

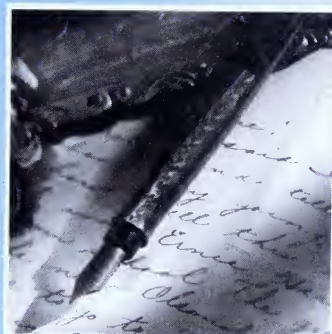


PHILIPPIANS, COLOSSIANS, PHILEMON

SHEPHERD'S NOTES

*When you need a guide
through the Scriptures*

Philippians, Colossians, Philemon



The Most Concise and Accurate
Way to Grasp the Essentials





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Philippians, Colossians, Philemon



Nashville, Tennessee

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FOREWORD

Dear Reader:

Shepherd's Notes are designed to give you a quick, step-by-step overview of every book of the Bible. They are not meant to be a substitute for the biblical text; rather, they are study guides intended to help you explore the wisdom of Scripture in personal or group study and to apply that wisdom successfully in your own life.

Shepherd's Notes guide you through both the main themes of each book of the Bible and illuminate fascinating details through appropriate commentary and reference notes. Historical and cultural background information brings the Bible into sharper focus.

Six different icons, used throughout the series, call your attention to historical-cultural information, Old Testament and New Testament references, word pictures, unit summaries, and personal application for everyday life.

Whether you are a novice or a veteran at Bible study, I believe you will find *Shepherd's Notes* a resource that will take you to a new level in your mining and applying the riches of Scripture.

In Him,

David R. Shepherd
Editor-in-Chief

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

DESIGNED FOR THE BUSY USER

Shepherd's Notes for Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon is designed to provide an easy-to-use tool for getting a quick handle on the important features of these books, and for gaining an understanding of their message. Information available in more difficult-to-use reference works has been incorporated into the *Shepherd's Notes* format. This brings you the benefits of many more advanced and expensive works packed into one small volume.

Shepherd's Notes are for laymen, pastors, teachers, small-group leaders and participants, as well as the classroom student. Enrich your personal study or quiet time. Shorten your class or small-group preparation time as you gain valuable insights into the truths of God's Word that you can pass along to your students or group members.

DESIGNED FOR QUICK ACCESS

Persons with time restraints will especially appreciate the time-saving features built into *Shepherd's Notes*. All features are intended to aid a quick and concise encounter with the heart of the message of these books.

Concise Commentary. Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon is replete with characters, places, and events. Short sections provide quick "snapshots" of the apostle Paul's narratives and arguments, highlighting important points and other information.

Outlined Text. A comprehensive outline covers the entire text of Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon. This is a valuable feature for following the narrative's flow, allowing for a quick, easy way to locate a particular passage.

Shepherd's Notes. These summary statements appear at the close of every key section of the narrative. While functioning in part as a

quick summary, they also deliver the essence of the message presented in the sections they cover.

Icons. Various icons in the margin highlight recurring themes in Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon and aid in selective searching or tracing of those themes.

Sidebars and Charts. These specially selected features provide additional background information to your study or preparation. These include definitions as well as cultural, historical, and biblical insights.

Maps. These are placed at appropriate places in the book to aid your understanding and study of a text or passage.

Questions to Guide Your Study. These thought-provoking questions and discussion starters are designed to encourage interaction with the truths and principles of God's Word.

In addition to the above features, several study aids have been included at the back of the book for those readers who require or desire more information and resources for working through Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon. These include:

Personal Study. Using *Shepherd's Notes* with a passage of Scripture can enlighten your study and take it to a new level. At your fingertips is information that would require searching several volumes to find. In addition, many points of application occur throughout the volume, contributing to personal growth.

Teaching. Outlines frame the text of Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon and provide a logical presentation of the message. Capsule thoughts designated as "Shepherd's Notes" provide summary statements for presenting the essence of key points and events. Application icons point out personal application of the message of Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon. Historical Context and Cultural Context icons indicate where background information is supplied.

Group Study. *Shepherd's Notes* can be an excellent companion volume to use for gaining a quick but accurate understanding of the message of a Bible book. Each group member can benefit by having his or her own copy. The *Note's* format accommodates the study of or the tracing of themes throughout *Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon*. Leaders may use its flexible features to prepare for group sessions or use them during group sessions. Guiding Questions can spark discussion of the key points and truths of the message of *Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon*.

LIST OF MARGIN ICONS USED IN PHILIPPIANS, COLOSSIANS, AND PHILEMON



Shepherd's Notes. Placed at the end of each section, a capsule statement that provides the reader with the essence of the message of that section.



Old Testament Reference. Used when the writer refers to Old Testament Scripture passages that are related or have a bearing on the passage's understanding or interpretation.



New Testament Reference. Used when the writer refers to New Testament passages that are related to or have a bearing on the passage's understanding or interpretation.



Historical Background. To indicate historical, cultural, geographical, or biographical information that sheds light on the understanding or interpretation of a passage.



Personal Application. Used when the text provides a personal or universal application of truth.



Word Picture. Indicates that the meaning of a specific word or phrase is illustrated so as to shed light on it.

PHILIPPIANS

INTRODUCTION

Philippians, more than most other epistles of the apostle Paul, reveals Paul's situation, his personal history, and his deep and abiding affection for a church that loved him.

In addition to revealing Paul's heart, the epistle contains a fresh presentation of Jesus Christ. In a lofty hymn about Jesus Christ, Paul called his readers to an examination and interpretation of the mind of Christ. Paul's life had been transformed radically by his encounter with Christ and by the obedience that Christ's love brought from him.

This letter reads easily. Apart from Philemon, Philippians is the most personal of all Paul's letters.

THE CITY OF PHILIPPI

Philippi is one of the better-known New Testament cities. It was located in the eastern part of the Roman province of Macedonia, on the Egnatian Way, the principal highway from Asia to the West. About eight hundred miles from Rome and approximately ten miles from the seaport of Neapolis, it was a strategic city in ancient times. Abundant resources such as water supplies, timber, and metals made the city important commercially.

Its most imposing geographical feature was a 750-foot-high rock cliff that overlooked Philippi. Many reliefs, depicting the religious cults popular at Philippi, were sculpted on it. Everyone who entered the city was immediately confronted with the religious symbolism of the area.



In the first century, Philippi contained a diverse population. Three primary ethnic groups lived there, but many others came to Philippi for various reasons. The three groups were the native Thracians, the Greeks, and the Romans, who occupied the territory. From appearances, the Roman element was the strongest. Philippi was no doubt the most Roman of all the cities Paul visited.



Epaphroditus

The name Epaphroditus was common in the first-century Greek-speaking world. His personal name means "favored by Aphrodite or Venus." He was a friend and fellow worker of Paul the apostle. He had delivered to Paul a gift from the church at Philippi while the apostle was in prison. While he was with Paul, Epaphroditus became seriously ill. After his recovery, Paul sent him back to Philippi, urging the church to receive him with gladness.

AUTHOR

The Book of Philippians claims the apostle Paul as its author and reflects his personality. Early acceptance of Pauline authorship by such leaders as Clement of Rome and Ignatius provides additional support for this position.

ORIGIN AND DATE OF WRITING

Origin. The traditional view is that Paul wrote the letter from Rome during his first Roman imprisonment.

Date of Writing. The date of the epistle depends on the origin. Those who affirm the traditional view, from Rome, generally date the epistle at about A.D. 60–62.

OCCASION AND PURPOSE

Occasion. Why did Paul write the epistle when he did? The Philippian church had sent Epaphroditus to Paul with a gift (2:25–30). Paul likely wanted to thank the Philippians for this gift which had been sent for his support.

Purpose. Some members of the Philippian church had shown a tendency toward disunity and contentiousness. Paul encouraged them to consider the mind of Christ (2:1–11) and urged them to practice the humility evident in Christ as they related to one another. The church faced a challenge from false teachers who diluted or added to God's way for salvation (3:1–6). Paul made his readers aware of the dangers of legalism, on the one hand, and the dangers of sensuality and materialistic greed, on the other. Each of these teachings required strong resistance, and Paul intended to help the church deal with them.

Paul's letter also prepared the way for a forthcoming visit to the church by both Timothy and

himself (2:19–24). His expression of hope to see his Christian friends soon (2:24) indicated that Paul's long imprisonment in Rome was nearing its end.

AUDIENCE

The Philippian church became a model. From its beginning, it was healthy, even though at the time of Paul's writing it was experiencing a minor problem of disunity (4:2–7). We find several characteristics about this congregation:

- It was primarily a Gentile congregation.
- Women played an important role in the life of the church.
- The Philippians were a model of generosity.
- The church was loyal, as evidenced by its gifts of support to Paul and its desire to know Paul's state during his imprisonment in Rome.

BASIC OUTLINE OF PHILIPPIANS

- I. Greetings (1:1–2)
- II. Paul's Joyful Concern for the Church (1:3–11)
- III. Paul's Joyful Response in the Midst of Difficult Circumstances (1:12–26)
- IV. Paul's Personal Plea for Christian Unity and Humility (1:27–2:18)
- V. Paul's Pastoral Commendation for his Co-workers and Their Examples of Humility (2:19–30)
- VI. Paul's Warning against the Error of Self-righteousness (3:1–11)
- VII. Paul's Single-minded Exhortation to Christian Maturity (3:12–4:1)
- VIII. Paul's Gentle Advice for Joy and Peace among the Saints (4:2–9)

- IX. Paul's Genuine Thanksgiving for the Church's Generosity (4:10–20)
- X. Conclusion (4:21–23)

QUESTIONS TO GUIDE YOUR STUDY

1. Describe the city of Philippi, including its political and social environment.
2. What was Paul's purpose in writing to the believers at Philippi?
3. Describe the church at Philippi. What were its characteristics?
4. What is the basic value of the Book of Philippians to the present-day believer?



The Hellenistic Letter

Generally, Paul's Epistles do seem to follow the normal pattern of the Hellenistic letter, the basic form of which consists of five major sections:

1. Opening (sender, addressee, greeting).
 2. Thanksgiving or Blessing (often with prayer of intercession, well wishes, or personal greetings).
 3. The burden of the letter (including citation of classical sources and arguments).
 4. Parenesis (ethical instruction, exhortation).
 5. Closing (mention of personal plans, mutual friends, benediction).
-

PHILIPPIANS 1

THE SALUTATION (1:1–2)

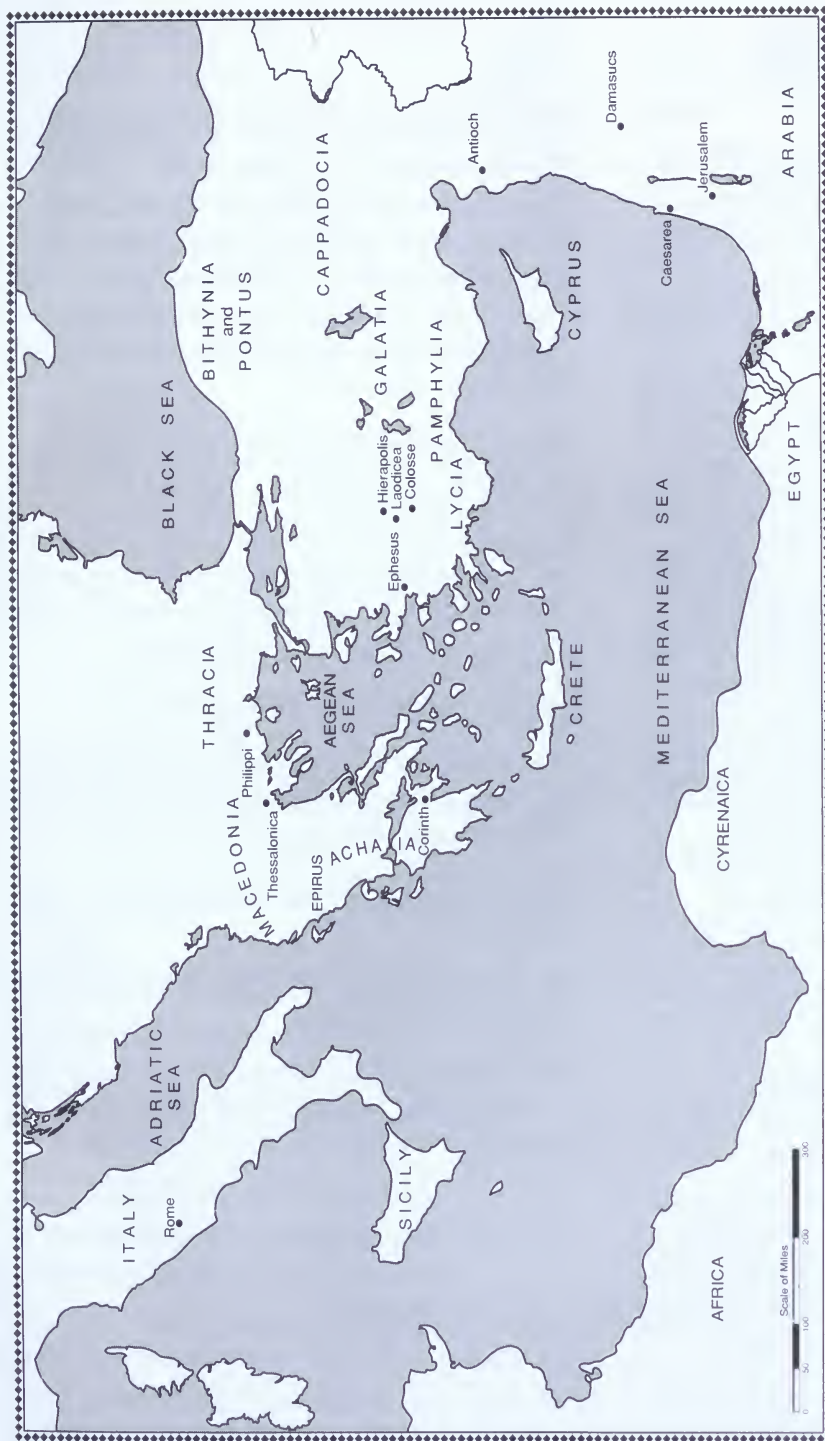
The greeting Paul sent the church at Philippi resembled the greetings of other first-century letters. Commonly, letters contained three elements: (1) identification of the writers, (2) identification of the readers, and (3) the greeting. Some differences occur, however, which reinforce the Christian nature of Paul's letters.

The Writers (v. 1a)

This letter names two writers: Paul and Timothy. Timothy, along with Silas, had participated in the original mission to Philippi (Acts 16:1ff.).

Readers (v. 1b)

Paul identified two groups of readers. They were the church at large and special persons within the congregation at the Philippian church. The special group consisted of bishops and deacons. Their precise functions are not clear.





Paul the Apostle

Paul was the outstanding missionary whose commission came from Christ Himself at the time of his conversion. Paul was Christ's apostle to the Gentiles.

It is difficult to overestimate Paul's impact on the transmission of Christian faith throughout Asia Minor and in the heart of the Roman Empire.

Not only that, Paul's interpretation of the life, death, and resurrection of Christ is set forth in thirteen New Testament letters. Our knowledge of the person and work of Jesus Christ would be greatly diminished without the knowledge God chose to impart through Paul.

Next to Jesus Himself, we know more about Paul than any other person in the New Testament.



Timothy

Timothy, whose name means "honoring God," was a friend and trusted coworker of Paul. He is listed as coauthor of this letter. Paul tells the Philippians (2:19-23) he hopes to send Timothy to them soon.



