

# Paul's Prison Epistles

## Lesson 1

## Paul's Imprisonment

## Lesson Guide



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## HOW TO USE THIS LESSON GUIDE

This lesson guide is designed for use in conjunction with the associated video. If you do not have access to the video, the lesson guide will also work with the audio and/or text versions of the lesson. Additionally, the video and lesson guide are intended to be used in a learning community, but they also can be used for individual study if necessary.

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- **Before you watch the lesson**

- **Prepare** — Complete any recommended readings.
- **Schedule viewing** — The Notes section of the lesson guide has been divided into segments that correspond to the video. Using the time codes found in parentheses beside each major division, determine where to begin and end your viewing session. IIIM lessons are densely packed with information, so you may also want to schedule breaks. Breaks should be scheduled at major divisions.

- **While you are watching the lesson**

- **Take notes** — The Notes section of the lesson guide contains a basic outline of the lesson, including the time codes for the beginning of each segment and key notes to guide you through the information. Many of the main ideas are already summarized, but make sure to supplement these with your own notes. You should also add supporting details that will help you to remember, describe, and defend the main ideas.
- **Record comments and questions** — As you watch the video, you may have comments and/or questions on what you are learning. Use the margins to record your comments and questions so that you can share these with the group following the viewing session.
- **Pause/replay portions of the lesson** — You may find it helpful to pause or replay the video at certain points in order to write additional notes, review difficult concepts, or discuss points of interest.

- **After you watch the lesson**

- **Complete Review Questions** — Review Questions are based on the basic content of the lesson. You should answer Review Questions in the space provided. These questions should be completed individually rather than in a group.
- **Answer/discuss Application Questions** — Application Questions are questions relating the content of the lesson to Christian living, theology, and ministry. Application questions are appropriate for written assignments or as topics for group discussions. For written assignments, it is recommended that answers not exceed one page in length.

## **Preparation**

- Read Acts chapters 21–28.

## Notes

### **I. Introduction (0:20)**

Prison Epistles: Letters to various churches and people that Paul wrote while he was in prison.

### **II. Background (2:20)**

#### **A. Events Preceding Arrest (3:36)**

On his third missionary journey (around A.D. 56 or 57) Paul and his companions were travelling from Asia Minor to Jerusalem to deliver funds to the Christians in Jerusalem who were enduring a famine.

The Holy Spirit had warned Paul that he would be imprisoned when he arrived in Jerusalem (Acts 20:22-24).

Believers prophesied Paul's coming imprisonment. Paul knew these prophecies were to prepare him for his coming hardships.

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.

Paul understood that his coming imprisonment would be “for the name of the Lord Jesus” (Acts 21:13).

Paul had wanted to preach the gospel in Asia and Bythinia, but the Holy Spirit had prevented him (Acts 16:6-10) so obeyed the Spirit and traveled to Troas.

Had Paul disobeyed the Holy Spirit by preaching in Asia and Bythinia, he would not have been able to preach in Macedonia.

## **B. Arrest in Jerusalem (9:50)**

Paul hoped that the gift would make Jewish Christians more eager to receive the Gentiles as full brothers in Christ.

James and the elders confronted Paul about rumors that he taught Jewish Christians living among Gentiles to disregard traditional Jewish practices such as circumcision.

Paul was free to follow Jewish traditions for the sake of the gospel or to behave like a Gentile when among Gentiles. But he was not free from the law's moral requirements in Christ. (1 Corinthians 9:20-21).

The elders suggested Paul satisfy the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem, demonstrating his commitment to the Mosaic law, by participating in the rituals of purification rites.

After his week of purification, Paul was in the inner court of the Temple, — “the court of Israel” — which was reserved for Jews alone.

The Jews wrongly assumed that Paul's associate Trophimus had also entered that court, and they were outraged.



As a citizen of Rome, Paul was entitled to special legal protections including the right not to be chained or beaten without a trial.

