

The Prison Epistles

Philemon, Colossians, Ephesians and Philippians

Quiet Time Series
October-November 2017

*Grace to you and peace
from God our Father
and the Lord Jesus Christ*

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Preface

The aim of this booklet is to help you to read, understand and apply the Bible to your life, via a series of short daily studies on some of Paul's letters, the so-called "Prison Epistles" (Philemon, Colossians, Ephesians and Philippians). For each section of scripture, we provide a mixture of notes and questions to help you get started, plus more detailed points for delving deeper into the text when you have time, and suggestions for applying the text. We have prepared studies for Monday to Friday, leaving weekends free for other study or catching up. The dates are a suggestion; feel free to read at your own pace. It is important to remember that the goal of Bible study is to understand and apply the Bible, not the quiet time series or a commentary. These extra tools are only a guide, an extra source of reference. This guide is not designed to feed you; God's word should do that.

At the beginning of the booklet is some background material addressing basic questions such as: Who was Paul? To whom did he write each letter? Where and when were they written? What were the religious, political, economic, cultural and geographical circumstances at the time? The letters are short and each can be read in a single sitting, to get an overview of the letter, ignoring the details to begin with. Then the second read would be based on the quiet time series, at which time you can delve deeper into the text. For each day's reading, we recommend that you read the Bible passage first — it is God's word, this booklet is not! — and write down any thoughts and questions you may have, and then go through the questions and notes for the passage. Any questions that are not answered here can be raised with one of the East Teaching Ministry (Andy, Martin, Rachael, Simon, Steve, Tony, Tuka and Ugo) personally. You are also very welcome to send any comments, criticisms and questions at any time by email to EastTeachingMinistry@gmail.com.

Ask yourself questions as you read; look for connections with other scriptures; take note of historical and cultural situations surrounding the letters, and try to deduce the original meaning and purpose of each individual passage. Then look for central themes over the whole of the letter, and over all of the letters, and draw out principles or lessons of application. Above all, enjoy the good news of God's grace and peace through Jesus Christ, and consider how to live worthy of His high calling.

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Introduction to the Prison Letters

Imagine for one moment that you are in a foreign city over 1400 miles from your home. And no, you are neither on holiday nor business. You are in prison for publicly spreading your faith in a country where it is illegal to promote Christianity. Maybe you were spotted by the authorities in the town centre; perhaps an acquaintance of a friend you confided in anonymously reported you to the authorities. You are in custody in a high security prison awaiting an appeal hearing, since you lost the first court case against you. Your prayer and hope is for the government to show clemency and release you. In the meantime you are offered very few privileges such as visitation rights. Although no family or relatives are nearby to visit you, you have a few Christian friends from the local church that is flourishing while underground and unknown to the authorities. There are also some grateful disciples from neighbouring countries where religious freedom is not as intensely restricted. In fact many of the churches in the region remember you for your love and conviction of the gospel truth, and your support for the churches. Some leaders and ambassadors of these churches seek permission from the government to visit you for 30 minutes once a fortnight. Receiving and sending communication by text, email and social media networks is prohibited, although you are given some stationery supplies to permit you to write letters. Of course, you are certainly not allowed access to a Bible to read. You can pray though! Many of your visitors are resourceful in writing out scripture passages in the form of letters for you to read and meditate on.

What would be your thoughts during this time of your life? How would you be feeling? Would you be joyful? If this question is hard to answer, think of other times (outside of prison) when you lost your joy due to tough trials. What blessings would you be thankful to God for?

The apostle Paul faced significant trials in his faith during his Christian journey, and all the more during his imprisonment in Rome.

What do we know about Paul?

Paul was a Jew born in the city of Tarsus in the Roman province of Cilicia (Acts 22:3). This is located south-east of modern day Turkey. According to tradition he was born around 5 AD (Jesus would have been around 10 years old then). A couple of times the Bible shows Paul's testimony to the fact that he had the entitlements of a Roman citizen and that he inherited this citizenship from birth (Acts 16:37-38; 22:25-28). But how could this be? According to Paul's testimony he was a circumcised Jew of the Benjamite tribe. He was personally taught in Jerusalem (probably from age 12) by the famous Gamaliel who was an expert in the Jewish Law. By the time he became a young Pharisee (30 years would have been the minimum age) he was extremely zealous for the Jewish Law and the traditions of his Jewish ancestors (Gal 1:14; Php 3:5-6). Surely, his ethnic citizenship and heritage was Jewish, a true "Hebrew of Hebrews"!

Before Rome invaded, all of Anatolia (Turkey) had belonged to the Greeks, since Alexander the Great (333 BC). When Pompey of Rome invaded the area in 66 BC, he provincialised the area of Cilicia and Romanised the city of Tarsus within it. He subjected the city to Roman control and renamed it Juliopolis after the then Roman consul Julius Caesar. All the population of that city, regardless of ethnic origin, were automatically given Roman citizenship. It therefore follows that their children and future posterity born in that city would also inherit Roman citizenship from birth. It is thus conceivable that Paul's grandparents and/or parents acquired this citizenship before Paul was born.

Paul was a highly educated man, reading and speaking both Hebrew and Greek. He was also learned in Greek literature and poetry, and he quoted from famous pagan poets like Aratus, Menander and Epimenides in his writings in order to win over the Greek Gentiles with cultural references that they would understand (Acts 17:28; 1 Cor 15:33; Titus 1:12).

Before Paul was converted to the faith, he was notorious for persecuting the church with the backing of the Sadducean high priest. He was powerful and revered amongst his Jewish peers for his zeal for the Law. After his conversion in Syrian Damascus, Jesus channelled Paul's zeal and passion for His purposes: the mission to bring the gospel of Christ to the Gentiles.



Figure 1: Map of First Century Asia Minor

Below is a brief timeline of Paul's life and missionary journeys:

- 33/35AD Paul is converted to Christianity in Damascus (Acts 9:1-19)
- 35-38AD Retreat to Arabia and return to Damascus (Gal 1:17)
- 38AD Paul visits the Jerusalem church for two weeks (Acts 9:26-28; Gal 1:18-19)
- 38-43AD Paul sent to Tarsus to save his life (Acts 9:30; Gal 1:21)
- 43AD Barnabas sends for Paul in Tarsus to help him with the Gentile mission in the cosmopolitan city of Syrian Antioch (Acts 11:25-26)
- 44-46AD Famine relief mission: Paul and Barnabas visit and support the Judean churches with contribution from the Antioch disciples (Acts 11:28-30)
- 46-48AD First missionary journey of Paul: Cyprus and the Galatian and Phrygian Roman provinces in Asia Minor (Acts 13-14)
- 48/49AD Paul summoned to the Jerusalem council: the Jew/Gentile controversy (Acts 15)
- 49AD Paul writes Galatians
- 49-52AD Second missionary journey of Paul: revisits the planted churches in Galatia and Phrygia; meets Timothy and Luke; mission extends to Europe (Acts 16-18)
- 50AD Paul writes 1&2 Thessalonians from Corinth
- 52/53AD Short visit to Ephesus, Caesarea, Jerusalem and then Antioch
- 54-57AD Third missionary journey of Paul; Paul resettles in Ephesus for three years (Acts 19-20)
- 54AD Paul writes 1 Corinthians from Ephesus
- 56AD Paul writes 2 Corinthians from the Macedonian province (north Greece)
- 57AD Paul writes Romans from Corinth or Cenchrea
- 58AD Paul's plan to return to Judea to help the churches (mission aid)
- 58AD Paul arrives in Jerusalem; Jewish riot (Acts 21-22)
- 58-60AD Sanhedrin hearing in Jerusalem; hearings and imprisonments in Caesarea (Acts 23-26)
- 60AD On appeal to Caesar, Paul is sent to Rome (Acts 27-28)
- 60-62AD Paul is under house arrest (Acts 28:30)
- 61AD Paul writes PHILEMON, COLOSSIANS, EPHESIANS (and a lost letter to the Laodiceans)
- 62AD Paul writes PHILLIPIANS
- 63AD Paul's possible visit to Spain based on a promise (Rom 15:28)
- 64AD Paul leaves Timothy in Ephesus
- 65AD Paul writes 1 Timothy from Macedonia
- 66AD Paul writes to Titus in Crete from Nicopolis in Greece
- 66/67AD Paul arrested and brought back to Rome; imprisonment in Manertime prison
- 67AD Paul writes 2 Timothy
- 67/68AD After two trials, Paul is executed in the reign of Emperor Nero
- 68AD Nero commits suicide

Why was Paul imprisoned in Rome?

When Paul returned to Jerusalem at the end of his third missionary journey in order to provide missionary aid to the church, many Jews from the Roman province of Asia had infiltrated the city. These Jews served as rabble-rousers to stir up the crowd when Paul was spotted in the temple. They found his teaching of Jesus offensive so they used the pretext of alleging that he had brought in Gentiles to defile the temple. Paul was immediately arrested with the intent of being lynched. However, the Roman cohort received news of this riot and quickly intervened. The Roman tribune allowed Paul to make his case of defence both before the crowd and before the Jewish council, but it was to no avail. Jesus then appeared in a night vision to Paul encouraging him to testify in Rome as he did in Jerusalem. When a Jewish plot to kill Paul came to light, the tribune arranged a quick transfer of Paul to a safer place of custody: the Roman headquarters in Caesarea. Paul had this custodial privilege on the merit of his Roman citizenship (Acts 21:17-23:35).

While in custody in Caesarea, Paul was summoned to three separate trial hearings; the first with the Roman governor Antonius Felix (52-59 AD); the second with the governor Porcius Festus (59-62 AD); the third with both Festus and the invited Herodian king Agrippa (50-100 AD) with his sister Berenice. Jewish representatives were also there to present their allegations against Paul. Paul consistently explained that he was obedient to a vision from heaven and that he was called preach repentance to both Jews and Gentiles; that he was obedient to the Law and the Prophets; that Jesus would come; and that Jesus' death, burial and resurrection is the gospel and the light for both Jews and Gentiles. This was Paul's own view of why he was on trial (Acts 24:21; 26:6-8,19-23).

When the governor offered to transfer Paul back for a Jewish trial, Paul used his citizen's right to appeal to the Emperor Nero. With this appeal he was sent to Rome under custody.

In Rome, although Paul was under house arrest for two years, he had the liberty of preaching to all who visited him. His own dwelling place was even hired at his own expense. It is very possible that the brothers in Rome would have helped him out with his living expenses.

Make no mistake, Paul was at no holiday camp. He was a guarded prisoner in chains for the Lord as his prison letters mention (Phm 1:1,10; Eph 3:1; 4:1; 6:20; Col 4:18; Php 1:13,17).



Here's an incredible insight: Paul was guarded by the Praetorian guard while under house arrest. But what was the Praetorian (imperial) guard? These were no ordinary Roman legionaries. Not even a centurion or tribune could qualify for this job. This specialist elite group, of which there were an estimated 9000 to 10000 under the imperial employ of Nero, were the equivalent of our modern day MI5 or the US navy seals or secret service. These obviously represented the emperor Nero's bodyguards. But unlike our modern day intelligence officials, they acquired immense power within the empire; they were known to dethrone and appoint puppet emperors to preserve their interests. This politically significant military group would have been scheduled in 8 hour shifts with 3 men per day guarding Paul over a 24 hour period for two years. It is no wonder that the WHOLE imperial guard came to know the gospel and his imprisonment for Christ (Php 1:13).

The Prison Letters

All four prison letters are traditionally attributed to Paul, based on the internal evidence. Each letter mentions Paul by name in the prologue with a signature formulaic greeting “Grace to you and peace from God our Father ...” as in all his letters. Some of the letters may also have been co-authored by Timothy.

What would the occasion have been for Paul to write to these specific people or churches, known and unknown to him? After all, since Paul was not travelling anywhere he would have had time to write to many other churches (it is of course possible that he did, and these other letters are lost). During the early period of Paul’s imprisonment, a traffic of disciples and guests visited and spent time with Paul. This dwindled by the time he wrote Philippians. Some were close companions of Paul who boarded the same ship to Rome (Luke, Timothy, Aristarchus, Tychicus, etc.). Some were ambassadors, special envoys sent by churches to give spiritual and/or financial support to Paul (e.g. Epaphroditus; Phm 2:25). Some men like Epaphras visited Paul to share concerns about local churches where heresy was developing, even though some of these churches were unknown to Paul personally (Colossae, Laodicea, Hierapolis; Col 2:1). Some were simply guests (including the runaway slave Onesimus; Phm 1:10) who might have heard the reputation of Paul’s preaching and sought to see the truth for themselves.

