

**THY
KINGDOM
COME**

**10. The Letters of Paul – Part 3
The Prison Epistles
Philemon, Colossians, Ephesians, and
Philippians**

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**A Teaching Commentary
of the New Testament**

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1. The Prison Epistles

Philemon, Colossians, Ephesians, and Philippians are often called the Prison Epistles, because Paul is believed to have written them during the Roman imprisonment described in Acts 28. Philemon, Colossians, and Ephesians are often dated as having been written around the same time, for reasons that will be discussed when we look at the books. Philippians was probably written a bit later. Philemon was written to address a need in the life of a particular individual. Colossians, Ephesians, and Philippians were written to edify and instruct the churches in those cities. Paul's confinement prevented him from going and dealing with issues directly, so he was forced to write to them in order to instruct them. For that reason, his confinement has worked to our benefit, because we have the legacy of these books.

2. Philemon

There are three main characters in the short book of Philemon:

- Paul, who was in prison at the time of the writing, probably in Rome. This was probably written during the Roman imprisonment of Acts 28.
- Onesimus, a runaway slave, who was with Paul at the time of the writing.
- Philemon, the owner of Onesimus.

It seems that Philemon and Paul knew one another. In Philemon 1, Paul addresses him as “Philemon our dear friend and fellow worker.” Because of their association, Onesimus also had made Paul’s acquaintance.

Onesimus had run away from Philemon. Philemon 19 implies that he may have stolen from Philemon as he fled, probably taking enough to sustain himself for a time. After running away, Onesimus found himself in a vulnerable position. He began to feel sorry for what he had done, but he was afraid to go back for fear of punishment. Thus he went to Rome and sought Paul’s advice. He spent at least some time with Paul, because Paul indicates in Philemon 13 that Onesimus has been of service to him while he has been in chains. Paul knew that matters had to be made right with Philemon, however.

Paul sent Onesimus back to Philemon, but wrote this letter in order to intercede on his behalf. Onesimus may have left as a rebellious servant, but he was returning as a submitted brother in Christ. Paul was appealing to Philemon to receive him as such.

Philemon 8-21 is the heart of the letter:

Therefore, although in Christ I could be bold and order you to do what you ought to do, yet I appeal to you on the basis of love. I then, as Paul – an old man and now also a prisoner of Christ Jesus – I appeal to you for my son Onesimus, who became my son while I was in chains. Formerly he was useless to you, but now he has become useful both to you and to me.

I am sending him – who is my very heart – back to you. I would have liked to keep him with me so that he could take your place in helping me while I am in chains for the gospel. But I did not want to do anything without your consent, so that any favor you do will be spontaneous and not forced. Perhaps the reason he was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back for good – no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother. He is very dear to me but even dearer to you, both as a man and as a brother in the Lord.

So if you consider me a partner, welcome him as you would welcome me. If he has done you any wrong or owes you anything, charge it to me. I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand. I will pay it back – not to mention that you owe me your very self. I do wish, brother, that I may have some benefit from you in the Lord; refresh my heart in Christ. Confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I ask.

There are times when Paul does not even try to be subtle. “I could be bold and order you...” “I will pay it back – not to mention that you owe me your very self.” He did not really leave Philemon many options. The last statement, “knowing that you will do even more than I ask,” implies that his real expectation is that Philemon will set Onesimus free.

In Paul's writings, he never advocated the outright abolishment of slavery. He did something perhaps more dramatic. He advocated treating slaves as brothers. If that happened, then the institution would collapse or at least would become an employer - employee relationship rather than any form of oppression.

As best we can tell, Philemon did indeed release Onesimus and Onesimus became one of Paul's beloved assistants. Colossians 4:9 indicates that Onesimus was one of the people who carried the letter from Paul to the church at Colossae.

In Philemon 22, Paul tells Philemon to prepare a room so that Paul can come and visit. This indicates that he expected to be released from prison soon. This may have been written at a time when the end of the Acts 28 imprisonment was in sight.

Philemon 23 mentions Epaphras, who is in prison with Paul. He is mentioned twice in Colossians. The closing also mentions Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke as being with Paul. Aristarchus is mentioned as a traveling companion of Paul in Acts 19:29, Acts 20:4, Acts 27:2, and Colossians 4:10. Demas is mentioned as a companion of Paul in Colossians 4:14. He is later mentioned as one who deserted Paul in 2 Timothy 4:10. The letters of Philemon and Colossians are generally thought to have been written around the same time because they both indicate that Epaphras, Onesimus, Aristarchus, Mark, and Luke as being present with Paul.

3. Colossians

There is nothing in Scripture to indicate that Paul ever set foot in Colossae. Colossians 2:1 indicates that he has never met many members of that church. Colossians 1:7 indicates that Epaphras (mentioned in Philemon) founded the church.

In Paul's day, Colossae was a small and fairly unimportant city, in the general vicinity of Ephesus. We know that Paul spent a long time ministering in Ephesus. It is possible that Epaphras became a convert during this time and took his newfound faith home to Colossae.

Reading the letter, we discover that Paul wrote it to address certain heresies that had started in the Colossian church. Colossians 2:8 says, "See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ." We are not certain about the exact nature of the philosophy that infected the church, but the letter reveals a great deal about it. It seems to have been a mixture of Gnosticism and Asceticism with a twist of Judaizer philosophy thrown in for good measure. What are these?

We have encountered the Judaizers before. They taught that Christians needed to live under Mosaic Law. They sought to impose Jewish dietary laws and laws concerning ceremonial cleanliness upon Gentile converts. Particularly troublesome was the requirement for circumcision. It was a barrier that many Gentile men did not wish to cross. It was an unnecessary barrier for them and it also denied the power of the cross. It was a particularly troublesome heresy for Paul and he dealt with it in several of his letters.

Gnosticism is a philosophy that teaches that spirit is good and matter is evil. It is a dualistic philosophy that says the spirit man is good and the flesh-and-bones body is not good. It teaches that salvation is achieved through knowledge – which feeds the spirit man. By achieving the appropriate special knowledge we can rise above the evil of our physical existence and ascend to spiritual salvation. It is a heresy that has never gone away. Today it manifests in such movements as Scientology, Religious Science, Christian Science, and other new age religions.

Gnosticism claimed (and claims) Jesus as one of its own. He was the ultimate ascended master. They have a problem with the claims of Christianity, however, because someone who came from God – who must surely be good – could not possibly have been bound to an evil flesh-and-bones body. Various forms of Gnosticism dealt with this in different way. Some say that Jesus only appeared to have a body. Others say that the pure spirit of Jesus inhabited the body of another individual while on earth and departed from that body right before the crucifixion (no doubt leaving his host to face the crucifixion alone). They obviously denied the death of Jesus and the bodily resurrection.

Asceticism adds a twist to Gnosticism. Some Gnostics believed that since the body was evil anyway, it did not matter what you did with your body. Asceticism says that the body is to be rebuffed by denying it of wants and needs. This will help the spirit to conquer the flesh.

