COLOSSIANS
AND PHILEMON
BIBLE STUDY

A Verse-by-Verse Study



Christ above all: in Him all things hold together,
and a letter of forgiveness for a runaway brother

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A note before you begin. This book is written to teach the Bible and encourage faith. It shares my understanding of Scripture and is offered for study and spiritual growth. It is not counseling, medical, legal, or financial advice. If you are facing a crisis, a health problem, or a legal or money problem, please reach out to a qualified professional as well as your pastor and church family. To the fullest extent the law allows, Andrew Dominguez, Trinfinity Enterprises, and Andrew Dominguez's heirs, estate, successors, and assigns accept no liability for how this material is used.

A Note on the Bible Translation Used in This Study

My preferred Bible for personal study, teaching, and research is the Steadfast Literal Bible (SLB). I chose it because it is a word-for-word translation in today's language, built on the ancient Scripture sources: the Hebrew and Aramaic of the Old Testament and the Greek of the New Testament. I prepared the SLB myself, and the Scripture in this book is taken from it.

Where a literal phrase would mislead an English reader, the SLB gives the writer's meaning in plain words. Words added for sense are set in bold italics so you can see what is in the original and what is not.

The complete Steadfast Literal Bible is free to read, search, download, and print at trinfinityenterprises.com/slb. If you want to check a verse in its full setting or read the translation's preface and principles, that is the place to go.

Above all, my desire is not to promote one translation over another, but to faithfully teach the Word of God, encourage careful examination of the Scriptures, and help readers grow in their knowledge, understanding, and relationship with the Lord.

May every page of this study direct attention not to the translation itself, but to the truth of God's Word and the One whom it reveals.

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Introduction

Welcome, and thank you for taking the time to work through this verse-by-verse study of the books of Colossians and Philemon. My purpose in writing this study guide is the same as it was for my study of Revelation: to bring you closer to our Creator and to give you a way to grow in your Christian walk.

I needed a lot of grace myself. I made choices that hurt my marriage and the people closest to me, and I fought alcohol for years. So when someone who has failed wants to walk right again, I try to remember how much grace I was given. Philemon is about receiving someone back. Grace means clearing the ledger, just as Christ cleared ours.

Colossians and Philemon are two short letters that Paul sent from prison at the same time, carried by the same men, to believers in the same small town. Colossians shows us that Jesus Christ is above all things and that we are complete in Him. Philemon shows us what that looks like when a wronged master and a runaway slave have to face each other as brothers. I do not claim to be an authority on the Bible or on these letters. I am simply someone like you who wants to grow closer to God and understand what He has given us in His Son. Before you read any part of this book, or any part of Scripture, I ask that you pray, asking God:

- For the Holy Spirit to be present, to help open your eyes and your heart (Psalm 119:18, 119:105)
- For discernment and knowledge (Psalm 119:66, James 1:5)

2 Timothy 2:15 (SLB)

"Be diligent to present yourself approved to God, a worker not needing to be ashamed, cutting straight the word of truth."

The Bible is God's Word to us (2 Timothy 3:16), given for training in righteousness. If we cannot understand what it says, we cannot apply it to our lives or help build God's kingdom.

So how do we go about understanding God's Word?

The first rule is context. You may have heard the saying "Context is King," but what does that mean? Every word, sentence, and passage helps explain the ones around it. Before we read any passage, we should ask a few simple questions: Who wrote it? Who was it written to? What came right before it? Knowing the answers gives us a clearer picture of what God is saying, both in general and to each of us personally.

Context matters a great deal in Colossians. Paul wrote it because a false teaching was pulling the believers away from Christ. If we forget that, the warnings in chapter 2 about food, Sabbaths, angels and harsh rules can seem strange. Once we see the problem, the whole letter makes sense: first Paul shows who Christ is (chapters 1 and 2), and then he shows how people who are complete in Christ should live (chapters 3 and 4). Philemon also needs its context. It is a personal letter

about one man, Onesimus, and we only understand it when we know who he was and why he was going home.

Exegesis, Eisegesis, and Hermeneutics

People typically interpret the Bible using one of two methods, Exegesis or Eisegesis. Both are explained below, along with a third word, Hermeneutics. Sometimes people use both methods to "make their case" for the interpretation they want. These definitions are based on www.merriam-webster.com, with my own notes added.

Exegesis means explaining a text, especially a passage of Scripture. Exegesis is reading and interpreting the full text of a passage, and drawing out what it is actually saying.

Eisegesis means reading your own ideas into a text. This happens when we try to find something in the text that really isn't there. It can lead to many errors, especially when we bring assumptions to a passage that aren't actually in it. This method can be used to justify a behavior, position, or belief that goes against what the text originally meant.

Hermeneutics is the study of the principles used to interpret a text, such as the Bible. "Hermeneutics" and "Exegesis" are sometimes used to mean the same thing. The difference is that Exegesis is the work of explaining a passage, while Hermeneutics is the set of principles that guides that work. In Biblical Hermeneutics, the Bible should be read literally unless the text itself gives us a different meaning.

2 Timothy 3:16-17 (SLB)

"16 Every Scripture ***is*** God-breathed and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training which ***is*** in righteousness, 17 so that the man of God may be complete, fully equipped for every good work."

This passage tells us plainly that the writers of Scripture were inspired by God. Every passage in the Bible came from God and was written down by man. These are not fairy tales or made-up stories. They are God's own breath, given to us so we can be equipped and ready to do good work.

Because every word was inspired and breathed by God, I believe we must let God's Word interpret itself. We must study the Bible using Exegesis, drawing out what the text says, guided by sound Biblical Hermeneutics.

We should study God's Word using the Golden Rule of Interpretation, as Dr. David L. Cooper stated it:

"When the plain sense of Scripture makes common sense, seek no other sense; therefore, take every word at its primary, ordinary, usual, literal meaning unless the facts of the immediate context, studied in the light of related passages and axiomatic and fundamental truths, indicate clearly otherwise."

(http://www.biblicalresearch.info/page55.html)

I read the Bible as it is written. Colossians teaches plainly, and this study takes Paul at his word: Jesus really is the Creator of all things and God in the flesh, His death on the cross really did cancel the debt we owed, and nothing needs to be added to Him. Philemon is just as plain. It is a real letter about a real man, and it shows the gospel at work in a real home.

This study uses the Steadfast Literal Bible (SLB) unless I note otherwise. To better understand the original Greek, I also used The Interlinear Bible (Jay P. Green Sr., ISBN 1-56563-977-4).

How This Study Is Laid Out

Each chapter of this study follows the same pattern as my study of Revelation:

- Scripture: the full text of the chapter, broken into sections, so you can read it straight through first.
- Preview: a short look at what the chapter covers.
- Study: the chapter again, verse by verse, with my notes on what each verse says and what it means for us.
- Summary: the main points of the chapter in a few lines.
- Study Questions: questions for personal study or a small group, from simple fact questions to questions about how we live. Some of them are personal. In a group, no one should ever have to answer one aloud, and what is shared in the group stays there.
- Old and New Testament links: after many verses you will find a short line in small type that lists the places where the other Testament quotes, fulfills, pictures, or echoes that passage. "Quoted" means the New Testament quotes the Old Testament words. "Fulfilled" means the New Testament tells us a prophecy or promise came true. "Pictured" means the New Testament itself points to an Old Testament person, event, or object as a picture of Christ. "Alluded to" means a clear echo in shared words or pictures. Every link is listed again in a table at the back of the book.

Each letter also has its own Overview and Background before its first chapter, so you know who wrote it, who it was written to, and why.

Using This Study With a Group

This study works for one person or for a group. Here are two ways a group can pace it:

- One chapter a week: five weeks, four for Colossians and one for Philemon. If you like, add a first meeting to read the Introduction and the Background of Colossians together.
- Half a chapter a week: ten weeks. The Scripture for each chapter is already printed in two parts, and the start of the second part is a natural place to stop.

For each meeting, I suggest reading the Scripture out loud together first, straight through, before anyone comments. Then walk through the Study section, stopping where the group has questions, and finish with the Study Questions and prayer. The first questions in each list can be answered from the text. The later ones are more personal, and no one should feel pressed to answer them aloud.

Some parts of these letters touch painful subjects: sexual sin and anger (Colossians 3:5-9), marriage and family (3:18-21), slavery (3:22-4:1 and all of Philemon), and forgiving someone who has wronged us (3:13 and Philemon 17-19). If you lead a group, read those sections ahead of time and be ready to listen. If someone shares something that puts them or another person in danger, help them get help right away.

I look forward to walking with you through the books of Colossians and Philemon. If you'd like to share feedback, please email me at andrew@trinfinityenterprises.com.

May God bless you and your time studying and getting to know Him better.

Overview of Colossians

Colossians is the twelfth book of the New Testament. It sits between Philippians and 1 Thessalonians. It is one of the four Prison Letters, the letters Paul wrote while under arrest. The other three are Ephesians, Philippians, and Philemon. Colossians and Ephesians are often called twin letters. Paul wrote them at about the same time, sent them with the same man, and many of their themes and phrases match. Ephesians puts the spotlight on the church, the body of Christ. Colossians puts the spotlight on Christ, the head of the body.

The theme of Colossians is that Christ is supreme and that He is enough. A false teaching had come into the church that said believers needed something more: special knowledge, strict rules about food and holy days, harsh treatment of the body, even the worship of angels. Paul answers with Jesus. Everything God is lives in Him, and everyone who belongs to Him is complete in Him:

Colossians 2:9 (SLB)

"For in Him dwells all the fullness of the Deity bodily."

The next verse finishes the thought: "and you have been filled in Him, who is the head of every ruler and authority" (2:10). Many Bibles use the word complete there. If you have Christ, you have everything you need.

Colossians has 4 chapters and 95 verses. Like Ephesians, it moves from teaching to living. Here is its structure:

Part One: Who Christ Is and What He Has Done (chapters 1 and 2)

- Colossians 1: Christ Above All
- Colossians 2: Complete in Christ

Part Two: Living the New Life in Christ (chapters 3 and 4)

- Colossians 3: Set Your Minds on Things Above
- Colossians 4: Wise Walk and Faithful Friends

Background of Colossians

Author: The letter opens with "Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ through the will of God, and Timothy the brother" (1:1). Timothy was with Paul when he wrote, but the letter speaks with Paul's voice ("I, Paul," 1:23), and Paul signs the greeting with his own hand (4:18). The early church accepted Paul as the author. Some modern scholars believe a follower of Paul wrote it after his death. They point to a few words and long sentences that are different from Paul's other letters, and to its teaching about Christ, which they think is too developed for Paul's lifetime. I take the letter at its word. It names Paul three times, speaks of his chains (4:3, 18), and closes with a list of real people, most of whom also show up in Philemon, a letter almost no one doubts Paul wrote. A writer's style changes with his subject, and Paul's teaching about Christ here matches what he wrote in letters no one questions (1 Corinthians 8:6; Philippians 2:5-11).

Who it was written to: Paul writes "to the saints in Colosse and faithful brothers in Christ" (1:2). Paul had never been there himself. He speaks of believers who "have not seen my face in the flesh" (2:1). Most of the readers were Gentiles, people who were not Jewish by birth. Paul says they were once "alienated and enemies in mind" (1:21) and "dead in the trespasses and in the uncircumcision of your flesh" (2:13).

The city of Colossae: Colossae (spelled Colosse in some Bibles) sat in the Lycus River valley, in the Roman province of Asia, in what is now western Turkey, roughly a hundred miles east of Ephesus. Two larger cities stood nearby: Laodicea, about ten miles away, and Hierapolis, a little farther. Colossae had once been an important town on the main road from the coast to the east, known for its wool and cloth, but by Paul's day it had grown small next to its neighbors. Many Bible teachers say that Colossae was the least important town Paul ever wrote to. The valley was hit by a strong earthquake in the early 60s A.D., and Colossae never really recovered.

Epaphras: Paul did not start this church. Epaphras did. He was from Colossae (4:12), and the Colossians first heard the gospel from him (1:7). Most likely he came to faith during Paul's three years in Ephesus, when "all those dwelling in Asia heard the word of the Lord Jesus" (Acts 19:10), and then carried the gospel home to his own valley. Paul calls him "our beloved fellow slave" and "a faithful minister of Christ on your behalf" (1:7). Epaphras had come to Paul in Rome with news of the church, both good and bad. He was also praying hard for the believers in Colossae, Laodicea, and Hierapolis (4:12-13). In Philemon 23, Paul calls him "my fellow prisoner."

The false teaching: Paul never names the false teachers or gives a full description of what they taught. He answers it, and we learn about it from his answers, mostly in 2:8-23. It was called "philosophy and empty deceit" and "the tradition of men" (2:8). It had Jewish parts: circumcision (2:11), rules about food and drink, feasts, new moons, and Sabbaths (2:16). It had parts that sounded very spiritual: "humility and the worship of the angels" and claims to have seen visions (2:18). It had strict rules for the body: "Do not handle, nor taste, nor touch" (2:21). And it seems to have treated Christ as one step on the way to God, not as God Himself. That is why Paul says so strongly that all the fullness of God lives in Jesus (1:19; 2:9). Bible teachers disagree on what to call this teaching. Some see an early form of what later became Gnosticism, a family of teachings that said salvation came through secret knowledge and that the body was evil. Others see a kind of

Jewish mysticism that focused on visions and angels. Many believe it was a local mix of both. We don't need to know its exact name. The answer Paul gives fits every teaching that says Jesus is not enough.

When and where it was written: Paul wrote as a prisoner (4:3, 10, 18). Most who hold that Paul wrote it believe he wrote from Rome during his house arrest, around A.D. 60 to 62 (Acts 28:16, 30-31). A few scholars suggest an earlier imprisonment in Ephesus, or Paul's two years in Caesarea (Acts 24:27), but Rome fits best with the freedom he had to receive visitors and with the people named around him, including Luke and Aristarchus, who sailed with him to Rome (Acts 27:2). Paul wrote Colossians, Ephesians, and Philemon at about the same time.

Tychicus and Onesimus: Two men carried the letter. Tychicus was from the province of Asia and traveled with Paul (Acts 20:4). He also carried Ephesians (Ephesians 6:21-22). With him went Onesimus, "the faithful and beloved brother, who is one of you" (4:9). Onesimus was the slave of Philemon, a believer in Colossae, who had left his master and met Paul in Rome, where he came to faith in Christ. Paul was sending him home, and he wrote the short letter to Philemon to go with him. Picture the scene. When Tychicus read Colossians aloud to the church, Onesimus was in the room, and maybe Philemon too.

Purpose: Paul writes to warn the believers against the false teaching, to show them that Christ is above all and that they are complete in Him, and to show them how to live a new life together in their homes, in their church, and before the watching world.

