

Colossians and Philemon



Judaism
Hellenism
Paganism

Bob Martin

SUNSET BIBLE STUDY LIBRARY

Colossians & Philemon

by
Robert Martin



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Colossians and Philemon

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Dedication

It has been said that the greatest sentence ever spoken for human understanding and success was written by the Holy Spirit in John 3:16, and to that I wholeheartedly agree. "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life." The second greatest sentence ever spoken was the simple, but beautiful, life-saving, two word reply when my wife Bess said, "I do," on December 20, 1955, the day we became husband and wife at the Fourth Street Church of Christ in Portales, New Mexico, where she and her family worshiped.

She was a child of God - I was not. If there can be found any good in me, she and God get all the credit. It was because of her deep love, faith and total commitment to God and to me, that I finally came to know and love God the way she does. If her life story, of living each day in the strength and help of God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit, were to become a book, it would be entitled, "The Making Of A Man."

I humbly bow, with her, before our God and say, "Thank you, Father, thank you for my Jesus and my Bessie!"
They are the reason for what flows from my heart.

Bob Martin



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A special "*thank you*" to
Rusty and Sue Russwurm
and their family
for making the printing of this book possible.

Preface to the Sunset Bible Study Library

Since 1962 Sunset International Bible Institute has been a leader in teaching God's Word, training local church leaders and preparing preachers and missionaries for effective ministry. Developed in the laboratory of preacher training and proven in the crucible of practical ministry, the Sunset curriculum has grown to forty core courses used both in our resident school and distance learning applications. In 1989 the Sunset Video Studio was inaugurated to record each course of study in a professional format. Those courses, each with a companion study guide, have been used to teach thousands of individual students and develop a world-wide network of video satellite schools in local congregations and mission fields.

Now in printed form that same library of trusted Bible study material is available through Sunset Institute Press for an even wider circle of Bible students, thanks to a benevolent God, an excellent editorial staff and a number of faithful supporters who believed in the project.

This book is the result of a multi step process which began with a videotaped course. The voice track of the videotape was first transcribed then formatted and edited from spoken to written style. The goal of the editorial process has been to produce a readable document while protecting the course content and the style and personality of the teacher. We believe the goal has been achieved and that each of the forty books planned for the Sunset Bible Study Library will likewise achieve that goal.

Special gratitude must be expressed to Cline Paden and Truman Scott who began the video course series in 1989, to Bob Martin, who directed Sunset Video Studio, to Virgil Yocham and the staff of Sunset External Studies Division who wrote the study guides, and to the staff of Sunset Translation Center who edited the manuscripts and to each faculty member of Sunset International Bible Institute who took extra time to prepare and present these courses in the studio.

In addition to the English version, this book and its companion volumes are being translated into the major languages of the world to produce a Bible study library which can be used on the mission fields of the world to mature Christians, train church leaders and grow churches that plant other churches.



A companion workbook on the study of Colossians and Philemon is available for purchase through Sunset International Bible Institute External Studies: 1(800) 687-2121 or extschool@sibi.cc.

Introduction

About one hundred miles from Ephesus, in the valley of the River Lycus, near where it joins the Meander, there once stood three important cities—Laodicea, Hierapolis and Colosse. Originally they had been Phrygian cities, but now they were part of the Roman province of Asia. They stood almost within sight of each other. Hierapolis and Laodicea stood one on either side of the valley with the River Lycus flowing between; they were only six miles apart, and they were in full view of each other. The third city, Colosse, straddled the river, twelve miles further up. (The Letter to the Colossians, Wm. Barclay)

When a New Testament book is studied, the geographical and cultural environment is extremely important to understanding its teaching. The cultural background of Colossians must be considered before we can get an adequate understanding of the Holy Spirit's teaching. Bob Martin does an outstanding job of opening our minds to the exhortations and warnings of the apostle Paul as he writes to the church in Colosse and to his dear brother and friend, Philemon. Although Paul did not directly establish the church in Colosse, probably meeting in Philemon's house, he expressed his deep love and concern for the brethren there.

Bob will boldly reveal the teaching of Paul as he assures the Christians in Colosse that Christ is all sufficient, and thus, there is no need and no room for any additions to the gospel. The Colossian brethren were in danger of being led back into the legalistic practices of Judaistic worship. In addition to this, they were trying to add certain practices of paganism. Either or both of these additions would corrupt the pure truth of the grace of God by which these brethren had become children of God and in which they were to continue to stand.

As Bob Martin concludes his study, he will take you into the heart and lives of Onesimus, Philemon's runaway slave,

Philemon himself and his fellow Christians and neighbors in Colosse. You will marvel at the workings of God as he brings Paul and Onesimus together in Rome and then travel back to Colosse and watch as Onesimus, now a Christian brother, is reunited with his master. How will Philemon receive his slave? How will he respond to his slave-owning neighbors? Will he continue to treat him as a slave? What a dilemma? Your faith will be strengthened as you almost close this book with a shout of victory!

Virgil Yocham
Dean, External Studies
Sunset International bible Institute

Table of Contents

Preface

I.	Background and History	1
II.	The Heresy at Colosse	15
III.	God's Wisdom Versus the World's Wisdom	27
IV.	Using What You Have	40
V.	The Supremacy of Jesus	51
VI.	Combating Heresy	63
VII.	Walking in Jesus	77
VIII.	The Christian's Relations with God and Man	91
XIX.	Philemon — Background and History	104
X.	In Jesus Christ You Are Somebody	116
XI.	Using God's Gifts	127
XII.	God Is Sovereign	141

Background and History

Acts 20:17–31

Introduction

This study will cover the Books of Colossians and Philemon. These epistles are tied together because of the people who are involved. Paul wrote to the “*brothers in Christ at Colosse*” (Colossians 1:1) and to Philemon, an important and influential member of the congregation at Colosse. The epistle of Philemon is a short, personal correspondence to Philemon from the Apostle Paul. It addresses an attitude that is essential to all Christians and extends an exceptional insight into the providential working of God in the affairs of mankind and especially toward those who are His elect.

When the precepts of these two books are combined, the student receives an extraordinary view of how a Christian is justified and how every Christian should live. These two books reveal some of the ways God moves providentially so that — “*... we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose*” (Romans 8:28).

Paul the Author

The Book of Colossians

The Book of Colossians is simply a letter, written by the Apostle Paul to the congregation of Christians who lived in the city of Colosse. As Richard Rogers, a former teacher for the

Sunset School of Preaching, has often stated, “Of all people Paul is the one person who is preeminently qualified to deal with this problem.” Paul had a dual citizenship which equipped him for the task of dealing with the problem at Colosse. In the Book of Colossians Paul wrote to Gentiles about a problem that was both Jewish and pagan. This letter was written between 62–64 A.D. when the congregation was plagued with pagan, Gnostic, and Judaizing influences.

Christianity began in the cradle of Judaism. But, it went beyond Judaism because Christianity is a world religion. By its nature, design, and purpose, Judaism was confined to a tiny country called Palestine whose borders were 150 miles long and 50 miles wide (241.4 kilometers long and 80.47 kilometers wide, Ed.). Its population was probably only four and a half million.

The Jews were hated and despised all over the world. Cicero (a Roman politician and philosopher who lived 106–43 B. C.) referred to Judaism as “a barbarous superstition” in one of his books. In chapter five and paragraph eight of Histories, Tacitus (a Roman historian who lived 54–119 A.D.) called the Jews “the vilest of people” — that was their reputation. Anti-semitism is nothing new. The Jews have always been hated because of their pride, arrogance, exclusiveness, and riches. They were bitterly hated in the first century because this attitude led them to rebellion and terrorism against anyone perceived as their enemy. Zionism is not a new thing. In their exclusive attitude the Jews were certain that they alone were God’s choice people and all others were nothing more than fuel for the fires of hell.

Paul was a Jew and proud of it. Second Corinthians 11:22 and Philippians 3:5 reveal Paul as being proud of his heritage. He was from the tribe of Benjamin, the tribe from which the first king had come; the tribe which had been loyal and faithful to Judah; the tribe which had held a place of honor whenever Judah went to war. He spoke the Hebrew language in a time when almost no Jews, outside Judea, did. He was a Pharisee

which meant he was of the strictest and most zealous of the Jewish sects. He advanced in his own religion above those his own age. He was schooled at the feet of Gamaliel, the most noted religious teacher of the day. Gamaliel did not teach boys; he was an instructor of rabbis which means that Paul was schooled as such.

Paul was not born in Palestine. He was born in Tarsus of Asia Minor. Tarsus was an important city. The most famous university in the world was in the city of Tarsus. The largest university was in Pergamum and the university with the largest library was in Alexandria, but the professors who taught in both of these universities had been schooled in Tarsus. Therefore, Paul had been well trained in Grecian philosophy. He was a Roman citizen by birth, because Tarsus was a free city. There were three free cities in Asia Minor in that day — Ephesus, Alexandria, and Tarsus. A free city did not have Roman garrisons because they had their own militia. They did not have a Roman governor and were able to elect their own officials. To be born in a free city was the same as being born in Rome with all its attending privileges.

Paul used his Roman citizenship whenever it helped him and he used his Jewish background when it was necessary. When the Jews formed a conspiracy to kill Paul, he asked them a question about the resurrection to distract them (cf. Acts 23–26). Paul had an enormous depth of knowledge from both worlds and he used that knowledge in every situation as he traveled preaching and teaching the gospel.

Therefore, Paul was exceptionally qualified to deal with any Jewish/Gentile problem that might arise in any congregation. Paul was Jewish by birth and training and had been educated in both the Jewish religion and academically as a Gentile. Paul was a man with dual citizenship and would understand the perceptions of both the Roman and the Jewish societies making him the perfect teacher. Paul was unique. There was no other man so qualified to understand and preach the gospel to the Gentile world plagued by Jewish and pagan heresies.

Why Was the Book Written?

One of the most important questions one can ask about any book in the Bible is, “Why was it written?” It is important to understand why Paul wrote each book to be able to hear what God is saying to Christians in these epistles. The circumstances of the letters convey Paul’s feelings when he was writing these two epistles. It is important to feel the beating of Paul’s heart, to see the light he had inside, and understand how and why the Holy Spirit stirred up his desire to share it. It is also important to know the city and the kind of people the Colossians were. Knowing how the people thought helps in understanding their beliefs and actions.



Colosse was located in Asia Minor (see map). The whole area known as **Asia Minor** in the Bible — Bithynia, Galatia, Pamphylia, Pisidia, and Cilicia — is the area that is called **Turkey** today. Colosse was part of a tri-city area located in the Lycus River Valley along with Laodicea and Hierapolis. The Lycus River is a tributary of the Meander River which flowed near Ephesus one hundred miles (160.9 kilometers) downstream. According to ancient historians, Heroditus and

Xenophon, Colosse was a large commercial center before Paul's time. Strabo (an ancient world itinerant geographer who lived from 64 B.C. to 21 A.D. and traveled throughout the Roman world, Ed.) wrote that after the Romans built the Via Ignatia, their major east-west highway which by-passed Colosse, the city dwindled to almost nothing.

Laodicea (cf. Revelation 3:14–22; Colossians 4:13) was the center of industry and famous for its textile industry as early as 190 B.C. The trade routes from north to south and east to west passed through Laodicea making it a center for trade, medicine, banking, and industry. It was the place of the very rich who were known for thinking, “. . . ‘I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing. . . .’” (Revelation 3:17). The Roman government was concentrated here; therefore, it was a place with many politicians.

Hierapolis was also a wealthy city, but not because of its commerce and trade. It was famous for its health spas and healing mineral baths. The hot mineral and steam baths were made possible by the volcanic activity in the area. It became a resort and pleasure center for the rich and famous. Laodicea and Hierapolis were two very large and rich cities.

In contrast Colosse was not very large, but it was very scenic. It was where the rich and powerful built their homes. There are ruins today of Laodicea and Hierapolis, but none of Colosse.

Historical Background

The People of Colosse

The area around Colosse was populated by a people known as Phrygians. The Phrygians had one ingrained practice; habitually sampling and inventing new kinds of religions. They were religious inventors who took a little portion of one religion, a bit of another religion, a sample of another religion, and then merged these all into a religious combination. Several

secular historians note this peculiar religious mania of the Phrygians.

Thousands of Jews were transported into this region. Josephus (a first century Jewish historian, apologist of priestly and royal ancestry, and Roman citizen who lived 37–100 A.D.) says that Antiochus III, who was the king of Syria (223–187 B.C.), transported 2,000 Jews from Babylon to Colosse. By 67 A.D. the district census numbered 11,000 Jewish males. In the process of time the Jews had forgotten what true Judaism was. Therefore, they had corrupted the Jewish practices of the Law of Moses to the point that one Jerusalem Rabbi wrote, “We have lost many Jews to the Phrygians and the baths and pleasures of Hierapolis.”

The Jews became like the Phrygians, among whom they lived, and forgot God. There were many Jews in the area, but they had forgotten what true Judaism was really like. They were like the Jews in Nehemiah’s day who had added to their religion a little bit of the religious practices of Ashdod, Ammon, and Moab. Their religion became a weak mixture of many different religions. Nehemiah said:

Moreover, in those days I saw men of Judah who had married women from Ashdod, Ammon and Moab. Half of their children spoke the language of Ashdod or the language of one of the other peoples, and did not know how to speak the language of Judah (Nehemiah 13:23–24).

The weakened religion of the Old and New Testament periods is very similar to present day denominationalism. Denominations have a little bit of everything: a little bit of the Old Testament, a bit of the New Testament, some Roman idolatry, some Calvinism, and anything else that makes a man feel good. Everyone wants to be right in his own brand of Christianity, and somehow men have convinced each other that, in the end, it will all be acceptable to God.

Paul in the City of Ephesus

About twenty-five years after the resurrection of Jesus, a man came from Tarsus to Antioch. His name was Paul. He had met Jesus as he traveled on the road to Damascus (cf. Acts 9:1–19). In Antioch he began his third missionary journey. On this journey he probably walked through the streets of Laodicea, Hierapolis, and Colosse on his way to Ephesus. He stayed in the city of Ephesus for almost two and a half years.

During that time Paul supported himself as a tent maker and taught in the school of Tyrannus (cf. Acts 19). Paul performed many mighty and unusual miracles as he openly preached the gospel of Christ Jesus. In a region filled with superstition and every kind of religion under the sun, those miracles were enough to get everyone's attention for hundreds of miles around. In fact, Acts 19:10, says, “*... all the Jews and Greeks who lived in the province of Asia heard the word of the Lord.*” That would have included Laodicea, Hierapolis, and Colosse.

Epaphras and Philemon

While Paul was proclaiming the gospel in the school of Tyrannus at least two men from Colosse came to Ephesus and heard him preach the gospel. They believed and went away as disciples of Christ. Their names were Epaphras and Philemon. Philemon was a very rich man with a large home. Philemon was not only wealthy, he was generous as well. The indwelling Holy Spirit had filled his heart with the love of God. Therefore, Philemon was not stingy or afraid to share his possessions. He was open-handedly generous like the God he served. Philemon, his wife Apphia, and their son Archippus, opened up their home and it became the meeting place for the church in Colosse. Epaphras was the evangelist who proclaimed the gospel to the people in Colosse. That was how the church began in Colosse.

The living seed was planted in Colosse and it began to grow just as God had promised. The faith of those in Colosse was strong and vibrant. That faith bound them together in love

for one another and filled them with hope. They were united to one Lord, in one faith, through one baptism taught in one gospel. They understood the mystery of Christ Jesus and realized that it brought them salvation. This secure belief was unusual in that part of the world.

They believed in the resurrection of Jesus from the dead and that He was the Lord of the universe. They believed that He controlled the events and the destiny of history. They lived by their faith in that truth. Thus, they could confidently hope in a bright and secure future. No one else could offer such a hope. Even the philosophers of that day had no hope for the future. To them and all others the future was dark; it was unknown and therefore feared. The concept of life after death was absent from all philosophical and religious thought because it did not exist. This is the darkness Christianity confronted offering the light and life of Jesus Christ Himself.

Warning of Apostasy

As Paul's third missionary journey drew to a close, the Holy Spirit warned Paul that "*prison and hardships*" (Acts 20:23) were facing him. As Paul hurried toward Jerusalem he stopped in Miletus and called for the church leaders of Ephesus to meet him there (cf. Acts 20:17–32). Paul told these bishops from Ephesus that a terrible apostasy, a radical departure from New Testament Christianity, would occur. He warned them it would come from an unexpected source:

Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made your overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood. I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them (Acts 20:28–30).

When a pack of wolves attack, it is easy to defend yourself if you know they are there, but “*from your own number*” wolves would not be expected. The same is true of wolves in sheep’s clothing. Christians do not expect “*wolves*” to spring up from among themselves and that makes the “*wolves*” hard to detect. It is easier to spot a pack of wolves that hunt together. A Christian has to have a very good nose to smell the wolf under the sheep skin. He needs to have a good ear to recognize the wolf’s voice behind the bleat.

Anyone who has studied the Book of Revelation with Richard Rogers (in the classroom or the video series) will remember Revelation 13. In Revelation 13:1–10, the sea beast arises “. . . with ten horns and seven heads, with ten crowns on his horns, and on each head a blasphemous name.” The power of Satan is easy to spot when the “*beast*” looks like a monster. In Revelation 13:11–18, “*another beast*” arises “*out of the earth*.” This “*beast*” has the appearance of a lamb, but he is not a lamb — “*he spoke like a dragon.*”

Revelation 13:14b says, “*he deceived the inhabitants of the earth.*” The “*beast*” can fool mankind, because when the Christian sees a lamb within the flock his first thought is Jesus and, therefore, the lamb must be from God. The “*beast*” may look like a lamb, but when he opens his mouth, he is not the Slain Lamb; he is the slayer lamb who chews, mauls, and devours the sheep. The problem is that the “*wolves*” or the “*beast*” are already among the sheep where he can scatter, cripple, and devour. The harm can be done before anyone is aware there is danger. The deceiver may already be among the flock and many of the sheep may have accepted the lamb.

Colosse’s Problem

This deception is what began to happen in Colosse. Try to understand what was taking place in this first century congregation. The majority of Christians today do not come out of the darkness of a pagan world like the people in Colosse. Many Christians do not have a background in witchcraft,

demon worship, idolatry, or the filthy gutters of immorality and impurity. Even when a person is not raised in a Christian home, many Christians in the western world come from a semi, pseudo-Christian background. Therefore, for some it is hard to appreciate what the people of Colosse had been through.

The Christians in Colosse had spent their entire lives around, involved with, or influenced by heathen temples. These superstitious people worshiped hundreds of pagan gods and lived among temples erected to those gods. By incorporating a little bit from different pagan styles of worship into their own religion they hoped to appease all the gods. Their religion was a mixture of worship styles, fueled by carnal passions, superstition, and fear. Along with idolatry, immorality was rampant among them. Sexual immorality was a natural and required part of worship in this pagan society. These people were deeply immersed in immorality and the ways of darkness.

The gospel suddenly burst into this darkness illuminating the minds and lives of the people at Colosse. The Colossians were recent converts who did not have many teachers. Even Epaphras, their teacher, was a young Christian himself. False teachers and their teaching never appear to be what they really are. The only weapon the Christians in Colosse had to motivate themselves to higher and nobler realms was their fierce new love for God and for each other. Often new Christians are very vulnerable and the new converts at Colosse were no exception.

No one knows what happened, but it may have been exactly as Paul said, “*Savage wolves*” arose from among the flock. Some of the wolves probably did not sound like a wolf at all. Think about how a new convert would react hearing these statements from someone he trusted:

- “We know you’re having problems with temptation; we know how easy it is to lapse back into those old habits and sins you use to practice. Let us show you what we know.”

- “We are sincere in our efforts to help you grow closer to Jesus and please Him. We have a way for you to do just that. You only need to follow our teachings.”
- “It is great that you placed your trust in Christ, but you must understand that this trust in itself is not sufficient. There are certain things that you must do to keep from falling back into what you used to be. We can show you a better way.”
- “It is very mysterious, but you’re lucky to have us, because we understand it. Faith in Jesus is great, you must have that, but you must also believe this . . . and practice what we show you. If you do exactly as we tell you, we will share extra needed wisdom and knowledge; we’ll show you all the rituals you must observe, all the things you must do, and the things you cannot do so you can overcome your old habits and make it to heaven.”
- “Listen to us and you will have all the fullness of God.”

True to their Phrygian nature “*the wolves*” would have blended parts of the Christian faith, parts of pagan worship, and portions of Judaism. They would have talked like the Pharisees by trying to bind certain rules and the keeping of certain rituals: fasting on certain days, not wearing certain kinds of clothes because they were not holy, do not do this or that, do this in a special way or it does not count. They began to bind certain rituals, traditions and teachings, and rules and regulations upon the new converts that God never intended to become rules for the Christian.

Then they introduced special messages and revelations from angels and new doctrines that had never been taught by Jesus and His apostles. They even began to encourage and practice asceticism (fasting and rigorous forms of self denial as a means of attaining holiness). They sought to insist on special knowledge about the basic elements of the universe in relation to achieving salvation.

This describes the wolf in sheep's clothing that was beginning to devour the flock at Colosse. Not a single generation has been free from Satan's influence. In every age someone with Phrygian type ideas has appeared among the flock in an attempt to diminish Christ's finished and completed work of salvation. It has a different slant or approach in every age, but whether it is 62 A.D., 1650, 1950, 1990, or today, a wolf in sheep's clothing among the flock will have its own particular appeal.

Some might wonder how the Christians in Colosse could accept such rebellious false teachings. This is not a difficult question to answer considering the many views of denominationalism that people accept as Christianity today. The Bible is the best selling book in the United States of America and at the same time the least read and understood. Instead of taking the time for personal study and understanding of the Bible men seek an easier way. They let different preachers tell them what the Bible says instead of finding out what it really says on their own. There is a desire to let someone else do the thinking for them. That way someone else can be responsible for his spiritual life. When the spiritual elite say, "Come, we'll lead you to God," many follow whatever is put before them. They even choose to believe that God will not hold them responsible for the false teachings they follow.

Men play a dangerous game taking chances with their spiritual lives in this way. This is what was happening in Colosse. Man struggled with temptation and even fall prey to it thinking he had immunity if someone else would take the responsibility for him. The Christians in Colosse played right into the hands of the false teachers and false prophets by allowing this to happen.

The problem that faced Epaphras in his ministry in Colosse was false teachers in the midst of the church. Epaphras decided to go to Rome to ask Paul what to do about all the problems. Rome was 1300 miles (2092 kilometers) away. The only way to get to Rome from Colosse was by a combination of walking,

riding a donkey, and booking passage on a sailing ship. The problems Epaphras faced are the same problems Paul addressed in his epistle to the Colossians.

Philemon was probably wondering what would happen next because, in the middle of all the problems within the church, one of his slaves had run off and taken half of the money sacks with him. The slave who had run away was Onesimus, who is the subject of the epistle written to Philemon.

Outline of Colossians

Key Theme: Jesus Christ is preeminent

Key Verse: Colossians 1:18

I. DOCTRINE: Christ's Preeminence Declared (Chapter 1)

- A. In the Gospel Message (1:1–12)
- B. In Redemption (1:13–14)
- C. In Creation (1:15–17)
- D. In the Church (1:18–23)
- E. In Paul's Ministry (1:24–29)

II. DANGER: Christ's Preeminence Defended (Chapter 2)

- A. Beware of empty philosophies (2:1–10)
- B. Beware of religious legalism (2:11–17)
- C. Beware of man-made disciplines (2:18–23)

III. DUTY: Christ's Preeminence Demonstrated (Chapters 3–4)

- A. In personal purity (3:1–11)
- B. In Christian fellowship (3:12–17)
- C. In the home (3:18–21)
- D. In daily work (3:22–4:1)
- E. In Christian witness (4:2–6)
- F. In Christian service (4:7–18)

Outline from Warren W. Wiersbe's commentary on Colossians,
Be Complete How to become the whole person God intends you
to be (Wheaton, Illinois: Victor Books @ SP Publications, Inc., 1984), 16.

