


The Prison Letters...


Ephesians 1:1-14 LIFE LESSON

Paul was a Jew and Pharisee, and in his early years when he persecuted followers! In fact, while on his way to Damascus to bring followers back to Jerusalem in chains, Jesus confronted Paul, and needless to say, he didn't go back to Jerusalem with any prisoners. Instead, over the course of the next twenty plus years, Saul/Paul followed Jesus' plan to reach both the Jews and Gentiles. And believe it or not, a part of God's plan included Paul going to Jerusalem to be imprisoned. But notice what Paul was willing to endure for the sake of Christ...

 **Acts 21:10-13 (NLT)** *A man named Agabus, who also had the gift of prophecy, arrived from Judea. He came over, took Paul's belt, and bound his own feet and hands with it. Then he said, "The Holy Spirit declares, 'So shall the owner of this belt be bound by the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem and turned over to the Gentiles.'" When we heard this, we and the local believers all begged Paul not to go on to Jerusalem. But he said, "Why all this weeping? You are breaking my heart! I am ready not only to be jailed at Jerusalem but even to die for the sake of the Lord Jesus."*

➔ **When it came to suffering persecution, do you think Paul's regrets over past behaviors made him more willing to suffer or die for Jesus? Why or why not?**

Even though Paul was entering a hard season of life, he was willing. And because of Paul's willingness, he used those prison years as a time to write letters. For these same reasons, we need to consider our attitudes whenever we're entering into something hard, especially when we know it's a part of God's calling. So with that in mind, let's look at what Paul wrote to the Ephesians...

 **Ephesians 1:1-2 (NLT)** *This letter is from Paul, chosen by the will of God to be an apostle of Christ Jesus. I am writing to God's holy people in Ephesus*, who are faithful followers of Christ Jesus. May God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ give you grace and peace.*

➔ **Look up three key features about the ancient city of Ephesus, or about the surrounding region, and share what you've discovered.**

The asterisk in this passage by the word "Ephesus" is indicating that none of the copies of this book contain the word "Ephesus"! So the truth is, even though Paul spent a lot of time around the region of Ephesus, he never mentions a letter to them, but he does mention a letter to the church in Laodicea...

➔ **Colossians 4:14-16 (NLT)** *Luke, the beloved doctor, sends his greetings, and so does Demas. Please give my greetings to our brothers and sisters at Laodicea, and to Nympha and the church that meets in her house. After you have read this letter, pass it on to the church at Laodicea so they can read it, too. And you should read the letter I wrote to them.*

➔ **In your opinion, why would Paul want the people of one church to read the contents of a letter addressed to a different church?**

So maybe the letter to the Ephesians should actually be called the letter to the Laodiceans. Either way, what we do know is that Paul, in spite of difficult circumstances, was trying to encourage the churches in all of these regions with some very important things. So let's move on...

📖 **Ephesians 1:3-5 (NLT)** *All praise to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly realms because we are united with Christ. Even before he made the world, God loved us and chose us in Christ to be holy and without fault in his eyes. God decided in advance to adopt us into his own family by bringing us to himself through Jesus Christ. This is what he wanted to do, and it gave him great pleasure.*

➔ **Based on all Paul said in this passage, what do we experience as followers as a result of our faith in God?**

According to Paul, we experience spiritual blessings in the heavenly realms, holiness or blamelessness, and adoption into God's family, all because of our faith. Now, when it comes to the spiritual blessings in the heavenly realms, Paul had some inside knowledge, but couldn't share that information with us. For instance, here's what he wrote...

📖 **2 Corinthians 12:2-4 (NLT)** *I was caught up to the third heaven fourteen years ago. Whether I was in my body or out of my body, I don't know—only God knows. Yes, only God knows whether I was in my body or outside my body. But I do know that I was caught up to paradise and heard things so astounding that they cannot be expressed in words, things no human is allowed to tell.*

➔ **Describe what your heavenly version of "paradise" would be?**

The second thing Paul mentioned we experience because of our faith in Christ, is holiness or blamelessness from sin, which was a common theme in many of Paul's letters. Again, look at what he wrote to the Colossians...

📖 **Colossians 1:19-23 (NLT)** *For God in all his fullness was pleased to live in Christ, and through him God reconciled everything to himself. He made peace with everything in heaven and on earth by means of Christ's blood on the cross. This includes you who were once far away from God. You were his enemies, separated from him by your evil thoughts and actions. Yet now he has reconciled you to himself through the death of Christ in his physical body. As a result, he has brought you into his own presence, and you are holy and blameless as you stand before him without a single fault. But you must continue to believe this truth and stand firmly in it. Don't drift away from the assurance you received when you heard the Good News. The Good News has been preached all over the world, and I, Paul, have been appointed as God's servant to proclaim it.*

➔ ***In your own opinion, what would be the consequences of “drifting away” as Paul put it?***

As followers, we must continue to trust that the combination of who Jesus is (God incarnate), along with what Jesus did (died for our sins), is the only “stain remover” that will ever work on our souls. Now, the third thing Paul mentioned was our adoption into God’s family, and that this was God’s plan before the foundations of the earth were formed, or prior to creation. This is consistent with what Paul wrote to the churches in Rome...

