

The Prison Epistles - PHILEMON 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.*" Col. 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.”* (Phil. 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.”* (Eph. 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 - PHILEMON STUDY 1

READ: Philemon 1-25

1. What do you learn from the salutation in vs. 1-3?
2. List the things which Paul appreciates about Philemon and what he desires to see in this man's life, vs. 4-7.
3. What do you see as significant in the way Paul raises the question of Onesimus' relationship with Philemon, vs.8-11?
4. Identify the factors on which Paul bases his appeal for Onesimus, vs. 12-16.
5. What do these three men now have in common, and why does Paul expect this to change Philemon's behavior toward Onesimus, vs. 15-17?
6. Reread the Epistle. What is your impression of:
 - ✓ Paul?
 - ✓ Onesimus?
 - ✓ Philemon?

RESPONSE

1. What do you consider to be the essential ingredients to maintaining good relationships between Christians?
2. Which man do you think had the hardest job? Explain.
3. In your own interpersonal relationships, what is the hardest thing you have to do?
4. What information in this letter is going to be of the most use to you in maintaining good relationships with other people?