Heresy at Colosse

Introduction

Philemon's family and Epaphras were possibly the only Christians Paul knew in the congregation at Colosse until Onesimus walked into his house in Rome. Yet, Paul had deep feelings for every Christian in that city. In Colossians 2:1 he wrote, "*I want you to know how much I am struggling for you and for those at Laodicea, and for all who have not met me personally.*" Paul was very distraught after he heard personally from Epaphras about the problems at Colosse. His mind began to race and be flooded with words of praise, warnings, and condemnations.

It is easy to imagine Paul pacing from side to side as he dictated the epistle of Colossians to Tychicus. The letter is filled with deep emotions and fiery reprimands. Some of Paul's sentences go on and on. He was a man who was burning inside as he opened his heart to these troubled brothers. Paul had been beaten, stoned, lashed, imprisoned, and left for dead — all for the gospel of Jesus Christ. He had literally poured out his life's blood for the brethren to bring them New Testament Christianity and to keep them committed and doctrinally pure. In the face of this frightening heresy Paul wrote emotionally but also as an inspired author. Internal evidence suggests that Paul wrote the books of Ephesians, Colossians, and Philemon within weeks or possibly days of each other. Colossians and Ephesians are almost parallel — thought for thought and chapter for chapter. There are over one hundred references to the Book of

Ephesians within the Book of Colossians. All the references to other books combined only total 182.

The Book of Colossians is a very sharp, terse, impassioned, apologetic witness to a church facing heresy. It seems to be written as if it were a frenzied, last minute attempt to save a drowning man. The Book of Ephesians is a very thought-out, logical, deep treatment of the same subject, but done with more thought and time. Both Ephesians and Philemon were triggered by the news brought by Epaphras from Colosse. Paul rapidly and fervently wrote the letter to the Colossians. He knew that Ephesus was only 100 miles from Colosse so he thoughtfully wrote to encourage the brethren there also. Since all these letters had to go to Asia by the hand of Tychicus, Paul probably decided this would be a good time to write to Philemon and return Onesimus, the run-away slave.

The Nature of the Heresy

Paul's letter is a forceful rebuttal to the multi-fold heresy that was taking root in the church at Colosse. It is important to understand the nature of this heresy. There are **ten characteristics** to remember. William Barclay's book The All Sufficient Christ contains a discussion of the nature of this heresy.¹ He lists a scripture reference with each characteristic.

1. **It was a beguiling seduction:** "*I tell you this so that no one may deceive you by fine-sounding arguments*" (Colossians 2:4).

Paul was warning the Colossians not to let anyone trick them with persuasive speech. The word in the Greek is

¹William Barclay, The All-Sufficient Christ Studies in Paul's Letter To The Colossians (Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press, 1963), 33–44.

pithanologia. Joseph Thayer defines it as “. . . in a bad sense, persuasiveness of speech, specious (a possible argument that is actually wrong, Ed.) discourse leading others into error.”² In a court room a lawyer will twist the facts in order to win his case. He might use clever and conceivably possible arguments that are not true. That is what Paul is referring to when he says “*fine-sounding arguments.*”

2. **It was philosophy rather than religion:** “*See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy*” (Colossians 2:8a).

“*Philosophy*” comes from two words: *phileo* which means to love and *sophia* which means wisdom. A philosopher is one who loves wisdom. The problem is, if you are going to love wisdom, whose wisdom are you going to love: your own wisdom, man-made wisdom, or God’s wisdom? Metaphysics is one branch of philosophy. According to Webster’s New World Dictionary, metaphysics is the branch of philosophy that deals with first principles and seeks to explain the nature of being and the origin and structure of the world. It is speculative philosophy because it almost always seeks to explain the origin of the world in terms of human wisdom. It was human wisdom not God’s wisdom that led Charles Darwin to develop his metaphysical philosophy of the origin of the species and the theory of evolution.

3. **It was based on human tradition:** “. . . which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ” (Colossians 2:8b).

²Joseph H. Thayer, A Greek-Lexicon of the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1977), Strong’s # 4086, 508.

Jesus had also taught about the heresy of adding human traditions to religion when some of the Pharisees and teachers of the law came to Him and asked:

Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? They don't wash their hands before they eat!"

Jesus replied, "And why do you break the command of God for the sake of your tradition? . . . Thus you nullify the word of God for the sake of your tradition (Matthew 15:2–3, 6).

4. **It turned religion into rule keeping:** “*Since you died with Christ to the basic principles of this world, why, as though you still belonged to it, do you submit to its rules . . .*” (Colossians 2:20).

The word religion means a binding back of man to God. **Ligo** means to bind as a ligament binds one bone to another. **Re** means again, back, or with return to a previous state. As a ligament binds joint to joint so religion binds man back to his original state with God. Scripturally religion refers to a man's Christian life, but in practical terms whatever a man is bound to becomes his religion. If a man is bound to his money, then that money becomes his religion.

5. **It issued rules and regulations governing food and drink:**

Therefore do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink . . . Since you died with Christ to the basic principles of this world, why . . . do you submit to its rules: "Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!" (Colossians 2:16, 20–21).

It is not uncommon for men to make up new rules and regulations that say you cannot drink this kind of beverage or

that kind of drink in the name of religion. There are all kinds of man-made rules and regulations about food and drink and their affect on your relationship to God — “Man” must abstain from eating this food at this particular time or for this length of time so he can prove himself to be holy and more acceptable to God.

6. It issued in the observance of special days:

Therefore do not let anyone judge you by . . . or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day. These are a shadow of the things that were to come . . . (Colossians 2:16–17).

A “*religious feast*” refers to something that would be a yearly observance, a “*New Moon*” is a monthly observance, and a “*Sabbath day*” is a weekly observance. Paul is admonishing the Colossians not to let anyone bind these types of observances upon them in a religious way. This teaching releases the Christian from the observance of a Christian Sabbath. Some people still believe that Sunday should be a Christian rest-day, but Christians do not observe a day, we keep a feast. Religiously, there is no day that Christians observe above another day. If a brother who is weak in the faith wants to observe a special day, the stronger Christian is supposed to tolerate him and help him bear the burden while he grows to understand (cf. Romans 14:1–10).

7. It issued in rigid asceticism:

Such regulations indeed have an appearance of wisdom, with their self-imposed worship, their false humility and their harsh treatment of the body, but they lack any value in restraining sensual indulgence (Colossians 2:23).

Asceticism means the harsh treatment or denial of the fleshly body for religious reasons. An example would be the Guru or holy man from India who lies on a bed of nails thinking the pain will bring him closer to God. The Penitent Indian in New Mexico who walks to a hill beating himself with a glass laced whip and then allows himself to be crucified thinks these actions on his part will bring him closer to God. The man in Latin America who puts hooks in the flesh of his back and pulls a wagon with a statue of the Madonna on it thinks the pain will make him more acceptable to God. The false doctrine Paul was warning the Colossians about issued in strict asceticism. They used harsh treatment and physical abuse of the body trying to kill the desires of the flesh for their religious purposes.

Christians need to be careful about fasting. Fasting for the purpose of killing the desires of the flesh is asceticism. Fasting in the Bible was never used as a form of asceticism. Every time fasting is mentioned in the Bible it is the result of sorrow or for the purpose of dedication.

8. It issued in circumcision:

In him you were also circumcised, in the putting off of the sinful nature, not with a circumcision done by the hands of men but with the circumcision done by Christ (Colossians 2:11).

The characteristics of rules and regulations governing food and drink and the observance of special days have reference both to Jewish and pagan practices, but the practice of circumcision was particularly Jewish. It had reference to the covenant sign that was given to Abraham. Christians do not practice fleshly circumcision for the purpose of religion. The covenant sign of circumcision takes place spiritually at baptism when the old man of sin is cut away.

9. It issued in the worship of angels:

Do not let anyone who delights in false humility and the worship of angels disqualify you for the prize. Such a person goes into great detail about what he has seen, and his unspiritual mind puffs him up with idle notions (Colossians 2:18–19).

Paul says two things here. First, those who worship angels are unspiritual. Second, appeals to angelic messages are not subject to verification. One may make up any kind of story and defend it as the word of God by the medium of angels. There is no easier way to lead the weak and gullible into all kinds of religious error.

These points draw attention to two avenues of heresy, Gnosticism and possibly demonic influence. From Paul's writing it would appear that the problem at Colosse may have been an incipient hybrid with Judaism — a mixture of Gnostic philosophy and Hebrew tradition. Some of the tenets of Valentinian and Cerinthian Gnosticism were that matter and spirit are co-eternal. Matter is evil and spirit is good. God is spirit and cannot touch evil matter. They would teach that there are emanations (aeons or angelic levels) between God and matter. They taught that Jesus was an emanation like God, but higher on the scale, closer to the true God. They made Him the highest but still less than God and certainly not incarnate. That led to the belief that since matter is evil Jesus could not have a physical body. He was a spiritual phantom. That is the concept that the Apostle John refutes in 1 John 1:1–3.

In light of Paul's warning to the Corinthians in his second epistle, this may allude to an appeal, on the part of some in Colosse, to the demon world or darker realm: ". . . Satan himself masquerades as an angel of light" (2 Corinthians 11:14). There is no evidence in the New Testament that God's work of revealing His will was invested to anyone other than the Holy Spirit Himself. The work assigned exclusively to the

Holy Spirit was the work of convicting the world of sin by the preaching of the gospel. The Holy Spirit Himself came into the world to enable men to preach the saving message of God to other men. The source of that message never came from anyone else. In fact, the two times that a demon attempted to give credence to the gospel message that demon's testimony was rejected (cf. Mark 1:23–25; Acts 16:16–18).

10. It Involved Worldly Rudiments

See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ (Colossians 2:8).

When you see all the characteristics of this heresy you can understand why the book of Colossians is a key book in understanding the place of Jesus Christ in Christian theology. The development of this Jewish-Pagan-Gnostic heresy literally questioned the uniqueness of the person of Jesus Christ. It was a mixture of Old Testament Judaism, pagan superstition, and gnostic mysticism that said, “Christ is good, but, you must also do this and that; you have to believe this and this . . .” It was a metaphysical philosophy that reduced Jesus to just one of many instead of One over all. You can just imagine the destructive power of that kind of doctrine. It totally denies Christ’s claim of having, “All authority . . .” in Matthew 28:18. It rejects the uniqueness ascribed to Jesus in John 1:1–14; 3:16; Philippians 2:5–9. And it renounces His exclusiveness proclaimed in John 14:6 and Acts 4:12. The essence of this heresy states that what Jesus did by being made flesh, living a perfect, sinless life, and paying the price of sin on the cross was not enough. Therefore, His attempt at effecting mankind’s salvation was inadequate and incomplete.

This same kind of reasoning and logic makes today’s denominationalism possible. The first step in dividing

Christianity is to reject the authority of Jesus Christ and His Word. When men reject the authority of Scripture they permit themselves the privilege of establishing their own authority. Their strongest reason for believing something is because of their own reasoning, human wisdom, and man-made traditions. They follow tradition instead of Scripture. Instead of Scripture being the only authority and the only way God speaks, Scripture becomes the least important way God says things.

This is the attitude that caused the problem at Colosse. This is basically the same heresy that is dealt with in the epistle to the Galatians. Judaizing teachers had invaded the congregations of Galatia. They argued that in addition to Jesus and His saving grace Christians had to keep the Law of Moses. They denied the all-sufficiency of Christ. Paul's appeal to the authority of Christ and the Word of Christ is clear. He said:

But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned! . . . You who are trying to be justified by law have been alienated from Christ; you have fallen away from grace. (Galatians 1:8; 5:4).

Paul was saying Christ is sufficient — you need nothing but Christ and His righteousness given at Calvary and if you add anything to that you fall from grace. Any one who tells you any thing different will be eternally condemned.

Christ's Supremacy

The Supremacy of Christ

In this letter to the Colossians Paul loudly proclaimed that Jesus is all-sufficient. He is everything the Christian needs. When someone is united to Christ he does not need other teachers and their doctrines, rules and regulations. In one almost endless sentence, Paul proclaimed the supremacy of Jesus Christ:

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy. For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, 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. Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior. But now he has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation — (Colossians 1:15–22).

This would have been exactly what Epaphras traveled all the way to Rome to hear. Christ is everything to all men. Paul continued by saying, “*To them (the saints) God has chosen to make known among the gentiles the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory*” (Colossians 1:27). This is the whole thing—the end of God’s purpose. This was His will from the beginning — that Christ should live in every Christian and be the hope of his glory. Paul reinforced this truth in Colossians 2:2–3:

. . . so that they may have the full riches of complete understanding, in order that they may know the mystery of God, namely, Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.

The true knowledge of God's mystery is Jesus Christ Himself. Everything every Christian will ever need is found in Jesus Christ. The Christian does not need all the false wisdom men are trying to give. This false wisdom is referred to as "*the rudiments of the world*" in the King James Version (cf. Colossians 2:8, 20). These elementary or "*basic principles*," which have been conceived by man, are the principles of human wisdom. They come from the development of what man wishes religion to be. Men may call these principles the "deep things of God," but man's wisdom is as shallow as a kindergarten class. All the treasures of wisdom and knowledge are found in Jesus rather than in false teachers.

All the fullness of Deity dwells in bodily form in Jesus. The Christian is made complete in Jesus. He is head over all rule and authority. Paul said:

When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory. . . . Here there is no Greek or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all (Colossians 3:4, 11).

Jesus Christ is everything. The Christian has everything in Him. That is why Paul said, "*I have become its servant by the commission God gave me to present to you the word of God in its fullness*" (Colossians 1:25). Everything has been revealed; there is no hidden knowledge, no hidden truth, and no special revelation yet to come. Paul told the Colossians that they had the Word of God in its fullness. The message that Paul delivered to them was all they needed.

Paul's Answer to the Heresy

Paul's answer to this heresy was two-fold. The answers to error are simple because they are true. First, the gospel is for all men — it is all inclusive. Paul said, “*We proclaim him, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone perfect in Christ*” (Colossians 1:28). The gospel is God’s only answer to men who are in sin, “*for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God*” (Romans 3:23).

The Christ of the gospel is all-sufficient. There is no way anyone can improve on what Jesus has already done. Jesus is all man needs. Any time man tries to improve on what Jesus has done, he denies the Christ and makes his own faith void.

The essence of the New Covenant is that every man can know God for himself. God assured Jeremiah that “*...they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest . . .*” (Jeremiah 31:34). The person who has been a Christian for fifty years and the new Christian have one thing in common — they both know the Lord in a saved way. Christ is in them and He is their hope of glory.

God's Wisdom Versus Worldly Wisdom

Colossians 1:1-8

Greetings and Introduction

The apostle Paul in writing to the church at Colosse wants them to understand two very important truths. Both of these truths have already been stated in Paul's epistle to the Corinthians:

For since, in the wisdom of God, the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe (1 Corinthians 1:21).

My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, so that your faith might not rest on men's wisdom, but on God's power (1 Corinthians 2:4–5).

Paul urged the church at Colosse to understand that no man can know God by worldly wisdom. This truth was very relevant to what was happening in Colosse. Paul did not try to manipulate the Christians with smooth talk and human wisdom. Paul used the Holy Spirit to convict them of their sins and to lead them to Christ.

The Messenger and His Message

Paul began his epistle to the Colossians telling them that he was "*an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God.*" This statement was not made to defend his apostleship. He did not go into an apologetic defense in this epistle like he did in his Galatian letter. There was no need to defend his apostleship to the church in Colosse; they did not doubt Paul's apostleship. The proof of his apostleship had occurred years before in the city of Ephesus when the signs of an apostle were shown in such magnitude that all of Asia heard the gospel.

Paul was assuring the brethren in Colosse that his message was not the smooth speech of philosophy. This was not a secret message delivered to them by another man. The message Paul was writing was the same open message they had heard before by the power and inspiration of the Holy Spirit. His message was not from man; it was the Word of God.

Paul knew about the problems in Colosse through Epaphras. Paul was addressing problems created because of the contrast between the truth and false doctrines. There were two messengers: the messenger sent from God and the one who delivered a message of human wisdom and opinion. Paul was the messenger from God. That is the meaning of the word ***apostlos*** — a messenger sent from God. Paul brought God's message in the words of God's Holy Spirit. God's message is not something that can be ignored.

God's Faithful Messenger

As an "*apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God,*" Paul was God's spokesman. The Book of Colossians is an authoritative book on the doctrinal subjects being addressed. As an inspired apostle whatever Paul says is a command from God unless he states otherwise. Paul made the following statement to the Corinthians:

*If anybody thinks he is a prophet or spiritually gifted,
let him acknowledge that what I am writing to you is*

the Lord's command. If he ignores this, he himself will be ignored (1 Corinthians 14:37–38).

If men refuse to accept the New Testament writings of Paul as binding on Christians, they are spiritually ignorant.

How is it that Paul could call himself an apostle? Was he an apostle by his own choice? Paul was not a self-appointed apostle. He was an apostle “*by the will of God.*” Paul was called to be an apostle when he was in the womb. Luke and Paul both record this information in their writings. Paul was in the city of Damascus after having seen Jesus in a vision on the road. He was blind and humbly waiting for further instructions from God. God appeared to Ananias and told him to go to Saul and place his hands on him to restore his sight. Ananias knew of Paul’s reputation and he was afraid. Luke recorded God’s words of assurance to Ananias:

Go! This man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel. I will show him how much he must suffer for my name (Acts 9:15–16).

In his letter to the Galatians, Paul said:

I want you to know, brothers, that the gospel I preached is not something that man made up. I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it; rather I received it by revelation from Jesus Christ . . . But when God, who set me apart from birth and called me by his grace was pleased to reveal his Son in me so that I might preach him among the Gentiles, I did not consult any man (Galatians 1:11–12, 15–16).

Paul was an apostle because it was the will of God. He was chosen before his birth to carry the message to the Gentiles.

Paul showed his willingness to become an apostle in the city of Damascus after three days of praying and fasting.

The Recipients of the Letter

Paul addressed his letter — “*To the holy and faithful brothers in Christ at Colosse*” (Colossians 1:2). That is a great description of the church — “*holy and faithful brothers*.”

Some versions translate the word “*holy*” as “*saints*. ” What is a “*saint*”? Is it a good Christian or a dead Christian who was a better Christian than most Christians? Many people think of a “*saint*” as someone who has lived an exceptional Christian life above and beyond the ordinary. Sometimes these people are recognized as “*Saints*. ” They are canonized and proclaimed to be “*Saint _____*” by some religious hierarchies. That is not what the word “*saint*” means. The word “*holy*” in the Greek (the original language of the New Testament) is the word ***hagios***. “*Holy*” means to be sanctified or set apart for a particular task.

The word “*holy*” has a two fold definition. The first part of the definition means to be separated from sin. The second part of the definition refers to the particular task — a “*holy*” one is dedicated to the service of God. It is not enough to be separated from sin. To be ***hagios/holy***, one must also be dedicated to God. If the Christian is not dedicated to God’s service, then separation from sin really has no meaning. Paul used this word in 1 Corinthians 6:9–11 when he contrasted Christian living with evil living. He said:

Do you not know that the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God? . . . And that is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.

The word “*sanctified*” is the Greek word ***hagiazo***, which is sometimes shortened to become the word “*saint*. ” A “*saint*” is one who is set apart and made holy. In these verses Paul

associates sanctification and justification with baptism — “*But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.*” Just as baptism washes away sin and sanctifies and justifies a man, it also sets him apart to serve God. The Christian is set apart because he belongs to God. That means that all areas of his life need to be aligned with the will of God.

Christians belong to God. They are called to be “*holy and faithful.*” Belonging to God will radically change the way a person lives. Paul said:

Do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your body (1 Corinthians 6:19–20).

All Christians are “*saints.*” They are set apart and dedicated to God for a purpose. Being a Christian is not about being perfect. Christians are separated from sin and the world to be “*faithful.*” That is the Greek word *pistos*. It means trustworthy. A “*faithful*” person is one who can be trusted. A husband or wife who is faithful can be trusted. Imagine the pain and anxiety a military man would feel when he is gone from home for months knowing that he cannot trust his wife. That is a tragic situation. Those heart breaking feelings are the same feelings Christ has when He knows that a Christian is not faithful.

There is a difference between being faithful and being perfect. A faithful student is one who is always in class. He knows why he is in class and he is devoted to learning while there. A faithful student will do the best that he can and sometimes that may mean making a 60 on a test instead of a 90 or 100%. A 60 may not sound as good as a 90, but if that is doing the best that he can do, then he is faithful.

There is a huge difference between being faithful and perfect. The problem with many who profess Christianity is that they equate perfection with faithfulness. If someone is not perfect, they say he is not faithful. Some Christians even have that same attitude about themselves. Have you ever heard someone say, “I don’t know if I’m saved”? Ask them why and they reply, “I’m not good enough; I’m just not perfect.” This attitude causes a person to become discouraged to the point that they give up on themselves. They see themselves as inferior and unworthy. That may have been a part of the problem with Onesimus, the run-away slave.

The brethren in Colosse were living for God with whatever wisdom and understanding they had as relatively new Christians. They were not perfect, but like the two talent man in Matthew 25:14–29, they were faithful with what they had. There were problems that Paul chastised them about, but they were still accounted as “*faithful*.”

Paul addressed the Christians in Colosse as “*brothers in Christ*.” He uses the phrase “*in Christ*” 84 times in his writings recorded in the New Testament. There is a grammatical construction in the Koine Greek known as the **locative of sphere**. It defines these Christians as living in the atmosphere of Jesus Christ. This is the only atmosphere in which a Christian can live. If you take a gold fish out of his bowl of water, he will die.

A Christian must live in the atmosphere of being “*in Christ*” — “*For in him we live and move and have our being*” (Acts 17:28). “*In Christ*” is a positional state of being. Paul told the Galatians, “*You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ*” (Galatians 3:26–27). It is not what the Christian has done; it is what Christ has done for the Christian. “*In Christ*” is how the Christian is able to stand justified, sanctified, counted “*holy and faithful*.” It is a positional state.

Paul began and ended every epistle recorded with a phrase about the grace of God. Colossians and Philemon are no exception (cf. Colossians 1:2, 4:18 and Philemon 3 and 25). Paul explained it this way to the Ephesians — “*For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith — and this is not from yourselves, it is a gift of God — not by works, so that no one can boast*” (Ephesians 2:8–9). Colossians 1:2 says, “*Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.*”

The word “*peace*” in the Bible refers to a right relationship with God. That relationship brings the Christian assurance. Assurance (confidence/ knowing that something is true, Ed.) is the greatest source of peace in the world. There are numerous New Testament scriptures that speak about this assurance from God:

- Acts 17:31 — “*... he (God) hath given **assurance unto all men**, in that he hath raised him (Jesus) from the dead*” (KJV).
- Hebrews 10:22 — “*Let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in **full assurance** of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us . . . and having our bodies washed with pure water.*”
- 2 Timothy 3:14 — “*But continue thou in the things which thou has learned and hast been **assured** of, knowing of whom thou hast learned them*” (KJV).
- 1 John 5:13 — “*I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know* (assurance) *that you have eternal life.*”
- Colossians 2:2 — “*My purpose is that they may be encouraged in heart and united in love, so that they may have the **full riches** (KJV uses the word **assurance** instead of riches) of complete understanding, in order that they may know the mystery of God, namely, Christ.*”

Assurance is what enabled Jesus to be victorious. It is that kind of assurance that brings great peace. Jesus said:

Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you, I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid. . . . I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world (John 14:27; 16:33).

Paul spoke about this kind of peace in Philippians 4:7. He said, “*And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.*” Peace is a perspective. If a Christians looks at the world through the perspective of the Bible, then he will see the world through the mind of Christ. It is important for a Christian to see things as Christ sees them.

Praise and Commitment

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 the saints — the faith and love that spring from the hope that is stored up for you in heaven and that you have already heard about in the word of truth, the gospel that has come to you. All over the world this gospel is bearing fruit and growing, just as it has been doing among you since the day you heard it and understood God’s grace in all its truth (Colossians 1:3–6).

