

NT EXPOSITORY NOTES

Paul's Letters:

COLOSSIANS & PHILEMON

Second Series

Gordon Lyons

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(ESV)

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COLOSSIANS & PHILEMON*(Second Series)*

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COLOSSIANS:

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

AUTHOR

Since the 1880s, some historical-critical scholars have disputed the Pauline authorship of Colossians and certain other Pauline letters. However, until the 19th century, the church accepted that the apostle Paul wrote (or dictated) Colossians. This acceptance of Pauline authorship continued until the 1800s.

Some differences in style, tone and wording exist between this Colossian letter and Paul's other epistles. However, we must allow for the possibility that Paul dictated his letters to an amanuensis – possibly, Timothy on this occasion. The letter might reflect the secretary's personal style and phrasing to some extent. However, the apostle signed off the letter in his own hand. Paul's handwritten signature demonstrated the letter's authenticity as an epistle of Paul himself, written perhaps under his dictation but by full inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

One point of contention giving rise to the questioning of Pauline authorship is the apostle's use of language or expressions not found elsewhere in Paul's epistles. However, we must remember that in Colossians, Paul addressed a form of false teaching. (Incipient Gnosticism/mysticism blended with distorted Jewish teachings and supposed communion with angels.) Therefore, Paul adapts his terminology to meet and counter this teaching. Thus, he uses expressions and employs concepts not usually found in his letters to other churches.

PURPOSE

The nature of this teaching made it necessary for Paul to explain in detail the implications arising from the deity of Christ and his equality with the Father and the Holy Spirit. Thus, the apostle may be quoting some words and phrases employed by the instigators of false teaching to respond to them more effectively. This form of false teaching – or false “philosophy”¹ – differs in nature, belief and practice from much of

¹ *Philosophy*: In Paul's day, “philosophy” was not as narrowly defined as it later became. In that day, philosophy encompassed a more comprehensive range of ideas and interests than it does now. At that time, philosophy might deal with the meaning, purpose and extent of life, religious and cultural beliefs, morals, ethics and many other connected concepts. Some religions, cults and other religious groupings might be considered the outworking of certain philosophical beliefs or principles. Indeed, at this time, the term “philosophy” was sometimes used more loosely to refer to a religion rather than a true philosophical school or discipline. It is, therefore, possible that Paul was using the term “philosophy” to refer to false forms of the Christian faith or false doctrine and beliefs, albeit perhaps containing elements of a philosophical nature.

In whatever way we understand Paul's meaning, the apostle refers to those who tried to apply humanistic “philosophical” principles to the Christian faith but were doing so because they failed to understand that the Christian faith rests on Christ and on biblical teaching alone. The fullness of wisdom and knowledge pertaining to life and godliness comes from YHWH God alone and is found in the teaching of the Bible exclusively—not in the wisdom of men. Although external aids, such as Bible commentaries, may help us interpret and better understand God's written Word, the teaching of that Word cannot be *augmented* by adopting any external teachings, principles or practices. The knowledge and wisdom of this world derive from the minds of finite, fallible and sinful men and women. It bears no relation or comparison to the knowledge and wisdom that God provides each believer by the teaching of his

that found elsewhere in Paul's epistles. Therefore, it is unsurprising if the apostle employs certain words, phrases and concepts not customarily used by him elsewhere.

This false teaching suggested that the Colossian believers' understanding of, and belief in Christ's perfect life and work of atonement, could be enhanced by adopting and practising the teaching and methodology proposed by the false teachers – or the instigators of this false “philosophy”.

In taking issue with this form of false teaching, Paul goes to some lengths in his introductory remarks to this church in emphasising the supremacy and sufficiency of the Lord Jesus Christ. The apostle makes it plain that the Colossian saints possess everything they need for life and godliness through faith in Christ alone, who is himself possessed of the very fullness of God.

Being very God, the Lord Jesus has revealed to these believers through his apostles all things required of them to live a holy and godly life. Other than regeneration and sanctification by the Holy Spirit, no extra experiences, teachings, or beliefs are necessary to enable these believers to grow in their faith. The perfection and finality of Christ's life and work and the fullness of his divine nature provide them with everything they would need to live to God's glory.

Due to the somewhat different circumstances prevailing in other local churches, the deity, fullness, and glory of Christ and his relationship to the Father may not have required the same degree of emphasis in Paul's other letters as it did in this letter to the Colossians.

DATE

c. A.D. 60–62

Paul wrote this letter to Colossae while imprisoned (or under house arrest), believed to be in Rome.

In A.D. 64, a massive and wide-ranging fire swept through Rome. After seven days, the firefighters and soldiers believed they had finally extinguished the flames. However, it broke out again in another part of the city, burning furiously for another three days. Besides the tragic loss of life, the fire incinerated many of the city's wooden homes, monumental buildings, religious temples, and priceless and irreplaceable artworks.

A rumour spread abroad among the surviving citizens that Nero, the emperor at this time, was responsible for this great conflagration. (Although, when the fire began, Nero was at his coastal home 38 miles away in Antium (Anzio).)

Word through the illumination of his Holy Spirit. The latter is divine. It is infallible. It is fully sufficient in and of itself, for it is sourced from the almighty and infinite God and not from sinful, finite and fallible human beings, as is philosophy, psychology and all other fields of human learning. Similarly, any “philosophy” incorporating false teaching, or encouraging any modifications, additions to or subtractions from God's Word, is not from God. This, however, does not preclude the critical evaluation of the sacred texts (Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek) that are aimed at improving the accuracy of subsequent translations from the original languages. (GL)

To deflect any blame from himself, Nero sought out a scapegoat in the form of the Christians in Rome. However, he did not accuse them principally of causing the fire. Instead, the emperor accused and condemned them for alleged “*hate crimes*”! He asserted that the Christians hated the human race.

Thus, the Roman historian *Tacitus* records:

Some Christians were arrested, confessed their faith, and were “*convicted not so much of the crime of incendiarism as of hating the human race*”.²

In reality, Nero knew what the Christians believed and practised. His wife was friendly with Jewish individuals, including the Jewish historian Josephus. They could have informed Nero of the Christians’ beliefs if he did not know already. Furthermore, if, by this time, Paul had appeared before Nero, the apostle would have made these beliefs very clear to the emperor during his trial. Nevertheless, Nero wilfully misconstrued the Christian faith’s nature, beliefs and practices to frame false charges against them. Thus he perpetrated the most heinous crimes against the Christians, pursuing them mercilessly to death on the streets and in the arenas of Rome.

The apostle Paul was imprisoned in Rome sometime around A.D. 60–62. The fire of Rome occurred in July of A.D. 64. Also, in A.D. 64, an earthquake destroyed the town of Colossae, and it was never rebuilt. Therefore, Paul’s letter to that church must have been dispatched sometime before that date, possibly around A.D. 60–62.

Nero died by suicide in A.D. 68. It is believed that Paul (and Peter) were martyred before Nero’s demise, possibly around A.D. 67 or early 68. It may have been even earlier, during the extreme persecution of believers following the fire of Rome in A.D. 64. However, we cannot confirm these dates from the Bible. They are only available from external historical sources, such as Suetonius and others (e.g. Tacitus, *Annals* xv.44).

² Philip Schaff, *Apostolic Christianity*, vol. 1 of [History of the Christian Church](#). Accordance electronic ed. (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1910), paragraph 1697.

COLOSSIANS CHAPTER 1

Salutation

Colossians 1:1-2

The apostle Paul begins his Holy Spirit-inspired letter by writing in verse 1:

COLOSSIANS 1:1

¹ Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother,

^{1a} Paul,³ an apostle of Christ Jesus... (ESV)

“Saul” was Paul’s familiar Jewish name before his dramatic conversion to the Lord Jesus Christ. He was commonly known as “Saul of Tarsus”. At that time, he was a zealous Pharisee and the chief persecutor of the Lord’s people (Phil. 3:5-6; 1 Tim. 1:13).

This former violent oppressor of God’s people announces his new position in the Lord Jesus to the saints at Colossae. Now, he who once opposed and despised Christ and his people is an apostle of Christ. Paul (Saul) no longer persecutes the church. Now, he is a “slave” (δοῦλος *doulos*) and ambassador of the One he formerly persecuted. However, Paul did not take this honourable office upon himself. By his matchless grace, God had called Paul to the saving knowledge of his Son, Jesus Christ. The risen, glorified Lord Jesus had appointed Paul to the apostolic office by the will of God (Acts 9:1-22).

Therefore, no man or body of men had appointed Paul to the apostolic office. The Lord Jesus himself had called and commissioned Paul to his service. Peter, James, John and the other apostles at the church in Jerusalem recognised Paul’s divine calling and apostleship. They also acknowledged that this calling and office had come directly from the risen, glorified Lord Jesus, not from man (Gal. 2:6-10). Therefore, what Paul was about to say to the Colossian saints in this letter was not to be considered the words, ideas or opinions of men. Instead, the Colossians were to accept these words as the Word of God, spoken to these believers through God’s Spirit-inspired apostle. Paul was relaying in this letter what the Spirit of God was revealing to him. The Holy Spirit instructed the apostle and guided him to write inerrantly the very words of God (2 Pet. 1:20-21; cf. 2 Tim. 3:16).

Timothy (or Timotheus) was one of Paul’s fellow labourers in the gospel and a true and faithful brother in the Lord. However, unlike Paul, Timothy had not explicitly been called or commissioned by the risen Lord Jesus to the apostolic office. In keeping with Paul’s desire for Timothy to join him in the Lord’s service (Acts 16:1-5), probably Timothy’s local church had appointed and ordained him to the church’s min-

³ Paul: “Paul” (Gk. Παῦλος *Paulos*) was Saul’s Roman name. His Jewish name was “Saul”. However, it was common for Roman citizens like Saul to adopt an alternative Greek or Roman name. (GL)

istry by the laying on of hands. Nevertheless, Timothy could relay Paul's Spirit-inspired words or instructions to the local churches (1 Cor. 4:17) and carry Paul's letters to these churches as the apostle's fully authorised messenger or apostolic delegate.

As a close associate of the apostle, Timothy may also have acted as one of Paul's amanuenses (a secretary, scribe, or transcriber). Timothy would be responsible for correctly writing the apostle's dictated words. Paul would verify the accuracy of these documents. When completed, these documents would become Paul's epistles or letters to the churches. As a mark of their authenticity, Paul would append his name to the end of such letters in his own handwriting (Col. 4:18).

However, this does not necessarily suggest that Timothy or any other amanuenses *co-authored* the writing of Colossians. Paul alone was the human author. God's Holy Spirit inspired the apostles (and the (genuine) OT prophets) to speak, write and teach infallibly and inerrantly in the name of the Lord. At most, we might say that Timothy acted as an amanuensis, co-editor and possibly the co-sender of the letter. On some occasions, Timothy would act as the letter courier and apostolic delegate responsible for reading and explaining the letter's contents to its recipients (Cf. 1 Cor. 4:17; 1 Thess. 3:2).

Neither Paul nor Timothy had visited the church at Colossae. However, they had met or were acquainted with certain Colossian believers, such as Epaphras, Philemon, Onesimus, Archippus, and Apphia (Philemon 1:2).

COLOSSIANS 1:2

² To the saints and faithful brothers in Christ at Colossae:

Grace to you and peace from God our Father.⁴

To the saints ... (ἁγίοις hagiois) "sanctified" or "holy" [ones]; those cleansed by the blood of the Lamb and reckoned righteous and holy unto God through Christ's redeeming work.

In Biblical terms, the "saints" do not constitute an elite, elevated or canonised order of individuals. Rather, in Scripture, the "saints" refer to all those who constitute the body of Christ – the true Church worldwide. Every regenerated and redeemed child of God is a saint:⁵ i.e. a "holy one", "separated one" or "sanctified one" (Rom. 1:7; 1 Cor. 1:2; Eph. 1:18). However, this separation from sin and the world's ungodliness implies a corresponding complete dedication to God and obedience to his Word and will.

⁴ Some versions read, ¹ " ... from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ". (e.g. Some MSS, plus translations, KJV, NKJV)

⁵ *saints*: Probably, Paul is using the term "saints" here for the people of God following its similar use in the Old Testament (e.g. Daniel chapter 7).

God has justified these saints by his sovereign grace and mercy or declared them righteous in his sight (Rom. 3:20-24; 5:1-9; 8:30; Gal. 3:11, 24). God has granted each one the ability to repent and exercise faith, freely and willingly, in the Lord Jesus Christ (cf. Acts 11:18; 2 Tim. 2:25). Each has experienced the work of the Holy Spirit in effectual calling, regeneration, justification and sanctification.

These saints in Colossae whom Paul is addressing are also “*faithful brothers in Christ*”. “Faithful” does not refer simply to their loyalty to Christ and the gospel – which was true of these believers – but also to the fact that they were *full of faith* (“faith-full”).⁶ They were committed wholeheartedly to the truth of the gospel and the eternal Word of God.

In the expression, “... *brothers in Christ*...” the Greek word translated “brothers” (ἀδελφός adelphos; “of the same womb”) refers to both “brothers” and “sisters” in the context of this verse.

... “*in Christ*” refers to the exalted position to which all believers in the Lord Jesus are spiritually elevated when redeemed by Christ and regenerated to newness of life by his Holy Spirit. The Lord unites every believer to himself for all eternity through his perfectly sinless life and his substitutionary and atoning death on their behalf. This perfect work results in the regeneration, justification, sanctification and future glorification of all those whom Christ has redeemed (Rom. 6:23; 8:1; 1 Cor. 1:30; 2 Cor. 5:17; Eph. 1:3; 2:6-7).

The apostle continues: “*Grace to you...*” The Colossian saints had already experienced the grace of God in salvation. Paul prays they may continue to experience God’s matchless grace – his undeserved or unmerited favour – as his redeemed and holy children in every aspect of their lives.

Along with that grace, the apostle prays that they may also know “*peace*”.

This tranquillity of heart and mind, flowing from the peace of God, surpasses all human understanding. This spiritual blessing brings everlasting inner peace to the hearts and minds of all who belong to Christ. God bestows supreme inward peace or tranquillity upon all who live by faith in his Word (Phil. 4:7). The Lord Jesus told his followers that – in this world – they would endure trials and tribulations (John 16:33). However, no amount of tribulation or trouble on earth can take away from believers’ hearts that immeasurable degree of spiritual peace that the world can neither know nor begin to comprehend (John 14:27; Phil. 4:7).

The apostle emphasises the sole source of such spiritual blessings: “... *from God our Father*”. The redeemed children of God experience divine grace and peace in their lives only because God has called them to belong to him. He has adopted them as his children and become their heavenly Father. As Paul declares elsewhere:

Rom. 8:15 ESV

¹⁵ For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, “Abba! Father!”

⁶ *faithful*: Gk., πιστός pistois; faithful, reliable, trustworthy, stable. [NA28 GNT]

Eph. 1:5 ESV

⁵ he [God] predestined us for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will...

This heavenly Father continually bestows every spiritual blessing in Christ Jesus upon his beloved children. However, as a loving Father, he expects his children to walk humbly, in line with the teaching of his Word – the Bible. God the Father bestows his blessings on his children through their faith in Christ and their willing and joyful obedience to his commands.

Prayer and Thanksgiving

Colossians 1:3-14

COLOSSIANS 1:3-4

³ We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, ⁴ since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love that you have for all the saints,

Paul had not yet visited the church at Colossae,⁷ although he was closely associated with Epaphras from Colossae and had met a few of its members elsewhere. From these, and possibly from other believers, the apostle had learned of this meeting of the saints at Colossae. He had also heard of their intense desire to honour the Lord and Saviour in their lives. Thus, Paul decided to write this letter to them to encourage them in their faith. Paul could fully instruct them in the Lord's ways through this epistle. He could teach them in greater detail something of their heavenly Father's majestic and glorious Person and the glories and complete sufficiency of his Son as revealed in the written Word.

Genuinely grateful to God for the salvation of these dear saints, Paul assures them that he and his co-workers are remembering them in prayer. With the apostle, this would mean earnest, fervent and regular prayer to God on their behalf. It would also involve heartfelt thanksgiving to God for his immeasurable grace and mercy toward these Colossian believers.

⁷ *church at Colossae*: At this point in time, most local churches existed as one or more house churches in each town or city. Dedicated places of Christian worship had not yet been established, although in some areas, public halls could be used on a temporary basis (cf. Acts 19:9). Thus, when Paul writes to Colossae or any other local church, he is probably sending his letters to the main house church in these locations. These house churches would later pass on Paul's letters to other house churches in that location. In some instances, Paul's letters would be exchanged between house churches in different areas; for example, between Colossae and Laodicea. (GL)

In verse 4, Paul explains that he had heard of their true faith in Christ from others, especially Epaphras, their leader and teacher (v.7). Again, the apostle had heard of the Colossian saints' sincere love for believers in their local fellowship and elsewhere. As Paul realised and taught, true Christian love expressed itself in numerous practical ways. These expressions of such love benefitted and blessed both the saints in light and the world of mankind more generally. The Word that Paul uses for "love" (ἀγάπη *agapē*) is a word meaning love shown through holy and natural affection and love demonstrated practically by acts of kindness, mercy or charity.

Good works can never earn a person's eternal salvation, nor can such works add anything to it. Nevertheless, faith resulting in love for Christ and his people *must produce* "good works" if that faith is genuine (Eph. 2:10; Titus 2:14; Jas. 2:14-17ff).

Anyone practising good works from a redeemed and sanctified heart has the assurance of an appropriate reward in heaven. However, these good works cannot contribute toward or augment in any way the gifts of repentance, faith and salvation that God provides in Christ Jesus by his sovereign grace alone.

To this end, Paul declares elsewhere:

Eph. 2:8-9 ESV

⁸ For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, ⁹ not a result of works, so that no one may boast.

COLOSSIANS 1:5-6

⁵ because of the hope laid up for you in heaven. Of this you have heard before in the Word of the truth, the gospel, ⁶ which has come to you, as indeed in the whole world it is bearing fruit and increasing – as it also does among you, since the day you heard it and understood the grace of God in truth,

... *the hope laid up for you in heaven*.... The confident expectation and assurance that, in heaven, God will fulfil his promise concerning each believer's salvation (2 Cor. 5:1; 1 Pet. 1:4; Rev. 3:12).

In the Gospel of John, chapter 14, the Lord Jesus declared,

John 14:2-3 ESV

² "In my Father's house are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? ³ And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also."

This promise is the believer's eternal hope: the assurance that – one day – the Lord Jesus will take all his redeemed children to be with him in heaven forever.⁸ These Colossian believers had heard and understood this assurance of eternal glory when – through faith and by God's sovereign grace – they had responded to the gospel message (v.6; cf. 1 Cor. 15:1-4). That message of salvation promises forgiveness of sins in this life and the assurance of eternal life. The promised gift of eternal life begins with regeneration and redemption. It continues throughout life until, ultimately, the believer is glorified and received into the Father's immediate presence and that of the Son, the Holy Spirit, and all God's holy angels in heaven (Rom. 8:17, 30).

^{6b} ... as indeed in the whole world it [the gospel] is bearing fruit and increasing – as it also does among you... (ESV)

This same gospel message – “*the Word of truth*” that the Colossians had heard, believed, and now lived by, was being spread abroad throughout the world (ἐν παντὶ τῷ κόσμῳ *en panti tō kosmō*). In common with the other apostles and servants of God, Paul carried this gospel to wherever he and they travelled.

Besides a great many of the priests (Acts 6:7), a good number of Jewish people from foreign lands who had come to Jerusalem to celebrate the Feast of Passover accepted the Messiah as their Lord and Saviour. Now, as Christians, they would carry the Word of truth back home to their native countries and people. Again, traders and travellers who believed in Christ would also take the gospel to the many foreign lands they visited. Thus, the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ would be extended to the entire inhabited world (Acts 2:5-13ff; see also Matt. 28:18-20).

The Colossian saints had heard and believed this gospel; among them, that message had been bearing fruit. However, from whom had these believers heard the gospel of eternal salvation? Who had proclaimed or explained it to them?

⁸ ... *in heaven forever*: The apostle John is speaking here of the Father's presence in heaven. However, this does not mean that the redeemed people of God will be located only in heaven itself. The Bible also speaks of a new heaven and a new earth in which righteousness dwells (2 Pet. 3:13; Rev. 21:1.). The redeemed of the Lord will be found throughout this new creation.

In verse 7, Paul writes:

COLOSSIANS 1:7

⁷ just as you learned it from Epaphras our beloved fellow servant. He is a faithful minister of Christ on your behalf.

The Colossian believers had heard the gospel truth from a servant of the Lord named “*Epaphras*”.⁹ Epaphras had been instrumental in establishing the church at Colossae and providing this church with sound teaching in the Word of God. Epaphras was probably also responsible for two other local churches in the Lycus Valley: Laodicea and Hierapolis (Col. 4:12-13).

We know little about Epaphras’ background. However – on one occasion – he may have been imprisoned for the gospel’s sake at the same time and place as the apostle Paul (Philemon 23).

Epaphras, a beloved servant of Christ, had expounded the gospel to those at Colossae who now were believers in the Lord Jesus Christ and members of his church. Such is the power of God when he takes the testimony of a faithful servant (in this case, Epaphras) and applies his Word to the hearts and lives of those who hear. Their acceptance of that Word through faith is due to the regenerating and sanctifying work of God’s Holy Spirit.

What was true of the faithful minister, Epaphras, is true also of any faithful servant of the Lord. The Holy Spirit can use their witness or testimony to the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ to draw many people to a saving knowledge of God’s Son – to the glory of God.

COLOSSIANS 1:8

⁸ and has made known to us your love in the Spirit.

Epaphras had told the apostle Paul and his co-workers something of the Colossians’ love for the Lord Jesus and all the saints. However, this was no ordinary love – likely to fade or pass away. This love was love for Christ and his redeemed people initiated and energised by the Holy Spirit of God. This love was no transient earthly love. It was a pure, spiritual love flooding their hearts and minds because of the eternal love of God that they had experienced in their lives through the sovereign calling of God in election and

⁹ *Epaphras*: Epaphras can be a contraction of the name “Epaphroditus” – although not believed to be the same person as the one so named in Philippians 2:25; 4:18. (GL)

regeneration. Now that holy and spiritual love expressed itself in heartfelt devotion to Christ. That sincere love communicated deep compassion and concern for a lost and perishing world: a world of individuals and nations still bound by the ravages of sin and its penalty of death – spiritual, physical and eternal death (Rom. 5:5; 1 Cor. 13:1ff).

In and of itself, human love and compassion cannot bring salvation to a sinful world. The love of God alone, expressed through Christ, his atoning substitutionary sacrifice and subsequent resurrection and ascension to God's right hand, is wholly sufficient to draw sinners to Christ and the fullness of his love and forgiveness (John 3:16).

COLOSSIANS 1:9

⁹ And so, from the day we heard, we have not ceased to pray for you, asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding,

From that day forward, Paul and his co-workers had been praying consistently for the saints at Colossae. The apostle's earnest desire was that these believers might come to an increasingly enriched measure of faith in Christ and a fuller and richer measure of God's will for their lives; primarily, that they should be sanctified by faith in Christ through the teaching of his Word (John 17:17).

However, knowing God's will requires a heart and mind eager to seek and recognise God's will. This spiritual knowledge could be achieved *only through prayerful and regular study of the Scriptures (God's Word)*, fellowship with other believers, and regular personal and corporate prayer and worship. Again, the knowledge of God's will could be found only through *spiritual* wisdom and *spiritual* understanding or comprehension. God's will for his redeemed people can never be known or comprehended by unspiritual men or women but only by those who are indwelt, sanctified, and guided by God's Holy Spirit.

COLOSSIANS 1:10

¹⁰ so as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God;

Here, we find why Paul wanted these Colossian saints to know God's will so that their daily lives might be worthy of the Lord.

Before their conversion, these believers had displeased and dishonoured God by their unbelief and sinful lifestyles. This condition was common to all fallen humanity. However, the Lord Jesus called these Colossians out of spiritual darkness and death into spiritual light and life (cf. Matt. 4:16; Acts 26:18; 2 Cor. 4:6; Eph. 5:8; 1 Pet. 2:9).

They had experienced and would continue to experience all the benefits of God's salvation. The Holy Spirit had regenerated them, and God had granted them faith to believe – freely and willingly – in the Lord Jesus Christ by that same Spirit of holiness (Eph. 2:8). Now, they had to learn what it meant to belong to Christ, take up the cross and follow him, and obey his Word and will.

Hence Paul prays that they may come to realise – *that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will* (v.9); and *the knowledge of God* (v.10): i.e. in an ever-growing awareness of the omnipotence, omnipresence, omniscience, righteousness, justice, wrath, holiness, and majesty of God (all constituting something of God's inexpressible glory) – together with an increasing awareness of all his other attributes, including truth, love, mercy, compassion, grace, kindness – all existing eternally in the Godhead to absolute perfection.

By knowing and obeying the will of God, these believers would grow in grace and the knowledge of their Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ. Then, their daily lives would be fully pleasing to him. Then, through their faith, they would produce real fruit in their lives, including works and acts that would redound to God's praise, honour and glory. Nevertheless, these good works, or acts of love and mercy, would result from their regeneration and faith in Christ. These works did not merit or contribute toward their salvation. However, good works arising from faith in Christ and obedience to God's will would contribute toward their reward in heaven (Matt. 5:16; Eph. 2:10; Titus 2:14; 3:14).

COLOSSIANS 1:11

¹¹ being strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might, for all endurance and patience with joy;

Paul continues, ... *being strengthened with all power*....

The apostle prays that these Colossian saints may experience the strength or fortitude to persevere in their faith. He doubles down on his remark by saying, ... *with all power* ... (δυνάμει *dunamei*). That is, Paul is praying that they may be *strengthened with all power* so they may live their lives to the glory of God. This includes the strength or power to live consistently godly lives and practise the faith they profess, not only among believers but also among a potentially hostile and unbelieving world. Similarly, and by that same strength or power, they are to resist the devil and temptation to sin, endure suffering for the gospel, and hold steadfastly to the goal set before them.

Nevertheless, how would these believers find inward strength to live a life honouring the Lord Jesus? Certainly not by their own resolve, will, or effort alone. No, it would require power far above what they possessed. Thus, Paul declares,

^{11a} ... being strengthened with all power, *according to his glorious might...* (ESV) (emphasis added).

The strength that would enable them to live to the glory of God came to them from the Lord God himself. It was a gift of power or might (κράτος *kratos*) from God above, from the very One who is the All-Powerful (omnipotent) God and whose power emanates from his everlasting glory (the “*Shekinah Glory*”; cf. Exodus 40:34-35).

All the regenerated children of God experience an influx of this power in their lives through the active presence and working of the indwelling Holy Spirit. The believer’s body is God’s holy temple, and God’s Spirit fills that temple,¹⁰ empowering that person to do all that God requires to honour his Name (1 Cor. 3:16; 6:19).

By that same power of the Holy Spirit, the believer experiences victory over sin’s dominion. He or she can benefit other people spiritually and practically through a life of faith and love.

The purpose of this God-given power, experienced through the Holy Spirit, is ... *for all endurance and patience with joy...* In other words, Paul prays that these dear Colossian saints may continue constant and steadfast in their faith, exhibit patience and understanding in all the many trials and tribulations of life, and persevere in their faith with a full measure of joy in the Lord.

On this same theme, the apostle Peter writes concerning redeemed believers:

1 Peter 1:3-9 ESV

³ Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, ⁴ to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you ⁵ who by God’s power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. ⁶ In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, ⁷ so that the tested genuineness of your faith – more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire – may be found to result in praise and glory and honour at the revelation of Jesus Christ. ⁸ Though you have not seen him, you love him. Though you do not now see him, you believe in him and *rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory*, ⁹ obtaining the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls.

(Emphasis added.)

¹⁰ ... *God’s Spirit fills that temple [our bodies]*: Commensurate with the capacity of our frail mortal bodies to contain that glorious infilling.

(Although he usually distinguishes between the two, Paul may be using the term “body” here to comprehend both our mortal body and our immortal soul.) (GL)

Nevertheless, how does a believer best learn to apply God's power in their lives?

By studying his Word: book by book, chapter by chapter, verse by verse, all passages examined in their proper context – not selected randomly or out of context. We best understand God's will for us by learning the Scriptures thoroughly and ensuring we interpret them correctly (2 Tim. 2:15).

The Holy Spirit demonstrates something of his power in our lives by helping us to understand the meaning of God's Word accurately, *taken in its proper context*. As he did with Jesus' disciples, the Spirit of God leads the believer into all truth (i.e. into a sufficiently clear understanding of Biblical truths) (John 16:12-15). The Spirit of God never teaches us anything that is not in full accord with the written Word of God. He never reveals to us anything except what the Bible itself contains and reveals.

When we say that the Spirit leads us into all truth, we are referring to the truths of the Bible: That is, spiritual, ethical and pragmatic truths applicable to our spiritual lives and to our everyday lives and work. However, the work of the Spirit in illumination relates primarily to *spiritual* (Biblical) truths. It does not imply that truths or facts about other fields of learning and knowledge are unimportant or invalid. So long as they do not conflict with or detract from learning the truths of God's Word, other areas of truth (or facts) can also be pursued. The expertise gained in many of these fields of learning (e.g. authentic science, medicine, law, technology and other practical forms of training and service) can be used profitably for the service and glory of God.

COLOSSIANS 1:12

¹² giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in light.

The apostle Paul continues by saying that – in his prayers – he thanks God the Father, who has qualified the Colossian saints, thus making them co-heirs to the inheritance with all God's redeemed and holy people worldwide.

Note the expression Paul uses,

^{12a} ... the Father, who has qualified you.... (ESV)

The Colossian believers' salvation through faith in Christ was not something they had earned or merited. It had nothing to do with what these saints had done. On the contrary, the Father had taken the initiative and done everything necessary to bring about their regeneration by the Holy Spirit. Again, by his sovereign grace, God granted them the ability to repent and exercise saving faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. Faith is the gift of God (Eph. 2:8), but once granted by God, a person exercises their faith in Christ *freely and willingly*.

Thus, God had enabled these Colossians to repent and call upon his Son for mercy by his sovereign grace. Following their regeneration by the Holy Spirit, they believed in the Lord Jesus *freely and willingly*. Thereby, God regarded them as his adopted sons and daughters. These Colossian saints were joint heirs with the Lord Jesus and all other “saints in light” worldwide (Rom. 8:15-17; Eph. 1:5; 3:6).

... *the inheritance* ... is what is bestowed – by God’s grace – on all his redeemed and holy people. It began with their election by God from before the creation of the world (predestination); it continues with their effectual calling and eternal salvation in Christ then with the lifelong process of sanctification. It will culminate with these believers’ glorification in their Father’s house in the realms of glory for all eternity (Rom. 8:17, 30).

God had called these Colossian saints to participate in his promised inheritance – sharing in the glorious promises with every other saint of God upon the face of the earth. Collectively, Paul refers to the worldwide body of believers (the Church or Body of Christ) as *the saints in light* (v.12). The “saints in light” are those whom God has called out of spiritual darkness into the light of life by the One who is the *Light of the World* – the Lord Jesus Christ (John 8:12). We may also view these believers worldwide as those who belong to God’s kingdom of truth and righteousness. (Living or walking “in the light” means living or walking “in truth and righteousness” or conforming one’s conduct to the teaching of the Living Word.)

COLOSSIANS 1:13-14

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

The One who is “*the Light of the World*” (John 8:12, 9:5) has delivered us *from the domain of darkness*. The domain or dominion of darkness was the realm of sin in and over our lives. It was that domain or realm where “*the god of this world*” (i.e. Satan) blinded the minds of unbelieving men and women. Satan hindered those still in their sins from seeking the things of God, effectively hiding from their hearts and minds the objective truths of God’s Word and the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ (2 Cor. 4:3-4; cf. Matt. 13:15, John 12:40; see also Isaiah 6:9-10).

Because of their sin, these Colossians remained alienated or estranged from God, darkened in their understanding of spiritual things (Eph. 4:18). In and of themselves, they were incapable of coming to a saving knowledge of the truth. Thus, we see how the corrupting power of a person’s fallen, sinful nature *binds and blinds* the mind, enslaving body and soul to the sinful nature’s dictates and desires. Similarly, those still living a sinful lifestyle and unreconciled to God are still abiding under God’s holy and righteous justice and wrath (Rom. 1:18).

However, in the case of the Colossian believers, God’s righteous wrath against sin and the sinner has been satisfied fully by Christ’s sacrifice of atonement and reconciliation on their behalf. Likewise, Paul declares that the Lord Jesus has delivered these Colossian saints from the evil and enslaving domain in which they once lived. Through Jesus’ sacrificial, atoning and substitutionary death upon the shameful

cross and his subsequent resurrection and ascension to his Father's glorious heavenly throne, the Lord Jesus purchased their complete salvation at the cost of his shed blood. The crucified, risen and exalted Lord Jesus was the one and only perfect, sinless Sacrifice offered up as a ransom to secure atonement and forgiveness for sinful men and women, thus fully reconciling these redeemed sinners to God (Heb. 7:27; 9:26; 10:12).

Not only so, declares Paul, but the God who called them and saved them through Christ has also transferred these Colossian believers (and all other believers in Christ) *into the kingdom of his beloved Son*. God has adopted them into his family as his redeemed and holy children. God has also granted them an inheritance among all the saints belonging to Christ's kingdom and with whom they will reign. These saints are his children. They are his heirs – joint heirs with Christ in his glory and heirs to the glorious inheritance reserved for them in heaven (Rom. 8:17).

The risen, glorified Lord Jesus lives in the hearts and lives of his redeemed people through the indwelling Holy Spirit granted to each child of God by the Father and the Son. Every genuine believer has been transferred into the kingdom of God's Son. Every believer is God's redeemed, justified and adopted child, indwelt by his Spirit and sealed unto God by that same Holy Spirit. Thus, the evil one can no longer exercise dominion over that person.

The devil cannot seize control over the life of anyone whom the Spirit of God indwells. Satan is a fallen *created* being formerly possessing considerable, but not unlimited, power over fallen and sinful humanity. However, the Holy Spirit of God is *uncreated, omnipotent, and eternal*. He who indwells every child of God is almighty or all-powerful (omnipotent). Thus, although he may tempt, deceive and oppress believers outwardly, the devil cannot control a child of God inwardly. Our redeemed body is the dwelling place of God's Spirit. It is the temple of God – and the temple of God is holy (1 Cor. 3:16; 6:19).

When we yield to sin, we surrender to our old fallen and sinful nature. We cannot blame Satan for causing us to yield to temptation or claim that Satan overpowered us and caused us to yield. We must accept responsibility before God for yielding voluntarily to the evil desires of our old sinful nature instead of putting that old nature to death through the Word of God and by the power of God's Holy Spirit (Rom. 8:13; Col. 3:5).

Let us then live in the light of our position in Christ, exalted to the heavenly realms (Eph. 2:6). Let us put to death the sins of the old nature and put on the new nature, pursuing sanctification and holiness of life as the Spirit of God works graciously and powerfully within us, renewing us day by day after the likeness of Christ.

The Son's Pre-Eminent Glory

Colossians 1:15-23

COLOSSIANS 1:15

¹⁵ He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation.

^{15a} He is the image.... (ESV)

This profound statement by the apostle, inspired by the Holy Spirit, makes it clear that – respecting his divine nature – the Lord Jesus Christ is equal with God the Father. In the scriptural sense, one cannot be the “image” (εἰκὼν *eikōn*) of a person without possessing all that person’s character and attributes.¹¹

The truth of Christ’s deity and full equality with the Father is taught by the entire context of this passage and many other passages of God’s Word. It is not drawn from the word “image” (εἰκὼν *eikōn*) alone. The Lord Jesus declares elsewhere, “... *Whoever has seen me has seen the Father...*” (John 14:9a ESV). Thus, the Lord Jesus asserts his complete equality with God the Father – including full equality of the Father’s divine character and attributes. Similarly, the apostle John declares concerning the Son of God, *‘In the beginning was the Word (λόγος *logos*), and the Word was with God, and the Word was God* (John 1:1 ESV; bold emphasis added).

Elsewhere in the Gospel of John, the Lord Jesus affirms, “*I and the Father are one*” (John 10:30 ESV). Furthermore, in Hebrews, the writer declares, “*He [the Son of God] is the radiance [ἀπαύγασμα *apaugasma*] of the glory of God and the exact imprint [χαρακτήρ *charaktēr*] of his nature...*” (Heb. 1:3 ESV).

