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Prison Epistles

Key verses: Ephesians 2:6-7; Philippians 1:6; 4:6-7; Colossians 2:8

Key personalities: Paul and his companions.

Timeline: The Church is established and grows by the Power of the Holy Spirit and the multiplying networks of Paul, 35-66 A.D.

Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon are called the "Prison Epistles" because they were written by the apostle Paul while he was imprisoned in Rome.

The Epistle of Ephesians, a 'circular' letter written by Paul and circulated to all of the churches in Asia Minor, to the church at Rome, Ephesus, Philippi, Colossae, and others was written to confront false teachers, erroneous doctrines, and immorality. This letter also addresses our relationship to God, our responsibility with interpersonal Christian relationships, the unity of the body of Christ, church leadership, spiritual warfare, and the practical implications of the Gospel. Paul reminds us of God's love and our exalted position we have in Christ.

The Epistle of Philippians is a short yet powerful letter that exhorts joy and encouragement for our continued faithful Christian walk. Paul gives his gratitude for the Philippians' support and love for his ministry. He addresses issues affecting the church as a whole, and he exhorts us to look to Christ's humility to help us be positive in Him by His example, knowing what we achieve by ourselves is nonsense and unimportant. Paul also encourages us to remain faithful even in tough times and suffering.

The Epistle of Colossians is a letter written by Paul while imprisoned to encourage and confront false doctrines like Gnosticism by false teachers. As soon as an apostle plants a church and leaves to plant another, bad people come in who forsake the true doctrine and disrespect Who Christ is and what He is about. So, Paul affirms Who Christ is; His Lordship must be front and center of a Christian and the teachings of a church. Christ's Kingdom is now. He is the head of the Church. The Message is simple. No extra rules are needed, and we have no excuse for immorality.

The Epistle of Philemon is a very short personal letter Paul addressed to Philemon and applied to anyone in that situation. Philemon was a slave master of Onesimus, who ran away. Onesimus shows up at Paul's doorstep as a new Christian. So, Paul writes to Philemon to receive him back as a brother in Christ. Paul shows a very un-cultural concern of a slave and proclaims our brotherhood in Christ, neither slave nor free (Gal 3:28).

The main theme of Paul's Epistles and ministry was the Supremacy, Sufficiency, and Centrality of Christ as LORD! Christ, as Creator and God, is superior over any idea, philosophy, religion, or mysticism. He is over trends, traditions, and even the Jewish laws that pointed to Him. No one--none--can gain salvation or fullness without Jesus Christ. How dare anyone foolishly misleads others with false truths or legalism away from the Truth to seek his own after Him.

Paul's missionary journeys took place from before 45 A.D. through 66 A.D. This is over 20 years of church planting, disciple making, networking, Epistle writing, going through the toughest things a human can endure all for the Glory of Christ.

Key Happenings: Churches are under siege by false teachers and empty philosophies!

Paul wrote to correct and to instruct people to stay away from what is false. Paul wrote to instruct us to embrace His effectual empowerment and the Truth. Paul gives his pastoral heart and concern as well as warnings and correction to this church in trouble. Real Christianity involves a cost and a commitment. Christ must be adored and honored first and foremost--over all else! The overarching call of God is to have a correct view of Christ, so our lives are aligned with His precepts and character. In this way, we can be on guard, and we live in a proper, pleasing way to glorify our Lord, so that people will see Christ exhibited in us (2 Pet. 2: 12-16; Rev. 2: 1-7)!

- Paul's correspondences to these churches under siege by false teachers, Greek philosophies, traditions, captivating Jewish mysticisms and prideful men seeking sensationalism and fake spirituality rather than Christ as Lord. Christ's Deity was being challenged and rebuffed for more so called "clever and newer" ideas--just like many today (Acts 19).
- These churches were struggling with heresies, such as that Christians must still practice Jewish ceremonies. They also taught a mixing of popular philosophical trends of the day, further making traditions into formal legalism. Then, those who also belonged to cults sought special favor and leadership in this church (Col. 1:15-16; 2:9).

They were seeking something extra and more, when God had already provided everything and ALL that is in salvation and hope.

Like all churches established or just starting out, problems occurred. The prime reason for these letters was to correct false and misleading teachings that were an infection and disruption to this or any church. Principally, the false teaching was stating that Christ was not enough. This was a clear and present danger that would tip any church outside of Christ's teaching, and it would have drifted into a cult status. Action was needed. A loving hand to be gentle and pastoral while carrying a big Holy Spirit stick to line them back up with the God who birthed, saved, and loved them.

