

COLOSSIANS

IS JESUS REALLY ENOUGH?

A 30-DAY DEVOTIONAL STUDY OF COLOSSIANS

INTRODUCING COLOSSIANS

Close on two millennia ago, an innocent prisoner penned a short letter from his Roman prison cell. It was written to a small group of people in the ancient city of Colossae.

Though the letter's subject matter is panoramically large, its key focal point is what truly takes one's breath away: *Jesus Christ... his magnificence and supremacy, his person and works – and the intoxicating privilege of having him as our Lord, Life and Love.*

We must be forever grateful that this letter survived. By God's orchestration, we have a chance to access *Paul's letter to the Colossians*.

In a world clouded with so many competing voices and distorted visions of reality, this epistle helps us to clearly see and deeply cherish Ultimate Reality. So colossal is the profundity, power and practical helpfulness of this letter's 1582 words, that it deserves a deep and slow perusal.

That is why, for 30 wonder-filled days, we will journey through it verse by verse, unpacking its meaning and profound significance for our lives and churches today.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK



1. Commit to a daily time and place

Set aside at least 10 minutes, but more if you can. Be alert, the devil doesn't want you to do this – make this commitment to yourself, in dependence on the Spirit's power.



2. Come with expectation and openness

Pray before reading: 'Open my eyes so I can see the wonderful things in your word' (Ps 119:18).



3. Take your time

Work through a 'day' over 2 or 3 days if it's too much to take in. But be sure to re-read the biblical text each time.



4. Read with a pen or pencil in hand

Highlight what impacts you most.



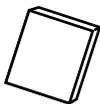
5. Pray in response to what you read

Pray through what you have highlighted as a means to drive truth deeper into your life. If it's a truth about God, praise him for it. If it's an insight into or an instruction about life, ask God to help you apply it.



6. Make it a community experience

Perhaps form a WhatsApp group with one or more people who are also journeying through this devotion. Share your highlight insight each day. Not only does this encourage everyone in the group, it is also a form of accountability to daily honour God's word.



7. Come back to this book in the future

But until then, pass it on to someone else.

THE LETTER'S STRUCTURE

Though this book doesn't follow this outline, it is helpful to break down the letter's thought structure which is as follow:

THE DIFFERENCE THE GOSPEL MAKES IN OUR LIVES (1:1-14)

- › Greeting: the new identity we receive (1:1-2)
- › Growing in faith, love and hope because of the gospel (1:3-8)
- › The Christian life described in a prayer (1:9-14)

THE MAGNIFICENT PERSON AND WORK OF CHRIST (1:15-23)

- › Christ, Lord of creation (1:15-17)
- › Christ, Lord of the church and new creation (1:18-20)
- › Christ's reconciliation of the Colossians to God (1:21-23)

HOW PAUL GIVES HIS LIFE FOR THE GOSPEL (1:24-2:7)

- › Paul's suffering and stewardship of the mystery (1:24-28)
- › Paul's ministry to the Colossians (1:29-2:7)

THE TEMPTING FALSE TEACHING AT COLOSSAE (2:8-23)

- › Warning about a deceptive teaching (2:8)
- › Help for the danger: resources in Christ (2:9-15)
- › Additional warnings about the teaching (2:16-23)

THE PROPER FOCUS: CHRIST AND OUR LIFE IN HIM (3:1-4)

DIRECTIVES FOR LIVING THE CHRISTIAN LIFE (3:5-4:6)

- › Dealing with the sins of the past (3:5-11)
- › Putting on the character of Christ (3:12-17)
- › Relating to family and in the workplace (3:18-4:1)
- › Persisting in prayer (4:2-4)
- › Relating to those outside the community (4:5-6)

FINAL REMARKS (4:7-18)

- › Remarks about the messengers carrying the letter (4:7-9)
- › Greetings from Paul's associates (4:10-14)
- › Greetings to the Christians in Laodicea (4:15-17)
- › Letter closing (4:18)



*The gospel which has come to you, in the whole world
is bearing fruit and growing – as it also does among
you, since the day you heard it and understood the
grace of God.*

COLOSSIANS 1:5-6



WEEK ONE

COLOSSIANS 1:1-14

1

FAITH, LOVE AND HOPE (1:1-5)



1 Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother, 2 To the saints and faithful brothers and sisters in Christ at Colossae: Grace to you and peace from God our Father. 3 We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, 4 since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love that you have for all the saints, 5 because of the hope laid up for you in heaven. Of this you have heard before in the word of the truth, the gospel...

The year is AD 62. Timothy helps Paul write a letter (v1) to the church in Colossae. *What is the backstory?* Many years earlier (sometime between AD 52 and 57), Paul had lived in the seaside city of Ephesus. For three years, as a result of his preaching ministry, a great revival spread across the region – ‘*all who lived in Asia heard the word of the Lord*’ (Acts 19:10). During this time, Paul multiplied his impact by sending out people to preach in the surrounding region – present day Turkey. One of the people he sent out was Epaphras who he, in later verses, describes as ‘*a beloved fellow servant*’ and ‘*a faithful minister of Christ*’ (v7). Having been converted under Paul’s preaching, Epaphras returned to his hometown some 160km to the East, the town of Colossae. There he shared the gospel and the Colossian church was born. Having never visited the church personally, Paul nonetheless carried this church in his heart – a church which indirectly and wonderfully resulted from his own ministry.

THE WORD ‘GOSPEL’ MEANS ‘GOOD NEWS’

When Paul says ‘*of this you have heard before in the gospel*’ (v5), he implies that the preceding verses describe aspects or benefits of the gospel. What is the gospel? *The gospel is the good news that God forgives us, accepts us, adopts us and makes us new – not because of what we do, but because of what Christ has done.* We’re saved not by our moral or religious performance, but by Christ’s faultless life, bloody death and bodily resurrection. These opening verses emphasize aspects of the gospel...

THE GOSPEL GIVES US A NEW IDENTITY (V2)

Upon receiving the gospel, we are newly identified as:

- *saints* – we are specially marked and set aside for God’s own possession and purpose.
- *brothers and sisters* – once strangers, we are adopted by a Heavenly Father and soon discover we are part of an eternal family.
- *in Christ* – we are joined into Christ, fused to him forever.

This gospel-given identity infuses our earthly identities with new meaning. Notice how God roots our new, eternal identity – saints, siblings and ‘in Christ’ – in our temporal identity. In their case they are ‘*in Christ at Colossae*’ (v2). We might be spiritually positioned in Christ, but we must not forget we are practically located in various life-roles: parent,

employee, citizen and neighbour. Each of these earthly identities now glows with the dignity of a higher gospel-bestowed identity, which redefines and guides our earthly ones.

THE GOSPEL PRODUCES FAITH IN US (V4)

The Colossian Christians were famous for the way the gospel had produced faith, hope and love in them. *Faith* is taking God at his Word, believing the claims of the gospel. Faith gets the whole Christian life started – *'we are saved by faith in grace'* (Eph 2:8). But saving faith then becomes practical faith. It keeps the Christian life moving forward. Whether we're facing opposition, delays or disappointments, we are to daily and practically apply our faith in Jesus to the situation. The gospel empowers us to trust that God will act toward us in a way that is true to who he is, and to what he has said. Faith then gives rise to something else...

THE GOSPEL PRODUCES LOVE IN US (V4)

Elsewhere Paul writes that *'all that counts is faith working through love'* (Gal 5:6). Faith gives rise to a security and confidence, which then overflows through us into the lives of others. We accept, forgive, serve, encourage, listen to, enjoy and bear with each other – despite all the weaknesses we are sure to find in each other. Faith and love are associated with yet another quality...

THE GOSPEL PRODUCES HOPE IN US (V5)

Hope does not refer to optimism, but future certainty. It is the expectant certainty that all history will be wrapped up by Christ as he ushers in a new heaven and earth, a glorious future that we have a share in. Life is tough. Life without Christ may have moments of optimism, but it is essentially a life *'without hope'* (Eph 2:12). The average person is optimistic that tomorrow will be better than today, and that next year better than this one. But as we pan out, we see that nothing on earth lasts, and all humans are under God's judgment because of sin. Our lives are headed toward the grave. There is no lasting hope in this world. It is all futile. But look at the hope the gospel brings... *'We have been born again into a living hope... to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled and unfading, kept in heaven for you... ready to be revealed in the last time. In this you rejoice.'* (1 Pet 1:3-5)

Notice the word 'because' in this first chapter of the book of Colossians... *'because of the hope laid up for you in heaven'* (v5). Verse 4 speaks of faith and love, and verse 5 tells us what gives rise to our faith and love - hope. Paul's point is that the certainty of our magnificent future with Christ only deepens our faith in Jesus, and our love for the people with whom we will spend all eternity. Of the three – faith, hope and love – which is the most important? In 1 Corinthians 13:13 we're told the answer. It is love. Why is that? This is because faith and hope are only possible this side of eternity, whereas love continues into all eternity. In heaven, faith becomes sight and hope becomes fulfillment, but love lasts forever. We will live forever in a kingdom of love. This is our certain hope.

It is a hope that feeds our faith and love. Already now we have faith in the king of love, and already now our confidence is that since love outlasts hate and apathy, it should be the defining trait of our lives and churches.

2

THE GOSPEL BEARS FRUIT (1:5-9)



5 ... you heard, the word of the truth, the gospel 6 which has come to you, as indeed in the whole world it is bearing fruit and growing - as it also does among you, since the day you heard it and understood the grace of God in truth, 7 just as you learned it from Epaphras our beloved fellow servant. He is a faithful minister of Christ on your behalf 8 and has made known to us your love in the Spirit. 9 And so, from the day we heard, we have not ceased to pray for you.

THE GOSPEL IS A MESSAGE WHICH NEEDS TO BE HEARD AND UNDERSTOOD

Paul calls the gospel *'the word of the truth'* (v5). *'Word'* means that it is a message with definite content. This content is nothing but *'the truth'* – the truth that God has given to humankind. It includes the truth of who God is, who we are, why God made the world, what's wrong with us and the world, where all history is going, and how God has redeemed us and the world through Jesus. The gospel answers all the biggest questions of life.

THE GOSPEL PRIMARILY COMMUNICATES 'THE GRACE OF GOD' (V6)

God demonstrates grace and love in at least 3 ways through the gospel.
God loves us despite our:

- *spiritual inability* – he does for us what we cannot do for ourselves, granting us the gifts of new life and faith.
- *undeserving past* – he does for us what we don't deserve.
- *what it cost him* – the Son of God left heaven for earth, and traded death for life to rescue those of us who could not lift a finger to save ourselves.

THE GOSPEL IS LIKE A SEED THAT STARTS US OFF IN THE CHRISTIAN LIFE

It is like a seed that is planted in our lives at the day of salvation, *'the day you heard it'* (v6).

THE GOSPEL CAUSES CONTINUOUS GROWTH IN US PERSONALLY

The gospel may start like a seed in our lives, but it soon becomes a plant that *'bears fruit and grows'* (v6) in the lives of believers. Paul speaks not just of its past, but its present effect in our lives – *'the gospel is bearing fruit ... since the day you heard it'* (v6). The gospel is not just the entry point of the Christian life; it is also the catalyst for continuing growth. The more we are exposed to the gospel, the more we understand and perceive it. The more deeply we believe it, the more it changes our lives for good. The gospel is not just the message that saves us; it's the message that continues to change us. It's not just the ABCs but the A-Z of the Christian life. It is not just the diving board into the Christian

faith, but the swimming pool of the Christian faith. It is a power. Once we have believed it, we need to, with the help of the Scriptures, ever more deeply study it and, with the help of the Spirit, ever more deeply believe and perceive it.

THE GOSPEL EMPOWERS THE FRUIT OF LOVE IN US

Paul had heard of the Colossian church's '*love in the Spirit*' (v8). A primary fruit of the gospel is that, as we continue to believe it, the Spirit produces greater levels of love in us and in our community. The gospel speaks of God's unconditional and sacrificial love for us, which – as we steep ourselves in it – tends to overflow into our relationships with others. Loved people tend to love people.

One of the ways the gospel empowers love in us is that *we start to pray for each other*. Paul, himself powered by the Spirit, reaches out to this community.

He does so in two ways:

- 1) He writes this letter to them, which we're reading
- 2) He prays for them

Paul claims that he has '*not ceased to pray*' (v9) for them. We will explore what he prays in the coming verses, but for now let's note that one way to really love each other is to pray for each other. Loving others makes you pray for them more. Praying for others makes you love them more. As Charles Spurgeon, a 19th century preacher, once said, 'No person can do me a greater kindness than pray for me'.

THE GOSPEL IS A POWER, CAUSING CONTINUOUS GROWTH OF THE CHURCH GEOGRAPHICALLY AND NUMERICALLY

It reaches '*the whole world*' (v6). It is like a plant that reproduces itself, and becomes millions of plants, to millions of people, in thousands of cultures and places across the world. If Paul delighted in the spread of the gospel, how much more should we nowadays – especially as we look to the non-Western world. By 2020, Christianity will have grown from 11.4 million Christians in East Asia (China, Korea, Japan) in 1970 and 1.2 percent of the population, to 171.1 million and 10.5 percent of the population. In 1910 only 12 million people, or 9 percent of Africa's population, were Christians, but they will number 630 million, or 49.3 percent of the populace, by 2020. The gospel's power is undeniable!

THE GOSPEL IS MULTIPLIED THROUGH MORE MESSENGERS (V7)

Paul preached the gospel, and equipped Epaphras to do the same. Each new messenger of the gospel means the gospel can have multiplied effect. Still today, God seeks to raise up and send into the world gospel messengers. These messengers can be likened to seed-sowing farmers who, having been transformed by the gospel themselves, then plant this message in the minds and the hearts of many, who in turn, can do the same for others. That God could use Epaphras, a far less experienced messenger than Paul, reminds us that *the power is not in the sower, but in the seed*. What a privilege it is to carry and sow this gospel-seed.

3

REVELATION & FRUITFUL OBEDIENCE (1:9-10)



9 And so, from the day we heard, we have not ceased to pray for you, asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, 10 so as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, bearing fruit in every good work...

PRAY FOR YOURSELF AND OTHERS

Paul is an inspiring model of prayer. We have a sample in verses 9-12 of the kinds of things we should pray for – both for ourselves and others. We will unpack his prayer over the next two days.

PRAY FOR SPIRITUAL GROWTH

Analyzing Paul's written prayers, such as this one, reveals that *he prayed almost exclusively for God's work in people's lives, as opposed to (as we often do) God's work in their circumstances*. He prays for the full utilization of the gospel resources, for the sake of personal spiritual maturity. A study of his prayer yields insight into *6 ways that God wants us to grow...*

1. GROW IN REVELATION

God desires that we 'be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding' (v9). We can know what God's will is. In fact we can be filled with this knowledge. This comes as we humbly and constantly immerse ourselves in the Scriptures. The word 'spiritual' here means 'empowered and inspired by the Spirit'. Therefore, this knowledge also comes as we allow the Spirit to illuminate the teachings of the Bible more deeply into our minds and hearts. That's more than intellectual knowledge, that's personal revelation. The great preacher, Charles Spurgeon, preached on this verse in 1883 like this...

'The Truths of God revealed in the Word of God are no longer secrets, seeing that they are revealed to us by the Spirit of God - and as far as they are revealed, it should be our desire to understand them - so as to be filled with the knowledge of them.

Let us try to know these truths more intimately. You may have knowledge in the brain, but it may not run into your spirit, so as to penetrate, permeate and saturate your spirit, until you are filled with it. Oh, to get the Gospel into one's entire nature and to be like the water pots of Cana, filled up to the brim! Never be impressed by the sophisticated agnostic whose glory it is that all his learning has revealed that he knows nothing. Rather concentrate your faculties upon the Word and will of God. Dive into the depths and climb

up to the heights and be afraid of nothing! Ask the Holy Spirit to saturate you with his Truth, as Gideon's fleece was wet with the dew of Heaven or as the Jordan overflows all its banks.'

2. GROW IN FRUITFUL OBEDIENCE

It is God's desire that we are not only filled with the knowledge of God's will, but that we implement it in every aspect of our lives. We are to *'walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, bearing fruit in every good work' (v10)*.

- › *Wisdom and knowledge are interdependent.* The only knowledge that truly counts is the knowledge that makes a difference to how we live. It's not just what we know, but how we apply that knowledge that truly counts. Wisdom, building *upon* knowledge, is the skillful application of knowledge to daily life. God wants us to grow in **both** knowledge and wisdom (v9). We *should not* have knowledge without wisdom. We cannot have wisdom without knowledge. We shouldn't have a root without fruit, and we can't have fruit without a root. Knowledge is the root, but wisdom – *'walking in a manner worthy of the Lord' – is the fruit.*
- › *Applying God's will requires effort.* The gospel grows and bears fruit in our lives (v6). Now in verse 10 we see that it requires our active co-operation to *'bear fruit in every good work.'* We are to be *'walking'* – moment-by-moment, step-by-step, situation-by-situation, day-by-day living life as God intends us to. The fact that it is *'good work'* means that living wisely involves exertion of our energy, will, emotion, time and action.
- › *Applying God's will benefits and blesses others.* When a plant bears fruit it does so for the benefit of others. In the same way it is not just God's plan that we live *godly* lives, but that we live *fruitful* lives – lives that make a deep impression upon others. This includes serving those who suffer, reaching those who don't know Christ, integrating our faith into the field of work we find ourselves in, and more.
- › *Applying God's will brings God pleasure.* God delights in our attempts to trust, obey and reflect him. Much like a parent delights to see their children living right, so God delights as we live for his glory. And notice that there are degrees of pleasure we can bring him. We see that we are to *fully* please him. On the one extreme we can sadden him, and on the other extreme we can thrill him. Let's find out what thrills him and dedicate our lives to doing that more and more.