Paul said the Sadducees opposed him because the gospel agreed with the Pharisees' teachings on many points, i.e., the resurrection which the Sadducees denied (Acts 23:6-8).

Paul counted himself a Pharisee, so preaching a gospel based on his vision of the resurrected Christ gained him some sympathy from the Pharisees in the Sanhedrin.

Under threat of ambush, Paul was transported to Caesarea Maritima into the custody of Marcus Antonius Felix, the governor of the Roman province of Judea.

### **C. Imprisonment in Caesarea (21:49)**

Caesarea Maritima: The capital city of the Roman province Judea.

Tertullus argued that Paul had disturbed the peace, incited riots, and tried to violate the temple

The Jews were convinced that Paul sought the downfall of Judaism and that he would proudly admit to trying to desecrate the temple (Acts 24:8).

Paul's response to his accusers had four main points:

1. No witnesses
2. Others disturbed the peace
3. No desire to defile the temple
4. Sanhedrin had not found him guilty

Hoping for a bribe, Felix delayed ruling on Paul's case for two years (Acts 24:26).

Felix' successor, Porcius Festus, asked Paul if he would be willing to have his case heard in Jerusalem rather than in Caesarea.

Paul appealed to his right as a Roman citizen to have his case heard by Nero Caesar himself for various possible reasons:

- He had no reason to believe that Festus would judge the case more fairly than Felix had.
- He was probably aware of the plot to kill him during his transfer from Caesarea to Jerusalem.
- The Lord appeared to Paul in a vision, assuring Paul that he would live to proclaim the gospel in Rome (Acts 23:11).

#### **D. Imprisonment in Rome (31:18)**

Paul was placed under the authority of a Roman centurion named Julius and put on a ship heading for Asia Minor (late A.D. 59).

Paul had already survived three shipwrecks (2 Corinthians 11:25) and advised Julius not to sail to Italy in winter.

He didn't advise against sailing to avoid his fate in Rome but because he wanted to fulfill the mission God had given him by reaching Rome safely.

A storm blew their ship out into the Mediterranean Sea for two weeks and Paul ministered to those on board, encouraging them that God had revealed that they would all survive.

After striking a reef near the Isle of Malta, the ship was destroyed. Paul and everyone else from the ship were stranded in Malta for three months.

After he was bitten by a venomous snake and survived, the natives began to think Paul was a god.

Paul also performed many miraculous healings in Malta, beginning with the father of Publius the chief official of Malta.

Three months later Paul and his companions set sail for Italy. Paul arrived in Rome later that year, and was placed under house arrest (early A.D. 60).

Paul lived under house arrest in Rome from A.D. 60-62 and was permitted to receive guests and to teach freely during this time (Acts 28:30-31).

### **III. Ongoing Ministry (38:45)**

#### **A. Book of Acts (39:51)**

Luke dedicated nearly nine chapters of the book of Acts to events related to this period in Paul's life (Acts 19:21–28:31).

##### **1. Awareness of Suffering (40:52)**

Paul knew that he would be imprisoned and suspected that he would even be put to death (Acts 20:22-25).

## 2. Awareness of Purpose (43:11)

Paul trusted that God would use his hardships to spread the gospel and any sacrifice would be worthwhile as God's way of promoting the good news of salvation in Christ (Acts 20:24).

Imprisonment would be the means through which Paul accomplished his ministry.

- Paul presented his testimony to the mob that sought his death (Acts 22:1-21).
- Paul testified to the gospel and Christ's resurrection before the Sanhedrin (Acts 23:1-10).
- Paul proclaimed the gospel to the Caesarean court — publicly at his hearing and privately to the governor Felix and his wife Drusilla (Acts 24:14-26).
- Paul proclaimed the gospel to the new governor Festus as well as to the Jewish king Agrippa and his wife Bernice (Acts 25:18–26:29).
- Paul regularly preached the gospel of the kingdom of God to all who had come to see him in Rome (Acts 28:23-31).

