

Exploring the Word of God: Reading Through Colossians and Philemon



Michael D. Morrison



GRACE COMMUNION
INTERNATIONAL

Living and Sharing the Gospel

Exploring the Word of God: Reading Through Colossians and Philemon

By Michael D. Morrison
Copyright 2013 Grace Communion International

Cover art by Ken Tunell. Copyright Grace Communion International.

Scripture quotations from Colossians 2 and Philemon are taken from New Revised Standard Version Bible, copyright 1989, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations in the other chapters, unless noted, are taken from the Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV®. Copyright ©1973, 1978, 1984 by Biblica, Inc.™ Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved worldwide. www.zondervan.com The “NIV” and “New International Version” are trademarks registered in the United States Patent and Trademark Office by Biblica, Inc.™

Table of Contents

[The Colossian Heresy](#)

[Already in the Kingdom: Colossians 1](#)

[Victory on the Cross: Colossians 2](#)

[Colossians 2:14 and the “Handwriting of Requirements”](#)

[New Clothes for New People: Colossians 3](#)

[Relationships in and out of the Church: Colossians 4](#)

[Philemon: A Slave as a Brother](#)

[About the author](#)

[About the publisher](#)

[Grace Communion Seminary](#)

[Ambassador College of Christian Ministry](#)

Introduction: This project began in the mid 1990s. The first volume of *Exploring the Word of God* was published in 1995. We were not able to print any more volumes, but we continued to study and write articles about Scripture. We have gathered these articles and are publishing them as e-books. We hope you find these studies useful and encouraging.

