

THE
DISCIPLESHIP
PLACE

Telling the New Testament
Story of God



SESSION 13

Ephesians, Philippians, and Colossians

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Ephesians, Philippians, and Colossians

SESSION OVERVIEW

Letter to the Ephesians

Letter to the Philippians

Letter to the Colossians

Application

Exam

Discussion Guide for Mentor and Participant

LEARNER OBJECTIVES

At the end of this session, you should:

- gain an understanding of the types of letters written in the first century.
- know the purpose and main content for Paul's letters to the Ephesians, Philippians, and Colossians.

INTRODUCTION

Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon comprise four of Paul's letters known as prison epistles. Each is believed to have been written while Paul was in prison at various locations in the Greco-Roman world. Ephesians has a general tone that does not appear to speak to a specific congregation, while the others address particular situations and communities.

LETTER TO THE EPHESIANS

NOTES

Paul writes this letter from prison in Rome. He wants to reassure the church and remind them of his teachings. He does not deal with specific church problems, so it may have been a circular letter written to a group of churches in the Ephesus area. It is interesting that some of the best ancient manuscripts do not have the words in Ephesus, but saints who are also faithful. The letter, thereby, becomes a general letter to the Church at large. In any event, what Paul says in this letter was and is relevant for the entire Church.

According to the classifications of letters that we have examined, Ephesians is primarily a paraenetic letter. Paul is writing to remind the Ephesians of what he taught them when he was with them.

WHO?

There are two primary theories on authorship.

Paul. The apostle (traditional position)—Eph. 1:1. The arguments for this position are:

- Paul is named in verse 1 as the author.
- The differences in vocabulary and terms reflect a change in Paul's thought and style and do not necessarily require the author to be a different person.

Pauline School. The arguments for this position are:

- Paul's other letters address churches in specific cities or areas.
- There are some differences in vocabulary and syntax (sentence structure).
- Some terms have a different meaning in Ephesians than they do in other Pauline writings.
- The style is different.
- Ephesians appears to be dependent on Colossians with much of Ephesians being paralleled in Colossians.

Audience. Church in Ephesus and perhaps the surrounding area of Asia. Most likely, a circular letter since Paul does not seem to deal with the problems of a particular church. Five ancient copies lack the words, "In Ephesus" in 1:1, but the title says, "To the Ephesians."



WHERE?

Author: Paul wrote from Rome in prison.

Audience: Those who lived in the prosperous commercial city of Ephesus.

- It was the capital city of the Roman province of Asia.
- The temple to Artemis (Diana, mother goddess) was the largest building in the city. The artisans and others who served this temple had a strong influence in the city. In Acts, Luke records an interesting story about Ephesus involving Paul (19:23-41). Near the close of Paul's ministry in this city, a riot breaks out due to the interference of the gospel with a profitable business. Demetrius and other silversmiths made statuettes of Artemis to sell to those who came to the city to worship her. As more and more people embraced the gospel, less concern was had for Artemis and the profits of Demetrius and the silversmiths declined. This observation is noteworthy because we generally see opposition to Christianity in terms of religious or political matters. In fact, some of the opposition to Christianity was due to economic reasons as well. People's acceptance of the gospel was not good for business.
- Other cults included: Cybele, Sarapis, Emperor cult.
- It was a major port city of Asia Minor on the Aegean Sea.

WHEN?

Traditional author. During Paul's Roman imprisonment, around AD 60-62.

Pauline School. Later in first century as it provides a summary of Paul's teaching in Asia Minor.

WHAT?

Christ is the Head of the Body, His Church. As such, Ephesians addresses one of the most important issues for the church then and now, namely unity. A key passage is 4:4-6 which reads: "There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, of God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all" (NRSV).

**NOTES***Brief Outline*

- Re-creating the Human Family of God: What God Has Done (1:3-3:21)
- Re-creating the Human Family of God: What God Is Doing (4:1-6:20)

Special Verses

- Eph. 2:11-22: Unity of Jew and Gentile in Christ.
- Eph. 3:4-20: Prayer for holiness (to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God" (3:19, NRSV).
- Eph. 4:11-16: Spiritual gifts and growth.
- Eph. 4:17-24: A comparison of the old life and the new (and to cloth yourself with the new self, created according to the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness" (4:24, NRSV).
- 5:21-33: Christ and the Church as a model for marriage.

