



Letters from Prison

Part Two



Letters from Prison

Part Two

Colossians and Ephesians

Vincent M. Smiles

with Little Rock Scripture Study staff



LITURGICAL PRESS
Collegeville, Minnesota

www.littlerockscripture.org

Nihil obstat for the commentary text by Vincent M. Smiles: Robert C. Harren, *Censor deputatus*.
Imprimatur for the commentary text by Vincent M. Smiles: † John F. Kinney, Bishop of St. Cloud, Minnesota,
August 30, 2005.

Cover design by John Vineyard. Interior art by Ned Bustard.

Scripture texts in this work are taken from the *New American Bible, revised edition* © 2010, 1991, 1986, 1970
Confraternity of Christian Doctrine, Washington, D.C. and are used by permission of the copyright owner.
All Rights Reserved. No part of the New American Bible may be reproduced in any form without
permission in writing from the copyright owner.



This symbol indicates material that was created by Little Rock Scripture Study to supplement the
biblical text and commentary. Some of these inserts first appeared in the *Little Rock Catholic Study
Bible*; others were created specifically for this book by Amy Ekeh.

Commentary by Vincent M. Smiles, © 2005, 2019 by Order of Saint Benedict, Collegeville, Minnesota. All
rights reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever, except brief
quotations in reviews, without written permission of Liturgical Press, Saint John's Abbey, PO Box 7500,
Collegeville, MN 56321-7500. Printed in the United States of America.

Inserts adapted from *Little Rock Catholic Study Bible*, © 2011 by Little Rock Scripture Study, Little Rock,
Arkansas; additional inserts, prayers, and study questions by Little Rock Scripture Study staff, © 2019 by
Order of Saint Benedict, Collegeville, Minnesota. All rights reserved. No part of this book may be repro-
duced in any form or by any means without the written permission of the copyright holder. Published by
Liturgical Press, Collegeville, Minnesota 56321. Printed in the United States of America.

Part Two: ISBN 978-0-8146-6454-4 ISBN 978-0-8146-6478-0 (e-book)

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Smiles, Vincent M., 1949– author. | Keegan, Terence J., author.

Title: Letters from prison : Philippians and Philemon / Vincent M. Smiles, Philippians ; Terence J. Keegan,
O.P., Philemon with Little Rock Scripture Study staff.

Description: Collegeville : Liturgical Press, [2019] | Contents: Lesson one (introduction and Philippians
1:1-26) — Lesson two (Philippians 1:27-3:1) — Lesson three (Philippians 3:2-4:23) — Lesson four
(introduction and Philemon) — Praying with your group — Reflecting on scripture. | Summary:
“Scripture study focusing on the letters Paul wrote to the Philippians and Philemon while in prison” —
Provided by publisher.

Identifiers: LCCN 2019017262 (print) | LCCN 2019980433 (ebook) | ISBN 9780814664551 (pbk.) | ISBN
9780814664544 (pbk.)

Subjects: LCSH: Bible. Philippians—Criticism, interpretation, etc. | Bible. Philemon—Criticism,
interpretation, etc.

Classification: LCC BS2705.52 .S65 2019 (print) | LCC BS2705.52 (ebook) | DDC 227/.607—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2019017262>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2019980433>

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Welcome	7
What materials will you use?	8
How will you use these materials?	8
Preface	11
Lesson One (Introduction and Colossians 1:1–2:5)	13
Lesson Two (Colossians 2:6–4:18)	25
Lesson Three (Introduction and Ephesians 1:1-23)	39
Lesson Four (Ephesians 2:1–4:16)	49
Lesson Five (Ephesians 4:17–6:24)	61
Praying with Your Group	72
Reflecting on Scripture	74



Wrap-Up Lectures and Discussion Tips for Facilitators are available for each lesson at no charge. Find them online at LittleRockScripture.org/Lectures/LettersPartTwo.

Welcome

The Bible is at the heart of what it means to be a Christian. It is the Spirit-inspired word of God for us. It reveals to us the God who created, redeemed, and guides us still. It speaks to us personally and as a church. It forms the basis of our public liturgical life and our private prayer lives. It urges us to live worthily and justly, to love tenderly and wholeheartedly, and to be a part of building God's kingdom here on earth.