Philemon is often included in commentaries about Colossians, partly because Philemon is usually considered too short to merit a commentary of its own, and it does not fit well with the Pastoral Epistles, which it follows in the canon. It does have similarities with Colossians, and Philemon apparently lived in or near Colossae.

~~~~~

# The Colossian Heresy

Jewish legalism — dissident liberalism — or pagan superstition?  
What was the problem that shook God's church at Colossae?

While Paul was in prison, probably in Rome,<sup>1</sup> heresy entered the church at Colossae, in Asia Minor. The news was brought to Paul by his close friend and co-worker, Epaphras (Colossians 1:8), who was a minister at Colossae (1:7; 4:12).

Scholars disagree in the way they understand the problem at Colossae and in the way they interpret Paul's admonitions. Did Paul intend to stop the advance of some philosophical sect? Was it to warn Judaizers who were arguing for circumcision? Was Paul informing the Colossians of their freedom from ordinances or from the ceremonial laws of Moses?

Paul's purpose — the main point of the letter — is disputed, and it will be analyzed below.

## The source of modern confusion

The problem at Colossae is clouded by an assumption that pervades commentaries and other exegetical works: that Paul's warning to the Colossians to beware of "hollow and deceptive philosophy" (2:8) indicates that a Greek or local philosophical sect was invading the Christian congregation to entice members away.

Based on this assumption, scholars and laymen alike have looked for a solution that would involve an intrusion of Greek philosophy in a Christian setting concerning Old Testament practices (Colossians 2:16). This has led to endless debates and general frustration. What *Greek* philosophy would be concerned with Old Testament ceremonial laws?

The search for a direct influence of Greek philosophical schools of thought on Colossae pervades the work of ancient and modern commentators.

Clement of Alexandria (A.D. 150-215) proposed that it was the Epicureans who were involved at Colossae. A similar thought was expressed in the West by Tertullian (A.D. 160-220), and commentators have followed suit ever since. Neo-Platonic thought has also been proposed as the underlying problem at Colossae, as well as a mixture of Eastern and Western philosophy, all because of the superficial reading of the term *philosophy*.

Older and traditional commentators generally propose a conflict between Paul's teaching and the discipline of philosophy. In his commentary, Thomas Scott writes, "The Judaizing teachers seem to have blended their system with speculation borrowed from the Pagans, and their different sects of philosophers." He adds: "The worldly elements of heathen superstition or philosophy were blended with legal and other external observances."

Finally, he looks back at his explanation and says, "Unless something of this kind be supposed, it will be found difficult to understand the apostle's discourse: for he spoke of philosophical delusions and legal ceremonies at the same time" (*Commentary*, Whiting & Watson, New York, 1812, volume VI, referring to Colossians 2:8-9).

Once wrong assumptions are removed, the epistle to the Colossians can be examined with a fresh outlook on the problem.

### **Internal evidence**

Paul attacks the heresy in Colossians 2:8-23. If we treat this passage as an oblique description of the problem, we could use the information given by Paul to draw up the following outline of its basic tenets:

1. It denied that the fullness of the Godhead dwelt bodily in Christ (2:9).
2. It denied that the Christian was complete in Christ (verse 10).
3. It tried to supplement the freedom in Christ by introducing ways of heightening Christian spirituality.

Some of the spiritual supplements, as recorded in Colossians, were:

1. circumcision (verses 11-14),
2. defunct principalities and powers (verse 15),
3. eating, drinking, new moons, sabbaths, etc. (verses 16-17),
4. voluntary humility and the worship of angels (verse 18), and
5. ascetic restrictions (touch not, taste not, etc., culminating in a neglect of the body) (verses 19-23).

The above points indicate neither that the heretics were denying the value of conversion to Christianity nor that they were endorsing a departure from the church of God at Colossae. They show that the heretics denied the adequacy of Christ (points 1 and 2). They were saying that Christians needed more for their salvation than what Jesus Christ had to offer. They felt they needed to re-appraise circumcision and certain ceremonial laws, along with some spiritual supplements, such as an attitude of humility and worship towards angels. To these they added a form of asceticism.

Paul's observation in 2:18-19 is that these teachers were "puffed up" in their minds and had "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." This tells us that they were Christians rather than outsiders. They were holding to Christ to some degree, otherwise Paul would have said that they had *rejected* Christ. In such a case, he could have dismissed them as unbelievers.

The heretical teaching about circumcision indicates that these teachers were of Jewish extraction. They were Jewish Christians and, most likely, from Colossae. Had they come from another area, Paul might have made a point of mentioning it, as he did in writing about false believers in Galatians 2:4.

That the church at Colossae was primarily gentile is evident from the comment that its members once were "alienated" and "enemies" (1:21) in

their uncircumcision (2:13), but now had been shown the riches of God's glory "among the Gentiles" (1:27). Paul's comments would be true even if Colossae included some converts from Judaism.

### **A Judaic philosophy**

At the time Paul was writing, Judaism was often referred to as a philosophy, even in Jewish writings. The Jewish philosopher Philo (10 B.C.-A.D. 50) wrote of "the philosophy of Moses" (*De Mutatione Nominum* 39). He also referred to Judaism as "the philosophy of our fathers" and as "Judaic philosophy" (*Legatio ad Gaium* 23 and 33). Similarly, Josephus wrote of the three Jewish sects as "three philosophies," i.e., three schools of philosophy (*Antiquities* 18.1.2). Philo and Josephus, writing in Greek, wanted to lend an air of dignity to Judaism.

In this context, a closer look at Paul's statement in Colossians 2:8 would be of some interest: "See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy." In some translations, one gets the impression that Paul warned the Colossians against two evils: 1) philosophy, and 2) vain deceit. If Paul had meant that, however, Greek grammar would require him to repeat the preposition: "through philosophy and through vain deceit."

Paul was not objecting to the discipline of philosophy; he was objecting to "*the* philosophy"—the philosophy known to his readers—that he designates as a "vain deceit." In other words, "Beware lest anyone take advantage of you through the empty deceit of the Jewish philosophy you have come into contact with."

The presence of the article in the original Greek ("through *the* philosophy") indicates that the Colossian heretics used that term for their teaching, perhaps for credibility (as did Philo and Josephus), and that the Colossian members also knew it or referred to it by the same name. Paul was not denouncing philosophy in general, but the deceit that this particular

philosophy entailed.

## **The worship of angels**

Paul's statement in Colossians 2:18 shows that the self-appointed teachers at Colossae taught a doctrine of "false humility and the worship of angels." But neither the pagan Greeks nor the Phrygians had any concept of angels. This is a tenet of Judaism. The tenor of the false doctrine at Colossae was that the Colossians were not *complete* in Christ (verse 9) and needed to approach God through angelic beings. Since the angels are much inferior to the Supreme God, the Colossians would have to lower their sights, so to speak, by approaching angels first!

Knowing how angel worship developed in the Gnostic schools of the second century A.D. (the schools of Cerinthus and of Valentinus), it is easy to see how the Colossian error fitted an earlier type of Gnostic doctrine.

The basic thought seems to have been the Christian's need to reach beyond Christ to a Supreme God through the mediation of angelic beings. These beings were of lower standing on the ascending scale to ultimate truth. Therefore the believers who sought to reach God directly or through one mediator, Christ, were presumptuous and needed a measure of self-abasement that would enable them to begin lower down on the scale. They could seek *gradual* completeness by invoking the mediation of lower, but more readily accessible, beings. This self-imposed humility, along with the active neglect of the body, would enhance their spirituality and their quest for completeness.

Paul's evaluation of the Colossian heresy was that it did not amount to true humility, as they had thought, but to a type of pride and carnality — a mere "appearance of wisdom" (2:23) — that was denying the significance of Christ.

Paul's teaching was that believers were members of the Body of Christ, who is the Head. Since Christ had triumphed over all "powers and



authorities” (2:15), the members of Christ’s Body did not need anything beyond Christ.

## **The roots of Gnosticism**

Prior to 1945, Gnosticism was known only from the counter-arguments of early Christians such as Irenaeus and Hippolytus. Although their writings contain Gnostic excerpts, their reliability was undetermined.

In 1945, an Egyptian peasant came across a jar full of Gnostic books, known as the Nag Hammadi texts. These books not only have served to confirm the accounts of the early church Fathers, but have indicated that some Gnostic ideas can be traced back to New Testament times. An example of early Gnostic teaching is given in the Gospel of Thomas.

The Gospel of Thomas is believed to have been compiled around A.D. 140. Professor Helmut Koester of Harvard University has suggested that “the *Gospel of Thomas*, although compiled c. 140, may include some traditions even *older* than the Gospels of the New Testament, ‘possibly as early as the second half of the first century’ (50-100) — as early as, or earlier than Mark, Matthew, Luke, and John” (Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels*, Vintage Books, 1981, pages xv-xvi).

The discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls in 1947 has also shed light on Gnosticism, because the Jewish sect of the Essenes cultivated some Gnostic ideas.

In light of the above discoveries, Josephus’ excursus on Jewish sects becomes enlightening. Josephus’ description of the Essenes speaks of a dualistic approach in the life of the Qumran community. They believed that “coming forth from the most rarefied ether they are trapped in the prison-house of the body...but once freed from the bonds of the flesh, as if released after years of slavery, they rejoice and soar aloft” (*The Jewish War*, tr. G.A. Williamson, Penguin, 1959, page 374).

The Essenes held to this doctrine so dearly that they vowed to impart it “to no man otherwise than as he himself received it” — after rigorous initiation. The books of the sect were preserved with similar care, “and in the same way the names of the angels” (page 373).

The ascetic practices of the Essenes included abstinence from certain foods. The Essenes could touch neither oil, nor meat, nor wine. Sabbath-keeping was the strictest possible among the Essenes. They “abstain from seventh-day work more rigidly than any other Jews.” Their extremism on Sabbath-keeping comes out more clearly in another statement of Josephus, in which he notes that they “do not venture to remove any utensil or go and ease themselves” (page 373-74). The Essenes adhered to strict discipline. They avoided the pleasures of the body, they prohibited marriage, the possession of wealth or property, all secular talk, even the changing of shoes and clothes.

In searching for the broader roots of Gnosticism, one finds isolated but relevant ideas in apocryphal works, both Jewish and early Christian. The Jewish-Christian work of the second century A.D., *Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs*, lists seven orders of angels and uses the same terminology as was used by the Colossian heretics. The two highest ranks of angels are in the seventh heaven, and are known as “thrones” and “powers” (compare Paul’s reference in Colossians 2:15). Similarly, the Book of Enoch, the best source of information for the development of Judaism (written by Chassidic or Pharisaic Jews around 163-63 B.C.), speaks of “angels of power and angels of principality” (Enoch 51:10).

The picture of 24 seats surrounding God’s throne was not introduced first in Revelation 4:4. Even before Revelation was written, the Jews were almost unanimously (not the Sadducees) teaching that everything had its angel. In the Book of Enoch 82:10 ff., the stars have their angels; each of the four seasons has its angel; each of the 12 months of the year has its angel and each

of the 360 days of the year (the full extent of the year at that time) had its angel. The Book of Jubilees claims that, on the first day of creation, God created various orders of angels: of the Presence, of the winds, of the clouds, of cold, of heat, of hail, of thunder, etc.

### **Paul's reply**

Paul dismissed the doctrines that had been elaborated on the basis of premises such as the above. That is the impact of Colossians 1:20, where he stressed that Christ was able, through his death, to “to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.”

By including earth and heaven, Paul was leaving nothing outside the mediating power of Christ. The vain deceit of the heretics was exposed. They were teaching the Colossians to give their allegiance to principalities and powers that, as Paul explained, were rendered defunct by Christ's triumph (2:15).

Paul's advice was that they should not let anyone usurp Christ's portion and take their prize from them (2:18). To think otherwise was to be deceived into a sense of false humility, into the lamentable state of worshipping created beings (angels) rather than the Creator himself. The heretics were dishonoring Christ by trying some other approach to God.

Paul was explaining that, in the teaching of the heretics, Christ was losing the place he had in God's plan of salvation. It is for this reason that Paul began to explain Christ's office and function early in the book by pointing out that “God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him” (1:19), and that the fullness dwells “bodily” (2:9). The term *fullness* was a special one for the Gnostics. The Colossian Gnostics may have used it, and Paul decided to put it in context for them using superlative language. Christ has the preeminence. He is *firstborn* of the dead, the *Head* of the church, the *fullness*

of God (1:15-20).

## **Asceticism**

“Touch not; taste not; handle not” (2:21) are not prohibitions of the Old Testament, neither are they an elaboration of any Old Testament command. As Paul pointed out, they were “based on human commands and teachings” (2:22). They have only a semblance of wisdom, but, in essence, they are a pretense that does not lead to any honorable end (2:23).

The Essenes had strict prohibitions with respect to meat and wine — even oil. Such items were not to be touched, let alone tasted. Self-imposed asceticism provided a feeling of superior spirituality. It gave the impression that the successful ascetic had managed to rise above fleshly desires and was now in a separate category. Even circumcision can appear to the ascetic to be valuable, simply because it can be presented in dualistic terms. By mortifying the body of the flesh, the ascetic can claim to uphold the life of the spirit.

