

## Colossians and Philemon

### Colossians

#### Salutation (1:1–2)

**1:1 Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother, 2 To the saints and faithful brothers in Christ at Colossae: Grace to you and peace from God our Father.**

Colossians opens with a very typical Pauline greeting (1:1). Paul identifies himself as an apostle of Christ Jesus, which means that he was personally appointed by Christ. In this case, as in five other letters, Timothy was his main co-worker, presented as the coauthor of the letter. Timothy was surely known by the Colossian church, for he had been with Paul on and off during his long ministry in Ephesus. Paul did not volunteer to be Christ's apostle nor did he earn the right. Rather, he was fully aware that he had been a persecutor of the church and so was responsible for the death of Christians when God chose him (1 Cor 15:9; Acts 22:20 presents him as encouraging and assisting those who killed Stephen). Paul never lost sight of the fact that it was God's choice that made him an apostle of Christ, not his own choice or merit.

Paul addressed his letter to God's holy (or set apart) people in Colossae (1:2). Paul did not view the church as different from Judaism, so he freely appropriated for Christians the titles of Israel in the Old Testament. They, even the gentile converts, were those people whom God had set apart for Himself. The distinctive characteristic of this group of Christians is that they are faithful, meaning that they are true to Christ. Just as Timothy was a brother, so also were they and just as their leader Epaphras was faithful so too were they.

Paul closed his salutation with his typical blessing or prayer, **Grace to you and peace from God our Father.** Paul picks up God's goal of shalom for His people and combines it with the distinctly New Testament sense of having grace from God. In fact, it is the grace from God which makes peace with God and mankind possible.

#### Thanksgiving (1:3–8)

**1:3 We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, 4 since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love that you have for all the saints, 5 because of the hope laid up for you in heaven. Of this you have heard before in the word of the truth, the gospel, 6 which has come to you, as indeed in the whole world it is bearing fruit and growing—as it also does among you, since the day you heard it and understood the grace of God in truth, 7 just as you learned it from Epaphras our beloved fellow servant. He is a faithful minister of Christ on your behalf 8 and has made known to us your love in the Spirit.**

The first part of the introduction is the thanksgiving, which falls into three parts. First we have the thanksgiving (1:3–10), then Paul flows into a prayer for the Colossians (1:11–12), and finally he rehearses the great things that the Father and Christ have done (1:13–22). Paul's introductions tend to foreshadow his core issues which will be addressed in the letter.

The one who gives thanks is full of joy, expressing oral appreciation for his benefactor's generosity. When one who gives thanks to God he or she expresses delight about the gift of grace. The present tense of the verb reveals Paul's and Timothy's constant gratitude for the repeated blessings bestowed directly upon them by

God or indirectly through the changed lives of converts. The prison environment could not deter Paul from his priestly offering of praise to God.

Paul and Timothy gave their thanks **“to God and the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.”** In the New Testament, the direction of thanksgiving is almost exclusively to God. The title **“Father of our Lord Jesus Christ”** is unique to the New Testament. In the Old Testament, God was known as the God of the Hebrew fathers Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Here He is seen as the God who has revealed Himself through His incarnate Son and through Jesus’ redemptive death and resurrection.

In this case, the thanksgiving was based upon reports that Paul had received, perhaps through Epaphras or others. The Colossians had put their faith in Jesus, and they showed this in how they loved other Christians (1:4). This commitment was inspired and nourished by an eschatological conviction regarding the hope of what God had for them in heaven.

Peter rejoiced that believers had been born into a living hope by the resurrection of Christ **“to an inheritance, incorruptible, and undefiled, and that fades not away, reserved in heaven for you”** (1 Peter 1:3–4). Christ promised that He would prepare a place for His own (John 14:1–3). Every believer knows that he has been blessed **“with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ”** (Eph 1:3). Our citizenship is in heaven (Phil 3:20), as is our treasure (Matt 6:20), and our Savior (Phil 3:20).

The Colossians had heard the truth of the good news (1:5). The gospel centers in Christ’s redemptive death and resurrection (1 Cor 15:1–4). It literally means “a good message”. It brings good news to a guilty, condemned world of lost humanity in that it declares what God has graciously provided through Christ’s death and resurrection. They had heard the message about Jesus and His Kingdom. They “understood the truth about God’s wonderful grace” (1:6). Having already mentioned faith, love, and hope, Paul now moves on to grace. When the gospel, the Good News, arrived we realized that good things come from God and we learn how much more God gave us in Jesus.

Since the Colossians already had the truth, they did not need a new truth that some were apparently teaching in Colossae. Paul assured the Colossian believers that their conversion and their subsequent spiritual growth were the same as that produced by the ministries of all the apostles throughout the Roman Empire. They were not deficient, as the heretics suggested. Since they had faith, love, hope, and grace, what more could they ask for?

The Colossians, as well as the people living in Laodicea and Hierapolis, had been evangelized by Epaphras (1:7). They had learned the gospel, says Paul, indicating that they had received a thorough grounding in it. As for the character of Epaphras himself, he was not just a slave of Jesus, as was Paul, or even a fellow slave with Paul, but a beloved fellow slave. In fact, he was Christ’s servant or minister. Finally, Paul added “on our behalf” (see note on 1:7), meaning that Paul had sent him to Colossae.

Epaphras did more than carry the gospel to Colossae. He also carried news from Colossae back to Paul (1:8). In particular he reported the Good News, the “gospel”, from Colossae that the Colossians demonstrated “love in the Spirit.” Wherever the gospel is truly received and taken to heart, the Spirit enters and transforms lives. Love for others is the evidence of this transformation. Thus, in reporting this love to Paul, Epaphras made it clear that the Colossians were truly converted.

## Prayer for the Colossians (1:9–12)

**1:9 And so, from the day we heard, we have not ceased to pray for you, asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, 10 so as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God. 11 May you be strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might, for all endurance and patience with joy, 12 giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in light.**

Paul always wanted believers to go on and develop more deeply as Christians. Paul wanted the Colossians to know that the positive news that he had heard about the Colossians had made him and his companions intense in their prayers for them (1:9).

The desire expressed in the prayer is that the Colossians might know the will of God fully. The God of the Bible is the God who has revealed Himself and His will, first in the Mosaic law, next in the priestly ministry, then in the prophets, and most fully in Jesus Christ, who released into His followers the Spirit who speaks and reveals God's will. The knowledge desired is not just mental understanding, but "the perception of God's will as seen in Christ.

Here the nature of this knowledge is expanded using the Old Testament word pair "wisdom and understanding." This is what Daniel and his friends had due to their faithfulness to the law (Dan 1:20), and it is also what the angel revealed to Daniel (Dan 9:22). But while in the Old Testament wisdom and understanding came primarily from the law, Paul is clear here that the Spirit is the source of this wisdom. In that sense he is closer to Isaiah 11:1–2, where "the spirit of wisdom and understanding" will rest on a "shoot" from "the stump of the line of Jesse". Spirit-given wisdom and understanding is knowledge that comes by means of the Spirit who is given by the "shoot," who is Jesus. The concept of "wisdom" deals with what we should be and do, and the idea of "understanding" refers to how we accomplish those goals.

Paul writes that this knowledge will enable them to live lives that will "honor and please" the Lord (1:10). Here "the Lord" is most likely referring to Jesus since He is the focus in this letter. This phrase, literally translated "to walk worthily," is living in such a way as will bring honor to Jesus. Gaining honor and avoiding shame were principal values in Paul's world. In this case, Jesus is the patron or benefactor, and one should live so as to please Him (1 Cor 7:32) and bring Him honor, which would include living in accordance with His teaching and lifestyle. Christianity was a "way" and hence was expected to affect one's lifestyle.

The concept of living so as to honor "the Lord" is further expanded in terms of a plant bearing fruit. Paul frequently urged believers to do good works as the natural expression of the Christian living in the Spirit. If such fruit is absent, one should question whether Christ is really present in them. Also, believers should grow with respect to their knowledge of God. Living out our faith in good works corresponds with understanding God and His ways better. Jesus said that if we obeyed His teaching we would know the truth (John 8:31–32).

As believers get to know God, they should experience God's power and glory (1:11), which is fully experienced in the coming world. Because of these experiences, believers can endure persecution patiently. An unending joy will remain, grounded in thankfulness. It is God the Father who initiates these privileges and gives us this inheritance.

The believer does not strengthen himself, but must be submissive to God who provides the moral enablement. Paul commanded, **“Be strong in the Lord, and in the power of his might”** (Eph 6:10). The apostle also prayed that Christians might be **“strengthened with might by his Spirit in the inner man”** (Eph. 3:16). With humble optimism, every saint should be able to confess, **“I can do all things through Christ which strengthens me”** (Phil 4:13). Both the indwelling Christ and Spirit are the source of this needed power.

The focus of the thanksgiving in the end of the prayer (1:12) is that the Father has enabled, or “qualified,” these Colossians to enter the true land of promise. This “sharing” in an “inheritance” reminds us of narratives in the Old Testament where Abraham was promised and Israel received an inheritance. The Israelites looked upon Canaan as their inheritance, but the believer shares in the **“inheritance incorruptible, and undefiled, and that fades not away, reserved in heaven”** (1 Peter 1:4). All believers are God’s **“children, then heirs; heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ”** (Rom 8:17). They share equally in what Christ has provided through His redemptive death and resurrection.

The purpose of this divine qualification of believers was that they might **“be partakers of the inheritance of the saints in light.”** The phrase, **in light**, is used to refer to the full experience of God’s presence. This is what Christians experience partially in worship, when they experience the presence of God, but it also points to a time when they will be among the sanctified people of God in the full light of His presence. True worship is a foretaste of heaven.

It is clear that the term **saints**, “holy ones,” can mean angels (Deut 33:2–3; Ps 89:6–7) and that such “holy ones” stand in the light of God’s presence (Jude 1:6; 2 Pet 2:4), but in Colossians (1:2, 4, 22, 26; 3:12), as well as elsewhere in Paul’s writings, all references to “holy ones” are to believers, **saints**, as those made holy by God. Furthermore, the association of entry into light with conversion is found in a spectrum of New Testament passages (Acts 26:18; Eph 5:8; 1 Pet 2:9).

Praise to the Father and Son for Salvation (1:13–23)

**1:13 He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, 14 in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins. 15 He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. 16 For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. 17 And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together. 18 And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent. 19 For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, 20 and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross. 21 And you, who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, 22 he has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him, 23 if indeed you continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel that you heard, which has been proclaimed in all creation under heaven, and of which I, Paul, became a minister.**

Paul first broke into praise to the Father. He is the main subject in the drama of our deliverance. He is the one who has rescued us and saved us. This is one of the few places in the New Testament where salvation is viewed as an already completed event, instead of as an ongoing or future salvation. It is also a clear instance of a text in which the Father is the one rescuing. Using a term that reminds the reader of the deliverance from

Egypt in the Old Testament (Ex 6:6; 12:17; Jdg 6:9), Paul praised the Father for deliverance from the “Egypt” where the Colossians had been in bondage, namely the **“domain of darkness.”** Paul views the world in this age as dominated by demonic or satanic power, which is **“the power of darkness”**.

It must be noted that the Father is the one who has rescued us (1:13). It was not the Son rescuing us from the wrath of the Father, as some popular forms of Christianity would have it. To be one who has been rescued is to be in a kingdom and subject to a king.

While the Father is the primary actor, the Son is also present in the drama of our rescue from the kingdom of darkness. In our union with Him we find our release from slavery to darkness. The expression “[he] purchased our freedom” (1:14) is in Greek a relative clause traditionally translated **“in whom we have redemption.”** The transaction of **“redemption”** is that of buying an individual out of slavery and takes place **“in him,”** meaning in union with Christ. Christ gave His life **“a ransom for many”** (Matt 20:28; Mark 10:45). He obtained **“eternal redemption”** for His people (Heb 9:12). He **“gave himself a ransom for all”** (1 Tim 2:6). This last word stresses the substitutionary character of His atonement.

