

Word & Spirit Bible Study Notes on Colossians & Philemon

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Col 1:1-5a

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

Who we are

Paul has an amazing way of packing a huge amount of theology into just a few words. Notice how everyone is described in these opening verses. He doesn't say "From Paul and Timothy, to those in Colosse". Instead, both the authors and recipients of this letter are described in some way, relating to what God has done in them.

So Paul describes himself as an *apostle*, a man on a mission, and this is by *the will of God*. In other words, he knew that it was God's sovereignty and grace, not his own choice that made him who he was, and gave him his authority.

Timothy (and the Colossians) are described as *brothers*. This speaks of the fact that now, in Christ, we are all members of one family, even if we come from different nationalities or cultural backgrounds. It also reminds us of the family love that should exist between us as believers. And it also speaks of the equality between us - despite his apostolic authority in the Lord, Paul speaks to them as their brother.

Finally, the Colossians themselves are described as being *saints* and those who are *faithful*. This is not flattery, it is God's gracious work in them that has given them faith¹ and made them holy². These words speak of what God *has done* in justifying them, and what he *is doing* in sanctifying them.

What we need

If there is one thing that Paul repeatedly prays that the readers of his letters will receive it is *grace* and *peace*. For Paul, grace and peace are not just what we already have received in the gospel - a free gift we did not deserve, that brings us peace with God³. They are also what we need to go on receiving, particularly as we seek to live out our faith in a hostile and difficult world. The good news is that God has an inexhaustible supply of grace and peace that he loves to lavish on us.

What we have

Paul is overwhelmed with thankfulness though, at the evidence of God already at work amongst them. In particular, he mentions three things, which are marks of all true believers. First, *faith* in Jesus Christ, the non-negotiable beginning point of the Christian life. Second, *love* for one another, the sure evidence of the work of the Spirit⁴. And third, *hope* that is not based on anything in this world, (that is on anything that could let us down), but is safe and secure in heaven.

¹ Although 'faithful' here probably has to do with their steadfast commitment. This also is an evidence of grace

² This is not to say they are perfectly holy now, but rather that they have been "set apart" for God.

³ This is just one aspect of what is meant by "peace". Like the Hebrew word "Shalom" it refers more generally to all the blessings that come from being part of God's family.

⁴ This is love for "all" the saints, not just loving people we naturally would get on with.

Col 1:5b-8

^{5b}Of this [hope] you have heard before in the word of the truth, the gospel, ⁶which 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, ⁷just as you learned it from Epaphras our beloved fellow servant. He is a faithful minister of Christ on your behalf⁸and has made known to us your love in the Spirit.

Gospel Truth

Paul has just been giving thanks for the faith, love and hope evidenced by the Colossian believers. But how did they come to have such a hope? His answer is “the gospel”. The gospel, or “good news” as we can call it, is the message that Paul wanted to spread. It is the gospel of *truth*, worthy of being believed and accepted by all. It is the gospel of *grace*, for it primarily tells about the free gift of forgiveness and life that we could not earn. And, as Paul will demonstrate later in this letter, it is the gospel of *Jesus Christ* - all the blessings and benefits come through him, and as a result of what he did in his death, resurrection and ascension.

Gospel Growth

The great thing about the gospel is that it has power to save people and change lives, and as long as there are people taking the gospel out and proclaiming it, then it will *bear fruit* and *grow*. The gospel is “bearing fruit” whenever a person believes the truth and trusts Jesus, but it also bears fruit as we continue to live in the light of the truth of the gospel - as we grow in faith, love and hope. This happens because those who receive the gospel also receive the gift of the Spirit, who enables us to live in a new way, filled with love for God and others.

Gospel Minister

We are also introduced here to the person who took the gospel message to the Colossians. His name was Epaphras, and quite possibly he had gone with the gospel to Colosse while Paul was imprisoned. Epaphras is described as a *servant*, indicating he was like Jesus in the way he acted. He was not seeking a position of honour for himself, but humbly served people by bringing them the good news. Epaphras is also called *faithful*. He applied himself wholeheartedly to the work of spreading the gospel, without giving up in the face of difficulty. He also kept the gospel message intact, not changing it or leaving any parts out, but proclaiming it faithfully.

Col 1:9-12

⁹And 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, ¹⁰so as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God. ¹¹May you be strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might, for all endurance and patience with joy, ¹²giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in light.

Fully Understanding

When Paul heard about the new believers in Colosse, his response was not just thanksgiving, but earnest prayer on their behalf. Paul was never complacent about perseverance in the faith, and he could often be found praying for believers that they would keep going and keep growing.

The first thing he prays for is for knowledge of the will of God. This, of course, includes knowing what things God's word permits and prohibits, but it is deeper than that. Spiritual wisdom and understanding enables us to apply the principles of God's word to our lives in a pagan culture, where we often have to make difficult choices about what we should, and should not do.

Fully Pleasing

If we have this sort of spiritual wisdom, and a deep understanding of the will of God, then it is possible to live in a way that pleases God. Paul calls this "walking in a manner worthy of the Lord". Understanding who we are as those "in Christ" should make a radical difference to the way we live our lives. Our behaviour can bring glory to God, but we must be careful never to bring disgrace on the name of Jesus.

The life that pleases God has two aspects to it. First, we are "bearing fruit" in "good works". That means that we do not remain self-absorbed, but we are actively seeking out ways to serve and do good to others. Second, we are continually increasing in our knowledge of God. This is relational not theoretical knowledge. It means that we are getting to know him by spending time in his presence, in prayer and worship, and meditation on his Word.

Fully Strong

Another thing Paul prays for is that they will have power. At first we might think this is power to perform miracles or power to defeat sin, but, as important as those things may be, this power and strength is for something else. It is power to persevere, to keep going, to endure difficult circumstances. Power to be patient in the face of trials that have no end in sight. And, most amazing of all - power to joyfully give thanks in the midst of it all. This is power that we all need, and we should especially pray that our brothers and sisters going through suffering and hardship would experience it.

Fully Qualified

How can we be thankful as we endure difficult circumstances? Paul gives us a reason for such joyfulness - we have an "inheritance". He says we are "qualified" to share in the inheritance. This is a reference to our adoption as sons and daughters of the Father. We need no more qualifications than that. Even those good works, by which we please God, do not make us any more qualified than we already are. And what is our "inheritance"? It is our future hope of resurrection, and life forever in God's presence. Our suffering is not endless, and because of our hope, we don't despair, but joyfully press on.

Col 1:13-16

¹³He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, ¹⁴in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins. ¹⁵He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. ¹⁶For 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.

King

Paul has been telling the Colossians all the things about them he is thankful for, and the things he is praying for them, but now he moves the focus of attention directly onto Jesus. This is especially important to him, since it would seem that the Colossians are being influenced by false teachers who are taking their attention away from Jesus. In these verses we see several truths about Jesus.

First, he is a *king*. When we become a Christian we have been transferred from one kingdom to another - from darkness into light. There is a new government in our lives. Whereas once we were ruled over by sin and Satan, now we are ruled over by righteousness and Jesus. So we are to think of Jesus as the reigning sovereign over the kingdom of God - the one to whom we owe our allegiance and obedience.

Redeemer

Second, he is our *redeemer*. Our transfer into God's kingdom did not come without a great cost. He bought us back at the price of his own blood. It was his blood that paid the price for our sins to be forgiven⁵. Elsewhere, Paul taught that the "wages" of sin is death (Rom 6:23) - by our sinful rebellion against God we have "earned" ourselves a death sentence. Yet, Jesus came as our substitute, dying in our place, taking the penalty that should have been ours, and opening the way for our sins to be forgiven. We are therefore to think of Jesus as our rescuer, who loved us so much that he gave himself to save us.