WHY?

- To encourage those who had once worshiped the pagan gods but were now Christians by reminding them of Paul's teaching.
- Paul's emphasis on the supremacy of Christ was important in a city of many gods.
- Paul ends with exhortations on how they should live, what their lifestyle should look like in their particular situation.

LETTER TO THE PHILIPPIANS

NOTES

Philippians, another prison epistle, is unique among Paul's writings, as it is the only letter written primarily to Roman Gentile Christians whom Paul has personally disciplined. Philippians is also distinctive among Paul's letters in terms of its positive tone that is generally one of thankfulness and joy. This tone is evidenced by 4:1: "Therefore my brothers and sisters, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, my beloved" (NRSV). The letter stands in stark contrast to Paul's letter to the Galatians. Paul's letter to the church at Philippi is only distinguished in that it represents a letter to the first church founded in Europe. Paul is writing to them while in prison in Rome, their mother city. He wants to assure them his chains have served to advance the Kingdom, and he is in prison only because of Christ and not for any other reason.

Philippians may be classified under the headings of friendship letter and paraenetic letter (letters of exhortation and dissuasion).

WHO?

Author: Paul's authorship has rarely been contested.

Audience: Church in Philippi. Gentile Christians, most likely the grandchildren of Roman war veterans who settled there on land grants from the Roman emperor for their war service.

WHERE?

Author: Paul was in a Roman prison.

Audience: City of Philippi in Macedonia.

- Philippi is nine miles west of the port city Neapolis on the Via Egnatia, the major east-west commercial highway.
- It was a busy, Roman administrative center.
- It was a Roman colony since 42 BC and populated by Roman war veterans. The people had certain civic and tax privileges.
- The people spoke both Latin and Greek.
- The city had a library and theatre.


NOTES

- The Acropolis (sacred high ground) had temples for Isis, Sarapis, and the Mother Goddess.

WHEN?

AD 60-62 while Paul was in prison in Rome

WHAT?

Express Paul's pastoral concern for them. He felt they needed reassurance that the gospel they believed in was marching on to victory, in spite of Paul's imprisonment.

Special Verses

- Phil. 1:21: "For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain."
- Phil. 2:5-11: Kenosis passage (Christ's self-emptying and exaltation by God) and a Christological poem.
- Phil. 3:7-11: Considers all things loss compared to knowing Christ.
- Phil. 4:8-9: What to think about, "whatever is true, noble, right, pure, lovely, admirable."
- Phil. 4:13: "I can do everything through him who gives me strength."
- Phil. 4:19: "And my God will meet all your needs according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus."

WHY?

- Paul wants to express his pastoral concern for the readers whose mother country has Paul in prison.
- Paul wants to identify the enemies of the gospel. They include Rome, false teachers, and troublemakers in the church in Philippi. It appears that some of these false teachers (Judaizers) wished to impose Jewish traditions on the Gentile believers (3:2). Others viewed freedom from the law in terms of license to live as they pleased (3:19).
- Paul desired to point opponents to Jesus Christ. He called for healing and unity in the Body of Christ.
- Paul also reminded the Philippians of his high Christology. Jesus was not just a human, but divinity itself.

LETTER TO THE COLOSSIANS



NOTES

The prison epistle Colossians is addressed to a church that was likely not founded directly by Paul, but rather by his representative Epaphras. Epaphras was a native of the city of Colossae (4:12). In this letter, Paul treats specific problems facing the church. The exact nature of these problems, however, is not certain.

Colossians is a letter that uses friendship terms, but, like Ephesians, is primarily a paraenetic letter that reminds the church of what Paul taught when he was with them or as conveyed by him through Epaphras.

Colossians evidences traits of a friendship and paraenetic letters.

WHO?

Author: Paul, the apostle. Colossians and Ephesians are very similar in content, but scholars think Paul wrote this shorter letter. Those who do not think Paul wrote Ephesians say someone in the Pauline school used Colossians as an outline or model and added to it.