Though it was written a long time ago, in the context of a very different culture, the Bible is no relic of the past. Catholic biblical scholarship is among the best in the world, and in our time and place, we have unprecedented access to it. By making use of solid scholarship, we can discover much about the ancient culture and religious practices that shaped those who wrote the various books of the Bible. With these insights, and by praying with the words of Scripture, we allow the words and images to shape us as disciples. By sharing our journey of faithful listening to God's word with others, we have the opportunity to be stretched in our understanding and to form communities of love and learning. Ultimately, studying and praying with God's word deepens our relationship with Christ.

Letters from Prison, Part Two Colossians and Ephesians


The resource you hold in your hands is divided into five lessons. Each lesson involves personal prayer and study using this book *and* the experience of group prayer, discussion, and wrap-up lecture.

If you are using this resource in the context of a small group, we suggest that you meet five times, discussing one lesson per meeting. Allow about 90 minutes for the small group gathering. Small groups function best with eight to twelve people to ensure good group dynamics and to allow all to participate as they wish.

Some groups choose to have an initial gathering before their regular sessions begin. This allows an opportunity to meet one another, pass out books, and, if desired, view the optional intro lecture for this study available on the "Resources" page of the Little Rock Scripture Study website (www.littlerockscripture.org). Please note that there is only one intro lecture for two-part studies.

WHAT MATERIALS WILL YOU USE?

The materials in this book include:

- The text of Colossians and Ephesians, using the New American Bible, Revised Edition as the translation.
- Commentary by Vincent M. Smiles (which has also been published separately as part of the New Collegeville Bible Commentary series).
- Occasional inserts  highlighting elements of the chapters of Colossians and Ephesians being studied. Some of these appear also in the *Little Rock Catholic Study Bible* while others are supplied by staff writers.
- Questions for study, reflection, and discussion at the end of each lesson.
- Opening and closing prayers for each lesson, as well as other prayer forms available in the closing pages of the book.

In addition, there are wrap-up lectures available for each lesson. Your group may choose to purchase a DVD containing these lectures or make use of the audio or video lectures online at no charge. The link to these free lectures is: LittleRockScripture.org/Lectures/LettersPartTwo. Of course, if your group has access to qualified speakers, you may choose to have live presentations.

Each person will need a current translation of the Bible. We recommend the *Little Rock Catholic Study Bible*, which makes use of the New American Bible, Revised Edition. Other translations, such as the New Jerusalem Bible or the New Revised Standard Version: Catholic Edition, would also work well.

HOW WILL YOU USE THESE MATERIALS?

Prepare in advance

Using Lesson One as an example:

- Begin with a simple prayer like the one found on page 13.
- Read the assigned material in the printed book for Lesson One (pages 14–21) so that you are prepared for the weekly small group session. You may do this assignment by reading a portion over a period of several days (effective and manageable) or by preparing all at once (more challenging).

- Answer the questions, Exploring Lesson One, found at the end of the assigned reading, pages 22–23.
- Use the Closing Prayer on page 24 when you complete your study. This prayer may be used again when you meet with the group.

Meet with your small group

- After introductions and greetings, allow time for prayer (about 5 minutes) as you begin the group session. You may use the prayer found on page 13 (also used by individuals in their preparation) or use a prayer of your choosing.
- Spend about 45–50 minutes discussing the responses to the questions that were prepared in advance. You may also develop your discussion further by responding to questions and interests that arise during the discussion and faith-sharing itself.
- Close the discussion and faith-sharing with prayer, about 5–10 minutes. You may use the Closing Prayer at the end of each lesson or one of your choosing at the end of the book. It is important to allow people to pray for personal and community needs and to give thanks for how God is moving in your lives.
- Listen to or view the wrap-up lecture associated with each lesson (15–20 minutes). You may watch the lecture online, use a DVD, or provide a live lecture by a qualified local speaker. This lecture provides a common focus for the group and reinforces insights from each lesson. You may view the lecture together at the end of the session or, if your group runs out of time, you may invite group members to watch the lecture on their own time after the discussion.

