



MESSAGE

STUDY GUIDE

GROUP MATERIAL

SONGS

Examining the text & our hearts:

Bible Reading: Eph. 3:1, 13; 4:1

“For this reason, I, Paul, the *prisoner of Christ Jesus* on behalf of you Gentiles...So...I ask you not to be discouraged over my afflictions on your behalf, for they are your glory...Therefore I, the *prisoner in the Lord*, urge you...” (Eph. 3:1,13; 4:1)

I. Why is Paul in Prison?(Eph. 3:1; 4:1; Acts 22:21; 24:27; 28:16, 30)

A. The Paradox of ‘Paul the Prisoner’

- “The paradox is poignant. Here is a prisoner extolling the triumph of the God he serves, the God who exalted Christ & is consummating all things in him. How can the servant of such a great God be captive in [prison]? How can the author of these grand words [Eph. 1-2, be] languishing in a lowly prison...?” [Abraham Kuruvilla, *Ephesians...Commentary*, p. 87]

B. ‘Paul the Prisoner’ –Victim or Victor?

- “Paul has just narrated the triumphs of God in Christ that vindicate the exaltation of Christ to the position of cosmic lordship. This is followed by Paul’s report...that he is in prison, which raises the question: *If Christ Jesus is exalted* to the position of cosmic supremacy over the powers... *why is Paul in prison?* Why has the exaltation of Christ resulted in the [apparent] defeat & humiliation of his servant? This looks...like...a glaring defeat at the hands of the powers that supposedly [are]...under the feet of the sovereign Lord Christ...*Paul’s imprisonment might give the impression* that he was *the victim, not the victor*, of the powers of the old world order. This apparent discrepancy must somehow be explained, and the digression in Eph. 3:2-13 makes plain that the imprisonment of Paul is not a defeat, but rather epitomizes the triumph of God in Christ. Paul does this by revealing...the cosmic dimensions of the ministry given to him by God, & that *his imprisonment*—far from hindering his ministry—*actually serves to*

magnify the triumph of God.” [Tim Gombis, “Ephesians 3:2-13: *POINTLESS DIGRESSION, OR EPITOME OF GOD’S TRIUMPH...?*” WTJ, Vol. 66, p. 316]

C. Arrested for speaking God’s radical truth (Acts 22:21)

- From Damascus, “I returned to Jerusalem & was praying in the temple, I fell into a trance & saw him [Jesus] telling me, ‘Go, because I’ll *send you far away to the Gentiles*’.” (Acts 22:17, 21)
- For “2 years [the Roman official] left Paul in prison.” (Acts 24:27) “When [they] entered Rome, Paul was allowed to live by himself with the soldier to guard him [house arrest]...Paul stayed 2 whole years in his own rented house.” (Acts 28:16, 30)

D. God verified his revelation to Paul (Acts 13-21) & Peter (Acts 10:34; 15:8-9)

E. “*For this reason...*” (Eph. 3:1a; 2:11-22)

- “You [Gentiles] are no longer foreigners & strangers, but fellow citizens with the saints, & members of God’s household, built on the foundation of the apostles & prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. 21 In him the whole building, being put together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. 22 In him you are also being built together for God’s dwelling in the Spirit. *For this reason*, I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus on behalf of you Gentiles...” (Eph. 2:19-3:1)

F. “On behalf of you Gentiles” (Eph. 3:1b; Acts 13:46b-47; 14:27; 18:6b)

- “Paul & Barnabas boldly replied, ‘It was necessary that God’s word be spoken to you [Jews] first. Since you reject it...we are turning to the Gentiles. 47 For...the Lord has commanded us: *‘I’ve made you a light for the Gentiles to bring salvation to the ends of the earth*’.” (Acts 13:46-47)

II. Paul Understood His Imprisonment to be God’s Will for Him (Eph. 3:1; 4:1)

- “For this reason, I, Paul, *the prisoner of Christ Jesus...I, the prisoner in the Lord*, urge you...” (Eph. 3:1a; 4:1)
- “How do you consider your life circumstances? Do we see ourselves as the captives of bad luck or unhappy circumstances that create bitterness and resentment? Or, do we look at every event in our lives as being under God’s control and...useable by him? Just as God brought good from Paul’s imprisonment—he wrote several NT books during that time—God intends to bring good out of everything, even unhappy things, in our lives.” [Kathy C. Miller, Paul & the Prison Epistles, p.]

