

I announced Sunday that we would take some time to cover the Prison Epistles in our Wednesday study. I do so with a little trepidation, as there is so much in these epistles that my temptation will be to slow down and go for the details rather than the big picture.

Consequently, I am going to resort to some old material and some more general works to guide my study.

Tonight's study will focus on introduction. You already know something about most of the cities of our focus because of our recent study of the seven churches of Revelation and then of course our series in the book of Acts we completed just a year or so ago.

The introduction is meant to elevate our understanding of the content of the Biblical material. Who was Paul writing to? Why was he writing? When was he writing?

I. Circumstances

A. Chronology of Paul's life

1. Conversion (32 AD)
2. First visit to Jerusalem (34 AD)
3. Joined pastoral team in Antioch (42 AD — appr.)
4. Second visit to Jerus. [famine offering] (45/46 AD) [Galatians says, "after fourteen yrs" — likely from his conversion point, counting parts of years as full years in the Jewish fashion]
5. First missionary journey (begin about 47 AD)
6. Jerusalem council (49 AD)
7. Second missionary journey (begin about 49/50 AD)
8. Third missionary journey (begin about 53/54 AD)
9. Arrested Jerus., Imprisoned Ceasarea (57 AD to 59 AD) [**suggested time and place, but unlikely**]
10. Shipwreck (winter of 59/60 AD)
11. First Roman imprisonment (60-61 AD) [**likely time and place**]
12. Second Roman imprisonment (65-67 AD)

13. Execution (67 AD approx)

B. The first Roman imprisonment

1. The first Roman imprisonment lasted (apparently) **two** years (Ac 28.30-31)

Ac 28.30-31 And he stayed two full years in his own rented quarters and was welcoming all who came to him, ³¹ preaching the kingdom of God and teaching concerning the Lord Jesus Christ with all openness, unhindered.

- a. Apparently under house arrest
 - b. Able to communicate with all visitors who might come to him
2. The time when **all four** prison epistles were written
 - a. All mention Paul's bonds (Eph 3.1, 4.1, 6.20; Phil 1.12-13; Col 1.24, 4.18; Phile 1)
 - b. Several companions mentioned more than once: Tychicus, Timothy, Epaphroditus, Onesimus, Aristarchus, Mark, Epaphras, Luke, and Demas

II. Composition

A. **Order** of the epistles

1. Colossians, Philemon, and Ephesians couriered by Tychicus

Ep 6.21-22 ¶ But that you also may know about my circumstances, how I am doing, Tychicus, the beloved brother and faithful minister in the Lord, will make everything known to you. ²² I have sent him to you for this very purpose, so that you may know about us, and that he may comfort your hearts.

Col 4.7-9 ¶ As to all my affairs, Tychicus, *our* beloved brother and faithful servant and fellow bond-servant in the Lord, will bring you information. ⁸ *For* I have sent him to you for this very purpose, that you may know about our circumstances and that he may encourage your hearts; ⁹ and with him Onesimus, *our* faithful and beloved brother, who is one of your *number*. They will inform you about the whole situation here.

- a. KJV adds at the end of Ephesians: “To *the* Ephesians written from Rome, by Tychicus”
- b. KJV adds to the end of Philemon: “<Written from Rome to Philemon, by Onesimus a servant.”

It is uncertain which of these were written first, all appear to be sent together.

Thiessen assumes “that they were written in the order: Colossians, Philemon, Ephesians, and Philippians.”¹

Personally, I think Col, Phile, and Eph were all written roughly at the same time, the order isn’t that important.

We will study them in Bible book order.

2. Philippians appears to be later than the first three Prison Epistles, near the end of the first imprisonment

Phil 2.19-24 ¶ But I hope in the Lord Jesus to send Timothy to you shortly, so that I also may be encouraged when I learn of your condition. ...²³ Therefore I hope to send him immediately, as soon as I see how things *go* with me;²⁴ and I trust in the Lord that I myself also will be coming shortly.

B. Special problem of **Ephesians**

Ep 1.1 ¶ Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, To the saints who are **at Ephesus** and *who are* faithful in Christ Jesus:

1. The words “at Ephesus” are missing from three older manuscripts (all other mss. include the words)
2. The heretic Marcion (c. 85 – c. 160) claimed it was written to the Laodiceans, not the Ephesians
 - a. Tertullian (c. 155 – c. 220) dismissed Marcion’s claims as a heretic, said Marcion had tampered with the title

¹ Henry Clarence Thiessen, *Introduction to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1943), 229.

- b. The dispute suggests that at least *some* mss. available in these early times omitted the words (otherwise Tertullian could have simply pointed to the text)
- c. Various subsequent church fathers were aware of the problem
 - 1) Origen (3rd C.)
 - 2) Basil the Great (4th C.)
 - 3) Jerome (5th C.)

“This is enough to show that an uncertainty, to say the least, attached itself both early and widely to the two words.”²

- 3. The matter is not one of doctrinal importance, but note:
 - a. There are no personal greetings in Ephesians, even though Paul spent three years there
 - 1) all other epistles contain personal greetings
 - 2) Including several people in Colosse whom he had never met (Col 4.15-17)
 - b. Paul addresses no local problems or mentions any converts in this book
- 4. Nevertheless, most of the church fathers accepted the tradition that the book was written to the Ephesians
 - a. It is proposed that the book was a circular letter, going first to Ephesus
 - b. Then it was to be distributed to the other churches of the region (the seven churches of Revelation?)
 - c. When Paul tells the Colossians to read the letter “from Laodicea” (note, not “to Laodicea”) he could be referring to Ephesians (Col 4.16)

² Marcus L. Loane, *Three Letters from Prison* (Waco, Texas: Word Books, 1972), 14.