Audience: Gentiles and some Jewish Christians in Colossae comprise the audience. The town is made up of Phrygians, Greeks, and Jews. Epaphras (founder of the church), Philemon, Apphia, Archippus, and Onesimus are church members named in scripture.

WHERE?

Author: Paul was in prison in Rome.

Audience: Church in Colossae, located 100 miles southeast of Ephesus in the district of Phrygia and was subject to many earthquakes. It was not a large city and was near Laodicea, which is another city in this area, mentioned in the Revelation of John. Colossae was located in the area now known as western Turkey.

WHEN?

AD 60-64 while Paul was in prison in Rome.


NOTES
WHAT?

Colossians is similar in content to Ephesians as revealed through a comparison of the following passages (see application below):

Ephesians	Colossians
1:1-2	1:1-2
1:15-17	1:3-4, 9-10
2:5-6	2:12-13
3:1-13	1:24-2:5
4:17-32	3:5-14
5:19-20	3:16-17
5:22-6:9	3:18-4:1
6:18-20	4:2-4
6:21-22	4:7-8

Special Verses:

- 1:15-20: Early Christian hymn on Christ as the image and fullness of God
- 3:1-17: Rules for holy living
- 3:18-4:1: Household code rules for Christian households: wives, husbands, children, fathers, slaves, and masters. According to Richard and R. Kendall Soulen, the form of these rules derives from Hellenistic moral instruction about household management. These rules, having their origins with Aristotle, were in widespread use in the Greco-Roman world. They reflect a hierarchical and patriarchal structure. Of interest is that these rules were not simply appropriated by Christians, but also modified at points (parallel passage in Eph. 5:21-6:9).

WHY?

- To assure the Colossians and Laodicians (Col. 4:16) of Paul's interest and care.
- To refute false teaching and teachers who are misleading some in the church.
- To make assertions about Jesus Christ as the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all Creation, and the one in whom all things hold together. Evidently, the heresy addressed by Paul diminished the person of Christ.
- The Colossian heresy included legalism (salvation based on works) and asceticism (harsh treatment of the body as a means of earning God's favor).

APPLICATION


NOTES

1. Read Ephesians, Philippians, and Colossians in two different translations. Look for answers to the five hermeneutical questions Who, What, Where, When, and Why. How do your findings correspond with those presented in this session? Any new findings other than presented in this session?

2. As we have seen in this session, the city of Ephesus was significant in the ancient world. Paul spent much time here. Using study Bibles, Bible dictionaries, or Internet websites (Biblical Studies Foundation <http://www.netbible.com>; Blue Letter Bible <http://www.blueletterbible.org>; Crosswalk.com Bible Study Tools <http://bible.crosswalk.com>), do additional research concerning this city which in some ways could be referred to as the New York City of its day and where Christians were treated as second-class citizens. Pay close attention to cultural and archaeological information. What new insights have you gained?

3. As indicated above, Colossians is similar in content to Ephesians as revealed through a comparison of the following passages. Using the same version of the Bible read the following texts and make a list of similarities and differences. What primary message or messages are presented by the parallel passages? What new insights have you gained through this exercise? How do these texts speak to the understanding of your faith?

Ephesians	Colossians
1:1-2	1:1-2
1:15-17	1:3-4, 9-10
2:5-6	2:12-13
3:1-13	1:24-2:5
4:17-32	3:5-14
5:19-20	3:16-17
5:22-6:9	3:18-4:1
6:18-20	4:2-4
6:21-22	4:7-8

4. In Col. 3:18-4:1, we observe what has been referred to as the household code rules for Christian households involving wives, husbands, children, fathers, slaves, and masters. As stated, these rules, having their origins with Aristotle, were in widespread use in the Greco-Roman world and reflect a hierarchical and patriarchal structure. Of interest is that these rules were not simply appropriated by Christians, but also modified at points. Using information

**NOTES**

from this session and study Bibles, Bible dictionaries, or Internet websites (Biblical Studies Foundation <http://www.netbible.com>; Blue Letter Bible <http://www.blueletterbible.org>; Crosswalk.com Bible Study Tools <http://bible.crosswalk.com>), look up and study the use and content of household codes or rules in the ancient world. Compare them with the text in Colossians. Note similarities and differences. What might we learn from this?

