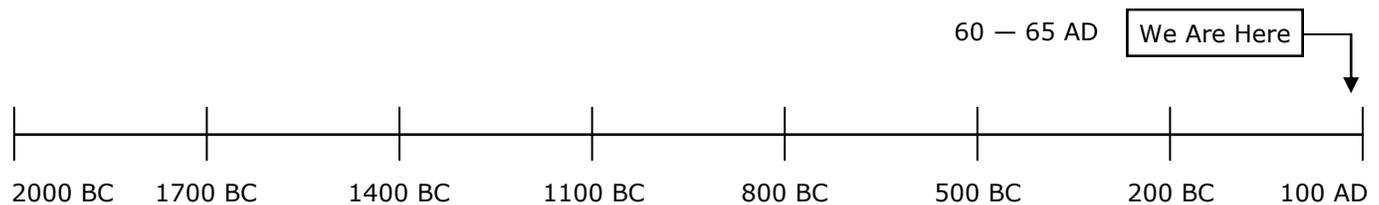


A Letter from Prison

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Week 49: December 3-9 — *Acts 21-28; Ephesians; Colossians*

94% Complete — 22 Days to Go



Helpful Resources

The Armor of God (p.253)

Making Sense of It All

- The Big Picture

After Paul's third journey, he returned to Jerusalem against the will of his friends. Those who loved him knew that going back to Jerusalem was to return to the lion's den. The Jewish religious leaders were doing all they could to stop the Christian movement. Thus, Paul was certainly one of the "devils" on their hit list. Just as expected, once Paul arrived, turmoil ensued. He was nearly killed at the Temple. However, the Roman garrison there rescued him and placed him under arrest. After it was discovered that the Jews wanted him dead and were willing to follow through with false charges, the Romans decided to move Paul to Caesarea. He was questioned several times, until he made an appeal to Caesar himself, which was the right of every Roman citizen. On his way to Rome, Paul was shipwrecked at Malta (just south of Sicily). In time, he was taken to Rome for trial; however, it would be two years before Nero would hear Paul's case. In that time, Paul was allowed some liberties. He was able to rent a home, to have guests, to hold services and teach, and even to correspond abroad with the churches he had established. Thus, while waiting for his trial, Paul wrote several of his New Testament letters, including *Ephesians* and *Colossians*. Let's take at these two books.

The Letter to the Ephesians

It is obvious from reading this letter that the Ephesians were dear to Paul; he spent at least three years with them during his third missionary journey and he had developed strong relationships. In fact, on his way to Jerusalem, the only group of elders that he arranged to say goodbye to were those from the Ephesian church. This letter was meant to encourage them and strengthen their faith. Here are a few of its major themes.

1. **We should rejoice in what God has done for us through Christ (1:3-14):** He is carrying out a plan, which He ordained long ago.
2. **Everything has changed for us because of Christ (2:1-10):** He has done everything for us; we have done nothing for ourselves. We were saved by His grace, not by works.
3. **Jews and Gentiles are now on the same team (2:11-18; 3:1-13; 4:1-7):** We also have the same goal, to glorify God and to share His message about Christ.
4. **We are children of light, who stand out from the darkness (4:17-31; 5:1-20):** We are to be different; our lifestyles should be night and day compared to the lost world.
5. **Relationships only work properly if Christ is honored through them (5:21-6:9):** With His love and self-denial, relationships are set for success.
6. **We need our armor! (6:10-18):** See "The Armor of God" sheet behind this review.

The Letter to the Colossians

Here is another letter Paul wrote in Rome. Though Paul never visited Colossae, he wrote this letter in response to news that he received about the Colossians mixing their beliefs with worldly philosophies. Thus, Paul tried to convince the Colossians of the sufficiency of Christ.