4

A SHARE IN THE INHERITANCE (1:9-12)



9 ... we have not ceased... asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will... 10 so as to walk in a manner... fully pleasing to the Lord, bearing fruit in every good work increasing in the knowledge of God. 11 May you be strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might, for all endurance and patience with joy, 12 giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in light.

Over and above revelation and obedience (see Day 3), *there are 4 other areas to grow in...*

3. GROW IN INTIMACY WITH GOD

There is a progression in Paul's prayer: first, we are filled with the knowledge of God and his will (v9). Then we steadily apply God's will to our lives (v10). What's next? We increase *'in the knowledge of God' (v11)*. We get to know God *even more intimately and deeply*.

Paul's flow of thought is difficult to picture. First we are to be filled with the revelation-knowledge of God and his will, says Paul. Now he says, God wants that knowledge to increase. But if we're already filled, where's the space for increase? For example, if a 5-litre bucket is full, there is no more capacity to hold more. What could Paul be implying? *Simply this: God can cause our capacity for knowing him to grow*. He upgrades us to become a 7-litre bucket!

How does our capacity for God grow? It grows as we are filled with the knowledge of God's will and as we steadily apply that knowledge to our lives. As important as these actions are, we don't get to know God by just sitting in a study, reading books and the Bible, and praying. *We get to know God on the journey of translating what God shows us into fruitful obedience to him*. As we are faithful to put into practice what God shows us of himself, he entrusts us with yet a closer relationship to himself.

4. GROW IN SPIRIT-RELIANCE

Next Paul prays that we *'be strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might' (v11)*. Knowing and applying God's will requires dedication and effort on our part, yet God is ready to strengthen us with his Holy Spirit. Sometimes we may feel like a paddle-boat trying to fight the currents of resistance – whether within ourselves, or from situations or people around us. In reality we are sailboats. The Spirit is the wind 'pushing' us all day, every day in the very direction God wants us to go. Our part is to prayerfully lift up, and keep up, our sails, daily depending on the Spirit's tireless, empowering presence and guidance.

5. GROW IN JOYFUL ENDURANCE

Paul prays that we may *'be strengthened... for all endurance and patience with joy' (v11)*. On the path of knowing God, doing his will, and bearing fruit for him there will be many difficult times. People will oppose us. Situations may discourage us. Sickness or emotional pain will slow us down. Delays may disappoint us. Some prayers will seem to go unanswered. Even with the breath of the Spirit in our sails, we may feel that this life of worship, obedience and service is too hard. We desperately need *God's grace to endure*. It is one thing seeking God and applying his will to our lives for a full day or week. But given enough time, the temptation to quit will inevitably come our way at many points. We must not quit. Rather, we should endure *'with joy'*. Some translations take the word *'joy'* and include it at the beginning of verse 12 to describe the nature of the thanks being given. The ESV however puts it at the end of verse 11, thereby giving us insight into the kind of endurance God is developing in us – a joyful one. Some stoic personality types may be able to white-knuckle their way through life, but the Spirit takes us further. He empowers *joyful* endurance, the kind of joy that comes when our treasure is not found in changing circumstances but in our unchanging Christ.

6. GROW IN GRATITUDE

Paul prays that we will give *'thanks to the Father, who has qualified (us) to share in the inheritance of the saints in light' (v12)*. Paul has already modeled gratitude for us: *'We always thank God... when we pray for you' (v3)*. James 1:17 reminds us that *'every good and perfect gift comes down to us from the Father'*.

We should especially be grateful for a *share in his 'inheritance' for the saints*, his people. Paul takes an Old Testament concept of inheritance and applies it spiritually to the church. In 1300 BC, the Israelites entered and *inherited* the Promised Land. Each family was allocated a portion or share of land. This gift of a partial allocation of the Promised Land was God's way of saying, 'You too belong to the people of God.' Now, in the New Covenant, it is not just Israelites, but everyone who trusts in Christ, who is allocated a *share amongst God's people*. There is a difference however: our inheritance is no longer physical land – it is light. This refers to every good and perfect thing that God brings into our lives now and forever. Thank God for these shafts of light. Count your blessings, naming them one by one – focusing not just on favourable circumstances, but – more importantly – on the gospel and all its blessing to us.

5

A TRANSFER OF CITIZENSHIP (1:13-14)



13 He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, 14 in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

Now we come to a new section in Paul's letter. What we have read (1:1-12) is a mere preamble to what Paul is about to say in verses 13-23.

Paul is about to make two main points:

- 1) God has worked through Christ to secure redemption and reconciliation for all who trust in him (v13-14 and v20-23).
- 2) Jesus Christ is not just Redeemer; indeed he is the Supreme Divine Creator over all creation, Lord over all human affairs and cosmic powers (v15-19).

Why does Paul make these points about Jesus in this letter? As we read ahead in Colossians 2, we find that there were some people in Colossae who were saying that Jesus was not enough to be our all-sufficient Saviour. His work in saving us and keeping us (they said) needed the supplementary work of angels, visionary experiences and rituals that had nothing to do with Jesus. But Jesus is indeed enough. Nothing extra is needed. Jesus is not only Redeemer and Reconciler, he is Creator and Lord of everything. In today's verses (v13-14), we start with 4 things we learn about Jesus' gift of redemption...

1. WE ONCE LIVED IN THE DOMAIN OF DARKNESS

Outside of Christ, *we're in a 'domain of darkness' (v13)*. We might not realize it, but outside of Jesus, we're blind to the glories of the gospel and Christ. We might be highly educated, yet still be hopelessly out of touch with ultimate reality. Ephesians 2:1-3 unpacks some sobering dimensions of the dark domain we live in: 1) Without Jesus, death is our destiny. In fact we're already dead in our sins. 2) We're ruled by the prince of the power of the air, Satan himself, who holds us captive in darkness and sin. 3) Even at our best, we're still ruled by the desires of the sinful nature. 4) Worst of all, we're under God's judgment. In this domain of darkness, though there may be exciting times in our lives, yet – from God's perspective – there is a tragic gloominess hanging over our lives. That's really bad news. Now for the good news...

2. WE NOW LIVE IN THE KINGDOM OF CHRIST

This is a kingdom (v13) of light (v12). In the gospel, we come into contact with Jesus, who is ultimate reality. Life in the new heavens and earth is now our destiny. We're dead to 'death', since we're promised immortal resurrection bodies modeled after Christ's own resurrection body. We're alive to Christ. We've been given authority over Satan, and have all we need to stay free from his traps.

God has opened our eyes and turned us 'from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God' (Acts 26:18).

Instead of being governed by the sinful nature, there is the invitation to live in the Spirit, who indwells us and prompts us with his leadings. Best of all, we're under the gracious rule of our King. He is not a cruel, corrupt and oppressive king. Rather he reigns over us in grace, wisdom, power, tenderness and righteousness. Even when circumstances seem dark, yet a wonderful light hangs over our lives. There is the glorious possibility of living the life we're meant to. Additionally, this kingdom is the kingdom of 'the beloved Son'. God loves and delights in his Son. We too love and delight in his Son (John 17:26). Mind-blowingly, God loves and delights in us as *much* as he loves and delights in his very own Son (John 17:23)!

3. THERE HAS BEEN AN INSTANT TRANSFER OF CITIZENSHIP

The moment we trust in Jesus, we lose our citizenship in the kingdom of darkness. We are now legal citizens in the kingdom of light. Our new identity documents are written in Christ's own blood. It has been done. It is not a ten-stage process. It's a one-stage redefinition of our entire lives in the sight of God.

4. THE TRANSFER OF CITIZENSHIP IS NOTHING LESS THAN GOD'S LIBERATING INTERVENTION

Paul seems to have in mind the Israelites who were enslaved in Egypt, a literal domain of darkness. They were then delivered and redeemed by God – both by the bloody sacrifice of a lamb, and by his power, which replanted them in new land. That ancient liberation of the Israelites points to what Jesus has done. We've been *delivered*. In Christ, *we have redemption, the forgiveness of sin*. But we have been released from slavery at a cost. The cost of our release is Christ's blood. No longer slaves to sin, Satan or death, we've been delivered and redeemed! Our sins have been forgiven – past, present and future.

The analogy of citizenship is really helpful. Imagine for example that we exchange citizenship from one country (say Brazil) to another (say Canada). Though we're now citizens in Canada, it will take some time to adjust to the new culture and values. We have to unlearn the ways of our previous country. We have to learn the new customs and language. It will take time. There will be some times when we fail miserably and temporarily lapse back into our old ways. But at that point, we don't lose our citizenship. Our identity as a citizen of the new country is secure. It is not based on our ability to act like citizens should act. It is the same with our salvation: the moment we trust in Jesus, we're transferred into his kingdom. We have to unlearn our old ways, and learn how to live in the new kingdom. It will take time to change our ways, but at no point will our citizenship be taken back. The transfer is a sheer act of grace. And it is for all eternity.



The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities - all things were created through him and for him.

COLOSSIANS 1:15-16



WEEK TWO

COLOSSIANS 1:15-29

6

THE LORD OF CREATION (1:15-16)



15 *(The Son) is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. 16 For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities - all things were created through him and for him.*

This is the first stanza in a song or poem about Jesus. Here we have the beginning of the most famous poem (or possibly 'hymn') ever written about Jesus. Scholars are divided as to whether Paul wrote it or perhaps it was a song that was doing the rounds in some of the early churches. It has a carefully thought-out structure, consisting of two stanzas, with parallel structures. They are stanza 1 (verses 15-16) and stanza 2 (verses 18-20) with a bridge statement in verse 17, which summarizes the essential meaning of both stanzas. Let's unpack what we learn about Jesus in the first stanza...

THE SON IS 'THE IMAGE OF THE INVISIBLE GOD' (V15)

The opening line of this poem affirms that about 60 years before Paul wrote this letter, God became one of us in the birth of Jesus. He is the 'image' of the invisible God. The Greek word is 'eikon' from which we get the English word 'icon'. Christ is the 'exact representation of God' (*Heb 1:3*). Do you want to know what God is like? Simply look at Jesus' life upon the earth. Jesus said, 'Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father' (*John 14:9*). The apostle John writes, 'No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known' (*John 1:18*). The Gospels which record Jesus' life, deeds and words offer us a window into the heart and being of God – his humility, courage, integrity, tenderness, mercy, power, grace, sacrificial love, consistency and ability to grieve, all held in striking juxtaposition.

THE SON IS 'THE FIRSTBORN OF ALL CREATION' (V15)

Jehovah's Witnesses wrongly take this verse to mean, 'The Son is the first one to be created'. But it does not say, 'The Son is the firstborn of all the rest of creation'. It says 'all creation'. Jesus is in a different category to all creation. He is 'uncreated'. *What does 'firstborn' mean?* It simply means 'Master' or 'Owner'. In the ancient world, the oldest son was called 'firstborn' to refer to his authority, under the father, over the rest of the family. If the father died, he had sole authority over the rest of the family. Jesus is in charge of all creation, including us. Additionally, the use of 'firstborn' in Scripture carries with it the idea of kingship. Most likely, Paul had in mind the rights and privileges of the firstborn son of a monarch who would inherit ruling sovereignty. This is how the expression is used of King David (and therefore of the Messiah who came in the line of David): 'I will make him the firstborn, the highest of all the kings of the earth' (*Psalms 89:27*).

'ALL THINGS WERE CREATED THROUGH HIM AND FOR HIM.'

The Son is the agent of creation. Nothing was made except in partnership with him. Also, everything was created 'for him'. *Not only is Jesus the source of creation. He is the goal of creation.* All things exist 'for him'. They belong to him. They are his. They find their meaning and continuing existence in him. Spurgeon, commenting on this verse, preached:

'That lovely river, those fertile valleys, that dense forest, yonder snow-clad Alps and everything else that Christ has created, you need not say, as some have done, 'I will not gaze upon the beauties of Nature, lest they should take my thoughts away from my Master.' Scorn not his works, lest you should also scorn the great Maker of them! His are the mountains. And the valleys are his - sun, moon and stars all shine to his praise and glory!'

THROUGH THE SON 'ALL THINGS WERE CREATED, IN HEAVEN AND ON EARTH, VISIBLE AND INVISIBLE, WHETHER THRONES OR DOMINIONS OR RULERS OR AUTHORITIES'

Christ created, owns and controls:

- *All places* – 'heaven and earth' covers all spatial reality.
- *All realms* – both the 'visible and invisible' ones.
- *All ranks of angels* – all 'thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities'.

Why this emphasis on angels? The Colossians believed that you needed certain angels protecting and providing for you. So Paul, in showing Christ's pre-eminence over angels, is saying that if you have Christ on your side, you don't need any supplementary help from any created angel. Also, later in the letter Paul will show the Christian's authority over Satan, a fallen angel.

What's the main point made in this first stanza? The Son is divine. He is the creator, owner and controller of the totality of creation. He is both the agent and the goal of all creation. He is therefore the supreme, unrivalled Lord of all creation. Because he is supreme, he is also sufficient to save and keep us.

7

THE LORD OF THE CHURCH (1:17-20)



17 And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together. 18 And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent. 19 For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, 20 and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.

Today we unpack the second stanza in the poem about Jesus. Stanza one (v15-16) is separated from stanza two (v18-20) by a bridge statement (v17) that we will return to in the next day. Let us unpack stanza two...

THE SON IS 'THE HEAD OF THE BODY, THE CHURCH'

'The church' here refers to the universal church – all the people who have ever and will ever call on the name of Jesus for salvation. The church is likened to a body with Jesus as its head. Think of what a head does for a body: it has vision to see where the body should go; it is the command centre, providing direction to every aspect of the body. Can you see the progression in this poem? The same Jesus who created the entire cosmos and rules over it with unrivalled authority and power (v15-16) also leads and sustains his church. Not only does he make and guide galaxies; he makes and guides churches.

THE SON IS 'THE BEGINNING'

Every river needs a source, or a beginning. No source, no river. In the same way, if it were not for Jesus, the historical church would have not come into being. Jesus once said, *'I will build my church' (Matt 16:18)*. As this river of the church flows on through the centuries, countless tributaries (more and more lives) are added to the forward movement of the church under Christ's continuing direction.

THE SON IS 'THE FIRSTBORN FROM THE DEAD'

The word *'firstborn'* (Greek: *protokos*) means 'lord' or 'master' (see the commentary on 1:15). Jesus came 'from' the dead. This refers to his resurrection. If we doubt that Jesus was truly king and lord of all things, we need to remember his permanent triumph over death in his resurrection. *'He was appointed the Son of God in power by his resurrection from the dead: Jesus Christ our Lord' (Rom 1:4)*. More than that, all those who trust in him are assured that one day God *'will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious (resurrected) body' (Phil 3:21)*.

IN THE SON 'ALL THE FULLNESS OF GOD WAS PLEASED TO DWELL'

Jesus is not a demi-god. The ancient Greek philosophers commonly taught that God had shared various aspects of his divinity with different angels. No single angel had all of God. People would call on a *collection* of angels in the hope that they could get all or most of God on their side. Paul corrects this. Jesus is fully God in the same way that the Father is fully God. All the fullness of God eternally dwells in him. To have Jesus is to have all of God. He is everything we could possibly esteem and need in one deity. This embodiment of God in Jesus Christ brings God great pleasure.

THROUGH THE SON, GOD HAS RECONCILED 'ALL THINGS TO HIMSELF'

Verse 20 is loaded with 3 layers of insight...

- *All things – not just humanity but the whole of creation – needs reconciliation with God.* How can this be? We know that many angels, through the sin of Satan, fell away from God. And we know that humanity, through sin, fell away from God. But the Scriptures also teach that this led to the partial disintegration of all of creation. This does not mean that there is no goodness left in creation. It means that creation has been corrupted and damaged. Creation, we're told, is currently *'subject to frustration'*; *'in bondage to decay'*, and *'in the pains of childbirth awaiting its liberation'* (Rom 8:18-23). When our relationship with God was damaged, all other relationships – with our inner selves, with each other, and with our environment was also damaged. As a result, war, racism, sickness, disease, ecological disaster, emotional breakdown, jealousy, murder and envy are rife in the world.
- *When Jesus died on the cross, he was restoring to himself not just humans, but the whole of creation.* This reconciliation comes *'by the blood of his cross'* (v20). Jesus died not just to reconcile our relationship to God, but to also reconcile all affected relationships – with our inner selves, with each other, with our environment. Said another way, Jesus' blood purchased the future glorification of the entire creation. Death, disease, suffering, poverty and injustice will be replaced with a new harmonious and uncorrupted creation.
- *The new creation has already begun; the church is the sample and agent of this new creation.* Notice the progression of 1:15-20. Jesus is lord of all creation. But creation has fallen in sin. Now, in verse 20, we see that Jesus is lord of the new creation. Christ will one day regenerate the cosmos, but already now he has planted this new creation in seed form into this world. What is the 'seed' of the new creation? It is his church. *We're a community of the future.* We already enjoy now what the rest of creation will enjoy later: reconciliation to God. And we are to be agents and ambassadors of this new creation: inviting others through outreach to *'receive this reconciliation'* (Rom 5:11) and, as the Spirit guides and empowers, to bring about 'samples' of the future world into this one – praying for God's kingdom to come wherever it is needed, fighting injustice, modeling racial integration, confronting ecological abuse, serving the poor, restoring broken relationships, living creative hope-filled lives, and modeling authentic oneness and community.

