

The Prison Epistles - EPHESIANS

INTRODUCTION

This Home Bible Study Guide is the first of a series on what are called the Prison Epistles: Philemon, Colossians, Ephesians and Philippians. These were all written by the Apostle Paul during his imprisonment in Rome. He had been arrested in Jerusalem in the summer of 58 A.D. and transferred for his own protection to Caesarea, the seat of civil government and the residence of the Roman governor of Judea, Felix. Paul was detained there for two years, simply because it was expedient for Felix to curry favor with the religious authorities in Jerusalem. He also thought that Paul or his friends would eventually offer a bribe to secure his release.

When Felix was recalled to Rome, the authorities in Jerusalem sought to persuade his successor, Festus, to return Paul to Jerusalem. They hoped to have him assassinated on the way. Festus refused to act without some understanding of the charges against Paul. During the hearing that followed, Paul exercised his right as a Roman citizen to have his case heard before Caesar. He set sail for Rome in the fall of 60 A.D. with an armed escort and some of his Christian companions but did not arrive there until the spring of 61 A.D. Luke's record, the Acts of the Apostles, ends at this point, with Paul under house arrest in Rome for a further period of two years.

From the context of the epistles themselves it would appear that Epaphras had arrived in Rome, bringing information to Paul relating to the churches in Colosse, Laodicea and Hierapolis. These cities were within 15 miles of each other in Asia. On behalf of these believers Epaphras was "*wrestling in prayer that they would stand firm in all the will of God, mature and fully assured.*" Colossians 4:12. Paul had the same desire for them although he had never met them.

He wrote his Epistle to the Colossians and sent it by the hand of Tychicus, one of his faithful companions from his days in Ephesus. Tychicus was accompanied by Onesimus, a run-away slave, who had since been converted. His master, Philemon, was himself a believer and a resident of Colosse. Paul wrote this very personal Epistle to Philemon to show how that in Christ steps of reconciliation and forgiveness could take place. We also know that Tychicus carried a third letter or perhaps letters.

We do not now have the letter to the Laodiceans, but we do have some early manuscripts of what is now called the Epistle to the Ephesians that leave room for the insertion of a location. F.F. Bruce in his Commentary Paul the Apostle of the Heart Set Free says: "*Perhaps we may call it (Ephesians) a general letter to gentile Christians, more particularly in the Province of Asia . . .*" The personal notes at the end of Ephesians link it with Colossians and provide formal justification for considering the two epistles in the same historical context.

We know of other churches in the Province of Asia from the Apostle John's letters to the seven churches, all of which were located within approximately 100 miles of Ephesus. The Epistle to the Philippians was written later and reflects the strength of relationships that had been built up "*because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now.*" (Philippians 1:4-5.)

We will be studying these letters in the order in which they appear in the New Testament. Through the Holy Spirit Paul has written a masterpiece in Ephesians in which he brings together all he has learned about "*He who has ascended higher than all the heavens, in order that he might fill the whole universe.*" (Ephesians 4:10)

In response to problems encountered in having the questions on content use up all the available time, leaving no time for the response questions, we have shortened the length of the passages to be considered and reduced the number of questions designed to clarify understanding of what the Scriptures say. We have added more response questions. It is crucial to the learning process that you answer and discuss these response questions every week. There is very little point to adding to your knowledge of the facts of Scripture without exploring and thinking through the implications of these facts for your own life.

There are many good commentaries available on these epistles and you might want to consult one of them if you have questions. However, the study is designed so that you can answer the questions using only your Bible.

Sources

New Bible Dictionary, Douglas, Eerdmans, 1965.

Expositor's Bible Commentary, Vol. 11, Zondervan, 1978.

The Life and Epistles of St. Paul, Conybeare and Howson, Eerdmans, 1950.

The Epistles of Ephesians and Colossians, New International Commentary, New Testament, Eerdmans, 1957.

Paul, Apostle of the Heart Set Free, Bruce, Eerdmans, 1972.

