

SESSION 5: PRISON LETTERS

PREPARATION FOR THE SESSION

Read Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians and Philemon.

Summary of the Video: Module 6, Episode 5

The so-called “Prison Letters” of Paul include Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon. They appear to be from the same time period when Paul was in prison. We’ll allow the God, Gospel, People and Mission structure to guide our investigation of these books.

GOD: TRINITY AND ATTRIBUTES

With these letters we discover the height of Paul’s views of Christ and the Spirit. Throughout, we see him declaring the unity of the Father, Son and Spirit. Jesus’ deity is everywhere assumed and explicitly taught.

GOSPEL: PROBLEM AND SOLUTION

These letters emphasize that Christians are “in Christ.” Our faith which results in union with Christ brings all the benefits of salvation, sanctification and glorification. The Prison Letters explore this reality with a wider breadth than any other writings.

PEOPLE: COMMUNITY AND ETHICS

Emerging from our new individual and corporate identity in Christ, the Prison Letters give explicit instruction about how to organize their communities. Since we have a new identity in Christ, we are called to “be who we are.” This requires unity, humility, and maturity.

We follow this with a discussion of Paul and his prayers. We’re challenged to study prayer and learn “how to” pray through his examples.

MISSION: KINGDOM AND ESCHATOLOGY

In this section we explore the tension between the “already and not yet” of Christ’s kingdom. He has done so much and yet there is a life for us to live and a future for us to receive.

If Paul was in prison in Ephesus, why would he need to write a letter to the Ephesians? We can’t be sure he was there. Some of the earliest copies don’t say “to Ephesus”; it may have been a “circular letter” (not to a specific audience but rather a general letter to Christians anywhere).

Terms You'll Need to Know:

Household codes (*Haustafeln*)—ancient cultures organized how households would operate by pointing out various roles and expectations (this included parents and children but also household workers).

Christology—teachings and doctrines of Jesus (his nature, his attributes, his works, his teaching).

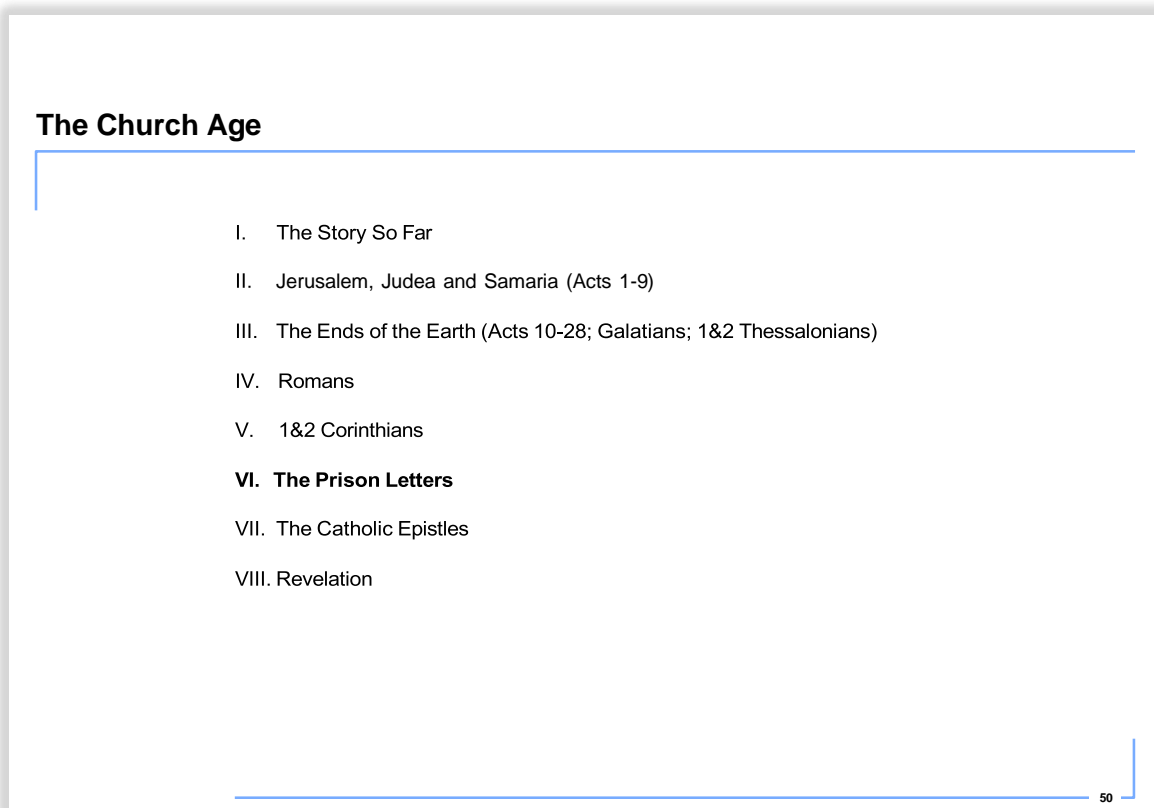
Doxological—worshipful.

