeeming and forgiving his people. Great benevolences were commonly directed by ancient kings toward their people, although God's benevolences certainly outweigh any offered by merely human rulers.

And in verse 14 Paul praised God for our inheritance in Christ. This pertains to God's kingdom because in 5:5 Paul identified our inheritance as an "inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God," and because inheritance rights belonged only to citizens of the kingdom.

## PRAYER

After this introductory praise, the next section is a prayer for Paul's readers found in Ephesians 1:15-23.

Paul's prayer consists essentially of three parts: his thankfulness for the believers to whom he wrote; a twofold petition that the Holy Spirit would enlighten them; and an extended explanation of that enlightenment.

Paul's prayer repeats all the same elements that we looked at in the preceding section of praise. It includes strong Trinitarian theology explicitly honoring the work of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, as in verse 17. It emphasizes that salvation comes through the atonement of Jesus Christ in verses 19 and 20. Its main petition, in verses 17-19, is for further revelation of the gospel, in the form of enlightenment that enables believers to understand the blessings they have received. And it speaks of the hope of our future glory in verse 18.

And just like the section on praise, the larger idea of the kingdom of God provides the context in which all of these other ideas are mentioned.

When we explored the theme of the kingdom of God in Paul's praise, we focused on three details: God's sovereign rule, which includes his power and authority; God's benevolence, which consists of the good things he freely gives to us; and our inheritance in Christ, which includes all the blessings of God's covenant with his people. And not surprisingly, all three of these kingdom elements are present in his prayer as well.

Paul mentioned God's sovereignty when he spoke of the Father's "incomparably great power" and "mighty strength" in verse 19 and when he spoke of Christ being enthroned above all other rulers in verse 21.

And he spoke of God's benevolence when he mentioned that God's power is "for us who believe" in verse 19, as well as when he said that Christ rules as king for the benefit of the church in verses 22 and 23.

And finally, in verse 18 Paul spoke directly of Christ's "glorious inheritance in the saints," which is the hope to which believers are called. Paul was able to speak of Christ's inheritance as our hope because, as he teaches in the body of the letter, Christ shares his inheritance with us so that his inheritance is our inheritance, too. Simultaneously, this alludes to the common Old Testament idea, found for example in Deuteronomy 9:26-29, that the kingdom of Israel was God's own inheritance, and that the people of kingdom were greatly blessed by this arrangement.

## **BODY**

Having seen the kingdom focus of Paul's praise and petition, we should turn to the main body of this epistle found in 2:1-6:20. The body focuses on the contrast between the righteous kingdom of God on the one hand and the sinful kingdom of demons and fallen humanity on the other hand.

There are many ways to outline the main body of Paul's epistle to the Ephesians. But in line with our focus in this lesson, our outline will emphasize how the themes of the main body relate to the topic of God's kingdom. We will divide the body into three primary sections: first, Paul's teaching on citizenship in the kingdom in 2:1-22; second, his explanation of the administration of the kingdom in 3:1-21; and third, a code for living within the kingdom found in 4:1-6:20. We will take a closer look at each of these sections, so let's begin by looking at citizenship in the kingdom of light in 2:1-22.

## **Citizenship**

Paul's teaching on citizenship in God's kingdom of light can be divided into three sections: First, Ephesians 2:1-3 focuses on the fact that fallen human beings are born into the kingdom of darkness and are enemies of God by nature. Second, Ephesians 2:4-10 details the way God grants us citizenship in his kingdom by transferring us from the kingdom of darkness to the kingdom of light. Third, Ephesians 2:11-22 discusses the nature of our citizenship in the kingdom of light.

First, Paul reminded his readers that the human race is sinful and fallen. We are spiritually dead; we have evil natures; we serve God's enemies; and as a result we are liable to fall under God's wrath on the Day of Judgment. Listen to the way he described fallen humanity in Ephesians 2:1-3:

**You were dead in your transgressions and sins ... you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air... All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath (Ephesians 2:1-3).**

Fallen human beings are God's enemies. Before God saves us, we willingly follow our sinful natures, and we serve Satan, the ruler of the kingdom of the air.

But as we saw earlier in this lesson, God sovereignly ruled that some people would inherit salvation. So, in Ephesians 2:4-10, Paul turned to the fact that God uses his royal prerogative to transfer them from the kingdom of darkness to the kingdom of light. As part of this process he renews our spirits so that we are spiritually alive. And he recreates us in Christ so that we have new natures that love God. He also predestines good works for us to do so that we serve God instead of his enemies. And as a result, we look forward to incomparable riches in the coming age, rather than to God's wrath and judgment.

The final topic Paul addressed in this section was the way God has now fulfilled the Old Testament ideal of combining both Jews and Gentiles into one kingdom under God's sovereign rule. This ideal is mentioned throughout the Old Testament.

For example, in Psalm 22:27-28 David laid out this vision for the future of the kingdom of God:

**All the ends of the earth will remember and turn to the Lord, and all the families of the nations will bow down before him, for dominion belongs to the Lord and he rules over the nations (Psalm 22:27-28).**

In Paul's day, however, the status of Gentile Christians was a highly controversial matter. The Jewish Christians did not generally object to the conversion of the Gentiles. But some of them did feel that Gentiles were second-class Christians.

Before Christ came the Jews actually did receive preferential treatment in God's kingdom. God's covenant people consisted primarily of the nation of Israel, and the fullest covenantal blessings belonged to free male Jews. Paul knew this truth of Old Testament faith. But through the apostles, the New Testament teaches that that all believers — whether Jew or Gentile, male or female, slave or free — receive eternal covenant blessings only through union with Christ. In Christ, each believer is counted as if he or she were Jesus himself, the free male Jew who kept God's covenant perfectly, and inherited all the covenant blessings.

As a result, the old distinctions between Jews and Gentiles in God's kingdom are obsolete. Because everyone gains salvation in the same way, the new standard is equal status and equal treatment for every citizen regardless of ethnicity. And because of this, all citizens of the kingdom of light are full citizens with the same rights and privileges, including full access to God. As Paul wrote in Ephesians 2:13-19:

**But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near... For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit. Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household (Ephesians 2:13-19).**

Now that we have looked at the idea of citizenship in God's kingdom of light, we should turn to Paul's teachings on the administration of the kingdom, which he presented in Ephesians 3:1-21.

## Administration

It should be obvious that every kingdom needs some sort of administrative structure. Kingdoms can't function well if they have only a king and a citizenry. Other government offices must exist through which the king administers his kingdom. In typical human governments, these include various levels and types of leadership such as those who make the laws, those who execute the laws, and those who judge violations of the laws. And the same is true in God's kingdom of light, especially as it is manifested in the church. The Bible teaches that the church is to be ruled by elders and that these elders are accountable to one another and to God.

In Paul's day false teachers were challenging the authority structure of the church. In fact, just before his arrest in Jerusalem, Paul had warned the Ephesian elders that false teachers would arise from their own ranks. In Acts 20:28-30 Luke recorded these words that Paul spoke to the Ephesian elders:

**Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers... I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them (Acts 20:28-30).**

Paul knew that false teachers would arise and that they would trouble the church. So, he instructed the elders to guard against these false teachers.

But what gave Paul the right to assign this task to the elders and to condemn the false teachers? Well, in Paul's day, there was another church office through which God administered his kingdom, one that existed as a foundational office but that no longer exists today. And this was the office of apostle. It was held by those who were picked and trained by God himself and who had met the resurrected Lord Jesus Christ — men such as Paul. The apostles were vested with God's authority and ruled infallibly over the entire church, including over the elders.

In Ephesians 3:2-7 Paul described his apostolic authority in relation to the administration of God's kingdom. Listen to his words there:

**Surely you have heard about the administration of God's grace that was given to me for you, that is, the mystery made known to me by revelation ... which was not made known to men in other generations as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to God's holy apostles and prophets... I became a servant of this gospel by the gift of God's grace given me through the working of his power (Ephesians 3:2-7).**

The apostles possessed special grace from God that empowered them in their ministry, and special revelation from God that taught them infallible truth. And they received an assignment from God to teach this revelation to the church. So, as an apostle it was Paul's obligation and right to explain the rules of God's kingdom to its citizens and to condemn

those who stood against him.

God appointed Paul to be his official representative on earth, his apostle. And this apostleship made Paul's word authoritative, as if it had been spoken by God himself. But why was Paul's authority so important at this point in his epistle to the Ephesians? To put it simply, the church needs to know whom to trust. If we are to please God, we have to be informed. We have to know what God requires of us. But in Paul's day, there were so many false teachings circulating that it was hard to know what God's requirements really were. The false teachers said one thing, the established leadership of the church said another.

Paul solved this problem by exerting his apostolic authority. He reminded his readers that because he was an apostle, his authority and insight were greater than all others. No false teacher could claim to be an apostle, and therefore no false teacher could have Paul's insight, or speak with divine authority. Paul, on the other hand, spoke God's words to God's people in order to lead them into the truth.

Wisely, Paul's teaching on the administration of the kingdom did not end with his assertion of authority but with a prayer, found in Ephesians 3:14-21. Paul had been a missionary, pastor, and apostle long enough to know that people don't recognize or accept the truth just because they hear it. He knew that he had the words of life, but he also knew that he couldn't make fallen people believe them. And so, he prayed that the Holy Spirit would illumine their minds so that they would accept his authority and teaching. And he prayed that consequently they would live in ways that built up the kingdom of God and blessed its citizens.

Now that we have looked at the ideas of citizenship and administration in relation to God's kingdom, we should turn to the code for living in the kingdom of light, recorded in 4:1-6:20.

## Code for Living

This code for living in the kingdom contains many different instructions on Christian behavior. But it can be summarized in the following way: we read of ecclesiastical order in the kingdom in Ephesians 4:1-16; purifying the kingdom in 4:17-5:20; domestic order in the kingdom in 5:21-6:9; and finally, the warfare of the kingdom in 6:10-20.

The section on ecclesiastical order in the kingdom, found in Ephesians 4:1-16, focuses primarily on positions of leadership, influence, and authority in the church. And Paul's teaching emphasizes the ways these roles work together for the good of all. Citizens are not to be envious of one another, but rather, appreciative of the contributions their brothers and sisters make. When each person does his or her assigned tasks, it benefits Christ. And because it benefits Christ, it benefits the whole kingdom.

Consider in this regard Paul's words in Ephesians 4:8:

**When he ascended on high, he led captives in his train and gave gifts to men (Ephesians 4:8).**

In this passage Paul referred to Psalm 68:18, which portrays the Lord as a

victorious king returning from battle. In Psalm 68 the Lord receives spoils of war from his conquered enemies. Paul, however, focused on what the Lord does with these gifts. Like ancient kings he shares them with his army. So, in a very real sense, these gifts benefit not only Christ, but the people of his kingdom.

Paul described some of these gifts in Ephesians 4:7-12:

**To each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it... It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up (Ephesians 4:7-12).**

Christ has divided his gifts in ways that enable the citizens of his kingdom to serve one another. And by this service, Christ's kingdom is increased and strengthened.

Chapter 4:17–5:20 explains the issue of purifying the kingdom of light from the corruption that remains within it. This corruption, or sin, was bred and nourished within us when we were citizens of Satan's kingdom of darkness. It is the product of our old, sinful nature, which we still retain even as citizens of the kingdom of light. But those within the kingdom of light who are believers also have a new nature that they can rely on to overcome their sin.

As Paul wrote in Ephesians 4:22-24:

**You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; to be made new in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness (Ephesians 4:22-24).**

God's kingdom is to be as morally pure as possible; it is to reflect the character of its king. And this is for the benefit of the whole kingdom. After all, God blesses and rewards moral purity. So, by refraining from sin, and by doing good works, the citizens increase the blessedness of the kingdom and ensure their inheritance in it.

The subject of domestic order in the kingdom of light is handled in Ephesians 5:21–6:9. This section speaks of maintaining the proper authority structures that exist within households and of the way each party within the authority relationships is to relate to one another.

In many ways this section resembles Paul's teaching on ecclesiastical order, found in Ephesians 4:1-16. In that section, Paul taught that everyone should honor and respect those who hold positions of leadership, influence, and authority in the church, and he taught those in positions of leadership to work for the benefit of all.

In this section on domestic order, Paul affirmed the authority structures between husbands and wives, parents and children, and masters and slaves. And he taught each party in these relationships to function in ways that honored and benefited all parties. And again, the reason was that these structures enhance life in the kingdom of God.

Lastly, in 6:10-20 Paul spoke of the warfare between the kingdom of light and the kingdom of darkness. Here Paul spoke of the fact that everyone in the kingdom of light is



called to serve in God's army, fighting the spiritual war against the kingdom of darkness.

Paul summarized this final section of the letter's body in Ephesians 6:11-12 where he wrote these words:

**Put on the full armor of God so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms (Ephesians 6:11-12).**

The devil and his kingdom war against the church and the kingdom of light, and our divine king demands our loyalty in this battle. To make sure that we can stand firm against our enemies, he suits us in his armor and arms us with his word.

### FINAL GREETINGS

The last section of Paul's epistle to the Ephesians is the closing, found in Ephesians 6:21-24. In this short passage, Paul offered a closing blessing, and indicated that Tychicus would deliver this letter.

## MODERN APPLICATION

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Now that we have investigated the background to Paul's epistle to the Ephesians and explored its structure and content, we are ready to address the modern application of the teaching Paul originally directed to the Ephesians.

Our application of Paul's letter to the Ephesians will divide into three parts, moving from narrower to broader aspects of God's kingdom: First, we will talk about honoring the king. Second, we will discuss building the kingdom. And third, we will address the topic of conquering the cosmos. Let's begin with the subject of honoring the king.

### HONORING THE KING

As we have seen, Paul's epistle to the Ephesians appeals to the idea that God is the divine king over all creation, and especially over the kingdom of his people. And our divine king has done so many wonderful things for us that we should eagerly respond by honoring him, especially through thankfulness, obedience, and loyalty.

Now, in keeping with the way ancient societies talked about kings and their people, Paul described God's royal benevolence to us in terms of "love." And he described our obligations to him in the same way. For example, listen to Paul's words in Ephesians 2:4-7:

**Because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions... And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms ... in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus (Ephesians 2:4-7).**

This passage is part of Paul's larger argument explaining how God makes us citizens in his kingdom. And his point in these verses is that God demonstrates his love when he regenerates us, transfers us into his kingdom, places us in a position of authority and honor, and gives us our inheritance.

In the ancient world, kings often expressed love for their subjects, and they also required their subjects to love them. In this national context, the word "love" described faithfulness and devotion, much like we speak of loving our countries even today. And it was expressed primarily by benevolence and protection on the part of the king, and by obedience and loyalty on the part of his subjects.

And this is precisely what we see in Paul's description of God's love for his people. The historical facts of the gospel prove that God is committed to the people of his kingdom and that he values us highly. His faithfulness to us is demonstrated through his kindness and protection as expressed in things like our predestination, Christ's death on our behalf, the regeneration of our spirits, our citizenship in God's kingdom, our union with Christ the heavenly king, and the glory we will inherit in the future. And because God has done all these wonderful things for us, we are obligated to honor him in return.

Listen to Paul's prayer in Ephesians 3:17-4:1:

**I pray that you ... may have power ... to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge ... Now ... to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen. As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received (Ephesians 3:17-4:1).**

Paul drew two applications from God's love in this passage: First, he honored God in doxological praise by ascribing glory to him. Second, Paul exhorted his readers to honor God through their obedience by living a worthy life.

We will look more closely at both of these ways we are to honor God, beginning with the praise and worship we are to render to him, and then moving on to our lives of obedience to him. Let's turn first to praise and worship.

## **Praise and Worship**

In Ephesians 5:19-20, Paul explicitly instructed his readers to honor God through praise and worship, writing these words:

**Speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ (Ephesians 5:19-20).**

Christians are always to be thankful for all of God's blessings. And we are to express our heartfelt gratitude in psalms, hymns, spiritual songs, and music in our hearts. These are all forms of praise and worship, whether we express them outwardly to others or inwardly to the Lord alone.

Besides instructing us to praise God, Paul included several models of praise for us to follow, including his introductory praise in Ephesians 1:3-14 and his doxological prayer in Ephesians 3:14-21. Both of these passages show us how to honor God through similar praise and doxology.

As we have seen, in both these sections Paul focused on the work of each person of the Trinity, the atonement of Jesus, God's revelation to us, and the future glory God has planned for us. And he mentioned these things in the context of honoring God for his kingship over us, speaking of God's sovereign rule, his benevolence toward us, and our inheritance in Christ.

Now, these are not the only acceptable ways to honor God as king. On the contrary, as Paul taught in Ephesians 5:19-20, we are to honor God for everything, not just for these few things. Nevertheless, it is important to recognize that when we honor God in praise and worship, it is right to acknowledge specific things that he has done.

Besides praise and worship, Paul also taught us to render obedience to our divine king as a way of honoring him.

## **Obedience**

One way that we are to express our obedience to God is by remaining fervently and persistently loyal to him, forsaking the powers and principalities. As Paul wrote in Ephesians 5:8-10:

**For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light ... and find out what pleases the Lord (Ephesians 5:8-10).**

We used to be citizens of Satan's kingdom of darkness. But now our loyalties have shifted. Because God has saved us, we owe him our obedience; we owe it to him to leave behind the sinful ways of the kingdom of darkness and to live in ways that please our new Lord and king.

Paul wrote again of this loyalty in Ephesians 6:24, where he pronounced this conditional blessing:

**Grace to all who love our Lord Jesus Christ with an undying love. (Ephesians 6:24)**

Our love for the Lord is to be “undying,” never-ending, persistent, devoted, steadfast.

God wants and demands our complete devotion and dedication. It won't work simply to add him to a pantheon of gods that we worship; he insists on our undivided loyalty. And he does not just want our passive loyalty, as if we might turn away from false gods and then simply rest in the blessings of his kingdom. No, he wants us to obey all his commands, not only forsaking other gods, but also actively doing the many good works he has planned for us.

Paul's words in Ephesians 2:8-10 offer insight in this regard:

**For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith — and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God... For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do (Ephesians 2:8-10).**

God did not save us just to keep us from perishing, or just so that we would enjoy a comfortable life in his kingdom. Rather, God also created us anew in Christ so that we would be productive citizens in his kingdom, doing the good works he has assigned to us.

In God's kingdom, good works play a specific role: they are tools by which God expands and purifies his kingdom, receives glory, and ministers to his people. And according to Paul, God's purpose in saving us was to ensure that we would do these good works. So, the proper response to God's grace is to accept our appointment as his servants and ministers. It is to adopt his goal as our goal, his purpose as our purpose. This is why Paul so often encouraged his readers to live in a “worthy” manner, one that reflected the character of the king and of his kingdom.

Now that we have considered some ways of honoring the king, we should turn to Paul's strategy for building the kingdom. Just as God requires our loving praise and obedience, he also requires that we help him expand and grow his earthly kingdom.

## **BUILDING THE KINGDOM**

To help us understand how to build the kingdom of God on earth, Paul employed a number of metaphors. Each one offered insight into how the citizens of God's kingdom are to relate to one another and to Christ, as well as into how we are to cooperate in growing God's kingdom. We will mention two such metaphors, beginning with the way Paul compared the kingdom to God's temple.

Listen to Paul's words to the Gentile Christians in Ephesians 2:19-22:

**You are ... members of God's household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit (Ephesians 2:19-22).**

Paul taught that the Gentile Christians were full citizens in God's kingdom, with equal

status to the Jewish Christian citizens. And to emphasize this fact, he described the kingdom of God as a building, with each Christian being a stone in the structure.

In this metaphor Christ has the position of preeminence, being the cornerstone of the foundation, the one on which all the other stones rely, in whom the whole building is united. The apostles and prophets held positions of high authority under Christ, being specially called as his representatives. All other Christians are stones in the structure, without distinction among us.

Now, the goal of this building was to become God's dwelling so that God could live in the midst of his people. The nation of Israel realized a blessing like this in the Old Testament, especially through the Temple in Jerusalem, just as Solomon proclaimed in 2 Chronicles 6. But the Old Testament also taught that the Gentiles would eventually live in God's presence, too.

For example, listen to God's words in Isaiah 66:19-20:

**They will proclaim my glory among the nations. And they will bring all your brothers, from all the nations, to my holy mountain in Jerusalem as an offering to the LORD (Isaiah 66:19-20).**

In this passage God taught that when he restored the kingdom to Israel — which he began to do in the New Testament through Jesus — the Israelites would return to the Temple in Jerusalem to worship the Lord. And strikingly, the Gentiles would come with them, actually bringing the Israelites to God as a holy offering from the nations.

So, when Paul taught that both Jews and Gentiles would live in God's presence as his Temple, he meant that God's kingdom was moving toward its final goal. This meant that God's kingdom blessings were now being extended to all races. But why did Paul use this specific metaphor? Appropriately, he used it to foster racial reconciliation between the Jews and the Gentiles in the church.

In Paul's day, some Jewish Christians perpetuated the idea that Jews were superior to Gentiles because they were the chosen people of God. They had received preferential treatment from God for so long that they had begun to think they deserved it.

But the truth is that all mankind, Jew and Gentile alike, is lost without Christ. None of us is the least bit deserving of blessing; all of us deserve to be condemned. Only Christ is deserving of blessing. Thankfully, because we are united to him, God counts us as deserving of blessing too.

So, as we build God's kingdom today, we must focus on the big picture of honoring God and living in his presence, and of striving to increase Christ's glory rather than our own. And we must be humble toward one another, recognizing that no believer is more deserving of blessing than any other.

Obviously, this means that modern racial and ethnic barriers in the church must be destroyed. But it also means that we must repent of other ways that we wrongly divide from one another, or wrongly elevate ourselves to the detriment of others. Perhaps our church leadership considers itself more important than the laity, or perhaps we treat wealthy Christians with more respect than we treat poor Christians. Perhaps we value our local congregation or our denomination so highly that we look down on those in other churches and seek to work independently from them as we build God's kingdom. In all such cases, Paul's teaching is that we must put aside our vanity and arrogance and

embrace all believers as our equals in the kingdom of God.

Now, as useful as the metaphor of the temple was, the metaphor that Paul used most frequently to explain kingdom building in his letter to the Ephesians was that of a body — specifically Christ's body, with Christ as the head, and with all believers collectively composing Christ's body. Paul used this metaphor in chapters 1, 3, 4, and 5 in order to draw out several different points of application.

He introduced this metaphor in Ephesians 1:20-23 with these words:

**[God] raised [Christ] from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, far above all rule and authority... And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, which is his body (Ephesians 1:20-23).**

Like the metaphor of the temple, this one also described the kingdom of God: Christ was seated as king in heaven, and ruled for the benefit of his people, the church.

Paul continued with this imagery in Ephesians 3:6, adding:

**Through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus (Ephesians 3:6).**

Paul's emphasis on racial reconciliation was evident again in this passage. He argued that Jewish and Gentile Christians are all united to Christ, and to one another in Christ, and that both receive blessings only because they partake of the promises in Christ.

Paul's fullest use of the body of Christ imagery, however, appears in 4:1-16 where he argued for ecclesiastical order in the kingdom. There he focused primarily on positions of leadership, influence, and authority in the church as means through which the rest of the church is empowered for ministry. He argued that the good works God has prepared for us consist largely of services to one another, for the purpose of building up the church so that it becomes a fitting kingdom for the Lord of the universe to rule. Listen to Paul's words in Ephesians 4:11-13:

**[God] gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ (Ephesians 4:11-13).**

God has established leaders in the church who are to prepare the rest of us to minister to one another.

And these leaders are to guide the church toward two goals. The first of these is reaching "unity in the faith." Here Paul had in mind that the church is to be doctrinally unified, having a mature and accurate understanding, and not being satisfied with only a basic understanding of the gospel. This is in keeping with Paul's earlier prayers that God would enable Paul's readers to understand God's kingdom blessings in Christ.

The second goal is “attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.” This goal is cosmic in scope; it is to bring all of creation under the rule of Christ, just as Paul taught in Ephesians 1:10. As amazing as it might sound, through proper church leadership and dedicated ministry among Christians, the entire universe can be brought under the lordship of Christ.

Paul continued this metaphor in Ephesians 4:15-16, where he explained some specific things the church leaders were to teach the people to do:

**Speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work (Ephesians 4:15-16).**

As each church leader speaks the truth in love to the church body, the body learns that truth. As a result, each Christian is able to minister meaningfully to others, performing works of service and encouragement. But notice something else as well: love must characterize both the leader's teaching and the church's works of service.

Now, just as God's love for us and our love for God are defined primarily in terms of loyalty and dedication within the kingdom, our love for other Christians is also defined in this way. Our love for our neighbors is not so much a feeling of personal connection, but rather a loyal commitment and dedication that seeks their benefit, even if we don't know them personally.

But this love is not mere cooperation or synergism. Rather, Christian love understands that our fellow believers are part of Christ's inheritance. Christ was willing to die in order to make them his, and he receives glory and honor because they belong to him. This should inspire us to value them more highly too, and to put forth the effort it takes to minister to them.

Now that we have explored the subjects of honoring the king and building the kingdom, we should turn to our final topic: conquering the cosmos. Jesus is the king over the church right now, but a day is coming when he will conquer all his enemies and rule over the entire universe.

## CONQUERING THE COSMOS

As we have seen, God's kingdom currently co-exists or overlaps with the present age of sin and death. During this time, God's forces — including his church — battle against the kingdom of the demons and fallen humanity. But eventually Jesus will return. And when he does, he will deliver final judgment against his enemies, forever crushing their ability to resist him. Eventual victory over the powers of darkness is certain. But until that day, we are obligated to stand and fight against them.

But even in the present age of sin and death, we have the upper hand in the battle against the demonic forces. As we have seen, our king is already seated in power and authority above them, and we are seated with him. God has already rescued us from their evil dominion and restored us to a state of blessing within his kingdom. And he has empowered us with his Holy Spirit to withstand the worst attacks our enemies can

muster. Consider Paul's words in Ephesians 6:13, 16:

**Put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand... Take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one (Ephesians 6:13, 16).**

Through his grace and Spirit, God provides us with power to stand against the demonic hordes.

And not only this, but the many blessings that the church receives are proof to the demons that their defeat is certain. In fact, Paul went so far as to say that the very existence of the church testifies to the doom of all of God's enemies. Listen to Paul's words in Ephesians 3:8-11:

**This grace was given me: to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, and to make plain to everyone the administration of this mystery, which for ages past was kept hidden in God, who created all things. His intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms, according to his eternal purpose which he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord (Ephesians 3:8-11).**

Even before the creation of mankind, God planned to use his church to reveal his glory to his demonic enemies. But he kept this fact a secret until the time of Christ. But now that Christ has come, God is using the church to demonstrate his wisdom and power to all his enemies. He is holding up the church as an example of his ability to defeat even the greatest schemes of the Devil, as proof of his power to reconcile all things to himself. After all, if he can redeem the human race from the corruption of sin, if he can reconcile even us to one another and to himself, there is nothing he can't do.

But we are not just on display. The church is God's prize. We are the treasure he has fought for and won from the kingdom of his enemies. We are the people God controls history to save, the beloved bride Christ gave his life to protect and to marry. Listen to Paul's description of Christ and the church in Ephesians 5:23-27:

**For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church ... Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her ... to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless (Ephesians 5:23-27).**

God loves and values us. And in the process of reconciling all things to himself and renewing and purifying the cosmos, he is starting with us. And therefore, the existence of the church, and the forgiveness of the church, and the sanctification of the church, prove that the kingdom of God has begun. And if it has begun, then it will certainly be completed. And when it is, the demons will be utterly destroyed, and Christ's reign will be absolute. As Paul wrote of Christ in Ephesians 1:22-23:



**God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way (Ephesians 1:22-23).**

Paul's words here are stunning: Christ has been exalted as king of the universe in order that the church might be blessed. We are his fullness, his body.

As much as Christ deserves to rule because of his own status and merit, the reason he actually does rule is that it blesses us. And therefore, the fact that the church is blessed — the fact that Jews and Gentiles, husbands and wives, parents and children, masters and slaves are reconciled to each other and to God — is proof positive that God is powerful and good and wise, and that he has begun to renew the cosmos.

## **CONCLUSION**

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In this lesson we have explored Paul's circular epistle to the Ephesians. We have looked at the background that provides the setting for the letter, and we have examined the letter's structure and content. Finally, we have considered the modern application of Paul's teachings in this epistle.

Paul's letter to the Ephesians has a very important lesson to teach us today. It teaches us that salvation is not just about individuals being redeemed from their sin. Rather, it is about building, maintaining and thriving in God's kingdom. As we improve our understandings of God's kingdom, we will be better prepared to resist its enemies, to live in ways that please God, and to gain his blessings for ourselves and for our fellow believers.

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**Dr. Reggie Kidd (Host)** is Professor of New Testament Emeritus at Reformed Theological Seminary. He received his M.A.R. and M.Div. from Westminster Theological Seminary and his Ph.D. in Christian Origins from Duke University. He is a member of the Evangelical Theological Society and is an ordained priest in The Episcopal Church. Dr. Kidd teaches at the Robert E. Webber Institute for Worship Studies and has served as a pastor and elder at multiple churches. He is the author of *With One Voice: Discovering Christ's Song in Our Worship* (BakerBooks, 2005) and has contributed to many other publications, including *The Spirit of the Reformation Study Bible* (Zondervan, 2003) and *The Reformation Study Bible* (Ligonier Ministries, 2005).

# Paul's Prison Epistles

LESSON  
THREE

## Paul and the Ephesians Faculty Forum



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# Paul's Prison Epistles

## Lesson Three: Paul and the Ephesians

### Faculty Forum

With  
Dr. Reggie Kidd

Students  
Larry Gwaltney  
Rob Griffith

### Question 1:

#### Why do some people question Paul's authorship of Ephesians?

**Student:** Reggie, we do have an account, written by Luke of Paul's ministry to the Ephesians yet some people question Paul's authorship of the book of Ephesians. Why do they do that, it strikes me as odd?

**Dr. Kidd:** Well, when you read Ephesians you realize that some things are a little bit different here than the way Paul customarily expresses himself. The language is more elevated. Sometimes people call it more full. For instance, in Ephesians 1:19, Paul piles up four different words for power. And if you just read the Greek and kind of get used to the way Paul expresses himself in say, 1 Corinthians, 2 Corinthians, Galatians, and Romans and you read Ephesians, it just feels a little different, a little bit more elevated, and a little more exalted. Then you notice that sometimes he'll use a similar word, or the same words, only they mean something a little bit different. Like in Colossians, he talks about the mystery as being Christ and in Ephesians mystery is Jew and Gentile being brought together.

Some ideas that seem kind of important to him in the early letters have changed. Like in the early letters, every time he uses the word "works" in the plural, he means works of the law as some sort of attempt to establish a relationship with God. Well, all of the sudden now in Ephesians, "works" in the plural gets used for what we do on the far side of salvation. In the early letters, when he talks about gifts he seems to be talking more about function in the church. And here in Ephesians, when he talks about gifts it's more about people who are gifted for an office to help other people serve. And in the earlier letters, it's clear that he thinks relationships ought to be worked out in a godly way. But here in Ephesians, he's talking about ordered patterned relationships along with Colossians: fathers and children, masters and slaves, husbands and wives. And so, some folks just feel that there's just a different hand, a different mind in view here that's in play. Now, as far as I'm concerned, it's to the very extent that you notice the differences. It's a little harder for me to imagine how somebody trying to pretend to be Paul would be so different. And how much easier it would be for Paul himself to unselfconsciously to express himself differently, to speak to a particular situation.

**Question 2:****In what ways is Ephesians similar to Paul's other writings?**

**Student:** So Reggie, you talk about a lot of the differences but surely there are similarities. In what ways is the book of Ephesians similar to a lot of Paul's writings in doctrine and language?