Revealer

Third, he is the *revealer* of God. Since God is invisible, how can we get to know him, or to see what he is like? It is true that God revealed himself in many ways throughout the Old Testament, including through his laws and his mighty acts of rescue for the people of Israel. But his ultimate self-revelation is Jesus Christ himself. He bears the image of God, meaning that as we come to see and know Jesus, we get to know God himself. And as we are conformed more into the image of Jesus, we also are being changed to bear the image of God, which is what we were created for in the first place. We therefore should think of Jesus as our example, the one we are to constantly look to, to see the glory of God.

Creator

Fourth, he is our *creator*. In calling Jesus "the firstborn over all creation", Paul does not mean that God made Jesus as the first part of creation⁶. No, Jesus is clearly said here to have been directly involved in the entire creative work of God. He made everything on planet earth and in

⁵ v14 there is something of a mixed metaphor here. Redemption pictures a price paid to free a slave. Forgiveness pictures cancelling the debt of a penalty owed. Jesus' blood paid the price of both our rescue from slavery to sin and our forgiveness for sin. (see also verse 20 for another way of saying this)

⁶ Firstborn probably has a metaphorical meaning - the firstborn son in ancient cultures was the preeminent one. It may well allude to Ps 89:27

outer space. Paul also wants us to know that Jesus made even the invisible things - angels and demons, powers and principalities that exist in the spiritual realm which we only have limited knowledge of. Because of this, none of these things can rival his power or glory in any way. So we should think of Jesus as all powerful, and worthy of being completely trusted.

Col 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.

The First

These verses continue with Paul's exaltation of Jesus, and we get to see several more aspects of his greatness here. Jesus is not just first in terms of importance, but first in terms of time - he existed before anything else; he was there in the beginning. He was also firstborn from the dead. That is not to say that he was the first person ever to be raised from the dead (because there had been several before him, Lazarus for example), but that he was the first to be raised to immortality - the first one to experience the end-times bodily resurrection promised in Scripture. All things "hold together" in him, which is another way of saying that the very universe itself couldn't exist without him. Our very existence is dependent on Jesus.

The Head

We have seen that Jesus is supreme as Lord over creation, but he is also supreme as Lord over his church, which is his new creation. Whatever system of church leadership we believe to be most biblical, ultimately, the head of the church is Jesus. He should be recognised as the one in control, the one who unites us, not just as local churches but as the worldwide universal Church. We can think of the church we attend as "my church" in terms of *belonging*, but never as "my church" in terms of *ownership*. Jesus is owner and ruler of his church. It is what he wants for it that ultimately matters.

The Fullness

In verse 19 we have a very significant statement about who Jesus is. He is not just a prophet. He is not even a powerful angelic being, sent from heaven to earth. He is fully divine, with all the "fullness of God" dwelling within him. Everything Paul has been saying about him in these verses points us to the fact that this is no ordinary person, but this is Immanuel - God with us, the almighty, awesome, living God come to earth in a human body. This is why we make Jesus the focal point of our worship as Christians. Paul may also be saying here that if the Colossians are seeking the "fullness of God", then Jesus is the place they will find it, rather than in whatever way the false teachers that were influencing the church were suggesting.

The Peacemaker

Paul has already alluded to the cross by talking of redemption and the forgiveness of sins. Here we see another aspect of what Jesus accomplished for us at Calvary. We have been *reconciled* to God - the relationship that was broken down has been restored. Our sins, which separated us from God, have been dealt with by the shedding of his blood. We were enemies of God, living in rebellion against him, and he too was opposed to us as the righteous judge who cannot turn a blind eye to sin. But through the cross, Jesus made peace between us and God. He turned God's righteous anger away, and turned our rebellious hearts back to God.

Interestingly, Paul doesn't just say that Jesus reconciled lost people to God, but that he reconciled "all things", in heaven and in earth. What does that mean? It is hard to say precisely

what is meant, but it reminds us that God's plan of salvation is huge⁷, encompassing the whole of creation. He intends not just to reconcile people to himself, but he intends to fix everything that was broken and destroyed by sin. When he has finished his saving work, the universe itself and even the unseen realm of spiritual beings will be put back into the perfect order God always intended.

⁷ it is "cosmic", as the theologians like to say

Col 1:21-23

²¹And you, who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, ²²he has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him, ²³if 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.

Hostile

Paul describes what the Colossians were like before they came to Christ. It sounds quite extreme to say that they were doing “evil” deeds. Does this mean that they were especially wicked, violent and sexually depraved? Not necessarily. The description of their minds as being “alienated” and “hostile” makes things clearer. Who were they alienated from? God. Who were they hostile to? God. Life without reference to God or in defiance against God is the essence of sin. And it is the state that all of us, even respectable, polite, hard-working people, are in before Jesus. We are alienated from God. We are his enemies. We need to be forgiven and brought back into relationship with him.

Holy

And that is exactly what Jesus did in his death. He *reconciled* us back to God. Our evil deeds were forgiven. Our hostile minds were won back to God. We were no longer alienated, but dearly loved children. The purpose of this reconciliation is that we be made “holy”, “blameless” and “above reproach”⁸. To be holy is to be set apart as people who belong to God. To be blameless is more than just to have our sins forgiven, but to live in a way that reflects that character of a holy God. To be “above reproach” means that no accusation against us can stick. So Satan’s accusations against us will not stand because of the blood of Jesus, but also, our good behaviour should be such a witness to our society that people have no grounds to make a valid complaint against us.

Hope

It is a wonderful thing that we have been reconciled to God, and called to be holy and blameless, but Paul here sounds a note of caution. There is no room for complacency in the Christian life. We need to *continue* in the faith. There are many difficulties and temptations that could cause us to fall away. Persecution from outside the church, false teaching from within the church, personal suffering that causes us to become discouraged, worldly pleasures that cause us to take our eyes off Christ. In the face of these, we must stand *steadfastly* and on a *stable* foundation. Paul will explain later in the letter how exactly this happens, but it could be summed up in the *hope* of the gospel.

Paul speaks of the gospel of *hope*, because although we enjoy now many of the benefits of the gospel, in many senses, we still await the full consummation of all that God has promised to us. This includes the bodily resurrection we will one day experience. Most importantly it includes living forever in the presence of God in the new world he will create that will be free from the devastating effects of sin. This is a hope worth holding on for. We need to hold fast to this hope and stand firm against those things that would cause us to lose heart.

⁸ holy, blameless, above reproach may well refer in particular to the final judgment, where we will stand justified before God.

Col 1:24-26

²⁴Now 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, ²⁵of 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, ²⁶the mystery hidden for ages and generations but now revealed to his saints.

The Mystery of Suffering

On a first reading of verse 24 we might be tempted to write Paul off as crazy and confused. He starts with the outrageous claim that he rejoices in his sufferings. Has he lost his mind? Most of us would consider freedom from suffering as an occasion for rejoicing. But Paul doesn't just "put up" with pain, he positively finds reason to thank God for it.

We are helped towards an answer by looking at the next thing Paul says, which also doesn't seem to make immediate sense to us. What could be "lacking" in the suffering that Jesus went through? Well in one sense, nothing. Jesus' death on the cross fully paid the price for our sins, and opened the door for us to be reconciled to God.

But that wasn't the end of the story. The message of the gospel must be spread around the world and received. And people such as Paul (as well as ordinary disciples of Jesus like you and me) must be the ones to take that message. What Paul realised, was that in going on mission, he would, like Jesus did, suffer. But he also understood, as Jesus did, that it would be worth it.

So Paul can rejoice in his sufferings, because he knows he is participating in God's plan to save his people, his "body", his church. His suffering is not pointless, but is helping to accomplish God's great sovereign plan. This is an attitude that we need to share, refusing to fear the suffering that mission might bring, but fixing our eyes on the bigger picture of eternity, and having an unshakable confidence in the God who works all things out for the good of those who love him.

