

God Is With Us, Even in Hard Times



SABBATH—DECEMBER 27

READ FOR THIS WEEK'S LESSON: Ephesians 3:1; 2 Corinthians 4:7–12; Acts 9:16; Philemon 1:15, 16.

MEMORY VERSE: “Always be happy because you belong to the Lord. I will say that again, ‘Be happy!’ ” (Philippians 4:4, EASY).



While in jail, Paul wrote letters to church members in the cities of Philippi and Colossae.

A SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTIST PASTOR was arrested for a crime he didn't do. The pastor went to jail for almost two years. At first, the pastor was sad and confused. Why did God let this bad thing happen to him? Didn't God care about him? Soon the pastor understood that God sent him to jail to save people! When the people in jail learned who the pastor was, they asked him to preach. So, the pastor preached the Good News about Jesus. The pastor also gave the people who were in jail books about the Bible. He baptized the people in jail and gave them the Lord's Supper. The pastor said, “Some days I had a hard time working in the jail. But I also felt so much joy. I felt happy when I saw the Lord change people's lives. I saw God answer my prayers.”

People thought that Paul and Silas did a crime, but they didn't do it. They, too, were thrown in jail. The man in charge of the jail “locked their feet in holes cut in heavy pieces of wood” (Acts 16:24, WE). While in jail, Paul wrote letters to church members in the cities of Philippi and Colossae (read Philippians 1:7 and Colossians 4:3).

This week, we will look at what happened to Paul while he was in jail. Paul's pain in jail helped him to see God's plan for his life. May Paul's example teach us how to keep serving God when times are hard.

PAUL, A MAN IN JAIL FOR JESUS (Ephesians 3:1)

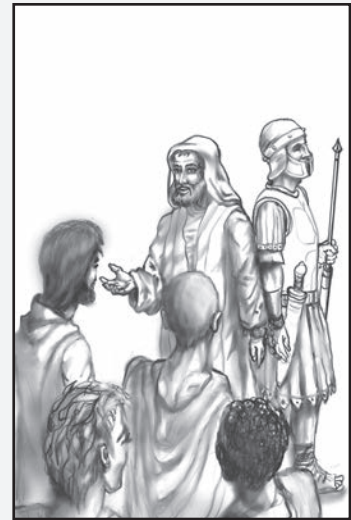
Paul wrote letters to the Philippians and Colossians. Paul's letters are named prison letters because he wrote them in jail. (Paul also wrote letters to the Ephesians and to Philemon while he was in jail.) Most Bible thinkers believe Paul wrote Philippians and Colossians while he was in Rome, about A.D. 60–62 (read Acts 28:16).

Read Ephesians 3:1 and Philemon 1. What does Paul say about his time in jail?

Paul gave his whole life to serve Jesus. If God wanted Paul in jail, then Paul was ready. Paul tells us the reason why he is in jail: "I am in chains for preaching the Good News" (Ephesians 6:20, NLV). Before Paul went to jail, he traveled and preached. He started churches and trained workers for God. Maybe Paul wondered, "Why am I in jail? I could do so much more for God if I were free!" Later, Paul went to jail a second time. While he was there, he wrote 2 Timothy. So, Paul wrote at least five letters of the New Testament in jail.

Paul doesn't tell us the name of the city where he was in jail. Some Bible thinkers say Paul was in jail at Ephesus or Caesarea. But there's no Bible proof that Paul was in jail at Ephesus. Was Paul jailed in Caesarea? Yes, but Paul wasn't in danger when he first went to Caesarea. Later, when Paul wrote to the Philippians, he was in real danger (read Philippians 1:20 and Philippians 2:17).

Paul's letter to the Philippians gives us hints about where his jail was. First, Paul talks about a special palace. This palace can mean the home of a local governor. Jesus was taken to the palace in Jerusalem where Pilate judged Him (Matthew 27:27; John 18:33). There also was a special king's home with a jail at Caesarea where Paul was sent to stay (Acts 23:35). But Paul doesn't use the words "special palace" to mean a place. Paul uses these words to mean people. They are "all the palace guards [about 14,000 men]" who learned about Jesus (Philippians 1:13, ICB). These guards were the best fighters in the Roman army. They protected the king of Rome and watched over the people in jail. Second, Paul sends greetings from "the Christians who live in the king's house" (Philippians 4:22, EASY). So, Paul was jailed in Rome when he wrote his letter to the Philippians. Paul was in contact with people who lived and worked in the palace.