- *The characteristic greeting in Paul's letters*
- *brings together two great words. "Grace" is*
- *God's undeserved favor toward us, mani-*
- *fested in the giving of His Son. The usual*
- *Jewish greeting was shalom or "peace." For*
- *Paul, that word describes the new relation-*
- *ship between God and believers and among*
- *believers themselves.*

PAUL'S THANKSGIVING AND PRAYER FOR THE PHILIPPIANS (1:3-11)

Philippians 1:3-11 forms a unit of thought in two movements: verses 3-8 express praise and affection for the Philippians, whereas verses 9-11 express Paul's prayer for them.

Paul's Thanksgiving (vv. 3-8)

Paul expresses his thanksgiving for the church at Philippi and tells them he does so every time they came to mind.

Characteristics of Paul's Thankfulness (vv. 3-7a)

We can see at least three characteristics of Paul's thankfulness for them:

1. *It is joyful.* Here is the first mention of joy, which will become a major theme in the letter.
2. *It is prayed with confidence.* Paul's confidence was based on the working of God in their midst, not in his own ability or persuasiveness.
3. *It is proper.* Paul maintains a sense of propriety. He balanced the two actions of "always praying" and "being confident."

Paul's Reasons for His Thankfulness

(vv. 7b-8)

Paul provides three reasons for his attitude of thankfulness:

1. *Paul had the Philippians "in his heart."* Although the church at Philippi started under difficult circumstances, the difficulties forged a bond of affection between Paul and those in the Philippian church.
2. *The Philippians' fellow-service in the apostolic ministry.* The love and respect was mutual. The Philippians carried Paul in their hearts and proved it by their support of him as he bore witness to Christ as a prisoner in Rome.
3. *The deep Christian tie between Paul and the Philippian believers.* The mutual affection between Paul and the Philippian believers was so strong that he longed for them with a love much like the love Christ had for both Paul and the Philippians.



Philippi

Philippi was a city in the Roman province of Macedonia. Paul did missionary work in Philippi (Acts 16:12) and later wrote a letter to the church there (Phil. 1:1). Paul first visited Philippi on his second missionary journey in response to his Macedonian vision (Acts 16:9). The Roman character of the city is apparent from Paul's other experiences in Philippi. (See also "The City of Philippi" in the Introduction.)



- *Paul expresses genuine thankfulness for his fellow-believers at Philippi. As partners in the gospel, they shared in the blessings of God's grace. This resulted in strong emotional ties between them and partnership in a shared mission.*

PAUL'S PRAYER FOR THE PHILIPPIANS (1:9–11)

Paul moves easily from thanksgiving to petitioning prayer. The two are part of the same spiritual activity. Paul's prayer contains two basic petitions regarding the Philippian believers:

(1) for a growing love, and (2) for complete character.

Prayer for Growing Love (v. 9–10a)

To the obvious command regarding love, Paul adds his own insights.



The Nature of a Growing Love (v. 9a). As Paul prays for his readers' love to abound, he prayed for their Christlike attitude of self-sacrifice to continue. We can see the dynamic growth Paul intends for this love. It is to "abound," which means that it is to be present in abundance. Second, the expression "more and more," builds love layer upon layer.

The Environment of a Growing Love (v. 9b).

Paul's prayerful exhortation to love came with instructions on how to implement it. Love is a will to do good to the objects of one's love. This intent to do good requires both "knowledge" and "depth of insight" on how to do that which is good for another person.

The Result of a Growing Love (v. 10a). A growing love, supported by proper knowledge and moral insight, enables one to see the best way to live in light of the day of Christ.



Knowledge

Paul uses a word for knowledge that does not speak of an intellectual knowledge (a product of the mind), but of experiential, applied knowledge (the product of experiencing by living).



Prayer for Complete Character (vv. 10b–11). Growing love provides for character development and completion. Paul identifies, through prayer, the nature of complete character, the means to it, and the purpose of it.

The Nature of Complete Character (v. 10b). Two words describe Paul's concern for the Philippians: "pure" and "blameless." He prayed that they would be "filled with the fruit of righteousness."

The Means to a Complete Character (v. 11a). Only Christ can produce these qualities in the Philippians.

The Purpose of a Complete Character (v. 11b). All of this is for the the glory of God.



- *Paul's prayer for the Philippians contains two*
- *basic petitions: (1) for a growing love, and (2)*
- *for complete character. A growing love pro-*
- *vides for character development and comple-*
- *tion. Paul closes his prayer by reminding the*
- *Philippians of their ultimate calling—to*
- *reflect God's character in their lives.*

PAUL'S CIRCUMSTANCES (1:12–17)

The Philippian believers desired to know Paul's circumstances, and Paul addressed their concern.

His Imprisonment (v. 12)

Rather than detail the hardships he faced, Paul takes a higher road. His primary concern was that the gospel go forward.

Reactions of Others to Paul's Imprisonment (vv. 13–17)

In explaining the situation at Rome, Paul discloses two important results of the events that had happened to him. Neither of these was expected, and thus Paul's word was news to them. At the same time, both reactions advanced the gospel.

The first reaction was that the gospel spread through the ranks of the soldiers. Paul says that they knew he was a prisoner of Christ.

The second result of Paul's circumstances involved the church at Rome. A new evangelistic



"Partnership"

This is one of the great words in Paul's Christian vocabulary. It is the Greek word *koinonia*. It is built from another Greek word—*koinos*—which means common. Many times we find it translated "fellowship." The Christian life is a partnership or fellowship. It is a shared life. We share in common with all other believers in the blessings of God's grace. We also share with them the responsibilities of our new life in the proclamation of the gospel. If the gospel is to reach our world, an effective partnership among many people is necessary.

effort sprang up, touching the entire community. Some members were encouraged by Paul and preached out of sympathy. Others, who were antagonistic toward Paul, preached in hope that they would create further trouble for Paul while he was in prison.



-
- *Paul made known to the Philippians the real*
 - *purpose of his imprisonment. He had been*
 - *placed there for the “defense of the gos-*
 - *pel”—that is, to present its claims. Indeed,*
 - *the gospel spread among the Roman soldiers*
 - *and a new evangelistic effort sprang up in*
 - *Rome from these difficult circumstances.*

PAUL'S ATTITUDE (1:19–26)

Paul's situation caused him to reflect deeply. He has two concerns: the outcome of his imprisonment and the trial and the possibility of his death. These verses reveal the tensions in Paul's life, and the carefully composed following section expresses Paul's emotions.

Paul's Joy in Salvation (vv. 18–24a)

Paul is obviously optimistic, and this section provides a description of Paul's joy.

Paul's Salvation and Hope (vv. 18b–20). Paul fully expected deliverance.

Paul then expresses hope in two ways—which are really two sides of the same coin. First, he expresses the hope that he will not be ashamed but rather, second, that he will honor Christ.

Paul is not so much concerned that he will be ashamed of Christ. Rather, his desire is that he would never bring dishonor to Christ. He wanted to act and speak boldly in even the most



"Deliverance"

Also translated "salvation," this word has been interpreted in two ways. First, it can mean deliverance from prison. Second, it can mean deliverance from this life to the full presence of Christ. Or, Paul could well have had both these ideas in mind.

difficult of circumstances in such a way that Christ will be highly esteemed by those who are observing his behavior.

To Live is Christ (vv. 21). For Paul, life was Christ. Before he encountered Christ on the Damascus road, Paul [Saul at that time] had been the center of his own world. It was a world of which God was a part. But the focus of Paul's pre-Christian life was his own righteousness before God—how well he was performing.

Paul's conversion was a revolution. Paul was no longer the center of his universe. Christ was. What Paul thought about himself and how he perceived himself mattered far less than what Christ thought of him. And Christ held Paul in such esteem that "he loved and gave himself for me." (Gal. 2:20) For Paul, death was simply much more of Christ—it was gain.

Paul's Commitment to the Philippians (vv. 21–26). Paul's words reveal a deep inner struggle. He came down on the side of expressing his confidence that he would remain with the Philippians to advance the gospel and to further their progress and joy in the faith.



- *Paul's attitude was one of sober optimism. His*
- *joy was anchored in the certainty of his salva-*
- *tion, the hope that he will not be ashamed on*
- *the day of judgment, and his commitment to the*
- *Philippians. His love for them dictated that he*
- *place their needs above his own desires.*

THREE EXHORTATIONS (1:27–2:18)

This verse begins a new section of the epistle: 1:27–2:18. A change of tone signals a change of direction. Paul moved from information to

exhortation. Three exhortations occur: 1:27–30; 2:1–4; 2:12–18.

A UNIFIED STAND (1:27–30)

The Philippians had the opportunity to witness to the world by their unified stand for the gospel. This would be particularly impressive if they stood strong through the sufferings they were called to endure. To address this issue, Paul discusses two matters: the nature of the stand (vv. 27–28) and Christian suffering (vv. 29–30).

The Nature of the Philippians' Stand (vv. 27–28)

The command “conduct yourselves” calls the church to appropriate conduct. Paul is reminding the Philippians of the obligations of people who participate in a society. In this case, the society was one of Christians whose strongest ties were in heaven. Paul explains this stand in two ways:

1. *In one spirit.* This refers to the attitude that should be a mark of the church. To describe the function of the body, Paul draws on the imagery of persons—“conducting as one man.”
2. *“Without being frightened.”* The church was to have an unflinchable steadfastness, even in the midst of persecution. Whoever the opponents were, they were not to intimidate the Philippians.

Christian Suffering (vv. 29–30)



The Nature of the Suffering (v. 29). Paul spoke straightforwardly about Christian suffering. He clearly states that God has given them the privilege of believing in Christ and suffering for Him. God is honored by both.

The Pauline Model of Suffering (v. 30). Paul's life provided the model of suffering he identified in



Paul's Suffering

Paul may be referring to the imprisonment and beating he and Silas experienced in Philippi after they prayed for an evil spirit to come out of a slave girl who was being used to tell fortunes. The beatings resulted in wounds which the Philippian jailer washed following his conversion. It's likely that the early members of the church at Philippi saw these wounds.

Paul reminds them that he continues to be involved in the same conflict which caused suffering in Philippi. He calls on the Philippians to step up and not to shrink back from the suffering which results from following Christ.

this verse. Paul reminds the Philippians that they had seen him suffer.



- *The Philippians had the opportunity to witness*
- *to the world by their unified stand for the gos-*
- *pel. This would be particularly impressive if*
- *they stood strong through the sufferings they*
- *were called to endure. Suffering confirms the*
- *believer's faith, bringing him or her in closer*
- *contact with the Lord and providing a vehicle*
- *for making commitment real and tangible.*

QUESTIONS TO GUIDE YOUR STUDY

1. What are the characteristics of thankfulness?
2. What prompted Paul's attitude of thankfulness toward the Philippians?
3. Describe the nature of Paul's prayer for the Philippians. What aspects of that prayer might we appropriately apply to our present-day churches?
4. How would you describe Paul's attitude while being imprisoned? Why did he have this outlook?

PHILIPPIANS 2

A UNIFIED MIND (2:1–4)

Paul's thoughts turn from the need to withstand pressure from the outside to the attitudes that were to characterize Christians. In 1:27 he exhorted the Philippians to unity, and here he continues that thought. This passage unfolds in three parts: the basis of Paul's appeal (2:1); the essence of Paul's appeal (2:2a); and the expression of unity (2:3–4). These become the resources for Christian unity.

Basis of Paul's Appeal to Unity (v. 1)

Four statements form the basis of Paul's appeal. Introduced by the word "if," they recall the blessings of being in a Christian community:

- 1. *If you have any consolation or encouragement in Christ.*
- 2. *If you draw comfort from His love.*
- 3. *If you have any fellowship with the Spirit.*
- 4. *If you have any tenderness and compassion.*

The Essence of Unity (v. 2)

Paul assumes that each of the four conditions set forth in the above "if" clauses exist among the Philippians. On the basis of these realities experienced by the Philippians, Paul urges them to fill his cup with joy by (1) thinking and feeling the same, (2) loving each other with the same love, and (3) having their souls in harmony with each other and with Jesus Christ.

Nothing would make Paul happier than for this unity of thought and feeling to pervade the church.

The Expression of Unity (vv. 3-4)

The unity of mind and heart will be strengthened and will express itself in actions that take the pattern—

DON'T DO THIS	DO THIS
The first "don't" is: don't act from motives where you are trying to outdo or outshine a brother or sister and build up your own ego.	The way to avoid this is to consider others better than yourself.
The second "don't" is: don't focus just on your own interest. To be sure, you must be concerned about your own interest. Not to be so concerned could result in irresponsibility.	But balance the concern with your own affairs by being concerned about the interests of others. Step outside yourself and look at things through the perspective of others.



- *Paul exhorts the Philippian believers to strive*
- *for unity and then provides the resources for*
- *Christian unity. To function as a community of*
- *believers, the church needs to be of one mind.*

THE EXAMPLE OF CHRIST (2:5–11)

In 2:5 Paul repeats the exhortation he made in 2:1–4. This repetition emphasizes its importance. Even more, it introduces the strongest possible model of humility and servanthood: the Lord Jesus Christ Himself.

Philippians 2:6–11 recalls the attitude and actions of Christ as He left the glories of His eternal state to become a man and die for our sins. The Philippians were to imitate Him because, in doing so, any problems of disunity that were beginning to appear could be solved.



Many New Testament interpreters believe this passage is an early Christian hymn. Its structure has two parts. Philippians 2:6–8 speaks of Jesus' servanthood and 2:9–11 speaks of His exaltation. If these verses do constitute a hymn, which seems reasonable, they reveal something of the worship of the early church and how Jesus Christ was viewed by the churches.

The Introduction to the Hymn (v. 5)

Paul introduces this hymn to Christ by urging the Philippians to have the same mind as Christ.

The Hymn to Christ (vv. 6–11)

If this passage indeed was a hymn, it may well have been used in worship in Philippi. And so Paul may have been reminding them of a text that was familiar to them.



"Emptied Himself"

A. T. Robertson asks, "Of what did Christ empty himself? Not his divine nature. That was impossible. He continued to be the Son of God. . . . Undoubtedly Christ gave up his environment of glory. He took upon himself limitations of place (space) and of knowledge and of power, though still on earth retaining more of these than any mere man. It is here that men should show restraint and modesty, though it is hard to believe that Jesus limited himself by error of knowledge and certainly not by error of conduct. He was without sin, though tempted as we are. 'He stripped himself of the insignia of majesty' (Lightfoot)." A. T. Robertson, *WPNT IV*, p. 444.



"Obedient"

Obedient and *obey* come from an old word that means to give ear to, to listen to. *Obedience* listens to and follows the wishes of another. The thought of death on a cross and the spiritual implications were overwhelming to Jesus as He prayed in Gethsemane. In His prayer to the Father, He asked if there were any way around drinking the cup He was about to drink. Three times after asking the question, He listened to His Father. There was no other way.



Cicero, the Roman philosopher, characterized crucifixion as "the most cruel and abominable form of punishment." {Verrine Orations 5.64} In another context Cicero said, "The very word 'cross' should be foreign not only to the body of a Roman citizen, but to his thoughts, his eyes, his ears." (Oration in Defense of C. Rabirius, 16) [Both of these quotes are found in *Philippians* by F. F. Bruce, Harper & Row, p. 54]

The hymn reminded Paul's readers of the glory of Christ prior to the incarnation. He was God by nature—just as God the Father was. But He didn't cling to what was His by nature; rather, He emptied Himself.

