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*THE MESSAGE OF*

# **COLOSSIANS**

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# OLOSSIANS

**DAVID K. BERNARD**

## **The Message of Colossians and Philemon**

By David K. Bernard

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**THE EPISTLE TO**

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## LOSSIANS

(The Lordship of Jesus)

The Epistle to the Colossians is a letter written by the apostle Paul to the Christian church in Colosse, a town in Asia Minor. It contains one of the most powerful presentations of the doctrine of Jesus Christ in the Scriptures.

### **Inspiration, Canonicity, and Text**

Colossians is part of the Bible, which is the inspired Word of God. The book claims apostolic authority from the very first verse. Chapter 2 issues an authoritative warning against a particular heresy and a refutation of it. Chapter 4 commands that the letter be circulated among Christians outside Colosse and read by them.

If we accept Paul as a genuine apostle and if we accept Colossians as a genuine book by him, then we must accept its claims to be authoritative and recognize that it is inspired of God for us. According to II Peter 3:15-16, the epistles of Paul are Scripture.

Throughout the history of Christendom there has never been a significant dispute over the inclusion of Colossians in the canon, the list of books recognized as Scripture. Among the first generation of writers after the completion of the New Testament, Ignatius and Polycarp cited or alluded to Colossians. Subsequently Diognetus, Justin, Tertullian, and Origen did also. Soon thereafter Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, the Muratorian Canon (c. 170), and the Barococcio Canon (c. 206) all named Colossians as authoritative. All major canons, councils, and branches of Christendom from ancient times to the present have considered it to be Scripture.<sup>1</sup>

Likewise, there has been no major dispute over the text of Colossians. This book uses the King James Version (KJV) as the primary text for exposition. There are some variant readings, but none of them significantly affects doctrinal meaning. We will make note of alternate readings proposed by modern textual criticism (which we will call the critical text), and we will also note a few places where the KJV differs from the majority of existing manuscripts (the majority text).

### **Author**

Since the Book of Colossians is part of the inspired Word of God, in the final analysis God is the true author of the book. God did use a human agent to compose the book, and according to Colossians 1:1, 23-24 that human author was Paul.

Paul, whose Hebrew name was Saul, was a very devout, highly educated Jew (Acts 22:3; Philippians 3:4-6). He originally persecuted the Christians bitterly, but after a miraculous conversion experience he began to preach the gospel he once opposed. He received his apostolic calling from God and his understanding of the gospel by divine revelation (Galatians 1:1, 11-12). He became the chief apostle to the Gentiles, the greatest missionary of the early church, and writer of much of the New Testament. Acts 9, 22 records Paul's conversion, while Acts 13-28 records his ministry.

Conservative scholars agree that Paul wrote Colossians. Some liberal critics have challenged this view, but even then they usually propose that a student or colleague of Paul wrote the book in an attempt to apply Paul's theology to the Colossian situation. They base their view on the following points: (1) Colossians contains a number of words not found in

other Pauline writings. (2) It addresses the errors of Gnosticism, a system that developed in the second century. (3) It presents an advanced view of Christ.

The doctrine of the inspiration of Scripture can explain these points. God inspired Paul to use words most appropriate to the message He wanted to convey, to refute false doctrines of the future as well as the present, and to proclaim the doctrine of Christ in its fullness.

The foregoing points can be further answered as follows: (1) An author often uses unique words to address a unique situation, and the specific heresy at Colosse caused Paul to employ some specific words he did not have occasion to use in other letters. Moreover, the possible participation of Timothy could account for these differences (Colossians 1:1). (2) While the doctrinal system known as Gnosticism was not fully developed in Paul's day, its key ideas, tendencies, and methods did not arise out of a vacuum but were already developing in the first century. (3) The church understood and proclaimed the true and complete doctrine of Jesus Christ from its beginning.

The evidence for Paul's authorship includes the notable similarities to other writings by Paul. For example, Colossians 2:19's description of the church as a body is much like that of Romans 12:4-5 and I Corinthians 12:12-27. The teaching on the Cross in Colossians 2:14-15 parallels the teaching of II Corinthians 5:19-21 and Galatians 3:13. And the many parallels with Ephesians and Philemon demand a common author for these three books. If Paul was not the author, then there is no credible alternative.

Although Colossians 1:1 mentions Timothy as well as Paul, we should regard Paul as the author, for most of the epistle is written in the first person with the author identifying himself as "I Paul" and "me Paul" (Colossians 1:23; 4:18). Timothy was Paul's junior co-worker and companion at this time, so Paul naturally included him in the salutation to the Colossian church. If Timothy helped Paul at all in the composition, Paul endorsed the result by signing the letter with his own hand (Colossians 4:18).

#### **Date and Place of Writing**

Paul wrote Colossians from prison (Colossians 4:3, 18). Thus the book is classified along with Ephesians, Philippians, and Philemon as one of Paul's Prison Epistles.

Most conservative Bible scholars conclude that Colossians was written during Paul's first Roman imprisonment (Acts 28:16, 30-31), which occurred in the early A.D. 60s, probably from 61 to 63. The book is contemporary with Ephesians and Philemon and is usually placed later than the other Pauline Epistles except Philippians and the Pastorals.

Ephesians, Colossians, and Philemon are closely related, all being sent to Asia Minor around the same time. Apparently Colossians and Philemon were written at the same time and place, sent to the same place, and carried by the same messenger. Both letters describe Timothy as being with Paul, mention Archippus, and say Onesimus was accompanying the letters, and in the greetings from Paul's companions, five of the six names in Colossians are repeated in Philemon. (See Colossians 1:1; 4:7-17; Philemon 1-2, 10-12, 23-24.)

The bearer of the letter was Tychicus (Colossians 4:7-8). He was a native of Asia Minor (Acts 20:4), and he also delivered Ephesians (Ephesians 6:21).

#### **Original Recipients**

The book was originally written to the church at Colosse (or Colossae), a city in the Roman province of Asia. This province encompassed western Asia Minor, or western Anatolia (the Asian portion of modern Turkey). The city was located in the Lycus River valley about 125 miles south of Ephesus, the provincial capital.

Colosse was formerly part of the kingdom of Phrygia. The majority of the inhabitants were Phrygians, with Greek culture being superimposed. There was a large Jewish

community in the Lycus valley and in Phrygia. (See Acts 2:10.) It appears that the Colossian church was mainly Gentile, but some Jewish influence was evident.

The letter mentions two neighboring cities: Laodicea and Hierapolis (Colossians 2:1; 4:13-16). They were on opposite sides of the Lycus River about ten to twelve miles northwest of Colosse. They were great trading cities and were relatively wealthy; Laodicea was the chief city of the district. The evidence indicates that by the A.D. 60s Colosse had declined in importance relative to the other two cities, but according to F. F. Bruce, it was still an important city into the A.D. 100s and even A.D. 200s.

Colosse was evidently evangelized during Paul's ministry at Ephesus, for all Asia heard the gospel during that time (Acts 19:10). Paul had never visited the city, however (Colossians 2:1). It seems that under Paul's oversight, Epaphras planted the churches in this area (Colossians 1:6-7; 4:12-13).

If we assume that Paul was imprisoned twice in Rome, it is probable that he visited Colosse after this letter, after his first imprisonment. Such was his hope and plan (Philemon 22).

At the end of Paul's ministry, there is an indication that all the churches of the area had turned away from him (II Timothy 1:15). Sometime later, Revelation 3:14-21 reveals that by the end of the first century the Laodicean church had mostly backslidden, and the Colossian church may have suffered the same fate.

### **Purpose**

The immediate occasion of the Colossian letter was (1) the visit and report of Epaphras, the founder and pastor of the church, to Paul and (2) the return of Onesimus, a runaway slave converted by Paul, to Colosse.

The purpose of the letter was (1) to strengthen and confirm the Colossian church and (2) to warn about and refute the particular heresy in its midst. The use of the singular in chapter 2 may indicate that one false teacher was particularly responsible for the doctrinal problems.

By inspiring the book, God evidently had a larger purpose in mind, namely, instructing the entire church throughout the centuries in the doctrine of Jesus Christ. Colossians 4:16 indicates this larger purpose by instructing that the Laodicean church also read the letter. In I Corinthians 1:2, Paul acknowledged that his writing was for the church everywhere, and as we have noted, II Peter 3:15-16 recognizes that all of Paul's letters were inspired of God for universal application.

### **Style and Structure**

Colossians employs a unique style and rich language. It contains fifty-five words not in any other Pauline epistle and thirty-four found nowhere else in the New Testament.<sup>2</sup> It does not make any direct reference to an Old Testament passage.

Certain prominent words in the book—such as *wisdom*, *knowledge*, *philosophy*, and *mystery*—seem to have been favorites of the Colossian heretics. The epistle uses their own language against them.

The book contains fewer personal references than is usual for Paul's letters—he was not personally acquainted with the Colossians—and consequently it reads somewhat less fluently.

Structurally, we can divide the Book of Colossians into three sections.

1. *Introduction* (1:1-14): a typical personal introduction by Paul that consists of a greeting, a thanksgiving, and a prayer.
2. *Body* (1:15-4:6): the substance or doctrinal content.



3. *Conclusion* (4:7-18): a typical personal conclusion by Paul that mentions the messengers, sends greetings to and from various Christians, and closes with a farewell.

### **Summary of Content**

The theme of Colossians is the lordship of Jesus. Colossians 2:6-10 expresses the central ideas: "As ye have therefore received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk ye in him: rooted and built up in him, and stablished in the faith, as ye have been taught, abounding therein with thanksgiving. Beware lest any man spoil you through philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men, after the rudiments of the world, and not after Christ. For in him dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily. And ye are complete in him, which is the head of all principality and power."

The epistle presents the person and work of Jesus Christ as the answer to all error. Its teaching serves not only to refute the particular heresy at Colosse but also any other error regarding the doctrine of Jesus Christ. It presents Jesus as the source, supporter, and goal of creation and as the redeemer and reconciler of fallen creation.

Consequently, the Book of Colossians contains the most comprehensive Christology, or doctrine of Jesus Christ, in all of Paul's epistles, and it makes some of the most important statements on the subject in the entire Bible. It clearly presents Jesus Christ as the full incarnation of the one true God, and it does so in a way that is incompatible with trinitarianism. (For statements of the full deity of Jesus, see Table 1 at the end of this chapter). Although a trinitarian, F. F. Bruce has expressed some significant insight relative to this point:

The Colossian heresy evidently encouraged the claim that the fullness of God could be appreciated only by mystical experiences for which ascetic preparation was necessary. Paul's answer to such a claim is that the fullness of God is embodied in Christ, so that those who are united to him by faith have direct access in him to that fullness....The role assigned to the Spirit in other letters is in Colossians assigned to the risen Christ. . . . Theoretically and in principle the indwelling Christ and the indwelling Spirit are distinguishable [from the trinitarian point of view], but practically and in experience they cannot be separated.<sup>3</sup>

As we have already noted, Colossians is closely related to Ephesians. Ephesians instructs on many of the same subjects as Colossians but in greater detail. In fact, approximately one-fourth of Colossians is contained in Ephesians.<sup>4</sup> (For a list of the many parallel passages in the two books, see Table 2 at the end of this chapter.) Ephesians is more comprehensive, while Colossians focuses on the problems unique to Colosse. Ephesians is more general and tranquil in tone, while Colossians deals with a particular conflict. Ephesians presents the doctrine of the church, while Colossians presents the doctrine of the Head of the church, Jesus Christ.

There are also many similar phrases in Colossians and Philemon. (See Table 3 in "Introduction to Philemon.") Colossians 3:22-4:1 and the Epistle to Philemon both deal with the relationship between masters and slaves.

We can divide the main body of Colossians into four major points, all centered around the lordship of Jesus Christ.

1. *The doctrine of Jesus Christ* (1:15-23): the nature of the lordship of Jesus.
2. *Paul as a minister of Jesus* (1:24-2:5): proclaiming the lordship of Jesus.
3. *False philosophy versus true faith* (2:6-3:4): the lordship of Jesus versus the false teaching at Colosse.
4. *Practical Christian living* (3:5-4:6): the lordship of Jesus in practical life.

## The Heresy at Colosse

Since Paul wrote Colossians in part to refute a particular false doctrine, the question arises, What was the nature of the Colossian heresy? We do not have enough direct information to describe it comprehensively, but the epistle indicates that it incorporated asceticism, angel worship, and certain rituals and that it attacked the supreme deity of Jesus Christ. It was not a Judaizing legalism like that in Galatia, but a form of mysticism and elitism. Apparently it synthesized Jewish traditions, Oriental mysticism, Greek philosophy, and Christian beliefs.

Many commentators have called the Colossian heresy a form of incipient Gnosticism or Jewish Gnosticism. Gnosticism was a religious system that originated in paganism as a combination of Greek and Oriental ideas, and it ultimately incorporated a number of Jewish and Christian elements. As a fully developed system it appeared in the second century A.D., but the Colossian heresy of the first century seems to have had several similar features. Perhaps the Colossian heresy represented an early, emerging, incomplete form of Gnosticism, or perhaps the two systems were similar because they drew from common sources.

Gnosticism emphasized salvation through *gnosis*, or higher mystical knowledge, which it considered to be greater than faith. Its basis was a radical dualism between spirit, which it considered good, and matter, which it considered evil. It taught that a series of progressively inferior emanations came from God; one of the lower ones was the creator of the world of matter.

The Gnostics taught that Christ was one of the higher emanations from God. Since such a good being could not be composed of evil matter, some said Jesus Christ was a spirit being only (docetism), while others said Christ was a spirit being who descended upon a man named Jesus at His baptism and departed at His crucifixion (Cerinthianism).

Based on their view that matter was evil, the Gnostics tended to one of two extremes: (1) asceticism (punishment of the body) or (2) antinomianism (no moral law), on the ground that what the body did was irrelevant.

The Colossian heresy thus contained several features characteristic of later Gnosticism: emphasis on mystical knowledge, devaluation of the deity of Jesus Christ, and asceticism.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Norman Geisler and William Nix, *A General Introduction to the Bible* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1968), 193.

<sup>2</sup> D. Edmond Hiebert, *An Introduction to the Pauline Epistles* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1954), 229.

<sup>3</sup> F. F. Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians*, vol. 10 of *The New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1984), 26, 28.

<sup>4</sup> E. Earle Ellis, "Colossians" in *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1962), 1334.

### Table 1

#### The Full Deity of Jesus Stated in Colossians

**Description of Jesus Christ Verse** Image of the invisible God 1:15 Firstborn of (One who is preeminent over) all

creation 1:15

Creator of all things 1:16

Goal of all creation 1:16

One who is before all things (eternal) 1:17  
Sustainer and upholder of all things  
(omnipresent) 1:17  
Head of the church 1:18; 2:19 Beginning 1:18  
Firstborn from the dead (victor over death) 1:18  
One who is preeminent in all things 1:18  
Manifestation of all the fullness of the Deity 1:19  
Reconciler of all things 1:20  
Spirit dwelling in Christians 1:27  
Possessor of all treasures of wisdom and  
knowledge (omniscient) 2:3 Object of faith 2:5 Realm of spiritual life 2:6 Source of spiritual  
nourishment 2:7 Spiritual foundation 2:7 Embodiment of all the fullness of the Godhead 2:9  
Completeness for the child of God 2:10  
Head of all principality and power (omnipotent) 2:10  
Source of spiritual life 3:4 One who is coming in glory for the church 3:4

## **Table 2**

### **Parallel Passages in Colossians and Ephesians**

#### **Colossians Ephesians**

1:1-2 1:1-2  
1:3-4 1:15-16  
1:9-11 1:16-19  
1:10-11 4:1-2  
1:14 1:7  
1:16-18 1:20-23  
1:20-21 2:12-13  
1:22 5:27  
1:23-29 3:1-13  
2:9-10 3:19  
2:12 1:19-20  
2:13 2:1  
2:19 4:15-16  
3:6-7 2:2-3  
3:8 4:31  
3:9-10 4:22-25  
3:11 2:12-19  
3:12 1:4  
3:12-15 4:1-4  
3:16 5:19  
3:17 5:20

### **Parallel Passages in Colossians and Ephesians**

#### **Colossians Ephesians**

3:18-19 5:22-33  
3:20-21 6:1-4  
3:22-4:1 6:5-9  
4:2-4 6:18-20  
4:5 5:16  
4:7-8 6:21-22  
4:18 6:24

I.

## **Prologue (Colossians 1:1–14)**

### *Personal introduction*

The Epistle to the Colossians begins with a salutation, thanksgiving, and prayer. This format is typical of Paul's letters.

#### **A. Greetings (1:1-2)**

*(1) Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God, and Timotheus our brother, (2) to the saints and faithful brethren in Christ which are at Colosse: Grace be unto you, and peace, from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.*

This salutation is patterned after a standard letter in New Testament times. Such a letter began with the writer's name, the reader's name, and a statement of greeting or concern for welfare.

*Verse 1.* Paul identified himself as an apostle of Jesus Christ. An apostle is literally someone who is sent, or a messenger. Although Paul did not claim to be one of the Twelve (I Corinthians 15:5), by using this title he claimed an authority and ministry like theirs. By contrast, he did not identify Timothy or Epaphras as apostles, although he recognized them as co-workers.

Paul was an apostle by divine calling. No mere mortal could give him this ministry; he received it from God Himself (Galatians 1:1, 15-16).

Although other associates were with Paul at the time (Colossians 4:10-14), only Timothy was included in the salutation, because he was Paul's permanent co-worker. While the greetings are from both Paul and Timothy, the epistle itself is actually from Paul and is based on his apostolic authority. He used the first person plural ("we") throughout the introductory passage (verses 3, 4, 7, 8, 9), but he switched to the first person singular ("I") in Colossians 1:23 and used it to the end, where he personally signed the letter (Colossians 4:18).

The title of "brother" here and in verse 2 reveals the close family relationship that Christians enjoy; it was apparently a standard title in the early church. The Greek text simply identifies Timothy as "the brother."

*Verse 2.* Paul wrote to the church at Colosse. He described the Christians there as "faithful," which can mean loyal, believing, or both. He also called them "saints," which literally means separated, sanctified ones or holy ones. The New Testament uses this term for all believers; all believers are to be separated from sin and dedicated to God.

Paul's Christian greeting was "grace and peace," which was an adaptation of secular forms. The typical Greek greeting was *charein* (rejoice, hail)—Paul substituted *charis* (grace)—and the typical Hebrew greeting was *shalom* (peace).

Both grace (the unmerited favor of God) and peace (harmony with God and the resulting tranquility of soul) come from God our Father through the Lord Jesus Christ, that is, by the mediation of the man Jesus (I Timothy 2:5). This statement is not a trinitarian reference; if it were, why does it omit the Holy Spirit? Rather, this greeting emphasizes the necessity of not only acknowledging God as Creator and Father (which the Jews and many pagans did) but also acknowledging God's revelation in Christ. It emphasizes that God's provision of salvation comes only through Jesus Christ. Interestingly, the critical text, which most trinitarian scholars use today, omits "and the Lord Jesus Christ."

**B. Thanksgiving for the Colossians (1:3-8)** *(3) We give thanks to God and the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, praying always for you, (4) since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus, and of the love which ye have to all the saints, (5) for the hope which is laid up for you in heaven, whereof ye heard before in the word of the truth of the gospel; (6) which is*

*come unto you, as it is in all the world; and bringeth forth fruit, as it doth also in you, since the day ye heard of it, and knew the grace of God in truth: (7) as ye also learned of Epaphras our dear fellowservant, who is for you a faithful minister of Christ; (8) who also declared unto us your love in the Spirit.*

Verse 3. After the initial greeting, Paul described his continual thanksgiving for the Colossian believers as he prayed for them. Not only did this gesture demonstrate courtesy, but it also illustrated an important truth about prayer: prayer should always be offered in the context of thanksgiving and not just as a series of petitions. We can actually view verses 3-14 as the description of a prayer with the following form: thanksgiving, petition, thanksgiving, praise. Thanksgiving brackets the petition and is offered continually with prayer. (See also verse 12.)

Paul prayed continually for the Colossians. Prayer was his daily habit. He believed in the power of prayer, specifically intercessory prayer. (See also verse 9.)

Paul directed his thanks to “the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ” (NKJV). Just as the Old Testament speaks of “the God of Abraham” to remind His people of the relationship and blessings resulting from the Abrahamic covenant, so the New Testament sometimes speaks of “the God of our Lord Jesus Christ” to remind us of the relationship and blessings available to us through the new covenant established by the atoning work of Jesus.

This designation does not mean that Jesus is a second divine person. As to His deity, Jesus is God, the Father, incarnate (John 14:9-11; Colossians 2:9). In whatever way this verse distinguishes Jesus from the Father, it also distinguishes Him from God. If He were a second person, then that second person would be neither God nor the Father.

Instead, the phrase relates to Christ’s true humanity as distinguished from God. He was an authentic human being in every way, and as a man He acknowledged the one true God of Israel as His God and Father. At the same time, God was fully incarnate in that human life.

Verse 4 presents two reasons for Paul’s thanksgiving. First, he thanked God for the *faith* of the Colossians. Faith in Jesus Christ is vital, for it is the very basis of salvation (Romans 1:16-17). Interestingly, the Greek preposition used for “in” here is not *eis* or *epi*, which are normally used to express the object of faith, but *en*, which carries the connotation of dwelling within Christ or being surrounded by Him. Bruce commented that Christ “is the living environment within which their faith is.”<sup>1</sup> Second, Paul thanked God for the *love* that the Colossians had for fellow Christians. Loving the brethren is the supreme abiding evidence of salvation (John 13:34-35). The word for “love” here is *agape*, the deepest, truest kind of love. Significantly, the Colossians’ love extended to “all” the saints.

Thus Paul was thankful that the Colossian believers exhibited the two essential aspects of Christian life: faith and love, salvation and godliness.

Verse 5 . Faith and love rest upon or spring from our future hope. Some commentators interpret hope to be a third reason for Paul’s thanksgiving, but it appears rather that we have faith and love because of hope.

This hope is objective, not subjective: it is already stored up for us in heaven. Verse 27 calls it “the hope of glory,” which comes by the indwelling Christ. Specifically, we have the hope of the second coming of Christ and an eternal reward from Him. Consequently, we live in accordance with divine, heavenly promises, not the promises of the world.

This hope comes through the preaching of the truth of the gospel. Verse 23 calls it the “hope of the gospel.”

Verses 4-5 link the three fundamentals of Christian life given in I Corinthians 13:13: faith, hope, and love. In this connection, Lightfoot remarked, "Faith rests on the past; love works in the present; hope looks to the future."<sup>2</sup>

Verse 6 expounds on the nature of the gospel that brings such hope. First, it is *universal*; it has come to the Colossians and to all the world. Verse 23 similarly says the gospel "was preached to every creature which is under heaven." Paul did not mean that every individual had already heard the gospel, including the Chinese and the American Indians, but he used a figure of speech known as hyperbole to stress the applicability and availability of the gospel. He apparently had particular reference to the Roman Empire. (Luke 2:1 uses "all the world" in this sense.) As a similar example, Paul said hyperbolically that the faith of the Roman Christians was "spoken of throughout the whole world" (Romans 1:8). The gospel had certainly spread throughout the province of Asia, in which Colosse was located (Acts 19:10).

Second, the gospel is *productive*; it is bearing fruit. (Both the critical text and the majority text add "and growing"; in any case verse 10 expresses this thought.)

The gospel was working in or among the saints since they heard and knew the grace of God in truth. The usual word for "know" is *ginosko*, but this verse uses *epiginosko*, which means "fully know." The gospel, or grace of God, cannot merely be accepted intellectually; it must be grasped spiritually and then transformed into experience. (See verses 9-10.)

The Colossians received the grace of God "in truth": there was no adulteration.

As this verse speaks of the entire world receiving the gospel truth, which must be unadulterated and comprehended fully, the motto of the United Pentecostal Church International captures its meaning beautifully: "The whole gospel to the whole world."<sup>3</sup>

Verse 7. The gospel came to the Colossians via Epaphras. "You learned it from Epaphras, our dear fellow servant" (NIV). Apparently, he was the founder and pastor of the church as Paul's co-worker. Paul described him as a fellow slave and a minister (servant, helper) of Christ. (Some manuscripts say "for us" instead of "for you," which would emphasize that Epaphras was Paul's representative. Only one letter makes the difference in Greek.) In Philemon 23 Paul called Epaphras a fellow captive; either this designation is metaphoric or else he shared imprisonment with Paul at some point.

Verse 8. Epaphras had reported to Paul the spiritual love of the Colossian believers. Some translations say "love in the Spirit," while others say "love in spirit." New Testament Greek does not make a distinction in capitalization here; it is a matter of interpretation. Either way, the meaning is the same, for their love was prompted by the indwelling Holy Spirit.

Taking the KJV rendering, this verse contains the only explicit reference to the Spirit in the entire epistle. This fact may pose a problem for trinitarians but not for Oneness believers, for they recognize with Paul that the Holy Spirit is synonymous with the indwelling Christ (Romans 8:9-11; II Corinthians 3:17; Colossians 1:27).

**C. Prayer for the Colossians (1:9-14)** (9) *For this cause we also, since the day we heard it, do not cease to pray for you, and to desire that ye might be filled with the knowledge of his will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding; (10) that ye might walk worthy of the Lord unto all pleasing, being fruitful in every good work, and increasing in the knowledge of God; (11) strengthened with all might, according to his glorious power, unto all patience and longsuffering with joyfulness; (12) giving thanks unto the Father, which hath made us meet to be partakers of the inheritance of the saints in light: (13) who hath delivered us from the power of darkness, and hath translated us into the kingdom of his*

*dear Son: (14) in whom we have redemption through his blood, even the forgiveness of sins.*

Verse 9 . Paul's prayer was based on the same reason as his thanksgiving: the good report motivated him to pray for the Colossians as well as to offer thanks for them. In fact, he prayed continually for them. (See also verse 3.) He never missed them in his prayers; he had the habit of praying, and of praying for them. (Other passages that underscore the importance and value of intercessory prayer for both individuals and churches are Ephesians 1:16, Philippians 1:4, and Colossians 4:2-3.)

We can divide Paul's prayer for the believers into two parts. (1) He prayed that they would *be filled with the knowledge of God's will*. The word for "knowledge" is not merely *gnosis*, but *epignosis*, meaning "full knowledge." His prayer request was that they would have a deeper understanding.

God's will is not obscure or mystical; this verse shows that Christians can and should obtain a full knowledge of God's will for their lives. (See also Ephesians 5:10; Colossians 4:12; James 1:5.)

