



signed sealed delivered

PAUL'S LETTERS TO THE CHURCH AT COLOSSAE





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River Oaks Community Church
1855 Lewisville-Clemmons Road
Clemmons, NC 27012

riveroakschurch.org

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Introduction

Under house arrest in Rome, between the years AD 60-62, Paul pens four letters that are commonly referred to as the “Prison Epistles.” Two of these letters—Colossians and Philemon—will be the subject of our winter small group study and seven-week sermon series. As we look more closely at the words written to the church at Colossae and to Philemon, an individual Colossian church member, we will examine the specific occasion for all of these letters, their historical context, and cultural background.*

We are told in Acts 28:30-31 that Paul “lived there [Rome] two whole years at his own expense, and welcomed all who came to him, proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance.” These comparatively favorable conditions of Paul’s first confinement in Rome allowed visitors to bring gifts and updates from the churches, and allowed Paul to reply through letters and messengers.

To the Philippians, we are told that Epaphroditus had brought good news and would return with a letter of encouragement (Phil. 4:18, 3:25). To the Ephesians, Colossians, and Philemon, we find that Tychicus, accompanied by Onesimus, played the role of common mail carrier. (Eph. 6:21, Col. 4:7-8). Additionally, Epaphras, who was instrumental in starting the church at Colossae, had been in Rome with Paul—filling him in on the love and struggles of the Colossian believers (Col. 1:7-8).

Theologically, Colossians is one of the most thoroughly Christ-centered books in the Bible. Paul’s letter speaks to three primary points along this theme:

1) Christ-centered teaching – a warning against heresy and the false teachers

* Another letter is referenced in Col. 4:16 as “the letter from Laodicea.” This letter could possibly be a fifth letter, now lost, or could refer to what we know as Ephesians, intended as a circulatory letter for all of the Asia Minor churches.

among them; 2) Christ-centered understanding – the supremacy of Christ; who he is and what he has done; and 3) Christ-centered living – standards and expectations for believers to maintain within their family and the church. In Colossians, Paul implores believers to focus on the majesty and sufficiency of Christ, who is the “image of the invisible God ... making peace by the blood of his cross” (Col. 1:15-20). This focus should ultimately impact the testimony and life of the believer.

Philemon, unique in both brevity and its personal nature, is written with an emphasis on forgiveness and the idea of equality found in Christ. Paul does not speak to the institution of first-century slavery, but does lay out principles that would transform relationships and guard against injustice. Note that, despite this being a personal letter, it was to be read to “the church” (Philem. 1:2). This specific issue was between Onesimus and Philemon, but perhaps other church members had similar situations and could benefit from this teaching.

The objective of our study is to grow in the understanding of God’s Word and to find application from these two epistles for our own life journey. Each of these letters contains fundamental truths that are necessary for our worship of Christ, our daily obedience, and our sharing of the gospel. To maximize the spiritual growth benefits available to each of us through this small group season, we suggest utilizing this study guide as follows:

- *Scripture: Each unit begins with the passage of Scripture highlighted for that specific week. There is no better place to start than to read, meditate on, and memorize the words of Paul.

- *In the Sandals: For God’s Word to truly impact us in this way, it will be critical that we place ourselves among Paul’s originally-intended readers.



Realizing that words written in the first century cannot mean today what they did not mean then, unless we have a general idea of the historical context and cultural background, we will miss many key points. To assist with this aspect of the study, each week we will introduce the unit by asking you to walk “in the sandals” of the Colossian believers.