Redemption is only through Jesus’ blood. In order to accomplish salvation, He had to die a predetermined type of death. Only death by crucifixion, with the shedding of blood, could produce the remission of sins (Heb 9:22). From the death of the innocent animal in the Garden of Eden to Christ’s death on the cross, one can trace a continuity of bloody sacrifices. The redemption of Israel from bondage in Egypt occurred after the Passover lamb was killed and its blood was sprinkled over the doorways of believers’ homes. Similarly, Christ, the antitype Passover lamb, had to die.

This release from slavery is further defined as **“the forgiveness of sins.”** The practical result of redemption in the life of the believer is “the forgiveness of sins.” The essence of forgiveness is the sending away of sins from a person who committed those sins. David rejoiced in this truth, **“As far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us”** (Ps. 103:12). That is, what was holding us under the power of darkness was apparently our sin, so when the sin is removed, the power of darkness has no more authority over us. And our sin is removed as we are joined to Christ.

Jesus Christ **“is the image of the invisible God”** in that He both represents and manifests God to the world (1:15). In the Old Testament God is presented as the one who cannot be safely seen (Ex 33:20) or who dwells in darkness (Ex 20:21; Deut 5:23), or who, when seen, is a vague form without features (Ezek 1:26–28). All of this indicates that God is so exalted and different from human beings that He cannot be perceived by them.

Wisdom was one way that God communicated Himself to human beings in the Old Testament, but in our passage He does it in two different ways. The primary focus in this passage is on making God visible in creation, but John 1:14 and 18 point out that Jesus was also the incarnation of the very character of the Father. Jesus Christ has “declared” the Father (John 1:18). He has literally exegeted Him. He has led the essence of deity out into open view so that men could see God in action. He is the Word who has become flesh, has become what human beings are, and so is visible and accessible to mankind. To see Jesus is to see, and experience, the Father (John 14:8–10). Therefore, if you want to know what the Father is like, look at Jesus.

The word **“image”** was used of the head of a ruler minted on a coin (Matt 22:20). It was used to describe John’s vision of the statue or idol of the Antichrist (Rev 13:14). The image always pointed to that upon which it

was based. Adam was made in the image and likeness of God (Gen 1:26). Humans today are still **“the image and glory of God”** (1 Cor 11:7). Truth about God can be learned from an objective, biblical study of mankind. Since humans are a living personality, one can conclude that God also is personal, possessing intelligence, emotions, and a will to choose. Since mankind has an innate conscience in his spiritual self, God also must be a moral, spirit being. Mankind, however, is like God, but he is not the same as God. He was made in the image of God.

On the other hand, Christ is the image of God (2 Cor 4:4). He did not become the image of God at His incarnation. No, He is the eternal image of the eternal, invisible Father. As the Son of the Father (1:12–13), He is the **“exact reproduction.”** Mankind is a finite image, but Christ is the perfect, infinite image. This eternal relationship became visible through the incarnation and the subsequent manifestation in Christ’s life, miracles, and words. As the perfect representative, only He could say: **“He that honors not the Son honors not the Father who has sent him”** (John 5:23). Only God could reveal God.

In verse 15 we read that Christ is **“the firstborn of every creature.”** The title connotes both priority and sovereignty. He existed before the world was created and He is the ruler over that creation. In Ancient Near Eastern culture, the eldest son, by right of being born first, received the birthright which entitled him to a double inheritance and family leadership upon the death of the father. The idea of supremacy soon overshadowed the concept of temporal priority. God thus established Israel as His **“firstborn,”** the sovereign nation, even though many other nations existed before Israel (Exod 4:22). God has planned to elevate the Son of David, the Messiah, as His **“firstborn, higher than the kings of the earth”** (Ps 89:27). Jesus Christ, as the physical first-born of Mary and the legal first-born of Joseph, is that promised sovereign (Matt 1:25; Luke 2:7). Because He is who He is, one day every created being will bow before Him and acknowledge His sovereign deity (Phil 2:10–11).

Jesus Christ is the creator. The phrase in verse 16 “by him” literally reads “in him.” This implies that He existed before creation and acted as the agent of creation. Both the plan to create and the power to create resided in Him. He was the originator, both the architect and the builder. Creation was within His domain. The object of creation was **“all things”**. This concept embraces the totality of the created universe, in both time and space. All things, collectively and individually, came from Him. Paul underscores that Christ made everything visible, invisible, heavenly, and earthly. Then he specifically points out that Christ made all the various spiritual authorities, no matter how exalted and no matter how good or evil any given power may be (1:16). It is in Christ and His creative rule that the Colossians are to find their security.

While the New Testament often speaks of Jesus as the agent of creation (John 1:3; Rom 11:36; Heb 1:2–3), it normally speaks of God as the ultimate cause and goal of creation (Rom 11:36; Heb 2:10; Rev 4:11). Here it is Jesus for whom and by whom all things were created. Jesus Christ is the agent or means of creation. The phrase “by him” is literally “through him.” **“All things were made by him: and without him was not anything made that was made”** (John 1:3). Also, Jesus is the purpose or goal of creation. All things are “for him,” or literally “unto him”. Creation has meaning only when it points to Christ.

The text in verse 17 states that Jesus is before all things, not that He was before all things. This verb structure can refer only to God. On earth Jesus claimed to be the eternal Yahweh who spoke to Moses, **“Truly, truly, I say to you, Before Abraham was, I am”** (John 8:58; Ex 3:14). He was with the Father **“before the world was”** (John 17:5). He eternally is in the form of God, sharing equally the essence of deity (Phil 2:6).

In 1:17 Paul brings together his thoughts on creation. Jesus is before all things (temporally and in rank) and holds all things together. If Jesus' preeminence is true for the original creation and all of the principalities and powers that exist in the universe, is it also true for the new creation, the redemption of the world? It was Christ in the first part and also Christ in the second. In a transitional phrase Paul wrote of Jesus as the head of the body. The creation becomes the church, or, as we might put it, the church is defined as the visible locus of the renewal of creation. And Jesus is the source of this new creation as well.

In verse 18, Jesus is the beginning, the source, and the ruler of the church, the new creation, just as He is of the original creation. That means that He is "**firstborn**" both in the sense that He is "supreme" over the new creation, in which death works backwards and new life is brought from the dead, and in the sense that He is the first member of this new creation since He has already risen from the dead to die no more.

If one goes to the beginning of creation, one finds Jesus supreme over all created things, and if one goes to the end of time, one finds Him supreme over all in the new creation. The Resurrection is the start of the end, with the whole future age being an outworking of what started on the day of Christ's resurrection. Paul emphasizes this tension with the double use of the term often translated "**firstborn**."

In 1:19 Paul continues. First, God in all his fullness was pleased to live in Christ. Drawing on Jewish conceptions of God living in human beings, Paul took it one step further. That indwelling was true of Jesus, but in His case the indwelling was "**God in all his fullness**." That God "**was pleased**" is also an Old Testament phrase that means God chose someone or something. Incarnation was a deliberate choice on God's part. And in Jesus we meet the fullness of God, for as John said, "**God gives him the Spirit without limit**" (John 3:34). Here we have a repetition of what John meant in recording Jesus' words, "**Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father!**" (John 14:9).

Now the act of redemption is attributed to the Father. The Father reconciled the creation through Jesus (1:20). The term "**reconcile**" assumes that a state of hostility exists. Paul had already mentioned that we were part of the "**domain of darkness**" and so controlled by a hostile power. In 1:21 he makes it clear that we were not simply deemed collectively hostile because of our submission to a ruler who is at odds with God but that we ourselves were also personally alienated from and hostile to God.

The Father is the One who reached out to make peace. Also, the peace He made extended not only to human beings, but to "**everything in heaven and on earth**." (1:20) That is, the reconciliation extends beyond humanity and has cosmic and creational effects. Romans 8:19–23 points to a freeing of the creation from bondage and decay as being part of the completion of redemption. In our passage here the creation is viewed as being alien or hostile to God and His purposes. Isaiah 11:6–9 and Isaiah 65:17–25 both picture a renewed creation of harmony and peace, attributed in Isa 11:1 to the reign of the "shoot" from Jesse's "old root".

Whatever the heavenly aspect of reconciliation may mean, what is clear is that reconciliation reaches beyond saving individuals, even beyond rescuing humanity. The goal of the Father is the extension of the Kingdom of his dear Son over the whole universe, not just over humanity. He is still interested in His creation, not just in people. Creation is not disposable, to be discarded, but rather it is viewed as renewable, to be purified.

The basis of reconciliation is the cross. This peace was brought about through "**the blood of his cross**". By his own suffering and death on the cross, Jesus Christ has returned all things to proper relationship with God. It was not the blood of a victorious battle that God used to bring peace to us. No, it was the blood of an

atrocious form of execution, performed upon His Son. This paradox is Paul's model for the Christian life, for while our Lord lives in glorious exaltation on the other side of the Resurrection, we are still on this side of the Resurrection, and our victories, like His, are won not through might but through sacrifice and weakness.

The Colossians were Gentiles, and as such had been previously alienated from God (1:20). While Ephesians makes it clear that this condition applied particularly to Gentiles because they lacked God's revelation that Israel possessed, in Colossians with its cosmic emphasis the focus is on their taking part in the alienation of the cosmos from God. At the same time, however, they were themselves hostile to God and this had worked itself out in evil deeds. It was precisely these people with whom Christ had reconciled or made peace with (1:22). The initiative to be reconciled came from Christ Jesus, not from the human side. Salvation is accomplished but not completed; it has already taken place but is not yet finished, for salvation is still in process. The ultimate goal is that the believers become "**holy and blameless ... above reproach**" (1:22).

First, all believers will be presented as "**holy**". This will be the climax of the divine work of sanctification. All redeemed are positionally set apart in Christ today. Positionally, believers are saints, or holy, now. We are also striving to be holy in our daily experiences, but at the return of Christ, we will be forever set apart from the effects of sin. Second, all believers will be "**blameless**", without spot or blemish. Elsewhere, Paul wrote that God "**has chosen us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before him in love**" (Eph 1:4). Blamelessness denotes the total removal of sin and guilt from the believing sinner. Third, all believers will be "**above reproach**". This word literally means "not to be called in." It is a legal term. No charge of condemnation or sentence of eternal death can ever be brought against believers in the court of divine justice. God's faithfulness guarantees that the acceptable standing will endure until the day of Christ (1 Cor 1:8).

Between God's reconciling initiative and the future consummation lies a process that would only come to completion if the Colossians continued on in their commitment to Christ (1:23). While Paul did not doubt that they would continue in their commitment, he did condition the future consummation upon it. Paul here as elsewhere (Rom 8:13; 11:22; 1 Cor 9:27; 10:11–12; Gal 5:4), insists that continuing in one's commitment to Jesus is essential if one is to have a real eschatological (end time) hope. The phrase "**the faith**" refers to that body of biblical truth which is essential to the doctrine of salvation, not to one's personal faith (Jude 3). Again, the issue is doctrinal accuracy, not gross sins.

They had built a permanent spiritual foundation upon the person and work of Christ, as expounded by the apostles and prophets (1 Cor 3:11; Eph 2:20). Paul uses the phrase "**stable and steadfast**" is a term for a building resting securely on its foundation, which naturally leads into the idea that one should not "**shift away**", or "be moved away", from the eschatological hope. This hope is the expectation of being presented before God in a sanctified state if one remains committed to following Jesus. The heretics tried to weaken their doctrinal convictions about the person of Christ and His work in creation and redemption, but their faith did not waver. Here, as elsewhere in the New Testament, eschatology (the study of the end times) is not intended to give us a map of the future but to transform our behavior in accordance with the rule of God so that we live in the present according to the values of that future toward which we are moving.

The Ministry of Paul (1:24–2:5)

**1:24 Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church, 25 of which I became a minister according to the**

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stewardship from God that was given to me for you, to make the word of God fully known, 26 the mystery hidden for ages and generations but now revealed to his saints. 27 To them God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory. 28 Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ. 29 For this I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me. 2:1 For I want you to know how great a struggle I have for you and for those at Laodicea and for all who have not seen me face to face, 2 that their hearts may be encouraged, being knit together in love, to reach all the riches of full assurance of understanding and the knowledge of God's mystery, which is Christ, 3 in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. 4 I say this in order that no one may delude you with plausible arguments. 5 For though I am absent in body, yet I am with you in spirit, rejoicing to see your good order and the firmness of your faith in Christ.