8

JESUS IS SUPREME (1:17-18)



17 And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together. 18 And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent.

Finally, we explore the most important part of Paul's poem about Jesus' lordship over creation, the church and new creation (1:15-20). Stanza one (v15-16) is separated from stanza two (v18-20) by a bridge statement (v17), which – structurally and logically – reveals two primary implications of the poem. Additionally, we unpack a clause in verse 18, which gives yet another implication for us...

JESUS IS 'BEFORE ALL THINGS' (V17)

The word 'before' has two meanings. First, it means 'chronologically before'. Jesus, as creator, existed before all creation did. Second, it means 'ahead of' – a reference to his supremacy. Jesus is pre-eminent over all creation. As such, he not only created but owns, cares for and controls everything. He is supreme over every aspect of his universe. He is Lord of the macro-universe and every galaxy within – including the Whirlpool, Sombrero and Starburst galaxies. He is Lord of the micro-universe within every atom – including every quark, gluon and neutrino. He is Lord of everything between – including every planet, plant and person.

JESUS 'HOLDS ALL THINGS TOGETHER' (V17)

We as humans - along with all of creation - find our meaning and continuing existence in him. As the two authors of *Jesus Manifesto* put it, 'Jesus Christ is the gravitational pull that brings everything together and gives them significance, reality, and meaning. Without him, all things lose their value. Without him, all things are but detached pieces floating around in space.'

The authors then urge us to keep Christ central in our understanding of all things:

'It is possible to emphasize a spiritual truth, value, virtue, or gift, yet miss Christ who is the embodiment and incarnation of all spiritual truth, values, virtues, and gifts. Seek a truth, a value, a virtue, or a spiritual gift, and you have obtained something dead. Seek Christ, embrace Christ, know Christ, and you have touched him who is Life. And in him resides all Truth, Values, Virtues and Gifts in living colour.'

JESUS IS TO BE PREEMINENT IN EVERYTHING

The final implication of Colossians 1:15-30 is: '*that in everything he might become preeminent*' (v18b). The rest of the poem affirms that Jesus is already preeminent. He is God. He is the Creator. He is Lord of creation, the church and the new creation. Yet this

line suggests that he still needs to *become* preeminent. This is clearly a reference to the fact that so many people have failed to recognize who Jesus is, and – even more tragic – so many Christians fail to really recognize just how supreme, and therefore sufficient, Christ is. This line occurs in the second stanza because it is in and through the church and the emergence of the new creation that Christ's supremacy will become clear to everyone.

The authors of the book *Jesus Manifesto* masterfully goad us back to the centrality and supremacy of Christ:

'What is Christianity? It is Christ. Nothing more. Nothing less. Christianity is not an ideology. Nor a philosophy. Christianity is the good news that Beauty, Truth and Goodness are found in a person. Biblical community is founded and found on the connection to that person. Conversion is more than a change in direction; it's a change in connection.'

The major temptation of the church today is JDD: Jesus Deficit Disorder. In parts of the church, the person of Jesus is increasingly politically incorrect, and is being replaced by the language of 'justice,' 'the kingdom of God,' 'values,' and 'leadership principles.' Yet, the centre and circumference of the Christian life is none other than the person of Christ.

All other things, including things related to him and about him, are eclipsed by the sight of his peerless worth. Knowing Christ is Eternal Life. And knowing him profoundly, deeply, and in reality, as well as experiencing his unsearchable riches, is the chief pursuit of our lives, as it was for the first Christians.

It's possible to confuse 'the cause' of Christ with the person of Christ. When the early church said, 'Jesus is Lord,' they did not mean 'Jesus is my core value.' Jesus isn't a cause; he is a real and living person who can be known, loved, experienced, enthroned and embodied. Focusing on his cause or mission doesn't equate to focusing on or following him. It's all too possible to serve 'the god' of serving Jesus as opposed to serving him.

May God have a people on this earth who are a people of Christ, through Christ, and for Christ. A people who are consumed with God's eternal passion, which is to make his Son preeminent, supreme, and the head over all things visible and invisible. A people who have discovered the touch of the Almighty in the face of his glorious Son, serving him out of an enraptured heart that's been captivated by his irresistible beauty and unfathomable love.'

JESUS IS SUFFICIENT BECAUSE HE IS SUPREME

Why does Paul stress these truths in this letter? The Colossian church was being tempted to trust in Jesus plus other things – praying to angels, rituals, submission to religious officials, legalism, spiritual experiences and more. So Paul counters this temptation by highlighting that Jesus' supremacy guarantees his sufficiency to save us, secure, satisfy and sustain us.



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

Having spoken of the redeeming work of the Son (v13-14), the lordship of the Son over creation (v15-17), and the lordship of the Son over the church (v18-20), Paul now speaks of the difference Jesus has made and is making in the lives of individuals.

WE NEED TO BE RECONCILED

In verse 21 he reminds us what we need salvation from: *Outside of Christ, we are 'alienated' from God.* Our sinfulness cuts us off from relationship with God, the One who had made us and for whom we had been made. This is why we feel 'something is missing' in our lives. There is – a relationship with our Creator. To fill that void we turn to god-substitutes – money, success, accomplishment, power or pleasure.

Outside of Christ, we are 'hostile in our minds' toward God. The idea of the God of the Bible does not come naturally to us. We're surprised to hear for example that God is Triune. Or that he is a Holy Judge who cares deeply about what we believe and value, and how we live and relate. Or that he is both transcendent and immanent at the same time. Or that he is a God who accepts us not because of our righteousness, but despite our unrighteousness. Or that we're saved by Christ's record and death not by our record. Though various cultures may more easily take to certain aspects of the gospel, all cultures tend to clash with some aspects of the gospel.

We are saved from evil deeds. Outside of Christ, we do 'evil deeds'. Our alienation from God, and the emptiness this leaves, as well as our wrong ideas about reality and God lead us to live in ways that don't reflect God's character. We fall short of the consistency, love, integrity, courage, compassion and forgiveness that are meant to mark our lives as image-bearers.

THE CROSS OF CHRIST HAS RECONCILED US TO GOD

'He has now reconciled [you] in his body of flesh by his death' (v22). There was a real death on a real cross – a bloody death that achieved our reconciliation with God. We're no longer alienated from God. We're now united with him in relationship. We have access to the very heart of God, whom we can now call Father. We now can see, by grasping the revelation of God in the cross, that God is at one and the same time a God of justice (who cannot leave sins unpunished) and a God of love (who sacrificially puts our sins on Jesus on the cross and punishes them there). Grasping the cross breaks our hostility to the

idea of God as Holy Judge. All our evil deeds are forgiven. God no longer counts our sins against us. We're accepted not on the basis of what we do, but on the basis of what Jesus has done on the cross. What's more, God's gift of reconciliation is eternal. We will never be banished from his side. We're united to him forever.

CHRIST SEEKS OUR PROGRESSIVE HOLINESS

The phrase *'in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him'* (v22) is misinterpreted by many to mean, 'Now that you are reconciled to God, you are also made totally holy and blameless and above reproach in God's sight.' It's not a tragic misinterpretation, since there is some theological truth in the conclusion reached by that line of interpretation, a truth called *'the doctrine of positional holiness'* – a doctrine affirmed every time Paul calls people 'saints' ('holy ones'), a doctrine which teaches that the moment we trust in Christ, we share in Christ's righteousness and holiness in God's sight (2 Cor 5:21).

- › *However, positional holiness is not what Paul is speaking about here. He has moved from the past tense ('he has reconciled you') to future tense ('in order to present you ... above reproach before him'). Bible scholar Michael Eaton clarifies that Paul is in effect saying: 'Now that you're reconciled to Christ, he wants to, as a matter of priority, make you more and more holy and blameless so that on Judgment Day, Christ will be able to show the Father how significantly he has transformed your whole life in motive, word and deed.' In other words, Paul is not speaking here about our positional holiness, but – to use another theological term - our progressive holiness.*
- › *Why is it so important to not confuse the two, to not assume that Paul is speaking about our positional holiness when in fact he's speaking about our progressive holiness? It's because of the word and phrase that follows: 'if indeed you continue in the faith' (v23). Notice the word 'if'. If we assume Paul is speaking about positional holiness then the word 'if' suggests either that 1) we can lose our positional holiness if our faith fails, or 2) it shows that we never had positional holiness to start with. But nowhere in this letter does Paul try to cast doubt on the security of their salvation. Quite the opposite. In fact he rejoices in the certainty of their salvation (1:13-14) because of the supremacy of Christ (1:15-20).*
- › *So what is Paul saying? In effect: 'Now that you're reconciled to God, God desires you become more and more holy, a process that requires that you 'continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel that you heard' (v23). Day by day, we are to keep on trusting in Jesus and the gospel, refusing to place our faith and hope in anything else. Jesus has saved us from the penalty of our sin, now he wishes to save us progressively from the power of sin.*



24 Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church, 25 of which I became a minister according to the stewardship from God that was given to me for you, to make the word of God fully known, 26 the mystery hidden for ages and generations but now revealed to his saints.

27 To them God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory. 28 Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ. 29 For this I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me.

Paul models what it means to do the work of God. He is made a 'minister' and a steward (or 'distributor') of the gifts God has given the world and the church in Jesus (v25). There are 4 basics when it comes to doing God's work...

1. GOD'S WORK INVOLVES STRUGGLE

Paul writes this letter from prison. Doing God's work has cost him. He has been beaten, attacked, falsely accused, persecuted and intimidated. He has faced setbacks, discouragements and opposition from within the church and from outside of it. Now imagine what the Colossians must think: how is it that this so-called servant of God is suffering so? Paul explains that suffering and struggle is part and parcel of doing God's work...

'Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body' (v25). Paul imagines that there is a jar of suffering allocated by God for him to go through, a quota that is not yet filled up. *'Christ's afflictions'* is short for 'the body of Christ's afflictions' – the suffering of the people of Christ, a suffering that Jesus closely identifies with (see Acts 9:5). Struggle and suffering is part of God's plan as we move the gospel forward and establish the church. It involves a cost of physical, mental and emotional energy. When we respond well to the hardships incurred by doing Jesus' bidding, our joyful endurance only serves to magnify the worth of Jesus in the sight of those we minister to. That said, *we must not confuse our suffering with Christ's suffering.* Moments before Jesus died on the cross, he cried, 'It is finished'. His sufferings accomplished salvation – a task that is wonderfully complete. On the other hand, our sufferings help *distribute* salvation – a task that is far from complete.

2. GOD'S WORK INVOLVES INTRODUCING PEOPLE TO JESUS

'(Christ) we proclaim... (to) everyone' (v28). Paul's life had a single consuming focus: proclaim Christ to everyone! Elsewhere he said, *'I am not ashamed of the gospel, because*

it is the power of God to all who believe' (Rom 1:16). How desperately the world needs to hear about Jesus, who he is and what he has done for us on the cross.

Paul speaks of 'the mystery' (v26, 27). It is defined in verse 27: God decided to include totally non-Jewish people (Gentiles) in his salvation plan. To the surprise of Jews, Gentiles get to experience the fullness of the Messiah's salvation. This mystery was *'hidden in ages past, but (is) now revealed' (v26).* Though the Old Testament had hinted at it, it was not clearly taught nor anticipated by the Jewish people of old that there would come a day when the Gentiles would also share in the Messianic salvation they so looked forward to.

What is meant by, *'Christ in you, the hope of glory' (v27)?* At the moment of salvation, Jesus takes up residence in us through the Spirit. This indwelling of Christ is the guarantee of our place in the consummate future of a new heavens and new earth.

3. GOD'S WORK INVOLVES GROWING PEOPLE IN JESUS

Paul's passion was not just introducing people to Jesus. Coming to know Jesus is the start not the finish line. Every believer should, over time, move toward greater and greater maturity in Jesus. Paul says, *'Christ we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ' (v28).* Paul will not rest until every believer is 'mature'. The same word, 'teleos', can also be translated 'perfect' or 'complete'. For example, Jesus instructed us to *'be perfect, just as God is perfect' (Matt 5:48).* It does not refer to legalistic perfection, but to a considerable change that in our motivations, speech, actions, attitudes, way of relating, values and lifestyles. The Christian life may start with Jesus' name on our lips, but ends with Jesus' nature in our lives.

Not only do we pursue our own maturity in Christ, we get to assist others towards that end. Paul shows us how. Other than our example, prayer and love, we are to:

- 1) Proclaim Christ.
- 2) Warn people (against the dangers of unbelief, false teaching and compromised living).
- 3) Teach them with all wisdom (which means we do much skillful explaining of the gospel, and its implications for all of life).

4. GOD'S WORK INVOLVES RELIANCE ON GOD'S POWER

We are to *'toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within (us)' (v29).* God's work combines our best efforts and God's power. Our best strength, limited and unimpressive as it is, is undergirded by the unlimited energy and power of Christ. Notice that Paul wants to *'present' (v28)* us to God as mature; yet a few verses before (v23) we read that Jesus seeks to *'present'* (same word) us to the Father holy and blameless. The point is that we do not merely work *for* Jesus, we work *with* him.



You, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with Christ, having forgiven us all our trespasses, by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross.

COLOSSIANS 2:13-14



WEEK THREE

COLOSSIANS 2:1-23



2:1 For I want you to know how great a struggle I have for you and for those at Laodicea and for all who have not seen me face to face, 2 that their hearts may be encouraged, being knit together in love, to reach all the riches of full assurance of understanding and the knowledge of God's mystery, which is Christ, 3 in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.

4 I say this in order that no one may delude you with plausible arguments. 5 For though I am absent in body, yet I am with you in spirit, rejoicing to see your good order and the firmness of your faith in Christ. 6 Therefore, as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him, 7 rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving.

Though Paul has never met the Colossian church, he wants them to know that all that he does, he does for them too. He also mentions the church in Laodicea, the church closest to them, a mere 15kms away.

THE CHRISTIAN LIFE IS LIKE HAVING A TREASURE CASE

God wants us to '*reach all the riches of full... understanding of... Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge*' (v2-3). There is far more to who Jesus is, and what Jesus has done, and what Jesus is for us than we have yet discovered or perceived. The first time we hear the gospel, it is as though we merely see the sparkle of one gospel-jewel. It is enough to lure us in to salvation. But then there is a whole treasure case. It will take all eternity to explore all the jewels, all the multi-faceted wonder and wisdom, beauty and brilliance of Jesus, and his salvation plan for the cosmos and for us: his church! Here is an invitation to wonder and to the humble, Spirit-empowered study of all that the Bible says about Jesus. Here is the need to stay in close contact with Christ, his Spirit, and his Scriptures day after day – the sparkle of the jewels reflecting upon our face.

NT Wright comments on this verse: 'Christianity is Christ. Put him in the middle of the picture of the world, and the world will stop spinning in incomprehensible circles and begin to make sense. Find him and you've got the treasure. It may take you a while to get it all out of the treasure chest and inspect it, but when you do you'll find that all the wisdom and knowledge that ever there was finds its full meaning in him. He is quite simply what it's all about.'

THE CHRISTIAN LIFE IS LIKE BEING IN AN ARMY

God desires that in every church, all the members '*may be encouraged, being knit together in love*' (v2). We are a band of brothers and sisters, a loving community yes, but also a platoon of soldiers locked in shoulder to shoulder as a fighting unit. Satan seeks to

destroy and resist us – for example he seeks to ‘*delude*’ the Colossians church with false teaching or ‘*plausible arguments*’ (v4). God’s plan is that we, like the Colossian church, would be in ‘good order’ and experience ‘*the firmness of... faith in Jesus*’ (v5). These terms were commonly used war metaphors that speak of us standing together in military position, ready for battle. As we take new ground for the gospel, our standing with fellow believers – shield locked into shield – is the only way to survive the counterattack of Satan. We are to stand our ground, keep our battle array and not break our line.

THE CHRISTIAN LIFE IS LIKE BEING A TREE

The seed of salvation takes root on the day we ‘*receive Christ Jesus the Lord*’ (v6). *Salvation is not the receiving of information, but the receiving of a person*, a person whom we rightly recognize to be the peerless Lord – Lord of the cosmos (through creation), Lord who serves amongst us (through the incarnation), Lord of redemption (through the cross), Lord of life (through the resurrection), Lord of the church (through the gift of the Spirit) and Lord of new creation (through his return). *Salvation comes not from us giving our lives, but from Jesus giving his*. Many people say that they became a Christian when they ‘gave their life’ to Jesus. In reality a Christian is someone for whom and to whom Jesus has given his life.

Having sent down the roots of our faith into Jesus, it is God’s plan that we continue to be ‘*rooted and built up in him and established in the faith*’ (v7). It is not enough that once long ago we sent down our roots in Jesus. We need to – day after day – draw nourishment and stability from Jesus our Lord and Saviour. We are to ‘*walk in him*’ (v6), continuing to drink his Lordship, life and love into the root system of our minds and hearts. This will result in greater grounded-ness, stability and fruitfulness. Deeper roots mean longer branches and more fruit. We learn to work out the implications of Jesus’ Lordship in every aspect of our lives. Every branch of our lives – our work-life, home-life, civic-life or social-life – is one more opportunity to show the difference Jesus makes. One fruit is worthy of mention – we will be ‘*abounding in thanksgiving*’ (v7). The gift of Jesus’ salvation and leadership is something to celebrate everyday!



