

THE PROBLEM WITH GYM MEMBERSHIPS

Colossians 4:18 – 28th and Final in the series, “Roots,” on Colossians

All right, I confess. Laurie and I went to see the *Jurassic World* movie a couple of weeks ago. Spoiler alert: the dinosaurs did it. I know, how could we do such a thing? Go see yet another sequel that pretty much followed the same script the first three in the series followed. Why would you do that? One of the lamentable trends in Hollywood over the past 25 years has been to not create new ideas and stories but to remake old ones and make sequels. I believe the last two movies we’ve seen have been this one and *Cinderella*, a sequel and a remake. This movie in a way combined those. It was a sequel that was almost like a remake.

Nevertheless, I am chagrined to admit that we both pretty much enjoyed it. It certainly kept our attention. It probably says something sad about us that we got a kick out of watching dinosaurs eat people yet again. But it wasn’t boring and at least it wasn’t offensive, other than some gratuitous violence. And it did have one piece of wisdom. At one point a central character said, “The key to a happy life is to accept that you are never actually in control.” If he had just added, “so trust God” it would have been perfect. However, I did have one large annoyance with the movie. How was it that somebody thought it was a good idea to create an amusement park with genetically engineered and recreated dinosaurs yet again? After the attempt to do that had horrifically ended in disaster three times you’d think no one would be the least bit interested in pulling that stunt. How stupid are the guests at this new park? Hey, I know what would be a great vacation. Let’s go to that park where they have man-eating dinosaurs that get loose and kill hundreds of people. Now that’s my idea of a good time.

Isn’t the definition of insanity doing the same thing over and over and expecting a different result? If the whole *Jurassic Park* saga were true, to me the main lesson of it would be that we need to *remember*. Today I want to talk about something we who are followers of Jesus need to remember. We’ll see it in Colossians 4:18 as we bring our study of Colossians to a close.

AN APPEAL FOR RESPECT

Paul did not actually put quill to papyrus to write his letters. He dictated them into his iPhone. Oh, wait, that’s not right. He didn’t have an iPhone. He did dictate his letters, but to one of his associates who then wrote them down. We don’t know who did the transcribing on Colossians. We do know that a guy named Tertius transcribed Romans, but all we know about him was his name means “third.” It is possible Timothy transcribed Colossians, but we really don’t know. However, in a

number of letters, Colossians being one of them, Paul signed the letter by closing it in his own hand.

Verse 18 begins with Paul telling the Colossians that he personally wrote these final words in his own handwriting. I think this was just Paul's way of putting a personal touch on the letter. It also confirmed that what his associate wrote was actually what Paul intended to say. Then he gave the Colossians the unusual command, "Remember my chains." This is a very personal and poignant touch. This is the only letter from Paul that has a comment like this. The Colossians were hardly likely to forget that he was in prison, so this was not merely a reminder of his current circumstances. He wasn't saying, "Please don't invite me to come spend a few weeks with you because I'm kind of tied up here. Literally." He drew his attention to his chains for a reason.

The point was not self-pity. He wasn't whining, "Hey, you should feel sorry for me because I'm being treated really bad and it's not fair." Call the waaambulance. Such an attitude would be the exact opposite of the mindset Paul displayed in Philippians 1, which was written during the same imprisonment as Colossians. In Philippians 1:12 Paul wrote, "Now I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel." He's encouraging the Christians in Philippi and telling them not to worry about his situation. Clearly, he wasn't feeling sorry for himself and whining about his predicament.

Then what was the point? This involves some interpretation. I will tell you what I think Paul was saying, but what I think is not written on stone tablets that were delivered to me on Mt. Sinai. I think he was reminding them of who he was, what he had done for the kingdom of God, and what that had cost him.

There was no shortage of religious leader wannabes back then, just as it is today. All manner of itinerant preachers and teachers would come through town from time to time. Some of them latched onto the church, but had their own agenda. They may have had a particular false doctrine to push, or they may have just been trying to get a following because that was a good way to make money. When you read the New Testament letters you will see that there was a constant competition over who was actually proclaiming the real gospel of Jesus. So there was always the question of why they should listen to Paul as opposed to someone else. Who made him Apostle?

