

WHY SHOULD WE READ AND DISCUSS THE LETTERS PAUL WROTE FROM PRISON?

A man named Paul who lived in the first century explained the teachings of Jesus to the Roman world and launched Christianity as a world religion. He did this in person as he traveled around the Roman Empire establishing communities of Jesus' followers, and also through letters, which he wrote to help guide these communities. Many of his letters have survived, and they've become part of the Bible. If you want to find out more about Jesus, they can help you discover life-transforming things about him.

Paul wrote about half of these letters while he was traveling around the empire. They're introduced in another volume in this series, *Paul's Journey Letters (PJL)*. Later in his life, Paul was held in prison by the Romans for years. During that time he continued to guide and direct the communities of Jesus' followers by writing to them. The letters he sent from prison are introduced in this volume. (Two of the letters, 1 Timothy and Titus, were written during a short time of freedom in between imprisonments, but they belong to this general period of his life and so will be considered "prison letters" as well.)

As in the case of the journey letters, the Paul we meet in the prison letters is a paradoxical and sometimes frustrating figure. He says many things that are genuinely inspiring: "We are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do." "Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ

Jesus.” But at the same time, Paul makes other statements that are difficult to understand, and which have remained controversial down through the centuries: “I do not permit a woman to teach or to assume authority over a man; she must be quiet.” “Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything.” Because of statements like these, many people find Paul confusing and upsetting.

But the problem is actually not with Paul, but with the way his writings are customarily approached. His thoughts and ideas are mostly known through individual statements like these that are typically quoted out of their original contexts. This study guide will give you the chance to engage Paul’s prison letters as entire works, within the context of his life and times, and so appreciate their overall meanings. To do this, you’ll be going through these letters faster, reading much more of them at a time. This might not be the way you’re used to seeing Paul approached. It might require a bit of an adjustment. But you’ll discover that his individual statements make much more sense when you can recognize how they fit within their larger historical and literary settings. When you read Paul’s letters this way, you’ll probably find that you understand and appreciate him in a way you never have before.

UNDERSTANDING THE
BOOKS OF THE BIBLE

PAUL’S PRISON LETTERS

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PAUL'S PRISON LETTERS

COLOSSIANS
EPHESIANS
PHILEMON
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1 TIMOTHY
TITUS
2 TIMOTHY

Christopher R. Smith



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UNDERSTANDING THE BOOKS OF THE BIBLE: Paul's Prison Letters
ISBN-13: 978-1-60657-062-3

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13 12 11 / 6 5 4 3 2 1

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A catalog record for this book is available through the Library of Congress.

CONTENTS

How These Study Guides Are Different	1
COLOSSIANS	
SESSION 1 Experiencing Colossians as a Whole	11
SESSION 2 Who Paul Is and What He Teaches about Jesus	16
SESSION 3 Following Jesus Means Living in a New Realm, Not Keeping Religious Rules	20
SESSION 4 Living a New Life Together as Followers of Jesus	25
EPHESIANS	
SESSION 5 Experiencing Ephesians as a Whole	36
SESSION 6 What God Has Done for Us through Jesus	39
SESSION 7 Life in a New Realm and the New Humanity	43
SESSION 8 The Unified Body's Diversity of Gifts; Putting Off the Old and Putting On the New	47
SESSION 9 The New Life in Basic Relationships; Arming for Spiritual Conflict	51
PHILEMON	
SESSION 10 Experiencing Philemon as a Whole	56
PHILIPPIANS	
SESSION 11 Experiencing Philippians as a Whole	63
SESSION 12 Paul's Prayer for the Philippians; Their Concern about His Imprisonment and Trial	66
SESSION 13 Jesus' Example, Illustrated by Timothy and Epaphroditus	71

SESSION 14		
	Paul's Example of Living to Know Christ	76
SESSION 15		
	Paul's Personal Thanks and Encouragement and His Practical Advice	82
	1 TIMOTHY	
SESSION 16		
	Experiencing 1 Timothy as a Whole	89
SESSION 17		
	Timothy Is to Correct the Problems in Ephesus as Paul's Representative	92
SESSION 18		
	Restoring Order and Decency and Establishing Good Leadership	97
SESSION 19		
	Ensuring Community Support for Worthy Leaders	103
SESSION 20		
	Living Both in This Age and the Coming One	108
	TITUS	
SESSION 21		
	Experiencing Titus as a Whole	114
	2 TIMOTHY	
SESSION 22		
	Experiencing 2 Timothy as a Whole	120
SESSION 23		
	Timothy's Heritage, Giftedness, Faithfulness, Teaching, and Dedication	124
SESSION 24		
	The Conflict and Sufferings of the Last Days	129

HOW THESE STUDY GUIDES ARE DIFFERENT

Did you know you could read and study the Bible without using any chapters or verses? The books of the Bible are real “books.” They’re meant to be experienced the same way other books are: as exciting, interesting works that keep you turning pages right to the end and then make you want to go back and savor each part. The UNDERSTANDING THE BOOKS OF THE BIBLE series of study guides will help you do that with the Bible.

While you can use these guides with any version or translation, they’re especially designed to be used with *The Books of the Bible*, an edition of the Scriptures from Biblica that takes out the chapter and verse numbers and presents the biblical books in their natural form. Here’s what people are saying about reading the Bible this way:

I love it. I find myself understanding Scripture in a new way, with a fresh lens, and I feel spiritually refreshed as a result. I learn much more through stories being told, and with this new format, I feel the truth of the story come alive for me.

Reading Scripture this way flows beautifully. I don’t miss the chapter and verse numbers. I like them gone. They got in the way.

I’ve been a reader of the Bible all of my life. But after reading just a few pages without chapters and verses, I was amazed at what I’d been missing all these years.

For more information about *The Books of the Bible* or to obtain a copy of this specially designed edition, visit <http://www.Biblica.com/TheBooks>. Watch this site for a four-volume set comprising the entire Bible in this format, coming soon.

For people who are used to chapters and verses, reading and studying the Bible without them may take a little getting used to. It's like when you get a new smart phone, or a new computer or tablet. You have to unlearn some old ways of doing things and learn some new ways. But it's not too long until you catch on to how the new system works and you find you can do a lot of things you couldn't do before.

Here are some of the ways you and your group will have a better experience of the Scriptures by using these study guides.

YOU'LL FOLLOW THE NATURAL FLOW OF BIBLICAL BOOKS

This guide will take you through the seven letters Paul wrote during or around the times of his imprisonments. As you read and discuss them, you'll follow their natural flow. (The way four of these letters unfold—Colossians, Ephesians, Philippians, and 1 Timothy—is illustrated in the outlines on pages 32, 33, 62, and 88.) These letters have now become biblical books, but you won't go chapter-by-chapter through them. The chapter divisions in the Bible often come at the wrong places and break up the flow. Did you know that the chapter divisions used in most modern Bibles were added more than a thousand years after the biblical books were written? And that the verse numbers were added more than three centuries after that? If you grew up with the chapter-and-verse system, it may feel like part of the inspired word of God. But it's not. Those little numbers aren't holy, and when you read and study Paul's letters without them, you'll hear their message more clearly than ever before.

To help you get a feel for where you are in each book's natural flow, in the longer letters the sessions will be headed by a visual cue, like this:

Ephesians > Main Body > Practical Teaching

YOU'LL UNDERSTAND WHOLE BOOKS

Imagine going to a friend's house to watch a movie you've never seen before. After only a couple of scenes, your friend stops the film and says, "So, tell me what you think of it so far." When you give your best shot at a reply, based on the little you've seen, your friend says, "You know, there's a scene in another movie that always makes me think of this one." He switches to a different movie and before you know it, you're watching a scene from the middle of another film.

Who would ever try to watch a movie this way? Yet many study guides take this approach to the Bible. They have you read a few paragraphs from one book, then jump to a passage in another book. The UNDERSTANDING THE BOOKS OF THE BIBLE series doesn't do that. Instead, these study guides focus on understanding the message and meaning of one book at a time. Your group will read through these six letters in their entirety, not just selected chapters or verses.

Sessions 1, 5, 10, 11, 16, 21, and 22 are overviews that will let you experience each of Paul's prison letters as a whole, to prepare you for considering their individual sections. Reading through an entire book at once will be like viewing a whole movie before zooming in on one scene. Groups that read books of the Bible aloud together have a great experience doing this. (If you've never done it before, give it a try—you'll be surprised at how well it flows and how fast the time passes.)

For these overview sessions, the discussion will be briefer and designed to allow people to share their overall impressions. If you're using *The Books of the Bible*, you may find it helpful to read the book introductions in that edition together before reading each book itself.

As a group leader, you should take a moment after each of these readings to allow people to ask about any words or phrases they didn't understand and to let the group work to understand them together.

YOU'LL DECIDE FOR YOURSELVES WHAT TO DISCUSS

In each session of this study guide there are many options for discussion. While each session could be completed by a group in about an hour and a

half, any one of the questions could lead to an involved conversation. There's no need to cut the conversation short to try to "get through it all." As a group leader, you can read through all the questions ahead of time and decide which one(s) to begin with, and what order to take them up in. If you do get into an involved discussion of one question, you can leave out some of the others, or you can extend the study over more than one meeting if you do want to cover all of them.

Particularly note those places where there are instructions "For Your Next Meeting" at the end of a session, and use them to prepare for the following session.

TOGETHER, YOU'LL TELL THE STORY

Each session gives creative suggestions for reading the passage you'll be discussing. The discussion options will often invite group members to retell the biblical story from fresh perspectives. This kind of telling and retelling is a spiritual discipline, similar to Bible memorization, that allows people to personalize the Scriptures and take them to heart. This discipline is very timely in a culture that increasingly appreciates the value and authority of story.

If you're using *The Books of the Bible*, you'll find that the natural sections it marks off by white space match up in most cases with the sections of the reading. If you're using another edition of the Bible, you'll be able to identify these sections easily because they'll be indicated in this guide by their opening lines or by some other means that makes them obvious.

EVERYBODY WILL PARTICIPATE

There's plenty of opportunity for everyone in the group to participate. Everyone can take turns reading from the letters that you'll be considering. Group members can also read the session introduction aloud or the discussion questions. As a leader, you can easily involve quiet people by giving them these opportunities. And everyone will feel that they can speak up and answer the questions, because they're not looking for "right answers." Instead, they invite the group to work together to understand the Bible.

YOU'LL ALL SHARE DEEPLY

The discussion questions will invite you to share deeply about your ideas and experiences. The answers to these questions can't be found just by "looking them up." They require reflection on the meaning of each saying, in the wider context of the book it belongs to, in light of your personal experience. These aren't the kinds of abstract, academic questions that make the discussion feel like a test. Instead, they'll connect the Bible passage to your life in practical, personal, relational ways.

To create a climate of trust where this kind of deep sharing is encouraged, here are a couple of ground rules that your group should agree to at its first meeting:

- *Confidentiality.* Group members agree to keep what is shared in the group strictly confidential. "What's said in the group stays in the group."
- *Respect.* Group members will treat other members with respect at all times, even when disagreeing over ideas.

HOW TO LEAD GROUP STUDIES USING THIS GUIDE

Each session has three basic parts:

Introduction

Have a member of your group read the introduction to the session out loud to everyone. Then give group members the chance to ask questions about the introduction and offer their own thoughts and examples.

Reading

Have some people read out loud the selection from Paul's letters that you'll be discussing. The study guide will offer suggestions for various ways you can do this for each session. In the overview sessions, your whole group will take turns reading through a letter in its entirety.

Discussion Questions

Most questions are introduced with some observations. These may give some background to the history and culture of the ancient world or explain where you are in the flow of a letter. After these observations there are suggested discussion questions. Many of them have multiple parts that are really just different ways of getting at an issue.

You don't have to discuss the questions in the order they appear in the study guide. You can choose to spend your time exploring just one or two questions and not do the others. Or you can have a shorter discussion of each question so that you do cover all of them. As the group leader, before the meeting you should read the questions and the observations that introduce them and decide which ones you want to emphasize.

When you get to a given question, have someone read aloud the observations and the question. As you answer the question, interact with the observations (you can agree or disagree with them) in light of your reading from the Bible. Use only part of the question to get at the issue from one angle, or use all of the parts, as you choose.

(In some cases, reading and discussion will be combined, and discussion questions may also be asked in the introduction to a session.)

TIPS FOR HOME GROUPS, SUNDAY SCHOOL CLASSES, COMMUNITY BIBLE EXPERIENCES, AND INDIVIDUAL USE

If you're using this guide in a *home group*, you may want to begin each meeting (or at least some meetings) by having dinner together. You may also want to have a time of singing and prayer before or after the study.

If you're using this guide in a *Sunday school class*, you may want to have a time of singing and prayer before or after the study.

This study guide can also be used in connection with a *community Bible experience* of the letters Paul sent from prison. If you're using it in this way:

- Encourage people to read each session's Scripture passage by themselves early in the week (except for sessions 1, 5, 10, 11, 16, 21, and 22, when the whole church should gather to hear

entire letters read out loud).

- Do each session in midweek small groups.
- Invite people to write/create some response to each small-group session that could be shared in worship that weekend. These might involve poetry, journal or blog entries, artwork, dramas, videos, and so on, and especially the creative retellings that are invited in some sessions.
- During the weekend worship services, let people share these responses, and have preaching on the topic of the session that was studied that week. Speakers can gather up comments they've heard from people and draw on their own reflections to sum up the church's experience of that session.
- The following week will be devoted to the next session in the same way.

This guide can also be used for *individual study*. You can write out your responses to the questions in a notebook or journal. (However, we really encourage reading and studying the Bible in community!)

Note: Anytime you see *italicized* words in Scripture quotations in this book, the italics have been added for emphasis.

COLOSSIANS



EXPERIENCING COLOSSIANS AS A WHOLE

INTRODUCTION

*Have someone read this introduction aloud for your group, pausing to allow for discussion of the question that is suggested in the middle. As you listen, you can find the locations that are mentioned on the map on page 10. Cities and regions on this map appear in **bold** type when they are first mentioned in this guide.*

The study guide in this series called *Paul's Journey Letters (PJL)* traces his life up to about AD 58. It leaves him in the city of **Corinth**, where he was helping the followers of Jesus in **Macedonia** and **Achaia** (modern-day Greece) organize a collection to help the poor in **Judea**. Paul's plan was to bring this collection to **Jerusalem** and then head back out into the western part of the Roman Empire to continue sharing the good news about Jesus.

This guide to *Paul's Prison Letters* will trace the story of the rest of his life. Paul wasn't able to fulfill his plans to journey into the western part of the empire. He had become such a controversial figure by the time he went to Jerusalem that his presence there sparked a city-wide riot. He was taken into custody by Roman officials, who held him for interrogation. He was moved to the city of **Caesarea** for his safety. There he had several hearings and trials, but his case was repeatedly delayed. After two years, he invoked his rights as a Roman citizen and asked to have Caesar hear his case personally. So he was

taken to **Rome**, where he spent at least two more years awaiting trial. But while he was a prisoner there, he continued to guide communities of Jesus' followers in various parts of the empire through letters and messengers. Some of his letters were so useful and inspiring that they were preserved and have become part of the Bible. You'll be reading and discussing them in the course of this guide. (Two of the letters, 1 Timothy and Titus, were written during a short time of freedom between imprisonments, but they belong to this general period of his life and so will be considered "prison letters" as well.)

- What other moral or religious leaders can your group name who've been imprisoned for a time and who've used this experience as the opportunity or inspiration to create some influential writings? (There are some suggestions at the end of this session that you can compare your list with, once you've made it.) Why are such leaders so often imprisoned? Is this actually good for them and their causes if it leads to writings like these?

One community Paul wrote to around AD 60–62 was in the city of **Colossae**. It was about 100 miles east of **Ephesus**, which had earlier been Paul's base of operations for over two years (see *PJL* session 4). From Ephesus he'd sent a man named Epaphras, who was originally from Colossae himself, to establish communities of Jesus' followers in his home city and two other ones nearby, Laodicea and Hierapolis. Epaphras was later arrested and also brought to Rome as a prisoner. There he was able to give Paul the latest news from these cities.

Epaphras told Paul that the community in Colossae was strong and growing, but that it was also threatened by some of the same influences Paul had needed to correct in some of his earlier letters. The Colossians were mostly Gentiles, but like the Galatians they were being pressured to receive circumcision, keep kosher, and observe the Sabbath and other Jewish holy days (*PJL* sessions 17–20). Some of the Colossians, like the Corinthians, were priding themselves on having visions and getting secret spiritual knowledge (*PJL* sessions 5, 10, and 16). Many in the community apparently also thought, again like the Corinthians, that "harsh treatment of the body" would somehow liberate the spirit (*PJL* session 7). Paul recognized that in all these ways the

Colossians were trying to add something to the salvation they'd received when they put their faith and trust in Jesus. By trying to add to it, they were paradoxically diminishing it. So he wrote them a letter explaining that God's complete salvation is received and experienced in relationship with Jesus. This letter is now the book of Colossians in the Bible.

READING

Choose someone who's a good reader and have them read Colossians out loud to your group. This should take about ten to twelve minutes. (This was how the letter was delivered to its original recipients: Tychicus, as Paul's representative, read it to the gathered community at Colossae.)

As you're listening to Colossians, you can read along in the text if you wish. It's on pages 15**–15** in *The Books of the Bible*. (If you're using another edition, you can find it in the table of contents.) You can also follow how the book unfolds by looking at the outline on page 32. Or, if you want to recapture something of the Colossians' original experience of receiving this letter, you can just listen as it's read.

If you don't understand the meaning of particular words or phrases, make a note of them. After the reading, your group should work together to understand these better. (For one thing, in his letters, Paul often refers to Jesus as "Christ." This is a Greek term, *christos*, that translates the Hebrew word "Messiah." Both mean literally "anointed one." This is a title for the special agent of salvation and spiritual deliverance that God promised to send.)

Notice how this book of the Bible is an actual letter. It has brief opening and closing sections that follow the standard conventions for letters of the time. At the beginning, the sender and recipients are named, and a good wish is offered. (Since Paul's long-time collaborator Timothy is with him in Rome, Paul writes on behalf of the two of them.) In the letter's conclusion, as was also customary, Paul introduces his messenger, Tychicus. He also notes that Onesimus, who's originally from Colossae, is now returning there as well. (We'll find out much more about Onesimus in session 10, when we consider Paul's letter to Philemon, who was a leader in the community at Colossae.) Finally, Paul extends greetings to the Colossians from various other people they know, particularly their friend Epaphras.

