

New Testament Foundation 8

Letters from Rome Part 1 (Ephesians and Philippians)

Paul spent three years (AD 53 - 57) in Ephesus, the primary city in the Roman province of Asia. Just before sailing for Jerusalem, Paul instructed the elders to guard God's flock and to protect the church from false teachers that he knew would come. (Acts 20:28-30) Shortly after arriving in Jerusalem, Paul was arrested under false charges (Acts 21:27-29) and spent the next several years in Roman custody. But even with Paul in custody, the Ephesian believers continued to preach the gospel message. Gentiles were coming to faith in Christ, but had no background in the Scriptures. When Paul received the good news, he wrote this letter from house arrest in Rome. The purpose was to give instructions to help the elders teach new believers how to grow in their faith in Christ and give clarity to what it means to be the church. *"This letter to the Ephesians has sometimes been called 'the quintessential Paul,' because it concisely summarized the essence of Paul's faith and theology."*¹

Letter to the Ephesians - written A.D. 60/61 - Instruction in Faith and Theology

Many of the new believers did not know Paul, so he opened by identifying himself as *"an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God."* He had been called into service as an apostle of Christ by God. He was writing to *"the saints in Ephesus, the faithful in Christ Jesus."* (Eph. 1:1) The word *"saint"* refers to those who have accepted God's gift of salvation through Christ. Paul's usual greeting of *"grace and peace"* combines both the Greek greeting of *"Charis"* with the Hebrew *"Shalom."* It is possible for Gentile and Jew to have grace and peace together through *"God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ."* (Eph. 1:2)

Notice that Paul referred to Christ Jesus and to Jesus Christ in his opening. One key to understanding Paul's writing is the significance of the word order. When he placed *"Christ"* first Paul was emphasizing His deity and that He is the risen Lord, the Messiah and anointed one of God. When he placed *"Jesus"* first, Paul was emphasizing His humanity and sacrificial death for our sins.

This letter was meant to be a *"circular letter"* meaning that it would be circulated among the various house churches in Ephesus rather than being read in just one location. Letters were read aloud during public worship so Paul began by leading them in worship and praise to God.

1. Why is the believer to give praise to God? (Eph. 1:3)

There are two key phrases in this verse; the first phrase is *"spiritual blessing."* A blessing refers to something of value which one cannot earn or buy. Here Paul praised God for pouring out His spiritual blessings upon those who are *"in Christ,"* the second phrase. This was so important that Paul used it 90 times in this short letter. It is through Jesus that we receive

salvation (from the wrath of God) and new spiritual life. Paul referred to the new position of the believer as life "*in Christ*" because that is how God sees us - "*in Christ*."

2. Using Ephesians 1:4b, 5:
 - Before the creation of the world, what was God's plan for the believer?
 - What was God's motivation for this?
 - What did He (God) predestine for the believer?
 - Through whom was this accomplished?
 - What did Paul say regarding this plan?
3. Paul continued with God's spiritual blessings saying they are for "we," who were the first to hope in Christ meaning the Jews (Eph. 1:12) and also for "you" meaning the Gentiles. We each come to faith in Christ by hearing the word of truth and by believing. What happens when someone believes the Gospel, the good news of Christ? (Eph. 1:13b)
4. Using Ephesians 1:14, for those who are in Christ, how did Paul:
 - Describe the presence of the Holy Spirit?
 - What does the Holy Spirit guarantee?
 - For how long?
5. Paul described the human condition without Christ as "dead in your transgressions and sins ... following the ways of the world." (Eph. 2:2) "But because of His great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive in Christ even when we were dead in transgressions." (Eph. 2:4, 5a) How is someone saved? (Eph. 2:8a)
6. Why is it important to remember that salvation cannot be earned but is the gift of God? (Eph. 2:9)

