

PRESSING ON TOWARD THE HEAVENLY CALLING

A 12-Week Study Through
the Prison Epistles

Steve Gallagher

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the Prison Epistles

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Pressing On Toward the Heavenly Calling

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INTRODUCTION

The Prison Epistles are a divine archive of profound revelations about the kingdom of God, accumulated by a man who for many years enjoyed unbroken fellowship with the Lord. Each epistle possesses its own unique style and theme: Ephesians offers incredible glimpses into the heavenly domain inhabited by God and the powerful spiritual entities—both fallen and unfallen—who influence and affect mankind; Philippians is a joyful celebration of the vibrant Christian life; and Colossians focuses on the Christ, the great Center of the spiritual realm.¹

Paul wrote these three books toward the end of his life. Having “fought the good fight... finished the course... kept the faith,” he was now moving toward “the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge” would award him. (2 Timothy 4:6-8) For nearly thirty years, the “apostle to the Gentiles” had been *Pressing On Toward the Heavenly Calling*.

This twelve-week study of Ephesians, Philippians and Colossians can be extremely rewarding. However, it should be understood at the outset that such an examination can only be cursory at best. It is impossible for any single human to exhaust the riches of these three epistles—especially in 84 lessons. For instance, Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones wrote a commentary of six thick volumes solely on the book of Ephesians. I have studied his books and yet, when I read the writings of Joseph Beet, Albert Barnes, Alexander MacLaren and others, I find a wealth of new revelations never once touched upon by Lloyd-Jones!

Of course, it should go without saying that the student will derive precisely as much from this study as he desires. The casual reader will breeze through the lessons exerting little effort, content to impatiently answer questions without any real prayerful consideration. On the other hand, the earnest student will approach these treasure troves with anticipation and wonder. He will begin each day’s homework with questions in his heart such as: “What will I discover today?” and “How will God speak to my heart in this study?”

¹ The book of Philemon is also considered one of the “Prison Epistles,” but due to space limitations will not be included in this study.

² For an exhaustive study on how the spirit of this world is affecting believers, please see my book, *Intoxicated with Babylon*.

“Unless we realize our dependence upon the Holy Spirit the Word will not speak to us,” penned Dr. Lloyd-Jones. “If we read the Word of God without praying for enlightenment, we shall probably get very little out of it. We must never depart from this consciousness of our dependence upon the Spirit’s power and enlightenment. The ‘anointing,’ the ‘unction from the Holy One,’ of which the Apostle John speaks is needed constantly and increasingly.”¹

With that in mind, I would like to offer a few suggestions that I believe will help the reader maximize the benefits of this study through the Prison Epistles:

First, prayerfully approach each day’s lessons.

The Lord will speak to you and implant His wisdom in your heart if you will but ask Him. You do not need more biblical knowledge; you need a divine impartation! If you will ask, seek and knock, unexpected doors will be opened to you through Scripture. Approach the Word with expectancy and faith!

Second, be ever mindful that you live in a world that lies under a satanic enchantment. Spiritual darkness pervades our culture. The intoxicating voice of darkness blares at you relentlessly through television, radio and the Internet. It appears as truth, but is actually laced with underlying false messages, cunningly cloaked in seemingly innocuous information. The Bible is the one existing source of pure truth. Humble yourself before it and treat it with the utmost reverence.

Third, spend as much time as you can in your studies. You probably don’t realize how much you have been polluted by the spirit of this world.² The more time you spend soaking in Scripture, the more you will take on the mind of God. Conversely, the more you immerse yourself in the world, the more its standards and values will shape your thinking and desires.

If you feel as though you have already been terribly contaminated, don’t despair! The Word of God can and will straighten out faulty perspectives, skewed attitudes and unlawful desires. You need only immerse yourself in it, allowing it to do its supernatural work inside you.

INTRODUCTION

Last, please keep in mind that the Prison Epistles were written by a man with a great love for Scripture. To the spiritually dull, and those who are devoted to worldly entertainment, spending time in it will seem like a tedious, obligatory drudgery. To those who approach

this study with a grateful, loving heart, it will become a "fountain of life."

