

# Persecuted but Not Forsaken



## SABBATH AFTERNOON

**Read for This Week's Study:** Eph. 3:1; 2 Cor. 4:7–12; Acts 9:16; Philem. 15, 16; Col. 4:9; Phil. 1:1–3; Col. 1:1, 2.

**MemoryText:** “Rejoice in the Lord always. Again I will say, rejoice!” (Philippians 4:4, NKJV).

**A**n Adventist pastor, imprisoned on false charges, spent nearly two years behind bars. Though at first greatly perplexed, he realized the prison was his God-given mission field. When his fellow prisoners learned that he was a pastor, they asked him to preach. He did, and he gave out literature too. He even baptized prisoners and conducted Communion services.

“At times,” he admitted, “it was difficult ministering in the prison, but there was also joy, especially when you saw prayers answered and lives changed.”

Paul wrote Philippians and Colossians from prison (see Phil. 1:7, Col. 4:3). In fact, in Philippi itself, after Paul and Silas were unjustly accused, the jailer put “their feet in the stocks” (Acts 16:24, NKJV). At midnight, they were “praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them” (Acts 16:25, NKJV; emphasis supplied). Truly they knew how to “rejoice always.”

This week we'll look at the circumstances that Paul faced. He saw a larger purpose for what happened to him, and perhaps we can learn from him when we, as we inevitably do, face our own trials.

\* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, January 3.

## Paul, the Prisoner of Jesus Christ

Philippians and Colossians are called Prison Epistles because they were written while Paul was in prison (the others are Ephesians and Philemon). Most commentators think they were written while Paul was in Rome, about A.D. 60–62 (*see Acts 28:16*).

**Read** Ephesians 3:1 and Philemon 1. What is the significance of how Paul characterizes his imprisonment?

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Paul has given his life in service to Jesus Christ. If that service includes being a prisoner, he is ready. Paul describes himself as “an ambassador in chains” (*Eph. 6:20, NKJV*). He had been on missionary journeys, raising up churches and training workers for the Lord. He may have asked, “Why am I here when I could be doing so much more without these chains?” Paul was also imprisoned later, when he wrote 2 Timothy, which is considered a Pastoral Epistle. So at least five books of the New Testament were written while he was in prison.

In none of the prison epistles does Paul mention exactly where he was imprisoned; thus, some have suggested either Ephesus or Caesarea. But there is no biblical evidence that Paul was ever imprisoned in Ephesus. Caesarea might seem a more likely possibility, except there is no apparent threat to Paul’s life in this city. There definitely is that threat, however, by the time Philippians was written (*see Phil. 1:20, Phil. 2:17*).

This epistle gives us some other clues as to where Paul was at the time of his imprisonment. First, there was a *praetorium*. This can refer to a provincial governor’s official residence, like the one in Jerusalem, where Jesus was examined by Pilate (*Matt. 27:27, John 18:33*), and in Caesarea, where Paul was imprisoned (*Acts 23:35*). But Paul clearly uses this term not of a place but in reference to people. He says “the whole palace guard” became familiar with the gospel (*Phil. 1:13, NKJV*). In Rome, these were elite soldiers, about fourteen thousand, who protected the emperor and guarded his prisoners.

Second, Paul also sends greetings from the believers in “Caesar’s household” (*Phil. 4:22*). This indicates that Paul was a prisoner in Rome and in contact with those who served the imperial household.

**How do we learn to make the best of whatever tough situation we find ourselves in? Why is that not always easy to do?**

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## Paul in Chains

While in Macedonia, Paul mentions multiple imprisonments (*2 Cor. 6:5*, *2 Cor. 11:23*, *2 Cor. 7:5*). The first recorded instance was in Philippi (*Acts 16:16–24*). Later he was imprisoned in Jerusalem briefly before being transferred to prison in Caesarea.

