

The Prison Epistles

Before we go into Paul's last itinerary, we're going to study some of the things that he did before he started on that itinerary. What he did was that he wrote a few epistles. It was while Paul was at Rome in Acts 28 that he spent two years in his own hired house.

Prior to getting to Rome, he wintered in Malta. After the winter was over he sailed up to Sicily to Syracuse, from there to Rhegium and from there to Puteoli. From there he walked up to Appii Forum and from there to the Three Taverns. Then he followed what we would call the Appian Way into Rome. When he first came to Rome the Jews didn't even know that he was accused of anything. Finally after a little period of time there he was released and spent two years there.

If he arrived in the spring when would it be that two year period would be up? Spring or possibly early summer, therefore he could have set out on his last itinerary sometime in the late spring or early summer. This sort of fits with some of the records, as we're going to see later on. While he was in Rome, he wrote some epistles that are commonly called the prison epistles because they were written while Paul was in prison or shortly after his release. Three of these epistles are Ephesians, Philippians and Colossians. They all deal with one great subject, the mystery. The first two that were written were Ephesians and Colossians. They were written while Paul was in prison. After his release Philippians was written and then Philemon.

If you go to Rome today to see where Paul spent his time in prison, they show you the Mamertine prison. It's very cold with stone walls and a little hole in it. It's very dark and damp. To imagine that this is where Paul may have written the great epistle to the Ephesians is unbelievable. How he could get inspired in a place like that is unbelievable. It's cold, damp, dark and that is where he wrote the epistle to the Ephesians and probably the epistle to the Colossians if that was the prison. It's not certain that that was the place where he was kept. He could have been kept some other place. We don't know. That's only tradition of men. Then after his release he wrote Philippians and Philemon.

This is the order that you gather by studying the Word but there's only indications as to the order. You can't read, "While he was in prison in Rome he wrote..." There are only indications, perhaps somewhat stronger than that of Galatians but not as strong as those of Corinthians and Romans.

First of all I want to establish that these are the epistles regarding the mystery. Ephesians was the great doctrinal treatise regarding the grace and the mystery. The book of Philippians was written to correct practical error that had crept in through the misuse of the revelation given in the book of Ephesians. Colossians was written to

correct doctrinal error that crept in due to the misuse of the revelation given in the book of Ephesians.

Ephesians 3:4-9:

Whereby, when ye read, ye may understand my knowledge in the mystery of Christ)

Which in other ages was not made known unto the sons of men, as it is now revealed unto his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit;

That the Gentiles should be fellowheirs, and of the same body, and partakers of his promise in Christ by the gospel:

Whereof I was made a minister, according to the gift of the grace of God given unto me by the effectual working of his power.

Unto me, who am less than the least of all saints, is this grace given, that I should preach among the Gentiles the unsearchable [untrackable] riches of Christ;

And to make all *men* see what *is* the fellowship [administration] of the mystery, which from the beginning of the world hath been hid in God, who created all things by Jesus Christ [“by Jesus Christ” not in text]:

Verse 6: the Gentiles should be fellowheirs, and of the same body, and partakers of his promise in Christ by the gospel – is the greatness of the mystery.

Remember, he was at Ephesus before and while he was at Ephesus he taught them a lot of things but the fulness of the mystery was not revealed till later. He wrote back to the Ephesians where he had spent three years and wrote to them this great doctrinal treatise, Ephesians, to set before them the greatness of what this administration was all about. Colossians was written to correct doctrinal error which crept in very quickly after the original epistle was sent while Paul was still in bonds.

Colossians 1:24-25:

Who now rejoice in my sufferings for you, and fill up that which is behind of the afflictions of Christ in my flesh for his body's sake, which is the church:

Whereof I am made a minister, according to the dispensation [administration] of God which is given to me for you, to fulfil [*plēreoō* - complete] the word of God;

“fulfil” - *plēreoō* – complete. What is it that makes the Word full in capacity?

Colossians 1:26-27:

Even the mystery which hath been hid from ages and from generations, but now is made manifest to his saints:

To whom God would make known what *is* the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles; which is Christ in you, the hope of glory:

Already they were not going by the greatness of the Gentiles being of the same body with the Jews, partakers of the promise in Christ by the gospel and fellowheirs. The riches of the glory of that, the cream on top, was the Christ in you, the hope of glory. Already they were starting to go away from that so he writes back and says, “LOOK! The mystery, don’t let it stay a mystery.”