Most people in the early church were illiterate; so, it was customary to read the letters of the Apostles as well as a Gospel aloud to the worshippers.

The Churches often received a letter addressed to them and other letters copied that were meant for another church at first, but Paul realized they were all were dealing with these issues. So, the Epistle to the Ephesians, also got a copy of Romans, or both that went to the Laodiceans as well as Philemon. Ephesians, Romans, and thus were "encyclical," as in circular letters that were copied and went out to more than one recipient, mostly in Asia Minor. An exception was Philemon, it was a personal letter to one person. It was read aloud because of the situation that needed to be settled in front of the entire assembly regarding a mutual brother (Eph. 1:1).

- Paul usually closes with greetings and prayer and the challenge for all to continue and complete the ministry. While Paul was in prison, he practiced the custom of dignitaries dictating their letters (Rom. 16:22; 1 Cor. 16:21; Gal. 6:11; 2 Thess. 3:17; Philem. 19).
- Colossians is a masterpiece about the Person, Work, and Godhood of Christ. The doctrine of His cosmic relationship and superiority are similar to John's doctrine of the Logos (John 1:1-18). Jesus is Supreme and was, before the beginning, the Creator and Controller of the universe. Christ is therefore willing and able to save us from our sins by His redemptive work. In so doing, He is proven perfect so we can trust in Him and have fullness and newness of life in Him.
- Colossians teaches us that Christ conquered the darkness and evil powers. He is The Reality of the universe and must be real in us, too. By the cross, He made our salvation possible and all the treasures of the universe are in Him and for Him. We have new life in Him. We **must** hold fast to Christ as Supreme in our hearts and in our church, for He is to be worshiped and glorified. This is what builds us up in faith and practice and also builds healthy relationships and churches. How we lead comes from how we follow Him; we do this best when we know Him more to grow in Him more!
- Paul encourages people to pursue spiritual maturity in faith, love, and obedience. If people want real Truth and wisdom, they must learn and grow in Christ. He will fill their new lives beyond comprehension. We as Christians need to trust in Christ, live lives dependent on Him, and seek those things that are not fleeting or dishonoring or that cloud us from Him (Col. 1:2-8; 28; 2:6-7).

Christianity was the solution; it is so simple, most people missed the profoundness of it and try to add to it, complicate it or dilute it by their own misunderstanding or willfulness.

The new, fancy philosophical theories were as catchy and powerful then as today's false teachers. Just as the deceptive TV ministries, politically-minded "leaders" of some churches, and cults of personality seek to fleece

the flocks and leave people empty, to too did the others do the same in the past. This is devastating and corrupt and leaves a church in chaos and confusion that also struggles with false teaching infiltrating them, too.

Paul was an extreme example of multiplying networks and energizing and influencing people for the Lord. Being excited about who you are in Christ is an essential aspect of attracting people and motivating them for and in leadership. New Christians bring in most of the new converts because they are excited and are energized. Even though new Christians may be ignorant on theological and apologetical matters, they are bringing people in versus people who have been Christians for many years, but tend to lose their excitement and, thus, may rarely bring people into the church.

Paul gives blessings on the people who helped him: Tychicus, Onesimus, Aristarchus, Mark, Barnabas, Epaphras, Luke, Demas, Nympha, and Archippus demonstrated what it means to be mobilized to serve and sacrifice. Not only did they contribute to Paul's ministry, but they are immortalized in our Bible and in Heaven, too. Our service also reflects into eternity, touching others and our Lord, too!

Paul's recognition is a testament to the importance of influence, mobilization, faith in action, and being kind and good people who get excited and joyful about their task and call. If someone in leadership has all the gifts and abilities except the ability to get it across to others, he is pretty much ineffective and in the wrong position.