Freedom in Christ material—from author Neil T. Anderson come several books, workbooks and ministries that aim to disciple a person out of their old beliefs and habits and into their new identity, beliefs and practices in Christ.

D.A. Carson, *A Call to Spiritual Reformation: Priorities from Paul and his Prayers* (1992), also called *Praying with Paul: A Call to Spiritual Reformation* (2015).

Watch Video

Watch Module 6 Episode 5 (37 minutes).



The screenshot shows a video player interface with a title 'The Church Age' and a table of contents. The table of contents lists eight items, with item VI, 'The Prison Letters', highlighted in bold. The page number '50' is visible in the bottom right corner of the video player frame.

The Church Age

- I. The Story So Far
- II. Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria (Acts 1-9)
- III. The Ends of the Earth (Acts 10-28; Galatians; 1&2 Thessalonians)
- IV. Romans
- V. 1&2 Corinthians
- VI. The Prison Letters**
- VII. The Catholic Epistles
- VIII. Revelation

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God: Trinity and Attributes

- Paul's Christology reaches its highest expression in the Prison Letters (Philippians, Ephesians, Colossians and Philemon), on top of the Trinitarian formulations we find in Ephesians (1:11-14, 17; 2:18, 22; 3:14-17; 4:1-6)
 - Php 2:5-11: "Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father." [What OT text is this adapting? Why does it matter?]
 - Eph 3:14-21: "For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith—that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen."
 - Col 1:15-20: "He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross."
 - Col 2:8-10: "See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ. For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, and you have been filled in him, who is the head of all rule and authority."⁵¹

Gospel: Problem and Solution

Eph 1:3-14

Chosen in Christ
 Predestined for adoption through Christ
 Blessed in Christ
 Redeemed in Christ
 All things to be united in Christ
 Obtained an inheritance in Christ
 Sealed with the Holy Spirit in Christ

Php 3:7-14

Found in Christ, having a righteousness that comes through faith in Christ, in order to know him, suffer with him, become like him, and share in his resurrection
 Called upwards in Christ

ἐν Χριστῷ
 "In Christ"

Eph 2:1-22

Made alive together with Christ
 Seated in heavenly places in & with Christ
 Shown immeasurable kindness in Christ
 Created in Christ for good works
 Gentiles brought near in Christ
 Built together into God's temple in Christ

Col 1:11-29

Redeemed and forgiven in Christ
 All things held together in Christ
 Fullness of God pleased to dwell in Christ
 [Christ in you, the hope of glory]
 Everyone to be presented mature in Christ

Col 2:11-15

Circumcised in Christ, without hands
 Buried and raised with Christ in baptism
 Made alive together with Christ
 Triumphed over rulers & authorities in Christ

People: Community and Ethics

Community: the *Haustafeln* (Eph 5:21-6:9; Col 3:18-4:1; cf. Phm 8-21)

- Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ
 - Wives, submit to and respect your husbands, as the church submits to Christ
 - Husbands, love, nourish and cherish your wives, as Christ loves the church
 - Children, obey and honour your parents
 - Fathers, discipline and instruct your children, and do not provoke them to anger
 - Slaves, obey your masters sincerely and diligently, serving them as the Lord
 - Masters, do the same to them (!), stop your threatening, and treat them justly & fairly
- Philemon: take Onesimus back, “no longer as a slave, but more than a slave, as a beloved brother”
 - Receive him as you would receive me. Charge it to me. You owe me your life!

Ethics: Be Who You Now Are (Eph 4:1-5:21; Php 2:1-18; Col 3:1-17)

- Unity, humility & maturity: work out your salvation
 - Have this mind, which is yours in Jesus. Look to the interests of others, not just yours
 - Make every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace
- Put off your old self, and put on your new self
 - Truth without falsehood, anger without sin, work without stealing, talk without corruption, kindness and forgiveness without malice
 - Imitate God and walk in love: not in sexual immorality, greed, idolatry or filthiness (for such people do not inherit the kingdom), but in light, with wisdom, pleasing the Lord
 - Put on compassion, humility, patience, since you are all one in Christ: Greeks, Jews, etc
- Do not grieve the Holy Spirit. And do not be drunk on wine, but be filled with the Spirit

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People: Paul and his Prayers