Philippians was written to correct the practical error that crept in do to the misuse of the revelation given in the book of Ephesians. So they were practicing error. They new they had Christ in them but they weren’t realizing it in their practice.

Philippians 4:13:

I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me.

I’ve got Christ in me. I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me. They knew they had Christ in them but in practice they weren’t exercising that strength they had. I have the ability to do all things through Christ who strengthens me. That’s the mystery. That’s what these prison epistles are all about. Don’t call them prison epistles but that’s what they are commonly called. The only reason there called that is because of where they originated.

Ephesians 3:2-3:

If ye have heard of the dispensation [administration] of the grace of God which is given me to you-ward:

How that by revelation he made known unto me the mystery; (as I wrote afore in few words,

“I wrote afore in few words” – i.e. – “I just briefly mentioned it before. Now I’m laying before you the greatness of that mystery.”

Paul wrote I Corinthians when he was in Ephesus. Before he had gone to Jerusalem, he had been in Ephesus for about three years. While he was there for that three year period, in Acts 19, he wrote to Corinth.

I Corinthians 2:1-3:

And I, brethren, when I came to you, came not with excellency of speech or of wisdom, declaring unto you the testimony [mystery] of God.

For I determined not to know any thing among you, save Jesus Christ, and him crucified.

And I was with you in weakness, and in fear, and in much trembling.

I Corinthians 2:6-8:

Howbeit we speak wisdom among them that are perfect: yet not the wisdom of this world, nor of the princes of this world, that come to nought:

But we speak the wisdom of God in a mystery, *even* the hidden *wisdom*, which God ordained before the world unto our glory:

Which none of the princes of this world knew: for had they known *it*, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory.

That's basically all he says about it. It was so great, folks, that if the princes of this world had known it they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. God can never go beyond your believing. He has no hands but our hands. God can never give you a steak bigger than you're able to eat. Do you teach your 3 year old children how to use a gun? No, you might give them a toy one but you would never give them a real one because they're not capable of receiving it yet. God could only reveal certain things of the mystery to these people at Corinth or Ephesus or any place else because they still weren't big enough to receive it. I don't know if Paul was big enough to receive it yet either because the fulness of it was not revealed until much later, although certain things were starting to fall into line.

Have you ever heard of progressive revelation? God may not reveal the whole scoop to you now. One of the reasons may be you're not big enough to receive it. But as time goes on He progressively reveals more and more. There are a lot of things like this in the ministry. Have we learned it all? No but we're constantly acquiring more and more knowledge and the more open we are to receive that Word, the more we find out about it. God can never reveal anything to you beyond what you're capable of receiving. He'll never give you a steak bigger than what you can eat. If you can only eat a 16oz steak, He won't give you a 32oz steak. It's not like The Back Forty which is a smorgasbord. It's available but God knows your appetite; what you can take.

A lot of people, if they get too much of the Word at one time, "throw up" spiritually. God just reveals a little at a time; what ever you're able to take. It's the same way with me. All of us are like that.

I Corinthians 4:1:

Let a man so account of us, as of the ministers of Christ, and stewards of the mysteries of God.

We're stewards of the mysteries of God. This thing was so big that had the princes of this world knew they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. It reminds me of Adam and Eve's original sin. The first or second year I sat through the class Power for Abundant Living, I asked the question, "What was Adam and Eve's original sin? What did they eat?" Dr. Wierwille told me, "Maybe some day I'll teach it to you." It wasn't until about 3 or 4 years later, I think, that we had a session with a few people and he taught Genesis chapter 3. At that time nobody was big enough to receive it. He taught it when we were big enough to receive. That has happened in other categories.

Paul said, "Someday I'll teach it to you. I'm telling you this; it is so big that if the princes of the world had known it, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. That's how big it is." He was sort of wetting their appetite. After he wrote that, he made the trip up to Macedonia and wrote II Corinthians. From there he came down to Corinth where he wrote the book of Romans. In Romans he mentions it again.

Romans 11:25:

For I would not, brethren, that ye should be ignorant of this mystery, lest ye should be wise in your own conceits; that blindness in part is happened to Israel, until the fulness of the Gentiles be come in.

They knew Gentiles were coming into the body, didn't they? He said that this had been the mystery. It's starting to progressively unfold to the people. Is Romans regarding the mystery? No, so could he really declare it? No, Romans relates itself to other areas of our justification. When he wrote Romans, he could not declare the greatness of the mystery.

Romans 16:24:

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ *be* with you all. Amen.

This verse is not in the text.

