

Paul's Prison Epistles

Lesson 1

Paul's Imprisonment

Manuscript



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INTRODUCTION

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 had worldwide impact and continues to influence people for Christ even today. 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 Bunyan's book.

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 lastly, 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

As we approach Paul's prison epistles, it's important to understand that scholars are somewhat divided on where Paul was imprisoned when he wrote his letters to the Colossians, Philemon, the Ephesians, and the Philippians. Some believe he wrote from Caesarea, while others believe that he wrote from Rome. In this lesson we'll take the view that Paul probably wrote his prison epistles 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 they had collected 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:

I am going to Jerusalem, constrained by the Spirit, not knowing what will happen to me there, except that the Holy Spirit testifies to me in every city that imprisonment and afflictions await me. But I do not account my life of any value nor as precious to myself, if only I may finish my course and the ministry I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God (Acts 20:22-24).

In several of the cities Paul had 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 other 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 didn't want him to be arrested. They feared for Paul's safety, and didn't want him to come to harm. But Paul

knew that God was planning to use his arrest and imprisonment to further the spread of the gospel. As we read in Acts 21:13:

Paul answered ... "I am ready not only to be imprisoned, but even 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 upcoming imprisonment as a means to advance the gospel and minister to the church.

People often wonder how Paul decided when to face persecution and when to run. And I think it does come down to a decision point many times. The Holy Spirit really has to give that guidance, but there are many factors involved. And I think for Paul, it involved kingdom values. What's the best for the kingdom? He wasn't just in it for himself. He was willing to suffer and to die.

— Dr. Clay Quartermann

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 Bythinia, 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 Bythinia, he would not have been able to preach in Macedonia. Through this experience and many others, Paul had come to follow the leading of the Spirit's to Jerusalem no matter what would happen there. 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 the confidence that God had called him to spread the gospel and 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.

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?

ARREST IN JERUSALEM

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, 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 Gentile followers of Christ 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 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 encourage Jewish communities to abandon the traditions they had added to the Mosaic law. On the contrary, he himself followed Jewish traditions 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. Paul believed that all 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 as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though not being myself under the law), that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (not being outside the law of God but under the law of Christ), that I might win those outside the law (1 Corinthians 9:20-21).

Paul was happy to follow Jewish traditions for the sake of the gospel. But God did not obligate him to maintain these traditional Jewish applications of Old Testament law. And he did not hesitate to behave like a Gentile when he was among Gentiles. 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 Jewish traditions for the sake of the gospel.

It's 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.

When Paul made his final trip back to Jerusalem, he participated in a very important Jewish ritual of cleansing, of purification, related to four believers in Jesus, Jewish believers, who had taken a vow. Now we don't know what the vow was, but we know the process involved in this. And the process would be that they would eventually go to the temple, they would make an offering and select a time where their vow would be completed... He makes his way to the temple with them. He pays for their offering — which would have been a considerable sum — for them to fulfill their vow, and purifies himself along with it. And the main reason he did this, it really has nothing to do with trying to follow the law in terms of having salvation; it really is much more opening the door for the gospel... I think Paul looked at things like the customs, the rituals, the things of various cultures that he could participate in in order to build a bridge to the people he wanted to reach with the gospel. And so that's what he's doing with fulfilling that Jewish ritual of purification.

— Dr. Dan Lacich

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 he represented. 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 Jewish Christians in Jerusalem. 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 followers of Christ. 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:

When Paul perceived that one part were Sadducees and the other Pharisees, he cried out in the council, "Brothers, I am a Pharisee, a son of Pharisees. It is with respect to the hope and the resurrection of the dead that I am on trial." And when he had said this, a dissension arose between the Pharisees and the Sadducees, and the assembly was divided. For the Sadducees say that there is no resurrection, nor angel, nor spirit, 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 crucial 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, that he had appeared to him in a vision, and that Jesus 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, the Roman commander Claudius 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 Marcus Antonius Felix, the governor of the Roman province of Judea.

Now that we've reviewed the events preceding Paul's arrest and the circumstances of Paul's arrest in Jerusalem, we should turn our attention to his imprisonment in Caesarea in the custody of Felix.

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'll 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 Maritima, probably in A.D. 57, he was in the custody of the Roman governor Felix 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 Jewish 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 sanctity of 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 find out from him about everything of which we accuse 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 against him. 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 from Asia Minor 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 Governor Felix 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 seek to have him executed?

