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\*This character study / commentary into Apostle Paul is based mostly on Charles Swindoll's "Great Lives in God's Word" series on Paul and A.T. Robertson "Epochs in the Life of Paul: A Study of Development of Paul's Career." Main source materials are based on contents in these books unless otherwise noted.

**Sunday August 27, 2023**

**Lesson 19: The Prison Epistles**

**Reference: Acts 28:17-30; Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, Philemon**

When we last saw Paul, he and 276 other passengers were on a multiple month journey across the Mediterranean from Caesarea to Rome, persevering through storms, shipwreck, and other life-threatening challenges. They found shelter from the storm on the Island of Malta where Paul practiced his ministry through the winter months. By Spring or early Summer of AD60, Paul arrived into Rome.

### **Book of Acts Published – ~ AD60**

Shortly after arriving in Rome, Luke would complete and publish the second volume of his work, the volume we know today as the book of Acts. The original manuscript for Acts allegedly did not have a title, as it was intended to be a companion volume to the Gospel of Luke. This created some confusion, which led various church leaders to adopt the title "Acts" or "Acts of Apostles" or "Acts of the Apostles," or even "Acts of the Holy Apostles" found in various manuscripts<sup>1</sup>. Church tradition infers that Luke had a third volume in mind chronicling Paul's ministry unto this martyrdom in AD67. This inference / assumption was based on the abrupt ending for the second volume, that Paul spent two years under house arrest in Rome (Acts 28:30) – a passage that would be forward looking at the time that this volume was released (~AD60) and evidently subsequently edited since Luke mentions nothing of the events in Paul's "Prison Epistles" during these two years.

### **Timeline – Paul's Imprisonment in Rome – AD60-62**

The book of Acts concludes with Paul being imprisoned in Rome, living in a rented house under house arrest (28:30) and guarded by a Roman soldier (28:16). This would be his living arrangement for the next two years (28:30). He was allowed visitors and he passes time by evangelizing / proclaiming the kingdom of God, teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ (28:30).

### **The Trial (~ AD61)**

Recall that Paul was sent to Rome to face charges that he committed crimes against Rome that is worthy of the death penalty. Though Festus (governor of Judea) could not find evidence supporting the charge, since Paul appealed to Rome's authority during the trial before Festus, Paul had to be sent to Rome to face trial as a prisoner (Acts 26:30-32).

There are no known records found as to when this trial actually took place, though we know that a trial or a hearing did happen because Roman law would not have allowed setting a prisoner free without investigation. The accusers must present their case, as a no-show would mean punishment upon themselves. However, legal loopholes exist in those days to postpone or delay, which is evidently what the troublemaking Jews did seeing how they were unable to persuade Felix or Festus in Caesarea. Locking Paul away for two years and keeping him from preaching was sort of a consolation prize for these Jews. As for the trial itself, it was likely conducted in a very similar manner as the trials before Felix, Festus, and Agrippa in Caesarea, leading to Paul's release sometime in AD62.

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<sup>1</sup> Kenneth G. Hanna, *From Gospel to Glory: Exploring the New Testament*

### The Prison Epistles (~ AD61-62)

It was during this period in Rome that Paul would pen the epistles that are commonly referred to as “The Prison Epistles” – Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, Philemon. Looking into the contents and context of these epistles, we can gain some insights into Paul’s personal and ministry life during this stay in Rome.

### Philippians – Revealing Paul’s Gospel Ministry Activities in Rome

The book of Philippians is commonly accepted as the last of the “Prison Epistles” penned by Paul before his release. Moreover, it seemed to have been written towards the end of his imprisonment where a trial had already happened (Phil 1:19-20), and with Paul himself seemingly expects to be set free (Phil 1:24-26; 2:24).