In verse 9 the passage changes both tone and structure. The hymn continues, but God rather than Christ becomes the subject:

1. God "exalted him to the highest place." The word actually means "superexalted." This action occurred as a consequence of Jesus' voluntary humility. It clearly came because of His servantlike attitude and actions.
2. God "gave him the name that is above every name." Jesus, by virtue of His humility, has become the object of highest adoration.

The one who was humiliated by men was "exalted" by God. Because of His matchless obedience, God gave Him a matchless name. "Every knee" will bow, and "every tongue" will acknowledge Him to be Lord. The end result of the universal dominion of Christ will be that God will receive the "glory" due Him.

OBEDIENCE: THE BELIEVERS' APPROPRIATE RESPONSE (2:12–18)

Following his extended hymn to Christ, Paul returned to his primary concern of 1:27—working together with one mind.

Practical Christianity (vv. 12–13)

Paul had observed that the Philippians practiced obedience while he was among them. He told them that while he was away from them, it was all the more important that they be obedient to the teaching they received from him.

He urges the believers to work out their salvation (v. 12) and provides a reason for doing so (v. 13).



The Command to Work Out Their Salvation (vv. 12–13). The Philippians were to make salvation work in their lives.

Positive Steadfastness (vv. 14–16)

Here Paul warns his readers of the dangers of murmuring and arguing. Paul knew that selfishness and vainglory led to complaints. He may have been attempting to head off even more problems in the community.

The Command to Stop Complaining (v. 14). “Do everything without complaining or arguing.” Those activities are unworthy of Christ’s servants, and they have a negatively contagious effect among a body of Christians.

The Purpose of the Command (vv. 15–16). When individuals and churches have the mind of Christ and refrain from complaining and arguing, they will be innocent and pure. There will be a marked difference between believers and the surrounding world.

Personal Joy in Ministry (vv. 17–18)

Paul’s concern for the Philippians’ steadfastness did not replace his joy for them and their service to the Lord. Paul uses three words that recall the sacrificial system: “poured out,” “sacrifice,” and “service.” Paul indicated he was being “poured out” like a drink offering along with those he loved so much. Rather than being discouraged about his circumstances, Paul had great joy.



Salvation was central to Paul’s theology. In his other letters, Paul describes salvation as a past event (Eph. 2:8–9) and as a future consummation (Rom. 13:11). Here he spoke of working out salvation in the present.

They were to work out their salvation with an attitude of “fear and trembling.”



“Fear and Trembling”

This phrase doesn’t indicate a cowardly sort of fear. It was intended as an encouragement for believers to have an awe that is appropriate in the presence of God. Wuest translates this phrase like this: “carry to its ultimate conclusion your own salvation with a wholesome, serious caution and trembling, for God is the One who is constantly putting forth His energy in you both in the form your being desirous of and your doing his good pleasure.”



- *Paul commands the Philippians to “work*
- *out” their salvation by being faithful in living*
- *the Christian life. He also urges them to have*
- *the mind of Christ and to grow toward the*
- *goal of blamelessness. Above all, they were*
- *called to be like Christ.*

The following verses form a break in the letter. Here Paul provides information about his situation and his intent to visit the Philippian church when he could.

PAUL'S PLANS FOR TIMOTHY (2:19–24)

The Sending of Timothy (vv. 19–22)

Knowing that he could not visit Philippi, Paul hopes to send Timothy in whom he had complete confidence because he was “like-souled” (“I have no one else like him”). Paul provided these evidences to support his commendation of Timothy:

1. Timothy had a genuine interest in the affairs of the church at Philippi.
2. Timothy sought the things of Christ rather than his own interests.

The Importance of Timothy (vv. 23–24)

Obviously, Timothy had a significant role in Paul's work. Paul makes two statements that reveal Timothy's importance to Paul and the work of the gospel. First, Paul needed Timothy a while longer. Second, Timothy replaced Paul, who desired to come when he could. In sending Timothy, Paul sent the best he had—an extension of himself—a costly gift to them.

PAUL'S PLANS FOR EPAPHRODITUS

(2:25–30)

The Commendation of Epaphroditus (v. 25)

Paul wanted to send Timothy, but he also found it necessary to send Epaphroditus. That raises many questions. Why should Paul have felt that way? Would Epaphroditus not be of service to Paul as the church originally intended? Did something happen to sour him or Paul? Paul provides us with no answers to these questions.

The Reason Paul Sent Epaphroditus

(vv. 26–28)

Paul mentions Epaphroditus's sickness. On the way to Rome, Epaphroditus apparently fell sick and nearly died. It was better for Epaphroditus to return home than to die in service to Paul. Further, Paul expected that the church would be eager to see him.

The Command to Honor Epaphroditus

(vv. 29–30)

Paul urges the church members at Philippi to welcome Epaphroditus appropriately, with the honor due him. If the church had any doubts about whether Epaphroditus had failed, Paul relieves those concerns. Epaphroditus had risked his life for Paul, but he had also done it in demonstration of his love for them. He endured sickness near to death for their sakes.



- Paul commends the service of two Christlike
- men. Both thought of others before their own
- concerns, and both served the Lord and His
- church. They would journey to the church in
- Paul's place, in the hope that he would follow
- soon.

QUESTIONS TO GUIDE YOUR STUDY

1. Paul exhorted the Philippians to be “like-minded.” What did he mean by that?
2. What does it mean that Christ “emptied” Himself? What should be our response to this?
3. What does it mean for us to “work out” our salvation?
4. What can we learn through the examples of Timothy and Epaphroditus?

PHILIPPIANS 3

At this point in the epistle, Paul turns his thoughts more directly to the false teachers and to Christian living. Paul provides an interchange of instruction and exhortation. Commands predominate again until 4:10.

Two concerns occupy Paul's mind. First, certain persons attempted to undermine his ministry, and he had to counter them. Second, the problem of disunity demanded one final appeal, and Paul provided it with more direct language. These two concerns form the logical divisions of 3:1–4:19.

PAUL'S EXHORTATION TO AVOID FALSE TEACHERS (3:1–21)

Be Joyful in the Lord (v. 1a)

Halfway through the letter Paul says, “In conclusion!”

As he thinks of bringing the letter to a conclusion, he echoes a key theme: rejoice in the Lord.

Be On Guard against False Teachers

(vv. 1b–3)

There is humor in the way Paul begins this section of warning. He is admitting repetition in what he is about to say. But like the skilled educator he was, he felt it was for the good and safety of his beloved Philippians.

Paul speaks from experience. He had traveled the road the false teachers were traveling. He knew the weaknesses of a legalistic approach to salvation, and he knew the joys of coming to God through Christ. A subtle danger, however, was the threat that some would become legalistic Christians. In their enthusiasm, they might not be able to distinguish legalistic Christianity from the real thing and might not be able to see the dangers of legalism.

With three rapid statements, Paul warns the Philippians about false teachers. Three times he uses the verb “watch out for” in connection with false teachers whom he characterizes as dogs, those who do evil, and mutilators.



“Dogs.” Eastern people generally hated dogs. The Jews often described Gentiles that way, but here Paul applies that term to false teachers. Perhaps he was envisioning the packs of ravenous dogs that roamed the countryside eating whatever they could.



- Paul warns the Philippian believers about
- the threat posed to them by false teachers.
- These teachers were legalists who exalted the
- physical rite of circumcision. Genuine
- believers do not trust in any physical distinctions or in their own achievements. Their
- trust is in a God of power and glory who
- redeems them through Jesus Christ.

Paul's Testimony (vv. 4–6)

Paul gives a firsthand testimony of the bankruptcy of the flesh. He says if anyone could boast of fleshly status and achievement, he



Circumcision

"This is My covenant, which you shall keep, between Me and you and your descendents after you: every male among you shall be circumcised. . . . And every male among you who is eight days old shall be circumcised through your generations . . ." (Gen. 17:10–12, NASB).

could. His background naturally divides into two logical categories: heritage and achievement.

His Heritage. Paul was circumcised on the eighth day. This means he was an Israelite by birth and not a proselyte.

He was of the tribe of Benjamin—the youngest of Jacob's sons and the only one born in Canaan. Although a small tribe, Benjamin produced Israel's first king—Saul—for whom Paul may have been named.

He was a Hebrew of Hebrews. Although Paul was born in Tarsus, both of his parents were Hebrews. It's likely his lineage was well known to him and solidly Hebrew.

His Achievements. Paul gives his readers three items that provide the standard to measure his achievements: the Law; zeal for the nation, and righteousness.

Paul had chosen to be a Pharisee. Pharisees were known for their love of the Law, their strict interpretation of it, and their ethical consistency. Paul's zeal was at the core of his persecution of the church. Finally, as a staunch observer of the Law, Paul had attained the righteousness of the Law.

These characteristics of heritage and achievement reveal that Paul's acceptance of Christ did not occur because he was marginally Jewish. He had not failed at his own religion. The point of his testimony is that he had seen a better way and chosen to follow it.



- Paul's heritage and achievement revealed
- that his acceptance of Christ did not occur
- because he was marginally Jewish. He had
- seen a better way (the gospel of Jesus Christ)
- than the Law and chosen to follow it instead.

The Righteousness of Faith (vv. 7–11)



When Paul was confronted by Christ (Acts 9:1–19), he made a radical decision. He could hold on to his advantages of birth and moral achievement that he possessed, or he could trust Christ for salvation. But he could not do both. He had to make a choice.

This section of Paul's warning explains Paul's real values. The real value Paul found was in knowing Christ personally. That brought zeal for perfect character not found through the Law.

Paul considered his previous gains as loss (v. 7). He continued to affirm that decision and expressed that conviction even more firmly by saying that he counted all things as trash compared to knowing Christ (v. 8).

Three times in verses 7–8 Paul expresses that his goal is Christ. For him, knowing Christ was better than the combined value of his former life. Christ exceeded everything else.

The power of Christ's resurrection. Christ was crucified. He was dead and buried, but God raised Him from death. God, who created the world out of nothing, spoke once again and the lifeless corpse of Jesus Christ was transformed into a being that is now incapable of death.



"Knowing Christ
Jesus"

The word *knowing* means "to have personal acquaintance or experience with." To "know" Christ is to be in an intimate relationship with Him through faith. The person who knows Christ experiences the power of His Resurrection.



To explain what he means, Paul uses the illustration of athletic games. He was like a runner in a race. In races the winner's prize, the laurel wreath of the victor, was often placed at the finish line as an added incentive to the contestants. Since the Greek athletic games captured the imagination of all people in this area, Macedonia included, this illustration spoke vividly to Paul's readers.

The content of Paul's goal revolved around his repetitive use of the verb "press on" (vv. 12, 14). Paul attaches two activities for attaining his goal.

"Forgetting what is behind." This expresses Paul's future orientation. For him, every day was a new adventure.

"Straining toward what is ahead." This captures the athletic metaphor of the Greek games. It is graphic, bringing to mind the straining muscles, clear focus, and complete dedication of the runner to his race to the prize. Both mental and physical discipline were necessary.

Those in Christ, believers, participate in His Resurrection. Paul experienced that resurrection life first on the road to Damascus, but from that point on he wanted to have greater personal knowledge of the Risen Christ.

There is another mark of the person who knows Christ. He shares in the sufferings of His Lord.

The fellowship of sharing in His sufferings. Knowing Christ also means identifying with His death. Being united with Christ in His death was a spiritual reality, but being conformed to His death was the daily process of living. Paul realized that conformity to Jesus' death made him a candidate for resurrection power. This helps explain the spiritual discipline Paul mentions in 3:12–16.



- Paul had tried the way of right relationship
- with God by heritage and achievement.
- Although he doesn't say so explicitly in this letter, he found this approach to right relationship
- with God to be a dead end—because of the sinfulness of human beings. But God provided a
- way of rightstanding through the death and
- Resurrection of Jesus Christ. Paul found in
- Christ what he had been seeking all his life.
- And once he found what he had been looking
- for, he left all for the knowledge of Christ.

PRESSING TOWARD THE GOAL (3:12–16)

Paul's Desire to Fulfill His Call (vv. 12–14)

Paul wanted to guard against any misunderstanding of his previous comments. He wanted his readers to know that he had not crossed the finish line in the Christian race as yet. He also

wanted them to know that he had not achieved perfection.

Paul's Encouragement to Other Believers **(vv. 15–16)**

Paul's experience set a pattern for all believers. If they would understand it and join with him, they would avoid the influence of false teachers. Three movements occur in this command: a call to unity, a warning of misconduct, and an exhortation to continue:

1. *He calls the Philippians to unity* (v. 15). He calls on those who are perfect or spiritually mature to "take such a view of things." This is one word in the Greek text, meaning "be minded." It includes thoughts, values, and intentions. Paul knew that everyone would not see things as he did, so he urged them to be open to God's view of the matter.
2. *He gives them an exhortation* (v. 16). The believers were to remain steadfast. They were to remain true to what they had and with a collective discipline that was to characterize the entire church. This meant they were not to follow the false teachings of Paul's opponents.



- *Paul's experience correctly set a pattern for*
- *all believers. If they would understand it and*
- *join with him, they would avoid the influence*
- *of false teachers.*

THE FALSE TEACHERS' CHARACTER EXPOSED (3:17–21)

Paul continues to warn the church about false teachers. In this passage he moves to plural



"Mature"

The word *mature* is a form of the verb "made perfect" which Paul used in 3:12. He is not talking about "sinless perfection" or "super spirituality." The only kind of maturity possible to us is the recognition that we are not yet perfect and the commitment of our lives to running the race to the end. "Here the term means relative perfection, not the absolute perfection so pointedly denied in v. 12" (A. T. Robertson, *WPNT* IV, p. 455).

rather than singular subjects so that the entire church is included.

Encouragement to Imitate Paul (v. 17)

Earlier Paul had urged the church to imitate Christ (2:5–11). Here he urged the Philippians to imitate him. There is no egotism involved, however, as Paul realized they would follow (“take note” of) other Christian models as well. In Paul’s absence, they were to find other models who were true to his commitments.

Characteristics of Paul’s Opponents (vv. 18–19)

Then Paul delivers his final blow against the false teachers. Emotion fills his words here, and he confesses his tears as he writes. These teachers followed Paul about, seeking to entice people away from the truth. They opposed the message of the cross, hindering those who would take advantage of its work. Paul cherished the cross. The fact that the false teachers did not honor the cross reveals who they were. Theirs was organized, active opposition to the gospel.

Paul exposed these teachers by revealing their character, providing four statements about their doctrine and practice:



“Citizenship”

A. T. Robertson points out that Paul was proud of his Roman citizenship—just as the Philippians were proud of theirs. With this citizenship came protection and many other privileges. But Paul was more proud of the fact that he and his fellow Christians at Philippi were citizens of heaven.

1. They followed their appetites—literally “their God is their belly.”
2. They are proud of what they should be ashamed of.
3. Their focus is exclusively on this world.
4. Their end is destruction.

Paul ends this section by presenting a Christian perspective, in which he contrasts the earthly and the heavenly. This metaphor had rich meaning to the Philippians, as they were proud of their Roman citizenship. Although the term

citizenship may imply a place, Paul uses it of a people. Genuine believers are not citizens of this world, but belong to a heavenly commonwealth. Their “citizenship is in heaven.”

Paul also makes it a point in verse 21 to focus on the physical body, which would be transformed to become like Christ’s body. This body is destined for eternity. Paul’s hope involved a physical transformation. The power of the resurrection would be complete when Jesus exerted His power in the bodies of believers. This hope should have caused the believers to press on toward that great day.