The deeper understanding that Paul desired for the church consisted of wisdom and spiritual (not carnal) understanding. In this context, these words signify the full knowledge of spiritual principles and the ability to apply those principles.

As chapter 2 shows, the false teaching at Colosse put heavy emphasis on knowledge, wisdom, and understanding. It appears that God inspired Paul to use terms popular with the heretics in order to refute their false concepts.

Verse 10. The purpose of knowledge is transformation, or right conduct. (See also verse 6.) There is and must be a union of doctrine and conduct. Christians are to walk, or live, in a worthy manner. We are not worthy of God's grace, but in response to His grace and through the power of His grace, we must strive to live up to our Lord's standards. (See Ephesians 4:1.)

We are to please God fully. True Christians desire to please the Lord in all respects. The specific results of knowledge are twofold: (a) *bearing fruit* in every good work (as in verse 6) and (b) *growing in full knowledge (epignosis)*. True spiritual knowledge causes us to bear fruit (produce good works) and grow further in the knowledge of God's will. (Alternatively, some commentators say this verse means to bear fruit and to grow in every good work by knowledge, because knowledge has already been requested and presupposed.)

Verse 11. (2) Paul also prayed that the believers would *receive power to do God's will*. He referred primarily to strength of will or strength of character, including power to deny the flesh, refuse temptation, and resist the devil. God will endow us with all strength according to His glorious power. He will give us the power to do whatever He leads us to do. When He commands, He enables. (See Romans 8:4; Philippians 2:13.)

The twofold request of verses 9-11 should be the basis of all our prayer. Simply put, the request is that we may fulfill the will of God.

Jesus taught us to pray, "Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven" (Matthew 6:10), and in the flesh He Himself prayed, "Not my will, but thine, be done" (Luke 22:42). William Barclay observed, "It so often happens that in prayer we are really saying, 'Thy will be changed,' when we ought to be saying, 'Thy will be done.' . . . We pray not in order to escape life but in order to be better able to meet it."<sup>4</sup> The focus of our prayer should be God's will, not ours.

Spiritual strength produces three characteristics.

1. *Patience*: endurance, or patience that conquers obstacles.
2. *Longsuffering*: patience especially with people.
3. *Joyfulness*: rejoicing, especially in times of tribulation.

Having joy in trials is an important Christian attitude. (See Romans 5:3; James 1:2; I Peter 4:13.) By God's grace, we can rejoice even in trials, knowing that God still has control of our lives, that He will work all things together for our ultimate good, and that we will eventually be victorious. (Some commentators say that joy should instead be connected with thanksgiving in verse 12: "with joy giving thanks.")

*Verse 12.* Once again, Paul offered thanks to God. His prayer was in the context of thanksgiving. (See also verse 3.)

The reason for thanksgiving in this verse is that the Father has qualified us for a share in the inheritance of the saints in the kingdom of light. We did not earn this privilege; God graciously allotted it to us. (The critical text says "you" instead of "us.")

*Verse 13* further explains that the Father has delivered us from the dominion of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of His Son. The Greek literally reads, "the Son of His love," indicating God's love for the Son as a man and God's love for us as revealed through the Son. This verse compares us to captives who have been rescued by force and to a population that has been removed or transplanted.

We are now in the kingdom of the Son; that is, we now partake of the grace of God purchased by the atoning death, burial, and resurrection of the Son. We presently enjoy the spiritual blessings of the kingdom of God (Romans 14:17), yet there is a future consummation of the kingdom of God that awaits us (I Corinthians 15:24-28). We already are in possession of the inheritance, but we now partake only of the first fruits, the down payment (Romans 8:23; Ephesians 1:14). In eternity, we will not simply be in the kingdom of the Son, but we will enjoy the fullness of the kingdom of God. Bruce explained, "In I Corinthians 15:24 . . . [Christ's] mediatorial sovereignty is then merged in the eternal dominion of God."<sup>5</sup>

*Verse 14* explains how we were placed in the Lord's kingdom: by redemption. Redemption means deliverance, release, emancipation. This verse compares us to captives who have been ransomed by a payment.

We have redemption in the Son, the man Christ Jesus who died for us. The ransom payment was the blood of Jesus, which satisfied the requirements of God's holy law and thereby delivered us from the penalty and effects of sin. The blood of Jesus is His life given up in death—His substitutionary, atoning sacrifice for us. Both the critical text and the majority text omit "through his blood" here, but it is undisputed in verse 20 and in the parallel passage of Ephesians 1:7. (Indeed, textual critics typically say that scribes added the phrase in Colossians 1:14 under the influence of Ephesians 1:7). Moreover, I Peter 1:18-19 clearly teaches that the blood of Jesus accomplished our redemption.

Verse 14 is an amplification of verse 13, and the one acting in verse 13 is the Father. Deliverance, translation, and redemption are actually the work of the Father. The One who delivers and the One who redeems are not two separate persons but one divine being. The Father was incarnate in the Son and thereby reconciled the world to Himself (John 14:10; II Corinthians 5:19; Colossians 1:20). The Father did not send someone else; He gave of Himself. (See John 3:16.)

Christ's redemptive work enables us to receive the forgiveness of sins. This verse and Ephesians 1:7 are two of the few places where Paul mentioned forgiveness (Greek, *aphesis*), although the word is common elsewhere in the New Testament. Paul typically



spoke of salvation in terms of justification—being declared righteous by God. Justification includes both the removal of sin (forgiveness/remission) and the imputation of righteousness. Forgiveness focuses on one aspect of the initial salvation experience, whereas justification is a more comprehensive term. We receive the full work of forgiveness/remission at repentance and water baptism (Acts 2:38), while justification also involves the work of the Holy Spirit (I Corinthians 6:11). The new birth experience of the New Testament church includes both water and Spirit (John 3:3, 5); namely, it consists of repentance, water baptism in the name of Jesus, and receiving the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:38). The wording of Colossians 1:13-14 is similar to God's commission to Paul as recorded in Acts 26:18. God called Paul "to turn [the Gentiles] from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan unto God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins, and inheritance among them which are sanctified by faith that is in me." God is the One who performs this work as the gospel is preached and people believe.

Verse 14 is transitional. It introduces a grand passage of praise to Jesus Christ, which is a fitting conclusion to Paul's prayer. It also introduces the main theme of the epistle—the lordship, preeminence, person, and work of Jesus Christ—and verses 15-20 proceed to elaborate on these points.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>Bruce, 41.

<sup>2</sup>J. B. Lightfoot, *St. Paul's Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon* (1875; Repr. Lynn, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 1981), 134.

<sup>3</sup>For this thought, see Bruce, 42.

<sup>4</sup>William Barclay, *The Letters to the Philippians, Colossians, and Thessalonians*, rev. ed., in *The Daily Study Bible Series* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1975), 108-9.

<sup>5</sup>Bruce, 52.

II.

## Doctrine of Jesus Christ (Colossians 1:15–23)

### *The nature of the lordship of Jesus*

The prologue of the epistle climaxes with thanksgiving for the redemptive work of Jesus Christ, leading directly and logically into a discussion of who Jesus is and what He has done for us. This discussion forms the first major section of the body (teaching portion) of the epistle. It examines the lordship of Jesus Christ, describing His preeminence in both creation and redemption and His work of reconciliation.

### A. Preeminence of Jesus (1:15-20)

*(15) Who is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of every creature: (16) for by him were all things created, that are in heaven, and that are in earth, visible and invisible, whether they be thrones, or dominions, or principalities, or powers: all things were created by him, and for him: (17) and he is before all things, and by him all things consist. (18) And he is the head of the body, the church: who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead; that in all things he might have the preeminence. (19) For it pleased the Father that in him should all fulness dwell; (20) and, having made peace through the blood of his cross, by him to reconcile all things unto himself; by him, I say, whether they be things in earth, or things in heaven.*

Colossians 1:15-20 is one of the greatest proclamations of the doctrine of Jesus Christ in the New Testament. Many commentators, pointing to the rhythm of the passage and the

repetition of key words, suggest that it was perhaps an early hymn. Its theme is the supremacy and all-sufficiency of Jesus.

*Verse 15.* The Son of God, Jesus Christ, is the “image of the invisible God.” The word *image* is the translation of the Greek word *eikon*, from which we get the English word *icon*. Vine explained, “The word involves the two ideas of representation and manifestation. . . . In Colossians 1:15, ‘the image of the invisible God’ gives the additional thought suggested by the word ‘invisible,’ that Christ is the visible representation and manifestation of God to created beings.”<sup>1</sup> According to William Barclay, *eikon* was the word used for “portrait,” and it was also used for the description of the chief characteristics and distinguishing marks of parties to a contract.<sup>2</sup>

Other translations help bring out the meaning: “the visible expression of the invisible God” (Phillips); “the very incarnation of the invisible God” (Twentieth Century New Testament); “the exact likeness of the invisible God” (Williams); “the true likeness of the God we cannot see” (Knox).

Charles Erdman said that *eikon* means likeness, representation, manifestation, resemblance, and revelation, and he further explained, “In describing God as ‘invisible,’ Paul does not mean merely that he is not visible to physical sight, but that he cannot be discovered by the unaided reason and intellect and imagination. God cannot be known except in and through Christ.”<sup>3</sup>

Many people maintain that “image” refers to an eternal distinction and relation in the Godhead; that is, one person called the Son is the eternal image of another person called the Father. But, instead, “image” relates to the Incarnation, as the following points demonstrate. (1) The context reveals that the subject of discussion is the Incarnation (Colossians 1:19). (2) The antecedent of the pronoun “who” is “Son” (Colossians 1:13). The title of Son designates the human person in whom God was incarnate, who was born and who died (Luke 1:35; Romans 5:10; Galatians 4:4). Thus the “image” is a genuine human, not a second divine spirit. (3) The prepositional phrase “of the invisible God” qualifies “image,” showing that the image under discussion is visible and therefore physical, human. (4) The image is of “God”—the totality of the Deity, the fullness of the invisible One—not merely the image of one of three divine persons.

Other passages also express this truth. The Son is “the brightness of his [God’s] glory, and the express image of his person” (Hebrews 1:3). “No man hath seen God at any time; the only begotten Son, which is in the bosom of the Father, he hath declared him” (John 1:18). “Christ . . . is the image of God” (II Corinthians 4:4).

In a finite, limited sense, all humans are images of God (Genesis 1:26-27). But Jesus is the image of God in a unique sense, for He is the perfect image of God and in Him dwells the fullness of deity (Colossians 1:19). A perfect representation is a manifestation or incarnation; thus, unlike other humans, Jesus is the incarnation of God, revealing God to humanity. “In him the nature and being of God have been perfectly revealed . . . in him the invisible has become visible.”<sup>4</sup> Jesus is “the first true man who fulfills God’s design in creation . . . the archetype, the effluence of God’s glory and not, as other men, its reflection.”<sup>5</sup>

“Firstborn” comes from the Greek word *prototokos*. Hebrews 1:6 uses the same Greek word, there translated “firstbegotten,” to describe Christ. Erdman explained the meaning and significance of the word: “‘Firstborn’ here means two things: priority in time and supremacy in place or position.”<sup>6</sup> In Bible times, the eldest son of a family had preeminence

over his brothers; he had special power, authority, honor, and inheritance rights. As a result, “firstborn” came to signify preeminence even when no time factor was involved.

As God, Jesus was not born at all; as a man, He was born in Bethlehem after thousands of years of human history. Obviously, then, the primary meaning of “firstborn” here is supremacy over all creation; it does not mean that Jesus was actually born before all other humans. Both the New King James Version (NKJV) and the New International Version (NIV) render the phrase here as “the firstborn over all creation.”

As Barclay explained, “In Hebrew and Greek thought the word *firstborn* (*prototokos*) has only very indirectly a time significance. . . . *Firstborn* is very commonly a title of *honour*.”<sup>7</sup> Many scriptural examples verify that “firstborn” does not always refer to an actual birth or to a priority in time. God called Israel His firstborn because He chose that nation over all the other nations, not because it was the first nation (Exodus 4:22). He said King David would be His firstborn because He exalted him over other rulers, not because he was the first king (Psalm 89:27). Hebrews 12:23 calls the saints the firstborn ones (plural in Greek). Job 18:13 speaks figuratively of death’s firstborn, and Isaiah 14:30 similarly talks of the firstborn of the poor.

Consequently, Vine explained that “firstborn” expresses Christ’s “priority to, and preeminence over, creation, not in the sense of being the first to be born. . . . [In] Colossians 1:15 . . . the clause means both that He was the Firstborn before all creation and that He Himself produced creation.”<sup>8</sup> Lightfoot similarly interpreted the relevant phrase: “It will therefore signify: ‘He stands in the relation of *prototokos* to all creation,’ i.e. ‘He is the Firstborn, and, as the Firstborn, the absolute Heir and sovereign Lord, of all creation.’”<sup>9</sup> He noted that Rabbi Bechai called God the “Firstborn of the world,” obviously not meaning that God was ever born but that He was preeminent.

Many people maintain that “firstborn” refers to an eternal relation between two divine persons; that is, one person called the Son is eternally being begotten by another person called the Father. According to Psalm 2:7, however, the Son was begotten on a specific day, and Hebrews 1:5-6 links this verse with the title of firstbegotten, or firstborn. Moreover, we have already seen that the Son was the human person in whom God was incarnate. Thus, the begetting of the Son relates to the Incarnation, not to an undefined, incomprehensible, eternal process.

A study of the Scriptures reveals that Jesus is the firstborn or firstbegotten in several senses.<sup>10</sup> (1) He is the first and only begotten Son of God in that He was literally conceived by the Holy Spirit in the womb of Mary (Matthew 1:18, 20; Luke 1:35; John 3:16). (2) The plan of the Incarnation existed in the mind of God from the beginning, before anything else, and God predicated all creation upon the birth of the Son (Colossians 1:17; Hebrews 1:2; I Peter 1:19-20). (3) Jesus is the first man to conquer sin, and so He is the firstborn of the spiritual family of God (Romans 8:17, 29; Colossians 1:13). (4) Jesus is the first man to conquer death, and so He is the first fruits of the resurrection, or the firstborn from the dead (Colossians 1:18; Revelation 1:5). (5) Jesus is the head of all creation and the head of the church, so He is the firstborn in the sense of having preeminence among and power over all things (Colossians 1:15-18).

*Verse 16* begins to explain how and why Jesus is preeminent. First, He is the Creator. The verse twice states that everything was created “by him.” The first occurrence of “by” is a translation of the Greek preposition *en*, which literally means “in.” Bruce explained its connotation: “The phrase ‘in him’ seems to mark Christ out as the ‘sphere’ within which the

work of creation takes place; one might compare Ephesians 1:4, where the people of God are said to have been chosen 'in him' before time began. God's creation, like his election, takes place 'in Christ' and not apart from him."<sup>11</sup>

The second occurrence of "by" comes from the preposition *dia*, which is used in the same way in John 1:3, 10; I Corinthians 8:6; and Hebrews 1:2. Because this word can mean "through," many people claim that Christ was the intermediate agent of creation for another divine person called the Father. The preposition does not require this interpretation, however. For example, Romans 11:36 and Hebrews 2:10 use the same word to describe creation by God, the Father.

The Bible clearly teaches that one solitary Being, God or Jehovah ("the LORD"), created the universe without assistance from anyone else. (See Isaiah 37:16; 44:24; 45:18; Malachi 2:10.) Passages such as John 1:3, Colossians 1:16, and Hebrews 1:10 speak of Jesus as the Creator because He is the one God of the Old Testament—Jehovah—manifested in the flesh (John 8:58; 20:28; Colossians 2:9; I Timothy 3:16).

The antecedent of the pronoun "him" in Colossians 1:16 is "Son" in Colossians 1:13; thus, the Son, Jesus Christ, is the Creator. He was not yet the Son, however, when He created the world. As we have already seen, the title of Son relates to the Incarnation, to the man in whom God fully dwelt. This verse does not mean that Jesus created the world as the Son, as a human. Rather, it means that the One who later became the Son created the world. For example, when we say, "President Lincoln was born in Kentucky," we do not mean he was president at the time of his birth. Rather, the one who later became president was born there. The Creator is the eternal Spirit of God who later incarnated Himself in the Son and was manifested to us as Jesus Christ.

Perhaps this verse expresses a further truth: God created the world with the Son in view, or in dependence upon the future manifestation of Himself in the Son. "God . . . hath in these last days spoken unto us by his Son, . . . by whom also he made the worlds" (Hebrews 1:1-2). God based all creation on the future Incarnation and Atonement. Though He did not pick up the humanity until the fullness of time, the Incarnation was His plan from the beginning, and He acted upon it from the start. In the plan of God, the Lamb was "slain from the foundation of the world" (Revelation 13:8). The Lamb was "foreordained before the foundation of the world, but was manifest in these last times" (I Peter 1:19-20).

God created humans in the beginning so that they would love Him, worship Him, have fellowship with Him, give Him glory, and perform His will. (See Isaiah 43:7; Revelation 4:11.) At the same time, God foreknew that they would fall into sin and thereby thwart His purpose for creation. But God, who "calleth those things which be not as though they were" (Romans 4:17), also had in His mind the Incarnation and the plan of salvation through the atoning death of Christ. Even though He knew humanity would sin, He also knew that through the Son humanity could be restored and could still fulfill His original purpose. In this sense God created the world through the Son, or by using the Son. In the same way, God justified Old Testament believers on the basis of the future Cross (Romans 3:25). In view of the impending fall of humanity, God's plan of creation was predicated upon the man Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

Other passages show that God created and now sustains all things "by" Jesus Christ in the sense of purpose and plan. "To us there is but one God, the Father, of whom are all things, and we in him; and one Lord Jesus Christ, by whom are all things, and we by him" (I Corinthians 8:6). Ephesians 3:9 says, "God . . . created all things by Jesus Christ," and verse 11 speaks of "the eternal purpose which he purposed in Christ Jesus our Lord."

In Greek the word “created” appears in two different tenses, which underscore the distinct connotations of the two prepositions translated “by.” The first occurrence of “created” in Colossians 1:16 is in the aorist tense, which denotes simple past action. The second occurrence of “created” is in the perfect tense, which means that all things have been and stand created through Christ. According to Lightfoot, the former “describes the definite historical act of creation,” while the latter describes “the continuous and present relation of creation to the Creator.”<sup>12</sup> The church exists and we have spiritual life today not only because of God’s initial creative act thousands of years ago but also because of God’s redemptive act in Jesus Christ. ‘We are sustained daily by the grace of God bestowed upon us through the Cross, and the living Christ imparts life to us through His indwelling Holy Spirit. The Spirit of Jesus. created the human race initially and is yet transforming and molding those who believe in Him, for Jesus is “the author and finisher of our faith” (Hebrews 12:2). (See Colossians 1:17 for a further statement of the sustaining work of Christ.)

All things were created “for him.” The Greek preposition is *eis*, meaning “for, unto.” In other words, Jesus is the goal of creation. Interestingly, Romans 11:36 and I Corinthians 8:6 both use the same Greek preposition to say that all creation is “to” or “in” God, the Father.

Jesus is the Creator of “all things,” whether heavenly or earthly, visible or invisible, spiritual or physical. This verse specifically lists thrones, dominions (lordships), principalities (rulers), and powers (authorities) as originally created by Him. These designations cover all beings or forces, whether now good or evil. Since Jesus created all things, He has authority over them.

Colossians 2:10 and 2:15 again emphasize Christ’s authority over principalities and powers. Ephesians 1:21, a parallel passage, says Christ is “far above all principality, and power, and might, and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this world, but also in that which is to come.”

By specifically mentioning things in heaven, Colossians 1:16 affirms that Christ created even the highest angels and has authority over them. This statement is significant in that the Colossian heresy included a form of angel worship (Colossians 2:18).

In summary, all creation has its beginning, process, and end in Jesus Christ. Its origin, continuance, and conclusion all depend upon Him. He is the source, sustainer, and final goal of creation.

*Verse 17* underscores the teaching of verses 15-16 that Christ is the source and sustainer of creation.

“He is before all things.” As the one true God, the Spirit of Christ was eternally preexistent. Moreover, the Son—the foreordained Lamb—was first in the mind of God; all creation was predicated upon the Incarnation and the Atonement.

Significantly, the verse says “He is” instead of “He was.” Jesus is not merely a human; He is also the eternal, unchanging God (Hebrews 13:8). Yahweh (Jehovah), the unique name used to identify the true God in the Old Testament, comes from the third person singular form of the verb “to be,” meaning “He is.” It is equivalent to the first person singular form that God used for Himself, “I AM” (Exodus 3:14). In the New Testament, Jesus identified Himself as “I am,” the God of Abraham (John 8:58).

“By him all things consist.” Literally, “in Him all things hold together” (NIV). Since the verb is in the perfect tense, it connotes that in Him all things have held and still hold together. Similarly, Hebrews 1:3 says He is “upholding all things by the word of his power.”

*Verse 18.* Jesus is the head of the church, “the inspiring, ruling, guiding, combining,

sustaining power, the mainspring of its activity, the centre of its unity, and the seat of its life.”<sup>13</sup> The church is Christ’s body (Romans 12:5; I Corinthians 12:12, 27); He is its head. Jesus is also the beginning. As God, He is both prior in time to everything, including the church, and the originating power, or source, of everything, including the church. Jesus is the firstborn from the dead. Using the same Greek word, *prototokos*, Revelation 1:5 calls Him “the first begotten of the dead.” He is the first fruits of the resurrection (I Corinthians 15:20, 23). He was the first human being to be raised with an incorruptible, glorified body. He is “the first-born of a new humanity which is to be glorified, as its exalted Lord is glorified.”<sup>14</sup>

Verses 15 and 18 express two closely related ideas: Jesus is the firstborn in the resurrection as well as in creation. Just as the world was His first, or physical, creation, so the church is His second, or spiritual, creation. He is supreme in both spheres.

Jesus has the preeminence in all things. Literally, He is “holding first place.” As to His deity, Jesus has always been supreme, but by virtue of His human life, death, resurrection, and ascension He conquered sin, death, hell, and the devil and established the New Testament church. (See Acts 2:32-36; Philippians 2:9; Hebrews 2:14; 9:14-16; Revelation 1:18). He thus openly declared His lordship and earned the right to be called Lord as to His glorified humanity. He is not only the King of eternity but also the human Messiah and Savior. His resurrection proclaims His universal preeminence as the perfect man, the incarnate God.

*Verse 19* can be translated in one of two ways. Either way, the fundamental meaning is the same.

1. The Greek grammar of the verse supplies an explicit impersonal subject: *pan to pleroma*, meaning “all the fullness.” Using this interpretation, the verse reads, “All the fullness willed (or was well pleased) to dwell in him.” Marshall’s *Interlinear Greek-English New Testament* identifies the subject here as “all the fullness,” while the Revised Standard Version identifies it as “the fullness.” J. B. Phillips translated, “It was in him that the full nature of God chose to live.” This option seems likely because it means both Colossians 1:19 and 2:9 have the same subject in Greek.

2. Alternatively, since the verb is personal, perhaps there is an implied personal subject. The KJV supplies “the Father,” while the NIV supplies “God.” Kenneth Taylor has rendered it, “For God wanted all of Himself to be in His Son” (Living Bible).

Bruce concluded, “The clause as it stands offers an explicit subject for the verb: ‘the fullness was well pleased to take up residence in him.’ . . . One cannot decide certainly whether ‘God’ or ‘the fullness’ is the more probable subject.”<sup>15</sup> The New English Bible combines both ideas, showing that either way the basic meaning is the same: “For in him the complete being of God, by God’s own choice, came to dwell.”

“Pleased” is translated from the aorist tense of *eudokeo*, literally meaning “was well pleased.” The same verb and tense appear in Matthew 3:17, where God said, “This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased,” literally, “in whom I was well pleased.” Perhaps Colossians 1:19 is an amplification of Matthew 3:17, showing that the Father was well pleased to dwell in the Son.

“Dwell” connotes a permanent state as opposed to a temporary one.

“Fulness,” from the Greek *pleroma*, means that Christ is not merely a representation, summary, or sketch—as the “image” in verse 15 could otherwise be interpreted—but the full revelation of God. The Gnostics later used *pleroma* for the supreme God Himself in contrast to His emanations. The word here means “the plenitude” . . . the totality of the Divine

powers and attributes.”<sup>16</sup>

Clearly, Jesus Christ is not merely an emanation from God, as the Gnostics taught, nor is He merely an image of God in the sense that other humans are. Rather, all the fullness of the Deity (Godhead) dwells in Him. “In Christ the completeness of deity dwells. He is not merely endued in an especial way with the Holy Spirit, but is rather the dwelling-place of the very essence of God.”<sup>17</sup> Colossians 2:9, a parallel passage, states, “For in him dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily.”

*Verse 20.* The purpose of the Incarnation is the Atonement. God came in flesh to reconcile His fallen creation back to Himself. Knox translates that God came “to win back all things . . . into union with himself.”

God has reconciled all things to himself through Jesus Christ. The subject of verse 19—whether it be the fullness of Deity, God, or the Father—is the one who acts in verse 20. The pronoun *him* in both verses refers to Jesus. Thus God has made peace through the blood of Christ’s cross; by or through Christ God has reconciled all things to Himself. “Through him God planned to reconcile in his own person, as it were, everything on earth and everything in Heaven by virtue of the sacrifice of the cross” (Phillips). God the Father is the actor because God was incarnate in Christ. Reconciliation is supremely the plan and act of the Father. “And all things are of God, who hath reconciled us to himself by Jesus Christ . . . to wit, that God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself” (II Corinthians 5:18-19). The church was purchased by God’s own blood (Acts 20:28).

By contrast, Ephesians 2:16 and Romans 5:10-11 say that reconciliation is the work of Christ, the Son. If the Father and the Son were two separate persons, there would appear to be a contradiction, but since God was incarnate in the Son, the work can be attributed to God directly (through the Son) or simply to the Son.

This verse describes the atoning, redeeming work of God in Christ in terms of reconciliation and making peace. To reconcile means to restore to a relationship, to restore to favor. As sinners, we were God’s enemies and were subject to divine wrath. Through the death of Jesus Christ, however, we now have a relationship of peace with God. (See Romans 5:1, 10.)

Reconciliation comes specifically through the blood of Jesus. Blood is essential to life; it supplies life-sustaining oxygen and nutrients to all the body. “The life of the flesh is in the blood. . . . It is the life of all flesh; the blood of it is for the life thereof” (Leviticus 17:11, 14). The shedding of blood represents life given up in death. The blood of Christ represents the sinless life that He lived on earth and voluntarily gave up on the cross. The blood of Christ signifies the death of Christ.