Romans 16:25-26:

Now to him that is of power to stablish you according to my gospel, and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery, which was kept secret since the world began,

But now is [is being] made manifest, and by the scriptures of the prophets [New Testament prophets], according to the commandment of the everlasting God, made known to all nations for the obedience of faith:

Now it is being revealed; the mystery.

Romans 16:27:

To God only wise, *be* glory through Jesus Christ for ever. Amen.

It's only in closing that he mentions it. What's the next Epistle that's written? Ephesians, but it took three years. He wrote this saying, "There's a mystery that's been kept secret since the foundations of the world but now it is being revealed by progressive revelation. It's being unfolded as we can receive it." Then he closes and doesn't say anything more about it because the greatness of what it was is revealed in Ephesians.

God has a purpose for everything He says; where He says it, why He says it, how He says it, to whom He says it and when He says it. After he writes Romans he goes through areas and to Miletus where he meets with the leaders from Ephesus. Then he travels down to Jerusalem, gets in trouble, ends up in jail and spent two years in Caesarea's jail. From there he leaves by ship. Then he gets in a shipwreck and then goes to Rome. So about three years later, he's in jail at Rome and he finishes, what was being made known, at that time. He writes it back to an area where he spent three years, "As I wrote afore in few words." Then he tells them what it is: that's Ephesians, then Colossians and Philippians.

When Paul went to Rome, remember Acts 27 and 28 was the fourth "we" section. So Luke travelled with Paul. Timothy may have travelled with Paul. Timothy did a lot of travelling with him but I can't document that. I know that Timothy was with him while he was at Rome though. There was another one that was with him. That was Aristarchus. He was one of those companions that travelled with him in Acts 20:4, when he went to Jerusalem.

Acts 27:2:

And entering into a ship of Adramyttium, we launched, meaning to sail by the coasts of Asia; *one* Aristarchus, a Macedonian of Thessalonica, being with us.

Now Aristarchus is joining Luke and Paul on their trip to Rome. Timothy may have been along. I don't know. I said that Paul was in chains at Rome when he wrote Ephesians.

Ephesians 6:18-20:

Praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit, and watching thereunto with all perseverance and supplication for all saints;

And for me, that utterance may be given unto me, that I may open my mouth boldly, to make known the mystery of the gospel,

For which I am an ambassador in bonds [chains]: that therein I may speak boldly, as I ought to speak.

"Help me get out of this mess and get back into declaring the gospel, so I can speak it boldly." It was shortly after this, he spent two whole years in his own hired house.

Ephesians 6:21-22:

But that ye also may know my affairs, *and* how I do, Tychicus, a beloved brother and faithful minister in the Lord, shall make known to you all things:

Whom I have sent unto you for the same purpose, that ye might know our affairs, and *that* he might comfort your hearts.

Tychicus may have been the one who delivered the epistle to the Ephesians. He's the first person we've got to consider in watching the chain of events. His name is Tychicus and Paul sent him, by the time they read this, to Ephesus. Tychicus was one of those seven in Acts 20:4 that travelled with Paul down to Jerusalem; those seven guys plus Luke who travelled with Paul.

Acts 28:20:

For this cause therefore have I called for you, to see *you*, and to speak with *you*: because that for the hope of Israel I am bound with this chain.

This is while Paul's at Rome. Like Ephesians said, "ambassador in chains." These are the indications that sort of point to the fact that he was in chains, physically.

Colossians 4:3-7:

Withal praying also for us, that God would open unto us a door of utterance, to speak the mystery of Christ, for which I am also in bonds [chains]:

That I may make it manifest, as I ought to speak.

Walk in wisdom toward them that are without, redeeming the time.

Let your speech *be* always with grace, seasoned with salt, that ye may know how ye ought to answer every man.

All my state shall Tychicus declare unto you, *who is* a beloved brother, and a faithful minister and fellowservant in the Lord:

This is the same one he was sending to Ephesus.

Colossians 4:8-9:

Whom I have sent unto you for the same purpose, that he might know your estate, and comfort your hearts;

With Onesimus, a faithful and beloved brother, who is *one* of you. They shall make known unto you all things which *are done* here.

Tychicus was on his way to Colosse as well as Ephesus. Colosse is still in Asia. Another indication that Paul was in bonds and chains is in verse 18:

Colossians 4:18:

The salutation by the hand of me Paul. Remember my bonds. Grace *be* with you. Amen.