The Mystery of the Gospel

Paul's mission and ministry in particular was to make known a "mystery". Although it is no longer really a mystery. It used to be hidden - the gospel was indeed there in the pages of the Old Testament, but no one really saw it clearly. But with the coming of Jesus, his death, resurrection and exaltation, now it has all fallen into place. The mystery has been revealed. It now remains for the word of God to be proclaimed in all its fullness, as the kingdom of God advances against the kingdom of darkness. It was this glorious high calling of proclaiming the gospel that Paul believed was not just worth suffering for, but worth dying for.

Col 1:27-29

²⁷To 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. ²⁸Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ. ²⁹For this I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me.

Indwelt by Christ

Paul has just been talking about a “mystery”, the mystery of the gospel, which had been hidden for ages, but has now been revealed. Now he elaborates a little more on what exactly the “mystery” is. He describes it as “Christ in you”. This is fascinating, because Paul normally prefers to speak of *us* being “in Christ”. But there is truth in both ways of speaking. When he says we are “in Christ”, he refers to all the privileges and benefits we enjoy by our being joined to Jesus. And where he says that Christ is “in us”, he refers to the fact that Jesus indwells his people both individually and as a church by his Holy Spirit.

There are two more elements to this mystery. First is that the Gentiles are included. The Old Testament prophets often envisaged a time when God would dwell amongst his people (i.e. the Jews), but the mystery (which was there in the Old Testament but not everyone saw it) is that the Gentiles are included too. God’s plan of salvation is for *everyone*.

The second is because Christ is “in” us, we have the “hope of glory”. That is to say, we have confidence that God will complete what he has started in us, the transforming work of changing us fully into the image of Christ (who is himself the perfect image of God).

Mature in Christ

Paul now explains why it is that he is always proclaiming Christ, preaching Christ, teaching about Christ. It is because he wants people to become “mature” in Christ. That is, he is not just interested in converts but making disciples, who progressively grow in their likeness to their Saviour. We should not be content to remain in immaturity, but should seek to be those who are blameless in character.

And how does this maturing take place? Well Paul’s strategy is to “teach” people and “warn” people. He teaches them the true wisdom of God’s word⁹, pointing them repeatedly to Christ in order that they may get a clearer vision of him, which would lead to a deeper relationship with him, which in turn would result in a greater likeness to him. He is also willing to “warn” people. That is to say, he doesn’t assume that this progress to maturity is automatic. There are many dangers that threaten our growth in Christlikeness, and therefore to be warned is helpful for us in order that we may stand firm against the devil’s schemes.

Empowered by Christ

So Paul’s passion in life was to preach and proclaim Jesus, and to urge people onwards towards maturity. It’s what he spent every spare moment doing. But he was clear that this was not happening just in his own strength. No, because of the mystery that Christ dwells within us, he knew that the power of the Spirit of God was giving him the energy to keep going. When we align the goal of our lives with the purposes of God, then we can expect to experience the same empowering and enabling.

⁹ While he doubtlessly intends to pass on wisdom to the Colossians, Paul here may also be referring to the wisdom that *he* as a teacher needs in order to help believers grow into maturity.

Col 2:1-5

¹For 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, ²that 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, ³in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. ⁴I say this in order that no one may delude you with plausible arguments. ⁵For 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.

True Wisdom

Paul has just told us how he struggles and fights for the maturity of the believers he comes into contact with. This includes those like the Colossians, who he has not met in person. He has several goals in the teaching he brings to them (which was of course, mainly in the form of letters, and perhaps also in the form of people such as Epaphras bringing Paul's teaching to them in person).

First, he desires their *encouragement*. There are many forces that threaten to discourage them. By fixing their eyes on the hope of glory¹⁰ they have in Christ they will have strength to keep going. Second, he desires their *unity* in love. We should not think that we can stand firm in the faith on our own. Rather, we need one another, and this requires a genuine love between us.

Third, and most importantly, he desires that they reach the point of a full *understanding* and *knowledge* of God's mystery. Jesus is of course the one referred to by the word "mystery". It is in coming to know Jesus that we discover all true knowledge and wisdom. We need not seek it anywhere else.

False Wisdom

The reason that Paul stresses that true wisdom and knowledge is found in Christ is that some people were suggesting other routes. They were effectively saying that Christ alone was not enough - people needed some other extra source of wisdom and knowledge. But we must realise that in Christ are the *riches* and *treasure* of wisdom, knowledge and understanding. It is by knowing Christ more, rather than going anywhere else, that we will become rich in wisdom.

Does this mean Christians shouldn't study philosophy or engage in other academic pursuits? Not at all. But it does mean that we should beware of any teaching in the church that suggests to us that Christ is not enough. The nature of the false teaching will vary in different times and places, but the remedy is always to fix our eyes on Jesus and seek to know him more.

¹⁰ Col 1:27

Col 2:6-8

⁶Therefore, as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him, ⁷rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving. ⁸See 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.

Keep on Course

We might think that Paul would be happy enough that these Colossians have, as we would put it, “become Christians”. And of course he was. But that was only the beginning of the story. The repentance and faith in Jesus that marked the day of their conversion were not to be one-off events, but to be a way of life for them.

The Christian life is one of ongoing growth. Though we are truly new creations, there is still the need to grow stronger in faith and deeper in our knowledge of God. And this will result in a new kind of behaviour, since the Lordship of Jesus is not just a truth to be believed, but a reality that impacts everything we do. It will also radically affect our outlook on life. We will be people characterised by consistent thankfulness.

Keep Away

The Colossians needed this reminder to keep going, because there were some people who were trying to divert them onto a different course. What they needed to realise was that the Christian life, from start to finish revolves around Jesus. We are not just “in him” by virtue of our conversion, but our discipleship and growth is also “in him”.

So we should always be suspicious of any teaching, no matter how philosophically sophisticated, or rooted in ancient traditions it might be, that proposes something other than Jesus as the key to discipleship. The real secret to wisdom and spiritual growth is to keep our eyes fixed on Jesus. We do this by means of the Word and Spirit. The Word of God gives us a clearer vision of who Jesus is, and the Spirit of God empowers us to follow in his footsteps.

Col 2:9-12

⁹For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, ¹⁰and you have been filled in him, who is the head of all rule and authority. ¹¹In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, ¹²having 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.

Filled and Circumcised

Yet again Paul turns the spotlight onto Jesus Christ, the central character not just of the book of Colossians, but of the whole universe and of God's plan of salvation. Here we have a very plain statement of the meaning of the incarnation. Jesus was fully God, and yet fully human - he had a physical body. In these verses Paul mentions four ways in which we are related to him.

First, we have been "filled" in him. This is quite tricky language - filled with what exactly? Paul probably means that in Christ, we have been given everything we need. He reminds us that Jesus is the highest ruler and authority, and so if we are connected to him, like a body connected to a head then we have no need for anything else from outside him to give us "fullness".

Second, we have been "circumcised" in him. Again, what could be meant by this? Paul is quite clear that he does not refer to physical circumcision. This circumcision symbolises the New Covenant that we belong to, that we are the inheritors of the promises God made to Abraham, and that we are set apart, and devoted to God as his own people. In speaking of "putting off the body of flesh", he probably refers to the fact that our propensity and desire for sin, our "sinful nature" as it is sometimes called, has been removed.

Buried and Raised

Third, we have been "buried" in Christ in baptism. This is an image Paul has used elsewhere¹¹. Our baptism acts as a powerful enacted picture of the way we have died to our old life of sin¹². It shows also that we are "in Christ", the one who died for us, bearing our sin¹³. When we are baptised in water, we identify with his death, saying "that was for *me*, for *my* sin".

Fourth, we have been "raised" with Christ through faith. Water baptism serves also as a picture of the new life we receive. When Jesus rose from the dead, he was the first man of the new humanity. We too, as we are born again, when we come to faith in Jesus, become participants in the new humanity. Of course, our bodily resurrection is still future, but we have already experienced the power of God bringing spiritual life to us.