8 See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ. 9 For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, 10 and you have been filled in him, who is the head of all rule and authority.

OUR CONFIDENCE IN CHRIST IS UNDER THREAT

Through faith in the gospel, we can joyfully declare, 'Jesus is supreme, and therefore he is sufficient for me. He is my very life, the fountainhead who satisfies and sustains me, the solid rock upon which I build my life, the anchor for my soul, the compass by which I orientate myself, the one whom I am privileged to worship and adore, the Lord who competently saves, secures, keeps, cares for, nourishes, provides for, protects, guides and transforms me.'

But just when we're on the road of living in the confidence, stability and power that comes from faith in Christ's sufficiency, along comes some teaching or person or idea that seeks to undermine that simple conviction. *This is what had happened to the Colossian church.* These verses give us profound insight into the false teaching (named *the Colossian heresy* by Bible scholars) being promoted...

What exactly was the heresy?

Bible scholars have been able to draw out an answer, incomplete as it is, based on the data within Paul's letter, especially verse 8. Most notably it was a kind of an ascetic, paganized Jewish mysticism. An influential, self-styled 'spiritual guide' in Colossae, was urging the church to embrace many of the elements of this false teaching, perhaps somehow integrating it into their faith in Jesus. His argument was simple: 'Jesus seems nice, but he is not enough.' This false teacher may have been promoting his heresies even from within the church. He may previously and partially have embraced the gospel, but had not let go of his own gospel-contradicting ideas, and was urging others to do the same.

- › The heresy had *Jewish roots*. It seems the local Jewish synagogue had absorbed many pagan ideas into their religion, and was now trying to influence the part-Jewish church. The evidence for this: Paul chooses a rare word for 'take captive' (v8) (Greek: *sylagogeo*) which seems to be a deliberate wordplay on the word for synagogue, *synagoge*.
- › The heresy was a '*philosophy*' (v8). What is philosophy? It is trying to make sense of the universe – providing answers to the big questions about God, reality, meaning, death, right and wrong. A noble venture, but apart from God's gift of revelation, philosophy is guesswork.

- › The heresy was *'empty deceit' (v8)*. It promised far more than it could actually deliver. It promised that one could be truly spiritual, fulfilled, protected from evil spirits and curses, in harmony with the universe, freed from present and future afflictions, enlightened, and blessed by God.
- › The heresy was *'according to human tradition' (v8)* – including folk beliefs of that time and region. It was *'according to the elemental spirits (Greek: stoicheia) of the world'*. Stoicheia likely refers to the fundamental principles of pagan religion, a term widely used for spirits in Persian religious texts, magical papyri and some Jewish texts. Paul likely uses it to refer to demonic spirits. Although the false teaching was handed down as human tradition, it ultimately traced back to the influence of demonic forces, says Paul.

Other verses in chapter 2 throw yet more light on the heresy. It included being circumcised (v11), keeping special diet laws and holy days (v16), invoking angels (v18), having visions (v18), strict rules about foods and things that cannot be touched (v21), and ascetic severity to the body, probably fasting from food and sex (v23).

SATAN'S LIE: JESUS IS NOT ENOUGH

The heresy said, as many current heresies do, that you need more than Jesus for your enlightenment, salvation, acceptance with God, spiritual power, meaning in life and spiritual protection. It claimed one had to invoke special powers and angels. The heresy taught that Jesus had only *some* authority, and only *some* of God's attributes and *'fullness'*. (It was commonly believed in the ancient world that God had somehow divided up his attributes amongst a plethora of angels, and to acquire all of God one must gather all the angels on your side.)

CHRIST IS COMPLETE

So what does Paul do? He highlights that this false teaching is a real danger. We are to let *'no one take [us] captive' (v8)*. This phrase was used of pirates who would rob and plunder a ship. We must not let anyone plunder us of the treasures we have in Christ and his gospel. Our main safeguard is to steep ourselves in the supremacy and sufficiency of Jesus. Contra the heresy, Jesus is *'the whole fullness of deity' dwelling 'bodily' (v9)* – fully God and fully human man, a divine being taking on human nature. God the Son has no less authority, nor fullness than the Father. All of the Father's qualities and authority reside in him also.

IN CHRIST WE ARE COMPLETE

We have been *'filled in him' (v10)* or as some translations put it, we are *'complete in him'*. *We are safe, and need not be intimidated by anyone or anything.* If we are *'in Christ'* – fused into him – then it means that we share his fullness and authority. No rule or authority, no king of a country, no demon of hell, has higher authority than Jesus. *Our identity is settled, and we need not look for our identity elsewhere.* Christ alone can satisfy us. We need not look to anything in this world to be our centre, to be our life, to be our source. Our identity is in Christ now and forever. This is not some experience or level of spirituality yet to be reached. It's a jewel of truth already in our treasure case – to be cherished today.



11 In Christ you were also circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, 12 having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead. 13 And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, 14 by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross.

IN CHRIST WE HAVE A NEW HEART

The Colossian heresy, partially rooted in Judaism, emphasized the need for circumcision of males. Paul counters this by saying that Christians already have received a circumcision of the heart – on operation ‘made without (earthly) hands’ (v11). He refers to regeneration – God cutting out our old sinful heart, and replacing it with a new heart.

When was this new heart, this spiritual circumcision received? It happened when we were ‘buried with Christ and raised with him’ through ‘faith in the powerful working of God’ (v12). This alludes to the moment of our salvation, when we were fused into Christ. Our union with him means we participate with Christ in his death and resurrection. We died with him on the cross, were buried with him in his grave. Now the self that used to live apart from Christ has died. But we were also raised with him. The new self has been born (again), raised with Jesus, made alive with him.

This all happened at the time of our ‘baptism’ (v12) – we were ‘buried with him in baptism’.

Is Paul teaching ‘baptismal regeneration’ – the belief that we receive new life in Christ at the moment of our water baptism? No. That would contradict the two points he has just made:

- 1) salvation is done ‘without (human) hands’ (v11) and
- 2) salvation is ‘through faith’ (v12).

Why then does Paul mention ‘baptism’ in the middle of a section about regeneration? There are two possible answers: 1) If he has water baptism in mind, it is because it depicts salvation as being united with Christ in burial and in resurrection – both aspects perfectly portrayed in water-baptism as we go under the water (into our water grave) and come up again (into our new life). 2) Perhaps he does not have water baptism in mind at all. The word ‘baptism’ can simply mean ‘being placed’. For example Jesus speaks about his own ‘baptism’ of suffering, and 1 Cor 12:13 says that at the moment of our salvation we are ‘baptized’ by the Spirit into the body of Christ.

The point made is that in Christ, we have been made alive. We 'were dead in our trespasses' (v13). Our sinfulness had cut us off from the life of God, making us spiritually unable to respond to God with faith and love. Yet, 'God made us alive together with him' (v13), supernaturally giving us a new heart – a miracle energized by the very power that raised Jesus from the dead. This new heart gives us a new appetite and capacity for enjoying God, trusting Jesus, hating sin and loving people.

IN CHRIST WE ARE FORGIVEN

Paul has just spoken of how in Christ we are made alive with a new heart. Now he explains what made that possible in the first place: our sins have been forgiven. Notice the order: *'God made us alive having forgiven us' (v13)*. Forgiveness lays the foundation for regeneration. Our acceptance by God makes possible our infusion with God's life.

We all need forgiveness. We have all 'trespassed' the boundaries that God set for us. So doing, we are in 'debt' to God. The wages of sin is death. We owe God, with a rightful ('legal') case being made against us by his justice. All of the commands of God accuse us. As Spurgeon put it: 'Each of the Ten Commandments has, as it were, united with the rest to draw up an indictment against us. The first commandment says, 'He has broken me.' The second cries, 'He has broken me,' — the third, 'He has broken me.' The whole ten together have laid the same charge against each one of us; that is the handwriting of the law condemning every man and woman'.

But instead we're forgiven. Though God has legal right to demand our blood, he offers his own. Look carefully at the picture Paul uses to speak of the way God forgives us. He speaks of 'the record (or certificate) of debt' that stood against us with 'its legal demands' being 'nailed to the cross'. Paul calls attention to the certificate nailed to the top of Jesus' cross (John 19:19). As a common practice, the Romans would nail a record or certificate of the list of crimes above the head of the person being crucified. See what Paul is suggesting? The list that was actually written (in God's mind at least) did not consist of anything wrong he did. It consisted of everything wrong we have done!

Our sins have been *'set aside' (v14)*. This means they have been wiped out. The Greek word Paul uses was used in the case of whitewashing walls, or overlaying something with gold, or removing ink from a papyrus document. Our sins have been covered and overlaid with Jesus' blood. We are given a clean slate.

This wiping clean is all as an act of sacrificial love, an act of sheer grace. The Greek word for *'forgiven' (v13)* is *'charizomai'*, the verb form of the noun *'charis'*, which means grace. Though we're so undeserving, Jesus would rather die than live without us – this is surely amazing grace!



15 He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him.

16 Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath. 17 These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ.

In the previous day, we learnt that in Christ we have forgiveness and a new heart. Now we learn of two more remarkable gifts we have in Christ...

1. IN CHRIST WE HAVE VICTORY

Jesus disarmed *'the rulers and authorities'* (v15). But who are they? Some Bible scholars assert that it speaks of the military and political power of the day – in particular, Rome. However, most say it speaks of the angelic powers that resist God – Satan and his demonic forces. Whichever way we take it, there is truth in it.

The language of *'disarm'*, *'open shame'* and *'triumph'* points to the way Rome used to publicly humiliate their enemies: A general or army, returning from battle victoriously, would march in with a long line of bedraggled prisoners behind them, and if possible right at the end, the king of that nation. They would then celebrate and, during proceedings, execute the king. Talk about public disgrace.

This is, more or less, what Rome did to Jesus by crucifying him. Having claimed to be some kind of rival king, he warranted mockery and a humiliating death. His crime was written above his thorn-barbed head: 'King of the Jews'. Having no army, he did not need to be marched back to Rome.

There's a deeper layer to this. Not just Rome, but Satan thought he was conquering Jesus. Satan was, after all, the key conspirator of Jesus' death (John 13:2). When Jesus was dying on the cross, stripped naked and humiliated, Satan and his demonic forces were no doubt celebrating their triumph, their disarming of the Son of God.

Now rub your eyes and read verse 15 again. Rome thought they were triumphing. Satan's angels thought they were victorious. But the exact opposite was true. On the cross, *it was Jesus who was disarming his enemies*. Though he was naked, in reality he was stripping *them* naked, shaming them, triumphing over them. Christ, in this picture, is the conquering general; the powers and authorities are the vanquished enemy displayed as the spoils of battle before the entire universe.

How does this work? In an act of weakness, Jesus takes on the power of Rome. By blood, he was launching a kingdom of love that would not only spread throughout the Roman empire, but outlast it a million times over. In his naked death, he was stripping Satan of

his captives. Through the cross, Jesus made it possible to reclaim billions of people out of the domain of darkness into his kingdom of light. Satan had chained people with sin's power, with the fear of evil spirits, and through accusing their consciences with sins of the past. Yet, the key that unlocks all these chains was forged on the cross.

Not only do we worship a victorious Christ; we share in his victory.

1) The persecuting kingdoms of this world may strip us of our lives, but cannot touch our salvation. The kingdom of light invades, judges and outlasts them all.

2) Evil spirits need not tyrannize us. Many 'sophisticated' people in the world may disregard evil spirits, but one of the central features of much of the world today, and almost the entire world of the past is the fear of evil spirits. For example, an ancient amulet has been discovered that gives insight into life in the ancient Roman empire. It is inscribed with a plea to 'Michael, Gabriel, Uriel, Raphael' for protection from 'the hated one'. How relieved the Colossian Christians must have been to throw out these ineffective amulets, and invoke the name of One who has all authority over angels and demons. This same authority over Satan is given to all Christ's followers (Luke 10:19).

2. IN CHRIST WE HAVE SUBSTANCE, NOT SHADOW

The leaders of the Colossian heresy also insisted that the Colossian church obey many of Moses' ritual laws with regard to *'food and drink'* and *'festival, new moon or Sabbath'* (v16).

What do we do with the 2000 verses of legislation given to the ancient nation of Israel in the Old Testament, especially the ritual laws like the ones the heresy emphasized? Paul tells us that they are mainly symbolic. They merely foreshadow the coming of the Messiah and his kingdom. In Paul's metaphor, Jesus shines as a light from the future to the past, and his shadow (the Old Testament ritual laws) provides a hint or an outline, but not with much detail, of the One to come. They all find their fulfillment in Jesus. He is the Sabbath. He is the Passover Lamb. He is the High Priest of the Day of Atonement. He is the year of Jubilee.

In fact Jesus' shadow falls upon the entire Old Testament. For example, every figure points to him. Jesus is the true and better Adam – he obeys God in the garden and as a result salvation, not sin, is imputed to us. Jesus is the true and better Joseph – he stands at the right hand of the high king, extending mercy and provision to his betrayers, using his power to save us in loving reconciliation. He is the true and better Moses — standing as a mediator of a covenant, going up the mountain in his ascension, and as a result the law/Spirit comes down.

Every story, every page in the Old Testament whispers his name. Every priest, prophet, deliverer and king is but a shadow of the Perfect One. Christ is the long-awaited substance of things. We're beyond shadows. We now have the real thing.



18 Let no one disqualify you, insisting on asceticism and worship of angels, going on in detail about visions, puffed up without reason by his sensuous mind, 19 and not holding fast to the Head, from whom the whole body, nourished and knit together through its joints and ligaments, grows with a growth that is from God. 20 If with Christ you died to the elemental spirits of the world, why, as if you were still alive in the world, do you submit to regulations— 21 “Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch” 22 (referring to things that all perish as they are used)—according to human precepts and teachings? 23 These have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting self-made religion and asceticism and severity to the body, but they are of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh.

The Colossian false teachers taught that if you were to make progress spiritually you needed to embrace and practice their concoction of Jewish legalistic mysticism. In verses 18 and 21-23.

| WE DISCERN 3 LIES ABOUT WHAT IS REQUIRED TO PROGRESS SPIRITUALLY...

LIE 1: IF YOU SUBMIT TO OUR CONTROLLING LEADERSHIP, YOU WILL ROGRESS SPIRITUALLY

These false teachers would ‘*pass judgment*’ (v16) on people who disagreed with them. They used condemnatory tactics - ‘If you don’t listen to us, and join us, then there is no hope for you. We’ve got the truth that you need.’

Servant-hearted leaders need to humbly lead faith-communities, and followers need to humbly co-operate with such leaders (Heb 13:17). But there are limits to what it means to follow spiritual leaders. For example, spiritual leaders are never to think on our behalf, or be too heavy-handed, or condemn those who won’t agree with them on things beyond the clear teachings of the Bible. Leaders are to assist us as we follow Jesus, but never set themselves up as our Jesus-substitutes.

LIE 2: IF YOU HAVE MYSTICAL EXPERIENCES, YOU WILL PROGRESS SPIRITUALLY

The ‘*worship of angels*’ (v18) probably involved invoking angels for protection from evil spirits. ‘*Going on in detail*’ (v18) is a term that likely refers to a higher stage of mystery cult initiation. (The leader of the Colossian faction may be basing part of his teaching on spiritual experiences he gained in a pagan ritual initiation.) The talk ‘*about visions*’ (v18) shows that some form of mystical experience and insight was offered as part of the false teaching. Satan provides spiritual experiences to ensnare people in false teaching. He masquerades as an angel of light (2 Cor 11:14).

There are, however, God-given spiritual experiences in the life of a Christian – the infilling of the Holy Spirit, and the gifts of dreams, visions and prophesy. Satan seeks to counterfeit these. However, even God-given experiences are not the substance of the Christian life. They are supplementary to faith in Christ and his sufficiency. Having these experiences does not necessarily mean that progress is being made spiritually. For example, the excitement of experiences is a poor substitute for the substance of Christ. God-given visions might illuminate the Bible's teaching on a matter, but they are not where we find out what we believe and how we are to live. We have all we need to know in Scripture, the sole source of doctrine.

If we're not careful, our spiritual experiences may also '*puff (us) up*' (v18) into a state of spiritual pride. We may feel spiritually superior to those who have yet to have the same experiences. It's no wonder that, when Paul was given his vision of the third heaven, God also allowed a humbling '*thorn in the flesh*' to keep him down to earth (2 Cor 12:7).

LIE 3: IF YOU EMBRACE STRICT AND ASCETIC LAWS, YOU WILL PROGRESS SPIRITUALLY

There were some specific taboos taught by the false teachers – *Do not handle, do not taste, do not touch* (v21). '*Asceticism and severity to the body*' (v23) refers to such things as fasting from food and sex, and possibly even self-mutilation.

Still today, some churches or teachers over-emphasize fasting, or have extra-biblical laws that call for the avoidance of all kinds of pleasure and beauty, as though this would guarantee progress spiritually. The primary danger of this is stated excellently: '*they are of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh*' (v23). Fasting from sex does not equate to freedom from lust, nor does depriving ourselves of possessions to freedom from greed, nor does humiliating ourselves to freedom from pride. Jesus died to set us free from futile legalism (v20).

