

Introduction to Philemon, Colossians, & Ephesians

Paul was in prison at Rome. He was under house arrest and given a lot of freedom to receive friends and support. He was able to send letters to several congregations. We have four of these “Prison Epistles”: Philippians, Ephesians, Colossians, & Philemon.

During Paul’s imprisonment, a runaway slave from Colossae came to see him. The slave’s name was Onesimus. Paul knew Onesimus’ master. His name was Philemon. In fact, Paul had taught Philemon the Gospel and brought him to faith in Christ.

Onesimus became a Christian and served Paul’s needs while he was in prison. Paul wanted Onesimus to return to Philemon. He wrote a letter to Philemon on Onesimus’ behalf, explaining that Onesimus was now a brother in Christ. Paul also promised to repay Philemon whatever Onesimus owed him. With letter in hand, Onesimus decided to return to Philemon in Colossae.

Tychicus was one of Paul’s helpers. He was in Rome with Paul. When Onesimus went back to Colossae, Paul wrote a letter to the Colossian church. He also wrote a letter to the Ephesians. He told both of those congregations that Tychicus would tell them in person how Paul was doing. He told the Colossians that Onesimus (which was one of them, a Colossian) would also give them a report of Paul’s situation.

When comparing the “Prison Epistles” of Ephesians, Colossians, and Philemon, we quickly see their close connections. They have many characters and topics in common. In fact, some of the wording and structure is the same.

Paul had worked with the Ephesians in the school of Tyrannus for a few years during his third missionary journey. They were, no doubt, very close. The elders had wept with him during a meeting where he told them they may not see him again. The Christians at Ephesus had heard that Paul was in prison and were very worried about him. They could have been concerned that the future of Christianity itself would be threatened if anything happened to Paul. He wanted to assure them that Christ was alive and well! He wanted them to have full assurance, knowledge, wisdom, and understanding that God would protect the church. Paul emphasized that the Ephesians needed to remain faithful and unified. He gave specific instructions how they were to conduct themselves as Christians.

Comparison of Colossians & Philemon

Colossians	Philemon	Characters
4:7 & 9	Vs. 10	Tychicus & Onesimus (Tychicus - Ephesians 6:21)
4:10	Vs. 24	Aristarchus & Marcus (Mark)
4:12	Vs. 23	Epaphras
4:14	Vs. 24	Luke & Demas
4:17	Vs. 2	Archippus

Comparison of Ephesians & Colossians

Ephesians	Colossians	Topic
1:1-2	1:1-2	Introduction
1:7	1:14, 20	Redemption, forgiveness
1:10	1:20	All-inclusive Christ
1:15-17	1:3-4, 9-10	Intercession for the readers
1:18	1:27	Riches of glorious inheritance
1:21-22	1:16-18	Christ's domain
2:5	2:13	You he made alive
2:12-13	1:21-22	Aliens brought near
2:15	2:14	Abolishing the commandments
3:1	1:24	Paul, the prisoner
3:2-3	1:25-26	Divine mystery made known to Paul
3:7	1:23, 25	Paul, minister of the universal gospel
3:8-9	1:27	Paul to make known the mystery to all
4:1	1:10	Lead a life worthy of your calling
4:2	3:12-13	With all lowliness, meekness, patience forebearing one another
4:15-16	2:19	Christ unites members of the Church
4:22-32	3:5-10, 12	Put off old nature and put on new nature
5:3-6	3:5-9	No immorality among you
5:15	4:5	Walk wisely and make the most of time
5:19-20	3:16-17	Sing songs, hymns, and spiritual songs, giving thanks to God
5:21-6:9	3:18-4:1	Household Duties: husbands, wives, children, parents, slaves, masters
6:18-20	4:2-3	Paul the prisoner exhorts persistence in prayer
6:21-22	4:7-8	Tychicus sent to inform church about Paul and to encourage them