Paul did not enjoy suffering. But this letter reveals him sitting in prison, a rather uncomfortable location, with the threat of punishment hanging over his head. These sufferings Paul viewed as Christ's sufferings, taking place in Paul's own body on behalf of Christ's body, the church (1:24). That Jesus still suffered in His body, the church, was clear to Paul at his conversion, "**Why are you persecuting me?**" (Acts 9:4) Thus, "suffering" in the New Testament always indicates those negative experiences that come from outside oneself, either from physical or psychological abuse or else from one's exertions for the sake of Jesus and His gospel. Paul experienced these sufferings abundantly (2 Cor 4:8–12; 11:23–29; 12:10).

Paul viewed the amount that Christ must suffer in His church as a determined, finite amount before the consummation of the Kingdom. This is in keeping with the Jewish concept of the "messianic woes," a time of suffering before the coming of the Messiah. This idea of "birth pangs" or "woes" before the end of the age and the coming of the Messiah was based on such Old Testament passages as Daniel 12:1, Habakkuk 3:16, and Zephaniah 1:15. This concept developed further in Second Temple Judaism.

Based on this doctrine and such sayings of Jesus, followers of Jesus realized that although the Messiah had come and had suffered for them, there was still more suffering for the whole people of God before the Messiah would return (Acts 14:22; Rom 8:17; 1 Thess 3:3). This was viewed as a fixed amount of suffering. Hence, in absorbing the abuse that he did, Paul was "taking in himself" as much as possible of that amount, so that there was less for others. It is in this sense that he can speak of the suffering as "**for you,**" even though he had never visited the Colossians.

God had a secret plan from the ages past (1:26; Dan 2:28–29). He had worked time and history to the point when He revealed it, principally through Paul (1 Cor 2:1; 4:1). The Colossians were privileged to have received this revelation. This mystery is literally, "**Christ in you [gentile believers] the hope of glory**" (1:27). Elsewhere Paul speaks of this mystery as the Gentiles being included with the Jews in the people of God (Eph 3:3–6), the gospel about Jesus being preached to the Gentiles (Rom 11:25), everything being brought together under the authority of Christ (Eph 1:9–10), and the transformation of all believers at the resurrection (1 Cor 15:51). Here the focus is on the presence of Christ in Gentile believers. The scope of this is cosmic. God made it clear that Christ will indwell Gentiles without them having to become Jews. And as we look on into the eschatological future, we see these Gentiles transformed according to and participating in the glory of God. The experience of the indwelling Christ is the evidence that a person belongs to Christ.

In the proclamation of the gospel, there is an announcement of the possibility of forgiveness and a warning that judgment is coming, along with the announcement that God's ruler is the resurrected Jesus. Those who

responded to this announcement would confess Jesus as their Lord and become followers of Jesus. Both before and after they committed themselves as His followers, they needed instruction about who Jesus was and what lifestyle He called them to. Therefore, the goal is to present the believers before the royal throne as mature copies of Christ, joined to Christ and like Christ.

Paul can at one and the same time be conscious of hard work, painful struggle, successes, failures, and of the power of Christ working in him. Since Paul was working so hard for “everyone” within his assigned area, he viewed himself as having “**struggled**” for Christians whom he had never met (2:1). It is likely that Epaphras had founded the church in Colossae and probably the church in Laodicea, as well. The churches were about 10 miles apart along the Lycus River. We have in Colossae a church that Paul knew about and felt responsible for, and yet a church that had never met him directly. He wanted these believers to know that even though they had never seen him, he cared about them. Whether it was through his general labor to spread the gospel or through his prayers for them (2 Cor 11:27), he wanted them to know that he cared as much for them as for the churches in which he had been more personally involved.

Paul stated the goal of his letter when he told them that he wanted them to be “**encouraged**” (2:2; Eph 6:22; 2 Thess 2:17) and “**knit together in love**”, an expression of communal solidarity. Corporate unity is very important in the New Testament (2:19; Rom 14:15; 1 Cor 16:14; Phil 2:1–2). However, commitment to Christ does not bypass the intellect, as Paul indicated by piling up terms for understanding. Paul wanted the Colossians to attain “**to all riches of the full assurance of understanding**” (2:2). The essence of spiritual “**understanding**” is the Spirit-guided ability to perceive the redemptive purpose of God in the Scriptures and to relate it to the complexities of contemporary life. What they were to understand is God’s “**mystery**”, and this mystery is simply Christ. He is what was hidden and has now been revealed. He is the key to all that God is about in the world. The Kingdom of God is embodied in and revealed through Christ. Therefore, “**all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge**” lie hidden in him (2:3). They are hidden because they were a mystery until Christ was revealed, and they remain a mystery to those who are not committed to being followers of Christ. For many Jews, all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge were in the Torah, which also sees Wisdom as embodied in the divine revelation. Over against such Jewish claims, Paul asserted that Wisdom is not embodied in a book but in a person. It is the Messiah who is the key to the Torah.

Paul had good reason for asserting this so strongly, for some were trying to deceive the Colossians with “**plausible arguments**” or “well-crafted arguments” (2:4). It is probable that these people were members of the local synagogue. Paul’s previous argument that Christ is the embodiment of God’s Wisdom would have directly contradicted the teachings of these people, who were probably arguing that the Colossians needed to add some Jewish observances to their commitment to Christ to come into a fuller truth. For Paul, anything added to Christ subtracted from Christ.

Paul’s concern for the Colossians was heightened by the fact that although he was not physically present with them, he was there “**in spirit**”. By this he did not mean that he was there in his thoughts. Paul’s language here is very close to the sense of 1 Cor 5:3, where Paul considers himself as truly present by the Spirit. Paul considered himself present as they read his letter in the gathered community in Colossae. Therefore, he rejoiced when he “**sees**” that they were living as they should and that their faith in Christ was strong (2:5). Faced with pressure to add other practices to Christ, the Colossians were not in a crisis, for they were standing firm. Their “**faith in Christ**” or, “commitment to Christ,” was firm. Since Paul could “**see**” this in the Spirit, he was content that he was strengthening and encouraging the Colossians.

## The Way In Is Christ (2:6–7)

**2:6 Therefore, as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him, 7 rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving.**

The Colossians had received a tradition about Jesus, passed on to them from Paul by Epaphras and whoever else was involved in planting the church in Colossae. This tradition, this message of the Good News, consisted of two main parts. 1) “Jesus of Nazareth is the Messiah”, as demonstrated through His life, deeds, and teaching. 2) “Jesus of Nazareth is the Lord”, as demonstrated in His death, resurrection, and leadership. Having received this message, the Colossians were to continue to “**walk in him**” (2:6). We begin the Christian life by committing ourselves to Jesus of Nazareth as the Messiah and living Lord. We live the Christian life by living our lives in relationship with Him, that is, submitted to His lordship and living as a person “in Christ.” This also means a rejection of all rival claims to one’s loyalty and an active submission to Jesus’ guidance and His worldview. The Christian life begins with a commitment to submit to Jesus, and the Christian life goes on by continually living out this commitment.

Paul then used a series of metaphors (2:7) from agriculture (roots grow[ing] down into him), one from building (lives be[ing] built up on him), and one from the Old Testament (establishing your faith in the truth). In the third metaphor “**in him**” changes to “**in the faith**” because the faith is about Him and our commitment to Him, and this expression allows for the parenthetical statement “**you were taught,**” which refers back to the tradition they had received from Paul through his co-workers.

## Christ is all sufficient (2:8–15)

**2:8 See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ. 9 For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, 10 and you have been filled in him, who is the head of all rule and authority. 11 In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, 12 having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead. 13 And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, 14 by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross. 15 He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him.**

Paul warned them, not against philosophy in the technical sense, but against the danger found in human ways of thinking and schools of thought, especially those that were deceptively persuasive and would entrap the Colossians (2:8). Paul divided all the influences on human thought into three sources: human tradition, elemental spirits, and divine Wisdom or Christ.

First, human tradition contrasts with the tradition that they had received about Christ. This human tradition could be religious, such as the law or interpretations of the law, which Paul knew so well from his background and with which he struggled in Galatians, or any other human knowledge that is passed down.

Second, the various basic or elemental spiritual powers of the universe were those thought to be behind the elements themselves (earth, air, fire, and water) or controlling the stars, planets, and other parts of the

universe. The issue was not that the traditions coming from these sources were bad or demonic or entirely false, but that they came from this age, and were **“not according to Christ.”** To be from Christ these powers would have had to take their point of view and foundation from the rule of Christ, including the life and teaching of Jesus. But it is to the extent that they take us away from Jesus or give us a different perspective on the world than Jesus does that these spiritual powers are deceptive. And they turn into lies because only **“in him [Christ] the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily.”** (2:9)

If we want to discover the will and character of God, Jesus is the one and only source. The implication of this fact should be obvious. Since the Christian is by definition in union with Christ, then this fullness is also in us. We are **“in him,”** and the fullness of deity is **“in him,”** so we participate in that fullness. There is nothing more that we need outside of the framework of Christ and His Kingdom. Since the fullness of God was in Jesus the human, so our humanity does not make this impossible for us. This speaks to what was evidently the problem being faced in Colossae, where some appear to have been adding religious practices of various types that would in their minds be the keys to a fulfilled life or spiritual power. No, you already have it all since **“you have been filled in him”** (2:10). It may be a potential that you have not drawn upon or even realized, but it is all there. Furthermore, Paul adds, driving the point home, Christ is **“the head of all rule and authority.”** Therefore, whatever spiritual powers the Colossians were being told they could influence through their religious practices, there was no need to do so. The originator, sustainer, and ruler of all such powers, good or evil, is Christ.

Paul added a series of metaphors or models to illustrate what has happened in our Christian initiation (2:11–15). The various metaphors fly by with blinding speed in order to develop a composite picture of the completeness of what happened when the Colossians committed themselves to Christ. Several of the metaphors have Jewish references. When a Gentile wanted to become a Jew, there was a particular order of initiation events that he or she was led through to become a proselyte.

It is unlikely that the Colossians were being asked to become full proselytes to Judaism like the Galatians were. Nor is it likely that what was being asked of them was connected to their salvation, as Paul understood the situation in Galatia to be. But it does seem likely that the Colossians were being asked to adopt some Jewish practices, mixed in with some pagan mystery religion practices, as additions to what they had received in Christ, perhaps as something that would protect them from various spirits or as something that would lead them to a deeper spiritual level.

The first metaphor Paul used is that of circumcision, by which a proselyte entered the Old Testament covenant (2:11). This was particularly significant in Asia Minor, Greece, and Italy, where circumcision was the characteristic mark of Jewish identity and nationality for males, separating them from Gentiles, who viewed it as mutilation of the body. Circumcision is something the Christian already has in Christ. Like the metaphors that follow, this circumcision is a completed event, already finished. While Scripture and some sects of Judaism spoke of a spiritual circumcision, this metaphorical usage never replaced physical circumcision. Here in Colossians the only circumcision is inner “spiritual” circumcision, applied to the Christian on the basis of Christ’s stripping off of flesh at the Cross. That act of Christ is the basis of belonging to the covenant people.

The second metaphor is that of baptism, which Paul identifies with the death of Christ (2:12). The idea that baptism is that of an identification with and appropriation of the death of Christ is also found in Romans 6:3–4. The people immersed in the water should view themselves as buried with Christ and be dead to the values

and desires of this world. This baptism is not identified with circumcision, but rather symbolizes one aspect of the spiritual circumcision, namely, the identification with the burial of Christ.