Christ’s blood was the ransom required by God’s holy law to redeem us from sin (Matthew 20:28; I Peter 1:18-20). His death was a propitiation, a sacrifice of atonement that fulfills God’s just requirements and allows Him to pardon sin without compromising His holiness (Matthew 26:28; Romans 3:25). Jesus took our place in death and suffered the penalty we deserved for our sins (Isaiah 53:5-6; II Corinthians 5:21).

The blood of Christ reconciles “all things,” even inanimate creation, to God. Because of human sinfulness, all of creation labors under a curse, but one day God will remove the curse and all its effects (Genesis 3:17-18; Romans 8:19-22; Revelation 22:3). Significantly, the Gnostics taught that matter was evil and that salvation consisted in freedom from matter, but this verse teaches that God’s plan is to reconcile all of creation to God. He will resurrect us physically, He will establish a physical kingdom upon earth, and in the end He will create a new heaven and a new earth.

Both things in heaven and on earth are included in the work of reconciliation. This statement does not mean that heavenly things, such as God's angels, need reconciliation from sin, but it simply expresses the scope, adequacy, and completeness of Christ's work. Perhaps it also indicates that redeemed humans and the angels in heaven will be reconciled to each other. The larger implication is that all things, even the hosts of heaven, are subject to Christ, not only by creation but by His work of atonement. Perhaps heavenly beings are mentioned specifically because of the problem of angel worship in Colosse (Colossians 2:18).

Philippians 2:10-11 similarly proclaims that one day everything in heaven, on earth, and under the earth will acknowledge the lordship of Jesus. Significantly, Colossians 1:20 does not mention things under the earth, for those who persist in rebellion will not be reconciled to God through Christ.

In summary, the *initiator* or source of reconciliation is God, the *ground* or basis of reconciliation is the blood of Jesus Christ, and the *result* of reconciliation is a state of peace with God. And verse 23 reveals that the human *means* of receiving reconciliation is continuing faith.

**B. Reconciliation through Jesus (1:21-23)** (21) *And you, that were sometime alienated and enemies in your mind by wicked works, yet now hath he reconciled* (22) *in the body of his flesh through death, to present you holy and unblameable and unreproveable in his sight: (23) if ye continue in the faith grounded and settled, and be not moved away from the hope of the gospel, which ye have heard, and which was preached to every creature which is under heaven; whereof I Paul am made a minister.*

These three verses expound upon the message of redemption and reconciliation stated in verses 13-14 and 20.

*Verse 21.* God has reconciled the saints through the blood of Jesus. We needed reconciliation because we were alienated from God by our sins. We were actually His enemies, because we rebelled against His will. (See Romans 5:10.)

We were enemies of God in our minds. Our thoughts and desires were evil; our minds were opposed to God's law and will. "The carnal mind is enmity against God: for it is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be" (Romans 8:7).

*Verse 22.* The redemptive work of Jesus Christ abolished our alienation, and His redemptive work depended upon the death of His physical body. The Gnostics did not believe in the reality of Christ's flesh, but this verse emphasizes the necessity of believing that He truly came in human flesh. (See also I John 4:2-3.) Our salvation depends upon it; otherwise, we have no blood of atonement, no kinsman redeemer, no substitutionary sacrifice. Christ's physical body is the necessary link between the Incarnation and the Atonement.

The One who acts in verses 21-22 is the same One who acts in verse 20: God. The NIV translates, "He has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death." Phillips's translation seems to recognize that both the pronouns "he" and "him" refer to God: "You . . . he [God] has now reconciled through the death of his body on the cross." The body of Christ is the very body of God.

The result of reconciliation is to make us holy, blameless, and beyond reproach, or "holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation" (NIV). The words "holy and unblameable and unreproveable" include justification (being counted or declared righteous at the new-birth experience), and they also encompass sanctification (the progressive work of being separated from sin and dedicated to God).



The use of “present” here and in verse 28 underscores the reference to sanctification; the word speaks of our presentation to Christ at His coming. Ephesians 5:27 states this point clearly: “That he [Christ] might present it to himself a glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish.”

Bruce explained that Colossians 1:22 encompasses both initial justification and progressive sanctification, culminating in eternal salvation: “The pronouncement of justification made in the believer’s favor here and now anticipates the pronouncement of the judgment day: the holiness of life which is progressively wrought by the Spirit here and now is to issue in perfection of glory at Christ’s *parousia* [coming].”<sup>18</sup>

Simply stated, the purpose of reconciliation is holiness. (See Romans 8:3-4; Ephesians 2:8-10.) God saves us in order that we might live a holy, godly life.

Verses 19-22 reveal a strong link between the doctrines of Oneness, the Atonement, and holiness. The doctrine of Oneness—the absolute oneness of God and the absolute deity of Jesus Christ—proclaims that God reconciles us to Himself in Jesus Christ. The doctrine of the Atonement explains how He does so: through the death of Christ. Finally, God’s work of reconciliation calls us to a life of holiness so that we can walk in restored fellowship with the holy God (I Peter 1:15-16). Moreover, Christ’s blood gives us the power to live a holy life. If we refuse to partake of God’s holiness, however, our sin will separate us once again from God, just as sin separated Adam and Eve from Him in the beginning. (See Isaiah 59:2; Romans 8:8.)

Verse 23 reminds us that God will present us holy, blameless, and beyond reproach only “if ye continue in the faith.” The verb “continue” is present tense, indicating that we must remain in the faith if we expect to enjoy the final benefits. “If” reveals a condition: the means or condition of receiving God’s work of salvation is faith, specifically continuing faith. Ultimately, the work of reconciliation will be effective for us only if we continue to trust in the Lord and His gospel until He comes for us. “This reconciliation assumes, of course, that you maintain a firm position in the faith, and do not allow yourselves to be shifted away from the hope of the Gospel” (Phillips).

Clearly, the doctrine of unconditional eternal security (“once saved always saved”) is wrong. It says that replacing “if” by “if . . . not” would be correct, but such an action would reverse the meaning. This doctrine would actually make this verse, as well as the two we shall cite next, irrelevant and meaningless. We enjoy the goodness of God “if thou continue in his goodness: otherwise thou also shalt be cut off” (Romans 11:22). We are saved by the gospel “if ye keep in memory what I preached unto you, unless ye have believed in vain” (I Corinthians 15:2).

We must be “grounded,” or established firmly; “settled,” or steadfast; and “not moved away,” or not being shifted. The image is that of a building, and the admonition is to remain firmly on the one foundation.

The foundation is “the hope of the gospel,” namely, the gospel message that brings salvation and the hope of eternal life that it generates. Similarly, verses 4-5 state that Christians base their faith and love on their heavenly hope.

Like verse 6, verse 23 says that the gospel has been preached to the Colossians and to everyone. Again, this statement is a figure of speech known as hyperbole, and it stresses the universality of the gospel. The gospel’s universal proclamation, availability, and application serve as its credentials. Perhaps there is an implied contrast to the heresy at Corinth, which was apparently associated primarily with a local teacher.

Paul identified himself as a “minister,” or servant, of the gospel. The switch to first person singular pronouns begins here. The personal reference forms a bridge to the next portion of letter, which deals with the ministry of Paul.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup>W. E. Vine, *Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words* (McLean, Va.: MacDonald Publishing Company, n.d.), 586-87.

<sup>2</sup>Barclay, *Philippians, Colossians, and Thessalonians*, 118.

<sup>3</sup>Charles Erdman, *The Epistles of Paul to the Colossians and to Philemon*, vol. 12 of *Erdman Commentaries on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1934), 51. Erdman cited J. B. Lightfoot for the first three synonyms.

<sup>4</sup>Bruce, 57-58.

<sup>5</sup>Ellis, in *Wycliffe Bible Commentary*, 1338.

<sup>6</sup>Erdman, 52.

<sup>7</sup>Barclay, *Philippians, Colossians, and Thessalonians*, 119.

<sup>8</sup>Vine, 444.

<sup>9</sup>Lightfoot, 148.

<sup>10</sup>For a discussion of each point, see David Bernard, *The Oneness of God* (Hazelwood, Mo.: Word Aflame Press, 1983), 118-20.

<sup>11</sup>Bruce, 61-62.

<sup>12</sup>Lightfoot, 151.

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*, 157.

<sup>14</sup>Walter Bauer, et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 2d ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 726.

<sup>15</sup>Bruce, 72.

<sup>16</sup>Lightfoot, 159.

<sup>17</sup>Herbert Carson, *The Epistles of Paul to the Colossians and Philemon*, vol. 12 of *The Tyndale New Testament Commentaries* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1960), 45-46.

<sup>18</sup>Bruce, 79.

III.

#### **Paul As a Minister of Jesus (Colossians 1:24–2:5)**

##### *Proclaiming the lordship of Jesus*

After explaining the central truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ—the lordship of Jesus in both creation and redemption—Colossians briefly focuses on Paul’s ministry of proclaiming the gospel.

##### **A. Sacrificial labor (1:24-29)**

*(24) Who now rejoice in my sufferings for you, and fill up that which is behind of the afflictions of Christ in my flesh for his body’s sake, which is the church: (25) whereof I am made a minister, according to the dispensation of God which is given to me for you, to fulfil the word of God; (26) even the mystery which hath been hid from ages and from generations, but now is made manifest to his saints: (27) to whom God would make known what is the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles; which is Christ in you, the hope of glory: (28) whom we preach,, warning every man, and teaching every man in all*

*wisdom; that we may present every man perfect in Christ Jesus: (29) whereunto I also labour striving according to his working, which worketh in me mightily.*

Verse 24. The apostle Paul suffered to preach the gospel. He did not participate in the work of the Atonement, for Jesus Christ alone was the one sacrifice for the sins of the world (Colossians 1:20; Hebrews 10:12-14). Paul's suffering was ministerial, not mediatorial.

Paul endured hardship and persecution for Christ's sake, specifically for the sake of Christ's church. In doing so, he entered into the fellowship of Christ's sufferings (Philippians 3:10). The same love that motivated Christ to sacrifice His life motivated Paul to minister (II Corinthians 5:14). In fulfilling his ministry, he suffered for Christ's sake, and this suffering was his share in the afflictions of Christ—not the sufferings of Christ on the cross but the sufferings of the corporate body of Christ, which is the church.

More specifically, "the afflictions of Christ" in which Paul participated are the sufferings involved in building up the body of Christ; in this work, Christ has left room for further suffering by His servants. Perhaps there is the additional thought that Christ suffers as His ministers suffer. For example, in Acts 9:4-5 Christ told Paul that in persecuting the believers Paul was actually persecuting Him: "Saul, Saul why persecutest thou me? . . . I am Jesus whom thou persecutest."

J. W. Shepard commented, "The 'remainder' of the suffering of Christ at any time is that which is lacking for the full establishment of God's Kingdom and the perfection of his people in that period and for the future. It is a form of mental anguish which the Lord felt on behalf of the Colossian Christians and which Paul in like manner felt."<sup>1</sup> Lightfoot explained, "The Church is built up by repeated acts of self-denial in successive individuals and successive generations. They continue the work which Christ began."<sup>2</sup>

The phrase "in my flesh" indicates that Paul's suffering included physical suffering.

Paul did not have a martyr's complex. He did not complain about his sufferings, nor did he boast of them. Rather, he rejoiced in them. He did not enjoy them, but he knew that they came because he was doing God's will and work, that God was still in control of his life, and that God would work all things together for ultimate good. Joy is the proper Christian attitude in time of trial or temptation (Romans 5:2-3; James 1:2; I Peter 4:12-13).

Like Colossians 1:18, Colossians 1:24 identifies the church as the body of Christ. Verse 25 identifies Paul as a "minister," or servant, of the church. God gave him a "dispensation" to serve the church. The Greek word here is *oikonomia*, which means "stewardship, administration, office, commission." His apostleship, particularly his calling to preach the gospel to the Gentiles, came from God; he was not self-appointed. The purpose of his ministry was to proclaim and fulfill the Word of God, not his own purposes and ideas. God gave him this ministry "for you," his readers. The Colossian church was part of the body of Christ, and more particularly, Colosse was a Gentile city. Thus, Paul established his authority to teach the Colossians and address the heresy in their midst.

Verse 26 elaborates upon Paul's ministry and message. The commission God had entrusted to him was to proclaim the mystery, or secret, that had been hidden in the past but was now revealed to the saints. As Bruce has noted, the Greek word translated "mystery" refers to "something hitherto concealed but now revealed, and especially (in biblical usage) some aspect of the divine purpose."<sup>3</sup>

Formerly, the mystery "hath been hid." The Greek text uses the perfect participle, which indicates concealment for a long time. Now, however, the mystery "is made manifest." The Greek text uses the aorist tense, which indicates that at a certain time the revelation came.

This revelation has come to all the saints—believers, Christians— not just to the apostles.

*Verse 27.* God Himself willed that this mystery be revealed to all believers, including Gentiles.

The phrase “the riches of the glory of this mystery” speaks of the profound, invaluable, magnificent character of the mystery. This language is reminiscent of the frequent use of “riches” in Ephesians. Colossians 2:2-3 also speaks of “riches” and “treasures” in Jesus Christ.

The mystery is “Christ in you” namely, the promise and reception of the indwelling Christ. While the phrase may refer to Christ’s presence in the church corporately, meaning “Christ in your midst,” it seems that the more prominent thought is Christ’s presence individually, that is, “Christ within each of you.” Believers do not receive Christ because they are part of the corporate church, but they are part of the corporate church because Christ dwells in them individually.

Christ dwells in us as the Holy Spirit. (See Romans 8:9-11; II Corinthians 3:17). The way we receive Christ into our lives is by repenting and receiving the Holy Spirit as recorded into the Book of Acts. Christ promised to be present with His disciples throughout this age; the way He fulfills this promise is not by physical presence but by His Spirit. (See Matthew 18:20; 28:20; John 14:16-18.)

New Testament believers enjoy the indwelling presence of Christ in a way unknown to believers of earlier ages. The baptism of the Holy Spirit was unavailable to the saints of earlier generations, but from the beginning of the New Testament church on the Day of Pentecost, all saints—not just the apostles—receive the Spirit. (See Jeremiah 31:31-33; Ezekiel 11:19; Luke 24:47-49; John 7:39; 16:7; Acts 1:4-8; 2:1-4; 11:15-17; Romans 8:3-4; Hebrews 8:6; 11:39-40; I Peter 1:10-12.)

Since Colossians 1:27 particularly notes that God has made known the mystery to the Gentiles, it seems that the mystery is more particularly that “Christ dwells in you Gentiles.” The Jews historically thought that the promises of God belonged to them alone, but God revealed that the Gentiles were also heirs of the promise of the indwelling Christ. (See Ephesians 3:2-12.)

In explaining the mystery, the majority text uses “who,” referring to Christ, instead of “which” but the antecedent is “mystery,” and thus “which” seems to be more appropriate. Either way, there is no real difference in meaning, for the mystery is Christ dwelling in us.

Christ’s indwelling presence is our “hope of glory,” or pledge of final glory. If we do not have the Spirit of Christ we do not belong to Him, but if we have His abiding presence we have spiritual life, righteousness, the promise of resurrection, and an inheritance as God’s children (Romans 8:9-17). The Holy Spirit is “the guarantee of our inheritance until the redemption of the purchased possession, to the praise of His glory” (Ephesians 1:13-14, NKJV).

*Verse 28.* Since the revealed mystery that God had commissioned Paul to proclaim was the indwelling Christ, Paul preached Christ. (See I Corinthians 1:23; 2:2.) The preaching of Christ includes (1) *warning*—admonishing, reproving, convincing of error—and (2) *teaching in wisdom*—instructing in the truth.

Significantly, Paul preached to everyone. The gospel is for all. Specifically, wisdom is for everyone, not just for an elite, as Gnosticism taught.

The purpose of preaching is to present everyone perfect in Christ Jesus. (The critical text omits “Jesus.”) In other words, the goal of preaching is practical holiness.

The time when the saints will be presented to Christ is at His second coming. The thought here is similar to I Thessalonians 5:23: “And the very God of peace sanctify you wholly; and

I pray God your whole spirit and soul and body be preserved blameless unto the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ," (See also Ephesians 5:27; Colossians 1:22.)

"Perfect" is translated from *teleios*, which means "mature, fully grown, complete, whole." The Christian life is a continual growth process, a process of perfecting holiness (Matthew 5:48; II Corinthians 7:1; Philippians 3:12-16). No one is absolutely perfect, but each of us should seek to be relatively perfect, or mature. We can live a holy life by separating from sin and dedicating ourselves to God. We can be perfect, or mature, by maintaining our faith in Christ, living a repented life according to God's Word, and seeking to grow progressively more Christ-like by the power of the indwelling Spirit (Ephesians 4:13). God expects continual growth in grace and knowledge and increasing production of spiritual fruit (John 15:1-8; II Peter 3:18).

"Every man" is repeated, stressing that there is no spiritual elite in the church. Everyone who believes and obeys the gospel will be presented as perfect to the Lord when He comes; He will transform all the saints into sinless perfection at His coming. Contrary to Jewish and Gnostic ideas of the first and second centuries, everyone has this opportunity.

Verse 29. Paul labored, or toiled, to bring about this result in the lives of everyone to whom he ministered. Several words in this verse describe his strenuous efforts and God's empowering grace.

- "Labour" (*kopiao*): "toil carried to the point of weariness or exhaustion"; a word often used of manual labor.<sup>4</sup>

- "Striving" (*agonizomai*): struggling; agonizing; "the most strenuous and self-denying effort."<sup>5</sup> This word carries the athletic connotation of contending in the arena or engaging in a contest. It comes from the same root as the word translated "conflict" in Colossians 2:1.

- "Working" (*energeia*): energy, operative force, power in action. Paul did not merely toil and struggle according to his own human strength and ability but according to God's working, which worked in him. (In both Greek and English, the same root appears first as a noun and then as a verb.)

- "Mightily" (*dunamis*): in power, in strength. God's working through Paul was powerful. Preaching the gospel requires strenuous and even agonizing human toil, and it may involve considerable human suffering, but the preacher does not stand alone. God will anoint his efforts far beyond his human ability and empower him supernaturally. In this way, the preacher will be able to accomplish the spiritual task that God has entrusted to him.

### **B. Personal concern (2:1-5)**

*(1) For I would that ye knew what great conflict I have for you, and for them at Laodicea, and for as many as have not seen my face in the flesh; (2) that their hearts might be comforted, being knit together in love, and unto all riches of the full assurance of understanding, to the acknowledgement of the mystery of God, and of the Father, and of Christ; (3) in whom are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. (4) And this I say, lest any man should beguile you with enticing words. (5) For though I be absent in the flesh, yet am I with you in the spirit, joying and beholding your order, and the steadfastness of your faith in Christ.*

Verse 1 begins with a phrase that is typical of Paul: I would have you know. (See Romans 1:13; Philippians 1:12.) He wished to inform his readers of the great struggle he undertook on their behalf. "Conflict" is from the Greek word *agon*, which means "struggle, fight, opposition." It conveys athletic imagery, connoting a contest in the arena. Verb forms of the same root word appear in Colossians 1:29 ("striving") and 4:12 ("labouring"). Paul's

struggle was primarily in his spirit and in his prayers. Similarly, the struggle in Colossians 4:12 refers to prayer.

Paul had never been to Colosse and Laodicea, but he carried a strong burden for the saints there as well as others he had not met personally.

Verse 2 presents Paul's threefold purpose for struggling spiritually. He wanted the believers (1) to be *encouraged* ("comforted"), (2) to attain *unity in love* (see also Colossians 3:14), and (3) to attain the full riches of *complete understanding*. These are the primary goals of discipleship. Significantly, it is impossible to divorce spiritual understanding from brotherly love.

According to the KJV, the ultimate goal of understanding is to have the "acknowledgment" or full knowledge (*epignosis*), of "the mystery of God, and of the Father, and of Christ." As in Colossians 1:26, a mystery is something once concealed but now revealed. We need to understand not only that God is our Father and Creator, as the Jews of the Old Testament did, but also that God became incarnate in Christ and that as a true human Christ made atonement for our sins. (See John 17:3; I Timothy 2:5.)

The use of "and" here does not designate separate persons; if so, not only would Christ and the Father be distinct persons but so would God and the Father. (See also Colossians 3:17.) Actually, the Bible reveals that Christ is the Father incarnate. (See Isaiah 9:6; 63:16; John 10:30; 14:9-11; Colossians 1:19; 2:9.) The distinction here is similar to that in Colossians 1:2 (KJV): knowing God as the Creator and Father of all and also knowing God as incarnate in Jesus Christ for our salvation.

In the critical text verse 2 omits "Father" and simply concludes with "the mystery of God, Christ" or "the mystery of God, of Christ" The NIV translates: "the mystery of God, namely, Christ." This rendering can mean that Christ is God Himself or that the revealed mystery of God is Christ. Both statements are true. (See John 20:28; I Timothy 3:16.) In any case, verse 3 attributes full deity to Jesus.

Verse 3 teaches that Jesus Christ is omniscient (all wise, all knowing). He is the treasure house in whom are hidden all wisdom and knowledge. They are hidden but available to all who seek Him. It seems that here wisdom (*sophia*) refers to spiritual insight while knowledge (*gnosis*) refers to the specific truths of the gospel.

This verse stands in contrast to the false teaching in Colosse. The false teachers proudly claimed wisdom and knowledge of their own (Colossians 2:8, 18, 23), but actually all wisdom and knowledge is in Christ. If the false teachers were like the Gnostics, they claimed secret, esoteric knowledge, but true wisdom and knowledge are revealed secrets that are available to all who know Christ.

Verse 4 makes explicit the warning against the false teaching in Colosse. Tactfully, Paul did not accuse the believers of already being deceived, but he warned them of the danger of someone deceiving them with enticing words. The singular "any man" here and in verse 8 may indicate that one false teacher was particularly responsible for the doctrinal problems in Colosse. (See also verses 16, 18.)

To "beguile" here means to deceive. "Enticing words" means persuasive speech; plausible (but false) arguments; fine-sounding, attractive arguments. By contrast, Paul made a point not to use "enticing words of man's wisdom" but to preach the gospel "in demonstration of the Spirit and of power" (I Corinthians 2:4).

Verse 5. Although Paul was absent in body, he was present in spirit. In other words, he assured the Colossian believers that he was with them in his thoughts and in his prayers. He rejoiced over two characteristics of theirs. 1. Their "order"—orderliness, soldierly discipline.

The word has military connotations.

2. The “stedfastness”—firmness, stability—of their faith in Christ. The Greek preposition for “in” is *eis*, meaning that Christ is the object of faith. Again we see Paul’s tact, courtesy, and gentleness under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Just before the subsequent verses begin a specific refutation of the Colossian heresy, verse 5 reaffirms the positive spiritual qualities of the Colossian believers.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>J. W. Shepard, *The Life and Letters of St. Paul* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1950), 516.

<sup>2</sup>Lightfoot, 166.

<sup>3</sup>Bruce, 84.

<sup>4</sup>Erdman, 66.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid.

IV.

### False Philosophy versus True Faith (Colossians 2:6–3:4)

*The lordship of Jesus versus the false teaching at Colosse*

This section of Colossians is polemical; it opposes and disputes the false teaching at Colosse. By contrast, the previous portion of the epistle is doctrinal, and the subsequent portion is practical. This passage issues a strong warning against error and constitutes the heart of the epistle.

**A. The sole sufficiency of Jesus (2:6-15)** (6) *As ye have therefore received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk ye in him: (7) rooted and built up in him, and stablished in the faith, as ye have been taught, abounding therein with thanksgiving. (8) Beware lest any man spoil you through philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men, after the rudiments of the world, and not after Christ. (9) For in him dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily. (10) And ye are complete in him, which is the head of all principality and power: (11) in whom also ye are circumcised with the circumcision made without hands, in putting off the body of the sins of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ: (12) buried with him in baptism, wherein also ye are risen with him through the faith of the operation of God, who hath raised him from the dead. (13) And you, being dead in your sins and the uncircumcision of your flesh, hath he quickened together with him, having forgiven you all trespasses; (14) blotting out the handwriting of ordinances that was against us, which was contrary to us, and took it out of the way, nailing it to his cross; (15) and having spoiled principalities and powers, he made a shew of them openly, triumphing over them in it.*

Verse 6 speaks of the Christian life as a journey on a path. The only way to victory and eternal salvation is for us to continue walking (living) in Jesus Christ in the same way that we began in Him, namely, by faith and through the power of His Spirit.

We received Christ and experienced the new birth by faith (Ephesians 2:8-9); therefore, we must continue to live in Christ by faith. “The just shall live by faith” (Romans 1:17). We put on Christ initially, becoming part of His body by repentance, water baptism, and the baptism of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:38; I Corinthians 12:13; Galatians 3:27); therefore, we must continue to live a repented life, bear His name, be filled with His Spirit, and put Him on (Romans 13:14). We received Christ by receiving His Spirit; therefore, we must continue to live by the power of His Holy Spirit. “Received ye the Spirit by the works of the law, or by the

hearing of faith? Are ye so foolish: having begun in the Spirit, are ye now made perfect by the flesh? . . . Walk in the Spirit” (Galatians 3:2-3; 5:16). (See also Romans 8:1-16.)

Verse 7 first compares the Christian to a plant. We are to be “rooted” in Jesus Christ. The Greek uses the perfect participle, which indicates that our rooting is to be permanent, abiding, once for all.

Next, the verse compares the Christian to a building. We are to be “built up” in Jesus Christ. The Greek uses the present participle, which indicates that our building up is to be continual, progressive, day to day.

We are to be “stablished”—established, confirmed, strengthened—in the faith. The Greek again uses the present participle, showing that this establishing is a continual process. This process is to occur “as ye have been taught”—not in accordance with the human thinking described in verse 8 but in accordance with gospel truths and instruction from God’s Word.

Finally, we are to abound, or overflow, with thanksgiving. A key to spiritual victory is to maintain an attitude of thankfulness under all circumstances. (See Ephesians 5:20; Colossians 3:17; I Thessalonians 5:18.) (The critical text omits “therein.”)

Verse 8. After verses 6-7 describe the way to live victoriously as a Christian, verse 8 issues a warning and a call to vigilance, opening with “beware.” The Greek text literally says, “Beware lest there will be . . . ,” using a future indicative verb to express that the danger is not merely conjectural or hypothetical but real and likely.