So here is a short reconstruction of events giving occasion to the letters:

- Onesimus runs away from his Christian slave master Philemon in Colossae and flees to Rome
- Onesimus meets Paul and becomes a disciple
- Epaphras, the founder of the Colossian church, meets Paul to discuss a dual heresy rising in the church
- Paul writes a letter to Philemon in Colossae appealing to his Christian nature to accept Onesimus back as a brother and not a slave
- Killing two birds with one stone, Paul also writes to the wider Colossian church to address the heresy
- Having addressed Colossae, Paul is now compelled to write a general circular letter for all the churches in the province of Asia to express the need for unity through the grace of Christ; this is known as Ephesians (a lost letter to the Laodiceans may have also been written; Col 4:16)
- Tychicus, a native of Asia, delivers these 3 or 4 letters from Rome, taking Onesimus along with him (Col 4:7-9)
- Epaphroditus, a messenger from the Philippian church, sends financial support to Paul
- Towards the end of his imprisonment, Paul writes a letter of thanksgiving to the church in Philippi
- Epaphroditus returns home with the Philippian letter after he recovers from an illness



Figure 2: Map of First Century Asia Minor, Macedonia and Achaia

The Letter to Philemon

It is very likely that this letter was the catalyst for addressing wider issues in all the churches in Asia. Philemon (his name meaning “affectionate”) was a disciple in Colossae. He was also a wealthy slaveowner, and the church met in his house. His wife Apphia and Archippus (possibly their son, or a co-leader of the Colossian church) are also mentioned. If Paul had not founded or visited the Colossian church, how did he know Philemon, Apphia and Archippus so well?

When Paul taught in Ephesus for three years, many would have been acquaintances of Paul, including Epaphras. The whole of the Asian province had heard of Paul’s preaching of the gospel (Acts 19:10). Subsequently, these disciples would have left to plant the churches in Colossae, Laodicea and Hierapolis.

The letter does not say why the slave Onesimus (meaning “beneficial/useful”) ran from his master. Perhaps Philemon was not active in sharing his faith with his slaves; maybe Onesimus took advantage of his lenient Christian master and fled to find freedom. According to Roman law Onesimus was Philemon’s property and the crime of escaping was punishable by death. Paul, knowing that Onesimus still belonged to Philemon, appealed to his Christian attitude to embrace Onesimus back as a brother.

The Letter to the Colossians

Colossae was a small town located in the Lycus river valley, 10 miles from Laodicea and 100 miles east of the main city Ephesus. In the time of the Seleucid Greek ruler Antiochus the Great (223-187 BC), 2000 Jews had been resettled in this region; nevertheless, the town still consisted mostly of Gentiles. By 63 BC, the male Jewish population in Colossae had grown to 11000.

Epaphras was the minister who first planted the church in Colossae and possibly other neighbouring churches like Laodicea. He visited Paul in Rome and reported concerns of a heresy that was germinating within the church. Clearly there may well have been outside influences too.

Gentile Christians had come from a background entrenched in Greek philosophy. An incipient type of Gnosticism (belief in esoteric knowledge) infiltrated the church and polluted the gospel. It taught that the spiritual was good and the physical was evil. As such it was questioned whether Jesus could be the Christ, and especially how Jesus could be God and man in bodily form. Practices of maltreating the body (asceticism) and worshipping angels (adopted from an oriental religion, Zoroastrianism) were soon brought into the church.

If that was not enough, the Jewish Christians were influenced to Jewish ceremonialism by outside Judaizers, making the observance of circumcision rites and special Jewish festivals a prerequisite for the Christian faith. These doctrines were being taught to the exclusion of the main gospel truth. Paul had to write a sharp letter to deal with these issues.

A Circular Letter (to the Ephesians?)

Having written a shorter letter to the Colossians, Paul spent some more time to write a more general circular letter to the whole region of the province of Asia. But surely in the first verse it states that it is addressed to “the saints who are in Ephesus”! If we were to survey some of the oldest manuscript codices, such as the Codex Vaticanus (325 AD) and the Codex Sinaiticus (350 AD), you will find “in Ephesus” missing in those Greek texts, as well as the Chester Beatty collection of papyri (200 AD). In fact, it is only in a later copy of a codex (Alexandrinus, 450 AD) where it is found. Nevertheless, the letter was known by the title “To the Ephesians” in the early church going back to at least the 2nd century AD. If it was not intended for any one church group, and many of the other churches in that area were personally unknown to Paul, that would explain why the letter does not have any personal greetings, unlike Paul’s other letters. As the letter was circulated, it would have been copied and the name of the destination church inserted. In general, we do find that even letters addressed to specific churches were expected to be circulated to neighbouring churches in the area (Col 4:16), so it makes little difference whether the letter was addressed first to Ephesus, the main city of Asia, or not.

The outline of Ephesians is very similar to that of Colossians, although the theme of the whole letter is summed up in 1:10 “... in Christ all things are brought together in unity”. Chapters 1 to 3 describe the unity in Christ through grace. Chapters 4 to 6 describe how the church should fit into this unity according to God’s will.

The Letter to the Philippians

The city of Philippi was founded and named after Alexander the Great's father, Philip of Macedon, in 359 BC. It originally had a lot of gold ore, which was used to finance his Greek wars. Later, the Greeks were defeated by the Romans and the area of Macedonia was provinced making Philippi its main city capital. By 42 BC there was Roman civil war between two factions (the Battle of Philippi) and later in 31 BC (the battle of Actium). Defeated soldiers who were retired, senators and others in Rome who supported the defeated armies were deported to Philippi. Subsequently, Philippi became a Roman colony (a second Rome). The whole populace were Roman citizens and the whole culture and rule of law was Roman, with their local government of Roman magistrates. Latin was spoken and taught in that city, unlike other cities in Macedonia where they spoke only Greek.

In 49/50 AD Paul first visited this city (Acts 16). The households of Lydia (a businesswoman) and the Philippian jailer were baptised into Christ. Both homes were very hospitable to Paul when he was there.

Twelve years later, Paul wrote a letter while imprisoned in Rome to express thanks to the church for their gift of financial support (4:14-18). Paul mentions how the gospel was having an effect in Rome due to Paul's house arrest. He is hopeful of being released soon and is eager to send back their messenger Epaphroditus and later on Timothy to encourage the church (2:19-30). His exhortation to the church was for them to guard against the Judaisers who wanted to impose Jewish ceremonialism upon the gospel, to take pride in their heavenly citizenship and not their Roman one, and to resolve disagreements between sisters in the church.

One common theme that emerges in all of these letters is that Paul encourages his hearers to live a life worthy of the gospel (Eph 4:1; Col 1:10; Php 1:27).

How to Read Paul's Letters

Many false practices and false teachings are due to incorrect interpretation of scripture, in other words, a failure to understand how to read the Bible. Letters (or "epistles") are quite different from other genres of writing found in the Bible, such as history, law, and Old Testament (OT) prophecy. On the one hand, they are addressed to Christians, so any doctrine or general instructions usually have an immediate relevance for us. So when Paul writes "For by grace you have been saved through faith" (Eph 2:8), we have no problem recognising this as applying to all Christians, and not just those in the church who first received these words.

On the other hand, the Biblical letters are personal, as the author typically knew many of the recipients of the letter personally. This means that they contain greetings and personal instructions which give us some idea of the lifestyles and relationships of early Christians, but don't have any direct practical application to our lives. For example, Paul's instruction to Timothy to bring his cloak and scrolls (2 Tim 4:13) does not mean that we should always travel with a jacket and a Bible, nor that we should return lost property, although both of these might be reasonable things to do.

Another factor to consider is the wider context, the culture and times of the letters, which add to the challenge of understanding and applying these scriptures. Many of the customs of the first-century Middle East are very foreign to our twenty-first century Western lifestyle and ways of thinking. It is not easy to determine the extent to which we should take each instruction literally, e.g. 1 Th 5:26 Greet all the brethren with a holy kiss; or 1 Tim 5:23 No longer drink water exclusively, but use a little wine for the sake of your stomach and your frequent ailments. It is important to consider the purpose of each passage (e.g. is Paul's concern to teach about the manner of greeting each other, or is he just asking them to pass on his greetings?) and to be consistent in the way we interpret scripture, so that we are not picking and choosing the parts that we like.

Quiet Time: Philemon

Phm 1:1-25 — A Personal Plea

Mon 9 Oct

Philemon is a short, personal letter to a brother and fellow-worker in the Gentile mission, Philemon. Apphia and Archippus (perhaps Philemon's wife and son) and their house church are also addressed in the letter, but most of it is directed to Philemon only (apart from verses 22 and 25, where "you" is plural). The author, Paul, was in Rome under house arrest (Acts 28:30-31), but this didn't stop him reaching out and helping Onesimus to become a Christian (v10). Onesimus was a slave who had apparently run away from his master, Philemon. Onesimus's conversion did not remove his obligation to return to his master, and Paul pleads for Philemon to accept and forgive him.

Questions

- Why does Paul introduce himself as a "prisoner" rather than an "apostle" as in other letters?
- What was Paul's attitude to Philemon in v4? Why did he feel this way? How often do you mention your brothers and sisters in prayer?
- Are you effective in sharing your faith? What does Paul suggest might help in verse 6?
- Consider the arguments that Paul uses to convince Philemon. Why does Paul ask rather than tell Philemon what he should do (v8-14)? Would Paul have been wrong to use his apostolic authority? What dangers exist with the use of authority, even if used correctly?
- Who is Paul imitating in verse 17-19 when he offers to pay any debt owed by Onesimus?

Further Notes

Paul describes himself as a "prisoner of Christ" (v1); he understood the imprisonment to be God's will. The whole letter centres around the request that Philemon forgive Onesimus. This is an example of how the gospel transforms relationships and challenges the world's social order (see Col 3:11). We will see this theme again in Colossians and Ephesians.

v8-10 Paul sets aside his apostolic authority so that Philemon's response can be voluntary (v14), a response to the gospel, arising from love for God and respect for Paul. Paul wants the relationship to be healed on the heart level, so he avoids any use of force in convincing Philemon.

v15-17 "Was separated": by whom? Paul implies that God orchestrated the situation to bring about Onesimus's salvation and restoration of his relationship with Philemon. This reconciliation is Paul's main concern, rather than Philemon releasing or sending back Onesimus to help him. It is a radical request to ask Philemon to receive Onesimus as he would Paul, as a partner. We do not know Philemon's response, but fifty years later there is record of a bishop of Ephesus named Onesimus – perhaps this was the same man, the fruit of relationships healed by the gospel!

One difficult issue raised by this letter (and also Ephesians and Colossians) is the view of slavery in the Bible. Christianity was the driving force behind the UK's movement to abolish the slave trade, but the Bible seems to accept slavery (Ex 21:1-6; Eph 6:5-9; etc.), and here we see Paul sending a slave back to his master! In this case interpreters are divided over whether Paul expected Philemon to set Onesimus free; he doesn't explicitly make such a request (but see v16).

The Bible passes over politics and social order to address the heart directly, but the transformation of our hearts revolutionises our relationships and our political and social views. Here, the teaching regarding slaves and masters suggests that slavery does not have to be abusive, if based on the cross. But just like other relationships which are too often abusive (employment, marriage; dare I say church leadership?), it is man's sin rather than the social structure itself that is the greatest problem. Slavery is not a desirable state, but it doesn't stop one from serving God (1 Cor 7:21-23). Releasing a slave or abolishing all slavery does not necessarily change anyone's heart, just as the end of slavery in the USA did not end racism. The radical change brought by the gospel here is the transformation of the master-slave relationship, the abolition of the class difference and replacement with brotherhood. Society can only be changed if individual hearts are changed.

Quiet Times: Colossians

Col 1:1-14 — Living a Life Worthy of the Lord

Tue 10 Oct

This section describes how as Christians we have been rescued from a dark place and now live in a kingdom of light. We are therefore called to reflect on our motivation to live a new life that demonstrates that we understand the cost of our freedom.

Questions about the Text

- What do you think it means when it says that “the gospel is bearing fruit” (v6)?
- What do you think Epaphras taught the church (v7)?
- What do you think it means to “live a life worthy of the Lord” (v10)?

Questions for Us

- How are you doing in regards to praying for others including those you have never met?
- Consider how you are growing in the knowledge of God. In what specific areas would you say you are growing spiritually?
- Do you regularly reflect on your thoughts and actions and ask if they are pleasing to God? If not consider how this might be beneficial (v10).

Further Notes

Paul had never been to the church at Colossae and yet he prayed for them. How we pray and what we pray about give good insight into where our hearts are at; whether we are self-focused or others-focused. We tend to pray about things that dominate our minds. If we face trials and difficulties these things tend to dominate our prayers. Col 4:2-4 gives an insight into Paul’s focus even though he was in prison; he prayed not for release but more opportunities to share the gospel. When we pray, are we seeking to do God’s will, asking questions like: “What is His will for me in the midst of this challenge?”. Quite often, we may find ourselves praying a self-centered prayer focused on asking for relief from the challenge or situation.