The third metaphor is that of resurrection with Christ (2:13). Unlike his other discussions of death and resurrection where resurrection is future, here Paul speaks of resurrection as an event in the past, for as Christ has been raised so also those in Him are already raised. This is similar to the Johannine insistence that those who commit themselves to Christ already have eternal life. This resurrection **“in Christ”** came about because these believers trusted in **“the mighty power of God,”** the God **“who raised Christ from the dead.”** While in the Johannine tradition Jesus speaks of having the power to lay down His life and to take it up again (John 10:18), the more typical teaching was that God had raised Christ from the dead (Rom 4:24; 1 Cor 6:14; Gal 1:1), thereby vindicating and setting His seal of approval upon Christ and also exalting Him to a place of rule over all creation. This is the teaching that Paul refers to here. The reference to resurrection brings Paul back to the reason why the Colossians had needed resurrection -- they had been dead. They had been Gentiles, outside of the covenant with Israel (Eph 2:12), and as such had transgressed God’s law (1:21). Paul viewed such foreignness to the covenant as natural because they had been, and physically still were, Gentiles. For many Jews, the Gentiles were permanently cursed, because they lived in a state of ritual impurity as those outside of the covenant and thus ignorant of its demands. Gentiles not only continually transgressed the covenant, but they also were never purified from their resultant state. God is the God of resurrection. He makes the dead alive. God made the believers alive by virtue of their union with Christ. At the same time, He forgave their sins, again, using the expression **“transgression”** to refer to their previous violation of His law. They are already forgiven. They are already alive. They are already part of the people of God.

The fourth metaphor is that of the dismissal of charges (2:14). Paul pictured all people as implicitly or explicitly having promised to obey some public decree, probably meaning the law of God, which many Jews saw at least in part as binding upon Gentiles as well through the Noahic Covenant. According to the metaphor, this public decree is **“against us”** in that human beings have not fulfilled their obligations. But rather than punishing us, God wipes out the note. Then the metaphor shifts, for instead of **“cancelled,”** God takes the note and nails it to the cross. This would remind those in the Greco-Roman world of the charges against the condemned criminal, which were often nailed to a stick affixed to his or her cross. But in this metaphorical use Paul did not mean to refer to the historical charges against Jesus, **“Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews,”** but the charges against us, graphically showing that Christ died for us and in His death the charges ended as well.

The fifth metaphor is that of a cross and a triumphal procession, where the spiritual rulers and authorities are viewed as a tunic or cloak over Christ (2:15). On the cross He was stripped naked, but this stripping is shifted from His being stripped to His stripping them off. So Paul pictures Christ at the cross rending the spiritual rulers and authorities powerless over Him. Then, using a term found only in Matthew 1:19, Paul makes another allusion to the cross, **“he shamed them publicly.”** On the cross the criminal was utterly and totally publicly shamed, exposed as weak and totally naked to the mockery of all who passed by, but Paul inverts the imagery and depicts the spiritual rulers and authorities publicly shamed by the cross of Christ. Then there is another shift of metaphor, for, again, using a rare verb (also found in 2 Cor 2:14), Paul pictured Christ as a general leading those He had conquered. They are led along in chains, ridiculed by the throng along the way, being dragged forward to imprisonment or execution. All of this happened in Christ at the cross.

Christ, not religious practices and rule (2:16–19)

**2:16 Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath. 17 These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ. 18 Let no one disqualify you, insisting on asceticism and worship of angels, going on in detail about visions, puffed up without reason by his sensuous mind, 19 and not holding fast to the Head, from whom the whole body, nourished and knit together through its joints and ligaments, grows with a growth that is from God.**

If the previous paragraph in this passage depicts the state of the Christian and the effects of what Christ has done for him or her, then there are consequences of this insight for the Christian life. Paul here tells the Colossians not to allow anyone to condemn them for what they ate or drank or which festivals they did or did not celebrate, which echoes Romans 14:3–13. Naturally, people cannot control what others may think or say, but they can choose to ignore it or refuse to allow the others to make them feel guilty by their condemnation. Given that the Lord's Supper was a communal meal in the first two centuries, it is not surprising that what people ate or drank would become an issue for others in the church. Unlike the situation in 1 Corinthians 8, there was no danger of the other person being led to violate their own conscience and thus do something that they believed Christ condemned. Here the issue is that they were condemning believers. So Paul said, **“let no one pass judgment on you”** (2:16).

Paul admitted that at least some of these rules were indeed part of the Torah, the Old Testament law, but, he insisted that these rules were shadows of something that was coming (2:17). Now in Christ, and particularly in His resurrection, that which was coming has now come and the shadows are no longer necessary. Paul reexamined the Old Testament text in the light of Christ and His Kingdom, and that reexamination determined which parts were still binding and which were not. For instance, he viewed the Sabbath as fulfilled in the whole of the new age that Christ inaugurated and so found the literal Sabbath and any other Jewish festival no longer binding. In fact, Jewish practices in general are not binding on the church, nor do they make a person more spiritual for keeping them, whether it be in matters of diet or in matters of time.

Returning to the criticisms leveled against the Colossians by the teachers Paul rejected, Paul told the Colossians to not let anyone disqualify them by their delighting in practices of fasting associated with seeing and entering into the angelic worship in heaven (2:18). This disqualification could occur either by individuals condemning them and making them feel disqualified or by individuals leading them astray and causing them to disqualify themselves. That there was intense Jewish interest in angels at this time is clear. Given the exalted status of angels, there was a desire among some Jews to participate in the angelic liturgy attested in numerous pieces of late Jewish literature. The early followers of Jesus also had an interest in angelic worship. Paul refers to the presence of angels during human worship in 1 Corinthians 11:10 and to speaking in **“the languages ... of angels”** in 1 Corinthians 13:1. Paul is clearly saying that this angelic worship is not higher or better. John's Revelation witnesses to an impulse to worship angels (Rev 19:10; 22:8–9), which is rebuked, and it also records angelic worship in heaven. In arguing that Christ is superior to the angels, Hebrews witnesses at least to the temptation to exalt angels in the communities. Given this interest in angels and their worship in heaven, it is easy to imagine what some might have said to the Colossians regarding angelic worship and fasting. Paul's response is cutting. It is not that he rejected heavenly visions. He had some himself (2 Cor 12:1–4). But, having shown how great the status of the believers in Colossae was, he opposed the assertion that they would be disqualified unless they had such visions too or worshiped according to the pattern seen in such visions (2 Cor 12:7).

Paul argued that such pride in one's spiritual privileges and the condemnation of others for not seeking such experiences is not spiritual but comes from a mind directed by one's natural humanity, one's flesh. Such pride indicates that one has let go of Christ, who is head of the church and holds the whole church together (2:19). Paul was using a metaphor to indicate that Christ, as the head, holds together and nourishes the church as if it were His body and that this care for the church is not separate from the Father but is a growth that comes from the Father through Him. Therefore, a person cannot claim that he or she is in fellowship with the Father or worshipping the Father while bypassing the Son. The fact is that while Paul in other texts encourages dreams and visions, he was strongly against anything that divides the church. Paul had no problem with fasting and other spiritual disciplines, but when they divided the body of Christ, with one group feeling superior to another, they betray a merely human attitude. There is one Christ to whom every Christian submits. True worship focuses on Christ, and it is He who binds us together.

Christ, not Jewish purity (2:20–23)

**2:20 If with Christ you died to the elemental spirits of the world, why, as if you were still alive in the world, do you submit to regulations— 21 “Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch” 22 (referring to things that all perish as they are used)—according to human precepts and teachings? 23 These have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting self-made religion and asceticism and severity to the body, but they are of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh.**

In this section, Paul brings this first part of his argument to a conclusion. As he already pointed out in 2:11–12, the believers in Colossae have died with Christ and therefore are “dead” to the various spiritual powers of this age (2:20). The problem was their tendency to act as though they were still living in this age and so to follow rules that applied to this age. The rules in question appear to be basic purity rules. There are plenty of rules in the Old Testament about what one could and could not eat (Lev 11) and what one could not touch or handle (2:21). Such purity issues were very much the concern of Pharisaic Judaism and the Qumran community that produced the Dead Sea Scrolls. They were also the concern of other Jewish groups that were in no way as extreme as the Pharisees, even including some parts of the Jesus movement.

But these rules, argued Paul, are simply human teachings that concern things that are consumed as one uses them (2:22). In saying this, Paul was surely following the teaching of Jesus found in Mark 7:7, **“Their worship is a farce, for they teach man-made ideas as commands from God.”** Paul was also following Jesus' further comment in Mark 7:17–19 that food cannot make one impure, since it is eaten, digested, and then expelled. Neither Jesus nor Paul would allow any validity to even the Old Testament food laws, calling them human traditions, much less to our later interpretations and applications of them.

Paul concluded his assessment of the rule-bound spirituality that was threatening the Colossians with a sentence that is so difficult both in terms of grammar and vocabulary that no scholar can be sure of its meaning (2:23). If **severity to the body** was an expansion of the other two terms, **self-made religion and asceticism**, then Paul probably means that strong devotion and pious self-denial are of no value with respect to dealing with human pride (Gal 6:12–13; Phil 3:3–4). In fact these measures increase the problem. On the other hand, if his point is that the worship, self-humbling, and severe treatment of the body, while appearing wise, are of no help, then they simply lead to the gratification of our fallen human nature. Regardless of Paul's intended meaning, what is clear is that anything that moves Christ out of the center of one's life is not a helpful form of spirituality. One may fast in order to quiet the body and become more focused in one's communion with Jesus. One may engage in devotional exercises that enable one to submit more fully to the

teaching and direction of Jesus. But the minute these things become goals in themselves or are seen as means to gaining spiritual power, they become unhelpful at best or at worst negative influences in one's life.

Introduction of Ethical Implications (3:1-4)

**3:1 If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. 2 Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. 3 For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. 4 When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.**

Having concluded his discussion of the negative forms of spirituality that tempted the Colossians, Paul moved on to a presentation of what true spirituality looks like. The starting point of Christian spirituality is the realization that Christ's resurrection resulted in His vindication by His exaltation to sit on a throne at God's right hand (3:1). This insight led Christians to quote Psalm 110:1 so often, "**The Lord said to my Lord, 'Sit in the place of honor at my right hand until I humble your enemies, making them a footstool under your feet.'**"

The ultimate origin of this insight, however, was not in the Old Testament itself but in the teaching of Jesus (Matt 19:28; 25:31) and in Jesus' use of Daniel 7:9–14: "**I watched as thrones were put in place and the Ancient One sat down to judge.... As my vision continued that night, I saw someone like a son of man coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient One and was led into his presence. He was given authority, honor, and sovereignty over all the nations of the world, so that people of every race and nation and language would obey him. His rule is eternal—it will never end. His kingdom will never be destroyed.**" Not only does Christ rule due to His creation of the world, but He also rules due to His renewal of the creation. There is no other power or authority, aside from the Father, higher than Jesus.

The next step in Christian spirituality is the realization that the Christian has been raised with Christ (3:3–4). Identification with Christ means that one is dead to the world, to its principalities and powers, and to the various rules of piety, since they are all rooted in this age. But identification with Christ means that one is also resurrected with Christ. As in the Pauline parallel statement in Rom 6:4–6, this death and resurrection does not mean that the one committed to follow Christ is no longer living in this world. First, there is still a significant need for instruction on how to live in this world. The "not yet" of this life will be taken up in 3:5. Second, the ruling Christ has not yet been revealed openly. That is, He already reigns, but His reign is hidden from the majority of the people on earth (similar to 1 Pet 1.)

Therefore, the Parousia of Christ, His coming, is not that He will return or that He will begin to rule so much as that His present rule will become evident to the whole world. The point is that Christians already find their life in Christ **your life is hidden with Christ in God** (3:3) in that He is the hope of resurrection, He is the guide of our lives, He is the one with whom we identify, and He is the ruler to whom we submit. But it is a life hidden with Christ in God in that Christ is visibly hidden, and those not committed to Christ cannot understand this total identification with an unseen reality (3:2). What is hidden with God cannot be attacked or destroyed by this age. The implication of the believer's life being hidden with Christ is that we will also share that future revelation, the "**glory**" of Christ when His rule is revealed. "**When Christ, who is your life, is revealed to the whole world, you will share in all his glory**" (3:4). No matter what those around them think, these believers have a future that is as great and as sure as Christ's.

All these realizations have a significant implication, which is that one should take on the mindset of heaven, and not the mindset of earth (3:2). With their consciousness full of the reign of Christ, believers look for how that reign is to be experienced now and view the things of earth with the values of heaven. This is a paradigm shift. Believers have a new set of values because we know that Christ reigns. To really commit oneself to following Christ is to take on a whole new perspective, one determined by the present reign of Christ and its future unveiling.