¹¹ See Romans 6

¹² Baptism is more than just a picture, or a symbol of our conversion. It is presented as *part* of our conversion. We are to have faith, repent, be baptized in water, join a local church, and receive the baptism in the Holy Spirit. These things all belong together, and we should not think of any of them as "optional" parts of conversion. Paul's mentioning of "through faith" reminds us that baptism has no power of its own apart from faith.

¹³ It also may be relevant that Jesus himself referred to his cross as a baptism (Luke 12:50)

Col 2:13-15

¹³And 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, ¹⁴by cancelling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross. ¹⁵He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him.

Dead

In these verses we are described as being both “dead” and “uncircumcised” before we came to Christ. To be “dead” speaks of our dire spiritual need. Spiritual (and ultimately physical) death was the result of the first human trespass in the garden of Eden, and continues to be the result of sin. “Uncircumcision” might just mean that the Colossians were Gentiles rather than Jews, but Paul is probably picking up on some Old Testament usage of circumcision as a metaphor for being wholly devoted to the Lord¹⁴. To be uncircumcised would be to be devoted to a different lord, to be an idolater.

But the good news is that despite our spiritual death, we have received new life. This is what Paul has just said concerning baptism; that we are “raised with Christ,” and are part of the new humanity of which he is the firstborn. We have new hearts of flesh, hearts that are truly “circumcised”, to use the language familiar to those who knew their Old Testament Scriptures.

Debtors

Not only were we dead, but we were in debt. Our sins had piled up a mountainous debt that we could never hope to repay. But through the cross, our sins have been completely forgiven. It’s like having all our debt completely wiped out. We need fear no creditors knocking on our door - we owe nothing. It’s like having our legal record completely wiped clear. We need fear no police officers knocking on the door - the case is closed.

Disarmed

So through the cross we have a completely right standing with God. But what of Satan and his demonic forces? Do they still have power and authority over us? Paul answers that, by affirming that at the cross, these “rulers and authorities” were defeated and humiliated. Though their final sentencing and doom is future, they are defeated foes, stripped of any right or authority they may have had. They were usurpers anyway, attempting to sit on the throne that rightfully belonged to Jesus. And at the cross, at the very moment they thought they were doing away with a contender to their rule, they were in fact being deposed.

¹⁴ See, for example Deut 10:16 and 30:6; Jeremiah 4:4 and 9:26; Acts 7:51

Col 2:16-19

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

Don't Let them Judge You

At this point in the letter, Paul starts directly dealing with some of the false teaching that the Colossians were being influenced by. The trouble is, we don't know exactly what those teachers were saying. But there are some clues here for us.

First, the false teachers had rules and regulations about food and drink. Presumably, these were prohibitions, maybe requiring people to abstain from eating unclean foods, or maybe meat that had been slaughtered in pagan ceremonies. Second, the false teachers had rules and regulations about various religious festivals that ought to be observed. Their regulations and prohibitions seem to be a curious mix of Jewish and pagan ideas. In every age the church has been tempted to mix together elements of their culture with elements of the Bible to end up creating a new religion that is effectively a denial of the gospel.

Faced with the claims of the false teachers, many of the new Colossian converts would have been worried. Perhaps they needed to change their diet and observe these religious feasts in order to truly know the favour of God. But Paul's answer, as always, is to point them back to Christ. Even if the false teachers' rules and practises could be found in the Old Testament Scriptures, the important thing to realise is that the law points forwards to Christ. To have the ceremonies without Christ is futile. And if you already have Christ, then you are no longer under any obligation to observe those ceremonies.

Don't Let Them Disqualify You

But the false teachers weren't just trying to get people to observe new rules and festivals. They were also encouraging people into a new "higher level" of spirituality, involving visions of angels, possibly brought on by extreme fasting. Again, the Colossians could easily be lured into following, but Paul calls them to stay connected to Jesus, who is the head of the body. To go off after these things is to disconnect yourself from your source of life and growth.

Whilst modern day false teaching in the church is very unlikely to take on the exact form that it did in Colosse, many of the basic elements are recurring. A legalistic insistence that people submit to various laws, or a super-spiritual and conceited obsession with visions can easily sidetrack Christians from their main focus. Our source of life does not come from keeping strict rules, nor through mystical experiences, but in the fact that we are connected to Jesus. All the fullness of God is found in Jesus; it is a terrible mistake to look for it elsewhere.

Col 2:20-23

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

Submitting to Rules

Paul has been warning the Colossian believers not to pay attention to the food regulations and festival observances that the false teachers were promoting. But why not? It would appear that some of these rules apparently “made sense” - they seemed like good ideas for promoting a godly life and fighting sin. Paul gives three reasons why these rules should not be followed.

First, we have died with Christ, and have been raised with him¹⁵. Because of this, we are part now of his new kingdom, with a new king ruling over us. To carry on obeying the old rules and regulations is to act as if we were still living in the old kingdom. We now look to Jesus for our guidance on how we are to live, and are free to reject any additional impositions that come on us from outside.

Second, these are merely human teachings, and relate to earthly, perishable things. In other words, to live according to these rules would be to demonstrate that we haven't understood the significance of our new birth. Living merely as rule-followers reveals that we are still earthly-minded¹⁶.

Third, these regulations have no value in suppressing the sinful desires of our “flesh” anyway. This is not because rules can't help us change our behaviour. They might be able to do that. But they cannot change our hearts. The New Covenant life is one led by the Spirit and empowered by the Spirit, one characterised by an obedience to Jesus that flows out of love for Jesus. How much better this is than a joyless, fear-based and guilt-driven life of rule-following.

Does this mean that there are no rules whatsoever? Does this mean we can reject any command and do whatever we feel like? No. Paul himself is quite willing to give direct instructions to believers. But what he is really doing is calling them to submit to the lordship of Jesus in all things. We are to live in light of the reality of the fact that Jesus is Lord of everything. Therefore we do not fight sin by finding strict rules to follow. Rather, our spiritual growth comes as we remain connected to Jesus, our source of life, and seek to live in the light of who he is and what he has done for us. Don't follow rules; follow Jesus.

¹⁵ See Col 3:1

¹⁶ See Col 3:2

Col 3:1-4

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

Raised with Christ

Paul has already made the point that those of us who are “in” Christ, have died with him. Now he adds that we have also been raised with Christ. By virtue of being “in” Christ, what is true of Jesus is also true of us. We have died to our old way of life, and are now already experiencing something of the life of the age to come. Although in one sense our own “resurrection” is yet future, even now we get to experience some of the resurrection power of Jesus at work in us.

If this is the case, then we need a new way of thinking. Unlike the earthly-minded way of thinking that focuses on rule-keeping, we instead are to set our minds on “things above”. But what exactly does that mean? Does this mean I can only think about God or the Bible, and never about ice cream or movies?

What I think Paul is suggesting is that everything in life should be done in reference to the universal lordship of Christ, and in recognition of who we are in him. In other words, there is nothing at all in life that is not to be done in accordance with the values of heaven. This is possible because our life is lived in the power of the Spirit, who writes God’s laws on our hearts, rather than by following external rules and regulations.

Hidden with Christ

So we died with Christ to our old way of life, and we are also raised with Christ and able to experience his transformative power at work within us. But what does it mean to say that our life is “hidden with Christ in God”? Paul seems to be speaking of the great place of security and privilege we enjoy. However fragile and precarious our human existence may seem to us, the truth is that we are kept safely in the very presence of God. And though we may appear as ordinary and unimpressive to the watching world, our true identity is what God says about us. We are indeed the true people of God, those who belong to Jesus Christ.

Understanding the reality that we are “in Christ” will give us a completely new perspective on the future. Jesus’ life is our life, and Jesus’ future is our future. And since Jesus’ future is to return in glory, then our future is to be with him in glory. The glory is of course the glory of being finally and fully transformed into the image of Christ. This knowledge of our glorious future enables us to live peace and hope-filled lives, and inspires us to live in accordance with the reality of who we are “in Christ.”

