



Prison Song

In the devotions (*Reflect*) this week we are launching into a six month study of what are generally referred to as Paul's "prison epistles" — Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon. We've dubbed the series "beyond the bars" because in these four letters we find a powerful statement of what it means, what it takes to live "beyond the bars" — even when we are still behind them. They can be literal "bars" of a prison cell, to be sure. Or they can be the "bars" of whatever life circumstances you may be facing that are confining you, hemming you in, holding you up.

We have a tendency to think that the "pursuit of happiness" is something only possible in the absence of the barring circumstances of life; that true joy can only grow in soil that is free of whatever "weeds" you may be struggling with at present. In these four letters penned during his confinement in Rome for two years, Paul begs to differ with that assumption. And more than that, he shows the way. The cardinal Christian virtues of faith, hope and love can't be learned from a book, they must be modeled.

That's precisely what Paul does for us in these letters.

There are two essential settings for the absorbing of truth.

One is the "cubicle" in which you do your own study and reflection (whether or not it's an actual cubicle).



The other is the face-to-face, interactive setting of a small group of fellow students/disciples, where insights can be shared and compared, conclusions and applications mutually reached and validated.

Reflect (the weekly devotions) provides you with something you can launch from in your "cubicle" time. *Relate* is intended to help you prepare you for your "small group" time — whether or not you are in an "official" small group.

Think of *Relate* as prep for some enjoyable "water cooler" moments as God makes them available and as you seize those opportunities. Biblically, the revelation and apprehension of truth was never meant to be primarily a private pursuit. It was intended to be a community process. The first three of the prison epistles were written to be read to a community of believers, and even circulated beyond that. And even the more private letter of Philemon quite obviously ended up being read and celebrated in community (which is why we are reading it).

So, get your cubicle time, but get out of the cubicle and get around those water coolers or bistro tables or living room tables or neighborhood grills and share the wealth.

The Focus of *Relate*

In the past, *Relate* has had background notes, cultural tidbits, and study notes, as well as questions to help spur discussion in groups of all shapes and sizes, as well as questions intended to help equip parents in having some healthy family interaction.

You will still frequently find many of those elements here, but the focus is shifting slightly. The fact is, we don't want to make this too easy — to fill in all the blanks for you. (Where's the fun in that, anyway?) We want to help and encourage and equip and challenge you to dig for yourself so that you have some "personal wealth" to share as you interact with others.

Yes, there will be discussion questions to consider and perhaps use in small group interaction. But there will also be suggested ways of digging deeper into the text — words to look up, topics to research with suggested resources, further reading to pursue. There will also be suggested spiritual exercises — challenges to engage the text and its meaning through engaging in some of the classic spiritual disciplines such as prayer, fasting, meditation and scripture memorization.

So, dig in. Nuff' said.

Small Group Discussion Guide

Lean In

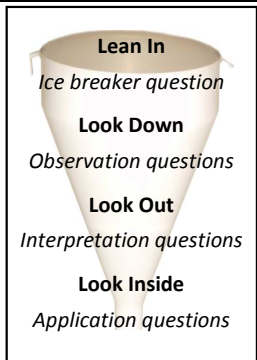
- What has been your own personal “Rome”? When have you found yourself confined by circumstances or conditions beyond your control? How did you handle the experience?

Look Down / Look Out

- Look at Ephesians 5:15-20. What does it mean for you to “make music to the Lord in your heart”? How essential is musical skill in caring out this charge? To whom do you sing? What is your song?
- Look at Philippians 4:4-9. How would you summarize Paul’s “recipe” for living a “worry-free” life?
- Look at Colossians 3:15-17. What does Paul see as the key to being in tune and staying in step with others? To what extent do you hear harmonizing melodies (as opposed to screeching noise) in your relationships at church? at work? at home? If it is screeching that you hear, how can you introduce a new song?
- How are you doing at “cultivating thankfulness”? How often do you find yourself thanking God and others as opposed to finding fault or complaining to or about others (or God)?

Look Inside

- “If I only didn’t have to deal with _____ I could really be happy and free.” How would you fill in the blank? What life conditions or situations are you currently facing that you just wish would go away so you could have some peace?
- How dominated is your life by worries and anxieties? Which worry is looming the largest before you right now? What steps can you take to personally implement Paul’s teaching in this passage?



spiritual exercise

scripture memorization/meditation

I like to identify three songs — one each in Ephesians, Philippians and Colossians. Some speak of these as early hymns that Paul has taken and incorporated into his letters — much as we might use some lines from a well-known hymn like *Amazing Grace*. At any rate, I imagine Paul closing his eyes and singing (more like chanting) them — and as they were read, I imagine the reader and audience doing the same.

For this exercise, don’t worry about creating a melody, just learn the lyrics. Memorize the words. Play them in your head. Carry them with you over the next six months of this study. Learn them little by little, line by line. Just read the three songs listed below and pick *one*. Then savor it, enjoy it, let it speak to your soul...

- The Preeminent Christ Hymn** *Colossians 1:15-20*
- The Suffering Servant Song** *Philippians 2:5-11*
- The Spiritual Blessings Song** *Ephesians 1:3-14*

Family Discussion Guide

Day 1 Acts 28:14-16, 30-31

Where do you feel more trapped and “claustrophobic” — in a dentist’s chair or in your principal’s (or boss’s office)? How do you think Paul felt as he waited two years for his court date before the emperor?

Day 2 Ephesians 5:15-20

What musical instrument would you love to learn how to play? What does it mean for *you* to “make music” to the Lord?

Day 3 Philippians 4:4-9

How often do you find yourself worrying about “stuff”? Why do we tend to worry so much? How does Paul give us a way out of worrying?

Day 4 Colossians 3:15-17

How often on a typical day do you find yourself saying “Thank you” to other people? at home? at work? one on one with God? After reading what Paul says, what would you say is the key to being thankful

Day 5 Philemon 1:4-7

What kind of friend was Philemon to Paul? Who’s been a friend like that to you? To whom have you been that kind of friend?

Digging Deeper

Pick one or more of the following topics or subject matters to dig into a bit more, in the spirit of Job 28:9-11

Man’s hand assaults the flinty rock
and lays bare the roots of the mountains.
He tunnels through the rock;
his eyes see all its treasures.
He searches the sources of the rivers
and brings hidden things to light.

If you have access online, google it, ask it, bing it, whatever it takes. (Just don’t go to any bad places...)

If you’re a man after my own heart and want to pursue the more traditional path turning pages in books rather than on a website, pick up a good Bible dictionary or encyclopedia or concordance as needed (if you need tools, check here in the BookCellar for some good deals, or even resources you can borrow).

Do whatever it takes and let your hands “assault the flinty rock.”

Topic 1 Which time in prison was this?

Some think that these letters were actually written during Paul’s imprisonment in Caesarea prior to his confinement in Rome. Read Acts 21-28, and do some background research on the pros and cons of Caesarea versus Rome. While you’re reading and looking, be sure to ask and answer the question, “What difference does it make?”

Topic 2 Slavery in the Greco-Roman world

The resource notes in the study binder contain a brief summary from one source. See what else you can find! What was it like to be a slave in Paul’s day? How many people in Paul’s world would have been slaves? What is a racial thing? How does Paul deal with the issue in these four letters?

Topic 3 Emperor Nero

Nero was the emperor of Rome before whom Paul was waiting to appear. Dig into his bio and background. Who was Nero? What kind of man was he? How optimistic should Paul have been about the outcome of his hearing on a purely human level?