

"God's Love Story Sermon Outlines"

by Doug Hamilton

Section 36: The Love Story Cannot Be Bound (The Prison Epistles)

In late summer of AD 60, at a modest abode in Rome, an elderly man (Philemon 9) named Paul was placed under house arrest for crimes which he did not commit. For twenty-four hours a day he was chained on both wrists to members of the Praetorian Guard, the elite secret service of Emperor Nero. With Paul were two of his closest friends, Luke and Aristarchus (Col. 4:10, 14). They volunteered to travel the entire trip from Caesarea to Rome, risking their lives as well. It would be a long two years that Paul would be unable to go out and work the mission field which he so loved, but at least he could receive visitors. The Jews of Rome would come and visit Paul (Acts 28:17-23), hearing about the gospel of Jesus and needing to make a decision. He actually became somewhat of a celebrity among the people of Rome. *Philippians 1:13* “so that my imprisonment in the cause of Christ has become well known throughout the whole praetorian guard and to everyone else”

The scripture states concerning Paul’s house arrest in Acts 28:30 *And he stayed two full years in his own rented quarters and was welcoming all who came to him.* In this lesson we will examine the identification of some of these visitors and their relevance concerning the *Prison Epistles*.

Visitor #1: Onesimus

One day a man shows up at the door of Paul. His name was Onesimus. He was the slave of a well-known brother in Christ named Philemon. Apparently he stole some funds from his master (Philemon 18) and fled to Rome to start a new life. While there he heard a familiar name, the apostle Paul, who was being held under house arrest in a nearby neighborhood. He thought back to those church member conversations in his master’s house about this Paul and his missions. Being in a strange city of over a million people, Onesimus reasoned it might be good to visit Paul and possibly receive some sort of guidance. Working up the courage to do so, he went to the location of the apostle.

After introducing himself, he sat with Paul and heard more about the mission work, the church and the gospel of Jesus Christ. Onesimus had been a slave, having never been able to come and go as he pleased. To hear about the message of being freed from sin and having a new Master in Christ (Romans 6:17-18) proved too much to resist. When Paul explained how to become a Christian, Onesimus gladly responded. He converted to Christ. For the better part of a year he became a faithful helper for Paul (Philemon 11), fetching supplies and running errands. His quality assistance to Paul while under house arrest earned him the name in Colossians 4:9 as “*Onesimus, our faithful and beloved brother*”.

Visitor #2: Tychicus

Not long after, a familiar face appeared at the door of Paul’s home. He was an Ephesian named Tychicus. He was directly involved with some of the missions of Paul. Tychicus was the apostle’s personal choice of delegate for the collection from the Asians concerning the

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benevolence effort in Jerusalem (Acts 20:4-6). It was Tychicus whom Paul sent to Crete to free up Titus to visit the apostle in Neapolis (Titus 3:12). He also relieved Timothy so he could visit Paul in his second Romans imprisonment (2 Tim 4:12). The apostle would have had joy for Tychicus to be there. Paul loved him very much, confirming so in Col 4:7 *"Tychicus, our beloved brother and faithful servant and fellow bond-servant in the Lord"*.

Tychicus brought Paul up to date concerning the work in Asia. Paul in return offered advice concerning the same. He explained to him the importance of returning to Colossae, informing them of the conditions of his imprisonment (Ephesians 6:21) and encouraging them to stay in the faith (Col. 4:8). Tychicus would stay on for a number of months to be of assistance to Paul in his time of need.

Visitor #3: Epaphras

Around AD 53, the apostle Paul spent two years in Ephesus, leading many to Christ. There was a man named Epaphras from Colossae who traveled to Ephesus. Paul referred to him in the letter to the Colossians as the *"faithful minister of Christ"* (1:7) and the *"servant of Christ"* (4:12). This was because in Ephesus he met Paul, heard the gospel of Jesus Christ, converted and took God's Love Story back to his home area, including Hierapolis and Laodicea (4:13). It was through men like him *"that all who lived in Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks"* (Acts 19:10). Apparently Epaphras and another convert named Aristarchus (Col 4:13) traveled 1500 miles to Rome in order to support Paul in his house arrest. This was why he referred to Epaphras in Philemon 23 as *"my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus"*. He would stay the remainder of Paul's house arrest, aiding him the best way he could.