7. In Christ, the believer is called "God's workmanship," or His masterpiece. What is God's plan for His workmanship? (Eph. 2:10)
8. The mystery to past generations has now been made known by the Spirit of God. Using Eph. 3:6:
 - How was that mystery revealed?
 - What is that mystery?
9. What additional blessing is ours "in Christ"? (Eph. 3:11, 12)
10. The first half of this letter focused on giving instructions on who God is and the spiritual blessings that belong to all who are "in Christ." In the second half, Paul focused on how to live in the light of being "in Christ." What did Paul urge the Ephesians to do? (Eph. 4:1)
11. What characteristics should be evident in one who lives this way? (Eph. 4:2,3)
12. Many of the ancient peoples practiced "syncretism" - the combining of various cults and religious practices. To make sure that did not happen in the churches at Ephesus, Paul reminded them of the truth of the Gospel. Using Ephesians 4:4-6 fill in the blanks below.

"There is _____ body
and _____ Spirit
just as you were called to _____ hope when you were called
_____ Lord,
_____ faith,
_____ baptism;
_____ God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.

13. How did Paul summarize his instructions on right living? (Eph. 5:1, 2)
14. Three of Paul's letters (Philemon, Colossians and Ephesians) were written at this time, while under house arrest in Rome. His ministry partner Tychicus would be delivering all three of these letters to their destinations. Using Ephesians 6:21, 22 and Colossians 4:7 & 8:
- How did Paul describe Tychicus?
 - What else did Paul say that Tychicus would do?

Philippians - written in AD 61/62 - Thank you

The last letter Paul wrote during this imprisonment was a thank you letter to the church at Philippi. They had sent gifts to Paul by way of Epaphroditus. Unfortunately, Epaphroditus had become sick and almost died while with Paul, so he was returning home earlier than expected. (Phil. 2:19-30) Paul also wrote to commend Epaphroditus for his faithful service. The church at Philippi was very dear to Paul's heart and had helped him on many occasions.

15. At the time Paul wrote this letter he had been in custody for nearly four years, yet there were still no formal charges against him. As a Roman citizen, he was entitled to a fair trial within two years of arrest. What was Paul's attitude toward this unjust imprisonment? (Phil. 1:12-14)
16. This letter to the Philippians is also called Paul's "joy letter" because he used the words "joy" and "rejoice" 25 times in four chapters. Paul was not rejoicing in his circumstances but "in the Lord." Why did Paul say it was important to maintain this attitude of "rejoicing in the Lord?" (Phil. 3:1)
17. Paul's greatest joy was knowing Christ. How did he express his desire to know Christ more? (Phil. 3:10)
- Through the power of _____
- The fellowship of _____
- Becoming like Him in _____
- And to attain to the _____

18. Paul had been serving the Lord for 25 years as an apostle to the Gentiles. (Acts 9) Did Paul feel as if he had completed that task? (Phil. 3:12, 13a)
19. How was Paul able to keep his focus in spite of the very difficult circumstances? (Phil. 3:13b, 14)
20. There were times when Paul was discouraged and anxious and yet he was able to overcome those very difficult times. What advice did he give to the Philippians on how to overcome anxiety and to find peace in the midst of difficult circumstances? (Phil. 4:4-7)
21. What was his "secret of being content?" (Phil. 4:10-13)
22. What did Paul say that he was confident in the Lord about? (Phil. 2:24 see also verse 19)

Paul's Release from First Roman Imprisonment

Although there is no Biblical record of Paul's release from this first Roman imprisonment, his own letters as well as church tradition reveal that he was released, probably in AD 62. The most likely reason would be that if no one came to press charges within two years, Roman law required the prisoner was to be freed.

In AD 62 the political climate for the believer (Christian) was still somewhat favorable. The church was protected as a sect of Judaism and Emperor Nero was still fairly tolerant. But that was just about to change!

Bibliography

¹ Walton, Strauss & Cooper, "The Essential Bible Companion" Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2006, pg. 96