Paul’s explanation dismisses the whole question. If Christians have buried the entire old self in the grave symbolized by the waters of baptism, why would they want to pretend that it could now help their spirituality?

Circumcision repelled the Gentiles. It does not appear to have been a major issue at Colossae, otherwise Paul would elaborated on it in Colossians 2:16-23.<sup>2</sup>

## **Judging others**

Paul’s warning concerning judging “what you eat or drink” (2:16) needs clarification. The original says nothing about food or drink; it speaks about the act of eating and the act of drinking. The terms *brosis* and *posis* refer to acts, not substances (compare 1 Corinthians 8:4 and 2 Corinthians 9:10 with 1 Corinthians 6:13, 8:8, 10:3 and Hebrews 9:10).

As mentioned earlier, the Essenes abstained from eating meat or any meat product. Similarly, they would abstain from oil and reject any food that had

been touched by defiled hands. Had they been in Elijah's position, they would not have eaten food touched by a crow. They would not believe that God would command ravens to feed a prophet (1 Kings 17:4).

As for drinking, there is no prohibition in the Old Testament that would affect anyone but a priest (Leviticus 10:9) and a Nazarite (Numbers 6:3). An ascetic teaching, however, such as that of the Essenes, could prohibit wine and milk. It could prescribe times and conditions for the use of other foods; it could also regulate the amounts so as to protect the members from the evils of luxury or excess.

Paul's answer to the ascetic content of the Colossian heresy is that such matters are "destined to perish with use" (Colossians 2:22). The sense of this verse is similar to that conveyed by Matthew 15:17 and 1 Corinthians 6:13. There is no moral value in prohibitions enjoined for purposes of asceticism.

One can imagine how silly the Colossian heresy was in attempting to hold onto Jewish ceremonial rules, for example, once a Christian had lost sight of Christ's direct mediation. As Paul points out with logical force, what is the point of subjecting oneself to decrees of any sort after the fullness of Christ has been set aside? Nothing can replace Christ. Without Christ at the center, absolutely nothing would stand, no matter how many commandments one would care to keep, and no matter how strictly one were to keep them.

The reason for this claim is plain: Such acts *do not involve the removal of sin*. Only Christ, with his sacrifice, is able to nail every person's spiritual debts to the cross (2:14), thus triumphing over all traditional and nontraditional principalities and powers. Whatever had power over man's spiritual life — whether an order of angelic beings, or an ascetic principle — it was already superseded by Christ. He was now "the Head, from whom the whole body, supported and held together by its ligaments and sinews, grows as God causes it to grow" (2:19).

The judging that was going on at Colossae was misguided (2:16). The matters listed, despite the claims of the Colossian heretics, could not transcend Christ who is now the body, the substance, the very center of God's plan of salvation. All else is a mere shadow that holds no value as a replacement for Christ. After all, the Colossians were members of the very Body of Christ!

The heretics were trying to push the church of Colossae out of the light and into shadows. Even though God's law had a "shadow of the good things that are coming," it could not "make perfect those who draw near to worship" (Hebrews 10:1).

In summary, the Colossian heresy was caused by Jewish Christians who had fallen prey to early Gnostic teachings. Paul addressed this problem, not by reference to the Old Testament, but by centering the minds of the Colossians on the completeness and fullness in which they shared as members of the Body of Christ.

## **Endnotes**

<sup>1</sup> Some scholars pose the possibility of Ephesus as the place of Paul's imprisonment; others cite Caesarea. A case can be made for each of these locations, though not with equal force. For the purposes of this article, these differences, which are peripheral to the nature of the Colossian heresy, will be laid aside.

<sup>2</sup> The Old Testament is nowhere quoted in Colossians because it is not in question.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

[back to table of contents](#)

# Already in the Kingdom:

## Colossians 1

Colossae was a small city in Asia Minor, not important for much of anything — it is known to us chiefly because the apostle Paul wrote a letter to the believers who lived there. The church was started by Epaphras, who had learned about Christ from Paul, so even though Paul hadn't started the church, he felt a sense of responsibility for its health and growth.

Strange ideas were circulating in Colossae. False teachers were saying that knowing about Jesus was a good beginning, but that believers needed deeper wisdom and some new ascetic practices in order to reach their true potential. Epaphras had tried to set them straight, but Paul thought it would be helpful for him to assure the Colossians that the gospel they heard from Epaphras was indeed the complete gospel.

### **Address information (verses 1-2)**

The letter begins by saying who wrote it: “Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother.” Greek letters didn't normally name companions as co-authors, so it is likely that Timothy helped write this letter.

Next, the recipients are greeted: “To God's holy people in Colossae, the faithful brothers and sisters in Christ: Grace and peace to you from God our Father” (NIV 2011 edition in this chapter). Paul believes that they are faithful; he does not seem to think that they are in serious danger of apostasy — they just need some reassurance.

### **Prayer of gratitude (verses 3-12)**

Greek letters often began with a prayer or blessing; Paul modifies this custom to tell the Colossians what he prays about. He praises them indirectly, giving God the credit for their faith and love: “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 and of the love you have for all God's people."

Their growth comes from knowledge the gospel has given them: "The faith and love that spring from the hope stored up for you in heaven and about which you have already heard in the true message, the gospel that has come to you." By the word "hope," Paul is referring to the *object* of our hope — a heavenly reward. Christian life, including faith toward God and love toward others, is given a foundation by knowing that God gives us eternal life.

Paul reminds them that they are part of a growing movement: "The gospel is bearing fruit and growing throughout the whole world, just as it has been doing among you since the day you heard it and truly understood God's grace." He assures them that they have heard *all* the truth — they do not need any supplements or add-ons to bring them to a higher level of spirituality.

"You learned it from Epaphras, our dear fellow servant, who is a faithful minister of Christ on our behalf, and who also told us of your love in the Spirit." Since Paul could not go everywhere, he trained people like Epaphras to be part of a missionary team that carried the gospel into outlying areas. He brought back news to Paul that the people in Colossae were responding to the gospel.

After this, Paul resumes the description of his prayers for the people: "For this reason, since the day we heard about you, we have not stopped praying for you. We continually ask God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all the wisdom and understanding that the Spirit gives." Paul did not wait for a crisis to pray for the people — as soon as he heard about their love, he started praying for their growth in wisdom. He did not need additional information — he wanted them to grow in their understanding of the message



they had already received.

Why did he pray for this? Because he wanted to see their faith and love be evident in the way they lived: “so that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and please him in every way.” Paul then lists four ways in which believers might please God:

1. “Bearing fruit in every good work,
2. “growing in the knowledge of God,
3. “being strengthened with all power according to his glorious might so that you may have great endurance and patience, and
4. “giving joyful thanks to the Father.”

Paul wanted the believers to know God’s will so they would do good works, learn more about God, have strength to withstand difficulties, and remain thankful.

### **Already qualified (verses 13-14)**

One reason to be thankful is that God has already “qualified you to share in the inheritance of his holy people in the kingdom of light.” We could not qualify on our own, but God did it for us. How did he do that? “He has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.”

Our sins would disqualify us from the kingdom of light, but God, in Jesus, has forgiven our sins, so we are now qualified. Just as God redeemed the Israelites out of Egypt and gave them land as an inheritance, he redeemed or rescued us from the dominion of darkness and sin, and has given us our inheritance.

### **Christ is supreme (verses 15-23)**

In a poetic passage, Paul then describes how great Christ is: “The Son is the image of the invisible God...” He shows us what God is like — not in physical characteristics, but in spiritual attributes such as love and

righteousness. He is also "...the firstborn over all creation." This does not refer to a birth or any other beginning in time. Rather, "firstborn" refers to a pre-eminent status.

Christ has this superiority because he is the Creator: "For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him." Christians do not need to appease government officials or spirit beings; we are already approved by Christ, the highest of all powers.

Paul summarizes: "He is before all things, and in him all things hold together." He sustains all that he has created.

After recounting Christ's role with creation, Paul describes his role in redemption, the new creation: "He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead [the first to be raised from the realm of the dead], so that in everything he might have the supremacy."

Paul again mentions that Jesus is a complete representation of the Father, and a complete Savior: "For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him [Jesus is fully divine], and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross."

Earlier, Paul used the metaphor of redemption. Here, he describes salvation as reconciliation, making peace between enemies. God achieved this peace by sending Jesus, who was not only fully divine, but also fully human — someone who could represent all creation in his atoning death on the cross. The Creator became part of creation in order to rescue us from our own sinfulness. In him we died, and in him we are raised to new life — life with God.

“Once you were alienated from God, Paul says, and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior.” Yes, our sins had separated us from God. “But now he has reconciled you by Christ’s physical body through death.”

Why? “To present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation.” The debt has been paid, the sin has been erased; there can be no accusation for those who trust in Christ Jesus (Romans 8:1, 33-34). When we appear before God, we are holy in Christ — fully qualified for his kingdom.

There is one requirement: “...if you continue in your faith, established and firm, and do not move from the hope held out in the gospel.” You are on the right boat, headed to the right destination. Don’t jump ship — this is the right ship. The ticket has been paid for, so you don’t need to work for it. Jesus has done all that needs to be done — he is the only one who could, and the only one who did.

“This is the gospel that you heard,” Paul assures the Colossians, “and that has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven, and of which I, Paul, have become a servant.” You have heard the real gospel, and you already know enough, Paul says — you do not need any secret, obscure information or any extra rituals. You are already in the kingdom of Christ. It’s good news!

### **Paul’s work for the church (verses 24-29)**

After Paul mentions that he is a servant of the gospel, he reflects on the fact that his ministry is rewarded not with wealth, but with persecution. (Colossians 4:2 indicates that he is writing from prison.) But he sees a positive role for his troubles: “Now I rejoice in what I am suffering for you, and I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ’s afflictions, for the sake of his body, which is the church.”

There was nothing lacking in Christ’s afflictions — what he did was fully

sufficient for our salvation. What is lacking, from Paul's perspective, is that Paul has not experienced nearly as many afflictions as his Lord did. So in his sufferings he is filling up this deficiency, and he is glad to do it, because he is suffering for serving Christ, for helping the church grow.

He serves Christ by working for his body, the church: "I have become its servant by the commission God gave me to present to you the word of God in its fullness." Here Paul again mentions that the Colossians have the complete gospel. He describes the message as "the mystery that has been kept hidden for ages and generations, but is now disclosed to the Lord's people." It's not a mystery anymore — it is revealed.

"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, the apostle to the Gentiles, is doing his best to help everyone hear the message: Christ is in you, and he is our assurance of glory. In him we have forgiveness, redemption, and reconciliation with God. By being joined to him, we are transferred into his kingdom, and there is laid up for us in heaven a great reward.

"He [Christ] is the one we proclaim, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone fully mature in Christ." There is no secret part of the message, or additional levels of initiation, as many Greek religions had. No, Paul is proclaiming the full gospel, enough to bring everyone to complete glory. Christ is all they need to know.

"To this end I strenuously contend with all the energy Christ so powerfully works in me" (verse 29). Just as he gave God thanks for the faith and love of the Colossians, here he gives Christ credit for all the work that he is doing. Just as creation was done by, through, and for Christ, the new creation is being done by him, through him, and for him, too.

**Things to think about**

How often do I pray that others might grow in wisdom and knowledge?  
(verse 9)

Is it *possible* for people to live a life worthy of the Lord and do everything  
he wants? (verse 10)

Do I *feel* like I am in the kingdom of Christ? (verse 13)

Is Christ supreme in my life and thought? (verse 18)

When I was alienated from God, did I *feel* alienated? (verse 21)

What supplements do people try to put on the gospel today?

Have I suffered in letting people in on the secret of Jesus? (verse 24)

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

[back to table of contents](#)

# **Victory on the Cross:**

## **Colossians 2**

In chapter 1, Paul prays for the readers' wisdom, understanding, and Christian life (1:9-14). He reminds them of how great Christ is, and that they have been reconciled to God through Christ. Paul is working hard to teach everyone about Christ. At the end of Colossians 1, Paul explains that he struggles to teach believers so they can be complete in Christ (1:28). Our goal is in Christ, and is not found in any other message. Paul continues this theme in chapter 2 and explains the power behind our salvation and transformation.