Knowing about these philosophies, it will be obvious to see how Paul counters them in this letter. Look for repeated uses of the word "body." Look for repeated emphasis that Jesus came in a flesh-and-blood human body. Look for repeated uses of terms like "knowledge," "wisdom," and "mystery" referring to the true message of the Gospel. Colossians is Paul's attempt to dismantle these false teachings in the Colossian church.

Paul wrote this letter to a church surrounded by confusion. People were telling them to seek peace and fulfillment through human philosophies and heresies. Paul stood as a pillar among them, remind them to find peace and unity with God by setting their minds on things above.

3.1 Greeting

Colossians 1:1-8

The letter is from Paul and Timothy and is to the church at Colossae. Paul begins by commending them for their faith. Their good reputation has reached Paul and he is encouraged by them. He also indicates in Colossians 1:7 that Epaphras was their leader and the one who instructed them in the faith, i.e. the founder of that church.

3.2 Jesus, The Image of the Invisible God

Colossians 1:9-29

In Colossians 1:9-29, Paul attempts to give a brief presentation of the truth of the Gospel, using every phrase and every term that he can to counter Gnostic teaching. It is artfully done:

For this reason, since the day we heard about you, we have not stopped praying for you and asking God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all spiritual wisdom and understanding. And we pray this in order that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and may please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God, being strengthened with all power according to his glorious might so that you may have great endurance and patience, and joyfully giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the kingdom of light. For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy. For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.

Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior. But now he has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation – if you continue in your faith, established and firm, not moved from the hope held out in the gospel. This is the gospel that you heard and that has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven, and of which I, Paul, have become a servant.

Now I rejoice in what was suffered for you, and I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ's afflictions, for the sake of his body, which is the church. I have become its servant by the commission God gave me to present to you the word of God in its fullness – the mystery that has been kept hidden for ages and generations, but is now disclosed to the saints. To them God has chosen to make known among the Gentiles the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.

We proclaim him, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone perfect in Christ. To this end I labor, struggling with all his energy, which so powerfully works in me.

Notice the repeated emphasis on the truth of Christ being the only wisdom, knowledge, understanding, and mystery that make sense. There is no need to pursue Gnostic wisdom or to attain some special revelation. The knowledge that is already available in the Gospel message is the only wisdom the people need. It contains the “mystery that has been kept hidden for ages and generations, but is now disclosed to the church.”

Also notice the repeated emphasis on Christ’s physical body and his death – his blood, shed on the cross. Paul says that Christ’s death was the mechanism through which God reconciled the world to himself, bringing us peace and forgiveness. There is an emphasis on Jesus being the creator of physical things – matter.

There is also an interesting counter to Gnostic philosophy when Paul said that we were once “enemies in our minds” with God. Gnostics taught that the mind was where you achieved oneness with God. The mind was your path to salvation. Paul correctly pointed out that our minds are where unfaithfulness and rebellion begins. The mind is the battlefield. It is not the sanctuary. Our reconciliation came through the sacrifice of Jesus’ physical body – not through anything that we will ever conjure up in our minds.

Paul also goes after Asceticism by pointing out that Jesus has already “suffered for you.” Salvation does not come through any suffering that you inflict on yourself. It comes by accepting the suffering that Jesus took on for us in his physical body.

Thus in this passage Paul has done much to counter the false teachings. He has also presented some great truths. It is important not to get lost in how he said things and lose sight of what he said. Some important points that he makes include:

- There is an inheritance for the saints in the Kingdom.
- God rescued us from the “dominion of darkness” and brought us into his Kingdom, giving us redemption and forgiveness for sin.
- Jesus was the visible image of the invisible God. He came to show us the Father by being a physical representation of the character of God.
- The church is a body with Jesus at the head. We, the members, function to give the body mobility and to cause it to bear fruit.
- Jesus was the firstborn of creation and he was the firstborn from the dead. This was done so that he would have supremacy. The fact that he was firstborn from the dead implies that others will follow.
- We have peace with God because of the shed blood of Jesus.
- We became enemies of God in our minds, i.e. through thoughts and attitudes that led to rebellion. We are reconciled to God through the sacrifice of Jesus.
- The mystery of the Gospel was hidden for generations but has now been made known to the Gentiles.

3.3 Do Not Be Taken Captive

Colossians 2

Paul continues to counter the Colossian heresies in chapter 2. Colossians 2:1-5 says:

I want you to know how much I am struggling for you and for those at Laodicea, and for all who have not met me personally. My purpose is that they may be encouraged in heart and united in love, so that they may have the full riches of complete understanding, in order that they may know the mystery of God, namely, Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. I tell you this so that no one may deceive you by fine-sounding arguments. For though I am absent from you in body, I am present with you in spirit and delight to see how orderly you are and how firm your faith in Christ is.

Again we see the repeated emphasis on the fact that the Gospel is the only wisdom, knowledge, understanding, and mystery that the people need to grasp in order to be reconciled to God. In the last verse, we even see Paul pick up on the theme of the body vs. the spirit, only using it in a completely different vein.

We also see in this passage that Paul has never met many of the Colossians personally. As mentioned in the introduction to the book, he had most likely never visited this city. This letter expresses his care for them, however, and his desire that they not be deceived by “fine-sounding arguments.” He continues to attack those arguments in Colossians 2:9-12:

For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form, and you have been given fullness in Christ, who is the head over every power and authority. In him you were also circumcised, in the putting off of the sinful nature, not with a circumcision done by the hands of men but with the circumcision done by Christ, having been buried with him in baptism and raised with him through your faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead.

The last thing that a Gnostic would have wanted to hear is that Jesus was the “fullness of the Deity ... in bodily form.” Paul is adamant in point out that there is nothing inherently evil about the body. Jesus was a living, breathing human being. He was also fully God.

Paul also addressed the Judaizers in this paragraph. The Judaizers would have forced circumcision on Gentile converts. Paul says that in Jesus, we have the circumcision represented by putting off the sinful nature, which is superior to a circumcision done by human hands. He links circumcision to baptism. Circumcision was a rite of initiation into the Jewish community. Baptism is a similar rite of initiation into the Christian community. Circumcision symbolized entering into the old covenant. Baptism symbolizes entering into the new. Symbolically in baptism we are buried with Jesus, as we go into the water, and raised with him from the dead, as we rise up out of the water. The old circumcision removed a physical layer of skin. The new circumcision removes sin. He goes on in Colossians 2:13-15 to show how, at a time when we were dead in our sins, God gave us life and forgave our sin. He canceled the law that opposed us and nailed it to the cross. Thus the law and the circumcision that the Judaizers tried to impose upon the church had no place.

In Colossians 2:16-19 he says:

Therefore do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day. These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ. Do not let anyone who delights in false humility and the worship of angels disqualify you for the prize. Such a person goes into great detail about what he has seen, and his unspiritual mind puffs him up with idle notions. He has lost connection with the Head, from whom the whole body, supported and held together by its ligaments and sinews, grows as God causes it to grow.