Christ's words to Paul summarize the purpose of this suffering: "Take courage! As you have testified about me in Jerusalem, so you must also testify in Rome" (Acts 23:11).

### **3. Awareness of Blessings (46:54)**

Paul's gospel testimony spread with the dramatic blessings of God's Spirit (Acts 19–28).

## **B. Letters to Churches (47:46)**

### **1. Preaching (48:03)**

Paul asked for prayers that he would have the strength to fulfill his apostolic responsibility (Ephesians 6:19-20; Colossians 4:3-4).

### **2. Praying (50:13)**

Paul's imprisonment actually increased the time he was able to spend in prayer (Ephesians 1:16-18).

Paul explained in his letters that he regularly prayed for the church and for individual believers (Philippians 1:3-9; Colossians 1:9; Philemon 6)

### **3. Suffering (53:44)**

When the goal and product of suffering is the advancement of God's kingdom through the promotion of the gospel, suffering is ministry.

Suffering for the sake of the gospel is a powerful and purposeful ministry:

- an indisputable testimony to the truth of the gospel (Philippians 1:14).
- secures benefits for others, following Christ's example (1 John 3:16; Ephesians 3:13)
- a continuation of the suffering of Christ himself (Colossians 1:24).



Until Christ returns the church must still endure suffering and because Jesus loves us and is united to believers, he suffers when we suffer (Acts 9:5).

#### **4. Writing (1:01:53)**

Paul's writing ministry during his imprisonment was through his letters to the churches in Colosse, Ephesus, Philippi, and to the Colossian man, Philemon

Paul engaged in pastoral ministry individuals by name by pleading for reconciliation

- Syntyche and Euodia (Philippians 4:2-3)
- Onesimus and Philemon (Epistle to Philemon)

Paul also directed his letters to the theological issues that involved the church as a whole.

#### **IV. Theological Unity (1:06:55)**

**A. King of Creation (1:07:54)****1. Sovereignty (1:08:32)**

Christ's sovereignty means that he has the strength and power to accomplish his will, and the legal authority and right to do so.

When Jesus ascended into heaven, God the Father vested him with sovereignty over all creation (Ephesians 1:20-22).

Jesus Christ rules over the entire creation with absolute power (Matthew 28:18).

Not everything in creation obeys him as it should. But Jesus has the right to command its obedience, and the power to make it obey.

**2. Honor (1:11:39)**

Christ deserves honor because:

- he is perfect and holy and righteous.

- he holds a position of highest authority.
- he executes that authority justly and righteously.
- he is the creator and sustainer of the universe.
- he is divine — Jesus is God, and God is worthy of the highest honor imaginable.

Paul refuted false teachings, emphasizing Christ's unique and surpassing greatness as the divine Son of God (Colossians 1:16-17)

Jesus is to be held in highest honor because he is the creator of everything that exists.

### **3. Determination (1:15:17)**

Paul's outlook on the return of Christ grew out of traditional Jewish views of the end times presented as two grand ages of humanity:

- “this age” — the present age that was characterized by sin, death and corruption.
- “the age to come” — time which the Bible also refers to as “the kingdom of God” and “the kingdom of heaven.”

Jesus revealed that this two age concept was not entirely accurate; the two ages would overlap for a time:

- “inauguration” — the earthly ministry of Christ
- “continuation” — the time in which the church existed in Paul’s day, and in which it continues to exist today
- “consummation” — Christ’s return or second coming

Jesus reigns as king from heaven. He wants and plans to rule over every inch of creation as fully and gloriously as he now reigns in heaven.

Our future inheritance is guaranteed. Jesus must return in order to deliver our inheritance in the consummated kingdom (Ephesians 1:13-14; Philippians 3:20-21).

Our inheritance will include new, glorified bodies. Paul held on to this hope for himself during his suffering.

**B. Union with Christ (1:20:27)**

When we believe in Jesus, we are united to him in a spiritual, though mysterious way and we are counted as blameless in the court of heaven.

