

christ
above all



Colossians

part one



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Table of Contents

Easter Lesson: The Case for Easter (4-5-26)	3
Lesson 1: The Message of Colossians: New Life (4-12-26)	7
Lesson 2: Welcome to the Family! - Colossians 1:1-8 (4-19-26).....	17
Lesson 3: Discovering God's Will for Your Life - Colossians 1:9-14 (4-26-26)	27
Lesson 4: Christ, Supreme Lord and Sufficient Savior - Colossians 1:15-20 (5-3-26)	37
Lesson 5: Stable and Steadfast - Colossians 1:21-23 (5-10-26)	47
Lesson 6: The Supreme Ministry - Colossians 1:24-29 (5-17-26)	53
Lesson 7: Apostolic Concerns - Colossians 2:1-5 (5-24-26)	61
Lesson 8: Learning to Walk - Colossians 2:6-15 (5-31-26)	67
Lesson 9: The Guarding of Your Treasure - Colossians 2:16-23 (6-7-26).....	77
Lesson 10: New Life in Christ - Colossians 3:1-4 (6-14-26)	83
Lesson 11: Putting Off, Putting On (Part 1) - Colossians 3:5-11 (6-21-26)	89
Appendix: Answer Guide	95
Sources	97

Easter Lesson (4-5-26)

The Case for Easter (Lee Strobel)

[This lesson was adapted from *The Case for Easter: A Journalist Investigates Evidence for the Resurrection* by Lee Strobel]

Objective: To examine the historical and biblical evidence for the resurrection of Jesus and think critically about its truth and implications.

Introduction

Question: What kind of evidence would convince you that something unbelievable is actually true?

Read: 1 Corinthians 15:3–8 (ESV)

(Focus on eyewitness testimony and the centrality of the resurrection)

Key Idea:

Christianity stands or falls on the resurrection (v. 14).

Part 1: Did Jesus Really Die?

Summary (from Strobel): Jesus' death by crucifixion is one of the most well-attested facts in ancient history. Roman execution methods were thorough, and medical analysis confirms death—not survival.

Scripture:

- **Mark 15:37–45** – Jesus' death confirmed by a Roman centurion
- **John 19:33–35** – Blood and water from His side (evidence of death)

Discussion Questions:

1. Why is it important to establish that Jesus actually died?
2. What details in these passages show certainty about His death?
3. What alternative explanations (like survival) do people suggest today?

Key Point: A real resurrection requires a real death.

Part 2: Was the Tomb Really Empty?

Summary (from Strobel): The empty tomb is supported by early sources, the inclusion of women as witnesses, and the inability of authorities to produce a body.

Scripture:

- **Matthew 28:1–10** – The empty tomb discovered
- **John 20:1–8** – The disciples verify the empty tomb

Discussion Questions:

1. Why does the empty tomb matter for the resurrection claim?
2. What stands out about who discovered the tomb first?
3. What are some natural explanations people give for the empty tomb?

Key Point: If Jesus' body had remained in the tomb, or if authorities had produced His body, Christianity would have ended immediately.

Part 3: Were There Credible Eyewitnesses?

Summary (from Strobel): Multiple people and groups claimed to see the risen Jesus. Their lives were radically changed, and many were willing to suffer and die for this belief.

Scripture:

- **Luke 24:36–43** – Jesus appears to the disciples
- **John 20:24–29** – Jesus and Thomas
- **Acts 4:18–20** – Boldness of the apostles
- **1 Corinthians 15:5–7** – Multiple witnesses, including 500 people

Discussion Questions:

1. What makes eyewitness testimony credible or not credible?
2. How did the disciples change after seeing the risen Jesus?
3. Would people willingly suffer for something they knew was false?

Key Point: The transformation of the disciples strongly supports the truth of their testimony.

Part 4: What Does It Mean for Us?

Scripture:

- **Romans 1:4** – Jesus declared Son of God by the resurrection
- **Romans 10:9** – Salvation tied to belief in the resurrection
- **1 Peter 1:3** – Living hope through the resurrection

Discussion Questions:

1. If the resurrection is true, what does that say about Jesus?
2. How should it affect the way we live?
3. What questions do you still have about the resurrection?

Conclusion

The resurrection is not just a matter of faith—it is grounded in historical evidence and eyewitness testimony. Are you convinced? Why or why not?

Lesson 1 (4-12-26)

The Message of Colossians: New Life (Colossians Overview)

Summary

Paul's letter to the Colossians is a jewel of Christian Scripture. Only four chapters long, it is easy to read through in one sitting, yet it provides stunning vistas of the perfections of Christ that few other New Testament documents can match in such short space. Its majestic hymn of Christ at 1:15–20 is rivaled only by that of Philippians 2:5–11. The letter therefore provides a feast for the theologian to digest. Yet Colossians also pulsates with a message that, despite the limits of the situation for which it was originally written, remains as relevant and significant as ever.¹ (For further background, see the *ESV Study Bible*, pages 2289–2292; available online at www.esvbible.org.)

Observation Questions (What does the book say?)

1. Who wrote the letter and who was with him? (Colossians 1:1)
2. To whom was the letter written and where were they located? (Colossians 1:2)
3. What reasons does Paul give for thanking God for the Colossian believers? (1:3–5, 1:7–8)
4. What descriptions are given of Jesus Christ that show His supremacy? (1:15–20)
5. What does Paul say Christ has done for believers regarding sin and reconciliation? (1:13–14, 1:21–22)
6. What warnings does Paul give about false teaching? (2:4, 2:8, 2:16–18)
7. What kinds of religious rules or practices does Paul warn against? (2:16–23)
8. What new identity do believers have in Christ? (2:12–13; 3:1–4; 3:9–10)
9. What sinful behaviors are believers told to “put to death”? (3:5–9)
10. What Christian virtues are believers told to “put on”? (3:12–14)
11. What instructions are given about relationships in Christian households? (3:18–4:1)
12. What final instructions does Paul give about prayer and Christian witness? (4:2–6)

Interpretation Questions (What does the book mean?)

1. What does Colossians teach about the supremacy and sufficiency of Christ? (1:15–20; 2:9–10)
2. Why might the believers in Colossae have been vulnerable to false teaching? (2:4, 2:8, 2:18)
3. What does it mean that believers are united with Christ? (2:12–13; 3:1–3)
4. Why does Paul emphasize setting our minds on things above? (3:1–4)
5. How does the gospel transform the way believers live? (3:5–17)
6. How should Christ's authority affect relationships in daily life? (3:18–4:1)
7. What role does thankfulness play in the Christian life? (2:7; 3:15–17; 4:2)

¹ Christopher A. Beetham, *Colossians and Philemon, A 12-Week Study*, ed. J. I. Packer, Dane C. Ortlund, and Lane T. Dennis, *Knowing the Bible* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015), 7.

Application Questions (How should this change us?)

1. How should knowing who Christ is affect the way you live? (1:15–20; 3:1–4)
2. What modern ideas or teachings might distract believers from Christ today? (2:8; 2:16–23)
3. What sins might believers today need to “put to death”? (3:5–9)
4. Which Christlike qualities should Christians actively pursue? (3:12–14)
5. How should the peace and the word of Christ shape the life of a church? (3:15–17)
6. How can believers be more intentional in prayer and sharing the gospel? (4:2–6)

Lesson Outline [This lesson was adapted from Mark Dever and John F. MacArthur Jr., *“The Message of Colossians,”* in *The Message of the New Testament: Promises Kept* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2005), 281–297.]

The dispute we have is this: whether God so radically changes individuals that we can rightly refer to them as born again, regenerated, and recipients of new life. This is the Christian claim, and the claim has been made for two thousand years. More than that, this is the Christian hope. I fear that in some of our nation’s current discussions, seeds are being sown that indirectly but deeply prejudice people against the hope that any significant change can occur in their lives. But this is exactly the outrageous claim we make as Christians: you can have a genuinely new life in Christ. Though many imperfections and difficulties remain, we believe the new life we have in Christ is so different from what we had before that we can understand why the Bible uses radical images such as darkness to light and death to life. So great is the change in us.

Of course, many people make errors when thinking about this new life in Christ. Some regard it as a matter of self-effort. Others present it as a life of private religious devotion and mystical contemplation, a life lived for, by, and of the self. Others regard it as quite the opposite, believing the new life is entirely a matter of visible actions such as attending church, observing religious customs, or serving the poor and needy. Of course, many others today deny that change is needed, or, if it is needed, that it is impossible. We cannot tackle all these issues here, but amid these discussions I would like to lay down some biblical teaching about this key Christian idea of *new life*. To do that, we turn to Paul’s letter to the Colossians.

INTRODUCING COLOSSIANS

We do not know exactly what the situation was that prompted Paul to write this letter. It appears that after Paul preached the gospel in Ephesus on one of his journeys, an individual named Epaphras carried the gospel message from Ephesus up the Lycus Valley to a little town called Colosse. Epaphras, apparently a native of Colosse (4:12), appears to have become a Christian through Paul’s ministry while away from home. He then returned to his native town to spread the gospel (1:7). Sometime thereafter, situations arose in Colosse that confused Epaphras and sent him back to his first teacher for further instruction. Paul then sent a letter

back up the Lycus Valley to the churches meeting there, particularly to a church meeting in the town of Colosse. And this is what we have as the letter to the Colossians.

Colosse was no Jerusalem, Rome, Athens, Corinth, or Ephesus, and we have no record of Paul ever visiting Colosse. When the letter was written, Colosse was a middling-sized town located on a main road. After the New Testament period, however, a new road was laid farther to the west, which took Colosse off the traveler's path. The town then declined in numbers, eventually becoming entirely depopulated.

The wonderful letter Paul writes to the church in Colosse is composed of four short chapters, and you can read it out loud in fifteen to twenty minutes. In chapter 1, Paul tells the Colossians about his prayers for them, about the person and work of Christ, and about the mission Christ has given him to preach the gospel to people like the Colossians. In chapter 2, Paul contrasts the Christian gospel with other ideas that might tempt this young church. The power of Christ's gospel, he says, can be seen in the changed lives of those who follow Christ. Those who have become captive to false philosophies find themselves unable to restrain sensual indulgence. In chapter 3, Paul reminds the Colossians of the mind-set and the behavior they should adopt as Christians. Then in chapter 4, he sends news and greetings. Colossians describes the new life we have in Christ as Christians. Therefore, we will use this letter to survey a few important aspects of this new life, even amid the confused discussions about whether true change is even possible.

NEW LIFE BEGINS AND ENDS WITH _____

The first thing to be said about this new life shared by Paul and these Colossians is that it begins and ends with God. In other words, it is given *by* God. And it is lived *for* and *with* God.

Given by God

The source of our new life is God. Paul begins the letter by praying, "We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, because we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus" (1:3–4a). Paul thanks God because he knows God is the one who gives faith. It is also God who strengthens faith (1:11), who qualifies us to share in the inheritance of the saints in the kingdom of light (1:12), who rescues us from the dominion of darkness and brings us into the kingdom of the Son he loves (1:13) and who redeems and forgives (1:14). All this is the work of God: qualifying, rescuing, bringing, redeeming, forgiving, and strengthening. If you are a Christian, where do you think your new life came from? Do you imagine you created it out of your wit and resources, using bits of traditions, a few wise sayings, and a dash of religious optimism, like some sort of religious stew? That is not what Paul presents in this letter. The new life he describes is no more self-generated than our physical life is self-generated. New life is a gift from God.

Lived for God

Not only is new life from God, it should be lived for God. Now, it may take a moment to get your mind around this idea if this is the first time you have thought about it. Yet that's what

Paul prays in 1:10: “And we pray this in order that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and may please him in every way.” He asks for lives “worthy of the Lord.” What a phrase! And why should we live such lives? Not to please our parents, our pastors, or even ourselves, but to “please him in every way.” God’s pleasure should be our delight, our joy, our motive. It should be our unswerving purpose, not because we must but because we may. Christ invites us to stop delighting supremely in ourselves, and to begin delighting supremely in him...Understanding that the new life God gives us is ultimately for himself—so that we may please him in every way—helps us to be more honest when reading Scripture. So this new life God gives is given by him and for him.

Lived with God

Does the Bible really teach that we can have a relationship with God? According to Paul, a relationship *with* God is precisely what characterizes our new lives as Christians. This new life begins when we are “reconciled” to God through Christ. We have already seen that God has qualified, rescued, brought, redeemed, and forgiven us (1:12–14). And notice where he has brought us: to the kingdom of the Son he loves (1:13). In 1:20, Paul says that through the Son, God was pleased “to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.” In essence, our new life *is* a being-reconciled-to-God. It is having our relationship with our Creator restored.

You and I were originally created to have such a relationship with God. We were created “by him and for him” (1:16). But we threw our relationship with God away for sin instead. “Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior” (1:21), Paul says to those who are now Christians. Think about these words graphically. First, we were “alienated,” that is, we were made aliens. We were to God what green beings from outer space with antennas are to us. Our sin made us strange to him. Worse yet, we were “enemies.” Our thoughts opposed him. Our hearts worked overtime to avoid him and slander him. This evil behavior, obviously, set us apart from him. It excluded us from his presence.

“But now,” Paul writes gloriously in 1:22, “he has reconciled you by Christ’s physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation.” If we are Christians, God has reconciled and restored our relationship with him. How? By Christ’s physical death. To what end? To present us blameless in his sight!...The new life we have in Christ is characterized most fundamentally by our restoration to the presence of God with joy and acceptance and love.

NEW LIFE INVOLVES _____

The new life begins and ends with God, yet it dramatically involves our own lives as well. Paul describes at least three ways this is true.

Changed Radically

This new life radically changes what we are. A great reversal takes place, which Paul writes about succinctly in chapter 2: “When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your sinful nature, God made you alive with Christ” (2:13). If you are a Christian, this describes your experience. You were dead, and now you are alive. Paul writes about our death-to-life transformation again at the beginning of chapter 3... Specific instructions then follow: “Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry” (3:5). Then several verses later: “now you must rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips” (3:8). And so on. The Colossian Christians were once dead *in* sin, and now they are to be dead *to* sin. Their previous connection with sin and sinning was evidence of their spiritual death. Now their struggle to separate themselves from sin gives evidence of their new life. Their orientation, inclination, first love, disposition, affection, hearts, and minds have been changed. So their behavior must change too.

This new life changes us radically. Paul gives a small picture of what the new life looks like in 3:12: “Therefore, as God’s chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience.” If you have not experienced this radical change in your life, I testify that you can. You can have radically new life—at the root! And without such a change, you cannot be saved...

Contested Dramatically

Not that this new life is easy! I do not mean to suggest that. Our new life will face rivals and competitors from within and without (2 Cor. 7:5).

From without: empty promises. For starters, Paul points to the empty promises of worldly philosophies. In chapter 2, Paul exhorts these Colossian Christians, “See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ” (Col. 2:8). Behind these philosophies are “fine-sounding arguments” (2:4). Scholars have written many books trying to figure out what these arguments were. Whatever they were, Paul regards them as dangerous because they encouraged people to rely on human wisdom and not on Christ. Paul therefore exhorts his readers to continue in Christ: “So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live in him, rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness” (2:6–7). These empty philosophies do not root and build up saints in the Lord. Only living in Christ can do that.

Others, perhaps, are attracted by less obscure alternatives. It appears that some people in Colosse were teaching that submitting to a list of rules completes faith in Christ, and that God’s full revelation was reserved for Sabbath-keepers or keepers of food laws. Some insisted that non-Jewish converts to Christ should be circumcised. Would Paul go for that? Affirm his Jewish heritage and incorporate new aspects from Christ? No way! In 2:11, Paul insists that the Colossians are circumcised in Christ already in every way that matters: “In him you were also

circumcised, in the putting off of the sinful nature, not with a circumcision done by the hands of men but with the circumcision done by Christ.” Christ had freed them from the law’s demands. They must not go backwards, from faith in Christ’s righteousness to a sad attempt to manufacture their own.

Religious forms and regulations do not produce new life in God. Even in the Old Testament, the regulations given through Moses merely pointed to Christ’s new age. These false worshipers, however, “[delight] in false humility and the worship of angels” (2:18). They go “into great detail” about what they have seen (2:18). They proudly demand, “Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!” (2:21). They craft their own worship, confess humility with their mouths, and treat their bodies harshly (2:23). But do not be fooled, says Paul. Christ plus anything is no Christ. Rely on Christ entirely or not at all... Apparently, Paul was aware of the fatal tendency to downplay Christ, and so he prepares for the discussion of Christ’s competitors in chapter 2 by gloriously displaying Christ in chapter 1. As much as any passage of Scripture, the famous hymn of chapter 1 sticks in the throats of all who downplay Christ. (See 1:15-20)

From within: the old self. In addition to rivals from without, the Christian faces rivals from within, and the competition is intense. As we saw several moments ago, Paul addresses the heart, mind, and will in chapter 3. He exhorts his readers to set their hearts on things above (3:1), and then he tells them to do the same with their minds (3:2). Their hearts have to die to this world. Their minds have to get out of the gutters. And all this involves struggle. But the Christian’s motivation is clear: “For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God” (3:3). The temptations of the old self continue, but the Christian should see the folly of these things. The Christian is dead to this world. You can play with dead things, but why? Your worldly life has died. Your new life is now *from, for, and with* Christ!

Even though the old self has “died” (3:3), Christians must continue to “put to death” the “earthly nature” that is still alive and kicking (3:5). God has changed us radically, therefore Christians must live radically changed lives. (See 3:5-11) The earthly nature, the old self, continues to make threats against our allegiance to Christ. It shows up in sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires, and greed...Surely, our day is no different from Paul’s. The old way of life can feel like “second nature” to the Christian. Anger, rage, malice, slander, filthy language, lying, ethnic hatred, prejudice, and bigotry are not unknown among us. But a Christian must rid himself or herself of these things, Paul says. A Christian must put on a different kind of clothing (3:12–17), which we will look at momentarily.

In this world, our new life in Christ does not have a monopoly. It faces competition for the mind, heart, and will. Christians historically have therefore referred to the church in two parts: the church militant and the church triumphant. The church triumphant is the church in heaven, delivered from sins, enjoying God’s presence, made pure and holy *in fact*. The church militant is the church on earth, struggling still with sin, beset by difficulties within and without, declared perfectly holy in Christ, showing that holiness in increasing measure through the work of Christ’s Spirit in and among its members. The old nature is strong. It is sort of the Mr. Hyde to our new nature’s Dr. Jekyll. Only in our story—and this is crucial—the good guy, Dr. Jekyll, wins!

Lasting Permanently

This new life will not be defeated. Whether someone perseveres in Christ to the end, therefore, becomes an essential component for discerning whether he or she truly has Christ's new life. The new life that is real does last. How does it last? We fight to endure, trusting that God will preserve us. So Paul exhorts his readers to "continue." (See 1:22–23) We will be presented holy in God's sight if we continue. So continue. Paul commands the same thing in chapter 2: "just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live in him" (2:6). And then he prays that the Colossians would have "great endurance and patience" (1:11)...

Real believers endure by striving to endure. Yet real believers are ultimately kept through no effort of their own. When we fail to understand the necessity and nature of perseverance, our understanding of the new life in Christ can lurch in one of two dangerous directions. On the one hand, we can begin flippantly taking it for granted as a onetime event. On the other hand, we can begin trembling in fear, thinking it will be a grueling test of our own mettle and righteousness. The first danger produces a church full of nominal Christians—people who are Christians in name only and who will tell you again and again they "prayed the prayer," even though their life looks no different from a non-Christian's. The second danger produces a church full of legalistic people who are blindly sure of their own righteousness. The doctrine of the perseverance of all true Christians, with which Paul sprinkles this little letter, acts as a great protection against both of these errors.

So, on the one hand, if you notice a tendency in yourself to take comfort in the fact that you prayed the prayer once, and if you notice that you do this especially to excuse acts of deliberate sinfulness, pray that God would help you to see the great challenge these verses (1:22–23; 2:6) give you. God calls you to continue in your faith, established and firm, not moved from the hope held out in the gospel, throughout your whole life! Your struggle is not over until the last breath leaves your body. Rethink what spiritual anesthetics you have passed out to others if you have told them otherwise.

On the other hand, if you notice a tendency in yourself to think only about your own sins or, conversely, your own righteousness, Paul offers great grounds for hope. As we saw earlier, God has undertaken the project of restoring you to himself. And if he has undertaken it, you can be sure he will finish it, as Paul promised the Philippians (1:6). The doctrine of perseverance should also give us charity for others. Whether those "others" are paragons of virtue or have fallen so far they must be excluded from the church, God, if he is savingly at work in them, will bring his work to completion. He will not stop!...So this new life begins and ends with God, but it also deeply involves ourselves. We really change, we really struggle, and we really persevere, with, as Paul says, "all his energy, which so powerfully works in me" (1:29).

NEW LIFE INVOLVES LIVING FOR _____

Finally, new life involves living for others. Notice that in the Bible, and specifically in this letter to the Colossians, the new life is no mere inner feeling of transforming ecstasy with God, where

people see us with closed eyes, a seraphic smile, and the glow of gentle, enraptured piety. When lived out, this new life will always mix our lives up with others.

Exemplified By Paul

Paul presents himself as an example of the new life we are called to in Christ. He continually involves himself in the lives of others.

He writes to them. Just look at this letter! He has not just written some nice, flowery Sunday school lessons. He has written difficult words of warning and rebuke. He has written words of encouragement and instruction and guidance, even though he sits in prison.

He thanks God for them. “We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you,” he says at the letter’s beginning (1:3). Why does he thank God for them? “Because we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love you have for all the saints—the faith and love that spring from the hope that is stored up for you in heaven and that you have already heard about in the word of truth, the gospel that has come to you” (1:4–6). In short, he thanks God for the faith, hope, and love that the Colossians have been given in Christ through the gospel. Is this what you thank God for in the lives of other Christians?

He prays for them. In 1:9, Paul admits, “since the day we heard about you, we have not stopped praying for you.” And what does he pray? That God would fill them “with the knowledge of his will through all spiritual wisdom and understanding.” He unceasingly asks God to grow them in faith. Again, is this what you pray for in the lives of other Christians?

He preaches to and suffers for them. In his preaching and suffering, Paul fulfills the commission God has given him to build the church (1:24–25). Paul writes this letter for the same reason he preaches. He loves these people, and God has called him to instruct them and to suffer for them. So he labors through beatings, imprisonments, arguments, angry words, stones, and challenges to his integrity and his sanity. And he rejoices in such service!

He desires their perfection and maturity. (See 1:28). Paul does not merely declare his love. He labors in his love. And this love for Christ and for them pushes him forward with this hope fixed in his mind: presenting them perfect in Christ. Paul writes to these Colossians; he thanks God for them; he prays for them; he suffers for them; and he has never even met them! They had learned the gospel from Epaphras, remember? That is amazing. Paul has a love that pours itself out for others. Should we then praise Paul? Or, conversely, should we sit back discouraged, thinking we will never measure up to Paul the apostle? No, Paul’s new life began and ended with God. God did it. Real change is real, because God is merciful and mighty.

Lived Out in Every Sphere

What “others” should our new lives pour themselves into? What spheres of life are affected?

The home. Toward the end of chapter 3, Paul addresses the different members of a household (3:18–21). Notice the idea that is repeated twice—“as is fitting in the Lord” and “for this pleases the Lord.” As mentioned earlier, that is why we have this new life—to please the Lord.

The workplace. The new life will also transform our approach to the workplace (3:22–4:1). Paul addresses most of the employees of his day as “slaves,” or what we might call “servants” in our culture. As with his instructions for the home, he encourages them to remember what pleases the Lord. Work for Christ, he says. Masters, or employers, likewise, must be fair, remembering that God will judge them.

Everyplace. Consider finally Paul’s instructions to everyone (4:2–6). Your new life will make the most of *every* opportunity. Your new life is comprehensive. There are no pockets of your life that can be hidden from its effects. It should affect the way you treat everyone around you, in whatever circumstances. Similar to the advice he gives employees in 3:23, Paul says to you, me, and every Christian, “Whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him” (3:17).

Lived Out with One Another

Finally, this new life can be lived out only with one another. Consider the virtues Paul encourages Christians to wear (3:12–17). Compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience, forbearance, forgiveness, and above all love. Sounds like a nice list, doesn’t it? Maybe they give you a sort of sweet and religious feeling. You might want to put the words on a placard and hang them on the wall. But stop and think about it: for the most part, only bad circumstances require us to wear these virtues. The occasions in which they are required are really quite messy. When do you need to show compassion? When do you need to show kindness? What circumstances require you to demonstrate humility? Gentleness is appropriate in response to what? When do you need patience? What about forbearance? When is forgiveness needed? And love?

Notice that these virtues, and caring for one another generally, are coupled with Paul’s instruction to “teach and admonish one another.” In other words, exercising compassion, kindness, humility, and so forth does not mean neglecting instruction. It is just the opposite: these virtues assume instruction is needed, and should be given when the conditions are appropriate. Yet we are not to offer instruction in a bitter or proud way, but with humility—“with gratitude in your hearts to God.” Notice, too, toward the very end of the letter, Paul promises to send Tychicus and Onesimus back to Colosse to share news and to encourage them (4:7–9).