There are potentially a number of false teachings addressed in this passage. Those who practiced Asceticism would be critical of what people eat and drink. Certain sects, including Gnostics and Judaizers, would have tried to impose the observation of certain feasts and

festivals on people. Some forms of Gnosticism included angel worship (what could be better – a spirit without a human body). Paul did not want the followers of Christ to get lost in the midst of any of these. Again, using terminology aimed at the Gnostics, he says that these people have lost touch with the Head, meaning Jesus, the one who supports the body and holds it together with ligaments and sinews. This is a very flesh-and-bones analogy used to describe the church.

Colossians 2:20-23 continues, addressing asceticism in particular.

Since you died with Christ to the basic principles of this world, why, as though you still belonged to it, do you submit to its rules: “Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!”? These are all destined to perish with use, because they are based on human commands and teachings. Such regulations indeed have an appearance of wisdom, with their self-imposed worship, their false humility and their harsh treatment of the body, but they lack any value in restraining sensual indulgence.

The people who practiced this philosophy may have given an appearance of being extremely disciplined. It may have seemed that they were achieving some higher level of spiritual by living lives of self-denial. These are not principles that are completely opposed to the teaching of Christ or of Paul. They have a different motivation, however. Activities such as fasting or self-denial in a Christian's life may lead him to a greater closeness with God. They may be carried out in obedience. They are not, however, a path to salvation. They may enhance the life of one who is already saved but they do not lead that person to God initially. The Ascetics taught that such behaviors offered a road to salvation as an alternative to the salvation offered by Christ. Twisted truth is more deceiving than a total outright lie. Asceticism was a shade of truth bent and distorted into a falsehood. Thus it was dangerous.

3.4 Things Above

Colossians 3:1-4:6

In chapters 1 and 2, Paul had dealt with worldly philosophies. In Colossians 3:1-2 he tells the people to leave behind earthly things and to set their hearts and minds on “things above.” He calls upon them to put to death philosophies and behaviors that led to death. These include sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry, anger, rage, malice, slander, filthy language, and lies (Colossians 3:5-9). These things bring the wrath of God. These are behaviors characteristic of our old selves. In Colossians 3:10-11 he says:

... Put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator. Here there is no Greek or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all.

There is a beautiful unity in Christ. When we clothe ourselves in his righteousness, then we all stand equal before God. None of us comes to the Father based on our own merit. We take off the elements of the old self, mentioned above. Paul says in Colossians 3:12 that in place of those, “clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience.”

These are the elements of the new self. Our lives are characterized by forgiveness and love, which brings us together in the unity that we need to have.

We are the members of the body of Christ, and we are bonded together with his peace. There is to be harmony in our relationships. Colossians 3:15-4:1 says:

Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and

admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God. And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

Wives, submit to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord.

Husbands, love your wives and do not be harsh with them.

Children, obey your parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord.

Fathers, do not embitter your children, or they will become discouraged.

Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything; and do it, not only when their eye is on you and to win their favor, but with sincerity of heart and reverence for the Lord. Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving. Anyone who does wrong will be repaid for his wrong, and there is no favoritism.

Masters, provide your slaves with what is right and fair, because you know that you also have a Master in heaven.

How do we achieve the peace of Christ?

- Teach and admonish one another with wisdom.
- Sing praise and worship with gratitude.
- Live a life such that nothing you do would bring shame to the name of Jesus.
- Have homes where the wife is submitted to the husband and the husband loves the wife. This is the order that the Bible consistently puts on the marital relationship.
- Have homes where the children submit to the parents and the parents nurture and love the children, never driving them to bitterness. Parents tend to be quicker to teach their children the first part of this than they are to remember the second part of it themselves.
- Have working relationships where employees (slaves) do everything as if they were doing it for the Lord. Ultimately it is him that we serve.
- Employers (masters) should treat their employees (slaves) in a manner that is pleasing to the Lord, remembering that they themselves have a Master in heaven.

It is really so simple. Praise God. Strengthen one another. Live a life of innocence. Do unto others as you would have them do unto you. Accept the role that God has assigned you and live it in gratitude. This attitude towards life will produce peace with God and with man. It will result in a life of contentment.

Last, in this section on “things above,” Paul specifically asks the Colossians to pray for him. Even though he is in chains (in prison) at the time of the writing, he desires an opportunity to continue preaching his message. He encourages the people of Colossae to be of good reputation and people with grace, so that the message of Christ may spread as they season the world around them.

3.5 Closing

Colossians 4:7-18

In the closing of the letter, we learn that Paul is sending the letter to the Colossians with Onesimus (the slave in Philemon) and another man named Tychicus. Tychicus is mentioned in

Acts 20:4. In Ephesians 6:21, he is identified as the messenger carrying that letter as well. (For this reason, Colossians and Ephesians are typically dated as having been written around the same time.) He is mentioned again in 2 Timothy 4:14 and Titus 3:12, He was obviously one of Paul's close companions later in life.

He also mentions Aristarchus, who was mentioned in Philemon. Mark is mentioned, and it is in Colossians 4:20 that we learn that he was the cousin of Barnabus. Epaphras is mentioned (the founder of the Colossian church). Luke and Demas are mentioned. There is mention of an unknown man named Jesus, also known as Justus. Paul greets an unknown Colossian woman named Nympha and another man named Archippus, who is mentioned in the opening of Philemon.

Paul instructs the church at Colossae to read the letter and then to circulate it to other churches, particularly the church at Laodicea. He instructs them to get a copy of a letter written to Laodicea and to read it. This letter to Laodicea no longer exists.

This gives us an interesting clue as to how the canon of the New Testament got started. This is the first letter that we have seen that actually contains instructions to circulate it, but that happened to all of the writings of the New Testament. The churches who received a given letter felt that it was of such importance that they made copies and sent them to other churches. The documents became widely circulated as important treatises of the church. 2 Peter 3:15-16 is evidence of this, as it references the circulated epistles of Paul. Many more were circulated than the ones we have preserved in the New Testament. During the fourth century, a series of church councils met to sort out which ones should be canonized into Scripture. The documents that were felt to contain eternal truths, of lasting importance to the church, and without error of any nature were collected and organized into the New Testament. By the close of the fourth century the twenty-seven books that we now consider to be the New Testament were considered by the church to be the final canon of New Testament writings.

Colossians was written to counter heresy. Heresies, and specifically these heresies, have never gone away. This book contains eternal and important truths for the church. It also contains a roadmap for finding the peace of Christ in our lives.

4. Ephesians

After leaving Corinth, Paul passed briefly through Ephesus at the end of his second missionary journey, recorded in Acts 18. He went there again on his third missionary journey, recorded in Acts 19. He stayed there nearly three years, which was his longest recorded visit to any one place. Ephesus was a center for the worship of the goddess Diana, but Paul was able to establish a very strong church in that city.

4.1 Greetings

Ephesians 1

This letter is from Paul to the church at Ephesus.

The opening of this letter explodes with theological richness. Ephesians 1:3-14 says:

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ. For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will – to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves. In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God’s grace that he lavished on us with all wisdom and understanding. And he made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, to be put into effect when the times will have reached their fulfillment – to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ.

In him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will, in order that we, who were the first to hope in Christ, might be for the praise of his glory. And you also were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation. Having believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God’s possession – to the praise of his glory.