Elsewhere, Paul mentions being “in my chains” (*Philem. 10, 13, NKJV*). Although under house arrest in Rome, he was chained to an elite Roman soldier. Ignatius, a Christian of the early second century who was chained up like this, described the soldiers as behaving like “wild beasts . . . who only get worse when they are well treated.”—Michael W. Holmes, ed., *The Apostolic Fathers* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), p. 231.

**Read** *2 Corinthians 4:7–12*. In this passage, what reveals how Paul was able to endure the trials he faced? What seems to be the focus of his life?

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No matter how hard life got, Paul was able to see a brighter side, and that gave him courage to bear up under stress. Despite Satan hurling everything he could, Paul knew he was not forsaken.

**Read** *2 Corinthians 6:3–7*. What spiritual resources did Paul have available to help him face these difficulties?

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Often, we may be tempted to look at our circumstances, our weaknesses, or our past failures and become discouraged. It’s at times like these that we need to remember all the amazing provisions God has made for our success in battling evil. One of the most important is the Bible itself, “the word of truth,” because we can learn from others’ mistakes and also learn how these people have succeeded. Also, the Holy Spirit “makes effectual what has been wrought out by the world’s Redeemer. It is by the Spirit that the heart is made pure. Through the Spirit the believer becomes a partaker of the divine nature. Christ has given His Spirit as a divine power to overcome all hereditary and cultivated tendencies to evil, and to impress His own character upon His church.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 671.

**How can we, as laity or as clergy, always “commend ourselves as ministers of God” (*2 Cor. 6:4, NKJV*)? What does that mean?**

## Paul in Philippi

During Paul's second missionary journey, shortly after Timothy was added to the team, they are forbidden by the Holy Spirit to continue across Asia Minor (*Acts 16:6*). So, during a vision of the night, Paul sees a man pleading with him to “‘come over to Macedonia and help us’” (*Acts 16:9, NKJV*). So, immediately they head to the seaport nearest Macedonia and sail from Troas across the Aegean Sea to Neapolis, on the European continent. But rather than evangelize there, Paul, Silas, Timothy, and Luke, who joined them at Troas (as indicated by the use of “we” in *Acts 16:11*), head to Philippi.

In his evangelistic activity, Paul always thought strategically. Philippi was “the chief city of that part of Macedonia” (*Acts 16:12*). In fact, it was one of the most honored cities of the Roman Empire, being given the status of *Ius Italicum*—the highest possible designation a city could be granted. Its citizens had the same privileges as if the city were located in Italy, including exemption from the land tax and the poll tax, and anyone born in the city automatically became a Roman citizen. It was also an important stop along the *Via Egnatia*, which was the main overland road connecting Rome with the East. Establishing an important Christian presence there enabled them to bring the gospel to many other nearby cities, including Amphipolis, Apollonia, Thessalonica, and Berea (*see Acts 17:1, 10*).

Interestingly, the official language in first-century Philippi was Latin, evidenced by the predominance of Latin inscriptions. In *Philippians 4:15*, Paul even addresses them with a Latin-sounding name, *Philippēsioi*, apparently in recognition of their special Roman status. Nevertheless, Greek was the language of the marketplace and of the surrounding towns and cities and the means by which the gospel was spread. Luke describes how Paul and his team joined people for prayer by the riverside, where Lydia and her household were converted (*Acts 16:13–15*). Being a businesswoman (“a seller of purple”), she would have been one of the major financial supporters in Philippi of Paul’s ministry. The time Paul and Silas spent in prison there led to the conversion of another entire household—that of the jailer.

The Holy Spirit knew that Philippi would be the ideal beachhead for the spread of the gospel through Europe, even though there would also be persecution. However evil it is, persecution can, in certain circumstances, enable the gospel to reach people who otherwise might not be reached.

**Read *Acts 9:16*. How does this help us understand some of Paul’s trials? How might this help us understand some of our own?**

## Paul and Colossae

We have no record of Paul ever visiting Colossae, which again tells us something about the effectiveness of his evangelistic strategy. First, it was Epaphras, a resident of Colossae (*Col. 4:12*), who brought the gospel to that city (*Col. 1:7*). But how was he converted? Most likely, it was in the mid-50s, when Paul was in nearby Ephesus and “all they which dwelt in Asia heard the word of the Lord Jesus” (*Acts 19:10*; compare *Acts 20:31*).