Being born again and experiencing new life in Christ shows itself in how we live with our families, our friends, our colleagues, fellow church members, and even acquaintances. This new life does not consist merely of our private opinions, private practices of prayer, secret giving, and so forth, though Jesus clearly commends such private practices (Matt. 6:1–18). Living out the new life we have in Jesus Christ also involves giving ourselves for others, regardless of the responses we receive from them. They may imprison us. They may slander us. They may shrug

us off with indifference. But they must not stop us from living out our new lives in Christ of love toward them.

CONCLUSION

New life, according to the Bible, is from, for, and with God. It involves radical change in who and what we are. And it always involves us in the lives of others. Have you known that kind of change in your life? And don't simply think of what others might say of you. You might die today. What will you say to God? He knows the truth. Have you known that kind of change? Do you know the life that comes to those who know his Son?

Lesson 2 (4-19-26)

Welcome to the Family! (Colossians 1:1-8)

¹ Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother,

² To the saints and faithful brothers in Christ at Colossae:

Grace to you and peace from God our Father.

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

- Colossians 1:1-8 ESV

Summary

Despite the hardships of Paul's Roman imprisonment, the theme of thanksgiving saturates the letter. References to thanksgiving appear in every chapter (vv. 3–8; 2:7; 3:16–17; 4:2). The emphasis on thanksgiving is a powerful antidote to the legalism threatening the church. While legalism motivates people to serve and obey God in order to get some reward from God, thanksgiving motivates people to serve and obey God because of the enormous gift they have already received. Paul's petitions are always accompanied by expressions of gratitude. Here his prayer of thanksgiving focuses on the Colossians' faith and love. Faith in Jesus as God, Savior, and King is the requirement for salvation. Love for others is the automatic result of salvation. Paul thanks God for the Colossians' faith and love, rather than congratulating them for it, because he recognizes that both faith and love are gracious gifts from God (Php 1:29). Paul later describes this love as prompted by the Spirit (Col 1:8).

Paul summarizes the gospel that was spreading throughout the world as a message about God's grace. This description seems aimed at the legalism threatening the church since such legalism emphasizes human effort and neglects divine grace. Epaphras was the one who introduced the gospel to the Colossians. If Epaphras had been converted under Paul's ministry (probably in nearby Ephesus during Paul's third missionary journey), then sometime later Paul sent Epaphras to Colossae as his representative.¹

¹ Charles L. Quarles, "Colossians," in *The NIV Grace and Truth Study Bible*, ed. R. Albert Mohler Jr. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2021), 1654.

Observation Questions (What does the text say?)

1. Who is identified as the author of this letter, and who is with him?
2. How are the believers in Colossae described in verse 2?
3. What specific reasons does Paul give for thanking God in verses 3–4?
4. What three Christian virtues appear together in verses 4–5?
5. According to verse 5, where is the believers' hope located?
6. How is the gospel described as working in the world (v. 6)?
7. What does Paul say the Colossians have "heard" and "understood" about God's grace?
8. Who is Epaphras, and what roles does he play according to verses 7–8?
9. What report does Epaphras bring to Paul about the Colossian believers?

Interpretation Questions (What does the text mean?)

1. Why might Paul begin the letter by emphasizing thanksgiving rather than correction?
2. How are faith, love, and hope connected in this passage?
3. What does it mean that the gospel is "bearing fruit and increasing"?
4. Why is it significant that the gospel is growing "in the whole world" as well as among the Colossians?
5. What does Paul imply about the source of genuine Christian love in verse 8?
6. How does Paul's description of Epaphras establish credibility and trust in his teaching?
7. What does this passage suggest about how believers come to understand God's grace?

Application Questions (How should this change us?)

1. What evidence of faith, love, and hope is visible in your life right now?
2. How does knowing your hope is "laid up in heaven" shape how you handle present struggles?
3. In what ways is the gospel bearing fruit in your life—or where might growth be stalled?
4. Who has played an Epaphras-like role in helping you understand the gospel?
5. How can your love for others better reflect love that comes from the Spirit?
6. How might gratitude for God's work in others change the way you speak about fellow believers?
7. What steps can you take this week to live more intentionally in light of the gospel's growth and power?
8. Was there anything from last week's sermon that was especially challenging? Convicting? Encouraging?

Lesson Outline [This lesson was adapted from R. Scott Pace, "*Colossians*," in *Exalting Jesus in Colossians and Philemon*, ed. David Platt, Daniel L. Akin, and Tony Merida, *Christ-Centered Exposition Commentary* (Nashville, TN: Holman Reference, 2021), 3–13.]

The personalized approach Paul takes in each of his letters emphasizes the importance of his greeting and its contents. Since the apostle was not responsible for planting the church at Colossae, his lack of personal rapport and familiarity required a more affirming disposition (2:1–2). The tone of Paul’s letter to the Colossians was one of encouraging exhortation, and his epistolary greeting and expression of thanksgiving typify his demeanor toward them. Although his goal was ultimately corrective, and the Christological issues facing the church were of the highest doctrinal significance, he did not use a stern rebuke and confrontational approach as he did with the Galatians (Gal 1:6–9; 3:1). Instead, he chose a more personable and winsome tone that reflected his genuine enthusiasm for the Colossians’ faith, and he lovingly urged them to progress further in their understanding and devotion to Christ.

In the early 1990s, one of the most famous advertising slogans was, “Membership has its privileges.” This well-known mantra was promoted by American Express in an effort to elevate the perceived status of its cardholders and to invite those who could qualify to benefit from its exclusive rewards. Their advertisement piqued the interest of those who were unfamiliar with their program and celebrated the status of those who were already involved.

While they may have coined that particular phrase in their campaign, the concept itself was nothing new. In fact, the apostle Paul had described the same reality centuries before credit cards or country clubs even existed. But the membership he described was not to a financial entity; it was membership in a family. This membership is not reserved for those with elite status, it cannot be earned based on merit, and its rewards are not calculated by an earthly standard. But it does come with immeasurable benefits. The opening section in this letter describes the ultimate membership offer that God extends to all of us. In its original context, Paul’s greeting served to welcome the Colossians to the family of faith, to celebrate the divine privileges they now shared, and to inspire their faithful service in the gospel mission. For followers of Jesus Christ, the opening to Colossians provides the same contemporary purpose, as it reminds us of three important spiritual truths.

As Members of God’s Family, We Have Reasons to Be _____ (1:1–2)

Paul’s personal introduction to the church at Colossae follows the form of a typical epistolary greeting. He announces himself, along with Timothy, as the author, states his credentials, identifies the recipients, and extends a personal salutation. The broader audience of “the saints in Christ” indicates the public nature of the letter and Paul’s intention to address the church as a whole (v. 2, cf. 4:16). But in speaking to God’s family of faith, he strategically uses the standard elements of his greeting to encourage them with realities we all can celebrate.

We Should Celebrate Our Personal Callings (1:1)

Paul introduces himself as “an apostle of Christ Jesus.” This parallels many of his other letters (Rom 1:1; 1 Cor 1:1; 2 Cor 1:1; Gal 1:1; Eph 1:1; Col 1:1; 1 Tim 1:1; 2 Tim 1:1; Titus 1:1), but it is of particular importance for the Colossians for two related reasons: their lack of personal familiarity with Paul (2:1) and the crucial nature of the doctrinal issues he planned to address. His authority as an apostle—one who had encountered the resurrected Lord (Acts 1:21–22; cf.

1 Cor 15:7–9), one who received his message directly from Christ (Gal 1:15–17), and one who was recognized among the authorized church leaders (Gal 2:6–9; cf. Acts 9:27–28)—serves as the basis by which he will assertively declare the doctrinal truth regarding Christ and will convincingly refute the false teachers.

While Paul is establishing his authority and exerting influence, he is not boasting of his prominence and exhibiting arrogance. The modifying phrases for his identity as an apostle, “of Christ Jesus” and “by God’s will,” emphasize Christ’s ultimate authority over his life and God’s grace in his appointment (cf. 1 Cor 15:9–10; 1 Tim 1:12–15). The apostle also humbly includes “Timothy our brother” as a co-sender of the letter. Similarly, later he elevates the status of Epaphras, “our dearly loved fellow servant,” as a “faithful minister of Christ” despite his lack of any formal position (1:7).

Through Paul’s introductory testimony we are reminded that God has a plan for each of us. Though your position may not have an official title or status, the Lord calls each one of us to serve according to his will for our lives. As a follower of Christ and participant in his kingdom, every believer has significance and purpose because each has been called by God individually. Whether as pastors, schoolteachers, public servants, or dedicated employees, we members of his kingdom family can celebrate our personal callings!

We Should Celebrate Our Spiritual Community (1:2)

Although our individual callings can be celebrated, Paul’s greeting also emphasizes the communal nature of our salvation and the joy it should produce. He addresses the believers “at Colossae” as “saints in Christ” and as “faithful brothers and sisters” (v. 2). Paul uses the term *saints* to speak of their positional status “in Christ” as God’s holy ones (cf. 1:4, 12, 26) who are distinguished from the world and literally set apart. He also refers to them as “faithful brothers and sisters,” highlighting the familial relationship they share “in Christ” and their persevering devotion.

Paul extends his customary greeting, “grace ... and peace,” to them, which further defines their identity through their relationship with “God” as “our Father.” As recipients of God’s grace, they now enjoy peace with God and stand in right relationship with him (Rom 5:1–2). Therefore, Paul commends these ongoing, sacred gifts as a prayerful greeting and reminder of the gospel basis that unites them as God’s people.

One of the most glorious truths about our salvation is the reality of our acceptance into God’s family. Because of his great love for us (1 John 3:1), and through our personal faith in Jesus (John 1:12), we are adopted as his children (Rom 8:15; Gal 4:4–7) and enjoy a special relationship with God as our heavenly Father. Our common faith in Christ also unites us together as “brothers and sisters,” as a family who loves and supports one another. Additionally, as members of God’s spiritual family, we are joined together as members of Christ’s body (Col 1:18, 24; cf. Eph 4:4–6) who collectively serve Christ and strengthen one another (Col 3:12–17; cf. Eph 4:15–16).

Paul's greeting in his sister letter to the Ephesians relishes the countless blessings that our adoption entitles every believer to receive (Eph 1:3–14). This same tone of celebration marks the apostle's opening remarks to the Colossians. The familial language throughout these two introductory verses stresses the spiritual community that the believers in Colossae now constitute and the eternal community to which they now belong. As contemporary Christians and members of God's eternal family, we share these same blessings and should relish our spiritual community as we encourage one another to fulfill our spiritual calling. We certainly have reasons to be glad!

As Members of God's Family, We Have Reasons to Be _____ (1:3–5A)

Paul transitions from his introductory greeting to an intercessory prayer. His prayer for the Colossians is twofold; it focuses on praising God for their salvation (vv. 3–8) and petitioning God for their sanctification (vv. 9–14). Paul's appeal on their behalf also serves a dual purpose for his readers as it is both instructive and informative.

By way of example, his prayer instructs us how we should pray for others. The frequency of his prayers for the Colossians is implied by the participial phrase, "when we pray for you," and by the modifying adverb, "always." These terms imply a regular pattern of intercession that consistently includes thanksgiving on their behalf (cf. Eph 5:20). The focus of Paul's prayers for the church is the one to whom he directs his gratitude: "God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ." This phrase is of particular importance as it establishes a baseline for the Christology of the entire letter.⁴ Paul directs thanksgiving to God the Father (cf. 1:12; 3:17) while asserting the lordship of Jesus Christ who reveals the Father (1:15) and in whom "the entire fullness of God's nature dwells bodily" (2:9; cf. 1:19).

By way of expression, his prayer informs our understanding of redemption and provokes our heartfelt gratitude to God. Thanksgiving is a consistent theme throughout Paul's letter to the Colossians. It is mentioned numerous times—at least once in every chapter (1:3, 12; 2:7; 3:15, 16, 17; 4:2). The first portion of his prayer (vv. 3–5) is an expression of thanksgiving that reminded them, and informs us, of multiple reasons believers have to be grateful.

We Give Thanks for Our Saving Faith (1:3–4a)

The primary basis for Paul's gratitude was their testimony of "faith in Christ Jesus" (v. 4). This phrase certainly identifies Jesus as the sole object of their saving faith (Calvin, *Galatians–Philemon*, 138), but it primarily indicates that their faith abides and operates within the sphere or realm of Christ's lordship (v. 3; Moule, *Colossians and Philemon*, 49; see also O'Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, 11). This corresponds with his later encouragement for them to "remain grounded and steadfast in the faith" (1:23; cf. 2:5, 7). Paul was thankful for their saving faith in Christ and that it was continuing to operate as a living and active faith under the reign of King Jesus. The vitality and vibrancy of their faith resulted in a testimony that had made its way to Paul, and he was grateful.

The Colossians had received “the word of truth, the gospel” (v. 5) and were trusting exclusively in the person and work of Christ for salvation. As a result, their lives had been transformed. But Paul’s prayer of gratitude did not congratulate and celebrate the Colossians; it directed praise and thanksgiving to God. In the same way, we should rejoice over the gift of our salvation through faith, giving thanks to the Lord for “his indescribable gift” in Christ (2 Cor 9:15). In addition, this prayer also encourages us to maintain a vibrant faith that continues to live for Christ in submission to his lordship.

We Give Thanks for Our Sincere Love (1:4b)

The saving faith of the Colossians had become evident through their “love ... for all the saints.” Paul uses the Greek term *agapē* to identify the sacrificial love of the Colossians that reflected the sacrificial love of Christ. As those who had been transformed by the Savior’s love, they directed that love toward others (cf. 1 John 4:10–11). Specifically, Paul commended their love “for all the saints” (Col 1:4). This phrase does not limit their love by excluding others in a preferential or prejudicial manner. Rather, it highlights the indiscriminate nature of their love, “for all,” and its particular expression toward God’s people, “the saints” (cf. Gal 6:10).

Love for others is the evidence of a redeemed heart (cf. 1 John 3:14; 4:7–8) and the distinguishing mark of Christ’s followers (John 13:34–35). Later in his letter Paul challenges the Colossians to, above all else, “put on love, which is the perfect bond of unity” (3:14). The sincere affection believers share for one another emanates from the undeserved love we have received in Christ. It unites us together and provides the strength and support we all need. Paul was grateful for their sacrificial devotion, and likewise, we should give thanks for the sincere love we share as members of God’s family.

We Give Thanks for Our Secure Hope (1:5a)

For believers, the faith and love we exhibit spring from the hope we have in Christ. The construction of verses 3–5a explains the Colossians’ “faith” and “love” as by-products of their “hope.” Hope is the stimulating source for their abiding faith and active love. The hope Paul speaks of here is more than a presiding disposition of the heart or attitude of optimistic anticipation (cf. Rom 8:24). Here, “hope” is referring to the objective reality of that which is “reserved for [us] in heaven” by God (cf. 1 Pet 1:4–5) and has been revealed in “the gospel” (Col 1:5; cf. 1:23). Christ is the personification of this hope, “the hope of glory” (1:27), and abides in us, resides in heaven, and will one day reveal our hope when he appears (3:1–4; cf. Titus 2:13).

As with the previous two virtues of the Colossians, “faith” and “love,” Paul is previewing a subject he will reintroduce later in his letter by way of further exhortation and practical implication (1:23, 27). He also may be countering potential arguments from the false teachers and the doctrinal heresy plaguing the Colossians as it relates to heavenly encounters, “the worship of angels” (2:18; Pao, *Colossians and Philemon*, 53). But primarily, Paul is reminding them (and us!) of the infinite significance of our hope as the foundational anchor for our souls (Heb 6:19–20). Through this hope God supplies us with joy and peace as we trust in him (Rom 15:13). Because of its substance and its certainty (Rom 5:5), we can live with confidence and contentment as we give thanks for our secure hope in Christ.

The sum total of Paul's gratitude for the Colossians unites the three cords of Christian virtue—faith, love, and hope. These three abiding qualities are not temporal like our gifts and abilities (1 Cor 13:13). They are the motivation and the means for our work, labor, and perseverance in Christ (1 Thess 1:3). They unite us as we devote ourselves to drawing near to him and to encouraging one another (Heb 10:22–24; cf. 1 Pet 1:21–22). This familiar trinity of Christian virtues summarizes why we as members of God's family have countless reasons to be grateful.

As Members of God's Family, We Have Reasons to Be _____ (1:5B–8)

While our reasons to be glad and grateful draw us together, Paul is quick to explain that they also send us out. Our identity in Christ is inextricably linked to his kingdom agenda, and as members of God's family, we have reasons to be going. In his prayer Paul acknowledges the life-changing experience of the Colossians that he ultimately intends to affirm with his letter to them. But imbedded within their conversion is the message, "the gospel," and the messenger, "Epaphras," that will serve as the impetus for them to continue to carry the mission forward. By recounting their experience, Paul provides two important reasons that compel all believers to be going.

The Truth of God Is the Gospel Message (1:5b–6)

As they consider the hope that transformed their lives, he reminds them of their initial encounter with Christ. The phrase, "You have already heard about this hope" (v. 5), most likely refers to their hearing and reception of the good news of Jesus from Epaphras (vv. 6–7). Paul summarizes the message they received as "the word of truth, the gospel" (v. 5). Paul uses "the word" multiple times in the letter with various modifiers that all emphasize the supreme and salvific nature of the gospel (1:25; 3:16). The "word of truth" positions the gospel in contrast to the false teaching of the Colossian heresy (O'Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, 12). But perhaps most importantly, these verses establish the content of the gospel as the truth of salvation (cf. Eph 1:13).

The construction of the corresponding phrases in verses 5 and 6 parallels "the gospel" with "God's grace." This synonymous use highlights the unmerited nature of our salvation. The gospel and the grace of God are inextricably intertwined (Gal 1:6). In contrast to the works-oriented Colossian heresy, God's gracious gift of salvation cannot be earned and is entirely undeserved. The Colossians had "heard" and understood the gospel of grace, they embraced it by faith, and as a result their lives had been transformed.

Paul reminded the Colossians of the gospel message they received in order to compel them to spread the good news. In the same way, the gracious and glorious nature of our salvation should humble us and motivate us to share the gospel. Our appreciation of God's grace is directly proportional to the understanding of our need for it. And when we are mindful of our own undeserving nature, we will be more aware of the desperate need of the lost world around us to hear the truth of God that is the gospel message.

The Truth of God Is a Global Message (1:6–8)

The universal need for salvation, combined with the universal availability of God's grace, means the gospel message is also a global message. Paul encouraged the Colossians that the truth of God was "bearing fruit and growing all over the world" in the same way that it was among them (v. 6). In contrast to the local delusion of the Colossian heresy, the power of the gospel was unlimited in its impact. The phrase "bearing fruit" emphasizes the reproductive nature of the gospel, and "growing" refers to its maturing capability (Melick, *Philippians, Colossians, Philemon*, 198). Paul uses the same terms in his intercession for the Colossians (1:10). In essence, he was praying for the effects of the gospel to be realized in their personal lives as well. The good news of Jesus was transforming lives everywhere, and Paul encouraged them that their testimonies had become part of a gospel wave that was sweeping around the world. They were a part of a global movement!

In celebrating with the Colossians, Paul also reminded them of how they had received the gospel. Multiple phrases in these verses emphasize the means by which the good news had reached them. They had "heard" it (vv. 5, 6), it had "come to" them (v. 6), and they had "learned" it from Epaphras (v. 7). More than likely Epaphras was a Pauline convert who was responsible for starting the Colossian church (ibid., 198–99). A native Colossian (4:12), he had been instrumental in evangelizing the Lycus Valley, including the flourishing churches of Hierapolis and Laodicea (4:13; O'Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, 15). He was a close associate of Paul, a "fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus" (Phlm 23); and here in Colossians 1:7, he is described as Paul and Timothy's "dearly loved fellow servant." Like the co-senders of the letter, Epaphras was a surrendered bond servant operating under the lordship of Christ. Paul goes on to describe Epaphras as "a faithful minister of Christ." The term *minister* is often used to speak of Paul's associates, specifically in his missionary activity (ibid.). As a devoted follower of Christ, Epaphras was fulfilling his responsibility by sharing the good news and was therefore considered "faithful."

Epaphras was God's instrument that he used to reach the Colossians with the gospel. This reminds us of his designed plan for us to carry the gospel message to the nations. As Paul charged the Romans,

How, then, can they call on him they have not believed in? And how can they believe without hearing about him? And how can they hear without a preacher? And how can they preach unless they are sent? As it is written: How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news. (Rom 10:14–15)

As followers of Christ, we have the responsibility to share the good news that we received through the faithful testimony of others. As citizens of God's kingdom, it is our duty and our privilege. As members of God's family, our joint efforts in the mission of our Lord allow us to celebrate the "love" we have for one another (v. 8; cf. v. 4) as we share his love with others. This divine love is a manifestation of "the Spirit" (v. 8) that unites us and epitomizes the reasons we have to be going.

Conclusion

Paul begins his letter to the Colossians by welcoming the young church to the family of faith. He greets them with joy and enthusiastically reassures them of their irrevocable status as members of God's beloved people. In doing so, he also reminds them of the blessings, privileges, and responsibilities they have inherited. Paul's prayerful introduction assures us that we as modern Christ-followers are also recipients of these same glorious truths. As members of God's family, we have reasons to be glad, reasons to be grateful, and reasons to be going!

Perhaps the greatest truth for us as members of God's family is found in the rich theology of the passage. The presence of the triune God in these verses cannot be overlooked, and its significance cannot be overstated. The individual references imply the doctrine of the Trinity, and their collective presence implies an important familial truth as well. Through the mention of each divine member—"God the Father" (vv. 3, 6), "our Lord Jesus Christ" (vv. 3, 4, 7), and "the Spirit" (v. 8)—we are reminded of the intimacy and fellowship God intends for us to share as members of his family. The interpersonal harmony of the Godhead, along with its functional unity, models the intimate bond and spiritual benefits we share as God's people.

Paul's companion letter to the Ephesians emphasizes these Trinitarian truths more explicitly (Eph 1:3–14), but their implicit reality in this passage reinforces the same practical implications we have seen throughout Paul's introduction to the Colossians. Our adoption by the Father should provoke us to praise him with gladness. Our redemption by the Son should motivate us to follow him with gratitude. And our conversion by the Spirit should empower us to obey him by going. There is no doubt about it: as members of God's family, we have everything we need and more. Indeed, membership does have its privileges!

Lesson 3 (4-26-26)

Discovering God's Will for Your Life (Colossians 1:9-14)

⁹ And so, from the day we heard, we have not ceased to pray for you, asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, ¹⁰ so as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him: bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God; ¹¹ being strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might, for all endurance and patience with joy; ¹² giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in light. ¹³ He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, ¹⁴ in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

- Colossians 1:9-14 ESV

Summary

Paul's prayer of thanksgiving is followed by a prayer of petition. This prayer asks God to fill believers with the knowledge of God's will. In this context, God's will refers to his moral will. Knowledge of God's moral will is key to living a life worthy of the Lord that pleases him in every way. Paul lists four characteristics of a life that pleases God: doing good, knowing God, depending on God's power, and giving thanks (vv. 10–12)...Though Paul had just emphasized the importance of knowing the will of God, he prays now that believers will grow in their knowledge of God himself. Knowing God results in knowing the will of God. Living a life that pleases God is only possible when believers recognize their own weaknesses and depend completely on God's power. A life truly pleasing to God is motivated by sincere gratitude to the Father for spiritual blessings. These blessings include inheritance of God's kingdom, rescue from slavery to the powers of darkness, transfer from the kingdom of the enemy to the kingdom of the Son, and forgiveness of sins.¹

Observation Questions (What does the text say?)

1. What does Paul say he and others have been doing since they heard about the Colossians (v. 9)?
2. What specific request does Paul make in his prayer for them?
3. What kind of knowledge does Paul want them to be filled with?
4. According to verse 10, what is the purpose of being filled with this knowledge?
5. What four results of a worthy walk are mentioned in verses 10–11?
6. What kind of power does Paul say believers are strengthened with (v. 11)?
7. What attitudes should accompany endurance and patience?
8. What reason is given for giving thanks to the Father (v. 12)?

¹ Charles L. Quarles, "Colossians," in *The NIV Grace and Truth Study Bible*, ed. R. Albert Mohler Jr. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2021), 1654.

9. From what has God delivered believers (v. 13)?
10. Into what has God transferred believers?
11. What two blessings are mentioned in verse 14 as being found in Christ?

Interpretation Questions (What does the text mean?)

1. What does it mean to be “filled with the knowledge of his will”?
2. How does spiritual knowledge lead to a “walk worthy of the Lord”?
3. Why is bearing fruit an important sign of spiritual growth?
4. What is the difference between human strength and the strength Paul describes in verse 11?
5. Why would endurance and patience require God’s power?
6. What does it mean to share in “the inheritance of the saints in light”?
7. What does the imagery of being “delivered” and “transferred” teach about salvation?
8. Why does Paul emphasize redemption and forgiveness in Christ?