One of the things we see as we read the Acts of the Apostles is the deep passion and zeal on the part of Paul's opponents to see him killed, executed, whether by legal means or extralegal means or illegal means. And it does raise the question, why did Paul spark such murderous rage on the part of his opponents? ... Well, I think there are many ways we could answer this, but there is a word that comes up throughout Luke's narrative in Acts as you see Christians, the early Christians, in the presence of unbelieving Jewish authorities, and it's the word "jealousy." They were jealous that people were leaving the synagogue, and they were flocking to Jesus Christ, and they were living under the teaching and doctrine of the apostles in fellowship with other Christians.

— Dr. Guy Waters

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] hoped that money would be given to him by Paul. So he sent for him often and conversed 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. 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 and Paul's friend, 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 vision, assuring Paul that he would live to proclaim the gospel in Rome. As we read in Acts 23:11:

The Lord stood by him and said, "Take courage, for as you have testified to the facts about me in Jerusalem, so you must testify also in Rome" (Acts 23:11).

Paul's 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've seen, the Holy Spirit had already led Paul to believe that his imprisonment would further his gospel ministry. And at this point, he learned that his imprisonment would open the door for him 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.

Now, we have to keep in mind that, at this time, the power of Rome was in the eyes of faithful Jews the most powerful expression of Satanic and demonic power in the world. And later, in the book of Revelation, the apostle John referred to Rome as the great Satanic force that persecuted followers of Christ. To preach in Rome was a magnificent display of God's kingdom purposes. As Luke celebrated in the last verses of the book of Acts, God had opened the way for Paul to take the Word of the true King of the world, Jesus, right into the heart of the evil empire of the world.

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

IMPRISONMENT IN ROME

Because Paul was a prisoner of the Roman Empire, 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. The ship 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. This danger 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 something: not only did Paul have prophetic insight, but also, according to 2 Corinthians 11:25, Paul had survived three shipwrecks prior to this. Paul wanted to preach the gospel in Rome. He didn't advise against sailing because he wanted to avoid his fate in Rome. Instead, his warning came because he wanted to fulfill the mission God had given him by reaching 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 against Paul's warning. 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. He also encouraged them with what 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 were 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 venomous 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 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 taken 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:

He lived there two whole years at his own expense, and welcomed all who came to him, proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance (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 purposes were fulfilled. Paul made it to Rome. And for two years he was able to preach about the kingdom of God — the greatest threat against the power of the Roman Empire. In Rome, he taught about “the Lord Jesus Christ,” the King. And he did this “with all boldness and without hindrance” despite his house arrest, in the capital city of the most powerful evil empire of his day.

Paul's journey to Rome is very touching because it's unique how God causes the journey of a man to fulfill a greater purpose that's beyond his imagination. If you can imagine Paul having to preach in the synagogues and on the streets and is only able to speak to a certain class of people, all of a sudden through the journey of God, the work of God in his life, he's then moved into what you may call “confinement.” But that confinement allows him to now speak to soldiers, Roman soldiers to be specific. On one of the nights he was to be transported, two hundred foot soldiers, two hundred spearmen, and seventy horsemen had to lead him by night. Guess what they're talking about? Paul. The gospel. And now he's having to stand before governors and men, officials, that never came to the synagogue, that were never on the streets. His journey to Rome fulfilled a greater purpose in God's plan to get the gospel to everybody.

— Pastor Johnson Oni

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.

ONGOING MINISTRY

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 continue to spread the Gospel of Christ.

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 being 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:

I am going to Jerusalem, constrained by the Spirit, not knowing what will happen to me there, except that the Holy Spirit testifies to me in every city that imprisonment and afflictions await me. But I do not account my life of any value ... [N]one of you ... will see my face again (Acts 20:22-25).

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

I am ready not only to be imprisoned but even 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.

Paul had the courage to go forward to preach the gospel even knowing what would take place after arriving there in Jerusalem — that he would be imprisoned — because his commitment was to the preaching of the gospel... And he felt bound by the Spirit to go forward and to proclaim the gospel. And he did not allow any threats or opposition to his life or whatever to thwart or to divert him from carrying out the commission of the mission that God had given him to do.