Beyond the theme of the letter (to always rejoice in the Lord – Phil 4:4), the letter itself shared with us Paul’s life and activities during these two years in Rome:

- That he was in chains with a Roman guard (1:7,13); as such, was able to evangelize and bring many Roman guards (Gentiles) to salvation (1:12-14; esp 1:13).
- That he was free to carry on the gospel ministry (1:12) and direct coworkers to ministry in different areas (2:19-30; see also Colossians).
- That he was able to receive visitors either for the gospel ministry (2:25-30) or to receive support (4:10-18). The church in Philippi evidently provided for much of Paul’s needs during his 2-year imprisonment.

These activities are in alignment with Luke’s closing remarks (Acts 28:17-30), and makes it clear that God’s ministry through Paul was active even as Paul was imprisoned in Rome (cf Acts 23:11). The troublemaking Jews may have thought that they had silenced Paul for a time, but it was by God’s providence that through their actions, the Gospel expands to the Gentile nations. Implicitly, the letter informs us that the trial before Nero (Roman emperor at the time) might have taken place towards the end of AD61, given that Paul was released in AD62. The letter was evidently delivered by Epaphroditus (Phil 2:25).

### Philemon – Revealing Paul’s Counseling and Mentorship Activities in Rome

Conversely, the book of Philemon is commonly accepted as the first of the “Prison Epistles” penned by Paul. In Paul’s days, slaves were not necessarily degraded people. Many of the slaves were cultured and some served their masters in prominent roles, such as school teachers, etc. Runaway slaves seeking shelter in Rome were not uncommon, as they were able to blend in with all sorts of other people visiting the region.

One such runaway slave is Onesimus, who found his way to Paul’s presence while Paul was in Rome. Onesimus likely knew of Paul from his time in his master’s house (see summary for Colossians below). It would not be beyond reason to assume that he ran away to Rome specifically to seek Paul’s assistance in restoring him to his master’s grace. A runaway slave who fell into his master’s disfavor would not bold well for the slave in that society. In such cases, many would run to one of their master’s friends to seek or beg for intercession. Such may be – or even likely to be – the case here with Onesimus.

Philemon was not just another slave owner, he evidently opened his home to host the house church led by Epaphras in Colossae (Philem 2). Moreover, Onesimus did not just run away from Philemon, but he also evidently stole some goods as he left (Philem 18). From the contents of this letter, we can see how Paul brought Onesimus to Christ (Philem 10), mentored him to be a disciple (Philem 16) and coworker (Philem 11). Paul *then* wrote this letter to secure Philemon’s reconciliation with Onesimus, appealing to him on the basis of Christian love and as a personal request (Philem 9). The effort to bring Onesimus from an unbeliever to a disciple, then a disciple to a coworker, and to develop such relational bond that Paul would be willing to pay back Onesimus’ debts stolen from Philemon (Philem 19) could not have been achieved with a mere short visit. It revealed that Paul continues to spend time mentoring people, doing discipleship training and also ministry training while imprisoned in Rome.

Paul's effort bore fruit, as church tradition / history revealed that Onesimus would not only be reconciled to Philemon, but he would later serve as the bishop of the church in Ephesus in the early second century; which, at that time, would be the most prominent church in Asia Minor.

#### Colossians – Revealing Paul's Pastoral Administrative Activities to a Troubled Church from Rome

The book of Philemon closes with well wish remarks from Epaphras (Philem 23) who was the leader of the church in Colossae (Col 1:7). This informs us that Epaphras was with Paul (and Onesimus) when Paul wrote the letter to Philemon, and leads to the commonly accepted view that Colossians was written shortly after or around the same time as Philemon since it was delivered at the same time to the church (Col 4:7).

The church in Colossae was likely founded during Paul's extended stay in Ephesus (Acts 19:10). It was not planted by Paul, but likely by Epaphras who may have visited Paul during that time and received needed training and instructions to start that church. The church evidently met in several locations, to include the house of Philemon (Philem 2) and the house of Nympha (Col 4:15); though the latter was possibly the house church for Laodicea. There was no evidence that Paul ever visited the church in this city, but that he works closely with the church through several other leaders. By the time of Paul's stay in Rome, the church's gospel ministry evidently expanded to have church plants in Laodicea and Hierapolis (Col 4:13).