The book of Revelation witnesses to how widely the gospel spread throughout this area (*Rev. 1:4*). The most plausible explanation for this success, including its spread to Colossae, is as a result of the work of Paul’s converts, who first heard the message in Ephesus, the most important city in Asia Minor and a major port. Epaphras heard Paul’s preaching in Ephesus and, becoming one of his coworkers, he took the gospel back to his hometown of Colossae.

The city itself, about nine miles (15 kilometers) southeast of Laodicea, is only now being excavated, so we know less about it compared to more prominent cities of the region. We do know it had a sizable Jewish population with “as many as ten thousand Jews living in that area of Phrygia.” —Arthur G. Patzia, *New International Biblical Commentary: Ephesians, Colossians, Philemon* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers Inc., 1990), vol. 10, p. 3. Coins minted at Colossae indicate the people there, as in many Roman cities, worshiped a variety of gods. The pagan practices and strong cultural influences obviously presented Christians there with tremendous challenges, not only in evangelizing the city but also just remaining faithful to the pure faith of the gospel. Another prominent Christian in Colossae was Philemon, who may have been converted about the same time as Epaphras.

**Read** Philemon 15, 16. See also Colossians 4:9. What course did Paul gently urge Philemon to pursue with Onesimus?

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Although Roman law required Paul to return Onesimus to Philemon, Paul appeals to Philemon’s heart and conscience as a fellow believer and urges him to treat Onesimus not as a slave but as a brother (*Philem. 16*).

However much we detest the idea of slavery in any form, and wish that Paul would have condemned the practice, how do we come to terms with what Paul says here? (How fascinating that, during slavery in the United States, Ellen G. White specifically told Adventists to defy the law that ordered people to return escaped slaves.)

## The Churches of Philippi and Colossae

**Read** Philippians 1:1–3 and Colossians 1:1, 2. How are the churches in Philippi and Colossae described, and what significance does the depiction have?

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Paul's typical greeting in his epistles calls Christians in those places "saints"; that is, through baptism they have been set apart as God's special people, just as the people of Israel, through the practice of circumcision (*Exod. 19:5, 6; compare 1 Pet. 2:9, 10*), had been set apart as a "holy nation." (This has utterly nothing to do with the Roman church's practice of canonizing people as "saints.")

Also interesting is the parallel between the greetings of these two epistles. Paul refers to "overseers and deacons" (*Phil. 1:1, ESV*) in Philippi and "faithful brothers in Christ" (*Col. 1:2, ESV*) in Colossae. When the New Testament speaks of "faithful brothers," they have a specific ministry in the church (*see Eph. 6:21, Col. 4:7, 1 Pet. 5:12*). So, it appears Paul is addressing not only the church members but also the church leaders in these cities. The reference to offices that are more specifically described in other places (*for example, in 1 Tim. 3:1–12, Titus 1:5–9*) witnesses to the existence and importance of organization from the earliest period of the church.

Training coworkers such as Timothy and Epaphras and providing for the leadership of local churches was a priority for Paul and augmented his evangelistic efforts. In other words, there was a strategic approach to both outreach and retention. Our Adventist pioneers followed the New Testament model of church organization, as many *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald* articles from the 1850s show. In fact, James White said, "The divine order of the New Testament is sufficient to organize the church of Christ. If more were needed, it would have been given by inspiration."—"Gospel Order," *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, Dec. 6, 1853, p. 173. Long before Paul wrote to these churches, the apostles had already begun installing officers for the church in Jerusalem (*see Acts 6:1–6, Acts 11:30*), which "was to serve as a model for the organization of churches in every other place where messengers of truth should win converts to the gospel."—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 91.