Paul began his letter to the Colossians by reminding them of the double commitment they had made. He said, “. . . we have heard of your **faith** in Christ Jesus and of the **love** you have for all the saints — the **faith and love** that spring from the **hope** . . . ” (Colossians 1:4–5).

Their Commitment of Faith

When Paul said “*we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus,*” he did not mean that they had simply acknowledged the existence of Christ. Many people have knowledge of Jesus and may even say they believe in Him, but that does not mean they have made a commitment to Him. Biblical “*faith*” means there has been a commitment made to Christ. Paul referred to the Colossian’s faith knowing that they had made a commitment to trust in and rely upon Christ Jesus for their salvation. The Greek word for “*faith*” is *pistis*, which means there is such complete confidence and belief that one person is willing to commit everything to the other person. In the noun form it is a trust, reliance, or commitment. In the verb form there is the action of trusting, relying, or being committed to something.

“*Faith*” is often defined as commitment. Paul told the Romans, “*. . . if you confess with your mouth, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved*” (Romans 10:9). A Christian commits to make Jesus the Lord, Master, and Ruler of his life. He trusts Christ to completely care for him. He totally relies on Christ in such a way that his life reflects that reliance. By relying on Christ, the Christian commits himself to do anything Christ tells him to do. The moment the Christian refuses to obey Christ he stops relying on Him and His ability to save. Jesus said, “*Why do you call me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ and do not do what I say?*” (Luke 6:46). It is the act of a mindless person to call Jesus “Lord” and refuse to obey Him. Their faith committed the Colossians to obedience.

Their Commitment to Love

The Colossian brethren had also made a commitment of “*love . . . for all the saints.*” There are people who deny their faith by refusing to keep Christ’s commandments and there are people who say they “*love*” the Lord with one breath and then criticize the church in the next breath. This is impossible. The church is the Lord’s body and He is the head of that body (cf.

Ephesians 1:22–23). The brethren and the church are one and the same thing. The children of God show their love for Him by their love for each other (cf. 1 John 3:10–15). The church at Colosse was doubly committed — in “*faith*” and then in their “*love . . . for all the saints.*”

Paul did not start out by criticizing the church in Colosse because he loved them. They were his brethren in Christ even though there were problems in the congregation. There was also good among them. Love required that Paul build upon what was right and good. That is the way to solve problems within a congregation. Paul began with the good things he had heard about instead of causing more wounds by bringing up their faults in the very beginning — “*Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good*” (Romans 12:21).

The “*faith and love*” the Colossians had come as a result of the gospel and the hope of salvation the gospel brought to them. Their “*faith and love*” was based on the “*hope*” that was laid up for them in heaven. That “*hope*” is what gives “*faith and love*” their power. Men purify themselves as Jesus is pure because of the hope that they will one day be like Christ (cf. 1 John 3:1–3).

The Power of the Gospel

The power of the gospel is seen in the fact that faith brings grace and salvation. Paul encouraged the Colossians with this fact saying, “*All over the world this gospel is bearing fruit and growing, just as it has been doing among you since the day you heard it and understood God’s grace in all its truth*” (Colossians 1:6). They had received and understood God’s message of grace in its fullness. “*The gospel*” they had learned from Epaphras brought the assurance that they had received all the truth.

The gospel is a message of assurance. John ended his epistle by saying, “*I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have*

eternal life" (1 John 5:13). The Greek word for "know" that is used in this verse is the word *oida* instead of the word *gnosko*. **Gnosko** means that there is a process of learning still going on. **Oida** means that all the evidence is in and there is no doubt about the conclusion. Christians can "**know**" without a doubt that God is true. All His promises will be fulfilled and He has given each one of His children the assurance of salvation.

The assurance of salvation is in the power of the gospel. It is a universal message for the whole world. People "*all over the world*" have the full assurance of salvation through the gospel. The Colossian brethren were able to learn the gospel from Epaphras, who was Paul's fellow servant and also a faith minister of Christ. They had received the gospel and continued to grow and produce fruit. God's full grace and complete salvation had come to Colosse before the false teachers came among them. They did not need teachers with special knowledge.

God decreed that the message of God would be given not by angels but through men who would become preachers of His word.

How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can they preach unless they are sent? As it is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!" . . . Consequently, faith comes by hearing the message and the message is heard through the word of Christ (Romans 10:14–15, 17).

There is an obvious contrast made by Paul between Epaphras, his message, and the result of his message and what the false teachers had been telling them. Through the message Epaphras had preached they had grown spiritually and produced fruit. They understood "... God's grace in all its truth." When

Paul was bidding farewell to the Ephesian elders, he said, “*Now I commit you to God and to the word of his grace, which can build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified*” (Acts 20:32). He told Timothy:

All scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work (2 Timothy 3:16–17).

The world does not need man-made traditions, human philosophy, worldly wisdom, or instructions from angels to be right with God. The only thing the Colossians needed was the Word of God as it had been taught by Epaphras. Through that Word they had the love of God. That love comes only from the indwelling of the Holy Spirit — “*. . . God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us*” (Romans 5:5). The love of God is the proof of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit and that indwelling is the proof of the Christian’s salvation. Paul confirmed this fact in several scriptures:

He anointed us, set his seal of ownership on us, and put his Spirit in our hearts as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come (2 Corinthians 1:21b–22).

Because you are sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, “Abba, Father.” So you are no longer a slave, but a son; and since you are a son, God has made you also an heir (Galatians 4:6–7).

And you also were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation. Having believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the

promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance . . . to the praise of his glory (Ephesians 1:13–14).

Using What You Have

Colossians 1:9–14

Review

In the beginning of Paul's letter, he reminded the Colossians how, when, where, and from whom they had heard the gospel and received their salvation. He also reminded them that they had grown spiritually and in fellowship with God. They had heard the gospel preached by Epaphras and that gospel brought them salvation and made them both fruitful and acceptable to God.

Remember Who You Are

Paul began by telling the Colossians of how he had fervently prayed for them. He wanted to remind the Colossians that they once had a clear vision of who Jesus is and what He had done for them. He wanted to stir their minds to remember when and how they had heard the gospel. He wanted them to remember what they already knew and had obeyed. They needed to be reminded of their spiritual heritage and how they had grown in Christ. They needed to know that they would become more mature and in doing so they would become more God-like.

Paul wanted the Colossian Christians to remember their spiritual roots. They needed to understand their spiritual heritage to be able to grow in Christ. This understanding would allow them to grow more mature, more spiritual, and more

God-like. They would not be able to grow by keeping all the man-made rules and regulations. They had a spiritual past — that time between when they became Christians and when the false teachers came. There was a time when they were secure in their salvation. Remembering the security of their salvation in Jesus would help them to realize the absurdity of what the false teachers were saying. The Colossians once believed they were saved and in fellowship with God through Christ Jesus. Then the false teachers came and put doubts into their minds.

Paul's letter began by simply reminding the Christians in Colosse of the things they already knew. They had come to Christ with nothing. He had loved them unconditionally. They did not earn their salvation. They needed to remember that and continue in what they had once believed. Paul reminded them of who they were in the very beginning by addressing them as "*holy and faithful brothers in Christ.*" Sometime in the past, before the false teachers came, they had heard the gospel from Epaphras. They had learned the good news of God's love and grace. They had heard the gospel — a gospel that could not be helped or improved by man-made rules and doctrines. They had learned the whole truth from Epaphras.

God did not change. Jesus Christ has not changed. The Holy Spirit has not changed and the truth of God's word will not change (cf. Hebrews 13:7–9). Nothing concerning the gospel and salvation has changed from that day to this present time. Salvation is dependant upon God and not on man. It all began by the grace of God and it has been continually sustained and made complete by the grace of God. The living seed of Jesus Christ had been planted in the Colossians and they had grown spiritually by God's power rather than by man's wisdom or human power. By listening to false teachers and turning to man's wisdom, they were going to stifle the growth that had begun in the beginning through the gospel.

The Power of a True Life in Prayer

Paul revealed some important lessons about prayer when he wrote his letter to the Colossians. He made some very specific requests of God:

For this reason, since the day we heard about you, we have not stopped praying for you and asking God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all spiritual wisdom and understanding. And we pray this in order that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and may please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God, being strengthened with all power according to his glorious might so that you may have great endurance and patience, and joyfully giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the kingdom of light. For 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 (Colossians 1:9–14).

Remember the Power of Prayer

Paul asked God to “fill you (the Colossian brethren) with the knowledge of his will through all spiritual wisdom and understanding.” Paul was not asking that they understand some of the facts. He did not ask that they would be able to memorize a lot of scriptures. Some people can quote the whole Bible, but they do not necessarily understand what they have memorized. Some people can repeat what God says, but they do not understand His will. Paul was not asking for the Colossians to simply know what God said; he was asking that they be filled with the knowledge of God’s will — to be able to discern His

will. They needed a spiritual understanding of God's will to be able to live it.

Paul asked that they have the power to perform God's will: "*. . . being strengthened with all power . . . so that you may have great endurance and patience, and joyfully giving thanks to the Father. . . .*" Paul wanted the Colossian brethren to understand God's will and to have the power to practice it in their lives.

Remember the Source of Wisdom

Paul said, "*We have not stopped praying for you and asking God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all spiritual wisdom and understanding. . . .*" There is an obvious contrast between what Paul was praying for and what the false teachers claimed. "*All spiritual wisdom and understanding*" come from God. The false teachers claimed to be the source for understanding and finding the way to God. They claimed that wisdom, understanding, and knowledge were gained by keeping certain holy days and feasts. They claimed that the doctrines, rules, and regulations would eventually help bring knowledge. They believed in a system of works to please God and deserve His love.

By contrast, Paul taught that everything the Christian needed came from God. The Bible has never counseled the Christian to seek wisdom from the world. James says, "*If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him*" (James 1:5). When God gives wisdom and knowledge it is full and complete in Jesus Christ. A Christian does not need the regulations or traditions of men. Paul said, "*Such regulations indeed have an appearance of wisdom, with their self-imposed worship, their false humility and their harsh treatment of the body, but they lack any value in restraining sensual indulgence*" (Colossians 2:23). Man-made religious wisdom is worthless. It has no value to make anyone righteous.

Real wisdom and knowledge comes from God and His word which is inspired and useful for teaching, rebuking, and training in righteousness so that the man of God can be thoroughly equipped for good works (cf. 2 Timothy 3:16–17). In Christ and His Word, there is a perfect revelation of God’s will. The Christian does not need anyone to manipulate the Word of God to prove that he is worthy.

Paul prayed that the Colossians would be filled with the knowledge of God’s will; he prayed they would also be filled with wisdom and understanding of that will to enable them to solve their existing problems with the false teachers.

Remember to Live Worthy Lives

Paul also prayed that the Colossians would live a life worthy of the Lord by growing and bearing fruit (cf. Colossians 1:10–12). The King James Version translates this verse: “*walk worthy of the Lord.*” The Christian life is described most often in the King James Version of the Bible as a “*walk.*” These verses talk about the way a Christian should **live**.

The Christian Walk:

- “*Walk in newness of life*” (Romans 6:4).
- “*Let us walk honestly*” (Romans 13:13).
- “*We walk by faith, not by sight*” (2 Corinthians 5:7).
- “*Walk in the Spirit*” (Galatians 5:25).
- “*Walk by the same rule*” (Philippians 3:16).
- “*Walk worthy of the Lord*” (Colossians 1:10).
- “*Walk worthy of the vocation*” (Ephesians 4:1).
- “*Walk not as other Gentiles walk*” (Ephesians 4:17).
- “*Walk in love, as Christ hath loved us*” (Ephesians 5:2).
- “*Walk as children of light*” (Ephesians 5:8).
- “*Walk in the light, as he is in the light*” (1 John 1:7).

When the Christian “*walks*” as the Scriptures tell him to, then he is walking “*worthy of the Lord.*” The word “*worthy*”

is **axios**, which means fit. This same word is used in Revelation 3:4 — “*Yet you have a few people in Sardis who have not soiled their clothes. They will walk with me, dressed in white, for they are worthy.*” This verse describes who by God’s grace are “**worthy**” to be partakers of the inheritance. The Christian has been made worthy — he is of great worth to God for He counts you “**worthy**.”

Paul prayed that the Colossians would live the Christian life — the “*life worthy of the Lord*” is modified by four present participles as Paul described it:

- “**bearing fruit in every good work**”
- “**growing in the knowledge of God**”
- “**being strengthened with all power according to his glorious might so that you may have great endurance and patience**”
- “**joyfully giving thanks to the Father**”

The idea of “*bearing fruit*” is consistently, continually bearing fruit. Being fruitful has always been a requirement for the Christian life. Jesus spoke about bearing fruit when he said:

I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful. You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. Remain in me, and I will remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing (John 15:1–5).

Paul also wrote about “*bearing fruit*” as the result of growth in Christ. He wrote about the importance of the “*fruit of the Spirit*” in Galatians 5:22–23:

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law.

“*Growing in the knowledge of God*” is not only continual growth but also a life that does not become stagnant.

A Christian does not depend on his own power or ability. He depends totally on God’s provision — “*being strengthened with all power according to his glorious might so that you may have great endurance and patience.*” God has made a pledge to provide for His family with “*all power according to his glorious might.*” There are three points of “*power*” that God gives to His children: “*endurance*,” “*patience*,” and “*joy*. ”

“*Endurance*” is the word **makrothumeo**. It describes a person who is long-suffering without the thought of retaliation. It is one who does not have a short temper and is forbearing with other people. “*Patience*” is the word **hypomone**. It is a person who has the active, steadfast ability to wait for God and His will to be done in all circumstances of life.

The words “*endurance*” and “*patience*” describe how a Christian should act toward life and his brethren. He learns to endure and forbear. He waits patiently for God. Sometimes a man’s load in life is more than he can bear, and it is then that one Christian helps another to forbear. Sometimes one Christian has the privilege to help a brother carry a burden that is too heavy.

The word “*joyfully*” describes the attitude of a Christian. He is to have a radiant, sunny heart. Christians are to be sober but not somber. They should view life realistically seeing the bad and the good. The Christian’s prayer should be: “Oh, Lord, make me victorious over every circumstance. Make me patient with every person. And with all, give me the joy that no

circumstance or no man can ever take from me.” Joy comes from serving God and our fellow man out of the provision He supplies.

Use What You Have

Paul’s underlying spiritual principles are not always readily grasped, so I want to point out what I think is a key message in the spiritual concepts Paul was presenting to the Colossians. Notice that Paul did not pray for anything to be added to what they already had. He did not pray for more love or the things that accompany love. It does not make sense to pray for more love if the Christian has not used the love he already has. If a child asks for more milk when he has a full glass of milk already, does he need more milk? A Christian does not need to ask for more love when he is already filled with God’s love. Paul told the Romans, “. . . *God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us*” (Romans 5:5).

The Holy Spirit indwells every Christian. Through that indwelling Spirit God does several things: He seals us, He guarantees our salvation, He is our comforter, and He is our intercessor in prayer. The Holy Spirit also fills the Christian heart to overflowing with the *agape* love of God. A child is allowed to have more milk when he has drunk all the milk he has. He needs to drink the milk to grow and then he can have a bigger glass of milk. The child of God needs to use the love he has available to be able to grow. Christians have been filled with the fullness of God’s love. They do not need to ask for more love. They need to learn to love with the love that is already available and then they will grow in their ability to love. As that ability to love grows God will increase their capacity to love and love will overflow.

Use Your Giftedness

The brethren in Colosse had all that they needed in Christ Jesus for them to know God and become God’s dynamic

people. The principle of using what you have applied to them because what they needed was there all the time. They became spiritually lazy and did not use what they had available to grow the way they should. This enabled the false teachers to convince them that they needed more.

Paul used his letter to remind the Colossians of what they already had. The **full knowledge** of God's will is summed up in Christ Jesus. They had everything they needed to grow in Him. Paul prayed a similar prayer for the Ephesian brethren:

*For this reason I kneel before the Father, from whom his whole family in heaven and on earth derives its name. I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge — that you may be **filled to the measure of all the fullness of God** (Ephesians 3:14–19).*

Being filled with the “*fullness of God*” means that the Christian has the wisdom, understanding, and knowledge of God. Having the wisdom of God means that the Christian has a clear understanding of the true meaning of life. That is what the Christian “*walk*” is all about. It does not consist of an abundance of things; it is understanding what life is for and moving in the right direction. Acquiring worldly wisdom and things can become a liability instead of an asset. Jesus said, “*What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul?*” (Matthew 16:26).

Pleasing God in Every Way

Paul's prayer for the Colossians was that they should live "*. . . a life worthy of the Lord and please him in every way . . .*" (Colossians 1:10). God's purpose for every Christian in life is clear — the Christian is to become a continuation of Christ's life in this world. Christ is all anyone needs to become an extension of God's son. Adding human desires, rules, rituals, and regulations makes the person an extension of that human, not of Jesus. Paul was praying these things be so for the Colossians because he knew that if these things were true in their lives then the Colossians could face any heresy or false doctrine without a problem. They needed to understand the place of Jesus in their lives. He serves as the purpose of God in each Christian.

Every Christian needs to understand that Christ serves as the purpose of God in his life. God's purpose finds its fulfillment in His children when they walk worthy of the Lord. The old man of sin will die and there is a new person filled with Christ. When Jesus fills the Christian's life his life is changed in practical every day living. The changes are evident in his speech, his actions, and every aspect of his life. James, the brother of Jesus, said, "*Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says*" (James 1:22).

Christians Have Been "Rescued"

For 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 (Colossians 1:13–14).

Other translations of these verses use the word "*delivered*" instead of "*rescued*." The Greek word is *rhuomai*. It means to rescue or save something from danger. A person has been delivered away from the danger he was in. Literally there is the idea that Jesus snatched the person from the jaws of death. Paul

told the Romans, “*For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord*” (Romans 6:23). Death is what a person earns because of his sins — that is the wages. God rescued the Christian from the death penalty (wages for his sins) by paying the ransom price for his sins. Christians have been rescued from death and stand, not in darkness, but in the kingdom of His Son. Christians stand forgiven before God in His kingdom. In that kingdom sin has no power — the Christian has been rescued from the power of sin, the guilt of sin, the shame of sin, the judgment of sin, and from the penalty of sin. Sin cannot condemn the Christian. Paul said, “*Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus*” (Romans 8:1).

Sin does not condemn the faithful Christian. Jesus spoke to Paul on the road to Damascus saying:

I will rescue you from your own people and from the Gentiles. I am sending you to them to open their eyes and turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me (Acts 26:17–18).

God sent Epaphras to the Colossians to bring them out of the “*... darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God ...*” through His Word. They knew the gospel and had already been forgiven and sanctified. These facts should have given them (and all God’s children) a great deal of peace, comfort, and encouragement, but instead the false teachers wanted them to believe that they needed more.

The message that Paul gave to the Colossians is the same message for all — Christians have everything they need in Christ Jesus. God has rescued His children and protects them in the kingdom of His Son. Every Christian needs to believe, live, and accept these facts.

The Supremacy of Jesus

Colossians 1:14–2:5

The Supremacy of Jesus

In whom we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins. He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For by Him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by Him and for Him. He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together. And He is the head of the body, the church; He is the beginning and the firstborn among the dead, so that in everything He might have the supremacy. For God was pleased to have all His fullness dwell in Him, 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. Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior. But now He has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death to present you holy in His sight, without blemish and free from accusation—if you continue in your faith, established and firm, not moved from the hope held out in the gospel. This is the gospel that you heard and that has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven, and of which I, Paul, have become a servant. Now I rejoice in what was

suffered 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. I have become its servant by the commission God gave me to present to you the word of God in its fullness — the mystery that has been kept hidden for ages and generations, but is now disclosed to the saints. To them God has chosen to make known among the Gentiles the glorious riches of this mystery. Which is Christ in you, the hope of glory. We proclaim Him, admonishing and teaching every one with all wisdom so that we may present everyone perfect in Christ. To this end I labor, struggling with all the energy He so powerfully works in me. I want you to know how strenuously I am exerting myself for you and for those at Laodicea, and for all who have not met me personally. My purpose is that they may be encouraged in heart and united in love, so that they may have the full riches of complete understanding, in order that they may know the mystery of God, namely, Christ, in whom is hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. I tell you this so that no one may deceive you by fine-sounding arguments. For though I am absent from you in body, I am present with you in spirit and delight to see how orderly you are and how firm your faith in Christ is.

In the last passage of scripture Paul set forth the fact that Jesus Christ is the Savior of mankind. In Colossians 1:14–2:5 Paul gave ten points for the supremacy of Jesus. The main thrust of this passage is ten reasons or truths that make Christ supreme in all the universe. Each one of Paul's affirmations hits directly at the heart of what the false teachers had been saying about Jesus. Paul presented a view of the total sufficiency of the Lord Jesus Christ for every need and for all things. There is no need for anyone or anything else for salvation. I am going to cover these truths chronologically in order of time.

Christ Is Preeminent in His Relationship to the Universe

Jesus is preeminent over all creation because He existed before all creation — “***he is before all things***” (Colossians 1:17). In John 1:1–2, 14 John was talking about Jesus when he said:

*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. **H**e was with God in the beginning . . . The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.*

Paul was talking about Jesus when he wrote to the Philippians and said:

Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death — even death on a cross! (Philippians 2:5–8).

Jesus existed before the world was ever created. He is deity and existed in eternity as deity with deity. In John 8:58, Jesus told the Pharisees, “*I tell you the truth . . . before Abraham was born, I am!*” He was stating the fact of His preexistence to Abraham. And in that claim He calls Himself by the covenant name of Jehovah God, which means the Eternal One.

In John 17:5 as Jesus began His prayer to the Father for unity he said, “*And now, Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory I had with you before the world began.*” Jesus existed in the beginning. He existed before Abraham was born.

He did not just claim that He was, He said, “*I am.*” He is the Eternal One. Before the world was, He was. He has the same glory as the Father which means that He is preeminent.

When John the Baptizer was baptizing on the other side of the Jordan River, he “. . . saw Jesus coming toward him and said,

Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world! This is the one I meant when I said, A man who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me’ . . . I have seen and I testify that this is the Son of God (John 1:29–34).

In terms of physical birth John was six months older than Jesus. John was speaking about the fact that even though Jesus was born after John, He was greater than John because He had existed before John through His eternal existence as deity.

Christ Is the Preeminent One in His Relationship to God

Jesus is preeminent because He is deity. In Colossians 1:15 Paul said, “***He is . . . the firstborn over all creation.***” The natural position of the “firstborn” is a place of preeminence. It is the Greek word ***prōtotokos***. The word ***prōtotokos*** has nothing to do with birth order or being born. It is the word from which the word protocol comes. It means He is number One. And He is number one for many reasons. First, He is number One by reason of His deity and eternal existence. He existed before the world was ever created. Jesus is not a created thing like the universe. He is not a created being like man who was created to live in the universe on the planet earth. He is the preeminent one by virtue of His deity and eternal existence.

Christ Is the Image of God

Jesus is preeminent by virtue of His relationship to God. In Colossians 1:15 Paul said, “***He is the image of the invisible***

God . . .” Jesus was not created in the image of God as was man. He **is** Himself the “*image*” in which we have been created. That word “*image*” in the original language of the New Testament is the word *eikōn*, from which we get our word “icon.” It means the express image. He is not a copy or a photograph. He is the exact likeness. He is “one of” or “another like.” This is illustrated in Hebrews 10:1:

*For the law, having a shadow of the good things to come, and not the very **image** of the things, can never with these same sacrifices . . . make those who approach perfect (NKJV).*

The word “*image*” is contrasted with the word “*shadow*.” A shadow of something, a photographic likeness, or even a statue is only a copy or likeness of something. They are not the exact image. Jesus is “*the image of the invisible God.*” Jesus is the reality, which makes Him a contrast to the shadowy, the copy, or the unreal. That is Paul’s point in Colossians 2:17, when he was talking about feast days and celebrations from the Old Testament. He said, “*These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ.*” There is a contrast between the “*shadow*” and the “*reality*. ” Jesus is the reality, the substance, and the image of God.