A. An actual prisoner of Rome or its civic authorities

B. In reality a prisoner “of Christ Jesus” & “in the Lord” (Eph. 3:1; 4:1)

- “Paul didn’t consider himself as a prisoner of Rome [or Caesar]. He considered himself as ‘the prisoner of Christ Jesus’ [Eph. 3:1], because it was out of obedience to Jesus that he’s a prisoner there; and he trusted completely in the sovereignty of God”—Max. Anders
- “When Paul speaks of himself as ‘prisoner,’ it is always as ‘*prisoner of Christ Jesus*’ (Eph. 3:1; Philem. 1, 9), ‘*prisoner in the Lord*’ (Eph. 4:1...2 Tim. 1:8)...Most...under[stand] it as ‘one who suffers for the sake of Christ’...[implying, also] that Christ is truly sovereign over Paul’s circumstances...Paul views...prison...as...among his trials & afflictions as an apostle; he lives

out his commitment to the ‘word of the cross,’ as a prisoner of Jesus Christ. In Eph. [Paul’s] appeal is underscored by [his] costly commitment [as one] imprisoned for the sake of the Gentiles now addressed—‘prisoner of Christ...*on behalf of you Gentiles*’ (Eph. 3:1).” [D. G. Reid, “Paul the Prisoner,” in G. F. Hawthorne (ed.) *Dictionary of Paul & His Letters*, p.]

C. Bringing others into the correct understanding (Eph. 3:12-13)

- “In Christ Jesus our Lord...we have boldness & confident access through faith in him. 13 So, then, I ask you not to be discouraged over my afflictions on your behalf, for they are your glory.” (Eph. 3:11-13)

1. If I’m following God, shouldn’t everything go great?

2. Realizing that we all have access to God—“*we have...confident access thro’ faith in him*” (Eph. 3:12-13)

– “Paul’s imprisonment is no cause for alarm, nor is it an indication of divine disapproval of Paul and his ministry. Rather, God’s working in power in the ministry of Paul continued despite his earthly circumstances.’ As with Paul, so also with the rest of God’s people...God continues to extend his grace and exercise his power...no matter how adverse the circumstances.” [Abraham Kuruvilla, *Ephesians: A Theological Commentary*, p. 91]

III. Paul Went Deeper in Prison

- “Like a plant in harsh winter, Paul in prison was forced to put his roots down even deeper than he had yet gone...into the meaning of Jesus and his death.”—N. T. Wright
- Paul: “I’m bound like a criminal. But the Word of God is not bound.” (2 Tim. 2:9)

A. Paul continued to proclaim God’s kingdom & taught about Jesus (Acts 28:31; Phil. 1:12-13; 4:22)

- “What...happened to me...advanced the gospel...It’s...known...[by] the whole imperial guard... that my imprisonment is because I’m in Christ...All the saints send...greetings, especially those [of] *Caesar’s household*.” (Phil. 1:12-13; 4:22) Note: “*Caesar’s household* could refer...to the ‘royal family’ but [also] to anyone connected with the Emperor’s service, including soldiers, slaves, [etc.]. It’s likely...some of the latter group...responded positively to Paul’s message...” (ESV Study Bible)
- “When we entered Rome, Paul was allowed to live by himself with the soldier who guarded him [i.e., house arrest]...Paul stayed 2 whole years in his own rented house. And he welcomed all who visited him, 31 *proclaiming the kingdom of God & teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ* with all boldness and without hindrance.” (Acts 28:16, 30-31)
- “Ephesians...presents Jesus’ triumph in the world in *ironic* terms. Instead of coming into triumph through domination, Christ’s triumph is through the cross. Through the cross Jesus has overcome the powers of the world to bring redemption to mankind. This triumph comes through the church. Paul’s ministry embodies the same ideology of humility. Even through his imprisonment [Eph. 3:1: 4:1, Paul] continued to proclaim the gospel. Though his situation looked bleak, Paul’s proclamation of the gospel was a part of God’s plan of *triumph through humility*. In a similar way Paul called on believers to imitate him and participate in the same narrative. Believers extend the gospel into the world by following the same humble lifestyle in a corrupt world.” [B. I. Simpson review of T. G. Gombis’ *Drama of Ephesians*]