Col 3:5-8

⁵Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. ⁶On account of these the wrath of God is coming. ⁷In these you too once walked, when you were living in them. ⁸But now you must put them all away: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and obscene talk from your mouth.

Put to death

We have seen that to be “in Christ” means that we have “died” with him, and we have been “raised” with him. We are presently “hidden” with him and in the future we will “appear” with him in glory. In other words, our identity is completely and utterly bound up with Jesus. But what practical difference does this new identity make to the way we live our lives? Does it even matter what we do anymore?

In these verses Paul begins to spell out the implications of our union with Christ. First he deals with the negative. There are some things that we have to stop doing. He lists several examples of “earthly” behaviour. Many of them are related to desire - the desire to gratify my urge for sex, for vengeance, for money. Those who are earthly minded often see no reason to restrain those urges and desires.

But for those of us who are “in Christ”, how should we deal with them? First, we are not to gratify them. Our behaviour does matter. Paul tells us very plainly that God’s anger is provoked by such ungodly ways. Second, however, the rule-following program that the false teachers were advocating will get us nowhere in our quest for holiness. This is because the problem lies not at the behavioural level, but at the heart. And we can see this from the fact that Paul identifies covetousness as “idolatry”. In other words, the root issue is our tendency to set up things other than God as our source of joy, security and hope and as the objects of our devotion.

What we are asked to do then, is to “put to death” these earthly attitudes. In other words, we are to wage war against the old self and our idols. As Paul puts it in Romans 6:11, we are now to consider ourselves “dead” to sin. We are not to allow sin to rule over us, but instead we fully submit our lives to the lordship of Jesus.

The Old Clothes

There was a time for the Colossians when they lived as pagans, freely indulging their sinful desires. And this type of lifestyle comes naturally to all of us. It is what we will do automatically if we do not submit ourselves to God’s righteous standards. But now that we have been saved, these things should now be considered unnatural for us. We no longer excuse ourselves for them.

Verse 8 lists several attitudes characteristic of the old way of life. The thing they have in common is that these attitudes overflow out of our mouths. The words we use so often reveal what is deep within us¹⁷. One of the first evidences that we are living according to the new way of life is that the way we speak will change. Instead of words of hatred and slander should come words of love and truth.

So Paul wants us to live in the reality of our identity in Christ, but warns us not to assume that a change of lifestyle is automatic. We need to cooperate with the agenda of the Spirit in our lives,

¹⁷ See Matt 12:34

as he seeks to progressively conform us into the image of Christ. We have been given a brand new set of clothes to wear, but we need to take off the old set.

Col 3:9-11

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

The New Self

Paul has been explaining that life in Christ means a comprehensive rejection of the old way of life. We are to put to death the old desires, and to put off the old practices. And we have seen that the way to deal with the old life is not by legalistic rule-following, but by Spirit-filled Christ-following.

But what does it mean to “put on” the new self? Verse 10 gives us two clues. First of all, our “knowledge” is needs to be “renewed”. This refers to the completely new way of thinking that should be ours now we are in Christ. Paul speaks of this in Romans 12 where he says “do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind”. Repentance, which marks the beginning of the Christian life, is fundamentally a change in the way we think. No longer do we consider sin acceptable or excusable, but we see it from God’s point of view. This new way of thinking naturally results in a new way of living.

Second, the new self¹⁸ bears God’s image. This was always the Creator’s intention for his creation - that we bring him glory by reflecting his character. But the fall spoiled that, and God’s image was defaced. To put on the new self then, is to be progressively changed into the image of God. And if we should ask the question, “what does it look like for a person to bear the image of God”, we need look no further than Jesus (see Col 1:15). In the incarnation he became fully human, whilst fully bearing the divine image. It is as we become more like Jesus that we become more like our Creator.

The New Community

Now we may well have been interpreting Paul’s words in an individualistic manner up to this point. I personally must put off my old behaviour, and I personally must be transformed more into the image of Christ. But Paul has something a bit bigger in mind. It is the church, the new community of God’s redeemed people that can truly display his glory and image in a fuller way than we can do merely as individuals.

And how does the church reflect the glory of God? By being a community where barriers of division and hostility are broken down. Whatever nationality, religious pedigree, educational background or social status we may have, in the church we all come to God on an equal basis. Our identity is solely based on the fact that we are in Christ. If we recognise this as true, then we need to reject our former attitudes to those different from us, those we before would have despised, or avoided.

We need to ask how well our churches reflect this new reality. Is there really a display of the unity of Christ amongst us? Or are we still segregated into narrow bands of people from similar backgrounds? If we truly understood our new identity in Christ, then attitudes of superiority and prejudice would find no place amongst us.

¹⁸ Douglas Moo explains the “new self” not as a nature, but as a corporate identity - we are in Christ - the “new man”. This means that verse 11 is a description of the new man.

Col 3:12-14

¹²Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, ¹³bearing 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. ¹⁴And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.

The New Clothes

Paul has already listed some behaviours that, like dirty clothes, need to be taken off. Now he describes the new clothes that we have to wear. As always, we see that Paul never just tells us what we must *do*, without rooting it in *who we are*. We are God's chosen people, dearly loved by him, and set apart for him. It is through understanding our new identity that we become convinced of the need for a new lifestyle.

The behaviours listed here refer primarily to our attitude to other believers. Obviously our attitude to God and to unbelievers is also important, but the way we relate to fellow Christians is a key indicator of whether we have understood what it means to be "in Christ" - the "new man" described in verse 11.

Unity between people of different backgrounds, cultures and social standing does not come automatically. We need to deliberately cultivate attitudes of kindness and compassion towards those who are different from us; those with whom we do not naturally get along. Humility is important because we so easily look down on and judge those from different backgrounds from our own. Patience too is vital, since wherever there is diversity, there is a multitude of opinions on how things should be done. It requires great patience to work together when we have differences of opinion.

Forgiveness and Love

In fact, Paul is brutally realistic about the challenges that God's new humanity composed of such radical diversity creates. There will be the need for *forgiveness*, as well as simply putting up with things that are irritating to us. In our modern consumer culture, we much prefer to simply move down the road to the church that does things our way, and is made up of people who look and think like us. But this is not the way Jesus intended his church to function. We are to reflect his image by offering forgiveness to one another, recognizing that we have no right to withhold from one another what we were freely given.

The key ingredient for church unity is quite simply *love*. Without love there is no hope for unity. Harmony is not to be attained by arguing until everyone has reached common agreement, or trying to force everyone to fit into an identical mould. Rather, genuine unity is found where there are people whose love for one another is so strong that patience, forgiveness and humility towards one another flow out naturally.

Col 3:15-17

¹⁵And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body. And be thankful. ¹⁶Let 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. ¹⁷And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

Be Thankful

The theme of thanksgiving dominates these verses. Three times we are called to be thankful. If we are to have this grateful outlook on life, we will need to be those who meditate on what God has given us in Christ and what he has promised us. We so easily can focus on the things that are going wrong for us, on our disappointments and frustrations.

We need to make a decision to lift our eyes off the “earthly things” and onto the “heavenly things” that Paul has been explaining. It is as we do this that thanksgiving will start to flow out of us. This happens through the songs of worship we sing together as God’s new community, and is also to be expressed daily in our personal prayer lives. Prayer is not merely a recital of a list of requests, but should be an expression of our love and gratitude towards God.

Peace of Christ

A second theme dominates these verses and it comes as no surprise, since it is the overriding theme of the whole letter. Our thankfulness comes in the context of a life lived with *Jesus right at the centre*. First we are to let the *peace of Christ* rule in our hearts. To know his peace is to let go of anxieties and worries, and trust him completely. It is when we do this that we are able to be joyful and thankful, even in the midst of adversity. This peace also refers to the unity that should be amongst us as the “body of Christ”. If we are truly one in Christ, how can there be in-fighting amongst us?