Paul was reminding the Colossians that he was an apostle picked by Jesus to serve him and suffer for him. When Paul was first confronted by Jesus, the Lord sent a

man named Ananias to help him. In Acts 9:15-16 the Lord said to Ananias, “Go! This man is my chosen instrument to proclaim my name to the Gentiles and their kings and to the people of Israel. I will show him how much he must suffer for my name.” Paul’s chains represented his fulfillment of that call. He had preached to the Gentiles, now he was preaching to their king, and he was suffering for it. That made him worthy of respect. It meant that he should be listened to as Christ’s hand-picked representative.

I believe this is a subtle and gentle parallel to something Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 11:23. He was defending himself against some false teachers who had come to Corinth to preach about how Paul’s gospel wasn’t enough, that people need to obey the Law of Moses. He wrote, “Are they servants of Christ? (I am out of my mind to talk like this).” In other words, if you believe those guys are servants of Christ you don’t have both oars in the water. He went on, “I am more. I have worked much harder, been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again.” In other words, those guys may claim to be servants of Jesus, but Paul had actually served Jesus and had paid a dear price for it. He had proven his faithfulness through the hardships he had suffered. His chains proved that he was who he claimed to be, an apostle of Christ. A big point of this, I believe, is that the Colossians should respect Paul as an apostle who was suffering for Christ, and that as a result they should follow both his teaching and his example.

AN APPEAL FOR ASSISTANCE

Given this respect, I believe Paul was also asking them to support him. He was in a difficult situation, with his life hanging in the balance. One hard thing for prisoners was that the government back then required them to support themselves. They were dependent on people on the outside to provide them with food and whatever else they might need. So Paul needed some help. He got most of what he needed from associates, but any help would be greatly appreciated.

The most important assistance Paul needed was their prayers. He had already asked them specifically to pray for him that he would be able to proclaim the gospel openly. But I think he also desired that they pray for him in his imprisonment. In Philippians 1:19 Paul wrote, “I know that through your prayers and God’s provision of the Spirit of Jesus Christ, what has happened to me will turn out for my deliverance.” He believed that the prayers of the Philippians and others were a vital element in having his situation turn out the way God wanted.

I believe that he also is reminding them of his need for tangible assistance. In Philippians 4:10 Paul wrote, “I rejoiced greatly in the Lord that at last you renewed your concern for me. Indeed, you were concerned but you had no opportunity to show it.” He was rejoicing that they had sent a gift to help him out. In verse 18 he said, “I am amply supplied, now that I have received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent.” I believe he was hoping that the Colossians also might remember his chains and both pray for him and help him with his practical needs.

Fine, but what does it have to do with us? All of that happened a long time ago. Paul is long gone. The Colossians are long gone. Their city doesn’t even exist today. So why should we care? I believe that there are some lessons that we can draw from this brief little comment, some points of application for us.

IMPLICATIONS

HAVE CONCERN FOR THOSE WHO SUFFER

There are still people suffering for Jesus today, just as Paul did - people still in chains - and they need us to remember their chains. Did you know that on average 322 Christians are martyred every month in the world today? *The New York Times* reported last year that when ISIS conquered the city of Mosul in Iraq the Christians who lived there were given three alternatives: They could convert to Islam, they could flee the city, or they could die. As you can imagine, most chose to flee; but when they did, everything they owned was taken from them and they were told never to come back.

A year ago *The New York Times* published an article that depicted the circumstances of a man from Afghanistan who was called “Josef” in the article to protect his identity. He began to question his Muslim faith and after some time of searching he put his faith in Jesus. According to the *Times* he is currently hiding from family members who have vowed to kill him. One offered \$200,000 to the reporter who wrote the story, to reveal where Josef is hiding. He said when they find him not only will they kill him, they will also kill his three-year-old son. His wife and son are hiding in Pakistan. Josef’s faith is unshaken. He is quoted in the article saying that it’s like “my body is in prison but my soul is free.”

Our brothers and sisters in Christ who are suffering need us to remember them. But what will that mean for us? We don’t have the power to stop what happened in Mosul or to save Josef and his family, so what can we do? First we can make sure we stay informed. The worst thing for persecuted believers is to think that no one

cares. I can tell you from the most painful moment of our lives that even though people couldn't stop the pain, it somehow comforted Laurie and me when our pain mattered to people.