The writer of Hebrews began his epistle by saying, “*The Son is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being . . .*” (Hebrews 1:3). The King James Version translated this verse, “*Who being the brightness of his glory, and the express image of his person . . .*” The Apostle John said, “*No one has ever seen God, but God the One and Only, who is at the Father’s side, has made him known*” (John 1:18). The King James Version says, “*he hath declared him.*” The Greek word for declare is *exegeomai*, which means to make known as the New International Version translates it. This is the word used for an exegesis. To exegete something is to make known its meaning or to declare its substance.

Jesus in His human form declared, revealed, and made known the substance of God. Jesus said, “*. . . Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father . . .*” (John 14:9). He is the exact image of God.

In Christ Is All the Fullness of God

Jesus is preeminent in that He is the “*fullness of God*.” Colossians 1:19 states, “*For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him.*” Colossians 2:9–10 states the same thing emphatically, “*For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form, and you have been given fullness in Christ, who is the head over every power and authority.*” All the characteristics of Deity dwell within Jesus. He is God in bodily form. When Christ dwells in the Christian, the fullness of God dwells in us. Having the “*fullness*” of God through Christ means that the Christian needs nothing else.

He Is the Creator of All Things

Jesus is preeminent because He is the Creator. Colossians 1:16 says, “*For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him . . .*” John 1:3 says, “*Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made.*” Jesus created the World and everything in it.

The writer of Hebrews says, “*. . . he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe*” (Hebrews 1:2). It was Jesus who spoke, “Light be!” and light was. He spoke the command and His wish appeared out of nowhere. He is the power that created the universe and all that is in it. He is preeminent by reason of ownership — it is His, He created it.

He Is the Sustainer of All Things

Jesus is preeminent because He not only created all things, but He also sustains the creation. Colossians 1:17 says, “*. . . in*

him all things hold together." He spoke it into existence and in its existence He established the laws by which it operates and is sustained. He spoke everything into existence, the power who created everything, and the power that makes it possible for creation to continue to exist (cf. Genesis 1:1ff; John 1:2; Hebrews 1:2, 11:3).

He Is the Goal of All Creation

Jesus is preeminent because "*... all things were created ... for him*" (Colossians 1:16). All things were created to give Jesus glory. Creation was established and man put into it so that mankind might come to love God and give Him honor and glory. This was the main problem at Colosse. False teachers were denying the power of Jesus and His creation. They probably denied the goodness and all-sufficiency of Jesus and His creation. They denied the fact that man had been put in the midst of creation so that he could receive and enjoy life from God. And they surely denied that man in return needed to learn how to live from God and give God the praise for His generous and complete provision.

One Grand Statement about Christ

The next three statements about the Lord Jesus Christ are possibly the greatest statements in the New Testament. Together they make one grand statement — Christians are totally dependant on Jesus Christ for every need. Many people do not like the concept of being totally dependent. They would rather think of themselves as self sufficient. Paul revealed the concept of self sufficiency to be a lie.

Jesus is **the all sufficiency of God.** If all the sufficiency of God is in Christ, then there is nothing the Christian can do. If all the sufficiency of God is in Christ, then there is no sufficiency in anyone else. Therefore, it is stupid for the Christian to look to himself or someone else for the resources of his salvation. Everything the Christian needs for salvation is found in Jesus.

Works, man-made rules, regulations, doctrines, wisdom, or hidden knowledge cannot be the answer. The Christian does not need help from Mary, St. Augustine, or anyone else. Jesus is the answer.

The statements made in Colossians 1 about the person of Jesus Christ are magnificent. Deity became a man. He was deity incarnate. He became God in a human body of flesh and bone. When He looked in a mirror He saw His reflection just as you and I do. When He walked on the seashore He left foot prints in the sand. He was physically tired at the end of a day; He grew weary and slept. He was hungry when He had not eaten. He died on a cross at the hands of other men. He was buried in Joseph's new tomb. He resurrected from the dead and is still alive, seated on His throne at the right hand of God the Father.

Paul was talking about the One who had no beginning, the eternal God. His earthly name was Jesus Christ. He really became flesh, lived among men, died a real death, and then actually and physically rose from the grave. When He appeared after His resurrection men could touch His body and feel the spear and nail holes. He was not a figment of an addled imagination. He was not some Docetic apparition. He was, and still is, real. And He is alive!

He Is the Redeemer/Savior

Jesus is preeminent in relation to sin and man's greatest need, which is salvation. In the person of Jesus Christ God has granted forgiveness of sin. That means salvation from sin is not found in any other person except Jesus. Jesus alone brings forgiveness of sin to man. That is the statement of Colossians 1:14: "*in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.*" That is the eternal proclamation of the Apostle Peter in Acts 4:12: "*Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved.*"

In regard to sin, man is the transgressor and Jesus is the Redeemer, Savior, and Forgiver. Jesus is preeminent to man's salvation. To be free from sin, to be pure in the sight of God,

and to stand un-condemned before the tribunal of God one must receive the salvation that is in Jesus alone. This fact stands in direct contradiction to what was being taught by the false teachers in Colosse. Man does not need any new knowledge; he does not need any secret knowledge for his salvation to be accomplished. Salvation is in Jesus and no other.

He Is the Head of the Body

Jesus is preeminent in His relationship to the church. Colossians 1:18 says, “*And he is the head of the body, the church; the beginning . . . so that in everything he might have supremacy.*” In the original language the word “beginning” is the verb **archē**. That verb form means to be first and it is used to denote a ruler who created that which He ruled. The church is the body of the saved. It is made up of those people Jesus has saved. He is the ruler over the church in which the saved are safe. It is His church because He originated it, He built it, and He is the One who rules over it.

He Is the Firstborn from the Dead

Jesus is preeminent because “*he is . . . the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy*” (Colossians 1:18). It is because of His resurrection from the grave that He is the head of the church. He is the Head of the church, the beginning, and the firstborn because He is victorious over death. Paul told the Romans:

Regarding his Son, who as to his human nature was a descendant of David, and who through the Spirit of holiness was declared with power to be the Son of God by his resurrection from the dead; Jesus Christ our Lord (Romans 1:3–4).

Jesus’ power was declared, manifested, and proven by His resurrection from the dead. The result of that proven power is that He has the supremacy over all things. That is why

Colossians 1:19 says, “*For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him. . . .*” All the supremacy dwells in Jesus Christ according to the Father’s will. In Matthew 28:18, following His resurrection from the dead, Jesus said, “*All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.*” Notice the following quotes from Jesus **before** His resurrection:

John 5:30 — “*By myself I can do nothing; I judge only as I hear, and my judgment is just, for I seek not to please myself but him who sent me.*”

John 6:38 — “*For I have come down from heaven not to do my will but to do the will of him who sent me.*”

John 12:48–50 — “*There is a judge for the one who rejects me and does not accept my words; that very word which I spoke will condemn him at the last days. For I did not speak of my own accord, but the Father who sent me commanded me what to say and how to say it.*”

In these scriptures, which were spoken before the resurrection, Jesus claimed to be under total subjection to the Father. He did nothing without the Father’s authority. During His time on earth, everything that Jesus did was by direct command of God (cf. John 7:16, 8:26, 14:24, 15:10). After His resurrection, the writer of Hebrews says God,

... crowned him (Jesus) with glory and honor and put everything under his feet . . . because he suffered death so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone (Hebrews 2:7–9).

That is why Jesus came forth from the grave and said, “*All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me*” (Matthew 28:18).

Paul's Testimony Concerning the Damascus Road

Paul's Reaction

Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection all happened within 30 years of when Paul wrote this epistle to the Colossians. In the beginning Paul was an enemy of Jesus Christ. He believed Jesus was a blasphemer and an imposter trying to discredit God and Judaism. Paul's attitude before his conversion was that Jesus deserved to be hung on a cross like a criminal. Then years later Paul made a total attitude adjustment. He said, "*He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation*" (Colossians 1:15). This verse means that Paul changed from believing that Jesus was a criminal to knowing that Jesus is Lord, Master, and Ruler of all. The Hebrew word to describe Jesus was *adonai*. He is God — and to God every knee shall bow (cf. Romans 14:11; Philippians 2:10).

When Paul spoke to the crowds in Jerusalem, he told them about his drastic change of attitude. Luke recorded it in Acts 22:6–10:

About noon as I came near Damascus, suddenly a bright light from heaven flashed around me. I fell to the ground and heard a voice say to me, ‘Saul! Saul! Why do you persecute me?’ ‘Who are you, Lord?’ I asked. ‘I am Jesus of Nazareth, whom you are persecuting,’ he replied. My companions saw the light, but they did not understand the voice of him who was speaking to me. ‘What shall I do, Lord?’ I asked. ‘Get up,’ the Lord said, ‘and go into Damascus. There you will be told all that you have been assigned to do.’

Imagine the fear and horror that Paul must have felt. Paul knew immediately that he was the one who had been a

blasphemer. Under the Law Paul had loved, honored, and defended, blasphemy was punishable by death. Paul fell to the ground ready to accept his fate; but instead of killing him, God told him to go into Damascus and wait. God sent a man who taught Paul the Gospel. Paul “*got up and was baptized,*” and knew that he had been forgiven (cf. Acts 9:1–19, 26:1–23).

Paul Fulfills His Calling

The “*Jesus*” Paul met on the road to Damascus is the same One he proclaimed to the Colossians. **H**e is all they needed. He is all any Christian needs because He is God in the flesh. He is deity incarnate. He is the firstborn of all creation. He is first in time and order of all things. He is first in priority by virtue of His deity. He is first in priority, not only because He created it, but because He created everything for Himself. All creation belongs to Him. He is the goal of all the universe. He is the reason for its existence. He gave everything its life.

Then when all creation rebelled and died, Jesus came to bring a new birth, new life, and re-creation. He forgave the sins and the rebellion of man by his death, burial, resurrection, ascension, and coronation. He gave the Holy Spirit to be the Christian’s companion, comforter, seal, and guide. Jesus lives His life in the Christian through the Holy Spirit, which is the whole purpose of life on earth. Solomon said it perfectly in Ecclesiastes 12:13, “*Now all has been heard; here is the conclusion of the matter: Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man.*” Reverence means giving Him the preeminence. Jesus Christ is the object toward which all creation is moving. Paul told the Romans, “*For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever! Amen*” (Romans 11:36). Paul said, “*Now I commit you to God and to the word of his grace, which can build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified*” (Acts 20:32).

Combating Heresy

Colossians 2:8–23

Introduction and Review

Paul has already discussed the supremacy and the all sufficiency of Christ in great detail. He ended his message about the supremacy of Christ by saying:

So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live in him, rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness. See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ. For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form, and you have been given fullness in Christ, who is the head over every power and authority (Colossians 2:6–10).

Paul wanted the Colossians to know that all they needed was in Christ and the faith they had received in Him. They did not need the “*hollow and deceptive*” philosophies from man. Paul was speaking about the heresy some were attempting to add to the adequacy of Christ and the Christian doctrine of faith.

The Danger of Rationalism

False and Subversive Doctrines

Paul began by renouncing false teachers for trying to introduce human philosophy into Christian doctrine. Man-made philosophy, human wisdom, and rationalization have no part in Christian faith and doctrine. This addition was a blatant attempt to undermine the all sufficiency of Jesus.

This was not a new or unique problem. Men have always tried, in their self made wisdom, to rationalize or explain away God's word. It is man's way of going around God's commands. If man can explain away God's law in a philosophical argument then he can ignore God's law and at the same time soothe his conscience. That way he can reject God's will and not feel so guilty about it. Man corrupts God's word by trying to replace it with his own.

This is called the enthroning of man's intellect. It is the prevailing attitude among many religious leaders and denominations today. In an attempt to control people and organizations, denominational leaders will say that unless the person is trained by the prevailing hierarchy to perform a task, he is not qualified. Many people believe it is important to attend the right schools and be trained by someone who has specific degrees. It is the clergy-laity concept. If someone has attended all the right schools and had the right kind of training then he is clergy. Someone who has not been professionally trained to know right from wrong is considered laity because he has not had enough schooling. Many denominations believe it is important to have clergy (special people with special schooling, special degrees, and special knowledge) to be able to guide the people.

The New King James Version translates Colossians 2:8 —

Beware lest anyone cheat you through philosophy and empty deceit, according to the tradition of men,

according to the basic principles of the world, and not according to Christ.

The word “*cheat*” means to plunder like a pirate. False teachers will take the Christian captive and rob him of his spiritual birthright to lead him away from Christ through human philosophy. Philosophy means a lover of wisdom (*phileo*-love and *sophe*-wisdom). There is nothing wrong with loving wisdom, but the New Testament teaches that man is to desire and ask for God’s wisdom (cf. James 1:5). God’s wisdom comes from studying His word. Man’s wisdom is nothing more than human reasoning. That is why some people define philosophy as man’s attempt to explain the origin or meaning of the universe.

Paul said that human philosophy “*depends on human tradition.*” The NKJV says it is “*according to the traditions of men.*” The phrase “*according to*” is the word ***kathot***, which means that human philosophy has its root in man-made traditions. There is nothing wrong with traditions just as there is nothing wrong with the word philosophy. There are good and bad philosophies and traditions. Jesus has a philosophy that is not man-made. It came from God and is often in contradiction to man’s philosophy. The two philosophies are sometimes very different.

It is important for man to understand the difference between God’s philosophy and man’s. Jesus and the Apostles had a tradition. The word “*tradition*” simply means something which has been handed down. The tradition or teachings of Jesus were handed down by the Apostles to Christians.

The Apostle Paul told the Christians in Thessalonica, “*Therefore, brethren, stand fast and hold the traditions which you were taught, whether by word or our epistle*” (2 Thessalonians 2:15, NKJV). God handed His teaching down to Paul and Paul handed those same teachings without revision down to the Christians at Thessalonica. The traditions that Paul taught were from God, so they were not man-made traditions.

The false teachers in Colosse were handing down vain, deceitful philosophy that was not even reasoning from God's word. It is possible to twist and misuse God's word, but these false teachers were not even basing their reasoning on scripture. It was based upon reasoning from the dark recesses of man's mind rather than from the mind of God. Anything that is not from God is vain and useless.

The philosophies of the false teachers were being used to replace the revelation of God with "*the basic principles of this world.*" The King James Version uses the phrase "*the rudiments of the world,*" which would be the first principles from which all other things derive. In English the "A B C's" are the rudiments of the alphabet — the first letters from which all the other letters of the alphabet follow. Paul's whole argument is that the false teachers' knowledge is simply from man and it is nothing more than basic, childish knowledge. It is beneath the serious consideration of an adult.

The philosophies of the false teachers were based upon the principles of this world "*rather than on Christ.*" Paul described the walk of a Christian as "*rooted and built up in him [Christ] and established in the faith*" (Colossians 2:7, KJV). A Christian should be "*rooted*" in Christ and not in the world. The false teachers did not follow Christ. Their knowledge was not "*rooted*" in Christ. The false teachers in Colosse were trying to explain Jesus, salvation, and the Christian life in terms of empty, elementary, Christ-less human reasoning.

Paul exposed the false teachers as using "*hollow and deceptive philosophy.*" Other versions say "*vain deceit*" or "*empty deceit.*" Paul defined man's attempt to explain the origin and the meaning of the universe as an empty lie. If Paul were alive today, that is how he would describe evolution. Whether theistic or atheistic, the philosophy of evolution is an empty lie. False teachers in Colosse had their own empty lies saying they had the answer to Christianity. They claimed to have special knowledge that could unlock the mysteries of the universe and the deepest secrets of God. They made claims just

like the false teachers of today (cf. Mary Baker Eddy — Christian Science movement, Ellen G. White — Seventh-day Adventist, Joseph Smith — The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints). False teachers believe they have added knowledge that is necessary for salvation. There is no new knowledge or new practice that needs to be added to Christianity. There is no special key to unlock the truth of the Scriptures. Christianity is not a cheap gasoline that has to have an additive to make it work better. That idea contradicts what Paul said in his letters to Timothy and to the Romans:

All scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work (2 Timothy 3:16–17).

Faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ (Romans 10:17).

Christ and His doctrine is all a person needs for salvation. The faith that brings salvation in Christ comes from God's Word and not from philosophy or human wisdom.

Paul has revealed a problem that every Christian faces. This problem is not isolated to any one group or individual. This problem is the primary reason for division in the Body of Christ. It is the cause of denominationalism today. All Christians need to be united in the one body of Christ as one body of believers. Ephesians 4:3–6 says:

Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit — just as you were called to one hope when you were called — one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one

God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.

The Body of Christ has been splintered into many rival groups and torn by petty and doctrinal differences. There are over 300 different denominations with 300 plus doctrines; each caused by man-made doctrines and rules. The only way for Christians to unite is to use God's word as the only source of religious authority. There is only one source and it has to be God's not man's.

False Teaching Concerning Achieving Righteousness

I am sure the problems at Colosse began in a quiet way that seemed harmless. Someone might have said, "Jesus is a great example and you must do your best to be like Him. It is important to follow His example by sweating, working, and striving to be good. While you are doing that you must pray to a distant God every day asking Him to forgive you for not doing your best. You must promise to try harder. Trying harder leads you to believe that God will forgive you and accept you because of all your own labor." This was the mindset that had developed in Colosse. This thinking is an attitude that says a person can achieve righteousness because of what he does. People begin to believe they can be like Jesus by striving harder and doing specific things through works of merit. This concept leads Christians to believe they can achieve righteousness on their own.

Another concept on the opposite end of trying to go to heaven all alone is the teaching that Christians must have special teachers and leaders with a special knowledge to lead them on their quest for heaven. These teachers usually have a list of rules and regulations as requirements to be able to enter heaven. The list is man-made and includes not only what you must believe, but also things like where you can and cannot go, what you can or cannot do for entertainment, and what you can

or cannot wear. There are hundreds of examples of what the Christian must supposedly do to make himself holy and acceptable like Jesus. These rules and special methods must be followed to be a part of Christian fellowship and to have salvation; so say the false teachers.

The Peril of Ceremonialism

The problem with the philosophy of rule keeping is that it makes Christianity into a list of things to do or not do. It makes Christianity into something that Jesus never intended it to be. Paul said that man-made philosophy and worldly wisdom can take man “*... captive through hollow and deceptive traditions and the basic principles of this world ...*” (Colossians 2:8). He continued teaching on this concept with:

Therefore do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day. These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ. Do not let anyone who delights in false humility and the worship of angels disqualify you for the prize. Such a person goes into great detail about what he has seen, and his unspiritual mind puffs him up with idle notions. He has lost connection with the Head, from whom the whole body, supported and held together by its ligaments and sinews, grows as God causes it to grow. Since you died with Christ to the basic principles of this world, why, as though you still belonged to it, do you submit to its rules: “Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!”? These are all destined to perish with use, because they are based on human commands and teachings. Such regulations indeed have an appearance of wisdom, with their self-imposed worship, their false humility and their

harsh treatment of the body, but they lack any value in restraining sensual indulgence (Colossians 2:16–23).

Through Observing Religious Rituals

Paul encouraged the Colossians not to listen to teachers who wanted to tell them to abstain from certain foods or drinks and to observe certain days. In Christianity, as in the Old Testament, God's primary concern is not with doing or not doing. The Pharisee's problem was that the doing or not doing was all that mattered to them. God's primary concern has always been the source of why His children do what they do. David said:

*You do not delight in sacrifice, or I would bring it;
you do not take pleasure in burnt offerings.
The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit;
a broken and contrite heart,
O God, you will not despise*

(Psalms 51:16–17).

The whole of Christianity is Jesus Himself. It is not in the rules, it is Jesus Himself. Jesus Himself is supposed to be living inside every Christian. That is the whole point of Christianity. If Jesus sits on the throne of the Christian's life, if He is in control so that self has been crucified and Jesus is Lord and Master, then each Christian's actions will automatically be Christ-like. There is no need for rules and regulations to control his actions. With Jesus in his life each Christian will live life righteously and for His glory — “... *Christ in you, the hope of glory*” (Colossians 1:27). The “*hope of glory*” comes only when Christ is living within man causing him to live righteously by Christ's power and supply.

Through Mysticism

The New Testament epistles were written to help the first century Christians solve some of the problems they faced. Paul

and others did not write letters full of rules and regulations concerning what was or was not permitted. They all gave the same solution for every problem — every sin and temptation can be conquered by allowing Jesus to be the Lord and Master of your life. Jesus must be preeminent, supreme, and number one in each Christian's life. Christ's primary teaching was about **being**, not doing. Jesus said:

Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves. By their fruit you will recognize them. Do people pick grapes from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? Likewise every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus, by their fruit you will recognize them (Matthew 7:15–20).

God is concerned about what you are. If you are a thorn bush, then keeping all the rules will not enable you to bear figs (good fruit). A man cannot tie pears on an apple tree and call it a pear tree. A tree is known by the fruit it produces. In the same way, a man may look like a Christian outwardly, but it is his inner man that counts. Following the rules and regulations does not make the heart right.

This principle was also taught in the Old Testament. Jeremiah talked about the Law of Moses and the Old Testament covenant which was written on tablets of stone, but God declared He would make a new covenant:

*"The time is coming," declares the LORD,
"when I will make a new covenant
with the house of Israel
and with the house of Judah.
It will not be like the covenant*

*I made with their forefathers
when I took them by the hand
to lead them out of Egypt,
because they broke my covenant,
though I was a husband to them,”
declares the LORD.*

“This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel

*after that time,” declares the LORD.
“I will put my law in their minds
and write it on their hearts.*

*I will be their God,
and they will be my people.*

*No longer will a man teach his neighbor,
or a man his brother, saying, ‘Know the LORD,’
because they will all know me,
from the least of them to the greatest,”
declares the LORD.*

*“For I will forgive their wickedness
and will remember their sins no more”*

(Jeremiah 31:31–34).

Another Old Testament passage says:

I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws (Ezekiel 36:26–27).

Having God’s Spirit within and God’s Son as sovereign in his life will cause the Christian to follow God’s decrees and carefully keep His laws. That is the reason for putting God’s will within His children. That is why God’s law is written on the heart — to cause His children to follow His law. The Christian does not try to live by doing; he tries to live by **being**

God's child. Following all the rules and doing all the commandments does not make a person righteous nor merit his salvation. Jesus said: "*When you have done all those things which you are commanded, say, 'We are unprofitable servants, we have only done what was our duty to do.'*" (Luke 17:10, NKJV).

Through the Enslavement of Asceticism

The false teachers in Colosse had rejected the truth because of their childish theories based on their faulty understanding of the material and the spiritual world. Paul urged the Colossians to understand Colossians 2:9–10: "*For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form, and you have been given fullness in Christ, who is the head over every power and authority.*" All they needed to know to accomplish their salvation was in Jesus Christ. All the fullness of the Godhead is in Christ. Christ dwells within every Christian and in Him every Christian has "*the fullness of the Deity.*" This totally contradicts the Gnostic theory that spirit and flesh cannot reside together. Christians do not need any Gnostic or human theory to find salvation. Christ alone is sufficient and all Christians are complete in Christ.

Through Obeying Moses' Law

Paul addressed more than one false doctrine being introduced to the church at Colosse. There was the false teaching from the Grecian heresy which added human philosophy. There was also the heresy from the Jewish influence which used the keeping of Mosaic ritual as a test of Christian fellowship. Paul said:

For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form, and you have been given fullness in Christ, who is the head over every power and authority. In him you were also circumcised, in the putting off of the sinful nature, not with a

circumcision done by the hands of men but with the circumcision done by Christ, having been buried with him in baptism and raised with him through your faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead. When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your sinful nature, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins, having canceled the written code, with its regulations, that was against us and that stood opposed to us; he took it away, nailing it to the cross. And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross. Therefore do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day. These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ (Colossians 2:9–17).