Above all, be aware that the Holy Spirit is moving within and among you.

PREFACE

Welcome to Little Rock Scripture Study's *Letters from Prison, Part Two*. Before we begin our study, it may be helpful to understand why some of Paul's letters are classified as "Letters from Prison" (or "Captivity Epistles," as they have also been called).

Both the Acts of the Apostles and Paul's own letters attest to multiple imprisonments endured by Paul "for the defense of the gospel" (Phil 1:16). A determined and unflagging missionary, Paul was not shy about describing the danger and discomforts of his apostleship: "with far greater labors, far more imprisonments, far worse beatings, and numerous brushes with death" (2 Cor 11:23). It seems that Paul's message about a crucified Messiah won over some but angered others, Jews and Gentiles alike, to the point of physical attacks and incarceration (e.g., Acts 14:19; 16:22-24; 28:16; 2 Cor 11:24-26).

In five of the thirteen letters attributed to Paul, the apostle remarks within the letter that he is imprisoned at the time of its composition: Ephesians (3:1, 4:1), Philippians (1:7, 13-14, 16-17), Colossians (4:3, 10, 18), 2 Timothy (1:8, 16; 2:9), and Philemon (1, 9-10, 13). For example, in Philemon, Paul refers to himself as "a prisoner for Christ Jesus" (v. 1, 9), and in Colossians, he writes, "Remember my chains" (4:18).

Of these letters, 2 Timothy is typically classified with the Pastoral Letters (1 and 2 Timothy, Titus), leaving four remaining letters classified as Prison Letters: Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon. The authorship of Philippians and Philemon is undisputed (Paul himself is most certainly the author), so they are treated together in *Letters from Prison, Part One*. Because the authorship of both Colossians and Ephesians is uncertain, and because the two books share many themes and ideas, they are treated together in Part Two.

As you read the commentary provided in this book, you may notice that the author will sometimes quote the text of Paul's letters with a slightly different wording than you find in the outside columns of your book. In these cases, Vincent M. Smiles is providing his own translation based on the Greek text rather than quoting the New American Bible, Revised Edition. These complementary translations can work together to enhance your study and understanding of these letters.

Enjoy your study!

Letters from Prison

Part Two

LESSON ONE

Introduction and Colossians 1:1–2:5

Begin your personal study and group discussion with a simple and sincere prayer such as:

Prayer

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who fills us with every gift, who blesses us with every blessing, who loves us with everlasting love. May this word be God's life in us. May it be gift, blessing, and love for ourselves and for all we meet.

Read the Introduction on page 14 and the Bible text of Colossians 1:1–2:5 found in the outside columns of pages 15–21, highlighting what stands out to you.

Read the accompanying commentary to add to your understanding.

Respond to the questions on pages 22–23, Exploring Lesson One.

The Closing Prayer on page 24 is for your personal use and may be used at the end of group discussion.

INTRODUCTION TO COLOSSIANS

Colossians among Paul's letters

Among the thirteen letters that bear Paul's name, Colossians has a unique place. Seven letters are universally accepted as written by Paul (Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, 1 Thessalonians, Philemon). A large majority think that Paul did not write the Pastoral Letters (1 and 2 Timothy, Titus) or Ephesians, and a growing majority think the same regarding 2 Thessalonians. That leaves Colossians. A small majority favor the conclusion that Paul himself is not the author, but a number of them think that Paul was still alive and may have had some say in the letter's composition. In this case, someone like Timothy was the main author, with Paul providing input. Just about all would agree with one author's description of Colossians as a "bridge" between Paul himself and those who continued his ministry and wrote further letters in his name.

Colossians certainly bears many striking similarities to Paul's letters, but with regard to style and theology and the absence of some key Pauline terms (e.g., "righteousness," "law," addressing the readers as "brothers"), its distinctiveness is very apparent. The image of Christ and the church as cosmic entities is particularly distinctive, as also is the style of lengthy sentences overflowing with synonymous expressions. Whoever wrote Colossians knew Paul's letters, and perhaps Paul himself, quite well but also had developed a unique

style and theological view. Paul sometimes wrote in the name of his coworkers; here one of them or someone associated with them has written in Paul's name.

