

Paul's Prison Epistles

LESSON
ONE

PAUL'S IMPRISONMENT



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Paul's Prison Epistles

Lesson One

Paul's Imprisonment

INTRODUCTION

In the year 1675 in Bedford, England, the famous puritan preacher and writer John Bunyan was arrested for preaching publicly without a license, and he was jailed for six months. Previously, he had spent twelve years in prison, during which time he had written many books and pamphlets. So, rather than seeing this new imprisonment as a great tragedy, he took an optimistic view of it.

He is reported to have said, "I have been away from my writing too long. Maybe this is not so much a prison as an office from which I can reach the world with Christ's message."

Whether or not these were Bunyan's precise words, his ministry during this short imprisonment is undeniable. It was during these months that he wrote *The Pilgrim's Progress*, an allegory of the Christian life that is perhaps the most famous book ever written in the English language.

Now, we should all admire someone who accomplishes so much for Christ while in prison. But as significant as John Bunyan's work has proven to be, the apostle Paul's work accomplished something much greater. During his four years of imprisonment in Caesarea and Rome, he wrote epistles that are far more important than even Bunyan's *Pilgrims Progress*.

This is the first lesson in our series *Paul's Prison Epistles*. In this series we study the letters of Paul that are commonly called his "prison epistles." These are letters to various churches and people that Paul wrote while he was in prison for his service to Christ. We have entitled this lesson "Paul's Imprisonment." In this lesson we will be looking at the circumstances that gave rise to Paul's letters to the Colossians, Philemon, the Ephesians, and the Philippians.

Our discussion of Paul's imprisonment will address three main subjects: First, we will look at the background of Paul's imprisonment first in Caesarea and later in Rome. Second, we will explore Paul's ongoing ministry during his imprisonment, seeing how he continued to serve as Christ's apostle even while incarcerated. And third, we will examine the theological unity of the prison epistles, focusing on some major themes that they all share. Let's begin with the background of Paul's imprisonment.

BACKGROUND

One of the first things we should mention is that scholars are somewhat divided on the place Paul was imprisoned when he wrote his letters to the Colossians, Philemon, the Ephesians, and the Philippians. Some believe that he wrote from Caesarea, while others believe that he wrote from Rome. In this lesson we will argue that Paul probably

wrote from Rome, although this detail will not be critical to any of our interpretations. Nevertheless, because respected scholars disagree on these matters, we should discuss his time in both cities.

Our investigation of the background of Paul's imprisonment will begin with a survey of the events preceding his arrest. Next, we will explore the events surrounding his arrest in Jerusalem, and then his initial imprisonment in Caesarea. Finally, we will turn to his subsequent imprisonment in Rome. Let's look first at the events preceding his arrest.

EVENTS PRECEDING ARREST

Near the end of Paul's Third Missionary Journey, probably around the year A.D. 56 or 57, Paul and his traveling companions were making their way from Asia Minor to Jerusalem, primarily by boat. Their intention was to deliver funds to the poor Christians in Jerusalem who were enduring a famine. On their way they stopped in Miletus where Paul met with the elders from the nearby church of Ephesus. During this meeting Paul revealed that the Holy Spirit had warned him that he would be imprisoned when he arrived in Jerusalem.

We read his prophetic words in Acts 20:22-24:

Compelled by the Spirit, I am going to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there. I only know that in every city the Holy Spirit warns me that prison and hardships are facing me. However, I consider my life worth nothing to me, if only I may finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me — the task of testifying to the gospel of God's grace (Acts 20:22-24).

In many cities Paul visited believers prophesied Paul's coming imprisonment. But the Holy Spirit compelled Paul toward this imprisonment. So, Paul knew that these prophecies were not intended to dissuade him from his course, but rather to prepare him for his coming hardships. Paul had many enemies in Jerusalem, and he knew he might be arrested and imprisoned when he arrived. But he also knew that this suffering was part of God's plan for him.

From Miletus Paul and his company sailed to Cos, then to Rhodes, then to Patara. In Patara they found a ship that took them past Cyprus before arriving in Tyre. In Tyre the Holy Spirit moved many more believers to warn Paul of the coming hardships in Jerusalem. But Paul was still determined to reach his goal.

From Tyre the group sailed to Ptolemais, then to Caesarea on the coast of Samaria. Because there were so many cities named Caesarea in the ancient world, this particular city is sometimes called "Caesarea Maritima" which means "Caesarea by the Sea," to distinguish it from the others.

During his stay in Caesarea Maritima, Paul was warned yet again not to go to Jerusalem. In a well-known dramatic scene, the prophet Agabus bound his own hands and feet as a prophetic sign, warning that Paul would be arrested and bound if he continued to Jerusalem. It is easy to understand why Paul's friends did not want him to be

arrested. They probably feared for Paul's safety, and did not want him to come to harm. But Paul knew that God was planning to use his arrest and imprisonment to further the gospel. As we read in Acts 21:13:

Paul answered ... "I am ready not only to be bound, but also to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus" (Acts 21:13).

Paul understood that his coming imprisonment would be "for the name of the Lord Jesus." That is, the Holy Spirit was going to use Paul's coming imprisonment as a means to advance the gospel and minister to the church.

And Paul had good reason to trust the Holy Spirit as he faced these dangers. Earlier during his second missionary journey, Paul had seen the Holy Spirit's care for him. According to Acts 16:6-10 Paul had wanted to preach the gospel in Asia and Bythina, but the Holy Spirit had prevented him. Although this must have seemed strange to Paul, he obeyed the Spirit and traveled to Troas.

In Troas, Paul received a vision that revealed God's plan: Paul was to carry the gospel to Macedonia. Paul's work in Macedonia turned out to be quite fruitful. But had Paul disobeyed the Holy Spirit by preaching in Asia and Bythina, he would not have been able to preach in Macedonia. Through this experience and many others, Paul had come to know that God works in Mysterious ways. For Paul, it was enough to know what God wanted him to do and to trust that God would use this hardship to accomplish something wonderful and unexpected.

With this limited knowledge of his future, but also with sure trust in God's Spirit, Paul committed himself to facing prison. He completed his third missionary journey by traveling to Jerusalem, probably in the year A.D. 57. According to Acts 20:16 he may have arrived near the time of Pentecost, around the beginning of summer.

ARREST IN JERUSALEM

Now that we are familiar with the events preceding Paul's arrest, we are in a position to investigate the circumstances of his arrest in Jerusalem. How did Paul come into conflict with the authorities in Jerusalem? Why was he imprisoned?

When Paul arrived in Jerusalem, he stayed with a believer named Mnason and was well received by the church. The next day Paul visited James who was the brother of Jesus and the author of the New Testament book of James. The elders of the church in Jerusalem also gathered to meet Paul.