DISCUSSION

- ➔ If you've read Colossians before, but only a little at a time, what was it like to hear it all at once, and to recognize that it's an actual letter?
- ➔ What part(s) of this letter spoke to you the most during this initial reading? Why?
- ➔ What would you say is its overall message? What's the basic tension here—what are some people trying to get the Colossians to do that Paul doesn't want them to do, and what is Paul trying to get them to do instead?
- ➔ Can you identify a key sentence or paragraph in the letter that seems to sum up Paul's purpose for writing it?
- ➔ Look at the end of Colossians, where Paul introduces his messengers and sends greetings to the community from people they know. He also offers a particular word of encouragement to Archippus, who is probably an important leader of the community. What can you discover from this section of the letter about what life was like in the early communities of Jesus' followers, and about how Paul carried on his work? (For example, where did churches meet? How did they share news with one another? What kinds of people were Paul's coworkers? What kinds of people were community leaders?) What aspects of life in these early communities, as illustrated in Colossians, do you find most appealing? Why?

Examples of some moral and religious leaders whose imprisonment was the occasion or inspiration for influential writings:

John Bunyan, *Pilgrim's Progress*

Martin Luther King Jr., *Letter From a Birmingham Jail*

Nelson Mandela, *No Easy Walk to Freedom* (expanded into *Long Walk to Freedom* after his release)

Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, *Cancer Ward*, *The Gulag Archipelago*, and other writings

WHO PAUL IS AND WHAT HE TEACHES ABOUT JESUS

Colossians > Introduction

INTRODUCTION

In his letter to the Colossians, Paul will eventually offer a strong challenge to the way their community has been trying to follow Jesus. But because they don't know him personally, Paul begins by establishing a relationship with them, from which he can then speak to their community life. He introduces himself as a fellow worker of their friend Epaphras, and he tells them about his life and ministry.

Following the custom of ancient letters, Paul first describes some good things about the Colossians that he's grateful to God for, and he explains how he's been praying for them. Only then does he summarize the message he proclaims everywhere about Jesus and describe how he has worked hard and suffered as Jesus' messenger.

READING AND DISCUSSION

1 Have someone read the thanksgiving and prayer at the beginning of Colossians, starting with “We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you” and ending with “in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.”

➡ Paul describes Colossae as one of the many places in the world where the gospel (the good news about Jesus) has been “bearing fruit and growing.” What does it look like when the gospel does this? From what places in the world today have you heard firsthand reports of the good news “bearing fruit and growing”? Share some of these reports with the group.

➡ Divide your group into several smaller teams. Assign each team one or more of the following requests in Paul's prayer. Have each team discuss and then explain to the whole group what Paul means by these phrases. Then let each person say which of these things they'd most like to experience as a greater reality in their own life right now and why.

- Being filled with the knowledge of God's will through all the wisdom and understanding that the Spirit gives.
- Living a life worthy of the Lord and pleasing him in every way.
- Bearing fruit in every good work.
- Growing in the knowledge of God.
- Being strengthened with all power according to God's glorious might.
- Having great endurance and patience.
- Giving joyful thanks to the Father.

➡ Do you typically pray that God will give your family and friends things like spiritual enlightenment or joyful, thankful hearts? If not, use this prayer in the week ahead as a model to help you pray for individuals or a community in a new way. Share any resulting significant experiences you have in prayer at your group's next meeting.

2 Have another person read Paul's summary of his message about Jesus, beginning with “The Son is the image of the invisible God” and ending, “This is the gospel . . . of which I, Paul, have become a servant.”

In this summary of his message, and at the end of his prayer, Paul describes from a number of different perspectives how God has brought us salvation through Jesus. This is the most important thing he wants the Colossians to understand. But it's such a rich, deep, and complex reality that the only way to explain it is by describing it through a variety of images.

Paul also used multiple images to explain the work of Jesus in his journey letters, including some of the same images he uses here. For example, he told the Corinthians that Jesus *reconciled* us to God, that is, he restored a broken relationship, and that God *forgave* our sins because of what Jesus did (*PJL* session 14). Paul told the Galatians and the Romans that Jesus *redeemed* us, that is, he bought our freedom from slavery or captivity (*PJL* sessions 19 and 24). But here in Colossians Paul uses some additional images to describe from even further perspectives what Jesus did for us “through his blood, shed on the cross.”

➤ Work together as a group to explain how each of the following images captures an important aspect of what God has done for us through Jesus. Give a modern-day example to illustrate the image if you can.

- God gave us a share in an inheritance.
- God rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves (also called “the kingdom of light”).
- God declared us innocent (he made us “free from accusation”).

3 Finally, have someone read Paul's description of his efforts and sufferings, beginning with “Now I rejoice in what I am suffering for you” and ending, “I . . . delight to see how disciplined you are and how firm your faith in Christ is.”

Paul says here, “I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ's afflictions.” He does not mean that anything needs to be added to what Jesus did to bring us salvation—he will make that abundantly clear in the rest of his letter. Rather, he's speaking of the afflictions of Christ's “body, which is the church.” The work of Jesus on the cross is complete and entirely

sufficient, but his followers on earth are called to experience a certain amount of additional suffering as the agents and messengers of this salvation. “What is still lacking” means “what still remains to be experienced.” Paul says he will gladly do his part, by working hard to bring the good news about Jesus to people like the Colossians and if necessary suffering in the process.

➤ In what ways is the community of Jesus' followers on earth today still “filling up” the remaining afflictions of Christ's body? What part do you currently see yourself playing in this? What more are you willing to do?

4 Paul also says that he has received a commission to “fill up the word of God” to the Colossians (NIV “to present to you the word of God in its fullness”; the same term, “fill up,” is used here as is used for Christ's afflictions). By this Paul means that he is disclosing a part of the word of God to humanity that had previously been a “mystery . . . hidden for ages and generations.” This remaining word from God, now being revealed, is that Gentiles like the Colossians are included in God's salvation along with the Jews. This happens through Christ, “in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.” Once again, there is nothing lacking in Christ himself, but the revelation about him is becoming more and more complete through Paul's work.

➤ Do you think that everything we need to know (or can know) about God's salvation is now recorded for us in the Scriptures, since they have been completed with the addition of the New Testament writings? Or does the word of God to humanity still need to be “filled up” further in some way? If so, how would this be done?

FOLLOWING JESUS MEANS LIVING IN A NEW REALM, NOT KEEPING RELIGIOUS RULES

Colossians > Main Body > Correction

INTRODUCTION

In the main body of his letter to the Colossians, Paul begins by correcting the idea that various religious observances need to be added to faith in Jesus. The Colossians were Gentiles who “received Christ Jesus as Lord” when they heard about him from Epaphras. Later, however, other teachers came into their community and insisted that they needed to follow at least some aspects of the Jewish law to be genuinely saved. (The same thing happened in the communities at Corinth and in Galatia, *PJL* sessions 14, 19, and 20.) These teachers also encouraged “harsh treatment of the body” (probably going without food or sleep), the pursuit of spiritual visions, and the worship of angels.

Paul recognized that if the Colossians relied on these measures in addition to their faith, they would “lose connection” with Christ and become no better off than people who’d never met him in the first place. They’d be living as if they “still belonged to the world.” So in a brief but densely packed passage, he exposes how unreliable these measures are, and he challenges the Colossians to be “rooted and built up” in relationship with Christ instead.

Note: when Paul is describing *collective* human life apart from God here, he calls it the “world,” meaning not the earth, its inhabitants, or human culture, but rather a particular way of living, out of relationship with God. When he speaks of *individual* human life apart from God, he calls it the

“flesh,” meaning not the human body, but once again the desire and tendency to live on one’s own terms.

READING

Have someone read the first part of the main body of Colossians, beginning with, “So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live your lives in him,” and ending, “Such regulations indeed have an appearance of wisdom . . . but they lack any value in restraining sensual indulgence.”

DISCUSSION

1 In this passage Paul paints a portrait of two different realms in which people can live. He wants to show that the measures the Colossians are being urged to adopt will actually place them back in the realm they were taken out of when they believed in Jesus.

That realm is life apart from God—not necessarily lived in deliberate defiance of God, or even without thought of God, but nevertheless not in relationship with God. In this realm, the natural way of life is to devise systems of rules to follow and religious practices to observe (“human commands and teachings”). The belief is that these systems are grounded in “elemental spiritual forces,” which can deliver a secure existence within a vast and mysterious universe. But Paul insists that these systems don’t provide genuine life. Instead, the people who follow them are actually deceived, held captive, spiritually dead.

The other realm is life in Christ. Those who live by faith in him are free, forgiven, and spiritually alive. They are continually nourished and supported through an organic connection with Christ: He is the “head” and they are the “body.” They are no longer obliged to follow rules or religious systems. Instead they can live by faith, meaning that they can freely and actively trust Jesus to guide and influence them in every aspect of life.

➤ What different religious or moral systems do the people of your culture follow? Name as many as you can. (For example, think of those developed by formal religions, private societies, self-help groups, and service organizations, as well as systems that people

you know have devised for themselves.) What kind of security do these systems offer people? What are their positive contributions, and what are their limitations?

➤ If you are now a follower of Jesus, what system did you follow before you came to believe in him? To what extent do you think you're now actively guided and directed in life by your relationship with God, and to what extent might you still be following this system, or one like it that you've learned from other Christians?

2 To describe how faith in Jesus takes us out of the realm of life apart from God and brings us into the realm of life in relationship with God, Paul uses the imagery of two ceremonies that were performed to bring individuals into the community of God's people.

When the Jewish nation constituted this community, it used circumcision as a sign of belonging. Paul tells the Colossians that even though they are Gentiles, not Jews, they have received “a circumcision not performed by human hands.” Their “flesh,” their individual life apart from God, has been “put off.” (Paul will develop this idea at more length in his practical teaching, which we'll consider in the next session.)

When the people of God became a multinational community of believers in Jesus, baptism became the sign of a person entering this community. Paul explains to the Colossians that through baptism they've been “buried” with Jesus, meaning that they've died to their old realm of life, and they've been raised with Jesus into a new realm. (This concept is also developed further in Paul's practical teaching.)

Beyond these two images, Paul once again speaks about what Christ has done for us from a variety of perspectives. He says that through him, God made us alive when we were spiritually dead; that God forgave our sins; that he cancelled our debts; and that he defeated the powers that held us captive.

➤ Work together as a group to explain how each of these perspectives helps explain something more of what God has done for us in Christ. Which of them best helps you understand

how faith in Jesus brings us into the realm of life in relationship with God?

➤ Give anyone in the group who's been baptized the chance to share how this experience was a “burial” and a “resurrection” for them.

3 Paul notes that the rules the Colossians are being encouraged to keep deal primarily with what they eat and drink and with how they should observe particular days. He protests that this is making them concentrate on things that are superficial, perishable, and transient. This is why, even though these rules appear to be thoughtful and rigorous, they actually “lack any value in restraining sensual indulgence.” They focus on a “shadow” instead of the “reality” that is in Christ.

Paul explains that “in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form.” In his time the term “fullness” (*pleroma*) was used to describe the totality of all the gods, spirits, angels, etc. that were thought to exist in a hierarchy between the supreme God and human beings. The Colossians were being encouraged to worship some of these entities. Instead, Paul wants them to focus their attention and worship solely on Christ, so that they will concentrate on the reality of God's saving work rather than on a shadow of it. So Paul explains that Jesus embodies the whole *pleroma* of the Deity—when you've got him, you've got it all. Thus, the goal of the Colossians' faith should be to pursue a deeper and deeper relationship with Jesus himself, not to speculate about the various beings who might populate the heavens or follow practices that supposedly tap into “elemental spiritual forces.”

➤ In your own cultural and religious background, were certain kinds of food and drink discouraged or forbidden? If so, what kinds, and why? Were there expectations about how you should observe certain days of the week and year? Was there an emphasis on religious experiences such as visions, on heavenly beings such as saints or angels, or on practices such as fasting or going without sleep? If you formerly felt you should keep

these rules and pursue these experiences, but no longer do, what changed your mind? If you feel that followers of Jesus can still validly and helpfully do some of these things, explain why.

FOR YOUR NEXT MEETING

In the next session, as you're considering Paul's practical teaching about life in the new realm, your group will hold some interviews to explore how this life is lived out within the basic relationships Paul describes—between wives and husbands, children and parents, and employers and employees. He discusses these same relationships in Ephesians, and so in session 9 you'll explore his similar teaching there by interviewing some wives, children, and employees about these relationships from their perspective. But in the next session, you'll begin by interviewing some husbands, parents, and employers about their perspectives.

The group leader should recruit some people in advance for each role. They can be either members of the group whose experiences will be helpful and informative and who are willing to be interviewed, or else they can be special guests who can be interviewed in person, by speaker phone, etc. You can also record audio or video interviews with guests, using the questions in session 4, and play these recordings for the group.

Note: Slavery in the Roman Empire was different in significant ways from slavery in America and other places. As we'll see in session 10, Roman slaves could earn or be granted their freedom, and some of them were even adopted into their masters' families. The applicable analogy in most cultures today is to employees and employers. This is why you are being asked to interview employers, even though Paul writes about slaves and masters.

Also, as Paul writes about another of these basic relationships, he uses a word that can be translated literally as "fathers," but which in this context more likely means "parents." (See the NIV translators' note. In *The Books of the Bible*, these notes are at the end of each book.) So you should try to interview a mother as well as a father, and for that matter both male and female employers if possible.

LIVING A NEW LIFE TOGETHER AS FOLLOWERS OF JESUS

Colossians > Main Body > Practical Teaching

INTRODUCTION

Having explained to the Colossians that following Jesus means living in a new realm—in relationship with God, no longer apart from God—Paul now teaches them in practical terms how to live out this new life together.

READING AND DISCUSSION

1 Have someone read the first part of Paul's practical teaching, beginning with, "Since, then, you have been raised with Christ," and ending with, "Whatever you do . . . do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him."

Paul begins this teaching by expanding on the images of baptism and circumcision that he used earlier to explain how a person is brought out of the realm apart from God and into the realm of life in relationship with God.

Paul has already told the Colossians that they have been raised with Christ in baptism. Now he explains the implications of this: Since they've been raised spiritually with Christ—not just from the dead, but up into the

very presence of God—they should “set their hearts on things above,” not on “earthly things.” He doesn’t mean that they should no longer care about what happens in this world. Rather, the “earth” here is another image for the former life apart from God (like the “world” or the “flesh”). “Above” is another way of describing the new life in relationship with God.

To explain what this change in mindset looks like practically, Paul returns to the image of circumcision. “When you were circumcised by Christ,” he told them earlier, “your . . . flesh was put off” (meaning their desire and tendency to live apart from God). Paul describes this same reality here by telling the Colossians that they’ve “taken off” (“put off,” the same verb in Greek) their “old self” and put on a “new self.” He explains that this means giving up a set of destructive behaviors and replacing them with a set of character qualities that will lead to life-giving behaviors instead.

➤ As a group, go through this section of the letter and list all of the character qualities Paul encourages the Colossians to cultivate. Then go through it again and list all of the destructive behaviors that Paul tells them to give up. For each of these behaviors, identify one or more of the character qualities that would enable a person to overcome it.

➤ The teachers who came to Colossae after Paul were encouraging the believers there to focus on *externals* (what to eat and drink, what to do on certain days, etc.). Paul wants the Colossians to shift their focus to *internals*, and concentrate on becoming more and more like Jesus inside. He sums up his teaching by offering this practical rule: “Whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.” In other words, “Just make sure that what you say or do represents the character of Christ growing in you, and that it’s something you can offer gratefully to God, and you’ll be fine.” Do you think a person can reach the point where this rule alone is sufficient to guide their conduct? Or will a certain number of dos and don’ts always be necessary in this life?

2 Have someone read the next part of this teaching, beginning with, “Wives, submit yourselves to your husbands,” and ending with “You know that you also have a Master in heaven.”

Both here in Colossians and in his very similar teaching in Ephesians (which we’ll consider in session 9), Paul stresses that the new life will be lived out essentially in basic human relationships: between wives and husbands, children and parents, and slaves and masters.

These relationships, he explains, have become radically transformed because they’ve been carried into a new realm. People who, from an earthly perspective, are slaves and masters must recognize that together they have become fellow servants of a “Master in heaven.” Husbands and wives have become brothers and sisters in the faith who “submit to one another out of reverence for Christ,” as Paul writes in Ephesians just before discussing the husband-wife relationship. Children are to obey their parents because this “pleases the Lord,” as Paul writes here in Colossians, and their parents are to “bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord,” as he says in Ephesians. In other words, both children and parents are now accountable to God for how they relate to one another. So the *character* of these relationships has changed: no longer does one person attempt to dominate the other. Rather, the participants show each other respect and consideration before God.

However, the *nature* of these relationships remains essentially the same. One person in the relationship is still entrusted with leadership responsibility, while the other person respects that leadership and cooperates with it. The coming age has not yet fully arrived, and so these ongoing responsibilities must be honored. A situation we’ll explore in more detail in session 20, as we’re considering 1 Timothy, illustrates this principle well. Some slaves in first-century Asia Minor who were followers of Jesus thought that the arrival of the coming age meant that they no longer needed to respect their masters. But Paul explains that these slaves should actually “serve them even better,” since they are now “dear to them as fellow believers” and devoted to their welfare. In other words, relationships of the present age are transformed by the approach of the coming age not by a change in the responsibilities that people have towards one another, but by a change in the spirit in which these

responsibilities are carried out. And so Paul tells husbands not to “be harsh” with their wives, he tells parents not to “embitter” their children, and he tells masters to provide their slaves with what is “right and fair.” For their part, he tells children and slaves to “obey” their parents and masters, and he tells wives to “submit” to their husbands.

What Paul says here about obedience and submission is often misunderstood. These concepts don’t describe the *process* by which it’s decided what the people in a relationship will do. Specifically, they don’t imply that husbands, parents, and employers make decisions all by themselves and that wives, (growing) children, and employees have to follow them without asking any questions or providing any input. As Paul describes these relationships, it’s clear that no one has this kind of arbitrary power. Rather, obedience and submission describe a trusting, respectful *attitude* that leads to a response of support and cooperation.

Paul uses two different terms here, *obedience* and *submission*, and the distinction between them points to an important difference between the husband-wife relationship and the other two relationships he describes. Obedience, which Paul asks of children and slaves, implies a recognized *duty* to support and cooperate with another person’s leadership, while submission, which Paul asks of wives, suggests a voluntary *decision* to honor and respect a leader who has been given responsibility for one’s welfare and who is devoted to that task. Paul is not giving the Colossians a new set of rules to follow here, even though his instructions are in the form of commands. Rather, he’s describing how believers can live out the life of the new realm in their earthly relationships.

In this session you’ll interview some parents, employers, and husbands about these basic human relationships from their perspective. In session 9, you’ll interview some wives, children, and employees about their perspectives.

- ➞ Have the parent(s) you’ve arranged in advance to interview sit in front of the group. Have an interviewer ask them the following questions. (If you’ve recorded an interview with someone outside the group, play it instead.)

- How would you describe the responsibility you’ve been given to lead your family and ensure your children’s welfare?
- How do you hold yourself accountable to God for the way you fulfill this responsibility?
- As your children grow, what steps are you taking to provide them with advice and counsel, rather than giving them instructions or orders to follow, so that they will be able to make responsible decisions of their own by the time they leave home?