Specific vices and virtues (3:5–17)

**3:5 Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. 6 On account of these the wrath of God is coming. 7 In these you too once walked, when you were living in them. 8 But now you must put them all away: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and obscene talk from your mouth. 9 Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old self with its practices 10 and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator. 11 Here there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all, and in all. 12 Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, 13 bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. 14 And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. 15 And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body. And be thankful. 16 Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God. 17 And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.**

Based upon his previous teaching in this letter and his pastoral experience, Paul states that, even though we have died with Christ, we need to make a decision to kill certain “**earthly**” members, which are things that reflect the mindset of this age. Paul sees this as a process, not something that happened with the initial decision to turn from one’s own way to follow Christ. If it is a process, then, what are these things that are **earthly** that one must kill? Paul listed them in two groups. First, the vices that were part of the believers’ pagan past and had been decisively rejected at baptism. Second, those vices that they, as Christians, may still need to get rid of.

The first group of vices includes sexual sins, meaning not just the outward acts but also the impulses underlying them (3:5). To change a behavior a person ultimately has to deal with the inner dialogue and patterns of thought that he or she has set up for the sinful act. Then there is greed. In Greco-Roman thought, this could include sexual desire and so comes next in the list, but in Jewish thought greed tended to focus more on the desire for possessions. Jesus called this desire for gaining possessions the worship of Mammon (Matt 6:19; Luke 16:13). Jesus was building on Jewish teaching that shared this same insight. Paul does not go into the detail that Jesus does but simply says that greed is idolatry.

The combination of sexual sin with idolatry is a common association in Jewish writings and part of what Paul affirms from his heritage. Such sin is the cause of the final judgment in both Old and New Testaments, so it is not surprising to have it cited as the cause here (3:6). While Paul described these as part of the past of these believers, their life in the world, 3:7, a past renounced at baptism, he likely mentioned them not just because the temptation was ever present.

The second list (3:8) consists of verbal behavior that destroys community, starting with the outburst of anger (which means the outward expression) and moving toward the less obvious expressions of inner anger, such as malicious behavior (ill will toward another), slander, and abusive language (or “shameful language”), along with untruthful speech.

Community was an important reality in the New Testament period, and such behavior makes the community unsafe and so destroys it since it destroys trust. This is true whether the community be a church or a marriage. In other vice lists (Gal 5:19–21) these sins of the tongue, whether expressed verbally or only in one’s inner dialogue, are included in a single list as things that disqualify a person from “the Kingdom of God.” Injuring the community of Christ is very serious (1 Cor 3:17, “**God will destroy anyone who destroys this temple**”).

Although the preservation of community might be reason enough for getting rid of such vices, Paul gives a much more theological reason, using the metaphor of undressing and dressing (3:9). In conversion, baptism, a person has stripped off the “**old man**” (the sinful nature or the former life and worldview) and the behaviors that it led to, which were precisely those behaviors that Paul rejected. He or she has chosen to put on a new character, namely one that derives from Christ. But this choice in baptism must be progressively realized. That is, a person is progressively renewed according to the image of the Creator as he or she comes to know Him. This renewal may come by the Spirit, although, Paul does not mention the Spirit here. Further, Paul does not state who the Creator is (3:10).

Since there is in this passage a clear reference to Genesis 1:26–27, that is, humanity’s being created in the image of God, we would expect the Creator to be God the Father. But in 1:16 Christ is presented as the Creator. However, it is more likely that what Paul was picking up here is his previous teaching about Christ as the image of God. Therefore, the idea is that humanity is re-created in the image of Christ, who is Himself the image of God. This re-creation produces knowledge in us, for we are made new creatures into the image of Christ.

This fact has a major implication. Worldly distinctions do not matter. All that matters is Christ and our becoming like Him, for He lives in all believers. Paul’s focus is on ethnic distinctions, especially the Jew-Gentile divide, which again indicates the Jewish nature of the issues troubling the Colossians (3:11). Beyond this basic ethnic divide was the division of the world between “civilized” Greco-Romans and those they could not understand, the “barbarians”. A further major division of humanity was between slave and free, with the free having status and honor, and the slaves often having authority and derived status from their master, but no status or honor of their own. In Galatians 3:28 Paul adds “male and female.” None of these human distinctions are Kingdom distinctions nor are the prejudices that they inspire. The only thing that matters is the degree to which we have been formed into the image of God in Christ. Therefore, none of these distinctions were for Paul of practical significance in the church, where the slave might be an elder and the master a new convert or, as in the Aquila-Priscilla pair, the wife might be predominant and the husband a supportive partner.

Of practical significance for Paul, both individually and corporately, are the specifics of what it looks like to be made over into the image of Christ. First, there is a foundational theological conviction that in the eyes of the Father the believers are chosen, holy, and loved (3:12). This pictures the believers as the renewed Israel, for Israel was chosen (Deut 7:6; 14:2), holy (Ex 19:6), and loved (Deut 32:15; 33:26; Isa 44:2; Jer 31:3) by God. The language here is very close to that in 1 Peter 2:9, “**You are a chosen people. You are royal priests, a holy nation, God’s very own possession.**”

One reason there is no need to follow Jewish rules and celebrate Jewish festivals is that believers are already God's people. It is on this foundation of acceptance and security that one is to build the virtues. The virtues are not what create acceptance before God but the means of revealing the renewed image that God has put within. These virtues can also serve to reveal their lack and hence call into question whether one has in fact ever been re-created by God.

Second, virtue needs to be pursued. "**Put on**" is an active word (3:12). Human activity is needed in order to grow in virtue, to express outwardly what God had created inwardly. So we have a list of five virtues. The central contrast of this list as compared with the previous ones is the second list of vices, for these would be their opposite since **mercy, kindness** (goodness, generosity), **humility** (modesty), **gentleness** (courtesy, considerateness, meekness) and **patience** (delaying anger) would cancel out "**anger, rage, malicious behavior, slander, and dirty language.**" Rather than trying to attack the vice, the believer need only pursue the opposing virtue and the vice would be impossible.

It is not that within the Christian community there would be no provocation to anger. Paul was a realist. There would be those that one must "put up with" (3:13). More than that, there would be those who deserved a reprimand, and the believer would be obliged to forgive these people, just as Christ has forgiven us. Therefore, if people are to be renewed into the image of God in Christ, they will model their behavior on the example of Christ. And if they have been forgiven, they will find the power to forgive as they reflect on their own forgiveness. Modeling one's behavior on the behavior of Jesus is a teaching that Paul has in common with other writers (1 Pet 2:21–23). That is, of course, the meaning of being his apprentice or "disciple."

This can all be summed up in two virtues -- love and peace (3:14). The love referred to is not an emotion but a decision to do good to another, a willingness to sacrifice oneself on behalf of another. Hence, love is the opposite of a self-centered attitude. For Paul, it was clear that love was a cardinal virtue, whether he spoke of it as fulfilling the law (Rom 13:9–10), as that which makes faith work (Gal 5:6), or as the virtue that makes other behaviors Christian (1 Cor 13). Love is primary because it is an imitation of Christ. In addition to Jesus' teaching on the importance of love (Mark 12:29–31), the believer is also instructed by the behavior of Jesus, His self-giving for others.

With a look back at 2:19, Paul referred to love uniting perfectly, but what does it unite? Perhaps Paul left this deliberately vague, only wishing to underline the binding force of love, which is necessary both personally and corporately. However, here, as often elsewhere, Paul joined love with peace (2 Cor 13:11; Gal 5:22; Eph 4:2–3). Unlike his usual expression, "peace of God," Paul has here the "**peace that comes from Christ**" (3:15). This peace is surely the peace that Christ has already produced (1:20), which is to rule within the individual. The believer enters into a peace that God has produced through Christ when the reality of this peace rules within, controlling his or her behavior. For Paul, the heart, where this peace rules, is not the seat of feelings but the core of the person, where will and choice are centered.

The result is recognizing that God calls believers not to be individual holy people living in isolation from others but members of a single body. Believers can only live that out if they live at peace with one another. Inner peace founded on security in what God has done in Christ leads to outer peace with others.

Then comes Paul's final exhortation, "**Be thankful**" (3:17). When believers dwell on what they have in Christ and so become a thankful people, they cannot think about what their status is within the Christian community or within the world, and they cannot be concerned that others have more earthly power or goods. A thankful

heart is normally a peaceful heart, for if one is filled with thanks, he or she will find it difficult to engage in conflict.

If this is how the believers are to live in community, it is fitting for Paul to close this section with comments on the activities of the Christian community (3:16). This is Paul's alternative to the attempt to enter into the angelic worship that the teachers whom he opposed were apparently urging. The basis of the Christian gathering is the Good News, the message about Christ. This message is clearly seen in 1:15–20 -- Christ, creator of the universe; Christ, creator of the new humanity; Christ, head of the church; Christ all and in all. This message is to "indwell" the community, that is, it is to enter in and live in the core of their corporate lives. Since Christ is the embodiment of divine Wisdom, it is in such wisdom that they should instruct and exhort one another. Here the community carries on the ministry of the apostle (1:28) since they do this to each other.

The second aspect of the gathering of the community is corporate singing. While it is likely that the early church used Old Testament Psalms, we also see numerous new songs in the New Testament. Here, as in 1 Cor 14:15, Paul also includes songs composed and sung spontaneously under the direct influence of the Spirit. The meditation on Christ naturally leads to the sung praise of His Father. But worship does not end with the corporate gathering, but flows out into one's life in the world.

Therefore everything believers do is to be done as Christ's representatives, as those commissioned, authorized, and sent into the world by Christ and whose identity is determined by the name of Christ. In our passage, every word and deed is done for the sake and under the name of Christ. Worship now takes place behind the doors of the house, in the workplace, and in every casual conversation, since all deeds and words are shaped by a consciousness that one is acting under the authority and presence of Christ. This attitude naturally expresses itself in thanksgiving to the Father, for it was He who rescued us from the kingdom of darkness and brought us into the Kingdom of His dear Son.

The Christian household (3:18–4:1)

**3:18 Wives, submit to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord. 19 Husbands, love your wives, and do not be harsh with them. 20 Children, obey your parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord. 21 Fathers, do not provoke your children, lest they become discouraged. 22 Slaves, obey in everything those who are your earthly masters, not by way of eye-service, as people-pleasers, but with sincerity of heart, fearing the Lord. 23 Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men, 24 knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward. You are serving the Lord Christ. 25 For the wrongdoer will be paid back for the wrong he has done, and there is no partiality. 4:1 Masters, treat your slaves justly and fairly, knowing that you also have a Master in heaven.**

All that is said about the household in the early church must be understood in light of the fact that the early churches met in homes. In the New Testament period, the local church was a house church. The church was the household of God in which the individuals experienced a familial-like relationship and treated one another as brothers and sisters. From the Kingdom perspective, these relationships in Christ are real and lasting, while legal and blood relationships are transitory, limited to this age.

However, having mentioned relationships in the household of God, Paul now inserts material about relationships in the households in which the believers in Colossae lived out much of their life. Two perspectives govern this section. The first is the preceding instruction, "**Whatever you do or say, do it as a**

**representative of the Lord Jesus”** (3:17), which means that one needs to represent Jesus well within the culture. The second perspective is the **“Live wisely among those who are not believers”** (4:5). This section is about how the Colossians can wisely represent Jesus within the Colossians’ culture. In order to apply it to contemporary cultures, then, it requires cultural translation so that the resultant behavior represents Jesus as Lord and shows wisdom in living according to the new cultural norms and among those who are not believers within the new cultural situation.

With his announced goals in mind, Paul picks up three pairs of relationships that were the common topics of ethical instruction on household management in Greek literature. The household or extended family was the foundation for the city or state, and if the household fell apart, the city would not be far behind. Christians viewed themselves and were in turn viewed by their society as a segment of Judaism, which meant a foreign people with a different culture (Acts 16:20–21). Varieties of Judaism, including the Christian one, could be tolerated.

What set Christians apart from other Jews, however, is that they actively reached out to the local population and invited them to join their movement, adopting their way of life, and they did this without insisting on bodily mutilation, which is how Greco-Romans viewed circumcision. Hence, rather than simply living within the “host” culture, followers of Jesus actively recruited from the host culture. Also, they did this without demanding that slaves ask permission of their masters or wives ask of their husbands before joining the Christian community, adopting its customs, and so separating themselves from their former culture and that of their masters and husbands.