- *Paul delivers his final blow against the false teachers by revealing their character and outcome. They opposed the message of the cross and hindered those who would take advantage of its work. He contrasts them by discussing the characteristics of the true believer, who has the hope of being transformed into a new resurrection body.*

QUESTIONS TO GUIDE YOUR STUDY

1. How did Paul describe the false teachers who were trying to entice the Philippians with their doctrines?
2. What was the point of Paul’s personal testimony?
3. What does it mean for the believer to “know” Jesus?
4. How did Paul view his calling? What lessons on calling might we apply from Paul?

PHILIPPIANS 4

Throughout Paul's letter to the Philippians are hints of disunity among the members of the congregation. Paul confronted the disunity with strong doctrinal and practical instruction. Paul gave several exhortations: to steadfastness, to unity, to joy and peace, and to the proper outlook.

AN EXHORTATION TO STEADFASTNESS (4:1)

The previous passage contains the emotion of argumentation. In this passage, Paul speaks with the warmth of a friend.

The Address to the Readers

In his address, Paul makes three statements about his readers at the Philippian church:

1. *They were brothers.* They had oneness with each other and with Paul.
2. *They were those "whom I love and long for."* This speaks of Paul's desire to fellowship with them.
3. *They were Paul's "joy and crown."* For Paul, life was better because he knew these believers. They brought him joy even while he was awaiting trial.

Clearly, a strong tie existed between Paul and the church.

The Exhortation

Out of this friendship grew exhortation. Paul urged the Philippians to steadfastness. Roman armies were well known for standing unmoved against the enemy. The church was to stand in the same way. How was the church to stand? It was not to be weakened by disunity, turmoil, or wrong values. It was to stand together to accom-

plish God's will. This exhortation recalls Paul's instruction in 1:27.

AN EXHORTATION TO UNITY (4:2–3)

At this point, Paul addresses the problem of unity. The problem that erupted was a dispute between two women, Euodia and Syntyche. This problem was more than a passing disagreement. It had the potential of splitting the church. But Paul had faith in the women themselves and the church's ability to correct the problem.



- Paul exhorts the Philippian congregation to
- unity. A dispute between two women within
- the church threatened to divide the fellow-
- ship. Paul appeals to the women and offers a
- solution to their problem.

AN EXHORTATION TO JOY AND PEACE (4:4–9)

The Exhortation (vv. 4–7)

These six verses divide naturally into two major sections (vv. 4–7 and vv. 8–9), but they unite around a theme of peace. In 4:7 Paul writes of the peace of God that sustains Christians during times of hardship. In 4:9 he writes of the result of a proper thought life (4:8).

Philippians 4:4–7 speaks primarily to those occasions, when peace is lacking. They are those times when troublesome circumstances interrupt the normal flow of events. Paul gives his readers three commands to help them solve these kinds of problems:

1. *He commanded them to rejoice.* Their joy was to be in the Lord, and it was to be unchanging. Paul's own circumstances



Euodia and Syntyche

Euodia means literally "good or prosperous journey." *Syntyche* means "pleasant acquaintance" or "good luck."

In writing to solve the problem, Paul identified a process and reasons for helping these women.

The Process. The process began with the women themselves. Naturally, the best solution was for the women to solve their own problem. The word "agree" means that the women were to have the same attitudes and values that Christ had and which Paul expressed earlier in the letter (2:5–11).

The Reasons. Paul provides us with two reasons for helping the women. First, they were Christian sisters. Second, they fought with Paul for the gospel.

reminded him of the joy available in the Lord, and he wished that joy for them as well. Paul knows that no situation is beyond the Lord's help. Christians can rejoice in that, if nothing else. The phrase "the Lord is near" expresses the confident expectation of early Christians.

2. *He exhorts them to gentleness.* The word for "gentleness" has a variety of meanings. Gentleness or kindness in relation to others is a central idea. The gentle person does not insist on his or her rights.
3. *"Do not be anxious about anything."* This is a negative command but it has a positive thrust. Anxiety is a contradiction of the life of faith. It is the destructive, self-defeating worry about whether our needs are going to be met. It expresses itself in the idolatry of things. Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount spoke of anxiety (Matt. 6:25–34), where He stated the most common causes of anxiety. They are clothing, food and drink, and the future. Even in our contemporary life, with its complexities, the same simple concerns cause anxiety. Prayer cures anxiety, and Paul uses three words to describe prayer: "prayer," "petition," and "thanksgiving." Each contributes to a proper understanding of the comprehensive nature of the prayer life.

Paul's answer to anxiety is the peace of God. He makes three statements about this peace:

It is divine. Paul did not envision a situation where circumstances changed or external needs were met. This peace was a characteristic of God that invaded the Christian.

It "transcends all understanding." The word "transcends" is a word that means "excellent." Peace

excels over knowledge. Paul probably had in mind situations where knowledge is insufficient. Sometimes knowledge cannot explain, and sometimes explanations do not help. Peace, however, is a reality that Christians experience even when they don't understand the *whys*.

It will “guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.”

For these three reasons, prayerful people are peaceful people.

The Environment of Peace (vv. 8–9)

In verses 8–9, Paul turns his thoughts to providing an environment of peace by unity of thought. The church is to make these matters its collective goal, with God ruling in them. This section contains two lists. The first list is completed by the exhortation to “think about these things.” The second list concludes with “put into practice.”

Paul addresses the thought life first, identifying seven qualities that should characterize Christians. The following chart lists these qualities and provides their extended meanings. These characteristics would unite the church and present a good testimony to the world.

“Think on These Things” Qualities List

VIRTUE	EXTENDED MEANING
Whatever is true	truthfulness, dependability
Whatever is noble	worthy of respect, honor
Whatever is right	giving to God and people a justness that is worthy of them
Whatever is pure	holy in relation to God
Whatever is lovely	that which calls forth love; persons should be attractive, lovable
Whatever is admirable	praiseworthy, attractive
Whatever is excellent	morally excellent
Whatever is praiseworthy	worthy of praising God



“Guard”

“Guard” is a military term, implying that peace stands on duty to keep out anything that brings care and anxiety.

“Put into practice” instructions list. After presenting the standard for the thought life, Paul turns to Christian practice. Paul urges the Philippians to use him as a model of effective Christian living. The church is to model and cultivate these things it saw in Paul:

- Whatever you have learned
- Whatever you received
- Whatever you observed

The result of this kind of living would be the God of peace abiding with them.

The above two sets of instructions on peace complement each other. When anxiety appears, the cure is prayer. When the life is disorderly, the cure is mental and practical discipline.



-
- *Paul's exhortation addresses the anxieties of*
 - *life, and presents an environment of peace.*
 - *When anxiety appears, the cure is prayer.*
 - *When life is disorderly, the cure is mental*
 - *and practical discipline.*

PAUL'S EXPRESSION OF THANKS FOR THE PHILIPPIAN SUPPORT (4:10–20)

The final section of the epistle addresses finances. Paul thanks the Philippians for remembering him and his needs, as they had before. Because of their pattern of giving, they were a double blessing to him. Paul identifies some of the benefits for those who gave.

Paul's Situation (vv. 10–14)

Appreciation (v. 10). It may have been years between the gifts mentioned in 2 Cor. 8 and the one delivered by Epaphroditus. In the meantime, Paul had learned to be content with whatever God supplied to him. He states three

reasons why he fared well even during the time before he received their gift.



Contentment (v. 11). The first reason Paul did not need the gift was his own contentment. Twice Paul mentions that he had learned contentment. Paul came to grips with his circumstances and fared well in and through them because of his relationship to Christ.

Adaptability (v. 12). Circumstances are the arena of spiritual growth, and through them Paul developed adaptability.

In these varied experiences Paul displayed spiritual equilibrium. He was equally unaffected by poverty and riches. One learns this kind of knowledge by walking with Christ—who is the sufficient one—and by developing a biblical perspective of material things. By doing so, Paul had learned to rise above any circumstances.

Dependency (v. 13). Paul depends on Christ for strength. The expression “through him who gives me strength” clearly refers to the indwelling Christ. Paul could accomplish all that God wanted through the strength He provided.

Blessing (v. 14). Paul reminded his readers that their share in his work was good: “You share in my troubles.” First, they participated with him.

Second, Paul identified their partnership specifically with his troubles. The term *naturally* implies hardships of any kind, but it had a deeper meaning for Paul. In Col. 1:24 Paul speaks of suffering the “afflictions of Christ” so that his difficulties in spreading the gospel actually related to the Messiah.



“God’s work, done
God’s way, will never
lack God’s blessing.”
—Hudson Taylor

The gift of the Philippians was good because it demonstrated that they understood God's working in the world, and that they willingly supported it through God's servants.



- *Paul thanks the Philippians for remembering*
- *him and his needs. Because of their pattern of*
- *giving, they were a blessing to him. Paul*
- *identifies some of the benefits in store for*
- *those who gave.*

Paul's Attitude Toward Those Who Gave (vv. 15–20)

Paul's thankfulness turns to commendation and promise of reward. Both the nature of their giving and its motivation pleased the Lord.

Commendation (vv. 15–17). Paul commended the Philippian church for the way it supported him. Its support was unique, for it was the only Macedonian church to support him. He also commends them because their support was immediate and consistent. Finally, Paul commends them because their gifts were an investment in the work of God and in their future.

Blessings (vv. 18–19). Paul's commendation leads him to speak of how the Philippians benefited from supporting him. He indicates two benefits to the giver. First, God was pleased. Paul pointed out that their gift was an acceptable Christian sacrifice (see Rom. 12:1–2). The second benefit was that the believers would experience God's provision. Just as God had met his needs, He would also meet theirs.

Doxology (v. 20). Fittingly, Paul ends this passage with a doxology. God is the source of all good things. It was the love of God that was

expressed in the Philippians' gift. Paul remembers the ultimate purpose of life—to bring glory to God now and forever. The last word, therefore, is one of praise.



- *Paul promises the Philippians that they*
- *would be rewarded for their support. Both*
- *the nature of their giving and its motivation*
- *pleased the Lord.*

CONCLUSION (4:21–23)

The final greeting is typical. “All the saints in Christ Jesus” is everyone who trusts in Christ. Paul uses the word where we often employ the term *Christian*. The reference to “Caesar’s household” shows the opportunities Paul’s imprisonment opened for witness at the highest levels of Roman government.

QUESTIONS TO GUIDE YOUR STUDY

1. What problem at the church in Philippi prompted Paul’s exhortations in this chapter?
2. List Paul’s several exhortations in this chapter. What are the main thrusts of each? What is their common denominator?
3. What steps must a follower of Christ take to create an environment of peace?
4. Explain Paul’s view of contentment. What practical and spiritual lessons might we learn from Paul as a model of contentment?



“Caesar’s Household”

“Not members of the imperial family connected with the imperial establishment. . . .” Christianity has begun to undermine the theme of the Caesars.”

A.T. Robertson,
WPNT IV, p. 463



Colosse

The city of Colosse had a mixed population. The natives were Phrygian. Because of the military and commercial heritage of the area, however, Greeks may have settled there during the Greek period of dominance. To this were added Jews of the Diaspora, Romans involved in politics, and various ethnic groups drawn by commercial interests. From the epistle we know that both Jews and Gentiles lived at Colosse and became part of the church.

COLOSSIANS

INTRODUCTION

Christianity faced one of its most severe challenges in the complex and confusing intellectual climate of ancient Colosse. False teachers were urging the people to move away from their Christian roots and to accept other religious ideas. Although Paul did not found the church at Colosse, it bore his imprint, and Paul felt the responsibility to address its problems.

This epistle contains distinctive teachings about the person and work of Christ, Christian living and relationships, and Paul's conception of his ministry.

Studying the epistle is an adventure. Its pages are alive with relevance and challenge to those of us who live in an age of relativism and religious syncretism.

One theme predominates in Colossians: the centrality of Christ. No other epistle is as Christ-centered as this one. Whether the reader spends countless hours with Colossians or reads it only casually, every encounter with the text brings one face to face with the Lord whom the text introduces so well.

AUTHOR

Tradition supports the letter's claim that Paul was the author (Col. 1:1). Paul had never been to Colosse, but he wrote to them to address matters raised by Epaphras (1:7) who was with Paul at the time the letter was written (4:12). Some people doubt Pauline authorship on the grounds of the book's theology and style. But some obvious differences in the theological perspective do not automatically force the conclu-

sion that someone other than Paul wrote Colossians.

DATE OF WRITING

From the earliest times, most scholars have dated the Epistle to the Colossians to the time of Paul's first Roman imprisonment. The letter would have been written about the same time as Philippians and Philemon, around A.D. 60–61.

PURPOSE

Paul's purpose for writing the letter was to address false teachings in the church. Apparently these false teachings attempted to supplement the gospel and in the process of doing so were undermining it. We don't have a direct description of these false teachings; but on the basis of what Paul says in the letter, there are some inferences we can make about these teachings. They:

- undermined the centrality of Christ
- focused on speculative philosophical traditions
- observed dietary prescriptions and prohibitions
- observed certain religious rites of a Jewish nature
- venerated angels
- tended toward asceticism

(See article, "The Opponents of Paul in Colossians" at the back of this book.)

AUDIENCE

Paul addressed his letter to "the holy and faithful brothers in Christ at Colosse."

THE MESSAGE OF COLOSSIANS

The theme of this letter centers on the supremacy of Christ. In his letter, Paul emphasizes that Christ was sufficient for the total Christian life from beginning to end. Only He is worthy of



Although the problem addressed in Galatians was entirely different, Paul feared the same consequences. Adding to the Gospel of Christ is, in effect, to subtract from it.

worship and obedience, for the fullness of God is in Him and in Him alone (1:15–20). Believers needed no other source of understanding and knowledge (2:2).

The worship of the principalities and powers—if intermediaries—is both evil and foolish, for Christ is supreme in His authority over all of them (1:16). The unity and growth of the church depended on its faithful relationship to Christ, who is its head (2:19).

We know from Paul's letters that he was able to tolerate a great diversity of opinion and beliefs in the Christian body. But he resisted fiercely any teaching that denied to Christ His unique place as the only Savior and Lord of the church.

The church at Colosse had indeed held firm to its initial faith in Christ (2:15). But Paul must have feared that the Colossians could yet be seduced by false teachings which were subtly undermining the gospel.



"God . . . has spoken to us in His Son, whom He appointed heir of all things, through whom He also made the world" (Heb. 1:1–2, NASB)

Paul wrote his Letter to the Colossians, therefore, to encourage them to remain true to Christ and to assure them that they had in Him all that they needed to live and grow in faith.

THE THEOLOGY OF COLOSSIANS

Paul's major teaching centered on the question, Who is Jesus Christ? The apostle insisted that no chasm existed between the transcendent God and His material creation. Christ is both the Creator and Reconciler (1:15–23). He is the exact expression of God and brings together heaven and earth. A hierarchy of angelic powers or ruling spirits to mediate between God and humans is unnecessary. Christ is fully divine and fully human. Indeed, "in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form, and you

have been given fullness in Christ, who is the head over every power and authority” (2:9–10).

Second, he dealt with the issue of genuine spirituality. Paul developed the basis for genuine worship and spirituality by refuting the false spirituality that encouraged an unspiritual pride (2:6–23). He exhorted the Colossians to abandon sins of the old life and cultivate the virtues of the new life (3:5–4:6).

UNIQUENESSES OF COLOSSIANS

Most of Paul’s letters are addressed to churches made up of Jews and Gentiles. There may well have been no Jews in the congregation at Colosse.

Conspicuously absent from the letter are any Old Testament quotations or allusions. Paul’s teaching on Christ in this letter does not refer to Him as Messiah of Israel. The letter does mention the Sabbath (2:16) and circumcision (2:11).