- *Discussion Questions: As you complete each unit, take time to answer these study questions. This is a good way to further reinforce the highlighted Scripture and will provide a time of deeper discussion with your group.
- *Case Studies/Spiritual Growth Exercises: Unless we are leading one another to application of God’s Word, then our time together is of little value. Following the study questions, each week you will find an assortment of “case studies” and “spiritual growth exercises.” These are thought-provoking—and often challenging—scenarios to consider for our application of the Word. As you work through these exercises, think about how you might actually respond, discuss your thoughts with those close to you, and make some notes to share with your group. Remember: “Iron sharpens iron” (Proverbs 27:17); so be honest with yourself—and transparent with your group—as you apply God’s Word to your daily walk.
- *Notes: You will observe that the study guide layout leaves at least one full page for taking notes. We encourage you to bring the guide with you on Sunday mornings in order to write down the sermon notes, questions that come to mind, and specific points that may strike you. These pages can be beneficial in your group discussion time.

By fully emerging yourself in the background, meditating over the Scripture, engaging in meaningful discussions, and making use of supplemental materials, it is our prayer that:

You may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God. – Colossians 1:9-10

In Him,

David Holcomb

David Holcomb
Minister of Discipleship





MAP 1

The destinations of all of Paul's letters are shown on MAP 1. (Note: Rome – Ephesus – Colossae).

The likely route for Tychicus and Onesimus in delivering the letters to Ephesus, Colossae, and Philemon, is shown on MAP 2. Arriving near Ephesus by ship from Rome, they would have traveled a major inland road along the Lycus River Valley that connected the Mediterranean port city with the Euphrates River in the east. The road from Ephesus in the west and Sardis in the northwest, also met near Colossae. Hierapolis (12 miles northwest) and Laodicea (9 miles west) created a “triad” region of sorts, in which all three cities come together in Revelation 3:14-22 to create the example for the lukewarm church, Laodicea. Ephesus was approximately 120 miles west from Colossae.



MAP 2



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

To the saints and faithful brothers in Christ at Colossae:

Grace to you and peace from God our Father.

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

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, so as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God. May you be strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might, for all endurance and patience with joy, giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in light. He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.



Colossians

1:1-14



UNIT 1

IN THE SANDALS: COLOSSAE (OR COLOSSE)

The city of Colossae was located in the Roman province of Asia Minor, a region previously known as the Kingdom of Phrygia (modern-day Turkey). Situated along the Lycus River, Colossae stood at the crossroads of two great fifth-century B.C. trade routes—Ephesus to the Euphrates River (west to east) and Sardis to Southern Asia Minor (north to south).

One of three Christian cities in the unusually fertile—yet earthquake-prone—Lycus Valley, Colossae was the first to have achieved city status. As mentioned in the introduction, Laodicea sat 9 miles west of Colossae, and Hierapolis was 12 miles to the northwest. Colossae was approximately 120 miles due east of Ephesus.

What is known of Colossae comes mostly from the study of coins, a few ruins, and ancient writings. The historian Herodotus, in his work *History*, referred to Colossae as “a great city of Phrygia” in 480 B.C. Similarly, the historian Xenophon, in his work *Anabasis*, described Colossae in 400 B.C. as “large and prosperous.” Of such great importance was Colossae, that evidence points to a royal visit in 481 B.C. by the Persian King Xerxes, and later by Persian Prince Cyrus the Younger in 401 B.C.

It is well documented that textiles played an important part in Colossian history. Fertile pastureland, combined with a water supply that was famously heavy with chalk, led to a specialty wool and dyeing industry that was second to none. The “Colossian wool” was uniquely gloss black and of high quality, while “Colossinus wool” was dyed distinctively purple, as a result of the deep pink cyclamen flower. Given the emphasis on royal purple within the Greek and Roman empires, one can imagine the desire to acquire the absolute finest of materials.

By the time of Paul's letter, Colossae had likely diminished somewhat in significance. Changes in the road systems brought greater commerce and culture to nearby Laodicea, while neighboring Hierapolis drew large populations seeking the medicinal and cleaning properties of their natural hot springs. By the eighth-century A.D., the open, eastern-facing position of Colossae left it exposed to raiding Saracens during the Muslim conquests. Most of the population fled elsewhere during this time. Finally, in the twelfth-century A.D., the Turks destroyed the city. It has remained uninhabited and minimally excavated for the past 1,000 years, though an ancient church was recently unearthed by archeologists.