— Rev. Robert Alexander, Jr.

Second, the book of Acts tells us that Paul was not only aware of the suffering he would endure, but he was also well aware of the purpose of his suffering.

Awareness of Purpose

Paul knew that if God planned to let him suffer, the Lord also planned to use this suffering to promote the gospel. He was utterly convinced that God would use his hardships to spread the Christian gospel. And 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 do not account my life of any value nor as precious to myself, if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God (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.

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're 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 and taught about Jesus as Israel's royal Messiah to all who came to see him in Rome. In Acts 23:11, Christ's words to Paul summarize the purpose of all of this suffering:

Take courage, for as you have testified to the facts about me in Jerusalem, so you must testify also in Rome (Acts 23:11).

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

Paul's attitude toward suffering was really pretty astounding. You know, most of us in our lives we do kind of whatever we can to avoid suffering. And this was not really the case for Paul... He says that he delights in hardship; he delights in trials and tribulation and suffering, because when he is weak, then Christ is strong. So, in all of this what we really see is Paul's goal is not to glorify himself or to find comfort in life but to glorify Christ and to do whatever God had called him to do, to be faithful in building God's kingdom and proclaiming the gospel.

— Dr. Jeff Brannon

Third, in addition to Paul's awareness of his suffering and its purpose, the book of Acts teaches that Paul was very aware of God's blessings on his ministry during this time.

Awareness of Blessings

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 many 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.

The book of Acts teaches us much about Paul's ongoing ministry during his imprisonment, but we also learn a lot from his New Testament letters to the churches of Colossae, Ephesus and Philippi, and to a Colossian man named Philemon.

LETTERS TO CHURCHES

There are many ways to summarize what we learn from Paul's letters to the churches, 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've 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 words may be given to me in opening my mouth boldly to proclaim the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains, that I may declare it boldly, as I ought to speak (Ephesians 6:19-20).

Paul knew that, even in prison, his primary responsibility was to proclaim the good news about Christ and God's kingdom. 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:

Pray also for us, that God may open to us a door for the word, to declare the mystery of Christ, on account of which I am in prison — that I may make it clear, which is how I ought to speak (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.

Second, according to Paul's letters, his ministry from prison extended beyond preaching the gospel to unbelievers. It also included constantly praying for various churches and believers around the world.

Praying

Practically speaking, it's 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 the believers in Ephesus in Ephesians 1:16-18:

I do not cease to give thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers, that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ ... may give you the Spirit of wisdom and of revelation ... having the eyes of your hearts 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.

It's interesting as Paul writes to the Ephesians how often he talks about his prayer for them as he writes. We think about Paul certainly as the great evangelist given by Christ to his church. But also, maybe even above that, we think about Paul as a pastor. He had a pastor's heart. And a pastor's heart, with it comes a sense of great love for his people. And he loved the church at Ephesus. He had spent two years there. He knew these people. He loved these people. And his desire for them was for them to grow in Christ in a meaningful way as the church began to mature according to Christ's will.

— Dr. Jay Haley

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 in all my remembrance of you, always in every prayer of mine for you all making my prayer with joy ... And it is my prayer that your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment (Philippians 1:3-9).

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

We have not ceased to pray for you, asking that you may be filled with the

knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding (Colossians 1:9).

He also prayed for specific individuals. For example, in Philemon 6, he wrote this to the Colossian believers Philemon, Apphia and Archippus:

I pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective for the full knowledge of every good thing that is in us for the sake of Christ (Philemon 6).

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

Third, in addition to preaching and praying, Paul's letters to the churches indicate that his ministry in prison included suffering on behalf of others.

Suffering

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 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. In the first place, 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've 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:

Most of the brothers, having become confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, are much more bold to speak the word without fear (Philippians 1:14).

Paul's imprisonment gave boldness to the Philippians to share the gospel because it was in Philippi that he was first imprisoned. And when he was there in prison, this was the moment when they began to

pray and sing. You've got to imagine it for a moment. The prison is a dark place — the prison was very dark, they didn't have any light — but they were singing and praising God, and people that were there began to listen. The jailer gets saved, because after the miraculous move of God, they didn't just run out, they stayed there. And the people that were in prison and everybody in the surrounding area got saved. Now, for the Philippians, knowing that Paul did not stop preaching the gospel while he was in prison, and when he got out of the prison, became so much of an encouragement in of itself that prison does not hinder a person from being able to share the gospel. So, that's the boldness. It was a testimony... A man willing to suffer, willing to be arrested but yet remain faithful with the gospel was a man that anybody would want to emulate and have as a mentor. They were truly encouraged and not deterred from the gospel because of their imprisonment.