Word of Christ

Second, we are to let the *word of Christ* dwell in us richly. I think this refers to more than simply the words that Jesus uttered in the gospels. The whole Bible is the word of Christ, and is all about the gospel of Christ. Again, this is not a purely individual concern. I don’t just want to take in God’s word for my own benefit, but so that I can teach and encourage my fellow believers with it.

Name of Christ

Finally, everything we say and do must be done in the *name of Christ*. This means that we allow the universal lordship of Jesus to come to bear on *every* aspect of our lives. We are to do everything in reference to the fact that we are now “in Christ” and in accordance with the “new self”. In short, to be a Christian is to be a thankful, Jesus-saturated person.

Col 3:18-21

¹⁸Wives, submit to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord. ¹⁹Husbands, love your wives, and do not be harsh with them. ²⁰Children, obey your parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord. ²¹Fathers, do not provoke your children, lest they become discouraged.

Bringing it Home

In these verses, Paul begins to demonstrate with down-to-earth examples how the gospel is to make a real difference to every aspect of life. It has relevance to us no matter what our situation is. His teaching here, whilst not exhaustive, illustrates the varied ways in which we can apply the truth that we are “in Christ” to the different seasons of life and vocational situations in which we find ourselves.

What we believe should impact the way we live, and nowhere is this more true than in the relationships we have with our own family members. Often it is at home where we allow our emotions overflow in a way that we would normally suppress in different company. This means we can end up hurting those we love the most through our lack of self-control.

Wives and Husbands

Paul’s instruction to wives does not go down too well in our culture, but that should not make us quick to dismiss it or find ways of reinterpreting it. Submission is of course an appropriate way of life for every follower of Jesus, since he demonstrated a humble submissive attitude to his Father. Likewise, a wife is called to recognise her husband’s responsibility to act as a “head”¹⁹ in the relationship, and not to bring unnecessary conflict into the relationship by resisting his leadership.

Husbands too have Jesus as their model. They are primarily called to be loving to their wives. Whilst doubtless this includes romantic gestures, this love should be demonstrated by being considerate, and refusing to exercise headship in a harsh or overbearing manner. This kind of servant-hearted loving leadership will mean that his wife’s submission does not need to be a burden but a delight.

Children and Fathers

It is noteworthy that Paul addresses the children in this letter. He assumes that children can be Christians, and that they are included in the church’s teaching ministry. The way that they show their love for the Lord is by a simple uncomplaining obedience to their parents in all things. This humble and submissive attitude brings great pleasure to God.

Fathers are picked on here, not because mothers don’t have a role in disciplining children, but because men are expected to take a lead in being head of their family. But again, the temptation to use that authority in an overbearingly harsh way is very strong with men, and they need to be reminded that children are easily discouraged. Gentleness should characterise our dealings with our children at all times, even when they need to be disciplined.

¹⁹ Eph 5:23

Col 3:22-4:1

²²Slaves, 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. ²³Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men, ²⁴knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward. You are serving the Lord Christ. ²⁵For the wrongdoer will be paid back for the wrong he has done, and there is no partiality. ¹Masters, treat your slaves justly and fairly, knowing that you also have a Master in heaven.

Under New Ownership

It is likely that many of the Christians in Colosse were slaves. Undoubtedly most if not all of them would long for their freedom. Their situation in life was far from ideal, but Paul wants them to focus instead on their new status in Christ. All believers, whether slave or free in human terms, are now slaves of a new master - Jesus Christ.

So while the work they did for their human masters was often menial, exhausting and unrewarding, their attitude to it could be transformed if they viewed it as service to Christ. Jesus is actually willing to accept our mundane daily responsibilities, when done wholeheartedly, as offerings of worship. Though we may not always get the reward or recognition our efforts deserve, we have a sure and certain inheritance that our new master will reward us with.

This way of thinking liberates us from the “people-pleasing” approach to work. We will not be lazy when no one is watching us, because we recognize that the Lord sees everything. He notices when we have worked hard, and he also notices when we slack off surreptitiously. Though our human “masters” may or may not reward our effort, the Lord sees and is pleased.

Under New Authority

What about slave masters? We know of at least one in the Colossian church - Philemon. Obviously in an ideal world there would be no slaves at all. But there will always be those who are in managerial positions of some kind. How should they treat those who they are “over”?

Most importantly, those in positions of authority must recognise that they too are slaves of Christ. They are not the ultimate “lords” of anyone. Their own work must be done in such a way that submits to the lordship of Christ. This is practically worked out in the way they treat those under them. Are they just and fair? Do they recognise and praise good work when it has been done? Do they take care not to overburden employees with more than they can bear? Do they stay within appropriate boundaries when needing to correct or discipline their employees?

These verses remind us that the work we do, and the way in which we go about it is not disconnected from the lordship of Christ. We have the potential both to honour or to dishonour the name of Jesus as we attend to our daily business. This calls for prayerful consideration of how, in our own unique circumstances, we can best demonstrate the lordship of Jesus every day.

Col 4:2-6

²Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving. ³At 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-- ⁴that I may make it clear, which is how I ought to speak. ⁵Walk in wisdom toward outsiders, making the best use of the time. ⁶Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person.

Keep Praying

Paul is now drawing his letter to a close, and here he takes the opportunity to stress two important elements of Christian living that can easily get pushed to the sidelines. The first is *prayer* and the second is *witness*. In fact the two are connected, because Paul specifically seems to have prayer for evangelism in mind. In these brief verses, Paul gives us several characteristics of the prayer life of a Christian.

First, prayer should be *steadfast*. Prayer is not just for special occasions or urgent needs. It is to be part and parcel of the daily life of every believer. We need to cultivate the habit of regular prayer, in order that it becomes a natural instinct for us.

Second, prayer should be *thankful*. Several times in this letter Paul has highlighted the importance of thankfulness. Prayer that simply consists of a list of requests tends to become self-focussed, and falls short of cultivating the joyful and grateful relationship with God that he desires with each of us.

Third, prayer should be offered *on behalf of others*. Again, it is easy for us to focus exclusively on our own needs in prayer, but Paul here reminds the Colossians that he is in need of their prayers. Just because he is a mature believer does not mean he is not in need of prayer on his behalf.

Fourth, prayer should be offered for the *advance of the gospel*. It is striking how Paul doesn't ask them to pray for his comfort or his release, but only for opportunities for evangelism and clarity of speech when he takes them. In the New Testament, when prayer for evangelism is offered, it is always for the believers that they may have the boldness to speak out, rather than for those who will be hearing the message.

Keep Shining

Evangelism is not just the calling of a few especially gifted leaders. Each of us is to behave with wisdom towards unbelievers. This wisdom is demonstrated in several ways. First, *making good use of time*. Not all the ways we might attempt to reach people with the gospel are equally effective. We need wisdom in order to discern the best approach to take. Making good use of our time also challenges us not to simply idle away all our free time, but to consider how we can put it to use for the advancement of the kingdom.

Second, *speaking graciously*. It is easy for us to come across as arrogant or judgmental when we speak of our beliefs. We need to take care that God's love for the lost is evident in the way we speak. What exactly it means that our speech should be "seasoned with salt" is hard to pin down, but it seems to have connotations that the things we say taste surprisingly good to those who hear them. This is a way of speaking that provokes questions.

And these questions require the third characteristic of the wise, *being ready to answer*. To be ready to answer means that we need to know what we believe and why. It also requires us to have some understanding of the beliefs and worldviews of those we live and work amongst, in order that we can phrase our answers in a way that makes sense to them.

Col 4:7-11

⁷Tychicus will tell you all about my activities. He is a beloved brother and faithful minister and fellow servant in the Lord. ⁸I have sent him to you for this very purpose, that you may know how we are and that he may encourage your hearts, ⁹and with him Onesimus, our faithful and beloved brother, who is one of you. They will tell you of everything that has taken place here. ¹⁰Aristarchus my fellow prisoner greets you, and Mark the cousin of Barnabas (concerning whom you have received instructions--if he comes to you, welcome him), ¹¹and 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.