Colossians 1: Christ Above All

Scripture

1:1-14 Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ through ***the*** will of God, and Timothy the brother, to the saints in Colosse and faithful brothers in Christ: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and ***the*** Lord Jesus Christ. We give thanks to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, praying always for you, having heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and the love toward all the saints, because of the hope which is laid up for you in the heavens, which you heard of before in the word of the truth of the gospel, which is present among you, just as also in all the world, and is bearing fruit, just as also among you, from the day you heard and came to know the grace of God in truth; just as you also learned from Epaphras our beloved fellow slave, who is a faithful minister of Christ on your behalf, who also made known to us your love in ***the*** Spirit. Because of this we also, from the day we heard, do not cease praying for you and asking that you may be filled ***with*** the full knowledge of His will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding,***for*** you to walk worthily of the Lord for all pleasing, bearing fruit in every good work and growing into the full knowledge of God; being strengthened with all power according to the might of His glory, for all endurance and patience with joy; giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified us for the share of the inheritance of the saints in the light, who rescued us out of the authority of the darkness and transferred ***us*** into the kingdom of the Son of His love, in whom we have the redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins;

1:15-29 who is ***the*** image of the invisible God, ***the*** firstborn of all creation; because in Him all things were created, the ***things*** in the heavens and the ***things*** on the earth, the visible and the invisible, whether thrones or lordships or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through Him and for Him. And He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together. And He is the head of the body, the church; who is ***the*** beginning, ***the*** firstborn from the dead, so that in all things He Himself may come to hold first place; because in Him all the fullness was pleased to dwell, and through Him to reconcile all things to Him, having made peace through the blood of His cross, through Him, whether the ***things*** on the earth or the ***things*** in the heavens. And you, once being alienated and enemies in mind in the evil works, yet now He has reconciled in the body of His flesh through the death, to present you holy and without blemish and beyond reproach before Him, if indeed you continue in the faith, founded and steadfast and not being moved away from the hope of the gospel which you heard, which was preached in all the creation which ***is*** under heaven, of which I, Paul, became a minister. Who now rejoice in my sufferings for you, and fill up in turn the ***things*** lacking of the afflictions of Christ in my flesh for His body, which is the church, of which I became a minister according to the stewardship of God which was given to me for you, to fulfill the word of God, the mystery which has been hidden from the ages and from the generations, but now was made manifest to His saints, to whom God willed to make known what ***is*** the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles, who is Christ in you, the hope of glory; whom we proclaim, admonishing every man and teaching every man in all wisdom, so that we may present every man perfect in Christ Jesus; for which I also toil, striving according to His working which works in me in power.

Preview

Paul opens his letter to a church he has never visited. He thanks God for their faith, their love, and their hope, all of which came to them through the gospel that Epaphras preached. Then he prays that they would be filled with the knowledge of God's will, walk in a way that pleases the Lord, and give thanks to the Father who rescued them out of darkness and brought them into the kingdom of His Son.

That prayer leads Paul into one of the greatest passages about Jesus in the whole Bible. Christ is the image of the invisible God. He created all things, He holds all things together, He is head of the church, and through the blood of His cross He made peace. Paul then reminds the Colossians that they were once enemies of God and are now reconciled, and he tells them about his own work and suffering for the church, so that he may present every person complete in Christ.

Study

1:1 *Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ through **the** will of God, and Timothy the brother,*

Paul calls himself "an apostle of Jesus Christ through the will of God," An apostle is one who is sent, a messenger carrying the authority of the one who sent him. Paul had never met these believers, so he starts by telling them why they should listen. He did not take this job for himself. The risen Jesus called him to it (Acts 9:15).

He names "Timothy the brother" with him. Timothy was Paul's young helper and close friend (Philippians 2:19-22). He was with Paul in Rome, and the Colossians may have known of him from Paul's years in Ephesus. Notice that Paul does not call Timothy an apostle. He calls him a brother. That is a title every believer shares.

1:2 *to the saints in Colosse and faithful brothers in Christ: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and **the** Lord Jesus Christ.*

Paul writes "to the saints in Colosse and faithful brothers in Christ." A saint is not a super-Christian. In the Bible, every believer is a saint. The word means one who is set apart for God. These saints lived in a small town that most of the Roman world had never heard of, but God knew every one of them by name.

They were "in Colosse" and "in Christ" at the same time. That is true of every believer. We live at a real address on earth, but our true home and our life are in Christ.

"Grace to you and peace." Grace is God's favor that we did not earn. Peace is what comes to us because of that grace. Grace always comes first.

1:3 *We give thanks to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, praying always for you,*

Paul starts with thanks. "We give thanks to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, praying always for you." Paul was in chains, but his first thought was not his own problems. It was thanks for other believers.

Notice who Paul thanks. He does not thank the Colossians for being such good people. He thanks God. Faith and love in any believer are the work of God, so God gets the credit.

"Praying always for you." Paul prayed for people he had never seen. That should encourage us. You do not have to know someone well to pray for them. Missionaries, persecuted believers, and churches far away all need our prayers.

1:4 *having heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and the love toward all the saints,*

What had Paul heard? "Your faith in Christ Jesus and the love toward all the saints." These two always go together. Faith looks up to Christ. Love reaches out to other believers. If someone says they have faith in Jesus but has no love for His people, something is wrong (1 John 4:20).

Notice also that their faith is "in Christ Jesus." Faith is only as good as the One it rests on. The false teachers wanted to add other things to trust in. Paul starts by reminding the Colossians that their faith was already in the right place.

1:5 *because of the hope which is laid up for you in the heavens, which you heard of before in the word of the truth of the gospel,*

Where did their faith and love come from? "Because of the hope which is laid up for you in the heavens." In the Bible, hope is not a wish. It is a sure promise that has not arrived yet. And this hope is "laid up," stored away and kept safe, in heaven, where no thief or false teacher can touch it (1 Peter 1:4).

Here Paul gives us faith, love, and hope together, as he does in 1 Corinthians 13:13 and 1 Thessalonians 1:3. Hope fuels the other two. When we know what is waiting for us, we can trust God now and love others now, even when it costs us.

They first heard of this hope "in the word of the truth of the gospel." The false teachers had new ideas. Paul points them back to the truth they first heard.

1:6 *which is present among you, just as also in all the world, and is bearing fruit, just as also among you, from the day you heard and came to know the grace of God in truth;*

The gospel was "bearing fruit" and growing "in all the world." The gospel is alive. Wherever it goes, it bears fruit in changed lives, and it spreads. In Paul's day it was already moving across the Roman Empire. This was another answer to the false teachers. The gospel the Colossians had heard was not a small local idea. It was the same message God was using everywhere.

It had been bearing fruit in Colossae "from the day you heard and came to know the grace of God in truth." Notice the word "grace." The gospel is not a message about what we must do to reach God. It is the message of what God has done to reach us.

1:7-8 *just as you also learned from Epaphras our beloved fellow slave, who is a faithful minister of Christ on your behalf, who also made known to us your love in* ***the*** *Spirit.*

Here we meet Epaphras, the man who brought the gospel to Colossae. "Just as you also learned from Epaphras our beloved fellow slave." Paul is telling them that what they learned from Epaphras was right. They did not need a new teacher with a better message.

Paul calls him "our beloved fellow slave." In the Greek, the word for slave is doulos, a servant who belongs to a master. Paul and Epaphras both belonged to Jesus. Paul also calls him "a faithful minister of Christ on your behalf." A minister is a servant who works for others.

Epaphras had come to Paul and told him about their "love in the Spirit." It is good to notice that Epaphras brought good news about his church first, even though he had come because of a problem. That is a good example for anyone who leads.

1:9 *Because of this we also, from the day we heard, do not cease praying for you and asking that you may be filled* ***with*** *the full knowledge of His will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding,*

"Because of this we also, from the day we heard, do not cease praying for you." Now Paul tells them what he prays. He asks "that you may be filled with the full knowledge of His will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding."

The false teachers offered special knowledge to a few. Paul prays for the full knowledge of God's will for all of them. God does not hide His will from His people. He has made it known in His Word, and by His Spirit He gives us the wisdom to understand it and the understanding to apply it.

Notice what Paul asks for first. He does not ask for health, money, or an easy life. He asks that they would know God's will. What do you usually pray for others? This verse is a good model.

1:10 ***for*** *you to walk worthily of the Lord for all pleasing, bearing fruit in every good work and growing into the full knowledge of God;*

Why does Paul want them to know God's will? So that they can walk "worthily of the Lord for all pleasing." Knowledge is not the goal by itself. It is meant to change how we live. To walk worthily means to live in a way that fits who the Lord is and what He has done.

Paul gives two marks of this walk. They will be "bearing fruit in every good work," and they will be "growing into the full knowledge of God." The two feed each other. As we obey what we know, we come to know God better, and as we know Him better, we bear more fruit. A Christian who is not growing is not standing still. He is drifting.

1:11 *being strengthened with all power according to the might of His glory, for all endurance and patience with joy;*

Paul knows they cannot do this in their own strength. So he prays that they would be "strengthened with all power according to the might of His glory." The power comes from God, and it is measured by His glory, not by our weakness.

What is this power for? We might expect Paul to say for great miracles or great works. He says "for all endurance and patience with joy." Endurance is holding up under hard circumstances. Patience is holding back with hard people. It takes God's power to keep going and to keep from blowing up, and to do it "with joy." Sometimes the greatest display of God's power in a believer is a quiet, steady, joyful faithfulness that does not quit.

1:12 *giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified us for the share of the inheritance of the saints in the light,*

The last part of Paul's prayer is "giving thanks to the Father." Why? Because He "has qualified us for the share of the inheritance of the saints in the light." To qualify means to make someone fit or able. None of us were fit for heaven on our own. God made us fit.

The false teachers told the Colossians they were not yet qualified. They needed more rules, more visions, more steps. Paul tells them the Father has already qualified them. Their share in the inheritance is settled. In the Old Testament, each tribe of Israel was given its share of the Promised Land by lot (Joshua 14:1-2). God has given each believer a share in His kingdom of light.

1:13 *who rescued us out of the authority of the darkness and transferred **us** into the kingdom of the Son of His love,*

Here is how He qualified us. He "rescued us out of the authority of the darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of the Son of His love." This is a rescue and a move. Before Christ, we lived under the authority of darkness, the rule of sin and Satan (Ephesians 2:1-2). We could not free ourselves. God reached in and pulled us out.

"Transferred" was used for moving a whole people from one land to another, as conquering kings sometimes did. God has moved us out of one kingdom and into another. We now belong to the kingdom of His beloved Son. Notice that both verbs are in the past. If you belong to Jesus, this has already happened to you.

1:14 *in whom we have the redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins;*

In His Son "we have the redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins." Redemption means being bought back by paying a price. In Paul's day a slave could be redeemed when someone paid the price to set him free. Jesus paid the price for us with His own blood (1 Peter 1:18-19).

Paul tells us what that redemption means: "the forgiveness of sins." Forgiveness means God sends our sins away and no longer holds them against us. Notice the word "have." We do not hope to have it someday. Every believer has it now. The false teachers had no answer for sin. Their rules could not take away one sin. Only the blood of Christ can.

1:15 *who is **the** image of the invisible God, **the** firstborn of all creation;*

Now Paul begins one of the greatest passages about Jesus in the Bible (1:15-20). Many believe it was an early hymn or a confession of faith that the churches knew. Either way, it is God's Word, and every line lifts Jesus higher.

He "is the image of the invisible God." No one can see God the Father (John 1:18). But in Jesus, the invisible God has been made visible. Jesus is not a copy or a picture of God. He is the exact likeness of God, because He is God (Hebrews 1:3). Jesus said, "The one who has seen Me has seen the Father" (John 14:9).

He is also "the firstborn of all creation." Some groups use this phrase to teach that Jesus was the first thing God created. That is not what it means. In the Bible, "firstborn" often speaks of rank, the one who holds first place and the rights of the heir. God called Israel His firstborn (Exodus 4:22), and He said of David, who was the youngest son in his family, that He would make him His firstborn, higher than the kings of the earth (Psalm 89:27). Jesus is the firstborn over creation, the Heir and Ruler of it all. The very next verse proves He is not part of creation, because He made it.

Old Testament links: Psalm 89:27 (alluded to)

1:16 *because in Him all things were created, the **things** in the heavens and the **things** on the earth, the visible and the invisible, whether thrones or lordships or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through Him and for Him.*

Here is why Jesus holds first place: "because in Him all things were created." Jesus is not a created being. He is the Creator. John says the same thing: "All things came into being through Him" (John 1:3). If Jesus created all things, then He Himself was not created. He is God.

Paul spells out what "all things" means. "The things in the heavens and the things on the earth, the visible and the invisible, whether thrones or lordships or rulers or authorities." Those last four words were used for ranks of angels and spiritual powers. The false teachers seem to have honored angels (2:18). Paul says every angel that exists was made by Jesus. Why would anyone worship a creature instead of the Creator?

"All things have been created through Him and for Him." Jesus is the One who made creation, and He is the reason for it. You were made by Jesus and for Jesus. Your life will only make sense when He is at the center of it.

1:17 *And He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together.*

"And He is before all things." Jesus was before all creation, in time and in rank. He did not begin in Bethlehem. He has always been (John 1:1-2; 8:58).

"And in Him all things hold together." Jesus did not make the world and then step back. He holds it together right now. Hebrews 1:3 says He upholds all things by the word of His power. Every star stays in its place, every atom holds together, and your heart keeps beating because Jesus keeps it

so. Think about that. The same hands that hold the universe together were nailed to a cross for you. If He can hold the universe together, He can hold your life together too.

1:18 *And He is the head of the body, the church; who is **the** beginning, **the** firstborn from the dead, so that in all things He Himself may come to hold first place;*

Paul now moves from creation to the church. "And He is the head of the body, the church." The church is pictured as a body, and Jesus is its head. A body takes its life and direction from its head. The church does not belong to a pastor, a board, or a denomination. It belongs to Christ, and He leads it.

He is "the beginning, the firstborn from the dead." Jesus was the first to rise from the dead never to die again. Others had been brought back to life, like Lazarus, but they died again. Jesus rose in a glorified body, and His resurrection is the first of a great harvest (1 Corinthians 15:20-23). Because He lives, every believer will rise too.

Why all this? "So that in all things He Himself may come to hold first place." Jesus is first in creation and first in the new creation. He should be first in our lives too. Is He first in yours, or is He one priority among many?

1:19 *because in Him all the fullness was pleased to dwell,*

"Because in Him all the fullness was pleased to dwell." Most Bibles add the word God here, and the sense is clear from 2:9: it was God's good pleasure that all His fullness would live in Jesus. "Fullness" was a word the false teachers may have used for the spiritual powers between God and man. Paul takes their word and puts it all in Jesus.

Jesus is not partly God or a little bit divine. All of who God is lives in Him. And notice the word "dwell." This is not a short visit. God's fullness lives in Jesus to stay. We do not need to look anywhere else to find God. We find Him completely in Jesus.

1:20 *and through Him to reconcile all things to Him, having made peace through the blood of His cross, through Him, whether the **things** on the earth or the **things** in the heavens.*

God was also pleased "through Him to reconcile all things to Him." To reconcile means to bring back together two sides that were at war. Sin broke the peace between God and His creation. Through Jesus, God makes peace again.

How? "Having made peace through the blood of His cross." Peace with God was not made by rules, visions, or good works. It was made by blood, the death of Jesus on the cross in our place.

