

New Facebook Bible Study – The Prison Epistles – Begins July 2, 2020

Many people have described the efforts made to slowdown the spread of Covid-19 has been like being in prison. Some of the elderly with compromised immune systems are fearful and afraid to go out and thus find their life very confining. God reminded me of Paul's prison letters and I decided they would give us the spiritual insight into how we can handle life when God allows ours to change in dramatic ways.

The prison epistles are Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, letters to churches and a personal letter to Philemon. They are so named because they were written by the apostle Paul during his first incarcerations in Rome. The exact dates he wrote each of the prison epistles is unknown, but the two-year period he spent under house arrest in Rome has been narrowed down to the years AD 60–62. Paul's imprisonment in Rome is verified by the book of Acts, where we find references to his being guarded by soldiers (Acts 28:16), being permitted to receive visitors (Acts 28:30), and having opportunities to share the gospel (Acts 28:31). These details, along with Paul's mention of being with "those who belong to Caesar's household" (Philippians 4:22), support the view that Paul wrote the prison epistles from Rome.

Three of the prison letters, also called the imprisonment or captivity letters, were bound for three of the churches he founded on his second missionary journey (Acts 20:1-3). Always concerned for the souls of those he continually prayed for in these churches, his letters reflect his pastor's heart and his love and concern for those he thought of as his spiritual children. Colossians was written explicitly to defeat the heresy that had arisen in Colosse that endangered the existence of the church. In his letter, Paul dealt with key areas of theology, including the deity of Christ (Colossians 1:15–20; 2:2–10), the error of adding circumcision and other Jewish rituals to salvation by faith (Colossians 2:11–23), and the conduct of God's people (chapter 3). The letter to the church at Ephesus also reflects Paul's concerns for the beloved, especially that they would understand the great doctrines of the faith (chapters 1–3) and the practical working out of that doctrine in Christian behavior (chapters 4–6). The epistle to the Philippians is Paul's most joyful letter, and references to his joy abound within its pages (Philippians 1:4, 18, 25–26; 2:2, 28; 3:1; 4:1, 4, 10). He encourages the Philippian believers to rejoice in spite of suffering and anxiety, rejoice in service, and continue to look to Christ as the object of their faith and hope.

The fourth prison letter was written to Paul's "friend and fellow laborer," Philemon (Philemon 1:1) as a plea for forgiveness. Philemon's slave, Onesimus has run away from Philemon, had run away from Philemon's service to Rome, where he met the aging apostle and became a convert to Christ through him. Paul asks Philemon to receive Onesimus back as a brother in Christ who is now "profitable" to both of them (Philemon 1:11). The theme of the book of Philemon is forgiveness and the power of the gospel of Christ to undermine the evils of slavery by changing the hearts of both masters and slaves so that spiritual equality is achieved.

While the prison epistles reflect Paul's earthly position as a prisoner of Rome, he makes it clear that his captivity was first and foremost to Christ (Philemon 1:9; Ephesians 3:1; Colossians 4:18; Philippians 1:12–14). Paul's time in prison was for the purpose of the spreading of the gospel in the Gentile capital of Rome. The Lord Himself told Paul to "take courage! As you have testified about me in Jerusalem, so you must also testify in Rome" (Acts 23:11). Paul's time in captivity was no less profitable to us today than it was to the first-century churches he loved so well.

Read this introduction to the Prison Epistles and if possible, copy, print and save it. The background information contained here will be helpful in the study of the individual books. Most of this was copied from the www.gotquestions.org website.

Tomorrow I will print the specific Introduction to Ephesians as well as an outline. Then the next day we will begin the actual study of the book.

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