Tychicus may have already been sent to Ephesus and he may be sending Onesimus, with this epistle, who will pick up Tychicus and they go together to Colosse to correct what should be going on correctly over there. Or, Tychicus could have returned and gone back. I don't know. I imagine Onesimus came, since he was one of the Colossians (verse 9), and told Paul, "They're not listening to that epistle that you sent to the Ephesians." So Paul writes this and sends it back with Onesimus. That's a possibility.

That's Tychicus but also remember Onesimus. The Next one we have to consider is Timothy. He's not mentioned in Ephesians but he is mentioned in Colossians.

Colossians 1:1-4:

Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God, and Timotheus *our* brother,

To the saints and faithful brethren in Christ which are at Colosse: Grace *be* unto you, and peace, from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

We give thanks to God and the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, praying always for you,

Since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus, and of the love *which ye have* to all the saints,

Timothy is with Paul. Tychicus is being sent to Ephesus and then to Colosse. There are four more people we need to consider. They are in chapter 4 of Colossians.

Colossians 4:10:

Aristarchus my fellowprisoner saluteth you, and Marcus, sister's son to Barnabas, (touching whom ye received commandments: if he come unto you, receive him;)

Aristarchus was the one who travelled with Paul up to Rome, one of the seven. He's still with Paul in Rome. Marcus is the second one we want to consider.

Colossians 4:11-14:

And Jesus, which is called Justus, who are of the circumcision. These only *are my* fellowworkers unto the kingdom of God, which have been a comfort unto me.

Epaphras, who is *one* of you, a servant of Christ, saluteth you, always labouring fervently for you in prayers, that ye may stand perfect and complete in all the will of God.

For I bear him record, that he hath a great zeal for you, and them *that are* in Laodicea, and them in Hierapolis.

Luke, the beloved physician, and Demas, greet you.

Luke and Demas are with Paul. Those are the four I want to consider now: Aristarchus, Mark, Luke and Demas. They are with Paul. So also is Timothy. Tychicus and Onesimus are on their way. I also want to consider Epaphras. He was from Colosse but is with Paul in Rome.

Colossians 1:7-8:

As ye also learned of Epaphras our dear fellowservant, who is for you a faithful minister of Christ;

Who also declared unto us your love in the Spirit.

That tells you Epaphras had been in Colosse and he had come to Rome and he's the one who reported to Paul a lot of things that were going on. Onesimus may have come with him. Epaphras, it distinctly says he reported things that were going on.

These things we've seen are indicators that when Ephesians and Colossians were written Paul was at Rome in chains and these men were with him except Tychicus and Onesimus who he had sent back to Ephesus and Colosse.

After Paul was released I said he wrote Philippians and Philemon. First we consider Philippians chapter 2. You may have to re-work some of things once you get all these scriptures down. Remember, these are indications. They're not iron-clad statements. Philippi is in Macedonia. They had heard the Word along time ago. This tells you that when he wrote a letter it wasn't just kept in one area but it was circulated and other copies were made so that others could enjoy the Word in the letter. The Philippians were practicing error. Philippians was written after Paul's release.

Philippians 2:24:

But I trust in the Lord that I also myself shall come shortly.

Could he come shortly if he was in jail? No, that's an indication that he may have been released.

Philippians 1:12-13:

But I would ye should understand, brethren, that the things *which happened* unto me have fallen out rather unto the furtherance of the gospel;

So that my bonds in Christ are manifest in all the palace, and in all other places;

The Roman palace was in Rome. His bonds, chains, were known in the palace. That's an indication that he's in Rome.

Philippians 1:14-15:

And many of the brethren in the Lord, waxing confident by my bonds, are much more bold to speak the word without fear.

Some indeed preach Christ even of envy and strife; and some also of good will:

I don't think that this necessarily means that he was still in bonds. He could have been released. At any rate his indication was to come to them shortly.

Philippians 4:21-22:

Salute every saint in Christ Jesus. The brethren which are with me greet you.

All the saints salute you, chiefly they that are of Caesar's household.

Again, he was at Rome. That's Philippians. In Philemon's, he's writing to Philemon.

Philemon 22:

But withal prepare me also a lodging: for I trust that through your prayers I shall be given unto you.

His desire at this point is to come and visit some of these people; the Philippians and Philemon, who is in Colosse.

Philemon 1:

Paul, a prisoner of Jesus Christ, and Timothy *our* brother, unto Philemon our dearly beloved, and fellowlabourer,

Remember Timothy is with him.