**Dr. Kidd:** Well, I think that's a great question, Rob. I think, on close examination, what you wind up appreciating is that Paul is taking an opportunity to express some things that are latent in the earlier letters that he just hasn't had much time to develop. The whole thing about Christ's dominion over the powers that he reflects on pointedly in Colossians and then expands here in Ephesians, it's the same view of things that you have in Romans 8, where it talks about there is nothing that could separate us from the love of God in Christ, which includes the powers that are out there. The whole idea of salvation by grace through faith is the same. Christ's work of atonement is the basis for our life with God through his blood, Ephesians 1:7. The fact that we don't get a relationship through our works, but it's salvation through grace and faith. That's all one and the same. The whole project that is at the heart of Ephesians, of God bringing Jew and Gentile together in one new man at the cross, well, that is simply an explanation or explication or expounding of what he means in Romans 3:29-30 when he talks about there being only one God. There is not a God of the Jews and a God of the Gentile; there is only one God. And he's necessarily the God who brings salvation to both kinds of people, Jews and Gentile, the one through circumcision and the one.... Let me look that one up because it's such a great line. In Romans 3:29-30, he says, "Since there is one God who will justify the circumcision out of faith and the un-circumcision through faith." Same door, different ways to get through the door but it's the same door. In Ephesians, he has opportunity to develop that in a way that he hadn't developed it before.

**Question 3:****Why is the authorship of Ephesians important?**

**Student:** So, Reggie, why is the authorship of Ephesians so important if the doctrine is true?

**Dr. Kidd:** Well Rob, it wouldn't matter if it didn't claim to come from Paul. You know, the church accepted Hebrews without knowing who wrote it. A lot of people thought Paul did but in fact we don't really know and we accept it because what it says is so compelling and powerful and true. In the case of Paul's letters, they come with his own personal imprimatur. They say, "Believe this because I, the apostle, delegate of God have said this stuff." And it's conceivable that the truth would be true whether he was lying about writing it or not, but you have a huge ethical problem. And for a long time, scholars kind of were trying to give these letters like Ephesians a pass and say, "Well, everybody understood that the Holy Spirit's voice was what was

really important and the human vessel wasn't that important. And everybody knew that this was just a literary device that somebody would use to honor somebody before them." But the more that we have looked at ancient literature, the more we have seen that that dog just ain't going to hunt. There was a tremendous concern for intellectual property in Paul's day and people especially when it came to letter writing. There were all kinds of ways that people would ensure they weren't misrepresented in writing. And Paul does himself in Galatians when he writes, "Well, see what big hands and letters I write" as he closes the letter to certify that if he had used an amanuensis for the text of the letter, that it was his. And the more recent scholars who dispute Paul's authorship, they're just more honest. They say whoever wrote this was involved in a propaganda war and they employed the noble lie. Sort of like the executive who tells his secretary, "Tell them I'm not in" even when they are in because "I have more important things to do." And honestly, that's the choice. Because the letter claims to be by Paul, it really is Paul or it's somebody who is disingenuously, dishonestly manipulating people into thinking that it's Paul. So, there's some rather large choices.

#### Question 4:

#### Why would someone forge a letter in Paul's name?

**Student:** You use the term "propaganda war." Why would people forge or try to forge Paul's name?

**Dr. Kidd:** Well, we do have documents that come from the second century that show that there were spins on Paul and taken him in a direction of teaching that was against the domestic order. And I'm thinking in particular of the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*, where Thecla was... we don't know if she was a historical figure or not, she may have been. But the account that written about her at the end of the second century portrays Paul as teaching that is you want to get to heaven you can't have sex, so you can't get married. And so, Thecla comes under this teaching and baptizes herself and all kinds of crazy things happen. So, some scholars think that in order to make Paul more conservative than he actually was some people wrote documents like Ephesians and the Pastoral Epistles, 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus, to make Paul into this... more of a social conservative than he actually was. So, there were false teachers out there.

And you see this in 2 Timothy where some people are saying that the resurrection has already come. And 2 Peter and Jude are writing against false teachers who were often giving really confusing teaching about the way we live as well as the work of Christ. And John had to face the same thing too. It's says there antichrists are already out there and they are not really from us. So, the apostles had to deal with people who were spinning the faith in directions they were wanting to go. So, I can understand why people would think that after the age of the apostles others would come along and try to argue for the more orthodox line in the name of the apostles. The problem is one of well, in the first place, of ethics, proclaiming to speak on behalf of the one



who Paul calls in Titus, the “un-lying” God, only telling lies. And then the other thing is, you are not centuries after the fact. You are writing to people who are probably still living, who would know and be able to tell what is true from what is false.

So, the scenario that has writers being able to pass off things as actually being Paul's when they are not Paul's is just not really very plausible. I think we're back to the best explanation of the fact that letters like Ephesians read so much like Paul that, if they didn't have a name attached to them, the church probably would have thought that it was Paul. They are so close that they sound so much like him and there are such subtle differences that it's more plausible that the differences are there because Paul wrote them without having to try to sound like himself.

### **Question 5:**

**Did Paul really write this letter to the Ephesians? If not, what difference does it make?**

**Student:** Reggie, some bibles, in chapter 1, verse 1 of Ephesians, note that the words “in Ephesus” don't appear in all the manuscripts. And what I was wondering, is how does this affect our confidence in the first place that it really was written to them? And another question that falls under that, how does that affect our interpretation if that is an issue?

**Dr. Kidd:** That's a good question, Larry, and it's a good chance to go back and just try to crystalize one of the points we tried to make in the lesson. In the lesson, we did note that in some of the very early manuscripts the ‘in Ephesus’ isn't in there. And it's all so clear that Paul is writing in part to people he didn't know. And it struck a lot of scholars as being odd that Paul, who had been in Ephesus for three years, writes to people as though he didn't know them, and that's one of the reasons why some readers speculate that Paul didn't write it.

But one of the things that we talked about in the lesson was likelihood that Paul did write the letter primarily to Ephesus because Ephesus was sort of the mother church of a bunch of churches that got started in the surrounding Lycos Valley and Colossae was one of those, and the church at Laodicea would have been one of those, and it looks like there was one in Hierapolis and those churches were just a few miles from each other. So, the likelihood is that the letter circulated beyond Ephesus, and Paul intended it to circulate beyond Ephesus. And it would have been natural for the “in Ephesus” to have been dropped in the copies that circulate beyond Ephesus even though it was applying to those churches as well.

**Question 6:****Does this letter address local problems in Ephesus, or only in the wider community?**

**Student:** Well Reggie, we know that Paul didn't have any difficulties in writing to people that he had never met. So, I'm curious, how much of the letter is actually written to address problems in Ephesus or do we have a sense of how much of it is written to maybe a wider audience than just that city?

**Dr. Kidd:** Well, Ephesus, Rob, or the letter to the Ephesians is a great example of how Paul can be very specific to a particular situation and global at the same time. Here in this letter, when he talks about the church he's not just talking about a local congregation like he writes the letter to the churches of Galatia. Here he's talking about the church universal and what its significance is. And he talks in Ephesians, at the end of Ephesians 2, about how there had been this foundation laying work of the apostles and the prophets. Then how there is this edifice that is building that is beyond the particularities of any specific local church.

And the whole way that he paints the work of the ministry of the gospel in the church where Christ is giving gifts to church officers so that they can equip the church, or church members, for their work of service so that the bride can be built. And the bride of Christ is this larger conception of the church, sort of more the church universal. And the way that he addresses larger patterned relationships, family relationships: husbands and wives, parents and children, masters and slaves, and talks in a more general fashion, like in 1 Corinthians when he talks about worship, he is talking about the nitty-gritty of how he wants them to relate to each other specifically in Corinth. You know, they have these divisions among themselves where the poor are not getting to the table at the same time as everyone else and not therefore rightly discerning the body. They are breaking the body of Christ up and the Lord is slamming people and people are using their spiritual gifts to exalt themselves rather than each other. And he's telling them in terms that they need to understand in that particular situation that you need to edify each other.

You know, those are principles that it's pretty easy to infer for everybody. But he's really addressing that particular situation. Here in Ephesus, he is talking about worship in this larger sense of coming together to let the word of Christ... It's easy to blend Ephesians 5 with Colossians 3 because in both of these cases he is extrapolating about the nature and shape of worship, where the Word of Christ dwells richly among us. And we teach and instruct one another with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs and where thanksgiving is in our hearts. The whole thing on spiritual warfare is just, he's painting across this broad canvas and I think he intends for this letter in particular, kind of inspired by the juices that got flowing as he wrote the letter to the Colossians, to help the church however long history goes, wherever God raises up the church, here is what our life together should be like. That's one of the things that make Ephesians so exciting and it's so very popular — is that the right word — so

powerful in the church, so special to people over the ages, and we kind of sense, oh yeah, he is talking to all of us here.

### **Question 7:**

#### **Why should a Gentile be excited about a Jewish Messiah?**

**Student:** Now, Reggie, in the lesson you unpack this whole kingdom motif. Now, what I am curious about though is, to a Gentile what would be exciting to them about a Jewish Messiah reigning over the world?

**Dr. Kidd:** One of the things we see happening in the first century is that Jewish synagogues have been dispersed all over the Mediterranean basin. And they were in these synagogues telling Israel's story and Gentiles who had attached themselves to the synagogues would understand that at some point Israel's story turns to the nations. The promise in Genesis 12 had been that it would be through Abraham that the nations would bless themselves. And that's one of the things that Paul got was that with the resurrection of Jesus Christ the kingdom had come into this new phase in which that which the prophets had promised was happening, that the Gentiles would be attaching themselves to the kingdom of God. Images like Psalms 72 that the rulers from far nations bringing their tribute. We mentioned in this lesson how Psalm 22, where all the families of the earth are proclaiming God's name and worshipping Him.

So, Gentiles, as they come to understand Israel's story and understanding that Israel's story ultimately involves the nations, would see themselves as now a part of this great story through Jesus the Messiah. And Paul puts it in terms of now Jew and Gentile being fellow citizens, there being this peoplehood that were made up of people who were near, Jews, and people who were far off. And that's why we talk about inheritance now being shared and that's not just an Israelite concept but now it's a kingdom concept that involves Gentiles who are co-heirs along with Jews of the promises of God.

### **Question 8:**

#### **Do God's promises to Old Testament Israel apply to the church?**

**Student:** You guys will forgive me a little bit here, I'm going to get a little personal here because in listening to what you were saying in answering his question, I'm remembering years back when I was in church being taught by pastors and high school teachers that Israel is not the church and do not confuse the promises of both. You have a distinct time line between the two groups. And is it appropriate for Gentiles, for instance, now to come and make these claims that these promises are now our promises?

**Dr. Kidd:** Well, in fact that seems to be exactly what Paul has done. It goes back at least to the whole idea of Gentiles now being children of Abraham. "Father Abraham

had many sons, many sons had Father Abraham, I am one of them and so are you. So let's just praise the Lord." By definition, those of us who have trusted Christ, as Paul's concerned, are all sons of Abraham. His argument in Romans 11 about the branches that are natural to the olive tree and those who are grafted in makes sense if there is only one olive tree that is this sort of mega-Israel. That it doesn't matter whether you are Israelite by birth or Israelite by faith, if you belong to Christ you belong to the true Israel of God. And what drives Paul is the appropriation of promises made to Israel that are now fulfilled to everybody who belongs to the one true Israelite, Jesus Christ.

Paul, even in Romans 10, takes promises that Hosea had made very specifically to Israel and only to Israel that the one who was not loved will be loved, those who are not my people will be my people. In Hosea, the prophet was talking about God's reclaiming Israelites who had apostatized. But Paul applies those promises; he sees those promises being fulfilled in the gospel going out to Gentiles. So, Paul doesn't honor the distinction between Israel and the church. He believes that Israel has been reconfigured around Jesus the one true Son of Israel, and now everybody who belongs to Jesus Christ belongs to the Israel that matters. Which is why he can tell the Colossians, who are Gentiles, "You have been circumcised with the circumcision not made with hands and you have been buried in Christ with his baptism and raised with him."

### **Question 9:**

**Have significant distinctions between Jews and Gentiles been eliminated?**

**Student:** Have the distinctions now been eliminated between the Jew and Gentile?

**Dr. Kidd:** Yes, and that's why he says to the Galatians, "Everyone who has been baptized in Christ Jesus belongs to the covenant people." And so, the covenant has been reconfigured, and it's a new covenant. It's the old covenant that's really now come into its own.

### **Question 10:**

**In what way is the modern church one body?**

**Student:** Now, Reggie, in the letter Paul insists that the church is one body. Now, we can look around and see so many different denominations and ways to view Scripture. In what way, really, is the church one body?

**Dr. Kidd:** Well, Rob, that's a good and it's a painful question and yet it's a hopeful question. Paul points to the one head of the church and I think we have to believe that

there is a way that he, the Lord, has of standing above all the divisions we see and somehow seeing it all as being his bride. Different facets of the church seem to be given the ability to reflect different aspects of his truth and his being. That being said, it's still a sad thing. I don't think that Paul and the other apostles, for that matter, envisioned there being separate churches. Paul really resisted that idea in 1 Corinthians when he just said, "You got a Peter party and a Paul party and you've got a Jesus party." And he was so much against this centrifugal energy that we have seen characterizing the church over the centuries. And I think when the Lord comes back again there's going to be a lot of repenting and tears over our not being able to figure out how to obey the teaching that there's one Lord, one baptism, one faith.

Again, that being said because we live in an "already and not yet" situation, a situation in which the Lord simply does not seem to have given the ability for all who name his name to come into agreement on everything. Some of the issues are fairly minor like, you know, grape juice or wine. And others are fairly major, like when a believer decides, who is really in charge God or the believer? And it's almost like there is this divine, mysterious logic that is just above all of our logics and there is just this sinful propensity within all of us that the closer you get to really realizing how spectacular one part of God's truth is, you are a hair's breath away from heresy. And it's almost like he's created the church to have people who overstress the other side of the truth to be points of accountability to all of us.

And Paul gave us chapters like Romans 14 and 15, where he said in the face of issues that we can get a lot of energy over, that we need to learn to appreciate that you and I are going to disagree on some things and I need to respect the fact that you are his servant and not my servant. You answer to him and not only that, I believe that he will enable you to stand on the last day and not only that but somehow our whole hermeneutic, our whole approach to Scripture is supposed to take into account the idea that there can be a oneness of mind and a oneness of voice that still leaves one another to be able to have the responsibility to figure some things out and come to some different conclusions. But we don't have the option of not loving one another. And we don't have the option of not seeing the blood of Christ as being of stronger bond than our different persuasions on some issues.

### **Question 11:** **Does God love diversity?**

**Student:** How would you respond to the typical argument then that God loves diversity, so he loves all these different types of churches that are out there?

**Dr. Kidd:** Well, I think given the "already, not yet" situation that we're in, I think that some of that has to be true. I think that he allows the church to be accommodated to different people-groups preferences, wirings, things that he himself has placed in them by common grace. You know, the "Appalachian Bubba" who sings Amazing

Grace is sort of counterpart to the Northern-European high-church cathedral worshipper who is singing Bach. And it's like there is a fullness to his being that it's hard to imagine any church fully embodying. So, I think we have to entertain the possibility that he delights somewhat, not just in allowing individuals to reflect his image in wildly different ways but he is going to let some churches reflect his wildly divergent personality. I mean, he is transcendent and he is eminent, and he is high and he is low, he is just and holy, and he is tender and compassionate.

You know there are certain aspects of the faith that are heady, and there are certain aspects of the faith that are really touchy-feely, and there are certain aspects that are like, let's go get 'em! And the fact of the matter is, as church history has gone on, we have seen churches take on different aspects of who God is and, man, it would be nice if every church could be equal parts but that just isn't the way it is. And I think, Scripture is given to us in such a way that we need to continue to lean into, pray for, work for, there being a oneness of the actual expression of the church as possible. But then recognize that between now and when the Lord comes back again, there are going to be limits to how much we can actually accomplish that. But the challenge is not just to let ourselves sort of circle the wagons and get in our own little comfort-zone and just stay there and look askance at everyone who is different from us. Then what we need to do is, I think, is to move as boldly and humbly as we can towards one another instead of away from each other.

**Student:** Reggie, this is less a question, I think, than just my own observations but we don't have to reconcile ourselves to always assume that we will always have denominationalism and always these divisions. In church history, there were widely divergent looks and understandings of Christ's person and his work. And a lot of that came together. Sometimes it took centuries but eventually the churches resolved some differences and there's no reason why we can't be optimistic, I think, in looking years down the road that we have more agreement than we have right now. And we don't have to just assume that these disagreements are always going to exist.

**Dr. Kidd:** I hope you are right. And the point, I think, is to move towards each other and to go to the centripetal dynamic of the gospel as Paul teaches: one Lord, one faith, one baptism.

### **Question 12:**

**Did Paul downplay the idea of the kingdom of God for Gentile readers in Ephesians?**

**Student:** Reggie, in just a cursory reading of Ephesians it seems — and this is maybe true of all Paul's writings — is that he doesn't use the language explicitly the kingdom of God or in the same way or as much as Jesus does. Does this mean that



**the idea is being deliberately downplayed, let's say, for Gentile audiences? Or is it different somehow?**

**Dr. Kidd:** I think for Paul, the idea of the kingdom of God that he brought over from Jesus is so full that he wants to unpack it for people. And it is important to know that when Paul's friend and traveling companion, Luke summarized Paul's ministry in the very last verse of Acts, he has Paul in prison and what he is talking about is the kingdom of God. And what I think Paul is trying to do is put feet on the concept. And that's why we talked about in the lesson the different aspect of Jesus' lordship. Remember how at the end of chapter 1 of Ephesians, Paul talks about how God had raised Jesus up from the dead and placed him above all rule, and power, and authority. And given him like total charge of the cosmos and then I think what Paul wants to do is to help people understand just what that means for them and what their place in that is.

And that's why we talked in the lesson about their having a citizenship that is no longer defined by this world but Jew and Gentile together being citizens, together of God's kingdom. The inheritance that you can have only because you are a citizen, the fact that God himself reserves the right to name, which is a function of being a king. And the whole call to spiritual warfare, it's a call to be a part of an army. Well, this isn't a private militia; this is joining the one whole is defined in the Old Testament as the Lord of Hosts, Yahweh Sabaoth, the God of armies and he is establishing his rule and we are called to be a part of that. As well as the fact that Paul sees himself in prison as an ambassador, one who has been sent by a king to stake his claim on people around them.

And I think part of what Paul is doing, in a word, is to help people from their world and their different concepts of their duties of citizenship to their clan or their local municipality, or even if their Roman Citizens or if they're of Jewish heritage to recognize the claim of Jesus as the one to whom all dominion has been given impacts them in these different ways. So, it's very much kingdom stuff even though Paul doesn't use the language kingship directly as much.

### **Question 13:**

**Is the idea of the kingdom of God just a metaphor? How does it affect us today?**

**Student:** It seems in his usage of the kingdom of God in other letters and how it's referred to in Ephesians that sometimes he is using it as a metaphor and sometimes it's much stronger than that. Is it just a metaphor? Is it stronger than that? And how important is the kingdom of God motif to me today?

**Dr. Kidd:** Well, for Paul, it means there is one who sits at the right hand of God the Father, ruling everything on your behalf. I mean, it's a cool thing he does here at the

end of Ephesians 1, he says (paraphrase), “Christ has raised Jesus from the dead, made him sit at his right hand in the heavenly place, is far above all rule, and authority, and power, and dominion, and above every name’s that’s named not only in this age but also in that which is to come. And he has put all things under his feet and has made him head over all things, for the church.” He is the Lord and he has everything and he exercises his lordship in the interest of people like you and me. He is expending all his kingly energy on, to go to Ephesians 5, creating a context in which his bride, the church made up of you and me, can be radiant, can be glorious, can be clean, and holy. So, metaphor?

The way that he exercises his kingship now is invisible in that we do not see him visibly on the earth and yet he does exercise it by the power of the Holy Spirit and he exercises it as he brings together men and women from every race, nation, tribe, language, tongue into his people. And like in Ephesians 3:10, uses the church to put on display God’s wisdom, and so as we are his people we become the showcase of his love, and of his wisdom, and of his power.

### **Question 14:**

#### **What is the relationship between spiritual gifts and church offices in Ephesians 4?**

**Student:** Reggie, in chapter 4, this seems to be one of the few areas that they turn to talk about spiritual gifts but as I am looking at this, it seems like Paul is not talking about spiritual gifts the same way we normally discuss it. But he is talking more about offices and for me there is a little bit of confusion there. Could you clear that up?

**Dr. Kidd:** It’s a good question, Rob. It’s helpful to think about what Paul does, say in 1 Corinthians 12 and Romans 12, where he is talking about people who have gifts of tongues, of healings, of administration, of liberality. And Paul wants to make clear that those gifts are given, not for your own sake but so that you can benefit the body, so that you can build the body up. The focus in Ephesians 4 is a little bit different. Here he talks about God has given the gifts of these offices: apostleship, pastor, teacher, a prophet to the church. And his point here is that those officers and those offices are given to the church so that the people who fill those offices can do one thing: to equip the saints for their work of ministry. So, you have this really lovely picture. It’s Romans 12 and 1 Corinthians 12 for each and every believer is given a gift of a certain gift mix. And what they need is people who have the wisdom and the teaching to help them figure out how to discern their gifts and how to use their gifts; how to have those gifts shaped and formed by the teaching. The apostles come and they establish the foundation and the prophets provide content, and then pastors and teacher, their responsibility is to come along and nurture those who have those gifts and release them, empower them, and help them figure out how to use their gifts for the sake of the church.



So, I think you have here a wonderful picture of Paul's sense of what authority is all about. He's got Jesus Christ himself who has been raised from the dead and given that name that is above every name and he rules all things, not for himself but for the church at the end of Ephesians 1. And he is going to talk in Ephesians 5 about the way the bridegroom gives himself for the sake of the bride because it is her he wants to build up; it's her that he wants to beautify. And here he gives us a picture of those who were given authority in the church and a sense of what their authority is for. It's not for themselves but it's for the empowering and building up of people who will themselves be the ones who carry out the work of the ministry.

### Question 15:

#### **Do all church offices mentioned in Ephesians 4 still exist?**

**Student:** Well, while we are taking about offices and officers, with very few exceptions most people today don't believe that the office of apostle exists. Why is that? And if that's the case, have other offices been dropped as well?

**Dr. Kidd:** Well, Larry, it's a great question. Reading Ephesians is a great time to get a little bit of clarity on that because it's here in Ephesians where in chapter 2 Paul is describing this great project of house building that God is all about. And the reason that people — and I would be among those — who think that the office of apostolate and the office of prophet no longer is going on in the church in the same way that it was going on back then is because of what Paul says here in Ephesians 2:20 that “The house is built upon the foundation of the apostles and the prophets; Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone.” And he seems to have the idea of this foundational work that was done by the apostles among whom Paul would be numbered and the prophets. And I think, an implication of the fact that he talks about the apostles and prophets there is because he means not the Old Testament prophets but the New Testament prophets who were circulating and providing new revolution and new truth in Paul's own day.

That seems to Paul to be a foundation laying work and then he goes on in verse 21, “In whom the whole structure is joined together and grows in the Holy Temple in the Lord.” And the inference that many of us have drawn from this passage is that there was a once and for all ministry of the apostles and the prophets in the first century to establish the basic Christians truth. Then all the rest of us come along afterwards and we build on that foundation but we don't re-do the foundation.

So, now the work of the apostolate goes on but it's based on the foundation that was once laid that doesn't have to be laid again. There is a prophetic ministry but it is different than the work of the prophets in the first century church. So, people can go around today and call themselves apostles as they are sent as missionaries or church planters. But this is apostle with a small “a” and not a capitol “A”. And people go out

as prophets. I mean, they get into the pulpit every week and carry on the ministry of the prophets to unpack the Word and apply it, proclaim it, but they are prophets with a small “p” and not a capital “P.”

### **Question 16:**

**Does Paul’s instruction that wives submit to their husbands apply to every culture?**

**Student:** Well, sooner or later we have to at least discuss a little bit the Scripture in Ephesians that talks about wives submitting to their husbands. And I guess the question that needs to be asked here, is this unchanging normative principal or this just addressing a particular cultural issue of that day?

**Dr. Kidd:** Well, Larry, I think what’s important is to see the picture of husband and wife for Paul as it reflects the relationship between Christ and his bride. Indeed, Paul does expect wives to reflect the church’s responsiveness to her Lord, well, and to be responsive. But Paul’s, I think his heartbeat, his real interest is in creating the picture of the husband as having the same sort of interest in his bride as Christ had in his bride. And Christ’s authority, he exercises not for himself but for the bride that he loves, that he wants to be radiant, that he wants to be clean, that he wants to provide an environment for her to grow and flourish in. And I think it’s telling that for Paul the husband’s job is to be willing to die for his wife. And that’s the way this passage speaks so strongly to me and I think in the picture that Paul is painting of authority, I think honestly he is much less concerned with the responsibility that wives have to live for their husbands and much more concerned with the responsibility of husbands to be ready to die for their wives and not see them as an extension of their own ego. But to see their wives as being the people they serve for their best interest.

### **Question 17:**

**Is the armor of God entirely defensive, or does it also have an offensive quality?**

**Student:** Reggie, I have often heard people describe the armor of God as being just primarily defensive and so I’m curious, when Paul is writing this is he meaning these pieces of armor to be defensive or is there any way in which we are to be on the offense in terms of spiritual warfare?

**Dr. Kidd:** Well, Rob, when Spartan mothers gave their sons their shield and said, son, either come back carrying this or come back being carried on it, they were meaning that if you dropped your shield and ran, you would come back without your shield and you would have been a coward. But if you come back being carried on it, you died nobly. And if you come back carrying it well, you come back because you won. The shield was a defensive protection but she gave it with the understanding

that her son was going into war to go fight, to kill the enemy, and to conquer. And when Paul gives us these protections that would cover our head, our chest, and the rest of our body, he is equipping us so that we can go into battle to defeat the enemy. And so he gives us the sword of the Spirit that we use to conquer.

It goes all the way back to Jesus; the gates of Hell should not prevail against the church, meaning that we are going to go out and find the Lord bringing people from out of the dominion of darkness. Paul talks in Colossians 1 about how we have been transferred from the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of God's beloved Son. And Paul saw himself going around the Mediterranean world taking people out from under the dominion of the one that he called the "god of this world, prince of the power of the air", and repositioning them in a new kingdom where there was light, where there was immortality, where there was life, where there was love. It's very much a positive battle that we fight.

**Student:** And just brings sharper relief, that other verse that Jesus says when he says the kingdom of Heaven is advancing forcefully and forceful men seize hold of it. Apparently, Paul was talking, using kingdom language but he was spinning it a little different way, but it's there nonetheless.

**Dr. Kidd:** Yes, he has called us into his army and he has promised to protect us as he goes about establishing his kingdom though our efforts may seem so feeble at times. But, he rules and he is going to rule. He's going to rule.

### Question 18:

#### What is the main way we engage in spiritual warfare?

**Student:** So, what ways do you see us struggling not against flesh and blood? In what ways... because we talked about spiritual warfare, I mean, what is the prime way that we face spiritual warfare today?

**Dr. Kidd:** Prayer. I mean, one of the things that those of us who have been shaped by the secular West have the most difficulty with is understanding something that Paul understood very well and that is, our contention is not against fleshly powers. We have seen the church in one generation may be the church of the left and another generation may be the church of the right, who think it's all about politics. It's all about trying to establish public policy, and to go into the marketplace, into the governmental spheres and seek to bring about the kingdom of God directly through some sort of political action. We need to be in the marketplace, we need to be in the public square, we need to be making our case. But we need to be a people who are primarily operating on our knees and appealing to the Lord of Hosts to fight his battles, to thwart the evil one, and to raise up, and to frustrate unrighteousness, and to establish justice. And you know, fathers and mothers need to work hard to raise their children in the fear and the admonition of the Lord. But they need to do it as priests

who pray that the Lord will work out all of the contingencies in their kids' lives that they cannot control. And that the Lord would undergird their lives and that the Lord would be at work in their lives.

We need to work harder than we can possibly imagine in the church so that she can be radiant, and that she can be pure, so that she can be true, so that she can be a fellowship of love. But pastors need to be doing the bulk of their work on their knees. And it's really interesting that that's where Paul goes in this passage about spiritual warfare; he goes to prayer. "Take the helmet of salvation, the sword of the Spirit which is the Word of God. Pray at all times in the Spirit with all prayer and supplication. To that end, keep alert with all perseverance, making supplication for the saints."

And I'm really impressed with... as time has gone on, I've been impressed with the way the ancient church saw the church at worship as being primarily a church that's praying. Not just talking about what we think about the Bible, but seeing ourselves as being part of this heavenly worship that is going on where the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are magnified and glorified for who they are, and where we go as priests pleading the case of the rest of the world, the world that doesn't believe, the world that needs to know the living God. And where we come and we bear, on our hearts, the wounds, and the sicknesses, and the diseases of the world and place them before the throne of grace and ask him to help. There's spiritual warfare; there's where we conduct it primarily. We as a kingdom of priests are a point of contact between the God who is and his design for the world. I think primarily, the place where we fight spiritual warfare is on our knees in prayer.

### Question 19:

**Are praise and worship supposed to be primarily musical?**

**Student:** I got the impression from the lesson that when it talks about praise and worship that we're primarily talking about something musical in nature. Is that right?

**Dr. Kidd:** Well, it's interesting, Larry, that when Paul comes to the matter of worship he does talk about singing. And I am kind of a song guy and I think there is a special way that truth becomes more lovely, and truth gets pressed more deeply into us when we learn to sing it. The ancient church had a saying: *lex orandi, lex credendi*; "the law of praying is the law of believing." You know, show me how you pray and I'll show you what you actually believe. Well, I would augment that with *lex conenede, lex credendi*; show me what you sing and I'll show you what you believe. When we sing our faith it kind of carries into different places in our being. One of the things that the reformers did 500 years ago, when the singing had been taken away from the congregation and had become so elaborated, it had kind of become the work of the monks, is they gave song back to the congregation.

For Calvin, it was so important to get people singing the Psalms again that he started this project that eventuated in musical settings for all 150 Psalms. Luther spawned all kinds of hymn singing. But even Calvin, who didn't believe that we should really sing more than Scripture, he took the creed and had the creed set to music so that people could express the faith at... more in a way that their head and heart were brought together in the affirmation. Not just of propositions that were technically true but didn't necessarily affect their gut but that it would come from way down inside them.

And in point of fact, as the ancient church thought about song, they weren't thinking about just a mode of expression, they weren't thinking about just some warm-up to a sermon. They were thinking about the church at prayer. And to go back to our conversation earlier, when we gather for worship we are a kingdom of priests. We are that part of the world that God loves that recognizes who he is. We are the ones that bring creation's latent song and we bring the song that unbelievers cannot sing and we bring it and we express to God the love that this portion of his creation has for him. And so, our song is prayer. And for Paul, song is teaching as well. We help each other understand Scripture better when we sing Scripture and songs based on Scripture. And we help tell the story. Many of the Psalms are about declaring who God is, his fame, and his worth to the nations. And calling upon them to believe and obey.

So, even the singing, it's more than just song. It's God's people praying; it's God's people declaring and telling the story. But of course there is more to worship as well that Paul could have commented on that he comments on elsewhere, coming to the Lord's Table and being at the place where the whole design of redemption is reenacted. We touch, we taste, we see, we feel that God has strapped on the stuff of our humanity to our own existence and has come among us and has promised to redeem all the rest of creation.

I mean, I love what Paul does in Ephesians 3:10 where he talks about through the church "the manifold wisdom of God being made known to the principalities and powers in the heavenly places." And when we gather for worship, it's like I have this sense of the Father saying to the defeated demons and to the prince of the power of the air who has been dealt this deathblow and who now has to look on and say, "Look there are my people restored to life with me; restored in their relationships with one another. "Restored to life with me," Ephesians 2:1-10; "Restored in their relationship with one another," Ephesians 2:11 to the end of the chapter. "And now they're in relationship with me." But to go on further, worship for Paul, it's about singing... it's about singing but it's singing that really just is not warm-up to the sermon. It's a taking up the song of the redeemed in prayer and in teaching. It's coming together as a reconciled people but as you look elsewhere at Paul, in Romans 12:1-2, worship is just about the way that we live. It's 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365.25 days a year. It's everything that we do. It's presenting our bodies as living sacrifices.