Presumably, it was at this point that Paul delivered to the church the famine relief funds that he had collected during his third missionary journey. From Paul's earlier letters such as Romans and 1 and 2 Corinthians, we know that Paul was very concerned with the role these funds would play not only in aiding the poor Christians in Jerusalem, but also in reconciling Jewish and Gentile believers.

Paul hoped that when the Jewish Christians received this gift from the Gentiles their thankfulness would make them more eager to receive the Gentiles as full brothers in Christ. But Luke's account in Acts does not mention the delivery of the famine relief funds. Instead, it highlights certain concerns the Jerusalem church had regarding Paul's

ministry. Probably, this indicates that the Jerusalem church did not appreciate the famine relief funds as greatly as Paul had hoped they would.

Instead of rejoicing in the generosity of the Gentile Christians and affirming Paul's ministry, James and the elders informed Paul that certain rumors had reached Jerusalem concerning Paul's teachings and practices. Specifically, it was rumored that Paul taught Jewish Christians living among Gentiles to disregard traditional Jewish practices such as circumcision. Now, the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem strongly believed that all Jewish Christians should maintain traditional Jewish practices. And James and the elders were concerned that the local Jewish Christians would oppose Paul because of these rumors.

We should pause for a moment to point out that these rumors about Paul were false. Throughout his epistles Paul affirmed the validity of the moral law of God found in the Old Testament. And beyond this, he did not even encourage Jewish communities to abandon the traditions they had added to the Mosaic law. On the contrary, he himself followed Jewish tradition when he was in Jewish communities. However, he did teach that with the death and resurrection of Christ a new age had dawned. And as he explained in his epistles, neither Gentiles nor Jews were *required* to maintain these traditions. Christians should generally hold Jewish traditions in high regard, but only for the sake of spreading the gospel among unbelieving Jews.

Listen to the way he described his position on these matters in 1 Corinthians 9:20-21:

To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law), so as to win those not having the law (1 Corinthians 9:20-21).

Paul did not hesitate to behave like a Gentile when he was among Gentiles. But he was also happy to follow Jewish traditions for the sake of the gospel. Now, God did not obligate Paul to maintain these traditional Jewish applications of Old Testament law. As Paul said here, he was free to abandon these traditional practices. But he was not free from the law's moral requirements in Christ. In short, Paul believed that the applications of God's law had changed now that Christ had come, but that it was still acceptable to maintain the traditions for the sake of the gospel.

It is not hard to imagine how such a carefully nuanced doctrine might have been misunderstood, or why it might have been rumored that Paul taught Jews to abandon their traditions. In any event, James and the elders came up with a solution that they believed would satisfy the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem.

Specifically, they suggested that Paul demonstrate his commitment to the Mosaic law by participating in the rituals of the temple in Jerusalem. In particular, they urged him to undergo purification rites with four men who had taken Nazirite vows. This would show Paul's obedience to the law and submission to Jewish tradition. They also asked Paul to pay the associated expenses for these four Nazirites, which would demonstrate the depth of Paul's piety.

As the apostle to the Gentiles, Paul knew that his actions would affect the way the Jewish Christians perceived not only him, but also the Gentile Christians. Probably, he hoped that by supporting the Nazirites and purifying himself he would accomplish what the Gentiles' financial gift had not accomplished, namely, the warm reception of the Gentile Christians by the Jewish Christians. So, for the cause of Christ among the Jews, especially for the reconciliation of Jews and Gentiles within the church, Paul submitted to the Jerusalem church's judgment in this matter and began his week of purification.

Near the end of Paul's week of purification, he was spending time in the inner court of the Temple. The temple grounds included both an outer court and inner court. The outer court was separated from the inner court by a gate. The outer court was called the court of the Gentiles because people from all nations were permitted to enter it. But the inner court, the court of Israel, was reserved for Jews alone. Gentiles who entered the court of Israel were liable unto death.

While Paul was in the court of Israel, he was recognized by some Jews from Asia Minor. These were very likely unbelieving Jews rather than Christian converts from Judaism. Earlier, these same Jews had seen Paul with a man named Trophimus who had accompanied Paul to Jerusalem. Trophimus was also from Asia Minor, and the Asian Jews knew that he was a Gentile. So, when they saw Paul in the court of Israel, they wrongly assumed that Trophimus had also entered that court, and they were outraged.

In response these Jews roused the city against Paul, and an angry mob dragged him from the court of Israel intent on killing him. But when the commander of the Roman garrison in Jerusalem heard that the city was rioting, he rushed to quell the disturbance, chained Paul, and took him into custody. The commander, a man named Claudius Lysias, initially planned to flog Paul in order to compel him to explain the crowd's anger, but relented when he learned that Paul was a Roman citizen. As a citizen of Rome, Paul was entitled to special legal protections including the right not to be chained or beaten without a trial.

The next day Lysias presented Paul before the Sanhedrin, the Jewish ruling body, in order to discover the allegations against him. Apparently, no witnesses came forward to testify that Trophimus had entered the court of Israel, so Paul was free to defend himself by explaining why so many Jews had taken offense to his teachings.

As we read in Acts 23:6-8:

Paul, knowing that some of them were Sadducees and the others Pharisees, called out in the Sanhedrin, "My brothers, I am a Pharisee, the son of a Pharisee. I stand on trial because of my hope in the resurrection of the dead." When he said this, a dispute broke out between the Pharisees and the Sadducees, and the assembly was divided. (The Sadducees say that there is no resurrection, and that there are neither angels nor spirits, but the Pharisees acknowledge them all.) (Acts 23:6-8).

Paul claimed that the Sadducees opposed him because he was a Pharisee and that the gospel he preached agreed with the teachings of the Pharisees on many points. In fact, this was true, especially with regard to the resurrection. The Sadducees did not believe in

the bodily resurrection of the dead, and as a result, they would not tolerate Paul's Christian teaching about the resurrection of Christ.

On the previous day, Paul had addressed the angry mob by explaining that Jesus had risen from the dead and had appeared to him in a vision, and had explained the gospel to him. So, when Paul proclaimed to the Sanhedrin that he preached a gospel based on his vision of the resurrected Christ, he gained some sympathy from the Pharisees.

Once the Pharisees realized that Paul counted himself a Pharisee and agreed in many ways with their beliefs, they began to defend him in the Sanhedrin. But the Sadducees did not back down, and the meeting became extremely violent. So, once again, Lysias took Paul into custody.

The next day Lysias intended to present Paul before the Sanhedrin once again in order to get to the bottom of the allegations against him. But Paul's nephew warned Lysias that forty zealous Jews planned to ambush and kill Paul before he could reach the Sanhedrin. Now, since Paul was a Roman citizen, Lysias was bound to protect him. So, instead of sending him to the Sanhedrin, he transported Paul out of Jerusalem to the neighboring city of Caesarea Maritima and into the custody of Felix, the governor of the Roman province of Judea.

