

READING EPHESIANS, COLOSSIANS AND PHILEMON TOGETHER

JUNE 2026

What? Letters from the apostle Paul to Christians in Ephesus and Colossae (now in Turkey). The church in Ephesus (Ephesians) was founded by Paul (Acts 19), but the church in Colossae (Colossians, Philemon) was not personally known to him.

When? Written from prison in Rome, AD 60–62 (Acts 28).

Why? **Ephesians** is a letter of encouragement to a church in a city dominated by the occult and worship of the goddess Artemis. Paul wants to remind them of their blessings in Christ, promote unity and spur them to continue living godly lives.

Colossians is partly a response to dangerous false teaching that claimed real spiritual maturity is found away from Christ. Paul reminds the church of Christ's unique supremacy and urges them to continue trusting in him alone.

Philemon is written to an individual Christian in Colossae. Paul hopes to secure reconciliation between Philemon and a runaway slave, Onesimus, who had met Paul and become a Christian.

ADVICE FOR READING PAUL'S LETTERS

There are some extra resources you might find helpful on our website: litchardmission.co.uk/rbt

Some reminders when reading these letters:

- God wants you to understand him better as you read. If you're struggling, **remember to ask him for help!**
- Make the most of the fact that we're reading these books together. Is there **someone in the church** you can meet to discuss things with?
- **You don't need to understand everything.** Try to summarise the main point of the passage in one sentence, and then dig deeper into some of the details.
- These letters **were originally written to other Christians** in a different time and place. They are still timeless words from God for us, but it helps to ask "What did this mean for *them*?" before asking "What does it mean for *us*?"
- Paul **reminds us what God has done** before he tells us how to live. God's grace is the foundation for our obedience. There are lots of instructions in Ephesians 4–6, but the first three chapters only contain one direct command: Remember! (2:11)

WHAT ABOUT SLAVERY?

Philemon is written to a slaveholder, and Ephesians and Colossians both contain verses that address slaveholders but don't instruct them to release their slaves. These can be difficult passages to read today. A few things to remember:

- Slavery was **deeply embedded** in Roman society, encompassing many skilled and educated workers. As an often-marginalised minority, the first-century church was not in a position to change these structures of society.
- Paul's God-given words were **radically countercultural**, addressing slaves as equal church members (Colossians 3:11), and calling those of any status to relate to others with Christ-like servant-hearted love.
- In a later historical context, Christians were at the forefront of the movements to **abolish the transatlantic slave trade**. Their campaigning was motivated by the Bible's teaching on divine love and human dignity.

A SUGGESTED 28-DAY READING PLAN

Ephesians		Colossians	
☐ 1:1–14	☐ 4:1-16	☐ 1:1-14	☐ 3:18-4:6
☐ 1:15-23	☐ 4:17-32	☐ 1:15-23	☐ 4:7-18
☐ 2:1-10	☐ 5:1-14	☐ 1:24-2:5	☐ Review
☐ 2:11-22	☐ 5:15-33	☐ 2:6-15	Philemon
☐ 3:1-13	☐ 6:1-9	☐ 2:16-23	☐ 1–7
☐ 3:14-21	☐ 6:10-24	☐ 3:1-11	☐ 8–16
☐ Review	☐ Review	☐ 3:12-17	☐ 17–25
			☐ Review

FIVE KEY QUESTIONS

You might find it helpful to make notes as you read, so that you can remember what the Lord has been teaching you, use it to encourage others, and bring it to him in prayer.

- 1. What does this passage teach me about the riches of God's grace?** Before we can apply the letter's instructions, we need to remember the depth of God's love to undeserving sinners like us.
- 2. How do these verses lead me to worship Christ?** These letters are filled with reminders of the supremacy of Christ and the completeness of his saving work.
- 3. What is Christ teaching me about relationships?** Paul shows us how the principles of love and forgiveness shape our relationships in the church, the family and wider society.
- 4. What is Christ teaching me about his church?** These letters teach us about the nature and importance of church, and our place within this community.
- 5. How does this passage help me stand firm in faith?** The word of God is part of the spiritual armour that enables us to stand firm against the devil. What truths, promises or commands do I need to hear today?