

Historical Background To Paul's Prison Epistles: Colossians, Philemon, Ephesians, Philippians

(Source document: www.faulkner.edu/admin/websites/ccheatham/)

Also see "The Prison epistles" at: www.christianinconnect.com/bkgdpriepe.htm

Paul's Roman Imprisonment:

Paul wrote the Books of Colossians, Philemon, Ephesians, and Philippians during his imprisonment in Rome. The Lord brought Paul to Rome to complete the mission strategy that Jesus gave to his disciples just before his ascension into heaven. Acts 1:8 states that Jesus told his disciples they were to be his witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. Paul was brought to Rome to complete the mission of bringing Jesus' gospel to the ends of the earth. With the coming of Paul to Rome the gospel was brought from the Jewish capital of Jerusalem in the east to the Gentile capital of the world in Rome in the west. The Lord himself had told Paul, "Take courage, for as you have testified to the facts about me in Jerusalem, so you must testify also in Rome" (Acts 23:11).

In compliance with the Lord's will to have his gospel brought to Rome, Paul came there, not as an apostle who was free to go about conducting his ministry, but as an apostle in chains whose activities were limited because he was held under house arrest and guard. (See note on Praetorian Guard)

His imprisonment began in Caesarea years earlier. At the end of his third missionary journey, during which time he spent more than two years working in Ephesus, Paul revisited the churches he had established in Macedonia, the northern province of Greece, on his second missionary journey (cf. Acts 20:1-3). From there he traveled to Jerusalem by way of Troas and Miletus (cf. Acts 20:6, 13-16). In Jerusalem the Jews mobbed Paul, because they thought he had desecrated the temple by bringing a Gentile into it (cf. Acts 21:27-30). Roman soldiers came to Paul's rescue and took him into their custody (cf. Acts 21:31-33). Paul then became entangled in the Roman judicial system. He was taken to the Roman governor Felix in the provincial capital of Caesarea. Felix kept Paul imprisoned there for two years, hoping that he might receive a bribe from Paul for his freedom (cf. Acts 24:24-27). Festus then succeeded Felix as governor and intended to appease the Jews by having Paul transferred for trial in Jerusalem. Paul then resorted to his right as a Roman citizen and appealed his case to Caesar in Rome (cf. Acts 25:9-11).

Paul was transferred by ship under guard to Rome. Enroute his ship was wrecked in a storm off the island of Malta. Paul finally arrived in Rome around A.D. 59 to 60. There he was held under house arrest and guard for the next two years. His Roman imprisonment, or captivity, has been dated as A.D. 59-61, and even as A.D. 61-63.

The Dating Of These Letters:

While under house arrest in Rome, Paul was able to conduct a limited ministry. He was able to receive visitors, such as the Jewish leaders of the synagogue in Rome (cf. Acts 28:16-29), and to minister to those who came to him. He was also able to minister to the needs of the churches by means of letters which he was free to write.

Paul wrote his letters to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians and Philippians while under this house arrest in Rome. These letters were written around A.D. 60 to 61. Because Paul was under house arrest and imprisoned at the time, his letters have been called his imprisonment or captivity letters.

The Internal Evidence Within The Letters:

The internal evidence within the letters clearly indicate Paul wrote them while a prisoner in Rome. The internal evidence is as follows:

In the letter to the Colossians:

Colossians 1:24: Now I rejoice in the things suffered in your behalf, and I am completing in my flesh the things lacking in the tribulations of Christ for the sake of his body, which is the church.
Colossians 4:10: Aristarchus, my fellow prisoner, sends you his greetings,...
Colossians 4:18: This greeting is in my own hand writing, Paul's. Remember my imprisonment. Grace be with you.

In the letter to Philemon:

Philemon 1: Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy, our brother, to Philemon our beloved friend and fellow worker,...
Philemon 9: ...for love's sake I rather appeal to you, being such a one as Paul, an old man, but now also a prisoner of Christ Jesus –
Philemon 23: Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends you his greetings.