📖 **Romans 8:29-30 (NLT)** *For God knew his people in advance, and he chose them to become like his Son, so that his Son would be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters. And having chosen them, he called them to come to him. And having called them, he gave them right standing with himself. And having given them right standing, he gave them his glory.*

➔ ***Natural born children are sometimes an “oops” in that they’re not always planned. However, with every adopted child there’s always a choice. How does it make you feel to know you’re not an “oops” and that God chose to adopt you as a child of His own?***

Being a child of God, or being adopted into God’s family, means in part that we’re included in God’s disbursement plans for all of His heavenly wealth. Or in other words, being a child of God means we’re getting an inheritance from our Father in heaven. In fact, look at what Paul went on to say about this...

📖 **Ephesians 1:6-14 (NLT)** *So we praise God for the glorious grace he has poured out on us who belong to his dear Son. He is so rich in kindness and grace that he purchased our freedom with the blood of his Son and forgave our sins. He has showered his kindness on us, along with all wisdom and understanding. God has now revealed to us his mysterious will regarding Christ—which is to fulfill his own good plan. And this is the plan: At the right time he will bring everything together under the authority of Christ—everything in heaven and on earth. Furthermore, because we are united with Christ, we have received an inheritance from God, for he chose us in advance, and he makes everything work out according to his plan. God’s purpose was that we Jews who were the first to trust in Christ would bring praise and glory to God. And now you Gentiles have also heard the truth, the Good News that God saves you. And when you believed in Christ, he identified you as his own by giving you the Holy Spirit, whom he promised long ago. The Spirit is God’s guarantee that he will give us the inheritance he promised and that he has purchased us to be his own people. He did this so we would praise and glorify him.*

➔ ***Have you ever inherited anything? If so, what was it? And based on what you know about God or Heaven, what do you think our heavenly inheritance will include?***

Paul has now mentioned God the Father, Jesus, the Son, and now the Holy Spirit within the opening remarks of his first letter from prison. And not just that, between what Paul wrote, and what the writer of Hebrews wrote, we know a bit more about their roles. And when we combine this with what Jesus told us, it becomes clear that God, the Father, has a supreme will that He passes along to Jesus, the Son, who

then enables us to learn God's will through the Holy Spirit. And the Holy Spirit is what identifies us and guides us. In fact, let's look at what Jesus personally said about this...

📖 **John 5:30, 36 (NLT)** *I can do nothing on my own. I judge as God tells me. Therefore, my judgment is just, because I carry out the will of the one who sent me, not my own will. But I have a greater witness than John—my teachings and my miracles. The Father gave me these works to accomplish, and they prove that he sent me.*

📖 **John 13:16 (ESV)** *Truly, truly, I say to you, a servant is not greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him.*

📖 **John 15:26-27 (NLT)** *But I will send you the Advocate—the Spirit of truth. He will come to you from the Father and will testify all about me. And you must also testify about me because you have been with me from the beginning of my ministry.*

📖 **John 16:13-14 (NLT)** *When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all truth. He will not speak on his own but will tell you what he has heard. He will tell you about the future. He will bring me glory by telling you whatever he receives from me.*

➔ **Based on what Jesus said, is the person being sent greater than the person who sent them?**

➔ **If there is some sort of hierarchy within the Trinity, what is it?**

Because of our belief in Christ, we're going to experience some amazing spiritual blessings in the heavenly realms. But not only that, we're also holy and blameless and adopted into God's family. Which means, as followers, we're now included in God's disbursement plans for all His heavenly wealth. And speaking of God, remember that God is a Trinity, or that God is the Father, Jesus the Son, and the Holy Spirit all in one. Yet each of them plays a different role in our lives. The Father is the one who creates the plan, Jesus is the perfect example of what it means to follow God's plan, and the Holy Spirit is there to help teach us the plan and guide us through it.

MEMORY PASSAGE FOR THE WEEK

Put on your new nature, and be renewed as you learn to know your Creator and become like him. In this new life, it doesn't matter if you are a Jew or a Gentile, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbaric, uncivilized, slave, or free. Christ is all that matters, and he lives in all of us.

Colossians 3:10-11 (NLT)

EPHESIANS 1:1-14

LESSON GOAL: Introduce kids to Paul and his writings to the Ephesians from prison.