This recruitment appeared to undermine the authority of the household, especially since the new disciples of Jesus started refusing to worship the household gods. This rejection flew in the face of the patriarch of the family who exercised his authority to determine the religion of the household and who seriously believed in the gods. Therefore, this recruitment was undermining the security of the household, and, in the view of pagan masters and husbands, the gods might take revenge for the neglect they were receiving from the household members who had attached themselves to the Christian movement.

The first relationship that Paul discusses is the husband-wife relationship, the primary bond of the ancient household (3:18–19). However, the husband-wife relationship in antiquity was not necessarily expected to be one of intimacy but rather a practical arrangement. In this arrangement, the patriarchal authority of the husband was not questioned. Frequently, the husband was significantly older than the wife. We do not know whether this ideal was part of the culture in Colossae, although for practical reasons the husband in most cultures of that period was usually significantly older, having had to at least learn a trade, and the wife was usually just beyond puberty.

In this passage, wives are told to submit to their husbands, for this was the culturally appropriate relationship, which Paul views as also appropriate for those who belong to the Lord (3:18). Certainly, this value would be acceptable within the church, for submitting to one another is a Christian value (Eph 5:21; 1 Pet 5:5). Furthermore, Christ came to serve and so left the example of serving others. For Paul to ask women to fulfill this culturally demanded role was simply to ask them to live out a virtue asked of all Christians.

Paul conditioned this virtue, however, by the phrase **“in the Lord”**. This is the primary relationship in the life of the Christian, and no submission to any human being can be allowed to overthrow this relationship.

Therefore, submission to another person should not require something that would be incompatible with what

Jesus requires. Also, Paul made no attempt to justify this one-sided submission theologically. The justification comes at the end of the section in terms of living wisely in this world (4:5). What was wise in that culture and could commend the faith was a Christian wife avoiding what the world would consider insubordination, whether to a believing or unbelieving husband.

Paul could teach this because he knew that the marriage relationship was temporary, limited to this age, and not part of the age to come (as he indicates in 1 Cor 7). Within this relationship the husband had all of the power, so Paul instructed him not to abuse his power and to love his wife (3:19). In that culture, of course, the wife had little or no legal remedy if her husband should happen to be abusive. The love command is at best unusual in Paul's world, so this is the fundamentally Christian part of the command. The command to love is not a command to emotional warmth, but as we saw previously in 3:14, a command to seek the good of the other. In Ephesians 5:25 this is described in terms of following the example of Christ who gave Himself for the good of His "bride," the church. "Love," then, means self-sacrifice and servanthood, however dimly this may have been perceived by the Colossian readers. This attitude stands in contrast to that of the patriarchal culture in which the wife existed to serve her husband.

The second part of the household structure was children and fathers (3:20–21). While we in the Western world often read this passage as applying to minors and not applying to grown children, within the cultures represented in Scripture such an idea would seem strange, for prepubescent children were controlled by slaves, if not by the parents, and there was never a time when an older child was emancipated and left the authority of the father. A male was a child as long as his father lived, and then he either became the patriarch of the family or else he was subject to an elder brother. A female child was under the authority of her father until he gave her in marriage to another family, after which she was under the authority of her father-in-law.

Paul here cited cultural standards and also alluded to the fifth commandment, which is explicitly cited in the parallel passage in Ephesians 6:1–3. Obedience to parents, especially fathers, was a cultural standard, not just an idea that he found in the Old Testament. This obedience to parents was "in all things," including such things as marriage and vocational choice and how one raised one's own children. The reason given is that this pleases the Lord.

Having addressed children in the traditional way, Paul turned to the other side of the power relationship and spoke specifically to fathers (3:21). Mothers are not addressed since mothers did not have ultimate authority over any children and no formal authority over male children after age seven. The fathers are not to behave so that they aggravate or cause resentment in their children.

A father's bad behavior could discourage his child, and since the father is a believer, the child's resulting resentment or discouragement might be directed toward Jesus and the church. Fathers are not to discourage virtue but to encourage it. However, the son who is struggling with anger, resentment, or discouragement does not have energy or perspective to grow in more positive virtues. In this regard, the positive side of the command is found in Ephesians 6:4: **"Bring them up with the discipline and instruction that comes from the Lord."** Paul charges fathers to provide positive guidance, direction, and reward according to the teaching of and about Jesus rather than criticism, much less exploitation for the father's selfish benefit. For Paul, a father's authority was no longer absolute, as it was in the world around them, since it was and is to be governed by higher goals than his own honor or the family's profit. It is to be governed by what will lead their family forward "in the Lord." In our culture, of course, we would have to apply this to mothers as well since many contemporary families are headed by women, and in many families women and men share the leadership.

The third part of the household structure was slaves and masters (3:22–4:1). The length of his section may indicate that there were many slaves in the Colossian church. While this passage is commonly applied to employees and employers, we have to remember that there were several significant differences between first century Greco-Roman slavery and modern employment relationships. First, the slave could not quit. While it is true that at least in Rome a slave could probably expect to be freed after 15 or fewer years of service, during these years his or her service was involuntary. Also, Colossae was not Rome, and there is evidence that the prospects of release were dimmer in Asia Minor. Second, there were few restrictions on how a master could treat his slaves since they were considered his property rather than persons in their own right. Sexual or physical abuse was not uncommon. Third, the slaves had few, if any, available avenues of protest or protection. An employee today has options in dealing with an unjust situation that simply were not within the worldview of a slave in the first century.

Paul told slaves to obey their masters in everything (3:22), which is precisely how any first-century writer would have advised slaves. All areas of their life were under the power of their master, so they were to obey in everything. However, they were not to do this as if their masters were the final authority, trying to gain influence with them, for their masters are “**earthly masters**,” who, like spouses and parents, belong to this age. Paul had already pointed out to others that a believing slave is already free before the Lord (1 Cor 7:22), so slaves should not view slavery as something that touches the true status of the person. But for Paul this reality did not mean that the slave should rebel. Instead, he or she should follow the example of their Lord, who came to serve, and so slaves should serve their earthly masters sincerely. Slaves should be obedient, not out of fear of their master, but because they realize that they will answer to “**the Lord**” for all their words and deeds.

Whatever they do, they are doing for Christ (3:24), and he will pay them back with “**the inheritance**.” This is a statement full of radical contrast since under Roman law a slave could not inherit anything. The same Lord who will pay them richly for service well done will also pay back any wrong they do (3:25). The last judgment, when the Lord brings true justice to earth, can bring believers punishment rather than reward if they have not been truly serving Christ. Remember that Paul warned the Corinthians and Galatians because some apparently thought their inclusion in the church meant that they could inherit the Kingdom despite living a lifestyle of disobedience to Christ (1 Cor 6:9–10; Gal 5:19–21).

Paul’s instruction is based on an eschatological viewpoint, seeing life from the perspective of the return of Jesus to rule. Paul is talking about the slaves viewing themselves in the light of the value that Jesus has given them but like their Lord, being willing to serve and even suffer injustice, knowing that Jesus would set things right when He returned.

Paul ended this traditional section on the household with a brief comment to the masters. He had just said that Christ has no favorites, so the masters’ position in Greco-Roman society will count for nothing when Christ returns. He previously said (3:11) that in Christ there is no slave or free. So here he adds that the masters themselves are slaves since they have a master, Christ, in heaven (4:1). This is similar to what Paul had already said about free people in 1 Corinthians 7:22 -- to become a Christian is to become a slave of Christ. Therefore, the masters should realize that Christ will be expecting them to do what is just and fair toward their slaves, whether or not the slave is a believer.

When it comes to treating slaves as people, most likely Paul expected the master to take his primary cues from the behavior of Jesus. It might be advisable, then, for the masters to ask Jesus to show them the just and fair ways to treat slaves so that they could live according to His standard.

The final issue in this passage is that of its practical use today. It is clear that the goal of the passage is to preserve household values as they were understood in a first-century Greco-Roman culture, and to transform those values in terms of an overriding commitment to following Jesus as Lord. The problem that we face is that some of these relationships do not exist in Western culture today and also that some of these relationships have changed significantly. Spouses expect emotional intimacy and companionship from marriage rather than simply procreation of legitimate children. Children are expected to mature, leave home, and form a separate nuclear family rather than remain for life as a part of their extended family of origin. Employment issues are not dealt with the same way as a master and slave would be.

Certainly, all of the relationships in life still come under the rule of Christ and are transformed. Children as they grow to adulthood may be called on to develop mature relationships with their parents rather than simply to obey them. On the other hand, they may have to be encouraged to support their parents in their old age, something that even pagan extended families would have automatically done in the first century (1 Tim 5:8). Likewise, since neither the husband nor his father any longer has the patriarchal role in marriage, love and the type of mutual submission that it involves are the duty of both spouses in support of marriage.

Concerning prayer and concluding summary (4:2–6)

**4:2 Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving. 3 At the same time, pray also for us, that God may open to us a door for the word, to declare the mystery of Christ, on account of which I am in prison— 4 that I may make it clear, which is how I ought to speak. 5 Walk in wisdom toward outsiders, making the best use of the time. 6 Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person.**

In the beginning of Colossians Paul prayed for them, now he called them to pray and especially to pray for him, adding some summary concerns that show the focus of the ethical section. Prayer was extremely important to Paul. Here the idea is that of diligence or persistent attention being focused on prayer.

Prayer is not something that is just a religious activity but something important enough that one should persevere or be **steadfast**. Paul combined this concern with the picture of a guard on duty, forcing himself to stay awake and alert (4:2). The content of the prayer is not specified. Yet prayer, whether for the coming of Christ or for daily needs, is not founded on anxiety, but on thanksgiving. Paul demonstrated thanks in the beginning of the letter and then prayed that the Colossians would be a thankful people. He urged it in chapter 2 and also in chapter 3. Now, as he exhorts them to pray, he instructs them to pray in the same thankful spirit in which he prayed at the beginning of the letter.

If a person really believes that the Father has given him or her a new status in Christ, that person will inherit the Kingdom that Christ rules. This truth, combined with all the other affirmations that Paul has made, can only make a person thankful. Lack of thankfulness is an indication that “belief” is still only head-knowledge and has not penetrated the heart and become real conviction.

While Paul started off urging prayer in general, he felt no shame in requesting their prayers for himself. In fact, he did this at the end of many of his letters, showing that he saw the churches he had planted as participating with him in his ministry. It is precisely this participation in ministry that he requested prayer for here, rather than prayer for his personal well-being, release from prison (Phil 1:19), or strength for travel. He asked them to pray that there would be receptiveness to the gospel, which is indeed God's mystery concerning Christ (4:3).

In Colossians Paul has mentioned two aspects of this "mystery." First, it is "**Christ lives in you. This gives you assurance of sharing his glory**" (1:27). Then a few verses later it is "**Christ himself**" about whom Paul says, "**In him lie hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge**" (2:3). That is, one could read the Old Testament by itself and, without divine revelation, fail to grasp the nature of Christ or the fact that He would indwell the believer and give us the assurance that we will share in His glory. This revelation had been given to Paul. So his desire was that he would clearly communicate this revelation in places where there would be openness to the gospel (4:4).

Because the gospel needed revelation, Paul requested that he would indeed reveal it since that was what God had commissioned him to do. Because of his proclamation of the revelation of this secret he was in jail. His message was acceptable to many strands of Judaism until he differentiated himself by revealing that the living Christ was the center of God's plan. Paul knew that God had commissioned him to reveal Christ to the nations. The fact is that Christianity is about serving the resurrected Christ. The core of the message is that Jesus is alive, that He, through the Spirit, can live within the individual and incorporate him or her into the community of faith, and that He really is the embodiment of wisdom and knowledge.

Having requested prayer for his own life and proclamation in the world, Paul turned to the life and speech of the Colossians. Here the focus is on wise conduct with respect to those who are outside the Christian community. The contrast is not made in order to separate the Christian community from the world in terms of withdrawing from it, but in order to highlight where the Colossians should direct their concern. Christ has come, the Kingdom has been announced, the new age has begun, and the new age will soon come to its consummation in the revelation of Christ from heaven.