Once the parents being interviewed have answered these questions, let other group members ask follow-up questions, and let the whole group discuss the issues these raise.

- ➞ Have a similar interview with one or more group members or guests who are employers.
 - How do they understand and fulfill their leadership responsibilities within the workplace?
 - How do they provide their employees with what is “right and fair”?
 - What kinds of decisions would they like their employees to trust them to make, and in what situations do they cultivate employee participation in workplace decisions?
- ➞ Finally, interview one or more group members or guests who are husbands and ask them these questions:
 - How are you following Paul’s teaching to love your wife and not be harsh with her?
 - How do you fulfill the responsibility you’ve been given to show leadership in your marriage and pursue your wife’s welfare?
 - Young children are not responsible or accountable for their parents’ personal growth and development. Likewise, employees are not held accountable for the performance of their workplace superiors. But do you believe that your wife

is responsible in some way for your own personal growth and development? If so, how? Is this consistent with your marriage being a relationship in which you have been given responsibility for her growth and development?

Once again allow for follow-up questions and discussion.

3 Finally, have someone read the rest of Paul's practical teaching, beginning with, "Devote yourselves to prayer," and ending with "so that you may know how to answer everyone."

Here Paul briefly addresses the question of how to relate to "outsiders," meaning those who are currently outside the community of Jesus' followers. He asks for prayer for opportunities to speak clearly to them about Jesus, and he encourages the Colossians to act wisely towards them and speak graciously to them.

➤ What term or terms does your community of Jesus' followers use to describe the people that Paul calls "outsiders" here? What do these terms communicate about your attitude towards them and your expectations of them? If you wish your community would use a different term, what would it be? Why?

➤ Have volunteers create and perform role plays that illustrate (1) how a follower of Jesus might fail to "make the most of [an] opportunity" to speak with another person about him, and (2) what it looks like to "know how to answer" someone who's curious about the faith.

➤ Pray together as a group for opportunities to speak clearly to others about Jesus and for the ability to act wisely toward them and speak graciously to them.

NOTE

The conclusion to Colossians, where Paul extends greetings and offers encouragement, will not be the subject of a separate session in this study guide. There was an opportunity to discuss this part of the letter in the last question in session 1. If you didn't do that question then, you can do it at the end of this session.

OUTLINE OF COLOSSIANS

OUTLINE OF EPHESIANS

Session #

Opening: Writer's name, recipients, good wish

- 2 Introduction: Who Paul is and what he teaches about Jesus
 Paul's prayer
 Paul's gospel
 Paul's ministry and the mystery

Main body: Correction and practical teaching

- 3 Correction
 Following Jesus means living in a new realm,
 not keeping religious rules

- 4 Practical teaching
 Put off the old self, put on the new self
 Transformed life in basic relationships:
 Wives and husbands
 Children and parents
 Slaves and masters
 Encouragement to pray, including for Paul;
 wise conduct toward outsiders

Conclusion: Tychicus and Onesimus introduced; greetings

Closing: Handwritten greeting, good wish

Session #

Opening: Writer's name, recipients, good wish

- 6 Introduction: What Paul teaches about Jesus
 Paul's gospel
 Paul's prayer

Main body: Doctrinal and practical teaching

- 7 Doctrinal teaching
 Following Jesus means living in a new realm
 From death to life, from earth to "the heavenly realms"
 From separation and exclusion to reconciliation
 and family/community membership

Paul's ministry and the mystery

Prayer and praise

Practical teaching

- 8 Grow to maturity as the body of Christ
 Put off the old self, put on the new self
 Transformed life in basic relationships:
 Wives and husbands
 Children and parents
 Slaves and masters
 Put on the "armor of God" to oppose
 "spiritual forces of evil"

Encouragement to pray, including for Paul

Conclusion: Tychicus introduced

Closing: Good wish

EPHESIANS

EXPERIENCING EPHESIANS AS A WHOLE

INTRODUCTION

When Paul sent Tychicus to Colossae with his letter to the followers of Jesus there, he also had him deliver a very similar letter to some other believers. Unfortunately, we can't be exactly sure who they were. The original of this letter no longer survives (as is the case for all of Paul's writings); all we have are copies. In the earliest and best copies, this letter is addressed simply "to God's holy people." This is how Paul describes communities of Jesus' followers everywhere, so it doesn't help us identify who he's writing to here. Later copies read, "To God's holy people in Ephesus," and so this letter has become known as Ephesians. We'll use this customary name for it in this study guide.

However, these later copies probably only reflect a tradition that grew up around the letter. It's unlikely, for several reasons, that Paul actually wrote it to the followers of Jesus in Ephesus. As we noted in session 1, Paul spent over two years in that city and got to know the believers there well. If he really were writing to the community in this city, he would greet many of its members by name. He would surely write in Timothy's name as well as his own (as he does when writing to the Colossians and to Philemon), since Timothy worked closely with Paul when he was in Ephesus and the believers there would know him. But there are no greetings at the end of Ephesians, and Paul writes only

in his own name. He addresses the recipients as people he hasn't met personally: he says that he has "heard about" their faith, and that they have "surely . . . heard about" his work as well. Also, as we'll see in session 16 when we consider 1 Timothy, the believers in Ephesus were encountering some of the same influences that Paul warned the Colossians about, including pressure to worship various heavenly beings and to "abstain from certain foods." But in the letter known as Ephesians, Paul doesn't address such influences.

It's more likely, therefore, that this is a general letter, one that Paul wanted Tychicus to read to many different communities of Jesus' followers as he traveled through western and central Asia Minor on his way to and from Colossae. (Paul introduces Tychicus as his messenger within the letter.) It's clearly an expanded and slightly rearranged version of Colossians, as you can see by comparing the outline of Colossians on page 32 with the outline of Ephesians on page 33. Ephesians speaks less to a specific situation and more deeply to the universal truth of what God has done for us in Christ and the life we are meant to live in response.

READING

Even though Ephesians, like Colossians, was read by a messenger to its original recipients, in this case take turns reading through it out loud as a group, one paragraph at a time. This reading should take about fifteen minutes.

Ephesians comes right after Colossians in *The Books of the Bible*. If you're using another edition, you can find it in the Table of Contents. (Paul's letters are traditionally arranged in order of length, so in other editions Ephesians comes before Colossians, because it's longer.) As you listen, you can follow how the book unfolds by looking at the outline on page 33. Once again, if you don't understand the meaning of particular words or phrases, make a note of them and discuss them together after the reading.

Notice how Ephesians displays the features of an ancient letter, particularly at the beginning and the end. Also observe that in its main body, Paul first offers doctrinal teaching—that is, he explains general, foundational truths—and he then offers practical teaching, discussing the implications of these truths for everyday living.

DISCUSSION

- ➔ Having now read through Ephesians, imagine that you are Tychicus and you've just walked into a community of Jesus' followers somewhere in Asia Minor that has gathered to hear this latest word from Paul. Unfortunately, you've misplaced the letter, and until you find it again (you know it's somewhere in your luggage) you'll have to summarize its contents from memory. What main points would you cover as you speak to this community?
- ➔ Why do you think Paul decided to create a general version of Colossians that Tychicus could read to various groups of believers as he traveled?
- ➔ What changes did you notice Paul making to Colossians as he revised it into Ephesians? What concepts does he expand on? What additional material does he include; why do you think he adds these things? What does he leave out, and why? What does he move to another place?
- ➔ Does it challenge your understanding of the inspiration of Scripture to see one biblical book rewritten as another? Why or why not?
- ➔ What part of Ephesians did you find most helpful, meaningful, or challenging as your group read through it? Why?

SESSION 6

WHAT GOD HAS DONE FOR US
THROUGH JESUS

Ephesians > Introduction

INTRODUCTION

Paul doesn't begin Ephesians by explaining his personal connection with the people it's addressed to as he did in Colossians, where he noted he was a fellow worker of their friend Epaphras. This is probably because Ephesians is a general letter intended for churches that were started by a number of different people who worked with Paul. He begins instead by offering praise for everything God has done for the letter's various recipients. In the process, he summarizes and reinforces what his coworkers have taught them about Jesus. Paul then tells them, as he did the Colossians, that he's heard of their faith and has been praying for them ever since. His account of his prayer culminates in a description of how God has exalted Jesus above all things.

READING AND DISCUSSION

1 Have someone read how Paul praises God at the beginning of Ephesians for what he's done for us through Jesus, starting with, "Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ," and ending with, "a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession—to the praise of his glory."

Here Paul once again describes the work of Christ from a number of different perspectives. The images he uses are all found either in his journey letters, such as *adoption* (PJL session 19); or in Colossians, such as *inheritance*; or in both Colossians and the journey letters, such as *reconciliation*, *forgiveness*, and *redemption* through his blood (see session 2). But Paul gives some of these images a further development here. He specifies, for example, that God “predestined” us for adoption, that he “chose us . . . before the creation of the world.” He also says that the reconciliation Jesus accomplished is not just between us and God; it will ultimately “bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth.”

- Which of the following best expresses your understanding of the concept of “predestination,” which Paul uses here? What are the positive contributions of each of these ways of understanding this concept? What are their drawbacks and limitations?
 - a. God decided before the world began which specific people he would save and which ones he would send to hell.
 - b. Because God has “all wisdom and understanding,” he knew who would receive him and who would reject him, and on the basis of that knowledge, he “chose” or “predestined” the ones who would receive him.
 - c. Paul is describing here what God predestined, not who God predestined: God’s purpose “before the creation” was that believers in Jesus would be “holy and blameless,” become part of God’s family, and bring him praise and glory.
 - d. I really don’t know what to make of the idea of predestination.

➤ When Paul speaks of God “bringing unity” to heaven and earth, he uses a term that means “to bring together under a single head,” that is, under Christ. “Heaven and earth” may mean spiritual things and material things. Or, as in Colossians, they may refer to the realm that is in relationship with God and the realm that is currently apart from God. As a group, try to describe what it

would look like in either case if “heaven and earth” were brought together in Christ.

2 Have another person read Paul’s prayer in Ephesians, beginning with “For this reason, ever since I heard about your faith in the Lord Jesus” and ending, “. . . the fullness of him who fills everything in every way.”

Paul shared with the Colossians a whole list of things that he was praying that God would do for them (session 2). But in his prayer here in Ephesians, he makes only one request. He asks God to give the followers of Jesus the “Spirit of wisdom and revelation,” to enlighten the “eyes of their hearts” so that they will be able to recognize and understand all that they have in Christ. Paul wants them to know the *hope* God has called them to, the *riches* of their inheritance, and the *power* of God that’s at work in them and for them.

- Invite any group members who are having difficulty feeling hopeful about their lives and futures to share briefly about their situations. Then pray together for them, asking God to open their spiritual eyes so they can have hope by seeing and believing that God will work out everything for them according to his own will and purposes.
- Invite anyone who’s struggling with a lack of resources to share about their situation. Then pray for them, that God would open their spiritual eyes to see and believe that he can and will provide everything they need to fulfill his purposes for them.
- Finally, invite anyone who needs greater power to face trials, temptations, and dangers to share briefly and discreetly about this. Pray for them, that God would reveal the “incomparably great power” he wants to use on their behalf.
- Do you think it would be sufficient simply to ask God to show loved ones who are followers of Jesus everything that they have

in Christ, rather than asking him to guide, protect, or provide for them in specific ways?

3 At the end of his prayer, Paul describes how God “raised Christ from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, far above all rule and authority, power and dominion.” The language here is very similar to the language in Colossians, with one significant difference. In Colossians, Paul said that “in Christ all the *fullness* of the Deity lives in bodily form.” Here in Ephesians he says that “the church” (the worldwide community of believers in Jesus) is “the *fullness* of him who fills everything in every way.”

As we saw in session 3, the term “fullness” (*pleroma*) was used to describe the totality of all the gods, spirits, angels, etc. that were thought to exist between the supreme God and human beings. Paul explained to the Colossians that the whole *pleroma* of the Deity is actually found in Jesus. And here in Ephesians, to help his listeners understand the remarkable character of the community they’ve become part of, Paul tells them that this *pleroma* fills the church as well, since it is the body of Christ. (Later in this letter, Paul will pray for his listeners, as a community, to be “filled to the measure of all the *pleroma* of God,” and he will encourage them, once again as a community, to “become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the *pleroma* of Christ.”)

➔ What, for you, are the practical implications of the idea that the totality of genuine divinity is now resident within the worldwide community of Jesus’ followers, since this community is the body of Christ?

LIFE IN A NEW REALM AND THE NEW HUMANITY

Ephesians > Main Body > Doctrinal Section
Ephesians > Main Body > Paul’s Ministry and the Mystery

INTRODUCTION

Paul begins the main body of Ephesians by emphasizing the same reality he described at the start of the main body of Colossians: Followers of Jesus have been taken out of an old realm and brought into a new one. This doctrinal section provides an essential foundation for the practical teaching that Paul will share in the rest of the letter, as he explains how its recipients can live out this reality in their life together.

READING AND DISCUSSION

1 Have someone read the beginning of this doctrinal section, starting with, “As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins,” and ending with, “For we are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.”

Paul describes here, in many of the same ways he did in Colossians, how believers in Jesus are brought into a new realm. He tells his readers they were

once *dead* in their sins, but have now been made *alive* with Christ; that they once belonged to “this *world*,” but they have now been brought into the “*heavenly* realms”; and that they once followed the thoughts and desires of “the *flesh*,” but now they can be directed by “the *Spirit*” in their “inner being.” (This last phrase is found in Paul’s prayer at the end of this section.) Paul also explains here, as he does several times in his journey letters (*PJL* sessions 6, 14, 21), that his readers are no longer part of “the *age* of this world” (NIV “ways of this world”), but are already experiencing God’s purposes for “the *coming ages*.”

➔ To illustrate from your own experience something of the reality that Paul is explaining here, describe a time when you moved out of one “realm” into another, so that you lived with a new sense of purpose or responsibility, or with a new respect for an authority you formerly disregarded. For example, you may have graduated from high school or college and gone on for further studies or into the work force; become newly aware of a responsibility to care for the environment; left home to get married or take a job in a distant city; become a parent; or joined the armed forces or an intentional community or a movement for social transformation. In what ways does the difference between your old life before this change and your new life after the change help illustrate how people who become followers of Jesus embrace new priorities, directions, responsibilities, and loyalties?

2 Have another person read the next part of this doctrinal section, beginning with, “Therefore, remember that formerly you who are Gentiles by birth . . .” and ending, “You too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.”

Paul’s specific message to this letter’s recipients is that even though they are Gentiles, they are no longer alienated from God’s people or excluded from his covenants. Instead, they are now “fellow citizens with God’s people and also members of his household.” God has created a new humanity in Christ, in which both Jew and Gentile are reconciled to one another and

to God. By his Spirit, God inhabits this new humanity as a “holy temple.” This community is known for the peace and reconciliation it brings to the world as it draws people from a wide variety of backgrounds together into a harmonious unity.

➔ Where have you most clearly seen this “new humanity” become a reality on earth? That is, where have you seen a shared identity in Christ displace the distinctions between people of different backgrounds? Where have you seen a community created that has become a “home” for the Holy Spirit?

➔ If you’re part of a local community of Christ’s followers, how would you rate its effectiveness at representing this “new humanity”: not very effective, somewhat effective, or very effective? Why would you give it this rating? How can you help it become (even) more effective?

3 At this point Paul is ready to transition into his practical teaching, so he begins to appeal to his listeners to live in a way that reflects the new reality of their existence. He describes himself as a “prisoner of Christ Jesus,” as someone who is actively suffering for their sake. But he realizes he hasn’t told them anything about his sufferings and imprisonment (as he had by this point in *Colossians*). He can’t assume that all of this letter’s different recipients know enough about him for him to make this appeal effectively. So he first offers a brief description of his calling from God to “preach to the Gentiles the boundless riches of Christ.” He explains, as he did in *Colossians*, that a “mystery . . . which was not made known to people in other generations” has been revealed to him: “Through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body.” Paul has devoted his life to making this mystery a reality, and as a result he’s currently in prison.

Have someone read this next part of the letter, beginning with, “For this reason I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles” and ending, “I ask you, therefore, not to be discouraged because of my sufferings for you, which are your glory.”

➔ Has God impressed some burning truth, implicit in the gospel, on your heart that your family, friends, and others haven't yet been able to see as clearly? If so, how would you describe it briefly? Are you willing to work and even suffer to help this truth become known and understood and expressed practically in the life of God's people?

4 Paul's reflections on his calling to "preach to the Gentiles" lead him to conclude the letter's doctrinal section with a renewed prayer for its recipients and with a doxology, a wish for God to receive glory. Have someone read this prayer and doxology, beginning with "For this reason I kneel before the Father" and ending with "To him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen."

➔ In response to everything you've learned so far in Colossians and Ephesians, write a prayer for your group or church to experience the new reality of life in Christ Jesus, and conclude it with a doxology of your own.

THE UNIFIED BODY'S DIVERSITY OF GIFTS; PUTTING OFF THE OLD AND PUTTING ON THE NEW

Ephesians > Main Body > Practical Teaching

INTRODUCTION

In a series of practical teachings based on his doctrinal teaching, Paul next explains how the recipients of his letter can live out their new life together. He begins by describing how the community of Jesus' followers, even as it experiences *unity* as the body of Christ, grows to maturity as its members employ a *diversity* of gifts. He then urges his listeners, as he did the Colossians, to put off their "old self" and put on a "new self." This means, once again, giving up a set of destructive behaviors and replacing it with a set of character qualities that will lead to different, life-giving behaviors.

READING AND DISCUSSION

1 Have someone read Paul's practical teaching about how the unified body grows to maturity through a diversity of gifts, starting with, "As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received" and ending with, "From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work."

Paul says that each member of the body has been given grace “according to the measure of the *gift* of Christ” (NIV “as Christ apportioned it”). Each person’s gift is designed to build up the body in some way. Certain people are given gifts that enable them to equip and empower others to use their own gifts. These equippers, Paul says, are apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers.

- ➔ Name some people you know or have heard about that you believe are good examples of using each of the following gifts effectively:
- Apostles, those who lead and guide the wider community of Jesus’ followers.
 - Prophets, those who say what God would say to the church and to the society, including those who “speak truth to power,” those who preach relevantly and convincingly from the Bible, and those who warn of the future consequences of current actions.
 - Evangelists, those who proclaim the good news about Jesus compellingly, in terms that others can understand and that many respond to.
 - Pastors, those who care for individual followers of Jesus and their local communities.
 - Teachers, those who clearly explain the truths of God’s word so that others are “made new in . . . their minds.”

How have people with gifts like these influenced your life as a follower of Jesus?