BASIC OUTLINE OF COLOSSIANS

- I. Introduction (1:1–14)
- II. Explanation of the Supremacy of Christ (1:15–23)
- III. Ministry for the Church (1:24–2:5)
- IV. Warnings against False Spirituality (2:6–3:4)
- V. Exhortations for Ethical Living (3:5–4:6)
- VI. Conclusion (4:7–18)

To see the geographical location of Colosse, refer to the map in the Introduction to Philippians, p. 5.

QUESTIONS TO GUIDE YOUR STUDY

1. What was Paul’s purpose in writing Colossians?



Colosse

Shortly after Paul wrote this Epistle to the Colossians, the entire Lycus Valley was devastated by an earthquake (about A.D. 61), which probably ended occupation of the city.

The city was located in the southwest corner of Asia Minor in what was then the Roman province of Asia. Hierapolis and Laodicea were situated only a few miles away. All three were in the Lycus Valley. A main road from Ephesus to the east ran through the region.

Colosse was prominent during the Greek period. By Paul's day, it had lost much of its importance, perhaps due to the growth of the neighboring cities. Extremely detrimental to all the cities of the region were earthquakes that occasionally did severe damage.

2. Describe the nature of the heresy that threatened the believers at Colosse. How serious was this threat?
3. What theme rings throughout Paul's letter to the Colossian Christians?
4. What is the relevance of Colossians to present-day believers?

COLOSSIANS 1

SALUTATION (1:1-2)

Paul addressed this epistle to a congregation previously unknown to him (1:4; 21). While Paul knew many of the churches in the area by "face," he did not know them all. It is inconceivable, however, that these churches did not know of him. Paul's lack of personal knowledge does not significantly change his introduction, which contains the three elements normally included in first-century correspondence: the writer(s), the readers, and a greeting.

The Writers (v. 1)

This letter has two writers, Paul and Timothy, although later the epistle clarifies the fact that Paul is primary writer. Paul included Timothy because of his share in the ministry.

The Readers (v. 2a)

The readers are Colossian Christians. They were located in Colosse, and Paul addressed them as "holy and faithful brothers in Christ."

The Greeting (v. 2b)

This greeting was typical for Christian and non-Christian epistles. "Grace" points the readers to the basis of their new life in Christ, as well as the state of grace in which they were to con-

duct their lives. “Peace” is a consequence of grace received.

PAUL'S THANKSGIVING AND PRAYER FOR THE COLOSSIANS (1:3–23)

Paul's Thanksgiving for the Colossians (vv. 3–8)

Paul typically opens his epistles with an expression of thanksgiving for the church and his assurance that he was praying for them.

Paul's thanksgiving embraces three growing aspects of the Colossian church—their faith, love, and hope.

Although Paul had never visited the church, he knew well their Christian experience and accepted it as genuine.

Nature of the Growth. The presence of faith, love, and hope showed the Christian character of the Colossian church. The phrase “faith in Christ Jesus” is not the same as faith directed toward Jesus Christ. Paul assumes that the object of their faith was Christ.

The original Greek focuses on the Colossians, existence “in Christ” and the faith they exercised in that new context.

A second evidence of their growth was the presence of *love*. Paul used the term *agape* for Christian love. Paul advanced two truths about this love. First, it is sacrificial. The term *agape* reminded them of the sacrificial love of Christ for them. Second, within the Christian community, love is indiscriminate. The love was directed to all the saints. Love, however, has little value if it is held only among the saints. It must be expressed to others. *Agape* love fulfills two objectives: (1) it represents Jesus to the



“Christian love”

Paul's understanding and discussion of love make it a central theme, and his use of the noun *agape* makes the term almost a technical term. Prior to Paul, in fact, the Greek term *agape* was little used. Instead of using a word for *love* already filled with meaning, Paul took the seldom-used term and filled it with Christian meaning. Christian love is not simply an emotion that arises because of the character of the one loved. It is not due to the loving quality of the lover. It is a relationship of self-giving that results from God's activity in Christ. The source of Christian love is God (Rom. 5:8), and the believer's response of faith makes love a human possibility (Rom. 5:5).



"Hope and love react upon each other in many ways. Love quickens hope, and no doubt hope stimulates loves . . . Love springs up when faith is born in the heart. But to ignore the fact that all the graces are organically related and bound up together and react upon each other, is to fail to understand Christian character. Love cannot be hermetically sealed up and disjoined from faith and hope. When the Christian life is quickened at any one point, it is quickened at all points. When hope grows bright, love gains an added intensity."

—Edgar Young Mullins, *Studies in Colossians*

world, especially in His bodily absence, and (2) it perfects the body of Christ.

Basis of the Growth. After expressing thanksgiving for the Colossian Christians' maturity in Christ, Paul presents the reason for their growth. It is their hope. Hope provides the basis for Christian growth since the most basic elements of faith toward God and love toward others grow out of hope.

Without hope, faith and love are greatly diminished.

This hope is both objective and subjective. The first is the object of hope—complete redemption already secure in heaven. The second is the activity of hope in their hearts as they anticipate future blessing. This hope is both object and activity of the heart.



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- *The church at Colosse was healthy in many respects. It had a living love for all Christians and a solid hope of life eternal through the gospel. These virtues are solid ground for genuine thanksgiving.*

Paul's Prayer for the Colossians (vv. 9–14)

The character of Paul's prayer. Three statements describe the character of Paul's prayer on behalf of the Colossians:

1. *The occasion for its prompting.* The condition of the church at Colosse and the danger of heresy to the church prompted Paul's prayer.
2. *The specific nature of the prayer.* "Praying" covers the entirety of the prayer life. "Asking" expresses a particular request

that God intervene in the lives of the people for whom Paul prayed.

3. *Its consistency.* Paul prayed regularly and consistently for the Colossians.

The content of Paul's prayer. Paul prayed specifically for a knowledge of the will of God for the Colossians. The prayer is informed and motivated by Paul's awareness of developments in the church at Colosse.



Knowledge of God's mind comes from spiritual resources. We cannot know God's will through our own efforts. Our human responsibility is to place ourselves in an environment conducive to spiritual growth where God can reveal His mind. Specifically, Paul identified this environment as "through all spiritual wisdom and understanding" (v. 9). While the words "wisdom" and "understanding" convey different nuances of meaning, together they make a clear point. Spiritual understanding includes wisdom, which is the acquisition of knowledge and the application of that knowledge to a specific concern.

The purpose of Paul's' prayer. Paul prayed with a goal in mind. His stated purpose to the Colossians is "that you may live a life worthy of the Lord." He is speaking of wisdom applied to living, not simply wisdom applied to knowledge. His prayer is directed toward the transformation of the Colossians' character and witness. He speaks in terms of the characteristics of those who walk in God's will.



Paul identifies three characteristics of those who walk in God's will:

1. *They have continued growth in the spiritual life.* This involves effective service and growth in knowledge. "Bearing fruit in



"Knowledge"

The Greek word Paul used for knowledge had many applications, both religious and nonreligious. It is a compound word-form that includes the word *knowledge (gnosis)* and a preposition (*epi*, "on, upon, over"), which at times slightly changes its meaning. A secular use of the term occurs in the New Testament in 1 Pet. 3:7, where Peter urges husbands to love their wives according to knowledge. He meant that they should have a personal understanding of their wives' specific needs. Generally in the New Testament, however, the word has a religious use. It was likely a favorite word of the teachers in Colosse who sought to add to the gospel.



"Strengthening"

Paul uses two different words for power in verse 11.

The power he describes as strengthening may be defined as "the potential to exert a force to perform some function." The word *power* refers to "the power to rule or control."

Believers need God's power to endure the circumstances of life and to relate positively to other people. Paul uses two terms to explain the empowering of the believer in the will of God: endurance and patience.

every good work" refers to the reproductive aspect of the Christian's calling. This can take the form of evangelism or the fruit of the Spirit in a Christian's life (Gal. 5:22–23) which, at times, is called fruit-bearing.

This first characteristic has two focal points. First, it clearly demonstrates that God's will is related to growth in Christian experience. Second, Christian service is a natural response to the will of God, but so is gaining spiritual understanding. A close relationship exists between these two.

2. *They have the power to persevere.* People need to know what God wants them to do. They also need the strength to live by the will of God. Paul believed the possibilities of spiritual power were unlimited for the believer. God strengthens us "according to his glorious might." Paul emphasizes the nature and application of the power available to the Christian.
3. *They exhibit joyful thanksgiving to the Father.* This is heartfelt, genuine thankfulness that grows out of the experience of salvation. Christians should never forget what God has done for them. They should allow this life-changing experience to bring them daily joy.

God is to be thanked because He qualified believers for an inheritance (v. 12); He rescued believers from darkness (v. 13a); and He brought believers into the Son's kingdom (v. 13b).



- *A personal knowledge of God's will is accompanied by three characteristics. First, continued growth in the knowledge of God comes in the arena of service. Second, power is given to endure both difficult circumstances and people who seem to counter the work of God. Finally, joyful thanksgiving is offered to God the Father for what He has done in planning and effecting salvation.*

THE PERSON OF CHRIST (1:15–20)

From Paul's perspective, to add to the gospel is to fail to understand who Christ is. When a person rightly understands who Christ is, he will see that it's impossible to add to who He is and what He has done.

Evidently these false teachers in Colosse valued knowledge and wisdom. They were seeking to enlighten the believers in Colosse in order to enable them to grow in wisdom and knowledge.

Paul says, in effect, they're pointing in the wrong direction. Christ Himself is the source of knowledge, wisdom, and life-transforming power. What the Colossians needed was an adequate understanding of Christ.

Many believe Paul's presentation of Christ in this context is a hymn that was sung or spoken in worship.

The first section presents Christ's relation to the created world. Paul answers basic questions about the origin and purposes of creation.

The other section presents Jesus' relationship to the redemption of what He created. Paul



The word translated "image" does not mean just a replica or a likeness. The reality itself is present in the image. God Himself, the invisible one, had become visible and accessible to the human race through Jesus Christ. To see Jesus is to see God (John 14: 9).



"Fullness"

This is a technical theological term meaning "the totality of the Divine powers and attributes" (Lightfoot). The fact that all the fullness of the Godhead dwelt in Christ was shocking. The false teachers were right. The distance between God and sinful human beings was great. How could such a gap be bridged? Their proposal was likely that a chain of spiritual beings bridged this gap. And so sinful human beings had to recognize these intermediaries, including Christ, in relating to God. The truth of the gospel is far simpler: that the fullness of God dwells in Christ.

reminds his readers of the redemptive purposes of God in and through Christ.

Jesus: Lord of Creation, vv. 15–17. Paul makes two assertions about this theme. First, "He is the image of the invisible God."

Second, Jesus is "the firstborn over all creation." Some have wrongly interpreted this to mean that Christ—prior to His incarnation—was a creature, the first creature born. But in the context of what follows, this can't be the meaning of that phrase.

Christ is the agent of creation. Name anything in the visible world (physical objects) or in unseen worlds (whether invisible particles or spirits). Christ created it, and it exists for Christ.

Moreover, Paul says that Christ is the one who holds all reality together. Not only that, as Redeemer, He is creating a new order in the midst of the old order. This new order is the church, of which He is the head. Just as in the human body the head exercises control over the body, so Christ is head of the church.

Paul's first claim about Jesus is that God's fullness indwelt Him (v. 19).

The second claim has to do with God's purpose in Christ (v. 20). The universe was fragmented and in disharmony. Paul understood this in cosmic terms. Not only were there hostile people; there were also rebellious spiritual powers that were against God. God's purpose in Christ is to bring the universe, fragmented by rebellion and sin, back together to restore the harmony that existed at creation when God looked at everything and declared it to be good.

Peace is achieved through the blood of Christ. One of the deepest human perceptions is that wrong must be punished. Our sin against God was such that only God could pay the cost. And that He did in His Son, Jesus Christ.



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- *To understand Christ is to know Him as*
 - *supreme over all created beings and to know*
 - *Him as our Redeemer.*

THE SALVATION OF THE COLOSSIANS (1:21–23)

Having spoken of the universal and cosmic nature of the work of Christ, Paul now applies it specifically to the church at Colosse.

The Colossians' Former Condition (v. 21)

Paul reminded the Colossians of the blessings of reconciliation. When Paul uses the term *alienation*, it obviously meant that at one time the Colossians had been outside the sphere of God's blessing. These Gentiles were far removed from the promises of God's blessings. Further, their minds were opposed to God; their actions were evil rather than good. In such a condition, the possibility of reconciliation seemed remote.

The Colossians' Present Condition (vv. 22–23)

The present condition is one of reconciliation—reconciliation achieved in the fleshly body of Christ. It was not just an apparent body. Christ was fully human. The Colossians owed their salvation to the initiative of God in their lives. They had voluntarily responded to God's offer of reconciliation. Being reconciled to God, they had new values, motivations, and outlooks.

But the purpose of God in Christ had not been exhausted in the conversion of the Colossian Christians. It looked toward the future when the Colossian believers would be presented to God as the people God intended them to be, pure, without blame.

Since these believers had not seen Paul personally, he included an extended section on the nature of his ministry.

PAUL'S MINISTRY TO THE CHURCHES (1:24–29)

In this summary statement of Paul's ministry, two focal points emerge. Paul sees two dimensions to his mission: suffering and completion of the work God gave him.



“That Which Is Lacking”

This is a startling expression. Bratcher and Nida observe, “In no sense does Paul mean that Christ's sufferings and death for the redemption of mankind was not sufficient; what is meant is that in the service of Christ his servants are called upon to suffer as he did; suffering is an integral part of the ministry of Christ's servants, as it was of Christ himself. Barclay translates ‘the uncompleted sufferings which the work of Christ still entails.’” (Bratcher and Nida, p. 37).

To Complete the Afflictions of Christ (v. 24)

The first aspect of Paul's ministry involved suffering. Paul knew from the time of his conversion that unique suffering would be his lot. Paul addresses two areas of his suffering.

Suffering for the Colossians. Paul's mission to the Gentiles brought suffering at the hands of Jews and Gentiles alike.

Suffering for Christ. Paul stated that his call involved “filling up that which is lacking in Christ's afflictions” (1:24, NASB).

To Complete the Word of God (vv. 25–27)

The second aspect of Paul's ministry involved the Word of God.

Paul's Role (v. 25). Paul saw his role as a servant of the church. His stewardship fulfilled a part of the divine plan that God foresaw long ago but which He clarified through the events in Paul's life.

The Revelation to Paul (vv. 26–27). Paul's role in the administration of God's plan related to the "mystery that has been kept hidden for ages and generations, but is now disclosed in the saints" (v. 26).

Paul may have used the concept of mystery because the false teachers were seeking to pull the Colossians away from the gospel by using the concept of mystery. We humans are attracted to mysteries and even more to the idea that we may be among the few who understand such mysteries.

The content of the mystery is: "Christ in you, the hope of glory." Believers could expect to share in the inheritance of the saints because Christ lived in them and Christ in them now constitutes the hope of glory in the future.

Paul's Message, Method, and Purpose (vv. 28–29)

His Message. Paul's message was Christ. The gospel is not a system, a hierarchy, or a set of regulations. It is the person and work of Jesus Christ. He is the beginning, center, and end of it. It is only as life is lived in Him, subject to His will and direction, that Christians become "mature."

His Method. Paul states his method with two verbs: *admonishing* and *teaching*. Teaching complements admonishing.