Epaphras evidently visited Paul in Rome to seek pastoral guidance about false teachings and heresy (Col 2:4-5) not just in Colossae, but also in their various church plants (Col 4:16). From the contents of this letter, we can see Paul working in an administrative pastor capacity to direct various leaders to that church – and other churches in Asia Minor (See Ephesians below) in order to address various doctrinal issues.

- He sends Tychicus (with Onesimus) to deliver this letter and to comfort their hearts (Col 4:7-9)
- He will be sending (or hopes to send) Mark, who by now has reconciled with Paul and has become Paul's fellow worker (Philem 24). Mark would serve in a pastoral assistant capacity (Col 4:10).
- He encourages Archippus (Col 4:17), who was evidently called to a specific ministry in that church, to complete the work of his calling.
- He sends a companion epistle along with this epistle (Col 4:16) to address the doctrinal issues and instructs the church to make copies of the companion epistle to be shared with other churches. Contents of this companion epistle is generally understood to be the book of Ephesians (see below)
- He introduced other leaders and co-laborers with him (Col 4:7-14), which in the context of the needs of the church, would be leaders who can advance sound doctrine (possibly for future encounters).

#### Ephesians – Revealing Paul's Pastoral Care Ministry Activities from Rome

The doctrinal contamination (heresy) reported by Epaphras evidently concerned Paul enough that Paul decided to pen another letter along with his letter to Colossae. This companion letter to Colossians is often referred to as a "circular epistle" because the original copy wasn't intended for or addressed to one specific church (the term "church" throughout the letter is used in a general sense, rather than a local sense), but to all the churches in Asia Minor, with the idea that it would be copied and passed around (cf Col 4:16). In this manner, as the scribes copy the letter, some – not all – would change the addressee to be the name of that church (i.e.. "To the saints who are in {name of the church}" Eph 1:1). The copy of this letter that has been preserved by the Holy Spirit and canonized in Scripture is the copy sent to the church in Ephesus – hence, the book of Ephesians. This also explains why manuscripts were found without the words "in Ephesus."

In the same spirit for the writing of the book of Romans during the winter months roughly three years ago, Paul had in mind the need to strengthen the doctrine and practices of believers in Asia Minor. After learning about how the believers in Colossae were easily deceived by heresy through persuasive words – and how

this behavior has spread through church plants of Colossae, Paul has concerns for other churches in Asia Minor as well, leading him to write this letter focusing on the doctrine of the Body of Christ.

Paul's teaching style using illustrations to communicate doctrinal concepts is also revealed in this letter. Having spent much time with the Roman soldiers chained to him, Paul would be well informed on the body parts of a Roman soldier's armor, which he used to illustrate the "Armor of God" (Eph 6:10-20).

### **Analysis – Paul's Imprisonment in Rome**

As referenced earlier, Paul's life and ministry while imprisoned in Rome (his first imprisonment) can best be observed through his letter to the church in Philippi. That letter, written towards the end of his imprisonment, revealed how Paul views his life and legacy at that point in time. When he wrote that letter, he wasn't entirely sure that he would survive the trial (Phil 1:19-21), though he seemed cautiously optimistic that he would (Phil 1:24-26). In spite of this uncertainty, he was grateful to those who had provided for his needs (Phil 4:10), and was content with whatever the circumstances (Phil 4:11-12). He rejoices that he is being used by God in spite of troubles and persecution (Phil 3:1-2), and he encourages others to follow his example (Phil 3:15-21). He has embraced this unique attitude about life that can effectively be summarized as "It's about Christ."