Beloved Brothers

In these verses, Paul gives us a brief glimpse of some of his friends and co-workers. First is Tychicus, who is apparently on his way to see them, maybe even delivering the letter. Paul not only loves him as a brother, but commends him for his faithfulness and service. He is not just a messenger, but is charged to bring encouragement to the believers in Colosse, suggesting that he had a gift of teaching.

With Tychicus is Onesimus, the runaway slave who has become a believer and is on his way to be reunited with his master Philemon. Paul wants them to recognise that Onesimus is now part of the church family. He is to be welcomed back as a brother. This is a vital principle for church unity - we are to accept and love one another, because God himself has accepted and loved us.

Fellow Workers

Paul also mentions three other people who are with him and send their greetings. Aristarchus, who had been a travelling companion of Paul in Ephesus²⁰, is also in prison. Quite likely he too had been imprisoned due to his boldness in spreading the gospel. It must have been a blessing for Paul to have a fellow believer in prison with him, in order that they might encourage one another.

Mark is also mentioned here. Apparently Paul had sent instructions that he was to be welcomed if he came. This is likely because the story of Mark's desertion of Paul²¹ had become well known, and he might have been given the cold shoulder as a result. The believers are not to dwell on his past failures but welcome him as a beloved brother, just like Onesimus.

Another character we know little about is Jesus, also known as Justus. It seems likely that he chose a different name to be known by as a mark of respect for Jesus Christ. Paul tells us that Justus, Mark and Aristarchus are unique in the fact that they are the only Jews who are working with him in his mission to the Gentiles. Paul still had a great concern for Jews to be saved, despite the focus of his evangelism amongst non-Jews, and doubtless the evidence of God's grace in the lives of these men gave him hope that more of his fellow Jews would turn to Christ.

These briefly mentioned names remind us that not all God's people are called to high profile ministries, and yet we are still able to be a great blessing and play an important part in the advancement of the kingdom if we give ourselves to faithful ministry and service, and to encouraging and comforting our brothers and sisters.

²⁰ See Acts 19:29

²¹ See Acts 15:37-38

Col 4:12-15

¹²Epaphras, 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. ¹³For I bear him witness that he has worked hard for you and for those in Laodicea and in Hierapolis. ¹⁴Luke the beloved physician greets you, as does Demas. ¹⁵Give my greetings to the brothers at Laodicea, and to Nympha and the church in her house.

Prayers

Now Paul sends greetings from Epaphras, the man who likely founded the church in Colosse before returning to tell the imprisoned apostle the news. Paul wants them to know that despite not being presently with them in person, Epaphras has a deep and abiding love for the Colossian believers and is praying with great earnestness for them. In particular he prays for them to be *mature*, and *confident* of the will of God. Doubtless these qualities will be of particular use to them as they stand against false teaching.

Paul adds his personal endorsement of Epaphras. He is a servant of Jesus who has worked hard on behalf of the church in various places. It is appropriate that the sacrificial hard work should be recognised where it occurs. Whilst worship belongs to God alone, gratitude should be shown towards one another.

Greetings

Greetings from Luke, Paul's travelling companion and gospel writer are also sent. Paul mentions Luke's job as a physician. It has often been pointed out that he sees no tension between the practise of medicine and the supernatural gifts of healing that were often seen in Paul's ministry. God works through both means, and is deserving of no less praise when we are healed through "natural" means as opposed to supernatural.

The mention of Demas brings a sad note, since we know from 2 Tim 4:10 that Demas did not stand firm in the faith, but fell in love with the world. Sobering stories such as his remind us of the need to remain close to God and to pray for one another's spiritual wellbeing with the same passion that Epaphras showed.

Finally in these verses, Paul sends his own greetings, first to the nearby church in Laodicea (who also sadly did not persist in love for God - Rev 3:15), and second to a woman called Nympha²². We know very little about her except that she hosted a house-church, maybe in Colosse or the vicinity. We can guess that she might have been a wealthy woman, perhaps widowed, and some may even suggest she may have had a leadership role in this house church. At the very least we can say that she used what she had to bless and serve the church, using the gift of hospitality, which is appropriate for all believers, and especially for those called as elders of the church.

²² It is not 100% certain that Nympha was a woman, since some manuscripts have a male name (Nymphas) here.

Col 4:16-18

¹⁶And 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. ¹⁷And say to Archippus, "See that you fulfil the ministry that you have received in the Lord." ¹⁸I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand. Remember my chains. Grace be with you.

Read it in Church

Paul expected this letter to be read to the church in Colosse, and also to be passed on to be read in the nearby church at Laodicea. Obviously the New Testament had not yet been put together at this point, but we still see the importance attached of having apostolic teaching read out in the church. We should take care to continue this practice by making room in our meetings for the Bible to be read. It is far too easy to simply assume we know what it says, but as we listen to it with eager and expectant hearts, God will speak to us afresh through it.

Fulfil your Ministry

Archippus is given the straightforward instruction that he is to fulfil the ministry the Lord gave him. We don't really know who he was or what his ministry was²³, but we see the importance of encouraging others to do what they know God has called them to do. The fear of failure can make us reticent to follow God's prompting, but the encouragement of our brothers and sisters in the church is often his way of providing the impetus for us to step out in obedience and faith.

As he closes the letter, Paul again reminds them that he needs their prayers. We should not take for granted that those suffering for the gospel will be able to bear up under persecution, but make it a matter of earnest and steadfast prayer. Paul also tells them what he, as always, prays for them - that they will know God's grace. This is perhaps the simplest and yet most significant prayer request we can make on anyone's behalf. Whatever we have or do not have, whatever circumstances we find ourselves in, it is God's lavish grace that will sustain us, and bring us joy, peace and hope.

²³ Archippus is mentioned in Philemon as a "fellow-soldier" of Paul

Expository Notes on Philemon

Philemon 1:1-6

¹Paul, a prisoner for Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, To Philemon our beloved fellow worker ²and Apphia our sister and Archippus our fellow soldier, and the church in your house: ³Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. ⁴I thank my God always when I remember you in my prayers, ⁵because I hear of your love and of the faith that you have toward the Lord Jesus and for all the saints, ⁶and I pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective for the full knowledge of every good thing that is in us for the sake of Christ.

Greetings

A certain amount of detective work is needed to piece together exactly what is going on in this letter, but the opening lines will be very familiar to anyone who has read any of Paul's other letters. He is never content simply to state who the letter is to and from; he always adds in descriptive phrases, since he always views himself and others from a gospel perspective.

Paul describes himself as a *prisoner* for Jesus. Most likely this means he literally writes from jail. Far from seeing this as a disaster, he more or less treats it as an honour. Whatever he is doing and wherever he is, he is doing it for Christ, as his ambassador.

Timothy is described as a *brother* and Apphia as a *sister*. It is vital that we do not simply view other believers as having the same opinions or religion as us, but as close family members, who we deeply love and are committed to.

Philemon, the main recipient of the letter, is a *fellow worker* and Archippus is a *fellow soldier*. We are not just a family, but a family together on a mission. God intends for us to work together in cooperation, encouraging one another along as we work hard and fight for the kingdom of God to be advanced.

Prayers

Paul never tires of telling people that he prays for grace and peace for them. These two gifts from God are our privilege in the gospel, and are available to us in never-ending supply. His prayers are also filled with thankfulness for all that God is doing amongst them.

His prayer highlights the importance of a right relationship both to our Lord Jesus, and to our brothers and sisters in Christ. Our attitude towards Jesus should be one of faith - a loving trust in him that predisposes us to do all that he asks of us. But on top of this there must be a genuine love for our fellow Christians, which is crucial for a well-functioning church.