You and I have embarked upon a lifelong spiritual journey. My hope is that this Bible study will help you as you continue *Pressing On Toward the Heavenly Calling*.

GETTING STARTED:

purefeministres.org/pressing-on-toward-the-heavenly-calling



WEEK 1: CHOSEN BY GOD



Day One

Scan For



This Week's Video

1. Read and meditate on Ephesians 1:1-14 (supplemental reading: Romans 1).
2. Depending upon the translation, Ephesians 1:3-6 is broken down into either one (KJV & NKJV), two (NASB), three (AMP & NIV) or even four (NLT) sentences. Carefully consider what this remarkable section of Scripture is saying. Using up to four sentences, rewrite this passage in your own words.
 - a.
 - b.
 - c.
 - d.
3. According to Ephesians 1:3, what have believers been blessed with?
4. According to Ephesians 1:4, for what purpose were believers chosen?
5. According to Ephesians 1:5, what were believers predestined to?
6. According to Ephesians 1:6, what was freely bestowed upon believers?
7. Read the following verses and write out what it means to be *in Christ*.
 - a. Ephesians 1:4
 - b. Ephesians 1:7
 - c. Ephesians 1:10b-11a
 - d. Ephesians 1:13b

¹ The New American Standard Bible (which I use) translates the Greek phrase, "freely bestowed." However, it is rendered differently by other Bible translations, thus underscoring one of the unavoidable challenges of preparing this type of Bible study.

WEEK 1: CHOSEN BY GOD



Day Two

1. Read and meditate on Ephesians 1:1-14 (supplemental reading: Romans 2).
2. Again, depending upon the translation, Ephesians 1:7-12 is broken down into either one (KJV), two (NASB & NKJV) or three (AMP, NIV & NLT) sentences. Once again, ponder what is being expressed in this passage of Scripture. Using up to three sentences, rewrite it in your own words.

a.

b.

c.

3. Compare the two statements made in Ephesians 1:6-8 about grace. Verse 6 says that it was "freely bestowed" (NASB & AMP), or "freely given" (NIV) to us.² Verse 8 states that it was "lavished" (NASB, NIV, & AMP) upon us. Look up the words *freely bestowed* (Gk. *charitoo*₅₄₈₇)³ and *bestowed* (Gk. *perisseuo*₄₀₅₂) in a Bible dictionary and list some of the synonyms provided for each.

charitoo

a.

c.

b.

d.

perisseuo

a.

c.

b.

d.

4. This second term, *perisseuo*, is especially interesting. Look up the following verses and tell what you learn about this word.

a. Romans 15:13

b. 1 Corinthians 15:58

c. 2 Corinthians 1:5

d. Philippians 1:9

² The King James Version expresses it differently.

³ Throughout this study I have utilized the Strong's numbering system to aid the student with understanding Greek terms.

WEEK 1: CHOSEN BY GOD



Day Three

1. Read and meditate on Ephesians 1:1-14 (supplemental reading: Romans 3).
2. Rewrite Ephesians 1:13-14 in your own words.
3. Some people view the gospel almost as if it were nothing more than a lifeless tome of rules and regulations. By contrast, to the apostle Paul, the gospel was brimming with the life and Spirit of God. Look up Romans 1:16 and write out Paul's definition of the gospel.
4. Look up the following verses and describe what you learn about the Holy Spirit.
 - a. Proverbs 1:23
 - b. Luke 11:11-13