Paul asks God to fill the Christians with the knowledge of God’s will through the power of the Spirit as this will help them live a life worthy of the Lord, leading to a fruitful life and in turn spiritual growth. Would you say you are filled with the knowledge of God’s will? This will help us to live a life worthy of the Lord. Knowing God’s will and striving to match our lifestyle against this knowledge will help us to live a life worthy of the Lord. The use of “worthy” (v10) implies a connection where one motivates the other. For example, comparing Christ’s life and your life: does your life reflect Christ? Daily we are faced with a whole range of situations that require godly discernment to make decisions that ultimately should please God. Often there is no clear indicator as to whether we are making or have made the right decision. However, one thing we can ask ourselves is whether we approach our decision making in a manner worthy of the Lord.

In this section Paul is also tackling some of the errors being introduced by false teachers associated with a dual heresy that had some early elements of Gnosticism mixed with Jewish traditions (see Introduction to Colossians). The suggestion from the heretics was that the Christians at Colossae might be lacking some special knowledge. The notion seems to be that although Epaphras started the church well, the false teachers were offering to provide special knowledge that at its core conflicted with the gospel.

This section answers the question, “Who is Jesus of Nazareth? A mere man or the almighty God?” We are reminded of the supremacy of Christ; the one we worship, serve and call brother and Lord. The question is, how does this knowledge impact your daily life?

Questions about the Text

- Why do you think Paul states the facts about Christ in v15-20?
- He is the head of the church – how do you connect with this statement?
- What do you think it means to be holy in His sight?

Questions for Us

- Why do you think it was important for Paul to remind the Christians at Colossae of Jesus’ lordship?
- What are the implications of knowing these facts Paul presented about Jesus?
- What aspects of the description of Christ encourage you most and why?

Further Notes

We must always be asking ourselves how head knowledge translates to our core beliefs and also to our behaviour as Christians and our hopes and expectations. It is important for us to know the facts about Jesus Christ, as this protects us from heresy and false doctrine. For example, God is invisible but Jesus allows us to see exactly what God is like, in His nature. This is important because it demystifies the nature of God. If you know what Jesus is like you will know what God is like. Also, Jesus created all things in heaven and on earth – He is not just a good man or a spiritual leader, but God indeed. Jesus is the head of the church – yes, obey your leaders (Heb 13:17); yes, be willing to be taught by others (Matt 28:20); yes, submit to one another out of reverence for Christ (Eph 5:21); but we all need to know what the leader and head of our church (Christ) is saying. You need to know your Bible, be focused on doing what the Bible says above church focus, be comfortable to question things said from the pulpit, be comfortable to question the decisions of church leadership, and make sure any concerns are based on your understanding of the Bible.

In terms of Paul’s intentions in this letter to address some of the false teachings, Paul wants the Christians to see that following Christ is sufficient. Yes, we do need to grow in Christ, but the message of salvation is sufficient. No other teachings are necessary.

Paul explains how Christians, in their current state, are blessed by being holy and blameless in God's sight. However, there is an ongoing expectation to grow and become fully mature.

Questions about the Text

- What do you understand by the phrase “established and firm” (v23) and what do you think this looks like?
- What is the hope held out in the gospel (v23)?
- In what ways can a person “move from the hope held out in the gospel” (v23)?
- What is your understanding of v24 regarding “what is lacking in regards to Christ's afflictions”?
- What do you think the “mystery” (v26) refers to?

Questions for Us

- Do you see yourself “without blemish and free from accusation”? If not, why not?
- Consider your journey to becoming “fully mature in Christ”. How would you evaluate your progress and how would you communicate this to others?
- How active are you in helping others mature in the faith (v28-29)?

Further Notes

There seems to be a conditional requirement to our reconciliation, our being presented as holy and without blemish in God's sight: the condition is that we continue in our faith, established and firm (the RSV uses the phrase “stable and steadfast”).

With regards to v24, at first reading this might be difficult to understand. It might come across that there is something lacking in Christ's atoning sacrifice on the cross (but see Heb 10:10-14). Verses 24-29 are probably best read and understood as a unit. The issues addressed by Paul appear to be related to false teachers, with their associated language and message, which appears to be that something is lacking in the Colossian Christians' knowledge, so that the Christians in Colossae need to search for further knowledge (“fill up”, a kind of play on words). Christ's affliction for his body most likely refers to the sufferings of Christ in regards to his earthly ministry in order to help people become and remain children of God. Paul attached no atoning value to such suffering, it was rather suffering as a minister: as Christ suffered as a minister so Paul suffers as a minister. In this way, Paul suffered for the sake of the body. The application for us is that as Christians, we are called to suffer for Christ and share in the ministry of reconciliation.

In verse 25, Paul was commissioned to present the word of God in its fullness. He calls it a mystery now revealed – again this appears to be a direct challenge to false teachers who might claim that there is something lacking in the message the Christians in Colossae received. Also, being a mystery revealed indicates that there is no hidden knowledge that can be taught. The application for us today is to be grounded in God's word, and be confident we know what God expects of us. All teaching has been revealed in the word and there is no new teaching that supplements it. It might be new to your ears if you haven't read or understood a passage, but it certainly isn't new in its being available to us.

Although we have the word there is still work to be done (v28-29) as we set our sights on maturing or growing in the faith. This growth can come about by teaching and correcting and also by the maturing effects of life's experiences.

In v29, we see that Paul's life was very intentional and he recognised the source of his strength. In simple terms, Paul was able to do more than he thought humanly possible because he relied upon and was deeply motivated by Christ. Reflect on this when you consider your own limitations and attitudes.

Paul engages in addressing the issues at hand. He is concerned that the Colossians are not deceived by “fine-sounding arguments” (v4), that no-one takes them captive through “hollow and deceptive philosophy” (v8). In Christ is found all the wisdom and knowledge (v3) that we need to live a full life.

Questions about the Text

- What do you think it means to be “united in love” (v2)?
- What do you think “knowing the mystery of God” means (v2)?
- Why do you think the verse indicates that the treasures are hidden (v3)?

Questions for Us

- If you are an overseer of any form in the church reflect on how hard you are working to help others grow (v1).
- Do you see yourself as “united in love” with your brothers and sisters?
- What can you do to further improve your unity with other disciples?
- How seriously are you taking your daily study of the Bible (v4,8)?
- When you discuss the Bible with others who have strong opposing views to your own, how do you ensure that you have a correct understanding (v4,8)?

Further Notes

Paul starts this section displaying some qualities of anyone in an overseeing role: caring deeply for people, working hard to help others be encouraged, united, having understanding and knowing God. Further, we see here some crucial information that helps us understand unity in the fellowship and how that is closely connected with a true understanding of Jesus Christ. There is a constant call in churches that the members are united (in love). However, if unity is threatened due to fundamental differences in our understanding of Jesus Christ (and therefore His word), then unity can be difficult. Basically, the closer we draw to God, the more unified we should become. Also, we should be confident about what constitutes unity and what is acceptable as differences in opinion and behaviour.

A subject that keeps cropping up in this section, as well as in the book as a whole, is a call for the Colossian Christians to not be misled by fine sounding arguments (v4), to resist the temptation to believe those who are introducing philosophic and humanistic reasoning deceptively dressed up as a call to true spiritual growth (v8). The motivation for these warnings is best grasped by understanding the heresy at Colossae (i.e. teachings being introduced to the church that are contrary to the original gospel). It is not clear exactly what constituted the heresy at Colossae, although most scholars believe it was an early form of Gnosticism with some elements of Judaism (see 2:16). Gnosticism is derived from the Greek word *gnōsis* (knowledge) and often threatened the early church, causing the apostles and later church leaders to teach against it in many other books. It was based on the claim of mystical and intellectual knowledge that could be accessed only by few. Gnosticism taught that there is no connection between the physical world, which is evil, and the spiritual world, which is good. One form of gnosticism concluded that our actions don't matter, and so gave a license to sin. Another form taught harsh asceticism (v18,21-23) to avoid the evil of the physical world.

These heresies have modern day equivalents which include teachings placing an emphasis on belief above deeds. These for example say “just believe and you will be saved” effectively teaching that how you live your life is not that important (contrary to 1 Tim 4:16). The claim that a physical act (e.g. baptism) could not possibly influence our spiritual status, as taught by many evangelicals, is based on a gnostic premise. Other heresies can include legalism, the notion that doing certain rituals, practices and actions will earn or merit a better relationship with God and possibly influence our salvation.

Col 2:16-23 — Beware of Worldly Traditions & Regulations Mon 16 Oct

Following a passage where Christ is highlighted as the source of many benefits to us, Paul now make a contrast that assaults the heretical teachings in the church. Here some of the heretical values and arguments are specifically named and confronted.

Questions

- What did the teachings that Paul was opposing in this passage produce in Christians?
- List 3 ways in which they contrast with Christ's teachings.
- What non-Christian teachings have you been subject to in the past that caused similar feelings of judgment and inadequacy? How do these affect you today?
- What arguments can you make from this passage to help you counter such rules in the future?

Further Notes

In this passage, Paul directly and clearly opposes the Colossian heresy (see introduction). He opposed the sense of judgment or disapproval that the Colossian brotherhood would be exposed to if they did not adopt the practices of the false teachers.

The false teachers produced a sense that the gospel was not enough unless you fulfilled additional requirements that were by their nature enslaving. The danger here was that if they thought God's grace through the gospel as taught by Epaphras was not enough, salvation could be sought by legalistic observances as prescribed by the teachers.

Also these teachers seemed to promote the worship of angels. While Judaism held some deference to angels as servants of God and men, in their weakness they were tempted to worship these heavenly beings, instead of only worshipping God.

The description given by scripture to these teachers is damning. If they trusted in their additional teachings, they had themselves lost connections with the head (i.e. with Jesus, v19). They were repudiating the core teaching of remaining in the vine (John 15:4-5) i.e. holding to Jesus' core teachings and supporting the fellowship with true doctrine.

Paul points to further motives for these teachings. First, they were based on human nature and centred on the flesh. Next, they were driven by pride (self inflation) and perhaps wanting to be recognised for their ascetic practices which could include fasting and similar practices, which were claimed to prepare the body for receiving visions. There was also an unbalanced focus on peripheral issues to the faith (v17 "shadows of things to come") or false issues (thus the call to resist defrauding) that had nothing to do with true spirituality.

Adherence to these teachings was sure to rob the brotherhood of the freedom that they enjoyed in Christ, as Paul implies in v20 in reference to words that could have been the very language that the false teachers were using: "Do not handle, do not taste, do not touch", in addition to the compulsory observance of certain days or celebrations (v16).

These passages will hopefully help us steer away from false teachings and opinions that can lead to legalism. We have as Christians an amazing amount of freedom by not being bound to beliefs that hold the world captive. Let us enjoy these and stay bound to Christ's light load (Mt 11:30).

Col 3:1-11 — Put On the New Self (I)

Tue 17 Oct

In this partly doctrinal appeal (v1-4), Paul encourages Christians to focus on a renewed life, recalling the work God has done to set them apart as renewed beings. The passage also reminds the audience of the sinful pattern of their previous lives in order to contrast with what they have access to now.

Questions

- What thoughts help you remember that you are a new being?
- What sins are you grateful for overcoming through Christ? Consider where you would be today if you had not repented of these sins.
- How is your knowledge of God being renewed?
- How are you doing in terms of seeing all in the fellowship as equal before God regardless of race, social status, education and wealth?

Further Notes

This passage starts by calling the Christians to focus on Christ. It is clear that Paul considers the Colossians to be Christians, who have already put on the new self (v9-10), but here he calls them higher, emphasising a continued effort in using the word “seek”, so that they never allow themselves to drift.

The term “died” (v3) is used to indicate that the old earthly ways of life have fundamentally no hold over Christians, while v4 points to a resurrection when Christ returns (see Rom 6:4; 2 Cor 4:10). “Put to death” (v5) implies that we should be in constant and active spiritual warfare against our flesh.

Paul goes on to a first list of vices that start with external actions (sexual immorality) and gradually progresses to underlying attitudes that reflect cravings of the heart (impurity, evil desires, etc.) and are usually the source of the outward actions. Of particular note is covetousness (or greed), which reflects a misplaced desire for security in something other than God.

A second list of vices is followed by an admonition to not lie (v9) which is often connected with the sins of malice and slander. The admonition again includes putting off (the old self) and putting on (Christ), expressed in the language of putting on or taking off a garment (Rom 13:14).

Finally, different classes of people are affirmed equal. Scythians who originated from around the Black Sea were often considered a lower class people among Gentiles in that area and were often slaves. Slaves were considered and treated as property in Paul’s day, but here they are valued as people of God, as we see again later in how masters were to treat their slaves (Col 4:1).