Paul frequently encouraged his readers through their sharing in Christ's kingship.

We are united to Christ in his:

- death and resurrection (Colossians 3:1-4)
- ascension and kingship (Ephesians 2:6-7)
- sufferings (Colossians 1:24)

Paul 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 (Colossians 1:24).

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.

**C. Ethical Living (1:25:33)**

Paul spent as much time teaching about Christian ethics as he did addressing doctrinal matters (1 Corinthians 13:2).

**1. Christ is King (1:27:27)**

Because Christ is sovereign and just, we are legally and ethically obligated to obey everything that he commands (Philippians 2:9-12).

Paul urged Christians to live holy lives out of respect for their King's honor (Philippians 1:27; Colossians 1:10).

**2. United to Christ (1:30:44)**

Our union with Christ should lead us to ethical Christian living because:

- Christ works within us by his Spirit, enabling and leading us to submit to the ethical obligations we have before our King (Philippians 2:12-13; Colossians 3:5-10).

- God has commanded that all who are united to his Son must live holy lives. God has predestined good works for us to do (Ephesians 2:10).
- We are 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 (Ephesians 4:25; Philippians 2:1-3).

## **V. Conclusion (1:37:44)**

## Review Questions

1. What significant events preceded Paul's arrest?
2. What particular circumstances led to Paul's arrest in Jerusalem?



3. Summarize the events and nature of Paul's imprisonment in Caesarea.

4. Summarize the events and nature of Paul's imprisonment in Rome.

5. How did Paul's imprisonment reveal important insights about God and about Paul's own ministry?
6. Describe three things that the book of Acts teaches us about Paul's ministry during his imprisonment.

7. Describe four things we learn from Paul's letters about his ministry in prison.
8. Summarize three ways in which Paul developed the doctrinal theme of Christ's kingship over creation.

9. Describe Paul's doctrine of the believer's union with Christ. What are some of its implications?
10. Summarize Paul's explanation of the requirements for ethical living implied by Christ's kingship and our unity with Christ.

11. What is the main theological truth that underlies the theological unity of Paul's prison epistles? How does it relate to the themes of Christ's kingship over creation, our union with Christ, and ethical living?

## Application Questions

1. Paul received many warnings regarding imminent danger in Jerusalem, yet he continued toward the city. What gave Paul the confidence and fortitude to move forward in faith? How may we learn from the example of Paul as he faced difficult circumstances and adversity?
2. Why was Paul able to minister freely both to Jews and to Gentiles? What does it look like for believers today to live out Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 9:20-21?
3. God used Paul's imprisonments to advance the gospel and the kingdom of God. How has God worked through adverse circumstances in your life to advance his gospel and kingdom?
4. Explain how suffering can be a form of Christian ministry. Compare and contrast Paul's outlook on suffering with your present understanding of suffering.
5. While Paul's situation as a prisoner was not ideal, he still continued to seek opportunities to proclaim the gospel. What opportunities do you have to proclaim the gospel?
6. Paul spoke often of our union with Christ. In what ways does understanding the doctrine of our union with Christ bring you hope and comfort?
7. What is the most significant insight you have learned from this study?

## Glossary

**Agabus** – Prophet who warned Paul that he would be put in chains in Jerusalem

**apostle** – Special New Testament office held by someone who had been taught by Jesus, had seen the risen Lord, and had been chosen for the office by the Lord himself; from a Greek word meaning "one who is sent"

**Asia Minor** – A geographical area that is now part of western Turkey where Paul did the majority of his missionary work

**Bunyan, John** – (1628-1688) Puritan preacher and writer from England who was imprisoned for 12 years for his Protestant beliefs and wrote numerous books, including *The Pilgrim's Progress*

**Caesarea Maritima** – Capital city of the Roman province of Judea on the coast of Samaria where Paul was imprisoned after his trial in Jerusalem; also known as "Caesarea by the Sea"