Application Questions (How should this change us?)

1. How often do you pray for others the way Paul prays in this passage?
2. In what ways can you seek to grow in the knowledge of God’s will?
3. What would it look like in your daily life to “walk in a manner worthy of the Lord”?
4. Where do you most need God’s strength for endurance or patience right now?
5. How can remembering your salvation increase your gratitude toward God?
6. What evidence of spiritual fruit is present in your life?
7. How should the reality of redemption and forgiveness affect the way you view your past and your future?
8. Was there anything from last week’s sermon that was especially challenging? Convicting? Encouraging?

Lesson Outline [This lesson was adapted from *R. Scott Pace, “Colossians,” in Exalting Jesus in Colossians and Philemon, ed. David Platt, Daniel L. Akin, and Tony Merida, Christ-Centered Exposition Commentary (Nashville, TN: Holman Reference, 2021), 15–26.*]

When it comes to finding God’s will for our lives, many Christians...are easily convinced that God has designed a plan for us with lots of dead ends, as though we are mice making our way through some experimental maze. Whenever we come to a point where we don’t know which way to go, we are forced to reverse course and pursue a different path. This results in our wandering through life with uncertainty, second-guessing our decisions, feeling frustrated at every wrong turn, and hoping that somehow we will reach our destination and finally find God’s will.

But discerning God's will for our lives was never intended to be like working through *a maze*. He designed it to be *amazing*! So, how can we know with certainty what his will is for us? And what is involved in accomplishing his plan? Paul answers these questions through the second portion of his prayer for the Colossians. This passage teaches us how we can determine God's will for our lives, both individually and corporately, and the necessary steps to fulfill it.

We Must _____ the _____ of Finding God's Will (1:9)

Verses 9–14 make up the second stanza of Paul's prayer for the Colossians. The intercessory couplets share several parallel components, including thanksgiving (vv. 3, 12), prayer (vv. 3, 9), hearing (vv. 4, 9), bearing fruit, growing (vv. 6, 10), and saints (vv. 4, 12). These commonalities provide emphasis and highlight underlying themes, but the shared similarities do not eclipse the individual significance and progression within the second portion of Paul's prayer report (Pao, *Colossians and Philemon*, 64).

Paul's gratitude for their faith in the first section (vv. 3–8) spawns prayers of intercession on the Colossians' behalf—"For this reason" (v. 9)—in the second section. Because of their adoption into God's family and their simultaneous appointment into his service, Paul petitioned the Lord to reveal his will for them while praying that they would have the spiritual eyes necessary to discern it (cf. Eph 1:17–19). The apostle's concern did not stem from the rise of the false teaching; it had been consistent all along. He had not "stopped praying" for them "since the day" he had become aware of their faith.

Paul uses two verbs somewhat synonymously, "praying" and "asking," to describe his appeals on their behalf. The first term is the most common word Paul uses for prayers in his letters and is general in nature, describing the entirety of prayer life (Melick, *Philippians, Colossians, Philemon*, 200). The second term is more specific and focuses on a particular aspect of his prayers for the Colossians, namely, his intercession for their faithfulness and fulfillment of God's will. Paul's example teaches us that we are all in constant need of intercessory prayer that is not occasional or based on impending circumstances. His immediate and ongoing prayers for the Colossians confirm for us that God's will for our lives is a present reality more than a distant fairy tale. And ultimately, his petition demonstrates that our ability to know and follow God's will for our lives begins with and depends on prayer!

God's Will Has Been Disclosed (1:9)

One of the most significant aspects of Paul's prayer for the Colossians is found in the request itself. He prays that God's people "may be filled with the knowledge of his will" (v. 9). The implied truth underlying his petition is that it is actually possible for believers to know and understand God's will for their lives. If it were not a possibility, Paul would not have prayed this for the Colossian Christians.

When determining God's will for their lives, most people take a *discovery* approach. Like a tourist on a beach looking for lost treasures, they approach it with a spiritual metal detector,

sweeping the detector around as they wander through life hoping they stumble onto it. Yet when they uncover what they have found, they are often disappointed to see the equivalent of empty cans, tarnished objects, or worthless trinkets. This is like encountering a dead end in my maze, so they start the discovery cycle over again and hope the next beep will be it.

But God did not design his will to be found that way. He would not design a plan for our lives to hide it from us. Therefore, we must adopt more of a *discernment* approach. His will for us is outlined with clear instructions, so finding it is more like working with a treasure map than a metal detector. Instead of letting us aimlessly wander around, he gives us the specific steps that will lead us right to the place in life where we can enjoy the satisfying pleasures of knowing him and fully experiencing his will for our lives.

These steps are clearly prescribed in Scripture. In fact, at least five times in the New Testament God's will for people is explicitly stated. In 1 Timothy 2:3–4, the Bible teaches us that *it is God's will for us to be saved*. His desire for our salvation affirms his love for all people and his desire for their repentance and redemption (cf. 2 Pet 3:9). Spiritual conversion is the necessary first step in experiencing God's will for our lives. Paul's prayer acknowledges this in that our "knowledge of his will" is discerned with "wisdom and spiritual understanding" (v. 9). But it also demonstrates the reality that just like in the matter of salvation, God's further will and desire for our lives can be rejected.

Scripture also affirms that *it is God's will for us to be sanctified*. First Thessalonians 4:3 clearly asserts, "This is God's will, your sanctification." To be *sanctified* literally means to be "set apart" or to be "made holy." This is often understood as the process of our lives being increasingly conformed to the likeness of Jesus (Rom 8:29). God saves us so that we will become "holy and blameless ... before him" (Eph 1:4). Therefore, his will for our lives includes our spiritual growth as we are transformed by his grace (2 Cor 3:18). But the process of sanctification is only possible through another aspect of his will for our lives. The Bible makes clear that *it is God's will for us to be Spirit-filled*. Paul counseled the Ephesians to "understand what the Lord's will is," continuing: "Be filled by the Spirit" (Eph 5:17–18). While believers receive the Holy Spirit at salvation (Eph 1:13), yielding to his control and allowing him to permeate every area of our lives is an ongoing and deliberate process. Our moment-by-moment surrender to his abiding presence in our lives is an essential part of God's will for every believer.

As we faithfully live for Christ through the power of the Spirit, we also begin to recognize that *it is God's will for us to stand*. First Peter 2:15 teaches us, "It is God's will that you silence the ignorance of foolish people by doing good." Living in opposition to a world that is hostile to Christ and his ways requires believers to stand firm in our faith and devotion to him (1 Cor 15:58). This involves taking a stand against the enemy (Eph 6:11–14), standing up for the truth (Jude 1:3), and standing up for those who cannot stand for themselves (Jas 1:27).

Finally, his Word teaches us that *it is God's will for us to suffer*. This doesn't typically come to mind at graduation celebrations when we are being lavished with well-meaning assurances of the great lives God has for us. It certainly isn't what we visualize as we dream of God's best. But

1 Peter 4:19 tells us that believers “who suffer according to God’s will” should continue to trust the Lord and live by obedient faith. This type of suffering is the natural result of God’s people going against the grain—living counterculturally and experiencing resistance and opposition for their faith. Jesus prepared his followers with a warning about this hostility (John 15:18–21). Likewise, Paul instructed Timothy, “All who want to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted” (2 Tim 3:12). As followers of Christ, we are not guaranteed to be spared from suffering. In fact, we are assured of the opposite. When we live according to God’s will, we have to endure hardship for his name’s sake.

Because these five aspects of God’s will are clearly stated in the Scriptures, none of us have to blindly wonder, *What is God’s will for my life?* He has told us. Granted, these elements of God’s will do not answer specific questions about particular decisions. But these are even better! They are *clear*. We know with certainty that it is what God wants. They are *consistent*. They won’t change tomorrow even if our circumstances do. And they are *customized*. Even though they are universally true, they are personal instructions and are applicable for each one of us.

These spiritual realities of God’s will are also practical. When we devote ourselves to pursuing these things that God has clearly revealed, we will realize his more specific will for our lives. When we obey his clearly expressed desires and specific instructions, they ultimately translate into a knowledge and understanding of his intentions for our lives. By devoting ourselves entirely to those aspects of his will that he has plainly revealed, we will be able to discern the more personalized and specific plans he has for us. As a result, we can move forward with confidence, being convinced that it is possible to know and understand God’s will for our lives.

God’s Will Must Be Discerned (1:9)

While certain aspects of God’s will have been clearly revealed, more personal and particular elements must be discerned. Paul’s prayer for them to be “filled with the knowledge” of God’s will could point to a true knowledge and fullness in contrast to the Colossian heresy’s presumed distortion of knowledge (cf. 2:2–3; 3:10) and diminishing of Christ’s fullness (cf. 1:19, 25; 2:9–10). But the primary significance of this phrase and its complementary term is that believers can have a clear and certain understanding of God’s revealed will.

There are other significant aspects of Paul’s prayer regarding God’s will and our discernment that are important to note as well. First, it is a passive knowledge, “that you may be filled,” indicating that we must rely on the Lord to grant us understanding that we cannot obtain on our own. Second, God’s will is “spiritual” in nature and can only be discerned accordingly. Only believers have the capacity to recognize and discern spiritual truths that are disclosed and confirmed by the indwelling Spirit of God (1 Cor 2:10–14). And finally, the knowledge of his will goes beyond a casual or cognitive recognition and leads to a practical appropriation in “wisdom and ... understanding.” The wisdom from above is distinct from worldly understanding, and both are distinguished by their corresponding works (Jas 3:13–18).

Therefore, we must carefully discern God’s will through prayer and the guidance of his Spirit. We must confirm his will in accordance with his Word. And we can evaluate its validity for our

lives by the fruit it produces. Because God has graciously disclosed his will and provided everything we need to discern his will, through Paul's prayer in this passage, we can affirm the possibility of finding God's will for our lives.

We Must _____ the _____ of Following God's Will (1:10)

Paul's prayer for the Colossians not only reveals the possibility of knowing God's will; it also challenged them to embrace the purpose of following God's will. Too many times, especially in our culture, we can have a desire to know and follow the Lord's plan, but not for the right reason. If we are not careful, our motivations can subtly, and tragically, become selfish. Paul clearly explained to the Colossians that his desire for them to discern God's will was not for their own personal benefit; he had a far greater purpose in mind. In the same way, we must evaluate our own motives and align them with the ultimate ambition.

We Must Long to Please Christ (1:10)

The desired outcome of Paul's petition is clearly marked by the phrase "so that," which interprets the infinitive form of the verb *to walk* as denoting purpose. In addition, Paul's prayer uses two parallel phrases that identify the ultimate goal of fulfilling God's will: "worthy of the Lord" and "fully pleasing to him." This designates the honor of Christ and the glory of God as the intended outcome of obedience. In other words, Paul's desire for them to know God's will is not for their own personal pleasure but so that their lives may be pleasing to God!

We must adopt this same purposefulness in our own lives. Most believers desire to discern God's will for their own personal benefit—what makes them happy, fits in their plans, achieves their dreams, answers their prayers, and satisfies their desires. But satisfying him must become our deepest passion and our highest goal. We must be willing to lay down our dreams and desires in order to pursue his will for our lives. God does not always ask us to relinquish these things, but he knows our hearts and whether we are willing to put his will over our own. It is easy to say that we will, but when it comes down to it, are we willing to lay anything and everything on the altar for him?

Many people expect the Lord to give them what they desire, and some may even quote Psalm 37:4 to justify their expectations: "Take delight in the LORD, and he will give you your heart's desires." But this misunderstanding portrays God as some cosmic genie who is obligated to grant us our wishes as long as we ask "in Jesus's name." What this verse actually means is that God will infuse our hearts with his desires when we learn to delight ourselves in what pleases him.

We Must Live to Please Christ (1:10)

Our desire to please Christ cannot simply be a sentiment or feeling; it must translate into action. We must not only *long* to please Christ; we must *live* to please Christ. Paul's emphasis on knowledge, wisdom, and understanding in verse 9 cannot be divorced from the action in verse 10. His prayer for the Colossians was intended to influence their behavior as noted by his

use of the familiar metaphor “to walk.” This term, drawing on its Hebrew roots (cf. “live” in Gen 17:1), summarizes one’s lifestyle and characterizes it as one of obedience and godliness (Melick, *Philippians, Colossians, Philemon*, 203). The accompanying phrase in this verse, “walk worthy of the Lord,” depicts a manner of life that is consistent with their identity as saints (v. 2; cf. Rom 16:2), their “calling” (Eph 4:1), the “gospel of Christ” (Phil 1:27), and “God” himself (1 Thess 2:12; Pao, *Colossians and Philemon*, 70). This pattern of behavior corresponding with their redeemed nature and abiding faith is ultimately what pleases the Lord and fulfills his will (cf. 1 Thess 4:1).

This means that pursuing God’s will for our lives must be defined as comprehensively living in submission and surrender rather than living in comfort and convenience. It means our lives must be entirely and exclusively devoted to honoring him. We can’t live the selfish way we want to and hide behind sanctified excuses like, “Well, God knows my heart.” Our true desires will be revealed through our actual behavior as we embrace the ultimate purpose of following God’s will: pleasing Christ!

We Must _____ the _____ of Fulfilling God’s Will (1:10–12)

Paul’s heart and desire for the Colossians are not limited to abstract spiritual thought. His prayer for believers also provides concrete instruction. The structure of these verses reveals a fourfold pattern that specifies practical aspects of the life that pleases the Lord. Paul uses four parallel participles, not always captured by contemporary translations, to describe the process of fulfilling God’s will: “bearing fruit” (v. 10), “growing” (v. 10), “being strengthened” (v. 11), and “giving thanks” (v. 12). The verbs of ongoing action provide us with practical steps in the process of fulfilling God’s will for our lives.

We Are Called to Good Works (1:10)

The first aspect of the process Paul identifies is “bearing fruit in every good work” (v. 10). This phrase “bearing fruit” speaks to the work of the gospel throughout the world (v. 6) but now references the specific work it performs in the life of the believer. Genuine faith inevitably produces good works (Jas 2:14–26), and God has redeemed us to be a people who are zealous for good works (Titus 2:14). These works are “fruit” produced by the Spirit (Gal 5:22–23)—fruit that glorifies God and distinguishes us as Jesus’s disciples (John 15:8). As part of God’s will for our lives, he has prepared good works for us to do (Eph 2:10), and he enables us to perform them (Phil 2:13).

We Are Called to Go Deep (1:10)

The process of fulfilling God’s will also includes “growing in the knowledge of God” (v. 10). The ever-increasing nature of the gospel, “growing” (v. 6), is now personally experienced in the life of the believer through a deepening knowledge of God. Our relationships with the Lord are intended to increase in spiritual depth and personal intimacy (2 Pet 3:18). Just as Paul elevated knowing Christ above everything else (Phil 3:8), we must also set this as our ultimate goal and highest priority (Jer 9:23–24). We grow in our knowledge of him through spending time in

prayer, personal Bible study, and faithful obedience. These disciplines not only enable us to discern his will; they also equip us to fulfill it (Rom 12:2).

We Are Called to Grow Strong (1:11)

Paul also points out that the process involves “being strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might” (v. 11). This is not merely encouragement for us to rely on the Lord. It means that fulfilling God’s plan will be impossible apart from his divine strength. God’s will for our lives will extend us beyond our own capabilities. It will require emotional and physical stamina that can be sustained only with his spiritual strength (cf. Eph 3:16). The use of the passive form of this participle, “being strengthened,” accentuates the Lord as the active provider of divine enablement. The parallel phrases “all power” and “his glorious might” reinforce the supreme nature of his strength that enables us to fulfill his will. By his might, the Lord will empower us to have “great endurance and patience” (v. 11). These terms speak to the afflictions we will endure in this world as believers (John 16:33; 2 Tim 3:12) and the patience that must characterize our lives as we trust and follow him (Jas 5:7–8). Ultimately, if we pursue paths that can be accomplished in our own strength and ability, then we have achieved something less than God’s will.

We Are Called to Give Thanks (1:12)

Finally, the process of fulfilling God’s will concludes with our “giving thanks to the Father” (v. 12). This and the parallel thanks directed to the Father (vv. 3, 12) serve as bookends for Paul’s introductory section of prayer for the Colossians. He now clearly begins to shift his focus to the primary concern and content of the letter (Moo, *The Letters*, 99). He concludes this section with this fourth and final participle, “giving thanks,” to describe the joyful and grateful hearts that should epitomize those who are devoted to God’s plan.

The privilege of participating in the Lord’s kingdom enterprise is only possible because he “has enabled [us] to share in the saints’ inheritance in the light” (v. 12). The passive verb “has enabled” describes a divine qualification to participate in his will that is not based on our effort or merit. According to the subsequent verses, God’s work of rescue and redemption positions us for participation in his kingdom (vv. 13–14). In order to make his point, Paul intentionally uses exodus terminology—“share” and “inheritance” (v. 12; cf. Exod 6:6–8), along with the deliverance language in verse 13—to evoke thoughts of Israel’s divine rescue from Egypt and the allotted portions of the promised land among the tribes (Melick, *Philippians, Colossians, Philemon*, 205–6). As God’s new covenant people, we share in the “saints’ inheritance” and have been apportioned the spiritual privileges available in Christ to members of his kingdom of “light” (Moo, *The Letters*, 101–2).

In other words, God graciously includes us and willingly uses us to accomplish his divine purposes here on earth. This should prompt us to “give thanks in everything; for this is God’s will for [us] in Christ Jesus” (1 Thess 5:18). When we are mindful of the Lord’s undeserved kindness toward us, it should influence everything we do, saturating our hearts and lives with gratitude (Col 3:17). Therefore, thanksgiving is not simply a sentimental attitude of reflection but an intentional action of obedience. Being thankful is an integral part of fulfilling God’s will.

We Must _____ the _____ of God's Will (1:13–14)

The final two verses of this section elaborate on the Father's work of salvation to qualify his people for his service. These verses serve multiple literary purposes as they specify the nature of the work, identify the means by which it is accomplished, accentuate the work of the Son, and segue into the body of the letter. The transitional purpose of this section includes the shift from second person, "you" (v. 12), to first person, "us" (v. 13). This change in voice provides rhetorical force to Paul's argument (Pao, *Colossians and Philemon*, 75) while also referencing his own testimony with his metaphorical light/darkness terminology (see Acts 26:12–18; Moo, *The Letters*, 104). In the broader scope of the section, the rescuing work of the Father through the redemptive work of the Son assures the Colossians of the freedom they possess to enjoy and experience God's will.

We Have Been Rescued from Darkness (1:13)

In verse 13, Paul describes the positional status of the believer in before-and-after terms. This is foundational to his arguments throughout the letter and is first established here. The two complementary verbs establish a stark contrast that reinforces the present reality of their sacred standing as God's people. The Greek term Paul uses for "rescued" speaks to the peril of our lost condition prior to Christ. The parallel term, "transferred," describes the sequential or simultaneous⁴ act of the Father in salvation and reinforces the vast, insurmountable distance between the two conditions.

The contrast is deepened even further by the disparity between the positional realms, "the domain of darkness" and "the kingdom of the Son." These phrases not only describe positional standing, but the terms *domain* and *kingdom* imply the controlling influence over their respective residents. Furthermore, the two are polar opposite in their nature, as "light" (v. 12) and "darkness" (v. 13) cannot coexist (2 Cor 6:14). In Scripture, darkness commonly refers to the condition of the depraved world and is depicted by the physical and metaphorical blindness used to characterize the lost. Jesus described himself as "the light of the world" (John 8:12), and he invaded the darkness of sinful humanity and could not be overcome by it (John 1:4–5). Christ reigns over his kingdom of "light" (v. 12) as the One the Father "loves" (v. 13), and we are now citizens with the other saints and members of his household (Eph 2:19; cf. Phil 1:27; 3:20).

Being rescued from the darkness also includes the applied benefits of redemption. Through his death on the cross, Christ atoned for our sin and "in him" we have "forgiveness of sins" (cf. 2:13; Eph 1:7). Paul shifts the verb tense from the completed, threefold work of the Father in verses 12–13 to the present tense, "we have," in verse 14 to indicate the ongoing and permanent effects of our salvation (Harris, *Colossians and Philemon*, 37). As a result, we are released from the guilt, shame, and bondage of sin and are free to pursue God's will for our lives.

We Have Been Redeemed for a Purpose (1:14)

Our freedom from sin is also a freedom to serve. The emphasis throughout this section focuses on the Colossians' purpose as a result of their new position. Paul's prayer desired a practical outcome: that they would "walk worthy of the Lord" and "fully pleasing to him" (v. 10). Each of

the four participles in the passage were steps in the broader process of serving the Lord (vv. 10–12). The Colossians' position as recipients of God's gracious redemption highlighted their undeserving status and God's desire to rescue lost humanity through the work of his Son.

As God's people, we have a new position, a new purpose, and a new perspective. Our eyes have been opened and we can recognize the hopeless state from which we were rescued. We are free from our slavery to sin and free to serve Christ and fulfill his will. These truths also convict our hearts of the desperate condition of the world around us and heighten our awareness of our responsibility to live as light (Matt 5:14–16). We must live holy and blameless lives to shine as stars in the midst of a dark and perverse world (Phil 2:15). Above all, we must be faithful to proclaim the "light of the gospel" of our glorious King Jesus to penetrate the blindness of darkened hearts around us so that they too may be rescued (2 Cor 4:4–6). We have been redeemed for this purpose!

Conclusion

Paul's twofold prayer for the Colossians perfectly demonstrates how our identity as believers in Christ translates into our responsibility as disciples of Christ. As we reflect on and relish our membership in God's family, we are commissioned as his followers to fulfill his will for our lives. God's will for our lives was never intended to be a mystery for us to solve. Instead, he has graciously provided everything we need to faithfully accomplish his plan (2 Pet 1:3). He has rescued us from blindly wandering in the darkness of our sin and has given us the redeemed ability to accurately discern and actively pursue his divine will. This means each of us has been appointed to serve in a particular role to collectively achieve God's kingdom agenda of sharing the good news of salvation through Jesus Christ. Therefore, we can live with purpose, with confidence, and with hope as we devote our lives to pleasing our Savior and participating in his plan.

Lesson 4 (5-3-26)

Christ, Supreme Lord and Sufficient Savior (Colossians 1:15-20)

¹⁵ He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. ¹⁶ For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. ¹⁷ And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together. ¹⁸ And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent. ¹⁹ For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, ²⁰ and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.

- Colossians 1:15-20 ESV

Summary

Paul proclaims the supremacy and sovereignty of Christ, who was present and active in the creation of the universe and who remains active in sustaining and reconciling all things. Whether Paul himself wrote this hymn is debated; he could have borrowed material used in early Christian worship. Regardless of authorship, the hymn is a central component of the letter, providing the basis for Paul's key points in chs. 2–3 about the sufficiency of Christ and the futility of false teachings. Because God's fullness dwells in Christ (v. 19), He is all that believers need.¹

Observation Questions (What does the text say?)

1. How is Jesus Christ described in verse 15?
2. What does the passage say Christ is "the firstborn of"?
3. According to verse 16, what things were created through Christ? List the categories mentioned.
4. For whom were all things created?
5. What does verse 17 say about Christ's existence in relation to creation?
6. What does the passage say Christ does to all things in verse 17?
7. What is Christ called in relation to the church in verse 18?
8. What title is given to Christ regarding the resurrection in verse 18?
9. What does verse 19 say about what was pleased to dwell in Christ?
10. According to verse 20, what does God reconcile through Christ?

Interpretation Questions (What does the text mean?)

1. What does it mean that Christ is "the image of the invisible God"?

¹ John D. Barry et al., *Faithlife Study Bible* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2012, 2016), Col 1:15–20.

2. How should we understand the phrase “firstborn of all creation”? Does it mean Christ was created?
3. Why is it important that all things were created through Christ and for Christ?
4. What does it mean that “in him all things hold together”?
5. How does Christ being the “head of the body, the church” shape our understanding of the church?
6. Why does Paul emphasize Christ as “the beginning” and “the firstborn from the dead”?
7. What does it mean that the “fullness” of God dwells in Christ?
8. What kind of reconciliation is described in verse 20, and how was it accomplished?

Application Questions (How should this change us?)

1. How does seeing Christ as the image of God affect the way you understand who God is?
2. If everything was created for Christ, how should that shape the way you live your life?
3. What areas of your life do you struggle to place under Christ’s authority as head?
4. How does knowing that Christ holds all things together give you confidence during uncertain times?
5. What difference does Christ’s resurrection make for your hope about the future?
6. How should the truth that reconciliation came through the cross shape your gratitude and worship?
7. What is one practical way you can honor Christ’s supremacy in your daily decisions this week?
8. Was there anything from last week’s sermon that was especially challenging? Convicting? Encouraging?

Lesson Outline [This lesson was adapted from R. C. Lucas, *Fullness & Freedom: The Message of Colossians & Philemon*, *The Bible Speaks Today* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1980), 44–58.]