The danger is that someone would “spoil you.” The verb means to take captive, carry off as spoil, rob, cheat. Here are the means by which such an event could take place.

- “Philosophy.” The word simply means love of wisdom, but this verse couples it with “vain deceit,” giving it a negative connotation. Hence it means false human wisdom as opposed to true spiritual wisdom.

- “Vain deceit,” or empty deception. The Greek uses one article for “philosophy and vain deceit,” indicating that both descriptions refer to the same thing. Thus the NIV combines them into one description: “hollow and deceptive philosophy.”

- “The tradition of men.” There is an implied contrast here to the commandments of God. (See Mark 7:6-9; Colossians 2:22.)

- “The rudiments of the world.” The same Greek phrase appears in verse 20 and in Galatians 4:3. The Greek word translated “rudiments” is *stoicheia*, which means “fundamental principles, basic principles, first lessons, rudimentary instruction, elements.” The same word is translated “elements” in Galatians 4:9. Some commentators say that here it means elemental forces, powers, or spirits, but according to the context of both Galatians and Colossians it seems to mean legalistic traditions or teachings based on worldly, fleshly thinking.

Thus false philosophy is based on human traditions and principles of the world. Instead of following these faulty sources of teaching, we need to learn Christ.

We must not base our doctrine of Christ upon human philosophy. Unfortunately, the terms and concepts that characterize traditional trinitarianism were borrowed from secular philosophy of the ancient world, and they lead to a distortion of the true doctrine of God. Instead of appealing to tradition, creeds, philosophies, and manmade doctrines, we should adhere to the text, teaching, and thought of Scripture itself.

Verse 9 presents the doctrine of Jesus Christ in contrast to false teachings. It is a magnificent description of the Incarnation, for it emphasizes both the true deity and true humanity of Jesus Christ. Let us examine each major word of the verse.



• “Him.” The antecedent is “Christ” (verse 8), or more fully, “Christ Jesus the Lord” (verse 6).

• “Dwelleth,” or lives. The word is in the present tense, meaning that the fullness of God continues to dwell in Jesus Christ. The union of deity and humanity in Christ is permanent.

• “Godhead” (*theotes*): the Deity. This Greek word appears only here in the New Testament. It is “the abstract noun for God . . . and includes not only the divine attributes but also the divine nature.”<sup>1</sup> The word refers to the state of being God, to the sum total of God’s nature. The identity of Jesus as God would be established if verse 9 simply said, “In Him dwells the Godhead,” for by definition “Godhead” is the fullness of absolute deity.

• “Fulness” (*pleroma*): plenitude, totality. The same word appears in Colossians 1:19. The Gnostics used it to designate the supreme God in contrast to lesser emanations from Him. This verse contradicts the Gnostic view that Christ was an emanation from the *pleroma*; instead, it says that the *pleroma* is in Christ. To be as clear as possible, the verse says “the fulness” of the Godhead dwells in Jesus, although the Godhead can never be less than complete and absolute.

• “All.” To underscore the deity of Christ even further, the verse says “all” the fullness, although by definition anything less than all would not be fullness. Lightfoot explained that “all the fulness” means “the totality of the divine powers and attributes.”<sup>2</sup> Thus verse 9 uses three words to declare the absolute deity of Jesus in the strongest of terms, although one would have been sufficient to express the point.

• “Bodily” (*somatikos*): “bodily-wise, corporeally, assuming a bodily form, becoming incarnate, with a bodily manifestation.”<sup>3</sup> This word contradicts the Gnostic view that Christ was a spirit being only. In Christ, God has joined Himself to humanity and has come into this world as a human being.

In order to capture the full meaning and implication of verse 9, let us examine some other translations and paraphrases.

• “For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form” (NIV).

• “For in Christ the Godhead in all its fulness dwells incarnate” (Twentieth Century New Testament).

• “It is in him that God gives a full and complete expression of himself (within the physical limits that he set himself in Christ)” (Phillips).

• “For in Christ there is all of God in a human body” (Living Bible).

• “For in Him the whole fullness of Deity (the Godhead), continues to dwell in bodily form—giving complete expression of the divine nature” (Amplified Bible).

• “In Him (Christ) dwells permanently all the fulness (pleroma, plenitude) of the Godhead or deity in bodily form, and even also in His glorified humanity upon the throne of the universe” (Shepard).<sup>4</sup>

• “In Christ the entire fulness of the Godhead abides forever, having united itself with man by taking a human body” (Lightfoot).<sup>5</sup>

Charles Erdman has provided an excellent commentary here:

“In him” is emphatic. It is in Christ, and nowhere else, that one is to find “the fulness of the Godhead.” In him the fullness “dwelleth,” that is, has its permanent abode. This “fulness” means the unbounded powers and attributes of God. The word “Godhead” denotes the essence or content of divine being, that indeed which constitutes God. Here in most absolute terms Paul states not merely the divinity but the deity of Christ. The word deity,

and its corresponding word in the Greek, denotes the “being God.” Christ is not only Godlike; he is God.<sup>6</sup>

John 1:1, 14 is a parallel passage: “The Word was God. . . . And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us.”

All the roles, titles, and attributes of God are invested in Jesus. Whatever God is, Jesus is. He is the incarnate God, Father, Word, Spirit, Lord, and Jehovah. (See John 1:1, 14; 8:58; 10:30; 14:9-11, 16-18; 20:28; II Corinthians 3:17.) In sum, Jesus Christ is the incarnation of the one God, and this truth is foundational to our faith.

Ephesians 3:19 uses similar language as part of a prayer that Christians “might be filled with all the fulness of God.” Although the language is similar to that of Colossians 2:9, the idea is somewhat different. Ephesians 3:19 does not mean that Christians can be God incarnate as Jesus is, nor does Colossians 2:9 mean merely that Jesus was filled with the Spirit as Christians are. A study of their respective contexts will demonstrate the differences between these two verses.

The main theme of Colossians is the lordship of Jesus. In particular, Colossians 1-2 proclaims His authority, preeminence, omniscience, omnipotence, and deity. (See Table 1 in “Introduction to Colossians.”) The specific words used in Colossians 2:9 express that He is God incarnate. Thus the verse strongly affirms the absolute deity of Jesus Christ.

By contrast, the main subject of Ephesians is the church. The church is the fullness of Christ because it is His body (Ephesians 1:23). The prayer that we be filled with the fullness of God is coupled with the prayer that Christ dwell in our hearts (Ephesians 3:17). In other words, since Christ is the fullness of God, when we have Christ in us we have the fullness of God in us. Thus Ephesians 3:19 speaks of the fullness we have through Christ. It is a parallel to Colossians 2:10, not Colossians 2:9.

Jesus Christ is different from Christians in that He is actually God incarnate, God revealed in flesh, the human personification of the one God. The Deity resides in Him because He was literally conceived by the Spirit of God; God joined Himself to humanity in the womb of Mary. Jesus embodies the Spirit of God without measure (John 3:34-35). Ordinary humans can live without the Spirit of God in them, but it was not so with Jesus. He was God by nature, by right, by identity; He was not merely deified by an anointing or indwelling. Unlike the case of a Spiritfilled person, the humanity of Jesus was inextricably joined with all the fullness of God’s Spirit.

Jesus possessed the unlimited power, authority, and character of God as His very nature, while we participate in those qualities only by having Christ in us. We have the fullness of God in our lives only as we let Jesus Christ live in us. We can let God’s nature shine through us and control us, but we can also quench it and let our own human nature dominate.

With regard to “fulness,” or *pleroma*, Lightfoot explained the contrast and connection between Ephesians and Colossians:

When we turn from the Colossian letter to the Ephesian, it is necessary to bear in mind the different aims of the two epistles. While in the former the Apostle’s main object is to assert the supremacy of the Person of Christ, in the latter his principal theme is the life and energy of the Church, as dependent on Christ. . . .

Your fulness comes from His fulness; His *pleroma* is transfused into you by virtue of your incorporation in Him. . . . The Church, as ideally regarded, is called the *pleroma* of Christ, because all His graces and energies are communicated to her.<sup>7</sup>

Verse 10 is the practical application of verse 9. The deity of Jesus Christ is not merely an abstract theological concept; it has profound implications for our daily lives. Since Jesus is the fullness of God in flesh, we are “complete,”—filled, completed—in Him. “Complete” here comes from the same Greek root word as “fulness” in verse 9. Some translations use the same English word in both verses to make the connection clear: “And you have been given fullness in Christ” (NIV). “And you are in Him, made full and have come to fullness of life—in Christ you too are filled with the Godhead” (Amplified Bible).

In short, we have everything we need in Jesus. If all we know is Jesus, we know enough to be saved, healed, delivered, protected, and preserved, for when we have Him we have everything that God is. Even if someone does not understand the doctrine of God or has never heard of the Holy Spirit, he can repent of his sins by confessing to Jesus, have his sins washed away in the name of Jesus, and receive the Holy Spirit (the Spirit of Jesus) by calling upon Jesus in faith. For example, Cornelius and his household received the Holy Spirit when they repented and believed the simple message about Jesus, and then they were baptized in Jesus’ name (Acts 10:36-48). Repentance, the remission of sins at water baptism, and the baptism of the Holy Spirit all come through the name of Jesus (Luke 24:47; John 14:26; Acts 2:38).

Because Jesus is God incarnate, He is the head of every “principality” (ruler) and “power” (authority). (See also Colossians 1:16; 2:15.) Not only did Jesus have original authority as Creator, but He continues to exercise full authority over all creation. All forces—good or evil, natural or supernatural—are subject to Him. In other words, He is omnipotent (all powerful).

Just as John 1:1, 14 parallels Colossians 2:9, so John 1:16 parallels Colossians 2:10: “And of his fulness have all we received, and grace for grace.” Ephesians 3:17, 19 is also a parallel: “That Christ may dwell in your hearts by faith . . . that ye might be filled with all the fulness of God.”

Verse 11 explains that our completion or fullness in Christ includes the new birth and new life. Circumcision, the means by which a Jewish male entered into covenant with God and identified with God’s people in the Old Testament, is a type or foreshadowing of our initiation into the new covenant, which occurs by “the circumcision of Christ.” In Christ we have been circumcised, not physically but spiritually, not by a man but by God. New Testament circumcision does not cut away physical skin, but it puts off (literally, strips off) “the body of the sins of the flesh.” (The critical text omits “of the sins.”)

We have been set free from the sins of the flesh, of the fleshly body, of the sinful nature. Our new birth did not eradicate the sinful nature itself, but God wiped away our past sins and gave us power to overcome the sinful nature. (See Romans 6:6-7; 8:1-4; Galatians 5:16-18.) We must still struggle with the sinful nature, but we have received power to resist it and received a new attitude toward it (Colossians 3:5).

Verse 12. Our spiritual circumcision took place when we were buried with Christ and raised with Him. The use of the aorist (simple past) tense for each of the three Greek verbs that mean “circumcised,” “buried with,” and “raised together” suggests this connection. Some versions make this link between verses 11 and 12 explicit: “In him you were also circumcised . . . with the circumcision done by Christ, having been buried with him in baptism and raised with him through your faith in the power of God” (NIV). “[Thus you were circumcised when] you were buried with Him in [your] baptism” (Amplified Bible, brackets in original).

Our burial with Christ occurred at our water baptism. “In baptism” means “in the act of baptism.” Similarly, Romans 6:4 says, “We are buried with him [Jesus Christ] by baptism.”

Although the primary purpose of this passage is not to teach the mode or formula of water baptism, its description of baptism presumes immersion in the name of Jesus. Neither Paul nor his original readers would have thought of baptism as a burial if it were performed by sprinkling or pouring; the only connection between baptism and burial is the scriptural mode of immersion. (See Matthew 3:16; Acts 8:38-39.)

Neither would they have thought of baptism as a burial specifically with Jesus if it were performed by invoking the names of three different persons; the identification with Him comes by invoking His name in faith. (See Acts 2:38; 8:16; 10:48; 19:5; 22:16.) Since Jesus is the fullness of the Godhead incarnate, the name of Jesus is “the name [singular] of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost” (Matthew 28:19). The name of Jesus reveals the Father, was given to the Son at birth, and is the name in which the Holy Spirit comes to us (Matthew 1:21; John 5:43; 14:26).

Colossians 2 also presumes that baptism is only for those who believe and repent. Verse 12 reveals that faith is necessary for spiritual circumcision. The concept of burial implies a previous death, to which verses 13 and 20 refer explicitly. By definition, death to sin and self-will occurs at repentance. Clearly, then, infant baptism is neither appropriate nor valid.

Some argue in favor of infant baptism on the ground that Old Testament circumcision was for infants. But they fail to understand that the new covenant is spiritual and not physical. Spiritual circumcision is for those who are coming to birth spiritually, not physically. It is a spiritual separation from sin. Moreover, as we shall see, New Testament circumcision also includes the baptism of the Spirit; therefore, only those who are presently capable of also receiving that part of the experience are qualified for water baptism.

Our resurrection with Christ occurred through faith in the working of God, the same God who raised Jesus from the dead. God works in our lives by His Spirit, for the same Spirit that raised Jesus from the dead dwells in us (Romans 8:11). When we repented and believed, God filled us with the Holy Spirit, and the Holy Spirit imparted new life. (See Romans 6:4; 7:6; 8:2, 10, 13.)

The clause that describes our resurrection with Christ begins with “wherein,” meaning “in which,” apparently referring back to water baptism. Consequently, some commentators assert that spiritual resurrection occurs automatically at water baptism, and they identify spiritual circumcision with water baptism alone. The New Testament reveals that both water baptism and Spirit baptism are part of the new birth, however, so it is more correct to speak of both as part of spiritual circumcision. (See John 3:5; Acts 2:38; I Corinthians 6:11; 12:13; Galatians 3:27; Titus 3:5.) Spiritual circumcision includes both the putting away of sin by repentance and water baptism and the impartation of new life by the Holy Spirit. Both are part of entering the new covenant and identifying with God’s people in the New Testament church.

New spiritual life does not come automatically at the ceremony of baptism; it comes through faith, specifically through faith in the working of God. “The faith of the operation of God” here means “faith in the operation of God” according to Greek grammar, and “the operation of God” implies the work of the Holy Spirit. Someone may be truly baptized in water and yet not be filled with the Spirit (Acts 8:15-16). At most, then, we should understand “wherein” to indicate that baptism symbolizes new life in the Spirit. When someone is baptized, his sins are washed away, and as he rises out of the water he opens his heart to receive the Spirit. The act of rising thus symbolizes his entrance into new life, but he must actually receive the Spirit in order to truly experience the new life.

The two Greek words translated “wherein” can also be translated “in whom.” In fact, the identical words are translated “in whom” at the beginning of verse 11. If that is their meaning here, then the reference is to Christ: we are resurrected in Him. This rendering would make verses 11 and 12 parallel and would encompass the baptism of the Spirit more directly.

A careful study of verses 11-12 and the typology of circumcision will dispel two false concepts of water baptism. First, some teach that baptism is symbolic only and is not part of New Testament salvation. But circumcision was not optional under the old covenant. Once God gave the command to Abraham and his descendants, it became part of the obedience of faith and was necessary for entrance into the covenant. “This is my covenant, which ye shall keep, between me and you and thy seed after thee; every man child among you shall be circumcised. . . . And the uncircumcised man child . . . shall be cut off from his people; he hath broken my covenant” (Genesis 17:10, 14). Even after the overwhelming spiritual experience that Moses had at the burning bush, God would have killed him if he had not circumcised his sons (Exodus 4:24-26). An uncircumcised man could not participate in the Passover supper (Exodus 12:43-44). Even after the Israelites entered the Promised Land, they had to obey the command to be circumcised (Joshua 5:2-9). Without circumcision an Israelite male was not part of God’s people; he was subject to the penalty of death and could not participate in God’s salvation plan for his nation. Similarly, today we express our faith and identify with the new covenant by obeying God’s command to be baptized.

The second false concept is that baptism alone is necessary to enter the new covenant. Even under the law, circumcision alone was valueless without a corresponding faith in God and obedience to His Word (Deuteronomy 30:6; Jeremiah 4:4; Romans 2:25; 4:12). Colossians 2:12 shows that baptism must be associated with faith and the regenerating work of God’s Spirit. Baptism is not effective because of the water or because of human works; it is effective by the death of Christ and our faith in Him. He is the One who washes away our sins by His blood when we come before Him in obedient faith.

Colossians explains that in our new birth we identified with Christ’s death, burial, and resurrection. First, we died with Christ (Colossians 2:20; 3:3). Then the Greek uses three verbs that have the suffix *sun*, which means “co-” or “together.” Literally, we were co-buried with Christ (Colossians 2:12), co-raised with Christ (Colossians 2:12; 3:1), and co-quickened or co-enlivened with Christ (Colossians 2:13). (See also Romans 6:1-11.)

In the context of warning against false teaching, verse 12 seems to say, “Remember your new-birth experience, and you will be delivered from adding anything to Jesus Christ. As you remember how He saved and transformed you, you will understand anew who He really is, and you will maintain your faith in Him alone.”

*Verse 13* reiterates the message of verses 11-12. Before our new birth, we were dead in our sins and in the uncircumcision of our flesh (the unregenerate state of our sinful nature). At the new birth, God “quickened” us, or made us alive, with Christ and forgave us of all our sins. The Greek verb translated as “having forgiven” here is *charizoumai*, which literally means “show grace.” It seems to encompass all the work of forgiveness or remission, including both repentance and water baptism. (See Acts 2:38.) As in verse 11, the new birth includes both the removal of sins and the impartation of new life.

The subject of this verse is God. He is the One who saves us. Verses 10-12 attribute the work of salvation to Christ, but there is no contradiction. Since God is fully incarnate in Christ, the work of Christ is the work of God Himself.

*Verse 14* explains how God made provision so that we could receive the new birth. Although there is no explicit change of subject from verse 13, the words “his cross” obviously point to Christ, so many commentators say there is an implied change of subject

from God to Christ. Either interpretation is acceptable, for the Atonement was the work of God in Christ. Much like Colossians 1:19-22, Colossians 2:9-14 links the doctrines of Oneness and the Atonement.

This verse uses the analogy of a debt to describe God's work of forgiveness, likening sin to a debt we incurred to God. The Greek word for "handwriting" is *cheirographon*, which means "a note, bond, handwriting, certificate of debt, unpaid note, unfulfilled obligation." It is "a statement of debt signed by the debtor in token of his acknowledgement of his indebtedness."<sup>8</sup>

The Epistle to Philemon, which Paul wrote at the same time as Colossians, provides a good example. In verse 19, Paul formally promised in writing to Philemon that he would stand good for the debts of Onesimus, saying, "I Paul have written it with mine own hand." He used the words *cheir* (hand) and *grapho* (write); the same words form *cheirographon*.

The "ordinances" defined the duties we failed to fulfill. The word especially refers to the law of Moses. (See Ephesians 2:15.) Although the law was good and holy in itself, because of our sin it could not save us; it could only condemn us. It was against us; it stood opposed to us. (See Romans 3:20; 4:15; 7:5-13; 8:3-4.) As Carson explained, "The law of God not only stated our guilt, but cried out for the penalty due to such guilt."<sup>9</sup>

When we were born again, the debt of sin in our lives was blotted out, canceled, wiped out. God wiped out the record of debts with its requirements that was against us, which was contrary to us. He "canceled the written code with its regulations" (NIV). He no longer held us accountable for the broken ordinances and unpaid debts of the past, but He gave us a new start. He "has utterly wiped out the damning evidence of broken laws and commandments which always hung over our heads, and has completely annulled it" (Phillips).

He "took it out of the way." The Greek phrase literally means He "removed it out of the middle, set it aside, took it away." The verb is in the perfect tense, which draws attention to the continuing effect of what has happened. God has removed what hindered our fellowship with Him. Not only did He erase the writing, but He tore up the condemning document itself.

He did so by nailing it to the cross. The verb is aorist, referring to the one past act by which He has performed the work. The cross represents the atoning work of Jesus Christ, including His death, burial, and resurrection, resurrection being necessary for the death to bring victory to us (Romans 4:25). We participate in the benefits of the Atonement by identifying personally with Christ's death, burial, and resurrection through the new birth. Bruce has explained the "handwriting" and "ordinances" well:

The sins which have now been forgiven represented, so to speak, a mountain of bankruptcy which those who had incurred it were bound to acknowledge but could never have any hope of discharging. They had violated the ordinances of the law, and nothing that they might do could afford redress. But Christ wiped the slate clean and gave them a fresh start. He took that signed acknowledgment of indebtedness which stood as a perpetual witness against them and cancelled it by his death. . . .

[In the words of J. A. T. Robinson, the handwriting is] "our written agreement to keep the law, our certificate of debt to it"... But our failure to keep the law has turned this certificate into a bond held against us to prove our guilt; it is this bond, representing the power which the law has over us, rather than the law itself, which Paul views as cancelled by Christ.<sup>10</sup>

Interestingly, from verse 13 to verse 14 there is a change of pronoun from "you" to "us." Paul described the conversion experience in the second person, but when he described human sinfulness he tactfully changed to the first person plural so as to include himself.

*Verse 15.* By the cross Christ “spoiled principalities and powers” The verb here means to disarm, strip, put off. It is the same word translated as “put off” in Colossians 3:9, and the noun form is translated as “putting off” in Colossians 2:11. Using the metaphor of a victor stripping his defeated enemies of clothing, armor, and arms, Colossians 2:15 announces Christ’s total victory over all rulers and authorities.

Colossians 1:16 and 2:10 establish Christ’s preeminence and authority over the same two categories of forces. This verse speaks of them as evil spiritual forces.

Christ also “made a shew of them openly.” He exposed, disgraced, or mocked them in public; He “made a public spectacle of them” (NIV). The Greek word for “openly” can also mean “boldly.”

He “triumph[ed] over them” by the cross. He led them in triumph. Together, the two phrases paint a picture of captives in the triumphal procession of a Roman general.

The message of verse 15 is that not only did Christ free us from guilt, but He also freed us from the power of sin. Not only did He cancel our debt, but He triumphed gloriously over our foes.

In summary, the new birth is our spiritual circumcision (verse 11) and our identification with the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ (verses 12-13). On the cross Jesus paid the penalty for our sins (verse 14) and defeated the forces of evil (verse 15); we enjoy these benefits when we identify individually with His atoning work. In this way, we find everything we need in Him and are complete in Him (verse 10). The efficacy of His atoning work and the validity of our salvation are dependent upon His identity as the one God incarnate (verse 9). For this reason, we must not be deceived by false human doctrines and traditions (verse 8); instead, we must continue to walk by faith in Him (verse 6), being established and built up in Him alone (verse 7).

#### **B. Freedom in Jesus (2:16-19)**

*(16) Let no man therefore judge you in meat, or in drink, or in respect of an holyday, or of the new moon, or of the sabbath days: (17) which are a shadow of things to come; but the body is of Christ. (18) Let no man beguile you of your reward in a voluntary humility and worshipping of angels, intruding into those things which he hath not seen, vainly puffed up by his fleshly mind, (19) and not holding the Head, from which all the body by joints and bands having nourishment ministered, and knit together, increaseth with the increase of God.*

After combating heresy in positive terms by establishing the sole sufficiency of Jesus, the epistle directly confronts the false teaching at Colosse. This passage issues a twofold warning against ritualism/asceticism and mysticism; evidently both were characteristic of the Colossian heresy.

*Verse 16.* “Therefore” points back to the all sufficiency of Christ. Because our salvation is in Christ alone, we do not need to be concerned about people who would judge us in ritualistic matters. Because Christ nailed the ordinances to the cross, we should not let anyone condemn us in these matters. As verse 17 shows, the examples in this verse relate to Jewish ceremonial law and possibly to more stringent elaborations on its regulations. The examples given fall under two categories.

The first category is eating and drinking. (The KJV “meat” simply means “food.”) The law of Moses classified certain foods as unclean (Leviticus 11:1-32). Water or other liquids could also be unclean, or forbidden because of a vow (Leviticus 11:34-36; Numbers 6:3).

The second category relates to sacred days. The Greek words here mean (1) a festival or feast, (2) a new moon festival, and (3) Sabbaths (plural). The festival or feast was an annual holy day such as the Passover or Pentecost. The new moon festival was a monthly

holy day (Numbers 10:10; 28:11-15). The Sabbaths were weekly holy days. Some argue that this verse means only special Sabbaths associated with the annual festivals, not the weekly Sabbath, but every Old Testament and New Testament use of “Sabbath” refers to the weekly Sabbath unless otherwise specified, and so we should understand it here. Moreover, the use of the plural covers any and all Sabbath days or observances.

It appears that we have here an exhaustive description of sacred days throughout the year, similar to their listing in many Old Testament passages. (See I Chronicles 23:31; II Chronicles 2:4; 31:3; Isaiah 1:13-14; Ezekiel 45:17; Hosea 2:11.) Hence the Twentieth Century New Testament translates the phrase as “annual, or monthly, or weekly festivals.”

This verse does not prohibit people from continuing to observe certain dietary laws and religious days. As a matter of culture or personal preference, individuals can continue these or other similar practices as long as they do not become contentious over them or make them issues of salvation. The point is that no one should try to compel observance of such rituals, nor should someone feel condemned for not observing them.

The church today is not under God’s covenant with Israel as epitomized by the Ten Commandments but under the new covenant (Jeremiah 31:31-34; Romans 7:5-6; Galatians 3:23-25; 4:21-31; Hebrews 8:6-13). As a result, the church no longer observes the physical signs and ceremonies of the old covenant, such as circumcision (Galatians 6:15). God and His Word are unchanging, but some of His commands relate only to certain people or a certain time. While God’s moral law never changes, Christians are not subject to the ceremonial law of the Old Testament (Acts 11:5-9; 15:1-29).

Specifically, Christians are not compelled to obey the dietary laws (Mark 7:14-19; Acts 10:11-16; I Timothy 4:1-3). Nor is physical Sabbath keeping a requirement under the new covenant (Romans 14:5-6, 13; Galatians 4:9-11).

The Sabbath was given uniquely to the nation of Israel (Exodus 31:13; Deuteronomy 5:15; Ezekiel 20:12-13). It was ceremonial in nature, not inherently moral. (See Isaiah 1:10-20; Matthew 12:1-13.) Jesus and Paul affirmed the moral law of the Old Testament; they referred to some of the Ten Commandments as stating eternal moral standards, but it is notable that they did not mention the Sabbath law in these references (Mark 10:19; 12:28-31; Romans 13:8-10).