It is not difficult to keep informed about what is happening to Christians around the world. There are a number of organizations that have websites that speak directly to this issue. You can visit Voice of the Martyrs (at www.persecution.org) and Open Doors International (at www.opendoors.org) to keep on top of what's happening to Christians around the world.

Second, we can act. There are things we can do to help persecuted Christians. Write letters or emails to leaders in our nation encouraging them to put pressure on those who persecute Christians. Write foreign leaders appealing to them to stop. Write to the persecuted Christians themselves. Give money where it may help. But most of all, we must pray. Prayer is what Paul most desired from the Colossians. It is the one thing we can do that will help suffering brothers and sisters the most.

FOLLOW PAUL'S INSTRUCTION

To remember Paul's chains is to remember who he was. He was chosen by God to proclaim the good news of Jesus, to be his apostle and to be given revelation from God. He suffered for answering that call, but he fulfilled it completely. He was God's chosen instrument. In other words, what he wrote is authoritative and is to be obeyed. Do we actually obey his teaching?

Comedian Louis CK says, "I have a lot of beliefs, and I live by none of them. That's just the way I am. They're just my beliefs. I just like believing them...they're my little 'believies.' They make me feel good about who I am. But if they get in the way of a thing I want I sure as heck do what I want to do."

Paul wrote much of the New Testament, and included is a great deal of instruction about how we are to live. Unfortunately, it is easy for us to turn all of that into our little "believies." They make us feel good about believing these truths – that is, unless they get in the way of what we want to do; then we just go ahead and do it anyway. Have you ever used the Pandora program on your computer or your phone? You can tell Pandora the kind of music you like, giving particular artists as an example. Then they play songs from the style you like and you can give them a thumbs up or thumbs down. Thumbs down means I don't like that one, don't give me any more of that. They scratch it off the list and don't play it anymore. All these instructions from Paul are not like Pandora. Oh, I don't like that one. I'll give it a thumbs down. Don't tell me that one again. This is not a restaurant menu where

you choose the items you like and ignore the ones you don't like. To remember Paul's chains is to remember who he is, a man delivering truth from God.

The Christian dating website, Christian Mingle.com, recently did a survey in which they asked Christian single people between the ages of 18 and 59 "Would you have sex before marriage?" A whopping 63% said yes. Kenny Luck of Every Man Ministries wrote, "Christian young adults have become sexual atheists. In other words, God has nothing to say to them on that subject of any consequence, or at least anything meaningful enough to dissuade them from following their own course of conduct." Apparently they are not paying attention to Paul's instruction about sexuality.

I read an interesting statistic this week. It is that 58 million Americans own a gym membership. Actually, that's not the interesting one. The more fascinating number is that 39 million of those people, 67% of them, never use those memberships. The problem with gym memberships is that they don't help you get in better shape if you don't use them. You don't get slimmer, you don't get six pack abs by just joining a gym and paying the fees. And having "believies" that we don't employ has the same problem. They don't make us more like Jesus.

Some of Paul's teaching is more than a little inconvenient. In 1 Corinthians 6:7 Paul addressed the fact that some in the church at Corinth were taking their disputes to court by suing each other. Paul wrote, "The very fact that you have lawsuits means that you have been completely defeated already. Why not rather be wronged? Why not rather be cheated?" What a radical way of living! He tells us to choose to lose money, to allow ourselves to be cheated by a supposed brother, rather than bring dishonor to the name of Christ. The implications of that kind of living are enormous. Paul is telling us to live by the principle, "I'd rather lose than have Jesus lose, and I don't really care what I have to lose."

Here's another winner from Ephesians 4:29. "Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen." There's another killer. Don't say anything that won't edify and bless people. I have been amazed by how I have preached sermons on that topic, and then learned of people who sat listening to that sermon, agreeing, saying that's one of their believies, only to immediately go out and trample all over it with selfish, negative, critical, hurtful words that give grace to absolutely no one.

