

The Books in the New Testament (II): The Prison & Pastoral Epistles

Passages: As listed in the lesson.

Memory Verse

“Finally, my brethren, be strong in the Lord and in the power of His might.” (Ephesians 6:10)

Knowledge of God’s Will [God’s Word]	Knowledge of God [God’s Divine Nature]	Good Works [Behavior]
<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Paul’s calling greatly affected his life: he was to be an apostle to the Gentiles, and proclaim the mystery of the gospel.2. Paul’s imprisonment was for the “furtherance of the gospel.”3. Know the major themes of the prison and pastoral epistles.	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. The wisdom of God is a hidden wisdom which God ordained before the ages for our glory (1 Cor 2:7).2. God has revealed His wisdom to us through His Spirit (1 Cor 2:10a).	Put on the whole armor of God.

Overview

Events and Spiritual Teachings

- A. God’s Calling and Its Effect on Paul’s Life
- B. The Prison Epistles
- C. The Pastoral Epistles

Life Application: The Armor of God

Memory Verse

Conclusion: As a result of his calling, Paul suffered many tribulations including imprisonment, despite having committed no crime. Yet, he was willing to face these for the sake of the gospel. When we actively don the armor of God, we become more prepared for sharing and spreading the gospel and, like Paul, can view life and suffering from a heavenly perspective.

A. God's Calling and Its Effect on Paul's Life

Imagine this with me for a moment: You've been arrested and thrown into prison, all because you believe in God and keep the Sabbath. Your comfort and freedoms have been taken away from you, and your life is now at stake. You could be executed the next day. What are your thoughts while sitting in jail, staring at the bars?

Would you grumble and protest? What are your feelings? If the prison guard gave you a pen and a sheet of paper, what you would write? And who would you write to? What you choose to write in that moment will reveal something about you.

Today, we'll be talking about Paul, who was called by God to serve as a steward of the gospel, especially towards the Gentiles. In acting out this role, Paul experienced imprisonment and many tribulations. However, his letters never express any complaint towards his situation. Before we go over his letters, let's study his calling in a bit more detail first.

1. Paul's calling

God had chosen Paul for a special mission: to be an apostle to the Gentiles (Acts 9:15; 26:17; Rom 1:5; 11:13; Gal 2:8–9). He was called to proclaim the mystery, "which from the beginning of the ages has been hidden in God who created all things through Jesus Christ" (Eph 3:9; cf. 1:9). He explained this mystery: that God's plan was to save the Gentiles and bring them together into one body with the Jewish people.

Although he suffered many tribulations while proclaiming the gospel to the Gentiles, Paul understood that he had been called to act as a steward of God's grace (Eph 3:2). Under this stewardship, Jews and Gentiles might be sanctified and reconciled both to God and with each other.

2. Paul's willingness to be imprisoned

Paul was imprisoned three times despite having committed no crime (Acts 16:17; 21:11; 23:11). Unbelieving Jews plotted his death to stop him from preaching (22:21–22), resulting in Paul's trial and imprisonment under Felix. After two years, Felix's successor, Porcius Festus, held a trial for Paul again. None could prove that Paul had committed any evil, but when standing before King Agrippa, Paul appealed to Caesar to avoid being sent to Jerusalem. As a result, he was sent to Rome around A.D. 60. There, Paul lived under house arrest for two years, chained daily to a Roman soldier (28:16, 30) until his release in A.D. 62.

3. A cause worthy of imprisonment

No one likes to suffer, and no one would want to be stripped of their freedoms and imprisoned. Yet Paul understood that this was part of God's plan – through his imprisonment, the Gentiles could come to know the "unsearchable riches of Christ" (Eph 3:8). Knowing this, Paul considered himself a prisoner for the sake of Christ Jesus, so he was willing to suffer for the sake of preaching the gospel. While in chains, he wrote, "Therefore I ask that you do not lose heart at my tribulations for you, which is your glory" (3:13).