Of course, Christians are to be faithful to local church meetings whenever they are held (Hebrews 10:25), and from the earliest times, Christians have usually conducted their main worship services on Sunday (Acts 20:7; I Corinthians 16:2). Early believers chose the day of Christ’s resurrection to emphasize that they were not under the old covenant, which the Sabbath symbolized, but under the new covenant, which His resurrection instituted. Nevertheless, any day is appropriate for a special spiritual observance (Romans 14:5-6).

*Verse 17* explains the purpose of these superseded ceremonial laws. Literally, they were a shadow of things coming; they were prophetic or typological. (See Hebrews 8:5; 10:1.) Like the shadow cast ahead of someone who is walking around a corner, they provided significant preliminary information about the One who was coming.

The body (substance, reality) is of Christ. He is the One who cast the shadow ahead of Him. Now that we possess the reality, we no longer need the shadow. Now that we can learn of Him directly, we no longer need to participate in rituals that teach about Him indirectly and incompletely. God used the ceremonial law—including blood sacrifices, dietary laws, circumcision, Sabbaths, and feasts—as types of truth to be found in Christ and His gospel. Since we now have the substance, we no longer need to observe the types and shadows.



In particular, the dietary laws separated the Israelites from all other nations and taught Israel a clear distinction between the clean and unclean, the holy and profane. (See Leviticus 11:47; Ezekiel 22:26.) These principles of separation and distinction are vitally important in a spiritual sense today (II Corinthians 6:14-7:1).

The Sabbath provided a weekly day of rest for Israel and also served to separate it from all other nations. It pointed to the spiritual rest that Jesus provides and that we enjoy every day under the new covenant (Matthew 11:28-30; Hebrews 4:9-11). We partake of that rest today through the baptism of the Holy Spirit with the initial sign of tongues. (See Isaiah 28:11-12; Acts 2:38; 3:19.) We also receive sanctification, or power to separate from sin and identify with Christ, through the indwelling Holy Spirit (II Thessalonians 2:13; I Peter 1:2).

Just as the physical Sabbath provided physical rest and sanctification for the Israelites under the old covenant, so the indwelling Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Jesus Christ, provides spiritual rest and sanctification for the church under the new covenant. Just as the Sabbath was a constant reminder of Israel's deliverance from bondage and of their covenant relationship with God, so the Holy Spirit is a constant reminder of our deliverance from sin and of our new covenant relationship with God. The Spirit gives us power over sin (Acts 1:8; Romans 8:4), and the Spirit effects the new covenant in our hearts (II Corinthians 3:3; Hebrews 8:8-11). By living in the Spirit, we enjoy the true Sabbath every day.

Verse 18 issues a warning against mysticism. It evidently describes the specific character of the Colossian heresy, and its use of singular pronouns seems to indicate that one person was particularly responsible for the false teaching.

The verb translated as "beguile . . . of your reward" means to rule against, give judgment against. It portrays an umpire disqualifying a competitor for a prize in a contest. By extension, the word can mean to rob, condemn, defraud, or cheat. By following the sort of teacher described in this verse, a Christian could lose his reward of eternal life.

The specific nature of the false teaching in Colosse was "a voluntary humility and worshipping of angels." The word translated as "voluntary" is a present participle that means to wish or to delight. The teacher that this verse warned against wished to disqualify people by so-called humility and angel worship, or perhaps the verse means he delighted in these errors.

Such a teacher misleads people by a false humility. Humility is a virtue, but in this context the word has a negative connotation, leading translations such as the NKJV and NIV to supply the adjective "false." Humility that one delights in is not humility; moreover, the latter part of the verse states that this teacher was actually full of pride. Verse 23 further explains that he had a mere pretense of humility. He probably boasted of his professed humility and used it in an attempt to attract followers, but humility is an elusive quality that one loses by claiming it.

Such a teacher also misleads people by angel worship. In this regard, the teachings of Colossians 1:16 and 2:10 become especially significant: since Jesus created and exercises authority over all principalities and powers, including angels, we should worship Him and not angels.

Perhaps there is a close connection between these two errors: the Colossian heretics exercised a false humility by seeking angelic mediators rather than going boldly to God Himself. (See Hebrews 4:16.)

The phrase "intruding into those things which he hath not seen" apparently means that this type of person tries to delve into and expound upon spiritual matters that he really does not understand. The verb translated as "intruding" can mean to take a stand on, enter into,

or dwell on. Phillips's translation says, "Pushing his way into matters he knows nothing about."

According to Bruce, "intruding" is a religious term signifying an initiation rite of a mystery religion: it describes a person entering into a sacred area in order to see the mysteries (the things he has not seen). The mystery religions were small, esoteric religious groups in ancient Greek culture that revealed mysteries—secret rites and doctrines—only to initiates.

The critical text omits "not" here, saying, "Intruding into things which he has seen." Hence the NIV translates, "Such a person goes into great detail about what he has seen," and Barclay renders, "Making a parade of the things which he has seen." Some commentators think the phrase refers to a claim of seeing visions.

The type of person described in this verse is futilely made conceited by the mind of his flesh. "His unspiritual mind puffs him up with idle notions" (NIV). Contrary to his appearances or claims, he does not have true humility.

**Verse 19.** The reason for pride and false doctrine is that the false teacher does not hold fast to the Head, who is Christ (Colossians 1:18; 2:10). He does not cling to Christ and so loses connection with Him. Here, Christ's designation as the Head is not so much a statement of His authority, which other verses have already proclaimed, as it is a description of Him as the origin and only source of spiritual life and health.

From the head, the whole body is supported and held together by ligaments and sinews (or joints and ligaments). This metaphor shows the need for contact and attachment between Christ (the Head) and the rest of the church (the body). (See Ephesians 4:16 for a parallel passage.)

As the result of a proper relationship with Christ, the church grows with the growth of God. It grows as God causes it to grow; it grows in accordance with the plan of God.

**C. Results of death with Jesus (2:20-23)** (20) *Wherefore if ye be dead with Christ from the rudiments of the world, why, as though living in the world, are ye subject to ordinances,* (21) *(Touch not; taste not; handle not;* (22) *which all are to perish with the using) after the commandments and doctrines of men? (23) which things have indeed a shew of wisdom in will worship, and humility, and neglecting of the body; not in any honour to the satisfying of the flesh.*

The NKJV is helpful in conveying the meaning of this passage: "Therefore, if you died with Christ from the basic principles of the world, why, as though living in the world, do you subject yourselves to regulations—'Do not touch, do not taste, do not handle,' which all concern things which perish with the using—according to the commandments and doctrines of men? These things indeed have an appearance of wisdom in self-imposed religion, false humility, and neglect of the body, but are of no value against the indulgence of the flesh."

This passage takes the truths of verses 11-15 and applies them to refute the false teachings described in verses 16-19. In particular, it explains the practical consequences of dying with Christ as mentioned in verse 13.

**Verse 20** reminds us of our death with Christ. The Greek verb is in the aorist tense, indicating a specific past event. In other words, we died with Christ at the time of our conversion.

"If" is used here to reason from a true premise; in this context it means "since." The verse proceeds to draw conclusions about our death with Christ.

Christ's death annulled the law's demands on us, superseding the Mosaic law and instituting the new covenant. Since we died with Christ, there is no reason for us to be subject to the Mosaic law or to the fundamental principles of the world. As the commentary

on verse 8 discusses, in the context of Colossians “the rudiments of the world” seems to mean legalistic traditions or teachings based on worldly, fleshly thinking.

Death severs the bond of a subject to a ruler. By the death of Christ and our identification with it, we no longer belong to the world system but to the kingdom of God. But if we impose man-made rules and regulations upon ourselves, then we are acting as if we still belonged to the world—as though we were part of the world system. In short, there is no justification for a system of ritual observances like the false teaching at Colosse.

“Ordinances” appears here and in verse 14, where it refers to the Mosaic law. Apparently, verse 20 does not refer to the Mosaic law itself, for the law leads to Christ (verse 17) while “the rudiments of the word” in verse 20 lead away from Christ and so do the related “commandments of men” in verse 22. (See also verse 8.) The argument of verse 20 seems to be: If the law of Moses, which God instituted, has been superseded by the new covenant, then certainly mere human laws and ceremonial regulations cannot now be added to the new covenant and made mandatory.

Our death with Christ has a fourfold significance, and Colossians presents the logical application of each aspect:

- *We died to the law* (Romans 7:4-6). Therefore, we are not subject to the ceremonial law of the old covenant (Colossians 2:16-17).
- *We died to the world* (Galatians 6:14). Therefore, we are not subject to the fundamental principles or elements of the world system (Colossians 2:8, 20).
- *We died to self, to the flesh* (Galatians 5:24). Therefore, we are not subject to man-made laws; nor should we practice asceticism or sensuality (Colossians 2:22-23).
- *We died to sin* (Romans 6:6-8). Therefore, we must put off sinful attitudes, habits, and activities (Colossians 3:5-10).

(The critical text and the majority text both omit “wherefore” at the beginning of verse 20.)

Verse 21 provides examples of ritualistic laws that are no longer binding on us: Do not touch, nor taste, nor handle. It is important to understand that Paul did not issue these admonitions; rather, he quoted false teachings. Some people, including Ambrose and Hilary in early church history, have mistakenly interpreted this verse as a scriptural prohibition, whereas actually it cites these restrictions as improper.

It is also important to understand that this verse does not speak of moral issues but of ceremonial regulations or man-made rules (verses 16, 22). “The context points rather to ceremonial uncleanness in terms of meats and drinks which perish in the using.”<sup>11</sup> Many passages of Scripture make it clear that under the new covenant Christians still have commandments to obey and guidelines to follow (Matthew 28:20; John 14:15; II Timothy 2:3-5; I John 2:3-6). Christians still must abstain from morally unclean practices and separate themselves from worldly appearances, associations, and activities (Romans 12:2; II Corinthians 6:17; 7:1; Colossians 3:5-9; I Thessalonians 5:22).

The regulations cited here concern prohibitions on eating, drinking, or touching ceremonially unclean things. This verse possibly refers to Jewish ceremonial law, which was fulfilled and abolished in Christ (verses 16-17), but more probably it speaks of man-made regulations (verse 22). Perhaps these rules were elaborations based on Jewish law; perhaps they were created by the false teachers at Colosse. Mark 7:1-13 describes a similar situation: the Pharisees of Christ’s day required various ceremonial washings and adherence to other regulations. These practices were not part of the law of Moses but were manmade traditions that actually led people to evade and ignore God’s commandments.

Verse 22. The things that these illegitimate prohibitions relate to are meant for destruction in

the process of being consumed; these things perish as they are used.

Again, we see that the discussion does not relate to principles of holiness but to morally neutral practices. Specifically, perishable food can neither make someone holy or unholy, so under the new covenant there is no point in adhering to regulations regarding it. (See Matthew 15:1-20; Mark 7:1-23.)

Moreover, these regulations are merely human commandments and doctrines. They are not divinely ordained, and therefore they cannot instill new life. The words of God are living and they bring life (Matthew 4:4; John 6:63; Hebrews 4:12). The commandments and doctrines of humans, however, will lead us astray (Isaiah 29:13; Mark 7:6-9; Colossians 2:8).

*Verse 23.* These man-made regulations have a reputation, show, or appearance of wisdom. By implication, they do not actually manifest true spirituality. Instead, they display three negative characteristics:

- “Will worship”: self-imposed worship, religion, or ritual; self-made religion.
- A professed “humility.” As in verse 18, the context reveals that this humility is false or assumed. Actually, the practitioners are puffed up with pride.
- “Neglecting of the body”: severe discipline of the body; harsh treatment of the body; austerity; ascetism. It is true that the Christian must deny self, submit to God’s will, reject sinful desires, kill sinful deeds, and live a self-disciplined life (Luke 9:23-24; Romans 8:5-6, 13). For example, disciplinary practices such as fasting are needed. But the purpose of self-discipline and self-denial is not to punish the body, for it is God’s temple, or to earn favor with God, for it comes by God’s grace. Rather, the purpose is to control the flesh, establish spiritual priorities, focus on the things of God, and develop faith for needs.

Ascetic, legalistic practices do not help a person to attain spiritual goals. They are “not in any honour to the satisfying of the flesh.” The preposition “to” (*pros*) is used in an unusual manner here, which has led to two major interpretations. Apparently, in this clause it means “for” or “against.” In other words, these ascetic practices are not of any value against the indulgence of the flesh. “They lack any value in restraining sensual indulgence” (NIV). They fail in their asserted purpose of restraining from evil.

Alternatively, some commentators say the meaning of the preposition here is “except.” Thus, the ascetic practices are of no value, except for the indulgence of the flesh. “They are of no value, they simply pamper the flesh” (Moffat). They “are of no value, serving only to indulge the flesh” (RSV margin). Carson explained, “Whatever shew of wisdom they may have, [they] are of no real value, but, by pandering to human pride, only tend to the indulgence of the old sinful nature.”<sup>12</sup>

The Amplified Bible offers both interpretations: “They are of no value in checking the indulgence of the flesh—the lower nature. [Instead, they do not honor God] but serve only to indulge the flesh” (brackets in original). In any case, the main point is clear: ascetic human rituals or regulations do not develop or facilitate true spirituality but instead promote the flesh. Ironically, they allow or promote a form of sensuality.

**D. Results of resurrection with Jesus (3:1-4)** (1) *If ye then be risen with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ sitteth on the right hand of God. (2) Set your affection on things above, not on things on the earth. (3) For ye are dead, and your life is hid with Christ in God. (4) When Christ, who is our life, shall appear, then shall ye also appear with him in glory.*

This section marks a transition in the epistle from theological statement to practical principles. It is the climax and conclusion of the preceding section, and it also provides a summary of the practical teachings to follow.

As in Colossians 1:15-23, we see in Colossians 2:8-3:4 a close linking of the doctrines of Oneness, the Atonement, and holiness. The truth of the one God as fully revealed in Jesus Christ is the basis for the Atonement and therefore our salvation. The Atonement, in turn, is the basis for the Christian life of holiness. Our salvation does not make holiness irrelevant; rather, it makes true holiness, inward and outward, both possible and necessary.

Just as Colossians 2:20-23 explains the practical implications of our death with Christ, so Colossians 3:1-4 explains the practical implications of our resurrection with Him.

*Verse 1* assumes that we have been raised up together with Jesus Christ as stated in Colossians 2:12. The Greek verb for “risen” is in the aorist tense, denoting a specific past event. Literally, we were co-raised with Him. His resurrection has given us new life.

As in Colossians 2:20, the word “if” here is used to reason from a true premise; it means “since.” The passage draws practical conclusions about our resurrection with Christ.

Specifically, we should seek the things above, or heavenly things. In other words, we should seek righteousness and holiness. God’s redemptive work in Christ and our personal identification with that work by the new birth provide the incentive and power for holiness.

By way of identifying the meaning of “above,” the verse explains that it is where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God. There is no word for “hand” in the Greek; it is understood. This omission helps us to understand that the phrase is metaphoric rather than physical. As a Spirit, God does not have a physical hand apart from the human body of Christ.

Throughout Scripture “the right hand of God” is a figurative expression that denotes God’s strength, preeminence, and glory (Exodus 15:6; Psalm 44:3; 98:1). As applied to Christ, this idiomatic phrase signifies that Christ possesses all the power, authority, preeminence, and glory of God (Matthew 26:64-65; Acts 2:34-36). The visible Christ is invested with all the fullness of the invisible Spirit (Colossians 2:9).

The right-hand position also denotes Christ’s mediatorial role (Romans 8:34; Hebrews 8:1). His one, supreme sacrifice provides intercession for our sins and free access to the throne of God (Hebrews 10:12; I John 2:1-2). In that sense, the Epistles speak figuratively of Christ as being on right hand of God rather than on the throne as in Revelation. In His humanity, He is still our mediator, and not until after the resurrection and judgment will this role cease.

Some people say that Christ’s sitting at the right hand of God is proof of two distinct divine persons with two physical bodies. Such a view is tantamount to a belief in two gods and implies that Christ is not the true God. God is indivisibly one (Deuteronomy 6:4), and Christ is God (John 20:28). God is an invisible Spirit (John 1:18; 4:24), and therefore He does not have a physical body outside of Jesus Christ. There is only one divine throne in heaven, and Jesus Christ is the One on the throne. (See Revelation 1:7-8, 11, 17-18; 4:2, 8; 7:17; 22:3-4.)

When Stephen saw a vision of heaven, he did not see or call upon two divine beings; he saw and called upon one—Jesus Christ. Yet he did not see Jesus merely as He had appeared on earth but saw Him invested with all the glory of God and in the position of preeminence. Thus the Bible records that he “saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing on the right hand of God” and that he said, “I see the heavens opened, and the Son of man standing on the right hand of God” (Acts 7:55-56). He called upon God by saying, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit” (Acts 7:59).

Most commentators, including trinitarians, agree that Colossians 3:1 describes Christ’s lordship and not a physical positioning of two divine bodies. The verse means, “Reach out for the highest gifts of Heaven, where your master reigns in power” (Phillips). According to Carson, “The right hand of God is the place of holiness, of intercession and of power. Hence

to seek those things which are above is to aim at emulating the characteristics of the Christ of glory.”<sup>13</sup>

Bruce explained, “The apostles knew very well that they were using figurative language when they spoke of Christ’s exaltation in these terms: they no more thought of a location on a literal throne at God’s literal right hand than their twentieth-century successors do.”<sup>14</sup> Similarly, Martin Luther ridiculed the “heaven of the fanatics with its golden chair and Christ seated at the Father’s side.”<sup>15</sup>

In sum, since we have been resurrected with Christ we should seek those things associated with His glorious reign and emulate His holy characteristics.

Verse 2 underscores the message of verse 1, telling us to mind the things above, not the things on the earth. Not only should we seek heavenly things, but we should think heavenly thoughts. We are to set our minds on heavenly things, view everything from the perspective of eternity, adopt a new set of values, live by the standards of the new creation rather than the old order. “Be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind” (Romans 12:2). (See I John 2:15-17.)

Verse 3 again reminds us that we died with Christ to explain why we should not set our mind on the old, carnal things of this world. It literally says, You died. The verb is in the aorist tense, denoting a specific, past event. Although this death to sin occurred at our conversion, we must continue to make it a practical reality in our everyday lives. “Reckon ye also yourselves to be dead indeed unto sin” (Romans 6:11).

Our life is hidden with Christ in God. The verb is in the perfect tense, signifying a past action that has continuing effects. We died to the old life, and our new life comes from God through Christ. Our new, spiritual life is a hidden one, for carnal people do not perceive or understand it. Nevertheless, it is our real life. “For, as far as this world is concerned, you are already dead, and your true life is a hidden one in Christ” (Phillips). Not only do we have the assurance of eternal life in the future, but the Spirit of the indwelling Christ imparts new life to us in this present world (Romans 8:2, 9-11).

Verse 4. Christ is the source of our true life. He said, “I am the way, the truth, and the life” (John 14:6). Paul explained, “I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God” (Galatians 2:20).

Although our present spiritual life is hidden as far as the world is concerned, when Jesus Christ returns to earth physically, we will be revealed to the whole world. Whenever Christ is manifested (revealed), we also will be manifested (revealed) with Him in glory. Jesus will descend to the Mount of Olives with His saints, and they will rule and reign with Him. (See Zechariah 14:3-5; Revelation 19:11-15; 20:4-6).

Instead of “our life,” the critical text says “your life,” a difference of only one letter in Greek.

Colossians 3:4 marks the conclusion of the more theological portion of the letter. Having proclaimed the lordship of Jesus and refuted the heresy at Colosse, the epistle continues with practical exhortations and applications.

#### **Notes**

<sup>1</sup>Ellis, in *Wycliffe Bible Commentary*, 1340.

<sup>2</sup>Lightfoot, 181.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., 182.

<sup>4</sup>Shepard, 519.

<sup>5</sup>Lightfoot, 177.

<sup>6</sup>Erdman, 76.

<sup>7</sup>Lightfoot, 263, 182-83.

<sup>8</sup>Carson, 69.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid.

<sup>10</sup>Bruce, 109 & n. 91.

<sup>11</sup>Carson, 77.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., 79.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., 80.

<sup>14</sup>Bruce, 133.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid.

V.

### **Practical Christian Living (Colossians 3:5–4:6)**

#### *The lordship of Jesus in practical life*

As is typical in Paul's epistles, a section of practical applications follows the doctrinal heart of the Colossian letter. This passage applies the truths taught in the preceding portion of the book to daily Christian living. In particular, Colossians 3:5-17 elaborates on the principles of Colossians 3:1-4.

By contrast, the false teaching at Colosse failed to provide practical guidance for godly living. It did not restrain the flesh or enable people to walk in holiness (Colossians 2:23). Instead of imposing a legalistic code as false teachers did, the inspired apostle Paul presented comprehensive principles for the Christian life. This type of teaching shows the way of true holiness.

**A. Putting off the old man (3:5-11)** *(5) Mortify therefore your members which are upon the earth; fornication, uncleanness, inordinate affection, evil concupiscence, and covetousness, which is idolatry: (6) for which things' sake the wrath of God cometh on the children of disobedience: (7) in the which ye also walked some time, when ye lived in them. (8) But now ye also put off all these; anger, wrath, malice, blasphemy, filthy communication out of your mouth. (9) Lie not one to another, seeing that ye have put off the old man with his deeds; (10) and have put on the new man, which is renewed in knowledge after the image of him that created him: (11) where there is neither Greek nor Jew, circumcision nor uncircumcision, Barbarian, Scythian, bond nor free: but Christ is all, and in all.*

**Verse 5.** As in Romans 12:1, "therefore" marks a transition from doctrinal discussion to practical exhortation. It shows the logical and necessary connection between theology and practical life. A spiritual understanding of the one God revealed in Jesus Christ, the atoning work of Jesus, and the new birth will lead people to walk in holiness.

The primary exhortation is for us to act as new people. We are to live in accordance with what happened to us. We must be in lifestyle what we are in identity. We died to sin, and sin has no claim upon us, but we must act out this truth in everyday life. (See Romans 6:1-14.)

Specifically, we are to "mortify"—put to death, kill— all carnality. "For if ye live after the flesh, ye shall die: but if ye through the Spirit do mortify the deeds of the body, ye shall live" (Romans 8:13).

We must kill our "members which are upon the earth," namely, the members of our body on earth. The ensuing list of moral wrongs shows that the verse does not mean for us to

destroy physical members of the body but to destroy evil attitudes and actions of the body. The verse uses the physical body as a symbol of the moral nature of which it is the instrument. As a related example, Jesus told us to cut off our right hand and pluck out our right eye rather than to commit sin (Matthew 5:29-30). He did not thereby recommend physical mutilation but rather emphasized the importance of moral purity.

Verse 5 lists five specific evils that we must kill. They progress from the more specific to the more general, and they overlap. In effect, the list covers all evil desires and attitudes.

- “Fornication”: sexually immoral acts.
- “Uncleanness”: impurity. As Romans 1:24-27 shows, the term includes homosexuality.
- “Inordinate affection”: lustful or dishonorable passion.
- “Evil concupiscence”: evil desires.
- “Covetousness”: greed; acquisitive desire; selfseeking; desire for more than one ought to have, especially something that belongs to others. In this context, it may have particular reference to wrongful desires for someone else’s spouse. (See Exodus 20:17.)

Greed is a form of idolatry, for it makes a god of the object of greed, such as material possessions. This object becomes the greedy person’s priority, and in effect he serves it. (See Matthew 6:24; Luke 12:15.)

Verse 6. The wrath of God comes upon people because of these sins. God’s wrath is His judicial attitude in relation to sin; it does not mean vindictiveness, bitterness, or personal hatred. God’s hatred of sin is a necessary part of His love for humanity, because sin damages, perverts, and destroys humanity.

The verb is present tense, meaning God’s wrath “is coming.” Those who disobey God now suffer the consequences of their sin and will continue to do so until God’s wrath culminates in the final judgment.

Some manuscripts and therefore some translations omit the phrase “on the children of disobedience,” but no one disputes its presence in the parallel passage of Ephesians 5:6. “Children of disobedience” refers to all those who act according to a disobedient nature, that is, those who persist in sin.

Verse 7 reminds us that all of us once walked in these sins when we lived in them. “For all have sinned” (Romans 3:23).

Verse 8 . We are not to continue in our sins. By the grace of God, we are to put off all sinful attitudes and actions. Sin is like unclean clothing. We are to divest ourselves of sin by continually putting it to death. In addition to the sins listed in verse 5, this verse names five attitudes to put off. (See also Ephesians 4:22, 31.)

- “Anger.” Anger without a cause is wrong (Matthew 5:22). While anger as an instinctive reaction to wrong is not sin in itself, it can make a person dangerously susceptible to sin, and when harbored as an attitude it can become sinful. It can lead to the sins of revenge, bitterness, hatred, or abusive speech. Jesus apparently became angry when He cast the dishonest money-changers out of the Temple, but He did not sin. Ephesians 4:26-27 admonishes, “Be ye angry, and sin not: let not the sun go down upon your wrath: neither give place to the devil.” Even when anger is justifiable, we must not let it lead us into sin, but we must use its motivation to act in a positive way about the distressing situation. We must put anger away quickly and not let it develop into a sinful attitude.

- “Wrath”: rage; passionate outburst; violent anger; quick temper.
- “Malice”: viciousness; a desire to harm others.
- “Blasphemy”: reviling or slandering God. In this context it probably has a more general meaning, encompassing all forms of slander.



- “Filthy communication”: obscene speech; filthy or abusive language. This description includes lustful innuendos and suggestive speech.

The phrase “out of your mouth” probably refers to all the preceding evils rather than just the last one. We must specifically avoid these attitudes as expressed in speech.

Verse 9 mentions another sin of the tongue: lying. A present rule for Christians is, Do not lie. All lying is wrong, but it is particularly disgraceful to lie to a fellow believer, because Christians naturally trust each other even if others do not.

We should abide by the foregoing instructions because we have already put off the old man and his deeds (evil practices). “Having put off” is in the aorist tense, meaning it is something we have already done. It is not the same verb as in verse 8, but it is the same verb as in the beginning of Colossians 2:15, and it means to strip off, to take off. We have already stripped off the old man at our conversion, but we need to reaffirm that status. We died with Christ, but we still have to reckon ourselves as “dead indeed unto sin” (Romans 6:6-8, 11).