And so, that's why Paul will talk from chapters 4, 5, and 6 about the way we live out oneness, the way we work out our gifts, the way that we expose the deeds of

darkness. It's about the way we forgive one another the way Christ has forgiven us. It's about the way that husbands love their wives and wives respond to their husbands. It's about parents and children. It's about masters and slaves. It's about... Worship is the whole of the Christian life that comes together in this very focused expression week after week when we gather for worship. And it's all extremely important to Paul.

### **Question 20:**

**How does worship in the gathered church differ from other types of worship?**

**Student:** You are talking about worship as the whole of the Christian life but it does seem that Paul views worship together as a body on the Lord's Day as a special event. How is that different than worship being every 365.25 days of our life?

**Dr. Kidd:** Well, it's like we are dispersed for living out worship before him and then we are gathered to create this marvelous embodied expression. And there is a positive centrifugal force as he disperses us and sends us out, as he distributes us out into the world, into the marketplace, into the public square, to reflect his glory, his dominion. But then he calls us together because we need to be reminded. As he tells Timothy, "Remember Christ Jesus." We need to be reminded that this is really true. And the world according to Jesus in John 13 has the right to say, "Yeah, they really are my disciples on the basis on whether they love one another." And we come together to express our love for each other so that the world has a chance to be a... People from the world, we should be bringing people to this place where they will see love that they may not see any place else. Paul has that sense in 1 Corinthians 14 of the unbeliever coming among us and hearing God's oracles proclaimed, seeing people living together a kind of life that they know nothing about and saying, "Surely God is among them." So, there is a way in which there is crystallization, an embodiment. Just like God's love took of the flesh of his Son Jesus so that the invisible God could become visible and now Jesus becomes visible in the world in two ways: one, in the way that we live in the world and the way in which we gather and as an embodied people we say something about who he is in our life together. And you have to be together for that to happen, for us to be able to say, "The peace of the Lord be with you. And also with you."

### **Question 21:**

**How do we reconcile the individual and corporate aspects of the gospel?**

**Student:** Reggie, the lesson suggests that the gospel is bigger than individual reconciliation. How do we reconcile the individual aspects with the corporate aspects and is either one of them more important?

**Dr. Kidd:** Neither is more important. They belong together. It's the great thing about the gospel. I once had a sociology professor who said, "You know, the Old Testament is all about the people of God and the New Testament is about the individual." And I thought, well no, because it is in the Old Testament that Ezekiel says, "Don't think that you are going to be punished for anybody's sins but your own." And in the New Testament it's as much about the bringing together of a people as it is as individuals getting saved. So, it's a false choice to think about the gospel being either individual or corporate or there being a priority to one or the other. The reality is: I am a son, you are a son, we are the bride. And there is no gospel without both of those. There is no gospel without individuals knowing the living God and there is no gospel without you and me being connected. It's a "both/and" or it's nothing.

### Question 22:

#### What is the relationship between the gospel and the kingdom of God?

**Student:** Well, in listening to that, I think in my own experience the emphasis was always on the individual. I'm just thinking of my own past and the gospel was always just how somebody got saved.

**Dr. Kidd:** We're here to fix that.

**Student:** Well, that's good because that's going to bring us to the next question then. If the gospel is more than just me getting saved...?

**Dr. Kidd:** It is that.

**Student:** It is that. We're not denying that but if it's more than that then what is the relationship between the gospel and the kingdom of God? Are they synonymous? Are they two separate things?

**Dr. Kidd:** That's a great question. The kingdom is God's dominion. The kingdom is where God is totally absolutely in charge. Now, in the "already, the not yet," that's kind of a messy deal. He has reestablished his claim in the death and resurrection of Jesus. Jesus is *Christus Victor*. He is the one who has come into the situation of ungodliness, into the situation of rebellion and he has destroyed our greatest enemies: sin, and death, and the Devil. And he has promised in his resurrection... I mean, his resurrection is the promise that one day from sea to shining sea, from the height of heavens to the depths as far down as you can go, every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that Jesus is Lord.

But in the meantime, there are vast sections of this creation that God has reclaimed that do not acknowledge his rule. That doesn't mean that God's not in charge. It means that we don't see the way he exercises his dominion. For now, Paul is still



willing to talk about the Devil as being the god of this world. And as far as we can see there are vast areas of God's creation that are not under God's rule. That's because they're not visibly under God's rule, and he is allowing the drama of redemption where there is still the effects of the fall to be worked out.

The place where we are supposed to see graphically God's kingdom and his rule is the church. And that is, we are that part of the created order who have consciously, in the now, bowed the knee and said, "Jesus is Lord." We are supposed to be the place where his kingship is manifest and is palpable, and is something that you can touch and feel and sense. We are supposed to be the place where people see God's rule. Now, the fact of the matter is we are part of the "already and the not yet" as well because we are still sinners. We still carry around the old man, and we still only partially submit to his rule. But we're in the game and we're about seeking to be the focused embodiment of his kingdom in the church. And then, we have responsibilities as citizens, as participants in the marketplace, as family members of people who are not believers, to reflect kingdom values all around us. So, there's huge overlap but I think what we are trying to get at in the lesson is that the church is where the kingdom of God, for the now, is focused in an "already, not yet" situation.

### **Question 23:**

#### **What are some practical ways to build the kingdom of God?**

**Student:** Okay, Reggie, so now, I'm thickheaded. If you could give me some practical ways to build the kingdom of God, what would you say?

**Dr. Kidd:** Practical ways to build the kingdom of God? You build the kingdom of God most directly when you take that piece of turf, which is your primary stewardship, and that's you and put yourself daily under the dominion of the one who is Lord of Heaven and Earth, and exalt him as your ruler. And then from there, seek to live out his rule in the circle of relationships around you, as husband, as father, as student, as employee, or citizen and everywhere you go... But before "everywhere you go", I would give a priority to beyond your family, I would give a priority to building the kingdom by building the church, by being a loyal, faithful participant of a local church where the Word is preached, where the sacraments are ministered, where the poor are taken care of, where discipline... where fellow sinners have come to get healing and to get accountability. So, I would kind of build it out from there: you, your closest network of family, church and then everywhere that you are called to go.



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**Dr. Reggie Kidd (Host)** is Professor of New Testament Emeritus at Reformed Theological Seminary. He received his M.A.R. and M.Div. from Westminster Theological Seminary and his Ph.D. in Christian Origins from Duke University. He is a member of the Evangelical Theological Society and is an ordained priest in The Episcopal Church. Dr. Kidd teaches at the Robert E. Webber Institute for Worship Studies and has served as a pastor and elder at multiple churches. He is the author of *With One Voice: Discovering Christ's Song in Our Worship* (BakerBooks, 2005) and has contributed to many other publications, including *The Spirit of the Reformation Study Bible* (Zondervan, 2003) and *The Reformation Study Bible* (Ligonier Ministries, 2005).

# Paul's Prison Epistles

LESSON  
FOUR

PAUL AND PHILEMON



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# Paul's Prison Epistles

## Lesson Four

### Paul and Philemon

#### INTRODUCTION

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Most of us have experienced times when we feel that a friend owes us a favor. Maybe you've done something nice for a friend — given him a gift or helped him in a special way. And then the time comes when you need help, and so you approach your friend, asking him to repay the favor. At times like these, we often go to our friends and say, "I know you may not want to do this, but I could really use your help. And you do owe me a favor."

In many ways, the apostle Paul faced a situation like this. He needed a favor from his friend Philemon. So, he wrote a letter to Philemon, reminding him of how much Paul had done for him, and asking for a favor in return.

This is the fourth lesson in our series *Paul's Prison Epistles*. We have entitled this lesson "Paul and Philemon" because we will be taking a close look at the letter Paul wrote to his friend Philemon, a member of the church in Colosse. We will see how Paul petitioned Philemon for a favor, asking Philemon to reconcile himself to Onesimus, Philemon's slave who had recently come to faith in Christ.

Our study of Paul and Philemon will divide into three main parts: First, we will survey the background of Paul's letter to Philemon. Second, we'll examine the structure and content of Paul's letter to Philemon. And third, we will focus on the modern application of this letter. Let's look first at the background to Paul's letter to Philemon.

#### BACKGROUND

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Paul's letter to Philemon differs from his other Prison epistles in at least two ways. For one thing, it is significantly shorter than the other letters he wrote during his imprisonment. In fact, it addresses only a single issue. And for another thing, it was written to an individual rather than to a church, meaning that it is deeply personal. And this means that the more we know about Philemon and the other people involved, and the more we know about the circumstances Paul addressed, the better prepared we will be to understand Paul's teaching in this letter and to apply it to our own lives today.

We'll explore the background to Paul's letter to Philemon in three ways: First, we'll identify the people involved in the matter Paul addressed in his letter to Philemon. Second, we'll look at the problem that gave rise to Paul's letter. And third, we'll explore Paul's involvement and mediation of the problem. Let's first turn our attention to the people involved in this matter.

## PEOPLE

Many different individuals are named in Paul's letter to Philemon, but we will focus on those who were directly or indirectly involved in the favor Paul asked of Philemon.

First, we will introduce Philemon himself. Second, we will turn to Philemon's slave Onesimus. And finally, we will mention a number of people who served as witnesses to Paul's involvement in the matter between Philemon and Onesimus. Let's begin with Philemon, the man to whom Paul wrote this epistle.

### Philemon

Philemon's hometown is not mentioned in Paul's letter to him, but Colossians 4:9 indicates that Philemon's slave Onesimus was a resident of Colosse. Listen to Paul's words there:

**[Tychicus] is coming with Onesimus, our faithful and dear brother, who is one of you (Colossians 4:9).**

Since Onesimus lived with his master Philemon at the time Colossians was written, Philemon must also have lived in Colosse.

Colosse was a fairly small city situated in the Lycus Valley near the towns of Laodicea and Hierapolis. The Lycus Valley lay in the region of Phrygia within the Roman province of Asia, known in modern times as Asia Minor.

Philemon himself appears to have been actively involved in ministering to other believers in Colosse. For instance, in Philemon 7, Paul spoke of the way Philemon had lovingly refreshed the hearts of other believers. Paul thought so highly of Philemon that in verse 17 he spoke of Philemon as his partner in gospel ministry. And it may even be that in verse 2 Paul identified Philemon as the host of the local church.

But beyond this, Philemon seems to have had a significant history with Paul that formed a strong bond between the men. Consider Paul's reminder to Philemon in Philemon 19:

**You owe me your very self (Philemon 19).**

In all likelihood, Paul meant that he had brought Philemon to faith, although it is also possible that he had literally saved Philemon's life in some other way. But whatever the case, Philemon owed Paul a great debt.

We can also see the strength of their relationship in Philemon's prayers for Paul's release from prison, and in Paul's plan to lodge with Philemon after being released from prison. We read Paul's words to this effect in Philemon 22:

**Prepare a guest room for me, because I hope to be restored to you in answer to your prayers (Philemon 22).**

The Bible does not explain how Paul came to know Philemon. But as we have seen in earlier lessons, it does say that Paul traveled through Phrygia during his second and third missionary journeys. But as we have seen, Paul was not familiar with the churches in the Lycus Valley. The truth is we don't know how Paul and Philemon became friends. But we can say with confidence that they knew each other very well.

## Onesimus

The second person we should introduce is Onesimus. According to Philemon 16, Onesimus was Philemon's slave, although it is unclear what kind of slave he was and in what specific capacity he served Philemon.

In the Roman Empire during the first century, slavery was extremely common. As much as one-third of the Empire's population consisted of various sorts of slaves. Slaves were typically owned by wealthier individuals, and their status depended largely on that of their owners.

Some Roman slaves were uneducated and performed menial tasks, but others were educated — some highly so — and served in ways commensurate to their education. They could be household managers, accountants, tutors, or almost anything else that was needed.

And although it was generally preferable to be free than enslaved, it is worth noting that more than a few poor individuals voluntarily sold themselves into slavery in order to obtain the security of daily food and shelter. And we know from historical records that in the early church, some Christians sold themselves into slavery in order to raise money for beneficences such as feeding the poor.

Generally speaking, the rights of masters over their slaves were not absolute. Roman law allowed slaves to earn money and own property, including other slaves, and even to purchase their own freedom from their masters. And beyond these rights, many slaves were manumitted, that is, given their freedom, when they turned thirty years old, even though this practice was not mandated by law.

Because Onesimus was Philemon's slave, he was a member of Philemon's household. But unlike his master, Onesimus was not a believer, at least not initially. But after Onesimus left Philemon's household to seek Paul's help, the apostle led him to faith in Christ and grew to love him greatly. Paul expressed his love for Onesimus in Philemon 10-16, writing:

**I appeal to you for my son Onesimus, who became my son while I was in chains... [He] is my very heart ... He is very dear to me (Philemon 10-16).**

Paul referred to Onesimus as his "son" because he had brought him to faith in Christ and because he had developed a fatherly love for him.

In addition to these two main figures, Paul also mentioned a number of other Colossians in his letter to Philemon, including Apphia, Archippus and Epaphras. Each of these people also had a relationship with Philemon. Paul probably mentioned them with the expectation that they would serve as familiar witnesses and help him in his appeal to Philemon on Onesimus' behalf.

## Witnesses

Paul mentioned Apphia and Archippus in the letter's address, found in Philemon 1-2. Listen to what Paul wrote there:

**To Philemon our dear friend and fellow worker, to Apphia our sister, to Archippus our fellow soldier and to the church that meets in your home (Philemon 1-2).**

The mention of Apphia as Paul's "sister" might simply indicate that she was a believer. But since she is distinguished from the rest of the church, it is more likely that she was a member of Philemon's household — probably his wife. Archippus, in turn, may have been the host of the local church, although it is also possible to read this verse as saying that the church met in Philemon's house. Whatever the case, given the nature of the letter, it is likely that he was mentioned as a person of some influence over Philemon, whether as a local pastor or as part of Philemon's household.

With regard to Epaphras, you will recall from our prior lessons that he had been the one who established the church in Colosse and that the churches of the Lycus Valley had sent him to minister to Paul in prison. Because he was with Paul at the time, he could not serve as a local witness in Colosse. But his status in the church made his opinion particularly respected. So, Paul included a special greeting from Epaphras. Listen to these words, found in Philemon 23 and 24:

**Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends you greetings. And so do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas and Luke, my fellow workers (Philemon 23-24).**

Notice that the greeting from Epaphras is listed first and that it is both longer than and distinct from the others. This emphasis on Epaphras let Philemon know that Epaphras was doing more than sending a greeting; he also had a keen interest in making sure that Philemon would respond properly to Paul's letter.

## PROBLEM

Having introduced the people most closely related to the subject of Paul's letter, we are in a position to address the problem itself. What exactly went wrong that required Paul's intervention?



It's no secret that some workers are not good workers, that some servants are not good servants, and that some people refuse to accept their responsibilities and fulfill their obligations. And unfortunately, it appears that Onesimus was one of these people. And his failures, whether slothful, negligent or malicious, angered his master Philemon — so much so that Onesimus had greatly feared punishment from Philemon. And so, in order to avoid this punishment, Onesimus left Philemon's household. Consider Paul's words to Philemon about Onesimus in Philemon 11:

**Formerly he was useless to you (Philemon 11).**

There is a play on words here. The name "Onesimus" is actually derived from a Greek word meaning "useful" or "profitable." But Paul said here that Onesimus had proven useless. By this wordplay Paul granted the point to Philemon that Onesimus truly had been a useless or unprofitable slave.

Worse than this, according to Philemon 18, Onesimus may actually have caused a significant loss for Philemon. Listen to Paul's words there:

**If he has done you any wrong or owes you anything, charge it to me (Philemon 18).**

Many interpreters understand this verse to imply that Onesimus had stolen from Philemon, which was a common crime among household slaves. But Onesimus might also have incurred a loss for Philemon in other ways, such as through poor management of household resources, or destruction or loss of property.

In any case, Philemon had a right to be angry, and Onesimus probably had good reason to be afraid of Philemon. Under Roman law, masters had the right to punish slaves severely, even with heavy beatings. Onesimus was so worried about Philemon's wrath that he fled in fear.

Paul alluded to this circumstance in Philemon 15, where he wrote these words:

**Perhaps the reason he was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back for good (Philemon 15).**

Apparently, Philemon himself had not intended for Onesimus to leave, and probably did not approve of his leaving. But Paul suggested that God had a positive reason for allowing the situation. Through this time of separation, God changed Onesimus so that he became a great benefit to Philemon.

Now, in the Roman Empire, slaves who left their masters' households in this manner were not necessarily fugitives. If they fled with no intention of returning, they were fugitives. But the law also permitted slaves to leave their masters temporarily to find an advocate or mediator who might reconcile them to their masters. Several Roman jurists recorded this fact. For instance, Vivianus, who wrote between A.D. 98 and 117, argued this way:

**If a slave leave his master and come back to his mother, the question whether he be a fugitive is one for consideration; if he so fled to**

**conceal himself and not to return to his master, he is a fugitive; but he is no fugitive if he seeks that some wrongdoing of his may be better extenuated by his mother's entreaties.**

Similarly, Proculus, writing in the early first century, had this to say:

**A slave is not a fugitive, who, having in mind that his master wished physically to chastise him, betook himself to a friend whom he induced to plead on his behalf.**

And Paulus, in the late second century, provided this commentary:

**A slave who takes himself off to a friend of his master to seek his intercession is not a fugitive.**

These legal comments demonstrate that Roman law permitted slaves to run from their masters, so long as they were running to someone else for help and not trying to gain their freedom. So, if Onesimus fled in order to ask Paul to be his advocate and mediator with Philemon, he was not a fugitive.

In summary, then, the initial problem in Philemon's household was that Onesimus had caused some loss to Philemon, whether intentionally or unintentionally, through negligence, sloth, or malice. And this problem was compounded by the resulting tension between Onesimus and Philemon, including probably Philemon's anger and intent to discipline Onesimus, and Onesimus' fear. And finally, it culminated in Onesimus' flight from Philemon. Philemon may have assumed that Onesimus was a fugitive. But Onesimus' true motives remained to be seen.

## **MEDIATION**

Now that we have identified the people and problem that Paul addressed in his letter to Philemon, we should turn to Paul's mediation between Philemon and Onesimus. As we consider Paul's mediation, we will look at two matters: first, Onesimus' petition that Paul become his advocate; and second, Paul's agreement to advocate for Onesimus. Let's turn first to Onesimus' petition to Paul.

### **Onesimus' Petition**

During this time, Paul was in prison. As we have said in prior lessons, it is most likely that he was imprisoned in Rome, although it is also possible that he was in Caesarea Maritima. But whether he was in Rome or Caesarea Maritima, he was quite a long way from Colosse where Philemon lived.

According to some scholars, this distance was too great for Onesimus to have sought out Paul as an advocate or mediator. As a result, they conclude that Onesimus was seeking to start a new life far from Philemon and encountered Paul only accidentally.

Now, we should admit that Scripture does not tell us what Onesimus was thinking when he fled from Philemon, nor does it tell us how he came to meet Paul in prison. Nevertheless, it does provide some details suggesting that Onesimus sought out Paul as his advocate.

For one thing, Onesimus went to the city where Paul was imprisoned. And he should have known full well that Paul resided there because the church at Colosse had sponsored Epaphras' mission to care for Paul in prison. We read about this in Colossians 4:12-13 where Paul wrote these words:

**Epaphras, who is one of you and a servant of Christ Jesus, sends greetings. He is always wrestling in prayer for you, that you may stand firm in all the will of God, mature and fully assured. I vouch for him that he is working hard for you and for those at Laodicea and Hierapolis (Colossians 4:12-13).**

Since Onesimus was from Colosse, and since his master Philemon was a prominent member of that church, Onesimus probably knew where Paul was. And with this knowledge, Onesimus chose that same city as his destination.

Besides this, once in the city, Onesimus pursued a meeting with Paul. Paul was imprisoned under house arrest so that he could not move about freely. It's hard to imagine, then, that Onesimus could have run into him accidentally. It's most likely that Onesimus went to Paul on purpose.

Finally, Paul wrote to Philemon only after Onesimus had endeared himself to Paul. In Paul's letter to Philemon, he indicated that he had converted Onesimus to Christianity, and that Onesimus had ministered to Paul in prison. In other words, Paul defended Onesimus only after Onesimus had proven himself to Paul. Since Onesimus stayed with Paul long enough to secure his advocacy, it suggests he had fully intended to seek Paul's help in his situation.

Having considered Onesimus' petition that Paul become his advocate, we are now ready to look at Paul's agreement to defend Onesimus before his master Philemon.

## **Paul's Agreement**

Paul did not immediately agree to mediate between Onesimus and Philemon. After all, Onesimus was both an unbeliever and an unprofitable slave, and Philemon was a good, loving man. Philemon had a right to be angry and to discipline Onesimus, and there was no indication that he planned to do this unfairly or unjustly. Philemon would have been within his rights to punish Onesimus. So, if Paul were to defend Onesimus, it would have to be on the basis of mercy. And before he would ask for mercy for Onesimus, he would first have to be persuaded that Onesimus was genuinely repentant.

Paul's initial reluctance in this matter is admirable. After all, it would be foolish to pardon wrongdoers simply because they are afraid of being punished. Consider in this regard Paul's words in Romans 13:40 where he spoke of civil rulers in this manner:

**He is God's servant to do you good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword for nothing. He is God's servant, an agent of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer (Romans 13:4).**

This same principle applies in many relationships that include authority structures, such as between parents and children, and in the social structure of the first-century Roman Empire, masters and slaves. Godly authority figures carry out appropriate punishments because it is the right thing to do.

And so, it was appropriate and probably typical that when a slave or servant appealed to his master's friend for help, that friend did not impose upon the master without being sufficiently persuaded that it was the right thing to do.

For the sake of comparison, let's consider a historical example where another Roman slave appealed to his master's friend for help. A little before A.D. 111 the Roman senator Pliny the Younger wrote a letter to his friend Sabinianus on behalf of a freedman who worked for Sabinianus, and this letter has been preserved for us through history. Listen to this excerpt from Pliny's letter:

**The freedman of yours with whom you said you were angry has been to me, flung himself at my feet, and clung to me as if I were you. He begged my help with many tears ... he convinced me of his genuine penitence. I believe he has reformed, because he realizes he did wrong... Make some concession to his youth, his tears, and your own kind heart, and do not torment him or yourself any longer.**

Just like Onesimus, this freedman of Sabinianus turned to his master's friend for help. And just like Paul, Pliny did not agree to mediate until the freedman had proven his repentance and good intent.

So, it is safe to assume that Onesimus initially stayed with Paul to convince the apostle of his good intent. And during this time, Paul preached the gospel to Onesimus, and the Holy Spirit brought him to faith in Christ. And since genuine conversion is always accompanied by repentance of sins, it is safe to conclude that Onesimus repented of all his sins that had so angered Philemon. And with his newfound life in Christ, Onesimus became a new man, and dedicated himself to ministering to the apostle in prison. And Paul, in turn, cared deeply for this new child of God, and grew to love him as a son.

Once Onesimus had gained Paul's favor, it was appropriate that he return to Philemon. So, Onesimus left for Colosse bearing Paul's letter of advocacy. According to Paul's letter to Philemon, legally Onesimus might have remained with Paul without becoming a fugitive. But morally this would not have been the best solution. Rather, the Christian values of charity and reconciliation demanded his return to Philemon.

The reason for this can be found in Philemon 12-16, where Paul wrote these words:

**I am sending him — who is my very heart — back to you. I would have liked to keep him with me ... But I did not want to do anything without your consent, so that any favor you do will be spontaneous**

**and not forced... He is very dear to me but even dearer to you, both as a man and as a brother in the Lord (Philemon 12-16).**

Paul sent Onesimus back to Philemon because he wanted any gift from Philemon to be voluntary rather than compulsory, and because he wanted Philemon and Onesimus to be reconciled as brothers in Christ.

Presumably, their reconciliation would best be accomplished through a face-to-face meeting in which Onesimus repented and asked for Philemon's forgiveness, and in which Philemon graciously forgave and accepted Onesimus. And given Paul's high praise of Philemon as a deeply loving Christian, as well as Paul's strong advocacy for Onesimus, it appears that Paul expected this to be the outcome.

## STRUCTURE AND CONTENT

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Now that we have surveyed the background to Paul's epistle to Philemon, we are ready to explore its structure and content, looking at the specific strategy and arguments Paul used to mediate between Onesimus and Philemon.

Paul's letter to Philemon is unique in many ways. For one thing, it is Paul's only canonical letter that does not focus on teaching. In Philemon Paul wrote as an advocate rather than as a teacher. For another thing, in nearly every other letter, Paul directly appealed to his apostolic authority commanding that things be done as he ordered. But in Philemon, he explicitly chose not to command his friend, but to approach him as a co-worker for the gospel, and to ask him for a favor. And besides this, Philemon is Paul's most personal letter, expressing his deep concern both for Onesimus and Philemon, and making requests based on their friendship.

In short, in Philemon we see a humble man of God in action, taking responsibility, holding others accountable and expressing Christ's love. And so, as we survey the details of this letter, we will pay attention to Paul's Christian attitudes and actions, looking at the way he practiced the very ideals he communicated in his other prison epistles.

Our discussion of the structure and content of Paul's epistle to Philemon will follow the outline of the letter itself beginning with the salutation in verses 1-3, then continuing with Paul's thanksgiving for Philemon in verses 4-7, and Paul's petition on behalf of Onesimus in verses 8-21, and finally concluding with final greetings in verses 22-25. Let's begin by looking at the salutation in verses 1-3.

## SALUTATION

The salutation, which appears in verses 1-3, identifies Paul as the primary author of the letter, and states that the letter also came from Timothy. It includes an address that names Philemon as the letter's primary recipient and mentions several others who were to bear witness to the letter: Apphia, Archippus, and the local church congregation of which Philemon was a member.

Paul knew that he was making a big request of Philemon and that it might have been difficult for Philemon to do him this favor. So, rather than allowing the matter between Philemon and Onesimus to remain private, Paul invited Philemon's household and church to witness his advocacy for Onesimus. No doubt he hoped that the watchful eyes of so many fellow believers would encourage Philemon all the more to be gracious to Onesimus. The salutation ends with a standard greeting in the form of a brief blessing.

## THANKSGIVING

Following the salutation, we find Paul's thanksgiving for Philemon in verses 4-7. Paul commonly included a section on thanksgiving at this point in his letters. Paul spoke mainly of Philemon's love for the church, thanking the Lord for the ways Philemon had blessed his fellow believers in Colosse. Paul praised Philemon with these words in Philemon 5-7:

**I hear about ... your love for all the saints. ... Your love has given me great joy and encouragement, because you, brother, have refreshed the hearts of the saints (Philemon 5-7).**

Paul did not say what Philemon had done, but he did mention that it had been refreshing for the saints. Perhaps Philemon had come to their financial relief, or had performed works of service for them, or had done them some other benefit. Whatever it had been, Philemon had done it well and with a good heart. And since Onesimus had become part of the church, Paul expected Philemon to show him the same love.

Consider the situation between Philemon and Onesimus in light of Paul's teaching in Colossians 3:12-14 where Paul wrote these words:

**Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity (Colossians 3:12-14).**

Paul had called the Colossians, including Philemon, to remember that God loves and forgives all believers. And he had encouraged them to reflect the same love toward one another, patiently bearing with one another when wronged, and forgiving grievances rather than demanding recompense.

The application to Philemon and Onesimus is not hard to see. Onesimus had wronged Philemon — Paul affirmed that this was true. Yet, he asked Philemon to love consistently, to show Onesimus the same love that he showed to other believers. He asked Philemon to bear up patiently under the wrong he had suffered and to forgive Onesimus rather than punish him. By affirming Philemon's love, Paul encouraged him to be consistent in his character, and not to let his anger overrule his love when it came to Onesimus.

### **PETITION**

After the section on thanksgiving, Paul presented his petition to Philemon in verses 8-21. The petition represents the main purpose of the letter, namely advocating on behalf of Onesimus before Philemon. We will explore the petition in some depth, breaking it down into the following six elements:

- An explanation of Paul's role as advocate in verses 8-10
- An explanation of Onesimus' role as petitioner in verses 11-13
- An explanation of Philemon's role as master in verse 14
- An explanation of God's role as providential ruler of the universe in verses 15-16
- Paul's petition itself in verses 17-20
- And Paul's statement of confidence that the petition would be granted, in verse 21

Let's start by turning to Paul's explanation of his role as advocate.

### **Paul as Advocate**

Listen to Paul's words in Philemon 8-10:

**Although in Christ I could be bold and order you to do what you ought to do, yet I appeal to you on the basis of love. I then, as Paul — an old man and now also a prisoner of Christ Jesus — I appeal to you for my son Onesimus, who became my son while I was in chains (Philemon 8-10).**

Because Paul was an apostle of Christ, he had the authority to order Philemon to do the right thing. But instead, he wrote to Philemon in ways that elicited Philemon's sympathy and concern.

In this passage Paul spoke as a weak, elderly man in need of help. And to those who are familiar with his strong writing style in other letters, this may seem more than a little unusual. After all, Paul commonly demanded that people respect his authority and submit to his teaching. Was he merely trying to manipulate soft-hearted Philemon? No. This was simply another side of the real Paul that we do not see often in his other letters.

Listen to the way Paul's critics in Corinth spoke of this other side of Paul in 2 Corinthians 10:10:

**His letters are weighty and forceful, but in person he is unimpressive and his speaking amounts to nothing (2 Corinthians 10:10).**

Paul's critics attacked him for presenting himself as forceful in his letters, but humble and unassuming in person. In person, Paul could be quite meek. And this should not surprise us. After all, Paul constantly strove to be like Christ, who also knew when to be forceful and when to be humble.

Consider Paul's teaching in Philippians 2:5-8:

**Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: Who ... made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant ... he humbled himself and became obedient to death — even death on a cross! (Philippians 2:5-8).**

Jesus Christ, God incarnate, was a strong teacher. But he also humbled himself so far as to let mere creatures subject him to an ignoble criminal's execution. It was only fitting, then, that his apostle should emulate him in similar ways, having a strong presence at some times, and being needy and mild at others.

Paul didn't need to trick or manipulate Philemon — he was an apostle. If he had wanted to, he could have demanded Philemon's obedience. And had he done so, Philemon probably would have complied. But Paul wanted Philemon to respond to this situation with genuine Christian love. So, he appealed to Philemon's heart, asking him to have compassion on an elderly man in prison and on the newly converted brother in Christ who ministered to him. And it was from this perspective that Paul introduced his advocacy for Onesimus.

After introducing himself as Onesimus' advocate, Paul spoke about Onesimus himself in verses 11-13. He also explained in more detail the relationship between Onesimus and Paul that led the apostle to bring Onesimus' petition before Philemon.

### **Onesimus as Petitioner**

In Philemon 11-13, Paul wrote these words:

**Formerly [Onesimus] was useless to you, but now he has become useful both to you and to me... I would have liked to keep him with me so that he could take your place in helping me while I am in chains for the gospel (Philemon 11-13).**

The Onesimus that Paul described here was a very different man from the one who had come to him asking for a mediator.



Onesimus had been a worthless slave. But he had been converted to Christ; he had repented of his sin, and mended his ways, showing his good faith by putting forth earnest effort to care for Paul in prison. And because Paul knew that Philemon was a loving Christian, he expected Philemon to rejoice at the news that Onesimus had come to Christ, and to forgive his transgressions as he would any other Christian who sinned against him.

Paul included a wordplay in Philemon 11-13 that emphasized this change in Onesimus. Specifically, *chrēstos* (χρηστος) was remarkably similar to the word *christos* (χριστος), meaning "Christ." Paul's word for "useless" was *achrēstos* (ἀχρηστος), from the Greek prefix *a*, meaning "not," and the root *chrēstos*, meaning "useful." Similarly, Paul's word for "useful" was *euchrēstos* (εὐχρηστος) from the prefix *eu*, meaning "well" or "good," and the root *chrēstos*, again meaning "useful." And the wordplay was this: Onesimus was *achrēstos* or "useless" when he was *achristos* or "without Christ." But he became *euchrēstos* or "very useful" when he received *christos* as his Lord.

