

# Study 9: Ephesians

## Colossians & Philemon

These three letters, along with Philippians were all written during Paul's two year house arrest in Rome, and are frequently referred to as "The Prison Epistles". We have already looked at Philippians due to its geographical proximity to Thessalonica, and the interaction between the two churches. In this study we will do a partial revisit of Philippians as we look at the people who were around Paul during his period of house arrest.

### ***Introduction***

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### ***Philemon – Date and Occasion***

### ***Philemon – Brief Outline***

### ***Homework and preparation for next week:***

- Read the notes as a review of the study
- Why do you think the Ephesian and Colossian letters are so similar?
- Skim read First and Second Timothy and Titus
  - Where is Timothy?
    - What's going on with the church there?
  - Where is Titus?
    - What task has Paul given him to do?
  - Where is Paul?

## Notes for study 9: Ephesians, Colossians & Philemon

### Introduction

These three letters, along with Philippians are referred to as “The Prison Epistles”, and written during Paul’s two year house arrest in Rome. In this study we will do a partial revisit of Philippians as we look at the people who were around Paul during his period of house arrest.

### Background

Paul first visited Ephesus whilst returning to Jerusalem on the second journey. It was the fourth largest city in the known world at the time, and would have been like a magnet to Paul. Unlike most places he went, when Paul preached in the Synagogue, “...*the Jews wanted him to stay longer...*” (Acts 18:20), but he needed to return to Jerusalem. He came back and stayed for 2½ years on the third journey from 54 to early 57 AD – the longest that he stayed anywhere.

Paul returned in AD 58 after visiting Macedonia and Corinth and “...*from Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called for the elders of the church...*” (Acts 20:17). What follows is an emotional discussion with the brethren that he loved, especially when he tells them that this will be the last time that he sees them. He then warns them that “...*from among your own selves men will arise speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them...*” (Acts 20:30).

THIS VERSE SETS THE SCENE FOR MUCH OF WHAT IS WRITTEN CONCERNING THE EPHESIAN CHURCH. Division was going to arise in the church, and the leaders of the congregation who had been charged with shepherding the flock would be the ones responsible!

When he returned to Jerusalem, Paul was arrested after only 5 days, and was then placed in “protective custody” in Caesarea and “forgotten about” for 2 years. After several hearings, he finally appealed to Caesar and was sent to Rome and placed under house arrest pending a hearing until his accusers came from Judea to lay the charges against him. Towards the end of that period he wrote the letters known as the Prison Epistles, including Ephesians (AD 63).

About 5 years had expired since the meeting with the Ephesian elders, and the Ephesian letter is written as a call to faithfulness in view of the impending apostasy. The letter was triggered by a runaway slave named Onesimus, who had run away from his master Philemon (a Christian from Colosse) and turned up at Paul’s house in Rome. Onesimus became a Christian whilst in Rome, and Paul sends him back to his master with a letter of commendation (the letter to Philemon), along with the letters to the churches in Colosse and Ephesus.

The following table will help us “unravel” those who were with Paul when he wrote the letters:

Ephesians	Colossians	Philemon	Philippians
	Timothy (1:1)	Timothy (1)	Timothy (1:1) Epaphroditus (2:25)
Tychicus (6:21)	Tychicus (4:7) Onesimus (4:9) Aristarchus (4:10) John Mark (4:10) Epaphras (4:12) Luke (4:14) Demas (4:14)	Onesimus (10) Aristarchus (24) John Mark (24) Epaphras (23) Luke (24) Demas (24)	

Onesimus had given “one side of the story” about the things going on in Asia Minor. Of particular concern to Paul was the digression in Colosse (they were embracing other things including the worship of angels, and trying to blend that with Christianity). It is clear that Paul sends Tychicus to find out what’s really happening, and he says in Colossians (4:8) “...*that he may know your circumstances...*”. Tychicus would also bring news of Paul, and the message from Ephesians 6:21 and Colossians 4:7 are virtually word-for-word.

### ***Ephesus – The City***

Ephesus was a major city in the region called “Asia Minor”, and the centre of the region for trade, culture, commerce, politics and religion. With a population of around 200,000 it was the fourth largest city in the world at the time. Other cities in the area in New Testament times include those addressed as “The seven churches of Asia” in Revelation chapters 2 and 3: Smyrna, Pergamos, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, Laodicea; and Colosse.

The city was famous for its huge theatre with a seating capacity of 50,000 and the Temple of Diana (or Artemis) which was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. [Some of the others were the Egyptian pyramids, The hanging gardens of Babylon, The lighthouse at Alexandria, The Colossus of Rhodes].

In Paul’s time, a harbour existed near the city, but it has since silted up and is now 5 km (3 miles) away. Great wide paved roads such as the Arcadian way went through the city linking the centres of trade of the harbour and the Agora (marketplace).