After admonition against lists of vices in the previous passage, Paul now encourages Christians to pursue various virtues which he lists. Many of these virtues draw upon the indwelling of Christ and an attitude of remembrance and appreciation of Christ.

Questions

- How do you think the world views humility and how do you embrace humility in your Christian walk?
- Many of the virtues listed address one another dynamics in the church. As you reflect on each item, how are you doing in each of these virtues?
- From the passage, what should motivate pursuing these virtues? How can we avoid the trap of self reliance as we pursue these virtues?
- Do you feel confident and empowered to admonish each other in the fellowship? What can stop you from doing so?

Further Notes

This passage starts with the very encouraging reminder that we have been chosen and set apart by God and are dearly loved by Him (see 1 Pet 2:9) and on this ground gives a series of encouragements regarding how Christians relate to each other. Note that the term “one another” (or “each other”) appears 3 times in this passage. This emphasises that practical Christianity involves us being in each other’s lives, prescribing even how we should behave when we hurt each other.

It is important to note that the list of virtues in verse 12 are all qualities of God displayed throughout his word: compassion (Jn 4:2; Ps 86:15); kindness (Rom 8:22); humility (Php 2:6-11); meekness (or gentleness; Mt 11:29); patience; etc. Scripture encourages us to put on these virtues because Christ himself displayed them. Considering also the cross of Christ, there is no greater motivation to embrace these. This passage also recognises that there will occasionally be grievances between Christians, but again an attitude of Christ, i.e. imitating His forgiveness, is called for.

Of these virtues, humility was largely seen as a negative by Gentiles (as is in the world today) as it resonated with weakness and shameful lowliness. In certain languages today, it denotes poorer social classes. In Christ, as described above, humility is a virtue and should be pursued and displayed in our lives.

The admonition to be thankful denotes heartfelt gratitude to God but may also encourage an outward expression of this gratitude in the fellowship through verbal praise of God. Verse 16 further encourages all Christians to teach and admonish one another. This implies that all Christians, without exception, can contribute to another’s spiritual growth – this is not only the role of leaders, teachers or more mature Christians. Every contribution matters. The passage goes further to encourage singing of psalms as a way of expressing the indwelling of the word of Christ. This gives great importance of song as a component of worship, of helping us set our minds on things above and as a way of teaching and admonition. This would certainly include an attitude of thoughtfulness and wisdom toward each other.

Finally, the passage gives us the understanding that no aspect of our life is to be left untouched by Christ. There is no such thing as “compartmentalisation” of our faith, as our relationships, whether with our brothers and sisters, with our immediate family, secular or spiritual, are to be under the influence of Christ and His will.

This passage gives practical directions for various groups, starting with closest family and progressing to slaves and masters. The appeals are made under the umbrella of subjection to Christ.

Questions

- Why do you think the passage addresses the need for wives to submit to their husbands? Likewise, why are husbands addressed to love their wives and not be harsh?
- In what ways can children be exasperated (“provoked” in ESV) by their fathers?
- What sort of behaviour were Christian bondservants (slaves) tempted to adopt with regards to their masters?
- How did Paul motivate Christian masters to treat their slaves?

Further Notes

This passage places all relationships on even ground. In Paul’s time, husbands, masters and parents “lorded over” their wives, slaves and children respectively. But Paul calls his listeners, both the dominant and subordinate groups, to humility and consideration for each other, motivated by the example of Christ. The dominant member is to consider his responsibility to and the needs of his subordinate as an expression of love and godly fear, while those who are subordinate are to voluntarily subject themselves to the one over them, as an expression of trust in God, just as Jesus humbly subjected Himself to the authority of the Father while on earth (1 Cor 15:28).

Starting with the most intimate of relationships, that of husband and wife, wives are called to submit to their husbands. The passage indicates God’s design, that by submission to her husband, a wife can express her submission to God (Eph 4:22-24,33). Complementarily, the husband is called to love his wife, a facet of which is not being harsh, i.e. treating her with gentleness. Other passages use terms like “cherishing” and “nourishing” (Eph 4:25-33), pointing to the sacrificial example of Jesus with the church. By following these mutually edifying commands – loving, cherishing, submitting and respecting – marriage becomes a beautiful reflection of God’s will and heart to mankind, and can have a powerful influence on children, other Christians, extended family and the world.

Moving on to the next close relationship, scripture admonishes children to obey or submit to parents (see Eph 6:1-3). Again we recall Jesus’ humility as he obeyed his own earthly parents in his childhood (Lk 2:51). It is noteworthy that children are addressed as part of the church who heard the letter. This also implies that their obedience would have been to Christian values as the parents were probably Christians. In view of fathers’ authority and responsibility for their children, they are admonished not to irritate their children. It is easy as a father to fall into a trap of over-emphasising authority over relationship with children. Here Paul instructs fathers to be considerate to their children, understanding their limitations and preferences, whilst bringing them up in discipline and instruction in the Lord (Eph 6:4). This requires wisdom, as each child is different in temperament, inclinations and abilities.

Finally, Paul addresses the relationship between masters and slaves. Slavery was very common in the first century and the economy of the Roman empire depended heavily on it. Slaves were often abused and treated cruelly and Paul encouraged gaining freedom (1 Cor 7:21) if possible. But Paul is not focused here on emancipation of slaves or ending this practice, but on transforming how slaves related to their masters and vice versa. With the view that one or both parties were Christians, Paul was keen that their behaviour reflected Christ.

All Christians, regardless of status, serve God (cf Eph 6:5-8) and their sincere service to earthly masters will reflect their sincerity to God. Just like the upper class Pharisees, who were keen for human praise (Mt 6:1-5), slaves were vulnerable to the same pitfall of people-pleasing. Although employment today does not come near to what slavery was, many of the principles are applicable. To help us apply this passage, we should consider: are we slack in our work when no one is watching? Is our attitude at work to please men or to please God? Do we compromise on our relationship with God and His church to gain favour with the world through our professional life? Or do we keep our eye on the true rewards of our labour as Christians even at the work place?

For masters, who were probably fewer in the Colossian fellowship compared to the slaves, Paul calls for justice and fairness, keeping in mind that they are, like their slave brothers, subject also to God (Eph 6:9). Again, the principles apply to anyone in a position of authority over workers.

Paul ends his letter with final admonitions primarily focused on steadfastness, evangelism and how Christians should relate to the world. There is a common theme of how human speech is used to declare the gospel, whether in the mouth of an evangelist or the casual but wise speech, backed up by actions, of a Christian. Paul concludes with a long list of personal greetings, giving us some insight into the close fellowship and connectedness of the early church.

Questions

- From the text, beyond the call for steadfastness in what ways do you think we are to be watchful in prayer?
- How much do you pray for local and world evangelism?
- What does it mean to have speech seasoned with salt? What can you do to grow in your speech as verse 6 describes?
- How engaged are you in building Christian relationships outside your local congregation?

Further Notes

Paul, in asking for prayers, is asking for an active participation and cooperation in his evangelistic mission to the Gentiles. He refers to prayer as a struggle (v12) and requiring effort (Rom 15:30-32), perhaps evoking the image of Jacob wrestling with the angel (Gen 32:24-25). This points to intercessory prayer as a powerful contribution to missionary work.

Additionally, prayers require perseverance and watchfulness. Paul's use of the word "watchful" may echo Jesus' request of his disciples in Gethsemane (Matt 26:40-41) and points to an meaningful engagement in prayer, with an eager expectation of the "coming of the Kingdom of God". We are to avoid spiritually "sleeping", by constantly engaging in battle for our spirituality and against the flesh, in a world that is keen that we become unaware (sleep) of our spiritual warfare.

There is a strong theme of evangelism by speech and action in v3-6 as Paul appeals for prayers that as an evangelist, he may be able to announce the gospel with clarity and that people with open hearts may be available to respond to it. Likewise, Paul upholds evangelism with timely, balanced, wisely pondered and gracious words to those who are curious about our faith (1 Pet 3:15-16). Having speech seasoned with salt entails gauging our audience and speaking in a manner that is engaging and relevant to their walk of life. And with this, we need God's help to say the right words.

Verses 7-18 contain personal greetings, although many details (v9 ESV "everything that has taken place here") are omitted as inappropriate for the letter. He leaves these to the informal reports of Tychicus and Onesimus, whom he endears to the church and who bear the letter. Onesimus is probably the runaway slave of Philemon.

Next a number of Jews in Paul's company are mentioned and send their greeting. Notably, Mark, who once abandoned the mission field (Acts 15:36-39) and whom Paul did not favour bringing on another mission, is spoken of in positive light. Paul later adopted Mark as one who was useful to his missionary work (2 Tim 4:9) and who went on to write the gospel of Mark.

Next to send their greetings were the Gentiles in Paul's company, including Luke the physician, who wrote the gospel and the book of Acts. Epaphras gets special mention as the one who first preached the gospel in Colossae, as well as in Laodicea and Hierapolis. He had been struggling in prayer for the Laodiceans, probably being the most aware of the Colossian heresy.

In verse 16, the Colossian church is directed to share their letter with the nearby Laodicean church (about ten miles away) and in turn read Paul's letter to them. Here you see Paul encouraging a model of interdependent and connected churches where all churches support each other with teaching and fellowship.

Archippus, who is also referred to as a fellow soldier (Php 1:26), was part of Philemon's household, perhaps his son. Commentators speculate on what his ministry may have been but it was probably preaching the gospel in Colossae in the absence of Paul or Epaphras. His mention may have been to commend him to the church.

Finally, Paul as he often did in other letters (1 Cor 16:21; Gal 6:11; 2 Thess 3:17; Phm 1:19), takes the pen and writes the final greeting in his own handwriting, so that the Christians may be able to recognise his writing and safeguard against false letters circulated in his name (2 Thess 2:2).

Quiet Times: Ephesians

Eph 1:1-10 — Spiritual Blessings (I)

Mon 23 Oct

The apostle Paul greets the recipients and then inspires them by describing many of the unseen yet very real blessings that each of them has. These blessings are centred around Jesus and his work on the cross and are just as real for us today. The passage is full of spiritual concepts that take the reader away from the physical, visible world to a non-material spiritual world described as the “heavenly realms”, which stretches from “before the creation of the world” to “when the times will have reached their fulfilment”.

Questions

- How many different spiritual blessings are described in these verses?
- Which of these do you connect with? Which of them do you find it harder to connect with?
- How real are these to you? Do you believe that these are yours now?
- How is God described in these verses, specifically in relation to what He does for us?

Further Notes

Verses 3-14 in the Greek are one sentence. The “heavenly realms” are mentioned in Eph 1:20; 2:6; 3:10 and 6:12 and are a reality where Christians and evil spirits (6:12; the “powers and authorities”) in some sense co-exist. It could be that Paul is describing this reality in some sense as a future state, but it is nevertheless secure now and exists now for the Christian due to the power of God and our faith. “Every spiritual blessing” means “blessings mediated by the Spirit” for those “in Christ”, i.e. Christians.

v4-6 Scientists are reasonably confident that our universe had a beginning, the Big Bang, but can say nothing about what existed before that beginning. Here (as in Jn 1:1-3, Jn 17:24, and 1 Pet 1:20) we learn that God existed and had already planned salvation, which is introduced as being a state of holiness and blamelessness (see also Col 1:22). This is not referring to our efforts to be holy and blameless, but God’s work to make us holy and blameless. Christians receive family status as God’s children (described as “adoption”), emphasising God’s initiative to bring us close to Him. God’s work is done “in love” (v4), “in accordance with his pleasure” (v5) and “freely given” (v6) – God enjoys saving us and knowing us!

v6 “to the praise of his glorious grace” means that ultimately God is glorified by our salvation.

v7-8 “Redemption” in Greek times meant buying back freedom from slavery, bondage or capture and in the Bible is used to describe the release of slaves (Ex 21:8) and the Israelites from Egypt (Deut 7:8). Here it could mean freedom from sin (i.e. the punishment sin brings) or from Satan’s realm and world (2:2-3). “Through his blood” shows that the price of freedom was the death of Jesus. Use of “riches” and “lavish” serve to deepen and amplify the intensity of the description of God’s work for us in Jesus.

v9-10 “Mystery” is something that has now been revealed to Paul and the other apostles and prophets to be shared with others (3:5). The revelation is that eventually, in God’s own time, all the fragmented parts of the universe (spiritual, material, seen, unseen etc.) will be summed up, or completed, or given meaning in Jesus. Jesus will be the focal point, the end; not just the vehicle for how Christians are blessed and forgiven, but the final destination for everything that will continue to exist.

Eph 1:11-14 — Spiritual Blessings (II)

Tue 24 Oct

Paul continues his long and deep description of what God has done for us as well as reminding us that everything God does ultimately brings glory to Him too.