The apostle Paul asserts that the Son of God “... *is the image of the invisible God...*” God the Father, of course, is invisible. He is a pure inexpressible Spirit whom no one can see with mortal eyes. As pure Spirit, God is omnipotent, omniscient, and omnipresent. These and all his other perfect attributes represent God’s glory. God is unfathomable, but he reveals to human beings all that is necessary for them to know, understand and believe about his Person, Nature and Work. He makes himself known to us through the incarnation and teaching of his eternal Son, the Lord of life and glory, and his Holy Spirit, the Spirit of grace and glory. We discover everything necessary for us to know and believe about God in his written Word, The Bible.

¹¹ *Image*: Compare the word used here for “image” (Gk., “*eikon*”) with that used in Hebrews 1:3 for “exact imprint” (ESV) or “image” (KJV)—Gk., *χαρακτήρ* *charaktēr*; referring to the exact image or character of God the Son with God the Father.

The apostle continues,

^{15b} [He is] ... the firstborn ¹² over all creation (ESV).

Paul asserts that the Lord Jesus Christ reigns supreme over all creation. As the eternal Son of God, Jesus existed before the creation of the universe and everything contained within it. As the apostle John declares in the Gospel: *“In the beginning was the Word (λόγος logos) ...² He was in the beginning with God”* (John 1:1a,2 ESV; emphasis added). This expression reflects the opening words of Genesis: *“In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth...”* (Gen. 1:1 ESV; emphasis added).

Being uncreated and eternal, the Son of God ranks above every *created* being in heaven (e.g. angels, holy and evil) and on earth. No *created* being anywhere in heaven or earth can challenge or usurp his sovereignty, power and glory over the universe. God the Father brought the entire universe into existence through his Son. All creation is under his sovereign control, and everything in that creation must yield to his absolute sway.

God the Father is not part of the physical creation since – like his Son and the Holy Spirit – he is eternally existent and uncreated. Again, God the Father is pure Spirit. He has no physical or material elements within his essential Being.

¹² *Firstborn*: As in several other places in God’s Word, “*firstborn*” refers to pre-eminence, priority, rank, or status. This metaphorical use of the word occurs in both the Old and New Testaments. The context must decide whether a particular use of the expression “*firstborn*” relates literally to a first-born child in a family, or metaphorically to a person’s pre-eminence, priority of office, rank, or status. In the context of this entire section of Paul’s letter, the latter use needs to be understood.

The term “*firstborn*” is used elsewhere in God’s Word in a metaphorical sense. For example, in Exodus, the LORD declares:

Exodus 4:22-23a ESV

²² Then you shall say to Pharaoh, “Thus says the LORD, Israel is my firstborn son, ^{23a} and I say to you, “Let my son go that he may serve me.”

Here, the entire people of Israel is called the LORD’s “*firstborn son*”. Clearly, then, this is a reference to the people of Israel’s pre-eminence or status as God’s chosen people, not to their being firstborn literally.

Similarly, in Psalm 89, it is written concerning David, the Lord’s servant and king of Israel:

Psalm 89:27 ESV

²⁷ And I will make him the firstborn,
the highest of the kings of the earth.

Clearly, the word “*firstborn*” is being used metaphorically here to refer to David’s status, rank, or priority to which the LORD appoints him as king.

It is in this metaphorical sense that the word “*firstborn*” is being used here in Colossians. The apostle Paul uses this term to refer to the Lord Jesus’ pre-eminence and supremacy over his entire creation.

Furthermore, the dwelling place of the triune God (the “third heaven” or “heaven of heavens” is outside or beyond the created universe. As an omnipresent Spirit Being, the ordinary laws of physics, time, space and motion do not apply to the Godhead. On the contrary, the Sovereign God who established the laws of nature can overrule or suspend them at any moment, as he sees fit.

Paul continues:

COLOSSIANS 1:16

¹⁶ For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities – all things were created through him and for him.

^{16a} For by him all things were created.....(ESV)

“In the beginning, God created...” (Gen. 1:1). However, God the Father created everything through God the Son and by exercising God the Holy Spirit’s omnipotence. This joint act of omnipotence demonstrates that the Lord Jesus was present with the Father and the Holy Spirit from the eternal ages. It also proves that the Lord Jesus is Co-Creator with his Father and the Holy Spirit. Thus, it shows the truth of the Scripture below, ... *without him* [i.e. the Son], *there was not anything made that was made*.

John 1:1-3 ESV

¹ In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

² He was in the beginning with God. ³ All things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made.

Returning to Colossians, the apostle writes in verse 16:

^{16a, b} ... For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth.... (ESV)

God the Father created all things in heaven and earth through his Son.¹³ Earth was God’s perfect creation, as was the universe of stars, planets, and other bodies in space. All were created perfect, testifying to the power, glory, majesty, and handiwork of God.

Through his Son, the Father created all things —

^{16c} ... visible and invisible... (ESV)

¹³ *Creation*: Originally, everything that God created was perfect—morally and/or physically. Imperfection, decay, sin, death and the curse upon the earth, and everything it brought forth, came only with the subsequent disobedience and fall of man. This degradation of mankind and the created universe was preceded by the earlier fall of Satan and the demons or evil angels and their expulsion from the highest heaven to the realms of this earth. (GL)

From the most minute material particles or elements invisible to the naked eye to the mighty spiritual beings that inhabit the heavenly realms, including angels. Initially, all angels were created perfect and holy, serving the Lord in his glorious heavenly abode^{14,15}

^{16d} ... whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities... (ESV).

Whether concerning the spiritual powers or authorities in the invisible upper realms or visible earthly realms, the Son of God is their Creator. God instituted all such powers. Over these dominions, rulers, or authorities in heaven and on earth, God's Son reigns supreme. The risen, glorified Lord Jesus exercises absolute power and authority over all his works, including every created being in heaven or on earth. These authorities, rulers or dominions may be established or deposed at his command or by his works of providence.

Initially, God's creation was perfect in every respect. God instituted the exalted offices Paul mentions above to serve his purposes in a perfect sin-free creation. However, some God-ordained authorities in the upper realms rebelled and lost their rights and privileges under God. The Lord banished these rebellious agents (fallen angels) to the realms of earth and its environs. There, they continued to exercise a usurped but limited power over fallen mankind – but only as God ordained or permitted.

^{16e} ... all things were created through him and for him (ESV).

Everything that God created, he created through his Son. God intended the whole creation to serve his purposes and glorify his holy Name. Thus, we see that the entire creation – visible and invisible – was created perfectly and for the glory of God. Again, we are reminded that the Son of God was present and active during the creation, sharing the same attributes or characteristics of God the Father and God the Holy Spirit – three divine Persons in one single and perfect Godhead from all eternity.

COLOSSIANS 1:17

¹⁷ And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together.

¹⁴ *Angels*: Those angels who later rebelled against the Lord were expelled from the heavenly realms to the realms of this earth. These are the “fallen angels”, among whom are numbered Satan (the devil) and his wicked angels or demons.

¹⁵ *Heaven*: We must bear in mind that the “heaven” where God, the holy angels, and the redeemed of the Lord dwell is not part of God's creation (the cosmos and all its created content): i.e. God's dwelling place in heaven is distinctly separate from the entire physical universe and outside the realms of human investigation and research. The heaven where God, the holy angels and God's redeemed people dwell—the “heaven of heavens”—lies beyond or outwith the created universe(s) and remains totally unaffected by anything that happens in God's *created* heaven and earth.

The future “*new heaven and earth*” refers to a renewal of the *created* heaven and earth and therefore will assume a physical form. However, this will be a perfect or flawless heaven and earth where righteousness dwells. No traces of sin, imperfection, impurity or any other defect will be found within this new creation. (GL)

^{17a} And he is before all things... (ESV).

Here, again, the apostle asserts the pre-eminence of the Lord Jesus Christ. The exalted and glorified Lord Jesus, through whom God created the heavens and the earth, is above and before all things throughout the entire creation. He precedes the creation, for the Son has been present eternally with the Father and the Holy Spirit. The Son of God is supreme over every created being – human and angelic. Through him, these beings were made, and to him, they owe their existence (John 1:1-3; Heb. 1:1-12).

Furthermore, nothing in all creation can continue in existence except by the express will and purpose of God the Father operating through his Son.

^{17b} ... and in him all things hold together (ESV).

The Son sustains or upholds the entire universe, and all it contains by his will or Word of command. He raises up and deposes rulers through his divine providence (Dan. 2:21). He controls everything throughout creation, causing all things to work together to fulfil his intended plan and purposes for the entire creation, including all humanity. However, the Son's supreme command over his creation does not excuse the sinful behaviour of fallen, sinful mankind. Each man or woman is wholly responsible for their actions, and God will judge each person accordingly.

Concerning the Son's supremacy or pre-eminence over all creation, the writer of Hebrews says:

Heb. 1:1-4 ESV

¹ Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, ² but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world. ³ He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the Word of his power. After making purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, ⁴ having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs.

This passage from Hebrews demonstrates unmistakably the pre-eminence, power and glory of the Son, his deity and equality with the Father and the Son's supremacy over all creation, including everything in the entire universe.

COLOSSIANS 1:18

¹⁸ And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent.

(Cf. Eph. 1:22-23)

The Lord, who is supreme above all others, is also the Supreme Head of the church – the spiritual Body of Christ. The “church” consists of the entire body of regenerated ¹⁶ believers worldwide. It does not refer to a specific ecclesiastical organisation, denomination or fellowship but to the total number of genuinely regenerated children of God worldwide, irrespective of their local church affiliation. The local church at Colossae represented just one element of the universal church.

Incidentally, we must remember that – in Scripture – the term “church” (ἐκκλησία *ekklēsia*) does not refer to a physical building. Rather, this term refers to the body of believers who ordinarily meet within such buildings. The “church” consists of the *people* who belong to Christ, not the buildings or the denominations where they meet to pray and worship.

The church, which the Lord has redeemed with his shed blood, is Christ’s spiritual Body. Christ is the *only Supreme Head* of that body, the Church, *in heaven and on earth*. There is no other *Supreme Head of the church* in heaven or on earth.

The apostle continues:

^{18b} ... He ... is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead... (ESV).

“... beginning” refers to the Lord’s supremacy and priority in this place. Thus, concerning the “firstborn”, Paul writes in Romans,

¹⁶ *regenerated [believers]*: Regeneration of individual believers is effected exclusively by the Holy Spirit working directly upon a person’s soul or innermost being. This constitutes a new, *spiritual* birth—being “born anew” from above (John 3:3-7). Christening or water baptism may symbolise regeneration, but—in and of themselves—physical ordinances performed by human means cannot bring about such regeneration. Spiritual regeneration (or the new birth from above) cannot be imparted by any human minister or priest to a recipient (as in christening or baptism by water). The new birth (regeneration) is imparted exclusively and solely by the Holy Spirit of God to whom he will, when and where he wills. A person may experience the new birth within or outside a church setting. For example, the Ethiopian eunuch reading the prophet Isaiah while travelling in his chariot experienced spiritual rebirth once the evangelist, Philip, explained the significance of God’s Word to him. Following this experience, the Ethiopian chancellor requested (water) baptism as a token of his repentance, faith and obedience to the Word of God (Acts 8:26-40). (GL)

Romans 8:29 ESV:

²⁹ For those whom he [God] foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the *firstborn among many brothers*.

(Emphasis added)

The Lord Jesus, whom the Father has highly exalted and given a name above all other names in heaven and on earth (Phil. 2:9), is the One who exercises supreme authority over all his redeemed and sanctified brothers and sisters. These believers comprise the church or redeemed people of God on earth. The glorified, reigning and coming Lord Jesus is the One who leads his people onward to eternal glory (i.e. the church or redeemed people of God in heaven) (Eph. 5:27).

Returning to Colossians 1:18, the apostle continues:

^{18c} ... that in everything he might be pre-eminent (ESV).

The Head of the church is supreme over all creation. Here, however, his glory is demonstrated in connection with his redeemed and holy people (also known as the “saints”, “sanctified”, or “holy” ones).

In everything relating to his body, the church, Christ is pre-eminent. No one can usurp his position as the church’s Head, Saviour and Lord, nor can his sovereign rule over his redeemed church be opposed or changed in any way. He is the Beginning and the End, the First and the Last, the Alpha and the Omega – expressions pertaining exclusively to the Most High God (YHWH) and his co-equal and co-eternal Son (Rev. 1:8; 21:6; 22:13). Everything God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit has planned, purposed or predestined for his holy church will be fulfilled in the church’s final sanctification and glorification.

COLOSSIANS 1:19

¹⁹ For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell,

He who is pre-eminent over all creation is characterised by the same fullness of glory as God the Father. Indeed, as expressed here, the entire fullness of God’s eternal glory also dwells in the Son: i.e. in respect of his deity, the Son of God possesses in his own Person all the attributes of the Father, and in equal measure with the Father, including omnipotence, omniscience and omnipresence. Therefore, regarding his divine nature, the Son of God is the exact image of the Father. As the writer to the Hebrews declares:

Heb. 1:1-4 ESV

¹ Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, ² but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world. ³ He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the Word of his power. After making purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on

high, ⁴ having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs.

Likewise, the Son is co-equal with the Father and the Holy Spirit.

Thus, to the church at Philippi, Paul declares:

Phil. 2:5-11 ESV

⁵ Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, ⁶ who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, ⁷ but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. ⁸ And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. ⁹ Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, ¹⁰ so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, ¹¹ and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

The incarnate Son of God veiled or “laid aside” his glory during his time on earth. He set aside or concealed temporarily the full visible splendour of his majestic glory (which no one can look upon without being utterly consumed by that glory (cf. Ex. 33:20)). However, the eternal Son of God *did not divest himself of his divine nature or deity*. Yet, for our sakes, he assumed true human nature (sinless and perfect) to accomplish our redemption. (On the mount of transfiguration, the Lord Jesus revealed some limited traces of his eternal glory to his disciples, Peter, James and John (Matt. 17:1-2)).

Thus, he, who was and is true God, became true man to live, suffer and die *as a perfect, sinless man* for the redemption of all his people worldwide. The Lord Jesus manifested his glory when he rose triumphantly from the dead on the third day, showing himself alive to his disciples. At Calvary, the Lord of Glory achieved complete victory over Satan, sin, death, hell and the grave, as was confirmed by his resurrection. The Lord’s ascension to his Father’s right hand in glory demonstrated the acceptance by the Father of Jesus’ atoning sacrifice on Calvary’s tree for our sins. There, our Chief Shepherd and glorified Redeemer reigns supremely over and preserves his church until the day of their final redemption and glorification in heaven.

COLOSSIANS 1:20

²⁰ and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.

In this context, and concerning human beings, “*to reconcile*” is to effect the means through which a change from one state to an entirely different state takes place. In this case, from a redeemed person’s

state of sinfulness, unrighteousness and alienation from God to a state of complete forgiveness, justification and adoption by God – secured for all believers by the Lord Jesus’ substitutionary and atoning sacrifice at Calvary.

God has effected complete reconciliation between himself and fallen, sinful human beings through the Lord Jesus’ consistently righteous and perfect life on earth and by his atoning and substitutionary work of redemption and reconciliation on the cross. Previously, all men and women had been at enmity with, and alienated from, God. Thus all humanity was abiding under his just and holy wrath because of their unforgiven sins (Rom. 1:18). Now, however – their peace with God being made through the blood of the cross (v.20c) – all those whom God’s Holy Spirit has brought to repentance and faith have been reconciled to the Father in heaven (Rom. 5:1; cf. 2 Cor. 5:18ff). The offence caused to the Most High and Holy God in heaven by people’s sinful behaviour, thoughts, words, deeds and attitudes has been resolved and removed from God’s sight. This has been accomplished through the Lord Jesus’ sinless life, suffering and death on the cross and his subsequent resurrection and ascension to glory (Col. 2:13-15).

This atonement and reconciliation of men and women to God through Christ’s work applies to all his elect people worldwide. However, as we can see from many Scriptures elsewhere, those who remain impenitent and under God’s wrath for their sins are not included in this act of reconciliation. That is, the phrase, “... *to reconcile to himself all things...*” does not imply universal salvation or reconciliation for every person on earth. God has already prepared eternal condemnation and separation from his presence everlastingly for all those who remain impenitent to the end (Matt. 25:41; Rev. 20:13-15; 22:15).

The God of peace has established peace and harmony with his redeemed, justified and sanctified people forever through the blood of his cross shed by way of atonement. The shed blood speaks of the immeasurably high cost of our redemption, i.e. the yielding up to death of the Lord Jesus’ perfectly righteous and sinless human life on behalf of sinful, unrighteous human beings who were God’s enemies. Christ, the Righteous One, died for us, the unrighteous ones, to bring us to God (Rom. 5:8-10; 8:34). (Reconciliation to God through a perfect sacrifice involving the shedding of blood was long prefigured and practised by the OT sacrifices of atonement for sin (e.g. Lev. 5:6ff)).

The reconciliation of which Paul speaks in verse 20 is not limited to redeemed human beings. Christ’s death and resurrection achieved reconciliation “... *to himself [for] all things, whether on earth or in heaven....*” (cf. v.16 above). Nevertheless, this reconciliation of “*all things*” does not include Satan and the demons since God has already prepared a place for them in hell (Matt. 25:41; Rev. 20:1-15). Christ’s work of atonement was on behalf of fallen, sinful *human beings*. It does not include Satan and the fallen angels. These higher forms of created beings had rebelled against God before he created mankind. Therefore, God expelled them from his holy and glorious presence, and they will remain so for all eternity.

Christ’s death on the cross achieved victory over mankind’s sin and alienation from God, bringing forgiveness, justification and complete reconciliation with God for all his elect (John 17:2, 6, 9, 24; Rom. 8:18-39). However, Christ’s same triumph at the cross brings for Satan and the fallen angels only God’s righteous judgment, condemnation and – ultimately – eternal separation from God in the lake of fire (Heb. 2:14; Rev. 20:10). There can be no salvation or reconciliation with God for the devil and the demons.

Nevertheless, other aspects of God's creation have been or will be fully restored or pacified through the blood of Christ's cross. This restoration or reconciliation will include the natural world, which – we must remember – was cursed by God (Gen. 3:14,17). The Most High God (YHWH) placed a curse on the planet Earth when he expelled Adam and Eve from the perfect paradise of Eden. From then on, the earth, over which God had given them dominion, would be invaded by thorns, thistles and other damaging or contaminating agents because of Adam and Eve's sinful unbelief, covetousness, disobedience, rebellion and pride (Gen. 3:22-24). Sickness, disease, disability and many other afflictions and impairments also arise – directly or indirectly – from the fall of man. These, too, will be remedied in the restoration of all things. Thus, the reversal of this situation in the new heaven and earth may be connected to Christ's work of atonement and reconciliation at Calvary (2 Pet. 3:13; Rev. 21:1).

Following the Flood, God told Noah that he would never again "curse" the ground because of mankind's sin (Gen. 8:21). In context, however, this curse relates to God's condemnation of mankind and his judgment upon them preceding and including the time of Noah's flood. It is not the same as the universal curse upon the earth that God issued at the time of the fall of man (Gen. 3:17-19). This universal curse remains in effect and will continue until the reconciliation of all things in the future.

Thus, the apostle Paul declares in Romans:

Romans 18:19-23 ESV

For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God. ²⁰ For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope ²¹ that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. ²² For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. ²³ And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies.

Furthermore, the reconciliation of all things "*on earth or in heaven*" (Col. 1:20) probably extends to purifying or cleansing the entire created universe. We must remember that parts at least of the universe have been defiled or contaminated by the prolonged presence of a vast horde of evil and unclean spirit beings (Satan and the fallen angels). God will consign Satan and the demons to that place he has already prepared for them (Matt. 25:41; Rev. 20:10). Then, all remaining traces of their evil presence and contaminating influence on earth and in heaven will be cleansed and purified forever. Christ's reconciliation of all things on earth or in heaven includes restoring all things in the universe that sin – together with its acts and consequences – has utterly defiled.

COLOSSIANS 1:21-22

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

Notice the sequence of thoughts in Paul's mind here:

- **Condemned / Alienated**
- **Justified / Reconciled**
- **Sanctified / Glorified** [ultimately]

²¹ And you, who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds... (ESV).

The word "*alienated*" applies to estrangement or separation from and enmity with the person of God.

Before their redemption – and like all other unregenerate people worldwide – these Colossians were alienated by their sins and misdeeds from the All-Holy, All-Righteous God (Cf. Jer. 17:9-10; Eph. 2:12; 4:18-19). Paul says that they were "*hostile in mind...*" ¹⁷ In all matters pertaining to God, they were utterly opposed to his will and instructions for mankind, as revealed in his Word, the Bible. Consequently, their rebellious and sinful nature led them to practise evil or wicked deeds – not all of the same magnitude, but all expressing contempt for God and his holy Word. As a result, they were abiding under God's just wrath and judgment (Rom. 1:18), **condemned** to a lost eternity, **alienated** from God and yet utterly unwilling to seek God or repentance for their sin and rebellion.

^{22a} ... he has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death... (ESV).

Nevertheless, while in this dreadful condition and while yet sinners, the Lord reached out to them in mercy. By his sovereign grace and through the work of the Holy Spirit, God brought these same sinful people to an awareness of their great danger, their ongoing judgment under the wrath of a holy and righteous God, and their impending final doom. By his grace and mercy in effectual calling and regeneration, the Lord God brought these people to true repentance for their sins and genuine saving faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. Thus, by the work of the Holy Spirit in their hearts and lives, these Colossians were brought by God's grace to full redemption in Christ Jesus, involving their complete **justification** and **reconciliation** with God.

^{22b} ... in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him (ESV).

Those whom God calls, he also justifies... (Rom. 8:30). These redeemed saints at Colossae had been called, saved and justified. They had been declared righteous in the eyes of God because he saw them as clothed with the perfect righteousness of his Son. That is, God considered the lives and characters of these redeemed sinners ¹⁸ to be clothed or covered entirely with the perfect righteousness of Christ.

¹⁷ *hostile*: Gk., ἐχθροὺς echthrous, hostile; enemy. [UBS5-T]

...in mind: Gk., διανοίᾳ dianoia, mind, thought, intention. [UBS5-T]

¹⁸ ... *redeemed sinners*: By the Son's sacrifice of atonement, death, burial, resurrection and ascension to the right hand of the Father in glory, redeemed sinners become "*saints*", i.e. the "*set apart*", "*sanctified*", or "*holy*" people of

Those whom God justifies, he also **sanctifies** (1 Cor. 6:11). All those redeemed by the Lord's atoning sacrifice are redeemed to holiness of life or increasing godliness in their daily living. The believers' ongoing sanctification will culminate in their final **glorification** once called into the Lord's immediate presence in heaven (Rom. 8:30).

The declaration of righteousness (i.e. justification) was and is an act of free and sovereign grace on God's part. These sinners, abiding previously under God's wrath and righteous judgment, now find themselves under God's favour, grace, mercy and peace – reconciled to God by the atoning blood shed on the cross. They have been justified in God's sight by the righteousness of his own Son. Christ died to pay the penalty for their sin and rose again for their justification. Even now, the risen, glorified Lord Jesus intercedes with the Father on behalf of all his redeemed children worldwide (known collectively as the "church" or "church universal"). Likewise, the Lord Jesus intercedes for all those whom, by his Holy Spirit, God will yet call to believe in his Son.

In passing, justification should not be understood merely as a legal concept, acquitting the sinner from guilt and condemnation. This much is true. However, those whom God justifies are now obligated to live a life honouring and glorifying God and benefitting their neighbours.

COLOSSIANS 1:23

²³ if indeed you continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel that you heard, which has been proclaimed in all creation ¹⁹ under heaven, and of which I, Paul, became a minister.

^{23a, b} if indeed you continue in the faith, stable and steadfast... (ESV).

(Cf. Matt. 10:22)

A sure indication that a person has received new life in Christ is their stable and steadfast perseverance in everything relating to their Christian faith. Thus, genuine believers search the Scriptures daily, as did the Jewish enquirers at Berea (Acts 17:11). They seek the guidance of the Holy Spirit to enlighten their minds and help them understand those Scriptures (Cf. John 16:13). They pray to God through his Son and meet regularly with other believers to worship, praise and serve the Lord. These activities are all part of the believer's faith. So, too, is living a God-honouring day-to-day life that is entirely consistent with their profession of faith.

^{23c} ... not shifting from the hope of the gospel that you heard... (ESV).

God. (GL)

¹⁹ " ... in all creation under heaven": Or as margin; " ... to every creature under heaven", i.e. to all humanity.

... Not being moved from the truths of the gospel you received from the apostles and other genuinely appointed servants of God... Not being deceived by false teachers who pervert or misapply the teaching of God's Word to suit their distorted views or to further their erroneous and aberrant aims or objectives.

The apostle Paul exhorted the Colossian believers to hold fast to the truth as they had heard it and received it from Epaphras (in person), from Paul himself (by his letters) and from other genuine servants of God. These Colossian saints were to guard that truth. They were not to allow anyone anywhere to dissuade them from believing these imperishable gospel truths. Nor were they to permit anyone to mislead them into error, sin and unfaithfulness to God and the message of eternal salvation in and through Christ Jesus alone (Acts 4:12).

As we shall see later in this epistle, some professing believers at Colossae were in great danger of being misled into false and inaccurate teaching. Explicitly or implicitly, such false teaching denied or questioned the principle of faith in Christ's person and work alone as entirely sufficient for salvation and eternal life.

^{23a-c} if indeed you continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel....

The Colossian believers could be assured of their eternal salvation and security by continuing in the truths of the gospel, remaining stable and steadfast and not turning away from the paths of truth and righteousness. Those who do turn aside *permanently* from the truths of the gospel demonstrate that they were never really the regenerated children of God, e.g. Judas Iscariot and Demas (Acts 1:25; 2 Tim. 4:10; 1 John 2:19).

Thus, concerning the saints' perseverance in the faith, the writer to the Hebrews declares:

Hebrews 3:12-14 ESV

¹² Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God. ¹³ But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called "today," that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. ¹⁴ For we have come to share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original confidence firm to the end. (See also Heb. 3:15-19)

Returning to Colossians, Paul writes concerning the gospel:

^{23d} ... which has been proclaimed in all creation [or, "to every creature"] under heaven... (ESV)

This glorious gospel of eternal salvation through repentance and faith in Christ was heralded throughout the known world by the apostles, by other accredited servants of God, and by believers from various local churches. (Some of these believers would be travelling from town to town by virtue of their vocation, employment or trade.)

Thus, we see that there is only one way of salvation for every human being: By accepting and believing the gospel's message. There is no other way under heaven given among men whereby they must be saved (Acts 4:12; Phil. 2:10).

^{23e} ... and of which I, Paul, became a minister (ESV).

Appointed by the Lord Jesus to carry the gospel to the Gentiles and everyone to whom the Lord would send him, Paul – the former Pharisee who had persecuted believers – now is the minister or servant ²⁰ of Christ. In his mercy, the Lord has redeemed him and has dispatched him to proclaim the everlasting gospel, primarily to those of non-Jewish heritage.

Paul was thoroughly trained in the Old Covenant Scriptures. Before his conversion, Paul had been instructed in the Scriptures by Gamaliel, the grandson of Rabbi Hillel. Gamaliel was a leading Pharisee and a renowned teacher of the Law and of the Old Covenant Scriptures more generally (Acts 5:34; 22:3). After his conversion, the risen Lord Jesus had personally instructed Paul concerning the New Covenant (or New Testament), involving the gospel message. The apostle had spent three years in Arabia, further preparing for the work to which the Lord had called him (Gal. 1:17). Thus, Paul was well prepared to proclaim the truths of God's Word accurately and fearlessly. The Lord had fully equipped the apostle to expound that truth and to refute error and false teaching.

Now that he had been divinely appointed to this task and empowered by the Holy Spirit, Paul could declare God's Word with all the dynamism and authority of a Spirit-inspired apostle and emissary of Christ Jesus himself. Those truths that the *original apostles, and the apostle Paul*, taught the churches were to be received by the Colossian believers (and all other local churches) as the inspired, unchangeable and unchallengeable Word of God and his Son, Jesus Christ (2 Pet. 1:19-21).

The Bible, the inerrant Word of God, was to be the church's only source of teaching. The Colossians – and all other believers – were to learn from that Word alone and progress in their faith only through the preaching, teaching, and prayerful study of that Word, as the Holy Spirit illumined their minds and aided them in their understanding of the Truth. However, some Colossian believers were in danger of being deceived by certain people proposing additional teaching sources or distorting the gospel's true teaching. Thus, Paul wrote this letter to warn them against departing from the fullness of truth found exclusively in Christ through his Word, the Bible, alone.

COLOSSIANS 1:24

²⁴ Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church,

²⁰ Minister/servant: (Gk., διάκονος diakonos [GNT28-T]. Not δοῦλος doulos, meaning "servant" or "slave" as minister/servant may be translated in many other passages of the NT. (GL)

^{24a} Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake... (ESV)

Paul rejoices insofar as he has been honoured by the Lord Jesus to suffer for his name's sake. The apostle is not rejoicing in suffering for its own sake but because the Lord Jesus has shown him mercy and called him to proclaim his name among the Gentiles. However, the Lord had called Paul not only to believe in him but also to endure suffering for his sake (Phil. 1:29). Thus, the apostle counts it an honour to serve and suffer – if needs be – for the sake of the Colossian church and for every other local church for whom the Lord Jesus has given Paul responsibility.

^{24b} ... and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions... (ESV)

The apostle is saying that "*in my flesh*", i.e. concerning his human frame or mortal body, he is endeavouring to the utmost of his abilities, and as empowered by the Holy Spirit, to build up and strengthen the body of which Christ is Head. In this case, this was the local church or churches at Colossae. (Of course, the apostle acknowledged that Christ was the Head of the entire church worldwide, not just the local churches.)

When Paul speaks of "*filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions...*" he is not speaking of Christ's substitutionary sufferings in relation to his work of atonement. That work was a *perfect* work, and it is a *finished* work (Heb. 10:10-14). The Lord Jesus atoned for our sins once-for-all. His intercession/mediation on our behalf continues in heaven throughout this present age.

The Greek word translated here as "afflictions" (θλίψις *thlipsis*) is not used in connection with Christ's substitutionary sufferings and his work of atonement. Rather, this word is used in connection with the ordinary sufferings, trials, tribulations and distressing circumstances of a person's everyday life. (As an example of such afflictions endured by Paul, see 2 Cor. 11:23-29.)

Nevertheless, distinct from Christ's intense sufferings in connection with his atoning sacrifice, there is another sense in which the phrase "*Christ's afflictions*" may be considered to relate to the sufferings of Christ's Body on earth (i.e. the church, of which Christ is Head). The risen and exalted Head of the church may be said to "suffer affliction" because of the sufferings of the members of his Body on earth.²¹ This situation, however, is entirely different from the indescribable sufferings that the Lord endured at Calvary, where – upon completion of that perfect atoning sacrifice – the Lord Jesus declared, "*It is finished!*"

However, considering Paul's repeated remarks elsewhere about suffering for Christ, it is probably best to understand his comments here as referring to the afflictions suffered for Christ and his church because of his calling as an apostle and servant of the Lord Jesus.

Perhaps we can illustrate this best by the Lord Jesus' own words concerning Paul's appointment to service:

Acts 9:15-16 ESV

²¹ See Calvin's Commentary on this passage for a fuller explanation.

¹⁵ But the Lord said to him [Ananias], 'Go, for he [Saul/Paul] is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel. ¹⁶ *For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.*

(Emphasis added)

Thus, the apostle is speaking of his personal afflictions for the sake of Christ. He is aware of what the Lord Jesus had suffered for our redemption, and he is also aware that his personal sufferings can never compare with the sufferings of the Saviour. Nevertheless, insofar as it is humanly possible, the apostle is willing to endure even more personal sufferings for Christ and his church (Cf. Eph. 3:13; 2 Tim. 2:10. See also 2 Cor 4:7-12; 1 Thess. 3:2-4).

COLOSSIANS 1:25

²⁵ of which I became a minister according to the stewardship from God that was given to me for you, to make the word of God fully known,

Looking back to the end of v.24, together with the beginning of v.25, the apostle says:

^{24c} ... His body, that is, the church, ^{25a} of which I became a minister... (ESV)

The Lord Jesus called Paul to be a "minister" (διάκονος diakonos; 'servant') of his "Body", the church. The apostle was an officially appointed servant or minister of Christ and his gospel. He was responsible to the Lord for attending to and shepherding the saints who were meeting in various local churches, predominantly those from a Gentile background.

^{25a, b} ... according to the stewardship from God... (ESV).

"...the stewardship ... ²² is the administration or management and responsibility for arranging and carrying out specific assignments to the complete satisfaction of the Appointee. Paul was fully responsible to God for discharging his commission faithfully to the local churches and people to whom the Lord sent him.

Notice that the apostle attributes the granting of his stewardship to God, although it had been the Lord Jesus who had commissioned and appointed him (Acts 9:10-16). Paul considers Father and Son co-equal in all things, including divine power, glory, and authority. This demonstrates that every word spoken and every work or act performed by the Son is a word, work or act that has proceeded from the Father. That word, work, or act is then executed by or through his Son concurrently with the presence, power and person of the Holy Spirit (John 5:19,30).

To what purpose did Paul receive this stewardship? The apostle declares:

²² stewardship: Gk., οἰκονομία, oiko nomia. manage, administer, plan. [BDAG 697:1b]

^{25b, c} ... that was given to me for you, to make the word of God fully known (ESV).

Concerning the Colossian saints (and the saints of God everywhere), Paul's commission was *to make the word of God fully known*.²³ The Colossians had already experienced the word of God under the ministry of Epaphras. Through the teaching of this word, the Colossians came to experience the gift of salvation and eternal life. This word and gift were their sure foundation in Christ.

However, the Lord had placed upon the apostle Paul the responsibility to build upon that foundation: To provide sound teaching in God's Word that would build up and strengthen the believers in their most holy faith. This sound teaching would then equip them to make progress in their Christian lives, to stand their ground against the godless world of fallen humanity and against the wiles of the devil.

Thus, it was incumbent upon the Colossian believers to receive this apostolic teaching as the Word of God and to act on it accordingly. Concurrently, however, they would be expected to search the Scriptures daily for themselves, thus confirming from other parts of God's Word the truth of everything that Paul or his associates taught them.

There was no possibility of the Colossian church being taught error by the apostle Paul or by any other God-appointed apostle since these men were speaking and teaching by inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Therefore, they could not err or be mistaken in their pronouncements.²⁴

However, as will be seen shortly, Paul was aware that certain false teachers were likely to, or had already begun to arise within the church or would infiltrate the church from elsewhere. Therefore, the Colossian saints needed to be well grounded in the truths of God's Word so that they would not be led astray or enticed into sin by these pernicious doctrines or misguided individuals. Indeed, even when Paul was writing, some people within the Colossian church had been adversely influenced by misleading or erroneous concepts and ideas expressed by particular individuals. Paul will deal with this potentially serious error later in this letter.

²³ ... *to make the word of God fully known*: The expression "fully known" may be understood as making God's word known fully and clearly to the saints at Colossae and other local churches. However, "fully known" may also refer to making God's word known to peoples in other, more distant lands. See exegetical commentaries for alternative interpretations of the phrase "*fully known*".

Furthermore, Paul would not have understood the expression "*word of God*" (λόγον τοῦ θεοῦ) as being confined solely to the gospel message, as the context might seem to imply. Every word spoken by God is the "*word of God*", whether in the four Gospels or in other parts of the Bible. Thus, the entire Bible is the "Word of God", and Paul would likely have understood the expression in this more comprehensive sense.

²⁴ *Apostolic authority*: For a more comprehensive explanation of Paul's apostolic authority, the reader may refer to *NT Expository Notes: 2 Corinthians* (2021 edition) (2 Cor. 10:8) by Gordon Lyons.

COLOSSIANS 1:26

²⁶ the mystery hidden for ages and generations but now revealed to his saints.

^{26a} the mystery hidden for ages and generations... (ESV)

During the Old Testament era, the LORD God had called a people for himself. Out of all nations on earth, the LORD (YHWH) had chosen Abram (later, “Abraham”). God had elected Abraham’s descendants (the Hebrew people or, later, the people of Israel) to be his distinctive or unique people. The LORD set the Hebrew people above all peoples and nations on earth – not because they were superior or the greatest of peoples (indeed, humanly speaking, they were among the least significant of peoples), *but because God loved them* (Deut. 7:7-11).

By his love, grace, and mercy, these chosen people – later known as the Jewish people – were to become God’s unique or treasured possession. Among the entirety of fallen and sinful humanity, these chosen people alone could fully experience God’s mercy and salvation. (Nevertheless, many God-fearing Gentiles *did seek and find* God’s mercy and grace through the witness of the Jewish worshipping community.)