Recently, we found ourselves at odds with American Airlines. They decided they wanted to charge us \$175 for giving back our Frequent Flyer miles when we canceled a Frequent Flyer reservation. Only they didn't inform us of that. They just charged our credit card. This didn't seem quite right to me so I called to discuss it. The woman from their "customer service" department that I talked to seemed to have a curious definition of the word "service." To her service apparently means arrogantly and officiously informing the customer that he is a dolt who cannot understand the obvious fact that this is the rule so he needs to just shut up and go away. I had lots of words that I thought of to share with her... Unfortunately, I remembered that dumb verse from Ephesians. What was more important to me, that money or actually living by what the verse commanded? I am happy to inform you that I remembered Paul's chains and did what he said. But I'm really bugged about the principle of the thing...which means losing that money. So I'm getting back at American by telling you what they did... Take that, American Airlines!

Or how about Philippians 2:3, which says, "Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather in humility value others above yourself." In other words, quit taking care of you, and do everything you can to take care of others. That's another one that I've watched people nod and agree with then do just the opposite. Kevin Miller is a pastor at a church back in Wheaton, Illinois. He asked on his Facebook page, "What's hard about serving?" Some of the responses were revealing. One person said, "It doesn't fit in my schedule, like when my aging parents need help or just need me to be with them." Another person responded, "The needs seem endless. I may get sucked in and not get to do what I want to do." One person insightfully said, "What's hard about serving others - is others."

The San Francisco Chronicle a couple of years back published an article on its front page about a woman named Linda Wilson Allen. She is a bus driver in the metro transit system in San Francisco. That is a difficult and thankless job. She has to battle difficult traffic while dealing with cranky passengers, engine breakdowns and other delightful problems. She does it, but she more than does the job. She tries to love and serve the people who ride her bus. She learns their names and she waits for them if their late, making up time later in her route. An elderly woman named Ivy was struggling to get her heavy grocery bags onto the bus. Linda got out of her seat and carried Ivy's bags onto the bus. She saw a woman named Tanya in a bus shelter. It quickly became obvious that Tanya was new to the area and was kind of lost. It was almost Thanksgiving so Linda said, "You're here by yourself, you don't know anybody. Why don't you come to my house for Thanksgiving and relax with me and the kids?" At the end of her route she says, "That's all. I love you, now you take care." She has built such a community of blessing on her bus

that passengers offer her the use of vacation homes, bring her floral bouquets and when they found she likes to wear scarves with her uniform they showered her with scarves. She makes an effort to do the inconvenient.

Philippians 4:4 says, “Rejoice in the Lord always.” That is a really nice believe. We love to recite that one, then not do it. You all know that in our family we are all rejoicing over the fact that Anna and Toby are expecting their first child in December. Early this year there was a period during which it appeared that having a child might be difficult for them. It turned out to be a false alarm that was caused by a doctor misreading a test result. But for a period of a couple of months it seemed like a real possibility that they might not be able to have kids. There are greater tragedies in life, but for them, and for us, this would have been a real loss. I think they are going to be terrific parents. I confess that my first thought was not to rejoice in that. I was hugely saddened by the mere possibility. It was easy to rejoice when we learned that there had been a mistake, and it was way easy to rejoice when we found out that Anna is pregnant. But to rejoice had it been true that they would never have kids? I’m supposed to rejoice in that? Paul wrote, “Rejoice *always*.” That’s other worldly. Yes, that is exactly the point. It is not natural. It is something we must choose in Christ because of what we have in Christ. Remembering Paul’s chains means respecting his authority, and that means obeying his commands.

BE INSPIRED BY PAUL’S EXAMPLE

Remembering Paul’s chains could have had a chilling effect on the Colossians. They could have said, “Wow, look what happened to that guy when he tried to tell people about Jesus. Let’s not make that mistake.” But Paul felt it would have the opposite effect. It would encourage them to be more courageous in following Jesus. I think he believed that because he had seen it happen. In Philippians 1:14 he wrote while in prison, “Because of my chains most of the brothers and sisters have become confident in the Lord and dare all the more to proclaim the gospel without fear.”

That seems curious to me. Why would believers be more confident in the Lord because of Paul’s chains? My first reaction is that his chains would have just the opposite effect. If you see somebody thrown in prison for telling people about Jesus, aren’t you more likely to try to keep your head down? Isn’t the typical response, “Man, how can I keep that from happening to me?” When you are speeding down the freeway and you see someone ahead of you get pulled over for speeding, isn’t your tendency to slow down just a bit because you don’t want to share that driver’s fate? Seeing that isn’t going to make you bolder and cause you

to step on the gas and go even faster, is it? Are you going to say, “Hey, if that guy can speed regardless of the outcome I want to do that too”?