Questions

- What do you think “predestined” means?
- What is the purpose of salvation from God’s perspective according to v12?
- How is the Holy Spirit described here?
- Looking through verses 3-14, what do Christians do?

Further Notes

v11-12 Recipients of this letter lived in a society that promoted belief in supernatural powers that could control and influence people. Both v4 (“chose us”) and v11 (“predestined” and “purpose of His will”) emphasise God’s power in reaching those who truly seek him. These concepts do not mean there is no human choice or responsibility but rather that God has very deep and strong purposes that cannot be defeated by other spiritual entities, something that would have comforted the recipients.

Note on predestination and free will: We may wonder if we have free will if God predestines. In Acts 2:23, Peter tells the crowd that the crucifixion of Jesus took place in accordance with “God’s deliberate plan and foreknowledge” (NIV) and yet the people were still held responsible (v36). So did God force the people to crucify Jesus (was it predestined, so the people were compelled to do it)? God clearly knew that Jesus would be crucified but that doesn’t mean He made it happen. God has a unique vantage point outside of space and time that allows him to view our world before events have happened, including events caused by free thinking humans.

v13-14 The Holy Spirit “sealing” the believer happened when they “believed”. In Acts 19:1-5, Paul asks some disciples if they received the Holy Spirit when they believed. When they answer that they didn’t, Paul explains that baptism in Jesus’ name was what they needed to do in order to get the Holy Spirit (they had only received John’s baptism, not Christian baptism into Jesus). The Holy Spirit is furthermore described as “the deposit guaranteeing our inheritance”. At some future time (such as described in verse 10) God will “redeem” (receive) the Christians but until then, the Holy Spirit is a mark of ownership for Christians. The purpose of a seal is to prove ownership and offer protection; we are now owned by God and under his powerful protection (see also 2 Cor 1:22).

Paul interrupts his praising of God to speak personally to the recipients, describing his prayers and wishes for them, before continuing to describe the power and authority of God and Jesus.

Questions

- What can you learn from Paul's prayers for the Ephesian Christians, which you can apply to your prayers for yourself and others?
- How might the recipients of the letter have felt when they heard of Paul's prayers for them?
- What do you learn about God's power in these verses?
- What else do we learn about Jesus in these verses?

Further Notes

v17-18 The "eyes of your heart" refers to the human mind, will, spirit, or centre of perception and decision. The "hope" is referring to the blessings described earlier in the letter. The "inheritance" can either be that they will one day be God's possession (v14) or that they one day receive a spiritual inheritance from God (Gal 4:7).

v19-21 Paul also prays that they understand God's power. In the OT the story of the Exodus and parting of the Red Sea were used to show God's power. Here to show how powerful God is, Paul describes Jesus as being "above" in seniority and authority any other power, including spiritual ones. If Christians in the region were afraid of other spirits, then this would encourage them. The phrase "mighty strength" is literally "the operation of the strength of his might", emphasising how powerful God is. God's power gave life to the dead Jesus, and put Jesus above all else, so all are "under" him (Christ is exalted, which is a further step than "resurrected", which is simply made alive; exalted means a superior finishing position). There are similarities with Ps 110:1 and the phrase where the LORD says to David's Lord "sit at my right hand".

v22-23 Jesus, having been described as the ultimate authority, with everything "under" Him, is then placed as head of the church. This is very encouraging if we stop and think that the ultimate leader and authority of the church is the all-powerful Jesus. There are similarities with Ps 8:6, but now the "everything" of the Psalm refers to more than the world that humans rule over – now it's the entire universe and spiritual powers in the heavenly realms, both now and in all future states.

Eph 2:1-10 — Grace to Jews and Gentiles

Thu 26 Oct

Paul focuses now on the spiritual condition of Jews and Gentiles (non-Jews) before and after their conversions in order that God's amazing grace can be fully appreciated.

Questions

- What picture does Paul paint of our lives before becoming a Christian?
- What influences are non-Christians under according to verses 2-3?
- What picture does Paul paint of God in relation to us?
- How are "good works" mentioned in verses 9-10?

Further Notes

v1-3 Spiritually "dead" is the shocking truth of where we were before God rescued us. Verse 3 says we were "deserving of wrath", so there's no doubt of the point here, we had failed, we were lost, damned, and as we had chosen to reject God's love we actually deserved the wrath we would face. Paul describes three ways we ended up in the mess:

1. "You followed", means it was something we chose to do and were responsible for;
2. "The ways of this world", describes the general influences of godless individuals and society on us that may seem to work but actually oppose God and his will;
3. "Ruler", "spirit" refer most likely to Satan and evil spiritual influences.

The "air" (v2) was generally understood to be the lowest part of heaven closest to the earth, and the abode of Satan (in Col 1:13 called "the dominion of darkness", which in Ephesians is "kingdom of the air"). So this describes the pervasiveness of Satan around us and his influence over unbelievers, which all (including the Jews and Paul himself) have been part of. Satan does not control people but provides influences that people can choose to follow.

v4-5 These verses contrast with the first 3 verses, where the depths of our sin and hopeless situation are revealed. Now however we are spiritually "alive" (before were dead), we are saved (before lost), and we are with Christ (before separate from God). Even more, this describes God as having "great love for us" even when we were dead in sin. It can be helpful to imagine for a moment that we were not attractive to God when he reached out to us with all that sin in our hearts, minds, actions and core, but he reached out nevertheless.

v6-7 "Raised us up" refers back to 1:20, where God raised Jesus to the highest spiritual point in the heavenly realms, above all powers and authorities. Incredibly, we are placed with Jesus in that elevated position! The overall purpose is that God's kindness, mercy and love will be seen to illuminate the majesty of God (as 1:6); in 1:19 Jesus' resurrection showed God's power; here our resurrection shows God's grace.

v8-10 Though our works don't save us, works are part of the Christian life as something we do to serve God and work with Him. When we connect with the amazing salvation we have, being grateful by doing what God wants does not seem too much to ask.

Paul continues to describe the wonders of being saved by reminding the readers of where they came from spiritually. He focuses on spiritual peace as he explains more of the work that Jesus did and finishes by describing the Christian's relationship with God in terms of citizenship, family and the temple.

Questions

- Why does Paul again ask his readers to remember their pre-Christian lives?
- When you remember your pre-Christian life, what do you think of? Does that make you more or less grateful for being a Christian now?
- What two groups of people are made into the “new man” of verses 14-16?
- How important is spiritual peace to you? What do you understand by it?

Further Notes

v11-12 “Remember”, calls us to stop and think about where we used to be; when we do that, what springs to mind? Do we miss the experiences, or shudder at the spiritual reality? The spiritual reality, building on 2:1-3, is that we were separate from Christ, not part of God's people, without the promises to look forward to, hopeless, without God.

v13 The blood of Jesus brings us near to God and in the right relationship; near and far comes from Is 57:19 and is taken up again in v17-18. It was used by Jews to describe a Gentile (far) who became a Jew (near) who was then near to God and his people.

v14-18 For us, these two groups (Jews and Gentiles) seem abstract: we don't see the world as Jews and non-Jews; nevertheless God did have to bring the two groups together somehow, as the OT led to a distinct separation of Jews from everyone else. In this passage peace is mentioned 4 times together with other concepts closely related, e.g. “two groups one”. Not only does Jesus “make peace” (15) but He “Himself is peace” (14), in that Jesus makes those who were formerly Jews or Gentiles into a new people – Christians. He does this by destroying the OT law that separated Jews from Gentiles in his death. The “law with its commands and regulations” is hotly debated: what was set aside (nullified), was it only some aspect of the Old Covenant or the entire Old Covenant? The context suggests Paul means the entire Old Covenant, which is supported by passages such as Heb 8:13. The point of the passage is clear however, that Jesus creates in himself a new man that transcends Jews and non-Jews and makes peace with them and God.

v19 “Consequently” i.e. the new status in Christ is a result of Jesus creating the new man. Christians are now citizens of God's nation and part of his family.

v20-22 The cornerstone is the first and fundamental stone used by the builders to determine all the rest of the building stones - so Jesus determines the church (see Is 28:61). The “foundation” is the message taught by the apostles and prophets (most likely NT ones) who were directly inspired by God. The church is likened to the OT temple in which God's Holy Spirit lives, though now the Spirit lives in individual Christians in a special child-parent relationship to God the Father.

Eph 3:1-13 — Paul’s Role and the Church’s Role

Mon 30 Oct

This passage moves away from the main theme of Eph 1-3, so that Paul could teach about his personal circumstances, that is, his imprisonment in Rome. The purpose of the passage is to encourage the church about his imprisonment, which Paul understood as being part of God’s plan to reveal His grace to Gentiles through Jesus Christ. The way this plan works out in history and in our lives shows the wisdom of God.

- One theme that repeats several times throughout this letter is that of “mystery”, describing the gospel message or one of its effects. Usually when we use the word “mystery”, we are talking about something strange. But in this context it just means “something that requires revelation”, that is, something which you wouldn’t know about if it hadn’t been revealed to you by God. What exactly is this mystery in verse 6 (see also Col 1:26-27)?
- What promise do you think Paul is referring to in verse 6? Could this be the promise to Abraham (Gen 12:3; 22:18; Gal 3:8), repeated to Isaac (Gen 26:4) and Jacob (Gen 28:14)?
- The main point of this passage is expressed in v10: God uses the church to display his wisdom to angels! He didn’t announce His plan to them; instead he lets them watch what happens on earth. How does the church display God’s wisdom? Does the church live up to this (now or throughout history)? With this purpose in mind, how should we live?

Further Notes

In case this thought overwhelms you, Paul encourages us (v11-12) that we can approach God with confidence, knowing that we are part of His plan. Part of this confidence is how we respond to difficult circumstances. As a concrete example, Paul returns to the thought that began in v1, concluding that even his imprisonment is part of this plan, which has led to the spread of the gospel, particularly to the Gentiles.

Eph 3:14-21 — Praise to God for His Blessings

Tue 31 Oct

The first three chapters of Ephesians focus on praise to God for His great blessings to us. As a fitting conclusion to these chapters, Paul expresses a prayer in response to these blessings. His prayer is for us; he prays that we would have strength, faith from Christ’s presence with us, stability from God’s love for us, deep understanding of God’s love, being filled and transformed into God’s image, with the final purpose that God will be glorified according to His plan.

- God loves to hear us pray, whether it is about small things or large. Here Paul focusses on the big picture. Do you ever pray like this? What can we learn from this prayer?
- Consider v16. How rich is God? How glorious? So how much strength can God’s presence in us give?
- Do you believe that God can and will answer this prayer (v16-20) in your life? What does v20 say about this? Who gets glorified when all these things happen (v21)?

Further Notes

Note that God is glorified in Jesus and in the church. This seems somewhat imbalanced: I would have thought that God is glorified by Jesus and embarrassed by the church! But the two belong together: Jesus is the head, and the church is the body, and God’s glory is seen when the church follows its head.

In v17, love is described with two metaphors: the root of a tree and the foundation of a building. Both pictures make the point that love is the key to the stability and growth of the church. Also our own growth to become more like Christ requires an ever deeper understanding of God’s love for us (v19). To fulfil our purpose of glorifying God, we must be filled and overflowing with God’s love.

Eph 4:1-16 — A Worthy Response: Unity in the Church **Wed 1 Nov**

God's calling places responsibilities on us (Eph 1:4; Php 1:27; Col 1:10; 1 Th 2:12). None of us were called by God because we were worthy; it is always by God's grace rather than our merit that we are called by God. But now that we have received this grace, God has made us worthy, and He calls us to live up to our new worth.

- What do you think this means for your life?

The first area that Paul addresses is our relationships (v2-3). If these are transformed by the gospel, the result is unity (v3-6). If we share everything mentioned in verses 4-6, then we have "more in common" with our brothers and sisters than we usually realise, and certainly more than our differences, so we should be able to work together as a team.

- Do you have any strained relationships in the church? Be diligent (v3) to do something about this today.
- How large is Christ's gift (v7)? Consider that this is how much grace you have received. How does that make you feel?
- In verses 8-11, after Christ ascended into heaven (Ac 1:9), what gifts did He give the church? How did He do this? With what gifts does He bless us today? Note that one purpose of Christ's ascension (v10) was to fill all the world with His blessings (see also Jn 14:16-17,25-28).
- From our point of view, what purpose do the gifts serve in the short term (v12) and the longer term (v13)? In your experience, is this how the church works? Consider also v16: all the parts of the body, if working properly, do so in a coordinated way. Note also how maturity in Christ should lead to stability in doctrine, honest and loving communication, and growth (becoming even more like Christ).