Thus, for many generations, the Jewish people believed that the only way to experience God’s grace, mercy and salvation was by being one of his chosen people – the lineal descendants of Abraham. In their eyes – albeit mistakenly – God had excluded all other peoples from his covenant with Abraham and from the LORD’s everlasting grace and favour in redemption (Cf. Rom. 9:6-8).

This alienation of all nations from fellowship with God had come about because of Adam and Eve’s sins, rebellion, and subsequent fall from grace and right standing with God. All mankind has inherited our first parent’s fallen, sinful nature. All mankind now stands guilty before God for the sinful nature inherited from Adam and for their personal sins (Rom. 3:23; see also Rom. 2:12).

Because of their sins, all fallen humanity is now living under God’s just wrath and curse (Rom. 1:18). In his righteous judgment, the Lord God had pronounced this sentence upon Adam, Eve and all their descendants. Thus, in subsequent generations, only God’s chosen or elect people could experience God’s mercy through redemption, including atonement for and forgiveness of sin.

At that time, redemption from sin was typified through sacrifices and offerings and symbolically by the shed blood of perfect animal sacrifices. These perfect, unblemished animal sacrifices, offered in the Tabernacle (later, the temple) daily – and annually on the Day of Atonement – portrayed the necessity and coming of a Great Redeemer who would make one final blood sacrifice for sin for all time. This sacrifice would not merely *symbolise* the taking away of sin – as did the animal sacrifices. It would *actually* take away sin, fully, finally, and forever (Cf. Heb. 9:11-28; 10:1-18).

However, when that Redeemer (Messiah or Christ) appeared on earth, he shocked the Jewish establishment and people. To begin with, the Jewish people had expected a Messiah who would set up his divine kingdom on earth and rule triumphantly over all their enemies. Failing to understand the teaching of

their Scriptures correctly, they did not anticipate a Messiah who would come to suffer and die for the sins of his people – before ultimately setting up a kingdom that could never be destroyed (Cf. Dan. 2:44; 6:26).

This revelation was a fundamental stumbling block to the Jewish people of Jesus' day. Furthermore, to learn that the Messiah had come not only to redeem people from among the Jews but also from among the *Gentiles* was more than many of these perplexed Jewish people could bear. It was enough to hear that the Messiah had not come to live and rule on earth, but to suffer and die, and to hear also that the benefits of that atoning sacrifice and that complete salvation was not to be confined to the Jewish people alone – as they had supposed; even although their prophets had frequently foretold otherwise – was beyond their comprehension.

Furthermore, the LORD had expressly told Abram that, through him, he (YHWH) would bless all nations (not just Abram's immediate descendants or Israel exclusively).

Thus, the LORD declared to Abram:

Genesis 12:3 ESV (see also vv.1-2)

³ "I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonours you I will curse, *and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.*" (Emphasis added)

God's grace, mercy, and salvation through the Messiah – Christ the Redeemer – was to be extended to include human beings from every nation on earth. Demonstrating genuine faith and godly repentance, everyone who called upon the name of the Lord and accepted Christ as their Saviour and Lord would be forgiven of their sins and saved eternally. This gift of salvation applied to everyone, Jewish or Gentile, whom God had predestined from eternity and whom now the Holy Spirit would call and regenerate unto eternal life. Furthermore, it applied irrespective of that person's former religious beliefs or creed and regardless of nationality, race, colour, class, biological sex, or any other human distinction.

This news must have caused utter astonishment and bewilderment to the religious leaders and the Jewish people. Were the despised Samaritans (half-Jews) to be included? *Yes!* Were all other ungodly peoples, tribes, and nations to be included? *Yes!* Everyone who, by the grace of God and by the working of the Holy Spirit, was led to call upon the name of the Lord would be saved for all eternity. Every one of those whom the Spirit had called would be counted among the elect or chosen of God. All those people who thus called upon the Lord Jesus for mercy and forgiveness had already been given to the Son by the Father before the creation of the world (John 10:29; 17:20-26).

This revelation of God's truth constituted the *mystery hidden for ages and generations* ...: that believing Gentiles and believing Jews would be included in the redeemed and holy people ("saints") called to belong to the Lord Jesus Christ. (Other "mysteries" of God that he has now revealed to his people are mentioned elsewhere by Paul.)

The apostle continues:

^{26b} ... but now revealed to his saints (ESV).

In this context, the Lord's "saints" (or "holy ones" [separated from the world and dedicated to God]) are the redeemed and sanctified people of God – the Colossian church being representative of one such assembly of saints or believers.

The apostle declares to these saints at Colossae – many of whom came from Gentile backgrounds – why they had been privileged to experience the love, grace, mercy, and salvation of God when it had been supposed previously (but erroneously) that this salvation could come to the descendants of Abraham exclusively, or at least to the line of Israel exclusively. No. As Paul explains in the following verse, this free, full, and final salvation would be extended to people of *all nations*. Everyone whom the Lord God would effectually call would respond to that call – as had these Colossians – and would find eternal salvation through their God-given faith in Christ.

Thus, in verse 27, Paul continues:

COLOSSIANS 1:27

²⁷ To them God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.

To them – i.e. to the "saints" or "holy ones" called by God – the Lord chose to reveal that salvation through the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ: a gospel and salvation that extends now to all peoples, Jews and Gentiles, as it had done already to the saints at Colossae. The riches of God, usually associated with his manifold blessings on the Jewish people of old, would now be poured out fully upon both believing Jews and believing Gentiles. Both would be united in one "body", the church, through their faith in Christ and by association with him in his life, death, resurrection, and exaltation to glory.

Thus, the "mystery" – the previously undisclosed plan of God now revealed to the saints – was that both Jewish and Gentile believers should experience the presence of Christ within, in the person of the Holy Spirit, and both should be united to him as members of the same body. Through Christ, these saints – called out of every nation on earth – would experience God's saving and regenerating grace and power and benefit from all the blessings promised to those in Christ Jesus. Ultimately, their hope in Christ would be realised fully and finally when they would be taken into his immediate presence in glory (cf. v.5; Titus 1:2; 1 Peter 1:4).

COLOSSIANS 1:28

²⁸ Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ.

Christ is the one – the *only* one – whom the apostle proclaims as the Saviour of fallen men and women. There is no other name under heaven given among mankind whereby we must be saved (Acts 4:12). Thus, Paul calls upon the Colossian saints to respond to the teaching of the Lord Jesus, given to them by the church's apostolic representatives ²⁵ (e.g. Timothy) or special messengers or ministers (e.g. Epa-

²⁵ *Apostolic representatives or delegates*: These special messengers acted with apostolic approval and could relay to the churches the authoritative teaching of the Lord Jesus and his personally appointed apostles. However, unlike the Twelve apostles and Paul, these messengers were not themselves inspired by the Holy Spirit to speak, teach, or act *infallibly* in relation to the churches. Therefore, these messengers or representatives could not authoritatively, *and of their own accord*, instruct the churches infallibly in the Word of God. They could do so only as representatives of the Spirit-inspired and personally appointed apostles of the Lord Jesus: viz., the Twelve apostles (including Matthias, who replaced Judas) together with the apostle Paul.

EXTENDED NOTE: INSPIRATION, INFALLIBILITY AND INERRANCY:

True infallibility pertains only to the original Author of the Bible (God). Every word spoken by God is infallible. It is the inerrant expression of God's Sovereign will concerning himself and men and women, as revealed from heaven. God's word and will cannot be hindered, thwarted or deferred by any human or angelic persons or agencies, nor can God's word and will fail to be accomplished in full. Like the prophets of the Old Testament, while inspired by God's Holy Spirit, the apostles of the New Testament *conveyed or channelled* God's infallible word to the people exactly as He had spoken it to them through His Holy Spirit. Thus, there could be no error in God's word as delivered or revealed by him to his servants and recorded *in the original* Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek autographs.

However, although God's Word (the Bible) is infallible and inerrant, this does not mean that the apostles (or prophets of the Old Testament) could teach infallibly and inerrantly *in and of themselves*. (This includes those people today—preachers, prophets, or ecclesiastics (so-called)—who *falsely* claim to be speaking authoritatively from God or by the Holy Spirit, yet whose preachings or pronouncements are contradicted by the clear teaching of the Bible. Such deceivers must be counted among the false prophets and rejected utterly.)

No finite human being or ecclesiastical body—no matter how highly elevated—can ever speak, teach or write infallibly or inerrantly *of their own accord*. Total infallibility and inerrancy are characteristics of the infinite triune God alone. By inspiration of the Holy Spirit, the apostles wrote and taught infallibly and inerrantly *as and when God's will, words or messages were conveyed to them*. While God communicated with the Twelve apostles and Paul in this manner (through words, dreams or visions), *the Holy Spirit ensured that these apostles heard and wrote down God's will or words inerrantly*. While still inspired by the Holy Spirit, the apostles relayed God's exact words to the people. The Holy Spirit guided these faithful servants of God in everything they wrote, taught, or preached, thus preserving God's Word from errors during transmission (2 Pet. 1:20-21).

God's will and Word remain infallible, inerrant, and immutable throughout the ages. It cannot be changed or modified by any authority on earth—religious, civil or military, or by any other *created* person, body, or agency in heaven or on earth—whether angelic, ecclesiastical or secular.

In these last days, God has spoken to us by his Son (Heb. 1:1-2). Everything God requires of people is found in the Lord Jesus' teachings and that of the Twelve apostles and Paul. Also included here—although not one of the Twelve—are Mark, the writer of Mark's Gospel, and Luke, the writer of Luke's Gospel and the book of Acts. (Mark probably relied on the apostle Peter as his principal source. Luke, the physician and historian, was a known associate of the apostle Paul.)

phras), and latterly conveyed to them by Paul himself in this letter. In that teaching, Paul urges the believers at Colossae to hold fast to the truth as they have received it and not be sidetracked into doctrinal or ethical error by listening to and heeding the false ideas and “philosophies” ²⁶ arising in their midst. The teaching that Epaphras and other approved messengers of the Lord had given to them was based on the sure foundation of the gospel of Christ. It was the Lord’s teaching, relayed to them by the Lord’s servants.

The “*wisdom*” of which Paul speaks is not the fallible wisdom of this world but rather the infallible wisdom that proceeds from God above (1 Cor. 1:21; 3:19; Jas. 3:15,17). By heeding the Lord’s teaching, these saints would grow in their faith, knowledge, and wisdom, ultimately reaching spiritual maturity in the things of the Lord – although never entirely so in this life.

This verse is a warning from Paul concerning those straying from the gospel’s essential truths. These people were being led wrongly – and were attempting to lead others – into a so-called fuller experience of Christ than they had known already. False teaching and errors in doctrine and practice are bound to arise when the people of God fail to hold steadfastly to the original God-given truths as revealed in his Word alone, as taught by the Lord Jesus alone, or as proclaimed and expounded by the original apostles alone.

COLOSSIANS 1:29

²⁹ For this I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me.

Paul labours tirelessly, struggling with all his powers to provide sound teaching to all the churches within his remit. The apostle is aware of the many false prophets and apostles (so-called) arising within the churches or infiltrating them from elsewhere. Thus, Paul is engaging all his abilities – as he is empowered

The Scriptures of the New Testament and the Scriptures of the Old Testament together comprise God’s infallible and inerrant Word in 66 books (The Apocrypha excluded as being non-canonical) (Rom. 15:4; 2 Tim. 3:16). No other similar communication from God can be expected in these last days. There will be no further prophets, apostles or other messengers *speaking by inspiration of the Holy Spirit* and providing additional instructions from God in heaven. Everything necessary for people to know, understand, believe, and practice is found in the Bible and the Bible alone. This is and will remain the sole source of divine authority and revelation for all mankind until the end of this present age. (GL)

²⁶ “*philosophies*”: Paul is not disparaging the discipline of philosophy *per se*. The apostle is warning against those who were abusing the principles of philosophy to further their own misguided ends or who were misapplying philosophy to suit their own agenda.

We must remember that philosophy is a human-based discipline and all humans are fallen, finite and sinful individuals. Thus all their beliefs and teachings are, to some extent, influenced by their sinful nature. Philosophy may be very usefully employed in appropriate settings. However, we must bear in mind that the understanding and comprehension of finite and fallible men and women can never reach or comprehend the mind and wisdom of the eternal God nor fully explain God’s ways. The infallible knowledge and wisdom of Almighty God stand immeasurably above any fallible human field of learning, whatever its form. (GL)

by the Holy Spirit – to counter these false teachers and their erroneous and harmful doctrines. Paul’s earnest desire is to build up the churches in their most holy faith, founded only on the teaching of the Lord Jesus Christ and the apostles’ doctrine: a pure and infallible reflection of the Lord’s teaching and God’s inerrant Word more generally.

However, for Paul, it has become a genuine struggle. He is attempting with all his might to feed the church of God, build them up in Christ Jesus, and see them grow and develop in their faith; ultimately, that they might be fully mature in the presence of the Lord Jesus himself. Even so, the apostle has to contend with false teachers in the church and, therefore, must develop and emphasise particular areas of the Lord’s teaching more fully to expose the errors of these so-called apostles and teachers.

This spiritual battle against evil requires great strength of character and acuity of mind and is not something that even the apostle Paul could accomplish by himself. Thus, he depends entirely on the power of the Lord Jesus, imparted to him and working through him by the person and energy of the Holy Spirit within him. The Spirit of God alone enables Paul to fulfill his apostolic ministry, withstand the powers of evil and the messengers of Satan, and teach, encourage, and strengthen the saints in all the churches committed to his care.

COLOSSIANS CHAPTER 2

SPIRITUAL UNDERSTANDING, KNOWLEDGE AND WISDOM FOUND IN CHRIST ALONE

Colossians 2:1-3

COLOSSIANS 2:1

¹ For I want you to know how great a struggle I have for you and for those at Laodicea and for all who have not seen me face to face...

^{1a} ... *how great a struggle* ... (struggle = Gk., ἀγῶνα agōna (*agony*)) [UBS5-T]

The apostle Paul wanted the saints to be aware of his afflictions on behalf of the churches, including theirs at Colossae. The saints there may have heard something about Paul's intense sufferings from Epaphras – a native of Colossae and the leading teacher in that church. However, because most Colossian believers had not met Paul, they were unaware of everything the apostle endured. Paul was struggling (*agonising*) with all his might (physically, mentally and spiritually ²⁷ (*spiritual warfare*) to build up the churches and refute erroneous teachings among some of them. Again, this lack of awareness was true not only of the church at Colossae but also of the church at Laodicea – to whom this letter would be forwarded later ²⁸ (Col. 4:16).

²⁷ *physically, mentally and spiritually*: Paul's struggles for the truth of the gospel here represents a classic example of *spiritual warfare*. Primarily, spiritual warfare is the battle for the truth of God's Word against misapprehension of the truth, or the teaching of false doctrine, either resulting from erroneous human teaching or as the "doctrines of demons" promulgated by various false teachers (1 Tim. 4:1). Essentially, this is a spiritual warfare against Satan and his human agents—the false teachers, frequently appearing to people not as evil teachers but as "*angels of light*" (2 Cor. 11:14). Like Satan himself, his human agents (the false teachers) hide their real persona behind a cloak of (false) piety, respectability, and geniality. They may indeed hold high office within their particular church or denomination. They may be arrayed in costly clothes or religious regalia. Nevertheless, Satan is the father (originator) of lies (John 8:44). Thus, the devil and his human agents do all in their power to twist, distort, malign or pervert the truth of God's infallible and unchangeable Word, the Bible. However, in many cases, these false teachers ensure that their evil teachings are concealed or muted to some extent by feeding their flocks a measure of genuine truth, thus beguiling them into accepting *most* or *all* of their teachings (Gal. 1:6-9). (GL)

²⁸ Letters had been sent by Paul to both the Colossian and the Laodicean churches, intended possibly as circular documents to be exchanged between several local churches. Apparently, however, the letter to the Laodicean church was lost subsequently and therefore could not be included in the canon of New Testament Scripture.

(A document known as "*The Epistle to the Laodiceans*" circulated in the early church. For many years, it was considered by many of the church fathers (Jerome excepted) as having been written by Paul. Jerome, however, thought the document was spurious. It was not written in Paul's style (similar to Colossians, which Paul penned about the same

COLOSSIANS 2:2

² that their hearts may be encouraged, being knit together in love, to reach all the riches of full assurance of understanding and the knowledge of God's mystery, which is Christ...

Paul might have been suffering painful afflictions in his ministry as an apostle to the churches, but he was enduring all things for the sake of the Lord Jesus Christ. Love for Christ and the people of God drove Paul to struggle with all the energy within him to feed the churches on the Bread of Life (John 6:22-51) and defend them from erroneous, misguided, and ultimately malevolent teaching.

The apostle's heartfelt desire was for these believers to be united in love for one another and for all the saints who formed an integral part of Christ's body, the Church. However, this objective could be achieved only by holding fast to the body of truth already delivered to them by Epaphras and perhaps others. Any departures from Christ's teaching and the apostolic doctrine would result in strife, disagreement, division, and loss of harmony between believers. Such a divergence from the truth would result in a loss of love for one another and a lukewarmness among the fellowship of believers (Cf. Rev. 3:15-22 respecting the church at Laodicea in its latter years).

Thus, it was essential to maintain the bonds of love in the full acceptance of the truth. This truth was made known in the Word of God alone, including in the Old and New Testament Scriptures. God spoke these Holy Scriptures to his people through his appointed prophets and apostles. Furthermore, the truths of God's Word had been revealed to men and women by the incarnation, life, and teaching of the Lord Jesus Christ. Through faith in Christ and the working of the Holy Spirit in their hearts and lives, every regenerated child of God would grow in grace and love for one another. By holding fast to the truths delivered to them once-for-all by the Lord Jesus and his apostles, they would mature in their faith and learn how to recognise and deal with doctrinal errors and refute false teaching. This spiritual maturity is something of what the apostle means when he declares:

^{2b} ... to reach all the riches of full assurance of understanding and the knowledge of God's mystery, which is Christ... (ESV)

We cannot fully plumb the depth of Paul's expression, "*... all the riches of full assurance of understanding....*" However, it is certain that these riches would be imparted to the Colossian believers (and saints elsewhere) only through a thorough understanding and acceptance of the teachings of Christ and his

time as his genuine (but now lost) letter to Laodicea. The spurious "epistle" addressed to Laodicea comprised passages cited from several different NT authors. This "epistle" remained in circulation until shortly after the Reformation, at which point it was dropped from general acceptance and circulation.) (GL)

apostles. By these teachings alone, they would come to discern the truths of God's Word, their significance in and for their lives, and their application to their lives from day to day. However, this learning process would be no mere academic exercise. Important as that might be, the teachings of God's Word could be fully known only as the Holy Spirit shed light on the minds of God's children by his illuminating power and guided them into all truth, i.e. all the truths of God's Word, the Bible. By this means alone, these believers would come to a full assurance of faith and understanding in the things of God.

Paul continued,

^{2b} ... and the knowledge of God's mystery, which is Christ... (ESV)

God's "*mystery*" is some truth or matter, previously hidden or obscured, but now revealed in and through the teachings of Christ Jesus and his apostles. As we have noted already, one such "*mystery*" was the fact – previously obscured – that believing Gentiles were to become joint heirs with believing Jews through their faith in the gospel and that both would share in the inheritance of the saints in light (Col. 1:12).

In the Bible, the term "*mystery*" encompasses several other truths hidden, or only partially made known, from before the foundation of the world. However, all such "*mysteries*" necessary for believers to know are revealed through Christ and his apostles. Nevertheless, without the regenerating power and indwelling presence of God's Holy Spirit, no one can even begin to comprehend the true meaning of such spiritual truths.

Even today, many who claim allegiance to Christ have never experienced regeneration by the Holy Spirit.²⁹ Their "*faith*" is formal or nominal, not genuine and living. Therefore, these false "*believers*" or nominal "*Christians*" are still abiding under God's wrath in their unforgiven sin. Without the indwelling Holy Spirit, they remain in spiritual darkness – incapable of understanding the things of God's Spirit correctly (1 Cor. 2:14). Sadly, many of these people may even serve as ministers, priests, evangelists, elders, bishops, archbishops, deacons, or hold other church offices. However, they are like the blind leading the blind (Matt. 15:14). Without the Spirit of God, they have no light in them (Cf. Isa. 8:20). Their misguided example and unspiritual teaching are toxic to the genuine people of God. Paul was trying to prevent or correct this sterile and spiritually poisonous situation caused by false and unspiritual "*instructors*" within the churches.

²⁹ A person experiences regeneration (and justification) by the Holy Spirit through faith in Christ and the teaching of God's Word, the Bible. Regeneration of the soul can never be imparted by means of water baptism or christening, nor is a person ever justified in God's sight by that means. Baptism/christening may typify or symbolise cleansing and the new birth, but it most certainly does not bring about the new birth (spiritual regeneration). This is exclusively a work of God's Holy Spirit effected without any antecedent or accompanying human ceremonies or rituals. (GL)

COLOSSIANS 2:3

³ in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.

^{3a} in whom... (ESV)

In Christ are hidden or concealed the entire treasury of wisdom ³⁰ and knowledge.³¹ The mysteries of God are concealed in Christ – *and in Christ exclusively* (who is the infinite Wisdom of God personified (1 Cor. 1:24,30)). Through Christ alone, these mysteries are made known to the believer. The Holy Spirit takes of the things of God and reveals them to us, but only gradually or by stages and in proportion to our faith and growth in grace (John 16:15).

In Christ, wisdom and knowledge remain hidden or reserved until the right time. However, through his Holy Spirit, the Lord Jesus discloses by stages or degrees both spiritual wisdom and spiritual knowledge, leading to spiritual discernment, to each believer throughout their life's walk with God. That spiritual treasury can never be exhausted. In Christ, it is an infinite resource – always available to every saint of God who calls upon and worships God in spirit and truth (John 4:23-24; 16:13).

Thus, Paul assures the saints in Colossae that Christ will never fail them or fail to meet their needs. However, *they must abide in God's Word to continue growing in grace, wisdom and knowledge*. They must search the Scriptures frequently and prayerfully, heeding or obeying the will of the Lord as revealed therein, forsaking sin, and pursuing righteousness and holy living – as the Spirit of God guides and directs them through his unerring and unchanging Word (1 Cor. 15:2; 2 Tim. 2:15).

³⁰ *Wisdom*: (Gk., σοφία sophia); including spiritual comprehension and spiritual discernment together with the ability to correctly and skilfully apply divine truths. Spiritual wisdom, derived from God's Word and God's Spirit, enables a regenerated child of God to correctly understand and apply the teaching of God's Word to any situation relating to spiritual matters, and everyday life, work, and relationships. (GL)

³¹ *Knowledge*: (Gk., γνώσεως gnōseōs); including understanding and insight. Knowledge comes through the prayerful, careful, systematic searching of God's Word, learned contextually and correctly interpreted with the guidance of the Holy Spirit and by the analogy of Scripture (comparing Scripture with Scripture). (GL)

WARNINGS AGAINST FALSE TEACHERS**Colossians 2:4-5**COLOSSIANS 2:4

⁴ I say this in order that no one may delude you with plausible arguments.

This threat to the fellowship was why the apostle Paul laid such stress on seeking the wisdom and knowledge that comes from God. It was to ensure that the saints at Colossae became more firmly grounded in the unfailing truths of God's Word. Only by feeding on the Word and accepting and applying its teachings would these saints become knowledgeable in the things of God as revealed in the Scriptures. This Word of Truth alone could build them up in their most holy faith. Only the Holy Spirit could illumine their minds to comprehend or understand aright what they were reading in God's Word or what they were hearing from the apostles' letters as they were read aloud in their church fellowships.

Thus, grounded in the truth of God's Word and filled with wisdom and knowledge from God, they would know how to stand by the truth and recognise and refute error. This knowledge was essential since some individuals attempted to lead these believers away from the truth of sound doctrine. These individuals presented some very plausible arguments to the believers at Colossae. Some of these false teachers intimated that they possessed additional or "higher truths", or greater enlightenment, necessary to their faith in Christ. These misguided instructors attempted to persuade the Colossians that they could impart these esoteric truths to the church members, thus aiding them in their faith and walk with God.

As we shall see, this was a lie of the devil. These men were not acting as servants of the Lord. They had arisen in the church or had infiltrated the fellowship from elsewhere, only to entice the Colossian believers away from the sound and unchanging truths of God's Word, including the teaching of the apostles and other genuine servants of the Lord Jesus. These false teachers were beguiling ³² the believers away from the truth with a series of very plausible and convincing – but deceptive – arguments. They suggested that the truths they had accepted thus far could and should be augmented by further truths, knowledge, and experiences, leading to more significant spiritual enrichment. These were convincing but devious, deceitful, and delusional words on the part of the false teachers.

This risk of adulterating or contaminating the pure gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ presented a very great danger to the church at Colossae (and elsewhere). Thus, Paul is about to deal with it. However, for now, he is forewarning these believers about the dangers of false, additional teaching in their fellowship. He is exhorting them to seek the knowledge of the truth as revealed by Christ and his commissioned apostles

³² *beguiling*: In Galatians, Paul uses the word "*bewitched*" to express this concept. [O foolish Galatians, who hath *bewitched* you, that ye should not obey the truth, before whose eyes Jesus Christ hath been evidently set forth, crucified among you? (Gal. 3:1 KJV)]

and to remain in that teaching *alone*. Furthermore, the apostle is exhorting them – with their entirely sufficient knowledge of the truth as revealed in the Scriptures – to stand resolutely against any form of false, misguided or misleading teaching.

COLOSSIANS 2:5

⁵ For though I am absent in body, yet I am with you in spirit, rejoicing to see your good order and the firmness of your faith in Christ.

Paul was not physically present with the Colossian saints at this time, but he assures them that he is with them in spirit: the spirit of prayer and intercession. By the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, the apostle is now writing this letter to them. The Spirit of God guides Paul's responses concerning what he has heard about the Colossians' situation and which matters to deal with now.

⁵ ... *yet I am with you in spirit....*

Paul is here making it plain that – although absent physically – he is very much present with them in spirit. For a better understanding of what this means, compare the apostle's very similar words to the Corinthian church:

1 Corinthians 5:3 ESV.

³ For though absent in body, I am present in spirit; and as if present, I have already pronounced judgment on the one who did such a thing...

Although written under very different circumstances, Paul asserts that his presence in spirit is tantamount to his actual presence. The Corinthians were to act on the apostle's instructions as though he were actually present in their midst. So, too, the Colossians were to be assured that Paul was as close to them spiritually as though he were really present among them.

The apostle has every cause to rejoice over the Colossian saints. Although he has not met most of them, he has been assured of their steadfastness in the faith. Probably, Paul gained this information from Epaphras – a believer from Colossae who had been instrumental in founding, instructing and building up the church there before Paul's proposed visit.

The Colossians had been well established in their faith. Paul's main concern was that they should remain firmly grounded in these truths without being misled into error and false teaching by some individuals now attempting to influence them adversely.

HOLD FAST TO THOSE TRUTHS ALREADY RECEIVED**Colossians 2:6-8****COLOSSIANS 2:6**

⁶ Therefore, as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him,

This statement represents one quick test for the Colossian saints: In what manner did they receive Christ Jesus the Lord?

They had received him through hearing and believing the gospel. They had listened to the words of salvation, and eternal life proclaimed in the gospel. They had embraced the gospel message, and the Christ proclaimed therein, and they had done so *because the Holy Spirit had regenerated them, illumined their minds to the truth of the gospel, and drawn them to repentance and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ*. Nothing was added to that saving gospel message. They received it by grace through faith (Eph. 2:8). By that faith, granted by the grace of God, they now stood eternally secure in Christ Jesus.

Thus, says Paul, *in the same way* that you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so continue to walk (behave) in him, recognising Christ both as their Saviour and their Lord. These Colossians had responded by faith to the truth of the gospel message, as the Spirit had enabled them. Now, they were to continue to live their everyday lives as believers following the teaching of that same message, as the Spirit enabled them to understand correctly and submit to the truths of God's Word.

During their walk with God, the Holy Spirit would guide them into all truth, as he did with the twelve apostles. The Spirit would take the things of Christ ³³ and reveal them unto these believers (John 16:13). He would open their hearts and minds to understand and apply or obey the truths of God's Word. The Spirit of God would reveal the true significance of God's Word, as contained in the Old Testament scriptures or scrolls and those of the New Testament.³⁴

³³ ... *things of Christ* : That is, the Holy Spirit would enable believers to comprehend more fully everything that Christ had taught his followers, and that the apostles and other servants of God were now teaching the local churches. All these "*things of Christ*" (or "*things concerning Christ*") are now contained in the canon of God's Word, the Bible. (GL)

³⁴ *New Testament*: At this time, the various scrolls which, in due course, were to form the New Testament had not yet been collected together and assembled as a single unit. Once the canon was completed and closed, however, the 27-book NT volume would be recognised as the one and only authoritative source of God's inspired, infallible, inerrant, and unchanging Word (as were the individual scrolls written before this time). Then, the canon of the New Testament would be combined with that of the Old Testament to form our present-day Bible.

Furthermore, the Holy Spirit would inspire the apostles of the Lord Jesus to instruct these Colossian believers more extensively in the Scriptures. However, in all these things, the Colossian saints would be reading or hearing *God's Word alone* – without any “truths” (so-called) being added to the infallible, inerrant and unchanging Scriptures of Truth.

COLOSSIANS 2:7

⁷ rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving.

^{6b} ... so walk in him, ^{7a} rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught... (ESV)

The believers were to walk in him (i.e. live their lives by his teaching)... However, before they could walk in the teachings of Christ, they needed to be firmly rooted in the most basic or fundamental truths of the gospel. Paul believed these saints were firmly grounded in the faith, as he had remarked earlier (v.5). The apostle believed they had been well established in the faith. They had entirely accepted the truth they

EXTENDED NOTE: THE NT CANON OF SCRIPTURE

In addition to the OT Scriptures, and until the NT canon was completed, believers made use of individual copies of Jesus' teaching as found in the four Gospels. (Prior to these being committed to writing, the believers would have been instructed orally by the Apostles.) Later, the believers also made use of the individual letters (or copies of them) that the apostles of the Lord Jesus (e.g. Peter, James, John and Paul) had written to various local churches or individuals. As they became available over the years, these Gospels and Letters were read aloud, taught, or proclaimed in the various local churches and other appropriate locations. In their original form (i.e. the autographs), these individual documents (scrolls) were fully God-breathed (inspired) when delivered. No autographs remain extant today. However, the recognition of plenary inspiration carried over from the autographs to the various copies, so long as these copies remained true to their respective autographs. Generally, the most accurate of these copies of the documents or scrolls were later used to compile the now-closed New Testament canon.

However, several centuries would elapse before all the documents now forming the NT canon were finally accepted as the only documents for which genuine authorship (and, therefore, inspiration) could be established. Among the many spurious writings then in circulation, the 27 books now forming the New Testament were the only ones considered either genuinely apostolic writings or the writings of other (non-apostolic) eye-witnesses, such as *Mark* and *Luke*. (Although not one of the twelve Apostles, Mark received information primarily and directly from the apostle Peter, and Luke received information primarily and directly from the apostle Paul.) Among all the other writings available at this time, these 27 NT documents alone were essentially complete and absolutely inerrant due to their being God-breathed or inspired by God. The NT canon of Scripture was then closed to any further additions or amendments. This does not exclude some corrections to certain texts of the manuscript copies made necessary by the subsequent discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls. (GL)

had been taught, primarily by Epaphras. These believers were now trying to live by that truth as guided and instructed by the Word of God and the indwelling Holy Spirit.

This degree of spiritual progress was cause for thanksgiving and rejoicing – in the joy of the Lord. It was a real cause for rejoicing and praising God for all his goodness and love toward them in and through Christ Jesus.

COLOSSIANS 2:8

⁸ See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ.

Now, Paul comes to the first issue at hand – false teaching. The Colossians had received the gospel message, responded to it, adhered steadfastly to it, and were learning to apply its teachings to their lives. Recently, however, some individuals suggested to the Colossian saints that they could gain further spiritual enlightenment and fulfilment by accepting and applying the additional teachings they offered.

The exact nature of these teachings is still being determined. However, they seem to form two groups:

- 1) They appeared to add specific Jewish rules, rites and ceremonies to the Christian faith and practice and,
- 2) They appeared to add some quasi-philosophical or pagan and esoteric principles and practices.

Considering the degree of syncretism apparent in some of these teachings, it is possible that a merging or partial merging of these two groups occurred.

Excursus

False Teaching at Colossae

Some false teachings possibly involved elements of the following:

- 1) **Idolatry** (*Loving or being devoted to another person or object more than God*). Idolatry is the worship of false gods or the setting up of any other idolatrous object or person which we adore or worship. Similarly, idolatry can mean loving something or someone more than we love God or considering someone more important

to us than God. However, if God, the Father or the Lord Jesus Christ, is not the primary object of our love, we are worshipping an idol in our hearts or minds (Exod. 20:3-6).

Idolatry (Under the pretext of mediation with God).

Idolatry can consist of the setting up of any mediators between God and man other than, or in addition to, God's only appointed Mediator, Jesus Christ (1 Tim. 2:5). Thus, angel worship and attempts at mediation through angels are forbidden, as are any other counterparts (v.18-19).

Similarly, the veneration of (canonised) "Saints" constitutes idolatry, as does the veneration or adoration of any person in heaven or earth other than the triune God. These alleged "intercessors" with Jesus or God represent the setting up of false gods since no one except the risen, glorified Lord Jesus Christ or His Holy Spirit can *intercede* with the Father for the believer (Rom. 8:26-27,34; Heb. 7:24-25). No one but the glorified Lord Jesus alone can *mediate* between God and man. Appealing to any other supposed heavenly intercessor or mediator constitutes idolatry (1 Tim. 2:5; Rev. 19:10; 22:8-9).

These Colossian believers would need to deal with whatever form of idolatry had ensnared them. They would need to repent, recognising that God must occupy not only the throne of heaven but also the throne of their hearts and lives.

(NOTE: The apostle Paul exhorts Christians to intercede for all people everywhere (1 Tim. 2:1). However, this relates to a general prayerful intercession with the Father on behalf of other people. As in all such cases, Christ (alone) is our Mediator with the Father, while the Holy Spirit aids us in making intercession with groanings that human language cannot fully express (Rom. 8:26-27). Nowhere in the Bible are we encouraged or commanded to approach God the Father through anyone other than his Son and the Holy Spirit.)

2) ***Legalism/Ritualism*** (including observance of some Jewish rules and ceremonial practices or observance of certain pagan rituals or other rites, ceremonies or devotions).

For those in Christ Jesus, former Jewish rules, practices and ceremonies were no longer required, contrary to suggestions made by some false teachers. Such observances might relate to feast days (Jewish festivals), Sabbaths or holy days, months or years (Rom. 14:5-9), or they might relate to dietary laws (Lev. 11) or other recognised Jewish customs and practices (Rom. 14:1-4).

Concerning any rituals or practices contaminated by paganism, these would be expressly condemned in the Word of God.

The Colossians needed to recognise that Christ had fulfilled and abrogated all former Jewish *ritual and ceremonial* laws and practices. Therefore, these old laws, customs and practices no longer applied to God's redeemed and holy people (vv. 16–17; Mark 7:14-19; Rom. 10:4; Gal. 2:15-21; 3:10-14; 5:1).

Likewise, they needed to recognise that their former pagan beliefs, customs and practices could form no part of their new life in Christ Jesus. Christ – and Christ alone – was fully and permanently sufficient for salvation, life and godliness.

- 3) **Asceticism**³⁵ (*including harsh treatment of the body* (v.23)). (Some false teachers and philosophers considered the body inherently evil.)

Asceticism is the practice of intense self-denial or attempting to subjugate any form of gratification, especially concerning the body. The practice can amount to a form of good works that attempts to merit favour with God. Many ascetics would go to great lengths to subdue their bodies, trying (futilely) to keep them under control. However, they erred greatly in supposing that the body was a source of evil instead of seeing it as God's good creation being misused or abused for sinful purposes. The source of that sin was not the body but the mind (or "heart") (Matt. 15:19-20).

Ascetic practices could never resolve the problem of a sinful mind. Renewal of the mind (including our reason or rational faculties) is a work of the Holy Spirit, effected through the Word of God and applied to the believer's mind and conduct through the sanctifying work of God's Holy Spirit.