Now that we have reviewed the circumstances of Paul's arrest in Jerusalem, we should turn our attention to his imprisonment in Caesarea in the custody of Marcus Antonius Felix, the governor of Judea.

IMPRISONMENT IN CAESAREA

During the period of Paul's imprisonment, the Roman province of Judea consisted essentially of the regions known as Judea in the south, Samaria in the middle, and Galilee in the north. You will recall that Caesarea Maritima was on the coast of Samaria. It was also the capital city of the Roman province Judea.

When Paul first arrived in Caesarea, probably in A.D. 57, he was kept in custody for five days until his accusers arrived from Jerusalem. Those accusing him included the high priest Ananias, a number of Jewish elders, and Tertullus who was the lawyer for the group.

When the accusers arrived, Felix held a hearing. At this hearing Tertullus argued that Paul disturbed the peace and incited riots. This was a very serious charge in the eyes of Governor Felix since it was his duty to keep peace in Judea. But even more importantly, from the Jewish point of view, they also accused Paul of trying to violate the temple. The Jewish elders who were present affirmed this accusation, although none of them came forward as official witnesses.

Evidently, the Jews wholeheartedly believed the false rumors about Paul. They seem to have been convinced that Paul sought the downfall of Judaism and that he would proudly admit to trying to desecrate the temple. And so the only witness the Jewish accusers called upon by name was Paul himself!

We read Tertullus' closing words to Felix in Acts 24:8:

By examining [Paul] yourself you will be able to learn the truth about all these charges we are bringing against him (Acts 24:8).

Now, Paul was not a lawyer, but his response to his accusers was compelling. His defense had four main points:

First, he pointed out that there were no witnesses against him for any of the alleged crimes. This meant that there was no basis for any of their charges. This was an important point because Paul was accused of committing his crimes in broad daylight in a crowded area. If he had been guilty, certainly someone should have seen it.

Second, he rightly argued that others had disturbed the peace, not he. The riot had been started by Jews from Asia Minor. Paul was not a disturber of the Roman peace; the Jews were. This fact was confirmed by the letter from Lysias that accused the Jews of planning to assassinate Paul.

Third, and perhaps to the surprise of his accusers, Paul insisted that he had had no desire to defile the temple. On the contrary, he believed everything written in the Scriptures, and he had come to the temple to worship.

Fourth, Paul reminded the court that the Sanhedrin had not found him guilty. This argument was quite damaging to the prosecution. The proper Jewish ruling body, the Sanhedrin, had not proven him guilty of the alleged crimes. Why then did they still seek to have him executed?

Now, in God's mysterious providence, Felix was a dishonest ruler. Based on the insufficient accusations against Paul, Felix could have released him. But he didn't. Instead, he saw an opportunity for personal gain, so he held off ruling on the case, preferring to wait for Paul to offer him a bribe.

In Acts 24:26, Luke explained,

[Felix] was hoping that Paul would offer him a bribe, so he sent for him frequently and talked with him (Acts 24:26).

Initially, Felix said he would rule on Paul's case when Lysias the Roman commander arrived in Caesarea. But Felix put off ruling on Paul's case for two years.

At the end of these two years, however, Felix was replaced as governor by Porcius Festus. When Festus took his seat as governor in A.D. 59, Paul's Jewish opponents in Jerusalem saw another opportunity to kill Paul. They planned another ambush and petitioned Festus to deliver Paul to Jerusalem under the pretense that they wished to have his case reopened and handled locally. So, Festus convened a hearing in which he asked Paul if he would be willing to have his case heard in Jerusalem rather than in Caesarea.

At this point, rather than agreeing to have his case heard in Jerusalem, Paul appealed to his right as a Roman citizen to have his case heard by Nero Caesar himself, and Festus had no choice but to grant this request. Scripture does not record Paul's specific motivation for this appeal, but we do know a few details that might explain it.

First, Paul had little reason to believe he would be released after a trial in Jerusalem. He had already spent two years in prison because Felix had not dealt with him fairly. He had no reason to believe that Festus would judge the case more fairly.

Second, Paul was probably aware of the Jewish plot to kill him. Luke, the author of Acts, was a friend of Paul, and he was aware of the plot to assassinate Paul during Paul's transfer from Caesarea to Jerusalem. So, we can reasonably expect that Paul was also aware of this plot.

Third and most importantly, when Paul had been arrested by Lysias, the Lord himself appeared to Paul in a dream, assuring Paul that he would live to proclaim the gospel in Rome.

As we read in Acts 23:11:

The Lord stood near Paul and said, "Take courage! As you have testified about me in Jerusalem, so you must also testify in Rome" (Acts 23:11).

That Paul received this vision at the time of his arrest gave him reason to think that his imprisonment would eventually give him opportunity to proclaim Christ in Rome. As we have seen, the Holy Spirit had already led Paul to believe that his imprisonment would further his gospel ministry. At this point, he learned that his imprisonment would open the door to go to Rome.

Any combination of these reasons would have been sufficient motivation for Paul to appeal his case to Caesar. But whatever his motivation, one thing is clear: Paul was finally going to be able to preach the gospel in Rome, even if it would be from prison.

Now, before Paul was sent to Rome, he had the opportunity to explain his case before the young King Herod Agrippa II. And after hearing Paul's arguments, Agrippa told Festus that Paul could have been set free had he not appealed to Caesar.

But the Lord had something very different in mind for Paul. For reasons that were unclear even to Paul at this time, the Lord planned to use Paul's imprisonment in Rome to extend the reach of the gospel.

Having explored Paul's two-year imprisonment in Caesarea, we are now prepared to look at his subsequent imprisonment in Rome. We will begin by focusing on the long journey from Caesarea to Rome.

IMPRISONMENT IN ROME

Because Paul was a prisoner of Rome, he had to be transported under Roman guard. So, he was placed under the authority of a Roman centurion name Julius and put on a ship heading for Asia Minor. Paul's traveling companions Luke and Aristarchus were permitted to accompany him.

The ship sailed from Caesarea, probably in late A.D. 59. They made land first in Sidon where Paul was allowed to visit some of his friends. From Sidon they sailed past Cyprus and along the coast of Cilicia and Pamphylia before making port in Myra in the region of Lycia.

In Myra they boarded a ship headed for Italy. From this point on, they experienced rough sailing. They made their way to Cnidus, then they were forced to turn south, sailing to the island of Crete and eventually docking in Fair Havens.

Because it was now winter, the weather had become dangerous for sailing. The dangers of sailing at this time led Paul to advise the centurion Julius not to put out for Italy. Although it may seem odd for Paul to have advised experienced sailors, it is important to remember not only that he had prophetic insight, but also, according to 2 Corinthians 11:25, that Paul had survived three shipwrecks prior to this. Paul wanted to preach the gospel in Rome. He did not advise against sailing because he wanted to avoid his fate in Rome, but because he wanted to reach Rome safely.