— Pastor Johnson Oni

In the second place, we can rightly think of suffering as a ministry because it secures benefits for others. After all, Jesus Christ suffered on behalf of sinners and 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 for the suffering that others endure for this cause. As the apostle John wrote in 1 John 3:16:

By this we know love, that [Jesus Christ] laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers (1 John 3:16).

Paul believed this. As we've 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 not to lose heart over what I am suffering for you, which is 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 also 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 my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am filling

up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that 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.

The apostle Paul talks about filling up that which is lacking in the sufferings of Christ, meaning we are to bear with humility and gladness the cost of discipleship. It is often said of the early church, the power of their witness was that they died so well, that they bore suffering in a way that showed their ultimate loyalties weren't to this world but to God, but because of that, then, they were of great earthly good... And so, we have this mind in ourselves, this attitude that was in Christ Jesus, as Paul says in Philippians 2, so that if we share in his sufferings, we will also share in his resurrection and his glory.

— Rev. Michael J. Glodo

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 still endure suffering as it extends the kingdom of God around the world. 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:

[Saul] said, "Who are you, Lord?" And he said, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting" (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. Although Christ is exalted on high, he will suffer until his return 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 serve Christ in fulfilling that appointed suffering.

Besides indicating that Paul ministered by preaching, praying and suffering 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 Colossae, 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 regarding these women in Philippians 4:2-3:

I entreat Euodia and I entreat Syntyche to agree in the Lord... [H]elp these women, who have labored side by side with me in the gospel (Philippians 4:2-3).

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.

The book of Philemon is quite interesting in the way it's presented. It appears that Paul is nicely asking Philemon to free his slave. In fact, he doesn't even try to use his authority as an apostle ... and he's

allowing Philemon to really save face and look good in all of this. But if you read Philemon closely, at least when I read it, I see an individual who's talking to Philemon, telling about Paul's own role in Philemon's life. He's kind of a spiritual father. He then says, you know, "I don't want to command you to do this, but as a coworker, as a friend," you know, "do this to help me out," and he's showing the important change that's happened in Onesimus, and he's now become a brother; he's more important than a slave, and how helpful he actually is to Paul. And then in the end he says, "Get a bed ready for me. I'll be there."

— Dr. Joseph D. Fantin

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've seen, both the book of Acts and Paul's New Testament letters indicate that Paul was actively involved in ministry during his imprisonment. He knew that God had given him prison as an opportunity to 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 of his duties as an apostle of Jesus Christ.

Now that we've introduced the background of Paul's imprisonment and considered his ongoing ministry during his imprisonment, we're ready to turn to the theological unity of his letters from prison. In this section, we'll 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.

THEOLOGICAL UNITY

Needless to say, Paul's letters from prison share a number of important doctrinal foundations. Most basically, they all affirm the same gospel. But as we all know, the Christian gospel is a multifaceted message. So, it's also important to realize that Paul's letters from prison are unified by several aspects of the gospel that were especially important for Paul personally during his years of imprisonment and important for those who first received his prison epistles.

Our discussion of the theological unity of the prison epistles will focus on three closely-connected teachings that Paul returned to time and again in these letters. First, we'll look at the doctrine that Jesus Christ is King of creation. Second, we'll focus on a particular aspect of Jesus' kingship, namely believers' union with Christ in his kingship.

And third, we'll see that these two doctrines point toward the requirements of ethical living. Let's look first at Paul's teaching that Jesus Christ is the King of creation.

KING OF CREATION

Paul's emphasis on Christ as the King of creation is perhaps more pronounced in his letters from prison than in any of his other writings. We'll consider three aspects of Christ's kingship that appear frequently in these epistles: Christ's sovereignty, including his power and 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.

According to Paul, when Jesus ascended into heaven, God the Father vested him with this kind of sovereignty over all creation. Jesus is so powerful and so authoritative, that his sovereignty extends over all other kings and rulers, 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 places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come. And he put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to 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).

