

CHAPTER 7

Prison Letters

(Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, Philemon)

When we studied the book of Romans (see Chapter 5), we learned that Paul had a great desire to go to the city of Rome and visit the Christians there (Romans 1:10-12). God made it possible for Paul to go to Rome, but it all worked out in a very unusual way. Paul was brought to Rome as a prisoner! His crime was this: ***He preached the wonderful Gospel of God's grace*** (that God is able to save all those who come to Him through Christ, whether Jews or Gentiles, slaves or freemen, males or females, rich or poor--Hebrews 7:25; Galatians 3:28). The interesting story of how Paul got to Rome is told in the book of Acts, chapters 21-28.

During the time when Paul was a prisoner in Rome, he wrote four letters which are now part of our New Testament: Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians and Philemon.

WE WOULD EXPECT a prisoner to say something like this: "I am poor and miserable!" *BUT PAUL SAID* to the Ephesians, "I am rich and blessed with more blessings than I can even count" (Ephesians 1:3). **This is the message of EPHESIANS.**

WE WOULD EXPECT a prisoner to say something like this: "I am the most unhappy and discontented person in the whole world!" *BUT PAUL SAID* to the Philippians, "I can rejoice at all times and I can be content in whatsoever state I am in, even when I am in prison" (Philippians 4:4,11). **This is the message of PHILIPPIANS.**

WE WOULD EXPECT a prisoner to say something like this: "I am in desperate need. Life is terrible!" *BUT PAUL SAID* to the Colossians, "Christ is everything I need! Christ is my Life!" (Colossians 2:10; 3:3). **This is the message of COLOSSIANS.**

WE WOULD EXPECT that if a Christian were thrown into jail he might say, "Lord, I need to get out of here so that I can start serving the Lord again!" *BUT PAUL SERVED THE LORD* even during his time in prison. He even preached the gospel to a runaway slave named Onesimus and this man was saved. **This is the message of PHILEMON.**

Paul did not think of himself as a prisoner of the Romans (even though he was). Instead he saw himself as the P_____ of _____ (Ephesians 3:1 and compare 4:1). What a wonderful thing it is to be the Lord's prisoner and slave!

The Living Lord had captured Paul and He was not going to let him go! Has the Living Lord captured you? Are you bound by the chains of love?

1) Ephesians--Christ Is Our Wealth!

The story is told of an aged silver miner who had spent his whole life searching for silver in the mountains of the Old West. He had become so involved with his search that his wife and children had left him. When he died, the handful of people who came to bury him found in his possessions a note instructing them to bury him under his cabin. As the spadeful of earth were turned over, a lustrous gray material began to appear. It was the famous Comstock Silver Vein, the richest in California history. That miner had been a millionaire all his life, but he had never claimed his wealth. He did not even realize how rich he really was!

Every true believer is a spiritual billionaire. The Bible says that Christ became poor (and died for us) so that we through His poverty might be _____ (2 Corinthians 8:9). The problem is that often we fail to realize how rich we really are. The believer is a child of the King but often he goes around living as a **pauper** (a very poor person) instead of living like a **prince**! The Book of Ephesians was written to show us how rich we are and to remind us of all the blessings we have *in Christ*! God has blessed us with "all S _____
B _____ in heavenly places in Christ" (Ephesians 1:3)!

As you quickly look through the first three chapters in the letter to the Ephesians, what are some of the blessings and riches that you have IN CHRIST (two are already completed for you):

God has chosen me to be His very own (Ephesians 1:4-5)

God has forgiven all my sins (Ephesians 1:7)

One of the blessings that every believer shares is the privilege of being a member of the Church of Jesus Christ. The book of Ephesians has much to say about the Church.

Paul describes the Church as a **BODY**. Can you find a verse in each of the first four chapters of Ephesians that speaks of the Church as the BODY of Christ?

Ephesians chapter 1, Verse _____

Ephesians chapter 2, Verse _____

Ephesians chapter 3, Verse _____

Ephesians chapter 4, Verse _____

Christ is the Head of this body (Ephesians 1:22-23) and each believer is a member!

Paul also describes the Church as a **BUILDING** or a temple (a holy place where God dwells and lives). Can you find a verse in Ephesians chapter 2 where the Church is described as a temple?
Ephesians chapter 2, Verse _____.

Paul describes the Church not only as a **BODY** and a **BUILDING**, but also as a **BRIDE**. In Ephesians 5:22-33 Paul carefully explains what marriage should picture. The husband is to picture the Lord and the wife is to picture the Church. The wife is to honor her husband, submit to him, obey him, and respect him. In the same way the Church is to honor the Lord, submit to

Him, obey Him, and respect Him.

What a blessing it is to be a member of the body, a part of the building, and to be married to the Lord (enjoying a close oneness and a close relationship with Him)!

2) Philippians--Christ Is Our Joy!

Paul's letter to the Philippians was actually a "Thank You Letter" in which Paul thanked the Philippians for the gifts which they had sent to Him (Philippians 4:15-17). But Paul also used this letter to greatly encourage and strengthen these believers in the Lord.

The key words in this letter are "JOY" (noun) and "REJOICE" (verb). Can you find the word "joy" or the word "rejoice" in each of the four chapters of this letter?