- ➔ What do you believe are your own spiritual gifts? (They may or may not be among the five mentioned here; Paul lists many other gifts in 1 Corinthians and Romans, *PJL* sessions 10 and 28, although those lists are not exhaustive, either.) How have you been able to use your gifts to build up the body of Christ? What more would you like to be able to do with them? Pray together as a group that each of you would have increasing opportunities to use your spiritual gifts.

2 Have someone read Paul’s practical teaching about putting off the old self and putting on the new self, beginning with, “So I tell you this, and insist on it in the Lord, that you must no longer live as the Gentiles do” and ending, “. . . always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

Paul gives several examples here of how the “putting off” of a destructive behavior is actually accomplished through the “putting on” of a life-giving one that displaces it. Instead of lying, believers should practice speaking the truth. Instead of stealing, they should work hard so that they are able to give. Instead of “obscenity, foolish talk or coarse joking,” there should be thanksgiving—a positive appreciation for what is excellent and praiseworthy in any situation. Instead of being “drunk on wine,” believers should be “filled with the Spirit.” In short, rather than simply trying to stop doing something that’s harmful and destructive, followers of Jesus must actively cultivate words and actions that are helpful and build people up.

- ➔ Have each person read silently through this section again and pick out the actions of the “old self” that they’d most like to see changed in their own lives. Have each person decide on at least one positive activity they can begin practicing now to displace each of the actions they identify. (People are free to ask for advice if they wish, either openly in the group or in a private conversation with a friend or pastor. They should also share their resolution with someone who can help hold them accountable.) Pray as a group that each person, as they are “filled with the Spirit,” would successfully begin to replace the old self with the new self in this way.

FOR YOUR NEXT MEETING

In session 4 you looked at Paul’s teaching in Colossians about basic relationships from the perspective of husbands, parents, and employers. In the next session your group will consider Paul’s similar teaching here in Ephesians

from the perspective of wives, children, and employees. You will once again hold interviews with group members or guests. The leader should recruit some appropriate men and women in advance to be interviewed for each role. Audio or video interviews can also be recorded using the questions in session 9. The people who represent children can be teenagers or young adults, or they can be mature adults who agree to talk about how they related to their parents while growing up.

THE NEW LIFE IN BASIC RELATIONSHIPS; ARMING FOR SPIRITUAL CONFLICT

Ephesians > Main Body > Practical Teaching, continued

INTRODUCTION

As Paul continues his practical teaching, he describes how the reality of new life in Christ is to be lived out in basic human relationships between wives and husbands, children and parents, and employees and employers. The essential principles he teaches are the same as in the corresponding section of Colossians, but he illustrates them here at much greater length.

Paul's final practical teaching is about how people who choose to follow Jesus become part of a great conflict between God and "the spiritual forces of evil." Believers need to be continually aware of this conflict and equip themselves with spiritual weapons.

Paul concludes this letter by introducing Tychicus as his messenger and offering a good wish for its recipients.

READING AND DISCUSSION

1 Have someone read Paul's practical teaching about basic relationships, starting with "Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ" and ending with "You know that he who is both their Master and yours is in heaven, and there is no favoritism with him."

Paul once again portrays how these basic human relationships have been transformed in their *character* by being brought into the new realm of life in Christ. He describes how each person in the relationship should now use it as a means of honoring God. For example, wives should submit to their husbands “as [they] do to the Lord,” husbands should love their wives “as Christ loved the church,” and so forth. But Paul also describes once again how the *nature* of these relationships remains unchanged: they are still situations in which one person has been entrusted with leadership responsibility and the other person respects and supports them in this role. In this session you’ll hold a series of interviews as you did in session 4, in this case asking wives, children, and employees to describe these relationships from their perspective.

- ➔ Have the people you’ve chosen to represent wives sit in front of the group and have someone ask them the questions below. Then allow for follow-up questions from other members and for group discussion. (If you’ve recorded an interview, play it instead.)
 - Paul says here that “the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body.” In both Colossians and Ephesians, Paul elaborates on this “head” image by describing Jesus as the source of life and growth for the whole body. In what ways has your husband helped you grow as a person?
 - How do you understand the concept of “submission”? (Would you add anything to what’s said about this in session 4?) How does your submission to the Lord provide you with a model for how to relate to your husband? Give some recent examples of times when you’ve “submitted” to your husband. How does your husband take your ideas, opinions, suggestions, and wishes into account?
 - Husbands were asked in session 4 whether they believed their wives were responsible in some way for their husbands’ personal growth. Do you believe you are responsible and accountable for your husband’s growth and development? If so, how? How is this consistent with your husband’s leadership and responsibility for you?

- Paul also tells wives to “respect” their husbands. How do you show this respect in practical ways?
- ➔ Paul actually says much more to husbands here than he does to wives. Give the husbands in your group the opportunity to share any additional insights they’ve gotten from this passage about the responsibility that has been entrusted to them. Before describing these basic relationships, Paul tells all believers to “submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.” In light of this principle, how do husbands submit to their wives? How do they show them respect? What does it mean to love your wife as you love your own body? How do you put that into practice?
- ➔ Have someone similarly interview the people who’ve agreed to represent children and ask them these questions:
 - As a child, was it easy or difficult for you to obey your parents? What made it one thing or the other? Were there times when you were able to obey your parents as a way of obeying the Lord? If so, describe these times.
 - Was there a point when your parents started giving you advice rather than instructions or orders? How old were you, and how did they begin to make this change?
 - What does it mean to “honor” your parents? Does a child ever outgrow this obligation? What are some ways in which you honor your parents now?
- ➔ Finally, have someone interview those who are representing employees, using these questions:
 - Are you able to do your current job, or were you able to do a previous job, “wholeheartedly, as if you were serving the Lord”? What helps a person have this perspective on their work?

- Can you give some specific examples of things you should do to maintain quality and integrity in your work when no one is looking?
- Should employees today “respect and fear” their employers? If so, in what ways?
- Do you feel that God has ever rewarded you personally for a job well done? If so, explain how.

2 Have someone read what Paul writes about spiritual conflict, starting with “Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power” and ending with, “Pray that I may declare it fearlessly, as I should.”

➤ In a spiritual endeavor, have you experienced opposition that you felt was coming from the “forces of evil” that Paul describes here? Were you able to use the “full armor of God” to defeat these forces, such as by praying, finding assurance in Scripture, exercising your faith, etc.? If so, tell your story to the group.

➤ What are the roles of “truth,” “righteousness,” and “readiness” in overcoming spiritual opposition? How would dishonesty, immorality, and a lack of preparedness contribute to an individual or group’s spiritual defeat?

3 Finally, have someone read the remaining part of Ephesians.

➤ What’s the most important thing you learned about Jesus from the related letters of Colossians and Ephesians? What’s the most important thing you learned from them about how to live as a follower of Jesus?

PHILEMON

EXPERIENCING PHILEMON AS A WHOLE

INTRODUCTION

Besides Colossians and Ephesians, Paul sent one more letter with Tychicus to Asia Minor. He wrote it to a man named Philemon. In this session you'll read and discuss this third letter.

So that you can experience it as freshly as possible, it won't be summarized or explained in advance. Instead, you'll discover from the letter itself why Paul wrote it and what he hoped to accomplish through it.

READING

Have someone read Paul's letter to Philemon out loud. This should take only a couple of minutes. Philemon comes right after Ephesians in *The Books of the Bible*. (In traditional versions, you'll find it at the end of Paul's letters, since it's the shortest.) As you listen to the letter, look for the answers to the following questions, and then respond to them together as a group afterwards:

- Who was Philemon? (What do we learn about him from this letter: Was he a follower of Jesus? Was he rich or poor? Etc.) What role did he have in the community at Colossae? What was his connection with Paul?
- Who was Onesimus? What was his former relationship to

Philemon? Under what circumstances did he go to Rome, where he met Paul? What was his relationship with Paul?

- Why is Paul sending Onesimus back to Colossae? What does he want Philemon to do for him?
- Who does Paul write to besides Philemon? Who do you think these people are? (You've met one of them before, at the end of Colossians.)
- In whose name does Paul write besides his own? Who does he send greetings from, and who are they? (You also met them in Colossians.)

DISCUSSION

1 Slaves in the Roman world sometimes came to have significant responsibilities within their masters' households. Some of them eventually became so trusted that they were adopted into their masters' families and even made their heirs. (The possibility of a slave being adopted provides the background to the images of *adoption* and *inheritance* that Paul uses in Colossians and Ephesians to describe the new relationship we have with God through faith in Jesus.) Onesimus must have been a particularly trusted slave of Philemon, because Paul says, "He is very dear to me but even dearer to you, both as a fellow man and [now] as a brother in the Lord." In other words, their former human relationship was one of great trust and affection. But Onesimus betrayed this trust when he ran away to gain his freedom. It appears that he actually stole from Philemon to get money for his journey, since Paul writes, "If he has done you any wrong or owes you anything . . . I will pay it back." Now Paul wants Philemon to forgive this betrayal and once again have a relationship of trust and affection with Onesimus. He implies that it's safe for Philemon to take this risk because Onesimus was not a believer before, but now his character has been radically transformed through faith in Jesus.

- ➡ As a rule, forgiveness doesn't mean giving the offending party the chance to hurt you all over again. But Paul asks Philemon to make himself vulnerable in this way. Put yourself in Philemon's position, perhaps by thinking of a situation in which you've been

betrayed or defrauded. How difficult would it be for you to believe that Onesimus has been genuinely transformed and can be safely trusted again?

➔ Have you ever been reconciled (restored to a former close relationship) with someone who hurt or betrayed you? (Recall that Paul uses the image of *reconciliation* to describe how Jesus restores God’s relationship with us.) What gave you confidence that you could trust this person again?

2 In the Roman world, letters and legal documents were usually dictated to a professional scribe, although they could be authenticated by a short portion written in the author’s own hand (as at the end of Colossians). But when a person took on a debt, they would write out a certificate of indebtedness in their own handwriting, to make it legally binding. (Paul has such a certificate in mind when he writes in Colossians that God “forgave us all our sins, having cancelled the charge of our legal indebtedness,” literally “our handwritten document.”) Paul inserts a mini-certificate within this letter to Philemon: “I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand. I will pay it back.” Paul wants Onesimus to receive forgiveness, but he also wants to honor the demands of justice, so he promises to make reparations for whatever Onesimus has stolen.

➔ If you are a follower of Jesus, did you find that God led you to make some things right that you’d done wrong before you became a believer? If so, tell the group how you did this, if you can do so discreetly.

➔ Have you ever pledged your own resources to help a person pay off past obligations so they could make a new start in life? What gave you the confidence to commit your resources in this way?

➔ If the gospel is all about receiving the free gift of God’s grace, why do debts and obligations from our past life without

Jesus carry forward into our new life with Jesus, as in the case of Onesimus here?

3 Onesimus fled from Colossae to Rome, where he became a follower of Jesus and eventually helped care for Paul in his imprisonment. They developed such a close relationship that Paul says he is “my very heart” and calls him his “son.” Onesimus is the only individual he describes this way in his letters besides Timothy and Titus, who are his closest collaborators. Paul explains that he wants to keep Onesimus by his side and consider him Philemon’s representative (just as the Philippian church sent Epaphroditus as their representative to care for Paul in prison, as we’ll see in session 11).

But if Paul keeps Onesimus in Rome, Philemon would have no choice in the matter, and Paul wants him to act voluntarily. So he’s sending Onesimus back to Colossae, where Philemon could legally enslave him again and punish him severely. Paul asks Philemon to receive Onesimus back instead “no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother”—not even as an adopted son, who would still be under Philemon’s authority, but as a free man and an equal.

➔ Write a short letter from Philemon back to Paul, explaining what you’re going to do with Onesimus and why.

4 Paul addresses his letter not just to Philemon, but also to Apphia, who, according to the broad consensus of interpreters, is most likely Philemon’s wife. It’s also addressed to Archippus, an important leader of the community in Colossae who’s greeted at the end of Colossians. The good wish at the end of this letter is directed to all three of them (“*your* spirit” is plural), suggesting that Paul expected Tychicus to gather Philemon, Apphia, and Archippus together to hear the letter. The letter includes greetings from Epaphras, who founded the Colossian church, and from four of Paul’s other fellow workers, implying that these colleagues all know about this letter and what Paul is asking in it. The letter as a whole is also addressed to the church that meets in Philemon’s home, and while Paul doesn’t necessarily expect Tychicus to read it to them as well, he does want Philemon to realize his

responsibility to set a good example for all of these believers. He is clearly hoping that Philemon will be influenced by his family and friends, near and far, to do what he ought to do.

- ➔ Do you think it's fair for Paul to make Philemon hear and respond to his letter in front of other people like this? Why or why not?
- ➔ What kind of marriage relationship does Paul apparently believe that Philemon and Apphia have? Is Paul's expectation that Apphia will influence Philemon's decision consistent with the concept of wives' submission, as described in Colossians and Ephesians?
- ➔ Can you describe a time when friends and family members helped you do the right thing when this was difficult?

NOTE

Philemon most likely gave Onesimus his freedom in response to Paul's letter. It's doubtful that the letter would have been preserved otherwise. In fact, tradition says that Onesimus eventually became the leader of the large and influential community of Jesus' followers in the strategic city of Ephesus. His name means "useful," and as Paul predicted, he became greatly useful to both Paul and Philemon and to the community of Jesus' followers.

PHILIPPIANS

OUTLINE OF PHILIPPIANS

The main body of Philippians is written in the form of a *chiasm*. This is a style of writing in which the first part is paired with the last part, the second part is paired with the next-to-last part, and so on. This style was considered elegant and refined in Jewish literature.

Session

- 12 *Opening: Senders' names, recipients, good wish*
 - | *Thanksgiving and prayer*
 - | Main Body
 - | A. Paul speaks to the Philippians' concern about his imprisonment and trial
 - 13 B. Paul urges the Philippians to follow the example of Jesus; practical implications
 - | C. Paul will send Timothy soon
 - | C. Paul is sending Epaphroditus now
 - 14 B. Paul urges the Philippians to follow his own example; practical implications
 - 15 A. Paul thanks the Philippians for their concern for him and their recent gift
- Closing: Greetings, good wish*

SESSION 11

EXPERIENCING PHILIPPIANS AS A WHOLE

INTRODUCTION

Some time after Paul wrote Colossians, Ephesians, and Philemon, while he was still being held prisoner in Rome, he wrote a letter to the community of Jesus' followers in the city of **Philippi**. Paul had proclaimed the good news about Jesus in this city on his second journey (*PJL* session 1), and this community was formed at that time.

Once again, so that you can experience this letter as freshly as possible, it won't be summarized or explained in advance. Instead, in this session you'll be invited to discover from your own reading what it's about.

READING

Have people take turns reading Paul's letter to the Philippians out loud. This should take less than fifteen minutes. Switch readers whenever you come to what feels like a natural break. Philippians comes right after Philemon in *The Books of the Bible*. (In traditional versions, you'll find it in the middle of Paul's letters.) You can follow how the letter unfolds by looking at the outline on page 62.

As you listen, look for the answers to the following questions, and afterwards respond to them together as a group:

- In what ways have the Philippians maintained a relationship with Paul in the years since he first came to their city? What have they done for him specifically in his current imprisonment?
- Who is Epaphroditus? Why did he come to Rome? Why is Paul now sending him back to Philippi?
- What is Paul waiting for before he sends Timothy to Philippi as well?
- What has been happening as a result of Paul's imprisonment? What two possible outcomes is he anticipating as his trial nears completion? How does he feel about these possibilities?
- What problems is the community in Philippi facing? How does Paul advise and encourage them to respond to these problems?
- In summary, for what reason or reasons did Paul write this letter?

DISCUSSION

- ➡ What part(s) of Paul's letter to the Philippians spoke to you the most as you listened to and discussed it? Why?
- ➡ Has an individual, a family, or a community been a continual source of encouragement and help for you over the years, as the Philippians were for Paul, both when he was "defending and confirming the gospel" on his journeys, and at times like these, when he was "in chains"? If so, tell the group a little about them. What have you been able to do for them in return?
- ➡ Paul urges the Philippians to imitate Jesus, and he offers Timothy, Epaphroditus, and himself as further examples of Christlike character. Who do you know today that you'd consider to be an example in the same way? What makes you say this about them? What would you most like other people to imitate about you, as a follower of Christ?

- ➡ Your community sends a large special gift to help a Christian worker that you know well. In response, this worker records a video that they want you to show in your worship gatherings. The worker begins by thanking you for your gift and ongoing support and by describing many things they appreciate about you. But then they say, "Listen, I'm concerned about some of the things I've heard are going on in your community." What things do they talk about? What correction, advice, and encouragement do they offer?

PAUL'S PRAYER FOR THE PHILIPPIANS; THEIR CONCERN ABOUT HIS IMPRISONMENT AND TRIAL

Philippians > Opening
Philippians > Main Body > First Section

INTRODUCTION

As the outline on page 62 shows, the main body of Paul's letter to the Philippians is in the form of a *chiasm*. That is, it's built out of paired sections that are nested inside one another:

- A. Paul speaks to the Philippians' concern about his imprisonment and trial
- B. Paul urges the Philippians to follow the example of Jesus; practical implications
- C. Paul will send Timothy soon
- C. Paul is sending Epaphroditus now
- B. Paul urges the Philippians to follow his own example; practical implications
- A. Paul thanks the Philippians for their concern for him and their recent gift

In this session we'll look at the first of these sections, as well as the letter's opening.

Paul writes to the Philippians towards the end of his Roman imprisonment, when his trial is nearing its conclusion and he will soon be either set free or executed. After expressing how thankful he is for the Philippians and describing how he's been praying for them, Paul's first concern in this letter is to reassure them that they don't need to be worried about him. Being in prison hasn't curtailed his work as a messenger of Jesus. "What has happened to me," he explains, "has actually served to advance the gospel." They also don't need to worry that he's feeling bad about rivals who are taking advantage of his imprisonment to promote their own understanding of the gospel. "What does it matter?" he asks. "The important thing is that . . . Christ is preached." And the Philippians don't even need to worry that Paul might be executed. "To me," he insists, "to live is Christ and to die is gain."

READING

Have someone read the opening of this letter, including the senders' and recipients' names, Paul's good wish for the Philippians, and his thanksgiving and prayer for them.

Then have someone read the first part of the main body of the letter, beginning, "Now I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that what has happened to me has actually served to advance the gospel," and ending, "since you are going through the same struggle you saw I had, and now hear that I still have."

DISCUSSION

1 Before getting to their main business, letters in the Roman world (like our own letters and e-mails today) often said something brief like, "I hope all is going well with you." In his letters, Paul expands this customary formula at great length. He doesn't just tell the recipients that he hopes all is well; instead, he reports that he's been praying all will go well with them, and he explains specifically what he's been praying for. In many cases, he also gives thanks to God for what has already been going well.