Is it any wonder that the sovereignty of Christ was important to Paul while he was in prison? Jesus, the Christ, rules over all creation. He rules over all earthly governments and nations and over every angel and demon. Clearly, not everything in creation obeys

him as it should. But the Father has given Jesus the right to command obedience and the power to bring about submission to his will as he wishes. Christ has the absolute right and power to bless those he loves, and to destroy his enemies. This facet of the gospel was a source of strength for Paul as he suffered, and he proclaimed it boldly in his prison epistles.

Besides emphasizing the sovereignty of Christ as the King of creation, Paul drew attention to Christ's honor, his glory and value that demands respect, emulation and worship from all of his followers.

Honor

While in prison, Paul repeatedly emphasized that Christ deserves honor because he is perfect and holy and righteous. He deserves honor because he holds a position of highest authority, and because he executes that authority justly and righteously. He also deserves honor because he is the creator and sustainer of the universe. We could easily list hundreds of reasons for why Jesus is worthy of honor. But perhaps the greatest reason that Paul gave in his prison epistles for why Jesus deserves honor and praise is because he is divine. Jesus is God, and God is worthy of the highest honor imaginable.

Paul's heightened awareness of Christ's honor also rose to the surface in these letters because some false teachers in the church did not appreciate how special Jesus was. Apparently, these false teachers had introduced the veneration of angels and spirits in addition to Jesus. Paul refuted these false teachings by emphasizing Christ's unique and surpassing greatness as the divine Son of God. Listen to the way he contrasted Christ with other spiritual beings in Colossians 1:16-17:

For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities — all things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together (Colossians 1:16-17).

As this passage indicates, Jesus is to be held in highest honor because he is the creator of everything that exists — even of the angels and spirits that the false teachers revered. Jesus is the one who established all the lower offices that other rulers hold, both in the spiritual realm and on earth. Christ 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 Colossians 1:15 and following, we encounter a part of the letter that scholars like to refer to as the “Christ hymn” of Colossians. And what we get is an extraordinary picture of the supremacy of Christ over all creation, that he is above all things — everything is under his authority — that he is at the center of all things, and more than that, that God has created all things through him and Jesus sustains all

things. And so, the picture here and in other places, like in Ephesians 1, for example, gives us a picture of a cosmic Christ whose significance for the world goes far beyond simply his birth, death, and resurrection, as important as those events are, but that he is the agent of God in creation, he is the sustainer of creation, and he is the Lord over all creation, so that all things find their end, their goal, their fulfillment in him.

— Dr. Constantine Campbell

In addition to speaking of Christ as King of creation in terms of his sovereignty and honor, Paul also 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 grand ages of humanity. Before Christ came, the world was in "this age" — the present age that was characterized by sin, death and corruption. Then 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."

According to widely held Jewish beliefs, the age to come would come 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'll refer to as the "inauguration" of the kingdom of God — and extending until Christ's return or second coming — which we'll refer to as the "consummation" of the kingdom of God. In between the inauguration and consummation is the period we'll 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.

Paul frequently appealed to his outlook on eschatology or the last days because it explained both the problems that he faced as a prisoner, and it addressed many of the problems of the churches to which he wrote while in prison. The present age of sin, death and corruption had not been completely abolished. This is why the believers continued to suffer. Nevertheless, one day in the future Jesus would return to bring final judgment against unbelievers and final blessings to all believers. In the meantime, Christians must hold fast to the hope that Jesus really will return.

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 blessed all his faithful believers in the new creation. And he plans to do this by spreading his kingdom across the entire earth. Paul knew Christ's plan was to rule over all creation, and he confidently asserted that Christ was determined to consummate his kingdom. It was for this reason that he wrote of believers having a future inheritance and of the great rewards that would be theirs when Christ returned. For example, consider his words in Ephesians 1:13-14:

When you ... believed in him, [you] were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, who is the guarantee of our inheritance (Ephesians 1:13-14).

Paul insisted that every Christian's 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 from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body to 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 held on to this hope for himself during his suffering. He also proclaimed it to Christ's followers 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 drew attention to Christ as the King of creation, and he relied on Christ's royal sovereignty, honor and determination as cornerstones for his teachings. These themes appear repeatedly in these letters, providing the basis for many of Paul's teachings, especially to the Colossians, Ephesians and Philippians.