His Purpose. Paul's purpose is "to present everyone perfect in Christ." This purpose has three emphases:

1. *Three times Paul referred to "everyone."* Clearly he could not rest until all Christians lived up to what God expected.
2. *Paul had a perspective of the last days.* When he stated "to present" every



"Mystery"

"The word *mystery* is used in the New Testament in a rather special sense, of those secret things, which man could have never discovered for himself, but have now become known because God has been pleased to reveal them. The New Testament 'secret' is a secret proclaimed to all men and revealed to faith; the 'mystery' of the pagan world was a secret, the knowledge of which is made available only to the initiated, and received through the rites of initiation." (Stephen Neill, *Paul to the Colossians*, p. 36.)



"How Greatly I Strive"

A. T. Robertson translates this phrase literally as "how great a contest I am having," a metaphor from the athletic arena.

person, he thought in terms of the return of Jesus and the desire to see each Christian mature in Christ.

3. *Paul willingly exerted himself toward the end.*
The term *struggling* was used of athletes who painfully pursued athletic glory.



- *In this passage, Paul shows us how he viewed*
- *his ministry. Suffering had been an inescap-*
- *able part of it. His attitude was, "I rejoice in*
- *my sufferings." His task as an apostle was to*
- *make the gospel fully known. Paul took no*
- *credit for all he had accomplished, as it had*
- *been due to the energy and power of Christ at*
- *work in him (NEB).*

QUESTIONS TO GUIDE YOUR STUDY

1. Describe Paul's prayer for the Colossians.
What were the elements of his prayer?
What was its purpose?
2. Why was Paul thankful for the Colossian believers?
3. What is the theme of verses 15–20?
4. Describe Paul's ministry to the churches.
What were the goals of his mission?

COLOSSIANS 2

PAUL'S MINISTRY TO THE COLOSSIANS (2:1–7)

As Paul applied his ministry to the Colossians, he began the struggle. His struggle was emotional rather than physical. In verse 1 we learn for the first time that Paul was not personally

acquainted with the Christians in Colossians or Laodicea, a neighboring city to Colosse.

The Object of Paul's Concerns (v. 1)

Paul desired to be faithful to his calling. This could best be accomplished by a face-to-face meeting with the Colossians and with their fellow Christians in Laodicea.

The Purpose of Paul's Concerns (vv. 2–3)

Paul's main purpose. Paul's main purpose was that the Colossians might be encouraged in heart. Their encouragement grew out of a genuine love that formed a tie stronger than a mere physical tie and from the riches of an understanding that contains assurance and certainty. Moreover, such understanding yields a true knowledge of God's mystery—Christ Jesus.

The Reason for Paul's Concern (vv. 4–5)

Paul expresses his reasons for concern in a two-fold way. He uses doctrinal and personal perspectives.

Doctrinally. Paul is concerned that the Colossians not be deceived by “fine-sounding arguments.” Their heretical arguments came with the appearance of “deeper theology.” In reality, they were subtle inroads of heresy. The church needed to see past these arguments the false teachers were presenting. The best antidote to this false teaching was the true knowledge which is in God's disclosure of Himself in Christ.

Personally. Paul also had a personal reason for his concern. He had not seen the Colossians in person, but he felt a strong tie to them. He was with them in spirit. Paul was delighted to hear of their steady faith in Christ.



"Rooted" and "Built Up"

The first metaphor pictures sinking the roots of faith into the soil of Christian truth. The other calls to mind building on the foundation of faith. These point to the continued growth of the church, but with a distinct emphasis. The strength is related to its faith. The attack of the false teachers was against "the faith," the system of Christian truth and its ramifications in life.

The Application to the Colossians (vv. 6–7)



In making specific application of these things to the Colossians, Paul's primary concern was that they continue to grow in Christ.

1. *They had already received Christ.* Paul wanted them to reflect on *how* they had received Him, and that was to be a model for their present lives. The word "as" (v. 6) draws attention to the relationship between receiving and continuing. Paul is calling them to a focused faith in the all-sufficiency of Jesus not only for the first step of salvation but as they live out the day-to-day reality of that salvation.
2. *They were "rooted and built up in Him . . . strengthened in the faith."* Notice the two metaphors "rooted" (from the agricultural world) and "built up" (from the construction world) in the faith.
3. *They were "overflowing with thankfulness."* Paul frequently used thankfulness as one of the litmus tests of Christian health. Thankfulness is an antidote to the poison of false teaching.



- *This section ties Paul to the Colossians, identifies his tribulation with their faith, and encourages them to continue on the same path on which they have begun so well.*

PAUL'S DEFENSE AGAINST DOCTRINAL THREAT (2:8–19)

The threat concerned two major tenets of the Christian faith. The first is (1) the doctrine of salvation, the person and work of Christ specifically related to the cross, and (2) sanctification,

the application of the cross to the development of personal purity.

The Doctrine of Salvation (vv. 8–15)

The attack of the heretics struck at the heart of the Christian faith. It was a direct attack on the doctrine of salvation. In this section Paul addresses two concerns: (1) the worship of angels, and (2) the practice of the Law.

The nature of the threat (v. 8). Paul saw the heresy as a planned, organized attack against what God has revealed through His prophets and apostles. This false teaching made inroads at Colosse through what Paul calls “hollow and deceptive philosophy.” Paul states three characteristics about this philosophy. Together, these provide a standard of measurement not only for the Colossians but for us as well.

1. *The philosophy was human.* Basically, the false teaching represented man's attempt to arrive at the truth apart from God's help. Paul explains that it “depends on human tradition.”
2. *The philosophy was viewed as coming from the elementary principles of the universe.* Paul may have been referring to angelic powers, which were incorrectly perceived as being in authority over the world. Whatever the specific interpretation, Paul's point is that the elements were inferior.
3. *The philosophy was non-Christian.* This characteristic perhaps points to the heart of the danger. The philosophy was not “according to Christ.”



Elementary Principles of the Universe

“A general belief in Paul's time was that spiritual beings—frequently associated with planets and stars—controlled every man's future. This ancient astrology, coupled with the ideas that secret knowledge enable man to control the power of these things, seems to have formed a basic element in the false teaching in Colossae. Astrology, secret knowledge, and strange regulations all promised a super-Christian life. But Paul wrote that this was deceptive.” [Harold S. Songer, *Colossians: Christ Above All*, Convention Press, p. 67]



"All the Fulness of the Deity"

Stephen Neill paraphrases this expression in the following way: "When God entered into the world in the incarnation of Christ, it was the whole of Himself that he was pleased to give to us. Your new teachers imagine that the fulness of the divine essence is distributed among a whole crowd of beings, divine and semi-divine. This is a fundamental error. Everything of God that can be known by man was seen and understood in the human bodily life of Jesus Christ. Whenever we touch Him, we touch the reality of God, the whole reality of God." [Stephen Neill in *Paul to the Colossians*, pp. 41–42]

- *The Colossian Christians were being confronted with a heresy that threatened two major tenets of the Christian faith: the first is the doctrine of salvation, and the person and work of Christ. In his Letter to the Colossians, Paul offers a defense against this false teaching.*

The Answer to the Threat (vv. 9–15).

To answer the teaching of the heretics, Paul now focuses on the person and work of Christ. He relates the work of Christ to both the supernatural powers and the Law.

Jesus is the sufficient Savior. Paul emphasizes Jesus' work in relation to the Law and His dominion over other spiritual beings.

Jesus is completely God. Paul argues for the deity of Christ by stating that "for in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form." This is Paul's way of saying that Jesus is fully God—just as the Father and Spirit are fully God.

Paul informs the Colossians that they "have been given fullness in Christ." He means that they are complete in Him. Although the blessings of salvation may increase, in Christ they have the "fullness" of God. There is no need to be concerned about other spiritual beings or powers.

To describe the absolute adequacy of what Christ brings to the Colossian Christians, Paul uses the figures of circumcision and baptism.

Circumcision. Presumably the Colossians were Gentiles. They had not been circumcised physically. But Paul describes their experience of conversion as circumcision. In this experience they had put off the "sinful nature." That stood for the old life of rebellion against God. When they

became Christians, the Colossians were freed from the power of rebellion that enslaved their lives.

Baptism. The Colossians, of course, had been baptized. Paul equates Christian baptism with dying and being buried. Christ died and was buried in a tomb. We die and are buried with Him in a “watery grave.” This means that there is a radical dividing line between what the Christian now is and what he used to be. He not only died but is also raised with Christ.

The decisive phrase in v. 12 is “through your faith.” Paul did not believe that the physical act of being put under the water changed a person any more than physical circumcision did. What is important is our trust in God. What is even more important is what God does for the believer. God makes him or her “alive” with Him.

Paul uses two metaphors to express the heart of what Christ did for believers: the handwriting of ordinances being removed (“the written code”) and nailing the accusations to the cross (“nailing it to the cross”).

These two metaphors present Paul’s doctrinal conclusions regarding the Law and the work of Christ. God forgave, canceled the condemnatory aspects of the Law, and paid the accusations in full.



- *The central error of the false teachers was*
- *their failure to recognize the sufficiency of*
- *Christ to meet the needs of believers. Paul’s*
- *argument countered his opponents at every*
- *point. No one should follow these false teach-*
- *ers. They were defeated, disgraced, and pow-*
- *erless because of the work of Christ. Jesus is*
- *the sufficient and sovereign Savior.*



“The written code.”

This handwriting represents the certificate of indebtedness written in one’s own hand. This means that the personal note that testifies against us is canceled.



“Nailing it to the cross.”

Most likely this refers to the indictment hung over the prisoner’s head when he was crucified. By such action, the criminal’s debt to society was canceled since he paid for the crime.



Sanctification

Sanctification is vitally linked to the salvation experience. It is concerned with the moral and spiritual obligations assumed in that experience. We are set apart to God in conversion, and we live out that dedication to God in holiness.

The Doctrine of Sanctification (vv. 16–19)

In these three verses Paul focuses his attention on the implications of his teaching for Christian living. He discusses the Colossians' relationship to the Law (vv. 16–17) and to the supernatural powers (vv. 18–19). The commands of verses 16 and 18 predominate this section.

Concerning asceticism (vv. 16–17). “Do not let anyone judge you.” The nature of asceticism was related to matters of the Law. However, Paul also sees a need to address the attitude of some of the members of the Colossian congregation, as they were critical and demanding. The problem was that the heresy gave great importance to dietary laws. Certain foods and drink were forbidden. The heresy also placed great emphasis on holy days.

However, Paul maintains that the reality of the Christian life is not determined by holding to dietary laws or observing holy days. The person who has Christ does not need to worry about keeping those laws.

Concerning angel worship (vv. 18–19). “Do not let anyone who delights in false humility and the worship of angels disqualify you.” False humility may have expressed itself as severe ascetical practices and self-mortification and the worshiping of angels. Such practices have the paradoxical effect of increasing a person's pride—which is the core of human sinfulness.



- Paul discusses doctrines of Christian growth
- with two specific reference points that were
- the foundations of the false teaching: asceticism and angel worship. Christians should
- realize that they need only Christ. Whatever
- one experiences, the objective tests of truth

- *must prevail. Christ, not experiences, deter-*
- *mines spiritual reality.*

PAUL'S DEFENSE AGAINST THE PRACTICAL THREAT (2:20–3:4)

The Doctrine of Salvation (vv. 20–23)

Paul looks back to the time of the Colossians' conversion, which he calls their death with Christ which freed them from the ruling principles of the universe. Christian growth and freedom consists in understanding and living out the consequences of this truth.

The nature of the attacks (vv. 20–21). The false teachers brought with them definite ideas about religious life. They had an organized system that forbade certain practices. Paul defines these practices and reveals their character as enslaving and legalistic.

Reasons not to submit (vv. 22–23). Paul provides two reasons not to submit to false teachers. The first reason is the nature of the believer's conversion. Christ's death had already delivered believers from the "basic principles" of the world.

The second reason is that such practices are superficial and fail to address the sinful self which Christ desires to transform into His own likeness. Only He can accomplish that. Therefore, trust in Him is not only the first step in salvation but the basis of every other step.



- *Paul defends the faith against the practical*
- *threats of the false teachers. The false teach-*
- *ers held to an organized system that forbade*
- *certain practices. Paul explains that such*
- *systems have no value in the sanctification of*
- *the believer and that they will perish.*

QUESTIONS TO GUIDE YOUR STUDY

1. What was Paul's concern for the Colossians? Why was he concerned for them?
2. What false teaching had invaded the Colossian church? What was the nature of the heresy? What was wrong with it?
3. What specific points and truths did Paul use to counter the false teaching? What are the implications of Paul's teaching in Colossians for the church's contemporary response to such philosophies as the New Age movement?
4. Describe the doctrines of salvation and sanctification. How are they related?

COLOSSIANS 3

In this section Paul maintains his defense against the practical threats of the teaching of the false teachers.

THE NEW LIFE IN CHRIST (3:1-4)

The Nature of the Christian's Higher Calling (vv. 1-2)

People are not changed by imposing legalistic restrictions on what they eat or drink. They are changed by the power of Christ.

Paul urges the Colossians to take their eyes off earthly concerns and look to Christ.

The higher things, those above, Paul defines in 3:1 as "where Christ is seated at the right hand of God." This imagery called to mind the enthronement of Christ.



Robert Murray M'Cheyne used to counsel: "For every look you take at your sinful self, take ten looks at Christ."

Reasons to Seek the Higher Calling (vv. 3–4)

Paul presents three reasons Christians should seek things above:

1. *The Resurrection of Christ* (v. 1). The believer lives in resurrection as a new creation of God.
2. *The new life source* (vv. 3–4). The new life is Christ. His life energizes Christians, enabling them to be and do what they should.
3. *The future manifestation of glory* (v. 4). The believer's life, which is hidden in Christ, will be revealed. The Second Coming of Christ will be a time of glory.



"Right hand"

Perhaps Mark 14:62 provides the insight to understand this metaphor. There Jesus told the high priest, "You will see the Son of Man sitting on the right hand of the Mighty One, and coming on the clouds of heaven." The right hand was the place of power. The term may also refer to a position of privilege.



- *The life of Christ is a profound reality. It is a*
- *life that draws its existence from the very*
- *center of all reality, Jesus Christ Himself.*
- *The Christian has a higher calling, which is*
- *to set one's mind and heart on things above.*
- *Paul's admonitions that follow are controlled*
- *by the thought of the full life that belongs to*
- *all who are in Christ.*

With the doctrinal foundations in place, Paul addresses the false teachers and exposes their errant positions. The apostle turns his thoughts more directly to the specifics of Christian living. This second part of the epistle falls into three logical groupings, and each contributes to Paul's thought uniquely. They are: (1) individual and corporate responsibilities 3:5–4:1); (2) exhortation to the Colossians to be careful witnesses (4:2–9); and (3) miscellaneous greetings (4:10–18).

In this first section (3:5–4:1), Paul's theme is the preeminence of Christ in Christian living. In it, he addresses order in the Christian life and church. Paul's primary ethical concern surfaces. If the Colossians were not to live like those around them, how were they to live? In response to God's grace, they had specific duties. To spell out those duties, Paul issues a series of commands, all of which seem to have equal weight.

THE NEW PERSON (3:5–17)

The Old Nature and the New (vv. 5–11)

Paul commands the Colossians to “put to death” the old self or nature. The old self is to be crucified in order that sin might be rendered ineffective in the believer's life (Rom. 6:6).

This old self is characterized by attitudes and actions which Paul lists. The first of these are in vv. 5–6. Paul identifies these vices and then gives a reason to leave them.