Paul's writings make it clear that to him, the gospel is far more precious than freedom, and Christ more valuable than his own comfort. He welcomed any who came to see him, and he

continued “preaching the kingdom of God and teaching the things which concern the Lord Jesus Christ with all confidence, no one forbidding him” (Acts 28:31).

During his imprisonment, he also wrote the letters of Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon (Eph 3:1; 4:1; 6:20; Phil 1:7, 13; Col 4:10, 18; Phm 1:1, 9–10). These letters, of course, became a part of the New Testament that we study today. As a group, the four are often referred to as the “prison Epistles.”

B. The Prison Epistles

1. Themes of the Prison Epistles

Earlier, we thought about what we might write if given a pen and a sheet of paper while in prison. What would your letters look like if you were imprisoned? Let’s take a look at the themes of each prison epistle, and then try to further our understanding of each epistle.

	Ephesians	Philippians	Colossians	Philemon
Theme:	Christ and the church	Joy in Christ	Christ is the center of our faith	We are all equal in Christ
Date Written:	From A.D. 59–64	Likely A.D. 61–62	From A.D. 62	From A.D. 58–61

a. Ephesians

The Epistle to the Ephesians was written to address the topics on heavenly places, spiritual knowledge, unity in the church, and the armor of God. It focuses on how our faith needs to mature to one that is God-centered.

b. Philippians

The Epistle to the Philippians is a letter of joy. “Rejoice in the Lord always. Again I will say, rejoice!” is the resounding theme of Philippians (Phil 4:4). Philippi was the first church God established in Europe during Paul’s second missionary journey (A.D. 49–52). The first converts in this city were a seller of purple cloth named Lydia, the keeper of the prison, and their families (Acts 16:13–40). In the letter, Paul informs the believers of his situation and encourages them to endure persecution and rejoice in all circumstances.

c. Colossians

The Epistle to the Colossians is a letter about Christ being the center of our faith. Paul knew that the members at Colosse were facing the threat of heresies and that they needed to reaffirm that Christ is the only Savior, and God Himself. Paul wrote this letter to counter false teachings and remind believers to remain steadfast in Christ. He also urged them to forsake the sinful living of pagans and lead a Christ-centered life.

d. Philemon

The Epistle to Philemon is a personal letter written to Paul’s friend and fellow laborer, Philemon (Phm 1:1). Onesimus was Philemon’s slave who had run away because he had wronged or owed Philemon in some way (vv. 11, 15–16, 18–19). But Onesimus became a believer during his stay with Paul (v. 10). This letter teaches us about the spirit of reconciliation and forgiveness, and about how to act as peacemakers and intercessors if two members of Christ’s body are at odds with each other.

2. A Sacrificial Love

Let's look at a few famous passages that Paul wrote while imprisoned.

Ephesians	Philippians	Colossians	Philemon
"Therefore I ask that you do not lose heart at my tribulations for you, which is your glory." (Eph 3:13)	"Yet indeed I also count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ." (Phil 3:8)	"I now rejoice in my sufferings for you, and fill up in my flesh what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ, for the sake of His body, which is the church." (Col 1:24)	"[Yet] for love's sake I rather appeal to you— being such a one as Paul, the aged, and now also a prisoner of Jesus Christ." (Phm 1:9)

From these verses, we can see that Paul did not bother complaining or wallowing in self-pity, but instead expressed great joy in his letters (Phil 4:4), even in the worst situations. He always had each church in his heart, and greatly longed for the members "with the affection of Jesus Christ" (Phil 1:7–8). Keep in mind that Paul founded the three churches during his second missionary trip (Acts 20:1–3) and referred to Philemon as a "beloved friend and fellow laborer" (Phm 1:1).

Paul understood that his imprisonment was for the "furtherance of the gospel," and rejoiced at being able to fulfill God's will. Even the palace guard clearly saw that Paul's chains were "in Christ" (Phil 1:12–13). His devotion to the gospel was such that even those who imprisoned him saw Christ in his actions! He exemplified what it means to offer a sacrificial love and taught us how to view life and suffering from a heavenly perspective.