COLOSSIANS 1:1-14: DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

The first section of Colossians gives us insight into the founding and spiritual growth of the Colossian church, the remarkable prayer life of the Apostle Paul, and God's design for the spiritual growth of all believers.

1. In verse 4, the Apostle Paul connects faith in Christ Jesus with love for the saints (believers). Why is our faith in Jesus directly related to love for His people?

* For additional insight into this idea, see 1 John 4: 19-21.



2. Epaphras was the person who brought the message of the gospel to Colossae. Further insight into his love for the Colossians is seen in Colossians 4:12-13. How do these verses indicate that Epaphras continued to work hard for the Colossian Christians?
3. Paul's prayer and benediction found in Colossians 1:9-12 reveal goals for our spiritual growth. List four of these goals below, noting why each one is important for a mature Christian.

GOAL	WHY IMPORTANT?

4. Verse 13 of chapter 1 tells us that God has transferred the believer from the authority (“domain”) of darkness to a new kingdom. Why is this language used to describe the situation of a Christ-follower?

★ How should our lives be different in “the kingdom of his beloved Son”?

CASE STUDY

You have a friend at work who talks often about her love for God. She listens to Christian music and has a Christian fish symbol and Bible verses on display in her office. But she makes it clear that she dislikes any form of church or “organized religion.” She maintains that most Christians are judgmental hypocrites, and that faith is best lived “one-on-one with God.”

Based on verses in Colossians 1 and 1 John 4, how could you guide her to a better understanding of genuine faith?



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

And you, who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, 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, 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.

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, 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, the mystery hidden for ages and generations but now revealed to his saints. 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. Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ. For this I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me.



Colossians

1:15-29



UNIT 2

IN THE SANDALS: THE COLOSSIAN CHURCH

There are three commonly-held beliefs on how the Gospel message spread to Colossae and ultimately led to the beginning of the Colossian church. None of these beliefs include Paul's direct connection or the fact that Colossae would have been one of his missionary-trip destinations. In fact, Paul writes in Colossians 2:1 that he is struggling for those that "he has not met personally," indicating that he has heard much about them through others, but has never visited.

First, in Acts 2, both Asia and Phrygia are listed as being home to those having been filled with the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. It is reasonable to expect that Jewish pilgrims from the Lycus Valley were among them, returning to the area of Colossae with the Gospel message. Secondly, in Acts 19:10, we are told that Paul and Timothy had stayed in Ephesus for two years, providing daily instruction so that "all the residents of Asia heard the Word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks." And of course, it is entirely possible that Peter and Silas visited the Lycus Valley on their missionary trip to Asia, Galatia, and elsewhere, as noted in 1 Peter 1:1.

Although not completely certain, most commentators believe that it was Paul and Timothy's time in Ephesus that is most responsible for the spread of the Gospel in Colossae. The relationship between Epaphras and Paul indicates that a strong level of discipleship had occurred between them in the past, and that it originated when Epaphras visited Ephesus. Paul refers to him as a "fellow servant" and "faithful minister." He then clearly indicates the level of leadership that Epaphras had in Colossae, even to the degree of sharing the original message, saying that they "learned it [the truth] from Epaphras" (Col. 1:7).

That the church at Colossae was primarily Gentile is evident from several statements: its members were once "alienated and hostile in mind" (Col. 1:21); they were "in

the uncircumcision of [their] flesh” (Col. 2:13); and, more directly, the riches of God’s glory had been shown “among the Gentiles”(Col. 1:27). It is also likely that some Christian Jews were among the fellowship. It’s estimated that Colossae had a large Jewish population and some of the heresies that Paul warns against are rooted in Jewish law.

COLOSSIANS 1:15-29: DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Having noted that God has provided his people with “redemption, the forgiveness of sins” (v. 1:14), Paul now teaches us about the Redeemer. His purpose is to direct his readers to the supremacy of Jesus Christ over all things. The deity and sovereignty of Jesus provide the basis for the completeness of his work on the cross.