Paul also pointed to ways in which Onesimus had already begun to make reparations for his transgressions. As Paul wrote, Onesimus was taking Philemon's place in service to Paul.

In the ancient world it was not unusual for a master to loan a slave to another person. This action was rightly considered a gift of sorts, as the master lost any work the slave might have done during the time of the loan, and the friend to whom the slave was loaned benefited. In this sense, through Onesimus, Philemon really was ministering to Paul. This is why Paul said that Onesimus had become useful not only to him, but also to Philemon. So, Philemon had yet more reasons to be merciful to Onesimus.

Finally in this section, Paul also mentioned that he had sent Onesimus back to Philemon, presumably carrying Paul's letter to Philemon, and probably traveling in the company of Tychicus. Paul mentioned this in Philemon 12, writing:

**I am sending him ... back to you (Philemon 12).**

Onesimus was returning to Colosse to petition Philemon for mercy in the hopes of being reconciled to him, and perhaps even of being released. Onesimus was not a fugitive, and was returning to face his master's judgment.

## Philemon as Master

After describing his own role as advocate, and Onesimus' role as petitioner, Paul went on to speak of Philemon's role as master in verse 14.

Here, Paul acknowledged Philemon's authority over Onesimus, and revealed his own motivation for making an appeal to Philemon instead of commanding him. Paul wrote these words in Philemon 14:

**I did not want to do anything without your consent, so that any favor you do will be spontaneous and not forced (Philemon 14).**

Paul wanted Philemon himself to choose to do the right thing. And so he made it clear that his petition came as a request rather than as an apostolic command.

It may be that he wanted his friend to gain heavenly rewards by doing the right thing for the right reason. And perhaps he also thought that a voluntary reconciliation between the two men would make their brotherly relationship in Christ all the stronger.

Additionally, it appears that Paul wanted to show Philemon respect and to give his benevolence the benefit of the doubt. Then, if Philemon treated Onesimus well, it would provide greater encouragement both to Paul and to the church. This was Paul's reasoning in Philemon 7-9, where he wrote in this way:

**Your love has given me great joy and encouragement, because you, brother, have refreshed the hearts of the saints. Therefore, although ... I could ... order you to do what you ought to do, yet I appeal to you on the basis of love (Philemon 7-9).**

Essentially, Philemon's past love and faithfulness to the church encouraged Paul to think that Philemon would be loving and faithful to Onesimus as well.

In all likelihood, Paul chose this route for a variety of reasons, leaving Philemon in the traditional Roman role of a master who had to sit in judgment over his slave. He could decide harshly choosing to discipline Onesimus. Or he could judge mercifully, forgiving Onesimus for the sake of Christ, and for the sake of his friend the apostle Paul. The choice was truly his to make, although Paul made it abundantly clear which choice was the right one.

## God as Ruler

After laying out the various human parties in their relations to one another, Paul reminded Philemon of God's role as providential ruler in verses 15 and 16. In this section he pondered the greater good that God might bring out of Onesimus' sin if Philemon would only grant his request.

Paul referred to God's providential hand in Philemon 15-16, writing these encouraging words to Philemon:

**Perhaps the reason [Onesimus] was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back for good — no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother. He is very dear to me but even dearer to you, both as a man and as a brother in the Lord (Philemon 15-16).**

The Lord providentially controls everything in the universe. And he often permits bad things to happen in order that his good purposes might be accomplished. Paul suggested that in this case God had orchestrated events to bring Onesimus and Philemon into conflict in order that Onesimus would be forced to seek Paul's advocacy. And the Lord allowed this in order that, through Paul's ministry, Onesimus might be brought to faith in Christ, and subsequently reconciled to Philemon as an equal in the Lord.

By speaking about God's providential control of the universe, Paul asked Philemon to step back from the conflict with Onesimus in order to see it from the perspective of God's plan. Yes, Philemon was angry, and he had a right to be. But the problems with Onesimus were insignificant compared to the blessings that God had bestowed through their strife.

Philemon was a good man. And once he realized that God had orchestrated the conflict with Onesimus in order to save a lost soul, his anger may well have turned to joy, just as Paul had hoped.

## Petition

After introducing all the characters involved in the mediation, Paul finally stated his petition in verses 17-20. Specifically, he asked Philemon to forgive Onesimus, and he offered himself as Onesimus' substitute in the event that Philemon chose to exact payment or recompense from his slave.

Paul's twofold petition is summarized in Philemon 17-18:

**Welcome him as you would welcome me. If he has done you any wrong or owes you anything, charge it to me (Philemon 17-18).**

Notice what Paul did here — he appealed to Philemon for a personal favor, as if Paul himself were the one who needed Philemon's grace. He did not argue that Onesimus deserved to be restored to Philemon. On the contrary, he implied that Onesimus deserved punishment. And he did not ask Philemon to show Christ-like mercy to Onesimus.

Figuratively speaking, Paul did not stand beside Onesimus as his defense attorney persuading Philemon to be merciful for Onesimus' sake. Instead, he stood in front of Onesimus as his father and protector, shielding him from Philemon, and providing reasons that Philemon should be merciful for Paul's sake.

Listen to the way Paul concluded his petition in Philemon 20:

**I do wish, brother, that I may have some benefit from you in the Lord; refresh my heart in Christ (Philemon 20).**

Paul hoped that Philemon would so respect Paul that he would extend mercy to Paul's spiritual son Onesimus. And so, in his petition, Paul asked Philemon to minister to the apostle by showing kindness to his son, whom he loved with all his heart.

And notice Paul's language here. First, Paul asked Philemon to "benefit" him, using the Greek verb "*oninémi*" (ὀνίνεμι) upon which Onesimus' name was built. Essentially, he asked Philemon to follow the example of his slave Onesimus in being useful to Paul. Second, Paul repeated his use of the word "refresh." In Philemon 7, Paul had commended Philemon for refreshing the saints. Here he encouraged Philemon to demonstrate integrity by refreshing the imprisoned apostle as well.

Scholars have raised many questions about the details of Paul's petition. Some believe that Paul was merely asking Philemon to treat Onesimus with mercy and kindness, and not to seek retribution or even restitution for the wrong Onesimus had committed. Others believe that Paul was asking Philemon for even more, perhaps for Onesimus' manumission, that is, his freedom.

This may be implied by Paul's words in Philemon 15-16, where Paul wrote in this way:

**You might have him back for good — no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother (Philemon 15-16).**

It is possible to read this verse as meaning that Paul wanted Philemon to free Onesimus so that Onesimus would no longer be a slave. This idea is strengthened when we notice that the Greek word "*aiōnion*" (αἰώνιον), here translated "for good," is rightly translated in several English translations as "forever" or "eternally." Even though Roman slavery was often perpetual, it was technically a temporary arrangement, so Paul could not rightly have assured Philemon that Onesimus would remain his profitable slave forever. But our relationships in Christ really will endure eternally. This makes it tempting to see an allusion in this verse to Philemon manumitting, or granting freedom to, Onesimus.

At the same time, it is important to recognize that Paul did not teach that Christian faith required all Christian masters to free their believing slaves. In 1 Corinthians 7:21 he did teach that freedom was preferable to slavery. But his instructions to households in which believing masters owned believing slaves did not include manumission. For example, he provided this teaching in 1 Timothy 6:2:

**[Slaves] who have believing masters are not to show less respect for them because they are brothers. Instead, they are to serve them even better, because those who benefit from their service are believers, and dear to them (1 Timothy 6:2).**

In light of the many ways slavery has been an institution of terrible abuse throughout history, it may seem odd to hear Paul speak in this way. After all, when most modern people think about slavery, our minds immediately recall the horrible atrocities committed in the African slave trade. We think of people who were enslaved by force, torn from their families, and subjected to some of the most inhumane treatment imaginable.

They were raped and beaten and branded and murdered. And to our shame, many Christians defended this brutality by appealing to the way the Bible approached ancient slavery. But they were tragically and devastatingly wrong. Neither Paul nor any other biblical author would have affirmed these practices. Instead, they would have condemned them in the harshest terms.

But in Paul's setting, slavery was different. It was usually a positive economic arrangement, especially when both master and slave were Christians. And the reality was that both master and slave lived in the same household and were required by God to minister to one another, and to love one another. They were, for all intents and purposes, an extended family.

And because these relationships could be conducted in ways that were both godly and beneficial to all parties, Paul did not instruct the church to tear down the social institutions. Instead, he taught them to handle slavery in a Christ-like fashion.

We can be certain that Paul wanted the best for Onesimus and that Philemon knew how to meet the apostle's expectations. But Paul's vague language makes it impossible for us to know whether he was simply asking Philemon to forgive Onesimus and to treat him as an honored slave in his house, or if he was asking for Onesimus' legal freedom. Without knowing more details about Onesimus' skills and circumstances, it is hard for us to guess which outcome would have benefited him more. But in all cases, it is clear that Paul's petition was designed to secure a good life for Onesimus, one in which he was treated with Christian honor and respect, and shown love and mercy by the church.

## Confidence

Lastly, after presenting his petition to Philemon, Paul ended with a statement of confidence in verse 21. Here, Paul expressed his belief that Philemon would do as the apostle asked. We read these closing words to Paul's petition in Philemon 21:

**Confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I ask (Philemon 21).**

Paul had two strong reasons for believing that Philemon would grant his request. First, Philemon respected and loved Paul, and therefore would have been motivated to please him. And second, Philemon loved the church, which Onesimus had just joined.

Scripture does not record Philemon's response for us, nor does it tell us what happened to Onesimus. For many centuries it was believed that Philemon released him and that he eventually became bishop of Ephesus, dying as a martyr in Rome in A.D. 95. And there certainly was a bishop Onesimus who succeeded Timothy in the first century.

But in truth, Onesimus was a common name, so the slave may not have been the same man as the bishop. At the same time, a Christian trained by Paul easily could have risen to prominence, so we should not rule out the possibility.

In any event, Paul's confidence in Philemon should incline us to suspect that he did whatever was best for Onesimus. And according to some scholars, the fact that we even possess Paul's letter to Philemon implies that Philemon did the right thing since he probably would have destroyed the evidence of Paul's request if he had not granted it.

## FINAL GREETINGS

Now that we have looked at Paul's petition to Philemon, we should turn to the last section of the letter, the Final Greetings to Philemon and his household, found in Philemon 22-25.

This section contains rather standard greetings in verse 24, and a fairly standard blessing in verse 25. But two details in the earlier verses are worthy of special attention.

First, in verse 22 Paul expressed his expectation that he would be released from prison rather quickly, and he asked Philemon to prepare a room for him. No doubt this would have encouraged Philemon to grant Paul's request as he would have to face the apostle himself in the near future.

Second, as we mentioned earlier in this lesson, Paul sent a special greeting from Epaphras in verse 23, indicating that Epaphras served as a remote witness to the Philemon's resolution of the matter with Onesimus.

Now that we have looked at the background to Paul's epistle to Philemon, as well as at its structure and content, we are in a position to discuss the modern application of Paul's exemplary advocacy on behalf of Onesimus.

## MODERN APPLICATION

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One reason that Paul's epistle to Philemon is so important is that it shows us how Paul applied his own theology in his own life. As we look at his letters to the Colossians and the Ephesians, we find many general statements and hypothetical applications of his teachings. And these are extremely helpful to us. But in his letter to Philemon, we have moved beyond the general into the specific, beyond the hypothetical into the actual, beyond instruction to action. We see Paul as a Christian living consistently with his doctrine.

And so, as we look for modern applications of the book of Philemon, we will pay special attention to the ways Paul's mediation between Onesimus and Philemon corresponds to his teachings in other epistles, especially those to the Colossians and to the Ephesians.

As we consider the modern application of Paul's letter to Philemon, we will focus on three matters: first, the need for accountability among Christians; second, the value of compassion in our relationships in the church; and finally, the importance of reconciliation within the family of God. Let's turn first to the need for accountability among Christians.

### ACCOUNTABILITY

As we have mentioned, in his letter to Philemon Paul called on several individuals as witnesses to his advocacy for Onesimus, including Apphia, Archippus, Epaphras, and the local church at Colosse. Although Paul did not explicitly state his reason for doing this, the best explanation would seem to be that he hoped their watchful eyes would encourage Philemon to do the right thing.

This strategy was in keeping with his teaching in Ephesians 5:11-21. We will look at several sections of verses from this passage, beginning with Ephesians 5:11-15, where Paul gave these instructions:

**Have nothing to do with the fruitless deeds of darkness, but rather expose them. For it is shameful even to mention what the disobedient**

**do in secret. But everything exposed by the light becomes visible... Be very careful, then, how you live — not as unwise but as wise (Ephesians 5:11-15).**

Paul taught that Christians are to expose sins. His reasoning was that those who commit them would be ashamed to have their sins known. The wise thing to do, then, is to expose our lives to the light, that is, to the fellowship of the kingdom of light, so that we are prevented from sinning.

Now, Paul was not saying that Christians should police each other by making sure no one of us is ever alone or by spying on each other. Rather, he was pointing to the wisdom of accountability. When we live our lives in the open, when others know what we are doing, we are less likely to succumb to temptation. One reason for this is that we are ashamed to commit some sins when others know about them.

In the case of Onesimus and Philemon, if no one knew about Paul's letter, and if Paul himself did not plan to follow up with Philemon, then no one would have been able to hold Philemon accountable for doing the right thing. If he had treated Onesimus harshly, only Philemon himself would have known that this violated Paul's request.

But in making the matter public, Paul ensured that Philemon would endure the disapproval of his family and the Colossian church if he treated Onesimus harshly. The threat of this motivated him to do the right thing. The Lord himself commonly used the potential for shame to motivate his people to do the right thing in the Old Testament.

For example, in Habakkuk 2:16 the prophet proclaimed these words from God to Judah:

**You will be filled with shame instead of glory... The cup from the Lord's right hand is coming around to you, and disgrace will cover your glory (Habakkuk 2:16).**

God threatened to shame the Judahites in order that they would turn from their sin. And in Ezekiel 7:18, the Lord tried to motivate Israel to obedience with the following threat of shame:

**They will put on sackcloth and be clothed with terror. Their faces will be covered with shame and their heads will be shaved (Ezekiel 7:18).**

In the same way, we have many secret sins in the modern church. Christians are willing to live with many of these sins, but would be ashamed if others knew about them. So, one way for the church to hold us accountable with regard to these sins is for believers to stay in close fellowship.

But shame is not the only form of prevention that Christian accountability offers. On the contrary, Paul's example in Philemon emphasizes that Christians should be accountable to one another largely through pleasant fellowship. Listen to Paul's words in Ephesians 5:19:

**Speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs (Ephesians 5:19).**

Christians also keep one another from sinning by offering encouraging words to one another.

Finally, Paul indicated that we are to hold one another accountable through the mutual submission that all believers must render to one another. Listen to his words in Ephesians 5:21:

**Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ (Ephesians 5:21).**

The church is to be a holy place, a fellowship of God's obedient people. And this means that the church's counsel should be godly and righteous.

So, as we live in fellowship with one another, encouraging each other to good deeds, we need to pay special attention to the ways that our church leaders and traditions train us to behave, and to the counsel of wise and godly believers.

In summary, through Paul's use of witnesses to Philemon's interactions with Onesimus, we learn that the church can prevent sin and encourage good works by showing disapproval for sin, by offering encouragement, and by submitting to the church's wise counsel.

Now that we have looked at the implications that Paul's letter to Philemon has for accountability in the church, we should turn to our second point of application: the importance of compassion in our relationships with other Christians.

## COMPASSION

Of all the characteristics that Christ demonstrated during his earthly ministry, it is perhaps his compassion that was the most striking. Yes, he had a zeal for holiness and reverence, and his emphasis on righteousness and morality is undeniable. And he showed unparalleled wisdom and integrity and dignity.

But even more memorable are his kindness, his pity, his concern, his love for others, his eagerness to forgive, his willingness to suffer so that others would not have to. It is the stories of him raising the dead, comforting the living, curing the sick, restoring the lame, feeding the hungry, shepherding the lost and the hurt and the frightened — and dying on the cross for the sake of those who hated him. In short, it is Christ's compassion that touches our hearts most deeply. And it is this compassion that Paul encouraged us to imitate through his praise, teaching, and example in his letter to Philemon.

We will consider two types of compassion in Paul's letter to Philemon beginning with kindness and charity, and then looking at acts of intercession. Let's begin by considering acts of kindness as examples of Christian compassion.

## Kindness

Paul taught all believers to show kindness and charity when he praised Philemon for his ministry to the church, and when he appealed to these as the basis for his petition to Philemon. Listen to Paul's words in Philemon 7-9:



**Your love has given me great joy and encouragement, because you, brother, have refreshed the hearts of the saints... I appeal to you on the basis of love... as Paul — an old man and now also a prisoner of Christ Jesus (Philemon 7-9).**

Paul was encouraged by the ways Philemon had refreshed the hearts of the saints, that is, the ways he had demonstrated kindness to other believers. And Paul wanted to receive similar charity on the basis that he was an old man and a prisoner, one deserving of pity and in need of aid. As he wrote in Colossians 3:11-12:

**Christ is all, and is in all. Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion [and] kindness (Colossians 3:11-12).**

Because other believers are united to Jesus, we must treat them as we would our Lord, and as our Lord has treated us, showing them abounding care, and helping to meet their needs.

In these and many other ways, Paul showed that kindness and charity are important aspects of Christian living. And so, just like Paul and Philemon, modern Christians must be moved by pity and love for those in the church, and we must respond to their needs so far as we are able.

## **Intercession**

A second type of compassion Paul encouraged in his letter to Philemon was intercession in which one believer becomes an advocate for another. Intercession can take many forms. On one end of the spectrum, it can be as simple as an expression of opinion without personal risk that sways circumstances in favor of another. On the other end of the spectrum, it can be as intense as giving up one's life to protect another who is guilty. The most obvious example of this type of intercession is the sacrifice that Christ offered in order to obtain salvation for sinners.

And in between these two extremes, many other types of intercession are possible. Listen to Paul's words to Philemon in on behalf of Onesimus in Philemon 17-19:

**Welcome him as you would welcome me. If he has done you any wrong or owes you anything, charge it to me... I will pay it back (Philemon 17-19).**

Through Paul's example, modern Christians are called to intercede for other believers in similar ways. Sometimes we are called to intercede in simple ways. At other times, our compassion for others may call us to greater levels of intercession.

And in some cases, compassion may even compel us to intercede by laying down our lives for the benefit or protection of others. As Paul wrote in Ephesians 5:1-2:

**Be imitators of God ... and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God (Ephesians 5:1-2).**

Now that we have looked at some ways that Paul's teaching in Philemon applies to accountability in the church and to Christian compassion, we are ready to turn to our final topic: the reconciliation of believers to one another through our Lord Jesus Christ.

## **RECONCILIATION**

When we speak of reconciliation, we need to make it clear that we are not simply talking about creating unity and love where none existed before. Rather, we are talking about creating unity and love where hostility existed before. Reconciliation is rooted in forgiveness and mercy, and it is maintained through patience and longsuffering. It assumes that there is a source of conflict between us, but that we have put aside the conflict in order to pursue something better, namely, mutual peace with one another, mutual love for one another, and mutual ministry to one another.

In his epistles to the Colossians and Ephesians, Paul spoke frequently of reconciliation between believers, both on an individual level and on a corporate, ethnic level. And he described this reconciliation as an essential element of the gospel.

Paul did insist that both Onesimus and Philemon had an obligation to restore their relationship, and to embrace one another as brothers in Christ without holding grudges. Onesimus, for his part, had to repent of his sin, which he had done upon converting to Christianity under Paul's ministry. And as Philemon's slave, he also had to submit himself to Philemon's judgment. Philemon, in turn, was obligated to love Onesimus, to treat him with kindness, to forgive his sin, and to embrace him as a brother in Christ. In the same way modern believers must be eager to repent and to forgive one another, and to be restored to right relationships.

In the same way, in Paul's day, there were still tension, resentment and other conflicts between different races or ethnicities in the church, and Paul was not arguing that everyone who felt such strife was unsaved. Rather, he was saying that the basis for such problems had been erased by Christ, so that all racial and ethnic strife in the church was invalid and therefore sinful. For instance, in Ephesians 2:14-16 he wrote about the reconciliation of Jewish and Gentile believers with these words:

**[Christ] is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility ... His purpose was to create in himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace, and in this one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility (Ephesians 2:14-16).**

According to Paul's argument here, the reconciliation between Jewish and Gentile believers in Christ is an aspect of our union with Christ, and therefore it is an essential step in our reconciliation to God.

And the same is true in our day with regard to racial and ethnic strife, as well as with regard to every other difference between believers that becomes a source of problems. Because we are united to Christ, we are all forgiven and blessed. So, we have no basis for resenting or refusing to be reconciled to any believer. Our Lord has removed any basis for conflict between us so that we must recognize our strife as sin and strive for unity, love and harmony in the body of Christ. Listen to Paul's words in Ephesians 4:32:

**Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you (Ephesians 4:32).**

And consider his teaching in Colossians 3:13-15:

**Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity. Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace (Colossians 3:13-15).**

We have been called to abandon our prejudices and resentments, and to love one another, to see each Christian through the eyes of Christ, and to enjoy peace together. Reconciliation between believers should be a high priority in the modern church.

## CONCLUSION

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In this lesson we have looked closely at Paul's epistle to his Colossian friend Philemon. We have explored the background to this letter, and we have studied the letter's structure and content. And lastly, we have considered a number of modern applications derived from Paul's example in his letter to Philemon.

The epistle to Philemon is a small but wonderful part of the New Testament. It offers us a unique insight into how the apostle Paul related to other believers and confirms that he lived out the very doctrines he taught. Beyond this, it has much to teach us about the value we should place on each and every believer in the church, and on the ways that a proper consideration of their value ought to impact our lives, especially when it comes to maintaining right relationships.

As we live according to the principles that Paul modeled for us in his letter to Philemon, we will take great strides toward ministering to each other and toward building the church for the glory of Christ.

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**Dr. Reggie Kidd (Host)** is Professor of New Testament Emeritus at Reformed Theological Seminary. He received his M.A.R. and M.Div. from Westminster Theological Seminary and his Ph.D. in Christian Origins from Duke University. He is a member of the Evangelical Theological Society and is an ordained priest in The Episcopal Church. Dr. Kidd teaches at the Robert E. Webber Institute for Worship Studies and has served as a pastor and elder at multiple churches. He is the author of *With One Voice: Discovering Christ's Song in Our Worship* (BakerBooks, 2005) and has contributed to many other publications, including *The Spirit of the Reformation Study Bible* (Zondervan, 2003) and *The Reformation Study Bible* (Ligonier Ministries, 2005).

# Paul's Prison Epistles

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# Paul's Prison Epistles

## Lesson Four: Paul and Philemon

### Faculty Forum

With  
Dr. Reggie Kidd

Students  
Christopher Caudle  
Wes Sumrall

#### Question 1:

**Does Paul's letter to Philemon have any doctrinal authority over modern Christians?**

**Student:** Reggie, how did the letter of Philemon make it into the New Testament? It is a letter that is written to an individual and there's not a lot of doctrine in it. So, I am wondering, what authority does it have over us today and in the lives of others?

**Dr. Kidd:** Well, I'm sure it got in because it was written by Paul. And the fact that it was written to an individual is secondary to the fact that Paul wrote it. But it isn't just individual because, as we saw in the lesson, he is writing it to Philemon in the context of his house church. And even though the doctrine doesn't sit like really heavy on it, there is pretty significant doctrine underneath it. And I think, in the wisdom of the church, there was a recognition that the apostle to the Gentiles commissioned to take the gospel to them was here applying the gospel in a very specific situation that should be suggestive of the application of the gospel to lots of other kinds of situations.

#### Question 2:

**Would Paul's letter to Philemon have been read to the entire church?**

**Student:** Reggie, would the letter to Philemon, the person, would it have been read in the gathered church? And if it would, wouldn't that have been a little awkward to have a letter written to you was being read in front of all your friends and fellow Christians?

**Dr. Kidd:** That's a good point, Christopher. It does look like this letter would have been read in front of the church. In fact, it's not written just to Philemon by himself because Paul sends greetings to more than Philemon. He sends greetings to Apphia, and to Archippus, and the church that meets in their house. So, it's clear that for Paul this is a very personal matter but it's not a private matter. The relationship between Philemon and Onesimus is about, well, it's about Philemon's family because Onesimus was a part of his family and it's going to affect the whole church. So sure, it would affect the way Philemon hears the letter and he might have felt a little sting



of awkwardness. And yet, I think we have a misconception of Christianity if we think that it is fundamentally a private matter and not a matter of relationships from beginning to end. So, I think there is some pastoral wisdom here in Paul reminding Philemon, even in the pastoral setting that he is to deal with this issue that much more is at stake than the question of what Onesimus might own him. There are lots of people that are looking. There are lots of folks whose appreciation of how the gospel gets applied is at stake in how he works this out and how he responds.

### **Question 3:**

**How often did Paul describe the gospel's implications for a specific person?**

**Student:** Reggie you mentioned that Philemon's situation with Onesimus is a chance for Paul to apply the implications of the gospel. Is this the only time Paul uses an individual or an individual circumstance to do that or is that something he does in other places as well?

**Dr. Kidd:** He begins with himself as he tells the Corinthians, "Imitate me as I imitate Christ." And there was a certain sense that he had of his own vulnerability and accountability to the people that he was serving to say, "Look at my life and see if you see Jesus in me." He going to write to Timothy in 1 Timothy about how his own being chief of sinners is case and point of the fact that Christ came in mercy for sinners and not for righteous people. And he feels like the gospel should be embodied in our lives from being to end. So, he is not at all afraid to point to his own protégés like Timothy and Epaphras and points to them like in the letter of Philippians that we deal with in the next lesson as examples of the kind of life he wants to promote. So, Philemon needs to understand and I think rightly in Paul's eyes that he like Paul has been benefited tremendously from the gospel and is himself in a position either to benefit people who are dependent upon him or not to do right by them and not to benefit them. And thus in his own being, be a denial of the gospel. And I think, in one respect, all he is doing with Philemon is putting before him the responsibility to think about how his behavior and how he works out his matrix of relationships, either reflects the gospel or denies the gospel.

### **Question 4:**

**Do all forms of slavery compromise human dignity?**

**Student:** Reggie, it seems like any time Christians read the book of Philemon, the subject is always in the back of our minds is slavery in general. Doesn't slavery in any form, compromise human dignity? And what it is that early Christians knew that maybe we are missing?

**Dr. Kidd:** Well, Christopher, you are right. Slavery would not exist were it not for the fall. And the New Testament's task of acceptance of its existence is an expression of the understanding that we still live in the "not yet" and when the Lord finally returns, every valley will be raised and every mountain brought low. In the meantime, we have to kind of grope our way through a world that is still falling. And people are going to have to live through hardship. It is important to understand that the institution of slavery as Paul would have experienced it and as the early church would have experienced it in the main was way different from slavery in the antebellum South in the United States, or the slave trafficking and forced prostitution that is going on now around the world. It was a far more benign institution.

But the point is, Paul wasn't really thinking primarily in terms of an institution. He was thinking in terms of relationships between brothers and sisters who get transformed by the power of the gospel. And his firm commitment was that where you are in whatever social matrix you are in does not define who you are. And it is possible. And here is the redemptive thrust for all of us because all of us are going to experience some measure of what it is to be a slave, some measure of what it is to be without your ability to choose being there on the underside of an over-under relationship. And all of us have the challenge of figuring out how it is that we tell ourselves the story of our having been bought with a price and our not being defined by being in that position. And all of us are going to be, or almost all of us, are going to be on the topside of over-under relationships. And the way the gospel works itself out in Paul is he recognizes that people are going to be in over-under relationships and with those places in life come responsibilities. And especially for Paul, who was free, who had all kinds of privilege and advantages, like with Philemon the preeminent responsibility was to figure out how to be a steward of the advantages that you have to serve and benefit other people.

So, that is a starting point in understanding how to approach slavery. At the same time, it's important to recognize that while there is a tacit acceptance of the way things are in Paul's world there is not an endorsement of slavery as such. In fact, in 1 Timothy 1 where Paul runs through the basic outline of the ten commandments and talks about how the law was given so that we would understand what unrighteousness is, one of the terms that he uses in the place of stealing is "man stealing." And "man stealing" was a term used for slave trading in Paul's world where people would go and steal people and force them into slavery. So, I think the way Paul would express himself would be to the extent that slavery can serve as a means of establishing a relationship within a household situation for a person who would be without social protection, without work, without the dignity of having a place at somebody's table.

And again, we have to appreciate that in Paul's day municipal domestic slavery was about being brought into somebody's house and the householder would be assuming responsibility for their care, and their provision, for giving them work, for taking care of them. And to the extent that this particular social arrangement can be used to enhance people's dignity as opposed to just throw them into the street without any resources, Paul is willing to accept it. But to the extent that it's exploitative, to the

extent that people are going out and grabbing people, and forcing them into this kind of work, I think Paul would say, “No, the church needs to stand up and say this would be wrong.”

### **Question 5:**

#### **How should the church respond to modern forms of slavery?**

**Student:** Reggie, slavery is clearly different today and was different in the South than it was in Paul's day and in many countries of the world today, it is just rampant. And you made an allusion to forced prostitution and sex slaveries that are rampant. What exactly is the response of the church today to that? How far does the church go? Do we support organizations such as International Justice Mission that go into countries like this? And it's a messy situation certainly. We can't say to those who victims to just stay within their social framework, like Paul would say back then. But what do we say?

**Dr. Kidd:** That's a great point, Wes. I think we support those kinds of movements. And Paul can't say everything that he might say any time he tries to say anything or he wouldn't say anything at all. And there are other places in Paul where he clearly recognizes even so called secular standards of what is right and what is fair. And he tells us to do good to everybody, to the household of faith in particular, but to have an eye to that which is good for everybody. And to do that which is understood to be right, and true, and correct by everybody else. And in the case of the just and fair treatment of people who are unable to do good for themselves and who are forced into harsh dehumanizing situations, there are a host of Old Testament passages and considerations that I think Paul would go to as quickly as we would about the need to defend the orphan and the widow. And to go to wrongdoers and perpetrators of violence and say, “No, that's wrong.”

### **Question 6:**

#### **Is understanding Roman slavery important to understanding Paul's letter to Philemon?**

**Student:** The issue of slavery is a pretty prominent issue in the book of Philemon, Reggie. How important is it for us to understand that nature of first century slavery when we are trying to understand this letter to Philemon?

**Dr. Kidd:** It's a good question, Wes, but in the first place... here is where it's helpful to understand the difference between their world and our world. For Paul, actually the institution of slavery isn't under discussion at all. It is for us because of our cultural history. But for Paul, this is really more about a relationship between two men and the household that they live together in. It helps us, I think, to set aside some of our own cultural issues, to understand what slavery did mean in that world. That it was much

more of a household relationship in the first place. It was often a means of people who had no means of support, no social safety net, to have protection and to have a place, to have a name that they wouldn't otherwise have had. For many people, being a slave was their status. And it helps us a lot to not hyperventilate when we see Paul accepting slavery to understand the nature of slavery in his day and see how different it was from the way slavery developed in the West subsequently.

**Student: Reggie, Wes' question brought something to my mind and that is, if it's important for us to have a more correct understanding of first century slavery, how important is it in general to understand the historical background of letters? Is that something we should do for every book of the Bible?**

**Dr. Kidd:** Well, Christopher, as much as we can, sure. Now, we believe in the sufficiency of Scripture. We believe Scripture is the authority and only Scripture is the authority. But that doesn't mean that we ignore... well, the very fact that we believe that Scripture is sufficient means we have that obligation to find out, as much as we can, what it said in the first place to its listeners. And what our view of Scripture obligates us to is to take our bearings as to what it means for us on the basis of what it originally meant to the people that it was written to in the first place.