The “old man” is the person we used to be, the old life, the unregenerate lifestyle, the dominion of sin. (See Romans 6:6-7.) We still battle the flesh, or sinful nature; it has not been eradicated. (See Galatians 5:16-18; James 4:5; I John 1:8.) At our conversion we turned away from the sinful lifestyle and received power to overcome the sinful nature. Every day we must reaffirm our death to sin and use the power of the Holy Spirit to kill the desires and potential deeds of the sinful nature.

Verse 10. Not only have we put off the old man, but we have already put on the new man. Again, the verb is in the aorist tense, referring to a previous event, namely, our new birth. The “new man” is the person we now are; our regenerate lifestyle; our new personality shaped, empowered, and indwelt by the Holy Spirit.

Not only were we born again, but we are continually being renewed spiritually. The verb is present tense and refers to a progressive change in personality. This process is often called sanctification, and II Corinthians 4:16 also describes it: “Though our outward man perish, yet the inward man is renewed day by day.”

This renewal takes place in or unto knowledge. The Greek word is *epignosis*, which literally means “full knowledge.” Once again, this word refutes the claims of heretics to special, hidden knowledge. All Christians can and should be “transformed by the renewing of your mind” (Romans 12:2).

This renewal occurs according to the image of the Creator. In the beginning, God said, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness,” and He “created man in his own image” (Genesis 1:26-27). Consequently, humans are spiritual, mental, and moral beings like God. Similarly, through the new birth God recreates humans in His spiritual image and fashions them progressively into His perfect likeness. Ultimately, He will transform us into sinless perfection and glorification at the catching away of the church and thus fulfill His ultimate purpose for creating us. Perhaps Colossians uses Genesis 1:26-27 as an analogy, or perhaps Genesis 1:26-27 encompasses not only the initial act of creation but also God’s redemptive work through the Son (in the Incarnation).

Since Jesus is the Creator (Colossians 1:16), we are specifically recreated in His image. This recreation relates not only to His deity but also to His humanity. Therefore, the Scriptures state that we are “conformed to the image” of God’s Son (Romans 8:29). “We all, with open face beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord, are changed into the same image from glory to glory, even as by the Spirit of the Lord” (II Corinthians 3:18).

Verse 11. In this new way of life, there should be no discrimination between people. Every Christian has equal standing and privileges in the sight of God. Christ has abolished

all barriers of birth, nationality, ritual, culture, and class. Not only does Christ do away with sinful habits and attitudes—one of which is social prejudice (James 2:9)—but He abolishes social barriers as well. The church must recognize and implement this truth. We should overcome the human tendency to stigmatize those who are different from us, not by a forced uniformity but by Christian love and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit.

The verse specifically lists several invalid bases for discrimination.

- “Neither Greek nor Jew”: race or nationality. A “Greek” was someone whose language and culture were Greek. For the Jews in Paul’s day this term was more or less equivalent to “Gentile,” since Greek was the language of commerce throughout the Gentile world known to them.
- “Circumcision nor uncircumcision”: religious heritage, privilege, or ritual. This classification distinguished religious Jews, including Gentile converts, from Gentiles who did not follow the law.
- “Barbarian, Scythian”: culture. To the Greeks, all non-Greeks were known as barbarians. A barbarian was simply a foreigner, but the word obtained a negative connotation because of prejudice against foreigners. A Scythian was an inhabitant of the area around the northern coast of the Black Sea in the European part of the modern Soviet Union. In the ancient Roman world, Scythians were considered the worst of barbarians, or savages.
- “Bond nor free”: social rank or class. In the ancient world there was a drastic distinction between slaves, who were considered mere property with little or no human rights, and free people.

Instead of showing partiality by drawing attention to distinctions such as these, we should recognize that Christ is all things to us and that He is in all these classifications and in all these kinds of people.

The Epistle to Philemon shows that Paul adhered to this principle personally (verse 10) and that he applied it in a practical way to the problem of slavery (verse 16).

Galatians 3:28 states the same truth as Colossians 3:11 in a more general way, using the categories of race or nationality, social rank, and gender. Apparently, Colossians 3:11 was written more specifically to address certain problems in Colosse. It seems that the Colossian heretics considered themselves a spiritual elite and discriminated on the basis of ritualistic observances, so-called higher knowledge, and perhaps culture.

**B. Putting on the new man (3:12-17)** *(12) Put on therefore, as the elect of God, holy and beloved, bowels of mercies, kindness, humbleness of mind, meekness, longsuffering; (13) forbearing one another, and forgiving one another, if any man have a quarrel against any: even as Christ forgave you, so also do ye. (14) And above all these things put on charity, which is the bond of perfectness. (15) And let the peace of God rule in your hearts, to the which also ye are called in one body; and be ye thankful. (16) Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom; teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord. (17) And whatsoever ye do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God and the Father by him.*

Just as verses 5-9 describe characteristics of the old way of life that we are to shun, so verses 12-17 describe characteristics of the new way of life that we are to adopt.

Verse 12 tells us to “put on,” that is, to clothe ourselves in these godly attributes. Because we have put off the old man and put on the new man and because Christ has become our all in all (verses 9-11), “therefore” we are to clothe ourselves with a godly character.

Moreover, we are to do so in keeping with our status as “the elect of God, holy and beloved.” The Old Testament uses these three descriptive words for Israel, but under the new covenant they refer to the church, which is composed of both Jews and Gentiles (verse 11). “The elect” is plural in Greek and means the chosen ones. The gospel call is universal, but only those who respond in faith are actually called out of the world, or chosen. (See Matthew 20:16; John 3:16; Romans 8:30; II Peter 3:9; Revelation 22:17.) We became “holy” by the new birth, yet we have the responsibility to continually pursue and perfect holiness in our lives by God’s grace (I Corinthians 1:2; II Corinthians 7:1; Hebrews 12:10, 14). “Beloved” is a perfect participle in Greek, literally meaning “having been loved.” God’s love for us preceded our love for Him and motivates us to live a godly life.

The verse specifically lists five characteristics of the new life that we are to adopt. Significantly, it focuses on the importance of interpersonal virtues rather than merely personal ones.

- Compassion (“bowels of mercies”). In the Bible, “bowels” is an idiom for the seat of emotions, much like “heart” in modern English.
- Kindness (or goodness).
- Humility.
- Meekness (or gentleness).
- Longsuffering (or patience).

*Verse 13* continues the description of Christian character, admonishing us to bear with one another and to forgive one another when complaints arise. (Ephesians 4:32 is a parallel verse.)

To forbear, or bear with, one another means to be patient, kind, and helpful with regard to the faults, shortcomings, weaknesses, and trials of others. Galatians 6:1-2 explains, “Brethren, if a man be overtaken in a fault, ye which are spiritual, restore such an one in the spirit of meekness; considering thyself, lest thou also be tempted. Bear ye one another’s burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ.”

“Quarrel” means a complaint or grievance. If anyone has a complaint against another, he is to forgive that person as the Lord has forgiven him. Christ loves us unconditionally. Before we turned to Him, He willingly died to provide forgiveness for us. Moreover, He bore the cost of our sins. If we are to adopt His attitude, then we must continue to love those who hurt or mistreat us, be willing to forgive them whether they seek forgiveness or not, and be willing to suffer because of their actions. (Philemon 18 provides a practical example of Paul’s willingness to bear the cost of the sin of Onesimus.) Although those who do wrong have a responsibility to rectify their wrong, regardless of whether they repent or not we must not hold grudges, become bitter, retaliate, or seek revenge. We must maintain a loving attitude towards everyone, and through prayer and the grace of God we can.

*Verse 14.* Above, or over, all the virtues listed in verses 12-13, we are to clothe ourselves with love (*agape*). Love is like the outermost garment that completes a clothing ensemble and makes it appropriate for wear. Without love a Christian is not fully clothed.

Love is the bond of completeness. “Perfectness” comes from the same Greek root as “perfect” in Colossians 1:28, and it means completeness, completion, fulfillment, or perfection. Love unites all the virtues; it “binds them all together in perfect unity” (NIV). It is “the power which unites and holds together all those graces and virtues, which together make up perfection.”<sup>1</sup> As Colossians 2:2 expresses, the saints are to be “knit together in love.”

*Verse 15.* We are to let divine peace rule us. (The critical text says the peace “of Christ” instead “of God.”) “Rule” comes from the same Greek root as “beguile” in Colossians 2:18. Here it means to be an umpire, to arbitrate differences. In other words, the principle of peace should be the deciding factor in a conflict of motives or reasons.

As members of one body we have been called to peace. In other words, the church is called to unity. (See Colossians 2:2.)

Another important Christian virtue is thankfulness. (See Colossians 1:3, 12; 2:7; 3:17; 4:2.) In fact, all Christian conduct is motivated by thankfulness to God for His saving grace.

*Verse 16.* The Christian life must be based upon and saturated with the Word of God. We are to let the Word of Christ live in us richly. As the psalmist said, “Thy word have I hid in mine heart” (Psalm 119:11).

“In all wisdom” may relate to the foregoing phrase, as the KJV and NKJV indicate, or it may relate to the following phrase, as the NIV indicates. If the former, then God’s Word makes us rich in true wisdom. If the latter, then we are to teach in wisdom. Both thoughts are true.

We need Christ’s Word to dwell in us richly so that we can teach (instruct) and admonish (exhort, urge, caution, warn) each other and offer praise to Christ. The NIV links teaching with wisdom, but the KJV, the NKJV, and Phillips link teaching with singing. If the latter, then Christian songs are for mutual edification as well as praise to God. This interpretation seems to fit the context best.

Along with the parallel verse of Ephesians 5:19, this verse shows the importance of music in church worship and uses three distinct terms to describe this type of worship:

- “Psalm” (*psalmos*). This word refers to the psalms in the Bible. It also indicates musical accompaniment. *The Pulpit Commentary* explains, “A ‘psalm’ (from psallo, to play an instrument) is ‘a song set to music.’”<sup>2</sup> This word contradicts those who forbid the use of musical instruments in worship. At the least, it instructs us to sing the psalms of the Old Testament, many of which command us to praise God with various musical instruments. (See Psalm 150.) How could we sincerely sing such psalms while rejecting their message?

- “Hymn” (*hymnos*): hymn, song of praise to God.

- “Spiritual song” (*ode pneumatike*): other Christian songs. *Ode* is the general word for song, so the adjective “spiritual” is used to make it distinctively Christian. This phrase could also include “sing[ing] with the spirit,” or singing in tongues (I Corinthians 14:14-15).

Lightfoot explained the distinction between these terms as follows: “The leading idea of psalmos is a musical accompaniment and that of hymnos praise to God; ode is the general word for a song, whether accompanied or unaccompanied.”<sup>3</sup>

The verse, provides guidelines for the use of music in worship. We are to sing (1) with grace, (2) in our hearts, or with inward emotion, and (3) to the Lord. (The critical text says “to God” instead of “to the Lord.”) Music that is not motivated by the saving and sustaining grace of God, that is not an expression of genuine, heartfelt worship, or that is directed primarily toward other people to impress or entertain them has little value in an apostolic worship service.

*Verse 17.* Christians are to do everything—whether in word or deed—in the name of Jesus. We must submit to the lordship of Jesus over the whole of life. This admonition is more comprehensive than a list of regulations such as the ones that characterized the Colossian heresy. Instead of merely checking to see if a proposed action is on a man-made list of forbidden things, we should ask, Can I glorify God in doing this? Can I invoke Christ’s help and blessing in this endeavor? Barclay commented here:

One of the best tests of any action is: "Can we do it, calling upon the name of Jesus? Can we do it, asking for his help?" One of the best tests of any word is: "Can we speak it and in the same breath name the name of Jesus? Can we speak it, remembering that he will hear?" If a man brings every word and deed to the test of the presence of Jesus Christ, he will not go wrong.<sup>4</sup>

This verse does not require us to pronounce the name of Jesus orally before every activity, but it deals with the attitude in which we conduct every activity. In other words, all our words and actions should be consistent with the invocation of the name of Jesus. When there is cause to invoke God's name, particularly at a solemn or formal occasion, this verse applies in a specific way, telling us to approach God in the name of the Lord Jesus. For example, we are to pray for the sick and cast out demons in the name of Jesus (Mark 16:17-18; James 5:14), which means actually invoking the name of Jesus in faith (Acts 3:6, 16; 16:18). Water baptism consists of both word and deed, so we should actually invoke the name of Jesus in baptism, as the apostles did (Acts 2:38; 8:16; 10:48; 19:5; 22:16). The name of Jesus is what identifies Christian baptism and distinguishes it from other baptisms.

Moreover, in everything we do, we should give thanks to God. (See Ephesians 5:20; I Thessalonians 5:18).

We give thanks to God the Father through Jesus Christ. There is only one God, and He is the Father (John 17:3; I Corinthians 8:6). God and Jesus are not two persons, for Jesus is God incarnate (Colossians 2:9). Jesus is the divine-human person through whom God has revealed Himself to us and provided salvation to us and through whom we can know God and have a relationship with Him. God chose the name of Jesus and the Incarnation to manifest Himself to us; therefore, by doing all things in the name of Jesus we actually honor God the Father, not a second person.

### **C. Social relations (3:18-4:1)**

*(18) Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as it is fit in the Lord. (19) Husbands, love your wives, and be not bitter against them. (20) Children, obey your parents in all things: for this is well pleasing unto the Lord. (21) Fathers, provoke not your children to anger, lest they be discouraged. (22) Servants, obey in all things your masters according to the flesh; not with eyeservice, as menpleasers; but in singleness of heart, fearing God: (23) and whatsoever ye do, do it heartily, as to the Lord, and not unto men; (24) knowing that of the Lord ye shall receive the reward of the inheritance: for ye serve the Lord Christ. (25) But he that doeth wrong shall receive for the wrong which he hath done: and there is no respect of persons. (4:1) Masters, give unto your servants that which is just and equal; knowing that ye also have a Master in heaven.*

Having dealt with moral vices and virtues, the epistle moves on to specific social relationships. It particularly deals with relationships in a Christian household: husbands and wives (Colossians 3:18-19), children and parents (Colossians 3:20-21), and masters and servants (Colossians 3:22-4:1). This passage is a relatively brief summary; a more complete treatment appears in Ephesians 5:21-6:9. Titus 2:1-10 and I Peter 2:18-3:7 also deal with the same subject.

The passage emphasizes mutual privileges and responsibilities. The pagan society of Paul's day defined these relationships in a one-sided manner, giving all power and authority to one of the parties, but Colossians presents them as reciprocal. All relationships are "in the Lord" or related to the Lord. (See Colossians 3:18, 20, 23; 4:1). Moreover, the whole passage falls within the scope of Colossians 3:17, which establishes the lordship of Jesus over all areas of life.

Verse 18 tells wives to submit, or be subject, to their own husbands. In other words, wives should acknowledge the leadership role of the husband in the family. (See also Ephesians 5:22-24; Titus 2:4-5.)

This attitude is proper, or fitting, in the Lord. The clause is descriptive, but it can also be seen as restrictive: the husband has the authority to lead only to the extent that it is proper in the Lord.

The wife is not inferior to the husband, nor is she his slave. The Bible presents marriage as a partnership between two people of equal value, worth, and rights who fulfill distinct but complementary roles (Genesis 2:18, 24; I Corinthians 11:11-12; I Peter 3:7). This verse does not say that women in general should submit to men in general or that a woman must submit to all men. Rather, it speaks specifically of the marriage relationship and tells a woman to submit to her own husband.

In a world sensitized by the women's liberation movement, the word *submit* may seem archaic to some. But understood in the biblical sense there is nothing offensive about it, and we must not lose the truth it expresses. It does not allow a husband to abuse his wife in any way, make arbitrary decisions based on his wishes alone, make selfish demands upon her, or treat her as inferior to himself. Instead, he must love his wife, give honor to her, and seek to please and benefit her as much as he would himself. (See Ephesians 5:25-33; Colossians 3:19; I Peter 3:7.)

Submission here simply means deferring to the husband's final authority. In any unit, one person must have ultimate responsibility and authority, and God chose the man to fulfill this role. Major decisions in a marriage should be made on a cooperative, mutually agreeable basis, but in situations where someone must assume final authority and responsibility, the husband should do so. He should be the spiritual leader. He should bear the primary burden of providing for the necessities of the family (I Timothy 5:8). God places a heavy responsibility upon the husband and gives him a corresponding authority to fulfill his obligations.

In a very real sense husbands and wives are to submit to each other (Ephesians 5:21). The husband must sacrifice himself for his wife (Ephesians 5:25). He must recognize that she has power, rights, or authority over his body even as he does hers (I Corinthians 7:4). Like all Christians, they must give preference to one another in honor and bear with one another in love (Romans 12:10; Ephesians 4:2).

Charles Erdman's comments are helpful in explaining the true meaning of the wife's submission to her husband:

In such submission there is nothing humiliating or degrading. It is not inconsistent with intellectual and moral and spiritual equality. It is merely the recognition of an authority which is essential to social and domestic order and welfare. It is the natural expression of love which manifests itself in willing service and finds joy in giving pleasure.

Nor is this subjection unlimited. Obviously a wife must not submit when obedience requires an action contrary to conscience, or conduct at variance with the expressed will of God. . . .

[Love] makes tyranny and unkindness, selfishness and cruelty, absolutely impossible. It removes from the submission expected of a wife all that is distasteful or difficult. Indeed it places a husband in a position of actual subjection, for he is compelled by love to obey every claim the wife may make for support, for sympathy, for protection, for happiness.<sup>5</sup>

Verse 19 tells husbands to love their wives. (Titus 2:4 similarly tells wives to love their husbands.) The verb here is *agapao*, which refers to the deepest, truest love and is usually

used in Scripture for Christian love. True love is not mere affection, but it is a strong concern for a person's whole welfare. Husbands are to love their wives sacrificially and to love them as they love their own bodies (Ephesians 5:25-33).

Husbands are commanded not to be bitter, or harsh, toward their wives. As discussed in the commentary on verse 18, husbands must submit to their wives in many ways. The command for husbands to love their wives means that they have no authority to abuse them, treat them selfishly, or disregard their desires. A husband must give honor to his wife, and if he mistreats her in any way, he will block his relationship with God (1 Peter 3:7).

Verse 20 tells children to obey their parents in all respects. Such obedience pleases the Lord.

While children should always honor their parents, the duty of obedience is not absolute. There is no indication that adult children who have established their own home are still bound to follow their parents' desires. Moreover, children have no duty to commit sinful acts, violate conscience, or disobey the expressed will of God at the behest of parents, and they should not do so if they have a choice in the matter. The general principle of Acts 5:29 applies: "We ought to obey God rather than men." (The critical text says that children's obedience is well pleasing "in" the Lord, implying conformity to a Christian standard.)

Verse 21 tells parents not to provoke (irritate, embitter) their children. It specifically addresses fathers because they have the greater responsibility and also the greater tendency to be harsh, but the principle applies to both parents. Clearly, this verse rules out all physical or emotional abuse.

If parents discipline their children too stringently, they may discourage, or dishearten, them. In such cases, children may ultimately turn against their parents or their parents' faith. Proper training of a child involves both discipline and encouragement.

Verse 22 tells servants to obey their earthly masters, and employees today should likewise follow the directions of their employers. The Greek word *doulos* literally means "slave." While slavery is an indefensible, inhuman, evil system, and while many slaves in Paul's day suffered cruelly, the working arrangement of many slaves was similar in some ways to that of an indentured servant or a career employee. Today, the principles expressed in Colossians 3:22-4:1 apply to employees and employers.

This passage does not endorse slavery; indeed, the principles it expresses actually undercut slavery. Moreover, Colossians 3:11 shows that slavery contradicts the very basis of Christianity. But the epistle recognizes that slavery was an unavoidable fact of life in the first century. The apostles' purpose was to preach the gospel, and they did not engage in social or political activities in an attempt to abolish slavery or revolutionize society by massive, violent protest. Rather they sought to transform individual lives by the power of the gospel, and that process would ultimately make a strong impact upon society. For the existing situation, then, Paul taught Christians how to cope with the evils of slavery and how to Christianize its forms. Slaves were not to combat the evils of slavery with violence; instead, until society changed, they were to recognize the legal rights of masters. (For further discussion of slavery, see "Introduction to Philemon.")

Colossians deals with this subject at length. The immediate reason was probably because Onesimus, a converted runaway slave, was returning to his master in Colosse with the letter.

Verse 22 recognizes that in the temporal world order there are masters and slaves. It does not concede that a master has total authority over a slave, but only "according to the flesh," that is, according to human laws and activities.

Christians who find themselves bound by the civil law to human masters should submit to

them and work diligently. Slaves, servants, and employees should not merely render eye-service; that is, they should not work diligently only when their masters observe them. Nor should they merely be men-pleasers; that is, they should not work only to win the favor of their human masters.

Rather, Christian workers should work with sincerity of heart and with reverence for God. (The critical text has “the Lord.”) In other words, they should be conscientious workers.

*Verse 23.* Christians should work heartily, literally, from the soul. They should work as though they are working for the Lord and not for humans. The phrase “whatsoever ye do” echoes verse 17, reminding us of that verse’s admonition to submit to Christ’s lordship in everything.

This verse expresses the Christian doctrine of work. Work is not merely a drudgery or something we should shirk whenever possible. It is honorable for everyone. It is both a responsibility and a privilege. The Lord wills for us to work in order to support ourselves, our families, and society and in order to help others. (See Ephesians 4:28; II Thessalonians 3:6-15; I Timothy 5:8.) When we work, we are actually working for the Lord, and therefore we should strive for excellence. When we work as unto the Lord, our labor becomes a testimony before unbelievers of our allegiance to God and of His grace in our lives. (See Titus 2:9-10.)

*Verse 24.* Not only do we labor for the Lord and not merely for humans, but we look to the Lord and not merely to humans for our reward. This truth should motivate us to work indeed as unto the Lord. The Lord will pay us fairly. Whatever injustices we endure in this life, He will more than repay us in the life to come. He will give an inheritance as a reward.

This promise was particularly comforting to the slaves to whom it was originally addressed. Although they were not part of the family for which they labored and had no hope of payment from their master, God promised them an inheritance, or a son’s portion.

Again, the passage reminds Christian slaves that they are not merely serving humans but the Lord Christ. (The critical text omits “for,” and in this case the clause could be translated as a command: “Serve the Lord Christ.”) The Greek word for “Lord” is *kurios*, the same word for “master” in verse 22. The true master or employer of Christians is not an earthly overseer but Jesus Christ Himself.

*Verse 25.* Just as a conscientious worker will receive a fair reward, so a wrongdoer will receive a “reward” for his wrongdoing. God will see that he is paid back for what he has done. “Whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap” (Galatians 6:7). Again, whatever is not repaid in this life will surely be repaid in the life to come.

There is no favoritism or partiality in this matter. This principle applies to everyone. By implication, it applies to both master and slave; both have equal responsibilities and privileges in God’s sight.

*Chapter 4, verse 1* tells masters to grant what is right and fair to their servants, and employers today should do the same for their employees. The society of the first century gave masters absolute power over their slaves, but Christianity imposed the demands of justice upon them.

The word translated as “give” means to grant, supply, or show. It is in the middle voice in Greek, which indicates the subject’s intimate involvement. Masters are to give of themselves to ensure fairness. It appears that a Christian master who implemented these principles fully would eventually come to realize that he should give his slaves their freedom.

To impress upon masters their responsibility, verse 1 reminds them that they themselves have a Master in heaven. Again, the Greek word is *kurios*, meaning Lord or Master. The



implication is that their heavenly Master will treat them as they treat their slaves.

Other verses allude to the principle that God treats us as we treat others. “Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors” (Matthew 6:12). “For with what judgment ye judge, ye shall be judged: and with what measure ye mete, it shall be measured to you again” (Matthew 7:2). Understanding this concept would cause Christian masters to treat their slaves very well indeed and probably emancipate them.

#### **D. Prayer and witnessing (4:2-6)**

*(2) Continue in prayer, and watch in the same with thanksgiving; (3) withal praying also for us, that God would open unto us a door of utterance, to speak the mystery of Christ, for which I am also in bonds: (4) that I may make it manifest, as I ought to speak. (5) Walk in wisdom toward them that are without, redeeming the time. (6) Let your speech be always with grace, seasoned with salt, that ye may know how ye ought to answer every man.*

This passage provides some additional instructions as the epistle draws to a close. It focuses on prayer and witnessing, which are the responsibilities of every Christian. Verse 2 admonishes us to “continue in prayer,” meaning to devote ourselves to prayer, to make prayer our habit. Paul, Timothy, and Epaphras were examples of Christians who prayed faithfully (Colossians 1:3, 9; 4:12).

Two ingredients are vital to prayer: (1) *watchfulness* (keeping awake, being alert, being spiritually sensitive) and (2) *thanksgiving*. Once again, the epistle places emphasis on giving thanks to God. (See Colossians 1:3, 12; 2:7; 3:15, 17.)

Verse 3. Paul specifically requested that the Colossian saints pray concerning him. (“Withal” means therewith, together with, or in addition.) He switched back to the first person plural to include his co-worker, Timothy, in the request. Clearly, there is power in intercessory prayer. (See Colossians 1:3, 9; 4:12.)

The prayer request was twofold. First, Paul wanted the Colossians to pray that God would open a door for the message so that he and Timothy could proclaim the gospel. He desired above all else to speak “the mystery of Christ,” which is the message of the Incarnation and Atonement and specifically the message of “Christ in you, the hope of glory” (Colossians 1:27). And Paul’s proclamation of the mystery of Christ was the reason for his imprisonment.

Verse 4. Second, Paul requested the Colossians to pray that he would be able to proclaim the message properly, that is, to make the mystery plain and clear. Even though he was a veteran missionary, he did not have confidence in his own human ability, but he depended upon the grace of God and the prayers of the saints to make his ministry effective. He did not rest upon his laurels but still felt it was his duty to share the gospel and to do so effectively.

Significantly, Paul’s personal prayer request centered around the preaching of the gospel and the furtherance of God’s kingdom instead of around his personal needs and desires. Only in the last verse of the letter did he so much as imply that the Colossians pray concerning his personal circumstances of imprisonment.

Verse 5 admonishes believers to act in wisdom, or conduct themselves wisely, toward outsiders. (Verse 6 provides a practical application.)

We are also to redeem the time, “make the most of every opportunity” (NIV), or “make the best possible use of [our] time” (Phillips). The Greek verb is in the middle voice, which involves the subject closely in the action. In other words, we should buy up for ourselves each opportunity. We need to regain time that the devil would like to misuse. In short, we should use our time wisely and for God’s cause. This principle applies to all our activities

and all our time, but in the context it seems to refer particularly to opportunities for prayer and witnessing.