Thus, the Colossian believers needed to realise that the false teachers promoting asceticism were leading them away from the truth of God's Word. Such erroneous teaching threatened to impede the Holy Spirit's work of sanctification in their lives. These Colossian Christians had been saved by faith; they must now live by this

³⁵ *Asceticism* comes from the Greek word *askesis*, meaning, "exercise, training, practice". Ascetics renounce worldly pleasures that distract from spiritual growth and enlightenment and live a life of abstinence, austerity, and extreme self-denial. Asceticism is common in Hinduism, Jainism, Buddhism, Judaism, and Islam. Asceticism is not to be confused with Stoicism. Stoics believed that holiness can reside only in the spiritual realm, and all physical matter is evil. Ascetics do not necessarily believe that the flesh is evil, but they do go to great lengths to deny the flesh in order to transform the mind or "free" the spirit. Historically, asceticism has involved fasting, exposing oneself to heat or cold, sleep deprivation, flagellation, and even self-mutilation. Asceticism is usually associated with monks, priests, and yogis. [cited from gotquestions.org]

faith. Not by works of merit, nor by the harsh treatment of the body, but by trust in God and Jesus Christ his Son, who is the all-sufficient Saviour and Lord of their lives (Gal. 3:1-3).

- 4) **Mysticism**³⁶ *(including trance states and (extra-biblical) visions (v.18) (practised by various sects or cults)).*

Mysticism is the attempt to communicate with God at a higher spiritual level. It may involve trance states, intense meditation, supernatural visions or altered states of mind/consciousness. Mysticism was practised among various pagan cults and other semi- or quasi-religious groups. It sometimes involved ascetic practices (see preceding entry) and may have been practised among certain Jewish cults.

Some false teachers promoted elements of mysticism and may have suggested that the Colossian believers add this practice to their faith in Christ.

Paul, however, realises the danger of becoming involved with such esoteric beliefs and practices. Suppose some form of mysticism was being commended to the Colossian saints. In that case, the apostle reminds the believers that everything they need to know about God has already been provided. It has been revealed to them through the gospel, the person and work of Christ, and the preaching and teaching of Christ's apostles. Saving faith in the Lord Jesus Christ and the Word of God is entirely sufficient to make known all that God requires them to believe and practise. Involvement in mysticism detracts a person from real communion with God and from the truths of his Word. It is wholly unnecessary, susceptible to abuse, and nowhere in the New Testament commended to believers.

NOTE: When the apostle Paul was caught up to the "third heaven", he had not sought or initiated this experience by himself (as in mysticism). Instead, God had instituted the event. From beginning to end, the entire experience remained in

³⁶ *Mysticism* can be found in many religions. Often it involves asceticism of some type and seeks union with God. It is certainly right to want to draw close to God, but mystical union with God is different from the type of intimacy with God to which Christians are called. Mysticism tends to seek out the experience and is sometimes seen as secretive or elitist. Christians are aware of and engaged in spiritual realities ([Ephesians 1:3](#); [6:10–19](#)) and biblical Christianity involves spiritual experience, but intimacy with God is intended for all Christians and is not veiled by any sort of mysterious practice. Drawing near to God is nothing mysterious or elitist but involves things like regular prayer, studying God's Word, worshipping God, and fellowshiping with other believers. Our efforts pale in comparison to the work God Himself does in us. In fact, our efforts are more a response to His work than they are something that originates in us. [cited from gotquestions.org]

God's hands, and Paul had no control over it (2 Cor. 12:1-7). Therefore, Paul's experience cannot be compared to the mysticism mentioned above.)

5) **Demonism/Spirit-appeasement** (*a demonic practice, as is all other forms of occultism*).

While still living their former pagan lifestyles, some of these Colossians may have been involved in various pagan beliefs and practices. This participation included appeasement for possible "offences" committed against the gods or favours sought from the gods by submitting offerings to these pagan gods or spirits. Such petitions, worship and offerings were standard practices among many pagan/heathen peoples. However, although in reality non-existent (1 Cor. 8:4-6), these pagan gods or ancestral spirits were used as Satan's instruments. Satan used these lifeless idols to deceive and delude people into believing that their gods (so-called) represented real and powerful spiritual entities or supernatural beings. (In reality, any such evil supernatural entities that existed were demonic and fell under God's righteous wrath and judgment.) By deluding and deceiving people, the devil succeeded in holding them in spiritual bondage and darkness. All this was a malicious attempt to prevent them from discovering the true Light of the World and worshipping and praising the only true and living God.

The Colossian believers needed to realise that none of their former pagan worship practices could co-exist with their faith in Christ. Such beliefs and practices were delusive lies of the devil, and the redeemed children of God must have no part in these practices or any other form of demonism or occultism.

6) **Philosophy** (*Most relevant here would be the teachings of the Greek philosophers. ("Philosophy" (φιλοσοφίας philosophias) means "love of wisdom" or "investigation")*).

Various schools of philosophy were active at this time, and some Colossians may have been acquainted with students of these schools. Perhaps they were now trying to introduce some philosophical concepts into the Christian faith or were encouraging the believers to engage philosophical principles to understand biblical truths. Philosophy is of value in its rightful place. However, its rightful place is not in understanding, interpreting or explaining the *spiritual* verities of the Scriptures. The wisdom of philosophy is essentially the wisdom of this world, not God's wisdom.

There is an immense difference between seeking to learn scriptural truths using God's wisdom and knowledge and using this world's wisdom and knowledge. This world's wisdom is humanistic, earthly, and unspiritual – because man's fallen, sin-

ful nature corrupts it. The wisdom that God grants to his redeemed people is divine wisdom from above (Jas. 1:5). In God's redeemed and holy people, both knowledge and wisdom are sanctified by the Holy Spirit.

Whatever its value in other realms, any philosophy based on secular principles or concepts has no lasting merit or value concerning the things of God or interpreting and understanding the truths of God's inerrant Word. The spiritual insight needed for comprehending divine truths comes only through the teaching work of God's Holy Spirit. Secular concepts or principles can never explain the truths of the Bible from a spiritual perspective. They can operate only at an academic – and (in this case) – an unspiritual level.

The apostle Paul debated with philosophers at the Areopagus (Mars Hill) in Athens (Acts 17:18-34). However, Paul confounded these highly educated scholars by presenting them with the life-changing truths of the gospel. For all their professed love of wisdom, most of these philosophers turned their backs on the saving Wisdom of God. In their spiritual blindness, they were utterly unable to comprehend spiritual truths. Thus, the Colossians needed to learn that God's Word and God's truth cannot be interpreted by philosophical or any other secular or humanistic means. The truths of God's Word can be comprehended through the prayerful study of that Word and the teaching of the Holy Spirit alone.

This does not suggest that academics or scholars cannot know God or experience his salvation or that their expertise is of little significance in God's sight. The ability that allows them to learn, accumulate advanced knowledge and practise professionally is a gift from God. The apostle Paul was a very knowledgeable scholar who had trained under Gamaliel. Luke, the writer of the Gospel of Luke and the Book of Acts was a professional physician. Over many years, numerous highly qualified academics/scholars have been faithfully engaged in the Lord's service. We are greatly indebted to these men and women for their knowledge and expertise, which many of them use judiciously and wisely to the glory of God. However, those who serve the Lord Jesus recognise the inadequacies of unsanctified, worldly, human-based wisdom and knowledge. Thus, they depend on the spiritual and divine wisdom and knowledge found in Christ Jesus to guide them in all their ways.

.....

Whatever the precise nature of the false teachings, they amounted to a gross distortion of God's pure and holy Word. Accepting these teachings would have meant adding to God's Word – expressly forbidden in Deuteronomy (Deut. 4:2 (*by precept*); Rev. 22:18-19 (*by principle*)).³⁷ However, there was no need to add to the gospel or to the Scriptures more generally. Everything these believers needed spiritually had been provided in Christ Jesus and through the gospel message. The apostles would expound these scriptural truths to the church, and the Holy Spirit would lead the believers by stages into all the truths of God's Word – everything necessary to practical and godly or holy living.

To add anything to the truths the Colossian believers had received was to imply that these truths were somehow deficient. To accept the proposition that they could achieve even greater fulfilment or higher spirituality through believing and applying either philosophical principles and practices or Jewish rites and ceremonies was to imply that the gospel proclaimed by the Lord Jesus and his apostles was incomplete or inadequate. It was insufficient for practical living and for worshipping God fully and acceptably.

These were very subtle and plausible suggestions presented to the Colossian believers. However, they were entirely erroneous, deviously misleading, and essentially evil. Had the Colossians accepted any of these false teachings, they would have been contaminating the pure message of the gospel. Similarly, they would have rebelled against the Lord Jesus' clear teaching and that of his Holy Spirit-inspired apostles. Thus, Paul warns these believers not to be led astray by "*human tradition*"³⁸ (the learning or wisdom of unspiritual, uninspired or worldly "church leaders" (so-called)) or by the "*elemental spirits of the world*". (The *elemental spirits of the world* included – but were not limited to – the teachings of unspiritual, uninspired and worldly philosophers and certain religious false teachers, and often included pagan or heretical worship of spirits or angels.)³⁹

³⁷ *by precept ... by principle*: In Deuteronomy 4:2 speaking through his servant Moses, God (YHWH) expressly forbids adding to any of His words. The context of this *precept* permits the application of this prohibition to apply beyond the book of Deuteronomy to all God-inspired Scripture. In Revelation 22:18-19, the context requires that the prohibition apply primarily to the prophecies just foretold in Revelation. However, although contextually applied to Revelation in the first instance, the *principle* forbidding any additions to God's Word in Revelation may be applied more generally to all of God's Word. (GL)

³⁸ "*human tradition*": That is, traditions based on the misinterpretations of finite and fallible men. These men were not inspired by the Holy Spirit. Therefore, because of their inability to comprehend spiritual matters correctly, they were not qualified to advise or comment on scriptural matters or on the teaching of God's Word. This stands opposed to "*the traditions*" handed down to the churches by the apostles and other genuine servants of God, which ought to be received since these are traditions originate only from the Bible. These "traditions" are a pure and accurate reflection of the teaching of God's infallible and inerrant Word as recorded in the sacred Scriptures and as taught by the original apostles appointed and commissioned by the risen Lord Jesus personally. (GL)

³⁹ From Paul's remarks concerning these false teachers, it would appear that some of them espoused an early version of Gnosticism (incipient Gnosticism). These false teachers were attempting to seduce the believers into adopting some of their erroneous beliefs and practices, incorporating these concepts into the Christian faith. Such additions to the gospel and the teaching of the Bible more generally amounted to outright heresy. It denied the supremacy of the risen, glorified Lord Jesus. It denied the absolute sufficiency of Christ's work on the cross, together with his continuing mediation with the Father on behalf of every true child of God. It also denied the total sufficiency of God's written Word as providing everything necessary to salvation, life, and godliness. (GL)

THE WHOLE FULLNESS OF DEITY DWELLS IN CHRIST**Colossians 2:9-10**COLOSSIANS 2:9

⁹ For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily,

This profound truth is why nothing ever needs to be or ever can be, added to the gospel message or the Christian faith.

⁹ For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily (ESV)

This magnificent statement shows the believers just why they already possess everything necessary for faith and salvation in Christ. It is impossible to add to that which is already perfect – in every detail. However, Paul does not consider the perfections of Christ’s person, work or teaching in isolation. He is stating very much more. *The whole fullness of deity dwells bodily in him [Christ] - in his very being.*

By saying that the whole fullness of deity dwells **bodily** in him ... the apostle refutes the teaching that the body is inherently evil. (A person’s sinful or evil thoughts, inclinations, attitudes, etc., issue from the mind (or “heart”), not the body. The body can be abused or misused to express a person’s sinful behaviour. In and of itself, however, the body is not evil nor is it the source of sin.)

Paul’s statement implies emphatically that – regarding his divine nature – the Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is equal with God the Father himself. The same infinite level of deity that characterises the Father’s person and nature likewise characterises the Son’s (and the Holy Spirit’s) person and nature. Thus, Paul is not merely speaking of Christ as a Redeemer in the form of a man (i.e. according to his perfect, sinless human nature alone). Rather, the apostle speaks of the One who is fully equal with God the Father: The incarnate Lord Jesus – the God-Man – who once-for-all redeemed and now intercedes in heaven with the Father for fallen, sinful men and women. Thus, it is written that **God was in Christ**, reconciling the world unto himself (2 Cor. 5:19; cf. John 1:1).

As the writer to the Hebrews declares concerning the Lord Jesus:

Hebrews 1:8 ESV

⁸ But of the Son he says,

“Your throne, *O God*, is forever and ever....”

(Emphasis added)

Since, at his incarnation, the Lord Jesus Christ was fully God in bodily form (albeit with his deity veiled *but not diminished*), Jesus or God the Son is everything that God the Father is. Therefore, all those believers whom the Spirit has regenerated and who now are “in Christ” have *in him* everything they will ever need both in this life and in the life to come. It would be impossible to add anything to the fullness of deity, and out of that fullness proceed all the blessings and benefits of salvation and eternal life. To attempt to add any truth or teaching or to seek any experience to that already provided in and through Christ would be a monstrous act of ingratitude and wilful unbelief in God the Son’s promises, power, glory and trustworthiness. It is no light matter to despise God’s grace by doubting God’s ability to provide all things needful to salvation and life – without adding other spurious truths, teachings or spiritual experiences.

Finally, note once again the words used by Paul to express this truth:

*...in him the **whole fullness** of deity dwells bodily* (v.9).

The apostle is doubling his superlatives: He declares not only that the **whole** deity dwells in Christ, but the **whole fullness** (πᾶν τὸ πλήρωμα) of deity so dwells.

Since Christ is essentially God with all God’s attributes, then there is no more the Lord’s redeemed people could ever need or desire to aid them in their daily Christian experience. In Christ – and in Christ alone – they possess all the riches of glory for time and eternity.

COLOSSIANS 2:10

¹⁰ and you have been filled in him, who is the head of all rule and authority.

^{10a} and you have been filled in him... (ESV)

Christ embodies in his glorious Person the very fullness of God. Those who are in Christ are complete in him. In him, they have been filled with everything necessary for salvation and eternal life. In him, they have been united as part of the body of Christ (the church) – of which he is the Head.

Since the Colossian saints’ union with Christ has resulted in their filling by the Spirit of Christ, nothing more can be added to this perfect union. The Holy Spirit, who guarantees their final salvation and continues to sanctify them in preparation for their appearance in glory, also provides all the resources and guidance needed for their daily lives and their acceptable worship of God. To suggest that further enlightenment or visions or experiences involving mysticism or asceticism could aid them in their spiritual

lives is to suggest that the completed work of Christ was inadequate to provide full salvation. Furthermore, it suggests that the work of the Holy Spirit in regeneration and sanctification is somehow lacking and could be augmented by adopting additional teaching and practices – often recommended by false teachers.

Accepting such false teaching would be to denigrate the work of God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – and would be tantamount to wilful unbelief in the complete sufficiency of Christ’s atoning sacrifice to effect our forgiveness and reconciliation with God (Rom. 6:10; Heb. 7:27; 9:12,26; 10:10). Thus, Paul warns the Colossians against these errors of doctrine and practice. The apostle again emphasises that these saints possess full salvation through their faith in Christ – to which nothing must or can be added.

^{10b} ... who is the head of all rule and authority. (ESV)

No higher power or authority exists than in the Godhead, comprising the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. God the Son is supreme over every power and authority on earth and in the heavens; all must submit to his sovereign sway. Therefore, to suggest that further aids are necessary – such as the mediation or worship of angels, any other created spirits (or, later, beatified, venerated or canonised “Saints”⁴⁰) – is to disbelieve God’s Word regarding the full sufficiency of our salvation. Furthermore, it is to rebel against God’s Word that forbids the worship of angels *or any being or object other than the Lord God and Jesus Christ, his Son* (Ex. 34:14; Deut. 8:19; Matt. 4:10; Rom. 1:25; Heb. 1:6; Rev. 7:11; 11:16; 19:10; 22:9).

BELIEVERS MADE ALIVE SPIRITUALLY IN CHRIST

Colossians 2:11-15

COLOSSIANS 2:11

¹¹ In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ,

Circumcision was the God-ordained sign of the covenant the LORD made with Abram (Abraham) (Gen. 17:12-14; Lev. 12:3). This act signified the dedication of a male child to the Lord their God and a child of

⁴⁰ “Saints”: Those individuals beatified, venerated or canonised by the church hierarchy are not thereby recognised by God as “saints”. God recognises as *saints* those only whom his Holy Spirit has called, regenerated and sanctified unto eternal life through genuine godly repentance and faith in Christ. Concerning human beings (as distinct from God and the holy angels), the word translated “saint” (related to ἁγιασμός *hagiasmos*, “holiness”, “sanctification”, or “consecration”) is a term that applies to every spiritually regenerated and redeemed child of God—and to no other human beings in heaven or on earth. (GL)

the Abrahamic covenant. That child was being set apart as holy to the LORD. Obedience to this act involved a solemn and binding commitment from the child's parents to raise their child or children in all the teachings and practices of the Old Covenant scriptures.

Circumcision also symbolised the putting off of the "flesh" or sinful nature. Thus, it was seen not only as a physical exercise but also as a spiritual exercise, alluding to the cutting off of sin and a renewal of the heart or mind (Deut. 10:16; 30:6; Jer. 4:4).

However, Paul does not appear to be referring here to the physical act of circumcision – as he does elsewhere (e.g. in Galatians 5:1ff). His emphasis was not on the rite of circumcision itself but on what circumcision symbolised and involved. The apostle uses the term metaphorically to emphasise the necessity of Christian believers to recognise that they have been chosen and set apart by God to serve him and live to the praise of his glory. By their spiritual regeneration and subsequent baptism, they have been spiritually "circumcised".⁴¹ The Holy Spirit has called them, created them anew in Christ Jesus, cleansed them, and now sanctifies them daily. Thus, they are to put away ("cast off") the "works of the flesh" or the thoughts, words and practices of the old sinful nature, since they have been dedicated to God and are being indwelt by God's Holy Spirit.

This is the "*circumcision made without hands....*" It is not the *physical* act to which Paul refers but the *spiritual* act. This act is not carried out by human agency (as was physical circumcision). Instead, "spiritual circumcision" is entirely a work of the Holy Spirit in effecting a person's regeneration. This spiritual act involves the creation of a new God-inclined nature in that person: a wholly renewed nature set apart to and for God. Only those who have experienced this act of spiritual regeneration are justified by God's grace and declared righteous in his sight.

This new nature implies a new holy lifestyle thereafter. In Christ, the believers' sins have been atoned for and forgiven. In him, regenerated believers are reckoned to have been wholly cleansed of all unrighteousness. Thus, they must put off "the body of flesh" (the old sinful way of life) and follow Christ. Spiritually, he is the means of their "circumcision". He is also the means of their cleansing and separation unto God and their pursuit of holiness of life through the indwelling presence and sanctifying power of the Holy Spirit.

⁴¹ *Circumcision (spiritual)*: "But when God accomplishes His good pleasure in the elect, or works in them true conversion, He not only causes the gospel to be externally preached to them, and powerfully illuminates their minds by His Holy Spirit, that they may rightly understand and discern the things of the Spirit of God; but by the efficacy of the same regenerating Spirit He pervades the inmost recesses of man; He opens the closed and softens the hardened heart, and *circumcises that which was uncircumcised*; infuses new qualities into the will, which, though heretofore dead, He quickens; from being evil, disobedient, and refractory, He renders it good, obedient, and pliable; actuates and strengthens it, that like a good tree, it may bring forth the fruits of good actions." [Creeds: Canons of Dort, Article 11, Heads 3 & 4, emphasis added.]

Circumcision demonstrated obedience to God's command, separation from the world, dedication to God and acceptance of that person into the privileges and responsibilities of the Old Covenant. Another significantly important act symbolises the regenerated child of God's acceptance into the privileges and responsibilities of the New Covenant established in and through Christ Jesus.

To this act, Paul now refers in the following verse:

COLOSSIANS 2:12

¹² having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead.

For the Colossian saints – as for all regenerated children of God – their old way of life was dead and buried. In and with Christ, they had been raised again to newness of life – raised spiritually to a new and holy life set apart to God.

The putting to death of the old life and subsequent renewal of life is symbolised in baptism. The waters of baptism signify the vivifying and cleansing or purifying effect of the Holy Spirit's work in regeneration and sanctification.⁴² Ultimately, sanctification will culminate in glorification.

Just as Christ died and was buried for our sins, so in baptism, the child of God symbolises their death to sin and the "burial" of their old life. However, just as the Lord Jesus was raised again to life by the power of God, so also rising from the waters of baptism symbolises the believer's *spiritual* resurrection to a new life in Christ Jesus through the power of the Holy Spirit (Rom. 6:3ff).

By faith, the believer accepts that all their sins have been atoned for through the vicarious death of Christ on the cross. He or she believes that by Christ's triumphant resurrection from death, the child of God has been raised spiritually and justified in God's sight. Baptism signifies to the believer and all who witness this act that that person's former sinful lifestyle has died with Christ and that the new life they now live, they live to God for his service and glory.

It should be noted that water baptism is a typical or symbolic act. In and of itself, the baptismal act cannot regenerate the soul, cleanse the mind, or relieve the conscience from sin and guilt. The Holy Spirit alone does this – but not via water baptism. Rather, through effectual calling, regeneration, and sanctification, the Spirit of God imparts new birth and works out God's plan of holy living for each believer. Although a God-given ordinance, and of the utmost importance, the rite of baptism cannot effect a soul's

⁴² ... *sanctification*: Our faith in Christ and our justification by God follow immediately from regeneration, which is then followed by ongoing (progressive, lifelong) sanctification. (GL)

salvation. It can neither initiate nor effect the regeneration of a person's soul. Nevertheless, baptism is an act of obedience to the word and will of God and the express command of the Lord Jesus. To neglect or despise this act would be wilful disobedience to the command of the Lord (Matt. 28:18-20).

Rather than being a saving rite, water baptism demonstrates that the recipient has been dedicated to or is yielding themselves wholly to God. That person is demonstrating their belief in the power of Christ to redeem their soul, of the Holy Spirit to sanctify them, and of the Father to keep them eternally secure in Christ Jesus.

It follows that everyone who has experienced spiritual regeneration will thereafter bring forth the fruits of repentance in their daily lives. Such fruits are represented by good works produced – not for gaining merit – but as evidence of a wholly renewed life dedicated to glorifying God (Gal. 5:22-26; Eph. 2:10; Titus 2:14; 3:14; Jas. 2:14; 3:13).

COLOSSIANS 2:13

¹³ And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses,

^{13a, b} And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh... (ESV)

Here, the apostle expands on his use of the terms “circumcision” / “uncircumcision”. Paul reminds the Colossians that they had been dead (spiritually) in their sins before their regeneration by the Holy Spirit. They were estranged from God. Their trespasses had cut them off from all possible fellowship with God and placed them under the continuing and just wrath of an almighty and holy God (Rom. 1:18).

^{13b} ... the uncircumcision of your flesh... (ESV)

Although alive physically, they were dead spiritually. The metaphorical phrase, “*the uncircumcision of your flesh*”, refers to the fact that – before their conversion – these Colossians had never been dedicated as set apart to God. They had never been “circumcised” (spiritually). At that time, they were living in a morally and spiritually unclean state and condition. As such, they were alienated from God (Eph. 2:12; 4:18; Col. 1:21). Therefore, they had no part or lot in the kingdom of God or his Son. Such good deeds or moral rectitude that they could produce at that time may have been acceptable to and commendable in the sight of men and women. However, in the sight of God, even their most virtuous deeds and most sincere works of charity or mercy were like filthy rags. As the Scripture says:

Isaiah 64:6a KJV

But we are all as an unclean *thing*, and all our righteousnesses *are* as **filthy rags**....

In Colossians 2:13 above, the expression, “... *your flesh*...” (σάρξ *sarx*) emphasises the fact that – at that time – they still lived according to their fleshly desires and inclinations, i.e. according to the impulses of their fallen, sinful, natural, and unrenewed self.

In complete contrast to this situation, Paul declares:

^{13a} And you, ^{13c} “God made alive together with him [Christ]...” (ESV)

Who granted these sinful people a new, regenerated and cleansed (“circumcised”) life?

Their salvation from sin and its penalty was certainly not achieved by anything these Colossians had done or were able to do. Those spiritually dead are *incapable* of doing anything that would lead to their spiritual regeneration or renewal. Regeneration is entirely a work of God’s sovereign grace. It is carried out in a sinner’s life through the agency and power of the Holy Spirit. He – and he alone – raises the spiritually dead and grants these people new life in Christ Jesus.

However, this new life cannot be bestowed without the concurrent granting of forgiveness of sin. Forgiveness of sin and remission of its penalty (death) is the gift of God. This gift is made possible only because of the Lord Jesus’ substitutionary and atoning sacrifice on the cross at Calvary to pay the penalty for his people’s sins, together with his subsequent resurrection from death, and his ascension to glory (1 Cor. 15:3-4; Heb. 9:11ff).

Therefore, Paul declares:

^{13a, c, d} And you... God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses (ESV).

COLOSSIANS 2:14

¹⁴ by cancelling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross.

As with all unregenerate humanity – then and now – the “*record of debt*” relates to the fact that all sinful human beings stand condemned by God’s law (or “*decrees*”). Every unredeemed person worldwide abides under God’s righteous wrath and judgment for their sins. According to God’s law, no one can be absolved of or discharged from this debt unless that debt with its penalty is repaid in full. Fallen, sinful humanity can never pay off the debt since they are already abiding under the wrath and judgment of

God for their sins (Rom. 1:18). The legal demands against estranged sinners could be met only by someone who was totally sinless and prepared to offer up his own perfect, sinless life as a substitutionary sacrifice for sin – because the wages (punishment or penalty) for sin is death.

Rom. 6:23 ESV

For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

No fallen, sinful human being could make such an act of atonement and reconciliation with God. Nor could any fallen human being do anything to expunge the debt they owed to God. Atonement and the absolute discharge of this debt could be achieved only by the work of a sinless Redeemer acting on the powerless sinner's behalf (vicarious atonement).

Such was the Lord Jesus Christ. For this express purpose, the Son of God laid down his perfectly holy and righteous life to pay the debt on behalf of sinful men and women. By that substitutionary and sacrificial death on the cross and his subsequent resurrection and ascension to his Father's right hand, the Lord Jesus has satisfied God's holy and righteous judgment against sin. The Lord Jesus has fully paid the price of redemption for every sinner, without exception, *whom the Holy Spirit would effectually call and regenerate*. The Lord Jesus has achieved their reconciliation with God the Father through the blood of his atoning sacrifice.

As God's Word says,

Leviticus 17:11 ESV

"For the life of the flesh is in the blood, and I have given it for you on the altar to make atonement for your souls, for it is the blood ⁴³ that makes atonement by the life."

⁴³ *It is the blood ...*: i.e. the shedding of blood, or the laying down of a perfectly sinless life in death, represents the offering up to God of a perfectly unblemished and fully satisfactory sacrifice of atonement for sin. The Saviour laid down his perfect *life* on behalf of sinners and for their redemption and reconciliation with God. God's acceptance of this atoning sacrifice for sin and sinners was demonstrated clearly by the Lord Jesus' resurrection from the dead and ascension to the Father's right hand in heaven—the position of highest honour and glory. (GL)

Furthermore, it is written in Scripture:

Hebrews 9:22 ESV

Indeed, under the law almost everything is purified with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins.

Returning to Colossians 2:14, Paul declares:

^{14b} ... This he set aside, nailing it to the cross (ESV).

By his sacrifice of atonement, the Lord Jesus has effectively and permanently cancelled (“blotted out”, “wiped out” or “wiped clean”) the record of debt owed to God by the sinner. That righteous judgment was satisfied and annulled (“set aside”) by Christ’s death on the cross, followed by his resurrection and ascension to glory. Thus, the legal demands of the sinner’s debt to God were considered “dead” (“nailed to the cross”) with Christ in his death. These legal demands no longer have any claim over a redeemed sinner. The forgiven sinner has been discharged or absolved of all liability toward God for his unregenerate former manner of life. Christ has already paid the full penalty for that person’s sins. Consequently, God has now declared or reckoned that redeemed person to be justified in his sight.⁴⁴

Apart from Christ’s perfectly sinless life and redeeming work, the debt these Colossians owed to God could never have been repaid. In their fallen, sinful condition, they could never have begun to repay that debt through repentance, earnest prayers, or any other religious acts. In their sinful state, they did not desire to seek true repentance or pray earnestly to God for mercy. They were lost – unable to connect with or respond to spiritual realities because spiritually, they were “*dead in their trespasses and sins*”. They were helpless to do anything to honour or please God or to obtain his mercy.

It might be argued that they could have “sought the Lord that he may be found”⁴⁵ (Isa. 55:6). However, they were never likely to do this without the prior working of the Holy Spirit in their lives and minds – an act of God’s free and sovereign grace, love and mercy alone.

⁴⁴ “*person ... justified in his [God’s] sight.*” This is a legal declaration of righteousness whereby—in God’s sight—the sinner is considered righteous from the standpoint of God’s law and that law’s former condemnation of the sinner. This is because—by Christ’s atoning and substitutionary work—the sinner has been fully absolved of all these demands and the death sentence on the unrighteous imposed by God’s law. However, being *declared* or *reckoned* righteous does not make the redeemed sinner *inherently* righteous. Increasing righteousness of life flows from the ongoing and lifelong work of sanctification, not justification. (GL)

⁴⁵ “*Seek the LORD that he may be found.*” It must be remembered that, in many instances, Scriptures of this nature were usually addressed to believers (not unbelievers) by way of warning, exhortation, or encouragement. Alternatively, such appeals or warnings could be addressed to redeemed but backslidden children of God, not to those who had never experienced spiritual regeneration and were still in their original fallen and sinful condition—as were the Colossians before their conversion. (GL)

COLOSSIANS 2:15

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

^{15a} He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame... (ESV)

He [i.e. God (acting through Christ)] disarmed, spoiled, or brought to utter ruin and degradation the rulers, powers, or authorities...

Some disagreement exists among commentators concerning the rulers and authorities Paul refers to here. Most agree that the apostle refers to higher *spiritual* beings, powers and authorities. However, the context demands that only *evil* beings and authorities be considered. Thus, good and holy angels who honour and worship God, serving him day and night, would be excluded from the apostle's remarks here. (Having said this, however, we must remember that *every* created higher power in the universe, good or bad (although none were created bad), remains under the Sovereign power and authority of the Lord Jesus Christ.)

The implied exclusion of the holy angels leaves only the *evil* spiritual powers, authorities, or rulers to be considered. It is these most malevolent of beings – chief of whom is Satan – together with the demons (or fallen angels) that God has disarmed or brought to utter ruin through Christ's death on the cross and his subsequent triumphant resurrection, ascension and exaltation to glory at the Father's right hand.

The rule, or controlling power, that Satan once exercised over fallen and rebellious mankind has been greatly diminished. The evil one can still tempt believers to sin with his now-restricted power. However, he cannot exercise the same degree of dominion over people that he formerly did, including when Christ was ministering on earth. (We need only consider the number of demon-oppressed or possessed people during Christ's earthly ministry before his death on the cross.)

Now that Christ has overcome and defeated Satan at the cross, greatly diminishing the devil's power and severely restraining his evil intentions and actions, the evil one cannot inflict serious or lasting harm on the people of God. Ultimately, the Lord will consign Satan to the hell God has prepared for him and all the rebellious and fallen angels (Matt. 25:41). The torments of that place will endure unabated for all eternity. At this time, however, the evil one exercises his now-restricted powers around the realms of the earth. To this end, the devil can act directly, but within limits, upon fallen men and women or indirectly through his influence upon human beings who, knowingly or unknowingly, act as his malign agents on earth.

Concerning Christ's triumph over evil supernatural powers, the apostle Paul said:

¹⁵ He [God] disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him ⁴⁶ [Christ] (ESV)

Through his Son, God has destroyed the immense supernatural power ⁴⁷ of the evil one. By his death on the cross, Christ has disarmed the devil, considerably reducing the effectiveness of his former supernatural powers and restraining the extent of these powers over fallen mankind.

When, on the cross, he cried, “*It is finished!*” the Lord Jesus was referring to the glorious work of atonement and redemption and the destruction of Satan’s usurped power over mankind. The evil one and his demonic horde have been put to open shame. God in Christ Jesus has triumphed over them victoriously through the blood of his cross.

We should note that the reference to disarming rulers and authorities and putting them to shame probably also relates to the Colossians’ former association with pagan gods and these gods’ supposed connection with, or possession of, supernatural powers. This would include some of these Colossians’ previous involvement in Greek or Roman idol worship, occultism, mysticism, astrology (horoscopes), and other quasi-religious forms. Satan’s influence lies behind all such malignant powers or authorities in heaven and earth. Therefore, these, too, have been disarmed and laid waste by Christ’s victory on the cross. This victory has been celebrated by the Lord Jesus’ triumphant resurrection from the grave and ascension to his Father’s right hand.

The military expressions in this verse metaphorically relate to the triumphant procession of victorious generals and their armies following their success in war. When made prisoners-of-war, defeated armies were once dragged in chains through the mud-covered streets by the victorious army. In like manner, Satan and his allies have been defeated, chained and dragged unceremoniously through the realms of this earth. Satan and his evil associates have been put to an open shame like the vanquished armies, as Christ has triumphed victoriously and gloriously over them.

⁴⁶ ... *in him* ...: In Greek, the pronoun translated in “*him*” (αὐτός *autos*) can equally be translated as in “*it*” (i.e. in the cross). However, we believe that—given the preceding “*He*” (i.e. God)—“*in him*” (i.e. Christ) should be the rendering here. God the Father was operating through the person and agency of his Son. (GL)

⁴⁷ *supernatural power*: Originally created as a holy angel, Satan’s power was greater by far than that of any human being. However, as a **created** being who later fell from his original holy state, his power was never unlimited. The devil’s power did not in any sense compare with or equate with God’s power. God’s power (omnipotence) is unlimited, the exercise of which is restricted by himself alone in line with his infinite love, mercy, and wisdom. Even before his defeat at the cross, the devil’s power—although supernatural—was limited in its extent and effects. (GL)

FULL SUFFICIENCY FOR CHRISTIAN LIVING IS FOUND IN CHRIST ALONE

Colossians 2:16-19

COLOSSIANS 2:16-17

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

Paul now provides more details concerning the false teachings to which he had alluded earlier (v.8). The Colossian believers were to realise that Christ was their Supreme and Sovereign Head. *All* their spiritual needs would be met in him. Furthermore, the risen, exalted Lord Jesus was the Supreme Head over all creation. Everything had its source in him, including everything these saints needed to follow a holy and godly life. No additional beliefs or actions were required besides their faith in Christ and union with him in regeneration, justification and sanctification. Ultimately, the outworking in their lives of these and other *Biblical* truths would lead to their glorification in the Father's presence.

Everything necessary for salvation is found in Christ and in him alone. Therefore, Paul exhorts these Colossian saints to fix their minds wholly on him and to follow him and him alone. There was no further need for rituals or legal observances relating to OT laws and ceremonies. Christ fulfilled every Old Testament shadow and type. Yes, the principles of the *moral* law (embodied in the Ten Commandments) still apply. However, the *sacrificial, ritual* and *ceremonial* laws (concerning food, drink, feast days/holy days, sin offerings, and the like) had been fulfilled and abrogated by the Lord Jesus Christ.

These sacrifices, rituals, rules, regulations, and ceremonies were the shadows of what was to come. Christ's perfect life, sacrifice of atonement, and resurrection to glory fulfilled all these Old Testament shadows or types. The complete fulfilment of all the Law's requirements by Christ's life and work ended forever all the festivals, new moons, Sabbaths ⁴⁸ and other requirements of the old covenant era (Heb. 10ff).

⁴⁸ *Sabbaths*: The reference here is to the various forms of sabbath observances prescribed under the Law—not to the command given by God following the creation of mankind for one day in seven to be observed as a day of worship and rest. Christians do not keep the Sabbath *per se* as prescribed for Israel under the Law of Moses. However, present-day believers keep one day in seven as a day set apart to God for worship and rest. Commonly, this day is Sunday or the Lord's Day, as celebrated by the apostles and early church commemorating the Lord Jesus' triumphant resurrection and ascension to glory. (GL)

Therefore, no one had the right to judge or criticise these Colossian believers for not adhering to the false teachers' misconstrued view of Christian living. These misguided or false teachers' erroneous views involved a blend of Jewish beliefs and practices with certain Jewish or pagan philosophies and some form of asceticism, mysticism, angel worship or mediation of angels. All these beliefs and practices would be *supplemental* to the finished work of Christ and therefore implied that – in and of itself – that work was insufficient to achieve all the benefits arising from complete salvation in Christ Jesus. According to its proponents, additional beliefs and practices were necessary to augment or complete Christ's work – or, at least, to experience the full benefits of that work.