So, everywhere we can we want to get as close to hearing it and reading it through their ears and through their eyes. For instance, if you read the letter to the Galatians, you realize pretty quickly that Paul is upset. And you don't have to have been a product of the first century to understand that when Paul says, "Oh, you foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you?" But if you read contemporary letters you get a deeper sense, a more immediate sense of Paul's anger because you realize that after you read a few letters contemporary to Paul that the custom was that before you got around to the point of your letter, you know, after you said, "from so-and-so, to so-and-so," that you would include some sort of a blessing or prayer for their well-being. And pagans as well as Jews and Christians did this sort of thing. But Paul eliminates that word of blessing or prayer and goes straight for, "You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you?" And recognizing that Paul is dropping out a culturally expected wish or prayer or blessing helps us to see just how upset he is about what is happening in Galatians. Now we can get on his wavelength anyway but closer attention to the cultural situation that he wrote into and the etiquette of letter writing makes us see that he really is slapping them upside the head.

### **Question 7:**

**Why did Paul try to persuade rather than command Philemon to free Onesimus?**

**Student: Reggie, in some places in Paul's letters he just comes out and issues a command to the people he is writing a letter to. But in this book, in Philemon, he is more reserved. He is attempting to persuade Philemon to do what is right. What**

**does Paul gain by doing it this way? Why doesn't he just tell Philemon what to do? And I guess, where is the line that one crosses between just persuading someone to do it and giving them the choice and crossing that line and becoming manipulative?**

**Dr. Kidd:** It's a good question, Wes. You know, for anybody that is in pastoral leadership... I'm sorry, anybody that is in any sort of responsible role where your job is to get "X" done that involves getting other people to do it or to help you on your behalf, you have to ask the question, "how do I lead," as opposed to, "how do I manipulate?" For Paul, he has a pretty keen sense that it's not enough for somebody to say the right words or to do the right thing. There really has to be an existential or personal ownership. It's like, for me as a teacher, I am far happier when I take you right up to the place where you feel like you figured it out. Instead for me just telling you the answer and you remembering it. You really own it better when I put the comma there and you've said, "Well, if that's true then..." And then you land exactly where I was hoping you would. So, it's Socratic method.

And I think a lot of what Paul is doing is teaching by setting the stage for Philemon and helping him to consider all the contingencies that are in play here. From what he has already done to benefit his community, to what spiritual debt he owes to Paul, to the folks that are watching, to the consideration you know of just asking them to consider God's providence. Maybe what started out to be really a bad situation, maybe God was involved in this. And maybe you have the opportunity to have a relationship with a guy that just couldn't have meant that much to you, even though he was in your household. And now he's more than just a member of your earthly household but he is your brother forever. And he wants to give Philemon this cluster, this complex of considerations but respect the fact that Philemon's the one who's got to really own this decision.

And what's really interesting is that Paul kind of hints... well, not hints but he implies that there's a right thing to do and then says, "And I know that you will do even more than what is right." And what's been so intriguing over the centuries about the letter to Philemon is that commentators still don't know what he was asking him to do. And there is just a little bit of mystery here in which I think Paul was really trusting in the power of the regenerate heart. You know, he wrote Colossians at right about the same time he wrote Philemon and he wrote it to the church here in Colossae. And he talks about wisdom and how Christ is our wisdom. I think he sees here an opportunity for Philemon to more than do the right thing. I think he sees the opportunity for Philemon to step further into his own union with Christ, to, his own understanding of what it is for him to be bought with a price and to work out what that means for his relationship with somebody else.

**Question 8:****Should we adopt the same strategies of persuasion that Paul used with Philemon?**

**Student:** I guess my question is, can we use Paul's method here as kind of a map or, for lack of a better word, a formula of how to lead people when we need to get them to do what we do and influence them as opposed to providing them incentives to do something whether that be positive or negative, cause that can seem to go in a bad place and become manipulation. But maybe we just try to paint a picture for them of what is best for all parties involved?

**Dr. Kidd:** Well, Wes, the idea of painting a picture is a good one, I think. You're right, there is not a formula here but part of what Paul winds up doing in the appeal he gives here in verses 17 through 19 is painting a picture of the gospel in his own life and asking Philemon to consider how he can tell the same story in his own life. I mean, the language here is really extraordinary. He says, "If he has done you any wrong, any injustice, or owes you anything..." and the root word there goes up in the theology of justification, that we have wronged God and God has to bring us and right-wise us with respect to his law. And he says "If he's wronged you in any way or owes you anything..." and I think Philemon is supposed to get the idea of, "Okay, he wronged me but I wronged God; he owes me but how much more do I owe God?" And Paul says, "Put it on my tab; impute it to me," and uses the same root that uses in Romans to talk about God not imputing or holding against us our own unrighteousness but imputing to us the righteousness of Christ. So, Paul is kind of stepping in between and saying, "I am willing to do for him what Jesus did for you and me." And that is to bear the cost. And then he says, "Not to mention, you owe me your very self."

This is sort of a New Testament version of the Old Testament's saying, "You were slaves in Egypt weren't you? And how were you going to get out of that? You weren't, were you? That's why I had to come with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm and I brought you out. Now you're mine. Now, look around you. Are there slaves in the land? How would people who had been brought out of slavery treat people who were enslaved?" Then he uses the same logic for widows and orphans. "You were orphans; I became your father. You were widows and I brought you into a relationship with myself. Now, look around you at the widows and the orphans and care for them the way I cared for you."

And this is what I was talking about before when I said Paul is giving Philemon the opportunity to take a step deeper into his own union with Christ in his death and resurrection in him. And to basically consider in Paul's willingness to take the rap for Onesimus, the fact that Jesus had taken the rap for him, Philemon, and then to give up whatever Onesimus might owe him. And beyond that, to embrace him as a brother. I think there is just incredible pastoral wisdom here and it's a great study in leadership that doesn't cross the line into crass manipulation, and just using peer-pressure, and

just ordering him around. But really wanting Philemon himself to own the right decision and a decision that's beyond right but which is really about stepping into a whole new eternal family relationship with a brother he wouldn't have had, but now he has forever.

### **Question 9:**

#### **What gave Paul the confidence to use such a risky strategy with Philemon?**

**Student:** Reggie, you mentioned that Paul has confidence in the regenerate heart of Philemon and you mentioned how important the gospel and its implications are. But this still looks like Paul really is running the risk. This form of leadership implies a risk that in some cases people blew it or in some cases people don't see the implication. Is there anything else you would mention that helped Paul take this risk or other things leaders today should keep in mind?

**Dr. Kidd:** Well, two things come to mind, Christopher. One is that this is not done in a social vacuum. This is done in relationship. This is done between a man who led one man to the Lord and then leads another man to the Lord. And there is a bond between them that's more than just words on a page. And two, there is just this real understanding of the change that takes place in people and trusting to God to work in such a way that people will be able to have been changed to live out their new identities.

I mean, there is this lovely thing that happens that we talked about in the lesson about the naming of Onesimus, and sort of his getting renamed from "not useful" to now "useful", only with a word that would have sounded like "well-Christed." Then the call for Philemon to do a benefit to Paul using the same Greek root that is actually underneath Onesimus' name. There is this beautiful way that Paul has of appealing to truth and saying, "You guys are different people because of the gospel. Now, work it out as to what that means." The wisdom here that we should take away, I think, is this profound sense that I as a pastoral leader can't make things happen but I can lay out the case for you as best I can and then trust God, trust the God who changed you and the God who, like he intimates here, is always at work. You know, maybe God is the one who set this whole thing up.

I can't not think about the fact that it was in the same time frame that Paul wrote this that he wrote Colossians where he talks about Christ's lordship over supernatural powers in his letter. And then, the fact that he wrote Ephesians where for the first three chapters he is more praying his case than arguing his case. And I can imagine Paul on his knees as this letter is going. It had to take several days for the letter to get from Rome to Colossae. And I can imagine every waking hour Paul on his knees, asking the Lord to work in these guy's hearts. I think, you are asking for what sort of pastoral take away from this and there is a basic trust that God works, the basic trust



that God really makes people new. And the exciting thing about being in pastoral ministry is that we get to go to people and remind them of who they are now and then trust them to God and then our role becomes what I know Paul was doing: praying and asking the Lord to work. To me, that's one of the things that is most needed in reclamation in our day is pasturing that is done on our knees instead of just from the pulpit, and just in the counseling office. Pulpits are absolutely critical. Counseling rooms are absolutely critical but I think we are going to be really surprised when we get to glory and see how much the kingdom has been built from people on their knees asking the Lord to work in powerful ways.

### **Question 10:**

#### **Did Onesimus have the responsibility to make reparations to Philemon?**

**Student:** Philemon makes the point really clear that we should show mercy to one another. But where is the place for justice or for reparation? Didn't Onesimus have the responsibility to payback whatever wrong he had done to Philemon?

**Dr. Kidd:** Well, Christopher, I think you're right. When I have done somebody wrong... And it's hard to read between the lines here and know exactly what had gone on and we acknowledge that in the lesson. But it does appear that Onesimus had wronged Philemon somehow. Whether through malice or through oversight, somehow he had disadvantaged Philemon and something is owed. As a believer, it is my obligation to try and set things right with somebody and I think the stipulations in the book of Exodus 22, when it talks about restitution, those principles do carry over. Where it is my responsibility, as best I can, when I have wronged somebody, to seek to make that right. And so, I think part of what Paul was doing is sending Onesimus back so that he can come to his master and say, "I have wronged you. Will you forgive me and can I make it right with you?"

### **Question 11:**

#### **Do we always have to show mercy when we are wronged?**

**Student:** Reggie, what about times when we are wronged by someone? Do we have to always apply mercy or is there a place where we can call for justice?

**Dr. Kidd:** Well, I think, trying to take our bearings as much as we can from Philemon, I think the own-ness on us is to consider whether, in a particular situation, we can't let it go. At some level, the last thing any of us wants to do is to demand justice because who is totally just? What the gospel demands that we consider is if we were to go before God and say, "I want you to do what's fair. I want you to do what's right. I want you to do what's just," God would say, "Well, let's talk about that." What do you think perfect justice would do to you? And I think, we are supposed to recognize that if God would be totally fair, totally just, and totally right for God to



just smash us like a bug. But what he did out of his mercy and his compassion was send his Son to pay the penalty so that right would be done. And so that which is fair, that which is just is done, and that our sins are punished. And it is our primarily responsibility to treat other people as in need of the same sort of forgiveness that was extended to us. And so, where we can just take it, I think Paul would say, "Take it."

Now, there is a larger social network to consider. There is the need for the value of property to be upheld and maintained for the social good. There is the need for human life to be valued for the social good. And so, it's not for me to go to the courts and to the police and just say, "Let everybody off and, please, there should be no consequences for somebody who does a crime against me." And I think, it's one of the things that God has built in. As you move from Romans 12 to Romans 13, you can see this, and it might be worth just taking a quick look. Paul talks about our responsibility at the end of Romans 12, and our responsibility is to "repay no one evil for evil, but take thought for what's noble in the sight of all, if at all possible. So far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God. For it is written, 'Vengeance is mine. I will repay,' says the Lord." We don't go get paybacks. We put things in the Lord's hands. And in fact, "If your enemy is hungry then feed him; if he is thirsty, give him drink." In other words, model for him what was done for you. If God wants to exact justice, he can take care of exacting justice. My job is to reflect the other side of things, the mercy that was extended to me.

You know, what's great for Paul is, in Romans 3, he talked about the way that, by offering his Son as an atonement, justice has been taken care of, even there, even if I don't see the payment. "For by doing so you will heat burning coals upon his head. Don't be overcome by evil but overcome evil with good." My job is to seek to overcome evil with good. Now, he turns to Romans 13 and says, "Wes, Christopher, Reggie, you can do this," because in this world of "already, not yet", where the fall continues, even though there is going to be an ultimate accounting at the end of time, I know that if I just let things unfold and if there are no social controls, we are just going to have the same sort of situation you had before the flood in Genesis 6–9. So, what I am doing, and it's what God did all the way back in Genesis 9 after the flood, I 'm setting governmental agencies and authorities. And I am going to put responsible adults on the playground and their job is to tell bullies, "No." And the reason that you and I don't have to fight for our rights and scrap for every bit of justice that we can get is, well, in the first place, we know the Lord is going to cover it. But in terms of just living together in a fallen world, we need to know that there are going to be responsible authorities who will come and who will exact a measure of justice.

And that is the positive side of what's going on here in Romans 13, where he says that we are supposed to pay taxes, we are supposed to honor governing authorities, and that God has not given the sword to the state for nothing. He has given the sword to the state because they are to be — and it's an interesting word he uses — a "minister" on his behalf, whether they know him or not, whether they know it's his law that is ultimately at the center of the universe. They, to the extent that they

promote good and punish evil, they are his servants. And our job is to let them do their job.

### **Question 12:**

#### **How does Paul bring the gospel to bear on Onesimus?**

**Student:** Reggie, we've talked a lot already about how Paul lays out the big picture of the gospel for Philemon. What does Paul do for Onesimus? How does Paul bring the gospel to bear on him?

**Dr. Kidd:** Christopher, that's a great question and it's easy to get preoccupied with Philemon and his responsibility as a slave owner. But Onesimus is an important player here and we were talking a few minutes ago about the need when I have done somebody wrong to be willing to go own up, ask forgiveness, and offer whatever I can do to make the situation right. And that's what Onesimus is being asked to do. And we have to remember this is a very young Christian. He has just gotten the gospel. We don't know long he has been with Paul but probably not a real long time. And Paul is crediting a great deal to him and his understanding that his identity is new, and that he was useless and now he is useful, and now he is a brother to this man that he must have thought... well, we don't know what he would of thought of Philemon but know he is being asked to think of this guy who was just his master to be his brother as well and you know, Onesimus is going back. Paul expresses a great deal of confidence in Philemon's doing the right thing. But Onesimus, new to the faith, he knows that there really ought to be some consequences for what he has done and he is being asked to trust that this man who was simply his lord — with a capitol "L" — will now embrace him and not abuse him. And if he were to exact some sort of retribution... and you know, what's he thinking about all of that? I just don't know. It's a call for a guy who is just a young Christian to be very brave as well as to be very humble. And this is a huge step, I am sure, for Onesimus to take.

### **Question 13:**

#### **Do Paul's teachings on slaves and masters apply to other types of relationships?**

**Student:** Reggie, do Paul's teachings on slaves and masters apply to any other types of relationships?

**Dr. Kidd:** Yeah, Wesley, I think we're all going to be in relationships in different points in our lives where we are on the Philemon end and more on the Onesimus end, more in the position of power and strength or more in the position of weakness. You know, we're different places in our growth in Christ, Philemon being the mature elder brother and Onesimus being the younger brother. And part of the joyful challenge of living is making the leap from this text and the kind of relational grid that it's

presupposing and the text of lives and the relational context in which we live. And I think an imaginative, faithful reading of this text is really important.

And just to hit again some of the major points that we tried to stress in the lesson, what is it to know that even when bad things have happened that it's really God who is at work and he has ultimately good things in view? As Paul will say in Philippians that he understands that God is at work to will and work in our lives and that he will see us through to the day of Christ Jesus. There is nothing that comes into our lives that he is not going to use to our benefit. There is the whole matter of the renaming, or in Onesimus' case, coming in Christ to live up to a name that had just been seemingly arbitrarily imposed upon him. And now that he belongs to Christ, he really can be a useful, productive bearer of the image of God, something that would have been a total mystery to him before.

And you know, all of us can think about our names. Christopher means "Christ-bearer". How sad it would be if you didn't know the living Christ and you didn't have him to bear out into the world around you? And you know, I think that could be a source of meditation for you from time to time. My name, Reggie, is a diminutive of "king" and, well, there are different ways to be a king. There is pride, there is arrogance, there is thinking of yourself more than you are but then there is also what it is to bear the image of God who made us for nobility and for dignity, and who has given me the responsibilities. He has given me a little piece of the turf of his creation, beginning with me, and my family relationships, my friend relationships, my church, my work. In all those places, I'm called now in Christ to do what Adam and Eve were originally called to do and that is be God's sub-kings, under him and to do good. We all are to get our bearings from this way that Paul lays his life out in the shape of a cross and says, "If he's done you any wrong, put it on my account." We are to be looking for ways that we can go into the world and seek the good news that God has sent his Son to bear our sins and he wants us to be ones who bring hope to situations where people are at odds with each other and where reconciliation doesn't look like it's possible.

And we are supposed to be like Paul and see if we can bring people together to talk through things. And if I am in relationships were I am more like Philemon, I really think that I am supposed to count wrong that was done to me as something that I put on Christ's shoulders, and not exact vengeance. And when I have done wrong, as Onesimus had done, I am to own and I'm to go seek to make things right. If I am in the power position that Philemon is in, I am to see that position as not to my advantage but to other people's advantage. And if I'm in Onesimus of being more of a servant, I am to be the best servant that I can. I am to seek to please, not my human master, but my Lord Jesus himself. So, I think there is plenty of take away here.

**Question 14:**

**Do the principles explained in Philemon apply to our relationships with unbelievers?**

**Student:** Reggie, you mentioned that this takes place in the context of two believers. How would the message of this book apply to people who are in those over-under relationships when one of the parties was an unbeliever?

**Dr. Kidd:** Yeah, Christopher, when the other party is not a believer, I can't assume that they are going to do the right thing. And I still have to know that the God who spun the earth into existence and the God who was not surprised and shocked when Adam and Eve fell, and the God who decided that he wasn't going to let the universe just spin out of control but decided that he was going to redeem all things, I have to believe that the God who allows evil to happen so that a greater good can occur through the evil motives of evil people, I have to believe he is able to work in that situation. I cannot presume, well, I should never presume on God's redeeming grace on anybody, but when I talk about trying to reconcile with a believer, I really can believe that the Holy Spirit is going to be at work in that other person, to soften their hearts, to let them know, because we are both in submission to God's Word, what their responsibility is here. And with an unbeliever, I have to be much more on my guard. I think it's very important in those relationships when I have to work things out with an unbeliever to be very much in fellowship, in counsel, in accountability with relationships with fellow believers so that I can get counsel that's beyond my own.

**Question 15:**

**How does Paul's message apply to Christians who are mistreated by unbelievers?**

**Student:** How would we apply the message of Philemon to people who are in those over-under relationships if they were being terribly treated by an unbeliever?

**Dr. Kidd:** Well, here, Christopher is where the principles of justice and my responsibility to be an advocate on your behalf come into play. Part of the beauty of Christian community, especially if you are in submission to a council of elders, and you know there are different ways that churches govern themselves but there should be, in any church, a counsel of wisdom where I can take my situation and go receive wise counsel and protection. The Lord himself will ultimately be my champion and sometimes there is not going to be a human agency, or a brother, or a sister, or a counsel that can come along and come between me and somebody who is doing me wrong. When that's not in place, all I can do is say, "I know that my redeemer lives and on the last day I will see him in the flesh and he will make all things right." But between now and then, where I can find counsel I should go seek counsel, and where I am able to come alongside my brother who is being mistreated and I have the

opportunity, well, I have the responsibility to see that right is done on his or her behalf as best I can.

### Question 16:

#### What does the book of Philemon have to say about guilt and shame?

**Student:** Reggie, what does the book of Philemon have to say about those who are just struggling with guilt or shame because of sin or whatever circumstances in their lives?

**Dr. Kidd:** I think, Wes that Paul has some really helpful things to say about people who are still crippled by the question of how much of the burden for their own sin they carry. Like does God still look at them as guilty? And to people who feel intense shame, like they just feel undressed and embarrassed all the time. I think in the first place of the lovely thing that he does with Onesimus where he sees this man with a new identity, with a name that he couldn't live up to, and now he is invited to see himself as a new person in Christ. He can go to Philemon and offer to make right whatever he can precisely because he knows that God has made things right for him, and that Christ paid a penalty for him. So he can go, not as a guilty person who is wondering if the jury is out on him, but he can go as a redeemed free person who bears no guilt. And he can be, at the heart of who he is, unaffected by whether Philemon responds well or responds poorly because he knows that the one judge who really counts has already brought in a verdict and it's not guilty.

On the matter of shame, which I think is this sense of just feeling just like embarrassed and undressed and dirty like everybody is looking at me and I'm just ugly and I can just never be good enough, there too the whole notion that Onesimus has been renamed and been given a value is above and beyond anything that he could ever imagine for himself. And has been, to go over to Colossians, the letter that was written about the same time, he has been clothed now with the righteousness of Christ and God doesn't look at him in way that would bring him shame.

And another aspect of shame is just not feeling like you belong. You are just totally on your own; you're just totally lonely. You're alone in that you feel like everybody just sees all the ugly but you don't feel like you belong anywhere. The theology that is underlying this is that not only has Christ paid the penalty to take your guilt but he has made you a member of his family. You belong to him. He is your elder brother and you've got a place at his table if at nobody else's. Hopefully Philemon is going to get it and Philemon is going to make a wide spacious place for him back in his house, and will welcome him and lavish love on him. But, the fact is, because Onesimus has been made new, he is not ultimately dependent upon whether Philemon is going to get that or not.

So, I think for those of us who will take the time to go deep into this letter and sit

before it and really consider its implications for who we are, new in Christ, and especially reading it alongside Colossians and Ephesians, there is plenty, there is a world of stuff to be said for those of us who tend to be crippled by feeling like we are still guilty and like there is still an angry judge that is just waiting up there to get us. And Philemon, Colossians, and Ephesians say, “No, there’s not,” and that we are seen as being righteous in Christ, and therefore we can live positively and boldly. We can live out of grace and live out of gratitude and not guilt. And for those of us who just feel like we are ugly, not just guilty but ugly, twisted and good for nothing, this letter, along with Colossians and Ephesians tell us, “Oh no, not only has mercy been extended to us but the welcome mat is there at the Father’s house. And he has given us his name and he has shared his inheritance with us. There is a place at his table for us.”

### **Question 17:**

#### **How does our identity in Christ motivate us to reconcile?**

**Student:** Reggie, Paul seems to be a little ironic, or in an unanticipated way, he seems to say that because your identity is a given that would be motivation to try to reconcile. That seems to be at odds with how things often feel where the offer of an identity motivates you to reconcile. What does Paul want us to carry away from this?

**Dr. Kidd:** Yeah Christopher, I think you are kind of at the heart of the mystery of the way that Paul operates. For him, there is the statement of an indicative. This is what has happened for you. And then, following that indicative there is an imperative. You don’t do your duty in order to make something happen. You do your duty because something wonderful has happened for you. So again, it’s a motivation out of gratitude and not guilt. It’s not in order to get but it’s a motivation that comes out of a gift that has already been given. I’m not sure if that’s what you had in mind or not.

**Student:** It’s just interesting that for the people in this relationship, for Philemon and Onesimus, before the letter was written they probably could have both imagined what the other one should be doing. And Paul doesn’t appeal necessarily to those things at all. Rather he lays out this gospel picture.

**Dr. Kidd:** Yeah, and then asks them both to take their bearings from that and to figure out how the relationship should be different because of that. Not what the other guy should be doing but how I fit into the story of Jesus, and how he is working his design out into my life and the world around me.

It takes a lot of pressure off. It means my responsibility is not so much to worry about you because I can’t control you. My responsibility is to worry about my stewardship of me, my stewardship of what the gospel story means for me, and what the presence of Jesus in my life is. What today’s measure of living in union with him, of stepping

into the death of baptism in him, and the life of coming up out of the waters in him would be. And then letting the Lord go between me and the other person and see if he can bring us together in such a way that I could never do by just trying to control the situation myself.

**Student:** That reminds me of something you mentioned in the other lesson, and that is that those who focus on Christ and things above actually are more effective in their earthly relationships. And this seems to be an example of that principle.

**Dr. Kidd:** Yeah, Christopher, and I think that's why Philemon is such a gift to us, because that great teaching that is there and the letter to the Colossians that could be stuff that you just sort of put up on the mantle piece and say, "Ooh, that's really kind of nice and exalted Christology, you know, a wonderful mindset to have." And miss that even in Colossians, Paul means for that great truth to get worked out in the reality and the stuff of normal life. But it becomes inescapable that we are supposed to work that stuff out in the real stuff of life when we see Philemon coming alongside the instructions to masters and servants. And those matters that even in terms of Colossians, could just be sort of kept at a principal level, they become flesh. You see the wit, you see the subtlety of Paul's argument, you see Paul's willingness to take people way down the road of making responsible situation but then finally saying, "Now you step up and you do the right thing. But not just the right thing, the more than right thing and more than that, for the right reason in light of all the stuff I have said in Colossians." And that's a great point, Christopher.

### Question 18:

#### Should we limit our pursuit of reconciliation with unbelievers?

**Student:** Reggie, we talked about reconciling with unbelievers. What are the limits of reconciliation? What does it look like when we try to reconcile denominations? What does it look like when we work with people who proclaim the name of Christ but aren't living Christianity out? And there are other examples. What are the limits in those circumstances?

**Dr. Kidd:** Thanks, Wesley. It's a great chance to offer some important qualifications here because Paul is dealing with brothers that he believes are in submission to his own teaching. And beyond that, that apostolic truth of Jesus, who he is, what the point of his coming was, the grace that is ours. In reality, as church history has gone on, not only do we see that Augustine's sense that the city of man was just going to become more and more the city of man, more and more a corrupt place that needs the presence of the city of God to be a counter veiling force. The city of God, the people of God are deeply divided on what it is to be confessors of Christ. There is a sad range of willingness to submit to the teaching authority of Paul in the New Testament. There are vast swaths of the church that feel that it's not necessary to confess Orthodox Christianity and have crazy ideas that Paul would and other



apostolic writers would frankly not recognize as being the faith. And that's why we have books like 2 Peter and Jude, so that we understand that we have a responsibility to have a more prophetic stance. When the name of Christ is being claimed and yet the reality is people are not in submission to him and with folks in churches like that we can find ourselves being allies in some moral issues like abortion, slave trafficking, the need for help relief in Africa, and that sort of thing but we're not on the same page in terms of the gospel that we are seeking to proclaim.

### **Question 19:**

#### **Should we limit our pursuit of reconciliation with believers?**

**Student:** How about between true Christians when their relationships become so fractured that they are tempted to lose hope for reconciliation? How does Paul's message to Philemon offer hope? Or what are the limits of that hope for people still living in a fallen world?

**Dr. Kidd:** One of the things, I think, that's helpful to observe is the way Paul walked through difficult relationships. And one in particular that sort of abuts Philemon is the strained relationship between Paul and Barnabas. Going all the way back to the 1<sup>st</sup> missionary journey where Barnabas, who was uncle to John Mark, wanted to take John Mark along on the second missionary journey when John Mark had abandoned the mission on the 1<sup>st</sup> missionary journey. And Paul was not willing to take John Mark along on the 2<sup>nd</sup> missionary journey. The book of Acts was clear there was no small disturbance over how to handle that, and these two brothers, they walked away from each other. And what happened was they didn't force a closure at that point that could only have been painful. They let each other go and my sense would be, they entrusted one another to the Lord and said, "We can't work this out now and yet we're not going to let the mission just come to a halt, we're not going to call each out and force everybody to try to throw one of us out." What happened was that Barnabas took John Mark back to Cyprus where they had gone in the first place in the first missionary journey. And Paul picked up Silas and launched the second missionary journey to the North through Asian Minor. And what happened was because these brothers didn't force the church to come to a conclusion of who was right and who was wrong, they wound up with a ministry that proliferated, so that you had basically two missionary journeys going on at the same time.

It abuts Philemon because in Colossians 4 we find Paul making affectionate remarks about John Mark who was the source of the division among them in the first place. Colossians 4:10... it's interesting because in the previous verse he links this letter up with Onesimus. I'll go back to verse 8, "I've sent Tychicus to you for this very purpose, that you may know how we are and that he may encourage your hearts and with him, Onesimus." So, the scenario here is the estranged slave carrying the letter from Paul back to his master along with this delegation that's bringing the letter to the Colossians, that is the letter to the Colossians to the church in Colossae. "And with



him, Onesimus the faithful and beloved brother who is one of yourselves. They will tell you of everything that has taken place here. Aristarchus,” — now I’m on to verse 10 — “my fellow prisoner greets you and Mark, the cousin of Barnabas concerning whom you have received instructions. If he comes to you, receive him.” The sense that we get here is that there has been, somewhere along the way without there being an explanation of it, some sort of reconciliation. And that now, years later, Paul sees John Mark as being a part of the fellowship, a part of the *koinonia*, a part of the mission. And what is honorable and noble here is that Paul and Barnabas just gave the Lord time to work things out.

**Student:** Well, Reggie, you mentioned that sometimes relationships just take time and that part of managing that is just to trust that God can work in time. It is interesting that you point out that John Mark is mentioned there with Onesimus verse by verse. I bet that also pointed out a lot to Philemon and the church that Paul wasn’t asking them to do something he himself wasn’t modeling.

**Dr. Kidd:** That’s a good point.

### **Question 20:** **How can we rightly interpret God’s providence?**

**Student:** You know Reggie, the circumstances surrounding the book of Philemon with Onesimus’ arrival and his appeal, Paul seems to have been able to understand exactly what to do in this situation and what God seemed to have in mind in terms of his providence. How can we as modern Christians rightly interpret God’s providence and know how to act in certain situations?

**Dr. Kidd:** It’s funny that sometimes you kind of feel like, wouldn’t you love to have Paul alongside you, just to say, “Here’s what’s going on.” Although sometimes when I read how much he can get in your face, I think, well maybe it’s just as well. But yes, what I love about Paul is that here is a guy who is totally alive to what is going on around him and at the same time he is so just because he knows that he is living under heavens that are habituated, that Jesus is sitting on the throne. Paul’s own life is hide with him and Jesus is coming back and he is going to make all things right. The demons, the hosts of the Devil’s minions are pacified. They can’t do anything more than the Lord of glory and Lord of history will allow. And Paul has this sense of everything that happens is in his sovereign hands.

You are right. We don’t have the mind of Christ in the same way that Paul had it because, well, none of us should claim to be an apostle with a capitol “A.” And I get really suspicious when somebody tells me they’ve had the kind of visions that Paul said he had in 2 Corinthians and all that stuff. But Paul does say that we have the mind of Christ and all wisdom has been given to us in Christ and he does so in Colossians. He puts each of us in a place where he has promised to be with us, to be

adequate for us, to not put temptation in front of us that is not common to man from which there is not an escape. And to give us a competency to do which he has called us to do.

The thing that is so remarkable about this cluster of letters: Philemon, Colossians, and Ephesians is that I think he gives us a sense of perspective as we seek to interpret providence. That involves prayer, that involves being in submission to his church under officers who carry out the apostolic prophetic function and who pastor and teach, where we are going to get the challenge to live and love, and in holiness to find counsel so that we can discern what our situation is before God and how we can live in it wisely.

So, it's a great question. And what Paul wants us to do is to see every relationship as an opportunity to live out our new identity in Christ, every situation as being an opportunity to ask the question, "Well, why did the Lord put this particular situation in front of me and how can I see his goodness and his providence even in the things that don't look so good now? And how can I live as one who has had every wrong I've done paid for, every obligation I owe paid for? And then how can he use me to express his desire to bring that same sort of forgiveness, that same sort of healing power, that same sort of reconciling power of relationship, how can I bring that to other people?"

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**Dr. Reggie Kidd (Host)** is Professor of New Testament Emeritus at Reformed Theological Seminary. He received his M.A.R. and M.Div. from Westminster Theological Seminary and his Ph.D. in Christian Origins from Duke University. He is a member of the Evangelical Theological Society and is an ordained priest in The Episcopal Church. Dr. Kidd teaches at the Robert E. Webber Institute for Worship Studies and has served as a pastor and elder at multiple churches. He is the author of *With One Voice: Discovering Christ's Song in Our Worship* (BakerBooks, 2005) and has contributed to many other publications, including *The Spirit of the Reformation Study Bible* (Zondervan, 2003) and *The Reformation Study Bible* (Ligonier Ministries, 2005).