This time at the end of the age is not to be given over to evil forces or abandoned but used well for the purposes of the rule of Jesus and our own future with Him. It is this that is accomplished through wise conduct. Wise conduct has two aspects. First, conversation is to be "**gracious and attractive,**" meaning speech that was attractive, not trite.

Interesting conversation leads to relationship, and within that relationship questions of lifestyle come up. The Christian will know how he or she ought to answer each person. This response will be gracious, witty, and interesting, but it will also clearly point to the hope that a person has in Christ. However, this is in response to questions asked by the non-Christian due to the Christian's wise lifestyle, not due to the Christian's aggressive invasion of the unbeliever. God will give believers the opportunities to share about the Christ who motivates us.

Conclusion (4:7–18)

**4:7 Tychicus will tell you all about my activities. He is a beloved brother and faithful minister and fellow servant in the Lord. 8 I have sent him to you for this very purpose, that you may know how we are and that**

he may encourage your hearts, 9 and with him Onesimus, our faithful and beloved brother, who is one of you. They will tell you of everything that has taken place here. 10 Aristarchus my fellow prisoner greets you, and Mark the cousin of Barnabas (concerning whom you have received instructions—if he comes to you, welcome him), 11 and Jesus who is called Justus. These are the only men of the circumcision among my fellow workers for the kingdom of God, and they have been a comfort to me. 12 Epaphras, who is one of you, a servant of Christ Jesus, greets you, always struggling on your behalf in his prayers, that you may stand mature and fully assured in all the will of God. 13 For I bear him witness that he has worked hard for you and for those in Laodicea and in Hierapolis. 14 Luke the beloved physician greets you, as does Demas. 15 Give my greetings to the brothers at Laodicea, and to Nympha and the church in her house. 16 And when this letter has been read among you, have it also read in the church of the Laodiceans; and see that you also read the letter from Laodicea. 17 And say to Archippus, “See that you fulfill the ministry that you have received in the Lord.” 18 I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand. Remember my chains. Grace be with you.

The conclusion of the letter falls into three parts, the commendation of the messengers, the greetings, and Paul’s final requests and blessing. Paul has ended the body of his letter. First, he will attest to the trustworthiness of the letter bearers (4:7–9). Then he will send greetings from various leaders around him (4:10–15). Next he will give a couple of final instructions (4:16–17). Finally, he will take up the pen himself and write his personal greeting and blessing (4:18).

Tychicus was the primary letter carrier (4:7). The job of a letter carrier was not simply just to carry the letter. The job included reading the letter to the congregation, explaining and expanding anything that needed it, and answering the questions that arose, whether about the content of the letter or about the writer and his situation. This is the reason why the commendation of the letter carrier was so important and why the authors sometimes say that the person was “faithful.” The letter carrier was authorized to be the first exegete and to expand and fill in as needed. They were the first interpreters of Peter and Paul.

Also, the Pauline churches were bound together not by organizational structure but by personal relationships. Men and women who had worked with Paul as co-workers for periods of time remained behind in this or that city to assist churches in the area, carried letters from Paul to churches or from churches to Paul, or returned to their home communities, bringing with them a web of relationship that bound the various Christian communities together. In the case of Colossians, the letter carrier was Tychicus, whom Acts identifies as an Asian (Acts 20:4). Since he first appears with Paul at the end of his final visit to Corinth and then as an Asian delegate on Paul’s trip to Jerusalem, it is possible that Tychicus became Paul’s co-worker while Paul was in Ephesus.

Tychicus was identified as the letter carrier not only for Colossians but also for Ephesians (Eph 6:21) and possibly the Epistle to Titus (Titus 3:12). Paul’s point, however, is that he was not only more or less local but also part of the Christian family. The Christian family was viewed as more significant than one’s biological family and was treated as a real family. Tychicus is also recognized as a co-worker. The expression “**in the Lord**” was added by Paul to make it clear that his status in this world was not that of a slave since Onesimus, a slave, was part of the group coming to Colossae (4:9). This is how he described the Colossians themselves in 1:2 and how he described Epaphras in 1:7, which puts Tychicus on a par with Epaphras as a full member of Paul’s closest group of companions.

Along with Tychicus went Onesimus, who was commended in similar terms, although not called a co-worker (4:9). Onesimus was certainly the same Onesimus about whom Philemon was written since he is “**one of your own people,**” so presumably he returned from carrying that letter to Philemon. These two men, Tychicus and Onesimus, had the same duty. They were to report to the Colossians in detail about Paul’s situation, certainly including the situation of the church in the city where he was imprisoned.

The other job that the letter-carriers had was to encourage the Colossians (4:8), which probably was intended to come from their personal reports about Paul, as well as from the letter and its interpretation by these two Christian workers.

Having said what he could to make sure that his messengers would be well received, Paul then turned to relaying the greetings from those known to the Colossians. This is another indication that the various Christian communities saw themselves as parts of an extended family and took their family relationships seriously.

The first person to send greetings is Aristarchus, a co-worker of Paul’s (4:10; Phlm 1:24). He had come from Thessalonica (Acts 20:4) and had been with Paul during his Ephesian ministry (Acts 19:29). It is probably during this period of ministry that Aristarchus came in contact with some of the Colossians, either because of a trip to Colossae or because some Colossians had visited Ephesus. When Paul wrote Philemon, Aristarchus was not in prison, but at this time he too was a prisoner like Paul.

The second greeting is from “Mark, Barnabas’s cousin” (4:10). According to Acts 13:5, John Mark went with Paul and Barnabas on the first missionary journey. Later (Acts 13:13), however, Mark abandoned the mission party. When Paul and Barnabas started to set out again from Jerusalem, Barnabas wanted to take Mark again. Paul was so opposed to this and Barnabas so strongly for it that the missionary pair split, and Barnabas took Mark with him to Cyprus (Acts 15:36–39). Perhaps Barnabas was right and Mark redeemed himself on that trip. Whatever the case on that missions trip, in the years since Mark reconciled with Paul and became and would remain a trusted co-worker. He was also with Paul when Paul wrote Philemon and was there referred to as Paul’s co-worker (Phlm 1:24). However, it is likely that Mark had not yet visited Colossae, for Paul had to instruct them to “receive” or “welcome” him, which they might have been reluctant to do if they had only known his early history with Paul and the conflict that this had caused (Acts 15:36–39). 2 Timothy 4:11 pictures Mark as being in or close to Asia and also as being very valued by Paul.

The third greeting is from Jesus Justus (4:11). He, along with Mark and Aristarchus, was identified as a Jew. If we are correct in viewing the false teaching that was threatening the Colossians as essentially Jewish, this indication that three of Paul’s co-workers were Jews would demonstrate to the Colossians that some Jews held Paul’s point of view. They alone were with Paul. This “only” along with the fact that these three were a comfort to Paul may also indicate Paul’s sadness that large numbers of Jews had not joined the Jesus movement, a sadness that he expressed in Romans 9–11. These three, however, were his co-workers, to which title he added the unusual expression “**for the Kingdom of God.**”

When Paul speaks of the Kingdom, as he has already done once in Colossians (1:13), he normally speaks of inheriting the Kingdom or of the characteristics of the Kingdom, rather than working for the Kingdom. The last we hear about Paul in Acts is that he is “**boldly proclaiming the Kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ**” (Acts 28:31). The announcement of the reign of God and Jesus as the agent of that reign was central to Paul’s gospel.

The fourth greeting comes from Epaphras (4:12). When Colossians was written Epaphras was not in jail, but when Philemon was written he was (Phlm 1:23). We learned earlier (1:7) that he had brought news about the Colossian believers to Paul and that he had previously ministered in Colossae. Here he is identified as a Colossian, which would explain his previous work to see the church established in his city and his present concern for that church. What Paul makes clear is that Epaphras' prayers echo Paul's own. As Paul struggled for them (1:29; 2:1), so does Epaphras. As Paul wanted them to be mature and confident, so did Epaphras (1:28). Here we have a true Pauline co-worker, a Colossian in origin, but of one heart with Paul, presumably having learned how to pray from Paul. Since he was from the Lycus Valley, the focus of his prayers was specifically directed there (4:13). Paul said that he bears witness to the fact that this "**slave of Christ Jesus**" did not just say that he prayed for his fellow believers at home but did in fact do so. In fact, he labored intensely in prayer, not just for those in Colossae, but also for the two nearby cities Laodicea and Hierapolis. There was certainly a church in Laodicea. However, this is the only mention of Hierapolis in the New Testament.

The final greetings come from Luke and Demas (4:14), who also sent greetings in Philemon 1:24. Virtually all we know about Luke comes from this brief passage, except for 2 Timothy 4:11, "**only Luke is with me**. Luke's designation as a physician indicates that he had some learning. Luke could have obtained what training he had as a free man or been trained as a slave and later received his freedom. Whatever his previous history, Paul thought highly of him.

Paul's reference to Demas is the shortest of all. Did Paul already suspect that Demas would abandon him (2 Tim 4:10) and so omitted the friendly comments he had for the others, or was Demas hardly known by the Colossians so that Paul just mentioned him as a companion?

Paul then instructed the Colossians to greet their neighboring church, that in Laodicea (4:15). The Laodiceans were also part of the family of God. What we know about Laodicea (besides the references in Rev 3:14–22) is that the church was large enough to consist of more than one house church and that one of the house churches was led by a person whom Paul knew. Nympha was apparently a woman of some means since it was usually the wealthier members of the church who hosted the gatherings. She was either single or had a particularly tolerant husband who was not a Christian since her husband was not named. As host of the church and its common meal, the Lord's Supper, she was also its leader. Paul knew three other leaders in Colossae -- Apphia, Archippus, and Philemon. No church or individual believers were greeted in Hierapolis, which probably means that there was as yet no church there, even if the people there were regularly prayed for by Epaphras. Whatever believers were in that city probably worshiped in one of the house churches in Laodicea.

Paul directed the Colossians to send their greetings, and the letter we know as Colossians, to the church in Laodicea, and in turn the Colossians were to ask for the letter Paul had written to Laodicea. Both letters were to be read aloud in the sister churches (4:16). In antiquity it was normal for letters to be read aloud to their recipients. The letter to Laodicea has apparently not survived (unless it was a circular letter and comes to us via the Ephesian copy). Paul apparently thought that this letter was helpful enough that it should be read in a second church, yet we do not have the letter.

Having made clear that the letters were to be exchanged, Paul turned to Archippus, who was clearly a leader in Colossae, having previously been a companion of Paul (4:17; Phlm 1:2). He was possibly part of Philemon's household. Paul knew that Archippus had received some specific commission from the Lord. What is clear is that he needed some authority or encouragement to carry this ministry out. We must remember that Colossians would be read out loud before the whole church, so everyone would know that Archippus had

received some commission from the Lord and had Paul's full backing in carrying it out. The letter would serve to give Archippus the corporate encouragement and backing that he might need.

Paul had finished his letter. As the custom was, he reached out his hand to take the pen from the scribe so that he could pen his signature and a few words in his own handwriting at the end of the letter (4:18). The author's penning of the final greeting was the custom for papyrus letters in Paul's day (1 Cor 16:21–24; Gal 6:11–18; 2 Thess 3:17–18). After writing "Paul," he then wrote with his own hand: "**Remember my chains.**" This request pointed to Paul as one who was suffering due to his commitment to Christ and His Kingdom. But it was also a genuine request that they could fulfill through prayer, through physical support, and through sending assistants like Epaphras, Onesimus, and Archippus back to Paul.

Paul ended the letter in his typically Pauline way -- "**Grace be with you.**" Grace was what Paul had experienced from God. Grace was how he began the letter (1:2). Grace was how he ended it.

### Philemon

Salutation (vv. 1–3)

**1 Paul, a prisoner for Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, To Philemon our beloved fellow worker 2 and Apphia our sister and Archippus our fellow soldier, and the church in your house: 3 Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.**

When Paul opened the letter, he avoided the term "apostle" with its overtones of authority and chose the title "**prisoner**" because that would show his need, and would give him a status parallel to that of Onesimus (v. 1). In this letter Paul was not only interceding for Onesimus but also identifying with him and, as we shall see later, substituting for him.