In any event, the captain and owner of the boat convinced Julius that their journey would be successful, and the ship set out once again. Before long, however, they were caught in a violent storm that blew them past Cauda, far out into the Mediterranean Sea. The storm lasted for two weeks, during which time Paul ministered to those on board and encouraged them that God had revealed to him that they would all survive. Eventually, the ship struck a reef near the Isle of Malta and was destroyed by the surf.

With the ship destroyed, the sailors, soldiers, prisoners, and everyone else from the ship was stranded on Malta. Paul, his companions and his guards remained in Malta for three months and were cared for during this time by the island's residents.

During Paul's stay in Malta, some remarkable events occurred. At one point, Paul was bitten by a poisonous snake. The natives initially took this as a sign that Paul was a murderer and expected him to die. But Paul suffered no ill effects from the snakebite. As a result, the natives changed their mind about Paul and began to think he was a god.

Now, we know from other contexts that Paul must not have allowed the natives to continue to consider him a god. For example, when the Lystrans mistook Paul for the god Hermes, Paul protested that he was a mere man and used the opportunity to present them with the gospel. We can rightly assume that this is also what he did in Malta.

Paul also performed many miraculous healings in Malta. His healing ministry began when he healed the father of Publius. Publius was the chief official of Malta. And when news spread that Paul had healed Publius' father, everyone else on Malta who was sick also came to Paul and was healed.

Three months later, in the early part of A.D. 60, winter passed, so Paul and his companions and guards set sail once again for Italy. Leaving Malta they sailed north to the Island of Sicily, putting in to port at Syracuse. From Syracuse they sailed to Rhegium on the southern tip of the mainland of Italy. When they left Rhegium, a strong south wind carried them rapidly up the coast to Puteoli where believers came from surrounding regions to visit Paul. After a week, Paul was finally moved on to Rome. He arrived in Rome later in A.D. 60 and was placed under house arrest.

Paul lived under house arrest in Rome for two years, from A.D. 60 to 62. During this time, he was under guard, but he was also permitted to receive guests and to teach freely. Because the Jewish leadership in Judea had not informed the Roman Jews about Paul's case, the Roman Jews made their own inquiries of Paul. Through his preaching, some of them were converted to Christianity. But others rejected his claims about Jesus and his arguments from the Old Testament.

Luke summarized Paul's stay in Rome in Acts 28:30-31:

For two whole years Paul stayed there in his own rented house and welcomed all who came to see him. Boldly and without hindrance he

**preached the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ
(Acts 28:30-31).**

Paul's arrest in Jerusalem had been unjust, painful, and even life-threatening. And his imprisonment in Caesarea had been one long miscarriage of justice. His journey to Rome had involved many hardships as well. But in the end, Paul's hopes were realized and God's word was fulfilled. Paul made it to Rome. And for two years he was able to preach the gospel "boldly and without hindrance" — despite his imprisonment — in the capital city of the most powerful empire of his day.

ONGOING MINISTRY

Now that we have surveyed the background of Paul's imprisonment, we are in a position to explore his ongoing ministry during his imprisonment. As we will see, Paul was not idle during his time in prison. Rather, he continued to serve actively as a minister of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Paul was an apostle. Jesus had personally called and trained Paul and appointed him to serve as his ambassador, his covenant emissary. And as strange as it may sound to us today, Paul's appointed tasks were not put on hold when he was imprisoned. On the contrary, in God's providence prison was exactly where God wanted Paul to be at this time in his life. God himself had orchestrated events so that Paul's imprisonment in Rome would provide the opportunity for Paul to spread the Gospel of Christ to the heart of the western world.

We have two major sources of information about the apostle Paul's ongoing ministry during his years of imprisonment. On the one hand, the book of Acts tells us many things about Paul's ministry at that time. And on the other hand, Paul's various letters to churches offer insight into his ministry from prison. Let's begin by examining what the book of Acts tells us about Paul's ministry.

BOOK OF ACTS

Paul's experiences of imprisonment were very important for Luke, the author of Acts. He dedicated nearly nine chapters to events related to this period in Paul's life. From Paul's decision to go to Jerusalem and Rome in Acts 19:21 to the end of Luke's book in Acts 28:31, Luke detailed Paul's purposeful move toward his arrest in Jerusalem and the imprisonment that followed.

These chapters are full of many details, but at least three major themes appear on many occasions: Paul's awareness of his coming suffering, his awareness of God's purpose for his coming suffering, and his awareness of the way God's blessings would be poured out through his suffering.

First, Paul was aware that his service to Christ was about to bring severe hardship and suffering into his life.

Awareness of Suffering

In Acts 19–28, Luke described Paul as well informed about his coming hardships. Paul knew that he would be imprisoned and suspected that he would even be put to death.

For instance, listen to these ominous words from his speech to the Ephesian elders in Acts 20:22-25:

Compelled by the Spirit, I am going to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there. I only know that in every city the Holy Spirit warns me that prison and hardships are facing me... I consider my life worth nothing to me ... None of you ... will ever see me again (Acts 20:22-25).

And he later told the believers in Caesarea in Acts 21:13:

I am ready not only to be bound, but also to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus (Acts 21:13).

Paul was acutely aware of the difficulties that awaited him in his service to Christ and his gospel, and was willing even to be martyred.

Awareness of Purpose

In the second place, Paul was well aware of the purpose of his suffering. He knew that if God planned to let him suffer, the Lord also planned to use this suffering to promote the gospel.

Paul believed that God would use his hardships to spread the Christian gospel. He knew that any sacrifice he might have to make would be worthwhile because it would be God's way of promoting the good news of salvation in Christ.

Listen again to what he told the Ephesian elders in Acts 20:24:

I consider my life worth nothing to me, if only I may finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me — the task of testifying to the gospel of God's grace (Acts 20:24).

Paul was convinced that his ministry in prison would include testifying to the gospel, and that it was part of his task as an apostle to undergo these hardships. Rather than hindering Paul's apostolic ministry, imprisonment would be the means through which Paul accomplished his ministry.

And in fact, as we read elsewhere in Acts, this is precisely what happened. In Acts 22:1-21, we read that when Paul was arrested in Jerusalem, he presented his Christian testimony to the mob that sought his death.

In Acts 23:1-10, Luke explained that Paul testified to the gospel and Christ's resurrection before the Sanhedrin, the Jewish ruling body.

Then in Acts 24:14-26, we learn that Paul proclaimed the gospel to the Caesarean court both publicly at his hearing and privately to the governor Felix and his Jewish wife Drusilla. We are also told that Felix regularly spoke with Paul for a period of two years.

Following this, in Acts 25:18–26:29, Luke tells us that Paul proclaimed the gospel to the new governor, Festus, as well as to the Jewish king Agrippa and his wife Bernice.

And In Acts 28:23-31 Luke explains that Paul regularly preached the gospel of the kingdom of God to all who had come to see him in Rome.

