



Provided by the Church of the Lutheran Confession - Board of Missions

## Missiology

### Lesson 15 – Paul’s Last Letters and Journeys

By the time Paul reached Rome, he had already written several letters that found their way into our New Testament: Galatians, First and Second Thessalonians, First and Second Corinthians, and Romans. While he was a prisoner in Rome, he wrote four more letters: Ephesians, Colossians, Philemon, and Philipians. What can we learn about mission work from these letters?

Paul wrote to the Ephesians from Rome during his imprisonment. Paul had spent three years in Ephesus, and he and they knew each other well. Paul began his letter with a comprehensive discussion of God’s plan of salvation, centered in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. **“In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of His grace”** (Ephesians 1:7). Those who are brought to faith in Jesus Christ are told that God chose them from eternity to be His, and that their conversion from unbelief to faith was entirely a matter of God’s grace. **“For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast”** (Ephesians 2:8-9).

All those who are brought to faith in Christ become members of the Holy Christian Church, which is made up of all believers in Jesus Christ throughout the world and in all of history, from the days of Adam and Eve to the end of the world. One of Paul’s main points is that there is only one Church, which includes Jewish believers and Gentile believers, as well as believers from all races and cultures and countries. Emphasizing the oneness of Christ’s Church is a major part of every missionary’s work, despite the outward appearance of many divisions. Paul compares the Christian Church to a human body with many parts, each part having its own particular function. **“To each one of us grace was given according to the measure of Christ’s gift”** (Ephesians 4:7). Among the gifts Christ gives His Church are apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers. God gives these gifts to help the Church grow in faith and love in the constant struggle against their own sin and the workings of the devil.

Paul outlines the pattern of the true Christian life. The Gospel is the motivation for doing the will of God. **“Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God in Christ forgave you. Therefore be imitators of God as dear children. And walk in love, as Christ also has loved us and given Himself for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God for a sweet-smelling aroma”** (Ephesians 4:32 – 5:2). Paul’s words to Christian husbands and wives, and to Christian parents and their children are especially noteworthy.

Paul wrote a similar letter to the Christians in Colosse, another city in the province of Asia. Paul had never been in Colosse, but one of his associates by the name of Epaphras had brought the Gospel to that city. Paul wrote this letter because the Christians in Colosse were troubled by false teachers who had introduced a religion that involved the worship of angels, the following of all kinds of food customs and other ceremonial laws, and the notion that faith in Christ was not enough for salvation.

The letter to the Colossians exalts Christ as the head of the Church. It tells us that **“in Him dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily”** (Colossians 2:9). We **“are complete in Him”** (Colossians 2:10), and do not need to advance beyond Him into all kinds of self-chosen ceremonies and self-chosen worship. Our Christian life is a fruit of our faith in Christ, which is the working of the Holy Spirit. Paul says: **“As the elect of God, holy and beloved, put on tender mercies, kindness, humility, meekness, longsuffering, bearing with one another, and forgiving one another, if anyone has a complaint against another; even as Christ forgave you, so you also must do”** (Colossians 3:12-13).

In his letter to the Colossians Paul refers to some of his fellow-workers, Aristarchus and Luke, who accompanied him on his voyage to Rome and were still with him, as well as Mark and Epaphras and a man named Demas, who abandoned Paul later on. Paul’s associate, Tychicus, delivered both of these letters to Ephesus and Colosse. No doubt these letters were shared with other congregations as well.

When Tychicus made the trip from Rome to Ephesus and Colosse, he was accompanied by a slave named Onesimus. Onesimus had run away from his master Philemon, who lived in Colosse. Onesimus had come to Rome and Paul became acquainted with him there. Onesimus also became a Christian. But Paul felt compelled to send Onesimus back to Philemon. Paul wrote the New Testament letter to Philemon to explain the situation and urged Philemon to take Onesimus back again and to regard him as a fellow-Christian. He also hinted that it might be a good idea to release Onesimus from his slavery.

From this short letter to Philemon we learn that Paul did not consider it his business to bring about social reform, that is, to eliminate slavery from the Roman Empire. He was a missionary of the Gospel of Christ, and that was his major concern. How happy Paul was to hear of the spread of the Gospel, **“which has come to you (the Colossians), as it has also in all the world, and is bringing forth fruit, as it is also among you”** (Colossians 1:6)!

It seems that the last letter Paul wrote from his imprisonment in Rome was his letter to the Christians in Philippi. At this time Paul was hopeful that he would soon be set free, for he wrote to the Philippians: **“I trust in the Lord that I myself shall also come shortly”** (Philippians 2:24). Paul does not mention Luke or Aristarchus or Mark in this letter; therefore, it is likely that they were no longer with him in Rome. But Timothy was with him and is named with him as the author of this letter.

The Philippians had heard that Paul was a prisoner in Rome. They had helped him with material gifts in the past, and they wanted to support him again once more. For this purpose they sent one of their leaders, a man named Epaphroditus, to bring financial aid or some other assistance to Paul. In this letter Paul calls Epaphroditus **“my brother, fellow worker, and fellow soldier, ... your messenger and the one who ministered to my need”** (Philippians 2:25). Paul was happy to receive their gift of love, writing to them: **“You have done well that you shared in my distress. ... Not that I seek the gift, but I seek the fruit that abounds to your account. Indeed I have all and abound. I am full, having received from Epaphroditus the things sent from you, a sweet-smelling aroma, an acceptable sacrifice, well pleasing to God”** (Philippians 4:14-18).

