

A STUDY OF THE PRISON EPISTLES

THE ABSENT APOSTLE

In his final moments on Earth, Jesus Christ looked at his motley crew of disciples. These men, just weeks before, had run to hide after Jesus died on the Cross. Now, the world needed to know about the King that crushed death.

Standing on the Mount of Olives, Jesus knew what lay ahead. Jesus said, *“You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the farthest parts of the earth”* (Acts 1:8). With these words, he ascended to heaven.

Since that moment, the story of Jesus Christ has spread across the globe. As you read this page, you sit across vast oceans, hills, and plains from where Jesus walked the Earth. Acts 1:8 has come true—and we are the beneficiaries. Yet, much of the fulfillment of Acts 1:8 rested in the work of an apostle who was not with Jesus on that mountain.

Jesus had few noteworthy disciples during his life. However, when Christ radically saved Saul of Tarsus on the road to Damascus, that all changed. Saul, the well-born, educated, zealous Pharisee became Paul, the Apostle. Paul not only wrote most of the New Testament, but he eventually took the gospel to Rome as Christ’s Ambassador in chains.

ACTS 25:6–12

⁶ After Festus had stayed not more than eight or ten days among them, he went down to Caesarea, and the next day he sat on the judgment seat and ordered Paul to be brought. ⁷ When he arrived, the Jews who had come down from Jerusalem stood around him, bringing many serious charges that they were not able to prove. ⁸ Paul said in his defense, “I have committed no offense against the Jewish law or against the temple or against Caesar.” ⁹ But Festus, wanting to do the Jews a favor, asked Paul, “Are you willing to go up to Jerusalem and be tried before me there on these charges?” ¹⁰ Paul replied, “I am standing before Caesar’s judgment seat, where I should be tried. I have done nothing wrong to the Jews, as you also know very well. ¹¹ If then I am in the wrong and have done anything that deserves death, I am not trying to escape dying, but if not one of their charges against me is true, no one can hand me over to them. I appeal to Caesar!” ¹² Then, after conferring with his council, Festus replied, “You have appealed to Caesar; to Caesar you will go!”

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

In this section of our study, we want to provide additional information to our study. Most often, this section will dive deeper into an issue or topic brought up in, or adjacent to, our study. Other times, this section will give you some “back-pocket” ammunition you can share with others later.

Today, check out this 5-minute clip in the QR code. It provides a helpful introduction into the final chapters of *Acts* that we’re looking at this Week and next.



DISCUSSION

ICEBREAKER

OBSERVATION

1. Who brought charges against Paul, and to whom did they bring them? (6-7)

2. How does the text describe the merit of the charges against Paul?

(7)

(10)

(11)

3. To whom did Paul appeal, and how did they respond? (11-12)

4. Verse 11 makes clear that Paul is willing to accept any just punishment. Based on this verse, how far was Paul willing to go to share the gospel?

INTERPRETATION

5. Appealing to Caesar got Paul a one-way ticket to Rome. What advantages do you see in your own life that God might use to share the gospel with others?

APPLICATION

Paul is a great example that God often uses people through difficult circumstance. God never promises ease. If you’ve been going through something hard, talk to your coach today.

UNITE!

ZERO WEEK

A STUDY OF THE PRISON EPISTLES

STUDY NOTES BROADCASTING UNITY

The New England Patriots won their first Super Bowl in 2002 against the St. Louis Rams. The Patriots were huge underdogs, but this win led to a decade long dynasty. Nobody knew how the game would finish, but the biggest clue came in how the game started.

Every kid in pee-pee football dreams of the day their name gets called out over the PA in the Super Bowl. The Rams' high-powered offense were called out of the tunnel, one-by-one, enjoying their moment in the spotlight. They'd earned the right to get recognized on the biggest stage of their lives.

The Patriots' introduction followed. However, the Patriots chose to be introduced as a team, rather than individual players. ESPN commentator, Trey Wingo, called it "the coolest thing I have ever seen in 36 years of Super Bowl history." The Patriots ran onto the field as *one*—not as a group of individuals wearing the same uniform, but as one team rallying passionately around one mission. These guys gave up the opportunity to broadcast their *names* to millions of viewers, choosing instead to broadcast their *unity*.

THE APPEAL

God used the Apostle Paul to accomplish a great deal as both a missionary church-planter, and a writer. Everywhere Paul went a riot or revival soon followed—sometimes both at the same time. One such riot broke out when Paul went back to Jerusalem. In order to keep Paul safe from the mob, he was arrested.

Paul faced trial after trial, until eventually winding up before **Festus**. **The Jews** brought **many serious charges that they were not able to prove**. However, **Festus**, wanted **to do the Jews a favor**. It appears Paul could see that freedom was not an option—being handed over to the Jews was an unjust death sentence. So, Paul exercised a right he had from birth. A right that very few people had much less a backwater religious zealot from the outskirts of the empire, saying, **"I appeal to Caesar!"**

As a citizen of Rome, Paul had that right and the conversation pretty much ended there. **Festus replied, "You have appealed to Caesar; to Caesar you will go!"** Thus, the great Apostle Paul had an all-expense paid trip to the center of world power in the most influential empire our world has ever known. Yet, he did so as a prisoner.

Although bound, Paul was bound to win. As we will see, captivity did little to slow his ministry. Paul authored four letters we call "Prison

Epistles." In Week 1, we'll study the circumstances behind these letters as described in Acts 28.

UNITE

Paul penned these letters during his 4-year confinement—roughly two years in Israel and another two years under house arrest in Rome. He probably wrote these letters during that second period. An easy way to remember these "Lockdown Letters" is to recall the first letter of each book, and then picture the Apostle Paul, sitting next to a Roman Guard, sipping a Pepsi (PEP-C).

Letter #1 — Paul wrote *Ephesians* to the church at Ephesus and it became a widely circulated document among numerous churches. We won't be studying Ephesians in this playbook since we went through it in detail just a few years ago. What follows is the order in which we will study each remaining "Lockdown Letter."

Letter #2 — Paul wrote *Philippians* to address matters in the church at Philippi, a prominent city near the east coast of Northern Greece. Paul had visited that city on his 2nd missionary journey (Acts 16:14-34). Ironically, almost immediately upon arrival, the apostle's faith led him to be tortured and imprisoned. Literally overnight, his captivity ultimately led his jailer's entire household to become Christ followers.

Letter #3 — Paul wrote *Colossians* to the church in Colossae, a city we don't read about in Paul's journeys. Given its location, however, it was probably a church planted as a result of Paul's ministry in Ephesus.

Letter #4 — Finally, Paul wrote *Philemon* to one of the leaders of the church in Colossae. It contains very personal communication on a very sensitive topic... how a Christian master, Philemon, can and should receive Onesimus, his runaway slave who had now become a brother in Christ.

Despite the possible dire circumstances facing Paul, his heart was with the churches he'd helped start. They had problems of their own and he wasted no time helping and encouraging them. He knew the transformative power of the gospel. He had experienced it first-hand.

Paul understood that the real root of every major problem we have is sin or the effects of sin. That means the only real answer is the gospel. Whereas sin brings division and confusion, Paul prayed, hoped, and wrote that the Church would come together in Christ—that in the gospel they would unite.

Unity stands out in these books, but it's often missing in our lives. The gospel must transform our relationships. Unity based on truth must win. Because if truth wins, we all win.