The close connections between Colossians and Ephesians is discussed in the commentary on Ephesians.

When and why was Colossians written?

A reasonable hypothesis is that the letter was written from Ephesus, perhaps while Paul was in prison in Rome or shortly after his death (i.e., early to late sixties A.D.). It has two main purposes: first, to respond to the challenge presented by "the philosophy" (2:8), and second, to provide some support for Epaphras (1:7; 4:12-13) and others in their furthering of Paul's ministry. "The philosophy" probably had its home in Judaism (note 2:11, 16, 21) and invoked ideas from popular philosophy, such as "the elements of the world" (2:8), which were identified with spiritual "powers" (2:10, 15, 18). Colossians has none of the polemic of Galatians, but as in that case, the law was being introduced as a necessary factor between believers and God, as though the divine-human relationship required a legal code (see 2:13-15). Like Paul in Galatians, this writer insists that believers live "in Christ" (2:7) and indeed "in God" (3:3) and have no need of any such intervening power (cf. Gal 2:19-21).

The value of Colossians for today is in that teaching. Believers in every generation need to remember that nothing is to displace the primacy of a direct relationship with God "in Christ."



1:1-2 Opening greeting

The opening verse is identical to the opening words of 2 Corinthians 1:1. In Corinth (1 Cor 9:1-5; 2 Cor 11:5-33) and in Galatia (Gal 1:1–2:14), Paul had to defend his apostolate. In Colossae his apostolate seems to have been unchallenged, but the words “apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God” might have been necessary because the Colossian churches did not know him by sight (2:1) and also he wanted to make more effective the commendation of those who would continue his ministry (1:7; 4:7-14). Timothy had long been a major partner in Paul’s mission (1 Thess 1:1; 3:2; Acts 16:1-3). Although the addressees are “the believers in Colossae” (1:2), the letter is intended also for other churches (4:13-15). The greeting here is shorter than usual (cf. Rom 1:7; 1 Cor 1:3).

1:3-8 Thanksgiving

In Greek this thanksgiving comprises just one sentence. Generally, it echoes Paul’s thought and language well; “giving thanks,” “praying,” and recalling of the recipients’ coming to faith are all characteristic of Paul’s thanksgivings (e.g., Phil 1:3-5; 1 Thess 1:2-5). Further, faith, love, and hope are featured here, as in 1 Thessalonians, but whereas, for Paul, hope is a quality that enables “eager expecta-

I: Address

CHAPTER 1

Greeting

¹Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother, ²to the holy ones and faithful brothers in Christ in Colossae: grace to you and peace from God our Father.

Thanksgiving

³We always give thanks to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, ⁴for we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and the love that you have for all the holy ones ⁵because of the hope reserved for you in heaven. Of this you have already heard through the word of truth, the gospel, ⁶that has come to you. Just as in the whole world it is bearing fruit and growing, so also among you, from the day you heard it and came to know the grace of God in truth, ⁷as you learned it from Epaphras our beloved fellow slave, who is a trustworthy minister of Christ on your behalf ⁸and who also told us of your love in the Spirit.

continue

tion” for the coming reward (Rom 8:18-25; Phil 1:20), here it suggests not expectation but the reward itself “reserved for you in heaven” (1:5).

The Colossians “heard” the gospel from Epaphras and recognized in it “the grace of God.” Epaphras had established the church in Colossae (1:7-8; 4:12-13) and had been imprisoned with Paul (Phlm 23); he also provided the news of the Colossians’ faith (their “love in the Spirit”) and (probably) of the competing “philosophy” (2:8). The strong commendation (“our beloved fellow slave . . .”) unites Epaphras closely with Paul, confirming his fidelity to Christ “*on your behalf*” (cf. 1:24; 2:1); the latter phrase is otherwise used most often of *Christ’s* sacrifice (e.g., Rom 5:8; 8:32; 1 Cor 11:24). The gospel, says the writer, “has come to you” and indeed to “the whole world,” something of an