We saw in Colossians and Ephesians how Paul integrated lengthy prayers and thanksgivings right into the main body of those letters, in order to introduce himself and his message. Here in Philippians the thanksgiving and prayer are briefer and more independent of the main body, but they nevertheless introduce some of the letter's overall themes, such as Paul's partnership with the Philippians and the implications of his imprisonment.

- ➔ As in Colossians and Ephesians, Paul's primary prayer request is that the Philippians will "abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight." He says that if they do, they will be able to "discern what is best" and will be "pure and blameless for the day of Christ." "What is best" means what is preferable or more advantageous, whether this means good over bad, better over good, or best over better. A greater ability to distinguish and choose among such things, Paul says, is evidence that a person is becoming spiritually mature. Where do you see yourself in this process, and why?
 - a. I'm learning to distinguish between good and bad.
 - b. I'm beginning to recognize the difference between good and better.
 - c. I'm able to identify what's best and choose that consistently.
- Pray together as a group that you will all grow in "knowledge and depth of insight."

2 Paul reassures the Philippians that even though he's a prisoner, he's been able to continue spreading the good news about Jesus in an unexpected way. Different members of the Praetorian Guard (NIV "palace guard"), the elite unit that is Caesar's personal bodyguard, have been watching over him in shifts. As a result, over time, this whole unit and "everyone else" (others in the emperor's personal employ) have heard about Jesus, and some have become his followers. (At the end of this letter, Paul sends greetings from these believers who "belong to Caesar's household.") And so the gospel is reaching effectively into the very heart of the empire.

- ➔ Are you aware of ways in which the good news about Jesus is reaching the social and political elites in your culture? If so, share

what's happening. If not, how do you think the good news might reach these people? Either way, pray that it will do so more and more effectively, even if this has to happen in unexpected ways.

- ➔ Have you heard of other situations where the work of a leading messenger of Jesus seemed to be curtailed by illness, injury, or imprisonment, but it actually advanced instead? If so, share the story with the group. Paul writes here that "because of my chains, most of the brothers and sisters have become confident in the Lord and dare all the more to proclaim the gospel without fear." In these situations, when the leader's activities were restricted, did this cause others to become bolder? If so, how?

3 Several years before this, Paul wrote to the community of Jesus' followers in Rome to ask them to support a journey he was planning to take to the western part of the empire. There were some differences between his understanding of the gospel and theirs, so he had to explain and defend his own understanding at length (*PJL* sessions 22 through 28). It seems that, despite this letter, some differences remained. Many in Rome apparently continued to believe that Jews and Gentiles who were followers of Jesus should maintain a ceremonial separation from one another, and that Gentiles should be encouraged to follow at least some provisions of the Jewish law.

Paul opposed these teachings vehemently in letters such as Galatians and Colossians. But in those cases, outside teachers were coming into communities that Paul and his coworkers had founded. They were trying, as Paul saw it, to take away from Gentile believers the freedom they had in Christ. But here we see that he considered it a different matter if such teachers went out and created new communities of their own by leading fresh people to faith in Christ. Even though the people who disagreed with Paul were trying to take advantage of his imprisonment to advance their own understanding at the expense of his, he recognized that, whatever the motives, Christ was being preached and people were coming to faith. So he rejoiced.

- ➔ Who are the people whose teachings and emphases you disagree with most, even though you still consider them to be

genuine followers of Jesus? (The disagreement could be over issues like charismatic gifts, the role of women, free will and predestination, worship style, adapting to postmodernism, etc.) Suppose that your local community of Jesus' followers has been going through some rough times that have hindered its outreach and growth. Meanwhile, a short distance away, a community that embraces one or more of the emphases you disagree with most has been growing by leaps and bounds. Can you thank God that so many people are becoming followers of Jesus, even though they're not coming to your church and they're being taught things you have serious problems with? Why or why not?

4 Paul encourages the Philippians not even to be concerned that he might be executed. If he is, he insists, he will “depart and be with Christ,” which is better than life itself. And if he isn't, he'll remain where he can help believers like the Philippians. In fact, he concludes, they still very much need him, so he's “convinced” that he will be acquitted and released.

➔ If you were facing the real prospect of death, do you think you would feel torn between going to be with Christ and remaining in this world to help his followers? Under what conditions and circumstances would you be drawn more to one outcome than the other?

➔ Paul was persuaded he would survive because he still had important and indispensable work to do on this earth. Why are you still alive?

JESUS' EXAMPLE, ILLUSTRATED BY TIMOTHY AND EPAPHRODITUS

Philippians > Main Body > Second, Third, and Fourth Sections

INTRODUCTION

In this session you'll consider the next three sections of Paul's letter. Even though the Philippians are valuable partners in Paul's work, their community is experiencing some problems. One of the most serious is arguments and broken relationships between the members. Paul recognizes that these are ultimately caused by pride and selfishness. So he appeals to the community to be unified. He reminds them eloquently of the example Jesus set of humble, unselfish service. Then, as he explains why he'll be sending Timothy to Philippi shortly and why he's sending Epaphroditus now, he points to the character of these two coworkers as further examples of Christlike selflessness and sacrifice.

READING

Have someone read Paul's appeal for the Philippians to be unified, including his description of Christ's example and its implications, beginning, “Therefore if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ” and ending, “So you too should be glad and rejoice with me.”

Then have someone read the section where Paul says he hopes to send Timothy to Philippi soon.

Finally, have someone read Paul's explanation of why he is sending Epaphroditus back to Philippi now (ending, "He risked his life to make up for the help you yourselves could not give me").

DISCUSSION

1 Epaphroditus probably told Paul about the arguments and broken relationships in Philippi when he came to Rome. These may have appeared, on the surface, to be caused by real or imagined slights and wrongs, or by differences in firmly-held convictions about matters of belief and practice. But Paul recognized that the ultimate cause of these broken relationships was an attitude of pride and selfishness. People felt that they knew better, or were better, than others, and that their own personal interests were more important. Paul appeals to the Philippians directly to be unified, and he offers Jesus' example of humility and unselfishness as the antidote to their wrong attitudes.

Many interpreters believe that in this section Paul is quoting an early poem or hymn about Jesus. (The words may be set as poetry in your edition of the Bible.) Whether Paul is quoting these words or composing them himself, they are a lyrical and memorable description of Jesus' humility, sacrifice, and consequent exaltation.

➔ In what practical way could you best follow Jesus' example of humble sacrifice in your own life right now? If you're in a troubled relationship, how could you work for the best interests of the other person, rather than insisting on your rights and prerogatives? What do you think God would do in the situation if you began to take steps in this direction?

➔ If there are currently divisions within your own community of Jesus' followers, what appear to be the causes, on the surface? To what extent have they been aggravated at a deeper level by pride

and selfishness? If you've taken a side in these divisions, honestly examine your own attitudes and motives. Ask God to help you change any motives that have contributed to the division. If you've been trying to make peace between the sides, pray that God's Spirit would work in everyone's hearts, including your own.

➔ As Paul describes the implications of Jesus' example and urges the Philippians to "do everything without grumbling or arguing," he tells them to "work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you." If you're a follower of Jesus, what aspect of your life of faith is currently causing you the most "fear and trembling"? How do you understand the relationship between your responsibility to "work this out" and the reality that God is at work in you?

2 Paul explains to the Philippians that as soon as he knows the outcome of his trial, he'll send Timothy to them with this news. He adds that he looks forward to hearing the latest about them when Timothy returns. In the Roman Empire, travel was on foot, by horse or horse-drawn vehicle, or by sailing boat. It would have taken weeks, if not months, for Timothy to get to Philippi and back. In the meantime, while waiting for news, Paul could only entrust his friends to God in prayer.

➔ Paul cites Timothy as a Christlike example of a person who doesn't look out for his own interests, but rather shows "genuine concern" for others' welfare. This is demonstrated by his willingness to make a long and dangerous journey from Rome to Philippi and back so that Paul and the Philippians can remain in close touch. Give an example of someone you know who has gone to great lengths to help and encourage others.

➔ Today we would make a phone call or exchange text messages or e-mails and find out in seconds how our friends were doing. Are our spiritual lives and relationships with other believers better or worse off as a result of these instant telecommunications?

3 As Paul describes Epaphroditus's illness and recovery and explains why he's sending him back to Philippi, he portrays him as another model of Christlike character. The parallels are clear: Epaphroditus also left a position of privilege (he must have been a respected member of the community, if not one of its leaders, to be sent as its representative) in order to do the work of a servant, caring for the personal needs of a prisoner. As a result he "almost died," but God raised him up, and now this man is to be held in "honor." Through his self-sacrificing service, Epaphroditus has become a living example of Christ.

➔ Have you ever gone or been sent to help someone in another place? (For example, you might have gone to stay with someone for a while after they had a baby, visited and encouraged people who were sharing the good news about Jesus in another country, or gone to care for someone who was in the hospital or seriously ill at home.) If so, tell the group about your experience. Were you there representing your family or a community? What privileges, opportunities, and advantages did you have to give up in order to go help this person? How did you recognize when your assignment was completed and you could return home? Does learning about Epaphroditus help you see your experience in a new light? If so, how?

➔ Paul tells the Philippians that Epaphroditus came to Rome "to *make up* for the help you yourselves *could not give me*" (that is, because you were far away). This is actually the same expression Paul uses in Colossians when he writes, "I *fill up* in my flesh what is *still lacking* in regard to Christ's afflictions, for the sake of his body, which is the church." In other words, Paul suffers to help followers of Jesus in a way that Jesus himself no longer can, since he's not present physically anymore. If Jesus were still present on earth, what kinds of things do you think he would help you with in order to ease your struggles and sufferings? Who has been "making up for" the help that Jesus would give you? Who can you help in this same way?

➔ Conclude your time together, if you wish, by singing or listening to a song that's based on Paul's description of Christ's example. (For example, Caroline Noel's hymn "At the Name of Jesus," Graham Kendrick's song "The Servant King," or something similar.)

PAUL'S EXAMPLE OF LIVING TO KNOW CHRIST

Philippians > Main Body > Fifth Section

INTRODUCTION

In this session you'll consider the next section of Paul's letter to the Philippians, in which he urges them to follow his own example of living not for personal achievements but for the knowledge of Christ. He encourages them, as people whose "citizenship is in heaven," to join him in "forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead."

READING

Have someone read this next section of the letter, beginning, "Further, my brothers and sisters, rejoice in the Lord!" and ending, "The Lord Jesus Christ . . . will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body."

DISCUSSION

1 Paul warns the Philippians against the teaching that certain Jewish observances, particularly circumcision, have to be added to faith in Jesus. He strongly opposes this same teaching in his letters to the Galatians (*PJL*

sessions 20 and 21) and the Colossians (session 3 of this guide), and to some extent in his letters to the Corinthians and Romans (for example, *PJL* session 25). In those letters Paul offers involved scriptural and theological arguments to refute this teaching. In this letter he takes a more personal approach. He describes how he has all the qualifications these rival teachers could ever expect, but insists that these things are "garbage" compared with "the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus."

Paul's basic argument is, "I'm telling you, as someone who's got it all [at least as they would see it], that it isn't that much, not compared with knowing Jesus." He explains how he was circumcised when he was eight days old, not later as an adult convert; how he's a natural descendant of the tribe of Benjamin, not a Gentile who's trying to become part of Israel; and how he was entirely observant of the law as a member of the strictest sect, the Pharisees. He says he was "faultless" when it came to "righteousness based on the law." He doesn't mean that he was sinless, but that he regularly kept all the Jewish regulations regarding food, the Sabbath, religious festivals, and so forth. Gentiles like the Philippians could never match a record like this. But they shouldn't even bother. "Been there, done that," Paul says. He insists that if they are living in relationship with Jesus, they already have something infinitely superior.

➤ If you're a follower of Jesus, what did you think life was all about before you met him? Does your relationship with him now make all of your former ambitions and achievements seem like nothing by comparison? If not, how could your relationship with Jesus become deeper and more authentic, so that it would give you a quality of life that indeed surpassed anything you knew without him?

2 Paul's Jewish qualifications were "garbage" or worthless in three specific senses:

- By comparison with knowing Jesus.
- As a means of becoming more acceptable to God.
- As something that Gentiles like the Philippians should want to obtain themselves. (Trying to become more Jewish would be pointless for them.)

But these qualifications were not absolutely worthless. God doesn't give people "garbage." Paul's upbringing, steeped in Jewish heritage and culture, actually enabled him to explain to people throughout the Roman Empire how Jesus, the Messiah of Israel, could be the Savior of the world. For Paul's particular calling, his background was an indispensable ministry tool. (At one point he even appealed to his Jewish qualifications to renew the Corinthians' confidence in him, *PJL* session 16.)

➔ What background, advantages, opportunities, and experiences has God given you that have equipped you to fulfill the special purpose he has for your life? Give each person the chance to list what they believe some of these things are. (Anyone who's having trouble identifying them can ask the group for help.) Have you ever been tempted to think of these things as your own achievements and to believe that because of them God should think more highly of you than of other people? Pray silently together, giving each person the chance to thank God for the things they identified and to ask God's forgiveness for any times they've acted entitled or superior because of them.

3 Paul says that he wants to know Christ and specifically to know both "the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings." By knowing Christ in both of these senses, a person passes through death into new life.

Participation in Jesus' sufferings means two things. It means the one-time act of dying to life in the old realm by identifying with his suffering and death on the cross. But it also means the ongoing process of "filling up what is lacking" in Jesus' sufferings by joining in his ongoing work in the world. (The word translated "participation" here is the same one Paul uses at the beginning of this letter to describe the Philippians' "partnership" with him.)

Knowing Jesus' resurrection power also means two things. As a one-time act, it means being raised to spiritual life out of spiritual death by identifying with Jesus' resurrection. As an ongoing process, it refers to the way believers are transformed within by the power of the Holy Spirit. (As Paul wrote in

Romans, "If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies.")

The one-time act is more in view when Paul talks in Colossians and Ephesians about identifying with Jesus, as through baptism. The ongoing process is more in view here in Philippians as Paul talks about "pressing on toward the goal."

➔ Do you feel that you are currently experiencing Jesus' resurrection power and participating in his sufferings, as an ongoing process? If so, in what ways? If not, what do you think would have to change in your life for you to experience whichever aspect(s) you're missing?

4 While believers can have resurrection power in their lives, Paul specifies that the resurrection itself hasn't happened yet. After saying he wants to attain to the resurrection of the dead, he adds, "Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already arrived at my goal . . ." (or "have already been made perfect").

He may need to say this to counteract a specific false teaching that was circulating at this time. As we'll see in session 23 when we consider 2 Timothy, Paul had to correct people in Ephesus who were saying that "the resurrection has already taken place." He had explained to the Thessalonians some years before that the "day of the Lord" had not yet come (*PJL* session 3). The Corinthians, too, were influenced by the idea that they had already "begun to reign," that is, that they were already fully in the coming age. This led some of them to live as if what they did in their bodies didn't matter (*PJL* session 6).

If, as Paul writes this letter, there is a similar teaching in Philippi, this may explain why some people there are also gratifying their desires without restraint. They're living as if their "stomach" (their desires) was their "god," and they're actually proud of what they're doing wrong (just as the Corinthians were proud to have a case of incest in their community). Paul actually weeps for these people as he dictates this letter.

➔ What teachings or beliefs of your culture might make a follower of Jesus think they could live basically to fulfill their own desires? What does it look like in your culture when people live this way?

What can be the consequences of their actions, for their health, relationships, and spiritual life? Have you ever heard someone boast about something they should actually be ashamed of? If so, describe this to the group (without revealing any identities).

➤ How do people become “enemies of the cross” when they live as if what they do in their bodies doesn’t matter?

5 Paul encourages the Philippians to follow his example of “forgetting what is behind” (in his case, trying to be accepted by God through keeping the law) and “straining toward what is ahead.” Using an image from the athletic competitions of the day, he speaks of pressing on towards the finish line to win the prize. This means successfully fulfilling the calling from God that leads “above” (NIV “heavenward”). He urges the Philippians to not have their minds “set on earthly things,” but to remember that their citizenship is “in heaven” (just as he told the Colossians, “Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things”).

In other words, Paul wants the Philippians to recognize, as he does, the distinction that followers of Jesus should be most concerned about. It’s not the one between Jew and Gentile, or between keeping the law and not following it. Rather, it’s the distinction between a person’s old life “below” and their new life “above.”

When it came to relying on law keeping, Paul actually served as a counter-example—someone whose changed life showed that keeping the law doesn’t make us more acceptable to God. But when it comes to setting the mind on things above, he offers himself as a positive example for the Philippians to imitate.

➤ In your own life, what things should you leave behind and forget, and what things should you look ahead to and strive towards? (Use discretion in describing wrong actions that have been forgiven and can truly be left in the past.)

➤ The city of Philippi was a colony of Rome, meaning that its residents held Roman citizenship. Paul evokes this idea when

he tells the Philippians that “our citizenship is in heaven,” and when he calls them “citizens of heaven” earlier in the letter. The implication is that the community of Jesus’ followers is a colony of heaven here on earth. Describe the closest thing you’ve seen to the people of one nation or culture forming a “colony” outside their home country. How does this help illustrate the implications for believers of the image Paul uses here?

PAUL'S PERSONAL THANKS AND ENCOURAGEMENT AND HIS PRACTICAL ADVICE

Philippians > Main Body > Sixth Section

INTRODUCTION

In the last section of his letter to the Philippians, Paul addresses the community and several of its members directly and personally. This was a common practice of the time. In his earlier letters, as you've seen, Paul similarly uses the final section for greetings and personal matters. But here he uses the opportunity to thank the Philippians once again, as he did at the start of this letter, for their concern for him. They have demonstrated this concern in a practical way by sending Epaphroditus to Rome to care for him and by sending gifts to meet his financial needs. Despite his imprisonment, Paul's relationship with the Philippians fills him with joy, and he offers them positive and uplifting advice as he draws the letter to a close.

READING

Have someone read this final section of Philippians, beginning where you left off last time and reading through to the end of the letter.

DISCUSSION

1 Earlier in the letter Paul urged the whole community at Philippi to “make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind.” Now he appeals directly to two of its leading members, Euodia and Syntyche, to “be of the same mind in the Lord.” He doesn't describe what their dispute was about, but it must have been a very public one, since he addresses them by name in this open letter. Paul asks someone he calls his “true companion” to help them be reconciled. This is probably one of his coworkers whom he has sent to Philippi. (This would explain how the community heard about Epaphroditus's deathly illness.) Many interpreters believe this coworker was Luke, who would have been known and respected in Philippi because he remained there for some time after Paul first visited that city. We know from Colossians and Philemon that Luke was with Paul in Rome, so he could have sent him to Philippi to help resolve the conflicts there, particularly the one between these two women, when he learned about the conflicts from Epaphroditus.

➔ Are you aware of Christian leaders who are openly fighting and feuding? How does this affect the cause of the gospel? What can be done to help people like this become reconciled?