1. **Christ is divine; He was (is) God in flesh** (1:15-23). Thus, He is worthy and deserving of being the Head of the Church.
2. **Christ is and has everything we need** (2:1-23). We don't need to run to worldly things. Those things will only leave us empty and unfulfilled.
3. **Our new life in Christ demands a new mindset** (3:1-17), a new way of thinking. We should no longer fancy the things of this world but should set our minds on things above.
4. **Relationships are wonderful if our aim is to please the Lord** (3:18-4:1). When they serve selfish reasons, relationships can be strained, hurt, and even broken.

- The Rest of the Story

Did you find yourself wondering what happened to Paul at the end of *Acts*? Why did Luke not finish the story? Two thoughts prevail. When one considers the overarching theme of *Acts* (1:8), that of taking the Gospel to "Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and the ends of the earth," it would be right to say that Luke covered the story well. Paul, then, would not be the completion of that mission but the beginning. The rest of the story would be for us to finish. However, while Luke may have been done, many believe that he was not, for the ending of *Acts* seems rather abrupt. It seems that since the main topic of *Acts* was the ministry of Paul, Luke would have wanted to end it. Why wouldn't he cover Paul's trial and the rest of his life? It could be that Luke was intending to write a second book and never finished it. We will never know. The rest of Paul's life can be inferred from the rest of his writings, as well as from the traditions handed down through church history. Paul did stand trial before Nero, he was acquitted of all charges, he endeavored a fourth missionary journey (perhaps as far west as Spain), he was ultimately arrested by Nero (64), spent time again in a Roman prison, and was finally beheaded (68). No matter what we don't have in the Bible, we must believe that we do have all that God wanted us to have.

- Personal Application

One of the many commendable aspects of Paul's character is evident in his tangent to Malta, and that is his attitude towards ministry despite his personal circumstances (*Acts 28:1-10*). Even though Paul found himself a prisoner, adrift at sea, in the midst of a storm, shipwrecked in a strange place, and bitten by a snake, he found the courage to be a positive testimony in the eyes of others. Most often we allow our circumstances to dictate our responses, when we should learn from Paul and determine to respond appropriately no matter what. It is then that we make the most impact for the Kingdom of God.

The Bottom Line

Though our *enemy* wants to keep us *down*, through *Christ* we can *overcome* and be used for *good*.

Questions to Consider

1. What observations did you have in your reading of *Ephesians* and *Colossians*?
2. What does Paul mean that relationships should be centered around Christ? Are yours?
3. What are some practical ways "to put on your spiritual armor" regularly?

The Armor of God

"Put on all of God's armor so that you will be able to stand firm against the schemes of the Devil." *Eph. 6:10-18*



Artist Unknown

The Fight: Like it or not, all believers are in a war, not one in the physical realm but in the spiritual realm. Thus, we must defend ourselves with spiritual armor and fight with spiritual weapons. We must know well the tools of war.

Belt of Truth: As a belt holds all pieces together, so is truth our unifying strength. We can have confidence that what we believe is true and that truth will ultimately prevail.

Breastplate of Righteousness: The breastplate was worn to protect the vital organs. We too must guard our heart with all diligence and work at living holy lives, above reproach so as not to give the enemy an advantage.

Shoes of Peace: We are first peace-makers, ready to show others how to make peace with God and with man through Christ.

Shield of Faith: The Christian faith is a great shield to us. Satan respects it and cannot breach it. As we grow in faith and confidence in God, we become less prone to be struck and wounded by the fiery arrows of our enemy.

Helmet of Salvation: Our beliefs, decisions, actions, and emotions begin in the mind. We must be vigilant to allow Christ to transform it, else we fall prey to doubts, lies, and schemes.

Sword of the Spirit: The only offensive weapon in our arsenal is the Sword, which is the Scripture. Jesus defended Himself against Satan with the Word, so can we. We must be able to wield the Word well, with skill and authority.

Pray at All Times in the Power of the Spirit: Prayer is a sure defense and a potent weapon; remember, our strength comes from the Lord.

“We are not fighting against people made of flesh and blood but against the evil rulers and authorities of the unseen world, against those mighty powers of darkness who rule this world, and against wicked spirits in the heavenly realms.” *Ephesians 6:12*