**circumcision** – The Jewish tradition of excising the foreskin of the male penis instituted by God as a sign and seal for his covenant people in Genesis 17:10-14

**Claudius Lysias** – Commander of the Roman garrison in Jerusalem who took Paul into custody and protected him from an angry mob after learning that Paul was a Roman citizen

**consummation** – Third and final stage of inaugurated eschatology when Christ will return and fulfill God's ultimate purpose for all of history

**continuation** – Second or middle stage of inaugurated eschatology; the period of the kingdom of God after Christ's first advent but before the final victory

**doctrine** – A synthesis and explanation of biblical teachings on a theological topic

**eschatology** – The study or doctrine of the last days

**Felix, Marcus Antonius** – Governor of the Roman province of Judea who tried Paul in Caesarea and kept him in prison for two years, expecting a bribe for Paul's freedom

**Gentile** – Non-Jewish person

**gospel** – Literally, "good news"; announcement that God's kingdom came to earth through the person and work of Jesus and that it expands toward its great consummation as God grants salvation to those who receive and trust in Jesus as the Messiah

**Herod Agrippa II** – Last of the Herodian kings; also known as Julius Marcus Agrippa; Son of Herod Agrippa I and great-grandson of Herod the Great; heard Paul's petition in Caesarea and found him innocent

**inauguration** – First stage in inaugurated eschatology; refers to Christ's first coming and the ministries of his apostles and prophets

**Julius** – Roman centurion who was assigned to take Paul to Rome to stand trial before Caesar; known to have treated Paul kindly

**Luke** – Author of the third gospel and the book of Acts; a Gentile convert to Christianity and one of Paul's co-workers; believed to have been a physician

**Macedonia** – Name of an ancient Roman province located in and to the north of present-day Greece; region where Paul was told in a vision to go and share the gospel during his second missionary journey

**Malta** – Island in the Mediterranean where Paul was shipwrecked on his fourth missionary journey

**martyr** – A person who willingly suffers or is killed for refusing to turn from their religious beliefs

**Mosaic law** – Also called the law of Moses; can refer to the first five books of the Bible, known as the Torah or Pentateuch, or the statutes, ordinances, caselaw and judgments revealed by God to the ancient Israelites through Moses

**Nazirite** – Someone who voluntarily made a vow of dedication to the Lord and followed a set of rules that included no drinking wine, no cutting hair and no proximity to a dead body (see Num. 6:1-21)

**Nero** – Roman emperor from A.D. 54-68 who persecuted Christians; blamed the Christians for a fire in Rome in A.D. 64; executed Paul (according to tradition)

**Pharisees** – Jewish religious sect from the first century known for their strict observance of the Law; believed in the future resurrection, but also believed that God would not intervene until Israel became obedient to the Law

**Porcius Festus** – Governor of the Roman province of Judea who succeeded Felix; sent Paul to Rome to appeal to Caesar at Paul's request

**prison epistles, the** – Letters to the Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon that Paul wrote while he was in prison for his service to Christ

**Sadducees** – Jewish sect at the time of Christ that only adhered to the five books written by Moses (Genesis–Deuteronomy) and did not believe in angels, spirits, or the resurrection of the dead

**Sanhedrin** – The highest court and council of ancient Israel that had both religious and civil jurisdiction

**sovereignty** – Theological term that refers to God's continuing rule and complete authority over all creation

**Tertullus** – Lawyer for a group of Jews from Jerusalem who argued before Governor Felix in Caesarea that Paul had incited riots and violated the sanctity of the temple

**the age to come** – Phrase used by rabbis and leaders in Israel to describe the future age of righteousness, love, joy and peace that would follow the exile; time when all of God's purposes for history would be fulfilled

**this age** – Phrase used by rabbis and leaders in Israel to describe the present age of sin, suffering and death

**Trophimus** – Gentile from Asia Minor who accompanied Paul to Jerusalem and who incorrectly was thought to have entered the inner court of the temple with Paul, causing an uproar among the Jews