It is well known that Paul used literary assistants at times in the composition of his epistles. Timothy is also named as a co-sender elsewhere (*see, for example, 2 Cor. 1:1, Philemon 1*). The fact that Paul goes on to use "I" rather than "we" shows that his authority stands behind these epistles also.

**Further Thought:** “God has chosen you to salvation through sanctification of the spirit and belief of the truth. Therefore stand fast. . . . If you serve God faithfully, you will meet with prejudice and opposition; but do not become provoked when you suffer wrongfully. Do not retaliate. Hold fast your integrity in Jesus Christ. Set your face as a flint heavenward. Let others speak their own words, and pursue their own course of action; it is for you to press on in the meekness and lowliness of Christ. Do your work with steadfast purpose, with purity of heart, with all your might and strength, leaning on the arm of God. The true and exalted nature of your work you may never know. The value of your being you can measure only by the life given to save you. . . .

“For every soul who is growing up into Christ there will be times of earnest and long-continued struggle; for the powers of darkness are determined to oppose the way of advance. But when we look to the cross of Christ for grace, we cannot fail. The promise of the Redeemer is, ‘I will never leave thee nor forsake thee.’ ‘I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world.’”—Ellen G. White, in *The Youth’s Instructor*, Nov. 9, 1899.

## Discussion Questions:

- ① Paul was imprisoned several times, always unjustly. How do you respond when you are unfairly treated? What Bible promises can you suggest for such times?
- ② Of the persecution of Christians, Tertullian, an early church leader, said, “The oftener we are mown down by you, the more in number we grow; the blood of Christians is seed.”—Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, eds., *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 3, (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 1999), p. 55. At the same time, persecution in some places and times has greatly hindered the work of the church. What are ways that we can support those who suffer persecution for their faith?
- ③ Think about the memory text for this week in light of the hardships Paul suffered. “Rejoice always.” What does that mean? How are we supposed to do that? Someone you love is sick or dies. You lose your job. You are in great physical pain. Perhaps the key to understanding this is to ask, “Rejoice always in what?” That is, no matter our situation, what can we always rejoice in?

# Investing in Thirteenth Sabbath

By VANIA CHEW

An Australian woman took a second look at Thirteenth Sabbath mission projects when her church encouraged members to give more than whatever they had in their pockets on the last Sabbath of each quarter.

Marilene Stevenson remembered a time when church members baked cakes and grew vegetables and sold them to raise money for Sabbath School investment projects. She wondered if she could do something similar and give the money to the Thirteenth Sabbath Offering, also known as the Quarterly Mission Project Offering.

Marilene didn't have the time, or inclination, to bake cakes and grow vegetables. However, she had started using a throat spray that she found helpful and had been recommending to others. When other people expressed interest in the spray, Marilene came up with the idea of buying it wholesale and reselling it. Any profit would go directly to the Thirteenth Sabbath Offering.

That first investment in throat spray spurred Marilene to seek more ways to raise money for mission.

"It really began with me buying stuff that I wanted," she said. "But it turns out that the things that I like to buy are the things that other people want to buy, too; they just don't have the time to go and buy them!"

Working with local farms and factories, Marilene was able to purchase healthy products at wholesale cost and sell them to family and friends at a cheaper rate than retail. She has sold exotic fruits, fresh tofu, and specialty vegan items over the years. She also has made floral arrangements and sold them for special occasions such as Mother's Day.

"It gives me a real buzz," she said. "I'm helping the people who I am selling to and, at the same time, raising money for a good cause."

Since she began investing, Marilene has raised 300 to 600 Australian dollars (US\$200 to \$400) each quarter for Thirteenth Sabbath mission projects.

She encourages all church members to give generously to Thirteenth Sabbath projects, even if it requires an investment to give a little more.

"I hope that it will inspire others to do something more than just a token offering like I was doing," she said. "God has truly blessed me with firsthand experience of His great faithfulness. How can I not want to share that?"

*This quarter's Thirteenth Sabbath mission projects are in the South Pacific Division, whose territory includes Marilene's home country of Australia. Thank you for planning a generous offering on March 28.*