Eph 4:17-32 — A Worthy Response: Transformed Behaviour **Thu 2 Nov**

Living worthy of our calling also means abstaining from various behaviours that might have characterised our lives in the past (2:12), and probably still characterise the society in which we live (4:17). Note how our behaviour (how we "walk") is linked to the mind (v17) and the heart (v18). This passage makes an excellent study on the topic of repentance. Think about this as you read this section.

- What is God's view of secular thinking (v17)?
- How do most people seek happiness, security and satisfaction in life? Do you still have areas of your life which you are trying to fill the wrong way? How consistent is your life with what you have learnt about Christ (v20)?
- How does Paul describe the process of change in verses 22-24? What do you think the clothing represents?
- Note how each wrong practice in verses 25-32 is replaced by the right one: lying to truthfulness, anger to self-control and reconciliation, stealing to giving, discouraging to encouraging speech, bitterness etc. to kindness and forgiveness. Can you find any others? This is an important practical insight into how to overcome sin. Christlike behaviour is not just refraining from wrongdoing, but being a blessing to others.
- Why does the Holy Spirit care about our behaviour and even our thoughts and attitudes? If you are a parent, have you ever been annoyed by ingratitude shown by one of your children. How do we show our gratitude for the salvation that we have received from God?

Eph 5:1-21 — An Imitator of God

Fri 3 Nov

Chapter 5 continues along the theme of living the Christian life as part of the church (4:1-16) and as individuals (4:17-32). Paul urges us to be imitators of God in light of all discussed in the letter so far.

Children are natural imitators. That's how they learn. They learn about how to be men and women from adults around them. As a "dearly loved child" of God Paul urges us to be imitators of our Father in Heaven, our Abba. As a living example of what to imitate He provided Christ in the flesh. He lists behaviours that are sinful and others that are Christ-like. And Paul simplifies things for us by explaining that sin and Christlikeness are like darkness and light. As a dear brother once discipled me by saying, "If you're too busy doing good you won't have the opportunity to do bad".

This passage is an encouragement to us all that we can be better men and women than we can imagine by imitating Him who called us out of the darkness and into the light.

Questions

- **v3-4** How do you feel about all the sins listed in this passage for you to avoid? Do you find it overwhelming, challenging, or helpful?
- Is there any particular area in which you are "stuck", unable to turn away from a certain sin or regularly returning to it? If so, have you sought help from the body of which you're part of to "shed light" (v8) on the "darkness"?
- Which "encouragement" inspires you more to imitate God? To imitate Him out of love (v1-2,19-20), or for the fear of His wrath (v5)?
- In v17, "but understand what the Lord's will is": what does that mean in the context of this passage? Does it mean to obey Paul's instructions on christian living or does it mean something else?

Eph 5:22-32 — The Mystery of Marriage

Mon 6 Nov

You might be forgiven, upon reading this passage, if you think that it's solely about the relationship between a husband and his wife. And if you're single you're probably getting ready to skip to the next quiet time. Don't. There is a profound mystery in this passage that would set you free to serve Christ wholeheartedly if you would embrace the truth of it.

Questions

- Husbands and wives: What does "husband is the head of the wife" mean?
- Wives: How happy would you be to practice v22-24 if your husband is practicing v25-31?
- Husbands: How encouraged to practice v25-31 would you be if your wife is practicing v22-24?
- Husbands and wives: Is your motivation to practice your role dependent on your spouse practicing his/hers? Or is your motivation Christ? (v1-2)
- Husbands: Can you love your wife if you don't know her? "Love your wife" (v32) is a command. How important has it been to you to learn who she really is and how she would feel most loved?
- Wives: Your husband needs your respect like he needs air to breathe! Give it to him and watch him transform into the husband God always intended him to be. In what ways can you show your husband a healthy godly respect?
- Everyone (regardless of marital status): Verse 32 is the key in this passage that uses the example of marriage between husband and wife to point the way to the ultimate relationship between Christ (the head, the husband) and the church (the bride, the wife). We are each (individually) and all of us (corporately) the bride of Christ. We are a suitable helper. He dies for us. We submit to Him. We give to Him our respect and submit to Him. He knows and loves us and washes us with the Word. He is our Head. In light of this verse, what can you as a disciple, take away from this passage of scripture?

Eph 6:1-9 — Parent/Child, Master/Slave

Tue 7 Nov

This passage addresses godly behaviour in our relationships at home and work, the relationships where we spend most of our time. The mistake can be made to skip over this passage as “the bit after the marriage stuff but before the real spiritual meat in the Armour of God”. The value of this passage can’t be underestimated. Its brevity belies its importance.

- In what context are you to “obey your parents”?
- The promise in v3 is a reward from God for obeying His command in v1-2. Is this reward by God’s divine intervention or as a natural consequence of obeying His command?
- What does it tell you of God’s heart that He rewards your obedience of His command in v1-2?
- Whose training and instruction can exasperate your children, yours or God’s?
- When training and instructing your children in the Lord do you also model them and exercise God’s patience, forgiveness, love, compassion, etc.?

Verses 5-9 have been misused in the not too distant past to claim that slavery is Biblical, or to demonstrate that the Bible is invalid or out of date because of its acceptance of slavery. It is important to make the distinction that in this passage Paul was not trying to end slavery across the world but rather to address the relationship parameters between masters and slaves. We will explore this passage in the context of employer and employee as the principles still apply to us today.

- Considering v5-8, do you need to change the mental paradigm of how you approach your work?
- Do you obey Christ as v5 commands you should obey your employer?
- In light of v9, do you as an employer or manager treat those under you with the same heart as described in v5-8? Is your leadership laced with respect and sincerity of heart? Do you serve them wholeheartedly to enable them to do their jobs as if serving the Lord?

Eph 6:10-18 — The Armour of God

Wed 8 Nov

This passage of scripture is the conclusion of all that came before in Ephesians. The letter has addressed who you were and who you have become through Christ, your role in the body of Christ, as well as behaviours to avoid and behaviours to embrace in your relations with others.

Suddenly Paul brings you to a spiritual battlefield and instructs you to arm yourself or perish. He has sought to inspire your heart and mould your character and behaviours so you may be able to grasp the realness of the spiritual warfare that has been waging around you. It is time for you to suit up and take your place in God’s army.

Questions

- Whose strength, power and armour will enable you to stand against the devil’s schemes? Have you been trying to do it without them? Who do you think convinced you that you could do it your way?
- Which battle is the armour of God for? The spiritual battle against the forces described in v12 or the battle within yourself to do good and not sin? Are they the same battle or separate?
- How do you equip yourself with truth and righteousness (v14)?
- What is the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace (v15)?
- In what ways can you use your faith as a shield (v16)?
- Do you wear your salvation for all to see (v17)? Do you wield the Word? Have you sought training and mastered your weapon or does it lie unused and unpolished until Sunday morning?
- Upon equipping yourself with the armour of God, what then does God command you to do? What are your orders?

Quiet Times: Philippians

Php 1-4 — The Big Picture

Thu 9 Nov

Welcome to Paul's letter to the church in Philippi, better known as Philippians. Before you go any further, read the letter straight through, preferably in one sitting. It is only 4 chapters long so it won't take you very long. If you are not a strong reader, that's perfectly okay: today we are blessed with many wonderful audio bibles so relax with a nice cup of your favourite hot drink and listen to it.

If you have been around the block a few times, spiritually speaking, read or listen to the letter in a version you are less familiar with, as this will help you to think in new ways. The Bible Gateway website is a good place to look for an audio version or something different to what you are used to.

As you read/listen I have just one thing I want you to do for now – imagine you are a good friend of Paul. Philippians is not a formal communication from a high and mighty leader; this is a personal letter from a dear friend with whom you have worked to advance the gospel for as long as you have been a Christian.

And now sit back and enjoy.

Php 1-4 — The Aim of Philippians

Fri 10 Nov

Picture this situation: your life's work for the past 30 years has been to spread the gospel in a region whose people know nothing of Christianity and whose government position varies from neutral to hostile. Several of your co-workers have died at the hands of persecution and churches you have started are experiencing varying degrees of social, economic and even violent persecution. You have been arrested and it's not looking good. You have taught the churches God is faithful, loving, all knowing and all powerful.

There is one church in particular with whom you have worked in partnership to spread the gospel. For many years they have supported you financially and emotionally. Recently they sent a delegation to you to bring you material support, encourage you and see how you were doing. The leader of the delegation, a dear friend of yours and much loved member of the congregation, nearly died through illness as a result of the visit.

In the background, there are ongoing attempts by a faction of the greater church to impose their teaching that Jewish law and circumcision must be followed by the congregations you started. On the other hand, there is also an ever present danger that churches will be sucked into the materialistic and hedonistic value system of the pagan world.

In group dynamics, any group under stress is at risk of internal conflict. For example, if you have played in a sports team, think of how your team bickered when you were getting thumped. The church had much to disagree on: doctrinal issues such as the person and role of Christ; which "special days" and "special foods" to observe; how to live at peace with the pagan world without being co-opted; how to get along with local customs and norms without offending God; and how to respond to persecution in a way that does not compromise but doesn't make it worse.

Now your assignment: write a letter to this church with whom you have worked so closely.

1. What are your main concerns?
2. How do you reassure them of God's sovereignty even in these difficult times?
3. How do you convey your affection while at the same time preventing them from being discouraged by your unjust imprisonment?
4. How do you encourage them to stand firm in their own trials?

5. How do you remind them of sound doctrine, bearing in mind you want to avoid a lengthy theological treatise like in your letter to the Romans?
6. How do you help them to keep their spiritual compass pointed in the right direction?
7. How do you promote unity in the face of hardship?

This was of course Paul's assignment when writing to his dear friends in the church in Philippi. Personally, I give him an A*.

Php 1:1-11 — Saints and Slaves

Mon 13 Nov

In most of Paul's letters he introduces himself as an apostle, for example to the church in Ephesus he writes "Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God", but to the Philippians he introduces himself and Timothy as "slaves of Christ Jesus". Why do you think he did this?

Paul says he is writing to the "holy ones" or "saints" together with the church leaders. Have you ever said, "I am not a saint" to justify some bad behaviour? I hope not, but in any event, if you are indeed a Christian, that is not just a poor cop out, it is also profoundly untrue. A saint or holy one is a person set apart to Christ, which is by definition what a Christian is. So welcome to the sainthood! A sober side of this truth is the "title" saint or holy one is an unambiguous pointer to how we need to be in our relationship with God. Chameleon Christianity is no Christianity at all.

In verses 3 to 11 can you feel the strength of Paul's emotion? He really, really loved this church. This letter is no academic exercise – it is a heartfelt outpouring to dear friends. He prays for them in joy, he has confidence in them, he has them in his heart, he sees them as partners in both suffering and evangelism, he misses them and wishes the very best of spiritual blessings for them.

Who are your close friends? If you could not be with them what would you write to them? It is worth reflecting on Jesus' words, "It is more blessed to give than to receive." (Acts 20:35). If you have no close relationships you would do well to consider why this is and ask how giving you have been emotionally and how involved in team efforts (e.g. organising a HOPE Day of Service, arranging dates to encourage others, running a prayer group, or volunteering to teach our children on Sunday mornings) you have been.

Further Notes

The NIV and many other versions translate Paul's greeting as "servants of Christ Jesus" whereas the Greek clearly means "slave" (I have quoted from the HCSB above), and would have been understood as such by his readers. Why do you think the NIV and other translators "softened" the word to "servants"? What does it mean to be a slave? How comfortable do you feel about being a "slave of Christ Jesus"?

To a modern reader, the word "slave" conjures up images of the transatlantic slave trade with its brutality, rape, dehumanisation, torture and oppression of kidnapped African men, women and children for hundreds of years. Roman slavery was characterised by the same abuses, although there were some slave owners who were "good and considerate" (1 Pet 2:18). So it is quite remarkable that the Bible uses such a strong word to describe our relationship to God.¹ The voluntary choice to be a slave of God emphasises the strength of our belief in the goodness of our Master. Probably translators chose a softer word for fear that people be put off the gospel thinking that God supported the evils prevalent in slavery, or even that people might use the Bible to defend the slave trade and modern day human trafficking.

¹It is not just Paul's writings; see also 1 Pet 2:16; 2 Pet 1:1; Jude 1:1; James 1:1; Mk 10:44; Lk 17:10.

Php 1:12-18 — Trusting God in Hard Times

Tue 14 Nov

I think it is fair to say Paul was having a challenging time in prison. I don't know exactly what his circumstances were like but we can safely assume it was not somewhere to go on vacation. Do you notice how positive he is? There is a proverb that says "a problem is only an opportunity borne along by a very strong wind." I must admit the first time I was told this proverb was to encourage me when I was going through a tough time but it only served to annoy me. But with hindsight there is much truth to it and Paul exemplified the principle well. His focus was on all the ways God was using him while in prison rather than "life is tough", "my imprisonment is unfair", "there is no justice", etc. (add your own favourite "woe is me").