WEEK 1: CHOSEN BY GOD



Day Three: continued

c. John 7:38-39

d. John 16:13-15

e. Romans 8:5-6

f. 1 Corinthians 3:16

g. 2 Corinthians 3:17

h. Galatians 5:16-18

i. Galatians 5:22-23

WEEK 1: CHOSEN BY GOD



Day Four

1. Read and meditate on Ephesians 1:15-23 (supplemental reading: Romans 4-5).
2. Why is Paul giving thanks in Ephesians 1:16?
3. According to Ephesians 1:17, what does Paul ask God to give to the readers of his epistle? Explain what you think he means by these terms.
4. In Ephesians 1:18-19a, Paul asks the Lord to enlighten the Ephesians so that they may know three things. List them.
 - a.
 - b.
 - c.
5. It's obvious from Paul's writings that he considered it essential for a person's heart to be enlightened to spiritual truth. Look up the following verses (or phrase within a verse) and describe what you learn about the heart.
 - a. Deuteronomy 5:28-29
 - b. Psalm 51:17

WEEK 1: CHOSEN BY GOD



Day Four: continued

c. Proverbs 4:23

d. Isaiah 29:13

e. Jeremiah 29:13

f. Joel 2:12-13

g. Matthew 6:21

h. Acts 5:3

WEEK 1: CHOSEN BY GOD



Day Five

1. Read and meditate on Ephesians 1:15–23 (supplemental reading: Romans 6–7).
2. What phrase in Philippians 3:10 best corresponds to what Paul is saying in Ephesians 1:19b–21? In what way are these verses a good commentary on Philippians 3:10?
3. According to Ephesians 1:20b–21, where is Christ seated?
4. According to Ephesians 2:6, where are believers seated?
5. Read the following verses in *The Amplified Bible* and write out what fresh insights or perspectives you gain from each.
 - a. Even as [*in His love*] He chose us [*actually picked us out for Himself as His own*] in Christ before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy (consecrated and set apart for Him) and blameless in His sight, even above reproach, before Him in love. (Ephesians 1:4)
 - b. For He foreordained us (destined us, planned in love for us) to be adopted (revealed) as His own children through Jesus Christ, in accordance with the purpose of His will [*because it pleased Him and was His kind intent*] (Ephesians 1:5)
 - c. In Him you also who have heard the Word of Truth, the glad tidings (Gospel) of your salvation, and have believed in and adhered to and relied on Him, were stamped with the seal of the long-promised Holy Spirit. (Ephesians 1:13)
 - d. That [*Spirit*] is the guarantee of our inheritance [*the firstfruits, the pledge and foretaste, the down payment on our heritage*], in anticipation of its full redemption and our acquiring [*complete*] possession of it—to the praise of His glory. (Ephesians 1:14)

WEEK 1: CHOSEN BY GOD



Day Six

1. Read and meditate on Ephesians 1 (supplemental reading: Acts 6).
2. Review the sentences you wrote for question 2 in your Day One and Day Two homework. Meditate upon the realities that have been expressed in Ephesians 1:3-12. It would be right to sit down and spend time thanking God for each one of these promises. Using the truths expressed in this passage, make a list of seven things for which you are grateful.
 - a.
 - b.
 - c.
 - d.
 - e.
 - f.
 - g.
3. Review the verses about the Holy Spirit listed in question 4 of Day Three's homework. Would you say that you have been filled with the Holy Spirit? According to Jesus, if we ask the Lord to fill us, He will. Prayerfully ponder each of these verses, asking God to fill you with His Spirit. Make this an ongoing prayer in the future.



Day Seven: Saul the Pharisee

Supplemental Reading: Acts 7:1-8:3

Time Frame: 2 B.C. - 36 A.D.

He was born in the great Cilician city of Tarsus, about the same time as that other Birth in Bethlehem. As a Pharisee and a Roman citizen, his father was undoubtedly one of the community leaders of their Jewish neighborhood. Young Saul grew up hearing the exploits of the heroes of the faith such as Abraham, Moses, David and the prophets. However, probably more impacting on his impressionable mind was watching his father's daily observances of the various religious rituals such as those surrounding the Sabbath. No doubt, the young lad watched with fascination as his father carefully donned his phylacteries and special shawl preparing for prayer.

Clearly, the adolescent determined to follow in his father's footsteps at an early age. He was probably no more than 13 years old when his father announced that he had secured a highly coveted position for his son in the school of the great Jewish teacher Gamaliel in Jerusalem. One can only imagine the boy's excitement when he made the journey to the holy city he had heard about since earliest memory.