- *Tychicus*. He was from the west coast of Asia Minor and worked with Paul. He carried this and other letters from Paul to churches such as Ephesians and Philemon around 60-61 A.D. He was a trusted coworker and envoy. This is also a key fact to show that Paul wrote this letter (Acts 19; 20:4; 21: 27-36; 28:30; Eph. 6:21-22; Col. 4:7, 16; 2 Tim. 4:12; Titus 3:12; Philem. 1, 9, 23-24).
- *Onesimus*. Was a slave of Philemon's who sought Paul's help to become free. Paul did something even greater; he brought him and Philemon forgiveness and reconciliation as well as human rights and showed them the importance of Christian unity and brotherhood, which is what that Epistle is about. Thus, Paul instructs this church to welcome Onesimus as a brother, even though he was an escaped slave! An "Onesimus" eventually becomes a bishop of Ephesus, this region in the early second century, but it is not certain that this is the same person.
- *Aristarchus* was a Jew from Thessalonica, a republic of Macedonia, and also worked with Paul in Greece and Ephesus, as he accompanied Paul on his trips and to Rome where he was imprisoned with him (Acts 19:29; 20:4; 27:2).
- *Mark*. The human author and/or *secretary* for the Gospel of Mark, that Paul and perhaps another Apostle supplied that information to, was a cousin of Barnabas, the great disciple maker. Paul had a rocky relationship with him and Barnabas earlier, all of them going their separate ways for several years; but, now the rift is healed and they are working together powerfully. This is the power of reconciliation and allowing the Peace of Christ to reign, which requires us to set aside our pride for the Gospel and for unity in the Church (Acts 13:13; 15:37-40; 2 Tim. 4:11; 2 Tim. 4:11; Col. 1:20-22; 3:15; Philem. 24).
- *Nympha*. She was a woman who led--even may have co-pastored or hosted a church in Laodicea. In the early church, there was more of a partnership in leadership, with women often serving as leaders. Most churches met for worship and instruction in homes or public halls or in some friendly Synagogues. Church buildings did not occur until Christianity became legal, nearly 300 years later (Acts 12:12-13; 16:13-15; Rom. 16:1-6, 12-13; 1 Cor. 14:33-35; 16:19; Eph. 5:22-33; Philp. 4:2-3; Philem. 2; 1 Tim. 2:11-15; 3:2; Titus 1:8; Heb. 13:2; 1 Pet. 4:9; 2 John 1-5).

Paul' use of the term *Church*, is the "members of one body," of Christ. The closer we are to Christ, the closer we are to one another and to what Christ has called us to do and be. Once we make real peace with God, we will be able to make and maintain peace with others. We believers need to practice unity and peace among one another as a display of how God brings peace to all of us. If we fight and are in disunity, "how can God be of peace" will be the objection from those who do not know Him (whom we are called to reach) or are new to the faith. Paul experienced strife and then reconciliation--a model for us all (Rom. 12:4; Eph. 3:6; 4:24-26; Col. 3:15).

Exercise your faith and take advantage of your opportunities to grow and promote Christ's Message.

Faithfulness and helping one another by service and collective action is what matters to God. The more we put into our faith and come together, the more we are used to get the Gospel out. This is also about encouragement and service; it is contagious and mutually shows one another our faith while it is also displayed to those who do not know Christ.

Key Takeaway: The principles of the Gospel must impact us so we are influenced and energized by it. If the leader is not excited, the message will drop off and fall flat. The learner and hearer will not desire something irrelevant and unexciting. If they see no excitement in the leader, why would they want to be a part of it? The nature of the Christian life is the joy and excitement of being in Christ over all else, and this should be the biggest motivation so the excitement the leader receives from his growth becomes contagious to those around him; this is *influence*. Being in Christ means living our lives for Him with excitement in all times and all places. This is *influence*.

The Call to the Church? The list of names Paul gives at the end of his letters show us the importance of mentoring and working through one another as ministers or in ministry. This is about being utilized and taught, willing to grow from our relationships and network so they are utilized and flowing, especially with God. Then we can be used to energize and complement one another. We can collectively be used with the gifts and abilities to strive to the fullest to the Glory of God and persevere with the Gospel.

Questions to Ponder

1. Why do some people rather stay away from what is God's effectual empowerment and Truth and embrace what is deceitful?
2. The churches Paul writes to are under siege by false teachers and Greek philosophies. How are churches today under siege?
3. If Christianity is the solution, but it is so simple, most people missed the profoundness of it and thus seek to add to it.
4. If you were able to change, and Paul the "chief sinner" was able to change, how can this give you hope for others and perseverance to be a good witness?
5. If your view of God becomes distorted, so will your behavior. How have you seen this take place?
6. In all churches problems occur, how does this give you hope to help with your church?
7. How does your life reflect that Christ is our head spiritual leader, Lord and God, where our hope and life come from?
8. How can you practice unity and peace among one another as a display of how God brings peace to all of us?
9. If your church is under siege by false teachers or bankrupt philosophies, what do you need to do?
10. What is the best way for you and the people around you to be utilized and taught to grow in your relationships especially with God?
11. How does your church show the importance of mentoring and working through one another as ministers or in ministry?
12. What needs to happen to energize and complement one another to the fullest to the Glory of God and persevere with the Gospel?