Put down the verses in which these words are found:

Philippians Chapter 1: _____
 Philippians Chapter 2: _____
 Philippians Chapter 3: _____
 Philippians Chapter 4: _____

Paul understood that there is a difference between "joy" and "happiness." A person can be happy and not have real joy. A person can have joy but not really be happy. The word "happy" comes from a root "HAP" which means "luck, chance, good fortune." Here are some other words that come from this same root: "happen," "happening," "happenstance," "happy-go-lucky." To remember the word "happy" just think of "happy-go-lucky." If things "go lucky" then you can be happy! If things **happen** the way you want them to **happen**, then you can be happy.

For example, you can be happy if

... it's a nice day
 ... you get a real special gift for Christmas or for a birthday
 ... you do well on your report card
 ...everything is going your way

But what happens if your luck runs out? What happens if things do not happen the way you had wanted them to happen? What happens if

... the rain spoils the activity or event
 ...you don't get the gift you hoped you would get
 ...you get poor grades on the report card
 ... you catch the flu
 ...your favorite team does not win
 ... your friend lets you down

Happiness depends on circumstances and happenings! If things go well, I can be happy! If things do not go well, there goes my happiness!

Joy is much different than this. **How often** should a believer rejoice, according to Philippians 4:14? (Circle the correct answer.)

- a. whenever things go well
- b. sometimes
- c. always
- d. at least once a week

What should the believer rejoice in?

- a. rejoice in our circumstances
- b. rejoice in the world situation and in what we read in the daily newspaper
- c. rejoice in ourselves
- d. rejoice in the Lord

JOY does not depend on circumstances, JOY depends on the LORD, and **He never changes!** Even though Paul's circumstances were terrible (he was a prisoner!), he could rejoice (compare Acts 16:22-25).

We cannot always count on things happening the way we would like them to happen. But we can always count on God being God no matter what happens. Suppose you get in your car to drive to the beach and ten miles from home you get into a minor accident and end up spending the whole day in the repair shop. Does this mean God has changed? Have God's promises changed? Is God able to teach you and bless you in the middle of these circumstances?

3) Colossians--Christ Is Our All!

Paul's letter to the Colossians is somewhat like his letter to the Galatians in that the Colossian church was also being influenced by false teaching.

False teaching (even today) often presents a wrong idea or concept of who Jesus Christ truly is. For example, the Jehovah's Witnesses are a religious cult. They teach that God (Jehovah) created Jesus Christ and then Jesus Christ created everything else. This would make Jesus a mere creature. Also this would mean that Jesus is not God, because God had no beginning and God was not created. This is harmful and false teaching because the Bible says, "the Word (Jesus Christ) was G _____" (John 1:1).

The best way to deal with such error and false teaching is to present Jesus Christ as He really is! This is exactly what the Book of Colossians does. It presents Christ as the Supreme One, the Creator of all things, the Head of the Church and the One who should have first place in everything! Yes, Jesus Christ is **all that we need**; He is **everything we need** and we are **complete in Him** (Colossians 2:10).

In Colossians chapter 1, find the right verse to go with each of the following statements about our Lord:

1. **Jesus Christ is the image of God (if you want to see what God is really like, look at Christ!).**
Verse _____

2. **All things were created by Jesus Christ. Verse _____**
3. **Jesus Christ is the Head of the Church. Verse _____**
4. **Jesus Christ should have preeminence or first place in all things. Verse _____**
5. **In Jesus Christ we have redemption and forgiveness of sins. Verse _____**

The letter to the Colossians is similar in many ways to the letter to the Ephesians, and it is even possible that Paul wrote both of these letters on the same day. To see this, compare the following verses:

Ephesians 1:7 with Colossians 1:14
Ephesians 4:29 with Colossians 3:8
Ephesians 4:32 with Colossians 3:13
Ephesians 5:19 with Colossians 3:16

Also both of these letters give instructions and commands to the following groups of people: wives, husbands, children, fathers, servants (slaves), masters (slave owners). See Ephesians 5:22-6:9 and compare with Colossians 3:18-4:1.

4) Philemon--The Story Of A Runaway Slave

Paul wrote this brief letter to a believer whose name was Philemon. Philemon was a member of the Colossian church. As we read this short letter, we learn of a slave who apparently stole something from his master Philemon (see verse 18) and then ran away to the city of Rome. As things turned out, this runaway slave (whose name was O _____, verse 10) ran right into God's missionary, the Apostle Paul! Paul was a prisoner at the time! Paul shared with Onesimus the good news of salvation and he was born again (verse 10). The slave was now a SAVED SLAVE and he had a brand new Master!

Suppose Onesimus had suddenly returned to his master Philemon. What do you suppose Philemon might have said? Perhaps something like this: "You no good rascal! Where is that money that you stole from me? You deserve to be punished for stealing and for running away!"

Philemon, however, did not realize that the slave who was returning to him was very different from the slave who ran away! The person who ran away was an unprofitable slave; the person who returned was a profitable brother in Christ (see verse 11--the name *Onesimus* means "profitable").

Not only did Paul send Onesimus back to his master, but he also sent this small letter which we now call the Book of Philemon. After Philemon read this letter, what do you think he might have said to Onesimus? Perhaps he said something like this: "Onesimus, you are my slave, but much more than that you are my _____ (verse 16). I know that Christ has forgiven all your sins, and I also forgive you for running away from me. In the body of Christ there is neither

bond (slave) or free; we are all one in Christ. With God's help I want to be the best MASTER that I can be to you! Welcome home!"

How do Ephesians 4:32 and Colossians 3:13 fit in with the message of the book of Philemon?