"Whether the things on the earth or the things in the heavens." Does this mean everyone will be saved in the end? No. The same letter speaks of the wrath of God coming on the disobedient (3:6), and Jesus spoke plainly of eternal punishment (Matthew 25:46). Paul means that through the cross God will bring all creation back under Christ's rule. Those who receive Him are reconciled as friends. Those who refuse Him will one day bow to Him as Lord (Philippians 2:10-11).

1:21-22 *And you, once being alienated and enemies in mind in the evil works, yet now He has reconciled in the body of His flesh through the death, to present you holy and without blemish and beyond reproach before Him,*

Now Paul turns from all creation to the Colossians themselves. "And you, once being alienated and enemies in mind in the evil works." This is what we were before Christ. Alienated means cut off, strangers to God. Enemies in mind means our thinking was against Him. And our minds showed up in our actions, "in the evil works." Sin is not only what we do. It starts in how we think about God.

"Yet now He has reconciled in the body of His flesh through the death." Paul makes a point here. Jesus made peace in a real human body that really died. Some false teachers said the body was evil and that God would never take on real flesh. Paul says our salvation was won in Jesus' flesh.

Why did He do it? "To present you holy and without blemish and beyond reproach before Him." That is how God will see every believer on the last day: holy, spotless, with no charge left against them. Not because we earned it, but because Jesus paid for it.

1:23 *if indeed you continue in the faith, founded and steadfast and not being moved away from the hope of the gospel which you heard, which was preached in all the creation which* ***is*** *under heaven, of which I, Paul, became a minister.*

"If indeed you continue in the faith." Paul adds a condition. Those who are truly reconciled will continue in the faith, "founded and steadfast and not being moved away from the hope of the gospel." The false teachers were trying to move them away. Paul calls them to stand firm on what they first heard.

Bible teachers disagree on what verses like this mean. Some believe God keeps every true believer to the end, and that continuing in the faith is the proof that a person's faith was real (1 John 2:19). Others believe a person who once believed can turn away and be lost. I leave that question open here, as I did in my study of Romans. What is plain is the call: keep holding on to Christ and to the gospel you heard.

The gospel had been "preached in all the creation which is under heaven." Paul means it had spread across the known world, not only in one corner. "Of which I, Paul, became a minister." The man writing had once tried to destroy the church. Now he served the gospel he once fought.

1:24 *Who now rejoice in my sufferings for you, and fill up in turn the* ***things*** *lacking of the afflictions of Christ in my flesh for His body, which is the church,*

"Who now rejoice in my sufferings for you." Paul goes right on from verse 23, where he called himself a minister of the gospel. He was in prison, and he rejoiced. Why? Because his suffering was for the church.

"And fill up in turn the things lacking of the afflictions of Christ in my flesh for His body, which is the church." This is a hard phrase. It cannot mean that Christ's death on the cross was not enough

to save us. Paul has just said that Christ made peace through the blood of His cross (1:20), and that we have redemption and forgiveness in Him (1:14). Nothing needs to be added to that.

So what does Paul mean? Many believe he means that Christ still suffers when His people suffer. When Jesus stopped Paul on the road to Damascus, He asked, "Why are you persecuting Me?" (Acts 9:4). Others believe Paul means the sufferings that the church must go through as it carries the gospel to the world, which Christ has given His servants to share. Either way, Paul counted it an honor to suffer so that others could hear about Jesus.

1:25 *of which I became a minister according to the stewardship of God which was given to me for you, to fulfill the word of God,*

Paul "became a minister according to the stewardship of God." A steward was a servant put in charge of his master's house. He did not own it, but he was responsible for it. God had given Paul a job to do, and it was "for you," for the Gentiles like the Colossians.

What was the job? "To fulfill the word of God." That means to preach it fully, to make it fully known, holding nothing back. Every pastor and teacher has the same calling. The goal is not to say what people want to hear. The goal is to give them the whole Word of God.

1:26 *the mystery which has been hidden from the ages and from the generations, but now was made manifest to His saints,*

Paul calls this word "the mystery which has been hidden from the ages and from the generations, but now was made manifest to His saints." In the Bible, a mystery is not a puzzle or a secret for a few. It is a truth God kept hidden in past ages and has now made known.

This is a sharp contrast with the false teachers. They offered secrets for a special few. Paul says God's mystery has been "made manifest to His saints," that is, to every believer. Nothing in God's plan is kept from the ordinary Christian. It is all open to us in His Word.

1:27 *to whom God willed to make known what **is** the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles, who is Christ in you, the hope of glory;*

What is the mystery? "Christ in you, the hope of glory." God "willed to make known" its riches "among the Gentiles." The Old Testament told us that the Gentiles would be blessed through Abraham's seed (Genesis 12:3). What it did not make plain is that God would live inside Gentile believers by His Spirit and make them one body with Jewish believers on equal terms (Ephesians 3:6).

"Christ in you." Not Christ near you, or Christ helping you from a distance. Christ lives in every believer. And because He lives in you now, you have "the hope of glory," the sure promise that one day you will share His glory (3:4; Romans 8:18).

1:28 *whom we proclaim, admonishing every man and teaching every man in all wisdom, so that we may present every man perfect in Christ Jesus;*

"Whom we proclaim." The message is a Person. Paul did not preach a system, a set of rules, or a philosophy. He preached Christ.

He did it by "admonishing every man and teaching every man in all wisdom." Admonishing is warning, pointing out danger and calling for change. Teaching is explaining the truth. Both are needed. Notice "every man" three times. The false teachers had their inner circle. Paul's message was for everyone.

The goal: "So that we may present every man perfect in Christ Jesus." Perfect here means complete, fully grown, mature. Paul was not satisfied with getting people saved. He wanted to see them grow up in Christ. That is still the goal of every true ministry.

1:29 *for which I also toil, striving according to His working which works in me in power.*

"For which I also toil, striving according to His working which works in me in power." The word for toil means to work to the point of being worn out. The word for striving is the Greek word that gives us agony. It was used for athletes straining in a contest. Ministry is hard work.

But look at the balance. Paul worked hard, and yet the power came from God, "His working which works in me." This is how the Christian life works. We do not sit back and do nothing, and we do not try to do it all in our own strength. We work hard, and we rely on God's power while we do it (Philippians 2:12-13).

Summary

Paul greets the saints in Colossae and thanks God for their faith in Christ, their love for all the saints, and the hope laid up for them in heaven, which they learned from Epaphras through the gospel that is bearing fruit in all the world. He prays that they would be filled with the knowledge of God's will, walk worthily of the Lord, be strengthened with God's power for endurance and patience with joy, and give thanks to the Father who rescued them from the authority of darkness and brought them into the kingdom of His Son. Christ is the image of the invisible God, the Creator and Sustainer of all things, the head of the church, and the firstborn from the dead, in whom all the fullness dwells and through whose blood God made peace. The Colossians, once enemies, are now reconciled and will be presented holy before Him if they continue in the faith. Paul rejoices to suffer for the church and toils to proclaim Christ in you, the hope of glory, so that he may present every person complete in Christ.

Study Questions

1. What three things did Paul thank God for in the Colossians? (1:4-5)

2. Who brought the gospel to Colossae, and how does Paul describe him? (1:7)

3. What did Paul ask God to give the Colossians, and why? (1:9-10)

4. What does it mean that God "rescued us" and "transferred us"? (1:13)

5. What does the word "firstborn" mean in 1:15, and how does 1:16 show that Jesus is not a created being?

6. What does it mean to you that "in Him all things hold together"? (1:17)

7. How did God make peace with us? (1:20)

8. What is the mystery Paul says has now been made known? (1:26-27)

9. Paul wanted Jesus to "hold first place" in all things (1:18). What would it look like for Him to hold first place in your schedule, your home, or your work this week?

10. Paul prayed for people he had never met. Who could you pray for this week the way Paul prayed in 1:9-12?

Colossians 2: Complete in Christ

Scripture

2:1-15 For I want you to know how great a struggle I have concerning you and those in Laodicea, and as many as have not seen my face in ***the*** flesh, so that their hearts may be encouraged, being knit together in love, and to all ***the*** riches of the full assurance of understanding, to ***the*** full knowledge of the mystery of the God and Father and of Christ, in whom all the treasures of wisdom and of knowledge are hidden. And I say this so that no one may delude you with persuasive speech. For even if I am absent in the flesh, yet I am with you in the spirit, rejoicing and seeing your order and the firmness of your faith in Christ. Therefore, as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, walk in Him, having been rooted and being built up in Him and being established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in it with thanksgiving. Watch out that no one will be the ***one*** who takes you captive through philosophy and empty deceit, according to the tradition of men, according to the elementary principles of the world, and not according to Christ; for in Him dwells all the fullness of the Deity bodily, and you have been filled in Him, who is the head of every ruler and authority; in whom also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, in the stripping off of the body of the sins of the flesh, in the circumcision of Christ, having been buried with Him in the baptism, in which also you were raised with ***Him*** through the faith of the working of God, who raised Him from the dead. And you, being dead in the trespasses and in the uncircumcision of your flesh, He made alive together with Him, having forgiven you all the trespasses, having blotted out the handwriting against us in the decrees, which was opposed to us; and He has taken it out of the midst, having nailed it to the cross; having stripped off the rulers and the authorities, He made a public display ***of them*** openly, having triumphed over them in it.

2:16-23 Therefore let no one judge you in food or in drink or in respect of a feast or a new moon or Sabbaths, which are a shadow of the ***things*** coming, but the body ***is*** of Christ. Let no one defraud you of the prize, delighting in humility and ***the*** worship of the angels, intruding into ***things*** which he has not seen, in vain being puffed up by the mind of his flesh, and not holding fast the head, from whom all the body, being supplied and knit together through the joints and ligaments, grows ***with*** the growth of God. Therefore if you died with Christ from the elementary principles of the world, why, as if living in ***the*** world, do you submit to decrees, "Do not handle, nor taste, nor touch," which are all for decay with the using up, according to the commandments and teachings of men? These things indeed have a reputation of wisdom in self-made worship and humility and severe treatment of ***the*** body, not in any honor, toward ***the*** indulgence of the flesh.

Preview

In chapter 2 Paul comes to the reason he wrote. He tells the Colossians how hard he is struggling in prayer for them, because he wants them to be encouraged, knit together in love, and to know Christ, in whom all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge are hidden. Then he warns them. Some people were trying to take them captive with persuasive speech, empty philosophy, and the traditions of men. Paul's answer is Christ. All the fullness of the Deity lives in Him bodily, and believers are complete in Him. In Christ they have been circumcised without hands, buried and

raised with Him, made alive, and forgiven. On the cross He blotted out the record of debt against us and triumphed over every power.

In the second half of the chapter, Paul names the false teaching more directly. Do not let anyone judge you over food, drink, feasts, new moons, or Sabbaths. Those things were a shadow, and Christ is the reality. Do not let anyone rob you of the prize through false humility, worship of angels, and visions. And do not go back to man-made rules like "Do not handle, nor taste, nor touch." Those rules look wise, but they have no power to stop the sinful desires of the flesh.

Study

2:1 *For I want you to know how great a struggle I have concerning you and those in Laodicea, and as many as have not seen my face in **the** flesh,*

"For I want you to know how great a struggle I have concerning you." The word for struggle is the same word Paul used for "striving" in 1:29. It is the word for a hard contest. Paul was in prison, so he could not go to them. He fought for them in prayer.

He struggled for the believers in Colossae and "those in Laodicea," the larger city about ten miles away, "and as many as have not seen my face in the flesh." Paul had never met most of these people. Yet he cared about them enough to wrestle in prayer for them. Real love for the church does not stop at the people we know.

2:2 *so that their hearts may be encouraged, being knit together in love, and to all **the** riches of the full assurance of understanding, to **the** full knowledge of the mystery of the God and Father and of Christ,*

Paul gives the goal of his struggle. First, "so that their hearts may be encouraged." To encourage means to strengthen and give courage. Second, that they would be "knit together in love." False teaching tears churches apart. Love ties them together.

Third, that they would reach "all the riches of the full assurance of understanding." Assurance is being sure. Paul wants them to be sure of what they believe, so they are not shaken by every new teacher. And all of this leads to "the full knowledge of the mystery of the God and Father and of Christ." The mystery is Christ Himself (1:27). The more we know Him, the less room there is for error.

2:3 *in whom all the treasures of wisdom and of knowledge are hidden.*

Christ is the One "in whom all the treasures of wisdom and of knowledge are hidden." The false teachers claimed to have secret knowledge. Paul says all the treasures are in Christ. Not some of them, all of them.

"Hidden" does not mean kept away from believers. It means stored up, like treasure kept in a safe place. Those treasures are open to everyone who comes to Christ and keeps digging into His Word. If you want wisdom, you don't need a secret teacher or a new revelation. You need to know Jesus better.

2:4 *And I say this so that no one may delude you with persuasive speech.*

"And I say this so that no one may delude you with persuasive speech." Here is the danger. Someone was using smooth, convincing arguments to lead the Colossians away from Christ. To delude means to trick by false reasoning.

False teaching rarely sounds false. It usually sounds wise, spiritual, and deep. That is why it is dangerous. The test of any teaching is not how persuasive the speaker is. The test is whether it matches what God has said, and whether it keeps Christ at the center or pushes Him to the side.

2:5 *For even if I am absent in the flesh, yet I am with you in the spirit, rejoicing and seeing your order and the firmness of your faith in Christ.*

"For even if I am absent in the flesh, yet I am with you in the spirit." Paul could not be there, but his heart was with them.

He was "rejoicing and seeing your order and the firmness of your faith in Christ." Those two words come from the army. Order means soldiers standing in their ranks. Firmness means a solid line that does not break. Paul was a prisoner chained to Roman soldiers, and he may have had that picture in front of him every day. The church in Colossae was still standing firm. Paul praises them first and then warns them. That is a good way to correct anyone.

2:6 *Therefore, as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, walk in Him,*

"Therefore, as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, walk in Him." This verse and the next one are the heart of the letter. How did the Colossians receive Christ? By faith, as a gift of grace. That is also how they are to keep walking.

Notice the full name: "Christ Jesus the Lord." They received a Person, and that Person is Lord. Receiving Him means trusting Him as Savior and bowing to Him as Lord. We do not start the Christian life by grace and then finish it by rules and our own effort (Galatians 3:3). We start with Christ, and we keep going with Christ.

2:7 *having been rooted and being built up in Him and being established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in it with thanksgiving.*

Paul piles up pictures of what it means to walk in Him. "Having been rooted," like a tree with deep roots. "Being built up in Him," like a house going up on a solid foundation. "Being established in the faith," firm and settled. The first is already done, and the others keep going. Once we are rooted in Christ, we keep growing upward.

"Just as you were taught." Again Paul points them back to what Epaphras taught. They did not need a new gospel.

"Abounding in it with thanksgiving." A thankful heart is one of the best guards against false teaching. A person who is grateful for what he has in Christ is not out looking for something more.

2:8 *Watch out that no one will be the **one** who takes you captive through philosophy and empty deceit, according to the tradition of men, according to the elementary principles of the world, and not according to Christ;*

"Watch out." Here is the warning. Paul does not want anyone to be "the one who takes you captive." The word pictures a kidnapper carrying off a prisoner, or a raider carrying off spoils. False teaching does not set people free. It makes them captives.