THE PRISON EPISTLES - EPHESIANS STUDY 1

READ: Ephesians 1:1-14

1. What do you learn from the salutation in this letter, verses 1-2?
2. Why is praise offered to God, verses 3?
3. How are these spiritual blessings obtained, verses 4-8?
4. What do you understand verses 9 and 10 to be saying?
5. For what reasons were the believers chosen and predestined, verses 4-5; 11-12?
6. Identify the steps in the process by which these people came to share Paul's hope in Christ, verses 13-14.

RESPONSE

1. How does this passage refute the idea that the gospel is concerned only with your sins?
2. What do the verbs used to describe God's activity on your behalf tell you about God?
3. Why can you be confident that God's purpose in Christ will be accomplished?
4. What do you think is involved in living a life that is "to the praise of His glory"?

THE PRISON EPISTLES - EPHESIANS STUDY 2

READ: Ephesians 1:15-23

1. Why does Paul include these people in his prayers, verses 15-16?
2. List the attributes which he desires them to receive, verses 17-19.
3. To what is God's incomparably great power on their behalf equal, verse 20?
4. What is Christ's position in relation to the present age, verse 21?
5. What is His position in relation to the church, verse 22?
6. What is the function of the church, verse 23?

RESPONSE

1. What do you learn about prayer from verses 15-19?
2. In what ways are your prayers for other believers different from this prayer?
3. How do you think God's incomparably great power is being manifested today?
4. Review your answer to question 6. How does this view of the church differ from yours?

THE PRISON EPISTLES - EPHESIANS STUDY 3

READ: Ephesians 2:1-10

1. List the phrases which describe what was true once of our lives, verses 1-2.
2. Why is it not possible to successfully argue that we were simply victims of sin, verse 3?
3. What characteristics of God were active on our behalf, verses 4-5?
4. What has God done for us and why, verses 6-7?
5. What do you understand the teaching of verses 8 and 9 to be?
6. What is the purpose for which God has acted on our behalf, verse 10?

RESPONSE

1. Why do all the political and social reforms which promise a better life for man fail?
2. By what processes has God broken the cycle of failure in your life?
3. What do the verbs "*raised*", "*seated*" and "*show*" used in verses 6 & 7 tell you about God's purpose for your life?
4. Verse 10 indicates that there are some immediate things you should be doing. What are some of the ways in which you are fulfilling this requirement?

THE PRISON EPISTLES - EPHESIANS STUDY 4

READ: Ephesians 2:11-22

Before proceeding with the questions, you should read Genesis 17:1-14 where the rite of circumcision is given to Abram by God as a sign setting him and his descendants apart as a people belonging to God. In the centuries that followed, the covenant, the sign of which was circumcision, became separated from the faith which gave the rite its original significance (see Paul's argument in Romans 4:9-12).

The word "*uncircumcised*" when used by a Jew was a word of contempt. It summed up all the hostility which the Jews felt for the Gentile pagans. Such people had no claim on the blessings of God. These were reserved for the "*circumcised*". This exclusive spirit was the cause of the first serious division in the early church (see Acts 15:1-2 and 5-29). The resolution arrived at by the Council in Jerusalem was never fully accepted by some Jews "*zealous for the law*". The problems which their attitude and actions caused appear again and again in the New Testament letters.

1. Humanly speaking, what is the situation in which the Gentiles find themselves, verses 11-12?
2. Why is it now possible for Gentiles to change their relationship to the Jews, verse 13?
3. What has been accomplished by the blood of Christ, verses 14-16?
4. What do Jews and Gentiles now have in common through Christ, verses 17 -18?
5. List the conclusions that can now be reached about those Gentiles who have been saved, verses 19-20?
6. What is God now doing in the lives of those who know Him, both Jew and Gentile, verses 21-22?

RESPONSE

1. List some differences that are used in pride to separate Christians today.
2. Why are these not valid?
3. Do you think there are any valid reasons to refuse to have fellowship with another Christian? If so, what are they?
4. What point do you think Paul is making in these verses?

THE PRISON EPISTLES - EPHESIANS STUDY 5

READ: Ephesians 3:1-13

Paul here interrupts his development of that which flows out of both Jews and Gentiles being built together to become a dwelling place in which God lives by His Spirit. He now provides an explanation to his readers of the reason why he has the authority to write as he does and why he is so knowledgeable about God's plans. What he writes here is consistent with his other letters in which he says that his information was received by direct revelation from God (see I Corinthians 11:23; Galatians 1:11-12).