C. The Pastoral Epistles

After his release from his first imprisonment around A.D. 60–62, Paul wrote 1 Timothy and Titus. Shortly after, he was imprisoned again, during which time he wrote 2 Timothy. After this letter, he was martyred. These three letters are referred to as the "pastoral Epistles," because they contain instructions regarding the pastoral care of the church.

Themes of the Pastoral Epistles

The content of these letters differs greatly from the prison epistles. They are centered on the qualifications of church workers, such as pastors and deacons, and focus on church organization and discipline among its members. The phrase "this is a faithful saying," is not used anywhere else in the Bible, but appears five times in the pastoral Epistles (1 Tim 1:15; 3:1; 4:9; 2 Tim 2:11; Tit 3:8). Paul used this phrase to highlight key teachings in these three letters.

	1 Timothy	2 Timothy	Titus
Theme:	Defend the gospel	Preach the word	Set the church in order
Date Written:	From A.D. 62–66	Likely A.D. 66–67	From A.D. 63

1. 1 Timothy

Paul charges Timothy with the responsibility to defend sound doctrine and combat false

teachings in the church. He also urges Timothy not to let anyone despise his youth, but to “be an example to the believers in word, in conduct, in love, in spirit, in faith, in purity” (1 Tim 4:12). He writes about sound doctrine and worship, and instructs Timothy on how to recognize and respond to false teachers.

2. 2 Timothy

This was the last of Paul’s epistles before he was put to death under the Roman Emperor Nero. A very personal letter to Timothy, it contains Paul’s last words of exhortation. He reminds Timothy to stand strong and not to be ashamed of the testimony of the Lord, but to hold fast to the pattern of sound doctrine. As a worker of Christ, he must preach the word at all times, as well as convince, rebuke, and exhort with all longsuffering and teaching (2 Tim 4:2).

3. Titus

This letter focuses on: teaching believers how to ordain qualified elders to take care of the church; behavior in accordance with sound doctrine; engaging in good works; the importance of standing against false teachers who lead them away from the truth. Paul uses this letter to advise Titus on how to manage and organize the church in Crete, reminding Titus that leaders must be sound in doctrine in order to guard the church against false teachings and evil practices. Workers must also have sound speech and conduct. By setting an example, the believers will imitate them, hold fast to the correct teachings, and exhibit Christ-like behavior.

From these letters, we can see that Paul understood that his time in the ministry was coming to an end. He was passing the torch to a new generation of church workers. Today, that same torch has been passed to each of us.

Check for Understanding

1. **What is the special mission that God chose Paul for?** He was called to be an apostle to the Gentiles (Acts 9:15; 26:17; Rom 1:5; 11:13; Gal 2:8–9), and to proclaim the mystery (Eph 1:9).
2. **What is the worthy cause of Paul’s imprisonment?** That through his imprisonment, the Gentiles will come to know the “unsearchable riches of Christ” (Eph 3:8).
3. **What are the themes of the prison Epistles?** Ephesians: Christ and the church; Philippians: Joy in Christ; Colossians: Christ is the center of our faith; Philemon: We are all equal in Christ.
4. **What do the prison Epistles teach us about Paul’s attitude while imprisoned?** He understood that his imprisonment was for the “furtherance of the gospel,” and rejoiced at being able to fulfill God’s will.
5. **What are Paul’s three letters to Timothy and Titus also called? Why?** The *pastoral Epistles*, because they contain instructions regarding the pastoral care of the church.

Life Application

The Armor of God

Did you know that we are constantly in a state of warfare? Paul states that the “rulers of the darkness of this age” are “hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places” (Eph 6:12). Therefore, “we do not wrestle against flesh and blood,” but against demonic powers of which we need to be fully aware. These include temptations of the flesh, cultural norms that are against God’s word, and other subtle tools that Satan uses to wage war against God’s children.

1 Peter 5:8 tells us, “Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour.” Paul describes Christians as soldiers of Christ in Ephesians, chapter 6, and offers an important teaching to apply to our lives, so that we will not be defeated.