The passage says, “In love he predestined us to be adopted as his sons...” It again says, “having been predestined according to the plan...” This raises a question that has caused major furor in the church over the years – predestination. Are we pawns in God’s game of life? If our lives are predestined, then do we really have a free will?

This is in fact a very serious question. If you take the concept of predestination to its logical conclusion, then you reach the assumption that everything that you do was determined before you were born. Choices that you make are irrelevant because outcomes are already decided. You have no real responsibility for anything. This significantly slants views about evangelism. If our lives are predestined, then so is our eternal fate. If that is true, then nothing that you do can alter your election. Before you were born, God either chose you to be one of the saved or he did not. The same is true for everyone else. Why then should I expend any energy on trying to win people to the Lord? Why was Paul out spending so much time and energy and enduring such suffering on behalf of a cause that was determined before he was born?

Scripture as a whole teaches that we have free wills. The Gospel is a “whosoever believeth” proposition, not a “whosoever was predetermined” one. Following Jesus is a conscious choice. Our choices do alter our eternal fate and we do have responsibility. How then do we reconcile this with the statements above?

This question is further complicated if you add the fact that God is omniscient. How can God know how eternity is going to turn out unless everything is already decided? If he knows everything that I will ever do then do I really have a free will?

Bringing together the concept of predestination, the omniscience of God, and the free will of man into a coherent picture may be a mystery that will not be revealed until we are with God. I once heard the concept illustrated, and regrettably I do not know the source of the analogy. It says that heaven may be pictured as a large walled city with an open gate. If you look at the gate from the outside, it has a sign over it saying “Whosoever will may enter.” Once you enter the city, if you look back at the gate from the inside there is a sign hanging over it that says, “I predestined you to be adopted as sons.” The reality is that God may have predestined every man and woman to be adopted into his Kingdom, but the only ones who will actually benefit from that predestination are those who respond to the “Whosoever will.” The predestination (i.e. the desire of God) is there, but does not violate our free will.

As for the omniscience, I can best understand that from my own family. I know my children fairly well. Presented with certain circumstances, I can predict with great accuracy how they will react. I know them well enough to know what kind of choices they will make. That does not mean that they are not making the choices of their own free will. If I can know that much about my children, then how much more does God know about me?

God predestined each of us to enter his Kingdom. It is his pleasure to adopt us as sons. Those of us who have responded to this invitation through Jesus Christ have been “marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God’s possession – to the praise of his glory.” This concept of the Holy Spirit being given to us as a seal and a deposit is also found in 2 Corinthians 1:22 and 2 Corinthians 5:5. The Holy Spirit is God’s seal of ownership on us. It is also a guarantee given to us, preparing us for the future glory of the Kingdom.

Paul continues in this introduction to tell the Ephesians that he loves them and prays for them constantly. He has heard good things about them, which encourages Paul greatly. He prays the riches and the power of God for their lives. He says in Ephesians 1:19-23:

That power is like the working of his mighty strength, which he exerted in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every title that can be given, not only in the present age but also in the one to come. And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way.

It is an awesome thought that the very power which could raise Jesus from the dead now indwells our lives. Surely that should change us.

4.2 By Grace You Have Been Saved

Ephesians 2

Before coming to Christ, any man is dead in sin. God rescued us in that condition. Ephesians 2:4-10 says:

But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions – it is by grace you have been saved. And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus. For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.

It is only by God’s grace that we have been saved. Our salvation is a gift. It cannot be earned. It can only be received by faith. Even the faith that we need to receive the gift has been provided to us by God. The provision is entirely his.

There is a bit of a dichotomy in the statement above, however. We cannot be saved by works. At the same time, we were “created in Christ Jesus to do good works.” Works cannot bring us salvation. Once we have received salvation, however, works should be the natural response to that. Our works are a response of gratitude. They are not prerequisites to being saved.

Our salvation should also bring a response of hope. We have hope in the promise that God will raise us up and seat us with Christ in the heavenly realm that he may reveal to us the riches of his grace.

In Ephesians 2:11-13, Paul emphasizes that this grace of God which leads to salvation has been extended to the Gentiles. Formerly they had been kept from the promises of God. Now they have been brought into the Kingdom. In Ephesians 2:14-18, Paul says that Jesus, through his sacrifice “has made the two one,” meaning that he has brought Jew and Gentile together as brothers in the Kingdom of God. He has broken down the walls and brought unity and peace. He has brought both to the point where they have access to the same Father through the same Spirit. Ephesians 2:19-22 says:

Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God’s people and members of God’s household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.

The cornerstone was not only a support structure and a foundation, but it is the standard by which all other stones are measured. In ancient architecture, the dimensions of the cornerstone determined all other dimensions in the building. All other stones were reshaped so that their length, height, and width would line up with the requirements of the cornerstone. Thus it is with the Kingdom of God. Jesus is the cornerstone. The apostles and prophets are the foundation. Our lives should be reshaped to conform to the cornerstone. By conforming to his image and joining with one another, Jews and Gentiles come together to form a “holy temple in the Lord.” This is the new dwelling place of God.

4.3 Gentiles in the Kingdom

Ephesians 3

We assume from the emphasis on the status of Gentiles in Chapters 2 and 3 that the Ephesian church was largely Gentile. Paul emphasizes in this chapter that he was called to be an apostle to the Gentiles. It was God’s desire that they be brought into the Kingdom and it was for that purpose that he was called. He has endured suffering for their sake, and says in Ephesians 3:1

that he is in prison on their behalf. This verse is the first indication that we have that it was written from prison.

Ephesians 3:10-12 says:

His intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms, according to his eternal purpose which he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord. In him and through faith in him we may approach God with freedom and confidence.

The church has a bigger purpose in God's plan than some of us realize. God uses the church to convey his wisdom and his purpose to "rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms." The powers and principalities in the angelic and demonic realms stand in awe of what God had done in the church. Here he has reconciled Jew and Gentile. He has also sifted the wheat from the chaff. They see conveyed in the witness of the church their own destinies. They also marvel that we, the church, have free access to God through Jesus. We are permitted to approach his throne with "freedom and confidence."

Knowing all of this, being in prison is nothing to Paul. No chains and no amount of suffering could deter him from his resolve to build the Kingdom. His joy is being God's instrument of adding the Gentiles to the fold. His life and his thoughts are devoted to their concern. He says in Ephesians 3:17-19:

And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge – that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.

4.4 Live Lives Worthy of Your Calling

Ephesians 4:1-6:18

4.4.1 Quit Living As the Gentiles Do

Ephesians 4

The next section builds on the premise made in the last. God has rescued the Ephesian Christians from their former Gentile lives, bringing them into his Kingdom. They must therefore quit living lives like they formerly lived. He tells them in Ephesians 4:1 to "live a live worthy of the calling you have received." The same Holy Spirit that has been given to us as a seal and a deposit will empower us to rise above behaviors and attitudes that once characterized our lives. As individuals, we are called to be humble, gentle, patient, and forbearing, doing all things in love. As a community we are to live in unity and peace. Ephesians 4:4-6 says:

There is one body and one Spirit – just as you were called to one hope when you were called – one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.