# Paul's Prison Epistles

LESSON  
FIVE

PAUL AND THE  
PHILIPPIANS



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# Paul's Prison Epistles

## Lesson Five

### Paul and the Philippians

#### INTRODUCTION

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When soldiers face the uncertainties of war, their minds often turn toward thoughts of death. They look for ways to find comfort for themselves and to comfort loved ones back home. Often they write letters of thanks and advice, encouraging their loved ones to carry on bravely and to live in ways that will bring them honor.

Well, in many ways, Paul's epistle to the Philippians is like a letter to home from a soldier anticipating that he might die. Paul wrote Philippians at a time when he was suffering greatly, at a time when he wondered if he might soon be killed. And he wrote to people he loved. And so, his words to the Christians in Philippi were heavy but caring, sad yet consoling, appreciative but bittersweet. From Paul's perspective they could well have been his final words of advice and heartfelt thanks to his faithful friends.

This is the fifth lesson in our series *Paul's Prison Epistles*. And we have entitled this lesson "Paul and the Philippians" because we will be examining Paul's letter to the church in Philippi. In this letter, Paul wrote to encourage the Philippians, who were worried about the sufferings he was enduring. As he anticipated the possibility that he might soon die, Paul wrote a letter of hope and encouragement for the times of persecution and distress he and the Philippians faced.

We will divide our study of Paul and the Philippians into three parts: First, we will survey the background of Paul's letter to the Philippians. Second, we'll look closely at the structure and content of Philippians. And third, we will explore the modern application of this letter. Let's begin by looking at the background to Paul's letter to the Philippians.

#### BACKGROUND

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As we have said throughout this series, it is always important to know something about Paul's circumstances, and those of the people to whom he wrote. Knowing these details helps us orient ourselves properly to Paul's message, and to receive it as Paul intended.

So, as we approach Paul's letter to the Philippians, we need to ask questions like: Who were the Philippians? What was happening in their lives and in Paul's life? And why did Paul write to them? The answers to questions like these will help us to understand Paul's authoritative teaching in this letter, and to apply it to our own lives.

As we investigate the background to Paul's epistle to the Philippians, we will focus our attention on three matters: First, we will consider Paul's relationship with the Philippians. Second, we will mention some details of Paul's suffering in prison. And

third, we will explore the conditions in Philippi at the time Paul wrote to them. Let's begin by looking at the relationship between Paul and the church in Philippi.

### RELATIONSHIP

Philippi was an important city in the Roman province of Macedonia, an area that now lies in modern Greece. It lay along the Via Egnatia, the main road connecting the city of Rome to the eastern provinces of its empire. And it possessed a special status with Rome so that it had the same rights as a Roman colony in Italy, and even provided its citizens with Roman citizenship.

Paul had planted the church in Philippi during his second missionary journey somewhere the year A.D. 49 or 50. Before he reached Philippi, he had been ministering in Asia. But then he received a vision of a man begging him to bring the gospel to Macedonia. In response to this vision, Paul sailed for Macedonia, landing in Neapolis, but moving quickly inland to the city of Philippi about 10 miles northwest of Neapolis.

Many of Paul's activities in Philippi are recorded in Acts 16:12-40. For example, it was in Philippi that Paul gained his first convert in Europe, the merchant woman Lydia. And it was in Philippi that he was jailed for an exorcism he performed on a slave girl. This was also where the well-known Philippian jailor professed faith in Christ, because he was so moved by Paul's compassion for him.

Paul's ministry in Philippi was so successful that even when he left the city, the Philippian Christians supported Paul sending him monetary gifts at various times when he was in financial need. Listen to Philippians 4:15-16, where Paul wrote about their generosity:

**When I set out from Macedonia, not one church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving, except you only; for even when I was in Thessalonica, you sent me aid again and again when I was in need (Philippians 4:15-16).**

The church in Philippi loved Paul, and they regularly helped him with financial gifts. According to Philippians 4:10, 18, the Philippians also sent Paul a gift close to the time that he wrote his letter to them. Listen to Paul's words there:

**At last you have renewed your concern for me. Indeed, you have been concerned, but you had no opportunity to show it... I am amply supplied, now that I have received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent (Philippians 4:10, 18).**

Although there were some Philippian believers who appear to have been financially secure, the church as a whole was exceptionally poor, so they were not always able to help Paul financially. But when they had the opportunity, they gave to him generously.

And just as the Philippians loved Paul, he felt strong affection for them as well. He loved them for their commitment to the Lord, and for the way they had been his

partners in gospel ministry. They were his close friends, people whose fellowship he enjoyed and whose presence he missed. Listen to the way he spoke to them in Philippians 1:4-8:

**In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now ... I have you in my heart ... I long for all of you with the affection of Christ Jesus (Philippians 1:4-8).**

In fact, in Philippians 2:12 and 4:1 Paul referred to the Philippians as his “dear friends,” using the Greek word *agapētos*. *Agapētos* is the term Paul commonly used to describe his closest coworkers and beloved friends such as Tychicus, Epaphras, Philemon, Onesimus, and Luke. Paul’s love for the Philippian church appears to have been more particular and specific than his love for many other churches, and it was manifested not only in feelings of belonging and familiarity, but also in a continuing vibrant friendship.

And this should not be surprising. After all, it isn’t hard to imagine that there would be a close bond between Paul and Lydia, his hostess; or between Paul and the jailor, whose life he saved; and perhaps even between Paul and the slave girl whom he rescued from demon possession. In all events, Paul had grown to love the believers in Philippi. And they had the same feelings toward him.

Now that we have seen the caring, supportive relationship between Paul and the Philippians, we should turn to the details of the apostle’s suffering in prison. What was Paul enduring at the time he wrote to the Philippians?

### **SUFFERING IN PRISON**

Throughout his long ministry, Paul often suffered greatly. He was repeatedly whipped, beaten with rods, and hunted by assassins. He was imprisoned many times and once he was even stoned and left for dead. And he did not always bear up well under these hardships. At times, he was depressed, even despairing. For instance, during his third missionary journey, he wrote these words in 2 Corinthians 1:8:

**We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about the hardships we suffered in the province of Asia. We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired even of life (2 Corinthians 1:8).**

Here, Paul described his feeling of being defeated, of temporarily losing hope because of the terrible conditions and circumstances he endured.

Paul knew that life is never truly hopeless, that God is able to rescue us from any trouble. But he was also a human being; he had weaknesses just like ours. And the truth is that sometimes knowing and trusting in God’s sovereignty isn’t enough to keep us from despair. Even Paul struggled. Even Paul wanted to give up. Even Paul felt abandoned.



And as we read the details of his epistle to the Philippians, it seems that he might have been struggling with similar feelings at the very time he wrote to this church that he loved so dearly. His theology anchored him in the truth, encouraged him that God was working for good, even through suffering. But Paul's heart was still heavy, and his sorrow was profound.

In his letter to the Philippians, Paul did not disclose all of the troubles that weighed on his mind. But he did speak of some of them, and he revealed the collective impact all his troubles were having on his state of mind. For instance, he spoke frequently of death as a welcome relief from his suffering. For example, in Philippians 3:10, he wrote these words:

**I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death (Philippians 3:10).**

In this verse, Paul revealed that his present suffering was so great that his best hope for escape was death. And he saw his present sufferings as the means to his death. And in Philippians 1:20, Paul explained his perspective in this way:

**I eagerly expect and hope that I will in no way be ashamed, but will have sufficient courage so that now as always Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death (Philippians 1:20).**

Paul lacked courage at this point, but he hoped that he would gain it before he was tested. His concern was to honor Christ — either by withstanding the test gracefully, or by dying with dignity and resolve, not abandoning his confession of faith. And immediately after this, Paul expressed his desire to die with these words:

**For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. If I am to go on living in the body, this will mean fruitful labor for me... I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far (Philippians 1:21-23).**

At the time he wrote this, Paul wanted to die. But usually he wanted to live, and to preach — to carry the gospel to new places and peoples, to bring salvation to the world.

Now, under normal circumstances, Christians should not want to die. Yes, at our deaths we will be with the Lord, and we should look forward to this, but not so much that we embrace death as a friend. We were created for life, and the Scriptures teach that death is a curse. Paul himself called death an “enemy” in 1 Corinthians 15:26. But at this point in Paul's life, his circumstances were so oppressive that the benefits of being with Christ outweighed his desire to continue in ministry, as well as his hatred for death itself.

But Paul did not just imply his troubled state of mind through his desire for death. He also stated it explicitly in several different places. For example, in Philippians 2:27-28, he spoke of Epaphroditus' recovery from illness in these terms:

**[Epaphroditus] was ill, and almost died. But God had mercy on him, and not on him only but also on me, to spare me sorrow upon sorrow. Therefore I am all the more eager to send him, so that when you see him again you may be glad and I may have less anxiety (Philippians 2:27-28).**

Epaphroditus' death would have added more sorrow to the sorrow Paul already felt. And even though Epaphroditus' return to Philippi would reduce Paul's anxiety, it would not eliminate it.

Perhaps the best explanation for Paul's sorrow and anxiety and for his statements about death is that at this point his life was in serious jeopardy. As we saw in a prior lesson, he may have written this letter from Rome or from Caesarea Maritima. If he wrote from Rome, it may be that he expected Caesar to condemn him. And if he wrote from Caesarea Maritima, he may have been worried about the Jewish plan to assassinate him. But whatever the impending threat, Paul seems to have been contemplating the real possibility that he would die soon.

For instance, in Philippians 1:20 he wrote hopefully; "Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death." And in 1:20 he indicated that he might have a choice of dying, writing, "If I am to go on living in the body, this will mean fruitful labor for me. Yet what shall I choose?" In 2:17 he spoke of the possibility that he was "being poured out like a drink offering." And in 3:10 he suggested that his current sharing in the sufferings of Christ might well lead to Paul "becoming like Christ in his death."

But Paul was not absolutely convinced that he would die. Elsewhere in this letter, he expressed the hope that he would survive. For example, in Philippians 1:25 he wrote, "I know that I will remain," indicating an expectation that he would live to continue ministering to the Philippians.

Paul was not absolutely sure what would happen to him. On the one hand, he knew that his death was a real possibility, and so he tried to prepare his friends in Philippi for the worst. On the other hand, he had some level of expectation that he would survive, and so he encouraged them to hope for the best. But whatever the future held for him, at the time he wrote this letter he was suffering greatly so that he struggled with sorrow and apprehension.

Having looked at Paul's relationship with the Philippians and his suffering in prison, we should now explore the conditions that existed in Philippi at the time of Paul's letter to them. What circumstances did they face that required Paul's attention and exhortation?

## **CONDITIONS IN PHILIPPI**

Paul addressed many conditions in the church in Philippi, but we will focus on just two matters: the Philippian church's concern for Paul, and the internal and external problems that existed for the church in Philippi. Let's begin by mentioning the Philippians' concern for Paul.

## Concern for Paul

As a whole, the church in Philippi had a strong, loving relationship with the apostle Paul. And when they heard about his sufferings in prison, they were dismayed and worried about him. So, as soon as they were able, they demonstrated their concern by sending a gift to meet Paul's earthly needs, and by dispatching Epaphroditus to deliver the gift to Paul and to minister to him in prison. Paul mentioned this gift in Philippians 4:18, writing this note of thanks:

**I have received full payment and even more; I am amply supplied, now that I have received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent. They are a fragrant offering, an acceptable sacrifice, pleasing to God (Philippians 4:18).**

As we have mentioned, the Philippians were not wealthy, so this gift constituted a significant sacrifice on their part. But they sent it eagerly because they were so concerned about Paul's well-being. And as we read in Philippians 2:25, the Philippian church also sent Epaphroditus to minister to Paul in prison. Listen to Paul's words there:

**It is necessary to send back to you Epaphroditus ... who is also your messenger, whom you sent to take care of my needs (Philippians 2:25).**

Apparently, Epaphroditus also delivered a report to Paul expressing the Philippians' fears that Paul was being persecuted by other believers and that a threat of death hung over his head. And in his letter to them, Paul confirmed that the Philippians' had properly understood his circumstances, and expressed appreciation for their concern.

For example, in Philippians 1:15-17, he admitted that certain preachers of the gospel were troubling him. He described his situation with these words:

**Some preach Christ out of envy and rivalry ... out of selfish ambition, not sincerely, supposing that they can stir up trouble for me while I am in chains (Philippians 1:15-17).**

In fact, one of the reasons Paul felt so sorrowful was that so few of the believers around him, including Christian leaders, truly dedicated their hearts to gospel ministry. Listen to his words to this effect in Philippians 2:21:

**Everyone looks out for his own interests, not those of Jesus Christ (Philippians 2:21).**

In short, the Philippians were justified in their concern for Paul at this time. Paul's troubles were great, and his support was thin.

But the Philippians weren't simply concerned about the fact that Paul was suffering. They were also worried that he might die, whether through assassination or public execution. And these fears were justified. As we have seen in prior lessons, the Jews had attempted to assassinate Paul more than once, and the crime of which he was

accused was punishable by death. So, out of deep concern for the apostle, the Philippians devoted themselves to prayer on Paul's behalf. Paul thanked them for their prayers in Philippians 1:19-20, with these words of encouragement:

**I know that through your prayers and the help given by the Spirit of Jesus Christ, what has happened to me will turn out for my deliverance. I eagerly expect and hope that ... Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death (Philippians 1:19-20).**

Paul was grateful for the Philippians' prayers and assured them that even death would be a welcomed form of deliverance from his suffering.

Having considered the Philippians' concern for Paul's well-being, we should now look at some of the problems that existed for the church there, stemming from a variety of sources.

## **Problems for the Church**

The church in Philippi faced at least three types of problems: First, they appear to have faced persecution from those outside the church. Second, they were threatened by the possibility of false teaching similar to that which had infiltrated other churches. And third, they struggled with conflicts between one another in the church. Paul mentioned the persecution they were undergoing in Philippians 1:27-30, writing these words:

**Stand firm in one spirit, contending as one man for the faith of the gospel without being frightened in any way by those who oppose you... For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ ... to suffer for him, since you are going through the same struggle you saw I had, and now hear that I still have (Philippians 1:27-30).**

Some years earlier, just after he had planted the church in Philippi, Paul had encountered great resistance from Jews in the neighboring Macedonian city of Thessalonica. And as we read in Acts 17:5-13, these angry Jews accused Paul and the other believers of violating Roman law. As a result, Paul was forced to flee the city by night to avoid further persecution by Jews, as well as arrest by the civil government. These Thessalonian Jews were so zealous that they pursued Paul even to the city of Berea. So, it is reasonable to think that these same Jews, or others like them, also troubled the church in Philippi and perhaps roused the local government against the church as well. But whatever the specific nature of the persecution in Philippi, it is at least clear that the church was truly suffering at the hands of unbelievers.

A second problem faced by the Philippian church was the threat of false teaching. Now, it appears that false teaching had not yet deeply influenced the church in Philippi, since Paul did not confront it directly. But he did prepare the Philippians to reject any false teaching that might reach their city. Consider Paul's words about circumcision in Philippians 3:1-3:

**It is no trouble for me to write the same things to you again, and it is a safeguard for you. Watch out for those dogs, those men who do evil, those mutilators of the flesh. For it is we who are the circumcision (Philippians 3:1-3).**

Paul was concerned that false teachers who advocated abuses of circumcision might trouble the Philippian church. He also condemned false teaching in Philippians 3:18-19:

**Many live as enemies of the cross of Christ. Their destiny is destruction, their god is their stomach, and their glory is in their shame. Their mind is on earthly things (Philippians 3:18-19).**

Paul's language here might describe any number of false teachings, including such things as dietary asceticism and improper use of Old Testament dietary laws.

Now these types of false teachings might have come from two sources. On the one hand, Paul may have been concerned about the heresies that had threatened the churches in Colosse and the other cities of the Lycus Valley.

As we mentioned in a prior lesson, these false teachings in the Lycus Valley combined Christian teachings with elements from Greek philosophy, asceticism, and corruptions of Jewish law. For example, Paul specifically associated this false teaching with an abusive use of circumcision in Colossians 2:11-12, as well as with dietary asceticism in Colossians 2:20-23.

On the other hand, he may have been worried about Christian Judaizers from Jerusalem such as those he had written against long ago in Galatians 2:11-21, and more recently in Romans 4:9-17. It is possible that he also ran into conflict with them during the trip to Jerusalem that resulted in his present imprisonment. Like the false teachers in the Lycus Valley, the Judaizers also abused circumcision and diet, forcing Gentile believers to adhere to outmoded forms of adherence to the Old Testament law.

Lastly, besides troubles with persecution and false teaching, the Philippians struggled with conflicts among believers within the church. Paul addressed these conflicts in general terms in Philippians 2:1-3 with this exhortation:

**If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any fellowship with the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion ... [be] like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose. Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves (Philippians 2:1-3).**

And in Philippians 4:2 he exhorted two women who seem to have been unable to resolve their differences, writing these words:

**I plead with Euodia and I plead with Syntyche to agree with each other in the Lord (Philippians 4:2).**

Now, the internal conflicts in Philippi did not warrant harsh discipline. Still, they were disruptive, unproductive and sinful. Self-centered, unloving conflict is never acceptable in the church. So, Paul spent a substantial amount of space emphasizing the importance of unity and love in the church.

Now that we have looked at the background to Philippians, we are ready to consider our second topic: the structure and content of Paul's canonical letter to the church in Philippi.

## STRUCTURE AND CONTENT

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As we consider the structure and content of Paul's letter to the Philippians, we will divide the letter into six main sections: the salutation in 1:1-2; a section of thanksgiving in 1:3-8; Paul's prayer for the Philippians in 1:9-11; the main body of the letter in 1:12-4:20; and Paul's final greetings in 4:21-23. Let's begin with the salutation in verses 1 and 2.

### SALUTATION

The salutation in 1:1-2 identifies Paul as the primary author of the letter and states that the letter also comes from Timothy. Throughout this letter, Paul consistently referred to himself in the singular using the words such as "I" rather than "we." And in Philippians 2:19 and 22 he referred to Timothy in the third person.

The salutation of Philippians is somewhat different from those in most of Paul's other letters because it does not mention Paul's apostleship. Only 1 and 2 Thessalonians and Philemon share this distinction. But all three of these other letters do mention Paul's apostolic authority outside their salutations. Only in Philippians do we find an entire letter in which Paul never calls explicit attention to his apostolic authority.

Now, this does not imply that Paul's letter to the Philippians lacks apostolic authority. Rather, it is a testimony to his relationship with the Philippians, to their high regard for Paul, and to their eagerness to please the Lord. Not once did Paul have to remind them of his office and authority.

Following the salutation, Paul moves to a section of thanksgiving in 1:3-8. This move from salutation to thanksgiving is consistent with the form Paul followed in most of his other canonical letters, Galatians and Titus being the only exceptions.

### THANKSGIVING

The first part of Paul's thanksgiving, found in Philippians 1:3-6, presents a fairly standard statement of thanks, speaking of the joy the Philippians have brought to Paul and of his expectations for their ultimate salvation.

But Philippians 1:7-8 are rather unique in Paul's thanksgivings, emphasizing the depth of his love for the Philippians. Listen to his words there:

**It is right for me to feel this way about all of you, since I have you in my heart... God can testify how I long for all of you with the affection of Christ Jesus (Philippians 1:7-8).**

These verses indicate that Paul's relationship with the Philippians was deeply personal and heartfelt.

### **PRAYER**

Following his thanksgiving, Paul offered a prayer for the Philippians in 1:9-11. This prayer is fairly brief, but it is packed with statements that reflect the emphases of the entire letter.

Essentially, Paul prayed that the Philippians would express their Christian love by living in ways that honored God. First, he prayed that they would have the discernment necessary to make proper judgments. Second, he prayed that this discernment would lead them to perform good works, and to persevere in faith and practice until Christ's return in judgment. Finally, he prayed that the Philippians' would bring glory and praise to God through their good works and perseverance.

After his prayer, Paul turned to the main body of his epistle to the Philippians found in 1:12–4:20. This section has been outlined in various ways by different scholars. But in this lesson, our outline will primarily follow the logical flow of Paul's encouragements and instructions to the Philippian church.

### **BODY**

When Paul wrote to the Philippians, he was suffering greatly, and his very life was in jeopardy. As a result, he was beset by troubles and anxiety. We might even describe him as despairing. And it was from this mindset that he wrote to the believers in Philippi.

Paul knew these might be his final words to them. So, he expressed his deep feelings for them, letting them know how much he loved them, and how thankful he was for their friendship and ministry. And he also offered final words of wisdom, teaching them to deal with adversity in ways that would honor God.

Keeping in mind this overarching perspective on Philippians, we can discern the following order to his thoughts in the body of this letter: first, a description of Paul's perseverance in prison in 1:12-26; second, his exhortations to the Philippians to persevere in 1:27–4:9; and third, Paul's affirmation of the Philippians' perseverance in 4:10-20. We will take a closer look at each of these sections, beginning with Paul's perseverance in prison in 1:12-26.

## Paul's Perseverance

Paul persevered in prison not by denying his suffering, and not by embracing it, but by finding reasons to be joyful despite his suffering. And he took the time to explain and defend his joy in order to encourage the Philippians to stop worrying about him. He appreciated their concern, but did not want them to be distressed about his circumstances.

In this section of the letter, he focused on three sources of the joy he found in the midst of his sorrow: the success of his present ministry in verses 12-18a; his hope for future deliverance in verses 18b-21; and his anticipation of future ministry in verses 22-26. Paul explained that by focusing on these good things, he was better able to endure his hardships.

For example, in verses 12-18a, he explained that even though he was suffering in prison, he was happy that his present ministry continued to thrive. Listen to his account in Philippians 1:17-18:

**[Some] preach Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely, supposing that they can stir up trouble for me while I am in chains. But what does it matter? The important thing is that in every way, whether from false motives or true, Christ is preached. And because of this I rejoice (Philippians 1:17-18).**

In part, Paul suffered because spiteful evangelists created trouble for him. But even though they harmed him personally, he rejoiced in the fact that they preached the true gospel.

Paul also found joy in his hope for future deliverance, which he described in verses 18b-21. He focused on the possibility that he might eventually be released from prison. But as we have said, during this time, Paul's suffering was so severe that even death would have been a welcomed relief. And so, he was encouraged by the hope that his suffering would be relieved, whether by his acquittal or by his death. He described his perspective in Philippians 1:18-21:

**Yes, and I will continue to rejoice, for I know that ... what has happened to me will turn out for my deliverance... whether by life or by death. For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain (Philippians 1:18-21).**

In one sense, the threat of death troubled Paul greatly. But in another sense, he was able to see past his death to the joy that would be his in the presence of Christ in heaven. And by focusing on release and heaven, Paul was able to find a degree of joy in the midst of his troubles.

In much the same way, in Philippians 1:22-26, Paul also looked to the possibility of a future ministry to the Philippians as a source of joy. Listen to his encouragements in Philippians 1:25-26:



**I will continue with all of you for your progress and joy in the faith, so that through my being with you again your joy in Christ Jesus will overflow on account of me (Philippians 1:25-26).**

The Philippians loved Paul, so they would have been relieved to hear that he still hoped to live. And he loved them too, and took comfort and satisfaction from the thought of their prosperity in Christ.

## **Exhortations to Persevere**

After using his perseverance in prison to encourage the Philippians not to worry about him, Paul included a long section of exhortations for the Philippians also to persevere in Philippians 1:27–4:9. Here Paul instructed them to remain faithful to Christ and to live exemplary lives even in the midst of distressing circumstances.

Our treatment of Paul's exhortations will discuss the following four main topics: the importance of perseverance in 1:27–2:18; the help for perseverance that ministers provide in 2:19-30; Paul's own example of perseverance in 3:1-16; and finally, his instructions regarding challenges to perseverance in 3:17–4:9. First, let's look what Paul said about the importance of perseverance in Christian faith and practice.

In Philippians 1:27-29, Paul acknowledged the Philippians' struggles with hardship and encouraged them with these words:

**Stand firm in one spirit, contending as one man for the faith of the gospel without being frightened in any way by those who oppose you... For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ ... to suffer for him (Philippians 1:27-29).**

The Philippians' sufferings were distressing and painful. But they were not beyond God's control. On the contrary, God himself had planned their suffering as a means of blessing them. And therefore, it was vital that they persevered through these difficult times, both by maintaining their faith and by living righteously.

As we have seen in other lessons, Jesus' work of suffering will not be finished until he returns. In the meantime, he completes his appointed suffering through the church. Because believers are in union with Christ, when we suffer, Jesus suffers. And from Paul's perspective this was not just a means of completing Christ's appointed sufferings, it was also a badge of honor.

As we just read in Philippians 1:27-29, God had not just "permitted" the Philippians to suffer — he had "granted" them to suffer. Paul unpacked this idea in Philippians 2:5-9, where he wrote these words:

**Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus ... he humbled himself and became obedient to death — even death on a cross! Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name (Philippians 2:5-9).**

Jesus willingly endured suffering and mistreatment in order to benefit the church, and his reward for this sacrifice was immeasurably great. In the same way, believers should humbly endure suffering and mistreatment in order to benefit the church. And when we do, our reward will also be great. This was why Paul could write these words in Philippians 2:17-18:

**Even if I am being poured out like a drink offering on the sacrifice and service coming from your faith, I am glad and rejoice with all of you. So you too should be glad and rejoice with me (Philippians 2:17-18).**

Paul did not just want the Philippians to endure their appointed suffering, but to rejoice in the midst of it because of the blessings it produces. Moreover, he wanted them to rejoice in the blessings that would result from his own sufferings, just as he rejoiced in the blessings that flowed from their sufferings.

Paul encouraged believers to focus on the rewards of suffering in order that they would have the strength and courage to persevere in faith and holy living, even under great duress. After all, if they did not endure, they would not gain the blessings suffering could provide.

After stressing the importance of perseverance and inspiring them with its blessings, Paul offered the Philippians practical help for perseverance through the hardships they were enduring by sending ministers to care for them.

Paul knew that his letter would teach the Philippians how to handle suffering. But he also understood that it is much easier to endure suffering when we have real people helping us on a daily basis and suffering right alongside us. So, Paul determined that along with his letter, he would also send his friends to minister to the Philippians in their time of need.

First, Paul planned to send Epaphroditus, the Philippians' own messenger who had originally come to minister to Paul. It is likely that Epaphroditus was the one who actually delivered Paul's letter to the Philippians. As we learn in Philippians 2:25-30, the church in Philippi was worried about Epaphroditus because he had fallen ill, and Epaphroditus was concerned because they were so worried. So, Paul sent Epaphroditus back to them in order to ease their minds as well as to minister to them.

Next, Paul planned to send Timothy to Philippi. For the time being, he remained with Paul in prison, ministering to the apostle during his distress. But as we read in Philippians 2:19, Paul expected to be able to send him to help the Philippians in the near future.

Finally, Paul hoped that eventually he himself would be released from prison and would come to minister to the Philippians. He expressed this expectation in Philippians 2:24, where he wrote these words:

**I am confident in the Lord that I myself will come soon (Philippians 2:24).**

The Greek word *pepoitha*, here translated "confident," is probably better rendered "persuaded." Paul was hopeful about his release, but he was not certain of it.

In all events, Paul knew that sympathetic human beings would be extremely valuable to the church in Philippi as it struggled under the weight of hardships. So, he set out a schedule that would provide them with skilled and loving ministers on a regular basis.

In the next section of exhortations, found in Philippians 3:1-16, Paul offered himself as a positive example of perseverance in the faith, both with regard to his mindset and behavior.

Specifically, Paul explained that when he had come to faith in Christ he had ceased to rely on earthly standards to gain God's favor and blessing and had begun to rely solely on Christ. But this was not because he failed to measure up to earthly standards. On the contrary, by earthly standards Paul should have been among God's most highly favored. Listen to the description of his credentials in Philippians 3:4-6:

**If anyone else thinks he has reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for legalistic righteousness, faultless (Philippians 3:4-6).**

If any mere human being could have merited God's blessings by keeping the law, it was Paul.

But the truth of the matter is that no fallen human being can be good enough to merit God's blessings of salvation and eternal life. And so, Paul refused to rely on his earthly merits and depended only on Christ's merit, which God credited to him by means of faith.

At the same time, he also made it clear that merely professing faith is not sufficient to guarantee our salvation. On the contrary, we must also persevere in faith in order to obtain eternal life. We must maintain our faith, and we must live holy lives, or else we prove our faith to be false.

This is why he placed so much emphasis on perseverance in Philippians 3:12-16, writing about salvation in Christ in these terms:

**Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me... I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus... Only let us live up to what we have already attained (Philippians 3:12-16).**

Professing faith is not enough; we must prove our faith by persevering. And if we do not persevere to the end, maintaining our faith in Christ for our salvation, and remaining faithful to him in godly living, we prove that our faith was false.

Paul's final exhortations pertained to the challenges to perseverance, which he addressed in Philippians 3:17-4:9. These exhortations are primarily applications of his exhortation that the Philippians follow his example of perseverance.

In addressing the challenges to perseverance, Paul encouraged the Philippians not to allow false teachers, or conflict within the church, or personal hardship to cause them to falter in their faithfulness to God. And he began by focusing on the ways that false teaching could invade the church and threaten its perseverance. Listen to Philippians 3:18-19, where he wrote this harsh condemnation:

**Many live as enemies of the cross of Christ. Their destiny is destruction, their god is their stomach, and their glory is in their shame. Their mind is on earthly things (Philippians 3:18-19).**

Clearly these enemies of the cross of Christ were not believers. Nevertheless, they were in a position to threaten the church, perhaps because they spoke persuasively, or because they were influential in the church.

In any case, Paul insisted that believers reject the false teachings of Christ's enemies, persevering in pure Christian faith and practice. The desire to avoid trouble and suffering was not a sufficient reason to lose faith in the gospel, and persuasive arguments were no substitute for the power of the Lord.

But Paul also warned that true believers within the church could present challenges to the perseverance to other believers. As one example of this, he mentioned a problem that existed between Euodia and Syntyche. Listen to his words in Philippians 4:1-3:

**Therefore ... stand firm in the Lord, dear friends! I plead with Euodia and ... Syntyche to agree with each other in the Lord... [L]oyal yokefellow, help these women who have contended at my side in the cause of the gospel (Philippians 4:1-3).**

By this conflict, Euodia and Syntyche were failing to stand firm in holy living, and by their influence they also threatened the perseverance of other believers in Philippi.

And lastly, Paul exhorted the Philippians not to allow individual hardship to hinder their perseverance. He encouraged them to adopt a joyful perspective, and not to allow anxiety to discourage them. His thoughts are represented well by these words from Philippians 4:4-7:

**Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! ... Do not be anxious about anything, but ... present your requests to God. And the peace of God ... will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus (Philippians 4:4-7).**

Paul's practical instruction was that believers should ask God to relieve their anxieties. In some cases, God might do this by eliminating the troubling circumstances. But it would appear that in most cases, Paul expected the change to be one of heart and mind, of attitude and perspective.

## Affirmation of Perseverance

Finally, in 4:10-20 Paul closed the body of this letter with a few words affirming the Philippians' perseverance in faith and Christian living, especially through their continued ministry to Paul himself.

In this section, Paul thanked the Philippians for the money they had sent to relieve his suffering in prison. Paul's thank-you note assured them that he had received the money and that it had helped to improve his conditions. But the greatest value the money had for Paul seems to have been emotional. Listen to his words in Philippians 4:12-14:

**I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want... Yet it was good of you to share in my troubles (Philippians 4:12-14).**

The money probably alleviated some of Paul's suffering, but his contentment came from God. The real value these funds had was in touching Paul's heart. Through their sacrifice on his behalf, these impoverished Christians had let Paul know how much they truly loved him.

The Philippians could not have demonstrated their love for Paul at a better time. At this point, Paul's imprisonment was weighing heavily on him. He was suffering and despairing. Imagine how comforting it must have been for him to be reminded that so many people loved him and wanted to share in his sufferings!