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PAUL IN CHAINS (2 Corinthians 4:7–12)

While he lived in a house in Rome, Paul was chained to a soldier.

While Paul is in Macedonia, he says that he was put in jail many times (2 Corinthians 6:5; 2 Corinthians 11:23; 2 Corinthians 7:5). The first time Paul was put in jail was in Philippi (Acts 16:16–24). Later, Paul was put in jail in Jerusalem for a short time. Then Paul was sent to jail in Caesarea.

Elsewhere, Paul talks about “being held in chains” (Philemon 1:10, 13, NIV). When Paul was in jail at Rome, he lived in a house. While he was in this house, Paul was chained to a soldier. This soldier belonged to the special group of soldiers who were the best fighters in the Roman army. In the A.D. 300s, a Christian named Ignatius also was chained to a Roman soldier. Ignatius said the soldiers behaved the same as “wild animals. They behave even worse when people are nice to them.”—Michael W. Holmes, editor, *The Apostolic Fathers* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), page 231, adapted. So, life in jail was very hard.

What helped Paul to stay strong when he suffered during hard times? Read 2 Corinthians 4:7–12 for the answer.

When times got hard, Paul always had hope and faith. His hope and faith gave him courage to stay strong. Satan did everything he could to make Paul suffer and lose hope. But Paul knew that God was always with him.

What spiritual blessings helped Paul to stay strong during hard times? Read 2 Corinthians 6:3–7 for the answer.

Often, we look at our past mistakes. We know we are weak. We look at the terrible things happening around us and feel no hope. At these times, we must remember all the gifts God gives to us for success. One of the most important gifts God gives us is the Bible. The Bible helps us learn from other people’s mistakes. The Bible also teaches us how people won the fight against evil. God gives us the Holy Spirit, too. The Holy Spirit “helps us live the Savior’s life. The Spirit makes the heart clean and holy. The Spirit helps us become the same as God in our hearts. Jesus gave us His Spirit to help us win the fight against every sin and evil in our hearts. The Spirit helps God’s church to be filled with His holy life and His love.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, page 671, adapted.

PAUL IN PHILIPPI (Acts 9:16)

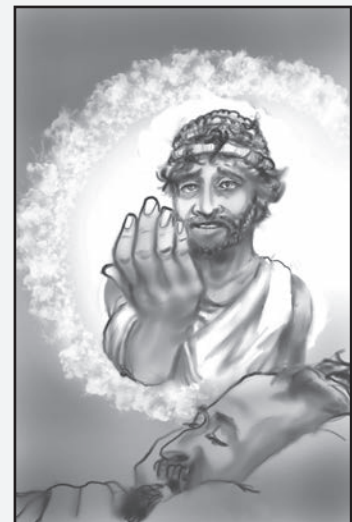
During Paul's second preaching trip, Timothy joins Paul's team. Shortly after, the Spirit forbids Paul to cross Asia Minor (Acts 16:6). Asia Minor is modern-day Turkey. That night, Paul has a dream. In the dream, Paul sees a man from "Macedonia. The man stood there and he said to Paul, 'Please, please come across the sea to Macedonia and help us' " (Acts 16:9, EASY). Right away, Paul and his team sailed from Troas. Paul's team included Silas, Timothy, and Luke. Luke joined them at Troas (Acts 16:11). Paul and his team sailed over the sea to a city in Greece. But they didn't preach there. The team then went to Philippi.

Philippi was "the most important city in the region [in that part] of Macedonia" (Acts 16:12, EASY). Also, Philippi was one of the most honored cities in the Kingdom of Rome. The people who lived in Philippi could vote and own land, the same as Roman people who lived in Italy. Also, the Philippians didn't pay certain taxes. Anyone born in the city of Philippi was a Roman citizen. Philippi was an important stop on the Via Egnatia. The Via Egnatia was an important road that connected Rome with the East. So, Paul wanted to start a church in Philippi. A church in this city would help Paul and his team share the Good News with many other cities nearby. Some of these cities included Amphipolis, Apollonia, Thessalonica, and Berea (read Acts 17:1, 10).

In Paul's day, the Philippians spoke the Latin language. But the people spoke the Greek language in the marketplace and in the towns around Philippi. Luke tells us how Paul and his team joined people for prayer at the riverside. There, Lydia and the people who lived and worked in her house became Christians (Acts 16:13–15). Lydia was a businesswoman who sold purple cloth. Lydia used her money to support Paul's work for God. During Paul and Silas's stay in Philippi, they spent time in jail. Their time in jail caused the manager of the jail to become a Christian. All the members of his house became Christians, too!