2 Paul gives the whole community practical advice and encouragement to help them overcome their conflicts. He explains how they can be peaceful and filled with noble thoughts, rather than being agitated, suspicious, and resentful.

➔ What is causing you the most anxiety in life right now? In the week ahead, put Paul's advice here into practice. Rather than worrying, pray about your situation, making specific requests about it, and look for things you can give thanks for. Report back to the group at your next meeting what happens as a result.

➔ What kinds of thoughts are most troubling or unwelcome for you? Paul tells the Philippians to think about things that are true, noble, right, pure, lovely, admirable, excellent, and praiseworthy.

For each of these words, give at least one example of something it describes. In the days ahead, if you find yourself thinking about things these words don't describe, choose with God's help to think instead about something they do describe. If you experience a breakthrough in taking control of your thoughts, tell the group how.

➔ In this section, as in the previous one, Paul offers himself as an example to the Philippians: "Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me—put it into practice." Which of your own qualities would you encourage other people to imitate?

3 As Paul thanks the Philippians for their gifts, he specifies that he wasn't eager to receive money from them, even though he had needs. He says he has "learned the secret of being content in any and every situation . . . whether living in plenty or in want." With this in mind he explains, "I can do all this through him who gives me strength." Rather, he was eager to see their "account" credited for what they did. He knows that God encourages and blesses generosity and compassion, and he rejoices to see the Philippians exhibit these qualities.

- ➔ Which of the following do you feel you're better at?
- "Living in plenty": Genuinely enjoying an abundance of resources, but not wasting them; instead, when you have more than enough for yourself, finding good causes to support and deserving people to share with.
 - "Living in want": Knowing how to live simply and make do creatively with what you have, and being able to trust God by faith to supply your needs.

How could you become better at living in the situation that's more challenging for you now?

- ➔ What do you think God "credited" the Philippians for?
- The money they sent Paul on this occasion, and their sacrifice of Epaphroditus's companionship and leadership while he was away.
 - The good attitude and generous qualities that led them to make this gift and sacrifice.
 - The encouragement Paul received from their help.
 - All of the results of Paul's ministry, starting from the "early days of . . . the gospel," that were made possible by the Philippians' ongoing support.

Based on what Paul writes here, what kinds of things do you think God will "credit" you for? How might these credits be paid out in the end?

1 TIMOTHY

OUTLINE OF 1 TIMOTHY

SESSION 16

Opening: *Writer's name, recipient, good wish*

	Session #	
First Commissioning of Timothy "Command certain people not to teach false doctrines."	17	
	18	First Instructions Reestablish order and decency
		Second Instructions Ensure that elders and deacons are properly qualified
Second Commissioning of Timothy "Point these things out to the brothers and sisters."	19	
		Third Instructions Ensure church support for worthy widows and elders
Third Commissioning of Timothy "I charge you . . . to keep these instructions without partiality."	20	
		Fourth Instructions Ensure order in master-servant relationships
Fourth Commissioning of Timothy "These are the things you are to teach and insist on."		
		Fifth Instructions Instruct the rich
Final Commissioning of Timothy "Guard what has been entrusted to your care."		

Closing: *Good wish*

EXPERIENCING 1 TIMOTHY AS A WHOLE

INTRODUCTION

Shortly after he wrote to the Philippians, Paul was released from prison, as he expected. He had been imprisoned for at least four years. During this time, the community of Jesus' followers in the city of Ephesus had come under the control of rival leaders and teachers much like the ones Paul had warned the Colossians about. They were forbidding certain foods, encouraging harsh treatment of the body, and pursuing secret and speculative spiritual knowledge. Like some in Corinth (*PJL* session 7), they were also encouraging believers not to get married.

These rivals apparently had so much influence in Ephesus that Paul couldn't address the situation there by writing directly to the community from prison. (As we saw in session 5, the letter known as Ephesians most likely wasn't sent to the community in Ephesus.) Instead, Paul made a personal visit to the city after his release. He wasn't able to stay long enough to resolve the situation; for some reason, he needed to continue on into Macedonia. So he left Timothy there and wrote him a letter, which he clearly intended the community to hear as well, authorizing him to act as his representative. This letter is now known as 1 Timothy. In this session you'll get an overview of it, and you'll consider its sections in more detail in the following sessions.

READING

As a group, take turns reading through 1 Timothy out loud. This should take less than fifteen minutes. Switch readers whenever you come to what feels like a natural break. 1 Timothy comes right after Philippians in *The Books of the Bible*. (In traditional versions, you'll find it near the end of Paul's letters.) As you listen, if you don't understand the meaning of particular words or phrases, make a note of them. After the reading, your group should work together to help everyone understand these better.

Notice how the letter alternates between (1) sections in which Paul commissions Timothy to act on his behalf by publicly announcing and confirming his authority and (2) sections in which Paul gives Timothy instructions about the wrong practices and teachings he is to correct. (See the outline on page 88.) Listen especially for places where Paul describes the situation in Ephesus, so that you can understand it better.

Notice how this book of the Bible, too, is an actual letter, but that it has only a very brief opening and closing. Paul doesn't need to close a gap of space or time as he writes to this close collaborator, so he gets right down to business.

DISCUSSION

➡ As you listened to 1 Timothy, were there things you didn't understand or that bothered you or that you had questions about? Tell the group what these were. Make a note of them and be sure to discuss them together in the sessions ahead when you get to the parts of the letter where they appear. (You don't need to try to resolve everyone's questions and concerns at this point, just identify them.)

➡ Based on the overall view you've just gotten of 1 Timothy, work together as a group to describe, briefly and in general terms, what was going on in Ephesus at this time, why Paul was concerned about it, and what he told Timothy to do about the various components of the problem.

➡ Were you ever part of a community of Jesus' followers that you really enjoyed and appreciated, then were away from it for some time, and then discovered (either on a return visit or through other contacts) that it had changed in significant ways that you weren't comfortable with? If so, describe this experience for the group. Did you and others try to encourage the group to return to its earlier character? If so, what happened? Has listening to 1 Timothy helped you get any further perspective on this experience?

➡ The contemporary movie industry speaks of "four quadrants," four different audiences it designs films for: younger men, younger women, older men, and older women. Give examples of movies aimed at each audience. Paul employs these same categories as he tells Timothy how to correct the situation in Ephesus. He lists the groups by name at one point ("treat younger men as brothers," etc.), and he also uses them as the basis for his instructions. (For example, if a widow is an older woman, she can be supported by the church, but if she's a younger woman, she should remarry.) What is the value and legitimacy of dividing people into these four groups? Which group would you belong to? How does this help determine what activities you will be most effective in and how others should relate to you? What are the limitations of this kind of classification? (For example, Paul also tells Timothy, "Don't let anyone look down on you because you are young," and he told the Galatians that in Christ there is not "male and female.")

TIMOTHY IS TO CORRECT THE PROBLEMS IN
EPHESUS AS PAUL'S REPRESENTATIVE

1 Timothy > First Commissioning

INTRODUCTION

Paul begins this letter by commissioning Timothy in writing to act as his representative in Ephesus. He wants to put his full authority behind this younger colleague so he can deal with the problems there. This is the first of several places in the letter where he does this.

In this first commissioning, Paul describes the main problem in the community: certain people are teaching “false doctrines.” He states publicly that he has put two of them, Hymenaeus and Alexander, under discipline. (He says specifically that he has “handed [them] over to Satan.” This is the same expression he uses in 1 Corinthians to describe the expulsion of offending members from the community, *PJL* session 6. This removes them from its spiritual shelter and protection.) Paul reviews his own personal history and describes how Jesus appointed him “to his service,” to remind the believers in Ephesus of his own credentials and authority. He also recalls the prophecies that were spoken about Timothy, to show that God’s power and authority rest on him as well.

READING

Have someone read this opening part of the letter, beginning with, “As I urged you when I went into Macedonia, stay there in Ephesus so that you may command certain people not to teach false doctrines any longer,” and ending with, “Among them are Hymenaeus and Alexander, whom I have handed over to Satan to be taught not to blaspheme.”

DISCUSSION

1 The exact nature of the “false doctrines” that were being taught in Ephesus is unclear. But Paul’s references to “endless genealogies” and “controversial speculations” suggest that they involved, at least among other things, attempts to describe the relationships between beings that supposedly made up the *pleroma* of entities between the supreme God and humanity. (Recall the explanation of this concept in sessions 3 and 6.) The false teachers may have been combining elements of Jewish religion with pagan concepts and drawing characters from the Hebrew Scriptures into their speculative genealogies. This would account for why Paul says, “They want to be teachers of the law, but they do not know what they are talking about.” They were emphasizing speculative knowledge at the expense of inner transformation, which Paul explains is the real “goal” for followers of Jesus. They were offering the same kind of “fine-sounding arguments” that he had warned the Colossians about. This situation in Ephesus is also reminiscent of the one Paul addressed in Corinth some years before, when the community there divided into factions as it became absorbed in speculative reasoning (*PJL* session 5).

➡ What issues have you seen become the subjects of speculation that you feel is excessive and diverts followers of Jesus today from becoming more like Christ? Why do you think people get involved in such speculation—what’s in it for them? What can help people recognize that they should instead be pursuing “love . . . from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith”? What does it look like when people pursue this?

2 The false teachers' misuse of the law leads Paul to describe its proper use, which is to identify and restrain behavior that doesn't reflect God's intentions for human life. (In Galatians, Paul explains in detail that this is the purpose of the law, *PJL* session 19.) His list here of activities that are "contrary to the sound doctrine that conforms to the gospel" includes "practicing homosexuality." As in Romans (*PJL* session 23), he is using homosexuality as an example of an activity that the law says is not in keeping with God's intentions.

➤ The Bible's perspective on homosexuality creates a challenge for followers of Jesus in many contemporary cultures. Their challenge is to express this perspective without being perceived as lacking respect or promoting hatred. If you are a follower of Jesus, what impact does your faith have on the way you relate to people who are attracted to members of the same sex? Would the surrounding culture consider you a part of the problem or a part of the solution as it seeks to protect these people from hatred and violence?

➤ In 1 Corinthians Paul offers a similar list of activities that he says don't reflect God's intentions (*PJL* session 6). That list includes the same term that's translated here as "those practicing homosexuality." Paul tells the Corinthians, "that is what some of you were," suggesting that when these particular members of the community became followers of Jesus, they no longer practiced homosexuality. Do you know, or have you heard of, anyone like this today? If so, tell the group about them, using discretion and not mentioning their names unless they've publicly shared this part of their life stories themselves. How do they describe the change in their lives? What do you make of this?

➤ Do you know anyone who wants to be a follower of Jesus but who also wants to remain in a same-sex relationship? How would you respond to someone who trusted your advice and asked whether they could do this? What approaches have you seen

communities of Jesus' followers take to people in this situation? Would you like to see these communities approach them any differently? If so, how, and why?

3 Paul describes himself as the "worst of sinners," because he was once "a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man." Before he met Jesus, he tried to keep people from following him. He had many believers imprisoned or executed. But now, he says, he has been "shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his immense patience as an example for those who would believe in him and receive eternal life." Paul's opponents in Ephesus may have been trying to use his well-known past as an enemy of the church to discredit him. Paul directs the attention instead to Jesus, who has shown mercy to him and to everyone in the community. As he does, he can't help breaking out into grateful praise and blessing.

➤ When a person is describing how much Jesus has done for them, they may relate some of the wrong things they did before they met him, to show what great mercy they have received. This can be done with restraint and discretion, with the focus on Jesus and his mercy. Alternatively, however, the bulk of a person's story may consist of lurid and sensational details of past wrongdoing. If you've heard people share their stories either way, briefly and discreetly describe how they did this. What principles can be applied to keep stories like these from becoming scandalous and instead make them truly Christ honoring?

4 Paul tells Timothy, "I am giving you this command" (or "entrusting you with this responsibility") "in keeping with the prophecies once made about you, so that by recalling them you may fight the battle well." Apparently when Timothy first professed faith in Jesus, or when he was baptized, or when he was first authorized to work with Paul, or on some similar occasion, gifted prophets were present who predicted the kinds of things God would do through him. As Timothy faces this daunting challenge in Ephesus, Paul encourages him to remember these assurances of his spiritual destiny. What

Paul writes here is also intended to make the community respect and obey Timothy as he works to restore order among them.

➔ Have you ever heard someone say something on a significant occasion about your own calling and destiny, or someone else's, as a follower of Jesus? If so, tell the group what was said, by whom, and on what occasion. Have these words begun to come true? If they were spoken about you, have you found them empowering? If so, how?

RESTORING ORDER AND DECENCY AND ESTABLISHING GOOD LEADERSHIP

1 Timothy > First and Second Instructions

INTRODUCTION

Once Paul has commissioned Timothy to act as his representative, he begins to give him instructions on how to correct various problems in the community at Ephesus.

The first set of instructions explains how he is to restore order and decency. The community is wracked with controversies, disputes, and arguments. Its members are no longer exhibiting “godliness and holiness.” Timothy is to set things right by encouraging prayer and the qualities of restraint and respect for authority.

The second set of instructions describes the proper qualifications for community leaders, both “overseers” whose work includes governing and teaching and “deacons” whose role is administration and service. Paul has already deposed two renegade leaders, Hymenaeus and Alexander, and he hopes Timothy will be able to identify and install new leaders of noble character who will restore peace and order to the community.

READING

Have someone read Paul's first set of instructions to Timothy, beginning with, “I urge, then, first of all, that petitions, prayers, intercession

and thanksgiving be made for all people,” and ending with, “women will be saved through childbearing—if they continue in faith, love and holiness with propriety.”

Then have someone read the second set of instructions, beginning with, “Here is a trustworthy saying: Whoever aspires to be an overseer desires a noble task,” and ending with, “Those who have served well gain an excellent standing and great assurance in their faith in Christ Jesus.”

DISCUSSION

1 Paul describes an important goal as he begins to instruct Timothy: To “live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness.” He will use these terms and similar ones repeatedly in both sets of instructions that follow. He explains that when authorities are respected and people of noble character are admired, this creates peaceful conditions that are pleasing to God, who “wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth.” In other words, these conditions are conducive to the good news about Jesus being shared and welcomed. And so Paul urges the community to pray for “all those in authority,” so that with honest and capable leadership the society will take on these desirable characteristics.

➤ Does your local community of Jesus’ followers pray regularly for leaders in government, business, education, the arts, etc.? If so, how and when do they do this? Can you think of further ways that you personally and your community together could pray for these leaders and their influence on society? If so, share your ideas with the group.

➤ If God “wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth,” why doesn’t this seem to happen for some people?

2 Paul’s first set of instructions is intended to reestablish a “peaceful and quiet life” within the community of Jesus’ followers. He tells Timothy

that the men should pray together “without anger or disputing.” He then gives a series of directions about the women in the community that, despite his peaceful aims, is the subject of great debate among interpreters.

One initial concern that’s relatively clear is about the way women were devoting considerable time, attention, and money to their clothing and hairstyles, at the expense of the “good deeds” they might otherwise do. Timothy is to encourage them to observe modesty, decency, and propriety in the way they dress and act. This is “appropriate for women who profess to worship God,” literally “who profess godliness,” a close synonym of the term in Paul’s earlier phrase “all *godliness* and holiness.”

➤ Does your own culture influence and even pressure women to be unhealthily concerned about clothing, hairstyles, makeup, etc.? If so, how? What similar pressures do men face? How can women and men who are followers of Jesus make “good deeds” their priority, even as they have an appropriate and healthy interest in staying in shape and looking their best?

3 A second concern that Paul tells Timothy to address is less clear. In some way the women were not exhibiting the kind of “quietness” (the same term as in “peaceful and *quiet* lives”) that was appropriate in gatherings of the community. Rather than learning respectfully, they were apparently challenging the teachings that were being presented. (We’ll see in the next session why it was women in particular who were disrupting the meetings in this way.) In response, Paul forbids them to “teach or to assume authority over a man.”

Many interpreters understand this as a principle that Paul wants to apply in all communities of Jesus’ followers. Other interpreters believe that this is a restriction Paul wants Timothy to put in place for the time being in Ephesus, to correct a disorderly situation there and restore “quietness.”

One difficulty in deciding between these interpretations arises from the fact that a key term, *authentein*, translated “assume authority” in the NIV, appears only here in the whole New Testament. So we get no help from Paul’s other letters, or from other writings of the earliest communities of Jesus’ followers, in understanding precisely what it means.

- Some interpreters argue that *authentein* means “to be in authority over” another person. They also argue that when, in the next set of instructions, Paul describes male and female deacons but only male overseers, this indicates that he wanted the positions of highest authority in the community to be reserved for men. These arguments support the conclusion that what Paul writes here is intended as a general prohibition.
- Others argue that *authentein* means “to assume a stance of independent authority,” which would fit a context in which the women were contesting established teachings. This understanding supports the idea that in this passage Paul is only implementing a temporary local prohibition.

The debate between these positions is impassioned, wide-ranging, and actively ongoing.

➞ Do you know any women who are pastors? Have you ever heard them address what Paul writes here and explain why they believe they can be pastors? If so, briefly summarize their explanation for the group. What do you think of it?

4 The *reasons* Paul gives for his instructions here are as controversial and disputed as the instructions themselves.

- Those who believe Paul is generally limiting women’s roles say he is appealing to the creation narrative in Genesis, specifically the story of Adam and Eve, to give these limitations a universal, transcultural grounding. They believe he’s saying men should be in authority because Adam was created before Eve, and because Eve was the one initially deceived by the serpent.
- Those who believe that Paul’s instructions instead represent a temporary local prohibition argue that he is reviewing the creation narrative in order to correct an erroneous retelling of it, by those who “want to be teachers of the law, but . . . do not know what they are talking about.” This revisionist history, which apparently said the woman was created before the man and was a source of life and enlightenment for him, was either:

(1) the content of the false teaching that the women in Ephesus were asserting in defiance of the community’s established beliefs, or else (2) it was the grounds on which they claimed to know better than their male teachers. In 1 Corinthians Paul had to correct a similar revisionist history by insisting that “man did not come from woman, but woman from man” (*PJL* session 9). Here he says, “Adam was formed first, then Eve.” According to these interpreters, he adds that “it was the woman who was deceived,” in order to explain that by eating the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, Eve did not become a source of enlightenment (as the false teachers in Ephesus, who promoted “what is falsely called knowledge,” would have thought). According to this interpretation, Paul is not providing a universal grounding for a general prohibition; rather, he is knocking out the ground from under a specific false teaching.

Once again, the debate between these two interpretations is ongoing.

Paul’s closing *reference* to “childbearing” is also the subject of much discussion and debate.