How do they do it? "Through philosophy and empty deceit." Paul is not against all careful thinking. He is against a system of ideas that leaves out Christ. That kind of philosophy is empty, because there is nothing in it, and it is deceit, because it fools people.

It comes "according to the tradition of men," passed down by people, not given by God. And "according to the elementary principles of the world." Bible teachers read that phrase in two main ways. Some believe it means the basic, beginner rules of religion, like the ABCs, that people followed before Christ came (Galatians 4:3, 9). Others believe it means spiritual powers that people thought ruled the world. Either way, it is "not according to Christ." That is the final test.

2:9 *for in Him dwells all the fullness of the Deity bodily,*

Here is why we don't need anything else. "For in Him dwells all the fullness of the Deity bodily." This is one of the clearest verses in the Bible on who Jesus is. Deity means being God, all that makes God who He is. All of it lives in Jesus. Not a part of it, not a spark of it, but "all the fullness."

And it lives in Him "bodily." Jesus took on a real human body, and He still has it. He is fully God and fully man, in one Person, and He will be forever. He is not one of many paths to God. He is God come to us in the flesh (John 1:14).

Notice the word "dwells." It is in the present tense. All the fullness of God lives in Jesus now, as He sits at the Father's right hand in His glorified body.

2:10 *and you have been filled in Him, who is the head of every ruler and authority;*

"And you have been filled in Him." Paul uses a play on words. All the fullness of God is in Christ, and you have been filled in Him. Many Bibles use the word complete here. If you belong to Jesus, you are not missing anything you need for life with God. You don't need a special experience, a secret teaching, or a higher level. You have Christ, and in Christ you have it all.

He is "the head of every ruler and authority." Those are words for spiritual powers. The false teachers wanted to honor angels and powers. Jesus is the head over every one of them. Why would we look to the servants when we have the Master?

2:11 *in whom also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, in the stripping off of the body of the sins of the flesh, in the circumcision of Christ,*

"In whom also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands." Circumcision was the sign God gave Abraham and his family (Genesis 17:10-14). The false teachers may have been telling the Gentile believers they needed it. Paul says they already have the real thing.

It was "made without hands," done by God, not by man. It was "in the stripping off of the body of the sins of the flesh." Physical circumcision cut away a small piece of flesh. The circumcision Christ gives deals with the whole sinful nature, cutting us off from its rule. Moses and the prophets spoke of this circumcision of the heart (Deuteronomy 30:6; Jeremiah 4:4).

"In the circumcision of Christ." Some read this as the spiritual circumcision Christ performs on us. Others read it as Christ's own death, when His whole body was cut off for us. Both point to the same truth: it is Christ's work, not ours.

Old Testament links: Deuteronomy 30:6 (alluded to)

2:12 *having been buried with Him in the baptism, in which also you were raised with **Him** through the faith of the working of God, who raised Him from the dead.*

Paul then turns to baptism. Believers have been "buried with Him in the baptism, in which also you were raised with Him." Baptism pictures what has happened to us in Christ. We died with Him, were buried with Him, and were raised with Him to a new life (Romans 6:3-4). Going under the water is like going into the grave. Coming up is like coming out of the tomb.

Notice how we were raised: "through the faith of the working of God, who raised Him from the dead." Faith is the hand that receives what God does. The water does not save. God saves by His power, and we receive it by faith. Baptism is the obedient, public step a believer takes after trusting Christ, showing the world what God has already done inside.

Some Christians see a link between circumcision in verse 11 and baptism in verse 12, and they baptize the infants of believing parents, as Israel circumcised its baby boys. Others read verse 12 as baptism that follows faith, since it speaks of being raised "through the faith." This study follows the second reading, but believers on both sides agree that salvation is by grace through faith.

2:13 *And you, being dead in the trespasses and in the uncircumcision of your flesh, He made alive together with Him, having forgiven you all the trespasses,*

"And you, being dead in the trespasses and in the uncircumcision of your flesh." This is what we were. Not sick, not weak, but dead. A dead man cannot help himself. "Uncircumcision of your flesh" reminds these Gentile believers that they were once outside God's covenant people, with hearts still ruled by the flesh.

"He made alive together with Him." God did for us what we could never do for ourselves. He raised us to life with Christ (Ephesians 2:4-5).

"Having forgiven you all the trespasses." Not some of them. All of them. Past, present, and future, every sin was laid on Jesus. If you are in Christ, there is no sin left on your account for God to punish (Romans 8:1).

2:14 *having blotted out the handwriting against us in the decrees, which was opposed to us; and He has taken it out of the midst, having nailed it to the cross;*

How did God forgive all our sins? "Having blotted out the handwriting against us in the decrees, which was opposed to us." The word for handwriting was used for a written note of debt, an IOU, signed in a person's own hand. Each of us has a record of debt against us. God's law shows what we owe, and every sin adds to the bill. We could never pay it.

God "blotted out" that record. Ink in those days could be washed off the page. God wiped the page clean. "And He has taken it out of the midst, having nailed it to the cross." When a Roman criminal was crucified, the charge against him was sometimes nailed above his head (John 19:19). God took our charge, our whole record of debt, and nailed it to the cross where Jesus died. The debt was paid in full.

2:15 *having stripped off the rulers and the authorities, He made a public display* ***of them*** *openly, having triumphed over them in it.*

"Having stripped off the rulers and the authorities." Those are the evil spiritual powers that once held us captive (Ephesians 6:12). At the cross, Jesus disarmed them. Satan's greatest weapon against us was our guilt before God. When Jesus paid for our sins, He took that weapon away.

"He made a public display of them openly, having triumphed over them in it." Paul pictures a Roman triumph, a parade where a winning general led his defeated enemies through the streets for everyone to see. What looked like Satan's victory, the death of Jesus, was really his defeat. Believers do not need to fear the powers of darkness. They have been beaten. Jesus won.

2:16 *Therefore let no one judge you in food or in drink or in respect of a feast or a new moon or Sabbaths,*

"Therefore let no one judge you in food or in drink or in respect of a feast or a new moon or Sabbaths." Now Paul names the false teaching more plainly. Someone was telling the Colossians that to be right with God, they had to keep certain food laws and holy days. The list follows the Old Testament pattern: yearly feasts, monthly new moons, and weekly Sabbaths (1 Chronicles 23:31; Hosea 2:11).

Paul says don't let anyone judge you on these things. They were part of the Law of Moses that God gave Israel, and they are not the measure of a believer's standing with God. Romans 14:5-6 gives the same freedom: one person honors a day, another treats every day alike, and each should do it for the Lord.

2:17 *which are a shadow of the **things** coming, but the body **is** of Christ.*

Why are these things not the measure? Because they "are a shadow of the things coming, but the body is of Christ." A shadow is real, but it is not the thing itself. If someone is walking toward you around a corner, you see the shadow first. When the person arrives, you don't keep staring at the shadow.

The food laws and holy days pointed ahead to Christ. The body, the real substance, belongs to Christ. Jesus is our true rest (Matthew 11:28; Hebrews 4:9-10). Now that He has come, we look to Him, not the shadow.

What does this mean for the Sabbath today? Good Bible teachers disagree. Many believe the weekly Sabbath was part of the Law given to Israel and is fulfilled in Christ, so believers are free to worship on any day, and most churches gather on Sunday, the day Jesus rose. Others believe the Sabbath principle of one day of rest in seven still stands, and they keep Sunday as the Christian Sabbath. Still others believe the seventh-day Sabbath is still binding and that Paul means only the special Sabbaths of the feasts. Whatever we think, Paul's point stands: no one should judge another believer's standing with God by these things.

2:18 *Let no one defraud you of the prize, delighting in humility and **the** worship of the angels, intruding into **things** which he has not seen, in vain being puffed up by the mind of his flesh,*

"Let no one defraud you of the prize." The word was used for an umpire who disqualifies an athlete. The false teachers were acting like judges, telling the Colossians they did not qualify. Paul has already said the Father qualified them (1:12).

Paul describes these teachers. They were "delighting in humility." This was a false humility, a show of lowliness that was really pride. They were also into "the worship of the angels." Bible teachers read that in two ways. Some believe these people were praying to angels or honoring them as go-betweens, thinking God was too high to approach directly. Others believe it means they claimed to see and join in the worship that angels give in heaven, through visions. Either way, it took their eyes off Christ. Angels themselves refuse worship (Revelation 22:8-9).

They were "intruding into things which he has not seen." They claimed visions and special experiences and built their teaching on them. But they were "in vain being puffed up by the mind of his flesh." All their spiritual talk came from a proud, fleshly mind.

2:19 *and not holding fast the head, from whom all the body, being supplied and knit together through the joints and ligaments, grows **with** the growth of God.*

Here is the root of the problem: they were "not holding fast the head." Anyone who lets go of Christ cuts himself off from the source of life. A body part cut off from the head cannot live, no matter how spiritual it looks.

Paul pictures the church as a healthy body. "All the body, being supplied and knit together through the joints and ligaments, grows with the growth of God." The body gets everything it needs from the head, and each part passes it along to the others. The growth is "the growth of

God," growth that God gives. Real spiritual growth does not come from rules or visions. It comes from staying connected to Jesus and to His people.

2:20 *Therefore if you died with Christ from the elementary principles of the world, why, as if living in **the** world, do you submit to decrees,*

"Therefore if you died with Christ from the elementary principles of the world." The word "if" here means "since." When Christ died, believers died with Him. That death cut us off from the old way of trying to please God by rules (Romans 7:4).

So Paul asks, "Why, as if living in the world, do you submit to decrees?" It is as if a man was set free from prison but kept going back to his cell every night. You have been set free. Why live as though you were still under the old system? Paul is not saying believers have no rules. Chapter 3 is full of commands. He is saying we are not made right with God, or made holy, by keeping human rules.

2:21-22 *"Do not handle, nor taste, nor touch," which are all for decay with the using up, according to the commandments and teachings of men?*

Here are the decrees: "Do not handle, nor taste, nor touch." Notice how the list gets stricter as it goes. These rules were about food and physical things.

What is wrong with them? First, they deal with things "which are all for decay with the using up." Food is eaten and gone. Jesus said that what goes into a man's mouth does not make him unclean, because it goes into the stomach and out again (Mark 7:18-19). Second, they are "according to the commandments and teachings of men." They come from people, not from God (Isaiah 29:13; Matthew 15:9). Religion that is built on man-made rules can look very serious and still miss God completely.

Old Testament links: Isaiah 29:13 (alluded to)

2:23 *These things indeed have a reputation of wisdom in self-made worship and humility and severe treatment of **the** body, not in any honor, toward **the** indulgence of the flesh.*

Paul admits these rules look good. "These things indeed have a reputation of wisdom." People are impressed by them. Paul names three things. "Self-made worship," worship that people make up for themselves instead of what God asks. "Humility," again the false kind. And "severe treatment of the body," harsh fasting and denying the body to try to become holy.

Then Paul gives the verdict: these things are "not in any honor, toward the indulgence of the flesh." Bible teachers word this phrase in different ways, but the point is clear. These rules have no real value in stopping the desires of the flesh. You can keep every outward rule and still have a proud, angry, lustful heart. Rules can change what we do for a while. Only Christ can change who we are. That is where Paul turns in chapter 3.

Summary

Paul tells the Colossians how hard he struggles in prayer for them, that they would be encouraged, knit together in love, and come to know Christ, in whom all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge are hidden. He warns them not to be fooled by persuasive speech, but to keep walking in Christ as they received Him, rooted, built up, and thankful. They must not be taken captive by empty philosophy and human tradition, because all the fullness of the Deity dwells bodily in Christ, and they are complete in Him. In Him they were circumcised without hands, buried and raised with Him in baptism through faith, made alive, and forgiven all their trespasses. God blotted out the record of debt against us, nailed it to the cross, and triumphed over every evil power. So no one should judge them over food, drink, feasts, new moons, or Sabbaths, which were a shadow of Christ. They must not be robbed of the prize by false humility, the worship of angels, or claims of visions, and they must not go back to man-made rules that look wise but have no power against the flesh.

Study Questions

1. What did Paul want for the believers he was struggling for in prayer? (2:2)

2. Where does Paul say all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge are found? (2:3)

3. How are we to keep walking in Christ, and what pictures does Paul use for it? (2:6-7)

4. What test does Paul give for any teaching or philosophy? (2:8)

5. What does 2:9-10 tell us about who Jesus is and what we have in Him?

6. What did God do with the record of debt that was against us? (2:14)

7. What does Paul mean when he calls the food laws and holy days "a shadow"? (2:17)

8. Why do man-made rules fail to make us holy? (2:22-23)

9. Is there a rule or practice you have been trusting to make you right with God, or that you use to judge other believers? What does this chapter say about it? (2:16-23)

10. What would it look like for you to live this week as someone who is complete in Christ? (2:10)

Colossians 3: Set Your Minds on Things Above

Scripture

3:1-17 If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things above, where Christ is, sitting at ***the*** right hand of God. Set ***your*** minds on the things above, not the things on the earth. For you have died, and your life has been hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, our life, is revealed, then you also will be revealed with Him in glory. Therefore put to death your members which ***are*** on the earth: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and the covetousness, which is idolatry, because of which things the wrath of God is coming on the sons of disobedience, in which you also once walked, when you were living in them. But now you also, put off all ***these*** things: anger, rage, malice, slander, foul language out of your mouth. Do not lie to one another, having put off the old man with his practices, and having put on the new ***man***, who is being renewed in knowledge according to ***the*** image of the One who created him, where there is not Greek and Jew, circumcision and uncircumcision, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free, but Christ ***is*** all and in all. Therefore, as ***the*** elect of God, holy and beloved, put on hearts of compassions, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience, bearing with one another and forgiving each other, if anyone has a complaint against anyone; just as Christ also forgave you, so also you. And above all these things ***put on*** love, which is ***the*** bond of perfection. And let the peace of God rule in your hearts, to which you also were called in one body; and be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, in all wisdom teaching and admonishing yourselves in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your heart to the Lord. And everything, whatever you do in word or in deed, ***do*** all in ***the*** name of ***the*** Lord Jesus, giving thanks to the God and Father through Him.

3:18-25 Wives, subject yourselves to ***your*** own husbands, as is fitting in ***the*** Lord. Husbands, love ***your*** wives, and do not be harsh toward them. Children, obey ***your*** parents in all things, for this is well-pleasing to the Lord. Fathers, do not provoke your children, so that they may not become discouraged. Slaves, obey in all things ***your*** masters according to ***the*** flesh, not with eye-services, as men-pleasers, but in sincerity of heart, fearing God. And everything, whatever you do, work from ***the*** soul, as to the Lord and not to men, knowing that from ***the*** Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance; for you serve the Lord Christ. But the one doing wrong will receive back what he did wrong, and there is no partiality.

Preview

Chapter 3 is the turning point of Colossians. For two chapters Paul has shown who Christ is and what believers have in Him. Now he shows how to live. Man-made rules cannot change the heart (2:23), but union with Christ can. Since believers have been raised with Christ, they are to seek the things above and set their minds there. Their life is hidden with Christ in God, and when He is revealed, they will be revealed with Him in glory.