Philippi was an important city for a church. The church in Philippi helped God's people share the Good News in Europe. For sure, Paul and his team suffered for their faith in Philippi. But God can use our suffering to touch people's hearts with the Good News.

Read Acts 9:16. How does this verse help us understand Paul's sufferings? How does this verse help us, too?



"The man [in the dream] stood there and he said to Paul, 'Please, please come across the sea to Macedonia and help us.' "

PAUL AND COLOSSAE (Philemon 1:15, 16)



Paul asked Philemon to think of Onesimus as his brother in Jesus Christ.

The Bible doesn't say that Paul visited the city of Colossae. But we do know that Epaphras lived there (Colossians 4:12). Epaphras was the first person to share the Good News about Jesus in Colossae (Colossians 1:7). How did Epaphras become a Christian? We don't know for sure. Maybe Epaphras became a Christian when Paul was in nearby Ephesus, in the A.D. mid-50s. Because of Paul's "work, every Jew and Greek in Asia heard the word of the Lord" (Acts 19:10, ICB; compare Acts 20:31).

The book of Revelation also tells us that God's followers shared the Good News everywhere in Asia (Revelation 1:4). What was the reason for their success? The answer is Paul's preaching. People first heard Paul's message in Ephesus. Ephesus was the most important city in Asia Minor and a big seaport. Epaphras heard Paul preach in Ephesus. Epaphras became one of Paul's coworkers. Then Epaphras went back home to Colossae and shared the Good News there.

The city of Colossae is nine miles (15 kilometers) southeast of Laodicea. Scientists are now starting to dig up Colossae. So, we don't know much about this city at this time. We do know that as many as 10,000 Jews lived there. Coins from Colossae show that the people there worshiped many gods. So, Christians had a hard time sharing the Good News in Colossae. Also, Christians had a hard time staying loyal to God in that city. Philemon was another Christian who lived in Colossae. Maybe Philemon became a Christian about the same time as Epaphras.

Read Philemon 1:15, 16. Read also Colossians 4:9. What did Paul ask Philemon to do for Onesimus?

Roman law said that Paul must send Onesimus back to Philemon. But Paul asked Philemon to be kind to Onesimus. Onesimus was a slave. But Paul asked Philemon to think of Onesimus as his brother in Jesus Christ (Philemon 1:16).

For sure, slavery is evil. We may wish that Paul told Philemon to give Onesimus his freedom. (During slavery in the United States, Ellen G. White told Seventh-day Adventists not to obey the runaway slave law. This law ordered people to send runaway slaves back to their masters.) So, how can we explain Paul's advice to Philemon?

THE CHURCHES IN PHILIPPI AND COLOSSAE (Philippians 1:1–3)

Read Philippians 1:1–3 and Colossians 1:1, 2. What does the Bible tell us about the churches in Philippi and Colossae? Why is this information so important?

In his letters, Paul often greets Christians as saints. That's because they were baptized into the church. Baptism showed that they separated from their old way of life to become God's special people. In the Old Testament, God chose the Israelites to be His special people, too. God commanded the Israelite males to be circumcised as a sign. Circumcised means that the skin on the tip of the male sex part is cut off. This sign showed that the Israelites were separate from other people groups and belonged to God. God made Israel the same as His special treasure. God wanted the Israelites to be holy (Exodus 19:5, 6; compare 1 Peter 2:9, 10). In the same way, God wants Christians to be holy, too. Baptism shows that we belong to God.

Let's compare Paul's greetings in his letters to the Christians in Philippi and in Colossae. Paul writes to the "leaders and the deacons [helpers] in the church" in Philippi (Philippians 1:1, EASY). Paul also writes to "the holy and faithful [obedient to God] brothers in Christ" who live in Colossae (Colossians 1:2, ICB). When the New Testament talks about "faithful brothers," we understand that these men do special work for God in the church (read Ephesians 6:21; Colossians 4:7; and 1 Peter 5:12). So, Paul is talking to both church members and church leaders in Philippi and Colossae. In other parts of the Bible, we learn about the work for God that these leaders do in the church (read 1 Timothy 3:1–12 and Titus 1:5–9). These different jobs help us understand that leadership was important to God's church right from the start.