In Acts 23:11, Christ's words to Paul summarize the purpose of all of this suffering:

Take courage! As you have testified about me in Jerusalem, so you must also testify in Rome (Acts 23:11).

Paul suffered to spread the good news of Christ from Jerusalem to Rome.

Awareness of Blessings

In the third place, Paul was very aware of God's blessing on his ministry during this time. Luke's account in Acts 19–28 makes it clear that Paul's gospel testimony spread with the dramatic blessings of God's Spirit.

Luke also tells us that Paul's ministry included other things that contributed to his ability to proclaim the gospel and to apply it to the lives of individuals. For example, he received and interpreted visions to protect the lives of those on the ship that eventually crashed on the reef. He healed the sick on Malta. And he ministered to the individual needs of the believers who came to see him.

In addition to the information that is included in the book of Acts, we can learn much about Paul's ongoing ministry during his imprisonment from his New Testament letters to the churches of Colosse, Ephesus, and Philippi, and to the Colossian man Philemon.

LETTERS TO CHURCHES

There are many ways to summarize Paul's ministry, but at least four matters come to the foreground. Although he was physically confined, Paul continued to minister by preaching the gospel to various dignitaries and to his visitors, praying on behalf of churches and believers around the world, suffering many hardships for the benefit of the church, and of course, writing letters to various churches and individuals around the world. First, Paul preached the gospel during this time.

Preaching

As we have seen, Paul endured prison mainly to gain new opportunities to proclaim the gospel. And his letters from prison reinforce this idea. We see this not only in his regular identification of himself as Christ's ambassador in chains, but also in the prayers he solicited from the churches to which he wrote.

For instance, listen to his request in Ephesians 6:19-20:

Pray also for me, that whenever I open my mouth, words may be given me so that I will fearlessly make known the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it fearlessly, as I should (Ephesians 6:19-20).

Paul knew that, even in prison, his primary responsibility was to proclaim the gospel. And so, he asked the Ephesians to pray for him so that he would have the strength to fulfill his apostolic responsibility.

Similarly, in Colossians 4:3-4 he wrote:

And pray for us, too, that God may open a door for our message, so that we may proclaim the mystery of Christ, for which I am in chains. Pray that I may proclaim it clearly, as I should (Colossians 4:3-4).

Paul wanted prayer so that he would have the opportunity to preach the gospel so that he could take good advantage of the opportunities before him.

Praying

Second, Paul was in constant prayer for the churches. According to Paul's letters, his ministry extended beyond proclaiming the gospel to unbelievers. It also included constant prayers for various churches and believers around the world.

Practically speaking, it is very likely that Paul's imprisonment actually increased the time he was able to spend in prayer. During his missionary journeys, he was generally busy traveling, or even working to support himself. But in prison he had no job to do, no places to travel, and few distractions. This allowed him a great deal of time to pray. And from the testimony his letters provide, it would appear that Paul considered himself both obligated and honored to spend much of that time praying for others.

Listen to Paul's testimony regarding his prayers for other believers in Ephesians 1:16-18:

I have not stopped giving thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers. I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ ... may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation ... I pray also that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened (Ephesians 1:16-18).

Paul regularly and consistently prayed for the Ephesians. He believed that prayer was powerful, and he hoped that God would honor his prayers by blessing the Ephesians. Paul's efforts in prayer constituted a vibrant and valuable ministry to those who were not near.

In much the same way, in Philippians 1:3-9 he explained that he regularly prayed for the church in Philippi:

I thank my God every time I remember you. In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy ... And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight (Philippians 1:3-9).

And in Colossians 1:9 we read of his commitment to the church in Colosse:

We have not stopped praying for you and asking God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all spiritual wisdom and understanding (Colossians 1:9).

He also prayed for specific individuals such as Philemon, Apphia, and Archippus in the Colossian church. For example, in Philemon 6 he wrote:

I pray that you may be active in sharing your faith, so that you will have a full understanding of every good thing we have in Christ (Philemon 6).

In all these passages we see that Paul committed himself to praying for his fellow believers, seeking many blessings from God on their behalf.

Suffering

In the third place, in addition to preaching and praying, Paul's ministry in prison included suffering on behalf of others. Now, in and of itself, suffering is a hardship, not a ministry. But when the goal and product of suffering is the advancement of God's kingdom through the promotion of the gospel, suffering is rightly thought of as a form of Christian ministry.

Christians have always suffered, and always will suffer until Jesus returns. The Bible assures us of this. Now, that doesn't mean that all Christians suffer equally or to the extent that Paul did. But God has ordained that until Jesus returns to finish his work, until he has consummated his kingdom on earth, his enemies will still fight against him. And this means that Jesus' people will continue to suffer.

But Paul's life proves something — our suffering is not in vain. On the contrary, our suffering blesses the church. Our suffering testifies to the gospel, our suffering increases the glory that the church will inherit.

Suffering for the sake of the gospel is a powerful and purposeful ministry. For one thing, it is an indisputable testimony to the truth of the gospel. This is why we commonly

refer to Christians who die for their faith as “martyrs” or “witnesses.” We have already seen a number of ways that Paul’s suffering provided opportunities for him to preach the gospel. But it also encouraged others to proclaim the gospel as well.

Listen to Paul’s words to this effect in Philippians 1:14:

Because of my chains, most of the brothers in the Lord have been encouraged to speak the word of God more courageously and fearlessly (Philippians 1:14).

In addition to this it is right to think of suffering as a ministry because it secures benefits for others. After all, Jesus Christ suffered on behalf of sinners, and he died to save us. And Scripture teaches us to follow Christ’s example specifically by suffering for the sake of others. As believers, we should be willing to suffer hardship and even death for the benefit of others, and we should be thankful of the suffering that others endure for this cause.

As the apostle John wrote in 1 John 3:16:

This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers (1 John 3:16).

Paul believed this. And as we have seen, he was willing to go to prison, and even to die, if doing so would promote the gospel.

We read about his willingness to suffer for others in Ephesians 3:13:

I ask you, therefore, not to be discouraged because of my sufferings for you, which are your glory (Ephesians 3:13).

Paul’s point here was that his imprisonment allowed him to promote the gospel in new places and to new people, thereby bringing more and more people to faith in Christ. When the gospel spreads and the church grows, it increases the glory that all believers will inherit.

In the third place, Paul’s letters demonstrate that his suffering was a continuation of the suffering of Christ himself. In Colossians 1:24, Paul made the grandest claim of all regarding his suffering:

Now I rejoice in what was suffered for you, and I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ's afflictions, for the sake of his body, which is the church (Colossians 1:24).

In Colossians 1 Paul emphatically asserted the absolute sufficiency of Christ. So, when he said that Christ’s afflictions were “lacking,” Paul did not mean that Christ’s death was insufficient to save us, or that believers add their own merit to Christ’s death. Rather, Paul meant that Jesus’ work is not yet finished. When Jesus died and then ascended into heaven, he struck a major blow against evil, and effectively won the war against his demonic enemies. But Paul knew that satanic forces continue to skirmish

against Christ and his kingdom. Jesus will not fully and completely abolish his enemies until he returns in glory.