ONLY FOCUSING ON JESUS WILL CAUSE US TO PROGRESS SPIRITUALLY

Verse 19 tells of the thing that these false teachers failed to do: '*hold fast to the Head, from whom the whole body, nourished and knit together through its joints and ligaments, grows with a growth that is from God*'. In the same way that the head leads, guides, co-ordinates and nourishes a body, so Christ plays that role in every church ('*the whole body*') and in every individual Christian ('*joints and ligaments*'). Only as we focus on, and rely on Jesus do we '*grow with a growth that is from God*' (v19).

Our walk with Christ will indeed involve an appropriate submission to godly leaders, some God-given spiritual experiences, and some appropriate disciplines and restraint in our lifestyles. These are important. But the point is that they are never the focus, nor the reason for growth.

In the same way a trellis assists the growth of a vine, these may assist in the process of spiritual progress and growth. But it is only as we send down our roots into the soil of Jesus that we '*grow with a growth that is from God*' (v19). Anything other than a Christ-centred spirituality, one rooted in the substance of Jesus as found in God's Word, is a '*self-made religion*' (v23).



If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. For you have died, and your life is 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



WEEK FOUR

COLOSSIANS 3:1-9



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

WHAT A PRIVILEGE IT IS TO BE JOINED TO CHRIST!

Paul's more common phrase 'in Christ' means the same thing as the phrase he uses twice here: 'with Christ' (v1, 3). It speaks of what theologians call the doctrine of our union with Christ. It states that when we put our faith in Jesus, we are fused into Christ – in much the same way a branch is grafted into a stem or a limb is joined to a body, or the way 'the two become one' as they are joined by God in the covenant of marriage. The Holy Spirit unites us to Jesus. But it means more than that. *The doctrine also means that...*

EVERYTHING THAT HAS HAPPENED TO CHRIST HAS HAPPENED TO US

In four particular ways...

- 1) *When Jesus died on the cross, there we were dying with him.* Paul has already said 'we died with Christ' (2:20).
- 2) *When Jesus was raised from the dead, there we were raised with him.* We have been 'raised with Christ' (3:1).
- 3) *As Jesus is now ascended to the right hand of God, we too are seated with him.* Our lives are 'hidden with Christ' (3:3) even as he is seated at the right hand of God. 'We are seated with Christ in the heavenly realms' (Eph 2:7).
- 4) *When Christ comes again, there we will be coming with him.* Paul is explicit about this: 'When Christ appears (in his Second Coming) we will appear with him' (3:4). Let's dig deeper into these concepts...

WE 'DIED WITH CHRIST'

When he was upon the cross, all the sin of the world had a claim on his life. He became the sin-bearer. But, having paid the price for the sins of the world, he died. Sin no longer has any claim upon his life. Since we're in Christ, his death to sin is our death to sin. Though we may be tempted to sin, sin is no longer our rightful master.

WE HAVE BEEN 'RAISED WITH CHRIST'

In his resurrection, Jesus defeated death itself. He will never die again. Death no longer has any claim on his life. Since we're in Christ, his resurrection from the dead is our resurrection from the dead. Already, we have been quickened to newness of life by the

power of God. Death no longer has a claim on our lives. If Jesus does not return in our day, we will die physically, but it will be a quick transition into life eternal. One day, we will all receive glorified resurrection bodies, patterned after Jesus' own resurrection body (Phil 3:21).

WE ARE 'SEATED WITH CHRIST'

Ascended to the place of glory and honour, Christ co-rules the universe. His victory over all his enemies has been secured. It's just a matter of time before every last enemy is brought to a place of willful submission or rebellion-caused punishment at his feet. Since we're in Christ, his place in heaven is already our place in heaven. His authority is our authority. We are not divine like he is, so we cannot receive worship, or make ultimate decisions about the destiny of other people and the universe. But we are honoured to collaborate with Christ as he works in the world.

OUR LIVES ARE 'HIDDEN WITH CHRIST IN GOD'

Paul could have written, 'Your life is with Christ' but instead he writes, 'Your life is *hidden* with Christ'. This has two meanings:

1) *Hidden with Christ, we are absolutely secure.* When something is hidden it means that it is secure. The cash in our wallet can be easily lost, but the major investments kept in a bank (hidden from sight) are much safer. Though we may experience uncertainty, insecurity, pain, disease and even death here on earth, there is part of us that is untouchable, deeply hidden in the safest safety deposit – Christ in God. Paul borrows the language of the Old Testament: '*For he will hide me in his shelter... he will conceal me under the cover of his tent; he will lift me high upon a rock*' (Psalm 27:5-6) and '*In the shadow of his hand he hid me. He made me like a polished arrow. In his quiver he hid me*' (Isaiah 49:2).

2) *Hidden with Christ, we have a deeply personal relationship with God.* Jesus spoke about closing ourselves in a room to pray to God (Matt 6:6). God is our hiding place. Through prayer, usually unseen by others, we come close to God, accessing the very heart of God, wherever we are. It is our secret place.

WE WILL 'APPEAR' WITH CHRIST

Christ will return visibly and triumphantly. His glory will be evident to all. Multitudes might not believe that Jesus really is Lord because he is out of sight in heaven, yet one day it will be as clear as day to everyone everywhere that Jesus is heaven and earth's true King, the divine and glorious Son of God. Since we're in Christ, we too will be revealed for who we really are. There will be something glorious about us that will surprise even us! When Jesus returns, even creation will gasp as it sees '*the children of God being revealed*' (Rom 8:19). It would seem that not just Jesus' Lordship, but who we are in Christ, is often overlooked – obscured by our fragile, fallen, finite lives and bodies. But when Jesus returns that will change: our glorious identity will become blindingly obvious to all, not least to ourselves. We might be '*hidden*' now, but we will be unveiled then.



3:1 If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. 2 Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. 3 For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. 4 When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.

So profound are these 4 verses on our union with Christ that we will linger here this day and the next...

AFFIRM YOUR UNION WITH CHRIST BY FAITH

Our union with Christ is not something to be achieved, or attained through years of obedience or a series of spiritual experiences. It has already been done. It is not we who joined ourselves to Jesus, rather it is God's Spirit who joined us to Jesus (1 Cor 12:13). Our part is to affirm and enjoy it by sheer faith. God's Word says it. We believe it. That settles it.

LET YOUR UNION WITH CHRIST SHAPE YOUR RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD

When we pray, it is not as though he is distant and removed. Rather we are currently 'with Christ'. This is not a long-distance relationship. We're 'hidden with Christ in God'. God is our hiding place. We can set aside times in our days and weeks to be alone with him. But we don't need to wait until then to enjoy his presence, keep company with him wherever you are, throughout your day. Indeed while we drive, shop, play, work, clean and eat, we can draw close to him in our hearts.

LET YOUR UNION WITH CHRIST SHAPE THE WAY YOU PRAY

When we pray, we don't pray from earth. We pray from heaven. Praying from earth, we tend to be more aware of our needs, our desperation, the crisis we or another person is facing. There is an underlying angst and anxiety in our prayer. Praying from heaven however, we may still see the need, but we see it through larger eyes. We sense what he senses. We pray with a panoramic sense of God's superabundant powers and grace. Our feet are planted on the ground, but our spirits soar heavenward, where the rivers of God's grace find their boundless source.

LET YOUR UNION WITH CHRIST CHANGE THE VERY ATMOSPHERE AROUND YOUR LIVES

Fragile and imperfect as we may be, let's think of ourselves as humble conductors of God's power and love. Let's live in such a way that people around us sense that there is indeed something different about us. There is! We're seated with Christ in the heavenly

realms. The place where we stand has the potential of morphing into a 'throne zone' of God's presence, activity and blessing.

LET YOUR UNION WITH CHRIST CHANGE THE WAY YOU THINK ABOUT DISCERNING GOD'S WILL

A popular trend amongst Christians is to ask the question, 'What would Jesus do?' But when we remember that we are with Christ right now, and his life is my life, then the better question to ask is, 'What is Jesus doing ... in me, through me, through us? And how do I/we better co-operate with him?' After all, 'we have the mind of Christ' (1 Cor 2:16). He is ready to direct us, give us perspective, give us wisdom and grace to respond to whatever situation we're in. He did not merely leave us his great example. He is still currently so profoundly connected to us, that he is ready to impart wisdom and insight if we will just ask for it, and be sensitive to his leadings.

LET YOUR UNION WITH CHRIST ESTABLISH YOUR IDENTITY

The explosion of popular best-selling literature on the subject of 'finding yourself' is enough evidence of the deep longing to know who we are. Many people will spend years of their life trying to find themselves through travel, alternative spirituality, career changes, changing partners and trying on different personas. Yet, the revelation of our union in Christ is the answer to the question. We are united to Christ. That is our identity. Christ is our life.

Tim Keller in *Counterfeit Gods* tells the story of a lady in his Manhattan church whose life was changed by the clause, '*Christ is your life*' (v4). She had always been obsessed with men. Men defined her. When a relationship was going well, she soared. When it was going badly, she was devastated. Desperate for freedom from the emotional rollercoaster, she went to a psychologist who advised that she find a new focus in life – like career success. After pursuing this for a while, it finally dawned on her what her true problem was: she was finding her identity and source in temporal things, and though the psychologist meant well, he had merely encouraged her to trade one temporal source of identity for another. She then read the verse about Christ being her life, and claimed it by faith. She made a firm decision to keep steering her heart and mind to Christ, who alone can be the securing, satisfying, life-giving centre of one's life.

Tim Keller writes that when she met a man who seemed to show interest in her, she would say to this man quietly in her own head, '*You seem like a great man. Who knows? You may even become my husband, but one thing you can never be is my Life. Christ alone is my Life.*'

What are the counterfeit gods that you tend to live for? What can you learn from this woman in establishing your identity in Jesus instead?



3:1 *If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. 2 Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. 3 For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. 4 When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.*

The famous preacher Martin Lloyd Jones said, 'Our union with Christ is one of the greatest and most marvelous of all Christian doctrines, one of the most glorious beyond any question at all.' We will spend one more day on the implications of this pivotal doctrine for our lives...

LET OUR UNION WITH CHRIST GUIDE OUR PRIORITIES AND PREOCCUPATIONS

We are to 'seek' (v1) and 'set our minds on' (v2) the things above. This means we need to break from our preoccupation with things 'that are on the earth' (v2).

A disclaimer: what is material, physical and bodily is far from meaningless. God created us, and deemed our material existence to be 'very good' (Gen 1:31). Additionally, the Son of God's incarnation into bodily form, as well as his bodily resurrection, casts the most positive light imaginable on matter and creation.

So Paul does not mean we should minimize our humanity or creation in general, rather he speaks of a re-prioritization of our lives. We are to make Christ (who he is, what he has done, what he is doing, and who we are in him) the consuming priority and preoccupation of our life. Using different wording, Paul echoes Jesus: 'Seek first the kingdom of God' (Matt 6:33).

CS Lewis once quipped that, contrary popular opinion, the more truly heavenly-minded we are, the more earthly good we can be. Focused on Jesus, we will see what is truly most important, and also be able to tap into 'all his energy, which so powerfully works in us' (1:29).

Eugene Peterson helpfully paraphrases verses 1-2 in The Message:

'Pursue the things over which Christ presides. Don't shuffle along, eyes to the ground, absorbed with the things right in front of you. Look up, and be alert to what is going on around Christ -that's where the action is. See things from his perspective.'

The things that once were our preoccupation and priority – pleasure, success, fame, wealth, approval, control, comfort – are to be eclipsed by something (or Someone) truly worthy of our one and only lives. Spurgeon preached on these verses in March of 1880 like this:

'Let our minds ascend to Christ. Jesus has gone up - let us go up with Him! As for these bodies, we cannot as yet ascend, for they are not fit to enter the Kingdom of God - yet let our thoughts and hearts mount up and build a happy rest on high! Let our whole mind, soul, spirit, heart arise as when doves fly.'

LET YOUR UNION WITH CHRIST HELP YOU UNDERSTAND THAT YOU REIGN WITH CHRIST

Christ rules. The decisive victory over his enemies has been won on the cross (2:15) as confirmed in his resurrection. He now works to bring all things under his leadership and rule. He has *'all authority in heaven and earth'* (Matt 28:18). He is seated at the right hand of God. The 'right hand' is a hand of power and authority. We as Christ-followers have joyfully submitted to his authority. But consider also that we reign with Christ. We too are seated at the right hand of God. *'How much more will those who receive God's abundant provision of grace and of the gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man, Jesus Christ!'* (Rom 5:17) We are agents of Christ's compassionate and powerful rule. His kingdom advances through us. His will is done in the world through us. We operate not in our own authority, but in the name of Jesus, to whom we are fused.

LET YOUR UNION WITH CHRIST BRING ABOUT PERSONAL SECURITY

Our union and identity with Christ means we no longer need to prove ourselves to ourselves through our achievements. Fully accepted by God, and complete in Christ (2:10), we can climb off the exhausting hamster wheel aptly described by Madonna, who in a *Vanity Fair* magazine interview once said:

'I have always sought to conquer this horrible feeling of inadequacy, of being mediocre and uninteresting. I push past one spell of it and discover myself as a special person, then it comes back again. It's always pushing me, pushing me. Even though I'm now Somebody, I still have to prove I'm Somebody. My struggle has never ended and probably never will.'

Thankfully, whatever we try to achieve need no longer be an attempt to prove ourselves or to overcome a sense of deficiency. Rather our efforts and goals – whatever they may be – are to flow out of the secure base of acceptance and 'fullness' (2:10) that we *already* have.

An analogy here might be helpful. Physically, *Pilates* teaches people to regularly and even constantly 'activate' and live from their 'core' – that set of muscles wrapped around the lower spine. Every movement is to then flow out of that stability and centre. The other muscles are not to compensate for the weakness of the core, but rather to benefit from its strength. In a more psychological and spiritual sense, we also need to learn to 'activate' and live from our core identity, one that is in union with Christ. Instead of putting our central weight on such things as our achievements, wealth, security, control, reputation or even our closest relationships, we must learn to regularly and even constantly reaffirm our identity in Christ. One way to do this is to often – perhaps while driving, or lying in bed, or walking along – silently repeat to ourselves the re-centering, stabilizing truth: *'My life is hidden with Christ in God. My life is hidden with Christ in God.'*



5 Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. 6 On account of these the wrath of God is coming.

Where are we in Paul's letter? We have looked at the difference the gospel makes in our lives (1:1-14), the magnificent person and work of Christ (1:15-20), Paul as a model of doing God's work (1:24-2:3), the dangers of false teaching (2:8-23) and the proper focus for our lives: Christ and our identity in him (3:1-4).

Now we come to a new section (3:5-4:6): *a compact summary of a God-pleasing way to live*. It includes subsections on dealing with the sins of the past (3:5-11), putting on the character of Christ (3:12-17), relating to family and the workplace (3:18-4:1), persisting in prayer (4:2-4) and relating to those who are far from God (4:5-6).

WE MUST ASK WHAT THE WORD 'THEREFORE' IS THERE FOR

Verse 5 starts with the word *'therefore'* – 'Put to death *therefore*' (v5). Paul in effect says, 'in light of what I have just said to you, here are some things you need to do.' We *must* get the order right. Paul *first* emphasizes who Jesus is for us and what Jesus has done for us. Only then, do we hear what we are to do for Jesus.

THIS IS A REVOLUTIONARY APPROACH TO PERSONAL CHANGE

The way we usually think of personal change is to say: 'Let me make some changes in my life, then I'll become a new person.' But the gospel is the exact opposite: 'First, let me establish who I am – a new creature in Christ – and only then let me start making changes in my life that are compatible with my new identity.'

THERE ARE OTHER INFERIOR MOTIVATIONS TO CHANGE – LIKE FEAR AND PRIDE

The gospel issues an entirely different motivation to personal change than fear. We're so often motivated by fear: 'I'll change because I fear God's rejection or the disapproval of this community', 'I'll change because I fear not being good enough, or not being love-able enough.' We're also often motivated by pride: 'I'll change because I'm better than other people who sin in these ways', 'I'll change because I want to prove myself worthy of God's acceptance and the approval of this community.'

THE GOSPEL, IN CONTRAST, DESTROYS FEAR AND PRIDE

The gospel teaches us that we are both more sinful than we realize, and yet more loved than we could have ever imagine. This has a way of simultaneously vanquishing pride and fear.

In the gospel, pride is destroyed as I am humbled to the dust. How can I be proud when I understand that all I contributed to my salvation was my sin and failure?

In the gospel, fear is destroyed as I am affirmed to the stars. How can I fear when my Maker and the Maker of the Universe, the Person whose opinion matters most, declares me accepted, complete, and loved?

THE GOSPEL CHANGES OUR IDENTITY AND ONLY THEN CALLS FOR COMPATIBLE LIVING

Immediately after affirming our new identity in Christ (v1-4), verses 5-12 speak of the behaviour we are to get rid of, and the new behaviour we should embrace. Verse 10 uses the analogy of a clothing change. The idea is that we are to dress in our lifestyles as a true reflection of who we actually are underneath. If we see ourselves as paupers, we're likely to dress in rags. But if we see ourselves as royalty, we'll likely dress up. It's not a case of pretense. When we seek to be more like Jesus in our actions, we're not pretending to be someone we're not. In fact we're trying to be someone we already are. That's authenticity at its highest.

It's the old story of the ugly duckling: a swan thinks he is a duck, and acts like a duck because he thinks that's who he is. But when he discovers his true identity, he starts to live like a swan. Stage one is to discover who we are. Stage two, which can only come after stage one, is to choose to live in a way that is compatible with our true selves.