Now that we've looked at the doctrine that Jesus Christ is the King of creation, we should turn to a second teaching that points to the theological unity of the prison epistles, namely, believers' union with Christ in his kingship. It is our union with Jesus that results in his sharing his blessings with us.

UNION WITH CHRIST

Union with Christ is a central New Testament truth especially affirmed in the gospel according to John and in the letters of Paul. So, in John 14:6, Jesus says "I am the life." And in John 3:16, we read, "whoever believes in him shall have eternal life." And there in John 3:16, Jesus is not just the object of faith, he's the very place of faith, we believe into him, we're incorporated into him as branches into a vine. So, if he's the life, if I'm to have life, I have got to be united to him.

— Dr. Knox Chamblin

According to Paul, when we believe in Jesus, we are united to him in a mysterious, spiritual way in the eyes of God. And because we are united to Jesus, we are counted as blameless in the court of heaven, just as he is. And more than this, because we are united with Christ, we also share in the glory of his resurrection. 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 the honor of 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:

If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God... For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory (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 him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable 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 many ways right now, even though we may suffer in our current earthly circumstances. And when Jesus returns, our blessings will be increased beyond measure in the world to come. But Paul also appealed to our union with Christ in his kingship to give a proper perspective on things like suffering. He spoke of union with Christ in order to make it clear that Christ's followers do not suffer alone or in vain. This was true not only for Paul himself but also for his readers. Listen to his words in Colossians 1:24:

Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that 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 of 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 the church. And more than this, he taught that our suffering now

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, the union of every believer with the King of creation was the source of great confidence, great encouragement in times of trouble and great hope for the future.

Having examined how Paul's prison epistles are theologically united by his focus on Christ as the King of creation, as well as believers' union with Christ in his kingship, we should turn to a third unifying feature of these epistles: the requirement of ethical living that is rooted in Christ's kingship and our union with him.

ETHICAL LIVING

Everyone familiar with Paul's writings knows that the apostle spent as much time teaching about Christian ethics 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 in practical ways to their lives. He not only taught correct thinking or doctrines; he also stressed proper behavior and emotions. Paul even went so far as to say that unless true teaching is applied to our lives in ways that change our behaviors and emotions, it is worthless. Listen to Paul's words to this effect in 1 Corinthians 13:2:

If I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing (1 Corinthians 13:2).

As Paul taught, even if we were to fathom all mysteries and to have all knowledge or perfect understanding of God, it is not enough. Having good doctrine — even perfect doctrine — amounts to nothing if that doctrine does not change our lives. If it is not joined with love and does not result in the ethical living in obedience to Christ, it is of no value.

It should come as no surprise to us that Paul's prison epistles regularly emphasize ethical living. On the one hand, we are obligated to obey Christ because Christ is King. On the other hand, we are obligated to obey Christ because we are united to Christ. Let's focus first on the obligation to live ethically that flows from Christ's kingship.

Christ is King

As we mentioned earlier, 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've 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 a sovereign and a

just King, we are obligated to obey everything that he commands. This is the perspective Paul offered in Philippians 2:9-12, where he wrote these words:

God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth ... Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed ... work out your own salvation with fear and trembling (Philippians 2:9-12).

Jesus is ruler and Lord over everything in heaven, on earth and under the earth. He is the King of creation. And on the basis of Christ's kingship, Paul exhorted the Philippians to obey Christ. As we've also seen, Christ's kingship brings to light the honor that is due to him. Accordingly, Paul also urged that Christians must live holy lives out of respect for their King's honor. Christ is holy and righteous and honorable. And followers of Christ are obligated to live in ways that are worthy of the honor Christ deserves. Paul wrote of this in Philippians 1:27, saying:

Let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ (Philippians 1:27).

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

Walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him[,] bearing fruit in every good work (Colossians 1:10).

Paul was deeply concerned that he and his fellow Christians would live lives that were worthy of Christ to honor him and bring him pleasure. Believers accomplish this only 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 and to live ethically according to God's commands in the ways they think, behave and feel. Time and again, he pointed out that we are to do this in acknowledgement of Christ's kingship and to bring honor to him as the King of creation.