The circumcision Paul is talking about is not made with hands. It is a spiritual circumcision instead of a physical act. Circumcision was a covenant sign that the person was united in fellowship with God through the physical seed of Abraham (cf. Genesis 17:1–27). Spiritual circumcision indicates the same thing — it indicates union and fellowship with God as a member of a spiritual nation or family rather than the physical family. For Christians circumcision, the kingdom, and the priesthood are spiritual (cf. 1 Peter 2:5–10). Christians are spiritually united with God so they must have a spiritual circumcision. That is what Paul was talking about in Philippians 3:3–4:

For it is we who are the circumcision, we who worship by the Spirit of God, who glory in Christ Jesus, and who put no confidence in the flesh — though I myself have reasons for such confidence.

Paul was talking about a “*circumcision*” that removed the sinful nature, NIV, (body of the sins of the flesh, KJV). This “*circumcision*” is not done by the hands of men, but by Christ when a person is buried with Him in baptism. Paul was not saying that baptism was “*circumcision*,” but in baptism the “*circumcision*” takes place — “. . . having been buried with him in baptism and raised with him through your faith . . .” (Colossians 2:12). Spiritual circumcision occurs when a person is baptized. It is symbolic of cutting away the flesh of sin in a person’s life.

Paul used this same argument in Romans 6:1–9. When a person is baptized, he is spiritually circumcised — his sins are cut away because of his faith. Paul said, “*We are therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life*” (Romans 6:4).

Paul carried the reasoning of being spiritually circumcised one step further in 2 Corinthians 5:14–15, 17, and 21. He said that what God did to Christ in His death, burial, and resurrection, He does to Christians. What God did to one man (Jesus), He does to all who come to Him by faith. But when does that take place? It takes place in baptism. That makes baptism necessary for the cutting away of sin and to obtain fellowship with God. That is why Jesus said in Matthew 28:18–20:

All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.

“Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded

you. . ." (Matthew 28:19–20) is a direct command from Jesus Himself. Whatever Jesus has commanded should bring automatic obedience. Baptism spiritually circumcises the believer and places him in fellowship with God. If His presence and power resides in me I will do everything He asks. My life will be spent doing His will and not my own.

When a Christian chooses not to follow Jesus' commands that is like a fruit tree producing thorns. The Christian must die to himself and make Jesus Christ the Lord and Master of his life. Paul said the Christian can live a successful Christian life without human philosophy and man-made rules. He said, "*I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me*" (Galatians 2:20). If Christ lives in the Christian, then the fruit produced will be Christ-like. His life will be like a fruit tree producing fruit rather than thorns.

Walking in Jesus

Colossians 3:1–17

Review

In the previous lessons on this study of the book of Colossians Paul had discussed the preeminence and supremacy of Jesus Christ. He had refuted the false teachers who were saying that Jesus was insufficient. Paul proved that what Jesus did on the cross to provide salvation for mankind was sufficient. Man does not need special knowledge, visions, rituals, rules, or regulations. Paul summed up the all-sufficiency of Christ by saying:

So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live in him, rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness (Colossians 2:6–7).

Seven Points of Christian Identification

Every person comes to Jesus unable to accomplish anything toward his own salvation. **By faith** each person must rely totally on Christ Jesus and what He did in His birth, life, death, burial, resurrection, ascension, and coronation. Everything Christ did was perfect and complete. Mankind cannot add anything to make salvation better than it already is. He cannot take anything away from what Jesus has done. By faith man responds to God's gift of grace. He must not add rules and regulations or legalistic laws dreamed up by human

philosophy, man-made traditions, or Jewish laws. When a man tries to add anything to what Jesus did, he is basically saying that what Jesus did was imperfect and incomplete. That is the same as saying the salvation Jesus purchased with His own blood was insufficient, therefore, other things needed to be added.

Paul's argument was that the Colossians did not have these "added things" (cf. Colossians 2:13-23) when they first came to Christ by faith. These added rules were never mentioned in Apostolic teaching. Jesus told His disciples "*... the Spirit of truth ... will guide you into all truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come*" (John 16:13). The rules and regulations and the legalistic laws taught by false teachers have never been a part of the "*all truth*" the Holy Spirit taught the Apostles. The "*all truth*" which the Holy Spirit told the Apostles to preach was exactly what had been written in the New Testament. That means that what the Apostles taught as "*all truth*" is still being taught today through the Bible. God's word teaches the same truths Paul and the other inspired writers taught the first century Christians. Christians in all ages receive Christ by grace through faith and not by rule keeping, obeying rituals, or observing man's legal systems. Paul told the Ephesians:

For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith — and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God — not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do (Ephesians 2:8–10).

God's grace is accomplished in each Christian by faith in such a way that he walks in Christ Jesus. Walking in Christ means that the Christian walks as Christ would walk in this world. The only way a Christian can walk like Christ is to walk

by faith rather than by observing human traditions and rules or performing rituals developed by man.

Paul talked about spiritual circumcision which is the cutting away of sin that takes place when by faith a person is baptized into Christ. Paul told the Roman Christians in Romans 6:1–14 that Christians symbolically experience Christ’s death when they are “*buried with him through baptism*” (Romans 6:4). Christ died to atone for mankind’s sins. Christians are baptized to crucify sin in their lives. When Christ was raised from the dead, His resurrection destroyed the power of sin and spiritual death. His death on the cross made eternal life possible. When someone is raised from the waters of baptism his actions symbolize a burial and being raised to walk in a new life. The Christian dies to sin and is united with Christ. Being united with Christ means that the Christian is no longer enslaved to sin. He walks with Christ. He lives for Christ. And everything about his life revolves around Jesus Christ.

In his commentary on Colossians, J. B. Lightfoot explained:

Baptism is the grave of the old man, and the birth of the new. As he sinks beneath the baptismal waters, the believer buries there all his corrupt affections and past sins; as he emerges thence, he rises regenerated, quickened to new hopes and a new life. This it is, because it is not only the crowning act of his own faith but also the seal of God’s adoption and the earnest of God’s Spirit. Thus baptism is an image of his participation both in the death and in the resurrection of Christ.³

³ J. B. Lightfoot, Saint Paul’s Epistles to the Colossians and to the Philemon (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1879) 184.

When a person sinks under the baptismal water he disappears forever to the world. A new person is raised from the water—a new person devoted only to God. The world does not understand this new life. The world and its wisdom does not know God and they do not understand the changes a Christian makes in his life (cf. 1 Corinthians 1:21).

The change a Christian makes in his life style based on his awareness of who he is **in Christ** is the subject of the third chapter of Colossians. A Christian is raised “*with Christ*” to a new life “*with Christ*” when he is baptized into Christ. He begins a new life — “*For you died (in baptism), and your life is now hidden with Christ in God*” (Colossians 3:3).

A Christian knows who and what he is as a new creation in Christ. He knows he has been freed from sin. He does not put on a jacket that says, “I am a Christian. I am saved. I am good.” He has been saved to become something that is good. A light bulb is created to give light. A Christian is created to be light, salt, love, compassion, patience, goodness, loving kindness, and other attributes of God. A Christian is to “*participate in the divine nature*” of God and reflect His attributes (cf. 2 Peter 1:4). The attributes of His divine nature are to fill the Christian’s life in such a way that he becomes an extension of God so that others can see His nature through the Christian. Paul said, “*I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me . . .*” (Galatians 2:20). Christ lives His life in every Christian and through his own life the Christian draws others to Christ. Christians must have the mind of Christ (cf. Philippians 2:5), the love of God, and the indwelling Holy Spirit (cf. Romans 5:5). “*Christ in you*” is not only the “*hope of glory*” for every Christian, but it is also the hope for all those whom Jesus reaches through each Christian. Paul was writing to Christians who had been “*raised with Christ*” and whose lives were “*now hidden with Christ in*

God." The natural consequence of Christ living within every Christian means that Jesus will live His life through the church.

The Christian and His Character

The New Wardrobe of Grace

Christians "have been raised with Christ" to live a new and different life (cf. Colossians 3:1–17). They bring their lives as a "sacrifice of praise" (cf. Hebrews 13:15–16). Consider the following quotations from the New Testament:

Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God — this is your spiritual act of worship. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is — his good pleasing and perfect will (Romans 12:1–2).

As you come to him, the living Stone —rejected by men but chosen by God and precious to him — you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ . . . But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light (1 Peter 2:4–5, 9).

Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit lives in you? Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore

honor God with your body (1 Corinthians 3:16, 6:19–20).

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. For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory (Colossians 3:1–4).

These quotations relate what Paul and other Apostles taught concerning the Christian life. Every Christian has been:

- *Raised with Christ*
- *Seated (with Christ) at the right hand of God*
- *Died with Christ*
- *Now hidden with Christ in God*
- *Also will appear with him in glory*

Every Christian is:

- *A temple*
- *A priest*
- *A living sacrifice*

A **temple** is the sanctuary of God. It is the place where God lives and where sacrifices are made to God. Every Christian must offer his life as a sacrifice to God. That means not only does a Christian offer his life but also his body to God. A **priest** is the one who offers the sacrifices in the temple. A Christian offers a **living sacrifice** in the way that he lives. He is the **temple** where the sacrifice is offered; he is the **priest** who offers the sacrifice; and he is the **sacrifice** who offers himself daily to God.

Christians have been raised with Christ in baptism to live a new kind of life. Paul said, “*Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things*” (Colossians 3:2). Christians must live in the world, but they do not have to live like the world lives. Their minds have been transformed; therefore, they do not conform to the world. Paul’s letter to the Ephesians talks about these same things. Christians live, rule, walk, labor, and fight differently because their inheritance and their citizenship is in heaven (cf. Ephesians 1:11, 2:10, 19; 4:1; 5:8; 6:11–17; Philippians 3:30). Christians are aliens and strangers in this world. They live and act accordingly knowing they can do everything through a God who supplies their every need (cf. 1 Peter 2:11; Philippians 4:13, 19). Christians are able to live like Christ by setting their minds on heavenly things. Whatever the mind is set on becomes the focus of life. A Christian cannot be preoccupied with worldly things. His heart and mind must be set on heavenly things. Jesus said, “*For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also*” (Matthew 6:21).

The Christian Condition — How to Live

Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry. Because of these, the wrath of God is coming. You used to walk in these ways, in the life you once lived. But now you must rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips. Do not lie to each other, since you have taken off your old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator. Here there is no Greek or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all. (Colossians 3:5–11).

The practical application of living the Christian life involves knowing whose you are, what you are, and how you live. The natural result of being in Jesus means putting to death the earthly nature of the old man, getting rid of characteristics of the world, and putting on attitudes of a new man. Paul developed a lengthy list that covers these elements in an individual Christian's life to enable him to live in heavenly places, to set his mind on Christ, and to live the way God wants every Christian to live. When the Christian finally starts living this life he will discover that the Christian life is not a theory or an ideal; it is a way of life that works and brings joy, success, fulfillment, and peace of mind.

Put to Death the Earthly Nature

When the Christian is buried in baptism with Christ, he dies to sin and its power. Paul listed various elements of the sinful nature that died and were buried when the Christian received his spiritual circumcision in baptism. These characteristics of a sinful life are not a part of the Christian life in Christ. Paul said, "*Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature . . .* (Colossians 3:5). The following is a list of the character traits that Paul said must be put to death:

- ***Sexual immorality*** — illicit, forbidden sexual relationships (fornication).
- ***Impurity*** — moral and mental uncleanness.
- ***Lust*** — wrong passion (evil lust).
- ***Evil desires*** — desire to do what is wrong.
- ***Greed which is idolatry*** — uncontrollable desire to possess things.

Paul's words not only forbid the act but also the intent of these characteristics. Jesus said, "*But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart*" (Matthew 5:28). It is a matter of the heart just as wherever your desire or treasure is there will be your

heart also. A Christian's mind is to be set on heavenly places, therefore, inordinate desires must be dead and buried. His mind must be controlled by Christ rather than fleshly passions and appetites. The Christian's life is involved in living like Christ and not devoted to selfish matters.

Paul used the phrase "*you must rid yourselves of all such things*" (Colossians 3:8). The King James Version says "*put off all these.*" This is the Greek word *apekduo* which is an action word that is used when the person is hurriedly and frantically stripping off a filthy, soiled garment that needs to be destroyed or burned, such as garments that have been contaminated by an infectious disease. This kind of garment must be burned so that no one else will become infected. There is this kind of urgency and finality in putting off the old man and his sinful nature.

When a snake sheds its skin it is to get rid of his old skin. He cannot shed the old skin until he has grown a new skin under the old skin. It is the process of growing the new skin that pushes the old skin off the reptile's body. The old skin that has been discarded is never worn again. He becomes a new snake with a new skin. There is a parallel in this for the Christian. Jesus lives in the Christian and enables him to shed the old man and become a new man. The Christian must put off the following garments of sin:

Anger (orge) — this is the strongest of all passions. It describes the kind of wrath that leads a man to act or speak rashly. It is usually caused by uncontrollable pride that swells up when a person is offended.

Rage (thumos) — this is a more agitated and more abiding state than anger. It results when anger is allowed to build until it boils up with the thoughts of revenge.

Malice (kakia)—indicates the viciousness of character. Malice is the hateful attitude that goes beyond revenge or getting even to the point of doing harm.

Slander (*blasphemeo*) — means to speak evil of or issue words with the intent to cause harm. Words are spoken in such a way to destroy someone's character.

Filthy language from your lips (*aischrologia*) — this refers to an uncontrollable tongue; language that is intended to abuse and degrade someone. It refers to language that is impure and foul.

Lies — an untruth that is told; anything that is told with the intent to deceive. A lie is a lie and the degree of the lie does not lessen the fact that a lie will condemn your soul. The thing that makes a lie so bad is the fact that a man who will lie will do anything. Any evil that is committed usually has deception of some kind at the root of it — lie to self, to others, or about others. And a lie does not have to be an untruth. Whenever someone tells the truth with the intent to deceive that is still a lie.

Unchecked **anger** can lead to full blown **wrath**. Soon wrath develops into **malice** and a person begins to **slander** and speak against another person. If continued that can develop into **filthy language** meant as abuse and then that person will begin to tell **lies** about the other person. Sin is like a run away train — one thing leads to the other.

When a man is baptized into Christ, the old man with his sinful nature is put to death and buried. The sinful nature that once clothed him is dead. His clothes that once consisted of anger, wrath, malice, slander, filthy language, and lies are supposed to be buried and never put on again. The Christian cannot bury the old man of sin and continue to wear the old wardrobe as a new man in Christ. Everything that was once part of the old man must be buried with him. This is not an option; it is a requirement!

A new born creation in Christ wears new clothes. When he or she rises from the waters of baptism he or she is raised a new

person, clean and forgiven with all evidence of sin cut away. He is clothed with the righteousness of Jesus Christ. He no longer wears the filthy rags of sin. Peter said, “*But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God . . .*” (1 Peter 2:9). Children of the King do not wear beggar’s clothes; they are adorned in princely garments. Colossians 3:9–10 says, “. . . you have taken off your old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator.” Every Christian is being daily renewed in knowledge and in the image of God. Christ enables this renewal.

Clothe Yourselves

Therefore, as God’s chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity (Colossians 3:12–14).

The attitudes and actions Paul was talking about must be possessed by the new man if he is to be renewed day by day. The new man must rid himself of his sinful nature and then put on characteristics of God’s nature. “*God’s chosen people*” will clothe themselves with:

Compassion — “*tender mercy*” which means feelings for another person in their sorrow.

Kindness — an attitude or action of benevolence.

Humility — an attitude that considers others before self.

Gentleness — “*meekness*” which is submission to God.

Patience — “long suffering.”

Forbearance — helping others to bear their burdens.

Forgiveness — the attitude of not keeping track of wrong.

Love — “over all these virtues put on **love**, which binds them all together in perfect unity.” Love is the final garment in this wardrobe of grace. It is the perfecting and finishing quality in the Christian’s walk. **Love** is the predominant ingredient in the cause and effect relationship with Jesus. There is a song that states this same truth: “Blest be the tie that binds our hearts in Christian love; the fellowship of kindred minds is like to that above.”⁴

Relationships in the Christian Walk

Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful. 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 with gratitude in your hearts to God. And 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.

*Wives, submit to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord. **Husbands**, love your wives and do not be harsh with them. **Children**, obey your parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord. **Fathers**, do not embitter your children, or they will become discouraged.*

⁴ Alton H. Howard, Songs of Faith and Praise (West Monroe, LA: Howard Publishing Co., Inc., 1994) 711.

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. Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving. Anyone who does wrong will be repaid for his wrong, and there is no favoritism. Masters, provide your slaves with what is right and fair, because you know that you also have a Master in heaven. (Colossians 3:15–4:1).

In Colossians 3:15–4:1 Paul talked about reciprocal relationships in the Christian walk. Notice the different relationships and how they respond to one another in Christ. These relationships (dealing with one another) are to be done in the Lord's way. First Paul talked about the relationship between a husband and a wife. The Lord says wives are to be in subjection to the husband. That does not mean the husband is her ruler or boss. The husband is to love his wife and not to be harsh with her. A reciprocal relationship goes both ways; it is a relationship of love, not ruling. Ephesians 5:25 defines the husband's love “*. . . just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her.*” The husband is to love his wife to the point of laying down his life for her. It is love that holds up, exalts, builds up, and sacrifices for someone else.

There is a very special relationship between parents and children. The Lord's way is for children to obey their parents. There are two kinds of disciplines. One follows the Lord's will for parents to be patient, kind, loving, and understanding with their children. Children are created in the image of God and should be respected accordingly. The other discipline provokes, discourages, and drives the child away. This is not the Lord's

way and it is certainly not in His will. The key ingredient that differentiates between the two disciplines is love.

The next relationship Paul dealt with is the servant-master relationship. The key to being successful in any relationship is love and doing God's will. Servants (employees) are to do their work as if they were doing it for the Lord. Masters (employers) must treat those who work for them with love and consideration. The key thing is that the Christian employee or employer is in the Lord. In the Lord means that the Christian does God's will in every situation and circumstance of life.

Everything in the Christian walk can be taken care of by following what Paul said in Colossians 3:17:

And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to the Father through him.

The Christian's Relationship with God and Man

Colossians 4:2–18

Review

This will be the last chapter in the study of the Book of Colossians. Colossians 3 teaches the need to establish a new relationship with God through Christ. Paul discussed the Christian's relationship with God, Christ, himself, and others. These relationships are all the result of what man becomes when he is in Christ. New relationships are formed when the old man, with his former way of living for himself, and his cravings for the world have been crucified and put to death. Once a man has been buried and raised with Christ he seeks the things which are above where Christ is sitting at the right hand of God. His mind is set on heavenly things rather than on earthly desires. Paul also covered how to maintain relationships with the brethren.

Colossians 4 contains more on relationships and Paul's greetings to the brethren in Colosse. He continued the message in Colossians 4 with instructions on how to maintain the Christian relationship with God and how to maintain a relationship to those who are outside of Christ. The secret of staying close to God is found in communication with God. It is in the power of prayer. The way to maintain good relations with those in the world is to treat them kindly and with respect.

Paul's closing remarks contain the names of some of the people mentioned in the Book of Philemon and covered in the next four chapters in your study.

Christian Relationships

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. Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders; make the most of every opportunity. Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone.

Tychicus will tell you all the news about me. He is a dear brother, a faithful minister and fellow servant in the Lord. 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. My fellow prisoner Aristarchus sends you his greetings, as does Mark, the cousin of Barnabas. (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. 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. Our dear friend Luke, the doctor, and Demas send greetings. Give my greetings to the brothers at Laodicea, and to Nympha and the church in her house. 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. Tell Archippus: "See to it that you complete the work you have received in the Lord." I, Paul, write this greeting in my own hand. Remember my chains. Grace be with you. (Colossians 4:2–18).

The Christian's Communication

Praying for Ourselves

The new relationships in a Christian's life must be maintained through prayer and thanksgiving. Vigilance in prayer enables the Christian to always be on his guard against the devises of Satan. A Christian must learn to be thankful to God in every situation and circumstance of life.

Normally when a person prays, he tells God what is bothering him and asks for things from God. There is nothing wrong with these elements in prayer. The New Testament teaches that Christians are to let their requests be made known to God (cf. Philippians 4:6; 1 Timothy 2:1; Ephesians 6:18). Prayer should not always be about asking. It should also contain praise, honor, and gratitude to Him. Prayer is an avenue of worship to God as it is an avenue of communicating requests. Paul instructed the Philippians with these concepts:

Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding,

will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus
(Philippians 4:4–7).

Christians offer a worship of thanksgiving. The New Testament teaches thanksgiving for the hard times and the good times. If a Christian never experienced adversity he would never learn how to deal with it. Character growth comes about because of difficulty, challenge, hardship, and adversity in life. A person needs these things in his life to be able to develop properly. People become crooked in life in the same way that a river becomes crooked — by following the path of least resistance. When a dam is built across a river it is faced with an ultimatum. One alternative is to rise to the occasion and flow over the top of the dam. In meeting the challenge of the dam and rising to the top, the river becomes bigger and stronger. This same principle applies to humans. By meeting difficulties and obstacles in life with positive determination a person becomes bigger and stronger only when he overcomes the problem. Every Christian needs to learn to be thankful for all the difficult, unpleasant, and even, hurtful things that happen in his life. Conquering adversity enables him to grow and become a stronger better person.

Paul told the Romans, “*And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose*” (Romans 8:28). Trusting that God works through all things should encourage the Christian to be thankful for “*all things*.” God rules! He takes “*all things*” and uses them for the betterment of “*those who love him*.” If life gets rough, if I lose all the material things of this world, it does not matter. The Christian’s faith is in Who is in control. He trusts in the One who gives life. The Christian can praise God for all things because of his faith in God.

Praying for Others

Paul instructed the Colossians:

And pray for us, too, that God may open a door for our message, so that we may proclaim the mystery of Christ . . . Pray that I may proclaim it clearly, as I should” (Colossians 4:3–4).

The Apostle Paul asked for prayers that he might present the message of Christ in wisdom, love, boldness, and truth. It is important to remember those who present this same message today in prayer.

The Christian's Course

The Walk Must Match the Talk

In Colossians 4:2–4 Paul was talking about the Christian's talk with others and to God. In Colossians 4:5 he said, “*Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders; make the most of every opportunity.*” The talk is important, but the walk (“*the way you act*”) is vitally important. If your walk is not right, all the talk in the world will do no good. If your talk does not match your walk, everybody will know you are a hypocrite and scorn you and your professed belief.

It is essential for the Christian to walk carefully in view of the world. He must choose carefully “*the way you act toward outsiders.*” He must walk as a light to the world and he must walk with a purpose. The King James Version says, “*Walk in wisdom toward them that are without, redeeming the time.*” Redeem means to buy back something. Paul urged the Colossians to buy back every lost opportunity to do good and reflect the light of God. The Apostle Peter made the following statement: “*For you have spent enough time in the past doing what pagans choose to do . . .*” (1 Peter 4:3). The Colossians had lived long enough like the heathens. It was time for them

to stop living for self and to start living for God. They needed to take self off the throne and to put Jesus in His rightful place as Lord and Master of their lives. Christians must stop living for themselves and the things they crave and live for God. They need to redeem all the lost and wasted opportunities from the past.

There is no way man can pay back God for the way he lived in sin. There is no way a Christian can repay God for not allowing Christ to be supreme in his life. Christ Jesus is the Redeemer. God has forgiven and forgotten all past sins. The redeemed Christian must live a new life in a new way. His new life must redeem (buy) every opportunity. The Christian must walk with discretion, wisdom, and purpose. That purpose is to take every opportunity possible to do good and reflect the glory and power of God in his life. At the end of every day, the Christian can look back and see opportunities he may have missed.

Paul had been talking about making Christ supreme in the Christian's life. His message was not the message the false teachers were teaching in Colosse. This message would have an impact on the false teachers who were not teaching this message or living their lives with Christ as Lord and Master. Making Christ the Lord and Master will have a great impact on every Christian's life.