- Many interpreters see this as one more reference to the Genesis creation narrative, where God tells the woman she will have severe pains in childbearing because she has listened to the serpent and disobeyed God’s command. If this is the case, one reasonable interpretation of Paul’s meaning here is that he feels this is no longer the final word, now that Jesus has given himself “as a ransom for all people.” Instead, women will be “saved through childbearing”—that is, kept safe during childbirth, the effects of this curse being attenuated—through the sheltering and protecting effects of their new life in Christ. They must cultivate this new life by pursuing the qualities stressed throughout these instructions (“faith, love and holiness with propriety”).
- Other interpreters, however, translate this phrase, “Woman will be saved through the birth of the child,” and see this as a

reference to the birth of Jesus as the Savior.

- Still others say it means that women will *show* they are saved by taking on the domestic role they believe Paul emphasizes for women. They say childbearing is mentioned as a single activity that represents this entire role.

➔ Invite the members of your group, both women and men, to share if they wish any ways in which the debate about women's roles in light of Paul's teaching has affected them as followers of Jesus. Pray together as a group about what is shared, and also pray that the wider community of Jesus' followers will one day reach a common understanding of this question.

5 The leadership in the communities Paul helped establish seems to have become more formalized over time. His earlier letters are addressed just to "God's holy people" in a particular place, but when he writes to the Philippians, for the first time he addresses "overseers and deacons" as well as the community as a whole. Here in 1 Timothy, in his second set of instructions, he explains the qualities a person should have to be considered for these positions. In many cases he echoes terms that he uses in his first set of instructions. For example, elders are to be "respectable" and "self-controlled"; these are the same terms translated "modestly" and "with propriety" in regard to women's clothing.

➔ Look back over the qualities that are expected of overseers and deacons. For each one, describe what problems would arise if a leader lacked it (in a couple of cases Paul explains this himself) and how possessing the quality would equip leaders for their work. If you can, give examples of particular people you've known who you feel have exemplified these qualities well.

➔ If you were going to be considered for a leadership position, in which of the areas described here would you already be qualified? In which areas would you need to improve in order to be fully qualified?

ENSURING COMMUNITY SUPPORT FOR WORTHY LEADERS

1 Timothy > Second Commissioning
1 Timothy > Third Instructions

INTRODUCTION

After giving instructions about how to restore order and decency within the community and about how to identify qualified leaders, Paul states once again that he has placed Timothy in Ephesus as his authorized representative. This is partly designed to encourage him as he introduces necessary but difficult changes in the community's life. But it's designed even more to neutralize any potential opposition to his work.

Paul then gives his next set of instructions. He tells Timothy how to ensure that the community supports widows and elders who truly deserve it.

READING AND DISCUSSION

1 Have someone read Paul's second commissioning of Timothy, beginning with, "Although I hope to come to you soon, I am writing you these instructions so that, if I am delayed, you will know how people ought to conduct themselves" and ending with, "Treat younger men as brothers, older women as mothers, and younger women as sisters, with absolute purity."

We learn more about the false teachers in Ephesus from what Paul writes to Timothy here. He says they “forbid people to marry and order them to abstain from certain foods.” This suggests that, like the opponents Paul confronts in some of his other letters, they taught that spirit was good and matter was bad, and that the spirit could be freed by denying the body its pleasures. (The restriction on foods, which Paul challenges sharply, may reflect a misappropriation of Jewish dietary regulations by these would-be “teachers of the law.” The ban on marriage likely helped create the problems surrounding younger widows, discussed below.) To counter this teaching, Paul gives a brief summary of what the communities of Jesus’ followers believe, beginning with the affirmation that Jesus “appeared in the flesh.” He is probably quoting an early hymn, poem, or creed at this point.

But Paul then notes that the body can be overemphasized as well as underemphasized. He acknowledges that “physical training” (literally “bodily exercise”), which his younger colleague is apparently devoted to, is a positive and worthwhile activity. But he encourages Timothy to pursue godliness even more, since it has “value for all things, holding promise for both the present life and the life to come.”

Paul speaks to Timothy quite personally here, but always in a way that will increase the community’s respect for him. He once again mentions the prophecies that were spoken about him and reminds him of his giftedness. He also describes how Timothy can be an example to those around him, even though he is young (probably no older than his mid-30s, unusually young for a leadership position in this culture).

➔ In the communities of Jesus’ followers that you’re familiar with, are people more likely to look down on someone because they’re younger or because they’re older? List some of the best things that older and younger people each have to contribute. How can you help your community benefit more from the contributions of each group?

➔ Do you know a younger person who is “an example . . . in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith and in purity”? If so, describe how they are a good example in one of these areas.

➔ Does your culture generally overemphasize or underemphasize the body? Does your local community of Jesus’ followers help promote physical fitness among its members, as a way they can honor the bodies God has given them? If so, how? In what ways might it also be undermining fitness without realizing it?

➔ Drawing an analogy based on the theme of health and fitness, Paul tells Timothy to be “nourished on the truths of the faith” and to have “nothing to do with godless myths.” In other words, Timothy is to avoid spiritual junk food. How can a person do this today?

2 Have someone read Paul’s instructions about support for widows, beginning with, “Give proper recognition to those widows who are really in need” and ending with, “so that the church can help those widows who are really in need.”

The community of Jesus’ followers in Ephesus has admirably been offering financial assistance to widows, who in this culture might have no other source of support. But it has been assisting all widows, including those who have families who could help them and those who might remarry. This is putting an unsustainable burden on the community’s resources. It’s also creating some more serious issues.

In order to be “put on the list” for financial support, these widows are required to pledge themselves to Christ and promise not to remarry. They’re supposed to devote themselves instead to prayer and good works. But some younger widows have wanted to get married again so badly that they’ve broken their pledges and abandoned Christ.

Others are taking advantage of the support they’re receiving to live unproductive lives, idly “going about from house to house,” gossiping and “talking nonsense.” This is likely a description of these younger widows spreading the false teaching. They were probably also trying to promote the false teaching when the community gathered together. This would explain why, as we saw

in the previous session, Paul forbids women in particular to interrupt and challenge the authoritative teachings that were presented in these gatherings.

The broken pledges and idle gossip are disrupting the community and damaging its reputation. So Paul tells Timothy to impose a practical solution: The community should assist only older widows who have no other means of support. All families that are able should help their own relatives. And younger widows should remarry, have children, and manage their own homes, living responsibly rather than idly and disruptively.

➔ Paul says that people who have older relatives should “put their religion into practice by caring for their own family.” Do you know someone who has sacrificially cared for an older relative or friend, out of devotion to God? If so, share their story with the group.

➔ How are older people in your culture typically cared for? Have you ever heard of a community of Jesus’ followers today supporting its older members so they can devote themselves full time to prayer and good works? If so, tell the group about it. If not, what’s the closest thing to this that you have heard about? What does your own community of believers do for its older members?

➔ Thanks to labor-saving devices, many people today have a considerable amount of discretionary time, like the younger widows who were being supported by the community in Ephesus. What are some modern-day equivalents of the time-wasting and troublesome activities these younger widows were getting into? What positive and constructive alternatives would you recommend for the use of discretionary time?

➔ In 1 Corinthians Paul encouraged single people not to marry so that they could be more devoted to “the Lord’s affairs” (PJL session 7). But here in 1 Timothy he encourages younger widows to remarry so that “the enemy” will have “no opportunity.” Why

did Paul feel he could advance God’s interests in the first case by discouraging marriage and in the second case by encouraging it?

3 Have someone read Paul’s instructions about support for elders, beginning with, “The elders who direct the affairs of the church well are worthy of double honor,” and ending with, “But those elders who are sinning you are to reprove before everyone, so that the others may take warning.”

The “elders” Paul is describing here are not simply older men, but the leaders of the community. They are the “overseers” whose qualifications are discussed earlier in the letter. Apparently there’s a power struggle going on in Ephesus between elders who are loyal to Paul and those who are promoting the false teaching. Paul wants Timothy to protect the loyal elders by making sure they are properly paid for their work, particularly if it involves “preaching and teaching,” and by making sure they are not removed from office because of unfounded accusations. But he does want unworthy elders to be held publicly accountable.

➔ In your local community of Jesus’ followers, how are the leaders, especially those who preach and teach, compensated for their work? Who determines what they will be paid? Does everyone know how much they receive? Based on what Paul writes to Timothy here, would you suggest any improvements to the way leaders are compensated?

➔ Does your community have a mechanism for receiving and investigating accusations against its leaders? Are you confident that it has an effective process that protects good leaders and holds bad ones accountable? (If you’re not sure, ask someone in your leadership about this.)

LIVING BOTH IN THIS AGE AND THE COMING ONE

1 Timothy > Third Commissioning
 1 Timothy > Fourth Instructions
 1 Timothy > Fourth Commissioning
 1 Timothy > Fifth Instructions
 1 Timothy > Fifth Commissioning

INTRODUCTION

Paul concludes his letter to Timothy by giving instructions about how community members in the lowest and highest social positions—slaves and “those who are rich”—can honor God in their respective situations. He does this by describing how they must simultaneously balance their life in the present age with their life in the coming age.

These instructions are interspersed among several more passages that are addressed directly to Timothy, which are designed once again both to encourage him and to give the believers in Ephesus confidence in him as Paul’s representative.

READING AND DISCUSSION

1 Have someone read the next passage that’s addressed directly to Timothy, beginning with, “I charge you, in the sight of God and Christ Jesus and

the elect angels, to keep these instructions without partiality,” and ending with “Good deeds are obvious, and even those that are not obvious cannot remain hidden forever.”

Paul has given Timothy, a relatively young man, the authority to install, discipline, and remove older and more experienced leaders. Paul wants the community to have confidence that Timothy will do this with impartiality, integrity, and careful deliberation. So he “charges” him before God, Christ, and the angels—the equivalent of making him swear an oath. (There’s a similar “charge” [NIV “command”] at the end of the first commissioning, and there’s also one in the next personal passage of this letter.) But Paul also reassures Timothy that the responsibility of rewarding those who do right and punishing those who do wrong is ultimately God’s and that everyone’s actions and true motivations will become evident at the “place of judgment.”

➔ If Timothy, either through youth and immaturity, or simply because of the limitations of human knowledge, had mistakenly installed a bad elder or removed a good one, would God have held him accountable for this mistake? Or would God have said, “You did the very best you knew how, I’ll sort out the rest at the judgment”?

➔ Paul tells Timothy, “Keep yourself pure,” meaning, “Don’t become involved, in any way, in promoting the wrong things that are happening there in Ephesus.” But Timothy’s understanding of “pure” apparently included the idea that he should drink only water, and not any wine, which was the common beverage of the time. This was creating stomach problems and frequent illnesses, because water was of uneven quality in the Roman Empire. Paul encourages Timothy to “use a little wine” as a practical health measure. Do you think of alcoholic beverages as “impure”? If so, why? Do Paul’s words here lead you to think about this any differently?

2 Have someone read Paul's instructions regarding slaves.

Like many of the Corinthians (*PJL* session 6), some of the slaves in the community at Ephesus were acting as if the coming age had already fully arrived. They felt that earthly social distinctions no longer mattered among believers, and they were treating their masters with familiarity and disrespect, rather than honoring their authority. Paul explains the true implications of living simultaneously in this age and the coming one: these slaves should actually serve their masters even better, because they are “dear to them as fellow believers and are devoted to their welfare.”

➔ Why do you think Paul asked Philemon to take Onesimus back as “better than a slave, as a dear brother,” but told the slaves in Ephesus to “serve [their masters] even better”?

➔ Do you agree or disagree with the following statement? Why? “The abolition of slavery in most of the world, largely through the efforts of Jesus’ followers, is a significant way in which the coming age has more fully arrived since New Testament times.”

3 Have someone read the next passage addressed to Timothy, beginning with, “These are the things you are to teach and insist on” and ending with, “To him be honor and might forever. Amen.”

As Paul encourages and “charges” Timothy even further, he exposes the false teachers’ fundamental motive. Like the “super-apostles” in Corinth (*PJL* session 16), they “want to get rich” and they consider being a church leader and teacher “a means to financial gain.” Paul warns that “the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil” and urges Timothy instead to “pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance and gentleness,” the qualities that are the true aim of faith in Jesus.

➔ In the 1980s film *Wall Street*, the character Gordon Gekko (played by Michael Douglas) famously says, “Greed, for lack of a better word, is good. Greed is right. Greed works. . . . Greed, in

all of its forms—greed for life, for money, for love, knowledge—has marked the upward surge of mankind.” How would you respond to this assertion in light of what Paul writes here?

➔ To offer continuing encouragement to Timothy, Paul reminds him that he has been “called” to eternal life, and that he has embraced it by making a “good confession in the presence of many witnesses.” This refers to a public expression of faith in Jesus, most likely at baptism. Paul reminds Timothy that Jesus himself made a “good confession,” committing himself to God’s saving purposes, even when he was put on trial by the Roman government. Have you made a “good confession” yourself? If so, how and when? If you haven’t, but you’d like to, ask your group to help you arrange to do this publicly sometime soon.

4 Have someone read Paul's instructions regarding the rich.

Paul once again frames his instructions in light of the twin realities of the “present age” (NIV “present world”) and the “coming age.” He doesn’t insist that followers of Jesus abandon all of their wealth or that all of the community’s resources be distributed evenly among its members, as living more fully in the coming age might require. Instead, he tells the rich to “do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share,” and in this way to use their wealth in the present to build a “firm foundation for the coming age.”

➔ Other New Testament books show us that Jesus and his earliest followers did teach that wealth should be given away or shared evenly by believers. Why do you think this practice didn’t continue into the next generation, which Paul is addressing here?

➔ What wealthy people do you know who are a good example of the generosity Paul describes? Give some examples of the ways they model the investment of present wealth for the cause of the coming age.

5 Have someone read Paul's final words to Timothy.

- ➔ Now that you've considered all of 1 Timothy in more detail, have the questions and concerns you noted when you first read through the book been addressed? If not, see if the group can help you resolve any remaining issues now.

TITUS

EXPERIENCING TITUS AS A WHOLE

INTRODUCTION

When Paul was released from his imprisonment, he had so many tasks to attend to among various communities of Jesus' followers that he couldn't do them all in person. And so, at the same time he wrote 1 Timothy, he also wrote a very similar letter giving an assignment to another of his close collaborators, Titus.

Like Timothy, Titus was probably a younger man, since in this letter Paul calls him "my true son" and tells him, "Do not let anyone *despise* you," using almost exactly the same Greek term as when he tells Timothy, "Don't let anyone *look down on* you because you are young." In Galatians Paul describes Titus as one of his longtime collaborators (*PJL* session 18). He played an important role in bringing about reconciliation between Paul and the Corinthians at a difficult point in their relationship (*PJL* session 14), and he then helped organize the collection for the poor in Judea (*PJL* session 15). Now Paul has another strategic assignment for him, which he outlines in this letter.

So that you can experience the letter as freshly as possible, it won't be summarized or explained in advance. Instead, you'll discover from Paul's own words why he wrote it and what he wanted Titus to do. Because you have just

read and discussed 1 Timothy, you will be familiar with the background and circumstances of this very similar letter.

READING

Have someone read Paul's letter to Titus out loud. This should take about five minutes. Titus comes right after 1 Timothy in *The Books of the Bible*. (In traditional versions, 2 Timothy is placed between 1 Timothy and Titus, even though it was written on a later occasion.) As you listen, look for the answers to the following questions, and then respond to them together as a group afterwards:

- Where does Paul want Titus to act as his representative? (You can find this location on the map on page 10.) What is the main task that Paul wants Titus to fulfill there? What else does Paul want him to do? What groups will this affect?
- What people are causing problems in this place? How are they like the people who were causing problems in Ephesus? (List as many ways as you can.)
- Where does Paul want Titus to meet him when he's finished this assignment? (You can find this location on the map as well. Where does Paul seem to want to go from there, once winter is over? If you've studied *PJL*, recall the travel plans he described in Romans.) Who will Paul send to get Titus? (You've already met one of the possibilities he names; it's a person mentioned in Colossians and Ephesians.)

DISCUSSION

1 Paul asked Timothy to appoint both overseers and deacons in Ephesus, but he only asks Titus to appoint overseers (also called "elders") in **Crete**. The communities of believers in Crete were apparently smaller, so that one group of leaders could handle both the teaching and administrative duties.

- If you've belonged to believing communities that were of different sizes, which size has been your favorite, and why? What

are the advantages and disadvantages of each size? How small is too small for you, and how big is too big? What's gained, and what's lost, when a community becomes large enough that it's possible and necessary for its leaders to specialize in certain functions, such as teaching, leadership, administration, care for members, etc.?

2 Paul's opponents in Crete, like the ones in Ephesus, are speculating about "genealogies" and promoting "Jewish myths" (that is, fanciful stories spun out of the Hebrew Scriptures). Paul doesn't specify that they are forbidding marriage, but they are apparently prohibiting certain foods, since he insists, "To the pure, all things are pure" (just as he told Timothy, "Everything God created is good"). The false teachers in Crete are also trying to persuade Gentiles to be circumcised. In response, as he's done so many times in his earlier letters, Paul insists that practices like these aren't needed to make us more acceptable to God. God saved us, he explains, "not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy." What God really wants us to pursue is not speculative knowledge or ritual behavior, but Christlike qualities of character. He lists many of these qualities as he addresses different groups in the course of this letter.

➔ Paul once again speaks to four quadrants: older men, older women, younger women, younger men. Find his advice to your own quadrant and describe one way you'd like to apply it to your life. (There will be some cultural differences. For example, women married and had children much younger in these times than they do in many modern cultures, but concentrate on the character qualities that transcend these differences.)

➔ If you have leadership responsibilities, describe how you'd like to develop in your own life one of the qualities Paul says leaders should have. If you are an employee or otherwise work directly under someone else (for example, in the military), look at how Paul tells slaves to relate to their masters, and identify one way in which you'd like to improve in your own work.

3 When Paul describes how God saved us "not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy," he adds, "This is a trustworthy saying." He makes the same comment about three sayings in 1 Timothy:

- "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners."
- "Whoever aspires to be an overseer desires a noble task."
- "Godliness has value for all things, holding promise for both the present life and the life to come."

Paul is apparently quoting sayings that were commonly repeated among the wider community of Jesus' followers at this time. He is endorsing these sayings as wise and reliable guides to belief and action. This helps put the collective wisdom of the community behind his efforts to correct the situations in Ephesus and Crete.

➔ What are some of your favorite "trustworthy sayings"? That is, what expressions of common wisdom, not taken from the Bible but often heard among followers of Jesus, have you found to be accurate and helpful summaries of how to live and how to understand your faith?

4 The "trustworthy saying" Paul refers to here in Titus may have been a brief summary of what God has done for us through Christ. It was apparently circulating among believers and included all of the following points:

- When the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, he saved us,
- not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy.
- He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit,
- whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior,
- so that, having been justified by his grace,
- we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life.

➔ Work together as a group to explain what each of these phrases means, until you all understand them clearly.