Soon, the gifted student was gathered with other excited boys around the famous doctor, listening attentively, asking questions and taking notes. Even in this elite group, Saul excelled. This constituted his life over the next twenty years: studying the oral law handed down by the Jewish rabbis, mastering the exacting work of the scribe and debating with his Sadducean detractors. He was "a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the Law, a Pharisee... as to the righteousness which is in the Law, found blameless." (Philippians 3:5-6) He later wrote, "I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my contemporaries among my countrymen, being more extremely zealous for my ancestral traditions." (Galatians 1:14)

It is probable that Saul had returned to Tarsus before the wild-looking prophet named John came out of the Judean wilderness and began preaching repentance, baptizing people on the banks of the

Jordan River. Thus, he would not have been present in Palestine during the 3½-year ministry of the Miracle-worker from detestable Galilee.⁴

By the time Saul returned to Jerusalem, his years of Pharisaical training had left him a miserably arrogant man, disdaining nearly everyone who came across his path. Had his heart been more receptive to Scripture, he would have learned that "a proud look" is an abomination to the Lord. (Proverbs 6:17) But Saul, well into his thirties by now, had become so self-righteous and self-absorbed that he saw no need for change in his life. Indeed, he would have gladly stood before the Lord God Himself—fully confident in his own righteousness.

This ugly spirit had permeated his inner being by the time a godly young man named Stephen—"full of grace and power" and "performing great wonders and signs among the people"—began preaching powerfully in Jerusalem. Luke tells us that "some from Cilicia and Asia, rose up and argued with Stephen." (Acts 6:9) Tarsus, we must remember, was the capital of Cilicia. Undoubtedly then, Saul, full of bitterness and pride, was one of those who tried to shout down the upstart Christian. When he and his friends found themselves "unable to cope with the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking" (Acts 6:10), they dragged him to the closed chambers of the Jewish Sanhedrin. Saul and his friends produced false witnesses who accused him of speaking against the law and the temple.

When pressed about the charges, Stephen, seizing the opportunity, brilliantly recounted the history of the Jewish people's stubbornness. Then, suddenly, he passionately exclaimed, "You men who are stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears are always resisting the Holy Spirit; you are doing just as your fathers did. Which one of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? They killed those who had previously announced the coming of the Righteous One, whose betrayers and murderers you have now become; you who received the law as ordained by angels, and yet did not keep it." (Acts 7:51-54)

⁴ Had Paul actually seen or heard Jesus, which he surely would have had he been in Jerusalem during that time, he almost certainly would have mentioned it. Instead, he could only say that Jesus appeared to him later.



Day Seven: continued

The piercing truth of his words “cut to the quick.” They were so furious that “they began gnashing their teeth at him,” and drove him out of the city where they stoned him to death. “Saul was in hearty agreement with putting him to death.” (Acts 8:1a)

The martyrdom of Stephen appears to have opened the door to an all-out persecution of the fledgling Church. “Saul began ravaging the church, entering house after house, and dragging off men and women, he would put them in prison.” (Acts 8:3) Luke’s choice of wording here is very enlightening. *Ravaging* (Gk. *lomainomai*₃₀₇₅) is the term used when describing wild beasts tearing and ripping at raw flesh.

It was as “a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent aggressor” (1 Timothy 1:13) that Saul went after

the early Christians, locking “up many of the saints in prisons... also when they were being put to death I cast my vote against them. And as I punished them often in all the synagogues, I tried to force them to blaspheme.” (Acts 26:10-11)

Raging like a madman, the pompous Pharisee did everything in his power to force believers to renounce Jesus as an imposter and deny that He was the Christ. Saul hated Him and everything the “would-be Messiah” represented. Finally, full of hatred and blood-lust, he went to the chief priest and begged permission to go to Damascus to hunt down more members of this despised sect. He had no idea what awaited him along that fateful road.