

Women's Bible Study

A TWO-YEAR JOURNEY THROUGH
THE STORY OF GOD

Week 10 | The Church is a New Humanity | Paul's Epistles from Prison Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, Philemon

The gospel creates communities of faith devoted to Jesus and to one another

This week we're going to be looking at four short epistles written by the apostle Paul during the years that he was imprisoned in Rome. Because of his imprisonment, Paul was not free to visit the churches personally, and so he sent letters to the churches, giving them instruction about how to live as the people of God in the midst of a fallen world.

The Old Testament prophets had spoken of a time when God's people would receive a *new heart* and a *new spirit*—a new ability to love and obey God (Ezekiel 36:26-27). God would make a *new covenant* with His people and God's people would come to know Him more fully and be connected with Him in their innermost being. (Jeremiah 31:33-34).

This *New Covenant* was established through Christ's death and resurrection. This *New Covenant* brings a new vitality of spiritual life, a new creation, a *new humanity*. We participate in the *New Covenant* through faith in Christ. We who are followers of Christ are the *new humanity* prophesied in the Old Testament. The Bible says (2 Cor. 5:17) "*if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!*" We have a new identity in Christ; we a *new humanity*.

What does it mean to be "*in Christ*"? How do we understand this? Let's see what we learn from Paul's four prison epistles.

The Letter to the Ephesians: *Followers of Jesus are embraced as the covenant family of God*

1. **Read Ephesians 1:1-14** *Those who are in Christ have been lavishly blessed through God's grace*
 - a. What is God's purpose for each of us in the community of faith? (vs. 4; see also Romans 8:29)
 - b. What stunning privilege is granted to those who belong to Christ? (vs. 5)
 - c. *Personal reflection:* Consider that we are *adopted* into God's *family* through our union with Christ. What does that tell you about God? What aspects of that are most meaningful to you?
 - d. What further benefits come to those who are in Christ? (vs. 7-8)
 - e. Write the definition of the word *redemption*? (Ask Siri or Google and listen to 2-3 of the entries)
 - f. What is God's plan for the course of history? (vs. 9-10)
 - g. What do you learn from 1:11 about God's sovereignty—His ultimate authority over all things?
 - h. What happens when a person hears the gospel of Christ and believes in Him? (vs. 13-14)

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2. **Read Ephesians 2:1-10** *We were once spiritually dead, but now we have been given spiritual life*
- Paul depicts life apart from Christ as being essentially *death*, not *life*. How does Scripture describe our manner of life prior to our union with Christ? (2:2-3)
 - The central argument of this section is given succinctly in verses 4-5. What does verse 5 tell you that God has done for you?
 - What characteristics of God do you see in verses 4-5?
 - Consider God's work of grace in our salvation. [Note: *grace* means *the unmerited favor of God*]
 - On what basis have we received salvation? (verses 8-9)
 - What role do our good works play in meriting our salvation? (vs.9)
 - Our salvation is a *gift* from God, received through faith. According to Ephesians 2:10, how will God's purpose for us be displayed in our lives?

God's work of redemption is not just for individuals; it is a new work of creation by which God is forming a new spiritual community—a new people of God. God is building His church—the collection of people from every nation who have been joined with Christ and made alive through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. This is a new humanity.

3. **Read Ephesians 4:1-3** *Live your life worthy of the spiritual calling you have received*
- We have been raised from spiritual death to life. How should we now live? (vs. 1)
 - What personal qualities should be developed in our lives? (vs. 2-3)

Paul challenges us to take off our old selves, like an old set of clothes, and put on the new self—the new creation which is empowered by the Holy Spirit and is being shaped into the character-image of Christ.

4. **Read Ephesians 4:22-32** *Take off the old self and put on the new self*
- How does Paul describe this new self? (4:24)
 - What characteristics should be growing in you as a result of your new identity in Christ? (25-32)

*We have been adopted into God's family,
so we are called to live lives pleasing to Him*

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The Letter to the Philippians: *We can live in joy in spite of circumstances*

The book of Philippians was written to believers in Philippi, a thriving Grecian city near the Aegean Sea. Paul had founded this church on his second missionary journey, and his deep affection for them is apparent in the letter.