2 TIMOTHY

EXPERIENCING 2 TIMOTHY AS A WHOLE

INTRODUCTION

Paul's last letter is written once again from prison. Timothy was apparently unable to deal with the renegade leaders in Ephesus by himself, so Paul had to return to that city to help. There he suffered "a great deal of harm" from Alexander, the leading false teacher he'd tried to depose. Paul was imprisoned again and brought back to Rome. This time he expected to be executed—"poured out like a drink offering"—rather than be released.

Paul had dispatched his team of coworkers on assignments all over the eastern Mediterranean, and so he found himself virtually alone in this imprisonment. Things were moving faster this time around, now that the emperor Nero was openly hostile to followers of Jesus. There would be no series of delays stretching out over years. Instead, Paul had already had one "defense" (court appearance), and he sensed that "the time for my departure is near." So he wrote to Timothy, who was still in Ephesus, to ask him to come to Rome. There were some practical things Timothy could do to help him, such as bring a warm cloak for the impending winter and look after his needs in prison. Paul also wanted to strengthen and encourage this younger colleague so he could continue their work after his death. (He begins to do this in the letter itself.) But most of all Paul wanted to be able to say goodbye in person

to a close friend who had become like a "dear son" to him. So he wrote to urge Timothy, "Do your best to come to me quickly."

READING

As a group, take turns reading through 2 Timothy out loud. This should take less than ten minutes. Switch readers whenever you come to what feels like a natural break. You'll find 2 Timothy right after Titus in *The Books of the Bible*. The places mentioned in the letter, particularly at the end, are on the map on page 10.

Notice how this letter is different from 1 Timothy. It is not carefully structured, with commissioning passages inserted at strategic points to bolster Timothy's standing in the eyes of a listening community. Rather, it flows freely, as Paul pours out advice, encouragement, and challenges to his younger friend. He dearly hopes to see him again in this life, but in case he doesn't, he wants to tell him everything he can think of to equip him to carry on after he's gone.

DISCUSSION

1 Paul is not finishing his apostolic career by easing gracefully into the role of an elder statesman, collecting honors and tributes while keeping his hand in as a consultant. Instead, he's back in prison and likely to be executed. Much of the believing community is not supporting him in his sufferings and sacrifice. Demas, who was in Rome helping Paul during his first imprisonment (Paul sends greetings from Demas in Colossians and Philemon, calling him his "fellow worker"), has now deserted him. Phygelus and Hermogenes, two followers of Jesus from the province of Asia who are in Rome and could support Paul, have also abandoned him. Meanwhile, the renegade leaders are expanding their power and influence in Ephesus. Alexander has been able to get Paul rearrested, and Hymenaeus, now joined by a man named Philetus, has "departed from the truth" and is destroying the faith of many.

In short, people that Paul has worked closely with and invested in are abandoning him. Communities that he founded and spent years building are being destroyed. Paul's last days as an apostle are his darkest.

➔ Is it fair for God to let Paul end his days like this, after he's worked so hard and served so faithfully?

➔ Have you ever mentored someone and invested in them, only to have them turn their back on you? If so, draw on this experience to describe how you think it affected Paul when Demas deserted him in Rome.

2 Paul is not entirely alone, however. Luke, whom he calls his “dear friend” in Colossians, and who is a doctor, is there in Rome to care for him and encourage him. A man from Ephesus named Onesiphorus, who helped Paul in “many ways” during his struggles in that city, has come to Rome and “searched hard” for him and helped him. Four other companions of Paul send their greetings to Timothy; three have Latin names, and none are mentioned anywhere else in Paul's letters, suggesting that these are new converts. Even in these dark days, the gospel continues “bearing fruit and growing throughout the whole world,” as Paul wrote some years before to the Colossians.

➔ At what point in your life have you most needed your friends to stick by you? Which ones saw you all the way through? Were they the ones you would have expected to do this? Are there particular qualities that help identify in advance which friends are most likely to remain loyal and supportive?

➔ It's likely that Onesiphorus died shortly after coming to Rome. At the end of this letter, Paul sends greetings only to his “household,” not to him personally. Earlier in the letter he wishes similarly that God will show mercy to his “household.” About Onesiphorus himself he writes, “May the Lord grant that he will find mercy from the Lord on that day!” Let Onesiphorus tell his story in his own words. Assume that he has “found mercy from the Lord” and has been welcomed into God's presence after his death. From there, have him look back over his life and describe his interactions with Paul: how they met in Ephesus, how he responded to Paul's message, what he did for him there,

why he traveled to Rome to look for Paul during Paul's second imprisonment, who encouraged and discouraged him as he did this, why he had to “search hard” to find him, what he was able to do for Paul when he found him, and how he died. Use your creativity to supply missing details, but make the story as true to the actual situation as you can. Paint a portrait of this man that explains why he was “not ashamed of [Paul's] chains.”

3 Despite the disappointments and betrayals he's experiencing, and despite his renewed sufferings and uncertain future, Paul doesn't write mostly about his own feelings and fears. Instead, he uses this opportunity, which may be his last, to give Timothy his best advice about how to “live a godly life in Christ Jesus.”

➔ Which of the things that Paul writes to Timothy in this letter did you personally find most meaningful, challenging, and encouraging? How will you begin to put them into practice in your own life?

➔ A young person from your community of Jesus' followers is just about to go off to college. Write them a letter offering your thoughts on how they can pursue this opportunity wholeheartedly, without being “ashamed of the testimony about our Lord.”

TIMOTHY'S HERITAGE, GIFTEDNESS, FAITHFULNESS, TEACHING, AND DEDICATION

2 Timothy > Instructions and Challenges

INTRODUCTION

Paul's instructions to Timothy in this second letter are much more personal than in his first letter. They're not about how to regulate the affairs of the community. They're about how Timothy personally can face this time of deadly persecution and concerted opposition. As we noted in the last session, these instructions aren't carefully structured. Instead, they're shared spontaneously as Paul, facing execution, pours out his last and best advice to his "dear son." We'll begin considering Paul's various instructions and challenges in this session and finish looking at them in the next session.

READING AND DISCUSSION

1 Have someone read the first part of this letter, beginning with, "I thank God, whom I serve, as my ancestors did, with a clear conscience," and ending with, "Guard it with the help of the Holy Spirit who lives in us."

Paul wants Timothy to recognize he has been entrusted with a priceless heritage that must be preserved for future generations. This heritage is the saving faith in the true God that has been passed down among believing

people for centuries. Paul notes that he himself serves God "as my ancestors did" and that Timothy has likewise embraced the "sincere faith" he learned from his grandmother Lois and his mother Eunice. Paul explains that actually "this grace was given us in Christ Jesus before the beginning of time"—it's an eternal heritage that's older than the human race itself. It was entrusted first to the people of Israel, and it has now been revealed definitively to the whole world "through the appearing of our Savior, Christ Jesus." This heritage of faith is a "deposit," something that has been entrusted to Timothy to preserve and promote. So even in these perilous times, he must not be timid but represent Christ boldly with "power, love and self-discipline."

So that he can do this, Timothy has also been entrusted with a "gift." Paul speaks of it in his first letter, and later in this letter he says, "Preach the word . . . correct, rebuke and encourage—with great patience and careful instruction." So this gift was presumably the ability to preach and teach powerfully and effectively. The authority and heritage of the community is behind this gift: Paul reminds Timothy in his first letter that it was "given you through prophecy when the body of elders laid their hands on you," and he says more specifically in this letter that it is "in you through the laying on of my hands." Both sincere faith and genuine giftedness are conferred by the believing community on its younger members as their heritage and as a precious trust.

- ➔ If you are a follower of Jesus, who are some of the people who helped you become a believer by sharing their own heritage of faith with you? (Were any of them family members a generation or two older than you, as in Timothy's case?)
- ➔ Say whether you agree or disagree with the following statement, and why: "In order to meet God, you need to connect with people from the community that has preserved the true faith over countless centuries."
- ➔ To whom would you most like to pass on your own heritage of faith?
- ➔ What gift have you been entrusted with to help you represent Christ? How can you "fan it into flame"?

2 Have someone read the next part of the letter, beginning with, “You know that everyone in the province of Asia has deserted me” and ending with, “If we are faithless, he remains faithful, for he cannot disown himself.”

Paul knows that, under present conditions, faithfully representing Jesus will bring persecution. So he urges Timothy to “join with me in suffering.” He doesn’t want Timothy to be like Phygelus and Hermogenes, who have deserted him. Instead, he wants him to be like Onesiphorus, who was “not ashamed of my chains.” Paul wants Timothy to follow his own example: “I endure everything for the sake of the elect,” he explains, “that they too may obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus.”

➔ Paul gives Timothy three analogies to reflect on. Divide your group into three teams. Have each team discuss one of these analogies and then explain to the group how it would help Timothy understand what he needs to do:

- “No one serving as a soldier gets entangled in civilian affairs, but rather tries to please his commanding officer.”
- “Anyone who competes as an athlete does not receive the victor’s crown except by competing according to the rules.”
- “The hardworking farmer should be the first to receive a share of the crops.”

➔ Paul also quotes another “trustworthy saying” to encourage Timothy. It seems to have been circulating among the wider community of Jesus’ followers to inspire them to remain faithful during persecution. This saying distinguishes between people who “disown” (or “deny”) Christ and those who are “faithless” or disobedient. In this context, the distinction is apparently between those who openly deny their faith to avoid prison or execution and those who simply stop speaking about Christ out of fear. Christ himself will disown those in the first group, but he will “remain faithful” to those in the second group, continually working to restore their boldness and confidence. In your own culture, what could lead a follower of Jesus to turn away and deny him? What

would be the indications that a person had done this definitively? How can a person who’s afraid, and who may have disobeyed, recognize the ways that Jesus is still remaining faithful to them and so be drawn back instead of turning away?

3 Have someone read the next part of the letter, beginning with, “Keep reminding God’s people of these things” and ending with, “Everyone who confesses the name of the Lord must turn away from wickedness.”

Paul wants Timothy to be able to refute the ideas that false teachers are trying to spin out of the Scriptures. He can’t do this by adopting their methods. There’s no use “quarreling about words” or getting into “foolish and stupid arguments” (as Paul says in the next part of the letter). Instead, Timothy must be someone who “correctly handles the word of truth.” Since Timothy’s assignment in Ephesus was to publicly read, preach, and teach the Scriptures, this is likely a reference to the way Timothy should responsibly explain and interpret the Bible, through a regular program of sequential reading and careful exposition.

➔ What dubious teachings have you encountered that were based on scattered words and phrases lifted out of the Scriptures and reinterpreted to suit the teacher’s purpose? By contrast, what examples have you seen of preaching or teaching that represented careful, comprehensive biblical interpretation? Do you agree with the following statement? (Why or why not?) “The more of the Bible you become familiar with, the less likely you are to be deceived by a false teaching.”

➔ There is clearly a “quarrel about words” when it comes to the idea of “resurrection.” Hymenaeus and Philetus are teaching that the resurrection has already taken place (apparently in some secret and spiritual sense). They are saying, in more general terms, that the coming age has already arrived. Paul has had to fight repeatedly against this same error throughout his ministry, warning the Thessalonians, for example, that the “day of the Lord” has not

yet come (*PJL* session 3), explaining to the Corinthians that they have not yet “begun to reign” (*PJL* session 6), and so forth. In your own culture, is there a particular false teaching (not necessarily this one) that repeatedly resurfaces in different forms? Why do you think this particular teaching keeps finding an audience?

4 Have someone read the next part of the letter, beginning with, “In a large house there are articles not only of gold and silver, but also of wood and clay” and ending with “they will come to their senses and escape from the trap of the devil, who has taken them captive to do his will.”

So that Timothy will be “prepared to do any good work,” Paul urges him to “flee the evil desires of youth and pursue righteousness, faith, love and peace.” There are some assignments a person can fulfill even if they are having moral struggles. But the most important and strategic assignments require a person of well-formed Christlike character.

➔ Give examples of some of the things a person could do to help advance the cause of Christ even if they were struggling morally. (For example, could they help care for the building and grounds where the community meets, make meals for people in need, keep the information current on a website or Facebook page, etc.?) Then give examples of responsibilities you wouldn’t want a person to be given if they were having a difficult struggle that might lead to an open moral failure.

➔ Paul once again illustrates his point for Timothy, this time by describing the various articles that are found in a large house. Some are gold and silver, clean and polished, suitable for any use. Others are wood and clay, rough and dirty, suitable only for less noble purposes (NIV “common use,” such as waste disposal). What changes do you need to make in your own life so that God can use you to do anything, anywhere, whether simple or difficult, humble or high-profile?

THE CONFLICT AND SUFFERINGS OF THE LAST DAYS

2 Timothy > Instructions and Challenges, continued

INTRODUCTION

In this final session we’ll look at the rest of the ways Paul instructs and challenges Timothy as he faces the imminent end of his own life and ministry.

READING AND DISCUSSION

1 Have someone read the next part of 2 Timothy, beginning with, “But mark this: There will be terrible times in the last days” and ending with, “But they will not get very far because, as in the case of those men, their folly will be clear to everyone.”

When Paul speaks of the “last days,” he means the period when the coming age has already begun to arrive but the present age has not yet ended. The last days began with the life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus. He introduced the coming age, but he didn’t immediately end the present age. In other words, the last days extend from New Testament times to the present and will continue until Jesus returns.

Paul says there will be “terrible times” in this period. The forces of the present age recognize that, while their days might be prolonged as God gives

people the opportunity to respond to the gospel, they will definitely come to an end. This awareness makes everyone who is loyal to the present age desperate to experience as many of its selfish indulgences as possible in the time remaining. The result is that they take on all of the negative traits Paul lists here. They also “oppose the truth” in an effort to keep the coming age from arriving more fully and displacing the present one. Paul wants Timothy to know that this desperate conflict is taking place and that he should stay away from anyone who displays a clear intention to live for the present age for as long as it lasts.

➤ The biblical book of Exodus describes how Pharaoh’s magicians used their secret arts, although with only very limited results, to try to duplicate the powerful signs Moses was doing as he showed that God wanted the Israelites to be free. The names of the magicians aren’t given in Exodus, but Jewish oral tradition apparently recorded the names of two of them, Jannes and Jambres. Paul, familiar with this tradition, uses them as examples of people who “oppose the truth” in an effort to preserve one realm against the onslaught of another realm that’s invading it. If you’re familiar with the story of Moses and the Exodus, explain how it provides an illustration of the coming age breaking in and displacing the present age.

➤ Look at Paul’s list of the negative traits that people display in the last days and say which ones people in your own culture are most likely to live out if they give their loyalty to the present age in its conflict with the coming age.

2 Have someone read the next part of the letter, beginning with, “You, however, know all about my teaching” and ending with, “not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing.”

As he did several times in his first letter, Paul “charges” Timothy once again here. But this time there’s no listening community whose respect Paul is hoping to win by publicly commissioning Timothy. Instead, this is a personal

admonition. Paul urges his younger colleague to “endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, [and] discharge all the duties of your ministry” because he himself is “already being poured out like a drink offering.” “The time for my departure is near,” he notes gravely, and he wants Timothy to carry on their shared work after he is gone.

To encourage Timothy to follow his own example of willing suffering, Paul reminds him of the things that happened to him in **Antioch, Iconium, and Lystra**. These three cities in central Asia Minor were among the places Paul went on his first journey as a messenger of the good news about Jesus (*PJL* session 1). According to the book of Acts, Paul was driven out of Antioch by his opponents there; he had to flee from Iconium to escape being stoned; and in Lystra he was stoned and left for dead. But he survived the stoning and actually returned to Lystra on his second journey. There he met Timothy, who became his lifelong collaborator. Paul is effectively saying to Timothy here, “You knew right from the start how deadly this work might be. So don’t let the dangers deter you now.”

➤ Has following Jesus been portrayed to you as something that could potentially be very costly? If so, tell the group how. If you have chosen to follow Jesus, what dangers and opposition did you expect you might face as a result? Can the reminder that “you knew from the start how dangerous this might be” help you face a present situation with courage and strength?

➤ Even though rival teachings are vigorously competing with the gospel, Paul urges Timothy, “Continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of.” He says Timothy can be confident in the gospel because he has confidence in the people he learned it from (including Paul), and also because it agrees with the Scriptures, which are “God-breathed.” Who are some of the people who told you about Jesus whose lives, character, and teaching give you confidence in the gospel? Describe in your own words why people should have confidence in the Bible as a divine source of truth.

3 Have someone read the rest of the letter, beginning with, “Do your best to come to me quickly,” and reading through to the end.

As Paul concludes his letter to Timothy with information about their fellow workers and with some practical requests, it becomes clear how the conflict between the present age and the coming age is unfolding. Many of their collaborators are busy on assignments for the gospel throughout the eastern Mediterranean. (You can find the places mentioned here on the map on page 10.) However, Demas, a former “fellow worker,” has deserted Paul, showing that he “loves the present age” (NIV “this world”). Alexander, the chief opponent in Ephesus, has done “a great deal of harm” himself. Paul expects that “the Lord will repay him for what he has done.” Everyone who could have spoken on Paul’s behalf at his first defense deserted him instead—they were afraid and intimidated. But in their case, he prays, “May it not be held against them.”

This illustrates the contrast we considered in the previous session between the consequences of actively denying or disowning Christ, as Alexander has done (and perhaps Demas as well), and being faithless or disobedient, like these absentee witnesses. Mark, whom Paul wants Timothy to bring with him, is an excellent example of how Jesus “remains faithful” to people who fail but don’t actively deny him. According to the book of Acts, Mark deserted Paul on his first journey, but he has later proven how “helpful” he can be.

As for Paul himself, he has confidence that “the Lord . . . will bring me safely to his heavenly kingdom,” since, as he says a little earlier, “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.”

➔ If you feel that you may have failed in an assignment that God gave you, or not spoken up for Jesus because you were afraid, does the example of Mark here encourage you to see that you can still be greatly helpful to the gospel?

➔ Paul keeps fighting for the coming age right to the end of his life. He’s still coordinating a network of messengers throughout the Mediterranean world. And the only things he asks Timothy to bring him, besides a cloak to keep him warm during the impending

winter, are his “scrolls, especially the parchments.” This was likely his personal library. Many scholars believe the “parchments” mentioned may have been copies of various books of the Hebrew Scriptures. These scrolls and parchments were a rare and valuable resource. Paul wants to have full use of them for as long as he’s around and then make sure they’re left in good hands when he’s gone. (Perhaps he gave them to Timothy or even left them with the community of Jesus’ followers in Rome.) How can you similarly devote all of your strategic resources and all of the time and energy remaining in your life to the cause of the coming age?

➔ Now that you’ve read and discussed Paul’s prison letters, how would you sum up your response to these writings? Did your opinion of him change over the course of your readings and discussions? Do you think the popular image of him is accurate? If not, how would you correct it? In one sentence, how would you describe his contribution to the community of Jesus’ followers throughout the world and across the centuries?