1. Verses 15-20 provide one of the greatest descriptions of the supremacy of Christ found in Scripture. In the chart below, write key truths about Jesus found here, noting why each is important to our understanding of Jesus’ deity and His mission on earth.

TRUTH ABOUT JESUS	WHY IMPORTANT?



2. In verses 21-23 of chapter 1, the Apostle Paul describes the wonderful outcome of Christ's sacrifice on the cross for us. How is it possible for us to be presented "holy and blameless and above reproach" before God?
3. Is our continuance in the faith evidence of the genuineness of our faith? Why or why not?
4. In verses 24-29, Paul writes about his own efforts in ministry. In verse 29, he notes that he toils with God's "energy" at work in him.
 - * If God's power is at hand, why is Paul's hard work necessary?

CASE STUDY

You have a friend who believes that “all religions lead to God, as long as you are sincere.” He feels it is “narrow-minded and judgmental” to suggest that Jesus is the only way to God. He maintains that Jesus was a good teacher, but no different from the leaders of other world religions. Using what you have learned in Colossians, how would you guide your friend to a true understanding of the person of Jesus Christ?



SIGNED, SEALED, DELIVERED.

SPIRITUAL GROWTH EXERCISE

Carefully read Colossians 1:15-20, taking note of each truth about Jesus. Pause to thank God for each of these truths about our Savior.

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

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

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. For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, and you have been filled in him, who is the head of all rule and authority. In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, 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. 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, by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross. He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him.

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. These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ. 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, 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.

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— "Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch" (referring to things that all perish as they are used)—according to human precepts and teachings? 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.



Colossians

2:1-23



UNIT 3

IN THE SANDALS: PHILOSOPHIES

In Colossians 2:8, Paul writes, “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.” What exactly is Paul warning about? Equally important, what exactly would the readers of this letter understand Paul to be saying?

The Greek word for “basic principles of this world” is *stoichea*, which in this context denotes false, worldly, elementary teachings. These teachings, or philosophies, would have been divided into one of the four primary Greek philosophical schools listed below; they would have been well understood by most Hellenistic Greeks (a majority of Colossae Gentiles) of the first century. Paul is not condemning the idea of philosophy, but he is condemning the prominence of human philosophy over Gospel truth.

Platonism: Of the various “schools” of philosophy, Plato’s is said to have held more false teachings and led to more confusion in the early church than any other, particularly on the subject of man’s nature and his eternal destiny. The core pillar of Platonism is based on the IDEAL world, or real world that we don’t see. Our world was more of a “shadow world” in which our immortal souls were striving to merge with the immortal God. Our immortal souls would inherently return to the world of the IDEAL.

Stoicism: Mentioned in Acts 17:18, the Stoics were one of the largest and most important groups of the Hellenistic period. To Stoics, there was no God; there was only “absolute reason.” It was a law of nature governed by the orderliness of the

universe. Stoics also believed that passion and emotions interfered with reason, hence the terms “stoic appearance,” or a “stoic look.”

Epicureanism: Also mentioned in Acts 17:18 is the philosophy based on the teachings of Epicurus, which leaned to pleasure as the sole source of happiness. These pleasures included both pleasures of the mind and the body. Epicureans believed in gods; however, they believed that these gods did not interfere with human affairs, so as not to disturb human pleasure.

Skepticism: The argument that there was no right or wrong began with the philosophy of skepticism. By eliminating the ultimate standard for individuals, skeptics essentially eliminated any need for God.

Of course, there were many other philosophical traditions and beliefs, but these examples help us better understand the sort of thinking that early believers had to contend with in their teaching of God’s truth. It’s no wonder that Paul routinely reminded them of the truth and chastised them for slipping back into these ideas and principles.

COLOSSIANS 2:1-23 DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

In chapter 2, we see Paul’s great concern that the Colossian Christians not be misled into a legalistic counterfeit to Christ-founded salvation. He seeks to guard the Colossians from “plausible arguments” (v. 4), “empty deceit” (v. 8), and “self-made religion” (v. 23). Paul’s solution is to stress the uniqueness of Christ as the one “in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” (vv. 2-3).