I will give you my best guess at how that came about. Paul’s situation was a bit unique at that time. He wasn’t in prison just because he talked about Jesus. He was opposed by the ancient Jews because he claimed the gospel of grace made the Law of Moses unnecessary. In Jerusalem some people hated him because of that. They hated him so fiercely that they trumped up charges that he brought Gentiles into the Temple, a violation of Jewish Law, as a way of fomenting a riot against him. That was blatantly not true, and even if it was, the Romans didn’t much care. Paul was acquitted, but kept in prison because his judge wanted a bribe and refused to release him until he got one. There wasn’t much threat that Christians in Rome were going to have any of that happen to them. So I don’t think they feared that if they talked about Jesus, what happened to Paul would happen to them. They knew they would be opposed, ridiculed, possibly rejected and ostracized, but likely not jailed. They knew life might get difficult for them, but they weren’t all that worried about suffering Paul’s fate.

But they saw Paul’s courage and his confidence in God... his optimism even in an unfair and hard circumstance. They saw his inspiring willingness to do whatever it took to obey God’s call. They saw that what his enemies had intended for harm for Paul had turned out to give him opportunities he never would have otherwise had. God had opened doors to Paul into the palace guard, Caesar’s version of the Secret Service, so he was reaching people in the palace that had he not been in prison he could never have preached to. And he was reaching them successfully. Philippians 4:23 says, “All God’s people here send you their greetings, especially those who belong to Caesar’s household.” In other words, Paul converted people in the palace.

This had a couple of effects. First, the fact that God could use even the plots of people bent on injustice and evil to actually advance his kingdom gave them even more confidence in him. They had more certainty that God is bigger than humans, so they could trust him. Second, Paul’s example inspired them. If he was willing to suffer for Jesus, shouldn’t they be willing to do the same? The result was that they were more courageous than ever in living out their faith and telling people about Jesus.

Remembering Paul’s chains should have the same effect on us. It should cause us to have more confidence than ever in the might and wisdom of our great God. I was doing some reading this past week that was kind of depressing. I read about

the loss of religious freedom that is a near certainty in our country right now. I read about the horrific actions of ISIS and how they are steadily advancing. It is easy to get pessimistic and worried about the future when you hear such things. Then I remembered Paul's chains. I remembered that people tried to kill him, tried to have him be executed and managed to get him locked up unfairly for years. What they managed to do was to get Paul to a place where he could tell people in the palace itself about Jesus. Then they managed to get Paul to write some letters. So how important did those letters turn out to be? How would you like to live without any of the instruction and encouragement of Ephesians, Philippians and Colossians? If Paul hadn't been in prison, none of those letters would have been written. If God is wise enough and great enough to pull off something like that, he can probably be trusted to take care of events in my world today as well.

Paul wrote at the end of his life that even though he was almost all alone, he had been abandoned by many, he had fought the good fight, he had finished the race. Knowing that we have a God who is wise and mighty and good, who knows all about everything that happens in our world and our individual lives and has already planned to use every bit of it in his great and wise plan, who loves us, doesn't that cause something strong to rise in you that says, "I want to be like Paul. I want to fight the good fight, all the way to the end"?

A powerful and inspiring experience for me was encountering the story of a man who had died years before I heard about him. I read a book entitled, *Shadow of the Almighty*, by Elisabeth Elliot, a great follower of Jesus who died just last month. In it she used the letters and journals of her late husband, Jim, to tell his story. As you may know he was one of five men who went to Ecuador to bring the news of Christ to a violent Stone Age tribe in the jungles, an endeavor that was ultimately successful but that cost him his life. At one point in his life Elliot wrote, "God, I pray... light these idle sticks of my life and may I may burn up for you. Consume my life, my God, for it is Yours. I seek not a long life, but a full one, like you, Lord Jesus." On another occasion he wrote, "I covenanted with the Father that he would do either of two things: either glorify himself to the utmost in me or slay me. By his grace I shall not have second best." As it turned out, God did both.

Doesn't his example inspire you? Doesn't Paul's do the same? Remember his chains and seek to have God glorify himself to the utmost in you. Do not settle for second best.