In Ephesians 4:7, Paul loosely quotes Psalm 68:18. That verse says of God:

When you ascended on high,
you led captives in your train;
you received gifts from men,

even from the rebellious –
that you, O Lord God, might dwell there.

Ephesians 4:7 says:

But to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it. This is why it says:

“When he ascended on high,
he led captives in his train
and gave gifts to men.”

Note that he has turned it around so that Christ becomes the giver of gifts rather than the receiver. Christ descended so that he might gather up the captives. He then ascended back to the heavenly realm, leading the former captives to an eternal victory. To those who follow him he gave gifts. Ephesians 4:11-13 describes these gifts:

It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God’s people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.

Apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers are gifts that have been given to the body of Christ for the purpose of edification. A teacher does not teach for his own benefit. A prophet does not prophesy in order to hear his own voice. They do these things so that the church might be enlarged and matured. The goal is to bring us to unity, knowledge, maturity, and help us attain the fullness of Christ.

When we are spiritually immature, we are subject to being blown over by winds of heresies and false doctrines. We are vulnerable to being led from the faith. Paul does not want that. Jesus does not want that. Thus it is important that we reach the unity, knowledge, maturity, and fullness mentioned above. The way that we live our lives serves either as a paved road or a barrier for these things to come. Thus Paul says in Ephesians 4:17-32:

So I tell you this, and insist on it in the Lord, that you must no longer live as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their thinking. They are darkened in their understanding and separated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them due to the hardening of their hearts. Having lost all sensitivity, they have given themselves over to sensuality so as to indulge in every kind of impurity, with a continual lust for more.

You, however, did not come to know Christ that way. Surely you heard of him and were taught in him in accordance with the truth that is in Jesus. You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; to be made new in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.

Therefore each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to his neighbor, for we are all members of one body. “In your anger do not sin”: Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, and do not give the devil a foothold. He who has been stealing must steal no longer, but must work, doing something useful with his own hands, that he may have something to share with those in need.

Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. Get rid

of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.

Before Jesus enters our lives, we have hardened hearts. Our rebellion distances us from God. Without the Holy Spirit indwelling us, we are “darkened in our understanding” and are unable to have a relationship with God. After Jesus enters, however, we have perfect understanding. The Holy Spirit equips us to rid ourselves of our old ways and to fill ourselves with the new. We receive a new “attitude of our minds,” which makes all the difference. The war of sin is raged in our attitudes. With our new attitudes, we can be like God in righteousness and holiness.

The battle continues to wage, however, even after we have the Holy Spirit. We are still tempted to sin. We must not be defeated by falsehood, anger, stealing, unwholesome talk, bitterness, rage, brawling, slander, and malice – behaviors that disrupt relationships in the body because they do a disservice to fellow believers. We are not to “grieve the Holy Spirit of God.” What a thought! The Holy Spirit has chosen to live in us. According to God’s promise, he will not leave us. That means that whatever we do, he is there. He can feel joy through what we do. He can also be grieved by our behavior. It mostly depends on who is in control.

It is a bit ironic. If you got on a 747 for a flight across the ocean, would you demand that the cockpit be cleared so that you could fly the plane yourself or would you be more likely to let the professional crew get you to your destination? If you have any sense, you would get out of the way and let the crew do its job. You are much more likely to get to your destination safely and without trouble. They are trained to fly that craft. Translate that into your own life. You have the Spirit of the God who created the universe dwelling in you, anxious to “pilot the craft.” Most of us tell him on a daily basis to climb into the back seat and watch us drive. In our rebellion we ignore stop signs, drive too fast, drive on the wrong side of the road or over on the shoulder. When he calls to us from the back seat to slow down or be careful, we turn up the radio so that we do not have to listen to him. He is grieved. It is not a power struggle. He is grieved because we are putting ourselves in harm’s way and we do not love and respect him enough to listen to his still, small voice.

When the Holy Spirit whispers to us about falsehood, anger, stealing, unwholesome talk, bitterness, rage, brawling, slander, malice, or whatever, we need to “turn off the radio” and ask him to tell us more. Invite him to elaborate. Follow his leading. Slide over to the passenger seat and let him take the wheel. You are more likely to get to your destination safely and without trouble.

4.4.2 Be Imitators of God

Ephesians 5:1-21

Continuing with the theme that was established in chapter 4, Paul says that we are to be imitators of God. He says that we must rid our lives of any trace of sexual immorality, impurity, greed, obscenity, foolish talk, or coarse joking. Ephesians 5:5 says:

For of this you can be sure: No immoral, impure or greedy person – such a man is an idolater – has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God.

We have been brought out of darkness into the light of God. We are to live as children of light. Paul admonishes us to be careful how we live. Ephesians 5:18 says:

Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit.

Our pursuit should not be to fill ourselves with things that gratify the flesh, but to fill ourselves with the Holy Spirit. Everything from Ephesians 5:19-6:9 is a list of ways in which we can be filled with the Spirit. They include:

- “Speaking to one another with psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs.” (Ephesians 5:19)
- Praising God through singing and making of music. (Ephesians 5:19)
- Being thankful to God for all things. (Ephesians 5:20)
- Submitting to one another in the body of Christ. (Ephesians 5:21)
- Maintaining healthy family relationships, as described in the next section.

4.4.3 Godly Households

Ephesians 5:22-6:9

Paul gave instructions on family relationships in Colossians 3, similar to the ones in this section. The Ephesians version of these is more fully developed, however.

Paul spoke first to the wives. They are instructed to submit to their husbands in the same way that the church should submit to Christ. This was not a radically new concept. From Genesis 3:16 women have lived in submission to their husbands. Paul put a very new spin on it, however. Their submission was not to be out of fear or unworthiness. It was to be the same kind of submission that the church has to Christ. It is submission out of love and devotion. This becomes abundantly clear in the next instruction.

In Ephesians 5:25-33 he says:

Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless. In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. After all, no one ever hated his own body, but he feeds and cares for it, just as Christ does the church – for we are members of his body. “For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.” This is a profound mystery – but I am talking about Christ and the church. However, each one of you also must love his wife as he loves himself, and the wife must respect her husband.

This was a radically new concept. Although it was not uncommon for men to love their wives, there had never been a commandment to do so. Men were not only to love their wives, but they were to love them as Christ loved the church. If necessary, men were to sacrifice themselves for their wives, just as Christ sacrificed himself for the church. He was to care for his wife as he would care for his own body.

God designed the marriage relationship to be an ultimate source of comfort to men and women. In marriage we are able to find a level of significance and intimacy that exists nowhere else on earth. It is a relationship that nurtures us and comforts us. It is a procreative relationship. It is also a relationship that is healthiest when it observes the God-given order where wives submit to husbands and husbands love their wives. Submission is a concept that picked up a very negative connotation in the late twentieth century, but it is really a very positive thing. All of us are to live lives submitted in various ways – to God, to other believers, etc. Submission is selflessness, which is a godly attribute. If a husband truly loves a wife like Christ loved the church, then why would the wife have trouble submitting to that kind of leadership?

It is also important to remember that this whole section is developing the theme established in Ephesians 5:21: "Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ." Wives are to submit to their husbands, but we are all supposed to submit to one another.