**Verse 6.** We should always speak with grace. “Let your conversation be always full of grace” (NIV). “Let your speech at all times be gracious (pleasant and winsome)” (Amplified Bible). This principle applies to personal conversations as well as to preaching. In light of verse 5, this admonition is particularly relevant to our dealings with unbelievers.

We should season our speech with salt. This metaphor can have a twofold meaning. First, just as salt enhances the flavor of food and makes it more appetizing, so our speech should be pleasant and appealing. Second, just as salt preserves food, so our speech should be free from corruption.

We should also understand the proper way to answer each person. An appropriate answer can defuse a tense, troublesome, or dangerous situation. “A soft answer turneth away wrath” (Proverbs 15:1). Good answers are important in witnessing to the unsaved, which seems to be the primary meaning here. “Be ready always to give an answer to every man that asketh you a reason of the hope that is in you with meekness and fear” (1 Peter 3:15).

With these practical exhortations, the teaching portion of the epistle comes to a close.

### **Notes**

<sup>1</sup>Lightfoot, 222.

<sup>2</sup>G. G. Findlay, “Colossians” in vol. 20 of *The Pulpit Commentary* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, n.d.), 154. See also Vine, 581.

<sup>3</sup>Lightfoot, 225.

<sup>4</sup>Barclay, 160.

<sup>5</sup>Erdman, 103-4.

VI.

### **Epilogue**

#### **(Colossians 4:7–18)**

The concluding portion of the Epistle to the Colossians consists of a description of the bearers of the letter, greetings from Paul’s companions, closing messages, and a benediction.

#### **A. Bearers of the letter (4:7-9)**

*(7) All my state shall Tychicus declare unto you, who is a beloved brother, and a faithful minister and fellowservant in the Lord: (8) whom I have sent unto you for the same purpose, that he might know your estate, and comfort your hearts; (9) with Onesimus, a faithful and beloved brother, who is one of you. They shall make known unto you all things which are done here.*

**Verse 7.** It is evident that the primary bearer of the letter was Tychicus. Paul described him as a brother, faithful servant, and fellow slave in the Lord. He was to provide more details about Paul’s situation to the Colossian church.

Tychicus was one of Paul’s seven companions on his trip from Greece to Jerusalem on his third missionary journey (Acts 20:4). Evidently, these men were delegates from Gentile churches who brought offerings to assist the believers in Jerusalem. Tychicus was one of the representatives from Asia Minor, perhaps from Ephesus. On this occasion, he had evidently visited Rome and was returning to his home, so Paul used him to carry the letter.

Tychicus was also the bearer of the letter to the Ephesian church (Ephesians 6:21-22). This fact, along with the many parallels in thought and wording between Ephesians and

Colossians, indicates that the two letters were written at the same time. Tychicus was also the faithful emissary of Paul on other occasions (II Timothy 4:12; Titus 3:12).

**Verse 8.** Paul sent his trusted fellow laborer to Colosse specifically for the twofold purpose of communication and encouragement. Not only would he tell the news about Paul to the Colossians but he would also learn more about the situation at Colosse.

The critical text states that he was coming to tell the Colossians the news about Paul, saying, "That you may know our circumstances and he may comfort your hearts." But this reading would mean Paul said the same thing in three consecutive verses (verses 7, 8, and 9). The existing manuscripts are split about evenly between the two readings.

**Verse 9.** Onesimus accompanied Tychicus in delivering the letter. Paul described him as a faithful and beloved brother from Colosse. From Philemon 10-18 we learn that Onesimus was a runaway slave whom Paul had converted in Rome and who was returning to Philemon, the master he had wronged. The Colossian church knew him only in his former sinful state, yet Paul boldly proclaimed that he was "one of you" and sent him back as his emissary. This verse presents an outstanding testimony of the transforming power of the gospel and the early church's willingness to accept a converted sinner as a new person in Christ.

Both Tychicus and Onesimus came to report on the activities and conditions of Paul and Rome.

**B. Greetings from Paul's companions (4:10-14)** *(10) Aristarchus my fellowprisoner saluteth you, and Marcus, sister's son to Barnabas, (touching whom ye received commandments: if he come unto you, receive him;) (11) and Jesus, which is called Justus, who are of the circumcision. These only are my fellowworkers unto the kingdom of God, which have been a comfort unto me. (12) Epaphras, who is one of you, a servant of Christ, saluteth you, always labouring fervently for you in prayers, that ye may stand perfect and complete in all the will of God. (13) For I bear him record, that he hath a great zeal for you, and them that are in Laodicea, and them in Hierapolis. (14) Luke, the beloved physician, and Demas, greet you.*

These verses contain greetings from six companions of the apostle Paul: Aristarchus, Marcus (John Mark), Jesus Justus, Epaphras, Luke, and Demas. All but Jesus Justus also sent greetings to Philemon at this time, presumably because they knew him personally (Philemon 23-24).

**Verse 10.** Paul called Aristarchus his fellow prisoner. This designation was probably metaphoric, for Paul used the same title of Epaphras in Philemon 23 even though he had recently traveled to Rome to visit Paul (Colossians 1:7-8). Perhaps Paul used this description because Aristarchus was staying with Paul during his imprisonment and assisting him. Alternatively, Aristarchus could have actually been imprisoned with Paul at that time or on some earlier occasion.

Aristarchus was from Thessalonica in Macedonia. He accompanied Paul in Ephesus, on his voyage to Jerusalem, and on his voyage to Italy (Acts 19:29; 20:4; 27:2).

Mark was a relative of Barnabas, Paul's first missionary companion. In late usage, the Greek word here, *anepsios*, came to mean "nephew," but scholars today concur that at this time it meant "cousin." John Mark had accompanied Paul and Barnabas as an assistant on their first trip, but he left them partway. Consequently, Paul refused to take him on the next trip. He and Barnabas then split up, with Paul taking Silas and Barnabas taking Mark. (See Acts 13:5, 13; 15:36-40.) The kinship between Barnabas and Mark helps to explain Barnabas's special willingness to work with him.

By the time of this letter, Mark had proved himself to be a capable minister and was fully restored to Paul's confidence. In fact, someone, presumably Paul, had sent a recommendation of him, telling the Colossian church and probably others as well to receive him if he came by. Here Paul reminded the Colossians of those instructions. And in II Timothy 4:11, Paul commended Mark as profitable in the ministry.

At some point Mark wrote the Gospel that bears his name, probably in cooperation with Peter, for Peter considered Mark to be his son in the gospel (I Peter 5:13). Mark's story is an encouraging example of restoration and reconciliation, demonstrating that Christians can overcome early failures and disappointments as well as disagreements.

*Verse 11.* A third companion of Paul at this time was Jesus Justus. Nothing else is known of him. His surname probably served to distinguish him from Jesus Christ. The name of Jesus is the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew name of Jehoshua or Joshua, and it was apparently fairly common in Bible days. Nevertheless, only the Lord Jesus Christ was truly the personification of that name, which means Jehovah-Savior, for He was actually God with us, Jehovah come in the flesh to save His people from their sins. (See Matthew 1:21, 23; John 8:58.) In early church usage, the titles "Lord," "Christ," and "of Nazareth" served to identify the Savior from others who bore the name of Jesus.

Aristarchus, Mark, and Justus were Jews, the only Jews among Paul's fellow gospel workers in Rome at the time. They proved to be a real comfort to him.

*Verse 12.* Paul's fourth companion at the time was Epaphras of Colosse, whom he called a slave of Christ. (The critical text uses "Christ Jesus.") Apparently he was the founder and pastor of the church at Colosse and was visiting Paul in Rome (Colossians 1:7-8).

Epaphras struggled continually in prayer on behalf of the Colossians. The Greek word for "labouring fervently" is *agonizomai*, which Paul used of himself in Colossians 1:29. Epaphras prayed fervently that the Colossians would stand perfect (mature) and complete (full) in all the will of God. "Perfect" is a translation of *teleios*, which also appears in Colossians 1:28 and refers to maturity or completion. (Instead of "complete" here, the critical text uses a similar word meaning "fully assured.")

From this statement, it is apparent that Christians can know and do God's will. (See also Ephesians 5:10; Colossians 1:9-10.) God's will is not mystical or mysterious; He expects us to discern and perform it by His grace, and we can do so if we will pray and seek Him. This statement also reaffirms the value of intercessory prayer. (See also Colossians 1:3, 9; 4:3.)

*Verse 13.* Paul testified that Epaphras had great zeal for the saints in Colosse, Laodicea, and Hierapolis. Perhaps he was the founder and pastor or overseer of all three churches. Laodicea and Hierapolis were about ten or twelve miles northwest of Colosse on opposite sides of the Lycus River. (Instead of "zeal," the critical text uses a word that means concern, labor, pain, or distress.)

*Verse 14.* The fifth companion of Paul who sent greetings to the Colossian church was Luke. Paul called him "the beloved physician," or doctor. The apostolic church believed in, expected, prayed for, and experienced divine healing (Mark 16:18; I Corinthians 12:9; James 5:14), and miracles of healing accompanied and confirmed Paul's own ministry (Acts 14:8-10; 28:8). But no stigma was attached to Luke's medical profession. Clearly, having faith in God for healing and seeking or providing medical attention are compatible. Doctors can help us in many ways by teaching nutrition and good health habits, providing preventive care, alleviating pain, and treating injury, illness, and disease. When God does not heal instantaneously, it is advisable to seek medical care, at the same time continuing to trust Him for healing. He can use doctors to alleviate suffering and to help the body's healing

process. Ultimately, all healing is from Him, for He designed the body with its recuperative powers, endowed physicians with intelligence and skill, and created the substances from which medicines are extracted or manufactured.

Since Luke was not mentioned as one of the three Jews with Paul at this time (verses 10-11), it is evident that he was a Gentile. He accompanied Paul on some of his trips and remained faithfully by his side at the end of Paul's life (Acts 21:1; II Timothy 4:11). At some point, he wrote the Gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles, being the only known Gentile writer of Scripture. It seems that Luke relied on Mark's Gospel to some extent in writing his own, and this passage shows that the two men had ample opportunity to become good friends and to compare notes.

The last companion mentioned is Demas. Of the six, he is the only one whom Paul did not describe or commend here. Perhaps this omission indicates that Demas was already struggling spiritually; in any case, we find later that he forsook Paul out of a love for the world (II Timothy 4:10).

**C. Closing messages and benediction (4:15-18)** *(15) Salute the brethren which are in Laodicea, and Nymphas, and the church which is in his house. (16) And when this epistle is read among you, cause that it be read also in the church of the Laodiceans; and that ye likewise read the epistle from Laodicea. (17) And say to Archippus, Take heed to the ministry which thou hast received in the Lord, that thou fulfil it. (18) The salutation by the hand of me Paul. Remember my bonds. Grace be with you. Amen.*

*Verse 15.* After the greetings from his companions, Paul asked the Colossians to send his greetings to the Christian brothers in Laodicea, the chief city of the district, which was about ten or twelve miles to the northwest. He also sent greetings to Nymphas and the church at his house. Apparently, Nymphas was not a Colossian; he probably resided in Laodicea, and at least part of the church there met in his house. Perhaps he was an elder of the church, or what we might consider to be the pastor of a neighborhood group.

(The critical text makes the name feminine [Nympha] by using the feminine pronoun "her." Some manuscripts read "their.")

*Verse 16.* Paul instructed that this letter be read to the entire Colossian church and also to the church at Laodicea. He was aware that it had a greater than local application. Here is early evidence for the formation of the New Testament canon. From the beginning there was at least some awareness that this letter was intended for all of God's people. It was logical therefore that the church of Paul's day would receive it as divinely inspired and preserve it for the church in other locations and times.

Paul also instructed the Colossian believers to read the letter from Laodicea. This statement has caused much speculation. Some suppose that the letter he referred to was written by the Laodiceans or written to the Laodiceans by someone other than Paul, but it seems clear that it was actually a letter from Paul to the Laodiceans. Otherwise, how would Paul know about it, why would he mention it in this context, and why would he seemingly equate it in value with the inspired Colossian epistle?

A so-called Letter of Paul to the Laodiceans exists in a Latin manuscript.<sup>1</sup> But it is obviously a later production fabricated in response to this reference. It consists primarily of a string of phrases from Philipians with a few from other epistles such as Galatians. It has no clear purpose or theme.

Many commentators conclude that Paul was referring to the Epistle to the Ephesians, which seems probable. Most scholars assert that Ephesians was originally written as a circular letter and not just for the church at Ephesus. Many early manuscripts and

quotations omit the words “at Ephesus” in Ephesians 1:1, indicating that the letter was circulated to various churches in the earliest times. Unlike Colossians it does not deal with particular local issues or mention any local personages. It discusses many of the same themes as Colossians but in a more general and comprehensive way, and its main theme is the doctrine concerning the church. Perhaps it was sent first to Ephesus, the capital of the province of Asia, but also to the other cities of the province.

If Ephesians was a circular, it would naturally go to Laodicea, the largest city in the district, before it went to Colosse, a comparatively minor town. If Ephesians is not the letter Paul referred to here, then we must conclude that the Laodicean letter has not been preserved. But the Laodicean letter had relevance to more than one church, like the Epistle to the Colossians. Thus it seems probable that God inspired it and that He preserved it for us as the Epistle to the Ephesians.

*Verse 17.* Paul sent a special message to Archippus. From verses 15-16 it seems that he may have resided in Laodicea, and from Philemon 2 it appears that he was the son of Philemon.

Paul admonished Archippus to look after the ministry that he had received in the Lord in order to fulfill or complete it. “Ministry” here means service or work. Like all true spiritual ministry, his ministry was not merely a human undertaking, but it was from and in the Lord Himself. Perhaps Archippus was a preacher or an assistant minister in the area. Paul’s statement was probably not a rebuke but encouragement for a difficult task. If Archippus indeed ministered in Laodicea, and if the church there was already beginning to experience some of the spiritual devastation described in Revelation 3:14-22, then it is easy to understand why he would need such encouragement.

*Verse 18.* The epistle concludes with a personal greeting in Paul’s own handwriting. He usually dictated his letters but wrote the ending by his own hand to confirm their authenticity (Romans 16:22; II Thessalonians 3:17). (The critical text omits the ending of “Amen.”)

In closing, Paul requested that the Colossian believers continue to remember his imprisonment, indicating that they should pray for his release. (See Philemon 22.) Probably chains were attached to his hand at that moment and vividly reminded him of his bondage as he personally wrote these closing words.

Finally, Paul ended the letter as he always did, with a benediction of divine grace upon his readers.

**Note**

<sup>1</sup>For text, translation, and discussion of this spurious letter, see Lightfoot, 287-300.

**THE EPISTLE TO**

# PHILEMON

(Brotherhood under the lordship of Jesus)

The Epistle to Philemon is a personal letter written to a Christian man who lived in Colosse in the first century. In a practical setting, it teaches Christian brotherhood under the lordship of Jesus.

## **Author**

Philemon 1:1 names the apostle Paul as the author. It also mentions Timothy, Paul's junior co-worker and companion at the time, but Paul is clearly the author, for he wrote the letter in his own hand, and after the opening remarks he used the first person singular throughout, identifying himself as "Paul the aged" and "I Paul" (verses 9, 19). (For more information about Paul see "Introduction to Colossians.")

Conservative scholars agree that the book is genuine and was authored by Paul. The parallels with Colossians demand a common author for these two books, so all the arguments for Paul's authorship of Colossians support his authorship of Philemon. Since the letter is addressed to an individual, is very short, and discusses no major doctrinal point, there is no plausible explanation as to why the early church preserved it and included in the New Testament unless Paul was indeed the author.

## **Inspiration, Canonicity, and Text**

Since Paul was a recognized apostle in the early church, this epistle bears apostolic authority. In Philemon 8 he claimed the authority to command the reader.

According to II Peter 3:15-16, the epistles of Paul are Scripture. It does not seem that a letter of this nature would have survived and been included in the Bible if God had not inspired its composition and kept His hand of preservation upon it. In short, Philemon is part of the Bible, the inspired Word of God.

Throughout the history of Christendom there has never been a significant dispute over the inclusion of Philemon in the canon, the list of books recognized as Scripture. In the first generation after the completion of the New Testament, Polycarp alluded to it, and soon thereafter the Muratorian Canon (c. 170) and the Barococcio Canon (c. 206) named it as authoritative. All major canons, councils, and branches of Christendom from ancient times to the present have considered it to be Scripture.<sup>1</sup>

There has been no major dispute over the text of Philemon. This book uses the King James Version as the primary text for exposition. There are a few variant readings, but none of them significantly affect doctrinal meaning. We will make note of alternate readings proposed by modern textual criticism (which we will call the critical text), and we will also note a few places where the KJV differs from the majority of existing manuscripts (the majority text).

## **Date and Place of Writing**

Paul wrote Philemon from prison (Philemon 1, 9, 10,

13). Thus, the book is classified along with Ephesians, Philippians, and Colossians as one of Paul's Prison Epistles.

Most conservative Bible scholars conclude that Philemon was written during Paul's first Roman imprisonment (Acts 28:16, 30-31), which occurred in the early A.D. 60s, probably from 61 to 63. It is contemporary with Ephesians and Colossians and later than the other Pauline Epistles except Philippians and the Pastorals.

Ephesians, Colossians, and Philemon are closely related, all being sent to Asia Minor around the same time. Apparently Colossians and Philemon were written at the same time and place, sent to the same place, and carried by the same messenger. Both letters describe Timothy as being with Paul, mention Archippus, and say Onesimus was accompanying the letters, and in the greetings from Paul's companions, five of the six names in Colossians are repeated in Philemon. (See Colossians 1:1; 4:7-17; Philemon 1-2, 10-12, 23-24.) Since Tychicus delivered Colossians, he apparently delivered Philemon as well.

### **Original Recipient**

The Epistle to Philemon is one of two completely personal letters in the New Testament, along with III John. The addressee, Philemon, was a convert of Paul (Philemon 19). From the parallels with Colossians discussed in the preceding section, it is evident that Philemon was a member of the church in Colosse. As further evidence, Philemon's runaway slave, Onesimus, had come from Colosse and Paul was sending him back to Colosse to be reconciled with Philemon (Colossians 4:8-9; Philemon 10-12).

Apparently Epaphras was the pastor in Colosse (Colossians 1:6-8; 4:12) and Philemon was a lay member in whose house part of the church met for worship services (Philemon 2). His ownership of a sizeable house and at least one slave indicates that he was fairly wealthy. He was an influential Christian and an important benefactor of the church (Philemon 4-7).

Paul also addressed the letter to Apphia and Archippus. The implication is that Apphia was Philemon's wife and Archippus was his son (Philemon 2).

### **Purpose**

The occasion for the letter was the visit and report of Epaphras of Colosse to Paul and the return of Onesimus to Colosse.

Onesimus was a fugitive slave converted by Paul in Rome. Paul did not want to keep him in Rome without the consent of Philemon, his master, so he sent him back with this letter (Colossians 4:8-9; Philemon 10-12).

The immediate purpose of the letter was to effect a reconciliation between Onesimus and Philemon and to obtain permission for Onesimus to return to Rome. As we shall see, it is possible that Paul actually wanted Philemon to set Onesimus free. Paul specifically requested that Philemon forgive Onesimus and receive him back as a brother in Christ. Paul's request was evidently fulfilled; otherwise, it is unlikely that Philemon would have preserved the letter for others to read and that it would have survived for us.

An early tradition says that Onesimus was set free and returned to Paul in Rome. About fifty years after Paul's letter, Ignatius, bishop of Antioch in the early postapostolic age, wrote to the Christians at Ephesus. In his letter he mentioned their bishop, Onesimus, and made a word play on the name much as Paul did in Philemon 11 and 20. If the Ephesian bishop was the same man as Philemon's slave, then we have an amazing testimony of a runaway slave becoming the pastor of the capital city in his home province. If so, this circumstance would have provided an added incentive for the churches of the area to preserve and circulate the Epistle to Philemon.

In addition to helping Onesimus, there is a higher purpose behind this letter. God inspired it and included it in Scripture because of its message to the whole church on the subject of Christian brotherhood. In particular, we can identify at least five ways in which it is important to us today.

1. It provides insight into the character of Paul.
2. It is an instructive example of Christian courtesy, love, forgiveness, and submission.



3. It is a powerful testimony of conversion. Onesimus was so transformed that for Christ's sake he was even willing to return as a slave. Moreover, he and Paul had considerable faith in God and in Philemon, for the standard punishment for a recaptured runaway slave was branding as a minimum and often crucifixion.
4. In sharp contrast to the prevailing philosophy of the ancient world, it teaches the worth of all humans and the brotherhood of all Christians, principles that ultimately undermined slavery.
5. It shows that believers must apply Christian principles to all areas of life.

### **Style, Structure, and Summary of Content**

Philemon is a private letter that contains no explicit doctrinal instruction or exhortation. Nevertheless, as we have just seen, it is a valuable lesson in applied Christianity.

We have already noted the close relation of Philemon to Colossians and, to a lesser extent, Ephesians. The specific subject of Philemon is the master-slave relationship, which is treated more generally in Ephesians 6:5-9 and Colossians 3:22-4:1. (For parallels of wording between Philemon and Colossians, see Table 3 at the end of this chapter.)

Philemon consists of three major sections. 1. *Introduction* (verses 1-7): a typical personal introduction by Paul that includes a greeting, a thanksgiving, and a prayer.

2. *Body* (verses 8-21): the substance of the letter, which is a plea for Onesimus.

3. *Conclusion* (verses 22-25): a typical personal conclusion by Paul that includes greetings from various Christians and closes with a benediction.

Stated in general terms, the theme of Philemon is brotherhood under the lordship of Jesus. Verse 16 expresses the central idea: "[Receive him] not now as a servant, but above a servant, a brother beloved, specially to me, but how much more unto thee, both in the flesh, and in the Lord?"

We can divide the main body of Philemon into three major sections, all dealing with Paul's plea for Onesimus.

1. *Preparation for the request* (8-11): appeal on the basis of love, sympathy, and the gospel.

2. *The request expressed* (12-16): Paul's request for Philemon to forgive Onesimus and his desire to have Onesimus in Rome.

3. *The request reinforced* (17-21): Paul's pledge to pay Onesimus's debt and his expression of confidence in Philemon.

### **The Problem of Slavery**

Since the Epistle to Philemon concerns the relationship of a slave to his master, the question arises, How does Christianity view slavery?

Slavery was a universal institution in Bible days. In the ancient world, and under Roman law, a slave had absolutely no rights. He was the living property of his master. A master had the right to do anything to his slave, even to the point of executing him.

The Old Testament law sought to mitigate the evils of slavery by providing specific protections for slaves. It also commanded that all Hebrew slaves be freed after six years, in effect transforming them into indentured servants. In this area, as in so many others, it set the stage for the greater revelation of the New Testament.

The New Testament teaches that each individual is of infinite value, that God is no respecter of persons, and that society should conform to the will of God. These principles certainly exclude any form of dictatorship, tyranny, persecution, cruelty, or slavery. In short, slavery is an evil system that is contrary to the will of God and that violates the fundamental tenets of Christianity.

At the same time, the New Testament admonishes people to submit to governmental authority. It opposes retaliation, revenge, violence, and rebellion. (See Matthew 5:38-39, 43-

44; 26:52; Romans 12:19; James 5:6; I Peter 3:9.) Although the Roman Empire was a pagan government and a foreign dictatorship, Jesus did not endorse Jewish rebellion against it but taught submission to civil government (Matthew 5:40-41; 17:24-27; 22:17-21). Similarly, when slaves converted to Christianity, the apostles did not condone rebellion against their masters but taught them to serve their masters as they would the Lord (Ephesians 6:5; I Peter 2:18-23).

Instead of advocating social change by rebellion and bloodshed, Christianity undermined slavery indirectly but effectively. While teaching submission, the apostles established that slaves were persons, not property, and that masters and slaves were brothers who stood on an equal basis before God. Moreover, even though Roman law gave no protection to slaves, they taught that masters had great responsibilities to their slaves. Masters were to treat their slaves fairly and kindly. (See Ephesians 6:9; Colossians 4:1.) In essence, then, the New Testament instructed slaves to be submissive, not because their masters had any inherent rights over them, but in order to be effective witnesses of Jesus Christ in their ungodly society. (See Titus 2:9-10.)

As a result, the early church did not become sidetracked in a vain attempt at violent social and political revolution. Rather, it focused on winning souls and transforming individual lives. The church converted many slaves, who for the first time received spiritual hope. It also converted many slaveowners, often through the witness of their slaves. Christianity led these masters to provide a decent life for their slaves, in effect making them family servants or employees, and in many cases to emancipate them. Eventually, Christianity became a powerful force not merely for the humanization of slavery but for its total abolition.

The following remarks by various commentators explain how and why Christianity in general and the Epistle to Philemon in particular opposed slavery in an indirect, nonviolent fashion and enunciated principles antithetical and inimical to the entire system.

Paul made no revolutionary attack on the institution of slavery but in one brief epistle undermined its whole fabric. This is how Christianity deals with vast social problems.<sup>2</sup>

Slavery was an integral part of the ancient world; the whole of society was built on it.... If Christianity had, in fact, given the slaves any encouragement to revolt or to leave their masters, nothing but tragedy could have followed. Any such revolt would have been savagely crushed; any slave who took his freedom would have been mercilessly punished; and Christianity would itself have been branded as revolutionary and subversive. Given the Christian faith, emancipation was bound to come—but the time was not ripe; and to have encouraged slaves to hope for it, and to seize it, would have done infinitely more harm than good. . . . What Christianity did was to introduce a new relationship between man and man. . . . When a relationship like that enters into life, social grades and castes cease to matter. The very names, master and slave, become irrelevant.<sup>3</sup>

Slavery was woven into the texture of society; and to prohibit slavery was to tear society into shreds.... “Nothing marks the divine character of the Gospel more than its perfect freedom from any appeal to the spirit of political revolution.” It belongs to all time: and therefore, instead of attacking special abuse, it lays down universal principles which shall undermine the evil. ...A principle is boldly enunciated, which must in the end prove fatal to slavery.<sup>4</sup>

This recognition of brotherhood, this declaration of spiritual equality, was destined to undermine and destroy the very institution of slavery....Christianity has overcome social evils, not by armed force, not by insurrection, not by violence and revolution, but by the

establishment of principles by which institutions of cruelty and inhumanity have been undermined and overthrown.<sup>5</sup>

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>Geisler and Nix, 193.

<sup>2</sup>Shepard, 526.