The culture was geared around the Roman governance of the area as a pro-consulate, and the Greek culture that had inhabited the site for hundreds of years, centred on the worship of the God Artemis, (also called Diana). Whole industries had grown around supporting the temple of Diana, and making silver “charms” with Diana engraved on them. The practice of “magical arts” in the city was also a major industry.

### ***Ephesians – Date and Occasion***

The letter was written whilst Paul was in prison (3:1; 4:1; 6:20), however we are left to deduce during which imprisonment. The timing of his Caesarean imprisonment (AD 58-60) was quite soon after his last visit with the Ephesian elders (AD 58 – Acts 20:38; c/f Acts 21:10 – 25:3). The most likely time therefore was during his first imprisonment in Rome whilst on house arrest. This puts the timing around 62 or 63 AD, and the Ephesian letter is highly regarded as one of Paul’s “prison epistles” along with Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon.

The letter forms one part of a trilogy, along with Colossians and Philemon, that deal with Christ and the church (Ephesians), Christ and us (Colossians), and relationships between brethren (Philemon).

When Paul sends Onesimus back to Philemon in Colosse along with Tychicus, a native from Ephesus to accompany him, he writes the three letters (Colossians, Philemon, and Ephesians) and sends them with Tychicus.

### ***Ephesians – Brief Outline***

The following outline is consistent with the letter written as a “call to faithfulness” in view of the impending apostasy. We will look at this again next study as we look at 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Timothy.

- 1:1-2 Greetings and salutation
- 1:3-23 *Look at the blessings that you have in Christ – why would you want to go anywhere else?*
- 2:1-22 *Look where you’ve come from – why would you want to go back there?*

- 3:1-21 *The church (not Judaism) was God's eternal plan and purpose!*
- 4:1-24 *There's a spiritual war going on – don't get caught in the crossfire!*
- 4:25-5:33 *Hang in there – a call to Godly living*
- 6:1-24 *Stand and fight the battle!*

Ephesians goes right to the heart of the issues in Paul's writings. It contains an extended celebration of God's accomplishment, revealing His eternal purpose in Christ, then another lengthy discussion in which God's gifts towards man and the church are outlined.

### **Colosse – The Town**

Colosse lay in the valley of the Lycus River in the western part of Asia Minor (what is now Turkey), about 150 km from both Ephesus and Pisidia. It is close to the "seven churches of Asia" described in Revelation, and had a similar culture. In New Testament times, it was a city of little importance, although in previous history it had held some esteem. It was the least important city of any New Testament letter, but the people in all places (large or small) are important to God. By the time of the New Testament, the whole region had a strong Greek language and culture, but was under Roman rule.

"Colosse was a small market town situated on the south bank of the Lycus River in the interior of the Roman province of Asia (an area included in modern Turkey). Located about a hundred miles east of Ephesus, its nearest neighbors were Laodicea and Hierapolis (both of these cities had communities of believers; cf. 2:1; 4:13). Colosse and Laodicea were probably evangelized during the time of Paul's extended ministry in Ephesus (Ac 19:10), though there is no record of it in Acts. All our information about the church must be found in this letter and in incidental allusions in the companion letter to Philemon." (NIVBC).

At the time of writing, Paul had not visited the town of Colosse, although he certainly had some contact with the church. His helper Epaphras had evangelised the town most likely during Paul's extended time in Ephesus, for during this time "...all of Asia heard the word..." (Acts 19:10), and they had "...heard the truth of the gospel ... as you also learned from Epaphras..." (1:5,7). Paul was "...unknown by face..." to many of the brethren (2:1), and he had learned of the faith of the Colossian brethren by report (1:4). They clearly had a knowledge and an interest in Paul's affairs, even though he was far away from them.

### **Colossians – Date and Occasion**

When Paul arrived in Rome, he came with a letter from the Roman Governor of Judea, Festus outlining his case. His accusers (the Jews from Jerusalem) needed to come to lay charges against him so that Paul could defend himself. The first thing that Paul did upon arriving in Rome was to visit the Jews and introduce himself. They responded "... *We have not received any letters from Judea concerning you, and none of the brothers who have come from there has reported or said anything bad about you.* <sup>22</sup> *But we want to hear what your views are, for we know that people everywhere are talking against this sect.*"... (Acts 28:21-22 NIV). The Jews in Judea had forgotten about Paul (now that he was gone and out of the way), and those in Rome had nothing of concern to lay the charges.

After two years, if the charges had not been brought, then the statute of limitations applied, and Paul would be free to go. Early in the period of his house arrest he would face a great deal of uncertainty about when he might have to go to trial. But when the two years were nearly up, and there was no hint of any charges being laid, then Paul had every confidence in being released and with some degree of certainty as to when that might happen.

In the letter to Philemon, Paul is so sure of the nearness of his release that he tells him to “make up the spare bed for me”.

The date and occasion are detailed elsewhere in this study, and are AD 63, very late in the period of Paul’s house arrest in Rome, and it was written because he was sending Philemon back to Colosse.