So Paul calls them to put to death the old sins of the body and the tongue, to put off the old man and put on the new, where there is no Greek or Jew, slave or free, but Christ is all. He tells them to clothe themselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience, forgiveness, and above all love. The peace of God is to rule their hearts and the word of Christ is to dwell in them

richly. Then Paul brings the new life home, to wives and husbands, children and fathers, and slaves.

Study

3:1 *If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things above, where Christ is, sitting at* ***the*** *right hand of God.*

"If then you have been raised with Christ." Again the "if" means "since." Paul has just said that believers were buried with Christ and raised with Him (2:12). That is not only a future hope. It is a present fact for every believer.

So what follows? "Seek the things above, where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God." To seek means to go after something, to make it what we aim for. Our risen Lord is in heaven, seated at the place of honor and authority (Psalm 110:1). Our hearts should go where He is.

This is the real answer to the false teachers. They looked down at rules about food and days. Paul tells believers to look up, to Christ.

Old Testament links: Psalm 110:1 (alluded to)

3:2 *Set* ***your*** *minds on the things above, not the things on the earth.*

"Set your minds on the things above, not the things on the earth." Verse 1 speaks of what we seek. This verse speaks of how we think. What fills your mind when you are not busy? What do you worry about, plan for, and daydream about?

Paul is not telling us to ignore our jobs, our families, or our responsibilities. The rest of this chapter is about everyday life at home and at work. He is telling us to look at all of it from heaven's point of view. Someone has said that some people are so heavenly minded they are no earthly good. Most of us have the opposite problem. A mind set on things above will do more earthly good, not less.

3:3 *For you have died, and your life has been hidden with Christ in God.*

"For you have died." When Christ died, the believer died with Him. The old life ruled by sin is over (Romans 6:6-7).

"And your life has been hidden with Christ in God." Hidden means two things here. It means safe. Our life is kept with Christ in God, and no one can reach in and take it (John 10:28-29). It also means unseen. The world cannot see the real life of a believer. People see an ordinary person who goes to work and pays bills. They don't see that this person is united to the risen Lord of heaven. But one day it will be seen, as the next verse says.

3:4 *When Christ, our life, is revealed, then you also will be revealed with Him in glory.*

"When Christ, our life, is revealed, then you also will be revealed with Him in glory." Christ is not only part of our life. He is our life. And one day He will be revealed, shown openly to the whole world.

When will that be? I believe Christ will first come for His church before the seven-year Tribulation, to catch up His people to meet Him in the air (1 Thessalonians 4:16-17; John 14:1-3). Then at the end of the Tribulation He will return visibly to the earth, and His people will come with Him (Revelation 19:11-14; Jude 14). That is the day the world will see Him in His glory, and see His people with Him. What is hidden now will be on display then.

That truth should shape how we live today. If you will be revealed with Christ in glory, why live for the things that will be gone?

3:5 *Therefore put to death your members which **are** on the earth: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and the covetousness, which is idolatry,*

"Therefore put to death your members which are on the earth." Because we died with Christ and will be revealed with Him, we are to treat sin as an enemy to be killed, not a pet to be fed. "Members" means the parts of our body, used as tools for sin.

Paul names five sins. Sexual immorality is any sexual sin outside marriage between a husband and wife. Impurity is moral dirt of every kind. Passion is out-of-control desire. Evil desire is wanting what is wrong. Last comes "the covetousness, which is idolatry." Covetousness is always wanting more. Paul calls it idolatry because whatever we crave more than God has become our god.

Notice what Paul does not say. He does not say control these sins, manage them, or cut back. He says put them to death.

3:6 *because of which things the wrath of God is coming on the sons of disobedience,*

"Because of which things the wrath of God is coming on the sons of disobedience." God's wrath is His holy anger against sin. It is not a temper tantrum. It is the right response of a holy God to evil.

"The sons of disobedience" are those whose lives are marked by refusing God. His wrath is coming on them. Believers will not face that wrath, because Jesus took it for us on the cross (Romans 5:9; 1 Thessalonians 5:9). But that is not a reason to take sin lightly. It is a reason to hate it. Why would we keep playing with the very things that sent Jesus to the cross?

3:7 *in which you also once walked, when you were living in them.*

"In which you also once walked, when you were living in them." Paul is honest about their past. Many of these Gentile believers had lived in sexual sin and idol worship. That was how most of their world lived.

Notice the word "once." That was then. Paul does not pretend their past did not happen, but he does not let them stay there either. If God has saved you out of a past you are ashamed of, remember that He sees you now in Christ. Your past is a place you came from, not the place you live.

3:8 *But now you also, put off all **these** things: anger, rage, malice, slander, foul language out of your mouth.*

"But now you also, put off all these things." Paul uses the picture of taking off dirty clothes. The first list in verse 5 was mostly sins of the body. This list is mostly sins of the temper and the tongue.

Anger here is a settled, smoldering anger. Rage is a sudden blowup. Malice is wanting to hurt someone. Slander is speech that tears down another person's name. And "foul language out of your mouth" covers dirty and abusive talk.

Churches often watch hard for the sins of verse 5 and go easy on the sins of verse 8. God does not. A believer who would never commit adultery but who rages at his family or tears down people with his words still has some putting off to do.

3:9 *Do not lie to one another, having put off the old man with his practices,*

"Do not lie to one another." Lying destroys trust, and a church cannot be one body without trust (Ephesians 4:25). This includes the small lies we tell to make ourselves look better or to avoid trouble.

Why not lie? "Having put off the old man with his practices." The old man is who we were in Adam, before Christ, ruled by sin. When we came to Christ, that old self was put off, like old clothes thrown out. Lying belongs to that old wardrobe. It does not fit who we are now.

3:10 *and having put on the new **man**, who is being renewed in knowledge according to **the** image of the One who created him,*

"And having put on the new man." The new man is the new life we have in Christ. That new man "is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of the One who created him."

Notice that this is ongoing. Being renewed is a process. When we were saved, God gave us a new nature, and now He keeps shaping us. The pattern is "the image of the One who created him." God made man in His image (Genesis 1:27). Sin marred that image. In Christ, God is restoring it, making us more and more like His Son (Romans 8:29). And this happens "in knowledge," the true knowledge of God, not the secret knowledge the false teachers offered.

Old Testament links: Genesis 1:27 (alluded to); Genesis 1:26 (alluded to)

3:11 *where there is not Greek and Jew, circumcision and uncircumcision, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free, but Christ **is** all and in all.*

In this new man, "there is not Greek and Jew, circumcision and uncircumcision, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free." Every wall that divided the ancient world is named here. Race: Greek and Jew. Religion: circumcised and uncircumcised. Culture: a barbarian was anyone who did not speak Greek, and the Scythians were wild tribes from north of the Black Sea, seen as the lowest of the low. Social rank: slave and free.

None of those labels decides who we are in Christ. "But Christ is all and in all." This does not mean the differences vanish. A Jewish believer is still Jewish, and a slave in Colossae was still a slave. It means none of them matter for our place in God's family. If there is a group of people you look down on, this verse is for you.

3:12 *Therefore, as **the** elect of God, holy and beloved, put on hearts of compassions, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience,*

"Therefore, as the elect of God, holy and beloved." Before Paul tells them what to put on, he reminds them who they are. They are chosen by God, set apart for Him, and loved by Him. We don't live this way to become God's people. We live this way because we already are.

Now Paul gives the new clothes. "Hearts of compassions," deep pity for people who are hurting. "Kindness," being good to others. "Humility," not thinking too highly of ourselves. "Gentleness," strength under control. And "patience," putting up with people for a long time without blowing up. Every one of these is how Jesus treated people. To put them on is to put on Christ (Romans 13:14).

3:13 *bearing with one another and forgiving each other, if anyone has a complaint against anyone; just as Christ also forgave you, so also you.*

"Bearing with one another and forgiving each other, if anyone has a complaint against anyone." Paul is a realist. In any church, someone will have a complaint against someone else. Bearing with one another means putting up with each other's faults and quirks. Forgiving means letting go of a real wrong.

The measure is plain: "just as Christ also forgave you, so also you." How did Christ forgive you? Freely, fully, and while you did not deserve it. Forgiving does not mean pretending something did not happen, and it does not always mean trust is restored right away. It means we let go of our right to get even and leave it with God. Is there someone you need to forgive? Remember how much you have been forgiven.

3:14 *And above all these things **put on** love, which is **the** bond of perfection.*

"And above all these things put on love, which is the bond of perfection." Love is like the belt that holds all the other clothes in place. Without love, compassion turns into pity, kindness into a show, humility into a pose. Love ties everything together and makes the whole person complete.

"Perfection" here means maturity, being fully grown. The false teachers said the way to be perfect was secret knowledge and harsh rules. Paul says it is love (1 Corinthians 13:1-3).

3:15 *And let the peace of God rule in your hearts, to which you also were called in one body; and be thankful.*

"And let the peace of God rule in your hearts." The word for rule was used for an umpire who makes the call in a game. When we are not sure what to do, or when tempers start to rise, the peace of God should make the call. Many older Greek copies read Christ here in place of God, and the meaning is the same.

"To which you also were called in one body." This peace is not only a quiet feeling inside one person. God called us into one body, and His peace is meant to rule between believers.

"And be thankful." Paul keeps coming back to thanks (1:3, 12; 2:7; 3:17; 4:2). A thankful heart is hard to stir up into a fight.

3:16 *Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, in all wisdom teaching and admonishing yourselves in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your heart to the Lord.*

"Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly." The word of Christ is the message about Christ and the words of Christ, all of God's Word. To dwell means to live at home. God's Word should not be a visitor we see on Sunday. It should live in us and be at home in us, "richly," filling every room.

How does that show up? "In all wisdom teaching and admonishing yourselves." Every believer has a part in teaching and warning other believers. And "in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your heart to the Lord." Psalms are the songs of the Old Testament. Hymns are songs of praise to God. Spiritual songs are other songs prompted by the Spirit. Singing is not filler before the sermon. It is one way the Word dwells in us and is taught to others. Notice that the singing is "to the Lord," and it starts in the heart.

3:17 *And everything, whatever you do in word or in deed, **do** all in **the** name of **the** Lord Jesus, giving thanks to the God and Father through Him.*

"And everything, whatever you do in word or in deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus." This verse covers all of life. There is no part of your day that is outside the Lord's reach. To do something in His name means to do it as His servant, in a way that fits who He is, with His approval.

"Giving thanks to the God and Father through Him." Here is thanks again. If you can't do something in Jesus' name and thank God for it, that is a good sign you shouldn't do it. This simple test answers many questions about what a believer should or should not do.

3:18 *Wives, subject yourselves to **your** own husbands, as is fitting in **the** Lord.*

Now Paul brings the new life into the home. The same household pattern appears at greater length in Ephesians 5:22-6:9. Paul starts with wives. "Wives, subject yourselves to your own husbands, as is fitting in the Lord."

These are hard words for many people today, so let's read them carefully. Paul speaks to wives directly. He does not tell husbands to make their wives submit. It is a choice a wife makes as part of her own walk with the Lord. Submission does not mean a wife is less valuable. Jesus is equal with the Father, yet He came to do His Father's will (John 6:38). Submission is about role, not worth. And it is to "your own husbands," not to all men.

"As is fitting in the Lord." This puts a limit on it. A wife's submission never includes following her husband into sin. Our first loyalty is always to God (Acts 5:29). And submission never means putting up with abuse. If you are being hurt, or you are afraid in your own home, please tell a pastor or another believer you trust, and get to a safe place. If you are in danger, call for emergency help.

Bible teachers today differ on how this verse should be lived out. Some believe it teaches a lasting pattern of the husband's loving leadership in the home. Others believe the mutual love and humility Paul has just described (3:12-14) shapes how it works. I have taught the verse as I understand its plain meaning, and I encourage you to study it prayerfully for yourself.

3:19 *Husbands, love **your** wives, and do not be harsh toward them.*

"Husbands, love your wives." In Paul's day, the husband held almost all the power in the home. The culture expected him to rule. Paul does not tell husbands to rule. He tells them to love. The word is agape, the self-giving love that puts the other person first. In Ephesians 5:25 Paul adds that a husband should love his wife as Christ loved the church and gave Himself up for her.

"And do not be harsh toward them." The word means to be bitter or sharp. It pictures a husband who is irritated, cold, or cruel with his words. A husband who demands submission but treats his wife harshly has missed the whole point. Husbands, how does your wife experience your leadership? Does she feel loved, or does she feel managed?

3:20 *Children, obey **your** parents in all things, for this is well-pleasing to the Lord.*

"Children, obey your parents in all things, for this is well-pleasing to the Lord." Paul speaks to the children directly. That means children were in the church when this letter was read aloud. They mattered to Paul, and they matter to God.

"In all things" assumes Christian parents who are not asking a child to sin. A child's obedience is "well-pleasing to the Lord." When a child obeys, it is not only Mom and Dad who are pleased. God is pleased. That gives even small acts of obedience a big meaning.

3:21 *Fathers, do not provoke your children, so that they may not become discouraged.*

"Fathers, do not provoke your children, so that they may not become discouraged." Fathers had near total power over their children in the Roman world. Paul puts a limit on it. To provoke means to stir up, to irritate, to push a child until he gives up.

How do fathers do that? By being too harsh, never pleased, unfair, or always criticizing. The result is a child who is "discouraged," who loses heart and stops trying because he thinks he can never measure up. Parents, our job is to train our children, not to crush them. Correction should come with plenty of encouragement.

3:22 *Slaves, obey in all things **your** masters according to **the** flesh, not with eye-services, as men-pleasers, but in sincerity of heart, fearing God.*

Paul now speaks to slaves. In Paul's day, a large part of the people in the Roman Empire were slaves, and many of them were in the church. Roman slavery was not the same as the race-based slavery in American history. People became slaves through war, debt, or birth, and some worked as teachers, doctors, and managers. But it was still a system where one person owned another, and it was often cruel. In this very letter Onesimus, a slave, was on his way home to his master in Colossae (4:9).

Paul does not start a revolt. He tells slaves and masters that they both answer to the same Lord (4:1), a truth that cuts against the whole idea of one person owning another. In the letter to Philemon he asks a master to receive his slave "no longer as a slave, but above a slave, a beloved brother" (Philemon 16). In 1 Corinthians 7:21 he told slaves to take their freedom if they could get it. We should be honest that verses like these were later misused in America to defend slavery. Many other Christians, reading the same Bible, saw that every person is made in God's image and fought to end it. Paul's words were never a blessing on slavery. They were instructions for believers caught in a system they did not create.

To the slaves, Paul says, "obey in all things your masters according to the flesh." Notice "according to the flesh." Their earthly masters were only masters in this life. They had a higher Master. They were to work "not with eye-services, as men-pleasers," working hard only when the boss was watching, "but in sincerity of heart, fearing God."

3:23 *And everything, whatever you do, work from **the** soul, as to the Lord and not to men,*

"And everything, whatever you do, work from the soul, as to the Lord and not to men." This verse changes how we see work. "From the soul" means with your whole heart, not halfway.