IN CHRIST, WE RECEIVE AUTHORITY TO REJECT SIN FROM OUR LIVES

'We have died to sin, how can we live in it any longer?' (Rom 6:2). Sin no longer has rightful mastery over our lives. We must start using that authority. Paul uses the strongest language: *'put to death' (v5)*. It is a call to all-out war, total extermination. This war is not instant, and there will be many battles. But all of them need to be fought, based on the simple conviction that these sins are both beneath us and unsuited to our new identity in Christ. The phrase *'put to death what is earthly in you' (v5)* can be translated, 'kill those parts of your life that are part of the fallen identity outside of Christ.' Paul provides two lists of sins that we must eliminate from our lives (in verse 5 and verses 8-9), which we will explore in the next day.

What does Paul mean by *'On account of these the wrath of God is coming' (v6)*? He refers to Judgment day, when all such sins will be dealt with by God himself. Paul's point is that it is much better to spurn all the behaviours that Jesus has died to rescue us from.



5 Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry... 7 In these you too once walked, when you were living in them. 8 But now you must put them all away: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and obscene talk from your mouth. 9 Do not lie to one another...

PUT TO DEATH SEXUAL SIN

Paul has two short lists of some of the sins we are to put to death. The first list is ‘*sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry*’ (v5). The first four terms all speak of sexual sin. Sexual immorality is sex before or outside of the marriage covenant. *Impurity* overlaps in meaning with the first term and touches on all kinds of loose sexual conduct. Both *passion* and *evil desires* (which can also be translated *inordinate desires*) refer to the sin of handing ourselves over to distorted desires that lead us in the direction of sexual immorality and impurity. Paul is not saying that sexuality itself is sinful, and that we must somehow eliminate it. His concern is all the ways we tend to deface the image of God in us through sexual sin.

Our sexuality is something inherently beautiful and good (see Gen 1:27,31), but we have the capacity to abuse it. Think of your sexuality like a river. A river has the capacity to bring life and blessing wherever it flows, but if it floods its banks, it has the power to destroy and kill.

The fifth sin on the list is *covetousness*. This word usually refers to the inordinate love of things and money, and the envy of those who have more than we do. It is a sin that must be violently opposed, uprooted and killed in us, in part because it is *idolatry*. Idolatry is putting things before God, finding our security and meaning in them, instead of finding our security and meaning in God (Rom 1:25). Living for money and possessions is the worship of a counterfeit god.

Some commentators plausibly argue that, in light of the previous four sins on the list in verse 5, Paul is probably not speaking here of material covetousness, but of sexual covetousness. The words ‘*passion*’ and ‘*inordinate desires*’ do overlap in meaning with ‘*covetousness*’. If this interpretation is true, then it is interesting that sex can also serve as an idol (a point Paul makes explicitly in Romans 1:21-27). As we reflect on our culture, this bears true. Many people prize sex above all, elevating it to a god-like status. According to magazine covers, popular music lyrics and many movies, sex is heralded as the divine author of life, joy, meaning and fulfillment to those who drink from its nectar. But as wonderful as sex is (God made it, after all) it can never replace God in our lives. It is a good thing, but when we make it a god thing, that’s a bad thing.

PUT TO DEATH VERBAL SIN

The second list is, 'anger, wrath, malice, slander, and obscene talk from your mouth' (v8) and lying to one another (v9). All these sins are verbal in nature. They have to do with the corruption of our speech. In *anger*, we attack people verbally. In *wrath*, we have a temper-tantrum and say all kinds of hurtful, damaging things.

The first two sins have to do with emotional outbursts where we say things we often wish we didn't say. However, in the sins of *malice* and *slander* we say what we intend to say. *Malice* is hateful speech – words designed to hurt someone directly. *Slander* is false and accusing speech – words designed to damage their reputation.

Obscene talk refers to perverse language, swearing; 'foolish talk and coarse language' (Eph 5:4). *Lying* is speaking untruths or half-truths, with the intention of misleading people.

KILL THE SINS THAT KILL COMMUNITY

These two kinds of sins both have great power to damage relationships. Think how sexual sin has the power to damage relationships. For example, consider how a porn addiction or an affair can destroy a marriage, or how sex before marriage can intensify bonds between people, in such a way that breaking up is akin to a divorce. Likewise, the misuse of the mouth – giving verbal expression to anger, wrath, malice, slander, obscenity or lying – can devastate trust, distance people and destroy intimacy. We need to treat sin not as something that is inherent in who we are, but as an alien invader, something akin to a spiritual cancer. It must die, so the image of Jesus can be better reflected in our lives, and in our relationships.

KILL THE SIN BENEATH THE SIN

Paul mentions 'idolatry'. Although Paul does not go into this idea in depth, idolatry is essentially the sin beneath so many more surface, behavioral sins. As John Calvin said, 'The human heart is a factory of idols. Every one of us is, from his mother's womb, expert in inventing idols.' Under so many of our more outward sins there is a deeper sin that gives power to the outward sin. For example, we might lie about a failure, despite our stated commitment to integrity, when we prize our reputation with people above the approval God gives. In this case, the deeper sin is the idol of approval. Or we might sleep with someone to whom we are not married, but under that sin is a combination of the idol of romance and approval – the combined belief that 'I am not someone until I have someone' and 'I need this person to approve of me.'

What are some of the sins you are currently needing to put to death in your life? Can you identify the sin beneath the sin? What aspect from the gospel could help to displace this idol in your life?



Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.

COLOSSIANS 3:12-14



WEEK FIVE

COLOSSIANS 3:9-21



9 Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old self with its practices 10 and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator. 11 Here there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all, and in all.

OUR TRANSFORMATION STARTS WITH OUR TRANSPOSITION

Transposition refers to the new citizenship, position, identity and self we receive in Christ. We have 'put off the old self' (literally, 'old man') (v9). The tense in the Greek here refers to a past action with present implications – we 'have put off' – highlights that it has already happened. The old man was the self outside of Christ. The moment we are fused to Christ, that person comes to an end. In the same way, we have 'put on the new self' (v10). Again, the tense clarifies that we already have put it on. The new self has *already* eclipsed the old self. We are now in Christ. We have received a united-to-God-identity.

OUR TRANSFORMATION IS BUILT UPON OUR TRANSPOSITION

Transformation refers to the ongoing process of becoming more and more like Jesus. The gospel is unique in that we receive transposition first, and then – upon that secure, unshakable fact – we start to transform. We don't say, 'Let me change, then I will become a new person.' Rather we say, 'In Christ I am already a new person, now let me change.' Look carefully at Paul's words: '*Do not lie to one another, seeing that...*' (v9). Seeing what? Seeing that we are *already* in Christ. Our transposition is the basis and motivation for our transformation.

OUR TRANSFORMATION INVOLVES OUR RE-HUMANIZING

Though sin dehumanizes us, Christ re-humanizes us. In Christ we receive 'a new self, which is being renewed... after the image of its creator' (v10). We're made in God's image, after God's likeness. But all of us, through sin, have partially and sometimes totally defaced the image of God from our lives. We have fallen, and our humanity has in part been lost. Christ, the perfect human, the image of the invisible God (1:15) has come to restore the image of God to our lives. It is a process of becoming who we're meant to be: fully human. In falling from God, we fell from our full humanity. In being restored to God, we are restored to our full humanity.

We put off our old self 'with its practices' (v9). In other words, there is a way of behaving that comes naturally to a person who does not know Christ, and who is alienated from God. Paul is reminding us that if we are no longer that person, and so surely we shouldn't behave like that person. Now our new self 'is being renewed... after the image of its Creator' (v10). We are progressively (albeit slowly, with many setbacks) being transformed

to more accurately reflect God, the Creator who made us in his image, who is committed to restoring his damaged and defaced image in our lives.

OUR TRANSFORMATION INVOLVES LOTS OF THINKING

Our renewal is a renewal *'in knowledge'* (v10). As we *personally understand* the gospel, God, Jesus and our identity in Christ better, the transformation of our lives makes progress. We need to apply our minds if we are to become more Christ-like. At no point do we switch our brains off, rather we must think through how the gospel shapes our sexuality, speech and relationships.

OUR TRANSFORMATION INVOLVES ACCEPTING PEOPLE VERY DIFFERENT TO OURSELVES

In Christ *'there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all, and in all'* (v11). The image of God is defaced in us when we only gravitate to people like ourselves, and either avoid or look down upon people different to ourselves. To relate to people different to us is the pathway to true humanity.

This verse on the breaking down of social barriers comes immediately after mentioning that we are image-bearers (v10). Not surprising, the doctrine of the image of God in every person, of every age, class and ethnicity has powerfully served the social justice movements that have swept the globe in recent history.

The world then was as divided as the world is today. Jews, refusing to even eat with non-Jews, were notorious for looking down upon Greek and uncircumcised people. Roman citizens looked down upon the *barbarians* of the north, and especially the *Scythians* north of the Black Sea, a people group deemed to be the furthest thing from civilization – Romans saw them as a violent, uneducated and altogether inferior people. *Free* people looked down upon *slaves*, refusing to socialize with them.

Other than recognizing the image of God in all people, there are two additional ways that the gospel helps us overcome social barriers:

1) *The gospel dismantles the way we define ourselves.* By *'Christ is all'*, Paul means Christ redefines reality for us. The social, educational and ethnic ways we once defined ourselves by are now useless categories.

2) *The gospel gives all people the highest possible value.* By *'Christ is... in all'*, Paul means that the people we once looked down upon have been lifted to the highest possible state. Not only are they image-bearers (a point tacitly made in verse 10), Christ lives in them. If Jesus has accepted them and lifted them up, then surely we should do the same.



12 Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, 13 bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. 14 And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.

GOD PLACES US IN COMMUNITY

Sin has partially defaced the image of God from every human, family, community and culture. Through Christ, he seeks to restore the reflection of his character in our lives, making us more like the kind of people he intended us to be. But he doesn't do this transforming work by isolating us. Rather he places us in a Christ-centered community. Every church is meant to be a sample of the new humanity that Jesus is bringing about, a picture to the world of how relationships should work.

Having listed to us the community-damaging sin (v5-9) we should 'put off' (v8) or 'put to death' (v5), Paul next tells us what we should 'put on' (v12) in its place. In essence, we are to 'put on' community-building character. We are to become the kind of people who routinely deepen, develop and protect relationships, starting with the church-community in which God has placed us. This community is to reflect the face of God to the world, and that is only possible as we reflect the face of God to one another.

Before Paul lists how we are to treat each other, he reminds us how God has treated us: we are 'God's chosen ones, holy and beloved' (v12). This is ingenious. It is only as we ponder how God has treated us, that we are motivated and enabled to treat others like they should be treated.

| SO HOW DOES GOD TREAT US?

GOD HAS CHOSEN US

We are his chosen ones. This echoes something Jesus said: 'You did not choose me, but I chose you' (John 15:16). God initiated the relationship with us, even when we showed no interest in relating to him. He did not choose us because there was something special and attractive about us, but simply because he is the God of grace. In the same way, we should assume the responsibility of initiating relationships and moving toward people. Even if they do not move toward us. And despite the fact that they are not especially attractive, talented, godly or wealthy. As God's relationship with us is based on grace, so should our relationships with other people be.

GOD CALLS US 'HOLY'

The word 'holy' can be defined as: 'to take into one's personal possession for some special use.' God has marked us, setting us apart for his special purposes. It is

comparable to a man walking down a beach, picking up a few shells, and then decorating his home with them. Those shells have been taken into his personal possession for special use. Or it is like someone walking into a shop and buying a toothbrush. That toothbrush is now holy, taken into their possession for their use. These analogies fail, however, because usually we pick the nicest shells and toothbrushes, but God's selection of us has nothing to do with us. Nonetheless, through no intrinsic virtue in ourselves to boast in, he has taken us into his special possession, ready for his special use. We so easily become familiar with fellow-Christians, but we must keep reminding ourselves that we walk among 'saints' or holy ones – ordinary people set apart for God's extraordinary possession and use.

WE ARE GOD'S BELOVED

God loves us not because we're lovable, but because he is love. The Bible uses two metaphors to show how deep his love is for us: we are God's children, and we are God's spouse. We have unique access to his very heart and enjoy his total commitment. He is our Father and our Lover. It is true that God loves all people everywhere, having given up his Son for everyone (John 3:16), but it is not true that every person has received his love, and can now be called his child or spouse. To be included in his circle of love is a great privilege.

NOT ONLY DO WE RECEIVE GOD'S LOVE, WE NEED TO EXTEND IT TO OTHERS

Having affirmed how much God loves us, Paul now tells us how we are to love others. It is God's plan to make our lives a riverbed of his love to others. He tells us to dress in the wardrobe of clothing he has specially chosen for us. There are seven different items of clothing we are to wear, each a practical expressions of love...

- *Compassion* – merciful and tender-hearted
- *Kindness* – warmth and gentleness
- *Humility* – not thinking less of ourselves, but of ourselves less
- *Meekness* – a quiet strength, much like the strength of a stallion that has been tamed and channeled by a skilled rider
- *Patience* – even-tempered and long-suffering
- *Bearing with one another* – happily putting up with each other's flaws
- *Forgiveness* – refusing bitterness

Paul emphasizes forgiveness. We are to forgive as quickly and completely as Christ forgave us. In ourselves, we tend to lack the ability to love and have mercy toward others. But as we experience and meditate on God's love for us, we're enabled to love and forgive others too.

'And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony' (v14). After listing seven practical expressions of love, he says that above all these we are to put on the basic all-purpose garment, love. It is like a coat. After listing seven 'parts' of love, Paul implies that love is greater than the sum of its parts. If there is one word that should sum up the kind of people we're becoming, the kind of community we're becoming, and the kind of God we're reflecting to the world, it is the word loving. To the degree that we are loving people, to that degree is our community marked by 'perfect harmony,' and to that degree we have recovered our true humanity.



15 And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body. And be thankful. 16 Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God. 17 And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

PUT ON THE CHARACTER OF JESUS

Notice the opening word *'and'* (v15). Paul is still speaking about what we are to *'put on'* (v12). He has just listed several items of *'clothing'* – compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, patience, bearing with one another, forgiveness and especially love. But now he adds five more items of clothing – peace, ministry, praise, a Christ-approved lifestyle and gratitude.

CS Lewis, reflecting on this portion of Scripture, writes in *Mere Christianity*: *'Putting on Christ is not one among many jobs a Christian has to do; and it is not a sort of special exercise for the top class. It is the whole of Christianity.'* Rick Warren reminds us that *'Christlikeness is not produced by imitation, but by inhabitation.'* *We are in Christ and Christ is in us* (v11) – apart from our vital connection to him, we cannot become like him.

PUT ON A LIFE OF PEACE

'Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body' (v15). Peace here refers to harmony in relationships. It should become a value that rules in our hearts. This is not a superficial harmony. Sometimes sin will need to be confronted, which disrupts pseudo-harmony in the pursuit of authentic, deep harmony.

Paul gives one reason peace should be a priority in our decision-making: we have been called, or summoned by Christ in *'one body'*. Fused to him in faith, we are fused to each other in love. We are an extension of each other. *'In Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others'* (Rom 12:5). In the same way, our hand would not pull out our eye, so we should not damage each other in Christ's body.

Bearing all of the above in mind, we must remember that this kind of peace with each other is impossible without peace with Christ. As AW Tozer writes in *The Pursuit of God*:

'Has it ever occurred to you that one hundred pianos all tuned to the same fork are automatically tuned to each other? They are of one accord by being tuned, not to each other, but to another standard to which each one must individually bow. So one hundred worshipers meeting together, each one looking away to Christ, are in heart nearer to each other than they could possibly be, were they to become only 'unity' conscious and turn their eyes away from God to strive for closer fellowship.'

PUT ON A LIFE OF MINISTRY

'Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom (v16). The *'word of Christ'* refers to the gospel message. Every person that makes up the church should be thinking deeply on the gospel. It is not only the starting blocks of our faith, it is the race and the finish line too. This gospel-internalization should then flow over in our relationships in two ways: in ministry and in praise.

Overflowing with the gospel, we should *teach and admonish (or urge) each other in all wisdom.* These are the same words Paul used to describe the way he brings the church to maturity (1:28). It is not just leaders who should minister to God's people, but all of God's people should minister to God's people. We all have a ministry to help others find and then follow Jesus. Any gospel-empowered progress we have made personally qualifies and obligates us to help others make that same progress.

PUT ON A LIFE OF PRAISE

'Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly ... singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs' (v16). Overflowing with the gospel, we should sing together.

We sing:

- *Psalms* – songs and prayers in the biblical book of Psalms
- *Hymns* – songs created by Christians based on the themes of the gospel
- *Spiritual songs* – songs of the Spirit, spontaneous songs resulting from the Spirit's influence

PUT ON A LIFE THAT IS CHRIST APPROVED

'And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus' (v17). Every aspect of our lives – the way we speak to each other, treat each other, spend our money, manage our sexuality and time, all of it – can and must be done *'in the name of the Lord Jesus'*. What we do must be Christ approved and Christ-like. We cannot, for example, do something that contradicts his nature and claim that we do it *'in his name'*.