Activity

Teachers: For additional visuals, you can print and hand out the image provided on the last page.

1. Write down the name of each piece of armor, then add a brief description explaining its purpose.
2. Why is this piece necessary for spreading the gospel? Write down your answer for each piece.
3. Which piece do you personally think you need the most? Explain your answer and share with the class.

*Teachers: **The following portion is only necessary if your students are unfamiliar with the armor of God.** In which case, you can briefly go over each piece using the chart below.*

Armor	Girded waist	Representation	The Truth
Meaning			
The stability of the human body depends on its center of gravity, which is at the waist. A thick and heavy leather belt in battle ensured that a Roman soldier’s waist was protected and supported, and in addition, was used to carry their sword and other weapons. The Truth, which is the collective teachings of Jesus, the apostles, and the prophets, form the foundation of stability for the church (Eph 2:20–22). Jesus said He is “the way, the truth, and the life” (Jn 14:6). Without the truth, we are lost, rendering the rest of our armor useless, and the schemes of the devil will surely overpower us.			
How can I apply this to my life?			
We need to equip ourselves with the word of God, the only truth. Without it, we will be “carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, by the craftiness in deceitful plotting” (Eph 4:14)			
Armor	Breastplate	Representation	Righteousness
Meaning			
A soldier’s breastplate protects his heart. Jesus said, “For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks” (Mt 12:34). Our heart influences our words and actions, and it can often lead us to sin, but when we cover our heart with righteousness, we can avoid sin and remain holy.			
How can I apply this to my life?			
We need to allow God into our heart and allow the Holy Spirit to give us the power to live above sin. Ephesians 4:22–24 reminds us to “put off, concerning your former conduct, the old man which grows corrupt according to the deceitful lusts, and be renewed in the spirit of your mind, and that you put on the new man which was created according to God, in true righteousness and holiness.”			
Armor	Shoes	Representation	Gospel of peace
Meaning			
Roman soldiers wore hard, studded shoes into battle to protect their feet. Our feet can be particularly vulnerable, because any sharp object on the ground can easily cripple us. When we protect our feet with the gospel of peace, they can carry us away from sin, to the path that leads to light. Moreover, because our life now belongs to Christ (Gal 2:20), it is important that our feet travel to defend and to bring the gospel to others. Paul quotes Isaiah, who wrote, “How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him who brings good news” (Isa 52:7, cf. Rom 10:15).			

How can I apply this to my life?

A soldier defends his kingdom under the command of his king, and we, as God’s soldiers, have been commanded by Jesus to spread the gospel (Acts 1:8). We have the responsibility to tell the good news to the world, to bring the truth to our friends and family so that they too may be saved.

Armor Shield **Representation** Faith

Meaning

A shield serves as the first line of defense, and it provides all-encompassing protection. John wrote, “For whatever is born of God overcomes the world. And this is the victory that has overcome the world—our **faith**” (1 Jn 5:4) It is our faith that overcomes the world, not our personal strength or knowledge, because those who believe in God know that they have His protection.

How can I apply this to my life?

Faith is our shield, because when we have faith in God, we will never be afraid when faced with trials and suffering. Satan loses his power when we believe in God and all of His promises. No matter how many fiery darts are thrown at us, this shield acts as a protective barrier between us and the schemes of Satan. If we lack faith, we must ask God to help our unbelief.

Armor Helmet **Representation** Salvation

Meaning

Like our heart, our mind guides our decisions, and our thoughts are a spiritual battlefield every day. But when we fully accept salvation, we undergo a fundamental shift in our thinking. We are no longer deceived by the riches and the sins of the world around us but understand that we are here to pursue something far greater than anything on earth: our salvation (Mt 6:20, 33). As long as our minds are always on our salvation, we will be protected from the lies, deceits, and traps of Satan.

How can I apply this to my life?

Our mental battles are won when we fully accept the salvation of Christ. When we remember our salvation, we can recall that we have been saved and delivered from the power of sin (Eph 4:22–24; Jn 8:34–36). By recalling the salvation that awaits us, we can put off our former conduct, and instead make decisions based on God’s will, not our own or Satan’s.