Paul's purpose in writing this letter is fourfold:

- It is a letter of *encouragement* to them to ease their distress concerning his imprisonment
- It is a letter to *thank them* for their sacrificial giving in support of his gospel mission
- It is an admonition to *live in humility and unity*
- It teaches them (and us) to *find joy and trust God* in the face of adversity

1. **Read Philippians 1:12-18.** *Paul's life is at risk, but his joy is unshakable.*
 - a. Paul writes from prison. What is his attitude toward his circumstances? (1:18)
 - b. How has Paul's imprisonment served to advance the gospel? (1:12-14)
2. **Read Philippians 1:20-24.** *Paul's deepest desire is that Christ will be exalted.*
 - a. What is the source and the secret of Paul's joy? What is Paul's reasoning? (1:21-22)
 - b. *Personal reflection:* Consider Paul's view of his ultimate future. Are you able to share his perspective? How would this perspective serve to help you face the fears in your life?
3. **Read Philippians 2:1-11.** *We are to cultivate an attitude of humility.*
 - a. In light of our union with Christ, how should we relate to one another? (2:1-4)
 - b. In our achievement-oriented culture, the notion of humility is difficult for us to grasp. This passage challenges us to consider Jesus as a perfect model of humility and obedience.
 - i. Describe the nature of His humility. (2:6-8)
 - ii. Describe the nature of His exaltation. (2:9-11)
4. **Read Philippians 4:4-9.** *We can live in joy because we belong to Jesus*
 - a. How are we to respond to situations that cause anxiety? (4:4-7)
 - b. Although God gives peace as we walk prayerfully through difficult times, what choices help us cultivate a peaceful spirit? (vs. 8-9)

We have a new identity in Christ. We are no longer slaves to sin; we are no longer slaves to fear. In Christ we are sons of God. The book of Philippians shows us that we can find joy in our lives even in the face of adversity.

Rejoice! The Lord is near.

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The Letter to the Colossians: *Cling to Christ, Who is Supreme Over All Powers*

During Paul's imprisonment in Rome (Acts 28:30-31), he received a visit from Epaphras, a co-worker who had started the church at Colossae, a small city in southern Turkey. Epaphras reported to Paul that the Christian community in Colossae was being influenced by teachers of heresy—teachers who promoted mysticism and legalism that were contrary to the gospel of Christ. The Colossians were in danger of being deceived. Paul wrote this letter to the Colossians to correct errors in their thinking and to exhort the church to return to a true knowledge of Christ and obedience to Him.

1. **Read Colossians 1:9-14** *Paul prays for continued spiritual wisdom and understanding*
 - a. What does Paul pray that God will do in the lives of these believers? (1:9)
 - b. What is the desired result of God's work in their lives? (1:10)
 - c. What tremendous work has God done in our lives through Jesus? (1:13-14)
2. **Read Colossians 1:15-23.** *Jesus provides complete reconciliation*
 - a. List three things you learn about Jesus in Colossians 1:15-17
 - b. What has Christ accomplished through His death? (1:19-22)
 - c. What is the nature of fallen man apart from Christ, and how has Jesus changed that? (21-23)
3. **Read Colossians 3:1-17** *Clothe yourself with the character of Christ*
 - a. How are we to adjust the priorities of our lives? (3:1-2)
 - b. We have a new identity in Christ. How does Paul describe this change in us? (3:9-10)
 - c. What characteristics are in keeping with our new identity as Christians? (3:12-14)
 - d. What overarching purpose should govern our interpersonal relationships (3:15)
 - e. *Personal reflection:* How does the lifestyle described in (3:16) help you develop the virtues listed in 3:12-15)?

Your new identity in Christ should transform every aspect of your life

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The Letter to Philemon: *Paul pleads for forgiveness toward a Christian brother*

One strong implication of our new identity in Christ is that we are all forgiven sinners. We have all been saved by grace, and we must not withhold forgiveness from others. We are to forgive one another, and we must also treat one another with dignity, honor, and humility. A concrete example of this is described in Paul's letter to Philemon.

Philemon was a leader in the Colossian church. Philemon had once owned a slave named Onesimus, but Onesimus had stolen money from Philemon and had run away. This was a crime punishable by death under Roman law.

Onesimus had encountered Paul during Paul's imprisonment. Onesimus heard the gospel from Paul, and he had become a Christian. Now Onesimus was serving the gospel as a co-worker with Paul. When Paul sent the letter of *Colossians* to the church at Colossae, he also sent both Onesimus and this letter to Philemon. The purpose of the letter was to ask Philemon to forgive and embrace this brother in Christ (and former slave) who had wronged Philemon deeply. Paul asked Philemon to forgive and reinstate Onesimus as a "*dear brother*" rather than as a slave. Paul offered that he himself would pay to Philemon whatever Onesimus owed him.

1. Read Philemon 8-18

- a. How does Paul's commitment in this letter (vs. 18) reflect what Jesus has done for us?
- b. Why is forgiveness an appropriate response by Philemon? (See Ephesians 4:32)
- c. *Personal reflection:* Consider your identity as a beloved child of God, united with Christ and fully forgiven. Is there someone whom you need to forgive and embrace as a member of God's family?

*Because we are freely forgiven as a gift of God's grace,
we must extend the grace of forgiveness to others*

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