- In his outstanding *A Call to Spiritual Reformation: Priorities from Paul and his Prayers*, D A Carson studies the Pauline prayers in detail, and shows (surprisingly, at least to me) how different they often are to our prayers
- They are well worth a study – so long as you combine your study with praying yourself! – whether with Carson’s book as a guide, or independently. The ones he lists are:
 - Rom 1:8-10
 - Rom 10:1
 - Rom 12:12
 - Rom 15:5-6
 - Rom 15:13
 - Rom 15:30-33
 - 1 Cor 1:4-9
 - 1 Cor 16:23
 - 2 Cor 1:3-7
 - 2 Cor 2:14-16
 - 2 Cor 9:12-15
 - 2 Cor 12:7-9
 - 2 Cor 13:7-9
 - Gal 6:18
 - Eph 1:3ff
 - Eph 1:15-23
 - Eph 3:14-21
 - Eph 6:19-20
 - Php 1:3-6
 - Php 1:9-11
 - Php 4:6-7
 - Php 4:23
 - Col 1:3-14
 - Col 4:2-4
 - 1 Thess 1:2-3
 - 1 Thess 2:13-16
 - 1 Thess 3:9-13
 - 1 Thess 5:23-24
 - 1 Thess 5:28
 - 2 Thess 1:3ff
 - 2 Thess 1:11-12
 - 2 Thess 2:16-17
 - 2 Thess 3:2-5
 - 2 Thess 3:16
 - 1 Tim 1:12
 - 1 Tim 2:1ff
 - 2 Tim 1:3-7
 - 2 Tim 1:16-18
 - 2 Tim 4:22
 - Titus 3:15b
 - Phm 4-7
 - Phm 25

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Mission: Kingdom and Eschatology

Missional and Eschatological Tensions in the Prison Letters

You have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God (Col 3:1-4)	← <i>Are we dead to sin, or do we need to kill it?</i> →	Put to death, therefore, whatever is earthly in you (Col 3:5-10)
The Spirit is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance (Eph 1:13-14)	← <i>Is our future secure, or contingent on something?</i> →	You will be holy & blameless, if indeed you continue in the faith (Col 1:23)
For this I toil, struggling ... (Col 1:29a)	← <i>Are we, or is God, maturing believers?</i> →	... with all his energy that so powerfully works within me (Col 1:29b)
Work out your salvation with fear and trembling (Php 2:12)	← <i>Are we, or is God, working out our salvation?</i> →	Because it is God who works in you, both to will and to work (Php 2:13)
To die is gain. I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better (Php 1:21-3)	← <i>Is death a cause of joy, or sorrow?</i> →	If Epaphroditus had died, I would have had sorrow upon sorrow (Php 2:27)
Christ cancelled our debts completely at the cross (Col 2:13-15)	← <i>Is the work of Christ complete, or not?</i> (cf. Php 2:30) →	In my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions (Col 1:24)
All rulers & authorities are disarmed, and under Christ's feet (Col 2:10-15; Eph 1:20-23)	← <i>Is the battle against the powers won, or ongoing?</i> →	You need to stand firm, wrestle with principalities & powers, and take up the armour of God (Eph 6:10-20)
Our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Saviour ... (Php 3:20)	← <i>Is our future in heaven, or with bodies on earth?</i> →	... who will transform our bodies to be like his glorious body (Php 3:20-1)

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GROUP MEETING:

Discussion Questions

Before getting into these specific questions, spend a few minutes discussing what struck you or stuck with you from the video. What were some of the main points? Did any of Andrew's comments or questions open up the Bible in a profound way to you? Also, ask if anything was confusing or needs clarification.

1. It is often said that the Bible doesn't say, "Jesus is God". How would you respond to that claim?

2. How would you describe what it means to be "in Christ"? Compare and contrast this to other things that you might be "in".

3. Imagine two church members of different ethnicities aggravating one another as they promote their personal background. How would you disciple them through this? What theological truths and biblical texts would you bring into the discussion?

4. Walk through the list of “eschatological tensions”. Identify to which side you tend to drift in each statement. Talk about how to correct your leanings.

5. Read a few of Paul’s prayers in the list that was given. Discuss what aspects of his prayers you have adopted in your own and what aspects you would benefit from incorporating. (Bring these insights about prayer into your response time.)

Meditation on Scripture

Philippians 2:5-11

Ephesians 3:14-21

Colossians 1:15-20

Putting This Session into Practice

The Prison Letters are rich in Christology and instructive in prayer. This week, let’s combine these as we expand our prayer lives. Follow Paul’s content from the lists of verses about Jesus from “God: Trinity and Attributes” and his approach to prayer the lists of verses about prayer from “People: Paul and his Prayers.” Try to incorporate new aspects to your prayer life from his content and approach.