PUT ON A LIFE OF GRATITUDE

We are to 'be thankful' (v15), 'have thankfulness in (our) hearts to God' (v16) and be 'giving thanks to God the Father' (v17). Gratitude comes from steeping ourselves in all the ways God has been so good to us, first and foremost in the gospel, but also in other ways – sunshine and rain, friends and family, opportunities and protection, provision and guidance, strength and peace, the kindness and generosity of others. Faith might be the way of receiving God's undeserved grace, but gratitude is what happens once you have received it.

Gratitude is not just an act or attitude in itself; it is an adverb that qualifies everything else we do in our lives. We are to *'do everything... giving thanks.'* It is one thing having breakfast, but are we doing it gratefully? It is one thing singing a praise song, but are we merely going through the motions? We might be ministering to others what God has taught us in the gospel, but is the tone one of gratitude and humility, or weariness and self-righteousness?

63 | *18 Wives, submit to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord. 19 Husbands, love your wives, and do not be harsh with them.*

One of the reasons Jesus came to this world was to undo the damaging effects of sin upon our relationships with one another – no longer treating each other with anger, malice or deception, but instead being patient, kind, forgiving and loving. Next, in 3:18-4:1, he gives a few practical thoughts about how we should order our closest relationships – relationships in the home (between husband and wife, and between children and parents) and relationships in the workplace (between employer and employees). In some ways it is easier to love people we only see from time to time than the people we spend hours with daily. Unless Christ redeems these closest relationships, we have not been truly redeemed.

THE GOSPEL REDEEMS MARRIAGE ROLES

In those days, long before the rise of feminism, it was taken for granted that a husband had authority over his wife. The only exception we know of is some pagan cults, which tried to liberate women to be free from all obligations other than in the service of its god or goddess. As a norm, men asserted their authority over their wives in a superior, intimidating and self-serving way. Stopping short of removing all authority of a man over his wife, Paul gives several ways the gospel could better inform roles in marriage...

1. HE MOVES AWAY FROM THE HEAVY PATRIARCHY OF HIS DAY

The language of the day was, 'Wives obey your husbands.' But Paul chooses another word. Instead of 'obey' (Greek: *hypakouō*) he uses '*submit*' (*hypotassō*). Paul is not asserting that the husband is smarter or more gifted than his wife, or that his wife is in any way inferior to her husband in ability, value or contribution. Think of Paul's good friends and fellow church-planters, Priscilla and Aquila. The book of Acts gives us several glimpses into the functioning of this couple. Remarkably, Priscilla's name is usually mentioned first, contradicting the writing norms of that day. Scholars say this suggests she was more dynamically gifted than her husband, and yet was not in any way suppressed by him.

2. SUBMISSION SHOULD BE CHOSEN NOT IMPOSED

Paul puts the word '*submit*' in the middle voice, which means that it is a submission that is freely chosen. A husband is not to insist on his authority. It is something the wife freely and willingly grants him. She recognizes that, though they are equal in value and dignity, God has given each of them some kind of unique role. If the marriage is a team of equals, his role is captaincy of the team. Hers is to partner with him, bringing all her contribution and strength to bear, so that the marriage team will be all and accomplish all it is meant to.

3. WIVES ARE TO WORK OUT THE INFLUENCE OF CHRIST IN THEIR MARRIAGES

The key clause is *'as is fitting in the Lord'*. The very way that she relates to her husband must reflect the influence of Christ upon her life, not the prevailing norms of the culture. Paul does not explain what this means, but leaves it to each woman to work out. We can only guess some ways that this was applied. Perhaps one wife had previously deemed herself inferior to her husband, but in Christ she finds a sense of equal value to Christ, of equal importance in the mission of God. Perhaps another wife once found her ultimate identity in her husband, but then the gospel challenged her to find her identity in Christ, and bring to her marriage a sense of wholeness rather than a neediness or loss of self.

4. HUSBANDS ARE TO LOVE THEIR WIVES

In those days, little advice was given to men about how they should treat their wives. Wives were seen as a man's property. In a court of law, for example, a woman's perspective was inadmissible, since he was always right. With this in mind, Paul's telling men how to treat their wives was countercultural in itself! Not only this, but Paul tells men to love their wives. In Ephesians 5, Paul explains that men are to model their love for their wives on Jesus who lay down his life in sacrificial love for his church, working for her radiance. Husbands are to deny themselves as they seek to bless, serve and love their wives. As Thomas Kempis wrote in *Imitation of Christ in 1450*, *'He who loves with purity considers not the gift of the lover, but the love of the giver.'* Wives do not exist for the benefit of the husband. If anything, the opposite is true. This is why one of the measures of a husband's spiritual maturity is the flourishing of his wife.

5. HUSBANDS ARE TO BE GENTLE WITH THEIR WIVES

Because of their superior strength and oft-louder voices, men in their sinfulness have tended to intimidate and bully their wives. But not in a gospel-influenced home! He must speak tenderly, be sensitive to her needs, and receptive to her words and perspectives. This will help wives who may fear being diminished in the process of trusting her husband's authority to relax into her vital contributing role.

A FEW DISCLAIMERS:

- 1) This verse does not say women should submit to men in general; it speaks about wives to their husbands.
- 2) The command to submit to any earthly authority is not absolute. If a husband were to lead his wife to sin for example, or if he was abusive or not mentally sound, she should not submit.
- 3) The practicalities of all of these are not given. Rather Paul speaks about the spirit with which spouses should relate to one another. Each couple must work out the implications for themselves.
- 4) Paul addressed a chauvinistic culture, not our modern egalitarian one. We can only guess what Paul may have written to our context. Perhaps the question we must ask is, as Paul seemed to, what difference does the gospel make to today's common problem areas in marriages?



20 Children, obey your parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord. 21 Fathers, do not provoke your children, lest they become discouraged.

CHILDREN SHOULD OBEY THEIR PARENTS

When this letter was read to the church, there would have been little children in the crowd, whose ears would have pricked up as they heard the word *'children'*. Overall, the Bible gives two commands regarding how children are to treat their parents. They are to obey them, as we see in this verse, and to honour them (see Eph 6:2). Obedience applies to younger children specifically, whereas honour is something even adult children can give to their parents.

In the Roman-Greco world, parents had authority over children, who were to always obey them. What Paul offers that is new is a new reason for doing so. Not because 'it's the right thing to do!' Not because 'you'll be in a lot of trouble if you don't!' But because it *'pleases the Lord'*. Without a deep motive like that – the desire to please God – one could only expect external obedience in a child, not a heart-level obedience too.

PARENTS ARE NOT TO PROVOKE THEIR CHILDREN

The Greek word *'pateres'* is usually translated 'father' but can also be translated 'parent'. This instruction likely applies to both parents, but Paul must know enough fathers whom he thinks really need to hear this!

'Do not provoke your children'. This is Paul's main directive to parents. The word provoke can also be translated as harass, aggravate, vex, exasperate or irritate. We should not needlessly frustrate our children.

As with his prior instructions to husbands [v19], Paul is once again being countercultural. Children were seen as the property of their parents. Parents could do whatever they liked with their kids! Yet Paul goes into uncharted water by telling parents, particularly fathers, how to treat their children.

No practicalities are given for how to not provoke our children. It is for us to work out this principle in our parenting.

But surely the greatest implication is a failure to give our children what they most need – love, leadership and latitude - or to give it in a needlessly frustrating way...

GIVE CHILDREN UNCONDITIONAL LOVE

Nothing damages and provokes a child more than not being loved. Not only must we genuinely love our children, but we must express that love in a way that they can register and feel – through time, touch, gifts, words and acts of service.

GIVE CHILDREN GOOD LEADERSHIP

Not providing good leadership is a form of abuse. *One aspect of leadership is giving rules and boundaries.* When giving your children rules, see to it that the rules are age-appropriate, reasonable, not excessive, clearly communicated, not constantly changing and not randomly ascribed. As the child grows older and smarter, reasons for various rules need to be articulated. *Another aspect of good leadership is assigning consequences fairly and wisely.* We should never discipline and correct our children in anger. Certainly, parents must be firm, but that is not the same as harsh. We should not be graceless nitpickers and faultfinders. We should separate moral from less consequential rules. For example, this happens when a parent responds with the exact same kind of intensity and level of discipline to a child when they do something moral (like hurting another child) or something amoral (like clumsily bumping over a glass). We should try to understand the unique temperament of the child and how this influences their actions, as well as to the kind of discipline that will work best with them. *Another aspect of good leadership is taking every chance to pass wisdom on for faith and life.* Deuteronomy 6 speaks of impressing God's word and wisdom on our children: *'Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up.'* Paul Tripp writes in *Age of Opportunity*:

'In the family, life is brought not only to our doorstep, but into our kitchens, bedrooms, and dens. In the family, life is happening all around us, and it begs to be questioned, evaluated, interpreted, and discussed. There is no more consistent, pregnant, dynamic forum for instruction about life than the family, because that is exactly what God designed the family to be, a learning community.'

GIVE CHILDREN LATITUDE

Love and leadership give our children roots, but we also need to give them wings. A child is a separate person, and one task of parenting is to inculcate a sense of independence progressively. Never allowing our kids the freedom to make choices and mistakes is itself a form of abuse. Micro-managing our children, constantly criticizing our children, not affirming their unique gifts and talents, not giving them the freedom to say what they think, feel and want, and solving every problem for them – these are all surefire ways to damage a person for life.

DON'T FEED DISCOURAGEMENT IN YOUR CHILDREN

What happens when we fail to give our children the unconditional love, the good leadership, and the progressive latitude they need? Paul says they will become 'discouraged'. They lose heart or become dispirited. They have neither roots nor wings – and the frustration they feel in their childhood tends to be amplified into their adult years. We all tend to view the world through the lens of the kind of parenting we received. So if our parents were harsh and against us, it will feel like life is harsh and against us. Even more seriously, we tend to view God through the lens of our parents. If our parents are faultfinders, excessive in their discipline, emotionally distant or conditional in their love, this becomes a hurdle to be overcome in our relationship with God. Thankfully our Father in heaven can re-parent us, but what a gift it is when our parents more accurately reflect our encouraging God to us.



Whatever you do, work whole-heartedly, as for the Lord and not for men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward. You are serving the Lord Christ.

COLOSSIANS 3:23-24



WEEK SIX

COLOSSIANS 3:22-4:18



3:22 Slaves, obey in everything those who are your earthly masters, not by way of eye-service, as people-pleasers, but with sincerity of heart, fearing the Lord. 23 Whatever you do, work whole-heartedly, as for the Lord and not for men, 24 knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward. You are serving the Lord Christ. 25 For the wrongdoer will be paid back for the wrong he has done, and there is no partiality. 4:1 Masters, treat your slaves justly and fairly, knowing that you also have a Master in heaven.

THERE IS A MODERN PARALLEL: EMPLOYEE-EMPLOYER RELATIONSHIPS

In the first century, almost half of the population of the major Roman cities were slaves. They were not slaves in the same way that the New World enslaved people in the 1700s. For example, there was still a degree of civility built into the treatment of slaves, which is why most of the professionals of that day – such as doctors and masons - were slaves. The closest parallel modern concept for the word ‘slave’ is ‘employee’.

EMPLOYEES ARE TO WORK WITH ALL DILIGENCE

So we see in these verses how employees should express their faith in Christ in the area of work. *Christian employees are to...*

- Be obedient and co-operative, submitting to authority, doing what they are told to do. This does not apply if they are instructed to sin, however (see Acts 5:39).
- Consistently work well and honestly, when watched and when not watched. They are not only to give ‘eye-service.’
- Not be people-pleasers, but should rather be a God-pleaser, working as though Jesus himself were their supervisor.
- Be sincere in heart, honest and reliable.
- Be whole-hearted and diligent in their work, doing their very best.
- Know that Christ himself, their true Master, will either reward their good work (v24) or repay their bad work (v25).

EMPLOYERS ARE TO TREAT THEIR EMPLOYEES FAIRLY

‘Masters, treat your slaves justly and fairly’ (4:1). In the workplace how are those of us in authority over others to act? We are to be fair and just in the way we supervise people. Every employer must work out for themselves what this means for their particular context and situation. It may include such things as giving a clear and realistic job description, sufficient hours or days off so that the employee can rest and spend time with loved ones and be involved in the life of a church, paying fairly, acquitting in a fair way, and doing what we can to help develop the competency of the person, so that they progress towards their full potential. Paul gives the reason for treating employees fairly: *‘knowing that you also have a Master in heaven’ (4:1).*

THIS MEANS AT LEAST TWO THINGS:

- 1) We need to lead and supervise others in a similar spirit to the way Christ leads and supervises us. If Christ were to be an employer, how would he go about that?
- 2) We need to lead and supervise others, knowing that we ourselves are accountable to Christ himself. Those in power over other people must remember that all authority ultimately derives from Christ himself. We are under Christ's authority, who watches and rewards/repays us for our treatment of others. This brings us to a second important theme of this passage...

DO WHAT YOU CAN TO GAIN AND NOT LOSE YOUR INHERITANCE

Though these verses speak primarily about our attitudes to our work and the relationship between employer and employee, they are also full of insight into how we can either gain or lose our inheritance.

Paul teaches that over and above our salvation, which is absolutely secure, Christ has an inheritance for us. What's that? It is the reward – Paul speaks of *'inheritance as your reward'* (3:24) – that God wants to give us for our faithful, persevering and faithful obedience to him. This reward may come partially in this life, but it will come fully when we stand before the Judgment Seat of Christ, when he says the words, *'Well done my good and faithful servant'* (Matt 25:21). This reward essentially is the honour, affirmation and praise that Jesus gives us. Jesus tells us to make an effort to obtain God's praise rather than the praise and applause of people (John 5:44). Elsewhere the Bible speaks of this reward as our crown and our prize.

We must not confuse salvation, which is undeserved, with reward, which is deserved. The gifts of God's acceptance, justification, new birth and heaven are fully given to a person upon their salvation, never to be lost (John 10:27). They are secure. But over and above these gifts, God wants to reward us. Although all Christians are equally saved, not all Christians are equally rewarded.

Not only can our inheritance be gained, it can also be lost. The persistent wrongdoer will be *'paid back for the wrong they have done'* (v25). There is *'no partiality'* (v25) in this – just because we're God's child does not mean we're off the hook.

Those of us who persistently fail to trust and obey Jesus, who live for the approval of people more than God, and who fail to love and serve the people he calls us to love and serve, will forfeit something. Instead of praising us, Jesus will rebuke us. Our salvation will not be lost, but we *'will suffer loss'* (1 Cor 3:15). What will it be like to be an unrewarded Christian in heaven? We have no idea – the Bible does not say. We will still be loved and forgiven of course, but at the very least, our interaction with Jesus on Judgment Day will involve deep regret.

The letter to the Colossians gives many motivations for faithful, uncompromised living: gratitude for grace given; love for God and others; a new identity in Christ to live out; and chances to draw outsiders in. But let's not forget this one: the promise of reward and the threat of losing it.



2 Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving. **3** At the same time, pray also for us, that God may open to us a door for the word, to declare the mystery of Christ, on account of which I am in prison - **4** that I may make it clear, which is how I ought to speak.

12 Epaphras... is... always struggling on your behalf in his prayers, that you may stand mature and fully assured in all the will of God.

This last section in Paul's letter speaks about the different ways that God works through us. God works through us as we pray (v2-4), as we witness (v5-6), and as we work together (v7-18). In today's three verses we learn about the importance of prayer. Like lungs need air, Christians need prayer. Jesus came to reconcile us to the Father, and the Spirit lives in us to empower constant access to the Father through a life of prayerfulness. As EM Bounds in his book *Power in Prayer* writes, 'Prayer should not be regarded as a duty which must be performed, but rather as a privilege to be enjoyed, a rare delight that is always revealing some new beauty.'

| HOW ARE WE TO PRAY?

PRAY ON YOUR OWN AND WITH OTHERS

Apparently Paul and Timothy had regular prayer gatherings where they prayed for the Colossian church (1:1,3,9). Similarly, the first church devoted themselves to praying together (Acts 2:42). We should also commit to pray with others regularly. But we will also read of how Epaphras prayed for them on his own (4:12). We should also pray on our own.

PRAY FOR YOURSELF AND FOR OTHERS

Notice the phrase, 'At the same time, pray also for us' (v3). It suggests that while the church was praying for themselves, they should not forget to also pray for others – in this case for Paul.

PRAY WITH STEADFASTNESS

Paul combines the words 'continue' and 'steadfast' (v2) to highlight the great effort to be steadily applied in our praying. Said another way, there needs to be something militant about our praying. Spurgeon, preaching on the phrase 'continue steadfastly' said:

'Heaven's gate is not to be stormed by one weapon but by many. Spare no arrows, Christian. Watch and see that none of the arms in your armoury are rusty. Besiege the throne of God with a hundred hands, and look at the promise with a hundred eyes. You have a great work on hand – you are to move the arm that moves the world. Watch, then, for every means of moving that arm. See to it that you ply every promise; that you use every argument; that you wrestle with all might.'

PRAY WITH DISCIPLINE

If we only pray when we feel like it, we are in danger. We are most vulnerable to temptation and spiritual attack when we don't feel like praying. Satan does not mind if we fill up our lives with so-called Christian activities, but forget to pray. He does not mind our efforts to minister to others if they are not rooted in a prayerful attitude of dependence upon God. It is our dependence upon God that makes us so dangerous to the devil. A prayerless life is as foolish as a soldier marching into battle without weapons or armour. We're doomed to fail. Jesus instructed his disciples not just to pray on the night of his and their temptation, but to *'watch and pray'* (Matt 26:41) – in that order. It is watching and sober alertness that keeps us on our knees.