God wants us to understand how to live in this kind of a relationship, because it is a foretaste of the perfect marriage between Christ and the church. We submit to him as leader and he loves us so much that he laid his life down to rescue us. Why would we have trouble submitting to that kind of leadership?

God also cares about the marriage relationship because it is the nest in which children are born and raised. God wants children to have safe homes, where they are trained up in the ways of the Lord. Paul now turns to the parent/child relationship. Ephesians 6:1-3 says:

Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. "Honor your father and mother" – which is the first commandment with a promise – "that it may go well with you and that you may enjoy long life on the earth."

Fathers, do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord.

The Old Testament, specifically the Ten Commandments, told children to honor their parents. This was nothing new. Children were instructed to honor their parents whether or not they were honorable. Paul puts an obligation back on the parents, however. They are to be the kind of parents that children can honor. They should not exasperate their children. They should train them to be godly people.

It is interesting what has happened in these passages. The Old Testament had give instructions to wives and children. Paul affirmed those instructions, but then gave new instructions to the other half of both of those relationships.

Paul now turns to the slave/master relationship. As I have said before, this would be roughly akin to an employee/employer relationship today. It is interesting, therefore, that it be included in a section on family relationships. The reason for that is that it was common for slaves to live in the same home as their masters. That being the case, this was another family relationship that needed to be at peace.

The advice to slaves in Ephesians 6:5-8 is sound advice for employees to have today about their jobs and their employers:

Slaves, obey your earthly masters with respect and fear, and with sincerity of heart, just as you would obey Christ. Obey them not only to win their favor when their eye is on you, but like slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from your heart. Serve wholeheartedly, as if you were serving the Lord, not men, because you know that the Lord will reward everyone for whatever good he does, whether he is slave or free.

That would be a winning attitude in any workplace. The righteousness or unrighteousness of our employers should not affect our attitudes. If we work to serve the Lord in whatever we do, then we will do well. In Ephesians 6:9, Paul addresses the other side of this relationship. Masters are to treat their slaves in a godly manner. They should treat their slaves as they wish God to treat them. Who would not want to work for such an employer? Living a godly life is the key to a successful business life. Who would have thought?

4.4.4 Spiritual Armor

Ephesians 6:10-18

Paul has taught the people to put off their old lives and put on the new, to seek peace and unity the body, to be filled with the Holy Spirit, and to have proper relationships in their lives. Anyone who is seeking to follow God with such obedience will come under attack by the enemy who hates to see people perfectly submitted to God. It will happen. Paul wants the people to be prepared for it. He says in Ephesians 6:10-18:

Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. Put on the full armor of God so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. Therefore put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand. Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place, and with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace. In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the saints.

Paul uses imagery of warfare, which is very appropriate since that is precisely what this is. Note that the imagery used here is reflected in Isaiah 59:17 and in 1 Thessalonians 5:8, but it much more fully developed here than any place else in Scripture.

Armor does not keep us from being attacked. It equips us to withstand the attack. They are going to come, anyway, and without the proper armor we will be injured or killed.

Paul tells us that "our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world, and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms." That is often hard to remember, but it is so important. There are times when people in our lives will make us miserable. We will feel them attack us, slander us, manipulate us, and otherwise demoralize us. The closer they are to us the more vulnerable we are to being hurt by them. We have to remember, however, that when these things happen to us, the people whom we are apt to blame for the trouble are not the real enemy. More than likely, they are reacting (poorly, perhaps) to warfare on their own lives. It is a rare person who consciously wakes up each day and thinks, "What sort of grief can I cause to the people around me today?" It is common for people to wake up and think, "What am I going to do today to get out of the difficult circumstances of my life?"

Most people go through life without armor. Satan has them on the run. As they run, they bump into other people, often bruising them or knocking them down. It is not really something that they particularly wanted to do. They just know no other way to cope.

We need to be prepared to take the bumps and bruises and even mortal blows without causing them to ricochet off of everyone near and dear to us. Even when our flesh is crushed, we need to protect our spirits. When the evil days comes, after we have done everything possible to make things right, we need to be able to simply stand and endure. After all, the battle is the Lord's. So, to protect ourselves, we need:

- The Belt of Truth. We must be supported by the truth that we have been given.

- The Breastplate of Righteousness. Innocence is the best defense that we will ever have. Assaults will come, but they will ultimately bounce off of us if we have the breastplate of righteousness.
- Our Feet Fitted with the Readiness that comes from the Gospel of Peace. Without proper foot protection, the army cannot maneuver. We must always be ready to move when the time is right. The Gospel will advance. We must be prepared to take it forward. This will only happen if we live under the peace of the Gospel.
- The Shield of Faith. Enemies in the first century would shoot flaming arrows. To defend against them, soldiers carried wet shields. They would use the shields to catch and extinguish the arrows. With the shield of faith, we can catch and extinguish the fiery arrows of Satan.
- The Helmet of Salvation. The helmet was of utmost importance because it protected the head. Our salvation is the helmet that will protect our heads. Nothing can pierce it and jeopardize our standing before God.

These pieces of armor will protect us. The list also includes one offensive weapon – “the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.” As we wage war, it is the only offensive weapon that we have. To be trained for battle, our minds must be saturated with the instructions of the Commander-in-Chief. The lies of Satan and the pathetic attacks of his cronies cannot stand up against the power of the word of God. Hebrews 4:12 says, “For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.” Why would we ever want to enter a battle without such a weapon? The enemy hopes that we will.

Finally in this section Paul encourages us to “pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests.” Prayer charges us for battle. It is nourishment and refreshment that will keep us fit and prepared.

So in summary, Paul has told the Ephesians:

- They have been saved by grace and should respond with works that God has prepared for them.
- By God’s grace, the Kingdom has been extended to Gentiles.
- Having been brought into the Kingdom, they need to stop living like Gentiles and start living like Kingdom people.
- They need to become imitators of God.
- They should seek to be filled with the Spirit.
- Part of that is achieved through establishing godly relationships in the home and in the Christian community.
- They must be ready to withstand spiritual warfare that will surely ensue when they radically change their lives and become obedient to the mandates above.

4.5 Closing

Ephesians 6:19-23

Paul closes the letter by reminding the Ephesians to pray for him as well, that he may continue ministering the Gospel, even though he is in chains.

Ephesians 6:21 mentions Tychicus as the messenger who will carry the letter to Ephesus. Note that he was one of the messengers carrying the Colossian letter as well (which is one of the reasons that Colossians and Ephesians are assumed to have been written at approximately the same time.)

Paul closes with a benediction and a blessing for the Ephesian church.

5. Philippians

On his second missionary journey, Paul had a vision of a man from Macedonia bidding him to come to Europe. Paul responded, and the first city that he visited there was Philippi. He first arrived there in Acts 16. The first convert that he had in Philippi was a woman named Lydia. In Philippi, Paul and Silas were thrown into jail. An earthquake came during the night and caused their chains to fall off and the jail doors to open, but nobody fled. Their jailer was so impressed that he became a Christian.

Paul passed through Philippi again on his third missionary journey, recorded in Acts 20.