But after Epaphroditus reached Rome and found Paul, he got sick. Paul informed the Philippians that he **“was distressed because you had heard that he was sick. For indeed he was sick almost unto death; but God had mercy on him, and not only on him but on me also, lest I should have sorrow upon sorrow”** (Philippians 2:26-27). **“For the work of Christ he came close to death, not regarding his life”** (Philippians 2:30). The Gospel of Christ had worked in the hearts of the Philippian Christians, making them generous and kind and mission-minded. Paul did not accept financial help from all his congregations, but he did accept aid from the Philippians, for they knew what they were doing and why they were doing it.

After Epaphroditus recovered from his illness, Paul sent him back to Philippi with this letter to the Philippians. Since they were concerned about Paul's well-being as a prisoner, Paul assured them: **“I want you to know, brethren, that the things which happened to me have actually turned out for the furtherance of the gospel”** (Philippians 1:12). The Gospel of Christ was being preached in Rome, not only by Paul himself but also by others. **“Christ is preached; and in this I rejoice, yes, and will rejoice”** (Philippians 1:18). He was not afraid to die in Rome. He wrote: **“For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain. ... I am hard-pressed between the two, having a desire to depart and be with Christ, which is far better. Nevertheless to remain in the flesh is more needful for you”** (Philippians 1:21-24).

Paul was happy to be able to do more work in the service of his Savior. He thought of the believers in Philippi as an oasis in the desert, **“children of God without fault in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world, holding fast the word of life”** (Philippians 2:15-16). **“Our citizenship is in heaven, from which we also eagerly wait for the Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ”** (Philippians 3:20). This is what we pray for in the Lord's Prayer: that God's name may be hallowed by true teaching and godly living, that God's kingdom may come through the faithful preaching and teaching of God's Word, and that God's will may be done.

When the book of Acts ends, Paul is still a prisoner in Rome, awaiting trial before Emperor Nero. From accounts in church history, it seems that Paul was released a short time after sending Epaphroditus back home to Philippi with this letter to the Philippians. Whatever

journeys he made after his release are not known with certainty. He may have made that planned mission journey to Spain. Clement of Rome later wrote that Paul went west as far as he could. We know that he also traveled to the island of Crete, where he put his assistant Titus in charge of the congregations there. It seems he also went to Ephesus and put his assistant Timothy in charge of the congregations there. Paul wrote his first letter to Timothy in Macedonia. He wrote his letter to Titus in Nicopolis.

The letters to Timothy and Titus are pastoral letters, that is, letters from an older pastor to younger pastors to instruct them and encourage them in their work. From these letters we learn the purpose of our work, the qualifications of those who are to do it, and how to do the work itself. These books are invaluable for all Christian pastors and missionaries. We will be studying these letters later as we consider the qualifications of a missionary.

After his stay in Nicopolis Paul seems to have spent some time in Troas, Corinth, and Miletus. He was then arrested a second time and transported to Rome, where he was tried, convicted, and executed. Before his death Paul wrote his second letter to Timothy. Although the situation was bleak – both for himself and his Gospel ministry – because of persecution and false teaching, Paul wanted the great work of missions to go on after his death. Paul told Timothy that he must continue the work and be willing to face stiff opposition as a Gospel preacher. **“Do not be ashamed of the testimony of our Lord, nor of me His prisoner, but share with me in the sufferings for the gospel according to the power of God”** (2 Timothy 1:8).

Timothy needed to be a teacher of the truth, not a false teacher. Paul wrote: **“Hold fast the pattern of sound words which you have heard from me, in faith and love which are in Christ Jesus”** (2 Timothy 1:13). The Gospel preaching must continue after Timothy was gone. Therefore, Paul said: **“The things that you have heard from me among many witnesses, commit these to faithful men who will be able to teach others also”** (2 Timothy 2:2). We do not know how future teachers and preachers were trained in those days, but they passed on the Gospel to others in those days of severe persecution, a persecution that continued for many years.

At this time the textbook for training teachers was the Old Testament Scriptures, which was supplemented by the writings of the apostles and their associates. These later writings were gathered and preserved by the various congregations and copied again and again for future generations. Paul reminded Timothy: **“You must continue in the things which you have learned and been assured of, knowing from whom you have learned them, and that from childhood you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is given by inspiration of God (breathed out by God), and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work”** (2 Timothy 3:14-17).

During this second imprisonment in Rome Paul did not expect to be released. He wrote: **“The time of my departure is at hand.”** He was looking ahead to **“the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will give to me on that Day, and not to me only but also to all who have loved His appearing”** (2 Timothy 4:6-8). He was still concerned with the work of his associates: Crescens, Titus, Tychicus, Mark, Carpus, Aquila and Priscilla, Erastus, and Trophimus. Luke, the author of Acts, was with him to the end. Paul’s eternal future was assured because of Jesus Christ and the work of the Holy Spirit. **“The Lord will deliver me from every evil work and preserve me for His heavenly kingdom. To Him be glory forever and ever. Amen!”** (2 Timothy 4:18).

### Questions

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1. Which four letters did Paul write as a prisoner in Rome?
2. Which doctrines are taught in Paul’s letter to the Ephesians?
3. How is Christ exalted in Paul’s letter to the Colossians?
4. Who was Onesimus, and why was Paul returning him to Philemon?
5. What happened to Epaphroditus after he delivered the gift from Philippi?
6. What comparison did Paul make between life and death in his letter to the Philippians?
7. What did Paul mean by saying we are citizens of heaven?
8. What evidence is there that Paul went to Spain?
9. How did Paul arrange for mission work to continue after his death?
10. What did Paul expect to happen to him at his death? What about us?