The key is "as to the Lord." A slave in Colossae might have a hard or unfair master. But when he swept the floor or carried water, he could do it for Jesus. Today these verses apply to anyone who works for someone else. When you go to work, you are serving Christ. Your boss may never notice. Jesus always does.

3:24 *knowing that from **the** Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance; for you serve the Lord Christ.*

"Knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance." Think about how striking this was. Under Roman law, a slave as a rule owned nothing in his own name and had no right to an inheritance. Paul tells Christian slaves that the Lord will give them an inheritance.

"For you serve the Lord Christ." That is the real truth about every believer's work. You may wear a name tag with a company logo, but you serve the Lord Christ. He sees your work, and He will reward it at the judgment seat of Christ (2 Corinthians 5:10).

3:25 *But the one doing wrong will receive back what he did wrong, and there is no partiality.*

"But the one doing wrong will receive back what he did wrong, and there is no partiality." This warning cuts both ways. A slave who cheated his master would answer to God. And so would a master who mistreated his slave. That is why the next verse speaks to masters.

"There is no partiality." God does not play favorites. He does not judge the rich man by a softer standard than the poor man, or the boss by a softer standard than the worker. Everyone answers to the same Lord. No one gets away with wrong because of rank, and no one is overlooked because of being low.

Summary

Since believers have been raised with Christ, they are to seek the things above and set their minds there, because their life is hidden with Christ in God, and when Christ is revealed, they will be revealed with Him in glory. So they must put to death sexual sin, impurity, evil desire, and greed, and put off anger, rage, malice, slander, foul talk, and lying, because they have put off the old man and put on the new, where Christ is all and in all. As God's chosen and beloved people, they are to put on compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience, bearing with and forgiving one another as Christ forgave them, and above all to put on love. The peace of God is to rule their hearts, the word of Christ is to dwell in them richly, and everything is to be done in the name of the Lord Jesus with thanks. Paul then applies this to the home: wives submit to their own husbands as is fitting in the Lord, husbands love their wives and are not harsh, children obey their parents, fathers do not discourage their children, and slaves work from the heart as serving the Lord Christ, who rewards and judges without partiality.

Study Questions

1. Where is Christ now, and where does Paul tell us to set our minds? (3:1-2)

2. What does it mean that our life "has been hidden with Christ in God"? (3:3)

3. What will happen when Christ is revealed? (3:4)

4. Why does Paul call covetousness idolatry? (3:5)

5. Which sins in 3:8-9 do you think churches tend to overlook, and why?

6. What divisions does Paul say do not matter in the new man, and why? (3:11)

7. What is the measure of how we are to forgive? (3:13)

8. What does Paul say husbands, wives, children, and fathers should each do? (3:18-21)

9. Is there someone you need to forgive, or a complaint you need to let go of? What step could you take this week? (3:13)

10. How would your work change this week if you did it "as to the Lord and not to men"? (3:23)

Colossians 4: Wise Walk and Faithful Friends

Scripture

4:1-9 Masters, grant to the slaves what ***is*** righteous and fair, knowing that you also have a Master in ***the*** heavens. Continue steadfastly in prayer, keeping watch in it with thanksgiving, praying at the same time also for us, that God may open to us a door for the word, to speak the mystery of Christ, on account of which I also have been bound, so that I may make it manifest, as I must speak. Walk in wisdom toward those outside, redeeming the time. ***Let*** your word ***be*** always in grace, seasoned with salt, to know how you must answer each one. Tychicus, the beloved brother and faithful servant and fellow slave in ***the*** Lord, will make known to you all the things concerning me, whom I sent to you for this very ***purpose***, that he may know the things concerning you, and ***that*** he may encourage your hearts, with Onesimus, the faithful and beloved brother, who is ***one*** of you. They will make known to you all the things here.

4:10-18 Aristarchus, my fellow prisoner, greets you, and Mark, the cousin of Barnabas (concerning whom you received commands: if he comes to you, welcome him), and Jesus, who is called Justus. These, who are of ***the*** circumcision, ***are*** the only fellow workers for the kingdom of God who have become a comfort to me. Epaphras, who ***is one*** of you, a slave of Christ, greets you, always struggling for you in the prayers, so that you may stand mature and complete in all ***the*** will of God. For I bear witness to him that he has much zeal for you and for those in Laodicea and those in Hierapolis. Luke, the beloved physician, greets you, and Demas. Greet the brothers in Laodicea, and Nymphas, and the church in his house. And when the letter has been read among you, cause that it also be read in the church of the Laodiceans, and that you also read the ***letter*** from Laodicea. And say to Archippus, "Take heed to the ministry that you received in ***the*** Lord, that you may fulfill it." The greeting by my own hand, of Paul. Remember my chains. Grace ***be*** with you. Amen.

Preview

Paul finishes his word to the household with a command to masters: treat your slaves with what is right and fair, because you have a Master in heaven too. Then he turns to prayer and to the watching world. Keep on praying, with your eyes open and with thanks, and pray that God would open a door for the gospel. Walk wisely toward outsiders, make the most of every chance, and let your speech always be gracious and seasoned with salt.

The rest of the chapter is a list of names, and it is one of the warmest parts of the letter. Tychicus and Onesimus are carrying the letter home. Aristarchus, Mark, and Jesus called Justus send greetings, along with Epaphras, who is wrestling in prayer for the church, and Luke the beloved physician, and Demas. Paul sends greetings to Laodicea and to Nymphas and the church in his house, asks that this letter be shared with the Laodiceans, gives a word to Archippus, and signs off with his own hand: "Remember my chains."

Study

4:1 *Masters, grant to the slaves what **is** righteous and fair, knowing that you also have a Master in **the** heavens.*

"Masters, grant to the slaves what is righteous and fair." This verse belongs with the end of chapter 3. Paul has spoken to slaves. Now he speaks to masters. In a world where a master could beat a slave, sell him, or even kill him with little to fear from the law, Paul tells Christian masters that their slaves have a claim on them for what is right and fair.

Why? "Knowing that you also have a Master in the heavens." The same Greek word is used for both. The earthly master is himself a slave to the Lord in heaven, and he will answer to Him for how he treated the people under him. Every boss, manager, and business owner today should take this to heart. You will answer to God for how you treat the people who work for you.

Philemon, a master in Colossae, was about to hear this verse read aloud, with his own slave Onesimus standing in the room (4:9).

4:2 *Continue steadfastly in prayer, keeping watch in it with thanksgiving,*

"Continue steadfastly in prayer." To continue steadfastly means to keep at it, to be devoted to it and not give up. Prayer is not something we try once and then drop when nothing seems to happen. Jesus taught us to keep praying and not lose heart (Luke 18:1).

"Keeping watch in it." To watch means to stay awake and alert. The disciples fell asleep in the garden when Jesus asked them to watch and pray (Matthew 26:40-41). Paul wants believers to pray with their eyes open, alert to what is going on around them and to the dangers of false teaching.

"With thanksgiving." Here again Paul brings in thanks. Prayer without thanks soon becomes a list of complaints. When we remember what God has already done, it gives us faith for what we ask.

4:3 *praying at the same time also for us, that God may open to us a door for the word, to speak the mystery of Christ, on account of which I also have been bound,*

Paul asks for prayer for himself and his team: "praying at the same time also for us." Even the apostle Paul needed the prayers of a small church he had never visited.

What did he ask for? Not his release, though he hoped for it (Philemon 22). He asked "that God may open to us a door for the word, to speak the mystery of Christ." Paul was in chains, but his mind was on the gospel. He wanted opportunities to tell others about Jesus, and he knew only God could open those doors (1 Corinthians 16:9; Acts 14:27).

"On account of which I also have been bound." Paul was a prisoner because he preached Christ. He was not asking God to make the gospel easier. He was asking for more chances to preach it.

4:4 *so that I may make it manifest, as I must speak.*

"So that I may make it manifest, as I must speak." Paul asks for one more thing: clarity. He wanted to make the gospel plain, to say it the way it ought to be said. The best open door is wasted if the message is muddled.

That is a good prayer for every teacher, pastor, and believer who shares the gospel. Lord, give me the chance, and then help me say it clearly. If Paul needed prayer to speak clearly, so do we.

4:5 *Walk in wisdom toward those outside, redeeming the time.*

"Walk in wisdom toward those outside." Those outside are people who do not know Christ. Our neighbors, coworkers, and family members are watching how believers live. Walking in wisdom means living in a way that does not give them a reason to reject the gospel, and that may draw them to it (1 Peter 2:12).

"Redeeming the time." To redeem means to buy back. It was used for buying up goods at the market while they were available. Opportunities to show and share Christ come and go. Paul tells us to buy them up, to make the most of every chance, before it is gone (Ephesians 5:16). Is there someone in your life you have been meaning to talk to about Jesus?

4:6 ***Let*** *your word* ***be*** *always in grace, seasoned with salt, to know how you must answer each one.*

"Let your word be always in grace, seasoned with salt." Our speech should be gracious: kind, pleasant, and full of the grace we have received. Salt in Paul's day gave flavor to food and kept it from spoiling. Gracious speech is not dull and it is not rotten. It is worth listening to, and it is wholesome.

Why? "To know how you must answer each one." Not every person needs the same answer. Some are hurting. Some are angry. Some are curious. Some are mocking. A wise believer listens first and then answers each person in a way that fits. Peter says the same thing: always be ready to give an answer for the hope that is in you, with gentleness and respect (1 Peter 3:15).

4:7 *Tychicus, the beloved brother and faithful servant and fellow slave in* ***the*** *Lord, will make known to you all the things concerning me,*

Now come the personal greetings. "Tychicus, the beloved brother and faithful servant and fellow slave in the Lord, will make known to you all the things concerning me." Tychicus was from the province of Asia (Acts 20:4). He carried this letter and also the letter to the Ephesians (Ephesians 6:21-22).

Look at the three titles Paul gives him: a beloved brother, a faithful servant, and a fellow slave in the Lord. Tychicus is not famous. We know little about him. But he was the kind of person every ministry needs, someone who could be trusted to carry the mail, tell the news, and encourage the church. Faithful people like Tychicus are the backbone of God's work.

4:8 *whom I sent to you for this very **purpose**, that he may know the things concerning you, and **that** he may encourage your hearts,*

"Whom I sent to you for this very purpose, that he may know the things concerning you, and that he may encourage your hearts." Paul sent Tychicus for two reasons. He was to bring back news of how they were doing, and he was to encourage them.

A letter can teach, but a person can encourage in a way a letter cannot. Tychicus could sit with them, answer questions, and tell them how Paul was really doing. God still uses people to carry His comfort. Who has God placed in your life that you could encourage this week?

4:9 *with Onesimus, the faithful and beloved brother, who is **one** of you. They will make known to you all the things here.*

"With Onesimus, the faithful and beloved brother, who is one of you." Here is a quiet but powerful line. Onesimus was the runaway slave of Philemon, a member of this church. He had left Colossae as a slave who had wronged his master. He was coming back as a brother in Christ.

Notice what Paul calls him: "the faithful and beloved brother." The same words he used for Tychicus. Paul does not call him a slave here, or a runaway. He calls him "one of you." The church in Colossae had to decide how to welcome him. Paul's short letter to Philemon tells us more of the story.

"They will make known to you all the things here." Tychicus and Onesimus together would tell the church about Paul's situation in Rome.

4:10 *Aristarchus, my fellow prisoner, greets you, and Mark, the cousin of Barnabas (concerning whom you received commands: if he comes to you, welcome him),*

"Aristarchus, my fellow prisoner, greets you." Aristarchus was from Thessalonica (Acts 20:4). He was dragged into the riot in Ephesus (Acts 19:29), and he sailed with Paul to Rome (Acts 27:2). Here he is sharing Paul's imprisonment. Some think he took turns staying with Paul as a voluntary prisoner. Either way, he did not leave Paul alone.

"And Mark, the cousin of Barnabas." This is John Mark, who later wrote the Gospel of Mark. Years before, Mark had left Paul and Barnabas partway through their first journey, and Paul refused to take him on the second one. Paul and Barnabas split over it (Acts 13:13; 15:37-39). Now Mark is at Paul's side, and Paul tells the church to welcome him. Later Paul would write that Mark was useful to him for ministry (2 Timothy 4:11). Failure does not have to be the end of the story.

4:11 *and Jesus, who is called Justus. These, who are of **the** circumcision, **are** the only fellow workers for the kingdom of God who have become a comfort to me.*

"And Jesus, who is called Justus." Jesus was a common Jewish name, the Greek form of Joshua. This man went by Justus, perhaps out of honor for the Lord's name. We know nothing else about him.

"These, who are of the circumcision, are the only fellow workers for the kingdom of God who have become a comfort to me." These three men were Jewish believers. Many of Paul's own people had turned against him, and some believers in Rome even preached Christ out of rivalry with him (Philippians 1:15-17). These three stood with him. The word for comfort is the word that gives us our medical word paregoric, something that soothes. A loyal friend in a hard time is a gift from God.

4:12 *Epaphras, who **is one** of you, a slave of Christ, greets you, always struggling for you in the prayers, so that you may stand mature and complete in all **the** will of God.*

"Epaphras, who is one of you, a slave of Christ, greets you." Epaphras had planted the church in Colossae (1:7). He had come to Rome to see Paul.

Look at what he was doing: "always struggling for you in the prayers." The word for struggling is the word for a hard contest, the same word Paul used for his own striving in 1:29 and 2:1. Epaphras wrestled in prayer for his people.

What did he pray for? "So that you may stand mature and complete in all the will of God." He prayed that they would grow up in Christ, stand firm against the false teaching, and be fully sure of God's will. That is how a faithful pastor prays for his people.

4:13 *For I bear witness to him that he has much zeal for you and for those in Laodicea and those in Hierapolis.*

"For I bear witness to him that he has much zeal for you and for those in Laodicea and those in Hierapolis." Paul vouches for Epaphras. Many older Greek copies have a different word here, one that means hard labor or even pain. Either way, his prayers for these three churches in the Lycus valley cost him something.

Epaphras was far from home, and he could not fix the problems in Colossae by being there. So he did what he could. He prayed, hard and often. Never think prayer is the least you can do for someone. Often it is the most.

4:14 *Luke, the beloved physician, greets you, and Demas.*

"Luke, the beloved physician, greets you, and Demas." Luke wrote the Gospel of Luke and the book of Acts. He traveled with Paul, and he was with him in Rome. Because Paul has just named the Jewish believers with him (4:11), most see Luke as a Gentile. Paul calls him "the beloved physician." Luke was a doctor, and a dear friend.

Demas is named with no comment. Later, in Paul's last letter, he would write that Demas had deserted him, "having loved the present age" (2 Timothy 4:10). It is a sad note. A man can stand next to an apostle and still drift away. Let us hold on to Christ to the end.

4:15 *Greet the brothers in Laodicea, and Nymphas, and the church in his house.*

"Greet the brothers in Laodicea, and Nymphas, and the church in his house." Laodicea was the larger city near Colossae. Paul cares about the whole region.