### **Colossians – Brief Outline**

Colossians in many ways parallels the Ephesian letter with the emphasis on Christ and His pre-eminent position. The churches were geographically and culturally similar, and the letters were written at the same time. Although Paul had never visited the church at Colosse, he had knowledge of what was happening there from his many visitors.

The letter is clearly one of the *Prison Epistles*. Paul talks about his *fellow prisoner Aristarchus* (4:10), and asks to be *remembered in his chains* (4:18), and he discusses several of his visitors. This all fits the pattern of the time of the first Roman imprisonment (Acts 28:30-31), which places the date of the letter at 62-63 AD, and very late in the period. The letter to the church at Colosse and the letter to Philemon were both written together, and both delivered by Epaphras at the same time. In the letter to Philemon, Paul says that he expects to come there very soon, and Philemon is to *prepare the guestroom* accordingly (Phm 22). This would not be the case if the letters were written early during the two-year imprisonment.

The following outline is taken from Fee & Stuart<sup>1</sup>

- 1:1- 14      *Salutation, Thanksgiving, and Prayer*
- 1:15-23    *The Supremacy of the Son of God*
- 1:24-2:5    *Paul’s Role*
- 2:6 - 23    *Christ over and against Religious Seductions of All Kinds*
- 3:1- 11     *The New Basis for (Christian) Behavior*
- 3:12 - 4:6   *What Christian Life Looks Like*
- 4:7 - 18    *Final Greetings*

The letter contains warnings, both about the problems of the Judaisers, and also about Gnosticism (Gnostic means “to know”; so the Gnostics were saying that they have and seek knowledge. Likewise, “agnostic” means “I don’t know”).

Members of the [Gnostic] group held that they possessed a special revealed knowledge which was deeper and more genuine than that held by ordinary Christians. This knowledge had been delivered by Christ to special disciples and emerged in teachings and writings which had not been generally known among the churches<sup>2</sup>.

The Colossians were also embracing the worship of angels, and the letter addresses this issue by clear teaching on the nature of the Godhead and Christ.

The style is very much that of Paul, and parallels the Ephesian letter in many ways. Paul clearly knows many of the brethren, and regards the church there as one for which he has personal concern (c/f 2 Cor 11:28).

Four things that stand out in the letter:

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<sup>1</sup> Fee & Stuart, p.359

<sup>2</sup> Roberts, J.W: “The letters of John” The Living Word Commentary; R. B. Sweet Co.; Inc. Austin, Tx , p. 8

1. *Dealing with the false teaching.* We don't know precisely what the false doctrines were, and a lot of material has been written about it, which is usually referred to as the Colossian *Syncretism* because it represents a *blending* of a variety of religious beliefs, doctrines, and philosophy. We see Paul's *response* to the problem, and we have to try to second-guess what the problem actually is.
2. *The primary emphasis on the supremacy of Christ* over all things. This is Paul's response to the problem – the antidote!
3. *The situation in the church* emerges, and we can note the way in which he encourages the brethren, even although he hasn't been there.
4. *The situation with Onesimus* underlies the whole letter, and so Paul is conditioning the church to receive him back, just as he does with the letter to his master, Philemon.

### ***Philemon – The Situation***

Philemon was a Christian in Colosse, and the owner of the slave Onesimus, who had run away from his master and turned up at Paul's house in Rome. He had travelled around 1000 miles (1600 km), and had (apparently) funded his travels by stealing from his master. Philemon was a Christian who knew Paul, (either personally, or by reputation), and Onesimus must also have had some knowledge of Paul. After arriving in Rome, Onesimus was converted by Paul.

### ***Philemon – Date and Occasion***

The occasion of the letter is Onesimus' arrival in Rome, and probably about the same time, the arrival of Epaphras with news of the churches in the Lycus valley. Paul writes the letter to Philemon to ensure that he does not unduly punish Onesimus.

Written with the Colossian and the Ephesian letters, the Colossian letter is particularly relevant to the Philemon letter, since it addresses the situation in the church in which Philemon was a member. Issues with Onesimus are clearly addressed. The date of the two letters are placed together towards the end of Paul's first Roman imprisonment in AD 62/63. Paul's specific instruction to Philemon is to prepare the guestroom for his visit (22) as he expected to be released very soon, which provides strong evidence for a date late in the imprisonment. Paul's offer to repay Philemon any debt that Onesimus owed him also shows Paul's optimism at being released. Whilst under house arrest, Paul would have no income, and no ability to pay (although he did have sufficient financial resources to rent a house (Acts 28:30)). But after his release, Paul would be able to work to support himself, and pay back any debt to Philemon.

### ***Philemon – Brief Outline***

Our mutual obligations to each other as brothers and sisters in Christ are recognised, along with those of the Master and servant to each other in particular (as he has expounded in Colossians).

The following outline is adapted from Fee & Stuart<sup>3</sup>:

- 1- 3            *Salutation*
- 4-7            *Thanksgiving and Prayer*
- 8-21          *The Appeal*
- 22 - 25      *Personal Word and Greetings*

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<sup>3</sup> Fee & Stuart, p. 389