1. What was unique about Paul's administration of God's grace, verse 2 (see Ephesians 2:11-22; 3:6)?
2. a) How was this mystery made known to Paul, verse 3?

 b) What advantage did the holy apostles and prophets have over previous generations in understanding the Scriptures, verses 3-5 (see I Peter 1:10-12)?
3. What is the mystery of Christ, verse 6?
4. Why is Paul involved in the administration of this mystery, verses 7-9?
5. What is God doing through the church, verses 10-11?
6. What privileges can you enjoy as a result of what Christ Jesus our Lord accomplished, verses 12-13?

RESPONSE

1. In what way does the information in these verses change your opinion of the church?
2. List the ways in which you think your church is declaring the manifold wisdom of God?
3. What do you think your personal contribution is toward fulfilling God's eternal purpose?
4. What reasons do you have for approaching God?

THE PRISON EPISTLES - EPHESIANS STUDY 6

READ: Ephesians 3:14-21

Paul, having given an explanation of how he became a servant of the gospel, now returns in thought to *“the riches of God’s grace that he lavished on us with all wisdom and understanding”*, and the verses which follow are his response.

1. For what reason does Paul kneel before the father as verses 14 and 15 tell us he does?
2. List his requests in verses 16 and 17.
3. List his requests in verses 18 and 19.
4. What insight into God’s desire for the church do you get from verse 20?
5. Paul says in verse 21: *“to Him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever.”* How does the church bring glory to God?

RESPONSE

1. Look again at your list of requests for which Paul prays in verses 16-19. In what ways are these requests in contrast to your own prayers?
2. Why do you think these differences occur?
3. List the phrases which Paul uses in his prayer to describe God’s work and its results.
4. What do these tell you about God’s purpose for your life?
5. In what ways do you think your church manifests God’s glory?

THE PRISON EPISTLES - EPHESIANS STUDY 7

READ: Ephesians 4:1-16

Having expressed his desire that the believers *“be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God”* and that *“to God be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations for ever and ever”*, Paul now begins to explain how in fact we can bring glory to God in this present life.

1. What kind of behavior is required of you if you are to demonstrate the worthiness of the life you have received, verses 1-3?
2. What do all believers have in common, verses 4-6?
3. a) In what way are believers different, verses 7-8?

b) Why is Christ in a position to make these distinctions, verses 9-10?
4. List the distinctions and explain why they were made, verses 11-13.
5. Why is maturity necessary for every believer, verse 14?
6. What is the result when the gifts are being properly employed, verses 15-16?

RESPONSE

1. Why should you take Paul's instruction to live a worthy life seriously?
2. What do you think the results are when there are quarrels between Christians and churches over doctrine?
3. Have the gifts given by Christ to the church equipped you for any work of service? Explain your answer.
4. What do you do that contributes to the body growing and building itself up in love?

THE PRISON EPISTLES - EPHESIANS STUDY 8

READ: Ephesians 4:17-31

1. List the characteristics of our society, verses 17-19.
2. Why is this lifestyle no longer acceptable, verses 20-21?
3.
 - a) What is wrong with the old self, verse 22?
 - b) Where does the putting on of the new self begin and what are the results, verses 23-24?
4. What is the appropriate response, and why, to:
 - ✓ falsehood
 - ✓ anger
 - ✓ stealing (see verses 25-28)
5. Why is unwholesome talk not acceptable from a believer, verses 29-30?
6. List the responses you are to rid your life of and the attitudes with which these are to be replaced, verses 31-32.

RESPONSE

1. In the verses which describe our society, why do you think the phrases, *"futility of their thinking, darkened in their understanding, ignorance that is in them, lost all sensitivity"* are used?
2. Why should you take the conclusions seriously that are reached in these verses about our society?
3. What are the positive characteristics that give credibility to your witness for Christ.
4. Which of these instructions in regard to behavior do you find the most difficult to respond to and why?