Philemon 2:

And to *our* beloved Apphia, and Archippus our fellowsoldier, and to the church in thy house:

Archippus is with Philemon. In Colossians there's some more about Archippus. Colossians was written to the Colossians.

Colossians 4:17:

And say to Archippus, Take heed to the ministry which thou hast received in the Lord, that thou fulfil it.

Where was Archippus apparently? Colosse, so the indication is that Philemon, Archippus and Apphia are people at Colosse.

Where is Tychicus? He's gone to Ephesus and Colosse. There's no mention of him in either Philippians or Philemon. Onesimus is mentioned in Philemon.

Philemon 10-12:

I beseech thee for my son Onesimus, whom I have begotten in my bonds:

Which in time past was to thee unprofitable, but now profitable to thee and to me:

Whom I have sent again: thou therefore receive him, that is, mine own bowels:

In Colossians he was sending Onesimus back to Colosse. He had come from there and now he is sending him back. That would place this very close to Colossians, wouldn't it? All four of these are very close together. I think Ephesians would have had to be a little before because that was the great doctrinal treatise and the first time it was really revealed.

In Colossians, Paul was sending Onesimus back to Colosse. Philemon had a little problem with Onesimus because Onesimus had left him. He was a slave or something that had ran away and Paul said, "Look, so what. He's helped me a lot. You take him back."

Timothy is at Rome. Remember Philemon verse 1? He's with Paul. Philippians 1:1 says that also.

Philippians 1:1:

Paul and Timotheus, the servants of Jesus Christ, to all the saints in Christ Jesus which are at Philippi, with the bishops and deacons:

In Philippians 2 it says he's sending Timothy. Timothy is getting ready to leave but there's a little more to this.

Philippians 2:19-23:

But I trust in the Lord Jesus to send Timotheus shortly unto you, that I also may be of good comfort, when I know your state.

For I have no man likeminded, who will naturally care for your state.

For all seek their own, not the things which are Jesus Christ's.

But ye know the proof of him, that, as a son with the father, he hath served with me in the gospel.

Him therefore I hope to send presently, so soon as I shall see how it will go with me.

Is he sending him when he's writing this? No, but he's getting ready to send him. When he wrote Philemon, Timothy was still there, in Rome but he's getting ready to send him.

There's another one who's only mentioned in Philippians. His name is Epaphroditus. He had been sent to Philippi and he had returned from Philippi. He's mentioned in Philippians 2 and Philippians 4.

Philippians 2:25-30:

Yet I supposed it necessary to send to you Epaphroditus, my brother, and companion in labour, and fellowsoldier, but your messenger, and he that ministered to my wants.

For he longed after you all, and was full of heaviness, because that ye had heard that he had been sick.

For indeed he was sick nigh unto death: but God had mercy on him; and not on him only, but on me also, lest I should have sorrow upon sorrow.

I sent him therefore the more carefully, that, when ye see him again, ye may rejoice, and that I may be the less sorrowful.

Receive him therefore in the Lord with all gladness; and hold such in reputation:

Because for the work of Christ he was nigh unto death, not regarding his life, to supply your lack of service toward me.

Philippians 4:15-18:

Now ye Philippians know also, that in the beginning of the gospel, when I departed from Macedonia, no church communicated with me as concerning giving and receiving, but ye only.

For even in Thessalonica ye sent once and again unto my necessity.

Not because I desire a gift: but I desire fruit that may abound to your account.

But I have all, and abound: I am full, having received of Epaphroditus the things *which were sent* from you, an odour of a sweet smell, a sacrifice acceptable, wellpleasing to God.

Epaphroditus is not mentioned anywhere else that I know of. He's the one that nearly lost his life because he was working so hard down at Colosse for the Colossians.

Now we're ready for Aristarchus, Mark, Luke and Demas. While we're looking at this we'll also take care of Epaphras. He was with Paul. Epaphras had come from Colosse to Rome and was with Paul when he wrote Ephesians and Colossians. Now he has gone back.

Philemon 23-24:

There salute thee Epaphras, my fellowprisoner in Christ Jesus;

Marcus, Aristarchus, Demas, Lucas, my fellowlabourers.

Where are all five of these men? Colosse, they're all in Colosse now. Paul had sent them or they had gone to Colosse from Rome. See how that puts this a little bit later? That's why Onesimus has already left and Philemon has to be later. This is the apparent order: Ephesians, Colossians, Philippians and then Philemon. I would say Philippians and Philemon were written after his release because of some of the wording in some of the passages we looked at. Ephesians and Colossians were written while he was in chains.