### **Source of all truth**

Paul moves from general principles to mention his readers: "I want you to know how much I am struggling for you, and for those in Laodicea, and for all who have not seen me face to face" (2:1, NRSV in this chapter). Colossae and Laodicea were 11 miles apart, and Paul wanted this letter to be read in Laodicea, too (4:16). As Paul's missionary co-workers spread the gospel in this area, Paul wanted to help the new Christians be well grounded in their beliefs so they would not fall for some counterfeit message.

"I want their hearts to be encouraged and united in love, so that they may have all the riches of assured understanding and have the knowledge of God's mystery, that is, Christ himself" (2:2).

Greek "mystery religions" were popular in the first century, offering special rituals and passwords to advance to different levels in the spiritual world. Apparently the Colossian Christians wanted to understand mysteries, to have wisdom and knowledge — but they were so eager to have special teachings that they were listening to false teachings.

Paul uses the terminology of "mystery" but reverses it, because the "mystery" of Christ had been fully revealed. Paul gives the complete message

— there is no second or third level. When we are united with Christ, we are united with the highest possible level. We are already in the palace and do not need to buy a ticket to a train station that is only halfway there.

Paul’s sufferings and labors (2:1) were evidence that he was teaching not for his own benefit, but to benefit others. He is the one who had the true wisdom and the true understanding of the mysteries of Christ.

In Christ “are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” (2:3). Other religions might have part of the truth, but Christ has it all. We don’t need speculations about intermediate levels of spiritual power — what we need is a better understanding of Christ. Paul wants to focus his readers on Christ.

“I am saying this so that no one may deceive you with plausible arguments” (2:4). The religious competition might sound sophisticated or well-educated, but Paul wants his readers to remain faithful to Christ — and he is confident that they will: “For though I am absent in body, yet I am with you in spirit, and I rejoice to see your morale and the firmness of your faith in Christ” (2:5). The people are doing quite well, but Paul wants to help them resist not only bizarre teachings, but also those that subtly deviate from the simplicity that is in Christ.

“As you therefore have received Christ Jesus the Lord, continue to live your lives in him, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving” (2:6-7). Epaphras had already given them the full gospel message (1:7). There are no additional secrets to learn — all they need is to better understand the message they already received, continue in it, and to be thankful for what God has given us in Christ!<sup>1</sup> Christianity is not a search for the mysterious and the exotic — it is a simple faith in a Savior who died for us. It does not need to be complicated with extra ideas.

## **Fullness in Christ**

Paul warns them again: “See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the universe, and not according to Christ” (2:8).

The Colossians probably knew what Paul was talking about, but it is difficult for us to be sure. The ancient world had a wide variety of religious ideas and philosophies. Many of them offered special mysteries for the select few. Others were taught by traveling philosophers who tried to show how sensible and practical their ideas were.

In contrast to that, Paul taught salvation through a crucified man. He taught that God was in this man who was killed, and that God had brought the body back to life. (Most other religions taught that physical bodies were inferior and not worth saving.) Paul taught that this Christ would return on some future day to bring all bodies back to life and to judge the entire world.

In other words, Paul’s gospel did not depend on human wisdom — in some ways it went against human wisdom. It had a wisdom of its own. It did not depend on principles that most people already agreed with. It did not depend on clever arguments. It depended on Christ alone, on who he was and what he had done.

Gospel wisdom is backwards. Most religions try to figure out what people’s problems are, and from that, figure out what they need to solve those problems. But the gospel has a reverse logic. It begins with what Christ did, and from that, it discerns what the human problem is, and what it is that we need to be saved from. Once we see that the answer is Christ, we are better able to ask the right questions.

From what Paul says in verses 21-23, the “philosophy” taught a variety of restrictive rules, or self-abasement. Verses 11 and 16 suggest that it included Jewish customs such as circumcision and sabbaths. In Galatians 4:3, Paul



uses the phrase “elemental spirits of the world” to refer to Judaism. The Jewish historian Josephus uses the word “philosophy” to refer to different schools of Jewish thought.

In several cities, Paul struggled against people who tried to mix Jewish ideas into Christianity, and it is likely that this was also going on in Colossae. People had added human traditions to Judaism (Mark 7:8), and were trying to add them to the gospel. Paul is telling the Colossians that they shouldn’t fall for it. It might sound good on the outside, but it is empty on the inside.

Christians have something far better: “For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily” (2:9). Christ is fully divine, and he has (present tense) a human body. If we have Christ, we do not need any other ideas added on. Christ is superior to everything else, and all Christians have fullness in Christ, and he is fully God.

It is not only Christ, but *we also* “have come to fullness in him, who is the head of every ruler and authority” (2:10). Our salvation is complete in Christ.<sup>2</sup> When we are in him, we are brought into divine life. We do not need anything else. Through belief in Jesus Christ, we are already connected to God, brought into the life of the triune God. Christ is not only supreme, but also sufficient.

Paul then begins to explain the practical significance of how thoroughly we participate in Christ:

- “In him also you were circumcised with a spiritual circumcision, by putting off the body of the flesh in the circumcision of Christ” (2:11). On several occasions, Paul argued against people who said that Christians ought to be circumcised and obey the laws of Moses. It seems that someone suggested that the Colossian Christians ought to be circumcised. That isn’t necessary, Paul responds, since you have already been circumcised spiritually, through your faith in Christ. How

were they circumcised? In Christ.” Physical circumcision could only symbolize the removal of sin, but Christ performs the reality in our lives, making the symbol unnecessary. Through Christ, we are cut free from the rule of the flesh. The reality has been achieved, so the ritual is not needed. When we have Christ, we have enough. We do not need to add physical circumcision.

- “When you were buried with him in baptism
- “You were also raised with him through faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead” (2:11-12).

These are the results of faith in a Savior who is fully divine. The old person, corrupted by sin, is dead and buried. Paul is speaking spiritually and figuratively. Through faith in Christ, we are united with him, and what he has done is effective for us. He died for us, for our sins, so that our sins are no longer counted against us. He has paid for them.

In the death of Christ, our sinful self (spiritually uncircumcised) received the wages of sin. And in the resurrection of Christ, we also live with new life. What God did in Jesus Christ, he also did it for those who have faith in Christ. One practical significance of this is that our sins are fully forgiven. We do not need to do anything extra to kill them, pay for them or make up for them.<sup>3</sup> Through Christ, we have the spiritual status of being circumcised. It is done *in him* and *by him* because of our union *with him*.

### **Enemies are defeated**

Paul tells us what we were apart from Christ: “when you were dead in trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh ...” God solved this twin problem: He “made you alive together with him, when he forgave us all our trespasses” (Colossians 2:13). When we followed the desires of our flesh, we were spiritually dead and cut off from God — but in Christ, the sins that separated us have been forgiven, and because they are gone, we live with

Christ.

In verse 14, Paul describes this forgiveness: “erasing the record that stood against us with its legal demands. He set this aside, nailing it to the cross.” “The record” comes from the Greek word *cheirographon*, which often refers to a note of indebtedness; this is what was against us. We are forgiven and given life because our debts (our sins) were cancelled by Christ. They were transferred to him on the cross, and paid in full.<sup>4</sup>

Paul is using this financial illustration to again make the point that our sins are effectively and completely taken away in Christ. Those sins have no power over us; sins cannot impose regulations about what we have to do, because they were removed on the cross of Christ — gone. Christians do not need extra rules to deal with sin — we have Christ.

The forgiveness we have in Christ is a strategic victory for us: “He disarmed the rulers and authorities and made a public example of them, triumphing over them in it” (2:15).

Paul again uses the phrase “rulers and authorities,” probably referring to something the false teachers were teaching. Perhaps they were saying that Christians should do something to please or get help from some mystical powers. Paul is saying that Christ has conquered them all. When we have Christ, nothing else has power or authority over our lives.

The power called sin has no authority over us. We do not need special rituals to break that power — what we need is Christ, who has already triumphed over that power. And he has done it *in public*. Here Paul refers to the parades that victorious generals had — after disarming their enemies, they would take many of the conquered people as slaves, displaying them as booty from the conquest.

To most observers, it would seem that any crucified person had been conquered and publicly humiliated. Paul reverses that image, proclaiming

that Jesus was the one who really won the battle. Because his death freed us from our debts, the “rulers and authorities” lost the power they had over us. We owe them nothing, and they are exposed as powerless imposters. There is no special secret involved. All we need is faith in Christ, and our old sinful self is considered dead, and our new life is with Christ.

### **Jewish rituals a shadow of Christ**

Because of Christ’s victory, Paul writes: “Therefore do not let anyone condemn you in matters of food and drink or of observing festivals, new moons, or sabbaths” (2:16). Since we are fully forgiven and fully qualified in Christ (1:12), we should not let anyone question our salvation due to our “failure” to obey rules about diet and days.<sup>5</sup>

The false philosophy criticized the liberty that the Christians enjoyed, and Paul is saying, Pay no attention to their objections. You don’t have to obey those rules because you have been given everything you need for salvation in Christ. You are forgiven, and that philosophy has no authority over you.

The false teachers were saying that food and drink would somehow help people deal with sin in their lives. Whether they were saying a person had to avoid certain foods, or that a person had to eat certain types of foods, does not matter. Food and drink have no power to take away sin.

Paul is saying that we are fully forgiven in Christ, and we should therefore not let anyone judge us or criticize us about what we eat and drink. Of course, we cannot prevent what people *think* about us, no matter how careful we are. What Paul is saying is that we should not accept their judgments — we should not believe that our standing with God depends on food and drink regulations.

Similarly, because we are fully forgiven in Christ, we should not let others judge us with regard to festivals, new moons or Sabbaths. These, like circumcision, were part of the Jewish religion. Apparently the false teachers

of Colossae included a mixture of Judaism in their heresy.

But how could people in Colossae observe festivals, new moons, and Sabbaths? They could not do any of the sacrificial rituals in Asia Minor. Even Jews in Jerusalem did not think of sacrifices when they thought of how they observed the weekly Sabbath. Ordinary Jews observed the weekly and annual Sabbaths by not working. The false teachers were saying that this cycle of annual, monthly and weekly observances would help the Christians deal with sin in their lives.

That's not true, Paul said. Abstaining from work does not help anyone deal with sin. It does not forgive past sins, nor does it give power to avoid sin in the future. Sin was dealt with completely by Jesus' crucifixion, and as a result, we should not let others judge us by what we do or don't do on various days of the calendar.

Those rules may have had some value before Christ came, but are not needed now: "These are only a shadow of what is to come, but the substance belongs to Christ" (2:17). The dietary rules and sabbaths, like circumcision, symbolized a reality that we now have in Jesus. When we have the fullness, we don't need the silhouette.

The Jewish worship days were a shadow, a silhouette, of things to come. Paul does not elaborate about whether these days had any predictive value. He does not say how the new moons were shadows. He does not comment on how accurate a picture these days gave. He could see, however, that most of the people who kept such days did not accept Jesus as the Christ.

No matter what Paul meant by shadow, no matter whether the things to come are past or future, the result is clear: these days had no effect on sin. We should not let others criticize us regarding any portion of these days — nor should we judge others. As far as sin is concerned, these days are irrelevant.

Paul then makes this contrast: "but the substance belongs to Christ." The

Greek literally says “but the body of Christ.” This part of the verse has no verb, so we need to add one. Translators usually add the verb “is,” because Greek often omits the verb “is.” It was also common in Greek to contrast shadow and body as terms for picture and reality. The meaning is that food, drink and days are shadows, but the reality is Jesus Christ. Christ deals with sin in reality; foods and days can do it only in picture. Paul is saying that Christ is important; the shadows no longer are.<sup>6</sup>

### **False humility has no value**

Paul said, “Do not let anyone judge you about diet and days.” Now he gives a parallel admonition: “Do not let anyone...disqualify you” (2:18). No one can actually disqualify us, of course — Paul means that we shouldn’t let anyone make us think that we have to keep special rules in order to qualify.

These unnamed people are “insisting on self-abasement and worship of angels.” The rules may look like a demonstration of humility, but in actuality, they arrogantly claim that Jesus did not do enough for us. The false teachers, in addition to ideas about circumcision, foods and days, seem to have had some strange notions about angels. The people may not worship angels directly, but may claim that certain behaviors will help us join the angels in their worship of God.<sup>7</sup>