Introductions are now over. The customary thanksgivings and prayers are done. As we have seen they were not mere formalities, for they are filled with evidences of Paul’s acute understanding of the situation in Colossae. However, it is time now to come to the main purpose of the letter.

We might expect the apostle to begin with an appeal to the Colossian church to avoid the approaching dangers, which should be as obvious to them as they are to him. This, for instance, was his method when writing first to the Corinthians (1 Cor. 1:10f.) But in this case he does no such thing. It seems almost as if the new teachers and their attractive spiritual wares are forgotten. Instead Paul launches out into a great description of Christ, fit to stand alongside the famous non-Pauline passages of John 1:1–14, and Hebrews 1:2–4, being particularly close in structure to the latter.

The reason for this approach must be that Paul well knows that the Colossians are not willfully unfaithful. It is simply that they are young in the faith, with their convictions as yet unformed and immature. Because of this, the speciousness of the visitors' arguments has not been detected. It had not occurred to the Colossians that to welcome this new teaching was to be disloyal to the old. It seemed to them an exciting fresh revelation of truth taking them on from Epaphras' beginnings.

Paul sees in this dangerous innocence a failure to understand what belief in Christ, and loyalty to that belief, involves. It is therefore his wisdom to set before the church, right at the start of the letter, an exposition of the *supremacy* of Christ, or, as we might put it, his lordship. This positive instruction, once its implications have been grasped in terms of the *sufficiency* of Christ, will be the Colossians' best protection against error...To come to terms with a confession of faith like this, so concentrated and weighty, it may be useful first to set out the basic framework, even if inadequately, and then to suggest three important clues as to the significance of the statement as a whole.

1. *Christ supreme*
 - a. In creation (verses 15–17)
 - b. In the church, the new creation (verse 18)
2. *Christ sufficient*
 - a. In his person, God with us (verse 19)
 - b. In his work, God for us (verse 20)

The First Clue: the connection between the _____ and the _____ of Christ

It is often said that the theme of the Colossian epistle is the pre-eminence of Christ. He is supreme in authority over all things, as expressed in verses 15–18. But this confession that Christ is the true Lord of all is the essential foundation of all Christian discipleship. We must assume therefore that, in principle, the church at Colossae was built on this foundation since no other foundation for such wise building exists. If the believers had denied Christ's pre-eminence, then they would hardly be Christian at all. Yet of the reality of their faith we, like them, are already assured (verse 4).

So it would be truer to say that the theme of this letter is the *sufficiency*, or adequacy, of Christ as Saviour. This means that no other spiritual power whatsoever is necessary to bring to mankind God's full and final salvation. What was happening in Colossae was that the Christians seemed ready to deny the sufficiency of Christ for all their spiritual needs, and therefore, in practice, to deny the supremacy of Christ to which they were already committed.

It is for this reason that Paul drives home the lesson that just because Christ is the supreme Lord he must be a sufficient Saviour. He urges the Colossians to remember *who Christ is*. On such a basis he then calls upon them to recognize what such a Christ does for them (with

implied astonishment that they should look anywhere other than Christ)... The connection between Christ's supremacy and his sufficiency is a vital clue for the student of Colossians. Possessing pre-eminent authority, Christ must be a perfect Saviour. His sufficient adequacy depends on his supreme authority.

The Second Clue: The connection between Christ as _____ and as _____

Separating the various sections of this confessional statement for analysis can be dangerous if it leads us to divide what Paul has joined together. A particularly important connection here, relevant to the whole letter, is that between Christ as Creator and as Redeemer. For if the source of the universe, as well as of the universal church, is to be found 'in him' (verse 16) then we owe to Christ our physical existence and joys, just as much as our spiritual life. Thus both the 'material' and the 'spiritual' realms are brought firmly under the sovereignty of Christ. In view of this, the student of Colossians will look with special care for those tell-tale signs of the 'dualism' in thought and practice which was threatening the young church.

It seems certain that among the new teachers were the first of a multitude of guides who, often unwittingly, have troubled the Christian church ever since, by making a false distinction between the two realms, sometimes called 'secular' and 'sacred'. When this happens a whole way of thinking becomes possible that is not Christian. For example, religion becomes too 'spiritual' in a wrong and mischievous sense. Compared with spiritual gifts God's good gifts in the material world are little valued (2:21); God's realm is thought of increasingly in churchly terms such as traditional ritual and religious festivals (2:16–18); the 'religious' life comes to belong to the specialist in prayer, fasting, and mystical exercises rather than to the normal Christian (described in chapter 3) with his responsibilities in family life and daily labour; and soon it becomes even easier to neglect one's role as a citizen of this world because of one's membership in the church, and to conclude, to take an instance almost at random, that working for one's living is somehow inferior to living 'by faith'.

By so closely linking the truths of verses 15–17 with verse 18 Paul unites what 'religion' so often divides. With this clue in our possession, parts of the Colossian letter that might at first sight baffle us, more easily yield their meaning.

The Third Clue: Christ, before _____, on _____, and over all

One unmistakable aim of this great confessional statement is to tell us *who Christ is* (note the repeated 'he is' verses 15–18). For purposes of analysis and study we can recognize here the Christ who existed 'before all worlds', the Christ of history, and the Lord of the church alive for evermore. But it really seems as though Paul's fixed intention here is to unite what we so easily divide. When he writes of Christ to the Colossians he wants them to know that it is the full Christ, Creator, Redeemer and ascended Lord, of whom he speaks. He wants them to know that *all* (note the tireless repetition of this little word in every verse, almost every phrase) the

activity of almighty God in creating the world, and in visiting and redeeming his people, has been done in and through Christ. So that 'in Christ' (note the repeated '*in him*' for similar emphasis) the young believers in Colossae occupy a position of privilege beyond which nothing can be conceived.

This resolute refusal to divide God's work from Christ, or to divide Christ in respect of the various parts of his work, gives us a clue we need to recognize two forms in which 'fullness' teaching may have reached Colossae. It may have been by a claim that God had not finished his work of salvation for the Colossians in giving them Christ, so that he had still more to give them if his work was to be completed. But the false teaching may have been put in another way. The Colossians may have been told that to receive the benefits of Christ's saving work on the cross was one thing, but that to receive and enjoy the benefits of his reigning work at God's right hand was quite another. To be cleansed from sin was a blessed beginning; but to be delivered from sin's power they must now claim and appropriate the victory of the ascended Lord over the principalities and powers. To be fully saved the Colossians were urged to make the full Christ their own.

Against both these forms of erroneous teaching Paul's testimony stands unshaken. He teaches first that what God has done in Christ exhausts all that God has to do for us. He teaches, secondly, that when a person is in Christ, he or she is the beneficiary of all that God has done in Christ (*cf.* 2:9, 10).

a. Christ and creation (verses 15–17)

Though some of the details may be elusive, the main thrust of this section is not difficult to grasp—once the reader has recovered his breath! The whole created order, in time and space, owes its existence to Christ. He is its true origin. He sustains it in being. Without him it would have no ultimate meaning. All this, and much besides, is included in these brief overwhelming affirmations. At this point we will consider not what these verses tell us about creation, but what they tell us about Christ. And here we cannot do better than return to the two key words, supremacy and sufficiency.

(i) *In creation Christ is supreme.* This settles once and for all the status of those numerous heavenly powers and intermediaries that both fascinated and frightened the people of Paul's day (as often in our own). No attempt should be made to distinguish between the various 'authorities' listed in verse 16. All the church needs to know is that such existence and power as they possess is entirely dependent upon Christ our Lord. It follows that there is nothing such 'powers' can do to influence Christ or enrich him (as some Christians have appeared to suppose in their intercessions to departed saints); from this it further follows that there is nothing they can do to influence the destiny or experience of the person who is 'in Christ'. Exactly how the Colossian church was being troubled along these lines we do not know. But it is evident that the new teachers claimed an unusual familiarity with the 'powers in the heavenlies', and offered their expertise in these realms to the young Christians. We shall meet this later (*e.g.* 2:8). For the loyal Christian it is enough to know that these 'powers' have neither 'treasures' to give to, nor 'terrors' with which to frighten, the one who lives under the sovereignty of Christ.

(ii) *In creation Christ is sufficient.* Read verses 15–17 again and see with what force Paul repeats the little phrase ‘all things’. Whatever aspect of creation we care to think about, Christ is the sufficient explanation. And his power is as adequate as his wisdom.

The full significance of this is beyond our present scope. It is important to realize that the reason why Paul affirms this mighty truth to the Colossians is more practical than philosophical. He writes to Christians who can honestly say ‘Christ is my helper’, yet who have been thrown into confusion by teachers who confidently assert that this is not enough for effective living in God’s world. Not enough? Then the Christ of the visiting teachers is not the true Lord as preached by Paul. They must be among those who preach ‘another’ Christ. For whoever takes seriously the true Christ cannot doubt his adequacy to supply all his people’s needs and bring them to their goal. How strange if he who is sufficient to sustain a universe, should be insufficient in power for the little church at Colossae!

Now because of this immeasurable power of Christ described in verses 16 and 17, it is possible to understand and justify the great titles given to him in verse 15. Both descriptions, *the image of the invisible God* and *the first-born of all creation* have caused much discussion, which is explored fully in the larger commentaries. The position taken here is that they both refer to the fact that the power of Almighty God, maker of heaven and earth, *has been manifested* to us through Christ his Son, and *will be manifested* through Christ in the future.

First, Christ is *the image of the invisible God*. The interpretation here must be governed by the fact that the glory of the *invisible* God has actually been manifested to people through Christ. This must therefore refer to the incarnation (Jn. 1:14–18). Here the Creator manifested himself through the man Christ Jesus. The life and ministry of the Lord Jesus was a constant manifestation of the power of the Creator, as demonstrated for example by his miracles (*e.g.* Mk. 4:41). There is nothing strange or incredible in this, for he himself is the agent of all creation (hence the link between verse 15 and verses 16 and 17). Jesus is none other than the Creator entering his creation, so that he has only to speak and it is done (*e.g.* Mk. 3:5); also his word of command has creative power to produce obedience even from the dead (*e.g.* Mk. 5:41). Later we shall see how Christ is able to renew the lost and marred image of God in man (3:10).

Secondly, Christ is *the first-born of all creation*. The context forbids any interpretation of these words that makes Christ first among created beings. It is perverse to say this of one who ‘is before all things’, and through whom all things were made. The simplest explanation is the best; the ‘first-born’ son was always *the father’s heir*. God’s Son, Jesus Christ, is ‘heir of all things’ as the corresponding passage in Hebrews plainly says. This parallel description is relevant here, for it seems to arise out of a similar need to demonstrate the superiority of the Son over all angelic powers. The created order exists *for* Christ. One day the Heir will enter visibly into his full inheritance before a watching world. On that great day, when Christ’s glory manifestly appears, the church will share his inheritance and glory (3:3).

It is difficult to believe that these two titles are not related to the situation that had arisen in Colossae. It seems likely, as we shall see later, that the new teachers laid great emphasis on the need for the world actually to *see* in the church the 'manifest power' of God. Paul's answer is that the church's real life is 'hidden' at present with Christ: like her master she will often now appear weak, despised and rejected. If we wish to see the 'manifest glory' of God, we must *look back* to the life and work of the historical Jesus. Or we must *look forward*, because one day this beloved Son will 'appear' again with manifest glory. These two 'appearings', or times of divine manifestation, are constantly celebrated together in Scripture. Meanwhile the church lives between them in time, and the characteristic hallmark of her life is more likely to be suffering than glory.

b. Christ and the church

Supreme over the created order, Christ is now acclaimed as supreme head of the church. This is God's 'new creation'. How foolish therefore to imagine that Paul is here narrowing his horizons and speaking of a smaller 'religious' department within the whole world! The church is the new humanity. The NEB version of 2 Corinthians 5:17 well expresses the force of this even with respect to an individual conversion: 'When anyone is united to Christ, there is a new world; the old order has gone, and a new order has already begun.'

When Christ is called *the beginning, the first-born from the dead*, the reference is to his resurrection. This means even more, however, than that he became 'the first to rise from the dead' (as in one of Paul's discourses, Acts 26:23) to be followed by an innumerable company at the general resurrection. It also means that he is now the 'Author of life' (as in one of Peter's sermons, Acts 3:15), that is, the one who gives the new life in the Spirit to all God's people. The church therefore is the company of those who share the risen life of Christ. The Christians at Colossae well knew that, before the gospel came to them, they were *dead* in sins, but now God has made them *alive* together with Christ (2:13).

It is this basic truth that is enforced by Paul's famous description of Christ as *the head of the body*. The emphasis here is not on the mutual dependence of the various members of the body on one another (but see 2:19) so much as on the total dependence of the local (and universal) church on Christ for the continuance of its life. If a body does not hold fast to its head it can hardly hope to survive! Yet it is this striking way of speaking that Paul is to use later with strong intent in 2:19. Apparently it is very possible for a church *not* to hold fast to Christ as head, and thus to cut itself off from the essential nourishment that makes for proper growth. Our present passage implies that this will happen when Christ is not given the *pre-eminent* place that is rightfully his. This unique word takes up the idea of *primacy* which has already met us through the 'first-born' of verse 15, repeated in this verse (18). This must mean that the essential primacy of the church belongs to Christ. Submission to any other 'primacy' (*i.e.* such as has been demanded historically by the See of Rome) cannot be required of any churches as a condition of divine nourishment, unity and growth.

In the context of Colossians it must have been clear to the apostle that the new teachers were claiming too much authority. They evidently wished to 'head-up' the work at Colossae and be

the unchallenged fount of wisdom and instruction. Authoritarian leadership of this kind is always dangerous for the churches; it can too easily mean that they lose their hold on their heavenly leader. As in the Old Testament story, we in New Testament times can desire a king whom we can see and honour. When the church takes its mind and heart away from Christ and his words, human authority and tradition fills the vacuum. The ultimate consequences of this could be sterility rather than the constant increase and renewal of 2:19.

c. God with us in Christ (verse 19)

Verse 19 concerns the coming of God to dwell with men, foreshadowed from the earliest days of the exodus by the tent in the wilderness. Now it is in Christ that the fullness of God is pleased to dwell.

As we have seen, 'fullness' is a characteristic word of the Colossian letter; as a concept it played a large part in second-century Gnosticism, and even at this early stage was evidently becoming a major theme of the visiting teachers. Now the word 'fullness' (*plēroma*) can mean a *supplement*, that is, something added to supply a deficiency, or it can mean a *complement*, that is the full number that makes up a whole, for example a ship's company. The distinction between the two meanings may help to clarify the difference between the apostolic teaching and the new teaching. For Paul there was nothing whatever of the Godhead that was not in Christ; the full complement of divine attributes is to be found in him. But for the new teachers, union with Christ did not of itself bring anyone into such fullness of divine life; there was still room (and need) for a supplementary work of God. This could be thought of by saying that God had still more of himself to give than Christ, or that Christ was not received in all his fullness at conversion. However this was thought of, for Paul it represented a serious misunderstanding. The work of the teacher is to lead people to find their fullness in Christ alone: *he does not possess anything beyond Christ to give to his people*.

The aorist infinitive ('to take up his dwelling') gives verse 19 a reference to the incarnation that is hard to deny. But the present tense in 2:9 ('in him the whole fullness ... *dwells* bodily') reminds us that the Christ of history is now at God's right hand. Incarnation (verse 19) prepares the way for atonement (verse 20), but now we are to seek the fullness of God in Christ *above*, and not on earth (3:1f.)... Over against these rather 'natural' ideas, the startling words of Paul affirm that it was God's pleasure to make Christ the permanent dwelling place of his divine fullness, so that he should be the one mediator between heaven and earth. The apostolic teaching always takes with the utmost seriousness both the full deity and the complete and perfect humanity of Christ, for only so can he be the sufficient mediator between God and man. This apostolic view forbids a devotion to a human Jesus who is not Christ the Lord, just as it rules out the idea of a 'spiritual' Christ known chiefly as a miracle-worker rather than as a suffering servant...

By itself verse 19 is striking enough as a description of a unique and unrepeatable act of divine condescension, but it is only by seeing this verse *in its context* that the full implications of what Paul is saying become clear. It is the fullness of the Almighty God who is Maker of heaven and

earth that was pleased to dwell in Christ. What this paragraph demonstrates is that such a belief in Jesus as God incarnate was an essential part of the earliest Christian message.

d. God for us in Christ (verse 20)

If verse 19 tells us that nothing of God's fullness is lacking in Christ, verse 20 asserts that nothing in the universe is outside the range of God's reconciling work in Christ. Once more, the little word 'all' is significant in both verses. The need for reconciliation between God and his creation implies, of course, an already existing state of strife and disharmony. A gigantic rupture has taken place, dislocating the relationship between God and man, and throwing into disarray the whole created order. The world knows no settled peace. Futility and decay are the hallmarks of creation (Rom. 8:18f.); hostility and evil are the hallmarks of mankind (verse 21).

The ancient world knew what it was to ask questions about the baffling problems of reconciliation. But without the truth of the gospel there was no possibility of an answer so comprehensive, unqualified and decisive, as Paul gives here. It is not from man but God that the initiative has come: it is not through numberless emissaries that the work has been done but 'through him', the one Christ: the impossibility, as men saw it then, of reconciliation between heaven and earth has found its solution, not in some 'other-worldly drama' (Lohse) but precisely at a certain place, and at a time well remembered, where Christ had endured a bloody and painful death on a Roman cross.

The essence of verse 20 may be summarized by four statements:

(i) *Reconciliation is a work of God.* The Bible is not the story of man's search for God. From the first sentence ('In the beginning God created ...') Holy Scripture is marked out from other religious writings by its unique insistence that the initiative belongs wholly to God. If verse 21 realistically describes man's moral and spiritual state there can be no hope of peace unless God undertakes the work of peacemaking. Verse 19 precedes verse 20 precisely to make clear that God must even take human flesh to provide the Man who will be able to represent all men. So it is only 'through Christ' that reconciliation can be attempted and accomplished.

(ii) *Reconciliation is a work that has been accomplished.* Man need not wait for reconciliation until the end of time, for peace *has been made* by the death of Christ. Therefore reconciliation with God waits not upon human achievement but upon human acceptance. This apostolic affirmation cannot be surrendered in the face of liberal Christianity with its oft-repeated claim that the only change necessary for reconciliation with God lies in the heart of man: God, it is confidently said, does not need to be reconciled to us. If this were so, the work of Christ in dying would be directed only towards man (to melt his heart and shame him from his foolish rebellion). But it is undeniable, if we take seriously the language of the New Testament, that the work of Christ on the cross was directed toward God. 'We have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous, and he is the propitiation for our sins.' ...

(iii) *Reconciliation was achieved at the cross.* The 'blood' of the cross means Christ's sacrificial death. The Christian gospel concerns what happened there. The heart of the church's message

must therefore be the preaching of 'Christ and him crucified.' The church has constantly to return to this 'word of the cross' to rediscover her gospel, *and her power*. Since presumably the principalities and powers know full well the place of their defeat (2:15), it must be their overriding concern to lead the church to espouse a 'different gospel.' The serpent's shrewdest efforts are aimed to take people's minds off the place where his head was struck a mortal blow. In the case of the Colossian visitors it seems likely that Christ's cross was not the centre of their teaching. Perhaps they were tempted, as we are, to shift the centre of gravity from the historical faith, and to locate the place of power in their own ministry. Paul never locates power in persons or ceremonies. He would turn our eyes back to the cross for the place of power, and up to the throne for the true man of power.

(iv) *Reconciliation through Christ takes in all things*. Finally, the scope of this reconciliation is universal. It takes in the whole created order. 'All things' will share the wonders of peace with God. Other passages fill in the time scale of this, showing how creation must 'wait' for the day when God's sons will be revealed.

Conclusion

What is particularly important here is that Christ is again put before the Colossians, and ourselves, as a *sufficient* Saviour. Nothing and nobody lies outside the scope of his reconciling work. That is not the same as saying that everyone will be saved (an impossible hope if we take Christ's warnings as seriously as his promises). But it is to say that all who are ultimately reconciled to God will be saved by Christ's blood. Paul's statement here is the death knell of syncretism, that most popular of modern heresies, which calls upon men of different faiths to join hands against the common enemies of atheism and materialism. Christians have always confessed that there is but one God; they have also found themselves in loyalty bound to confess that there is but one way to that God, the God-man Christ Jesus. He alone is the God-given mediator. God has made him the agent of reconciliation for *all* just because there is no other mediator capable of reconciling *any*. 'He is the propitiation for our sins: and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world.'

Lesson 5 (5-10-26)

Stable and Steadfast (Colossians 1:21-23)

²¹ And you, who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, ²² he has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him, ²³ if indeed you continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel that you heard, which has been proclaimed in all creation under heaven, and of which I, Paul, became a minister.

- Colossians 1:21-23 ESV

Summary

Having considered Christ's majestic role in creation and in the pacification of the universe, Paul returns to the Colossians themselves, applying the hymn's motif of cosmic reconciliation to their personal alienation, which was overcome through Christ's death as proclaimed in the gospel. Once God's enemies and alienated from His life, they have now been given peace with God (Rom. 5:1, 2). This is a blessing that all believers enjoy.¹

Observation Questions (What does the text say?)

1. How does Paul describe the Colossians' past condition in verse 21?
2. In what ways were they hostile toward God?
3. What change has taken place according to verse 22?
4. Through what means did this reconciliation happen?
5. What is the goal or result of this reconciliation mentioned in verse 22?
6. What condition or expectation is stated in verse 23?
7. How does Paul describe the faith believers must continue in?
8. What warning is implied about moving away from the hope of the gospel?
9. How widely has the gospel been proclaimed according to verse 23?
10. What role does Paul say he has in relation to the gospel?

Interpretation Questions (What does the text mean?)

1. What does it mean that people were "alienated" and "hostile in mind"?
2. How do "evil deeds" relate to the hostility Paul describes?
3. Why does Paul emphasize that reconciliation came through Christ's physical body and death?
4. What does it mean to be presented "holy and blameless and above reproach" before God?
5. How should we understand the phrase "if indeed you continue in the faith"?

¹ R. C. Sproul, ed., *The Reformation Study Bible: English Standard Version (2015 Edition)* (Orlando, FL: Reformation Trust, 2015), 2123.

6. Why is being “stable and steadfast” important for Christian faith?
7. What is the “hope of the gospel” that believers must not move away from?
8. Why does Paul emphasize the worldwide proclamation of the gospel?

Application Questions (How should this change us?)

1. How does remembering your life before Christ deepen your appreciation for reconciliation with God?
2. In what ways can hostility toward God still appear in people’s attitudes or actions today?
3. How should the goal of being presented holy before God shape your daily choices?
4. What helps believers remain “stable and steadfast” in their faith?
5. What kinds of influences today might tempt someone to move away from the hope of the gospel?
6. How can you actively remind yourself of the hope found in the gospel?
7. What role might God be calling you to play in spreading the gospel to others?
8. Was there anything from last week’s sermon that was especially challenging? Convicting? Encouraging?

Lesson Outline [This lesson was adapted from R. C. Lucas, *Fullness & Freedom: The Message of Colossians & Philemon*, *The Bible Speaks Today* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1980), 59–65.]

This lovely little paragraph is characteristic of New Testament life and experience. The early Christians delighted to speak of the great change brought about for them by the gospel. The contrast between what ‘once we were’ and what ‘now by grace we are’ was frequently on their lips in testimony. Here, however, we are not listening to a Colossian Christian testifying to Paul, but to Paul testifying to the Colossians about what had happened to them. As earlier in the chapter (verses 12–14), the apostle thinks it wise to remind them what great things Christ had done for them.

Of course he does this in order to provide for them an illustration, drawn from their own undeniable experience, of the truth of reconciliation. What he has been expounding is no unproven theory, but truth they have been able to verify in life. Yet we may be sure that there is more to Paul’s purpose than this. The contrast between what they once were (verse 21) and the position they now enjoy (verse 22) is painted in such vivid colors, that it looks very much as if the apostle wishes to give the Colossians a new appreciation of the full extent of Christ’s reconciling work for them.

Since this particular aim of Paul’s will reveal itself several times in this letter, it is worth understanding it clearly now. If the new teachers were the precursors of those who, down the years, have sought in various ways to ‘complete’ the justifying work of God’s saving grace in

people's lives, we know that one effect of their teaching is to diminish the importance of the initial experience of conversion. Many teachers of a 'second experience' come to see this further initiation as the really significant change in a person's life bringing them fully into fellowship. Initiation into Christ and the forgiveness of sins, vital as they are, become merely introductory, and the vast mass of believing people are seen as still in this comparatively impoverished position. They are Christians, of course, but the real discoveries of God's resources lie ahead of them, and indeed may never be made.

That something like this was happening at Colossae is suggested by the extraordinary emphasis laid by Paul throughout this letter on the unique value and significance of that great spiritual change which people call variously by such words as conversion, justification, regeneration and reconciliation, and which is marked by Christian baptism. For Paul baptism is unrepeatable just because the divine work it signifies is unrepeatable. In a word, incorporation into Christ is always regarded by Paul to be *incomparable*. It is to enter a new world, and become a citizen of a new commonwealth: but of this we shall hear more later (3:10–12).