One even has to wonder if it was the Philippians that helped Paul conquer his despair. Was it their concern that restored his hope? Was it their love that inspired his decision to rejoice in the midst of his terrible circumstances? Was it their friendship that reminded Paul he was neither forgotten nor alone? One thing is sure: Paul loved the Philippians with all his heart. So, their gift could not have done anything but encourage him.

## FINAL GREETINGS

Lastly, the letter closes with Paul's final greetings in Philippians 4:21-23. This section is fairly standard, although one aspect of these final greetings deserves special comment.

Specifically, in Philippians 4:22, Paul sent greetings from the saints who belonged to Caesar's household. In the ancient world, Caesar's household included his family members and servants, whether or not they lived in the palace with him. And his servants were not limited to laborers; they also included his personal bodyguards, as well as many civil servants.

Now, the mention of Caesar's household has caused many Bible interpreters to conclude that Paul wrote from Rome, where Caesar lived and governed an actual household. But we should not draw this conclusion too hastily. The fact is, all of Caesar's civil servants and guards around the empire were reckoned as part of his household, including those stationed in Caesarea Maritima.

Whatever the case, the mention of believers within Caesar's household demonstrates that Paul's imprisonment had not hindered his gospel ministry. On the contrary, Paul had continued to gain disciples, even among his jailors.

Having explored the background to Paul's epistle to the Philippians as well as its structure and content, we are now in a position to consider the modern application of Paul's teachings in this letter.

## MODERN APPLICATION

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Needless to say, the epistle to the Philippians can be applied to our modern lives in many different ways. But in this lesson we have focused on Paul's attempt to encourage others as he faced what might have been his last days on earth. From this perspective, one theme comes to the foreground: Paul's encouragement to the Philippians to persevere — to continue walking faithfully before God. As we consider what Philippians means for us today, we will give our attention to this aspect of his letter.

As we think about the implications of Paul's epistle to the Philippians for modern Christian life, we will explore three aspects of Christian perseverance: First, we will address the nature of perseverance. Second, we will deal with the mindset of perseverance. And third, we will discuss the church's ministry of perseverance. Let's turn first to the nature of perseverance.

### NATURE OF PERSEVERANCE

In Philippians, Paul's teachings on perseverance are most easily understood in terms of three main factors: the definition of perseverance; the necessity of perseverance; and the assurance of perseverance. So, let's begin by looking at Paul's definition of perseverance.

#### Definition

Paul conceived of perseverance in terms of the twin ideas of true faith and righteous living. On the one hand, perseverance is maintaining our faith in the gospel of Christ, relying on his merit alone for our righteous standing before God. Paul wrote of this in Philippians 1:27, where he expressed his hope for the Philippians with these words:

**Stand firm in one spirit, contending as one man for the faith of the gospel (Philippians 1:27).**

As believers, we must remain steadfast in our commitment to the gospel, never giving up our beliefs. This is what we mean when we speak of persevering in faith.

True faith in the gospel of Christ can be described in many ways, but listen to one central focus of Christian faith as Paul described it in Philippians 3:8-9:

**I consider [everything] rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ — the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith (Philippians 3:8-9).**

In this passage, Paul indicated that all his human status and good works were useless for obtaining true righteousness and salvation. The only thing that could gain salvation for him was the righteousness of Christ, applied to Paul by means of faith.

So long as we continue to rely solely on Christ's merit for our righteousness, we are persevering — standing firm in our faith. Now, this is not to say that perseverance never admits to doubts. Rather, the point is that persevering faith never utterly and finally denies the truth of the gospel. Moreover, having true Christian faith does not mean that we have perfect theology. We may have many, many errors in our theology and still be faithful to the fundamental tenets of the gospel. But once we no longer believe the central truth that we are saved by Christ and Christ alone, then we truly fail to persevere.

In addition to defining perseverance in terms of true faith, Paul also spoke of perseverance as righteous living, as persistence in doing good and praiseworthy works. For instance, in Philippians 2:12-13, he spoke this way:

**Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed ... continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose (Philippians 2:12-13).**

Here Paul talked about continuing in good works, acting in ways that accord with salvation. Now, perseverance in good works does not mean that we live perfectly. We will never reach perfection in this life, and sometimes we stumble in serious ways. Rather, we persevere in good works when we strive to obey Christ faithfully.

## **Necessity**

Now, Paul did not want believers to understand just the definition of perseverance; he also wanted us to understand the necessity of perseverance both in faith and life, in order to obtain salvation, so that we would actually be motivated to persevere. Listen to Paul's words in Philippians 3:8-11:

**I consider [everything] rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ ... and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead (Philippians 3:8-11).**

Simply put, Paul taught that if we fail to maintain true faith, we will not be found in Christ, so that we will not be resurrected to a life of eternal glory. In other words, perseverance in faith is necessary for our final salvation.

Similarly, in Philippians 2:14-16, he offered this exhortation regarding righteous living:

**Do everything without complaining or arguing, so that you may become blameless and pure, children of God without fault in a crooked and depraved generation ... in order that I may boast on the day of Christ that I did not run or labor for nothing (Philippians 2:14-16).**

By avoiding complaining and arguing — that is, by living righteously — the Philippians could become blameless and pure, so that Paul would have reason to boast in his ministry. But if they failed to persevere, they would demonstrate that they were not children of God, that they did not truly trust in Christ and they would not be saved on the last day. And the same is true for us: if we do not persevere in righteous living, we prove ourselves to be unbelievers, and we will not be saved.

To many of us, Paul's teachings on the definition and necessity of perseverance might sound daunting or even harsh. But Paul's doctrine also had a third aspect that is quite encouraging, namely, assurance of perseverance. And in light of assurance, Paul's teachings on perseverance are not a threat to believers, but a comfort.

## **Assurance**

Paul assured the Philippians that every true believer will certainly persevere in both faith and righteous living, so that our salvation is guaranteed. It is still true that many falsely profess faith and actually do fail to persevere. But these are people who never truly had saving faith in the first place. Those whose faith is true, on the other hand, possess the Holy Spirit, who works in them to guarantee their perseverance. Listen to Paul's words in Philippians 1:6:

**[I am] confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus (Philippians 1:6).**

Paul was certain that if God had begun to save the Philippians, he would also finish saving the Philippians. He would not allow any of them to perish, but would cause all true believers to persevere until the day of Christ Jesus. And Paul's confidence should be our confidence too. If we truly believe, there is no way that we can fall from faith or from grace. Paul confirmed this idea in Philippians 2:13, where he gave this encouragement:



**Continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose (Philippians 2:12-13).**

The fear we are to have is not the terror that we might finally fall from grace, but overwhelming awe at the realization that God Almighty is working within each of us to ensure that we think and do what he wants. He controls our hearts and minds for his good purpose, which includes our perseverance so that there is no way we can fail to stand firm until the end.

## **MINDSET OF PERSEVERANCE**

Now that we have investigated the nature of perseverance, we are in a position to discuss the mindset of perseverance that believers should adopt. In our discussion, we will focus on three aspects of our mindset that Paul emphasized in his epistle to the Philippians: humility, optimism, and joy. Let's look first at Paul's idea that our mindset should be based in humility.

### **Humility**

As an authoritative apostle of the Lord Jesus Christ, Paul had every opportunity to be arrogant. God had supernaturally trained Paul for leadership; he had chosen Paul above all others to carry the gospel to the Gentiles, and he had performed many miracles through him as well. In churches all over the world Paul was revered as a hero.

So, when he was suffering in prison, he could have been tempted to think, "Why has God let this happen to me, of all people? I have been utterly faithful to him, and yet he refuses to bless me! I deserve better!" But challenging God's goodness is foolish and wrong. But Paul knew that, in truth, he had every reason to be humble before God. And by accepting this fact, he prepared himself to be built up by God and to persevere through the hardships he faced.

In this regard, Paul patterned his own mindset after the mindset of Jesus, who willingly humbled himself in order to obtain God's blessing for himself and for us. In fact, it was in support of his exhortations to be humble that Paul included his famous "Christ hymn," found in Philippians 2:6-11.

Some scholars have suggested that these verses constitute a hymn that was known in the church even before Paul wrote his letter to the Philippians. Others suspect that Paul wrote these verses specifically for this occasion. But whatever their source, the meaning of these verses is clear: Jesus is humble, and we are to pattern ourselves after him.

This passage describes Christ during three stages of history: his pre-incarnate state, his humiliation, and his exaltation. First, Paul spoke of Christ's condition before he took on flesh. At that time, Christ existed as God the Son, living in perfect union with the Father and the Holy Spirit, being equal to them in power and glory. Paul described Christ's pre-incarnate state in Philippians 2:6, where he wrote these words:

**[Christ], being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped (Philippians 2:6).**

This verse tells us at least two things about Christ: First, before he became a human being, Christ was glorious. Or as Paul put it, Christ had the "nature" or "form" of God. The Greek word Paul used was *morphē*, which generally refers to one's outward shape. Now, of course, Paul did not just mean that Christ looked like God. Rather, his outward appearance testified to the underlying reality that Christ actually *was* God.

Second, Paul indicated that Christ was humble. Even before he demonstrated this humility, the preexistent son made it known by his willingness to take on an additional form or nature — that of our humanity. Specifically, Paul wrote that Christ "did not consider equality with God something to be grasped." Here, Paul used the word *isos* to refer to Christ's "equality" or "sameness" with God. His meaning was that Christ's "form" or "outward glory" was the same as the glory exhibited by God the Father, but that Christ was willing to let go of the glory of his rightful heavenly standing in order to please the Father and purchase our salvation.

Next, Paul described Christ's humiliation, which is the period of his earthly life, beginning with his conception in Mary's womb and extending to his death on the cross. Listen to Paul's words about Christ's humiliation in Philippians 2:7-8:

**[Christ] made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death — even death on a cross! (Philippians 2:7-8).**

Corresponding to Paul's words about Christ's pre-incarnation, these verses tell us at least two things about Christ during his state of humiliation. First, Christ's humiliation was inglorious. That is, the Son of God put aside his divine glory in order to take the nature or form of a human being. Again, Paul used the Greek word *morphē* to indicate that Christ had exchanged his outward form so that he no longer exhibited divine glory, but instead exhibited the plain exterior of a human being.

Now, just as Christ's divine form indicated that he was truly and fully divine, his human form indicated that he was truly and fully human. But it is important to realize that in becoming human, Christ did not give up any of his divine attributes. Rather, he simply added a complete human nature to his complete divine nature, so that he is rightly said to be both fully human and fully divine.

Second, Philippians 2:7-8 confirm that Christ was humble. Just as he had been willing to put off his glorious form during the pre-incarnate period, he actually did put off this form during the time of his humiliation. In fact, his humility was so extreme that he permitted himself to be murdered by the very creatures whose form he had taken as his own.

Lastly, Paul described Christ during the stage of his exaltation, which began with his resurrection from the dead and ascension into heaven, and continues now in his rule over creation. Paul wrote of Christ's exaltation in Philippians 2:9-11, describing it in these terms:

**God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father (Philippians 2:9-11).**

Again, Paul indicated at least two very important things about Christ during this stage: First, Christ regained his glorious form, being exalted as the ruler of the universe, to whom every creature bowed in submission and worship. Second, Christ continued to be humble, even in this exalted, glorious state of universal sovereignty. After all, even his rule over creation was not intended to glorify himself, but to bring glory to the Father.

Now, Paul presented these ideas in Philippians because he wanted believers to follow Christ's example. After all, if the Son of God willingly submitted to such debasing humiliation, certainly his servants should be humble as well. And if Christ's humility helped him persevere through his suffering and death, then humility can help us persevere too. And this was precisely Paul's point in Philippians 2:2-4, where he wrote these instructions:

**[Be] like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose. Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others (Philippians 2:2-4).**

Humility helps us persevere in righteous living and in faith. On the one hand, it enables us to be like-minded, to create unity, to love and honor others, and to minister to their needs. And on the other hand, it helps us remember that the Father deserves our trust and loyalty even when our circumstances are miserable — even when we are persecuted — even when we are martyred.

## Optimism

Besides encouraging humility in believers as a means to perseverance, Paul emphasized the value of optimism, that is, a positive and hopeful outlook on life. In the modern world, it is not uncommon to hear people speak of optimism as a foolish endeavor, one that doesn't grapple with the real world, but simply pretends that things are better than they are. But Paul's optimism wasn't like this. His optimism was realistic. He did not ignore the bad things in life — in fact, he felt threatened by them. At its heart, Paul's optimism was simply a conscious decision to focus his attention on those things that were truly good and not on those things that were truly bad. It was born out of his faith in God's provision and blessings in the present world, and out of his hope for the redemption and rewards that God will give us in the future.

For example, during his suffering in prison, while he was being troubled by insincere preachers of the gospel, he chose to focus on the blessing that Christ was being

preached, even though the preachers had evil motives. Listen to his account in Philippians 1:17-18:

**The former preach Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely, supposing that they can stir up trouble for me while I am in chains. But what does it matter? The important thing is that in every way, whether from false motives or true, Christ is preached. And because of this I rejoice (Philippians 1:17-18).**

Paul's emotional state was complex. On the one hand, he was suffering. But on the other hand, he made a conscious decision to focus on the good things rather than on the bad things. And this choice helped him endure the sufferings of prison as well as his mistreatment at the hands of these preachers. And Paul's advice to the church in Philippians 4:6-8 was consistent with this attitude. Consider his words there:

**Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable — if anything is excellent or praiseworthy — think about such things (Philippians 4:6-8).**

Thinking optimistically and fighting against anxiety and discouragement, is a means of calling upon God to guard our hearts and minds. And therefore, it is also a means of persevering.

## Joy

Finally, in addition to humility and optimism, Paul also taught that the mindset of joy is a great help in Christian perseverance. For one thing, Paul himself concentrated on finding joy in order to persevere through his distressing circumstances. And by his example, he encouraged the believers in Philippi to do so as well. For instance, in Philippians 1:18-20, Paul spoke of his joy in this way:

**I will continue to rejoice, for I know that through your prayers and the help given by the Spirit of Jesus Christ, what has happened to me will turn out for my deliverance. I eagerly expect and hope that ... Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death (Philippians 1:18-20).**

Paul legitimately feared that he might be put to death. And yet, rather than focusing on the negative aspects of his death, he focused on the positive outcome his death might bring. He was optimistic, and as a result, he was able to rejoice.

Notice that in this case Paul's joy was not a naïve denial of pain and suffering, or even an overwhelming emotion of happiness. On the contrary, as we have seen, there was much sadness and suffering mixed into Paul's feelings as well. But despite his troubles, Paul truly was able to look at the good things in life and to rejoice over them. He could think about honoring Christ through a courageous death and be satisfied — even pleased — at Christ's exaltation. And that satisfaction and pleasure constituted joy. Paul did not feel only joy, but he did feel true joy. And this joy provided him with a desire to press onward, and it gave purpose to his suffering.

Paul also encouraged his friends in Philippi to adopt a similar attitude so that their joy would help them persevere as well. Listen to his advice to them in Philippians 4:4-6:

**Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! ... The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything (Philippians 4:4-6).**

Paul encouraged the Philippians to be joyful because the Lord was near, whether as their help in time of need, or as the king who would return to bring his reign of peace to all the earth. In either case, joy would motivate and enable the Philippians to fend off anxiety. And therefore, it would prepare them to persevere until the Lord's return.

By patterning our mindset after Paul's, by focusing on humility and optimism and joy, we can strengthen ourselves against anxiety and despair. It is inevitable that hardship will come and that we will suffer — sometimes greatly. So, when we do, we need to remember Paul's example and advice. We need to temper our suffering with a humble spirit, and to remain hopeful by thinking about the many good things we have in this life and the next. And we need to overcome the troubles of our condition by making a conscious decision to rejoice over those things in our lives that are still worthy of joy. In these ways, we can be strengthened, with God's help, to persevere.

## **MINISTRY OF PERSEVERANCE**

Now that we have explored the nature and mindset of perseverance, we are ready to turn to our third concern: the church's ministry of perseverance, expressed through our actions toward one another.

Paul recognized that the Philippians' ministry to him had helped him to persevere at many stages of his ministry, including his present imprisonment. At many different times they had supported him financially and emotionally. And they had even sent Epaphroditus to minister to him in prison. We can summarize their ministry to Paul in terms of material support, encouragement, and physical presence. In each of these ways, the Philippians bolstered Paul's spirits and empowered him to greater perseverance.

For instance, listen to Paul's heartfelt words in Philippians 4:13-14:

**I can do everything through him who gives me strength. Yet it was good of you to share in my troubles (Philippians 4:13-14).**

In some ways, these simple verses represent the heart of the Philippians' ministry to Paul and of his feelings about them.

Before Epaphroditus had come bearing the Philippians' gift to Paul, the apostle had been drawing strength from the Lord to persevere. But he had not had much moral support from others, and as a result, his optimism and his joy had faded. He was persevering, but it was hard work. But the Philippians' gift provided material support that somewhat alleviated his suffering so that persevering became a bit easier. And their concern for him, expressed through the gift and the sending of Epaphroditus, provided encouragement, helped him recover his optimism and joy. And of course, the physical presence of Epaphroditus not only ministered to Paul's earthly needs, but provided him with companionship and friendship to help him persevere all the more.

And so, it was with the most heartfelt thanks that Paul told the Philippians it was good of you to share in my troubles. Paul really and truly appreciated their ministry. And it gave him great comfort and joy to count them as his friends so that he was encouraged and helped to persevere by keeping his faith strong, and by living in ways that honored Christ.

And Paul intended his ministry to help the Philippians persevere through their own trials. As we read in Philippians 1:3-4, he prayed for them. He also wrote his epistle to them to teach them how to persevere. And more than this, he sent Epaphroditus to minister to them, probably as a leader in the church.

In the modern church, we can learn much from the way the Philippians ministered to Paul by providing material support. There are multitudes of Christians throughout the world who have great material needs. Some are so poor that finding food and clothing is a constant challenge. Others are oppressed by evil people in the world. Some are even sold into slavery and severely abused. And of course, there are many other real but less dramatic material needs felt by Christians in every part of the world. And one way we can minister to these believers, one way we can give them hope and help them persevere, is by meeting their material needs.

We can also learn a great deal from the way the Philippians ministered to Paul through their love and encouragement. They did not just send money to Paul; they also sent their love. Through Epaphroditus, they communicated to Paul that they were thinking about him and that he was in their hearts just as they were in his.

Modern Christians also need encouragement to persevere. We can offer words of encouragement in church, or over the telephone, or through a letter or a messenger, or in many other ways. But the point is that we should go out of our way to let people know that they are loved and that they are not forgotten.

And beyond this, we can spend time with people in person, simply sitting by them, being with them, and helping them with their physical needs, just as the Philippians sent Epaphroditus to Paul. Even in the church, many people are lonely, many need a friend. And many others need help with simple things like shopping and cleaning, or caring for themselves and their families. Being physically present with believers is another good way to help them persevere.

And we can also learn much from the ways Paul ministered to the Philippians. We can teach them how to persevere through sound doctrine and practical advice. If we are in positions of authority in the church, we can lead the church in ways that are encouraging and responsible, that communicate by word and by example that perseverance is both godly and possible. And no matter who we are, or where we are, we can always pray so

that in response to our requests, God himself will give other believers strength to persevere.

## CONCLUSION

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In this lesson we have explored Paul's canonical epistle to the Philippians, including the background that forms the historical and social context of the letter, the structure and content of the letter itself, and finally the modern application of this letter in the life of the Christian church.

Paul's epistle to the Philippians has many rich and wonderful truths to teach us about standing firm in our Christian faith, and about living righteously before our holy God, even during times of suffering and distress. As we submit ourselves to Paul's teachings, we will realize how utterly important perseverance is, and we will be greatly encouraged to dedicate ourselves to this awesome task. And most importantly, as we succeed in our own perseverance by following Paul's advice, and as we help others to persevere as well, we will bring glory and honor to our exalted Lord Jesus Christ.

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**Dr. Reggie Kidd (Host)** is Professor of New Testament Emeritus at Reformed Theological Seminary. He received his M.A.R. and M.Div. from Westminster Theological Seminary and his Ph.D. in Christian Origins from Duke University. He is a member of the Evangelical Theological Society and is an ordained priest in The Episcopal Church. Dr. Kidd teaches at the Robert E. Webber Institute for Worship Studies and has served as a pastor and elder at multiple churches. He is the author of *With One Voice: Discovering Christ's Song in Our Worship* (BakerBooks, 2005) and has contributed to many other publications, including *The Spirit of the Reformation Study Bible* (Zondervan, 2003) and *The Reformation Study Bible* (Ligonier Ministries, 2005).



# Paul's Prison Epistles

LESSON  
FIVE

Paul and the Philippians  
Faculty Forum



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# Paul's Prison Epistles

## Lesson Five: Paul and the Philippians

### Faculty Forum

With  
Dr. Reggie Kidd

Students  
Graham Buck  
Wes Sumrall

#### Question 1:

**Does Philippians address all types of suffering, or only suffering for the gospel?**

**Student:** Reggie, I have heard the book of Philippians be called the “epistle of joy” but in the lesson it seems that we really focus on Paul’s persevering the midst of trial. Clearly Paul is suffering for the gospel, but does the letter speak equally to Christians in all types of suffering or is it primarily focused on Christians who were suffering for the gospel?

**Dr. Kidd:** Good question, Wes. The letter is a great sort of paradigm or picture of the challenge for all of us to learn well from Scripture because often we realize we are listening in on someone else’s conversation. And we have to understand in the first place what is being said there and then get our bearings from there. And as you rightly observed, in this case Paul is specifically suffering for his profession of faith, his proclamation of the gospel. And some of us are going to experience exactly that kind of suffering and others of us are just going to deal with the hard stuff of life whether it’s sickness, failed relationships, dealing with our ongoing sin problem. And the joy of reading Scripture is recognizing that the same Lord and Christ who authored this is also at work in our lives and can give us wisdom by the Holy Spirit to pay close attention to what he is saying here. And also then to extract from here the wisdom that we need and the counsel that we need to help us in matters that are a little bit further removed but in which we need the same sort of comfort and the same sort of call to be joyful in the midst of difficult circumstances.

#### Question 2:

**Is Paul’s joy related to his suffering, or to his relationship with the Philippians?**

**Student:** Do you think that Paul’s joy is somehow closely connected to the fact that he is suffering for the gospel? Or is it that he feels this joy because of the audience to whom he is writing?

**Dr. Kidd:** Well, I don't know that that's really an "either/or". There is a certain loneliness that I think he feels at this particular moment in his imprisonment. And he has taken special comfort himself in not just the financial gift that Epaphroditus has brought from Philippi but what it represents about their love, their concern, their esteem for him. It's good to be reminded that Paul writes Philippians about the same time that he writes Colossians, where he talked about the privilege of completing the sufferings of Christ, and that brings into view this whole biblical narrative of God's suffering Son coming in the middle of time and accomplishing a redemption that inaugurates or brings in God's kingdom and then leaves physically to go to heaven, to sit at the right hand of the Father, and then to minister in this age through the Holy Spirit as his kingdom continues in anticipation of its consummation when he comes back. And the recognition that goes with that that because the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of Christ, Jesus is among us. And when his people hurt, whether that's for proclaiming the gospel as Paul is doing or whether it's just knowing the stuff of what it is to live in that period of time between the inauguration of the kingdom and its final consummation, that the Lord himself grieves. He is hurt and he feels our pain because he is among us. And so, part of the poignancy of this letter is that it connects us with what Christ is doing among his people and how we have the privilege, as Paul goes on to say here, of knowing the fellowship of his sufferings.

### **Question 3:** **Was it sinful for Paul to want to die?**

**Student:** So Reggie, what you seem to be saying is Paul was not so much despairing as he was just experiencing these real emotions of depression and loneliness but it seems in the text that he is really kind of struggling with this choice of whether he wants to live and still be able to preach the gospel or to die and go be with Christ. But was it sinful for Paul to want to die? And should Christians want to live, or should they want to die, and why?

**Dr. Kidd:** That's a great question, Wes and you read though this and you really do get the sense that this guy can't decide whether it would be better to go be with the Lord or stay here. And the fact of the matter is to go and be with the Lord is a good thing. It is a wonderful thing. It's remarkable, as precious as the continuation of fellowship with Jesus on the other side of the grave is to Paul, that he doesn't speculate more on just what's that like. All he says is to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord. He doesn't fill it in with a lot of the speculation that we get in the popular literature and so many funeral or memorial sermons that go on and on about streets of gold and all that other stuff. He is really rather reserved about that but it's clear that he recognizes that his death would bring, not just a continuation of the fellowship that he has with Jesus now, but an enhancement. And at the same time he does recognize that the whole pattern of the incarnation was about the one who was the most privileged, the second person of the trinity. Always God, always will be

God, laying aside the prerogatives of his deity, laying aside his glory to clothe himself with our humanity and coming to serve us. And I think at the end of the day that principle wins for Paul. As much as he knows how spectacular it would be to go and be with the Lord that the Lord has given him a calling to care for other people the way Christ had cared for him and the way that Christ cares for his church.

#### **Question 4:**

**How could Paul be both depressed and joyful at the same time?**

**Student:** So Reggie, we've just talked about this being Paul's epistle of joy but in it he really does seem to be in a bit of despair and depression. How does he manage to feel both those emotions and joy at the same time? Doesn't rejoicing sort of mean that you have already beaten those other emotions?

**Dr. Kidd:** That's a great question, Graham, and it's a good opportunity to focus on why Paul has been able to speak so powerfully over the centuries to the church. Here is the guy, I think, who really gets it about knowing Christ and understanding that knowing Christ is not being just sort of lifted out of the reality of your life. Here is a guy who is fully in touch with the hard stuff that is facing him. He is in prison. He's got people who are supposed to be on his side who are outside, who are proclaiming Christ all the more because they think it's going to make his situation worse. Meanwhile, he is worried about false teachers coming back into this church and bringing up old stuff that he had thought that he had dealt with in the letter to the Galatians. He has the very real possibility that he is going to be executed and he is just not in denial about the really hard stuff. And it's like often, I think, we tend to treat, in the church, joy as being some sort of glib happiness that you just kind of go for and put on by denying the hard things in your life. And what Paul has come to recognize is that stepping each day into that day's measure of a share in the sufferings of Christ is the place that you get to know him better. So, there is, I think, the things that feel despairing or that carry keen disappointment in Paul are really the backdrop against which, I think, way down in the depths of who he is he able to know the presence of one who is with him. And that's the place that you know joy, and it's just so very different than glib happy-clappy.

#### **Question 5:**

**Is the joy Paul described more a recognition of Christ than an emotive experience?**

**Student:** So that we can experience this kind of joy, is it fair to say it is more of recognition of the reality of who Christ is and what he is doing than so much an emotive experience?

**Dr. Kidd:** Yeah, it's a knowledge that creates its own sense. I mean, there is an experience that comes out of that. But it's a more settled, it's a surer, it's a deeper affection for him knowing that his love took him all the way to the cross and makes us near to him even now. I think one of the ways to distinguish Paul from like a false vision of joy is to think about stoics who were contemporary to him, whose idea was to just develop a total emotional passivity so that nothing affects you. And basically it's kind of like what my dad used to say to me, "Reggie, never let your highs be too high or your lows be too lows, just try to find that middle ground." And that's what the stoics were after, just kind of find this bland neutral grey, you know, or lukewarm-ness in your heart. And Paul is about recognizing the joy and the wonder of Christ's resurrection and the profound sadness of what it is still to be living in a fallen world as a fallen creature needing to lean towards the day in which everything is made new. So, for Paul, knowing Christ is recognizing that emotionally we live with black and white. We live with way up and way down, and knowing Christ is knowing him as the one that holds all that together, not negating. So, Paul's world is not bland gray. It's like black, black; white, whites; and super, super bright intense yellows, reds, and blues. And just recognizing that not denying the emotional range of life in this world is where you know the real Christ and not just some stoic denial of your emotions and denial of reality. And it's out of that knowledge of the real that the experience of real joy comes about.

### Question 6:

**Did Christian or secular virtues motivate the Philippians to care for Paul?**

**Student:** So Reggie, it seems like the Philippians are really good friends to Paul. I mean they support him emotionally, financially, in prayer. Were these kinds of things particularly cultural values and virtues that just happened to be in that time period or are they more specifically Christian virtues? And what sort of relationship, if there is a difference, should Christian virtues have with non-Christian virtues?

**Dr. Kidd:** Great question, Graham. Back in Paul's day benefactors would be given all kinds of honors by people who were dependent upon them and you could be a benefactor through your wealth. You could be a benefactor through your teaching. And teachers in Paul's day would often go around and they would collect for themselves audiences. And there would be this reciprocity or system of exchange, where I share with you my wisdom and you become my clientele and sort of a whole system of duties and obligations would come into play. And the teacher would sort of be this elevated person. And you can see Jesus already in his ministry seeking to undercut that, you know, like when he says in Matthew 23, "Don't let them call you teacher. You are a brother."

And one of the things that becomes clearer and clearer to me over time is how much Paul sees himself not just as the guy who gives us the statutes and decrees, but the

ones who seeks to know Jesus and to model Jesus for people. In this letter in particular, I think we see him cutting against the grain of standard benefactor relationships, which are often even called friendships, but they're not really friendships. There is one person who is in power and the other person is a dependent and they sort of create mutual obligations. What he points to so significantly in this letter, especially in chapter 2, is the way that Jesus related to us in the servant form and the language of warmth, the language of servanthood, commending Timothy as a servant, talking about Epaphroditus as their servant of his behalf and then his servant on their behalf. I think he is working really hard to establish a much deeper kind of bond of affection that is rooted not in reciprocal exchange but in all of us being the recipients of a grace that we could never repay so that we look not to our own interests and not to how our investments in our people builds up more social capital and puts them in more debt to us. But we live out our eternal indebtedness to the Lord who has freely paid for our sins and who has come among us, as what Jesus says he himself is, one who is among us to wait tables, to be our foot washer. And Paul calls the Philippians along with him to a lifestyle of that kind of servant love instead of that kind of normal system of reciprocities.

**Student:** So, kind of what you are saying is that the external things that we do may be similar to non-Christians but the internal motivations are entirely different.

**Dr. Kidd:** The same sort of spirit of liberality, community-mindedness, generosity that pagan philosophers would encourage among other people, Paul is encouraging that same sort of spirit. But not for the same sort of exchange back that people would expect in their social world. Their reward is from the Lord. Their reward is in seeing Christ being more formed among other people. It's not looking to your own interests but looking really to the interests of other people because your friend is taking care of you forever.

### Question 7:

#### Why did Paul feel such strong affection for the Philippians?

**Student:** So Reggie, even though the Philippians gave him all this money, Paul really seems to be working against this idea so you really couldn't say that the Philippians bought Paul's affections because it seems like his internal motivation would be different than what was going on in the secular world outside of him with the benefactors.

**Dr. Kidd:** Yeah, that's well put, Wes, and from Paul's letters to the Corinthians, we know he had a great deal of sensitivity towards the idea of being bought. One of the reasons that he was unwilling to accept the generosity of the Corinthians and their support for him was that he recognized that they saw in it a way of their establishing power over him and of their buying him as their like teacher. And to him he says, "Look, I didn't accept your support because I didn't want the kind of relationship that



that would have established between us.” And the very reason that he can accept the generosity of the Philippians is because he recognizes that they don’t have those sort of cultural strings attached that would sort of create an obligation back to them beyond the obligation he has to love the Lord and to speak the truth to them in love.

### **Question 8:**

**Was it normal for very diverse groups to be involved in the same local congregation?**

**Student:** Reggie, the lesson talks about several different converts that Paul had in Philippi. There was Lydia the merchant, there was the demonized slave girl, and there was the Philippian jailer. I mean these are people who come from very different social classes and just very different types of folks. Was it normal for such diverse groups to be involved in the same church gathering in Philippi? Or would they have gone to different churches there and maintained the social distance?