When we see our life through the lens of Christ, we tend to be more graceful, more forgiving, more accepting, and possibly even more determined. These are the characteristics that Dr. Swindoll observed as attitudes that Paul had embraced during this period of his life, leading to the living principles he recommends for us to embrace (edited version):

- **Embrace an Attitude of Unselfish Humility (Phil 2:3-4)** – Paul's troubles and predicament were not a result of his own doing, but a result of wrongful prosecution. His life had been turned upside down and made extremely uncomfortable. Yet, nowhere in the book of Acts or in any of his Prison Epistles do we find him crying "woe is me." Through his epistles, we can see how he acknowledged those who cared for his needs, but no records were kept of those who did him wrong. He simply and humbly submitted to his situation and doing his best to take the focus off of him and onto the Gospel Ministry. This is the "emptying-out principle" demonstrated by Christ that is the foundation for the attitude of unselfish humility. Effectively, don't make the situation – whatever situation – about us. Make it about the mission.
- **Embrace an Attitude of Joyful Acceptance (Phil 2:14-15)** – In two of his later epistles, Paul identified one qualification for spiritual leadership to be 'above reproach' (1 Tim 3:2; Titus 1:6). What does it mean to be 'above reproach'? Paul says it means to "do everything without grumbling or arguing" (Phil 2:14). Given how he has been wronged, he could justly complain, grumble, and make things awkward for others in the room. But he recognizes that doing so would put the credibility of the gospel at risk; as it would push people away. Instead, he chooses to accept his situation with a joyful attitude. People are drawn to joy; and people tend to stay away from grumblers. For ministry to thrive and support to grow, embrace a joyful acceptance for whatever the situation.
- **Embrace an Attitude of Strong Determination (Phil 3:13-14)** – In the third chapter of Philippians, Paul cited the need for us to confront our fleshly desires. As Swindoll noted: "At a time when many people in his place would be looking back in regret, wondering what life would have been like in a different profession, Paul repudiates the past and looks with confidence to the future." By Paul's own account, his flesh tells him that it's time to quit, change course, pursue the easy and comfortable path that he used to have. But knowing the truth and the Gospel, his determination guides him to finish the race. Following Jesus was never going to be easy in this world (cf Matt 16:24). We are all encouraged to "press on" with a strong determination to finish the race.

### Reflecting Upon the Word

Read Philippians Chapter 2:1-11. This is the passage where Paul described Christ's emptying-out humility.

1. What are some observable characteristics we identify from the humility exemplified by Christ (v6-8)?
2. What are some observable outcomes of adopting the humility of Christ (v9-11)?
3. What are some principles we can learn from these passages about how we should relate (v5) to one another in the body of Christ?

### Reflecting Upon our World

Paul's attitude and demeanor throughout his time (this time) in Rome reveals that he is consciously aware of how his actions impacts his surroundings.

1. Think of some leaders or pop-culture figures in our world (past or present) that exemplifies this form of selfless act, putting forth the needs of others ahead of their own. List them out.
2. From the leaders and figures you cited in the previous question, what can we learn about their upbringing and surrounding that made them act the way they do? How does their actions and their being impact those whom they work with / those they lead?
3. Review your reflections from the previous two questions. How does this inform us about how we can be an influential force in our society as ambassadors for Christ?

### Reflecting Upon Your Spiritual Journey

Today's lesson focuses on humility and its impact on our interpersonal relationship in Christ.

1. Identify someone whom you may have interpersonal conflict with. What are some steps that you can do restore that relationship? Think in terms of the principles from Philemon and journal your thoughts with prayers.
2. Reflect on a time when you were in a position (or may be in a position) where you were falsely accused of actions that have implications for the people close to you. How did you react to the situation? What was the outcome due to your reaction? How does your circumstance relate to Paul's circumstance in Rome? Journal your reflection and identify areas where you may do things differently – modeling Paul – should the same situation happen again.
3. Jesus says that as His followers, we must deny ourselves (Matt 16:24). Paul cited in his letter to Philippi that he has no confidence in the flesh (Phil 3:3). Reflect on times in your spiritual journey where you were tempted to take the "easy way out" – choosing to rationalize behaviors that would impact your growth towards Christ-likeness. What were your tensions? How did you react vs how should you have reacted? Journal your reflections in the form of prayers and seek the Spirit's guidance to help you "press on."