The letter addresses Philemon, who himself was a co-worker of Paul. We do not know when and where this took place, but it is quite possible that it was during Paul's long stay in Ephesus, since that city was relatively near to Colossae. Despite the personal nature of the issue at hand, Paul did not address Philemon in isolation, but included Timothy on his end and two others, Apphia and Archippus, along with the whole house church on Philemon's end (v. 2).

The church context in the New Testament was not what we today called "mega-churches", but that of a house church, a small group of up to 10-20 or so individuals who would have come to know one another intimately.

Paul's Thanksgiving and Prayer (vv. 4–7)

**4 I thank my God always when I remember you in my prayers, 5 because I hear of your love and of the faith that you have toward the Lord Jesus and for all the saints, 6 and I pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective for the full knowledge of every good thing that is in us for the sake of Christ. 7 For I have derived much joy and comfort from your love, my brother, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you.**

Paul normally expanded this section in his letters, as he did here (vv. 4–5). In this letter the thanksgiving itself is quite short, but Paul transitioned into a prayer that is part prayer and part affirmation of those very qualities in Philemon that will be required for meeting Paul’s request (vv. 6–7).

Unfortunately for us, Paul’s expression of this thanksgiving is very complicated. Verse 6 is so complicated that most scholars differ significantly, and many are not at all certain of their interpretations. It is truly one of the more obscure verses in the New Testament.

While the thanksgiving section was a formal part of the letter, Paul’s life was normally characterized by thankfulness, especially thankfulness for those in the churches he influenced who were doing well. This thankfulness was appropriate for Paul, since he could not conceive of a person really understanding what Christ had done, was doing, and would do in the future for him or her without that resulting in a deep, heartfelt thankfulness. It was out of thankfulness that Paul continually prayed for his friends in the faith.

Paul’s thankfulness was triggered by the reports he repeatedly received of Philemon’s trust in Christ and love toward others, a love that was expressed in generosity (v. 6). Those who trust in Christ should indeed be generous, for they should be inspired by Christ’s generosity and feel secure in Him and be able to share generously with others. A lack of generosity is, in fact, indicative of a lack of true trust in Christ.

Paul wanted this generosity, flowing from Philemon’s faith, to increase and to work itself out in an understanding flowing from experience. First, one needs to do the right thing, which in this case is to allow trust in Christ to work itself out in generosity, and then that will produce its effects, one of which will be new insights into all the good things we have from Christ. This, in turn, will increase our commitments and draw us closer to Christ.

At this point, the prayer ended, and Paul made a comment. The reports he had heard and his own contact with Philemon had given him joy and comfort (v. 7). Paul had heard about Philemon’s loving deeds. And Paul also heard how the hearts of God’s people were encouraged through these loving deeds. It is because he was so aware of Philemon’s character that Paul could move on to make a request that would stretch Philemon to new levels of loving action.

Paul’s Appeal for Onesimus (vv. 8–22)

**8 Accordingly, though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do what is required, 9 yet for love’s sake I prefer to appeal to you—I, Paul, an old man and now a prisoner also for Christ Jesus— 10 I appeal to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I became in my imprisonment. 11 (Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful to you and to me.) 12 I am sending him back to you, sending my very heart. 13 I would have been glad to keep him with me, in order that he might serve me on your behalf during my imprisonment for the gospel, 14 but I preferred to do nothing without your consent in order that your goodness might not be by compulsion but of your own accord. 15 For this perhaps is why he was parted from you for a while, that you might have him back forever, 16 no longer as a slave but more than a slave, as a beloved brother—especially to me, but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord. 17 So if you consider me your partner, receive him as you would receive me. 18 If he has wronged you at all, or owes you anything, charge that to my account. 19 I, Paul, write this with my own hand: I will repay it—to say nothing of your owing me even your own self. 20 Yes, brother, I want some benefit from you in the Lord. Refresh my heart in Christ. 21 Confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do**

**even more than I say. 22 At the same time, prepare a guest room for me, for I am hoping that through your prayers I will be graciously given to you.**

Paul's appeal comes in three parts. In the first two verses (vv. 8–9), he created the proper atmosphere. In the second part (vv. 10–16), Paul argues that his request is in Philemon's best interest. In the third section (vv. 17–22), he restates the request on a personal basis.

Paul here, as always, preferred persuasion and appeal to command. He really did have the authority to tell Philemon to do the **"right thing"** (v. 8), a thing that was in stark contrast with what Philemon's fellow citizens would think was right. But instead Paul appealed to him on the basis of love and Philemon's respect for him as an old man (v. 9) and a prisoner. Paul treated Philemon as a mature equal in Christ.

The content of Paul's appeal focuses on Onesimus. We are never told what it is that Onesimus had done, whether he had wronged Philemon in some way and had then fled to Paul to get Paul to intercede for him, or whether he had simply fled slavery and somehow had ran into Paul. Whatever the case, Onesimus had come into contact with Paul, who was already in prison, and thereby had come to faith in Christ (v. 10). This conversion puts Onesimus on the same level as Philemon. Both were converted through Paul, and so they were brothers in a dual sense, both in Christ and in having the same person lead them to faith in Christ, with Paul being their mutual father and patron.

Whatever Onesimus had done in the past, Paul admits that he had not been useful to Philemon. But that was the past, and before Onesimus had submitted his life to Christ. As a Christian, Onesimus had become useful to both Paul and Philemon (v. 11). A prisoner in the ancient world was dependent upon visitors for many of the necessities of life, often starting with food. Onesimus had taken care of these needs for Paul. But this care, Paul suggested, was to Philemon's credit, for as Paul was Philemon's father in Christ and patron, Philemon should have cared for Paul. Instead, unknown to Philemon, his slave was doing all that would have been appropriate for him to do, which was nonetheless a benefit for Philemon. Given Onesimus' faithful service to Paul, there was every reason to expect that he would also provide faithful and useful service to Philemon upon his return.

In sending Onesimus back, Paul had to struggle with two principles (v. 13). The first was his own need and his knowledge that Philemon would surely want to meet it if he could. The second was the need for reconciliation between Onesimus and Philemon. Both needs were respected in Paul's response. Onesimus had to return to Philemon, for only then could Philemon willingly release him to Paul. Onesimus was present with Paul without Philemon's consent. Onesimus had apparently separated from Philemon without permission. There was a need for him to be received back, for some form of reconciliation to take place, if Philemon's benefit to Paul were to be freely given (v. 14).

The critical issue for Paul was that Onesimus had a changed status. He was a brother in Christ as well as a slave (v. 16). In one sense, Philemon would have him back **"forever"** because as brothers in the same family they would eternally have that relationship (v. 15). In another sense, Philemon, at best, would only have him back for life since he had come back as a permanent slave. Philemon must realize that Onesimus is now a brother as well as a slave.

So how was Philemon to deal with Onesimus' new dual status? Surely Paul at least intended that Philemon would not punish Onesimus. But was he asking more than this? Was he simply stating that Onesimus be

received back as a useful slave, one more valued because he was also a Christian brother, or was he suggesting that the tension between the eternal relationship and the temporal one be resolved by releasing him from slavery? We do not know.

Paul may not have cared about the difference. The difference that he cared about was how Philemon treated Onesimus, not whether Onesimus was called a slave or a free man. He was to be treated as family. This treatment is not something that starts when we get to heaven but something that affects our relationships with believers now. We are brothers and sisters, children of the same Father. We recognize this fact by behaving accordingly.

In verse 17 Paul moves into a personal appeal, which contains two aspects. The first aspect we notice is the personal language Paul used, calling Philemon "**partner**" and "**brother**." The second aspect pertains to the fact that Philemon had suffered economic loss through the loss of Onesimus. Therefore, Paul thought it appropriate to bring up the issue and deal with it.

Philemon had been and was still Paul's partner (v. 17), a relationship Titus and Timothy also enjoyed. Leaning on the strength of this relationship, Paul urged Philemon to "**welcome [Onesimus] as you would welcome me,**" which is surely more than even a good, obedient slave would receive when coming home.

But what about Philemon's loss? Paul has avoided this topic until the end of the letter, but then he delicately brought it up with an "**if,**" which is a polite way of admitting that this was the case (v. 18). We do not know the nature of Onesimus' debt to Philemon. Whatever the economic loss, Paul assumed that he and Philemon (and Onesimus) agreed on its nature. Using very commercial language, Paul agreed to take the wrong upon himself, "**Charge it to me.**"

Paul then took the pen, which he usually did at the end of a dictated letter, but here he did it before the closing and did so to write with his own hand, "**I, Paul, write this with my own hand: I will repay it**" (v. 19). Since we do not know whether Philemon could read and since we realize that the letter was read to the church, by writing this Paul allowed everyone to understand the change in handwriting that the reader could clearly see. Paul added one last comment, which seems almost an afterthought but was surely intended to settle the issue: "**I won't mention that you owe me your very soul.**" While Paul did not refer to Philemon as his "son," as he did with Onesimus, Timothy, and others whom he personally led to the Lord, it is clear that Philemon came to Christ directly or indirectly through Paul. Paul had agreed to pay Onesimus' debt and surely meant this, but if Philemon reflected a little he would realize that he was himself far more in Paul's debt than Paul could be in his.

Paul quickly left the financial language and returned to personal language (v. 20). Using a play on Onesimus' name, Paul asked a favor on the basis of their common standing "**in the Lord**". Paul was not asking Philemon to do what would feel natural to him, nor was he asking him to do what his culture would demand that he do. Paul was asking Philemon to set himself apart as a Christian by acting "**in the Lord**".

Paul moved on from the request to express his personal trust in Philemon, a trust that developed during their time of serving together (v. 21). He was confident that Philemon would listen to or respond positively to his request. This does not mean that responding positively to Paul's request would be easy for Philemon. Paul's careful expression of his request shows that he knew that he was putting a lot of weight on their relationship. But in the end he believed that Philemon had been transformed by Christ and so would come

through with not only what Paul requested, warmly welcoming Onesimus and not holding his debt against him, but more. As a further encouragement not to let his trust down, Paul mentioned that he hoped to come to them (v. 22).

At this point, he shifted to the plural “**you**,” since this was for the entire church. While Paul did not express any certainty about his release, the language sounds like he was not too far away and he hoped God would act relatively soon. Whatever the case, the announcement of a visit was both good news and bad news for Philemon. Of course, it would be delightful to see his Christian leader and mentor. However, if Paul came and discovered that Philemon had punished Onesimus or was holding him at arm’s length, Paul would also discover this. Paul had placed before Philemon a difficult decision, and if Paul came, he would discover the answer in the presence of the whole church.

Paul’s Final Greetings (vv. 23–25)

**23 Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends greetings to you, 24 and so do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke, my fellow workers. 25 The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.**

It was proper to end a letter with greetings from people who knew the recipients and then to add a prayer to a god or gods for well-being. Paul, as usual, followed the Greek letter form but added his own Christian twists. Pride of place is given to Epaphras, a Christian leader whom the Colossians had sent to assist Paul (Col 1:7). At some time he had been effective enough to have ended up in prison with Paul (v. 23). When Colossians was written, it was Aristarchus, not Epaphras, who was in prison.

Mark, whom Paul at one time had not wanted to take with him (Acts 15:37–39), had clearly been reconciled to Paul (v. 24). He was presently with Paul in prison. According to Colossians, he was also with Paul but was about to set off on a journey that might bring him to Colossae (Col 4:10). The last word we hear about Demas was that he had deserted Paul, while the last word about Luke is “**only Luke is with me**” (2 Tim 4:10–11). All of the faithful service that Demas rendered, since he is called a co-worker here, is forgotten in the face of his failure to end well, while Mark’s failure in Acts 13:13 is forgotten because he proved faithful in the end.

When we come to the place in a Greek letter for the normal prayer to the gods, Paul, of course, blessed Philemon and his companions by the one God (v. 25). Jesus showed grace to us, and Paul prayed that Philemon would experience the grace of Jesus with his spirit.

Both reason and tradition indicate that Philemon did indeed follow this model of grace, for it is logical to suppose that had he rejected Paul’s appeal he would not have preserved this letter for others to read. Also, tradition tells us that a certain Onesimus, likely this very Onesimus, was the bishop of Ephesus toward the end of the century (Ignatius; Eusebius).

***Soli Deo Gloria!***