The Walk Must Be for the Right Purpose

Colossians 4:6 refers to day to day conversations with people. Talking to friends and neighbors about Christianity is an important part of the Christian walk. Paul said, "*Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone.*" The word "answer" in this passage is not **apologia** which means to make a defense. **Apologia** is the word the Apostle Peter used in 1 Peter 3:15:

*But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an **answer** to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have . . .*

Peter was talking about having a ready answer and being able to defend the Christian beliefs. His context is in a situation where someone was accusing Christians wrongly. The word that Paul used for “*answer*” is ***apokrinomai*** which means giving an answer to an honest question about Christianity. The question would be asked by someone who was sincerely interested in the Christian lifestyle. It signifies a reply/answer given to a question about a statement.

The Christian life (whether by deeds, actions, or verbal expressions) is a statement of the Christian’s beliefs. The Christian lifestyle can be so unique that it will arouse curiosity by others. The life of a Christian may cause others to question the reasons for a different lifestyle even to the point of becoming a Christian themselves.

Paul knew that it was important to answer questions in a manner that was “*full of grace*” and “*seasoned with salt*.” “*Grace*” means the answer is given with kindness and benevolence. ***Karis*** is the Greek word which means a benevolent gift which is given out of love. That is how God’s grace is defined. God’s grace is a free gift that has been prompted by His love. Grace is a benevolent gift that is intended for good.

The Christian’s speech is always to be used for building up, not tearing down. His answers to honest inquiries should be to edify and bring the questioners closer to God. Paul used the phrase “*seasoned with salt*.” The answers are to be chosen with care to reveal the joy and beauty of what God has done and the benefits of a life in which Christ is Lord. It is important to encourage interest. Salt is used to preserve the edibility of food. It is important to preserve someone’s interest in Christ and to

tenderly draw them to Christ with gracious benevolence rather than driving them away with harshness and arrogance.

Summary of the Book of Colossians

Paul's message in the Book of Colossians is simple. He told the Colossians they did not need human philosophy, Jewish rituals, man-made traditions, special knowledge, or special visions. All they needed was to be in Christ and to keep what they had received from Him. They did not need anything else. Jesus Christ is sufficient. Anything else is false. It will entangle you, enslave, and lead you away from Christ.

The logic of Paul's message is simple. In Christ the Christian is born again. He receives the new birth/new life when he is born of water and the Spirit. When he is baptized into Christ he receives his spiritual circumcision. This circumcision is the sign that he is in fellowship with God and has been sealed with the Holy Spirit. At this point he has everything he needs to be whatever God wants him to be and to do whatever God has planned for him.

When someone looks at a Christian's life, he can see Jesus living in the Christian. He becomes a different person which means that the Christian is becoming the person God meant for him to be. He is now free from all the distortion and darkness of selfishness. Self has been crucified and is dead. Christ lives His life in the Christian. Christ expresses Himself to the world through Christians. Every Christian is an extension of Jesus Christ. Jesus said, "*While I am in the world, I am the light of the world*" (John 9:5). Jesus is still the light of the world because He shines through in the Christian's life.

The big question is, "How do I know this is true? How does this affect my life? And how do I implement all of this in my life." Paul answers these questions in his writings to the Colossians. He said, "*Since, then you have been raised with Christ . . .*" (Colossians 3:1). The New King James Version

translated this, "*If then you were raised with Christ . . .*" Notice that Paul said "if" you were raised with Christ meaning if spiritual circumcision really occurred in baptism. It is important that a spiritual circumcision really did occur so that the old man can become the new man. Many may claim to be in the church and have the outward appearance of godliness (cf. 2 Timothy 3:5). In the world of Christianity there are those who really are Christians and those who only appear to be Christians. **If** you have risen with Christ it will affect your life.

Paul knew the answer to change from the old man to the new one — "*... 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). The King James Version says, "*... seek those things which are above.*" It is more than thinking about heavenly things. It is more than just seeking once in a while. Because the Christian has been born again, spiritually circumcised, and spiritually united with Christ, he must set his mind on a new direction. He must continually seek to be like Christ. Jesus is the center, the core, of his spiritual being. The Christian's soul has been "*rescued . . . from the dominion of darkness and brought . . . into the kingdom of the Son . . .*" (Colossians 1:13).

One of the ways to start the process of not being conformed to the world, but being transformed by the renewing of your mind (cf. Romans 12:2), is to set your mind on the things above (cf. Colossians 3:1). The mind must be renewed as a part of the total commitment to the Lordship of Jesus. When the Christian renews his mind then he will begin to produce fruit. Jesus said:

I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing . . . This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples (John 15:5–8).

Before the Christian can bear fruit his mind must be renewed by setting his mind on the things that are above. That is how the process begins. It must be an inward process before it can become an outward way of life.

The problem in Colosse was that because of false teachers, the Colossians thought they needed to change and add outward forms of worship with rules and rituals to become more spiritual. Paul said having Jesus as Lord and Master was the way to make life fruitful to the glory of God. Rule keeping is not the way to produce fruit.

There is the same problem in churches today. Some who have professed to be Christians for years and years have not made any visible changes in their lives because they have just been keeping the rules. They are still the same carnal, cantankerous, gossiping, back-biting, trouble-making, materialistic, unloving, unhappy, selfish people who have continued to walk around in darkness. They continue to walk in darkness because nothing has ever changed on the inside.

Becoming spiritually united with Christ causes the Christian to think differently because his mind is set on a different realm when he thinks on the “*things above*.” When a person’s mind dwells on spiritual things he will become spiritually minded. Being spiritually minded causes a life change within that can be seen. Jesus said:

Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in spirit and truth (John 4:23–24).

Man cannot worship a spiritual God in a spiritual way unless he himself first becomes spiritual. Peter said the purpose of Christianity is for each Christian to become partakers of the divine nature of God (cf. 2 Peter 1:4). The Christian must take

on God's nature in such a way that His nature becomes who the Christian is. When Moses asked God to show him His glory, God said:

I will cause all my goodness to pass in front of you, and I will proclaim my name, the LORD, in your presence. . . . Then the LORD came down in the cloud and stood there with him and proclaimed his name, the LORD. And he passed in front of Moses, proclaiming, “The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished . . .
(Exodus 33:19, 34:5–7).

These verses give a description about the glory of God. His glory is seen in His “goodness.” Out of God’s goodness flow love, mercy, grace, truth, longsuffering, and the things God is because of His goodness. His goodness is the way He loves. He does not love mankind because man is loving or lovable. He loves man because that is the way God is. God is good and there is never a time when He is not good. That is His nature. That is the way He is. There is no other way to explain God. God does not love His children because they deserve or have earned His love by keeping the rules or observing certain rituals. God loves His children because that is the way He is. He loves each child no matter who they are because that is God’s way.

God does not love His children because of their actions, but when people talk about other people they talk in terms of actions and works. That is why it is important for God’s children to set their minds on things above and to become like God. People who are not Christians see and judge God’s children in terms of actions and language. What a person says

and what he does outwardly is determined by what he is on the inside — what he thinks in his mind. The outward actions reflect the inward soul and spirit. Actions reveal the real person. The spirit of a person is defined by what he continually thinks about — it is his thought process. A man's thought processes revolve around how he thinks about himself, his life, his possessions, his God, his neighbors, and the world he lives in. "Who" a person is has to do with how he acts and responds toward people and the circumstances in his life.

If Jesus is not supreme in a person's life that usually means that "self" is the preeminent one in that life. When this kind of person looks inward he only sees himself. He continually thinks about himself first and the treasure within his heart is self. Whatever a man treasures becomes his god (cf. Matthew 6:21). What a person is today is only a belated announcement of what occupied his mind and captured his heart in the past.

Heathens are heathens because of what they are inside. Jesus said a person should not cut off his hand to stop stealing. The stealing did not originate with the hand; it originated in that person's heart and mind. The writer of Proverbs said, "*For as he thinketh in his heart, so is he . . .*" (Proverbs 23:7). The god that a person is always thinking about determines his lifestyle. The whole purpose of setting one's mind on things above is to become like God. Think about whom God is and His nature to become like God. The Christian puts off the old man of sin and discards the filthy garments. He puts on Christ and His garments of righteousness — he chooses to wear garments of divine nature. He does not need human philosophy, Hebrew or pagan rituals, man-made rules, or traditions. All he needs is to be in Christ.

When a person becomes like God he puts on the divine nature of God. He lives like God because that has become his nature. Setting his mind on things above changes a man's nature in such a way that it is life changing. The Christian acts the way he does because that is who he is. An apple tree bears

fruit because it is an apple tree. A Christian will bear fruit naturally because that is what he does.

The Psalmist said a righteous man “*. . . is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields fruits in season and whose leaf does not wither. Whatever he does prospers*” (Psalm 1:3). The Christian needs to remain faithful as one raised with Christ. He needs to continually see the things above where Christ is by keeping his mind set on those things which are above. Christ within the Christian is his “*hope of glory*” (Colossians 1:27).

Philemon and Onesimus

Philemon 1–25

Introduction

Sandwiched between the books of Titus and Hebrews there is the short epistle to a Christian named Philemon. It is a small but dynamic epistle that sets forth some of the Bible's greatest teaching about the providential working of God in the affairs of mankind to bring about His rule in the hearts of men and women everywhere. In Romans 8:28 the Apostle Paul was inspired by the Holy Spirit to give all Christians a message filled with so much hope and encouragement that it has literally become, for many, an anthem of faith. It says, "*And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love Him, who have been called according to His purpose.*" The book of Philemon serves as a shining example of how God brings about good in all things. And sometimes He does it without those individuals who are involved really being aware of His presence in their lives.

In the Book of Colossians Paul told Christians to totally trust God through Christ Jesus, who is all they need in this life to be prepared for the life that is to come. The Book of Philemon illustrates through individual lives how God works in the affairs of men to work all things for the good of those who love Him.

Background on the Roman Society

The goal of this chapter is to get to the heart of the message contained in this book to be able to understand what God is saying through it. Everything that pertains to the background of this book is found in the Book of Acts and in the books of Philemon, Colossians, and Ephesians.

The background for Philemon began years before in the city of Colosse, which was part of a tri-city area in the Lycus River Valley. The city of Colosse was located about 100 miles inland from Ephesus. Paul mentioned many of the cities that were prominent cities in New Testament history such as Ephesus, Laodicea, Hierapolis, and Colosse. Colosse was a residential town. Many of the wealthy who did business in Laodicea and Hierapolis commuted from Colosse. It was the kind of city where people went to observe the lifestyle of the rich and famous.

Colosse was also known for the practice of slavery. The rich people who lived there owned slaves. Do not try to understand the Book of Philemon with a 20th century mindset. It is important to realize that slavery was the way Roman society worked. Historians recorded that one-third of the Roman Empire was made up of slaves. That means there were about 70 million slaves in the Roman Empire. Slavery was the backbone of the Roman world.

Slavery in the Roman Empire was not men and women chained in dungeons and crawling with lice and vermin. Only the slaves who were criminals and anti-social were chained in rows in the galleys and fed to lions for entertainment. The average Roman slave had a good life, depending on his master. Many of them were doctors, teachers, nannies, servants, butlers, silversmiths, artisans, or administrators.

For the most part slaves were treated very well, but the Roman citizen did not look upon his slaves as human beings. They were thought of as living tools or breathing machines. Men who had been captured by the Roman Legions and

brought back to Rome were reduced to the status of a slave and no longer looked upon as a human being. In a census the Romans would list all the human beings in his household. Then he would list the animals and his physical assets and equipment. Last of all he would list all his human machines — the slaves. The Romans in the first century treated their slaves more like a machine than a human being. They maintained and serviced their human machines so that they could get the greatest amount of use from them. There was no real relationship between slave and master. The slaves were just some **thing** that made the master's life richer, easier, and more pleasurable.

This lifestyle caused a slave mentality among those who were slaves. When someone is treated as if he is nothing, then he eventually looks at himself in that way. He feels as if he is a non-person and there is no purpose to life. Slaves had a meaningless existence which created an attitude of working without any joy or fulfillment. They worked to escape being beaten or mistreated by a cruel master.

Philemon and Onesimus

God's Providence at Work

One of the many slave owners in the city of Colosse was a man named Philemon. His wife's name was Apphia and they had a son named Archippus. One of their slaves was named Onesimus which means "useful." Imagine a slave with the mind-set of believing he is useless, but his name is useful. Paul used the play on these two words in this epistle: useful and useless.

On his second missionary journey (about A.D. 54–56) Paul left Antioch and traveled northward through Tarsus, Lystra, Iconium, and on to Ephesus (cf. Acts 18:23–19). While in Ephesus Paul spent two years teaching in the school of Tyrannus. While teaching the Gospel, the Holy Spirit

confirmed Paul's message with so many unusual miracles that the Word of God spread to all who were in Asia (cf. Acts 19:10). The Gospel had such a great impact that many of those who believed brought their books of magic and sorcery and burned them in a huge bonfire. Acts 19:19 says the worth of those books that were burned was 50 thousand pieces of silver. That would be about \$175,000 on today's market.

Paul's preaching was extremely successful. People streamed over the mountains into Ephesus to hear him. They were converted and then returned to their own cities and countries with the Gospel message. Sometime during Paul's two year stay in Ephesus, Philemon heard Paul preach Christ's message of salvation. Paul referred to this debt in Philemon 19. Philemon was converted, receiving spiritual life from Paul, and went back home to Colosse. Possibly during this same time period while Paul was preaching in Ephesus another man from Colosse became a Christian. His name was Epaphras and he also returned to Colosse.

Philemon was a wealthy man with a large house. Epaphras was on fire with the desire to teach and preach the message of God. Philemon opened his house as a place for Christians to gather and Epaphras became the evangelist in Colosse. Philemon and Apphia's son, Archippus, also became an evangelist and later started the church in Laodicea (cf. Philemon 2; Colossians 1:6–7, 4:16–17). The church established a growing outreach to the entire area.

Philemon was a faithful, growing, active, productive Christian who had been converted by Paul. He was totally committed to the Lordship of Christ. Realizing the relationship that Philemon had to Paul will help in understanding the things Paul said to Philemon.

It is also important to remember that this was a time when the Roman Empire was strong and slavery was a part of everyone's life. Just because Philemon became a Christian does not mean that he released all of his slaves. Slavery was not

condemned by the preaching of the Gospel, but Christianity did change the master/slave relationship (cf. Ephesians 6:5–9; Colossians 3:22–4:1). Once the love of God is in a person's heart his relationships change and take on a God-like attitude. Surely Philemon's household was influenced by the change his conversion would have made in his life.

Onesimus — His Mindset and Circumstances

Philemon is shown to be a zealous and generous Christian, but at least one of his slaves was not outwardly impressed. His name was Onesimus. He seems to have been a man filled with resentment and bitterness toward Philemon and the world in general. Onesimus is a prime example of how a person can hear the Gospel around him but not hear it in his heart. He was probably a man who longed to be free, and yet, by not hearing the Gospel around him during his time with Philemon, he was rejecting the answer to life and freedom.

The freedom that Onesimus would have longed for would not have been a physical freedom which would have been impossible in Roman times. Onesimus would have known that his physical freedom would have put him in danger. Philemon would have been one who treated his slaves well, so Onesimus would have had a good life even as a slave.

Onesimus was searching for a different kind of freedom. Remember that a slave in the Roman world was a non-person. Onesimus probably longed to have an identity and to be able to discover who he was. This is exactly the worth and dignity God gives every person. Under Roman law Onesimus was a non-person, a nobody. In God every person learns that he has great worth to himself and to God. Christians learn who they are and what they are worth through Christ Jesus. There is an inborn desire in every man to know who he is, where he came from, and why he was created. All the answers to those questions were readily available to Onesimus while he was in Philemon's

household, but at the time his heart was blinded to that truth by his bitter attitude.

Onesimus must have surely made the decision to run away not to gain physical freedom, but in a frantic attempt to find himself. As a slave he was automatically a non-person and he would have known how dangerous it was to run away. One-third of the Roman population were slaves. The other two-thirds lived in fear of what the slaves could do. Rome could not afford for one slave to gain his freedom by rebellion and then successfully rally other slaves into a mutiny powerful enough to overthrow the Roman Empire.

The Roman government ordained that running away from a master was the worst of all crimes. A runaway slave automatically became a fugitive and he was on the authorities most wanted list. When he was caught two things happened: first, a red hot branding iron was used to sear his forehead with a mark that identified him as a rebellious slave, and second, he was turned over to his master who was permitted to do whatever he pleased. Many times a rebellious slave was flogged until he was almost dead. It was a common sight to see slaves crucified beside the road. Other slaves were forced to watch the crucifixion as a warning to anyone who might be considering running away. This kind of treatment was all legal.

No slave would have chosen to run away unless he had a deep seated, ingrained reason. Physical freedom would not have been enough of a reason. He could never really be physically free because he would have been sought after continually, forcing him to always be on the run. Onesimus must have surely had a deeper, more noble motivation for running. As Onesimus left Philemon's household it is possible that he decided to satisfy his resentment toward his master by cleaning out the safe (cf. Philemon 18). It is assumed that he headed for Rome to search for his own self-worth and dignity. A change of the outward circumstances can never change who a person is inside. Freedom or bondage never exist only on the

outside; it is always on the inside. Freedom never comes by keeping rules, ritual, and man-made traditions. Freedom begins on the inside and comes only in Christ Jesus. This is one of the most important messages found in both Colossians and Philemon.

Thousands of people today have the same slave mentality as Onesimus. These people run down life's highway jumping from one camp sight to another always looking for greener pastures. They want new circumstances, new experiences, and new possessions; actually they are looking for who they are, where they came from, why they are here, and where they are going. They are really searching for dignity, meaning, and honor, but they are looking in the wrong places. People who look to the world to find what they are worth will only hear that they are nothing special. The world conveys the following thoughts concerning a person's worth: you are just another branch on the family tree of an evolved species; you are just one among many; you are no better than anyone else. Only Jesus Christ tells people of their great worth. Only Jesus Christ demonstrates the true value of God's children by giving His life for each one.

Onesimus did not know his true worth. There are no details about his experiences after he ran away or his accomplishment in arriving in Rome. He surely had to travel to Ephesus and find a boat going to Rome without being caught. Ephesus was not that far from Colosse so there was always the possibility that someone would recognize him. He would have spent his time looking over his shoulder in constant fear of being caught. All the odds would have been against Onesimus on this journey. No one in the Roman Empire would want to endanger themselves by befriending a runaway slave. If someone was caught helping a slave they were fined thousands of dollars and liable for the total income that was lost for the master while the slave was gone. If someone even looked like a runaway slave he was immediately shunned and ignored. No one in the

Roman Empire would have taken the chance of becoming involved.

By the time Onesimus finally made it to Rome he would have been in bad shape both physically and emotionally. All of the money he had stolen would have been gone. He probably had to sleep on the street and beg or steal his food.

God Brings It All Together

During this same time frame the Apostle Paul had returned to Jerusalem where the Jews had stirred up the masses against him and a mob tried to kill him (cf. Acts 21–28). Paul was rescued by Roman soldiers and put in the dungeon. Instead of paying the customary bribes to the right officials Paul announced that he was a Roman citizen and appealed to Caesar. Paul was taken to Rome where Nero should have heard his plea, but Nero had a two year back-log of court cases. Because Paul was not before Caesar on criminal charges he was allowed to rent his own house and live under “house arrest” (cf. Acts 28:16). This would be like someone who is released on bail today. A Roman guard was assigned to guarantee that Paul did not go anywhere and that when the time came he would be present for his court appearance before Caesar.

Paul was in a rented house that he could not leave. He was not confined to a dungeon and he was able to have a group of fellow Christians with him. Biblical records reveal that Luke, the physician who wrote the Gospel of Luke and the Book of Acts, was one of his companions. John Mark, the author of the Gospel of Mark, was also there. Aristarchus, an early convert of Paul’s from Thessalonica (cf. Acts 27:2) and Demas, who later forsook Paul and the Gospel (cf. 2 Timothy 4:10), were also some of the companions who attended to Paul’s needs at this time.

Paul’s situation under house arrest allowed him to preach the Word of the Cross to hundreds of people. In the Book of Philippians Paul recorded the impact that he and his band of friends made upon the city of Rome. Paul converted his captors

and even members of Caesar's household during this time (cf. Philippians 1:12–14; 4:21). It is possible that his companions went out into the streets of Rome to bring people to Paul. It is entirely possible that Onesimus was one of these fortunate people. Was it luck that Onesimus heard the Word of God while he was in Rome? No, it was part of God's providence. There are no details for Onesimus' conversion. Perhaps Onesimus heard Paul's name in the streets of Rome and remembered hearing of his master's association with a man named Paul.

Man cannot escape God. The psalmist David wrote, "*Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence?*" (Psalm 139:7). He also said, ". . . *He leadeth me beside still waters. . . . He leadeth me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake*" (Psalm 23:2–3, KJV). The words "leadeth" in these two verses are two different words in the Hebrew. When God leads someone beside the still waters the word is **hahal**, which means simply to lead someone. When God leads someone in the paths of righteousness, the word "leadeth" is **nachah**, which means to drive as a shepherd would guide his sheep. This word shows the relentless efforts of the Father who will pursue His children in order to bring about their salvation. The same concept is conveyed in Psalms 23:6 when it says, "*Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life . . .*" The Hebrew word for "follow" is **radaph**, which literally means to pursue. It does not mean that God's goodness is going to leisurely follow His children. He is going to pursue His children with His goodness and mercy. This is the same word that would be used to describe a pack of drooling, snarling dogs as they relentlessly chased their prey. It describes a pursuit in which God will not give up. That is how much God desires that His children be saved. The Apostle Peter said it this way, "*The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance*" (2 Peter 3:9).

God Himself in the totality of His attributes fills all of creation. There is no way to escape God. As Paul told the Athenians in Acts 17:24–28:

The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by hands. And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything, because he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else. From one man he made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live. God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us. “For in him we live and move and have our being.” As some of your own poets have said, “We are his offspring.”

God is the very foundation and essence of all life. Even the atheist who curses God uses the breath which has been given to him by God. When Adam tried to hide from God, God knew where he was the whole time (cf. Genesis 3:8–10). Onesimus ran away from Philemon and God, but when Onesimus got to Rome and he was ready to hear the Gospel he did not realize that God had been with him the whole way. Onesimus ran searching for what he thought was right, thinking that he would have his own way. God knew what Onesimus needed, He knew where Onesimus was running, and He knew what would happen in the end. That is the way God deals with everyone. People may say, “I want my own way,” and God’s answer is, “Okay, do it.” In the end when man falls on his face doing his own thing in his own way, God is there to pick man up and to show mankind the right way — His own way — God’s way.

In Rome Onesimus had to face the horror and danger of being a run-away slave, but he was finally ready to hear the Gospel. It was the same Gospel that he could have heard in

Colosse in his master's household without the trouble and hardship of being a slave on the run.

The Gospel did not begin in Matthew; it began in Genesis. The “good news” began at the point of creation when God said, “*Let us make man in our image, in our likeness . . .*” (Genesis 1:26). Mankind was made in the image of God. That fact alone makes man a creature of tremendous worth. In the New Testament Jesus spoke of man’s worth many times. One example would be the Prodigal Son. The father ran to meet him rejoicing because something of great worth had returned to him (cf. Luke 15:11–20). In the parable of the lost coin, it is God who swept the house looking for one lost coin and then rejoiced because the lost coin was found (cf. Luke 15:8–10). It is God who looks for one lost sheep. He does not seek the lost sheep because it is bleating so pitifully. He looks for His sheep because that one lamb is valuable to Him (cf. Luke 15:3–7). These parables from Jesus convey the worth of each child to God. God loved man enough to die for every man — “*For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life*” (John 3:16). His love knows no boundaries when it comes to redeeming one of His own. Each one of His creations is of great worth to Him.

Think about this information and try to imagine the effect it would have on someone with a slave mentality. A slave was taught that he was simply a living machine — a thing. He did not know that he had been created in the image of God. He did not know that he was a person of worth. Hearing the Gospel conveyed to him that even though he was scarred, marred, and defaced by sin, God still loved him. God sent His son to die for each slave in captivity to set him free. Once a person understands his own worth to God, then he can begin to realize that he is a person. He is loved. Someone died especially for him. Christ’s death for Onesimus and for each child of God raises him up and unites him with God. That is the greatest of all honors. Being united with God is the ultimate dignity for mankind. That is the meaning of life. A life of worth is a life

lived in union with God through Jesus Christ. A man who is united with God cannot be enslaved. A slave in the Roman Empire can also be a free man with God the Father.