Two general guidelines to prayer are as follows:

- 1) Set aside a time and place every day to pray, and then diligently protect these times.
- 2) Stay prayerful all day long. Find ways to keep on reminding yourself to keep that posture of prayer.

PRAY WITH GRATITUDE

Pray *'with thanksgiving'* (v2). God loves gratitude and he hates ingratitude. In the same way little children are to be taught gratitude, so even followers of Jesus need to be taught to thank God for all his goodness to them. Three practical ideas are to: 1) include gratitude in your times of prayer (not just asking God for what we need, but thanking him for ways he has already answered prayers), 2) give thanks before eating meals, 3) in the last minutes of your day give thanks for every sign of God's goodness in the day.

PRAY FOR THE GOSPEL TO GO FORWARD

Paul asks for prayer for a door to open for the gospel message (v3), and for clarity and power in proclaiming it (v4). Let's not forget that Paul was in prison. You'd think he'd say, 'Pray for me that my prison door could open.' But Paul is more concerned with the forward movement of the gospel than his own. Instead he asks God for open doors for the gospel.

PRAY FOR PROGRESS IN GOD

A few verses down (v12), Paul comes back to the theme of prayer. He mentions the example of Epaphras, the very man who had introduced the Colossians to Christ. In his example we see that prayer is based on love, and true love leads us to pray. The Colossians were vulnerable to temptation, so Epaphras 'struggled' in prayer for them. We too can plead with God for others. And like Epaphras, we can pray that people will come to *'stand mature and fully assured in all the will of God'*. Coming to faith in Jesus is but the starting line. Now we need to make progress in assurance, maturity and doing God's will. We can pray this for others, and ourselves.

In fact, progress is impossible without prayer. As Richard Foster in *Celebration of Discipline* writes, *'Prayers changes things. But more than that, prayer changes the person who prays.'*



5 Walk in wisdom toward outsiders, making the best use of the time. 6 Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person.

GOD WORKS THROUGH US TO WIN PEOPLE WHO DON'T YET KNOW HIM

Paul has just spoken of his commitment to reach people far from God (v3-4). Now he tells us that we should share that same commitment – winsomely and wisely engaging ‘outsiders’ (v5) in the hope they too will become ‘insiders’. Jesus used the term first: *‘The secret of the kingdom of God has been given to you. But to those on the outside everything is said in parables’ (Mark 4:11)*. Paul gives us several instructions about how to relate to outsiders in such a way that we can reach them...

LIVE WISELY

‘Walk in wisdom toward outsiders’. Though we should be more concerned about our character than our reputation, we nonetheless should be thoughtful about the impression we are making on people with regards to our faith.

Recently, David Kinnaman of the *Barna Institute* surveyed the things that most put off people – both insiders and outsiders – from Christianity.

He came up with six main things:

- *Isolationism* – when Christians attack everything outside church, including the music, movies, culture, and technology that define our generation.
- *Shallowness* – when church is boring, Bible teaching is unclear or God is absent from our church experience.
- *Anti-science* – when the church fails to reconcile their interpretation grid of Genesis with scientific discovery.
- *Sex* – when Christians are over-simplistic, judgmental or denigrate the gift and beauty of sex while trying to address sexual sin.
- *Exclusivity* – when Christians fail to respectfully engage other belief systems in a pluralistic age.
- *Doubters* – when Christians don’t admit their doubts, and show how even doubt is an important part of the journey of faith. If we are going to wisely engage our culture, we must deal with these self-sabotaging ways of being a Christian in our society.

BE OPPORTUNISTIC

We are to *‘make the best use of the time’*. The clause can also be translated, *‘redeem the opportunities’*. God will bring many unbelieving people across our path – perhaps family members, friends, colleagues, neighbours or perfect strangers. We should expect that he will provide many unforced openings to have a meaningful spiritual conversation

with them. In this conversation we can find out where they are spiritually, or share the difference Jesus has made in our lives, or share an aspect of the gospel with them, or invite them to come to something that will engage them – like a Sunday meeting.

HAVE SPIRITUAL CONVERSATIONS IN A GRACIOUS, SALTY WAY

'Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt'. Gracious means we're not heated, harsh, argumentative or arrogant. It is possible to win the argument yet lose the person. Rather we communicate in a way where we listen even more than we speak, respect the person even if we differ with their views, and do what we can to build common ground in our beliefs (so that, off that common base, we more effectively tackle differences of view). These conversations should be salty. Salt does two things: it prevents decay and it makes us thirsty. As we speak to people about Christ, we should represent him well, and should provoke curiosity. One way to do this is to ask good, thought-provoking questions:

- *'What is your faith background?'*
- *'What led you to believe that?'*
- *'What stops you from exploring Jesus Christ?'*
- *'Is there a sense of void in your life?'*

PREPARE FOR SUCH CONVERSATIONS

Paul says we should know how we ought to answer each person. This suggests that we have given much thought to what we believe, why we believe it, the most common objections to faith in Christ, and to communicating this all in a way that is easy to understand. Having said that, we should not wait until we have all the answers to start having these spiritual conversations. In fact, it is as we have many such conversations that we grow in our skill and knowledge.

When we talk with someone and realize that we don't have an answer to the question they pose, it's much better to say, 'That's a good question. Let me think about that some more. Can I get back to you on it?' Then we find the answer. Some ideas include:

- Exploring the top apologetic websites listed on www.reasonsforgod.org/recommended-websites.
- Going to www.commonground.co.za and clicking on Tough Questions.
- Two books by Tim Keller: *Making Sense of God* and *Reason for God*.

Then we can lend them the book, or send them a link to something online, or recap what we learnt, and continue the conversation. That said, many times we do not have to have answers for people's objections at all. In many cases, merely listening respectfully tends to get the obstacle to faith 'off their chest', and then they are ready to hear more. Another option is to invite them to Alpha – or a similar course which exposes people to the gospel in a non-pressurized way over many weeks.

DON'T FORGET TO PRAY

We should not read verses 4-5 about a lifestyle of reaching out to others without first reading verses 2-3, which are about a lifestyle of prayerfulness. It is as we prayerfully depend on God, and are prayerfully guided and empowered by the Spirit, that we become more attuned to the opportunities at hand, having the words to say. Little prayer to God means little power with people!



7 *Tychicus will tell you all about my activities. He is a beloved brother and faithful minister and fellow servant in the Lord. 8 I have sent him to you for this very purpose, that you may know how we are and that he may encourage your hearts, 9 and with him Onesimus, our faithful and beloved brother, who is one of you. They will tell you of everything that has taken place here.*

10 *Aristarchus my fellow prisoner greets you, and Mark the cousin of Barnabas (concerning whom you have received instructions— if he comes to you, welcome him), 11 and Jesus who is called Justus. These are the only men of the circumcision among my fellow workers for the kingdom of God, and they have been a comfort to me.*

12 *Epaphras, who is one of you, a servant of Christ Jesus, greets you, always struggling on your behalf in his prayers, that you may stand mature and fully assured in all the will of God. 13 For I bear him witness that he has worked hard for you and for those in Laodicea and in Hierapolis. 14 Luke the beloved physician greets you, as does Demas.*

PAUL DID NOT LIKE TO WORK SOLO

He understood (as all great leaders do) that people in God's work should not monopolize the ministry opportunities, but rather multiply them. Paul selected a variety of people who partnered with him in his work. He spent time with them, built meaningful relationships with them, traveled with them, accepted their support, and sent them out to represent him. He spoke well of them to others, building them up in the process. Where did Paul get his passion for building team? His theology of God ennobled the value team – God is Father, Son and Holy Spirit, teaming together first in creation, then in salvation, and now in kingdom come. But there was also Jesus' example of building a team of apostles around himself.

LET'S LOOK AT PAUL'S TEAM

In these verses we see a list 8 men, all in contact with Paul in Rome, during the time of imprisonment. In this time in prison (unlike a later one described in 2 Timothy) Paul, though chained, enjoyed visits from many friends. Why is there no mention of women like Priscilla, Phoebe and Lydia? It was probably unsafe for women to come into an all-male Roman prison. Let's meet his team...

- **TYCHICHUS** - *Tychicus was 'a beloved brother and faithful minister and fellow servant in the Lord' (v7).* A native of Asia Minor, he joined Paul during Paul's ministry travels (see Acts 20:4). Along with Onesimus, he carried this letter, as well as the letter to the Ephesians (see Eph 6:21-22).

- **ONESIMUS** - Onesimus, a runaway slave from Colossae, had belonged to a Christian man, Philemon. He had run away to Rome, then somehow met Paul in prison. Paul led him to Christ and persuaded him to be reconciled to his master. He returned to his master, along with another biblical letter Paul wrote (*Philemon*), asking Philemon to mercifully forgive him. The other six men sent stayed with Paul and sent greetings...
- **ARISTARCHUS** - Aristarchus from Thessalonica (Acts 20:4) had been with Paul when the Ephesian mob had seized him (Acts 19:29). He also set sail with Paul for Rome, enduring a shipwreck (Acts 27:2). The other men in Paul's team simply visited Paul while he was in his Roman prison. It appears that Aristarchus made himself Paul's slave so that he could be imprisoned with Paul.
- **MARK** - Mark (aka John Mark) later authored *Mark's Gospel*. He had a spotted history. He had earlier accompanied Paul on a missionary journey and then abandoned him (Acts 13:13). Paul and Barnabas later had a sharp disagreement over him (Acts 15:39). Paul felt Mark was not reliable enough to take along on another trip. But look at God's redemption: years later Paul is ready to trust him as a fellow-worker once again.
- **JUSTUS** - We know nothing of Jesus, also known as Justus, other than that he shared the same of someone very important. Only Aristarchus, Mark and Justus were Jewish ('*men of the circumcision*' (v11)). The rest were Gentiles...
- **EPAPHRAS** - Epaphras, led to Christ by Paul in Ephesus, returned to his home town of Colossae, and planted the Colossians church. Though away from them, he carried the Colossian church close to his heart, constantly praying for them to withstand the false teaching that was tempting the church. He also started churches in Hierapolis and Loadicea (v13).
- **LUKE** - Luke the '*beloved physician*' accompanied Paul on some of his journeys, as well as his two-year imprisonment in Caesarea, and his two-year Roman imprisonment. We are very grateful to this man for bringing his great intellect and research methods to *Luke's Gospel* and *Acts* (see also 2 Tim. 4:11; Philem. 24). It is possible that Luke was in Rome to deliver his writings to a friend of the court, Theophilus (Luke 1:3, Acts 1:1) – and perhaps hoped to use it as part of Paul's legal defence.
- **DEMAS** - Sadly, Demas later became compromised and deserted Paul (2 Tim. 4:10). In Paul's final mention of him (see 2 Tim 4:10), Paul tells us that Demas had forsaken him, having loved this present world.

WE LEARN SOME PRINCIPLES OF TEAM LEADERSHIP:

- 1) Build team. Do God's work yourself, but at the same time identify, recruit, nurture and release fellow-workers. The advance of God's work is multiplied as we multiply 'fellow workers for the kingdom of God' (v11).
- 2) When times are tough, lean on each other.
- 3) Risk with people – we think of the risks Paul took, taking on people with relational problems like Onesimus and previous quitters like Mark.
- 4) Praise the good qualities of your team members.
- 5) Cherish the relationships. Before they are partners in God's work, they are brothers and sisters in Christ.



15 Give my greetings to the brothers at Laodicea, and to Nympha and the church in her house. 16 And when this letter has been read among you, have it also read in the church of the Laodiceans; and see that you also read the letter from Laodicea.

17 And say to Archippus, "See that you fulfill the ministry that you have received in the Lord." 18 I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand. Remember my chains. Grace be with you.

THANK GOD FOR YOUR BIBLE

What a privilege to have the New Testament. Nowadays, as individuals, so many of us have an entire New Testament. It is a library of 27 letters and documents that were written, in the early decades following Christ's return to his Father, by the apostles and those who knew the apostles. The Gospels and Acts aside, 22 of them were letters written to specific churches or leaders.

But go back to the first century. No individual had a New Testament. And churches, at best, might have had a copy of only a few of these 27 documents. In verse 16, not surprisingly, Paul tells them to have (a copy of?) this letter read to the nearby Laodicean church. He also wrote a letter to Laodicea and wanted that read to the Colossians. They also possibly had the Ephesian letter, which was originally in Tychicus' possession (Eph 6:21-22), but was probably a circular letter for all churches. This reminds us how grateful for the New Testament we do have. Let us never grow over-familiar with this treasure!

OPEN UP YOUR HOME

Up until the third or fourth century there was no such thing as a church building. Though larger congregations may have hired larger venues (see Acts 19:9), churches in the Roman cities tended to meet in several homes across the city (see Acts 18:7, Rom 16:5 and 1 Cor 16:19). Archeological evidence reveals that some wealthier Christians structurally modified their home to fit more people. This means that a city church met in smaller circles of fellowship in various homes across the city. This is the case in Colossae, where some Christians met in the home of a woman called Nympha (v15), and others in the house of Philemon (Philemon 2). Though larger venues are useful, we must also make our homes available for doing God's work. The large Jerusalem church '*met in temple courts and from house to house*' (Acts 5:42) – both are needed.

FULFILL THE MINISTRY YOU HAVE RECEIVED IN THE LORD

Though the whole letter is written for all the church, verse 17 is written for one person in particular, Archippus. Paul publicly targets him for encouragement. All we know about Archippus is that he likely lived in the home of Philemon and Apphia (see Philemon 1-2), and that Paul described him as a fellow-soldier in God's work. Apparently, Paul had at

one point met him and had a conversation with Archippus about how he could best serve Christ.

In that single verse we learn some of the basics of finding and fulfilling ministries that Jesus gives us as individuals: 1) *Ministry is received 'in the Lord'*. Ministry is something Christ commissions. We're ultimately accountable to him for what he tells us to do. 2) *Christ gives us different kinds of ministry*. We're all wired differently by God, and surrounded by very different opportunities and challenges that shape what ministry will look like for us. Additionally, the Spirit may lead two people with identical wirings and contexts to serve Christ in different ways. Ministry is something that flows out of our personal relationship with Christ. 3) *We're all in danger of starting, but not finishing*. Ministry may be left unfulfilled. One must take heed that their ministry is *'fulfilled'*. 4) *We should encourage others to fulfill their ministry*. Perhaps Archippus had become discouraged by all the pressures or distracted by other pursuits. He needed Paul to remind him and stir up passion in him again. We are all in danger of being discouraged or distracted simply because we fail to encourage each other in fulfilling our ministries.

ONE DAY IN HEAVEN, LET US HONOUR PAUL

Paul ends his letter by asking the Colossian Christians to remember him before the Lord. He writes the greeting with *'his own hand'* – Timothy had been functioning as Paul's secretary to whom he dictates the letter (see 1:1), but now right at the end Paul takes the stylus and signs the letter personally (see also 1 Cor. 16:21; 2 Thes 3:17).

When we see him in heaven, let's be sure to thank him for the chains and suffering he endured to pioneer the church into Asia Minor and in Europe – which would later become the fountainhead for the explosion of the church into the rest of the world. And let's thank him for the letters that he was able to write, most likely because he was in prison – it offered him time to think and write, as well as blocking him from face-to-face communication, which would not have benefited us.

Especially, let's thank him for letting God speak to us through Colossians, a book that has enlightened and equipped us to grasp the gospel and the growth it brings (1:1-12), to rightly magnify Jesus Christ – both his person and work (1:13-23), to inspire us to do the work of helping others both find and follow Jesus (1:24-2:7), to resist false teachings that would undermine our confidence and identity in Christ (2:8-3:4), to become truly human, reflecting the character of Jesus (3:5-17), to discover the imperative of seeing our relationships at home and work redeemed (3:18-4:1), and to know the thrill of how God works through us (4:2-18).

Said another way, this letter has helped us to see and savour *Jesus as our Lord, our Life and our Love*. Jesus is the Lord of creation, the church, new creation and ministry (chapter 1). He is also the Lord of our walk, our salvation and our growth (chapter 2). He is our very Life, drawing every part of us into himself – mind, body, attitudes and actions (chapter 3). Finally, he is Love – steeped in his Lordship and Life, we learn to be a riverbed of his love. Upwards, we love God in prayer; outwards, we love outsiders in mission; and inwards, we love fellow-believers in community and gospel-advancing partnership (chapter 4).

Is Jesus *really* enough? This letter helps us answer with full conviction: Absolutely!

CREDITS

Written by Terran Williams, congregational leader and pastor at Common Ground Church, edited by his wife, Julie.

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The biblical text used is the English Standard Version, Crossway Bibles: 2001.

OTHER THAN THE BOOKS MENTIONED ABOVE, TERRAN DREW MOST OF HIS INSIGHTS FROM SEVERAL BOOKS:

- Bentley, Michael. *The Guide to Colossians and Philemon*. Evangelical Press Auburn, USA, 2002
- Eaton, Michael. *Preaching through the Bible: Colossians*. Sovereign World Publishers, England, 2005
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ONLINE RESOURCES USED INCLUDE:

- Spurgeon's sermons archive: www.spurgeon.org/index/rindex.php
- ESV Study Bible. Good News Publishers, 2001
- www.biblehub.com - in particular, the interlinear and cross-reference tool
- www.bibletools.org - in particular, the study of the original manuscripts and other uses of the same Greek words in the New Testament

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