Do you have challenges in your life right now? Give yourself a score from 1 to 5 with 5 being you and God are one and you are seeing all the positives that are able to come through the challenge, and 1 being "woe is me". How did you do?

If you scored your response to previous big challenges you have had, how would you have done? Now the "truth hurts" question: do you see a positive progression?

Here's a bold truth none of us can duck: experience doesn't help us grow; *evaluated* experience helps us grow. The key is to think about what you can learn from a situation, whether positive or negative. It is worth saying that learning from success is just as important as learning from failure.

I think it would be a mistake to believe Paul was ignorant of the impact his life could be having if he was not in prison. If he had a choice I doubt he would have chosen prison, but he focused on the positives, not the negatives and trusted somehow that God had a plan in it all.

Php 1:18b-26 — Life and Death

Wed 15 Nov

In verse 19 Paul seems to make a rare mistake: he expects his imprisonment and unjust treatment to result in his deliverance. We know from history that it resulted in his beheading. But then whether you think of his comment as a mistake (bearing in mind he was human like us after all) depends on how you understand "deliverance". He goes on to explain in verse 23 how he would rather die and be with Christ, so in that sense the Roman soldiers who executed him were granting him deliverance.

Verses 20 and 21 are among the very first scriptures I ever memorised as a young Christian and they are as moving today as they were 25 years ago. If you are not good at memorising scripture don't focus on the words – focus on the passion and the idea. Paul is absolutely determined that he will uphold his dignity and with it Christ's dignity, no matter what his captors do to him. In every day and every way people would see the strength and character of Christ in him. When you think of imitating this it can be intimidating, even overwhelming. My advice is to change the way you think about it – don't see it as a standard to be achieved but rather just meditate on it, feel it in your veins, mull it over, talk about it, pray about it, think about it as you go about your business. For to me to live is Christ and I am determined that in everything I do and say Christ will be lifted up whether it is in my gentleness or my boldness!

Here are a few questions to prompt your thinking:

- Could you honestly say, "For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain"? Someone perceptive once said, "If you do not live for Christ you will not die for Christ."
- What are the situations in your life that give you the opportunity for "Christ to be exalted in your body"? How is it going?
- In general are you inward focussed or outward focussed? Difficult situations have the ability to bring out our true character. In terms of example, something that challenges me deeply is when Christ was being crucified he was giving towards those around him: forgiving the soldiers and the thief next to him, and arranging for his mother to be cared for. Not once did he complain – he had courage to exalt God in his death.
- If things are going well for you at the moment, I am genuinely glad to hear it, and long may it last! How can you exalt Christ through your kindness and generosity?

Php 1:27-30 — A Manner Worthy of the Gospel

Thu 16 Nov

Write down a list of words that describe conduct that is in “a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ”? This exercise works best if you write them down rather than just think them through.

When considering the words you wrote down, how do you think we are doing as a global church? How do you think we are doing as a congregation? How do you think you are doing as a family group? How do you think you are doing as a person?

Bear in mind we tend to be individualistic in our thinking whereas Christianity is about the Christian community as a whole, so the questions about your fellowship are just as important as about you as an individual.

Everyone one of the “how are you doing” questions refers to one or more human beings so there is no way an honest answer will give a perfect score. The obvious question is: whatever the issues are, are you part of the problem or part of the solution? Are you a blessing to the people in your life? I hope so.

Verse 29 has an interesting turn of phrase: “it has been granted to you” to believe in, and suffer for, Christ. It makes it sound like a privilege – okay, the believing bit is because it is the gateway to a relationship with God, but what about the suffering part??? I am not going to try to sugar-coat suffering; all I can say is what Paul says throughout his letter to the Philippians: look to the positive and see the impact God is having through you in the situation. In terms of the personal growth that comes through difficulties, a book worth reading is the Christian classic *A Pilgrim's Progress* by John Bunyan. There is a reason it is still popular several hundred years after it was written. As a side note, I was once ambling through a cemetery near Old Gate, killing time before an interview, and lo and behold there was his grave. It was so unexpected I remember it fondly to this day. In case you are wondering, I didn't get the job but shortly after that God blessed me with an even better one, so it was an opportunity to grow through disappointment and trust in God.

Php 2:1-11 — Part 1: Unity

Fri 17 Nov

This is one of the most famous passages in the Bible, and for good reason. Paul starts off by making an emotional appeal for unity in the church in verses 1-4. There is a huge amount you can say about this passage but in the short time we have there are two things that stand out to me.

Firstly, it is an appeal, not an order, although admittedly verse 3 veers towards being an instruction. Sometimes we can be legalistic in our mindset and see Christianity as a set of rules to follow. May I be so bold as to suggest that mindset misses the point – there are a number of scriptures on this subject and if you are interested a good place to start is Romans 8:1-17 and then the book of Galatians (yes, the whole book). I also recommend searching www.douglasjacoby.com with the search term “legalism”. Another thing to mull over is why the beatitudes (Matthew 5:3-12), which are often thought of as Jesus' “10 commandments”, are promises not commands.

But I digress. Back to the subject at hand, the point I am making is you don't have to be “like-minded” because that's the rule but because that's how Christians are. We value unity enormously, we cherish it and therefore nurture and protect it and if that means we don't get our own way or have to reach compromises then so be it. There is no way a large group of people are going to agree on everything all the time but we fight with weapons of righteousness while clothed in the character of the fruits of the Holy Spirit to always build unity.

In terms of building unity, how skilled are you? Would others describe you as a good listener? When you speak, do your words build up, even when you are upset? Do you “consider” others in your thinking? Someone insightful once said: “Being right does not give you the right.” The idea is that because we believe we are right, we think we have the right to force our “rightness” on others. This approach may be effective in the short term in getting people to do what you want but will alienate people from you and earn you a reputation for just about every negative aspect of character you can think of.

Secondly, Paul is appealing for unity but his appeal is not for unity itself but rather the conditions for unity. One of the main themes in my prayer life has been world peace and when I think of how much violence there is in this world it can feel despairing at times. Recently I have stopped praying for peace and started praying for the conditions that result in peace. I realised peace is a

product, not an input and so long as there is gross injustice (criminal, civil and social), rampant corruption, wanton greed that tramples on the vulnerable, status-driven pride, entrenched prejudice and intolerance and hearts that are quick to judge and condemn, we will never have peace. Back to Philippians, Paul appeals for the conditions necessary for unity. We can learn from this in many areas of our lives. For example, if you are a student, pray for and focus on self-discipline, a clear mind and building a network of study companions who call you higher. If you want to grow spiritually (I cannot imagine why you wouldn't), pray for and focus on the self-discipline for good quality Bible study and prayer times. Actively invite spiritual people into your life who set an example worthy of imitating and who can give you good counsel, read spiritual books (there is a huge range from character issues to Bible commentaries), and practise a character trait you want to focus on such as being serving.

Php 2:1-11 — Part 2: Humility

Mon 20 Nov

Paul calls us to be humble and describes it as valuing others above ourselves and looking to the interests of others. He then uses the example of Christ to show a practical demonstration of humility.

How would you define humility? This is a really important question, so please don't dodge it or skip over it lightly. Go ahead; define humility. The reason this is so close to my heart is because for many years humility was something I deeply desired (because pride was so deeply ingrained in me), but I didn't understand correctly what it was, which significantly hampered my quest to obtain it. It is self-evident that if we don't understand what we are looking for it will make it difficult for us to find it.

Spoiler alert: I am now going to give you my definition but for this exercise to benefit you, you need to first have a go on your own. Here goes: "humility is not taking your ego into account when making decisions". If you are defensive, why is that? Because you feel your ego is attacked. If you want to buy a flash new car, why is that? Because you want increased status. If you are unwilling to roll up your sleeves and do yucky work, why is that? Because you want to be seen in a certain way. A good, easy to remember definition goes like this: "Humility is not thinking less of yourself; humility is thinking of yourself less."

So much harm has been done over the years by people thinking humility means having a low opinion of one's self. It doesn't mean this at all! It just means removing your ego from the equation governing how you behave.

This is why insecurity and arrogance are both on the "pride spectrum". They are both a function of how you think others see you.

Jesus was humble because he did not take into account that he was divine when he became human and died on a cross. That is, he set aside his ego. It is the equivalent of a global superstar cleaning your toilet because you are sick in bed and cannot do it yourself.

Bear in mind who Paul was writing to. The Roman world was classist in an extreme way. Romans had legal rights others didn't (which is why some people would save up and buy Roman citizenship) and the society was highly stratified with a wealthy elite at the top and slaves at the bottom. His point was that in the church there is only one class. If even the Head of the church became a slave to all, don't think you can opt out.

The practical application for us is several fold:

- Do you always have an attitude of service and do whatever you can, whenever you can, to build up others without taking into account how you want to be seen?
- When you feel attacked by what someone says, do you listen to the merit of their words and park your ego? If their words are untrue, say so. If their words are true, take them on board. Humility doesn't mean others are always right, it means listening with an open mind in a genuinely curious manner.
- Are you happy to admit you don't know something when you don't know something?
- Are you happy to seek advice from others? I find much truth in the saying, "If one person tells you, 'you are a horse', tell them they are crazy. If 10 people tell you, 'you are a horse', buy a saddle."

When I was a young Christian I was taught a test of humility was whether I would accept advice from an alcoholic vagrant. I shared this with another Christian at the time and he responded that there was no way he would take advice from such a person. This left me in a quandary because I respected both the person who shared the advice with me and the person I shared it with. I realise now we were all talking past each other. The point of the advice given to me was humility will judge the merit of advice without taking into account how my ego feels about who gives it. The reaction to the advice was based on a concern about their ability to execute good judgement, not a proud refusal to take advice from a vagrant. This is an example of why I said earlier that understanding what humility is can be very important, because if you misunderstand it you may find yourself in a quandary, as I did at that time.

Php 2:12-18 — A Righteous Life

Tue 21 Nov

There are several key thoughts in this passage but the standout is a call to live a righteous life. There are two elements: (a) keep God in mind and remember that God is present in us; and (b) avoid complaining and arguing. The result of this is that we will be blameless and pure, and shine like stars in the sky against the backdrop of this world. You have to admit, that is a lofty result.

The call to “work out your salvation with fear and trembling” creates an apparent tension with scriptures like Ephesians 2:8 “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – not by works, so that no man can boast” and Ephesians 3:12 “In Him and through faith in Him we may approach God with freedom and confidence”. So which is it – do we regard God with trembling or confidence? For those of us with an overactive conscience this question is a big deal.

We respect God because, well, He is God! We approach God with confidence because through Christ He is our Father. Some of us did not have a good father role model (I am one of you) so you will need to use your imagination a bit in the next question. Would you describe a healthy relationship between child and father as one of respect or love? This is a false choice – surely the answer is both!

So let us be obedient to God (bear also in mind this is the gateway to the blessings promised by God) and rejoice in the confidence we have in his love.

The second big point is for us to do everything without complaining and arguing. It is interesting to see what a big deal this is. Just this point will make us stand out clearly from the world around us.

Are you the complaining type? I hope not. But what do you do if you see something that needs addressing? Sometimes there are legitimate issues that need addressing and they won't get solved if we skirt around them. I suggest the key is to be respectful and constructive, believing the best in others until proven otherwise. There is a world of difference between a positive, constructive, solution-oriented approach and a negative, whining, complaining approach. If you would like to see a Biblical example of conflict resolution read Acts 6:1-7.

Paul speaks highly of his two “full time” fellow workers Timothy and Epaphroditus. Timothy is commended for his focus on the interests of Jesus Christ and Epaphroditus because he almost died for the work of Christ.

Timothy was a young evangelist who was personally trained by Paul “as a son with his father” and is the person to whom Paul wrote the letters 1 & 2 Timothy. Epaphroditus was a member of the Philippian church who carried material support to Paul in prison. Do you notice the affection with which Paul speaks of both of them?

If Paul mentioned you in a letter to your congregation what would he say? Would he talk about your service, courage, sacrifice, generosity, kindness, wise counsel or joy? Would he mention how you have refreshed the saints? Would he call out what an encouragement to others you have been? Would he use you as an example of patient perseverance?

What legacy do you want to leave? It is a sobering thought but one day you will be at the end of your life, thinking “I wish ...”. What is it you would wish? That you had pushed through your fear barrier and were more outward focussed? That you spent more time with your family? That you had learned to forgive the person who hurt you so deeply?

Most of us will not be “famous” in the church like Timothy or Epaphroditus and that is very okay. It is the Lord Christ we serve, not our ego, and our meaning is bound up in Him. Year after year, patiently and persistently, we give, we serve, we make a difference and one day we look back and see the acorn of our service became a mighty oak.