1. In our time, what things compete against Christ as the source of “wisdom and knowledge”?

2. Carefully read 2:6-7. If you have received Jesus as Lord, how can you become more fully “rooted and built up in him and established in the faith”?

3. How would you explain to a friend what it means to be:
 - a. circumcised in Christ? (v. 11)

 - b. buried with Christ in baptism? (v. 12)

 - c. made alive with Christ (v. 13)

4. Why do people so easily gravitate toward legalistic requirements in order to gain acceptance with God?

CASE STUDY

You have a neighbor who often invites you to his church, despite the fact that you attend worship services and small group at ROCC regularly! In almost every conversation with your neighbor, he talks about the need for “genuine baptism,” “Scriptural worship,” or what he calls a “believer’s diet.” It seems clear that he doesn’t think you can go to heaven without these things. Your inclination is to avoid your neighbor, but your study of Colossians has inspired you to pray for him and seek to help him. What truths from Colossians would you use to help guide your neighbor from legalism to liberty in Christ?



SPIRITUAL GROWTH EXERCISE

Read Colossians Chapter 2, giving special attention to verses 16-23. Take a few minutes to write down any things that you might tend to rely upon (other than Christ) for your acceptance with God. Now ask the Lord to help remove your reliance upon these things and to transfer your trust to Jesus alone. Now read (slowly) Colossians 1:13-23.

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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.

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

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

3:1-14



UNIT 4

IN THE SANDALS: IDOLATRY

Just as the early church combated false teachings and worldly philosophies, pagan religions tempted many believers with a return to pre-conversion idol worship. There had been some early Greek gods and goddesses, but with Rome's conquest over one hundred years prior, Colossae had been introduced to numerous Roman religious deities and practices. Idolatry would continue to be a major hurdle to Christians for centuries to come. As referenced in Colossians 3:5, believers were constantly warned against idolatry and its ramifications regarding their relationship with God.

One characteristic specific to Colossae in the region was the loyalty of its citizens to the popular Greek goddess Cybele. She was the defender of mountains and fortresses, often seen with a crown comprised of the city walls. Festivals were held; worshipers sang loudly and played flutes. One of the more drastic forms of worship to Cybele included male castration in order that men would show their loyalty to her. Some believe that this is what Paul is referring to in Colossians 2:23 when he describes those who were "promoting self-made religion and asceticism and harsh treatment of the body." However, others believe Paul is pointing to a more pious behavior in this verse.

The bottom line is that in addition to confusing philosophical teachings, man-made idols and gods consumed first-century Colossians. In reading chapters 2 and 3, consider the reality of this environment and the impassioned plea that Paul makes for believers to resist both the teachings and the earthly nature.

COLOSSIANS 3:1-14: DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Paul now shifts to the practical application of theology. Having made it clear that our salvation is based wholly upon the work of Jesus Christ, he now tells us how to live in the light of God's grace. The key to newness of life is not adherence to rules, but ongoing communion with the risen Christ.

1. Read verses 1-4. Why does God tell us what He has done for us before He tells us how to live?
2. There are approximately 11 sins mentioned in verses 5-9. Do you see any particular emphases here?
- ★ How might you group these 11 sins into 3 or 4 categories?
3. How do you “put to death” (v. 5) a particular sin?
4. How do you “put off the old self” (v. 9)?



5. How do you “put on the new self” (v. 10)?

CASE STUDY

You have a friend at church who often seems angry and bitter. She went through a difficult divorce two years ago, and she blames her ex-husband for a variety of problems in her life. At times, her talk about him seems to reveal an intense hatred. Using verses from Colossians 3:1-14, how would you counsel your friend toward liberty from resentment and freedom in Christ?