Sexual immorality. This refers to illicit sexual intercourse. More specifically, “adultery” identifies sexual intercourse as the breaking of a covenant of marriage. “Fornication” generally refers to the act itself outside of a covenant relationship.

Impurity. Failure to have the proper attitude to God's gift of sexuality.

Lust and evil desires. These two words belong together. They generally refer to strong desires gone bad.

Greed. This word can also be translated “covetousness.” It is the longing for something that belongs to someone else, placing supreme value on something that belongs to someone else, or

placing supreme value on something not (yet) possessed.

These five are sins of personal aggression. The individual who commits them thinks more of himself than he does of others. Paul gives two reasons why Christians should never practice these sins. They bring the wrath of God (v. 6), and they characterize the former life of sin and rebellion (v. 7).

The Character of the New Nature (vv. 12–17)

Paul gives three commands that form the backbone of this section:

- He commands believers to clothe themselves with Christian characteristics
- He commands the church to let the peace of Christ rule it
- He urges the church to let the Word of Christ dwell in its midst.

Social relationships in the church. Every social group has its set of problems, and the church is no exception. Paul, therefore, calls the Colossians individually and collectively to be characterized by Christian graces that enhance their relationships.

Believers are God's "chosen" people. They belong to God as His redeemed community because of His saving initiative. As such, they are to be clothed with a new kind of life. Paul earlier spoke of the old that had to be put off; now he speaks of the new that must be "put on." He listed five virtues that characterize the people of God.



"Wrath of God"

"Wrath (*orge*) differs from passionate anger, which is immediate and strong; wrath is more settled in the long term. The wrath of God suggests the continuing revulsion of the holiness of God against sin. The holy God cannot abide injustice, pride, deception, and willful diminution of the good. God's righteous wrath is directed against sin" [Thomas C. Oden in *The Word of Life* p. 394]



We notice that the emphasis is on attitudes and actions that determine the believer's relationship to the community of the redeemed. Furthermore, the

relationship is one of love. All the elements in the list speak about different ways of expressing the love of God that has become the central fact of the believer's life. The unbeliever makes himself the center of his life. His thoughts and efforts are directed toward himself. The Christian makes others the center of his life, subordinating his own desires and ambitions to the welfare of his brother.

The Character of the Believer's New Nature

INDIVIDUAL QUALITIES:

Compassion

Kindness

Humility

Meekness

Patience

Interpersonal Qualities:

Endurance

Forgiveness

The Indispensable Quality:

Love

The new clothing of the Christian begins with personal attributes. Because Christians sometimes are difficult to live with, we need the grace of forbearance. People are prone to offend, so we need the grace of forgiveness. Everything on the list so far is an aspect or expansion of Christian love. Love is more important than anything else in the Christian life. It is the love of God expressed in His redemption for the Christian.

This love must be put on “above all,” for it is the identifying mark of the genuine believer.

Harmony in the church (v. 15). The second command of Paul calls the church to harmony. The peace of Christ is to rule in the believers’ hearts. It stresses harmony in the group rather than personal peace.

Freedom of the Word of God (vv. 16–17). Paul’s third command to the church at Colosse is to allow the word of Christ to dwell richly in their midst. This passage parallels Eph. 5:18–21, as the two passages speak to the same concern. Colossians says, “Let the word of Christ dwell in you.” Ephesians declares, “Be filled with the Spirit.” When the word of Christ dwells in the church, three activities result:



1. *Teach*. Instruction in the word of the Lord was evidently central from the beginning of Christian history.

2. *Admonish*. Christians have a responsibility for the moral and spiritual lives of one another.

3. *Sing as an expression of gratitude and worship*. This is characteristic of the church’s response to the word of her Lord. That word is the message of God’s love and redemption in Jesus Christ.



“Rule”

This peace is to “rule” in the congregation. This word is often translated “umpire.” The reason for such peace is that believers have been called into one body. The spiritual environment of the believer is the one body they must share.



- Issuing three commands that form the backbone of this section, Paul addresses social
- relationships in the church. He called the
- Colossians individually and then collectively
- to be characterized by Christian graces that
- enhance their relationships.

FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS (3:18–4:1)

Now Paul turns to some concrete advice about Christian living. Christian commitment affects every area of life, including the family. It was natural, therefore, for Paul to address Christian responsibilities in this area.

Wives and Husbands (vv. 18–19)

Paul believed there was an order for the family. It seems that he believed the order was God-given. In this order the husband functions as the head of the family.

Wives (v. 18). Wives are to submit to their husbands. Paul's term "submit" means "to subject or subordinate." The wife's submission is different than the submission of children or slaves. Children and slaves are told to obey; the wife is not. The wife has a very different relationship to her husband than children to parents or slaves to masters. The motivation for voluntary submission is that it is a proper Christian attitude. Such submission is an outworking of the lordship of Christ.



The term *agape*, used here, never occurred in secular households. The command, therefore, appears to be a distinctively Christian element of the marriage commitment. Paul follows this positive command with a negative one: "Do not be harsh with them." Paul probably meant that the marriage relationship could become an irritant to the one who does not love properly. The husband was to take care to see that bitterness did not develop.

Husbands (v. 19). The counterpart of the wife's responsibility is that of the husband. The simple command is to love.

Children and Parents (vv. 20–21)

Moving from the innermost family circle, Paul addressed the parent-child relationship.

Children (v. 20). Paul commands children to obey their parents. The word *obey* is stronger than the word *submit* used of wives. Paul reinforces this by using the phrase "in everything." Obedience is expected. Children have a responsibility in the Christian family order. To be pleasing to the Lord as Christians, they should obey their parents.

Parents (v. 21). In the Lord, parents have a mutual responsibility to children. Paul issues a command and a practical reason. “Fathers, do not embitter your children.” The reason for this command is to avoid discouragement. Constant nagging produces a situation where children are discouraged either because they cannot please those they love or because they feel they are of no worth to anybody. In God’s sight, children and parents have equal worth. Parents are to treat their children with respect as persons.

***Servants and Masters* (vv. 22–4:1)**

The guidelines for slavery were more complex than any of the other relationships.

Servants. Paul’s guidelines about slaves’ responsibilities were twofold: obey and serve genuinely. Paul uses the word “obey” rather than “submit.” Slaves, like children, were to obey in everything. Paul commands the servants to genuine service by urging them to work “with all your heart.” Paul mentions three motivations for such service:

- Reward: “You will receive an inheritance from the Lord”
- The sovereignty of the Lord
- “Anyone who does wrong will be repaid for his wrong.”

Surely Christian masters came under God’s judgment. God’s righteousness demands that any injustice be punished.

Masters (4:1). There was much cruelty and abuse of slaves in the Roman Empire. Christian masters were to be different. Justice and equality were to be the guiding principles of their conduct. The motivation Paul gave to masters reminded them that they, too, were slaves. Their heavenly Master rules over all. If masters were to

avoid judgment, they had to have a concern for fairness. Although slaves did not receive salaries, their basic needs were to be met in keeping with the value of human effort, time, and life. Paul gives masters a motivation by reminding them that they, too, were slaves. The heavenly master rules over all.



- *Paul provides practical advice about family*
- *relationships, including husband-wife,*
- *parents-children, and master-slave. Ulti-*
- *mately, individuals are judged by their per-*
- *sonal responses to the Lord in each situation.*

QUESTIONS TO GUIDE YOUR STUDY

1. What are the aspects of the Christian's higher calling? Why should believers seek it?
2. Paul speaks of the old and new natures. Why is there a struggle between the two?
3. Describe the new nature of the believer. What should characterize this new nature?
4. How does Christian commitment affect family relationships?

COLOSSIANS 4

Note: Colossians 4:1 belongs to the context of the last section of chapter 3, so it is covered in the previous chapter.

PRAYERFUL COOPERATION IN MINISTRY (4:2–6)

Paul concludes his epistle by reminding the church of some basic concerns: prayer (vv. 2–4),

wisdom (v. 5), and using careful communication (v. 6).

Prayer (vv. 2–4)



Prayer is a basic expression of the Christian faith. Because God is personal, a heavenly Father who cares for us, we should pray. In this passage Paul gives us three characteristics and the content of Christian prayer:

1. *Steadfastness.* In other epistles, Paul said, “Pray continually” (1 Thess. 5:17) or its equivalent. The same general tone occurs here.
2. *Watchfulness.* “Watchfulness” implies mental alertness. Presumably this meant that the Colossian Christians were to know the circumstances of life, particularly those that affected the spread of the gospel. Informed prayer is likely to be more purposeful, personal, and powerful.
3. *Thanksgiving.* Thankfulness is the environment of good praying, and it provides a safeguard for informed praying. All believers may be thankful for what God has done, is doing, and is going to do for us through His Son.

Paul provides two specific petitions with regard to the content of Christian prayer. Paul requested that the Colossians pray for an open door for the gospel. He was always seeking ways to communicate the gospel to others. Here he discloses the secret of his success in witness. He was successful because he looked to the Lord to supply the wisdom for the opportunity.



Wisdom was necessary because of their Christian testimony. The “ones outside” (nonbelievers) needed examples of their Christian testimony. “Make the most” is a translation of the Greek verb that means to buy back. It conveys the idea of “make the most of your time.” Paul is calling for the Colossians to make the time count for Christian purposes. Perhaps he was reflecting on his own limited opportunities as he awaited trial. The church should realize all of its opportunities to be of service to God and the world.

Wisdom (v. 5)

Having discussed a door of opportunity in ministry, Paul turned his thoughts to wise conduct. In the Bible, wisdom is God-given insight into God’s will and purpose.

Careful Communication (v. 6)



In the give-and-take of life, both the content of words spoken and the method of speaking matter. Paul continued his exhortations to the believers by addressing their speech. He makes two statements that illustrate the nature of the Christian’s talk: in grace and with salt.

In grace. This may be used in its full Christian sense, in a generic sense of charming, or with a combination of both. The third option seems most likely. However, Paul could hardly think of a Christian word so grand as “grace” and not fill it with Christian meaning. We could express Paul’s words here as, “Let speech be always with the graciousness appropriate to Christians, that is, those who love in a state of grace.”

With salt. Salt had three uses in Paul’s day: it could (1) preserve a food, (2) “sterilize” a food, or (3) season a food. In this passage, Paul takes the last meaning. Conversation is to be seasoned, that is acceptable and inoffensive.

Finally, Paul teaches in this passage that conversation is to be suited to each person: “That you may know how to answer everyone.” Sound answers offered with a positive spirit overcome many obstacles to the gospel. Paul’s text emphasizes the method of answering more than the content. It calls for Christian graciousness and sensitivity to the specific person and situation.



Paul ends his letter to the Colossians with this call to Christian virtues. He prays for wisdom to walk worthy of the Lord. This wisdom involves growth, power for endurance and patience, and joyful thanksgiving. That the epistle should end on a note similar to its beginning is fitting. It is also fitting that Paul should think in terms of reaching non-Christians with the gospel.

CONCLUSION (4:7–18)

Those Who Journeyed to the Church (vv. 7–9)
In the first century, letters were often carried by personal messengers. The Roman government provided an adequate mail system, but personal couriers made the communication more meaningful. Often a particular situation required such letters. Paul identifies both the courier and the immediate situation that prompted the letter.

Those Who Journeyed to the Church

RECIPIENT	OCCASION	BACKGROUND PASSAGES
Tychicus	A loved brother, faithful minister, and fellow-servant to whom Paul entrusted with considerable responsibility.	Acts 20:4; 2 Tim. 4:12; Titus 3:12
Onesimus	A “faithful and dear brother.”	Philemon

Those Who Sent Greetings (vv. 10–14)
Paul continues his closing by sending greetings from five men who were with him in Rome. They obviously had a close relationship with

both Paul and the church. In some cases, the connection with Paul is clear, but history is silent about their connection with the church.

Those Who Sent Greetings

RECIPIENT	OCCASION	BACKGROUND PASSAGES
Aristarchus	A fellow-prisoner and one of the three Jewish believers with Paul at the time.	Acts 19:29; 20:4
Mark	A fellow-worker with Paul.	Acts 12:12; 13:5, 13; 15:39; 1 Pet. 5:13; 2 Tim. 4:11
Jesus (Justus)	One of the three Jews with Paul at the time of the writing. He also comforted Paul in his trial.	Col. 4:11 is the only mention of this man.
Epaphras	A fellow-servant and faithful minister who originally brought the Colossians the gospel.	Col. 1:7; Philem. 23
Luke	Writer of Acts and the gospel of Luke. He had a significant role in the early church.	Philem. 24; 2 Tim. 4:11
Demas	Accompanied Paul to Rome, but later departed because he "loved this world."	2 Tim. 4:10

Those to Whom Greetings Were Being Sent (vv. 15–17)

Paul sent greetings to a final group of persons. The readers of the letter were instructed to greet them for Paul. Among other things, this reveals the closeness of the Christian communities in the area and the ease of communication from one to another. He sent his greetings to the

church at Laodicea, to Nympha, and also to Archippus.

Those to Whom Greetings Were Being Sent

RECIPIENT	OCCASION	BACKGROUND PASSAGES
Laodicea (church)	To encourage the believers at this church.	Rev. 3:14–22; Col. 4:13
Nympha	The church at Laodicea met at her house.	Acts 12:12; Rom. 16:5
Archippus	To encourage him to complete the work God had given him to do.	Philem. 2

Final Greeting from Paul (v. 18)

The letter ends with a personal touch. Paul signed the greeting in his hand. This means that someone else penned the epistle, which happened commonly in the first century and with Paul’s letters. Paul’s eyesight may have prohibited his actually writing these letters. The authenticity, however, came from Paul’s signature.

Here Paul gives two final reminders. They encapsulate the entire message of the letter:

1. Paul reminded the Colossians to “remember my chains.” As Paul was with the Colossians in spirit and had a passion for their well-being, so he asked them to remember and intercede for him.
2. Paul reminded the Colossians of God’s grace. He ends his letter where he began it. In a sense, the entire epistle argues for

the principle of grace, that God supplies salvation freely, that He requires nothing but a trust in the work of His Son, Jesus, and that grace sustains the Christian's life. If God's grace is with the Colossians, they need nothing else.

QUESTIONS TO GUIDE YOUR STUDY

1. Examine Paul's opening prayer for the Colossians. What does it teach us about Christian prayer?
2. What does Paul mean when he says to "be wise" in our Christian walk?
3. From Paul's teaching here, what should characterize Christian communication?
4. What is the significance of Paul's closing reminders to the Colossians?



In a letter written in the early second century, Ignatius of Antioch mentioned an Onesimus who was the bishop of the church at Ephesus. The supposition that Onesimus the slave and Onesimus the bishop were the same person is very attractive. If this is true, Philemon may have decided to free his slave in response to Paul's letter. Onesimus then showed himself to be worthy of the love and trust of Paul and Philemon by rising to a place of leadership in the church.

PHILEMON

INTRODUCTION

This beautiful and touching letter was written by the apostle Paul on behalf of Onesimus, a runaway slave. Paul was a prisoner when he wrote the letter. Customarily, interpreters have assumed that this was Paul's Roman imprisonment mentioned in Acts. Caesarea and Ephesus have been suggested, however, as other possibilities.

After escaping from his master, Onesimus had come into contact with the imprisoned apostle. Subsequently, Paul decided that Onesimus should return to his master. He wrote this brief letter to be delivered to Philemon at the slave's arrival.

AUTHOR

Few scholars seriously question the Pauline authorship of this epistle. From the early Christian centuries, it has enjoyed almost unanimous acceptance as a letter written by Paul. The earliest collections of the New Testament letters included Philemon without dispute. Today, virtually all scholars accept Pauline authorship.