Paul trained Timothy, Epaphras, and other Christians to become leaders of local churches. Paul thought that training leaders was very important work. These leaders helped Paul share the Good News in the cities. Paul had a plan for sharing the Good News and for church leadership. Our Seventh-day Adventist pioneers also followed this plan. Many years before Paul wrote to the churches in Philippi and Colossae, the church in Jerusalem followed this plan, too (read Acts 6:1–6 and Acts 11:30). The Jerusalem church "was a model of leadership for other churches to copy."—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, page 91, adapted.



Baptism showed that they separated from their old way of life to become God's special people.

ADDITIONAL THOUGHT: “God chose you to be saved. God wants to make you holy. Your belief in Bible truth will make you holy. So stand strong. . . . If you obey God, people will attack you for your faith. Do not get angry when someone hurts you. Do not hurt them back. Stay strong in Jesus. Do not worry about what anyone says about you. Don’t try to stop them from doing what they want to do. Your job is to empty your heart of all pride. Do your work with all your might and strength. Don’t give up. Trust in the Lord. How important is your work? You may never know the answer to that question in this life. But you can know how much your life is worth right now: God gave His Son to save you. That shows you that you are very precious. . . .

“Every true Christian will suffer hard times. Satan will try to stop you from becoming the same as Jesus in your heart. But look to the cross. When we look to the cross, we will succeed. Jesus gives us this promise: ‘I will never leave you; I will always be there with you.’ [Hebrews 13:5, EASY]. And ‘You can be sure that I will be with you always. I will be with you until the end of time.’ [Matthew 28:20, EASY].”
—Ellen G. White, in *The Youth’s Instructor*, November 9, 1899, adapted.



“When we look to the cross, we will succeed.”

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- ① Paul was thrown in jail many times. He did nothing wrong. How do you feel when other people aren’t fair to you or when they are mean to you? What Bible promises help you during these hard times?
- ② Tertullian was a leader in the early Christian church. When the Romans hurt and killed Christians, Tertullian said, “The more you kill us, the more we grow. Our blood is the same as seed.” At the same time, attacks on Christians made it hard for the church to do its work, then and now. What can we do to support Christians who are attacked for their faith?
- ③ Think how much Paul suffered. Now read the memory verse for this week. What does it mean to “always be happy” (Philippians 4:4, EASY)? How do we do that? What if someone you love is sick or dies? Or you lose your job? Or you are in terrible pain? As Christians, what reason do we always have to be happy?

THE 13TH SABBATH OFFERING

An Australian woman wanted to know how the Seventh-day Adventist Church planned to use the 13th Sabbath Offering worldwide. On the last Sabbath of each quarter, her church encouraged members to give whatever they could to the special offering.

Marilene Stevenson remembered a time when church members baked cakes and grew vegetables to sell. Then they gave the money they earned to the 13th Sabbath Offering. Marilene wondered what she could do to make money to give to the 13th Sabbath Offering, also named the Quarterly Mission Project Offering.

Marilene didn't have time to bake cakes or grow vegetables. But she was interested in selling a throat spray she started using. The spray helped her throat to feel better when she was sick. Other people were interested in the spray. So, Marilene decided to buy the spray and sell it. She planned to give any extra money she made from the sales to the 13th Sabbath Offering.

Marilene's sales were a success. So, she looked for more ways to make money for the 13th Sabbath Offering.

Marilene said, "I started with buying stuff I liked. Other people liked the same stuff. They wanted to buy these things from me because they didn't have time to go buy them!"

Marilene worked with local farms and factories. She bought healthful supplies for a cheap price. Then she sold these things to family and friends at a cheaper price than they could buy at the store. Marilene sold fruit, tofu, and vegetarian food over the years. She also made flower bouquets and sold them for Mother's Day and other special holidays.

Marilene said, "I like helping people and earning money at the same time for a good cause."

Since Marilene started selling things, she earned 300 to 600 Australian dollars (that's 200 to 400 dollars in US money). Marilene invested all this money to the 13th Sabbath Offering.

Marilene encourages all church members to give as much as they can to the 13th Sabbath Offering.

Marilene says, "I hope that my story will encourage other people to do something more than just give a few dollars as I was doing. God blessed me with a wonderful experience. I know that He is very wonderful. He is so good to me. I love sharing His love with other people."

This quarter's 13th Sabbath Offering will help support work in the South Pacific. This area includes Marilene's home country of Australia. Thank you for your offering on March 28.

INSIDE
Story
by VANIA CHEW



Marilene planned to give any extra money she made from the sales to the 13th Sabbath Offering.



Marilene Stevenson