SPIRITUAL GROWTH EXERCISE

Slowly read Colossians 3:12-13. Ask the Lord to show you anyone toward whom you have not lived out these verses. Is there anyone toward whom you have not been patient or kind? Is there anyone you need to forgive? Ask God to help you fulfill these verses in regard to anyone He brought to mind.



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And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body. And be thankful. 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. 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.

Wives, submit to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord. Husbands, love your wives, and do not be harsh with them. Children, obey your parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord. Fathers, do not provoke your children, lest they become discouraged. Bondservants, 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. Whatever you do, work heartily, 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. For the wrongdoer will be paid back for the wrong he has done, and there is no partiality.

Masters, treat your bondservants justly and fairly, knowing that you also have a Master in heaven.



Colossians

3:15-4:1



UNIT 5

IN THE SANDALS: FIRST-CENTURY SLAVERY

In his letter to the Colossians, Paul does not condemn slavery outright, nor does he demand that Christian slaveholders emancipate their slaves. On the other hand, the pressure applied by Paul on the institution of slavery was significant to his readers and to a culture not accustomed to such thought. In short, Paul specifically undermines the foundation of slavery—the notion that slaves were nonentities—through his declaration that there is no distinction between slave and free (Gal. 3:28), and insists that treatment be just and fair (Col. 4:1).

As to cultural context, it's important to understand the dynamics of Roman-Greco slavery. In the first-century Roman Empire, approximately one-third of the population was made up of slaves. Slaves had no legal status and, regardless of which category of slave one belonged, equality was not an acceptable condition.

The most common slave categories included:

Helots: subjugated populations taken from conquered regions and forced to serve as slaves. In many locations, helots comprised a majority of the population.

Indentured Servants: one reduced to slavery due to a debt, usually capable of working off that debt.

Chattel Slave: individuals bought and sold as property, often prisoners, captives, or those born into slavery.

In the letter to Philemon, Paul returns the slave Onesimus to his owner. It's not certain what category of slave Onesimus was, but Paul's request for forgiveness and equality would have again demonstrated a more redemptive view of slavery than that of society. The example of showing greater compassion and justice than what is acceptable to the world is something we can learn from how Paul

addressed the first-century master–slave relationship. It should also be noted that this same redemptive movement of Christian-led attacks on the late-century institution of slavery played a significant role in eventually bringing about abolishment of the practice.

COLOSSIANS 3:15-4:1: DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Paul continues his practical teaching on the new life in Christ with application to specific roles. His emphasis is not on rule-keeping, but on doing everything “in the name of the Lord Jesus” (v. 17).

1. Read Ephesians 5:18-6:9 and note the similarity to Colossians 3:16-4:1. In Ephesians, Paul commands us to “be filled with the Holy Spirit” (Ephesians 5:18), and in Colossians he writes, “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly” (Col. 3:16). Why are both necessary for a Christ-centered life?

★ How can you experience each of these benefits?

2. Note that thankfulness is mentioned in verses 15, 16, and 17 of Colossians 3.

★ Why is thankfulness so important for the Christian?



3. In his instruction to those in particular roles, Paul gives guidance to slaves. (Apparently, there were many slaves in the early Christian church.) It was not his purpose here to address the institution of slavery in his culture, but merely to show how Christians in different roles in life could do everything in such a way as to honor the Lord. How can Paul's instruction in verses 3:22-4:1 apply to Christians in the workplace today?
4. How can verses 23-24 shape your attitude toward your vocation, or calling in life (whether at home or in the workplace)?

CASE STUDY

You work with someone who professes to be a Christian, but he is the most negative and critical person in your office. Other employees avoid this person because of his bad attitude toward the company and its policies and management. You have been praying about whether to talk to this person when you get a group email—he has invited the whole department to a weekly Bible study he plans to hold (with company permission) in a conference room. Now you are more concerned than ever about the effects of his example on your co-workers! You feel you must have a talk with him. What will you say?

SPIRITUAL GROWTH EXERCISE

Memorize Colossians 3:17. Place the verse where you can see it every day this week. Ask the Lord to empower you to live it out.