Paul reveals more about the false philosophy when he says that those people were “dwelling on visions, puffed up without cause by a human way of thinking” (2:18). The people (like various Jewish writers of the time) probably said they had visions of heaven, and although they offered humility, they were actually full of pride, leaving Christ out of the picture.

Their focus had taken them away from Christ: “and not holding fast to the head, from whom the whole body, nourished and held together by its ligaments and sinews, grows with a growth that is from God” (2:19). Growth comes from Christ, not from secret information and special rules. This person

is not helping the body grow.

Paul now uses another argument, building on what he has already written: “If with Christ you died to the elemental spirits of the universe [and he implies that we did], why do you live as if you still belonged to the world? Why do you submit to regulations, ‘Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch’?” (2:20-21).

The Christian life is not lived by worldly wisdom. The things that sound good to religious philosophers are often wrong. We do not live by those regulations, but by Christ. When Christ died to “the elemental spirits of the universe,” we died to those regulations, too. Those petty rules have no authority over us. Our victory over sin does not come from our ability to keep rules — it comes from Christ on the cross.

“All these regulations refer to things that perish with use; they are simply human commands and teachings. These have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting self-imposed piety, humility, and severe treatment of the body, but they are of no value in checking self-indulgence” (verses 22-23).

Rules about avoiding certain foods, or avoiding work on certain days, may sound good and wise. They might make it look like we have power over our bodies, but they cannot break the power of sin. Only Christ can do that, and he has done it fully and effectively on the cross.

### **Things to think about**

How much do we need to know about Christ in order to be saved? (verse 3)

What deceptive ideas endanger Christian faith today? (verse 8)

Does my union with Christ change the way I view myself? (verses 11-12)

If God forgave all my sins (verse 13), why does the Lord’s prayer include a request for forgiveness?

What powers used to hold a grip on me? Does my life show that I am now freed? (verse 15)

Has anyone ever tried to tell me that I wasn't qualified for salvation? (verse 18)

Why do restrictive rules appeal to people? (verse 23)

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>The first three participles are in the passive voice, 'implying that divine action is essential in Christian growth.' Paul's readers have not rooted themselves, built up themselves, or strengthened themselves; God has" (David E. Garland, *Colossians and Philemon*, NIVAC, 140, quoting Murray Harris, 89). "The primary dynamic that should govern Christian behavior is...a living out of our relationship to Christ, an appropriating of what God has already accomplished in Christ. This also puts the emphasis where it belongs in Christian living — not on human willpower or effort but on God's grace — and enables such living to be characterized by thankfulness" (A.T. Lincoln, *New Interpreter's Bible* XI, 621).

<sup>2</sup>By using the word "fullness" for us right after using it for the Deity, Paul seems to be hinting at something we find in 2 Peter 1:4 — through Christ, we "participate in the divine nature."

<sup>3</sup>Garland and Lincoln argue that the circumcision of Christ was his *death*, in which he put off the flesh. But it seems to me that the people in Colossae, who did not have Romans 6, would not have understood it in this way. Either way, he represented us in what he did.

<sup>4</sup>It is not clear what the "regulations" are; Paul uses a similar word in verse 20 for the ascetic rules of the non-Christian "philosophy." It is likely that the philosophy taught various rules as a means of dealing with a person's spiritual debts; Paul is saying that since Christ has cancelled the debts, we do



not need to do anything further to reduce them.

<sup>5</sup>Paul's opponents taught restrictions (2:21); it is not likely that they would object to Jewish restrictions about wine, meat, and days on which people must abstain from work. But they would object to the freedom that the gospel gives Christians to eat and drink (cf. 1 Corinthians 10:25) and to ignore restrictions about days (cf. Romans 14:1-6).

<sup>6</sup> Some have suggested that we should add a different verb: Don't let anyone judge you by food and days, but [let] the body of Christ [judge you]. It is true that Paul sometimes uses "the body of Christ" to refer to the church, but Paul does not say that we should let the church judge us. He has just explained that our sins are fully forgiven in Christ; he is not going to reduce that idea by saying that we should let the church judge us. This is not in his thought or in the context. His point is that Christ is the reality that foods and days could only hint at. Moreover, most people who say that we should let the church judge on this matter, have ironically rejected the judgment that the church *has* already given regarding foods and days.

<sup>7</sup>Paul may be using sarcasm to imply that the philosophy gives so much attention to angels that it's like they are worshipping them. Paul would probably react more strongly if people were overtly worshipping angels.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

[back to table of contents](#)

## Colossians 2:14 and the “Handwriting of Requirements”

Christ “wiped out the handwriting of requirements that was against us... having nailed it to the cross” (Colossians 2:14, NKJ). What kind of requirements are being discussed?

The Greek word for “handwriting” is *cheirographon*, used in common Greek for a document written in one’s own hand as legal proof of indebtedness. Some modern translations call it a bond of indebtedness.

Christ wiped out a note of debt. What kind of debts did Christ cancel? He canceled our spiritual debts, our sins, our transgressions of God’s law, and this is what the note of debt refers to. In his crucifixion, Christ symbolically nailed our note of debt to his cross because his sacrifice paid our debts. 1 Peter 2:24 uses a similar analogy.

The Greek word for “requirements” (KJV “ordinances”) is *dogmasin*, a form of the word *dogma*, which is used only five times in the New Testament. *Dogma* can refer to decrees of Caesar (Luke 2:1, Acts 17:7) or apostolic decrees (Acts 16:4). In other writings of that era, *dogma* could also refer to the commandments of God (3 Maccabees 1:3, Josephus, *Against Apion* 1, 42) or the commandments of Jesus (Barnabas 1:6, Ignatius to the Magnesians 13:1).

Commentators generally agree that *dogma* in Colossians 2:14 refers to God’s laws. That makes the most sense in the context, because our spiritual debts have come from breaking God’s laws. However, some commentators have erred in saying that God’s laws have been against us and were nailed to the cross.

The meaning becomes more clear if we notice that *cheirographon* is singular and *dogmasin* is plural. It is the *cheirographon*, the note of debt, that

“was [singular] against us, which was [singular] contrary to us. And He has taken it [singular] out of the way, having nailed it [singular] to the cross.” The last part of verse 14 is about the handwriting, not the requirements.

God’s laws are not against us. It is the note of debt, our sin, that has been against us. The validity of the laws is not in question here; the fact that we incur a debt if we fail to keep the requirements implies that Paul is referring to laws that are valid.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

[back to table of contents](#)

# **New Clothes for New People:**

## **Colossians 3**

Paul has explained that we were buried with Christ and raised to new life in him (Colossians 2:12). We are new creations, new people, and our identity is now in Christ. In chapter 3, Paul draws some conclusions about the kind of behavior that should characterize our new identity.

Throughout Colossians, Paul stresses that Christ has done everything that is needed for our salvation. But this does not mean that we sit back and do nothing — Paul gives instructions for how we should respond to what Christ has done.

### **A life hidden with Christ**

Paul begins with general principles: “Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things” (Colossians 3:1-2). Earlier, Paul had drawn conclusions from the fact that we died with Christ (2:20). Here, he draws conclusions from the fact that we have a new life with him.

Since we are united with Christ, and Christ is with God, that is where we should set our affections. That is what we should desire, and that is what we should think about. This does not mean that we ignore earthly things (Paul has much to say about how we live in this world),<sup>1</sup> but that we bring heavenly qualities to our earthly lives. Paul is moving from a rebuttal of the false teachings, and moving toward a positive statement of how faith works in our lives.

Don’t worry about what you used to be. “For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God” (3:3). The old “you” is gone, killed with Christ on the cross and buried with him. Our new identity is in Christ, in

God. Although it may not look like it, our real self is to be found with him.

Christ has brought us into the heavenly places (Ephesians 1:20), and that should transform the way we think — including the way we think about ourselves. Our new life is to be patterned on the reality that Christ has brought us into the divine life, into the fellowship of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. We belong to God, and we should think and act like it.

Our true identity is hidden. “By no means everything about Christian living is apparent, not only to outsiders, for whom much of it appears foolish, but also to Christians themselves, for whom there remains mystery and much questioning until the final revelation.... Its hiddenness necessitates that Christians live by faith and not by sight and, therefore, without all the answers to the meaning of many events in their lives” (A. T. Lincoln, *New Interpreter’s Bible* IX, 641).

However, it will be evident to everyone in the future: “When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory” (3:4). Yes, we will be with him in glory in the future — but even now, Christ is our life. We should live in a way that is appropriate for those who live and move and have their being in him.

### **Out with the old**

Paul tells us how to respond to the fact that Christ defines our new life: “Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry” (3:5). We are to eliminate five vices — not just desires for illicit sex, but also for desiring too much stuff. In chapter 2, Paul criticized the people who said, “Don’t do this, don’t do that.” But here in chapter 3, Paul has also given a list of things to avoid. There is an important difference. The false philosophy was restricting *things*; Paul is telling us to avoid actions that hurt other people — actions that weaken a sense of community among the people of God.<sup>2</sup>

“Because of these, the wrath of God is coming” (3:6). God does not like it when some of his children hurt the other children, and punishment is appropriate. But there is no condemnation, and no punishment, for those who died with Christ and now live in him (see Romans 8:1 and 1 Corinthians 6:9-11). Our old life included wrong actions and desires: “You used to walk in these ways, in the life you once lived” (Colossians 3:7). But we should stop living that way. “You must rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips” (3:8<sup>3</sup>). As people of Christ, our attitudes and words should conform to a new standard. We should eliminate any habits that hurt other people.

“Do not lie to each other.” Why? Because “you have taken off your old self with its practices and have put on<sup>4</sup> the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator” (3:9-10). We are to change our approach to life because we have a new life.

God is re-creating us, but he does not force this change upon us — he tells us to do it: to put on, or to clothe ourselves, in something new. We are to make choices in the light of who we are. We are to become more and more like Christ is, because that is who we are. “No system of ‘dos and don’ts’ can create the image of God in humans.... The new life of obedience does not depend on [our] own feeble moral resolve but comes from being united with Christ” (David Garland, *Colossians and Philemon*, 203, 207).<sup>5</sup>

### **In with the new**

Our identity is not in our ethnic group, our education, or our social status. “Here [in Christ] there is no Greek or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian<sup>6</sup>, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all” (3:11). Christ is the epitome, the standard, the model, of everything that humanity was ever intended to be, and everyone finds their true identity in him. Rich and poor, sophisticated and simple, young and old, we are one in Christ.

How then should we live? “Therefore, as God’s chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness<sup>7</sup> and patience” (4:12). Since God has already chosen us, we should respond with these five virtues. These behaviors cannot make us worthy of salvation, but they are part of “a life worthy of the Lord” (1:10).

We are to be like Christ, and we should treat others the way he has treated us: “Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you” (3:13).

The chief virtue, the umbrella term that includes all good behavior, is love — which is also the one-word description of God’s nature. “And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity” (3:14).

“Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful” (3:15). It is hard to be angry and thankful at the same time. When we remember that we are a barbarian saved by grace, it is hard to be angry at the Scythian who is also saved by grace.

Paul concludes with more general exhortations: “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs<sup>8</sup> with gratitude in your hearts to God” (3:16). As we speak to each other and worship together, the message of Christ should dominate our thoughts. He has changed our identity, and that should change everything else.

“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). All of life, both words and deeds, are done in Christ, because he is our life. Verses 15, 16, and 17 all end on a note of thanks. Praise God for what he has done for us in Christ!

## **Christian households**

Paul includes brief comments for Christian marriages: “Wives, submit to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord. Husbands, love your wives and do not be harsh<sup>9</sup> with them” (3:18-19). Paul’s advice for women is typical for that time and culture, but his advice for husbands is unusual: It calls the men to self-sacrifice and puts limits on their authority.<sup>10</sup>

Greek philosophers sometimes gave similar comments for wives, children and slaves<sup>11</sup>—these are called “household codes.” The husband, father, and master were usually the same person; Paul gives instructions for him according to these three roles.

Paul’s next set of instructions is also brief: “Children, obey your parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord. Fathers, do not embitter your children, or they will become discouraged” (3:20-21). Paul addresses the children as morally responsible people who care about their relationship with the Lord. Fathers, who had primary responsibility for discipline, are warned to be careful in their role, and to consider the emotions of their children.