Armor Sword **Representation** The word of God

Meaning

A sword can be used both to parry attacks and to strike at the enemy, making it the only piece of armor that can also be used to attack. Hebrews refers to God’s word as a sword (Heb 4:12). It can pierce and penetrate the heart, revealing the innermost thoughts and intentions of those it touches. Jesus also used words from the Scriptures to defend Himself against Satan’s temptations, teaching us the value of studying and memorizing God’s word.

How can I apply this to my life?

By hiding His word in our heart (Ps 119:11), we can avoid sin by “bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ” (2 Cor 10:5). We can also use His word to defend ourselves against false teachings and persecution. But to do so, we must constantly meditate on His teachings and memorize God’s word to make ourselves spiritually stronger.

Armor Prayer **Representation** Communication with God

Meaning

Without a line of communication with his superiors, a soldier cannot receive instructions or send for help. We know that God is always right there next to us. But unless we open our heart to Him, we

cannot communicate with Him. Paul teaches us to pray without ceasing (1 Thess 5:17), with supplication and perseverance (Eph 6:18). To have an open line of communication with Him means having a prayerful attitude every moment of every day, and integrating Him into every thought, word, and deed of our lives. Whether it is a quick thought in our minds, a silent prayer in our hearts, or a prayer in tongues with supplication, God is always listening.

How can I apply this to my life?

Anything from praising or thanking God, to humbly asking for His help, is a form of prayer. When we turn to God instinctively in any situation in our lives, we implicitly understand that He is always with us, and open our hearts to Him. God wants us to turn to Him for all of our needs, so we need to make prayer a constant habit in our lives and learn to persevere in our prayers even when it seems like He is not answering us immediately. When we pray in the Spirit according to God's will, we receive instruction, guidance, comfort, strength, and wisdom.

Memory Verse

"Finally, my brethren, be strong in the Lord and in the power of His might." (Ephesians 6:10)

Meaning

The power we use to fight spiritual battles is not ours, but God's. Paul tells us that the exceeding greatness of God's power has been given to those who believe, and that is the power of the Holy Spirit. But the only way we become even stronger in the Lord is through prayer. So, to prepare ourselves for battle, we must increase our spiritual discipline through constant prayer and rely on the Holy Spirit.

Conclusion

As a result of his calling, Paul suffered many tribulations, including imprisonment, despite having committed no crime. Yet, he was willing to face these for the sake of the gospel. His letters show to us an attitude of joy, and a greater concern for the welfare of the churches than of himself. He exhorted the brethren to live for Christ, to defend against false teachings, and to diligently watch for Jesus' return by keeping Christ at the center of our faith. When we actively don the armor of God, we become more prepared for sharing and spreading the gospel and, like Paul, can view life and suffering from a heavenly perspective.

Lesson 9 Homework Assignment Answer Key

1. What power do we use to fight spiritual battles? Where does it come from?
The Holy Spirit, which comes from God.
2. What purpose did God want to accomplish through Paul's calling?
God had chosen Paul for a special mission: to be an apostle to the Gentiles. He was called to proclaim the mystery, "which from the beginning of the ages has been hidden in God who created all things through Jesus Christ" (Eph 3:9).
3. Which four books are the *prison Epistles*? Why are they called this?
The four prison Epistles are Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon. They are called this because Paul wrote them while he was imprisoned in Rome.
4. Why is it so important that the leaders of the church be sound in doctrine, speech, and conduct?
They must have sound doctrine to guard against false teachings and evil practices. By setting an example in speech and conduct, the believers will imitate them, hold fast to the correct teachings, and exhibit Christ-like behavior.
5. Why is faith in God our shield against Satan?
When we have faith in God, we will never be afraid when faced with trials and sufferings. Satan loses his power when we believe in God and all of His promises.
6. Which two pieces of armor do you lack the most? How can you work on improving them?
Personal answers.