Until that time, the church must endure the suffering God has ordained for us. And because Jesus loves us so dearly, and because he is united to all believers, he suffers when we suffer. In a very real sense, the suffering of the church is the suffering of Christ.

This is the very point that Jesus himself made to Paul during Paul's conversion on the Road to Damascus. Paul, then known as Saul, was actively persecuting Christians throwing them into prison and seeking their deaths. But while he was on his way to Damascus to arrest the Christians there, Jesus met him on the road, knocking him to the ground, and revealing the truth to him.

Part of the conversation between Jesus and Paul is recorded in Acts 9:5:

"Who are you, Lord?" Saul asked.

"I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting," he replied (Acts 9:5).

Jesus made it clear to Paul that to persecute believers is to persecute Jesus himself, and therefore, when a believer suffers, Jesus suffers too.

In summary then, Christ must suffer until his return, and he suffers through the suffering of his body, the church. But when his suffering is done, he will finally and completely defeat all his enemies, and he will glorify his church. Paul was privileged to help Christ fulfill that appointed suffering.

Besides indicating that he preached, prayed, and suffered as an apostle, Paul's letters also demonstrate that he engaged in a vibrant writing ministry while incarcerated.

Writing

Paul's writing ministry during the years of his imprisonment is demonstrated by his New Testament letters to the churches in Colosse, Ephesus, and Philippi, and to the Colossian man, Philemon. Through these letters Paul was able to provide relevant pastoral ministry to churches and individuals. And since these writings were preserved for us in the New Testament, Paul's ministry has been multiplied throughout the world for the past two thousand years.

Paul's writings reveal a rich ministry to churches and individuals with whom he had ongoing relationships. He knew many things about their circumstances and about them personally. And as a result, Paul was able to address many specific issues that concerned his audiences, both personal and theological. He even instructed some individuals by name. Despite his inability to travel, Paul's ministry was informed and carefully tailored to the specific situations of the churches and individuals to whom he wrote.

Consider, for instance, that in his letter to the Philippians Paul engaged in pastoral ministry by exhorting two women, Syntyche and Euodia, to reconcile with one another. These were women Paul knew, women who had labored alongside him, but who had come into disagreement with one another. Paul's concern for them was personal and loving, and his solution to their problem was tremendously tender.

We read his words to them in Philippians 4:2:

I plead with Euodia and I plead with Syntyche to agree with each other in the Lord (Philippians 4:2).

In much the same way, Paul also pleaded for reconciliation between believers in the book of Philemon. There he interceded on behalf of a slave named Onesimus who had fled his Colossian master Philemon. In fact, the entire book of Philemon is dedicated to petitioning Philemon to be gracious to Onesimus.

Apparently after fleeing his master, Onesimus had sought out Philemon's friend, Paul. And under Paul's ministry, Onesimus had become a Christian. Moreover, Onesimus had remained with Paul and had ministered to him in prison. So, Paul's ministry to Onesimus and Philemon was deeply personal, and he took care as their pastor and as their friend to reconcile their relationship.

Paul also directed his letters to the theological issues that involved the church as a whole, providing authoritative apostolic instruction with a pastoral hand. His teaching ministry as an authoritative representative of Christ did not falter during his imprisonment. Rather, Paul continued to provide infallible revelations of truth during this time and continued to apply that truth to the church through his letters.

As we have seen, both Acts and Paul's New Testament letters indicate that Paul was actively involved in ministry during his imprisonment. He knew that God had provided prison to him as an opportunity spread the gospel and to provide an example for the saints. And inspired with this knowledge, he conducted a robust ministry of preaching, praying, suffering, and writing, through which he faithfully discharged all his duties as an apostle of Jesus Christ.

THEOLOGICAL UNITY

Now that we have introduced the background of Paul's imprisonment and explained his ongoing ministry during his imprisonment, we are ready to turn to the theological unity of his letters from prison. In this section we will explore some of the doctrinal themes that the prison epistles share in common and explain how they fit into Paul's broader system of theology.

Paul's letters from prison share some important doctrinal foundations. Most basically, they all affirm the same gospel. But beyond that, they all share a common way of presenting that gospel, and they tend to emphasize the same aspects of that gospel. This is not to say that they are identical to one another. But there is a big picture that unites them, a common foundation on which all of them depend. And that common foundation is the fact that Jesus Christ is the conqueror and ruler of all creation.

Our discussion of the theological unity of the prison epistles will emphasize three main doctrines: First, we will look at the doctrine that Jesus Christ is King of Creation. Second, we will focus more closely on a particular aspect of Jesus' kingship over creation, namely, believers' union with Christ in his kingship. And third, we will

concentrate on the requirements of ethical living that the first two doctrines imply. We'll begin with the doctrine that Jesus Christ is the King of Creation.

KING OF CREATION

Paul's emphasis on Christ's kingship over creation is perhaps more pronounced in his letters from prison than in any of his other writings. We will focus on three aspects of Christ's kingship that appear frequently in his prison epistles: his sovereignty, which entails his power and his authority; his honor, including his glory and his worthiness to be respected, emulated and worshiped; and his determination to return again to consummate his kingdom on earth. Let's begin by looking at Christ's royal sovereignty.

Sovereignty

When we say that Christ is sovereign, we mean that he has the strength and power to accomplish his will, and that he has the legal authority and right to do so. In the ancient world, kings and emperors commanded the military forces of their countries, giving them the power to accomplish what they desired. The laws of their countries also acknowledged their right to rule and to govern, meaning that they also had the authority to accomplish what they desired. Many modern governments have similar power and authority.

According to Paul, when Jesus ascended into heaven, God the Father vested him with this type of sovereignty over all creation. Jesus is so powerful and so authoritative now that his sovereignty extends over all other kings and rulers as well, whether they are on earth or in the spiritual realm.

In Ephesians 1:20-22 Paul described the sovereignty that the Father granted to Christ in this way:

[The Father] seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every title that can be given, not only in the present age but also in the one to come. And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church (Ephesians 1:20-22).

Right now, Jesus Christ rules over the entire creation with absolute power. And his sovereignty is not simply limited to the heavenly realms; he rules over earth as well.

As Jesus himself proclaimed in Matthew 28:18:

All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me (Matthew 28:18).

Jesus Christ, our lord and savior, rules over all creation, from the furthest galaxy to the tiniest spot of earth. He rules over earthly governments and nations, and over every angel and demon. Clearly, not everything in creation obeys him as it should. But even so,

Jesus has the right to command its obedience, and the power to make it obey. And he has the power and right infinitely to bless those he approves and utterly to destroy his enemies.