Such teaching was tantamount to gross unbelief in Christ's perfect, finished work and implicitly denied the effectiveness of his atoning sacrifice at Calvary. This teaching was highly misleading. It bordered on blasphemy by implying that God did not provide an acceptable sacrifice of atonement when he yielded up his Son for the sins of fallen men and women.

Thus, the apostle strongly refutes the perverse arguments put forward by some individuals within the Colossian fellowship. There was no need to adhere to specific regulations regarding food or drink. There was no need to adhere to the former Jewish practices, commanded under the law to observe specific festivals (feast days), lunar observances or Sabbath observances. All these were limited to the era of the Law, and all had been fulfilled in Christ. Thus, in Christ – and in Christ alone – was complete salvation to be found. No external rites, ceremonies, rules, regulations or "religious experiences" were required of the redeemed children of God except those that Christ had explicitly commanded or enjoined. Such commands included baptism and the observance of the Lord's Supper. From apostolic teaching and practice, we might also include the assembling together of the Lord's people regularly for prayer, praise and worship.⁴⁹

⁴⁹ *Commandments of Christ and his apostles—the assembling together of the Lord's people*: The apostles observed this practice on the first day of every week (the Lord's Day). They also held additional meetings during the week, from house to house. Given the apostolic instructions concerning church government, offices and practices, it was clear that the Lord and his apostles expected the believers to meet for worship in local churches (initially, house churches). Only among the fellowship of believers could corporate prayer, praise and worship be experienced. Only in that setting could participation in the Lord's Supper be practised formally amidst the whole congregation. Baptism was often practised outdoors—as with John the Baptist and the Lord's disciples. However, this would not always prove practical and alternative arrangements would need to be made within each local church meeting place.

In passing, it should be remembered that the church does not consist of any single denomination or group of worshippers. The church, or body of which Christ is Head, is the worldwide company of God's redeemed and holy people. It comprises *true* (regenerated) believers from every nation on earth and a variety of local church denominations, fellowships, or other assemblies of the Lord's redeemed people. Every person worldwide whom the Holy Spirit has regenerated and called to faith in Christ is a member of God's universal or catholic church—of which Christ alone is the Supreme and Sovereign Head, both in heaven and on earth. (GL)

(Naturally, of course, every redeemed child of God should endeavour with all their heart, and by God's grace, to live a life worthy of their calling and election (2 Pet. 1:10), honouring to God, and beneficial to others, including their families and their neighbours.)

Thus, in complete harmony with the teaching of the apostle Paul, the apostle Peter writes:

2 Peter 1:3-11 ESV

³ His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence, ⁴ by which he has granted to us his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped from the corruption that is in the world because of sinful desire. ⁵ For this very reason, make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue, and virtue with knowledge, ⁶ and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with steadfastness, and steadfastness with godliness, ⁷ and godliness with brotherly affection, and brotherly affection with love. ⁸ For if these qualities are yours and are increasing, they keep you from being ineffective or unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁹ For whoever lacks these qualities is so short-sighted that he is blind, having forgotten that he was cleansed from his former sins. ¹⁰ Therefore, brothers, be all the more diligent to make your calling and election sure, for if you practise these qualities you will never fall. ¹¹ For in this way there will be richly provided for you an entrance into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

COLOSSIANS 2:18

¹⁸ Let no one disqualify you, insisting on asceticism and worship of angels, going on in detail about visions, puffed up without reason by his sensuous mind,

The false teachers – or those individuals in the fellowship who adhered to false teaching – tried vigorously and with plausible and beguiling arguments to induce the believers at Colossae to accept their misguided ideas and practices and apply them to their Christian lives. Paul, however, would have none of it. He strongly exhorts these saints at Colossae to reject such ideas (“philosophies”, so-called) and practices. The Lord Jesus had achieved full redemption for these believers. He had qualified them to share in the inheritance of the saints in light. Therefore, no one – whatever their standing in the church – had the authority to disqualify those whom Christ had redeemed with his precious blood. No one had the right or authority in the church – the Body of which Christ is Head – to insist on ascetic, mystical or legalistic practices or imply that such practices were essential to please God or to live a sanctified or godly life.

Furthermore, the apostle rejects the involvement of higher spiritual beings, such as angels, as necessary to augment Christian life and godliness or as a complementary means of approaching God the Father.

The apostle Paul excluded all forms or intermediate worship of God the Father, such as through the mediation of angels or any human being – however highly exalted. There was one – and one only – Mediator between God and man: The Man Christ Jesus (1 Tim. 2:5). Exalted to God’s right hand, the risen, glorified Lord Jesus *alone* acts as our Mediator with the Father. (The Holy Spirit is the believer’s *Intercessor* with God, but Christ alone is the only *Mediator* between God the Father and mankind (John 14:6)).

Whether Paul means that the false teachers encouraged the Colossian believers to *worship angels* or to join with the angels in the *worship that angels offered to God* is debated.⁵⁰ Either way, the involvement of angels – who are *created* beings – in this manner is a distraction from the worship of God through Christ alone and from the absolute pre-eminence of Christ over every aspect of a believer’s life and worship.

These misguided teachers ignored or downplayed the teaching that exalted the Lord Jesus Christ in all his fullness and glory. Instead of seeing Christ as the complete fulfilment of a believer’s redemption and the provider of every spiritual need, they emphasised the importance of (so-called) “heavenly visions”.⁵¹ They delved into great details about the nature and content of the visions they had received. However, they failed to identify the real source or nature of these visions or to explain how they could augment Christ’s finished work at Calvary. Such visions did not enhance the person or work of Christ. Instead, they detracted from and diminished his person and work by implying that additional actions or experiences were necessary to enter into the fullest enjoyment of fellowship with the Lord Jesus.

Even today, various false teachers claim to experience visions of or encounters with God, or they claim to hear God’s voice speaking to them (outside of Scripture). Some of these imposters claim to ascend into heaven, commune with God and descend again to earth to carry out his instructions. These are present-day examples of false teachers, lying prophets or pseudo-apostles. The devil is deceiving these individuals. Furthermore, by the wiles of the devil, these “prophets” are deceiving others with their pernicious doctrines and lying claims. The condemnation levelled by God against false teachers and repeated by Paul in writing to the Colossians applies just as much to today’s lying prophets as it did to those in Paul’s day and at all other times.

⁵⁰ *Join with angels* ...: Joining *with* angels to worship God is impossible while believers remain in their mortal bodies. The praise, worship and adoration of God expressed by the holy angels in glory would be incomprehensible to human beings during their earthly pilgrimage. Only when the children of God receive their new spiritual bodies when they are glorified and taken into the Lord’s immediate presence in heaven will they be able to worship God with all their heart and soul, in the language of heaven, as do the holy angels. Attempting to “*join with the angels*” in this life would involve a degree of mysticism or visionary experiences—a practice expressly condemned by the apostle Paul in this passage. (GL)

⁵¹ *visions*: These “visions” were not imparted by God or his Holy Spirit (as experienced on occasions by OT and NT prophets, etc.). Had this been the case, the apostle would have recognised them as such and would not have condemned those who received them. If they were not figments of the recipient’s vivid imagination or psychological events, such “visions” could have been of an occult nature. However, although they may have purported to be from God, such visions were more likely associated with evil supernatural beings such as fallen angels or demons. (GL)

Anything of whatever nature that seeks to augment, enhance, or “complete” a believer’s experience of salvation through God’s sovereign grace despises the grace of God. It rejects the fullness of Christ’s atoning work on the cross. It downplays the effects of his glorious resurrection and his triumphant ascension to his Father’s right hand. Again, it ignores the present and continuing work of intercession of the exalted Lord Jesus with the Father on the believer’s behalf. Furthermore, it ignores the Holy Spirit’s activity in this role as wholly sufficient to interpret and present our often inadequate prayers to God while also applying the full benefits of redemption and sanctification to every believer’s life.

The totality of redemption for the believer lies in Christ’s person and work – past, present and future – and the person and work of the Holy Spirit. No other experience is required to (supposedly) enhance or complete the believer’s new life in Christ Jesus. In Christ, each child of God enjoys the fullness of their Saviour’s love and compassion, together with every other blessing and benefit that flows from the Father above. All such blessings and benefits result from the believer’s full redemption in and through Christ Jesus.

“Man’s chief aim is to glorify God and to enjoy him forever” (WCF). Only in Christ Jesus can such enjoyment be found, and only in and through him can God the Father be glorified by us. Thus, Paul exclaims concerning the thought processes of such a false teacher: [he is] ... *puffed up without reason by his sensuous mind* (v.18c). (The use of the word “*sensuous*”⁵² indicates the earthly or carnal nature of the false teachers’ thought processes.)

Paul states that these false teachers’ ideas and suggested practices are not of God or the Holy Spirit. Instead, they are the products of an inflated ego and a sensuous (earthly, unspiritual) mind. At worst, they may result from a person’s involvement in forbidden spiritual practices such as attempted mediation with fallen spirits in high places, some form of occultism or mysticism, or straightforward satanic delusion, controlling influence or possession.

Such things must never have any place among God’s redeemed and sanctified people.

COLOSSIANS 2:19

¹⁹ and not holding fast to the Head, from whom the whole body, nourished and knit together through its joints and ligaments, grows with a growth that is from God.

^{19a} and not holding fast to the Head... (ESV)

⁵² *sensuous*: Gk., σαρκὸς *sarkos*. Noun fem sing gen (f) flesh, meat, body, sinful nature [GNT28-T]

Here, the apostle clarifies that these false teachers (or this false ideology or philosophy) have no connection with Christ. The individuals holding these misleading and erroneous views have abandoned the fundamental truths of the gospel. They have departed from the Head,⁵³ the Lord Jesus Christ, in whom God's Word inheres in all its fullness and glory.

Apart from a complete spiritual union and communion with Christ, no one belongs to Christ. In him (Christ), everything necessary for growing to an entirely sufficient knowledge of the truth is provided. In him, everything essential to life and godliness is applied to the believer's life through the person and work of God's Holy Spirit. So long as a believer abides in Christ and feeds on and obeys his Word, the Holy Spirit will impart to that child of God everything they need to know consistent with God's will for their life. Through his Spirit, the Lord will continue to sanctify each believer throughout their lifetime. This ongoing work of moral and spiritual sanctification is in preparation for the day when they will be glorified in God's presence and the presence of the Lord Jesus and the holy angels (Eph. 5:17).

Daily prayerful, praising and worshipping union and communion with the Lord Jesus is how a Christian grows to maturity and fullness of life in Christ Jesus. This regular fellowship in and with the Lord is how the body of Christ (the church) progresses through its new life in Christ. No additional experiences are needed to complete this journey, no questionable visions, no extra revelations, no mediation by any man, woman or angel, and indeed no worship of angels. Christ has already provided a complete – full, and final – salvation to which nothing must or needs to be added.

The believer grows spiritually only in God's appointed way and in his appointed time until they reach full maturity – all according to God's plan for them in Christ Jesus. To pursue God's appointed way by the teaching and guidance of the Holy Spirit as he opens to us the truths of the Bible is to follow the path of love, truth and holiness.

There is no other way, and no additional teachings or experiences are required of the believer or recognised by God or his Son as necessary for salvation and eternal life. Thus, those who teach the necessity or advisability of further experiences, visions, mediation, or angel worship have abandoned the Head (Christ). They have forsaken the fullness of Truth embodied in Christ alone and imparted to each regenerated and justified child of God by the Holy Spirit alone.

⁵³ *departed from the Head*: Or they have never been united to the Head. They are within the *visible* church but do not belong to the *invisible* church, the latter alone being the elect Body of which Christ is Head. (GL)

REPUDIATE FALSE TEACHING!*Colossians 2:20-23***COLOSSIANS 2:20**

²⁰ If with Christ you died to the elemental spirits of the world, why, as if you were still alive in the world, do you submit to regulations—

It seems likely that the false teachers had incorporated some form of syncretism⁵⁴ or incipient Gnosticism into their teaching. This thought arises from their mention of, or allusion to, higher spiritual beings and earthly forces coupled with human rules, regulations and rituals. These principles and practices had no connection with any established Christian truths, principles or practices. Instead, they reflected certain Jewish beliefs and practices and/or pagan philosophies, beliefs and practices. From a pagan perspective especially, such beliefs involved the supposed appeasing of spirits or spiritual beings, the presence of powerful forces in the world distinct from, but related to, the forces of evil in the *created* heavenly and earthly realms (not the perfect heaven where God dwells and reigns).

Indeed, in Paul's day and afterward, people believed in the powerful (supernatural) forces of nature or the natural world (distinct from God's providential care of the natural world). Perhaps those of a Jewish heritage had absorbed some of these beliefs and practices while living among their pagan (Gentile) neighbours. Likewise, some Christians – not well grounded in the truth of the gospel or God's Word – might have adopted some non-Christian beliefs and practices. Such assimilation would have allowed such beliefs to influence and modify their understanding of Christian teaching adversely – resulting in compromised truths and erroneous doctrines. Similarly, some weak believers may have attempted to integrate certain aspects of pagan philosophies and adapt them to their Christian beliefs – thus resulting in the kind of situation prevailing at Colossae.⁵⁵

⁵⁴ *Syncretism (religious or cultural)*: Syncretism, or the partial adoption/merging of two or more belief systems or cultural ideologies and practices into a single entity, e.g. the adoption of some aspects of Eastern mystical religious beliefs, practices or philosophies into the Christian faith. Syncretism of this nature results in serious errors of faith and practice and consequently leads to false teaching. Acceptance of such principles and practices not only compromises the teaching of God's inerrant and infallible Word but also implies that the teaching of God's Word is not entirely sufficient to save, keep, and sanctify those whom Christ has redeemed with his precious blood. (GL)

⁵⁵ This illustrates the great danger of adding to the Word of God by incorporating extra teachings or by adopting unscriptural principles and practices. The same is true of any attempt to subtract from the truths of God's Word, for example, by omitting the teaching of certain revealed truths or by minimising the importance of certain parts of God's holy Word. (GL)

The point of Paul's argument is that, since – in union with Christ Jesus – these believers have died to sin and to their old way of life, they have also died to all the beliefs, principles and practices associated with their former unregenerate life. The only beliefs, principles and practices that apply to them now are found in the teachings of the Lord Jesus Christ and his apostles.⁵⁶

COLOSSIANS 2:21-22

²¹ “Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch” ²² (referring to things that all perish as they are used) – according to human precepts and teachings?

These remarks may allude to specific Jewish rules or precepts and practices, although, to some extent, somewhat similar practices were found within pagan cults. However, Paul qualifies his statement by adding ... *according to human precepts and teachings....* (v.22b). The apostle may be referring to the ascetic practices of certain Jewish sects like the Essenes. Perhaps some false teachers had adopted such practices and were now trying to impose them on the Colossian Christians. Alternatively, the apostle may be alluding to the man-made rules and traditions of the Jewish elders and propounded by some scribes and Pharisees – teachings that the Lord Jesus roundly condemned (Mark 7:1-8).

⁵⁶ *Apostles*: The Greek word “*Apostolos*” (meaning, “sent one”, “apostle”, or “messenger”) is usually applied in the New Testament to the Twelve apostles of Christ plus the apostle Paul. (This includes Matthias but excludes Judas Iscariot, whom Matthias replaced.) However, English translations of the NT often designate certain other servants of the Lord Jesus as “apostles”, even though they were not known to be eye-witnesses of the resurrected Lord Jesus and had not been personally commissioned by the Lord to serve as an apostle. The Holy Spirit did not inspire this latter category to act or speak authoritatively in the name of the Lord (except as a representative or delegate of one of the commissioned apostles). Thus, unlike the commissioned apostles, these servants were not inspired to speak, teach or write infallibly to the churches under the direction of the Holy Spirit. Therefore, to avoid confusion, it is probably better to consider these other servants of God as (general non-inspired) *messengers* or *servants of* the churches rather than as (Holy Spirit-inspired) *apostles* of the churches. The latter included the Twelve apostles mentioned above and Paul, but no others concurrently or subsequently.

Since the same Greek word (“*Apostolos*”) is used concerning the original apostles appointed by the Lord Jesus himself and other Christian messengers of the gospel, it is necessary to distinguish between those appointed directly by the Lord Jesus and those appointed through local churches. The Lord authorised the former group alone to speak, teach and write infallibly when conveying God's Word and will to the people. They alone were invested with apostolic authority over the churches. There were no successors to these original apostles once they died. In his two New Testament letters, Peter claims to be an apostle of Christ (1 Pet.1:1) and a fellow elder (1 Pet.5:1). In 2 Pet. 1:1, Peter introduces himself as a servant (*slave* or *bondslave*) and an apostle of Jesus Christ. He never at any time lays claim to priority of office, nor does the apostle Peter ever claim in his letters to be the supreme head of the church on earth. Indeed, Peter expressly refers to Christ as the Stone and the Rock laid down by God and on which the church is founded (1 Pet. 2:1-8). (See 1 & 2 Peter.) Thus, no one today possesses genuine apostolic authority such as was granted to the Twelve apostles and Paul. (GL)

Whether Jewish or pagan regulations, one thing was clear: As with all other believers, Jewish Christians no longer lived under the law. The *sacrificial, ceremonial and ritual laws* God had given under the old covenant had been fulfilled and abolished by the Lord Jesus Christ and were no longer binding on Jewish Christians. If the Colossian believers were still being told otherwise, this was the (false) teaching of men. False teaching should never be regarded or accepted as obligatory on those who belonged to Christ. On the contrary, such misrepresentations of God's Word were to be rejected outright.

Similarly, those Gentile Christians who had been familiar with and possibly practised pagan sacrifices, devotions, rules, rituals and ceremonies had to realise that these rules and practices likewise had no place in their new lives in Christ. The Colossian saints – whether previously of Jewish or Gentile heritage – needed to comprehend that non-Christian religious or “philosophical” teachings and practices were contrary to the teaching of God's word and to a life of godliness.

The Colossian believers had been released from such bondage to human rules and regulations by their regeneration and union with Christ in his death and resurrection. Thus, they were to live in the freedom that Christ had achieved for them. In Christ, they were now free from all Jewish or pagan ritual and ceremonial laws and all forms of unscriptural human constraints concerning their faith and practice. Of course, they were still under obligation to the God-ordained civil law (unless that law conflicted with the commands of God) and to God's moral law. However, concerning religious matters, they were bound only by the teachings of the Word of God as interpreted and expounded by the Lord Jesus Christ and his commissioned apostles and as applied to each believer's life by the Holy Spirit – the Spirit of truth.

COLOSSIANS 2:23

²³ These have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting self-made religion and asceticism and severity to the body, but they are of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh.

Some pagan rituals and ceremonies were promoted as beneficial to the body and a person's spiritual life. Those who advocated such rituals and practices put forward some very plausible arguments for their acceptance and implementation. These arguments appeared to be wise advice that ought to be followed. However, to accept such arguments or advice was to yield to worldly or earthly wisdom. Earlier in this letter, Paul warned against this unspiritual wisdom. Elsewhere, the apostle proclaimed, “*The wisdom of this world is foolishness with God*” (1 Cor 3:19 KJV).

Also, accepting or practising such rituals and ceremonies was to accept and practise a self-made (or man-made) form of religion. Such religion may have involved ascetic practices or mystical experiences. However, for the Christian, there could be no acceptance of any religion or its beliefs and practices other than that associated with faith in Christ. This excluded any form of religion that was supposedly a necessary or suggested supplement to faith in the Lord Jesus. Christ was all and in all. Faith in him involves a total commitment to him and his teaching alone. That teaching provided everything necessary for spiritual

life, sanctification and godliness. No other spiritual teaching was required or permissible for the regenerated children of God.

Furthermore, adopting pagan spiritual rituals and practices were forbidden to Christians. Even if some pagan spiritual practices had been accepted, these would have been of no value in checking or correcting sinful desires – the fulfilling of which Paul refers to as “*the indulgence of the flesh*” (v.23b). Only by the work of the Holy Spirit in sanctification could such sinful attitudes and practices be held in check or overcome. No other experiences or practices were of any avail to the redeemed soul, to the believer’s growth in godliness and holy living and to their preparation in this life for glorification in the life to come. All these spiritual benefits and blessings were found in Christ alone – the supreme fountain of all wisdom and life – and in the sanctifying work of his Holy Spirit.

COLOSSIANS CHAPTER 3

EXALTED IN CHRIST JESUS

*Colossians 3:1-12**(Mark 1:3-8; Luke 3:1-17; John 1:6-8,19-28)*

COLOSSIANS 3:1

¹ If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God.

Paul has been speaking about the risen, exalted, and glorified Lord Jesus. The eternal Son of God is seated now at his Father's right hand, the place of highest honour, signalling pre-eminence and full equality with the Father (Phil. 2:9-11). The apostle has emphasised the absolute supremacy of Christ over all creation. Paul has reminded the Colossian saints that, in Christ, all the fullness of deity dwells bodily. Out of that fullness, the believers receive everything they need spiritually for life and godliness. Christ is all they need to progress in the faith, as the indwelling Holy Spirit sanctifies them (John 17:17) and leads them into all truth (John 14:26).

Therefore, having expounded on some of the first principles of their faith in Christ, Paul now explains how these truths should be practised in their daily Christian lives.

^{1a, b} If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above... (ESV)

The conditional clause, "*If then...*", does not necessarily imply an element of doubt. In the present context, "*If*" should probably be understood as "*Since...*" However, "*If*" may be the better translation if Paul intended to challenge the validity of certain believers' professions. The apostle believed that most of the Colossian fellowship consisted of genuine believers. However, despite their profession, he might have suspected that a few of them did not have genuine faith in Christ. Thus, he may be challenging these individuals to test their faith by declaring, "*If then you have been raised with Christ...*" (cf. 2 Cor. 13:5).

Paul's mention of "having been raised" with Christ in this place has led some commentators to believe that the apostle is saying that the resurrection of the body has occurred already. However, in this place, the apostle is not speaking of the future *physical* resurrection of the body, but of a present *spiritual* resurrection. These believers have *died with* Christ and have been united with him *spiritually* in his death. They have been *raised with* Christ and have been united with him *spiritually* in his resurrection (Eph. 2:5-6). Now, they live their new lives *in union with* Christ, implying that they have died to their old ungodly ways and now live to God's glory (Rom. 6:4). The rules, regulations, rituals and ceremonies of the world, or their old religious or irreligious ways, are no longer relevant to them or applicable to their lives.

In Christ, they have been raised above all these things. Now, they must endeavour to set their renewed hearts and sanctified minds on those things above: those that originate from the glorious presence of Almighty God. These blessings and benefits come down to them through God's Son and the person and agency of his Holy Spirit. These "things" include all the truths of God's Word that the Holy Spirit teaches God's people. The Spirit of God does this as believers read and meditate upon the "*Bread of Life*" (John 6:35) or the Word of God. As the believer reads the Word and prays, the Holy Spirit enlightens his or her mind, enabling them to understand the meaning and significance of God's Word.

Sometimes, it is said, "You can be too heavenly-minded to be any earthly use." We may respond, "If we are *not* heavenly-minded, then *we will be of no earthly use!*" If we fail to learn from God above, we will fail to mature spiritually, usefully, and to our full potential here on earth.

Those who seek to serve the Lord faithfully in ministering to their fellow men and women must first *seek the things that are above* (v.1b). Without a sound acquaintance with the things of the Spirit, originating from God above, we will not grow spiritually. Nor will we be able to help or guide anyone in spiritual matters. Spiritual guidance requires spiritual wisdom and spiritual insight. Such wisdom and insight can be found only in the teaching of the Holy Spirit of God as he reveals the truths of God's written Word to us in increasing measure.

^{1c} " ... where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. (ESV)

Of course, the latter part of this expression ('... *right hand of God*') is a metaphor involving anthropomorphism. God is pure spirit (John 4:24). Christ alone has a glorified spiritual body. This phrase, '*the right hand of God*,' means effectively that the Son is equal in power, glory and eternity with the Father. All the attributes of God the Father applies equally to God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. Again, to be '*seated at the right hand of God*' is to be exalted to the position of highest honour and glory alongside the Father (1 Pet. 3:22).

However, the phrase ... *where Christ is, seated* ... [note the comma before '*seated*'] also carries other essential truths: It indicates the risen Lord Jesus' exact *location* at present: ... *where Christ is* (i.e. in heaven). The verse continues, ... ***seated at the right hand of God***. The exalted Lord Jesus has finished his work on earth. Now, he sits at the Father's right hand to interpose for his elect as their merciful Mediator, Ruler and Judge (Mark 16:19; Rom. 8:34; Heb. 8:1ff).

Again, the phrase shows that – at present – Christ is reigning in glory at his Father's side. The exalted and glorified Lord Jesus reigns supreme over all creation, which creation he reconciled to God by sacrificing his life's blood. The old covenant foretold and prefigured this sacrifice of atonement, where the LORD God declared:

Leviticus 17:11 ESV

¹¹ For the life of the flesh is in the blood, and I have given it for you on the altar to make atonement for your souls, for it is the blood that makes atonement by the life.

The present element of Christ's supreme reign involves the reconciliation of fallen, sinful men and women to God through the work of the cross, and it applies to every one of God's elect children worldwide. Future elements of Christ's universal sovereignty include the final judgment, the completion of the believer's redemption in glorification when they receive spiritual and immortal bodies (1 Cor. 15:1-58), the creation of the new heaven and earth in which righteousness dwells (2 Pet. 3:13), and where the redeemed of the Lord will dwell forever (Rev. 21:1-2).

Thus, these Colossian saints are to set their minds on things above, preparing for what lies ahead in their Father's home. Yes, they are expected to serve God and mankind while remaining on earth. However, this world is not their home. They must be prepared to relinquish an ungodly or worldly lifestyle⁵⁷ or anything that brings dishonour to the name of Christ. They are his sanctified or "separated ones" (separated from the world and consecrated to God). Thus, to God they should now live, to the glory of his name.

Paul declares in verse 2:

COLOSSIANS 3:2

² Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth.

Remember, Paul is contending against the false "philosophies" or ideologies that were arising, or threatening to arise, within the Colossian church. These ideologies tended to distract some believers from dwelling on their riches in Christ to the world's more mundane philosophical and cultural practices.

Thus, the apostle declares,

^{2a} Set your minds on things that are above.... (ESV)

Paul exhorts the Colossian saints to concentrate their hearts and minds on the true source of all their blessings: i.e. on the risen, glorified Lord Jesus. He alone is the One who provides their salvation *and* everything they will ever need spiritually for their everyday lives. Indeed, all good things come down to us from the Father above (Jas. 1:17). He arranges our circumstances according to his plans and purposes for our lives. However, like the Colossians believers, we must also maintain close fellowship with the Father through his Son and the Holy Spirit.

In the triune God, the Colossians saints had everything they needed, drawn from the riches of glory in Christ Jesus. Those trying to lead them into false teaching or philosophies and cultic, mystic or ascetic

⁵⁷ "If anyone would be my disciple, he must take up his cross daily and follow me."

practices were denying the fullness available to them in Christ Jesus. They were attempting to draw them away from the One who is the sole source of their blessings and benefits from heaven. Granted, the false teachers would assert that they were only augmenting the work of Christ in the believers' lives by advocating additional or complementary beliefs and practices. However, such misguided proposals implied that the finished work of Christ, his present intercession and mediation in heaven, and the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit were insufficient in and of themselves.

This suggestion, of course, is heresy. Thus, the apostle asserts categorically,

² Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth (ESV).

Or, as Paul had said in v.1:

^{1b} ... seek the things that are above, *where Christ is*, seated at the right hand of God.
(Emphasis added)

Setting one's mind on things above is not to deny that the believer should make wise and God-honouring plans for his day-to-day life on earth. Indeed, the Lord holds us responsible for doing exactly this, so long as these plans accord with God's will for our lives (Cf. Jas. 4:13-15). For example, the Lord holds his people personally responsible for providing for and caring for their families. He also holds us personally responsible for discharging all our lawful duties and obligations to the society in which we live and work. Paul is not disparaging legitimate earthly concerns. The apostle warns against the influence and harmful effects of *false* teachings, *false* philosophies or ideologies, or *unspiritual/worldly/'elemental'* activities. For some of the Colossians, this included such things as asceticism, mysticism, occultism, or angel or spirit worship. Such things would adversely affect their spiritual lives. Lawful and God-honouring activities, pursuits and practices in the world are not being disparaged or discouraged.

The apostle continues by declaring:

COLOSSIANS 3:3

³ For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God.

Spiritually, the Colossian saints have died to their old way of life. In regeneration and faith, they have laid aside forever the demands and enticements of the old sinful nature. Now, they are learning how to live their new life in the power of God's Holy Spirit, pursuing sanctification and holiness of life.

The old life has not only been put to death (spiritually); it is now wholly hidden with Christ in God. To return to old beliefs, practices, thoughts, attitudes, and deeds would be to deny the reality of the new life in Christ Jesus. It would dishonour the name of the Lord who called them, redeemed them and set

them apart (consecrated and sanctified them) for himself. These Colossian believers have been separated from the ungodly or unrighteous opinions, beliefs and practices of this world and dedicated wholly to the worship and service of God. This separation from a worldly or godless lifestyle does not imply that God has called every believer to formal service or ordained ministry. However, it does mean that God expects all his redeemed children to love, worship and serve him in their everyday lives, whatever the nature of their vocation or occupation, while still living in this world (vv. 17,23).

COLOSSIANS 3:4

⁴ When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.

Every redeemed child of God has received their new life from God the Father through the work of the Son and by the regenerating and sanctifying power of the Holy Spirit. Essentially, Christ is the source and sustainer of their new life. Through their God-given faith, he has imparted that life to them. Through that faith, the Father has justified them. Through that faith, the Holy Spirit sanctifies them and prepares each child of God for their eventual appearance in glory.

One day, Christ, their Redeemer, will return to this world. When he appears, all those who belong to the Lord will be taken into his immediate presence. The bodies of those saints who have died before the Lord's return in glory will be raised and caught up with those still alive to meet the Lord in the air. The bodies of all believers will then be transformed to become glorified *spiritual bodies*. Although limited by its capacities applicable to a glorified, **created** body,⁵⁸ the believer's spiritual body will bear some resemblance to the Lord's glorious spiritual body. In his glory, they will share in the new heaven and the new earth (1 Cor. 15:35-58; 1 Thess. 4:16-18; Rev. 21:1-3).

⁵⁸ glorified *created* body: The distinction here is between the Lord Jesus' essential glorified body and the redeemed child of God's glorified, *created* spiritual body. The Son of God has existed with the Father in glory from the eternal ages and will forever so exist. The child of God, who is a **created** human being receives a form of glory akin to the holy angels, although, by virtue of his or her redemption, the believer stands in a much closer relationship to Christ. The believer's glory is that glory which is appropriate for *created* beings (perhaps similar to the glorious holy angels who also are God's *created* beings). However, it is not the same level of glory as that of the Father, the Son or the Holy Spirit. The glory of the triune God is an eternal, infinite and resplendent glory that no *created* being can approach unto and which cannot be equalled in any *created* being—human or angelic.

COLOSSIANS 3:5

⁵ Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry.

In view of the glorious inheritance awaiting them, Paul enjoins the Colossian saints to forsake their old way of life utterly, with its thoughts, attitudes and deeds. Everything that springs from the old sinful nature is earthly or carnal and is totally inconsistent with sanctification and holiness of life. These saints have been redeemed to God by the blood of the Lamb. Now, they must live to God, who has set them apart from the world, to live to his glory.

Thus, the apostle calls on these believers to “*put to death*” (Νεκρώσατε *Nekrōsate*, “*mortify*”) everything pertaining to the old nature and everything that is displeasing or dishonouring to the Lord and which is likely to grieve the Holy Spirit within them. Thus, for example, they are no longer to engage in any form of sexual immorality, in *thought* (e.g. lust), *word* (e.g. coarse or foul language) or *deed* (e.g. immoral sexual acts and obscene signs or gestures).

To emphasise the full range of offences involved in such sinful thoughts, words and deeds, the apostle exhorts the Colossian saints to put to death the following characteristics of the old sinful nature:

- **Sexual immorality:**⁵⁹ the broad term for all forms of sexual sin, whether by thoughts, words, or acts (Acts 15:20, 29; 21:25; 1 Cor. 5:1-2; 6:18-20; Gal. 5:19; Eph. 5:3; 1 Thess. 4:3).
- **Impurity:**⁶⁰ A refinement of the above. In the present context, impurity is concerned principally with sexually unclean or impure thoughts, language and deeds or any thoughts, attitudes or actions that involve defilement of the soul (including the mind) or body (Matt. 5:28; Mark 7:20-23; Gal. 5:19; 1 Thess. 4:7-8). We must remember that the believer’s redeemed body is the temple of God’s Spirit – and God’s Spirit is Holy. To defile our body is to desecrate God’s holy temple (1 Cor. 3:16-17; 6:19-20).
- **Passion:**⁶¹ In its present context, the emphasis is on excessive or uncontrolled sexual desire. For example, when a person pursues sexual intimacy in a manner dishonouring to God and forbidden

⁵⁹ Gk., πορνεία *porneia*, *sexual immorality or any form of sexual impropriety*.

[The word “pornography” is derived from πορνεία (*porneia*) + γραφή (*graphe*): i.e. sexual immorality [illustrated] pictorially as in a pictograph/pictogram (*graphe* = a writing or a graphic.)]

⁶⁰ Gk., ἀκαθαρσία *akatharsia*, *uncleanness, impurity, lewdness*.

⁶¹ Gk., πάθος *pathos*, *trouble; emotion; [lustful] passion* [esp. sexual, in the present context.]

in his Word (Rom. 1:26-27; 1 Thess. 4:3-5). God's blessing rests on natural sexual relations **within marriage** *between a biological male and a biological female only*, not on any other form of sexual union or between couples in an unnatural relationship. For example, all forms of sexual union involving any person other than a biological male with a biological female are unnatural unions. In his Word, God expressly prohibits such unions (e.g. same-sex unions⁶²). They are abhorrent in God's sight, and he condemns them explicitly and unreservedly (Rom. 1:24-28; 1 Cor. 6:9-11; Jude 7; see also Gen. 19:1-11; Lev. 20:13).

- **Evil Desire:**⁶³ Closely related to lust (covetousness) but with a greater emphasis on excessive sexual desires (cf. 1 Cor. 7:8) or sexual desires of an unnatural kind. This includes, but is not confined to, practices such as bestiality, homosexual practices, or any other kind of abnormal relationship. Essentially, this means any sexual acts or practices that are not between a biological man and a biological woman united in marriage.
- **Covetousness:**⁶⁴ Covetousness is greed, and greed is idolatry. Idolatry is the making of someone or something in one's life (other than God) the highest object of their desire or the most important or meaningful person or thing in their life (cf. Exo. 20:17; Jas. 4:1-4). In the sexual realm, covetousness involves an excessive desire for intimacy without due regard to their spouse's desires or feelings or their spouse's state of mind or health. Instead of sexual relations being an expression of *natural love*, affection and bonding, it has become an outlet for a person's *unnatural lust* for physical satisfaction. This takes no account of the hallowed nature of the sexual union nor of the fact that each partner's body is the sanctified and sacred temple of God's Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 6:18-20; 7:1-5; cf. Eph. 5:25-33).

COLOSSIANS 3:6

⁶² *same-sex unions*: This includes "sexual intimacy" involving "transgender" couples. Biologically, it is impossible for a human being to transition from one sex to another. In God's sight, a "transgender" person remains the same sex in which he or she was born (not "assigned at birth"). Thus, even if a man chooses to live as a woman, he remains a male, irrespective of any medical or surgical procedures carried out to supposedly change his gender, and irrespective of any civil or religious laws "legalising" the validity of his change in gender. The same principle applies to a woman wishing to change gender to a man. It is not biologically possible, and it is not recognised in God's sight. Indeed, if a man—although claiming now to be a woman—engaged in sexual intimacy with another man, this would be a forbidden homosexual relationship—not a commended heterosexual one. The same would apply to a woman—claiming now to be a man. If she engaged in an intimate relationship with another woman, this would amount to the forbidden practice of homosexuality (lesbianism). Nevertheless, God's mercy and forgiveness remain available to all those who genuinely repent and turn from their sin. Some of the Corinthian believers had once engaged in homosexual practices, but God forgave those who repented and placed them among his own redeemed and holy people (1 Cor. 6:9-11). ((GL))

⁶³ Gk., ἐπιθυμία *epithumia*, [evil] desire, [intense] longing, craving, lust.

⁶⁴ Gk., πλεονεξία *pleonexia*, greediness, inordinate desire, lust, insatiableness (more, more, more), avarice.