Paul’s advice for slaves is much more extensive<sup>12</sup>: “Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything; and do it, not only when their eye is on you and to win their favor, but with sincerity of heart and reverence for the Lord” (3:22).

Paul does not really mean “in everything.” If the masters told the slaves to stop believing in Christ, Paul would not want them to obey! He is speaking in generalities here, just as he did for wives and children. Repeatedly, Paul connects his commands with the Lord. For slaves he says, “with...reverence for the Lord.” Our Master has something to say about the way we function in society.

“Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men” (3:23). Slaves should work sincerely, not reluctantly, whether or not the master sees them. Their station in life, although far from ideal, is a



way in which they can serve Christ. Paul does not publicly call for an immediate end to slavery—that would only invite persecution for something that was then politically impossible. But his teachings paved the way for eventual abolition.<sup>13</sup>

Although our society is far different, the advice Paul gives here is often relevant to modern employment. Even if we feel trapped in an unpleasant job, we should be a good worker, because we are servants of Christ. But we show him no disloyalty if we look for a better job.

Reliable workers are often rewarded in this life, but there is an even more significant reward for Christians: “since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving” (3:24). In the Roman Empire, slaves could not inherit anything. But in Christ’s kingdom, they do. We belong to him, work for him, and are rewarded by him.

Paul next says, “Anyone who does wrong will be repaid for his wrong, and there is no favoritism” (3:25). Paul is apparently referring to the rewards (or penalties) of the final judgment. Misconduct will be viewed negatively—and this applies to slave masters as well as slaves.<sup>14</sup>

Paul addresses the masters directly: “Masters, provide your slaves with what is right and fair, because you know that you also have a Master in heaven” (4:1). Masters should realize that they are slaves of Christ,<sup>15</sup> and this should affect the way they treat their slaves. They should conform to what is right and fair. In time, Christians would ask whether slavery itself was fair—and when they had the freedom to campaign against it, they led the way in eliminating this immoral practice.

### **Things to think about**

Does my behavior reflect the fact that my life is hidden in God? (verse 3)

Would Christianity have a different reputation if churches preached more

against greed? (verse 5)

If God has wrath (verse 6), why should Christians eliminate anger? (verse 8, same Greek word)

How do social divisions affect Christian unity today? (verse 11)

What happens if I don't put on the clothing that Paul describes? (verse 12)

In my congregation, do we teach and admonish one another? (verse 16)

## Endnotes

[1] "This is not...a call to an other-worldly detachment or disinterest in life in this world, for the subsequent instructions in 3.5ff are very much concerned with practical living out of a life 'worthy of the Lord' (1.10) here in this world" (A.J.M. Wedderburn, *The Theology of the Later Pauline Letters*, 52).

[2] "The vices and virtues selected are those that will either disrupt or enhance the life of the Christian community" (Lincoln, 645).

[3] Ephesians 4:22-32 is a similar passage. Garland comments on "filthy language": "We can see that perversion in modern slang, which uses gutter terms to describe the sexual union in terms of acts of hostility, assault, and abuse" (Garland, 228).

[4] Same verb as the one in v. 12 translated "clothe yourselves."

[5] "When we interpret ethical passages, we face the temptation of reverting back to the approach of the Colossian errorists. We may want to issue edicts, develop strict rules, and engage in diatribe in order to rein in immorality. But...our godliness is not measured by the things we do not do. It comes from being in Christ, dying with Christ, and being raised with Christ.... We should never confuse being moral with being Christian, *but we cannot claim to be Christian if we ignore morality*.... Our behavior as Christians becomes an advertisement for what being in Christ does to a person's life.... Unbelievers look at Christians and ask how are they any

different from anybody else” (Garland, 219, 228).

[6] Scythians were nomadic peoples who lived north and east of the Black Sea, renowned for equestrian and military skill.

[7] “Lindemann defines it as the power which, in a situation of conflict, enables us to criticize another’s conduct so that they experience it as help and not as condemnation” (Garland, 211).

[8] We do not know how these three types of songs differ from one another. One plausible suggestion is that they refer to Old Testament psalms, Christian hymns, and spontaneous singing.

[9] “The verb...is in the passive voice and may be translated, ‘Do not become embittered [or resentful] toward her.’ Anyone can refrain from harsh treatment of others; Christians must do more, however. They must refrain from being flushed with rage or petulant when others treat them or respond to them in ways that irritate them. This directive addresses the eventuality that the wife might not always be properly submissive” (David Garland, *Colossians and Philemon* [Zondervan, 1998], 245).

[10] Ephesians 5 includes much more detailed instructions for wives and husbands (see the study of that chapter here). Some scholars have suggested, based on differences in early manuscripts of Ephesians, that Ephesians was a circular letter designed to be sent to numerous cities in Asia Minor. Some then speculate that it is the “letter from Laodicea” (Colossians 4:16) that Paul wanted the Colossians to read. This would explain why the advice for families is so brief in Colossians—Paul expected them to get the longer instructions in the letter we now call Ephesians.

[11] “Comparable instructions from other literature usually address only the male, adult, and free person” (Garland, 258, citing Eduard Schweizer, 213-14).

[12] Paul may have dealt with a runaway slave from this area: Onesimus.

Similarities between the people mentioned in Colossians and Philemon indicate that the letters were sent to the same area at about the same time. It is possible that the letter to Philemon was sent first, and he freed his slave, who then went back to Paul with a report about the false philosophy that was affecting the believers in Colossae.

[13] Slaves were an important part of the social and economic structure of the Roman Empire, and sudden abolition would have created social chaos. If Paul and his team of evangelists advocated the overthrow of slavery, the government would have taken quick action to silence them.

[14] This verse may “function both as a warning to slaves and as a reassurance to them. Not only if they do wrong, but also if they are treated wrongly, they can know that there will be an impartial judgment” (A.T. Lincoln, *New Interpreter’s Bible*, vol. XI, p. 658).

[15] Since all Christians are slaves of Christ, the exhortation to slaves “is able to represent most adequately the relation of all Christian of Christ” (M. Gielen, cited by Lincoln, p. 657).

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

[back to table of contents](#)

# Relationships in and out of the Church:

## Colossians 4

### Good words for everyone

In chapter 4, Paul begins to address everyone: “Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful. And pray for us, too, that God may open a door for our message, so that we may proclaim the mystery of Christ, for which I am in chains. Pray that I may proclaim it clearly, as I should” (4:2-4). Prayer should be a consistent part of our lives, and we should be watchful, or alert.<sup>1</sup>

Paul does not ask that his prison cell be opened, but that the door might open for the gospel, and that the message might be clear, so people know what they are being asked to accept. Paul has years of experience in preaching the gospel, but he still asks for God’s help. He may also be hoping that the Colossians apply these ideas to themselves— that opportunities might arise for *them* to relay the message, and that they do it clearly.

“Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders; make the most of every opportunity” (4:5). One element of wisdom is knowing that our conduct with others may affect their attitude to the gospel. If we are selfish, opinionated and judgmental, our neighbors may find our message a bit hard to believe.

“Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone” (4:6). If our words are gracious, they will make the gospel more attractive, more likely to be accepted.<sup>2</sup>

### Exchange of greetings

Ancient Greek letters often closed with an exchange of greetings, and Paul follows this custom, though he mentions many more friends than most letter-writers did: “Tychicus will tell you all the news about me. He is a dear brother, a faithful minister and fellow servant in the Lord” (4:7). Tychicus is

probably the one who carried the letter to Colossae.

“I am sending him to you for the express purpose that you may know about our circumstances and that he may encourage your hearts. He is coming with Onesimus, our faithful and dear brother, who is one of you. They will tell you everything that is happening here” (4:8-9). Paul says three times that these messengers will bring news of Paul’s circumstances—this hints at something important. Perhaps they will give details that Paul did not want to put in writing lest they be intercepted or censored.

“My fellow prisoner Aristarchus<sup>3</sup> sends you his greetings, as does Mark, the cousin of Barnabas” (4:10). Paul once objected to Mark (Acts 15:37-38), but he is on good terms with him now: “(You have received instructions about him; if he comes to you, welcome him.)

“Jesus, who is called Justus, also sends greetings. These are the only Jews among my fellow workers for the kingdom of God, and they have proved a comfort to me” (4:11).

Paul saves his longest comments for Epaphras, the person who started the church in Colossae (1:7): “Epaphras, who is one of you and a servant of Christ Jesus, sends greetings. He is always wrestling in prayer for you, that you may stand firm in all the will of God, mature and fully assured. I vouch for him that he is working hard for you and for those at Laodicea and Hierapolis” (4:12-13).

Epaphras had a special fondness for these people, and Paul could hear his concerns and felt that it would be helpful to tell the Colossians what Epaphras wanted for them: steadfastness, maturity, and confidence.

“Our dear friend Luke, the doctor, and Demas send greetings” (4:14). Luke is the author of a Gospel and the book of Acts. Paul says nothing about Demas here; we learn from 2 Timothy 4:10 that he eventually deserted Paul.

Paul then greets people in and near Colossae: “Give my greetings to the

brothers at Laodicea, and to Nympha and the church in her house” (4:15). Nympha’s church may have been nearby, in Hierapolis.

Paul tells them to exchange letters: “After this letter has been read to you, see that it is also read in the church of the Laodiceans and that you in turn read the letter from Laodicea” (4:16).<sup>4</sup>

“Tell Archippus: ‘See to it that you complete the work you have received in the Lord’” (4:17). Archippus was part of the church that met in the home of Philemon (Phm. 2). We do not know what “work” he was doing, but Paul encouraged him and affirmed its importance.

Letters were normally penned by scribes who had experience in writing on papyrus, but the real authors often signed the letter themselves. So Paul takes the pen and writes, “I, Paul, write this greeting in my own hand. Remember my chains. Grace be with you” (4:18). Grace is central to the Christian life, and Paul ends most of his letters on a note of grace.

### **Things to think about**

How do some parents embitter their children? (3:21)

What options did first-century slaves have when masters commanded them to do something immoral? (3:22)

How might trade unions and corporations make it difficult to apply verse 22 in the modern world?

How can good behavior help me answer people’s questions? (4:6)

Am I wrestling in prayer for someone? (4:12)

### **Endnotes**

[1] “Three elements of prayer are featured in this section: the necessity of alertness, its characterization by thanksgiving, and its participation in the mission of the proclamation of the gospel” (Lincoln, 663). Thanksgiving “functions as a test of whether a person has truly understood that the gospel is one of grace” (ibid.). Prayer “will focus on both the missionaries and their

message” (ibid.).

[2] Some interpreters have suggested that “seasoned with salt” means that we should leave people thirsty for more. This may be a good evangelistic strategy, but Paul seems to be giving advice for how to answer people, not to make them ask more questions. When we use salt in foods, our goal is to improve flavor, not to make people drink more.

[3] When Paul wrote the letter to Philemon, he called Epaphras a fellow prisoner, but he did not say that for Aristarchus (Phm. 23); it seems that Epaphras and Aristarchus had traded places by the time he wrote Colossians.

[4] If the letter was from the Laodiceans, we do not know the people it was written *to*, and it would be odd for Paul to require them to read it. For the possibility that this might be Ephesians, see note 2. Others have suggested that it is what we now know as Hebrews, or that it is Philemon.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

[back to table of contents](#)



# **Philemon:**

## **A Slave as a Brother**

Some scholars have read Paul's letter to Philemon as sowing the seeds of abolition, as suggesting that all Christian slavemasters ought to view slaves as members of the family, and should therefore free them all. Other scholars have read this same letter as saying that Christians who find runaway slaves ought to return them to their owners.

Some people today are embarrassed that Paul told slaves to obey their masters, and he did not directly tell slave-owners to free all their slaves. They think that Paul was far too soft on the evil of slavery.

So, the same letter can be viewed in different ways, depending on the point of view you are coming from – but slaves in the first century apparently were not too troubled by this. They accepted Christianity quite readily, even if it did not mean their freedom. They were happy with the spiritual benefits even if there were no social or economic benefits to go with it.

### **Introductory material**

Verse 1 says: “Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, to Philemon our dear friend and co-worker...” (NRSV throughout). This is the way first-century letters normally began. This is the way that modern letters begin, too, if we count the information on the envelope: the return address tells us who is writing, and then it says who it is being sent to.

This letter is from both Paul and Timothy. In many of his letters, Paul includes the names of his co-workers as co-authors. In this case, Timothy may have had a lot to do with the way the letter is written. Paul could be quite forceful, but this letter is tactful and subtle, perhaps well-suited to Timothy, who seems to have been of a more gentle nature.

Paul introduces himself as a prisoner of Christ Jesus. In some letters, he

calls himself a *slave* of Jesus Christ, but that may have been too much irony for this particular letter. But he is a prisoner, apparently in jail.