THE PRISON EPISTLES - EPHESIANS STUDY 9

READ: Ephesians 5:1-20

1. What is the thing most characteristics of Christ's love, verses 1-2?
2. List the kinds of behavior that are not acceptable in the lives of those who claim to be Christians, verses 3-4.
3. To insure that you understand verses 5-7, try to express their meaning in your own words.
4. What analogy is used to capture the difference between those who are believers and those who are not, verses 8-14?
5. What precautions should believers take and what protection do they have, verses 15-17?
6. With what positive actions are you to fill your life, verses 18-20?

RESPONSE

1. What do you think you have to do in order to live a life of love?
2. In the Christian community today, the statements made in verses 5-7 are sometimes considered too harsh. Why do you think this has happened, and what can you do to correct this misunderstanding?
3. What steps do you take in the process of distinguishing that which is of the light from that which is of the darkness?
4. How is it possible for you to give God thanks for everything?

THE PRISON EPISTLES - EPHESIANS STUDY 10

READ: Ephesians 5:21-33

Note - I have deliberately included verse 21 with the verses under consideration this week because it is a necessary precondition to what follows. In my opinion, no one can accept willingly and joyfully these instructions in regard to the marriage relationship without understanding and accepting that all Christians are already obliged to submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.

1. What is the motivation for submission, verse 21?
2. What condition is attached to the wife's submission to her husband, verse 22?
3. Why should this order be respected in a Christian home, verses 23-24?
4. What standard is to govern the husband's behavior to his wife, verses 25-27?
5. What is the key to unity in marriage, verses 28-30?
6. From the closing verses of this chapter, express in your own words God's original intention for marriage.

RESPONSE

1. Why do you think we find submission to one another so distasteful?
2. What makes a wife's submission to her husband possible?
3. The necessity for both men and women to recognize and respond appropriately to their interdependence on each other if they are to live in relationships that honor Christ both in the church and in marriage is clearly being taught in these verses.
 - a) Why do you think teaching and discussion has become focused on the wife's submission rather than on a husband's responsibility to love as Christ did?
 - b) What can be done to eliminate the sense of injustice this has produced in the minds of women?
4. Verse 31 is a quotation from Genesis 2:24 which expresses God's original purpose for marriage and was given before the fall. The same quotation is used by Jesus in Mark 10:5-9 in his defense of marriage. What do we learn about God and the marriage relationship from its use in these places?

THE PRISON EPISTLES - EPHESIANS STUDY 11

READ: Ephesians 6:1-9

1. List the reasons given why children should obey their parents, verses 1-3.
2. What instructions are given to fathers, verse 4?
3. Why is a slave to obey his earthly master, verses 5-6?
4. a) With what attitude is a slave to serve, verses 7-8?

b) Why?
5. What is the master's responsibility, verse 9?
6. In what respect are the slave and the master the same, verse 9?

RESPONSE

1. Obedience is no longer considered by our society to be an acceptable basis for behavior. Why should it be retained by Christian parents?
2. a) What do you think the command to fathers, "*do not exasperate your children*" means?

b) What, in your opinion, does training and instruction in the Lord involve?
3. What are the principles governing the relationship between slave and master that are valid for today?
4. What should be the Christian's response to the inequalities and injustices which he or she encounters in the work place?

THE PRISON EPISTLES - EPHESIANS STUDY 12

READ: Ephesians 6:10-21

1. What protection does a believer have against the devil's schemes, verses 10-11?
2. Why is it so difficult to stand, verse 12?
3. What is a Christian's responsibility in an evil day, verse 13?
4. List the equipment available to you, verses 14-17.
5. What are the guidelines given in regard to prayer, verses 18-20?
6. What do you learn about Paul from verses 21-24?

RESPONSE

1. What do you think is involved in taking a stand against the devil's schemes?
2. In your opinion, why do Christians continue to think that their main opponents are unbelieving men and women?
3. What action is required of you to use the following equipment:
 - ✓ Belt of truth
 - ✓ Breastplate of righteousness
 - ✓ Feet fitted
 - ✓ Shield of faith
 - ✓ Helmet of salvation
 - ✓ Sword of the Spirit
4. What have you learned about prayer from verses 18-20?