The letter was sent to strengthen the church. In chapter 3 we see evidence that the Judaizer influence was bother the church. Paul wanted to counter that.

5.1 Greeting

Philippians 1:1-11

The letter is from Paul and Timothy to the church at Philippi.

Paul extends a very warm greeting to the church, expressing great appreciation. He calls them partners in the Gospel. In Philippians 1:6 he says that he is confident that “he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.” He has confidence that God will continue to work among them until the day that Jesus comes again.

In Philippians 1:7 Paul mentions that he is in chains, which is how we know that this is one of the prison epistles.

5.2 The Results of Paul's Suffering

Philippians 1:12-30

Paul is in prison for the sake of the Gospel. He does not regret his suffering, however, because through it the Gospel has been advanced. His confinement has been a witness to his guards of the truth of Jesus. Furthermore, his inability to travel about and speak has encouraged others to do so on his behalf. The disciples that Paul has raised up are beginning to raise disciples of their own. That needed to happen.

Paul says in Philippians 1:15-18:

It is true that some preach Christ out of envy and rivalry, but others out of goodwill. The latter do so in love, knowing that I am put here for the defense of the gospel. The former preach Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely, supposing that they can stir up trouble for me while I am in chains. But what does it matter? The important thing is that in every way, whether from false motives or true, Christ is preached. And because of this I rejoice.

Apparently Paul sees two groups of people at work, preaching the Gospel. Some are motivated out of love for Paul. They are trying to further Paul's work while he is confined. Others are motivated out of a spirit of rivalry with Paul. We do not know what this rivalry is all about. We do know that Paul felt a real sense of ownership for the churches that he started. He was jealous

for them and watched over them like a mother bear does her cubs. It is possible that there were other church planters about who felt the same about the churches that they had started. There may have been a spirit of rivalry among these various factions. Some may have felt that Paul's confinement was an opportunity for them to gain some ground on him. Whatever their motive, Paul was not particularly worried about it. Whether they were doing it out of love or rivalry, they were preaching the true Gospel and people were being won to the Lord as a result. The Kingdom was expanding.

Paul also knows that his fate is in the Lord's hands and is not determined by the whims of Rome. He is content to be wherever God wants him to be and to do whatever God wants him to do. He says in Philippians 1:21-26:

For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. If I am to go on living in the body, this will mean fruitful labor for me. Yet what shall I choose? I do not know! I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far; but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body. Convinced of this, I know that I will remain, and I will continue with all of you for your progress and joy in the faith, so that through my being with you again your joy in Christ Jesus will overflow on account of me.

To Paul, death will be a gain. He wants to go spend eternity with Christ. Still, he knows that his life on earth bears fruit for the Kingdom. Because of that, he anticipates that his life will be extended. He believes that he will be permitted to spend time with the Philippian church again so that they might enjoy one another once more.

Paul encourages the Philippians to live lives worthy of their calling. They must stand firmly for the Gospel. They may well face suffering, just as Paul is currently facing, and if so they must endure it with the same resolve as Paul. He says that they must not be "frightened in any way by those who oppose you. This is a sign to them that they will be destroyed, but that you will be saved – and that by God" (Philippians 1:28-29).

5.3 The Attitude of Christ Jesus

Philippians 2:1-18

A theme that is common in Paul's writings is that of unity in the church. Paul calls upon the Philippians to have oneness. Philippians 2:1-11 says:

If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any fellowship with the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose. Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others.

Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus:

Who, being in very nature God,
did not consider equality with God something to be grasped,

but made himself nothing,
taking the very nature of a servant,
being made in human likeness.

And being found in appearance as a man,
he humbled himself

and became obedient to death –
even death on a cross!

Therefore God exalted him to the highest place
and gave him the name that is above every name,

that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,

and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord,¹
to the glory of God the Father.

This is an incredibly full passage.

Imagine what the church would be like if everyone did “nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility considered others better than themselves.” What if we really did look out for others interests in addition to our own. What a sense of family would truly prevail! Everyone’s physical and emotional needs would be taken care of; indeed there would be an abundance because everyone would be out working to ensure that everyone else had enough. There would be no petty arguments in the church. Most of our church committees would go away. We would have a surfeit of time to worship the Lord and enjoy each other because our energy would not be spent guarding our own agendas.

How do we ever get to that point? We adopt the servant attitude of Jesus.

Jesus was with the Father. He was God. He participated in creation. He was divine. The universe was his. Jesus loved mankind and mankind was lost.

In order to rescue mankind, Jesus gave up equality with God. He made himself nothing, emptying himself of his divinity for a time. He became a servant and took on the form of a man.

Sometimes it is hard for us to grasp that Jesus lived with all the confines of human existence. He had every limitation that we have. It would not have worked any other way. Jesus came not only to be our sacrifice, but to be our model. He showed us how we could interact with the Father in spite of our human limitations. He showed us how we could operate in the power of the Holy Spirit, in spite of our human limitations.

Jesus modeled prayer for us, and then taught us how to pray, fully anticipating that we would communicate with the Father just as he had. Jesus modeled working in the power of the Holy Spirit for us, and then taught us how to do the same. He gave us the filling of the Holy Spirit, fully anticipating that we would do works of healing, miracles, etc., just as he had done.

In the old television series, *The Beverly Hillbillies*, a family moved from some backwoods town out in the middle of nowhere into a mansion in Beverly Hills. There were many things about their new existence that they did not understand. Among them was the doorbell. Every so often, they would hear a bell ringing in the house. They had no idea what it meant. They did figure out after some period of time that if that bell rang long enough, eventually someone would start knocking on the front door.

The easiest way to remedy that situation would have been for someone to recognize that they did not understand what the doorbell was all about and to go out to the home and teach them about it. They could show them how it worked and how to use it themselves.

¹ Isaiah 45:23

This is sort of how it was with us. We were an illiterate backwoods group of people who had moved into a mansion. We did not understand all of the parameters of our new existence. Jesus came to earth to show us how to use the doorbell. He showed us how to live in the world without sin. He taught us how to pray. He taught us how to operate in the power of the Holy Spirit. He came because he loved us and did not want us living in confusion. It cost him dearly.

He knew that his earthly existence would end with his crucifixion, because he came to be our sacrifice as well. Again, motivated out of love, putting our interests ahead of his own, he humbled himself completely, even to death on the cross. That is the kind of attitude that we are supposed to have. It brings unity to the body. It pleases the Father. Because of Jesus' ultimate obedient surrender, the Father will ensure that every knee will bow before him and every tongue confess that he is Lord. He earned that right by his submission.

In light of this, Paul sees his own suffering as insignificant.

Philippians 2:12-13 says:

Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed – not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence – continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose.

This is a curious idea. Is my salvation something that I have or something that I must continue to work out? I believe that the answer is, “both.” Salvation is a gift that we receive. Once we have received it, it is ours. We do not have to go get a new supply every day. I also believe, however, that salvation is a gift that can be left behind. God will never take it away from us once he has given it to us. We can walk away from it, however.

