

Small Group Guide: The Unchained Gospel

****Series: The Prison Epistles | Week 1****

Opening Prayer & Icebreaker (10 minutes)

****Icebreaker Question:****

Share about a time when you felt "hemmed in" or restricted by circumstances. Looking back, did anything good come from that difficult season?

Review Key Points (5 minutes)

Paul wrote Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon while under house arrest in Rome (A.D. 60-62). Though physically bound, his message of Christ's freedom spread throughout the empire. These aren't just theological treatises—they're love letters from a suffering pastor to spiritual children facing persecution and pressure to return to their old lives.

****Central Message:**** Christ is Lord, and His freedom changes everything—our church, our family, our workplace, and our heart.

Discussion Questions

****Part 1: The Power of Limitation (15 minutes)****

1. The sermon stated, "Our biggest problems often bring us our greatest clarity." Have you experienced a time when limitation or difficulty actually helped you see God or His purposes more clearly? Share your story.

2. Paul's confinement didn't silence him—it provided clarity for his message. What distractions in your life might be preventing the kind of clarity Paul experienced? How might simplification or limitation actually help your spiritual growth?

3. Read Philippians 1:12-14. How did Paul's imprisonment actually advance the gospel? What does this teach us about God's ability to work through our worst circumstances?

**Part 2: Four Letters, One Christ (20 minutes)

Divide into four smaller groups (or discuss as one group if small). Assign each group one letter to read and discuss:

Group 1 - Ephesians (Read Ephesians 1:3-6)

- What does it mean to be "chosen in Christ before the foundation of the world"?
- How does knowing you were never an afterthought in God's plan change how you view yourself and your purpose?

Group 2 - Philippians (Read Philippians 2:3-8)

- What does Christ-like humility look like in practical terms?
- Where in your life (work, home, church) is God calling you to "empty yourself" and serve?

Group 3 - Colossians (Read Colossians 1:15-17)

- How does Paul describe Christ's supremacy?
- The sermon warned against seeking "secret knowledge" or spiritual shortcuts. What modern versions of this do you see today (social media, self-help spirituality, etc.)?

Group 4 - Philemon (Read Philemon 15-17)

- Paul asks Philemon to receive his runaway slave as a brother. What made this request revolutionary?
- Who in your life requires this kind of costly forgiveness or reconciliation?

****Regroup and share highlights from each discussion.****

**Part 3: Key Theological Words (15 minutes)**

Paul uses specific Greek words that shape his message:

- ****Charis (Grace):**** God's undeserved favor
- ****Koinōnia (Fellowship):**** Deep, costly community beyond surface relationships
- ****Mystērion (Mystery):**** God's plan now revealed—unity in Christ
- ****Oikonomía (Stewardship):**** Faithful management of what God has given us

****Discussion Questions:****

4. Which of these concepts challenges you most? Why?

5. The sermon describes real Christian community as "getting down into the muck and mire of daily living." How does this contrast with typical church fellowship? What would it look like for your small group to live this out more fully?

6. Read Ephesians 3:8-10. How is the church meant to display "the wisdom of God" to the world? What does this look like in practical terms for our families, workplaces, and neighborhoods?

*** **Part 4: Personal Application (15 minutes)**

7. The sermon asks: "Maybe today you feel bound—by fear, debt, disappointment, or just the mundane routine of everyday life." What is currently making you feel "chained" or restricted?

8. Paul's message is clear: "You may live in chains, but the gospel is not chained." How can you see God working even in your current limitations or struggles?

9. The sermon states: "You don't need new revelation, just deeper trust in the One who holds all things together." Where in your life are you seeking something "new" rather than trusting what God has already revealed in Scripture?

Key Takeaways

****Write these down or share which one resonates most with you:****

- Christ is bigger than your situation. Rome couldn't stop the gospel; your circumstances can't either.
- Don't underestimate what God can do through ordinary believers loving each other well.
- The fruit of the Spirit thrives even in dark places.
- You don't need new revelation, just deeper trust in the One who holds all things together.
- If the gospel can turn a slave into a brother, it can heal your home too.

This Week's Challenge

****Choose ONE of the following to practice this week:****

1. ****Embrace Your Limitation:**** Instead of fighting against a current restriction in your life, ask God what He wants to teach you through it. Journal about what you discover.

2. ****Practice Costly Community:**** Reach out to someone in your church or small group who is struggling. Don't just ask how they're doing—get involved in their life in a practical way (meal, help with a project, extended conversation).

3. ****Study One Letter:**** Pick one of the four Prison Epistles and read it in one sitting. Write down what stands out about Christ's character and lordship.

4. ****Pursue Reconciliation:**** If there's a broken relationship in your life, take one step toward reconciliation this week—whether that's prayer, a phone call, or a face-to-face conversation.

5. ****Counter-Cultural Living:**** Identify one area where cultural values conflict with gospel values in your home or workplace. Commit to one specific way you'll live differently this week.

Closing Prayer (5 minutes)

****Prayer Focus:****

- Thank God for the example of Paul's faithfulness in chains
- Ask for eyes to see how God is working through our limitations
- Pray for deeper community within your small group
- Request boldness to live counter-culturally for Christ's glory

****Close by praying Ephesians 3:20-21 together:****

"Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen."

Looking Ahead

Next week, we'll dive deeper into one of the Prison Epistles. Come prepared to share how God worked through this week's challenge.