This paragraph may be divided for ease of study as follows, the 'you' referring directly to the Colossians, and indirectly to all Christian people:

What you _____ (verse 21)

In view of Ephesians 2:12 this reference to estrangement from God suggests that the Colossian Christians had formerly been Gentiles. A 'hostile mind' toward God was no Gentile preserve, however, as the crucifixion proved. Such are the appalling consequences of the fall, that all people everywhere are known by a mentality that is naturally antagonistic to the truth of God. The unbeliever's normal reaction to the view that this verse takes of him will often prove the point. Antagonistic, please note, not merely apathetic. We deceive ourselves if we imagine that human apathy is the problem, and not, deep down, an enmity which resists the claims of God. Fallen man is not therefore 'good at heart', if Jesus is to be believed. 'Evil deeds' are the inevitable result of an evil heart, and persist in every human culture and reappear in every new generation, presenting man in society with his most intractable problems.

Such is the stark and grim description Paul gives of what the Colossians once were, and there is no reason to think that they would have dissented from the verdict, any more than an enlightened Christian would wish to disagree today.

Where you _____ (verse 22)

From the desperate position of verse 21 the Colossians have been rescued. Now they enjoy peace with God. Through Christ's death, they stand in God's presence *holy and blameless and irreproachable*. An important question here is whether Paul is using the language of justification (this would refer to their standing, as accepted by God into his family), or of sanctification (this would refer to their actual state, as people of exceptional moral excellence). Distinguished

commentators are found on either side. The context suggests that the language used points to the former, though Calvin who agrees with this, goes on to show the 'inseparable connection' between justification and sanctification here. In those who are 'reconciled', the work of perfecting the saints has already begun. At the last day blameless and irreproachable holiness will indeed be ours. The reasons for interpreting verse 22 as descriptive of justification, however, are strong ones.

a. Reconciliation is something God has achieved through Christ once and for all. The Colossians have no part in that achievement but to accept it thankfully. They are *now reconciled*.

b. The place where this great change took place was at *the cross*, and not in their hearts. It is an act right outside themselves that made them 'holy people'. (The emphasis on 'flesh' and 'death' is deliberately strong to counter the emerging mystical and Gnostic tendencies: no 'tuning into the Infinite' for apostolic Christianity except through the harsh discords of the cross).

c. Lohse points out that the verb *to present* was used in legal language, meaning 'to bring another before the court'. Brought before the divine Judge the now reconciled Christian is found to be without reproach, stain or fault. Despite past estrangement it is possible for the new believer immediately to live his life in God's presence. This is the language of justification.

What a contrast this is! What a change of position! Can anything be remotely comparable to this transference from darkness to light? And as has been said, this change of position is always accompanied by a change of heart. The reconciled man is a new man in Christ. Now he loves and reverences the God he formerly distrusted. And he who loves the Lord comes to hate evil.

How you must _____ (verse 23)

This verse confirms our understanding of Paul's meaning. The position the Colossians occupy before God as 'acceptable people' depends upon one condition—continuance in the faith. This continuance is then defined as faithfulness to the gospel. The gospel is then defined as:

(i) the gospel they had already heard, *i.e.* which had already proved itself to be living and powerful;

(ii) the gospel the world was also hearing, *i.e.* which had already proved itself 'catholic' or universal;

(iii) the gospel Paul had received and served, *i.e.* which had already proved itself to be apostolic.

The duty of the Colossians to this gospel is expressed in fine words, whose precise meaning epitomizes the appeal of the whole Colossian letter.

a. They are to be *stable*, literally, established or well-founded in the truth. To move from the gospel is to move from the foundations on which Christ has built his church, and therefore to lose Christian 'stability'.

b. They are to be *steadfast*. This is the great call of 1 Corinthians 15:58, where apostolic truth was again at stake. It means loyalty to the truths by which they were saved.

c. They are not to *shift*. A unique New Testament word, it literally means that they are not to be *dissuaded* from the hope of the gospel. This is extremely significant language, specially characteristic perhaps of the captivity epistles. The chief blessing of the gospel is the hope it contains for the future. Meanwhile, in the present, the church lives by faith. Now we have a 'taste' of 'the powers of the world to come'.⁷ It may be that the new teachers urged the believers not to be content with this 'taste', but to claim from God the full heavenly feast. But this, for Paul, is to 'shift from the hope'. It is to refuse to walk by faith. It is to bring Christ down to earth. It is to give oneself to 'another' gospel.

To *continue in the faith* is to be content with the gospel that first saved and delivered us from spiritual death and estrangement with God, and brought us straightaway to live in his presence, at peace with him. It is to base our lives and our teaching upon the apostolic doctrines of grace. It is for those whose confidence that they are reconciled is in Christ's work *for* us, not in Christ's work *in* us. It is to be unmoved and immovable in the face of strong winds of new doctrine, not just when people would deny the apostolic gospel but when, more subtly, they would improve upon it...

Conclusion

When we worked in East Africa, I remember chuckling for ages at a newspaper advert for a regional African airline. Their strapline proudly declared, "We take you all the way". This was what they touted as their unique selling point, because other airlines, presumably, expect passengers to leave the plane before the end of the flight. It is not a particularly encouraging thought. I would hope that getting me to my ticketed destination was the least they could do for me.

But it occurs to me that it is perhaps a useful strapline for what Christ does for us. He does take us all the way. This helps to explain the conditions that Paul speaks of in Colossians 1:23. All this is true, "if you continue in your faith, established and firm, and do not move from the hope held out in the gospel". I must admit that these conditions used to trouble me. After the wonderful confidence-building truths of verses 21–22, which highlight how much everything depends on what God has done for us, it can feel as if the next verse shatters the effect. It suddenly appears to depend on us again. Yet, in fact, that is to miss the point entirely.

This is because Paul's argument is not about our *efforts* but our *dependence*. It is about where we place our trust. His words form a sandwich of tenses: two instructions that apply now are the bread, while the results of two past tenses are the filling:

- The present: “*Continue in your faith*” and “*do not move*”. These verbs appear to be contradictions. But if the Christian life is a journey, they make perfect sense. It is about making progress (continue) along the right trajectory (do not move). This journey is set by the one in whom we have faith: Jesus. He is the one who gets us to the end. This is because ...
- The past: “*Established*” and “*firm*”. We are on this journey because Jesus started us on it. We certainly couldn’t have done that ourselves. But like a tree that has been planted (established) with good roots, we naturally grow up firm and strong.

So do you see the logic? If Jesus both starts us off on the journey and gets us to the end of the journey, then it stands to reason that he is the one to stick with. Don’t get distracted or deviate from the pathway or our guide. Who else can we turn to? Paul’s conditions here are therefore simply a matter of logic. If we decide partway to shift our allegiance to another, or, even worse, to try to wrest control and credit for the journey back to ourselves, it is inevitable that we will never make it to the end.

That would be like saying to the pilot of that airline when 500 miles out, “Well actually, captain, I’ll take it from here now, thank you”. And then jumping out of one of the rear exits. Sheer madness! No—Jesus takes us all the way. So don’t shift from him. As we will see, this was a matter of central importance to the Colossian church. Paul has much more to say about it.

But for now, do you see why Paul relishes the chance to proclaim this gospel, and why he is never ashamed to describe himself as its servant (v 23)? It is a message that is changing the whole world. We might not know exactly how it is proclaimed to every creature (as opposed to just every person), but what is abundantly clear is that Jesus’ lordship stands over every inch of creation. His work of reconciliation is by no means restricted to humanity, as if we were the only things that mattered in the cosmos. He is concerned for everything that he has made, from galaxies to electrons. But because every race of humanity has its integral place within creation, his cross-shaped victory is therefore of supreme relevance to all. At the very least, there is no people group or language that should be excluded from hearing it. For now there is no need for *anyone* to be excluded. All can be reconciled to their Creator. So what’s stopping us?²

² Mark Meynell, *Colossians & Philemon for You*, ed. Carl Laferton, God’s Word for You (The Good Book Company, 2018), 56–57.

Lesson 6 (5-17-26)

The Supreme Ministry (Colossians 1:24-29)

²⁴ Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church, ²⁵ of which I became a minister according to the stewardship from God that was given to me for you, to make the word of God fully known, ²⁶ the mystery hidden for ages and generations but now revealed to his saints. ²⁷ To them God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory. ²⁸ Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ. ²⁹ For this I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me.

- Colossians 1:24-29 ESV

Summary

Though Paul is in prison because of his bold proclamation of the gospel, he still experiences profound joy since he knows that his sufferings fill up, or complete, Christ's sufferings. Paul does not mean that Jesus' sufferings were inadequate to provide forgiveness. He is claiming that his proclamation of the gospel, which was often accompanied by tremendous suffering, is also necessary for the salvation of many people. Jesus' suffering was all that was necessary to *provide* salvation for sinners, but Paul's sufferings were necessary to *proclaim* salvation to sinners.

God himself commissioned Paul to preach the gospel and endure the sufferings that this ministry entailed (Ac 9:15–16; 26:15–18). The gospel had to be proclaimed because it was the revelation of a mystery long hidden. Though in past ages God's grace had focused predominantly on the nation of Israel, he also intended to lavish his grace on Gentiles. The mystery was that Christ indwells both Jews *and* Gentiles who believe the gospel. The indwelling Christ lives his own life through believers, and this produces a radical change in their character and behavior (Gal 2:20). The initial experience of transformation stirs hope for final and complete transformation in which the glory of God is restored to believers (Ro 3:23; 8:17–30). Humanity originally possessed this glory, sometimes called God's image, but this glory was marred and ruined because of sin. Paul preached and taught so that both Jews and Gentiles would have God's glory/image restored to them (Col 3:10).¹

Observation Questions (What does the text say?)

1. What surprising statement does **Paul** make about his sufferings in verse 24?
2. For whose sake does Paul say he is suffering?

¹ Charles L. Quarles, "Colossians," in *The NIV Grace and Truth Study Bible*, ed. R. Albert Mohler Jr. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2021), 1655–1656.

3. What does Paul say he is “filling up” in his flesh?
4. What does Paul call the church in verse 24?
5. According to verse 25, what role or responsibility has been given to Paul?
6. What does Paul say he was commissioned to do with the word of God?
7. How is the “mystery” described in verse 26?
8. To whom has this mystery now been revealed?
9. What is the mystery described in verse 27?
10. What three actions related to ministry are mentioned in verse 28?
11. What is the goal of this ministry according to verse 28?
12. How does Paul describe the effort he puts into his work in verse 29?

Interpretation Questions (What does the text mean?)

1. How could Paul say he rejoices in suffering for others?
2. What does Paul mean by “filling up what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions”?
3. Why does Paul emphasize his role as a servant or steward of God’s message?
4. What does the Bible mean by the “mystery” that was hidden but is now revealed?
5. Why is the phrase “Christ in you” so significant for believers?
6. What does it mean that Christ is the “hope of glory”?
7. Why does Paul stress warning and teaching “with all wisdom”?
8. What does it mean to present someone “mature in Christ”?
9. How does Paul balance hard work with reliance on God’s power in verse 29?

Application Questions (How should this change us?)

1. How can believers develop the same perspective on suffering that Paul expresses?
2. In what ways can suffering serve the good of the church today?
3. How does the truth that “Christ in you” change the way you think about the Christian life?
4. What steps help believers grow toward maturity in Christ?
5. How can you participate in warning and teaching others in a loving and wise way?
6. What does it look like to depend on God’s power while still working diligently in ministry?
7. Who in your life could you intentionally help grow toward maturity in Christ?
8. Was there anything from last week’s sermon that was especially challenging? Convicting? Encouraging?

Lesson Outline [This lesson was adapted from *R. Kent Hughes, Colossians and Philemon: The Supremacy of Christ, Preaching the Word (Westchester, IL: Crossway Books, 1989), 42–51.*]

R. C. Sproul, president of Ligonier Study Center, a popular theologian and a gifted and colorful communicator, tells of having the following exchange with one of his students: I remember a starry-eyed college student who looked at me and said in wonderment, “What was it like for

you when you were just a minister?” I lost it. I exploded in a paroxysm of indignation. “What do you mean *just* a minister? Don’t you realize that the parish ministry is the highest calling on earth? God had only one Son and He made Him a preacher!”

In my mind’s eye I see Dr. Sproul at his theatrical best, standing over his student like a latter-day Luther, while the student is trying to find somewhere to hide. Actually Sproul was just having fun, but he was serious about his point, which is that the Christian ministry is the highest calling. Of course Sproul is not the first to think this way. John Wycliffe, the English “Morning Star” of the Reformation, wrote: The highest service that men may attain to on earth is to preach the Word of God. This service falls peculiarly to priests and therefore God more straightly demands it of them. ... And for this cause, Jesus Christ left other works and occupied himself mostly in preaching, and thus did his apostles, and for this God loved them.

In the last century, Alexander Whyte of Edinburgh wrote to a discouraged pastor, “The angels around the throne envy you your great work.... Go on and grow in grace and power as a gospel preacher.” In our own day, W. E. Sangster of the Westminster Central Hall in London said: Called to preach! ... commissioned of God to teach the word! A herald of the great King! A witness of the Eternal Gospel! Could any work be more high and holy! To this supreme task God sent his only begotten Son. In all the frustration and confusion of the times, is it possible to imagine a work comparable in importance with that of proclaiming the will of God to wayward men?

And indeed, notwithstanding the fact that we are called to many different occupations and all of them holy if they are God’s will, the gospel ministry in its various forms is the highest call possible. Having introduced us in succession to the supremacy of Christ in creation (vv. 15–17), in the Church (v. 18), and in reconciliation (vv. 19–23), Paul now gives us a supremely magnificent perspective on his resulting ministry. It is a remarkably balanced view which delineates four aspects of his own ministry:

PAUL’S MINISTERIAL _____ (v. 24)

Paul explicitly said he rejoiced in his sufferings. From a secularist perspective, what he says is incomprehensible—“baptized masochism.” But Romans 5:3 speaks of exulting in tribulation; 1 Peter 4:13 says to suffer and rejoice; Acts 5:41 tells of the apostles rejoicing that they had been counted “worthy” to suffer. Paul too rejoiced. But why?

First, because his suffering brought good to the Church. “Now I rejoice in what was suffered for you, and I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking ... for the sake of his body, which is the church.” Without his willingness to suffer (described in 2 Corinthians 11, where he listed an amazing catalogue of miseries he had undergone to bring the gospel to Asia), there would have been no church in Asia. The gospel has always spread through missionary hardship. But there is something more here, and it is far more subtle: believers grow through their personal suffering, and the good they receive flows to others—thus edifying the Church. John Newton, the author of “Amazing Grace,” said: God appoints his ministers to be sorely exercised, both from without

and within; that they may sympathize with their flock, and know in their own hearts the deceitfulness of sin, the infirmities of the flesh, and the way in which the Lord supports and bears all who trust in Him.

God's servants benefit, and everyone benefits. For Paul, this is cause for rejoicing. This is why very often the suffering of a brother or sister in Christ is a great source of blessing to the Church, for their elevated character is transferred to fellow believers.

Secondly, Paul described his suffering as "fill[ing] up in my flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ's afflictions." This is one of the most debated verses in all of Scripture! Whole books have been written on its interpretation over the last 2,000 years. We know it does *not* mean that Paul made up that which was lacking in the atoning sufferings of Christ, for the whole of Colossians as well as the rest of the New Testament teaches the sufficiency of Christ in atonement (cf. 2:13, 14; 1:12–14, 19–22). Paul did not help with the Atonement; that was Christ's solo work. But one thing that the phrase does teach for sure (and everyone agrees on this) is that a close identification develops between Christ and the Church through suffering. Before Paul's Damascus Road encounter, Paul had been making Christ suffer in the people he was persecuting. Christ's first words to Saul made this clear: "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" (Acts 9:4). Jesus was being persecuted in the bodies of his followers. However, immediately after Paul's conversion Jesus said, "I will show him how much he must suffer for my name" (9:16). Now Paul would suffer, and Christ would suffer in him—a stupendous truth!

...How then did Paul fill up "what is still lacking in regard to Christ's afflictions"? No one knows for sure. Many top scholars today, such as Ralph Martin and Peter O'Brien, believe that Paul's words have reference to the common Jewish understanding that the Messianic Age was to be preceded by a definite amount of suffering (I Enoch 47:14; 2 Baruch 30:2). Thus the sufferings are the sufferings of God's people, but they are ultimately Christ's sufferings because of his identity with his people. So Paul in his sufferings helped fulfill Christ's and thus hastened the Messianic Age. If this is the correct interpretation, Paul was rejoicing because his sufferings (which are Christ's sufferings) were bringing the total nearer the ultimate goal and hastening the day of the Kingdom.

However that may be, one thing is clear: Paul knew his sufferings were good for the Church and that they brought to him a special closeness with Christ. Every blow that fell on him fell on his Master, and thus bound them even closer together in mutual suffering. Paul's experience was like that of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego who in the fiery furnace were joined by a fourth person: the Lord (Daniel 3:25). That is why Paul could pray from a Roman jail: I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death. (Philippians 3:10) Paul knew sufferings are miserable, but the resulting sense of union with Christ is wonderful.

PAUL'S MINISTERIAL _____ (vv. 25–27)

I have become its [the Church's] servant by the commission God gave me to present to you the word of God in its fullness....(v. 25) This charge has preaching as its main function, and specifically Biblical exposition. The phrase "to present to you the word of God" literally reads, "that I might complete the Word of God." The idea is to lay out the Word of God fully. People cannot know Christ better without knowing the Scriptures. Preaching (exposition) was the heart of God's call to Paul.

Preaching must open the Word of God. Paul affirms here such preaching is primary to an authentic ministry. There is no shortcut—it takes work. Joseph Parker put it this way: If I had talked all the week, I could not have preached on Sunday. That is all. Mystery there is none. I have made my preaching work my delight, the very festival of my soul. That is all. Young brother, go thou and do likewise, and God bless thee!

The specifics of this preaching are given in verses 26 and 27: ... the mystery that has been kept hidden for ages and generations, but is now disclosed to the saints. To them God has chosen to make known among the Gentiles the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory. Paul's preaching set forth a "mystery"—namely, that in some way God's saving purpose was going to be extended to the Gentiles (Isaiah 49:6; Romans 15:9–12). From the ancient Jewish perspective, this seemed impossible because of the mutual disdain which Gentiles and especially Jews had for one another. It was a mystery indeed!

Bishop John Green of Sydney tells about working with a group of boys, some of aboriginal blood and some of English descent, and how the racial tensions were such that they would not sit peaceably with each other on the bus. One day when things were out of hand, he stopped the bus, ordered them all out, and told them they were no longer black and white, but green. He lined them up in alternate order and made each one say, "I'm green," as he got back on the bus. They drove along quietly "integrated," until he heard a voice from the back of the bus say, "OK, light green on one side and dark green on the other!"

The ancient Jews and Gentiles were like that, but with distinctly less humor, and their animosities went far beyond skin. The prophesied reconciliation of Jews and Gentiles was truly a mystery. Then Christ came, and the middle wall was broken down, and Jews and Gentiles became together a new man establishing *shalom*, peace (Ephesians 2:13–18).

... the mystery of Christ, which was not made known to men in other generations as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to God's holy apostles and prophets. This mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus. (Ephesians 3:4–6)

Jews and Gentiles all sat down at one table and counted themselves one in Christ. It was a miracle! This had come about only because of "Christ in you, the hope of glory" (v. 27b). The indwelling of the Lord Jesus Christ is what made the miracle possible. This happened in Colosse,

and it can happen today. One of the greatest glories of the gospel is that it brings people who are different from each other together.

PAUL'S MINISTERIAL _____ (v. 28)

Paul's goal is nothing short of presenting to Christ complete, mature, full-grown Christians. He was not into the "I'll save 'em, you raise 'em!" type of thinking. Rather, his great joy was to present to Christ believers who have reached their maximum earthly potential.

For what is our hope, our joy, or the crown in which we will glory in the presence of our Lord Jesus when he comes? Is it not you? Indeed, you are our glory and joy. (1 Thessalonians 2:19, 20)

Listen to Paul's benediction in 1 Thessalonians 5:23: May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. Paul's means of bringing believers to maturity, according to verse 28, was threefold: proclamation, admonishment, and teaching. He *proclaimed* Christ; Christ was the beginning and the end of his message. As George Whitefield said, "Other men may preach the gospel better than I, but no man can preach a better gospel."

When the preaching of Christ brought converts, Paul spent time "*admonishing ... everyone*," which means that he corrected and warned them. Paul did not shrink from this unpleasant task of admonishment, because he cared. I understand that when Henrietta Mears, one of the most effective Christians of our time, entered a room, people often had the feeling that she was saying to each person, "Where have you been? I've been looking all over for you." This was certainly the way it was with Paul. He also spent his time "*teaching everyone*." The Greek text of verse 28 is emphatic, mentioning "everyone" three times. Paul proclaimed Christ and admonished and taught everyone because he truly believed Christ was for everyone, and he saw great potential in every soul he touched. What a way to look at life!

PAUL'S MINISTERIAL _____ (v. 29)

The truth is, no one can hope to have a Biblically authentic ministry without hard work. Paul's language in this verse is brutally compelling. The Greek word translated "labor" was used for work which left one so weary it was as if the person had taken a beating. It denotes labor to exhaustion. "Struggling," a stronger term than "labor," was the Greek word from which we derive the English word *agony* and was used for agonizing in an athletic event or in a fight. The words together describe the tremendous energy of Paul's apostolic ministry. He strained every physical and moral sinew to present every man complete in Christ. First Thessalonians 2:9 pictures this: Surely you remember, brothers, our toil and hardship; we worked night and day in order not to be a burden to anyone while we preached the gospel of God.

It is often said, “When all is said and done, there is more said than done.” It ought not to be that way! Luther worked so hard that many days, according to his biographers, he fell into bed. Moody’s bedtime prayer on one occasion, as he rolled his bulk into bed, was, “Lord, I’m tired! Amen.” John Wesley rode sixty to seventy miles many days of his life and preached an average of three sermons a day, whether he was riding or not. Alexander Maclaren would get to his office when the workmen went to work so he could hear their boots outside, and would put on workmen’s boots to remind him why he was in his study. G. Campbell Morgan kept a newspaper clipping for twenty years, entitled “Sheer Hard Work,” and said: What is true of the minister is true of every man who bears the name of Christ. We have not begun to touch the great business of salvation when we have sung, “Rescue the perishing, care for the dying.” We have not entered into the business of evangelizing the city or the world until we have put our own lives into the business, our own immediate physical endeavor, inspired by spiritual devotion.

Conclusion

Paul’s ministerial drive is a model for us all. Lest anyone misunderstand him, Paul says that he strives **according to His power, which mightily works within me**. All his toil and hard labor would have been useless apart from God’s power in his life. To the Corinthians he wrote, “By the grace of God I am what I am, and His grace toward me did not prove vain; but I labored even more than all of them, yet not I, but the grace of God with me” (1 Cor. 15:10). God gave Paul the strength to work hard at his ministry. Galatians 2:20 really sums up the two components in this human-divine action: “I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me, and delivered Himself up for me.” All Christians serve Christ in some capacity. Paul’s message to all in this passage is, “The things you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, practice these things” (Phil. 4:9).²

² John F. MacArthur Jr., *Colossians*, MacArthur New Testament Commentary (Chicago: Moody Press, 1992), 82.

Lesson 7 (5-24-26)

Apostolic Concerns (Colossians 2:1-5)

2 For I want you to know how great a struggle I have for you and for those at Laodicea and for all who have not seen me face to face, ² that their hearts may be encouraged, being knit together in love, to reach all the riches of full assurance of understanding and the knowledge of God's mystery, which is Christ, ³ in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. ⁴ I say this in order that no one may delude you with plausible arguments. ⁵ For though I am absent in body, yet I am with you in spirit, rejoicing to see your good order and the firmness of your faith in Christ.

- Colossians 2:1-5 ESV

Summary

Having described his ministry to the church at large, Paul now focuses his specific attention on the local congregations, particularly the church at Colossae and his service on their behalf. These verses are more personal and convey the apostle's affection for the Colossians with an endearing passion that should reflect our hearts for God's people.¹ In this section, Paul expresses his deep concern and spiritual struggle for believers in Colossae, Laodicea, and others who have not met him personally. His desire is that they would be encouraged in heart, united in love, and grow in full assurance of understanding, knowing the mystery of God—Christ himself, in whom all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge are found. Paul warns them so that no one will deceive them with persuasive arguments. Though he is not physically present with them, he rejoices to hear of their good order and the firmness of their faith in Christ.

Observation Questions (What does the text say?)