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

United to Christ

The Holy Spirit has united us to Jesus in all that he is and has done for us ... and because we are united to God's eternal Son, we are now adopted sons and daughters of a living God and brothers and sisters of Jesus the eternal Son. That would be enough, but there's more. The Holy Spirit in applying to us what Jesus has done for us also applies

that work of our union with Christ subjectively. Paul talks about this in Romans 6, when he talks about our dying to sin and being raised to righteousness. That that's a dimension that Paul says, now, that's going to make for a new way of living, for a new freedom from the tyranny and the dominion of sin in our lives. Not that we'll never sin again, but we no longer need to be dominated by sin as though it were our lord. It's no longer our lord, we've died. And we've been raised with Christ and so the Spirit begins his lifelong, patient, quiet, relentless work of conforming us more and more to the image of Christ.

— Dr. Dennis E. Johnson

In his prison epistles, Paul explained that our union with Christ leads to ethical Christian living for at least three reasons. First, as Paul wrote from prison, he stressed that believers' union with Christ means that God works within us through the Holy Spirit. We are not left alone in this troubled world to fend for ourselves or to work in our own strength. Rather, God works within us to enable and lead us to submit to the ethical obligations we have before our King. Listen to the way Paul spoke to these issues in Philippians 2:12-13:

Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure (Philippians 2:12-13).

As these verses indicate, we have the responsibility to “work out” our ethical living in service to God. But because we are united with Christ, God works in us. The Holy Spirit moves our wills 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 ... what is earthly in you ... seeing that you have put off the old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator (Colossians 3:5-10).

Because we are united to Christ, we are called to mortify our earthly nature and to put on our new nature in Christ. This “new self” is being renewed so that we live as we should as images of God.

What we now have at our disposal by virtue of our union with Jesus Christ is the power, actually, to say yes to Christ, to say yes to God's expectations upon us. No longer is the law merely something that condemns, but by the outpouring of the Spirit and fulfillment of the new covenant, realized in the resurrected Christ, who is the life-giving Spirit, we are empowered, we are enabled, we are motivated now to

respond in obedience to God in Christ. So, our union with Christ actually fleshes itself out in the way in which we walk in a delighted obedience, and knowing that when we sin, oh!, we have an advocate with the Father who stands and lives ever to intercede for us. But in that reality, in that repentance, as we enjoy that forgiveness, we are compelled once again to live in the dynamic of resurrection power because Jesus Christ is raised, and we are raised with him.

— Dr. David B. Garner

Second, Paul also stressed that God has commanded that all who are united to his Son must live holy lives. But, God has not merely commanded this. He actually has 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 for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them (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, Paul stressed that believers’ union with Christ means that 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:

Having put away falsehood, let each one of you speak the truth with his neighbor, for we are members one of another (Ephesians 4:25).

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. We are not to sin against one another, but to work for the benefit of all. As he wrote in Philippians 2:1-3:

If there is any encouragement in Christ ... in humility count others more significant than yourselves.

Our union with Christ obligates us and enables us to live ethically. And despite the struggles we all face, we are able to live according to the standard that Christ the King has set before us. 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 and ability to live ethically. As we’ll see in future lessons, Paul’s prison epistles share many other themes in

common. But the teaching that ties most of these common themes together is the fact that Jesus Christ is the King of creation.

CONCLUSION

In this introductory lesson to Paul's prison epistles, we've examined the background of Paul's imprisonment in Caesarea and in Rome and the circumstances that gave rise to these letters. We've explored Paul's ongoing ministry in prison, both his face-to-face ministry to others and his ministry through his letters. And finally, we've introduced the theological unity of all of Paul's letters from prison, especially how they stem from Paul's firm conviction that Jesus Christ is the King of creation.

In future lessons, we'll look more closely at each of Paul's prison epistles. And as we do so, we should keep in mind the background that we've 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 Colossae, 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. Paul's experiences of suffering as a prisoner for Christ led him not only to offer much instruction to the churches to whom he wrote in the first century. When we read these portions of the New Testament in the light of Paul's circumstances, his efforts to minister to others and the major themes that stirred his heart, we'll also see that they apply to our own lives and churches in the modern world.