Besides emphasizing the sovereignty of Christ, Paul drew attention to Christ's honor, which consists of his glory and value and demands the responses of respect, emulation and worship.

Honor

Christ is honored because he is perfect, holy, and righteous. And he is honored because he holds a position of highest authority, and because he executes that authority justly and righteously. He is also honored because he himself is the most valuable being in all of creation, the one whom God values more highly than any other. And he is honored because he is the creator and sustainer of the universe. We could easily list hundreds of reasons that Jesus is worthy of honor. But perhaps the greatest reason that Jesus deserves honor and praise is that he is divine; Jesus is God, and God is worthy of the highest honor imaginable.

One reason Paul emphasized Jesus' honor so greatly was that some people in the church did not appreciate how special Jesus was. Apparently, false teachers had introduced the veneration of angels and spirits into the church and had suggested that Jesus was just one of these many similar beings. One way that Paul refuted these false teachings was by emphasizing Christ's unique and surpassing greatness.

Listen to the way he contrasted Christ with other spiritual beings in Colossians 1:16-17:

For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together (Colossians 1:16-17).

Jesus is unique because he is the creator of everything that is — even of the angels and spirits that the false teachers revered. Jesus is not just the greatest ruler in the universe. He is also the one who established all the lower offices that other rulers hold, both in the spiritual realm and on earth. And he is the one who created the other rulers, including both human beings who rule on earth and beings such as angels and demons who have authority in the spiritual realm.

In addition to speaking of Christ's kingship in terms of Christ's sovereignty and honor, Paul emphasized Christ's determination to return to earth in order to consummate his kingdom.

Determination

To understand Paul's outlook on the return of Christ, we must remember that his teaching about the end times (or his eschatology) grew out of traditional Jewish views of

the end times. In the traditional Jewish theology of Paul's day, it was thought that Scripture presented two main ages of humanity. Before Christ came, the world was in the present age, which was characterized by sin, death and corruption.

This present age was to be followed by the age to come, which the Bible also refers to as the kingdom of God and the kingdom of heaven. This replacement was to happen all at once when the messiah or Christ came.

But according to Paul and the other New Testament authors, Jesus revealed that this traditional Jewish conception was not entirely accurate. The age to come would replace the present age, but not all at once. Instead, the two ages would overlap for a period of time, beginning from the earthly ministry of Christ, which we will refer to as the inauguration of the kingdom of God, and extending until Christ's return or second coming, which we will refer to as the consummation of the kingdom of God. In between the inauguration and consummation is the period we will call the continuation of the kingdom of God. This middle period is the time in which the church existed in Paul's day, and in which it continues to exist today.

This was an important concept for Paul to describe to his audiences because it explained so many of their problems. The present age of sin, death, and corruption had not been abolished, which is why the believers continued to suffer. Nevertheless, some day Jesus would return to bring final blessings to all believers. In the meantime, Christians must trust that Jesus really will return. And we may have great hope that this will happen because Christ is determined to finish what he started.

Right now, Jesus reigns as king from heaven. But he is not satisfied with that. He wants and plans to rule over every inch of creation as fully and gloriously as he now reigns in heaven. He will not be satisfied until he has finally and completely destroyed and punished all his enemies and ultimately blessed all his faithful believers. And he plans to do this by spreading his kingdom across the entire earth.

Because Paul knew Christ's plan to rule over all creation, he confidently asserted that Christ was determined to consummate his kingdom. It was for this reason that he commonly wrote of believer's having a future inheritance, and that he placed his great hope in the rewards that would be his when Christ returned.

For example, consider his words in Ephesians 1:13-14:

Having believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance (Ephesians 1:13-14).

Paul insisted that our future inheritance is guaranteed — God has promised and will not change his mind. As a result, Jesus must return in order to deliver our inheritance in the consummated kingdom.

And in Philippians 3:20-21, Paul wrote of Christ's return in these terms:

Our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, who ... will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body (Philippians 3:20-21).

When Christ returns to consummate his kingdom on earth, our inheritance will include new, glorified bodies. Paul could speak of this inheritance with great confidence because he knew that Jesus had promised to return, and that Jesus was determined to fulfill that promise.

Throughout his prison epistles, Paul relied on Christ's royal sovereignty, honor, and determination as cornerstones for his teachings. These themes arise repeatedly in these letters, providing the basis for many of Paul's teachings to the Colossians, Ephesians, and Philippians.

Now that we have looked at the doctrine that Jesus Christ is the King of Creation, we should turn our attention to the second point of doctrine common to the prison epistles, namely, believers' union with Christ in his kingship — our union with Jesus that results in him sharing his blessing with us.

UNION WITH CHRIST

According to Paul, when we believe in Jesus, we are united to him in a mysterious, spiritual way. And because we are united to Jesus, we are counted as if we were Jesus. For example, Jesus is blameless before God, and because we are united to him, we are also counted as blameless before God with all our sins being forgiven.

Paul returned to this concept frequently in his prison epistles as he encouraged his readers that they shared in Christ's kingship. Often he pointed out that because believers share in Christ's kingship they receive blessings during the present continuation of Christ's kingdom and look forward to even greater blessings at the consummation of the kingdom.

For instance, in Colossians 3:1-4, Paul wrote:

Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God... For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory (Colossians 3:1-4).

Through our union with Christ, we are united to Christ's death so that we also died with him. And we are united to Christ in his resurrection and life so that we are also raised with him. We are also united to Christ in his ascension and kingship so that when he returns in glory we will rule with him.

As Paul wrote in Ephesians 2:6-7:

God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace (Ephesians 2:6-7).

According to Paul, even now we are seated with Christ in the heavenly places, being united to him in his present kingship over all creation. As a result, we share his honor and his blessings in a spiritual way right now even though our earthly circumstances may not

reflect it. And when Jesus returns, our spiritual blessings will be increased, and we will receive earthly blessings as well.

But Paul also appealed to our union with Christ in his kingship to speak of things that are less pleasant, like suffering. He spoke of our union with Christ in order to encourage believers that they did not suffer alone and that they did not suffer in vain. We have already seen that this was true in Paul's life. But Paul also wrote that it was true in the lives of his readers.

Listen to his words in Colossians 1:24:

Now I rejoice in what was suffered for you, and I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ's afflictions, for the sake of his body, which is the church (Colossians 1:24).

The Christian life can be hard, and it can include great suffering.

Although our king reigns in heaven, he has not yet abolished all his enemies, and those enemies often turn their forces against us. But Paul took comfort in the fact that when we suffer for the gospel, our union with Christ ensures that Christ suffers and sympathizes with us. Paul also took comfort in knowing that through our union with Christ the king our suffering benefits others in Christ's kingdom, namely, the church. Finally, he taught that our suffering completes the appointed suffering of Christ, setting the stage for our King's triumphant return.