1. What does Paul say he is struggling or striving for in verse 1?
2. Which groups of believers does Paul specifically mention in verse 1?
3. What does Paul desire for their hearts in verse 2?
4. What does it mean that believers are to be "knit together in love"?
5. What kind of understanding does Paul want them to reach?
6. In whom are all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge hidden (v. 3)?
7. What warning does Paul give in verse 4?
8. Even though Paul is absent physically, what does he say about his presence with them in verse 5?
9. What two qualities of the Colossians does Paul rejoice in seeing?

¹ R. Scott Pace, "Colossians," in *Exalting Jesus in Colossians and Philemon*, ed. David Platt, Daniel L. Akin, and Tony Merida, Christ-Centered Exposition Commentary (Nashville, TN: Holman Reference, 2021), 50.

Interpretation Questions (What does the text mean?)

1. What does Paul mean by his “great struggle” for these believers?
2. Why is encouragement of the heart important for Christian growth?
3. How does unity in love help believers grow in understanding?
4. What does it mean that the treasures of wisdom and knowledge are found in Christ?
5. Why would persuasive or “plausible” arguments be dangerous for believers?
6. What might threaten the “good order” and “firmness” of a church’s faith?
7. How does Paul’s concern show the importance of spiritual care even from a distance?

Application Questions (How should this change us?)

1. Who are you currently praying and striving for spiritually the way Paul did for these believers?
2. What helps believers stay united and “knit together in love” in a church?
3. Where do people today often look for wisdom apart from Christ?
4. How can you guard yourself against persuasive but false ideas about God or truth?
5. What practices help strengthen your faith in Christ so that it remains firm?
6. How can you encourage other believers so their hearts are strengthened in the faith?
7. What role can you play in helping your church maintain unity, order, and strong faith?
8. Was there anything from last week’s sermon that was especially challenging? Convicting? Encouraging?

Lesson Outline [This lesson was adapted from *R. C. Lucas, Fullness & Freedom: The Message of Colossians & Philemon, The Bible Speaks Today (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1980), 81–85.*]

In this section Paul continues to write of his ministry. But a division here is allowable. So far (1:24–29) Paul has explained the leading principles that guided him in his work with all the churches. This pattern of apostolic ministry was explained to the Colossians so that the church might have a standard of comparison against which to measure the style of the new teachers. But now the apostle addresses them more intimately. He begins to open his heart, and share with them his special hopes and concerns for their future.

A very few sentences like these suffice to show why Paul was so greatly loved. Modern caricatures of the apostle as forbidding or angular, unnecessarily cerebral and dogmatic, indifferent to women and ungracious to opponents, are a painful commentary on present-day ignorance of his letters. But it is a common experience that grotesque misunderstandings easily grow when we never meet people face to face, and have to depend on garbled or second-hand accounts of their attitudes.

From a careful reading of verses 1 and 5 it looks as if just such a situation was in danger of arising in Colossae. The visitors were not without a capacity for disparagement, even malicious slander, if our understanding of Paul's swift defense of Epaphras is correct. The Colossians had never set eyes on the apostle nor heard him speak. In these circumstances it is not difficult to imagine that Paul's position could be misinterpreted, and mutual confidence damaged. All this would provide the perfect soil in which dissensions and divisions could grow.

Against this kind of background, Paul's words here leap to life. He tells the Colossians that he wants them to be aware of his personal interest in them, and the joy their stability gives him. He wants them to know that he is actively concerned for them (this seems to be the force of the word 'strive' which links with 'striving' in the previous verse, 1:29). And not just for them, but for the other Christian communities of the Lycus valley, especially the church at Laodicea, for similar perils threaten them all. Three features stand out in what the apostle has to say to them:

1. Paul's Special _____ (verses 1–3)

The special concern of this paragraph is not immediately obvious. One commentator has preferred 'instructed' instead of 'knit together' (a reasonable preference since the verb can mean either) on the ground that unity is not an issue in this letter. But there is no practical issue more important in this paragraph or in the whole letter than that of unity! For Paul the most certain result of any acceptance of the new teaching will be a breach of fellowship in the church. Therefore his special concern for the Colossians is that they should continue to be united in love. He writes specifically to *encourage* (there is a flavor of affectionate admonition in this word) them to stick together.

The fine thing about this word of exhortation is the balance of it. The apostle recognizes that lasting unity depends upon *truth* as well as *love*. Christians have to be substantially of one mind as well as of one heart. That is why Paul wants all the Christians at Colossae to share that rich spiritual assurance that comes with the conviction that *all* the secret treasures of divine wisdom and insight are to be found in Christ. This seems to be the thrust of the remarkable words in verses 2 and 3. Once it is agreed among the brethren that there are no essential truths outside of Christ, and that therefore there can be no essential insights hidden from anyone who is now in Christ, it becomes possible to maintain mutual confidence and love among themselves.

But on the other hand, if there are those who claim an understanding of God beyond the ordinary 'man in Christ', and if certain believers claim to have found spiritual riches more than those which conversion and baptism into Christ have given them, then church unity will be seriously at risk. Because disagreement here, at this central point, was seen by Paul to be so serious a matter, an interpreter could opt for the word 'instructed' rather than 'knit together', and claim that this binds the phrases together more coherently. Paul is then understood to be encouraging the brethren to instruct one another in love (a familiar Pauline thought), so that they arrive at a common mind about Christ and his fullness, with all the stability that such agreement brings. However, in view of the further use of 'knit together' in 2:19, the RSV translation is preferable.

2. Paul's Special _____ (verse 4)

If the unity of the church at Colossae was at risk, it is no surprise that Paul was deeply concerned. In his letters from prison the need for maintaining spiritual unity is repeatedly taught. On this subject the apostle could offer quite definite and pertinent advice, and he is prepared to name names, as in Philippians 4:2.

Here in verse 4, some commentators have thought that Paul has his eye on one particular leader among the innovators of whom he has received reports. What is much more probable is that, from such reports, Paul has come to recognize a particular quality that appears to characterize this man and his helpers. There is a certain stamp about them. It is not so much what they say as how they say it that reveals them to Paul. For what is noticeable about them is that they are skilled in the arts of persuasion. Their speech proves in practice to be most *beguiling*. There is of course nothing wrong in itself with the ability to persuade others. Paul himself was a highly skillful persuader from earliest days, and he often urges other preachers to be the same.⁴ But here the word is clearly given a negative meaning. There is a 'persuasiveness' that Paul fears.

The mark of these teachers, therefore, was that although their matter was false, their manner was such that people readily believed them. Their listeners were carried away by the eloquence and skill with which their case was presented. A more critical attitude towards what they said might have shown up the flaws in the argument. But people were in no mood for analysis when what they heard charmed and captivated them. The inevitable result followed; those who gave heed to these impressive and high-sounding speakers were *deluded* by them. This powerful word, 'deluded', means simply that people were deceived and led astray from the right paths. The Greek word occurs in one other place in the New Testament, James 1:22, where it is used to refer to our capacity, even as Christians, to deceive ourselves. So listeners to the new teachers might also be self-deceived, wanting to believe what they heard. Possibly, too, some of the teachers themselves were not conscious deceivers of others, but self-deceived in their turn.

It was essential to listen to Paul's warning in his own day: it is even more essential to heed it in our day when the arts of persuasion, and the means by which they can be exercised, are so highly developed. There is a fresh responsibility laid on Christians to examine all teaching for the truthfulness of its content rather than the attractiveness of its packaging. There is a new call to be skeptical of exaggerated rhetoric, the tendentious anecdote, or the theatrical appeal, for nothing is so dangerous as feeble reasoning allied to fast talking.

There is also a responsibility on those who preach, to follow Paul in his renunciation of the smooth talk of the salesman, or the clever one-sided presentation of the propagandist. People's minds are far too easily influenced by these means today. It is not that there is evil in possessing gifts of persuasiveness so long as these gifts are harnessed to, and controlled by, sound thinking. But as our business is with truth, and with the God-given conviction that it brings, all our methods of presentation should be as frank and truthful as we can make them.

3. Paul's Special _____ (verse 5)

This is a very happy verse. It gives the reader good hope that, despite the dangers facing the Colossian church through 'false brethren', and all the many anxieties Paul felt, there was to be a happy ending to the whole affair nonetheless. For the moment, at any rate, the situation as Paul saw it at Colossae was still cause for great joy. Though absent in body (the fetters saw to that, 4:18) he wants the Colossians to know that he is 'with them' in spirit, especially as their faith comes under fire.

We may allow ourselves this military metaphor since Paul makes use of similar army terminology when he describes the 'order' and 'firmness' of the church at Colossae. It is a natural use of language, perhaps used almost unconsciously, and suggests that despite the enticements of the false teachers, the Christians were standing firm with unbroken ranks. Their faith was still fixed, as we might say, foursquare on Christ alone...

Conclusion

As with the Colossians, our faith can also be challenged by the weight of our circumstances or the intimidation from our adversaries. But in Christ we have the full assurance of our security through his victory; and, therefore, we can encourage one another to stand firm in our faith. As a result, by affirming, anchoring, alerting, and assuring God's people, we can strengthen one another as members of the church.

Paul's faithfulness as a servant of Christ did not qualify him for a lofty status and a life free of troubles and trials. In fact, he encountered exactly the opposite. It was precisely because of his devotion to Christ that he was subjected to the suffering and struggles he endured. In gratitude for what Jesus had suffered on his behalf and for the eternal glory he secured, Paul willingly and joyfully subjected himself to hardships for the sake of Christ's church.

Many Christians today take the opposite approach to finding joy in the church. Sadly, members and guests often adopt a consumer mindset, looking for the highest rate of return with the least amount of required investment. They want to benefit from the ministries of the church and escape from the misery of the world without recognizing that the church was founded on and functions on servants' hearts, not selfish ones (Matt 20:28). Ultimately, the greatest joy in the Christian life is not found in the comfort and conveniences offered in the local church; it is found in offering ourselves in sacrifice and service to its Savior and Lord. By suffering as a minister of the church, striving for the mission of the church, and strengthening the members of the church, we can participate in the cause of Christ, be commended as his faithful servants, and share in our Master's joy (Matt 25:21).²

² R. Scott Pace, "Colossians," in *Exalting Jesus in Colossians and Philemon*, ed. David Platt, Daniel L. Akin, and Tony Merida, Christ-Centered Exposition Commentary (Nashville, TN: Holman Reference, 2021), 53.

Lesson 8 (5-31-26)

Learning to Walk (Colossians 2:6-15)

⁶ Therefore, as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him, ⁷ rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving. ⁸ See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ. ⁹ For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, ¹⁰ and you have been filled in him, who is the head of all rule and authority. ¹¹ In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, ¹² having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead. ¹³ And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, ¹⁴ by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross. ¹⁵ He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him.

- Colossians 2:6-15 ESV

Summary

This passage builds on Paul's remarks in vv. 2–3. Because Christ represents the full revelation of God (vv. 3, 9), and because believers are united with Christ (vv. 6, 10), the Colossians can be confident of their salvation and the defeat of worldly powers (vv. 7, 13–15).¹

Observation Questions (What does the text say?)

1. What does Paul tell believers to do in the same way they received Jesus Christ (v. 6)?
2. What four descriptions does Paul use for the believer's life in verse 7?
3. What warning does Paul give in verse 8?
4. What sources of false teaching are mentioned in verse 8?
5. What does verse 9 say dwells in Christ?
6. What does Paul say believers have received in Christ in verse 10?
7. What does Paul say about Christ's authority in verse 10?
8. What kind of "circumcision" does Paul describe in verse 11?
9. What connection does Paul make between baptism and burial/resurrection in verse 12?
10. What condition were believers in before God made them alive with Christ (v. 13)?
11. What two things did God do for believers in verse 13?
12. What happened to the record of debt that stood against us (v. 14)?
13. What did God do with the rulers and authorities according to verse 15?

¹ John D. Barry et al., *Faithlife Study Bible* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2012, 2016), Col 2:6–15.

Interpretation Questions (What does the text mean?)

1. What does it mean to “walk in Christ” the same way you received Him?
2. How do the images of being rooted, built up, and established describe spiritual growth?
3. Why would philosophy or human tradition pose a danger to believers?
4. What does Paul mean by saying the “fullness of deity” dwells bodily in Christ?
5. Why is it important that believers are described as being “complete” or “filled” in Christ?
6. What is the significance of the “circumcision of Christ” that Paul mentions?
7. How does baptism symbolize the believer’s union with Christ in death and resurrection?
8. What does the “record of debt” represent in verse 14?
9. How did Christ’s death deal with sin, guilt, and condemnation?
10. What does it mean that Christ disarmed the rulers and authorities?

Application Questions (How should this change us?)

1. What does it look like in daily life to “walk in Christ”?
2. What habits help believers stay spiritually rooted and strengthened in their faith?
3. What kinds of modern ideas or teachings might try to pull believers away from Christ?
4. How does knowing that the fullness of God is in Christ shape your confidence in Him?
5. In what ways can gratitude overflow in the life of a believer?
6. How should the truth that your sins are forgiven affect how you think about your past?
7. What encouragement do you find in knowing Christ has defeated spiritual powers?
8. How can the truths in this passage strengthen your faith when you face temptation or doubt?
9. Was there anything from last week’s sermon that was especially challenging? Convicting? Encouraging?

Lesson Outline [This lesson was adapted from *R. Scott Pace, “Colossians,” in Exalting Jesus in Colossians and Philemon, ed. David Platt, Daniel L. Akin, and Tony Merida, Christ-Centered Exposition Commentary (Nashville, TN: Holman Reference, 2021), 55–68.*]

Walking with God is a metaphor for the believer’s life that appears on the earliest pages of Scripture (Gen 5:22; 6:9; 48:15). It is used throughout the Old Testament to describe God’s people as they journey through life and live according to his ways (i.e., Deut 30:16; Pss 1:1; 119:1). In the New Testament “walking” describes a life of faith (2 Cor 5:7) and the nature of our spiritual growth and progress that parallels the physical development of a child (3 John 4). It is important for us to recognize what this familiar metaphor of walking is meant to communicate. Like life, walking spiritually requires strength and stamina, it involves direction and a destination; one must avoid pitfalls and overcome obstacles to stay on course.

Like a spiritual parent, Paul recognized these aspects of walking with God and the Colossians’ need to be encouraged, supported, and protected as they learned to take steps on their

individual spiritual journeys. He used the phrase previously in the letter to describe the Christian life God desires for his children that ultimately honors him (1:10). He uses it here, to “walk in him” (2:6), as he begins to offer his guidance for their growing faith.

These verses are essentially a synopsis of the entire letter and reflect the heart of the book. Paul transitions from his prayerful and personal introduction and bases his practical instruction through the remainder of the letter on the foundational truths he established in his extended opening. The use of “so then” (v. 6) clearly identifies the preliminary material (1:3–2:5) as the theological and circumstantial impetus for the Colossians to “continue to walk in him” (v. 6). The rest of the letter describes what a life devoted to Christ looks like, and this passage prescribes the initial steps of the lifelong journey. Paul teaches the Colossians what God wants all believers to know—that a faithful walk with Christ requires us to pursue intimacy with Jesus, find fulfillment in the sufficiency of Jesus, and claim our victorious identity in Jesus.

We Must _____ Our _____ with Christ (2:6–7)

In order to learn to walk with the Lord, the first step we must take is to deepen our intimacy with Christ. Paul describes this process in the initial verses of this passage that could also be characterized as the thesis of the letter. The initial phrase reminds the Colossians of their positional status as those who had trusted “Christ Jesus as Lord,” with the goal of provoking their further spiritual progression (v. 6). This phrase/title Paul uses in reference to their salvation draws from the description of Christ’s identity as the supreme and sovereign Lord in the Christ hymn of 1:15–20 and reinforces his deity and distinction over and above any rival teachings of the Colossian heresy. Therefore, “just as” the Colossians had “received” him as the “Lord,” they should “continue to walk in him” in complete submission and obedience.

This ongoing “walk” with Christ is the subject of Paul’s intercession for them (1:10), and the same term is used here as the focus of his instruction for them (2:6). Paul prescribes a life that honors the Lord by using four participles in 2:7 that mirror the four in his earlier prayer on their behalf—“being rooted” / “bearing fruit” (1:10), “built up” / “growing” (1:10), “established” / “being strengthened” (1:11), “overflowing with gratitude” / “giving thanks” (1:12; Pao, *Colossians and Philemon*, 156). His petitions, now directives, inform us how to deepen our intimacy with Christ.

We Are Called to Be Grounded (2:6–7)

Paul uses this horticultural metaphor, “rooted” (v. 7), to describe our positional status in the Lord and our need to remain firmly planted in him. His terminology evokes thoughts of the psalmist’s description of the “happy” man who is “like a tree planted beside flowing streams that bears its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither” (Ps 1:1, 3). In order to mature in our walk with Christ, we must be nourished by the source of life, Jesus himself, and be planted in the soil of God’s truth that allows us to abide in him. The term also echoes Jesus’s use of agricultural imagery as he instructed his disciples to “remain” in him (John 15:4–7). Not only do the roots provide access to the source of life, but they also provide stability and keep us from shifting or ultimately falling away. Similar to the way one may use the concept of *roots* to refer

to one's heritage, being "rooted" in Christ includes remaining grounded in the faith by which we "received" him (Col 2:6). Like the Colossians, our faith must continue in its original soil and not be uprooted. By continuing to draw from the streams of living water that never run dry, we will deepen our intimacy with Christ and produce fruit that remains.

We Are Called to Be Growing (2:7)

Our personal fellowship with Christ also fuels our continued growth in him. Paul shifts to a construction metaphor, "built up," to describe our personal and corporate spiritual progress "in him" (v. 7). The combination of agricultural and architectural metaphors weds the shared concept of a necessary foundation to produce and sustain growth (O'Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, 107). This reflects the same blended use of metaphors Paul combined to describe the growth God produces through the sowing and watering ministries of his servants as well as their construction efforts to build on the foundation of Jesus Christ (see 1 Cor 3:5–11).

As a construction term, "built up" is almost certainly an allusion to the people of God as his dwelling place (Pao, *Colossians and Philemon*, 157); we are being formed together and growing together "into a holy temple" (Eph 2:19–22; cf. 1 Cor 3:16). As we are rooted in Christ, we grow in intimacy with him and in community with his people, as "living stones" who are "being built" into a "spiritual house" (1 Pet 2:5). Therefore, God desires for us to grow deeper in our personal walk with Christ and in our corporate devotion so that we might be "built up" and draw closer to him.

Being "rooted and built up" will ultimately fortify the Colossians so that they may be "established in the faith" (Col 2:7). While some commentators interpret this as a legal metaphor, Paul is more likely using it to describe the collective effect of being grounded and growing (Moo, *The Letters*, 181). As believers, they will be strengthened and will persevere in their faith as it is reinforced through a continual commitment to the truth, "just as [they] were taught" (v. 7). In other words, Paul is challenging them and cautioning them to grow deeper in what they know (and *whom* they know!) in order to prevent their being seduced by false teachers with competing and conflicting doctrines that do not exalt Christ. Being "rooted ... built up ... and established" (v. 7) will allow us to "remain grounded and steadfast in the faith" and not be "shifted away from the hope of the gospel" (1:23).

We Are Called to Be Grateful (2:7)

The first three participles are all in passive form and emphasize God's role in accomplishing our grounding and growth. The final one, "overflowing with gratitude" (v. 7), is an active participle that highlights our response to God's redemptive and renewing work on our behalf. As we grow in Christ and stay focused on the gospel, the undeserved nature of God's grace toward us should humble us and produce gratitude in our hearts. Thanksgiving is a consistent theme throughout the letter and is meant to characterize the life of the believer (cf. 1:3, 12; 2:7; 3:15, 17; 4:2). It certainly includes a prevailing *attitude* of gratitude, but it also should be apparent through intentional *expressions* of thanksgiving. This seems to be the goal of Paul's exhortation in this verse as he characterizes it as "overflowing" from our lives. Our gratitude to the Lord will be evident through acts of kindness and benevolence to others, offerings of praise and worship

to the Lord, and lives spent in humble submission to him. As a result, our intimacy with Christ will perpetually deepen by producing further gratitude as we are grounded and growing in him.

We Must _____ the _____ of Christ (2:8–10)

In addition to deepening our intimacy with Christ, learning to walk with him also requires us to find our fulfillment in his total and utter sufficiency. The Colossians were being besieged with false teachings about the person and work of Jesus, and these deceptive and destructive heresies were threatening to undermine the foundation of truth on which their faith had been established. Pursuing the prescribed religious practices and adopting false ideologies that ultimately distort and diminish the nature and redemptive work of Christ would eventually leave them empty and derail their faith.

In similar fashion, our culture attempts to entice us with persuasive philosophies and worldly values that denigrate the person and work of our Savior and subtly seek to render our faith ineffective. In order to combat these dangerous influences, we must recognize the infinite worth of Christ as the only source of true fulfillment and denounce any teaching to the contrary. Paul goes on to explain how we can distinguish between faithful teaching and the contemporary versions of false teaching.

False Teaching Deceives Us and Denies Christ (2:8)

The nature of Paul's warning is stronger than a cautionary awareness. "Be careful" alerts his readers to the threat of an imminent danger that has serious consequences (v. 8). Likewise, his vivid metaphorical admonition to avoid being taken "captive" by false teachers speaks to the influential and delusional nature of their doctrine and its ability to enslave those who become convinced. His warning is further strengthened by the irony of the perceived freedom offered by those who take spiritual hostages contrasted with Paul's genuine freedom in the gospel despite his physical imprisonment.

His description of the false teaching also underscores its convincing and devious nature. The deceptive teaching of this world distorts its victim's entire perspective: "philosophy"; it is misleading and worthless: "empty deceit"; and it is not according to God's eternal truth but is "based on human tradition" and "the elements of the world" (v. 8). Paul describes the shallow and hollow foundation that these captivating doctrines are "based on" to intentionally contrast his previous instruction to the Colossians to be "rooted" and "established" in Christ (v. 7).

The fundamental flaw of all false doctrine is the distortion and denial of the foundational truth of the gospel, the person and work of Jesus. Paul accentuates this distinguishing factor, "rather than Christ" (v. 8), and thereby denounces any alternative teaching as that which is diametrically opposed to the gospel of Jesus. In other words, faith in Christ must be exclusive and cannot be enhanced, either by addition (through religious practices and good works) or by subtraction (by abstaining from sin or depriving yourself of privileges). While the deceptive philosophy and values of this world may not explicitly reject Christ, their failure to affirm his sole sufficiency ultimately denies him.

Faithful Teaching Edifies Us and Exalts Christ (2:9–10)

In contrast with the false teaching that deceives us and denies Christ, Paul characterizes faithful teaching as that which edifies us and exalts Christ. Having established the ultimate distinguishing factor as the person and work of Christ (v. 8), Paul now elaborates on the crucial distinctions of the gospel that set their faith apart. His description of the essence and effect of faithful teaching is in direct contradiction to that of the false teaching. The barren emptiness of the deceptive doctrine is exceeded by the divine fullness of Christ, “the entire fullness of God’s nature dwells bodily in Christ” (v. 9). The concept of “fullness” excludes room for any competing doctrines or practices. But Paul’s ultimate point was to affirm the comprehensive nature of Christ’s essence as the “entire” embodiment of divine nature. It reiterates Paul’s earlier declaration, “God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him” (1:19), with emphatic force as he explicitly and exclusively affirms that Christ is the real and actual presence of God himself in bodily form...

The implications of these crucial theological truths are significant and multifaceted. First, Christ is preeminent and worthy of all worship. Any teaching or practice that attempts to diminish his worthiness by elevating other beings or beliefs must be denounced. Likewise, any form of worship that dishonors or dilutes his infinite worth should be avoided. Second, Christ’s universal supremacy translates into his ultimate sufficiency. He is not lacking in any way; therefore, in him neither are we. In Christ we possess everything from true wisdom to eternal wealth to personal worth. Jesus is our everything! Finally, as God’s people, we “have been filled by him” (v. 10) and can experience our true fulfillment in him. Apart from Christ there is no genuine satisfaction, but through his fullness we are made complete. “In him,” and through him in us, we can fulfill our created purpose and experience life in its fullest expression (cf. John 10:10). Therefore, as we continue to walk in him, we must affirm his sufficiency in both our theological beliefs and our everyday behaviors, while denouncing every principle or practice that attempts to undermine his fullness.

We Must _____ Our _____ in Christ (2:11–15)

Progressing in our walk with him also requires us to define our identity in Christ. The letter to the Colossians follows the common being-doing pattern of New Testament epistles. This is sometimes referred to as the indicative/imperative approach, and Colossians provides a prime example of this design (Moo, *The Letters*, 176). This model is a synopsis of the Christian life: it is based on timeless theological truths and the reality of who we are in Christ (indicative), and the corresponding behavior and practical implications are prescribed and commanded (imperative).

As the hinge passage in Paul’s letter to the Colossians, these verses not only encourage us to progress in our walk (vv. 6–7) based on the timeless truths of Christ’s identity (vv. 8–10); they also propel us forward based on the fullness and reality of our identity in him (vv. 11–15). Paul repeatedly uses the phrase “in him” or “with him” in succession throughout these verses to signify the union we share with Jesus and the corresponding status we have as believers. The person and work of Christ are clearly the focal point, but, as Paul explains, our identity is

defined by his redemptive work that is applied to us through every aspect of the salvation he secured on our behalf.