"The church in his house." In those days churches did not have their own buildings. Believers met in homes. Philemon's house in Colossae had a church too (Philemon 2). A church is not a building. It is the people of God gathered around Jesus. Some Greek copies read Nympha, a woman, and "her house," and many modern Bibles follow those copies. Either way, a believer opened his or her home for God's people to gather.

4:16 *And when the letter has been read among you, cause that it also be read in the church of the Laodiceans, and that you also read the **letter** from Laodicea.*

"And when the letter has been read among you, cause that it also be read in the church of the Laodiceans." Paul's letters were read aloud in church. And they were meant to be shared. This letter was not only for Colossae. It was for the whole church, then and now.

"And that you also read the letter from Laodicea." What was that letter? Bible teachers hold three main views. Many believe it was a letter Paul wrote to Laodicea that has not survived. Others believe it was our letter to the Ephesians, which may have been a circular letter passed from church to church and would have reached Colossae by way of Laodicea. A few have suggested Philemon. A short letter called the Epistle to the Laodiceans circulated centuries later, but it is made up mostly of phrases from Philippians and other letters, and it is not accepted as Paul's. Scripture doesn't tell us which letter Paul meant. What we do know is that God has given us every word He meant for us to have.

4:17 *And say to Archippus, "Take heed to the ministry that you received in **the** Lord, that you may fulfill it."*

Paul has a message for one man: "Take heed to the ministry that you received in the Lord, that you may fulfill it." Archippus is named again in Philemon 2, where Paul calls him "our fellow soldier." He may have been part of Philemon's household, perhaps his son, and he may have been leading the church while Epaphras was away. Scripture doesn't tell us.

Paul gives him a public word of encouragement, and maybe a gentle push. "Take heed." Pay attention to it. God gave you a ministry, so finish it. Every believer has received some ministry from the Lord. It may be big or small, seen or unseen. Are you fulfilling yours?

4:18 *The greeting by my own hand, of Paul. Remember my chains. Grace **be** with you. Amen.*

"The greeting by my own hand, of Paul." Paul usually dictated his letters to a helper who wrote them down. At the end he took the pen and signed with his own hand (2 Thessalonians 3:17). That proved the letter was really from him.

"Remember my chains." As he wrote, the chain on his wrist may have dragged across the page. Paul asks them to remember him, to pray for him, and to remember that he was suffering for the gospel they had received.

"Grace be with you. Amen." Paul began with grace (1:2), and he ends with grace. The false teachers offered rules. Paul leaves the Colossians, and us, with the grace of God in Christ, who is all and in all.

Summary

Paul tells masters to give their slaves what is right and fair, knowing they too have a Master in heaven. He calls believers to keep on in prayer, alert and thankful, and to pray that God would open a door for the gospel and help him make it clear. They are to walk wisely toward outsiders, make the most of every opportunity, and let their speech always be gracious and seasoned with salt. Tychicus and Onesimus, the faithful and beloved brother from Colossae, are carrying the letter and news of Paul. Aristarchus, Mark, Jesus called Justus, Epaphras, Luke, and Demas send greetings, and Epaphras is wrestling in prayer for the church to stand mature and complete. Paul greets the believers in Laodicea and Nymphas and the church in his house, asks that this letter and the letter from Laodicea be shared, tells Archippus to fulfill his ministry, and signs with his own hand: remember my chains, grace be with you.

Study Questions

1. Why does Paul tell masters to treat their slaves fairly? (4:1)

2. What three things does Paul say about how we should pray? (4:2)

3. What did Paul ask the Colossians to pray for him, and what did he not ask for? (4:3-4)

4. What does it mean to be "redeeming the time" with those outside? (4:5)

5. What does it mean for our speech to be "seasoned with salt"? (4:6)

6. How does Paul describe Onesimus, and why is that striking? (4:9)

7. What does the story of Mark teach us about failure and second chances? (4:10)

8. What did Epaphras pray for the believers in Colossae? (4:12)

9. Who in your life does not yet know Christ? How could you walk in wisdom and make the most of your opportunities with them this week? (4:5)

10. Like Archippus, what ministry has the Lord given you, and what would it look like to fulfill it? (4:17)

Overview of Philemon

Philemon is the eighteenth book of the New Testament. It sits between Titus and Hebrews. It is the shortest of Paul's thirteen letters, and it is one of the four Prison Letters, written at the same time as Colossians and carried to the same town. Unlike Paul's other letters to churches, this one is personal. It is written to one man about one problem: a slave named Onesimus, who had wronged his master and run away, has become a believer, and Paul is sending him home.

The theme of Philemon is the gospel at work in a broken relationship. Paul asks Philemon to forgive Onesimus and to receive him back as a brother in Christ. He offers to pay whatever Onesimus owes. In a few lines, this small letter shows us forgiveness, reconciliation, and a picture of what Christ has done for us. The key verse is Paul's request:

Philemon 16 (SLB)

"no longer as a slave, but above a slave, a beloved brother, especially to me, but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord."

Philemon has 1 chapter and 25 verses. This study covers it in one chapter:

- Philemon: Receive Him as You Would Me

The letter itself falls into three parts:

- Greeting and thanks for Philemon's love and faith (verses 1-7)
- Paul's appeal for Onesimus (verses 8-21)
- Closing words and greetings (verses 22-25)

Background of Philemon

Author: The letter opens, "Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy the brother" (verse 1). Paul names himself three times (verses 1, 9, 19), and in verse 19 he says he is writing with his own hand. Very few scholars, even among those who doubt some of Paul's other letters, doubt that Paul wrote Philemon. Its names match the names at the end of Colossians, and it was accepted from early on as Paul's.

Who it was written to: The letter is addressed to "Philemon our beloved and fellow worker," to "Apphia the beloved," to "Archippus our fellow soldier," and to "the church at your house" (verses 1-2). Philemon was a believer, a man of some means who owned at least one slave and had a house large enough for the church to meet in. He seems to have come to Christ through Paul (verse 19), most likely during Paul's years in Ephesus. Apphia was most likely his wife, and Archippus may have been their son. Colossians shows that Onesimus and Archippus belonged to Colossae (Colossians 4:9, 17), so most believe Philemon lived there too.

Onesimus: Onesimus was Philemon's slave. His name means useful or profitable, and Paul makes a play on it in verse 11. The letter suggests that he had wronged his master, perhaps by stealing from him or simply by running off and leaving his work undone (verse 18), and that he had left Colossae. Somehow he came to Paul, who was in prison, and there he came to faith in Christ (verse 10). Most believe he was a runaway who fled to the big city of Rome to get lost in the crowds. Some suggest he went to Paul on purpose, looking for a friend of his master who could plead for him. Either way, he was now a new man, and Paul was sending him back.

When and where it was written: Paul was a prisoner (verses 1, 9, 10, 13, 23). Most who hold that Paul wrote it believe he wrote from Rome during his house arrest, around A.D. 60 to 62 (Acts 28:16, 30-31), at the same time as Colossians and Ephesians. Some suggest an earlier imprisonment in Ephesus, which was much closer to Colossae. Paul hoped to be released and to visit Philemon soon (verse 22). Onesimus carried the letter home, traveling with Tychicus (Colossians 4:7-9).

Purpose: Paul writes to ask Philemon to forgive Onesimus and to receive him back, not only as a slave but as a beloved brother. He also hints that he would like Onesimus to come back and serve with him (verses 13-14, 21), though he leaves the choice to Philemon.

What the letter says about slavery: Roman slavery was not the same as the race-based slavery in American history. People became slaves through war, debt, or birth, and some held skilled jobs. But it was still a system where one person owned another, and it was often cruel. A runaway slave could be beaten, branded, or even put to death. Paul does not command Philemon to free Onesimus, and he does not attack the system head on. But he does something that cuts at its roots. He tells a master to receive his slave as he would receive Paul himself, as a beloved brother "both in the flesh and in the Lord" (verse 16). Once a master and a slave see each other as brothers who answer to the same Lord, slavery cannot stand for long. We should be honest that this letter was later misused in America to argue that runaway slaves must be returned. That reading turns the

letter upside down. Paul was not hunting a runaway. He was pleading for one, and calling his master to treat him as family.

What happened next: Scripture does not tell us how Philemon answered. The fact that the letter was kept and shared suggests he did what Paul asked. About fifty years later, an early Christian leader named Ignatius wrote a letter to the church in Ephesus and mentioned their bishop (the overseer of the church there), a man named Onesimus. Some believe this was the same man, but we cannot be sure.

Philemon: Receive Him as You Would Me

Scripture

1:1-7 Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy the brother, to Philemon our beloved and fellow worker, and to Apphia the beloved, and to Archippus our fellow soldier, and to the church at your house: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and ***the*** Lord Jesus Christ. I thank my God, always making mention of you in my prayers, hearing of your love and the faith which you have toward the Lord Jesus and toward all the saints, so that the fellowship of your faith may become effective in ***the*** knowledge of every good ***thing*** which ***is*** in you toward Christ Jesus. For we have much joy and encouragement over your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you, brother.

1:8-25 Therefore, having much boldness in Christ to command you what is fitting, for the sake of love I rather appeal ***to you***, being such a one as Paul, an old man, and now also a prisoner of Jesus Christ. I appeal to you for my child, whom I have begotten in my chains, Onesimus, who once ***was*** useless to you, but now ***is*** useful to you and to me, whom I have sent back; and you, receive him, that is, my own heart, whom I was wishing to keep with myself, so that on your behalf he might serve me in the chains of the gospel. But apart from your consent I wished to do nothing, so that your good ***deed*** might not be as according to necessity, but according to willingness. For perhaps for this reason he was separated ***from you*** for an hour, so that you might have him back eternally, no longer as a slave, but above a slave, a beloved brother, especially to me, but how much more to you, both in ***the*** flesh and in ***the*** Lord. If then you consider me a partner, receive him as me. But if he has wronged you ***in*** anything, or owes ***you***, charge this to me. I, Paul, wrote with my own hand, I will repay ***it***; that I may not say to you that you owe me even your own self besides. Yes, brother, may I have benefit from you in ***the*** Lord; refresh my heart in ***the*** Lord. Having been persuaded of your obedience, I wrote to you, knowing that you will do even beyond what I say. And at the same time also prepare a lodging for me; for I hope that through your prayers I will be granted to you. They greet you: Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, ***as do*** Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, Luke, my fellow workers. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ ***be*** with your spirit. Amen.

Preview

Philemon is a short personal letter with a big heart. Paul greets Philemon, his family, and the church that meets in his house, and he thanks God for Philemon's love and faith, which have refreshed the hearts of the saints. Then he comes to his request. He could command Philemon, but he would rather appeal to him in love. Onesimus, Philemon's slave who had once been useless to him, has become Paul's spiritual child in prison and is now useful to them both.

Paul sends Onesimus back and asks Philemon to receive him no longer as a slave, but as a beloved brother. "Receive him as me," he writes. If Onesimus owes anything, "charge this to me." Paul offers to pay the debt with his own hand. That is a picture of what Jesus has done for us. Paul closes by asking Philemon to get a room ready for him, sends greetings from his fellow workers, and ends with grace.

Study

1:1 *Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy the brother, to Philemon our beloved and fellow worker,*

"Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus." In most of his letters, Paul opens by calling himself an apostle. Here he does not. He is about to ask a favor, not give an order, so he does not press his authority. Instead, he calls himself a prisoner. Philemon could hardly refuse a request from a man in chains for Christ.

Notice whose prisoner Paul is. Rome held the chains, but Paul saw himself as Christ's prisoner. Nothing happened to him outside the Lord's plan.

"Timothy the brother" is with him, as in Colossians 1:1. Paul writes "to Philemon our beloved and fellow worker." Philemon was not only a believer who opened his home. He worked alongside Paul for the gospel.

1:2 *and to Apphia the beloved, and to Archippus our fellow soldier, and to the church at your house:*

The letter is also addressed "to Apphia the beloved," most likely Philemon's wife. In that world, the wife ran the household, and the household slaves were under her care day to day. Her welcome of Onesimus would matter too.

"And to Archippus our fellow soldier." He may have been their son. Paul gives him a word in Colossians 4:17 about fulfilling his ministry. A fellow soldier is someone who has stood beside you in the fight.

"And to the church at your house." The church in Colossae met in Philemon's home. That means this private matter would be known to the whole church. How Philemon treated Onesimus would be seen by everyone who gathered there. Our faith is never only a private matter.

1:3 *Grace to you and peace from God our Father and **the** Lord Jesus Christ.*

"Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." This was Paul's usual greeting, but in this letter it fits especially well. Paul is about to ask Philemon to show grace to someone who did not deserve it, and to make peace with someone who had wronged him.

That is how grace works. God gave grace to us when we did not deserve it. Now He asks us to pass it on. We cannot give what we have not received, but every believer has received grace and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

1:4-5 *I thank my God, always making mention of you in my prayers, hearing of your love and the faith which you have toward the Lord Jesus and toward all the saints,*

"I thank my God, always making mention of you in my prayers." Paul prayed for Philemon by name. And he did it with thanks.

Why? Because he kept "hearing of your love and the faith which you have toward the Lord Jesus and toward all the saints." Philemon's faith was aimed at the Lord Jesus, and his love was aimed at all the saints. Paul puts love first here, maybe because love is what he is about to ask for.

Notice "all the saints." Paul is about to add one more saint to that list. Onesimus was now a believer too. Would Philemon's love reach far enough to include a slave who had wronged him? Real love for all the saints has to include the ones who have hurt us.

1:6 *so that the fellowship of your faith may become effective in **the** knowledge of every good **thing** which **is** in you toward Christ Jesus.*

Paul prays "that the fellowship of your faith may become effective in the knowledge of every good thing which is in you toward Christ Jesus." This is not an easy verse to put into plain English, and Bibles word it in different ways.

The fellowship of faith is the sharing that comes from belonging to Christ together. Paul prays that this sharing would become effective, that it would get to work and show itself in action. As it does, Philemon would come to know more fully every good thing God has given us in Christ. Faith that is shared and lived out grows. Faith that stays locked up inside does not. Paul is gently setting up his request. Philemon was about to have a chance to put his faith to work.

1:7 *For we have much joy and encouragement over your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you, brother.*

"For we have much joy and encouragement over your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you, brother." Philemon had a reputation. He was the kind of man who made other believers feel cared for. The word for refreshed was used for giving rest to a tired traveler or a soldier after a march.

The word for hearts here is the word for the inner parts of the body, used for the deepest feelings. Philemon had touched people deep down. Paul will use the same word twice more, in verse 12 for Onesimus ("my own heart") and in verse 20 ("refresh my heart in the Lord"). Philemon had refreshed many saints. Now Paul is asking him to refresh one more.

And notice that Paul calls him "brother." That word will matter in this letter.

1:8-9 *Therefore, having much boldness in Christ to command you what is fitting, for the sake of love I rather appeal **to you**, being such a one as Paul, an old man, and now also a prisoner of Jesus Christ.*

"Therefore, having much boldness in Christ to command you what is fitting." Paul was an apostle. He could have simply ordered Philemon to do what was right.

"For the sake of love I rather appeal to you." Paul chose not to command. Love does not force. A forced kindness is not much of a kindness. Paul wanted Philemon to act from his heart.