<sup>3</sup>William Barclay, *The Letters to Timothy, Titus, and Philemon*, rev. ed., in *The Daily Study Bible Series* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1975), 271-72.

<sup>4</sup>Lightfoot, 323, 325. The second sentence is a quotation from Goldwin Smith, *Does the Bible Sanction American Slavery?*, 95-96.

<sup>5</sup>Erdman, 131.

### Table 3

#### Parallel Passages in Philemon and Colossians

##### Philemon Colossians

1 1:1-2

3 1:2

4 1:3

5 1:4

6 1:9-10

16 3:1

23 4:12

24 4:10, 14

25 4:18

I.

#### Prologue (Philemon 1-7)

The Epistle to Philemon opens with a typical Pauline introduction that includes a salutation, thanksgiving, and prayer.

##### A. Greeting (1-3)

*(1) Paul, a prisoner of Jesus Christ, and Timothy our brother, unto Philemon our dearly beloved, and fellowlabourer, (2) and to our beloved Apphia, and Archippus our fellowsoldier, and to the church in thy house: (3) Grace to you, and peace, from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.*

The epistle begins with a salutation patterned after a standard letter in New Testament times. Such a letter began with the writer's name, the reader's name, and a statement of greeting or concern for welfare.

*Verse 1.* Paul identified himself simply as a prisoner of Jesus Christ. Since he was writing a private letter and since he was making a personal request instead of an authoritative command, he did not identify himself as an apostle, although he did so in most of his other epistles.

Paul was in prison at this time because of his preaching of the gospel of Jesus Christ. (See also verses 9, 10, 13.) The mention of his imprisonment underscores that he was making an appeal on the basis of his own sacrifice. He exemplified the principle that a leader or pastor can successfully appeal for sacrifice or discipline only if he participates in it also.

Out of courtesy, Paul included Timothy, his junior co-worker and companion at this time, in the salutation. Nevertheless, Paul himself was the author of the book (Philemon 9, 19).

As in Colossians 1:1, Paul simply identified Timothy as the (our) brother. The early Christians commonly used this title for each other, and it indicated the closeness of their fellowship.

Paul addressed the letter to Philemon, an influential member of the Colossian church, calling him the (our) beloved and a co-worker. Paul knew Philemon personally and had great affection for him, and he recognized him as a fellow laborer in the gospel. This designation could mean that Philemon was a preacher or an associate minister of some sort, but in this context it probably does not. As discussed in "Introduction to Philemon," Epaphras was apparently the local pastor. Verse 2 uses a more specific title for Archippus, perhaps to make a distinction between his functions and those of Philemon. The description of Philemon as a fellow laborer is probably simply a reference to his significant efforts in supporting the local church and winning souls.

Verse 2. Paul also greeted Apphia, a woman he called the beloved, and Archippus, whom he called a fellow soldier. (The critical text instead calls Apphia "sister.") From this mention it seems that Apphia was Philemon's wife and that Archippus was their son. Otherwise, there is no discernible reason why Paul would mention them in a personal letter to Philemon rather than in his companion letter to the Colossian church.

Paul did send a message specifically to Archippus in Colossians 4:17, encouraging him to fulfill the "ministry" God had given him. And here he called Archippus a fellow soldier. From these references it seems that Archippus was a preacher or associate pastor. Perhaps he ministered in Laodicea (as the context of Colossians 4 suggests), or perhaps he took charge of the meetings in Philemon's house.

Finally, Paul sent greetings to the church in Philemon's home. While Colossians addresses the entire body of believers in the city, this letter specifically greets the part that met in Philemon's residence. Probably no house could hold all the believers in the city at one time, so those in Philemon's area met in his house for worship services.

Verse 3 presents the standard greeting of Paul. For further discussion, see the commentary on Colossians 1:2. (There is no alternate reading in the critical text here, however, as there is for that verse.)

**B. Thanksgiving for Philemon (4-7)** *(4) I thank my God, making mention of thee always in my prayers, (5) hearing of thy love and faith, which thou hast toward the Lord Jesus, and toward all saints; (6) that the communication of thy faith may become effectual by the acknowledging of every good thing which is in you in Christ Jesus. (7) For we have great joy and consolation in thy love, because the bowels of the saints are refreshed by thee, brother.*

Verse 4 follows Paul's typical pattern of thanksgiving and prayer after the initial greeting. He assured Philemon of his continual thanksgiving and prayer for him. The verse parallels Colossians 1:3. Here again, we see the example and value of consistent intercessory prayer.

Verse 5 presents the reason for Paul's thanksgiving: the love and faith of Philemon. He was thankful for Philemon's faith toward Jesus and love toward the saints. Alternatively, perhaps he spoke of faith and love as a unit exercised toward both the Lord and the church. Colossians 1:4, a parallel verse, indicates the former meaning.

As in Colossians 1:2, Paul used the term "saints," which means sanctified or holy ones, and applied it to all Christian believers.

Verse 6 identifies Paul's purpose in praying for Philemon: that "the communication of thy faith" would become operative, or effective. The Greek word translated as "communication" is *koinonia*, which can also mean "fellowship." Commentators have proposed several

shades of meaning for the quoted phrase: (1) your share in the faith, (2) Christian fellowship, or (3) the sharing of your faith. The third option, which speaks of helping others, seems to be the most appropriate one in light of verses 5 and 7.

Paul specifically prayed that Philemon's sharing of faith would happen by, in, or unto the acknowledgment of every good thing. The word for "acknowledgment" is *epignosis*, which means "full knowledge." It also appears in Colossians 1:9-10, which records Paul's similar prayer for the Colossians.

Knowledge and the sharing of faith reinforce each other. Spiritual knowledge energizes the sharing of faith, and this act in turn leads to deeper knowledge. The NKJV focuses on the former aspect: "That the sharing of your faith may become effective by the acknowledgment of every good thing which is in you in Christ Jesus." The NIV focuses on the latter aspect: "I pray that you may be active in sharing your faith, so that you will have a full understanding of every good thing we have in Christ."

This knowledge or acknowledgement encompasses every good thing we have in Christ. (The KJV says, "In you in Christ Jesus," while the critical text says, "In us in Christ.")

*Verse 7.* Paul expressed the joy and encouragement he had because of the love of Philemon. Specifically, Philemon's love expressed itself in hospitality: he refreshed the hearts of the believers. (See also verse 20.) Not only did the church meet in his house (verse 2), but he apparently entertained traveling Christians as well (verse 22).

Like Colossians 3:12, this verse uses the Greek word for "bowels" in an idiomatic reference to the seat of emotions. Like Philemon 5, it uses "saints" as a designation for all Christians. As in Colossians 1:1-2 and Philemon 1, the common Christian title of "brother" reveals the close family relationship of believers.

(The critical text reads, "I had" instead of "We have," and the majority text uses "thanksgiving" instead of "joy.")

II.

## **Plea for Onesimus (Philemon 8-21)**

**A. Preparation for the request (8-11)** (8) *Wherefore, though I might be much bold in Christ to enjoin thee that which is convenient, (9) yet for love's sake I rather beseech thee, being such an one as Paul the aged, and now also a prisoner of Jesus Christ. (10) I beseech thee for my son Onesimus, whom I have begotten in my bonds: (11) which in time past was to thee unprofitable, but now profitable to thee and to me.*

*Verse 8* begins to present the main purpose of the letter: a request from Paul to Philemon. Paul tactfully reminded Philemon that he could be bold in Christ and command (order, charge) him to fulfill what he was about to request. Paul was an apostle, and apparently he had won Philemon to the Lord (verse 19), so he could have exercised great authority here.

Moreover, Paul was requesting Philemon to do what was fitting or proper—what he ought to do anyway. Paul had both the spiritual authority and the moral right to tell Philemon what to do in this matter.

*Verse 9.* Nevertheless, instead of commanding, Paul chose to appeal to Philemon on the basis of love. He was confident of success in this approach, for he had already noted Philemon's reputation for loving the saints (verses 5, 7).

In making his request, Paul described himself as an old man and a prisoner of Jesus Christ. He used the Greek word *presbutes*, which means elder or old man. (Some commentators have conjectured that the word was originally *presbeutes*, meaning ambassador, but they do not have any textual evidence to support their theory.) Evidently,

Paul was significantly older than Philemon, but the word *presbutes* does not necessarily mean he was very old. It probably served to draw attention to his many years of service and experience in the work of God.

In short, in this verse Paul appealed on two bases: love (affection) and sympathy. Although he had every right to command, he chose the humble approach as more appropriate and more effective.

We can learn an important lesson here: people usually respond better to an appeal rather than to an order. God has ordained authority and leadership in the church, but leaders are most effective when, instead of merely relying on their power and authority, they lead by example, persuade by principle, and appeal to the noble spiritual qualities of their followers.

Verse 10 states the subject of the appeal. It concerns Onesimus, who was returning from Rome to Colosse with this letter. (See Colossians 4:8-9.) His name literally means “useful” in Greek.

Paul called Onesimus his son. (The Greek word is actually the neuter *teknon*, meaning “child,” rather than the masculine *huios*, which specifically means “son.”) During his imprisonment Paul had begotten Onesimus spiritually, that is, he had converted him. As subsequent verses show, Onesimus was a slave of Philemon’s who ran away from Colosse and ended up in Rome. Somehow Paul met him there, witnessed to him, and won him to the Lord.

This verse shows that Paul really believed and practiced the principle he enunciated in Galatians 3:28 and Colossians 3:11: Class distinctions, including the distinction between slave and free, are abolished in Christ. The average person of that day would have rejected Onesimus upon learning that he was a runaway slave, but Paul went so far as to consider him a member of his own family.

In Greek, the name of Onesimus does not appear until the very end of the verse. Thus the verse builds a moment of suspense for Philemon, preparing him to receive this beloved child of Paul’s before identifying that child as the runaway slave who had wronged him.

Verse 11. Onesimus was formerly useless, or unprofitable, to Philemon, but since his conversion he was useful to both Paul and Philemon. True conversion not only changes a person’s beliefs, but it also changes his practical, everyday life. Christ truly transforms a person’s lifestyle and values.

The transformation of Onesimus provides a good example of the Christian work ethic. It is God’s will for people to work diligently, to serve their employers well, and to strive for excellence in their activities. (See the commentary on Colossians 3:23.)

Since the very name of Onesimus means useful or profitable, verses 10-11 make a play on words with the name.

### **B. The request expressed (12-16)**

*(12) Whom I have sent again: thou therefore receive him, that is, mine own bowels: (13) whom I would have retained with me, that in thy stead he might have ministered unto me in the bonds of the gospel: (14) but without thy mind would I do nothing; that thy benefit should not be as it were of necessity, but willingly. (15) For perhaps he therefore departed for a season, that thou shouldest receive him for ever; (16) not now as a servant, but above a servant, a brother beloved, specially to me, but how much more unto thee, both in the flesh, and in the Lord?*

Verse 12. Paul sent Onesimus back to Philemon for restitution and reconciliation. True repentance includes a godly sorrow for sin, and it will motivate a person to rectify the wrongs caused by his sin to the extent possible. As Barclay stated, “Christianity is not out to

help a man escape his past and run away from it; it is out to enable him to face his past and rise above it.”<sup>1</sup>

In the KJV, this verse presents in a direct manner the first part of Paul’s request: “Receive him.” (The critical text omits this phrase, saying merely, “Whom I sent back to thee in person, that is, mine own bowels.” If this reading is correct, Paul hinted at this request in verses 12-14, presented it somewhat indirectly in verses 15-16, and stated it plainly in verse 17.)

To underscore the importance that Paul attached to his plea, he described Onesimus as “mine own bowels.” As in verse 7, he used the Greek idiom for the seat of the emotions, saying, in effect, “He is my own heart.”

Verse 13 presents in an indirect way Paul’s true desire. Not only did he want Philemon to receive Onesimus, but he really wanted Philemon to permit Onesimus to return to Rome. Paul wished to retain Onesimus to assist him during his imprisonment. The Greek text literally says, “I resolved with myself.” In light of verse 16, Paul probably hoped that Philemon would fulfill this wish by setting Onesimus free.

Again, Paul noted that he was imprisoned for the gospel. He also remarked that if Onesimus had remained in Rome, then Onesimus would have helped Paul on behalf of Philemon, or in Philemon’s place. By this approach Paul delicately advanced two powerful reasons why Philemon should release Onesimus to help Paul: (1) he would aid the gospel and (2) he would aid Paul, to whom he personally owed service (verse 19). Moreover, Philemon only had a choice in the matter because of Paul, who had converted Onesimus and then sent him back.

Verse 14. Having expressed his own wish, Paul explained that he was not willing to do anything to carry out this plan without obtaining Philemon’s opinion, that is, his consent.

Paul sought Philemon’s consent so that Philemon would not do good out of necessity or pressure but by free choice. “But without your consent I wanted to do nothing, that your good deed might not be by compulsion, as it were, but voluntary” (NKJV).

Paul presupposed that Philemon would indeed fulfill his request and perform the “good deed”; he simply wanted Philemon to respond willingly. For this reason, Paul’s request was tentative and tactful. He hinted at the proper and desired course of action but never expressly stated it, so that Philemon would truly have a free choice. “But I would do nothing without consulting you first, for if you have a favor to give me, let it be spontaneous and not forced from you by circumstances!” (Phillips).

Paul’s seeking of Philemon’s consent presupposed that Philemon had a right to control Onesimus as his slave. Certainly, he had the legal right to do so, but since slavery is essentially an anti-Christian institution, we cannot say he had a God-given right to do so. (See “Introduction to Philemon.”) Significantly, Paul did not base the need for obtaining Philemon’s consent on the idea that Philemon had a God-given right to own Onesimus, but he based it upon God’s recognition and protection of human freedom of choice. Paul diplomatically showed that Philemon had a Christian duty to give his consent, but Paul—and God—wanted him to make the right choice of his own volition. As another example of this principle, Christians have a duty to give offerings (Malachi 3:8; I Corinthians 9:9-14), but God wants offerings from a cheerful, willing giver (II Corinthians 9:7).

Verse 15 indirectly requests that Philemon “receive” Onesimus, that is, forgive him and accept him as a fellow Christian. In fact, Paul suggested that events had transpired the way they did for this very purpose. Perhaps Onesimus departed from Philemon for a time (literally, an hour) so that Philemon might receive him eternally. In other words, perhaps God

allowed Onesimus to run away so that he could be saved and be reunited with Philemon eternally as a brother in Christ.

Significantly, Paul was modest in interpreting divine providence. He did not assert that God actually willed for Onesimus to run away, but he suggested that maybe God intervened in Onesimus's schemes and actions to push him in the right direction. He did not jump to conclusions and offer a pat answer that explained the hurts and wrongs as the perfect will of God. Such an approach could have been inconsiderate of Philemon's feelings as well as presumptuous. God's judgments are unsearchable and His ways are past finding out (Romans 11:33). We humans can offer conjectures as to why God allows certain things to occur, but we must be cautious in making such evaluations.

Even assuming God played no part in the initial action of Onesimus in running away, God can and often does bring good out of evil. Especially when His people are involved, He uses evil events caused by sinners or the devil to make good things happen. For example, sinful men caused Joseph to become a slave and ultimately a prisoner in a foreign land, but God used those very circumstances to exalt Joseph and to deliver his family from famine. His brothers acted evilly, but God allowed them to do so because He had a plan to bring about good out of it (Genesis 50:20). (See also Deuteronomy 23:5; Ezra 8:22; Proverbs 12:13, 21; Romans 8:28.) If people are responsive to God, He will work through them directly, but if people are unresponsive or opposed to God, He still foresees their actions and can work them into His plan in order to accomplish His will anyway.

Probably Paul offered his explanation to soften Philemon's feelings of betrayal because of the actions of Onesimus. If Philemon could see God working everything out for good in this distressing situation, he would naturally be more willing to forgive Onesimus and be reconciled to him.

*Verse 16.* Paul wanted Philemon to receive Onesimus no longer as a slave but as more—as a beloved brother.

Paul had already called Onesimus his child; now he called him his beloved brother, underscoring this description by saying it was especially true. Then he pressed his plea home in a startling manner: Onesimus should now be even more dear to Philemon than to Paul. The many years of close association between Onesimus and Philemon meant that the two of them should be able to have a very close relationship now that Onesimus was a Christian. Philemon should receive him as a brother "in the flesh," that is, as a fellow human being. Not only that, he should receive him as a brother "in the Lord," that is, as a fellow Christian.

Here we find a principle that completely undermines the institution of slavery and reveals that slavery is actually an anti-Christian system. Even though society made Philemon the master and Onesimus the slave, giving all rights and status to the former and none to the latter, Christianity dictated that Philemon accept and treat Onesimus as an equal in every way. According to Christianity, both master and slave should have equal civil and social rights as fellow human beings and equal rights in the church as fellow Christians.

If a Christian master truly implemented this principle, he would no longer treat his slave as a slave but would give him every consideration that an employer should give an employee. In other words, the classifications of slave and master would become irrelevant. Although Christianity acknowledged and submitted to the legal designations of master and slave, it totally transformed them from within, effectively rendering them irrelevant as far as Christians were concerned, but in a way that did not attack the authority of the state, cause rebellion, or incite violence.

For this reason, many commentators think that Paul actually meant for Philemon to grant



freedom to Onesimus. After all, implementing this verse would effectively grant freedom in all but name and legality, so why not do that, too? Paul did not state this intention in so many words, but his whole appeal consisted of tactful hints, and his final hint seems to be a suggestion that Onesimus receive his freedom. (See also verse 21.)

We can summarize Paul's request as follows: (1) He asked Philemon to receive Onesimus as a brother in Christ, forgiving him and being reconciled to him. (2) He desired for Philemon to send Onesimus back to Rome to assist him. (3) By implication, he hoped Philemon would grant Onesimus his freedom.

### **C. The request reinforced (17-21)**

*(17) If thou count me therefore a partner, receive him as myself. (18) If he hath wronged thee, or oweth thee ought, put that on mine account; (19) I Paul have written it with mine own hand, I will repay it: albeit I do not say to thee how thou owest unto me even thine own self besides. (20) Yea, brother, let me have joy of thee in the Lord: refresh my bowels in the Lord. (21) Having confidence in thy obedience I wrote unto thee, knowing that thou wilt also do more than I say.*

Having tactfully and somewhat indirectly presented his plea for Onesimus in verses 12-16, Paul reiterated his request and in effect promised to do whatever was necessary to ensure that Philemon would fulfill it.

**Verse 17.** In this verse Paul made a direct, firm request for Philemon to give Onesimus a kind reception and a full pardon. This idea appears previously in verses 12 (KJV) and 15, but verse 17 states it most clearly. Specifically, Paul wanted Philemon to receive Onesimus just as he would receive Paul himself.

Paul based his request on the close relationship between himself and Philemon. "So if you consider me a partner, welcome him as you would welcome me" (NIV). The word translated as "count" (KJV) or "consider" (NIV) literally means "have." "If" here functions just like "since," for Philemon indeed had Paul as a partner; he was Paul's fellow worker (verse 1).

Put in these terms it was inconceivable that Philemon would refuse Paul's request. To do so would be, in effect, to repudiate his special friendship with Paul.

**Verse 18.** In asking his friend to pardon Onesimus, Paul did not demand that Philemon suffer the loss involved. Rather, Paul offered: If he wronged you or owes anything, reckon it to me (put it on my account; charge it to me). From this statement, it appears that Onesimus had destroyed or stolen some of Philemon's property when he ran away.

This verse shows that repentance should include or be followed by restitution. (See Luke 19:8.) Onesimus had an obligation to repay the stolen money, and since he evidently had no means of doing so, Paul offered to do it for him.

We also see the generous and forgiving spirit of the apostle Paul. He was willing to bear the cost of the sin of Onesimus. In this way he exemplified the attitude of Christ, who willingly paid the eternal price for our sins and suffered in our place. Paul practiced what he preached in Colossians 3:13: "Even as Christ forgave you, so also do ye."

**Verse 19.** To emphasize the sincerity of his offer to pay the debt of Onesimus, Paul used a legal pronouncement: I Paul wrote with my hand, I will repay. In effect, he issued a legal promissory note.

This verse provides an example of the "handwriting" (*cheirographon*) spoken of in Colossians 2:14, which means a note, bond, or certificate of debt. *Cheirographon* comes from the words *cheir* (hand) and *grapho* (write), and both of them appear in this verse.

Paul typically dictated his letters, writing only the concluding remarks in his own hand, but apparently he wrote all of his short letter to Philemon in his own hand.

After guaranteeing the debt of Onesimus, Paul noted in passing, “Not to mention to you that you owe me even your own self besides” (NKJV). Apparently Paul had won Philemon to the Lord, so Philemon actually owed his whole life to Paul. Viewed in this light, the debt of Onesimus was already canceled by Paul’s assuming of it. Paul could have demanded that Philemon forgive the debt as a way of making a small, partial repayment of his own debt to Paul.

Again, we see the indirect, tactful approach of Paul. He gently reminded Philemon of his own debt to Paul without insisting on anything. Under the circumstances, Philemon probably refused the offer of payment from Paul.

There is a hint here that Philemon could repay Paul by sending Onesimus back to him. Verses 20-21 make this implication stronger.

*Verse 20.* Although Paul was willing to pay Onesimus’s monetary debt to Philemon and although he did not demand any repayment of Philemon’s moral and spiritual debt to him, there was something Philemon could do for him. He wanted Philemon to fulfill his request and thereby render profit to him.

Paul used the Greek verb *oninami*, which appears only here in the New Testament. Its form in this verse means “may I have joy, help, benefit, or profit.” *Oninami* is the verb from which the name Onesimus is derived; thus, much as in verse 11, there is a word play on the slave’s name. This pun perhaps served as a further hint that Paul wanted Onesimus himself, not some other joy or benefit.

As in previous verses, Paul based his appeal on the close Christian relationship between him and Philemon, calling Philemon his “brother” and asking for refreshing “in the Lord.” (The critical text uses “in Christ.”) Once again, Paul used the Greek idiom for the seat of emotions (“bowels”), asking for Philemon to refresh him emotionally or spiritually.

There is a close parallel between verses 7 and 20. Both address Philemon as “brother,” and both speak of “refreshing” the “bowels,” or heart. In verse 7, Paul commended Brother Philemon for his practice of refreshing the hearts of the saints; in verse 20, he asked Brother Philemon to live up to his character by refreshing his own heart in the matter of Onesimus.

*Verse 21.* Paul concluded his appeal by expressing his trust in Philemon: “Having confidence in your obedience, I write to you” (NKJV). He assumed the best. Positive reinforcement in this manner is usually much more effective than negative tactics such as threats or demands.

Not only was Paul sure that Philemon would answer his request but he also expressed confidence that “you will do even more than I ask” (NIV). Paul’s direct request was that Philemon welcome Onesimus as a brother instead of a slave, but he hinted at more. Perhaps Paul spoke in general terms of love and generosity that would exceed the minimum expected, but the context indicates that he had something specific in mind. If so, what “more” could Philemon do but restore Onesimus to Paul or grant him his freedom?

Either action would amount to the same thing. If Philemon sent Onesimus back to Paul, in effect he would relinquish his rights to Onesimus indefinitely, and Paul would certainly treat Onesimus as free. If Philemon set Onesimus free, Onesimus would probably return to Rome as Paul’s associate. In short, this verse hints strongly for Philemon to set Onesimus free so that he could return to Paul.

Based on the following points, we can assume that Philemon indeed fulfilled Paul’s request: (1) He had a noble, godly character (verses 5-7). (2) He was a close, beloved associate of Paul’s and was greatly indebted to him (verses 1, 9, 17, 19). (3) Paul had great

confidence in his obedience (verse 21). (4) The very survival of this letter indicates that Paul's plea was successful.

At the least, we can be confident that Philemon welcomed Onesimus back, pardoned him, and did not treat him as a slave any longer. In reality if not in legality, Philemon and Onesimus entered into a relationship of equality as fellow humans and brothers in the Lord. In all likelihood, Philemon also set Onesimus free legally, thereby allowing him to return to Rome and fulfill Paul's desire (verses 13-14, 21). According to early postbiblical tradition, Onesimus was indeed set free.

### **Note**

<sup>1</sup>Barclay, *Timothy, Titus, and Philemon*, 281. III.

### **Epilogue (Philemon 22-25)**

*(22) But withal prepare me also a lodging: for I trust that through your prayers I shall be given unto you. (23) There salute thee Epaphras, my fellowprisoner in Christ Jesus; (24) Marcus, Aristarchus, Demas, Lucas, my fellowlabourers. (25) The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. Amen.*

Verse 22. As an additional request, Paul asked that Philemon prepare a guest room for him. ("Withal" means in addition or therewith.) Hospitality was expected of all Christians (Romans 12:13). In this case, Philemon was a personal friend of Paul's and a willing host to all Christians (Philemon 2, 5, 7, 17, 19).

The reason for this request was that Paul hoped he would be set free through the prayers of the Colossian believers and therefore be able to visit them. (In the Greek, "your" and "you" are plural here.) Colossians 4:18 contains an implied request for such prayers. Tradition says, and conservative scholars generally agree, that Paul was set free after this time and then later imprisoned a second time in Rome.

Verse 23 briefly conveys greetings from Epaphras of Colosse to Philemon personally. ("Thee" is singular in English and Greek.) He was probably Philemon's pastor and was on a visit to Paul in Rome. Paul called him a fellow prisoner in the Lord. He was apparently free at this time, but he may have been imprisoned with Paul at some earlier time. Probably Paul simply used this term because Epaphras was a fellow gospel preacher who was presently staying with him while he was imprisoned and was giving him aid. (For further discussion of Epaphras, see the commentary on Colossians 1:7-8 and 4:12-13.)

Verse 24 conveys personal greetings from four fellow workers of Paul who were with him at the time: Marcus (John Mark), Aristarchus, Demas, and Lucas (Luke). Thus Philemon received greetings from five of the six co-workers mentioned in Colossians 4:10-14, Jesus Justus being the one exception. Apparently these five knew Philemon personally and Justus did not. Although the KJV uses "Luke" in Colossians 4:14 and "Lucas" in this verse, both verses use the same word in Greek, *Loukas*. (For further discussion of these four men, see the commentary on Colossians 4:10, 14.)

Verse 25. In closing, Paul pronounced a typical benediction of grace. (The critical text omits the ending of "Amen.") He changed from the singular "thee" of verse 23 to the plural "your," thereby including all the household. He expressed his desire that the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ reside and work within the innermost being of these dear friends and fellow Christians.

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