Outline of Philemon

- A. Paul, The Beloved Friend (Philemon 1–7).
- B. Paul, The Beseeching Intercessor (Philemon 8–16).
- C. Paul, The Burdened Partner (Philemon 17–25).

In Christ Jesus You Are Somebody

Philemon 1–25; Ephesians 6:5–9

Introduction and Observations

God's Providence at Work

Onesimus made his way to Rome and God, in His marvelous providential way, brought Onesimus to the house where Paul was living and teaching. Onesimus would surely have heard of Paul in his master's house. Knowing who Paul was and circumstances being what they were with Onesimus, it is probable that Onesimus did not tell Paul his entire story.

God was not through with His plans for Onesimus. At this same time Epaphras, the evangelist from the church in Colosse, had come to Rome to talk to Paul about some of the problems in the church at Colosse. Epaphras would have recognized Onesimus immediately. He would have known Onesimus as a runaway slave from the house in Colosse where the church met every week.

Having a runaway slave as one of his most recent converts would have put Paul in a difficult position. Philemon was Paul's friend, but Paul had become attached to Onesimus. Paul said:

I appeal to you for my son Onesimus, who became my son while I was in chains. Formerly he was useless to you, but now he has become useful both to you and to

me. I am sending him — who is my very heart — back to you. I would have liked to keep him with me so that he could take your place in helping me while I am in chains for the gospel (Philemon 10–13).

Paul's Dilemma in Regard to Slavery

Paul had a problem. What does the Gospel do to slavery? It abolishes it, but the question is how? Does the Gospel incite slaves to runaway? Does it call for the slaves to rise up and leave their masters? If Paul were to keep Onesimus in Rome he would be giving other slaves permission to leave their masters. The Gospel did not authorize that kind of response to God's message.

Paul also knew that if he sent Onesimus back to Philemon there was a chance that Onesimus would be branded on his forehead and then flogged. Philemon would face the problem of his other slaves thinking that if Onesimus could run away and get away with it then they could also run away. While Paul was wrestling with these thoughts Onesimus was in Rome faithfully and cheerfully serving Paul.

Onesimus had not only violated the law of the land by running away, but he had also stolen money from his master. That meant that he was twice a thief — he stole himself and he stole the money, both of which belonged to his master. In this situation there was only one thing a Christian could do — Onesimus had to go back to Philemon and ask for his forgiveness. Onesimus must return to Colosse and become a slave again. To be able to celebrate his new life in Christ, he must live in fellowship with God where he was supposed to be.

Paul addressed this problem when he wrote his epistle to the Ephesians:

Slaves, obey your earthly masters with respect and fear, and with sincerity of heart, just as you would obey Christ. Obey them not only to win their favor

when their eye is on you, but like slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from your heart. Serve wholeheartedly, as if you were serving the Lord, not men, because you know that the Lord will reward everyone for whatever good he does, whether he is slave or free. And master, treat your slaves in the same way. Do not threaten them, since you know that he who is both their Master and yours is in heaven, and there is no favoritism with him (Ephesians 6:5–9).

Paul had not addressed this subject until now and the answer was definite. As a Christian Onesimus was a slave to Christ. All Christians must render their service to the Lord and not to men. No man can enslave another man, but a Christian cannot run away from his circumstances. He is called to serve Christ in all circumstance. As a slave Onesimus was no longer working just to keep from being beaten. He was no longer a non-person. He was no longer a living machine. He was in Christ and in Christ he was a person of great value and worth. All Christians are free to make choices. They must embrace life wherever they are and in whatever circumstances they find themselves. Everything a Christian does must be done unto God.

This was what Paul was writing to the slaves in Ephesus. It would be easier for them to obey because they were still a part of a household; they were not in the same situation as Onesimus. He was a runaway slave, which put him in a more difficult situation. Christianity is not the great escape route. Man cannot escape life by living in a religious experience. Man has to live in the real world even if he is a Christian. Christianity is not an escape from the hard, harsh realities of life. Christians face the same realities and yet must let Christ live within. Christians overcome the realities of this through Christ's strength and His provisions. Before Onesimus ran away to Rome his prison was Colosse. As God's child he had

to go back to that prison. It was there in Colosse that he had to celebrate his freedom in Christ Jesus.

Onesimus was no longer a slave. He wore that title and he would still have to work as a slave, but he was not a slave. He had been set free on the inside. He would be free to love Philemon as a brother. All the resentment that was once a part of his life with Philemon and which was a part of himself was gone in Christ. Onesimus was free to delight in the glorious human being God had created. God delighted in him and loved him. Knowing this Onesimus could learn to love and be delighted in himself. A man who is free in Christ cannot be enslaved. He is free to take his place in society; wherever his position may be, he is free to glorify his great and magnificent God.

Paul's Letter to Philemon

Paul picked up his pen to write. He must have told Onesimus that he had to go back to Colosse and he could go with the letters that he was sending. Epaphras was there with his questions and problems. Paul wrote a letter to answer those problems. Paul wrote a letter to Colosse, a letter to Ephesus, and the letter to Philemon addressing the problem with Onesimus. Onesimus, in the company of Tychicus, traveled across the Mediterranean Sea with three books of the New Testament: Ephesians, Colossians, and Philemon.

Tychicus delivered the letter to Philemon. Onesimus probably waited outside for Philemon to read it and then decide what was going to happen to his returning slave. It was surely a tense moment. Paul's letter to Philemon is a short, but powerful epistle:

Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, To Philemon our dear friend and fellow worker, to Apphia our sister, to Archippus our fellow soldier and to the church that meets in your home:

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

I always thank my God as I remember you in my prayers, because I hear about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all the saints. I pray that you may be active in sharing your faith, so that you will have a full understanding of every good thing we have in Christ. Your love has given me great joy and encouragement, because you, brother, have refreshed the hearts of the saints.

Therefore, although in Christ I could be bold and order you to do what you ought to do, yet I appeal to you on the basis of love. I then, as Paul—an old man and now also a prisoner of Christ Jesus—I appeal to you for my son Onesimus, who became my son while I was in chains. Formerly he was useless to you, but now he has become useful both to you and to me.

I am sending him—who is my very heart—back to you. I would have liked to keep him with me so that he could take your place in helping me while I am in chains for the gospel. But I did not want to do anything without your consent, so that any favor you do will be spontaneous and not forced. Perhaps the reason he was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back for good—no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother. He is very dear to me but even dearer to you, both as a man and as a brother in the Lord.

So if you consider me a partner, welcome him as you would welcome me. If he has done you any wrong or owes you anything, charge it to me. I, Paul, am

writing this with my own hand. I will pay it back — not to mention that you owe me your very self. I do wish, brother, that I may have some benefit from you in the Lord; refresh my heart in Christ. Confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I ask.

And one thing more: Prepare a guest room for me, because I hope to be restored to you in answer to your prayers. Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends you greetings. And so do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas and Luke, my fellow workers. The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit (Philemon 1–25).

Paul had complete confidence in Philemon knowing that he would receive his letter in the spirit of love and thanksgiving.

The Testimony of Secular History

Later history and tradition gives information that is not in the Bible, but it is history that has been preserved. Tradition says that a few months after Philemon received his letter from Paul he gave Onesimus his freedom. Upon becoming a free man Onesimus chose the task of teaching and preaching the Gospel. The greater part of his service to the Lord was spent in the church at Ephesus.

There are writings that have been preserved even unto today from the early church fathers. They were prominent church leaders in the second, third, and fourth centuries. One of these men was named Ignatius. In one of his writings dated fifty years after the book of Philemon, Ignatius referred to one of the bishops whose name was Onesimus. Ignatius wrote: “You know of he who was useless and is now useful.” This phrase makes it appear that this is the same Onesimus. This Onesimus,

who was a bishop in Ephesus, was the man who went around all the area of the Mediterranean and collected all the letters of the Apostle Paul. That was the beginning of the canon now called the New Testament. Ignatius was the one who put it together. That would explain why the letter to Philemon was included in the Bible. It is the only personal letter of Paul's to a single individual .

Your Value to God

Certainly this letter was the beginning of the end of slavery. This was not the end of slavery physically for mankind, but men who have been truly liberated on the inside are also free outwardly so that he never has to live with a slave mentality. Unfortunately, there are many today who are trying to serve Christ with the slave mentality. Many Christians do not really understand who they are in Christ, therefore, they experience bondage on the inside. They have no sense of worth, no sense of the honor and dignity that is theirs in Christ. If this is the case with you this hour, I hope that somehow you will come to understand your place in Christ Jesus our Lord in this study.

Think about what Jesus said in Matthew 6:25–33:

Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink' or about your body, what you will wear. . . . Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life? And why do you worry about clothes? See how the lilies of the field grow. They do not labor or spin. Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these . . . So do not worry, saying, "What shall we eat?" or "What shall we drink" or "What shall we wear?"

. . . But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.

Jesus told the people that they were far more valuable than the birds of the air. God cares for His children just as he cares for the lilies of the field that are clothed in splendor. God provides abundantly for the things of nature. God's children are of more worth than the things of nature, therefore, God will take care of them. Jesus compared the royal robes of Solomon to the lowly lilies of the field. The lily is more beautifully clothed than anything man can make. Put a beautiful ornate purple robe under the microscope to magnify the fibers. The robe is no longer beautiful because under the microscope the color is blotchy and uneven. If you put a purple iris under the same microscope it is still beautiful. The more you magnify it the more intricate and beautiful it becomes. It is more beautifully arrayed than Solomon in his most ornate and beautiful robe.

Why does God put such great value on man? It is because man has been washed in the cleansing blood of His Son Jesus Christ. In Christ man is presented to God without spot or blemish. The Apostle Peter said, "*But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God . . . Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God . . .*" (1 Peter 2:9–10). God's children have been chosen. They are royalty! They are holy! Christians belong to God and, of all the things in the universe, they are the most valuable.

Christians are God's most treasured possessions. They have the most worth because of **who** they are and **whose** they are. God will provide everything His children need to be what He wants them to be. He will provide everything needed for every opportunity He sets before each one. As God's child we can have the same confidence as the Apostle Paul when he said, "*I can do everything through him who gives me strength.*" (Philippians 4:13). Paul did not say I can do some things or I

can do something occasionally. He said, "*I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me*" (Philippians 4:13, KJV). Paul continued this same scripture telling the Philippians how this was possible for God's children. He said, "*And my God will meet all your needs according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus*" (Philippians 4:19). Paul was saying the same thing that Jesus said — God will provide **all** your needs (cf. Matthew 6:25–33). This does not mean that God will provide all that His children want, but He will provide everything they need. There is a difference between what a person wants and what he needs.

A Book of Many Messages

This small, almost insignificant, letter sets forth more than one lesson or message. It is important to read the book through the eyes of each person involved to be able to see what Paul is saying. It is important to focus on what Paul was saying to enable Philemon and all who would later read this letter to see what is the heart and soul of Christianity. Paul's primary focus was the concept of forgiveness.

Through Philemon's Eyes

Philemon was a slave owner in the Roman Empire. His slave stole from him and then ran away. Then Onesimus returned to his master carrying a letter from Paul. As Philemon read the letter he must have realized that Paul was asking him to forgive his runaway slave. It was a difficult decision for Paul to send Onesimus back to his master. It was very difficult for Onesimus to return. But it was perhaps most difficult for Philemon to read this letter compelling him to make the difficult decision of forgiving a runaway slave. In the society of the first century this just would not have happened.

According to the customs, laws, and morals of the Roman Empire there was absolutely no reason Philemon should forgive

Onesimus. The civil statutes were the law of the land. Those statutes demanded that Onesimus be branded on the forehead and, at least, be flogged until he was near death. Philemon had to worry about what the other slaves would think if he did not brand Onesimus as a runaway slave and punish him for stealing from his master. Other slaves might get the impression that they could also run away because their master was a Christian and he was willing to forgive his slaves.

Philemon had to worry about what his other slaves would think, but he also had to think about the other slave owners. He knew that he needed to enforce the laws of the land even though he was willing to forgive Onesimus. Many of the members of the church in Colosse would have also been slave owners and probably watching Philemon to see what he was going to do in this situation. Every member of the congregation would be affected by Philemon's decision. This became a matter of what would be the right thing for Philemon to do as a Christian.

Through Onesimus' Eyes

There is a totally different focus looking at this letter through the eyes of Onesimus. The message for Onesimus, and all who would read this letter after him, would be the concept of learning to know who he was as a person who was truly free even though he had to be a slave. Onesimus knew that all the other slaves would know that he had become a Christian while in Rome and they would be watching him.

Through the Congregation's Eyes

The members of the church in Colosse must have wondered how all of this would affect their ministry in the tri-city area and the valley around. The first century with Roman rule was a hard era in which to teach the Gospel. Love was not a high virtue in Roman society. It was actually viewed as a character defect. When the Christians loved each other the Romans thought they were crazy. There are quotations from

letters and historical writings that confirm the fact that the love Christians had for each other was looked down upon by the Romans. Two such quotations in which the word “Christian” seemed to be spit out as if it had a bad taste in their mouths during the first century would be: “Behold how these Christians love one another,” and “These Christians are so mad they love one another before they have even met.” In this kind of atmosphere it was hard to teach others. It would be even harder to convince them that they needed to forgive a thieving, runaway slave.

Since a slave was only a living tool, a machine to be used, it would be especially hard to convince a Roman to love his slaves. It would be especially hard for Philemon to explain why he did not brand Onesimus simply because they were both Christians. Onesimus was a tool, a thing. If a tool breaks, its owner does not simply forgive it. You do not say to a tool, “I love you and I forgive you.” How would Philemon explain such actions to his fellow slave owners?

Philemon was truly faced with a difficult decision. On one side Paul had asked him to completely forgive Onesimus and treat him as a brother in Christ with all the privileges of being a fellow Christian. On the other side if Philemon forgave his runaway slave he would not only risk the wrath of his fellow citizens but also the humiliation of appearing weak before his own slaves. He also had to face other Christians who were also slave owners and Christians. What should Philemon do???

Using God's Gifts

**Philemon 4–21; Romans 5:5;
1 Thessalonians 3:12**

Introduction and Review

Philemon was faced with some awkward decisions. The Book of Philemon is one of the Bible's most graphic lessons on how brothers and sisters in Christ are supposed to forgive. Paul was asking Philemon to completely forgive and restore Onesimus without any retribution. This kind of request would have been difficult for Philemon for a number of reasons that are made valid only by the standards of human reason and wisdom.

The laws and customs of the Roman Empire demanded that Onesimus be branded on his forehead and be severely flogged at the very least. Under Roman law Philemon could have punished him to the point of death. If Philemon did not follow the laws and customs of the land, he would set a bad precedent in the eyes of his slaves, his brethren, and his pagan neighbors. If he did not punish Onesimus, his other slaves would think that he was a weak master and might try to take advantage of him. It would also send a message to the other slaves that God approved of civil disobedience.

It is probable that most of the congregation in Colosse were slave owners. They might have chastised Philemon because not punishing Onesimus might encourage rebellion among their own slaves and make life difficult for them. Whatever decision Philemon made would set a precedent of

conduct for all the other Christian slave owners. It would also affect the attitude of the population toward the church. The non-Christians in the Roman Empire already thought Christians were warped in their conduct. Any decision Philemon made could drive a bigger wedge between the church and the citizens of Rome. In some areas Christians were accused of cannibalism and all kinds of immorality. Philemon had to make a decision one way or the other.

Paul, the Burdened Partner

Life's Difficult Choices

Paul did not specifically tell Philemon to do anything. It would have solved Philemon's problem if Paul had given him instructions like, "This is what you must do," but Paul did not do that (cf. Philemon 8). If Paul had told Philemon exactly what to do then Philemon could have blamed any decision he made on Paul. Paul knew that the rules of legalism keep the Christian a spiritual infant forever because with no choices to make, there is no growth.

Legalism is having only rules to obey: do this, but do not do that; go here, but do not go there. Legalism is the reason there are people who have been Christians for ten years, twenty, or even fifty years and they have not grown in Christ. They are still infants. Paul addressed this same problem when it occurred in the congregation in Corinth. He was writing to a congregation that had been in existence nearly twenty years. I Corinthians 3:1–4 says:

Brothers, I could not address you as spiritual but as worldly—mere infants in Christ. I gave you milk, not solid food, for you were not yet ready for it. Indeed, you are still not ready. You are still worldly. For since there is jealousy and quarreling among you, are you not worldly? Are you not acting like mere men?

Christian writers normally categorize people in two classes: Christian people and worldly people. Paul revealed a third class of people — a long-term spiritual infant he refers to as a non-spiritual Christian. He cannot address these people as worldly because the worldly person does not accept the things of God. The people Paul was talking about were people who had come to God and were spiritually immature — spiritual infants. Infants normally grow into adults; if they do not reach adulthood, they usually die. It is unnatural for someone to grow physically and to still have the mind of an infant. It is unnatural for Christians to remain in spiritual infancy.

How to Grow a Christian

Paul's instructions to Philemon show how God helps Christians to grow. Legalism (rule keeping) will keep the Christian in an unnatural state of spiritual infancy. The grace of God sets the Christian free to make his own decisions in Christ and to grow into a mature man of God. Paul led Philemon into the heart of the Gospel and then left him to determine what he himself should do. He said, "*Confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I ask*" (Philemon 21).

Not only did Philemon have to make a momentous decision, but he also had to take full responsibility for the decision once it was made. He was called upon to forgive a runaway slave and allow him to return without any punishment. This would have been very difficult to do and also completely unheard of in this time.

This is the kind of message that would be hard to hear. The cross of Jesus will constantly touch man's life in areas where he does not want anyone to go. A Roman slave owner would have never expected his whole way of life to change so drastically. Some things appear to be solid and established — that is the way it is and that is the way it will always be. Change in some areas of a person's life are never expected. The cross of Jesus affects every little corner of a person's life. For a

Christian the cross changes and disturbs all the comfortable, established habits of a man.

For Philemon the cross changed the way he would have chosen to deal with a runaway slave. Philemon had to reach out to Onesimus in a way that he would have never expected to act. He had to restructure his morals, his thinking, and his lifestyle. Sometimes the love of God comes into a person's life in areas where he does not want to make changes. Sometimes the love of God calls for His children to change their orderly, neat and comfortable lives. Sometimes His love demands that His children move into a life style beyond anything they have ever dreamed.

Change has been a part of following Jesus from the very beginning. Jesus said, “*. . . If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me*” (Luke 9:23). A cross is not pleasant. A cross is not comfortable. A cross was an instrument of death. The only reason a person would “*take up his cross*” would be to be crucified upon it. This is not just a one time only death. Paul said, “*I die every day . . .*” (1 Corinthians 15:31). As the Christian grows spiritually he will find new areas in his life where self has not died and still needs to be put to death. The Christian life is a continual dying of self on a personal cross. Every Christian must take “self” off the throne in his life and put “self” on the cross. At the same time he must take Christ off the cross and put Him on the throne of his life. Christ challenges every Christian with his own impossibilities and then He is the one who enables each Christian to overcome and be victorious.

Christ is the one who said, “*. . . apart from me you can do nothing*” (John 15:5). Without Christ no man can turn the other cheek or go the extra mile (cf. Matthew 5:41). Without Christ no one can say, “Your will be done” and have that thought become a reality in his life (cf. Matthew 6:10). Apart from Christ man can do nothing. Paul said, “*I can do everything through him who gives me strength*” (Philippians 4:13). That means that when a man becomes a Christian he goes from

nothing to all things. It is Christ who makes the difference. There is only one place to get His love. Paul told the Romans: “*And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us*” (Romans 5:5). Man can do nothing without God’s love which is all powerful.

In one of his letters to the Corinthians Paul said, “*For Christ’s love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died*” (2 Corinthians 5:14). This is the kind of love that compels and motivates Christians to accomplish what is beyond their natural ability. Paul prayed about this kind of love for the brethren in Thessalonica, “*May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else, just as ours does for you*” (1 Thessalonians 3:12).

A compelling, motivating love is the kind of love Paul was talking to Philemon about. The Christian receives this kind of love when he is immersed into Christ. Acts 2:38 tells the seeking believer to “. . . ‘Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.’” When a person is immersed into Christ God gives him “*the gift of the Holy Spirit.*” Once a person has been immersed in baptism into Christ his heart is automatically filled with the love of God. This is what Paul was talking about in Romans 5:5. The love of God is automatically there.

Paul prayed that the love of God would increase and overflow so that every Christian would love his brother and everyone else with the love of God. Notice two things about Paul’s prayer. First, he assumed that the love was already within their hearts. Second, he assumed that the Thessalonians (and all Christians) were using that love to the fullest extent of their abilities. When a person puts on Christ in the new birth, the love of God is transplanted into his heart. And that love increases with us. Whenever someone uses the talents God has given him, those talents increase and grow with use. If the God-

given talents and God-given love is not used then they will be taken away. This is the principle taught by the parable of the talents (cf. Matthew 25:14–29).

Paul was talking to Christians in the Book of Thessalonians whom he assumed were using their Spirit-given ability to love with the *agape* love that God gives. Paul assumed that all Christians had this *agape* love and that it was active in their lives because he was praying that it would increase. The Greek word for increase is *pleonazo* which means to increase, to add to, to accumulate, and to multiply. It was a term used by bankers to describe the interest that was automatically paid on money. When someone puts money into a bank it draws interest. Paul wanted the love that his readers already had to be put to use so that it would increase.

The other word that Paul used when he was praying for the Thessalonians was the word “*overflow*” or the word “*abound*” in the King James Version of 1 Thessalonians 3:12. This is the Greek word *perisseuo* which means to exceed a fixed measure. Paul was praying that their love would grow over and above what was normally there. If a person’s heart normally only holds a gallon or a liter of God’s love, Paul was praying that there would be a gallon worth of love and then even more left over. When a person fills his plate with more food than he can eat, he has too much food. Paul prayed that their love would go beyond all the limits and continue to grow. He wanted them to have too much love.

Another picture of *perisseuo* is found in John 6:13 when Jesus miraculously fed the 5,000. The Scripture says, “*So they gathered them and filled twelve baskets with the pieces of the five barley loaves left over by those who had eaten.*” The phrase “*left over*” is the word *perisseuo*. After all the 5,000 had been fed and each one had had enough to eat, there were twelve baskets **left over** from what had once been five barley loaves. The same word is used again in the story of the prodigal son. The son was in the fields feeding the pigs “*when he came to his senses, he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired men*

have food to spare and here I am starving to death!" (Luke 15:17). The phrase “*to spare*” is the word ***perisseuo***. This word is always used to describe God’s generous provisions of which there is always plenty to spare.

Curtis Harrison, a graduate of the Sunset School of Preaching in Lubbock, Texas, spent 13 years as a missionary in Papua New Guinea. The New Guinea people speak Pidgin-English. (A pidgin language is generally based on one of the major world languages, such as English. Arising out of commercial activities, it contains a sharply reduced grammar and is much easier to learn than the parent tongue. Ed). The natives in Papua New Guinea have a word for ***perissieo*** which is ***bigpel tumas***. Loosely translated into English it means “plenty too much.” God is always generous and giving. He never holds back anything in giving to His children.

There are congregations today that hoard their money. They have tens of thousands of dollars in the bank and they brag about it. God never gives of His abundance so that His children can bury it in the ground or build barns to store it in (cf. Luke 12:16–21; Matthew 25:14–30). In the parable about the rich man whose life was taken from him for building bigger barns to store all his grain, Jesus said, “*This is how it will be with anyone who stores up things for himself but is not rich toward God*” (Luke 12:21). As His children, God expects Christians to be as generous and giving as He is. He expects His children to have the same family traits and characteristics. He gives His children everything they need and gives it overflowing (cf. Luke 6:38). When people start building barns and burying their abundance in the ground that is a good sign that it will not be long until they are spiritually dead.

