

Introduction

I, Paul, an old man and now a prisoner also for Christ ...

Philemon 1:9

The Prison Letters

The Prison Letters (sometimes called “epistles”) are a subset of books within the New Testament which includes Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon. As the name implies, these books were written while Paul was in prison. Within these letters, Paul calls himself an “ambassador in bonds” (Ephesians 6:20), referring to his chains. Rather than pouting about his suffering, Paul took great comfort in knowing that most of his brethren were now “confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, are much more bold to speak the word without fear” (Philippians 1:14). Calling himself “a prisoner for Christ Jesus” (Philemon 1), Paul calls on Christians to make use of their freedom to serve Christ and to “remember my chains” (Colossians 4:18).

All Prison Epistles begin with Paul identifying himself as the author of the books. The letters were delivered by a man named Tychicus who was from the same area as those receiving the letters (Acts 20:4). Paul calls him a “beloved brother and faithful minister” (Ephesians 6:21; Colossians 4:7). He apparently traveled with Paul often and was entrusted with delivering messages to the churches for Paul (2 Timothy 4:12; Titus 3:12).

The date of the writing of these epistles, while uncertain, falls within a five-year window. The specific date depends largely on where a person determines Paul to be imprisoned when he writes. Paul was imprisoned three different times: at Ephesus (52-53 AD), Caesarea (57-59 AD), and eventually Rome (60-62 AD). Tradition says that Paul was in Rome when he wrote the letters, but not everyone agrees. Paul says that he had been preaching to “the imperial guard” (known as the praetorium) in Philippians 1:13. He also mentions “Caesar’s household” in 4:22. This leads many to believe that Paul was either in the emperor’s palace in Rome or possibly in the governor’s palace in Caesarea (see Acts 23:35). Regardless of whether the imprisonment is in Rome or Caesarea, the date for the writing falls between the years of 57-62 AD.

About Ephesus

Ephesus is a city in the Roman province of Asia, which included Laodicea and Colossae. The letter to the Ephesians seems to be one that was passed around to various churches in the area. Even though Paul had been in Ephesus (Acts 18:18-20) and had worked with them at length (Acts 20:16-17), the book has very few personal greetings, especially compared to Colossians (see Appendix).

The book of Acts tells us about Paul’s journeys in this region. Paul began his journey in Asia Minor in the spring of 52 AD (Acts 18:23). He could have arrived in Ephesus in the late summer of that year (Acts 19:1). He began by teaching in the synagogue for three months (Acts 19:8). After that, he and the early Christians had daily discussions in a place called the lecture hall of Tyrannus. This continued for the next two years until the end of 54 AD (v. 10).

At this time, Paul was doing incredible miracles (v. 11-12). A group of traveling “exorcists” came to Ephesus and tried to imitate Paul’s miracles, but they failed in hilarious fashion (v. 13-16). This episode only made Paul more famous, as no one could do what he was doing. As a result, many of the local people believed the gospel of Jesus, including some of the local magicians and followers of false religions (v. 17-20).

Unfortunately, other people felt threatened by Paul’s success. A man named Demetrius made a living crafting silver idols and shrines for the pagan religions. With so many people starting to believe in Jesus, the whole pagan religion economy was starting to lose money. Demetrius got all the other idol makers and tradesmen together and told them that Paul was a threat to their business and their religion (v. 23-27). They rioted in the streets of Ephesus and shouted at the top of their lungs (v. 28-34). The city was in chaos, and Paul eventually left to travel to the region called Macedonia (20:1). Paul stayed in touch with the church in Ephesus, and prayed for them often (20:17 & 31).

Ephesian Themes

In this study, I want to focus on two interconnected themes in the Ephesian letter. First, we need to notice the concept of identity. Today, we are seeing a war being waged in our culture between two frameworks for identity. The Modern framework says, “I am who I am.” Identity is entirely personal and internal. The highest goal is to attain congruity between the person I desire to be within and the person I seem to be on the outside.

The Postmodern framework says, “I am who we are.” Identity is entirely communal. I belong to a class of people who define me. Our defining characteristic is our race, ethnicity, gender, social status, economic status, or an intersection of several of those. The highest goal is to champion the causes of my people.

In the church at Ephesus, these two concepts led to division and strife. Those who sought identity in an entirely personal way became preoccupied with self at the expense of others. Those who found identity in their group alienated other groups that existed within the church – notably the tension between Jewish and Gentile Christians (2:11-13).

Paul’s strategy is to teach all Christians to find their identity in Christ (not myself) and in his church (not my race, class, or gender). Because the identity of the people had been changed, the way they interacted could now change. People who were at one time enemies could become brothers and sisters in Christ. People with differing backgrounds could live their lives together based on a shared faith.

Second, the first theme sets up the second theme of Paul presenting a litany of metaphors for imagining the church. These Christians had to see their community with fresh eyes. They had to see their neighbor – not as a rival – but as a shared participant in the story of the church.

Paul offers up metaphor after metaphor to help the church think of itself in new ways. The church is God’s family (1:5-6), Christ’s body (1:22-23), God’s workmanship (2:10), a temple (2:19-22), the eternal purpose of God (3:8-12), a precious treasure or jewel (3:14-19), one unified whole (4:4-6), a new creation (4:20-24), God’s mirror image (5:1), Jesus’ bride (5:23 & 25), God’s servant in the world (6:5-8), and the army of the Lord of Hosts engaged in a supernatural war (6:10-12). Each image adds something to our understanding of who we are together in Christ and how that changes how we interact with each other.