He appeals as "Paul, an old man, and now also a prisoner of Jesus Christ." Paul was probably in his late fifties or early sixties, which was old for a man who had been beaten, stoned, and shipwrecked (2 Corinthians 11:23-27). The Greek word for "old man" is very close to the word for ambassador, and some Bibles read it that way. Either way, Paul stands before Philemon not as a boss but as a worn-out old friend in chains.

1:10 *I appeal to you for my child, whom I have begotten in my chains, Onesimus,*

"I appeal to you for my child, whom I have begotten in my chains, Onesimus." Look at how carefully Paul says this. He calls Onesimus "my child" before he even names him. By the time Philemon reached the name, he already knew that this man was dear to Paul.

"Whom I have begotten in my chains." Paul led Onesimus to Christ while in prison. Paul often spoke of those he led to faith as his children (1 Corinthians 4:15; Galatians 4:19). Paul was in chains, but the gospel was not chained (2 Timothy 2:9). Even in prison, God was saving people. You may feel stuck where you are, but God can use you right where you are.

1:11 *who once **was** useless to you, but now **is** useful to you and to me,*

"Who once was useless to you, but now is useful to you and to me." Here is a play on words. The name Onesimus means useful. But he had not lived up to his name. He had been useless to Philemon, maybe worse than useless.

Now he had become what his name said. Christ changes people. A man who was once a problem had become a help. Paul says he is useful "to you and to me." The change was real enough that Paul could stake his own name on it.

That is still what the gospel does. Many people who are written off as useless are one encounter with Jesus away from becoming useful to God and to others.

1:12 *whom I have sent back; and you, receive him, that is, my own heart,*

"Whom I have sent back; and you, receive him, that is, my own heart." Sending Onesimus back was not easy for Paul, and it was not easy for Onesimus. Under Roman law, a runaway slave could be harshly punished. Onesimus was going home to face the man he had wronged.

Why send him back? Because becoming a believer does not erase our responsibilities. Onesimus needed to make things right. Real repentance faces the people we have hurt. And Paul sends with him "my own heart," the same word for deep feeling used in verse 7. Paul was sending a piece of himself.

1:13 *whom I was wishing to keep with myself, so that on your behalf he might serve me in the chains of the gospel.*

"Whom I was wishing to keep with myself, so that on your behalf he might serve me in the chains of the gospel." Paul would have liked to keep Onesimus. He had become a real help to Paul in prison.

Notice the words "on your behalf." Paul gently suggests that if Onesimus stayed and served Paul, it would be as if Philemon himself were serving him. Philemon owed Paul a great deal (verse 19). Onesimus could have repaid some of that debt by helping Paul. But Paul would not make that choice for him.

1:14 *But apart from your consent I wished to do nothing, so that your good **deed** might not be as according to necessity, but according to willingness.*

"But apart from your consent I wished to do nothing, so that your good deed might not be as according to necessity, but according to willingness." Paul could have kept Onesimus and sent Philemon a note. That would have been taking a decision that belonged to Philemon.

Paul wanted Philemon's goodness to be free, not forced. That is the way God works with us. He does not want grudging obedience. He loves a cheerful giver (2 Corinthians 9:7). Paul respected Philemon enough to let him decide. When we lead others, we should give them the same respect.

1:15 *For perhaps for this reason he was separated **from you** for an hour, so that you might have him back eternally,*

"For perhaps for this reason he was separated from you for an hour, so that you might have him back eternally." Here Paul steps back and looks at the bigger picture. Notice the word "perhaps." Paul does not claim to know God's every purpose. But he suggests that God may have been at work in all of this.

Notice also how gently Paul puts it. He does not say that he ran away. He says "he was separated from you," as if God had a hand in it. Onesimus's sin was real. But God was able to use it to bring him to Christ (Genesis 50:20; Romans 8:28).

"For an hour," a short time, "so that you might have him back eternally." Philemon lost a slave for a while. He got back a brother forever. When we look back, we often see God at work in the very things that hurt us most.

1:16 *no longer as a slave, but above a slave, a beloved brother, especially to me, but how much more to you, both in **the** flesh and in **the** Lord.*

"No longer as a slave, but above a slave, a beloved brother." This is the heart of the letter. Onesimus was coming back as more than a slave. He was a brother in Christ.

"Especially to me, but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord." Onesimus was a brother to Paul in the Lord. To Philemon he would be a brother in both ways, "in the flesh," in their everyday life together in the same house, and "in the Lord," as members of the same family of God.

What does this say about slavery? Paul does not order Philemon to set Onesimus free. Many believe the words "no longer as a slave" and "even beyond what I say" (verse 21) were a strong hint that he should. What is clear is that a master who sees his slave as a beloved brother cannot treat him as property. The gospel put a seed in the ground that would one day help bring down

the whole system. This verse was never a blessing on slavery. It calls us to see every believer, whatever their place in life, as family.

1:17 *If then you consider me a partner, receive him as me.*

"If then you consider me a partner, receive him as me." A partner is someone who shares in something with you. Paul and Philemon shared in Christ and in the work of the gospel. Paul says if that partnership means anything, receive Onesimus the way you would receive me.

Think about what that would mean. If Paul himself came to Philemon's door, Philemon would throw open the door, prepare a meal, and give him the best room. That is how Paul asks him to treat a slave who had wronged him.

This is what God has done for us. He receives us the way He receives His own Son, because we are in Christ (Ephesians 1:6). And He calls us to receive one another the same way (Romans 15:7).

1:18 *But if he has wronged you **in** anything, or owes **you**, charge this to me.*

"But if he has wronged you in anything, or owes you, charge this to me." Paul does not pretend that Onesimus did nothing wrong. Forgiveness is not pretending. There was a real wrong and a real debt.

Then Paul says the most beautiful words in the letter: "charge this to me." The words were used for putting a charge on someone's account. Paul is saying, put his debt on my bill. Whatever he owes you, I will pay.

Do you see the gospel here? We owed God a debt we could never pay (Colossians 2:14). Jesus took our debt on Himself, as if to say, put it on My account. Our sins were put on His account, and He paid them in full on the cross. And His righteousness was put on ours (2 Corinthians 5:21). Paul did for Onesimus what Christ did for us. That is substitution, one standing in the place of another.

1:19 *I, Paul, wrote with my own hand, I will repay **it**; that I may not say to you that you owe me even your own self besides.*

"I, Paul, wrote with my own hand, I will repay it." Paul takes the pen from his helper and writes this line himself. It is like signing a promissory note, a written promise to pay. Paul means it. He will cover the debt.

"That I may not say to you that you owe me even your own self besides." Then Paul adds a gentle reminder. Philemon had come to Christ through Paul. He owed Paul his very soul. Paul says he won't mention it, and then of course he mentions it. There may be a smile in these words, but the point is serious. When we remember how much we have been forgiven, it becomes much easier to forgive others (Matthew 18:21-35).

1:20 *Yes, brother, may I have benefit from you in **the** Lord; refresh my heart in **the** Lord.*

"Yes, brother, may I have benefit from you in the Lord." The word for benefit is related to the name Onesimus. Paul makes another small play on words. He is saying, let me get some use out of you, as you get use out of Onesimus.

"Refresh my heart in the Lord." Philemon had refreshed the hearts of many saints (verse 7). Now Paul asks him to refresh Paul's own heart by welcoming Onesimus. Our forgiveness of others is not only between us and them. It brings joy to everyone who loves us both, and above all to the Lord.

1:21 *Having been persuaded of your obedience, I wrote to you, knowing that you will do even beyond what I say.*

"Having been persuaded of your obedience, I wrote to you, knowing that you will do even beyond what I say." Paul has been asking, not commanding. But here he uses the word "obedience." He trusts that Philemon will obey the Lord in this.

"Even beyond what I say." What could be beyond receiving Onesimus as a brother? Paul does not say. Many believe he was hinting that Philemon should set Onesimus free, or send him back to help Paul. Paul leaves it with Philemon and the Lord. When God's people forgive, the best of them go further than they were asked.

1:22 *And at the same time also prepare a lodging for me; for I hope that through your prayers I will be granted to you.*

"And at the same time also prepare a lodging for me." Paul hoped to be released and to come to Colossae. A lodging was a guest room. This little request also meant that Paul would come and see for himself how Philemon had treated Onesimus.

"For I hope that through your prayers I will be granted to you." Paul believed that the prayers of believers mattered for whether he would be set free. Prayer is not a formality. God uses it. Many believe Paul was released after his first imprisonment in Rome, traveled for a few more years, and was later arrested again (2 Timothy 4:6-8, 16-17). Scripture doesn't tell us whether he ever made it to Colossae.

1:23-24 *They greet you: Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, **as do** Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, Luke, my fellow workers.*

"They greet you: Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus." Epaphras was from Colossae and had started the church there (Colossians 1:7; 4:12). Here Paul calls him "my fellow prisoner." He may have been arrested too, or he may have chosen to share Paul's imprisonment.

The others are the same men named in Colossians 4:10-14: "Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, Luke, my fellow workers." Mark, who once failed and was restored. Aristarchus, who stayed close to Paul through riots and shipwreck. Demas, who would later desert Paul (2 Timothy 4:10). And Luke,

the beloved physician. Philemon was not alone in this. A whole team of believers was watching and praying.

1:25 *The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ **be** with your spirit. Amen.*

"The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. Amen." The letter began with grace (verse 3), and it ends with grace. Paul asked Philemon to show grace to Onesimus. The only way Philemon could do it was by the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ working in him.

That is true of us too. We cannot forgive the people who have wronged us in our own strength. But the grace that forgave us can work in us to forgive others. "Your" is plural here in the Greek. Paul's last word is for the whole church in Philemon's house, and for us.

Summary

Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, writes to Philemon, his family, and the church in his house. He thanks God for Philemon's love and faith toward the Lord Jesus and all the saints, and for the way Philemon has refreshed the hearts of the saints. Though he could command, Paul appeals in love for Onesimus, Philemon's slave, who became Paul's spiritual child in prison and has gone from useless to useful. Paul sends him back, though he would have liked to keep him, because he wants Philemon's kindness to be willing, not forced. Perhaps Onesimus was separated for a while so that Philemon could have him back forever, no longer as a slave but as a beloved brother. Paul asks Philemon to receive Onesimus as he would receive Paul, and to charge any debt to Paul's account, promising in his own hand to repay it. He trusts Philemon to do even more than he asks, asks him to prepare a room, sends greetings from his fellow workers, and closes with the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ.

There are people in my family I need to forgive, and I have tried to make things right from my side. So far it has not been mended. Paul asked Philemon to receive Onesimus back. I am praying for the day that can happen in my family.

Study Questions

1. Why do you think Paul calls himself "a prisoner" instead of an apostle in this letter? (1:1, 9)

2. What had Philemon done for the saints, and why does Paul mention it before his request? (1:5-7)

3. Why did Paul appeal to Philemon instead of commanding him? (1:8-9, 14)

4. What does the name Onesimus mean, and how does Paul use it? (1:11)

5. How does Paul look at Onesimus's running away in light of God's purposes? (1:15)

6. What does Paul ask Philemon to see Onesimus as, and what does that say about how believers treat one another? (1:16)

7. How is "charge this to me" a picture of what Jesus did for us? (1:18)

8. Why do you think Paul reminds Philemon that he owes Paul "even your own self"? (1:19)

9. Is there someone who has wronged you whom God may be asking you to receive back? What would it take to take that step? (1:17)

10. Is there someone you have wronged, as Onesimus wronged Philemon, with whom you need to make things right? (1:18-19)

Conclusion

Colossians and Philemon are two small letters sent to one small town, but together they cover a great deal. In Colossians, Paul showed us who Jesus is. He is the image of the invisible God, the Creator of all things, the One who holds all things together, the head of the church, and the firstborn from the dead. All the fullness of the Deity lives in Him bodily, and everyone who belongs to Him is complete in Him. On the cross He blotted out the record of debt against us and triumphed over every power. Because of that, we do not need anything added to Christ: not secret knowledge, not food laws or holy days, not visions or angels, not harsh rules for the body. We need Him.

Then Paul showed us how people who are complete in Christ should live. We set our minds on things above, where Christ is. We put to death the old sins and put on the new man, with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience, forgiveness, and above all love. We let the peace of God rule our hearts and the word of Christ dwell in us richly. We live it out at home, at work, in prayer, and before the watching world. "And everything, whatever you do in word or in deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to the God and Father through Him" (Colossians 3:17).

Philemon showed us that same gospel at work in a real home. A slave who had wronged his master came to Christ, and a master who had been wronged was asked to receive him as a beloved brother. Paul stood between them and said, "charge this to me" (Philemon 18). That is what Jesus has done for every one of us. We owed God a debt we could never pay, and Jesus paid it. Now He calls us to forgive as we have been forgiven, and to receive one another as He has received us.

As I said at the start of this study, the guiding principle throughout has been to read God's Word plainly, as it is written, and let Scripture explain Scripture. When we do that with these two letters, the message is clear. God "rescued us out of the authority of the darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of the Son of His love, in whom we have the redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins" (Colossians 1:13-14). The only thing required of us to spend eternity with God is to receive His Son, Jesus, as our Lord and Savior.

If you haven't yet entered into a relationship with Jesus, or if you want to deepen the one you already have with Him, I invite you to pray this prayer with me:

Lord Jesus, You are the Savior of the world, and You forgive all who come to You. I come before You to confess that I have sinned against You. I have rebelled against You and put myself first above You and all others. I want to have a deep, meaningful relationship with You where I can show others by my demeanor and character that You are first in my life. I am asking for Your forgiveness for all my sins. You died for me on the cross so that I could be forgiven and made right with God. Please help me not forget that You gave Your very life for me. I am asking that You take control of my life and make a new creature out of me and into the person You want me to be. I thank You, Lord, and I love You. Amen.

If you prayed this prayer, tell another believer, ask a pastor about being baptized, and find a church where you can grow and serve as part of the body of Christ, rooted and built up in Him (Colossians 2:6-7).

Old and New Testament Links in Colossians and Philemon

This table lists every Old and New Testament link printed in this study, in verse order. I took the links from the Treasury of Scripture Knowledge, with help from the OpenBible.info cross-references, and I checked each one by reading both passages in the Steadfast Literal Bible. Where I was not sure of a link, I left it out.

Verse in this study	Old Testament passage	Kind
Colossians 1:15	Psalm 89:27	alluded to
Colossians 2:11	Deuteronomy 30:6	alluded to
Colossians 2:21-22	Isaiah 29:13	alluded to
Colossians 3:1	Psalm 110:1	alluded to
Colossians 3:10	Genesis 1:27	alluded to
Colossians 3:10	Genesis 1:26	alluded to

Bibliography

The following sources were consulted for this study. The commentary reflects my own study and convictions, and any direct quotation from an outside source is identified and cited at the point where it appears.

Green, Jay P., Sr. (ed.). The Interlinear Bible: Hebrew-Greek-English. Hendrickson Publishers, 1986 (2nd ed.; printing used 2005). ISBN 1-56563-977-4.

Treasury of Scripture Knowledge. London: Samuel Bagster and Sons, about 1830. Public domain.

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