⁶ On account of these the wrath of God is coming.

Before their regeneration and justification, the Colossians had been living under the wrath and curse of God. In perfect justice, God was punishing them for their rebellious and sinful lives. This, of course, is true of every person worldwide who has not experienced the grace of God in salvation. It is true of every individual worldwide who continues to rebel against God and his Son or neglects God's requirement to repent and seek the Lord's mercy.

These people are living *right now* under the continuing righteous wrath of God for their sins. As the apostle Paul declares in Romans chapter 1:

Romans 1:18 ESV

¹⁸ *For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth.* ¹⁹ For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. ²⁰ For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. ***So they are without excuse.*** ²¹ For although they knew God, they did not honour him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. ²² Claiming to be wise, they became fools, ²³ and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things.

(Italic and Bold italic emphasis added.)

At this moment, all sinful and impenitent mankind is abiding under God's wrath. However, this judgment pertains only to this era. Ultimately, God's righteous and holy wrath will be expressed fully and finally on the Last Day – the Day of Judgment. This future and final judgment will be executed against all those who refuse to acknowledge God's person, presence, power and glory, or who continue futilely to deny his existence (Rom. 2:1-16; Jude 14–15; Rev. 20:10-15; see also Matt. 25:31-46).

By this time, the Colossian saints should have been well aware of God's present and future judgment on the ungodly world of mankind. They should have known that Christ had died to pay the penalty for their sins and to discharge these redeemed saints from God's righteous judgment against them; by sovereign grace, expunging their debt, granting them full justification and forgiveness of sins through faith in Christ Jesus. Thus, they must have realised that – having been justified – they could no longer live according to the desires and dictates of their old sinful nature without incurring the judgment of God. Furthermore, as those in whom the Holy Spirit now dwelt, they should have had no desire other than to live to please and honour the one who loved them and who had given up his own life for them – Christ, their Redeemer.

Undoubtedly, these believers were aware of the dangers of lapsing back into their old sinful ways. They would have endeavoured to do everything possible to live to the glory of God as enabled and guided by the Holy Spirit within them and as instructed by God's Word and the teaching of the apostles. Nevertheless, the old nature was still present within them and in conflict with the desires of the new nature. Thus, Paul must remind them forcefully that they cannot practise their old sinful habits while professing to belong to Christ. On occasions, they may fall into sin temporarily, which God will forgive upon confession to him and repentance for their failings. However, no genuinely redeemed child of God can continue to *practise habitually* sinful behaviour without bringing upon themselves the judgment of God. Furthermore, such persistence in sin calls into question the reality and validity of their professed faith in Christ (2 Tim. 2:19).

COLOSSIANS 3:7

⁷ In these you too once walked, when you were living in them.

The apostle acknowledges that, before their conversion to Christ, these Colossians participated to a greater or lesser degree in the practices of the old fallen, sinful nature. They may have engaged in at least some or more of the sinful examples listed above by Paul. Others may not have practised such sins by deed. Nevertheless, they would have been guilty of these and other sins by their sinful thoughts, attitudes, language and gestures. These thoughts, words or acts made them just as guilty of these sins as those who had committed the sinful acts more overtly. This situation is akin to the Lord Jesus' words when he declared that any man looking lustfully at a woman had committed adultery with her in his heart (Matt. 5:28).

Like all other unregenerate people worldwide, the Colossians had once walked (or lived) in sins of this nature, together with many other types or classes of sins. However, now that they had been renewed, they were to put to death all such sinful thoughts, attitudes, words, acts, and gestures. God had justified and forgiven them. The Holy Spirit had regenerated them and now was sanctifying them. Thus, they were to submit to the Spirit of God within them and actively pursue only a holy and godly life – a life lived to God's glory and no longer for self or the fulfilment of selfish aims or goals.

Perhaps because of some of the Colossians' long-standing acceptance of such sins, Paul found it necessary to spell out in more detail the exact nature of the sins to which he was referring and the consequences incurred by indulging the old sinful nature. The apostle will do this in the following verses.

We must remember that these Colossian believers had been saved from a culture steeped in paganism, idolatry, gross immorality and every other sort of sinful practice, together with various forms of "philosophy". As most Colossians were of Gentile rather than Jewish heritage, they lacked many moral teachings and restraints commonly found among the more pious Jewish people. Thus, the transformation from an ungodly and immoral manner of life to a godly and holy manner of life may have proved more

challenging to put into practice – for some, at least, of these new believers. This situation may have prevailed until they had learned more of the requirements of the Holy Scriptures. These requirements would include the teachings of the Lord Jesus and that of his commissioned apostles. For this and other related reasons, the apostle Paul finds it necessary to define what these believers must do to live a lifestyle that is pleasing and honouring to God. These new Christians would learn to forsake sexually immoral practices in their lives and all other forms and types of sins.

Thus, the apostle declares:

COLOSSIANS 3:8

⁸ But now you must put them all away: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and obscene talk from your mouth.

First, the apostle deals with a selection of sins involving evil inward attitudes, thoughts, actions and speech.

Anger may or may not be sinful. The Most High and Holy God is angry with the wicked every day (Ps. 7:11). In justice and righteousness, God will destroy the wicked (Ps. 145:20b). These are just two examples of righteous anger. Being the Righteous Judge, God can and will do no wrong. The All-Holy God is wholly justified in condemning and punishing sin in unrepentant sinners – as we all once were.

Similarly, there is such a thing among God's redeemed and holy people as righteous or justified anger. In and of itself, this kind of anger is not sinful anger. However, as God's children, we must always ensure that such anger never deteriorates into that unjustified and sometimes uncontrolled anger that proceeds from our old sinful nature. The kind of anger Paul condemns is this latter kind, a product of a person's old nature that has no place among the Lord's redeemed and holy people (cf. Eph. 4:31).

Similarly, **wrath** may be righteous or unrighteous. However, righteous and holy wrath (against sin and impenitent sinners) can justifiably be exhibited *only* by God himself or his Son. God's righteous wrath and judgment will be poured out upon the ungodly and the finally impenitent. Even now, those who are still in their sins (i.e. all unregenerate men and women) are abiding under the wrath and judgment of God (John 3:36; Rom 1:18ff). This judicial sentence of death ⁶⁵ pronounced by God upon all fallen and

⁶⁵ ... *sentence of death* ...; the wages (penalty) of sin is death (Rom. 6:23). All unregenerate men and women are abiding under God's wrath and judgment due to their unbelief and sin (John 3:36). The punishment for unforgiven sin is death—*spiritual, physical* and ultimately *eternal* death. Eternal death does not imply an end of conscious existence or cessation of existence. The soul is immortal and cannot die and the transformed body will be imperishable. Unforgiven sinners can only suffer eternally in hell. This is the ultimate meaning of "death" for every finally impenitent person worldwide. Of course, all repentant and regenerate people will never experience this eternal death. Rather, their place will be among the redeemed of the Lord and the glories of heaven and their Father's home. (GL)

sinful mankind can be annulled only through faith in Christ and his substitutionary and redeeming work on the cross and by his subsequent resurrection and ascension to glory.

Due to the fall of man and its resultant corrupting effects on a person's nature, all *human* expressions of wrath are sinful. Finite, sinful and fallible human beings are in no position to inflict their wrath on others. They are incapable of forming righteous and just judgments against other sinners since they do not possess the attributes required to know and judge people in the manner God alone can do. Therefore, Paul declares to the Colossians: We [believers] must "put away" all such things as *wrath*...

Next, Paul mentions *malice*. Like all other sins, malice proceeds from a malevolent heart or mind. It produces all manner of evil inclinations, feelings of ill-will, perverse thoughts, and wicked predispositions toward or against other people. Therefore, it has no place among the redeemed and holy saints of the Lord Jesus.

Slander ⁶⁶ is to denigrate or to speak evil, unjustifiably, of a person's character – defaming their reputation – or to accuse them verbally of some wrongdoing or wrong speaking of which the accused person is entirely innocent. Slandorous remarks expressed in writing are known as "*libel*". Slandorous remarks perpetrated against God – Father, Son, or Holy Spirit – constitute "*blasphemy*". Thus, slander in all its forms must be "put away" – permanently removed from a believer's way of life in Christ Jesus.

One of the most open and common forms of sin in Paul's day – as it is today – was a person's use of **obscene talk** or filthy language. For a redeemed child of God to engage in foul or coarse language or any other form of obscenity, whether by speech or by action, would be to defile the temple of God's Spirit (the believer's body). Since our body is the sanctuary of the indwelling Holy Spirit, any obscene thought, attitude, word, gesture or deed is a sin against the temple of God and the Holy Spirit of God. Thus, Paul says "*obscene talk*" must also be "put away". Instead, the redeemed believer should be living to glorify God in his or her body – which is God's (1 Cor. 3:16-17; 6:19-20).

These characteristics may appear self-evidently sinful and unnecessary for the apostle Paul to mention and condemn specifically. However, we must remember that many of these Colossians believers had come from an irreligious and immoral background. Such language and practices would have been commonplace among many, just as it is today among ungodly and immoral societies worldwide. Thus, Paul needed to elaborate on these matters so that the Colossian believers might be in absolutely no doubt about what does and does not constitute sin, sinful attitudes, language and behaviour.

The apostle now addresses another sin commonly found among ungodly people but which should not be present among the redeemed of the Lord:

COLOSSIANS 3:9

⁶⁶ *slander*: In the Greek text, the word used is "*blasphemy*" (βλασφημίαν *blasphēmian*. [USB5])

⁹ Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old self with its practices

In verse 8, Paul said that these saints must “put away” those sins he had listed. Now, in verse 9, the apostle lists one sin that they should have “put off” already: namely, the sin of lying, untruthfulness, deceit or bearing false witness (“perjury” in a court of law).

This sin is commonplace in the world of the ungodly. However, it should never be found among God’s redeemed and holy people. Elsewhere, Paul exhorts God’s redeemed people to speak the truth to one another in love (Eph. 4:15). Lying is deceiving another person and denying the truth of a particular matter. However, in the ordinary course of events, there can be no excuse or reason for telling lies or for deceiving another person concerning the truth.

In a few exceptional circumstances, someone may contend that lying is better than telling matters truthfully. There may be circumstances where telling the truth could significantly harm rather than help a person. In such cases, the truth, or the full measure of the truth, may be deferred until a more appropriate time.

In another situation, such as war or armed conflict, a prisoner-of-war may be ordered by an enemy interrogator to disclose details of his opponent’s plans, intentions and other intelligence-related or militarily sensitive matters. In response, the POW may withhold such information or provide misleading and inaccurate answers to his interrogators. This kind of response constitutes a form of lying or deception. However, one must consider the consequences on many other people if the interrogators were provided with accurate and reliable information that led to an attack on and destruction of a particular area and population. One must use sanctified wisdom and discretion when considering what to say in such situations. What does the Lord require of us in such exceptional circumstances?

⁹ Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old self with its practices (ESV).

These Colossian saints were crucified with Christ and raised with and in him to newness of life. Therefore, the old sinful habits, dispositions and practices were to be put to death or put away finally (or terminally). Thus, these believers – like all redeemed children of God – are to live in the realisation of this fact. They are to put into practice the realities of their new spiritual and sanctified life in Christ Jesus.

Thus, in verse 10, Paul writes:

COLOSSIANS 3:10

¹⁰ and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator.

The believer's old lifestyle inherited from disobedient and fallen Adam has died together with its sinful attitudes, thoughts, words, and deeds. They have been crucified (spiritually) with Christ Jesus and raised to newness of life in him. The lifestyle they now live, they must live for God's glory and not for self or selfish ambition. For unto God they have been separated (sanctified) from worldly attitudes and aims, and it is him they must now serve. Again, their redeemed and sanctified bodies are the temples of God's Holy Spirit. Thus, whatever they do in and with their lives and bodies (including their minds or rational faculties) will affect their relationship with the Spirit of God. The Holy Spirit is now dwelling within them. The believer's body is the Spirit's holy temple.⁶⁷

Furthermore, their sanctification – that began at their regeneration – is an ongoing process, daily leading to their increase and renewal in the knowledge of God. Daily, and by the work of the Holy Spirit within them, involving a growing awareness of the significance of God's Word, they are taught to accept, believe and apply the sacred Scriptures to their hearts and lives. By his Holy Spirit, God has regenerated and sanctified them. Step-by-step, and through the application of God's Word to their souls, the Spirit continues to renew these believers increasingly in the image of God. Ultimately, this will result in their glorification when they are called home to be with the Lord forever. Then, each believer will be presented before God's throne blameless (fully and finally sanctified and glorified) – perfect in the sight of God. All this occurs in a believer's life by the grace of God, through the work of his Son and the Holy Spirit (2 Cor. 3:18).

COLOSSIANS 3:11

¹¹ Here there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all, and in all.

In Christ, there is no distinction of race, ethnicity, colour, creed, nationality, status, sex, or any other distinction relating to human beings. Irrespective of any earthly distinctions, all regenerate believers are one in Christ Jesus. They differ only in the particular gifts, talents or abilities with which God has endowed them. Nonetheless, although manifold and diverse in nature and purpose, all the recipients of God's gifts are considered equal in his sight (cf. Gal. 3:28; Eph. 2:15).

^{11a} Here there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised... (ESV)

⁶⁷ *The believer's body is the Spirit's holy temple*: Depending on the context, the expression, "... Body ... is the temple of God's Spirit...", can refer either to the spiritual *Body of Christ* (the church) or to *the physical body of the believer* as being the temple of God's Holy Spirit. It has both a corporate and an individual application. (GL)

Whatever their nationality, ethnic group or colour, their former creed, or their former religious or irreligious practices, these Colossian believers are now united as one ⁶⁸ in Christ Jesus. The former distinctions are no longer significant to those united to Christ. As individuals, no human being is superior or inferior to any other. As persons, all are equal in God's sight. In the civil and legal realm, Christians retain their distinct national identities for as long as they remain in this world. However, national identities and other earthly distinctions will become irrelevant for those united to Christ. One day, all who belong to Christ will live and reign with him without such distinctions being recognised as necessary or appropriate.

Similarly, in the sight of God, Christians will not be recognised by their particular religious affiliation or denomination – irrespective of what form that might take – but by whether they belonged to Christ, regardless of their profession (Rom. 8:9; 1 Cor. 15:23). Some of those from the most theologically sound churches will *not* ascend to glory, for they personally did not belong to Christ. Likewise, some of those from the doctrinally weakest churches *will* ascend to Christ because they belonged to the Lord, notwithstanding the poor teaching upon which they had been fed.

^{11a, b} Here there is not ... barbarian... (ESV)

In ancient Greek society, anyone not part of Greek culture, education and lifestyle was considered a “barbarian”: i.e. uncouth, uneducated and common. Not so in Christ. The “uncouth”, “uneducated” and “common” are welcome to come to the Saviour. There is a place for everyone whom God's Holy Spirit calls to repentance and faith. Similarly, the cultured, the educated and the refined may come to the Lord in repentance and faith – everyone whom the Lord our God shall call. However, no one is inferior or superior to another in the kingdom of God. All are equal in the eyes of the Lord.⁶⁹ This applies from the highest to the lowest and from the least esteemed to the most highly esteemed on this earth. In Christ Jesus, all alike are equal; all alike are and will continue to be the redeemed, sanctified, and glorified children of God, and God will be their heavenly Father for all eternity.

^{11a, c} Here there is not... Scythian... (ESV)

The Scythians were from the Black Sea region. According to BDAG, they were “... *frequently viewed as the epitome of unrefinement or savagery*”.⁷⁰

⁶⁸ ... *united as one* ...: That is, they are united in and with Christ as members of his one Body, the church [worldwide], of which Christ is Head. (GL)

⁶⁹ *All are equal in the eyes of the Lord*: This relates to equality of persons. In God's sight, all people—as individuals—are equal. No person ranks above or below another person. However, equality of persons as individuals does not preclude the concept of submission of one person to another. For example, an employee is subject to his employer. Although, as individual people, both employee and employer are equal, in relation to their roles at work the employee submits to his or her employer. The same principle applies to the husband and wife relationship, to the relationship between rulers and their subjects, and to many other situations in the world. The two concepts (equality and submission) are complementary. They are not contradictory. (GL)

⁷⁰ *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*. 3d, [BDAG] Accordance electronic edition, version 2.8. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000.

There is some doubt among interpreters concerning how Paul intended this term to be understood. Some believe that the noun “*Scythian*” is being used to refer to those of the lowest classes, often engaged in manual or slave labour. Like the reputation attributed to the Scythians, these people were considered particularly uncouth, vile and undesirable. Nevertheless, from Paul’s mention of such people or his allusion to such a group, it is evident that some of these people were now included in the church at Colossae. They had been redeemed, justified, and sanctified by God’s grace. They shared equally with every other redeemed child of God within that fellowship. The world may have counted them as *nought*, but *not* so God. God had set his love upon them, called them by his Spirit to faith in Christ Jesus and redeemed them by his grace. Now, they belonged to Christ; his cherished children they would forever remain.

COLOSSIANS 3:12

¹² Put on then, as God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience,

Paul had appealed to these Colossian saints to put off their old sinful nature or put to death the desires and practices of that nature. Now, the apostle exhorts these believers to clothe themselves with the garments of salvation. As those whom God has chosen, whom he has set apart as holy and beloved in his sight, they are to wear only the garments of righteousness. Thus, they are to assume a heart of love, kindness and compassion for others. They are to practice meekness, considering others more highly than themselves – although they remain equal with them as a person. They must bear patiently with others, showing considerable restraint toward those who oppose them, sometimes vehemently.

COLOSSIANS 3:13

¹³ bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive.

The apostle now expands on the above. With compassion, humility and patience, these saints of the Lord are to bear with one another in love. They are to recognise that – although their neighbour may be in the wrong – the offended person, too, has many flaws and failings. Therefore, they should not judge unfairly, unjustly or out of resentment. Instead, they are to deal sympathetically and with understanding with the complaint levelled against them. They should seek forgiveness for any offence committed; likewise, the other person should seek forgiveness where appropriate. Ultimately, each party must remember that God in Christ has forgiven them – of a vast multitude of sometimes very significant sins. Thus, they must forgive others for their much less significant offences (Mat. 5:7, 21–26; 6:14–15; 18:35).

Paul is drawing directly on the teaching of the Lord Jesus concerning personal forgiveness. This same theme occurs throughout the Scriptures, where we are to follow the Lord's example of showing mercy and granting forgiveness even to those who seem least to deserve it. We must remember that God shows mercy to us and forgives us by his grace and not according to our just deserts. So, believers must also show mercy and forgiveness out of their love for one another. They should not withhold forgiveness from anyone who seeks it, nor to anyone to whom forgiveness is due, even if they have not actively sought it (Jas. 4:11-12).

COLOSSIANS 3:14

¹⁴ And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.

The apostle reminds these Colossian saints of why they need to show consideration, kindness, compassion and understanding to their fellow believers in Christ and those without a saving knowledge of Christ. Those who belong to Christ are the chosen people of God. They are also the beloved of God. God loved them when they did not deserve his love and mercy, but only his justice and wrath for their sins. Nevertheless, God forgave. Therefore, those whom God forgives must show love and forgiveness to those who have wronged or offended them.

Love unites. Love harmonises. Love forgives. Love seeks reconciliation. Christ's love *for* his people needs to be exhibited appropriately *by* his people to others – both those who belong to Christ and those who do not know Christ personally and savingly (Rom. 13:8-10; 1 Cor. 13:1-13).

COLOSSIANS 3:15

¹⁵ And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body. And be thankful.

Unresolved disputes and disagreements, lack of a forgiving spirit, and lack of love for one another result in disharmony among the people of God. This disharmony, however, is the opposite of the harmony and peace of God that passes all understanding. God imparts this peace through his Son to each of his redeemed children. Thus, Paul reminds these believers that they must allow the peace of Christ to rule in their hearts, affecting all their words, thoughts and actions toward other people (Phil. 4:7; see also John 14:27).

God had called these Colossian believers to belong to Christ Jesus. The Lord had called them to live for him and suffer because of his name. In the Saviour, they had been united with all other believers as

parts of one body in the Lord, of which Christ is the Head. Their union with him should have resulted practically in their union – and harmony – with all other saints of God.

The apostle also reminds them to be thankful: grateful to God for their salvation, the gift of eternal life and a secure inheritance in heaven. Grateful for every blessing and benefit that the Lord bestows upon them. Thankful for every act of love and kindness shown to them by others. Grateful for the life that God has given them, for the ability to worship, praise and serve him, and live to his glory.

COLOSSIANS 3:16

¹⁶ Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God.

^{16a} Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly... (ESV)

The word of Christ is the teaching of the Lord Jesus, as expounded by himself, his apostles and other local church leaders. Paul exhorts the believers at Colossae to become immersed in the knowledge and understanding of this Word. Only by becoming familiar with the Lord's teachings and with the Scriptures more generally would they come to grasp the full meaning and significance of God's Word for their lives.

^{16b} ... teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom...

- *Teaching*: In the sense of providing ongoing or consistent instruction in the Word of God.
- *Admonishing*: Warning, counselling or advising God's people concerning the implications of the texts being taught. The practical application to a believer's life of the exhortations, cautions or injunctions found in God's Word.

Once more fully acquainted with the Lord's teachings, Paul encourages these believers to teach others all the truths they have learned and warns them against departing from these eternal truths. However, they were to do so "*in wisdom*". They were to use discretion when explaining the meaning of the Scriptures to those in the learning process. Thus, for example, they were not to impose more challenging truths on immature believers. New Christians were to be given the milk of the Word before being fed on the more solid meat of God's Word.

This learning process should be accompanied with prayer, praise, and worship to God's glory, uplifting the soul in love. Thus Paul declares:

^{16c} ... singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs... (ESV)

Besides reading or hearing the Word, the Colossian saints were to praise the Lord and glorify his name in songs of worship. These songs could take the form of psalm-singing, as was practised by Jewish believers under the old covenant and by Christian communities under the new covenant. Hymns could augment

the psalms: i.e. songs of praise that were true to the teachings of God's Word, that exalted and glorified his holy and majestic Name, and that highlighted essential truths of the Bible. Similarly, believers could engage in (spiritual) songs (or odes). These songs were essentially Christian but perhaps less formal than psalms or hymns.

We should remember, however, that the terms translated in this passage as "hymns" or "spiritual songs" may not have carried exactly the same meaning in Paul's day as they do today, or people of Paul's day may not have classified their praise and worship forms exactly as we do today.

Again, with their lack of Biblical truths, or serious compromises of these truths, some modern hymns and spiritual songs would not have been considered worthy or appropriate for the worship and praise of God in early New Testament days.

We should note that these psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs were not reserved only for the church's formal worship services. As the apostle says elsewhere, God's redeemed people were to sing to the Lord (audibly or in their hearts) whether in the church, at home or in any other appropriate setting.

^{16d} ... with thankfulness in your hearts to God (ESV).

Singing praises to the Lord was not a vocal expression of words alone. A person cannot offer the Lord genuine praise and worship unless accompanied by a genuinely thankful heart for all God has done for them. Without heartfelt gratitude to God and his Son, songs of praise are just empty phrases that never reach the heights of heaven. Praise that honours and glorifies the Lord is praise (and prayer) that proceeds from a sincere, pure and thankful heart. Such praise and prayer reach the Father above, brings glory to his Name, and exalts a person's soul to closer union with the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

COLOSSIANS 3:17

¹⁷ And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

Before providing concrete examples in the following few verses, Paul summarises the Colossian believers' preceding instructions.

^{17a} And whatever you do, in word or deed... (ESV)

The apostle reminds these saints that the effects of regeneration and sanctification apply to every aspect of their lives. By thought, speech and action, they were to live to God's glory. They were to live to the praise and honour of him who loved them and called them to himself.

Thus, they should endeavour to speak and act kindly, thoughtfully and compassionately toward their neighbours. They should not utter any unkind, thoughtless or upsetting words toward others. They should not perform any harmful deeds toward others or denigrate their character in any way. In short, they should remember that God has made all people everywhere in his image (i.e. in respect of their moral, spiritual, volitional, and rational attributes [cf. Beale 2007: 843]).

To cause needless harm, pain or grief to others is an assault upon their Creator. The fact that God's image in men and women has been severely defaced and disfigured by the Fall and the consequences of sin does not remove our responsibility to recognise every person as God's creation and image.

Thus, these Colossians were to consider every word spoken to others and every action performed concerning them in this light. Their Creator would be their judge on the last day.

^{17b} ... do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus... (ESV)

Because of the vestiges of our old sinful nature, it can be challenging to practise what Paul is here enjoining on the Colossian saints. Nevertheless, the apostle reminds these saints (and us) of their obligation to honour the Lord Jesus in everything they say and do. Because of his Holy Spirit indwelling us, anything a believer says or does reflects on and could defile God's holy temple (i.e. our bodies⁷¹). Therefore our words and actions either honour God or dishonour him.

^{17c} ... giving thanks to God the Father through him (ESV).

In all things – spoken or performed – believers are to act such that God the Father and God the Son receive all praise and glory through the testimony and actions of each person's life.

Bearing these truths in mind, the apostle deals next with specific household duties and responsibilities.

⁷¹ *our bodies*: comprehending both body and soul.

HOUSEHOLD RELATIONSHIPS

The “household code” (v.18ff) employed here by Paul bears marked similarities to that era’s Hellenistic or Graeco-Roman *household codes* or *tables*. However, unlike these other codes, Paul has adapted his version to emphasise the sovereign Lordship of Christ over every created being and, in this place specifically, over both husband and wife. This Christological element is missing from the Hellenistic and other non-Christian versions of the code.

Colossians 3:18- 25

COLOSSIANS 3:18

¹⁸ Wives, submit to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord.

Let us clarify one significant issue from the outset: God created mankind male and female (Gen. 1:26-28). God created the woman from the man, not the man from the woman (Gen. 2:18, 20-25; 1 Cor. 11:8,12). Through the serpent, Satan enticed the woman (Eve), and she fell into sin. Eve then enticed Adam to commit the same sin – in rebellion against God. Hence, *the Fall of Man (involving both the man and the woman)* (Gen. 3:1-21).

As individual *persons*, God created man and woman as equals. However, concerning their respective *roles* within the family, the Lord requires that a wife should recognise her husband as her head and the head of the household. A wife should submit to ⁷² her husband, while both husband and wife submit themselves to the Lordship of Christ over them. This is the God-ordained order between a husband and his wife (Gen. 3:16b). However, this order does not imply any inequality on the wife’s part. As a *person*, a wife remains equal in status and value to her husband. Only in her *role as a wife* is a woman required to submit to her husband’s authority over the household.⁷³ (See Excursus below.)

⁷² Gk., ὑποτάσσεσθε *hupotassēs*, to submit to, or to subject [oneself] to. [UBS5]

⁷³ Equality/submission: Taking the example of the relationship between an employer and an employee: As a person, an employee is equal in every respect with the person of his employer. This applies regardless of rank, status, social standing, or any other distinguishing characteristic. However, in regard to his employment, the employee stands in a subordinate position to his employer. Because of his role as an employee, he is required to obey or submit to his employer’s instructions. This does not mean that he ceases to be equal with his employer *as a person*. He does not. It means only that—in relation to his role as an employee—he must submit to his employer’s authority over him.

So it is with a husband and wife. As a person, the wife remains fully equal with her husband, but in her role as a wife she submits to her husband’s headship or authority—without in any respect losing or diminishing her essential equality as a person created in the image of God.

*Excursus**Equality and Submission:
Complementary, not Mutually Exclusive Concepts*

By including the Lordship of Christ in these instructions, the apostle may be alluding to the Lord Jesus' position relative to his Father. For example, concerning his divine nature, the Lord Jesus is in every respect equal with his Father. However, concerning his human nature, the Lord voluntarily took upon himself the form of a man, submitting himself to his Father in the process. Nevertheless, the Lord's voluntary submission to the Father does not imply that he had become less than equal with his Father. As the Son of God, and in regard to his deity, Jesus remains equal with the Father in every respect. However, in regard to his humanity, the Son's submission to his Father can be observed most clearly at his incarnation and by his perfect obedience to his Father's will in life and death.

Submission is a distinct concept from *status*. The former does not necessarily involve or imply any loss of status or equality.

The different but complementary *roles* and *natures* of Christ are paralleled in the following verses in Colossians chapter 3 by the different but complementary *roles* (but not *natures*) between husband and wife, parents and children, etc. By submitting herself to her husband, a wife does not suffer the loss of her equal status *as a person* with her husband. As a *person created in God's image*, she always remains equal to her husband. It is only in relation to her *role as a wife* that the Lord requires her to submit willingly to her husband and recognise his headship over the household. Likewise, God requires that a husband treat his wife with the utmost love and respect, never taking advantage of his role as head of his wife and family. Similarly, Paul exhorts both husband and wife to recognise and submit willingly to the Lordship of Christ *over them both*.

.....

Admittedly, the foregoing analogy is very inadequate, because the wife must never be considered as being on a similar level to an employee of her husband. She most certainly is not her husband's "employee" (except where she has become his employee voluntarily, e.g. for business purposes). Rather, a wife should be her husband's loving spouse, *who is loved unconditionally by her husband* and whom he treats as an equal partner with the utmost dignity, consideration and respect and as he would treat himself. (GL)

COLOSSIANS 3:19

¹⁹ Husbands, love your wives, and do not be harsh with them.

The apostle immediately adds that a husband must love his wife and act accordingly toward her. Under no circumstances must a husband act in an overbearing manner toward his wife, who, as a person, is equal in God's sight with her husband and who – like her husband – has been created in God's image. Thus, any inappropriate treatment of either spouse toward their partner would also be directed against their Creator.

Paul enjoins a husband to act lovingly toward his wife and not from the impulses or reactions of his old sinful nature. God's Word commands him to put off that old nature, replacing it with the new nature created in true righteousness and holiness.

Harshness, thoughtlessness, unkindness, ruthlessness, lack of consideration, abuse (verbal, physical, psychological or emotional), cruelty, withholding of marital relations, and many other evil attitudes, actions, or characteristics stem from the old sinful nature. The fruits of that nature should have no place in the lives of God's redeemed and holy people. Love is of God and is the paramount fruit of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 13:13; Gal. 5:22; 1 John 4:7-8).

Paul exhorts husbands to show godly love and affection to their wives and never disrespect or dishonour the one to whom God has united them in marriage. Thus, a wife should be able to submit lovingly and willingly to her husband's headship over the household. She knows that this is God's will, and that her husband will always treat her according to that will and out of his genuine love and concern for her (cf. Eph. 5:22-32).

If and when either husband or wife sin against one another – and against God – they must acknowledge and forsake that sin, seeking forgiveness from their spouse and from God.

COLOSSIANS 3:20

²⁰ Children, obey your parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord.

Children are a priceless gift from God, as is the health, strength and ability to procreate successfully. God grants children to their parents so they may be a blessing to their father and mother. However, the Lord requires Christian parents to bring up their children in the fear of the Lord, teach them the Lord's

ways and discipline (train) ⁷⁴ them firmly and consistently, but in love and with great compassion, according to the precepts and principles of God's Word (Eph. 6:4).

Any maltreatment or abuse of a child, whom God has created in his image, or any form of cruelty, neglect, or withholding of natural affection, is an assault against the child and the child's Creator. The Lord will not hold guiltless those people who despise or harm those little ones created in God's image. Let us remember the words of the Lord Jesus, directed against those who were offending little children by hindering them from coming to Jesus: *"Let the little children come to me and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of heaven"* (Matt. 19:14; Mark 10:14; Luke 18:16 ESV).

For their part, children are required to respect and obey their parents – in everything. To "obey" means to listen attentively and respond accordingly to the instructions given.

Paul urges all responsible young people to respect their parents and follow their instructions. Thus, they will be blessed by the Lord and grow daily in the knowledge of the Lord. Those children who refuse consistently to obey their parents need to be disciplined firmly but lovingly and fairly and in line with the Bible's teachings and principles concerning the just application of discipline or corrective training.

The phrase "to discipline" means "to train" or "nurture".

(Gk., παιδεία, ας, ή(παιδεύω; 'cultural nurture' 1. "the act of providing guidance for responsible living, *upbringing, training, instruction...*" ⁷⁵)

Those children trained in the Lord's ways while young will not forget this training or discipline in their latter days. Even those who rebel against their parent's instructions at the time will – in later years – recall the truths that they once rejected and may have despised. Even one who has rebelled consistently against their parents cannot ultimately thwart the will and purposes of God for that person's life.

However, those believing children who live to please, honour, and obey their parents also please, honour, and obey the Lord Jesus Christ.

COLOSSIANS 3:21

²¹ Fathers, do not provoke your children, lest they become discouraged.

Paul exhorts fathers not to provoke their children. Instead, they should endeavour to show patience and understanding to each child learning step-by-step. All of us continue to learn throughout our lives, and

⁷⁴ *discipline (train)*: Refers here to training in righteousness.

⁷⁵ [A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature](#). 3d, [BDAG] Accordance electronic edition, version 2.8. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000.

sometimes the learning process can be rather frustrating, requiring much forbearance and perseverance. How much more so with a child still developing physically, mentally, emotionally and spiritually and who has not yet learned to cope fully with every new experience and process each one successfully?

Thus, Paul exhorts, do not discourage (or dishearten) them because of their sometimes unsuccessful attempts. Instead, parents should encourage their children lovingly and patiently, perhaps using different methods to help them succeed and win their parent's approval and an appropriate reward.

COLOSSIANS 3:22

²² Bondservants, obey in everything those who are your earthly masters, not by way of eye-service, as people-pleasers, but with sincerity of heart, fearing the Lord.

Paul now moves on to other household members – bondservants. The Greek for “bondservants” is the same word (δοῦλοι *douloi*, [pl]) translated as “slaves”. These servants were “bonded” to one particular household or family.

Like regular slaves, these bondservants were considered the master's property rather than human beings on the same level and enjoying equal status with their master. Often, masters treated their bondservants unjustly, unfairly, and contrary to all the teaching and principles of God's Word. Even so, such maltreatment did not apply to every household with bondservants. Some households treated their servants with dignity, honour, respect and compassion and eventually agreed to their servant's redemption from bondage (manumission) to become freemen or women.

The apostle Paul is not condoning the principle of slavery or bonded servitude. He is dealing with a situation that was then – and for centuries previously – had been practised and accepted by the populace as a normal situation. (In later eras, and in the light of God's Word teaching the equality of all men and women, bonded servitude/slavery was deplored and ultimately denounced.) ⁷⁶

⁷⁶ EXTENDED NOTE *Slavery*: The form of slavery existing in Paul's day was distinctly different from that found in N. America and elsewhere many centuries later. The earlier form comprised people taken into slavery as former prisoners-of-war, sold into slavery or voluntarily selling themselves into slavery. These earlier slaves could come from almost any rank or station in life, high or low. It was not confined to people of one or a few particular races or ethnic groups. Slaves were found among people of almost all races and ethnic groups. Many of these earlier slaves were appointed to positions of great responsibility and trust. For example, Joseph was sold to traders who took him to Egypt. There, Joseph served as a slave (Gen. 37:25-28; Ps. 105:16-18). Later, however, Pharaoh elevated Joseph to be the second in command of the nation (Gen. 41:39-46). In succeeding centuries, other slaves have been honoured and exalted. Nevertheless, despite the advantages obtained by some, many more were subjected to demeaning treatment, shame, outright cruelty and physical and verbal abuse.

In Paul's day, slavery was an accepted fact and way of life. However, God never approves of or condones the maltreatment or demeaning of any person created in his image—and that certainly includes slaves. Such treatment of

Thus, Paul encourages bondservants to be obedient to their earthly masters. Many, but not all, private household masters/fathers would refrain from maltreating or otherwise abusing their bondservants. This consideration for another human being contrasted sharply with many taskmasters involved in the more common forms of slavery or forced labour. These particular taskmasters often treated their slaves harshly and even contemptuously. In marked contrast, however, some privately owned household bondservants were considered a valued part of the household and treated as such.

COLOSSIANS 3:23

²³ Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men,

Paul enjoins these bondservants not to serve superficially, accomplishing only the bare minimum of their master's instructions. They were to serve their masters wholeheartedly, going beyond what was required of them to fulfil their duties and responsibilities.

Those bondservants who belonged to the Lord Jesus were to remember that they were primarily the bondservants of Christ. They ought, therefore, to honour the Lord Jesus in their household service. Likewise, if the bondservant's master was a believer in the Lord Jesus, the master also was a bondservant of Christ. As such, the Lord required the master to recognise his bondservant as a brother or sister in the Lord. Consequently, the believing servant deserved respect and honour due to every redeemed and sanctified brother and sister in Christ.