**Dr. Kidd:** Yeah, I think, Wes, that what we are supposed to infer is that this becomes one people. In the pagan world, people from those kinds of different backgrounds, they would have divided themselves up in their social circles. The trade guild people would have their group and the more elevated people would have their group and certainly a little demonized slave girl would have no place at either of those. And what is remarkable about what Christ is doing, as Paul sees it, is building one fellowship of people from all races, all tribes, all kinds of social backgrounds. And it would have been really remarkable but the picture we get here of a singular church and I think we should think of it as being a church made up of your Lydia’s, and your Philippian jailers, and your demonized slave girls.

**Student:** So, Paul really hits home in this breaking down of these dividing walls, like when he mentions in Romans that there are no longer Jew or Greek, slave nor free but that we are one. He is really pushing for that, isn’t he?

**Dr. Kidd:** Well, it’s actually in Colossians, which he writes right around this time, where he is really pushing that along with the letter to the Galatians. And I think that he sees that as being something that is to be modeled. And one of the reasons I think he comes around to identifying us as the true circumcision, who worship — exactly how he says that is really kind of nice to see — “We are the true circumcision who worship God in spirit and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh.” The divisions that are a function of our social backgrounds, we set those aside. And that is why Paul goes on to talk about, you know, if anyone would have confidence in the flesh it’d be me. And all those just go by the wayside because what brings us together is the one circumcision that we share and that is Christ Jesus was cut off. And we have been baptized together into this place in Colossians that he refers to as the one new man. Then he refers to him in Ephesians as the one new man that Christ has brought together at the cross.

So, for him, the bringing together of these kids of people this is part of the way that Jesus in Ephesians 3:10 demonstrates the wisdom of God to the powers and principalities. What you demonic forces were seeking to break up, I have brought together and in this community of reconciliation where there has been one family made up of the blood of Jesus, this one new circumcision. These people who have been baptized together, this is the signal that the day of social destruction, the day of social decay, the day of lovelessness, those days are numbered.

**Student:** Reggie, I guess it begs the question, should churches today look more like the first century church in this regard? It seems like churches today tend to group by social class more so and it's not so much a question of denomination but just a type of people. When churches do group like this are we not living in light of the fact that Christ has reconciled when we group together like this?

**Dr. Kidd:** Yeah, Wes, the question that does demand an answer for is why we don't work harder to realize relationships that are not based on preference, not based on the kind of car we drive, not based on having the same age children, or having the same age and stage in life but look intentionally for relationships that take us outside of our own social comfort zone. And relate to people that the only thing we have in common is the blood of Jesus Christ and the fact that he has befriended us and made us part of his family. That would be an amazing statement to a rightly skeptical world when they see us dividing up just the same way that everyone else does.

### **Question 9:**

**Should we focus on both Paul and Timothy as joint authors of Philippians?**

**Student:** In our lessons, we make a lot of important in the writer of the letter, the background of the audience, and that sort of thing. When Paul opens Philippians, he says it's both from him and Timothy. We don't really talk about Timothy too much. Should we look at him and his life circumstances as well to try and get a full understanding of this letter?

**Dr. Kidd:** Well, Graham, it's a good point because Paul makes a point not just to have Timothy alongside him in the writing of the letter, but he is going to send Timothy along as one who himself is learning what it is to live the Jesus-shaped life on behalf or in the midst of the Philippians. I appreciate what Paul says here in 2:19 and following. This is right after he has called the Philippians to look at Jesus who was in the form of God, came among us, now is exalted, and now he challenges them to work out their salvation with fear and trembling. And then he says, "I hope in the Lord Jesus to send Timothy to you soon, so that I may be cheered by news of you" — so Timothy is going to bring word back to Paul — "I have no one like him who will be genuinely anxious for your welfare. They all look after their own interest, not

those of Jesus Christ.” So Timothy is one in whom Paul has seen exactly what he is encouraging among the Philippians and that we see in Jesus, someone who is not looking to his own interests but to the interests of other people because of Christ Jesus. “But Timothy’s worth, you know. How as a son with a father he has served with me in the gospel.” They are going all the way back to the middle of the 2<sup>nd</sup> missionary journey when Paul tapped Timothy and drew him out to be his understudy or his protégé so he could pour his life into him, and he would learn Christ from Paul. “I hope therefore to send him just as soon as I see how it would go with me, and I trust in the Lord that soon I shall come also.”

Timothy would be a wonderful study because if the pastoral epistles were written after these, which I think they were, we see that Paul — the pastoral epistles being 1 & 2 Timothy and Titus — we see that not long after this, despite his fears of being executed, was released from prison and ministered again back in the eastern part of the Mediterranean Basin, where he wasn’t really sure that he that would be able to. When he gives that speech in Acts 20 to the Ephesians elders, he just said, “I don’t think I’m going to be back.” But it looks like he is going to be able to go back and he left Timothy, his young protégé and understudy, to represent him there. So, Timothy is one who is, for us, a great study of a younger man who comes to the tutelage of an older man who is able to embody Christ, to teach Christ, and entrust him to go, and live it out, and teach it out.

**Student:** So, Timothy is more an exemplar than so much we should understand him in the midst of the purpose and writing of this letter?

**Dr. Kidd:** Yeah, I think his...and Timothy’s is not so much an indication of co-authorship as I have Timothy alongside me who is going to be with you. Perhaps carrying this letter, perhaps being the one to provide the commentary, and the elucidation that, here is what this means.

### **Question 10:**

**What can we learn from the way that Paul exhorted Euodia and Syntyche?**

**Student:** Reggie, Paul calls Euodia and Syntyche to each other in the Lord in his epistle. Is this a form of public rebuke and exhortation where he calls them to agree with each other? It seems like a form of church discipline. Is this an example for us in today’s church to be calling people out in public like this and in writing?

**Dr. Kidd:** It’s a good question, Wes, and I think it’s important to get clear on the relational reality out of which this comes. These are people who know each other. You were talking about a time when the church meets. They meet in houses and homes where everybody knows each other. Which means that conflict affects everybody, but it also means that when I call your name I’m not calling your name

out in front of people who don't know you. And so we have to appreciate the scale that's at stake, that's involved here. It's a small scale. We have to appreciate the fact that the church here is not like some impersonal gathering where if I call you out I'm calling you out in front of people who don't know you and I'm shaming you in that sort of fashion.

And just the whole relational bond that you have to assume that is there between Paul and these ladies because he refers to them as those who have struggled mightily along with me and with Clement. And the fact that he refers in a way that's really unusual in his letters, he speaks specifically to a particular person and says, "I want you to help them out." He says this is "a genuine yolk fellow", a "*syzygus*". And we don't know if that's someone body's name or it may be a particular person who is in a position to really help them out. I think that what we can assume if that Paul does this because he is seeking to lubricate the relationship rather than make it more difficult. And in lots of church settings that would not be the effect. You know, if you are in a church of five hundred, a thousand, fifteen hundred, or two thousand and you start calling people out, I think you are getting into manipulative shame. And the kind of things that you would want to say are going to be far more effective if you said it in private.

**Student:** So, is this more like applicable to a small group meeting or some sort of home group type thing?

**Dr. Kidd:** Yeah, where there is a relationship and I might say, "Graham, I really wish that you and Wes would work this thing out. It's holding our group back. We can't really go any further and you know that, until there is a reconciliation here."

**Student:** Is there any particular reason why Paul put it here in the letter or is it just he finished one argument and he is moving onto something else?

**Dr. Kidd:** I hadn't really thought about that, Graham, but it is the place where he has said what he needs to say about Christ not looking to his own interests but looking to our interests. He has talked about his own struggle to know joy in the mist of false teachers, teachers who are teaching the right thing for the wrong reason, his anxiety that the church in Philippi is concerned about one of their own who's there and who's sick. And he has talked about how he is going to send Timothy as one who has modeled what he is talking about and who will be among them and who he expects to bring back a good report. And he's talked in chapter 3 about his own finding his identity, not in his background but in being found in Christ and pressing on. And I think, at this point, he has set the stage nicely to go to these two ladies and say, "Look, the conflict between you, it's not just some mission that is being held up here but the whole opportunity, the whole responsibility of the church is to model who Christ is. And I know that you know that. So in that regard, you know it's time to really work this out."

**Question 11:****What did Paul mean when he said that Jesus made himself nothing?**

**Student:** Reggie, in Paul's poem, or however you want to call it, in the letter he says that Jesus emptied himself, and I have heard people talk about that that means he lost some of his divine attributes or other things like that. How can that be? Could Jesus still be God and not have certain characteristics?

**Dr. Kidd:** Graham, from way back in the history of the church in the Byzantine Era all the way up to today, there are people who are wrongly teaching that Jesus diminished his divinity when he came along us. But the Orthodox Church has felt the need to maintain, and I think rightly so, that his emptying himself is not a diminishing of his deity. It's more an adding his humanity and coming among us in such a way that it is not his own interests that he comes to serve. I mean he had every right to just stay in Heaven forever and just be the eternal Son of God, the eternal second person of the trinity and enjoy the fellowship with the Father and the Holy Spirit that always was and that would be restored after the project of the incarnation by which he added humanity to his being. And when he comes among us, he comes as a servant. That's the point here and it's important I think here for us to recognize that when he is among us, he is still God. In the early church, it became important to stress that he was strong enough to save us. And at the same time, it was important to confess his complete humanity so that he could actually heal us and he could actually take the rap for us.

**Student:** So, I guess that's why some translations say he humbled himself rather than he emptied himself?

**Dr. Kidd:** Actually, it uses both verbs in here. It uses he emptied himself and he humbled himself but I think your point is well taken. The humbling is an explanation of the emptying himself. It's not a losing of his divinity. It is an adding his humanity in such a way that he could come among us as one who serves, as one who washes feet, as one who allows himself to be accused of being a criminal wrongly and to be cursed by the Father so that the Father can declare us righteous through his death.

**Student:** So, it's not so much that he loses divine attributes or anything like that but in that adding of his humanity he takes on our limitations?

**Dr. Kidd:** He takes on our limitations, and it's hard not to switch over to the logic of the writer to the Hebrews where he talks about how Jesus, though he was a Son, learned obedience. He comes and it's that that qualifies him to be our priest and our sacrifice. And the whole project of the incarnation, it has so many dimensions to it. In his incarnation he models true Sonship. He models what it is for us to live as sons of God. In his incarnation he comes to provide the obedience to the law that Israel had been called to but was never able to live. He does it in our place and he does it so that on the far side of his bearing the curses of the law, we could see what we are

supposed to live like. And prime among the things that he comes to model in his limitations is, "I don't have to assert my rights. I could call down legions of angels at any point but I'm not going to do that because I have come to serve and that means putting other people's interests above my own."

### **Question 12:**

#### **What is the difference between perseverance and preservation?**

**Student:** Reggie, in some traditions people talk more about preservation rather than perseverance. What is the difference between preservation and perseverance? Are these two concepts, are they at odds with each other and how is it that the lesson focuses more on perseverance than preservation?

**Dr. Kidd:** Well, I think Wes, that we tried to be true in the lesson to Paul's own emphasis, which I think is on perseverance. But there are plenty of notes about the other side of that which is preservation. Perseverance is this relationship from our side, the need to press on, and as we said in the lesson, we need to believe the truth and to live rightly. But there are notes in Philippians and we tried to be true to them, that are on the preservation side, which is that is what God does behind the scenes to keep us.

In Philippians 1:6, Paul says, as we pointed out in the lesson, persuaded of this, "That the one who began among you and in you a good work will complete it until the day of Christ Jesus." Paul doesn't get around to talking to us about our duty to persevere without first letting us know his own confidence in the fact that the one who began this thing in us, he's not just sitting back saying, "Well, I'm going to look and see what happens to Wes. Good luck." But he is at work in us then at the very time when Paul says the thing that most stresses our need to persevere, "Work out your salvation with fear and trembling." He recalls this note that, "The same one who began a good work in us, he is at work in us both to will and to work according to his good pleasure." So it's a "both/and". We are kidding ourselves if we think we can persevere without his preserving power and at the same time Paul does seem to be...and I think largely it is because of the relationship that he has with these folks, that he feels so free to talk with them about the privilege, as well as the responsibility, of a persevering faith, of you know, believing the right thing and then living it out in such a way that our life becomes more and more characterized by the one who's has taken up residency within us.

**Student:** So, if these two things are not at odds with one another then it's probably true that depending on, say, where we are in are in life or maybe somebody who we are talking to in life, we can use either one or the other as good biblical encouragement?

**Dr. Kidd:** Well yeah, Graham. It takes a great deal of discernment to figure out whether the person you are talking to needs more the softer, “He really loves you and he’s got a hold of you and he’s not going to let you go.” Or when the person you are talking to, you can just see that you are kind of sitting there and they need to be challenged to get up and walk. Like Jesus, in John 5, where he comes to the guy who has been at the pool there in Jerusalem for thirty-eight years and he has just given up on ever getting healed. And Jesus comes up to him and says, “Do you want to be healed?” And sometimes that’s our job to say, “Do you really like it there?”

When I was in college I played baseball and I was not a very good hitter. I didn’t have a very strong arm but I could work with pitchers and I could block balls that were thrown in the dirt. And a good catcher gets to know his pitchers and some pitchers need to be encouraged no matter how badly they are doing. “You are doing great. You’ve got it in you. Just keep going.” And other pitchers, their brain is somewhere else and you just need to say, “Hey, will you get with the program?” And it’s wise pastoral discernment. It’s pastoring that is determined to get to know people and know, in a particular moment, which side of the equation they need to hear. God is going to preserve you. Don’t let go because he is not going to let go of you. Or when you need to say, “Dude, you need to ratchet it out and you know that don’t you?” So, it’s time to stress the perseverance.

### Question 13:

#### Do our good works contribute to our salvation?

**Student:** Reggie, Paul says that we’re to work out our salvation. You sort of mention it a little bit in the lesson but I’m still kind of confused. Does that mean our works actually do something for our salvation, like have an effectual impact on it? Or is he talking about something else?

**Dr. Kidd:** Well, it’s pretty clear for Paul that our salvation is done. What Christ did on the cross, paid the penalty for our sins once and for all. That’s why he is so upset about people who are enemies of the cross that they don’t understand all that the cross does for us. As far as Paul is concerned, that’s a done deal. And yet, it’s a relationship that has to be lived out or it’s not a relationship. That’s why we talked about the need to believe the right things but then to live righteously, to live on the basis of that truth. And what happens is the right living reinforces the faith.

I love what C.S. Lewis does with eternal life in *The Great Divorce* where his point is that eternal life has already begun for us. And we just go deeper into it over time and at the end of time when the Lord comes back and all accounts are settled, we find out that the eternal life that we all think of as being in the future has either begun in this life or it doesn’t begin at all. The sad reality is that there are a lot of people who have said the right words, who have prayed a sinner’s prayer, and then have just gone on to live their lives as though that weren’t true. And for Paul, the living of a life that puts a



lie to that original prayer of faith, that original life, proves that that original prayer of faith was not really a prayer of faith because a prayer of faith is going to produce a certain kind of life because it is reflective of the Holy Spirit making us alive. And if we have been regenerate and made alive, for Paul, there is going to be a certain kind of life that goes along with that.

**Student:** So, that's kind of where Paul is saying the same thing as say James. "Show me your faith by what you do."

**Dr. Kidd:** For James, the proof of the profession of faith lies in the life that gets lived out.

### **Question 14:**

**Does God ever use the outwardly good works of unbelievers to bring them to faith?**

**Student:** Now, if there is kind of this reciprocal relationship between them. Are there any cases in which maybe people start doing things first and God uses that to bring them to subsequent faith?

**Dr. Kidd:** It's really hard to tell how that loop can work. Paul has this keen sense of there has to be God doing something in you. There is an indicative that has to happen that we can receive only by faith and then his appeal to obedience flows out of that. But then you do have a sense that that greater obedience which is going to involve belonging to God's people, having truth reinforced in all kinds of ways by seeing it in other people, that belonging to those people, living in that certain way, deepens our sense of faith.

Now, it so happens that for many of us, even before we believe, we find ourselves in this force field of that kind of community. We see it in other people and we come alongside and we attach ourselves to it and the Holy Spirit mysteriously uses that whole process of our kind of — even though we don't really believe and don't belong in that eternal sense — we find ourselves attached to God's people. This certainly happened with me. I was just loved by Christians and felt a part of their community. And it was being sort of this almost on the inside but kind of being aware that I wasn't really on the inside that made me long for what it was that would really make me belong to this. What switch needed to be flipped in my life to make me really like what I saw in them that I liked but I knew just wasn't in me.

**Student:** So, you were part of the group and doing things with the group but there was still that sense of something deeper.



**Dr. Kidd:** Yeah, and that's the thing that the Lord has to do to wake you up to why they are really like that. And you're wanting to be like that but just can't find the where with all.

### **Question 15:**

**How can good things come from preaching the gospel with wicked motives?**

**Student:** Reggie, Paul says in his letter that there are those who are preaching the gospel in order to get him in trouble but he says he is okay with that because for whatever reason Christ is being preached. How is it that good things can come from these people with wicked motives?

**Dr. Kidd:** Here it's helpful to recognize that in Christian ethics historically we have talked about the need for something to be true according to God's standard. That it needs to fit the situation and it needs to come out of faith and sincere motives. The reality is, there are lots of things that you do and I do that are going to be according to God's standard and are going to fit the situation but honestly, they come out of bad motives. You know, we are doing the right thing for the wrong reason. And one of the great things about God's grace is that even when we are doing the right thing for the wrong reason God is still going to be able to use it. He just is or he wouldn't be able to use anything because none of us can ever pretend to have pure motives.

I had a friend who once said, "Look, if it weren't for mixed motives I wouldn't have any motives at all. I wouldn't even get out of bed in the morning." So, I love the fact that Paul said this and that the Lord put this in the Canon. This is a call to all of us in the first place, to look at ourselves and to recognize that none of us has pure motives. And then it's a call to us to extend some charity to people who are often doing the right thing and we can tell it's for the wrong reasons. We can tell that it's sometimes even to our disadvantage but the point is Christ is able to use it. And we can stop running the universe and we can recognize that God, the God who created the greatest good out of possible, out of an evil scheme of Herod, Pilate, and Christ's enemies to put him on the cross, that God did the greatest good out of the worst thing ever done on planet earth. He can use people who are doing good ministry even though we can see that the motives are often really bad or at least questionable.

### **Question 16:**

**How should we respond to those who preach the gospel with wicked motives?**

**Student:** How do we take that when we do see this going on? We don't want to go so far as to stop them from doing ministry but somehow instruct or exhort them.

**Dr. Kidd:** It kind of depends on relationship. If I can build a relationship where I can make a difference and where I can ennoble somebody else's motives, the Lord would call me to do that. Sure, absolutely.

**Student:** So, it's better that they keep on ministering than to just say, "Cut it out," but to walk alongside them?

**Dr. Kidd:** Sure, and part of what Paul is trying to help us understand is that none of us gets it all right from our doctrine, to the way we are obeying and living it out, to the motives that we have. And we need to draw close. You know, we need to be in accountability relationships ourselves. We need to be in submission to authorities and we need to ask them to...I need to be around colleagues that will ask me why I am doing what I'm doing. And to help me struggle with the gap between the good I know that I ought to be doing and the good I am doing but am doing for the wrong reasons.

**Student:** That really seems to open the gates in terms of what God can use in his sovereignty and really to give a bigger picture of who God is in his power and sovereignty.

**Dr. Kidd:** I love what Abraham Kuyper says about the genius of Calvinism as a theological system. It is not primarily based on the need of the individual to find a relationship with God. It includes that but it's based the premise that God is about bringing glory to himself and he is reclaiming the planet. And he has not been intimidated by the curse. He was not intimidated by Satan's fall. He was not intimidated by our original forbearer's rebellion. He was not intimidated by Israel's disobedience. He is not intimidated by yours and mine and he works all things together for the good of those who love Christ Jesus.

### Question 17:

#### Who are the "true circumcision"?

**Student:** What did Paul mean when he called the Philippians the "true circumcision"? Were they remnants of the faithful Jews or were they something different? And is it the case that Gentiles can be part of the circumcision? What is the theological significance of all of that?

**Dr. Kidd:** Yeah, Wes. It's an extraordinary thing that is going on in Paul's theology cause he calls these people the "true circumcision". And let's go back to the 2<sup>nd</sup> missionary journey where we get, you know, what little portrait we have of this church. But I think it's a revealing one. It would have a person like Lydia in it. And we find her at the place of prayer on the Sabbath where Jews would be meeting but Luke simply calls her a worshipper of God. We don't know. She might be a Gentile God-fearer who has attached herself to the Jewish people or she might be Jewish herself. We just don't know. The point is...well, we just don't know. The Philippian

jailer would have been a Gentile, and the demon-possessed girl, who had the demon exorcised from her, would have been a Gentile. These are the kind of people who would have been in this church and without qualification Paul calls them the true circumcision.

Again, this letter was written around the same time as Colossians where Paul refers to the people in that church who would have been from Gentile backgrounds. He refers to them as having received their circumcision in a circumcision made without hands, in the circumcision of Christ, I think, meaning Christ's own death as sort of the metaphorically the foreskin of the human race who is cursed so that we might be accepted. And the way that they experienced that circumcision is through their baptism, and by their being joined to the new people of God. And that's why he can refer here in Philippians 3 to the true circumcision as being comprised in worshipping God in spirit, in the Holy Spirit who makes you alive in Christ Jesus, by taking our curse upon himself has taken a tension away by any confidence we could put in our flesh.

So, all of circumcision's symbolic power is now ours through Christ and we experience that through baptism. And you just think what circumcision would have symbolized. It would have symbolized the shedding of blood for sin. It would have symbolized consecration. The cutting off of the foreskin is a sign of dedication. I'm so in this that may what happened to this foreskin happen to me if I don't keep covenant. Well, good luck with that. And then third, it is a sign of membership in the people of God and that's exactly what baptism symbolized. And that is why you move from Colossians 2:11 to 2:12, where Paul refers to circumcision and then to baptism because baptism is a picture of our union with Christ in his death, his burial, and his resurrection where he paid the penalty for our sin and gave us new life. It is the place where we take the pledge. It's the place where we come alongside Christ and say, "Yes, his death is mine and his life is mine as well. And it's a place where we come to belong to God's people."

As Paul says to the Galatians, "Everybody who has been baptized into Christ Jesus is now part of the new humanity." We put on Christ and this is a place where there is no Jew/Gentile, male/female, slave/free. So, it's a sign of belonging. So, the point now is the Israel of God, the true circumcision, is defined by the true Israelite Jesus Christ. And everybody who belongs to him is a genuine son of Abraham, a true son of the circumcision. Whether you are a boy or a girl, whether you're a Jew or a Gentile, whether you are slave or free, no matter where you are from.

### **Question 18:**

#### **What are the central concepts of the gospel?**

**Student:** Reggie, so, there are kind of two groups of people that Paul is speaking against in this letter. There are those that we talked about earlier that were

preaching the gospel to bring him pain and then there are others who apparently are preaching another gospel. He doesn't really rail too hard against the first group but he really goes hard against the second group. What are, if you could say, the fundamentals or the central concepts of the gospel that perhaps this group was getting that these weren't? And why would he go so hard against that second group?

**Dr. Kidd:** That's a well-put question, Graham. It's important to recognize that Paul will accept people who are preaching what he considers to be the true gospel even if they are doing it in such a way that it causes him personal pain. But he has no patience with people who are preaching what he considers to be a false gospel. He calls them the mutilation in here. And the place where he gives us a hint of what he has in mind is at the end of 3:18, where he says that they are enemies of the cross of Christ. And that has to mean something like they are teaching in such way that what Christ did on the cross is not necessary. And probably the best way to think about that is what he says in chapter 3, that "I want to be found in the righteousness of Christ" and that is a righteousness that is only established by God, for us, at the cross as God punishes Christ in our place as Christ becomes our stand-in, our righteousness. So, the merit of Christ has to be applied to us, his righteousness on our behalf because our sin is taken away at the cross.

For Paul, you don't hold to the righteousness of Christ being ours because of the cross and as far as he is concerned, you become an enemy of the cross and spiritually his enemy as well. You are teaching a false gospel. He says that their belly is their god and when there is teaching that really is about...when teaching is about, really, not our coming into our obedience to the Lord and being brought into line with him and his purposes but when he just becomes the chaplain for our desires and he is just called to come in and bless our way of life, an addendum to our personal agenda that is really driven by our own appetites or our desires, whether it's literal hunger or whether it's sexual appetite or whether it's materialism, whether ambition. Whenever God becomes a servant to our bellies, for Paul, that is a false gospel.

And the other thing that he says in here is that their god is their belly and they glory in their shame. And that's all a part of that second denial of the gospel that you revel in this celebration of this way of life that God is supposed to somehow bless. Then, the third thing he says here is that they think about worldly things and then he contrasts that with our citizenship being in Heaven with Christ Jesus. Whenever the church, whenever the gospel becomes used to just promote some sort of other agenda besides...the things of the world, besides the agenda of God reclaiming and redeeming his creation, then Paul is going to have a big problem with that.

Now, there are some people who can do this in a sort of supernatural way. He was doing that with Colossians. Well, that's what was happening in Colossae where there was all this angelic speculation and generation of angels. But what it was doing was it was cultivating pride and it was cultivating a life that Paul called worldly even though it was supposedly heavenly. So, you can do this in a super naturalistic way and be on

the wrong side of Paul. Or you could do it in a naturalistic way and be on the wrong side of Paul where you reduce the whole Christian story, the whole biblical view, the whole theological project to just serving this world's ends. And honestly, in the last couple hundred years that has been the greatest tendency of the church in the West, where with a very strong anti-super naturalistic bias, you know, God doesn't do miracles, God couldn't bring a virgin child into the world, and dead people don't rise from the dead. There has been this project to reconcile Christianity with that worldview, a worldly worldview that comes and takes charge of the biblical worldview and won't let it speak its peace so that all the church is left with is bare-knuckle politics and just sort of a vague "do good-ism" that has really lost its sense of the power of God to make people over and to make deep and lasting changes in society.

So, I would say for Paul, in terms of this letter in tenants of the gospel that he would want to promote is the power of the cross to bring healing and forgiveness in a relationship with God, the call to obey something beyond our bellies, to submit ourselves to the Lord of universe who has a greater good in store for us in service to him. And to, if I can go over to Colossians, "to seek the things above" and to pay attention to the commonwealth of Heaven, to the city of God, to this ultimate citizenship that calls us beyond earthly loyalties and earthly agendas and to service of his kingdom.

### Question 19:

#### How can we identify and deal with false teachers?

**Student:** Reggie, how does Paul's dealings with false teachers and this book inform us today as to how we are to deal with people who differ from us theologically? How do we decide what's a false teacher and what isn't? And what do we do with those who are maybe false teachers in our church?

**Dr. Kidd:** Okay, Wes. Well, that's a good series of questions. What I think is helpful in Paul is that he here in Philippians is he does give some criteria for distinguishing what is false teaching. We were just saying, deny the cross, make Christianity just about baptizing your appetites, and a totally "this-worldly" approach to living. We live, at least in the West, we live a really confused and confusing ecclesiological landscape. There are just so many choices. But it usually is possible to tell when the cross is being denied and when the Christian life is being reduced to being about baptizing your personal appetites and when the whole agenda is not the kingdom but supporting an earthly pattern of living and existence. It's important to seek to discern where those things are being denied and really seek to find a church, to be a part of a church, to be in submission to a church where the gospel is being preached.

Part of your question is, what do we do when we find untruth or the lack of the gospel in our own church? And there I think it kind of depends on what voice you have and

to the extent that you have a voice, I think that you're responsible, we are responsible in saying, "Here is what the Bible says." And usually churches have a confessional basis, what creeds we're committed to, what particular shape our confession is supposed to take. And we have the responsibility to go and say, "This is what we are supposed to believe but this isn't what I am hearing. Help me understand why." And go from there.

But there is another side to this too. Just because our church situation in the West is so multi-faceted, there are lots of churches that do embrace the gospel, and do so truly. But there are lots of places where they parse the faith somewhat differently, nuance, nuance fine points but even have some pretty deep disagreements about some fairly significant things but they just aren't at the heart of it. There is a responsibility, I think, that Paul would give us to exercise a measure of patience with one another and extend a certain amount of grace on those issues. And, you know, those issues are more like the relationship between God's total sovereignty and our responsibility, meaning and mode of baptism, the exact way that God transitions from Israel to the church. There are any number of things with sort of how we give priority to mercy ministries and evangelism. Often you have matters of gift mix here and sense of calling. So, there is a great need to be discerning about when the gospel itself is at stake and when the gospel itself is not at stake, and when the gospel actually calls us to see past some of our differences, and embrace one another because what holds us together, the blood of Christ, is so much stronger than the differences we have on the way that we nuance the faith.

**Student:** I was just thinking like we talked about earlier the examples of Lydia and the jailer and the demon-possessed girl being from different social and ethnic groups all being brought into one that same kind of thing can be brought over into theological issues, can't it?

**Dr. Kidd:** Yeah, and you can imagine those three have to exercise a great deal of patience with each other as they bring their cultural baggage and their preferences, their educational levels, their whole upbringings to this whole new family relationship. The point is be committed to the family relationship and to the lordship of Jesus as opposed to my own personal set of priorities.

**Student:** If you happen to find somebody in your church or sphere of influence that is teaching falsity, at what time really, while you are walking along with them, do you say, "Enough is enough." Do you even say that really? Does Paul encourage that or not?

**Dr. Kidd:** I think the principles that Jesus taught about the need to go to a person and give them the opportunity to explain, to repent, that is the place that you begin and the point there is relationship. And if you can't get satisfaction there then, again, the pattern of Jesus is that we are in, if I'm alongside them in a church, we're in submission to a council of some sort, an ecclesiastical board, pastoral oversight and

then I, if I have to alone or if I can get them, we go together and seek adjudication counsel.

**Student:** So, it really seems like this process is difficult and could potentially be really messy. You could be misunderstood. You could have your own motives impugned, that you really could experience some measure of suffering in trying to reconcile these relationships.

**Dr. Kidd:** Yeah, and that's all the more reason to appreciate, Graham, the logic that Paul is operating on in the letter to the Philippians. He can speak very strongly because he sees himself constrained by this one who became incarnate for us. When he calls us to look not to our own interests but to the interests of others, sometimes the interest of others is to be like really affirming, like "You're doing great, Wes. I'm proud of you. Hang in." And sometimes looking to the interests of others for the sake of their eternal place is to come to them and say, "Graham, you're messing around with really dangerous ideas. This is not good."

And Jesus was willing to lay aside the privileges of the heavenly courts and to come not just to take on my humanity and yours, but to take on the criminality, the ugliness of who I really am, and to be cursed by the Father, to slip into the silence of death, to go into Hell itself that he might rescue me. And sometimes, looking past my interest to your interest will mean coming to you and saying, "Man, I hate to say this but I love you too much to not say it." When we see Paul use this really strong language, we have to appreciate that it's coming out of a passion that he has that people's eternal lives be secured and that they have confidence that on the day of Christ Jesus that they be able to stand with confidence before the Lord without a question of whether or not they have wedded true faith with right living.

And this letter is a great call for all of us to consider the humility of the Lord Jesus Christ in coming into our veil of tears to redeem us. And then to call us to be his hands, his feet, his voices as we walk through what sometimes is the valley of the shadow of death. Which sometimes is just being misunderstood, and sometimes it's seeing relationships that you wish could be better than they are but knowing his fellowship in the middle of those and knowing that there is joy because he is there and in the end there will be the power of his resurrection when he makes all things right.

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**Dr. Reggie Kidd (Host)** is Professor of New Testament Emeritus at Reformed Theological Seminary. He received his M.A.R. and M.Div. from Westminster Theological Seminary and his Ph.D. in Christian Origins from Duke University. He is a member of the Evangelical Theological Society and is an ordained priest in The Episcopal Church. Dr. Kidd teaches at the Robert E. Webber Institute for Worship Studies and has served as a pastor and elder at multiple churches. He is the author of *With One Voice: Discovering Christ's Song in Our Worship* (BakerBooks, 2005) and has contributed to many other publications, including *The Spirit of the Reformation Study Bible* (Zondervan, 2003) and *The Reformation Study Bible* (Ligonier Ministries, 2005).