EXAM



NOTES

1. Paul's letter to the _____ has a distinctly joyful tone.
 - A. Galatians
 - B. Ephesians
 - C. Philippians
 - D. Colossians
2. The letter to the _____ is distinguished by being one sent to the first church founded in Europe.
 - A. Galatians
 - B. Ephesians
 - C. Philippians
 - D. Colossians
3. In _____, Paul stresses Christ as the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all Creation, and the one in whom all things hold together. Evidently, the heresy addressed by Paul diminished the person of Christ.
 - A. Galatians
 - B. Ephesians
 - C. Philippians
 - D. Colossians
4. _____ is most likely a circular letter since Paul does not seem to deal with the problems of a particular church.
 - A. Galatians
 - B. Ephesians
 - C. Philippians
 - D. Colossians
5. _____ was a prosperous commercial city, capital city of the Roman province of Asia, and the location of a cult dedicated to Artemis (Greek name) or Diana (Roman name).
 - A. Ephesus
 - B. Laodicea
 - C. Colossae
 - D. D. Philippi

NOTES

6. _____ provides a stark contrast between the old and new life stressing the idea of clothing “yourself with the new self, created according to the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness” (NRSV).
 - A. Galatians
 - B. Ephesians
 - C. Philippians
 - D. Colossians

7. The heresy at Colossae included legalism (salvation based on works) and asceticism (harsh treatment of the body as a means of earning God’s favor).
 - A. True
 - B. False

8. Opposition to Christianity in the Greco-Roman world was solely on the basis of religious and political grounds.
 - A. True
 - B. False

9. The church at _____ was likely not founded by Paul himself, but rather by his representative Epaphras who was a native of that city.
 - A. Ephesus
 - B. Laodicea
 - C. Colossae
 - D. Philippi

10. In _____, it appears that some false teachers (Judaizers) wished to impose Jewish traditions on the Gentile believers, while others viewed freedom from the law in terms of license to live as they please.
 - A. Galatians
 - B. Ephesians
 - C. Philippians
 - D. Colossians

11. The household code rules for Christian households most likely have their origins in ancient Judaism.
 - A. True
 - B. False

 **NOTES**

12. The so-called kenosis passage describing Christ's self-emptying and exaltation by God is found in _____.
- A. Galatians
 - B. Ephesians
 - C. Philippians
 - D. Colossians
13. _____ stresses the importance of unity in the church. A key passage is 4:4-6 which reads: "There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, of God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all" (NRSV).
- A. Galatians
 - B. Ephesians
 - C. Philippians
 - D. Colossians
14. In _____, Paul wants to assure his audience that his chains have served to advance the Kingdom. He is in prison only because of Christ and not for any other reason.
- A. Galatians
 - B. Ephesians
 - C. Philippians
 - D. Colossians

DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR MENTOR AND PARTICIPANT



NOTES

Be prepared to discuss the following with your mentor.

1. What principles do you see Paul presenting in these letters? How could they be applied today?
2. What kinds of things would you think about if you were Paul sitting in prison?
3. In Ephesians, the need for church unity is stressed. How important is church unity? Do you see this as a problem in the church? If so, what forces do you see as leading to disunity? What might Paul have to say to or about these forces and our reactions to them?
4. As indicated in this session, near the close of Paul's ministry in Ephesus, a riot breaks out due to the interference of the gospel with a profitable business. It was also indicated that while opposition to Christianity is often depicted in terms of religious or political matters, much was due to economic reasons as well. People's acceptance of the gospel was not good for business. Reflect on this observation. How would the living out of the gospel impact business in America or any other country in the world?
5. Philippians is known as a letter of joy. Thoughts of these believers brought thanksgiving and joy to Paul. This tone stands in stark contrast to Paul's letter to the Galatians. If Paul were writing a letter to your church, how might it appear? Words of praise and thoughts of joy? Words of concern for areas of needed change?