The church has historically taken differing views on the question of “once saved, always saved.” Many good people believe that salvation will never be forfeited once it is received. Some take the opposite extreme and say that salvation must be received on a continual basis – when you stop receiving it you no longer have it. I take a stand somewhere in the middle, but closer to the first viewpoint. I believe that it is possible to sincerely pray to receive Christ and even live with him for a time, but to later decide that the cost of surrendering your life is a price you do not want to pay. I believe that many people have walked away from that decision and have abandoned the salvation that God freely gave them.

When Paul says that we must continue to work out our salvation, I believe that he simply means that we must hold to the decision that we have made. We must submit and to “God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose.” In keeping with the theme of this section, we work out our salvation in attitude. The war is waged in our minds. We do not lose our salvation the first time we sin. If we ever reach a point where we do not care about sin, however, then we are in trouble.

Thus Paul encourages the Philippians to continue doing the works that God has given them to do without complaining or arguing (Philippians 2:14). He calls upon them to endure in innocence. Even if they should find themselves in suffering, as does Paul, they should endure it with joy.

5.4 Messengers to Philippi

Philippians 2:19-30

In Philippians 2:19-24, we learn that Paul intends to send Timothy to minister to the Philippian church. He also expresses confidence that he himself will be able to visit them soon.

In Philippians 2:25-30 he also indicates that he is going to send Epaphroditus to them. Philippians is the only book that mentions Epaphroditus (he is also mentioned in Philippians 4:18). Apparently the Philippian church sent him to assist Paul while he was in prison. While serving Paul, Epaphroditus had become quite ill and had almost died. The people in Philippi were very concerned about him. Paul was going to send him back so that the people could see that God had restored his health and their anxiety might be eased.

5.5 Follow Sound Doctrine

Philippians 3

In chapter 3 we see evidence of a Judaizer faction in Philippi. Paul says in Philippians 3:2-11:

Watch out for those dogs, those men who do evil, those mutilators of the flesh. For it is we who are the circumcision, we who worship by the Spirit of God, who glory in Christ Jesus, and who put no confidence in the flesh – though I myself have reasons for such confidence.

If anyone else thinks he has reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for legalistic righteousness, faultless.

But whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ – the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith. I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead.

Paul is not too subtle in naming his opponents, “those dogs, those men who do evil, those mutilators of the flesh.” We get the point right away that he does not like them.

The Judaizers taught that there was value to be gained in Jewish ceremony. Paul says that this is rubbish. He presents his credentials. He had been a Jew of very high standing. He had pursued Judaism with vigor, even to the point of persecuting the church. He was the Sanhedrin’s golden boy. Then he met Jesus.

Everything that he held dear fell like dirt to the ground when he encountered the risen Christ. He discovered that his heritage, his works, and his zeal for the law bought him nothing. His only gain is in the cross of Jesus. Only through the “power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings” did Paul find the way to “attain to the resurrection from the dead.”

Thus he encourages the Philippians not to be caught up in the teachings of the Judaizers. They add nothing to the simplicity of the Gospel, but they do much to detract from it. He hopes that they will put aside all distractions and focus on what is important. He wants them to imitate him as “I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 3:14).

Our minds must not be on the things of the flesh. We must focus on things above. He says in Philippians 3:18-21:

For, as I have often told you before and now say again even with tears, many live as enemies of the cross of Christ. Their destiny is destruction, their god is their stomach, and their glory is in their shame. Their mind is on earthly things. But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body.

Pursuit of the desires of the flesh is the pursuit of destruction. We are to pursue the eternal. We may live here, but our citizenship is elsewhere. We are aliens in this world. Rather than looking to the powers and authorities of this world for sustenance, we await our Savior. The citizens of this world live in bodies that will perish. Jesus will glorify our bodies and fit them for eternity.

5.6 Closing

Philippians 4

In his closing section, Paul begins by asking two women in the church, Euodia and Syntyche, to get along. Apparently they have been feuding such that news of their dispute has made it all the way to Rome. Paul lovingly asks them to bring the dispute to a close and to get on with the work of the Kingdom.

Philippians 4:2-7 is a well-known and beautiful passage:

Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable – if anything is excellent or praiseworthy – think about such things. Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me – put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you.

Attitude is a key theme in the book of Philippians. It is much easier to say than to do, but Paul tells us to rejoice in all things. This is the attitude that we are supposed to have. Remember that this was written from prison. If anyone knew about situations that would tend to shut down any idea of rejoicing, it was Paul. Still he could say this. He understood how to be anxious for nothing because he really did trust the Lord. He presented his requests to God with confidence that they were heard and answered. Because of that, he really did have a peace that transcends understanding.

That is really the key to peace in life. If we really have confidence in God to hear, to understand, and to care, then we will have peace in all things. If we really believe that our lives are in his hands, then we are really shielded from any long-term impacts by our circumstances. We will have peace in all things. We will be able to rejoice in all things.

That does not mean that we will be happy about everything that happens to us. It means we can rejoice. Rejoicing is something that we do and not something that we feel. The doing will typically bring a feeling, however.

The key to all of this is the attitude of our minds. If indeed we fill our minds with things that are true, noble, right, pure, lovely, admirable, and praiseworthy, it make our minds fertile for the peace that transcends all understanding. If we fill our minds with doubt, anger, lies, immorality,

corruption, and the like, then it will defeat our ability to achieve the peace of God. We really can control this.

Paul thanks the church for sharing in his needs. The implication is that they have supported him financially. He says that he has had times of plenty and times of need. Philippians 4:12-13 says:

I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do everything through him who gives me strength.

Paul rightly recognizes God as his source of provision, but he thanks the Philippians for cooperating with God in meeting his physical needs. Note the contrast with Corinth. Paul was unwilling to take from the Corinthians because he was afraid of criticism that might result. He was grateful to receive from the Philippians. They must have been a more mature group of believers. Paul says that God will reward them for their generosity.

Before I leave this passage altogether, I must testify about the encouragement that I have received from the verse, "I can do everything through him who gives me strength." There are times in life when I face intimidating tasks. As a specific example, public speaking is an activity that often terrifies me. At times I am perfectly at ease with it, but other times just knowing that I am coming up soon on an agenda makes my heart race and my breathing intense. I find great strength in this verse. I know that I really can do all things through him who gives me strength. I can repeat this verse to myself and it will calm my heart and my breathing. This sword of the Spirit has defeated the fear of the enemy many times in my life. This is important. God is there for us all of the time. He not only enables us to accomplish "religious" goals in our lives. He empowers us to be victorious in ALL things.

Paul closes this letter with a brief benediction.

Philippians is a marvelous book. The passage in chapter 2 about Jesus' humility could inspire volumes. The passages about rejoicing and a peace that transcends understanding have brought wealth to the church for centuries. Knowing that I can do all things through him who gives me strength has helped me overcome many struggles in my own life. I love this book.

This is probably the last book that Paul wrote during his Acts 28 confinement in Rome. He was correct in saying that his sufferings at that time produced benefit for us. Perhaps God made him be still for a period so that he would put into writing the things that he had been saying verbally. Without this confinement, we would not have had Philemon, Colossians, Ephesians, and Philippians. It is indeed true what Paul wrote in Romans 8:28, that "God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose."

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