There are three possible locations for this imprisonment: Rome, Caesarea, or Ephesus. Acts tells us he spent a couple of years imprisoned in Caesarea, and a couple of years in Rome, so those are possible locations. But it is hard to imagine a runaway slave going all the way from Colossae to Caesarea. The scenario is more plausible if Paul is jailed in Ephesus. The problem is that the Bible never mentions Paul being jailed in Ephesus. David deSilva writes,

Acts is silent about such an imprisonment, but Acts, like all history, is selective in the story it tells. Paul refers to some ordeal in Ephesus (see 1 Cor 15:32; 2 Cor 1:8-9) and speaks of suffering imprisonments in the plural (even before his Caesarean and Roman imprisonments) in 2 Corinthians 6:5; 11:23. A run-in with the authorities in Ephesus resulting in a brief imprisonment is therefore a plausible scenario.[1]

An imprisonment in Ephesus also makes more sense for verse 22, where Paul says that he wants to stay in Philemon's home. Someone who gets out of jail in Rome would hardly be expected to go to a small inland city in Asia, especially when he has already announced plans to go to Spain.[2] But it would be plausible for someone who was leaving Ephesus. However, the exact location of writing doesn't affect the way we interpret the letter.

Verse 2 continues the address of the letter: "to Apphia our sister, to Archippus our fellow soldier, and to the church in your house." Apphia and Archippus are probably in Philemon's family, perhaps as wife and son, perhaps leaders in the church, though we cannot be sure. Nor does it matter, for they do not play any further role in the story.

It is significant that a church meets in Philemon's house – this means that Philemon is wealthy enough not only to have a slave, but also to have a house large enough for a small church to meet in. He was in the upper class,

probably in the top 5 or 10 percent.

It is also noteworthy that this letter is written to the whole church; the letter would be read to all the members. This could put Philemon on the hot seat: not only is Paul asking him to free a slave, but also everyone *knows* that Paul is asking him to do this, and everyone will be able to see whether he does. It is an acknowledgement that Philemon's actions affect the whole community. Gorman writes, "Paul wants Philemon, as a believer and especially as a church leader, to know that the subject of this letter is not a personal matter." [3] The relationship of one member to another can affect the entire church. deSilva writes,

Paul turns what appears to be a private matter into a household matter in the broader sense of the Christian family. The local community of faith will become a witness to Paul's request and thus also to Philemon's response. Philemon cannot act privately in the matter of Onesimus, who now is part of the larger household of God and not merely Philemon's household. [4]

Paul writes, "Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ" (verse 3). The normal Greek greeting in a letter was *charein*, greetings. Paul always changes this to a similar Greek word, *charis*, meaning grace, and he adds the typical Jewish greeting, *shalom* in Hebrew, *eirene* in Greek, meaning peace – and he notes that both grace and peace come to us from God. In his other letters, he usually mentions Jesus Christ as an equal source of that grace and peace.

### **Introductory prayer**

A typical Greek letter, even a "secular" one, usually began with some sort of prayer. Paul follows this custom, and his introductory prayers are not a formality – they are tailored to the content of the letter. Here he writes, in verses 4-5, "When I remember you in my prayers, I always thank my God because I hear of your love for all the saints and your faith toward the Lord

Jesus.” Paul will ask Philemon to exercise that love for one saint in particular, and Philemon will need some faith to do so.

Verse 6: “I pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective when you perceive all the good that we may do for Christ.” Paul isn’t talking about evangelism when he mentions “sharing your faith.” The phrase here most likely has a passive sense, not an active one: Philemon shares his faith with the people who have faith. We all have that in common; we share the same beliefs, and the fact that Philemon has the same faith as other believers should be “effective” – it should have results in his life in the way that he treats other believers (Onesimus, in this case).

And Paul hints at some “good” that Philemon may soon have opportunity to do – not just for another believer, but for Christ himself. Our faith in Christ should affect the way that we treat other people who have that same faith (see all the commands in the New Testament about the way we treat “one another”), and the way we treat them is in some sense the way that we treat Jesus Christ himself (see Matthew 25).

Paul has also been blessed because of what Philemon has done for others: “I have indeed received much joy and encouragement from your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you, my brother” (verse 7). Paul will refer to “refreshing the heart” again in this letter. At this point in the letter, it is a seed that will come to life a bit later. Paul wants Philemon to repeat the praiseworthy behavior.

### **Getting to the purpose**

In verse 8, Paul gets to the business of his letter: “For this reason, though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do your duty...” Paul was normally bold enough to issue commands, but in this letter he is content to drop strong hints. He is dealing with a touchy issue, and he wants Philemon to make his own decision, not just follow orders.

Also, if Paul issues commands, he is acting like a slaveowner, a behavior he wants Philemon to stop.[5] He wants Philemon to give up some of his customary rights, so Paul is willing to set an example for him by giving up some of his own.[6] Nevertheless, Paul is hinting that Philemon has a *duty*, something he *ought* to do as a result of his faith in Christ.[7]

He writes: “Yet I would rather appeal to you on the basis of love—and I, Paul, do this as an old man, and now also as a prisoner of Christ Jesus” (verse 9). The love here is apparently Philemon’s love for Paul. Paul adds a little emotional *pathos* by mentioning that he is an old man in prison. He is powerless, asking for a little pity. If Philemon loves Paul, he will respond.

Paul’s appeal or request is seen in verse 10: “I am appealing to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I have become during my imprisonment.” Onesimus was a common name for a slave, for it means “useful.” (Slaves were commonly given new names when they were sold.) This man has now become a Christian.

We do not know how it happened that Onesimus came into contact with Paul. Was it accidental, or did Onesimus seek Paul out on purpose? Would a runaway slave hang around a prison? It seems more likely to me that Onesimus looked for Paul on purpose.

Social custom may explain why. A slave was not legally considered a runaway if he went to a mutual friend, to seek that friend’s intercession with the owner. Onesimus may have committed a huge blunder (verse 18 may hint at some problem), and he wanted Paul to act as a mediator to help restore him without too much penalty. So Onesimus went to Paul, heard the gospel, came to faith in Christ, and began helping Paul. No matter what the past history, Onesimus is not *legally* a runaway – he is in the category of a slave seeking mediation through a friend of the owner. But in this legal status, he cannot stay with the friend forever – he must eventually be sent back to the owner.

Perhaps with a little rhetorical exaggeration, Paul admits that Onesimus had not been a very good slave. “Formerly he was useless[8] to you, but now he is indeed useful both to you and to me” (verse 11).

He is useful to *Paul*, but it is not clear how he is useful to *Philemon*. Perhaps Paul is speaking of the help that Onesimus has given to Paul, and Paul is counting that *as if* it came from Philemon, and Onesimus has been useful to Philemon by giving Paul the help that Philemon would have done if he had been there (verse 13). That’s a bit convoluted, isn’t it? But it’s part of the psychology of the letter: Paul is praising Onesimus as much as he can so that Philemon finds it easier to grant his request.

Verse 12: “I am sending him, that is, my own heart, back to you.” Paul calls Onesimus his heart (Greek *splanchna*, meaning internal organs, a metaphor for deep emotions), and this probably has a function later in the letter. Paul is sending him back, for Philemon is the legal owner.

(It bothers some people today that Paul sent Onesimus back, as if he was still property belonging to Philemon. However, it could have been counterproductive for Paul to say that Christianity required the abolition of slavery. It would also have been problematic for Onesimus to remain a fugitive; it was better to clear up his legal status. Slaves were 20 to 25 percent of the population, and universal emancipation would have meant social and economic chaos, and most of the slaves would not have ended up any better for it.[9] If Paul had said that Christianity was against slavery, it could have hindered the gospel among the upper class, given slaves ideas of rebellion, and caused more government persecution against the gospel. For whatever reason, Paul treaded carefully when it came to slavery.)

In verse 13, Paul reveals what he really wants – or at least it seems to me that this is the clearest statement of what he wants: “I wanted to keep him with me, so that he might be of service to me in your place during my

imprisonment for the gospel.” Paul wanted Onesimus to stay with Paul, helping him in his imprisonment (which would include bringing him food, for example, since first-century prisons did not provide food). Philemon could not do it (he would have if he could, Paul implies) because he lived too far away, but euphemistically speaking, Onesimus did it for him, in his place.

“But I preferred to do nothing without your consent, in order that your good deed might be voluntary and not something forced” (verse 14). Paul wanted to keep Onesimus, but Onesimus did not belong to him, and he didn’t want to keep him *without permission* (is this a hint?).

So Paul again says that Philemon has the opportunity to do a good deed (that is, letting Onesimus stay with Paul). This is what Philemon has the opportunity to do voluntarily, rather than being ordered to do it. Marshall writes, “Paul hoped that it might be possible for Onesimus to spend some time with him as a missionary colleague.... If that is not a request for Onesimus to join Paul’s circle, I do not know what more would need to be said.”[10]

### **Supporting discussion**

“Perhaps this is the reason he was separated from you for a while...” (verse 15). The reason for the “separation” may have been that Onesimus ran away, but Paul tactfully puts this in the passive. By doing this, he suggests that the “separation” may have been God’s doing—Onesimus was temporarily absent so that he could be restored more permanently—perhaps not Onesimus’s original intention, but that’s the way it is working out now.

The purpose: “so that you might have him back forever.” Does this mean that Paul wants Onesimus to stay in Colossae with Philemon? I think the other verses in the letter hint at something different, and I think that here Paul means that Onesimus will be restored to Philemon in a more figurative sense, as it says in verse 16: “no longer as a slave but more than a slave, a beloved

brother...” Paul is saying that Philemon should receive this good-for-nothing slave (to paraphrase v. 11) as a beloved brother, not as a slave. In other words, he should be freed. Don’t treat him like a runaway slave—treat him like a long-lost brother!

This is a rather tall order, a difficult request, and it is no wonder that Paul deals with it so delicately. If Philemon frees the runaway, what will his other slaves think? They might think: “Let’s get our freedom by pretending to believe in Christ.” What will the neighboring slaveowners think? “If Christianity means having to free your slaves, I don’t want my slaves to hear about it.” Paul seems to be putting Philemon in a tough spot.

Onesimus is a brother “especially to me but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord” (verse 16b). Onesimus is Paul’s son and Paul’s brother; now Paul is asking Philemon to treat him as a brother not just spiritually, in the church, “in the Lord,” but also “in the flesh,” in physical life. Achtemeier et al. write,

The reference to receiving Onesimus as a brother “both in the flesh and in the Lord” (verse 16) may indicate Paul’s desire that Onesimus be freed, so that he can be Philemon’s brother both within the Christian community (“in the Lord”) and in secular society (“in the flesh”).[11]

In other words, some social benefits ought to go along with the change in spiritual status. When people are equal in the Lord, believers should treat them equal in the flesh, too. (A principle that supports gender equality, too.) Our theology should affect our ethics.

“So if you consider me your partner,” Paul asks, “welcome him as you would welcome me” (verse 17). “Partner” is the Greek *koinōnos*, someone who shares in something. If you are with me in the faith, Paul is saying, treat him like you would treat me.

Let’s put this in a modern context. Imagine that you are a business owner.



One of your worst employees has taken the company truck without permission and wrecked it. He goes to your pastor, gets converted, and your pastor then asks you to give the guy his job back, give him a raise, and even to treat him as an honored guest. In first-century culture, Paul is asking for more than that!

“If he has wronged you in any way, or owes you anything, charge that to my account” (verse 18). Most scholars believe that this is a polite way of admitting that Onesimus wronged Philemon in some way—perhaps by being a lazy worker, perhaps by stealing something to help him on his unauthorized journey, or perhaps it was an accidental destruction of property, something that caused Onesimus to take off in the first place.

Whatever it is, Paul says, I’ll pay for it, and he signs it in his own handwriting to make it a legal note of debt: “I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand: I will repay it” (verse 19). I’ll pay for that truck, the pastor says.

But then he reminds Philemon that Philemon already owes Paul a great deal: “I say nothing about your owing me even your own self.” Whatever I owe *you*, Paul says, you owe *me* even more, because I have fathered you in the faith. DeSilva puts it in the terminology of the social customs of the time:

Paul claims to be Philemon’s *patron* on the basis of bringing Philemon the message of salvation.... Paul claims authority to command Philemon’s obedience as Paul’s *client*, a social inferior whose response of service may be commanded on the basis of Paul’s benefaction of salvation.”[12]

Financially, Philemon was probably a patron, but spiritually, Paul was the patron. So, no matter how much I ask for, Paul seems to imply, you ought to do it. Paul here has moved from being a helpless old man in prison and started to act like a person in authority. He is the “father” in the family of faith, and as head of the family he has authority over both Philemon and Onesimus. But he says he is not mentioning this. Luke Timothy Johnson

writes:

In the realm of the Christian *oikomene* [household] (which includes not only Philemon's immediate household, but all the Christian households in the larger Pauline communities), Paul possesses the authority of a "head." This means, in effect, that Paul has authority over Philemon's own household, including Onesimus, thus trumping the Greco-Roman social hierarchy of obligation.... Paul is Philemon's patron and "head" in the Christian household, so he did not have to return the runaway slave. But while Philemon is now the recipient of Paul's benefaction, he can again become the great benefactor of Paul's mission by "giving" Onesimus to Paul.[13]