He Circumcised Our Hearts (2:11)

In conjunction with the fullness of Christ and our fullness in him, Paul now expounds on our status as his people by referencing the Jewish custom of circumcision (v. 11). As the covenant sign of God's people in the Old Testament, circumcision was the defining physical distinctive that set his people apart from the pagan nations (Gen 17:9–14). It not only signified the covenant relationship; it also indicated the means by which the covenant would be ratified and fulfilled in the promised Messiah through Abraham's seed (Gen 12:1–7) and the seed of woman (Gen 3:15). Moses recognized the spiritual nature of circumcision and the circumcision of the heart that it ultimately represented (Deut 30:6).

Similarly, Paul affirmed the spiritual nature of circumcision (Rom 2:25–29) as well as the spiritual nature of the "seed" promise and its covenant fulfillment in Christ (Gal 3:16, 29). Therefore, he describes it here as a personal reality we possess in Christ, as those who "were also circumcised in him," and the spiritual covenant that has been performed by God, "a circumcision not done with hands" (Col 2:11)...

He Conquered over Death (2:12–13)

The spiritual circumcision we receive in Christ is accomplished through his sacrifice and our participation in it by faith. In addition to this redemptive truth, Paul goes on to explain that through Christ's substitutionary atonement and his bodily resurrection he also conquered death, defeating the ultimate penalty of sin (Gen 2:15–17; Rom 6:23), and offers us new life. Both aspects of Christ's work and our corresponding status in him are spoken of as that which have already occurred and are established, "*were* also circumcised" (Col 2:11), "*were* buried," and "*were* also raised with him" (v. 12; emphasis added). In addition, they also are both received and applied "through faith in the working of God" (v. 12).

Our communion with Christ in his death as those who "were buried with him in baptism" (v. 12) reinforces our "circumcised" status as his covenant people. But Paul's continued explanation, "You were also raised with him" (v. 12) and "He made you alive with him" (v. 13), highlights an additional aspect of our identity in Christ that has several implications. First, it offers us assurance of the eternal hope that is secured for all believers through Christ's resurrection (cf. 1:5, 12). Additionally, this crucial aspect of understanding is also the foundational truth and motivation for Paul's practical instructions through the remainder of the letter as that which corresponds to our new identity in him (3:1). And finally, not only should our godly lifestyle be consistent with our resurrected status, the power of God, "who raised him from the dead" (2:12), now dwells within us through the Holy Spirit and enables us to live according to our identity in Christ (cf. Rom 8:11). Because he has conquered death, "we are more than conquerors through him" (Rom 8:37), and we have the ability to say no to sin and yes to righteousness (cf. Rom 6:3–13).

He Canceled Our Debt (2:13–14)

The third aspect of Christ's work that defines our identity in him is the redemptive forgiveness that his work secures: he canceled our debt. Paul helps the Colossians understand the correlation between Christ's death, burial, and resurrection and the atonement it provides for our sin. The description of their previous status as those who "were dead in trespasses and in the uncircumcision of [their] flesh" (v. 13; cf. Eph 2:1–3) unites the two spiritual concepts from the preceding verses, Christ's "baptism" and "circumcision," and underscores the dramatic nature of spiritual conversion. It also establishes his atoning sacrifice as the source from which this third facet of our identity in Christ derives.

The sacrificial system of the Mosaic covenant was established to foreshadow Christ's sacrifice that would ultimately atone for sin (cf. Heb 9:11–10:18). Jesus died as "the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29) and will be worshiped with eternal praise as the "Lamb who was slaughtered" on our behalf (Rev 5:11–12). Through his blood, Christ atones for our sin, thereby securing our forgiveness through God's mercy and grace (Col 2:13; cf. Heb 9:22; 1 Pet 1:18–19). This forgiveness is comprehensive, "all our trespasses" (Col 2:13), and is complete (cf. John 19:30; Heb 9:26–28;).

While forgiveness has a forensic component that cleanses our sin (1 John 1:7, 9), it also has a financial connotation that cancels our debt. Paul emphasizes the second aspect in this passage, which corresponds to his previous description of salvation in payment terms: "redemption, the forgiveness of sins" (Col 1:14; cf. Eph 1:7). Christ's sacrifice satisfied and "erased" our "certificate of debt," the payment of death that our sin deserved and was owed to God (Col 2:14; c.f. Rom 6:23). This record of our sin, the violation of God's decrees and our required obedience, "its obligations," was "against us and opposed to us." In other words, we were indicted and stood condemned before God. But Christ, through his sacrifice, removed it "by nailing it to the cross" and canceled our debt. Therefore, we believers now stand before God forgiven, without guilt or shame, because the Lamb of God suffered the punishment for our sin!

He Condemned the Enemy (2:15)

Our spiritual conversion, "circumcision," resurrection, and "baptism" have not only provided us with new life and forgiveness of sin, but the work of Christ has also condemned the enemy. Paul previously declared Jesus's supremacy "over every ruler and authority" (2:10; cf. 1:16) by virtue of his sovereign nature. He now asserts Christ's supremacy based on his redemptive work on the cross and his resurrection that "disarmed the rulers and authorities" (v. 15). While Jesus voluntarily stripped off his body of flesh (v. 11), by his sacrifice he victoriously stripped the opposing spiritual forces of their power as he "disarmed" and defeated them. These cosmic powers of darkness are the agents of the ultimate enemy, Satan, who wage war against our souls with fear, guilt, shame, and the threat of punishment (cf. Eph 6:11–12). But through Christ these enemies and their weapons are rendered powerless, and we have the ability to overcome their relentless, though impotent, attacks. Ultimately, Christ's death on the cross and his resurrection from the grave secured our eternal redemption, but it sealed his enemies' fate of eternal condemnation (Rev 20:10–15).

He Confirmed Our Victory (2:15)

The final aspect of our identity in Christ is our triumphant status through the confirmation of his victory. Paul explains that Jesus not only disarmed and defeated the enemy, but he also “disgraced them publicly” (v. 15). This phrase includes a dual understanding, a temporal and an eternal sense, that characterizes Christ’s triumph as both a humiliating defeat for his enemies and a glorious celebration for his people. While the cross of Christ satisfied God’s wrath toward sin and disarmed the enemy, Jesus’s conquering the grave ultimately secures our victory as believers (1 Cor 15:54–57) and declares him to be the “powerful Son of God ... by the resurrection of the dead” (Rom 1:3–4). In addition, his ascension exalts him to his rightful throne (Heb 1:3), restores his preexistent and preeminent glory (John 17:5), and proclaims his victory from “heaven ... at the right hand of God” (1 Pet 3:18–22; Moo, *The Letters*, 215–16). In other words, through Christ’s physical and visible resurrection and ascension, Jesus put on public display his victory and his enemies’ defeat...

Conclusion

Paul’s challenge for the Colossians to continue to “walk” in Christ is the same call of God for believers today (Eph 4:1). But as in the case of the original recipients of his letter, this requires us to pursue intimacy with Jesus, to find fulfillment in the sufficiency of Jesus, and to claim our victorious identity in Jesus. Each of these steps in our walk faces specific challenges that attempt to trip us up and detour us in our journey.

For instance, as believers we will face the temptation to drift away from the foundational truth of the gospel and personal intimacy with Christ as we grow comfortable and complacent in our salvation. We can become distracted by the busyness of our lives and ministries or even begin to explore other sources of spiritual nourishment and fulfillment. Instead, we must deepen our intimacy with Christ through the renewing grace and mercy of the gospel so that we may continually be grounded, growing, and grateful.

Likewise, our world will continue to entice us with its indulgent values, its empty promises, and even its spiritual counterfeits in an effort to convince us that they can satisfy and stabilize our lives. Rather than abandoning Jesus entirely, we may be persuaded to compromise our faith by attempting to synthesize worldly beliefs and behaviors with our commitment to Christ. But the sufficiency of Christ requires us to denounce any competing means of fulfillment as that which is ultimately empty and can never truly satisfy. His fullness is the only source of true satisfaction that can never be diluted or depleted.

Ultimately, our walk with Christ must also overcome the temptations to find our identity in what we know, what we can do, or what we have. Our identity as believers is determined by *who* we know, what *he* has done, and all that *he* offers. Through his death, burial, and resurrection, Christ has adopted us into his family, he has purchased our salvation, and he has given us new life with the power to walk in the victory that he has secured on our behalf!

Lesson 9 (6-7-26)

The Guarding of Your Treasure (Colossians 2:16-23)

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

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

- Colossians 2:16-23 ESV

Summary

In 2:8–23, Paul mounts a frontal attack on the Colossian heresy. He has already dealt with philosophy (2:8–10) and presented Christ’s sufficiency (2:11–15). In this text, he continues his refutation of the Colossian heresy by dealing with legalism (2:16–17), mysticism (2:18–19), and asceticism (2:20–23).¹

Observation Questions (What does the text say?)

1. What command does Paul give in verse 16 about letting others judge believers?
2. What specific practices or observances are mentioned in verse 16?
3. How does Paul describe these things in relation to what is to come (v. 17)?
4. What does Paul say belongs to Jesus Christ in verse 17?
5. What practices are associated with those who might disqualify believers (v. 18)?
6. What problem does Paul identify in verse 19 regarding their relationship to Christ?
7. How does Paul describe Christ’s role in relation to the body?
8. What question does Paul ask in verse 20 about dying with Christ?
9. What kinds of rules does Paul list in verse 21?
10. According to verse 22, what happens to these human commands and teachings?
11. How does Paul describe the appearance of these practices in verse 23?
12. What does Paul say they ultimately lack power to do?

¹ John F. MacArthur Jr., *Colossians*, MacArthur New Testament Commentary (Chicago: Moody Press, 1992), 116.

Interpretation Questions (What does the text mean?)

1. Why would some people judge others based on food laws or religious festivals?
2. What does Paul mean when he says these practices are a “shadow” while the “substance belongs to Christ”?
3. Why is seeking visions or worship of angels dangerous for believers?
4. What does it mean to fail to “hold fast to the Head”?
5. How does Christ provide growth for the church as its head?
6. Why does Paul say believers should not submit to man-made regulations?
7. What does this passage teach about the difference between human religion and true spiritual life?
8. Why might strict rules appear wise but still be spiritually ineffective?

Application Questions (How should this change us?)

1. In what ways might Christians today judge others based on external practices rather than faith in Christ?
2. How can believers stay focused on Christ instead of religious traditions or human rules?
3. What helps you “hold fast to the Head,” staying closely connected to Christ?
4. Why is it tempting to think strict rules will make us more spiritual?
5. How can believers distinguish between helpful spiritual discipline and legalism?
6. What does it look like for a church to grow by relying on Christ rather than human systems?
7. How can this passage help guard you against teachings that sound spiritual but move away from Christ?
8. Was there anything from last week’s sermon that was especially challenging? Convicting? Encouraging?

Lesson Outline [This lesson was adapted from *R. Kent Hughes, Colossians and Philemon: The Supremacy of Christ, Preaching the Word (Westchester, IL: Crossway Books, 1989), 81–87.*]

The text under consideration carries an ancient warning, as the Apostle Paul sounded a note which has brought deliverance to all those through the years who would hear it. Originally a warning for the Colossian church which was being besieged by its cultured enemies, it still pertains today in a world where the Church is beset by equally sophisticated and deadly foes. Here is a powerful bulwark against the very subtle attacks which would rob the believer of his or her fullness.

“DO NOT LET ANYONE JUDGE YOU”: A WARNING AGAINST _____ (16, 17)

The warning included two areas: diet and days. Regarding their being judged about diet, there were evidently those who were saying that the way to God and spiritual fullness would be enhanced if the Colossian believers returned to the dietary laws of the Old Testament. As you

know, the Old Testament categorized certain foods as clean and unclean (see Leviticus 11:2–20). Unknown to the Jew, there were excellent physical reasons for the Old Testament laws, which Dr. S. I. Macmillen has catalogued in his interesting book, *None of These Diseases*. There were also spiritual reasons, for the distinctions between foods were meant to familiarize God’s people with the fact of purity and impurity, and thus to stimulate the conscience in everyday life. But when Jesus came, those dietary laws were abolished.

Jesus said to the Pharisees, who were offended by his liberated eating habits: “‘Are you so dull? ... Don’t you see that nothing that enters a man from the outside can make him “unclean”? For it doesn’t go into his heart but into his stomach, and then out of his body.’ (In saying this, Jesus declared all foods ‘clean’” (Mark 7:18–20; cf. Matthew 15:1–20). Peter’s vision settled it for him, as he saw a sheet lowered from Heaven, crawling with clean and forbidden animals. Peter was scandalized! “Then a voice told him, ‘Get up, Peter. Kill and eat.’ ‘Surely not, Lord!’ Peter replied. ‘I have never eaten anything impure or unclean.’ The voice spoke to him a second time, ‘Do not call anything impure that God has made clean.’ This happened three times, and immediately the sheet was taken back to heaven” (Acts 10:13–16).

Paul made this conclusion in 1 Corinthians 8:8—“But food does not bring us near to God; we are no worse if we do not eat, and no better if we do.” So the New Testament Scriptures are unified in telling us that all food and drink are lawful. Of course, dietary principles are a good idea. Eat too many Twinkies and you will no longer be “twinkletoes”; too many Snickers are no laughing matter. But dietary discipline is not a sign of spirituality. We are not to judge others, or allow anyone to pass a religious judgment on us, in regard to food and drink.

The same applies to days. The Jews had their special feast days (Leviticus 25) and their “New Moon” celebrations (Isaiah 1:13) and their Sabbaths (Exodus 20:9–11). When Christ came, he fulfilled them all! We no longer celebrate the Sabbath because we now worship on the “Lord’s Day” (Revelation 1:10), the first day of the week (1 Corinthians 16:2; Acts 20:7), the day which commemorates the Resurrection (John 20). Verse 17 says that these things are “a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ.” The dietary rules sensitized God’s people to purity, the great feasts taught various aspects of Christ’s work, and the Sabbath displayed something of the rest into which he leads his people. But they were just “a shadow.” The real thing has come in Christ (cf. Luke 24:27).

The idea that spirituality can be quantified provides an unfortunate basis for pride and judgmentalism. The flesh finds doing truly spiritual things difficult, as “the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak” (Matthew 26:41, NASB). But the flesh has no trouble with religious rules and regulations. There is an authentic lure to legalism. However, though legalism also has its downside. It spawns *judgmentalism*. Judgmentalism is miserable for the judged and the judging, because it shrivels their souls.

Legalism is intrinsically *joyless*, as the savage tribesman observed when a missionary was trying to convert him. The tribesman was very old and the missionary was very Old Testament, with a version of Christianity which leaned very heavily on the “thou shalt nots.” After listening to

what the missionary said, the tribesman replied, “To be old and to be Christian, they are the same thing!”

Legalism also demands *uniformity*. Whenever you find legalism dominant, you will find people who dress the same way and use the same speech, posture, and manners—even the same facial expressions! “Do not” produce a grotesque uniformity.

Lastly, such legalism produces a *surface faith*, because its adherents emphasize the things which are not really important. Their “do not” ignore deadly sins such as coveting, gossiping, slandering, bitterness, and hatred. Legalism limits one to shallow self-righteousness, and thus damns him.

Interestingly, Paul does not say, “Forbid the faithful to keep special days and special diets.” Rather he says, “Do not let anyone judge you” in these things. (v. 16) There is great liberty in what we Christians can do: we can keep days and diets, or forget them. But he rejects the right of anyone to judge and/or compel another to comply with his own preferences. We are not to judge others by these things, and we are not to allow others to judge us. This is a warning to take to heart, because time and time again as legalism has come into the Church, the Church has become judgmental, joyless, uniform, and shallow in faith. As bad as legalism is, there is another danger equally harmful...

DO NOT LET ANYONE DISQUALIFY YOU: A WARNING AGAINST _____ (vv. 18, 19)

Before we explore this idea, we must say that Christian mysticism *per se* is not evil, for its goal is a deeper knowledge of God. What we are talking about here is a deceptive mysticism which is not rooted in Christ. In the context here, it is a mysticism derived from the pretense and imagination of the Gnostics...The Gnostics were great pretenders and fooled not only themselves, but the Colossians. Paul says that the Colossians were in danger of being deprived of their reward and future glory by the pretense of their cultured Gnostic friends. The Gnostics’ power to fool people came from their deceptive approach, which is delineated in the clauses of verse 18.

They used bogus humility, delighting in “false humility and the worship of angels.” They loved to act humble and say, “We are not good enough to go directly to God, so we begin humbly with one of the angels, which, if we are in correct spirit, will elevate our requests through the hierarchy to God.”

Next the Gnostic claimed to have special visions, going “into great detail about what he has seen.” This was a technical phrase used in that day to describe “someone being admitted to a higher grade in one of the mystery religions.” Through this, they claimed to be on the inside. The Gnostic was actually proud. “His unspiritual mind puffs him up with idle notions,” says Paul. Advertising humility, they were filled with huge conceit.

It was all vanity and sham, but learning the secrets of the spirit world can be enticing. Tarot cards, for example, are inviting. Their aesthetic design is meant to exude mystery, and millions have fallen into their lie. Likewise, the mystic signs of the Zodiac have claimed many. An exceptional display of piety is also attractive to many. Some people are drawn to those who say they are the “humblest” people in town. And the thought of being excluded from the “inner circle” is so devastating for some, they will do anything to get in.

C. S. Lewis, giving a guest lecture in 1944 to King’s College (at the University of London), said that the desire to be in the inner circle (whatever it may be) is one of the “great permanent mainsprings of human action. Of all passions, the passion for the Inner Ring is most skillful in making a man who is not yet a very bad man do very bad things.” Applied to the realm of religion, this is especially true! Like the ancient dog of fable who, while carrying his bone, paused at seeing its own reflection in the water, and grabbing at the mirrored prize lost the one he had, there are multitudes who have lost *all* to deception.

The root of the problem is laid bare in verse 19: “He has lost connection with the Head, from whom the whole body, supported and held together by its ligaments and sinews, grows as God causes it to grow.” The false teachers had (and have) no part in the true Body of Christ. Conversely, this was (and is) the answer for those who want to steel themselves against their delusive teaching. We must hold fast to Christ, the Head.

LET NO ONE ENSLAVE YOU: A WARNING AGAINST _____ (vv. 20–23)

Spiritual discipline is good. But here Paul warns against extreme asceticism...Sadly, church history is replete with stories of ascetic excess in the rejection of beautiful and good things in the pursuit of God: rejection of marriage, sex, parenthood, the beauty of God’s creation, even rejection of self. But this “self-made” religion does not do any good. In fact, it can heighten fleshly temptation and along with it produce a joyless, defensive approach to life.

Yet, surprisingly asceticism has its own seductiveness. Today, in its Eastern form, it attracts the indulgent, cultured elite. Thousands today have their gurus through whom they make their ascetic “nod-to-God.” Seen for what it really is, this is an expression of independence from God which says, “I’m going to get to God on my own terms, by my own might.” Asceticism feeds the flesh by starving it.

The answer to such delusion is in the beginning of this section on asceticism, in verse 20: we have “died with Christ to the basic principles of this world.” Our death in Christ has freed us from the “elemental spirits of the universe” (RSV), the demonic powers of this world which promote and thrive on human asceticism. Because we died with Christ, they have no actual power over us. We need to reckon this to our account (Romans 6:11, 12) and live in the full joy of God’s creation, enjoying him and his people.

Conclusion

Paul has sounded a clear warning, calling us to look at things as they really are...The reality is this: “in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form,” and in him we have been made full (2:9, 10). But we can lose the benefits of that fullness very easily. We can fall to *legalism* and its attendant self-righteousness, joylessness, and judgmentalism. We can succumb to *mysticism* and develop a proud, elitist spirit which contributes nothing to true worship. We can get into *asceticism*, thinking it will make us more holy, when actually it will feed our flesh.

The answer to legalism is the continual realization of the grace of Christ. The answer to mysticism is an understanding of how profoundly we are related to Christ. The answer to asceticism is the reckoning that we have died, been buried, and are resurrected with Christ. The answer is where it all began: at the foot of the Cross. I have seen in my own life and the lives of those I have counseled that there is a tendency to move away from where we had our beginning: the Cross. All of our theology, all of our preaching, all of our singing hymns together, the disciplines of life experienced in family and relationships are meant to keep us right at the foot of the Cross—simply drinking long and deep from the Fountainhead, Jesus Christ.

Lesson 10 (6-14-26)

New Life in Christ (Colossians 3:1-4)

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

- Colossians 3:1-4 ESV

Summary

The believer's participation in Jesus' death and resurrection (2:12–13) should result in a new focus on Jesus' exalted position. The false teachers likely claimed they had ascended to heaven to worship God on his throne along with the angels. But Paul insists that if someone really peered into heaven, they would see Christ enthroned at the Father's right hand. This shows that, contrary to the false teachers, people should worship Christ and submit to his authority. Since the believer's life is hidden with Christ in God, believers have spiritually ascended with Christ and are enthroned with Jesus at the Father's right hand too.

So believers should begin to live a heavenly existence here and now. Believers should focus on heavenly matters (like Jesus' supremacy and authority) rather than earthly matters (like food and material objects or sensual pleasures). Though believers are united with Christ and participate in his heavenly enthronement, this truth is "hidden" (3:3). It is not visible to the world around them. When Christ returns, that glorious enthronement will be made apparent to all. But even now, Christ is the believer's life. Christ lives his own life through the believer (Gal 2:19–20), and this ensures that the believer will resemble Christ in his character and behavior.¹

Observation Questions (What does the text say?)

1. What condition does Paul mention at the beginning of verse 1?
2. What are believers commanded to seek in verse 1?
3. Where is Jesus Christ described as being seated?
4. What command is given in verse 2 about the believer's mindset?
5. What contrast is made between "things above" and "things on earth"?
6. What does verse 3 say has happened to the believer's life?
7. Where is the believer's life currently hidden?
8. What future event involving Christ is mentioned in verse 4?
9. What will happen to believers when Christ appears?

¹ Charles L. Quarles, "Colossians," in *The NIV Grace and Truth Study Bible*, ed. R. Albert Mohler Jr. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2021), 1658.

Interpretation Questions (What does the text mean?)

1. What does it mean that believers have been “raised with Christ”?
2. Why does Paul tell believers to seek and set their minds on things above?
3. How does Christ being seated at God’s right hand affect the meaning of this passage?
4. What does it mean that a believer’s life is “hidden with Christ in God”?
5. Why does Paul point believers to the future appearing of Christ?
6. How does the promise of sharing in Christ’s glory encourage faithful living now?

Application Questions (How should this change us?)

1. What are some practical ways to “seek the things that are above” in daily life?
2. What earthly concerns most often distract you from focusing on things above?
3. How can setting your mind on eternal realities change the way you approach work, school, or relationships?
4. What comfort do you find in knowing your life is hidden with Christ?
5. How does the promise of Christ’s return shape your priorities and decisions today?
6. What is one habit you could develop to keep your focus on Christ throughout the week?
7. Was there anything from last week’s sermon that was especially challenging? Convicting? Encouraging?

Lesson Outline [This lesson was adapted from R. Scott Pace, *“Colossians,”* in *Exalting Jesus in Colossians and Philemon*, ed. David Platt, Daniel L. Akin, and Tony Merida, *Christ-Centered Exposition Commentary* (Nashville, TN: Holman Reference, 2021), 77–82.]

Our freedom in Christ is claimed through our identity in him and our spiritual participation in his redemptive work. As Paul indicted the false teachers for their religious rules and practices, he simultaneously reminded the Colossian believers of their liberty from these enslaving teachings. The conditional statement in the previous verses, “If you died with Christ,” explained that through Christ’s death they possess a corresponding freedom that releases them from legalistic obligations (2:20). This section begins with a parallel conditional statement, “So if you have been raised with Christ” (3:1), which establishes the continuity of thought, transitioning from the negative cautions to the positive exhortations of Paul’s argument.

While death in Christ frees us from the law, our faith in Christ raises us to new life. This redeemed life certainly includes a behavioral component Paul will describe in the next passage, but it begins with a spiritual change that occurs in the heart. As he explains, new life in Christ transforms us at a more fundamental level by redirecting our pursuits, reshaping our perspective, and redefining our purpose.

Jesus Redirects Life's _____ (3:1)

While the false teachers were preoccupied with personal performance and experience, Paul describes our identity in a passive voice: “You *have been raised* with Christ” (v. 1; emphasis added), emphasizing God’s work rather than our efforts. This fundamental difference is significant because it establishes the positional starting point for our spiritual growth. The opening phrase in these verses is a declaration of certainty that is grounded in the spiritual reality of believers’ identity in Christ rather than in our vain attempts to earn his favor. As a result, he challenges them to consider how their life-direction should be determined accordingly.