NOTES





Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving. 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— that I may make it clear, which is how I ought to speak.

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

Tychicus will tell you all about my activities. He is a beloved brother and faithful minister and fellow servant in the Lord. I have sent him to you for this very purpose, that you may know how we are and that he may encourage your hearts, 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.

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), 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. 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. For I bear him witness that he has worked hard for you and for those in Laodicea and in Hierapolis. Luke the beloved physician greets you, as does Demas. Give my greetings to the brothers at Laodicea, and to Nympha and the church in her house. 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. And say to Archippus, “See that you fulfill the ministry that you have received in the Lord.”

I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand. Remember my chains. Grace be with you.



Colossians

4:2-18



UNIT 6

IN THE SANDALS: LAODICEAN LETTER

And when this letter has been read among you, have it also read in the church of the Laodiceans, and see that you read the letter from Laodicea.

Colossians 4:16

There are two credible suggestions as to the letter that Paul is referring to in this verse.

First, some scholars have identified the book of Ephesians as the “letter from Laodicea.” This thought is based on a second-century heretic, Marcion, who referred to the Book of Ephesians by this name in his writings. Additionally, some early manuscripts of Ephesians do not specify Ephesus as the destination recorded in Ephesians 1:1, suggesting that a later manuscript inserted Ephesus into the copy. Or perhaps Paul had intended the letter to be a circular letter for all the churches in Asia Minor, or throughout the Lycus Valley, beginning with the church at Ephesus and making its way to Laodicea.

The alternative opinion is much less complex and likely more accurate, according to a majority of scholars. Many of Paul’s letters were lost (Corinthians for example speaks of additional letters, yet we have only two), so it is entirely possible that this letter to the Laodiceans simply has not survived.

COLOSSIANS 4:2-18: DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

In this final section of his letter, the Apostle Paul calls the Colossian Christians to steadfast prayer (v. 2). He also expresses his need for their prayers in order to be effective in his ministry (vv.3-4). The bulk of the section gives insight into Paul’s dependence upon his “fellow workers.”

1. What does it mean to be “watchful” in prayer?
 2. Why would Paul, who taught the truths of the gospel to so many, need the prayers of others to make his preaching clear? (v. 4)
 3. Why is “gracious” speech associated with wise ministry to those outside of the church?
 4. In verse 10, Paul relays greetings from Mark, the cousin of Barnabas. Read the account of Paul’s disagreement with Barnabas over Mark found in Acts 15:36-41. Based on Colossians 4:10-11, what conclusions can you draw about Paul?
- ★ About Mark ?



CASE STUDY

Your friend has become discouraged about her job because none of her co-workers seem to be Christians. She dislikes the language and overall work environment and wishes she could work for a church or Christian non-profit. Using Colossians 4:5-6, how would you encourage your friend to see her job situation as an opportunity instead of a problem?

SPIRITUAL GROWTH EXERCISE

Take some time to read slowly through the Book of Colossians. Write down five or six things that you will ask God to do in you or through you as a result of your study of Colossians.



NOTES



Paul, a prisoner for Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother,

To Philemon our beloved fellow worker and Apphia our sister and Archippus our fellow soldier, and the church in your house:

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

I thank my God always when I remember you in my prayers, because I hear of your love and of the faith that you have toward the Lord Jesus and for all the saints, and 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. For I have derived much joy and comfort from your love, my brother, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you.

Accordingly, though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do what is required, yet for love's sake I prefer to appeal to you—I, Paul, an old man and now a prisoner also for Christ Jesus— I appeal to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I became in my imprisonment. (Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful to you and to me.) I am sending him back to you, sending my very heart. I 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, but I preferred to do nothing without your consent in order that your goodness might not be by compulsion but of your own accord. For this perhaps is why he was parted from you for a while, that you might have him back forever, no longer as a bondservant but more than a bondservant, as a beloved brother—especially to me, but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord.