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GLOSSARY

Agabus – Prophet who warned Paul that he would be put in chains in Jerusalem

apostle – Special New Testament office held by someone who had been taught by Jesus, had seen the risen Lord, and had been chosen for the office by the Lord himself; from a Greek word meaning "one who is sent"

Asia Minor – A geographical area that is now part of western Turkey where Paul did the majority of his missionary work

Bunyan, John – (1628-1688) Puritan preacher and writer from England who was imprisoned for 12 years for his Protestant beliefs and wrote numerous books, including *The Pilgrim's Progress*

Caesarea Maritima – Capital city of the Roman province of Judea on the coast of Samaria where Paul was imprisoned after his trial in Jerusalem; also known as "Caesarea by the Sea"

circumcision – The Jewish tradition of excising the foreskin of the male penis instituted by God as a sign and seal for his covenant people in Genesis 17:10-14

Claudius Lysias – Commander of the Roman garrison in Jerusalem who took Paul into custody and protected him from an angry mob after learning that Paul was a Roman citizen

consummation – Third and final stage of inaugurated eschatology when Christ will return and fulfill God's ultimate purpose for all of history

continuation – Second or middle stage of inaugurated eschatology; the period of the kingdom of God after Christ's first advent but before the final victory

doctrine – A synthesis and explanation of biblical teachings on a theological topic

eschatology – The study or doctrine of the last days

Felix, Marcus Antonius – Governor of the Roman province of Judea who tried Paul in Caesarea and kept him in prison for two years, expecting a bribe for Paul's freedom

Gentile – Non-Jewish person

gospel – Literally, "good news"; announcement that God's kingdom came to earth through the person and work of Jesus and that it expands toward its great consummation as God grants salvation to those who receive and trust in Jesus as the Messiah

Herod Agrippa II – Last of the Herodian kings; also known as Julius Marcus Agrippa; Son of Herod Agrippa I and great-grandson of Herod the Great; heard Paul's petition in Caesarea and found him innocent

inauguration – First stage in inaugurated eschatology; refers to Christ's first coming and the ministries of his apostles and prophets

Julius – Roman centurion who was assigned to take Paul to Rome to stand trial before Caesar; known to have treated Paul kindly

Luke – Author of the third gospel and the book of Acts; a Gentile convert to Christianity and one of Paul's co-workers; believed to have been a physician

Macedonia – Name of an ancient Roman province located in and to the north of present-day Greece; region where Paul was told in a vision to go and share the gospel during his second missionary journey

Malta – Island in the Mediterranean where Paul was shipwrecked on his fourth missionary journey

martyr – A person who willingly suffers or is killed for refusing to turn from their religious beliefs

Mosaic law – Also called the law of Moses; can refer to the first five books of the Bible, known as the Torah or Pentateuch, or the statutes, ordinances, caselaw and judgments revealed by God to the ancient Israelites through Moses

Nazirite – Someone who voluntarily made a vow of dedication to the Lord and followed a set of rules that included no drinking wine, no cutting hair and no proximity to a dead body (see Num. 6:1-21)

Nero – Roman emperor from A.D. 54-68 who persecuted Christians; blamed the Christians for a fire in Rome in A.D. 64; executed Paul (according to tradition)

Pharisees – Jewish religious sect from the first century known for their strict observance of the Law; believed in the future resurrection, but also believed that God would not intervene until Israel became obedient to the Law

Porcius Festus – Governor of the Roman province of Judea who succeeded Felix; sent Paul to Rome to appeal to Caesar at Paul's request

prison epistles, the – Letters to the Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon that Paul wrote while he was in prison for his service to Christ

Sadducees – Jewish sect at the time of Christ that only adhered to the five books written by Moses (Genesis–Deuteronomy) and did not believe in angels, spirits, or the resurrection of the dead

Sanhedrin – The highest court and council of ancient Israel that had both religious and civil jurisdiction

sovereignty – Theological term that refers to God's continuing rule and complete authority over all creation

Tertullus – Lawyer for a group of Jews from Jerusalem who argued before Governor Felix in Caesarea that Paul had incited riots and violated the sanctity of the temple

the age to come – Phrase used by rabbis and leaders in Israel to describe the future age of righteousness, love, joy and peace that would follow the exile; time when all of God's purposes for history would be fulfilled

this age – Phrase used by rabbis and leaders in Israel to describe the present age of sin, suffering and death

Trophimus – Gentile from Asia Minor who accompanied Paul to Jerusalem and who incorrectly was thought to have entered the inner court of the temple with Paul, causing an uproar among the Jews