As a result of our new life in Christ, Paul directs the Colossians to “seek the things above, where Christ is” (v. 1). This phrase intentionally describes a shift upward, away from the false teaching that was grounded in worldly things and human traditions (2:8, 20). Directing their affections toward the resurrected Lord also supersedes the false teachers’ elevated claims of visions and the worship of heavenly beings (2:18) while reiterating Christ’s ultimate supremacy and honor as the one who is “seated at the right hand of God” (3:1).

It is important to note that Paul is not prescribing a mystical experience with Christ that would parallel or compete with the claims of the false teachers. He is challenging the Colossians to reorient their lives toward the heavenly reality that is already theirs through their authentic union with Christ (cf. Eph 2:6). To “seek the things above” carries the connotations of directing our hearts’ passions and pursuits toward our eternal dwelling in Christ’s presence and his glory. This phrase contrasts our potential captivity by false ideologies and the things of this world, and it redirects our hearts’ affections toward those things that possess eternal value and substance.

Practically speaking, redirecting our pursuits begins with recalibrating our hearts’ desires. As we become captivated by Christ through our union with him, we should seek to filter our passions through his throne of majesty to ultimately align our will with his. Our pursuits, what we devote ourselves to, should be measured by their value in Christ’s kingdom, their purpose in accomplishing his mission, and their contribution to building his church. This may require us to reevaluate our careers or to reallocate our resources. It may involve reconsidering how we spend our time or invest in our relationships. Ultimately, our union with Christ should stir our affections for him and redirect our pursuits.

Jesus Reshapes Life's _____ (3:2)

Paul continues to describe the transforming impact of our union with Christ by expanding on the concept of our *seeking* with a specific admonition for our *thinking*. These two verses offer parallel and complementary thoughts, but they are not synonymous concepts. To “seek the things above” (3:1) describes the reorientation of our hearts’ affections. To “set your minds on things above” (v. 2) involves the reorientation of our volitional will (Moo, *The Letters*, 248).

The terminology in 3:2, “Set your minds,” describes a reshaping of the thought process and overall perspective of believers based on the eternal realities of their salvation. The apostle clearly recognized the holistic change that our redemption involves, especially the crucial importance of renewing our minds. If the false teachers were advocating an emotional and mystical experience, this rational and objective perspective certainly countered their doctrine. In contrast to their approach, Christians should not determine eternal truths according to “earthly things”; we must interpret the world around us according to the heavenly reality “above” us (v. 2). This means that the significance of reshaping the mind in the process of sanctification is not situational or optional; it is foundational.

Allowing Christ’s redemptive work to reshape our perspective is necessary for several reasons. Its primary significance is that it enables us to fulfill the great commandment by loving God with our entire selves, including our “mind[s]” (Matt 22:37–38). It is also essential because it protects us from the world’s influence as the culture attempts to conform our thinking to its pattern. Through the constant renewing of our minds, we can experience God’s transformation in our lives (Rom 12:2). This renewed perspective also guards our hearts and minds with God’s supernatural peace as we dwell on the things that are above (Phil 4:6–8). In addition, by focusing on that which is eternal, we can renew our hope in the midst of temporary afflictions (2 Cor 4:16–18). And ultimately, through new life in Christ, setting our minds on things above reshapes our perspective by allowing us to be led by the Spirit (Rom 8:6–7) and to “have the mind of Christ” (1 Cor 2:16 NIV).

Jesus Redefines Our _____ (3:3–4)

Our identity in Christ not only redirects our pursuits and reshapes our perspective. Paul concludes this section by explaining how our union with Christ redefines our purpose. He summarizes both of the premises in the passage by establishing them as the collective baseline for his final admonition. The two conditional clauses (2:20; 3:1) are now asserted as a single statement: “For you died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God” (3:3). This assertion points backward and forward in the text. “For” establishes this maxim as the basis for why the Colossians are to “seek” and “set [their] minds on” the “things above” (vv. 1–2). But the declaration also serves as the warrant for Paul’s continued exhortation. The flow is sequential from the established past, “you *died*,” to the present, “your life *is* hidden,” to the future, “you also *will* appear” (vv. 3–4; emphasis added). He now proceeds to explain how the present reality of these truths is intended to reset the trajectory of our lives toward eternity.

The description of the believer’s “hidden” life in Christ signifies our personal relationship with him, affirms the security of our salvation in him, and certifies our glorious inheritance in him that is yet to be revealed. For our lives to be “hidden” in him not only positions us in Christ but also positions Christ in us (1:27). We have “died” with Christ, yet by faith we continue to live through Christ’s abiding presence in hope of his promised return (cf. Gal 2:20). Paul clarifies that Christ “is [our] life,” and that which is “hidden” will appear. And when Christ “appears,” we “also will appear with him” (Col 3:4). In other words, both our “hidden” life in Christ and his indwelling “life” in us will be fully revealed when he returns “in glory” (cf. 1 John 3:2). In the

same way that the mystery of Christ was “hidden” in previous generations (Col 1:26), our identity in Christ and his pending return is “hidden” until he comes again “in glory” (3:3–4).

This future fulfillment of our current identity in Christ should redefine our purpose in multiple ways. For example, the glory of Christ’s return reminds us of the temporal nature of this world and the fleeting value of its possessions and pleasures. Therefore, we should not be deceived by the vain pursuit of earthly wealth, achievement, status, or gratification (1 John 2:15–17). In Christ we are citizens of heaven and should not be deterred or distracted by the enticing desires of the flesh or ways of this world (Phil 3:20–21). Rather, since we have an eternal inheritance that awaits us (Col 1:5, 12), we should “seek the things above” (3:1) by pursuing his kingdom and his righteousness (Matt 6:33).

In addition, the certainty of Christ’s return gives us assurance that allows us to live with confidence in a world filled with uncertainty. As a result, we can endure hardships and persevere by fixing our hope on the grace and glory that will be revealed at the coming of Christ (Col 1:27; cf. 1 Pet 1:13). This hope is sure and steadfast, “firm and secure,” as an “anchor for the soul” because Christ entered the holy place on our behalf (Heb 6:19–20) and is “seated at the right hand of God” (Col 3:1).

Finally, the imminence of Christ’s return should motivate us to live with urgency. The coming of our Savior delivers hope, but it also ushers in his impending judgment. While the promise of justice may comfort us as believers, it should also burden us as it seals the destiny of the unbeliever who will be separated from God for eternity (2 Thess 1:5–10). Therefore, we must live as Christ’s ambassadors, appealing to the lost to be reconciled to God through the power of the gospel (2 Cor 5:20).

As we anticipate the second coming of Christ, we can celebrate our life in him and rejoice at the glory we will share in his presence. But his imminent return is not intended to simply foster dreams of a heavenly eutopia that disregards the eternal significance of our earthly lives. Instead, we must allow our identity in Christ and his promised return to redefine our purpose. These truths should inspire us to live as citizens of heaven, strengthen us with hope, and motivate us to live with a gospel urgency.

Conclusion

Paul challenged the Colossians to grow in their faith and cautioned them not to be captivated by false teachings (Col 2:6–8). While addressing the specific issues of their church and community, he also established timeless principles for all believers to embrace that are grounded in our identity in Christ. As believers, our death in Christ liberates us from a life of insecurity, performance, and bondage under the law. Our life in Christ frees us to serve him with loving obedience and allows us to seek him with renewed passion.

Our personal union with Christ is comprehensive, and it associates us with every aspect of his work. We died with Christ (2:20; 3:3), we were buried with Christ (2:12), we have been raised

with Christ (2:13; 3:1), and, therefore, we will appear with Christ in glory (3:4; Moo, *The Letters*, 251). As those who have been united with Christ through faith, we should let our entire lives be transformed and devoted to his mission and will. Through our new life in him, Jesus intends to redirect our pursuits, reshape our perspective, and redefine our purpose.

While these truths define our personal identity in Christ, they also have corporate implications. Within the body of Christ, we should cultivate a spiritual community that does not shackle God's people with unnecessary guilt or pressure to perform. Christ's death has liberated us from the rules and regulations of this religious mindset that breeds a culture of shame. At the same time, this does not lead to a culture that accepts or endorses sinful behavior. Instead, as we dwell within the community of faith, we should collectively seek and set our minds on things above that we share in common with other believers. We should live with holy anticipation of Christ's return as we celebrate our new life in him and devote ourselves to the mission of seeing others liberated from the bondage of sin to inherit the eternal promises of King Jesus!

Lesson 11 (6-21-26)

Putting Off, Putting On (Part 1) (Colossians 3:5-11)

⁵ Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. ⁶ On account of these the wrath of God is coming. ⁷ In these you too once walked, when you were living in them. ⁸ But now you must put them all away: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and obscene talk from your mouth. ⁹ Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old self with its practices ¹⁰ and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator. ¹¹ Here there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all, and in all.

- Colossians 3:5-11 ESV

Summary

Because believers participated in Jesus' death, they should put to death the sins that characterized their past. Sins like sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires, and greed betray a focus on earthly matters inconsistent with a believer's new identity and focus (vv. 1–2). Such sins incite God's anger, and he will soon display his wrath against sinners who are characterized by such sins (v. 6). "Sexual immorality" (v. 5) includes all sexual sins, such as extramarital sex, premarital sex, prostitution, and incest. "Impurity" (v. 5) refers to sexual sins that are unnatural. Romans 1:24–27 points to homosexuality as an example of such impurity. "Lust" (Col 3:5) refers to the shameful passions that lead to immoral sexual acts. "Evil desires" (v. 5) refers to a craving for forbidden things. "Greed" (v. 5) refers to the desire to have more than one needs. Paul equated such materialism with idolatry, since it is a subtle form of worshiping created things rather than the Creator himself (Eph 5:5). All created things exist for the glory of Jesus Christ (Col 1:16). However, when people assume that accumulating more things is the key to their happiness, they unwittingly assign material objects a value and importance that belongs only to God.

The life of believers is not determined by their past. When they died with Christ, the persons they once were ceased to exist. They took off that old identity like a person stripping off a filthy garment. They forsook their old way of life. They assumed a new identity that is becoming more and more like the perfect humanity that fully exhibits the image and likeness of God before sin ever corrupted the human race. Fallen humanity is characterized by numerous divisions related to race, culture, and social status, but these divisions are broken down as the divine image is restored to believers. Christ indwells all kinds of people regardless of race, culture, or social status, for Christ is all that matters. Christ grants dignity and equality to all whom he indwells.¹

¹ Charles L. Quarles, "Colossians," in *The NIV Grace and Truth Study Bible*, ed. R. Albert Mohler Jr. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2021), 1658.

Observation Questions (What does the text say?)

1. What command does Paul give in verse 5 regarding earthly behaviors?
2. What specific sins are listed in verse 5?
3. What does Paul say about covetousness?
4. What reason is given in verse 6 for why these things are serious?
5. How does Paul describe the Colossians' past relationship with these sins (v. 7)?
6. What additional sins does Paul tell believers to "put away" in verse 8?
7. What command does Paul give regarding lying in verse 9?
8. What two images does Paul use to describe the change in believers (vv. 9–10)?
9. What is happening to the "new self" according to verse 10?
10. What kinds of divisions does Paul say no longer define believers in verse 11?
11. What statement about Jesus Christ concludes verse 11?

Interpretation Questions (What does the text mean?)

1. What does it mean to "put to death" sinful behavior?
2. Why does Paul call covetousness idolatry?
3. What does the phrase "the wrath of God is coming" emphasize about sin?
4. Why does Paul remind the Colossians that they once lived in these sins?
5. What is the difference between putting off the "old self" and putting on the "new self"?
6. What does it mean that the new self is being renewed in knowledge after God's image?
7. Why does Paul list social, ethnic, and cultural distinctions in verse 11?
8. What does it mean that "Christ is all, and in all"?

Application Questions (How should this change us?)

1. What sinful habits might believers today need to "put to death"?
2. Why is it important to treat sin seriously rather than casually?
3. How can remembering your past life before Christ encourage humility and gratitude?
4. What steps help believers actively "put off" sinful behaviors?
5. How can someone intentionally grow in the "new self" that reflects God's image?
6. What does this passage teach about unity among believers from different backgrounds?
7. In what practical ways can you show that Christ is central in every part of your life?
8. Was there anything from last week's sermon that was especially challenging? Convicting? Encouraging?

Lesson Outline [This lesson was adapted from *R. Kent Hughes, Colossians and Philemon: The Supremacy of Christ, Preaching the Word (Westchester, IL: Crossway Books, 1989), 94–100.*]

In Paul's writing, theology is always followed by a call to live it out. For example, in the book of Ephesians, the first three chapters are given to highest theology, only to be followed with this

practical call in 4:1—“As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received.” This call introduces the remainder of the book. Similarly, the magisterial theology of Romans 1–11 culminates in this great doxology: “For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever! Amen” (11:36). This is followed by a most practical call: “Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices” (12:1).

We have the same thing here in Colossians, where the sublimely esoteric theology of Chapters 1 and 2 spawns the challenge in 3:5—“Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature.” For Paul, doctrine demands duty; creed determines conduct; facts demand acts. We will now begin to study the practical application of the vast theology we have already studied.

LAYING ASIDE THE OLD LIFE: THE _____ (vv. 5–9a)

“Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry. Because of these, the wrath of God is coming. You used to walk in these ways, in the life you once lived.” (vv. 5–7) Jesus spoke of this same idea when he said: “If your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away” (Matthew 5:29). Obviously neither Paul nor Jesus was recommending literal surgery, for sin does not come from the eye (or the hand), but from the heart—the evil within. Centuries past in England, if a pickpocket was caught and convicted, his right hand was cut off. If he was caught again, his left hand suffered the same fate. One pickpocket lost both hands and continued his occupation with his teeth! Physical dismemberment cannot change the heart. “Put to death,” as Paul uses it, means to discard evil practices and, here in Colossians, to get rid of the twin evils of sexual sin and covetousness.

Specifically, there are four elements of sinful sensuality which must be executed. The first is “immorality” (*porneian*), from which we get the word *pornographic*. It means every kind of immoral sexual relation. Chastity was the one completely new virtue which Christianity brought to the world. Paul’s call was radical to the pagan culture in its day, and it is almost as radical today. As you voice Biblical morality, you often will be labeled a moral brontosaurus! The second element of sensuality which we are to kill is “impurity,” moral uncleanness. This is wider and subtler than physical immorality, for it embraces the lurid imagination, speech, and deed of a sensual heart or filthy mind. The third element is “lust,” the shameful emotion which leads to sexual excesses. Paul used the same word to describe the “passionate lust” of the Gentiles who do not know God (1 Thessalonians 4:5) and the “shameful lusts” of homosexuality (Romans 1:26). The fourth element of sensuality to be discarded is “evil desires”—wicked, self-serving, rapacious lust. What a deadly quartet we have here, and Paul said it must be slain outright—executed!

Personally I can think of no other array of sins more prominent in our society—and more in need of being put away. Daily living subjects the average American to a sea of sensuality. It is conceivable that on a given evening of TV watching, one may see more sensual sights than

one's grandparents did in their lifetimes. The magazine ads for certain brands of blue jeans defy adequate description in polite company, and the Fellini-inspired TV ads for perfume promote a mystical eroticism. The January 1984 issue of *Psychology Today*, a magazine not known for promoting Biblical concern, stated that a pervasive cultural desensitization has taken place through films which feature sexual violence, and suggested that such films be packaged with warning labels (as are cigarettes)!

What makes the situation even worse is the amazing human capacity for self-delusion in respect to sensuality...Regardless of man's delusion, God's Word still speaks: "Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires." This is a violent metaphor which expresses pain and effort. Killing naturally means tears and blood, but here it means even more. As Alexander Maclaren said: "It is far easier to cut off the hand, which after all is not me, than to sacrifice passions and desires which, though they be my worst self, are myself."

This metaphor teaches us that we must execute sensuality whatever the cost! Proverbs 6:27 says, "Can a man scoop fire into his lap without his clothes being burned?" Many Christians are daily heaping fire onto themselves and are being profoundly scarred. We need to be like Job, who said, "I made a covenant with my eyes not to look lustfully at a girl" (Job 31:1). We need to apply this across the board. There are books and magazines we must discard. Some of us need to toss out TVs. I am not endorsing any type of legalism, but God's Word speaks today, and we are to kill the members of our body which lead us into sensuality or promote covetousness, which our text calls "greed, which is idolatry."

The word "greed" or "covetousness" (κίβ) which Paul used here denotes not merely the desire to possess more than one has, but more than one ought to have, particularly that which belongs to someone else. The mention of this at the end of a list of sexual sins is highly significant, for it is intimately associated with them. It is really another form of the same evil desire, except that it is fixed on material things. Often when sensuality loses its hold, materialism takes its place. In my opinion, this is why many middle-aged men who were once devoted to sensuality are now equally given to money. These sins have the same source. Such greed is really the lowest form of idolatry, for nothing could be lower than putting our trust in a material thing and making that our god.

Whatever I put my trust in, I worship. Materialism is the true religion of thousands of confessing Christians today. There is a sense in which covetousness is even more dangerous than sensuality, because it has so many respectable forms. So often it is the successful covetous person whom we honor. As the proverb goes: If a man is drunk with wine, we kick him out of the church; if he is drunk with money, we make him a deacon!

This is serious business, because both these sins provoke the wrath of God: "Because of these, the wrath of God is coming. You used to walk in these ways, in the life you once lived" (vv. 6, 7). Paul's message is clear: since we have died, and have been buried, resurrected, and ascended

with Christ, since we have been made full of his fullness, there are some things we must put off: namely, sensuality and materialism. We are to slay them, regardless of the blood and the pain!

We are also to put off evil attitudes and speech: “But now you must rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips. Do not lie to each other” (vv. 8, 9a). It is said that Jonathan Edwards, third president of Princeton and America’s greatest thinker, had a daughter with an ungovernable temper. As is often the case, the problem was not known to the outside world. A young man fell in love with this daughter and sought her hand in marriage.

“You can’t have her,” was the abrupt answer of Jonathan Edwards.

“But I love her,” the young man replied.

“You can’t have her,” said Edwards.

“But she loves me,” replied the young man.

Again Edwards said, “You can’t have her.”

“Why?” asked the young man.

“Because she is not worthy of you.”

“But,” he asked, “she is a Christian, is she not?”

“Yes, she is a Christian, but the grace of God can live with some people with whom no one else could ever live.”

So it is with the believer filled with “anger, rage, malice.” The “anger” described here is growing, inner anger, like sap in a tree on a hot day which swells the trunk and branches until they are in danger of bursting. “Rage” is that anger boiling over. We see it in a quick temper. “Malice” bespeaks a viciousness of mind. It is the malignant attitude which plans evil and rejoices when misery falls on the one it hates, like Haman’s glee in building the gallows for Mordecai (Esther 5:14). These evil attitudes must be put away. If they are not, “the heated metal of anger will be forged into poisoned arrows of the tongue.” Further, “slander” will follow—that is, hurtful speech which defames one’s character. This, unchecked, will turn into “filthy language from your lips”—foul, obscene, abusive speech. Do not naively suppose that such things do not exist among professing believers. They do! “The grace of God can live with some people with whom no one else could ever live.”

Paul continued, “Do not lie to each other” (v. 9a). Lying is a great sin against God, against the Church, and against love. That is why God struck down Ananias and Sapphira in the first church. He wanted truth, not deception, not hypocrisy. “Therefore each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to his neighbor, for we are all members of one body” (Ephesians 4:25). A great church demands great honesty.

LAYING ASIDE THE OLD LIFE: THE _____ (vv. 9b-11)

Paul’s reason for living a godly life was this: “... since you have taken off your old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator” (vv. 9b, 10). We must put off the evil practices of our former life because when we

came to Christ, being baptized into his body (1 Corinthians 12:13) and born again (John 3:5–7), we spiritually “took off the old self” and “put on the new self.” “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation the old has gone, the new has come” (2 Corinthians 5:17). All authentic believers have a new self, with new spiritual sensitivities and abilities, and thus wonderfully new possibilities in this life.

This “new self ... is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator” (v. 10). There is constant renewal taking place in the believer’s life as he keeps increasing in true knowledge of what God is like. This knowledge leads to progressively being conformed to the image of the Creator, and thus building a life like his. What a thought! Paul says similarly in 2 Corinthians 4:16, “Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day.” And again, in 2 Corinthians 3:18, “And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord’s glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.” The more we put off the old nature, the greater freedom we have for the renewal of our new self according to the image of God.

The final reason for putting off the evils of the old self is that the new self brings a renewal that is so radical, it changes all human relationships. Paul says in verse 11: “Here there is no Greek or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all.” If we make a practice of putting to death our sensuality and covetousness, laying aside evil attitudes and malignant speech, we will fully experience this astounding removal of barriers in human relationships. The “new self,” lived out, brings the destruction of *racial* barriers (“Greek or Jew”), *religious* barriers (“circumcised or uncircumcised”), *cultural* barriers (“barbarian, Scythian”), and *social* barriers (“slave or free”). This will bring a resounding affirmation of Tertullian’s exclamation: “See how these Christians love one another!” An amazed world will acknowledge that Christians have the “real thing”: “All men will know that you are my disciples if you love one another” (John 13:35).

Conclusion

As in Paul’s letters to the Romans and the Ephesians, the high theology of Colossians 1 and 2 demands immense application. We must put off:

- *Sensuality*—“sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed.”
- *Evil attitudes*—“anger, rage, malice.”
- *Evil speech*—“slander, filthy language.”
- *Deception*—“do not lie to each other.”

Why must we put these things off? Because we have:

- *A new self* “which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator.”
- *New relationships*—“Here there is no Greek or Jew ... but Christ is all, and is in all.”

What motivation to put off the old and put on the new!

Appendix: Answer Guide

Lesson 1 (4-12-26)

The Message of Colossians: New Life (Colossians Overview)

NEW LIFE BEGINS AND ENDS WITH GOD

NEW LIFE INVOLVES OURSELVES

NEW LIFE INVOLVES LIVING FOR OTHERS

Lesson 2 (4-19-26)

Welcome to the Family! (Colossians 1:1-8)

As Members of God's Family, We Have Reasons to Be Glad (COLOSSIANS 1:1–2)

As Members of God's Family, We Have Reasons to Be Grateful (COLOSSIANS 1:3–5A)

As Members of God's Family, We Have Reasons to Be Going (Col. 1:5B–8)

Lesson 3 (4-26-26)

Discovering God's Will for Your Life (Colossians 1:9-14)

We Must Recognize the Possibility of Finding God's Will (COLOSSIANS 1:9)

We Must Embrace the Purpose of Following God's Will (COLOSSIANS 1:10)

We Must Adopt the Process of Fulfilling God's Will (COLOSSIANS 1:10–12)

We Must Relish the Freedom of God's Will (COLOSSIANS 1:13–14)

Lesson 4 (5-3-26)

Christ, Supreme Lord and Sufficient Savior (Colossians 1:15-20)

The First Clue: The connection between the supremacy and the sufficiency of Christ

The Second Clue: The connection between Christ as Creator and as Redeemer

The Third Clue: Christ, before time, on earth, and over all

Lesson 5 (5-10-26)

Stable and Steadfast (Colossians 1:21-23)

What you once were (verse 21)

Where you now stand (verse 22)

How you must go on (verse 23)

Lesson 6 (5-17-26)

The Supreme Ministry (Colossians 1:24-29)

PAUL'S MINISTERIAL ATTITUDE (v. 24)

PAUL'S MINISTERIAL CHARGE (vv. 25–27)

PAUL'S MINISTERIAL PURPOSE (v. 28)

PAUL'S MINISTERIAL ENERGY (v. 29)

Lesson 7 (5-24-26)

Apostolic Concerns (Colossians 2:1-5)

1. Paul's Special Concern (verses 1–3)
2. Paul's Special Warning (verse 4)
3. Paul's Special Joy (verse 5)

Lesson 8 (5-31-26)

Learning to Walk (Colossians 2:6-15)

We Must Deepen Our Intimacy with Christ (COLOSSIANS 2:6–7)

We Must Denounce the Insufficiency of Christ (COLOSSIANS 2:8–10)

We Must Define Our Identity in Christ (COLOSSIANS 2:11–15)

Lesson 9 (6-7-26)

The Guarding of Your Treasure (Colossians 2:16-23)

DO NOT LET ANYONE JUDGE YOU: A WARNING AGAINST LEGALISM (16, 17)

DO NOT LET ANYONE DISQUALIFY YOU: A WARNING AGAINST MYSTICISM (vv. 18, 19)

LET NO ONE ENSLAVE YOU: A WARNING AGAINST ASCETICISM (vv. 20–23)

Lesson 10 (6-14-26)

New Life in Christ (Colossians 3:1-4)

Jesus Redirects Life's Pursuits (3:1)

Jesus Reshapes Life's Perspective (3:2)

Jesus Redefines Our Purpose (3:3–4)

Lesson 11 (6-21-26)

Putting Off, Putting On (Part 1) (Colossians 3:5-11)

LAYING ASIDE THE OLD LIFE: THE CHALLENGE (vv. 5–9a)

LAYING ASIDE THE OLD LIFE: THE RATIONALE (vv. 9b–11)

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