MEMORY VERSE:

'We have been set free because of what Christ has done. Because he bled and died our sins have been forgiven. We have been set free because God's grace is so rich.' | **EPHESIANS 1:7 NIRV**

PAUL WAS WILLING TO SUFFER FOR JESUS

Saul was a Jew, a Pharisee, and a Roman Citizen and after Jesus's death and resurrection, he took it upon himself to "get rid" of Jesus followers because he thought they were leading people away from the true God. On his way to Damascus to arrest a group of followers and bring them back to Jerusalem for trial, Saul was confronted by Jesus and challenged for persecuting him and his followers. Jesus showed Saul mercy and called him to be an apostle. Saul was a Hebrew name, and he eventually chose to use his Roman name, Paul, as he began to preach to the Gentiles.

Paul was so aware of the mercy Jesus showed him, that he was willing to do anything for Jesus, whether it was going to prison or dying. Listen to what Luke wrote about him in the book of Acts:

'We stayed there several days. Then a prophet named Agabus came down from Judea. He came over to us. Then he took Paul's belt and tied his own hands and feet with it. He said, "The Holy Spirit says, 'This is how the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem will tie up the owner of this belt. They will hand him over to the Gentiles.' " When we heard this, we all begged Paul not to go up to Jerusalem. He asked, "Why are you crying? Why are you breaking my heart? I'm ready to be put in prison. In fact, I'm ready to die in Jerusalem for the Lord Jesus.'" |

ACTS 21:10-13 NIRV

Paul knew that he would eventually be imprisoned, but he didn't let it keep him from preaching about Jesus. In fact, he used the time to write letters to the churches in the areas he had been preaching to continue to encourage them. Those letters are now books in the Bible that continue to encourage us today.

EPHESUS OR ???

'I, Paul, am writing this letter. I am an apostle of Christ Jesus just as God planned. I am sending this letter to you, God's holy people in Ephesus. Because you belong to Christ Jesus, you are faithful. May God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ give you grace and peace.' | **EPHESIANS 1:1-2 NIRV**

An interesting fact about the book of Ephesians is that in the original manuscripts, Paul never actually mentions Ephesus. That was added at some later date, so we don't know for sure that he was writing to Ephesus. Regardless, we do know that he spent a lot of time writing to the regions around the area and that he was using his time in prison to continue to preach and encourage the churches in those areas.

CHOSEN BY GOD

'Give praise to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. He has blessed us with every spiritual blessing. Those blessings come from the heavenly world. They belong to us because we belong to Christ. God chose us to belong to Christ before the world was created. He chose us to be holy and without blame in his eyes. He loved us. So he decided long ago to adopt us. He adopted us as his children with all the rights children have. He did it because of what Jesus Christ has done. It pleased God to do it.' | **EPHESIANS 1:3-5 NIRV**

In the next part of his letter, Paul emphasizes how we were chosen by God even before he created the world and he has given us blessings because we belong to Christ! We were chosen to belong to Christ and to be part of God's family forever.

We were also chosen to belong to him. God decided to choose us long ago in keeping with his plan. He works out everything to fit his plan and purpose. We were the first to put our hope in Christ. We were chosen to bring praise to his glory. You also became believers in Christ. That happened when you heard the message of truth. It was the good news about how you could be saved. When you believed, he stamped you with an official mark. That official mark is the Holy Spirit that he promised. The Spirit marks us as God's own. We can now be sure that someday we will receive all that God has promised. That will happen after God sets all his people completely free. All these things will bring praise to his glory.' | **EPHESIANS 1:11-14 NIRV**

Paul understood something really important that he wanted to make sure others (including us) understand, we are loved and blessed by God and

through Jesus, we have access to all of his blessings in heaven and are included in God's family forever! All the mistakes we've already made, and all of the mistakes we'll make in the future have already been forgiven. And we have the Holy Spirit help us live in a way that will shine God's light.

When we remember that Paul wrote these words as he was chained up in a prison, we can see how it's possible to see our troubles as opportunities to encourage others and praise God even when we're going through a hard time.

DISCUSSION | REVIEW

- If you've ever been grounded (or kept from doing what you wanted because of illness/injury/family situation), what were you thinking about or feeling while you were grounded? (No wrong answers, it's just to help them be aware of their own reactions)
 - What do you think made Paul want to write letters like this while he was in prison? (Possible answers - he was bored, he wanted to obey God, Jesus told him to, etc.)
 - What would it look like to praise God even when we don't get to do what we want to?
- What do you think Paul meant by "spiritual blessing"?
- How do you feel about being part of God's family?
- What is one thing you learned today that you can share with a friend?