In the letter to the Ephesians:

Ephesians 3:1: For this reason I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles –
Ephesians 4:1: I urge you, therefore, I the prisoner in the Lord, to live in a manner worthy of the calling with which you were called.
Ephesians 6:20: ...for which I am an ambassador in chains, that I may speak it boldly as I must.

In the letter to the Philippians:

Philippians 1:12-14: Now I want you to know, brothers, that the things that happened to me have rather furthered the advancement of the gospel, so that my imprisonment has become known in the whole palace guard and to everyone else, and most of the brothers, having put their trust in the Lord because of my imprisonment, have even more courage to speak the word fearlessly.

The occasion of the writing of these letters:

Epaphras, leader of the church in Colosse in Asia Minor (cf. Colossians 4:12), came to Paul in Rome with good news and bad news about the church of Colosse. The good news was the gospel had born fruit among the Colossians (cf. Colossians 1:6), who were continuing in the faith (cf. Colossians 1:4) in Christ and in love for their fellow believers. The bad news was the Colossians

were being troubled by a new teaching that was contrary to the gospel which Epaphras had been preaching to them. The new teaching claimed a profound knowledge apart from Christ (cf. Colossians 2:8), an emphasis on following prescribed rituals (cf. Colossians 2:16), the worship of angels (cf. Colossians 2:18), and ascetic self-abasement (cf. Colossians 2:18 & 20-23). The new teaching which included the worship of angels indicates that it invoked spiritual powers rather than calling on Christ in whom the fullness of God dwelt in bodily form (cf. Colossians 2:9).

To deal with this new false teaching, Paul wrote his letter to the Colossians. In his letter Paul overwhelmed the false teaching by proclaiming the surpassing greatness of Christ. Paul then dispatched his co-worker Tychicus to carry his letter to the church of Colosse (cf. Colossians 4:7,8). Paul's letter was a circular letter to be shared with the other churches in the area, particularly nearby Laodicea (cf. Colossians 4:16).

With Paul in Rome was a runaway slave named Onesimus. Onesimus had come to Paul and had become a Christian (cf. Philemon 10). He performed valuable services for Paul, perhaps as a runner doing errands for Paul, who was not free to leave his house. Paul was obligated to return Onesimus to his rightful master, a Christian brother named Philemon. It appears that Philemon was a member of the church of Colosse, for he was known to Epaphras the leader of that church (cf. Philemon 23). Paul wrote his letter to Philemon, in which he expressed his desire to be able to retain Onesimus' valuable services in Rome. He asked Philemon to treat Onesimus kindly as a Christian brother. Since Tychicus would be traveling to the church of Colosse, where Philemon was a member, Paul sent Onesimus back to Philemon in the company of Tychicus. Tychicus carried, in addition to Paul's letter to the Colossians, Paul's letter to Philemon.

The route that Tychicus and Onesimus would logically travel to Colosse would take them through the port city of Ephesus, where Paul had ministered for more than two years. Paul had not revisited that church since he left it to go to Jerusalem about three to five years earlier. He seized the opportunity that Tychicus' passing through Ephesus offered and wrote his letter to his beloved Ephesians. Tychicus, then, also carried this letter for Paul and delivered it to the church in Ephesus.

While still under house arrest in Rome, Paul received another visitor--Epaphroditus. Epaphroditus was a member of the church in Philippi in Macedonia, the northern province of what is now Greece. In behalf of the congregation he brought Paul a gift for his support and reported that the Philippians were eager for some news about Paul's circumstances and the outcome of his trial before the Roman imperial court. This prompted Paul to write the last of his imprisonment epistles to the Philippians. He wrote to thank them for their gift, to inform them about his circumstances in Rome and about his trial, and to strengthen them in the hope and joy that was theirs in Christ.

Note: The **Praetorian Guard** (*Latin: Praetoriani*) was a force of [bodyguards](#) used by [Roman Emperors](#). The title was already used during the Roman Republic for the guards of [Roman generals](#), at least since the rise to prominence of the [Scipio](#) family around 275 BC. The Guard was dissolved by Emperor [Constantine I](#) in the 4th century.