Similarly, Christians today are asked by Christ to make personal sacrifices—but we are never asked to give more than what we ourselves have been given. deSilva points toward a modern application of this story:

Paul removes a major obstacle to unbegrudging generosity, namely, the excuse that we may have been injured in some way by the person in need. Paul tells Philemon not to withhold kindness from Onesimus because of any loss he may have suffered on Onesimus's account, but rather to symbolically charge that to Paul's own account. Similarly, we are challenged to measure other people's "debts" to us against our debt to God, to forgive as freely as we have been forgiven, to share and help as generously as we have been helped and sustained.[14]

Whatever obligations people have against us, whatever wrongs they have done against us, we should charge that to Jesus' account, and remember that our debt to him is far greater than what he asks of us.

So Paul asks again in verse 20: "Yes, brother, let me have this benefit from you in the Lord! Refresh my heart in Christ." He wants a benefit, he says, and this is what it is: Refresh my heart, my inner organs. This may be a figure of speech, a general phrase, but even if it is, I think Paul is using it

tongue in cheek, wanting Philemon to catch his allusion. He has already called Onesimus his heart – here he seems to be asking Philemon to *restore* him, or send him back.

“Confident of your obedience, I am writing to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say” (verse 21). Earlier, Paul indicated that he would not command Philemon (verse 8), but here he implies that there *is* a command that should be obeyed—in context, the command to refresh Paul’s heart—and to do even more than that, whatever that may be. He is indicating that he has been beating around the bush rather than coming right out and saying what he wants.

David Garland suggests another point of application: “We may not be able to undo all the injustice in the world, but in our local neighborhood we can stand with those individuals who are oppressed” (366). Paul could not eliminate slavery in entirety, but he could eliminate it for one person. He did what he could, rather than fretting about what he could not – and he did it by 1) showing that the gospel leads to social equality and 2) appealing to principles of the faith, not by issuing blunt commands.

He ends with one last request in verse 22: “One thing more—prepare a guest room for me, for I am hoping through your prayers to be restored to you.” Travel plans were often part of the closing comments in a letter, so Paul’s comment could be seen as a routine note, in this case also expressing confidence that Paul will soon be released from jail.

This request also says that Paul wants the friendship between them to continue. He does not want to impose on that friendship, but he does have an important request to make of his friend.

### **Closing comments**

In verses 23-24, Paul closes with the greetings that typically ended a first-century letter (though Paul has more companions than most letter-writers do).

This seems to be his whole ministry team at the time he wrote: “Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends greetings to you, and so do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke, my fellow workers.”

## Epilogue

Did Philemon do what he was asked? Walter Elwell and Robert Yarbrough note the following:

An ancient inscription discovered at Laodicea, a village very near Colossae, was dedicated by a slave to the master who freed him. The master's name: Marcus Sestius Philemon. We cannot be certain that this is the same Philemon as the one Paul addressed, but the identical names from the same locale do raise the possibility.[15]

Another interesting bit of history: Around the year A.D. 110, Ignatius of Antioch mentions that the bishop of Ephesus was named Onesimus. Since Onesimus was a name generally given to slaves, it is likely that the bishop of Ephesus in 110 was a former slave. We cannot be certain that this is the same Onesimus, but it is possible. Garland notes, "If Onesimus were twenty years old when Philemon was written, he could have been seventy at this time." [16] What Paul did in this short letter may have had repercussions in church history.

Paul closes with a benediction: "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit" (verse 25). And that is a good benediction here. May God's grace be with your spirit—and may his grace radiate out from you to bless everyone you meet. May the spirit of liberation, emancipation, and equality bring blessings to your relationships in Christ.

## Endnotes

[1] David deSilva, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (InterVarsity, 2004), 668.

[2] Similarities with Colossians (cf. Colossians 1:1; 4:9-10, 17) make most scholars conclude that Philemon lives in or near Colossae.

[3] Michael Gorman, *Apostle of the Crucified Lord* (Eerdmans, 2004), 456.

[4] deSilva, 669. If Philemon decided not to free the slave, he probably wouldn't have the letter read in church, either. But if he did decide to free the slave who had undesirable behavior, the letter would help explain the slaveowner's strange action.

[5] "Slavery is a system of bossing people around" (Paul Jewett, quoted in David E. Garland, *Colossians, Philemon*. NIV Application Commentary [Zondervan, 1998], 367).

[6] "Paul himself is imitating Christ by denying himself the use of a certain status and power.... The text echoes similar refusals to use apostolic privilege (1 Thessalonians 2:7; 2 Thessalonians 3:7-9; 1 Corinthians 9, esp. v. 19, all of which in turn are based on texts about Christ's self-denial (e.g., Philippians 2:6-8; 2 Corinthians 8:9))" (Gorman, 465).

[7] "Conformity to the pressures of authority is not what God seeks, but conformity to the mind of Christ.... If a pastoral leader must use authority to coerce rather than facilitate transformation, he or she may win a minor victory at the expense of the larger campaign for Christlikeness" (deSilva, 683).

[8] Paul is playing a little on words. *Onesimus* means "useful," but Onesimus was useless as a slave. "Useless" is the Greek word *achrēstos*, and indeed Onesimus had been *a-christos* – without Christ. But now that he is in Christ, he has become useful (*euchrēstos*).

[9] First-century slavery was not as oppressive as American slavery was — some slaves had white-collar jobs; others were blue-collar skilled workers. Emancipation was common upon age 30 or so. Some people actually sold themselves into slavery because the slaves had some economic security, whereas freedmen had to scramble to find jobs day by day. However, some first-century slaves did have it bad — forced to work in mines, fields or as oarsmen on ships —but those jobs were usually given to slaves who had

already misbehaved. “The number of papyri dealing with runaway slaves suggests that it was not a benign institution” (Garland, 349).

[10] Marshall et al., 146-147.

[11] Paul J. Achtemeier, Joel B. Green, and Maryanne Meye Thompson, *Introducing the New Testament* (Eerdmans, 2001), 423.

[12] deSilva, 671, 673.

[13] Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Writings of the New Testament* (Fortress, 1999), 388-389.

[14] deSilva, 676.

[15] Walter Elwell and Robert Yarbrough, *Encountering the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1997), 323.

[16] Garland, 306.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

[back to table of contents](#)

## About the Authors...

The first chapter was written and edited by employees of Grace Communion International. The other chapters were written by Michael Morrison.

Michael Morrison received a PhD from Fuller Theological Seminary in 2006 and is Dean of Faculty and Instructor in New Testament for Grace Communion Seminary. He is the author of numerous books, including:

*Who Needs a New Covenant? The Rhetorical Function of the Covenant Motif in the Argument of Hebrews* (print only)

*Sabbath, Circumcision and Tithing*

### **E-books:**

*The Bible: A Guided Tour* (co-author)

*Discipleship 101: Basic Christian Teachings*

*Evangelism Without Guilt*

*Exploring the Word of God: Acts of the Apostles* (co-author of volumes 1 & 4)

*Exploring the Word of God: Reading Through Romans*

*Exploring the Word of God: Reading Through Galatians*

*Exploring the Word of God: The Corinthian Letters*

*Exploring the Word of God: Reading Through Philippians*

*Inspiration, Authority, and Reliability of Scripture*

*The Proverbs 31 Woman and Other Biblical Women* (co-author)

*The Purpose for Human Life: Learning to Be Like Jesus Christ*

*Using Microsoft Word for Academic Papers*

*What Does the Bible Say About Prophecy and the Millennium?*

*What Does the Bible Say About the Old and New Covenants?*

*What Does the Bible Say About the Sabbath?*

*What Does the Bible Say About the Kingdom of God?*

*What Does the Bible Say About the Old and New Covenants?*

*What Does the Bible Say About Speaking in Tongues?*

*What Does the Bible Say About Women in Church Leadership?*



~ ~ ~ ~ ~

[back to table of contents](#)

## About the Publisher...

Grace Communion International is a Christian denomination with about 50,000 members, worshiping in about 900 congregations in almost 100 nations and territories. We began in 1934 and our main office is in North Carolina. In the United States, we are members of the National Association of Evangelicals and similar organizations in other nations. We welcome you to visit our website at [www.gci.org](http://www.gci.org).

If you want to know more about the gospel of Jesus Christ, we offer help. First, we offer weekly worship services in hundreds of congregations worldwide. Perhaps you'd like to visit us. A typical worship service includes songs of praise, a message based on the Bible, and opportunity to meet people who have found Jesus Christ to be the answer to their spiritual quest. We try to be friendly, but without putting you on the spot. We do not expect visitors to give offerings—there's no obligation. You are a guest.

To find a congregation, write to one of our offices, phone us or visit our website. If we do not have a congregation near you, we encourage you to find another Christian church that teaches the gospel of grace.

We also offer personal counsel. If you have questions about the Bible, salvation or Christian living, we are happy to talk. If you want to discuss faith, baptism or other matters, a pastor near you can discuss these on the phone or set up an appointment for a longer discussion. We are convinced that Jesus offers what people need most, and we are happy to share the good news of what he has done for all humanity. We like to help people find new life in Christ, and to grow in that life. Come and see why we believe it's the best news there could be!

Our work is funded by members of the church who donate part of their income to support the gospel. Jesus told his disciples to share the good news,

and that is what we strive to do in our literature, in our worship services, and in our day-to-day lives.

If this e-book has helped you and you want to pay some expenses, all donations are gratefully welcomed, and in several nations, are tax-deductible. If you can't afford to give anything, don't worry about it. It is our gift to you. To make a donation online, go to [www.gci.org/participate/donate](http://www.gci.org/participate/donate).

Thank you for letting us share what we value most — Jesus Christ. The good news is too good to keep it to ourselves.

See our website for hundreds of articles, locations of our churches, addresses in various nations, audio and video messages, and much more.

Grace Communion International  
3129 Whitehall Park Dr.  
Charlotte, NC 28273-3335

1-800-423-4444  
[www.gci.org](http://www.gci.org)

#### **You're Included...**

We talk with leading Trinitarian theologians about the good news that God loves you, wants you, and includes you in Jesus Christ. Most programs are about 28 minutes long. Our guests have included:

Ray Anderson, Fuller Theological Seminary  
Douglas A. Campbell, Duke Divinity School  
Elmer Colyer, U. of Dubuque Theological Seminary  
Gordon Fee, Regent College  
Trevor Hart, University of St. Andrews  
George Hunsinger, Princeton Theological Seminary  
Jeff McSwain, Reality Ministries  
Paul Louis Metzger, Multnomah University  
Paul Molnar, St. John's University

Cherith Fee Nordling, Antioch Leadership Network  
Andrew Root, Luther Seminary  
Alan Torrance, University of St. Andrews  
Robert T. Walker, Edinburgh University  
N.T. Wright, University of St. Andrews  
William P. Young, author of *The Shack*

Programs are available free for viewing and downloading at  
[www.youreincluded.org](http://www.youreincluded.org).

**Speaking of Life...**

Dr. Joseph Tkach, president of Grace Communion International, comments each week, giving a biblical perspective on how we live in the light of God's love. Most programs are about three minutes long – available in video, audio, and text. Go to [www.speakingoflife.org](http://www.speakingoflife.org).

[back to table of contents](#)



## **Grace Communion Seminary**

Ministry based on the life and love of the Father, Son, and Spirit.

Grace Communion Seminary serves the needs of people engaged in Christian service who want to grow deeper in relationship with our Triune God and to be able to more effectively serve in the church.

### **Why study at Grace Communion Seminary?**

Worship: to love God with all your mind.

Service: to help others apply truth to life.

Practical: a balanced range of useful topics for ministry.

Trinitarian theology: a survey of theology with the merits of a Trinitarian perspective. We begin with the question, "Who is God?" Then, "Who are we in relationship to God?" In this context, "How then do we serve?"

Part-time study: designed to help people who are already serving in local congregations. There is no need to leave your current ministry.

Full-time students are also welcome.

Flexibility: your choice of master's level continuing education courses or pursuit of a degree: Master of Pastoral Studies or Master of Theological Studies.

Affordable, accredited study: Everything can be done online.

For more information, go to [www.gcs.edu](http://www.gcs.edu). Grace Communion Seminary is accredited by the Distance Education Accrediting Commission, [www.deac.org](http://www.deac.org). The Accrediting Commission is listed by the U.S.

Department of Education as a nationally recognized accrediting agency.

[back to table of contents](#)

# **Ambassador College of Christian Ministry**

Want to better understand God's Word? Want to know the Triune God more deeply? Want to share more joyously in the life of the Father, Son and Spirit? Want to be better equipped to serve others?

Among the many resources that Grace Communion International offers are the training and learning opportunities provided by ACCM. This quality, well-structured Christian Ministry curriculum has the advantage of being very practical and flexible. Students may study at their own pace, without having to leave home to undertake full-time study.

This denominationally recognized program is available for both credit and audit study. At minimum cost, this online Diploma program will help students gain important insights and training in effective ministry service. Students will also enjoy a rich resource for personal study that will enhance their understanding and relationship with the Triune God.

---

Visit: <http://www.smashwords.com/books/view/367848> to purchase this book to continue reading. Show the author you appreciate their work!