This love for one another results in a deep "sharing" of our faith. This probably doesn't refer to evangelism (although that is a great way to "share" our faith), but to the deep fellowship we are to enjoy with one another. It is as we share our lives and our faith together that we will actually come to understand and appreciate it better. Our faith and love were never meant to be kept to ourselves, but to overflow towards other people, both inside and outside the church, and as they do so, we will grow up to spiritual maturity.

Philemon 1:7-10

⁷For I have derived much joy and comfort from your love, my brother, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you. ⁸Accordingly, though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do what is required, ⁹yet for love's sake I prefer to appeal to you--I, Paul, an old man and now a prisoner also for Christ Jesus-- ¹⁰I appeal to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I became in my imprisonment.

Refreshed

Paul has a request to make of Philemon, one that will be a potentially difficult one for him to receive, and so it is not a surprise that Paul is very diplomatic in this letter. But that does not mean we should dismiss what he says about Philemon as mere flattery. Paul made a practise of commending what was good whenever he saw it in fellow believers, so we have every reason to believe he is being sincere here.

Philemon was someone who characteristically brought refreshment to other believers. It doesn't tell us exactly how he went about this, whether through encouraging teaching, or through practical acts of kindness. Probably he did both, because Paul highlights that he was motivated through love. We should make it our aim to be those who bring refreshment to our brothers and sisters in the church by using whatever gifts God has given us to serve one another in love.

Request

Paul moves on to make his request. He does not simply want to issue a command to Philemon. This is because the matter is one on which Philemon must exercise his own free choice. There can be a temptation for older Christians to dictate to those younger in the faith exactly how they should behave. But it is always preferable to help people to understand the righteous principles of God's Word from which they are able to identify the right course of action. The Christian life is to be one that is led by the Spirit, not simply following laws imposed from without.

Verse 10 fills us in on the fact that Onesimus had become a Christian through Paul's ministry. We see how Paul viewed such converts as his own children. He felt a deep love and affection for them, wrestled in prayer for them and sought to support them in their Christian life in whatever ways he could.

Philemon 1:11-14

¹¹(Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful to you and to me.) ¹²I am sending him back to you, sending my very heart. ¹³I would have been glad to keep him with me, in order that he might serve me on your behalf during my imprisonment for the gospel, ¹⁴but I preferred to do nothing without your consent in order that your goodness might not be by compulsion but of your own accord.

A Useful Servant

Onesimus' name means "useful". Apparently a lot of slaves were given that name in the hopes that they would live up to it. However, it would appear that Onesimus did not have a reputation for hard work. Maybe to a certain extent Philemon had been glad to get rid of him. Hopefully, as a Christian, he would have treated Onesimus well despite his laziness. We have an obligation to show God's grace to others, even when they are not deserving of it.

But a radical change-around had taken place in Onesimus' life. In becoming a Christian he had a whole new attitude. He was now eager to serve others, and had proved invaluable to Paul. In some ways, Paul didn't want to let go of him, but he knew it was the right thing for Onesimus to go and be reconciled to Philemon.

The same kind of radical change should take place in each of us who are born again. We go from being self-seeking, self-centred and self-serving, to being selfless and servant-hearted, always looking for opportunities to bring blessing to others.

A Free Decision

Paul clearly had in mind what the right course of action for Philemon was. This might even include granting Onesimus his freedom. But Paul prefers not to issue commands to Philemon. He would rather give Philemon the opportunity to do the right thing out of love for God, for Paul and for Onesimus himself. By being too quick to issue commands to one another, we can often rob people of the chance to do the right thing out of their own free will. That is not to say that there is never a place for telling people what God's word requires of them, but we do well when we appeal first to love, and only to duty as a secondary motivation.

Philemon 1:15-19

¹⁵For this perhaps is why he was parted from you for a while, that you might have him back forever, ¹⁶no longer as a slave but more than a slave, as a beloved brother--especially to me, but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord. ¹⁷So if you consider me your partner, receive him as you would receive me. ¹⁸If he has wronged you at all, or owes you anything, charge that to my account. ¹⁹I, Paul, write this with my own hand: I will repay it--to say nothing of your owing me even your own self.

Reconciliation

So Onesimus the slave is to be reunited with his owner Philemon. But Paul wants this to be more than just a return to the way things were before. They now have a new and much more profound relationship, since Onesimus has been born again. Therefore Philemon must not think of him merely as an employee, but as a beloved brother. He is family.

Notice also that Paul suggests that God's sovereignty may even have been at work in Onesimus' running away, in order that he might be brought to the Lord. While we cannot claim to understand the reason for each and every circumstance, it is not inappropriate to, like Paul, be on the lookout for ways in which God may be mysteriously and providentially accomplishing his kingdom purposes, even in those events that seem unpleasant at the time.

Paul wants Onesimus to be received in exactly the same way that Paul himself would be received. In other words, there is not one kind of welcome we should reserve for especially notable Christians while others can be treated with less respect. If we grasp the radical equality that exists between us in the body of Christ, we will be careful to love and serve and honour everyone, rather than being guilty of offering preferential treatment to those who are prominent.

Recompense

Paul seems to be implying that Onesimus might owe Philemon some money, and perhaps Philemon continue to hold a grudge against him as a result. Paul does not ask Philemon to cancel that debt, but instead offers to pay it himself. This may be a subtle way of reinforcing the principle of equal treatment that he has just made. Philemon probably would never dream of calling in a debt that Paul owed him, since Paul was instrumental in his own conversion. But again, why should he have one standard for Paul and a different one for Onesimus?

Whatever Philemon's decision, and Paul is determined to allow him the freedom to make his own choice, Paul wants him to know that his offer to pay the debt is not mere words. When we make offers to help or financially support other believers, we need to take care to do so with complete integrity, being willing to carry through on our word if required.

These verses serve as a powerful reminder of the fact that our new identity in Christ should make a real difference in the way we relate to one another. In particular, the petty debts we hold one another accountable to should seem like nothing compared to the debt of sin freely cancelled through Christ's death on the cross.

Philemon 1:20-25

²⁰Yes, brother, I want some benefit from you in the Lord. Refresh my heart in Christ. ²¹Confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say. ²²At the same time, prepare a guest room for me, for I am hoping that through your prayers I will be graciously given to you. ²³Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends greetings to you, ²⁴and so do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke, my fellow workers. ²⁵The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.

Confidence

So this short letter comes to a close. Paul has not said outright what he expects Philemon to do, and although he doesn't want to command him, there has been a certain amount of pressure put on him. For Philemon to comply with Paul's wishes would be to "refresh" his heart in Christ. It should bring us great pleasure when we see our fellow believers living out the implications of the gospel in difficult circumstances.

Paul applies a bit more gentle pressure by expressing his confidence that Philemon will not only do the right thing, but will go the extra mile. There is a very real possibility that this "even more" would include granting Onesimus his freedom. Again we see a gospel principle here - those who are recipients of God's grace will not typically content themselves with merely doing what they ought to do, but will reflect the lavish generosity of God by going further in love.

Greetings

Paul asks Philemon to prepare a guest room for him, even though his ability to visit is not yet certain. He wants to make a personal visit, and takes it for granted that Philemon and his family will also be praying for this possibility. We see here that Paul is not fatalistic about the purposes of God. He expects prayer to be the means through which good things happen. We should not be afraid to make bold requests for things in prayer, especially when they are things that will serve to advance God's kingdom.

As usual, Paul is willing to allow others to send their greetings with his letter. Whilst the lists of names may mean little to us, they do speak of the value there is in extending Christian love outside the confines of our own local church towards believers in other places. No Christian should be isolated from a church, and no church should be isolated from other churches. God has made us one in Christ, and expects us to demonstrate it through our loving and prayerful concern for each other.

The letter closes with a prayer for grace. Philemon has experienced the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and now he has read this letter, he is going to have the opportunity to demonstrate grace to Onesimus. Indeed, it is only as we experience and appreciate the true riches of God's grace towards us, that we are able to let it overflow to others, even to those who seem undeserving of it.