B. Paul found new ways – e.g. writing instead of going

- While confined in prison, Paul wrote the NT books of Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians & Philemon
- “Just as God brought good from Paul’s imprisonment—he wrote several NT books during that time—God intends to bring good out of everything, even unhappy things, in our lives.” [Kathy C. Miller, *Paul & the Prison Epistles*, p.]
- “Like a plant in harsh winter, Paul...was forced to put his roots down even deeper than he had yet gone...into the meaning of Jesus & his death. From the depth...he drew hope & new possibilities...The fruit of that labor remains [in] the four Prison Letters [Eph., Phil., Col., Phil.] – writings that grew directly out of the struggle Paul had experienced. Their visions [are] of Jesus the Messiah sovereign over all the powers of the world...” [N. T. Wright, *Paul: A Biography*, pp. 266-268]

IV. What Are Our ‘Prisons’?

A. Due to spiritual warfare

- “I think Paul interpreted his imprisonment as the revenge of the [dark spiritual] powers into whose world he had been making inroads. He was used to confronting [Jewish & Roman authorities]...But in this case [Paul]...sensed...something else was going on. The forces against him were not simply human. He had stirred up a hornets’ nest with his powerful ministry in Ephesus... Paul in prison was forced to put his roots down even deeper than he had yet gone... into the meaning of Jesus & his death.” [N. T. Wright, *Paul: A Biography*, p.]
- Writing *Ephesians*, Paul “hasn’t forgotten [that]...the principalities & powers, [he] so openly challenged in the early days of his work in Ephesus, were able to strike back [resulting in his imprisonment]. [Paul] knows, he has learned that when you celebrate all the truths...in [Ephesians] chapters 1-3, particularly the truth that ‘*God’s wisdom...is...made known to the rulers & authorities in the heavens—through the church*’ [Eph. 3:10,] then ‘the rulers & authorities’ are unlikely to take this kindly...Paul explains [‘Don’t be discouraged by my afflictions’ (Eph. 3:12)].” [N. T. Wright, *Paul: Biography*, p. 298]

B. Due to the difficult situations we are in (Gen. 16 & 21)

C. Due to doing something we know we shouldn’t have done

V. How Do We Go Deeper With God?

A. We have access to God—“*In Christ Jesus our Lord...we have...confident access through faith in him.*” (Eph. 3:12)

B. Developing your private world

1. Cultivate your inner garden
2. Bible study group
3. Silence and Solitude
4. Music and Singing
5. Journaling

C. Deeper roots in community

D. You are not too young or too old to start

QUESTIONS:

- N. T. Wright says “Paul in [the confinement of] prison was forced to put his roots down... deeper...into...Jesus & his death.” How has (is) the “confinement” of the COVID-19 pandemic causing you to “put your roots deeper into Jesus & his death”?
- How do you view your life circumstances? Do we see ourselves as ‘captives’ of bad luck or unhappy circumstances that create bitterness & resentment? Or, do we look at every event in our lives as being under God’s control &...useable by him? Just as God brought good from Paul’s imprisonment—he wrote several NT books during that time—God intends to bring good out of everything, even unhappy things, in our lives. [Kathy C. Miller, *Paul & the Prison Epistles*, p.] Discuss.