Thus, Paul elevates bondservants from their lowly and inhumane position as animate property deprived of equality of person or status. In Christ Jesus, believing bondservants are exalted to the highest position of God's beloved and consecrated children. The apostle considers these bondservants (and other slaves) equal in status, value, dignity, worth and honour to every other human being whom God created. Of course, this elevation to equal status and spiritual position in Christ Jesus is true of every regenerate

another human being is totally at variance with the teaching, practices and principles of God's Word. Paul had to accept the situation as it then existed. However, his view of slavery is shown clearly in his letter to Philemon concerning his slave "Onesimus". Onesimus had been converted to Christ through Paul's ministry and Paul encourages Philemon (himself a Christian) to receive his slave back not merely as a slave but as a beloved brother in the Lord and one who was especially valued in God's sight (Philemon 1ff). Slavery was an inexcusable evil perpetrated by sinful men and women. But the Lord will not hold those guiltless who abused or demeaned any person created in his express image and likeness. An assault on that person is perceived as an assault against God—the Sovereign Creator, Lord and Judge of all the earth.

The apostle Paul made it clear that those slaves who belonged to Christ stood in exactly the same level as every other believer—slave or free. Every human being created in God's image (all humanity) is a slave to sin. Christ, however, is the Redeemer of sinful men and women, and he will set free all who call upon his name in true godly repentance and genuine faith in Christ as their new Lord and Master. (GL)

person, whether slave or free; for, in Christ, there is neither slave nor free. All are one, i.e. – as a person – everyone is of equal status before God (cf. v.11).

Paul encourages Christian bondservants to consider their real Master – the Lord Jesus Christ. Whatever the nature of their duties or responsibilities, they are to serve their masters as though they were serving the Lord Jesus – which indeed they are doing. Thus, they are exhorted to serve their master with all their hearts and not merely fulfil the bare minimum requirements necessary to accomplish their tasks. First and foremost, they must work to please the Lord and not men alone.

COLOSSIANS 3:24

²⁴ knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward. You are serving the Lord Christ.

The apostle reinforces his exhortations with this reason: Christian bondservants *know* – i.e. they possess the utmost assurance – that the Lord whom they serve will reward them for their service. This applies to every aspect of their service, whether relating to their earthly masters or any other good work they perform that honours God.

What is the nature of their reward? It is a share in the heavenly inheritance; participation with all the saints in light with the Lord in his new creation and glorious presence. Moreover, a commensurate reward for their faithfulness to Christ during their earthly life, including all the good deeds or works they performed in love, service and kindness toward others.

COLOSSIANS 3:25

²⁵ For the wrongdoer will be paid back for the wrong he has done, and there is no partiality.

Nevertheless, for a bondservant guilty of wrongdoing, he or she too will receive their due reward: in this case, in the form of punishment or withholding of beneficent rewards. On earth, this may range from mild correction or discipline, withholding of additional benefits, or some other form of punishment imposed by the servant's earthly master. Wrongdoers could be dealt with judicially in the courts in more serious cases, incurring fines or detention.

Concerning rewards in heaven, the Lord Jesus could withhold some of these – forfeited because of unfaithfulness to Christ during their life on earth. (This does not apply to their salvation which the Lord bestows as an irrevocable gift, not a reward.)

^{25b} ... and there is no partiality (ESV).

There will be no favouritism or preferential treatment of one person over another. The Lord will not treat a bondservant differently from any other person, slave or free. For, until their redemption by the grace of God, everyone – slave or free – was a *bondslave to sin* and abiding under God's righteous wrath and judgment. Therefore, concerning rewards, everyone will be judged, according to their works,⁷⁷ and as individuals of equal standing.

What is true of the bondservant is also true of the bondservant's earthly master: he will be paid back for any wrong he has done toward his servants or slaves.

Paul turns his attention specifically to these masters at the beginning of the next chapter.

⁷⁷ *According to their works*: This is not to deny salvation by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. The judgment here is for reward or loss of reward in heaven. It relates only to works of service or good deeds carried out *following* regeneration and justification, and not, in any respect, *preceding* salvation, *accompanying* salvation or *to aid in the attainment of* salvation.

COLOSSIANS CHAPTER 4

CLOSING INSTRUCTIONS AND EXHORTATIONS

Colossians 4:1 – 18

COLOSSIANS 4:1

¹ Masters, treat your bondservants justly and fairly, knowing that you also have a Master in heaven.

This verse properly belongs to the preceding section on household relationships.

Paul has addressed bondservants and exhorted them to serve and honour the Lord Jesus as well as their earthly master or lord.⁷⁸ Now, the apostle turns his attention to these earthly masters.

Paul exhorts these masters to show justice and fairness to their bondservants⁷⁹ in all their dealings with them. They must not act in an overbearing manner toward them. They may be the servant's earthly lord or master, but they are not the servant's heavenly Lord or Master. Christ alone is the supreme Master and Lord – Lord of all creation; Lord of every created being – human and angelic. Christ rules over the master as well as over the servant. Both master and servant alike are accountable to God, and the Lord God will judge both – without distinction, discrimination or prejudice.

Thus, the apostle calls for masters to show justice and fairness toward their servants – for both have a Master in heaven to whom they must give account.

⁷⁸ *master or lord*: In Greek, the same word (κύριοι *kurioi*) can be translated either as *master* or *lord*. In the Bible, when the translation “Lord” or “Master” is capitalised and in the singular, it can be applied to the Lord God or the Lord Jesus, as in the latter part of this verse. Thus, “κύριος” *kurios* translates either as “master” or “lord” relating to earthly masters, or as “Master” or “Lord” relating to our Master and Lord in heaven. (GL)

⁷⁹ *bondservants*: Gk., δούλοις *doulois*. The Greek word forms can be translated as “bondservant”, “servant”, “slave”, “bondslave”, “slavish” or “servile”.

*Excursus**Slave/Slavery*

Elsewhere in the New Testament, Paul uses the words slave/slavery metaphorically in connection with slavery to sin. For example, in Romans, the apostle declares:

Romans 6:15-19 ESV

¹⁵ What then? Are we to sin because we are not under law but under grace? By no means! ¹⁶ Do you not know that if you present yourselves to anyone as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin, which leads to death, or of obedience, which leads to righteousness? ¹⁷ But thanks be to God, that you who were once slaves of sin have become obedient from the heart to the standard of teaching to which you were committed, ¹⁸ and, having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness. ¹⁹ I am speaking in human terms, because of your natural limitations. For just as you once presented your members as slaves to impurity and to lawlessness leading to more lawlessness, so now present your members as slaves to righteousness leading to sanctification.

In this passage, Paul reminds believers that either they are *slaves to sin* or *slaves to righteousness*. Thus, being redeemed from their former slavery to sin, Christians are slaves to their Lord and Master, Jesus Christ.

Furthermore, the Scriptures remind us that, at his incarnation, the Lord Jesus Christ humbled himself, assuming the abject position of a slave:

Philippians 2:6-8 ESV

⁶ who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, ⁷ but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. ⁸ And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

Thus, when we consider the despicable evil of slavery as an institution, let us not forget our own slavery to sin (exhibiting despicably evil acts of our own will), our present failings, and our present position by grace as a slave of righteousness to our Master, the Lord Jesus Christ. Let us also remember the immense sacrifice made for us by our Lord and Master when he humbled himself, assuming the form

of a slave⁸⁰ and being obedient unto an ignominious death on a cross to secure our redemption.

.....

COLOSSIANS 4:2

² Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving.

Now, Paul focuses on maintaining living and healthy communication with our Father in heaven. We who belong to the Lord must, of necessity, talk to the Lord and should do so regularly. We should pray at home, at specific times, and at unscheduled intervals – whenever appropriate. The people of God should also gather to pray collectively and regularly at church meetings or other special prayer meetings.

Prayer includes adoration, praise and thanksgiving to God the Father through the Son for their many blessings and benefits. It also includes prayer on behalf of our local church leaders. Similarly, we should pray for our country's leaders in national and local government positions. Believers should also pray on behalf of other peoples, countries and nations (cf. 1 Sam. 12:23). However, no prayer – simple or profound – can ever reach God's ears if not presented from a contrite and humble heart (cf. 2 Chron. 7:14), through the Lord Jesus Christ's mediation and by the powerful personal agency of God the Holy Spirit.

In this verse, the apostle mentions some essential aspects of prayer:

^{2a} Continue steadfastly in prayer... (ESV)

Constancy or perseverance in praise, prayer and petition is crucial to a healthy and God-honouring prayer life. Paul exhorts these Colossian believers to pray – and to keep praying regularly. To remain constant in their communications with their heavenly Father. We must never cease to pray for a particular matter unless it becomes clear that it is not the Lord's will that we should pursue that matter any further.

To this end, consider Paul's appeal to God to remove his "*thorn in the flesh*". God answered this prayer in a manner Paul had not expected: "... *My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness*" (2 Cor. 12:9 ESV). Paul's thorn would ensure the apostle's humble dependence on God to uphold and provide for him. In his infinite wisdom, God would demonstrate his mighty strength or power

⁸⁰ *slave/servant*: The Greek word translated "*servant*" (δούλου, δουλου) in Philippians 2:7 can equally be translated as "*slave*". The word means *slave, slavish or servile* [UBS⁵; Also, BDAG: 259]

in Paul's life through the apostle's weaknesses – not through any supposed or actual power or strength of Paul's own.

^{2b} ... being watchful in it... (ESV)

Not only were the Colossians to persevere in prayer, but Paul also exhorts them to be “watchful” or “on their guard” in prayer. They were to be diligent or alert while they prayed. They were to fix their hearts and minds on the Lord alone at such times, not being distracted by circumstances or events around them. They were to be particularly alert or diligent against the wiles of the devil. Even in prayer, the evil one could tempt them, entice them, or cause them to lose heart in their intercessions. Such attacks and tactics could be expected. However, these “fiery darts of the evil one” (Eph. 6:16c) could be repelled by the power of the Holy Spirit and the truths of God's all-powerful Word (John 17:17): Attacking with the “sword of the Spirit” (Eph. 6:17), while being defended by “the shield of faith” (Eph. 6:16a).

^{2c} ... with thanksgiving (ESV).

No prayer to the Father through his Son would be complete without sincere praise and thanksgiving to God for all he has done for us in Christ Jesus. He granted us (spiritual) life and gifted us with life eternal by calling us to know and believe in his Son. He provides us with all things needful. He holds in his hands the life that he has imparted to us (Ps. 31:15). Nothing can happen to us except by his will and purpose for our lives. Our health, strength, abilities, talents, and gifts all come from him, and he can withdraw them at any moment. How much, then, do the Lord's people need to thank Him daily for all the generous benefits he bestows upon his beloved children? Moreover, even if the Lord should withdraw some of these blessings – as happened with Job – we must still thank and glorify God for doing what is right in his sight.

COLOSSIANS 4:3

³ At the same time, pray also for us, that God may open to us a door for the word, to declare the mystery of Christ, on account of which I am in prison—

When Paul wrote this letter to the Colossian church, the apostle's movements were restricted due to his house arrest in Rome. However, although unable to make personal visits to the various local churches, Paul communicated with them through his letters, delivered to the churches by the apostle's delegates.

Paul had never visited the Colossian church. The believers there had received instructions from the apostle via his delegates or associates, especially Epaphras. Epaphras, a Colossian by birth, had brought the gospel message to these Colossian people. This faithful servant of God taught the Colossians the fundamental truths of the gospel message. Possibly, some Colossian residents had previously heard Paul preaching in Ephesus during the apostle's prolonged visit to that city. Thus, some of these Colossians may have been converted at Ephesus or elsewhere and returned with the good news to Colossae. Nevertheless, Paul credits Epaphras for instructing them and others more fully in the way of truth (Col. 1:7).

Although unknown to most of them personally, Paul exhorts the Colossian believers to intercede for him in prayer. His concern was that, by their prayers, the Lord might open doors for the apostle to proclaim Christ more widely. The apostle's house arrest did not prevent him from meeting with certain other people and expounding the gospel to them. However, Paul longed for greater freedom to preach Christ by being released from the present restrictions on his liberty. Thus, Paul appeals to the Colossian church for their intercession with God on his behalf.

The apostle desires the freedom to declare much more widely the mystery ⁸¹ of Christ: this being Christ, the hope of glory, dwelling within each person whom the Holy Spirit brings to repentance and faith through the preaching of the gospel.

COLOSSIANS 4:4

⁴ that I may make it clear, which is how I ought to speak.

Paul earnestly desires to present the gospel freely and with the utmost clarity. He wants his hearers (or readers) to fully understand the message he proclaims concerning salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. Granted, a complete understanding of these spiritual truths requires the presence and power of the Holy Spirit to regenerate the soul and illumine the mind. No matter how clearly, powerfully or convincingly Paul – or anyone else – proclaimed the gospel message, no spiritually dead person could understand and respond to that message unless they first experienced the regenerating power of the Holy Spirit.

COLOSSIANS 4:5

⁵ Walk in wisdom toward outsiders, making the best use of the time.

Amid a hostile and unbelieving world, the Colossian believers were to show the utmost integrity in their daily lives. The world at large did not judge Christians so much by what they said as by how they lived.

⁸¹ *mystery*: In the New Testament, the word translated “mystery” frequently refers to some truth or truths previously hidden, obscured, or undisclosed in the counsels of God. One example is the “mystery” of Christ whereby—through the gospel—both Jewish and Gentile Christians are united in the church as equal members of one body in the Lord. On this occasion in Colossians, the “mystery” refers to Christ indwelling each believer in the person of his Holy Spirit whom God grants as a deposit or guarantee of what is yet to be completed in all its fullness of glory. This personal indwelling of the Spirit is the believer’s “hope” or full assurance of the culmination of glory awaiting us in heaven. These examples of Scriptural “mysteries” bear no relation to mysticism in any form. (GL)

Observing a professing Christian who failed to live a godly life and perhaps engaged in overt sinful practices, an unbeliever would quickly condemn that Christian as a hypocrite: one who, while professing faith in Christ, denied Christ by their compromising speech, actions, or lifestyle.

To this end, the apostle exhorts the Colossian saints to consider how they lived, i.e. how they conducted themselves in the world, especially before unbelievers. Thus, Paul declares,

^{5a} Walk in wisdom toward outsiders... (ESV)

This wisdom involved prudence, integrity, truthfulness, discernment, consideration and complete uprightness of speech, expressions, deeds, and everyday living. Believers were called upon to represent the Lord Jesus Christ in all sincerity, humility, honesty, love and compassion.

^{5b} ... making the best use of the time (ESV),

Elsewhere, Paul declares,

Eph. 5:16 KJV

Redeeming the time, because the days are evil

The Psalmist exclaims,

Ps. 31:15 ESV

“My times are in your [God’s] hand....”

Neither the Colossian believers nor we know how much time or how many days the Lord will grant to us in life. We may not always possess the same degree of health, strength, ability, or spiritual gifts, as we do now. Thus, the apostle encourages these saints to utilise the days that God allots to them to the very best of their ability, be their life on earth long or short. The Colossians were to live every day to honour and glorify their Redeemer and Lord – and so also should we. This profitable use of our allotted time involves meeting regularly to worship and praise the Lord and to live worthy of his name in the world outside. It also involves serving him faithfully with the talents, abilities and gifts he has given us and in the area of service to which he has called us or in which we are engaged.

COLOSSIANS 4:6

⁶ Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person.

Paul encourages the believers at Colossae to show courtesy and respect when speaking to other people. Bearing in mind that God created every human being in his own image (*see further on Excursus below*) – albeit since marred by the fall – believers should consider one another and people outside the church as

God's unique creation. Therefore, their speech should not seek to humiliate a person created in God's image. Thus, the people of God especially should always speak to others with humility, courtesy and understanding. Never should a child of God seek to verbally abuse, misrepresent, or otherwise scandalise any other person.

Due consideration and restraint do not exclude justified and constructive criticism to correct another person in a spirit of love, humility and empathy. Nor does it exclude the exercise of justified church discipline, whereby an offender in the church may need to be rebuked frankly by the church leadership. Again, this should be done in a spirit of love and humility – bearing in mind that the leadership should be expressing only the mind and will of Christ, as revealed in the Bible alone, for the offender's spiritual good and that of the entire fellowship.

Paul says the believer's language toward others should be "*seasoned with salt*". Salt purifies and preserves. However, the apostle is not encouraging hurtful or offensive language toward other people. Such unjustified verbal heartlessness would be utterly contrary to the teaching of the Lord Jesus and his apostles. Instead, the apostle is talking about maintaining a correct balance in truthful speech, *maintaining the truth in love and compassion*, even when hearing the truth may upset the hearer. In this instance, the wound caused by truthful but gracious⁸² speech may be aimed at causing that person to seek the Lord's healing or forgiveness for a particular matter. However, speech "*seasoned with salt*" must never amount to speech *saturated with caustic soda*!

Although used in a different context, the Lord Jesus spoke clearly of salt's positive effects on the part of his followers:

Matthew 5:13 ESV

¹³ "You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled under people's feet."

Here, "*salt*" speaks metaphorically of a believer's beneficial and purifying influence on society. By the integrity of their lives and their love for others, the Lord's followers exert a challenging influence on those still living according to the dictates and desires of their fallen, sinful nature and with little or no regard for the things of God. Thus, the Lord encourages his redeemed people to show forth their good works from a pure or sanctified lifestyle, of which unbelievers can take note.

⁸² *gracious [speech]*: Gk., ἐν εν, (in, with or by) Gk., χάριτι chariti (grace); i.e. "with grace" or "gracious".

*Excursus**Created in God's Image*

God created every human being in his own image (Gen. 1:26-27; 5:1). The word “image” relates to moral and spiritual characteristics, not physical ones. God is Spirit (John 4:24). As such, bodily characteristics or attributes do not pertain to him. Often, the Scriptures attribute physical/bodily attributes (hands, feet, eyes, ears, etc.) to the LORD God. However, these expressions are examples of *anthropomorphisms* – where some characteristics of God are portrayed figuratively in language that finite human beings can understand. Only via the incarnation did God’s Son – the God-Man – assume perfect physical human attributes as part of his dual (divine-human) nature (Phil. 2:5-8).

Furthermore, being created in God’s image does not imply that God bestows on us any of his *incommunicable* attributes. Such divine attributes include omnipotence, omniscience, and omnipresence. Nor does it mean that we become godlike replicas or “little gods” with some or all of God’s divine attributes, as is claimed today by certain false teachers. However, we *do* become increasingly Christlike in a moral and spiritual sense as God’s Holy Spirit sanctifies us through the Word and through prayer.

God’s image in men and women relates to the bestowal according to our limited capacities as created, finite human beings of some of God’s *communicable* attributes. Such attributes or characteristics include an appropriate measure of spirituality (our immortal souls), intelligence, will, reasoning ability, emotions, a sense of right and wrong governed by conscience, responsibility, and duty (morality/ethics). These God-given characteristics also include an intrinsic awareness of our Creator’s existence, power, and glory (revealed in our conscience and in the created heavens and earth) (Rom. 1:19-20). These spiritual, rational and emotional qualities constitute God’s image in man.

Due to the sin and rebellion of our first parents, all mankind has inherited a sinful and wholly depraved nature. Thus, when Adam and Eve conceived Seth, the Scripture tells us that Seth bore the fallen, sinful image and likeness of Adam. This fallen, sinful image is conveyed to all descendants of Adam and Eve, i.e. all humanity (Gen. 5:3).

The sinful nature inherited from Adam alienates everyone from their Creator, making them God’s enemies. Sin also brings upon all mankind *spiritual* death (Eph. 2:1-3) and alienation or separation from God. Consequently, although alive *physically*, every human being worldwide has suffered a significant impairment of God’s image within them, but not the total loss of that image. Indeed, everyone

reconciled to God in Christ Jesus has that image restored by the Holy Spirit through sanctification. Ultimately, this process will result in their glorification, and perfect restoration once called into God's holy and majestic presence. (GL)

.....

COLOSSIANS 4:7-8

⁷ Tychicus will tell you all about my activities. He is a beloved brother and faithful minister and fellow servant in the Lord. ⁸ I have sent him to you for this very purpose, that you may know how we are and that he may encourage your hearts,

The apostle Paul would be sending this letter to the church at Colossae by the hands of his delegates. These emissaries would include Tychicus, a faithful servant of the Lord and a valued aid to the apostle Paul (Eph. 6:21-22; see also Acts 20:4; Col. 4:7; 2 Tim. 4:12; Titus 3:12).

Tychicus had been associated with Paul over a prolonged period, and he was probably the principal letter carrier on this occasion. Possibly, also, Tychicus would be carrying Paul's letters addressed to some other local churches or individuals.

Tychicus would familiarise the Colossian believers with all that had been happening lately with Paul and his associates. Of particular interest to the Colossians would be Paul's present welfare while under house arrest in Rome and the likelihood of his early release and continuation of his ministry to the churches.

These appointed delegates ensured that Paul's letters to this and other local churches were delivered safely and were read aloud to the assembled believers. If necessary, these delegates would elaborate on any points of uncertainty, clarifying Paul's meaning concerning the contents of his letters. Although not themselves commissioned to speak or teach infallibly in the name of the Lord Jesus – as were Paul and the Twelve – these apostolic delegates could relay to the churches the apostles' God-inspired teaching as expressed in and through their various letters.

COLOSSIANS 4:9

⁹ and with him Onesimus, our faithful and beloved brother, who is one of you. They will tell you of everything that has taken place here.

Like Epaphras (v.12), Onesimus was a believer hailing from Colossae. Paul's letter to Philemon is concerned directly with Onesimus and his status as Philemon's slave. At some point, Onesimus had been converted through Paul's ministry while the latter was imprisoned or under house arrest (Philem. 10). Now, however, Onesimus had experienced the love of God in his heart and life and was endeavouring to follow Christ faithfully.

Onesimus accompanied the delegates travelling to Colossae with Paul's letter. Paul had also written a personal letter to the converted slave's owner, Philemon – appealing to him to accept Onesimus back into his household as a brother beloved of the Lord and to treat him accordingly. Philemon was a believer in the Lord Jesus and was well known in Colossae for his faithfulness to Christ and kindness to other believers.

COLOSSIANS 4:10

¹⁰ Aristarchus my fellow prisoner greets you, and Mark the cousin of Barnabas (concerning whom you have received instructions – if he comes to you, welcome him),

Like Mark and Jesus Justus (v.11), and like Paul himself, Aristarchus was a Christian of Jewish heritage. Aristarchus was one of Paul's travelling companions. In common with another of Paul's travelling companions, Gaius, both men came from Macedonia (Acts 19:29) – Aristarchus from Thessalonica (Acts 27:2) and Gaius from Derbe (Acts 20:4).

Paul refers to Aristarchus as "*my fellow prisoner*". It is uncertain whether or not this is to be understood literally or figuratively, but the former seems more likely in the present context.

Paul refers to Mark. John Mark, a cousin of Barnabas, accompanied Paul on his first missionary journey. However, Mark deserted Paul in Pamphylia, returning to Jerusalem before the mission had been completed (Acts 13:13; 15:36-40). Due to this, Paul was unwilling to take Mark with him on his second missionary journey. Later, however, Paul and Mark were reconciled, and both continued serving in the Lord's work (cf. 2 Tim. 4:11). John Mark is generally considered the writer of Mark's Gospel.

We do not know the details of the instructions concerning John Mark. However, Paul now considers him a reliable and trustworthy servant of God. Therefore, if Mark should ever visit them, the Colossian church should welcome him.

COLOSSIANS 4:11

¹¹ and Jesus who is called Justus. These are the only men of the circumcision among my fellow workers for the kingdom of God, and they have been a comfort to me.

^{11a} ... and Jesus who is called Justus... (ESV)

(Gk., ...καὶ Ἰησοῦς ὁ λεγόμενος Ἰουστός, [NTG; see also BDAG 472,5])

The name “*Jesus*” means “*Jehovah* [YHWH] *is Salvation*” (transliteration).⁸³

“*Jesus*” (O.T. “*Jeshua*” / “*Jehoshua*” / “*Joshua*”) was a fairly common name in Paul’s day. Although three instances of the name “*Justus*” are recorded in the New Testament, nothing more is known of this *Jesus Justus* than what Paul mentions here. Paul identifies this fellow worker as a Christian of Jewish heritage who greatly comforted and assisted the apostle.

COLOSSIANS 4:12

¹² Epaphras, who is one of you, a servant of Christ Jesus, greets you, always struggling on your behalf in his prayers, that you may stand mature and fully assured in all the will of God.

Also sending his greetings to the Colossian church was their own church leader and teacher, Epaphras. Epaphras, from Colossae, was a well-respected instructor in that local church and the churches of Laodicea and Hierapolis (v.13). All three churches lay within the Lycus Valley area.

Epaphras had nurtured the Colossian church (and the others) from its infancy, teaching the believers all that the Lord Jesus and the apostles had made known. It is unclear how and when Epaphras was converted, although it was probably through Paul’s ministry. However, Epaphras had shown himself to be a faithful and earnest servant of God, especially regarding the Colossian church. He had been their regular

⁸³ *Jesus, the Christ or Messiah*, bears this name above all others. Jesus Christ, the incarnate Son of God, is the supreme bearer of God’s salvation to all of God’s redeemed children. Thus, he is distinguished from all other bearers of the name “*Jesus*” by the appellation “*Christ*” (Gk., Χριστοῦ, CHristou) or “*Messiah*” (Heb., מָשִׁיחַ;). The title “*Lord*” (Gk., κύριον, kurion) as in the “*Lord Jesus Christ*” (Gk., κύριον Ἰησοῦν Χριστόν) is also used to emphasise the Son of God’s absolute pre-eminence above all other names in heaven and on earth (cf. Phil. 2:5-11). (GL)

preacher and teacher for some time, while – as yet – the apostle Paul had not met most of the Colossian believers in person.

^{12c} ... always struggling on your behalf in his prayers... (ESV)

Epaphras took his duties and responsibilities toward the Colossian church very seriously. Among other matters, he prayed consistently and earnestly for each member of this fellowship. Paul uses the term “*struggling*”⁸⁴ to describe the intensity of Epaphras’ intercession on behalf of these saints. Thus, the apostle Paul indicates that Epaphras *agonised* or *wrestled* in prayer for these believers. These are the same terms used by Paul himself when describing how intensely he prays for all the churches in his care.

Paul had good reason for speaking so highly of Epaphras to the Colossian church. Although not a directly commissioned apostle like Paul or the Twelve, Epaphras was a genuine believer and servant of God. Everything he taught was in line with the teaching of the Lord Jesus and his apostles. In contrast to the false teachers, Epaphras did not seek to add to God’s Word or subtract from it, nor did he seek to introduce additional experiences supposedly necessary or beneficial to life as a Christian. Instead, he was building up the church on the solid and sure foundation of Christ alone by his faithful teaching. Thus Paul seeks to commend Epaphras and indicate his complete approval for his life and service. Thereby, Paul encouraged the Colossian church to hold fast to sound doctrine as Epaphras had taught them and not to be sidetracked or diverted from the truth by those who would seductively introduce destructive heresies, fantasies, fictions or fables.

COLOSSIANS 4:13

¹³ For I bear him witness that he has worked hard for you and for those in Laodicea and in Hierapolis.

Epaphras did not confine his strenuous labours for the Lord to the Colossian church alone. As Paul could attest, Epaphras had assumed responsibility for the local churches at Laodicea and Hierapolis. Thus, not only was this faithful servant of God discharging his duties to his own local church, but he was also feeding the flock of several other churches in that region, including those at Laodicea and Hierapolis. This ministry to these churches was vital as Paul had not yet written letters specifically to these fellowships, although he had prepared a letter for the church at Laodicea (v.16).

COLOSSIANS 4:14

¹⁴ Luke the beloved physician greets you, as does Demas.

⁸⁴ *struggling* (or *agonizing*): Gk., ἀγωνιζόμενος, agōnizomenos; to strive, fight, struggle [UBS5-T].

Luke (the writer of both the Gospel of Luke and Acts [of the Apostles]) also sends greetings to the Colossian believers. Luke is described as a physician. He was not one of the twelve apostles, but, as the Lord's servant, he accompanied the apostle Paul on several of his journeys. Even now, he was present with Paul while that apostle was under house arrest for the gospel's sake.

Demas also sends greetings to the Colossian church. Demas, however, was later to forsake his profession of faith, deserting Paul and returning to the world. This action demonstrates that a person can profess faith in Christ and serve in the church in an official capacity but ultimately abandon the faith. Of course, it also demonstrates that Demas' faith was not genuine. He may have convinced others of the supposed genuineness of his faith in Christ – as did Judas Iscariot. (Only Jesus knew from the outset the true state of Iscariot's unregenerate heart. The disciples thought he was a genuine believer in Christ. Iscariot ultimately proved that he was no follower of Christ and no child of God but merely an imposter and a child of the devil; i.e. an unregenerate person masquerading as a believer while acting under Satan's evil influence).

No genuinely born-again believer can ever fall away from God's grace and mercy. Nor can they forfeit God's gift to them of eternal salvation through faith in Christ. They forever remain eternally secure. Only those who have never experienced regeneration by the Holy Spirit are capable of deserting their so-called (superficial) faith in Christ. Such was Judas Iscariot; such was Demas, and such also were Ananias and Sapphira, who lied to the Holy Spirit (Acts 5:3ff). In these cases – as in many other similar cases – their heart was not right with God. They had never been saved or justified. They were still in their sins, abiding under God's wrath for their impenitence and unbelief (Rom. 1:18): condemned for all eternity, notwithstanding their false profession and outward show of piety.

Sadly, this is still true of many *professing* "Christians" in the church today. Not all who claim allegiance to Christ belong to Christ. Though clad in fine clothes or arrayed in holy vestments, not all are the regenerate and redeemed children of God. Many imposters have infiltrated the church. These imposters can be found among ordinary church members and also among the highest orders of church leaders. Such charlatans are not counted among the genuine people of God. Although outwardly appearing ever so holy or pious, they are wolves in sheep's clothing, ravening wolves tearing the flock apart with their evil or false teachings, erroneous doctrines and vile pronouncements and practices (Matt. 7:15).

Such men and women stand before God, accused and condemned for their hypocritical lifestyle and ungodly teachings (Luke 13:27). Their destiny will be the same as that prepared for the devil and the wicked angels (Matt. 25:41; Rev. 20:10; cf. 2 Pet. 2:4).

COLOSSIANS 4:15

¹⁵ Give my greetings to the brothers at Laodicea, and to Nympha and the church in her house.

Paul asks the Colossian saints to pass on his greetings to the believers in the Laodicean church – another fellowship of believers located in the Lycus Valley. Some of these brothers from Laodicea possibly visited Colossae when Paul wrote his letter. The apostle had already instructed the Colossians church to forward their letter from him to the Laodicean church once they had read, and perhaps copied, it. Additionally, Paul had written directly to the church at Laodicea (v.16), but this letter is no longer extant.

At this time, almost all the Christian assemblies assumed the form of house churches. Much later, during the third century AD, they began to build structures specifically for Christian praise and worship. Until then, believers would gather to worship in house churches, suitable rented premises,⁸⁵ or even outdoors (Acts 12:12; Rom. 16:5; 1 Cor. 16:19; Cf. Acts 16:13-15,16).

Nympha⁸⁶ had offered a part of her home as a local house church. Presumably, she was a reasonably well-to-do lady with ample space within her home to accommodate all who wished to gather in the Lord's name.

Similarly, other individuals throughout these regions made their homes available as house churches for the growing number of Christian worshippers. Initially, the synagogue was available as a place of worship. Indeed, many God-fearing gentiles had previously associated with the synagogue worshippers. Furthermore, on many occasions, the apostles preached in various synagogues to Jewish worshippers (Acts 13:4, 14–43; 14:1; 17:1–4, 10–12; 18:4).

Nevertheless, due to the antipathy of some Jewish people against the Christian faith and the differences in beliefs and practices, the synagogue was not a suitable location for followers of the Lord Jesus. However, it would be many years before dedicated buildings could be established for Christian worshippers. (Incidentally, the “church”⁸⁷ (local and universal) relates to the *people* of God, not to the building in which these people meet to worship.)

COLOSSIANS 4:16

¹⁶ And when this letter has been read among you, have it also read in the church of the Laodiceans; and see that you also read the letter from Laodicea.

⁸⁵ *suitable rented premises*: For example, when preaching in the synagogue became untenable, the apostle Paul moved to the hall of Tyrannus. There, on a daily basis over the next two years, the apostle taught Christian disciples. Many other (non-believers) who were attending these meetings also heard the words of life proclaimed by the apostle Paul (Acts 19:6–10).

⁸⁶ *Nympha*: There is some uncertainty about the gender of this person. Accented as Νύμφαν, the name is feminine, from Μύμφα; accented Νυμφᾶς, it is masculine, from Νυμφᾶς. Most Greek manuscripts lacked accents. (Moo, Douglas J., *Pillar New Testament Commentaries, Colossian & Philemon*, 2008:349 fn 68.)

⁸⁷ *Church*: “ἐκκλησία”, *ekklesiā* meaning, congregation, assembly, or church. The expression relates to all those *people* whom God has called or will call to himself worldwide. The “church” consists of all God’s chosen *people* (not buildings or denominations) throughout the world.

A number of believers gathering to worship in these house churches may not have been fully literate. Thus, it was usual practice for such letters to be read aloud so that the hearers could understand and appreciate the contents of the apostles' letters. The person who read out the letter – usually the letter bearer (in this instance, *Tychicus* (vv.7-8 above)) – would also expound the contents of the letter, explaining clearly to the hearers what Paul, or another apostolic writer, had meant by the wording of these messages.

Once the letter had been read aloud in Colossae, it would then be passed on to the church at Laodicea for similar public reading. (As in other locations, the church at Laodicea may have consisted of several house churches.) The Laodiceans, in turn, would send their letter from Paul to the Colossian church. This exchange of apostolic letters may have been more commonplace among these local churches than is often realised.

COLOSSIANS 4:17

¹⁷ And say to Archippus, “See that you fulfil the ministry that you have received in the Lord.”

We know very little about *Archippus*. In Philemon 2, Paul refers to Archippus as a “fellow soldier”. Using this military metaphor may imply that Archippus was a regular servant of God engaged in the Lord’s work. The exact form of his ministry is unknown. However, Paul encourages him to persevere in this ministry and not become disheartened or discouraged. It is possible, but not certain that Archippus failed to complete the work he had begun for the Lord, or was becoming discouraged in that work. Thus, Paul feels it necessary to urge him to endure in the Lord’s service. Admittedly, however, this is speculation. We cannot precisely determine what the apostle had in mind from the text or the tone of Paul’s exhortation.

COLOSSIANS 4:18

¹⁸ I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand. Remember my chains. Grace be with you.

As was customary, Paul would have dictated this letter to a scribe or secretary (*amanuensis*), who would have written down the apostle’s inspired words on scrolls. Thus, since most of the letter’s contents would not be in Paul’s handwriting, the apostle appended his handwritten signature at the end of his letters. This signature authenticated the entire letter as having come from Paul the apostle – and, therefore, an entirely genuine apostolic document.

Paul requests that the church at Colossae remember his present condition. At the time, the apostle was in “*chains*” due to proclaiming the gospel freely and fearlessly among the people. Whether or not Paul is speaking literally or metaphorically about being in “chains” is uncertain in the immediate context. It is undoubtedly true that the apostle had been bound, chained, or otherwise restrained while in prison. However, at other times, it appears that Paul was under house arrest. Thus, the apostle had more liberty to receive visitors and speak with them and teach them. Of course, this may represent different stages of Paul’s imprisonment, beginning with more severe restraints (chains or similar) but later being relaxed to lesser restrictions affording a measure of liberty, such as house arrest. Outside the confines of a prison cell, house arrest afforded greater liberty to the apostle, permitting him to communicate more freely with other people. However, given his custodial status, Paul may have had to remain chained to a guard.

Paul finishes with one of his usual greetings: “... *Grace be with you.*”

Paul is speaking here of God’s immeasurable grace to all his elect. The undeserving love and mercy of a holy, righteous and just God who bestows his favour upon the most undeserving sinners. By that grace, he chooses them and calls them by his Spirit to a saving knowledge of his Son. By that grace, he adopts his redeemed people as his children and heirs – joint heirs with the Son of his love. By that grace, he keeps his people eternally secure until the day of final redemption, when – by his grace – they will be glorified and received into his presence for all the ages of eternity: From grace to grace, leading ultimately to God’s eternal glory and renown.