God’s provision for His children is always more than enough. The twelve baskets full left over in John 6:13 may sound like a waste, but it is really just a sign of God’s abundance. God is generous; there is always enough. There is always “plenty too much.” Christians are finite (limited) containers for God’s love. When they are filled with an

unlimited amount of God's love, there has to be too much. Something that is finite (limited) is never capable of containing the infinite (unlimited), but that is what happens in the Christian life when a person becomes filled with God's love. Love and forgiveness overflow.

In Matthew 18:15–22 the disciples were talking to Jesus about love and forgiveness. Peter asked Him how many times he had to forgive his brother when he sinned against him. The disciples understood that they needed to forgive, but they wanted to know how many times they had to forgive. Jesus said, “. . . *I say not unto thee, Until seven times: but Until seventy times seven*” (Matthew 18:22, KJV). In Hebrew numerology the number 7 is God's perfect number. The number 10 describes that which is complete. Seven times ten is 70 which would be God's perfection multiplied by God's completion. Jesus multiplied the number 7 by 70 which would be God's perfection multiplied by God's perfection to the absolute completeness. Peter was wondering if he could stop forgiving once he had forgiven his brother seven times. Jesus said they must forgive 490 times, but he was not just talking about forgiving a brother 490 times. He was talking about making it a habit to forgive. Jesus wanted His disciples to make forgiveness a way of life. Love is the way a Christian lives.

A Habitual Way of Life

Love and forgiveness for the Christian means going beyond the boundaries set by man and living the way Christ did. On the cross Jesus said, “*Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing*” (Luke 23:34). Jesus was deity, but he was also fully human on the cross. Stephen is another example of the way Christians must learn to forgive. As the stones were crushing the life out of Stephen he prayed, “*Lord, do not hold this sin against them*” (Acts 7:59-60). Stephen aggressively prayed that the people who were causing him such terrible pain would be forgiven. That is the kind of love that goes beyond any human definition. That kind of love is the

infinite agape love of God that is found in the finite container of a man. Man can go the second mile and turn the other cheek, and believe that he has gone the fixed limit. Man assumes that no one could be expected to go beyond those limits, but Paul knew human nature and he prayed for the Thessalonians and for all Christians, "*May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else . . .*" (1 Thessalonians 3:12).

Paul knew that by sending Onesimus back he was putting a demand upon Philemon for this kind of forgiveness. The pressure to forgive was on Philemon and all the congregations in that area. Every slave owner in the church would be affected by Onesimus' return. Paul and Onesimus had no way of knowing what might happen. Philemon might forgive, but others might just watch as he walked into their midst on Sunday. Onesimus was the man who had caused everything to change. His return challenged each one of them to face the truth and to actively choose to forgive him. Each one of them was forced to make a decision that went beyond what society called normal.

Paul knew that the church at Ephesus would receive their letter before the Colossians or Philemon received their epistles. Coming from Rome to Colosse, travelers had to land at Ephesus first. Perhaps that is why Paul wrote some of the following instructions to the church in Ephesus:

And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other just as in Christ God forgave you (Ephesians 4:30–32).

Before they heard the story about Onesimus Paul reminded them to forgive just as God in Christ had forgiven them. Paul

instructed them to love without prejudice or discrimination. God loved each one of them when they did not deserve to be loved. The same instructions would apply to the Colossian Christians who would be even closer to the situation. Paul wrote the following to them:

Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity (Col 3:12-14).

In Colossians 4:9 Paul said Tychicus is “. . . coming with *Onesimus, our faithful and dear brother, who is one of you.*” Paul knew that the act of love and forgiveness had to be a united effort on the part of the entire congregation. They needed to forgive because they loved with the love of God. Forgiveness is an action of love — the love of Jesus Christ.

Isaiah described the LORD as one who acted in genuine love, compassion, and kindness:

He will not shout or cry out, or raise his voice in the streets. A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out. In faithfulness he will bring forth justice; he will not falter or be discouraged till he establishes justice on earth. In his law the islands will put their hope (Isaiah 42:2–4).

These verses from Isaiah are talking about the reeds that grew on the river banks. Children would cut them into pieces about 12 inches long. Then they would hollow them out and cut little finger holes in a row on one side. They would put a half plug in one end to make a piccolo type of flute and play music on them. The reeds were very fragile especially after they had

been hollowed out. It was very easy to bend one and bruise it so that it was useless. When one was bent the children would just break it in two and throw it away. The bruised reed was useless and there were more on the river bank.

Isaiah said that the Messiah did not break the bruised reed. He did not throw it away. He was faithful and would have nurtured it until it could be mended and repaired. He did not snuff out the smoldering wick. In every home they had little lamps filled with olive oil to provide light at night and dark overcast days. The wicks in these lamps were made of the flax plant. As long as there was abundant oil in the lamp it burned without giving off an odor. When the lamp was left unattended and ran out of oil the lamp gave off a odious stench with smoke that caused a problem. It was a great embarrassment to the lady of the house if the house began to smell bad because no one had refilled the oil in the lamp. Everyone wanted to snuff out the smoking wick because it put off a bad smell. Isaiah said when the Messiah comes He will not snuff out the smoldering wick.

Sometimes people are like smoldering wicks — they are like bad smells that others want to get rid of. Jesus does not throw out people; He works with them until they are blazing, radiant testimonies to His glory. The Messiah is the One who shows mankind what God is like. Man can only see the love of God when he see Jesus Christ as Lord. Man can only be like Jesus when Jesus is in him. The bruised reeds and the smoking wicks in life can feel the love of Christ only through the hands of those who have become extensions of Christ.

Paul was telling Philemon that Onesimus was someone he needed to love and forgive. He was a bruised reed and Jesus had already nurtured and loved him so that he could become someone useful for God. He was a smoking wick that everyone in the church in Colosse would have rather thrown out and ignored. They had to make the hard decision to love and forgive Onesimus just as God had forgiven them. Christ had

forgiven Philemon, so what choice did Philemon have with Onesimus?

Christians must understand the grace of God and His love in everything they do. To be forgiven the Christian must be a forgiver. Jesus told His disciples and the crowds that surrounded Him on the mountainside:

This, then, is how you should pray: ‘Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name . . . Forgive us our debts as we also have forgiven our debtors. . . .’ For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins (Matthew 6:9– 15).

Christians must forgive as they have been forgiven and they must love as they have been loved. That is the foundation on which they forgive and love one another. A Christian filled with the love of God would never be so narrow, so mean and vindictive, so hard-hearted and selfish to say, “I will not forgive you.” A Christian filled with God’s love knows that the love of God does not work that way. Knowing that God had forgiven him he would not try to fool himself with such lies. Jesus taught the crowds how to pray and then explained the foundation of forgiveness.

In the Gospel of Luke there is an example of how loving and forgiving the Father is with His children (cf. Luke 15:11–24). This is the story of the prodigal son who left home, but then returned because he knew that his father was loving and forgiving. When the father saw his son coming he ran to him. The father was already searching and longing for him to return —

But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him. . . .

But the father said to his servants, “Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let’s have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.” So they began to celebrate.

The father ran to meet the son and then he sent the servant to bring the robe, the ring, and the sandals out to the son. Imagine the father waiting with the son *“a long way off”* and putting the clean clothes on his son and then walking back into the village with his son. Imagine the different effect this would have on the people who saw them. Try to imagine what the people would have thought when they saw a filthy, smelly, prodigal son walking home beside the father. This loving, forgiving father chose to clothe his son in such a manner that others would not know where he had been. The father knew, but there was no reason for everyone else to know. The father took his son home and blessed him and there was great joy and fellowship. There was a celebration and total acceptance.

God forgives His children to an infinite degree. God sees His children cleansed and innocent. His forgiveness is abundant and overflowing. It is beyond human limits, ability, and understanding. God’s forgiveness is not of this world. It comes only from God through Christ Jesus. Man can have this kind of forgiveness through Christ. That is the kind of forgiveness Paul was asking Philemon and all the congregations throughout Asia to have. Christians must forgive as they have been forgiven.

Philemon owed his life to the message he heard through Paul. As a slave owner, he stood as the judge for another man. He had to remember that he was also a human being and that he had stood before the judgment of God. He did not pay for his freedom. Another paid the price and set him free from the slavery of sin. He had to make the decision to do the same thing for Onesimus. The foundation of Christian forgiveness is that every Christian must forgive as he has been forgiven. Human

reasoning would have told Philemon that Onesimus needed to be branded. Perhaps Philemon stopped and thought about the fact that another had been branded in his place with a crown of thorns. Another had been flogged for all mankind. And just as rebellious slaves were sometimes crucified, Philemon's Lord was crucified and died in his place. Someone had to pay the price — that was the Law. All that justice ever demanded has been fulfilled by another — the Lord Jesus Christ.

God Is Sovereign

Philemon 15–25; Psalm 23:5, 56:8

The Overruling Providence of God

This is the last chapter in the study of Colossians and Philemon. Beginning in Philemon 15 Paul continued to counsel Philemon about God’s grace, which is providentially bestowed. Paul’s instructions were to help Philemon understand that God indeed does “. . . *in all things . . . work for the good of those who love him*” (Romans 8:28). Paul was leading Philemon into the heart of the Gospel and the very essence of God’s being in each Christian’s life. “*God is love*” (1 John 4:8, 16) and “*love*” seeks the very best for the one who is loved. God loved Philemon and forgave Philemon of his sin when he did not deserve God’s love or forgiveness. That which Philemon received from God — love and forgiveness — he needed to be willing to give to others. Paul was urging Philemon to see how God had worked things for his good:

Perhaps the reason he was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back for good — no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother. He is very dear to me but even dearer to you, both as a man and as a brother in the Lord (Philemon 15–16).

God Working in Man's Life

Looking at this letter and the events that happened in the lives of Philemon and Onesimus will help you to see a supernatural phenomenon that occurs in every Christian's life without them being aware of what is happening. It is the reality of God working in an individual's life to bring that person to Christ. At this very moment you are the sum total of all the past experiences in your life. If you look back on your life you will remember some events and experiences, which at the time may have seemed unimportant, that changed your attitudes and the direction of your life. Those events and experiences were instrumental in making you what you are today.

God, in His providence and His own marvelous way, works in every Christian's life to grow him into the degrees of spiritual maturity he is today. How does God work in one person's life and, at the same time, work in the lives of others? It is important to understand the ways of God; important to understand and believe that God indeed does use "*all things*" for the salvation of His children and for His glory. Understanding everything is not necessary; Christians do not always understand the things that happen in their lives. Believing that God is working will help the Christian not to become stoic, resentful, and bitter. It is important not to become a hindrance to what God is trying to accomplish in you. Instead of fighting God, the Christian must wait for God to work all things out for the good according to His purpose. Each Christian must become receptive to every opportunity he is provided by the Holy Spirit. The Apostle Paul unquestionably understood the ways of God making it easier for him to be a natural part of the process of bringing Onesimus to experience the new birth. Paul was writing to Philemon to help him understand the providence of God in his own life. Paul used a strange choice of words to describe what had happened between Philemon and Onesimus: "*separated from you for a little while*" (Philemon 15). Onesimus was "*separated*" from

Philemon because he ran away and in the process he also stole Philemon's money. Onesimus was a runaway slave and a thief; he was a criminal. All of this was something that Onesimus chose to do. A shameful, criminal act had occurred because of Onesimus' actions and the laws of justice needed to be served.

Onesimus ran away and stole from Philemon, but then a third person became involved. The crime no longer involved just two people; it also involved Paul the Apostle. Once Paul was involved there were laws of justice which superseded the laws of Rome and human wisdom. As a Christian he bowed to the rules of God on earth concerning everything that happened. God knew what Onesimus was going to do before he did it. God intervened in what Onesimus chose to do and turned the outcome of his criminal actions into a glorious conclusion. Paul was a Christian brother. Philemon was a Christian brother. And through God's intervention Onesimus also became a Christian brother.

Life is not a game of chance. Life is not the result of fate or a series of blind chances. The Bible emphatically teaches that God rules in the affairs of men to establish His kingdom in the hearts of men. God lives in and directs the affairs of His creation. Life has purpose and meaning because God is present in His creation. God's presence in this life causes His children to move toward His intended goal. What many people refer to as accidents, mistakes, failures, and deliberate sins God can turn around to point His children in the right direction. I am not saying that God caused these mistakes, accidents, or failures. I am not saying that God causes deliberate sin. God does not condone evil; He does not say that sin is good. But God can use each one of these things to turn them into something good in the lives of those who love Him. God does not encourage sin or failure. When man sins, it is his fault and not God's. Man chooses to sin, but God can and does use his sin and failures as an opportunity to teach right from wrong. God uses the consequences of sin to turn lives around. God is always faithful

to provide a way of escape for the man who is tempted (cf. Romans 8:28; James 1:13–14; 1 Corinthians 10:13).

Christians need to remember that with God they are safe. The psalmist David wrote about the Good Shepherd in Psalm 23 (cf. John 10:1–10). The Shepherd knows His sheep and calls them by name. He lays down His life for the sheep. The same Shepherd who protects and nourished His sheep also “*makes me lie down in green pastures . . .*” and in the “*valley of the shadow of death.*”

His children have no reason to fear. The Shepherd “*prepare(s) a table before me in the presence of my enemies.*” The shepherds during this time period would build a horseshoe shaped enclosure out of rocks with a small opening where he would lie down to block the entrance into the sheep fold to protect his sheep during the night. He literally became the door into the fold for the sheep. During the day he would gather grass and food for the sheep to munch on in the fold. As the night grew dark the sheep would have been fed and ushered into the protection of the fold. The sheep could hear the growls of the predators of the night, but they were safe within the sheep fold. God is the Good Shepherd and in Him Christians are safe. Jesus spoke about the parable of the lost sheep where the shepherd left 99 of his sheep in the sheep fold and went to look for one lost sheep. He said, “*In the same way your Father in heaven is not willing that any of these little ones should be lost*” (Matthew 18:14).

David wrote Psalm 56 when the Philistines had seized him when he was fleeing the wrath of King Saul. He had to use lies, deceit, trickery, and his wits to avoid being caught. As a result he ended up in a Philistine dungeon in Gath. David knew that the Philistines were making plans to put him to death so he called on the LORD. The LORD heard David and delivered him. David said, “*Thou tellest my wanderings: put thou my tears into thy bottle: are they not in thy book? When I cry unto thee, then shall mine enemies turn back: this I know; for God is for*

me" (Psalm 56:8–9, KJV). This verse does not make sense until you understand the Hebrew word for "*bottle*," which is ***nod***. This was a specific bottle that was used at the end of the summer to store the wine from the late grapes. Late grapes are the sweet grapes with the highest sugar content. These grapes make the best wine; it is the wine that is fermented over the winter months. When the Israelites began their spring festivals and celebrated the summer marriages they used the sweet wine for these festive occasions. David was actually saying, "You take all my tears and put them into your sweet wine bottle."

This verse should have great meaning for Christians today. Not only did God turn water into wine, He also turns His children's bitter tears into sweet wine. He takes the bitterness of life, the bitter tears of life, and puts them into a special bottle. Then in a few months He takes that which has been crushed and trampled and turns it into something good. God's redemptive process often takes time. God sweetens His children's tears in His time. God takes the bitterness and miseries of life, perhaps all the things that have been done deliberately and foolishly, and then He turns them into something that will work together for good.

The Reality of Life's Lessons

How does all of this relate to Philemon? It is easy for Christians to theologically discuss the fact that God is involved in all things, but when that discussion becomes personal everything changes. Suddenly for Philemon he had been robbed and a slave had run away. The theological discussion that God is sovereign became a circumstance that Philemon had to face personally. One of the things Paul taught in his letter to the Colossians was the fact that what you are determines how you react to the circumstances of life. This particular circumstance meant Philemon had to face the harsh reality of life. This event affected Philemon's finances and his property.

As Christian slave owners Philemon and his family would not have been ordinary masters. They would have been people who cared for their slaves physically and spiritually. They would have been praying for each one's salvation and trying to teach them the Gospel. In these circumstances Apphia and some of the other women in the congregation probably worried about Onesimus — wondering if he was okay, if they would see him again, if he would ever be exposed to the Gospel again, if Satan had taken away his chances to become a Christian. Philemon and the men may have thoughts that were a little harsher — why did Onesimus do this; why did God let this happen, we work doubly hard to help the church prosper and how is this going to affect us all?

Philemon and Apphia and the church in Colosse did not know that God knew what was going to happen even before Onesimus made the decision to run away. God had been working in the affairs of the world to make sure that Onesimus ended up with Paul in Rome. It is easy to see God's hand in this story generations later. The Christians in Colosse who had been praying to reach the lost around them could not possibly realize how much God was working to bring all of these events to a glorious conclusion. The devil did not win a victory with Onesimus. All the prayers were answered "*for the good of those who love*" the Lord (cf. Romans 8:28). If God had not been involved in their lives everything would have turned out much differently. With God in the picture, a discouraging mess became a victory celebration. Paul understood exactly how God had worked to bring all these events to a glorious conclusion — "*Perhaps the reason he was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back for good — no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother. . . .*" (Philemon 15–16).

God was not part of Onesimus decision to steal nor did He condone the stealing, the running away, or any other form of sin that may have occurred. But God is not shocked or

surprised by the wrongs of life. He works around the wrong and brings right into the lives of the people who love Him. God works in the lives of His children to bring glory to His name. Christians sometimes miss God's work in their lives because they are so concerned about their rights and wants. They miss the blessing of putting all things into His hands and resting quietly in His power, His might, and His peace. Christians are like the Prodigal son who chose to eat the leftovers from the pig pen (cf. Luke 15:11–24). There are many lessons to learn from that parable, but one lesson that is not as evident would be to look at the fact that every hog in the pen with the prodigal was on a mission from God. Every pig that pushed the son out of the way and every pig that grabbed the scraps first was pushing the son one step closer to home. God can use every circumstance of life to cause His children to do what is right and to bring Himself glory. When necessary He will use a hog pen and a muddy pig snout to send one of His children home again.

Only God knows the human heart and its breaking point. Philemon did not understand that Onesimus would have never obeyed the Gospel until he hit the bottom. Onesimus had to reach his breaking point and end up in the pig pen of his life, rooting like a hog just to stay alive. Only at that point was he ready to hear God's voice in his life. God used this time in Onesimus' life to teach him the primary lesson of the Christian life. Every child of God must rid themselves of feeling self sufficient. Jesus said, “*... apart from me you can do nothing*” (John 15:5). That truth must be the heart and soul of every Christian life. Without Jesus all mankind is hopelessly lost and frustratingly helpless.

The other side of being able to do “*nothing*” without Jesus is “*I can do everything through him who gives me strength*” (Philippians 4:13). “*Through him*” is the secret to victory in every endeavor of life. **Without** Christ man can do nothing. **With** Christ man can do anything. It is Christ who makes the

difference. Sometimes the only way God can cause His children to see His power in their lives is to strip them of self. Man has a nasty habit of thinking he can handle anything on his own. He needs to understand that God never gives him something that he can handle on his own. God sets an impossible task before His child for one purpose — to strip him of his self sufficient thinking.

Onesimus probably thought he could find true freedom by running away to Rome. He could only come to understand the folly of doing what he wanted to do by following his own will. Then in Rome he surely must have experienced the final desperation, frustration, helplessness, and total exhaustion that would enable him to listen to someone who could reason with him and show him God's way. Only then could he receive the Gospel and begin to receive from God all that he needed.

Philemon was probably a very angry man when he first realized that someone had taken his savings and that one of his slaves was missing. He would have been frustrated, not realizing he was standing at the beginning of a God-changing event. Such an event would have surely changed the first century church and helped to abolish slavery in the end.

Paul understood God's plan and he understood the situation in Colosse. That is surely why he opened his letter to Philemon with "*Paul, a prison of Christ Jesus*" (Philemon 1). Paul used the term "*bond-servant*" in many of his writings (cf. Romans 1:1; Galatians 1:10; Philippians 2:7; Colossians 4:12; Titus 1:1, NKJV). Paul thoroughly understood the principle of being a slave or prisoner — at the time he wrote this letter he was a prisoner of the Roman government. Paul knew that Rome could not hold him captive one minute longer than God would allow. Total authority was not in the hands of Rome; it was, and still is, in the hands of Jesus Christ. Paul was primarily a prisoner of the Lord Jesus Christ, not of Rome. This knowledge enabled Paul to understand that God was in control no matter what kind of disaster happened in his life. His primary purpose

in life was to be God's tool to touch every life that came within his reach.

Christians must learn to look beyond themselves and not to be so preoccupied with the details of every day life. The Christian needs to see every opportunity God sets before him as an opportunity from God. He needs to allow God to use him. Everything God does upon this earth involves humans because God gave man dominion over all the earth (cf. Genesis 1:28). Man does not sit back and watch as God does good. Man is in an active partnership with God. God wants His children to be trained athletes involved with God. Christians are not cheerleaders; they are active participants fully involved in the game of life.

We Are God's Messengers of Love

God is working beside His children as a partner in their labors. As a partner He will work out all things for their good, but He expects each Christian to be an active part. God said, "*I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. . . . So I have come down to rescue them from the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land . . .*" (Exodus 3:7–8), but He used Moses to accomplish this task. Moses was the instrument God used to work "*in all things . . . for the good of those who love him . . .*" (Romans 8:28)—God used Moses to work in the lives of the Israelites.

God is still working in the lives of His people today. He wants His message of love and salvation delivered personally to every man and woman in the world. Jesus came to bring salvation, but He sent the church to be a part of that mission. Wherever I go, people do not see the old worldly Bob Martin; they do not see the man I used to be. They see what Jesus has made of me, because they can see Jesus in me. Jesus is in me and the world can see Him in the things I do and in the way I respond to His offer of salvation. He offers that salvation to the world through His children.

Paul showed Jesus to Onesimus. He became God's message of love and salvation so that Onesimus could see Jesus. Onesimus remained with Paul to be taught the Christian walk. Once he had been grounded in the faith, Onesimus had to make some mature Christian decisions and go back to his master. He was not alone; he went as a child of God with God's love. He also had a letter from Paul to give to Philemon saying, "*If he has done you any wrong or owes you anything, charge it to me. I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand. I will pay it back . . .*" (Philemon 18–19). Paul had claimed Onesimus as his spiritual son (cf. Philemon 10). Under Roman law the father was responsible for the debts of his son. Paul accepted that responsibility. Paul took the risk of having to pay a heavy fine for harboring a runaway slave. Paul did not know for sure how Philemon would react. It would not have been uncommon for the master to become angry and in a rage brand Onesimus or flog him and demand payment from Paul under the law.

Paul was testing Philemon's love to the utmost degree. Asking Philemon to accept Onesimus back as his slave and also his brother in Christ was indeed a true test of Christian love, compassion, and forgiveness. Paul even asked for one more thing: ". . . Prepare a guest room for me, because I hope to be restored to you in answer to your prayers" (Philemon 22). Paul hoped to carry out his responsibility and love to the fullest by making full restitution to Philemon according to Roman law in person. Paul was not testing Philemon beyond what he would also ask of himself.

Every Christian has an Onesimus mindset in his life. Sometimes Christians are their own Onesimus—running away from something will not bring freedom. Christians will find who they are only in the freedom that is in Christ. Perhaps the Onesimus is someone who needs to be forgiven. That someone may have been placed in your life so that you can be the extension of God that will lead him to salvation. Challenges in the Christian life may come in the form of showing love,

compassion, or forgiveness, they may come more than once, but every challenge can be accomplished with the attitude of God working to bring about good for “*. . . those who love him, who are called according to his purpose*” (Romans 8:28).

Conclusion

May this study of God’s Word bring spiritual growth to your life and glory to God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. I want to leave you with the words of the Apostle Paul in Acts 20:32, “*And now . . . I commend you to God, and to the Word of His grace, which is able to build you up, and to give you an inheritance among all them which are sanctified*” (KJV).

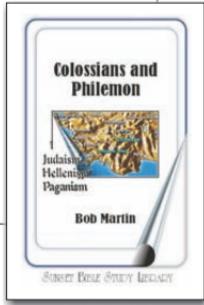


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