When I was a young child I was taught this song and the words have stayed with me all my life:

*In the morning of my life I shall look to the sunrise,
At a moment in my life when the world is new.
And the blessing I shall ask is that God will grant me,
To be brave and strong and true,
And to fill the world with love my whole life through.*

*In the noontime of my life I shall look to the sunshine,
At a moment in my life when the sky is blue.
And the blessing I shall ask shall remain unchanging,
To be brave and strong and true,
And to fill the world with love my whole life through.*

*In the evening of my life I shall look to the sunset,
At a moment in my life when the night is due.
And the question I shall ask only I can answer.
Was I brave and strong and true?
Did I fill the world with love my whole life through?*

The answer you give at the end depends on the decisions you make now.

Php 3:1-7 — Rejoice in God, Not Flesh

Thu 23 Nov

- Why does Paul warn the church to look out for those who “mutilate the flesh”?
- What does he mean by “for we are the circumcision”?
- If Paul was your close friend, what would he warn you to watch out for?
- In what ways can we put “confidence in the flesh?”
- Do you consider any status of your pre-Christian life as “loss for the sake of Christ”? Why or why not?

Further Notes

Paul begins this section of the letter with an instruction to rejoice in the Lord. The theme of joy runs throughout the prison epistles and is especially prominent in Philippians. The Greek word for joy, *chara*, is found 5 times and a similar word *chairō* (rejoice) 11 times. This is particularly incredible when we consider the circumstances under which the letters were written: Paul was confined under house arrest, chained up and surrounded by soldiers. On top of all this he had enemies trying to make his imprisonment worse (Php 1:12-18). Despite these challenges Paul found “no trouble” in calling his siblings in Christ to be joyful, and in setting an example himself.

In this state of joy Paul warns the church to be wary of those who insist on circumcision as a requirement of conversion. This topic had been raised before (Gal 6:12 for instance) and the disciples told that “neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but only faith working through love” (Gal 5:6). The issue boils down to a decision for the Christians – either to base their confidence of salvation in God’s love as demonstrated on the cross, or on their human efforts. After warning them against the latter, Paul goes on to remind them that he has plenty of reason to be confident in the flesh. Coming from an impressive background with a stand out spiritual CV, it would have been convenient for Paul to trust in his birthright and zealous behaviour. Instead he reflects and concludes, “whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ.”

How can we place confidence in the flesh? Can we be too focused on being brought up in a Christian family, the number of people we’ve baptised or our consistency in quiet times and church attendance? These things are great ... in their proper place, as ways we serve God and others in love, as a joyful overflow of our gratitude. That gratitude comes from confidence in God, not our own ability to attain righteousness.

Because his confidence is placed in God and not flesh, Paul can rejoice in a perfect God who is steadfast through a less than perfect situation. When we rejoice in the Lord, rather than being pulled up and down by circumstances in the fleshly realms, we rest secure that God is working all things for our good (Rom 8:28).

Php 3:8-16 — Forget What Lies Behind; Strain Forward

Fri 24 Oct

- What does Paul gain from knowing Christ? What does he give up?
- Paul has a specific focus in this passage. What is his goal? How can we “press on toward the goal”?
- What is your greatest wish?
- In what ways is knowing Christ of “surpassing worth” to our earthly accomplishments and goals?

Further Notes

Compared to a true relationship with Christ, everything else is rubbish. The Greek word translated to “rubbish” in the NIV or “dung” in the KJV is *skybalon*, defined as “any refuse, as the excrement of animals, offscourings, rubbish, dregs; something worthless and detestable.” This is a strong way to

describe the very things in which Paul once placed his confidence. To Paul, his status, connections, social class and accomplishments are like dog muck when compared to what he gained through his relationship with Christ. Knowing Christ brings a faith that grants us righteousness, and this allows us to share in the resurrection. In following Paul's example we are to actively forget the things we once cherished in our old lives and to put effort into moving towards something worth immeasurably more.

In becoming Christians we do not become perfect and God does not expect us to be perfect. Through baptism we attain: righteousness by faith; knowledge of God; growth through suffering for the sake of Christ; fellowship with the Holy Spirit; redemption from slavery to sin; justification from judgement; forgiveness of sin; confidence before God; and the promise of resurrection to new life (see Eph 1:3ff). This list is not complete – why not have a go at writing down all the blessings you have received, including the ones personal to your own life. Paul reminds us that there is so much more to obtain and we need to continue in our journey with the goal of heaven in mind.

The concept of wanting to share in Christ's sufferings (v10) is an odd one in many ways. Not many of us want to suffer! Paul desires to know Christ better and Jesus was after all a man of sorrows, familiar with suffering (Is 53:3). A deep fellowship comes in suffering together. Going through trials with others brings us closer together, to know Jesus' sufferings as he poured himself out in love, is to know Jesus. To know Christ's sufferings is also to know God's comfort (Heb 4:16; 2 Cor 1:3-5).

Php 3:17-4:3 — Citizens of Heaven

Mon 27 Nov

- Who are we called to imitate and why?
- What does it mean to be a citizen of heaven? What do you imagine heaven will be like?
- When you are faced with conflict how do you resolve it? How would a good friend describe your behaviour in a conflict situation?
- What does Jesus say about conflict in the church? (Matt 18:15-20; 5:21-24)

Further Notes

We know from Latin inscriptions found on stones in Philippi that it was a Roman colony. Writing in the region would have ordinarily been in Greek so the Latin signifies the area specifically being marked out as an extension of Rome. Citizens of Rome had the right to vote, to enter into contracts and to a fair trial (see Acts 22:22-28 for an example.) Citizenship was not available to all, it was gained by being born into a colony or paying a large sum for the rights afforded to Roman citizens. Some sources say only 10-15% of the population in the empire were citizens. The privileged few often took great pride in their citizenship. Many of those listening to the letter would have either been Roman citizens or would have aspired to be citizens. Paul calls them to a greater vision: citizenship in the perfect Kingdom of Heaven and the hope of a new life in a world more perfect than we can fathom (Rev 21:1-7; 1 Cor 15:35-49).

Remembering our upward call to citizenship in heaven gives us a different perspective on our fall outs and disputes on earth. God's church brings together a diverse group of sinners, many of whom would not choose to spend time together for any other reason but God's intervention! When Paul planted the church in Philippi we know his early converts included the affluent merchant Lydia (Acts 16:15), a Roman jailer and his family (Acts 16:16-18) and possibly a slave girl (Acts 16:28) - not a likely friendship group! Unity for them, as for us, required work. Naturally we will hurt one another and have grievances. God expects us to make peace with one another and to get help when we find that difficult (Php 4:2-3; Matt 18:15-17). Bitterness and quarrels often have broader consequences than are at first obvious and we need to resolve quarrels before they negatively impact the entire church.

As a church we need unity to strengthen us against persecution and to be effective witnesses. That unity is helped by a focus on heaven. Because of our citizenship in heaven we can stand firm in our faith. Because of our citizenship in heaven, we can be unified.

Php 4:4-9 — Rejoice in the Lord Always

Tue 28 Nov

- What are we called to do about things that make us anxious?
- What are you thankful for today?
- Why is it important to “guard our hearts”; what does this mean?
- What sort of things should we think about? What are some lovely etc. scriptures or thoughts we can meditate on? Why not write down a list of “good” things in this world. For example, there are millions fewer people in poverty around the world today than 20 years ago, polio is almost eradicated and there are charities providing clean drinking water to communities struggling with water born illnesses. There is much evil in this world but there is also much good.

Further Notes

Perhaps the best known verse on joy appears in this passage: “Rejoice in the Lord always, I will say it again, rejoice.” Very few of us can claim to be constantly joyful. It’s quite natural to feel happy when life is going our way and anxious when it isn’t. The concept of rejoicing when there are things to be anxious about is a strange one!

Think back a few chapters. Paul mentions sending Epaphroditus back, “so that when you see him again you may be glad and I may have less anxiety” (Php 2:28). What is going on here? Paul seems to be telling the church not to be anxious, right after admitting to his own anxiety. A closer look at the text removes any seeming contradiction. In Php 2:28, Paul uses the Greek adjective *lypos* (translated “anxiety”) to describe the anxiety he feels about Epaphroditus. In the passage we are considering today, he uses the verb *merimnaō* (translated “anxious”) to describe an action – the decision to remain in and reinforce a state of anxiety through dwelling on our worries. To feel stress or anxiety is not sinful, it is a normal and natural part of human existence. The issue is whether we choose to let the stress overwhelm us or to trust God. As R.H. Mounce once said, “worry is practical atheism.”

What a brilliant offer we receive from Christ: we are invited to trust God and turn our worries into prayers. Three types of prayer are mentioned in verse 6: *proseuchē* - worshipful prayer; *deēsis* - entreating prayer based on needing, seeking and asking; and *eucharistia* - grateful prayer of thanksgiving. When we pray thankfully instead of stressing out we receive joy and peace through prayer and trust. Our minds are clearer when we trust God (Is 26:3) and the peace he provides guards our hearts and so covers everything we do (Prov 4:23).

Paul gives a final charge to think about positive things. Today talk of mindfulness - being intentional about our thoughts and actively focusing on concrete and positive things for better mental health - is everywhere. Countless studies have shown that thinking positively and with gratitude can make us happier and more content. Positive thinking has even been linked to better mental function and emotional health. Yet with constant news of war, disharmony and suffering caused by sin, it can be hard to be positive. The Bible gives us clear instructions on how to protect our minds from the evil prevalent in this world: to think about true, honourable, just, pure, lovely, commendable, excellent and praiseworthy things, whilst taking care to practice what we have received through God’s messengers. Take some time to list scriptures and blessings that are true, honourable, just, pure, lovely, etc. Being mindful of the blessings in our life and thanking God for these things, as well as for his great promises, brings us peace.

Php 4:10-20 — The Secret of Contentment

Wed 29 Nov

- Why were the Philippians concerned for Paul? What did they do about it?
- How do you express thanks to others for how they help you?
- What does it mean to be content?
- How can you be ambitious in a righteous way?

- Paul sends greetings from the Christians in Caesar’s household. What does this suggest about how he used his time in prison? When last did you go out of your way to help someone? Do you share the gospel when you are in a tough situation?

Further Notes

During Paul’s missionary work the Philippians sent money on several occasions (v16; 2 Cor 11:9) and he praises them for excelling in “the grace of giving” (2 Cor 8:1-7). Here we can see that their generosity led to rejoicing in the Lord; when we give it glorifies God. We are called to give cheerfully (2 Cor 9:6-9) and sacrificially (Is 58:6-8) and in doing so we learn “it is more blessed to give than to receive” (Acts 20:35.) With giving comes a confidence in God’s provision through a personal experience of his riches (v19).

Over time, and through hardship, Paul learnt that contentment comes from relying on God’s strength through any and all circumstances, in good times and bad. When we are content, we are closer to God and it is noticed by others. It’s incredible to reflect on the fact that this letter closes with greetings from members of Caesar’s household. The implication is that Paul converted high ranking officials despite being imprisoned. When we rejoice in God through all circumstances, we can have an impact on this world despite hardship.

References and Further Reading

- Ephesians: New Testament Commentary (W. Hendriksen, Baker, 1967)
Good overall; conservative evangelical; clear but quite technical and theoretical
- The Letter to the Ephesians: Pillar NT Commentary (P.T. O’Brien, 2010)
Comprehensive, has a view on every word and phrase but can be too technical at times
- Introducing The New Testament (J. Drane, Lion Publishing PLC, 1986)
Introductory survey of the New Testament including social and historical perspectives
- Word Biblical Commentary: Colossians, Philemon (P.T. O’Brien, 1982)
Very Good and comprehensive, but quite technical, commenting directly on Greek and English texts in parallel
- The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon and to the Ephesians (F.F. Bruce, Eerdmans, 1984)
Good intermediate commentary
- New Daily Study Bible: The Letters to the Philippians, Colossians and Thessalonians (W. Barclay, St Andrew Press, 1959)
Useful historical background and explanation of ancient letters as a genre
- To Live is Christ (T. Jones & S. Jones, DPI books, 1995)
Some helpful practical applications of Philippians
- Philippians: The NIV Application Commentary (F. Thielman, Zondervan, 1995)
Good simple analysis of various interpretations presented without much bias
- Strong’s Expanded Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible (Expanded with Vines Dictionary of Old & New Testament Words). (J. Strong, Thomas Nelson, 2010)
Great tool for looking up the Greek words used in the letters; helpful for comparison and deeper understanding
- Colossians & Philemon: IVP New Testament Commentary (R.W. Wall, 1993)
Clear and readable, some emphasis on social application
<https://www.biblegateway.com/resources/commentaries/IVP-NT/Phlm/Pauls-Greetings>
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<https://enduringword.com/bible-commentary/philemon-1/>