END OF COLOSSIANS

PHILEMON

FOLLOWS BELOW

PHILEMON: INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

AUTHOR

The apostle Paul wrote this letter to Philemon regarding the latter's bondservant or slave,⁸⁸ Onesimus. Paul was under house arrest at the time, probably in Rome. He had met Onesimus while in custody, and at some point, Onesimus had been converted to faith in Christ. Now, together with Tychicus, Onesimus was on his way back to his master, Philemon, bearing this letter from Paul.

Philemon is believed to have lived in or near Colossae. This once-prosperous town was now in decline, surpassed by other towns, Laodicea and Hierapolis, situated not far distant. Three small cities – Colossae, Laodicea and Hierapolis – lay within easy reach of one another in the Lycus River Valley, the River Lycus branching from the River Meander.

PURPOSE

On his return from Rome to Colossae, Onesimus was accompanied by Tychicus who was a fellow servant in the gospel with Paul and others. Tychicus was carrying a letter from Paul addressed to the church at Colossae (*the Letter to the Colossians*). We know that a church met at Philemon's home in or near Colossae and this may have been where the Colossian believers assembled for prayer, praise and worship. However, it is not impossible that the letter addressed to the Colossian church may have been intended for a different house church meeting in the same town. (Specific buildings for Christian worship were not yet available to believers.⁸⁹)

Philemon and his household owned a sizeable dwelling and land. He also owned at least one bondservant named *Onesimus* (meaning "profitable" or "useful"). It is unclear why Onesimus left Philemon's household and travelled to Rome or under what circumstances. The bondservant may have known about Paul

⁸⁸ *bondservant (or slave)*: In Paul's day, bondservants or slaves did not necessarily come from specific classes or ethnic groups of people. Bondservants/slaves could come from almost any strata of society or any ethnic group. Slaves could have originally been from the "upper classes" as well as the "middle" or "lower classes". They could have come from any nationality. They could have been consigned to slavery as prisoners-of-war—and irrespective of their former military standing, rank or office. Again, some "higher class" people who had fallen on hard times would voluntarily sell themselves into slavery in order to survive with food and clothing. Nevertheless, slavery in any form was a perverse evil and it was never God's intention for anyone—because, originally, all mankind had been created in his image and were equal in status with one another. However, God sees all impenitent human beings as being *slaves to sin* and in need of redemption—and there are no exceptions due to rank, status or any other characteristic. All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. All unrepentant mankind remain *in slavery to sin and their sinful nature* unless and until regenerated and delivered from that condition by the sovereign grace of God. (GL)

⁸⁹ *... buildings ... not yet available*: Public buildings (halls, etc.) could be rented for this purpose if a town or city did not have a sufficiently large private home available to use as a house church. A few larger private properties incorporated a sufficiently large hall within the building where people could meet for worship (commonly used by Jewish worshippers where there was no synagogue). Some believers in Colossae were able to gather at Philemon's large home. Others would gather at similar house churches elsewhere. However, in Ephesus, Paul was obliged to rent the hall of Tyrannus for 2 years to fulfil part of his ministry in that city. (GL)

through his master, Philemon and was aware of the apostle's present location and circumstances. Perhaps Onesimus believed that Paul could help him with his master, Philemon.

There is no suggestion of abuse by Philemon or any form of maltreatment concerning Onesimus. Indeed, as a Christian, it is likely that Philemon treated Onesimus well and highly regarded him as his servant. Not all masters at this time were abusive toward their slaves or bondservants (although many were). Many masters held these servants in high regard and valued their service. Some were elevated to favourable positions, and a few were exalted to high offices of state (e.g. Joseph – formerly sold into slavery in Egypt – rose to second in command of Egypt under Pharaoh).

Onesimus may have wronged his master somehow, thus explaining his leaving home and seeking Paul's involvement. However, the nature of the bondservant's wrongdoing is not stated explicitly in the letter. Nevertheless, Paul may be implying some form of misconduct when he says to Philemon concerning Onesimus, *"Formerly he was useless to you...."* (v.11 ESV.) Another remark made by Paul is, *"If he has wronged you at all, or owes you anything, charge that to my account. ..."* (v.18 ESV.) Taken by itself, this remark may hint at potential offences. However, it could be merely suppositional – not necessarily implying any actual misconduct.

At that point, Onesimus may not have been a Christian. However, after spending some time in Paul's company, he was converted to Christ. Thereafter, Onesimus proved to be of considerable assistance to the imprisoned apostle. Paul desired that the now "profitable" or "useful" Onesimus should remain as his helper in Rome. However, the apostle knew that outstanding matters with Onesimus' master, Philemon, needed to be resolved. Therefore, Paul wrote this letter to Philemon and sent it to him along with his servant, Onesimus.

However, Paul was not sending a wayward bondservant back to his master, only to resume the same relationship with his servant as before. Onesimus was now a Christian – God's much loved and re-deemed child. Onesimus would be returning to resume his former duties and responsibilities. However, now Onesimus was no longer merely a slave. Although his duties toward his master remained, Philemon – himself a Christian – was to recognise Onesimus as his brother in Christ.

In God's sight, all those who are "in Christ" are fully equal in status and value with one another. Their rank, station, or status in this world is of no significance in the kingdom of God. In the spiritual realm, God does not recognise distinctions of race, colour, religion, nationality, ethnicity, sex or any other distinction. For all those "in Christ", these distinctions are set aside. In the believer's glorified spiritual body yet to come, such distinctions will be wholly inappropriate and unnecessary.

As individual human beings, all people are equal in the eyes of the Lord. Thus, Paul appeals to Philemon to treat Onesimus appropriately as his brother in the Lord Jesus Christ and to consider Onesimus as a person of equal value and standing with himself. Yes, Onesimus would remain a bondservant (until manumission) regarding his **role** in Philemon's household. However, regarding Onesimus' **status** as a person, the bondservant stood on precisely the same level as his master, Philemon. Furthermore, both Philemon and Onesimus were bondslaves of a higher Master in heaven. To that Master and Lord – Jesus Christ – both men were in subjection and would be held accountable for their service to their heavenly Master.

Paul could have used his apostolic authority to command Philemon to receive Onesimus back and to treat him well. However, as is so frequently the case with Paul, he refrains from using his apostolic authority to this end. Instead, in this short letter, the apostle appeals sincerely and diplomatically to Philemon to consider Onesimus' new status in Christ and act accordingly. Paul does not place Philemon under any form of duress. He leaves the decision regarding the re-acceptance of Onesimus in Philemon's hands. As a believer in Christ, Philemon must determine the right course of action – knowing that the Lord and Master of both men will hold Philemon to account for whatever decision he makes.

DATE

It is believed that Paul wrote his letters to Colossae and Philemon at approximately the same time. Both letters appear to have been carried together by the same letter bearers – Tychicus and Onesimus.

An earthquake around A.D. 64 destroyed the town of Colossae. Therefore, Paul must have written his letter to Colossae sometime earlier. Assuming Paul was being held in custody in Rome (rather than Ephesus or Caesarea, which some commentators believe), then the date of the letter would be around A.D. 60–62. This date was the approximate period when Paul was thought to be held in Rome, awaiting an appearance before the Emperor, Nero.

PHILEMON

PAUL'S PERSONAL GREETINGS***Philemon 1–3*****PHILEMON 1**

¹ Paul, a prisoner for Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother. To Philemon our beloved fellow worker,

Writing from prison, probably in Rome,⁹⁰ Paul greets Philemon, who is known to the apostle. Philemon's household was located somewhere in or near Colossae.

Paul describes Philemon as “... *our beloved fellow worker*.” Philemon, therefore, was not only a friend of Paul but also a believer and a servant of the Lord Jesus Christ. Possibly, Philemon occupied a position of responsibility within the local church. He may also have served the Lord in other ways, as seems to be apparent from Paul's reference to Philemon as “our beloved fellow worker”.

Philemon and his family were relatively wealthy. They had a sizeable dwelling and attached property or lands. They had at least one bonded servant or slave, of which more shortly.

PHILEMON 2

² and Apphia our sister and Archippus our fellow soldier, and the church in your house:

Paul continues by greeting two other believers: Apphia and Archippus. We know very little about either. Apphia was a Christian, as was Archippus. Paul addresses Archippus as “*our fellow soldier*”, implying that

⁹⁰ *probably in Rome*: Other possibilities sometimes suggested are Ephesus and to a lesser extent, Caesarea. Rome seems the most likely location (but see commentaries and other resources for alternative views). Paul, of course, was in prison because he preached the gospel fearlessly. This bold preaching had grievously offended many people who had heard Paul, insomuch that they complained officially to the authorities. This formal grievance resulted in the apostle's detention sometimes for his own safety, and at other times for further investigation into the charges alleged against him. On one such appearance before a local governor (*Porcius Festus* (Acts 24:27)), the apostle felt constrained to appeal to Caesar, this being his right as a Roman citizen (Acts 25:11-12). Thus, after some time, Paul was sent to Rome to await his appearance and defence before the Emperor (Nero, until A.D. 68). Traditional sources report that Paul was beheaded in the Ostian Way about A.D. 67 or early 68. However, the time or nature of Paul's death is not recorded by Luke in Acts. It may in fact have occurred at an earlier date, around the time of the Neroian persecution of Christians (c. A.D. 64). (GL)

he too was an active servant of the Lord Jesus Christ. Some commentators believe that Apphia was the wife of Philemon and either the mother or sister of Archippus.

Finally, Paul extends his greetings to the church in Philemon's house. This home, then, was one of the house churches found at that time in Colossae and many other places. There may have been other similar house churches in or around Colossae itself.

It would seem that Paul's letter to the church at Colossae – as distinct from this personal letter to Philemon – may have gone to a different location from Philemon's house church. We assume this because Philemon is not mentioned in the opening greetings of the letter to the Colossian church. Nevertheless, the various house churches around these areas would be in regular contact with one another.

During this period, no Christian-owned purpose-built structures existed in any towns or cities where a church fellowship could hold their meetings. Almost all church gatherings occurred in certain believers' homes or other suitably-sized premises. For example, when Paul could no longer preach regularly in the Jewish synagogue in Ephesus, he rented the lecture hall of Tyrannus for two years to preach and teach there (Acts 19:9).

PHILEMON 3

³ Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Paul extends his traditional blessing to the church in Philemon's house. Grace (χάρις charis) and peace (εἰρήνη eirēnē) speaking of the matchless grace of God and the unsurpassed peace flowing from a personal saving knowledge of God's Son and full fellowship with the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. In this verse, Paul mentions "*God our Father*" (the Father of all who believe ... "*and the Lord Jesus Christ*" (the Saviour and Shepherd of all God's elect people everywhere.

The Holy Spirit is not explicitly mentioned here, but he is prominent throughout the apostle Paul's various letters to the churches. God calls his chosen people to faith in Christ through the person and work of the Holy Spirit. By his divine agency and power, they are regenerated to newness of life and are enabled to embrace Christ by faith, *freely and willingly*. Through his indwelling power, the Holy Spirit leads the children of God into all truth. Without the Holy Spirit's presence and power, it is impossible to fully or accurately grasp the spiritual truths enshrined in God's Word, the Bible.

PAUL THANKS GOD FOR PHILEMON***Philemon 4–7*****PHILEMON 4**

⁴ I thank my God always when I remember you in my prayers,

The apostle Paul always remained faithful and fervent in prayer. Thus, he assures Philemon that he remembers him regularly before God's throne. As a brother in Christ, it would be natural for Paul to pray for fellow believers and their families regularly, and likewise, they would pray for Paul.

It is noteworthy that Paul specifies his thankfulness to God for these believers and for making them joint heirs with the Son in the Father's kingdom (Rom. 8:17).

PHILEMON 5

⁵ because I hear of your love and of the faith that you have toward the Lord Jesus and for all the saints,

Paul had heard from others concerning the degree of love and faith exhibited by Philemon, especially toward the Lord Jesus and his redeemed and holy people. Some of these believers regularly met in Philemon's home for prayer, praise and worship. For this loving fellowship with God's people, Paul is also thankful to God.

PHILEMON 6

⁶ and I pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective for the full knowledge of every good thing that is in us for the sake of Christ.

Love builds up, and faith strengthens believers in the things of God and his Son. As they fellowship and meet to praise and worship God, the Holy Spirit binds them together in spiritual union and holy love for one another. Thus, by this union and communion with each other, these saints are sharing their spiritual blessings and learning from one another in increasing measure more of the things of God as the Spirit of God teaches them, leading them into all truth.

PHILEMON 7

⁷ For I have derived much joy and comfort from your love, my brother, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you.

Paul confesses that he has received great spiritual support and blessings from Philemon's prayers. Even though the apostle is far removed from Philemon physically, Paul feels very near spiritually because he knows that Philemon and the church in his house are praying for him as much as he is praying for them.

PAUL BEGINS HIS APPEAL FOR ONESIMUS

Philemon 8–16PHILEMON 8–9 a

⁸ Accordingly, though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do what is required, ^{9a} yet for love's sake I prefer to appeal to you—...

As noted earlier, Paul does not use the authority invested in him by the Lord Jesus as an apostle. Paul loves the people of God, both individually and collectively. Out of his deep love for God's redeemed and sanctified children, the apostle deals with each one tenderly and compassionately, as though they were Christ's lambs (cf. John 21:15). He would much rather persuade, exhort and encourage the people of God than command them to obey his instructions as an apostle of the Lord Jesus Christ.

There would be occasions when Paul needed to use his apostolic authority for the church's good. However, this situation involving personal relationships between Philemon and Onesimus was not such an occasion. Such occasions might arise when Paul deals with disciplinary matters within the church, when exercising his God-given authority against false teachers and false doctrine, or when defending his Christ-appointed commission as an apostle against evil imposters, railers, and despisers of the faith. In all such cases, Paul is fully entitled to exercise his apostolic authority to the maximum extent against those who threaten to harm the genuine people of God or lead them astray from the singular truth of the gospel and of God's Word more generally.

PHILEMON 9b

^{9b} ... I, Paul, an old man and now a prisoner also for Christ Jesus—

Since his conversion ⁹¹ to Christ over 30 years earlier, this former zealous Pharisee – since become the apostle Paul – had covered much ground while proclaiming the gospel message. The apostle travelled to many regions throughout Asia Minor (much of modern Turkey) and Europe to fulfil his divine commission. He endured intense opposition and suffered much grief and sorrow for the gospel's sake. On many occasions, he had been falsely accused or misrepresented by various bodies and individuals – religious, civil and military.

Even now, Paul was being held in chains in Rome. The apostle had appealed to Porcius Festus for a trial before the Emperor in Rome. The local authorities had arrested him for preaching the gospel and bringing the name of the Greek goddess Artemis into disrepute. As a result of Paul's preaching, many people had stopped buying miniature idols from skilled craftsmen. Thus, the artisans filed a complaint against Paul, resulting in his appearance before Festus and, subsequently, his appeal to Caesar.

The ageing apostle Paul was now languishing in a Roman prison (or perhaps he was now under house arrest in his own rented apartment), awaiting his trial before the Roman emperor. The apostle hoped to be acquitted and to continue his ministry. However, Paul was now more advanced in years and less able

⁹¹ [*Paul's*] *conversion/age*: At the stoning of Stephen, Paul (Saul) is described as “a young man” (Acts 7:58). He would have begun training as a rabbi when about 30 years old. To have reached this stage, Saul would probably have been involved in Jewish religious activities for several years prior to formal training as a rabbi. Saul's training under Gamaliel would have continued for several years. During or following this time, Saul would have joined the ranks of the Pharisees as an active member. Thus, when provided with letters from the chief priests to persecute Christians in Damascus (Acts 26:10), Saul, the zealous Pharisee, was probably in his mid to late 30s. His conversion to Christ took place at this time, possibly making him around 37–39 years old.

We must remember, of course, that Saul had also received extensive schooling earlier in his life, during his upbringing in Tarsus. In addition to his basic education, Saul would have engaged in higher-level education, including social and political studies, morals and religious studies, and principles of philosophy. Although a follower of the Jewish faith, Saul's religious schooling at that time would have included religions or beliefs that were common in the wider Graeco-Roman world of that day. Thus, the apostle would be well versed not only in Judaism (a Hebrew of the Hebrews) but also in the various Greek and Roman cultures, beliefs, practices, and philosophies of his day and age. His debating and preaching skills became apparent when he engaged with and confounded the philosophers and other scholars gathered at the Areopagus (Mar's Hill) in Athens (Acts 17:16-34).

Some commentators believe that Paul the apostle met his death when in his mid to late 60s, possibly around A.D. 67–68 (or earlier)—and before the death of Nero in A.D. 68. Although he considered himself to be “an old man” (v.9), Paul would be outlived by the apostle John.

(Incidentally, some interpreters understand the Greek phrase translated “old man” (Gk., πρεσβύτερος *presbutēs*) as referring to Paul as an “elder” (as in “elder statesman”) or “presbyter” in the church, rather than specifying his age range (e.g. F. F. Bruce)). (GL)

to make extended journeys across various countries. He had hoped to bring the gospel to Spain, although perhaps not before visiting Colossae for the first time – even though Colossae lay in the opposite direction to Spain. Unfortunately, we do not know from the Bible whether Paul ever left Rome again to make any further evangelistic or ministering visits.

PHILEMON 10

¹⁰ I appeal to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I became in my imprisonment.

Paul appeals earnestly and sincerely on behalf of Philemon's bondsman, Onesimus. The apostle considers Onesimus as his "child". Spiritually, this was indeed the case. Paul had become Onesimus' spiritual father, instructing him extensively in the truths of the gospel and (humanly speaking) being the instrument of Onesimus' conversion to Christ. This conversion was brought about by God's Holy Spirit, effecting new birth or regeneration in Onesimus' heart resulting in his repentance toward God and faith in Christ as his Saviour and Lord.

After his conversion, Onesimus became extremely helpful to the ageing apostle. He probably assisted Paul in many practical ways while he remained in chains under house arrest. Since Paul could not leave his place of confinement, Onesimus likely undertook tasks or errands on the apostle's behalf. Paul was anxious to keep Onesimus with him in Rome. Nevertheless, the apostle realised that the resolving of Onesimus' relationship with his master in Colossae claimed priority.

PHILEMON 11

¹¹ (Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful to you and to me.)

Paul here is alluding to the meaning of Onesimus' name. "Onesimus" means "profitable" or "useful".

From this remark, it seems as though Paul understood Onesimus to have been unprofitable or useless to his master previously. However, the apostle does not elaborate further on this remark, so it is impossible to deduce exactly what Paul was inferring. Presumably, Onesimus had told Paul of his reasons for leaving Philemon. This information probably included some unfavourable information about Onesimus, but details are lacking.

Whatever the background circumstances, the apostle is now making it abundantly clear to Philemon that Onesimus is now likely to prove a highly *profitable* or *useful* (valuable) servant to his master. This may be because Paul has undertaken to make restitution to Philemon for any failings on Onesimus' part toward his master (v.18). More likely, however, is the fact that Onesimus is returning to his master as a

Christian and brother in the Lord and not merely as a bondservant. In virtue of his new-found faith, Onesimus is much more likely to serve his master with greater zeal and in the realisation that both Philemon and his servant serve the same Lord and Master in heaven.

PHILEMON 12

¹² I am sending him back to you, sending my very heart.

Paul is distressed that he must part company with Onesimus. He proved to be of such value to Paul in his confinement that he will miss his fellowship and practical assistance very much. Perhaps Paul is hinting that it would be appreciated if Philemon could send Onesimus back to Rome later. However, the apostle is unwilling to make his desire too obvious lest he should seem to be taking advantage of Philemon or his bondservant.

Others had attended to Paul in his imprisonment, including Luke, the physician (and writer of Luke's Gospel and Acts). However, perhaps Luke and these others had left Rome to take on other commitments. We know Demas, who was in Rome, would forsake Paul, deserting him for Thessalonica and returning to the world (v.24; see also Col. 4:14; 2 Tim. 4:10). Would this have anything to do with the severe persecution against Christians in Rome? ⁹²

PHILEMON 13

¹³ I would have been glad to keep him with me, in order that he might serve me on your behalf during my imprisonment for the gospel,

⁹² *persecution against Christians in Rome*: We know this was a period of extreme suffering and trials for Christian people in and around Rome. The dissolute emperor, Nero, was in power at this time. A great fire had just destroyed the city of Rome (A.D. 64). A rumour spread among the people that Nero was to blame for causing the fire (although, when the conflagration began, Nero was at the port of Antium (modern Anzio) some 38 miles or 61kms away from Rome). Nevertheless, to escape personal blame, Nero sought a scapegoat. He settled on the Christians. Thus, he brutally persecuted the followers of the Lord Jesus, carrying out unspeakable atrocities against the saints of the Lord. Many faithful servants of God met their death at his hands on the streets and in the arenas of Rome. Being a Roman citizen by birth, Paul should have been protected in some measure from the worst of Nero's atrocities. Nevertheless, it is believed that the apostle was martyred around the time of this persecution (A.D. 64) or shortly afterward, and before Nero's suicide in A.D. 68. As a Roman citizen, Paul was not put to a slow, agonising death by crucifixion (Like the Lord Jesus and possibly also Peter), but by beheading—if traditional extra-biblical sources are correct. (GL)

Paul acknowledges his indebtedness to Onesimus. For the many spiritual blessings the apostle had brought into the bondsman's life, Onesimus had tried to thank him in some measure by helping Paul practically and to the utmost of his ability. Not only had Onesimus assisted the imprisoned apostle materially and physically, but he may also have shared fellowship with Paul spiritually, thereby supporting and encouraging the ageing apostle.

Thus, Paul would have been delighted to retain Onesimus so that this servant of the Lord might continue to minister to the apostle Paul's needs and share fellowship with him. Paul sent Onesimus away from him and back to his master with great sadness and a degree of reluctance. Nevertheless, Philemon was the bondsman's rightful owner and master. Paul knew he must return Onesimus, but he also believed he was returning the bondsman to someone who would treat him well. To ensure that Philemon did not harbour any resentment against his bondsman, the apostle undertakes to discharge any debts owed to Philemon because of his bondsman's actions (v.18). Furthermore, Paul's accompanying letter explained to Philemon how his servant Onesimus had come to faith in Christ and how this should influence Philemon's attitude and behaviour toward his bondsman – now, a brother in the Lord.

PHILEMON 14

¹⁴ but I preferred to do nothing without your consent in order that your goodness might not be by compulsion but of your own accord.

Here, the apostle is making it very clear that he is not putting any pressure on Philemon to accede to his requests. Paul desires that Philemon should decide, of his own accord, how to respond to the apostle's entreaties. Paul was hoping and praying for a favourable outcome, but he did not want to take advantage of his friendship with Philemon by trying to influence him unduly. However, the apostle would be greatly concerned if Philemon provided a negative response. Thus, he adds in verse 15:

PHILEMON 15

¹⁵ For this perhaps is why he was parted from you for a while, that you might have him back forever,

Paul suggests that Onesimus' return and acceptance into the household again would prove much more beneficial to Philemon in the long run than his rejection. The bondsman returning to his master was not the same person who had left. God had transformed Onesimus' life. He was returning as a person made new in Christ Jesus and with a different outlook and attitude. Thus, the bondsman was now bound to serve his master with all his heart. Now, he would prove trustworthy and reliable because – like Philemon, his earthly master – Onesimus now had a Lord and Master in heaven to serve and honour.

PHILEMON 16

¹⁶ no longer as a bondservant but more than a bondservant, as a beloved brother – especially to me, but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord.

Yes, in law, Onesimus would remain Philemon's bondservant until manumission – unless Philemon voluntarily changed this situation earlier.

In his first letter to the Corinthian church, Paul expressed guidance respecting a person's status, including that of bondservants:

1 Corinthians 7:20-24 ESV

²⁰ Each one should remain in the condition in which he was called. ²¹ Were you a bondservant when called? Do not be concerned about it. (But if you can gain your freedom, avail yourself of the opportunity.) ²² For he who was called in the Lord as a bondservant is a freedman of the Lord. Likewise he who was free when called is a bondservant of Christ. ²³ You were bought with a price; do not become bondservants of men. ²⁴ So, brothers, in whatever condition each was called, there let him remain with God.

However, Onesimus was no longer merely a bondservant without rights or privileges. He was now a child of God and a servant of the Lord Jesus Christ, who had redeemed and forgiven him. The Lord recognised him as being on the same level as Philemon. Onesimus was not only *recognised* as being equal in status, but he was also *declared* in God's Word to be equal in status to every other human being. Concerning his *role* as a servant and workman, Onesimus remained subject to Philemon. However, concerning his *status* as a person, Onesimus and Philemon were equal in God's sight.

For Onesimus, the implications of this elevation in status are beyond measure. Previously, he had been a bondservant without recognition, rights or privileges. In many cases, he would have been treated as animate property – although it is unlikely that Philemon would have thus degraded him. Now, however, Onesimus was recognised as a child of God. Now, he was an heir of God's inheritance in glory and a joint heir with the Son of God himself. From a human perspective, he may yet be a bondservant. However, from God's perspective, Onesimus was now Christ's freedman.

The elevation in status here cannot be overstated. Even with manumission (emancipation), Onesimus' status could not have been raised to this level. Humanly speaking, Onesimus would have gained his freedom in due course. However, even after his release by Philemon, Onesimus would still be a slave – *living in bondage to sin*. But from this spiritual bondage, Christ had set him free. Now, this bondservant could never be returned to his former state of spiritual slavery leading to death (Rom. 6:16).

On top of all this, Onesimus was now Philemon's brother in Christ. He was a fellow believer, entitled to the love, respect and consideration of all believers in Christ. He would stand on the same ground and

share the same fellowship with every other redeemed child of God. Thus, should not Philemon consider all these things when responding to Paul's entreaties on behalf of Onesimus?

PAUL FURTHER ENTREATS PHILEMON

Philemon 17–20

PHILEMON 17

¹⁷ So if you consider me your partner, receive him as you would receive me.

Paul is anxious that Philemon will respond favourably and receive Onesimus back, as the apostle has requested. Paul knew very well that – under Roman law – Philemon could treat Onesimus most unfavourably if any actual offences had been committed. Under the circumstances, Philemon was entitled to claim full restitution from his bondsman, no matter how difficult that proved to be for Onesimus. Roman law provided some latitude to slave masters to deal with offending slaves in whatever way the master thought most appropriate. However, as a slave, Onesimus was afforded none of the rights and privileges that belonged to free men and women.

How, then, would Philemon respond to his returning wayward bondsman? This thought must have been of great concern to Paul. Philemon could have exercised his legal rights and demanded full restitution from – or inflicted even greater punishment on – the returning slave if indeed he had been guilty of specific offences. Onesimus himself must have feared greatly that his master might treat him harshly on his return. Hence, the strong appeals within Paul's letter to Philemon beseeching him to see Onesimus as a new person – a Christian and a brother in Christ. Not just as a slave but as a fellow believer whom Christ had forgiven and justified.

However, would a greatly offended Philemon forgive?

Thus, concerning Onesimus, Paul writes to Philemon, *"So if you consider me your partner, receive him as you would receive me."*

Paul expressed the desires of his soul for Onesimus. He must have prayed fervently for a favourable outcome. The last thing the apostle would want is to think that he had sent Onesimus back to endure harsh punishment at the hands of his master. Thus Paul appeals to Philemon to treat Onesimus as he would treat the apostle himself.

PHILEMON 18

¹⁸ If he has wronged you at all, or owes you anything, charge that to my account.

To further protect Onesimus from possible reprisals or adverse treatment, Paul extends an olive branch to Philemon. The apostle himself will undertake to reimburse Philemon to the full extent of his loss at the hands of Onesimus. Even if this was a considerable amount of money, goods or services, Paul was confident that the Lord would provide or overrule to resolve this situation. Thus, the imprisoned apostle was convinced he could fully meet his commitments to Philemon.

PHILEMON 19

¹⁹ I, Paul, write this with my own hand: I will repay it – to say nothing of your owing me even your own self.

At this point, Paul takes the quill pen from his amanuensis and writes this part of the letter himself. In his own handwriting, the apostle assures Philemon that he personally will discharge all debts owed by Onesimus to his master, Philemon.

Nevertheless, the apostle is not about to let Philemon forget the debt that he himself owes to Paul! It would seem that Paul had been responsible for leading Philemon to repentance and faith in Christ at some point in the past. Therefore, the apostle could rightly point out that (humanly speaking) Philemon owes his experience of salvation and eternal life to Paul's teaching and preaching.

The gift of salvation and eternal life was a debt that Philemon could never repay – otherwise, it would not be a gift! Nonetheless, although all praise and gratitude for this gift of salvation were due to God and his Son, Christ Jesus, Philemon was still indebted to the apostle Paul for being the human agent through whom, by his Holy Spirit, God bestowed that priceless gift of life.

PHILEMON 20

²⁰ Yes, brother, I want some benefit from you in the Lord. Refresh my heart in Christ.

Paul has demonstrated to Philemon that he himself is a debtor, unable to pay for the gift he received through the apostle's ministry – a ministry exercised out of love and compassion for other human beings.

Now, Paul reinforces his point by declaring:

²⁰ *Yes, brother....'*

Paul makes it plain to the wealthy and high-standing Philemon that he stands on equal ground with the apostle, notwithstanding his standing in society! Paul, therefore, can address Philemon as his equal and not from an inferior position. Furthermore, both men are brothers in Christ, one in the Lord.

Paul continues:

"... I want some benefit from you...."

The apostle is placing Philemon under a moral obligation to accede to his earlier request unconditionally. Philemon owes Paul an immeasurable debt for leading him to faith in Christ. Paul, of course, is not seeking a reward for proclaiming the gospel. Nevertheless, he reminds Philemon that his salvation – and Philemon's release from his own personal slavery to sin – was due in no small measure to his [Paul's] ministry (John 8:34; Rom. 6:16-22). Therefore – morally – Philemon ought to consider that when responding to the apostle's entreaties on behalf of Onesimus. This consideration of these events is the benefit that Paul seeks from Philemon.

Then, Paul adds:

"... Refresh my heart in Christ."

Paul has brought Philemon to a position where it would be impossible for him to refuse the apostle's request. Yes, Paul has acted diplomatically throughout, clearly stating that any decision must rest with Philemon alone. The apostle has no intention of exercising apostolic authority over Philemon. Nevertheless, Paul has brought Philemon to the point where he must respond favourably, out of a moral and spiritual obligation to the apostle, even though Philemon will still be responding of his own free will.

Thus, the apostle encourages Philemon to *refresh his heart in Christ* by following through with what he knows the Lord requires of him as Onesimus' master.

It seems that Paul was a master of putting someone on the spot, using immense tact, discretion, and unrelenting persuasion!

PHILEMON 21

²¹ Confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say.

The apostle believes that Philemon will accept his irrefutable arguments. Morally, he has no other option. Paul has demonstrated to Philemon what debts are due to whom – and Onesimus is not the only debtor in this situation.

Confident of Philemon's compliance, Paul expresses his gratitude to Philemon for his anticipated favourable reaction. The apostle is convinced that Philemon will go beyond Paul's requests and ensure the utmost goodwill and forgiveness toward the repentant Onesimus. However, perhaps the apostle hopes that Philemon will respond to the hints earlier in his letter of returning Onesimus to Rome. Paul would surely be missing Onesimus' practical assistance during his imprisonment for the gospel.

We are not told whether Onesimus did return to assist Paul in Rome. We can only assume that Philemon would have done everything in his power to be of assistance to Paul.

PHILEMON 22

²² At the same time, prepare a guest room for me, for I am hoping that through your prayers I will be graciously given to you.

Paul was hoping for an early release from captivity. Perhaps he anticipated an appearance before the emperor sometime soon.

Initially, the apostle had intended to travel on to Spain, but possibly he considered it more appropriate to visit Colossae first since he had never yet ministered in this church. This diversion would allow him to meet the Colossian believers in person, and also Philemon in either Colossae or Laodicea.

From the information provided by Epaphras and Onesimus, Paul would be aware of Philemon's spacious living arrangements. Thus, the apostle would know that his friend could provide him with a guest room, asking for this provision to be made soon. Similarly, Paul asks for the prayers of Philemon's household and presumably also of the church that met in his house.

As far as can be ascertained, Paul never left Rome after writing this letter. Although Luke (our Bible-historical source) does not record in Acts what became of the apostle after he had written his last letters from Rome, it is believed Paul was martyred outside that city. Traditional sources report that he was beheaded around A.D. 67 or 68. on the Osian Way, the busy highway linking Rome with its port city of Anzio (Antium). This event would have occurred during the reign of Nero and shortly before the Emperor's demise in A.D. 68. However, some commentators believe that Paul met his death several years before A.D. 67 or 68.

FINAL GREETINGS***Philemon 23–25***PHILEMON 23

²³ Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends greetings to you,

Epaphras was responsible for bringing the gospel to the Colossian people, establishing the church in that town, and building up the saints in their faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

It is uncertain whether or not Paul is here speaking metaphorically of Epaphras' situation. If to be understood literally, it is unknown under what circumstances or at what time Epaphras was imprisoned alongside Paul. Most of Epaphras' time had been spent around the Lycus Valley area, ministering to the church at Colossae and probably those at Laodicea and Hierapolis.

However, the apostle may simply be using "fellow prisoner" figuratively. Just as Paul is the bondsman or "prisoner" of the Lord Jesus, so also Epaphras is the bondsman and "prisoner" of Christ. Paul, of course, was also a prisoner in the literal sense for the gospel's sake.

PHILEMON 24

²⁴ and so do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke, my fellow workers.

Paul also conveys greetings from other co-workers visiting and assisting him in Rome.

Mark: Mark or John Mark, the cousin of Barnabas (Col. 4:10) and the writer of Mark's Gospel. Mark was an evangelist, but he was not one of the Twelve apostles. (Mark received information for his Gospel from the apostle Peter.) Some years earlier, John Mark had fallen out with Paul and abandoned him during his first missionary journey (Acts 13:13; 15:36-41). Subsequently, both men were reconciled. In these later years, Mark became a valuable worker alongside Paul (2 Tim. 4:11).

Aristarchus: Aristarchus was one of Paul's Jewish-Christian co-workers. A Macedonian from Thessalonica (Acts 20:4; 27:2), Aristarchus accompanied Paul at Ephesus and other locations (Acts 19:29). In Colossians 4:10, Aristarchus⁹³ is described as a fellow prisoner with Paul. Aristarchus, too, sends his greetings to Philemon and his household.

Demas: Demas was also present in Rome at this juncture and sends his greetings. (Demas was later to forsake Paul and return to the world. Sadly, this demonstrates that – like Judas Iscariot – Demas was never a truly regenerate child of God (John 6:71; 13:26). The Lord Jesus knew these men to be false professors of the faith. Until their apostasy, however, other followers of Christ considered them (mistakenly) to be genuine believers in the Lord Jesus Christ).

Luke: Paul now adds Luke's name to the list of those sending greetings to Philemon's household. Luke was a physician (Col. 4:14) and historian. Like Mark, Luke was not one of the twelve apostles. However. The Lord prepared him to write a substantial treatise for an eminent individual named Theophilus (Acts 1:1). In that treatise, Luke explains everything necessary concerning the Lord Jesus Christ, the Gospel, and the establishing of the Christian church. In our New Testament, this treatise consists of two volumes: (1) *The Gospel according to Luke* and (2) *Acts [of the Apostles]*.

PHILEMON 25

²⁵ The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.

Paul signs off with a characteristic benediction.

In using the word, “grace” (χάρις *charis*), Paul is not applying this word in a formal manner. The apostle would be thinking of the full significance of this word concerning God the Father, Jesus Christ the Son and the gospel of eternal salvation.

God the Father is he who provides eternal life to every one of his redeemed children – *by his grace*. God the Son is he who accomplishes eternal redemption for every one of these children by his sacrifice of atonement, resurrection and ascension to the right hand of his Father.

The work of salvation in its entirety is a gift of God's grace given to all those who deserved nothing other than God's righteous wrath for their sins. Nevertheless, in mercy, God extends complete forgiveness and redemption to his children – *by his sovereign, unmerited grace*.

When Paul adds, “... *be with your spirit*” the apostle means “May the grace of God be with you in your innermost being” or “in your very soul” Paul desires that the fullness of God's grace be shed abroad in the believer's immortal soul.

⁹³ According to tradition, Aristarchus suffered martyrdom at Nero's hands in the terrible persecution of Christians following the great fire of Rome (A.D. 64). (GL)

.....

Thus we come to the end of Paul's letter to his friend and brother in Christ, Philemon. We are not told the outcome of Paul's intercession with Philemon for Onesimus. However, it is likely to have proved favourable to all parties. Had Paul's appeal fallen on deaf ears, there would be no reason to preserve this letter or to include it in the canon of Scripture.

END OF PHILEMON