DATE OF WRITING

As with the other prison epistles, questions of place and origin interrelate. Three options have been suggested for the place of origin: Rome, Caesarea, and Ephesus. Clearly Paul was in prison at the time of writing (vv. 1, 9, 13, 23). The traditional view identifies Rome as the origin of the letter.

OCCASION AND PURPOSE

Occasion. The letter makes clear the occasion for writing. Onesimus, a slave of Philemon—a wealthy Christian convert in the Lycus Valley—had run away from his master. After leaving his master, Onesimus became a Christian through his contact with Paul while Paul was in prison. Onesimus served Paul faithfully for a time (v. 13), but he determined to return to Philemon to put his past life in order. A strong friendship developed, and Paul reminded Philemon of their relationship and suggested that his Christian commitment required such loving actions.

Purpose. Paul wrote Philemon to implore him to forgive and receive his runaway slave, Onesimus (v. 10). No doubt when Onesimus determined to get matters straight at home, some fear entered his heart. Even though his master was a good man (vv. 4–7), as a runaway slave, Onesimus deserved punishment. Paul took the role of



Those who decide for an Ephesian imprisonment place it early, about A.D. 55. Those who accept a Caesarean hypothesis place the letter at about A.D. 58. The traditional dating at Rome places the epistle at about A.D. 61.



Slavery in the First Century

The Roman world lived with slavery. From the earliest times, the government accepted and promoted the practice. In the Roman world, treatment of slaves varied considerably. By the first century, however, the institution of slavery was changing. Public sentiment decried harsh treatment of slaves, and many leading orators spoke against the institution. This caused many masters to free their slaves. Many slaves took the opportunity to run from their masters. They normally fled to large cities, where they could hide from the authorities. Although officially the government recognized the value of human life, many masters treated their slaves harshly. No doubt that was a fear in Onesimus's heart.

a mediator, imploring Philemon to have mercy on this new Christian.

AUDIENCE

The mention of Archippus both in Colossians 4:17 and in verse 2 of Philemon suggests that the recipients of this letter lived in Colosse. Philemon was the principal recipient. He apparently was a slave owner from whom Onesimus had fled. Probably Philemon had been converted during Paul's three-year ministry in Ephesus (Acts 20:31).

We cannot positively identify Apphia and Archippus. Some have supposed that Apphia is the wife of Philemon, and Archippus is their son. Paul also addressed the letter to the house church meeting at Philemon's home.

THEMES IN PHILEMON

Paul and Slavery

The obvious concern to contemporary Christians is the social institution of slavery. Many questions arise about the way Paul handled it. Why did he not forbid the institution? Why did he not recommend that Philemon release Onesimus? Why were his instructions so vague? Many people believe Paul moved too slowly in not condemning an evil institution.

Paul, however, taught equality. Colossians 3:18–4:1 contains some basic principles. Slaves served Christ in spite of their economic situation. Their owners were also slaves, only they were slaves to the Master in heaven. This equality was to lead the way to sympathy for each other. Further, God called people to serve Him in varied circumstances, and He judged impartially. The application of these principles would, in fact, bring an end to the institution.

The Epistle of Philemon does not forbid slavery overtly. Slavery was not even the issue it was written to solve: it was the occasion that provided the opportunity to address another matter. The issue was Christian relationships. Nevertheless, Christian relationships bring an end to such evils as slavery. (For a more detailed treatment of this topic, see the article “Paul and Slavery” at the back of this book.)

Christian Fellowship

The primary message of this epistle is Christian fellowship. The term *fellowship* occurs at strategic locations in the epistle, and the idea occurs elsewhere. Fellowship is participation in the lives of others. Partners' lives interrelate at the deepest levels, and partnership became the main avenue of appeal from Paul to Philemon.

Embodiment of the Christian Mind

A third powerful message from the epistle is the expression of Christian thought in action. Expressions of Christian thought permeate the letter:

- Two people were in need of reconciliation
- Paul pleaded the case of Onesimus, taking the side of the guilty in calling for forgiveness
- Paul offered to pay the debt that Onesimus owed, even though it was not his responsibility
- The reconciliation was, in essence, effected in Paul

This epistle provides insight into Paul that no other does. Paul pondered the meaning of grace, the cross, and the nature of salvation. Apart from personal salvation, nothing equals Christ-likeness in attitudes and actions. The gospel

demands it. In the Epistle to Philemon, Paul demonstrated it.

THE VALUE OF PHILEMON

Two features of this letter make it of great value in New Testament study. First, the letter provides an example of a Christian approach to the social problem of slavery. Attacking the institution forthrightly would have been futile. Paul, both in Philemon and in Colossians 4:1, urged masters to treat their slaves with compassion. Paul sounded no call for slaves to rise in armed rebellion, but he melted the resistance of both groups with a lavish outpouring of Christian love. He urged Philemon to receive Onesimus as a “dear brother.”

When a slave owner could refer to his slave as a brother in Christ, emancipation should not be far away. Christianity thus established conditions that made it impossible for slavery to endure.

This letter also presents an intimate, personal account of Paul. He writes not so much as a theologian or apostle to the Gentiles. Rather, he writes as a Christian man applying the gospel he has preached. His words show his integrity (v. 19) and genuine compassion for both Philemon (v. 7) and Onesimus (v. 16).

BASIC OUTLINE OF PHILEMON

- I. The Salutation (vv. 1–3)
- II. Prayer of Thanksgiving for Philemon (vv. 4–7)
- III. A Good Word on Behalf of Onesimus (vv. 8–21)
- IV. Paul's Personal Request (v. 22)
- V. Greetings and Benediction (vv. 23–25)

QUESTIONS TO GUIDE YOUR STUDY

1. Describe the setting for this epistle. Who are the key characters?
2. How did Christians in Paul's day view the institution of slavery?
3. From this short letter, what can we learn about Paul's view of Christian fellowship?
4. What is the value of Philemon for present-day believers?



Philemon

Philemon, whose name means "affectionate," owed his conversion to the Christian faith to the apostle Paul. Paul and Philemon became devoted friends. Paul's only epistle of a personal and private nature included in the New Testament was written to Philemon. A slave of Philemon, Onesimus, had robbed him and fled to Rome. Paul wrote to Philemon concerning Onesimus. Philemon had a judicial right to punish severely or even kill Onesimus. Paul's short letter challenged Philemon to apply Christian love in dealing with Onesimus.

PHILEMON

THE SALUTATION (1–3)

Paul began this letter like his other epistles. He identified three writers, the readers, and sent a greeting. At the same time, this salutation is unique. Its brevity is noteworthy. But more significantly, Paul did not use his usual title in describing himself.

The Writers (v. 1a)

The epistle identifies two writers in the opening verse: Paul and Timothy. Normally Paul uses a title appropriate to his position. He did, however, refer to his situation by stating that he was a "prisoner of Christ Jesus."

The Readers (vv. 1b–2)

The letter appears to address four readers: Philemon, Apphia (probably his wife), Archippus, and "the church that meets in your home." The letter makes clear, however, that Paul directed his comments to Philemon alone. Most likely Paul included the others because they were part of Philemon's family and courtesy demanded it.

The Greeting (v. 3)

Paul's greeting was a standard greeting for that day to which he added distinctively Christian elements. The logical order preserves the way God works: grace produces peace. These qualities come jointly from God the Father and Jesus. For Paul, Jesus performed the same activities as God. Particularly, He can supply grace and peace for the hearts of people.

PRAYER OF THANKSGIVING FOR PHILEMON (4–7)

As is common in Paul's letters, a prayer for the recipient follows the greeting. The prayer follows his customary pattern of thanksgiving and intercession.

Paul's Prayer (vv. 4–6)

When Paul thought of Philemon, he did so with joy and thankfulness. From Paul's prayer, two outstanding qualities of Philemon appear: faith and love. These two primary aspects of the Christian life are the cause of Paul's gratitude to God.

Commendation of Philemon (v. 7)

After concluding his prayer for Philemon, Paul stated a reason he expected Philemon to respond. In commending Philemon, Paul built on the expectation expressed in his prayer. He expected Philemon to do the "good thing" regarding Onesimus because Philemon was a man accustomed to doing "good things" for Christian people.

Paul accomplished three important tasks through this thanksgiving. First, he established good will between Philemon and himself. Second, Paul anticipated his case by stressing some of Philemon's good qualities. Third, he alluded

to some particular matters that would be helpful to him later in summarizing his letter.



- *Paul referred to Philemon's generous acts of*
- *love toward other believers because he was*
- *about to address an important appeal to his*
- *friend. He wanted Philemon to do yet*
- *another loving act that would inspire his*
- *brothers.*

PAUL'S PLEA FOR ACCEPTANCE OF ONESIMUS (8–21)

An Appeal to Love (vv. 8–14)

Paul knew that he had the authority “in Christ” to command Philemon. He probably also believed that Philemon would obey an apostolic injunction because he also recognized that authority. But Paul spurned the way of command. He preferred to appeal to the love of which Philemon had given such clear evidence.

Three people were intensely and personally involved in the transaction Paul had in mind. Paul, Onesimus, and Philemon all had a stake in it. Paul wanted all three, not just Onesimus and himself, to benefit from any decision made. Thus he had to give Philemon an opportunity to act according to his faith and love. He would not deprive his friend of the privilege of doing a genuinely Christian deed.

Only in verse 10 does the motive for Paul's letter become apparent. He is making an appeal for a slave belonging to Philemon. This is a “father” pleading for his “child.” Onesimus had trusted Christ through the witness of the imprisoned apostle.



“Useful” and
“Useless”

In describing this change of character, Paul used a double play on words. Both “useful” and “useless” are compound words containing a word that sounded exactly like *Christos* (Christ). What made such a difference in Onesimus's life? Christ had brought about the transformation.

Onesimus's new life. Christ had brought about a change in Onesimus. He had gone from being a "useless" to a "useful" person.

Paul desired to keep Onesimus with him. Indeed, he could have justified it as a service rendered to him by his friend in his imprisonment. But to do so would have been wrong, for it would have taken the decision out of Philemon's hand. But Paul emphasized how difficult the decision was. It was like sending his very "heart." It was as though Paul himself stood before Philemon in the person of the slave.

The Conclusion of the Appeal (vv. 15–22)

The providence of God (vv. 15–16). We must assume that Onesimus had run away from Philemon. There is a great deal about the whole episode we would like to know. Why had Philemon not won Onesimus to Christ? Perhaps his influence bore fruit later when his slave came to know Paul. At any rate, Paul suggests (v. 15) that the providence of God was at work in the whole affair. If Onesimus had not run away, he might not have become a believer. Because he was a Christian, however, the temporary relationship between the slave and his owner had become eternal. They would inherit the kingdom together.

Paul's relationship to Philemon (vv. 17–21). "Partner" is one of Paul's favorite words for describing relationships among Christians. They share together the mutual life in Christ, both in terms of its benefits and responsibilities. Paul and Philemon were partners in the greatest of all enterprises. Paul had emphasized this partnership in the address when he called Philemon a "fellow worker."

The apostle went even further. If Philemon had suffered any loss, he was not to look to Onesimus for repayment. Paul himself would stand good for any debt incurred as a result of the slave's escape. We have no way of knowing how Paul meant to repay such a debt.

Philemon had refreshed the hearts of the saints (v. 7). Now Paul made the request that his friend might do the same for him.



- *By virtue of his new life in Christ, Onesimus*
- *had a new character. He had been trans-*
- *formed by the gospel.*

PAUL'S FINAL REMARKS AND PERSONAL REQUEST (22–25)

Paul understood that and reinforced his appeal to Philemon by an affirmation of confidence in him. He expected his friend to go beyond what he asked him to do in his letter. If Philemon merited this confidence at all, Paul did not have to spell out clearly what he should do. Love always goes far beyond duty.

Paul was in prison, but he was evidently optimistic about the future. He believed he would be freed, and he apparently planned to return to the area of his former ministry to visit the churches. Believers normally provided food and lodging for traveling evangelists like Paul. The request for a “guest room” was very normal under the circumstances.

Paul normally ended his letters with a prayer for the greatest blessing for all of his recipients. That blessing is “grace.” Paul’s request is that God’s grace be given to the whole church.



Love and confidence are much more effective than hostility and suspicion in calling forth the best in other people. We generally strive to fulfill the expectation of those we love.

QUESTIONS TO GUIDE YOUR STUDY

1. Why did Paul write his letter to Philemon?
2. What characteristics make this letter so unique in the New Testament?
3. What lessons about Christian attitudes might we learn from the interaction we see in these verses? What can we learn from Paul about dealing with conflict situations?
4. We have no record of Philemon's answer to Paul. What do you suppose was Philemon's response?

REFERENCE SOURCES USED

The following list is a collection of the source works used for this volume. All are from Broadman & Holman's list of published reference resources. They should accommodate the reader's need for more specific information. All of these works will greatly aid in the reader's study, teaching, and presentation of these three epistles of the apostle Paul. The accompanying annotations can be helpful in guiding the reader to the proper resources.

RESOURCES:

Adams, J. McKee, rev. by Joseph A. Callaway, *Biblical Backgrounds*. This work provides valuable information on the physical and geographical settings of the Book of Acts and the apostle Paul's missionary journeys. Its many color maps and other features add depth and understanding to Luke's narrative.

Blair, Joe, *Introducing the New Testament*, pp. 157–69. Designed as a core text for New testament survey courses, this volume helps the reader in understanding the content and principles of the New Testament. Its features include special, maps and photos, outlines, and discussion questions.

Cate, Robert L., *A History of the New Testament and Its Times*. An excellent and thorough survey of the birth and growth of the Christian faith in the first-century world.

Holman Bible Dictionary. An exhaustive, alphabetically arranged resource of Bible-related subjects. An excellent tool of definitions and other information on the people, places, things, and events.

Holman Bible Handbook, pp. 719–28, 744–46. A comprehensive treatment that offers outlines, commentary on key themes and sections, and full-color photos, illustrations, charts, and maps. Provides an accent on the broader theological teachings. A scholarly treatment of

the text of Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon that provides emphases on the text itself, background, and theological considerations.

Lea, Thomas D., *The New Testament: Its Background and Message*, pp. 437–68. An excellent resource for background material—political, cultural, historical, and religious. Provides background information in broad strokes on specific books, including the gospels.

McQuay, Earl P., *Keys to Interpreting the Bible*. This work provides a fine introduction to the study of the Bible that is invaluable for home Bible studies, lay members of a local church, or students.

McQuay, Earl P., *Learning to Study the Bible*. This study guide presents a helpful procedure that employs the principles basic to effective and thorough Bible study. The various methods of Bible study are applied to the Book of Philippians. Excellent for home Bible studies, lay members of a local church, and students.

Melick, Richard R., Jr., *Philippians, Colossians, Philemon* (The New American Commentary), vol. 32.

Robertson, A. T., *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research*. An exhaustive, scholarly work on the underlying language of the New Testament. Provides advanced insights into the grammatical, syntactical, and lexical aspects of the New Testament.

Robertson, A. T., *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, “The Epistles of Paul,” vol. 4, pp. 433–513. Gives insights into the language of the Greek New Testament. Provides word studies as well as grammatical and background insights into the Prison Epistles.

Tolbert, Malcolm O., *Philippians, Colossians, 1 & 2 Thessalonians, 1 & 2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon* (Layman's Bible Book Commentary). A popular-level treatment of the Books of Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon. This easy-to-use volume provides a relevant and practical perspective for the reader.

Philippians, Colossians, Philemon

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