Visitor #4 Epaphroditus:

Epaphroditus was a member of the church at Philippi (Phil 2:25, 4:12) and likely a convert of Paul when he passed through during his missionary tours. He was an esteemed Christian sent by the church in Philippi to bring some needed supplies, funds and assistance to Paul while under house arrest. The apostle referred to Epaphroditus in Philippians 2:25 in five terms, *"my brother and fellow worker and fellow soldier, who is also your messenger and minister to my need."* It would have taken him a couple of months to travel the 800 miles to Rome and would have brought Paul joy. This was demonstrated in *Philippians 4:18 I have received everything in full and have an abundance; I am amply supplied, having received from Epaphroditus what you have sent, a fragrant aroma, an acceptable sacrifice, well-pleasing to God.*

Though he was commissioned by the church family to stay through the entire imprisonment, he became deathly ill and experienced a lengthy recovery. Philippians 2:25 states that *"...he was sick to the point of death, but God had mercy on him, and not on him only but also on me, so that I would not have sorrow upon sorrow."* Paul felt it best to send him back early for the sake of his health and out of concern for the church family in Philippi. In that day and among that culture it

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was a shameful thing to not live up to a commissioned task. If Paul were to send him home, he would need to address it to the church in Philippi.

The Prison Epistles It was with this background that we find Paul's writings referred to as the *Prison Epistles*. They are the four letters of Philippians, Ephesians, Colossians and Philemon.

The Letter to the Philippians:

Paul needed to send Epaphroditus back to Philippi and did not want the church to feel he let them down in his commission. He wrote the Prison Letter to Philippi.

- From his prison he thanked them for their generosity. *Philippians 4:15 You yourselves also know, Philippians, that at the first preaching of the gospel, after I left Macedonia, no church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving but you alone; ¹⁶ for even in Thessalonica you sent a gift more than once for my needs.*
- From his prison he encouraged them to press on to heaven. *Philippians 3:20-21 For our citizenship is in heaven, from which also we eagerly wait for a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ; ²¹ who will transform the body of our humble state into conformity with the body of His glory, by the exertion of the power that He has even to subject all things to Himself.*
- From his prison he emboldened the reputation of Epaphroditus. *Philippians 2:29-30 Receive him then in the Lord with all joy, and hold men like him in high regard; ³⁰ because he came close to death for the work of Christ, risking his life to complete what was deficient in your service to me.*

God's Love Story cannot be bound by chains.

The Letter to the Ephesians:

Paul sent a letter by the hand of Tychicus to take to the Ephesian church family. He knew they were at risk of being swallowed up in the culture if not followed-up with properly.

- The Ephesian culture thought they could work their way to heaven through their pagan customs, but Paul sent the message from his prison cell, saying *Eph 2:8-9 For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; ⁹ not as a result of works, so that no one may boast.*
- The Ephesian culture did not function as a unified body of Christ, but Paul let them know from his prison cell, "with all humility and gentleness, with patience, showing tolerance for one another in love, ³being diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. (Eph 4:2-3)
- The Ephesians culture came out of the power and magic movement, but Paul from his prison cell said to trust in the armor of God (Eph 6:14-15).

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The Letter to the Colossians:

There were some problems in Colossae that needed to be addressed, but it was more than 1500 miles from Paul's prison cell.

- They were being led astray into man-made religions, but from his prison cell he shut it down. *Col 2:8 See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deception, according to the tradition of men, according to the elementary principles of the world, rather than according to Christ.*
- They were focusing on earthly things rather than God, but from his prison cell he addressed it. *Col 3:2 Set your mind on the things above, not on the things that are on earth.*
- They were concerned about their comrade Epaphras, but Paul comforted them from his prison cell. *Col 4:12 Epaphras, who is one of your number, a bondservant of Jesus Christ, sends you his greetings, always laboring earnestly for you in his prayers, that you may stand perfect and fully assured in all the will of God.*

God's Love Story cannot be bound by distance.

The letter to Philemon:

Philemon was a slave owner and Onesimus was his slave. A master in the Roman Empire could do whatever he wanted with an escaped slave. Usually they would brand the mark "Fugitive" on the forehead and top of their hands. This way if they escaped again, everyone would know that he was an escaped slave. The master could beat the slave half to death or all the way to death. He could cut the ends of his feet off and make so that he would never run again.

Paul wanted Onesimus to return, but be treated as a brother in Christ by his master. In fact Paul even hinted at freeing Onesimus so that he could serve on the mission field. External biblical history tells us that Onesimus was freed and eventually became a church leader and was martyred for his faith.

God's Love Story cannot be bound by circumstances.

Everything we have covered in this lesson up to this point was simply the opening. Simply put, the title to the lesson this morning is "God's Love Story Cannot Be Bound." No matter what happens in your life, no matter what struggle you are having, no matter what hurt someone has caused you, no matter what illness you are suffering, God's Love Story cannot be bound! His love story permeates through chains, culture, distance, circumstances, sickness, sadness, pain and poverty. Nothing on this earth can limit God's great love story in your life, but you. So let go of that limited mindset and let God do His best work in you.