So if you consider me your partner, receive him as you would receive me. If he has wronged you at all, or owes you anything, charge that to my account. I, Paul, write this with my own hand: I will repay it—to say nothing of your owing me even your own self. Yes, brother, I want some benefit from you in the Lord. Refresh my heart in Christ.

Confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say. At the same time, prepare a guest room for me, for I am hoping that through your prayers I will be graciously given to you.

Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends greetings to you, and so do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke, my fellow workers. The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.



Dhilemon



UNIT 7

IN THE SANDALS: FIRST-CENTURY LETTER WRITING

Both Colossians and Philemon are introduced with a greeting from “Paul and Timothy, our brother.” Does this mean that both Paul and Timothy wrote these letters? If so, why do we consider them the Epistles of Paul, and not of Timothy?

The word “amanuensis” literally means “to be at hand,” or “within hand’s reach.” The term originated in Rome to describe a slave or personal assistant who was always “within hand’s reach” to perform whatever tasks were required. By the first century, it referred more specifically to a scribe or personal secretary.

Timothy, and others, are often identified as having served the amanuensis role for Paul. The use of a scribe was routine for early letter writing; in Paul’s case this might have been the result of poor eyesight, illness, or cumbersome chains. However, we can be certain through the study of Greek grammar and the letter’s use of specific first-person singular language (“I”), the letter is purely Paul. There would have been no doubt to the reader that Paul was speaking.

A final thought on early letter writing is our consideration of the actual process. We often envision Paul sitting at a desk, pen in hand (or pen in the amanuensis’ hand), and poetically writing away. This is far from how it really would have been accomplished. In the book *Paul and First-Century Letter Writing*, Randolph Richards describes the scene more clearly in order that we better appreciate God’s inspiration, and preservation, of these letters. He writes:

In Paul’s day, producing a letter was a time-consuming and costly business. There are ample resources from the ancient world to piece together what it must have been like. A secretary was usually part of the picture. But so were notes, drafts, corrections and careful rewrites, not to speak of scratchy pens, sooty ink and coarse papyrus. Interestingly, there is evidence that Paul involved his missionary team in the writing of letters. And then came the delivery over land and sea, the reading and circulation, as well as the epistolary afterlife of copying, collecting and storing.

PHILEMON: DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

The letter from Paul to Philemon was written by the apostle primarily to address the issue of Philemon's runaway slave, Onesimus. While in prison, Paul led Onesimus to faith in Jesus Christ (v. 10). He now appeals to his friend, Philemon, on behalf of Onesimus.

Read Colossians 4:7-18 to see the close connection between the Books of Colossians and Philemon. Notice that Paul refers to Onesimus as “our faithful and beloved brother” (Col 4:9). It is because of the close connection between the two biblical books that we are considering them together in our study.

1. How has the genuineness of Philemon's faith been shown in the past?
2. Why does Paul appeal to Philemon rather than exerting his apostolic authority with a command?
3. Paul refers to Philemon as his “fellow worker” (v.1), and later as his “partner” (v.17). He refers to Archippus as a “fellow soldier” (v. 2). What do these terms indicate about the body of Christ, the church, and how we should function?



4. As you think about the Book of Philemon, what qualities does Paul seem to think should characterize the Christian church?

CASE STUDY

A member of your church owns a business that suffered a significant loss several years ago due to embezzlement. The embezzler was caught, prosecuted, and imprisoned, and the business has recovered. On a recent visit to a local prison with your church, you met the embezzler. He seems to have become a sincere follower of Jesus while in jail. On account of his good behavior, he anticipates being released from prison in one month. He would like to attend your church, but he knows his former employer is a member, so he asks if he would be welcome. What will you say? How would you prepare his former employer for this possibility of his coming?

SPIRITUAL GROWTH EXERCISE

As you reflect on the Book of Philemon, ask the Lord to show you if there is anyone who has wronged you whom you have not forgiven. If someone is brought to mind, forgive that person and pray for God's greatest blessing upon his or her life.



NOTES



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