For reasons like these, Paul's prison epistles commonly drew upon the theme of our union with Christ. For Paul, our union with the King of Creation was the source of great confidence in our salvation, great encouragement in times of trouble, and great hope in the future.

Having examined Paul's use of the idea that Jesus Christ is the King of Creation, as well as believers' union with Christ in his kingship, we should turn to the final point regarding the theological unity of the prison epistles, namely, the requirement of ethical living that is implied by Christ's kingship and our union with him.

ETHICAL LIVING

Those who are familiar with Paul's writings know that the apostle spent as much time teaching about ethical Christian living as he did addressing doctrinal matters. In fact, nearly every time he introduced a doctrinal subject, he went on to explain how believers should apply that doctrine to their lives. And this application was not limited to correct thinking and proper doctrine. It also extended to believers' emotions and behavior. Paul even went so far as to say that unless doctrine is applied to our lives in ways that change our emotions and behavior, it is worthless to us.

Listen to Paul's words to this effect in 1 Corinthians 13:2:

If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing (1 Corinthians 13:2).

If we fathom all mysteries and have all knowledge, then we have a perfect understanding of God's revelation on all matters. In other words, we have perfect doctrine. But having good doctrine, even perfect doctrine, is not enough. If that doctrine does not change our lives — if it is not joined with love, and if it does not result in the ethical treatment of others and respectful obedience to Christ — it is worthless to us.

So, it should come as no surprise to us that Paul's prison epistles regularly emphasize ethical living. On the one hand, that fact that Christ is King obligates us to obey him. On the other hand, the fact that we are united to Christ obligates us to live in accordance with his character. Let's focus first on the obligation to live ethically that flows from Christ's kingship.

Christ as King

As we have already said, because Christ is King, he is sovereign. That means that he has the legal right to command our obedience. This in turn means that we have a legal obligation to obey him.

And as we have also said, Christ is a perfectly righteous and just king. And this means that his judgments and commands are perfectly ethical so that we also have an ethical obligation to obey him. Because Christ is both sovereign and just, we are legally and ethically obligated to obey everything that he commands.

This is the type of argument that Paul made in Philippians 2:9-12, where he wrote these words:

God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth ... Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed ... continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling (Philippians 2:9-12).

Jesus is ruler and Lord over everything in heaven, on earth and under the earth. In other words, he is the King of Creation. And on the basis of Christ's kingship, Paul exhorted the Philippians to obey Christ.

Moreover, as we have seen, Christ's kingship includes his honor. Accordingly, Paul also argued that Christians must live holy lives out of respect for their King's honor. For one thing, obeying Christ preserves his reputation. For another, because Christ is holy and righteous and honorable, he deserves to be obeyed.

Paul wrote of this in Philippians 1:27, saying:

Conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ (Philippians 1:27).

And in Colossians 1:10 he encouraged his readers by writing:

We pray this in order that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and may please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work (Colossians 1:10).

Paul was deeply concerned that Christ's honor and reputation be respected and protected, and he indicated that believers accomplish this when they do good works, that is, when they obey the Lord's commands.

Throughout his prison epistles, Paul exhorted his readers to obey Christ, to live ethically by following the Lord's commands to think, feel, and behave rightly. And although he did not always make the connection with Christ's kingship explicit, he did so often enough to make it clear that Christ's kingship should always be one of our fundamental motivations to live godly lives.

Besides teaching that Christians should live ethically because Christ is King, Paul explained that because we are united to Christ we are both obligated and enabled to live in accordance with his character and commands.

United to Christ

Our union with Christ obligates and enables us to live ethically for at least three reasons: First, Christ indwells us by his Spirit, giving us a new nature and compelling us to do good works. One result of the Spirit's indwelling presence is that our natures are being conformed to Christ's nature. As a result, we are transformed and motivated to obey Christ. In all this, God works within us to submit us to himself and to conform us to Christ's example.

Listen to the way Paul spoke to these issues in Philippians 2:12-13:

Continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose (Philippians 2:12-13).

Our union with Christ consists partly of our being indwelled by the Spirit of God. And the Holy Spirit moves our wills and compels us to act in obedience to God so that we live rightly and ethically.

Paul presented a similar argument in Colossians 3:5-10:

Put to death ... whatever belongs to your earthly nature ... since you have taken off your old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator (Colossians 3:5-10).

Because we are united to Christ, we have new natures. And because God has given us new natures, we have not only the obligation, but we are enabled to make use of them by doing good works and by resisting the temptation to sin.

Second, God has commanded that all who are united to his Son must live holy lives. In fact, God has not merely commanded this. He has actually predestined good works for us to do.

Paul wrote of this in Ephesians 2:10, where he taught:

We are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do (Ephesians 2:10).

We have been created in Christ Jesus, meaning that God has saved us through union with Jesus Christ. And part of the reason he has done this is because he has appointed good works for us to do.

Third, because we are all united to Christ, we are also united to one another through Christ. This obligates us to treat one another as we would treat Christ himself, and as we ourselves want to be treated.

As Paul wrote in Ephesians 4:25:

Each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to his neighbor, for we are all members of one body (Ephesians 4:25).

The phrase “we are all members of one body” might be more literally translated “we are members of one another.” Paul’s point was that we are united to one another in Christ and that this unity obligates us to treat one another with respect, not sinning against one another, but working for the benefit of all.

As he wrote in Philippians 2:1-3:

If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ ... in humility consider others better than yourselves (Philippians 2:1-3).

For at least these three reasons — our new nature, God’s command, and our union with one another — our union with Christ obligates us and enables us to live ethically, according to the standard that God has set down for us in Scripture.

We see then that Paul’s prison epistles are theologically unified by Paul’s rich and multifaceted doctrine of the kingship of Christ over all creation, including believers’ union with Christ and our consequent responsibility to live ethically.

As we will see in future lessons, Paul’s prison epistles share many other themes in common, as well. But the idea that ties most of these common themes together is the doctrine that Jesus Christ is the King of Creation.

CONCLUSION

In this lesson we have examined the circumstances that gave rise to Paul’s prison epistles and the basic theological approach that Paul used in these letters. We have explored the events leading up to his arrest and the imprisonment that followed, and we

have looked at Paul's ongoing ministry in prison. Finally, we have introduced the main theological theme that unites all of Paul's letters from prison, namely, the doctrine that Jesus Christ is the King of Creation.

Paul's prison epistles are rich in theology, and well suited for instructing and encouraging the church today. In future lessons, we will look more closely at these letters. And as we do so, we will keep in mind the background that we have studied in this lesson.

Knowing the hardships that Paul endured and the ministry he maintained in prison will help us understand Paul's motives and goals in writing to the churches of Colosse, Ephesus, and Philippi. And understanding the theological themes that unite these letters will help us understand many of Paul's particular instructions to each of these churches. With these ideas in mind, we will be better equipped to understand Paul's teachings and to apply them in our own lives and churches.

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